

John Lennard, The Poetry Handbook (Oxford UP, 2005)

on LAYOUT & the mise-en-page
in Emily Dickinson's 'I heard a Fly buzz'
& in Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song'

1. Emily Dickinson, 'I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—' (c.1863), published in *Poems* (1896); text and textual annotation from R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (3 vols, Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press, 1998), ii. 587 (N1121).

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—
The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—
I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—
With Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

Division [l.] 1 when | [l.] 5 them |

A *mise-en-page* is of a particular printed version, but common metre is common, and there would be no reason to remark Franklin's *mise-en-page* were it not (as his *textual annotation* suggests) for Dickinson's MS practices. Her poems progressed from *foul papers* (worksheets with revisions) to *fair copies*, bound into notebooks known as 'fascicles', or gathered in loose 'sets'; (variant) fair copies might at any stage be sent as letters, and some poems were revised after fair-copying, generating a second foul-paper-to-fair-copy sequence. This is orderly, and in general (though never intending to publish) Dickinson maintained her archive rigorously, destroying drafts once a fair copy had been made; however,

Constraints such as the edges of the paper, the presence of a boss, stains or imperfections, or the overlaps of envelope construction would redirect [Dickinson's] pencil or pen. The shapes of her materials—odds and ends of wrapping paper, advertising flyers, notebook leaves, discarded stationery—gave physical contour to her poems as they went on to paper. A draft of "The mushroom is the elf of

plants" [. . .] was recorded on the inside of a yellow envelope, set on point with the horizontal measure increasing then diminishing. The poem began at the peak, with only the first word laid down before line breaks began. Altogether, four were required for the first line ["The [/] mushroom [/] is the Elf [/] of plants—"]. The measure expanded until no additional ones were needed, then contracted until three were required by the last line ["And fleeter [/] than a [/] Tare—"]. There are many examples in which two or more copies of the same poem appear on papers of different shapes, yielding different line breaks [. . .] These were working drafts, but the same effect occurs on more formal copies, such as those sent to others and [. . .] in the fascicles. The former was typically on notepaper, the latter on stationery of larger size, yielding different configurations. Once line breaks began, it is not easy to find a manuscript of any poem in Dickinson's hand that exactly matches the physical lineation of the same poem in other copies.

(Franklin, i. 34–5)

Waste not, want not : paper is (and was) expensive, and neither lines nor quatrains are in doubt. Franklin simply displays them, recording the "physical lineation" he eliminates : here there are two, in ll. 1 and 5, and as there is only one MS of 'I heard a Fly buzz' readers know that in Dickinson's autograph ll. 1–8 (or 10) were laid out thus :

I heard a Fly buzz—when
I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—
The Eyes around—had wrung them
dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

And there is the problem, because that is exactly how the MS appears, the *turn-downs*, displaced portions of metrical lines, having 'physical lines' to themselves : as readers can see in the facsimile *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* published under Franklin's supervision in 1981.²⁷ They can also see that both turn-downs could without undue cramping have been avoided, and that in the penultimate line, almost at the

²⁷ 2 vols, Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1981, i. 591.

bottom of the page, "then" is cramped because a turn-down would displace the last line overleaf. Even in a rough draft like the one Franklin cites of "The mushroom is the elf of plants", ll. 3–5, at the widest portion of the paper, follow the same curious pattern, so that in the very middle "Hat" is followed by space extending across the whole diagonal : "At morning—in a Truffled [/] Hat [/] It stops upon a spot [//] As if it tarried always"; the stanza-break, fractionally wider than line-spacing, also occupies central space. Dickinson could neatly have written out all eight lines simply by using the envelope as a square rather than a diamond—but she didn't, any more than she usually adjusted the size of her hand to the available paper. Franklin, in a lovely phrase, invokes her "regard for boundaries" (i. 11) : those of words, lines, quatrains, and paper are constantly regarded and clashed—as different syntactical possibilities are encouraged to clamber about within and between quatrains, treating all those dashes (every one a boundary to regard) as handy monkey-bars.

