

## THE "ART OF BOARDS": ANALYZING CARPENTRY IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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### Introduction

From the first, Dickinson criticism has tended toward thematic treatment of her canon. In the earliest compilation, the Poems of 1890, Thomas H. Higginson arranged them according to life, nature, love, death, time and eternity.<sup>1</sup>

There are more precise categories: the bee poems, the "wife" poems; ones featuring the color purple or "Awe" or "Immortality--the flood subject," in Dickinson's own words. John Cody, in his analysis of the poet, thinks that for psychological reasons Dickinson chose symbols--the sun, sea, night, winter, summer--to propagate certain associations.<sup>2</sup>

On a study of the whole canon, yet another category--that of carpentry--also emerges at the poet's own oblique gesture. In poem #488 Dickinson notes her "Art of Boards" and says about a builder that "Had we the Art of Boards/ Sufficiently developed--He'd hire us/ At Halves--".

This paper examines Dickinson's "Art of Boards," an art about which she purports doubt--"had we the Art of Boards," she notes--which causes Cynthia Wolff to interpret the "Art of Boards" as Dickinson's poetry itself.<sup>3</sup> Possibly that is correct for the particular poem, but a larger question remains. Do other metaphors relating to building and carpentry center on any one theme?

It seems that Dickinson, for the most part through her "Art of Boards", creates sensations that activate images from or associations with the subconscious.<sup>4</sup> We do not always know what the metaphors

mean, but we seldom fail to be moved by them.

Cody credits Dickinson with great psychological acumen, even in realms about which she did not have information, calling her the “psychoanalysand par excellence”. He notes that

Her poems appear to have afforded her emotional relief from her psychic pain...They possessed also an analytic and documentary function. With penetrating self-observation and unnerving intuition she anticipated the major discoveries of psychoanalysis.<sup>5</sup>

Dickinson uses a great variety of metaphorical building materials--plank, beam, nail, scaffold, drill, auger, board, rafter, mason, and mortise--but it becomes clear that certain themes are uppermost in her mind as she incorporates these objects.

In the first place, among all the carpentry metaphors, plank most often deals with ideas that have some psychological insight regarding the self. By the same token, edifices and structures of some sort often contain astute observations about identity or an ironical twist as a comment about death. Finally, a smattering of carpentry metaphors relate to nature imagery or have whimsical motifs.

In a kind of double metaphor, in #488<sup>6</sup> Dickinson calls herself the carpenter--or poet, as some think<sup>7</sup>--or wielder of psychological insight as Cody has shown.

Myself was formed--a Carpenter--  
An unpretending time  
My Plane--and I, together wrought  
Before a Builder came--

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To measure our Attainments--  
Had we the Art of Boards  
Sufficiently developed--He'd hire us  
At Halves--

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It is significant that as a carpenter or poet, there is lack of pretense. It is not clear how deeply Dickinson intuited information about the persona, but "pretense" is a psychological concept that dovetails nicely here with the "Art of Boards". Furthermore, this is an example of how Dickinson anticipated psychological concepts as described above by Cody.

### Psychological Planking

Poems that use a plank metaphor incorporate a propensity for self-analysis. Perhaps there is no board so famous in the Dickinson canon as the one in #280, "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," nor is there one so justified in its clear, psychological thrust.

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And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down--  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing--then--

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The plank is introduced only after a psychological buildup of funereal tropes that enhance discomfort by their variety and their repetition. When the fourth stanza veers off into surrealism, "Then Space--began to toll,/ As all the Heavens were a Bell,/ And Being, but an Ear,/" the reader has little energy to forestall the final plunge into madness when the plank breaks.

In other plank poems however, the board is even more central and most often crucial to the psychological cognizance. In #875,

I stepped from Plank to Plank  
A slow and cautious way  
The Stars about my Head I felt  
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next  
Would be my final inch--  
This gave me that precarious Gait  
Some call Experience.

Here is the familiar two-stanza poem in which--and this is uncommon in Dickinson's system--the images are consistent in both stanzas, while the use of a period, much less two, is also rare. Stepping from plank to plank in itself suggests a delicate situation, but the perils of this poem are quickly heightened by the implied distance between sky and earth in the reference to "Stars" and "Sea".

"Final inch" portends creeping danger; only to level the full force of almost comic relief: the precarious gait is only after all, what we recognize as experience.

Poem #1433 treats plank in a similar vein.

How brittle are the Piers  
On which our Faith doth tread--  
No Bridge below doth totter so--  
Yet none hath such a Crowd.

