

Listening to Dickinson

DICKINSON DID NOT PUBLISH, nor did she destroy her manuscripts. She preserved more than half in sewn packets and unsewn stacks. Others, written on any available writing surface, were also saved. This act of conservation implies that Dickinson probably did want her poems to reach the public, beyond the circle of correspondents with whom she shared them. But she left no instructions for publication. And here lies the difficulty for editors and readers confronting her manuscripts in the present day. Since the poet did not publish, we have little evidence (as we do in the case of any number of published poets who left work uncollected) as to how the poems should actually look in print.

The history of publishing Dickinson may be described as a steady, even relentless, approach to the surviving manuscripts, an approach that over time admitted more and more graphic—and orthographic—irregularities. In 1890 Dickinson's first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, felt free to add titles; to emend unusual words; to regularize capitalization, spelling, and punctuation; to smooth out rhythms and rhymes. In 1924, however, Martha Dickinson Bianchi removed the titles. In 1945 Millicent Todd Bingham restored the irregular rhymes. A decade later, Thomas H. Johnson restored some of Dickinson's idiosyncratic spellings, her punctuations (most notably the dash) and capitalizations. He also began revealing an array of variants, from word choice to entirely new versions, and was the first of Dickinson's editors to arrange the poems not by topic but in chronological order. Most recently, R. W. Franklin (who in 1981 published the first facsimile edition of Dickinson's manuscript books) arranged the poems not just chronologically but also largely into fascicles and sets; restored her ungrammaticalities, including consistent misspellings; and substituted a smaller en dash (closer in size to Dickinson's dash marks) for Johnson's em dash.¹ While Franklin was at work on his edition, there emerged a competing editorial and interpretive project and philosophy, committed to reproducing in print, as completely as possible, the look of the manuscript: lines broken as they appear on the manuscript page (these breaks

ABSTRACT Emily Dickinson's poetry survives in largely unpublished manuscript versions, which some take as finished poems, with all their scriptural features (lineation, variants, calligraphy) intended. This equation of poem with manuscript not only obscures some of Dickinson's most striking visual effects but also mutes her music. By listening to her rhythms, and by reading rather than just looking at her poems, Shoptaw recovers Dickinson's radically experimental metrical practice. / REPRESENTATIONS 86. Spring 2004 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 20–52. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm.

are noted in Franklin's edition but not adhered to), dashes angled as Dickinson left them, and variants printed not only at the foot of the poem, the current editorial convention, but wherever Dickinson wrote them in. With its passionate fidelity to the manuscript and with its emphasis on the written mark, this latest editorial philosophy could be termed *scriptural*.

Such an editorial practice represents a radical departure from the normalizing print conventions to which Dickinson's poetry had earlier been subjected. And, in this sense, it could be seen as a step in the right direction. Logic appears on its side: the closer we get to the poem as Dickinson left it, the less we lose in the translation into print. Hence, the insistence on facsimile reproductions. By conflating the poetic text with the photographic text, the scripturalists imply that Dickinson imagined her poems exactly as they appear to us in her own hand. But did she? I want to pursue this question through a different sort of reading. It is certainly edifying to read Dickinson's texts in manuscript, taking the poems just as we see them. Yet it is also plausible that she did not "see" her own verse in quite this way. Dickinson wrote for both the eye and the ear. Too much faith in the manuscripts can make us forget this simple fact; we might open our eyes only at the cost of closing our ears. Which means, I believe, closing down the one dimension of Dickinson's poetry that is often misrepresented if not entirely neglected by modern editors—the radical innovation of her rhythms. Once we tune into this dimension, we may no longer be willing to forfeit the aural experience of her poems for the graphic delights of her manuscripts. That, at least, is what I hope to show.

Now You See It

Susan Howe was one of the first critics to respond to the interpretive possibilities of Dickinson's manuscripts. Asserting that these documents "should be understood as visual productions," Howe faults Thomas Johnson for representing Dickinson's poems stanzaically: "He arranged her 'verses' into hymnlike stanzas with little variation in form and no variation of cadence."² He ignored, in other words, most of the telling details of what Howe calls "Dickinson's manuscript version," including her "crosses and calligraphic slashes" (148), her "found poems" created by her "variants" (137–39, 152), her word spaces, and her line breaks. And so, she argues, the first lines represented in Johnson's (J910), and now in Franklin's (Fr 899) edition as "Experience is the Angled Road / Preferred against the Mind" miss the new form and cadence revealed in the manuscript version. This comes across in Howe's alternative transcription (which I can only approximate; *Birthmark*, 135–36):

Experience is the Angled
Road
Preferred against the
Mind

As wonderful as these lines appear, I believe they also distort the poem in another respect: they obliterate the “hymnlike stanza” by taking word spaces as pauses and treating runovers as new lines. “In the long run,” Howe claims, “the best way to read Dickinson is to read the facsimiles, because her calligraphy influences her meaning” (153). Yet she does not discuss the significance of these calligraphic features—what difference the angle or length or height of a dash might make to any poem. Dickinson’s marks are left to speak for themselves.

A provocative case for the meaning and impact of Dickinson’s visual, scriptural poetics is presented by Jerome McGann. Likening Dickinson’s manuscript displays to Charles Olson’s field compositions, McGann also complains of the conventional stanzaic arrangement of Dickinson’s poems, “deployed within (a) verse conventions of simple metrical forms, typically the quatrain, and (b) certain scriptural / typographical conventions of text presentation.” And he goes on to offer an alternative, “a more accurate typographical translation of Dickinson’s actual writing.”³ Here is McGann’s rendering of the first stanza of “Pain - has an Element of Blank -”, Franklin’s version of the entire poem (760A; complete with variant), and McGann’s commentary:

Pain—has an Element
of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it began—or if
there were
A time when it was not

Pain - has an Element of Blank -
It cannot recollect
When it begun - Or if there were
A time when it was not -
It has no Future - but itself -
It’s Infinite contain
It’s Past - enlightened to perceive
New Periods - Of Pain.
4 time] Day -

Even in this type-translation one observes how crucially *visible* this language is. The inertia of the quatrain supplies a subtextual measure for the play of variance. The most dramatic effects appear, I suppose, with the lines “of Blank—” and “When it began—or if.” The first is a moment of what Pound would later call phanopoeia (Dickinson playing with the blank space created by her script), the second (which interrupts the quatrain measure to play with the logic of syntax) of logopoeia. . . .

It does no good to argue, as some might, that these odd lineations are unintentional—the result of Dickinson finding herself at the right edge of the page, and so folding her lines over. Her manuscripts show that she could preserve the integrity of the metrical unit if she wanted. Besides, certain textual moments reveal such a dramatic use of page space as to put the question of intentionality beyond consideration.⁴

In McGann's radical reappraisal of Dickinson's lineation, every line in the manuscript—every return to the left margin—constitutes a line of poetry, susceptible to appreciation and interpretation as such. And yet McGann's own transcript provides evidence to the contrary. It reproduces a key feature of Dickinson's poem about which McGann is silent: only the lines of verse are capitalized. In fact, Dickinson capitalized all her verse lines in all her poems, no matter what kind of word the line begins with (for example, "It", "When", and "A" in 760A); by contrast, she began visible (runover) lines in the lower case ("of", and "there" in 760A) unless they begin with a word (usually a noun) that she routinely capitalized.

Capitalizing lines of verse is a print convention; poems in Dickinson's day were published that way. Dickinson's practice thus provides consistent, compelling evidence that she was in fact readying her poems for print publication. Her practice also casts a skeptical shadow on the significance of the lowercase lines. Couldn't they be runover lines? How else *could* Dickinson run over her lines? In McGann's theory of transcription, runover lines can't exist. Dickinson used the lower case, scripturalists might object, to distinguish her "radical" visual lines from her "conventional" metrical verses. Why then do the visual breaks always come near the end of the page? McGann remarks that "Dickinson seems to have had a special fondness for dropping the last measure of a quatrain to a new (and separate) line" (28). Yes, and she was also fond of starting a new page once she'd filled the one she was on. To make a compelling case for scriptural (as opposed to runover) lines, one would need to find a significant proportion of lowercase lines occurring after the first or second beats of verse lines, not at or near the right margin. But such lines can't be found in Dickinson's manuscripts. "It does no good to argue," McGann insists. Why not?

One of the ironies of scriptural approaches to Dickinson's poems is that some of her most interesting visual effects are either overlooked or blotted out. In this regard, it's important to distinguish between the visual and the scriptural dimensions of a manuscript. Visual features can be translated into print (for example, George Herbert's "Easter Wings"); the merely scriptural cannot. McGann says nothing, for instance, about the dash following "Blank -". The printed dash, unlike the manuscript mark, here illustrates the word *blank*. And a blank represents something missing, in this case forgotten. It is as though the word itself (for example, *Forgetting*) or part of it (*Blankness*) were left blank or unwritten (compare John Milton, "and for the Book of knowledg fair / Presented with a Universal blanc").⁵ Considered visually, the first verse already does what it says. The poem's final punctuation is also visually significant. "New Periods - Of Pain." concludes with a period, a punctuation rare in Dickinson's poetry. If we read the mark as a period (not just see it as a misshapen dot), we discover Dickinson's visual pun: a full stop to pain means only that another of its "New Periods" is about to begin. By making "Pain" her opening and closing word, Dickinson draws her poem into a circle, a periodic figure without beginning or end. And what about the ungrammatical capitalizing

of “Or” and “Of”? Don’t these capitals signal new lines? They might have, but they don’t come at the right margin. Aside from beginning verses, English capitals begin sentences, even elliptical utterances. The second statement, “It cannot recollect / When it begun -” seems to end on “begun -”. But then it begins again, rather than merely continues, with a disturbing afterthought, “Or if there were / A time when it was not -”. Every word in the last line (“New Periods - Of Pain.”) is capitalized, as if to show that each ending commences with a new sentence “Of Pain.” Each of these visual effects survive translation into print. Indeed, they must be read rather than simply seen for their significance to register. Perhaps for this reason McGann overlooks them.

