

Between the Sheets

Dickinson Unbound

Paper, Process, Poetics

Alexandra Socarides



In the middle of her book, *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics*, Alexandra Socarides describes a disorienting moment during her archival research when the familiar terms and narratives of scholarship on Emily Dickinson failed to accurately represent the materials before her. In the Amherst College Archives, Socarides describes wanting to look at “Set 2,” a group of poems on sheets that Dickinson did not sew together but were loosely assembled by her posthumous editor Mabel Loomis Todd and later represented in a fascicle-like “set” by Dickinson scholar R.W. Franklin. But, when the folder arrives from the vault, what she finds does not resemble what she expected. “Because scholars call them ‘sets’ and because Franklin reproduces them in groups that resemble the fascicles, someone visiting the archive at which they are housed is prepared to encounter loose sheets that are somehow related to each other, even if this mode of relation is unclear,” Socarides writes. In the archive, however, she reports “the disorienting experience of calling up these ‘sets’ and then not knowing what [she] was looking at.” “If you want to look at ‘Set 2,’” Socarides continues, “you have to request Folder ‘87’... a folder that contains the seven loose sheets that Franklin later distributed among sets 2, 5, 6a, 6b, and 7” (108). Some sets, like set 2, consist of poems on four sides of a single folded sheet of stationery, while others consist of multiple folded sheets. The archival researcher, Socarides explains, has to reconstruct these sets by consulting reference works and shuffling the manuscripts into the prescribed order. Socarides shows us that important terminological and methodological questions arise when we encounter the material evidence of Dickinson’s manuscripts. How is a single folded sheet a “set” in the same way that a group of ten folded sheets is a set? By whose logic have these sets, and our mediated encounters with them, been organized, Dickinson’s or her editors’?



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Dickinson Unbound proceeds from the tensions that arise between prevailing remediations and interpretations of Dickinson’s work and the material archive

of Dickinson's writing itself. Addressing these tensions head on, Socarides works toward their resolution via a materially grounded account of Dickinson's process and poetics. Socarides asks us to unbind the grasp that various editorial and interpretive positions have held on our understanding of Dickinson, and she guides us in this by unbinding the fascicle sheets long enough to consider anew the poet's material processes of composition and construction.

In three of her five chapters, Socarides presents Dickinson's career chronologically, charting a trajectory from orderly material forms to disorderly ones. Chapter one deals with bound fascicles; chapter four takes up loose, unsewn fascicle sheets; and chapter five addresses scraps and fragments. While it is common to characterize the fascicle-making stage of Dickinson's career as the most productive, perhaps because she was creating recognizable book-like forms, Socarides argues that Dickinson's move toward increasingly fragmentary forms represents the maturation of her thinking about closure and ending, the subject of so many of her poems. Socarides' map of Dickinson's career in chapters one, four, and five, traced through her specific and changing material practices, shows that Dickinson engaged with differently shaped material containers for her work as part of ongoing attention to and experimentation with relationships, endings, and closure.

After Socarides builds the critical apparatus for reading Dickinson's sheets and scraps in the introduction and chapter one, she puts aside the above-mentioned career trajectory to offer studies of Dickinson's material practices in relation to the nineteenth-century genres of the letter and the poetic elegy in chapters two and three. In truth, the relation of genre to material form is present throughout this study, but it is the primary focus of these middle chapters. Chapter two, "Epistolary Practices and the Problem of Genre," takes up the interrelations of Dickinson's poems and letters, a longstanding topic of interest in Dickinson scholarship and one that is refreshed by Socarides' material focus. While Dickinson's editors and critics "make it seem as if ... letters and poems were discrete and stable categories for her to write in," Socarides returns to the archival evidence to show that Dickinson was not invested in our generic categories but was, instead, actively exploring "the instability that existed at the heart of both modes of writing" (53).

Chapter two also highlights Socarides' ability to place Dickinson's material poetic processes in relation to the conventions of American women's writing in the nineteenth century. Socarides places the poetry in Dickinson's letters against the backdrop of nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals for women and their concerns about containment and proper gender performance. She discusses how Dickinson's parallel arrangement of sheets in self-made fascicles allowed her to work outside the gendered scripts for writing and scrapbooking in commercially available blank books. Through these explorations of genre and convention, Socarides offers a Dickinson conscious of the material contexts in which nineteenth-century American women wrote, and who actively chose practices that extended, subverted, or performed those expectations differently. Given

the poet's fidelity to the relations of words and poems on a single sheet, it becomes clear why the published book was not a proper end point for Dickinson's stacked sheets, for it seems likely that she knew how the printed book put interleaved pages in a different relation to one another than she desired for her poems. In Socarides' hands, Dickinson's famous stance toward print is less a condition of lack, and more a conscious choice to "understand exactly what print would enable and obscure" (46).

