

## Variants, Print Resistance and Creative Reading in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

### Versvariánsok, nyomtatásrezisztencia és kreatív olvasás Emily Dickinson költészetében

Emily Dickinson, napjaink egyik legismertebb és legelismertebb tizenkilencedik századi amerikai költője egész életében kerülte a publikálás nyomtatott formáit. Versei olyan tulajdonságokkal jellemezhetők, melyek nehezen összeegyeztethetők a nyomtatással. Ilyen a versek dinamikus, befejezetlen jellege, mely többek között a versekhez tartozó, alternatív módon beilleszthető szavak vagy sorok eredménye. A versvariánsok megváltoztatják a befogadás módját is, mivel a választás feladata szinte társszerzővé avatja az olvasót. A tanulmány érvelése szerint a szó tágabb értelmében versvariánsokat eredményez mindaz, ami megváltoztatja a vers identitását, például a kontextus vagy a műfaj módosulása, melyet két vers példáján demonstrál.

Emily Dickinson, one of the most reputed American poets of the nineteenth century, rejected the traditional ways of publishing during her lifetime. Instead, she opted for different forms of non-print distribution of her poems. These included her manuscript copies, the so-called “fair” copies, which she sent to friends and acquaintances in letters or gave them as gifts as well as her home-made booklets, the “fascicles”. Her writing method was also characterized by indirectness, circumferencial expression or “slant telling” as she wrote in “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (Fr1263<sup>2</sup>).

One of the reasons for her refusal of print publishing could be her awareness of the print resistant features of her poetry. These are as follows: (1) they are dynamic works of art unlike static printed texts (2) the poems are characterized by an unfinished quality due to the existence of variants and (3) the lack of titles (4) the manuscript

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2 The abbreviation “Fr” used throughout the paper refers to Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1998. Print. Citation by poem number.

poems may be regarded as artifacts, (5) print technology may not be adequate to reproduce the visual elements of the manuscripts, (6) print publication could have deprived Dickinson of the freedom of experimenting with the text. The present paper will focus on the variants as print-resistant, unfixed elements of Dickinson's poetry and argue that any change influencing the identity of the poem may result in a variant, using the term in a broader sense, which is a barrier to conventional reception and print publication.

Even in her fair copies, especially in her hand-made books, the fascicles, Dickinson frequently offered variants, that is alternate words, sometimes lines or stanzas. We may assume that she considered them equally ranked, integral parts of the poem. It is the reader's choice whether to include them separately or parallelly in one reading. Consequently, her poems are not static, fixed objects like printed texts preserving their momentary state at the time of printing but rather works in progress. Thus the reader's creative role in the production of the Dickinson poem is essential. As it is left to the reader to complete the poem, the outcome of the process is always different, depending on their personality and their mental or psychological state. Additionally, the poet does not always produce a final version of the poems, and the variants, the poems and the recipients enter into an interactive relationship with one another. The interchangeability of alternate elements also contributes to the dynamism of Dickinson's poetry. This exchangeability reminds us of a puzzle which has more than one solution. Paradoxically, the dynamic character of the poems with variants and the uncertainty attached to them also imply an element of hesitation, a moment of halt, when both poet or reader consider the variants within the poem. As Philip G. Cohen suggests, variants destabilize the text (Cohen 1997: 142). At the same time, this consideration as well as the perception of the poem with its visual elements on the manuscript page require that both the reader's mind and eyes be in motion. The poet also seems to be in constant movement, continually working on her poems: presumably not only with the aim of improving them or sometimes making them suitable for a special occasion or addressee but also, as Masako Takeda suggests quoting Dickinson's wording, to make them "breathe" (Takeda 2005: 145). Thus, the poet produces several revised versions of the poem.

A crucial element of the unfinished state, the existence of variants is obviously controversial to the concept of printing. Concerning the barriers to print represented by variants, Sharon Cameron argues that "variants indicate both the desire for limit and the difficulty in enforcing it. The difficulty in enforcing a limit to the poems turns into a kind of limitlessness, for...it is impossible to say where the text ends" (Cameron 1992: 6). Philip G. Cohen speaks about "radically unfinished" poems. He thinks that the author's intension is indeterminate owing to the existence of the variants, which results in a "textual otherness", a uniqueness of style (Cohen 1997: 142). Michele Ierardi sees the fact that the final copies are not final as a "refusal of booklike closure" (Ierardi 2012: 2).

