THE POWER OF VISUAL INTENTION IN EMILY DICKINSON’S POETRY

A Thesis Presented

By

Megan Marie Stefanski

To

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree

In the field of English

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

April 2018
THE POWER OF VISUAL INTENTION IN EMILY DICKINSON’S POETRY

A Thesis Presented

By

Megan Marie Stefanski

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English
in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities

Northeastern University

April 2018
ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Emily Dickinson scholarship is divided into two camps: those who place Dickinson’s poetry against her historical context and those who examine her written manuscripts as objects. This thesis combines these preexisting strands of scholarship through the lens of visual culture. The first section of this thesis displays the current divided state of Dickinson scholarship. In the second section, Dickinson’s poetry is discussed through the lens of visual culture and why it is relevant to discuss the poetry within those terms. The found manuscripts of Caroline Ticknor are used to further prove the relevance of the visual within the context of the 19th century. The final section performs close readings of images of Dickinson’s manuscripts against the generally accepted versions of Ralph Franklin’s edited editions, establishing that the normalized line breaks within Franklin’s editions weaken the power created by Dickinson’s original line breaks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Theo Davis, thank you for guiding me to write the paper in my head in such a way that allowed others to understand what I was thinking. Thank you for helping me to state my thoughts clearly and explicitly. I would not have been able to complete this under any other advisor.

To my wonderful cohort, thank you for saving my sanity. I’m glad for the friendships we made and I truly value the advice and guidance that all of you have provided me at one time or another.

To my parents, without whom I would have never made it to Boston. I love you both so much and I can’t thank you enough for all of the support you’ve given me.

To Chris and Alice, thank you for the candy and the proofreading. The candy helped me write it and the proofreading helped me finish it.

To Mike and Sue, thank you for the pen and paper that helped write this, even though you thought I was a weirdo for needing it in the first place.

To Meaghan Cuddy, you were a wonderful support system even when you were drowning in your own sea grass.

To Heather Brist, the best mentor for life a mentee could ask for. My graduate experience would not have been as rewarding if you had not been there to give me your advice and help.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................................2
Acknowledgments..................................................................................................................4
Table of Contents..................................................................................................................5
Introduction..................................................................................................................................6
Context, Manuscripts, and Intention.........................................................................................7
Visuality and the 19th Century...............................................................................................23
Close Readings........................................................................................................................38
Conclusion..................................................................................................................................49
Bibliography.............................................................................................................................50
**Introduction**

The two main focal points in Emily Dickinson scholarly work are contextualizing Dickinson as a poet historically and materialist examinations of her manuscripts. There is a lot of tension between these two lines of work, as at first glance they appear to be opposing forces. Historicizing Dickinson entails putting her within the timeline of other writers, specifically women writers, of the 19th century.\(^1\) Up until this point the manuscript studies\(^2\) have been focused on reading the manuscripts as objects and honing in on the materiality of them. However, part of the work that goes into contextualizing Dickinson’s poetry is to examine writing practices of the 19th century.\(^3\) The only way that that is of any use is when you explore that next to her manuscripts. Because of this, over the past couple of years the two have become close to intersecting. It has taken until now because each field attempts to stake its claim as the more important aspect of the field. I contend that the way that these two strands of scholarship are able to truly commingle and complement each other is if you look at Dickinson’s poetry from a visual culture standpoint. By looking at both the time she was writing in as well as the manuscripts themselves, it is obvious that there is a visual element that is important to take into consideration. When you look at the work through the visual lens, it becomes clear that Dickinson intended there to be some sort of interpretation based on the visual. There are too

---

\(^1\) The historical critics that I work with specifically are Barton St. Aramand, Elizabeth Petrino, Mary Loeffelholz, Cristanne Miller, Martha Nell Smith, Virginia Jackson, Marietta Messmer, Ena Jung and Stephen Cushman.

\(^2\) The critics that I reference who work on manuscript studies are Alexandra Socarides, Sharon Cameron, Domhnall Mitchell, Ellen Louise Hart, and Paul Crumbley.

\(^3\) By writing practices, I am referring to the writing and genre conventions of the 19th century. By looking at the way Dickinson was interacting with the written world around her, it becomes clear what she was doing based on the conventions of the time and what she was doing in spite of those conventions.
many aspects of the visual within her poetry for it to have been an accident.

My paper is divided into three sections. The first section will be making connections concerning contextualizing Dickinson within her time period of the 19th century, manuscript studies, and the intentionality of Dickinson’s poetry, paying particular attention to the visuality of it. The next section will discuss visual culture and how it can be directly applied to the work that Dickinson was doing. Lastly, the final section will consist of close readings of multiple poems, including: “It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did - ,” “Suspense is Hostiler than Death -,” and “Beauty - be not caused - It Is.” My goal with arranging my paper in this way is to trace the parallels between the two trains of thought through Dickinson studies in order to express how, when viewed together, they implicitly lead to an interpretation informed by visual culture. Ultimately, what I am attempting to prove in this paper is that Dickinson’s poetry should be valued for the visual aspect she intended for it. Without acknowledging the visuality of Dickinson’s poetry, readings of her are missing a vital layer of interpretation.

**Context, Manuscripts, and Intention**

**Historical Context**

When talking about context within Dickinson studies, there are multiple facets that are applicable. The broadest interpretation, and the subject of this section, is the context of Dickinson as a poet within the 19th century. The reason that this took so long to do was that Dickinson’s poetry was initially read in the same way as the poets who were writing at the same time that her poetry was popularized. That is, poets at this time had their poetry divided into a
certain “canon” of important words that represented the overall nature of their work. After Dickinson’s death, Mabel Loomis Todd violently edited Dickinson’s poetry for publication in a way that was harmful to Dickinson’s intended work. She cut apart Dickinson’s fascicles and heavily altered the poems to include semicolons and other punctuation that was not present in Dickinson’s original vision. She also titled the ones she published in order to normalize them for readers of poetry during this time. The first set of Dickinson’s poetry was published in 1890, four years after Dickinson’s death. Therefore, when the poems were being read, it was almost the turn of the century and Dickinson herself had written as early as 1850.

It was not until the work of Barton St. Armand’s book, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society*, in 1984 that scholars began thinking about Dickinson’s poetry in the context of when she was writing as opposed to the context through which she was initially read. The reason why this way of thinking about her poetry is so invaluable to the field is that we are able to see what parts of her writing she was adapting from the writing practices of the time and what was her own innovations. The book does the work of placing Dickinson within the context that she was writing in and emphasizes the importance of doing so. St. Armand contends that to read Dickinson as a “canon” as opposed to her full works “do[es] violence to her own very considerable artistic integrity.” It does that because then you are not looking at the connections

---


6 St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, 15.
that Dickinson was making within the corpus of her work. It is this thread that I intend to carry through the course of this paper. If you take her poetry outside of the timeline that it was written, it takes away Dickinson’s skill as a poet. As St. Armand puts it, her poetry is “of her age as well as beyond it.”

That is, she was writing poetry as a product of her time period, but it also transcends that time and is relevant and worthy of study to readers and scholars of today.

