

Reading the Fascicles of
Emily Dickinson
Dwelling in Possibilities

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“Whatever it is—she has tried it”:
Exploring the How and Why
of the Fascicle Project

Whatever it is—she has tried it—
Awful Father of Love—
Is not Our’s the chastising—
Do not chastise the Dove—

Not for Ourselves, petition—
Nothing is left to pray—
*When a subject is finished—
**Words are handed away—

Only lest she be lonely
In thy beautiful House
Give her for her Transgression
License to think of us—

Variants:

*When the subject is taken
**The words are withered away
J1204, Fr1200¹

To attempt to unravel across a century the “intentionality” of a poet who prized the slant route of truth (J1129, Fr1263) is to court mistakes and frustration. Certainly I cannot solve mysteries about which there is no proof; nevertheless, having shared some of the delights of discovering *what* Dickinson left in those fascicles, I turn briefly to considering *possibilities* for the how and why. However “backwards” it may seem to do so here, I move toward the end of this argument through the beginning; before discussing origins, I wanted to show results, the products.

Studying the Fascicles

Analyzing Dickinson's individual lyrics has become almost an industry. Split this lark and you'll find diverse music, bulb after bulb reserved for feminist, historicist, deconstructionist, or old-fashioned "new" critics. Another way of **grouping** the history of Dickinson scholarship, a history of criticism that is **readily** available in many of the books listed in this bibliography, is that suggested by Jerome McGann: three groupings of critical stances, leading from Wordsworthian to Kierkegaardian.²

Reading poems in their places (Fraistat's term for contextuality again) suggests that although each **fascicle** has **variety**, each also has its own voice so that each grouping elicits readings **roughly** in keeping with one or the other of these schools. Fascicle 40, for example, **subject of the Oberhaus** study, indeed lends itself to the first kind of reading in McGann's scheme, that "clearly drawn from a Wordsworthian and, more generally a Christian (Protestant) model" (1983, 22-26); Fascicle 40 is a **startlingly devout** book, startling in light of so many poems in other fascicles that are not. The flowery Fascicle 1 might invite the same school (Christian) of criticism, but Fascicle 14, in which Dickinson placed a poem almost identical to one in Fascicle 1 ("The feet of people walking home" [J7, Fr16]) lends itself more easily to the **second of McGann's school** (the Mellor School of skepticism). And we have already seen how Fascicle 10 invites the third and darkest (Kierkegaard/Praz) school. With this in mind, here is a brief chronology of those few who have taken seriously the challenge of reading the poems contextually, those who, in the words of Ruth Miller, let Emily Dickinson's choice guide them.

Although at the 1986 Folger Conference Miller, the first to take seriously the possibilities of reading Dickinson in her own collections (fascicles), claimed to have changed her mind about some of her conclusions, and although her pre-Franklin book was based on an ordering Franklin has corrected, her approach to the gatherings helped to define both what Dickinson's purpose was and what it was not. Warning readers not to find a chronology, not to find meaning in possible recipients, and not to find any single event or subject reflected by any one fascicle, Miller concluded that each fascicle has a range of feelings and subjects and that single fascicles have "polar feelings" (248). Her description of the books as "long link poems" (249) previews that of Rosenthal and Gall's as "Modern Poetic Sequences" (1983).

From the 1970s on, at least four dissertations³ focused on the fascicles, and in 1983 the first major book, that by William Shurr, which **chapter 1** outlines, attempted to interpret the fascicles as revelatory of the **personal romantic** crisis of the poet. That book, along with the private publication of Martha O'Keefe, began a discussion that failed to convince Franklin. Although Franklin made the last three of the dissertations and the two absolutely dif-

ferent books (one rather notorious, the other privately printed and known to only a cluster of people) possible, he has not joined the (slim) ranks of those who consider the fascicles as intentional compositions rather than repositories of her verse. Just so, as chapter 1 also reviews, few of the major scholars became interested in the value of letting Dickinson's voice guide them through her groupings in the fascicles, and several voiced outright scorn at those who did so. Franklin's disavowal of such attempts, courteous as it was, is perhaps the most daunting. Two years after completing his work, he maintained that "Emily Dickinson probably felt the need for an audience outside her domestic scene, but she did not prepare the fascicles for such an audience, nor for publication" (1983, 16). Knowing the raw material best, he is convincing when he tells us that the evidence for such intentional publications is not borne out by the apparent manner of their assemblage. To be sure, his words are cautionary, but he ends his *Studies in Bibliography* article with this somewhat ambiguous sentence, "Constrained by time, the fascicles may present the poems, recurrent in their concerns and strategies, in gatherings that appear to have design" (20).⁴