The unfinished nature of the poems also results from the fact that even if Dickinson produced more fair copies which are not necessarily identical, there is usually no final version of the poem or at least it is not indicated by the poet. Only occasionally does she underline the variant word she prefers, for example in the first version of “Paradise is of the option” (Fr1125A). Although Franklin argues that each of the fair copies prepared for different people or occasions are final for its person or occasion, he admits that this cannot be equated with a final intention for publishing (Franklin 1967: 132). All things considered, we can assume that the text of the poems is not fixed, which raises problems for their print distribution.

As Jerome J. McGann reminds us, the “print convention she inherited would organize such variants at the foot of the page, in what scholars would later call an ‘apparatus’. Many of her poems exploit that convention, but Dickinson also habitually threw her ‘variants’ all over the space of her pages—interlineally, in both margins (sometimes written up and sometimes down), within the area of ‘the line itself’, the so-called superior text. The whole space of the page was open to these add-on, sometimes free-floating, textual events” (McGann 1994: 199). This brings about changes in the visual effect of the handwritten poems, producing not only textual but also visual variants.

As for the variant words, while Sharon Cameron believes that they are non-exclusive, integral parts of the poem, Domhnall Mitchell asserts they are usable but unused elements, the poem or poems Dickinson might have written (Cameron 1998: 139; Mitchell 2005: 273). Both arguments suggest that alternate words do belong to the poem in one way or another. However, there are poems which have fair copies with and also without alternatives, as Dickinson usually included variants in the fascicles or sets but rarely in the copies sent or given to family members, friends or acquaintances. Contrary to the Cameron’s and Mitchell’s arguments, these fair, variant-free copies may testify that Dickinson did not necessarily regard the poems complete only with the variant words, lines or stanzas, although, when present, they should be considered parts of the poem. For example, “Of all the sounds despatched abroad” (Fr334) has three existing copies. The copy in Fascicle 12 contains three variant words. The one sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson does not include any additional variant words, though it adopts the alternate words from the fascicle copy and introduces five new ones. There are differences in punctuation and lineation, as well. The third copy sent to Susan Huntington, Dickinson’s friend and sister-in-law does not offer any variant words, either (Franklin 1988: 1: 356–8). Interestingly, sometimes Dickinson would make a fair copy for herself outside the fascicle or set, without giving alternatives for words, lines or stanzas. For instance, the fascicle copy of “There came a day at summer’s full” (Fr325) includes alternate words, while in the fair copy which was not bound but remained in her possession she did not include any extra words (Franklin 1988: 1: 344–5). This

may testify that the fascicles are not work copies prepared for her own use or for a possible later choice for a final version. At the same time, the existence of her own fair copies without variants may evidence that the variants are provided for the reader to accomplish the poem, just like a set of accessories of different colors may be provided for an outfit. As she usually did not include any variants in the poems sent to friends or relatives but made her choice of the alternative words and tailored the poem to the addressee, her own variant-free copies raise the question whether she regarded her own copy as the most relevant one for herself. If so, in this case she considered herself a reader of the poem. The significant difference between the manuscript form of poems including those offering variant options and the printed versions may serve as further evidence of the poems' resistance to print. Given the stage of technological development of Dickinson's time, the extra dimension of the former would have been impossible to be reproduced in conventional print publications. In addition, editors preferred to regularize the oddities, for example those of spelling or punctuation, of the poems. By producing variant versions of her poems, Dickinson did not only grant the readers unusual freedom for interpretation and co-authoring but also shared the job of editing with them when she kept the alternatives, without producing a finalized text fixed on the page. "Those Fair – fictitious People" (Fr369) is an extreme example of the above phenomenon with its twenty-six suggestions for eleven places, which would make 7680 poems possible, supposing every variant is a different poem (Franklin 1967: 202).