In order to promote his “visual text,” McGann needs to demote Dickinson’s rhythmic text. “The inertia of the quatrain,” he tells us, merely “supplies a subtexual measure for the play of variance.” But if we listen to the first line, for instance, we find that it is already full of rhythmic, as well as graphically visual, blanks. “Páin - has an Élemènt of Blánk -” has only three main beats, as it would in speech, and a lighter beat on the third syllable of “Element”. Rhythm is accentuated by sound patterning. The opening verse is punctuated by plosive clusters at either end (“Páin -”, “Blánk -”) and by an open and a nasal consonant (“Élément”) in the hushed and quickened middle. What about the dash in “Pain - has”? Dickinson’s dashes don’t just interrupt or slow the rhythm, they change it. The opening measures may be described as an interrupted trochee, riven with silence, followed by an iamb (Pain has | an El). But if we hear them the way Dickinson punctuated or scored them, we pause on the intense opening monobeat and quickly follow with an unemphatic anapest (Pain | has an El). “Pain -” and “Blank -”, which define the musical line and sound the original trauma, are each followed by a dash, a visual blank and musical rest. It’s hard to see what the “blank space created by her script” (or by her paper) after “of” would add to Dickinson’s own subtly cadenced music. What about McGann’s other scriptural break, “When it began—or if / there were”, which he claims “interrupts the quatrain measure to play with the logic of syntax”? Is it any more playful or significant than other possible divisions (for example, When it begun - or / if there were, When it / begun - or if there / were, and so on)? The rhythmic line, “When it begun - Or if there were”, which ends mid-clause on “were”, a subjunctive past tense in a poem about psychological time past, also interrupts the syntax and plays with semantics (there may be no time “When it [had] begun”).⁶ Whatever her stationery occasionally manages to do, Dickinson does better.

McGann’s argument is pressed further by Martha Nell Smith, an influential advocate for Dickinson’s scriptural poetics. Following Susan Howe, Smith locates a crucial turning point, in the ninth fascicle, in Dickinson’s compositional methods:

The material record suggests that she began to focus more and more on the possibilities afforded by the manuscript page, and experimented with lineation, calligraphic orthogra-

phy, angled marks of punctuation, and with leaving alternative word choices from which readers can choose. In other words, she began to render her poetic embodiments in terms of her holograph and cottage industry rather than in terms of typography and publishing industry.⁷

In keeping with this understanding of Dickinson’s “poetic embodiments,” Smith reads the manuscripts as immutable products. Her practice may be illustrated by her reading of Dickinson’s “Wild nights - Wild nights!”. On the left is my “scriptural” transcription (Smith leaves the poem in facsimile), on the right is Franklin’s version (269A; compare *Manuscript Books*, 1:222):

Wild nights - Wild nights!	Wild nights - Wild nights!
Were I with thee	Were I with thee
Wild nights should be	Wild nights should be
Our luxury!	Our luxury!
Futile - the winds -	Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -	To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -	Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!	Done with the Chart!
Rowing in Eden -	Rowing in Eden -
Ah! the Sea!	Ah - the Sea!
Might I but moor -	Might I but moor - tonight -
tonight -	In thee!
In thee!	

Smith objects not only to the verse lineation of the poem (which would move “tonight -” up to the previous line) but also, and more strenuously, to the normalized shaping of Dickinson’s cursive letters into “print”:

Erased from any typescript reproduction, which levels the effects of letters, is Dickinson’s extraordinary, somewhat seductive, calligraphy—the wide-mouthed *W*, the triangular *T* at the beginning of the sixth line, and the stunning flourish that crosses both *T*’s in “Tonight.” Obviously, in their production Higginson and Loomis Todd regularize the minutiae of Dickinson’s punctuation to “correct” her ecstatic exclamation mark without a point [after “Ah”] and to even the long and short dashes by translating them into conventional, equally demarcated signs; then, by altering the lineation, they smooth out the lyric’s rhythm, and, in doing so, mask the breathless sexuality conveyed by the holograph, tempering, therefore, her intemperance. (*Rowing*, 65)

Among the issues Smith raises, the most consistently far-reaching is Dickinson’s “calligraphy.” But if you consult the eleventh fascicle, into which Dickinson stitched “Wild nights -”, the first thing you notice is that Dickinson’s “wide-mouthed *W*” and “triangular *T*” are not unique but common. The preceding poem, “Why - do they shut me out of Heaven?” (268A), begins with a virtually identical *W*, and its fourth verse line, “Timid as a Bird!”, begins with an equally “triangular *T*”. Like McGann’s, Smith’s scriptural approach disallows mistakes. Dickinson cannot, for

instance, have accidentally left the exclamation point after “Ah” unpointed; it must mean something.⁸ And yet, as exciting as it is to see “Wild nights -” in Dickinson’s own hand, her “calligraphy” can’t matter poetically if it doesn’t change with her poems.⁹

As with McGann, Smith advocates for Dickinson’s experimental visuality by discounting her music, which she conflates with the conventions of mainstream publication. In “the first eight fascicles,” Smith writes, “Dickinson was obviously writing bibliographically, or with the book and the printed page in mind—her poetic forms in these are regularized variations on the tercet and quatrain, predictably lineated.” But with fascicle nine, Smith argues, Dickinson “began to distribute metrical units (tetrameter, trimeter, pentameter) over more than one line” (*Emily Dickinson Handbook*, 114–15). I hope to show that Dickinson’s rhythms are considerably more innovative than Smith’s traditional prosodic terms suggest. And so is her lineation. The prominent rhythm of “Wild nights -”, until we reach the final lines, is (syllables notwithstanding) two beats per verse line. But in the heavy seas of the opening, “Wild nights - Wild nights!”, every beat is a syllable and every syllable is a word, with beats enhanced by the long assonantal vowels (in American mouths, “Wild” is practically a diphthong). The opening exclamations have the rhetorical force and intonational curvature of an incredulous question (see “Me, change! Me, alter!” 281A), a passionate retort to a lover’s warning (as in, ‘Life together wouldn’t be Edenic. There’d be some wild nights’). The speaker then indulges in the becalmed domestic fantasy of “Rowing in Eden -” without chart or compass, until she remembers what she’s missing (“Ah! the Sea!”; compare her triple-measured exhortation, “Our’s be the tossing - wild though the sea - / Rather than a mooring - unshared by thee.” 410A).

“Wild nights -” ends on a different, but no less surprising, note. The divergent music of the last stanza, with its elongated third line (“Might I but móor - tonight -”) and abbreviated fourth (“In thée!”), far from “smooth[ing] out the lyric’s rhythm” and “mask[ing] the breathless sexuality conveyed by the holograph,” pitches the cadence and heightens the suspense. By contrast, reading “tonight -” on a line by itself would indeed smooth out the previous line by allotting it the usual two beats. More important, it would spoil the delightful final twist; “tonight -” isn’t the surprise, but “In Thee!” The rhythmic counterpointing illustrated by this ending represents crucial counter-evidence to the thesis advanced by Howe, McGann, and Smith. When Dickinson wants to break up the design of the quatrain by lineating against rhythmic expectations, she does so, without the aid of her stationery. And she tells us she means it by capitalizing her lines. This pervasive technique, which I call *converse lineation*, is almost always more delightful and interesting than anything produced by the arbitrary demands of her manuscript margins.

The issues of lineation and punctuation converge in a notorious episode in Dickinson’s life as a poet: the publication, without her consent, of “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (1096) in the *Springfield Daily Republican* under the title “The Snake”.

When it appeared (on Valentine's Day, 1866), Dickinson clipped it and sent it to Higginson, her longtime correspondent and future editor, along with a letter expressing her concerns: "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one - I told you I did not print - I feared you might think me ostensible" (quoted in *Variorum* 2:952). Here is the beginning of the poem, first from the *Republican* (1096[A]), then from Dickinson's manuscript (which Franklin dates "about late 1865"), transcribed with her notepaper's line breaks (*Manuscript Books* 2:1137; compare 1096B):

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him—did you not?
His notice instant is,

A narrow Fellow in
the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him -
did you not
His notice sudden is -

For Smith, what distressed Dickinson was the editorial resolution of the poem's playful ambiguities:

The question mark separates "not" from "notice," spoiling the anaphoric pun. "Not," followed so quickly by "notice," with no pause underscored between, brings to mind "Did you note?" . . . By emphasizing the break between lines, the punctuation mark practically insists on a particular reading, whereas its omission makes the relationship between the two lines more indeterminate, hence encouraging more interaction by the reader and more possibilities to create meaning. (*Rowing*, 12)

It's not clear to me that this was the issue. Comparing Dickinson's remarks with her poem, one is struck as much by what she does not take issue with as by what she does. She has nothing to say about the lineation and does not hesitate to refer to verse (not visible) lines: the "third and fourth." One could argue that Dickinson was referring Higginson (who would never have appreciated her bold new visual experiments) to the lines in the published version. But the fact remains that she makes no objection here to the verse lineation.¹⁰ As Kamilla Denman has pointed out, the newspaper version altered other punctuation marks and capitals without provoking Dickinson's comment. Denman reasonably asks, "Why did she complain only of the one editorial change?"¹¹

The most likely answer is that it was the one that most changed her meaning. Dickinson complains not about losing indeterminacy, as Smith argues, but about losing a particular "point" upon which her wit depends. With the dashes Dickinson

means to say ‘You may have met him. If you haven’t, he will appear simultaneous with his notice’ or calling card (I agree with Smith about the lurking presence of “note” here). In the version she sent to her sister-in-law, Susan, in 1872 (1096C), Dickinson herself removed the ambiguity by placing the question mark after “him?” even though this isn’t exactly a question (this manuscript quatrain, written when her eyesight had worsened, stretches over seven lines). When Dickinson says her lines “were one,” she means their meaning made them one. The effect she’s going for here is a snakelike enjambment between conditional and result clauses (the sharpest syntactical line break in the poem) in this elongated line, just the kind of visual and logical playfulness Smith and McGann appreciate. The resonating wit of the first verse has also passed without notice. The term “narrow Fellow” is linguistically odd; snakes aren’t “narrow”, they’re long. But if we hear in “narrow” what we expect, we discover the name of the famous quatrain poet who is never far from her mind, Henry Wadsworth *Longfellow*. The scriptural focus misses Dickinson’s acutely aural wit.