One need not claim what Franklin (and those who heed him) warns against: finding a tight "thematic, narrative, or dramatic structure" (*ibid.*, 17) for the fascicles. Indeed it is too bad that some of the earliest work seems to do just that. On the other hand, that bad start does not obviate the need for a new approach, one that respects the books as evidence of Dickinson's mind at play at particular moments in her artistic life. Such serious public beginnings at doing so have been demonstrated by Sharon Cameron, Dorothy Oberhaus, and members of a panel at the 1997 MLA in Toronto under the moderatorship of Martha Nell Smith: Robert Bray, Paul Crumbley, Marget Sands, and this writer. Responses to all of these have been debated with spirit within the various Dickinson chatlines and journals for over a decade with little bridging of the chasm that separates those who privilege working with the Dickinson manuscripts and those who consider such studies fanciful, obsessive, and misguided.⁵

Why and How: Dwelling in Possibilities

In all of this contentious discussion whirling around reading Dickinson through her own manuscript books, no one, it seems to me, has satisfactorily tried to explain *why* Dickinson might have attempted her editing project or how she went about it.

One cannot look long at the little volumes—any of the forty—without *seeing* Dickinson's self-determination as an organizing poet, a crafter of books as well as of stunning and complex lyrics. Obviously, the fascicles are products that reveal their producer's experiences, education, and preoccupations. They

are not necessarily, however, personal narratives or essays. Thus, although we might situate the production of the fascicles against the general background of what is (tentatively) known of her life as she compiled each—as I did in the preceding chapter—I do not mean to imply a one-to-one relationship between those events and her poems. Because that first study, Shurr's "Marriage," did so, it seems appropriate to address the complex subject of the reciprocity between the autobiography and the lyric statement.

I neither believe nor am comfortable in my disbelief that all or even most of the poems are "autobiographical," except as the "supposed person" of whom Dickinson spoke to Higginson. With that proviso, I agree that the poems as a whole may be read as what Weisbuch calls "archetypal autobiographies" (1972, 39) or even archeological autobiographies: layered and compressed and distorted levels of memory, desire, and consciousness. The lyric, in the words of Celeste Schenck, is a "serial effort at sketching a self in time and over time" (1988, 290). How consciously autobiographical—or not—that "serial effort" may be, it is complicated by what Alicia Ostriker has pointed out is particularly true of the woman poet, who simultaneously "resists discovery" and "yearns for discovery" (1986, 65). What Ostriker says about Margaret Atwood is incrementally greater for Dickinson: She "insists on our knowing that she is difficult to discover ["I hide myself—within my flower"], submerged—and possibly hostile—yet discoverable" (ibid.). In that an autobiography is, in Shari Bentstock's words, "an effort to recapture the self" (1988, 11), Dickinson's poetry is more often than not autobiographical. Nevertheless, I am suspicious of efforts to tell too literal a story from the traces Dickinson has left in the fascicles, especially when the telling of that story is based on a collection of poems from disparate contexts known and unknown. Poems in the fascicles almost certainly have been removed from their initial impetus still further by a conscious artist.

For the purposes of my study—and this is an extraordinary challenge in itself—I am interested in the way the voice of the poet moves from the dead to the mourner, for example (in Fascicle 3), from the host to the guest (in Fascicle 40), and from the believer to the skeptic within a single fascicle as the editor/author arranged the poems (obviously written earlier, sometimes many years earlier) in a new setting. That they are, to some extent, predicated on autobiographical experience is undeniable. That they are also carefully crafted artifacts and that the new entity they form, the twenty-second poem of a twenty-one-poem sequence, let us say, has its own validity is equally undeniable. Reading this new entity requires that we look closely beyond the individual words and poems to the intersection of words and poems. The *gnome* revealed in the physiognomy of the web itself⁶ created not a single strand, not even, necessarily, a collection of dialectically opposed images and ideas within each fascicle, but rather a web of interconnections. It is among

those interconnections that we begin "to ransack!" (J178, Fr175 F8).⁷ As long as the fascicle reader understands that Franklin has regularized what are diverse sizes and thicknesses of paper, he or she will come as close to the original source (Dickinson's worktable) as it is possible to be to any poet.

