

EMILY DICKINSON AS A PRIVATE POET

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson rejected print publishing, however, her preference for the handwritten page as a medium does not mean that she did not intend to share her poems with readers. Her alternatives to print publication appear to be numerous. Her methods of private publishing or sharing her poems with an audience include handmade booklets known as fascicles, unbound sets, poems included in letters, poems or lines of poems embedded in letters, letter-poems, fair copies of poems on individual sheets sent to recipients as gifts, and reading out poems to family members or friends.

Keywords

Emily Dickinson, publishing, alternatives to print publication, private poet, fascicles, unbound sets, letter-poems, gift-poems

Introduction

Emily Dickinson was a private poet, still, she found her ways of private publishing, intended for a limited circle of readers. Her preferred medium was the handwritten page. Paradoxically, while this is an alternative to print publishing which she found intruding her privacy, it reveals much more about the author as a private person. Although Dickinson's poems are not necessarily personal messages, as manuscripts, they appear in a personalized framework, bearing the personal touch of their author, evoking her memory. The reader's interpretative freedom is combined with and maybe limited by the authorial presence. Her manuscript distribution of the poems is in sharp contrast with her silence as a non-published poet, just like the highly emotional, intimate nature of her lyric.

Dickinson's bypasses of conventional print publishing involve: handmade booklets known as fascicles, unbound sets, poems included in letters, poems or lines of poems embedded in letters, letter-poems, fair copies of poems on individual sheets sent to recipients as gifts, poems included in letters and reading out poems to family members or friends.

Dickinson's handmade books: the fascicles

Dickinson's most characteristic products of private publishing are the forty fascicles which contain eight hundred poems altogether. Scholars agree that the fascicles, prepared between 1858 and 1864, are gatherings of poems, interrelated by theme, imagery, or emotion. The organizing principle and the relation of the poems is a complex and unexploitable topic which raises several questions, the examination of which is beyond the scope of this paper. In the present paper I would like to discuss the fascicles as an alternative form of publishing. These home-made books enabled Dickinson to exercise control not only over the text and the

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readers but also over the context of her poems. We could say that this method of self-publishing involves less publicity but more activity on the poet's behalf, as she both writes and edits the poems.

The fascicles as alternatives to print publishing raise the following questions: Were they meant to be shared at all or intended for private publication or are they preparations for print publication in the future? Or are they rather the results of the poet's private bookmaking activity?

Alexandra Socarides notes that the idea of fascicles as homemade books was not unknown in Dickinson's time. It was customary to write or copy poems or passages of prose into commonplace books, which often contained lines between the entries, like the fascicles. Autograph albums were also popular among Dickinson's contemporaries. They usually included the writings of others, addressed to the owner of the album [19: 71-72].

Another kind of blank book which served the purpose of copying as well as clipping and pasting different texts and pictures was the scrapbook (Socarides, "Rethinking the Fascicles" 76). These blank books were mass-market products, however, Dickinson did not use ready-made ones but constructed and sew the fascicles herself. Socarides finds that this "affected their status and genre" [11: 78].

Although the first fascicle is from 1858, R.W. Franklin supposes that Dickinson learned fascicle-making at Amherst Academy, where student writing was included in a manuscript called "Forest Leaves", "often hand-copied on single sheets of folded paper to form a volume". He suspects that "the little manuscript" (L247²) and "the little volumes" (L280) Dickinson mentions in her letters to her college friend, Henry Vaughan Emmons "may have been gatherings of her poems" [6: 1:9]. Alexandra Socarides and Melanie Hubbard argue that Dickinson's compositional methods had precedent in the manuscript culture she participated in, and that she and her peers wrote the way they did because of the education they received in composition and rhetoric [9: 22]. "When Dickinson pulled together her drafts, copying as neatly as possible onto sheets sewn into booklets, such as she must have made at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, she was doing what nearly every educated young person in the vicinity did for at least the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century" [9: 23]. Hubbard asserts that Dickinson and her peers "were well acquainted with the idea of writing down, sewing up, and circulating items of interest in what was a vibrant manuscript culture both in and out of the curriculum" and preparing booklets, manuscript newspapers was a widespread practice cultured in the high schools and colleges of the period [9: 23-25].

