

**Reading the Fascicles of  
Emily Dickinson  
Dwelling in Possibilities**

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## Dickinson's Aesthetics and Fascicle 21

Midway through a fascicle that is midway through her entire self-publishing project Emily Dickinson declared her aesthetic principles. In Fascicle 21 she copied, facing each other, two poems that, as far as we know, she had never sent to any correspondent and that were not published—and then separately—until more than thirty years after Dickinson's death: "They shut me up in Prose—" (J613, Fr445) and "This was a Poet—" (J448, Fr446).<sup>1</sup> Fifty years and generations of commentaries on the poems in isolation from each other passed before Ralph W. Franklin's *Manuscript Books* (1981) allowed us to see Dickinson's own settings for the poems in what she must have thought of as a matched set. Read together, in this the only "published" context she provided for them (Fascicle 21), the poems reveal the full scope of Dickinson's claim for the ultimate possibilities of her art.

As happens again and again in reading Dickinson's "poems in their places," a term I borrow from Neil Fraistat, the two poems speak to each other across the page, each opening up interpretive possibilities for the other. Although they come from the middle of her opus, they provide a suitable beginning, a test case for a revolutionary way to read Emily Dickinson and an opening to a discussion that I hope offers new ways to teach her. Here are two poems, both of them familiar to Dickinson readers as disparate entities; when explored together, however, as they concatenate against each other, as they echo and speak to each other across the page, they become new artifacts by virtue of their proximity. On the left, sixth in a series of seventeen poems, is the image of the speaker who resists being "shut me up in Prose—"; on the right, seventh in the series, is a triumphant response to that resistance in the exploration of why "This was a Poet—." On these pages "Prose," visually, almost viscerally, confronts "Poetry."

"Prose," a word that occurs only one other place in Dickinson's poetry, and that, tellingly, in "I dwell in Possibility— / A fairer house than Prose" (J657, Fr466, F22),<sup>2</sup> is the subject of a poem in which the speaker is a Houdini-bird. Later in this chapter I discuss the ways in which this poem also gathers images from previous poems within Fascicle 21; for now, let me focus on the ways it plays against the poem it confronts in the opened fascicle.

They shut me up in Prose—  
 As when a little Girl  
 They put me in the Closet—  
 Because they liked me 'still'—

recalls the speaker of the poem on the left. Across the page the speaker applauds:

This was a Poet—  
 It is That—  
 Distills amazing sense  
 From ordinary Meanings—  
 And Attar so immense

The poet is also, as the encomium (perhaps to Elizabeth Barrett Browning)<sup>3</sup> suggests, one who "Arrests" the "familiar species / That perished by the Door"; one who "Discloses" the Picture; one who is "Entitled" to "a Fortune." Each poem (almost always read without the other) is rich enough to sustain many an essay—and each has. For example, although Sewall cautions against reading the first poem as a "complaint against repression" (1980, 322), others, notably Karl Keller (1979, 186–87) and Maryanne Garbowsky (1989, 86), link the fear of criticism implied in "They shut me up in Prose" to the poet's relationship with her family and her fear of entrapment. Reading the first verse of this poem as it faces the first verse of "This was a Poet" confirms Sewall's point that literal incarceration and deprivation are less important to Dickinson than her sense of "herself as a poet." The onomatopoeic snap of that first line—"They shut me up in Prose"—offers a thesis; the image of the poet (in the poem on the opposite page) as the "Discloser," opening the door of that closet, offers the antithesis. The fact that the "they's" liked the "little Girl" to be "still" is the thesis; that the poet "distills" is the homophonic antithesis.

To be "shut up in Prose," to be "still" has horrifying Dickinsonian resonances. It is to be dead or dead-in-life. The poet had suggested that meaning in the punning end to "Some things that fly" (J89, Fr68, F3): "How still the Riddle lies!" This stillness is eerier and more oppressive than physical death;

it is the claustrophobia of trying to live with stolid minds, with "the stultifying prosaic, the leaden" (Bell 1988, 152), with "stasis, finality and absence of affective energy" (Stonum 1990, 120). It is a tremendous feat that the poet can "Distill." Along with the literal meanings of the line—to distill is to produce a heady liquor or a heavenly perfume (the Attar from the Rose)—and along with the way the use of the word echoes Emerson's "The Poet"<sup>4</sup>—the word "Distill" is also clearly a pun in this, Dickinson's own context. Emphasizing the speaker's repugnance at an imposed stillness—a state far from the dreamlike suspension of personality and prejudice associated with Negative Capability—the speaker of J613, Fr445 repeats defiantly:

Still! Could themself have peeped—  
 And seen my Brain—go round—  
 They might as wise have lodged  
 a Bird  
 For Treason—in the Pound—

The impossibility of doing so, of confining the Nightingale's apparently treasonous brain and voice by capturing it in a "Pound," defined in Dickinson's lexicon<sup>5</sup> as a place for cattle or the beasts "taken in trespassing, or going at large in violation of the law," is made both more clear and more ironic by its placement and resulting play with words. In this context the poet is the de-stiller, the de-stabilizer, the defiant.