In 1998, Elizabeth Petrino continued St. Armand’s work by examining Dickinson through the scope of women writers of the 19th century. It was common practice at the time to assume that women were writing of their emotions as they felt them. It was thought that women’s writing was not “intellectual,” but they could write about matters of emotion better than men could. Because of this, professional women writers had to write in specific ways, ways that the population at large expected women to think and write. The result of this was that those professional women were given more personal freedom. Society wasn’t as hypercritical of these women because it was assumed that their innermost thoughts were exposed for the world to see. In short, women exchanged professional creativity for personal freedom.

Because, as Cristanne Miller put it in her book Reading in Time, Dickinson was an “absorptive reader,” she was aware of the print culture of her time. She was also aware of what the expectations of women were. However, due to the fact that her family was in a comfortably in the middle class, Dickinson did not have to sacrifice anything in her work in order to conform

---

7 Ibid., 12.


to how society felt women should think.\textsuperscript{10} Petrino says that “she distinguished herself as the only American Renaissance writer who valued her own conception so completely that she was willing to forego publication.”\textsuperscript{11} She knew that if she published, she would have to make certain changes to her poems that she was not willing to make.

Partly due to Dickinson’s dedication to her craft, she did not pursue formally publishing her poetry in print. Being as aware of the print culture as she was, she would have known that her poetry would be altered in some way. She wanted to maintain total control of her work and the only way that was possible was if she maintained her own version of publication. I maintain that one of the aspects that she wanted control over was the visual aspect of her poetry.

Another way to keep contextualization present when reading is to ensure that you are reading the works themselves in their intended context. In 1955, Thomas Johnson did extensive work in reassembling Dickinson’s fascicles.\textsuperscript{12} He dated the poems according to the state of the handwriting and was able to place the poems in their groupings. Ralph W. Franklin expanded upon this work in 1981, and in doing so, he was able to assemble the fascicles as close as we will possibly get to Dickinson’s original order.\textsuperscript{13} When Franklin did his extensive work putting together the fascicles as close as possible to their original order, he assumed that Dickinson

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{11} Petrino, \textit{Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries}, 20.


\end{flushleft}
compiled them to be used as organizational tools. Sharon Cameron views them as having a more specific intentionality. Rather than just be organizational tools, Cameron posits in her book *Choosing Not Choosing* that the poems themselves are “individual utterances” or “units of sense.” Her main argument is that the fascicles have their own “poetic identity.” Cameron is of the opinion that the fascicles were Dickinson’s publications. We aren’t sure what Dickinson intended, but it is clear that something was intended. The fact that Dickinson stitched the poems together by hand clearly shows that she had something in mind while putting them together. The interesting aspect of Cameron’s argument is that since she is saying that the fascicles have the same poetic identity, a poem that was found across different fascicles, was a different entity altogether. The most compelling aspect of Cameron’s argument is her attention paid to Dickinson’s meter. Within the variants, Cameron states “for if in the variants we have the same metrical contour for alternative words, then it cannot be said that the variants indicate Dickinson’s attempt to find the ‘right’ word.” This, paired with the fact that the fascicles come from Dickinson transcribing her own work, shows that Dickinson had something specific in mind. The other idea that plays very strongly in this work is how the act of reading the Franklin and Johnson editions leads to different reading experiences. That is, readers can come to different conclusions about Dickinson’s work based on which editor they are reading. This directly

---

14 Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8–9. Part of Cameron’s argument is that even Franklin was not sure of what Dickinson’s intentions for her fascicles were. Because of this, to not allow for alternative interpretations of the fascicles does disservices to Dickinson’s craft.

15 Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing*, 15.

16 Ibid., 18.

17 Ibid., 24.
supports the idea that the physical context in which you read Dickinson’s poetry is just as important as the historical context.

For some scholars, the context of Dickinson’s work goes a step further and the letters themselves act as a form of context. The reason that we can place enough emphasis on the letters produced by Dickinson to consider them a “body of work” on their own is, as Marietta Messmer puts it in *Vice for Voices*, the letters are their own form of publication. As opposed to the fascicles, Dickinson’s letters have an intended and specific audience. This is important to think about in terms of intentionality because, while there are variances within her poetry, when it is a direct, known audience, the variances are not present within the individual poems. Keeping the poems within the context of how they appeared, both with their line breaks as well as the prose she wrote alongside them, ensures that the poetry is read the way it was intended. The letters themselves serve as a space of context because if we remove the poems from the letters themselves, the information that Dickinson wanted her audience to know would be lost. Additionally, as Messmer states, when Franklin and Johnson create the line breaks as they see fit, they are “‘creat[ing] an’ (artificial) regularity where there had been accidentality, and hence produce misleading signification.” While Messmer and I have different stakes in regards to intentionality, the editing of Dickinson’s line breaks is a violation of what she could have been intending, which is an idea that I will focus on later in this paper.

In Miller’s book *Reading in Time*, she does a combination of what these previous critics are doing. That is, she is looking at the period of time that Dickinson is writing, as well as

---


19 Ibid., 63.
looking at the context around how the poems are constructed to be read. The reason that her book is entitled *Reading in Time* is because Miller is both looking at the time in which Dickinson was writing in, as well as referring to the meter of Dickinson’s poetry. She constructs her argument through the development of Dickinson’s writing practices. Miller contends that while Dickinson had a moderately active engagement with the world around her, she was still not adhering to the social norms of the time. She also takes the idea of contextualizing Dickinson a step further because she frames her research by how Dickinson herself would have understood poetry.\(^{20}\)

The main flaw that has continually repeated itself within the history of the editors of Dickinson’s poetry is the fact that the edits disrupt both the physical and historical contexts of reading it. Not only are the “editors” unnecessary, they actually do harm to Dickinson’s poetry. As Martha Nell Smith argues in *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* in 1992, it is not merely edits that these scholars are doing, but something closer to translations.\(^{21}\) When editors are preparing Dickinson’s work to be moved to print, they are leaving imprints of themselves as readers. It is clear that their own interpretations shine through. While I mainly disagree with Domhnall Mitchell’s main argument, he is nevertheless very important to my own argument. Mitchell’s main contention is that there was no intention to Dickinson’s line breaks, but the way that he comes to that conclusion is the fact that the size of the paper gets in the way. He further states that the placement of the words is “a non-significant component of a letter or poem’s

\(^{20}\) The troubling aspect of Miller’s exploration of the manuscripts is that she uses the manuscripts as a means to an end of exploring the historical context and doesn’t see it as worthy of study in its own right.

He maintains that it is a worthwhile endeavor to attempt to make an authoritative edition of Dickinson’s poetry, one that does not contain the irregular line breaks and the variances within the poems. He states that that is a role for editors of Dickinson’s poetry. Mitchell states that a reader has different responsibilities than an editor, but what can an editor be if they are not a reader first? By prioritizing their own readings of Dickinson’s poetry, editors are doing a disservice to subsequent readers of her work.

Mitchell uses the idea of 19th century writing practices to defend the concept of having Dickinson’s poems be edited. Overall, his argument is in favor of Dickinson’s poetry being put in print. This would mean taking the poems out of their context of the manuscripts. He maintains that the manuscripts don’t lend themselves to any meaningful conclusions of Dickinson’s poetry. However, he does this by contextualizing the poems. So, even a non-contextual critic finds it useful to use context as a point of reference.