Thomas Wentworth Higginson labeled Dickinson's poetry "the poetry of the portfolio" using Emerson's term for private, unedited poetry, which had a well established tradition [8: 107]. As Eleanor Elson Heginbotham points out, it was not uncommon to produce individual collections of others' poetry, as, for instance, Dickinson's friend, Helen Hunt Jackson did among many others. She mentions Emily Brontë, who made prepublication books, copying them into notebooks, then after rearranging them, copied them again. Heginbotham presumes that Dickinson must have been familiar with this practice of

² The following abbreviations are used:

L:

Johnson, Thomas H., and Ward, Theodora, eds. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1965. Citation by letter number.

Fr:

Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1998. Citation by poem number.

professional writers [8: 108-110]. According to Elisabeth A. Petrino “the portfolio tradition takes on a distinctly feminine cast by mid-century”. Its sketches and fragments were not meant for publication. She finds that it was a suitable genre for women both for its unfinished and private nature. However, Dickinson’s fascicles are not unfinished in the sense of being fragmented. They are rather unfixed, open, and mobile. Nor are they private, in the sense of being the products of an amateur. They are very carefully written and edited self-publications. Moreover, although there is no evidence that the fascicles had any readers, they might have been circulated.

In order to decide whether Dickinson regarded the fascicles as finished products, it is important to understand her method of book-making, which is described by Franklin as follows: she copied the selected poems in ink onto sheets of letter paper, folded by the manufacturer into a bifolium. Then she stacked the sheets and bound them by stabbing two holes through the sheets on the left side and tied them with a string. Dickinson would prepare a formal copy of the worksheet, destroy the first copy, then prepare a further copy to be sent to family members or friends or to be retained. Following this she would enter the poem into the fascicle or later the unbound set. Some further copies to be sent or retained could follow this process.

In Fascicles 1-4 we can find only finished poems with the alternative readings resolved, and before 1860 she did not revise them in the fascicles. Later there are more and more variants, turning the fascicles into worksheets. It appears that Dickinson gave up making fascicles in early 1862, when she began to copy individual poems, sometimes fair copies, sometimes texts with alternative readings. She always destroyed the working drafts, which had served as basis for the fascicles. In the summer of 1862 she returned to fascicle making with Fascicle 16, to produce twenty-six new ones. Unlike concerning the previous fascicles, now copying and binding were close to each other, as the handwriting indicates [6: 1:22-25].

Franklin presumes that Dickinson’s goal could be merely “stocktaking, sifting and winnowing” the whole corpus, although at the beginning her intention was to produce finished products while later she just prepared fascicles “with no other purpose in mind than her own interest in the poems” [6: 1:11-20]. At the same time, almost two decades earlier, in the Introduction to *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* Franklin allows for the supposition that the fascicles “may have served privately as publication” besides the motif “to reduce disorder in her manuscripts” [6: ix]. There are no titles or title pages, the poems are not numbered or arranged alphabetically, there is nothing, like contents or indexes to facilitate finding one particular poem [6: 1:7].

The fact that the fascicles do not bear the poet’s name emphasize that she was comfortable, indeed, with anonymity. Her non-titling may be explained by her preference of anonymity as John Mulvihill suggests, and may serve as evidence that “she never had any interest in publishing” [14: 2]. However, this statement may be true for traditional print publication only, not for publication as such.

Nonetheless, there is no evidence that Dickinson shared the fascicles with anyone. Even the family members were surprised to learn about them when her sister, Lavinia Dickinson found them after her death. Franklin supposes that the later fascicles, especially from Fascicle 9, which contain alternative readings and are less carefully copied, were not intended for readers and would have been unsuitable for circulation [6: 20]. However, Dickinson intended to leave the task of finishing the poem to readers through the selection of the alternative word when more variants are offered and through creative interpretation. Thus the existence of unresolved readings is not necessarily evidence of her renouncement of an audience. As no one knew about the fascicles, it seems that she was storing them for future use, although if it was the near or the distant future, we do not know. However, she must have

had a definite purpose with them, probably that of leaving her poems in order for some kind of circulation before or after her death.