The word "variant" usually refers to the alternate words offered by Dickinson beside or above the lines or below the text of the poem. However, as the factors outside the text may also influence, slightly or more significantly, the identity of the poem, I suppose that variants—using the term in a broader sense—have two categories: in-textual variants, which imply changes in the poem itself and extra-textual variants, which derive from factors outside the text of the given poem.

The in-textual variants are as follows: (1) variant words, (2) variant lines, (3) variant stanzas, (4) variant lineation, (5) variant punctuation, (6) the manuscript including the alternate solution and (7) fair copies of the same poem without the variants marked in the copy.

The extra-textual variants comprise: (8) the same poem in different contexts, (9) poems as variants of one another, (10) various interpretations, (11) poems representing different genres.

Unfortunately, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate the influence of all the in-textual and extra-textual variants on the poems. However, I will attempt to show the effect of variants resulting from the change of text, context or genre.

An interesting example of variant lines is included in the first copy of “One need not be a chamber to be haunted” (Fr 407A):

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –  
One need not be a House –  
The Brain – has Corridors surpassing  
Material Place –

Far safer of a Midnight – meeting  
External Ghost –  
Than its Interior – confronting –  
That cooler – Host –

Far safer, through an Abbey – gallop –  
The Stones a’chase –  
Than moonless – One’s A’self encounter –  
In lonesome place –

Ourself – behind Ourself – Concealed –  
Should startle – most –  
Assassin – hid in Our Apartment –  
Be Horror’s least –

The Prudent - carries a Revolver –  
He bolts the Door –  
O’erlooking a Superior Spectre –  
More near –

Besides the four variant words in the Fascicle 20 copy of the poem, two alternative lines are also provided for the two final lines of the poem. Thus these variants are in a “strategic” position concerning the closure. They are as follows:

Variant closure1: “A Spectre – infinite – accompanying – /He fails to fear –”

Variant closure 2: “Maintaining a superior spectre –/None saw –”

The poem is a psychological thriller built on antonyms paralleled with each other within each stanza. The first two lines provide information about the “Material Place” of a haunted house and its tenant, compared in the third and fourth lines to the interior space of the psyche haunted by its own repressed unconscious mind, representing far more danger and “Horror” than the former one. Encountering one’s own self, “Ourself – behind Ourself – Concealed –”, a hidden facet of one’s own mind is more terrifying than the threat of a ghost. There are three spheres in the poem: the real, physical world of the house, the projection of the speaker’s fears to the real world by the embodied ghost and the interior of the “Brain”, that is the mental, psychological sphere. Both the “original” closure and Variant closure 1 in the Fascicle 20 copy suggest that we fail to notice our monstrous self, which is “Superior” to the “External Ghost” and is more dangerous as we concentrate on the external threats.

However, our failure to notice this darker self is unintentional, as the word “O’erlooking” indicates. Contrary to the above closures, the word “Maintaining” in Variant closure 2 implies an intended action.

If this is true, the existence of the darker side of the soul is the speaker’s fault, hiding it from others (see “None saw” in the final line) suggests it is her responsibility. Although the state of being “Haunted” described at the beginning of the poem refers to passive behavior, according to the second line variation it is changed for active participation on the speaker’s part. Thus, the line variation may result in a completely new interpretation of the whole poem.

Since the readers of a conventional print publication are not aware of any of the variants, for them a significant part of the poem is lost, as if they encountered only a fragment of the whole work. They are also partly deprived of the challenge of creative reading and the task of co-authorship. They receive a finished text, ready-made for them. The above poem may indicate why most of Dickinson’s poems lie outside of traditional print publishing.

Dickinson probably used whatever she could find to write on. Both the material and the already existing content of the cut-out, envelope, advertisement, recipe or shopping list she used may have influenced the writing process and sometimes led the poet to respond to them, both as author and reader, as if creating a work of applied

art. In the case of the workshop scraps or different cut-outs, it is not only the hand-writing but also the material on which the poem appears that makes the poem an artifact. The material may contribute to the poem, however, it may also serve as a barrier to interpretation. As Melanie Hubbard claims, the refusal to print and editorial intervention “allowed her to explore the materiality of representation” (Hubbard 2003: 54). Although Hubbard considers the graphic resistance of the poems a barrier for the reader, she asserts that in some cases material “seems clearly to have been designed” (Hubbard 2003: 56). In spite of the fact that it remains a question whether the poet’s reaction to the shape, the material and content of the paper she wrote on was intentional or not, it is obvious that the interaction between the poem and its material may result in inspiration and, at the same time, restriction for both poet and reader.