Read thus, the crisp and ambiguous "That" in the poem on the right ("It is That") is less mysterious. An asexual reference to the poet who is the subject of its own poem, it is also a further discussion of the bird that can escape the stultifying house of prose—and that can allow those of us who follow the mental gymnastics to do so as well. Read in the context of the fascicle in which it appears, the "treason" in "They shut me up in Prose—" faces one of Dickinson's synonyms for the poet, as one who "arrested" meaning. The closeted would-be-poet/bird in the poem on the left removes herself farther and farther as poet/bird segues into bird/star, looking down from vast heights. As bird, she—or rather—"Himself" laughs at the misguided audacity of the "they"s to contain her. As did Whitman, this poet declares active, timeless, spaceless, eternal existence.

## Discovering and Naming the Fascicles

As Whitman, too, but with less self-congratulation (and less of a coterie), this poet published herself. I will return to the effect Emily Dickinson's self-publication project has on the way we read the two poems in Fascicle 21 that declare her artistic purposes. First, let me set the scene for their appearance

on these two pages. When she died in 1886, Emily Dickinson left in “the old mahogany bureau . . . her friends’ letters marked to be burned unread, and her own manuscript poems,” reports her niece and future biographer and editor, Martha Dickinson Bianchi (1924, 102). Most interesting among the latter were the little volumes Bianchi describes as “slender packages [tied up] with a single thread.” We may balk at the devoted niece’s description of the Amherst poet as “another Lady of Shalott [working] at her subtler tapestries that were to amaze her readers when her little boat had drifted down to Camelot forever” (ibid., 86) but not at Bianchi’s notion of these little books as subtle tapestries, tied literally and figuratively with, if not “a single thread,” then with discrete and discoverable threads. Tracing these threads enables a bracing and perhaps more grounded (in Dickinson’s own choices) way of reading the poet than had been available before the books were reconstituted by Ralph Franklin and presented to Dickinson readers in 1981.

Whitman called his gatherings—all five versions of them—“Leaves of Grass.” What Dickinson herself called the (at least) forty little books, each made of four to seven prefolded (not nested) stationery sheets bound with thick string, we do not know. References to “my books,” “a little manuscript volume,” “portfolios of verses,” and “the little pamphlet” (L444a, L937a, L193) tantalize, but the name her first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, gave them links them etymologically with Whitman’s “leaves.” Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, simplified her mother’s term “fascicules” to “fascicles.” According to the *OED* a fascicle is “a bunch, bundle . . . a cluster of leaves or flowers . . . a tuft . . . a bunch of roots growing from one point” and, of course, “a part, number, livraison (of a work published by instalments).” These books, then, are Dickinson’s own leaves of grass. As Whitman bids us “read these leaves . . . every year of your life,” Dickinson also admonished her “Sweet—countrymen—” to read her “Letters to the World” and “Judge tenderly—of Me” (J441, Fr519, F24). The poet who punned would have appreciated the possibilities in a related word, “fasces”: “a bundle of rods bound up with an axe in the middle [with] its blade projecting. These rods were carried by lictors before the superior magistrates at Rome as emblem of their power.” Todd’s word for Dickinson’s manuscript books, then, is more appropriate than she or her daughter probably realized. The term, not an unusual one for writers in the “portfolio tradition,” relates both to a nourishing, beautiful, and organic unit (grass, flowers) and to a sharp, sometimes cutting, symbol for power.

As was Whitman (about whom she famously claimed not to know—“I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful” (L261)—Dickinson is self-consciously representative of and speaking directly to us, her “Sweet—countrymen,” to whom she pleads for a “tender” judgment. As the fascicle study reaches a new stage, how to judge her in her own context is

the problem this book poses. What Amy Lowell said about the challenge of reading Dickinson long before the Franklin reconstitution project was imagined is multiplied by reading her in this, the only context she provided for her work with the important and now much discussed exception of the inclusion of poems in letters:<sup>6</sup> "I think she'd be exacting, / Without intention possibly, and ask / A thousand tight-rope tricks of understanding." As Lowell imagines the visit with Emily Dickinson, she anticipates the energy and alertness readers need for reading Dickinson in her fascicles: "But, bless you," she says, "I would somersault all day / If by so doing I might stay with her."<sup>7</sup> Although for years Dickinson was read in imperfect editions,<sup>8</sup> her work invited readers to do what Lowell implies in her "tight-rope tricks," her somersaulting. Now the delights of the game—if you will—are even more difficult and delightful. Now Dickinson's own choice of placement for lyrics into "fascicles," available in reconstituted form in Ralph Franklin's 1981 *Manuscript Books*, invites current readers to discover and accompany Dickinson on the mental gymnastic feats they reveal.

Describing the fascicles, the only unmediated way of reading the poet, Richard Sewall calls them "her private substitute for publication or, most important for us, her notion of the way her poems should be presented to the world" (1980, 538); Maryanne Garbowsky speaks of them as "private acts of publication . . . a lens through which a more focused angle of vision is possible" (1989, 77–78); and Martha Nell Smith speaks of them as one of the strategies by which Dickinson controls the gender and political limitations of print and "expos[es] the ideological presumptions driving insistence on textual 'resolution.'" They are, says Smith from her vantage point as specialist in the letter manuscripts (and most recently as director of the Dickinson hypermedia-text project), "works that call all our modes of textual regulation into question" (1985, 57) and that force readers "to rethink . . . critical methods" (*ibid.*, 56).