It is as old as God--  
Indeed--'twas built by him--  
He sent his Son to test the Plank,  
And he pronounced it firm.

Poems #875 and #1433 are structurally similar with their sus-

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tained images in both stanzas, periods at the ends, their twisted humor and irony. In the second poem, however, brittle piers and a tottering bridge are striking metaphors that hint at psychological peril. The phrases "none hath such a Crowd" and "Indeed-- 'twas built by him--" lampoon belief, especially since Jesus has walked the plank. The "Gait Experience" can be inferred in this poem also, but the sarcasm is much stronger than in #875.

Dickinson continues to put strength in the trodden plank metaphor in #652, "A Prison gets to be a friend--". Very often her buildings--even a prison--represent stages of psychological awareness of the self. She begins associating planks with the past, with memory.

A Prison gets to be a friend--  
Between its Ponderous face  
And Ours--a Kinsmanship express--  
And in its narrow Eyes--

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We learn to know the Planks--  
That answer to Our feet--

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The voice of these planks is not as welcome as that "When Memory was a Boy--". The prison personified reminds and challenges, finally beating down the speaker until there is only "The slow exchange of Hope--/ For something passiver--Content". Thus, hope, as an ingredient of the past, is a psychological tool for the future and often couched in carpentry metaphors.

Past hope and another plank are evident in #1264.

This is the place they hoped before,  
Where I am hoping now.  
The seed of disappointment grew  
Within a capsule gay,

Too distant to arrest the feet  
That walk this plank of balm--  
Before them lies escapeless sea--  
The way is closed they came.

There is a particular psychological despair here in the familiarity of being in the place where “‘they’ hoped before” and now being shut off from returning to it--“the way is closed ‘they’ came”. The interjection of the oxymoronic “plank of balm” increases the surrealism and the despair about any reparations possible for the past.

In the first, #1343, of two seemingly nature-oriented poems using plank, the psychological thrust begins playfully enough, but has deeper portents.

A single Clover Plank  
Was all that saved a Bee  
A Bee I personally knew  
From sinking in the sky--

'Twixt Firmament above  
And Firmament below  
The Billows of Circumference  
Were sweeping him away--

The idly swaying Plank  
Responsible to nought  
A sudden Freight of Wind assumed  
And Bumble Bee was not--

This harrowing event  
Transpiring in the Grass

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Did not so much as wring from him  
A wandering "Alas"--

The bee "I personally knew", the "harrowing event" are seemingly exaggerations that contribute to a chilling denouement when the plank--the blade of clover--proves inadequate and the bee is dispatched by wind.<sup>8</sup> Yet a light reading of the poem may miss the personal hazard implied.

The second nature poem, #1198, is completely light hearted--in mood quite at variance with the use of plank in the above poems. Its metaphor of a ship--"And rose and fell the magic Planks" is without subtlety or surprise; when "the crew" is delighted, it is that and no more, unless we want to speculate on the identity of the butterfly and bee sailors. This poem is a rare case of imagery unhampered by levels of meaning.

### Psychological Edifices

Strong psychological overtones support each other in a mixture of plank and edifice in poem #1142, first example of the increasing importance of "buildings" and structure in carpentry poems.

The Props assist the House  
Until the House is built  
And then the Props withdraw  
And adequate, erect  
The House support itself  
And cease to recollect  
The Auger and the Carpenter--  
Just such a retrospect  
Hath the perfected Life--  
A past of Plank and Nail

And slowness--then the Scaffolds drop  
Affirming it a Soul.

Here the structure is symbolic of the maturation of the ego or soul. In the same way that building supports are removed when a construction project is completed, stages of psychological development are implied. The experience of tortured growth--"The Auger and the Carpenter"--are relegated to the past; a life that is mature goes through a constructing process--plank and nail--gradually, and only then, is the integration of the self revealed. Paula Bennett summarizes Dickinson's mental energy in this poem, citing it as evidence that the poet "knew clearly who and what she was...Dickinson's sense of self was utterly firm."<sup>9</sup>

Another poem that uses a building is the earliest cited here, #178, and is somewhat indefinite in development. The speaker puts the best part of life, the hay, in storage--in a barn, where it disappears. It

Was not upon the "Scaffold"--  
Was not upon the "Beam"--  
And from a thriving Farmer--  
A Cynic, I became.

Whether a Thief did it--  
Whether it was the wind--  
Whether Deity's guiltless--  
My business is, to find!

