

Reading the Fascicles of  
Emily Dickinson  
Dwelling in Possibilities

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# Acknowledgments

To the many who nourished my fascination with Emily Dickinson, her words: "Thank you tenderly—I was breathlessly interested" (L 979). Many of those people will not know the debt I owe them; I cannot adequately thank them nor include by name all those who since a childhood steeped in potent language, including Dickinson's, have enabled the writing of this book.

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course, thanks to Ralph Franklin, whose monument is the beautifully re-composed *Manuscript Books* on which this book depends.

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# Introduction: Reading Dickinson Contextually

They ask but our Delight—  
The Darlings of the Soil  
And grant us all their Countenance  
For a penurious smile—  
(J868, Fr908)<sup>1</sup>

Whatever else Dickinson intended in leaving at least forty hand-bound books for our “delight” (and we must begin with the qualification that we cannot *know* what she intended them to be), they are quite simply the most important clue she provided for reading the poems within them. They are Dickinson’s own context. Outside of this context for over one hundred years the individual flowers, the lyrics of Emily Dickinson, have been quoted, queried, quarreled with, used for sermon fodder, and analyzed for psychological, philosophical, cultural, historical, and, most temptingly, autobiographical import. They have been “improved” upon by early editors and even altered by later experts who shifted original idiosyncratic lineations and sifted individual lyrics from their earliest appearances on into categories.

The 1890s categories favored “Love,” “Death,” “Nature,” and so on, and those that reach into the twenty-first century continue to be organized into the slots that fit the scholar’s interests: into various strategies for surviving nineteenth-century womanhood, for example, or those reflecting agoraphobia, or those reflecting Puritanism, or those reflecting Zen thought. Essays and books showing the influence of George Herbert, of Emerson, of contemporary popular literature, of Shakespeare, and even of Milton have blossomed like those flowers Dickinson so often privileged. And, of course, from an author rich in reading, thought, imagination, passion, and skill such studies are entirely appropriate. Few, however, have allowed Dickinson’s own groupings to guide them.

Until 1981 that would have been difficult in any case. Scholars needed special permissions to use the holdings at Harvard’s Houghton Library, Amherst, and elsewhere. In that year, however, an event occurred that has the potential—to this point not quite realized—of revolutionizing the way any reader armed with two heavy, amazingly revealing books might read Emily Dickinson. In the words of Suzanne Juhasz, one of the few to take sufficiently appreciative note of the publication of Ralph Franklin’s *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*,

these books are most valuable for "the sense of her poems as hers, as belonging to and issuing from her specific and particularly personal character and lifestyle." Juhasz borrows from one of the earliest biographers, the poet's niece, in this next assessment of the publication: "Face to face with her *own* poems, presented to us by means of the bibliographic care of Franklin's work, I come closer to their artistic and biographical presence" (1983b, 60).

I am more interested in the artistic presence in this study than in the biographical presence, though, of course, the two can hardly be separated. To put it more bluntly, I would feel most uncomfortable deducing from the forty books called fascicles (I explain the term in chapter 1) that Dickinson was or was not wildly in love with any individual, far less the identity of that person; that she was or was not an unwavering believer in the God handed her by her Puritan/Congregational forebears; that she did or did not have political leanings, whatever the prominence of Squire Dickinson; or that she was obsessed with disappointment, illness, the grave, or similarly dark subjects about which she, as a human being living between 1830 and 1886, knew so much. Reflections of all the preceding seep into the poems she gathered into the fascicles and those she did not.

What interests me the most is the canny, intriguing, and, I must conclude—in spite of the weighty and persuasive arguments by some of the most influential Dickinson scholars (including the distinguished Dr. Franklin himself)—*intentional* artistry she used to compile these books. In fact, in light of some earlier studies based on the fascicles, one has reason to be wary.<sup>2</sup> Although I do not shy from suggesting various possibilities for interpretation based on fascicle context, what I want to share in this study is not any single interpretation but rather my own excitement at the glimpse the fascicle groupings provide into the playful and inventive mind of Emily Dickinson at her workshop; there, as others have put it, she self-published roughly half of her extant poems (almost nine hundred) between 1858 and 1864.

I see the forty books, then, not so much as composing one large finished architectural structure as offering delight in discovering the poet/editor's play within individual books. These, I grant, are far from finished. What David Porter says of "Dickinson's Unrevised Poems" must be heeded—especially considering that the source was one of Dickinson's wisest explorers: "Dickinson's glorious ricketiness, more authentic to her than finish, was part of a manifest, if unstated poetics in which the word, coming into being, was made not semantic flesh but sensation. . . . Her poems participate in an incomplete universe, exploiting the virtues of nonclosure" (1984, 27). That said, the fact of the fascicles deserves attention. Regardless of whether they were complete or finished or intended as prepublication studies, as self-publishing artifacts, as gifts, as scrapbooks, or as workbooks, they *exist*. That Dickinson, as far as we know, did not ask that they be destroyed; that she

compiled them as she was reaching out to the publishing community most vigorously; mostly that she gave each the care and wit that I as well as others have discovered in them argues for taking them seriously. Margaret Freeman's clever creation of a so-far unpublished "Fake Fascicle 41" may show that other groupings are possible and that they, too, may be studied for internal unity and tricky patterns—but they are not Dickinson's.