Those who have been interested enough to read Dickinson through these private substitutes for publication (these acts and performances) struggle with questions of intentionality. Although Jerome Loving declared the Franklin publication "the event for this year," noting that *The Manuscript Books* may also change the way we look at individual poems" (1981, 84–85), they immediately created controversy. For example, not everyone agrees with Willis Buckingham, who, in his review of the then-new *Manuscript Books*, proposed that each fascicle "may well constitute an intended sequence of interrelated poems" (1984, 614), or with Rosenthal and Gall, who went even further, discussing them as precursors of "the modern poetic sequence" (1983, 56).<sup>9</sup> Such proclamations were challenged before they were even uttered.

Franklin himself calls the fascicles "simply, poems copied onto sheets of stationery and, without elaboration, bound together. . . . They served

Dickinson as her workshop" (1983, 16–17). Robert Weisbuch concurs. In his 1983 review of the early reception of Franklin's work he slams Rosenthal and Gall for reading them as more than that: "Nearly every poem they treat," he declares, "is misread. More importantly, their fascicle narrative shows not a jot more coherence than one could derive from any random grouping of any of Dickinson's poems" (1983, 94).<sup>10</sup> David Porter follows the skeptical line of Franklin and Weisbuch. Although he says that Dickinson assembled her books "quite deliberately" and that the fascicles are the "sole repository of Dickinson's publications and thus take us closer to the poet's intention than we have ever been before," Porter also believes that Dickinson's motive was, simply, "to reduce disorder in her manuscripts" and that she "placed poems on the fascicle sheets according to the space available" (1983, 85). I do not lightly flaunt these daunting doubts—nor have others.

Although—or because—there is no consensus about the purpose of, significance of, or most appropriate way to read the *Manuscript Books*, studying Dickinson through her fascicles "promises to be one of the great voyages of discovery in modern criticism" (Rosenthal and Gall 1983, 73). The discovery has gotten off to a slow and somewhat rocky start. In the 1980s, in spite of incrementally proliferating studies of Dickinson's psyche and poetic methods, the possibilities inherent in the newly published *Manuscript Books* seem remarkably underobserved. Evaluations such as those by Porter, Weisbuch, and Buckingham were rare. Rummaging through issues of some seventeen journals that carry Dickinson-related articles uncovers little mention of the epoch-making event other than, in some, the publisher's advertisement.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a few articles and two full-length studies—radically different from each other—were on the way.

In 1983 William Shurr offered the first full-length study in his version of what he saw as evidence in the fascicle sequence of the "marriage" between Dickinson and the Reverend Wadsworth; in 1986 Martha Lindblom O'Keefe identified the entire sequence as religious reflections following the Catholic tradition of St. John of the Cross; in 1993 Sharon Cameron reversed the tone of fascicle studies by selecting fascicles (primarily 13, 14, 15, 16, and 20) to shed light on what is more interesting to her than personal or religious sources, the ontological implications of the variants within individual poems; and in 1995 Dorothy Oberhaus found Fascicle 40 to be the culmination of a conversion narrative. At least four dissertations and a half-dozen articles have offered substantial discussions of the value of reading Dickinson in the context she provided, the fascicles.

Vigorous, even occasionally contentious, discussion about what the fascicles represent is in keeping with the entire publishing history of the poet. Complex and often baffling ("All men say 'What' to me," as she told the powerful editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson [L271]), Dickinson herself set the

tone. On the one hand, she initiated a lifelong correspondence with Higginson in response to his famous challenge to women poets; on the other hand, this New Englander, an aristocrat deeply influenced at an early age both by the eleemosynary teachings of Mary Lyon and by the transcendentalists' abhorrence of the marketplace, staunchly decreed that "Publication—is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man—" (J709, Fr788 F37). Her own self-contradictory statements about publication are reflected in the cautionary words of major scholars: Weisbuch, Franklin, Porter, and others. There are reasons to be cautious about manuscript studies (though the one or two scholars who call it a "fetish" seem unduly wary). Perhaps they are thinking of some of the few studies that have begun the "great voyage" of fascicle reading, variously freighted with assumptions and theories of the readers themselves. Unavoidable and appropriate as this is, as Stanley Fish has convinced us, some of these readings tend to limit the possibilities that make the difference, as Dickinson implies in those paired poems, between prose and poetry. Anything as reductive as a single story seems to shut the little girl up again in that closet.

Stories are tempting, however, and those few that have been offered have persuaded many. William Shurr, the first to offer a reading after Franklin made fascicle study possible, finds a provocative one. Shurr's *Marriage of Emily Dickinson* (1983) posits that the entire forty-fascicle sequence is a narrative of a frustrated passion, but one that spurred the narrator's (in Shurr's view, that of the poet herself) explosion of writing. To make his claim, one widely quoted, even in the space of a major book, Shurr, of course, had to be selective, picking those lyrics that supported his narrative of a life-changing meeting with a clergyman; an erotic, anguished attachment, especially on a particular day "at Summer's full"; a painful separation; and more—all suggested as literal. Radically different in her conclusions but similar to Shurr in assuming a unifying narrative voice in the forty fascicles is Dorothy Oberhaus, who posits that Fascicle 40 is the culmination of the narrator's spiritual quest, that in the final fascicle the poetic "I" is "the meditator," who is represented as addressing Christ and herself" (1995, 29). Oberhaus says that "until one sees that the fascicles are the account of a long spiritual and poetic pilgrimage," one will not understand "the Christian nature of her mind and art" (187).

