Dickinson at thirty

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DICKINSON AT THIRTY

by

Philip Pardi

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Abstract

When we say there are “no Mozarts in literature,” we point to an enticing fact: writers become. Pick any text you love or revere, and there was a moment earlier in the author’s life when it could not have been written. The writers we remember develop over time; they change and are changed. Their careers divide, if not always easily, into a before (often thought of as a kind of apprenticeship) and an after (a work or body of work that has a significant claim on our attention). Personal relationships, lived experiences, social and political contexts, readers real and imagined, an inherited tradition, the work of one’s contemporaries, one’s own artistic practice—the writer stands at the confluence of countless forces and, in a complex dance of being influenced from without while simultaneously nurturing a voice from within, begins to write in a new and perhaps wholly original way. Such outliers as exist—Rimbaud (his poetry behind him at the age of twenty) or Keats (dead at twenty-five)—underscore both the fact and the mystery of development. It is over time, perhaps by fits and starts, perhaps in a smooth unfolding, that writers become writers, that poets become poets.

In the case of Emily Dickinson, this story of poetic development might seem impossible to recover. She is twenty-seven before she begins to save her poems, and already at that time, much of what we consider characteristic of her style is in evidence. She leaves behind no notebooks, no interviews, no autobiography, and precious few comments on poetry. With the exception of her early letters, she has little to say about day-to-day events. Those closest to her were notoriously reticent about her life and mostly silent about her poetry, the existence and scope of which were largely unknown to them. If we are interested in the moment when
Dickinson becomes *Dickinson*, in the process by which the young woman writing clever valentines becomes the poet we revere today, we would seem to be out of luck.

That story, however, deserves to be told. When she turns thirty in December, 1860, Dickinson is not yet the poet she will become; by April, 1862, when she writes her famous letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, things have changed. To be sure, her life and art do not collapse into a perfectly neat before and after, and the story that emerges is bedeviled by what we do not have (the gaps in the archive, the uncertainties of chronology) and by what we do have (the letters and poems that manage to omit details about her daily life and creative process). But if we read the poems of this period with care, hewing close to the poet who is writing and copying them, we encounter any number of moments when what is to come in the years ahead appears suddenly on the page before us, whether as old practices being consolidated and fine-tuned or as new directions being discovered and explored. To join Dickinson in the year she turns thirty is to join her on the cusp of an astounding period of creativity, and to read the poems of 1861 is to bear witness to a moment when crucial features of her poetics are falling—if we draw close, we can see and hear them fall—into place.
Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Ronald Bosco, Lana Cable, and Eric Keenaghan for their wise accompaniment and generous support during my years of graduate study and writing. From all three, I have learned to be a keener reader of poets and poetry. To Ron, I especially want to express my gratitude for offering steadfast encouragement and for reading *everything*—Ron alone knows how capacious that word is—that I sent along for comment and scrutiny.

Several semesters of teaching a seminar on Emily Dickinson at Bard College have enriched my understanding of her work, of what it means to read a poem, and of the joys of doing so in concert with others. I am thankful to my students for the many lessons along the way. For bibliographic assistance and for countless rich conversations over the years, I am particularly grateful to Jon Repetti.

My accumulation of debts to friends and family is unfathomable: to all, thank you.

Part of the joy of the past few years has been immersing myself not just in Dickinson’s writings but in the work of several generations of readers and scholars. My debt to particular writers will become evident in the pages that follow, but what I want to register here is my debt to those who are perhaps less present. To write about Dickinson is to encounter, time and again, difficult decisions about how to approach her work; to read one way is to part company with others who read another way. I have frequently had the experience of strongly disagreeing with one or another scholar while feeling certain that I emerged from the encounter a better, more perceptive reader. Dickinson’s words will outlast us all. In the meantime, being part of a vigorous conversation about her work has been a privilege.
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Introduction

One, Two, Three – Many – Emily Dickinsons

Just for fun, imagine you are there: December 10th, 1860. It snows all day. You have trudged through the cold and up the steps to 280 Main Street, collar raised against the wind. Before stepping inside, you kick your boots clean. Perhaps you have stopped in to speak with Edward, her father, on some matter related to his law practice or his position as treasurer of Amherst College. Or perhaps you are a friend of Austin and Susan, Dickinson’s brother and sister-in-law, and after a visit with them, you have followed the short path that joins the two houses to present your regards. Or, since we are imagining things, why not be a fly, free to buzz from room to room (ever mindful of sister Vinnie’s rolled up copy of the Springfield Republican) and to catch a glimpse of the poet on this, the night of her thirtieth birthday.

To us, the name “Emily Dickinson” conjures a host of images. People who do not read poetry know her. She has been in a Peanuts cartoon, on a postage stamp, to say nothing of recent incarnations in film and on TV. Her house is a museum, and in the gift shop you can buy coffee mugs featuring her portrait, posters with her poems, and red t-shirts that read “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” Just yesterday, setting aside these pages to pour myself a cup of tea, there she was, on the tag attached to the teabag: “Beauty is not caused. It is. – Emily Dickinson.” And if you read or write poetry, and especially if you love poetry, her roughly 2000 poems—most of them unseen by another living soul until after her death—amount to one of the most remarkable bodies of work that the world of poetry has to offer.

But on the night of her thirtieth birthday, in December, 1860, the Emily Dickinson we know does not yet exist. She is certainly a poet, and a skilled one at that. Upstairs, she has tucked away nearly two hundred poems, most of them copied in ink and sewn into one of eight small
packets. Among them are poems we return to still. But on that December night, most of what we
know and love about this American poet—the backward glances at death in poems such as “I
heard a Fly buzz – when I died,” the anguish of poems like “After great pain, a formal feeling
comes,” the meditative “There’s a certain Slant of light,” the deceptively childish “I’m Nobody!
Who are you?” and the yearning-filled “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” and over 1500 others, plus
virtually all of the poems on scraps, wrappers, and envelopes, all this lies in her future.

Looking out at that snowy evening, of course, Dickinson has no way of knowing where
her writing will take her. But we know. We know things will soon change in and around her. We
know she is on the verge of creating a body of work that readers will happily grapple with for
centuries to come. We know that her poems—when we are finally ready for them—will provide
one of the pillars on which we imagine American poetry to stand. As Dickinson looks out at the
snow, and as you stand there or buzz about as a fly, the woman before you is on the cusp of
becoming the poet we know.

When you hear the name “Emily Dickinson,” what comes to mind? Perhaps you
envision a poet perched at a narrow cherry desk, writing into the night by the light of an oil lamp.
Perhaps you see her dressed in white, lowering a basket of cookies to neighborhood children
from her second-story bedroom. Or perhaps you see her gliding breathlessly through the ill-lit
hallways of The Homestead, where she lived most of her life, or fleeing the arrival of visitors
into the solitude of her upstairs bedroom. Perhaps you have even stood in that room, now part of
the Emily Dickinson Museum, and closed your eyes and tried to imagine the presence of this
poet and to envision the life from which so much poetry flowed.
The white dress, the cookies, the fleeing: these images are alive and well in our collective memory and our ongoing creation of Emily Dickinson. During just the time I have been writing this study, two movies and a television series have portrayed one then another then a third version of the poet. Our portraits continue to evolve: while Christopher Benfey could lament in 2007 that the world was not ready to accept Dickinson as a flesh and blood lover, the 2019 television show portrays her escaping into the orchard for kisses with the woman engaged to her brother (“Secret Lover”; “Because I Could Not Stop”).

The effort to see Dickinson as she was, rather than as she was mythologized to be, is in some ways the story of Dickinson scholarship. In the beginning, there was the reclusive poetess, the “myth” of Amherst; today, we have Dickinson dressed as a man, sneaking in to hear a college lecture (“I Have Never Seen”); in between, oh so many Emily Dickersons. And if the threads of fact and fiction have sometimes been difficult to untangle, if bits of myth have been hard to shake, part of the reason is that, as Martha Nell Smith recently noted, some parts of the myth are true (Geoghegan). Dickinson did wear white for most of her adult life, she did remain (for the most part) on the grounds of her father’s house for over two decades, and she did leave behind nearly two thousand poems—far more than anyone knew or guessed—to be found after her death. She hid from company, refused to publish her poems, and (quite possibly) lowered cookies to groups of children from her upstairs window. When she died, a family friend wrote that the “service was suited to her—unlike any other I ever attended and very beautiful […] It was a never to be forgotten burial singularly fitting to the departed one” (Leyda II: 475-476).

Myths die hard, and sometimes, the result is a new myth. Pushing back against criticisms of Dickinson the poet—she was alleged, for example, to have written rhymes that “grated,” employed “cryptic” dashes, and failed to work out “a system” (Todd qtd. in Wineapple 275;...
Ransom 89; Blackmur 78)—some twentieth-century readers leaped to her defense. The result was Dickinson the “genius” whose work was so far ahead of her time that her sanity was tested and her radical poetics unappreciated till decades later. Here, one myth replaces another, as we go from one assumption (she was a bit strange) to its sequel (she was out-of-this-world brilliant). But we lose just as much in accepting Dickinson as a genius as we do in settling for the ethereal poetess. We lose the poet who actually made the poems, the woman who kneaded dough in the kitchen and, later that same day, lifted pen or pencil to copy one or another of the extant 1049 letters, the 1789 poems, and the countless scraps of prose and verse that constitute her artistic legacy. As Bob Dylan said when asked about the “myth” that increasingly enveloped him in the 1960s, “the myth can’t write the songs. It’s the blood behind the myth that creates the art” (qtd. in Radcliffe). When we settle for the myth, we risk losing the writing.

How to get back to the human being who wakes up in her small bedroom on Main Street one morning—or perhaps it is evening, and she has just returned from drying the dishes alongside the family’s live-in maid—and, probably working from an earlier draft, copies out the following lines onto a page that you can see today in the archives of the Dickinson Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard:

I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –
I felt the columns close –
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres –
I touched the Universe –

And back it slid – and I alone –
A speck opon a Ball –
Went out opon Circumference –
Beyond the Dip of Bell – (Fr 633)¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, poems are cited from Franklin’s Variorum and identified by the number he assigned. All spelling is Dickinson’s.
Where to start with a poem like this? Start with what we notice. The dashes, the concision, the characteristic misspelling of “upon,” the unexpected capitalizations—these are features to which we will turn shortly. But stay with the poem, read it a few times, maybe read it until you have it memorized—really, I can wait—and the journey it traces comes slowly into view. Forget what it all stands for, what it “means,” and stick with what the poem says: the Way is barred, Heaven is inaccessible, Earth is upside down, and against all that the poem portrays a power to “touch” the “Universe.” Then, too, there is the poise to step into what feels like an extremity, to step out and stand there and take it all in. To see, and even accept, one’s status as speck, one’s position as (merely) on a Ball.

We have barely started, but I want to stop there. This is a poem I sometimes bring into the first meeting of the semester-long seminar on Dickinson I teach. We read it as a way of wetting our feet, of sharpening our gaze, of noticing what we notice, but without much discussion. Then, fifteen weeks later, we return to it, noticing (if all has gone well) how much more we are able to notice. In the same spirit, I will set it aside for now, leaving it as something of a beacon toward which the following pages will slowly return us.

If you ask me about Dickinson, I might recite a favorite poem, but I might just as easily tell a story. On the face of it, this might seem odd, since I am seldom interested in biographical explications of poetry. As a rule, the poems I love are those that transcend whatever moments of lived life they may refer to, and this is especially true with Dickinson, whose poems seem designed to sever the links between poem and particular experience. Not that there is no connection to experience, but that the poems are often crafted to transcend (to leap away from) any particular experience. My interest in biography usually has little to do with explicating a
particular word or passage, and still less to do with using the poems to uncover the story of her life.  

The stories that intrigue me are those that remind us of the poet as flesh and blood, three-dimensional human being, stories that nibble away at the myths and remind us that this supposedly ethereal figure lived a life of daily routines that might seem (but only seem) incongruous with the poetry she left us. In the pages that follow, I am interested in the poems and in the story of how those poems came to be. Far from reducing the poems to biographical indices, such a focus reminds us—and the poems are poised to dazzle us all the more because of this—of the sheer quotidianness of Dickinson’s life. We learn something, not about the poem but about this thing we call poetry, when we envision her kneading dough on the same day that she sits at her desk to make fair copies of poems, or when we consider that, at the same time in her life, she could run and hide from visitors yet write poems that yearn painfully for togetherness.

The challenge of getting back to Dickinson the poet is vexed in no small part by Dickinson herself. Spend enough time with her letters and poems, and it is hard to shake the feeling that, even as you are pulled in, you are held off. On the one hand, the poems (to say nothing of the letters) draw us close, so much so that she alone among poets is typically known by her first name. On the other hand, both in her writing and in her life as remembered by others, there are just enough gaps, omissions, and fanciful departures from fact that, first-name basis or

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2 Both of these moves can, at times, enrich our experience of a poem. Sometimes, just knowing a simple reference—that her dog was named Carlo, for example, or that “Dollie” was her nickname for Susan—can shed new light on a poem. To such moments, we might add all of the occasions when Dickinson’s writing echoes or alludes to texts she had read. This is not biography, strictly speaking, but it works in the same way: knowing something from Dickinson’s life—an event, a person, a fact, a literary text—is brought fruitfully to bear on a poem. Similarly, when we encounter a series of poems that suddenly engage with a particular theme (fame, for example), we might consider what it tells us about Dickinson’s lived experience, and especially her thinking, at that time. In both cases, though, the same caution is in place: such insights should add to the ways we understand a poem, not pin it down.
not, we are kept at arm’s length. This paradox recurs in the pages below, and it comes with a warning if we are intent on reading her work with care: the feeling of intimacy is part of what is so appealing about Dickinson’s work, but it can lead all too easily to the feeling that we know her well enough to fill in the gaps that are characteristic of the archive.\(^3\)

It is a reading challenge, for the most part, but it is also an imagination challenge: Can we let this poet come to life without insisting that everything be nailed down? Can we allow this nineteenth-century writer to retain some of the secrets she evidently did her best to retain while enjoying, embracing, and immersing ourselves in a body of poetry that seems to speak to us directly, personally, intimately? Can we read this lyric poet the way that I believe a lyric poet asks us to read, attentive to every little thing about the poem while clinging to nothing, so that what is privileged is the experience that the poem brings to life each time we breathe new life into it?\(^4\) And can we read the poems we love and the poems that amaze us without losing sight of the woman who at one point in her life could not have written them and who, over time, with practice, and under a host of influences probably too numerous to fully describe, became the poet who could and did?

The following chapters, then, are about Dickinson at a particular moment in her life as a poet, about the poems she brings to completion at this moment, and about how we might most generously, capably, and excitingly accept the invitation of her poetry. This is Dickinson as poet, daughter, baker, sister, sister-in-law, aunt, neighbor, and poet once again. Somehow, the poems emerge from all of this, from the sum total as well as from the gaps in between, and each

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\(^3\) We might observe that the gap-ridden state of the archive (i.e. everything we have from and about Dickinson) adds a layer of intrigue to a poetic strategy already at work in the poems and letters. That the archive does this is not a coincidence, but it is nevertheless a historical (rather than an intrinsic) aspect of what has come down to us. If her two siblings or Susan had been prolific diarists, Dickinson’s reticence would have been no match.

\(^4\) To claim Dickinson as a “lyric” poet, as I do, is hotly debated. I turn to this question below.
glimpse adds something to the puzzle (or removes a piece we thought was in place). Piece by piece, both the life and the poetry come into sharper view.

Here, for example, is a glimpse of Dickinson in (probably) her early forties. The occasion is the annual commencement dinner, hosted each year by Edward Dickinson in his capacity as treasurer and trustee of Amherst College, and the memory comes from Dickinson’s niece Matty.⁵ At such times, she writes, Dickinson “forsook her usual seclusion [...] and radiant as a flying spirit, diaphanously dressed in white, always with a flower in her hand, measured her wit and poured her wine” (Bianchi Life 42). “I remember,” she writes elsewhere, “Aunt Emily standing by the east window in the dining-room, where the more intimate guests came to find her and take a glass of sherry poured from the great glass decanter with her own deft hand” (Face 8). Born in 1866, Matty is probably remembering events from the early 1870s—she herself was tasked with distributing teaspoons from a silver tray—and she is clearly reacting to one version of Dickinson by supplying her own.

But what I love about this story is that it simultaneously affirms and challenges many commonly held views. In some ways, this is the Dickinson we know: the elusive figure dressed in white, shy in a crowd, perhaps somewhat standoffish, and certainly a little elusive. In Matty’s descriptions, there is something ethereal, almost majestic, about her as she stands at the far end of the sitting room. Though Matty is pushing back against what she considers inaccurate accounts of her aunt’s life—above all, she wants Dickinson to appear normal rather than morbid

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⁵ Matty is Austin and Susan’s daughter and Dickinson’s niece; she publishes years later under the name Bianchi. For the sake of consistency, I try to use Dickinson’s own names (what she uses in letters) for her family and friends. Thus, niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi appears as “Matty” in these pages (but as “Bianchi” in the bibliography) and Dickinson’s sister Lavinia appears as Vinnie (which usefully distinguish her from their aunt Lavinia). Otherwise, Dickinson is Dickinson, her father is “Edward,” and her mother is “Mrs. Dickinson.” Her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson was known to Dickinson at various times as Sue, Susie, and Susan; I use “Susan.”
or odd—Dickinson nevertheless comes across as not all that different from the myth-like presence those accounts present.

Then again, Dickinson is not in her room waiting for the house to empty out. She is at the party, and anyone there would have seen her, could have approached her. You get the sense only a few would do so, and, having failed on more than one occasion to introduce myself to poets I admire, I, for one, am content to stand a little apart, sipping my ginger ale and taking the scene in. If you know a little about Dickinson at this stage in her life, you know she was probably involved in preparing for the event, baking and cooking alongside the family’s live-in maid. Later, she will dry the dishes that the maid has washed, chatter and laughter filling the room. This is a Dickinson very much bound up in the routines of the house, as likely to be found in the kitchen as in her bedroom, as likely to scribble a stanza on a scrap or envelope as on store-bought stationery.

Dickinson in the kitchen: another unlikely image of the poet. Whatever your image of Dickinson is, it ought to include her regular and apparently enthusiastic preoccupation with baking. She learned to make bread at the age of fourteen, and her father famously preferred hers to any other. Poetry and baking go well together. If what you want is time to think, baking bread is just the thing, and if you want something to do so that you do not get distracted from thinking, ditto. But baking bread in the nineteenth century was a thing unto itself. How, for example, are you to tell if the oven is at the right temperature? Housekeeping books from the time explain the standard method: you extend your fist into the hot oven, and count. The longer you can count without removing your hand, the cooler the oven. Can’t get past three? It’s ready for bread. Thus,

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6 Edward was expressing a preference not for homemade bread over store-bought bread but for Dickinson’s bread over someone else’s, most likely the maid’s. Katzman reminds us that commercial bakeries did not burst onto the scene until later in the century (qtd. in Murray “Miss Margaret’s” 718).
one of my favorite images of Dickinson: extending the hand that wrote the poems we love into an oven and counting: Dickinson as baker, Dickinson as daughter. She might have a line of verse in her head, but in the meantime, she has her hand in the oven (Murray, Maid 2; “Miss Margaret’s” 716).

Contrary to what some might guess, when Dickinson dies in May, 1886, she does have something of a reputation as a writer. It is true that the eleven poems published during her lifetime appear anonymously, and it is also true that even those closest to her are surprised by the discovery of the poems. No one in 1886 would have labeled her a poet or quarreled with the official record of her death, on which her “occupation” is listed as “At Home” (Leyda II: 474). But in these, the early decades of regular and reliable mail delivery, Dickinson’s letters and notes (of condolence, of remembrance, of greeting) make the rounds, and she frequently includes poems. In an obituary published in the Republican, Susan notes that Dickinson’s “writings were like no one else, and although she never published a line, now and then some enthusiastic literary friend would turn love to larceny, and cause a few verses to be printed. Thus, and through other natural ways, many saw and admired her verses” (“Obituary”). In all, Dickinson sends some

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7 Several of Dickinson’s bread recipes survive, and one of them gives us a sense of her contribution to household events: the list of ingredients for her Black Cake (a “Christmas specialty”) includes 2 lbs each of flour, sugar, and butter; nineteen eggs; five pounds of raisins; and half a pint each of brandy and molasses (Brose et al. 20).
8 Even the discovery of Dickinson’s poems is shrouded in mystery. Tradition has it that Vinnie found the poems and (though she burned Dickinson’s lifelong accumulation of letters) saved them. Years later, the family’s live-in maid, Margaret Maher, explained that Dickinson “kept them [her poems] in my trunk […] They were done up in small booklets, probably twelve or fourteen tied together with a string” (qtd. in Murray “Miss Margaret’s” 726). Possibly, the poems were kept in two locations; possibly, Maher moved the cache stored in her truck to the desk or some spot where Vinnie subsequently found them. According to Maher, Dickinson had asked her to burn the poems, but she could not bring herself to do it (Bianchi Face to Face 59-60). So even this moment—magical to us because of how close the poems came to being lost—eludes a clear telling. We have the poems; we are not quite sure how.
9 Susan protests a little too much here, since she was the likely conduit for a number of the poems “Surreptitiously communicated” (as the editors put it on one occasion) to the Republican (note to Fr 11). For more on the eleven Dickinson poems published during her lifetime, see Dandurand (“Publication”) and Franklin (Variorum 1531-1532).
530 different poems out into the world, including 90 to more than one person (Miller Reading 11), and there is ample evidence that they were shared.\(^\text{10}\)

The effect of so many letters and poems being sent in so many directions is hard to measure, but the editors of *Dickinson in Her Own Time* are probably correct when they write, “Sending poems to […] literary figures as well as to friends and neighbors meant that Dickinson developed a reputation as a remarkable writer” (xv). They point to the debate that followed publication of several stories under the penname “Saxe Holm.” Before Helen Hunt finally acknowledged having written the stories, Dickinson was frequently suggested—in letters to the editor of the *Republican*, for example—as their author (28-37). What Dickinson thought of this is impossible to know, but it offers some evidence that the poems circulated by Dickinson in her correspondence had something of a ripple effect in Amherst (which was, after all, a small town of just a few thousand residents at the time) and even beyond.\(^\text{11}\)

But Dickinson’s most well-known encounter with the world of publishing, and one of the more famous moments in her life, comes on April 15, 1862, when she writes to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, beginning a correspondence that will last the rest of her lifetime.\(^\text{12}\)

Writing to Higginson, one of the foremost literary presences at the time, was a bold move for an unknown poet, but it might be said that he asked for it. A few months earlier, he had published “Letter to a Young Contributor” in the *Atlantic*, in which he offered sober advice to would-be

\(^{10}\) Reading letters and poems aloud was a common nineteenth-century practice. Hart and Smith note that Susan marks one of Dickinson’s poems “To read to friends” (206). For descriptions of the excitement created by the arrival of a letter from Dickinson, see Bianchi (*Face to Face*) 9 and Theodora Ward (25).

\(^{11}\) When Dickinson was born in 1830, the population of Amherst was 2613 (Mitchell “Amherst” 13).

\(^{12}\) Over the years, she will send Higginson over 70 letters and over 100 poems, and he visits her twice in Amherst. Among the instructions left regarding her funeral, Dickinson asked that Higginson be notified; he attended and read Emily Bronte’s poem “Last Lines.” In the years that follow, Higginson co-edits the earliest volumes of Dickinson’s poetry and publicizes her work in essays and lectures. See especially Brenda Wineapple’s *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Anchor Books, 2008), as well as Higginson’s Preface to *Poems* (1890) and his essays “An Open Portfolio” (1890) and “Emily Dickinson’s Letters” (1891).
published writers. Dickinson sends four poems and a letter that famously begins, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask” (L 260). The letter itself is unsigned, but she encloses a small envelope, and in the envelope a card that bears her name.

When Dickinson writes to Higginson, she has begun an unprecedented period of productivity, and many scholars agree that the letter serves as a kind of “coming-of-age” gesture,” as Salska puts it (175). In 1862 alone, Dickinson will copy (for herself) or send (to friends) a total of 227 poems; between 1862 and 1865 (inclusive) she will copy or send some 849 poems (Franklin Variorum 1533). Whether she is writing new work at this frantic pace, revising poems started in previous years, or (as seems likely) doing both, still, what a frenzy of writing that must have been.

To say, as I have, that the Emily Dickinson who celebrates her thirtieth birthday in December, 1860, is not yet the Emily Dickinson known to us is perhaps an obvious claim. But within it lurks, to me, something magical: the process by which a poet becomes a poet. The cliché that there are “no Mozarts in literature” underscores the fact that writers develop over time. There is language, and there is all that can be done with language, and then there is the discovery of one’s own relationship to language. Such outliers as exist—Rimbaud (his poetry behind him at the age of twenty) or Keats (dead at twenty-five)—only serve to underscore both the fact and the mystery of development. It is over time, perhaps by fits and starts, perhaps in a smooth unfolding, that writers become writers, that poets become poets.

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13 Dickinson’s letters are identified by the number assigned by Johnson in The Letters of Emily Dickinson (1958).
To ask how this happens is at once an irresistible and impossible question, but that has not stopped us from trying. Inevitably, we seek the plot, we want the moment when something changes or falls into place or is discovered. We want, in short, a moment of “breakthrough,” a word that enters the conversation by way of Robert Lowell’s description of his own development as a poet. Although the “breaking” in Lowell’s case had primarily to do with poetic form, his critique of the poets around him feels relevant to many poets (including Dickinson) who feel the need to diverge from standard norms. Writing in 1961, he observes that the poets of his generation “have gotten terribly proficient at these [metrical] forms” and yet “the writing seems divorced from culture. It’s become too much something specialized that can’t handle much experience. It’s become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life” (Prose 244). To Lowell and to many who have written about him, his career offers a classic example of what Longenbach calls the “breakthrough narrative” (6).

Similarly, scholars writing about Keats have tried to pin the pivotal moments of his development as a poet, and for understandable reasons: between September, 1818, and September, 1819—practically to the day and seemingly against all odds—Keats writes virtually all of his lasting work. This year of writing has been described as “the most amazingly creative year that any English poet has achieved” (Gittings 4) and “the most productive in the life of any poet of the past three centuries” (Bate 388), while the step he now takes has been described as “a miracle” (A. Ward 218). But how did this “living year” happen? To some, it was Keats’s walking tour of Scotland during the previous summer; to others, his brother’s illness and death just a few months after his return; to still others, it was his relentless, years-long apprenticeship to the poets before him and his ongoing, painstaking thinking and theorizing about poetry. There are almost as many Keatses as there are Dickinsons.
Keats and Lowell figure in my study of Dickinson only occasionally, but the years I spent pondering the arcs of their respective careers has shaped the following pages in important ways. For example, I am persuaded by the work of Longenbach and others who have argued that we lose something important by focusing only on the “breakthrough narrative.” These writers point instead to significant threads of continuity in Lowell’s work that belie any talk of an abrupt break, threads that link his later work to his earlier work and threads that link his later work to the tradition from which he is apparently breaking. As with the word “genius,” the idea of a breakthrough falls short.

Scholars have pursued every conceivable path to explain the emergence of Keats’s mature voice, the moment when we can suddenly detect (as Auden puts it) the “strange event of qualitative change” in Keats’s verse (qtd. in A. Ward 218). In the end, though, some parts of the story resist being brought into the light. Gittings, who writes an entire book focused on a single year of Keats’s reading, nevertheless concedes that “[t]o find what poem Keats was reading while he composed does not, of course, explain the process of composition, nor suggest that there is any the less of an original miracle in that process. Rather the reverse; it shows how material can be transmuted, and how the ultimate moment of transmutation always escapes analysis.” (21). And when it comes to describing the way that Keats was different after his trip to

14 Other important insights into how we might think about a poet’s development can be found in Stanley Plumly’s Posthumous Keats, which focuses on the way Keats’s letters foreshadow later developments in his poetry; Robert Gittings’s John Keats: The Living Year, which recreates Keats’s annus mirabilis in extraordinary detail, noting how at every step along the way, Keats’s reading and his travels echo in his writing; and especially Walter Jackson Bate’s John Keats, a biography that is essentially an account of a tireless apprenticeship to poetry. Bate usefully insists that “we must evaluate influences to the degree that they release energies” (80), and his study does just that, hewing close to Keats’s practice as a poet and investigating what he learned from his encounters with Shakespeare, Milton, Leigh Hunt, and others.
Scotland, Ward allows that “[p]erhaps the closest one can come to an answer is to say that Keats had become a different person from the man who had written *Endymion* a year ago” (218).

This should remind us that to trace the arc of a poet’s development, even when (as with Keats) we have ample archives and first-hand accounts on which to rely, and even when (as with Lowell) we have a writer intent on helping us, even then, the task is complex and the goal liable to recede as we approach. Even in those cases, our thirst for details and our desire for answers can only get us so far. In turning to Dickinson, for whom we have still less to work with—less material and a less forthcoming poet—the task might seem impossible. But in the pages that follow, I want to tell that story, the story of a poet who is, as we join her, already an accomplished poet but is at the same time in the process of becoming a different poet. Well, *different*. The story that follows is as much about a consolidation of skills and a flourishing of habits as about new things coming into view. And even as we get close—close enough to see the magic—still, some of it might remain out of sight. Something happens; we see a part. Maybe one value of approaching Keats or Dickinson in this way is that it reminds us of all that cannot be reduced to mere cause and effect.

To many readers, the letter to Higginson in April, 1862, signals the end of Dickinson’s “early poetry” (*Porter Art*) and the conclusion of her “apprenticeship” (*Wolff 240*). The years that follow are justly famous: the pace of productivity is spellbinding. As a poet, it is what you live for. Wordsworth may have described poetry as the “emotion recollected in tranquility,” but many poets I know will attest to moments more akin to possession than calm.

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15 Porter goes further and notes that Dickinson herself sensed the end of a phase: “In her own mind certainly, the formative period had by then reached an end” (*Art* 15). Wolff notes that by 1862, “the major strategies of the Voice had been established, and her apprenticeship—whatever form that had taken—was clearly over” (239-240).
more heart-filled pursuit than heady deliberation. I once heard Li Young-Li describe the process of writing a poem as an attempt to open himself wide enough—he pulled his arms apart like superman opening his shirt, but in Li’s case, he meant to (painfully) pry open his torso—so that, like a key entering a keyhole, the poem might fit into and through him, his body.

Similarly, the poet Abe Louise Young once told me that when she is working on a new poem, she takes it everywhere—it’s in her back pocket at work, it’s under her pillow when she sleeps, it’s beside her plate when she eats. I know it as mornings when I discover the tea I had poured a few hours earlier has gone cold and the page before me is filled, moments I am left to look back on but of which I am never aware. Just writing. Sometimes, I see a student writing in class or on a bench outside, oblivious to all else, and hope—I make a silent wish—that they stay good and lost in that place for a good long while. In such moments, as Richard Wilbur writes in a poem that imagines his daughter writing in her upstairs bedroom, “It is always a matter, my darling, / Of life or death” (“The Writer”).

As a student, reading and re-reading my edition of Complete Poems, edited by Thomas Johnson, I was at first intrigued by the poems of 1862 to 1865, those years of furious writing. Then, when I discovered the “tabulation of poems year by year” (Johnson Variorum 1200-1201), my gaze zeroed in on the poems of 1862, a year in which (according to Johnson’s dating of the poems) Dickinson “wrote” 366 poems. A poem a day, or so it seemed. For years, it was that year, that ongoing frenzy of writing, that captivated me. Over time, I found similar moments in the lives of other poets. Keats’s “living year,” for example, or Sylvia Plath, who in the last year of her life writes the poems that will become Ariel.

By the time Franklin came along and re-dated the poems, making 1863 the year of prolific productivity, I had begun to see things differently and to ask new questions. For one
thing, where I had always thought of 1862 as the year when Dickinson “wrote” all those poems, it became clear that we knew little about when Dickinson composed her work. First Johnson and then Franklin have given us editions that organize Dickinson’s poems by year, but they have done so by dating the quirks, particularities, and gradual changes in Dickinson’s handwriting. Even if we trust that process of dating, the fact remains that, given a poem in the handwriting of 1862, the most we can say is that it—this copy—was made in 1862. This had the effect of shifting my focus from Dickinson’s frenzy of composition (which, no doubt, did at some point occur) to the evolution of Dickinson’s copying: when she records a poem in ink, to my mind, she is essentially finalizing it, declaring it done, by whatever standards she then has in her head regarding what she wants her poems to do.

More importantly, I had moved on to a different question. I never tired of the poems from 1862 or 1863, but for all the wonder they inspired, what began to intrigue me was what had made such a thing possible. Not the white heat of 1862 and 1863, then, but the years of Dickinson’s “early poetry” and “apprenticeship” that came before. If something fundamental falls into place for Keats when he is walking the highlands of Scotland, say, or if through sheer force of will Lowell is able to channel his demons and summon into being a renewed relationship to language in the years leading up to Life Studies, was there an equivalent for Dickinson? Did she have a breakthrough? Surely something happened to make the soon-to-come outpouring possible.

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16 I trust the dating, but we need to remember that specific dates are often wanting. Still, my argument is one of trends over time, and little depends on a specific date. Franklin notes that certain periods are especially hard to distinguish, e.g. the end of 1861 and the beginning of 1862 (Franklin Variorum 39).

17 Many scholars would disagree (e.g. Smith in both Rowing in Eden and Open Me Carefully), but the fact that she rarely revises poems after they are sent to friends or copied for herself indicates to me that she tends to make such copies only after she is happy with them. There are, of course, exceptions, and there are a great many later poems with alternatives listed in the margins. I turn to this debate in chapter five.
In the pages that follow, I set out to find that moment. To be sure, Dickinson’s life and art do not collapse into a perfectly neat before and after. The story that emerges is complicated, bedeviled in part by the status of the archive (what we have and do not have concerning Dickinson’s writing and life) and in part by her own habits of omission (in her letters, in her poems) and destruction (in her workshop). But the search for such a moment brings us close to the heart of those years of writing, the years of Dickinson’s “apprenticeship,” and to her poetry as a whole. Whatever language we use to describe it, if we stick close to the poems and hew close to the poet who is writing and copying them, there are unmistakable moments of—what to call them?—moments when what is to come in the years ahead suddenly appears on the page before us, whether as old practices being consolidated or new directions being discovered.

At a time when many of my friends and fellow poets were delightfully engaging with Dickinson’s later works—the “radical scatters” to be found on envelopes and scraps—I found myself increasingly drawn to this earlier moment in the story. It was, I realized, the way I like to read: with poets, my inclination is to read from the beginning, tracing the contours of discovery, noticing which aspects get jettisoned like so many spent fuel tanks and which—because they solve some problem or meet some need—are incorporated into an ongoing practice. With the writers I love, it is often their arcs of discovery that I lean into and over time have learned from.

Such an interest cuts against the grain in other ways. For a long time, most agreed that Dickinson’s career showed no signs of development, that there were “no marked periods in her career, no significant curve of development in her artistic powers, no progressive concern with different genres” (Anderson xii).18 Dissenting views tended to focus on Dickinson’s biography,

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18 See also Cameron, who refers to the “absence of development within the 1775 poems” (Lyric Time 14), and Pollak, who comments that Dickinson’s poetry “exhibits no clear-cut psychological development; she has no early, middle, and late manner” (Anxieties 22).
as when Robert Sherwood aligned the stages in Dickinson’s work with her (alleged) relationship to Reverend Charles Wadsworth, arguing that they agreed to a “spiritual marriage” and that she converted to Puritanism in 1862. Against this context of biographical intrigue, David Porter’s *The Art of Emily Dickinson’s Early Poetry* wrested attention back to the poetry itself, offering compelling readings of individual poems and of Dickinson’s treatments of key themes in the years before 1862. By then, he argues, she had both discovered her central themes and mastered her technique.\(^ {19}\) Work by Miller, Habegger, and most recently Martha Ackmann has begun to offer more nuanced views of the phases in Dickinson’s writing, particularly in relation to the early 1860s.\(^ {20}\)

Clearly, there is nothing in Dickinson like Keats’s explicit plan to write *Endymion* as preparation for his later verse (Weisbuch 22) and nothing as extreme as Lowell’s various reinventions of himself. In fact, as I argue below, Dickinson’s model of development is different from what we have come to expect from poets. Where many poets shed one skin in order to assume another, whether in formal or thematic terms, Dickinson’s poetic skin simply grows larger. When she begins to write new kinds of poems, she does not leave behind the old: rather,

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\(^ {19}\) Porter’s book is perhaps the most direct precursor to my own study. A key difference is that his approach is largely evaluative: he is looking for early “superior achievements” (163), poems that succeed on a par with her later poems of “mature artistry (171). I focus on Dickinson’s underlying and emerging poetics.

\(^ {20}\) In *Reading in Time*, Miller draws a sharp line at the year 1865, when Dickinson’s habits of saving, copying, and sending poems change radically. Although she does not delineate Dickinson’s career into stages, her focus on the year 1860 offers an essential spotlight on Dickinson’s early work, in particular its varied responses to worldly events and to literature from foreign lands. Habegger, studying the same time period, argues that Dickinson begins writing more first-person poems that “tell stories” about the poet herself, and he detects a deepening of Dickinson’s tragic vision at around this same time. For other arguments about Dickinson’s development, see Barnstone (*passim*), McIntosh (36–37), and Socarides (*Unbound*, chapter 4). For a completely different approach, see Morris, who argues that one of Dickinson’s characteristic gestures is to return in her later poems to concerns or themes raised in earlier poems: while early in her career she writes poems “resembling a hymn,” her later poems offer a “far more individual treatment of the same subjects” (40). In *These Fevered Days*, Ackmann tells the story of what she calls (in the book’s subtitle) “Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson.” Relying on extensive archival research and touches of historical fiction, each chapter offers a portrait of a day when Dickinson “was altered, pivoted, and not the same as she was before [….] a day when the poet was different, say, at ten o’clock at night from how she was at ten o’clock that morning” (xviii).
over time, she comes to write more kinds of poems. But if she is as capable of writing a poem that sounds “early” to us in her later years, certain aspects are found only in the poems that emerge later, and one of the virtues of attending to Dickinson at thirty—which is to say, largely the poems from 1861—is that we can see these later features emerging in the poems she copies and declares done.

With the April, 1862, letter to Higginson as an ending point, this study begins on Dickinson’s thirtieth birthday. To join Dickinson on that snowy night, on the cusp of the great outpouring about to come, is to join a poet who is still becoming. In the pages that follow, I argue that in 1860, it remains something of an open question exactly which way Dickinson’s writing “career” will develop. Like any poet, she stands at the intersection of a host of forces: there is the tradition of poetry that she inherits or resists (or both), her circle of contemporaries (including fellow poets, critics, other artists, imagined audiences), the broader cultural and historical moment in which she lives, and the day to day life she lives, full of whatever emotions, satisfactions, frustrations, joys, provocations, and imaginings it contains.

Crucially, to all this, we must add Dickinson’s own vision or “force” (to use a word she would have encountered in Emerson) or “genius” (in the old sense of the word) that guides, frames, shapes, propels, and otherwise insists on what needs to be said. Alongside arguments that posit poetic breakthrough versus poetic continuity, then, I want to trace the underlying phenomenon of the poet who, at the fulcrum of these various outward pressures, is ever and always engaged in a kind of inward listening, of trying—not in isolation from those pressures but in complex conversation with them—above all to get the poem right on her own terms.
As a reader, and as a listener, Dickinson was keenly aware of the language available to her, and as we will see, part of her achievement is to borrow exactly what she needs from any number of available discourses, vocabularies, and registers. For a poet, there is also the search for poetic models. Here, the comparison to Whitman is instructive, for he, too, felt the need to create a new voice for himself in his poems. As Wolff notes, Whitman eschewed the common poetic forms and language of his days. Instead, he found another language ready for use, namely, the language of “the common man,” as he called it (180ff). This was a language at once direct, clear, and poetic. American poetry had never quite seen a voice like Whitman’s before, but in nineteenth-century American culture, there was ample room and precedent for a straight-talking, loud-sounding, truth-telling, and confident male.

In Dickinson’s case, it is not that there were no models but that there were none that offered her exactly what she needed. She may have felt emboldened by her encounter with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but she did not find a viable model. She must have realized early on that the “voices” available to her—the “I” of the poems around her—were not compatible with the poetry she wanted to write. Much as she admired the poetry of the Bronte sisters and of Browning, these must have felt inaccessible to her, if only on formal grounds. The poems she would have read in the Republican or the Atlantic were in some ways experimental, as Miller and others have shown, but even as she admired them (and made copies to send in her correspondence), they apparently did not offer what she needed. And if we recall the metrical experimentation undertaken by Longfellow, the fervent first-person monologues composed by Robert Browning, and the independent yet spiritually assertive postures of Emerson, we can only surmise that she must have considered and ultimately dismissed them. For any number of reasons, these voices did not feel right when she considered the language she was increasingly
drawn to set on the page. The way thinking was formed into utterance by those writers did not feel or sound like her thinking, her utterance; their experience did not feel like her experience.

Then again, “looking” for a voice, seeking a “model,” is only part of the story, because there is a sense in which poets are only partly in control of their own poetic voices. Poets can imitate, which is to say, consciously try on the styles of others, seeking a model to adapt or tweak. But the negotiation of voice is equally inward: it is as much a listening within as a calculation without. The myths and metaphors of “hearing” the muse ring true for a reason. A poet quiets down, hopes to “hear” a voice, and hopes further that it is worthy of being set on the page. To finally discover or create a (public) language that does justice to the (private) voice within you—that is when you become a poet. For many, the discovery or invention of a style is the first great challenge: for a poet like Langston Hughes, a bold declaration of a new style comes together in a first book; for a poet like Adrienne Rich, it might take years and several volumes; for still others (Robert Lowell, James Wright), it might involve reinventing yourself one or more times during your career. But that process, whenever it happens, however much it is informed by what a poet reads, is driven and fed equally from within.

Dickinson’s word for this inner voice is “force,” as when she explains her request for feedback in her fifth letter to Higginson: “I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred” (L 271).21 She may have gotten the word from Emerson, who uses it liberally in “Self-Reliance.” Then again, the word appears early in her letters22 and may be an apt description of how it felt

21 This is one of the few times she considers poetry from the point of view of its creation. Usually, as Stonum (10ff) and others have noted, it is from the point of view of the reader, not the writer.
22 Cf. Dickinson’s words in a letter written in 1846: “I am alone with God, & my mind is filled with many solemn thoughts which crowd themselves upon me with an irresistible force” (L 11).
when she confronted the task of setting down language on the page. It is hard to miss the rush of thinking that Dickinson apparently experienced, as when she ends a letter to Joseph Sweetser by confessing, “I hardly know what I have said – my words put all their feathers on – and fluttered here and there” (L 190) or when her early letters come to an end, only to be followed by one or more postscripts. Although she and Emerson often part ways, this sense of language coming from within, perhaps in ways inexplicable or irresistible, seems shared.

But beyond all that, when it comes time to write a poem, there is the turn to poetic form and public language, and a poet hopes to find or create language that does justice to the languageless source of poetry in a way that will cross the divide to a reader. It is necessarily a search, because the exigencies of poetic language are such that the old language seldom serves the new moment. Dickinson seems to have realized this, writing to Samuel Bowles that “[t]he old words are numb – and there a’nt any new ones – Brooks – are useless in Freshet-time” (L 252). This has less to do with language itself and more to do with what language is doing. In recipes, news reports, in communication of all kinds, the principle need is clarity. (Wit is fine, detail is lovely, beauty is beautiful, but clarity is essential; “one tablespoon” is good; “a rounded rising sun’s worth of sweetness,” not so much.) In poetry, language sets out to create an experience—Dickinson in particular seems to have thought of poetry quite specifically in terms of the experience of reading. In the case of a lyric, the urge of poets to find a serviceable language is an urge to capture not just the experience but the experience of the experience as a newly unfolding thing.

23 As I explain in chapter one, I follow Johnson’s transcriptions (of letters) and Franklin’s (of poems) except I choose to represent underlining with underlining, rather than with italics.
As an experience in and of language, the lyric seeks ever a new sound. Or, if not new, renewed, different from its immediate precursors. Pound’s “make it new,” or better yet, Charles Wright: “What you have to say—though ultimately all-important—in most cases will not be news. How you say it just might be” (4). F. Scott Fitzgerald comes closer still:

> If you have anything to say, anything you feel nobody has ever said before, you have got to feel it so desperately that you will find some way to say it that nobody has found before, so that the thing you have to say and the way of saying it blend as one matter—as indissolubly as if they were conceived together [….] I mean that what you have felt and thought will by itself invent a new style, so that when people talk about style they are always a little astonished at the newness of it, because they think that it is only style that they are talking about, when what they are talking about is the attempt to express a new idea with such force that it will have the originality of the thought. It is an awfully lonesome business. (Fitzgerald *The Crack-Up* 303-4)

To state that style (“the way you say it”) must be linked to content (“the thing you have to say”) is not new, but what Fitzgerald captures here is the way we mistake style for something else. We notice style; style seems to sit on the surface. In a Dickinson poem, the way the lines unfold, the way they are inscribed on the blank page and against our pre-existing notions of how a poem ought to occupy that blank page, their movement through time, the leaps—we notice these things immediately. Fitzgerald’s phrase—“such force that it will have the originality of the thought”—is exactly right when approaching Dickinson: not just an original thought, but the experience of thinking the thought for the first time. The lyric is ever after an experience of newness, a fact that Dickinson discovers and relies on in her poetry.

We are, here, face to face with the twin mysteries of inheritance and creativity. If Dickinson was as well read as we suppose her to be, she knew what models were out there, and yet she was drawn to create something new. She had read widely, and at least part of her genius is her ability to draw on those materials while making them, marking them, as her own. That she
is influenced by poetic tradition seems clear; that she departs from this tradition seems equally clear. It is precisely in the step from inheritance to practice that Dickinson’s achievement lies, precisely in what Bate calls the “energies released” that we see Dickinson first becoming, then being, Dickinson. And it is an inward listening, an insistence on getting the poem to sound right to her, that both guides her writing and enables her to withstand the various pieces of advice (explicit or implicit) that come her way.

When writing about Dickinson, seemingly simple decisions—which source to cite, how to present a poem in type, whether to represent it in type—are not simple at all. Dickinson left the world her handwritten manuscripts, so to read her poems anywhere else is to read someone’s version of Dickinson. In the three volumes of poems published posthumously in the 1890s, Dickinson’s earliest editors generally felt free to improve rhymes, assign titles, and divide the poems by theme. Subsequent editions dispensed with titles but generally continued to regularize spelling and punctuation. There was little consistency between publications, at best a vague sense of chronology, and very few glimpses of the actual materials Dickinson had left behind. It was not until Thomas Johnson’s three-volume variorum (1955) that we had a reliable compilation of Dickinson’s poems in their (at times) multiple versions and in chronological order, and not until Ralph Franklin’s Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson (1981) that readers could see for themselves what Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts actually looked like.

24 After the three editions in the 1890s, publishing came to a standstill. Beginning in 1914, as those in possession of the manuscripts gradually brought more and more poems to light, six additional volumes were published. To give some sense of the disorder: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (published in 1924) was followed by Further Poems of Emily Dickinson (1929) and then by Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson (1935). The last book before Johnson, Bolts of Melody (1945), brought 650 new Dickinson poems into the world, but as many as a third of them originated from copies made by Mabel Loomis Todd in the 1890s, some of which included changes made in the process of copying (Franklin Variorum 4-6).
When Franklin was given full access to the manuscripts in order to produce a new and revised *Variorum* in 1998, it might have seemed like we would finally have a definitive version of Dickinson’s poems. Instead, the fascinating thing about the attempts to give us a definitive version of Dickinson’s poetry (in general) and about Franklin’s work (in particular) is that they did just the opposite. For many readers, a new and previously unknown Dickinson leaped from the pages of these meticulously edited volumes. This Dickinson shaped her letters (and left spaces between words) in suggestive ways, fashioned dashes to point meaningfully in different directions, broke her poetic lines in unusual and significant places, and assembled her poems (over a thousand of them) into sequences of her own devising. Scholars also brought renewed attention to Dickinson’s habit of including her poems in (or as) letters in ways that challenged

25 Johnson had been granted limited access to some manuscripts and was at times forced to rely on photostats.
26 The full title of Johnson’s variorum gives a sense of what the three-volume set was intended to provide: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts*. Other significant collections include Johnson’s own *Complete Poems*, a reading edition that includes one version of each poem (1960); Franklin’s three-volume *Variorum* and one-volume reading edition (both 1998); and Miller’s *Emily Dickinson’s Poems As She Preserved Them* (2016). To these I would add Hart and Smith’s *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (1998), which, though devoted to letters, includes a number of poems in a format quite different from Johnson’s and Franklin’s. In recent years, images of Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts have been available online at The Emily Dickinson Archive <https://www.edickinson.org>, and both the Houghton Library at Harvard University and the Frost Library at Amherst College have made much of their Dickinson Collections available in digital form. An entire issue of the *Emily Dickinson Journal* was devoted to Franklin’s *Variorum*, with titles ranging from “These Are Her Introduction?” to “Is That All There Is?” to “On Franklin’s Gifts and Ghosts.” For extended reviews of Franklin’s *Variorum* and Hart and Smith’s *Open Me Carefully*, see Miller’s “Whose Dickinson?” and Loeffelholz’s “The Incidental Dickinson.”
27 E.g. Smith, *Rowing* (65, 85) and various essays by Hart.
28 Wylder was an early advocate for reading the dashes as intentional bearers of meaning. She argued that Dickinson borrowed her dashes (of which she detected three distinct kinds) from symbols used by elocutionists to indicate word inflection. In Wylder’s view, Dickinson’s use of such marks enabled her to “create her own system of punctuation” directed to “the reader’s inner ear” (“Controversy” 207ff).
29 Susan Howe and Ellen Louise Hart are just two scholars who have studied Dickinson’s habit of breaking lines in ways that diverge from the poetic meter (Howe, *Birth-mark* 147-8, 152-3; Hart, “Manuscript Study” 170ff). See also Chung and Hart’s “Hearing the Visual Lines: How Manuscript Study Can Contribute to an Understanding of Dickinson’s Prosody.”
30 These are Dickinson’s fascicles (bound) and sets (unbound). If you consider the fascicles and sets to be intentional, crafted sequences, then poems appearing there ought to be read in the context of surrounding poems. Important studies along these lines include those by Cameron (*Choosing Not Choosing*) and Hegenson (*Dwelling in Possibility*). See also *Dickinson’s Fascicles: A Spectrum of Possibilities* (eds. Crumbley and Hegenson).
the distinction between the two forms.\(^{31}\) The poems, in short, suddenly appeared to make meanings in all kinds of ways that are lost when they are reproduced in standardized type, in regularized poetic forms, in chronological order, and removed from whatever material context (letter, folded sheet, envelope, etc.) was originally theirs.

So what to do, if you want to write about the poems? At the very least, we can be clear about the assumptions that underlie our work,\(^{32}\) and in the next few pages, I turn to three significant cruxes and to how they figure into my own project in the chapters that follow.\(^{33}\)

Manuscripts and Handwriting

I come to matters of handwriting as someone who has twice traveled down to the New York Public Library for exhibits devoted to poets I love and who, on both occasions, was reduced to tears by the encounter. Here was a sonnet by John Keats \textit{in his own hand}; here was a poem, written not twenty miles from where I live, by Federico Garcia Lorca \textit{in his own hand}.

Mitchell notes that handwritten manuscripts “bear the marks of intense presence […] of the artist

\(^{31}\) The inclusion of poems in or as letters raises important questions of genre. For a good (and relatively early) exploration along these lines, see Bennett, “‘By a Mouth that Cannot Speak’: Spectral Presence in Emily Dickinson’s Letters”; for a more recent argument, see Socarides, \textit{Dickinson Unbound} (70). Mitchell argues against such generic distinctions in chapter four of \textit{Measures of Possibility}.

\(^{32}\) “Assumption” is perhaps too soft a word—I do not mean they are hypothetical or tentative. In every case, the positions I outline are ones that I not only assume but strongly believe to be critically valid. But for the purposes of this study, where I am not chiefly concerned with offering evidence one way or another, they stand as assumptions.

\(^{33}\) I agree with Miller when she writes, “While such critical diversity might seem to stem from confusion or at least a lack of direction in current criticism, I instead find it healthy—especially in regard to a poet’s work that will easily outlast these and any other modes of reading critics can devise” (“Whose” 250). For my part, I wonder if, in the face of conflicting views (and in some cases perceptible impatience), maybe our response can take its cues from the study of poetry. If you come to poetry wanting answers, if you like your meanings pinned down, then the current state of openness regarding the central aspects of Dickinson studies is likely to frustrate you. But if part of what draws you to poetry is the experience of the poem as it unfolds (rather than any precise meaning it might or might not deliver), and if you are happy to go along for the ride as it unfolds, then these debates are endlessly intriguing. Just as, when we read a poem, we find ourselves inside the real time of the poem, so too, in our collective reading of Dickinson, we are still learning to read Dickinson. These debates feel like a fascinating conversation that, regardless of what you may be thinking as you walk away, enriches that thinking. My own experience has been that, just like I can enjoy a poem that still baffles me in some way), I feel deeply indebted to scholars with whom, in the end, I disagree.
working” (Measures 2), and we might easily feel, as Susan Juhasz observes of our encounters with Dickinson’s manuscripts, that we are “face to face with her own poems” (qtd. in Heginbotham “Magical” 66). There is something powerful about the encounter with the poet’s hand, though in the end it is perhaps not that different from the feeling of standing in the bedroom on the second floor of The Homestead, eying the desk, taking in the woodstove, imagining the life. At such moments, the life of the poet feels close.

The question, though, is whether or not the many features of the manuscripts—the swirling cursive and varied dashes and unexpected line breaks—ought properly to be considered bearers of meaning. That they influence our experience of reading is one thing, but is it the case that, as Susan Howe writes, “the best way to read Dickinson is to read the facsimiles, because her calligraphy influences her meaning”? (Birth-mark 153)³⁴

Because I value the experience of reading a poem, I have no desire to argue against how it feels to encounter a poem in its handwritten form. But I am persuaded by the work of scholars such as Domhnall Mitchell, who in a series of articles and then at length in Measures of Possibility draws a distinction between what he calls “calligraphic habits,” which may dazzle us but which in Dickinson’s case are fully a part of nineteenth century habits of handwriting, and aspects of inscription that embody “integral and intentional aesthetic effects” (78-9). Mitchell details Dickinson’s copying practices—such as leaving space at the end of a line to indicate paragraph endings, stanza endings, and transitions between prose and poetry—all of which

³⁴ Howe is referring to the facsimile publication, in 1986, of The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson, edited by Franklin, but she clearly believes the comment to be generally true of Dickinson’s manuscripts. To Howe, even the spacing between the letters of a word “is a part of the meaning” (152). Hart points to moments where the size of a letter emphasizes its alliterative qualities (“Manuscript” 176-7) or where the spacing between the words is used to create emphasis, a practice she links to nineteenth-century elocutionary texts (“Alliteration, Emphasis, and Spatial Prosody” passim but see especially 224-225).
combine with her practice of using capitalization to signal the beginning of poetic lines to make her intentions clear (chapter 2 _passim_). Mitchell points out that Susan (probably the person most familiar with Dickinson’s work and aesthetic tastes) adds titles, changes punctuation, and reassembles poetic lines that were divided in manuscript (71-72, 95-96). Mitchell’s point is that Susan, like any nineteenth-century reader, understood that these features of the manuscript “were not deliberate” (95).

On this view, Dickinson could break poetic lines when making copies (in letters to friends, in copies to be sent with letters, or in copies for herself) because she trusted that her reader would “hear” them and would know how to read them. Thus, a poem is not to be found in any one textual embodiment; a print version simply points to the poem that, independent of practical considerations in one or another copy, exists behind, as it were, its various incarnations. I agree with Miller when she writes, “I find persuasive historical and textual evidence that Dickinson’s art does not consist primarily or substantively in the visual irregularities of her handwritten texts and that, as a mid-nineteenth-century poet, she is unlikely to have constructed poetry along these lines” (“Shifting” 218).

The most significant implication is my choice of Franklin’s 1998 _Variorum_ as my main source, though at times I turn to Miller’s _Emily Dickinson’s Poems As She Preserved Them_. Both of these editions silently adjust lines that were broken purely for reasons of space. Thus, to turn to the poem

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35 My reaction to Mitchell’s work—and I read it at a time when the material features of Dickinson’s manuscripts were figuring heavily in my approach to the poems—is mirrored in the first line of Melanie Hubbard’s review of _Measures of Possibility_, which begins, “This book should signal the end of an era” (“Review”). While many scholars disagree with Mitchell, none that I know of have addressed the preponderance of evidence he presents.

36 Franklin’s three-volume variorum presents the poems in chronological order and includes all the variant readings. Occasionally, however, I have found it more useful to consult Miller’s _Emily Dickinson’s Poems As She Preserved Them_, which is a single-volume “reading edition” that presents the poems as grouped by Dickinson herself. (Separate sections gather “loose poems” and “Unretained Poems.”) When my concern is the sheet or fascicle context of the poem, I tend to use Miller. It should be noted that virtually without exception, Franklin and Miller lineate and punctuate poems in the same way.
quoted above, here is how it would appear in a “diplomatic translation” that preserved the line breaks on the one extant copy:

I saw no Way – The
Heavens were stitched –
I felt the columns close –
The Earth reversed her
Hemispheres –
I touched the Universe –

And back it slid –
and I alone –
A speck opon a Ball –
Went out opon Circum-
ference –
Beyond the Dip of Bell – (transcribed from MSB 738)  

In every case but “Hemispheres,” “alone,” and “ference,” these lines end where they meet the right margin. Whether you use the underlying meter (regular 4-3-4-3 stresses per line) or the cues found in Dickinson’s habits of capitalization and spacing, the assumption underlying Franklin’s, Miller’s, and my own view of the poem is that Dickinson heard these twelve lines of manuscript text as eight lines of poetry.

You can see how tempting it is to embrace the incidental effects inscribed here: for example, one could easily champion the line-break and pause before “Heaven” in a poem that is partly about heaven’s inaccessibility, and one could just as easily find meaning in the isolation of “Hemispheres” and the division of “Circumference” into two parts. And, to be clear, there are instances in her poetry where Dickinson uses a shorter line than the meter would call for or otherwise isolates a word or phrase by leaving space after it. As far as I can tell, Franklin reflects such moments in his transcriptions. The inscription can be enjoyed for having brought certain

37 My source is Franklin’s Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, hereafter referred to as MSB.
38 There is arguably space for “and” after “slid –” but the lack of a capital letter (“and” not “And”) indicates that the line is not meant to stand alone. Dickinson’s practice of capitalizing the first words of poetic lines is consistent.
effects (e.g. isolating “Heaven”) into being, but not for mounting a convincing argument that
they ought to be preserved in a transcribed version of the poem.\(^{39}\)

**Fascicles, Sheets, and Letters**

Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts and their implications for reading are just one way
that the publication of Franklin’s *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* contributed to a
“dissipation of certainty,” to borrow Mitchell’s phrase, about what constitutes a Dickinson text
(*Measures* 29). A similar decentering of the printed poem occurred when readers began to
emphasize the contexts in which Dickinson inscribed her work. The numbers tell the story: of the
1789 extant poems, over 1100 exist on neatly copied sheets (of which over 800 were sewn into
packets, or fascicles) and over 500 were sent (to at least 99 correspondents) in letters. Dickinson
sent poems with flowers, with gifts, as gifts, and (on one occasion) with a dead cricket.\(^{40}\)

Implicit in such a varied landscape of inscription is a question: in which context will we
now read an individual poem? Does the fact that Dickinson situates a poem in a particular setting
(on a sheet, in a fascicle, in a letter) call us to read it (only) in that context? The availability of
multiple contexts (sheets, fascicles, letters) and of distinct occasions (private copying, personal

\(^{39}\) Inevitably, we stray close to the question of intention: Franklin, Miller, and Mitchell agree that Dickinson would
have expected this poem to appear as two quatrains. “Intention” is a dirty word in some circles, but in this case, it
seems entirely appropriate to argue along these lines. One way of reading Mitchell, in fact, is to say that he is
recovering precisely the intentions that are contained in Dickinson’s handwritten copies and would be perceived by
a nineteenth-century reader. One of the delights of Mitchell’s exploration is that, by following local clues such as
capitalization (Dickinson always capitalized the first word of a poetic line) and what he calls “line-end phenomena”
(the space she leaves after a word to indicate that it is an overflow from the previous line), he re-creates the stanzas
that are regular (or as close to regular as Dickinson usually gets) in terms of meter and rhyme.

\(^{40}\) For the cricket, see Jackson (87–91). Note that only a few early poems exist as “drafts” or on “scraps.” I am
excluding the “radical scatters” and “gorgeous nothings” that Marta Werner, Jen Bervin, and others have made the
center of their study in recent years. These many texts, found on scraps, wrappers, envelopes, and paper fragments,
mostly date to the last twenty years of Dickinson’s life and thus fall beyond the scope of this study. As numerous
writers have observed, Dickinson’s habits of writing and copying transform radically after 1865.
correspondence, gifts) raises the prospect that the poems transcribed into the editions we customarily read might be distorted, incomplete, or otherwise different than what Dickinson thought she was creating when she set pen to paper. No matter where you encounter her work, how do you know some essential part of the text is not missing?

To this question, readers have responded passionately. Even before Franklin edited *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), which reproduced Dickinson’s fascicles and sets in facsimile, thereby allowing easy study of the poems in their fascicle context, scholars have been drawn to the fascicles. Such studies uncover rich connections, echoes, rebuttals, and self-corrections in the poems that Dickinson herself held together with thread.\(^{41}\) By contrast, Franklin and Mitchell argue that, however important the fascicles may be for our understanding of Dickinson’s poetic practice, they remain nothing more than “archives” created for “convenience” (Mitchell “Precincts” 86-87). Given the proliferation of poems in the late 1850s, these scholars posit that at some point Dickinson fell back on a familiar nineteenth-century practice and began to bind them as a way of introducing some order into her workshop (*MSB* ix-x).\(^{42}\)

A different focus has been pursued at least since Johnson’s 1958 edition of Dickinson’s letters, with a number of scholars emphasizing the epistolary context of Dickinson’s poetry.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{41}\) The enthusiasm for reading poems in their fascicle context is partly explained by the fact that these scholars were (happily) rejecting the emphasis on the individual poem, long championed by the New Critics. Important studies of the fascicles include such early works as Ruth Miller’s *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (1968) and William Shurr’s *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (1983), but it was Sharon Cameron’s ground-breaking *Choosing Not Choosing* (1992) that moved scholarship decisively beyond reading the fascicles as coded narratives while still taking seriously the implications of Dickinson’s ordering. For Cameron, to read a poem in its fascicle context is “to be confronted by a different interpretive situation” (32) than when reading it in isolation. Subsequent studies that foreground the fascicles include Dorothy Oberhaus’s *Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method and Meaning* and Eleanor Heginbotham’s *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibility*.

\(^{42}\) For more on the way sheet copying and fascicle making were familiar nineteenth-century practices, see St. Armand (chapter 1), Scheurer (“So of course” 14), and especially Hubbard (“The Word Made Flesh” *passim*). Socarides (26-35) points especially to the way Dickinson makes these practices her own.

\(^{43}\) For a good overview of scholarship on Dickinson’s correspondence, see the Introduction to Messmer’s *Vice for Voices*, especially 9-17.
For example, in *Open Me Carefully*, Hart and Smith emphasize the oft-overlooked role of Susan as (among other things) Dickinson’s most frequent correspondent,\(^{44}\) while Messmer has foregrounded Dickinson’s correspondence as a whole, arguing that because “Dickinson did not ‘publish’ any of her materials in the traditional sense, her correspondence (poems, letters, and letter-poems addressed to various recipients) constitutes […] the only part of her oeuvre that was systematically ‘authorized,’ that is, prepared for an audience by Dickinson herself” (2).\(^{45}\) Along these lines, Socarides writes of one poem that we “can understand what Dickinson was doing here *only* by reading these lines as part of her letter” (“Managing” 160, italics added), while Bennett writes of another that it “cannot be removed from the letter without jeopardizing our ability to read it” (“By a Mouth” 86).

To other scholars, our focus ought to be on the way Dickinson willfully oversteps generic boundaries by blurring poems and letters,\(^{46}\) while to still others, it is questionable whether Dickinson’s work can ever be adequately represented in print. As Bennett notes, “We have no category for a poem that is also a letter that is also a flower that is also a bird that is also a kiss (‘Hid, Lip, for Thee’) that is also Emily Dickinson herself—her spectral presence—mind without corporeal friend, many-shaped and one” (95). One, two, three, maybe several Emily Dickinsons, with our ability to read a poem seemingly in the balance. Soon, I will argue that the principle

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\(^{44}\) Hart and Smith attend closely to the look and feel of the handwritten manuscripts that pass between the two women, highlighting Dickinson’s “‘rough draft’ style of handwriting” (xviii) and her innovative “letter-poems” in the context of a life-long, passionate, perhaps erotic relationship: “Using less formal stationery for those writings—scrapes of paper lacking gilt edges or elegant embossments—likewise signals the intimacy of comfortable everyday exchange, a correspondence not bound by special occasions, but an everyday writing habit that takes as its subject any element of life, from the monumental death of a loved one to the negligible nuisance of indigestion” (xxii).

\(^{45}\) Messmer’s *A Vice for Voices* (2001) is the culmination of several decades of scholarly work focusing on the letters. Important precursors essays by Salska (“Dickinson’s Letters”) and Juhasz (“Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters”), as well as Bennett (“By a Mouth”). See also *Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters: Critical Essays* (2009).

\(^{46}\) Cf. Socarides, who argues that by incorporating the lines of poetry into her letter as part of the letter, Dickinson is “play[ing] with the boundaries between epistolary prose and poetry” (*Unbound* 70). See also Messmer, from whom I borrow the word “blur” (23); Salska (164); and Farr (*Passion* 6).
consequence of such concerns lies precisely in the way we understand the act of reading a poem. First, though, just as with Dickinson’s handwriting, the presence of so many contexts asks us to be clear about our assumptions, and in that spirit, I want to offer the views that inform my study.

To begin with, there is an additional unit of copying that merits our attention: the “sheets” onto which Dickinson copied so many of her poems (roughly two thirds). As Socarides points out, what distinguishes the poems brought together on an individual sheet is that they were (with very few exceptions) copied at the same time (Unbound 22-23). Fascicles, by contrast, often bring together sheets copied at different times and frequently bind them out of chronological order. We can, if we want, imagine Dickinson sitting down to copy the poems on a sheet in just one sitting. Still, in shifting the focus from the fascicle to the sheet, we risk simply relocating a host of questions: were the poems copied onto a single sheet meant to function as a sequence, and does the presence of one poem (or more) change how we read another? If the sheet is in some sense a primary unit for Dickinson, what exactly does that mean?

It means, for one thing, that at around the same time, Dickinson had decided these poems were finished. Unlike Socarides, who considers the sheets to be “units of composition” (22), I prefer to think of them as units of “copying,” which is to say, of deciding, after whatever process of composition and revision has occurred, to set them down in ink. It is where the impetus of composition eventually leads, where the arc of creativity lands. At times, as we will see in a later

47 A few words on terminology: A sheet refers to a single piece of paper, typically folded in half (by the manufacturer) and therefore providing four distinct surfaces to write on; a leaf refers to a piece of paper much like a sheet except that it is unfolded; it is sometimes created by tearing a sheet in half. A fascicle is a collection of sheets that Dickinson herself bound with string; sets are Franklin’s word for bundles of sheets similarly copied and stacked but left unbound. While Franklin’s ordering of the fascicle sheets is generally accepted by scholars, the order of the sets is less certain, due in large part to how they were handled after her death. Because they were not bound, there are fewer physical clues as to their original order. Miller, for example, claims that “there is no evidence […] that these [Franklin’s] gatherings were Dickinson’s” (Preserved 2).

48 Chapter two of Dickinson Unbound offers a thorough overview of Dickinson’s copying practices. Although I disagree with Socarides in certain ways, I am indebted to her work on this aspect of Dickinson’s workshop practices.
chapter, this leads to surprising insights: whether or not you think the poems on a sheet were meant to speak to each other, it remains the case that, by sharing the same sheet, they tell us something about what Dickinson considered poem-worthy at a given moment.\(^49\)

On the whole, I tend to be skeptical that either the sheets or the fascicles were intended as sequences,\(^50\) but in the case of individual sheets, I remain open to idea that more than mere chance was, on occasion, involved in the selection of poems. The question is too often characterized as all or none: either we read the sheets (or fascicles) as poetic sequences or we consider them to be constructions of convenience, of record-keeping. It seems entirely possible, though, that Dickinson was drawn to copying the sheets and sewing them into fascicles as a way of organizing her accumulation of finalized copies and thus making them easily available for future copying and that in the process of copying certain sheets, she found herself drawn to copy in succession poems that shared one or another characteristic.\(^51\) It also remains possible that Dickinson’s practice evolved over time.

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\(^{49}\) I return to this claim in chapter four: briefly, my view is that, given how seldom Dickinson revises a poem after copying it onto a sheet (or sending it in a letter), the fair copies on sheets represent a moment of apparent satisfaction with the poem as it then stands.\(^50\) The question of whether the fascicles ought to be read as wholes—that is, as sequences of poems assembled intentionally, with an eye toward the relationship between the parts and also toward the arc from first to last—consistently vexes the available evidence. Frequently, facts used to bolster one or another side are ambiguous. For example, the fact that some fascicles appear to be thematically unified might indicate Dickinson’s intention to bring these poems together. But it just as easily exemplifies her habit of returning in different poems to a familiar set of concerns. Likewise, the fact that she sometimes binds together sheets from different years seems equally to support the claim that she had a specific reason for picking those sheets and the claim that her workshop was in need of the kind of organizing that a fascicle could provide. One compelling argument for reading the fascicles as practical rather than thematic is that virtually all of Dickinson’s short poems occur at the very end of a sheet (while most long poems appear early in a sheet), which seems to indicate that she was choosing poems based on available space (Hubbard “Word” 37). Another is that she did not nest the folded sheets inside one another, which presumably she would have done if the intention was, from the beginning, a book-like sequence; a third is that, as far as we know, Dickinson never shared a sheet or a fascicle: her practice was to share poems individually (Mitchell, Measures 38-39; Franklin, “The Emily Dickinson Fascicles” 16-20).\(^51\) Socarides offers evidence that Dickinson returned to her fascicles frequently in later years (when she had stopped making them) for the purposes of making new copies of poems (“Managing” 161).
Heginbotham puts her finger on something important when she writes of her own reading experience that “it is hard to imagine that the kind of fun such discoveries provide this reader did not also delight the writer, whatever her motivation and process for putting them there” (71). To tweak this view slightly, who is to say that the purpose of the sheets and fascicles was not one of organization, but that, on occasion, with her drafts spread before her, at a particular moment in her life, she did not find reason to put one or more poems together? But that is a far cry from claiming that the poems were written to be read together: even if we imagine that Dickinson delighted in arranging poems in particular ways, it remains the case, I believe, that she composed the poems individually.

At the same time, I want to insist that none of this should limit our freedom to find connections between poems, regardless of where we find them. Reading has a momentum of its own, and at times, finding the way the poems on a sheet or fascicle relate to one another can be (at the very least) fun or even (let’s not settle for fun) revelatory of how the poems individually and Dickinson’s poetry more broadly say what they say, create the effects they create, and make the meanings they make. If there are echoes and resonances, even delightfully provocative ones, to be found among the poems of a particular sheet or fascicle, so much the better. We do not need to insist that Dickinson placed this or that grouping of poems together in order to marvel at the way they speak to each other.  

Moving forward, then, my assumption is that there is no reason not to pursue connections and patterns that emerge, especially on an individual sheet, but that doing so does not amount to

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52 For a parallel argument concerning Dickinson’s use of scraps and fragments, see Miller: “How could a mind so lively not notice the correspondence of features of a page, or torn envelope, to her own words?” (222), all of which provides a kind of “expanded pleasure,” writes Miller. “I object only to (implicit or explicit) claims that reading Dickinson accurately demands such attention to the material forms of her orthography and manuscripts, or that any print transcription ignoring the visual elements of a manuscript page misrepresents Dickinson’s poems” (223).
the claim that Dickinson intended the poems to be read in that configuration. Even if Dickinson had never assembled these collections, we might still find, say, two poems that offer different glimpses of death and marvel, not at their placement by the poet in some sequence but at the simple but powerful fact that the same hand and mind created both. In this sense, any pair or subset of poems by any poet are “neighbors,” even if not literally so. This is where the power of the sheet comes through, however, because when we consider poems on the same sheet (or on different sheets copied at the same time), we get a glimpse of Dickinson and her writing at a precise moment in time, a glimpse that might, at times, prove instructive.

**Dickinson as Lyric Poet**

What did Dickinson think she was doing? This question (framed more carefully, formed more rigorously) is at the heart of the most recent challenge to the way we have been reading Dickinson. Although she never refers to herself as a poet, Dickinson does offer to “sing” for her Norcross cousins, and her numerous references to poetry and poets make it clear, to me at least, that it was a label she would have embraced. On more than one occasion, she figures herself as (or allied with) a songbird, which in her day was as good as saying “poet.” But what kind of poet? In the nineteenth century, the role of “poet” came in different shapes and sizes, from the big names on books to the anonymous offerings in the “Poet’s Corner” of local newspapers, with various gradations in between.

In his Preface to *Poems* (1890), Higginson presents Dickinson as “belong[ing] emphatically to what Emerson long since called ‘the Poetry of the Portfolio’” (Preface 26). Emerson had used the phrase “Verses of the Portfolio” for poems written not for publication but as “effusions which in persons of a happy nature are the easy and unpremeditated translation of
their thoughts and feelings into rhyme” (“New Poetry” 121). Such work, he writes, is “less pretending than the festal and solemn verses which are written for the nations,” but its distinguishing characteristic is that, “not being written for publication, they lack that finish which the conventions of literature require of authors.” In this spirit, Higginson writes of Dickinson that “when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence” (27).53

Dickinson has also been presented in the context of a lively “manuscript culture” that stood outside, even counterposed to, traditional book-based publication. On this view, in eschewing publication, Dickinson was by no means alone. Michael Cohen points to the popularity of privately circulated albums and verse, noting that “Dickinson’s fascicles are the most famous unpublished ‘books’ of poems in the nineteenth century, but they are not unique” (69). In noting that “[s]cribal authors are the hidden majority among nineteenth-century American poets,” Cohen joins St. Armand, Hubbard, Socarides, and Scheurer in carving out a place for Dickinson as a writer whose practices (copying sheets, assembling fascicles, not publishing) are largely conventional. Similarly, Smith places Dickinson in the context of “the bourgeois nineteenth-century literary culture that nurtured and made possible her work, the literary culture of vibrant parlors which were sites of manuscript exchange, readings by and conversations with popular authors (such as Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe, both of whom were guests in Susan Dickinson’s home)” (“Public” 66).