Difficult as it is to meet Dickinson with the kind of attention I have paid her through the fascicles, it may be easier to discover *what* she was doing than *why* she was doing it. Thus far, this study has focused on the texts themselves, and they seem the best evidence of a seriousness toward the editing project, but this chapter also looks at evidence outside those texts that might give us clues: first at the gentle pressure of family example and culture; second at what she said and inferred about writing and work itself; finally this chapter considers what others who practice her art today have to say about their editing goals and methods. None of these can solve the mystery of creativity, but they help to surround it with a network of possibilities. A hint at answers to those overlapping questions may be the opening of a letter to Susan Dickinson when she was twenty-three: "*Write! Comrade, Write!*" (L105).

Five years after she wrote this note at the top of the letter that was entirely a poem, she selected that poem—minus the admonition at the top of the page—for her first "book." One senses that she is not only rallying Sue but also herself to diligence at her life's work. Although most Dickinsonians date the debut of Emily Dickinson as a self-conscious, serious poet from the first letter to Higginson in 1862, her evolution in her vocation was lifelong and almost inevitable. That, beginning in 1858, she went beyond the creation of individual Acts of Light to the self-publication of some forty books was only somewhat less inevitable.

In the first place, as Higginson's preface to the 1890 edition points out, Dickinson worked within a tradition well established, particularly in New England, that of the Portfolio Poet. Although Emerson's description of the private poet makes such a label for Dickinson pejorative, the "portfolio" tradition of private, unedited poetry provided Dickinson with a niche among contemporaries steeped in the romantic tradition.⁸ Emerson's description of earlier writers does not match Dickinson's method: "[B]eing not written for publication, they lack . . . finish [and] rhythmical polish," he had said, and even worse, "These are proper Manuscript inspirations, honest, great, but crude. . . . The writer was not afraid to write ill" (1912, 147).

However demeaning to our ears Emerson's words may seem (in the context of the romantic tradition in mid-nineteenth-century America they would not have seemed so), perhaps Higginson's use of the term tended to influence Dickinson's earliest carping critics. And if she wrote "portfolio poetry" in any sense of Emerson's description, she was in good company. Far from crude but certainly private (for a while) were the earlier lyrics of Anne Bradstreet, whose poems were also "robbed" of her and published widely. Two hundred years

after Bradstreet declared herself “obnoxious to each carping tongue,”⁹ women writers outside the portfolio tradition, from the widely read Lydia Sigourney to Dickinson’s friend and neighbor Helen Hunt Jackson, produced individual collections, often small and flower-bordered, and filled the pages of the proliferating gilded anthologies. Such American women and their British sisters, Jean Ingelow and Barrett Browning, anticipated an answer to Romney’s challenge in Barrett Browning’s influential *Aurora Leigh* (1856):

Women as you are,
 Mere women, personal and passionate,
 You give us doating mothers and perfect wives,
 Sublime Madonnas and enduring saints!
 We get no Christ from you—and verily
 We shall not get a poet in my mind (II:44).

Unless Barrett Browning’s Romney meant a “genuine” poet in the Marianne Moore (“Poetry”) sense, he was wrong. It was an age, as Hawthorne put it, of “Scribbling Women.” Their work filled the voluminous literary journals and those gilded anthologies covered and dotted with pictures of curly-headed soulful women, but none to my knowledge was as original, startling, culturally resistant, and funny as Dickinson, who famously resisted such a context as those volumes provided. As St. Armand says, Dickinson “was of her age as well as beyond it” (1984, 12).

Second, she came from a writing family. Tireless and careful correspondents, Dickinson’s parents courted through letters and, although the results, edited by Vivian Pollak, lack anything approaching the range, charm, and surprises of those of their daughter, they reveal respect for daily writing. Dickinson’s own practice of writing letters to some ninety-three known correspondents in her life (Tingley 1987, 15) was bound so tightly to the writing of poetry that the two enterprises are sometimes difficult to differentiate. Family members wrote everything from doggerel to serious essays. Alfred Habegger goes so far as to say of rather sappy verses of the young Emily’s mother (also Emily) that “These lines [the rather pathetic quatrain he quotes] from just before [the young poet’s birth] could not be mistaken” for Dickinson’s, but they do reflect the “consolatory purpose” of some of Dickinson’s work (2001, 67).