A different form of scripturalism is proposed by Sharon Cameron in *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles*.¹² Like Howe, McGann, and Smith, Cameron maintains that the fascicles—“definitive, if privately published, texts” (8)—represent not process but product. But for her, this means that the finished poem is a kind of hypertext with variants included.¹³ Cameron notes early on that her “assertions about Dickinson’s intentions with respect to the fascicles are speculative” (7 n. 6), but she nevertheless makes broad claims as to Dickinson’s choices:

The metrics of the poem insist we choose only one of the variants. But the presence of the variants insists on the impossibility of doing so. Another way to describe the dilemma is that, since Dickinson refuses to choose among the variants, she disallows us from doing so. . . . Since one cannot read the variants simultaneously, with respect to the variants, noted as non-exclusive alternatives, Dickinson is unread because Dickinson is unreadable. (42)

Readers familiar with literary theory will recognize in this thorny description the classic DeManian undecidability: one must but cannot choose. It is certainly true that variants, existing outside the text proper as possible revisions to it, raise deconstructive issues of the priority of “inside” and “outside,” text and margin. And any number of Dickinson’s poems respond surprisingly to deconstructive readings. But there’s no reason to think, as Cameron seems to, that Dickinson adds variants to each and every poem in her fascicles in order to construct deconstructive predicaments. Dickinson is unsettling in ways unforeseen by De Man, but which he would probably have appreciated, had he turned his mind her way.

The issue really is whether Dickinson *chose* not to choose, to paraphrase Cameron’s engaging title—a claim involving several difficulties. First, there is no apparent reason to take the variants, even though they appear on manuscript sheets sewn

together, as anything but possible late revisions (poets, like critics, often revise in galleys). Second, as a consequence of Cameron's model, there is no way for Dickinson to make a mistake or change her mind, or at least no way to do so safely on paper: the only revisions that can escape being taken as part of the finished hypertext are those that Dickinson contemplated (and kept) off the page. Cameron's approach leaves us no way to distinguish between a finished poem including variants and an unfinished draft. Third, and most crucial, Dickinson did in fact make fair copies of several individual poems that appear in fascicles. And none of these copies contains a single variant. Cameron insists that her deconstructive model holds, "despite the fact that Dickinson subsequently adopted variants from the fascicle sheets in the 'text' she sent to friends" (8). But the facts argue otherwise. That Dickinson sent poems to friends without variants means that she was perfectly capable of choosing. She neither found it impossible to choose nor did she refuse to do so. She chose. And if Dickinson chose to have her poems read without variants, so can we. We can also choose among her variants (though we may also choose to consider her variants together, to follow her revisionary oscillations). What we can't do, which Dickinson as the revising author often did do, is to forget about the unselected variants. We can't because that's how Dickinson left them.¹⁴

Like Howe, McGann, and Smith, Cameron dismisses Dickinson's traditional "metrics," which she associates with closure:

Dickinson's choosing not to choose is dramatically reiterated in the questions raised by the discrepancy between the boundedness implied by the quatrain form and the apparent boundlessness implied by the variant. To elaborate these questions: How does one interpret the fact that Dickinson chooses to write in quatrains and in hymn meter—in a structure that goes as far as possible toward bounding and containment—rather than to write in a looser form, as, say, Whitman does? Why is Dickinson writing in a form that bounds, contains, borders and excludes? Why does she write in an exclusionary form when she also through the structure of the variant makes the form all-inclusive? What is the residual challenge that the form poses to her endeavor?

One way to answer these questions is to say that Dickinson is choosing a form so as to subvert it. But a more intelligible intuition might be that Dickinson is rather exploiting a form so as to point to the "identity" or convergence of boundedness and *unboundedness*. (28)

Only variants, it seems, can rescue the quatrained poem from closure (a claim that would surprise poets from Sappho to Charles Bernstein). Cameron's speculation that Dickinson might have chosen some "looser form" neglects what poets and rhythmically attuned poetry readers know. Each poetic form has its own boundedness (Walt Whitman's lines and stanzas tend to break only at pauses in sense and syntax) and exclusions (Whitman's inclusive long lines can't be too hypotactic, elliptical, or abstract). Dickinson's poems, quatrained or not, are anything but closed. With each stanza, at times with each syllable, she presents us with a constantly changing horizon of actual and latent rhythmic possibilities.

Dickinson's Rhythmics

Throughout the history of American poetry, few poets have matched Dickinson's verbal music. To amplify her innovative lyrics, I will consider her quatrains alongside those of hymns, ballads, and their lyric offshoots. Comparisons are indeed illuminating. But the most clarifying lens for reading Dickinson is Dickinson, who learned composition largely from herself as she went. I use the word *rhythmics* both to encompass Dickinson's full rhythmic potential (her counterpointed verses and sentences, her dashed rhythms, her segmented semantics, consonantal timbres, her intonations, and so on) and to draw out her rhythmic poetics. The poet Louis Zukofsky described poetry as "An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music".¹⁵ Following the Bacchic Objectivist, I will distinguish between Dickinson's *speech beats* (emphases we give to words in speech—usually nouns, main verbs, and polysyllabic words) and *song beats* (where we expect the beat: in Dickinson it's generally on alternating syllables, or where the sound patterning—long vowels, alliterating or clustered consonants—calls for it).¹⁶ I will use a grave accent to distinguish syllables that are unstressed or lightly stressed in ordinary speech but carry a song beat in her verse, for example: "The Stillness in the Róom" (591A). An isolated song beat, here on the fourth syllable, typically makes a quiet line quieter. I will also distinguish between *downbeats* (stressed syllables) and *upbeats* (relatively unstressed syllables), and, for descriptive economy, between a quatrain's *odd lines* (one and three, usually longer) and its *rhyme lines* (two and four, usually shorter).

Dickinson's music would seem to derive from the ballad quatrain. In the 1840s and '50s a literary version of the ballad or hymn stanzaic form was in vogue in American lyric. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had reinvigorated English poetry with their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), but America, unlike England, had no native balladic tradition to draw on. Dickinson employed ballad rhythms only rarely and self-consciously, as in this shipwreck lyric (685A):

Glée - The grèat stórm is óver -
Fóur - have recóvered the Lánd -
Fórtý - gòne dówn togéther -
Ínto the bóiling Sánd -

The basic rhythmic form here—three main beats per line, with odd lines ending in upbeats—is rendered balladic by the frequent triple rhythms ("boiling" heard as three syllables). It's a distinctive sound ("Dóne with the Cómpass - / Dóne with the Chárt!"), but it isn't often Dickinson's. For American poets, it was more natural to adopt the familiar hymns to secular purposes. Longfellow wrote a stirring protest against Calvinist otherworldliness in "A Psalm of Life" (set in what the hymnodies identify, by syllable count, as 8s & 7s): "Tell me not, in mournful numbers, / Life is but an empty dream!—" He followed this in 1841 with a volume, *Ballads and Other Poems*, which included balladic lyrics such as "The Wreck of the Hesperus"

but also hymns such as “To the River Charles” (also in trochaic 8s & 7s): “River! that in silence windest / Through the meadows, bright and free”.¹⁷ Poets emulated the moral authority of the hymn, which prompted congregational assent. The prolific Lydia Sigourney, in her abolitionist lyric “To the First Slave Ship”, adapted the hymn form known as long meter (four iambic beats and eight syllables per line): “First of that train which cursed the wave, / And from the rifled cabin bore, / Inheritor of wo, *the slave* / To bless his palm-tree’s shade no more.” Helen Hunt Jackson, Dickinson’s contemporary and late correspondent, used the long meter to map the longitude of grief: “Dost know Grief well? Hast known her long? / So long, that not with gift of smile, / Or gliding footstep in the throng, / She can deceive thee by her guile?” Frances Harper, who composed almost entirely in hymn meters, wrote a shrewd dialect hymn, “Aunt Chloe’s Politics”, in what is called common meter (a 4343 iambic beat pattern) with the pregnant pause of a missing fourth beat after the penultimate line: “Of course, I don’t know very much / About these politics, / But I think that some who run ’em, [] / Do mighty ugly tricks.”¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, who like Harper could make fun out of hymnody (“Búrly, dózing, húmble-bée / Whére thou árt is cléme for mé”, in 7s, like “Rock of Ages”), could also turn hymnody into monumental elegy (“Hymn: Sung at the Completion of the Concord Monument, 1836”):

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

It is this long-metered hymn, with its tune adequate to its rebel farmers, and not his soaring but obstinate “Ode, Inscribed to W. H. Channing” that survives Emerson’s 1847 *Poems* in the public imagination.