All of this raises the prospect that we—accustomed as we are to a world of books and publishers—might be completely misreading Dickinson: her commitment to “verses of the portfolio” might have simultaneously represented a rejection of book publication and of the

53 St. Armand (4-12) and Petrino (Contemporaries 35-36) likewise connect Dickinson’s practice to “New Poetry.”
practice of reading poems individually in books. Smith, for example, considers Dickinson’s “chirographic ‘publication’” as a “consciously designed alternative mode of textual reproduction and distribution” (1-2). This argument finds its most extensive articulation in the work of Virginia Jackson, who argues that Dickinson’s poetry has been ‘lyricized,’ by which she means that we (incorrectly) read and interpret it with our own definition of lyric in mind, a definition Dickinson would not have recognized. To properly read Dickinson’s poems, Jackson argues, we must do so in their social and material contexts, whereby poems that seem sceneless or contextless (common refrains in Dickinson scholarship) turn out to be rooted in their moment of inscription and address (6). On this view, it is wrong to read a Dickinson poem as “an idealized moment of expression” that requires “only the context of its reading” (7), and her poems were certainly not “intended for performance by an anonymous reader” (137).54

I wonder if part of our confusion lies not in misreading the kind of poetry Dickinson was writing but in misreading what a “portfolio poet” was in the first place. When Emerson and Higginson invoke that phrase, it is always by way of excusing formal or surface imperfections. What the unpublished poet lacks is “finish” (Emerson) or correct “grammar” (Higginson). Emerson’s essay begins by celebrating the democratic principle by which everyone feels free to write and record their own thoughts in rhyme, but precisely because this is “everyone” and not the “talented,” he feels obliged to excuse the faults—faults, moreover, that both he and Higginson contend would have been overcome (or at least ameliorated) by the act of publication.55

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54 Jackson’s argument is more complex than I give her credit for, dealing as it does not just with how we read Dickinson but with how our conceptions of lyric (and what it means to read lyric) have evolved in the last 150 years. See especially chapter two, “Lyric Reading.”

55 It remains unclear to me whether publication has this effect because, in the lead-up to being printed, an editorial standard would be imposed on the work, or because publication leads to reviews which lead to lessons learned by
And then there is Higginson. He is much maligned for not recognizing the genius of the woman who wrote to him out of the blue in 1862, and his co-editing of the first few volumes of Dickinson’s poems imposed changes that took decades to repair. But he is arguably closer to the world of publishing and, more to the point, closer to the world of “manuscript culture” than we are. He hosted private readings, attended salons, read poems (possibly even Dickinson’s) at small gatherings, and tried in vain to get Dickinson herself to attend. If in his view the lyrics that Dickinson sent him were capable of making the journey into print and book form, I wonder who are we to disagree? I feel comfortable going along. As Loeffelholz has shown, Higginson worked hard to situate Dickinson’s work in the context of other American writers through his selection of titles (“Creation” 416). He clearly felt her poems fit in their company.

the poet (who reads the reviews). But this salutary view of publication was apparently widespread. When Dickinson’s childhood friend Emily Fowler Ford published her first volume of poems in 1872, a reviewer lamented that she had not had more practice as a writer. Noting that Ford was more a prose writer than a poet, the anonymous review asserts that “[t]o write manuscripts, not for publication, but for the private eyes of admiring friends, is a sure way to put a natural literary aptitude to a lingering death. If Mrs. Ford could have had five years’ daily discipline in writing for a living, she would thereby have sobered her untamed pen into a signally good writer of thoughtful and reflective prose. On the other hand, we doubt if a whole lifetime of training would have advanced her to high rank as a poet” (“Mrs. Ford’s Poems”). The review is harsh and condescending, but I quote it by way of showing a general attitude toward writing privately: it leads to low quality, unchecked by the eyes and reactions of others.

I have a soft spot in my heart for Higginson for various reasons. For one thing, as Brenda Wineapple writes, who among us can say we would have done any better if we were tasked with editing her poetry at that time? (282). Second, while there is no doubt that his co-editing with Mabel Loomis Todd yielded a version of Dickinson that obscured much of what we value today (the off-rhymes, the unexpected words) while working to normalize the poetry (with titles, in thematically organized sections), it remains the case that this first volume went through eleven editions, led to two additional volumes, and ultimately spurred Todd to gather Dickinson’s letters. Higginson and Todd knew their audience, and his name helped spread her reputation. It may well be that, had the poetry of that volume not been made so appealing to the late-nineteenth-century audience Higginson had in mind, much of Dickinson’s poetry would have been lost. And third, at the risk of stepping beyond the confines of a literary project, Higginson’s active and at times life-risking actions in support of abolition and escaped slaves, and as the first commander of an all-black Civil War regiment, has much to teach us about the way a life committed to literature might also be committed to essential humanitarian causes. We could use more Higginsons today in 2020.

Noting that Higginson tried to connect Dickinson to Helen Hunt Jackson and that he recommended Julia Ward Howe’s poetry to her, Loeffelholz observes that he was “trying to connect Dickinson with the most advanced embodiments of female literary accomplishment available to him” (416). His praise of Jackson tells us something of what he thought Dickinson had yet to learn: Loeffelholz writes that “Higginson thought [Jackson’s poetry] successfully split the difference between poems aimed at ‘the popular heart’ and those appealing to sophisticated readers with ‘the most condensed and deepest obscurity’” (416). After Dickinson’s death, Higginson continues to connect her work to that of other women poets by borrowing titles from their poems. Thus, writes Loeffelholz, “When at last a selection of her poems appeared in print, Dickinson was introduced to the public sphere of American
Higginson’s worry was that the poems would appear, as he says in the Preface, “like poetry torn up from the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them” (27). It is a qualitative doubt, but like Emerson, he believes the positive qualities (in Dickinson’s case, “a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed”) will prevail, and he goes so far as to compare certain aspects of Dickinson’s poems to Blake’s. (Emerson, in “New Poetry,” had compared one poem under review to a poem by Milton.) Beyond that, to me it is significant that Dickinson herself never complained (as far as we know) about a poem being transcribed for print publication, though she was quick to complain when a poem appeared with the punctuation altered. Similarly, in the years after Dickinson’s death, Susan never once suggested that Dickinson’s work was not meant for publication, and she herself facilitated the process by adding titles and adjusting punctuation in ways that parallel Higginson’s efforts. She was apparently as close as anyone to Dickinson, and such efforts make it hard to imagine that she believed that Dickinson’s work did not belong on the printed page, available for a general reader.58

Finally, the idea that Dickinson chose not to publish and was therefore divorced in some fundamental way from the world of lyric poetry neglects the fact that, as an avid reader, she would have encountered countless poems existing out in the world. She was, it is generally agreed, a voracious reader. She delighted in reading a poem backwards and claimed to know something was “poetry” if, as she famously reported to Higginson, “I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off” (PF 30, L 342a). Dickinson read and re-read the Psalms, the

letters as a flowering of that distinctive mid-century generation of American women poets: belated, but very much of her time” (418).

58 The closest she comes is suggesting that she envisioned a volume that would include Dickinson’s “letter-poems,” but while the phrase is suggestive and has been taken up by a number of critics, it remains unclear what Susan had in mind, especially since her other efforts were so conventional.
Victorians, Emerson and other Transcendentalists, Keats, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Virgil, Milton, to say nothing of the many poets published month after month in the *Atlantic Monthly* and daily in the *Springfield Republican*.

Crucially, in all of these places, she encountered poetry written for a distant reader. This, to me, is the crux of the matter. With the exception of whatever poems or pieces of occasional verse (none of which survive) might have made their way into her hands, the poems she read were intended for an unknown reader, designed to do what lyrics throughout history have done: come to life in the hands, breath, voice, and mind of a distant audience. Those poems might have featured an “I” or a “you” or both, but—again, allowing for an occasional exception in the form of an “occasional” poem here or there—no reader of poetry would be confused by those pronouns. This is not to deny that she wrote some poems that were personal or occasional. A good example is “Is it true, dear Sue?” (Fr 189) on the birth of her nephew:

Is it true, dear Sue?  
Are there two?  
I should’nt like to come  
For fear of joggling Him! (lines 1-4).

But she also wrote poems such as “I saw no Way – the Heavens were stitched,” a poem whose ambitions are poorly accounted for if we divorce them from the tradition of lyric poetry that feeds and is fed by it.

Dickinson clearly intended some poems as missives, and she would have received encouragement in a portfolio project from Emerson’s “New Poetry,” from the early exchanges of poems with friends, and from her schooling. But she was hardly a part of any circuit of manuscript sharing. For every poem she read in a contemporary’s handwriting, she likely read hundreds, thousands, in book form, by writers she did not know: the gambit of the form is that it
will find its way into the hands of a distant reader, so much so that it is the exceptions—poems like “Is it true, dear Sue?”—that stand out.

So it is with any poet. Long before you publish—if you choose to publish, if you are able to publish—you are engaged in creating, and creating, as I argued above, is always a double undertaking: both an inward and an outward listening. Inwardly: what language feels true, or sufficient, or beautiful, or just plain right in some inexplicable way? Outwardly: what is the space into which I am writing, what is given, what is allowed and not allowed, what has been done and what hasn’t, what new sounds will catch in the ears, which bits of language thrill, which ignite wonder, who is my imagined or real audience, and so on. For a poet, that outward gauging might involve years of reading and intense study (think of Milton retreating to Horton for five years of study) or it might, to borrow Robert Frost’s memorable image, be more akin to walking across a field in which this or that burr attaches in a process that is haphazard, unpredictable, at times barely noticed (12).

What is striking about the range of Dickinson’s poems is precisely the way—as a whole—they explore the many ways a voice might call, address, sing, or otherwise reach out from poet to audience. And this, I would argue, is precisely the province of lyric. That in some cases a lyric reaches out to say “I will not be coming over soon to help with the baby” (as Habegger reads Fr 189) and in another reaches out to ponder (more publicly) the nature of a

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59 My view of lyric is indebted in part to the work of Jonathan Culler, especially my sense that this kind of ebbing and flowing, what Lindley calls the “protean” aspect of the lyric (13), is part of what lyric has always done. Certain dimensions wax while others wane; it discovers one or another side of itself; it returns to features long left dormant. We can see this in the unfolding of lyric poetry over time and also in the work of individual poets. Doesn’t Keats more or less simultaneously write personally addressed sonnets (“To Haydon”) and universalized sonnets (“On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again”)? And aren’t we able to distinguish these from the playful (sometimes raunchy) ditties sent to his sister? When it comes time to mount an argument for my view of lyric, Culler will figure prominently, but at present, my concern is establishing as clearly as I can my assumption that Dickinson can be read as a lyric poet.
sunset, a moment of grief, or a preoccupation with immortality—what we see is a range of uses to which language might be put. In that sense, what we see in Dickinson’s poetry is a body of work that explores what language can do.

Just as we do not mistake Keats’s playful ditties written to delight his sister for the odes included in his third volume, so too we should not insist that a poem like “Is it true, dear Sue?” (Fr 189) works in the same way as, say, “Through the straight pass of suffering” (Fr 187). Both of these poems were copied around the same time (1861); both were apparently sent to Susan. Fundamentally, both poems take their place within a field that lyric poets have been exploring for millennia. Dickinson, on this view, has a capacious view of what a poem might do. It might reach out to a friend; it might (publicly) console; it might (seemingly privately) wrestle with death or grief or “circumference.” Any individual poem will place itself somewhere within this larger view, but taken as a whole, her body of work reveals an excited exploration of all the things a lyric might do. Over time, in what she writes, we see Dickinson’s emerging understanding (her implicit definition) of the lyric as she wants it to be. In what she “invents” (Stonum 22), we see her aspirations for the lyric.

The essential point, as I say, is that Dickinson has—as any avid reader and ambitious writer has—the image of a published poem readily available: she read them by the thousands in books and newspapers and magazines. To try to separate the occasional from the epistolary from the (for lack of a better word) literary is a fool’s game, because the lines are not really there: the differences exist only in the extreme cases. But for the fun of it, permit me this thought experiment: to the extent that we can imagine such a thing, I want to imagine a conversation with Dickinson about publishing her poetry. We show up with a wide sampling of her work, from “I saw no Way – the Heavens were stitched” to “Is it true, dear Sue?” and any number of others. I
can imagine her saying, when asked to publish certain poems, “No, that was just for [someone].” But I can also imagine her saying, when asked to publish a different poem, “Well, yes, *that* was meant for readers.” And if you’ve spent enough time writing, you can also imagine asking her to publish a poem and hearing a response along the lines of, “Well, I wrote that for [someone], but now that I look at it, there are some interesting things about it, so, yes.” This is, I would argue, how writing happens. The whole game of poetry is that you begin with a word, a sound, a syllable, a thought, something, maybe a line or an entire stanza, and then you follow the thread, often without any idea where you will end up. Once there, you might not know how you got there. But you have the poem, and the poem is something new. Lyric is language that outgrows itself.

These assumptions about Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts, their material contexts, and her status as a lyric poet inform the way I plan to read her poetry in the following pages. To my mind, it all adds up to an invitation to read broadly, amply, and openly as we bring the poem to life. We are free, even encouraged, to read different poems in different ways, and we are free to read with whatever we have in mind or on hand, using whatever contexts are available. This is important because there are by now countless ways you might read a Dickinson poem. In addition to the materialities of Dickinson’s manuscripts discussed above, there are also her literary contexts: the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, writers of Sentimental literature, contemporary women poets in the U.S. or in Europe, the Spasmodics, the Bible and the psalms and Isaac Watts, Victorian culture, Calvinism—I could go on—the list is long, delightful, and stocked full of small discoveries waiting to be made. But while I love the
scholarship that brings these connections to light, and while I make ample use of it when I teach, I also want to insist that none of it is necessary.

There are, in my view, no prerequisites for reading a poem. If you know that Carlo was the name of Dickinson’s dog, great, but if you do not know this, you still get to enjoy the poem that features his name. Your reading will diverge from that of a seasoned scholar, and when that small piece of knowledge comes along, it will likely expand your reading of the poem. But you need not conclude that your reading was wrong. To take a slightly tangential example: what are the prerequisites for putting on a CD and enjoying a song? My colleagues trained in classical music might hear a late string quartet by Beethoven differently than I do, just as I might hear a newly uncovered version of a Bob Dylan song differently than someone who is (sadly) uninitiated into the world of Dylan, but who is to say that the experience of the less initiated in either case is poorer than the experience of the deeply immersed aficionado or scholar? Who is to say that the joy is any less? Who is to say that the poem or the song is properly the province of the more studied reader or listener?

Ultimately, it depends on what you think the goal of reading is. If you believe there is one correct meaning behind a poem, a meaning that the reading process ought to move inexorably toward, then yes, you will think less of a less experienced reader. But if what you value is the experience of reading a poem, then poetry is there for you to enjoy with whatever you bring to it. Too often, reading a poem is presented (taught) as a kind of deciphering, of figuring out what a poem means, and in so doing, settling on a single “meaning.” It is easy to find claims that, in order to read this or that poem (or in order to read any Dickinson poem), you must have read this or that other body of literature or must approach it in this or that way. Nothing can be more
deadly. As long as the approach to a poem is characterized by such a practice of narrowing, much of the joy—to say nothing of the poet’s achievement—is lost to us.

The only “ought” I can think of is that we ought to return, time and again, to the poem itself, so that our experience of the poem is grounded always in the words and lines and spaces before us. We read with what we have. If you have Emerson, great, use Emerson, but then go back to the poem; if you have Calvinism, great, use that; and if you have several such touchstones, great, great, use them, and then return to the poem. But I want to defend the experience of a student reading a Dickinson poem for the first time without any of that scaffolding—this, too, counts as reading, and the experience is no less valid for not including whatever bits of knowledge others might value.

The dilemma we face as readers and teachers is that there is always some other piece that might prove helpful or interesting. For various reasons—having to do with the status of the archive of poems and letters left to us, on the one hand, and Dickinson’s evident delight in crafting language that performs and evades in multiple ways, on the other—this dilemma is especially present when we read her poetry. If you have read a poem in isolation, biography might add a useful twist, and so might seeing the poem in its fascicle context, and so might seeing it in its various epistolary contexts, and so might imagining her writing it alongside her Irish maid, and so might noting the way the poem echoes this or that psalm, poem, sermon, novel, or Biblical passage, and so on. It would seem an endless and impossible task. But that dilemma, I want to argue, is only a dilemma if we are attached to pinning down the “correct” reading of a poem, if what we are after is what the poem “actually means.” If instead we set out not to find the poem’s meaning but to experience it and to explore the many ways it means, we are poised to read well. Future readings will always be available as we expand the circle of our
knowledge; the poem may even seem to grow in the process; we may even favor new readings. But this reading, now, is what we lean into.

We read, always, with what we have in mind. Spend five years reading Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf or the Bible, and it will change how you read whoever comes next. In my case, I am sure that reading Keats has flavored my reading of Dickinson; more precisely, I am sure it has flavored my hearing of Dickinson. Keats, so attentive to vowels and to the patterns and variations of their sounds, comes alive when read aloud. This is not unique to Keats, but having spent a few years reading, reciting, and memorizing his poems, I had become acutely attuned to sound. It followed me wherever I went. Once, on an airplane, I looked across the aisle to see a sign in the pantry that read, “Trays must be secured during take-off, taxiing, turbulence, and landing.” During a slow moment, I asked the slight attendant if, just possibly, she could suggest they change that last word to touch down, in the interest of consonance, you understand—and, better yet, why not “Trays must be tucked in…?” I received in reply the look you get when someone cannot tell if you are joking, followed quickly by the look of someone who, on second thought, would rather not know.

If you commit to reading Dickinson’s poems aloud, they come alive in new ways. (Higginson apparently had a similar experience: he recalled later that it was when Mabel Loomis Todd, his co-editor, read a selection of poems to him that he perceived their merit more clearly.) Hearing the poems helped me to feel the underlying structures, the way the lines (and such sentences as there are) unfold under great pressure, as if every syllable were being counted, and also to feel how the poems shift, as they often do, from stanza to stanza. Such an approach opened up many a poem to me, and it also, I think, predisposed me to think of Dickinson as a
poet whose verse lives not on the page but above or behind it. When I encountered scholars who likewise focused more on the poem’s aural existence than on its material inscription on the page, I was all ears.60

So, too, my inclination to read Dickinson as a lyric poet. To Keats’s “I think I shall be among the English poets,” we have Dickinson’s “Could I make you and Austin – proud – sometime – a great way off – ’twould give me taller feet” (L 238) and “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her” (L 265). This is a Dickinson who reads, admires, and eventually joins the line of poets stretching back at least to Sappho and continuing up to the poets I read in the journals that arrive in my PO box each month.

To read a poem is, on the one hand, a simple thing. We know how to read, we can read aloud, we can return to the poem and re-read. At the same time, what a complex and wonderful thing it is to hold in your hands these words written without you in mind and yet, at some deeper level, with precisely you in mind. To read a poem is to step into a stream that has been flowing since as far back as we can trace language, a stream that is always there when we are ready for it. Dickinson is just one of the voices we can lend eye, ear, and breath to, and for the duration of the poem, during the time we take to tarry in it, experience it anew.

60 See, e.g., Miller (Reading in Time 10, 49ff; “Whose Dickinson?” 248); Loeffelholz (The Value of Emily Dickinson 6-10); Hart “Manuscript Study” 179-180. I turn to this idea in more detail in the next chapter.
Chapter One

“Odd Secrets of ‘the Line’ to tell”: The Achievement of 1860

It is often said that Dickinson’s characteristic style—whatever it is that makes Dickinson look and sound, to us, like Dickinson—is present from the very beginning of her career. But it might be more accurate to say that Dickinson chooses to begin her career precisely at the moment when she has settled on a chosen style. Her “career,” if that is even the right word, begins in 1858 because this is the year she begins to preserve her writing. To speak of Dickinson’s poetry is to speak of a body of work whose beginning is delimited almost entirely by Dickinson’s choosing. Writing to Higginson in 1862, she claims, “I made no verse – but one or two – until this winter – Sir –” (L 261), but few scholars take her at her word. Her letters from the 1850s indicate that she was already writing poems. With that in mind, in this chapter I want to study what kinds of poems, and what kind of poetry, Dickinson is writing in 1860, the year that will end with her thirtieth birthday.

We do not know how many poems she wrote and subsequently destroyed in the years before 1858.\(^1\) A handful, a dozen, a few hundred? Likewise, we do not know how many of the poems copied in 1858 or later were actually composed much earlier. What we do know is that in the summer of this year, something clicks. Now, when she sends a poem to a friend, she keeps a copy,\(^2\) and she begins to produce fair copies of poems in ink for herself. Once these copies are

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1 According to Franklin, no “poems or references to them survive” that can be dated to 1855, 1856, or 1857 (Variorum 9-10). Four poems (Fr 1 through 4) survive from earlier: one from 1853 that Dickinson later copied onto a sheet included in Fascicle 1 and three that were sent to friends who saved them.

2 Miller identifies two rare exceptions (two poems in 1859 and one in 1860) that are “not retained” (Preserved 699-700). Franklin argues that these three drafts are rare examples of “intermediate drafts,” copies that are neither first nor final drafts—“rare” because Dickinson usually destroyed such drafts upon making a fair copy (Variorum 13). In categorizing poems as retained or un-retained, however, it is important to remember that we may have only a fraction of Dickinson’s letters: according to Eberwein and MacKenzie, the one thousand extant letters might represent just one tenth of Dickinson’s total correspondence (1). Similarly, Hart and Smith remind us that the “boundaries of the correspondence from Emily to Susan are defined by what Susan saves rather than by what Emily writes” (3).
made, Dickinson apparently discards any and all previous drafts, thereby preserving something that looks like a final version of each poem.3

The process of copying, once begun in the summer of 1858, soon becomes systematic. Working with stationery that arrives already folded from the manufacturer, Dickinson copies out her poems, often with a horizontal line—Heginbotham calls it a “strong line” (73); Howe, an “ink slash” (143)—between them, until all four of the available sides are filled. The pages are small, typically measuring between seven or eight inches by five inches. She soon takes the further step of binding these sheets together. Her early practice (after copying poems onto all four sides of the folded sheets) is to stack four such sheets together, pierce the left side twice (front to back), and secure the packet with a thread or string tied in front (Franklin MSB xi-xii).4

These, then, are Dickinson’s sheets and fascicles, and many scholars agree that these years of sheet copying and fascicle making are at the heart of her creative efforts during this period.5 As Miller notes, writing generally about the years of fascicle and set making, “Dickinson copies all but thirty-two of the more than 1,100 poems she had written and saved by 1866 onto a sheet, and most sheets were bound into fascicles” (2). Amazingly, as far as we know,

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3 Franklin speculates about Dickinson’s “rules for destruction” of early drafts in the Introduction to his Variorum (11-20). Similarly, the fact that Dickinson “usually destroyed her worksheets,” writes Cameron, “invites us to regard the poems copied in the fascicles […] as definitive, if privately published, texts” (8).

4 Technically, then, these are “bifolia,” but as noted earlier, Dickinson does not “nest” one sheet inside another, as you might with a pamphlet or newspaper. Rather, the sheets are stacked, thereby maintaining the order of the poems on each sheet. Only twice does Dickinson continue a poem onto a new sheet (once each in Fascicles 2 and 33). In a few cases, she uses a “leaf or small rectangle of paper” for the overflow (Miller 739 n. 3; Franklin MSB xi). Franklin concludes from such details that the sheets were intended to be bound, since the (albeit occasional) overflow requires binding to preserve the order (“Fascicles” 3).

5 For more on the word “fascicle,” see Loeffelholz, “What is a Fascicle?” She supports using the word, while Franklin worries that it implies that each individual collection was intended as part of a larger sequence: “The fascicles are, simply, poems copied onto sheets of stationery and, without elaboration, bound together: individual manuscript books of simple construction” (“Fascicles” 4). Note that over three hundred poems (on 98 sheets) remain unbound but in groups: these are Dickinson’s “sets” (Miller Preserved 803-810). Socarides reads this phase of set-making as a distinct and important phase in Dickinson’s development (Unbound chapter 4).
Dickinson never showed these sheets, bound or loose, to anyone. Her sister, Lavinia, was shocked to find them after the poet’s death, and Howe conjectures that it was precisely this discovery that “galvanized her […] into action” (152). That the letters might easily have been burned in the days after Dickinson’s death is more amazing still.

As Franklin writes, the “idea of a bound volume appears to have been slow in coming” (Variorum 20). He notes that the sheets of Fascicle 1 were copied at different times during the summer of 1858 and were not bound in the order they had been copied. Once the idea took hold, however, Dickinson seems to have embraced it, and by the end of 1859, she had produced the first five fascicles. Perhaps, as 1860 begins, they are tucked into her cherry desk, upstairs in her room in the Homestead. These early fascicles, according to Franklin, are “impressive” (20). Although never shared, they were prepared as if for the eyes of others; Franklin’s point is that they could have been shared, and proudly: these are fair copies in ink, bearing no obvious signs of correction. If an edit was required in these early fascicles, Dickinson “used clean erasure, not overwriting or crossing out, and deftly squeezed in omitted letters.” Presumably, if she made a big mistake (or a major revision), she discarded the entire sheet and started anew. After creating the first four fascicles out of five different kinds of paper, she apparently procured (in the summer of 1859) a large quantity of “cream, lightly ruled” stationery. This is what she uses for the remainder of 1859 and all of 1860 for the construction of Fascicles 5 through 8 (Variorum 20-1; MSB 74).  

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6 Equally amazing, perhaps, is the fact that the fascicles were taken apart by Dickinson’s earliest editors—“torn open” and subsequently “sifted, translated, titled, then regrouped” in Howe’s words (Birth-mark 144). But this act, shocking to us, was in keeping with the times. Recall that Thoreau’s journals were cut up and reassembled in ways that have made it impossible to this day to recover their correct order. In The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson (1981), Franklin was able to re-construct the fascicles by carefully examining handwriting, pinholes, smudges, indentations, and other markings.

7 While individual sheets can be dated (however approximately) by the handwriting, there is no way to know when a fascicle was bound. It cannot be earlier than the date attributed to the last sheet, but any fascicle might have been bound much later than the sheets included. (In a few cases, individual sheets lasted years before being sewn into a
As 1860 begins, Dickinson has, in Franklin’s words, been working “steadily” since the previous summer (Variorum 21). Fascicles 1 through 5 have been bound, and—in addition to whatever new writing she is engaged in—she is hard at work copying poems onto sheets that will soon find their way into fascicles 6, 7, and 8. These three 1860 fascicles represent something of a desk-clearing: by the time this flurry of activity comes to an end in the late summer, nearly everything she has on hand will have been bound into a fascicle. Dickinson has been copying and preserving her poems for just two years, and the vast majority of the work for which she is remembered today has yet to be written. Still, these early poems are unmistakably hers: in reading the poems of 1860, one is struck by how much of her mature aesthetic is already in place. What can we say about them? What kind of poetry was Dickinson writing in this, the year that will end with her thirtieth birthday?

We might begin by turning to “Just lost, when I was saved!” (Fr 132), which Dickinson sends to Susan in early 1860 and copies, one year later, onto a sheet that is bound into Fascicle 10. Here is the version from 1860:

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Just lost, when I was saved!
Just heard the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with eternity
When breath blew back –
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide.
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Therefore, as one returned, I feel,
Odd secrets of “the Line” to tell!
Some sailor skirting novel shores!

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The exceptions include one sheet containing a single poem (subsequently sewn into Fascicle 14 in 1861) and a few poems that for now are not copied onto sheets (these are either poems sent in letters and entered into fascicles in later years or poems that, for whatever reasons, never enter the fascicles).
Some pale “Reporter” from the awful doors
Before the Seal!

Next time to stay!
Next time, the things to see
By ear unheard –
Unscrutinized by eye!
Next time to tarry
While the Ages steal –
Tramp the slow Centuries
And the Cycles wheel! (Fr 132)

The moment brought to life in this poem is a familiar one in Dickinson’s poetry. The speaker, having emerged from a threshold experience of some kind, looks back in wonder. The moment of the poem seems to follow quickly on the experience that prompts it. The speaker was nearly “lost.” She had heard “the world go by” and had braced herself “for the onset with eternity” when—suddenly, surprisingly—“breath blew back.” She had gotten close to the other side, but at the last minute, the tide awaiting her was left “disappointed” and she has now returned “with secrets […] to tell.” This short lyric will not reveal those secrets. It works, rather, to bring palpably to life the spirit-filled aftermath of the speaker’s journey and return.

The emotions here are palpable and the stakes are high, but exactly what is at stake? Of the many ways we might approach this question, one is simply to wonder, What is the experience from which the speaker returns? At one level, certainly, this is a poem about a close encounter with death: she had been on the brink of “eternity,” and it is “breath” that signals that she has
been “saved.” But if it is death, the speaker’s experience attests to there being something there: she returns, like a sailor, having seen “novel shores,” while the personification of “tide” as “disappointed” implies the presence, or at least the expectation, of people. Death seems to promise a warm welcome, perhaps by those who have already crossed over.

At another level, especially if we know other Dickinson poems that wrestle with questions of faith, or if we recall that she had been surrounded by friends and relatives who “found Jesus” during religious revivals in the 1850s, the narrowly avoided “onset with eternity” might refer to a religious conversion. Here, the poem leans playfully on the word “saved,” for the speaker writes of being saved from conversion. But while the poem celebrates being saved in this way, the speaker looks forward to one day joining those who have already made that same passage. To follow “Next time, the things to see” with “By ear unheard”—the mixing of sight and sound—renders beautifully the imagined moment of finding oneself on the other side, disoriented, head still spinning from the change. More to the point, to speak of these things as “unseen” and “unscrutinized” makes sense only in relation to the speaker’s experience: others have crossed over and testified to what they have seen and heard after reaching that far shore of faith, but the speaker attests here to the primacy of her own senses.

Once started, either of these readings could be developed, with increasing detail and nuance, by digging deeper into the poem itself, by drawing connections between this poem and others, or by finding relevant excerpts from letters or biographical accounts. But even as we are drawn into thinking of a poem in one way, a detail sometimes lingers, asking for more. Such moments (whether in the classroom or in the privacy of one’s own silent reading) invite us to go further into the poem. In this case, I find myself returning to the beginning of the second stanza:

Therefore, as one returned, I feel,
Odd secrets of “the Line” to tell!

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How to understand that quoted article and noun? “Line” might point in many directions: the front line of battle, a border line, the equator (echoed in the subsequent mention of sailors), a mathematical line, a line of writing or of poetry. To pursue the last of these: in the dictionary used by Dickinson—the 1844 edition of Noah Webster’s *An American dictionary of the English language*—there are two entries for “line” that relate to writing:

7. In writing, printing, and engraving, the words and letters which stand on a level in one row, between one margin and another; as, a page of thirty lines.

8. In poetry, a verse, or the words which form a certain number of feet, according to the measure. (Webster)

To return with secrets of “the Line” is to return with lines of poetry. The close brush, on this account, has been with the deepest sources of inspiration. But as the poem makes clear, it was something of a close call: this immersion in the creative act, out of which the poem is now being made, was intense. To sink into the wells from which poets drink is, on this account, to flirt with leaving the world as we know it.

Although she does not mention this poem, Adrienne Rich reads a number of others as descriptions of just such an all-consuming “possession by a daemon” (“Vesuvius at Home” 48). Quoting the first line of a later poem, Rich writes, “What, in fact, did she allow to ‘put a Belt around her Life’—what did wholly occupy her mature years and possess her? For ‘Whom’ did she decline the invitations of other lives? The writing of poetry. Nearly two thousand poems” (46). To return with “Odd secrets of ‘the Line’ to tell” is to experience deeply the powers of creativity, to survive the possession, and to make a poem out of the experience.

Before even engaging in any kind of deep or close reading, we have found three possible ways to approach the poem, three possible beginnings. And what if, while dawdling over “line”
in Dickinson’s dictionary, we peruse some of the other definitions among the list of twenty-three separate entries? Halfway down the list, we might notice,

13. Extension; limit; border.

Eden stretched her line
From Auran eastward to the royal towers
Of great Seleucia.  

This entry, with the example from *Paradise Lost*, would support a reading that emphasizes the religious-minded, other-worldly crossing that the poem brings to life. Moreover, “Eden” will catch our eye, though it might take a second to remember why: it is because of the poem that directly follows “Just lost, when I was saved!” when Dickinson copies it a year later. Here, though, as we allow our thinking about the poem to unfold, the story becomes more complicated. On the sheet in question, which was later sewn with four others to make Fascicle 10, “Just lost, when I was saved!” is followed immediately by “Come slowly – Eden!”

Come slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee –

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums –
Counts his nectars –
Enter – and is lost in Balms.  (Fr 205)

The Milton connection is perhaps incidental, but once here, we notice that this poem preaches outright the hesitation experienced in “Just lost, when I was saved!” Delay and deferral; waiting and preferring to wait. Interestingly, in both cases, it is not the speaker who is in control: in the earlier poem, being “saved” is something that happens *to* the speaker; here, slowness is a request, a petition, a hope. Greater forces are at work.
But “Come slowly – Eden!” is more than a poem about a deferred passage. Existing in just one copy and apparently not shared with anyone, the poem is charged with desire and, unlike the earlier poem, it closes with the thrill of consummation. Where “Just lost, when I was saved!” tells a tale of not crossing over, of not entering, “Come slowly – Eden!” brings to life the moment when the journey is completed. The context here, the slow progress of Reaching, humming, Counting, and Entering is frankly erotic. Dickinson goes out of her way to create this steady progression of actions: while the meter would seem to call for “Enters” to appear on the previous line (to provide a more comfortable three-beat line in this ballad-like poem), the poem instead emphasizes the progression of verbs. It also emphasizes the quick passage from entering to getting lost by denying even a line break of hesitation between the two. The word “lost” is used in both poems, but where “lost” is contrasted with being “saved” in one poem, it is modified in the other as “lost in balms.” Who would not want to be lost in balms?

By now it should be clear that yet another reading of the “Just lost, when I was saved!” is possible: what if the narrowly averted experience is the experience of falling completely in love or of consummating that love? True, the speaker tells of being “saved” from such an experience, but as the end of the poem makes clear, the act of crossing over is delayed, not dreaded. “Just lost, when I was saved!” would seem, on this reading, to exhibit exactly what it means for “Eden” to “Come slowly.”

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10 Caution is always needed when reading into Dickinson’s line breaks, since so many of them are dictated by the size of the paper onto which she is copying. In this case, a glance at the manuscript page confirms that there was plenty of room for “Enters -” to appear at the end of line 7 (see MSB 190).

11 As Cameron notes, in following the sheet from one poem to another, a word’s meaning can subtly shift or expand. “Lost” is a good example: the word simply rings differently when contrasted with being “saved,” on the one hand, and when modified by “in Balms,” on the other. We might welcome being “saved” at the beginning of “Just lost, when I was saved!”; by the end of “Come slowly – Eden!” we might welcome becoming lost. Cameron observes that Fascicle poems may agree, but they may also “be implicated in ways that are at once redundant and contradictory” (146). As noted earlier, though, to follow (and enjoy) these connections is not to insist Dickinson created this sequence with such effects in mind.
Encouraged by what we found in comparing two adjacent poems, we might widen our
gaze and consider the sheet as a whole. Sheet 3 of Fascicle 10 contains five poems. At the top of
the first page, “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –” (Fr 204) describes first the rising and then the
setting of the sun. It vividly renders the fading hints of sunlight as “boys and girls” who

were Climbing all the while –

Till when they reached the other side,
A Dominie in gray
Put gently up the evening bars
And led the flock away! (204 A)

Here, the disappearance of the light/children—the moment when they reach “the other side”—is
a source of mystery or even (depending on how one interprets the eight exclamation marks in the
poem) of delighted awe.

In the second poem, “A little Bread – A crust – a Crumb” (Fr 135 B), the speaker
references another moment of crossing over by briefly imagining “old Napoleon, / The night
before the crown!” She continues, “A Sailor’s business is the shore!” and adds two lines later,
“Who asketh more / Must seek the neighboring life!” As we have seen, both the word “shore”
and the idea of “the neighboring life” recur in the third poem of this sheet, “Just lost, when I was
saved!” At the level of both word and theme, the poems appear to be speaking to one another in
multiple ways. The glimpse of “novel shores” without reaching them, for example, might feel
like something of a failure after being assured that “A Sailor’s business is the shore” in the
previous poem.

“Come slowly – Eden!” follows as the fourth poem. As we have seen, it takes these same
ideas further still by imagining a moment of consummation, rendered as the bee (a favorite
image of Dickinson’s in matters of love and eros) entering the flower. Finally, the fifth and final
poem on this sheet is a couplet:
Least Rivers – docile to some sea.
My Caspian – thee. (Fr 206)

Here, the moment of entering or consummation, of crossing over, of tarrying while looking ahead to that “other shore”—all this is subtly elided in the image of rivers joining the sea, an image of the self losing itself in a greater being or cause. Here, the sheet that began with a poem positing the act of crossing over as the stuff of mystery and unknowing renders it rather as something altogether natural and irresistible.12

What began as a curiosity regarding “the Line” and a connection to “Eden” has, in the process of reading the poems in their fascicle context, brought to life a reading of the poems that is far more personal, physical even. Moreover, as the subject modulates from poem to poem, the poems themselves seem complicit in our increasingly expansive reading. By taking up similar concerns and similar bits of language, the poems copied onto this one sheet invite an ample reading of the subjects at hand.

We return to the question of Dickinson’s subjects or themes. Ever since the publication of Poems (1890) and Poems, Second Series (1891), which were divided into sections such as “Life,” “Love,” and “Nature,” the question of what her poems are about has informed the editing, publishing, and evaluation of her work. The error, of course, lies in trying to pin it down. In my experience as a teacher, the subject of a given Dickinson poem might be where we begin and where we end, but we seldom end where we began. We might turn to “Just lost, when I was saved!” and, for the sake of taking a first step, posit the subject of death. As we have seen, subsequent reading, listening, and contextualizing will deepen our experience of the poem. In the process, our sense of the subject may give way to one or more alternative readings. Along the

12 See Heginbotham (Reading 81-83) for more on these five poems, which she reads primarily in their fascicle context and especially in relation to “Safe in the Alabaster Chambers.”
way, Webster’s Dictionary, the sheet context, an epistolary context, an echo of a poem by Dickinson herself or someone else—these and other elements hover as possible directions to pursue. On the one hand, we move in concentric circles away from the poem, finding new ways to make meaning of the text before us; on the other, we repeatedly spiral back into the poem, where these insights allow us to experience—to see, to hear, to feel—the poem anew.

At some point, we might note that the varied readings share the sense that this threshold experience, this moment of near-transformation, is not a source of anguish or suffering:

Next time, to stay!
Next time, the things to see
By ear unheard—
Unscrutinized by eye!

By poem’s end, the speaker imagines—even longs for—a time when she will once again be permitted to enter those “awful doors” (where “awful” means full of awe and inspiring dread but not, as it does today, bad or unpleasant) and be exposed to knowledge or experience that is not available on this side. As noted, the poem manages an air of easy, barely contained excitement. Buoyed by what we have found in and around the poem, we might consider the ways it means at a more general level. It seems to be a poem about discovering (or confirming) that there is something beyond one’s own experience, something apparently larger than oneself. It seems to be a poem about glimpsing what lies beyond and about the joyful anticipation of one day reaching it.

In true Dickinson style, the poem can be read in relation to specific subjects and also in relation to ways of experiencing, seeing, or responding to those subjects. The poem is not only about the precipitating event (however we interpret it) but also about the (more general) experience of coming close, of getting a thrilling glimpse but no more. It becomes a poem that
renders the experience of a thing rather than being strictly about that thing. Our reading process has taken us away from and back into the poem, and in the process the poem has, in effect, expanded its reach at every turn. As readers, there is joy in this process if we can learn to let the poem expand; only if we are intent on nailing down a single interpretation will Dickinson’s work seem designed to frustrate us.

I am not saying, as Porter does, that Dickinson’s poems are “centerless” (“Searching” 196) or that what matters is the existence of Dickinson’s “language apart from the mute universe outside it” (193-4). Nor do I agree exactly with Weisbuch that, as readers, we ought never to “point” at a subject or situation when reading a Dickinson poem “because assigning the poem to one aspect of experience will rob it of its vital versatility” (“Prisming” 200). I readily concede that our reading must accommodate the characteristics that both Porter and Weisbuch draw our attention to—for example, the trouble that awaits us if we read her poems “too literally” (Weisbuch Poetry 20)—but I believe that Dickinson’s poems are sufficiently capacious to sustain multiple subjects, multiple pointings. In a classroom, which is in some ways the best model I can think of for reading a poem, the community of attention will veer this way and that until multiple options are brought to life. And then? We let them live. One student’s argument that a poem is an example of unmitigated desire does not require that we quash another student’s argument that the same poem is an expression of religious longing. More often than not, Dickinson has created a poem that can sustain both readings. We consider, perhaps marvel, that the poem sustains both; we wonder, perhaps, what it means that the poem can sustain both. The

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13 Weisbuch makes a similar point when he argues that “The scenes [in a poem] are not concrete but mentalized, illustratory, chosen, temporary, analogous” (“Prisming” 200).
14 I do agree, though, that her poems require “of the earnest reader […] patience of mind” and “the ability to live with indefiniteness and indeterminacy” (184).
point of reading, especially reading together, is to allow the poem to open in precisely these ways.\textsuperscript{15}

And there is joy. It begins, perhaps, in the initial wonder we bring to the poem, the wonder incited by our first encounter with it—its sound, maybe, or its gambit in terms of subject matter, or its enticing verbal constructions, or a question we cannot help but ask, or (as we will see elsewhere) the presence of a single, startling word—the wonder that prompts us to return to the poem and to turn our attention to the \textit{hows} and \textit{whys} and \textit{what-is this-word-doing?} of the lines before us. And the joy is nurtured in the experience of our attention being richly rewarded: our queries or curiosities are validated because the poem sustains them. Our initial questions lead to new, sharper, perhaps more interesting questions. The point is not where the process gets us (a definitive interpretation) but the conversation we have with ourselves or others along the way.

\textbf{Beyond its familiar subject, “Just lost, when I was saved!” looks and feels and sounds like a Dickinson poem.} The short lines are typical of virtually all her surviving verse even though this poem is atypical in having lines of ten and, in one case, twelve syllables. The poem spills quickly down the page—short lines always have this effect compared to longer lines—so that, even when a line is brought to a halt by punctuation, the short lines usher us energetically onward. Short lines mean speed.

Far from being unique to Dickinson, short-lined poems were everywhere in antebellum poetry. Miller has argued persuasively that Dickinson encountered examples of short-lined verse in numerous anthologies and periodicals of her day (\textit{Reading} 32-34). Specifically, the ballads of Dickinson’s day were typically written in lines of three or four beats, while the most common

\textsuperscript{15} As I will argue in chapter five, this kind of poem—capable, and perhaps designed, to sustain multiple kinds of readings—emerges noticeably in 1861, making Fr 132 an important forebear of poems to come.
hymn forms used lines of six to eight syllables, and often fewer. Examples abound in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860. While long-lined poems (pentameter or longer) can be found, the majority of poems are variations on the three- and four-beat line. William Dean Howells contributes regularly (e.g. “Andenken” in January and both “Pleasure-Pain” and “Lost Beliefs” in April), and in each case his quatrains feature lines that vary within a loose, ballad-like form.

Emerson’s “Song of Nature,” the first poem in the pages of the January, 1860, issue, does much the same.\(^\text{16}\)

> Mine are the night and morning,  
> The pits of air, the gulf of space,  
> The sportive sun, the gibbous moon,  
> The innumerable days.  
>  
> I hide in the blinding glory,  
> I lurk in the pealing song,  
> I rest on the pitch of the torrent,  
> In death, new-born and strong. (18)

The lines of this poem modulate between three and four beats, creating a loose, ballad-like meter. In *Poems* (1847), a volume owned and annotated by Dickinson, poems such as “Dirge” oscillate between three- and four-beat lines, while “Woodnotes I” goes even further, with three of the four sections featuring mostly lines of three and four beats but occasionally just two. (The third section is in pentameter.) Thus, while scholars are right to claim that short lines are characteristic of Dickinson’s poetry—Stonum, for example, includes short lines as part of Dickinson’s “stylistic signature” (24-25)—poems by her contemporaries show that short lines were not unique to her.

The same can be said of rhyme, although here the norm—full rhyme—is more dominant. Still, while much nineteenth-century verse was carefully (at times laboriously) rhymed, there

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\(^{16}\) Per the norm of the era, all of these poems appear anonymously in the *Atlantic*. I quote from the *Atlantic* version of the poem; Emerson revised the poem before publishing it in *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867).
existed an ample tradition of slant or partial rhyme. Where earlier scholars made much of Dickinson’s departures from full rhyme, more recent scholarship has brought to light the abundance of models she would have found in the poetry she read. Referring to the most popular collector and author of psalms and hymns, Mitchell notes that “about half of the rhymes in Watts are false,” meaning that her own use of slant rhyme was “an extension of his tradition” rather than a rebellion (Measures 227). And the same can be said of poetry. For example, much of Emerson’s “The Song of Nature” employs full rhyme, but the very first stanza uses slant rhyme (space/days), while in the fourth stanza, Emerson writes,

And ever by delicate powers  
Gathering along the centuries  
From race on race the fairest flowers,  
My wealth shall nothing miss. (19)

Here, the full rhyme shifts to the first and third lines, while the lines where rhyme would be expected are slant-rhymed (centuries/miss). Later stanzas similarly employ slant rhyme, as when “rule” rhymes with “full” and “race” with “days”).

But it remains the case that full rhyme was the norm in Dickinson’s day, and (Emerson’s poem notwithstanding) the vast majority of poems published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1860, for example, have full rhyme schemes of one kind or another. In book reviews of the era, the word “rhyme” was sometimes used as a synonym for “poem.” And however much we associate her with “slant rhyme,” Dickinson herself made frequent use of full rhyme: according to Timothy Morris, between 1858 and 1865, “exact rhyme is the most common type” (30). But the important point, made convincingly by Small, Miller, and others, is that while Dickinson embraced slant
rhyme and made it a constitutive component of her poetic practice, it was a practice she found in the literary culture around her.17

Beyond the short lines and the willingness to forgo a formal rhyme scheme, what is noteworthy about “Just lost, when I was saved!” is the freedom claimed by Dickinson to vary line lengths unexpectedly. Consider the opening two lines:

Just lost, when I was saved!
Just heard the world go by!

The first two lines establish a norm: each line has three stresses and six syllables, and every word is monosyllabic; the pace is quick. Furthermore, each line is a complete, emphatic utterance. All of this information—perhaps it is more of a feeling—is with us when we come to the third line:

Just girt me for the onset with eternity

This line is twice as long—double the syllables, double the stresses—and it includes two (necessarily slower) polysyllabic words that account for fully half of the syllables in the line. To top it all off, the sentence is not even complete: we end this doubly long line with the word “eternity” but without any helpful punctuation, and for an instant, in the momentary timelessness of the line break, we hover, suspended. It is an odd feeling because the action of the sentence seems complete: a period or exclamation mark would fit just fine. Instead, after flirting with “eternity” briefly, we discover the next line and realize that both sentence and moment are still unfolding:

Just girt me for the onset with eternity
When breath blew back
And on the other side
I heard recede the disappointed tide. (lines 3-6)

17 Scheurer notes that even Dickinson’s composition textbooks sanctioned “imperfect rhymes” (“Speaking and Composition” 18). For more on rhyme, see especially Judy Jo Small (Positive as Rhyme), Lindberg-Seyersted (Voice of the Poet), Hart (“Manuscript Study, Fascicle Study”), and Miller (“The Sound of Shifting Paradigms” and chapter three of Reading in Time).
Here, as line 3 continues into lines 4, the moment completes itself. We might have hovered briefly in the presence of “eternity,” but we quickly hurtle on, punctuationless, and both speaker and reader return to time, to breath, to sequence. In lines 4-6, we again have two short lines followed by a longer line that equals the sum of the first two; again, we experience a feeling of expansion, as if breath (and with it life) were returning after a moment at the edge. We get two, three, then five beats; four, six, then ten syllables: even before reaching the word “returned” in line 7, we feel ourselves returned.

Interestingly, if not for one line-break, lines 4-6 would make two perfect lines of iambic pentameter:

> When breath blew back and on the other side
> I heard recede the disappointed tide.

But Dickinson is after a different effect, not the summarizing certainty of a heroic couplet but the measured return, in time, first to breath (again, the line break asks us to hover, this time as “breath blew back”) and then to full awareness that the speaker is no longer “on the other side.” The feeling of return grows right before our eyes or, better, right within our breathing and speaking of the poem. In this way, the lines (the decisions about line lengths and line breaks) punctuate and enact the progression of experience.

Of the stanza as a whole, we might say that the generally short lines move us along quickly, while the swelling of lines 3 and 6 mirror, in each case, the experience of the speaker. In line 3, we feel ourselves swept to the very edge of eternity; in line 6, we feel ourselves brought back. Part of the story being told by this poem, then, is captured (experienced) in the lengths of the lines. Although it is made of mostly iambic lines, and while almost every line scans quite easily, the effect here is to prioritize the way meaning can be achieved by lineation and line breaks, and in particular by the way patterns can be set up and then varied. Whether this poem
borrows more from the ballad or the hymn is, in the end, less important than the fact that it claims a measure of freedom from both.

As the poem unfolds, it continues to skirt the rigidity of poetic form in order to render a more varied, authentic response. Each time the emotional moment of the poem changes (e.g. when the second stanza turns to an excited present tense posture), so too does the meter. Throughout the poem, the lines find their form (meter and length) hand in hand with thoughts finding their language (meaning and sound). The voice rushes on as the underlying meter pulls us forward, in conjunction with the short lines, the mostly monosyllabic vocabulary, and the use of repetitions such as “Just” and “Some” and “Next time.” Meanwhile, the line breaks, the occasional polysyllabic vocabulary (notably in the longer lines), and certain marks of the punctuation slow us down. Dickinson’s control of the reader’s experience—this, after all, is exactly what prosody aims to do—is complete.

“Just lost, when I was saved!” is in some ways an extreme case. Dickinson is not always so free with metrical choices, and she is certainly capable of using stanzas inherited from the hymn and ballad traditions to achieve startling effects. And while she did write a few poems that might be considered free verse, for the most part, her lines and stanzas are “regular” in the sense that they would not be out of place in either a nineteenth-century ballad or hymn. But as “Just lost, when I was saved!” demonstrates, she was perfectly willing to allow other factors to inform her choices about a line or stanza: already, she had discovered the freedom to vary (or

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18 The second stanza opens with lines of iambic tetrameter and stays there for three lines. After the variations in the first stanza, the poem settles into a rhythm and repeats it, excitedly. It is not that tetrameter is inherently exciting but that, after so much back and forth, a new and stable and recognizable pattern emerges and briefly holds. As Small notes, rhymes “have whatever meaning they do have only in the context of a rhyme pattern, which exists in the context of the whole pattern of words, ideas, rhythms, and other sounds of a poem” (26).

19 Johnson makes a similar point, writing that this poem “is one of her best early attempts to create by way of letting the form be shaped by the mood” (“Poet and Muse” 75).

20 Morris lists several examples of “unrhymed or free verse” (30) poems but the number is small.
abandon) a pre-existing pattern if the need arose. And, as “Just lost, when I was saved!” indicates, she had a clear sense of how a line of poetry can work as a bearer of meaning.

Perhaps all poets have this intuitive sense. But it is of special importance for a formal poet, for if there is one thing that sinks a poet who writes in form it is the abundance of small ways we are tempted to force the words to fit the form. Not for the last time, we see her using something available to her in the surrounding culture (in this case rhyme) but on her own terms. Already in her early work, writes David Porter, “we discern […] its bold disregard of conventional shapeliness” (156). It is not that the poems are unshapely but, rather, that they are willing to disregard conventional shapeliness: they are willing to privilege other effects over a lock-step adherence to patterns.

To put it differently, the relationship to form that a poem like “Just lost, when I was saved!” demonstrates is radical in the following way: one of the things that meter does, that form does, that both the syllabics of the hymn and the stress patterns of the ballad do, is allow for a measure of predictability. Form is predictive: it proffers the comfort of knowing what comes next. We expect a particular number of beats, a particular-sounding word, a particular kind of repetition, a certain kind of stanza. What Dickinson does—radically in this poem and more subtly in those poems where she yokes together different stanzaic forms—is disrupt this predictive power. There is something of a free-verse ethos at work here, the freedom and the power to disrupt patterns, but Dickinson is not a free-verse poet: the units (lines and stanzas) that she combines are, almost invariably, metrically regular in their own right, and many poems are
fully regular. Clearly, to her, the sound of poetry was metered. But the spirit of variation is strong, its possibility ever lurking. Even when the form holds, you sense it is a choice.  

**Formally, then, Dickinson has discovered several pillars on which to build her short lyrics.** There is the use of short lines, which afford a poem the kind of speed we might associate with rapid speech or thought; there is the solidify of meter, whether borrowed from the ballad tradition or the hymn tradition, with which to structure lines; and there is power (of expression, of assertion, of identity, of precision, of meaning-making) in the freedom to depart from any form or pattern, which thwarts any easy expectation of what comes next and allows other aspects of the poem to come to the fore.  

The importance of this last discovery cannot be overstated. By declaring itself free of a blind adherence to form—of refusing to allow form to over-determine choices about words, lines, or sounds—Dickinson’s poetics insist that other factors are at play in the unfolding moment of the poem. What comes first may or may not prepare you for what comes next; meaning is often achieved in the variation. As a poet, this sense of freedom is not only liberating but empowering: to feel free, at every turn, to abandon a pattern is to be open, with each new syllable in the creative process, to countless possibilities. It is important to remember that when Dickinson lists alternate words for a poem (a topic to which we turn below), virtually all of them maintain the meter of the line in question. Clearly, the metered sound of the line mattered to her. But she apparently felt no compunction to force a new stanza into whatever mold the previous stanzas would lead you to expect.

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21 For a related argument, see Christina Pugh. Pointing to a moment in Fr 407 where the number of syllables drops suddenly to two, Pugh writes, “Because the stanza has begun as common meter […] we can only read this dimeter as having ‘lost’ two beats from the stabilizing tetrameter” (18).

22 Hart notes that they typically maintain the existing alliterative pattern, too (“Manuscript Study” 188).
Likewise, if the meaning or feeling of the poem could be best realized by relying on shorter lines than expected, she felt no compunction to privilege stanzaic continuity over such possibilities. Although she often seems to have thought and composed in stanzas (seen in the fact that the vast majority of her stanzas are “regular” in some sense), she was fully attentive to the ways that the line (especially line lengths) can be constitutive of the feeling and meaning of a poem. In a way, the principle at work here is that “all meaning is local,” which is to say, in Dickinson’s practice, choices are never rote, never prescribed. The many poems she wrote fully in one form or another are not a contradiction to this; rather, they point to her different experiences of writing her poems: sometimes, hewing close to a form felt right; sometimes, other choices beckoned.

If, as we have seen, there was precedent in the world of poetry for Dickinson’s short-lined verse and slant rhyme, what about for these experiments in form? The short answer is, yes. As Miller has convincingly shown, reading Dickinson’s poetry in the context of the poetry of her day “reveals that Dickinson’s forms were not at all ‘unheard of.’” She adds that the “practice of formal innovation and her understanding of form in relation to sense and argument […] was thoroughly a product of her time (Reading 36). The connections between Dickinson and her contemporaries, rather than the divergences, constitutes a rich area of study in recent years, one that brings into view what she “borrowed” so that we can better see how it was put to use in her own practice, and a thread in the pages ahead is precisely her ability to take what she needed but not feel bound by its trappings.23

23 For more on the poetic context surrounding Dickinson, see A History of Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry, edited by Putzi and Socarides, and several essays in Dickinson in Context, ed. Eliza Richards. Early important works include Petrino (Dickinson and Her Contemporaries) and Emily Stipes Watts (The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945).
Furthermore, as the work of Small, Cohen, Miller herself, and others makes clear, to read Dickinson in the context of other nineteenth-century poets who experiment with form is to read her quite specifically in the context of the ballad tradition and, especially, of the early nineteenth-century ballad revival. This stands in sharp contrast to the long-standing view that Dickinson is best read in the context of the hymn tradition of Isaac Watts, whose books were in her father’s library, to say nothing of the countless hymns she would have encountered during her education and her years of attending church. To read her only against the hymn tradition—or, as others have done, to read her only against a perceived dominant tradition of iambic pentameter verse—is in some ways to exaggerate her radicalness, because the ballad offered her much greater freedom.

The hymn cannot easily admit variation once a stanzaic norm is established because its form is utilitarian: the function of form in a hymn is to enable church-goers to recite—in the extreme case, to sight-read—an unfamiliar text by knowing how many syllables to expect in each line. If the first stanza is in Common Meter (a quatrain with lines of 8-6-8-6 syllables, respectively), so too is each ensuing stanza. It is true that Dickinson writes numerous poems that are fully in one or another hymn form, and it is likewise true that both hymn culture and hymn meter influenced her writing in important ways. But when thinking about Dickinson’s habit of varying lines and stanzaic forms within a poem, it is the ballad, and in particular what Miller calls “loosened ballad meter” that is most useful (“Dickinson and the Ballad” 30). This inheritance is on display in her earliest poems. Of the fifty-seven poems in the three fascicles of

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24 The presence of hymns is such that Porter guesses that she channeled hymn meters without even knowing it (73).
25 In the Preface to *Church Psalmody*, the editors write, “as they [the stanzas] are all to be sung to the same tune, it is obvious that all the stanzas should be similar to each other, and regularly conformed to the measure adopted” (Mason vi).
26 The influence of hymns on Dickinson’s poetry has been developed at length by, Anderson, Johnson (*Interpretive*), Manheim, Morgan, and Porter (*Art*), among others.
1860, for example, twenty four are best described as employing a ballad or a “loose ballad” form. For example, here is a poem (Fr 171) that Dickinson copied and included in Fascicle 8, with the number of stresses and syllables alongside:

A fuzzy fellow, without feet – 4 8
Yet doth exceeding run! 3 6
Of velvet, is his Countenance – 4 8
And his complexion, dun! 3 6

Sometime, he dwelleth in the grass! 4 8
Sometime, opon a bough,
From which he doth descend in plush 4 8
Opon the passer-by! 3 6

All this in summer – 2 5
But when winds alarm the Forest Folk, 5 (4?) 9
He taketh Damask Residence – 4 8
And struts in sewing silk! 3 6

Then, finer than a Lady, 3 7
Emerges in the spring! 3 6
A Feather on each shoulder!
You’d scarce recognize him! 3 6

By men, yclept Caterpillar! 4 (3?) 8
By me! But who am I,
To tell the pretty secret 3 7
Of the Butterfly! 3 5

However simple this poem might appear, at the level of form, it is fascinating. It begins in Common Meter (if read as a hymn) or ballad meter (if read as a ballad). Which is it? In the first two stanzas, there is no formal evidence to point to one rather than the other. The third stanza, with its unusual stress and syllable counts, might perplex us at first: both the stresses and the

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27 These twenty-four poems do not include poems that are equally in hymn and ballad form, such as poems with stress patterns of 4-3-4-3 and syllable counts of 8-6-6-6 or poems with stress patterns of 4-4-4-4 and syllable counts of 8-5-8-5. For the most part, these twenty-four “loose ballads” are poems where the stanzas contain varied and un-patterned syllable counts but generally feature three to four stresses per line.

28 If we look beyond form, other questions lurk. Is this poem telling a story like a ballad? Or is it adopting but subtly playing with the hymn genre by coopting a sacred form to sing about something small and natural? Both options seem plausible; together, they underscore the value of keeping both forms in mind.
syllables seem to introduce a radically different pattern. And without the pattern, it becomes
difficult to scan individual lines: the second line of this stanza might easily have either four or
five stresses, depending on whether it begins with a stress on “But” (making the line trochaic) or
with two unstressed syllables (giving it a more balladic feel). Then again, we might rearrange the
lines as follows:

All this in summer – But when winds  4  8
alarm the Forest Folk,       3  6

This restores the ballad meter, as well as the hymn meter. Dickinson might be playing with form,
breaking the lines so as to deliver slightly more emphasis on “summer” so that the line break,
combined with the dash, invites us to linger briefly, the way summer might linger, refusing to
fade, until it does. Alternately, she might have realized that the full line was not going to fit and
chosen to break it where there was a natural break.29

The first three stanzas, then, seem compatible with hymn or ballad. Beginning in the
fourth stanza, however, the syllable pattern changes, which is something hymns (almost by
definition) cannot do. True, the stanza (7-6-7-6) is in a form that some hymns employ,30 but the
change in stanzaic form moves this significantly away from the norms of hymns. The fifth and
final stanza completes this move by introducing a third stanzaic pattern. Read as a hymn, this
would indeed be radical, even subversive.

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29 This breaking of a 4-beat line into two lines of dimeter is a common way that Dickinson diverges from metrical
patterns. Essentially, it exaggerates (or introduces) a caesura in the middle of the line. A look at the manuscript
confirms that Dickinson might have fit part of “But when winds” on the previous line, but certainly not all of it
(MSB 173), and I have yet to find a case of such enjambment where the entire 4-beat line could fit together.
However meaningful the enjambment might be, the claim of intention remains indeterminate. It is entirely possible
that the twin realizations that the line would not fit whole and that a line-break after “summer” offered rich
possibilities followed quickly one upon the other. See also Fr 546.
30 See Small (44). In Church Psalmody, Watts doesn’t use 7-6-7-6 in isolation, but he does use an eight-line stanzaic
form labeled “7s and 6s” with syllable counts of 7-6-7-6-7-7-7-6 and a form labeled “PM” with stanzas of 7-6-7-6-
7-6-7-6 (e.g. hymns 216, 438, 490, and 533).
Meanwhile, the number of stresses has remained steady at three or four, and as such, the poem retains the feeling of a ballad. Like many of the poems in texts known to Dickinson—Emerson’s Poems, the Atlantic Monthly, the Springfield Republican, and elsewhere—the variations in syllables leave intact a commitment to lines of either three or four beats. This poem takes advantage of two distinct ways that the ballad allows for variation. First, as can be seen above, the number of stresses can remain constant even while the number of syllables is allowed to vary. Thus, the lines that have three stresses vary in their syllable counts between 5 and 7, meaning that the ballad, in the hands of a skilled poet, retains some flexibility at the level of line and line length: lines are able to expand and contract, allowing for a far more flexible and varied speaking voice.\textsuperscript{31}

Secondly, perhaps as a result of the flexibility of the ballad line just indicated, the formal expectations of the ballad stanza had loosened up over time. Especially as compared to the hymn, the nineteenth-century ballad is strict only to a point. The most common and well-known stanza (“ballad stanza”) will have four lines in a pattern of 4-3-4-3 stresses. But in practice, stanzas in nineteenth-century ballads varied: they might just as easily have patterns of 4-3-3-3 or 3-3-4-3 stresses, and a single ballad might use a variety of such forms. Somewhere along the way, the line between “ballad” and “short-lined poem” becomes permanently blurred.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} To give a sense of how much variation is possible while holding the number of stresses constant, note that in Longfellow’s “The Children’s Hour,” published in the September issue of the Atlantic, several of the three-beat lines have as many as ten syllables. Syllabic variation is common in many of the oldest ballads, doubtless because it existed for many years as an oral form and because they were sung to tunes. Ballads needed to keep time (hence the regularity of stresses) but were otherwise free to tell their tale.

\textsuperscript{32} This evolution is fascinating, and it provides a useful lens through which to imagine the ballad forms that surrounded Dickinson. Originally, the stanza seems to have resulted from the breaking of the so-called fourteener (a line of fourteen syllables and seven stresses) in two, leaving lines of 4 and 3 beats, respectively. However strict initially, a strict adherence to form ebbs and flows in the history of the ballad. Writing about a much earlier moment, C. S. Lewis describes the transition from rural, oral ballads to urban, literary, and (ultimately) broadside ballads as a “gradual” process (59). Lewis notes that a “thinness and unevenness” characterized the “street ballad” that emerged: “one reason […] was simply a lack of skill in handling the considerable variety of meter and stanza-form which the balladists attempted. The basic 4-4 or 4-3 stress of the traditional ballad, sanctified by long usage, [had been] in the singer’s blood and easy to manage compared with these more elaborate measures” (84). In “The Meter of the
Here, for example, is a short poem appearing in the February, 1860, issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*:

**The Poet’s Friends**

The Robin sings in the elm;  
3 7
The cattle stand beneath,  
3 6
Sedate and grave, with great brown eyes,  
4 8
And fragrant meadow-breath.  
3 6

They listen to the flattered bird,  
4 8
The wise-looking, stupid things!  
3 7
And they never understand a word,  
4 9
Of all the Robin sings.  
3 6

Published anonymously, this poem by William Dean Howells offers a simple but fair example of how meter was handled in poems influenced by the ballad. The first stanza employs a fairly common ballad form of 3-3-4-3 stresses, while the second employs the still-more-common pattern of 4-3-4-3 stresses. Meanwhile, the syllables vary from 6 to 9. Other ballads vary still more, with stanzas of 3-3-3-3 also appearing with some frequency. Most important, however, is that the same ballad might easily include several stanzas and lines of different forms without, apparently, anyone calling foul.

Taken as a broad tradition, then, the ballads of Dickinson’s youth and early writing life exhibited a free approach to questions of meter—free within certain constraints. Although I have not found it laid out explicitly, it is as if someone said, “Feel free to forget the familiar pattern of 4-3-4-3 stresses as well as the old 4-4-4-4 pattern, but *do* make sure every line has either 3 or 4 beats.” From the point of view of Dickinson’s development as a poet, the ballad offered her an

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Popular Ballad,” George Stewart notes that tri-syllabic substitution (which is what allows the number of syllables to expand) has been present in ballads from the very beginning without disrupting the meter, largely because music held the beat structure together. More significant changes (variations) were introduced “when ballads were composed without the aid of the tune” (945)—that is, when they went from being musical and oral to being literary and authored. Untethered from music, the form was free to vary, but it had always varied.
important message that was nowhere evident in the tradition of the hymns: the poet is free to adapt the line and the stanza when needed. A poem such as “Just lost, when I was saved!” shows her taking full advantage of such freedom; a poem such as “A fuzzy fellow without feet—” shows her working closer to the forms around her, but with a measure of freedom all the same.

In the end, though, it seems meaningless to insist that either the hymn or the ballad is most responsible for Dickinson’s poetics. For one thing, they are more alike than different. For another, she was immersed in both traditions: she came of age as a poet at a time when both were viable options for serious poetry, and she clearly liked the sound of (and felt comfortable with) both. The best ways of thinking about it is that the two traditions, combined, gave her a rich and varied sense of how a three- and four-beat line could sound. She chose them—hymn and ballad—as a tradition of three- and four-beat verse, over other models she would have encountered in some of her reading, such as the iambic pentameter. The essential choice was the choice of short-lined verse: that basic decision outweighs all others. The fact that the vast majority of her lines and stanzas are metered shows that, to her ear, poetry was metered language; the fact that she so often departed from the form in which a poem began shows that

33 Ballads and hymns are not entirely distinct traditions. According to Brogan, “In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when vernacular hymn-writers such as Sternhold and Hopkins sought to appeal to the hearts and minds of the religious laity by setting the psalms to music, they did so by the natural expedient of casting their new hymns into the meters, and sometimes the melodies as well, of those songs the laity knew best—the ballads. Hence the meters of the popular ballads passed into Protestant hymnals, where they influenced centuries of not only hymn singing but also the writing of literary poetry” (119).
34 Extra syllables allow for a mix of iambic and trochaic lines, among other important effects, so the very feel of the line is in play when extra syllables are allowed.
35 Among the books in the family library, practitioners of iambic pentameter include Shakespeare, Milton, George Lunt, Charlotte Bronte, among others. Among the poems published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1860, those in pentameter are outnumbered decisively by short-lined (three- and four-beat) verse.
36 My argument here agrees with Hart. Referring to work done with Sandra Chung, Hart writes, “we […] say that Dickinson wrote in four beat verse, a family of rhythmic forms that are arguably simple, accessible, and universal compared to, say, iambic pentameter. Four-beat verse is ubiquitous in English folk songs, nursery rhymes, greeting cards, and political chants” (qtd. in Hart “Manuscript” 174). In Anatomy of Criticism, Frye speaks generally of four-beat verse as “inherent in the structure of the English language” (250). Similarly, writing of Common Meter (quatrains with stress patterns of 4-3-4-3), Brogan writes that “the rhythmic pattern of this, once heard, is unforgettable” (119).
there were considerations other than formally consistent patterns that mattered to her in the act of writing. It is, above all, her freedom from strictly adhering to either form, rather than the forms themselves, that lies behind much of what we find special in her poetry.

**Though not unique to Dickinson, the choice of the present tense as her preferred moment of utterance is another essential aspect of her poetics.** For example, in early 1860, Dickinson copied this short poem onto the bottom portion of one of those cream, lightly ruled sheets:

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She died – this was the way she died.
And when her breath was done
Took up her simple wardrobe
And started for the sun –
Her little figure at the gate
The Angels must have spied,
Since I could never find her
Opon the mortal side. (Fr 154)
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This poem, too, hints at a beyond: the speaker finds herself on this, the “mortal” side, while intuiting a place that lies behind “the gate.” Again, it is “breath” that punctuates the change: when the “little figure” is “done” breathing, she gathers her things and moves on, presumably through the “awful doors” glimpsed in “Just lost, when I was saved!” and through the “gate” of this poem. Where the speaker in the earlier poem is “returned,” the figure described here is apparently welcomed by the “Angels.”

Much could be said about this short lyric, but what draws me to it—what delights me each time I return to it—is the stutter-step of the first line: “She died – this was the way she died.” In charting Dickinson’s use of verb tenses, this poem would go alongside the (few) other past-tense poems: the verbs make this so. Yet the feeling of the poem is something else again.

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37 Of the fifty-four poems that Franklin dates to 1860, only three are fully past tense: Fr 145, 154, and 182.
It seems intent on bursting into the present tense, to be a present-tense event: the story is past (she died, she took, she started) but this (right here, in the present tense of my telling it to you now) is how it happened. The combined effect of the dash and underlining draws attention to the present-tense utterance of the poem, even as it recounts an event from the past.\textsuperscript{38}

We have seen this already in “Just lost, when I was saved!” There, in fact, the effect is even more marked, as the poem—after an initial stanza in the past tense—actually moves fully into the present tense:

Therefore, as one \textit{returned}, I feel,  
Odd secrets of “the Line” to tell!

By the time we reach the third stanza, which looks forward in time, we are clearly perched in a moment of present-tense wonderment:

\begin{quote}
Next time to stay!  
Next time, the things to see  
By ear unheard –  
Unscrutinized by eye!
\end{quote}

What begins as a past-tense narration has become, in the process of the poem’s unfolding, a present-tense utterance. Interestingly, of the fifty-four poems copied in 1860, five of them make this same leap within the poem from past to present.\textsuperscript{39} They are essentially present-tense poems: in reading any one of them, there comes a moment when we discover we are actually in the moment of present-tense narration; we are present for the telling, for the experience that comes

\textsuperscript{38} Dickinson does not leave a space between stanzas, so Franklin and Miller both print it as an eight-line poem. But it is also a perfect example of common meter (stanzas of 8-7-8-7 syllables) and ballad meter (stanzas of 4-3-3-3 beats or stresses). In terms of the beats, the poem is fully iambic with the exception of the first line, where “this” is underlined and presumably stressed, contrary to expectation: the underlining thus works not only to emphasize a word’s meaning but to signal a deviation in the iambic pattern. The line might have read, “She died – the way she died was this” if metrical regularity were of the essence. Instead, meter bends, and meaningfully. Pugh similarly notes occasions where the presence of a dash changes the meter of a line (12-14).

\textsuperscript{39} Fr. 132, 146, 159, 175, and 183.
after the events described, for the attempt at language in the aftermath of experience. These poems do not so much insist on their status as present-tense utterances as assume it.

There is nothing remarkable about a lyric poem setting up shop in the present moment: lyric has long been considered a fundamentally present-tense form, and it is worth noting that both the ballad and the hymn have present-tense aspirations: the ballad, even when it tells a past-tense story, often foregrounds the telling or the singing; the hymn, in as much as it includes a petition or an address to a deity, likewise enacts a present-tense performance. In Emerson’s Poems (1847), a copy of which was owned and apparently read with care by Dickinson, most of the poems either are fully in the present tense or include present-tense moments. In the short poem “The Rhodora,” for example, a past-tense opening yields to a present-tense moment of apostrophe:

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!

40 I quote from the copy of Emerson’s Poems (published in 1847) that was given to Dickinson in 1850. This volume, now in the Houghton library, bears pencil markings attributed to Dickinson, and numerous pages show signs of having at one point been folded in half or at the top corner. Of this gift, she writes in a letter, “I had a letter – and Ralph Emerson’s Poems – a beautiful copy – from Newton the other day. I should love to read you them both – they are very pleasant to me” (L 30).

41 To take a somewhat random sample: of the five poems marked with an “x” in the table of contents of Dickinson’s own copy, three are either fully in the present tense or are framed (because they end) in the present. These five poems include “Each and All” (which I count as past tense because, while it features several present-tense stanzas, it ends in the past tense), “The Problem,” “Good-bye,” “Woodnotes, I” (which, though it begins in the present tense, I count as past because it ends in a moment of past-tense speech), and “Dirge.” In another sample—the five poems that (according to Capps) are directly quoted by Dickinson in letters or poems—four are in the present tense: “Bacchus,” “Hymn,” “The Humble-Bee,” and “The Snow-storm.” Only “Fable” is fully in the past tense. (Capps 173-174).
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you. *(Poems 59)*

From “pierced” and “found” in the first two lines, this poem shifts into present tense with a statement (“Here might the red-bird come…”) in line 7, and then more fully with the address to “Rhodora!” in line 9. It shivers back into the past a few lines later (“Why thou wert there […] I never thought to ask, I never knew”) before ending fully in a moment of present-tense thinking: “in my simple ignorance, [I] suppose.” That is, although the verbs of the final line (“brought…brought”) are literally in the past tense, they are framed as an utterance in the present tense of the poem’s unfolding. The last eight lines are an extended present-tense apostrophe that includes references to the past.

Emerson articulates the value of such present-tense writing in a remarkable comment nestled deep inside his “Lecture on the Times,” published in 1860.42 Complaining about the writers of his day, he says that “the thinker gives me results, and never invites me to be present with him at his invocation of truth, and to enjoy with him its proceeding into his mind” *(Miscellanies 275).* Emerson points here to something Dickinson discovers and develops in her own lyric practice: she will invite the reader to be “present” for the “proceedings” of the mind. Recall the way “Just lost, when I was saved!” moves into the present and the way “She died – this was the way she died” strains likewise toward the present in spite of its past tense verbs.

Interestingly, while the effect is powerfully in evidence in Dickinson’s work, Emerson himself sometimes turns away from the challenge of situating the poem fully in the present. On

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42 This lecture was included in Emerson’s *Miscellanies.* Published in 1860 and owned by Susan Dickinson, it apparently did not reach her hands until 1869—that, at least, is the date of her signature inside the cover (9). In any event, in what follows, my claim is not that Dickinson is literally responding to this line but, rather, that both she and Emerson apparently share an interest in a text that “invites” the reader in. Miller likewise draws a connection between this passage and Dickinson’s work *(Reading 30).*
more than one occasion, his poems abandon the present tense mid-way through the poem. His famous poem “Each and All” begins as a bit of musing:

Little thinks, in the field, yon red-cloaked clown,
Of thee from the hill-top looking down;
The heifer that lows in the upland farm,
Far-heard, lows not thine ear to charm;
The sexton, tolling his bell at noon,
Deems not that great Napoleon
Stops his horse, and lists with delight,
Whilst his files sweep round yon Alpine height.

A few lines later, however, the poem turns to the source of this musing:

I thought the sparrow's note from heaven,
Singing at dawn on the alder bough;
I brought him home, in his nest, at even;
He sings the song, but it pleases not now,
For I did not bring home the river and sky;—
He sang to my ear,—they sang to my eye.