Meeting Dickinson here on her own ground can be, as Randy Blythe said in the *South Atlantic Review* of Sharon Cameron's highly respected study of the fascicles, "a life's work." Blythe makes clear that the work must engage many scholars and many years "to determine and make suppositions about all of the fascicles, their inner subtleties of arrangements, and their interrelatedness" (1994, 156). Not quite a life's work yet, this study, which stakes out particular territory, will, I hope, move the discussion about the nature of the collection as a whole and of the place of individual poems within the whole further along in a positive direction. If it spurs readers to select a fascicle or two for their own discoveries, so much the better; if students from high school to graduate school use fascicle groupings as beginning points for Dickinson studies, they will be richly rewarded.

When Ralph Franklin published the *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* in 1981, he offered the closest thing to the unmediated mind of the artist Emily Dickinson that all but those fortunate few who use the carefully guarded library holdings will ever encounter. Within the two fat volumes of crisply copied manuscripts, admittedly conveying a different effect from the actual thin sheets of paper, the reader may encounter forty extant fascicles that show Dickinson's skills as an *editor* as well as the creator of individual poems that have been variously called metaphysical, lyric, pastoral, romantic, modern, and more. Each book, holding between eleven and twenty-nine poems, was composed of four to seven stationery sheets, folded, stacked (not nested), and sewn together with twine.

These books are among the treasures Lavinia Dickinson discovered in what has variously been described as a "rosewood" or a "mahogany" chest. All Dickinsonians know the story: how Dickinson's sister and executor Lavinia took her recently deceased sister's poems to sister-in-law Sue and then to family "friend," Mabel Loomis Todd, precipitating not only a battle between the house of Dickinson/Bianchi and that of Todd/Bingham but also a series of competing publications, beginning in 1890. None of these early publications followed Emily Dickinson's words and prosody—far less her own groupings—adequately. Although the fascicles are threaded together both literally and figuratively, they have been ignored or belittled as part of any project with an aesthetic plan.

Healthy skepticism about some details is entirely appropriate, and an even healthier curiosity keeps us wondering whether there were more than these

forty books. Did Dickinson give any to friends, for example? Might some turn up as the Evergreens are more thoroughly archived? Most important of all, obviously, are the probably unanswerable questions about *why* Emily Dickinson composed them. Absent answers to such tantalizing questions, we have quite enough work to explore the forty we know. They point the way toward the *how* of the project, though that, too, will remain unknown unless a diary or letter turns up miraculously to document the enterprise. It is the *what* that amazes and delights us.

Previous fascicle studies have taken various approaches. Dissertations by Paul Gallipeo (1984) and Robyn Bell (1988) attempt an overview of all forty books, as did the privately printed work of Martha O'Keefe and the first book on the subject by William Shurr. More recent studies—those by Sharon Cameron and Dorothy Oberhaus—have focused on specific individual groupings. Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing* (1992), in addition to looking closely at several of the middle cluster of fascicles, considers the theoretical assumptions behind Dickinson's increasing use of variants in her manuscripts. Oberhaus (somewhat as did O'Keefe) offers a more theological and thematic reading of Fascicle 40 particularly, though she also touches on earlier books. Shorter studies by John Gerlach and William Doreski use specific books as demonstrations of ways to read Dickinson's self-publications.

This book, influenced by several of these, began before half of them had been published. Central to its thesis is that context shapes interpretation. Conscious always of the dangers of stepping onto the shaky grounds of the "intentional fallacy," I posit that it is not illogical to see what proximate poems can tell us about each other and what the selections—for they are that, it seems to me, rather than repositories—suggest about the concerns of their author at the moment she bound them together. Neil Fraistat's collection of essays, *Poems in Their Places* (1986), reinforced such a thesis, making this reader wonder why so few had attempted to put Dickinson's back in *their* places. Although Fraistat's book involved mainly British canonical poets, this notion, iterated within the essays, became central to my study; returning to the original publication's groupings of individual lyrics or narratives may tip us off to possible meanings not obvious when a poem is isolated. But what would provide a testing ground for such a thesis? How could one use these books to make responsible guesses to interpretive possibilities (I use the plural emphatically).

In other words, *what* poems and *what* places? When I discovered, through Franklin, that eleven of Dickinson's poems had been "repeated" (he posits that she "forgot" she had already used one) in a second fascicle, I looked closely at the surrounding contexts for the repeated poems. The result is this book. Nothing, it seems to me, shows so dramatically the effects of the pressures of the surrounding work—the contiguous poems, the shape of a book,

the “thumbprint,” for want of a better word to describe the peculiar tone of each book, than comparing the way a single poem operates in two different settings.