Reading the American hymnodic lyricists, who seem more or less bound to their era, one is struck by Dickinson’s currency.¹⁹ Her radical experiments with hymn form may be illustrated by one of her most devastating lyrics (320A):

Thère’s a cértain Slánt of líght,
Winter Áfternóons -
Thàt opprèsses, like the Héft
Òf Cathédral Túnes -
Héavenly Húrt, it gíves us -
Wè can fínd no scár,
Bùt intèrnal dífference -
Whère the Méanings, áre -
Nóne may téach it - Ány -
’Tis the Séal Despáir -
Àn impériál afflíction
Sént us òf the Áir -

Whèn it cómes, the Lándscàpe lístens -
Shádows - hólđ their bréath -
Whèn it góes, 'tis like the Dístance
Òn the lóok of Déath -²⁰

How are we to describe the evolving rhythms of this poem? It's tempting but—as the subsequent quatrains make clear—inaccurate to describe the opening quatrain as iambic tetrameter with an elided initial syllable. This was Higginson's error when he emended the second verse to “smooth out” the poem's rhythm and diction (“weight” for “heft”) for the poem's 1890 publication:

There's a certain slant of light,
On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.²¹

Higginson's emendation, we should note, unintentionally “irregularized” Dickinson's rhythm. The first seven beats now flow more evenly across the line break, but at the cost of making the second line iambic, unlike any other in the poem. What is marred along with the music is the American idiom, “Winter Afternoons -”, which in company with the contraction “There's” places the light not only seasonally but regionally (those who know Dickinson's turns of phrase will recognize her light). Higginson's mistake exemplifies the shortcoming of traditional foot-scansion when confronted with Dickinson's odd-syllabled lines. Dickinson's opening quatrain is really neither iambic with a missing first nor trochaic with a missing last syllable. Framed by beats, its odd-syllabled lines (7575) create a sharply defined measure that impedes enjambment, an effect tempered by soft openings (the glide of “Winter”, the muted song beats of “There's”, “That”, and “Of”). There's nothing missing from these lines; they are rhythmically and syntactically complete.

They do, however, hold latent possibilities. At seven syllables, the odd lines split the difference between three and four trochees. In subsequent quatrains, Dickinson develops her music by realizing both these measures. While the rhyme lines remain throughout at five syllables with three beats, probably to maintain single rhymes, it's the odd lines that carry the rhythmic changes. In the middle quatrains they are pared down to three beats.²² In the last they extend to four. Across these variations, the overall rhythm establishes itself as trochaic, with line endings alternating, after the first quatrain, between upbeat (odd lines) and downbeat (rhyme lines). This rhythmic development is significant; the quatrain meters could not be reordered without mixing up their meaning. With its beat-framed lines, the first quatrain bears the oppressive certainty of the slanting light. By comparison, the odd lines of the middle stanzas, though metrically complete, sound unfinished, lopped. They end on not actual but virtual fourth beats (virtual because we expect the poem's 4343 beat pattern to continue).²³ Three of these fourth beats are marked

visually by scarlike dashes (working doubly as musical rests), which when they are seen and heard are also felt. After two three-beat stanzas, the final quatrain's odd lines, with their four full trochees all falling on speech beats, feel appropriately elongated, vast. Each stanza thus feels too long or too short, but each meets its stage of development.

Dickinson's "Slant" develops an exceedingly uncommon measure. She did not learn it from Isaac Watts; his psalms and hymns are without exception iambic (as I've noted, later hymnodists wrote in trochaic forms, such as 8s & 7s, but I've found none in 7s & 5s). Nor did she find it among traditional ballads, which are also invariably iambic. I can find no trochaic 4343 quatrains among Renaissance songs, nor among Romantic or post-Romantic English or American lyrics. The form is unusual even among Dickinson's own poems.²⁴ The opening beat-framed measure of "Slant" most closely resembles the seven-syllable measures of songs (John Donne, "Goe, and catche a falling starre / Get with child a mandrake roote"; William Blake, "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night"); and hymns ("Rock of Ages! cleft for me, / Let me hide myself in thee"). By this system, "Slant" may be described as 7s & 5s (developing into 6s & 5s and then into 8s & 5s). But despite its rhythmic angularity, its opening 4343 downbeat pattern recalls the 4343 iambic form known as common measure, a form popularized by the prolific Watts, whose imagery provides the positive for Dickinson's negative light. Here are the starkly despairing opening quatrains from three of Watts's hymns:

Oppressed with guilt, and full of fears,
I come to thee, my Lord;
While not a ray of hope appears,
But in thy holy word.

Plunged in a gulf of dark despair
We wretched sinners lay,
Without one cheerful beam of hope,
Or spark of glimmering day.

How long wilt thou conceal thy face,
My God, how long delay?
When shall I feel those heavenly rays
That chase my fears away?²⁵

Like Dickinson, Watts could represent feelings of guilt, fear, despair, and doubt. But throughout and beyond these emotional storms there shines steadily a "ray" or "beam of hope," carrying with it the promise of "heav'nly" grace and salvation. This is the crucial difference between Watts's hymns and Dickinson's trochaic lyric, which might be described as a Watts hymn running in reverse.

Where Watts's beam lifts up, Dickinson's light bears down. Where his ray offers

heavenly hope, her slant gives a “Heavenly Hurt” that may be identified with despair (the poem’s speaker is not a nonbeliever, or the light would not hurt; “Cathedral Tunes” feel oppressive only to those who are “certain”, like the faithful, of Heavenly bliss—certain, that is, of being excluded from it). This blighted quatrain comes from the same poet who entered this common-measured hymn into the previous fascicle (211A; “About early 1861”):

I’ve heard an Organ talk, sometimes -
 In a Cathedral Aisle,
 And understood no word it said -
 Yet held my breath, the while -

 And risen up - and gone away,
 A more Bernardine Girl -
 Yet - knew not what was done to me
 In that old Chapel Aisle.

In this musical conversion, implicitly likened to a virgin’s deflowering, the church organ’s breath-stopping power is softened by the last verse’s “old” nostalgic haze. But nothing in “Slant” keeps Dickinson’s light from cutting through and lodging itself within. The light there is moreover anything but light.²⁶ The aspirate /h/ of “Heft” and “Heavenly Hurt” can only be performed by emptying the lungs of air; reading it aloud is like having the wind knocked out of you. The oppressive effect is reinforced by the partially concealed word *heavy*, which reverberates in “Heft” as well as “Heavenly”. The phrase “Heavenly hurt” bespeaks the *heavy heart* it overlays.²⁷

The sense of absences intensifies in the third stanza, where the dashes ending the odd lines seem to mark not only missing beats but missing words. The line “None may teach it - Any -” in particular seems to swallow its syllables.²⁸ The line has been praised for its ambiguity, but I think it’s not so much ambiguous as elliptical, nearly speechless. Yet we know what she means: “None” who have suffered despair may teach what it feels like to “Any” who haven’t. To the saved reader, the simile “That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes -” would be meaningless. Dickinson tells it more clearly, if less compellingly, in a later (common-metered) poem: “Despair’s advantage is achieved / By suffering - Despair - / To be assisted of Reverse / One must Reverse have bore -” (854A).

In the fourth quatrain, Dickinson steps back from the moment of impact to contemplate its arrival and departure. The elongated odd lines, internally balanced, and yoked by slant rhyme (“listens -”, “Distance”) as well as parallelism (“When it comes,” “When it goes,”), might herald a healing restoration of balance. But the rhyme lines tell it differently. In “Shadows - hold their breath -” the subject is cut off (a *caesura* is a cut) from its verb, as we too hold our breath for the interval of a dash (only to lose it with “hold”). A new emotion now enters the poem—fear. Beyond it lies despair, indistinguishable from death. The departure of the oppres-

sive “Slant” thus does not produce a lightening of spirits. In the final abstracted, depersonalized death scene, the consolations of religion are wholly absent. What Dickinson’s contemporaries would miss in particular is the “look” of bliss on the face of the dearly departing, as the soul sets forth on its journey up the heavenly ray. Instead we find a neutral “Distance”, as emotion is numbed into indifference.