Shurr and Oberhaus reflect major lines of autobiographical inquiry: one involves Dickinson's romantic/sexual life, the other her spiritual quest. Both are debated vigorously. Almost every critical biography, including the newest by Alfred Habegger (2001), offers candidates for the "Master," for example. Just as much print has been devoted to the debate between those who discover heterodox beliefs (Dickinson stamps her foot at God), on the one hand, and those who have found devotional messages for sermons on the other.<sup>12</sup>



Readers might differ on how appropriate such discussions are to the poet who said "I hide myself / within my flower" (J903, Fr80, F3, and F40) but who also cautioned Higginson not to confuse her with the "I" who is the "supposed person" (L268).

Readings such as those of Shurr and Oberhaus (different as they are from each other) form one approach to the fascicles thus far: to follow what the reader sees as something approaching a narrative. Another has been to sample the fascicles and apply to them principles of contemporary literary theory. In a sense that original work of Rosenthal and Gall, the subject of Weisbuch's scorn, a study of Fascicles 15 and 16 that likened them not to narratives but rather to the "modern poetic sequence," was such a study. Although it used different critical premises, another theoretical discussion was Paul Gallipeo's 1984 dissertation, which likened Fascicle 17 to a "unified structured link-poem" and to "a magnet or electrical field . . . created by its component parts and transformed by those same parts" (101).

The most notable example, however, a stunning model of the application of theory to simple observations, is Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing* (1992). Cameron admits that Dickinson's work is not "sceneless" when taken in fascicle context and that "scenes and subjects can be said to unfold between and among the poems as well as within them" (4); she argues forcefully that the fascicles are witness to Dickinson's resistance to closure. Far from unlocking a secret or telling a story, the fascicles, says Cameron, "embody the problem of identity," particularly in the variants that indicate intentional resistance to closure. The fascicles are indications not of "leanness" but of an "excess of meaning" (43).

Cameron's focus on the variants is an example of a growing interest in the *how* of Dickinson's presentations over the *what*. Susan Howe, Paula Bennett, Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Hart, and Jerome McGann have pointed increasingly to the look of the poem or letter, to what Bennett (1992) calls the "Spectral Presence in Dickinson's Letters" and what McGann calls "Emily Dickinson's Visible Language" (1993). Such interest in the appearance of the texts, an interest that predates the reconstitution of the fascicles (see, for example, James Miller's discussion of Dickinson's "Bright Orthography" [1967]) and is not limited in applicability to the fascicles (see Paul Crumbley's *Inflections of the Pen* [1996]), informs my readings of the texts. With such readers, I am almost as interested in the play of black on white, on the uses of space, on the nonverbal marks, as in the diction and imagery themselves. Margaret Dickie ends an instructive review of such scholarship with an invitation: "Known as the author of her poetry, Dickinson must now be studied as its editor and publisher" (1995, 332).

I come to this study with neither a conviction that the fascicles tell a unified story of passion (whether of spirit or of body, although traces of narrative

wind through single "books") nor a willingness to attribute to Dickinson a prophetic sympathy for postmodern critical theory, although her poetry and her aesthetic principles anticipate, for example, Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory.<sup>13</sup> My study owes much to the scholarship of hundreds of others, but it is primarily the result of simply looking long enough at the fascicles, armed with Dickinson's dictionary and my own open mind. As Ruth Miller suggested readers do when she made a first foray into fascicle studies even before the corrected version was reproduced, I have tried to "let Dickinson's voice guide" me (1968, 8)—rather, to let her *voices* guide, for, as Cameron insists, the fascicles as an entire project and as single entities are as resistant to closure as the individual poems that compose them. My readings will no doubt be as challenged as have those of Shurr, Oberhaus, and others. Such a dialogue, entirely appropriate in textual studies, particularly those dealing with the self-contradictory Dickinson, will be healthy. I hope that the *method* of looking at the poems—as they present themselves on the page—closely and with an open mind provides another model for the reading and teaching of the Bird freed from the Pound.

My reading, then, joins the fray that Dickinson anticipated when she said that her "Wars are laid away in Books" (J1549, Fr1579). The wars did not begin with Franklin's work on the fascicles. Few poets have created such feisty publication battles. If they began when Dickinson uttered nearly opposite proclamations about publishing, they were fully joined shortly after her sister Lavinia, who had discovered the forty little volumes in that "mahogany bureau,"<sup>14</sup> took them to sister-in-law and intimate friend Sue, then retrieved them in a huff at Sue's apparent inaction, and took them to the wife of an Amherst professor, a woman with her own literary ambitions and intimate ties to the Dickinson family. The related struggles between the families over property, literary and landed, are vividly recreated in Polly Longworth's *Austin and Mabel* (1984). They continued as the house of Todd (Mabel and daughter) and the house of Dickinson (Sue and daughter) produced competing editions of the poems and interpretations of the remarkable poet, as their holdings were distributed between two libraries (Amherst and Harvard), and even as Thomas Johnson's epochal (for Dickinson readers) *variorum* (1958) met a critical public in the 1950s. Just so, the wars of interpretation over the intentionality of Dickinson in creating her books continue in more subtle forms.

### Franklin and the Fascicles

Although more and more people have, in Martha Nell Smith's words, "been interested enough to take the time" to explore the fascicles, they have not been particularly encouraged by the scholar whose work alone makes fascicle

study possible. Ralph Franklin's position on the revolution his *Manuscript Books* (1981) makes possible is itself somewhat ambiguous. In his introduction he implies that Dickinson's fascicles were her method of facing the chaos of life and art (ix), but he seems in one sentence to allow for two opposing interpretations. On the one hand, he argues that she may have stopped binding in 1864 after six years of the practice because she had "survived the crisis and drive of 1861-63" (her need); on the other hand, he says that with her survival from whatever crisis claimed her, "the desire to leave an organized legacy to the world" (her vocation) declined (xii). In the two phrases he offers the scenario, first, that the collection was a frantic attempt at survival and perhaps somewhat inchoate; later, that it was a distinct form of self-direction.