Domhnall Mitchell assumes that Dickinson was preparing for future “textual or print distribution”, a project that she gave up later. The fact that the fascicles were not sent to anyone, unlike individual poems “suggests that their intended audience may not have been an intimate, or local, or even contemporaneous one” [12: 166, 225]. Mitchell thinks that the construction of handmade editions and the high quality of the language indicate a desire for permanence as well as “her awareness of a larger nexus of relations between herself as a writer and an unknown audience of the future” [13: 170]. Nevertheless, the unfinished nature of her poems and her demands from readers appear to contradict this supposition. Considering the existence of alternative readings, the later fascicles seem like interactive books denying permanence. As far as Dickinson’s intentions are concerned, fascicles 1-8, which have only finished poems, may have been written with print publication in mind. Jerome McGann observes that in these fascicles “she arranges the lines as they would be expected to appear in a printed book. These texts are being copied to imitate, at their basic scriptural level, the formalities of print”. McGann thinks that Dickinson rejected publishing “with its medium of print, because she came to see how restrictive and conventional that medium had become” [12: 250]. Sharon Cameron also argues that the fascicles were a form of private bookmaking. She contests Franklin’s assumption that they were merely a means of stocktaking. Cameron finds that Dickinson destroyed the worksheets as she might have regarded the fascicles “as definitive, if privately published, texts”, although Dickinson adopted variants from the fascicles in the copies of individual poems she sent to friends, and included variants in fair copies, as well, in the last thirty fascicles [3: 142]. Contrary to Franklin’s view, Sharon Cameron believes that the fascicles were intended not for ordering but for arranging the poems. It is possible that Dickinson left single poems temporarily separate to stitch them to the place where they would fit later. Cameron also sees it as an evidence that twenty of the forty fascicles were copied in 1862 but not all written in the same year. The facts that sometimes she repeated a poem within a fascicle as, for instance, “Portraits are to daily faces” (Fr174) copied in Fascicle 8 with variant first lines or copied on matching leaves poems from different fascicles or included in fascicles poems from different years suggest that there should have been a conceptual scheme [2: 14-18].

This method of changing arrangement may lead to the conclusion that for Dickinson the manuscript copy was the only possible way of publishing. Additionally, her binding practice of stacking the sheets instead of nesting them meant that the sheets were prepared individually. In this form the unfixed openness of the text could be retained. It also offered the possibility of the constant revision of the texts. Furthermore, if we agree with Smith’s supposition that from the early 1860’s Dickinson regarded her poems as “holographic entities” [17: 205], the manuscript collections seem to be the most suitable form, indeed. Martha Nell Smith also assumes that both Dickinson’s manuscript books and letters were her method of publishing, and calls them “a consciously designed alternative mode of textual reproduction and distribution” [18: 2]. Similarly to Sharon Cameron, Dorothy Oberhaus, Susan Howe and others, she finds another evidence of this: “the lyrics within the manuscript books require the context of the fascicles, the poems of the same fascicle may be variants of one another [17: 203]. Cameron sees it as an evidence that “once Dickinson had copied poems into fascicles she usually destroyed her worksheets” thus “she might herself have regarded them: as definitive, if privately published, texts” [4: 14]. Consequently, the fascicles are not just products of stocktaking, nor are they preparations for print but carefully compiled and edited publications.

Nonetheless, it remains doubtful whether Dickinson meant the fascicles for a contemporary or a future audience. Nell Smith is not certain, unlike Franklin, that the manuscript books were private documents, not shown or sent to anyone. She suspects that Helen Hunt Jackson's letter may include a reference to a fascicle: "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it" (L444a). In another letter (L976a), ten years later Jackson writes: "I wish I knew what your portfolios, by this time, hold" [18: 73]. As discussed above, portfolio poetry was quite common at the time, and Jackson knew about Dickinson's poetic activity. Thus the word "portfolio" could be just a reference to the poems she may have written, not necessarily to the fascicles.

The unbound sets

The sets represent an ostensibly similar form of non-print publication. They contain unbound sheets similar to those of the fascicles. Franklin presumes that Dickinson may have given up binding as "her need for self-publication declined" or because "unbound sheets may have been easier for her to use" [17: xii]. Franklin contributes the first interruption of fascicle-making in 1864 to the problems related to her eyes. Her ophthalmologist, Dr. Williams forbade her the use of pen and ink, thus she wrote everything in pencil. When she returned to copying the poems in ink onto the fascicle sheet, she did not bind them [6: 1:25]. Still, the need for organizing and editing her poems suggests that the unbound sheets may have had a similar publishing function as the fascicles. Nevertheless, fascicles and sets represent different forms of self-publication. Fascicles are characterized by the relationship of the poems as lyric sequences, the poems they include are dependent on each other, with an interplay among them. Conversely, sets are both literally and metaphorically unbound. Alexandra Socarides supposes that the poems become more independent and self-contained as the individual poems become Dickinson's prominent concern [20: 129].

