theories and methodologies

Emily Dickinson's Animal Pedagogies

COLLEEN GLENNEY BOGGS

Carlo died—
E. Dickinson
Would you instruct me now?
—Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Johnson 449)

IN 1866 EMILY DICKINSON ENDED A LAPSE OF EIGHTEEN MONTHS IN HER CORRESPONDENCE WITH THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON BY SENDing him three lines that connect the major concerns of her work: death, subjectivity, and the conditions of knowledge. When Higginson later published these lines in "Emily Dickinson's Letters," he explained that the poet would on occasion include "an announcement of some event, vast to her small sphere as this," the death of her dog who had been her companion for sixteen years (450). In measuring Dickinson's loss biographically by the "small sphere" of her life, Higginson sets aside her ability to "wade grief" (Franklin 312) and situates her letter within the sentimental culture of pet keeping, which had transfigured a predominantly agricultural practice (*pet* initially referred to a lamb) into a staple of genteel domesticity and bourgeois subjectivity (Mason; Grier; Kete; Ritvo; Thomas). Far from participating uncritically in the roles and relations Higginson projects onto her, Dickinson interrogates the formation and gendering of sentimental subjectivity (Dillon; Blackwood) by placing "Carlo died" in relation to the other two lines—the signature and the call for instruction. "E. Dickinson" refers ambiguously to Emily or to her father, Edward Dickinson (Holland 146). The signature pluralizes the subject; it doubles and ultimately

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obscures "E."'s gender. This ambiguous subject hinges on the animal's death as a scene of pedagogy: it stands in the liminal space between the announcement of Carlo's death and the request: "Would you instruct me now?"

It is easy to overlook this question's relevance and its bearing on Carlo's death, since the call for instruction is a constant refrain in Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson. If we trace that refrain, it becomes apparent that Dickinson consistently links the scene of pedagogy with the formation of subjectivity through the trope of the animal. In her introductory letter to Higginson, she asked him, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? . . . Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude" (Johnson 403). Dickinson portrays a liveness that animates her poetry, and whose breathing produces the poet's own affective "quick[ening]." She more fully develops these connections when she responds to Higginson's request for a self-description: "You ask of my Companions Hills—Sir—and the Sundown—and a Dog—large as myself, that my Father bought me—They are better than Beings—because they know—but do not tell—and the noise in the Pool, at Noon—excels my Piano" (404). This composite portrait blends the animate and the inanimate, the object with the subject, to unhinge their epistemological meanings and ontological differentiation. But what exactly is the surplus that makes her "Companions . . . better than Beings"? In using the term *companion*, Dickinson draws on the same vocabulary that informs Donna Haraway's reading of human beings and dogs as "companion species" that stand "in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship" to each other (12). Like Haraway, who argues that animals "are not about oneself. . . . They are not a projection" (12), Dickinson abandons the normative reference to human subjectivity by making the dog "better than Beings" and erasing "human," the implied adjective before "Beings."

Her abandonment of that reference should also give us pause from relating Dickinson too readily to Haraway and the growing number of feminist scholars who believe animal studies in general and "dog writing" in particular "to be a branch of feminist theory" (Haraway 3; see also Donovan and Adams). Dickinson's terse prose cautions us about patriarchy's vested interest in sentimentalizing women's relation with animals (Ortner) and in making women's performance of their gender contingent on their performance of their species. Higginson connects the two performances in his 1887 article "Women and Men: Children and Animals," where he insists that "the care given by the young girl [to her pet] was simply the anticipated tenderness of a mother for her child." Casting the girl's relation to her dog as analogous to the mother's relation to her child infantilizes women (women are like girls), anthropomorphizes animals (pets are like children), and animalizes children (children are like pets).

Early reviews picked up on Dickinson's use of infantilization as a strategy for exploring these oddly mutable subject positions; they described Dickinson's poetry as showing "the insight of the civilized adult combined with the simplicity of the savage child" (Bates). In describing the dog as something that "my Father bought me," Dickinson casts herself in the role of her parent's child. She draws attention to the objectifying structures that underlie the sentimental association of women and animals by pointing to Carlo's status as a commodity and gift. Her reference to "myself" and "me" inscribes Dickinson's subjectivity in this act of gift giving and places her in the precarious position that women share with fetish objects and anthropomorphized subjects (Sedgwick): by dropping the preposition "for" and by establishing a simile between the "dog" and "myself," Dickinson allows for the double possibility that Carlo or "me" was the object her father "bought." With this odd slippage between the dog and

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the daughter, the gift and the recipient, she suggests that women, children, and animals mediate the relation between the object and the subject; they establish the boundaries along which human subject formation in distinction from nature becomes possible.