In 2005, Virginia Jackson’s book *Dickinson’s Misery* was a call to action for Dickinson scholars that is still relevant today. Jackson asks the question of how to read Dickinson’s poetry if not as lyric, because she wanted to push back against the assumption of reading Dickinson as

---

22 Domhnall Mitchell, *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 16. Here Mitchell was specifically talking about the multidirectionality of the writing, but it goes into his argument about how we can draw conclusions based on Dickinson’s work “demonstrating patterns of inscription that point to a conventional, extralinguistic principle of organization [which means we can] largely dispense with the manuscripts and rely on printed editions” (17).


24 Ibid, 17.
such. Within her argument, she maintains that Dickinson’s poetry appears sceneless because “the poems in bound volumes appear both redeemed and revoked from their scenes or referents, from the history that the book, as book, omits.” That is, when Dickinson’s poetry is placed within its context, the meaning becomes more clear and it is obvious that Dickinson was not attempting to write opaquely. Her goal in writing the book was to push back against the common practice of applying contemporary definitions to nineteenth century intentions. Jackson wanted to complicate the notion of readers interpreting Dickinson’s poetry by contemporary standards and to challenge readers’ notions regarding the concept of genre. An addition to Jackson’s original call to action that I would like to include here is the concept that print culture is so ingrained in our psyche as readers that there is no way to distance ourselves from it. Even as readers, we self-edit or translate the poems within the confines of print. As stated before, since Dickinson did not publish her poems willingly we can assume that she did not intend for her poems to be read in printed forms. In spite of this, I believe that it is worth attempting to get to. Even though our perceptions of both print and the genre of the lyric may get in the way of understanding Dickinson’s poetry in the way she intended it to be, it is still worth the attempt.


26 Ibid, 3.

27 The opaqueness, as I get into, is a result of editors altering Dickinson’s poetry.

28 It is worth noting that Dickinson would not have had any level of intention with any sort of printed work of hers, since she did not pursue getting her poetry published within her lifetime.
Within *Reading in Time*, Miller’s version of an answer to that call is to position Dickinson within her own time. However, Miller also frames her argument as being in opposition to Jackson because Dickinson would have thought of her own poetry as “lyric.” This is something that I see Jackson and Miller agreeing on, in spite of Miller explicitly stating that she does not agree with the reading and interpretation that Jackson has.\(^{29}\) To say that Jackson’s claim in *Dickinson’s Misery* is that Dickinson did not write lyric poetry is to not understand the subtleties of the argument. Jackson’s claim concerns the concept of genre and how we define it, rather than making concrete claims one way or another in regards to the “true” genre that Dickinson was writing in. Therefore, both Miller and Jackson state that Dickinson was writing in some form of “lyric” poetry. It is also worth noting that without Jackson’s work, there would be no opening for Miller’s work and discussion of genre.

Out of all of the critics that place their emphasis on the manuscripts, Alexandra Socarides is the one that places the most importance on materiality. Her argument throughout *Dickinson Unbound* from 2012 centers around the idea that Dickinson’s poetry both influenced and was influenced by the material that she wrote it on. The way that she goes about doing this is to use other forms of criticism, such as media studies and archeology. She does this to emphasize the fact that Dickinson’s poems are made objects. It is both extremely important and useful to think about Dickinson’s poetry in this way. Emphasizing the fact that these are made objects recognizes the intense amount of work and effort that Dickinson put into her poetry. It also

\(^{29}\) Within the conclusion of *Dickinson’s Misery*, Jackson states “To call such a miscellany either a list of genres or to call those genres lyric is to suggest how capacious retrospective lyric reading can be, and also to suggest the messiness that I would like to attach to what are often purified terms, to suggest that genres themselves might be read as historical modes of language power” (235). Hence, Jackson was aware of the concept of the lyric within the 19th century and was instead more interested in getting a more specific definition. Dickinson may have called her poetry lyric, but the definition is so broad that that argument is all but useless.
directly challenges the notion that nineteenth century women writers were just writing straight from an emotional perspective. *Dickinson Unbound* is a direct response to the call to action at the end of *Dickinson’s Misery*. Rather than read the poems as lyrics, Socarides states it is useful to go beyond the written work and “read” the object itself, especially the object’s past. Because there is a more intense level of intention in Socarides’s interpretation, her argument is of immense importance to my own. If we think of Dickinson’s poetry as objects that have a created history as opposed to poems that simply “are,” we are looking at the poetry with the assumption that everything that Dickinson did was purposeful and with clear intention. She argues that Dickinson “treat[s] paper not simply as the material that holds her lines, drafts, and fair copies, but as a constitutive and meaningful part of the making and dissemination of the poems themselves.”

If we accept Socarides’s interpretation as correct, it becomes easier to recognize that Dickinson was working both inside of and adjacent to the writing practices of the 19th century. Dickinson recognized that printed versions of her work would not incorporate everything she felt was important to it and so she put her effort into making poems in the way that she envisioned them.

**Context Within the Text**

An even deeper level of context is that of the line level. At its most potent, that’s where the importance of the manuscript page comes in. This is some work that Ellen Louise Hart does in “Hearing the Visual Lines: How Manuscript Study Can Contribute to an Understanding of Dickinson’s Prosody” in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. In support of what I am arguing for a

---

more intense look at the visuality to Dickinson’s poetry, Hart is arguing here that the line breaks that Dickinson chose to put in her poetry were there for a reason.\textsuperscript{31}

Within the chapter, the first thing that Hart calls attention to is the fact that Dickinson’s visual lines don’t always line up with her metrical lines.\textsuperscript{32} There is a clear intention to this because, as Hart goes on to prove, a “reader” gets two different interpretations when looking at the two versions side by side. This is due to the emphasis changes that occur when editors normalize Dickinson’s line breaks. And, as Hart’s close reading of “Because I could not stop for Death” clearly demonstrates, the emphasis added to the poetry due to Dickinson’s irregular line breaks adds an enhanced level of nuance to the poem. That is, by looking at and reading the manuscript version of the poem, readers are guided to a certain level of interpretation that is lost otherwise. The spaces and line breaks ensure that the eye is guided differently than when the poem is printed on a page. This shows that Dickinson wanted to be in control in every aspect of her writing, which is why she did not want her poetry in print. She witnessed editors changing her poetry to fit what they viewed as “correct.” Since she did not have the role of editor, she could not ensure that her poems were published in the way that she intended them to be read.

\textsuperscript{31} Another aspect that Hart is looking at in this chapter is that she is taking a look at the change that took place within Dickinson’s handwriting over the years that she was writing. Part of what Hart says here is that penmanship was something that was relatively uniform in the nineteenth century. However, by examining the manuscripts, Hart was able to see that the way Dickinson wrote changed. To change one’s handwriting takes conscious effort. In other words, Dickinson changed the way she wrote on purpose for some intended reason. Hart posits that it is due to Dickinson intentionally altering how readers would vocally read the poems.