In my interpretation, as loose sheets are interchangeable, the shift of Dickinson's publishing practice could make it possible for her to experiment with the unfixed openness method she established with the variants. It was easier to rearrange the unbound fascicle sheets than the bound ones, although, as Franklin mentions, we have some information about the close context of the poems in the sets, since, as Franklin writes, the order within a given sheet is known [6: 3:1542]. However, it does not necessarily imply that Dickinson did not think of the sets as sequences of poems the order and context of which could be altered. Consequently, the change of method may be seen as a means of further loosening the limitations of the fixed text. Interestingly, the wish for a somewhat permanent form of nonprint preservation contradicts the desire for multiplicity.

As an evidence of the existence of some editing principle and the need to rearrange the poems, it is interesting to observe that sometimes she grouped the poems differently in the fascicles than in the sets or within the letters including more poems. Occasionally, Dickinson would leave some of them out of gatherings. This suggests that the purpose of her activity could be more than stocktaking. For example, the first version of "Knows how to forget!" (391) is included in Fascicle 19 while its longer variant appears in Set 7 [6: 1:415-6]. The latter is copied on the same sheet as "'tis anguish grander than delight" (Fr 192), which is not included in Fascicle 19 at all, although it is thought to have been written in about 1861, earlier than Fr 391. The three variants of "Sweet – you forgot –but I remembered" (Fr 635) were included in both Fascicle 31 and Set 7. However, in the fascicle the poem is on the same sheet as Fr 634 Fr636 and Fr 637, while in the set it shares the sheet with the poems Fr 996-1000, which are not included in Fascicle 31. The above changes seem to be the results of an editing activity rather than the simple arrangement of the poems.

Poems embedded or included in letters

Emily Dickinson's bypasses of publication appear to be inventively numerous. The letters represent another medium which enables her to reinvent an old cultural tradition and adopt it to her needs. In her correspondence she finds different ways to meet the goal of publishing. There are letters enclosing poems, letters parts of which have qualities of poems and it is for the reader to decide which genre they belong to, poems which are letters referred to as letter-poems, and poems embedded in letters. Similarly to her unwillingness to fix her work in print, she does not have the intention to fix the context or the genre of the poems, either.

Correspondence as a form of publishing offers the same advantage as fascicles and sets: the poems appear in Dickinson's own, personal context. Franklin observes that in case of the incorporated poems, it is often obvious that the passages are poetry, however, sometimes the only evidence that she meant them as poetry is that she capitalized the first words of lines [6: 1:32]. Letters could also enable the poet to customize the poem to the recipient, that is she would sometimes produce a different variant for a different addressee. As Agnieszka Salska informs us, sometimes the same poem was included or embedded in different letters, "its meaning changed by the new context or adjusted to suit it" [16: 178]. "I have a bird in spring" (Fr49), is an example of this, as well as that of the influence of the change of context and genre on the poems.

According to Franklin, there were more than forty recipients of the poems, most of which were sent through correspondence. Susan Dickinson received about two hundred and fifty poems, other recipients included Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Louise and Frances Norcross, Samuel Bowles, Elisabeth Holland, Mabel Todd, Helen Hunt Jackson and Maria Whitney [16: 3:1547]. In the case of the letter-related poems, the context of the letter may clarify the message of the poem, or at least facilitate interpretation for the critical reader, who may, in turn, respond to the poem. The distribution of poems in letters thus enhances critical reading and establishes an interactive situation with the possibility of a dialogue. Given the conversational-dialogic voice of the letters, the poems make the impression of being part of oral rather than written communication, as if they were read out or recited, which could probably make them "breathe" better³ (L262).

Contrary to the impersonal character of print, letters provide a personal context for the poems, as if they were written for or addressed to the owner of the letter, even if they were not. The audience of these poems is also personalized, it is not the faceless mass of printed publications. It could serve as a source of inspiration for Dickinson that she knew at least the first readers of her poems. Thus, she was in control not only of the poems but the audience, as well.