In staging her relation to her dog, Dickinson performs and undercuts these differentiations. Although describing the dog as her father's gift infantilizes Dickinson, Carlo allows her small stature to appear "large." By drawing on the animal as a trope-reversing trope (Gates), Dickinson deconstructs the processes and parameters of gendered subject formation. The name *Carlo* signifies on the central role that dogs play in the literary construction of subjectivity. Dickinson named Carlo after two literary characters, St. John River's dog in *Jane Eyre* (Capps 95) and Ik Marvell's dog in *Reveries of a Bachelor* (Eberwein 41, 192). The name then refers not only to a real dog but also to the fictional representation of animals.

The fictional use of animals for didactic purposes reaches back to antiquity and Aesop's animal fables. The fable tradition, however, uses animals as stand-ins for human beings; it is not interested in animals as such. John Locke's widely read *Thoughts on Education* (1693) sparked a new interest in teaching children kindness to animals (Perkins). Locke asked that "Children should from the beginning be bred up in Abhorrence of *killing* or tormenting any living Creature. . . . And indeed, I think People should be accustomed, from their Cradles, to be tender to all sensible Creatures" (101). Locke's statement suggests that animals teach children inner values: he depicts children as needing to "be bred" into an emotional and moral response of "abhorrence" against harming animals. This claim sparked a debate over human beings' ethical obligations and animals' legal rights—that is, over the very concerns that are central to the philosophical and legal branch of contemporary animal studies that emerged in the late 1970s (Singer; Regan; Scully; Sunstein and Nussbaum). More recently, poststructuralist scholars have questioned the emphasis on "animal rights" because it anchors "the contingency of the social contract" on "noncontingent natural ground" (Wolfe 39). The poststructuralist approach hopes to deconstruct the humanism from which it departs, without resorting to essentialist categories. Locke's writings are instructive for this approach as well. Taken up by Francis Hutcheson, Mary Wollstonecraft, David Hume, Thomas Paine, and such Romantic authors as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, John Clare, and Charles Lamb (Perkins; Morton), Locke's reflections on animals' didactic importance fundamentally changed pedagogical strategies for educating children to become liberal subjects. In the late eighteenth century, animals began to take on a central function *as animals* in the instruction of children. Even fables were enlisted in the new endeavor, as the subtitle of Sarah Trimmer's vastly popular *Fabulous Histories* (1786) illustrates: *Designed for the Instruction of Children respecting Their Treatment of Animals*. In fact, animals played an increasingly important role not just in moral education but also in children's initiation into language, as the example of *Aesop's Fables in French: With a Description of Fifty Animals Mentioned Therein and a French and English Dictionary of the Words Contained in the Work* indicates.

Emily Dickinson's Carlo participated in this educational reform. In 1863 Dickinson's uncle by marriage, Asa Bullard, published a book entitled *Dog Stories*, which prominently featured a dog named Carlo. As the secretary and general agent of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, Bullard edited the *Sabbath School Visitor*, to which Edward Dickinson subscribed for his children beginning in 1837 (Habegger), and Bullard numbered among the relatives Dickinson knew best (Longsworth 28), since she stayed with him and her aunt Lucretia when she visited Boston for eye surgery. In sketches that restage

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the constant warfare between his dog-loving niece Emily and her cat-loving sister Lavinia (e.g., "Our Kitty and Carlo" [11–13]), Bullard depicts scenes that amount to Christian allegory: Carlo, as portrayed in "Faithful Dog," cannot be lured by temptation to abandon his master's charge (25–27). In "Little Charlie and Fido," the dog "appears to *know* about as much as s*ome* boys; and he is a great deal more ready than some are to do a favor, and more thankful for any act of kindness shown him" (7–10). Indeed, dogs come to stand in for knowledge itself when Bullard describes how Carlo clears a ditch because his master's voice encouraged him: "Many children find their school duties hard to accomplish. Let the *kind* word of encouragement be given, and many of them, like the little dog Carlo, will surmount the difficulty and find their future course a joyous one" (64). Didactic like the texts that represent them, animals mediate liberal subjectivity: Bullard's admonition ties the "*kind* word" and animals to each other, as jointly enabling scholarly accomplishments; it promises that the pursuit of learning will find "joyous" fulfillment in a "future course"—a promise in which animals themselves have recently been included (Hearne).