The effect is interesting: both present and past are palpable in this poem. The opening lines will frame how we experience what follows, and as such they hold out the possibility of returning to the present tense. Instead, the poem remains in the past tense, ending as follows:

As I spoke, beneath my feet
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club-moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground,
Over me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and of deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole. (Poems 14-16)

By ending in the past tense, the poem privileges not the moment of utterance that is underway but the experience being recounted. If we are invited in, it is only to the story of what has already happened. The contrast with a poem like “Just lost, when I was saved!” is stark: there, we end up
alongside the speaker, perched in the present, awaiting the future: “Next time to stay!” By contrast, in “Each and All,” we end up alongside a speaker whose gaze is trained backwards. The story of what happened, not the telling of the story and the story’s aftermath, is brought into focus. I cannot right now think of a single Dickinson poem that similarly abandons the present for the past tense. To frame it a little too simply: Emerson says, Here is what I saw and thought and felt, while Dickinson says, Here is what I am saying and thinking and feeling.

The decision to settle on the present tense as the site for most of her lyrics is essential to Dickinson’s poetics, and an important part of her discovery as a poet concerns the various ways she is able to tap into this present-tense potential of the lyric poem. Readers have long noted such effects, as when Howe describes her work as a “premeditated immersion in immediacy” (Birth-mark 139). What remains to be explored is how this effect is achieved. From the vantage point of 1860, what we can see and say is that even a poem cast in the past tense (such as “She died – this was the way she died”) seems to strain toward the present tense, while other poems (“Just lost, when I was saved!”) knowingly occupy a fully present-tense moment.

This self-positioning in the present tense, inside a particular moment, is clearly integral to Dickinson’s experience of (and response to) the world around her. Her letters reveal an ongoing interest in such precisely defined moments. In an early letter to Jane Humphrey, for example, Dickinson writes that “The winter was all one dream, and the spring has not yet waked me, I would always sleep, and dream, and it should never turn to morning, so long as night is so blessed” (L 35), which strikes me as a classic and recurring Dickinson gesture: to be after one thing (“winter was all one dream”) but before another (“spring has not yet waked me”), so much so that by the end of the sentence, she imagines that present tense lasting forever (“so long as night is so blessed”). Written when Dickinson was nineteen, such moments demonstrate an early
fascination with the instant, a fascination that begins early and soon becomes a driving force for
the kind of lyric Dickinson chooses to write. Much of what follows in the years ahead can best
be understood as attempts to do work in the present tense of the lyric, to stand in a moment
between two moments, to be in the “night” even as the dream itself has apparently “ended.”

Perhaps the most familiar characteristic of a Dickinson poem is the way it looks on
the page. Mention Dickinson to someone who is familiar with her work but is not a scholar, and
soon the question comes: what is the deal with all the dashes? And the same question might be
asked of several other habits of punctuation. Consider this poem from the summer of 1860, when
Dickinson makes two copies, sending one (signed “Emily”) to Susan next door:

To learn the transport thro’ the pain –
As Blind men learn the sun –
To die of thirst, suspecting
That Brooks in meadows run –

To stay the homesick – homesick feet
Opon a foreign shore –
Haunted by native lands – the while –
And blue – beloved Air

This is the sovereign anguish –
This – the signal wo –
These are the patient “Laureates” –
Whose stanza, hushed, below –

Breaks in victorious Carol –
Inaudible – indeed –
To us – the duller Cornets
Of the mysterious “Band” – (Fr 178 A, 1860)

Arguably, before we even get to the poem’s subject or form, what we notice is its inscription: the
frequent use of dashes, capitalization, and underlining, as well as the occasional use of quotation
marks. Such habits of punctuation and emphasis are everywhere in Dickinson’s poetry from the very beginning. To read a Dickinson poem requires that we decide how to read these marks.

What, for example, might we make of the two unexpected capitalizations in the first stanza? As a reader, I experience these words differently. I cannot miss the nudge to think of “Blind” as perhaps something more than (mere) literal and physical blindness. Similarly, “Brooks in meadows” has a slightly otherworldly quality: not brooks but Brooks, the poem quietly insists. The emphasis is slight, and we might have considered the figurative meanings of the word blind anyway. But the poem leaves no doubt. Gently, but unmistakably, it adds a link between two moments—Blind men and Brooks in meadows—that are already linked via the consonance of b’s and m’s. Each moment, we are made to understand, is to be read with the other in mind. For one thing, as a pair of opposed images, they re-state (but more vividly) the initial contrast between transport and pain. They take us further into the dichotomy.

In my experience, students and others reading aloud learn (or decide) to adjust their tone slightly upon encountering an unexpected capitalization. Not air but Air. To move through such a world is to be reminded that things and ideas are not as simple as we might think. In the words of Sharon Leiter, “[b]y capitalizing words that are not normally capitalized, the poet is pointing to them, lifting them up, as it were, in her hierarchy of importance” (262). Moreover, Capitalization was hardly a practice unique to Dickinson. Both Hart and Scheurer have shown that nineteenth-century textbooks encouraged their use: Lindley Murray’s English Grammar (1824) includes capitalization as a way of making words “remarkably emphatic” (qtd. in Hart “Manuscript” 176), while Richard Parker’s Aids to English Composition Prepared for Students of all Grades (a textbook probably known to Dickinson) advises that “[a]ny words when

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43 See also Miller Grammar 58-59.
remarkably emphatical, or when they are the principal subject of the composition, may begin with capitals” (qtd. in Scheurer “Speaking and Composition” 18).44

But it should be noted that there are alternate explanations for Dickinson’s capitalizations. Perhaps, some have argued, they are best understood as a holdover from an earlier, outdated system, more an arbitrary habit than a source of meaning. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of her earliest editors, reasoned that in her letters Dickinson “followed the Old English and present German method of thus distinguishing every noun substantive” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters”). Even in her letters, this is not exactly right, while in her poems, some non-nouns are capitalized, and many nouns are lower case. But it remains possible that it was an unconscious habit of handwriting rather than an intentional method of emphasis.45

Further doubts emerge from Dickinson’s letter to Higginson in which she objects to the addition of a question mark when one of her poems (Fr 1096) appears in the Springfield Republican. And she is correct: the question mark does change how the line is understood. But critics have noted that she makes no complaints about the removal of her dashes and capitalizations (Mitchell 31). The letter suggests that Dickinson understood that such things are meant to be corrected upon publication, and both Mitchell and Lindberg-Seyersted have pointed out that many nineteenth-century writers in England and the U.S. apparently took for granted that it was the job of editors to deal with punctuation: between them, they note that Wordsworth, Browning, Byron, Keats, and Poe deferred to others on matters of punctuation, editing, and even titling (Measures 27; Lindberg-Seyersted 27).46 And Miller, who is articulate about the ways that

44 Similarly, Emerson’s lectures occasionally feature capitalizations, typically nouns of importance. In “Lecture of the Times,” mentioned above, Emerson capitalizes “Future,” “Democracy,” “Revolt,” and “World-Soul.”
45 Writing sixty years after Higginson, Austin Warren similarly claimed that Dickinson capitalized nouns “after the fashion of Carlyle and the German language” and observed that her “capitalization of adjectives cannot be reduced to principle” (102).
46 More generally, MacMullen notes that “[e]arly printers did the punctuating for the author […] or the publisher did” (3 n. 5).
Dickinson’s capitalizations affect the meaning of a text, nevertheless guesses that Dickinson did not oppose stripping capitalizations from her poems. She rightly points out that there is no record of any such complaint about the ten poems known to have been published in Dickinson’s lifetime (*Reading* 117).

A further argument against reading too much into Dickinson’s capitalizations, and into her use of punctuation generally, is that multiple copies of the same poem seldom retain the same punctuation: even in cases where every word is the same, the punctuation typically changes. In the two copies of “To learn the transport thro’ the pain –” (see below), only three of the sixteen lines share identical punctuation: the use of capitals, underlining, exclamation marks, commas, and dashes vary far more often than they remain constant—and here we have two copies apparently made at the same time.\(^47\) If Dickinson’s notation is so important, the argument goes, how can it vary so much between two copies of the same poem?

Such objections demand a certain level of clarity in any account of Dickinson’s punctuation,\(^48\) and I think they can be successfully and convincingly countered. The fact that Dickinson does not maintain exactly the same capitalizations when she copies a poem, the (apparent) fact that she does not object to the elimination of the capitalizations in “The Snake,” and the (completely hypothetical) possibility that she might have happily published her poems in a more standardized format—to my mind, all such claims miss the point. The challenge for us as readers is to neither over-read nor under-read what we have before us. What we have are handwritten manuscripts: on the one hand, these are not copies prepared with Dickinson’s

\(^{47}\) For a more extreme case, see the versions of Fr 174, which were apparently copied around the same time.

\(^{48}\) An early, agile, if regrettable response to Dickinson’s capitalizations is offered by John Crowe Ransom, who acknowledges that they are “honorable” as a means of “conferring dignity” on their subjects. Nevertheless, he argues that her editor will have to “reckon with certain conventions” and “respect those capitalizations […] even while he is removing them” (89).
approval for publication; on the other hand, they capture (presumably quite faithfully) Dickinson’s own inscription of the poem. What they record is a version, a rendition, of the poem at a particular moment in time. As a reader of such handwritten manuscripts, what matters—all that we can say with certainty—is that on this occasion Dickinson chose to capitalize this or that word. Faced with the evidence of such choices, we are pushed as readers in two ways.

First, at the local level, we are called to notice in what ways the capitalizations enrich our reading of the poem. (Here we counter the first few arguments raised above.) Does the presence of capitalized words tweak or even deepen our encounter with the poem? Does it resolve or muddy a particular line of inquiry? Does it make one or more ways of attending to the poem more compelling? If it is at least logically possible that Dickinson’s capitalization are arbitrary, a matter of haste or unconscious habit, does the poem, as inscribed, argue otherwise? In this poem, the relationship established in the first line is between transport and pain, the former being rather abstract and other-worldly, the latter something all too much of this world. The opening gambit of the poem is that these two very different kinds of experiences are in some way linked. The “sovereign anguish” of line 9 is precisely the feeling of “suspecting,” of feeling “haunted” by, an intuited link between the material present and what lies beyond, combined with the inability to reach from here to there. On this side: pain, looking into the sun until you are Blind, thirst, feet on foreign shores, hushed stanzas, dull Cornets; on the other: transport, sun, Brooks, native lands with their blue—beloved Air, Laureates and their Carols, and a mysterious Band.

At first glance, it seems that these two lists divide nicely into one with capitalizations and one without, but (happily) it is not so simple. While the world of “transport” is rife with capitalized—and thus, in some way, essentialized—qualities (Brooks, Air, Laureates with their Carols, and the mysterious Band), there are others that are not capitalized (sun and native lands).
Conversely, in a list of words that are associated with the “pain” of line 1, many are lower case but several (Blind and Cornets) are capitalized. So it is not the case that a simple dichotomy of worlds is at work in these decisions. Instead, we are left with only some words, to borrow Weisbuch’s phrase, being “granted philosophical stress” (72). So far, the poem resists offering an easy pattern.

The story is complicated, or enriched, when we turn to the other existing copy of this poem, made (according to Franklin) around the same time (summer of 1860) on a sheet that was added to Fascicle 8. I print it side by side with the version sent to Susan:

To learn the transport thro’ the pain – To learn the Transport by the Pain –
As Blind men learn the sun – As Blind Men learn the sun!
To die of thirst, suspecting To die of thirst – suspecting
That Brooks in meadows run – That Brooks in Meadows run!

To stay the homesick – homesick feet To stay the homesick – homesick feet
Opon a foreign shore – Opon a foreign shore –
Haunted by native lands – the while – Haunted by native lands, the while –
And blue – beloved Air And blue – beloved Air!

This is the sovereign anguish – This is the sovereign Anguish!
This – the signal wo –
These are the patient “Laureates” – These are the patient “Laureates”
Whose stanza, hushed, below – Whose voices – trained – below –

Breaks in victorious Carol – Ascend in ceaseless Carol –
Inaudible – indeed – Inaudible, indeed,
To us – the duller Cornets To us – the duller scholars
Of the mysterious “Band” – Of the Mysterious Bard!

(Fr 178 A, 1860, sent to Susan) (Fr 178 B in Fascicle 8)

In the fascicle copy, Dickinson has capitalized several additional words: in the first stanza, both Transport and Pain; later, she has capitalized both words in the two noun phrases, Blind Men and Brooks in Meadows. Elsewhere, Anguish and both words of the concluding noun phrase, Mysterious Bard, are capitalized. Again, many but not all of the nouns are capitalized. One
impact is to further underscore the consonance of m’s and b’s—found not only in the first stanza but also in the last line. (Those six words, in fact, offer a fascinating snapshot—a shadow structure, as it were—of the entire poem: Blind men...Brooks in Meadows...Mysterious Bard.) In this version, again, it is not the case that all of the qualities associated with “transport” are capitalized and all those associated with “pain” are lower-case. If anything, the capitalizations here go further, insisting on the importance of the things that make up both the world beyond and our world: we are reminded at every turn of the metaphorical reach of the poem. But the fact remains that each poem emphasizes slightly different features of experience, and in neither poem is there a system that explains exactly why.

Here we come to the second impact of Dickinson’s capitalizations, an impact more global than local. If there were a (simple) system by which words on one side of the equation were capitalized and those on another were not, that would still be meaningful. Some poems and some poets work in this way. But the lack of a pattern—the repeated, unexpected decision to capitalize nouns—draws attention to the decision itself. As Weisbuch writes, “Dickinson takes over the ancient poetic habit of signifying the generality of importance of certain words by capitalization, but the words she chooses to capitalize are not usually the traditional ones” (72; italics in original). He adds that “capitalizations announce that a personality is deciding for itself the words that should be granted philosophical stress.” Put another way, in a poem where every noun is capitalized, or where only words of a certain (predictable) type are capitalized, the effect would still be to emphasize those words and qualities. But in that case, a convention would prevail: the entire poem would be understood to mean in a particular way. By contrast, the

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49 Blake’s use of capitalization and W. S. Merwin’s eschewing of punctuation offer two examples of poets where the effect is global, not local.
inconsistent use of capitalization—the absence of a pattern—has the deeper effect of positioning each decision as an individual one.

Here we might expand the conversation to include other kinds of punctuation in Dickinson’s poetry—especially the comma, dash, and exclamation mark. To be sure, all of them play multiple and important roles in how a poem means. But one thing they share in Dickinson’s manuscripts is a sort of willfulness: they seem to appear when they want, and all of them are open to revision when Dickinson copies a poem. Local effects, then, seem to come and go: a reading of Fr 178 in the version sent to Susan might make something of the fact that neither pain nor transport are capitalized, arguing that in so doing, the poem refuses to grant them the same importance as such palpable presences as Blind men and Brooks in meadows. On this reading, the poem brings to life a world in which the physical aspects of experience are greater than the abstract names by which we know them. Turning to the copy in Fascicle 8, where both words are capitalized, a different argument will have to be made, according to which the two words are emphasized, perhaps because they are, ultimately, fundamental arenas of our experience.

A similar predicament confronts us in the third stanza:

This is the sovereign anguish –
This – the signal wo –
These are the patient “Laureates” –
Whose stanza, hushed, below –

This is the sovereign Anguish!
This – the signal wo!
These are the patient “Laureates”
Whose voices – trained – below

Here, of the twelve instances of emphasis found in the first version, only three remain unchanged. As is often the case when Dickinson copies a poem but changes the punctuation, several moments of emphasis are retained even as the means of emphasis differ. Thus, several cases of underlining (“This” and “sovereign”) are replaced by exclamation marks that emphasize

50 In counting dashes, commas, exclamation marks, quotations, I count pairs of quotation marks and commas as a single instance of each.
the entire line rather than isolated words; similarly, the dashes around “trained” replace commas around “hushed,” isolating it but in a new way. So far, so good. But the third line of this stanza seems clearly less emphatic: in the absence of both instances of underlining and without the dash at the end, the line simply means in a slightly different way. As with the changes to the capitalization of “pain” and “transport,” a slightly different case will have to be made when explicating how the poem’s poetics undergird its meaning.51

What we need is a way to defend our readings at a local level that nevertheless remains consistent at the level of Dickinson’s corpus of 1789 poems, and in particular those that exist in more than one copy. To my mind, it is precisely the way Dickinson’s punctuation registers an individual performance of a poem that paves the way. Writing about Dickinson’s use of dashes and commas, Lindberg-Seyersted makes the point succinctly: Dickinson’s use of punctuation was “a conscious, but impressionistic method of stressing, of arranging the rhythmical units of her verse.” She adds that such punctuation “was a creation of the moment, seldom deliberated” (Voice 196). That much of Dickinson’s punctuation and methods of emphasis feel like “a creation of the moment” seems profoundly true. Similarly, Miller writes (building on Shoptaw), “With Dickinson, the emphasis is not on text but on making: she has a making intent and a making act, the latter taking textual form but not, I believe, essentially defined as a written document” (Reading 111). Each written copy, in this view, is a “performance” of the poem, but no copy is identical to the poem. “The poem,” Miller concludes, “did not live for her in any single performance or manifestation of its written form” (117).

51 One option is to claim that certain poetic effects have no deeper connection to meaning. This point can be made negatively (in the hands of the New Critics, it is a charge leveled at Dickinson) or positively (Culler argues that certain poetic effects might exist independent of hermeneutics).
The general phenomenon at work is eloquently described (although not in relation to Dickinson) by Wimsatt and Beardsley. In “The Concept of Meter: An exercise in Abstraction” (1959), they take issue with scholars who propose that a poet’s reading or recording of a poem should inform our view of the poem’s meter. They acknowledge that “the reading [ aloud] of the poem is primary: it is what the poem is for” before adding that “there is another and equally important sense in which the poem is not to be identified with any particular performance of it, or any set of such performances. Each performance of the poem is an actualization of it, and no doubt in the end everything we say about the poem ought to be translatable into a statement about an actual or possible performance of it. But not everything which is true of some particular performance will be necessarily true of the poem.” As can be seen, their primary concern is meter, and in that regard, I agree that an author’s oral recitation cannot change the meter of the poem as printed. But their language is useful in considering the relationship between poem and performance: the poem is not the performance, or in Dickinson’s case, is not the inscription.

An even earlier articulation of this idea—again in the negative—is in Austin Warren’s 1957 review of Johnson’s variorum. Writing generally of how the poems ought to be printed for general readers, Warren notes that “[e]ditions for general reading should undoubtedly ‘regularize’; but how to treat Emily’s punctuation is the difficult point. Apart from her periods, the overall effect of the dashes is either to reproduce pauses in her own reading of the poems or to render the clauses and phrases a fluidity of transition lost by a rigid system.” He finds such irregular pointing problematic, and adds that the "best method I can propose is to omit—after the

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52 Similarly, in 1967, Franklin wrote of Dickinson’s punctuation marks, “To the biographer or the curious, they would be, if properly dated, merely the historical record of a passing performance” (Editing 120). My argument finds value in what Warren and Franklin are quick to dismiss and in what Wimsatt and Beardsley articulate in passing. My view is closest to Miller’s: “Dickinson regarded the poem as an essentially aural structure, which could be performed or mapped in distinct and various ways in writing” (12).
fashion of some contemporary poetry—all punctuation, or all save that of the period: a method which would not, in any case I can summon up, obscure the comprehension of her poetry” (103).

What gets lost in all this, as MacMullen indicates, is the importance of punctuation in “the expression” of a writer’s “thoughts” (1). His warning against the imposition of rules by style manuals in prose points to the impact of normalizing Dickinson’s punctuation: if we force rules on writers, he argues, “writers would lose their voice” (9). What I want to emphasize is the way Dickinson’s punctuation, particularly when used to confer emphasis, participates and furthers this performative, present-tense dimension of the text and the creation of this “voice.”

It is important to note that underlining, capitalizing, and quotation marks are often grouped together as forms of “artificial” emphasis, which is to say, external to the syntax of the poem. Punctuation can be used in much the same way. To the extent that it introduces pauses into a text, it divides the existing text into smaller units. The effect, as Denman writes, is to “create units of words, words that [are] one, enclosed within marks of punctuation and separated from other words by these marks” in an ongoing process of “separation and recombination” (29-30). We experience the same text differently when it is punctuated differently because of the differences in emphasis.

But there are ways of conferring emphasis in English that are not artificial but “natural”: these include word order, syntax, and certain specific (often rhetorical) constructions. In poetry, the toolkit is even larger, as emphasis can be achieved through rhyme, consonance and alliteration, rhythm, caesura, line endings, line length. What these many means of pointing have

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53 MacMullen is writing about prose, but his comments apply equally to poetry, in my view.
54 I do not love the term “artificial”; Miller’s word is “performative,” which is closer, but that word carries its own unwanted valences.
55 An entirely different explanation of Dickinson’s use of artificial emphasis is proposed by Manheim, who argues that in her early poems, “Dickinson called attention to the language she had borrowed” by using underlining and quotation marks (396). I do not follow this line of argument, but I am indebted to Manheim’s reading of Dickinson’s early letters and in particular to his analysis of the ways they influence her emerging poetic style.
in common is that they make the matter of emphasis one of language itself. The very structure of the sentences, the sounds of the words, the rhythm of the clauses, the juxtaposition of individual elements, the order in which information is revealed—all of this conspires in the hands of a skillful writer to communicate exactly where attention ought to land.

By contrast, marks in the service of emphasis lean into the text and insert a feeling of stress from *without*. Stress is achieved—and meaning tweaked or created—not through the arrangement of words and sounds into structured sentences or poetic lines but (largely) through the delivery. As a result, intentionally or not, these devices cannot avoid a gentle pointing at the *pointer*: capitalization, underlining, and exclamation marks remind us that a voice is shaping meaning in the process of unfolding the text before us. To read or hear Dickinson’s punctuation as indicative of *this* performance of the poem at *this* moment is a way of honoring the meaning and effect of punctuation while accommodating the fact that, as Dickinson’s repeated variations of the same poem demonstrate, no single transcription is ever equal to the poem itself. To put it perhaps as strongly as I dare, by attending to the punctuation and marks of emphasis of a particular copy, we get as close as we can to how Dickinson herself heard the poem—on this occasion, at least. More generally, what is literally true of underlining is figuratively true for all of her punctuation marks: their appearance inserts and asserts the presence of an inscribing hand and a communicating mind.56

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56 An analogy can be found in the way some writers describe literary translation. Tim Parks, for example, describes translation from one language to another as a “performativ act at a particular moment.” It follows that different translations, undertaken at different times, will necessarily vary. In addition to those writers already mentioned, my argument here has benefited from numerous others, including Porter (Art 54), Weisbuch (Poetry 73), Hart (“Manuscripts” 180). Edith Wylder has likewise argued that Dickinson’s punctuation “calls attention to the fact that her speaker is speaking, and, as such, helps to evoke and sustain the vital immediacy of the emotions her words are projecting” (215). She adds that “notations, like an artist’s signature, authenticate the role she has created for her dramatis persona by registering her own performance of it” (219).
We are left, still, with the question of what Dickinson herself would have done if she had overseen the publication of a volume of her poems. To my mind, we simply do not have enough evidence to make any bold claims. But our situation as readers is no less rich for that concession. We have the poems, copied out and performed for us in ways that are suggestive and inviting. Where an authorized version of a poem seems to give us the poet’s final and singular version, Dickinson often gives us versions, plural. Even in cases where just one copy of a poem exists, knowing (as we must) that another copy would likely have been copied out with slight changes to the punctuation should make us attend all the more closely to the version we do have, delighting in all the ways the poem is working, while reminding us that punctuation itself is only part of the story.

For one thing, frequently these marks emphasize parts of the poem that are already emphasized. We saw this in “Just lost, when I was saved!” when words connected by consonance (the m’s and b’s) are also capitalized, and we see it in the many cases where Dickinson adds a dash to the end of the line (because the end of the line is emphasized anyway). In such cases, the use of artificial emphasis underscores effects already present in the text, effects to which we should attend anyway, though it reminds us (if we need reminding) that Dickinson was fully aware of those effects.

But it remains the case that many of Dickinson’s marks create concrete and novel effects, such as adding stress where it would otherwise not be felt, adding a meaningful pause or stutter step, or “multiply[ing] ambiguities while suggesting interpretive emphasis” (Hart 171). Careful reading will note and dwell on such moments. To capitalize “Transcendence” or to underline “this” is to change, however slightly, the way the poem means. To view Dickinson’s punctuation as a record of how she heard the poem on the occasion of its copying leaves indeterminate what a
(hypothetical) fully authorized version might have looked like. We have, in manuscript, a version of the poem, rather than *the* poem. But maybe this can remind us that even in cases where we think we have *the* poem—in the poet’s authorized publication—it is only ever *a* version.⁵⁷

The best analogy I can think of is by way of music: what exactly is happening when, say, Bob Dylan releases alternate versions of a song previously released on an album? Here we might be tempted to think that the album offers the authorized version, while the other recordings offer “drafts” (from, say, rehearsals or demo tapes) or variations (from, say, later live performances). But what is happening when Dylan performs a song, night after night, before recording it? (Any avid fan of a band will have had the experience of hearing new songs in concert before they are ever available for purchase.) Where is *the* song? What if Dylan never records an official (studio) version? Similarly, we might ask what is happening when a Broadway-bound musical tours the provinces, playwright and director firmly in tow, working out the kinks and revising the script, before it arrives on Broadway? What if it never arrives? Where is the play?

Dickinson reminds us that a version of a text captured in a published text, a recording, or a script is only ever just that—*a* version. But even as we admit that what we have is less than what we are accustomed to having in a poet’s work, there is no reason why we cannot embrace the texts that we do have and make, from them, whatever meaning the text allows us to make. In fact, that meaning-making process is richer for the uncertainties that surround our reading and interpretive work. If we envision the role of the reader as active—if we can make our peace with less-than-systematic patterns of meaning-making, if we can sit with the kind of indeterminacy

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⁵⁷ Surely our attitude about such things is affected by technology: back when each new copy of a poem required that it be literally copied anew by hand, the introduction of changes must have been far more common. Printing and publishing broke down this norm somewhat: now there was an apparently primary and official version. But for materials in manuscript, to speak of *the* poem was far from stable. The whole idea of a *variorum* emerges from this fact. I return to this point in chapter five.
that Porter and Weisbuch point to as inevitable aspects of reading Dickinson—we are poised to read well. We just need to “let Emily sing” for us. Perhaps, becoming immersed in the rich conversations made possible by the archive she left behind, we even go from wishing Dickinson had published and settled the matter once and for all to being rather glad that she did not.

As should be clear by now, these many aspects of Dickinson’s style are not separate. The short, enthusiastic, even urgent-sounding lines; the variety of metrical lines and stanzas that are free to veer away from one formal pattern to another; the present-tense verbs (or, absent that, the present-tense feeling achieved through other means); the way marks of artificial emphasis form an integral part of the poem’s meaning even as they bring to life this enunciation of the poem—these aspects of Dickinson’s poems contribute to the feeling we have of a speaker speaking to us right now, within the moment that is the poem. What we have seen is that, even in Dickinson’s early poems, such strategies are already in evidence.

What remains to be addressed are two of Dickinson’s distinctive uses of punctuation: the dash, which is probably her most famous form of notation, and the exclamation mark, which has a particularly strong presence in the sheets and fascicles of 1860. Numerically, dashes far outnumber exclamation marks: in the 173 poems included in Fascicles 1-8 (as transcribed by Miller), there are roughly 950 dashes and 402 exclamation marks. Not surprisingly, both punctuation marks are on display in the articles, stories, and novels of Dickinson’s day. Here is an excerpt from “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream” by Charlotte Bronte, published in Poems (1860), which was inscribed as a gift from Samuel Bowles to Susan:

I feel a firmer trust—a higher hope
Rise in my soul—It dawns with dawning day;

58 Thus, there are 1352 of these two kinds of punctuation in the 2109 lines of verse in Fascicles 1-8. At that rate, two out of every three lines will feature one or the other.
Lo! on the Temple's roof—on Moriah's slope  
Appears at length that clear and crimson ray,  
Which I so wished for when shut in by night;  
Oh, opening skies, I hail, I bless your light!

Part, clouds and shadows! glorious Sun appear!  
Part, mental gloom! Come insight from on high!  
Dusk dawn in heaven still strives with daylight clear,  
The longing soul doth still uncertain sigh.  
Oh! to behold the truth—that sun divine,  
How doth my bosom pant, my spirit pine! (291)

Not all of Bronte’s poetry is so given to exclamations, but here and elsewhere in the books known to Dickinson, they are far from rare. The dashes, while not disruptive, are hard to miss. Each one stops the sentence in its tracks, usually for syntactic reasons (each of them could be replaced with a comma, a period, or perhaps a colon). Similarly, a cursory look at the poems published in the *Atlantic* in 1860 reveals exclamation marks at every turn. In “Through the Fields to Saint Peter’s,” which appears in the January issue, nine of the final twenty lines end with exclamation marks; Whitter’s “The Truce of Pescataqua,” in the February issue, features occasional but regular exclamations. If we, today, shun them in poetry, we should not automatically assume nineteenth-century attitudes were the same. The nineteenth century liked its poetry emphatic.

Dashes, while less numerous in the pages of the *Atlantic*, can likewise be found in poems and stories. Scholars have long seen a connection between its power to introduce a pause into a line of poetry and comments found in Samuel Worcester’s Preface to *Psalms, Hymns, & Spiritual Songs of Rev. Isaac Watts* (1848), a copy of which was in the Dickinson family library. Worcester writes, “In the *Punctuation*, regard has been had to musical expression. In some instances, therefore, different points or pauses are inserted, from what would have been used, had
the grammatical construction, only, been regarded. The *dash* is intended to denote an expressive suspension” (vii-viii).

For now, three points about the dash will suffice. First, the thing that stands out about the many dashes in Dickinson’s early manuscripts is that fully two-thirds of them occur at the end of a poetic line, where they usually coincide with the end of a clause, phrase, or sentence. And this is generally true of the dash in Fascicles 1-8: the vast majority occur where another punctuation mark (typically a comma, but sometimes a period or semicolon) would comfortably fit. Dashes may indicate a pause, but they commonly occur where a pause was already present, whether for syntactic reasons (the boundary of a phrase or clause) or for poetic reasons (the end of a line). Dashes that interrupt a sentence or are otherwise “non-grammatical,” by contrast, typically occur just a handful of times in each fascicle. This means that dashes are mostly not so much creating new moments of suspension as adding to moments already present in the text.

Secondly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, among Dickinson’s first eight fascicles, the dash is actually more present in the first three. Comparatively, the highest number of dashes occurs in Fascicle 1 (over 200), followed by Fascicle 3 (145) and then Fascicle 2 (125). This high number doubtless has to do with the fact that Dickinson adds a dash to the end of a great many poetic lines, a practice that, while continuing in subsequent years, diminishes over time. By 1860, Dickinson has settled into using the dash less than before, with Fascicles 6-8 averaging roughly 90 dashes. But lest we think that the dash emerges as the discovery of a maturing poet, the numbers tell us otherwise.

A third point about the dash consists of a few words of caution. As we have seen, Dickinson herself will often replace a pair of dashes with a pair of commas, and vice versa, when

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59 This is especially true of the earliest fascicles: the first three fascicles have twice as many end-of-line dashes as the three fascicles of 1860, despite the fact that the latter group includes more lines of poetry.
copying a poem. This leads Lindberg-Seyersted to claim, “[f]or an understanding of the poem it is often inessential if the mark is rendered by a dash or a comma; a study of Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts makes it quite clear that frequently the two marks perform identical roles” (Punctuation 29). The dash is an essential part of Dickinson’s identity as a poet, but that should not deter us from acknowledging that she evidently considered the dash and the comma interchangeable.

Punctuation in Dickinson’s time was hardly a stable set of rules. As Honan, MacMullen, and others have documented, the role of punctuation was very much in flux during Dickinson’s lifetime. Where it had once been conceived primarily as a way of indicating how a text ought to be read aloud, with commas and dashes indicating pauses, it was increasingly understood as a means of indicating the underlying logic or syntax of the sentence. This latter view is ours today in English: we expect a comma, for example, to tell us something about the structure of the unfolding sentence. When students punctuate to indicate a pause, we correct them.

But as practiced and taught in the early nineteenth century, commas and dashes (and capitalization and underlining, for that matter) were intended chiefly to indicate various moments of emphasis or pause during oral recitation. What is often observed of religion might be said of punctuation, namely, that the world Dickinson was born into was quite different from the one she

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60 Further, fascinating evidence can be found in Dickinson’s letter to Mary Warner in 1856, most of which consists of Dickinson’s copying of “My Child,” a poem by John Pierpont about the death of a son. “My Child” was reprinted widely; Johnson notes that her version “is closest to” the version in The Sacred Rosary, edited by Nathaniel Willis and published in 1844 (notes to L 183). It should come as no surprise that Dickinson changes the punctuation on numerous occasions, but her alterations nevertheless stand out. The poem is built on a pattern of repeated phrases, whereby each of the first eight stanzas ends with a dash, followed by the phrase “he is not there!” The dashes play an essential role in visually, palpably establishing this pattern. In Dickinson’s copy, however, after the third stanza, the dashes are replaced by commas, meaning that the pause is retained but via alternate means (and in stanza 6 she relocates the comma before rather than after “that”). Moreover, in the one spot where the text in Willis’s anthology does use a comma—in the penultimate stanza, where a comma introduces the repeated phrase as quoted text—Dickinson does the reverse: here, she replaces the comma with a dash. Clearly, then, to Dickinson, the difference between a comma and a dash seems less important than the fact that, at that particular moment in the poem (or letter), a pause or break of some kind is implied.
lived to see in her later years. To the extent that she followed an elocutionary approach to punctuation, she was not being radical but old-fashioned. As Lindberg-Seyersted writes, while “punctuation was becoming more syntactical and more fixed, Emily Dickinson never abandoned the elocutionary basis” (*Punctuation* 28). The excerpt quoted above from Worcester’s Preface, where he clarifies the role of punctuation in the text that follows, is dated 1834, indicating that already around the time of Dickinson’s birth the two ways of using punctuation were in use. That Worcester feels the need to explain the uses of punctuation indicates that he did not trust that he and his readers shared a common, governing principle. With so much in flux in the world of punctuation, we need to be careful not to see rebellion where there is none.

Far from closing down our analysis, the cautions indicated above can actually open a window on new features of the poems. For example, to the extent that commas and dashes are often substituted for one another in Dickinson’s work, we are reminded that the difference between the two might be slim. Does this diminish the impact of the dash? Or does it rather elevate the importance of the comma, so that both are in fact playing an essential role in the way the poem sounds when it is read (whether aloud or silently)? Put another way, while there are countless scholarly investigations into Dickinson’s use of the dash, very few scholars have bothered with the comma. (To again return to the excerpt from Worcester, we might note how powerfully he employs commas, not dashes, to insert breaks where the grammar calls for continuity.) We, today, are comfortable with commas; they are our most common punctuation mark. But perhaps we ought to read into them a little more in the context of Dickinson’s poems. I would not go so far as to say that every comma is in fact a dash in disguise, but surely
Dickinson’s use of both marks reminds us that the comma, too, was a full participant in the way a poem was made to sound and mean.\footnote{A better distinction (than commas versus dashes, semicolons, etc.) is between grammatical and non-grammatical stops: rather than worrying about the kind of the interruption, we might do well to focus on the fact of the interruption where it is clearly introduced for the purpose of performance.}

If we turn now from the dash to the exclamation mark, we find that the story is rather different. For one thing, while it is present in each of the first eight fascicles in great numbers, more than half of them appear in the final three fascicles. That is, taking the first eight fascicles as a basis for comparison, Dickinson’s use of the exclamation mark peaks in 1860. From a mere 36 in Fascicle 1 (with sheets from 1859), they expand to 54, 70, and 102, in Fascicles 6 through 8, respectively (sheets from 1860). And while Dickinson might exchange them for other punctuation marks, they have a palpable effect on the poems where they do occur, and they give to the poems of 1860 a particular feeling of urgency. As such, they provide two clues as to the kind of poem Dickinson was interested in writing in these early years.

One clue concerns the nature of the utterance that the poems present. A good example is the following short poem, copied onto a sheet in the summer of 1860 and bound into Fascicle 8:

\begin{center}
\textbf{At last, to be identified!}  \\
\textbf{At last, the lamps opon thy side}  \\
\textbf{The rest of life to see!}  \\
\textbf{Past Midnight! Past the morning Star!}  \\
\textbf{Past Sunrise!}  \\
\textbf{Ah, What leagues there were}  \\
\textbf{Between our feet, and Day!}  \\
\end{center}

(Fr 172)\footnote{Based on my inspection of the manuscripts in facsimile, I have underlined only “see!” where Franklin underlined “to see!” As always, I follow Franklin, Miller, and others in reproducing Dickinson’s spellings.}

This poem returns once again to the question of what lies beyond our world, and in that way it is reminiscent of “Just lost, when I was saved!” Here, though, the speaker has already crossed over. We do not know this immediately—the verbs of the first stanza, cast as infinitives, leave us in
doubt. If we have read only the first stanza, we might think that the poem is written from the perspective of someone on this side, someone looking ahead in the spirit of “Just lost, when I was saved!” (“Next time, to stay! / Next time, the things to see”). But the second stanza corrects us. After detailing the journey that has led “Past Midnight! Past the morning Star! / Past Sunrise!” the speaker looks back and affirms that, back in the world, “there were” many “leagues […] Between our feet, and Day!” If she has not been “identified” and cannot already “see” “the rest of life”—I find the first stanza indeterminate on this point—the moment is apparently imminent. One feels that the journey to “Day” is behind her. At the very least, she stands on the threshold and has every expectation of crossing. Perhaps we are once again in that familiar perch between two moments, brought to life here in the easy-to-overlook comma that separates “our feet” and “day.” (If ever there was a dash-like comma, this is it.)

The poem delays revealing not just the location but the existence of a speaker: there is no explicit mention of a first-person speaker until the very last line. But even before we arrive at the pronoun “our,” we sense that there is a speaker. Partly, this is due to the mention of “thy” in line two, from which we intuit that someone is addressing someone. But the effect is more fully underscored and amplified by the insistent tone achieved by exclamation marks that punctuate this short poem. As with the capitalizations and underlining, exclamations add emphasis and affect how we hear the text, “lifting” (to again borrow Leiter’s term) not just a single word (Dickinson seldom underlines more than a single word) but an entire line or thought. In so doing, they contribute to our sense of a speaker precisely because the urgency of address is palpable.

63 In all, a total of five (out of 54) poems copied in 1860 feature a delayed first-person speaker.
64 As Miller notes, the effect of an exclamation mark is to emphasize the “entire statement” or sentiment so that it is “italicized” (57).
This phenomenon has led some scholars to compare her poetry to speech, others to compare it to dialogic interactions, and still others to compare it to epistolary prose. To this we might add the palpable desire of so many hymns to be heard (and answered), as well as the implied (or explicit) desire of a balladeer to have people “listen to my song.” What unites these ways of approaching Dickinson’s poetics is that they underscore the apostrophic, and thus present-tense, quality of the verse.

Along these lines, it is interesting to note that among the poems of 1860, there are a number that feel like examples of apostrophe despite the fact that they lack (or defer until late in the poem) the typical markers of apostrophe. In “Will there really be a ‘morning’?” (Fr 148), the first two quatrains contain a cascade of questions (six question marks in eight lines) before becoming an overt apostrophe in the final stanza:

       Will there really be a “morning”?  
       Is there such a thing as “Day”?  
       Could I see it from the mountains  
       If I were as tall as they?  

       Has it feet like Water lilies?  
       Has it feathers like a Bird?  
       Is it brought from famous countries  
       Of which I have never heard?  

       Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!  
       Oh some Wise Man from the skies!  
       Please to tell a little Pilgrim  
       Where the place called “morning” lies!

Here, we feel the poem as an act of address long before this fact is made explicit in the final stanza. In fact, while the third stanza does include an address of sorts, it is hardly to be taken literally. The whole poem feels like a cry; one feels, in the urgency of the lines and pleas, a
genuine desire to be heard and perhaps even answered.\textsuperscript{65} In this poem, it is the question marks that achieve this effect; in other poems, the abundance of exclamation marks does much the same. Elsewhere, a number of poems feature short-hand gestures toward apostrophe, such as “Never mind my breathless Anvil! / Never mind Repose!” (Fr 163) or “Not portly–mind!” (Fr 135) that likewise keep the feeling of address alive.\textsuperscript{66}

My claim is not that such effects are unique to Dickinson’s poetry. Rather, taken as a whole, these many ways of emphasizing the words of a poem provide our first clue about the kind of poem Dickinson apparently values at this time: namely, poems that are characterized by a kind of apostrophic power. In as much as they contain moments of apostrophe, they state this preference outright; in as much as they defer or omit an explicit address while retaining the feeling of apostrophe, they point to something Dickinson seems to almost take for granted: the existence of a poem as an act of address. Of interest from the vantage point of the poems of 1860 is that so many of them feel intense, insistent, and voice-driven in their urgent desire to reach through the poem and be heard. If earlier we noted the ways that punctuation and emphasis point back to the voice that is uttering the poem, these gestures of apostrophe point away from the voice and outward. Dickinson’s poems share this characteristic dual pointing, both back (to the voice) and out (to the imagined audience). More often than not, the poem is perched between the two, balanced in the present tense that is brought to life in the lyric.

A second observation regarding the exclamation mark is how often Dickinson uses it to end a poem.\textsuperscript{67} Just four end with dashes. Given that the exclamation mark can be used to

\textsuperscript{65} Denman describes Dickinson’s early verse as frequently “ejaculatory poems, which seem outcries aimed with considerable dramatic effect at God or others” (33).
\textsuperscript{66} By my count, in addition to the eleven poems that include an explicit apostrophe in 1860, another dozen feel apostrophic without any formal address making them so.
\textsuperscript{67} If we look at Franklin’s transcriptions of the poems dated to 1860 as a whole, thirty-eight out of fifty-four poems end in exclamation marks. Of the others, per Franklin: four end with periods, four with question marks, and two with dashes. An additional four poems exist in multiple copies from the year: in three cases (Fr 166, 173, 178), the
communicate different feelings—surprise, excitement, irony, horror, etc.—this fact, by itself, says little about the tone or mood of any given ending. But one does get the feeling in these poems that things are being wrapped up: to read her final lines is to read a series of statements or observations that end emphatically. Such poetry ends with a full stop. At the same time, as Denman notes, in Dickinson’s early poetry, “so many final exclamatory lines come like the unveiling of a surprise that the author has known from the start” (32). This is something to keep an eye on, because poems in which the ending is seemingly known from the outset pose something of a problem for a poet whose interest is the creation of a present-tense lyric. To recount what has already been thought or figured out is not, after all, to be alive in the now of the poem. I mark this tension here as something Dickinson’s poems will have to wrestle with.

**The second clue about the kind of poem Dickinson evidently wants to write has to do with how they affect the reading experience.** An interesting feature of “At last, to be identified” is that five of the six exclamation marks immediately follow sentence fragments. But when reading or hearing the poem, we almost hear them as complete sentences because the delivery—and with it, the meaning—has been clarified. The exclamation mark helps us to read a line like “At last, to be identified!” as something along the lines of “I’m excited that the time has come when I will finally be identified.” This is not to say that the line lacks that meaning without the terminal punctuation mark, but none of the other available options foreground that reading as strongly as the line with the exclamation mark does. In short, the exclamation mark breathes some sense into the line. The line could be even more elliptical, but the two punctuation marks

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fascicle version ends with an exclamation mark, while the version sent to Sue ends with a dash; in one case (Fr 162) the fascicle version ends with a question mark, while the version sent to Sue ends with an exclamation mark. Finally, Fr. 174 exists in two fair copies, both of which were bound into fascicle 8: one ends with a period, the other with an exclamation mark.
work against that possibility by setting off the opening words (and thus making it clear that “At last” is an introductory phrase) and by inserting a degree of excitement so that the line as a whole feels like a statement of longing. In this way, the punctuation marks generally—and the exclamation mark specifically—contribute to the construction of a poem that is economical in its use of words: thanks to the punctuation, we hear more than what the words merely say, which means fewer words are needed.

We come here to a topic that goes by many names in the literature—concision, compression, or sometimes deletion—which is one of the central features of Dickinson’s poetry. It is also a phenomenon that is remarkably difficult to quantify, though we know, roughly, what it means to experience it in a poem: there are fewer words than might be normally used, gaps or leaps between the parts of the language that are used, and key omissions that leave the reader to either fill in what is missing or struggle with what cannot be filled in. The result is speed: we get where we are going faster, unencumbered by anything resembling excess in the telling.68

To take one example, consider the rest of the first stanza of Fr 172:

At last, to be identified!
At last, the lamps opon thy side
The rest of life to see!

While the first line can be put back together into a complete utterance, the second and third lines are trickier. A fuller version might read, “At last the time has come when I will see the lamps opon thy side (of a divide) for the rest of my life!” The parallel punctuation (commas after “At

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68 Most Dickinson scholars take up the issue at some point. Porter does not do so directly, but the things he values—e.g. her “astonishing control”—clearly rely on compression. To Dobson, Dickinson’s practice of concision indicates her understanding of the limitations placed on women’s writing and her “awareness of what ‘can’t be told’” (99). Freeman argues that Dickinson’s poetry “represents a crucial fact about intimate conversation: the closer the relationship between participants in a discourse, the more implicit the speaker’s discourse becomes and the less help the hearer needs to process it” (192). Weisbuch also makes the connection to intimacy (“Prisming”). Morris accords it a central part of Dickinson’s ability to offer an increasingly “individual treatment” of her chosen subjects, especially in her later poems (40).
last” and exclamation marks at the end) facilitates this reading by giving us something to read with. But other readings are possible. As in the first line, the task of unpacking the line falls to the reader, except here there is ample room for debate and no satisfyingly final answer. Deletion, as Miller has explored in detail, is sometimes recoverable, sometimes not (Grammar 22-39). I would argue that the first line above is pretty clearly recoverable, but the second ascends quickly into interpretation. A few ways the lines might be understood, beginning with the original pair of lines, might include the following:

At last, the lamps opon thy side
The rest of life to see!

It is exciting that the time has come when I will see the lamps opon thy side (of the divide) for the rest of (my) life

It is exciting that the time has come when the lamps opon thy side (of the divide) will be lit and the rest of life will be seen (by me? thee?)

It is exciting that the time has come when I will arrive on your side and see the rest of life.

Taken as a whole, these lines offer a good example of the kind of subtle work that a comma, an underlined word, and an exclamation mark can do to breathe some personality and intensity—what we might call voice—into clipped lines. Even if they do not fully resolve the sentence into a single agreed-upon meaning, they enable the utterance to feel like an utterance, and a complete one at that. (These lines also show the power of omitted punctuation: note how the lack of punctuation at the end of the first line allows for much of the ambiguity we detect.) Dickinson’s concision is not modernist minimalism, and while we should not mistake the speaker for

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69 Miller’s discussion of compression in A Poet’s Grammar (1987) is by far the most in-depth. Among other things, she builds on a distinction made by Samuel Levin between deletions that are “recoverable” and “non-recoverable”—see his “The Analysis of Compression in Poetry” (1971)
Dickinson the person or poet, these poems are not impersonal. We feel the presence of a living utterer, and punctuation is part of how the lines achieve this vitality.

Compression is clearly of importance to Dickinson. One cannot read her work without the feeling that words are not used lightly, as if using two words where one might do were at all costs to be avoided. One interesting question is, Where would she have discovered and sharpened this particular aesthetic sense? The ballad tended to omit certain kinds of details, but in Dickinson’s hands, the effects go far beyond what ballad writers had been doing. At the same time, the idea of compression was articulated in several texts known to Dickinson. Scholars have long pointed to the instructions in various volumes of hymns known to Dickinson. Here is the advice of Lowell Mason and David Green in their Preface to *Church Psalmody*: “Every line should be full of meaning. At every syllable, the mind should feel that it is making progress, taking some new view, or receiving some additional or deeper impression […]. An unmeaning line or word, thrown in to make out the rhyme or measure, is like a dead limb on a living body—a cumbrous deformity, better amputated than retained” (v).70

Still, however widespread the idea of compression might have been, countless writers read those same words without building a lifetime of poetry on the principles they bring to life. Somehow, the idea of compression was especially lodged in Dickinson’s writing aesthetic. It is hard to read her work without feeling that there is a principle at work by which no poem is allowed to use more words than is absolutely necessary. The early poems, if less compressed, are typically spare. To gaze at the fifty-four poems from 1860 is to see Dickinson’s style in process:

70 On an entirely different note, an anonymous reviewer in the January edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* writes of a recent volume of poems that the “author has not yet learned, and we could not expect it, that writers of verse tell us all they can think of, and writers of poetry only what they cannot help telling. The volume would have gained in quality by losing in quantity […] We shall look to meet him again, bringing a thinner, yet fuller book” (“Review of Avolio” 123-4).
not quite the compressed verse of her prime, yet seemingly committed to using as few words as possible. In particular, words that provide connections between words or phrases (words like “therefore” or “as a result,” etc.) are consistently absent from Dickinson’s poetry.

The role of punctuation is easy to overlook, but it plays an essential role in holding together utterances that lack such connective words. At the simplest level, the concision in Dickinson’s poetry is created by this ratio: fewer connectives, more meaning-bearing words. At a more complex level, it is created by leaps of language that mirror the disjunctions of fast-moving thought. Just as metered language is what sounded like (or counted as) poetry to her ears, so too one guesses that compressed language is what sounded poetic. And when you combine this aesthetic of compression with the kind of freedom noted earlier—the freedom to prioritize effects other than formal patterns—and add to this an array of tools to emphasize language without adding in more words, along with a fleet of punctuation marks to compensate for missing words, the result is a poetic style that is remarkably agile and a poetic sound that has the potential to be as rich sonically as it is intimate emotionally.

One thing that this makes clear—and this is the second insight or clue I promised earlier—is that Dickinson’s style is invested in the way a poem involves the reader. As Stonum notes, “[n]early all of her remarks about poetry in letters, poems, or recorded conversations imagine literature from the point of view of the audience.” He adds, “time and again Dickinson dwells on the effects that words, poems, and other forms of expression can have on an audience” (10). This speaks directly to the reader’s participation in the experience of the poem: as readers, given such language, we lean in.

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71 I return to this view in later chapters. The idea is nicely articulated in Scheurer (“Near, but remote” 99), Weisbuch (Poetry 20), and especially Deppman (Trying to Think 50).
Chapter Two

“In four weeks we are all happy again”: Dickinson’s Epistolary Poetics

In this chapter, I turn to Dickinson’s letters, especially her early letters, those she writes in her teens and twenties, and especially those she writes before beginning to save her poems. These letters are not like Keats’s. They do not spell out a poetic program, nor do they report on a day’s worth of writing, walking, reading, or thinking. But this is language from the same hand that makes the poems. My interest is in uncovering the habits of mind at work in these early writings, the better to see how the same habits operate in the poetry. Perhaps, if her story were characterized more by breakthrough than continuity, the story of Dickinson at thirty could begin with Dickinson at, say, twenty-nine. We might simply continue where the previous chapter left off. But breakthroughs have a habit of slipping through the fingers; Lowell and even Keats remind us so. An approach to Dickinson in the 1860s begins—if we want to tell the story well—in her teens and twenties because this is when several essential habits of mind, language, and life fall into place. We will eventually reach Dickinson at thirty—we might blow out a few candles before we are done—but this chapter begins in the late 1840s, then dawdles in the 1850s, the better to prepare us for the poems that follow.

Dickinson’s letters have been mined for language that echoes the poems, for the ways she engages with (and arguably undermines) the genres of letter and poem, and for her use of the letters to prepare for the writing of poetry. The story I want to tell likewise connects the letters and poems. It is, essentially, a story of continuity: the habits we uncover in the early letters will, when the time comes, serve Dickinson well as a poet.¹ In turning to the early letters, what stands

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¹ Though her focus (on Dickinson’s use of riddles in her letters to Higginson) differs from mine, Cindy MacKenzie likewise considers the way “fundamental elements of Dickinson’s poetics emerge from and are inflected by the properties of the epistolary” (13). I borrow the phrase “epistolary poetics” from her essay.
out is the work they do—for Dickinson and for her readers—to elide distance and to create what she calls the “far more exceeding and ‘eternal weight’ of presence!” (L 52). Her letters deploy a host of presence-making practices that prove adept at creating a shared space in which to “commune” with the reader, while at the same time finding several distinct ways of leaping (as is her wont) away from strict tellings of fact.

But while it is in some ways an easy step from the (early) letters to the (somewhat later) poems, it remains the case that poems are not letters. Besides the obvious differences of form and meter, there is the compelling difference of audience: the thousands of poems that Dickinson reads in books and periodicals over the years posit a reader quite different from the readers of her letters—namely, an unknown or distant reader. Part of the wonder of her poems, then, is that she felt free to rely on her practice of letter writing despite the fact that her audience had changed. She moves, seemingly with great ease, from an assumed intimacy with a known correspondent to an assumed intimacy with an unknown reader.

Consider the mind at work, the way it channels itself into language in this early letter to a beloved friend:

Jane, dear Jane.

The voice of love I heeded, tho’ seeming not to; the voice of affliction is louder, more earnest, and needs its friends, and they know this need, and put on their wings of affection, and fly towards the lone one, and sing, sing sad music,

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2 The quoted phrase is from 2 Corinthians 4:17. In turning to the letters, it should be remembered that some are, like the poems, dated solely on the basis of the handwriting. In the years since Johnson’s edition, a few new letters have come to light, and twenty-eight letters have been re-dated by Franklin (Variorum 1575-76). Some scholars find the dating of the letters far from certain. Hart and Smith re-date a great many letters, often assigning them to broad ranges, e.g. “late 1850s” or even “1850s.” Nothing in my argument hinges on the precise date of a single letter. As always, I use Dickinson’s spelling and punctuation. I add punctuation [in brackets] only if clarity requires it.

3 I say this advisedly, given how many poems Dickinson sends to family and friends. It is crucial, though, not to uniformly collapse the recipient of a poem into the intended or imagined reader of a poem. There are exceptions, but as we will see, they tend to prove the rule that there is always more in play than correspondence between friends.

4 That choice might seem obvious to us, but there were clearly other options. The confidence to approach her poems in the same way that she approached her letters may, in fact, be the root of much that we enjoy in her poetry.
The opening of this letter is characteristically poised between two concerns: acknowledging Jane’s predicament—Jane has returned home because her father is ill; he dies, in fact, on the very day Dickinson writes this letter—and carving out space for her own response. Each of these three sentences broaches Dickinson’s ability to reach out successfully and appropriately to Jane: the first characterizes how friends ought to respond to the affliction of friends (they “put on their wings of affection […] and sing, sing sad music”); the second narrates how she has “struggled” to find time to “be with” Jane in the writing of this letter; the third admits some uncertainty about how to reach out in light of Jane’s burden (“I can hardly dare to talk”).

Taking its bearings from absence, this letter holds out, in return, a kind of presence. She soon continues, “I can tell you how dearly I love you, if this will make you happier. I have been much with you since you first wrote me, always with you, but more since then, for the last few days you have been very near, very dear indeed, and I have often wished, and prayed, to see you, and to hear you, and to feel your warm heart beating near me, what music in such quiet ticking!”

The language is emphatic. Dickinson takes pains (chiefly through underlining) to ensure that her reader will hear the text as she herself intends it to be heard. The presence of the writer is felt in the delivery of the prose, then, even as the writing makes this desire for presence explicit: “It would be very precious to me […] to be a strong right arm you might lean on when you looked all around, and could find none, this is none of it permitted now, and I think, and strive, and attempt, but come no nearer the end.”
The gesture is both outward and selfward. Dickinson reaches out warmly, in language rich in emotion and intent on communicating, but the effort is fraught with her own presence. Parts of this letter, as Jane Eberwein points out, sound “strangely tactless” because Dickinson keeps the focus at least partly on herself ("Messages" 112-13). In time, writes Eberwein, Dickinson learns to compose messages that “are brief, tactful, and focused on the recipient at whatever stages of grief the author expected to find her reader.” In this early letter, by contrast, Dickinson has a difficult time getting herself offstage.

As a measure of Dickinson’s ability to write what we expect in a letter to a grieving friend, Eberwein’s critique sounds right. At the same time, in as much as the letter reveals a way of thinking, this dual pointing—to the writer and to the reader—neatly captures Dickinson’s approach to the act of writing. While she will soon progress to other topics in this letter, her instinct on sitting down to write is to address and embrace the two situations at hand: hers and Jane’s. She wonders, “Can I console so far off, wont the comfort waste in conveying, and be not, when my letter gets there?” Even as she is engaged in bridging the gap between herself and Jane, she wonders if bridging is possible. Reaching across the gap, she remains troubled by the gap.

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5 Eberwein wonders if Dickinson is taking to heart the advice of etiquette manuals to treat letters like conversation (105-6) and accurately observes that Dickinson’s early letters of condolence tend to be “talkative, self-absorbed, and diffuse, sometimes burying acknowledgment of grief in a pile-up of unrelated information” (104).

6 Eberwein points to L 278, sent to her two Norcross cousins after the death of their father in 1863, as a “transition from sentimental and even formulaic early attempts at comfort to the mature writing that is typically more heart-felt yet distilled” (102). The death was all the more painful because the cousins’ mother had died just three years earlier. Part of the success of this later letter, I would add, lies precisely in the way it weaves together the writer’s and the readers’ worlds. “What shall I tell these darlings,” writes Dickinson, “except that my father and mother are half their father and mother, and my home half theirs, whenever and for as long as, they will […] Wasn’t dear papa so tired always after mamma went, and wasn’t it almost sweet to think of the two together these new winter nights? The grief is on our side, darlings, and the glad is theirs. Vinnie and I sit down to-night, while mother tells us what makes us cry, though we know it is well and easy with uncle and papa, and only our part hurts.” While reaching across a distance, Dickinson manages to create an “our” that includes her cousins, her mother, her sister, and herself. If the weaving is more expertly done in this later letter, the instinct to weave is the same.
In her early letters, Dickinson is pained by absence, vexed by the very thing that makes a letter possible. “I want to see you more than I ever did before” (L 53), she writes to Austin in 1851, when he is teaching at Endicott School in Boston. During the years her brother is away from Amherst, Dickinson’s letters to him are filled with such exclamations. To some readers, these gestures sound formulaic, like a good sister saying what a good sister ought, but I find it hard to write them all off. She genuinely wants him home. In a few letters, she even asks him to return (L 67 and 71), but more often, she waxes emotional. “If wishing could bring you home,” she writes, “you were home today” (L 80). And a year later: “I am glad you think of us, and think you would like to see us, for I’ve thought a good many times that you would soon forget us, on going away from home” (L 104). Home, home, home: the word beats like a drum in her letters to Austin. “Get home, dear Austin—how soon now you are coming, and how happy we are in the thought of seeing you” (L 115). She stares at the “nail” on which his coat ought to

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7 Eighty-six letters from Dickinson to her brother appear in Johnson’s edition of Letters. Of these, all but fourteen are dated between 1851 and 1854 (inclusive), the years when Austin was teaching at Endicott School in Boston (June, 1851, to July, 1852) and attending Harvard Law School (March, 1853, to July/August, 1854). See Johnson’s notes to L 42, 96, 103, and 167. Interestingly, while other sets of correspondence have garnered the attention of scholars—e.g. there are significant essays on Dickinson’s correspondence with Abiah Root (Orzeck), Mrs. Holland (Tingley), Higginson (numerous), the so-called Master Letters (countless), etc.—a sustained analysis of these letters to her brother has yet to be undertaken. For the relationship between Emily and Austin in the 1850s, Sewall’s treatment is probably the most thorough, but see also a short section in Messmer (107-14).

8 Messmer writes that Dickinson “initially fashions herself in the seemingly nontransgressive role of sister-nurturer. Yet by specifically highlighting a nurturer’s required attributes, such as strength, experience, and a superior capacity for handling pain and affliction, Dickinson is able to subtly tip the relational power balance” (108). Messmer’s study is invaluable to readers of Dickinson’s letters and poems; among other things, she traces quite perceptively the ways Dickinson’s letters—in their sheer variety of registers and forms of bravado, humor, and self-deprecation—have the effect of challenging the “the strictures of womanhood and the discursive positions of submissive and dutiful daughter and sister” (114). But where Messmer tends to see Dickinson’s various voices and displays of emotion as strategic—she writes, for example, of how Dickinson’s letters include her “pose of an ‘older,’ more experienced sister patronizing her younger, less competent brother who thus comes to depend on her care and advice” (108)—I read them as genuine efforts to communicate, comfort, and, yes, advise. That is, I read them not as cases of “fashioning” or “posing” but as essentially truthful communications. That there are many sides to Dickinson, and that they apparently conflict at times, means only that she is as complicated as anyone else. My difficulty, I suppose, begins with the word “pose,” a term introduced into Dickinson scholarship by Austin when he says (upon reading his sister’s letters to Higginson) that “she definitely posed in those letters” (Sewall 227). Here, he registers an encounter with a side of Dickinson that he had not seen before. What these early Dickinson’s letters do, in my view, is present different sides of a person with many sides—no different, in that regard, from the way our own emails and texts and letters to friends and family members and colleagues and superiors might vary in all kinds of ways without (or without necessarily) presenting outright falsehoods.
be hanging; she misses seeing his hat, misses his slippers beneath the kitchen chair (L 109 and 115). His return, by contrast, holds out a “future full of sleighrides” (L 65).

Letters, by definition, are a reaching out. To the extent that they request a reply, they are a prodding. When disappointed, it is a short step to clinging: “Now if you dont answer this letter soon I shall – I shall do something dreadful,” she writes to Abiah. “So if you wish to save me from the commission of some terrible deed you must write me very soon” (L 9). To Austin, she complains still more bitterly: “Seems to me you are hardly fair, not to send me any letter – I was somewhat disappointed to be thus overlooked – my note from you once a week, had come so very punctually I did set my heart on getting a little something – even a word of love, a line not quite unmindful, and I had from my heart fully and freely forgiven you, but now I am very angry” (L 48).9 At such moments, what terrifies Dickinson is the prospect of being forgotten.

Above all else, in the face of distance and separation, she wants to be present in the thoughts of far-away others. “I’m so afraid you’ll forget me,” she writes to Emily Fowler in 1851, “through these cold winter days, when I cannot come to see you, that I cannot forbear writing the least little bit of a note—to put you in mind of me” (L 40).

For her part, she assures absent friends that they are being remembered, being spoken of, as if being talked about were something sacred. “We have all thought of you,” she assures Austin, only half-apologizing for not having written sooner, “and that is better than writing.”10 Similarly, her letters to Susan recount many scenes in which Dickinson and others think and talk

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9 For longer, sterner rebukes for not having written, see L 114 to Austin and L 172 to Susan. For a lengthy, wistful, slightly worried appeal, see L 103 to Susan.

10 One wonders, in a culture where praying for others is common, whether being thought of has a particularly powerful resonance. Dickinson herself resorts to language borrowed from scripture to describe the act of keeping an absent loved one in mind, as when a letter to Susan segues easily into a statement about eternity: “I dont forget you a moment of the hour, and when my work is finished, and I have got the tea, I slip thro’ the little entry, and out at the front door, and stand and watch the West, and remember all of mine – yes, Susie – the golden West, and the great, silent Eternity, for ever folded there, and bye and bye it will open it’s everlasting arms, and gathers us all” (L 103; I have deleted a comma after “everlasting” that is indicated by Johnson but not by Hart and Smith).
about their absent friend: “Always when the sun shines, and always when it storms, and always always, Susie, we are remembering you, and what else besides remembering: I shall not tell you, because you know! Were it not for dear Mattie, I dont know what we would do, but she loves you so dearly, and is never tired of talking about you, and we all get together and talk it oer and oer, and it makes us more resigned, than to mourn for you alone” (L 77).

Distance provokes her; absence goads her. Writing to Austin just two days after he has returned to Boston, she reports,

I have been trying to think this morning how many weeks it was since you went away – I fail in calculations – it seems so long to me since you went back to school that I set down days for years, and weeks for a score of years – not reckoning time ‘by minutes’ I dont know what to think of such great discrepancies between the actual hours and those which ‘seem to be.’ It may seem long to you since you returned to Boston – how I wish you could stay and never go back again. Everything is so still here, and the clouds are cold and gray – I think it will rain soon – Oh I am so lonely! (L 59)

Moving at nearly the speed of thought, taking up issues of personal emotion with varying degrees of urgency and playfulness, this paragraph presents the mind as it tries to calculate, to find the correct measure and the right words for, the experience at hand. Dashes stand in for other punctuation marks and underlining adds emphasis—both function here in ways that clarify the imagined delivery and thus the intended meaning. The writing strives to be clear before turning abruptly to the weather and then to a frank admission of the emotion that underlies the entire effort: “Oh I am so lonely!”

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11 This gesture of thinking of one who is absent occurs in various permutations: Dickinson assuring others that she thinks of them; Dickinson assuring absent friends that she and those around her frequently talk about them; Dickinson wondering if others are thinking of her; even Dickinson feeling certain that Austin is right at that very moment thinking of her (e.g. L 60). There is a sense, too, that being talked about will make one happy, as when she writes to Austin shortly after he has returned to Boston, “I said to Martha this morning that I was going to write and we decided between us that it would make you happier to have us talk about you and wish you could be here, and write you more again” (L 62).
Prompted by absence, this letter quickly resolves into an expression of Dickinson’s attachments:

You had a windy evening going back to Boston, and we thought of you many times and hoped you would not be cold. Our fire burned so cheerfully I couldn’t help thinking of how many were here and how many were away, and I wished so many times during that long evening that the door would open and you come walking in. Home is a holy thing—nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it’s blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on and one and another forsake, in whom you place your trust—here seems a bit of Eden which not the sin of any can utterly destroy—smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer it is and brighter than all the world beside.

Beginning with a cold coach ride and continuing by way of a warm fire, this paragraph posits “home” somewhere between “the world” and “Eden.” To Dickinson, the Eden of home is better than the biblical Eden because it is impossible to ruin or destroy. The outside world, by contrast, is peopled with those who will forsake your trust. Still, friendship and physical presence do matter, and a few lines later, she will encourage Austin to spend some time with Edmund Converse, a friend then living in Boston. And by the end of this paragraph, in this missive that dwells on Austin’s absence, Dickinson will enumerate all of the people who are present in her life: “Emily Fowler and Mat were here all afternoon yesterday—never saw Emily F—when she seemed more sincere—shall go and see her soon—Mat misses you very much, and her dear sister Susie. Henry Root was here all evening.” What comes through in this letter, more than anything, is her longing to be with others.

Given what we know about her decision, in later years, to remain mostly at home, it may still be surprising to find that Dickinson's early letters regard correspondence as a poor substitute for being together. She routinely counts down the days until her addressee will rejoin her.

Referring to the expected date of Austin’s return, she slips easily into the present tense: “Now

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12 This letter marks the first time “Eden,” a significant and recurring image, appears in any of her extant writing.
Austin, mark me, in four weeks we are all happy again!” (L 60). There is a sense of incompleteness in being separated from friends and family. She longs to sit at Jane Humphrey’s feet, look in her eyes, and tell all (L 35), while to Emily Fowler, she confesses, “I am very puny alone” (L 32). In these letters, it is presence she longs for, distance she rues.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in response to absence, and in the face of distance, Dickinson’s correspondence is rich in gestures of presence-making. Even in her earliest extant letters, the impulse is clear, as when she begins an 1845 letter to Abiah, “I have now sit down to write you a long, long letter. My writing apparatus is upon a stand before me, and all things are ready. I have no flowers before me as you had to inspire you. But then you know I can imagine myself inspired by them and perhaps that will do as well” (L 7). In bringing to life the scene of writing, this passage resembles the opening paragraph to Jane Humphrey: there, she gestures repeatedly to the plight of herself as letter writer; here, she offers a mini self-portrait. At such times, Dickinson’s own presence becomes part of the way the writing gets started: the moment of writing, the very fact of writing, becomes part of the writing.

There is something informal about such gestures, something cozy and confident, reflecting a level of comfort and intimacy with the addressee. They recur in letters to close friends, as when she reports to Jane Humphrey, “I’m just from the frosts, Jennie, and my cheeks are ruddy and cold –” (L 180), or when she begins a letter to Emily Fowler, “I have just come home from meeting, where I have been all day, and it makes me so happy to think of writing you that I forget the sermon and minister and all, and think of none but you” (L 161). But it is especially in her letters to Austin, who can easily imagine the scene at home, that

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13 By contrast, there are no such gestures in Dickinson's letters to people she does not know well.
14 See L 93 to Susan for another good example.
Dickinson seems intent on bringing the household to life. “We are waiting for breakfast, Austin, the meat and potato and a little pan of your favorite brown bread are keeping warm at the fire, while father goes for shavings” (L 58). As in her letters to friends but with more homely details to lean on, Dickinson frequently presents Austin with short portraits of the scene from which he is absent.

In such passages, not just the physical setting but the lived, present-tense moment of writing is brought to life, as when she writes to Austin, “I have made the fires, and got breakfast, and the folks wont get up, and I dont care for it because I can write to you” (L 89). For Austin, as for us, such passages offer a snapshot of Dickinson in the midst of her day-to-day life of chores, church, and weather: “Well Austin – it’s Sunday evening – Vinnie is sick with the ague – Mother taking a tour of the second story as she is wont Sabbath evening – the wind is blowing high, the weather very cold, and I am rather cast down, in view of all these circumstances” (L 159).

It is not that Dickinson does this explicitly in all her letters, and much less in all her poems. Rather, this emphasis on establishing the moment and the physical setting points to the way Dickinson’s writing roots itself, explicitly or implicitly, in the occasion of writing. As we saw in chapter one, by 1860 Dickinson’s poems are characteristically perched in the present tense. To the extent that they look back, they typically bring to life not just the (past) moment but also the (present) experience of looking back. It is this tendency of Dickinson’s poems to anchor themselves in the moment from which they arise that we see prefigured in the early letters.

At the same time, sometimes in the very same sentence, these letters evoke the scene of her absent addressee. Writing to Abiah in August, 1845, the fourteen-year old Dickinson muses,

15 As Messmer notes, Dickinson often writes her letters on Sundays, an act which Messmer characterizes as “transgressive” (33) of religious norms. (Susan, by contrast, rarely does so.) At the same time, the “day of rest” was just that for Dickinson: as this last excerpt makes clear, Dickinson was responsible for plenty of housework. Writing on Sunday seems to have been a practical solution for any woman tasked with regular household responsibilities.
“I can imagine just how you look now. I wonder what you are doing this moment. I have got an idea that you are knitting edging” (L 7). Five years later, also to Abiah, she will write, “you seem aware that I am writing you, and are amused I should think at any such friendly manifestation when you are already present” (L 31). It is as if the bridge of communication requires firm footings on both sides: both writer and reader are integral to the act of writing. As Salska notes in her study of Dickinson's letters, by the time Dickinson began saving her poems, “she had formed her notion of the writer-reader bond on the paradigm of the relation between intimate correspondents” (173). These, too, are gestures of informality, and combined with the recurrent act of bringing the scene of writing to life, they both rely on and contribute to a feeling of intimacy, the spirit of which will carry over into the poems.

In animating both the scene of reading and the scene of writing, Dickinson narrows the distance in between. Her letters constantly imagine away the distance or express frustration that she cannot do so, as when she writes to Susan in 1851,

I wept a tear here, Susie, on purpose for you – because this ‘sweet silver moon’ smiles in on me and Vinnie, and then it goes so far before it gets to you – and then you never told me if there was any moon in Baltimore – and how do I know Susie – that you see her sweet face at all. She looks like a fairy tonight, sailing around the sky in a little silver gondola with stars for gondoliers. I asked her to let me ride a little while ago – and I told her I would get out when she got as far as Baltimore, but she only smiled to herself and went smiling on. (L 56)

In this remarkable letter to Susan, written when they are close friends but well before Susan’s engagement to Austin, Dickinson cannot quite quell her instinct to dismiss the distance that

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16 Hart and Smith connect this feature of Dickinson’s correspondence to the practice of fiction writers: “the writer Dickinson participates in a long-established literary tradition by making both the addressee and the writer seem real, even present to the readers.” As a result, they argue, we ought to be “interpreting the letter as consciously paralleling fictional expressions of the period and not simply as authentic emotional exclamation” (Smith 122).

17 Commenting on those moments when Dickinson turns explicitly to the reader, Salska points to Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Hawthorne’s “Custom House,” two texts known to Dickinson. In both, we find moments where the narrator directly addresses the reader.
separates them. Just as a poem might move from one simile (or metaphor or image) to another, seeking the best way to render the experience at hand, Dickinson keeps trying to describe how the distance between them might be overcome. When one idea runs its course, she finds another:

I think she [the moon] is quite ungenerous – but I have learned the lesson and shant ever ask her again. To day it rained at home – sometimes it rained so hard that I fancied you could hear it’s patter – patter, patter, as it fell upon the leaves – and the fancy pleased me so, that I sat and listened to it – and watched it earnestly. Did you hear it, Susie – or was it only fancy?

The letters work to imagine presence in place of absence: in this case, if the moon refuses to bring them close, perhaps the rain will: “Susie – was it only fancy?”

Similarly, reaching out to Austin when he is ill, Dickinson writes,

Don’t tell them, will you Austin; they are all asleep soundly and I snatch the silent night to speak a word to you. Perhaps you are sound asleep, and I am only chatting to the semblance of a man ensconced in warmest blankets and deep, downy pillows. I am afraid not, dear Austin, I’m afraid that dreadful pain will keep you wide awake all this dreary night, and so afraid am I, that I steal from happy dreams and come to sit with you.” (L 66)

Such imagined moments of literally being together are an extreme case of making her presence felt, an aspect of Dickinson’s letters that has been described at length by Martin Orzeck in his study of Dickinson’s letters to Abiah Root. He notes that Dickinson has a “serious need to summon a presence out of the absence” (142) and describes Dickinson as “a writer who, from her mid-teens, demonstrated a passionate interest in the capacities of language and the imagination to evoke a sense of presence in the wake of personal loss and absence” (158).18 To me, the essential point is her seeming discovery that letters—and more generally the act of

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18 Orzeck’s study offers a compelling account of the ways Dickinson’s prose sets out to make art out of absence. In her letters to Abiah, he writes, “Dickinson strove to exploit the restorative capacity of language to its fullest and to achieve a communion of feelings both frank and intimate in the process” (158). More generally, he notes that “Dickinson’s ability not only to cope with loss but also to transform it into a prerequisite for artistic growth remains a lasting testament to her resourcefulness and a significant aspect of her achievement” (150). Miller similarly argues that Dickinson's letters and poems share a reliance on absence in order to create a palpable sense of presence (Grammar 9). Numerous scholars have detailed elements of “the quest” in Dickinson’s work, which often presupposes a distance to be traversed or overcome; see Porter (Art) and Weisbuch (“Prisming”), among others.
writing, of wielding language—can address and at times resolve, all at once, the problem of
distance, the fear of being forgotten, the desire to be remembered, and the wish to be heard. In
the words of Paula Bennett, letters and poems become, for Dickinson, places of “deeply personal
communings” (‘By a Mouth’ 94).  

In the world created by Dickinson’s letters, distance dissipates. “I am going to meeting
now,” she writes to Susan, then teaching in Baltimore. “Meet me at the Academy, and we will sit
together” (L 172). Or, finding herself at home (“The inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining
me”) while the rest of her family are at meeting, she tells Susan, “Don’t you go to meeting.
Come with me this morning” (L 77). Language is figured as something capable of transcending
the distance between writer and reader: it gathers both into a single moment of possibility.