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The lost hay cannot be found in the structure of the place--in the beams or on the scaffolding. To pursue it, the speaker evolves from farmer to cynic, from hunter to ransacker. Yet the over-all



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demeanor of the poem has a 19th century Romantic flavor that all but hides the psychological action.

Another structure that has psychological ramifications is the "Tent" of heaven, #243, whose full metaphoric structure is drawn out to include a mimicry of carpentry.

I've known a Heaven, like a Tent--  
To wrap its shining Yards--  
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear--  
Without the sound of Boards  
Or Rip of Nail--Or Carpenter--  
But just the miles of Stare--  
That signalize a Show's Retreat--  
In North America--

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In this double metaphor heaven and tent stand for an exalted experience, but heaven behaves as a tent, departing from the landscape without the clamor to be expected from a smashing and ripping up of its foundations. Rather the demise of the experience leaves the emptiness of "miles of Stare", semantically a nonsensical phrase, but not necessarily without communication emotionally--therein lies the psychological power.<sup>10</sup> The bitter disappointment of the loss of this experience is mitigated by the sarcasm of the metaphoric "Show's Retreat in North America."

Sometimes Dickinson twists the language; instead of the edifice shoring up the psychological reality--hope, hope creates the metaphorical house in #1481.

The way Hope builds his House  
It is not with a sill--

Nor Rafter--has that Edifice  
But only Pinnacle--

Abode in as supreme  
This superficialities  
As if it were of Ledges smit  
Or mortised with the Laws--

The psychological energy of hope is a focused one--pinnacled as it were--and the usual parts of the building, the window sills, the rafters, are not its components so much as far stronger stuff: particularly laws "mortised"--as solid as concrete.

In contrast to the pinnacle, Dickinson connects mind and emotion and assigns it to a building's other extremity, the cellar in #1182.

Remembrance has a Rear and Front--  
'Tis something like a House--  
It has a Garret also  
For Refuse and the Mouse.

Besides the deepest Cellar  
That ever Mason laid--  
Look to it by its Fathoms  
Ourselves be not pursued--

In this, one of her most psychologically astute poems, Dickinson not only recognizes the depth of memory and shows it to be a result of the carpentry--"the deepest Cellar/ That ever Mason laid--", she also hints at being chased by our own demons, once we recognize what is down there. Cellar emerges as one of Dickinson's most memorable psychological images, even more so in #1225.<sup>11</sup>

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Dickinson's poems, on the one hand notorious for their brevity, on the other well-known for their obscurity, offer numerous cases of vague imagery and development. In #1689 the subject "thee" does not center down; it is the metaphoric carpentry suggestion of edifice--"Mansion of Identity"--that brings psychological focus to the poem.

The look of thee, what is it like  
Hast thou a hand or Foot  
Or Mansion of Identity  
And what is thy Pursuit?

Thy fellows are they realms or Themes  
Hast thou Delight or Fear  
Or Longing--and is that for us  
Or values more severe?

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With the hint that the search is really for Identity for the sake of the "thee", such terms as "Pursuit", "Delight", "Fear", and "Longing" shore up the confidence that "thee" is a human being invested with psychological needs. But clarity is not satisfied; this poem is an example of what Weisbuch describes as Dickinson "always retreating forward, escaping from one danger to find herself another."<sup>12</sup>

Another kind of edifice opens up Dickinson's prolific management of death (over half of her poems) and the psychological elements here are present thanks to the carpentry. In the well-known #216, "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers", rafter and roof hold up the building; the poet mocks at death within. The "safe" of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers--/"; the ironic "meek" in "Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection--"; the contrast between the construction of "satin" and "stone" furthers the psychological disjunction suggested in the opulent, but cruel tomb setting.

Other poems on death have slighter references to building materials and carpentry, hardly crucial to the direction of the poem; still, they spark a metaphor or enhance an oxymoron as in #592.

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer--  
What care the Dead for Day?  
'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face--  
And Purple Ribaldry--of Morning

Pour as blank on them  
As on the Tier of Wall  
The Mason builded, yesterday,  
And equally as cool--

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The cold and inanimate structure of a wall is compared to the unresponsive dead. "Pouring as blank" particularly suits the warmth and gold of a sunset over against the absence of feeling or response. In a similar vein, in poem #1135, whose subject must be inferred and which may possibly be a tombstone, masonry again contributes to the unresponsiveness of the subject.

Too cold is this  
To Warm with Sun--  
Too stiff to bended be,  
To joint this Agate were a work--  
Outstaring Masonry--

How went the Agile Kernel out  
Contusion of the Husk  
Nor Rip, nor wrinkle indicate  
But just an Asterisk.