What situates Bullard's book in a larger context of nineteenth-century children's literature is that it does not just portray the animals' behavior as exemplary; it uses animals to teach children kindness and draws on versification to do so:

> I'll never hurt my little dog,
> But stroke and pat his head;
> I like to see him wag his tail,
> I like to see him fed.
>
> The coward wretch whose hand and heart
> Can bear to torture aught below,
> Is ever first to quail and start
> From slightest pain or equal foe. (59–60)

These stories operate on the basis of what I will call didactic ontology, by which I mean the practice of teaching children how to be human by teaching them how to be humane. Animals take on a double role in this didactic literature: they stand in for children—their behavior models for the child how to behave—and they remain animals, whose vulnerability and exposure to potential cruelty teaches children to be kind. Children relate to these animals through a double sense of identification and disidentification: because the animal is like them, they are asked to extend kindness, but the kindness they extend makes them human stewards of the animal and marks their separation from it. Animals are a trace of children's own presocial being and a supplement to liberal subjectivity.

Read in this context, Emily Dickinson's portrayal of her dog as "better than [human] Beings" echoes a key assertion of this literature, that the virtues of animals reflect on the moral shortcomings of human beings. But Dickinson undercuts that lesson by dropping "human" and confounding the parameters of didactic ontology, where the human is the teleological outcome. Her insistence that her companions "know—but do not tell" indicates her resistance to didactic interpretation of the animal. Dickinson silences the pedagogical voice and instead gives play to "the noise in the Pool, at Noon" that "excels my Piano." Whereas sentimental literature maps the trace and the supplement in teleological relation to each other, Dickinson experiments with their fissures by staging and suspending the child's entry into an adult symbolic order that turns animals into dead metaphors by disavowing and historicizing their presence.

Using the same metric form and rhyme pattern as Bullard, Dickinson performs a formal parody of this kind of animal writing in a poem from 1871:

> A little Dog that wags his tail
> And knows no other joy
> Of such a little Dog am I
> Reminded by a Boy

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Who gambols all the living Day
Without an earthly cause
Because he is a little Boy
I honestly suppose—

The Cat that in the Corner dwells
Her martial Day forgot
The Mouse but a Tradition now
Of her desireless Lot

Another class remind me
Who neither please nor play
But not to make a "bit of noise"
Beseech each little Boy—
(Franklin 1236)

Dickinson begins the poem sounding like the didactic literature she imitates: she suggests that the boy is like the dog, but the moral lesson we expect to follow—that likeness obliges him to a kindness that ultimately separates him from the dog—is missing. Indeed, if we look closely, the dog is not a stand-in for the boy, but, on the contrary, the boy is a stand-in for the dog in Dickinson's reversal of the trope. Dickinson's boy is allowed to inhabit a relation to the dog that resists their didactic separation from each other. The resistance to didactic separation deepens when we consider this poem's private circulation. In letters to her family, Dickinson habitually referred to herself as a boy—for instance, when she wrote to her nephew Ned: "Mother told me, when I was a boy, that I must turn over a new leaf. I call that the foliage admonition. Shall I commend it to you?" (Bianchi 37). Turning an admonition into a question, Dickinson here, as in the poem, undercuts the didactic message "another class" wants to impart. Indeed, resistance to "admonition" is a theme throughout her correspondence with Ned. In the letter that included an abridged version of this poem, Dickinson offset its purported didacticism by adding a postscript: "P.S.—Grandma characteristically hopes Neddy will be a good boy. Obtuse ambition of Grandma's!" (Bianchi 38). Far from reprimanding the boy, Dickinson allies herself with him against the adults who would silence him. Unlike the cat's dead "Tradition" of a "martial Day," which stands in opposition to the boy's "living Day," the boy is free to "know no other joy" than the expression of his own pleasure.