The letter-poems and gift-poems

The letter-poem is Dickinson's characteristic genre in which she may have intended to create the intimacy of correspondence for her poems. In many of the letter-poems some standard clichés characteristic of conventional letters are employed: at least an opening salutation and a signature, disguising the poems as letters. Thus, the Dickinsonian letter-poem constitutes a transition between private letters and epistles, typically meant for publication. This hybrid genre may be also regarded as a form of self-publication. The letter-poems are intended for a narrow, individualized, target readership. Unlike in the case of the poems enclosed or

³ In her letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson she asks whether her poems are alive and breathe.

embedded in letters, there is no context to assist interpretation. Furthermore, the intimacy of these texts and the enigmatic language rich in allusions, comprehensible for the addressee only, act as factors of alienation, as obstacles to reception by hindering understanding. Composed for sending like prose letters, their style is defined by the addressee's social standing and relationship with the author. The private nature of the texts is violently changed by print publication. Moreover, this form serves as a mask to reduce the risk of revealing herself in her art, a risk she seems to fear so much.

Certainly, examples of this transitional genre may be found as early as antiquity. However, in Emily Dickinson's case this genre is of special importance. She managed to create a form suitable for her reserved, reticent nature, a disguise tailored to her personality and to that of the intended reader.

Yet, we cannot assume that she had full control of the public of her letter-related poems, as the private sharing of letters was customary in Dickinson's times. Dickinson chose the intimate and private medium of correspondence as one of the means to distribute her poems. However, it lost some of its privacy when the recipients shared the letters with others. In spite of her secluded lifestyle and non-published status, she was known as a poet not only by her personal acquaintances. According to Karen Dandurand, Higginson was the most active in sharing Dickinson's letters and poems with his friends and family members, for example, Helen Hunt Jackson or his sisters. As a comment to his sister in L481n he mentions a parody of a Dickinson-letter his close friends, Theodora and Sarah Woolsey produced at a party. It is known that he spoke about and read poems by two unknown women poets, Dickinson and his sister, Louisa in a women's club on 29 November 1875 [5: 265, 266]. As Dandurand points out, the audience "potentially included many of the leaders of literary Boston and, indeed, some of the major writers of the time". Although Dickinson's name was not revealed, Dandurand believes that some of the audience may have recognized her poems [5: 267, 268].

Dickinson would also read out some of her poems to family members. Fred D. White quotes Martha Ackman, who tells the story of Emily Dickinson's relative, who heard Dickinson "declaim her poetry". Ackman also describes as Dickinson's cousin, Louise Norcross would sit behind the pantry door and listen to Dickinson reading her poems to her [21: 91-92].

The private sharing of the poems included gift-poems, as well. Dickinson would prepare a hand-written copy to be offered to a friend or a family member, sometimes accompanied with some fruit, sweets, flowers or some other present. "When Katie walks, this simple pair accompany her side" (Fr 49), for instance, was sent to Dickinson's friend, Katherine Scott Turner during one of her visits to Amherst between 1859 and 1861. Turner later added the following lines to her transcript of the poem: "Emilie knitted a pair of garters for me & sent them over with these lines" [6: 1:99]. The same person received the poem "It cant be 'summer'!" (Fr 265) in October 1861. Turner explained on the transcript she prepared for Susan Dickinson several years later: "Emily sent over this poem, with three clover heads & some bright autumn leaves [6: 1:284]. A copy of "South winds jostle them" (Fr 98) accompanied flowers which Dickinson sent to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross probably in 1859. Another copy of the same poem and two more poems were enclosed with pressed flowers in Dickinson's second letter to T.W. Higginson in April 1862 [6: 1:135, 136].

CONCLUSION

Dickinson rejected print publishing as she objected to the commercialization and mass reproduction of literature. She did not intend to tailor her poems to meet the taste of editors or the demands of the market. Neither did she wish to get involved in the world of literary business. She insisted on keeping full control of her work and wanted to select her readers. Her negative experience of editors printing her poems without her permission and altering them as it happened, for instance to “A narrow fellow in the grass” (Fr 1096) could have contributed to her rejection. In her letter to Higginson she complains that the editors of Springfield Weekly Republican added a question mark, although her use of irregular punctuation was deliberate [21: 89]. “Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me – defeated too of the third line by punctuation. The third and fourth were one” (L316). Furthermore, she may have found it objectionable that once a poem was published in a paper, its reprinting could not be controlled, either.

Instead of traditional print distribution she found alternative ways of publishing, which involved fascicles, unbound sets, poems included or enclosed in letters, letter-poems and gift-poems. She opted for the more intimate and personalized handwritten, handmade media as she preferred to control and safeguard her privacy characterized by female reticence along with her artistic integrity.

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