From childhood Dickinson was encouraged to write vividly. As a school-girl she wrote “strikingly original” compositions and probably contributed to a school publication called “Forest Leaves” (Sewall 1974/1980, 342, 350). By the time she was twenty, she had seen her work (“Valentine Eve”) in print; even though it was far from her later quality, the unsigned poem in *The Indicator*, which begins with the traditional invocation, “Awake ye muses nine,” announced that another Dickinson had joined the ranks of writers.

Third, as even the rather labored and artificial valentine shows, Dickinson had a gift. For all the discipline and craft she brought to refining, containing, and continuing her enterprise, Dickinson reminds us at the close of Fascicle 21 that the initial impulse for poetry—as with Frost’s “lump in the throat, a homesickness, a heartsickness”—was “Given to [her] by / the Gods” (J454, Fr455, F21). It often came to Dickinson unsought: “A Thought went up my Mind” (J701, Fr731, F35), she says, or “It struck me—every Day / . . . And let the Fire through— / . . . It Blistered to my dream—” (J362, Fr636, F31). As easily as the gift of poetry could come, she acknowledged in these poems, it could drift away, as these poems continue. Another might seem to play into Franklin’s conclusion that the fascicle project was an effort of safekeeping and retrieval:

Heavenly moments . . . [are like]
 A Grant of the Divine—
 That Certain as it Comes—
 Withdraws—and leaves the
 dazzled Soul
 In her unfurnished Rooms (J393, Fr560, F27)

No doubt the books did help her to save and order the fruits of those heavenly moments, but, along with the tricky evidence within the fascicles, there’s this: Dickinson “decided to be Distinguished,” as she told her cousin Louise Norcross (L199). Child of Puritan overachievers, whose influence was strong, she had at age fifteen crowed that her one composition of the term “was exceedingly edifying to myself as well as everybody else. Don’t you want to see it?” (L6 to Abiah Root). She teased her “Brother Pegasus” over his verses (L110), and she made no secret of her desire to make Sue and Austin “proud of me—sometime—a great way off” (L238 in that remarkable correspondence with Sue about “Alabaster Chambers”). Problematic as her relationship to print may have become, letters and poems attest to the personal ambition of Emily Dickinson from a young age. Natural gifts, a fine education, parental encouragement, hard work, and ambition, however, do not necessarily lead to great poetry; as Vivian Pollak says, “great art has a human history” (1988, introduction). The personal and spiritual dramas, along with the reading that took life in her mind and poems, have been the subject of most other Dickinson studies. Precisely what led Dickinson to accept the directions of lines in her library—Emerson’s to “insist on [her]self” and of Thomas à Kempis to “Fly the tumultuousness of the world as much as thou canst” and work daily (or nightly)—is unrecoverable.

Unrecoverable, too, is the precise impetus for gathering her poems into booklets. Well documented, although not in the fascicle context, is the influence of

Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, written two years before Dickinson gathered her first book. Itself a full novel in verse, it might provide a source in that its eponymous writing heroine says, "Behold at last, a book. . . . If life-blood's fertilizing, I wrung mine / On every leaf of this" (Part V, 168). Another of her favorite writers, Emily Brontë, made prepublication books, first copying them into one notebook, from which she rearranged them for another. Margaret Homans says of Brontë's practice that "the apparent care with which the poems were chosen and arranged indicates . . . [that] she is consciously developing a myth of the imagination" (108–9). Whether Dickinson knew this fact or not, she must have known that such a practice was common for professional writers. Chances are she *was* following traditions of those she so admired and about whom she did read as much as she could. Barrett Browning, "that Foreign Lady" ("I think I was enchanted" [J593, Fr627, F29]), whose picture hung on Dickinson's bedroom wall, appeared in many letters, especially those to Bowles and Higginson in 1862. As for Brontë, who died in 1848 when Dickinson was an impressionable eighteen, probably devouring obituary stories, she was a "favorite" of Dickinson's. So said Higginson, who read from Brontë at Dickinson's funeral.