This is not universal print-practice—turn-downs are normally right-justified and don't count as lines themselves—but whether to eliminate Dickinson's "physical" line-breaks is unexpectedly difficult. In the first properly edited *Collected Poems*, Johnson's in 1955,²⁸ they went, and regular quatrains with blank lines between were imposed on most poems in which such structures are audibly present. Franklin is more cautious, correcting errors in transcription (he added the dash after "uncertain" in l. 13), but also standardises lineation. Both editors thus eliminate an unorthodox practice that Dickinson was at some pains to maintain (and none to suppress) throughout her life. They disregard another of her boundaries, in that with 1,700+ short poems to include, none gets a page to itself as it might in its fascicle (and 'I heard a Fly buzz', cramping its penultimate line, does). Moreover, in Johnson the march of quatrains over so many pages made Dickinson seem to march herself, despite her dashes ; a falsely induced sense of unflinching regularity that makes the fascicles a shock. Franklin's print edition, re-endorsing metrical regularity and display, partly pacifies a furore his photographic edition ignited, but the "physical" line-breaks can be reconstructed from his edition, and sometimes should be²⁹ : it was, during and after all, Dickinson who pointingly put them there.

²⁸ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (3 vols, Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1955).

²⁹ See Martha Neil Smith, 'Dickinson's Manuscripts' and Sharon Cameron, 'Dickinson's Fascicles' in Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristianne Miller, eds, *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Amherst: U. Massachusetts P., 1998).

Dickinson's handwriting poses two other problems : how to identify dashes (p. 144), and what to do with *litterae notabiliores* ('more noticeable letters'³⁰)—often larger *minuscule* forms (handwritten 'lower-case') rather than distinct *majuscule* forms (handwritten 'upper-case'), and a judgement-call for transcribers. Her capitalisation is unpredictable and the *duct* of her hand changed with age, so there is room for doubts ; in general Johnson and Franklin agree, and concerned readers can now check for themselves. Franklin does beg a question by noting that Johnson "preserved" Dickinson's capitalisation and punctuation "within the limits of conventional type" (i. 6), while he "follows" them "within the capacity of standard type" (i. 36) : both phrases seem to mean the same thing, my 'normative limits of the metal page', but Franklin, who worked on computers, was not in the same boat as Johnson ; however Dickinson "Signed away [/] What portion of me be [/] Assignable", one could now reproduce her capitalisation more accurately, and again, should sometimes do so.

2. 'September Song' (p. 72).

Some aspects of layout (especially "it [/] is true") are necessarily subsumed in and treated under 'Lineation' ; the critical issue remaining is Hill's decision to explode his sonnet with *blank* lines between 'stanzas'. His intent is undoubted : no compositor or publisher would impose such layout of themselves, and Hill's insistence that even the justified prose-poems of *Mercian Hymns* be quoted exactly is widely known (N2050). For readers the primary consequence is to disguise his invocation of sonnet-form, but that is not Hill's primary purpose, which (taking a deep breath) I suggest as graphic representation of his humility in speaking at all, and of the pressing reasons for gladly curt reversion to silence following "This is more than enough."

Grimly humorous, one might say that with the *Sho'ah* it is easiest to keep your feet out of your mouth if you don't have too many feet about ; the visual spareness of 'September Song'—its deficit in articulation represented by the failure of the black-and-white outline to match that of other sonnets, and 26 'missing' beats—suggest layout as (in Eliot's term) an 'objective correlative' of Hill's difficulty in meaning. To speak of the *Sho'ah* at all is to face epistemological difficulty ; to speak as Hill does is to risk incomprehension, or worse. One acid test is to type 'September Song' as a prose-paragraph (but, if you respect Hill and the

³⁰ This term usefully covers both handwritten and printed forms ; the singular is *littera notabilior*.

gravity of his subject, don't post or print it) and let your eyes flick between screen and Hill's own layout : which better grasps his meaning and integrity ? Relineations and resettings to display as much as possible of the sonnet-form are equally object lessons in what might be called (in the Brechtian sense) an alienating layout.