Two years later, answering some preliminary fascicle studies, he followed up his long introduction to the book with an article in *Studies in Bibliography*. This article offers provisional answers to important questions, questions on which this study and all others depend: Can we know that Dickinson actually did the compiling (yes); were there other fascicles at the time of Dickinson's death besides those Franklin compiled? (probably not); who mutilated the few poems that have been cut or scratched out? (he thinks Todd, although Todd herself said it was Austin Dickinson); what was Dickinson's purpose in her compilation work? Here he repeats his view that "the fascicles are, simply, poems copied onto sheets of stationery and, without elaboration, bound together" (4), that "they were private documents copied for her own uses" (16), and that they served Dickinson as her workshop" (17).

Finally, in the last two pages of the article he addresses those who find a pattern in the sequences, saying that "the thematic, narrative, or dramatic structure discerned according to such possibilities, if any, would be looser than criticism has often assumed or perhaps would find attractive." Admitting a fraction of the evidence that there *is* some structure (the contrapuntal nature of the two poems in Fascicle 21 is his one example), he insists that "order can be apparent even in randomness. The tune, as Dickinson reminds us," he says, "may not be in the tree but in ourselves." The magnitude of Franklin's contribution and his status have made this view almost a commonplace.<sup>15</sup>

In the spirit of Franklin's resistance to taking seriously attempts to find patterns, David Porter contends that proof of Dickinson's motive "to reduce disorder in her manuscripts" was that "she placed poems on the fascicle sheets according to the space available [and that] short poems are usually used as fillers" (1983). A close reading of the poems in their places, however, ratifies Willis Buckingham's observation (countering that of Porter) that "there remains a likelihood that several poems on each sheet represent a significant grouping" (1984, 614). That likelihood indeed seems corroborated by close

reading of, for example, Fascicle 8, in which several small poems, poems *not* included, I suspect, merely to use the space, speak to each other across the pages as much as do the two prose/poetry poems I have selected for the opening of this chapter and by the fact that Dickinson was apparently not resistant to leaving spaces when it suited her purpose. She does so, in fact, at a significant stage of Fascicle 21.

If one does not select the four or five or six poems of a fascicle—or from many fascicles that suit a thesis (see Scholl, for example)—one is more likely to see that patterns exist everywhere and that Dickinson has slyly left not only the doublings such as in the prose/poetry pair but also a number of other “tight-rope tricks” as well. For example, at times a poem in the center of a fascicle acts as a sort of stile, up toward and away from which the fascicle moves. Elsewhere Dickinson seems to have compiled her poems as her niece and nephews must have played dominoes, ending one poem with an image that will begin the next. She may end a fascicle with a poem that seems both a culmination of the fascicle and a precursor to the first poem so that, as is true in Fascicle 1, the opened book provides the visual trick of leading the reader back to the first poem from that on the back cover. In addition to the mirroring of poems on opposing pages of the opened book as in the prose/poetry confrontation, Dickinson has chosen poems to place on neighboring leaves that are at once reprises and revisions of earlier poems. She has made poems (or speakers in poems) address each other dialogically. She has spilled lines from certain poems and used them on the next page as titles for adjacent poems. She has used verses separated from previous verses on their new page to bridge proximate poems. She has often privileged clusters of images in each fascicle, giving each what, for want of a better word, seems its own “thumbprint” or maybe its “DNA”: that network of design that differentiates it from the others.

Looking for and finding such tricks, somersaulting with Dickinson as I do, is the only “story” this book provides. Because this volume is limited to a sample (of eight) fascicles, it invites others to turn classrooms into laboratories for similar observations of the remaining books. How many of the tricks did Dickinson intend? That question, insistently and sometimes querulously posed by students, is unanswerably absent of any miraculous attic discoveries of letters or interviews. Without such a miracle, however, one may guess by way of parallels. In choosing from her poems those for each book, Dickinson was probably as balanced between willful planning and serendipity as her less verbal sisters who stitched intricate patchworks out of the fabrics of their lives.

In literary terms she followed a tradition that Neil Fraistat’s “literary history for contextural poetics” (1986, 13) shows is as old as Horace and as familiar to Dickinson as Milton, Herbert, and Browning. Most of these subjects of the essays in Fraistat’s book worked collaboratively with editors.

Dickinson, working alone (with the important exception of her communications with Sue), has left even more interesting studies in the trickiness of contextuality. Perhaps she wove her individual poems together as Frost says he composed single poems, with intentional self-conscious craftsmanship balanced with an openness to surprises: "No surprise for the writer," Frost said, "no surprise for the reader" (1972, 394). Reading Dickinson's "tight-rope tricks" recalls Frost's delight in "remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of the unexpected supply keeps growing" (ibid., 394–95).