In being asked "not to make a 'bit of noise,'" the boy is deprived of the ability to participate in the poesis of Dickinson's "pool, at Noon." Dickinson resists the didactic separation of children from animals; the possibility of poetic expression lies in their connection with each other. Yet even in a poem like this one, that possibility is always deferred. Being "reminded" links memory to admonition. In portraying the little boy, the I of first-person liberal subjectivity can be "reminded" of the "little Dog" but is already part of the didactic structures that prohibit the subject's participation in the undifferentiated relation between the boy and the dog. Language is an imperfect way of re-creating the "bit of noise" that has here become citational.

Whereas her parodic poem identifies this problem, Dickinson reaches in other works for the "Phraseless Melody" of true poesis by reshaping her relation to language (Franklin 334)—that is, by making poetry animate. In Dickinson's work, animals mark the liveness of a natural language beyond social silencing:

Many a phrase has the English language—
I have heard but one—
Low as the laughter of the Cricket,
Loud, as the Thunder's Tongue—

Murmuring, like old Caspian Choirs,
When the Tide's a'lull—
Saying itself in new inflection—
Like a Whippowil—

Breaking in bright Orthography
On my simple sleep—
Thundering it's Prospective—
Till I stir, and weep—

Not for the Sorrow, done me—
But the push of Joy—
Say it again, Saxon!
Hush—Only to me! (Franklin 333)

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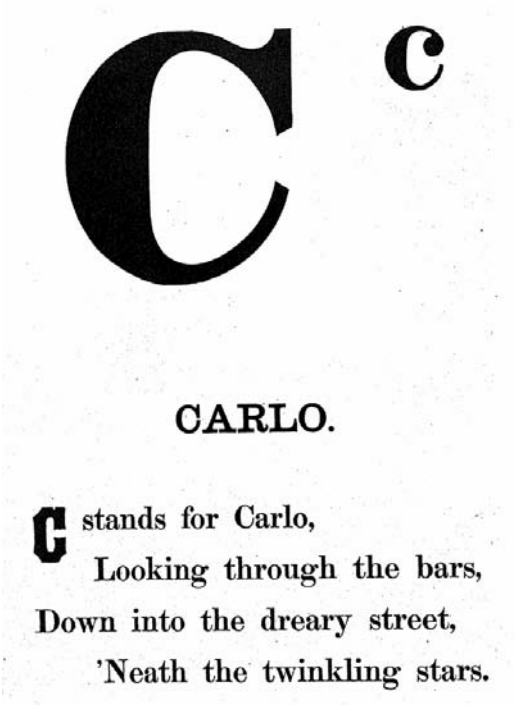
The "one" phrase withheld is figured in relation to "the laughter of the Cricket" and the "new inflection" of the "Whippowil." The utterance takes on the shape of "Orthography" in Dickinson's "simple sleep." Akira Lippit's work is useful for reading this poem: through an interpretation of Freud's dreamwork, Lippit locates "a kind of originary topography shared by human beings and animals," in which "the animal becomes intertwined with the trope, serving as its vehicle and substance" (1112). Lippit coins the term "animetaphor" to describe the animal as both "an exemplary metaphor" and an "originary metaphor" and argues that animals function "as the unconscious of language, of *logos*" (1113). Following Jacques Derrida, Lippit argues that *logos* "is engendered by a *zoon*, and can never entirely efface the traces of its origin. The genealogy of language . . . returns to a place outside of *logos*. The animal brings to language something that is not a part of language and remains within language as a foreign presence" (1113; see also Derrida). The animal thus takes on the role of "a vital metaphor, that enters the world from a place outside of language," a "figure that is metamorphic rather than metaphoric" (1117–18). Key to Dickinson's imagining of this metamorphic figure is her odd enjambment, "Like a Whippowil— / Breaking in bright Orthography," which brings the "new inflection" of the phrase in conjunction with "the branch of knowledge which deals with letters and their combination to represent sounds and words" ("Orthography"). Dickinson is literalizing one of Higginson's odder suggestions, that "kittens . . . about the house supply the smaller punctuation in the book of life; their little frisks and leaps and pats are the commas and semicolons and dashes, while the big dog puts in the colons and the periods" ("Women"). Dickinson locates animal presence in orthography, in writing itself.