The scope of Dickinson’s dashes is something that is impossible to grasp when only looking only at the printed work. As Ena Jung says in “The Breath of Emily Dickinson’s Dashes,” the dashes became something unified within the printed text, even though the way Dickinson wrote it had different inflections. Dickinson was doing different things with the differently inflected dashes she was using, but then the editors of her poetry disregarded her creative choices. Within the article, Jung is attempting to articulate the scope of Dickinson’s dashes. Part of how she does this is to bring up an instance where Dickinson herself spoke about her use of the dashes. Within a letter of hers, Dickinson states “That is’nt an empty blank where I began - it is so full of affection that you cant see any - that’s all.”

33 The “empty blank” in this case was represented within the letter as a dash. As Jung points out, referring to it explicitly indicates “an anxiety that her punctuation will be disregarded.”

34 Having this anxiety verbalized shows that Dickinson had a level of visuality intended. The dash is a visual manifestation of emptiness. The fact that Dickinson not only included it, but explicitly stated its purpose shows that Dickinson had a level of visuality intended. If she did not wish for her work to be read a certain way, she would not have gone out of her way to ensure that her dash could not be misinterpreted.

Dickinson’s use of the dash to portray something invisible relates in a way to Suzanne Juhasz’s argument in The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind. In that book, Juhasz discusses how Dickinson uses concrete examples to discuss abstract ideas. For instance, she says “The mind can expand, can grow wider and wider under the demands of


34 Ibid, 2.
experience. To depict... this kind of development, Dickinson frequently uses... a geographical vocabulary. In this instance, Dickinson is using her punctuation and form to convey something that is not visible. By using the visible to act as a stand in for the invisible, Dickinson is placing emphasis on what is seen. Although it is a much earlier work than Jung’s article, my placement of Juhasz’s book here is intentional. When Juhasz was writing in 1983, the state of Dickinson scholarship was still very much in the throes of analyzing her poetry in a formalist fashion. However, when one pairs this formal approach with the more contemporary visual approach, a stronger concept of what Dickinson intended becomes obvious and the scope of Dickinson’s genius becomes apparent.

Throughout the course of her argument, Jung’s reason why she uses manuscripts over printed versions to perform close readings on is because “Almost every punctuation mark in a typeset edition requires the editor to interpret possibilities, thereby simplifying the text.” This is useful for Jung’s argument because she is talking about the variety of ways that the dashes are used. Like Jung’s work, Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson, Paul Crumbley’s book written in 1997, concerns itself with the nuances of Dickinson’s dashes. Crumbley also pays particular attention to how the mark looks on the page. His argument within his book is that it is the punctuation within Dickinson’s poetry that reflects the voices within it. The way he goes about supporting his claim is to perform multiple close readings over the same poems through the course of their individual publication histories of different editors. Through doing this, he comes to the conclusion that the different versions lend themselves to different


readings. He describes Dickinson’s poetry as being conventionalized in print.\textsuperscript{37} The result of the aforementioned “conventionalization” is that it removes space for “independent reader participation.”\textsuperscript{38} The reason for this is that the editor’s interpretation as reader shines through, overshadowing the space that Dickinson left intentionally unsettled in order for the reader to draw it open with their interpretation. Crumbley’s solution to this is to produce his own translations to present to readers. They are closer to what Dickinson intended. The problematic thing about Crumbley’s versions is that they are presented as versions of poems of Dickinson, but they are still translations of Dickinson’s poems that inherently remove layers of interpretation for future readers. However, the translations are highly invaluable tools for scholars. By making these translations to present to readers, it becomes clear what the scholar intends to place emphasis on. It is when this version becomes the “normal version” where things get unclear. Dickinson intended for people to engage with her work in specific ways, otherwise she would have written them according to how Higginson and Todd eventually normalized them. She was clearly aware of the writing practices at the time and she purposefully went against them. We run into problems when we privilege a specific reader’s interpretation instead of how Dickinson intended her work to be read.

In Stephen Cushman’s chapter entitled “The Broken Mathematics of Emily Dickinson” in his book \textit{Fictions of Form in American Poetry} that was written in 1993, he states that Dickinson’s “supposedly fragmented structures actually tend toward likeness and congruity, not


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 7.
necessarily toward unity, but toward a pluralistic har­mony among fragments.”39 The reason that she used the dashes, according to Cushman, is to emphasize the fragmented nature of the world. He states that “Dickinson's dashes mediate between the modulations of syntax and the overall contours of lineation, a mediation between the discontinuous and the continuous.”40 Dickinson’s goal in writing her poetry in this disjointed fashion is to have readers make sense of the poetry as they would the world itself. It is also the cause of the importance of her slant poetry. If the poems did not have that disjointed aspect to them, the imperfect rhymes would not work as connectors of the poetic unit and would instead be used to cause division within the poetry.41

This internal connection even carries over the genre divide. Cushman argues that her metricality “challenges the distinction between verse and prose.”42 Essentially, he is stating that it is the metricality of her prose that is blurring the genre line. This is just another example of Dickinson playing with how and what she wrote. Ultimately, Cushman is making the claim that, while Dickinson never explicitly discussed her form of poetry, there is a sort of a meta-conversation going on within the poetry itself regarding the form of her poetry. That is, her poetry has a tendency to be about poetry and the act of writing.

While I agree with what Cushman says regarding Dickinson’s form, I disagree with what he says regarding Dickinson’s execution. In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson expresses her


40 Ibid., 62.

41 Ibid, 60.

42 Ibid, 51.
disappointment and frustration that when one of her poems was printed, the editor did not respect her creative choices regarding punctuation. She says, “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 had told you I did not print—I feared you might think me ostensible.”

When Cushman looks at this letter, he claims that she is too picky when discussing the complaints she made about the addition of a comma. It only makes sense to be critical of Dickinson’s complaint if you don’t acknowledge that she was aware and conscious of the creative choices she was making. You must ask yourself why Dickinson is seen to be “overly fastidious and fussy.” If, as I argue, she was intending some level of visuality, there would be no way for her to be too picky, because every deviance from her work is a deviation from the meaning and emphasis that she intended to give it.

It may seem easy to disregard Dickinson’s annoyance as being “too picky,” but if we examine Dickinson’s reaction to her work, we actually can gain a lot of insight into her relationship with her work. It is only someone who has a clear vision for how they intend their work to be read who would maintain a lot of focus and attention to something so small as a simple comma. This letter draws clearly into focus the attention to detail that Dickinson had within her work. Not only that, but it shows that Dickinson both paid attention to the details, and found them necessary to her craft.

43 Ibid, 63.

44 Ibid, 63.

45 Ironically, Cushman notes the care that Dickinson is showing for the visual in this instance, but he is dismissive of it, claiming that she possibly cared too much.
Here, it is useful to remind ourselves of the work that Socarides was doing. Part of Dickinson’s writing process included destroying drafts of her poetry. Because of this the only poems that are available to readers and scholars to look at are the poems that Dickinson wanted and intended people to look at. It is only by looking at the writing practices where this becomes clear. It shows that Dickinson only intended certain copies to be seen and that those copies have survived indicates that they are worth examining as complete.

The main issue with Dickinson scholarship up until this point is that scholars are too concerned with their particular pockets of analysis. They don’t seem to be too concerned with bridging the gap across the different facets. I believe that making connections within the scholarship proves St. Armand’s point that her poetry was “of her age as well as beyond it” in ways that go far beyond what he was originally arguing.