Perhaps, too, contemporary poets can help as we imagine Dickinson's bookmaking project. In a later chapter a number of working poets tell us how they put together their collections; some stress careful choice, whereas others claim to surprise themselves. No doubt, careful craftsman though she was, Dickinson, who said "Trust in the Unexpected—" (J555, Fr561, F27), surprised herself, both with the poem and also with the new thing the poem became in the booklet in which she placed it. The fascicles, evidence of craftsmanship and serendipity, of the willed and the wild, are the products of the process Frost and others describe. Was it a surprise, we wonder, to discover that the stillness of the little girl shut up in prose could be de-stilled by a poem that—Franklin's revision of Johnson's numbering notwithstanding—might have been written earlier? Such mysteries of the creative process will not be solved, and such mysteries contribute to my skepticism that the entire forty contain a *single* story.

When one takes the time to read the poems in their fascicle settings, however, it is difficult not to believe that Dickinson must have planted or at least recognized most of the surprises that await the reader. The poems exist on the page. Emily Dickinson placed them there. Unlike any other major poet except perhaps Blake and Whitman, the arrangement has been unmediated by any other mind. Intentionality is irrecoverable; what exists on the page, thanks to Franklin, is recoverable and readable.

### The Paired Poems: "Familiar Species"?

What is recoverable and readable, for example, are the two poems of Fascicle 21 with which this chapter begins. Placed opposite to the remembered resistance to enclosure—exemplified by the laugh of the bird that cannot be kept in the pound ("They shut me up in Prose")—is "This was a Poet's" certainty that "Himself—to Him—a Fortune [is] / Exterior to Time" (J448, Fr446). From first line to last the two poems about the poet speak across as well as down the pages. Curiously the first, "They shut me up in Prose," never uses

the word "poem" or "poet," and the second, "This was a Poet," defines the poet (Dickinsonianly slantwise) by negatives, in vocabulary dotted with prefixes "de-," "a-," and "un-." There is that pun on "Distill," for example. The poet unsettles us and also presses and imprints the ordinary into the thoughtful and beautiful, as the two possibilities for sense/incense suggest.

Such sense is amazing, another word with punning possibilities, as in *a/maze*. "Amazing sense" is almost oxymoronic. The adjective is a word that, in its primary, unpunning form implies wonder. In her own culture, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, "amazing sense" evokes John Newton's hymn to Grace (1986, 216). Thus subliminally suggested, "grace" echoes elsewhere in the fascicle. The substantive "sense" on the other hand, for its long list of meanings in the 1828 Webster's,<sup>16</sup> is most commonly associated with common (ordinary) sense, practicality, or reasoned judgment. "Sense" is subverted by the epithet of which it is part, especially when one plays with its adjective as with "distills" and "disclose." To be in a maze is to be confused, confounded, puzzled, unsettled. Hawthorne's minister, for example, is "in a maze" as he emerges from his visit with Hester in the woods; having become aware of more possibilities for escape than he had thought possible, he responds in manic manner. Little girls who are confined in stillness to a closed closet are discouraged from such a state. The reader of the paired poems might add that, because the last line of the matching poem presents the bird/star/poet laughing, the poet may also *a/muse* us.

The poet in the poem on the right ("This was a Poet") arrests the familiar species, suggesting both that she is empowered to stop the world for her artistic purposes as Keats does with the youths chasing maidens around the Grecian urn and that she *a/rests* as she *de/stills*—that she troubles (in one reading) that "familiar species / That perished by the Door." The reader is back to the little Girl in the Closet, put there by the "they"s who liked her "still" or at rest. The power of poetry is oppositely to stop (arrest) time and to stir things up, to *a/rest* as he or she *de/stills*. What she *a/rests* is "the familiar species." This word ("species"), too, acquires new meaning when read in its fascicle setting. Without that setting, we may suppose that the poem is divided into two parts, the first part offering a botanical metaphor. Its first two verses propose the poet as a kind of chemist transforming through distillation the ordinary (familiar species) into the extraordinary (Attar so immense). Read as a scientific analogy (involving botany, chemistry, and perhaps even alchemy), the familiar species are botanical specimens—perishable but recoverable if pressed into lovely Attar (the "Essential Oils" of J675, Fr772, F34 that are "expressed" by Suns and Screws to enhance the "Lady's Drawer"), but the reader of the poems paired would also think of the human species, in this case, perhaps ordinary humans, the "they"s pent up in the House of Prose, the kind about whom Dickinson spoke to Higginson as

people "without any thoughts . . . (you must have noticed them in the street)," she remarked. "How do they live. How do they get the strength to put on their clothes in the morning" (L342). Dickinson's dictionary has another meaning for "species," as well, one to which I will return with a suggestion of a corroborating source: It is a "Representation to the mind. Wit—the faculty of imagination in the writer which searches over all the memory for the *species* or ideas which it designs to represent." A simple botanical metaphor is densely complicated by the writer who read her lexicon closely and who arranged her poems carefully.

The second half of the "This was a Poet" also gathers meaning by its proximity to "They shut me up in Prose." That on the left suggests that the poet, the Little Girl who would not be closeted, has boundless powers if "Himself" but "wills" his (her) own freedom to "Abolish his Captivity." To "will" has legal implications that remind the reader of the entitlement of the poet and reader in the answering poem's next two verses. Switching from botanical to economic language, the poet becomes, apparently, a wealthy philanthropist who allows glimpses into his or her "Fortune— / Exterior to Time," but the poem ends on another page, where the final verse both serves as an introduction to the next poem and the summation of the paired poems. What the poet, uncloseted, has "to will" is "so much that "Robbing—could not harm." This is Emerson's finale to his essay on the poet: The poet, in Emerson's words, is "the owner of all land, tax free." The vast holdings of the poet's imagination is a theme to which Dickinson often turned, of course ("My basket holds—just— / Firmaments" [J352, Fr358, F17]; "To make a prairie" [J1755, Fr1779], and "The Brain is Wider than the / Sky" [J632, Fr598, F26], for example). That all that universe to which the poet by dint of imagination is entitled may be given away without any diminishment to the poet and that there is so much that even the poet is "unconscious" of it is the point of both poems. As she would say later, "A word is dead / When it is said, / Some say. / I say it just / Begins to live / That day (J1212, Fr278).