At first I determined to look at all eleven repetitions—at about twenty-two fascicles, though that is a tricky number because, as you will see, some fascicles contain more than one repeated poem, and one fascicle (Fascicle 8, included in this study) contains two versions of the same one. So rich was the mine in which I had chosen to delve that it seemed better to look closely at a representative sample than to attempt a more superficial survey of all of the repetitions. I chose four pairs; those have been more than sufficiently challenging and rewarding. Perhaps the discoveries I have made within these eight fascicles will move others to read the books in their own ways.

The four pairs encompass the beginning and end (Fascicles 1 and 40) of the six-year project that must have taken up so much midnight weaving time for the thirty-something-year-old poet at the height of her powers. They include, too, Fascicles 6 and 10, in which Dickinson placed the poem (in quite different versions) that is perhaps most discussed in terms of the editorial collaboration between Sue and Emily, “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers—” (J216, Fr124). They also include Fascicles 14 and 3, which house the same poems as those in Fascicles 1 and 40 respectively. And my choices include the remarkable Fascicle 21, with which I begin this study, for the most stunning of the paired poems, a pairing that reveals (albeit slant) Dickinson’s aesthetic principles, and Fascicle 8, which includes a duplicate of an important poem within Fascicle 21.

Reading what Jerome McGann calls Dickinson’s “Visible Voice” increases exponentially one’s appreciation for the deliberate care of the person whom Richard Sewall has no trouble labeling a “genius.” Convinced as I was by the startling surprises revealed in the “visible voice” of the fascicles that the order of the little books that I compared with each other represented editorial choices, I was not daunted by the history of negative responses to fascicle reading, which I discuss later. Simply reading the fascicles for years was enough to convince me. Although I find Michael Riffaterre’s theories on the *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) (which do not, of course, include Dickinson) helpful descriptions of the enterprise of reading poetry, this study is not indebted to any particular theoretical school. It is, however, bolstered by practicing poets, Dickinson’s inheritors. Acting on Dickinson’s boldness, I began conversations with about a dozen working poets, some of whom are among America’s “laureates” (literally). I asked them not about individual poems or theories of poetry but about their own (often agonizing) editorial choices. Knowing that twelve poets will have twelve different ways to select previously written works for a small publication, I nevertheless thought that their practices and their hunches about those of Dickinson would form an appro-



priate support for this examination of an extraordinary self-publishing enterprise. In telling their own stories about attempting to order the wildness of the poems, they hauntingly evoked images of the woman who elected to give her life to writing poetry in that big house on Main Street in Amherst; perhaps she, too, spread poems out on the floor, considering them one by one, riffling through piles of copies for the perfect match; filling a gap here or chuckling at herself at the punning possibilities in putting one poem near another. No one *knows* how or why she undertook the fascicle project, but we do know the effect they may have on an alert reader.

The fascicles have the wildness of bottled genies. It is true they are not particularly great in extent or size although few contemporary poets can claim to have edited more than eight hundred poems into forty volumes, each of which produces the surprise in the reader of which Frost spoke ("No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader"). Spending time with the fascicles convinces the reader that Dickinson is not only one of the great poets in the English language but one of the craftiest editors as well. When Johnson's variorum appeared in 1955, Louise Bogan said of "this new text" what the fascicles, the oldest text, reveal in even greater measure: "To read Emily Dickinson in this new text, in which every idiosyncratic habit of spelling, punctuation, diction, and localism is reproduced, is to read her in a slightly different language. . . . We come upon a woman of timeless genius . . . and an artist who more often than not was right the first time" (96). It is time to return to that "first time" once more—this time with minds open not only to Dickinson's different and wholly absorbing language but also to her visual tricks.

Knowing that most readers will not be armed with Franklin's volumes, although we can hope for a readers' edition someday, I must ask the reader to trust this much about the chapters that follow: whenever I quote a poem from a fascicle, it will appear in a form as close to the manuscript as print can render it (and my eye distinguish it). That means that lineation (and sometimes capitalization) will differ from that in the two most dependable current readers' volumes: that edited by Johnson, which has been the variorum from the 1950s to 1998, and that edited (and newly numbered) by Franklin. Although it seems awkward, there is no way around the thicket of numbers that follows each poem: J = Johnson's number; Fr = Franklin's number; F = fascicle number. Whenever all of the poems within a discussion are clearly from one fascicle, the last number will not appear. Missing from this thicket of signs is another contextual clue that would open up an entirely different study, but that is one in which scholars such as Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Hart, Erika Scheurer, and others are engaged: the study of the letters in which many of

these poems were also embedded. Such settings provide yet another ground of contextual study of poems in their places, one we hope will increase as Dickinson scholarship progresses in the twenty-first century. Let us hope that it is a century in which someone will discover in some long-lost “ebon box” a bundle of dusty pages that we can hold to the light as Dickinson said she held a letter (J169, Fr180, F8). After all, she said, “I keep bringing These— / Just as the Night keeps / fetching stars” (J224, Fr254 F10). However tantalizing it is to think that such a discovery might solve some of the riddles a study such as this one raises, let me begin to share the surprises currently visible to one reader.