I turn now to a poem that picks up where “Slant” leaves off. Set in common measure, this poem shows how unsettling a hymnodic lyricist Dickinson could be (576A):

The differènce betwéen Despáir
And Féar - is like the Óne
Betwéen the instant òf a Wréck -
And whèn the Wréck has béen -

The Mínd is smóoth - no Mótion -
Conténted às the éye
Opón the Fórehèad of a Búst -
That knóws - it cànnòt sée -

The difference of this lyric begins with its opening tetrameter line, which is rhythmically complete but syntactically unfinished. I term this characteristically Dickinsonian effect, the continuing of syntax beyond the closure of a verse or stanza, *disclosure*. The effect, which is clearly intentional here (the capitalized “And” confirms the line break), depends on the interplay of syntax and rhythm (disclosure can’t be achieved in nonmetrical free verse, which specializes instead in enjambment). The newness of Dickinson’s music becomes more appreciable when we compare it with the Wordsworth tune that was playing in her ears, whether she knew it or not, when she composed her poem:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The meter of Wordsworth’s lyric is the same, and the verbal echoes are unmistakable (“Fear” / “fears”, “cannot see - ” / “nor sees”, “no Motion” / “No motion”). Add to the mix Dickinson’s “internal difference -” (from “Slant”) and Wordsworth’s “and, oh, / The difference to me!” (from another “Lucy” poem, “She dwelt among th’untrodden ways”), and it becomes clear that Dickinson had more than common-metered hymns on her mind.²⁹

Though Wordsworth’s poem has its own magnificently muted intensities, to our

ears Dickinson is the more modern musician. With “No mótion hás she nów, no fórcé”, for instance, Wordsworth achieves a slow and untroubled tempo with un-stopped nasals and long vowels. But compare his line with Dickinson’s “The Mínd is smóoth - no Mótion - ´”, where, along with nasals and long vowels, she unsettles the calm aftermath with a dashed, fragmented syntax and a truncated fourth beat. We might also contrast Wordsworth’s with Dickinson’s use of disclosure. Where Wordsworth compounds meanings between lines (“She seemed a thing that could not feel” momentarily and prophetically endows the thinglike girl with insensibility), Dickinson apparently suspends them. Yet her disclosural verse also carries a demonstrable sense. “The difference between Despair” is the gulf of self-consciousness, across which the self looks at itself as at an inanimate object—not an “I” but an “eye / Opon the Forehead of a Bust -” (*bustum* is the Latin word for tomb). Dickinson’s speaker speaks not of an unnamed girl but objectively of herself.

In another key altogether, Dickinson offers a sublimely ironic variation on the hymn in the last version of a famous 1859 lyric (124F; sent to Higginson on April 15, 1862):

Sáfe in their Álabàster Chámbers -
 Úntòuched by Mórning -
 And úntòuched by nóon -
 Sléep the mèek mèmbers of the Rèsurréction,
 Ráfter of Sátin and Róof of Stóne -

 Gránd gó the Yéars,
 In the Créscent abóve them -
 Wórlds scóop their Árcs -
 And Fírmaments - rów -
 Díadems - dróp -
 And Dóges - surrender -
 Sóundless as Dóts,
 On a DísC of Snów.

While the underlying long meter (4444 beat pattern) remains audible, Dickinson’s verse plays with and against the form. With nonrhyming verses ending on upbeat (“Chambers -”; “Resurrection,”; “above them”; “surrender”), and syllables oscillating between 9 and 11 (“Sleep . . . Resurrection,” is arguably a pentameter), Dickinson overlays her hymnodic long meter with another syllable-count rhythm. But the elongation threatens to turn her ironic elegy into a mere parody. As if to prevent the dactylic gallop that her primary beats might produce (Gránd gó the | Yéars in the | Créscent a | bóve them), she cuts her four-beat lines in two, turning her second quatrain into an octave. These midline segmentations amount to a wonderful instance of converse lineation (contrast her notepaper’s bathetic enjambment: “Alabas / ter Chambers”). Here the pervasive alliteration and long vowels (“Grand go

the Years”), along with suspenseful dashes (“Diadems - drop -”), space out the downbeat march, and create instead a music of interstellar, imperial vastness—a grand progression lost on the “meek members” but not on Dickinson’s congregated audience.

Dickinson’s hymns do sometimes offer paradisaical bliss, albeit unorthodox. Here is one, a seductive variation on short meter (3343 beat pattern; 205A):

Come slowly - Eden!
 Lips unused to Thee -
 Bashful - sip thy Jessamines -
 As the fainting Bee -

 Reaching late his flower,
 Round her chamber hums -
 Counts his nectars -
 Enters - and is lost in Balms.

The key to seduction is deferral, and we are put off from the first syllables. As the rest of the lyric confirms, there are three beats per verse—the first three beats in three words (Cóme | slówly - | Éden!). To give the opening trochaic rhythm its due, we must wait out the first upbeat by pausing slightly and dwelling on “Come”. We will also hover over and imbibe both long-voweled, alliterating syllables of “slowly -”; and if we are not to slur our words, we must pause between the two long *e*’s in “slowly - Eden!” the final short syllable of the seductive address (Eden is where you are) being the first true upbeat. Three words: three kinds of pauses.

The most satisfying deferral occurs at the first quatrain’s open ending. We hear rhymed verse as an alternating sing and song (Mary had a little lamb / Its fleece was black as soot) and sing and song (And everywhere that Mary went / The lamb was underfoot). Dickinson plays off our expectations by *disclosing* her concluding “song” line; “As the fainting Bée -” closes the rhythm and rhyme scheme but opens up a new syntactical branch and figurative space. This disclosure shifts the rhyme onto the odd line and inverts the 6 & 5 syllable rhythm into 5 & 6, a disconcerting song-sing, as the fainting reader gropes for his resting place: “As the fainting Bee - // Reaching late his flower;”. By this point, we should know better; we’re being led on. Dickinson withholds not only the consummation of a quatrain but of a verse. In their first edition, Todd and Higginson placed “Enters -” at the end of the previous verse (“Counts his nectars—enters;”), restoring to their ears the quatrain’s three-beat measure. Did they think to ask why Dickinson, who was obviously keeping count, dropped “Enters -” to the final line? My answer is that this converse lineation (“Cóunts his néctars - / Énters -”) mixes syntactical and rhyming satisfaction (“nectars -” also slant rhymes with “flower;”) with narrative and rhythmic anticipation (two beats, not three); it keeps us hanging on. The dramatically deferred and rhythmically dashed “Enters -” quickens what follows: “Énters - and is lóst in Báłms.” The climactic verb does double rhythmic duty, acting as a beat

for the seventh and the eighth verse. And in the following rush of lightly stressed monosyllables, the rhythm isn't fully satisfied until the last perfumed word.

Later in this essay I'll look at some of Dickinson's most aberrant measures. But it would be a mistake to think that her rhythmic involve only the transgression of metrics. Consider this delightfully hypercorrect (initially, at least) performance in a hymnodic short meter (3343 iambic beat pattern; 359C):

A Bird, came down the Walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angle Worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,
That hurried all abroad -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim.

Dickinson's bird, walking stiff-legged with excessive care, behaves like an excessively polite drunk trying to pass himself off as a gentleman. In traditional prosody, word boundaries don't matter, iambs usually overflow their words. But in Dickinson's quatrain, every iamb coincides with a monosyllabic word boundary until "an Ang / le Worm", where she bites the worm and word "in halves" (compare the notepaper's witless line break: "A Bird, came down the / Walk -"; *Manuscript Books*, 1:373).

The distinctive feature of short meter is its asymmetry. With its four beats, the third line sets up the quatrain's resolution like the V-chord in a blues progression. In the fourth quatrain of "A Bird", with its four three-beat lines in a row, Dickinson breaks this pattern with another, with three beats a line. The odd lines' final upbeat ("Cautious," "feathers,") produce the form identified in hymnals as 7s & 6s, a favorite Dickinson variation on short meter. The extra upbeats make for a hesitant, poised rhythm, capturing the divergently "cautious" attitudes of speaker (afraid

of frightening the bird) and bird (afraid of being caught).³⁰ In the final quatrain, Dickinson concludes her development from short meter to 7s & 6s by blending these forms (3343 beats / 7686 syllables), and pairing an upbeat (“Ocean,”) with a downbeat (“Banks of Noon,”) ending odd line. The change is amplified by the disclosure of the fourth into the final stanza (“And rowed him softer Home -”, though complete in rhythm and rhyme, calls syntactically for the completion of the next stanza’s “Than”). With this bridging, Dickinson transforms not only her imagery but her rhythm from an earthbound jerkiness into an airborne fluidity. The sound patterning of the striking but traditional closing similes (Dante, Homer: wings as oars, air as ocean) enhances the rhythmic continuity. With their long vowels and continuant consonants, the alliterative downbeats (“Than Óars divide the Ócean / Too sílver fór a séam,; /v/ and /f/ alliterate at a slant) could hardly be less intrusive. A lesser poet would have continued in this ethereal mode and would perhaps have heightened the contrast by adding more /k/ breaks to the opening quatrain. Why, then, for her finale—“Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon, / Leap, plashless as they swim.”—does Dickinson introduce several bilabial stops accentuated with a neologistic impasse? Why dilute the “plashless” oaring with a consonantal splash? You can’t always determine the sense of local sound effects, but it gives me pleasure to think that if she lost the bird, Dickinson caught its parting wingbeats.

Dickinson is mostly thought of as a poet of hymnodic quatrains, and there’s no doubting she was partial to hymn meters. A survey (see appendix) of the first quatrains of the 295 poems she wrote in 1863—her most productive year, in Franklin’s dating (which I follow here), and the year that saw the creation of most of her renowned poems—yields one hundred in common meter (8686). At a distant second, comprising about one eighth (37) of the total, come the short-metered poems (6686). Another familiar meter, long meter (8888), Dickinson used only six times, each time rhyming it as couplets. There are also three poems in the sestet variation of common meter known as common particular meter (886886). But the surprising and wholly unrecognized feature of these celebrated poems is that Dickinson worked most frequently in none of the above, often inventing a meter for a poem and using it just that once. The number of poems Dickinson composed in 1863 in patterns rare or unheard of in religious or secular lyric poetry, including her own, surpasses even those in common meter.