**Visuality and the 19th Century**

The way I propose we connect the scholarship is to look at Dickinson’s poetry through the lens of visual culture. Unintentionally, the critics discussed in the previous section have laid the groundwork for examining Dickinson’s poetry in a more visual way. Visual culture combines the historical context work of looking at the writing practices of the nineteenth century with the manuscript studies work of examining the way Dickinson was writing them in accordance with those writing practices. In short, it effectively combines the two threads of Dickinson scholarship in a way that does not elevate one field of study from another. In order to examine this bridge more deeply, I must discuss what visuality is in general and how it directly relates to Dickinson scholarship at this point.

---

46 St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, 12.
Within the context of the next section of my paper, I will be talking about the subject of visuality and how it specifically enhances understanding of Dickinson’s poetry. First, I would like to be more clear and explicit in regards to what I mean when saying visuality. Up until this point, I have used both “visuality” and “materiality” almost interchangeably, which is partly due to the nature of Dickinson scholarship in the field as it stands currently. However, they do have specific definitions and it is important to discuss them.

When discussing “materiality,” I am referring to the investment scholars have in looking at objects in a material way and how they are valued purely for their objecthood or thingliness. The way that I differentiate between this investment in materiality and visuality is how readers interact with the object. When thinking about “reading” an object by examining its materiality, there is a physicality to the interpretation. Readers are reminded of the outside world. Dickinson’s interactions with her fascicles is a perfect example of this acknowledgment of materiality. The act of reading through the fascicles as objects is a way of reading materially. This consciousness of materiality is also something that Dickinson was aware of. As Virginia Jackson brought up in *Dickinson’s Misery*, she sent her brother a leaf. However, while Jackson believes that the leaf is something objective (“a leaf is a leaf is a leaf”\(^\text{47}\)), the leaf itself is worth reading materially. It shows us that Dickinson was thinking about things in a material way. She was aware of the difference in talking about the leaf and the actual leaf itself. In other words, having a critical investment in materiality entails physically interacting with objects with multiple senses, as opposed to only examining what you can see. Visuality certainly has some overlap with this perception of materiality, but serves a broader purpose. It is the interpretation

\(^{47}\) Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, 12.
of how we perceive the material as well as what bridges the inherent gap present between the physical world and the mental world. Dickinson’s stake in visuality is that she wanted people who were engaging with her poetry to read it in a specific way. She did that by playing around with punctuation and the line breaks. For the most part, Dickinson’s punctuation is respected, but the publishers of today still feel the need to connect the visual and metrical line breaks.

Objects being valued for their objecthood and material nature was definitely something present in the 19th century and a concept that Dickinson herself would have been aware of. In the Antiquarian Society of Worcester, there is collection of manuscripts and writings from a woman named Caroline Ticknor. Within the letters there are a variety of confirmation of receipts of her literary work, serving as proof of her being a published writer. In fact, included in her correspondence was a letter from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a friend of Dickinson’s during her lifetime and a man who was vital in the publication of Dickinson’s poetry after her death. A collection of Ticknor’s poetry that is included in the archive is centered around everyday household objects. Figures 1-4 are some pictures that I took while I was there.48

The main collection of poetry is entitled *On the Shelf*. Each poem in the set has a moral that goes along with it. They are rather simple poems, as you can see by the rhyming couplets as shown in Figure 4, and although they were edited quite a few times, I do not believe that they were ever published. Above the initial poem, as seen in Figure 1, there is a shelf drawn in what appears to be colored pencil and “on the shelf” are cutouts from magazines that represent the subject from each of the poems. It is clear that they are from magazines because if you look at

Figure 1: “On the Shelf” front
Figure 2: “On the Shelf” back
Figure 3: “The Disabled Clothes Horse”
TEA-POT (2)

But this, my friends say, "is not so."
"Simply because I'm in the row."

My ornamental days are past,
But I'll be useful to the last.

And there's no better place to fill
Than that of boon companion still.

For, as they say, "If you're pretty, you're pretty,"
So, if we're a teapot, we're a teapot patterned.

From the collections of the American Antiquarian Society.
the opposite side of the poem, as shown in Figure 2, you can see the print from the other side of
the pasted object. It is unclear whether Ticknor was influenced by her poetry to cut out these
objects, or if she found the objects and then decided to write poetry based on it. This lack of
distinction is actually important to this discussion. The relationship of word and image matters in
the fact that it is there, and to know which came first would indicate a privileging of one over the
other.

Since Ticknor was in similar print culture circles as Dickinson, we can assume that they
read and interacted with similar things. However, through looking at Ticknor’s work, we can see
that they were using it in different ways. Ticknor’s work is explicitly working with materials
from outside sources, whereas Dickinson in, as Miller puts it, the “absorptive reader.” She was
taking aspects of using materials and that way of interacting with print and incorporating that
into her writing. Instead of cutting out objects, Dickinson used the form of her writing and line
breaks in order to capture similar emotional responses. The reason for this also is the fact that
Dickinson’s poetry is a blending of abstract and concrete whereas Ticknor’s poetry is about
concrete objects. Dickinson uses a blending of concrete and abstract in the subjects of her
poems⁴⁹ in the way that she uses a blending of visual and written language in the actual work of
her poetry.

Visual culture is the only way to effectively observe the act of blending that Dickinson is
doing. She is not working in images, but she is working with the way that the words she is using
look. She realizes how print typically looks, something that she also knows people take for
granted. She was dealing with visual culture in adapting her writing to change the way people

⁴⁹ Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Continent*. 
read her work. One of the foremost scholars of visual culture is WJT Mitchell. In his piece “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” he describes in detail what visual culture is interpreted to be versus what it really is. Within the article, he lists eight “counter-theses” to myths that are commonly associated with visual culture in order to explore visual culture in an accurate way. Essentially, he is pushing back against the notion that visual culture deals only with pictures, while also acknowledging the nebulous nature of the field. This article is especially useful for exploring Dickinson’s poetry in a visual way because it can be placed within this context neatly; in one way or another, her poetry can be related to many of the theses. In his own words, those counter-theses are what “emerge when the study of visual culture moves beyond … received ideas [about visual culture] and begins to define and analyze its object of investigation in some detail.”

The first statement is “Visual culture encourages reflection on the differences between art and non-art, visual and verbal signs, and the ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes.” The most obvious connection here is the connection between the visual and verbal signs of Dickinson’s poetry. This directly relates to the criticism that has been done by Hart and Miller in regards to the aural. Here it is important to remind the reader that the only reason that the poetry can have that aural quality is due to the visuality. The way that the work is mapped out on the page affects how someone engages with the work.


52 Here it is also worth noting that the concept of semiotics is important when thinking of Dickinson’s poetry because of her particular use of dashes. Although it is beyond the scope of this particular paper, there has been much analysis done on the scope of Dickinson’s punctuation
The second statement is “Visual culture entails a mediation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked; also on deafness and the visible language of gesture; it also compels action to the tactile, auditory, the haptic and the phenomena of synesthesia.”\[^{53}\] Going back to the idea of punctuation, that is Dickinson’s way of gesturing with her poetry. It is lost when it is shifted to print. Relating to the “invisible” as mentioned with the sentence, so much of Dickinson’s poetry relies on the unseen. The blank spaces that she includes in her handwritten poems add to the poems’ layers of meaning. An example of what they add is layers of “tactile” because of their purposeful inclusion.