One of Socarides' lasting contributions to Dickinson scholarship will surely be her demonstration that the poet paid close attention to, and made meaningful decisions based on, the discrete unit of the sheet. While previous scholars have advanced readings of Dickinson's fascicles as meaningful wholes, basing interpretations on the proximity of poems assembled in book-like form, Socarides asks us to undo the fascicles' stitches in order to study how exactly Dickinson made them. "Dickinson had a particular method for copying that kept poems distinct from one another and preserved the unit of the folded sheet" even when those sheets were sewn together in fascicles (24). In the first chapter, Socarides gives a detailed reconstruction of Dickinson's process, revealing that the fascicle poems were copied onto separate folded sheets and later sewn together. The sheets were not folded, interleaved, and then written upon as if they were a bound book, but folded and stacked one on top of another in a form of parallel relation. In readings of the relations that emerge between poems that share the same sheet, Socarides calls us to recognize how "respecting the breaks that exist between sheets gives them back the identity they once had as Dickinson copied poems onto them and allows us to focus on the relationship between poems that the sheet, as a unit of composition, sets in motion" (44). Dickinson did not regard the book as a meaningful unit of analysis for her work, but too often, her editors and critics have.

These insights set the stage for chapters three and four, in which Socarides' incredibly close attention to Dickinson's arrangement of sheets leads to new insights into the poet's later formal and generic experimentation. Socarides demonstrates how the sheet is important for reading and interpreting Dickinson's poetry in several close readings. In chapter three, "Sewing the Fascicles: Elegy, Consolation, and the Poetics of Interruption," for example, Socarides reads sequences of poems about death that, when "read with an awareness of individual sheets," shows how Dickinson engaged with and challenged the generic conventions of elegy. "By writing poems about death and by sewing them to each other, Dickinson investigates the inability of poetry to represent the nature of loss as it exists at the very limits of comprehension" (80). While elegies conventionally explore consolation and closure, Socarides finds that Dickinson's practice of copying and sewing sheets created space to explore the topic of death through the interruption of spatial and temporal sequences, multiple or shifting perspectives, and the foreclosure of consolation and finality. Dickinson's focus on interruption, fragmentation, and open-endedness is pushed to the extreme when she writes on scraps and fragments of paper, the focus of her late production and Socarides' fifth chapter, "Methods of Unmaking: Dickinson's Late Drafts, Scraps, and Fragments."

Dickinson stopped recopying drafted poems and arranging them on whole sheets, and instead left poems in their drafted state on scraps of envelopes or advertisements. Pins (and the pinholes through which Socarides traces them) are sometimes all that hold scraps together during this period when Dickinson most firmly “rejected the book as a source of containment, comprehensibility, and authority” while she “navigat[ed] new relationships to issues of order, wholeness, finality, and relation in her poetry” (166).

Dickinson Unbound is in many ways a complementary volume to Virginia Jackson’s influential *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005). Jackson argues that, beginning with Thomas Wentworth Higginson and continuing through the twentieth century, Dickinson’s poetry has been subjected to a process of “lyricization” that isolates the poet and the poems from their material contexts and translates them into a lyric form closer to editors’ intentions than Dickinson’s (8). Socarides acknowledges that Jackson’s call for renewed attention to Dickinson’s material contexts and mediations “made available the particular questions that drive” the book (5). It is also worth mentioning that Socarides is equally generous toward scholars with whom she ultimately disagrees, noting, for example, that while she parts ways with Sharon Cameron on whether fascicles should be read thematically, her own work on sheets is made possible by Cameron’s influential move toward studying fascicles in the first place. Together, *Dickinson’s Misery* and *Dickinson Unbound* have historicized the editorial and critical apparatuses brought to bear on Dickinson’s work, and shown how expectations about poetics and genre must be tested against Dickinson’s actual manuscript production. While Jackson’s book has already become a standard-bearing work on the lyric, Socarides’ book will be similarly influential in scholarship and teaching on the processual dimensions of material textuality in general, and of Dickinson’s poetics in particular.

Readers lacking a deep investment in the history of Dickinson scholarship might initially look past what is, essentially, a single-author study. To this reviewer, however, *Dickinson Unbound* offers a great deal to those more generally concerned with the direction of book history and print culture studies. Socarides shows how the dominant and idealized form of the printed book incorrectly shaped critical expectations about a writer who worked primarily in manuscript sheets, scraps, and correspondence. That Socarides’ methodology stems from “book history” while her objects of study are clearly not books demonstrates the necessity of the field’s recent turn toward more capacious terms like “material texts” and “material textuality.” When Socarides asks, “what happens when we treat the paper itself as a meaningful context for reading and interpretation,” she helps broaden our methodology beyond the printed book toward the full diversity of signifying material in the archive (39). In this fascinating work, “material textuality” points not only to a diverse range of texts, but acknowledges that paper in its materiality has signifying capacities itself.

Socarides’ *Dickinson Unbound* is an important book that advances how we

understand the poet's work in relation to its material archive. In addition to her meticulous research and clear arguments about Dickinson, Socarides models how rigorous attention to material contexts and processes can enable other scholars and critics.

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