Martha Nell Smith has uncovered an inspiration much closer to home than these, however. She discovered in "a commonplace book of Sue's" that "tucked inside of it was a fascicle of poems in Sue's early handwriting (1850s). They were not her poems but were poems from Prescott, Poe, and others." Smith concludes that "fascicle-making was part of the manuscript culture in which Dickinson was deeply embedded." Along with the fascicle of Sue's, Smith found one made by Sue's sister Martha (not her daughter Martha). As Smith has been telling the rest of us for a long time, "we, in the twentieth century, have been seeing Emily's [works] through the machine of the printed book." Dickinson, on the other hand, saw her works as part of a culture that was all around her, that of the handmade book.¹⁰

Thus, the inspiration for the fascicle project may not be entirely irrecoverable. What is certainly recoverable—thanks to Lavinia, whose determination to bring her sister's work to print took her to Sue and then to Mabel Loomis Todd and Higginson—is the result. As I outlined briefly in the first chapter, thanks to the Harvard and Amherst libraries, whose troves both Johnson and Franklin used, and, of course, thanks to Franklin one may read Dickinson in an almost unmediated form. Recovering the intentional and serendipitous surprises Dickinson left there is both simplified and compounded by the self-publications.

It is simplified because one discards the usual complications of arriving at authorial intentionality that McGann explored in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983). Because Dickinson had no editor, unless she collaborated with Sue—and this possibility is tantalizing, especially to scholars

such as Martha Nell Smith—there is no mediating editor or printer. The authorial construct is free of the "history of transmission and . . . history of production" (121–23). Reading the fascicles eliminates the problems of authorial intention that McGann posed: Gone is the difficulty of "choosing less-than-final intentions" because a reading of a particular edition "will capture . . . someone else's intentions" (34); gone is the peril of problematical readings that result from using a text produced by "a struggle between the pen of the author, the pencil of the editor, and the mechanized tools of the printer" (48).

One need not, as McGann puts it, "try to reconstruct a lost original document" (66). Franklin has completed that heroic task. Both his own account of his process and the internal evidence of the results, the reconstituted fascicles, indicate the extent of his accuracy. We need not "distinguish . . . between a history of transmission and a history of production" (123) because the fascicles were not publicly transmitted. With Dickinson's fascicles, alone in the canon of major writers, except perhaps for Blake's illuminated privately printed books and Whitman's visions and revisions in *Leaves of Grass*, editorial changes (in the form of Dickinson's variants) "spring from a single *fons et origo*" (49). McGann's reminder that "the very term 'authority' suggests the author is taken to be—for critical purposes—the ultimate locus of a text's authority" is particularly true of the fascicles. Leaving aside important questions such as the existence of more than the known forty fascicles and the whereabouts of some of the missing leaves Franklin lists in his appendix, what remains is Dickinson's own work.

On the other hand, recovering Dickinson's intentions is complicated by the contradictory statements Dickinson wrote about "print" and "publication" and the lack of any known comments about the forty books she was binding, except possible hints such as "I've nothing else—to bring, / You know— / So I keep bringing These—" (J224, Fr253, F10). Any conclusion about whether Dickinson yearned to have her "letter to the World" (J441, Fr519, F24) read or she sincerely disdained publication, that being "foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin" (L265 to Higginson), must be highly provisional. Both of these last comments were recorded in 1862, her *annus mirabilis*. All we know is that she apparently did not choose to publish in print, except in a small way, as Karen Danderand discovered, in support of the war effort.

The concomitant difficulty, however, is in judging whether Dickinson intended the books (or the poems within them) to be read as finished. This is not a problem imposed by those almost private productions of Blake and Whitman. We do not know to what extent her books, the fascicles, are those she might have left had she decided on or been offered encouragement and a trusted collaborative editor. I am not alone in being grateful that she did not have such help, although some contemporary poets, such as Marilyn Nelson,

whose help I elicited for this chapter, praise such collaborations. Dickinson's habit of altering lineation, punctuation, and diction in versions of poems she sent to differing recipients and in the poems she repeats in a second fascicle is witness to her resistance to closure. That openness is what encourages the reader who must insist on this as Dickinson's own form of self-publication to play with her, a play validated by the closest possible reading.