The third statement is “Visual culture is not limited to the study of images of media, but extends to everyday practices of sense and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated. It is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves.”\[^{54}\] This directly relates to Dickinson in that she had a blending of genres when it came to letter writing. Scholars are still divided as far as whether they consider Dickinson’s letters to be publications or not. The letters are also the way the Dickinson interacted with people in her everyday life. They are reflections of her “lif[e] and loves.” Not only that, but Dickinson had a tendency to write in a way that appeared to be immediate, but we are aware of her practice of copying poems in order to find the right assemblage of words on the space that she was writing on. This also is connected to the fact that she destroyed her drafts and that also gives her poetry a sense of simply being as opposed to a poem that is constructed.

and how they have a great effect while reading when they are handwritten because print normalizes the handwritten marks.


\[^{54}\] Ibid, 170.
The fourth statement is “There are no visual media. All media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign types.” As stated previously within this paper, Socarides works with Dickinson in ways that include media studies and archeology. In a very explicit way, Socarides is proving the point that Dickinson can be examined through visual culture as Mitchell explains it. However, the spirit of what she is arguing also lends itself to Mitchell’s argument as well. Socarides talks about how Dickinson’s poems are “made objects” in a way that makes them more tangible from calling them poems. By discussing the media nature of Dickinson’s poetry, Socarides is showing how Dickinson can be looked at through the lens of visual culture.

The fifth statement is “The disembodied image and the embodied artifact are permanent elements in the dialectics of visual culture. Images are to pictures and works of art as species are to specimen in biology.” The “images” in this case are the poems written by Dickinson herself. While I don’t think that Dickinson was intending her poetry to be considered “images,” this type of vocabulary is useful in discussing the work that Dickinson was doing. The artifacts in this case are the material objects that Dickinson was writing on. Specifically, I am referring to her fascicles and her letters. As stated previously, lots of research has gone into discussing the materiality of Dickinson’s poetry. A step further is to discuss the way in which Dickinson herself also explored the space of the “artifact.” As stated previously, Dickinson once sent her brother a leaf alongside a letter. In doing this, I argue in opposition of Jackson that Dickinson was experimenting with an aspect of visual culture in an era where it was not defined yet.

The sixth statement is “We do not live in a uniquely visual era. The ‘visual’ or ‘pictorial turn’ is a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto emerging and so called

55 Ibid, 170.

56 Ibid, 170.
visual media. Images are convenient scapegoats, and the offensive eye is ritually plucked out by ruthless critique."57 Ironically, by applying the theory of visuality to Dickinson’s poetry of the 19th century, I’m fulfilling the requirement within this thesis. If the concept of visuality were just a fad, it wouldn’t fit so nicely against work from a non-contemporary era. Visual Culture is something that has been present through the years of artists and poets work, but there was never a name or something to describe them before.

In summation, looking at Dickinson’s poetry through the lens of visual culture mends the disconnect within manuscript studies and historicizing of Dickinson’s work. By connecting it explicitly to visual culture, connections between the two sides of the field naturally appear. Mitchell’s “Seeing Visual Culture” is an adequate introduction while discussing visual culture, but it is hardly the only application that the field has to offer. Below, I discuss some more work that Mitchell has done in the field, as well as bring in work from other scholars, such as Rosalind Krauss and Johanna Drucker.

In another article by Mitchell, “Word and Image,” he discusses what it means to read text as an image and to read images as text.58 At its core, that is the differentiating factor when looking at the poetry of Dickinson and Ticknor. Dickinson is doing things spatially with her poetry, so looking at her poetry through that lens is useful. That is, the poetry that Dickinson is doing incorporates the visual within its form. Mitchell states that “the issue of ‘word and image’ focuses attention on the relation of visual representation to language.”59 Dickinson wanted her

57 Ibid, 170.


poetry to be read in a certain way and so she had specific intentions for the visuality of it and how her readers would interact with it. This also ties back to why she was so particular with the placement of her punctuation. Punctuation alters the way you read and interact with text. Dickinson was aware of this and used many different aspects of physical placement to affect the way readers interacted with her work. Dickinson cared about the visuality of her poetry because she wants to control how readers read her work.

Ticknor’s act of removing the images and incorporating them into her own poetry relates to what Mitchell means when he is referring to the fact that “the image has to denote or represent what it stands for; merely looking like it isn’t enough.”60 The original images within the magazines had different intentions than to be included in a work of poetry. Not only that, but when you look closer at the broken mug, the line is so crisp on the break that it appears that Ticknor fashioned a broken mug from an image of an unbroken mug. They are true representations of the poetry that Ticknor is writing.

As stated previously, the images of Ticknor’s poetry are more removed than the visual aspect that Dickinson incorporated. This relates directly to what Mitchell was saying when referring to print “present[ing] a double face to both the eye and the ear; one face is that of the articulate sign in a language; the other is that of a formal visual or aural gestalt, an optical or acoustical image.”61 Multiple critics have commented about the aurality of Dickinson’s poetry. Miller in particular has actually stated that Dickinson valued the aural aspect of her poetry more than the visuality of it. While it makes sense that Dickinson would incorporate the aural and

60 Mitchell, “Word and Image,” 52.

61 Ibid, 47.
Miller poses a compelling argument, I must push back against her claim that Dickinson placed more importance on the auditory than the visual. The written word has an inherently visual quality to it. In order to have an aural quality to it, Dickinson must shape her poetry in a visual way in order for her audience to interpret the poem through the auditory lens.

The main theory behind Rosalind Krauss’s article “The Im/Pulse to See” is the idea that there is a rhythm or “pulse” to visuality. The example that she uses within the article is how Picasso drew the same artwork over and over again, in its own form of rhythm. Drawing the same image minutely differently multiple times gives the viewer an impression of a “flipbook.” It may seem obvious and unnecessary to bring poetry into this visual depiction of rhythm, but in Dickinson’s case, she was writing poetry in both the typical aural version as well as in the visual way that Krauss describes. Her act of making was reminiscent to Picasso’s act of making described by Krauss. Constantly rewriting her poetry, whether it be for her fascicles or for when she was writing her poetry within letters, establishes, as Krauss puts it, a “gesture in motion.”

At first glance, the work that Johanna Drucker is doing in the chapter “Visual Performance of the Poetic Text” seems to be outside the scope of this paper. She refers to 20th century poets specifically and even refers to Dickinson specifically by name as a poet who had “terse and elaborat[e] poetic form.” The way that she is described here shows that Drucker sees

---


63 Ibid, 70.

64 Ibid, 70.

Dickinson’s visuality as more of an afterthought to form, and not at the center of the discussion. However, I contend that Dickinson intended visuality in the same way that the poets that Drucker describes, and therefore the theory that Drucker describes applies to Dickinson as well. Drucker states that “Written work is always at a remove from the writer, cast into an autonomous form.”\(^{66}\) To a certain extent, I agree with this in relation to Dickinson’s work. However, Dickinson’s work should be presented as it was intended by Dickinson before it is “cast” off as an “autonomous form.” She goes on to say that there is the “possibility of… disguising the writer through writing.”\(^{67}\) This is something that Dickinson herself valued, as evidenced by her declaration that the speaker within her poetry is a “supposed person.”\(^{68}\) The poets that Drucker describes are “visual” in that they are “untranslatable (even more than other poetry) because of their emphatic insistence on the bond between material form and performance.”\(^{69}\) I feel that Drucker would include Dickinson’s poetry in the grouping of “other poetry,” but Dickinson’s poetry is more aligned to the untranslatable aspect of visuality. As stated previously, there is a certain layer of her poetry that gets erased when it is normalized in print.