Except, that is, when it cannot: while letters might successfully conjure a moment of
togetherness, so too they might narrate the failure to achieve one. In such cases, what we witness
is not a reunion but a frustrated attempt at one. We saw one example of this in Dickinson’s
attempt to ride the moon all the way to Baltimore. Similarly, she writes to Abiah,

Amherst and Philadelphia, separate indeed, and yet how near, bridged by a
thousand trusts and a ‘thousand times ten thousand’ the travellers who cross,
whom you and I may not see, nor hear the trip of their feet, yet faith tells us they
are there, ever crossing and re-crossing. Very likely, Abiah, you fancy me at
home in my own little chamber, writing you a letter, but you are greatly mistaken.
I am on the blue Susquehanna paddling down to you; I am not much of a sailor, so
I get along rather slowly, and I am not much of a mermaid, though I verily think I
shall be, if the tide overtakes me at my present jog. Hardhearted girl! I don’t
believe you care, if you did you would come quickly and help me out of this sea;
but if I drown, Abiah, and go down to dwell in the seaweed forever, I will not
forget your name, nor all the wrong you did me!

Why did you go away and not come see me? (L 69).

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19 Bennett notes, rather beautifully, that to Dickinson “Writing/reading poem-letters was a way of making love, a
moment of intimate congress, between two minds ‘without corporeal friend,’ or of mind alone, experiencing itself to
the fullest” (94). The phrase quoted by Bennett is from Dickinson’s June, 1869, letter to Higginson: “A letter always
feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend” (L 330).
As with the letter to Austin that resolves into a plaintive “Oh I am so lonely!” (L 59), this letter can only hold off a frank admission of emotion for so long: why *did* Abiah visit Amherst but leave without seeing Dickinson? With that thought lurking, what we trace is the path of the mind, the spells it works in language. Dickinson’s later letters will not just delay such admissions but omit them entirely; here, by contrast, we see the underlying emotion (palpable not just in the concluding question but also in the earlier “Hard-hearted girl! I don’t believe you care” alongside a reconstruction of the emotion in language. Witnessing the emotional truth and the fictional tale that it inspires, we see the before and the after.

These imaginings of actually being together, along with the literal-minded evocations of her own moment of writing and of her reader’s moment of reading, are features especially of Dickinson’s early letters. With time, they become less frequent. But what they reveal is a commitment to distance-closing and to direct address that, even when the more literal manifestations fall away, remain in place. In Dickinson’s poetry, they find a natural home in the many ways she turns to apostrophe, in the way intimacy is achieved in spite of the inherent distance between writer and reader, and more fundamentally in the assumptions they reveal about what language is being marshalled to do. Imagined, imaginative, vividly rendered: Dickinson responds to absence by leaning in, with language as her chosen tool.\(^\text{20}\) Her letters enact a full-hearted embrace of writing as a means of not just speaking across distance but eliding it.

\(^\text{20}\) Dickinson’s fantasies of transcending distance do not always require an actual letter. “I come and see you a great many times every day, though I don’t bring my body with me, so perhaps you don’t know I’m here,” she writes to Emily Fowler (L 111). To Jane Humphrey, she comments, “I have written you a good many letters since you left me – not the kind of letters that go in the post-offices – and ride in mail bags – but queer – little silent ones – very full of affection – and full of confidence – but wanting in proof to you – therefor not valid – somehow you will not answer them – and you would paper, and ink letters.” She wonders, “Sometimes I didn’t know but you were awake – and I hoped you wrote with that spirit pen – and on sheets from out the sky. Did you ever – and were we together in any of those nights?” (L 30).
If we turn to the poems, the mind we encountered in the letters is easy to detect. Let us begin at (or near) the beginning. The earliest poem that Dickinson herself saved was initially enclosed in a letter to Susan in March, 1853:

Write! Comrade, write!

On this wondrous sea
Sailing silently,
Ho! Pilot, ho!
Knowest thou the shore
Where no breakers roar –
Where the storm is oer?

In the peaceful west
Many the sails at rest –
The anchors fast –
Thither I pilot thee –
Land Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!

Emilie – (L 105)

To state the obvious: this is quite clearly a poem—rhyme and meter make it so, as do the capital letters at the beginning of each line. Moreover, while Dickinson’s letters to Susan during these same months are in ink, this page is copied in pencil, meaning it would have stood apart if enclosed with any of the letters from around then. At the same time, in being addressed to “Susie” and signed “Emilie,” in being grounded in a moment of address, and in echoing some of Dickinson's favorite imagery (the sea, the shore), the poem reminds us of her early letters. And by sending it to a friend, Dickinson treats this poem like a letter. In Salska’s words, when

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21 Dickinson “saved” this poem by later copying it (with revisions) onto a sheet included in Fascicle 1 in 1858. This poem appears as Fr 3 in Franklin’s Vario rum and as letter #15 in Hart and Smith’s Open Me Carefully. I print it as it appears in Johnson’s Letters, where it is dated “about March 1853.” This copy survives because Susan saved the letter, but Johnson concedes that it remains unclear exactly which letter the poem accompanied (note to L 105). According to Hart and Smith, “[t]his is the first poem that Emily is known to have sent to Susan” (44).
22 Her letters from the same period to Austin are in pencil, so this isn’t a firm line. My point is a narrow one: this sheet would have stood as something distinct from the letters Susan received around that time.
23 Johnson doesn’t say where, but “Susie” presumably appears on the flip side of the page.
Dickinson “started writing poems she treated them from the very beginning like letters; that is, she enclosed them when writing to her closest friends” (172-73). In various ways, then, this poem partakes of both genres. We see her practice of the two genres overlapping.

A palpable part of this poem is direct address. To begin with, in the copy sent to Susan, the very first line (which Johnson considers a title and which Hart and Smith seem to consider the first line) sets the poem up as an exchange between two “comrades.” Beyond that, the poem itself brings to life a moment of address complete with a reply. In the first stanza, a question is posed, a petition made, to the “Pilot”: “Knowest thou the shore / Where no breakers roar”? The second stanza contains the Pilot’s reply, a description of the place (it is located in the “peaceful west” and is characterized by “sails at rest” and “anchors fast”) and also a rendering of the experience of arriving there: “Eternity! / Ashore at last!” The poem brings to life two sides of a conversation, a call (perhaps even a prayer) and response.

“On this wondrous sea” (Fr 3), then, offers some simple ways that an early poem might resemble a letter: overlapping language and images, a shared interest in moments of address, the presence of salutation and signature, the very act of sending it in the mail. For a similar but contrasting example, we might look at a poem that also appears in Fascicle 1:

It’s all I have to bring today –
This, and my heart beside –
This, and my heart, and all the fields –
And all the meadows wide –
Be sure you count – sh’d I forget

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24 In Rowing in Eden, Smith writes that the phrase is “centered above the poem as a title would be” (170); in Open Me Carefully, the line is listed in the index as a first line, which is how it appears in their transcription. Johnson suggests that at this time Dickinson “had begun writing poetry and was probably encouraging Sue to do the same” (notes to L 105). But as he himself observes, Dickinson elsewhere writes to Austin that she had written to Sue “three times,” apparently without reply. There is no evidence that she is doing more than asking for a letter. Miller, whose edition of Dickinson’s poems reproduces the fascicles intact, notes neutrally that this poem was “sent to” Susan “with the comment ‘Write! Comrade, write!’” (Preserved 41). Mitchell, observing that Dickinson omitted “Write! Comrade, write!” when transcribing the poem into Fascicle 1, concludes that “its biographical potential does not seem to have been a significant element of its composition” (92-3; see also 356, n. 127). For evidence that Dickinson was occasionally frustrated and/or saddened by Susan’s failure to write, see L 172 and 177.
Some one the sum could tell –
This, and my heart, and all the Bees
Which in the Clover dwell. (Fr 17)

This playful lyric feels and sounds like a missive sent by Dickinson to a friend or loved one. The “It” of the first line and the “This” of the second and third lines would seem to be the poem itself; alternately, the poem might have accompanied a gift (a flower, a petal, a twig), since we know Dickinson often sent such things to friends, sometimes with an accompanying letter or poem. The poem has all the markings of a poem—an ABAB rhyme scheme, a 4-3-4-3 metrical pattern, capital letters at the beginnings of lines—even as it enacts a moment of address that is both personal and outwardly directed. It feels very much like a “poem-letter” (Bennett “By a Mouth” 94) or a “letter-poem” (Susan’s word, picked up by Hart, Smith, and others).

The wonder is that, as far as we know, it was not sent to anyone. Copied in 1858, this poem exists in one copy, tucked into Fascicle 1, where presumably no one but Dickinson ever saw it. As such, it offers a good example of how a Dickinson poem can take its cues from letter writing even as it commits to the genre of lyric: “It’s all I have to bring today” is definitely a poem, but it borrows significantly from Dickinson’s experience of writing oh so many letters over oh so many years. In cases where we know such poems were sent to a friend, we might say they serve as a kind of “letter-poem,” but in cases where we suspect it was never shared, or in cases where it was shared but was also included in a fascicle as a discreet text or was perhaps sent to more than one recipient, we are left to notice how the poem, while remaining a poem, leans on the habits, gestures, and strategies of a letter writer. This short lyric is fully conscious of its own status as text and its own gambit of address, and in so doing, Dickinson doesn’t so much

25 It is entirely possible, of course, that this poem was sent to someone and the letter doesn’t survive. But the point made here could be made of numerous other poems.
redraw the line between letter and poem as make a poem that honors the spirit of a letter. She writes a poem like a letter-writer.

For a third and final example, we might turn to a poem that Dickinson sent to two friends in 1859 and subsequently included in Fascicle 4:

Heart not so heavy as mine
Wending late home –
As it passed my window
Whistled itself a tune –
A careless snatch – a ballad –
A ditty of the street –
Yet to my irritated Ear
An anodyne so sweet –
It was as if a Bobolink
Sauntering this way
Carolled, and paused, and carolled –
Then bubbled slow away!
It was as if a chirping brook
Opon a dusty way –
Set bleeding feet to minuets
Without the knowing why!
Tomorrow, night will come again –
Perhaps, weary and sore –
Ah Bugle! By my window
I pray you pass once more. (Fr 88 B)

This poem begins in the past tense: very quickly, in the first eight lines, a whole scene comes to life: a listener at a window, a passerby, a whistled tune. We get, too, a glimpse of the underlying emotions: the listener’s heart is “heavy” and her ear “irritated,” while the tune of the passerby is, by contrast, an “anodyne so sweet.” The next eight lines try one then another simile to capture the effect: we get close with the first comparison, then closer with the second. What we trace in the progression from “Bobolink” to “brook” is the mind honing its way of perceiving and thus understanding the experience. Hearing the tune was like hearing a bobolink, presumably in its

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26 I use version B, the copy sent to Mary Bowles; the earliest version (A) exists only in copies made by a friend. Such copies raise doubts because copiers often play loose with punctuation. Version B, in Dickinson’s hand, is more trustworthy. Dickinson made a third copy (in quatrains, with six revisions of words) and included it in Fascicle 4.
“chirping” and in the way it suddenly appeared, and then too in the way it started and paused and started again; it was also, perhaps more precisely, like hearing the sound of a brook, with an emphasis now on its impact on the hearer.

That is, as we move from one simile to the next, we move from sound to listener, from an essentially passive experience of hearing the bird’s song (captured in the description of the bobolink’s song) to an active response (captured hauntingly in the image of bloody feet dancing) on the part of the hearer. In addition, while the four lines about the bobolink bring the image to a close—by the end of those four lines, the song has “bubbled slow away” so that the situation has returned to how it stood before the intervention of the song—the second simile ends with no such conclusion. We are left with the feet dancing, “Without the knowing why!” We sense, in the progression of similes, a mind at work as it seeks the best way to capture the experience: the event described is in the past, but the search for an adequate rendering is unfolding right before us, stanza to stanza.

This crescendo toward action, this lack of closure, and this sense of a searching mind combine exquisitely to set up the leap that occurs in the next line and in the final four lines as a whole:

Tomorrow, night will come again –  
Perhaps, weary and sore –  
Ah Bugle! By my window  
I pray you pass once more.

Here, the fully present-tense moment of the poem comes to the fore: we are no longer in the midst of the events described—the whistling, the hearing—but in the moment of those events being remembered and recounted. As the poem looks ahead to the next night, we gather that we are most likely perched shortly after the events described. It is from this moment that the poem has emerged and in this moment that the poem garners the concluding gesture of overt
apostrophe, the calling out to the passerby. Despite its past-tense beginning ("passed… Whistled") and its past-tense similes ("It was as if"), this poem shows itself to be, in the end, a present-tense experience.

There is no mistaking this poem for a letter—it clearly exists as a poetic text—but in resolving as it does into a moment of present-tense address, the poem again reveals Dickinson’s habit of situating her writing self fully in the present moment. And in one way this poem goes further than “It’s all I have to bring today”: whereas that poem was figured as a moment of literal address, this poem resolves into a moment of poetic apostrophe. That is, while “It’s all I have to bring today”—however poetic it might be—could be mistaken for an actual missive sent by Dickinson to one or another friend, “Heart not so heavy as mine” remains defiantly a poem. The apostrophe at the end is poetic: there is no pretense that these words are meant to reach the passing whistler. It is intended only for the reader of the poem.27

While “On this wondrous sea” was literally addressed to Susan (in L 105), and while “It’s all I have to bring today” feels like it could have been addressed and sent to someone, “Heart not so heavy as mine” avails itself of the conventions of apostrophe for the purposes of a poem. What we see is Dickinson composing poetry that channels her penchant for address toward purely poetic ends. She is by no means the first to do this in a poem, of course, and there was no shortage of models for such a move in the poems of her day. Apostrophe, as Culler reminds us, is as old as lyric itself.

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27 Jonathan Culler might put it this way: this poem is no more an attempt to communicate with the unknown whistler than Blake’s “The Sick Rose” is an attempt to communicate with the rose. It is, he would say, a form of “triangulated address,” in which the poet addresses rose or passerby for the purposes of a poem written for a reader (222-223).
But like all poets, at some point, Dickinson needed to discover such things for herself, needed to make such practices her own.\textsuperscript{28} We encourage young poets to read all they can; we invite them to borrow or steal; we tell them not to reinvent the wheel. That is all well and good and right and true. But in a sense we do reinvent the wheel. Finding something useful \textit{out there}, somewhere, wherever it may be, is the easy part. Whether Dickinson learned such things from others or discovered them sui generis within, the important step was for them to find a natural home in her habits as a writer, and it was precisely the writing of so many letters that provided an ample space, and more than a decade, in which to investigate, befriend, and internalize them. As Eberwein writes, “[i]t was through the process of writing letters that Dickinson first explored her literary resources and identified the themes, tone, self-image, and artistic strategies that would characterize her poetry” (\textit{Strategies} 47).\textsuperscript{29} Practiced and naturalized, even if not consciously, they become part of what it means, to Dickinson, to write.\textsuperscript{30}

To some scholars, what’s at stake here is not just the way Dickinson’s letters pave the way to her poems, but the extent to which the very line between letter and poem is interrogated by Dickinson’s writing practices. Salska, for example, refers to the border between letter and poem. Salska, for example, refers to the border between letter and poem.

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Keats: “Nothing ever becomes real until you experience it – Even a proverb is no proverb till your life has illustrated it” (230); Emerson: “What he [another soul] announces, I must find true in me” (\textit{Major Prose} 114).

\textsuperscript{29} Eberwein continues, “The letters, fluent and stylistically experimental from the start, gradually refined her experience into distilled units of associative imagery anticipating both her poems and her later, cryptic correspondence” (\textit{Strategies} 47). Among the “artistic strategies” and devices found in the letters, Eberwein lists puns, wordplay, coining startling phrases, the use of “extravagant […] imagery,” apostrophe, exhortation, repetitions, and “literary and scriptural allusions” (51).

\textsuperscript{30} The links between Dickinson’s letters and poems have been explored extensively and in vastly divergent ways. In addition to texts cited elsewhere, see especially Salska, who argues that the “letters to the female friends of Dickinson’s youth, to Susan Gilbert, and the drafts to ‘Master’ form a continuum, whose importance for the purposes of Dickinson’s art resides in the opportunities provided, on one hand, for cultivation of intense sensibility through enlarging the writer’s emotional experience and, on the other, for practicing the craft and skill of its expression” (171); Cynthia Wolff, who argues that letters became for Dickinson not just a means of communicating but also “a self-conscious, disciplined exercise in the artful use of language” (128); and Miller, who argues that Dickinson’s many letters and informal notes “provide the perfect analogue for the confiding but noninformative voice of Dickinson’s poems” (\textit{Grammar} 10). \textit{Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters} (eds. Eberwein and MacKenzie) brings together a remarkable set of essays, while Messmer’s \textit{A Vice for Voices} remains the only monograph devoted wholly to Dickinson’s correspondence.
poem as “permeable” (178), while Bennett points to the way Dickinson’s practice emerges over time, noting that “by maturity, poems had become letters to Dickinson and letters, poems” (“By a Mouth” 76). Hart and Smith offer an extended reading of Dickinson’s “blending of poetry with prose, making poems of letters and letters of poems, as a deliberate artistic strategy” (xxvi). And in a monograph focused entirely on Dickinson’s letters, Messmer writes of a “blur” between the two genres: “Especially Dickinson’s post-1850s epistolary self-conceptualizations and self-representations can best be understood in terms of such a blurring of factual needs and linguistic constructions of ‘fictions’ (rather than simply the unmediated ‘confessions’ of an essentialist self)” (80). 31

The essential point, it seems to me, is that, however rich we find the resonances and overlappings between letters and poems, such shared practices are rooted in Dickinson’s assumptions about what language is being called to do when she sits down to write. Throughout her work, there is a strong sense that language is being marshalled to bridge a distance, to bring to life a moment of address, to forge an occasion of connection in which intimacy is possible. When Salska argues that in Dickinson’s writing, “[p]oems become connected to the immediacy of the moment while letters participate in the impersonality of the finished artifact” (178), she points to a significant feature of Dickinson’s poetics, a feature that leads to the poetic practices we have noted.

Crucially, for all of this to happen—in letter or poem—the writing must commit to bringing to life the experience of a moment in which to “commune.” 32 Such an effect can be

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31 Messmer writes of Dickinson’s letters to her female friends that they are “instrumental in initiating a crucial borderblur between ‘factual’ sociocultural circumstances and ‘fictional’ epistolary responses, between referential and the nonreferential, between the personal and the literary realm” (104); Farr observes, “writing letters that scan, enclosing poems in letters, composing poems that are letters, revising and rerevising both, Dickinson did not always sharply distinguish between the uses of her art” (Passion 16).
32 “Commune” is Bennett’s word; “communion” is Orzech’s.
achieved in a poem written fully in the past tense, but this act of communing, addressing, or making presence fits most naturally in the present tense. In the first chapter, I noted the preponderance of present-tense poems in 1860. The same is true in 1858 and 1859: all but three of the forty-two poems copied in 1858, and all but two of the eighty-one poems copied in 1859, either are fully in the present tense or (which is the same thing) end in the present tense. In addition, each of the four poems that predate 1858 is in the present tense. From the very beginning, then, to write a poem goes hand in hand for Dickinson with the creation of just such a moment. Taken together with the other effects we have studied, what we see in Dickinson’s early letters are the habits and inclinations that push in the direction of a certain kind of poem, a poem that—distance and absence be damned—is laden with presence-making attention in the fully present-tense experience of unfolding language.

Reading through Dickinson’s early letters, you quickly realize this is a writer who cares about the experience of her readers, wants (at times) to make them laugh, hopes (at others) to bring something tangibly to life before their eyes, intends (at still others) for them to feel something. She does other things, too, such as insist that they write back or lament the intervening distance or request that they fill a prescription for her, but the reader’s joy and pleasure—these are recurrent concerns. She says as much in a letter to Abiah, which begins,

I love to sit here alone, writing a letter to you, and whether your joy in reading will amount to as much or more, or even less than mine in penning it to you, becomes to me just now a very important problem – and I will tax each power to solve the same for me; if as happy, indeed, I have every occasion for gratitude – more so, my absent friend, I may not hope to make you, but I do hope most earnestly it may not give you less. (L 69)

We see here the familiar weaving of writerly and readerly concerns, with one (the writer’s task) in service to the other (the reader’s experience), and this feeling of responsibility toward her
addressee is palpable throughout her correspondence. Thus, to Austin, she reports *not* writing until her mood lifts: “somehow I have to work a good deal more than I used to, and harder, and I feel so tired when night comes, that I’m afraid if I write you, ’twill be something rather bluer than you’ll be glad to see” (L 123).  

In both her choice of topics and her manner of treating them, Dickinson’s letters are more those of someone intent on pleasing, even entertaining, than of someone seeking to report the news from her side of the divide.

As pleaser, as entertainer, Dickinson is skilled. When she was a student at Amherst Academy, her principal later recalled, Dickinson’s “compositions were strikingly original” and “excited not a little envy” among her classmates (qtd. in Sewall 342). Her friend Emily Fowler later recalled Dickinson as one of the two “wits of the school” (qtd. in Sewall 370). We have seen these skills at work in countless letters, as when she offers the extended image of paddling down the Susquehanna in a fraught attempt to reach Abiah. Elsewhere, we see it when she jokes to Susan that “Vinnie is sewing away like a *fictitious* seamstress, and I half expect some knight will arrive at the door, confess himself a *nothing* in presence of her loveliness, and present his heart and hand as the only vestige of him worthy to be refused” (L 73).

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33 See L 65 for another example of her decision not to write when not in the right mood; see L 89 for an apology for not being able to “write you anything very refreshing this time” because she is so tired. There are also occasions where she writes but does not send a letter; “I wrote you last week,” she writes to Mrs. Holland, “but thought you would laugh at me, and call me sentimental” (L 133).

34 “Entertaining” would have been a feature of Dickinson’s study of composition in school, as Scheurer’s fascinating study of student writing makes clear. She notes that extant compositions from a student of Dickinson’s generation, when compared to those of Dickinson’s own father when he was a student, demonstrate “a quite different set of expectations […] The purpose of her [Dickinson’s contemporary’s] writing is not to inform or to persuade, but simply to entertain” (“Speaking and Composition” 13). Habeggar, though, observes that Dickinson’s cleverness—he has in mind Dickinson’s valentines from the early 1850s, but the same might be said of her early letters—is an impediment she needs to overcome before she can write her mature poetry: “In order to become the extremely personal, passionate, and complex poet of the 1860s, Dickinson had to cease being the brilliant entertainer and somehow empower that hidden female subject” (234).

35 We should remember that a standard part of the curriculum was oral recitation of one’s writing. Separately, Dickinson and her friends seem to have shared their work, occasionally assembling short miscellanies. Valentine’s Day in particular was a moment when one’s writing, witty or otherwise, was circulated.
Humor is often the order of the day when Dickinson sits down to pen a letter, as when she kids her uncle for not having written to her: “Dont remember a letter I was to receive when you got back to Boston – how long and how broad – how high – or deep it should be – how many cars it should sink – or how many stages tip over – or the shaking of earth when it rested,” she writes, and she is just getting started. “[T]here remains no more but to fight. War Sir – ‘my voice is for war!’ Would you like to try a duel – or is that too quiet to suit you – at any rate I shall kill you – and you may dispose of your affairs with that end in view […] Uncle Loring and Aunt Lavinia will miss you some to be sure – but trials will come in the best of families” (L 29). We should imagine Uncle Norcross reading this letter to his family, or perhaps imagine several listeners gathered around as one of his daughters reads it aloud.

Fun, pure and simple. But beyond that, what we see is an actual situation (wanting a letter) being transformed into an occasion for artifice. And while it might seem like good fun and nothing more, beneath the humor lies an easy-to-underestimate feature of Dickinson’s early letters: the leap into fiction. The letter, seeking a laugh or aiming to entertain, veers away from the facts and into something made up. Such leaps are a prominent feature of her early letters: they leap easily from the actual to the imagined, the better to achieve the desired effect on the reader.

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36 For the quoted phrase (“My voice is for war”) Johnson points to Milton: “My sentence is for open war” (II. 51). Another possible source is Thomas Moore’s “Orator Puff,” a poem much anthologized in the early nineteenth century and included in several elocutionary textbooks. The phase also pops up in the correspondence of James Madison, the correspondence of General Custer, and elsewhere. On the general topic of humor in Dickinson’s work, see especially Comic Power in Emily Dickinson (1993), edited by Juhasz, Miller, and Smith.

37 Dickinson at times expressed reservations about letters being addressed to more than one person. Writing in November, 1866, she opens a letter to Mrs. Holland, “A mutual plum is not a plum,” and adds a little later, “Send no union letters” (L 321). Still, she must have known her letters would be shared, and she herself often shared those she received. When writing to a married friend, her general practice is to write to one of them and to include salutations and regards for the other, as her numerous letters to Samuel Bowles and Mrs. Holland indicate. Her letters to her two Norcross cousins usually address one (L 228) but sometimes “both” (L 225).
Even catching a cold becomes an occasion for creation. In what Orzeck calls a “virtuoso narrative,” we get a glimpse of the kind of writing that might have inspired envy in her classmates. In 1850, she writes to Abiah,

I am occupied principally with a cold just now, and the dear creature will have so much attention that my time slips away amazingly. It has heard so much of New Englanders, of their kind attention to strangers, that it’s come all the way from the Alps to determine the truth of the tale – it says the half was’nt told it, and I begin to be afraid it was’nt. Only think, came all the way from that distant Switzerland to find what was the truth! Neither husband – protector – nor friend accompanied it, and so utter a state of loneliness gives friends if nothing else. You are dying of curiosity, let me arrange that pillow to make your exit easier! I stayed at home all Saturday afternoon, and treated some disagreeable people who insisted upon calling here as tolerably as I could – when evening shades began to fall, I turned upon my heel, and walked. Attracted by the gaiety visible in the street I still kept walking till a little creature pounced upon a thin shawl I wore, and commenced riding – I stopped, and begged the creature to alight, as I was fatigued already and quite unable to assist others. It would’nt get down, and commenced talking to itself – ‘cant be New England – must have made some mistake, disappointed in my reception, dont agree with accounts. (L 31)

Before the tale is done, the creature will follow her home, kiss her “immoderately,” and sleep for days in her bed. “I sneezed so loud one night,” concludes Dickinson, “that the family thought the last trump was sounding, and climbed into the currant-bushes to get out of the way.”

Read as a group, Dickinson's letters of the 1850s reveal her early understanding that there is no reason to feel bound by the facts at hand. As Eberwein writes, “The main function of Emily Dickinson’s early letters seems to have been to grasp attention in intensively personal encounters, something she did by ignoring the news” (49), adding that “[f]eelings were what Dickinson’s letters communicated best—often to the exclusion of situation, just as her poems would do” (51). While the purpose of a letter is at least partly to share news from home and to convey remembrances, Dickinson’s commitment to communicating personally and intimately (on the one hand) and to entertaining or bringing joy to her reader (on the other) opens the door
to freely inventing and concocting. When writing, her imagination is engaged, and we frequently find ourselves lifted from this world into an imagined one.\textsuperscript{38}

Such leaps away from the situation at hand become an essential component in Dickinson’s writing, and these jumps from fact to fiction constitute just one of three ways her early letters manage to step away from what she elsewhere refers to, in a letter to Austin, as “tell[ing] you all the news” (L 89). A second way concerns language itself: here, language itself embodies the leap, as we remain in touch with the facts at hand but leave behind any semblance of plain, reportorial telling. Thus, where she might simply say that she is thinking of Austin, she instead writes, “a shadow falls upon my morning picture – where is the youth so bold, the bravest of our fold, a seat is empty here – spectres sit in your chair and now and then nudge father with their long, bony elbows” (L 58, October 1851). Elsewhere, writing to Jane Humphrey in 1852, she launches into descriptive passages of the world around her: “[A]nd the big brown Earth is busy, arraying herself in green – first she puts on pantalettes, then little petticoats, then a frock of all colors, and such sweet little stockings and shoes – no, they are not shoes, they are least little bits of gaiters, laced up with blossoms and grass. Then her hair, Jennie, perfectly crowned with flowers” (L 86). Colorfully, using images and personification, along with the by-now familiar gestures of underlining to emphasize the act of sharing this text, this passage feels very much like an attempt to please her reader through language itself.

\textsuperscript{38} Messmer argues that Dickinson’s letters “begin to change substantially” around the time of her letter to Abiah in late 1850 (76). Thereafter, “[t]he letter-writing act itself is consequently redefined as a creative, literary task dependent on imagination and inspiration” and “[e]ntertaining her audience now becomes Dickinson's major purpose in writing letters” (77). The trend pointed to by Messmer seems generally true, but entertainment and even a certain literariness have been present in Dickinson’s letters from the beginning, and her negotiations (especially with Austin) about conveying news or disclosing feelings both continue into the 1850s. For example, she can still write to Austin, in 1853, “Somehow I am lonely lately – I feel very old every day, and when morning comes and the birds sing, they don’t seem to make me so happy as they used to. I guess it’s because you’re gone, and there are not so many of us as God gave for each other. I wish you were at home” (L 123).
Dickinson’s term for such moments is “poetize,” a word she uses in an 1852 letter to Susan: “I mourn this morning, Susie, that I have no sweet sunset to gild a page for you, nor any bay so blue – not even a little chamber way up in the sky, as your’s is, to give me thoughts of heaven, which I would give to you. You know how I must write you, down, down, in the terrestrial; no sunsets here, no stars; not even a bit of twilight which I may poetize – and send you!” (L 77). Some critics have read Dickinson’s departures from (mere) non-fictional telling as rebellious or transgressive, and this is doubtless true when the letters are read in the context of nineteenth-century manuals on letter writing and etiquette. Women, Messmer notes, were counseled to write letters devoid of fiction, metaphor, or decoration. The prescribed purpose on sitting down to write was to reach out in conversational, nonliterary prose, and women were specifically counselled not to revise their letters (30-35). Manuals such as John Bennett’s Letters to a Young Lady (1824) pointed to epistolary prose as “the only style of writing of which they [women] will find it inconvenient to be ignorant.” In her letters, a woman’s “thoughts are expressed spontaneously, as they flow, and become, more immediately, (what every letter always should be) a lively, amusing, written conversation. A man attends to niceties of grammar; or well turned periods; a woman gives us the effusions of her soul.” Poetry, according to Bennett, risked exciting a woman’s “sensibility to an extravagant degree” (qtd. in Messmer 29, 28).

39 I hear, though I haven’t seen it noted elsewhere, a faint echo of Shakespeare here. I’m thinking of Richard II’s speech at a key moment of self-positioning in relation to Bolingbroke, when he says, “Down, down, in the base court.” A slight echo, perhaps, but Dickinson was exceptionally well-versed in Shakespeare.

40 Messmer concludes, “[i]t is against this classification of women’s letters as being emotional, nonliterary, and endowed with a primarily social, utilitarian function, as well as against the concomitant strict separation between poetic and epistolary discourses, I argue, that Dickinson’s correspondence constitutes a powerful statement” (31-32). There is some evidence that Dickinson began revising her letters in the 1850s, though few actual drafts survive. Wolff points to similarities between letters in the mid-1850s as evidence that Dickinson seems to have kept drafts or notes from earlier letters, “which she evidently kept to refer to when shaping the style of subsequent letters” (128). While it does seem likely to me that Dickinson began drafting letters around this time, such echoes are not the evidence I would point to, as I tend to credit a poet’s memory more than this. Images, phrases, even whole sentences have a way of echoing in the writerly brain.
What stands out is the extent to which some of Dickinson’s early practices do conform to prescribed norms (e.g. writing amusing, effusive letters) while others refuse to adhere to prescribed norms (e.g. the literariness of her letters, her leaps into fiction, her use of poetic language, and her eventual drafting and revising of letters). Moreover, pretty much all of these practices seem to be part of her letter-writing from the very beginning. This suggests that even when Dickinson was writing in line with the manuals of her day, she wasn’t doing so out of obedience to them: just because Dickinson read something that coincides with her practice does not mean she heeded that particular piece of advice.\(^1\) She might, rather in the spirit of Emerson, have experienced such moments as confirmations of already-held beliefs or opinions. Emerson and Dickinson, it seems to me, would both be hard pressed to change based on the advice of another. In Dickinson’s case, it rather seems that she was, from the very beginning, heeding her own sense of language. She was, from early on, writing the way she wanted.\(^2\)

Throughout Dickinson’s early correspondence, we find a writer who is evidently thrilled to exchange the language of news-telling for the joys that can be created through writing itself. As Tingley notes, rather than accept letters as a woman’s responsibility, Dickinson’s early letters “redefined letter-writing as a pleasure rather than a dreaded duty or household chore” (qtd. in Messmer 32). There is ever an appeal, implicit or explicit, to the pleasure and power of language. At times, we might feel we are witness to Dickinson’s own discovery of this pleasure and power; short of that, we frequently bear witness to moments when she delights in both.

\(^{41}\) Similarly, just because she refused to obey certain prescribed norms does not mean she was a committed rebel.

\(^{42}\) That she chooses to retain certain aspects of her early style and to drop others shows that her “mature” style was, as Stonum argues, “invented” (24). I return to this point below, as it needs to be made carefully: my argument is that Dickinson’s early letters reveal habits of mind that foreshadow her later writing, but in no way am I arguing that she simply wrote the way she thought. Her poetics emerge from working with, and from re-working, her earliest instincts about writing: she will curb her effusiveness, for example, but she will opt for greater and bolder leaps.
 Appropriately, then, no sooner has she lamented the impossibility of poetizing to Susan, Dickinson is off to do just that, to embroider in poetic terms: “Yet Susie, there will be romance in the letter’s ride to you – think of the hills and the dales, and the rivers it will pass over, and the drivers and conductors who will hurry it on to you; and wont that make a poem such as can ne’er be written?” (L 77). Conversational, perhaps, but artfully so. The cascade of one “and” after another brings this passage to life even as the journey it imagines closes the distance between them and becomes a poem in and of itself. As with those passages where fiction replaces fact, here too the leaps are not so much in what the language is describing (the underlying thoughts or feelings) but in how. Such passages reveal moments where Dickinson is enjoying, reveling in, the spells that language can cast for the benefit of an appreciative reader.

A third kind of leap brings us beyond the quotidian altogether. Typically, it involves a leap into the language of scripture or into full-fledged imaginings of what the scripture foretells, but the fundamental gesture is of radically expanding the frame of reference from daily life to something much larger. In a letter to Susan that is achingly full of love for her absent friend, for example, Dickinson describes how she and Martha talked about her:

Our last words were of you, and as we said Dear Susie, the sunshine grew so warm, and out peeped prisoned leaves, and the Robins answered Susie, and the big hills left their work, and echoed Susie, and from the smiling fields, and from the fragrant meadows came troops of fairy Susies, and asked “Is it me”? No, Little One, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor can the heart conceive” my Susie, whom I love.

These days of heaven bring you nearer and nearer, and every bird that sings, and every bud that blooms, does but remind me more of that garden unseen, awaiting the hand that tills it. (L 92)

Interestingly, this last line figures a poem as not just a thing but a process in which distance is overcome.

For more on Dickinson's use of “and” and, more generally, of parataxis, see Miller, *A Poet's Grammar*, 30-37; for the ways that “and” echoes biblical style, see 132-38.
Such language—note again how the repeated use of “and” adds a literary, even biblical, tone to the passage—works to gradually broaden the frame of reference. Beginning with the imagined, magical response on the part of leaves, Robins, hills, and fairies to Susan’s name, the passage goes on to invoke Corinthians 2:9 (the quoted line) and then to mentions of “heaven” and of a “garden unseen.” The language here leaps effortlessly from one register to another, adapting biblical language to describe earthly love, “heaven” to describe life on earth, and those “unseen gardens” to describe a place that seems somehow to straddle both worlds.

Similarly, a passage that begins with a simple effort to comfort Austin ends up, by paragraph’s end, somewhere else:

… do not be lonely. Susie is lonely, and Martha, and I am lonely too, and this is a lonely world, in the cheerfulness aspects of it. We will not live here always— but [?] will dwell together beyond the bright blue sky, where ‘they live whom we call dear.’ The winter will fly swiftly, then will be the spring— think of nothing but hope— heed nothing but anticipation— ‘the griefs of the present moment are not to be compared with the joys which are hereafter.’ Bye and bye you are coming home— so is Susie— so is joy and gladness, which have been staying away just as long as you have. Don’t mind the days— some of them are long ones but who cares for length when breadth is in store for him, or who minds the cross, who knows he’ll have a crown? (L 63; the square brackets and question mark in the third sentence are Johnson’s to indicate a missing or uncertain word.)

This paragraph fascinates in its ability to render one world (in which Dickinson and Austin, as well as Susan and Martha, are sadly separated but can look forward to being together in a few months) in terms of another (in which they will all be together in the “bright blue sky” of eternity). The quoted lines\textsuperscript{45} bring the two worlds close. Dickinson clearly has no compunction about using religious language to render earthly feelings.\textsuperscript{46} The blending is complete: should we

\textsuperscript{45} The first is presumably from a psalm or hymn known to Dickinson and Austin, although I have yet to discover the source; the second echoes Romans 8:18, which (in the version of the Bible owned by Dickinson’s family) reads, “For I reckon, that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be real in us” (Holy Bible).

\textsuperscript{46} In one of my favorite examples, Dickinson writes to Austin, “Glad to know you were better— better physically, but who cares for a body whose tenant is ill at ease? Give me the aching body, and the spirit glad and serene, for if the gem shines on, forget the mouldering casket!” (L 54).
understand those “joys of hereafter” located “beyond the bright blue sky” as a reference to the afterlife, or is she using such language metaphorically to describe the time they will be together?

The answer, in the context of the full passage, seems to be both.

Dickinson’s word for such leaps is “illustrate,” as in a well-known letter sent to Abiah in 1850: “Where do you think I’ve strayed, and from what new errand returned? I have come from ‘to and fro, and walking up, and down’ the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he’d been, but not to illustrate further I tell you I have been dreaming, dreaming a golden dream, with eyes all the while wide open” (L 36). Here, Dickinson specifically contrasts illustrating with telling: she will tell Abiah about her dream after illustrating the experience in literary and scriptural terms. She is aware, even at this early moment, of the degree to which she is departing from straight-forward reporting. Years later, Austin will complain about precisely this aspect of Dickinson’s letters, or so it seems from her reply: “you say you dont comprehend me, you want a simpler style. Gratitude indeed for all my fine philosophy!” (L 45). Elsewhere, it becomes clear that what Austin wants is news from home, but here he seems to have specifically complained about her way of writing, her “style.” He wants her to “tell,” and she tries, but even her letters to Austin jump at the chance to write as she pleases. “Vinnie will tell you all the news,” she writes, “so I will take a little place to describe a thunder shower which occurred yesterday afternoon” (L 89). She then does just that, filling a lengthy paragraph, more than half the letter, with her description, after which she notes, “I tho’t of you all the time, and I thought too, of Susie; I did wish you both here through all that blessed shower.” She would rather paint a picture, reach out to her reader, or (as here) do both.47

47 Dickinson often thinks about writing in terms of painting, usually when lamenting her inability to truly render a particular scene or emotion. For example, describing how much she misses Susan, Dickinson writes, “I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be – solitude, and the figures – solitude – and the lights and shades, each a solitude” (L 176). Four years later, in one of the so-called Master Letters,
Such moments are common in Dickinson’s early letters: a passage (sometimes a single sentence) that begins in the day-to-day world around her manages, by its end, to touch on or invoke broader topics such as faith, eternity, or heaven. Almost without noticing, we go from thinking about one thing to thinking about something else, and in the process, the aperture of reading and of imagining widens. At times, such references are easy, passing, as when she writes to Mrs. Holland, “Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above” (L 179). Here, the stress seems to be on the “and” that joins her thanks for this world (in which she hopes, despite being so busy, to see her friend soon) to her thanks for that other world (where they will have ample time together). Similarly, writing to Jane Humphrey about the family’s upcoming move from one house to another, Dickinson writes, “No day goes by, little One, but has its thoughts of you, and its wish to see you. When shall you come again? We shall be in our new house soon; they are papering now, and — Jennie, we have other home — ‘house not made with hands.’ Which first will we occupy?” (L 180).

Scholars have long observed that no text is more quoted in Dickinson’s work than the Bible, and a vast body of scholarship has detailed the way her poems and letters put religious texts to use in achieving their own ends. Her sources include the countless hymns and psalms she heard and recited in church, the texts and lectures she encountered in school, the Bible she writes, “I wish that I were great, like Mr. Michael Angelo, and could paint for you” (L 187). She goes on to note, “You ask me what my flowers said – then they were disobedient – I gave them messages.” Where writing fails, then, painting might succeed. More generally, in Dickinson’s conception of communication, there is an interesting triangulation between writing (which is her chosen medium), painting (which offers something that writing cannot), and speaking (in which we “bruise each other less […] than in writing, for then a quiet accent helps words themselves too hard” [L 332]). In each case, Dickinson indicates her awareness of a limit on the act of writing, an awareness of what it cannot, at times, achieve. Unlike writing, both painting and speaking rely on physical presence. Part of their appeal, then, derives from the fact that they exist in a world that (by definition) has none of the distance that so much of Dickinson’s writing seeks to overcome.

48 Key texts include Nimble Believing by McIntosh, Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture by Morgan, and all three of the major biographies (Sewall, Wolff, and Habegger). Important essays include “Emily Dickinson’s Literary Allusions” by Pollak, “Is Immortality True?” by Eberwein, and “Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture” by Reynolds. See, too, the short section on biblical language in Miller’s Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar.
studied in school and heard recited by her father each morning when the family gathered in
prayer. And there was precedent, too, for the borrowing and repurposing of religious texts. In his
study of the many different vocabularies and registers in Dickinson’s poetry, Reynolds mentions
several prominent contemporary preachers of Dickinson’s day and argues that she would have
learned such borrowing from them: “What new religious stylists like Wadsworth and Park had
finally taught Emily Dickinson is that religion could be freely applied to many secular situations
and expressed through startling imagery” (171). Thus, whereas in an early letter to Abiah,
Dickinson feels the need to apologize for using scriptural language,\(^49\) she soon dispenses with the
apologies and quotes them freely, seamlessly. What once felt like a risky leap no longer feels
quite so bold; rather, it satisfies her sense of what language does when it is brought to bear on
experience and reaches out to a reader.

When it comes to her poems, Dickinson’s use of biblical passages plays an essential role
in the meanings made, in the emotions and thoughts presented, and in the performances
achieved. But reading these early letters, what stands out is the way such gestures enact a habit
not unlike her habits of fictionalizing and “poetizing”: what we see, in addition to any particular
contribution to meaning, is the way Dickinson’s writing is given to leaps away from the
quotidian situation and into realms of language and thought. What we see is a habit of mind, a tic
at the intersection of language and experience. Given a situation, the pressure Dickinson
experiences when writing is centrifugally away from its concreteness, outward into orbits of
language and moments of more profound contemplation.\(^50\)

\(^{49}\) “Excuse me quoting from the Scripture, dear Abiah, for it was so handy in this case I couldn’t get along very well
without it” (L 8, August 1845). On the question of Dickinson incorporating quotations and allusions into her own
writing, see also \textit{Reading in Time}, where Miller connects Dickinson’s practice to the “widespread […] culture of
reprinting dominant in the United States from the early nineteenth century into the 1850s” (95).

\(^{50}\) I want to be clear that in writing about Dickinson’s “habits of mind,” I am not arguing that Dickinson's poetry is
the result of a quirky personality. Stonum summarizes this view as follows: “It has sometimes been tempting to
explain her verbal eccentricities as the spontaneous expressions of a mind as singular as the language in which it
True, this urge to embellish, this instinct for invention, this flair for the fictional and propensity for the poetic, this love of the leap—none of this, by itself, makes a poet. It may have been a bold move, as Messmer has argued, in as much as Dickinson discards the gendered expectations of how women were expected to write letters, and it may have been exceptionally clever when practiced by someone with Dickinson’s flair for language, as countless readers have celebrated, but it was not, is not, in and of itself, poet-making.

The truth is that, at its deepest level, perhaps we will never account fully for Dickinson’s talent. The heart of the heart of creativity, be it Dickinson or any artist we revere, may well lie beyond our gaze. But in spending time with her letters, we begin to discern what her talent had to work with and how it found its way into poetic language. We can trace the way her impulses took shape, the way she made choices about the forms of language she would employ, and the way they managed to chart a course beyond where others had gone. If Dickinson had not gone on to become a poet, we might notice other things. But she did, and while we must resist the urge to read them as leading inexorably toward the poetry that follows, at the same time, there are hints of what is to come.

I have been arguing that these habits offer a glimpse into how her mind worked, where her thinking tended to take her, and ultimately what it meant for her to sit down and write. We are, in a sense, pondering Dickinson’s genius, but in the old sense of the world: not brilliance but (in the words of the first few entries in Dickinson’s copy of Webster’s Dictionary) the “peculiar structure of mind which is given by nature to an individual, or that disposition or bent of mind

more or less directly manifests itself. An odd style from an odd woman, in other words” (31). As he goes on to note, “Dickinson can hardly be considered a primitive artist.” As Stonum himself and others make clear, Dickinson chooses her style, and it is a style focused on creating a precise set of effects. My point is that this choice or invention was—for Dickinson, as perhaps for many poets—a matter of both an inward and an outward listening.
which is peculiar to every man, and which qualifies him for a particular employment; a particular natural talent or aptitude of mind for a particular study or course of life; as, a genius for history, for poetry, or painting” (24). Your genius, in this sense, is what distinguishes you from others, what defines your unique talents. Dickinson’s genius is clearly on display in the early letters. The recurring concern with distance and with overcoming it, the leaps that reach searchingly outward, the burning awareness of both the reader’s and the writer’s participation in the experience of correspondence, the settling into a moment of shared time—that is, everything we have considered in this chapter—this is how she tended to think, and these are her habits when wielding language. All of this is what makes Dickinson Dickinson.51

With this in mind, we can perhaps notice a few things about the early poems.

When Roses cease to bloom, Sir,
And Violets are done –
When Bumblebees in solemn flight
Have passed beyond the Sun –
The hand that paused to gather
Opon this Summer’s day
Will idle lie – in Auburn –
Then take my flowers – pray! (Fr 8, 1858)

51 Later in life, Austin jotted down a few notes on the topic of genius, of which Sewall writes, “[i]t seems inescapable that he had Emily in mind” (224). Among other things, Austin’s notebook contains the following comments: “Genius is Veracity,” “With Genius there is always youth and never the obituary eloquence of memory,” and “Genius deals with the Elemental the roots of things and takes nothing second hand” (qtd. in Sewall 224). Sewall guesses that “some of the items are snatches from his reading, but most seem to be his own, the kind of thing he and Emily discussed together, or later, he and Mabel” (224). In fact, all of these phrases are attributed to Emerson in “Mr. Emerson in the Lecture Room,” a reminiscence of Emerson as a public speaker, published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1883, though originally written as a letter, dated “Boston, April 28, 1870” (A. F. 823-824, 818). Austin also sketches a few notes on “Fancy” and “Imagination,” which Sewall reads as implicitly contrasting “the world of the Evergreens” including “Sue and her crowd” with his sister (224). Austin writes, “Fancy is full of accidental surprises and amuses the vacant or idle mind – / Imagination silences Fancy – / Fancy becomes speechless in its presence – / Imagination deals with the identity of things / It is more central, Tragic” (qtd. in Sewall 224-25). This last comment, writes Sewall, is “one of the best of its generation” in terms of capturing something essential of Dickinson herself (225). But these words, too, come directly from “Mr. Emerson in the Lecture Room,” although the exact words attributed to Emerson are, “It is real, central, tragic” (A. F. 822). A. F. is actually Annie Adams Fields (Bosco).
This poem feels very much like a missive that would have accompanied a bunch of flowers, but (as was the case with “It’s all I have to bring today –”) only a fascicle copy is extant. This poem is, on the surface, quite simple. An avid gardener, Dickinson was especially attuned to the visible effects of summer’s end—the withering of flowers, the departing of the birds, etc.—and the first four lines look ahead to precisely that moment when flowers and bees alike will have vanished. Perhaps the fourth line, with its reference to passing “beyond the sun,” signals a larger frame, but it might simply refer to a great distance. Still, Dickinson would presumably know that bees do not migrate, and their “solemn flight” is the first hint we get that we are not only in the world of passing seasons.

That hint is affirmed in the final four lines, where the frame expands right before our eyes. First, we see the day’s events, the pausing and the gathering of flowers. But by the end of line six, we realize that the sentence has yet to reach its verb. We have been in a four-line dependent clause (“When… When…”) and then in a two-line subject (“The hand that pauses to gather / Opon this Summer’s day….”) It is when we reach the verb in line 7, a moment the first six lines have been carefully deferring, that the hint of something larger is fully realized. The poem’s claim, we discover, is that the hand that has picked these flowers “will idle lie – in Auburn –”

The mention of “Auburn” is subtle but precise: with its meaning as an adjective being “brown” or “of a dark color” (Webster’s), the word invokes the color of autumn and thus continues the seasonal theme. But most scholars agree that the word here refers to Mt. Auburn

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52 Again, it is entirely possible that a copy was included in correspondence and has been lost. As Farr writes, this poem was “[p]robably written, like many of her poems, to accompany a bouquet” (Gardens 96). In Fascicle 1, however, it appears as a discreet poem copied onto sheet 4.
Cemetery in Cambridge, MA, which Dickinson visited in 1846. And this moment, which the entire poem has been building toward, is underscored by Dickinson’s choice of poetics: after encountering two commas and two dashes in the first four lines, the center of the poem—this statement about the fate of the “hand that paused to gather”—unfolds over two and a half lines without any punctuation, so that, quite quickly, we simultaneously reach the verb (thus completing the sentence) and step from the realm of seasons into the realm of mortality. The poem, which began as a seemingly simple comment on the passing of time in terms of seasons, becomes, gently in the hint of “beyond the Sun” and then emphatically in line 7, a poem that is also about the death of the speaker. The final line clinches the lyric as an act of apostrophe, completing the gesture of “Sir” in line 1.

Present from the very beginning, Dickinson’s leaps will grow bolder over time. And while the word “leap” does not appear frequently in Dickinson scholarship, the gesture is everywhere discussed under other labels. For example, both concision and disjunction, to name two prominent topics taken up by Dickinson’s readers, have at their root the poetic leap: what we experience as readers to be moments of disjunction or concision are, from the point of view of the writer, moments where the language of the poem takes not one step but three or seven or nineteen. What we see in an early poem such as “When Roses cease to bloom, Sir,” is Dickinson’s early comfort with precisely that kind of leap, akin to the way her letters might (to return to L 63) begin by lamenting the “lonely world” that has separated Dickinson from Susan

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53 Judith Farr writes, “The concept of Mt. Auburn, a cemetery planned and laid out as a garden-park and one whose avenues were named for the flowers she preferred—‘Gentian,’ ‘Heliotrope,’ ‘Violet,’ ‘Anemone,’ ‘Tulip,’ ‘Harebell,’ ‘Orchis,’ ‘Geranium,’ ‘Narcissus,’ ‘Daisy,’ ‘Camellia,’ ‘Primrose’—always strongly appealed to her” (Gardens 96). Other poems make clear that to “lie” is to have died (see e.g. Fr 124).
54 If the poem accompanied a bouquet of flowers, the surface meaning here is clear. Absent the flowers, as is the case the fascicle copy, one might read “flowers” as denoting the poem itself, reminding us of similar gestures in, for example, Shakespeare’s sonnets (where the fact that the poem will outlast everything is emphasized). Alternately, “take my flowers” might be read along the lines of many a poem that essentially says, Take me, in the spirit of Marvell’s “To a Coy Mistress” or Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”
and Austin yet end by asking, “who cares for length when breadth is in store for him, or who minds the cross, who knows he’ll have a crown?”

Another poem to consider in this context is vexed in some ways, but the challenges are directly connected to the features we have been discussing.

I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing –
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears –
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.

Yet do I not repine
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown –
Learneth beyond the sea
Melody new for me
And will return.

Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine –
And though they now depart,
Tell I my doubting heart
They’re thine.

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear,
Each little discord here
Removed.

Then will I not repine,
Knowing that Bird of mine,
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return. (Fr 4)
Copied and sent to Susan in 1854, this poem bears many of the marks we have been noticing in the early letters. At its root, the poem meditates on an experience of absence in the present and on the compensations that await in the future: the poem works, like so many of the letters we have considered, to overcome distance by imagining a form of presence. At first, it seems like a simple case of migration—the robin has wintered over but has, with the arrival of spring, flown “beyond the sea.” This is already a slight variation on the common trope of birds leaving at the end of summer, but it is (mostly) accurate: though robins would not fly across the sea from Massachusetts, they did, and do, fly north after spending the winter in southern New England. The bird is gone in summer and is learning “melody new for me.” As with other migrating birds, the expectation is that the bird “will return.” With the first two stanzas, then, we are on familiar ground: absence and distance have sparked the writing and have brought this poem into being.

Leaps are everywhere. If we assume that the poem is not (or not only) about a bird, then the entire poem consists of a leap—into fiction, into metaphor, into what almost feels like the language of fable. So, too, within the poem: when the departed bird of stanzas 1 and 2 is described as “Fast in a safer / Held in a truer Land” in stanza 3, we feel the frame of reference expand. More than migration, more than a temporary absence, is at stake. Moreover, in this third stanza, the poem switches to the plural: not just this bird but others “are,” we are told, “Fast” and “Held” in that other land. In so doing, the poem pulls back to consider an ongoing process of loss, and we cannot help but think that not migration but something more significant—death, perhaps, or a kind of metaphorical death—is the cause of the separation.

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55 Using the handwriting as a guide, Johnson dates this poem (and accompanying letter) as “about 1854,” as does Franklin; Hart and Smith date it “mid-1850s.” During these years, Susan was away for various lengths of time—teaching in Baltimore, visiting her brothers, and at one point resting to recover from a case of bad nerves.
The impact of such loss, however, is mysteriously curative: as we continue, the fourth stanza recounts a process of healing, of overcoming. Sight in the here-and-now is clarified, and “Each little doubt and fear, / Each little discord here / [is] Removed.” As we reach the fifth and final stanza, this feeling of restoration lingers, but so too does the absence. If we expected the bird to return, we are disappointed. What is overcome is the pain of absence, not absence itself. Instead, the poem offers an apparently satisfactory compensation: from its new perch in a “distant tree,” the bird will “Bright melody for me / Return.” Song, not robin, returns. To the extent that distance is overcome, it is not in the sense of being erased but, rather, in the sense of being transcended. What returns is the bird’s “Bright melody.”

“I have a Bird in spring” is one of only four poems we can reliably date before 1858. It survives not because Dickinson preserved it but because she enclosed it in a letter to Susan in 1854.56 Here, the story of the poem becomes more complicated. Short and to the point, the letter begins,

Sue – you can go or stay – There is but one alternative – We differ often lately, and this must be the last.
You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved, – sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitterer than death – thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and only add an agony to several previous ones, and at the end of day remark – a bubble burst! (L 173; Johnson’s transcription has “that” following “bitterer,” which I emend based on Hart and Smith 67).

This is an especially moving letter, evoking as it does Dickinson’s frank awareness of what it means to live in a world characterized by loss and, in particular, the loss of cherished companions. To Dickinson, some such losses are “bitterer than death” and have resulted in a heart that “bleeds so frequently.”

56 In November of the same year, she included the final stanza in a letter to the Hollands (L 175).
What this letter makes plain is not just that Dickinson has experienced the loss of friends but also—if the year is 1854, she is now twenty-three—that she has by now made a conscious choice. The letter continues,

Such incidents would grieve me when I was but a child, and perhaps I could have wept when little feet hard by mine, stood still in the coffin, but eyes grow dry sometimes, and hearts get crisp and cinder, and had as lief burn.  

Sue—I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed, and though if this is taken, I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me—there is a darker spirit will not disown it’s child.  

Few have been given me, and if I love them so, that for idolatry, they are removed from me—I simply murmur gone, and the billow dies away into a boundless blue, and no one knows but me, that one went down today. We have walked very pleasantly—Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge—then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on.

The poem follows immediately, followed in turn by the uncharacteristic signature “E-” beneath the last line. That the letter indicates a moment of tension between the two women seems clear, but beyond that, diverse interpretations have been offered. The word “idolatry” is reminiscent of a comment made by Susan many years later, to the effect that some of Dickinson’s letters were not suitable for publication because they were (in Susan’s words) too “personal and adulatory ever to be printed” (qtd. in Hart and Smith xxii).\(^{57}\) Had Emily been too warm, too emphatic, or too demanding in their relationship?

Alternately, does the letter refer to differences between the two women concerning religion? Dickinson’s comment that Jesus Christ might “remark he does not know me” and her claim that “there is a darker spirit will not disown it’s child” seem to point to such differences. Susan converted in 1850 and was by all accounts rather orthodox about her faith. Hart and Smith

\(^{57}\) Dickinson herself uses the word in a one-line letter to Susan: “Susan’s Idolator keeps a Shrine for Susan” (L 325, about 1868; Hart and Smith date it “late 1860s” [156]).
note that Susan was "known to honor certain religious conventions," such as not writing letters on the sabbath, and as late as 1898, she "considered converting to Catholicism" (69).

Or, to take a third possibility, is the tension best explained by the possibility of Susan and Austin’s move to the Midwest? In the mid-1850s, engaged but not yet married, they visited Susan’s brothers and pondered a possible move to Michigan. Wolff notes Dickinson’s “excessive anxiety and anger at the prospect of losing not merely Susan but what was much more important, her brother Austin” (117). She adds that the anxiety wasn’t limited to Emily: “the entire family was shocked to discover that Austin and Susan were seriously considering such a move, and there is good reason to suppose that all expostulated strenuously with him.” It is in the midst of this family crisis that Edward is able to offer Austin a deal: if the couple will stay in Amherst, he will in turn build a house for them and take Austin on as a partner in his law firm “on even terms” (Susan’s words qtd. in Wolff 118). Susan writes to her brothers that the decision “was something of a sacrifice for Austin’s spirit and rather of a struggle with his pre-conceived ideas” (117), giving us a sense of how close the couple was to leaving town.58

Yet another interpretation connects this letter to Dickinson’s love for her sister-in-law. Messmer writes that the letter is best understood in the context of Dickinson’s fear of losing Susan, if not geographically then emotionally, as a result of her marriage. What unsettled Dickinson, on Messmer’s view, was the possibility that Sue would leave her and “complete the transition to woman- and wife-hood” (88).59 Farr notes that an “argument about religion may underlie this letter” and suggests more specifically that “the implication in her letter is that

58 The loss of both Austin and Susan would have only added to the losses suffered by Dickinson. Wolff underscores that the loss of two allies at this moment would have seemed a dire development, given that Amherst did not “take a particularly enlightened attitude towards women’s activities” and given that Edward’s “hostility toward intellectual women remained unchanged” (118). Wolff further notes the pattern of young men coming to town (to study or to work) and, when they leave, doing so with brides from among Dickinson’s circle of friends (113).
59 I turn to the relationship between Dickinson and Susan in the next chapter. For a helpful survey of perspectives, see Messmer 217-218, note 21.
Dickinson’s excessive love for Sue is a sin against the first commandment, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me,’ and costs her heaven” (125, 124). Beneath this, writes Farr, was Dickinson’s “recognition that she can love people (her friends, Sue, Master) more than God” (125).

Whatever the cause, whatever the pain, whatever the reason for their “differ[ing] often lately,” it’s clear that there were some things Dickinson would not give up, some ways she would not walk, even if it meant enduring the “hemorrhage” and the bitterness of losing a beloved friend. Whatever her form of “idolatry,” she is clearly not considering changing her ways. “I have lived by this,” she insists. “[T]here is a darker spirit will not disown it’s child.”

Read in the context of the letter, the poem itself takes on new life. Smith writes that the poem’s optimism “belies the letter’s tone” (164), while Messmer reads the poem as foreseeing a reunion: “Sue’s eventual ‘return,’” writes Messmer, is “considered a certainty” (90), making the poem a correction or qualification of the letter itself. Farr offers a rich reading of the possibilities by asking, “Is Dickinson suggesting here, as she does elsewhere, that Sue’s marriage (by which she serves heaven) causes her to fly from her first beloved, Emily herself?” and later concludes that the message to Susan is, ‘Go, but I know you can’t.’”

We have, perhaps without even realizing it, wandered into biography while developing these interpretations, and the question of whether (and how) biography should inform our reading of this or any Dickinson poem is one we can defer for only so long. For now, what is

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60 Smith further notes that the letter—which is commonly “recognized as one of Dickinson’s ‘bitterest’” (165; ‘bitterest’ is Eberwein’s word in Dickinson 284 n. 10)—is itself ambiguous because of the way it undercuts images of “extreme physical and emotional pain” by comparing them to a bubble popping (165).

61 Farr’s treatment of the relationship between Susan and Emily is rich and nuanced. She sets the “ardent” relationship in the context of “a cult of fond sentimentality among Victorian girls” that acquired “an ambiguous eroticism” (101; more generally, see 122-127 on this poem and letter.) For more scholarship on this letter and poem, see Hart and Smith 67-69; Hart “Alliteration” 231; Sewall 166, 206, 209, and 389; Messmer 90.

62 At present, I happily defer it until the next chapter.
striking to me is that while several of these readings seem plausible, none are decisive. The poem feels larger than all of them—having outgrown its inception, the poem now resists being pinned down. It has, after all, leaped fully into metaphor, and it makes no apparent effort to clarify or “illustrate” the situation that may have given rise to it.

Habegger considers the poem in this light, which is to say, as a moment of poetic activity that steps away from the “quarrel” indicated by the letter. He writes that the poem contains a “surprising transformation” in which Dickinson “offers a generous poetic tribute to her alienated friend” (323). In the poem, the speaker “trusts that it [the bird] will learn a new melody elsewhere and that ‘each little discord here’ will be resolved.” Where the letter argued, writes Habegger, the poem embodies “the hopeful and giving turn (‘return’) that made a poet out of Emily. Her attachment stretched to the limit, she shifts from a damaged relationship to the larger generalities of art […]. We here observe a generative moment in Dickinson’s art,” he continues, a moment when “her poetry arises as an act of transcendence or resurrection” (324). In the poem, on this view, language pivots from the actual situation (news, telling, etc.) to offer something significantly new.

What makes so many biographical interpretations of “I have a Bird in spring” possible is the extent to which Dickinson has shed the situation and committed fully to the world of the poem. In reading letter and poem together, what we see, what we sense, is the poem straining

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63 In his analysis of this poem, Habegger approvingly quotes Miller, and I approvingly do the same: Dickinson’s poems, writes Miller, “are private messages universalized by a double release from private circumstance,” an effect achieved by being addressed to an “unlimited” audience and by presenting a voice that is “more a dramatic than a personal ‘I’” (Grammar 15). I remain doubtful as to whether the poems sent to Susan necessarily consist of private messages—some might, some might not, and in some cases we cannot know. But that many of the poems are successfully “universalized” seems patently true and is, as I have argued, an essential part of a rich lyric. Writing about Dickinson’s later poems, Lindberg-Seyersted makes a similar point, noting that frequently the “occasion” that “prompted the initial composition of the poems” feels separate from the occasion of the letter; she imagines Dickinson with a “scrap basket” of poems that could be used when the need arose to write a thank-you note or a message of condolence [Voice 29].
away from, even outgrowing, the letter. More even than Habegger, I would argue that the poem constitutes a full step away from the matter at hand. The words “transformation” or “transcendence” point to a gesture with which we are by now familiar: the characteristic leap away. Far from clarifying or commenting on the situation, the poem begins and fulfills an arc of its own, leaping from the real-world situation to some newly made thing, and it is precisely the success and fullness of that leap that makes the poem what it is. Though sent to Susan, the audience is no longer limited to Susan.

Beyond that, in the very middle of the poem, with its references to a “safer hand” and a “truer Land” and a “doubting heart,” we leap to a still-further realm. There is, as I have noted, something curative about this step, something healing in this newly attained perspective:

In a serener Bright,  
In a more golden light  
I see  
Each little doubt and fear,  
Each little discord here  
Removed.

The poem’s very structure celebrates precisely the act of stepping away: it is when “mine” are affirmed as really and truly mine, despite the fact that they have “depart[ed],” that something new comes into view, namely, the new perception by which “doubt and fear” and “discord” are “Removed.” It is only after this moment of insight that the poem makes its subtle but decisive discovery: where the first stanza promises the return of the bird, the last foresees only the return of the melody. The leap enacted in the third stanza is what makes the insight of the fourth stanza possible, and both of them, in turn, fuel the reworking of expectation in the final stanza. “I have a Bird in spring” becomes, in the way it enacts a certain train of thought, a poem about the way we think something through. It becomes a poem in which something is discovered in the course of—
which is to say, in the present tense of—its duration: we end somewhere different from where we began. The poem itself leaps and takes us along for the ride.

If, by contrast, this poem were (merely) a postscript or a counterpoint to the letter, if it did nothing but tell us about Dickinson and Susan, how much smaller it would feel, and how seldom we might return to it as readers. We return to it—in fact, this is one of the reasons we call it a lyric poem—precisely because it does more. It performs something, discovers something, right before our eyes.

Dickinson’s embrace of a language given to leaps brings us close to the very genre of lyric itself. Call it a confluence, a happy confluence, between what we see in Dickinson’s early letters and what we find in the millennia-old tradition we see her joining. In her seeming dissatisfaction with reporting, and in the parallel habit of leaping away, leaping elsewhere—not just anywhere but with a sense of freedom that makes many kinds of leaps possible—in this we glimpse a mind whose arrival at the intersection of language and experience is characterized by a searching creativity. It is, to return to the definition of “genius,” what especially “qualifies” her for “employment” as a poet.

To trace this tendency to leap in the early letters is often to find the effect achieved rather nakedly, with the accompanying emotion (e.g. “I’m so lonely!” or “Why did you go away and not come see me?”) alongside the fictional or linguistic flight. Later, in both letters and poems, the leaps will typically leave fewer tracks—we get the flight, unscaffolded, and at times we will need to work hard to make sense of, for example, the distance traversed inside a metaphor. But such moments differ from these early moments in degree, not kind. Throughout, whenever Dickinson’s language moves in this way, what such moments reveal is a kind of restlessness in
Dickinson’s pivot from experience to language. There is both an impatience with rendering the situation itself and a parallel fascination with what comes into view when language is brought to bear. Typically, Dickinson’s devotion is precisely to that new view, to what language can do in the moment of its unfolding.

There are, of course, exceptions, poems where the cause or the connection to the real world is (or seems) explicit, perhaps even primary. Fr 5, for example, is about having “two sisters,” one of whom lives “a hedge away,” and it ends “Sue – forevermore!” Fr 41 mentions “Dollie” (Dickinson's nickname for Susan), while Fr 49 is all about “Kate,” presumably a friend of the family, Kate Anthon. Fr 45 is titled “Snow-flakes.” We might, that is, at times feel that we have good reason to connect a particular poem to something “real” in Dickinson’s life. At the most basic level, reading these poems mirrors the experience of reading Dickinson’s early letters, where the leaps—into fiction, into scripture, etc.—serve to “illustrate” some underlying experience. When we envision Dickinson paddling down the Susquehanna or being stopped on the street by a muttering apparition from the Alps, after all, we know that she is actually lamenting the absence of Abiah or suffering through a cold. We follow her thinking; we know what she means. To encounter “Sue” or “Dollie” is likewise to have a piece of the real world tag along with us into the world of the poem.

To put it another way: the leap from Abiah to paddling, or from cold to indignant international visitor, or from wanting a letter from Uncle Norcross to “my voice is for war!”—these are small leaps. “Small” because it does not take much effort to retrace the way from one riverbank to the other. By comparison, as Dickinson begins and then develops her craft as a poet,

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64 I did not have Emerson in mind when writing this, but looking back, I am reminded of a passage from “Self-Reliance,” an essay (not that it matters) that Dickinson was doubtless familiar with: “The intellect is vagabond, and the universal system of education fosters restlessness. Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home” (*Major Prose* 145).
the leaps are frequently larger, more ambitious. And one reason for this is that Dickinson routinely denies us the knowledge of what is being illustrated; in fact, to put it more strongly, she seems committed to composing lyrics that elude or evade any such easy pinning down. There is, already in many of the early poems and increasingly in the poems that follow, a full appreciation of the lyric as an offering of language that has been (to use Miller’s word) “universalized” (15). At such times, in stark contrast to what we saw with her early letter of condolence to Jane Humphrey—and well before she has the breakthrough to a more tactful and less self-centered approach on such occasions—she seems to have no trouble getting herself offstage. We are no longer in the world of what happened; we are in the world of what is happening now, namely, the moment being brought to life in the poem.

That there are exceptions only serves to reminds us, at a still deeper level, that Dickinson's work is explorative of precisely this phenomenon. Taken together with the poems in which Dickinson definitively leaves behind all such context, these poems that seem to connect to her life reveal that the question of what her lyrics will do, what she wants them to do, is not a settled question. Moreover, it presages a decision that is central to her poetics: as we have seen, and as countless scholars have noted, the Dickinson lyric is frequently poised not just in the present tense but in the moment directly after some intense or crucial moment. Frequently—and this is characteristic of many of her most famous poems—the exact nature of those precursor moments is never made explicit.65 In such poems, we are given the moment of the poem but not whatever moment might have immediately preceded it. The poem that comes after an experience exists not to recount or revisit that experience but to bring to life what it is like to live in the unfolding moment of after. To the extent that they take their cues from actual experiences, then,

65 I return to this topic in chapter five, but we have already seen several poems that work like this, e.g. Fr 132.
Dickinson’s lyrics perform a kind of pivot: they become, in their encounter with language, some new experience. From this perspective, Dickinson’s choice of the present tense is far from arbitrary. It is integral to her lyric practice: it facilitates, at times even embodies, the step away from a particular circumstance, the leap into the world of the lyric.

This habit of leaping, taken in all its variations, does not a poet make. At the same time, in perhaps a small way, we are face to face with a simple but essential lyric impulse: the urge to go beyond the telling and to instead render or create something new, something made, using language beholden not to what happened, not to what was, but to whatever might right now come into being. To say that “I have a Bird in spring” doesn’t work to describe the situation or to distill a message about past events is to note that its “allegiance” is to that which it is becoming, the poem that is emerging with the reader in mind.66

This is what stays with me after spending time with Dickinson’s early letters: all the many ways they depart from what Dickinson calls “so much matter of fact” (L 161) and instead step briskly on to other concerns, other effects, other realms. Austin may complain about the lack of news, but others are happy to be entertained on Dickinson’s terms, to follow wherever she goes.67 And while I do not think, as some critics do, that she was consciously honing her craft in these early letters, her comfort with writing in this way is clearly foundational to her later work as a poet: increasingly, she will not tell, and she will rarely reveal: what her poems will do is

66 Nearly all of Dickinson’s explicit considerations of poetry describe or define it by the effect it has on the reader. See Stonum 10-14. For “allegiance,” see Richard Hugo’s words below.
67 Here is the account by Theodora Ward, the granddaughter of Josiah and Mary Holland, written many years later: “The arrival of each letter from Emily was an occasion of excitement for the whole family. Because of their mother’s impaired sight, one of the girls usually read the letters aloud, and my mother became expert in deciphering the strongly individual handwriting, even though some of Emily’s expressions were beyond her understanding. Frequently there were poems enclosed […] Her poetry was set apart as something special, not to be judged according to recognized standards, but warmly cherished as the individual expression of her stimulating, elusive, affectionate self” (25).
present, and it is this characteristic gesture of stepping away from discursive telling or recounting to poetic making and showing that makes such presenting possible.68

This way of thinking about language and experience is intimately connected to Dickinson’s lyric practice, and we are already in a position to see some of the connections between her epistolary and lyric impulses. We might note, for example, that this gesture—the leaping of language—is a common refrain in considerations of how poems work and how the act of poetic invention unfolds. To name a few: Richard Hugo argues in *The Triggering Town* that one of the toughest but most important steps in writing a poem is getting yourself free of whatever triggered the poem: “Somehow you must switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words” (12). Similarly, Robert Bly writes (in his book *Leaping Poetry*) that “a great work of art often has at its center a long floating leap.” He adds that the “real joy of poetry is to experience this leaping inside a poem” (4).69 And not just poets. Philip Roth points to a similar process when he highlights the importance of the writer’s “ability to imagine oneself into

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68 To spell this out a little further: in arguing that these letters reveal habits of mind is to disagree somewhat with critics who see the early letters as “exercises in style” (Sewall 374), “a self-conscious, disciplined exercise in the artful use of language” (Wolff 128), “experimenting with several different stylistic registers” (Stonum 23), “practices that are “nurtured in preparation for her poetry” (Eberwein Strategies 49), or a kind of “creative writing program” (Salska 171). My argument is, rather, that over the course of many years and many trials, the letters offer Dickinson countless natural and fortuitous occasions for writing, and what we see during this time is the way some writerly inclinations solidify while others are discarded. To my mind, these letters are first and foremost letters: they reach out to a particular person with something to communicate. They do not amount to any kind of self-directed writing “workshop”—something only critics in the age of MFA programs would likely claim—by which she is plotting her way toward her future writing career as a poet. Even if, as seems likely, she is writing poems throughout much of the 1850s, she is not consciously laying the groundwork for the forty fascicles she will begin to assemble in 1858, for example. She loved to write, she loved to play with language, and (as Sewall reminds us) she and her correspondents took letter writing seriously (370). At the same time, writing clearly came to her quite naturally and she often wrote speedily. She doubtless wrote countless poems during the 1850s that she chose not to save, but we need to remind ourselves that while we know where her writing will lead her in the decades ahead, she knew no such thing. It’s true that some or many of the poems in the early fascicles might date to the 1850s. My point is that while she may have been drafting poems as the decade progressed, her letters remain letters: sincere efforts seeking to bridge the gap between herself and her addressee. To us as readers of her poetry, they offer clues regarding how and where her poetics took shape.

69 Bly is especially focused on the way a poem leaps “from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object soaked in conscious psychic substance” (4). I should note that Bly would not agree that Dickinson’s body of work is an example of a poetry that “leaps” as he understands the term.
a situation which is not necessarily connected to the life you lead whatsoever. To let the ball […] bounce, you know, by itself” (Remnick). Even in cases where we suspect the poem is connected to the life she leads, Dickinson’s best poems will indeed find a way to let the ball bounce “by itself.”

My favorite description along these lines comes from Mathew Zapruder, who writes,

The power of the activated material language in poetry can only fully be pursued when the writer is not ultimately preoccupied with any other task, like storytelling or explaining or convincing or describing or anything else. In their poems, poets do those things, but only as long as it suits them. A poet is always ready to let them go. Every true poem is marked, somewhere, by that freedom. And that choice to be ready to reject all other purposes, in favor of the possibilities of language freed from utility, is when the writer becomes a poet” (14).

My point is not to set down a definition of the poem or the lyric but, rather, to note that to speak of leaps is to get close to what a lyric is often said to do. It also gets to the heart of what Dickinson’s poetry will do in the decades that follow, informing her practice of metaphor and leading directly to effects such as concision and disjunction, effects that are in some circles synonymous with her name. In all of this—as in her preoccupation with absence, her habit of using language to create presence and to elide distance, and her penchant for reaching toward her reader in the moment of the poem—we find threads in the early letters that are then gathered and woven anew in her earliest poems. In as much as Dickinson’s early letters offer a snapshot of a writer’s mind as she discovers the pleasures of moving beyond “storytelling or explaining or convincing or describing,” we find that we are simultaneously reading the letters of a twenty-something poet-in-the-making and encountering one of the deepest urges underlying the lyric tradition.
Chapter Three

“My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any”: A Biographical Interlude

If you walk east from the center of Amherst today, following Main Street as it slopes down and gently out of town, you’ll find a pair of statues depicting Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. It can be moving to stumble across the pair, as I did, unexpectedly. Suddenly, there they are, these two New England poets, perched on rocks, in apparent conversation. Dickinson, with her back to the road, appears to be holding forth, while Frost reclines and listens. The statues nicely reverse the roles we commonly attribute to each poet, throwing Dickinson’s life into sharp relief. We think of Frost as something of a public figure, but Dickinson is identified with her home—it is there, after all, that I am walking, and there are others on the sidewalk making the same journey—and in particular with her bedroom: the cherry desk, the Franklin stove, the trunk in which the poems are found.