### Kamesian Poetics: An Unlikely Source?

Dickinson's emphasis in the paired poems on the subversive and affective possibilities of poetry situates her aesthetic principles far from those of her contemporary "fireside poets," whose more strictly metered, true-rhyming, nationalistic, and inspirational verse was rarely de-stilling or unsettling. It is not so far, however, from that of Emerson or, as Gary Stonum vividly describes, from that of Emerson's inspiration, Carlyle. What Stonum tells us about "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" (J1129, Fr1263) fits the paired poems and the fascicle that frames them, the way one reads each fascicle, in fact: "The hermeneutic zigzag of truth and error, blindness and enlighten-

ment, or affirmation and insinuation may itself be a little dazzling. Indeed, the razzle-dazzle may be the point, and the zigzag is certainly the method. Dickinson's double writing *differs* itself, always actively and often flagrantly from any singularity it has itself signified" (64–65). Dickinson's own famous description of the razzle-dazzle of genuine poetry, the subject of the paired poems, privileges the affective nature of poetry: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way" (L342a). Although early readers discounted that statements such as this or poems such as the paired ones in Fascicle 21 might be based on any particular aesthetic background or convictions, many readers have since noted Dickinson's profound debts to Emerson,<sup>17</sup> and Gary Stonum's book thoroughly articulates the influence of Carlyle.

Few, however, have followed up on Carlton Lowenberg's suggestion of another possible influence, Henry Home, Lord Kames. According to Lowenberg, Kames was taught at Amherst Academy between 1835 and 1849 (Dickinson studied there from 1840 to 1847).<sup>18</sup> Although Christine Ross has recently traced the effect of that study on Dickinson's prosody (particularly her meter), she does not discuss this poem's heretofore (I believe) unnoted echo. One of the Scottish Associationists, Kames contributed to many of the familiar tenets of English romantic poets and critics. Both indirectly and directly, he also affected nineteenth-century American writers.<sup>19</sup> Particularly when he devotes chapters to answering his own question, "By what mark does the ear distinguish verse from prose?" (308), and cites the effects of harmony that make the reader say "this is poetry" (307),<sup>20</sup> his words seem an influence on Dickinson; she repeats, paraphrases, and improves on him, most notably in Fascicle 21's "This was a Poet." Although she may have eschewed his pedantry on grammar, syntax, and even syllabication (her questioning of whether "syllable" differs from "sound" in "The Brain is Wider than the / Sky—" [J632, Fr598, F26] seems an oblique reference to such passages), her keen ear and her knowledge of poets from Shakespeare on may have led her to pay attention to Kames's view of poetry as "strictly the language of the imagination . . . the most vivid form of expression that can be given to anything . . . the perfect coincidence of the image and the words with the feeling we have, and of which we cannot get rid in any other way" (342). ["Is there any other way?"] That is what Fascicle 21, particularly the pair of poems at their center, is all about: the exhilaration of self-identification, a sense of belonging in the company of those "elevated above common nature" (Kames 1761, 308), those who are free from the house of prose. When Dickinson tells us that the poet is "so unconscious" of the vastness that is his entitlement that "The Robbing—could not harm," she comes close to



Kames, who—distinguishing between perception, sensation, conception, imagination, feeling, and memory—said: “I transport myself ideally to the place where I saw the tree and river yesterday . . . and in this recollection, I am *not conscious* of a *picture* or representative image, more than in the original surveys” (ibid., 10–11). Melinda Ponder, who has written on Hawthorne’s use of Kames (Hawthorne studied Kames at Bowdoin), explains that Kames’s “theory of ideal presence” insisted on an interpretation of imagination that pervaded romantic literature. “Imagination,” explains Ponder, was “a complex faculty that could store and recall” (1990), not simply recreate images for didactic purposes.

Kames, a profound influence on Keats, begins his study with a discussion that may have informed the witty fullness, the astounding, penetrating quality of Dickinson’s lines. Although Kames deplores puns, he praises wit as “joining things by distant and fanciful relations, which surprise because they are unexpected”; solid judgment neglects “trivial relations.” Just so, “Memory and wit are often conjoined, but seldom with solid judgment” (1761, 22). Dickinson says as much in a more dazzling way in the paired poems that differentiate the stultifying house of prose (solid judgment) from the poet’s house of possibilities in which memory and wit are conjoined, sometimes (seldom) with common sense, more often with “amazing sense.”

Later in his study Kames employs Addison and Locke to explore the nature of wit, calling it the “most elegant recreation. . . . Wit gently elevates without straining, raises mirth without dissoluteness, and relaxes while it entertains” (ibid., 208). Dickinson’s whole poetic enterprise is directed away from relaxing readers, but, as Amy Lowell’s somersaulting suggests, it is, among much else, “entertaining” as it amazes, de/stills, and puzzles.