In order to demonstrate how a different context and genre may influence the reading experience, I would like to discuss an unusual case in which the interplay between the text and the visual image of the handwritten object may change the identity of the poem and result in a differing variant. The following poem (Fr 1545) was written on the inside of an envelope:

A Pang is more conspicuous in Spring  
In contrast with the things that sing  
Not Birds entirely – but Minds –  
And Winds – Minute Effulgencies  
When what they sung for is undone  
Who cares about a Blue Bird’s Tune –  
Why, Resurrection had to wait  
Till they had moved a Stone –

The poem may have been tailored to the shape of the flattened envelope, as not only the lineation but also the message seems to fit it. The shape is that of an arrow which may cause the sharp, tense feeling of pain, the “Pang”:

A pang is more  
 conspicuous in Spring  
 In contrast with the  
 things that sing, those -  
 Not Birds entirely, but  
 Minds - Minute Effulgen -  
 And Winds - - eies  
 When what they sung  
 for is undone  
 who cares about  
 a Blue Bird's Tune -  
 whil Resurrection  
 had to wait  
 till they had moved  
 a Stone -



Owing to the line division of the original manuscript, the text precisely follows the arrow-shape of the envelope as an objectified symbol of pang. In contrast with the eight line version of both the Johnson and the Franklin edition, in the manuscript there are enough lines to fill the entire space of the envelope. The final words: “a Stone” constituting a separate closing line are given special emphasis. Thus, “Stone” as another object which might cause sharp pain becomes a symbol of “Pang”, giving the poem some circular symmetry. Interestingly, although the line “And Winds” is obviously below “Minute Effulgencies” on the manuscript, and is printed accordingly in the Johnson edition, in the Franklin edition the line ending with “Minds –” is followed by the line beginning with “And Winds –”, as if both were described as “Minute Effulgencies”. The last four lines also appear on the inside of an envelope addressed to Louise Norcross by Dickinson (Franklin 1988: 3: 1353).

The above examples testify that both the text and the visual image of the handwritten poem on the page constituting a different context and genre may contribute to the change of identity of the work, resulting in a variant as well as different interpretation. Jerome McGann is right when he speaks about the “dramatic interplays between a poetics of the eye and a poetics of the ear” characterizing Dickinson’s poetry from the winter of 1861. At this time, instead of following the conventions of text presentation of print, she began using experimental writing techniques which, in McGann’s view, make her a forerunner of Modernism (McGann 1996: 248–9). It has long been a challenge for Dickinson scholars to decide whether the scriptural characteristics of the manuscripts are results of a deliberate strategy or not. Martha Nell Smith is certain that Dickinson focused more and more on the possibilities of the manuscript page and began to exploit more fully the details of scriptural corporealization (Smith 1988: 196). Damhnall Mitchell has doubts about Dickinson’s intentionality. As he sums up, Dickinson’s writing practices can be understood “as nineteenth-century graphic initiatives”, “as the accidental byproducts of a nineteenth-century home-based literary production not oriented toward publication” or “as formal deviations” interpreted as “fully deliberate graphic experiments” (Mitchell 2000: 226). However, the poet’s intentions are beyond the point: the physical, graphic and contextual features of her orthograph pages exist and have a significant impact on interpretation. Thus they influence the way they are or are not published, as they do not conform to the standards of print representation. Moreover, the poems are characterized by further features which make them resistant to print. Given the technological limitations of Dickinson’s time, many of the visual features were not even translatable into print. In conventional and mechanical print reproduction the “anti-print” features were and still often are either regularized or eliminated by editors. As a result, some important layers of meaning may be lost in print publication while the reader is deprived of the freedom of creative reading and the responsibility of co-authorship and editorship.

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