We now know that Dickinson’s life at home was far more varied, and far more social, than was once believed. The image of her writing all of those poems at that small desk, isolated from the world in her small room, is more myth than fact. At times, though, it seems like all roads lead back to that bedroom. A 2013 “disassembly” of the room, undertaken by the Emily Dickinson Museum, removed the twentieth-century flooring to reveal the floorboards from Dickinson’s day. “Wear marks on the floor,” one account reads, “confirmed that the Dicksons followed [the] standard nineteenth-century practice of covering the floor with long strips of straw matting” (Wald “‘This is a timid’” 29). The report continues, “the pinstripe pattern of the matting

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1 Created by Michael Virzi, the two statues, each of which is a silhouette cast in steel, were commissioned by the Amherst Public Arts Commission and dedicated in 1996. Frost lived in Amherst for many years (including a few on Main Street, above what is now the police station). From 1917 to 1919, he taught at Amherst College.
pressed into the floor by foot traffic through the room […] allowed us to pin down the location of several items of furniture, including Dickinson’s bed—the width of a single bed—and take note of worn-away finishes in places where her feet left the floor at night and hit the floor in the morning” (29).

This brings us eerily close to the lived life; some might say too close. Then again, it is precisely that lived life that has brought me to Amherst and that brings as many as fifteen thousand visitors to the Homestead each year. For as long as Dickinson’s poems have been in circulation, readers have sought out the person and the place that produced them. Higginson, to whom Dickinson sends some 70 letters and around 100 poems (Johnson 964-5; Franklin Variorum 1546), reports to her in 1869 that

> Sometimes I take out your letters & verses, dear friend, and when I feel their strange power, it is not strange that I find it hard to write & that long months pass. I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that perhaps if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but till then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light. Every year I think that I will contrive somehow to go to Amherst & see you. (L 330a)

In this short passage, captivated and perplexed by Dickinson’s words, Higginson twice aspires to visit her in person. As Erica Scheurer writes of this letter, “while the intimacy of [Dickinson’s] approach was inviting, the ‘fiery mist’ the poet’s words created also was baffling” to him. She adds, “[w]e, along with Higginson, are pulled towards Dickinson, but left with questions” (101-2). As with many writers, or perhaps even more so, her words offer an intimacy that readers are quick to want to explore.

Dickinson draws us in. My concern at present, as I walk toward the Homestead on this sunny but cold November afternoon, and as I write in a rented room just outside of town, is the

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3 Here I refer to readers whom Dickinson did not know personally. Many poems, after all, were sent to friends.  
4 Higginson eventually meets her in August, 1870, when he visits her in Amherst for the first time.
lived life. Perhaps it is curiosity, no different than our desire to visit any place with historical resonances. Do we sense proximity might yield some new understanding? Or, feeling ourselves touched by the intimacy of the poems, do we wish to stand nearer their source? Perhaps, as Jane Wald eloquently writes, we “enter her home, her story, and her work to touch creativity itself” (“The ‘Poet Hunters’” 71). As I hope to show, to ponder Dickinson (or any poet) as a living presence behind the poetry is to more fully embody and embrace our role as readers. Far from reducing the poems to autobiography, as some might worry, and farther still from “explaining” or nailing down this or that particular reference, to engage with some level of biography is to more capaciously greet the poet in the “meeting place” of the poem (Rukeyser 20).

Then, as now, Dickinson’s home was just a short distance from the center of town. Photographs from the 1850s and 1860s show buggies hitched to posts, men in bowlers gathered in twos and threes, and many of the same brick buildings that line the intersection of Main Street and North Pleasant Street today (Longsworth 66-7). Phoenix Row, the array of businesses you reach first when walking into town, featured a shop selling trunks, a drug store, and a hotel called The American House. Just up from there was The Amherst Hotel, the post office, a bookstore, and a general store (Longsworth 34-5, 66). In Dickinson’s lifetime, the town’s growth was buoyed in succession by the creation of Amherst Academy, the opening of Amherst College, the arrival of the railroad, and the steady flow of immigrants, primarily from Ireland. Industry, such as board and carriage making, also spurred development. At one point, the two hat factories in town employed some 600 workers (Felton 144).

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5 Dickinson herself wrote that “biographies convince us of the fleeing of the biographied” (L 972), but she seems—like many in her day—to have enjoyed them. See Finnerty (“‘If Fame’” 30).
6 Rukeyser had more to say about Dickinson in her biography of Willard Gibbs, where she writes that Dickinson’s life was “a close expression of American self-destruction” (qtd. in Pollak Our Emily 5).
7 As Mitchell points out, all of these items—boards, carriage, hats, mills—appear in Dickinson’s poetry, so that she “was able to promote a sense of her own skills and excellence in relation to a larger community of artisans and workers, within the nexus of a wider awareness of competition, limitations, and transience” (“Amherst” 21).
For the most part, though, the Amherst of Dickinson’s youth was a collection of small farms. Roads were neither paved nor lit, and from 1841 to 1864, the town had no bank. A bell tolled at 9:00 to tell the townspeople they ought to be in bed (Bingham *Home* 64-5). Back then, the short walk from town to Homestead would take you past fields and an occasional house. The Pelham hills rose to the south; closer to home, after 1853, was the final stop of the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad. Streets were dirt and stone: dust or mud or ice, depending on the season. A frequently reproduced lithograph from 1858 shows a one-horse buggy waiting in front of the Homestead alongside a narrow, tree-lined Main Street (Longsworth 54).

Nowadays, it takes longer to leave behind the last offerings of commerce, but it is still a quick walk, and before you know it, you reach the two statues in Sweetser Park, the Evergreens, and finally the Homestead, now the Emily Dickinson Museum. The easiest way into the house remains the back door, which brings you into the kitchen wing. From there, you can walk the hallways she walked, step into the pantry and the two parlors, or ogle the door to the cellar, where she kept her personal cupboard of supplies and gingerbread (Bianchi *Face* 6). You can climb the stairways she climbed, step into her bedroom, trimmed now, as then, “in off-whites and pale yellows” (Wald “‘This is a timid’”). Though furnished mostly with replicas, the room is arranged as in Dickinson’s lifetime: the dresser is set between the two southern windows, the cherry desk in the southwest corner, the bed to the left, and the Franklin stove to the right. Through the windows to the west, you can see what Dickinson saw—a stretch of landscaped lawn leading to the Evergreens—but to the south, you have to squint to imagine the view of hayfields trailing away to the distant mountains (Fuss 58).

Entering Dickinson’s room, you might turn to eye the door, the lock, and hear:

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8 The house was acquired by Amherst College in 1965, but much of the original furniture had already been acquired by the Houghton Library at Harvard University.
The Way I read a Letter’s – this –
’Tis first – I lock the Door –
And push it with my fingers – next –
For transport it be sure

And then I go the furthest off
To counteract a knock – (lines 1-6, Fr 700)

While they appear in no more than a dozen or so poems, keys and locks had important personal resonances. Matty recalls that Dickinson’s “love of being alone in her room was associated with her feeling for a key, which signified freedom from interruption and the social prevention that beset her downstairs. She would stand looking down, one hand raised, thumb and forefinger closed on an imaginary key, and say, with a quick turn of her wrist, ‘It’s just a turn – and freedom, Matty!’” (Bianchi Face 66).

“Can I lock the door?” I ask the docent as our tour group files in.

“Sorry, no,” she says.

Dickinson’s bedroom, as many have observed, was the best in the house, with south- and west-facing windows offering plentiful light and ample opportunities to surveil the comings and goings of visitors (Fuss 55-56). It also afforded easy listening of happenings below. One such occasion was the death of her father in 1874. Contrasting Dickinson’s absence with the presence of her devastated father downstairs, Matty writes, “The world seemed coming to an end. And where was Aunt Emily? Why did she not sit in the library with the family if he [Austin] could? She stayed upstairs in her own room with the door open just a crack, where she could hear without being seen” (Face 13).

Over the years, both the Homestead and the Evergreens have undergone restorative renovations, returning the buildings to their nineteenth century conditions. The disassembly that uncovered evidence of the straw floor coverings also “clarified the repositioning of closet,
stairway, and passage doorways during Emily Dickinson’s lifetime” (Wald “‘This is a timid’” 29). Hedges have been regrown, fences and gates restored, gardens replanted. Work has even been done recently to recreate the “soundscape” of the property (“Edenic Possibilities” 4). We long, it seems, to walk and see and hear and feel the world as Dickinson did.

The letter from Higginson, the poem featuring the lock, the death of her father—all of this comes later.9 It all adds up to a life we imagine and define in large part by the room and house in which it unfolded. Whether we have been to the Homestead, seen pictures of it, or merely know the story of Dickinson’s withdrawal into her father’s home, to think of Dickinson is, more often than not, to think of her in the Homestead on Main Street.

**It is easy to forget, then, that it is only after 1855 that Dickinson’s life begins to assume this familiar shape.** Although she was born in the Homestead (in 1830) and will die there (in 1886), Dickinson and her family move in 1840 to a house on North Pleasant Street, known then as West Street. Those moments of missing Austin’s coat and slippers, of eying the empty nail, of longing for loved ones to “come home,” of insisting that “Home is a holy thing,” and of pining for “my own DEAR HOME”—that is, the many sentiments and scenes brought to life in chapter two—these unfold not at the Homestead but in a house less than a mile away.10

The home on North Pleasant Street was a place Dickinson and her siblings liked to be. Austin is reported to have said that the happiest years of his life were spent there (Bingham *Home* 64). Joseph Lyman, a cousin who was sometimes invited to stay in the house when Dickinson’s parents were away, describes the home to his mother as “that charming second

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9 Matty, a key source for details about Dickinson’s room and, more generally, about life in the two houses, was born in 1866, so she speaks at best of life in the early 1870s and after.

10 The building was razed in the 1920s, and a gas station now stands in its (rough) location (Fuss 28).
home of mine in Amherst” (Sewall *Lyman* 8). Of Lyman’s letters, Sewall notes that “[a]gain and again he stresses the warmth of the Dickinson circle, its integrity and harmony,” adding that the “testimony of this young enthusiast may help lay to rest the persistent notion of the bleakness of the Amherst scene and of the Dickinson family as joyless and introverted” (8). To Lyman, time spent with the Dickinsons meant, above all, conversation: “I like them better than I do my own family, not that I would grieve so much for their death but I would give more to talk with them as we used to talk” (5).

With its huge chimney offering “the warmth of the kitchen fire” (Fuss 35) and providing heat for several downstairs rooms, the Dickinson home brought the family together, as a letter to Austin in 1851 makes clear. “We have just come from meeting,” she writes. “Father and mother sit in state in the sitting room perusing such papers only, as they are well assured have nothing carnal in them. Vinnie is eating an apple which makes me think of gold, and accompanying it with her favorite [New York] Observer, which if you recollect, deprives us many a time of her sisterly society” (L 63). As the only source of heat, the chimney made the rooms arrayed around it (the kitchen and sitting room) into appealing locations, even for solitary acts such as reading and writing letters. Dickinson’s letters make it clear that, at times, the kitchen became the special province of the children: “I dont love to read your letters all aloud to father – it would be like opening the kitchen door when we get home from meeting Sunday, and are sitting down by the stove saying just what we’re a mind to, and having father hear” (L 116, April 1853). A week later she tells him, “I miss the long talks most, upon the kitchen stone hearth, when the just are fast asleep” (L 118).11

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11 Elsewhere, Dickinson shows that Edward is sometimes part of the fun, as when he mocks the preacher after meeting (L 135). On another occasion, he rings the church bells to draw the town’s attention to the northern lights (L 53). If Dickinson gets to have many sides, why not Edward?
The return to the Homestead in 1855 will inaugurate a new phase in Dickinson’s life, but her world is already changing before the move. For one thing, she cannot have remained unaffected by what Bingham describes as a time of “funerals and fears” (Home 176). In one of the more piercing footnotes in Dickinson scholarship, Bingham lists thirty-three young people from Dickinson’s world who die between 1851 and 1854, often of consumption, but also of typhus, cholera, and dysentery (179-180). From the house on North Pleasant Street, Dickinson could see the village graveyard and watch processions of mourners as they entered the cemetery to bury loved ones (L 9). She would have seen not only the funeral train occasioned by each death, but also the regular Sunday procession to decorate the graves of loved ones with flowers. As Bingham observes, the “wonder is, not that Emily as a young girl thought and often wrote about death, but that any buoyancy of spirit remained” (180).

For the residents of religiously conservative Amherst, thoughts of death were inseparable from matters of faith. When Horace Greeley’s son dies of cholera in 1849, “fasting, humiliation and prayer were publicly prescribed as ‘appropriate duties,’” writes Bingham. “The scourge was an inscrutable dispensation from Almighty God, regarded by many as direct punishment for their sins” (178). In 1850, Dickinson’s friend Emily Fowler, ill for some time, writes to Dickinson and Austin, “Just now God is reminding us of our duty and our happiness in a different way than usual” (qtd. in Wolff 102). In an age without antibiotics, anesthesia, or any real understanding of germs and contagion, an age when those who died typically died at home, cared for by the women of the family, death was part of the fabric of daily life and thus a constant presence to be reckoned with. Austin, in a letter to Susan’s sister, expresses a doubt that must have occurred to many: “I ask myself, Is it possible that God, all powerful, all wise, all benevolent, as I must

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12 See also L 9, in which a funeral procession seems to come and go in her letter just as it comes and goes beyond the window.
believe him, could have created all these millions upon millions of human souls, only to destroy them?” (qtd. in Sewall 106).

Conservative Amherst: it is worth pausing to recall the persistence of orthodox faith in this mid-nineteenth century town where all four churches traced their roots back to the Puritans (Eberwein “Immortality” 68). The views espoused by Calvinism were grim: there was nothing you could do to “save” yourself—your fate had been sealed back at the beginning of time—so the best you could do was look for signs that you were among the elect. Humans were a “depraved race,” held (in Jonathan Edwards’s memorable rendering) like a spider between God’s two fingers above the fires of hell, and most were doomed. Those who failed to convert were destined to eternal damnation, and most who did convert faced the same fate. Grim, but firmly entrenched. As Eberwein writes, “few belief systems could have seemed more stable than Calvinist Christianity in the Connecticut Valley of Dickinson’s youth” (68). Changes might have been happening elsewhere, but in Amherst and surrounding areas, the views brought centuries earlier by the Puritans to the New World remained a formidable force.  

But if Calvinism was a vital presence in the intellectual and religious life of New England, it had persisted in the face of ongoing challenges: a growing secular culture, the spread of enlightenment values, and the proliferation of less orthodox (and more welcoming) faiths. Then, too, there was the perennial risk of backsliding among the converted. In response to these challenges, under the intense leadership of Jonathan Edwards, Calvinism had unleashed something new in American culture: the religious revival. It is no coincidence that both the Great Awakening (1735-1741) and the Second Great Awakening (1815-1835) began in the

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13 It was Amherst’s religious conservatism that had led to the founding of Amherst College in 1821. After Harvard was “lost” to the Unitarians—it had been founded by the Puritans in 1636 to train clergy, but the balance had tipped toward the Unitarians in 1805—the search was undertaken for the location of a new school to educate missionaries in keeping with orthodox theology. Amherst was the chosen site; Dickinson’s grandfather was one of the founders.
Connecticut Valley, nor that they thrived in Amherst itself. While aimed at those who had not yet been saved, the revival by its very nature requires an ample population of similarly minded Christians who want to be saved. Amherst and surrounding areas, where conversion was a widely shared expectation, were just such a place. Habegger notes that “revivals were understood to be a periodic feature of church life. It was expected that a thriving congregation would undergo a well-managed spiritual cataclysm every few years, following which membership would receive a dramatic boost” (388).

The revival established itself as a powerful communal event, capable of reducing congregants to tears—and quite literally to their knees—and convincing many to give themselves over to Christ. The power of such experiences was amplified by the increasing willingness of Congregational churches to present salvation as a choice, open to all, rather than a predetermined fact (Eberwein 85). With conversion now a matter of free will, the act of not converting became, likewise, a choice. The pressure on those who had yet to declare themselves for Christ was now stronger than ever.

Revivals were a constant presence in Dickinson’s life. In 1831, within a year of Dickinson’s birth, her mother converted during a revival. Subsequent revivals were held in or near Amherst in 1834, 1841, 1845, 1850, and 1855. In 1850 alone, her father, sister, and several close friends all stood before the congregation to publicly profess their submission to Christ.

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14 As Eberwein notes, revivals became essential after 1833, when the State of Massachusetts stops subsidizing churches. Thereafter, churches need to attract members in order to survive financially (“Immortality” 81). It also increased the competition from faiths offering gentler perspectives on human life, surer ways to salvation, and more enjoyable meetings—would you rather join a church that says your fate is predestined or one that says you can do things in this life to secure salvation? Would you rather sit and listen or get up and sing?

15 Of Edward’s conversion, a friend later remembered that Edward’s “pastor said to him in his study – “You want to come to Christ as a lawyer – but you must come to him as a poor sinner – get down on your knees & let me pray for you, & then pray for yourself”” (qtd. in Sewall 66). Sewall observes, “It was not easy for Dicksons to get down on their knees and pray before others – or to be demonstrative even before God […] The doctrine of the ‘poor sinner’ was congenial to neither father nor daughter.”
One by one, most of her friends and all of her family converted; Austin would be the last, in 1855. Following the conversion of Abby Wood, Dickinson wrote that Abby “makes a sweet, girl Christian, religion makes her face quite different, calmer, but full of radiance, holy, yet very joyful. She talks of herself quite freely, seems to love Lord Christ most dearly, and to wonder, and be bewildered, at the life she has always led. It all looks black, and distant, and God and heaven are near, she is certainly very much changed” (L 36).

When Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847-8, she found herself in the midst of an all-out revival. According to one account, the school had an amazing eleven revivals in twelve years (Habegger 198). Each day included times for group prayer, solitary prayer, and special meetings with those who had yet to convert. At school-wide gatherings, students were divided into three groups: those who had been saved, those “with hope” of being saved, and those who professed “no hope.” Dickinson, needless to say, was regularly in the last group, where she took her place among the “impenitent,” but she was far from alone: on Christmas Eve, some twenty-five girls indicated that they remained “without hope” (199-202).

Her letters make clear that at certain points she was tempted to “accept the call,” and on one occasion, she thought the moment had arrived. To Abiah, she writes, “I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly – and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior” (L 10). The feeling passes, though, and rather than miss it, she fears it might happen again, telling Abiah in the same letter, “I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself.”

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16 Habegger makes it clear that there was a concerted effort—something of a plot, in fact—among certain teachers and cousin Emily Norcross to monitor and nudge Dickinson toward conversion (My Wars 203-205; for more detail see “Evangelicalism and its Discontents” 403-409).
word “deceived” speaks volumes, but it doesn’t completely negate the “perfect peace and happiness” she remembers feeling. This letter eloquently brings to life both the appeal of those feelings and her budding sense that her interests lie elsewhere. As she writes in her next letter to Abiah, returning again to that experience of near-conversion, “the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her siren voice” (L 11).

Meanwhile, Dickinson is constantly bearing witness to those who do convert. Writing to Jane Humphrey in 1850, she reports, “Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion” (L 35). Her rebellion, though, is not disbelief: “It certainly comes from God – and I think to receive it is blessed – not that I know from me, but from those on whom change has passed.” Her attitude consists of faith (she takes conversion seriously), of exclusion (“the hand” has not been “held” to her), and of conviction (she stands “in rebellion”). The same tension remains four years later when she and her family sit through a sermon on “death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly.” She writes to Dr. and Mrs. Holland that “somehow the sermon scared me, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole were true, and I would not for worlds have them know that it troubled me” (L 175). But trouble her it did, and she longed to talk with her friends about it.

When I look around and see how easily we, today, are convinced to agree with our peers (or with what we read or hear), I cannot help but wonder how Dickinson managed. Just one or two articles about this or that supplement, or a few voices doubting an otherwise scientifically sound claim, and all too often we follow. In Dickinson’s case, it was not a voice or two but an entire culture. Somehow, though, she resisted, and her ongoing exposure to the
pressures of conversion meant a lengthy period of deepening resolve. In critiquing an early poem that he deems less successful than later efforts, Habegger writes that it is “a clever performance that neatly wraps up matters still at issue for the writer. It gives too knowing and willful an answer” (My Wars 355). For Dickinson to write the poems she would one day write, she would need to move beyond mimicking such “knowing and willful” answers and either discover her own answers or decide that there was no answer. Bolder yet, many of her poems will simply change the question. What she needed, in short, was the courage of her convictions, and it is in large part these years of ongoing non-conversion that prepare her for the poetry to come.\footnote{Conversion as described by Dickinson in her letters, and as understood in the culture around her, is a profound, physical experience: those who convert appear changed. But it also seems likely that conversion resulted sometimes from social pressure. To some, it must have seemed easier to fake conversion than to endure life as someone who is surely damned. And then there were pragmatic reasons to convert—Austin, for example, seems to have converted as a prerequisite for his marriage to Susan. Who knows how many others similarly took the step for practical reasons or simply to end the scrutiny? In this context, Dickinson’s non-conversion comes into a different focus: she not only felt insufficiently moved to convert, she also resisted whatever pressure there must have been to pretend to convert.}

If conversion is a letting go, a submission to a pre-existing structure and an all-knowing authority, Dickinson’s response was to lean inward: surely, that is, one of the reasons Dickinson resisted conversion was her strong sense of self. Wolff notes that “true faith meant that a Christian would never react to the specter of sickness or death with horror or resentment or anger” (88). The church had answers to some questions and forbid asking others: anyone who had truly embraced Jesus would find their questions either resolved or discarded. To Dickinson, whose poetry is, among other things, an extended investigative quarrel with the conditions of mortality, such an acceptance must have run counter to something felt deeply but firmly within.

Two letters written within two days of each other in 1854 bring the complexity of Dickinson’s views into focus. Mid-January finds Dickinson at home. Her father is in Washington, Austin is in Cambridge, Lavinia is in Boston, and Susan (a close friend but not yet married to Austin) is in New Hampshire. On January 13, Dickinson writes to Reverend Hale,
who she believes was with her friend Ben Newton at the time of his death. Newton, a law student who had worked in Edward’s law firm from 1847 to 1849, was by all accounts someone Dickinson admired. It was Newton who gave her a volume of Emerson’s poems, and before dying, he will write that he hoped to live until she “had been a poet” (L 265). Newton was a Unitarian, which must have been a breath of fresh air to Dickinson upon her return from Holyoke: he comes into her life not long after those letters to Abiah recounting her near-conversion and her worries that she had “neglected the one needful thing.” Writing now to Reverend Hale, a man she does not know, Dickinson inquires, “I have often hoped to know if his last hours were cheerful, and if he was willing to die.” She continues,

I was then but a child, yet I was old enough to admire the strength, and grace, of an intellect far surpassing my own, and it taught me many lessons, for which I thank it humbly, now that it is gone. Mr Newton became a gentle, yet grave Preceptor, teaching me what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublime lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler, and much more blessed […] He often talked of God, but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in heaven – Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven.” (L 153)

The letter is heartfelt, the questions urgent. How did Newton die? Where is he now? The tone of the letter itself is respectful, measured, generous.¹⁸

Two days later, with her family still away, Dickinson walks to church alone. She writes to Susan immediately upon her return to the house. “I’m just from meeting, Susie,” she begins.

I walked – I ran – I turned precarious corners – One moment I was not – then soared aloft like Phoenix, soon as the foe was by – and then anticipating my enemy again, my soiled and drooping plumage might have been seen emerging from just behind a fence, vainly endeavoring to fly once more from hence. I reached the steps, dear Susie – I smiled to think of me, and my geometry, during the journey there – It would have puzzled Euclid, and it’s doubtful result, have solemnized a Day. How big and broad the aisle seemed, full huge enough before,

¹⁸ Habegger notes that while Newton did belong to Hale’s church, it was another minister who attended his deathbed. Two later letters to Hale indicate that he must have replied, for she writes, “I thank you when you tell me he was brave, and patient – and that he dared to die” (Habegger 314-315; Wagner; Wagner and Tanter).
as I quaked slowly up – and reached my usual seat! […] After the opening prayer I ventured to turn around. Mr Carter Immediately looked at me – Mr Sweetser attempted to do so, but I discovered nothing, up in the sky somewhere, and gazed intently at it, for quite a half an hour. (L 154)

Written two days apart, these letters bring beautifully to life Dickinson’s varying postures toward church and faith. Writing to Hale, Dickinson is concerned, curious. She knows Newton was a Unitarian and wants to learn whether he remained confidently so until the end. She further wants to know what the pastor thinks of Newton’s chances in the afterlife. By contrast, her journey to church occasions a rich and humorous narrative. While she can be an astute observer of sermons, this sermon is lost in the fun that can be had. The adventure of attending church brings out her humor, and behind the humor, there is evident discomfort, but lost in both are the acts of worship and prayer that the hours-long meeting would have included. Thinking of Newton, Dickinson is drawn in; thinking of going to meeting, her imagination takes flight.

In part, these letters show the different ways a mind might grapple with matters of faith in the company of different audiences. The concern for Newton is genuine; so, too, is the discomfort she feels in church. If we add the “sharp discernment” (Sewall 358-9) she displays in response to sermons, her familiarity with the Bible and her ability to quote from it verbatim, and add to all this the varying degrees of playfulness and sincerity on display at different moments in her early letters, we begin to see the expansive nature of her approach to belief: even while doubting some aspects of it and playing with others, hers is a mind engaged with faith. She does, after all, choose to walk to church, and her discomfort is primarily social in nature.

As Wolff notes, “Dickinson’s rejection of faith […] was not, as a modern reader might suppose, a renunciation of the belief that God exists: in some manner, she retained a deeply rooted conviction in the existence of God until the day she died; the terms of her belief fluctuated, but the flame of it was never quenched” (143). Dickinson believed. To ask exactly
what she believed is almost to ask the wrong question. Probing and establishing the grounds and limits of belief—defining, testing, doubting, wondering, playing, while also creating a place for what cannot be known—this, in some ways, is the work being done in countless letters and poems. Dickinson’s faith is a constant re-thinking, or what McIntosh calls “nimble believing.”

What she needed were allies. She needed others who shared (or would at least go along with) her tendency to puzzle and wonder, to play in ways that might in another context appear irreverent, and to probe the questions that mattered so deeply to her. Sewall notes that “[e]very death, every illness she heard about among her friends, set Emily Dickinson wondering about ‘those great countries in the blue sky of which we don’t know anything’” (535; the quoted line is from L 217). He continues, “She saw loss of any sort, whether of a lover, a friend, her flowers in the fall, or […] her power and will to write poetry, as an emblem of the perennial mystery, all the more excruciating because she loved the people and things of this world so intensely.”

In this context, a second trend—visible before the move in 1855 and solidified soon after—comes into view: the mid-1850s see an almost complete makeover in Dickinson’s roster of correspondents. Dickinson’s last extant letter to Abiah (L 166) is in July, 1854; her last to Jane Humphrey (L 180) is in 1855; and her letters to Emily Fowler, after peaking in 1853 (six letters), dwindle to just one in 1854, after which just two short notes (one acknowledging a note of condolence, another thanking her for a gift) are extant. Other important mid-decade epistolary exchanges—e.g. those with Henry Emmons (in 1853 and 1854) and John Graves (from 1853 to 1856)—will end, soon, too. The only constant is Susan, to whom there are letters extant for almost every year between 1850 and 1886, the year of Dickinson’s death, but even here there is a

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19 Cf. Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown and Dickinson’s comment in 1882: “On subjects we know nothing […] we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps believing nimble” (L 750).
20 Her letters to Austin likewise come to an end, but for a different reason: he completes his schooling and returns to Amherst in the summer of 1854. Of Dickinson’s 86 letters to Austin, 83 are dated 1854 or earlier.
wobble: the mid-1850s are the years of the “You can stay or go” letter, ending with “I have a bird in spring.” All told, it is a time of disruption in Dickinson’s relationships.

In hindsight, we can see that during these same years, several of the most important correspondences of her adult years are just beginning (her first letter to Elizabeth and Josiah Holland is in 1853) or are about to begin (her correspondence with Samuel and Mary Bowles begins in 1858, with her two Norcross cousins in 1859). Far from coincidental, these changes tell a story about the person Dickinson is becoming in the 1850s. For Dickinson, to whom audience is essential in so many ways—we should recall the intimacy with which she conjures or otherwise reaches out to her readers—the importance of her evolving epistolary relationships cannot be overstated: different readers allow for different possibilities, different ambitions. Or, conversely, and I think more accurately, we might say that different possibilities and ambitions require different readers. In the mid-1850s, it is not too much to say that Dickinson slowly chooses a new audience for herself, an audience with whom she feels the freedom and intimacy she needs.21 By the time the 1850s are complete, the turnover in her epistolary friendships will be complete: leaving aside a few playful notes to Austin in the 1880s and the two short notes to Emily Fowler, there is no correspondent other than Susan who receives letters both before and after the mid-1850s.22

21 In her early letters to Abiah, Dickinson raises and wrestles with matters of faith; in her letters to Austin, faith hardly comes up. Similarly, a letter to the Hollands in 1853 (L 133) is noticeably more playful than the preceding sequence of weekly, dutiful letters to Austin. Dickinson, like all of us, writes to different people differently.  
22 Sewall offers compelling evidence that Dickinson continued to correspond with Joseph Lyman after the 1850s (Lyman 60, 71), reminding us of the many lost letters. Lyman, he writes, was the kind of person she tended to enjoy: “She was extraordinarily responsive to the color, warmth, and range of experience of friends or notables who came from beyond the Amherst circle” (61). In this sense, Lyman was more like her later roster of correspondents. Sewall further notes the possibility that Lyman and a friend visited Dickinson in the 1860s (82-3) and points out that at least some of his recollections would seem to date to the mid or late 1860s rather than earlier (74-6); the editors of Dickinson in Her Own Time say this visit “likely” occurred when Lyman came to Amherst in 1863 (12). Leiter notes that Dickinson apparently corresponded with Abby Wood, who married in 1855 and soon left for Syria, and that Wood visited Dickinson in 1873 (404). Again, yes, the missing letters, and also the sense that Dickinson’s correspondents in her later years included old friends if they stepped into new and adventuresome lives.
That Dickinson was in some sense remaking her world becomes clear when we turn to a second pair of letters, written within months of each other. In July, 1854, Dickinson writes to Abiah to decline an invitation, saying that she only leaves home in the event of an “emergency,” before adding, “If I ever leave home, which is improbable, I will, with much delight, accept your invitation; till then, my dear Abiah, my warmest thanks are your’s, but dont expect me” (L 166). Less than two months later, though, she happily accepts an invitation. A year earlier, Dickinson and Vinnie had visited the Hollands, and now Mary Holland has written to invite them again. Dickinson begins, “Thank you, dear Mrs. Holland – Vinnie and I will come, if you would like to have us” (L 174). After reviewing the details of the trip, she adds, “Three days and we are there – happy – very happy!” The visit occurred—their second to the Hollands—and the correspondence continued for the rest of Dickinson’s life.

Years later, after Josiah Holland’s death (in 1881), Dickinson writes to Mrs. Holland, “I shall never forget the Doctor’s prayer, my first morning with you – so simple, so believing. That God must be a friend – that was a different God – and I almost felt warmer myself, in the midst of a tie so sunshiny” (L 731). This memory of her first visit hints at what is so appealing to Dickinson when she enthusiastically accepts an invitation to return: they saw eye to eye on, and presumably could talk freely about, matters of importance to her. (When she was “troubled” by the sermon, recall that it was to the Hollands that she wrote and with whom she wished to speak.) Some things, it seems, could still draw her from her father’s home. She will not visit Abiah; she will return to the Hollands. She is making choices about whom to include in her world.

23 A similar sentiment occurs in a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross a few years later: “I believe the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears” (L 230 March 1861?). For more on Dickinson’s friendship with Mary Holland, see especially Stephanie Tingley, “‘My Business is to Sing’: Emily Dickinson’s Letters to Elizabeth Holland.” One gleans something of Josiah Holland’s appeal to Dickinson from an attack in The Hampshire and Franklin Express, where his views were labeled “creedless, churchless, ministerless Christianity” (Leyda I: 296).
Over the course of her twenty-two letters to Abiah, there is a gradual decline in Dickinson’s playfulness. Early on, she felt great freedom. In January, 1850, after her parents have gone out, she writes that “God is sitting here, looking into my soul to see if I think right tho’ts. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good, and he knows every one of my struggles” (L 31). By contrast, in her last few letters to Abiah, “God” is mentioned rarely and without any apparent irony or playfulness. Dickinson’s willingness to make light of matters of faith and, more fundamentally, to follow her thoughts (her pen) without restraint, diminish over time. In 1852, she all but apologizes for writing of unholy things on the sabbath: “your kind heart will be lenient,” she implores, “forgiving all empty words and unsatisfying feelings on the Sabbath-day ground” (L 69). As Sewall notes of Abiah’s conversion: “With Abiah safely in the fold and Emily out, the tone of the letters changes, and the intervals between them […] lengthen considerably. The two were no longer facing the same problem” (382).

Writing to the Hollands, however, Dickinson apparently feels free to joke, wonder, and inquire earnestly. Her first letter begins where her early letters to Abiah leave off:

Dear Dr. and Mrs Holland – dear Minnie – it is cold tonight, but the thought of you so warm, that I sit by it as a fireside, and am never cold any more. I love to write you – it gives my heart a holiday and sets the bells to ringing. If prayers had any answers to them, you were all here to-night, but I seek and I don’t find, and knock and it is not opened. Wonder if God is just – presume he is, however, and t’was only a blunder of Matthew’s. (L 133)

Such playfulness bordering on irreverence is essential to Dickinson and to her ways of thinking and writing. At stake is the freedom to follow her thoughts, to pursue her own questions. As Lavinia would say many years later of her sister, “She had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do” (Bingham Home 414). To which we might add, if it is not redundant, she had to think her own thoughts, not “right tho’ts,” and to think them in her own way. If earnest questioning became more difficult with friends who, in one way or another, conformed to roles
ready-made for them, it is something she would need to find elsewhere. The friendships with the Hollands, with (soon) her Norcross cousins, and with Mary and Samuel Bowles provide just that. She wants conversation and thoughtfulness, not doctrine, in the face of a heartfelt question.

Scholars have long considered Dickinson a demanding friend and correspondent, and some have noted that many of her friendships came to an end when those friends marry and leave Amherst. In some cases (one thinks of her friendships with Jane Humphrey and John Graves, for example) it does seem that marriage—and, with it, whatever walls Dickinson intuited or erected as each friend settled into a societally sanctioned role—was the precipitating factor. At times, too, it seems the cause was not marriage exactly (several of her new friends are married, after all) but an acceptance of a life of roles. Sewall emphasizes Dickinson’s frustration as her friends “accepted with cheer and energy the values and the challenges of mid-nineteenth century life—the outgoing piety, the missionary spirit (at home and abroad), the expansionism in every phase of national life” (371). This sounds exactly right, with the proviso that she did not react passively to such frustration: she sought out new friends, allies, and audiences. “She was,” recalls sister Vinnie, “always watching for the rewarding person to come” (Bingham Home 413).

The figures who matter to Dickinson combine to offer Dickinson a hospitable space for her thinking, and however diverse that group might appear, each member allows one or another important aspect of her thinking to emerge, even thrive. Mitchell notes that a number of the preachers encountered by Dickinson were influenced by Higher Criticism, which stressed

24 My point is not that everyone in this group shared her thinking but that, collectively, they offered a space for that thinking. She could share seemingly irreverent poems with Samuel Bowles; she could imagine a friendlier God with the Hollands; she could wax poetical about the world around her with her Norcross cousins. With all of them, too, she could sincerely appeal to God’s grace and to the promise of salvation. There was, simply, more room to think things through on her own terms. One thinks of Emerson’s characterization of a friend as someone in whose presence one can “think aloud” and “be sincere” (Collected Works II: 119). Tingley connects this phrase specifically to Dickinson’s letters to Mrs. Holland (“‘My Business is to Sing’” 182); I would extend its usefulness to many of her favored relationships, especially later in life.
“intuition, mystery, and personal feelings in religious experience” (“Amherst” 16). Josiah Holland, for example, though extremely conservative on matters of gender, is a firm believer that one’s own feelings surpassed the importance of scripture. “Christianity, in the form of abstract statement, and in the shape of a creed, has not for me any particular meaning,” according to Holland (qtd. in Habegger 309). “I have to test things through my heart and best feelings.” Habegger observes that from Holland, Dickinson received “authorization to go on trusting her feelings,” an insight that might equally be applied to any number of the important presences in her life: Holland and other preachers join Emerson as voices in Dickinson’s world that value the voice within over any voice from without.

But to put it this way makes it sound strategic, calculating. As the 1850s progress, Dickinson is not consciously accumulating a roster of useful correspondents, nor is she plotting to secure the most generative audiences for her writing. To read her letters is to see the genuine affection she feels and the palpable sense of welcome she cherishes; it is to see her responding to the people with whom she feels comfortable, with whom she feels free to be herself. In these relationships, her ways of being, thinking, and expressing herself require little or no editing, and she herself feels loved. She may gauge her words with her audience in mind—it goes without saying, for her as with any of us, that we shine differently in different friendships—but the relationships that thrive at this time are those in which she feels no need to be other than who and how and what she is. That we see different sides of Dickinson and hear distinct voices as we go letter to letter shows how successful she is at building an ample community of thought and at nurturing an ample arena in which the ways (plural) of writing that are of interest to her are welcome. She forges a community of intimates with whom she can relate on her own terms.
A final trend that begins before the move to the Homestead and accelerates after it is Dickinson’s writing of poetry. As always, the details are fuzzy, and scholars have identified numerous early moments when her “apprenticeship” to poetry seems to begin. But there seems no doubt that she is writing poems during the 1850s. To my mind, the most compelling evidence consists of her references (always elliptical, always playful) to poems and to the writing of poetry. In 1853—the year she sends “On this wondrous sea” to Susan—Dickinson apparently shared her work with Henry Vaughn Emmons, a former classmate. “Please accept,” she asks in a letter to Emmons, “a few of my flowers” (L 119). A subsequent letter clarifies that the flowers were poems and were only a loan: “while with pleasure I lend you the little manuscript, I shall beg leave to claim it, when you again return” (L 121). Later, she asks that he return “two little volumes of mine which I thoughtlessly lend you” (L 150, but with the transcription corrected by Franklin [Variorum 9], January 1854).

Other early letters likewise imply that Dickinson was writing creatively. Her lines to Jane Humphrey, when Dickinson is twenty, are often understood as a reference to her writing: “I have dared to do strange things – bold things, and have asked no advice from any – I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong” (L 35). Three years later, in 1853, she explicitly chides Austin for purporting to be a writer: “Now Brother Pegasus, I’ll tell you what it is – I’ve been in the habit myself of writing some few things, and it rather appears to me that you’re getting away with my patent, so you’d better be careful or I’ll call the police!” (L 110). Taken individually, it can be hard to know what to make of such moments, but taken as a whole, and set

25 Sewall traces Dickinson’s experiments with poetry to her teens (396); Murray points specifically to Dickinson’s letter (L 29) to Joel Norcross in January, 1850, as her “debut” (Maid 69); Wolff likewise points to Dickinson’s letters of the early 1850s (128); Fuss points to Dickinson’s return to the Homestead in 1856” (30); Habegger, whose biography traces Dickinson’s development as a poet with particular care, points to her early friendships with Newton and especially Emmons as key moments (317-318).

26 This comment to Austin comes in the same month—March, 1853—that she sends her first poem to Susan (“On this wondrous sea”).
alongside the correspondence with Emmons, it all points to the beginnings of a new “habit,” one that overlaps with many of the letters we have seen.

In the end, there is much we cannot know, and care is needed, as “On this wondrous sea” (Fr 3) demonstrates: Dickinson copied it into Fascicle 1 in 1858, and if we had only that copy, we might mistake it for a poem written in 1858. But as we saw in chapter two, there exists a copy sent to (and saved by) Susan in 1853. There is no way of knowing how many other poems copied in later years were likewise composed earlier, but the existence of that one poem and the fact that it precedes the fair copy by a full five years ought to caution us about making any great pronouncements about an outpouring of creative energies, whether in 1858 or any year.27

What we know is that—however it happened, whenever it began, whatsoever the exact moment it crystallized for her—as the 1850s progress and her twenties unfold, Dickinson begins and then intensifies a practice of drafting, copying, and sharing poems. While it is tempting to look for a moment where it suddenly happens, it is far more likely a process, an unfolding: at a time when her friends and family were choosing to align themselves with ways of knowing provided by the doctrines of the church or ways of being inscribed in ready-made roles such as wife, teacher, or missionary, Dickinson chooses her own way of knowing and being. To our image of the poet-in-the-making developed in chapter two—the young woman whose letters reveal habits and gestures that foreshadow the poetry to come—we need to add that at least some of that poetry was not “to come” but had already arrived. It is in her correspondence with Emmons, as Habegger notes, that Dickinson refers for the first time to her “crown” (320). The direction seems clear: a practice of writing and exploration is underway.

27 What little evidence we have (i.e. early or intermediate drafts that for some reason were not discarded) confirms that individual poems might remain uncopied, and whole sheets unbound, for months or even years. See Franklin’s Introduction (especially 11-28) and Socarides (25-26).
It is in the midst of these diverse unfoldings, emergings, and discernings in Dickinson’s life that the family returns to the Homestead in November, 1855.28 To Mrs. Holland, she reports that in the aftermath of the move, she is “out with lanterns, looking for myself” (L 182). But while disorienting to Dickinson, the move represented a significant achievement for her father. Repurchasing the Homestead was his way of redeeming the family name after the bankruptcy of his father.29 As if to emphasize the point, he embarked on several major renovations, which took six months to complete.30 Whereas the building “was initially a more homogenous space, with the bedrooms doubling as sitting rooms, and the sitting rooms serving as extra bedrooms,” the renovated Homestead enacted a new cultural ideal. For those who could afford it, the family home was increasingly seen “as a refuge from the outside world, a private domain dedicated to nurturing the interior life of its newly leisured citizens” (30). Fuss notes that the main staircase, for example, “was moved to the back of the hallway, physically removing access to the private family quarters from the public realm of the street” (33). In the renovated Homestead, Dickinson’s bedroom will be more private and harder to reach than ever.

The ability to retreat to that room, however, depends on more than creating a private space. When we imagine Dickinson in her room, we forget that during the long New England

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28 The Homestead had been built by Edward’s father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, in 1813. At the time of Dickinson’s birth in 1830, Edward’s family had been living in half of the building, Samuel and his immediate family in the other. When Samuel sold the building to David Mack in 1833, Dickinson’s family moved into the larger half, which they rented from Mack. Dickinson is nearly ten when they leave the Homestead in 1840; she is a month shy of twenty-five when they return in 1855. See Fuss 26-27.

29 The achievements and failings of Samuel Fowler Dickinson are recounted in all of the major biographies. A co-founder of both Amherst Academy in 1814 and Amherst College in 1821, Dickinson’s grandfather combined missionary zeal with financial recklessness. He left Amherst in 1834, following the foreclosure and sale of the Homestead and with Amherst College, perhaps his proudest legacy, on the verge of bankruptcy. Much of Edward’s life—the purchase of the Homestead, the lifelong commitment to the College as treasurer, his generosity to town and church—can be read as an attempt to supplant the failings of his father and untarnish the Dickinson name.

30 “Major” is perhaps an understatement: the house cost $6000 to purchase; the renovations, according to Fuss, cost an additional $5000. By contrast, the total construction cost of Austin and Susan’s new house was $4500 (Fuss 30).
winters, as well as on cool nights in fall and spring, warmth is a luxury. The single hearth of her first nine years in the Homestead and the single huge chimney of the next fifteen years on North Pleasant Street are the one sure respite from the cold. In winter, the family moves the dining room table into the sitting room, close to the “cheerful fire” (L 139). Along the same lines, as long as light is scarce or expensive, it makes sense to light just one room after dark. Gathering in the evening to write letters or read the news, then, is pragmatic.

In the renovated Homestead, the kitchen and dining rooms will continue to be used as common spaces, but new technologies remake the bedrooms into places of escape. Fuss observes that the availability of inexpensive oil lamps now makes it possible to light more rooms in the house, and she especially highlights the installation of cast-iron stoves in all the major rooms, which has the effect of “decentralizing the family and creating new zones of privacy. More than any other revolution of the domestic interior, the Franklin stove made it possible for individual members within the family to seek privacy from the family” (54). For Dickinson, the availability of a well-lit, warm, and private bedroom—whether for writing, thinking, or listening to the world outside—must have been a revelation. As Fuss concludes, “Of all the reasons hypothesized for this nineteenth-century poet’s famous withdrawal, one is compelled to wonder whether Dickinson chose to isolate herself within her bedroom for the simple reason that, for the first time in the history of the domestic interior, she could” (55).

Meanwhile, a precarious balance is emerging at home. From a young age, Dickinson and her siblings have been directly involved in maintaining the household. Manuals on housekeeping

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31 Another respite was sharing a bed with someone (see L 3; Habegger 130). Fuss makes it clear that views on personal and private space in Dickinson’s youth were different from ours and, furthermore, that they were changing during her lifetime. The move in 1855 brings these changes palpably into Dickinson’s home and life.
32 It also appears she shared her Pleasant Street bedroom with Lavinia, referring to it as “our room” in one letter (L 98) and concluding another, “It is late – Goodnight – Vinnie is snoring!” (L 47). The Homestead bedroom is all hers.
encouraged parents to keep children, especially girls, busy with chores, and Dickinson’s parents valued both childhood industry and a self-sufficient household (Murray *Maid* 61-2, 65-6). Austin tended the chickens and horses, pumped water from the well, and oversaw laborers who worked on the grounds; Vinnie and Emily helped with the baking, cleaning, and sewing. When Edward was away, relatives from out of town or boarders were relied on for some of the more strenuous tasks. As Murray notes, “temporary help was hired seasonally or for specific tasks such as laundry or dress making” but, overall, the preference before returning to Main Street was for the family to do what was needed (*Maid* 12).

The sheer amount of work required in a nineteenth-century household such as Dickinson’s is foreign to most of us. Just doing the laundry was a three-day process, so tedious that maids were known to negotiate lower wages in order to be excused from doing it (63). Water had to be pumped from the well; the presence of oil lamps and woodstoves created a constant settling of soot and ash in the house; slop buckets (from indoor toilets) needed to be emptied; most, perhaps all, of the food would be made from scratch. Here, perhaps, Dickinson’s life is not the one we tend to envision. In popular imagination, she is typically removed from the day-to-day labor of managing a nineteenth-century household, but her letters make clear that she was immersed in the daily routines of household life, both during childhood and as an adult. She learns to bake bread, then bakes regularly; she seems constantly to be sewing (L 8, 14, 159).

In short, long days. We get a keen sense of her life from a passing mention that her day begins with her father “rapping” on her door (L 175) and, on another occasion, that she “rose” at

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33 If we allow for the hired labor required to run and maintain the house and grounds, the Dickinson household was self-sufficient; see Murray, *Maid as Muse*, 59-60.
34 An excellent overview of such “daily work” in a household such as Dickinson’s can be found in Murray’s essay “Miss Margaret’s Emily Dickinson” (see especially 714-723).
her “usual hour” to make the fire (L 156). The impact on her ability to write letters seems clear. She frequently excuses delays in writing by pointing to how busy she has been, and on several occasions, a few days (L 158) or even ten (L 36) pass before a letter can be completed. The fact that she routinely writes letters on Sunday is celebrated by some critics as a happy transgression of the sabbath, which it surely is, but it points more directly to the fact that for many years, Sunday is indeed her day of rest. But even the rest of Sundays must have compromised when, in the days after the move, Dickinson’s mother falls ill, as she reports to Mrs. Holland: “Mother has been an invalid since we came home, and Vinnie and I ‘regulated,’ and Vinnie and I ‘got settled,’ and still we keep our father’s house, and mother lies upon the lounge, or sits in her easy chair” (L 182). Mrs. Dickinson will not fully recover for four years.

Meanwhile, whether on North Pleasant Street or Main Street, the Dickinson home is a busy place. Guests are a regular feature of life, house calls are common, and Edward’s status in town means the Dickinson home is the site of large social events, including the annual Commencement Dinner that requires the labor of everyone. For much of her life, and especially during these early years, Dickinson is involved in all of these activities. Beyond events hosted at the Homestead, her days include the “usual rush of callers” (L 145). We get a glimpse of Dickinson receiving visits, and of the fun she can have in describing them, in a letter to Austin. Already well into a lengthy paragraph about recent visitors, she writes that she entered the sitting room, “more dead than alive, and endeavored to make conversation. Father looked round triumphantly. I remarked that ‘the weather was rather cold’ today, to which they all assented – indeed I never witnessed such wonderful unanimity” (L 79). A further attempt at conversation

35 By contrast, she reports in an August letter to Susan that “Father and mother were gone last week, upon a little journey – and we rested somewhat” (L 172).
36 A short list of letters mentioning housework during these years includes L 30, 36, 39, 73, 89, 90, 102, 123, 131, 157, and 182.
falls flat, but there is no escape: “I endeavored to shrink away into primeval nothingness – but sat there large as life, in spite of every effort. Finally Father, accompanied by the cousins, adjourned to the kitchen fire – and Vinnie and I, and our friends enjoyed the rest of the evening.” One senses here the way any social visit might be awkward and, in particular, the way Dickinson might experience such awkwardness. To imagine Dickinson making small talk is to appreciate anew the appeal of her bedroom upstairs. But these are years when she, too, visits; in one letter, she reports making calls all day (L 142). As with her list of correspondents, so too with visits and callers: it is more a matter of who. Her friends are welcome.

Even as she is immersed in maintaining the house, caring for her mother, and engaging in expected forms of socializing at home and in the homes of others, Dickinson is cushioned. Beginning in 1850, in an apparent concession to his daughters, Edward had advertised for a “maid of all work.” Murray guesses that Lavinia and Dickinson would have had to argue their case, since their mother had long believed in running the household without such assistance (Maid 59-60, 71). Possibly Mrs. Dickinson’s recurring illnesses contributed to the decision, but whatever the impetus, beginning in 1850, a few maids appear on the pages of Dickinson’s letters, including Mrs. Mack doing the laundry (L 85), Mrs. Scott doing the ironing (L 114), and several women hired as seamstresses (L 157 and 158).37

But when there are gaps, they are filled by the two daughters, and in the first half of the 1850s, Dickinson is spared somewhat but not completely from domestic work. In July, 1854, she complains to Abiah that currently “we have not a girl” and that she has been busy attending to company (L 166). And various passages from letters around that time make it clear that she is

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37 This list includes those who worked inside the house. For help managing the grounds and horses, a long list of hired hands and groundskeepers appear in Dickinson’s letters, both before and after the move. In addition to Murray, see Johnson’s “Appendix 2: A Note on the Domestic Help” (Letters 959).
frequently occupied with the combination of visiting and household duties. In a letter she is forced to put down for a few days before completing, she writes to Austin that “[w]e are almost beside ourselves with business, and company” (L 158), while a letter from a week earlier gives a vivid sense of her day-to-day life:

yesterday, I washed the dishes […] Then I worked until dusk, then went to Mr Sweetser’s to call on Abiah Root, then walked around to Jerry’s and made a call on him – then hurried home to supper, and Mother went to the Lyceum, while John Graves spent the evening with Vinnie and I until past 10 – Then I wrote a long letter to Father, in answer to one we had from him yesterday – then crept softly, not to wake all the folks, who had been asleep a long time – I rose at my usual hour, kindled the ‘fires of Smithfield,’ and missed you very much. (L 156)38

All this in the same year (1854) as her exchange of manuscripts with Emmons and a year after sharing “On this wondrous sea” with Susan. Somehow, in the midst of it all, Dickinson is managing to write poems. But to judge by many of her letters, the days pass beholden to others, and the changes introduced in 1850 were, at first at least, inconsistent.

A fascinating aspect of the move to Main Street is that the renovations undertaken by Edward enshrine the presence of full-time help into the very structure of the building. Fuss describes how a new “two-story rear ell, of moderate height, relocated the kitchen and washroom to the back of the house while creating servant quarters above, accessed by a back staircase” (32). With these structural changes come adjustments in how the Dickinson family approaches household labor. As Murray observes of the year 1855, the year of the move, “On one side, the family managed with the assistance of relatives and alongside help hired for specific or seasonal tasks but, on the other, an Irish maid-of-all-work became a domestic mainstay. Tasks that had once been Austin’s—care for the animals and grounds—were shifted permanently to hired hands” (Murray “Architects” 14-15). While there had been maids and “hired hands” during the

38 The “fires of Smithfield” is a reference to the burnings of protestants during the reign of Mary Tudor. It seems to have been a common expression.
years on North Pleasant Street, the presence of live-in domestic help ensures that Dickinson’s life in the renovated Homestead will be, by design, radically different.

This “Irish maid-of-all-work” is Margaret O’Brien, who now begins a nine-year stint as live-in maid, and this is where several threads come together. What Murray’s scholarship makes clear is that Dickinson’s productivity as a writer correlates to the presence of servants in the Dickinson home: the flow of creative energies and the manuscript practices that are in evidence beginning in 1858 owe something to the fact that, since 1850, the family has had some kind of help, and beginning in 1855, has had permanent help (Maid 75-6). Dickinson’s most productive years as a poet, 1858 to 1864, are, Murray writes, neatly “framed by O’Brien’s tenure” in the Dickinson household and by the corresponding freedom from domestic chores that Dickinson now enjoys (“Miss Margaret’s” 724). With “Margaret O’Brien at the stove,” observes Murray, Dickinson’s contributions decreased to wiping the plates her maid washed or baking all the breads and puddings” (“Architects” 15; see also “Miss Margaret’s” 725).

To Dickinson, the arrival of a full-time, live-in maid adds another way that her life in the Homestead is congenial to writing. If, as the common view holds, her bedroom was a place of solitude, she now had time to retreat to it; if her days are not full of leisure, still, hers is a life without any great financial hardship; if she bakes bread and dries the dishes, her days are buffered from the exhaustion and excesses of full-time domestic labor. If what she wants is time and space to think, to forge her own answers to the pressing questions within her, she seems, increasingly, to have it. If she wants to write, she can.

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39 Earlier scholars had puzzled over the drop-off in productivity after 1865. Johnson writes that her “great poetic drive was suddenly at an end” (Letters 448). Writing in 1981, Franklin wonders if Dickinson’s “poetic drive [was] somewhat spent” by the late 1860s (MSB xiii); in 1998, he amends this view and writes that the “apparent winding down […] was related to her eyes” (Introduction 25). Murray counters that 1865 is when Margaret O’Brien marries and leaves the Homestead, so that for three years, Dickinson is busy once again with housework (Maid 81).

40 Just as she assembles a roster of friends whose ways of thinking she shares, so too she takes on precisely those chores that she enjoys: her letters make it clear that she abhors cleaning but loves to bake.
This Dickinson is not isolated. The Homestead, with its shared dining room and kitchen, its frequent visitors, and its various tasks and chores that set her to work side by side with hired help, continually brings Dickinson into contact with others. Murray notes that “with the 1855 renovations to the Dickinson family Homestead, it became easier to enter the new kitchen wing from the yard than to pass through the three doors and passageways from the family parlor” (10). The impact on Dickinson was such that she “was more reachable by peddlers and stablemen than by her Yankee peers.” To think of Dickinson as the decade progresses is to think of a woman making time for thought, for correspondence, and for poetry within an interwoven fabric of domestic obligations, daily routines, and household relationships.

Meanwhile, unlike so many of her girlhood friends, two of the most important people in Dickinson’s life are settling down nearby. After their engagement in 1853, Austin and Susan had considered following the path of many young entrepreneurs of the day and relocating to the Midwest.41 In 1854, both had spent time on what must have been partly a reconnaissence trip (see Johnson’s notes to L 172 and 176). Susan’s letters make it clear that the couple expected to join her brothers after getting married, and as we have seen, Dickinson’s letters reveal depths of pain at the prospect of them leaving. It is now that Edward makes his offer to Austin: if the young couple will stay in Amherst, Edward will build them a house on a lot adjacent to the newly acquired Homestead and Austin will become a joint partner in his father’s law firm. After some deliberation, they accept, and a notice dated October 31, 1855, appears in The Hampshire and Franklin Express to announce the partnership (Longsworth 56).

41 Cf. Margaret Fuller a decade earlier: “The people on the boat [heading for Chicago] were almost all New Englanders, seeking their fortune. They had brought with them their habits of calculation, their cautious manners, their love of polemics” (Summer 12).
Susan writes to her brothers that “Austin’s Father has overruled all objections to our remaining here and tho’ it has been something of a sacrifice for Austin’s spirit and rather of a struggle with his pre-conceived ideas, I feel satisfied that in the end it will be best and he will be fully rewarded for his filial regard” (qtd. in Wolff 117-18). After their marriage in July, 1856, brother Austin and “sister” Susan become Dickinson’s neighbors for life.

Austin and Susan’s new home quickly becomes something of a salon, and Susan is reportedly a gracious and talented host. In the words of Martha Nell Smith, Susan was “powerfully intellectual” and a “vivacious, charismatic, sometimes arrogant, often generous, acutely and astutely well-read woman and devoted mother” (“Susan and Emily Dickinson” 65). To Dickinson, the Evergreens means that both her brother and her closest friend, as well as the site of frequent social gatherings, are just a short walk away. If she chooses not to make the trip, she can hear the din through the pines, but in the early years, she is apparently there often.42 Years later, Catherine Scott Anthon will remember her extended visits to the Evergreens (in 1859, 1861, and 1863), recalling “Those celestial evenings in the Library—The blazing wood fire—Emily—Austin. —The music—The rampant fun—The inextinguishable laughter. The uproarious spirits of our chosen—our most congenial circle” (Eberwein et al. In Her Own Time 37). Elsewhere, Anthon remembers Emily “with her dog, & Lantern! often at the piano playing weird & beautiful melodies, all from her own inspiration, oh! She was a choice spirit” (qtd. in Habegger 373). Dickinson herself seems to recall occasions such as this in a letter to Anthon, writing that “[t]hose were unnatural evenings. – Bliss is unnatural” (L 209).

42 Often, but not always: famously, she did not attend the gathering at the Evergreens when Emerson was the guest after delivering his lecture “The Beautiful in Rural Life” before the Amherst Students’ Association on December 16, 1857. See Bosco and Myerson, The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, where the lecture appears under its original title, “Country Life (Concord).”
Similarly, Susan’s daughter, Matty, tells of “wild games of battledore and shuttlecock in the long winter evenings; Emily convulsing their onlookers by her superfluous antics added to their game. She improvised brilliantly upon the piano all sorts of dramatic performances of her own, one she called the Devil being particularly applauded” (Bianchi Life 64). Of these gatherings, Dickinson writes to Mary and Samuel Bowles, “I think Jerusalem must be like Sue’s Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there, and you and Mr Bowles are by. I hope we may all behave so as to reach Jerusalem” (L 189). In her own account of life in the Evergreens, Susan describes entertaining Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Olmsted, Wendell Phillips; stories are told, books discussed, and poems read aloud, as when Samuel Bowles “would draw from his pocket” an as-yet “unpublished poem” by one or another well-known poet (Rowing 176-77; Annals 3-11). Smith observes that the “accounts recorded of life in the Evergreens sound gay, culturally rich, and vibrant with fine meals and delectable conversation” (Rowing 176). Of Austin and Susan, and of evenings shared at the Evergreens, Dickinson writes to Mrs. Bowles, “I find they are my crowd” (L 212).

Through it all, through all of the changes that the mid-1850s bring into Dickinson’s life, one of the few constants is Susan, and the nature of their relationship is one of the great unknowns in Dickinson scholarship. History seems to have left us just enough material to make many scenarios plausible without leaving enough to rule many of them out. Thinking about the

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43 Battledore and Shuttlecock: a racket game similar to badminton.
44 For a correction of Johnson’s dating of this letter, see Himelhoch and Patterson.
45 The relationship between Susan and Dickinson has been described as cordial but not especially close after the mid 1850s (see Sewall’s chapter “Susan and Emily”); as friendly in a way that was fruitful for Dickinson’s poetry but was nevertheless characterized by Susan’s “distance, highness, aloofness” (Habegger 367); as a “passionate and erotically intense love relationship” that in its early phase “had a physical dimension” and that, more generally, aided Dickinson “in the process of […] discovering the sources of her own creative power” (Erkkila 164-65); and as one of mutual devotion such that Susan was “the most important person […] through Dickinson’s life” with demonstrations of “carnal as well as […] emotional affection” (Smith Rowing 28, 25). It was not until the 1990s, in works such as Martha Nell Smith’s ground-breaking Rowing in Eden (1992), that Susan’s importance garnered
developing poet in her mid to late twenties, what seems essential is not the exact nature of their personal relationship but the extent to which, at this early moment, the writings shared with Susan illuminate her role in Dickinson’s life as a writer, to which I turn below.\textsuperscript{46} Still, there is no denying the intensity of Dickinson’s feelings, as evidenced in the letters, nor the importance of Susan’s presence in Dickinson’s day-to-day life. Over the course of her lifetime, Dickinson will send between 400 and 500 letters, notes, and poems to Susan.\textsuperscript{47}

Moreover, Dickinson’s correspondence with Susan seems to have been an integral part of her daily life, especially in later years, when (according to Matty) Susan’s family could depend on something—a poem, a few words, a piece of cake—arriving every evening.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, according to Smith and Hart, certain characteristics distinguish it from other letters. They report that Dickinson’s letters to Susan are typically in her “casual script […] in the handwriting more similar to [her] private notes for developing expression” and she routinely uses “less formal stationery for those writings—scraps of paper lacking gilt edges or elegant embossment” (xxii). Noting that letters and poems sent to Susan were often hand-delivered (by one of Susan’s children or by someone working in the two houses), Hart and Smith add that “[o]f all Dickinson’s correspondence to others, only writings to Susan are on very small pieces of paper sustained critical attention. See also Paula Bennett, \textit{Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet} (1990), and Judith Farr, \textit{The Passion of Emily Dickinson} (1992).

\textsuperscript{46} To be clear: I do not consider the nature of their relationship to be a minor or uninteresting point. For now, though, I find the available evidence inconclusive; as Pollak writes, the “bedroom door remains locked” to us (“Brief Biography” 40). At least some of the problem has to do with how we read Dickinson’s letters to Susan: are they “hyperbole” (Sewall \textit{Life} 202) or expressions of true yearning, as Hart, Smith, and others argue? My main point is that in the time period that is my focus—the late 1850s, for now—Susan’s availability as a reader is crucial.

\textsuperscript{47} Differentiating between letters and poems can be problematic, but a (rough) breakdown is 252 poems (Franklin 1547, 1549) and 153 letters and eighteen prose fragments (Johnson 964–5). Smith refers to “nearly 500 writings” (“Susan and Emily Dickinson” 52). Beyond generic distinctions, it is not always clear what was sent to whom. In his 1998 \textit{Variorum}, Franklin lists dozens of “poems that have been, or in some cases might be, regarded as having been sent” to Susan “but are not so considered in this edition” (1547, 1550). In the same year, Hart and Smith write in their introduction to \textit{Open Me Carefully} that “[t]wenty poems and one letter not previously associated with Susan are reproduced in this collection” (XXII). We are reminded of how the condition of the archive hinders our certainty even as it allows for a proliferation of possibilities.

\textsuperscript{48} See especially \textit{Face to Face} (8-9) and \textit{Life and Letters} (chapter six).
(11.5 x 12.5 cm.)” (xxvii). All of this, they argue, reveals a level of “trust, familiarity, routine” and “the intimacy of comfortable everyday exchange” (XXII).

We are left to reckon, though, with the limitations of what Dickinson shared with Susan, some of which touch directly on Dickinson’s writing in the years leading up to her thirtieth birthday. As Miller has pointed out, Dickinson didn’t share many of her most profound poems with anyone: Dickinson, writes Miller, “circulates no poems with direct mention of the civil war, few that invoke the war indirectly, and relatively few of her poems most frequently anthologized and regarded as among her most important for understanding her thought and art today” (Reading 10-11). As far as we know, Dickinson did not circulate any of her poems on sheets, any copies that include alternatives in the margins or at the bottom of the page (her so-called “variants”), nor any of her fascicles, not even with Susan. That is, while Susan was surely a favored recipient of certain kinds of poems, and while the writings sent to her played an important role in Dickinson’s life as a writer, she was nevertheless excluded from much of what commands our attention today. Susan was undoubtedly an important part of Dickinson’s developing sense of herself as a poet, but she, too, was just one piece of the larger puzzle.

This, then, is Dickinson’s life in the new Homestead. She dries dishes, bakes bread, makes jams and puddings; she entertains; she visits neighbors, attends church, spends an occasional evening at the Evergreens; she plays games and improvises on the piano; she counts on a circle of family and friends, some near, some far. The first few years after the move—1856, 1857, the first half of 1858—offer a fascinating moment to ponder, a time when Dickinson is writing poetry but has not yet begun to preserve her poems. Much is hidden from our view. While we have 135 letters written between 1851 and 1854, we have just five letters each in 1855
and 1856, and none from 1857. These years—precisely the time when Dickinson would seem to be honing her craft and settling into life as a poet—remain markedly unmarked. If the early 1860s dazzle us (as they soon will) because we have an outpouring of poetry alongside a limited amount of details about her life, these years—the years leading up to that outpouring—dazzle us because we have so little of anything.

We get a keen glimpse of Dickinson at this time by way of several letters written after the family’s move to Main Street. Writing to Graves in April, 1856, Dickinson begins,

It is Sunday—now—John—and all have gone to church—the wagons have done passing, and I have come out in the new grass to listen to the anthems. Three or four Hens have followed me, and we sit side by side—and while they crow and whisper, I’ll tell you what I see today, and what I would that you saw.

You remember the crumbling wall that divides us from Mr Sweetser—and the crumbling elms and evergreens—and other crumbling things—that spring, and fade, and cast their bloom within a simple twelvemonth—well—they are here, and skies on me fairer far than Italy, in blue eye look down—up—see!—away—a league from here, on the way to Heaven! And here are Robins—just got home—and giddy Crows—and Jays—and will you trust me—as I live, here’s a bumblebee—not such as summer brings—John—earnest, manly bees, but a kind of a Cockney, dressed in jaunty clothes. Much that is gay—have I to show, if you were with me, John, upon this April grass—then there are sadder features—here and there, wings half gone to dust, that fluttered so, last year—a mouldering plume, an empty house, in which a bird resided. Where last year’s flies, their errand ran, and last year’s crickets fell! We, too, are flying—fading, John—and the song “here lies,” soon upon the lips that love us now—will have hummed and ended.

To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air—is no schoolboy’s theme! (L 184)

I quote at length to give a sense of how Dickinson’s letters glide from thought to thought. The prose, with its gestures of emphasis to indicate how it should be read and heard, is so expertly

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49 I take these numbers from Johnson. Hart and Smith have re-dated some letters and conjectured that there was no gap in 1857, but I have not seen any evidence that Johnson’s dating is inaccurate beyond a few corrections suggested by Habegger, Mitchell, and Franklin. Still, it remains the case that we cannot know for sure. In addition to Vinnie’s destruction of letters received by Dickinson (including all but a few from Susan), some of Dickinson’s letters to Susan were reportedly destroyed, at her request, after her death (Bianchi Face 176).
handled, and the focus so keenly attuned to what is present and to what is intuited, that it is tempting to think that here, finally, is the breakthrough we have been looking for. The sense of intimacy is palpable. Each time I reach a letter such as this—and there are several in the mid-1850s—I think, well, here is something new: this sounds like a poet. Sewall points out that the language in this letter is at times metrical; Dickinson, he writes, “seems to be reaching for a poem, or poems” (Life 405).

But there is nothing here that we have not already seen—the gestures of scene setting, the rendering of a present tense moment even as it conjures occurrences from the past, the leaps from quotidian to other modes of thinking, seeing, and being. Palpable, too, is the movement of a mind following its own train of thought, letting one thing lead to the next. Perhaps the letter’s quick and sure step feel new, the speed with which we go from all that is “gay” to features that are “sadder” and “fading” to, remarkably, a vision of the day when their lives of “flying” will have come to an end, and then—beyond that even—a time when the song hummed at their passing by loved ones will have ended. In just a half dozen lines, whole lifetimes pass.

Call it leaping; call it concision; call it elision. With dashes and commas pacing the performance, the gestures are familiar even as the delivery seduces. Call it a difference of degree, not kind; call it perhaps a consolidation: this passage is like so many early letters, only more so. Gone is the restraint regarding scripture in her letters to Abiah; gone are explicit appeals of “why don’t you write?” and “I am so lonely” sent to brother and friends. In their place is language and thinking that goes where it will, at a pace of its choosing, in an address that is personal, even intimate, yet measured, controlled.

This letter to Graves provides a snapshot of Dickinson’s thinking at a time when her commitment to poetry is taking shape and her religious leanings are becoming clearer. In
particular, we see Dickinson’s stance with regard to two powerful pulls on her imagination: on one hand, this world, the world around her; on the other, that other world, the eternity that is to come. As early as 1846, Dickinson had articulated the crux of the matter to Abiah: “I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die” (L 13). Already at the age of fifteen, then, the question for Dickinson was how to balance a belief in “God & his promises” with her “affections” for “the world.”

She is clearly drawn to both. It is telling, for example, that when Dickinson writes of her regret at having “neglected the one thing needful” and explains that “it is hard for me to give up the world” in an early letter to Abiah, she also—in the same letter—offers an enthralled description of her experience of spring: “How glad I am that spring has come, and how it calmed my mind when wearied of study to walk out in the grass fields and beside the pleasant streams in which South Hadley is rich! There are not many wild flowers near, for the girls have driven them to a distance, and we are obliged to walk quite a distance to find them, but they repay us by their sweet smiles and fragrances” (L 23). While thoughts of conversion might pull her one way, her day-to-day experience—of walking the fields, sitting beside streams, and gathering flowers—pulls another. She continues, “The older I grow, the more do I love spring and spring flowers.” The question of conversion, far from being a question only of belief, is for Dickinson bound up with her unwillingness to forfeit so much of what she loves, as church doctrine requires.

But in thinking about such matters in language borrowed from the church, Dickinson inherits a strong dichotomy. Although she can wax eloquent about her personal experience in the world, she routinely employs clichés such as the “fleeting pleasures of time” (L 10) or posits “the world” against the “golden opportunity” afforded her during a revival (L 23). On such a view,
this world is “wicked” and to oppose conversion is to stand “in rebellion” (L 35). In her Congregationalist church, she would have heard, on many a Sunday, that eternity alone was worthy of our concern. In both the language and the doctrine of the church, the “World” and “Eternity” represent opposed and mutually exclusive realms.

Dickinson wants “Eternity” and “the World,” and working out a way to have both becomes an ongoing project. At nineteen, she finds her way breathlessly from an account of her daily chores to a frank reckoning with what it might portend. Writing to Jane Humphrey in January, 1850, she explains that with Vinnie away and “my two hands but two – not four, or five as they ought to be – and so many wants,” she has not had time to write (L 30). Her task, she says, is to “mind the house – and the food – sweep if the spirits were low – nothing like exercise to strengthen – and invigorate – and help away such foolishness – work makes one strong, and cheerful – and as for society what neighborhood so full as my own?” These many trials, she concludes, offer “an opportunity rare for cultivating meekness – and patience – and submission – and for turning my back to this very sinful, and wicked world.” Here, Dickinson mimics perfectly the message of church and society to a young woman: the need to “exercise” as a means of submission, the value of cultivating “meekness,” and generally the call to deny or repress the needs of the self.

But as the letter to Jane continues, Dickinson shows that she is far from ready to “give up the world.” She inclines “to other things,” she writes, “and Satan covers them up with flowers, and I reach out to pick them. The path of duty looks very ugly indeed – and the place where I want to go more amiable – a great deal – it is so much easier to do wrong than right – so much pleasanter to be evil than good, I dont wonder that good angels weep – and bad ones sing songs.” The choice is evidently between the “wicked” world and the path of duty, between bad angels
who “sing songs” and good angels who “weep,” between doing “wrong” and doing “right.”

Exactly what Dickinson has in mind when she writes that she “incline[s] to other things” is unclear, and some might want to read this as another early gesture toward her own writing. To me, though, the vision is broader and the stakes still higher: it is a life oriented toward the primacy of this world and the joys to be experienced here, among them flowers, birds, and bees, as well as the sympathy and affection of friends and the freedom to commune with them by letter. It is a life of picking whatever “flowers” she chooses, of thinking her own “tho’ts,” of leading a life of intellectual independence.

When she expresses reluctance about converting, after all, it is because other things matter more. Consistently, Dickinson privileges the natural world around her. Alongside the frequent mentions of sermons and scripture in her letters, references to the “World” are ever present. On some occasions, Dickinson’s pen warms—seemingly right before our eyes—to the task of rendering an experience of nature. After describing the arrival of spring to Jane Humphrey, Dickinson adds, “Oh she’ll be a comely maid, by May Day, and she shall be queen, if she can! I do wish I could tell you just how the Robins sing – they don’t sing now, because it is past their bedtime, and they’re all fast asleep, but they did sing, this morning, for when we were going to church, they filled the air with such melody, and sang so deliciously, that I tho’t really, Jennie, I never should get to meeting (L 86). As spring is vividly rendered, the robins’ songs compete directly with the duty of attending church. The letter brings to life not just spring, flowers, birds, and birdsong but also—in the writing itself—Dickinson’s enthusiastic response to it all. “Bless God,” she writes to Susan a year later, “that we catch faint glimpses of his brighter Paradise from occasional Heavens here!” (L 107).
A few years later, in a letter to Mrs. Holland, these opposites are brought together with steady assurance: “Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above” (L 179, March 1855). Here, it is precisely the “and” (complete with the subtle but emphatic pause achieved by the comma that precedes it) that is stressed as it joins her thanks for this world (in which she hopes, despite being so busy, to see her friend soon) to her thanks for that other world (where they will have ample time together). Similarly, as her letter to Graves in April, 1856, continues, she affirms their parity outright:

It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal – when air and earth are full of lives that are gone – and done – and a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection! Congratulate me – John – Lad – and “here’s a health to you” – that we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of the one “that now is” –

The gesture here is small but essential: two lives—one earthly, the other “Eternal”— with no need to overlook one for the other. This is a precise statement of a perspective that has been long in the making. Where a good churchgoer would be “chary” of this life, Dickinson sees no such need. She is well on her way to writing, as she will two years later, that the “charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally” (L 193).