Without overly determining that Dickinson’s vivid, eye-blink-brief aesthetic statement—the paired poems imbedded in and radiating through Fascicle 21—is indebted, consciously or not, to a rather turgid eighteenth-century critic, it is nevertheless worth noting that she had two centuries of theory behind these two pages. In them she seems to have distilled the essence, the “amazing sense” in the poetic impulse. Kames, part of that layering of influences, offers his distinction between verse and prose by saying that one difference is in the effect on the ear (ibid., 309). He begins his long list of such effects—lists of meters—by saying that “different *species* of verse are governed by different rules peculiar to each *species*” (312). Adept at memorizing, Dickinson may have harbored this use of a relatively odd word to apply to poetry from her academy reading to add to her notion of the poet as one whose Attar is formed from “familiar species,” one who is the discloser of pictures, unconscious of the difference between the actual and the remembered, therefore perpetually rich, immune from theft—“Exterior—to—Time.”

## Reading Contextually

Discovering "rules" peculiar to the species of books Dickinson compiled is reductive of the permeable, plastic, varied, and idiosyncratic nature of each. Nevertheless, taking the time to study tricks such as those imbedded in the paired poems in the middle of Fascicle 21 yields the surprise for the reader Frost talked about. Reading poems closely in their fascicle context, that "great voyage of discovery," is both an inward journey into the heart of individual poems and an outward one into the possibilities inherent in the new entity the collected mass becomes.

First, consider the inward journey, one that occupies much of this book. Separated from their intended repositories and pigeonholed into "topics" ("love" and "death," for example), the poems have been read for one hundred years in synthetic isolation/combination. Even modern and postmodern editions and critical commentaries have imposed the order of the compiler (is the subject, say, agoraphobia or thirst or monastic devotion?). Reading a single poem in the context of its fascicle cannot cancel out the contextual possibilities, particularly those by versions that the poems in letters suggest. Each poem had an originating impulse that was probably quite separate in time, space, and condition from the editor's (Dickinson's) determination to include the poem in the new context. Reading the individual lyrics in and out of fascicle context might be compared to reading Henry James, say, in his notebooks, then in the first edition of novels, and then in the 1910 New York edition, complete with hindsight prefaces. On the other hand, close reading of these books must certainly be attempted by anyone wishing to move closer to the poet who said, "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" and who ends that poem with, "Can one find the rare Ear / Not too dull—" (J842, Fr945). Reading individual lyrics through the prism that their contextuality provides engages the reader in a process closer to Dickinson's own deliberations—at least those of the moment of the fascicle binding—than any of the reader's own devising, no matter how schooled in Dickinson's life and work or the prosody of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that critic might be. More than half of her extant poems written in or before the six busy years Dickinson apparently created the fascicles (1858–1864) are imbedded in the forty books that, as far as we know, she did not mandate be burned.

Reading individual lyrics in their fascicle places, as this study shows, turns one of the "slight" early poems, "The Gentian weaves her fringes—" (J18, Fr21, F1) into an invocation, an opening blessing. The process makes mutual mirrors not only of the two poems I have discussed in this chapter but also of eight poems (no fewer than four pairs) in Fascicle 14. It transforms "As if some little Arctic flower" (J180, Fr177, F8) into a self-reflexive text, punctuated with a suggestion of how to read the poems and the books those poems made: how to discover the possibilities by "your inference therefrom."

Along with opening up individual poems for revision, close reading of the fascicles reveals that Dickinson engineered structural surprises within the groups. Without reducing these surprises to rules or formulas (à la Kames) or claiming that any one of these is common to each fascicle, the tricks of arrangement provide a structure far more complicated than a house of prose. Contextual reading through the fascicles challenges what Denis Donoghue said twenty years before the *Manuscript Books* proved otherwise: "Shall we say that the values of the long poem are those of interview—adjustment of measure, addition, and subtraction, the modulation of perspective, the massive deployment of force. And image is the short poem, the single glance. If it requires adjustment there will be time—we hope—for another glance, in another poem" (1965, 123). Donoghue follows this differentiation with his conclusion that "Emily Dickinson is one of the greatest masters of image. There is no reason to think that she had any talent at all for interview" (*ibid.*).

But the fascicles show that Dickinson's talent for "the image, . . . the single glance" is, in fact, melded with that "of interview." The sharply aphoristic dazzlers for which Dickinson is famed<sup>21</sup> have a context, and our involvement in both the line and context increases the reader's respect for the multiplicities of potential discoveries in and between even the apparently simple poems. William Doreski's study of Fascicle 27 maintains that reading contextually in the fascicles "offers an alternative way of understanding some poems that have until now seemed fairly transparent in their thematic content, and others that have been largely ignored by critics because of their obdurate opacity" (1986, 64). As Doreski demonstrates, such contextual reading increases or changes appreciation for canonical Dickinson poems and alerts us to the hitherto hidden interest of those that have never been part of the dialogue on the canon, whether because of "obdurate opacity" or because of their apparent insignificance.

Reading contextually is an established practice as Fraistat's collection of essays demonstrates. Included in that collection is Stuart Curran's highly relevant discussion of Wordsworth's groupings: "To remove poems from the context in which Wordsworth intended them to be read at the very least leads to a narrowing of their meaning," says Curran. "In a few cases it may wholly alter it" (1986, 236). In chapter 2, I explore the context for the paired poems in Fascicle 21, in which movement surges from the terrified speaker of the first poem to the bold and wealthy speaker, at last identified: the poet.