Play—deeply serious play—is what those who have read and written about Dickinson and who are practicing poets themselves report as an attitude in their editing. Fifteen American poets weighed in on my questions to them about the challenge of selecting and placing poems in their places. Although they *do* write for print, most of them in differing ways agreed that Dickinson, who did *not*, was probably self-conscious as an editor and probably faced the same kinds of decisions as they did. Their helpful comments are recorded in greater detail in Gudrun Grabher and Martina Antretter's collection, *Emily Dickinson at Home*; I excerpt from the sometimes long letters they wrote in response to my questions, not to *prove* that Dickinson worked in the same way but to show the common habits and attitudes and to suggest that Dickinson may well have shared their agony in decision making and their joy in the finished products.

“Low at [Their] problem bending”: Dickinson's Fellow Editors

To be sure the poets do not speak in one voice, but there are enough similarities to make it possible to imagine Dickinson in her own workshop. Among the fifteen are Richard Wilbur, whose “Sumptuous Destitution” essay is basic to Dickinson scholarship; Alicia Ostriker, who devotes much of her *Stealing the Language* (1986) to the woman she calls “America's first radically experimental poet, and . . . the first woman poet whose poetic language and structures systematically register and resist the dominance of masculinity and rationality in culture” (43); and Sandra Gilbert, whose groundbreaking *Madwoman in the Attic*, with Susan Gubar ([1979] 1984), helped to shape subsequent thought on Dickinson.

Wilbur, Ostriker, Gilbert, and other practicing poets—most of them with more than two or three volumes of published work—talked about their practices in weaving poems into new volumes and offered educated guesses about Dickinson's. Charles Wright and Richard Wilbur were the only poets among the fifteen who said that chronology is the largest factor in their editorial arrangements of poems. Wilbur, for example, sounds much like Franklin about Dickinson:

A collection of mine generally contains all the satisfactory poems which have been written since the last collection. Each poem of mine exhausts my present

sense of the subject, so that I don't write suites or clusters of poems on a single theme, and don't aim at unity. When the poems of a book of mine cohere, it is simply because I wrote them and have certain persistent concerns."

Nevertheless, Wilbur, who elsewhere in his letter acknowledged that, for example, the openings of his collection are carefully considered, is somewhat guardedly open to the notion that Dickinson may have made use of more complex arrangements: "I think it quite possible that she, like Yeats or Stevens, was conscious of creating thematically clustered poems, and bound some of her related pieces together."

Unlike Wilbur, who makes the process sound almost effortless (his books seem to me to belie that), most respondents (see Appendix A) spoke of the labor and thought, almost the agony, they invest in putting poems in their places and voiced strong suspicions that Dickinson worked with similar intentionality. So many spoke of the process as happening "on the floor" that we turn with new interest (perhaps even amusement) to Dickinson's comments on her familiarity with the floor: "[T]he Dust behind I strove to join / Unto the Disk before— / But Sequence ravelled out of Sound / Like balls upon a Floor" (J992, Fr867). Dust balls bouncing around, frustrating order, suggest a metaphor for the difficulties of ordering the piles of poems. Elsewhere she says, "The Pile of years is not so high / As when you came before / But it is rising every Day / From recollection's Floor" (J1507, Fr1337). Such metaphoric "floors" in Dickinson's vocabulary are palpable to Betty Adcock, who says, "For me a book arrangement usually means sitting on the floor with all my new poems, spreading them out around me and grouping them. . . . This can take days, and no one can walk on that floor! I group and regroup, sometimes toward variety and sometimes toward relationships between poems." Linda Pastan offers the same picture, saying that when she has "fifty or sixty poems finished, I spread them around me and try to discover which deserve to be in a book and how these relate to each other." Alicia Ostriker speaks of the "horribly hard, confusing work of selecting and rejecting and then . . . *arranging*" poems. "The floor," she says, "gets covered with poems, grouped into various categories, regrouped, sequenced, exchanged with each other; the order shifts and re-shifts, the sections of the book form and change places." Annie Finch tells a similar story, saying that she works until her poems follow "each other with the kind of tension and inevitability I required." These poets and more remind of us of Dickinson:

Low at my problem bending,
 Another problem comes—
 Larger than mine—Serenes—
 Involving statelier sums.