To achieve a vital poetry, beyond the parameters of a liberal education's animal metaphors, Emily Dickinson deconstructs liberal subjectivity by alphabetizing her poetry. Dogs generically named Carlo featured in the nineteenth-century vogue of animal alphabets—alphabets that linked a letter with an image and with rhymed text to initiate children into literacy. In *The Picture Alphabet* (1879), by "Cousin Daisy," a picture of a mangy dog looking through bars (fig. 1) is accompanied by the rhyme "C stands for Carlo, / Looking through the bars, / Down into the dreary street, / 'Neath the twinkling stars" (fig. 2). This kind of animal alphabet participated in, and in Dickinson's reinterpretation circumvented, the structures of liberal subjectivity. As Patricia Crain has documented, "By the beginning of the nineteenth century, alphabetization supplants rhetorical training, not only as a mode of communication but as a primary structuring of subjectivity" (5). Alphabets function as an "androgyne, moving back and forth between text and image" (7), and complicate the relation between textual and physical representation. The extensive use of animals in these alphabets also indicates "that there are two kinds of utterances: a natural, irresistible, autonomic kind, which



Fig. 1
From *The Picture Alphabet* (1879), by Cousin Daisy. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

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C c

CARLO.

C stands for Carlo,
Looking through the bars,
Down into the dreary street,
'Neath the twinkling stars.

Fig. 2
From *The Picture Alphabet* (1879), by Cousin Daisy. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

we share with the animals—an exhale, a cry of a baby, the communication between working man and working beast; and an artificial, learned kind—that of alphabetic, educated speech, which we draw from the animals, but which distinguishes us from them" (36). Dickinson aims to recapture the former utterance in her use of animal orthography.

The animation of orthography reshapes the relation between writing and subject formation. Carlo is an anomaly in Dickinson's references to animals in that he is one of only three named animals (Carlo, Chanticleer, Pussy). Even those three are named not individually but generically; they participate in the larger animal orthography of Dickinson's poetic enterprise. In fact, the range and number of animals Dickinson mentions in her poems are astonishing: by my count, she lists over seventy different animals and names at least one animal in twenty percent of her poems. In creating an animal orthography, Dickinson strains beyond metaphor to an animetaphor that gives poetry an extrasocial liveness, as one of her most famous poems illustrates:

> 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— (Franklin 591)

Having "signed away" the "portion of me" that is "Assignable," Dickinson relinquishes the scene of domestic confinement in the room and social witnessing to harness the "Breaths" for her own postliberal subjectivity. The subject's death enables an animation of the poem itself: incessant buzzing and alliterative sounds invoke the impersonal fly whose intervention in the first line separates the I of liberal subjectivity from an undefined I that gains animation from death. Animals allow Dickinson to play one kind of death against another. The death of liberal subjectivity is an imagined overturning of the animal's figurative death and an entry into a poetic liveness beyond liberal subjectivity.

Dickinson's letter to Higginson stages such an animal orthography:

> Carlo died—
> E. Dickinson
> Would you instruct me now? (Johnson 449)

Starting with *C* for *Carlo*, moving to *D* for *died* and to *E* for a signature, she replicates in her lines the progression of the alphabet. Adding another *D*, for *Dickinson*, she also symbolizes the rhyme scheme of the poems, like Bullard's, associated with educating

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children to have the right relation with animals: *ced*. Her concluding question to Higginson, whom she admired as a naturalist (Asahina), ironizes the didactic lessons that animals impart: she has, indeed, been well instructed. The fact that "Carlo died" then poses a threat and opens up a possibility for Dickinson's enterprise. As Higginson put it, "A dog is itself a liberal education, with its example of fidelity, unwearied activity, cheerful sympathy, and love stronger than death" ("Women"). In staging her carefully learned lessons of animal pedagogy, Dickinson portrays Carlo as a figure for liberal education. But she also takes his literal death to explore Higginson's promise that the dog exceeds the parameters of liberal subject formation and provides a figure of liveness beyond social formation. Carlo's literal death opens the possibility for his orthographic liveness; through Carlo, E. Dickinson's subjectivity can again become an open-ended question.

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