Sewall, I believe, overstates the case when he claims that Dickinson “was not geared to rebellion” (Life 396).\(^5\) As I see it, her work is a bold, fervent, and multifaceted rebellion against many received forms of knowing, being, and making. But her form of rebellion is complex: in much the same way that she accepts the general terms of poetic meter but insists on remaking it according to her own experience of language, so too in the area of faith, she insists on remaking it on her own terms, according to her own instincts and insights. Dickinson’s rebellion—more subtle than Emerson’s, more private than Whitman’s, and more pointed than, say, Helen Hunt

\(^5\) The word “rebellion” is Dickinson’s: “I am standing alone in rebellion,” she writes to Jane Humphrey” (L 35); “my rebellious thoughts are many,” she tells Abiah Root (L 39). She borrows it (or so I assume) from Milton.
Fisk’s—consists of accepting certain foundations offered to her by the surrounding culture and then building upon them according to codes of her own devising.51

But Sewall’s comment helps us understand the dilemma faced by Dickinson in the mid-1850s. In her embrace of language from the church, as we have seen, Dickinson finds herself cast in the company of “Satan” and “bad angels” who sing, and she describes her earthly attachments as “bad,” “naughty,” “evil.” Such language, lifted right out of sermons, gave her a ready-made way to separate herself from the hordes and identify herself as different. Early on, it was useful, even empowering. But it was not a designation she would accept for long, and her letters trace a steady path toward a different self-image. It is noteworthy that all three uses of “rebellion” and “rebellious” in her letters occur between 1848 and 1850. Perhaps, given her upbringing, those terms were simply too stark. Her rebellion was not Byron’s: she did not revel for long in being “bad.”

In part, as we have already seen, this effort plays out in language, in her use of biblical terms, names, and stories to render the world around her. Thus, even as she registers her opposition to the church’s perspective and articulates her embrace of the world she loves, she does so in language borrowed from church doctrine, and the highest praise she can summon for the world around her is to compare it to heaven. At some point, such repurposing of religious language will become a conscious poetic strategy—whole poems will be built on this gesture—but early on, in her letters, one senses less a strategy and more a willingness to use what is at

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51 Sewall writes that “unlike her Amherst contemporary, Helen Hunt Fisk, a robust and open rebel ‘quite inclined [at age six] to question the authority of everything,’ she [Dickinson] was not geared to rebellion. She had been a model child, a good girl in school, a dutiful daughter. She had to find another way” (396). Along the same lines, Smith writes, “Like many women writers of her day, Dickinson donned conventional appearances to voice radical departure from official rhetoric extolling wives and motherhood” (Rowing 38). McIntosh connects this aspect of Dickinson’s thinking to Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau: “They do not as a rule follow set literary forms but use available forms to distort them, thereby in effect inventing their own” (Nimble 31).
hand: to Dickinson, the language of the sacred was the highest there was, and she knew it extremely well.

One way of sounding Dickinson’s thinking here is to ponder one of the more puzzling aspect of her letters in the mid-1850s: during this period, Dickinson repeatedly imagines an afterlife populated by the people she loves.\textsuperscript{52} Here, as Barton Levi St. Armand has shown, Dickinson echoes sentiments that were common in the culture around her: the idea of a heavenly reunion with loved ones, he notes, offered consolation at a time when high infant mortality (to name one impetus) was a fact of life (46-7). But in Dickinson’s case, such consolation would seem to be an effort to mollify precisely those fears that she elsewhere is intent on tackling head on. Tackling them, staring into them, re-imagining them—this will be the work of many poems of the not-so-distant future. Knowing later poems that imagine death in stark and lonely terms, we might expect images of happy reunions in heaven to steadily diminish over time.

If anything, however, during the mid-1850s, the opposite is true: strikingly, eight of the ten extant letters from 1855 and 1856 refer to a reunion with loved ones in heaven.\textsuperscript{53} At the simplest level, such assurances serve as a shorthand way of expressing affection, an easy way of accepting separation by gesturing to a future togetherness. Beyond that, though, what we see is the continuation of her engagement with matters of faith: to foresee reunions in “Eternity” is implicitly to foresee one’s own presence there. I do not mean anything as grandiose as Robert Sherwood’s claims that Dickinson experiences a religious conversion 138). Rather, and more

\textsuperscript{52} Writing to Jane Humphrey just before the family’s impending move, for example, Dickinson writes, “We shall be in our new house soon; they are papering now, and – Jennie, we have other home – ‘house not made with hands’” (L 180), while in the letter to Graves, she refers to a fun-filled April a few years earlier and comments, “Our April got to Heaven first – Grant we may meet her there – at the ‘right hand of the Father.’” When, in 1856, she sends a poem by John Pierpont to Mary Warner in commemoration of the death of Warner’s sister, it is a poem emphatically about such reunions (L 183).

\textsuperscript{53} L 181 has no such mention; L 178 implies a Heaven but comments only that “this is not forever, you know, this mortal life of our’s.”
simply, Dickinson gradually but deftly sets aside the grim theology around her, the concerned
looks on the faces of family members and neighbors, and the troubling encounters with damning
sermons. She needs both “Eternity” and this “World”; any doctrine that opposes them will have
to be overcome or refashioned.

What stands out in these letters is the confident and that joins her thanks for this world to
her thanks for that other world. In a second letter to Mrs. Holland, written a few months later, she
jokes that she has been “wicked” by reading her bible, then adds,

I’m half tempted to take my seat in that Paradise of which the good man writes,
and begin forever and ever now, so wondrous does it seem. My only sketch,
profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have
seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those
who are with me now, and those who were “parted” as we walked, and “snatched
up to Heaven.”

If roses had not faded, and frost had never come, and one had not fallen
here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than
the one below – and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I
have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous. Don’t tell Him,
for the world, though, for after all He’s said about it, I should like to see what He
was building for us, with no hammer, and no stone, and no journeyman either.

Dear Mrs. Holland, I love, to-night – love you and Dr. Holland, and “time and
sense” – and fading things, and things that do not fade. (L 185 August 1856)

Were I invited to read a few of my favorite Dickinson poems to a group of tentative listeners, I
might slip in this letter for good measure—not that anyone should mistake it for a poem. It is a
keen expression of love from one living and breathing friend to another, a statement in micro of a
set of allegiances and leanings and assumptions and longings, extending a warm and bold
embrace to her reader and “time and sense” and “fading things” and “things that do not fade.”

Here, as when the birds nearly detain Dickinson from attending church, heaven and earth are on
the same level, in apparent competition. Heaven is explicitly a place where Dickinson expects to
find her friends, “all of them – every one of them,” and the only blots on earth are the losses
caused by frost and death.
Such letters extend a capacious embrace of both this paradise and that other paradise, so that, at precisely the moment when Dickinson is turning with greater seriousness to poetry, she is finding ways to render the world around her in the most exalted terms available to her while imagining with equal conviction the heavenly paradise that will succeed this earthly one. Not for her—this poet who will soon declare “My business is to sing” (L 269)—a world where only “bad” angels “sing songs”; not for her a heaven that insists we forfeit the world “below.” As she sees things, there is no reason to choose between “fading things” and “things that do not fade”—she reaches for both, as if the vision of one heaven provides ballast for the vision of the other.

We know exactly one thing about Dickinson in 1857: in August, she is named one of three judges for the “Rye and Indian Bread” contest at the annual Cattle Show (Leyda I: 349).\(^{54}\) Nothing else—no poems, no letters, no anecdotes—can be reliably dated to that year. In 1858, there are again extant letters, though none, according to Johnson, can be dated much earlier than the summer. But while it is tempting to project onto this period of seeming retreat—the written record is thin to non-existent for several years at this point—it seems likely that lost letters are to blame. We know what is coming, and a moment of withdrawal fits the story we want to tell. But with Margaret O’Brien in the Homestead, with a bedroom offering solitude, and with time to take advantage of it, it is hard to imagine Dickinson not writing letters. Habegger notes that Joseph Lyman’s correspondence during the spring and summer of 1857 mentions letters received from Dickinson and Vinnie; that same year, Lyman unfolds an envelope (postmarked in May) from Dickinson and repurposes it as stationery for a letter to his fiancé (My Wars 347). Moreover, in subsequent letters, there are no acknowledgments or apologies.

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\(^{54}\) She earned this honor by winning second place in the same contest the previous year, for which she won 75 cents. On that occasion, Lavinia had been one of the judges (Leyda I: 344-5).
regarding delays in writing. In the case of Susan, it seems simply to have taken a while for Dickinson to settle into the habit of writing to her now that she lives next door.\footnote{At first, Dickinson apparently has little immediate need to write to someone she can (and does) easily see. It has always seemed to me that Dickinson’s letters to Susan ought to be divided into actual letters (sent when Susan is out of town) and notes (typically hand-delivered, typically in the years when Susan lives next door). A letter to someone in another town is quite different from a short missive carried a hundred yards by a maid or child. This is a minor point, perhaps, but the gestures hardly seem the same: \textit{I write because I cannot see you} versus \textit{I write because I would rather write to you}. When the correspondence picks up in 1858, the first letter (L 194) comes when Susan is visiting her sister in Geneva, NY, and the next two (L 197, 198) consist of poems, although in both cases the dating by Johnson is uncertain. The first unambiguous “note” sent from the Homestead to the Evergreens is L 201, dated by Johnson “about 1859,” in which Dickinson excuses herself from visiting: “I should love dearly to spend the Evening with the girls, but have made calls this afternoon, and accidentally left my mind at Prof Warmer’s.” We have seen that there was some tension around the time of the move (see chapter two), but my sense—and this is perhaps my main point—is that whatever gap there is in the correspondence between Dickinson and Susan is far more likely to have been a moment of transition between the actual letters (before 1856) and the hand-delivered notes (beginning roughly in 1858 and 1859). It simply took a while for Dickinson to take up this phase of their correspondence. Hart and Smith do not follow Johnson’s dating of the letters and consider the gap to be an “editorial construction” (xxvi).}

By the middle of 1858, when we again have a handful of letters, Dickinson has begun to copy poems onto folded sheets of stationery: according to Franklin, she copies forty-four poems during the second half of 1858. In the words of Robert Creeley, this is when Dickinson “begins to make decisive changes in her whole proposal of herself to the world” (50).\footnote{Creeley is actually referring to a slightly later moment—1862—but I quote him here because “decisive changes” seems exactly right for what Dickinson is doing when she begins to copy her poems onto sheets.} It is now that Dickinson begins to regularly share poems with Susan, and while we know that Susan is not the only early audience for Dickinson’s poetry,\footnote{As we have seen, poems were apparently shared with Emmons, while her early valentines were circulated and, in one case, published anonymously in the \textit{Springfield Republican} (Fr 2, published February 1852). But those events come at a much earlier moment in Dickinson’s life of writing.} she plays a pivotal role at this key moment in Dickinson’s “proposal of herself to the world.” In 1858, a year when Dickinson circulates just one other poem (Fr 18 is apparently sent to her two Norcross cousins), Dickinson shares nine or ten\footnote{Franklin is unsure about Fr 11; see \textit{Variorum} 66-68, 1550.} poems with Susan; in 1859 and 1860, Dickinson will send her an additional forty-one poems—far more than she sends to any other recipient—and by the time she writes to Higginson...
in April, 1862, she will have sent at least sixty poems to Susan (Franklin Variorum 1547-1557).\textsuperscript{59} If the general trend of Dickinson’s epistolary attachments is toward those with whom she feels free to think and write as she pleases, the correspondence with Susan is an extreme case of this freedom. To have a ready and welcome audience for one’s work is a gift most poets would relish, and this is especially true, perhaps, of a poet not publishing for broader audiences or in the early stages of imagining such an audience.\textsuperscript{60}

The act of sharing a poem achieves a kind of closure, however tentative, to the drafting process. Such sharing might elicit a response; failing that, the poet knows that the poem will at least be read, recited, even heard by another; in many cases, especially later in life, Dickinson probably knows it will be read aloud to those gathered alongside the recipient.\textsuperscript{61} Beyond that, sending a poem is an acknowledgment to oneself that something complete has been created. One phase of the composition process is marked and brought to a close, and while revision is always a possibility, the fact that Dickinson revises so few poems after sending them in a letter (or revises them in only minor ways) shows that she tends not to share drafts until she deems them close to done. Franklin observes that Dickinson typically sends “poems to recipients during composition and preliminary copying, before entry into the fascicle” (notes to Fr 11). If this is

\textsuperscript{59} Franklin offers a complete list of circulated poems (Variorum 1547-1557). The important point at this early stage is that, other than the very early exchanges, no one other than Susan receives more than a handful of poems from Dickinson until 1862, with the exception of Samuel Bowles, who receives three in 1859 and seventeen in 1861.

\textsuperscript{60} As I have already noted, it remains the case, with Susan as with all of her correspondents, that Dickinson is mindful of what she shares. In arguing that her new roster of correspondents gives her the greater sense of freedom, I am not arguing that this freedom is complete. But even if partial, it remains an expansive freedom in comparison with the epistolary relationships that end around this time. Taken as a whole, the roster of correspondents embraced by Dickinson offers a welcome space for her thinking, sharing, and wondering. But as we will see, there were still plenty of texts that (as far as we know) she shared with no one. Mitchell takes note of “Dickinson’s practice of occasionally sending parts of poems to Susan rather than the full version” (357 n. 134) and continues, “The wider import of such selection is that Dickinson carefully regulated what kinds of materials she sent to particular correspondents, modulating and from time to time effectively censoring portions that might have been misconstrued” (357 n. 134).

\textsuperscript{61} The best examples come from Matty (Face to Face 8-9) and Mrs. Holland’s granddaughter (Emily Dickinson’s Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland 24-25).
correct, it underscores the role, and in these early years the usefulness, of sharing a poem as a step toward considering it complete. Revision is always possible, but in the meantime, sharing a text affirms its readiness for a reader.62

It seems clear that Dickinson found an important audience in Susan.63 If, as I believe, the sharing of one’s work can be a crucial component of the writing process, punctuating the otherwise solitary and constantly unfolding process of composing, rethinking, revising, and copying with a moment of reading—of being read—then Susan’s availability seems essential.

The fact that Dickinson begins to share an increasing number of poems with Susan at the same time that she begins copying them in groups onto sheets indicates that around this time she begins to view her poems with a new degree of finality: not only does she deem them ready for a reader, she also—because copying multiple poems onto a single sheet means revisions to one poem will require recopying all of them—seems to consider these poems “finished.”64

Taken together, the uptick in poems shared with Susan and the practice of preserving fair copies of her poems mark a new stage in what it means to Dickinson to be a poet. The fresh batch of stationery; the three sheets carefully copied in the summer of 1858 and the subsequent

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62 In 1858, according to Franklin, Fr 5, 18 (also sent to her Norcross cousins), 24, 32, 35, 38, 42, 43, and 44 are sent to Susan before being copied onto a sheet. In addition, Fr 11 is apparently sent to someone (possibly Susan) before being copied and, as we have seen, Fr 3 had been sent to Susan in 1853. Franklin also mentions occasions where the fascicle version comes first: Fr 9, 14, and 16 are apparently sent to their recipients (Samuel Bowles, Higginson, and Susan, respectively) after being copied onto a sheet. (For details, see Franklin’s notes to these poems; for a study of four early poems that are circulated before being copied, see Socarides “Managing Multiple Contexts.”)

63 Martha Nell Smith argues that Dickinson’s correspondence was a form of publication (Rowing 2; see also her essay “Public, Private Spheres”). She writes that the “nearly 500 writings” sent to Susan “constitute one of two major corpora that Dickinson bequeathed to the world at her death (the other being the more than 800 poems in the fascicles)” (“Susan and Emily Dickinson” 53).

64 In arguing that Dickinson seldom revised her poems after sharing them in a letter, I disagree with Smith, who considers many of the poems sent to Susan to be “drafts” (Open Me Carefully 64). I turn to a well-known exception—the exchange concerning “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (Fr 124)—in a later chapter. For a critique of Hart and Smith’s claim that Dickinson sent drafts to Susan and that their relationship constituted a poetry workshop, see Mitchell (96-99). He writes carefully that, “[t]his is not to say that such a workshop could not have existed in theory or that it did not exist in practice; it is simply to say that the surviving historical evidence no longer unequivocally supports such an assertion” (Measures 96).
step (taken now or perhaps in the fall) of sewing them together with a fourth sheet (copied in the
late summer) into what we know as Fascicle 1; the destruction of earlier drafts—all this
distinguishes the new phase as new. If the copying and binding process grows out of Dickinson’s
practices earlier in the decade, and if she is often working with poems previously drafted—both
of which seem likely—still, her new methods and her dedication to the process, to say nothing of
the scope of the undertaking as it continues month after month and into the following years,
leave those various precursors behind. Once begun, this process of copying sheets and sewing
them together will continue (with occasional, not insignificant interruptions) for seven years and
include nearly half of her extant poems.

The year 1859 will bring an additional eighty-one poems into the world. Dickinson may
still be bringing earlier poems to completion, but even so, this is a remarkable number,
demonstrating what is now a sustained commitment to the practice of making and preserving
copies of her poems. To take one example, at around this time, she makes several copies of a six-
stanza poem that takes autumn as its cue. It begins,

These are the days when Birds come back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee.
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief,

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf. (Fr 122 C, stanzas 1-4) 65

65 Miller (82-3) reads the final punctuation mark in line 7 as a comma.
Existing in multiple copies, several of which are in handwriting that Franklin dates to 1859, this poem is sent to Susan and copied into Fascicle 6 in autumn of that year. The poem is often listed among Dickinson’s most significant work. Porter, in his study of Dickinson’s early poetry, calls it one of her poems of “mature artistry” (170-71), while Sewall observes that it is “so superior to the verse the Republican habitually honored as to defy comparison” (Life 476).

The return of birds implicitly raises the prospect of spring—the moment, normally, “when Birds come back”—but the illusion of spring is not allowed to take hold. For one thing, it is only “a very few” birds; for another, the look they take is “backward” and the skies “resume […] old sophistries of June.” With a “mistake” here and “fraud” there, this is not a poem about being deceived into thinking spring has returned: this is autumn, the leaves are falling, and the very language proffers regret. What the poem brings to life is not so much the “plausibility” of June’s “sophistries” as the experience of someone feeling pulled to believe in them, of “almost” believing, but knowing better.

The first four stanzas bear witness to a soul bearing witness to the confirmation of summer’s end. The “timid leaf” that falls through the “altered air” lays plain what the speaker knew when the words “fraud” and “backward” are first uttered. The poem seems poised for an explicit turn to regret: after such a frank recognition of the forces at work, what else would we expect at this point? And in that context, what comes next is nothing short of wondrous: not regret, not complaint, not even a gesture toward a lesson learned, but something else:

Oh sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze –
Permit a child to join –

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!
What we get in the concluding two stanzas is a heart-felt plea for participation in the changing world, in the vanishing moment. The insistence is palpable, reminiscent of numerous moments in her letters when, despite the difficulty in imagining away a distance, the attempt to do so continues. It is this gesture of petition, combined with the way the poem suddenly brings it to life, that gives the poem its particular power.

Put another way, what we see here is the power apostrophe can harness—addressed here to the changing season itself—as a way of conveying a deep-felt personal longing. In the leap to religious terminology, the language of the petition confers spiritual significance on the tokens of the season, making the leaves and seeds and light and air into elements of a religious ceremony. In a gesture that should be somewhat familiar by now, the poem works by way of a leap to achieve a transformation right before our eyes: what were leaf and air in the fourth stanza become, in a quick roll-call, a “sacrament,” a “Last Communion,” and “sacred emblems” that are then cast in the form of “consecrated bread” and “immortal wine.”

Nothing in the first four stanzas prepares us for this leap. The leap is not huge—we have seen it before in the letters—but it is clearly marked, both in the new kind of language and in an added tweak to the form of the line. In particular, the leap is made musical, palpable, by anaphora: first “Oh… Oh…” and then “Thy… Thy…” work to reinforce the fluid (but ever-present) feeling of rhyme so that the poem ends musically, almost chorally. As the language turns to the sacred, the tone is prayerful. Right when we thought we knew where the poem was going, it steps to a loftier realm, a realm at once more spiritual and more personal.

Such mastery belies the fact that this poet has only recently begun to preserve her work. At the same time, the poem hearkens back in all kinds of ways to writing that has come before—the elegiac letter to John Graves, the missives to Austin that leap from quotidian detail to
otherworldly pondering, the yearning to overcome distance in so many letters to friends, the steady and discerning gaze directed at the natural world. One wonders, perhaps, as one wanders the Homestead on a crisp fall day, what it would have been like to bump into this poet, still early in her life as a writer yet seemingly wise already to the ways that the page can present a moment of lived experience.

And then there is this note, scribbled beneath a small image that is sent to Susan:

My “Position”!
Cole.
P.S. Lest you misapprehend, the unfortunate insect upon the left is Myself, while the Reptile upon the right is my more immediate friends and connections.
As ever,
Cole. (L 214)

The signature, “Cole,” apparently refers to the painter Thomas Cole, and the name is used here, writes Johnson, to “typify talent in sketching” (notes to L 214). The image itself, in Johnson’s words, consists of “a woodcut clipped from The New England Primer […] showing a youth pursued by an upright wolf-like creature with forked tail.” Matty, describing many such nights of entertainment at the Evergreens, explains the circumstances: “It was on one of these winter nights of revel that they forgot the hour and suddenly, unwarned by the approaching beams of his lantern across the snow, became aware of her father’s presence in their midst, to inquire the meaning of such prolonged hours. Emily is said to have drooped and disappeared before him like the dew, without a sound, but with a wicked glance or gesture to assert her unreconcilement to the proceedings” (Life and Letters 64).

As an example of her father’s extreme care—probably too generous a word in this instance—this story fits alongside plenty of other accounts in which we see him worrying about the health of his wife and children. But more striking is the date: this episode with the lantern apparently takes place in 1859, which means that Dickinson is twenty-eight, the same twenty-
eight that copied “These are days when Birds come back –” and has by now assembled a half-
dozen fascicles. At a moment when she has already begun to create a lasting body of work, and
at an age when most of her friends have married and moved away, are raising families, or are
overseas doing missionary work, Dickinson is escorted home by her father.

Copied, possibly written, within months of each other, these two texts make an
interesting pair. Behind one, we detect the incisive mind of a poet whose thinking is taut, whose
tone combines knowing with humility, whose control of language is precise; behind the other, in
the young woman led away in embarrassed “unreconcilement,” we find a daughter who is feisty
but obedient, a child who has stayed up past her bedtime. If we sense a dissonance between these
twoDickinsons, it is partly because we seem to get different, even contradictory, glimpses of her
autonomy. Even in humility, the poem projects an air of confidence. By contrast, while the note
itself is wittily subversive, the story behind the note is one of childlike submission.

Knowing where Dickinson’s life is heading, we can see such moments as stops along the
way to the greater autonomy (personal and poetic) that we know is to come. But to imagine such
an event when that full story had yet to be written—when there was no guarantee how the story
would turn out—is to appreciate the delicate balance of forces at work during Dickinson’s early
years. On the one hand, hers is a mind characterized by independence and power; on the other,
hers is a world not given to recognizing independence and power in a woman. For Dickinson,
this struggle plays out in myriad ways. In a letter to Mrs. Holland (by now a trusted confidante)
in 1859, Dickinson tells the story of a visit gone awry: “I guess I have done wrong – I don’t
know certainly,” she writes. She explains that while spending the evening at Susan’s, the
doorbell rang, at which point, she writes, “I ran, as is my custom.” She and her friend Kate hide.
The caller, however, proceeds to ask for her. It turns out he is Mr. Chapman, a friend of Mrs.
Holland and also something of a friend to Dickinson—he had paid a visit to the Homestead a day earlier. She and Kate are trying to decide whether to emerge when Susan opens the door and declares them “detected.” Dickinson writes, “Overwhelmed with disgrace, I gasped a brief apology, but the gentlemen simply looked at us with a grave surprise” (L 202).

Given what we know about Dickinson’s later life, and given some of her descriptions of social visits, this episode may not be especially shocking. But it is worth noting that, though Dickinson flees company, she is not seeking solitude—she is, after all, spending the evening with Kate, Susan, Austin, and perhaps others. In the same letter, she deems the visit of these same gentlemen a day earlier “pleasant.” Still, she flees, and she is mortified at the result. “After they had retired,” she recounts to Mrs. Holland, “Austin said we were very rude, and I crept to my little room, quite chagrined and wretched. Now do you think Mr. Chapman will forgive me? I do not mind Mr. Hyde of Ware, because he does not please me, but Mr. Chapman is my friend, talks of my books with me, and I would not wound him.” With this letter to Mary Holland, Dickinson encloses a letter of apology addressed to Mr. Chapman, asking her to read it and, if she approves—“if it is said as yourself would say it, were you rude instead of me”—to deliver it to Mr. Chapman’s office. The same young woman who ran from Mr. Chapman longs not to lose the opportunity to talk with him of books. And yet to flee is, as she notes, her “custom.”

According to another anecdote from around the same time, Edward was especially insistent that Dickinson attend church one particular Sunday.66 As recounted years later by Lavinia and recorded by Todd, “He commanded, she begged off, until both were weary. She saw there was no further use to talk, so she suddenly disappeared. No one could tell where she was.

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66 Habegger notes that an especially spirited revival began in 1858 and continued into 1859, “bringing a total of twenty-four new members into the First Church by confession of faith” (348). To my mind, this seems a likely context for this story.
They hunted high and low, & went to church without her” (Leyda II:478). She was still absent when they returned, and the family began to get worried. “Some hours later,” reports Todd, “Emily was discovered calmly rocking in a chair placed in the cellar bulk-head, where she had made old Margaret lock her in, before church.”67

What these stories trace is Dickinson’s need to carve out a space at the intersection of her own strong inclinations and the equally strong inclinations of those around her. It is not entirely unlike her embrace of the (general) constraints of poetic form or her evident affinity for some (but not all) of the underlying tenets of orthodox faith: in each case, she accepts certain givens while rejecting others. And I do not mean to say she does this as part of a negotiation of some kind or in order to strategically meet the world half-way. Rather, just as she does believe (but insists on doing so on her own terms), and just as she does conceive of poetry as made up of language that is both aurally patterned and metrically regular (but insists on exploring the rich possibilities to be found both in those forms and in exceptions and variations), so too does she choose to live within certain structures (her father’s house, her slate of chores) while forging, out of such givens, the life she needed.

After spending time with Dickinson’s letters and poems, there comes a moment when I am no longer surprised that she would, over the years, decide to spend more and more time within circles of her own defining. Because we know what is to come—the relative seclusion, the decades of writing, the austere (even anguished) poems not yet in evidence in these early years—it fits into a pattern that we, at our remove, can see. But in the moment, it must have been both vexing and thrilling: vexing to come up against the constraints, but thrilling to discover, over time, a path that would suffice. What comes through whenever I spend time with

67 “Margaret” is Mrs. O’Brien, not the more well-known “Maggie,” whose employment does not begin until 1869.
Dickinson’s poems and letters of the 1850s is the extent to which she is, of necessity, and probably without even knowing it at first, creating the path as she goes, a path that includes this world, filled with friends, flowers, birds, and hints of what lies beyond it; the next world, with its beckoning shore, familiar faces, and mysterious God; and, increasingly, poetry, with its many opportunities to “illustrate,” to “paint,” and to think her own “tho’ts.”

We return, then, to 1860, to Dickinson on the cusp of thirty, to the poet who copies “Just lost, when I was saved!” (Fr 132) and the other poems considered in chapter one, to a poet whose life, as should be clear by now, is shaped by countless forces, in countless ways, large and small. And who is to say which of these is most important to the developing poet? Who can tell, for example, if the presence of the Franklin stove in her bedroom was not the key piece of the puzzle, without which, nothing? Or the fact that she had just enough work to keep her busy but not so much that she lost sight of her writing? Even her letter writing, which seems to play an essential role in her apprenticeship to language and would seem to flow from her alone, is contingent on happenstance: that she had time (and energy) to write is largely an issue of class, but beyond that, there is the fact that, in the Amherst of her youth, letter writing was part of the fabric of daily life. A few decades earlier, when letter delivery was less efficient, she would never have written so much. She comes of age when getting a response in a reasonably short period of time is (newly) a possibility, one she embraces and seems to rely on. Who is to say, without the promise of a response and thus without the practice of all those letters, whether her writing would have developed as it did?

And who even is to say that Edward’s extreme care, the speed with which he hauls his daughter home from Mt. Holyoke when she has a cough, for example, or more generally the role
he seems to have played in making sure his daughters stayed home and his son stayed near, thereby providing, though this was not his intention, the young poet with an environment where she was protected, free to think and to write—who is to say he did not play a central role in Dickinson becoming Dickinson? Even his manner, apparently so stern and domineering, offered Dickinson something she could use. Sewall, after describing Edward’s “stubbornness” and “imperiousness,” observes that it “is tempting to speculate how much of [Dickinson’s] attitude she derived from her father—and transformed” (67), while Habegger notes that “[o]ne of the most important lessons Edward taught his children was that they could hold themselves aloof, apart. They could maintain a quiet integrity in any and all situations” (“Evangelicalism” 413). 68

Who is to say who or what made the difference? Another person might have gone under, might have required more time, fewer chores, more support, less isolation, fewer interruptions. Still another might have found it hard to resist the pressures of the faithful around her or the part of herself that believed. And still another might have thrown out so many of the old forms—I am thinking especially of poetry, but it applies, too, I think, to faith—that she lacked a sufficient foundation on which to stand, imagine, and create. Dickinson’s genius, to return to that word again in its older sense, was precisely in taking from all of this—and there is more we haven’t gotten into, including her voracious reading of poetry and fiction, her instruction in rhetoric and composition, her fluency in Latin, her education in botany, etc.—to take from all this precisely, but only, what she needed in order to create the poems for which we remember her to this day.

68 Habegger further observes that when Edward’s political career with the Whig party came to an ignominious end, Dickinson perceived his “insistence on the ‘high, strong ground’ and his resolute political isolation as signs of noble character. Seeing him in this way furnished a model for defining and taking control of her own emerging fate. His fixities authorized her own, and most of all with respect to her life’s work” (My Wars 299).
To turn to biography, as I have done in this interlude, is not an obvious move. My early training took pains to teach me to exclude pretty much everything about the poet’s life and times from my reading of a poem. Actually, I was not so much taught as told. No one explained why, no one noted it was a choice, no one hinted there might be varied reasons (some good, some bad) for thinking about the poet when thinking about a poem. To this day, in some circles, that single-pointed emphasis on the text remains. “Close reading,” a phrase we inherit from a generation of critics who scorned the inclusion of biography in matters of interpretation, typically refers to a practice of reading a text without reference to personal, historical, cultural, or any other kind of contextual information. Such an approach has no interest in the details of a poet’s life, nor in the poet’s world; it asks that the poem speak for itself.69

Too often, though, we act as if the only way to bring the poet’s life into a discussion of the poet’s work were to use it to nail down the poem’s meaning or identify its speaker. But what if biography were more of an opening than a narrowing of possibilities? What if we could use it to add to (rather than replace) other readings of the poem and enrich our experience as readers? The challenge is not to resist the siren call of biography at all costs but to find ways to make this turn responsibly, to use such facts and details as seem relevant in ways that nourish our encounter with the poem. To my mind, there is ample space for biographical inquiry when reading a poem, but it remains the case that there are different ways of “turning to” or “bringing in” biography.

69 It has been this way since at least the early twentieth century, when proponents of the co-called New Criticism sought to restore our attention (as readers, as students, as critics) to the text. At the time, it was a healthy corrective: reading now became an attempt to decipher not what the author was trying to say but what the text on the page managed to say. With this move came the important reminder that the speaker of the poem should never be mistaken for the poet. In the classroom, where biography is easily used to offer a too-simple way to read a poem, identify the speaker, and resolve its complexities, these corrections are essential.
For example, poems are sometimes read to illuminate the life that produced them, as when Dickinson’s poems of personal anguish are read as signs of her own personal anguish. If a poem alludes to a crisis of some kind, on this view, the crisis must be Dickinson’s. Or if one or another friend is named in a poem, or if the poem is sent to a friend, the poem is used to shed light on their friendship and on what might have been happening at that moment in Dickinson’s life. Similarly, Dickinson’s poems that broach the topic of faith are often cited as evidence for her own views on faith, just as her poems that refer to “singing” are taken as declarations regarding her own singing, that is, on her practice as a poet. In each case, we read through the poem into Dickinson’s life: to the extent that a poem points at something, we locate it in Dickinson’s lived experience and claim an understanding of that lived experience. Poem becomes a lens onto poet.

Any time a biographer uses a poem to affirm something about the poet’s experience or beliefs, we are in the presence of biographical reading in this sense, and while I tend to think that poems offer poor evidence for anything in a poet’s life, I nevertheless am delighted to come across insightful connections being made between Dickinson’s poetry and her life or mindset at a particular moment. Handled well, such methods bring us closer to the poet behind the poem. Such is the case, for example, when Habegger notes the emergence (after 1860) of a new kind of first-person poem “implying a passionate inquiry into the writer’s peculiar destiny.” He adds, “Full as they are of exaggerated and fabulistic elements, these dramatic first-person retrospects articulate a very real personal effort” (My Wars 405-6). Even when the poems employ “the mask of fiction,” Habegger continues, “there is still personal reference; if the poems’ fables change, their emotional core does not; they are always welling up from a massive central volcano”

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70 Cf. “Is it true, dear Sue?” (Fr 189) or the mention of “you and Dr. Holland” in (Fr 131); see also the discussion of “I have a Bird in spring” (Fr 4) in chapter 2.
The point here—this is biography, after all—is less to make sense of the poem and more to use the poem to make sense of the mind and life and moment from which it has emerged.

Similarly, Loeffelholz finds evidence for Dickinson’s feelings about her own trajectory as a writer in a pair of poems that share a common image. “When she copied out ‘God made a little Gentian’ in 1863,” writes Loeffelholz, “Dickinson may have believed that the vocational emergence it envisions for the late-blooming gentian was within her reach” (Value 34). This flower that blooms late in the year seems to be, in this poem, a symbol for Dickinson’s own late blooming. Referring to the question that ends the poem—“Shall I—Bloom?”—Loeffelholz adds that “there is little reason to think that the question of an appropriate audience was sheerly rhetorical for Dickinson at this time.” The emphasis is not just on “blooming,” a metaphor for successful publishing, but on late blooming: Dickinson was thirty-two at the time. But with time, as Loeffelholz notes, things change. She writes that “[a]t some point in Dickinson’s life, this openness to publication seems to have shut down,” and as evidence she quotes from “The Gentian has a parched Corolla—” (Fr 1458, copied in 1877), in which the gentian is “beautifully indifferent to questions of audience, status, and permanence” (35). Taken together, then, the evolving use of an image in these two poems offers evidence for an evolving posture on Dickinson’s part. Reading this or other similarly adept analyses, I find myself nodding along.

And yet this same method has been used to support so many conclusions I find unlikely—that Dickinson was “born again” as a Puritan in 1862, that she was ever and always an avowed atheist, that she was sexually abused by her father, to name just a few—that the danger of such an approach becomes immediately clear. The method is only as good as the evidence

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71 Habegger seems especially aware of what it means to use poetry in the service of biography. Elsewhere, after quoting a short excerpt that seems to “boast” of her own “fecundity,” he writes, “But we remind ourselves that this is not a diary entry and that we know almost nothing about the daily originating matrix of the writer’s work” (405).
(not just the poems themselves but also the care with which they are read), and beyond that, only as good as corroborating evidence and common sense allow. Then, too, these are poems, and as such, especially in Dickinson’s case, they often display little interest in pointing back to the life from which they have emerged. As Loeffelholz notes in response to claims that some of Dickinson’s poems are coded references to autoeroticism, such a reading “seems only a different way of trying to pin down the referents that the poems themselves deny their present-day readers, rather than valuing their power on their own terms” (39). In a similar vein, Smith notes of one poem that to read it “as a biographical document [...] runs the risk of reducing criticism to gossip,” adding that “[w]hat is most exciting, therefore, is not identifying the ‘real’ object(s) of Dickinson’s most profound erotic attractions, but the ways in which she transformed homoerotic desires into compelling literature” (Rowing 38).

To the extent that we want to use the poems in this way—to excavate the biography—the message seems clear: draw conclusions with care. As in other areas of Dickinson study, the paucity of evidence leaves room for many interpretations, and the evidence offered by poems is typically inconclusive. To perhaps state the obvious: there is no necessary correlation between what a poet presents in a text and the poet’s own life or beliefs. Placed alongside other kinds of evidence, such as letters or the reminiscences of friends and family, some such biographical readings seem plausible, even convincing. And as I noted at the outset of this chapter, there is something about Dickinson’s poetry, frequently remarked upon, that draws us in—we seem especially keen to stand close to her or to imagine we can see her, know her, as the presence behind or within the poetry.

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72 Robert Weisbuch makes this point emphatically in “Prisming Emily Dickinson,” where he argues that Dickinson’s poems do not “point” to her life or to any specific and identifiable subject.
73 The spirit of Eberwein’s warning, cited above, holds true here: “One can make whatever case one wants about Dickinson’s beliefs or disbelief by selecting individual poems, letters, or even lines” (“Immortality” 70).
If reading the poems in this way is, as I have said, more an exercise in biography (exploring the life) than in literary study (exploring how a poem makes its meaning), a closely related approach does focus on the poem: rather than using the poem to understand the life, here we rely on biography to understand the poem. Thus, at the most pedestrian level, knowing that “Dollie” was a nickname for Susan will (on this view) steer us toward a more accurate reading of a poem such as “You love me – you are sure –” (Fr 218), with its repeated worries that she might one day find “Dollie – gone.” Or, at a slightly more interpretive level, knowing that “Auburn” likely refers to a cemetery visited by Dickinson might (in fact, it did, in chapter two) shed some light on a poem such as “When roses cease to bloom, sir” (Fr 8). At its best, approaching the work in this way opens up the poem to readings we might not otherwise consider or even know about. Knowing that Carlo is Dickinson’s dog, for example, allows us to read poems that mention “Carlo” in ways entirely unavailable without that particular piece of information.

The early years of Dickinson scholarship, aided by the “myth” of Dickinson as a reclusive poetess, trafficked heavily in biographical readings of her poetry. Poems were read as a means of glimpsing the life, and the life was used as a means of better understanding the poems. Dickinson was, moreover, portrayed as a writer and thinker isolated from the culture surrounding her. Much of the work being done by the many excellent books on Dickinson in the 1960s and 1970s, in fact, can best be understood as efforts to push back against these two characterizations: some sought to establish Dickinson’s skill as a poet, as a practitioner who was making thoughtful artistic choices, while others worked to uncover the many ways that our reading of her work can be informed by the many contexts in which she wrote. The practice of referring to biography in order to interpret a poem gave way to a much broader practice by which one or more of the
contexts in which she lived and wrote—historical, political, religious, cultural, aesthetic—are brought usefully into the reading of a poem.

To take just one example: for many years, scholars found few echoes of the Civil War in Dickinson’s poetry. Dickinson famously writes “‘George Washington was the Father of his Country’ – ‘George Who?’ That sums all politics to me” (L 950), and for years, she was taken at her word. In the introduction to Dickinson’s letters, Johnson writes that since “Dickinson’s full maturity as a dedicated artist occurred during the span of the Civil War, the most convulsive era in the nation’s history, one of course turns to the letters of 1861-1865, and the years that follow, for her interpretation of events. But the fact is that she did not live in history and held no view of it, past or current” (xx). As the years progressed and other aspects of her isolation gave way to more complex and nuanced views, her isolation from the war remained a commonplace.

In recent decades, beginning especially with Shira Wolosky’s *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (1984), this view has been replaced by a view of Dickinson as a poet who was, in ways large and small, quite responsive to the war. News from the front lines would have reached her in her reading of periodicals, in household conversations, and in letters from Higginson, who commanded the first all-black regiment of Unionist troops. Writing to Higginson, she states that though she was not “reared for prayer – when service is had in Church, for Our Arms, I include yourself” (L 280 February 1863).74 And, as we will see in the next chapter, Amherst itself was swept up in the events of the war as it unfolded. In this context, poems such as “The name – of it – is ‘Autumn’ –” (Fr 465) and “It feels a shame to be Alive” (Fr 524) can be read as Dickinson’s private witness to events both on the battlefield and in the soul of one who is watching those

74 The “Our” is significant: for the most part, Dickinson does not express pro-Northern sentiments, registering instead the deaths as individual tragedies and incorporating the war into investigations of matters already of concern to her. Smith notes that Dickinson had family on both sides of the war and argues this may account for some of her reticence about choosing a side (“Public, Private Spheres” 67).
events unfold. Once the connection is made, it seems almost impossible for it to even have been overlooked—such is the power of context.75

But in which context to read Dickinson? Over the years, answers have included, in addition to the Civil War, such movements and cultural forces as the Transcendentalists, the Spasmodics, the Azarian school, the Romantics, Victorian culture, the tradition of sentimental literature, the Scottish New Rhetoric, the philosophies of Bacon and Kant, hymn culture, the ballad revival, the position of women in nineteenth-century American culture, Dickinson’s relationship with Susan, to name a few. Many, perhaps all, of these approaches can be useful to us as readers at particular moments, with particular poems, but the question remains, which to use when? Furthermore, the relevance of so many contexts seems to imply that to read Dickinson requires knowing all of them. Otherwise, how to choose? There is no shortage of essays and books that argue that, in order to really read Dickinson, we must do so with this or that context in mind, but the risk quickly becomes that the act of reading a poem becomes an academic endeavor. As I noted in the introduction, though, in my view there should be no prerequisites to reading a poem: we read with what we have.

Yet the value of a biographical or historical approach is apparent each time I teach: if what we sometimes want is a way in, a place to start, contexts provide just that.76 The beauty of the reading process is that we seldom end up where we began—e.g. a poem that we approach by way of Dickinson’s relationship with Susan might lead us in all sorts of other directions—and that seems precisely the point. Setting Dickinson in context can help us make sense of certain

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75 Such poems still need to be read with care. As Miller has shown, a poem that appears to be about topical issues might, on closer examination, prove otherwise. See her study of “The Black Berry – wears a Thorn in his side” (Fr 548), which she argues is not (contrary to other readings) a poem about the “black man as Christian martyr to slavery’s torment” (Reading 14).

76 To be clear, such contexts provide just one possible way in. In my experience as reader and teacher, where you start is less important than the habit of continuing to read and wonder, letting the original way into the poem stand without being overly chained to it.
references, and it might settle certain questions, but more often than not, the poem outgrows one context, and we are forced to reckon with newer, perhaps unforeseen questions. It is rare, when reading Dickinson, to find that the poem does just one thing.

The danger lies in allowing the biographical facts or contextual information to do too much work: a poem that mentions Mrs. Holland need not be read as (only) a poem about Mrs. Holland, just as a poem about the sea need not be read as (only) a poem about the sea. It is, after all, first and foremost, a poem, and as such, it will—in the meeting of any decent poet and any open-minded reader—be capacious enough to include a host of separate (even contradictory) readings. One of the joys of poetry, in fact, lies precisely in the wonder we feel when we realize that two distinct readings of a poem might both be true. Dickinson’s own practice, as we will see, is to revel in just such a proliferation of possibilities, which should encourage us not to feel hemmed in by any especially convincing reading. For that reason, even when we suspect such a biographical or historical connection exists—indeed, even when we know such a connection exists—to settle on it as the reading of the poem or to privilege it over every other reading risks working counter to the entire impetus of the poem, which is, as I have been arguing, to leap away from everyday experience and from our everyday wielding of language. To focus only on the biographical import of a poem is to forget that we are reading a poem, the very nature of which is to create a wholly new experience, available to each new reader and each new reading.

There is a second way that biography might prove useful in the process of reading a poem, and this has less to do with Dickinson’s lived experience and more do with her mind. It

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77 I have in mind here “I started Early – Took my Dog” (Fr 656).
78 There are, to be sure, poems that seem especially rooted in the life behind them or in the relationship within which they are shared. As I will shortly argue, the best way of thinking about this feature of Dickinson’s poetry is to say that Dickinson simply writes many different kinds of poems: some seem to be purely “occasional,” which is to say, to belong completely to their moment; others seem more like attempts to write poems in the lyric tradition that Dickinson was immersed in as a reader; and still others seem to exist somewhere in between.
concerns her reading and, generally, her exposure to aesthetic and other currents of her day. Take, for example, Dickinson’s use of dashes and capitalizations, as discussed in chapter one. Clearly, we can read the punctuation and make some sense of it without any supporting information. But knowing that there was ample precedent for the dash to signal a pause (rather than a syntactic boundary) and for capitalizations to signal emphasis (rather than being capricious) enables us to make better sense of Dickinson’s own use of both gestures. With the information we have about contemporary practices around her, we do not need to guess: we know that her reading and education would have included these features, but we see, too, where she steps beyond the practices common in her day, which in turn lets us perceive with greater accuracy exactly what she accomplishes that is new.

It is in how she puts these disparate devices to work in concert that her distinctive kind of poem comes into view: her use of slant rhyme, her use of ballad and psalm forms, her making of the fascicles, her practice of concision—in each case, we get closer to understanding Dickinson’s achievement by seeing what she inherited (from the culture around her, from her education, from the tradition of poetry) and then determining what she did with that inheritance. Her achievement is in no way diminished by noting such precedents; rather, we are left to marvel at what she made with what was given. If many people were using concision, for example, and if editors around her were explicitly calling for the elimination of any extra word, it remains the case that only in Dickinson’s hands does it become part of a complex of poetics unlike anything seen in her day and for a long time after.

This use of biography seems essential to me when we are considering the work of any poet but especially an innovative poet whose work has expanded our sense of what the lyric can do. Things that seem old-school to us may have been radical in their day, and since the lyric as a
genre traffics in newness, noticing such moments of innovation is part of the joy of reading the lyric across time. Knowing a few key facts about context and tradition, then, helps us to become better readers of what David Lindley calls the “protean” lyric (13) and more attuned to the accomplishment of individual practitioners.

This seeming tangent about biography proves to be no tangent at all when we realize that Dickinson herself seems to have wrestled with these same issues: if as readers we need to grapple with the relationship between Dickinson’s art and Dickinson’s life, so too did Dickinson. Much of what we saw in chapter two—the flights into fiction, the leaps into biblical or poetic language, the assumption of intimacy, the elision of distance in the interest of a shared presence, and the insertion of a poem where a letter might have been—much or all of this can be seen as Dickinson’s own exploration of the varied ways language might take its cues from experience without being beholden to it. To touch, however briefly, on biography, then, is perhaps the best way to appreciate what Dickinson is doing when she moves from lived experience to lyric expression. As we move toward a consideration of Dickinson at thirty, biography takes its place alongside her poetics (the subject of chapter one) and her epistolary habits (the subject of chapter two) as an essential tool as we work to make sense of the poetry she sets on the page at this early but crucial moment in her development.

Beyond all that, biography reminds us of what exactly we are doing when we pick up a poem and read. There are other ends—beyond those of interpretation—served by bringing to life the poet behind the poem, ends that bring us close to the heart of what it means to read, perhaps even why we read: the debate about biography is, in the end, a reminder about what we do when we read a poem, as I learned one afternoon with my students. We had been reading Dickinson’s poems, and a quarter of the class had at this point read Habegger’s biography. One afternoon in
March, we went for a walk. I asked students to keep the talking to a minimum and to notice at least 25 things along the way as we made our way across the campus, onto a dirt road, now snow and mud-covered, and out to the edge of the Hudson River.

An overhead camera would have seen sixteen bodies fan out at different paces, taking different routes, walking solo or in pairs or threes, some writing as they went, others storing up images to write down when they stopped, all of us bundled against the cold but gradually warming in the occasional sun. After arriving at the spot where the river found its way into side streams and thickets, some of them frozen over, after (inevitably) one student tested the ice on a finger of river and fell in to his knees, after another had managed to slip and muddy his jeans, after we had all watched with some surprise as a log barreled past us in a stretch of open water, buoyed (or so we imagined) by the receding tide, we came together and shared some of what we had noticed along the way. A stray chickadee, browned leaves warming their way through snow, potholes covered in ice except where a car had cracked through. “And the light,” one student added, “the way it’s sort of sideways through the trees.” “Through the bare trees,” said another.

As we stood there, quiet then talking then quiet again, I felt cold and thought we should return to the warmth of our classroom, but I said, “Do you want to read a poem, or should we head back?” Read a poem, came the answer, so I distributed copies of a poem Dickinson copied in 1865:

A Light exists in Spring  
Not present on the Year  
At any other period –  
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad  
On Solitary Fields  
That Science cannot overtake  
But Human Nature feels.
It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Opon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay —

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Opon a Sacrament – (Fr 962)

There was quiet. Then June said, It’s funny, but that is exactly what I was trying to explain to Amy when we were walking.

It’s as if she wrote it on a day like today, said another.

Maybe she did, I said. We have to imagine it, because we don’t know, but we can imagine that just a few hundred miles from here, and a few hundred years from here, she looked out her window—"

She might have walked in it, like us –

She was a walker, you know. Emily and her dog –

True, so we can imagine her walking on a day like today, with the light like it is today, “when March is scarcely here.” And just think about that: that connection: Dickinson walking, then writing, and then copying out this poem – she is there, writing it, and we are here, reading it, and we meet in the “meeting place of the poem,” her present tense and ours. Each time we read the poem, we bring it to life and, in a way, we reach out to her. That’s what we do whenever we read a poem, but usually we don’t stop to think about it. But it’s a kind of magic, isn’t it?

Something that as far as we know no other species does. When we read a poem, we step into the
tradition of poems and – I’m not sure what the right metaphor is – we receive it, or it is transmitted to us, or we perform it –

We breathe it, said a student.

That sounds right, I said.

To read a poem is so easy, but how often do we stop to think about what it really constitutes, this meeting across the years and miles? Maybe we cannot dwell on that fact each time we read, but now and then, it’s worth it, I think, to ponder the human being that set the whole chain of events in motion. Briefly, the poem lives in us, becomes a part of our life. We breathe it to life. Briefly, we breathe together. Then we, and it, move on. “It passes, and we stay.”

As a teacher, you never know what lessons or which moments will register with students. But in subsequent conversations and writing, that experience in March was mentioned again and again as a moment when we felt the power of the lyric as it came to life in us even as it conjured to life the writer who, not long ago, and not all that far away, and without any of us in mind, sent it our way. At such moments, biography does nothing to explain the poem. It reminds us, rather, of the magic that is the tradition of poetry.
Chapter Four

“Forever – is composed of Nows”: Dickinson at Thirty

When Dickinson turns thirty on December 10, 1860, her life and the world around her are changing in essential ways. Some trends—the approaching Civil War, the ending of certain friendships, the deepening of others—must have been apparent to her and to those close to her, but other patterns are visible best in retrospect. It is now, for example, that her travels and visits away from home come to an end. Just two months before her birthday, she writes a hurried note to Susan: “You cant think how much I thank you for the Box – Wont you put the things in this one – it is’n’t half so pretty, you know, but it’s such a bother to tip one’s duds out – (L 226). The “Box” is a trunk for traveling (evidently being used by Sue for storage) and the occasion is an impending trip with Vinnie to visit Eliza Coleman, a friend then living in Middletown, Connecticut. But this trip, according to Vivian Pollak, is Dickinson’s “last social visit away from Amherst” (Historical Guide 245). Other than visits to Boston and Cambridge to seek medical care for her eyes in 1864 and 1865, she will remain in Amherst for the rest of her life.¹

Within Amherst, too, her orbit is becoming more circumscribed. During the early and mid-1850s, Dickinson reports outings of all kinds: sugaring trips, sleigh rides, impromptu games of charades in the woods. When, in 1850, a friend stops by to invite her “to ride in the woods, the sweet-still woods,” it is not disinterest but a slate of kitchen chores that forces her, tearfully, to

¹ In February, 1864, Dickinson will travel (with Vinnie) to Boston for an initial consultation with Dr. Henry Willard Williams, a well-regarded ophthalmologist. She returns for extended periods of treatment from April to November, 1864, and from April to October, 1865 (Pollak Historical Guide 248-9; Habegger 483-4), and one learns something of her life in the early 1860s from her experience of having that life taken away from her. She is well cared for by her Norcross cousins, with whom she lives, and she praises the doctor. But her letters—L 288 to 297 in 1864; L 308 to 309 in 1865—make it clear that she desperately misses Vinnie. “I miss you most, and I want to go Home and take good care of you and make you happy every day” (L 289). She misses Susan, to whom she sends some remarkable letters: see, e.g., L 288, 292, 294, and especially 306, which ends, “I would have drowned twice to save you sinking, dear, If I could only have covered your Eyes so you would’n’t have seen the Water.” Because the treatment requires resting her eyes and avoiding bright lights, she misses reading, writing letters, and even seeing the world around her: “dear Vinnie, I have not looked at the Spring” (L 289).
Decline (L 36). In 1852, she reports to Austin, “I have been to ride twice since I wrote you” (L 72), and she tells him that “Root, Harrington, Storrs, Emmons, Graves, and the Tutors, come in quite often to see us” (L 76). And in a brief note to Henry Emmons after hearing of his engagement in August, 1854, she writes, “Were not my parlor full, I’d bid you come this morning, but the hour must be stiller in which we speak of her. Yet must I see you, and I will love most dearly, if quite convenient to you, to ride a little while this afternoon – (L 169). A gentle invitation, but an invitation all the same. In notes and letters written in the 1850s, such events are common, and even in early 1860, Dickinson is still visiting Reverend Dwight and his wife (Leyda II: 7). Years later, Emily Fowler will look back at her childhood friendship with Dickinson and insist there was “nothing of the recluse about her” (qtd. in Sewall Life 370).

During these same years, though, something of her later habits comes into view, and at least one story involves a letter written in 1852 to this same Emily Fowler. It reads as if it were composed on Fowler’s stoop:

Dear Emily,

I can’t come in this morning, because I am so cold, but you will know I am here – ringing the big front door bell, and leaving a note for you.

Oh I want to come in, I have a great mind now to follow little Jane into your warm sitting room; are you there, dear Emily?

No, I resist temptation, and run away from the door just as fast as my feet will carry me, lest once I come in, I shall grow so happy, happy, that I shall stay there always, and never go home at all! You will have read this quite, by the time I reach the office, and you can’t think how fast I run!

Below her signature, she adds,

P.S. I have just shot past the corner, and now all the wayside houses, and the little gate flies open to see me coming home! (L 78)

2 This same letter gives a sense of social life in the college town of Amherst: “There are a good many lectures here now, before the Lyceum. Mr Mt Pleasant-Nash, is giving a course of Agricultural ones, twelve in all—and besides a lecture from him once or twice a week, there is also another from some other gentleman, on some literary subject. Prof Fowler gave one upon Adam Smith, last evening. Tutor Edwards will give the next.” More generally, as we saw in the previous chapter, social calls—both visiting and being visited—are part of the fabric of middle-class life. In Vinnie’s diary for 1851, the only year she kept one, Sewall notes that “[v]ery few days went by without the girls’ either receiving or making calls” (415).
Fun, affectionate, and creative in its use of the present tense (note how the postscript is written in the present tense of Emily Fowler’s reading of the message), this letter narrates a moment when—what shall we call it?—shyness or anxiety (albeit a happy kind, if she is to be believed) or household responsibilities come between Dickinson and what she says she wants to do. She does not explain why such a visit is a “temptation,” nor does she apologize or offer details as to why she cannot stay. Perhaps she once again has chores to do? But why all this talk of being cold and the possibility of becoming “so happy”? More than anything, one senses that shying away from a visit is not terribly uncommon and that moments such as these are not about seeking solitude but about staying within the known circle of home.3

As she approaches thirty, Dickinson’s excursions become fewer and fewer. The process is apparently slow. Years later, Vinnie will write that it was “only a happen,” as in, it just gradually happened (qtd. in Sewall Life 153). She explains that when their mother was ill, “one of her daughters must be constantly at home; Emily chose this part and, finding the life with her books and nature so congenial, continued to live it, always seeing her chosen friends and doing her part for the happiness of the home.” If this sounds like one sister covering for another, it remains the case that, as Sewall noted long ago, the stories offered by Vinnie, Susan, and Austin all point to the “gradualness” of Dickinson’s seclusion within the Homestead and thus to their sense that it was “natural” (Life 154).4

3 For similar moments, see L 86 and Fr 234.
4 In Sewall’s words, those closest to Dickinson seem “not to have been disturbed by the eccentricities, so long and slow was the process of their development.” He then adds, memorably, “But the rest of the world, waking up late to what had happened, saw them as very unnatural indeed and, as with all such phenomena, wanted an explanation. So the mythmaking began” (154). Sewall’s treatment of Dickinson’s withdrawal (see especially 153-157) remains one of the most careful. He observes that Vinnie’s “only a happen” is too simple an explanation and notes that any “single-cause” theory must likewise be deemed too simple. Still, he argues that there was at least some “disenchantment with ‘the world’ or ‘society’” in Dickinson’s withdrawal (156). In the end, given that we lack crucial information, he concedes that many “possibilities must be left open.”
While the words of Vinnie and Austin must always be weighed against their evident desire to deflect attention from their sister and from the family as a whole, the evidence suggests the process was indeed gradual. The part of Dickinson that cannot bring herself to enter Emily Fowler’s house waxes at the expense of the part that is thrilled to find herself playing charades in the woods. Her family owns ample land around the house, especially across the road, where there are over seventeen acres of pasture, known as the Dickinson meadow, and the Homestead itself is surrounded by land, fruit trees, Dickinson’s garden, and a greenhouse. A deck, accessible through glass doors, sits on the east side of the house: Marta McDowell imagines Dickinson and Vinnie relaxing there after the day’s work is done (17-18). For Dickinson, there is no question of being housebound, no question of being cut off from nature, and certainly (as Murray’s work reminds us) no question of being isolated from other people. But trips into town, social visits, chance encounters on the street, attending church, and the inevitable socializing both before and after—these are slowly coming to an end.

There are references to attending church in Dickinson’s letters from 1858 (L 194) and possibly 1859 (L 200), but none after that; in December, 1859, when she recounts (to Mary Bowles) that she called on Austin at the Evergreens on a Sunday, she mentions that he had stayed home, but her own absence goes without comment (L 213). While her letters continue to implore her closest friends (her Norcross cousins, Samuel and Mary Bowles, Elizabeth and Josiah Holland) to visit her in Amherst, and while she might still write to Mary Bowles that “I say I will go myself – I cross the river – and climb the fence – now I am at the gate – Mary – now I am in the hall – now I am looking your heart in the Eye!” (L 235, about August 1861), by
the time she turns thirty, Dickinson increasingly remains “at home,” separated from many of those she holds dear. At some point, even her visits to the Evergreens come to an end.

**Palpable in her early letters and increasingly a part of her lived experience,**

Dickinson’s confrontation with distance naturally finds a way into her earliest poems. Distance, for Dickinson, can be literal—the physical gap between us and what we want—but it can also be figurative: the gap between a current state (of deprivation, suffering, or anguish) and a desired future state (of fullness, peace, or joy). As a group, this nexus of themes is a central and lasting feature of Dickinson’s work: from early on, her poems are characterized by an exploration—variously querying, probing, quarrelling, or accepting—of the gaps caused by departures, absences, seasons, and deaths. As Farr writes, Dickinson’s “art is founded on thrilling loss” (182). But where her letters in the 1850s feature many gestures designed to elide an intervening distance, her earliest poems do little more than take note of it. In the forty-three poems copied in 1858, distance in its various guises appears in straightforward ways: heaven and the dead are figured as “distant,” “far,” and “dim” (Fr 27 and 34); distances are what we stare into, whether literally (Fr 33) or figuratively (Fr 13 and 16); and losses are bemoaned (Fr 12 and 39) or hurriedly consoled (Fr 19, 22, 30, 34).

One short poem from this year (copied in 1858 and subsequently sewn into Fascicle 1) engages more actively with loss, but it does so in order to insist that the loss is no loss at all:

To lose – if One can find again –
To miss – if One shall meet –
The Burglar cannot rob – then –

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5 “At home” is, famously, what is listed as Dickinson’s “occupation” on her death certificate (Leyda II: 474).
6 Eberwein’s discussion of Dickinson’s poems on loss (62-69) is especially insightful; see also Farr (126-127) on how the “loss of Sue” gave Dickinson “an experience of privation and sublimation that became one of her chief poetic themes” (127).
The Broker cannot cheat.
So build the hillocks gaily –
Thou little space of mine
Leaving nooks for Daisy
And for Columbine –
You and I the secret
Of the Crocus know –
Let us chant it softly –
“There is no more snow”! (Fr 30)

Prompted by the absences occasioned by winter, this poem takes loss in stride, suggesting that what we “miss” is not truly gone. Moreover, this knowledge is contained in the first few lines, so the “secret” that spring will return hardly feels like a secret at all. There is no need to suffer when loss and absence are temporary: one can go about one’s business “gaily.”

By contrast, in the poems of 1859 and 1860, Dickinson expands her treatment of distance, deprivation, and loss. A short poem copied in the summer of 1859, for example, makes something positive out of absence:

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land – by the Oceans passed.
Transport – by throe –
Peace, by it’s battles told –
Love, by memorial mold –
Birds, by the snow. (Fr 93)

The gambit of this poem is that the experience of deprivation has something to teach us: in each line, a particular difficulty yields a new understanding. It is hard to shake a slight feeling of gloom here, as there is a strong sense that we are doomed to appreciate certain things only when they are gone. But at the same time, the poem gently redeems such experiences—the “throe” of pain, the “memorial mold” of death, the barrenness of “snow”—by what we can take from them.

In several cases, in fact, it is precisely this teaching that is emphasized: “Peace” is taught not by battles but by “battles told,” and “Land” not simply by oceans but by “oceans passed.” The poem emphasizes the experience of reflecting on (or simply moving beyond) the difficulties.
encountered. More subtly, while we think of winter as a time with neither bird nor birdsong, Dickinson (as other poems make clear) knows otherwise: though the prime season for birdsong is spring and early summer, the starkness of winter might teach us a thing or two about robins, crows, woodpeckers, and owls, all of which overwinter in New England and are more noticeable against a backdrop of snow and with no leaves to obscure them. The word “taught” occurs in just the first line of this poem, but it hovers over each succeeding line, marshaling the way we learn about a thing from its opposite.⁷

Similarly, in a poem such as “For each extatic instant,” copied that same summer, there are rewards in proportion to one’s suffering:

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For each extatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the extasy –

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of Years –
Bitter contested farthings –
And Coffers heaped with tears! (Fr 109)
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In some ways, this is a simple poem of complaint, and it is easy to emphasize the “anguish” and those “Coffers heaped with tears!” The poem leans in this direction: where the first stanza devotes two lines to “extatic” and “extasy,” the second stanza, after an initial nod to that “beloved hour,” ends with three lines tinged with suffering. If the first stanza attempts some balance, the second is more in keeping with that “quivering ratio” by which the “Years” outnumber the “hour[s].” The poem’s structure and the weight of the ending combine to underscore what we endure. But what interests me is that odd word “ratio” and the sense, implicit here, that pain and suffering are not to be separated from the “extasy” and the “beloved

⁷ For a particularly interesting approach to Dickinson’s treatment of deprivation, see Pollak’s “Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry”; see also Kher (233).
hour.” A ratio is mathematical and precise. This connection between opposites is wired into the construction of the poem, with “For” telegraphing that each stanza is about to offer some kind of exchange.8

Inevitably, experiences such as absence, suffering, and deprivation are sometimes presented as necessary. In “Who never lost, is unprepared,” Dickinson asks,

Who never climbed the weary league –
Can such a foot explore
The purple Territories
On Pizarro’s shore? (Fr 136 A, lines 5-8)

By the logic of this poem, only by climbing the “weary league” could Pizarro (the first European to reach the Pacific by crossing the Americas) be able to explore the “purple Territories.” In one of her letters, Dickinson mentions the “hallowing – of pain” (L 242), and in poems such as this, something like “hallowing” seems to be at work: as pain leads to peace, suffering to understanding, deprivation to fulfillment, and separation to reunion, the former is redeemed as it contributes to attaining the latter. A few years later, Dickinson will declare outright that “The hallowing of Pain / Like hallowing of Heaven, / Obtains at corporeal cost –” (Fr 871).

By my count, close to a dozen poems in 1859 and 1860 articulate the view that we can learn from absence, suffering, or deprivation in order to appreciate or attain their opposites. It is a small sample, roughly ten percent of the poems copied during these years. But the glimpse it affords of Dickinson’s early poetry is instructive. As the poems of 1859 and 1860 begin to posit a usefulness to distance and deprivation, whether because such experiences teach us, deepen our appreciation, or otherwise “prepare” us for what is being withheld, what we see are Dickinson’s early habits becoming activated in new ways: we see the same characteristic “leaning in”

8 The word “ratio” appears in two other poems, and in each case, it performs the same kind of work of bringing this mathematical concept to bear on the question of loss and compensation. See Fr 78 and 317.
encountered in earlier letters, the same habit of making presence in the face of absence, and the same expansive embrace that was capable of holding together both heavenly and earthly charms. It is, as before, a wide embrace, secure in the knowledge that fulfilment will somehow, at some point, arrive. Some poems hope for fulfilment in this world, others in the next, but the view on display is of eventual satisfaction. As these poems lean in, they find something to lean on.

The idea that opposites such as suffering and bliss are inherently connected is by no means uniquely Dickinson’s. It is a mainstay of the psalms, for example, where a heavenly reward awaits those who suffer on earth. Emerson makes the idea into a form of cosmic law in his essay “Compensation,” where he writes, “for every thing you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something” (Collected Works II: 58). He adds, “the compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding also, after long intervals of time. A fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of friends seems at the moment unpaid loss, and unpayable. But the sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all facts” (73). Around the same time and not all that far away (though it can feel like another planet), Walt Whitman is writing that he contains multitudes and contradictions. It was a time not of undoing but of embracing contraries.

To my mind, there is especially something of Keats in Dickinson’s treatment of such contraries, the Keats who writes in one of his letters that the

common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscrib[e]d

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9 Dickinson famously claims not to have read Whitman, having “been told,” as she reports to Higginson, “that he was disgraceful” (L 261). Her source was probably Josiah Holland’s review of Leaves of Grass in the Republican, titled “‘Leaves of Grass’—Smut in Them” (Leiter 326).
straightened notion! Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making.”
Then you will find out the use of the world […] I say “Soul-making.” (249-250)  

How, Keats then asks, “are Souls to be made?” His answer shares something of Dickinson’s urge to both accept and refashion the accepted religious views of his time, with a few capital letters thrown in for good measure: 

How, but by the medium of a world like this? […] Do you not see how necessary a World of Pain and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways?  

Keats’s view, in line with many of his Romantic peers and Transcendentalist successors, is of worldly experience that prepares us by way of “pains and troubles” for the next.  

Closer to home, this idea appears in a sermon by Charles Wadsworth that was sent (by a family friend) to Dickinson in January, 1858 (Leyda 1: 352). In Wadsworth’s words, “[c]haracter is the creature of development and discipline. It depends quite as much upon experience of pain, as of pleasure” (qtd. in Habegger 409). Dickinson heard Wadsworth preach during her 1855 trip to Philadelphia, corresponded with him at least once, and received a personal visit from him in 1860. Also in 1858, Josiah Holland publishes Bitter-Sweet, a book-length poem that claims, among other things, that there is “[i]n every evil a kind instrument / To chasten, elevate, correct, subdue” (qtd. in Whicher 202).  

Dickinson may not be inventing these ideas, but she is already bringing them into her own poetry in startling ways. One of her more well-known poems, in handwriting from 1859, offers an early example:  

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10 My claim is not that she read these precise texts at this moment but that the ideas were in circulation. In Emily Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination, Diehl points to the “comingling of delight and pain” in the work of Keats and Dickinson and notes that “the symbiosis of opposition informs their mutual perception of how one learns to live” (100). For Dickinson’s exposure to Emerson, see especially Capps 111-119.
11 Reading this particular sermon must have been a complicated experience for Dickinson, for while her views on the necessity of suffering seem to overlap with those presented by Wadsworth, elsewhere in the same sermon, he dismisses lyric poetry as (in Habegger’s words) “a weak, backward-looking wail” (My Life 333).
12 Many consider Wadsworth to be the intended recipient of the so-called Master Letters, to which I turn below.
Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (Fr 112 C)

In 1864, this poem will be published (probably without Dickinson’s approval) in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Dandurand “New Dickinson” 25), and in 1878 it will be reprinted in A Masque for Poets. Appearing anonymously on both occasions, as was the norm at the time, “Success is counted sweetest” distills ideas in circulation in a style that we recognize as Dickinson’s, even though editors made changes “true to contemporary taste,” as Sewall writes (584). At the time, though, the poem occasioned some guesswork, as the editor of A Masque for Poets explained to Dickinson in a letter: the poem, he wrote, “for want of a known sponsor Mr Emerson has generally had to father” (qtd. in Sewall 583).

This is Dickinson as reader, as shrewd distiller of ideas encountered and made her own. “Success is counted sweetest” reminds us that Dickinson, like any poet, is actively (whether consciously or not) breathing in not just the world around her but the responses of writers to the world. We see, too, her emerging—indeed, already emerged—habit of dispensing with any and all excess words as if there were a price to pay for each excessive syllable. Years later, in an extreme version of this, she will send Higginson a quatrain beginning “Lay this Laurel on the One,” which Higginson considered “the condensed essence” of his poem “Decoration” and “far
finer” (qtd. in Loeffelholz “Decoration” 663). But from early on, her reading was apparently immersive, fashioning her language both with what it offered (things she could borrow or rework) and how it did so (aspects she sometimes accepted, other times rejected). We return here to the question of biography, a sometimes-theoretical discussion that becomes quite grounded when we are faced with poems such as “Success is counted sweetest” or “Lay this Laurel on the One.” This is another occasion where Dickinson’s reputation as a private, inward poet yields to something more accurate: a poet whose practice leans on her encounters with other writers’ encounters with the world. When the source of inspiration is a poem, what we see is Dickinson reading broadly and carefully in the tradition to which she is also contributing.

On some occasions, the hallowing of pain that we find in the poems of 1859 and 1860 goes further than anything we have seen in her letters. For example, as I read the correspondence and poems of the years leading up to this moment, there is nothing in the letters like this short poem copied in late 1860.

Did the Harebell loose her girdle
To the lover Bee
Would the Bee the Harebell hallow
Much as formerly?

Did the ‘Paradise’ – persuaded –
Yield her moat of pearl –
Would the Eden be an Eden,
Or the Earl – an Earl? (Fr 134)

Dickinson sent her fair share of passionate letters in the 1850s, many of which express intense frustration at separation and bear witness to a welling up of desire for togetherness. But none go

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13 Loeffelholz’s article offers an extended, careful reading of this poem and of Sewall’s analysis of it.
14 Here, the contrast with Keats is instructive. As Stanley Plumly notes, it is in Keats’s letters that he articulates “[m]uch of his important thinking—thinking well beyond the skills and substance of the early poems” (124). He adds, “Many of his most famous utterances on the shape and spirit of his mission appear in advance of its execution as poetry—not as theory so much as a thoughtful working-out, a workshop of ideas put to practical use.”
so far as to link attraction, love, or desire *causally* to its withholding. The question posed by the
poem is simple but provocative: if the harebell allowed the bee to enter with ease, would the bee
even want to? Might it, at the very least, think differently of the flower? This first stanza
manages to offer both a literal (natural) and a figurative (sexual) reading, but the underlined
“hallow” hints of a still larger frame. The second stanza follows up on that hint and enacts
Dickinson’s by-now familiar leap: we go from a garden (whether literal or figurative) to
“Paradise” and “Eden,” which is to say, to a still greater stage. If “Paradise” let itself be talked
into yielding its “moat of pearl,” would “Eden” even “be an Eden?” Is not an Earl precisely
defined by what he cannot attain? “The poem,” as Weisbuch notes, “raises its bet” and “intimates
[…] a more universal and metaphysical fear” (*Poetry* 17).

There is one other thing that always catches my eye when I return to this poem:
“persuaded.” The last stanza may bring us into the realm of religion, but since when do we argue
our way into heaven? Even as the poem expands its reference to the biblical world, it retains its
natural and (especially) its sexual connotations. Rather than leaving one reading behind as a new
one comes into view, this poem insists that we continue to read with all three in mind. What we
see in this short poem is the way a much-circulated idea becomes, in Dickinson’s hands, a
powerful moment of poetry, harnessing in just eight lines the ability of the lyric to point in
several directions at once. It marks, too, an early moment where these competing frames of
reference—nature, sexuality, spirituality—are allowed to coexist without one or another being
the central theme or topic of the poem as a whole.

Attaining what we want, grasping for what we yearn to hold, arriving where we wish to
be—in the world created by this poem, such things depend on and even gain from distance or
deprivation. In the most extreme version of this view, it is precisely when a thing cannot be had
that it becomes most desired. “‘Heaven,’” as Dickinson will write a few years later, “is what I cannot reach” (Fr 310), where heaven is not so much described as defined as something unattainable. Later still, in an 1878 letter to a man she seems to have been in love with, she will write, “Don’t you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – don’t you know that ‘No’ is the wildest word we consign to Language?” (L 562). These views, articulated with a kind of artistic clarity in subsequent poems and letters, first appear as Dickinson’s meditations on distance and deprivation deepen in poems such as Fr 134.

There is even—in the poems from these years but not the letters—a degree of ecstasy associated with pain. In a way, this is a natural extension of the “hallowing of pain,” but the difference in degree is significant:

A wounded Deer – leaps highest –
I’ve heard the Hunter tell –
’Tis but the extasy of death –
And then the Brake is still!

The smitten Rock that gushes!
The trampled Steel that springs!
A Cheek is always redder
Just where the Hectic stings!

Mirth is the mail of Anguish –
In which it cautious Arm,
Lest Anybody spy the blood
And “you’re hurt” exclaim! (Fr 181)

This poem begins as a celebration of the pains associated with deprivation. Dickinson would have been familiar with the imagery of deer and hunter from any number of places, especially her beloved Shakespeare, as Wolff notes, and “almost certainly it was Shakespeare who made her familiar with the Elizabethan pun for sexual climax—‘death’” (Wolff 205). The stanza
moves quickly from an allusion to the Bible (Moses striking the rock in Exodus) to an image of “trampled” but explosive power\textsuperscript{15} to the human body.\textsuperscript{16}

The third stanza leaps again, this time to the world of human interaction. Pain, on this view, is best hidden, and by the time we arrive at the line positing that “Mirth” is but “the mail of Anguish,” the coexistence of contraries has become almost a rule of nature. The poem is reminiscent of Emerson’s essay “Compensation,” which cycles through a range of fields to repeatedly make its point that compensation always comes. That Dickinson manages to do this in twelve spare lines tells us something of the skills already at her command as she approaches her thirtieth birthday. In the summer of 1860, she sends a copy to Susan and makes a second for herself, which she soon includes in Fascicle 8. She is seemingly on a roll.

\textit{Then something halted her course.}

To contend, as I do, that Dickinson’s seclusion cannot be reduced to a single, simple, or sudden external event is not to argue that her life is not shaken by significant events. In fact, what makes her thirtieth birthday such a tantalizing moment is the abundance of potentially significant events. If we want potential lovers to make an entrance to complicate the plot, the “Amherst stage [is] crowded with most of the candidates,” as Jay Leyda writes of 1860 (I: lxi); if we want evidence that something undisclosed but powerful happens in her personal life, the poems seemingly have plenty to offer; if we want her correspondence to include editors and advocates who are in a position to publish her work, she is already corresponding with two and

\textsuperscript{15} Literally, perhaps, a spring—the steel spring had been invented in 1857 and was in use in armchairs (Hagens)—but also, as Leiter notes, a figure for the poet, who is “filled with powerful, tumultuous emotions set to release” (56).

\textsuperscript{16} Leiter’s commentary offers an especially good reading of this poem. Among other wonderful insights, she observes that “Hectic,” in this context, “denotes a hectic flush, the term used in Dickinson’s time for the type of flush accompanying ‘consumption’ (as tuberculosis was then known). Thus, the notion of an illness that creates a false sense of liveliness is added to the other dimensions […] of the wound” (56-7).
will soon reach out to a third; if we want to imagine that now is when Dickinson leaves the Homestead for practically the last time, we can; if we want a calamity of national proportions to shake her small town, we have only to wait; if we want her writing practices to change course in unmistakable ways, we have only to continue reading her hand-written manuscripts.