I check my busy pencil,
 My figures file away.
 Wherefore, my baffled fingers
 Thy perplexity? (J69, Fr75, F5)

These practicing poets speak of the balance of work and intuition, Wilbur saying that the process of arranging a book “is an intuitive process; some of my decisions are nothing I can explain,” and Alicia Ostriker likens the work to that of a painter:

You’ve seen a painter working at a canvas, stepping back to look at what’s just been done in the upper right-hand corner, and going back to the painting to fiddle with something in the middle left . . . the process of creating a composition in which every part coheres is more complicated than the painter could *describe* to you—but that is what artistry is all about.

Sometimes, according to the poets, the process is beyond even what we might call “intuition.” Sandra Gilbert wrote of a complete suspension of logic in relation to the birth of *Ghost Volcano*. She was working, she explained, on a different collection when in the wake of the shock of her husband’s sudden death, “One night I actually dreamed a solution” to the problem of fitting one poem into the collection on which she was working. That poem, “Widow’s Walk,” became crucial to *Volcano*, the new book she would soon be completing.

For the most part, though, indescribable as the process seems to be to poets, they indicated the great care they invest in editing. Every single correspondent spoke of the importance of first and last poems in a sequence. Even Wilbur, whose earlier comments seemed to understate the difficulties, says, “I incline to feel that the first poem of one of my books should not stump the reader.” Allowing the obvious response that *all* of Dickinson’s poems “stump the reader” to some extent, we recall that the first of each sequence studied so far indicates the direction in which the remainder of the poems will go. Julie Fay, Sandra Gilbert, and Natasha Saje particularly emphasize the importance of entrances and exits from sequences in books. Do they write poems specifically for sequences? Excluding those who write intentional sequences almost as narratives (Charles Wright, for example, and Julie Fay in her first book), most poets say that they do not often write “to fill a gap.”

Saje speaks of the “trajectory” of the poems within a collection, “a trajectory from fixity to play, disorder, openness . . . from constraint to possibility”; Linda Pastan speaks of the “shape of a book (its opening and closing, the way poems face each other on the page).” These, says Pastan, “are all important to me, [but] I never think about them while I am actually writing.” The poets’

attempts to describe their process and their products find varying metaphors, all of them helpful in describing the fascicles of Emily Dickinson. Debra Kang Dean speaks of the poems in a collection as "cluster[ing] together like iron filings"; John Solensten speaks of "multiple unitary devices" that cluster like "prism shards." Turning the figure, he speaks of them as akin to "musical structures—ragtime and jazz and the fugue with theme and voices and the dying away of voices." Almost all speak of the poems in "dialogue" with each other, a pattern that we have already seen, particularly in the two poems (Prose/Poetry; Still/De-stilled; and so forth) in Fascicle 21, with which this study began. The next chapter offers many more examples.

These practices and patterns are as old as Petrarch, who, says Neil Fraistat, "rearranged *Canzoniere* nine times." Fraistat points out that Petrarch "visualized *Canzoniere* as an elastic form: one allowing him to shape and reshape all of the shorter poems he wished to acknowledge publicly within an overarching if continually refocused vision" (1986, 6). Each essay in Fraistat's collection, as each of the letters poets wrote in response to my questions, tries a different metaphor, but all of them acknowledge an impulse toward shape.

Such is what I have attempted in the previous four chapters, using as a sort of test case the effect of a duplicate in each of the four fascicles (8 and 21, each with its own version of "The feet of people walking home," and 6 and 10, each with a rather radically revised "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"). To round out the enticement for others to do their own readings, I offer one more chapter in which I show that from her first to last fascicle Dickinson's words *live* (as Higginson resisted telling her they did) in extraordinary contextual relationships. The Amy Lowell-type play has yielded discoveries that I don't think evolved from my own ear (as Franklin warns). The discoveries—these doublings, mirrorings, and other patterns of themes, images, syllables, and sounds *are*, in fact, Dickinson's—the only ones we have outside of the contexts she provides in letters. Dickinson may or may not have been conscious of all the contextuality of relationships within the fascicles any more than she might have been of the intertextuality observed in virtually every thematic study of her work. That is not to say such findings as those in the next chapter are not valid. She encouraged them in "A word is dead / When it is said, / Some say." Her answer to what "some say" is "I say it just / Begins to live / That day" (J1212, Fr278).