While talking about the development of visuality in poetry in the 20th century, Drucker states that there was a “shift from attention to form to attention to process and concept as the primary force of poetic composition.”\(^{70}\) As the work of Socarides in particular shows, this

\(^{66}\) Ibid, 131.

\(^{67}\) Ibid, 131.

\(^{68}\) Cushman, “The Broken Mathematics of Emily Dickinson,” 74.


distinction in Dickinson’s poetry is somewhat blurred. That is, Dickinson took just as much care with her process as she did with her form. Her form informed her process and vice versa.⁷¹

Dickinson’s attention to the visual is something that has been ignored in the scholarship even though that scholarship has been skirting around the issue for years now. Within the previous section, I have gone over in detail various ways in which Dickinson fits into the scope of visual culture studies. Dickinson’s poetry treats language with the same visual care as many artists do with their work. Dickinson’s work relates to what people in the visual culture field have been saying, but no one has thought to apply her work to the visual until now because she is working solely with language and not with images.

**Close Readings**

The final section of my paper is focused on close readings of particular poems of Dickinson. Reading the Franklin reading edition of the poem “It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did” is a different poetic experience than reading Dickinson’s manuscript version because his versions strips away the power of the visual. In the Franklin, the spacing and line breaks are adjusted and normalized. I contend that the line breaks and spacing that Dickinson used in her unedited version are important in reading the poem because there is a level of precision of meaning missing if they are removed or normalized.

The line breaks and spacing within this poem add a layer of emphasis that is missing with the reading edition. The reading edition’s first line is “It dont sound so terrible - quite- as it did.” That line reads as having a speaker almost talking over herself. She barely takes a breath in the form of a dash before she is correcting herself. In the manuscript edition, as shown in Figure 5 below, the “first” line takes up two lines. The first line is “It don’t sound so terrible.” That line is

---

Figure 5: “It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did”

72 Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Houghton Library - (144c) It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did, J426, Fr384
It dont sound so terrible - quite - as it did -
I run it over - “Dead”, Brain - “Dead”.
Put it in Latin - left of my school -
Seems it dont shriek so - under rule.

Turn it, a little - full in the face
A Trouble looks bitterest -
Shift it - just -
Say “When Tomorrow comes this way -
I shall have waded down one Day”.

I suppose it will interrupt me some
Till I get accustomed - but then the Tomb
Like other new Things - shows largest - then -
And smaller, by Habit -

It’s shrewder then
Put the Thought in advance - a Year -
How like “a fit” - then -
Murder - wear!73

in and of itself is a complete thought. Placing “quite - as it did” on the second line shows more contemplation by the speaker. The reading edition reads more as if the speaker has already thought about it and is trying to explain things to the readers. The manuscript version reads as if we as readers are experiencing thoughts with the speaker as she is experiencing them. The line after this one also comes into a similar issue of changed emphasis. In total there are three “lines” in the manuscript versions that are only one word. This inherently gives those words more emphasis. The first example is within the first stanza. In the reading edition, it is one line of “I run it over - ‘Dead’. Brain - ‘Dead’.” The word “Brain” is sandwiched between two “Dead”’s. It

73 Emily Dickinson, “It Dont Sound so Terrible - Quite - as It Did,” in The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Ralph William Franklin, Reading ed., 3. pr (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 176. For all of the citations of the reading edition, I will be using full notes because I feel it is important to emphasize Franklin’s role as editor in the poems.
represents the speaker thinking about or telling her Brain about death. It has a contemplative air to it; she’s just running through the idea of death in her mind. In the manuscript, the entire meaning gets shifted. By having the second “Dead” on its own line, there is a finality to it. “Dead.” The reader has the entire line to contemplate the finality of Death like the way the speaker of this poem does. In both of these differences in line breaks, the emphasis is shifted because the manuscript edition gives more gravity to the words by giving them more space on the line.

Because Dickinson understood the weight that language could possess, she played around with it in a visual way that is missing from the reading edition. One of the ways she does this is by having her form enforce the interpretation she wants her reader to have. Going back to the previous example mentioned, not only does the word “Dead” get more emphasis when it is on its own line, but structurally it represents the finality of death. It has its own line, as well as the punctuation of a period. It is final and self-contained as an object. The next two examples of single word lines are connected. In the reading edition, the lines “Say ‘When Tomorrow comes this way - /I shall have waded down one Day’.” and “I suppose it will interrupt me some” are three lines divided by a stanza. However, in the manuscript version, they are five lines. At first, the “way” may seem like an unintentional carry over because Dickinson ran out of room on her line, but when you begin the next stanza, it is clear that it is an interruption that is anticipating the following lines. The stanza that begins with “I suppose it will interrupt me” is littered with actual, structural interruptions. The single line of “some” is the first, but is quickly followed by lines that contain gaps of space. The spaces also support the concept of Dickinson’s original line breaks because, if the spaces were not included, Dickinson could have easily fit another word on the line. The spaces interrupt the natural flow of reading. Since Dickinson’s other spacing is
relatively unified otherwise within the poem, this indicates that in this instance it is important. In the Franklin edition of the third stanza, there are absolutely no “interruptions” of any kind, aside from the content. By normalizing the line breaks and spacing, Franklin removed a layer from this poem that is present within Dickinson’s original manuscript.

In addition to Dickinson’s form following the purpose of her poem, it is her attention to how the visual affects language that allows her to play around with the fluid meaning of words. In the stanza mentioned above, the last two lines read “Like other new Things - shows largest - then -/ And smaller, by Habit.” The line containing the word “largest” is the larger line. In the manuscript version, the last two lines are “Largest - then -/And smaller, by Habit.” At first glance, this seems to be an ironic use of size in regards to line length; however, considering my argument regarding the emphasis of blank space within the interior of the poem, the line that contains the word “largest” contains the larger amount of blank space. This reading of the poem is not present with the reading edition. In the next stanza there is another example of Dickinson playing with double meaning. In the reading edition, the second line of the final stanza reads “Put the Thought in advance - a Year -.” The clear reading of that is to think of something a year ahead of time. However, when you read the lines from Dickinson’s manuscript, you see “Put the Thought in”. This gives the concept of thought more physicality and tangibility to it. The next line then reads as “Advance - A Year.” This reads more as moving forward rather than doing something beforehand. While there is still the initial reading present from the reading edition in the manuscript as well, the additional line breaks add a level of concreteness and motion. Since we already know that Dickinson is a subversive poet, it seems odd to normalize the lines when it removes multiple layers of playful double meanings.
As evidenced above, two different interpretations become apparent, depending on which version of Dickinson’s poetry you are reading. Dickinson’s line spacing and breaks serve a specific, intended purpose of adding precision to the poem. By removing Dickinson’s spacing and original line breaks, Franklin effectively removed some of Dickinson’s intended emphasis and experimentation with language.