Dickinson often experimented, for instance, with what I’ll call *disproportioned quatrains*—those in which odd lines can outmeasure rhyme lines by as many as four downbeats. Burdened by absence, the abbreviated rhyme lines nonetheless measure up to their lengthy counterparts, as in this unforthcoming nature poem (778A):

Four Trees - opon a solitary Acre -
 Without Design
 Or Order, or Apparent Action -
 Maintain -

The Sun - opon a Morning meets them -
 The Wind -
 No nearer Neighbor - have they -
 But God -

 The Acre gives them - Place -
 They - Him - Attention of Passer by -
 Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply -
 Or Boy -

 What Deed is Their's unto the General Nature -
 What Plan
 They severally - retard - or further -
 Unknown -

To make her rhyme lines sound like lines and not runovers, Dickinson displaces them syntactically. “Maintain -”, for instance, an elliptical reflexive (compare 777A, “Beetle at the Candle - / Or a Fife’s Fame - / Maintain - by Accident that they proclaim -”) is displaced from its subject, “Four Trees -”, and from any object (the trees in this Civil War poem maintain their position like sentries, perhaps by order of General Nature). The poem is reflexively designed into four quatrains, the disproportioned lines suggesting a visible lack of revealed meaning or purpose. The result is an eye-stopping field composition, one mut(e)ilated by a literal manuscript translation. Realigned, the two interior stanzas illustrate the disproportionate merits of scriptural and converse lineation:

The Sun - opon a Morning
 meets them -
 The Wind -
 No nearer Neighbor - have
 they -
 But God -

 The Acre gives them - Place - / They - Him - Attention
 of Passer by -
 Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply -
 Or Boy -

Scripturally lineated, the second stanza adds two pointlessly enjambed lines (“Morning / meets them -” and “have / they -”) and destroys the stanza’s visual disproportion. Rhythmically lineated (the better to hear it), the third quatrain reveals its counterpoint rhythm, identical with the first quatrain’s (11, 4, 9, 2). As Dickinson composed it, the third quatrain is lineated rationally (What is the mutual purpose of the trees and their acre?) and counterpointed disproportionately. With each line given equal weight, disproportioned quatrains create palpable absences. In the fourth quatrain of “Four Trees -” a question carries no response. The term *general nature* was coined by Joshua Reynolds, but Dickinson probably knew it from

Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765): "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."³¹ Conversely lineated and disproportionate, Dickinson's poem is resolutely singular. But the length and breadth of its pleasure dwells precisely in its resistance to generalization.

Dickinson's best-known disproportioned lyric is "The Soul selects her own Society -" (409A), which pares its 10,4,8,4 opening down to a 9292 close:

The Sóul selécts her ówn Sociéty -
 Thén - shúts the Dóor -
 To hér divíne Majóritý -
 Présént nó móre -
 Unmóved - she nótes the Cháriots - pássing -
 At hér lów Gáte -
 Unmóved - an Émperòr be knéeling
 Opón hér Mát -
 I've knówn her - fròm an ámple nátion -
 Chóose Óne -
 Thén - clóse the Válves of hér atténtion -
 Like Stóne -

Disproportion is most evident in the final quatrain, where the concentrated slanting rhyme lines resound. This effect is lost if we lineate according to her notepaper ("an ample / nation -", "of / her attention"; *Manuscript Books*, 1:450). In "The Soul selects" disproportion suggests the promotion of quality over quantity, the one (plus one) over the many, and rhythmically amplifies the severe selectivity of the single imperial self confronting the innumerable mass of candidates.

Disproportion also breeds ellipsis, making absence both visible and audible. In this intensely elliptical lyric, Dickinson composes a rhythmic of self-denial (782A):

Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -
 The letting go
 A Presence - for an Expectation -
 Not now -
 The putting out of Eyes -
 Just Sunrise -
 Lest Day -
 Day's Great Progenitor -
 Outvie
 Renunciation - is the Choosing
 Against itself -
 Itself to justify
 Unto itself -
 When larger function -
 Make that appear -
 Smaller - that Covered Vision - Here -

With its lack of quatrain divisions and its proliferating dashes, this difficult poem seems to deny itself even a disproportioned rhythmic pattern. The dash following “Renunciation -” introduces a silence and all but removes the song beat on the copulas. Though the beat counts are familiar, the result is not far from speech rhythm, or from the initial phase of *vers libre*, as we may hear in Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (spaced as in its first publication, with my accents):

The Àpparítion of these fáces in the crówd
Pétals on a wét, blàck bóugh.³²

The rhythm of Pound’s first line (his spaces work something like Dickinson’s dashes) is almost identical with Dickinson’s “Renunciation - is the Choosing / Against itself”, and Pound too couples rhythmically disproportionate lines. Unlike several other modernists (Robert Frost, H.D., Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Louise Bogan, and so on), Pound took no notice of Dickinson, perhaps missing her musical phrasing in her metronome. Had he attended to “Renunciation -”, Pound would have discerned a liberated verse.

But the verses of “Renunciation -” are not completely freed, no more than are Pound’s. Their disproportionate quatrains, conversely lineated throughout, are still recoverable, although less and less so as the poem proceeds. I relineate the first thirteen lines into slant-rhymed quatrains here, not to suggest that this is the correct way to represent the poem, but to render underlying rhythmic frame more audible. Dickinson’s rhythm pairs upbeat-framed odd lines with disproportioned rhyme lines:

Renùnciátion - is a píercing Vírtue -
The létting gó
A Présence - for an Èxpectátion -
Nòt nów -

The pútting óut of Éyes - Júst Súnrise -
Lèst Dáy -
Dáy’s Gréat Progénitòr -
Òutvíe

Renùnciátion - is the Chóosing
Agáinst itsélf -
Itsélf to jústify
Únto itsélf -

In the first brilliantly disproportioned quatrain, the syllabic reduction (11, 4, 9, 2) occurs not only between odd and (disjunct) rhyme lines but from one pair to the next, a reduction repeated in the next quatrain (9262). From this increasingly speechless performance we can recover the figure of renunciation (Would you like the sun? “Not now -” Are you sure? “Just Sunrise -” thank you): full presence is

put off, “Day” (the sun) is not to outshine “Day’s Great Progenitor” (sunrise). For Dickinson, renunciation is a willful, even a knowing, blindness. The argument here recalls the allegory of “Before I got my eye put out -” (336B) which ends in a similarly sheltered blindness. Renunciation there (with an encrypted pun on “pain”) is an anesthetic:

So safer - guess - with just my soul
Opon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes -
Incautious - of the Sun -

Such abnegation, as the paradoxical third quatrain of “Renunciation -” reiterates, serves the larger interest of survival. But whereas “Before I got my eye put out -” (336B) personalizes the complaint, “Renunciation -” keeps the affliction at pronoun’s length. The depersonified “itself” is both renunciation’s myopic perspective and the self-negated self.

In the final blinded quatrain, the renunciation is nearly complete; both meaning and metrical form lie almost beyond recovery. But the figured argument is still underway (for “larger function” insert the sun; for “that Covered Vision”, shaded eyes). And the skeletal form of upbeat-framed odd lines and pared-down rhyme lines remains just audible. The couplet of five and four syllables, “When larger function - / Make that appear -”, reduces disproportion to an upbeat. But with the final couplet, disproportion reasserts itself. I offer two rhythmic possibilities:

Smaller - that Covered
Vision - Here -

Smaller - that Covered Vision -
Here -

Though the first would preserve the spare 5 / 4 disproportion of the previous couplet, the second (which I prefer) would keep the dashed phrase intact and end with a rhythmic and a semantic surprise: following the distancing “that”, we expect “There -”. With “Here -”, dashed and gasped, Dickinson at last identifies the covered vision, not with the speaker, but with the poem.

For many of Dickinson’s poems, the underlying measure is not the hymn quatrain but the heroic couplet. In the following pentameter couplets, lineated conversely as quatrains, Dickinson avoids Popean closure with stanzaic disclosure (930A):

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns -
Each age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference -

In one of her most reproduced lyrics, the formal rhythm of Augustan pentameter couplets is announced, then submerged, then transfigured (372A):

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?
The Feet, mechanical, go round -
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -
This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -³³

The fractured middle stanza graphically illustrates what we call “going through the motions”; the numbed heart (like the metrical “Feet”) goes mechanically through her daily rounds like a workhorse at a mill.³⁴ If we untangle her converse lineation, we may hear Dickinson’s underlying hymnodic measures:

The Fèet, mechánicàl, go róund -
A Wóoden wáy / Of Gróund,
or Áir, or Óught - / Regárdless grówn,
A Quártz conténtment, like a stóne -

With its 4344 rhymed couplets, the quatrain lies still in disrepair, but is not impassable. In her manuscript, Dickinson wrote down (either copied or composed) the middle stanza differently, then numbered lines for transposition (an arrangement ignored by Johnson, and first adopted by Franklin):

1 The Feet, mechanical, go round -
3 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
2 A Wooden way
4 Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

It’s interesting that the same underlying 4344-beat pattern, if not the rhyme scheme, is already present in the manuscript. I suspect Dickinson first composed the stanza rhythmically, as we find it here, then reordered the lines in order to transform

“Ground” into the audible (not visual) equivalent of a final rhyme. Converse lineation will often expose internal rhymes and give linear definition to a rhythmic fragment.