“Then something halted her course.” This has long been one of my favorite sentences in Dickinson scholarship. “Something halted her course”: an assertion. But the word “something” leaves it, the thing, the ostensible reason for the sentence, unnamed. The line comes from Franklin’s narrative of late 1860: “Fascicles 5 through 8 occupied Dickinson steadily through the summer of 1859 until the summer of 1860. Then something halted her course: there were no more fascicle sheets for the rest of the year” (Variorum 21). In short, around the time Dickinson turns thirty, in December, 1860, a transition of sorts is underway.

It is, as should be clear by now, just one of several occasions when we would dearly love to know more. In some cases, such as the return to the Homestead at the end of 1855, we can imagine much of what was happening around her, but we lack important details and have virtually no poems. In 1857, we have nothing but a loaf of Rye and Indian Bread. In 1858, the year she begins systematically copying and retaining her poems, we have twelve letters and forty-three poems, but no commentary on the new practice of sheet making and fascicle sewing. In each case, we know enough to know we would like to know more, and we know enough to articulate questions and outline possibilities. We know something is happening, but we don’t know exactly what it is.

When, in the latter half of 1860, Dickinson stops copying poems onto sheets, we likewise know something but not enough to say what happened or why.17 It might have been nothing:

17 Dickinson does continue to finalize poems during this period, but not on sheets: four are what Miller calls “loose poems” and seven are poems sent to others but “not retained” (Preserved 527-28, 700-702).
perhaps she was busy doing other things. Perhaps she had by now copied all of the poems she wished to preserve from earlier years, making the fall of 1860 and the winter months of early 1861 a time of new writing. Perhaps, as many like to imagine, something *happens*. Much of the conjecture—a love affair, an infatuation, a breakdown of some kind, an episode of eye trouble, the fear of blindness, etc.—is directed to late 1861, in large part because Dickinson herself later (in 1862) writes to Higginson of having had “a terror – since September – I could tell to none” (L 261). But whatever that terror was, what seems clear is that, both within and around her, things are changing even before then.

**In November, 1860, just a month before Dickinson’s thirtieth birthday, Abraham Lincoln is elected president; ten days after her birthday, South Carolina secedes from the Union.** As the daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals arrive in the Homestead, the headlines tell a tale of times that are changing. In the *Hampshire and Franklin Express*, a weekly newspaper printed in Amherst, the headline on November 9, 1860, reads “Great Republican Victories!” (*Hampshire*). A week later, with time now to opine rather than report, the editors write, “Never, within our recollection, was a more triumphant vote than that by which Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin were elected President and Vice President by the people of the United States.” And the war, when it comes, comes as no surprise. “Since our last issue,” reads an article in the new “War News” column on April 19, 1861, “the expected conflict between the Government and the Rebels has taken place, and Fort Sumter […] has been reduced to a smoldering ruin.” Visitors, too, especially the irrepressible Samuel Bowles, would have brought news, opinions, and (in Bowles’s case) doses of reassurance when times were dark (see L 277).

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18 The fall of 1861 is also when Dickinson refuses to see Samuel Bowles, who has come to pay a visit. As far as I can tell, this is the first known instance of her turning away a close friend. See her letter of apology (L 241).
Just as Dickinson’s isolation from other people has often been exaggerated, then, so too has her ignorance of politics. As Wolosky writes, “[e]very circumstance of Dickinson’s social existence argues against her utter detachment from public affairs” (Voice 34). Slavery would have been a frequent topic of conversation in the Dickinson household. When Dickinson was ten, Edward had defended three black men who had “abducted” eleven-year old Angeline Palmer, a black girl who risked being sold into slavery (Murray, “Architects” 17). It is not hard to imagine Edward pontificating after a day at the office or in court, and Murray guesses that Dickinson heard this case and others discussed at the dinner table. Edward also served one term (1852-1854) in the U.S. Congress, and his letters home, which were doubtless shared, would have reported his efforts and travails.

Although he was personally opposed to slavery, Edward was a loyal Whig who opposed outright abolition on the grounds that it would violate the Constitution. His two years in Washington overlapped with several crucial moments in the lead-up to the war, including passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which Edward opposed, allowing white settlers in new territories to decide the matter of slavery for themselves (Habegger 297-8). A meeting at which early steps were taken toward founding the Republican Party took place in his Washington hotel room (Wolosky, “Public” 104-105), but Edward himself remained a Whig. He ran again in 1854, but he and the entire Whig party were swept from office by the new and short-lived Know-Nothing Party.

As late as October, 1861, Edward was still denouncing as “heretical dogma” the position that “immediate and universal emancipation of slaves should be proclaimed by the government” (Leyda II: 34). But he was supportive of Amherst’s contributions to the war effort, raising money for uniforms and for the families of absent soldiers and giving a speech to departing soldiers.

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By 1862, his embrace of the war was complete. In a letter to Senator Charles Sumner that shares something of his daughter’s exclamation marks but none of her restraint, Edward writes, “This infernal rebellion which must soon be put down forever! & forever!! will so shake up the extremes of conservatism & radicalism, that true views of our Republican Institutions will be widespread, and enduring! & our gov’t be exorcised of the unclean devils who have made their ‘dens’ in our very Council Chambers!” (qtd. in Habegger 402).

The coming war swirls around Dickinson both at home and in her hometown. In April, 1861, after a sermon in the College Chapel, the chemistry professor announces that he will enlist if one hundred men will do likewise. Within an hour, a hundred students have given their names. “I never knew Amherst to be so much excited as it is now by the war news,” writes one observer. “I went up street last night, and found it difficult to work my way along from Cutler’s store to Phenix Row on account of the crowd collected together by excitement” (Leyda II: 26). In May, the Republican reports that a small number of students “who reside in the slave states, left Wednesday, for home, and will probably enlist in the secession army” (Leyda II: 27).

Still, for Dickinson and for Amherst, as with most observers in the north, the war does not truly hit home until news arrives of battles and casualties. In July, 1861, rumors circulate about the outcome of the first battle at Bull Run, and when the evening train arrives in Amherst with the latest edition of the Springfield Republican, someone reads news of “the disastrous tidings” to the assembled crowd (Leyda II: 31). In October, Amherst resident Mrs. Adams loses one son; in December, she loses another. “Mrs Adams herself has not risen from bed,” reports Dickinson. “Poor little widow’s boy, riding tonight in the mad wind, back to the village burying ground where he never dreamed of sleeping! Ah, the dreamless sleep” (L 245). The year 1862 will bring occasional good news, such as the Union victory at Newbern in March, but also the
sobering defeat at the second battle at Bull Run in August, followed by the unprecedented carnage of Antietam in September.19

But it is the death of Frazer Stearns, son of the president of Amherst College and seemingly beloved by all, that grips the Dickinson family and Amherst itself. It was Stearns who had telegrammed about the death of the second Adams son, and in writing to her cousins at the time, Dickinson had openly worried that he might “be brought home frozen.” In March, 1862, when news arrives of his death, she dutifully reports it to her cousins: “You have done more for me – ‘tis the least I can do, to tell you of brave Frazer – ‘killed at Newbern,’ darlings. His big heart shot away” (L 255). She goes on to describe Stearns’s death, the return of his body to Amherst, and the memorial service. “Austin is stunned completely,” she concludes. “Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do.” Where Dickinson’s earlier letters to Austin had recorded the deaths of Amherst residents (typically from illness) with some reluctance, this letter shows her willingly, and in some detail, “telling all the news.” She writes as much out of personal necessity as from obligation.

Earlier critics saw little trace of the war in her poetry, but it is now generally agreed that a large number of poems register and respond to the events of the war.20 At times, whole poems take on a new life when read in the context of the war; at other times, one or another image or

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19 In their avid reading of periodicals, the Dickinsons were very much of their time, which coincides with a “frenzy of newspaper reading in the United States” precipitated by civil war and advent of photographs (Garvey qtd. in Scholes 8). Scholes notes that “[w]hereas the newspaper was already, in the nineteenth century, an active site for expanding poetry’s public use and function, especially its potential for timely political response, this was especially so during the Civil War” (8).

20 For more on Dickinson and the Civil War, see Wolosky, Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War (1984) and “Public and Private in Dickinson’s War Poetry” (2004); Barrett, “Public Selves and Private Spheres: Studies of Emily Dickinson and the Civil War, 1984-2007” (2007), To Fight Aloud is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War (2012), and “Slavery and the Civil War” (2013); and Marcellin, “‘Singing off the Charnel Steps’: Soldiers and Mourners in Emily Dickinson’s War Poetry” (2000). It is telling that as late as 2013, Barrett’s essay “Slavery and the Civil War” includes an argument that Dickinson was responding to national events (in her own way) and to the poetry of her contemporaries, e.g. Julia Ward Howe (207). Again, we see evidence that the myth of the reclusive poet has been slow to yield.
allusion become clearer in that context. Dickinson’s poems engage not just with events but with the way those events are discussed in the news and in the work of other writers. As Faith Barrett writes, “the language of Dickinson’s war poetry offers a probing and insightful response to contemporary political discourses” (“Drums” 108). While Dickinson’s Civil War poems do not offer a cohesive response to national events, they do respond, and in so doing, they show this most private of poets registering national events within the fabric of seemingly private poems.

But even as we find resonances of the war in Dickinson’s poetry, it remains the case, as Mary Loeffelholz notes, that “we must also respect their frequently ‘oblique’ relationship to the conflict” (Value 92). In ways that should not surprise us, the leap from wartime events into poetry leaves many of the details behind. It is telling that for so many years the connections between these poems and the raging war went unnoticed. It was not until Shira Wolosky’s A Voice of War in 1984 that serious attention was given to the relevance of the war to Dickinson’s poetry, and as late as 2013, Faith Barrett feels the need to insist that there is no contradiction between accepting Dickinson as an innovative poet and accepting that she was, in her own way, responding to both national events and to the poetry of her contemporaries (“Slavery” 207). The myth of the isolated poetess—in this case, isolated from national events—dies hard.

More than anything, this points to the ease with which Dickinson’s lyric practice is able to assimilate the war and the concerns it raises. Unlike other events, to which I turn below, the Civil War was a thing transformable. The letter to her cousins may have gone further than others in reporting events of the day, but her poetry of the same period absorbs those same events with barely a ripple, allowing her to continue thinking about things already of concern to her. Weisbuch observes that the “Civil War […] could only exaggerate the fear that ‘going away’

21 Loeffelholz quotes “Oblique” from a letter to Higginson in which Dickinson writes, “War feels to me an oblique place” (L 280 February 1863).
was a preparation for death, since many Amherst friends did ‘go away’ and then ‘were gone’ forever” (*Poetry* 88), while Wendy Martin observes that to Dickinson the conflict “was a macrocosm of the civil war Dickinson waged inside herself” (*Cambridge Introduction* 37).\(^{22}\) Dickinson herself, writing to her Norcross cousins in 1862, observes that “[s]orrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one’s own, now would be many medicines. ’Tis dangerous to value, for only the precious can alarm” (L 298).\(^{23}\) To her, the anguish without and the anguish within were conterminous.

Evidence for this can be found not only in how easily the war was missed by critics but in how easily poems written before the war fit into discussions of Dickinson’s wartime writing. Consider “Success is counted sweetest” and its image of a dying soldier:

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Not one of all the purple Host  
Who took the Flag today  
Can tell the definition  
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –  
On whose forbidden ear  
The distant strains of triumph  
Burst agonized and clear! (Fr 112 C, lines 5-12)
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If Franklin is correct, Dickinson sends “Success is counted sweetest” to Susan and copies it onto a sheet in the summer of 1859, a full two years before the war truly begins. Yet both Wolosky (“Public and Private” 111) and Martin (*Cambridge Introduction* 36-7) weave excerpts of this

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\(^{22}\) In her groundbreaking study, Wolosky writes that the war “dramatically confirmed the anguish and confusion that constituted her world. Death in particular had always seemed the epitome of incomprehensible sorrows and sudden blows. War intensified this image” (*Voice* 41.)

\(^{23}\) This letter was dated “1864?” by Johnson; Leyda (II: 72) corrects the date to “Late December?” of 1862, presumably because the letter refers to new work by Robert Browning and because the *Republican* published his “Christmas Even and Easter Day” (and noted his new volume) in its issue of December 20. It was also at this time that Dickinson learned that Higginson had enlisted. In February, 1863, apparently after reading of his deployment (in the January 1 issue of the *Republican*), she writes, “I trust you pass the limit of War, and though not reared to prayer – when service is had in Church, for Our Arms, I include yourself” (L 280).
poem into discussions of Dickinson’s response to the Civil War. Similarly, Whicher quotes four lines from “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (first copied in 1859) in a section mostly devoted to the Civil War years (140). The war, as Habegger writes, gives Dickinson “a powerful vehicle,” but the concerns it propels forward are hardly new (404).

From the standpoint of Dickinson in December, 1860, all of this awaits in the future. But it is helpful, as we prepare to move forward into 1861, to know what is to come. In the years following Dickinson’s thirtieth birthday, what stands out is the continuity that the war affords Dickinson’s poetic project. The war does not so much alter her basic poetic interests—death, separation, immortality, faith, love, nature—as intensify and focus them. When the war arrives, Dickinson is poised to work with it on her own terms. Her poetry does respond; there is, we now see, a ripple. But it took us one hundred years to notice.

**In the midst of all this, on December 10, 1860, Dickinson turns thirty.** After a few days of cold but fair weather, today it snows: “Snowing most of the day” is how the Amherst Weather Records put it, with the storm not ending until after nightfall (Meteorological Journals 548). Years earlier, she had written that “Vinnie thinks twenty must be a fearful position for one to occupy – I tell her I dont care if I am young or not, had as lief be thirty” (L 73). Still, one wonders if there was any sense of disbelief at reaching such an age? Did the day pass differently than others? With Margaret O’Brien in the house, Dickinson’s chores have been reduced, but there is a lot to do in the morning. Was it business as usual down in the kitchen?

Did she have a party? Hard to say; hard even to know what kind of party the Dickinsons might have thrown. “Happy Birthday,” the song we sing today, will not be written until later in the nineteenth century, and lavish presents were not yet the norm. The tradition of birthday cakes
and candles, popular in Germany and spreading elsewhere in Europe, will not take root in the United States until the 1870s (Gage and Gage). It was taking a while for the old Puritan opposition to celebrations of any kind to abate, and only later in the nineteenth century would child-rearing books advocate marking the occasion of a child’s birthday. The day after her birthday in 1847, when she is at Holyoke, she writes to Austin, “Did you think that it was my birthday – yesterday? I dont believe I am 17” (L 19), but she doesn’t belabor it, and it doesn’t sound like she expected anything from Austin on the occasion.

Still, especially in later years, Dickinson herself remembers the birthdays of friends, sending sometimes a poem, sometimes a flower, sometimes both. From Cambridge, she sends a birthday card to her three-year-old nephew in June, 1864, and when Dickinson sends “One sister have I in our house” to Susan in 1858, Johnson wonders if it might have been on the occasion of her birthday (notes to L 197). In both 1870 and 1880, on the occasion of Susan’s fortieth and fiftieth birthdays, Dickinson sends a short poem (L 356 and 679). And there are occasional hints that others remember and perhaps celebrate Dickinson’s birthday. Johnson notes (though Dickinson does not) that a gathering of a few friends, recorded in a letter to Austin, was on the occasion of her twenty-first birthday (notes to L 65). Mary Bowles in particular seems to have been diligent. In December, 1858, Dickinson writes to her, “Your flowers came from Heaven,” and she concludes the letter, “Angels fill the hand that loaded Emily’s” (L 196). A year later, on her very birthday, she begins a letter to Mary with thanks: “You send sweet messages. Remembrance is more sweet than Robins in May orchards” (L 212).

Mostly, though, we are left to imagine. Suffice it to say, however she passes the day and whatever the musings it inspires, as her thirtieth year comes to an end and as the snow falls outside her window, Dickinson is many things: daughter, sister, baker, gardener, dog walker,
lapsed church goer, writer of letters and notes, and the author of two published poems (both anonymously) and roughly 200 unpublished poems, most of them copied in ink on sheets that have been sewn into small packets. For all the artistry and skill on display in those poems, however, she is not yet the Dickinson we know, and for the moment, she is not even making new copies of poems. While there are legitimate successes tucked away upstairs in her bedroom, poems we would cherish without what is soon to follow, it is what is about to happen that has repeatedly captured the imagination of readers and for which we remember her today. Neither the body of work we celebrate nor the reclusive life we often associate with her name exist. We do not know enough to call it an impasse, but as I will soon argue, at this point in Dickinson’s life and writing, the future we know to be hers is far from the only possible path now stretching before her. Things might have turned out otherwise.

More to the point, from her perspective—and let’s (why not?) imagine her taking stock, at some point on this day, of where she is and where she is heading—there was no knowing what the future might hold. In the one letter that Johnson assigns (tentatively) to December, 1860, written to her Norcross cousins, Dickinson is alternately playful and pensive. With no evidence other than the falling snow, I like to imagine her writing this on her actual birthday, in her bedroom, before or after the day’s activities. “I received your feather with profound emotion,” she begins, referring perhaps to a birthday remembrance, before thanking them for a cape sent earlier in the fall. When she turns to the weather, she begins with a look back, but she quickly makes her peace with the loss: “I miss the grasshoppers much, but suppose it is all for the best. I should become too attached to a trotting world.” And then she takes in the day around her: “My garden is all covered by snow; picked gilliflower Tuesday, now gilliflowers are asleep. The hills
take off their purple frocks, and dress in long white nightgowns. There is something fine and something sad in the year’s toilet” (L 228).

“I feel,” she writes, “rather confused to-day, and the future looks ‘higglety-pigglety.’”

In the months that follow Dickinson’s thirtieth birthday, a new degree of personal sorrow begins to enter her poetry. Pain in its various guises has been a part of her poetry since the beginning, but typically as a general, even abstract, phenomenon. Unlike the ripple occasioned by the Civil War, easy to miss and closely allied with long-held concerns, what emerges now are moments of surprising personal intensity in poems that are clearly working out how best to accommodate them:

I shall know why – when Time is over –
And I have ceased to wonder why –
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky –

He will tell me what “Peter” promised –
And I – for wonder at his woe –
I shall forget the drop of anguish
That scalds me now – that scalds me now! (Fr 215)

Peter said he would stand by Jesus, only to publicly disavow him before the evening was through, and Dickinson notes here the pain Jesus must have felt in that moment of betrayal. Copied in the early spring of 1861, this poem hazards the hope that, upon hearing of the “woe” experienced by Jesus, the “anguish” currently being experienced will be reduced to a mere “drop.” In so doing, it posits two separate responses to the pain of today. First, it is clear from the very beginning that compensation or fulfillment, while hoped for, has been deferred until the afterlife. Second, what awaits in that other world is actually not fulfillment or pleasure, not the
“morning” of earlier poems, and certainly not “bliss” or “extasy,” but simply, perhaps merely, knowledge: “I shall know why.”

For seven lines, despite a tone of resignation, this hope holds sway. There is even some coherence to the emerging thread of thought: the repeated assonance that links “I,” “why,” “Time,” “I,” “why,” “sky,” and “I”; the consonance of w’s in “why,” “when,” “why,” “will,” “will,” “wonder,” and “woe”; the pattern of forward-looking thought as we go from “shall know” to “will explain” to “will tell” to “shall forget”—all of this sets up the remarkable last line, when all of these patterns are overturned. In their place, building on the metaphor of “drop” just introduced, we get two repetitions of “scald,” a word not prepared for sonically in the preceding lines, and an insistent “now.” As the drop morphs into something with an immediate and outsized effect, the poem registers the moment of disruption in its fabric of sound.

This last line marks a beautiful moment when Dickinson’s present-tense poetics merge with her newfound interest in presenting genuine anguish. For years, as we saw in chapter one, Dickinson has been privileging the present tense as the perch from which to write. In this case, though, the result is that the poem essentially stops—is stopped—in its tracks. The poem implicitly asks, How do I write from within this moment of deeply felt pain? The answer, not uttered but enacted, is that the poem cannot continue. The way the poem reaches the first “That scalds me now” and hovers—for the span of a dash—as if it might recover, only to discover it cannot go on, results in a poem that does more than it says. Repetition, exclamation, the slip from perfect rhyme (“why”/”sky”) to slant rhyme (“woe”/”now”), the dash that seems to offer a turn but cannot: having begun as a presentation of thinking, the poem finds it cannot keep thinking.24 We encounter a mind stuttering in its attempt to move forward, until finally the effort

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24 In approaching poems as attempts to think, I am indebted to a thoughtful thread of Dickinson scholarship that includes Weisbuch, Scheurer, Deppman, and Miller.
dissolves into its present-tense moment of “now.” As we go from a present-tense effort to understand and accept to a present-tense moment of pain, what we experience is a poem unfolding in real time.

This last point is crucial. Writing poems in the present tense is one thing, but to activate the present tense in the line-by-line unfolding of a poem is to tap into one of the deepest and most powerful resources available to a lyric poet: this poem, the poem insists, is happening now, as you, dear reader, bring it to life. Dickinson does not invent this move—poets from Sappho onward have found ways to make good use of this dimension of the lyric, and Shakespeare (though he also did not invent it) used it to create remarkable effects in his soliloquies. But what we see in a poem such as “I shall know why – when Time is over –” is Dickinson’s understanding of what that present-tense perch can offer, an understanding that is evident in several poems from this period. Using the word “now” or “here” is the least of it: the power is found in the way the unfolding of the poem, the thinking it does and the turns in that thinking, mark the poem as something not re-presenting some past moment but presenting (even as it glances backwards or forwards) a moment, a moment that constitutes the poem itself. In the next chapter, I turn to those poems and to the power of this insight; for now, this poem from early 1861 ought simply to remind us that Dickinson is, as she writes, learning from what she writes.25

This poem offers little or no comfort. The phrase “scalds me now” dominates our experience of the poem, effectively canceling everything that came before it. The best that the poem dares to hope for is a kind of deferred instruction, when Christ will explain “each separate

25 While any number of earlier poems situate themselves in the present tense in interesting ways—a short list would include Fr 50, 61, 67, 69, 81, 119, and 126 from 1859, and Fr 146, 154, 173, 175, and 183 from 1860—few exploit it as later poems do. The closest might be Fr 154, which (as we saw in chapter one) begins, “She died – this was the way she died,” thereby calling attention to its own telling, and Fr 158, in which the third stanza mentions “A little tremor in my voice / Like this!” which does the same. The 1859 poem “Heart not so heavy as mine” (Fr 88), discussed in chapter two, likewise locates itself in a moment of utterance.
anguish” and the pain will be forgotten. But even that hope is diminished because, as the first stanza makes clear, by then the speaker in this poem will “have ceased to wonder why.” Understanding may arrive, but not in time to console.

This is not the first poem we have seen that presents the “quivering ratio” tilted toward tears, pain, and anguish, but to me, this ending feels completely new. When it begins, the poem is poised to affirm a kind of Christian patience not all that different from the psalms and sermons of Dickinson’s day, but the poem’s inability to continue gives powerful, first-person evidence of the pain one is supposed to endure stoically. Though Dickinson would probably not have read the seventeenth-century Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, the feeling here is similar to moments in her poem about the burning of her house, in which she articulates her submission to God’s will that her house should burn to the ground while simultaneously noting, in painstaking detail, what was lost in the blaze [232-233]. Whatever the poem may say, we find equal meaning in what it does, and part of what this poem does is offer sharp, sudden testimony of an experience of personal pain, a dimension of her poetry held consistently at bay until now.

Interestingly, Dickinson uses the word “scald” on just one other occasion, and this later poem shows Dickinson returning to the same crucial question of how to make sense of, how to think through, such an experience. Copied one year later, “I should have been too glad, I see –” shows the kind of writing that “I shall know why – when Time is over –” brings into view:

I should have been too glad, I see –
Too lifted – for the scant degree
Of Life’s penurious Round –
My little Circuit would have shamed
This new Circumference – have blamed –
The homelier time behind –
I should have been too saved – I see –
Too rescued – Fear too dim to me –
That I could spell the Prayer
I knew so perfect – yesterday –
That scalding one – Sabacthini –
Recited fluent – here –

Earth would have been too much – I see –
And Heaven – not enough for me –
I should have had the Joy
Without the Fear – to justify –
The Palm – without the Calvary –
So Savior – Crucify – (Fr 283 C, stanzas 1-3)²⁶

“Sabacthini” is what Jesus said to God from the cross: “why hast thou forsaken me?” Where the earlier poem could not continue from within the moment of scalding, this poem looks back at that moment and works to redeem it. Back then, “Sabacthini” was a scalding prayer; now, it is “Recited fluent.” Time has worked to make fluency, which is to say language and possibly even thought, once again possible.

As it attempts to make sense of suffering, this later poem presents the kinds of contraries we have already seen. “Fear” is posited as a necessary precursor to “Joy,” and the crucifixion at “Calvary” to the “Palm” of resurrection. If I had been too happy on earth, the logic runs, I would not have truly appreciated heaven. We are seemingly back in the world where “Water” is taught by “thirst” and “Transport” by “throe,” encountered in Fr 93. But then, in line 18, comes the stunning leap:

“So Savior – Crucify –”

It is, in fact, a double leap. Not only does the poem turn to apostrophe for the first time, it also breaks with the pattern of offering unified stanzas. Where the first two stanzas take six lines to

²⁶ This version of Fr 283 is from 1863. The earlier version (dated “about 1862” by Franklin) is lost; the third stanza of the poem was sent to Susan in 1862. Note that (as always) I use Dickinson’s spelling; the more common spelling for Dickinson’s “Sabacthini” is Sabachthani.
round out an initial thought, the third stanza gets as far as five lines, at which point, like the earlier poem, something breaks: the determined effort to note what “I see” cannot continue. Where the thinking in “I shall know why – when Time is over –” breaks down, here the thinking breaks off, veering instead into what is technically an address but sounds more a defeated cry. The attempt to affirm the necessity of suffering runs out of steam.

As the stanza breaks prematurely and this cry is uttered, the source of authority shifts in the fourth and final stanza:

Defeat whets Victory – they say –
The Reefs in Old Gethsemane
Endear the + shore beyond –
’Tis Beggars – Banquets best define –
’Tis Thirsting – vitalizes Wine
Faith + bleats to understand –

+ Coast + faints.²⁷

The “they say” of the final stanza qualifies everything the poem has been trying to articulate, a shift that is underscored by the turn to the third person: we are clearly in the land of what “they say,” not what “I see”: it is “they” who say that Gethsemane (where Jesus was betrayed and arrested) is what makes the resurrection possible. Here the poem abandons thinking for itself and turns to the language of received wisdom, a pattern that neatly mirrors “I shall know why – when Time is over,” which tried to look ahead but could only hold off the pain for so long. Both poems find an effort to think something through stymied, prompting a change in direction, a moment of self-interruption. And in both poems, that change is registered in the course of the poem itself.

Even as the later poem notes the compensation to be had in exchange for today’s suffering, though, it continues to wonder why. “Faith bleats to understand,” Dickinson concludes, and the sheet includes (beneath the poem) the word “faints” as an alternative for

²⁷ Dickinson marks two spots with a “+” to indicate words for which she offers variants below the poem.
“bleats” (Franklin *MSB* 804). Both words emphasize our inability to comprehend the *why* of this trade-off. I see the rule, the poem suggests, but *why* is there such a rule? If the poem began as an attempt to affirm or embrace a view received from scripture, a view articulated successfully in any number of earlier poems, the final stanza, in which belief “bleats” or “faints” to understand, concedes just how hard it is to see, accept, or believe. We are left to go on faith, the poem seems to say, but even faith might be insufficient.

An even starker example of the kind of poem that will follow from “I shall know why – when Time is over –” is also copied in early 1862:

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A Weight with Needles on the pounds –
To push, and pierce, besides –
That if the Flesh resist the Heft –
The puncture – Coolly tries –

That not a pore be overlooked
Of all this Compound Frame –
As manifold for Anguish –
As species – be – for name. (Fr 294)
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The first stanza, with its precise description of a device designed for torture, is among the starkest in Dickinson’s poetry. Poetically, the pace is brisk. There is no “It was like…” to introduce the poem, no “I felt a…” or “It reminded me of …” to ground our perspective: we are thrust immediately into an image. As if to heighten our discomfort, we soon find we lack even the solidity of a complete sentence to orient ourselves, so that as we read, and as the dashes string us along, part of the poem’s power is derived from our expectation (never fulfilled) of finding a main verb in the unfolding sentence.29 If a poem made of complete sentences gives us a

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28 I follow Franklin and Miller in emending Dickinson’s spelling of “cooly” (*Variorum* 317; Miller 138).
29 As I read the poem, there is no main verb. It is possible, perhaps, to read “Coolly tries” as the predicate for “A Weight with Needles on the pounds,” but that yields an even more awkward intervening series of phrases (“To push, and pierce, besides – / That if the Flesh resist the Heft – / The puncture –”). However you read it, the syntax is struggling to formulate itself.
feeling of a mind having thought things through, here the fragmentary nature of the poem captures the feeling of a mind registering what it beholds. In the world of this poem, some things simply are. They “push,” “pierce,” and are “manifold,” which is to say, according to Dickinson’s dictionary, they are “many in number; numerous; multiplied” (Lexicon “manifold”). Whether we trace the actual image back to the inquisition, to the Salem witch trials, to another historical precedent, or to Dickinson’s imagination, what astonishes is the brutal nature of the torment, so much so that the language itself strains to contain it.30

Not surprisingly, what is omitted is the precipitating event, but having spent time with Dickinson’s early letters, it would be far more surprising if the poems did point to such a moment. While it may be a powerful poetic strategy, it is more fundamentally a long-standing habit of mind. And while much has been made of the “omitted center” (Leyda I: xxi) or “scenelessness” (Weisbuch Poetry 16) of Dickinson’s poems, it is more important to note that the omission comes with something to take its place. As Adrienne Rich writes of her early encounter with Dickinson, “[m]ore than any other poet, Emily Dickinson seemed to tell me that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological, was inseparable from the universal” (43). Rich’s phrase, “the intense inner event,” seems exactly right. Whatever might have happened in her life—be it one thing or many, a single moment or an accumulation, something rooted in love or trauma or both or perhaps mostly in her imagination—it is the inner experience of what happened that Dickinson brings into focus. It is akin, perhaps, to certain iconic moments in film

30 Such images of torture—not just pain but pain inflicted intentionally by another—recur in the poems of this period, as does the sense that resistance is impossible. More generally, as Habegger notes, the “idea of extreme pain, appearing in a few poems in 1859, became one of Dickinson’s major subjects in the early 1860s. Of the twenty-three instances of the word ‘hurt’ in her poems (noun or verb), every single one occurs between 1860 and 1863” (408). The sheet on which “A Weight with Needles on the pounds” is copied includes two others that are likewise obsessed with suffering and loss: “I got so I could hear his name –” (Fr 292) and “A single screw of flesh” (Fr 293).
when the camera records not the significant event (an explosion, a moment of betrayal, a kiss) but the character’s face as it registers the event.

**Many of Dickinson’s most well-known poems plumb the depths of that “intense inner event,” and in so doing, they respond to the moment when “I shall know why – when Time is over –” comes grinding to a halt.** Dickinson, I want to suggest, is newly committed to finding an adequate language for such experiences, and the result is a group of poems, all of them copied between 1861 and 1864, that are among her most searing presentations of a suffering individual. Unlike the Civil War, pain of this kind will require something new, and it will create more than a ripple. The presentations themselves vary—these poems may be in the first or third person, feature individuals whose pain is solitary or individuals whose pain is linked to someone else, render pain as something physical or as something existential, rely on a single extended metaphor or move from one attempt to the next to the next, employ language that is fluid or ruptured—but they share one thing: in none of them is pain redeemed, hallowed, or otherwise resolved. In stark contrast to the poems copied in 1859 and 1860, these poems replace teaching with torment, hallowing with harrowing.

A few months after copying “I shall know why – when Time is over,” on what must stand as one of the more remarkable days in her career as a practicing poet, Dickinson reaches for a

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31 The list of the poems I have in mind includes “I got so I could hear his name” (Fr 292), “A weight with Needles on the pounds” (Fr 294), “If I’m lost – now –” (Fr 316), “I like a look of Agony” (Fr 339), “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (Fr 340), “‘Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –” (Fr 341), “It was not Death, for I stood up” (Fr 355), “The Soul has Bandaged moments –” (Fr 360), “After Great Pain, a formal feeling comes” (Fr 372), “Give little Anguish -” (Fr 422), “The first Day’s Night had come –” (Fr 423), “‘Twas like a Maelstrom with a Notch” (Fr 425), “I read my sentence – steadily –” (Fr 432), “It would have starved a Gnat –” (Fr 444), “He fumbles at your Soul” (Fr 477), “From Blank to Blank” (Fr 484), “There is a pain so utter” (Fr 515), “Pain has an element of Blank” (Fr 760), “Pain expands the Time” (Fr 833), and “I felt a cleaving in my Brain” (Fr 867), among others. To be sure, there are earlier poems that resemble these, such as “Just lost, when I was saved!” But that poem offers the solace of a “next time.” As a rule, Dickinson’s early poems always find solace or compensation somewhere.
single leaf of stationery and makes final copies of two short poems. Together, they show
Dickinson in the process of creating the language she needs for these “intense inner events.” The
first poem offers a mini taxonomy of pain:

It is easy to work when the soul is at play –
But when the soul is in pain –
The hearing him put his playthings up
Makes work difficult – then –

It is simple, to ache in the Bone, or the Rind –
But Gimblets – among the nerve –
Mangle daintier – terribler –
Like a Panther in the Glove – (Fr 242; Miller 129)

On this view, pain in the body—whether in the “Bone” or the “Rind”—is nothing like pain in the
“soul” or “nerve.” The cause of the pain, of course, is left out, but the experience is brought
vividly to life. And as the poem reaches for an adequate language, it likewise stretches
Dickinson’s writing. It marks the only occurrence of “gimblets” in her work, a word commonly
spelled “gimlet,” which is defined by her edition of Webster’s dictionary as a “borer” or a “small
instrument with a pointed screw at the end, for boring holes in wood by turning” (Lexicon
“gimlet”). The meeting of such an instrument with the nervous system is indeed “terribler,” a
word (along with its cognate “terrible”) that appears here for the first time in her poetry.32

This poem imagines pain being inflicted in ways that are intentional and ritualistic:
someone or something is presumably handling this “gimblet.” And the image of a borer meeting
the nerve becomes darker still in the phrase “Mangle daintier.” The word “Mangle,” also used
here for the first time, is bad enough, but to qualify it with “daintier”—to attempt to make of
mangling something “elegant” or “palatable” or “delicate” or “delicious”—only makes it

32 “Terribler” and “terrible” appear in seven poems (Rosenbaum 753).
worse. Unlike the Civil War, personal pain of the sort being presented here calls for larger and (to us) impossible-to-miss accommodations. This is especially true of the final line, which leaps to an image so weird that I keep expecting to stumble upon an explanation, perhaps an alternate meaning of the word “glove” or some idiomatic expression unfamiliar to me. I have asked one friend after another, especially those who have delved more deeply in nineteenth-century literature, but so far, nothing. My reaction, though, testifies to the odd and oddly unsettling nature of the image itself, an oddness that Dickinson, at this point in her writing career, is clearly interested in pursuing. Like “Mangle daintier,” the image confronts us by pulling us in contrary directions. A panther—a beautiful but undeniably wild animal familiar to Dickinson from her readings of the far east—trapped in a comfortable, domestic, yet painfully constricted “Glove.”

After copying out that last line, Dickinson turns the leaf over and copies a poem that speaks to the same world of inward pain. It begins,

That after Horror – that ’twas us –
That passed the mouldering Pier –
Just as the Granite crumb let go –
Our Savior, by a Hair –

A second more, had dropped too deep
For fisherman to plumb –
The very profile of the Thought
Puts Recollection numb – (Fr 243 A; lines 1-8)

33 Versions of “mangle” appear in four poems. “Daintier” does not appear in Dickinson’s edition of Webster’s; “dainty” is defined as follows: “(1) Nice; pleasing to the palate; of exquisite taste; delicious; as, dainty food. His soul abhorreth dainty meat. Job xxxiii. (2) Delicate; of acute sensibility; nice in selecting what is tender and good; squeamish; soft; luxurious; as, a dainty taste or palate; a dainty people. (3) Scrupulous in manners; ceremonious. Shak. (4) Elegant; tender; soft; pure; neat; effeminately beautiful; as, dainty hands or limbs. Milton. Shak. (5) Nice; affectedly fine; as, a dainty speaker. Prior.”

34 Such compressed bits of language—one thinks also of “Quartz contentment” (Fr 341) or “Ethereal Blow” (Fr -- are a central feature of Dickinson’s poetry and have wide attention. A good, detailed exploration is offered by Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, who notes that the use of contrasts “forms a powerful principle in Emily Dickinson’s diction” (Voice 103) and connects this practice to Dickinson’s interest in paradox and “slantness” (see 103-107). I take up moments such as these in chapter five, where I consider them in the context of the (ages old) lyric practice of embracing or holding together contraries.
At the center of this poem is an experience of “Horror”—another word that appears now for the first time in Dickinson’s poetry—that characteristically leaves the precipitating event unspecified. The first stanza is compressed to the point of being difficult to unravel—the very surface resists easy parsing. What is this world made of? The image of a “mouldering Pier” is clear enough, whether we think of an actual pier in disrepair, a pier “eaten away partly by water, partly by the spectre of death” (Cameron Lyric 107), or the metaphorical “pier of faith” that appears in several of Dickinson’s poems. 35 The association of the “Granite crumb” with “Our Savior” recalls the stone that blocked the tomb from which Jesus emerged on Easter Sunday: on this view, Jesus managed to escape the tomb, but barely. Alternately, this “Granite crumb” may (as Cameron argues) stand for the earth itself or (as Wolff argues) present the image of a tombstone, which in New England were often decorated with figures of “death” (Cameron Lyric 107; Wolff 266-267). Compounding our difficulty is the phrase “Just as”: does it work to compare the “crumb” to the “Pier” (something like, we passed the pier just like the crumb let go of our savior) or is it chronological (we passed the pier at the same time as the crumb let go)?

In the classroom or with friends, I find we can circle around for a long time before a snippet of narrative takes shape. We often end up—without discarding those other possibilities—with at least one interpretation that yields a cohesive stanza. “It’s like a scene from a movie,” as one student said, where the “us” of the poem is traversing (perhaps running full tilt across) a faltering pier seconds before (“just as”) the footing for the pier (the “Granite crumb”) dissolves. The pier collapses, but the Granite crumb remained intact just long enough to become “our Savior,” but barely. It is a tale of near escape and of what happens in the wake of such an escape.

35 See, for example, “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” (Fr 978). At the level of visual imagery, the pier also foreshadows the appearance of fishermen in the second stanza.
I cannot think of a poem copied before 1861 that is difficult in precisely this way. Yes, there are earlier poems that invite multiple interpretations, poems that reward our time with deepening meaning and expanded fields of reference. There are certainly poems that are metaphorically complex and richly allusive, and we are by now accustomed to poems that omit important details or facts. But almost without exception, the poems that precede 1861 have at least one clear, initial, frame of reference: a poem is, or appears to be, a poem about (or an address to) a flower, a death, a bird, a friend, a lover, or a particular person such as Jesus. From there, our reading might go many places, but we at least have a reading with which to begin. By contrast, “That after Horror – that ’twas us –” insists that we work hard just to make sense of the surface of the poem. As such, it marks a moment where the compression or concision that Dickinson clearly favors—she has not, in letter or poem, been in the habit of lingering over details, explanations, or transitions—has a profound impact at the level of poetics: these four lines feel more beholden to the experience they are struggling to render than to the experience of any imagined reader.

That struggle, it becomes clear, is what this poem is about, so much so that it simply cannot move on. The second stanza remains obsessed with the horror-filled experience and cannot shake how close the occasion came to dropping us “too deep.” The language itself—note the elided subject; presumably, we are expected to supply a “we” or “I,” in line 5—registers the fraught feeling of living “after.” And at this point, the poem might have simply ended, allowing the numbness to derail its progress much like the scalding drop of the poem a few months earlier. Instead, unable to look away and unable to move on, and in keeping with the poem on the opposite side of the page, the final eight lines stare headlong into that moment of horror:

The possibility – to pass
Without a moment’s Bell –
Into Conjecture’s presence
Is like a Face of Steel –
That suddenly looks into our’s
With a metallic grin –
The Cordiality of Death –
Who + drills his Welcome in – + nails

However you read this difficult final stanza, there is no compensation to be found, no lesson learned, no salvation earned. The poem remains fixated on what almost happened, so that the ending reads like a version of “Just lost, when I was saved!” gone terribly wrong. Rather than the excited anticipation of “next time,” this poem obsesses with the way an effect lingers: after the horror, the haunting. The “possibility”—what almost but did not quite happen—is overwhelming.

The result is a simile, contained in those final five lines, without precedent in Dickinson’s poetry before this year. There is no escaping the newfound terror that Dickinson manages to capture in the image of a “Face of Steel” with a “metallic grin,” to say nothing of the association of death with the verb “drills” and its alternate “nails.”

To be in the presence of “Conjecture” is to come face to face with death, a familiar enough topic for Dickinson. But the treatment here diverges from the poems and letters of preceding years: almost without exception, when Dickinson’s early poems present an image of death, the process of dying is naturalized or made familiar in some way. Thus, in one poem, the “procession” to “where the angels are” includes a

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36 To me, this has always seemed an unlikely Civil War poem, but Wolosky reads the “metallic grin” as a rifle and notes that the third stanza was sent to Higginson (then a combatant in the war) in 1863 (Voice 42).
37 Most readings consider the precipitating “horror” of this poem to be a near-experience or contemplation of death (e.g. Porter Art 166–7, Cameron 106–108), but it can also be read as a poem that likens another (presumably traumatic) experience to death, as a poem about life after the Biblical fall, or as a comment on life in a world without faith. As always, the poem gives us the inner experience of the unnamed event.
38 I borrow the word “naturalize” from Petrino, who argues that Dickinson rejects the Victorian practice of “naturalizing” death, opposes the fiction of death as sleep, and casts “doubt on the apparent comfort that Victorian mourning conventions sought to offer” (Contemporaries 123). Petrino’s view holds true for most of Dickinson’s career, but the first few years—1858 to 1860—strike me as an exception. Similarly, writing specifically about Dickinson’s poems on death, Farland notes Dickinson’s “deliberate departure from a historically specific mode of representing immortality: sentimentality’s conduct of death” (369). Seen this way, Petrino’s further claim that Dickinson’s views borrow from Puritanism is fascinating because it implies that Dickinson worked her way back.
Bobolink and an “aged Bee” (Fr 22), and in another, dying occurs “as quiet as the Dew / From an accustomed flower” (Fr 159). Deaths come easy in these poems: one “little figure / Rocked softer – to and fro –” and “slipped quiet from it’s chair” (Fr 84), while another “strolled softly o’er the hill” (Fr 141). And almost everywhere, it seems, the dead are met or accompanied by angels.

We need to be careful when writing about such a large group of poems—several dozen, by my count—because, as we might expect, they enact a variety of stances. But what they share is an effort, even a confidence, in making of death something known or knowable. If you know Dickinson’s later poems, what is noteworthy in the poems from 1858 through 1860 that touch on death is the relative lack of awe and fear. Even when Dickinson registers a complaint, as she does when she writes about “children / Early aged” who have gone to their deaths “unnoticed” by God, the poem has them “tuck[ed]” into “thoughtful graves” (Fr 91). And even when these poems express doubt about the standard story of death and heaven, as in “Going to Heaven!” (Fr 128), the tone is light and the register playful.

A seeming exception to all of this is a poem that has attracted a great deal of attention over the years, a version of which Dickinson copies onto a sheet in 1859:

toward Calvinism after starting out more in line with Victorian culture. What it shows at a deeper level, though, is that as Dickinson develops her own stance toward death, she is able to draw on multiple traditions, all of which feed (but also must vie with) her own instincts as her thinking and poetics develop.

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39 See e.g. Fr 6, 22, 73, 154. In poems where death is not naturalized, heaven is typically rendered in traditional terms, whether as a “Kingdom” (Fr 34), as a “home” (Fr 43), or as a “gate” through which we “Pass royal” (61). At this point, Dickinson’s heaven features “Coaches” and “footmen” (Fr 77) and “crowns” and “courtiers” (Fr 81), and a cemetery becomes “the Village” that is “often passed […] When going home from school” (Fr 41).

40 To the extent that she quarrels at all with God in her early poems, Dickinson tends to do so “with bemusement rather than outrage,” as McIntosh writes (43). Some critics read these early poems as ironic (e.g. Barnstone), but when read alongside her letters, these poems seem genuine in their longings, quarrels, and hesitations. In March, 1860, when Dickinson learns that her Aunt Lavinia has died, she writes to Vinnie (who has been caring for Lavinia), “I see nothing but her room, and angels bearing her into those great countries in the blue sky of which we don’t know anything. Then I sob and cry till I hardly see my way ‘round the house again; and then sit still and wonder if she sees us now, if she sees me […] Tired little aunt, sleeping ne’er so peacefully! Tuneful little aunt, singing, as we trust, hymns than which the robins have no sweeter ones” (L 217). Dickinson acknowledges not “knowing,” wonders if her aunt can see her, and adds a tentative “as we trust,” but such doubts are a long way from irony. What I sense more than anything is Dickinson’s pain, so much so that, as Eberwein notes, it is a rather poor letter of consolation (“Messages” 104). I would argue that it is not a letter of consolation at all: it is an expression of Dickinson’s own suffering to a sister whose care she once described as “motherly” (Sewall Lyman 70-71).
Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by morning
And untouched by noon –
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin,
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them –
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the sweet Birds in ignorant cadence –
Ah, what sagacity perished here! (Fr 124 B)

Susan would later (in 1861) say of the first stanza that “I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never can again” (notes to Fr 124). In this poem, the dead “sleep” beneath a “Roof of Stone,” unreachable, untouchable. Above them, life goes on. The birds sing, the breeze laughs, the bee babbles. In some ways, this justifiably famous poem seems to be the exception that proves the rule. There is nothing else like it in Dickinson’s early verse; nowhere else does the tone and the content combine to create such feelings of gloom associated with dying.

And yet, it is surely worth noting that the dead in this poem “Sleep” and are “Safe.” When it was published, first in the Republican in 1862 and subsequently in Poems, 1890, the poem was titled “The Sleeping” (notes to Fr 124). Cold as the image is, it does not contradict the standard pieties of the day. And Dickinson knew this, because when she returned to it in 1861 and attempted to make the poem “frostier” after Susan objected to the second stanza, she made one radical change. The revision consists mostly of an entirely new second stanza, but Dickinson also replaced “Sleep” with “Lie” in the first stanza. There is perhaps nothing more telling than the fact that to Dickinson in 1859, the dead “Sleep,” whereas in 1861, they “Lie” beneath their “Roof of Stone.” With the dead safely asleep, the early version of this poem fits easily alongside
others that manage to comprehend death, to face it without a sense of terror.\footnote{When she encloses a copy of this poem with her first letter to Higginson in April, 1862, she reverts to “Sleep,” presumably guessing that he would like that version better. And, indeed, this is the version he and Todd would choose to publish in \textit{Poems} (1890).} By contrast, with the dead simply lying there, as they are in 1861, the poem darkens, and we find ourselves much closer to the world of “That after horror – that ‘twas us –” and others\footnote{See e.g. “Two swimmers wrestled on the spar” (Fr 227) and “How many times these low feet staggered –” (Fr 238). Note that Dickinson can still render death as a form of sleep (Fr 210), and she can still imagine it offering a reunion of some kind (Fr 199). She does not simply switch from one version of heaven to another; rather, her vision of what is possible, the network of what is imaginable, expands.} where death is anything but comfortable.

If you arrive at the leaf containing “It is easy to work when the soul is at play –” and “That after horror – that ’twas us –” after reading other (later) poems, they might not be too surprising; if you have read only the poems that precede them, they surprise. Whenever I read through the poems in chronological order, this moment of copying stops me in my tracks.\footnote{Neither Franklin’s nor Miller’s editions allow you to read the poems in purely chronological order. Franklin begins each year with poems not collected in fascicles before proceeding to the fascicle sheets, so some loose or uncollected poems from later in a given year have lower numbers than earlier fascicle poems. Miller presents the fascicles in order, but as we have seen, this does not always align with the order in which the sheets were copied. Using the dates assigned to each sheet in Miller’s edition, it is possible to reconstruct their order.} For all the poems that depict an anguish arising from separation, deprivation, or loss, here the suffering is acute, the language pushed to new depths. More importantly, there is no compensation to be had, no redemption to be found in the pain. Suffering – \textit{period}. If you seek assurance that pain might lead somewhere or teach you something, if you perhaps still want anguish to earn a reward of some kind, Dickinson will still occasionally agree, but you will need to find it in another poem. Such hope lies beyond the horizon of these poems: here, the language is deployed to other ends.

Given the uncertainties of dating Dickinson’s poems, I have always felt cautious about writing a sentence along the lines of, “here, for the first time, Dickinson does ….” But if I were
to write that sentence—I’m thinking, thinking—now is when I would write it. These two poems, copied on flip sides of the same leaf at some point in the summer of 1861, strike me, and have always struck me, as something new. Unable to incorporate these experiences seamlessly into her already established poetic practice (as she did with the events and emotions of the Civil War) and unwilling to simply stop in that moment of “scalding,” each of these poems reaches for the language needed to render the experience. If we return to “It is easy to work when the soul is at play –” with this in mind, the poem seems to bring precisely this fact to life: the impossibility of continuing to “play” in a world where pain has made its way deep inside. Whether we look to words used here for the first time (“terrible”/“terribler,” “mangle,” “horror”), the stressed syntax of “It is easy to work when the soul is at play,” or the compressed imagery of “That after Horror – that ’twas us,” Dickinson’s language is stretching to meet the challenge she has now embraced.

Poems such as these seem to point directly to a moment of acute pain in Dickinson’s own life. From poems like these, as well as those that follow, we get an image of Dickinson’s dark years, a period described by Sharon Leiter as one of “extreme psychic disorientation” (13), and poems that, as Faith Barrett observes, “point toward an experience of mental breakdown or acute depression (“Slavery” 206). Surely, the thinking goes, something in Dickinson’s life lies behind these brutal poems. Such language must come from somewhere.

At the same time, though, these are poems, and revised poems at that. The copy of “I shall know why – when Time is over –” provides direct evidence not of the “scalding” itself but

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44 The most famous account along these lines is John Cody’s After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson (1971), a study of Dickinson’s mental health that argues that Dickinson had a breakdown in 1857. He writes more generally of her “crisis of 1857-1864” (352) and of a “recurrence of old symptoms and an outbreak of new ones” in 1861 (289). While disagreeing with Cody in important ways, Pollak likewise points to a period of “extended depression” in 1857 (Anxiety 78). Of the three major biographies, Wolff’s Emily Dickinson (1986) is the most focused on Dickinson’s psychology.
of Dickinson’s decision to write about it. And if, as I believe, it is only when a poem succeeds on her terms that it enters her correspondence or is copied onto a sheet, this moment of copying tells us that at some point in early spring of 1861, Dickinson feels satisfied with this poem. In so doing, she chooses to honor an occasion when thinking is overturned by feeling, language’s encounter with experience is brought to a standstill, and the hope for compensation is fraught at best. She deems this inward, private moment poem-worthy. Similarly, the two poems copied a few months later testify to Dickinson’s decision to peer into and write about those moments of horror. Reading the poems against the backdrop of what she has written before, we see her poetic practice adjusting, we see her making language she needs.

To put it another way: what comes to mind when you imagine the day Dickinson sits down to copy those two poems in the summer of 1861? One option is to imagine a day of numbing pain. Another is to imagine an occasion of writing, a moment when she reaches for a clean leaf of stationery—not a folded sheet: she apparently anticipates needing only two sides of a page for the task at hand—and copies first one and then the second poem. She is in her bedroom, let’s say, and we might reasonably guess that it is late, so that the windows reflect the room back into itself: the bed, closed door, and Dickinson herself if she positions herself just right and raises her gaze. Has she been working on this pair of poems for hours, days, perhaps even weeks or months? Are there copies in pencil, drafts with corrections, that she works from and discards? We cannot know. Were the first drafts written in moments of acute suffering as a way to relieve the pain? We cannot know. What we do know is that on this day, she decides they are sufficiently finished to merit being copied in ink and saved.45

45 This vision of Dickinson engaged in writing (rather than swept up in emotion) might sound like Wordsworth’s oft-cited but questionable notion that “poetry […] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” But I make no claim here about the conception or drafting of the poems. My argument is that, however and wherever the writing began, it ends in the moment when Dickinson the poet decides that it succeeds on her own terms.
Given the changes we see in her writing, it seems clear that in addition to whatever emotional turbulence she may be enduring in 1861, Dickinson is wrestling quite consciously with the challenge of bringing events from her personal experience into her poetry. This is not to deny that she had one or more intense emotional experiences: that remains the most likely reason for the sudden emergence of these poems, whatever we might think about what and when it happened. But Rich’s point, to return to her essay, is broader: in heralding Dickinson’s focus on “the intense inner event,” she goes on to champion the way “the personal and psychological” become, in Dickinson’s work, “inseparable from the universal.” According to Rich, Dickinson’s poetry shows that there is “a range for psychological poetry beyond mere self-expression” (43).

The important point is that Dickinson moves away from personal experience (and away from mere representation of this experience) to find broader resonances. She was able, as Wolff notes, “to move beyond the merely personal” (145). The early letters, with their refusal to “tell all the news,” were the first step in a process that comes to fruition now, when Dickinson finds herself writing about the personal but in terms that are wholly her own.

While pure “self-expression” or “merely personal” writing was never a likely direction for Dickinson, steering clear of these modes is like steering clear of cliché: it requires strategies beyond not doing something. A poet needs to figure out how to make art out of the torrent of experience, be it inward or worldly. The fact that Dickinson’s work is seldom a form of self-expression should not blind us to what Dickinson’s poems of 1861 begin to work out. Whenever the difficulties began in Dickinson’s life, it is only when she decides to admit them into her poetry and to forge an adequate language for them that her resourcefulness as a poet is tested anew and forced to expand. In just the few poems discussed above, we see it expand right before our eyes.
That Dickinson is trying to solve this problem is clear even when we turn to her most agonized texts from this time, the three so-called Master Letters. These letters, two of which date to 1861, have transfixed readers since their publication in the late 1950s.\footnote{It is a measure of their passion that the publication of these letters was suppressed until 1955. When Mabel Loomis Todd published the first offering of Dickinson’s letters in 1894, she included only six sentences and assigned them to 1885 (Letters 374). According to Sewall, it was Austin and Vinnie who edited the letter down “for protective reasons, giving their selection a deliberately misleading date” (512). The full text of the three letters was not published until 1955 in Emily Dickinson’s Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family, with documentation and comment, edited by Mabel’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham. Johnson published them again in the 1958 edition of Dickinson’s letters. In 1986, Franklin assigned new dates to the letters and published them in a facsimile edition. I use Franklin’s dating and text. I turn below to the question of the Master’s identity.} Found with her other papers after her death, these texts are clearly drafts rather than final versions, but beyond that, little can be said for certain: whether fair copies were made and sent, for example, or who the intended recipient (assuming there was one) might have been. And while all three letters appear to reply to questions or comments received, it remains a mystery whether they were part of an ongoing correspondence or if Dickinson only wrote them as if that were the case. What they share, though, is a kind of linguistic reaching that feels entirely consonant with her poems of the same period.

The first letter, in handwriting from “spring 1858,” comes just after the calendar year for which we have no surviving texts (1857) and just before Dickinson begins copying and preserving her poems (mid-1858). A crucial moment indeed. The letter bears witness to an experience of personal pain and to the hope that the future holds a remedy:

Each Sabbath on the Sea, makes me count the Sabbaths, till we meet on shore (will the) and whether the hills will look as blue as the sailors say. I cannot [talk] (stay) any [more] (longer) tonight [now], for this pain denies me.” (Franklin Master Letters 16-17)\footnote{Though I am using Franklin’s text—hereafter cited in the text as ML—I adopt Johnson’s convention of indicating Dickinson’s cancellations [words she crossed out] in brackets and her additions (interlined above or below the text) in parentheses. Thus, in the second line here, “will the” is inserted above “and” and both “stay” and “longer” are interlined above “any.” Deciphering that particular passage is tricky, and it is not clear to me that I agree with all of Franklin’s decisions. But as I am working from copies and Franklin from the originals, I follow his version.}
In looking ahead to a future reunion, this letter echoes others from 1855 and 1856 in which Dickinson finds consolation for present-day separations in imagined reunions in the afterlife. In many ways, this letter fits alongside others from the same time period, and Franklin guesses that she began this copy with the intention of sending it (ML 11). What distinguishes it from most of her letters is the formality, especially the formal-sounding addresses to “Master” and a certain humility of tone. The evocations of nature (“The Violets are by my side – the Robin very near – and ‘Spring’ – they say, ‘Who is she – going by the door”’) might have found a home in a letter to Graves, and the poetic phrasing (“How strong when weak to recollect, and easy quite, to love”) would not have been out of place in a letter to her Uncle Sweetser. Though heightened in some ways, this letter feels like a short step away from the rest of her epistolary prose. What sets it apart more than anything is the delicate balance of personal disclosure and formal address.

The second letter, in handwriting that Franklin dates to early 1861, is drafted in pencil. It begins seemingly in media res, without salutation, apparently in response to an earlier comment:

Oh, did I offend it – [Did’nt it want me to tell it the truth] Daisy – Daisy – offend it – who bends her smaller life to his (it’s) meeker (lower) every day – who only asks – a task – [who] something to do for love of it – some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad – (ML 22-3)

It remains unclear what the offense was, but it apparently involved “tell[ing] the truth.” Referring to herself as “Daisy,” positioning herself as “small” and “meek,” and mentioning a “Love so big

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48 If “I shall know why – when Time is over –” encourages us to look to early 1861 for the moment of Dickinson’s “terror,” this first Master Letter stretches the time still earlier. It is also in 1858 (in the summer) that Dickinson begins a letter to her uncle Sweetser, “Much has occurred, dear Uncle, since my writing you – so much – that I stagger as I write, in its sharp remembrance” (L 190). She does not explain what “has occurred”: Johnson guesses that it concerns the illness of Dickinson’s mother following the move to Main Street (notes to L 190), but others have suggested 1857—the year for which we have neither letters nor poems—as a time of severe emotional difficulty. Pollak, for example, points to complications in her relationship with Susan after her marriage to Austin, and she connects this matter directly to the Master Letters: “If Dickinson’s still powerful attachment to Sue precipitated a chronic depression in 1857, this would also explain why, in 1858, the year in which her art as we know it was born, she had also written her first letter to the ‘Master’ whom she conceived as the alternative to her disappointed love for Susan” (Anxiety 79).
it scares her,” the letter looks back not just to a missive received but to an actual, physical
parting:

Daisy – who never flinched thro’ that awful parting, but held her life so tight he
should not see the wound – who would have sheltered him in her childish bosom
(Heart) – only it was’nt big eno’ for a Guest so large – This Daisy – grieve her
Lord – and yet it (she) often blundered – Perhaps she grieved (grazed) his taste –
perhaps her odd – Backwoodsman [life] ways [troubled] teased his finer (sense)
nature. (ML 22-5).

We see here the familiar, quick-footed movement across the parts: the leaps and omissions that
carry the momentum forward. Dashes are everywhere, marking pauses and indicating emphasis
without allowing the forward-moving prose to come to a stop. The pace here, of language and of
thought, is barely contained.

It is, to my mind, an improbable letter. More than the first Master Letter, more than any
of Dickinson’s early letters, the language here is a high-wire act, where the danger of falling
accompanies every step. Despite the turns to direct address—e.g. “but punish do [not]nt banish
her – Shut her in prison, Sir – only pledge that you will forgive – sometime – before the grave,
and Daisy will not mind”—this letter feels entirely different from her other letters. Try reading it
aloud. What comes across more than anything is the posture of supplication:

Low at the knee that bore her once unto [royal] (wordless) rest, [now – she] Daisy
[stoops a] kneels, a culprit – tell her the [offence –] fault – Master.”

Dickinson has done all kinds of things in her letters and poems, but there is nothing before this
one that mixes such taught, unrelenting language with such acute, personal need.

The third letter is dated “summer 1861” by Franklin, making it roughly contemporary to
the leaf containing “It is easy to work when the soul is at play –” and “That after Horror – that
’twas us.” Of the three letters, it is the longest, most varied, and most painful. “If you saw a
bullet hit a Bird,” it begins, “and he told you he was’nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy,
but you would certainly doubt his word” (ML 32-3). Apparently responding to an earlier expression of doubt, the letter tries again and again to convey depths of feeling: “One more drop from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom – then would you believe?” There is even an attempt to imagine a moment of togetherness:

If it had been God’s will that I might breathe where you breathed – and find the place – myself – at night – if I (can) never forget that I am not with you – and that sorrow and frost are nearer than I – if I wish with a might I cannot repress – that mine were the Queen’s place.” (ML 34-7)

But, try as it might, the prose cannot pull it off. This short excerpt is barely half of the full sentence, and as it winds its way forward, you can feel how its movement is frustrated at every turn by the desire to say everything that needs to be said. Although it begins by gesturing toward the possibility of being together, the sentence is built, as Habegger notes, “in a long ‘if’ clause, tacitly conceding satisfaction is out of reach” (419). The thinking is fraught with its own thinking.

The letter raises one hope after another—meeting in Amherst, meeting in old age, meeting in heaven—none of which seem plausible. Perhaps the letter’s most heartbreaking image is its simplest: “Could’nt Carlo, and you and I walk in the meadows an hour – and nobody care but the Bobolink – and his – a silver scruple?” (ML 40-1). To ask for so little and know it is too much—this letter conjures possibilities that remain out of reach much like those poems that feature the pain without the compensation. Meanwhile, in a letter that leaves so many details unspecified or rendered in metaphoric language, the mention of Carlo stands as a rare moment when Dickinson admits a personal detail into the prose.49 But even beyond Carlo, the letter is, as Sewall writes, “intensely personal, tossing propriety aside, confessing all” (Life 516).

49 At around the same time (spring/summer of 1861), she includes Carlo in a poem (“What shall I do – it whimpers so –” [Fr 237]). In both letter and poem, the mere mention of her dog brings her own person forcefully into the text,
After spending a little time with these letters, you can see how tempting it is to use them to imagine the life behind them. They stand out because the language employed here is seldom found elsewhere in Dickinson’s writing. The only precedent I can think of are some of the early letters (especially, but not only, those to Susan) that express a fervent, pent-up desire to be together. In this sense, the Master Letters are a continuation of earlier practices and habits: they reach out, they plead, they lean into a separating distance. But no one would mistake these letters for those. Where the earlier letters were “effusive,” as Wolff notes, the second and third Master Letters especially are characterized by language that is shaped and crafted—in fact, with the additions and deletions extant on the page before us, we can see the shaping and crafting taking place. According to Franklin, Dickinson made some revisions to the second letter while writing it, and she then returned to it (at some later time) “with a sharpened pencil, making further revisions but leaving many aspects unresolved” (*ML* 21). The third letter was written in ink—perhaps begun, as Franklin suggests, “as a final draft, suitable for sending”—and is revised both in ink and in pencil (*ML* 31). These were texts that Dickinson returned to.

To my mind, what comes through more than anything in these letters is a writer exploring the ways language might render personal experience. As Sewall writes, it might appear that “the images and metaphors [are] pouring out willy-nilly, with no contrivance, the release of an overburdened heart. But clearly,” he continues, “the letters are the work of a supremely conscious artist” (520). In the language of these letters, we see aspects of her writing already

and it is noteworthy that this is the only time that Carlo appears in a poem, as if she soon recoiled from including so much of the personal in her poetry. Carlo, that most personal of identifiers, subsequently appears only in letters. Wolff notes “the poignant exhibition of pain” (408) and Sewall observes that the third letter in particular is “intensely personal, tossing propriety aside, confessing all” (516). Habegger observes that many readers “are shocked by the openness and direness of [Dickinson’s] need” in the Master letters (417), noting that they contain “the direct expression of desire and agony” (418). Messmer notes that “[s]trategies of both humiliating self-denigration and destructive self-empowerment are at their most painful extremes” in these letters (*Vice* 132), while more recently, Loeffelholz argues that the “fundamental subject” of the second and third Master Letters is “shame” (*Value* 50). But it bears repeating that we should be cautious in ascribing all of these emotions to Dickinson herself.
familiar to us—how, in Dickinson’s hands, categories and registers are increasingly free to blur or leap, one into the other, and how language sometimes gives the appearance of doing its best to keep up with the speed of thought—but the intensity, the “openness and direness of her need,” as Habegger puts it (417), sets these letters apart. As they stand when all of the revisions are taken into account, the result (especially in the second and third letters) is language that is intensely personal and intensely poetic. Whether they were begun as actual letters and then abandoned or begun as letters and subsequently revised and sent without our knowledge, what seems clear is that, as soon as she began writing, as soon as she began to try to render the personal in language to her liking, she encountered a problem that pushed her to write and revise in new ways.

These letters, then, in addition to whatever existence they had as actual letters, are soundings of language. How, they seem to ask, might it sound to render intense inner experience? How (and how much) of the personal can be brought over into public language? Salska comes close to the view I am proposing when she writes that “[w]e can feel the language struggle to suppress and pattern the content of experience. That is a new need, a new development in Dickinson’s correspondence” (174). This new need arises precisely because Dickinson is now writing at the intersection of experience and language in a new way, but it is not so much a question of suppression as it is of rendering: the artist at work finding the language—not just words but the structures and patterns of thought they enact—to accurately present a moment or an experience.51

51 Susan Howe emphasizes the way these letters quote from and allude to literary works that mattered deeply to Dickinson, especially Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Howe writes that “the way to understand her writing is through her reading.” She argues that the letters are best understood outside of any biographical context: “Far from being the hysterical jargon of a frustrated and rejected woman to some anonymous “Master”-Lover, these three letters were probably self-conscious exercises in prose by one writer playing with, listening to, and learning from others” (27).
It is, in the end, another form of listening. Whether we imagine the poet listening for that muse-like voice within or reading what has just been committed to the page to test how it sounds, the question is always how best to honor the experience in language, and the search is always for that language. Dickinson was aware of this challenge, writing at one point to Bowles (perhaps to thank him for one of his kindnesses) that the “old words are numb – and there a’nt any new ones – Brooks – are useless – in Freshet-time” (L 252 early 1862). That last phrase, with its image of small brooks being overwhelmed by the floods occasioned by spring, captures precisely the dilemma now confronting Dickinson: how to accommodate the newly rising flood.

One thing worth noting is how far we have come from Dickinson’s early tendency in her letters and her poems to entertain.\textsuperscript{52} We see it fall away in “That after Horror – that ’twas us –” as well. As the gravity of the experience grows, entertainment falls by the wayside, and illustrating gives way to Dickinson’s desire for her language to embody the ebbs and flows of experience, of thinking. What kind of language will suffice? What kind of language might be too much? Amazingly, this poet of compression and concision touches directly on these questions in the third letter, when she takes up the question of how much to say:

“Vesuvius dont talk – Etna dont – [Thy] one of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could’nt look the world in the face, afterward – I suppose – Bashful Pompeii!” (\textit{ML} 38-9)

Such a view is perhaps not surprising coming from a poet who in “\textit{A wounded Deer} – leaps highest –” extolled the value of concealing anguish with mirth. But the stakes are high. The crisis, imagined or real, threatens to overwhelm: language itself is dangerous (a mere “syllable” buried Pompeii), heaven appears unrewarding (because, as she makes clear elsewhere in the

\textsuperscript{52} Cf. Habegger, who notes (apropos of Dickinson’s compositions in the early 1850s) that “[i]n order to become the extremely personal, passionate, and complex poet of the 1860s, Dickinson had to cease being the brilliant entertainer and somehow empower that hidden female subject” (234).
letter, even there the two lovers will not be alone), and the person to whom she is writing feels remote (“I fear you laugh”). But in the process of rendering the crisis and writing into it, as it were, Dickinson is working to find and refine the language she needs.

At around the same time that she was revising the second and third Master Letters, Dickinson penned a short poem on the back of an abandoned letter. This 1861 draft was the basis for a later (1863) fair copy, which is the one I print here:

A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be –
Sunrise – Hast Thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight – I am yet a Maid –
How short it takes to make it Bride –
Then – Midnight – I have passed from Thee
Unto the East – and Victory –

Midnight – Good night – I hear them Call –
The Angels bustle in the Hall –
Softly – my Future climbs the Stair –
I fumble at my Childhood’s Prayer –
So soon to be a Child – no more –
Eternity – I’m coming Sir –
Master – I’ve seen the Face – before – (Fr 185 C)53

This poem is one of only seven by Dickinson that include the word “master” (Rosenbaum 471).54 After drafting it in 1861, she revised it in 1862 (changing “Master” to “Savior,” among other edits) and then again in 1863 (restoring “Master”), at which point she added it to Fascicle 32. As with the letter, the poem was a text to which she returned.

The poem confidently expects to meet her “Master,” and it differs markedly from the letter (specifically the third). The letter pleads; the poem assures. The letter worries about a love that cannot find satisfaction in this world or the next; the poem conflates human and spiritual

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53 No words are changed between 1861 and 1863. One exclamation mark becomes a dash (line 4), a few dashes are added in other lines, more words (nouns and a few verbs) are capitalized, and a stanza break is introduced.
54 These seven include occurrences of both “master” and the possessive “master’s.” All seven poems, it should be noted, were written between 1859 and 1863.
loves and narrates the moment of their imminent fulfillment. The letter cannot ward off a sense of defeat; the poem recounts a triumph. The letter asks, “Will you come to Amherst – would you like to come Master?” (ML 42-43); in the poem, “my Future climbs the stair.” Yet even as they diverge, they are in conversation with each other: in revising the second-to-last line, originally written as “The Vision flutters at the door,” Dickinson included language that closely mimics the second Master letter, in which she first addressed the recipient as “Sir,” only to cross it out and write “Master” instead. The poem retains both forms of address: “sir – / Master.”

There is a great deal to be said about this poem, some of which I defer until the final chapter. Read alongside the Master Letters, though, what comes through is the way the poem (precisely as Adrienne Rich observes of other poems) makes something universal out of something apparently personal. More generally, to read the letters in the context of the poems is to see a poet stretching in different directions, testing the resources available to her, and making discoveries. Sometimes, the gap between letter and poem shows just what she is up against. If we return to the second Master Letter, for example, we might note that it is (according to Franklin’s dating) contemporaneous with “I shall know why – when Time is over,” a poem with which it seems to share little. Then again, it does share something of its emotional self-positioning, and where words elude the poem, the letter finds them:

You send water over the Dam in my brown eyes –

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55 This poem is one of many where we can detect an overlap with one or another of the Master Letters. To give one other example that bears on a poem we have encountered: Toward the end of the second letter, Dickinson writes, “Master – open your life wide, and take [in] me forever, I will never be tired – I will never be noisy when you want to be still. I will be [glad as the] your best little girl – nobody else will see me, but you – but that is enough – I shall not want any more – and all that Heaven will [prove] (only) disappoint me – will be (because) it’s not so dear” (ML 28-9). How not to hear, in that last line, something of “I should have been too glad, I see – / And Heaven – not enough for me – / I should have had the Joy / Without the Fear”? Sewall considers the letters to be “the seedbed, the matrix, of dozens of her poems,” which sounds right, but he overstates the case when he says that “[p]robably no poem she wrote after the experience recorded in the three letters was entirely unrelated to it” (Life 520).
I’ve got a cough as big as a thimble – but I dont care for that – I’ve got a Tomahawk in my side but that dont hurt me much. [If you] Her Master stabs her more –

The letter reads as if what could not be brought into the poem (that moment of scalding anguish) has instead found its way into this letter, although, to be sure, such frank and first-person language would never have made it into a poem. But if her other extant letters from around the same time are to be believed, neither would it have found its way into a letter.56

And that is precisely the point: if Dickinson is, as I argue, searching at this time for an adequate language for an intense, inward experience, for poetic strategies that will enable her to convey what she wants to convey in ways that are acceptable to her, what the Master Letters show is yet one more attempt. Or, actually, many attempts: in the second letter alone she flirts with the personal (“my brown eyes”), the sentimental (“water over the dam”), with capturing the contours of thinking (“Daisy – Daisy – offend it – who bends her smaller life to his meeker every day – who only asks – a task – something to do for love of it”), with self-effacement (“I will be your best little girl”), and with poetic imagery (“Oh how the sailor strains, when his boat is filling”).57 Written in pencil, full of cancelations, revised on at least two different occasions, and constantly shifting in tone and register, this letter offers a roll call of linguistic strategies. It is in the form of a letter—it may even have become an actual letter sent to a living and breathing person—but what it does is explore the capacities of language.

Just as “I shall know why – when Time is over –” and “It is easy to work, when the soul is at play –” usher new words and new responses to pain into Dickinson’s poetry, the Master

56 To the extent that it might have found its way into a letter, it would have been one of the intense early letters to one of her girlhood friends, especially those that worry about any perceived distance or coolness of affection. But as Martin notes of the second Master Letter, while it “employs the language of wounding that is so prominent in Dickinson’s complaints against friends,” in this Master Letter “she does not adopt the powerful, disdainful pose she assumes so often in response to disappointments in friendship and love. Confused by her powerful feelings, Dickinson conveys a childlike fragility and vulnerability” (Cambridge Introduction 80).
57 For ease of reading, I print these excerpts without the indicated deletions.
Letters bring new strategies and treatments of pain into Dickinson’s epistolary writing. The difference is that we know where those poems lead—we have the bounty of poetry from 1862, 1863, and after—whereas the Master Letters do not seem to open up any new ground. If anything, Dickinson’s letters soon become shorter and more elliptical, so that the trail opened by the Master Letters seems to go cold.

Unless, that is, the letters and poems both lead to the same place. Taken as a whole, the writing that Dickinson does in the spring and summer of 1861—poems and Master Letters—is best understood as a kind of search, a pushing of language in the service of new needs. When Rich credits Dickinson with not writing poetry of “self-expression,” or when Porter credits her with “confining the centrifugal pressures of emotions within an aesthetic framework” (Early 157), they point to a real achievement. Fundamentally, that achievement begins with the decision to solve a problem: how to render or otherwise honor in language a moment of intense inward experience. Whether the pain and anguish date to this period or have been around for a while—at least, say, since the “So much has happened” letter to Uncle Sweetser in early 1858—it is only now, when she decides to broach these matters in her poetry, that such restraint is called upon. What we see is the stretching of language and the development of new strategies needed to accommodate this newfound topic. For whatever reason, when Dickinson listens inward for the voice from which her poems are made, there is now a personal edge from which she does not flee.

But who, who, who was Dickinson’s beloved, and to whom might she have sent these letters or imagined sending them? Precisely because they are so personal, these letters raise the biographical question in palpable ways. But precisely because this is Dickinson, they tend to
raise more questions than they settle. Scholars have tried to identify the intended recipient, often assuming that there was one (and only one) such person.\(^{58}\) In the classroom, ideally, when a student returns having read one or another book about Dickinson’s life and says the evidence is overwhelming that Dickinson was in love with Reverend Charles Wadsworth, another student returns (let’s make it fun) on the very same day and, having read a different book, says, no, clearly, based on the available evidence, the love of Dickinson’s life was Samuel Bowles. And another will arrive (a bit late, coffee in hand) to say no, no, no, it was definitely Susan. Someone else will have found either Genevieve Taggard’s early book (*The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*, published in 1930) or Christopher Benfey’s more recent article in *Slate* (“Emily Dickinson’s Secret Lover!” published in 2008) or perhaps the article that occasioned Benfey’s own piece (an essay in *New England Quarterly* by Carol Damon Andrews) and say, funny, I thought Dickinson was engaged to George Gould and that 1861 was the year their engagement broke off. And there are others, too. Evidence, evidence everywhere.