The poem “Beauty - be not caused - It Is” is another example of how Franklin’s alternative, normative line breaks do a disservice to Dickinson’s originals. Before even going through the poem line by line, it is useful look at the poem as whole entity, first with Dickinson’s manuscript (Figure 6; seen above) and then with Franklin’s reading edition version. Dickinson’s version is two stanzas of five lines divided by a single line. There is something inherently beautiful about this display of symmetry. It feels very intentional as there are multiple references to beauty and nature and symmetry is something that is endlessly present in nature. Franklin’s version removes this by having the initial stanza contain three lines and the final stanza contain four lines.

The first line in Dickinson’s version is “Beauty - is not Caused” and the second line is “It Is.” They work well as separate lines because they can act as complete thoughts and sentences without relying completely on the other. Furthermore, the thought that Dickinson is attempting to get across is that beauty “is” and has intrinsic value of simply existing. When Franklin puts those two thoughts on the same line, he is removing the space for rumination. He is rushing past the thought of beauty not being able to be caused. In Dickinson’s original version, the thought of beauty not being able to be caused is given equal weight as the concept of beauty being something that “is”. They are opposing thoughts as presented by Dickinson, whereas Franklin presents them more so as being interconnected.
Figure 6 “Beauty is not caused - It is -”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Houghton Library - (18a, b) No Crowd that has occurred, J515, Fr653; Beauty - be not caused - It Is -, J516, Fr654.
Beauty - be not caused - It Is -
Chase it, and it ceases -
Chase it not, and it abides -

Overtake the Creases

In the Meadow - when the Wind
Runs his fingers thro’ it -
Deity will see to it
That You never do it  

The next line of Dickinson’s is “Chase it, and it ceases -” which works as a complete thought and sentence. At the end of the line, the thought is finished, or “ceases” as the line indicates. The next sentence is spaced out over two lines: “Chase it not, And it/ Abides” with “abides” taking up an entire line by itself. Spacing it out over two lines gives the thought a sense of perseverance and timelessness. Not only that, but the final word that is on its own is “abide” and by having the words spaced out in such a way, Dickinson has her poetry do just that: abide. There is also something to be said for the idea of “chase” within this poem.

When Dickinson is talking about chasing beauty, the sentence is “caught” by the end of the line. She begins to parallel that line in the next one, but the thought she is putting forth is the opposite. Therefore, it stands to reason that the line itself would end differently. She is no longer chasing, and so the thought is able to continue to “abide” on the next line. Franklin drastically simplifies the poem by choosing to blindly parallel the form of the previous line, rather than have it visually mimic thoughts that Dickinson is trying to convey.

The original formation of the next stanza is much more jumbled than what Franklin edits it to be. By dividing up “… when/ the Wind/ Runs…” Dickinson has made the lines seem to be

reminiscent of the disruptive sensation of wind blowing because that set of lines feels rather choppy. Overall, the third stanza has a way of avoiding complete linear thought in the way that the first stanza does not. That is, none of the ends of lines also indicate the end of a thought aside from the last one. While this remains true for the Franklin version as well, the Dickinson lines are all the more choppy and wild. This reflects the beauty that Dickinson is referring to because the line breaks feel more wild and natural. It is as if the wind blew around the line breaks and we as readers must allow them to stay where they lay. If we move them, it will be akin to chasing beauty.

Within the poem “Suspense is Hostiler than Death -” the line breaks are significant in a way that Franklin ignores for the most part. What Franklin deemed one line, Dickinson originally had as two. In Dickinson’s version, the opening line is “Suspense is Hostiler than” and then “Death” is on a line all on its own. There is a level of power there that is not present in the Franklin edition. Having “death” stay on its own line instead of being attached to the first line does a couple of things. First, it forces the line to end on a more suspenseful note. This is effective for how Dickinson intends to portray how important the concept of suspense is within this poem. She is both describing and showing the hostility of suspense. The second thing that it does is acknowledge the finality of death. By giving it its own line, Dickinson is giving weight to the concept of death. She is setting it up in contrast to suspense. Suspense is ongoing, but death is final.

Ironically, only a few lines later, Dickinson is minimizing the gravity of death when she says “is just Death, and.” The fact that she dismissively calls it “just Death” and flimsily ends the line with “and” and without punctuation reduces the power that she had just given to death by
Figure 7: “Suspense - is Hostiler than Death”  

Suspense - is Hostiler than Death -
Death - tho'soever Broad,
Is Just Death, and cannot increase -
Suspense - does not conclude -

But perishes - to live anew -
But just anew to die -
Annihilation - plated fresh
With Immortality -

Giving it its own line. However, this was necessary to do. Dickinson is attempting to put forth the controversial topic of “suspense” being worse than death. In order to effectively show her perspective, Dickinson first had to show a satisfactory amount of acknowledgement of death. This way, when she subverted it a few lines later, it would serve to display how much worse suspense was, when it had the power of trivializing death.

The line break that the two versions have in common is important to discuss in regards to the overall theme of the poem. It is almost ironic that Franklin allows for a stanza break where he does, but it is a necessary one. The lines that end the first and the second stanza are “Suspense - does not conclude -//But perishes - to live.” This is very significant because it shows the initial stanza ending in a suspenseful manner. The reason why it is important to point out this moment, even though it is something that Franklin kept in, is that it is the only example of Franklin keeping a line break that served a rhetorical purpose in addition to being a metrical line.

Staying at this line of the poem, you’ll notice that in the Franklin edition, the initial line of the second stanza ends in “anew” whereas the Dickinson edition ends in “live.” Looking again at the first line of the second stanza in Dickinson’s edition, it is “But perishes - to live.” Much like what was displayed in “Beauty be not caused- It Is,” it is an effective use of symmetry. Its

---

purpose here is to show a contradiction and irony in order to portray how uncomfortable being in suspense is. “Anew” is left on its own line in order to begin “a new” phase of the poetry. The line after that then draws the focus back on death, which gives this segment a very cyclical nature. At the end of the poem, we see that that cycle is what Dickinson wanted when she places “Annihilation” and “Immortality.”

**Conclusion**

Dickinson did not publish her work in print for a reason; she was aware that her work would be normalized in the transition. She chose instead to circulate her work in a way that allowed her to produce the work in a way that she intended. There are too many examples within her work that strengthen the meaning of her poetry through her lines breaks to merely attribute it to the constraints of the paper. As evidenced by my close readings above, the visual aspects of the poems enforce the meaning of the different poems.

Throughout the course of this paper, my aim was to first display the ways in which Dickinson scholarship was pointing towards the visual and the ways in which adding a visual culture lens mediates the tension in scholarship. Adding the visual culture lens actually brings us to a closer understanding of what Dickinson herself was intending to do. As evidenced through the state of the field at present as well as through my own examinations of the text, it is obvious that understanding of Dickinson’s poetry is enhanced with the visual element.
Bibliography