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Another edifice begins to be described in #892 as a building. "Who occupies this House?/" But it is soon implied that the "edifice" is actually a tombstone. "Some Houses very old,/ Some--newly raised this afternoon,/ Were I compelled to build/ It should not be among/ Inhabitants so still". The poem goes on to show how a community gets its burying ground, the psychological build-up very subtle indeed.

If this is a tombstone that represents a once living, vital being ("How went the Agile Kernel out?"), the tombstone alone remains--more final than a wall--masonry--because it is an "asterisk"--a symbol that indicates more can be said on the subject than is allowed by the presence of the stone.

The very brief #1647 is a puzzling riddle. "Of Glory not a Beam is left/ But her Eternal House--/ The Asterisk is for the Dead,/ The Living, for the Stars--/". Here the poem incorporates "beam", either as a rafter or a shaft of light; while "Asterisk" makes a sudden entrance. Its appearance in the above poem prepares us for its juxtaposition with the edifice, "House".

Carpentry images appear briefly in other poems, rendering a psychological tweak, but not significantly influencing the basic direction of the work. In #561 about nail, Dickinson says "Death--is but one--and comes but once--/ And only nails the eyes--/", but the nail is oxymoronic in #1140, "November hung his Granite Hat/ Upon a nail of Plush--".

In poem #1064, she says the hours "Drill silently for Heaven--"; while in #1034, a tool offers a lighter imagery about a woodpecker, "His Bill an Auger is".

## Conclusion

In summary, an analysis of Dickinson's "Art of Boards" indicates that, first, in most cases carpentry metaphors signal a psychological probing or elaboration of truth. This is not to say that the canon does not generally display great psychological acumen as Cody and others have shown above. Dickinson is quite adept at executing a psychological thrust in her other topical pursuits such as in the nature poems and the "immortality" poems. But as Helen McNeil has pointed out, the concept of topic is itself an arbitrary term in Dickinson's work, "Whenever I or any other critic may write that Dickinson does or does not assert something, chances are that there is another Dickinson poem which speculatively advances the opposite assertion."<sup>13</sup>

Second, in the light of this remark it is even more impressive that plank and edifice metaphors so consistently pursue psychological themes instead of, for instance, pointing in the direction of love or concerning themselves with time or nature.

Finally, a corresponding body of carpentry poetry that eschews psychological issues, does not appear. By contrast, it is clear that among the canon's other topics a variety of concerns develop other than psychological ones.

From these observations, we may conclude that Dickinson's term, "Art of Boards" is an unconscious description of a particular group of carpentry-related poems. And the focus of the "art" of this carpentry centers on various psychological overtures distinctive to those buildings and boards and to the very poems themselves.

## NOTES

1. See Richard B. Sewall's, The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), II, p. 571.

2. John Cody, After Great Pain. The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard

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University Press, 1971), p. 7.

3. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Emily Dickinson. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 431.

4. Robert Weisbuch credits Dickinson with foreknowledge of modern psychological terms--the reader recognizes this not the poet. He says we can talk about "descent into unconscious, so long as we remember that the unconscious did not exist as a connotative word for a pre-Freudian romantic like Dickinson..." Emily Dickinson's Poetry. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 105.

5. Cody, After Great Pain, p. 6.

6. Dickinson's poems in this paper are taken from and numbered as in Thomas H. Johnson's The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Vols. I, II, III, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).

7. Along with Wolff (see note #3 above), David Porter also thinks Dickinson is discussing her own poetic craft in this poem. But he stresses its vagueness and evasive meaning. Dickinson. The Modern Idiom (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 64.

8. Paula Bennett, Emily Dickinson. Woman Poet. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 37-8.

9. Bennett, Emily Dickinson, p. 148.

10. In this poem David Porter centers on the importance of "miles of Stare" which he calls an example of Dickinson's disparate word groups. Ibid., p. 11.

11. Although not a proper carpentry poem, #1225 parallels #1182 very closely.

Its Hour with itself  
The Spirit never shows.  
What Terror would enthrall the Street  
Could Countenance disclose

The Subterranean Freight  
The Cellars of the Soul—  
Thank God the loudest Place he made  
Is licensed to be still.

Thus, Bennett concludes, “There were, Dickinson knew, discoveries no one should reveal.” Ibid., p. 120.

12. Weisbuch, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 177.

13. Helen McNeil, Emily Dickinson (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 13.

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