Dickinson’s musical genius is also evident in her definitive final quatrain, a hybrid of hymnodic 6s and neoclassical 10s. Her last, fractured pentameter is especially remarkable. Part of its emotional power derives from its narrative displacement. Like the close of “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -” (591A; “And then the Windows failed - and then / I could not see to see -”), this ending recounts events that predate its poem, delivering us to the brink of the opening line. It is also marked by an overwhelming narrative acceleration: three phases in three broken phrases. As scored by her dashes, the line both delays and accelerates. Unlike the assonant and long-voweled “great pain”, “First - Chill -” resists treatment as a spondee; the intense consonantal friction and fracturing dash ask us to hear the phrase as two isolated words (with a rising intonation on “First -”). The next measure, “then Stúpor -”, also sharply set off, lightens or deadens the music by putting one beat in the middle of three syllables. And the brilliant final measure, “thèn the létting go”, surprises us by not slowing down or congealing but by quickening and fluttering the metrical pulse. Even if outlived, Dickinson tells us, only formality survives.

“To fill a Gap”

I’ll end my survey with a poem that’s insistently rhythmic, though it will not scan (647A):

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it -
Block it up
With Other - and ’twill yawn the more -
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air -

The slant rhyme of “more -” with “Air -” reverberates a final conversely lineated pentameter couplet (in my realignment):

To fill a Gap / Insert the Thing that caused it -
Block it up / With Other - and ’twill yawn the more -
You cannot solder an Abyss / With Air -

But with this scheme, we discover at most a mismatched tercet: 5a6b5b. Something is still missing. In its first, rather late publication, in 1929, Martha Bianchi Dickinson gave “the more -” its own line, producing an alternation of short and long lines:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it -

Block it up
With Other - and 'twill yawn
the more -
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air -

It looks nice, but it lacks an eighth line to fill out a quatrain. Dickinson herself apparently tried to close the gap by taking up “Plug a Sepulchre -” as an alternative for “solder an Abyss”:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it -
Block it up
With Other - and 'twill yawn the more -
You cannot Plug a Sepulchre -
With Air -

This revised four-beat line would slant rhyme with “more -” and “Air -”, but it would also expose the second line as an unrhymed oddball. Nothing will fill the gap, as Dickinson must have realized, short of a new line, one before the first, the absence of which probably caused the poem to come into being in the first place. Yet as it stands, “To fill a Gap” is a complete and compelling poem, iambically rhythmized and internally rhymed. We may call it *vers libre*, but it is freed only by being doubly unbound.

Think of the poem in the abstract. Everything here is of the essence. Such a poem would have the shape of movement without itself moving. Its emotion, to which thoughts and inflections might be drawn, would draw its essence from no one. And its pointed wording, if you could call it wording, would owe itself to no words or marks in particular. Its promise would be kept in advance, and kept secret. It would not be visible, since that would be to appear one way or another. It would be difficult to read.

Think now of the poem in the concrete. The ultimate concrete poem would also fulfill its promise, though in a way wholly unpredictable from its conception. Nothing here happened by accident. If it moved, it would move in a way unlike any other. Its thinking and feeling, though fully present, would be unrepresentable and unidentifiable, since either would compromise its immaculate singularity. It would be marked, and its marks would be on paper. The ink, of Rhapsodium, an element harnessed for this poem only, and as yet beyond the orbit of the periodic table, would never dry. The marks, however faint or canceled, would be wedded to their peculiar paper, the paper to its table, the table to its room, the room to the region where the poet inscribed it. It would be at most partially visible, and would perhaps be different from one time to another, like the weather. It certainly could not reappear elsewhere or otherwise. It would be difficult to read.

These experiments—which when conducted under different conditions would

produce not wholly different results—perhaps illustrate my point that reading, like writing, is a messy and an impure but not an impossible process of abstraction and of mediation. We recognize words and sentences, figures and rhythms, even if we don't know quite what to make of them. The rhythmic line is no less material than the cursive line. We make it new in our mouths, our noses and throats, our lungs and ears, as we shape and pace the phrases and gaps as Dickinson scored them. The poem is not all there visibly on the manuscript, not even on the printed page. It's also embodied by the composer for the performing body of the mindful reader.

Dickinson didn't tell us what to do with her poems, but we know, if we know anything about poetry, that her manuscript's lines are so routinely awful, so "free" circa 1970, Dickinson would have found them laughable. We also know that Dickinson wrote poems and sent them out without variants. To do so, she chose between various words. She even wrote a poem on the subject, where verbal is likened to marital and to office selection, and finally to Divine election (1243A):

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried -

The Poet searched Philology
And was about to ring
for the suspended Candidate
There came unsummoned in -
That portion of the Vision
The Word applied to fill
Not unto nomination
The Cherubim reveal -

Dickinson no sooner takes up the common measure than, with her disclosure "There came unsummoned in -", trades it in for a lighter rhythm, 7s & 6s. Her still waiting variants—"further" and "vainer" for "finer", "probed" for "searched", "just" and "when" for "was", "Advanced" for "There came"—apply to fill positions (rhythmic, syntactic, and so on) they themselves help define. Since none of them were revealed to be the right word, they are destined to remain candidates. By contrast, the seventh line, even though uncapitalized, works rhythmically and syntactically as a verse in the poem. The lowercase "for" must be a mistake—but not one worth worrying about. A more fruitful dwelling place is "unto nomination" (Until that time? Unto that poet?). Despite its imperfect and unfinished manuscript state, Dickinson's revelation manages to come through: the right word chooses the poet. The poem may be remembered, written about, enjoyed, and admired. We want to dwell upon it, even if we never can settle on its boundaries, because it's the poem we're after.

**Appendix:
Dickinson's 1863 Measures**

In section A of the appendix, the stanzaic measures of Emily Dickinson's 1863 poems are arranged in order of the frequency with which Dickinson used each measure. In section B, the measures are arranged chronologically by poem number. (The measures of first stanzas only are given.) Poems are identified by R. W. Franklin's numbers in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), and the version cited, where more than one exists, is the fascicle version. I use the following abbreviations: cm—common meter, sm—short meter, lm—long meter, cpm—common particular meter, t—trochaic (unless otherwise noted, poems are iambic). I also indicate, parenthetically with an equal sign, underlying stanzaic rhythms for conversely lineated stanzas. See also David T. Porter, who lists “the most irregular” of Dickinson's “early poems” (pre-1861) in *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 191–93.

A. Measures Used in Two or More Poems. **Cm (8686)**: 504, 506, 507, 512, 513, 514, 516, 519, 524, 525, 528, 529, 533, 534, 536, 540, 544, 546, 550, 552, 566, 569, 571, 572, 576, 583, 586, 589, 591, 595, 596, 597, 598, 601, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 617, 621, 622, 628, 629, 631, 633, 642, 645, 646, 650, 657, 658, 660, 662, 663, 668, 673, 674, 676, 680, 686, 691, 695, 696, 700, 703, 707, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 717, 719, 725, 730, 731, 735, 737, 739, 741, 748, 750, 756, 757, 758, 760, 764, 767, 770, 771, 774, 775, 779, 780, 781, 784, 785, 791; **sm (6686)**: 501, 510, 517, 526, 527, 530, 531, 532, 535, 554, 555, 558, 560, 564, 565, 567, 573, 579, 588, 602, 604, 613, 614, 634, 636, 638, 648, 683, 689, 693, 708, 720, 721, 723, 740, 744, 772; **8676**: 511, 518, 521, 523, 582, 620, 640, 656, 690, 698, 699, 747; **8585 (t)**: 651, 681, 759, 762, 773, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 792; **6676**: 574, 605, 653, 655, 664, 679, 687, 717, 722; **7676**: 551, 580, 603, 627, 630, 669, 716, 768; **6666**: 563, 590, 592, 632, 649, 694, 728, 729; **7686**: 515, 520, 553, 561, 578, 675; **lm (8888)**: 587, 665, 677, 678, 751, 793; **cpm (886886)**: 704, 743, 745; **6565 (t)**: 727, 755, 783; **11,4,9,2**: 778, 782; **9595 (t)**: 635, 766; **86**: 499, 500; **7676 (t)**: 654, 661; **6676**: 655, 659; **6664**: 541, 612; **6464 (=10,10)**: 606, 706; **5555 (=10,10)**: 594, 732

B. Measures Used in One Poem Each. 502: **75**; 503: **7373**; 505: **10,8,10,8**; 508: **8846**; 509: **86443 (=cm)**; 522: **8956 (=cm)**; 537: **5,6,6,4,9,10 (t, =11,10,9,10)**; 538: **4444**; 539: **8484**; 542: **868686**; 543: **6453**; 545: **44686 (=cm)**; 547: **10,6,7,6**; 548: **10,6,9,6**; 549: **10,8,8**; 556: **9,10,11,8**; 557: **5986 (=cm)**; 559: **9694**; 562: **4464**; 568: **9494**; 570: **8,6,13,7 (=8676 + 7)**; 575: **6947**; 577: **5453**; 581: **44864486886 (=886886886)**; 584: **9886**; 585: **9696**; 593: **8,6,10,4 (=cm)**; 599: **6694 (=6676)**; 600: **44787 (t, =8787)**; 615: **9899**; 616: **11,10,11,8**; 618: **6,4,6,4,10,10 (=10,10,10,10)**; 619: **10,5,9,6**; 623: **8474**; 624: **8689 (=cm + 3)**; 625: **9864**; 626: **13,2,9,4**; 637: **53686 (=cm)**; 639: **4486446 (=88686)**; 641: **6,10,6,8**; 643: **4846**; 644: **5546 (=10,10)**; 647: **473882**; 652: **6446 (=10,10)**;

666: **76644 (=7686)**; 667: **4444**; 670: **11,4,9,4**; 671: **8659 (=cm)**; 672: **7777**;
 682: **885344 (=lm)**; 684: **44585 (t, =8585)**; 685: **7776**; 688: **10,10,10,10**; 692:
8383 (t); 697: **84488 (=lm)**; 701: **66535544 (=12,8,10,8)**; 702: **8886**; 705:
686886; 709: **7374**; 724: **9492**; 726: **11,7,11,6 (t)**; 733: **6564774**; 734: **5464**;
 736: **8887**; 738: **7586 (=sm)**; 742: **446**; 746: **4,10,4,8**; 749: **68484**; 752:
4,5,8,10,7 (=9,8,10,7); 753: **4844**; 754: **6,5,10 (=6564)**; 765: **664664**; 761:
44585 (t, =8585); 763: **626536 (=cm)**; 769: **444387 (t, =8787)**; **13,8,5 (t, =8585)**;
 777: **6,5,11 (t, =6565)**

Notes

This paper has benefited immeasurably from five gifted readers, who helped me at each stage transform it from an obsession into an article: Ellen Oliensis, Katherine Bergeron, Susan Stewart, Steven Monte, and Jean Day.

1. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared to All Known Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955). Unless otherwise noted, I will be quoting from Franklin's variorum edition.
2. Susan Howe, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values," in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, N.H., 1993), 131–53; here 141, 134–35.
3. Jerome McGann, introduction to *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, 1993), 26–41. McGann's argument, that all manuscript features are potentially significant, closely follows Howe's. Both Howe (*Birth-mark*, 137–39, 152) and McGann (*Black Riders*, 33–38), for instance, consider "variants" not as variants at all but as Dickinson's found poems.
4. McGann, *Black Riders*, 27–28. The facsimile of "Pain -" may be found in Dickinson, *Manuscript Books*, 2:819. McGann's typescription follows Johnson's (Franklin's was not then available) in using em dashes and a lowercase "or". It's missing a dash after "it was not -", a variant mark before "+time", a *u* in "begun", and a capital for "Or". Compare Howe: "Close examination of the Franklin Manuscript Edition shows that [Dickinson] could have put words onto a line had she wished to" (*Birth-mark*, 153). For an examination of this thesis, see Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (Amherst, Mass., 2000), 199–227. By measuring several right-hand margins, Mitchell argues that Dickinson did not have room to write in her runover words. For my argument, the relevant measurement is metrical.
5. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 3.47–48, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston, 1998), 417. Spellings and capitals from Flannagan's edition.
6. Another of McGann's examples (from "Many a phrase has the English language -", 333A) seems more convincing:

Breaking in bright Orthogra -
 phy

Even though "phy" is in the lower case, indented, and hyphenated, it does look as though it might be playfully reflexive. What then of "accommo - / date" (671), "Alabas -

- / ter” (124), “Bu / gles” (1655), “chest / nut” (1670), or “Delig / ht” (1636), to take a few from Franklin’s list of Dickinson’s more than two hundred word divisions (*Variorum* 3:1562–67)? We could no doubt manufacture interpretations for each of them. But how many of these readings would illuminate the poem at hand? And how is Dickinson supposed to hyphenate a word if not with a hyphen?
7. Martha Nell Smith, “Dickinson’s Manuscripts,” in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, Cristanne Miller (Amherst, Mass., 1998), 115–16. See also Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin, Tex., 1992). Smith differs significantly from Howe in pressing an erotic interpretation of Dickinson’s manuscript productions.
 8. Franklin punctuates “Ah -” with a dash, but I agree with Smith that it’s an exclamation point. It’s angled the same as her other exclamation points in the poem, and “Ah!” seems exclamatory.
 9. Mitchell (*Monarch*, 216–17) is similarly skeptical of Smith’s (*Rowing*, 83–85) description of Dickinson’s *Ss* and *Ts* in “The Sea said ‘Come’ to the Brook” (1275B) as oceanic. Howe (*Birth-mark*, 150) closes her article with a facsimile of the poem but does not comment on it.
 10. See Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, 2001), 508.
 11. Kamilla Denman, “Dickinson’s Volcanic Punctuation,” *Emily Dickinson Journal* 2, no. 1 (1993): 191.
 12. Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles* (Chicago, 1992).
 13. Contrast Smith, who views variants as alternate word choices “among which readers can choose” (*Handbook*, 116), and McGann and Howe, who take them as found poems. Cameron also differs significantly from Howe, McGann, and Smith in limiting her discussion to variants and fascicles. Though she shows little interest in Dickinson’s “metrics,” Cameron follows Johnson’s edition and represents her poems in stanzaic verses, ignoring manuscript line breaks.
 14. I am in much more agreement with Cameron about her understanding of Dickinson’s fascicles, which I take to be the central importance of her study, though it is beyond the scope of mine. When Dickinson stitched her poems together into packets, she chose to do two things: she grouped these poems and not others, and she arranged them in one order and not another. The fact that she composed some of the poems at different times only reinforces the fact that she constructed her fascicles deliberately. Reading a poem in its fascicle context may reveal dimensions of that poem’s meaning or figuration previously overlooked (even by Dickinson), and fascicles themselves may be read as constructed poetic sequences, with their own interrelated meanings, figurative structures, and musics. As mentioned earlier, however, Dickinson’s practice of sending single poems as fair copies means that we too can choose to read her poems in isolation. The fascicle context remains at most an option, as it was for Dickinson herself.
 15. Louis Zukofsky, *A* (Berkeley, 1978), 138.
 16. See Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1995), especially his distinctions between stress and beat (64) and promotion and demotion (70–77). I am much indebted to Attridge’s richly and delightfully informed study. I differ from him in considering sound patterning as a matter of rhythm.
 17. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York, 2000), 3, 19.
 18. For Lydia Sigourney, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Frances Harper (among many other

- lyric hymnists), see *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. Cheryl Walker (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992), 7, 252, 290. Habegger (*My Wars*, 29–31) notes that Phoebe H. Brown, a friend of Dickinson’s mother, authored a well-known hymn, “I loved to steal awhile away,” which was cited by the poet.
19. On the relation of Dickinson’s poems to English hymns, see Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), 84–92; Martha England, “Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts: Puritan Hymnodists,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 69 (Feb. 1965): 83–116; David T. Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson’s Early Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 55–75, and his *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 99–104. Hymn and ballad stanzas, metrically and socially distinct, are too often simply equated.
 20. For a more rigorous rhythmic analysis, see Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 147. Lindberg-Seyersted’s parallel scansion, one for metrical and one for speech rhythms, are fascinating but difficult for me to hear together. Still, her pathbreaking study is invaluable in revealing the contours of Dickinson’s rhythmic speech.
 21. Emily Dickinson, *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, ed. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson (Boston, 1890), 106.
 22. Sounding “difference” as two syllables, as in speech, preserves the upbeat ending and picks up an assonant slant rhyme with “gives us -”. Also speechlike, the three trochees of “An imp^{er}ial affliction” combine three syllables into a single “empyrial” (the uppermost atmosphere) upbeat.
 23. The term comes from Attridge (*Poetic Rhythm*, 58–61). In Dickinson, virtual beats occur in both odd and rhyme lines.
 24. Here’s an exception: “When I hoped, I recollect / Just the place I stood - / At a Window facing West - / Roughest Air - was good -” (493A).
 25. John Donne, “Goe, and cache a falling starre,” in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert Grierson (London, 1933), 8. William Blake, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1988), 24. Isaac Watts’s psalms appear in Lowell Mason, ed., *Church Psalmody* (Boston, 1832), 255, 277, 55.
 26. New Englanders will recognize this “Slant of light” as a raking winter afternoon glare (Dickinson’s failing eyes, biographers tell us, were particularly sensitive to light). Dickinson perhaps adapted the phrase from a melancholy scene in Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (chap. 5), which finds Arthur Clenman wandering through cluttered cellars lit by “pale slants of light from the yard above”; a few pages earlier, he beholds his mother sitting at a desk, “look[ing] as if she were performing on a dumb church organ.”
 27. For more on such unwritten but still resonant words and phrases in Dickinson’s (and others’) poems, see my “Lyric Cryptography,” *Poetics Today* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 221–62.
 28. As such, it invites Higginson’s emendation, “None may teach it anything,” which mangles the rhythm while personifying the light as a recalcitrant schoolchild.
 29. William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (New Haven, 1977), 1:364, 366. This poem was first published in 1800, in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.
 30. Cristanne Miller helpfully terms the ambiguity “syntactic doubling” and concludes that it “acts to multiply the possibilities for interpretation in a poem, to increase indeterminacy”; Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 38–39; I would suggest that meanings here are not so much multiplied as conflated, in a kind of compressed simile likening feeder with fed.

31. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare (1765)," in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven, Conn., 1968), 61.
32. Ezra Pound, *Personae*, rev. ed., ed. A. Walton Litz and Lea Beachler (New York, 1990), 251.
33. Compare "I cannot live with You - / It would be Life -" (706), which ends, as John Dryden might, with a conversely lineated triplet (verse rhymes: here / are / Despair; line rhymes: apart / here / ajar / Prayer / Despair):

So we must meet apart - / You there - I - here - /
 With just the Door ajar / That Oceans are -
 and Prayer - / And that White Sustenance - / Despair -
34. For an appreciation of the "stupefied" movement of these lines, see Judy Jo Small, *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme* (Athens, Ohio, 1990), 106, 233. Stressing the aberrant character of the meter, Small views this transposed version as even more prosodically "deviant."