As if summoned to vex us, many of the contenders appear in Amherst in 1860 and 1861. It is in March, 1860, that Reverend Wadsworth calls on Dickinson. Samuel Bowles has been in

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\(^{58}\) A short (but obligatory) overview: Thomas Johnson (1955) and Robert Sherwood (1968) were early advocates for Wadsworth, while Sewall (*Life* 1974), Franklin (*Master Letters* 1986), and Judith Farr (1992) favor Samuel Bowles. Farr’s long study of what she calls the “Master materials” (chapter four) is especially thorough, and alongside the long list of poems directed to Dickinson’s Master, Farr offers an equally long list of love poems addressed to Susan (337ff). Pollak (1986) argues in favor of Wadsworth but notes further that the Master of the letters “is best understood as an idealized masculine alter ego” (101-102). Benjamin Lease (1990) and Habegger (2001) have weighed in more recently to argue that it was Wadsworth. John Evangelist Walsh has argued for Judge Otis Lord (2012). Wolff (1986) also explores this possibility (400-406) but notes, too, that it might have been one of many men who passed through Amherst at the time. Writing in 1951, before the full publication of the Master Letters, Rebecca Patterson claims that Kate Scott Anthon was the intended addressee of some forty love poems; in *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, she offers the earliest argument (of which I am aware) that Dickinson’s beloved was a woman. Faderman (1977), Bennett (1990), and Erkkila (1992) are among those who subsequently develop this argument (though Erkkila, like Farr, differentiates between Dickinson’s love for Susan and her love for Master). Martha Nell Smith argues against reading the Master Letters in purely biographical terms, but she also wonders if certain revisions were done so as to disguise the gender of the recipient (*Rowing* 240 n. 17). Smith is one of several critics who reads the letters as literary exercises or constructs of some kind; see also Diel (25-26). To Adrienne Rich, Dickinson’s master is poetry itself.
and out of the Evergreens and the Homestead for several years by now, and between 1860 and
1862, Dickinson sends him at least nineteen letters (Johnson 961). Susan, of course, is a constant
and nearby presence in Dickinson’s life, although, as noted in chapter three, scholars are divided
as to how close they really were. Kate Scott Anthon visits Amherst several times during these
same years, often staying at the Evergreens. To these obvious contenders, we can add Helen
Hunt Jackson’s husband, Major Edward B. Hunt, who visited Amherst in August, 1860, for
commencement and who, as Higginson recalled, “interested her more than any man she ever
saw” (L 342 b). And then there is Judge Otis Lord, with whom Dickinson was clearly in love
later in life and who, in addition to being a regular visitor to Amherst (Leyda I: lix), brings his
wife to meet the Dickersons in June, 1860. Candidates aplenty. But barring the discovery of
some new trove of letters, we seem destined not to know.

For my part, I am glad. I am convinced that not knowing has kept us agile as readers,
alert to small signs and discreet echoes, alive to enticing possibilities. Not knowing returns us
again and again to the poems and letters, to the language, to the craft of this poet who manages to
do things never seen before in the English language. I sometimes liken the situation, in reverse,
to the question of Milton’s blindness: imagine for a second that we did not know if Milton was
literally, physically blind. Forget what you know. Imagine. What if you encountered a passage
like this without knowing much about the poet:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless (168).

The invitation to investigate “how my light is spent” as a metaphor is delightful. Soon, though,
the fact of Milton’s blindness comes out—“wasn’t he, like, blind?” comes the eventual query—
and we settle for one reading. I see this sometimes with new readers of Milton, new enough to the world of poetry that they know nothing about the poet behind the works we are reading. More than once I have wondered how much more we might get from the trope of blindness if we could hold on to the possibility that it was just a metaphor. Or was also a metaphor. Because—and this is perhaps the central point—even when brute fact does underlie one or another aspect of the poetry, it does not follow that the poet is using it only in that way. Fact suggests many a leap that it cannot fully contain or exhaust. The edifice of poetry is built on this simple truth: language, once free, roams freely. Our reading makes it so.

So, too, with Dickinson. Even where fact undergirds some aspect of a poem, it does not follow that Dickinson means to refer only to that fact. Conversely, not knowing who and in what manner of attachment Dickinson loved, we have been able to read her many love poems in ways that are open, creative, and enjoyable without any sense of neglecting their origins. We might have read that way anyway, but not knowing has made it easier for us, collectively, to imagine, to meet the lyric where it works best: in our creative reading of it. The freedom to explore has resulted in a tradition of scholarship that, if we can allow it into our brains without letting it think for us, can enrich and enlarge our experience of the poetry—and it is, above all, our own experience of the poetry that is paramount.

Somewhere between believing (as I sometimes do) that Dickinson was in love with Reverend Wadsworth and believing (as I sometimes do) that Dickinson was in love with Susan, between the moment when both of those narratives seem simultaneously possible and those moments when I am convinced no single person occupied that position, between the certainty that what Dickinson managed to do was channel not the person but the feeling (abstracted from one or several different and/or imagined people) into her writing and the certainty that the desire
to walk with Carlo and the bobolinks and her beloved is perhaps the most genuinely personal plea to enter her writing—somewhere in the midst of all this, or after getting up and walking awhile, I’m left with the strong feeling that the poetry itself is that much greater precisely because it has been shaped to step beyond the life of one woman, gauged to reach a distant and unknown reader, and crafted to create the experience anew each time we read it. Not knowing, not clinging to facts, sets us up to read Dickinson’s poems as poems and to enjoy the ways they manage, at times spectacularly, to do what poems do best: to create a world, an experience, a moment for a reader.

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59 If it seems that I am arguing against the use of biography and context when reading, not so. As I have argued in the Introduction, I firmly believe that we read with whatever we have in hand (in mind), and that the sundry facts of the poet’s life and world can enrich our reading of a poem. But to repeat: such facts are a beginning: they ought to open our eyes, expand our sense of the poem’s reach, then send us back to the poem. Context and biography become a problem when we use them to stop reading; used to leap-frog our experience of the poem into some new direction, I say, Yes—and now let’s read the poem again.
Chapter Five

“My Business is to sing”: The Dickinson Lyric

In the archives of the New York Public Library, there is a letter from Vinnie to Dickinson’s childhood friend Emily Fowler Ford, written in September, 1893. The occasion is an effort, spearheaded by Mabel Loomis Todd but with Vinnie playing her usual supporting role, to gather and publish Dickinson’s letters. On the last page of the letter, beneath Vinnie’s signature and seemingly as a return address (though there is no actual address), someone has written,

Lavinia Dickinson
Sister of
Emily Dickinson
The Poet. (“Letter”)

“Emily Dickinson / The Poet”: There is something quite moving about this small gesture, capturing as it does Vinnie’s new understanding of her sister’s life, a sister with whom she had lived for over fifty years and to whom she had been devoted.1 After Dickinson’s death, this devotion took the form of cajoling and encouraging others as they assembled and published the early volumes of poetry and, now, the letters. On her death certificate, Dickinson’s occupation is listed as “At Home” (Leyda II: 474), but by 1893, with the success of several early efforts behind her, Vinnie could indeed identify her sister as “The Poet.”

But when, we might ask, did Dickinson become a poet in her own eyes? A gifted student, she often impressed others in school. Austin later recalled that her “compositions were unlike anything ever heard – and always produced a sensation – both with scholars and Teachers – her imagination sparkled” (qtd. in Sewall Life 222). In her teens and early twenties, she composed clever Valentine’s Day poems, one of which found its way into a friend’s commonplace book.

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1 Though Vinnie is often excluded from the lists of Dickinson’s confidants, she apparently saw a few poems. She later remarked, “I never looked at Emily’s poems except those she herself showed me” (qtd. in Sewall Life 155).
and onto the pages of the Republican (Leyda I: 234-235).\textsuperscript{2} We have seen her exchanging poems with Emmons in her twenties and heard her report Ben Newton’s wish to have lived until she “had been a poet” (L 265). There is the remarkable confluence of events in March, 1853, when she learns of Newton’s death, sends her first poem to Susan, and writes the stern but playful letter to Austin in which she threatens to call the police because she, too, has been in the habit of writing poems.\textsuperscript{3} Finally, there is the decision in 1858 to preserve her poems on neatly copied sheets: clearly, in her own eyes, she is now a practicing poet. The forty-three poems copied in 1858 and the eighty-one poems copied in 1859 show her settling into the role with determination and skill. If we add the fifty-three poems copied in 1860, Dickinson has created a sizeable archive of poems by the time she turns thirty, most of them copied onto sheets in ink and sewn into packets with thread. Her career, such as it is, is underway.

But while Dickinson’s poems in the late 1850s and in 1860 are recognizably hers, her practice is still developing. At least through 1860 and 1861, for example, Dickinson is more dependent (compared with later years) on overt literary allusion, and she is more likely to draw attention to borrowed words and phrases with quotation marks and italics. By contrast, direct quotation occurs less frequently in her work after 1861 (Pollak “Literary Allusions” 60; Manheim 366-7).\textsuperscript{4} Her reading has always played a crucial role in her own poetry, but it is taking time for her to define that role. Like many writers, she is a voracious and immersive reader, but

\textsuperscript{2} The text in question is her first published poem (appearing in the Republican in February, 1852) and only her second extant poem: Fr 2 “Sic transit Gloria mundi.”

\textsuperscript{3} This poem and letter follow just a week after news of Newton’s death reached Dickinson. If his wish to live until Dickinson had “been a poet” was included in his last letter—and he does seem to have spent his last months writing to friends and settling his affairs—then receiving this wish was also part of her experience of March, 1853.

\textsuperscript{4} This decrease in quotations and allusion can be contrasted with Dickinson’s ongoing habit of quoting or invoking literary works and Biblical passages in her letters. See Sewall’s discussion of quotation in Dickinson’s letters to Mrs. Holland (621ff); the thorough treatment of quotation in Messmer’s fifth chapter, “Manipulating Multiple Voices”; and the third chapter of McIntosh’s Nimble Believing. Some of the scholarship on patterns in Dickinson’s poems over time rely on Johnson’s dating of the poems, but my review confirms the trends noted by these writers.
the making of poetry out of one’s reading, no less than the making of poems out of one’s personal experience, is not accomplished in one step. From our vantage point, we know she will soon discover how, in Manheim’s words, to “treat her borrowed vocabulary as her own” (397), but to Dickinson in 1860 and 1861, that insight is still in the making.

Dickinson’s reading leads to another feature of her early poems. As Miller has shown, the poems of 1860 frequently refer to—and, to an extraordinary degree, rely on—images culled from her readings about travel and the far east. “A staggering thirty of the fifty-four poems written during 1860,” writes Miller, “contain some mention of travel, escape, or of foreign places, language, or people” (Miller Reading 139). Dickinson was not unique in this fascination, as travel narratives and accounts of visits to the far east were then a popular genre. In Dickinson’s case, though, it means that precisely at the time when she is staying closer to home, she is—first by way of her reading, then by way of her writing—venturing further and further away. Expansive reading allows her writing to expand: Miller notes that Dickinson’s use of foreign or exotic tropes is especially prominent between 1860 and 1863, and as such, it offers another example of Dickinson reaching for new means in the making of her poems. The “Panther in the Glove” in the last line of “It is easy to work when the soul is at play” owes as much to Dickinson’s reading as to the inner experience the image is deployed to render.

Taken together, these patterns of quoting and borrowing add to our portrait of a poet whose poetics—at precisely the moment she is composing the second and third Master Letters and finalizing her earliest renderings of “intense inner events”—are evolving. What I want to

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5 As Pollak notes, quotations can easily “inhibit the poet in developing an organic structure for her poems” (“Allusions” 58).

6 Sometimes, whole poems, such as “Will there really be a ‘morning’?” (Fr 148) and “‘Morning’ – means ‘Milking’ – to the Farmer” (Fr 191), are made of Dickinson’s interrogation of received words and concepts. This habit will soon take the form of her well-known “definition” poems, but in my view, the authority to do that kind of work is mostly not present in Dickinson’s poems before 1862.
suggest is that as 1860 unfolds and comes to an end, as Dickinson looks out at the snow on her thirtieth birthday, she is hard at work solving a problem that every poet must face, a problem sometimes phrased in terms of a poet’s “voice” or “authority.” I will soon take up those terms, each of which is useful to a certain extent, but to my ear they tackle the question from without, offering metaphors to describe what is actually a concrete need. For Dickinson, as for any poet, the challenge is always and always to get the poem to sound right on her own terms, a challenge made more complex when, as often happens, those terms are changing.\footnote{We have only to think of the excruciating process by which Lowell produced Life Studies or James Wright produced The Branch Will Not Break to see how difficult this process can become. Dickinson is not overturning her previous practice nearly so completely, but perhaps those two extreme cases can help us to appreciate the different but no less real challenge now faced by Dickinson.}

The emotional upheavals in her life and the (more consequential) decision to render such moments in poetry combine to push her poetics to new places, and her ample reading brings in new words, images, and memorable fragments of language. But the question, ever alive to a practicing poet, is how she wants a poem to sound, to work, to unfold. The distance from the general-sounding “if pain for peace prepares” to the personally anguished “Gimblets – among the nerve – / mangle daintier” speaks volumes not just about Dickinson’s views (or pain) but also about her willingness to explore anew all that a poem can do and all that language can be.

In this chapter, I turn to the nature of the lyric poem Dickinson increasingly comes to write as she settles into her life in the Homestead and embraces the vocation of poet. In 1861, Dickinson’s poetic practice extends, expands, deepens. It is not, as should be clear, a case of a sudden breakthrough. What we see is a coming together of trends already in evidence, a consolidation of lyric practices. We see a poet tapping with ever greater confidence and skill into the resources available to a lyric poet. Not a breakthrough, then, but perhaps a ripening and a reaching, made possible by the spreading of deep roots.
On May 4, 1861, for the third time during her life, a poem by Dickinson appears in the *Springfield Republican*. Published anonymously, the poem was titled “The May-Wine” by the editors:

I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
+ Not all the Frankfurt Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro’ endless summer days –
From inns of molten Blue –

When “Landlords” turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove’s door –
When Butterflies — renounce their “drams” —
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints — to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
+ From Manzanilla come!

+ Vats upon the Rhine
+ Leaning against the – Sun –
(Fr 207 B; *MSB* 227)

What I love about this poem is its sheer exuberance: joy and more joy, it proclaims. To “taste a liquor never brewed” and be an “inebriate of air” is to find one’s drink in unlikely yet everyday places. From its opening lines, the poem offers a celebration of delight that eludes a simple, straightforward reading. In some ways, the poem brings to life an experience not unlike the one desired in “These are the days when Birds come back,” where the wish was “Thy sacred

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8 The two previously published poems are Fr 2, a Valentine’s Day poem that appeared in 1852, and Fr 11, a poem that was “Surreptitiously communicated” to the *Republican*, as the editors note, and published in 1858 (Franklin *Variorum* 1531, 66). The conduit for Fr 207 was probably Susan, but no source for the published text is extant. Because the *Republican* version includes “editorial alterations,” I use the version (B) that Dickinson copied onto a sheet at approximately the same time and subsequently included in Fascicle 12 (notes to Fr 207).
emblems to partake – / Thy consecrated bread to take – / And thine immortal wine.” But the season in that earlier poem was autumn and the mood elegiac, whereas here, even without the editorial imposition of the title, the moment is spring-like and the fervor irrepressible. Where the earlier poem begins firmly in one world (the birds, skies, and falling leaves of late autumn) before leaping into another (sacraments, communions, consecrated bread, and immortal wine), “I taste a liquor never brewed” contains its leap from the start: Who ever heard of “tankards” being “scooped in Pearl”? After just the first two lines, as Leiter notes, we find ourselves brought into the world of the imagination, the only place where such things can exist (122).

Read the poem a few times, read it like you mean it, and what comes to life is an experience of naturally occurring delight and of unabashed partaking. The poem is not so much sceneless as multiply staged: we are “drinking,” we are luxuriating, we are drunk on air and dew. We are reeling through air and inns and skies, and just when we think the “I” of the poem might be a bee, a butterfly, or some other naturally occurring reveler, the third stanza disallows that possibility. If we can let go of wondering what it all means and just go along for the ride, we are poised to understand it by way of simply enjoying it as we breathe it life.

Such joy is remarkable when we consider that the poem was copied at roughly the same time as “I shall know why – when Time is over –” and not long before the leaf containing “It is easy to work when the soul is at play –” and “That after Horror – that ’twas us.” It reminds us that Dickinson, no less than any of us, can experience a multitude of emotions in any short period of time. More to the point, what it shows is that Dickinson’s writing is invested in exploring a range of experiences. Each poem offers a new try, a fresh moment, a different take, so much so that her work can be characterized by two seemingly opposite claims: she does, as I say, explore radically different facets of experience in poems developed concurrently; at the
same time, she is a poet who returns again and again to the same topics and scenarios in order to think it through anew.

In “I taste a liquor never brewed,” we also see Dickinson borrowing from the discourses of her day, in this case, the language of temperance movements (Reynolds 172-3). Temperance literature, often in the form of cautionary tales of drunkenness, was very much in the air, and Dickinson would have encountered it in the pages of fiction and in newspaper stories. Reynolds observes that the quotation marks around “Landlords” and “drams” hint that the words have been borrowed from popular novels of the day, while more generally, Dickinson’s creation of a speaker who is “both completely drunk and completely temperate” playfully engages with tropes from temperance writings (172). In Dickinson’s version, the drunkenness being celebrated is neither dangerous nor foul. In fact, by the end, the presence of Seraphs and saints allows the poem to leap to more sanctified ground, although the effect is more comic than serious. And that is precisely the point: drunkenness here is no menace; it is liberating.

When we speak of Dickinson’s “reading,” then, we need to include not just the literary and religious texts that were so prominent in her world (and in her library), not just the news of national events like the Civil War, but also the reports from the world of popular culture found in the newspapers and magazines that regularly arrive in the Homestead.9 As we have seen elsewhere, it is not just Dickinson’s borrowing but the wide range of her borrowing that is distinctive.10 Writing specifically of Dickinson’s debt to popular culture, Reynolds observes that

9 Writing to Josiah Holland (then an editor at the Republican) and his wife in 1853, Dickinson had asked, “Who writes those funny accidents, where railroads meet each other unexpectedly, and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally? […] Vinnie was disappointed to-night, that there were not more accidents—I read the news aloud, while Vinnie was sewing” (L 133).
10 In addition to the essay by Reynolds, who studies the influence of sermons, temperance literature, sensational literature, and women’s fiction on Dickinson, see also Sandra Runzo’s “Theatricals of Day”: Emily Dickinson and Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture (2019), which carefully traces the impact of popular entertainments (such as music, theater, minstrelsy, and popular fiction) on Dickinson’s poetry.
her “most sophisticated poems are those in which she permits imagery from radically different cultural arenas to come together in an explosive metaphorical center” (187). Writ large and reframed from the perspective of the poet making decisions in the act of writing (rather than “permitting” things to happen), this is precisely the habit we have seen elsewhere: Dickinson’s characteristic willingness to leap, in this case between registers, vocabularies, and discourses.  

At the same time, this poem is in conversation with literary texts in significant ways. Here, for example, is the first stanza of Emerson’s poem “Bacchus,” which Dickinson would have found in the copy of Emerson’s Poems given to her by Ben Newton:

Bring me wine, but wine which never grew
In the belly of the grape,
Or grew on vine whose tap-roots, reaching through
Under the Andes to the Cape,
Suffered no savor of the earth to scrape. (Poems 188-191)

Just as she does with Higginson’s “Decoration,” Dickinson offers a distillation of the earlier poem. And just as Emerson builds on and departs from a tradition of invocations and on the work of writers important to him at the time, so too does Dickinson build on and depart from Emerson. Where “Bacchus” is in the form of an address, Dickinson harnesses a voice full of confident assertion, building to the mid-poem climax of “I shall but drink the more!” Read one then the other poem, and Dickinson’s sounds like a declaration of independence, an appropriation and enacting of the power that Emerson only describes.

Dickinson’s poem also echoes Emerson’s “The Poet,” another text she certainly knew. Emerson’s essay carves out a sacred role for poets, whom he dubs “liberating gods” (Major

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11 When these leaps are built into the structure of the poem itself, Reynolds’s term—“fusion”—is apt. But I prefer to speak of “leaps” in order to emphasize the similarity, indeed the continuity, with other (especially earlier) practices, where there is a clear sequence, a leaping from and to, on display.

12 A copy of Essays: Second Series (first published in 1844) was in the Dickinson family library and includes pencil marks in the margins (Capps 116). Both Leyda (II: 20) and Capps (115-116) quote excerpts from “The Poet” in relation to “I taste a liquor never brewed,” and Leyda even refers to the poem as a “comment” on the essay.
Prose 216), but he makes a crucial distinction. After noting that “bards love wine, mead, narcotics, coffee, tea, opium, the fumes of sandal-wood and tobacco,” he clarifies that these pursuits represent “a spurious mode of attaining freedom, as it was, an emancipation not into the heavens, but into the freedom of baser places.” He continues,

But never can any advantage be taken of nature by a trick. The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body [.....] So the poet’s habit of living should be set on a key so low and plain, that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water. (214)

We see here the “air” and something of the summery pleasure that will figure in Dickinson’s poem. Crucially, where Emerson uses the language and experience of actual intoxication to set up his depiction of the “few” who receive “the true nectar” (214), Dickinson completely merges the two: hers is a portrait of a rare fellow who is nevertheless drunk on the “common influences.” Where Emerson writes that “the imagination intoxicates the poet,” Dickinson shows us this intoxication in unmitigated action, and where he writes that the true poet attains “emancipation into heaven,” Dickinson’s “little Tippler” finds himself, in the final stanza, in the company of the Seraphs and Saints while “Leaning” (per one of the variants) “against the – Sun.” Not for the last time, we see Dickinson doing in a poem what Emerson preaches ought to be done.

Read alongside these two texts, “I taste a liquor never brewed” sounds like an assertion of unabashed artistic inspiration and power, and as such, it fits comfortably alongside several letters and poems in which the idea of being a poet seems to be on Dickinson’s mind. In a number of poems copied in 1860, for example, Dickinson draws attention to the act of “singing.” Thus, as we have seen, the word “this” is used in “Where I have lost, I softer tread” (Fr 158) and “To learn the transport thro’ the pain” (Fr 178) to refer to the performance of the poem itself. More
significant, though, are those occasions when singing itself is thematized. In another poem from 1860, Dickinson imagines making gifts of flowers and playing her “Tamborin […] all summer long,” before breaking off in the final stanza to worry,

What if they hear me?
Who shall say
That such an importunity
May not at last avail? (Fr 176 lines 13-16)

The poem, perhaps an appeal concerning those who are distant or dead, figures music as an effort to be made in public, and it openly wonders whether it will be heard or heeded.

By late 1861, Dickinson is taking up the question of singing and of being noticed in more explicit terms. In one well-known poem, there is again wonder at the possibility of being heard:

Why – do they shut me out of heaven?
Did I sing too loud?
But – I can say a little “minor”
Timid as a Bird! (Fr 268 lines 1-4)

Where the earlier poem considers the possibility that singing might open a door, this poem wonders if singing might result in a closed door. But rather than tracing a change in Dickinson’s views, these two poems are best read as two different takes, as alternate scenarios. What is consistent is the preoccupation with what it means to sing, and it is significant that the offer to “say a little ‘minor’” nevertheless involves singing.

Meanwhile, on the same sheet, Dickinson copies a poem that seems to build on all of these various moments and to gather them into a determined cry:

I shall keep singing!
Birds will pass me by
On their way to Yellover Climes –
Each – with a Robin’s expectation –
I – with my Redbreast –
And my Rhymes –

Late – when I take my place in summer –
But – I shall bring a fuller tune –
Vespers – are sweeter than matins – Signor –
Morning – only the seed – of noon – (Fr 270)

This poem reads as if the elated speaker of “I taste a liquor never brewed” had come down to earth, reconsidered the whole business of singing, and decided to forge ahead. The voice here has been seasoned, presumably by experience or contrary views, and the poem begins with what sounds like a retort. At its heart, this poem celebrates the virtue of arriving late, of taking your place among others, but of doing so on your own sweet time. Against matins, morning, and the speedy travelers of the world, Dickinson declares her allegiance to vespers, noon, and patience. It is a confident voice that looks ahead to taking “my place” and singing a “fuller tune.” The poem, as Judy Jo Small writes, is “something of a poetic manifesto” (29), and while it offers an image of arriving late, it nevertheless imagines arriving.

Singing and being heard are frequently on Dickinson’s mind in the early 1860s, and while we cannot read too much into any individual comment, these various and varied moments, when taken together, point to a period of intense reckoning. As early as December, 1859, in a letter to Louise Norcross, Dickinson recalled a conversation when the two of them had “decided to be distinguished.” She continues, “It’s a great thing to be ‘great,’ Loo, and you and I might tug for a life, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and we all can listen. What if we learn, ourselves, some day! Who indeed knows?” (L 199). The same spirit is evident in a letter to Susan in the summer of 1861. The occasion is the well-known exchange between the two women concerning “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” a poem drafted some two years earlier.

13 Date of letter corrected by Habegger.
As a rare example of Susan’s editorial feedback to Dickinson, these letters have attracted widespread attention. Of interest to me, though, is the note following Dickinson’s last attempt to please Susan: “Could I make you and Austin – proud – sometime – a great way off – ’twould give me taller feet” (notes to Fr 124).

Written some eighteen months apart, both letters ponder the possibility of receiving recognition for one’s writing. We know what happens: in the years ahead, Dickinson will resist publication, opting instead to circulate some poems through correspondence and to keep the rest in her desk or trunk. But Dickinson in 1861 does not yet know what path she will take. “Being great” and hoping to make Austin and Susan “proud,” even if she locates that moment in the future, “sometime – a great way off,” does not sound to me like posthumous fame. Such thinking will soon lead to lines that prefer vespers over matins and noon over morning, but we do not see (yet) the decision to eschew publishing and to instead leave a trove of poems for others to find.

For a while, and in her own way, Dickinson seems to be ruminating on just what it means to commit to a life of writing. Take, for instance, the word “business,” which appears in a poem for the first time in 1860. The word is significant because later, in 1862, it will figure in two of Dickinson’s most famous pronouncements about her mission as a poet. To Higginson, in a

14 The exchange between Dickinson and Susan is recounted in Franklin’s *Variorum* (notes to Fr 124). The exchange was evidently prompted by an earlier critique by Susan, since Dickinson begins the letter accompanying a (revised) draft of the poem with the comment, “Perhaps this verse would please you better – Sue.” (Franklin guesses that the entire episode might have been set in motion by a visit from Samuel Bowles to the Evergreens in June, 1861; perhaps, Susan’s opinion was offered in person.) In response, Susan famously writes that she is “not suited dear Emily with the second verse.” Dickinson subsequently drafted two new versions, one of which she sent to Susan with the comment, “Is this frostier?” In *Open Me Carefully*, Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith argue for the existence of a kind of poetry “workshop” in which Susan and Dickinson exchanged work, for which the exchange surrounding “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” is a prominent piece of evidence. When Dickinson sends this poem to Higginson a year later, she includes the version of the second stanza with which Susan was “not suited.”

15 Dickinson’s relationship to publishing is the subject of a great deal of insightful scholarship. Cf. Smith, who writes that Dickinson “publishes” her poetry in her correspondence with Susan and in her fascicles (*Rowing* 2); Cameron, who says she publishes “privately” in her fascicles (8); Morris, who claims that the fascicles are Dickinson’s “own handwritten variorum” (29); and Messmer, who argues that only Dickinson’s letters can be said to have been fully “authorized” for an audience (2-3).
paragraph mostly devoted to requesting his critique of her poems and to promising to respond with “obedience” and “gratitude,” she remarks, “Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that – My Business is Circumference” (L 268 July 1862). And at some point that same summer, ostensibly in reference to the many letters she has written without receiving a reply, Dickinson writes to Elizabeth Holland,

Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can’t stop for that! My Business is to love. I found a bird this morning, down – down – on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears?

One sob in the throat, one flutter in the bosom – “My business is to sing” – and away she rose! How do I know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened, and applauded her unnoticed hymn?” (L 270)

As she imagines the smiles and laughter of friends and of the entire nation, she vows in each case to persevere: she has business to take care of. The vision of the bird provokes a question: why sing if no one hears? Dickinson quickly provides the bird with an answer and just as quickly imagines a possible audience. The effect is to value the song even of one who is “down – down – on a little bush at the foot of the garden,” one whose song is apparently “unnoticed.”

The word “business” appears a total of eight times in six poems, all but one of them copied between 1860 and 1862; on five of those eight occasions, the word appears in the phrase “my business” (Rosenbaum 114). By contrast, the word “fame” does not receive a significant treatment until the summer of 1862 (250). By then, the idea is very much on her mind, and these poems are increasingly skeptical of worldly fame, working frequently to redefine the

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16 Miller notes “my business is to love” is quoted from a novel by none other than Josiah Holland (Reading 124).
17 The six poems are Fr 135, 175, 176, 292, 494, 440, and 1022 (where it appears as a variant for “warrant”).
18 “Fame” appears in just one earlier poem, Fr 135, but only in passing. For Dickinson’s fuller treatments of the theme, see especially Fr 389, 405, 481, 536, and 738. Rosenbaum counts a total of twenty-eight appearances of “fame,” “fame’s,” and “fames.” Two poems (Fr 1702 and 1788) are undated, existing only in Susan’s transcription. Rosenbaum also lists sixteen poems featuring the words “renown” or “renowned,” the earliest of which is Fr 323, copied in 1862.
concept inwardly. If she can attain “Fame of myself, to justify” (by which she means something like self-respect or what she describes in another poem as the “favor” of her own “soul”), then

All other Plaudit be  
Superfluous – An incense  
Beyond Necessity – (Fr 481 lines 2-4).

Repeatedly, when Dickinson takes up the notion of fame, she defines it in terms of one’s own, inner esteem. “My soul – accused Me – And I quailed,” she writes, whereas “All Else accused Me – and I smiled – / My Soul – that Morning – was My friend” (Fr 793). What seemed like patience—what perhaps was patience initially—becomes something else: the understanding that her commitment to writing is to be “justified” from within rather than from without.

These views on fame, however conspicuous they become in 1862 and after, have yet to emerge in 1861. Similarly, when Leiter and Habegger note an upsurge in poems that take up questions of poetic power and of Dickinson’s “peculiar destiny” as a writer in the early 1860s, we can go further and observe that, with the exception of “I taste a liquor never brewed,” all of the poems listed by Leiter (Fr 303, 445, 466, and 473) and by Habegger (Fr 439, 444, 451, 466, and 473) in the course their arguments are copied in 1862. That is to say, in 1861, Dickinson is on the cusp of copying—but has not yet finalized—the many poems where we find her keenest explorations of fame and renown, of the vocation of poetry, and of her relationship to all of them. Those later views are well known, but if we can avoid letting our knowledge of what happens later distort our view of events as they unfold, we can perhaps glimpse Dickinson in the midst of a moment when all of this—her business, her vocation, and her very definition of fame—are

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19 In her comments on “I taste a liquor never brewed,” Leiter observes that it is one of several poems from this period that offers an “evocation of her poetic power” (122), while Habegger notes that, beginning in 1860, we see more poems that are “generally implying a passionate inquiry into the writer’s peculiar destiny” (405).

20 Similarly, in “The Metapoetic Element in Dickinson,” Josef Raab considers a dozen or so poems in which Dickinson considers the nature of the poet, and once again, the earliest is “I taste a liquor never brewed” (see especially 288-292).
aswirl. Soon, Dickinson’s investigation of poetry as a vocation and of her relationship to it will result in some of her most famous poems: “They Shut me up in Prose” (Fr 445), “This was a Poet – It is That” (Fr 446), “I reckon – When I count at all –” (Fr 533), and “The poets light but lamps” (Fr 930), among others. But in 1861, Dickinson is still pondering.

Even Dickinson’s thoughts about publishing, a vexed issue that is a topic in its own right, offer evidence that her views are still in the making. The appearance of “I taste a liquor never brewed” in May, 1861, is followed by the publication (also in the Republican) of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (under the title “The Sleeping”) in March, 1862. On the latter occasion, Susan writes to Dickinson to ask, “Has girl read Republican? It takes as long to start our Fleet as the Burnside” (Leyda II: 48). 21 Given how well Susan knew Dickinson, it seems highly unlikely that she would celebrate this publication if it had occurred against Dickinson’s wishes. Later, yes, Dickinson will refuse efforts to publish her work, famously equating “Publication” with “the Auction / Of the Mind of Man” (Fr 788, copied in 1863), but the evidence suggests that as late as 1862 (and possibly later), her mind was apparently not entirely made up. 22

To be sure, the question is not new. Like everyone else in Calvinist Amherst, Dickinson has been asking herself about her “calling” since childhood. But as we have seen, from early on, Dickinson’s answer to questions of faith is to weigh her own path: “The path of duty looks very

21 “Burnside” apparently refers to General Burnside, who had recently captured Roanoke Islands. For more on this note, see Smith, who highlights the “our” and argues that the two women were jointly engaged in promoting Dickinson’s work (180-184; 248 n. 21). Mitchell notes that it was almost certainly Susan who forwarded “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” to the Republican (Monarch 264).

22 Dickinson’s uncertainty may well extend later: in 1864, five of her poems appear in periodicals in the span of just two months (Variorum III: 1531). Loeffelholz guesses that most or all of these were forwarded to editors by Susan, who by then had a small accumulation of early poems (“Fascicle” 38 n. 27). Of this moment, which comes after Dickinson had begun her correspondence with Higginson and after receiving his advice not to publish, Loeffelholz writes that “Dickinson may well have spent the second half of 1863 in suspense over whether to abide or defy Higginson’s verdict on publication; the evidence suggests […] that whatever her own ambivalence about the verdict, at least Susan Dickinson wanted to defy it” (38). Implicit in all of this, as I see it, is that Dickinson does not object. The critiques of fame in poems copied in 1862, then, emerge alongside a lingering openness to publication.
ugly indeed […] I dont wonder that good angels weep – and bad ones sing songs” (L 30). This early letter (Dickinson is nineteen) counterposes “duty” and singing. But soon enough—just as she has done elsewhere—Dickinson manages to gather both in a single embrace, to make singing her duty, even (we might say) her business. What we see in the deliberations and declarations of 1861 and in the poems of 1862 is the moment where this arc of inquiry lands.

In the midst of these vocational contemplations and probably adding to them, the news of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s death in June of 1861 must have felt particularly poignant. Her affection for the British poet was so well known that three different friends send her pictures of the poet in the days after her death (L 271). Perhaps more than any other writer, it was Browning who had provided Dickinson with examples of women who had pursued art without compromise.23 Her early friendship with Emmons had included a shared admiration for Browning, whose work Emmons promoted in essays he published in 1853 and 1854 (Habegger 317-318). At that time, the work that commanded their attention was “A Vision of Poets” (1844), which presents the vocation of poetry in exalted terms, casting poets as royalty, saints, and martyrs. Dickinson identified even more strongly with Browning’s epic, Aurora Leigh, the book-length tale of a woman who escapes confinement and achieves literary recognition.24 Browning’s portrait of a female writer who chooses art over all other responsibilities was radical in its day.

At a key moment, when Aurora is refusing Romney’s marriage proposal, she begins by articulating her opposition to any marriage that is not between equals, after which she tells him,

Ah, you force me, sir,
To be overbold in speaking of myself:

23 Stonum (35-46) perceptively brings out the particular power that Browning’s example would have held for Dickinson. See also Erkkila’s detailed discussion (Wicked 68-79), Finnerty (“Transatlantic Women Writers” 114-117), Capps (83-87), and Habegger (317-321, 385-388).
24 First published in 1856, Aurora Leigh was owned by Susan (in its 1857 edition) and by Dickinson herself (in an 1859 edition). Both copies, in the Dickinson archives at Harvard and Amherst, respectively, contain numerous passages marked in pencil, and Susan’s appears to have both her and Dickinson’s annotations.
I too have my vocation,—work to do. (Book II, 455-457)

Moments like this earned the censure of critics but delighted readers like Dickinson.

More important than Aurora’s fictional journey was the example set by Browning herself, by George Eliot, and by the Bronte sisters, all of whom championed not just art but art freed from social or moral purposes.\(^\text{25}\) Though Dickinson has little to say about political events such as the Seneca Falls Convention (in 1848), she was acutely aware of the emergence of women authors.\(^\text{26}\) As Erkkila notes, in “associating” herself with Browning, Dickinson “was identifying her work with the most powerful woman poet of her time” (71). Later, Dickinson writes at least three poems in memory of Browning, the most stunning of which begins,

\[
\begin{align*}
&I \text{ think I was enchanted} \\
&\text{When first a somber Girl –} \\
&\text{I read that Foreign Lady –} \\
&\text{The Dark – felt beautiful – (Fr 627 copied in 1863)}
\end{align*}
\]

The poem narrates a series of transformations (“Bees – became as Butterflies – / The Butterflies – as Swans”) and presents the effects in religious terms, describing that moment of reading as a powerful “Conversion of the Mind.” By poem’s end, the encounter works a kind of “Magic”:

\[
\begin{align*}
&T\text{was a Divine Insanity –} \\
&T\text{The Danger to be sane} \\
&\text{Should I again experience –} \\
&T\text{is antidote to turn} –
\end{align*}
\]

To tomes of Solid Witchcraft – (Fr 627 lines 25-29)

\(^{25}\) See Finnerty (“Transatlantic” 109-110). In their willingness to flaunt gendered expectations, these European writers held far more appeal than women writing in the U.S., who (at least the most well-known among them) wrote mostly about topics considered appropriate for women. But it was not simply a case of Dickinson being more radical than her domestic contemporaries: as Erkkila argues, part of Browning’s appeal for Dickinson was “her privileged class position, her conservative politics, and her essentially aristocratic notion of the role of the poet” (Wicked 73); she makes a similar point regarding the appeal of George Eliot to Dickinson (81).

\(^{26}\) Dickinson came of age when the debate over women writers was in the air. In 1848, after years of speculation, the Bronte sisters made their identities (and gender) known to their publisher, and in 1850, they published their well-known explanation. In 1859, the identity and gender of George Eliot (real name: Marian Evans) became public. In addition, Dickinson was certainly aware of George Sand’s career and of the controversy her lifestyle provoked.
This is Dickinson at her most Dickinsonian, turning the world upside down and finding logic and sustenance in the new order. It is fitting that when writing about Browning, from whom Dickinson derived confidence for her own vocation as female artist, the poem itself is bold, confident, and unapologetic. By the end of the poem, “Magic,” “Deity,” and “Insanity” have been corralled together, all of them in reference to the experience of reading Browning, and all of it available as an “antidote” when one is threatened with “The Danger to be sane.” It is, as Erkkila notes in her perceptive reading of the poem, another “poetic manifesto” (69), but unlike the earlier “I taste a liquor never brewed,” this poem focuses on inheritance rather than writing. It claims Browning as a forerunner and highlights how it feels to have one’s world reshaped by an experience with poetry so powerful that it changes how the world is seen.

Taken together, the sanctified portrait of writers found in “A Vision of Poets,” the unapologetic portrayal of a female writer in *Aurora Leigh*, and the example of Browning’s life must have been liberating to Dickinson in her twenties. But there is good reason to believe that Browning’s death in 1861 is of equal importance. For Dickinson, Browning was linked to the question of vocation, and her death brings that question into renewed focus. Not only are the poems most commonly associated with Browning copied in 1863, so too are most of the references to Browning in her letters (Capps 167-168). She would have eagerly read two articles in the *Atlantic* and one in the *Republican* that memorialized Browning; the September article by Kate Field in the *Atlantic* has been neatly cut out from the issue (the remainder of which exists in the Dickinson archives at Harvard), and such clipping is consistent with Dickinson’s habits, though there is no guarantee she did the clipping (Miller Reading 4). As

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27 For one exception, see her letter to Emmons (L 171). The three poems commonly thought to refer to Browning are Fr 600, 627, and 637. In addition, Fr 448 and 596 have plausible links to Browning.

28 This article quotes three lines from “A Vision of Poets” that resonate: Browning writes of “poets true / Who died for Beauty, as martyrs do / For Truth,—the ends being scarcely two” (qtd. in Capps 83). In Dickinson, the relevant
It adds up to a moment of ample reading, inner listening, linguistic stretching, and vocational reckoning, all of which coincides with the early phases of Dickinson’s seclusion. It is a moment worth pausing over, though again, it calls us to attend to the moment itself and not to what we know will follow. In his study of Dickinson’s early letters to Abiah Root, for example, Martin Orzeck writes movingly about the way Dickinson’s early experiences of absence—recall the friends moving away, the friendships ending, and the various deaths around her in her teens—connect to her later seclusion as a poet. She might prefer presence in some ways, he notes, but in coming to terms with the absence of others, she discovers that absence is essential to her vocation (141). He builds here on Sewall’s argument that “Essence, for her, required absence” (qtd. in Orzeck 141). Having realized that something is lost in presence and something gained in absence, she perceives what a commitment to poetry will require.

passage can be found in two stanzas in Fr 448: “I died for Beauty – but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb / When One who died for Truth, was lain / In an adjoining Room – // He questioned softly ‘Why I failed’? / ‘For Beauty’, I replied - / ’And I – for Truth – Themselves are One – / We Brethren, are’, He said” (lines 1-8). Dickinson might have gotten these ideas from Keats, or she might have gotten them directly from “A Vision of Poets.” But it is also possible that it was the September article that brought them to her (renewed) attention. A similar thing happens when Dickinson writes poems commemorating Charlotte Bronte: Bronte died in 1855, but Dickinson’s poem for her (“All overgrown by cunning moss” (Fr 146) was drafted in 1860, quite possibly after she had read Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte Bronte, which (like Dickinson’s poem) presents Bronte in Christ-like terms (Erkkila Wicked 67).

To her Norcross cousins, Dickinson writes after Browning’s death, “That Mrs. Browning fainted, we need not read Aurora Leigh to know, when she lived with her English aunt; and George Sand ‘must make no noise in her grandmother’s bedroom.’ Poor children! Women, now, queens, now!” (L 234) In tracing the transformation of both Sand and Browning from “Poor children” into “queens,” Dickinson highlights their respective journeys to achievement. Similarly, her first poem for Browning describes her having “a Head too high to crown” (Fr 600).
The story told by Orzeck and Sewall is that Dickinson chose a life of seclusion in order to create the necessary conditions for her art. “The budding poet,” concludes Orzeck, “was now [October, 1848] learning the severe lesson of her vocation, which would require her to renounce (or at least subdue) her interest in the immediate gratification offered by friendship, public interaction, even the pursuit of fame” (142). Wolff likewise wonders if seclusion was “the necessary condition for her art” (167), while in a different context but very much in this spirit, Adrienne Rich argues that Dickinson’s withdrawal was a deliberate means of protecting her genius and of dedicating herself to her poetry. Poetry, writes Rich, was what Dickinson allowed to “put a Belt around her Life” (46).

Orzeck, Rich, and others are writing against a persistent tendency to pathologize Dickinson’s choice to remain at home for the better part of twenty-five years. To defend Dickinson, it was common to insist that, whatever the social norms that surrounded her, and whatever the pressures (societal, parental, gendered) that weighted her decisions, her life was the life she chose. It became central to Dickinson’s story to emphasize her independence, her autonomy, and her control over this most salient characteristic of her adult life. She was, in short, no longer a victim. Thus, writing to reclaim Dickinson from her characterization as a madwoman or as a frustrated spinster forced into seclusion, Rich argues that Dickinson knew she was a genius and that her withdrawal was a deliberate means of protecting her genius: “Given her vocation, she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies” (35). Where the “terms she had been handed” such as “Calvinist Protestantism, Romanticism, the nineteenth-century corseting of women’s bodies, choices, and sexuality […] could spell insanity to a woman’s genius,” Dickinson successfully withdraws into her own world and “explodes in poetry” (36).
To my mind, it has always felt too neat, too much a part of how we want to imagine Dickinson, to insist that she decided that becoming a poet would require never leaving her house again. The figure of the poet, the romantic rebel—whether she is charting unexplored terrain or coopting constraints that would otherwise bind her—our image of the hermitic genius dies hard. The more I try to envision Dickinson’s actual life, the more it strikes me that while the choice of privacy might have been consistent with her vocation as a poet, it was also, and more substantially, perhaps even primarily, rooted in her deepest preferences as a person.

After all, an appreciation of time alone was nothing new to Dickinson. Even in her early letters, we find her welcoming the chance to abscond with a few precious moments alone, as when, at Mt. Holyoke at the age of seventeen, she reports that she skipped a school outing: “Almost all the girls went & I enjoyed the solitude finely” (L 16). Four years later, in a remarkable letter to Austin, she articulates something of the trade-off between time alone and time with friends. Replying (we surmise) to Austin’s expression of loneliness, she writes, “if you talk with no one, you are amassing thoughts which will be bright and golden for those you left at home – we meet our friends, and a constant interchange wastes tho’t and feeling, and we are then obliged to repair and renew – there isn’t the brimfull feeling which one gets away” (L 54). Dickinson muses here on two parallel conditions. At the simplest level, she addresses Austin’s distance from home and offers something of a pep talk for him to “amass” thoughts and share them in letters. Time alone, on this view, allows one to gather materials for writing. More profoundly, Dickinson zeroes in on the cost of socializing, the way a person “wastes tho’t and feeling,” after which one must “repair and renew.” More than anything, what comes across is her awareness of the richness found in solitude, that “brimfull feeling which one gets away.”
As we move beyond the need to pathologize Dickinson’s desire for solitude, the challenge for us as readers is to accept and yet qualify our image of the (relatively) reclusive life Dickinson now creates for herself. As Hart and Smith properly note, the need for time alone is “a requirement that has rarely been questioned when enjoyed by male writers” (xvii). Rich similarly writes that “[w]hat might, in a male writer—a Thoreau, let us say, or a Christopher Smart or William Blake—seem a legitimate strangeness, a unique intention, has been in one of our two major poets devalued into a kind of naivete, a girlish ignorance, feminine lack of professionalism” (42). But it remains the case that few if any of the male writers they have in mind routinely ran from company, confined themselves to the family property, and (as Dickinson will do in later years) conducted conversations from behind half-closed doors. In truth, we barely have the language we need. The words and phrases that crop up—“overwhelming irrational anxieties” (Pollak 47), “phobically” housebound (Wolff 167), “peculiarities” (Cody 51), “Shy and disturbed” (Palmer 768), “emotional fragility” (Porter Idiom 19), and there are many more—are emphatically negative. And from the perspective of today’s world, in which we practically never find ourselves alone, the decision risks looking odder still.

Even the words I am using—seclusive, reclusive—are fraught. The challenge is to find a way to describe her life that acknowledges the rarity and even the extremity of her choices without insisting on an evaluation. Moreover, what many of these accounts miss, it seems to me, is the evident joy that Dickinson feels in the life she has created for herself. Her happiness is noted by nearly all who knew her best. Her niece Mattie’s recollections, admittedly from a later moment, make it sound like there was always something of a mischievous delight around Dickinson, while Vinnie will later insist that Dickinson “had a joyous nature” (qtd. in Sewall

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30 One thinks, for example, of the generosity of spirit in Octavio Paz’s account of meeting Robert Frost: “There he was, in his cabin, removed from the world, not to renounce it, but to see it better” (2).
Sewall observes that “there is no hint in the letters that she felt herself trapped in her home, or that she wished she were somewhere else. For the most part, she gives the impression of not having enough time in ‘our hurrying house’ for all she wants to do” (Life 619). And years later, Higginson reports asking her “if she ever felt the want of employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor,” to which Dickinson replies, “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time.” After a pause, she adds, “I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough” (L 342a). By contrast, in a letter to Higginson during her stay in Cambridge, she describes it as a “prison,” adding that she didn’t bring Carlo because “he would die – in jail” (L 290.)

The key, I think, is to distinguish between two different aspects of Dickinson’s life at this time. In far too many instances, we collapse Dickinson’s need for solitude—hours, and lots of them, in which to think, “repair anew” away from the bustle of the world, and write—and her chosen lifestyle of relative seclusion.31 In the culture around here, and especially among writers and thinkers she valued, there were many voices that cherished the ideal of “getting away.” If, as seems likely, she read Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” she would presumably have nodded when he writes, “Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home,” although “forced” isn’t quite the right word once we acknowledge that Dickinson chose to stay at home (Major Prose 145).32 She would doubtless have enjoyed the words of Thomas Carlyle, whose portrait she had on her bedroom wall in later years, when he writes in Hero as a Man of Letters,

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31 Finding the right word is tricky, but “relative seclusion” comes closest to what I mean. Secluded in the way a place can be—hard to reach though not unreachable—and “relative” because of the busy household she would have encountered whenever she left her room.

32 If Dickinson read Emerson carefully, she would have known that his message is not simply a call for trusting yourself and doing your own thing. His version of self-reliance requires that we be open to certain things outside us: “We do not yet see that virtue is Height, and that a man or company of men plastic and permeable to principles, by the law of nature, must overpower and ride all cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not” (Major Prose 139).
“We should look to ourselves: there is great merit here in the ‘duty of staying at home’! And on the whole, to say truth, I never heard of ‘worlds’ being ‘saved’ in any other way” (23). And in Dickinson’s beloved *Aurora Leigh*, the protagonist declares,

> I kept the life thrust on me, on the outside  
> Of the inner life with all its ample room  
> For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,  
> Inviolable by conventions.

Even her austere schooling at Mt. Holyoke championed time alone: Mary Lyon insisted that dorm rooms include “lighted closets,” that is, “individual spaces in each room where a young woman could separate from her roommate and have time to pray or think” (Ackmann *Fevered* 35). Call it privacy, perhaps, or call it time to think her own “tho’ts,” or call it “freedom,” as she does, or just plain solitude. Whatever it is, Dickinson thrives in it.

But solitude is not seclusion, and Dickinson did not need to forego leaving the Homestead in order to have an ample solitude in which to wonder and write. Just as she ventured to the kitchen to bake, to the pantry for supplies, or to the conservatory to tend her plants, she might have walked into town or gone riding or visited a friend. There is no reason that stretches of solitude, even very long ones, cannot be threaded into a life that otherwise participates in the world beyond the home. Solitude and creativity, for Dickinson as for many writers and artists, go hand in hand, and various features of Dickinson’s life (economic class, primarily) made such solitude a lifelong possibility. In deciding to live an increasingly secluded life, Dickinson did not secure for herself *more* solitude but a completely different *kind* of solitude, so different that it really is not the same thing. Solitude was hers upstairs, whenever her presence was not required below; the life of seclusion which she fashions for herself over time responds to a different need.

In truth, for all the arguments about how Dickinson needed to seclude herself, whether for her art or her sanity, there remains something intangible to this moment when she not only
stops leaving home but also begins to wear white (and only white). It feels too simple to ascribe
the choice to her vocation; it feels too easy to point to some traumatic event that no other extant
evidence fully substantiates; and it feels too big to chalk up to a single precipitous decision.
Vinnie’s phrase—“only a happen”—sounds more and more right to my ears. It is a curious fact
about us as readers that we seem willing to accept poems that baffle us, poems that retain, after
lengthy consideration, some of their mystery, but we cling to our expectation that a person’s life
fit into a narrative that makes sense to us. But if there is one thing poetry might teach us, maybe
it is to hanker a bit less for certainty. What if this poet’s life, the life that gave us the poems, the
life led mostly at home for more than two decades, is simply but beautifully part of the mystery?
She lived the life she chose, seemingly without complaint; some years she wrote a lot; others, not
so much. Jerome Charyn writes of the poet that she “was born and died a Dickinson, and the
white wrappers she began to wear were the costume of a gardener, a baker, and a poet who had
little time for corsets and fanciful clothes. She was always the mistress of her own life, and the
agoraphobia we prescribe to her is our own facile way to deal with the mystery of cre-

This, to my ear, also feels right. And I say “feels” because we are admittedly seeking an
understanding without sufficient evidence. Spend enough time with a poet and her work, any
poet but especially Dickinson, and you begin to feel you know her. The trouble here is the same
one we have encountered in other instances: the logic of what “feels” or “sounds” right, however
convincing it is to us, has led other writers considering the early 1860s to visions of scarring love
affairs, traumatic abortions, and religious revelations. But what strikes me after spending so
much time with the poems and letters is that the gesture of staying close to home feels more like
an assertion than a retreat, more of a habit that grows stronger than a connection that gets
severed. It feels more like an expression of a person’s comfort than a strategic plan in the service
of art. It strikes me quite forcefully that, had Dickinson been distracted from writing poems after her twenties and lived her life as a devoted baker and gardener, she would nevertheless have chosen to live this way.

The more I read Dickinson’s poems of 1861, the more it strikes me as a year of **becoming**. Both in her life and in her poetry, it is now that important habits—some of them long-standing, some newly emerged—become entrenched in her world. And while there are (as we saw in the previous chapter) poems from this year that venture into new ground, there are others whose importance lies in the way they serve as a bridge between earlier and later writings. The poems I have in mind build unmistakably on what has come before while paving (perhaps even discovering) the way toward the poems that will soon follow. To say this is to insist, again, that in 1860 it remains somewhat of an open question exactly which way Dickinson’s poetry will evolve, but here the evidence I want to present is the emergence not of something new but of poems that deploy bolder versions of effects glimpsed in previous years. In particular, three poems strike me as pivotal.

**Spring, 1861: “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” (Fr 221)**

Early 1861 sees the production of several new sheets. Quite likely, these are poems drafted in the fall and winter, but whenever they were first written, it is not until the spring that Dickinson is ready to commit them in ink. On one such sheet, having copied four poems already and with the final (back) page of the sheet remaining, she fills it with this poem:

He was weak, and I was strong – then –
So He let me lead him in –
I was weak, and he was strong then –
So I let him lead me – Home –
'Twas’nt far – the door was near –
'Twas’nt dark – for He went – too –
'Twas’nt loud, for He said nought –
That was all I cared to know.

Day knocked – and we must part –
Neither – was strongest – now –
He strove – and I strove – too –
We did’nt do it – tho’! (Fr 221)33

I like to tell students that this poem performs seven different kinds of magic. Or five. Or nine.

Pick a number. With time, we can meet the challenge. We might read, re-read, and re-re-read the
poem until its movement, the experience of it, is within us. Read it until you have it
memorized—there are worse ways to spend an hour. (Among other things, it will change how
you experience a red light or the wait for an elevator.)

What kind of world is brought to life in this poem? A world of movement, of
togetherness that is tested, of strength that ebbs and flows. It is a world that honors mutuality, the
way one being or presence sustains another, a world where “He” brings light and says nothing,
and where that is enough. It is a world where two beings join with ease but where the parting is
not so easy. Read it like you really mean it, and you can feel the arc of the poem as it rises and
falls, only to land ambiguously in the last stanza. (After two stanzas of apparently willing
togetherness, how to read the word “must” and of their striving to “part”?) We can learn a lot by
sitting with how it feels to read it. What does it all mean? In part, it means how it makes you feel.
Whether you are reading this short poem for the first time or the eleventh, what emerges is a
story—a movement, an experience—of two becoming one, of mutuality, and of a final but
somewhat vexed togetherness.

33 Details about the physical nature of the sheet come from Franklin’s Manuscript Books (I: 158-160).
Sooner or later, though, questions arise: Who is “He” and where are they going and what are they doing? The pronoun is capitalized, so perhaps it is Jesus, the figure of numerous other Dickinson poems, especially since the speaker allows this figure to “lead me – Home” and is equated with light. Then again, as the poem begins, “He” is “weak,” so if this is a poem about Jesus and faith, it is also a reworking of our customary ways of thinking about them. (We should note, too, that on two occasions “him” is not capitalized.) By the end of the first stanza, they have gone home together, and by the end of the poem, they have also spent the night together, making this a poem that leans on the literary conventions of lovers who must separate in the morning. But if so, they are joined in a curious kind of love. Or what if “He” is neither deity nor person? It could be an idea, a memory, the muse, perhaps poetry itself. It might be anything that takes us by the hand (I am reminded, randomly, of the early letter to Abiah in which Dickinson describes a cold visiting from the Alps) and escorts us “Home.”

The poem remains completely engaging without allowing one or another of the possible stories to dominate. It has an air of allegory about it, a sense that we are in the world we know (a world of homes and doors, days and nights) while at the same time being in one or more other worlds. The poem reads as if it were built on the premise that no single explanation should be allowed to prevail. We are invited to keep all of those stories in mind, which is to say, we are left not with a particular story but with an experience: strength that comes and goes, strengths that complement one another or compete, individualities that diverge and then join. We have seen Dickinson elide the details before, but this poem makes an all-out poetic strategy of not providing the full picture: it practically dares you to answer the question, What is happening here, and who is He?

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34 Cf. Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, “‘Tender Pioneer’: Emily Dickinson’s Poems on the Life of Christ.” See also McIntosh on how and why Dickinson makes use of Jesus in her poetry (110ff).
The layering of fundamentally distinct but equally plausible readings in “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” is where Dickinson’s early habit of happily leaving behind facts and details finds its way fully into her poetry, and it does so not just in the way the poem unfolds (leaps from this to that) but in the very conceit of the poem. Dickinson, like any poet, has written plenty of poems that can be read in multiple ways, and she has even written poems where the literal and metaphoric readings vie for primacy; now, though, she writes a poem that insists on being read in multiple ways. The habit is not new, but the effect here is beyond what we have seen before. In some ways, it resembles an early poem such as “Have you got a Brook in your little heart” (Fr 94), which depicts one’s inner life by way of an extended metaphor: a brook in the heart, surrounded by flowers and birds, that overflows “in March” but might run dry “in August.” The difference has everything to do with the way this earlier poem foregrounds the brook and its world, as compared to the lack of any such foregrounding in “He was weak, and I was strong – then.” In both cases, we have the building blocks of a metaphor—two or more things that resemble each other—but in the later poem, we have no proposed relationship, no sense that one should be read as a way of approaching the other. The various numerous ways of reading simply are. With the poem not declaring one or another reading to be primary, it is left to the reader to decide.35

35 Another early precursor is “Just lost, when I was saved!” (Fr 132), which we considered in chapter one. See also “Delayed till she had ceased to know –” (Fr 67), which seems to be simultaneously about the death of a flower and the death of a person. As readers, though, we know exactly where we are: we quite clearly find ourselves in the world of metaphor—two things drawn together—and thus we have a place to stand. In “He was weak, and I was strong – then,” by contrast, we lack even that. In ways that I have yet to see fully discussed, one thing this poem does is create the possibility of comparison while dispensing completely with metaphor. There is probably a longer study to be undertaken here having to do with the way Dickinson’s undertakes the task of likening. In similes, the act of comparison is presented directly; in metaphor, the action is both direct (the poem points to the likeness) and indirect (there is no signaling: we simply see one thing in terms of another). In poems such as “He was weak, and I was strong – then,” where the effect feels somewhat like that of allegory, the action far less directed, precisely because we are not in a position to know what we are meant to read in terms of what. Porter, Weisbuch, and others have explored these effects in related ways, but there is more to be said about how Dickinson—who can wield simile and metaphor as well as anyone—pursues the work of comparison.
In virtually all of Dickinson’s early poems, by the time the first stanza is over, you know where you stand. After that, of course, all bets are off, but at least there is a point of departure. By contrast, in “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” and in a number of important poems that follow, Dickinson revels in offering the reader less. From the very first word, we are uncertain, and while she has always been willing to leave facts and stories behind, these poems go further by allowing for many possible stories to coexist. Such poems, in turn, insist that readers fill in the gaps, and in so doing, they reveal a newfound confidence on the part of the poet who, no longer interested in entertaining or illustrating, is keen to create an experience for her imagined reader. This poem invites you to bring the experience to life for yourself and to assign the particulars that matter to you. However you approach it, at a certain point, you realize this is a poem designed to give you an experience, and that the experience is one of the meanings of the poem.

A good example of where this insight eventually leads can be found in a well-known poem that Dickinson finalizes (in two copies) in 1862. It begins,

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Players at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on –  
He stuns you by degrees –  
Prepares your brittle nature  
For the Etherial Blow  
By fainter Hammers – further heard –  
Then nearer – Then so slow (Fr 477 A, lines 1-8)

As before, the referent of the pronoun “He” is unspecified. In the first two lines, we are launched immediately into the world of music, the central metaphor of the poem, and then into a kind of pre-experience. The poem does not proceed in strict chronological order—by line 3, we know already that “full music” is coming later, and by line 6, we understand that “full music” is also an
“Ethereal Blow.” The “fumbling” of line 1 is terrifying largely because we know what is to come. Moreover, structurally, the poem goes back and forth between what “He” does and what “Players at the Keys” do: lines 1 and 4–6 attribute actions to Him, while lines 2, 3, and 7–8 refer to what the Players do. These middle lines (lines 7–10) draw out the process, which has the effect—because we know, we know—of prolonging the inevitable agony. As what is approaching draws near, both Breath and Brain have time to collect themselves, and it is then that it—the blow, the full music—arrives:

Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to Bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked Soul –

When Winds take Forests in their Paws –
The Universe – is still – (Fr 477 A lines 9-14)

Here we see the underlying gesture of “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” put to work in terrifying ways: just as the “He” of the first line has been left consistently unspecified, so too, the sentence which presents the moment of arrival does so without a grammatical subject: “Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt.” We understand that the same “He” is behind the blow, but the effect is dramatic. Happening takes precedence over specifics, with dashes inserted to draw it out for maximum effect. The concision—the way the poem leaps—is palpable.

Over the years, this poem has been read in a dizzying number of ways, with “He” variously identified as God, a preacher (sometimes specifically Reverend Wadsworth), a lover, the incarnation of Dickinson’s Master, a poet, poetry itself, the wind. And there can be no

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36 As Miller notes, some or all of line 8—in particular, the phrase “Then so slow”—can be read both in conjunction with line 7 and in conjunction with line 9, an effect she labels “syntactic doubling” (Grammar 115). Miller’s commentary on this poem (113-118) is especially insightful. She traces the various ways the poem has been read, and she usefully emphasizes a feature shared by otherwise divergent interpretations: “In all cases,” she writes, the poem “allows us to interpret His approach as both fulfilling and devastating” (116).

37 When published by Todd in 1896, this poem was titled “The Master” (notes to Fr 477). Judy Jo Small asks, “is ‘He’ a preacher? A poet? a lover? The wind? God?” (53). Miller writes, “He—be it lover, attacker, a promised or
objection to reading this poem in all these many ways: at such moments, the poem truly comes to
time, whether in the back and forth of the classroom, the privacy of silent reading, or the
inevitable pondering that happens when you put a poem down but cannot stop thinking about it.
With an unnamed “He” at its center, this poem invites us to read generously. From the
perspective of the writer developing her craft, the achievement of a poem like this—and it is just
one of many that work in similar ways—was made possible by poems such as “He was weak,
and I was strong – then –” and by the discovery of all that can be gained when what was once a
habit is allowed to become an all-out poetic strategy.\footnote{38}

Spring, 1861: “A wife – at Daybreak I shall be –” (Fr 185)

For a second feature that gets renewed attention at this time, we return to a poem
considered briefly in the previous chapter. I print here the first extant version, which Dickinson
copied onto the back of an abandoned letter at some point in the spring. She had gotten as far as
writing “Dear Friends, I bring you so” on a piece of stationery; later, on the reverse, she wrote
out the following poem in pencil, possibly working from an earlier draft:

\begin{verbatim}
A wife – at Daybreak I shall be –
Sunrise – hast thou a flag for me?
At midnight – I am yet a maid –
How short it takes to make it Bride!
Then – Midnight – I have passed from thee
\end{verbatim}

\footnote{38} Dickinson will write a number of poems that feature an unnamed “He” or otherwise remain indeterminate in ways
that build on Fr 221 and resemble Fr 477. See “I rose – because He sank –” (Fr 454), a poem that in many ways
revisits the scenario in “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” (Fr 596), which features not an unspecified “He” but an unspecified “you.” Frequently read as a poem about Susan, the
poem can also be convincingly read as a poem about Dickinson’s encounter with Browning. See also “He put a belt
around my life” (Fr 330), “He touched me, so I live to know” (Fr 349), and “I gave Myself to Him” (Fr 426).
Unto the East – and Victory –
Midnight – Good night – I hear them call –
The Angels bustle in the hall –
Softly – my Future climbs the stair –
I fumble at my Childhood’s prayer –
So soon to be a Child – no more –
The vision flutters in the door –
Eternity – I’m coming sir –
Master – I’ve seen the face before – (Fr 185 A)

This is the first of Dickinson’s so-called “wife” of “bridal” poems, a group of several dozen poems that envision a marriage or union of some kind. That they emerge in 1861 adds yet another wrinkle to our sense of the poet as she moves through the year, and this poem show why: it augurs the arrival of an altogether extraordinary, life-changing experience.

Some readers find this poem difficult, but the difficulty is not one of understanding what the poem is saying. The words, the “story,” the arc of expectation and waiting and recognition and imminent change—all of that is easy to glean. What can be difficult is the feeling that you

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39 In this 1861 version of this poem, with Dickinson’s cancellation of the twelfth line, her intentions regarding the order of the final two lines are unclear (to me, at least). I follow Franklin in assuming that a small mark beneath the word “vision” and above the dash following “Eternity,” which resembles but is not quite the same as the “+” used in other manuscripts to indicate alternatives and additions, is present here. Moreover, all of the later copies of this poem, including the version we saw in chapter 4, present the lines in this order.

40 Counting and categorizing Dickinson’s poems is tricky, of course—we risk repeating the error of Dickinson’s early editors, who insisted on dividing her poems into sections of love poems, nature poems, religious poems, etc. But it is a safe move if we remember that few if any of her poems belong in just one category or section. As I see it, Dickinson’s marriage poems include the six poems that feature the word “wife” (Fr 185, 194, 225, 244, 267, and 857); the six poems that include related words such as “marriage,” “married,” and “wed” (Fr 280, 325, 596, 818, 832, and 1056); and a great number of additional poems that describe unions of some (typically transformative) kind, e.g. “If He dissolve – then – there is nothing – more –” (Fr 251), “Forever at His side to walk –” (Fr 264), and “Again – his voice is at the door –” (Fr 274), among others. Pollak places the roughly forty poems that are “concerned with wedlock” in the context of the hundreds of poems about male figures (Anxieties 157), but I follow Eberwein in considering Dickinson’s “bridal poems” (her phrase) to include poems where unions of any and many kinds are envisioned. Important treatments of this grouping of poems can be found in Porter (Idiom 195-209), Pollak (Anxieties chapter 6), Eberwein (Strategies 173-176), and Loeffelholz (Value chapter two but especially 45-53). Pollak writes perceptively that the “center of Dickinson’s love story is a marriage that may or may not have been—once—consummated physically but that for reasons either unspecified, specified summarily, or specified inadequately […] is thwarted in the real world. It is thus an interior marriage, a marriage of the spirit divorced from social circumstances” (Anxieties 165), but where she attempts to use the poems in order to retrieve or excavate a single, coherent love story, I prefer to see these many poems as different lyrics that may (or may not) point to real events. Once the writing starts, in my view, all bets are off, and the fact that many of the stories in different poems are similar is no reason to reduce them to non-fiction.
ought to know what is happening in more particular ways and that, at some level, you should
know what the poem “means.” As was the case with “He was weak, and I was strong – then,” we
can go a long way by just bringing the story to life and tracing the obvious (and evidently
apocalyptic) arc from “midnight” to “Daybreak” to the sound of “my Future” climbing the stairs.
What this poem invites is a conversation about how the individual pieces, words, and worlds fit
together, and every line in this poem contains a word that might serve as a starting point for that
of this poem is captured in the way these and other nouns align, the way the poem circles back to
the word “midnight” three different times while also accumulating images for what it knows is to
come. Map out how the words relate and how the poem progresses from one to the next, and you
begin to get a sense of how intricately Dickinson has crafted the feeling of slow but inevitable
arrival. To allow the poem to live (for at least a while) in that space where its movement and
inner relationships are enough is to go a long way toward letting this poem mean what it means.

If we want to know who, exactly, arrives, we find that the poem has carefully left many
options open. Though it borrows a narrative structure from tales of brides, the language is so
dense with words from other registers that we know, as readers, that we are simultaneously in a
number of different worlds. A husband, a lover, a moment, death, Jesus, God, the muse, poetry, a
new phase of life—the effect of borrowing from so many distinct discourses is to make it unclear
which, if any, are to be taken literally. The poem creates a world that borrows from but does not
finally overlap completely with other worlds we know.

While this is the first poem to feature the word “wife” and the first to present marriage in
such apocalyptic terms, it nevertheless builds on earlier moments in Dickinson’s writing. One
straightforward but important precursor is a poem that exists in just one version, a “clean draft” in pencil “on a fragment of paper” (notes to Fr 133) copied in the second half of 1860.

Mute – thy coronation –
Meek – my Vive le roi,
“low” interlined above “Meek”
Fold a tiny courtier
In thine Ermine, Sir,
There to rest revering
Till the pageant by,
I can murmur broken,
Master, It was I – (Fr 133)\(^41\)

This earlier poem marks the first appearance of the word “Master” in Dickinson’s verse, and while it seems to have been copied after the first Master Letter, it may have originated around the same time. Either way, it represents an early attempt to broach the emotions raised in those letters, and it is perhaps worth noting that Dickinson never returned to copy this poem onto a sheet.\(^42\) Like the Master Letters, the poem offers a complicated vision of togetherness, and the moment it brings to life is not one of marriage or union but of remaining unrecognized and unchosen. This love is “Mute” and “Meek,” making the contrast with the later poems all the more compelling.

Whether we look at the earlier Master Letter (as we did in chapter four) or at “Mute – thy coronation” (a clear precursor in numerous ways), the step to the bold declaration of “A wife – at Daybreak I shall be” is breathtaking. Just as Dickinson works to elide distance in her early letters (as we saw in chapter 2), and just as she works to boldly set aside the apparent gap between this “World” and “Eternity” (in chapter 3), she now claims a new status for herself. Unlike the ever-present Master of the Master Letters, however, the bridegroom is typically absent from these

\(^{41}\) For the interlined “low,” see the image at <https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/239025>.

\(^{42}\) That is, this poem exists only on a scrap of paper, and in fact it has the distinction of being the earliest extant “fragment” (Franklin) or “loose poem” (Miller) we have. This particular poem comes at a time when Dickinson was not making fair copies on sheets. As Franklin notes, during the years when Dickinson was not copying poems onto sheets, “such drafts, undestroyed, are encountered frequently” (notes to Fr 133).
poems, and in truth, as marriage poems go, there is something rather solitary about the scenes they conjure. What comes through more than anything is the journey of the person at the center of the poem—almost always a first-person speaker—and the experience on the verge of happening.

From early on, Dickinson was in the habit of presenting threshold moments and experiences of radical transformation or transition, and in these poems we find a second kind of precursor to Dickinson’s bridal poems.\(^{43}\) In these poems, we glimpse moments of sudden and often ravishing change. An early example is a poem she later sends to Higginson, though the earliest version of the text dates from 1858 and is included on a sheet added to her first fascicle:

As if I asked a common alms  
And in my wondering hand  
A stranger pressed a kingdom,  
And I – bewildered stand  
As if I asked the Orient  
Had it for me a morn –  
And it sh’d lift it’s purple dikes,  
And flood me with the Dawn! (Fr 14 lines 5-8)

Though not linked to any particular event or person, the spirit of these lines is precisely what re-emerges when Dickinson writes a poem like “A wife – at Daybreak I shall be –” and the poems that follow. What is new in 1861 is setting the poem on the cusp of such a moment. It is not just the present tense we feel so powerfully in these poems but the choice of which present tense: the moment brought to life is “urgently proleptic,” as Stonum puts it (172). It is both fully aware of the change about to come and fully in its own moment. It is not until the last line that we get a glimpse of “the face”: the entire poem has been alternately moving toward and holding back

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\(^{43}\) I borrow the word “transformation” from Miller, who links such poems to Dickinson’s immersion in tales from the far east (Reading 136). Eberwein refers to “transitional moments” (176).
from that glimpse, and even so, we cannot be sure if the face is seen or intently anticipated. Either way, the final two lines, with their appeal to “Eternity,” “sir,” and “Master,” remain on the cusp of a moment that we know will change everything.

Even when set alongside its precursors, “A wife – at Daybreak I shall be –” strikes me as a significant step. Eberwein refers to it as “[p]erhaps her greatest bridal poem” (174), which is all the more remarkable given that it may well be her first such poem. But the precise order is less important than the fact that it is accompanied in short order (before the end of 1861) by a series of like-minded poems, including “Title Divine – is mine!” (Fr 194), “I’m ‘wife’ – I’ve finished that –” (Fr 225), “Forever at His side to walk –” (Fr 264), and “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection!” (Fr 267). If the details behind such poems elude us, if the poems have clearly been designed to leave them behind or to create imaginary ones, it remains the case that it is now, in 1861, that Dickinson deems these poems done and is ready to commit them to a sheet (in the case of Fr 225, 264, and 267) or send to a friend (as she does with Fr 194).

Coming when they do, in the year that sees Dickinson settling ever deeper into the writing life, it is not difficult to read these poems in vocational terms. We return to Rich’s idea that poetry was the “Master” whom she let “put a belt around” her life. Similarly, Loeffelholz observes that many of the poems that were “included in the ‘Love’ section of Higginson and Todd’s 1890 Poems” can easily be read as “witnessing Dickinson’s marriage to her art rather than to a literal human lover” (Value 47). Such poems manage to be “vocational as well as erotic,” she notes, and if we add to this Dickinson’s frequent use of both royal and scriptural

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44 Dickinson’s decision to cut “The vision flutters in the door” from her draft shows that the poem is designed to end emphatically: in just two lines, we encounter “Eternity,” “sir,” and “Master,” and rather than a (mere) “Vision” we encounter a “face.” By comparison, the deleted line feels far more tentative.
imagery, we have poems that work to bring together entirely different vocabularies to achieve startling effects.\textsuperscript{45}

It is especially striking that Dickinson would so fully merge these different dimensions of the broader culture at this moment in her writing life. To overlay the language of poetic vocation with the language of love, and to overlay both with the language of spirit, is to borrow from the language of the sacred and the regal in order to capture, in exalted terms, the calling of poetry. The “crown” she envisions wearing in any number of poems is no less important for being equally the crown of marriage, faith, and her art. In each case, she has thrown her arms wide and drawn disparate worlds together, and in the ensuing embrace, she has built a poem that feels larger than the sum of its individual readings because it both contains them and refines the way we think about them. Such language fashions a form of self-blessing or self-coronation for Dickinson the poet, even if, as she writes, “None suspect me of the crown, / For I wear the ‘Thorns’ till \textit{Sunset} – / Then – my Diadem put on” (Fr 267, copied in late 1861).

\textit{Summer, 1861: “That after Horror – that ’twas us –” (Fr 243)}

A third example of a practice that deepens is also found in a poem we have already seen, the haunted and haunting rendering of “after Horror” that ushers new words and a grimmer view of death into Dickinson’s work. There is more to be said about this poem, in particular about the way it locates itself in time. For convenience, I reprint it here:

\begin{verbatim}
That after Horror – that ’twas us –
That passed the mouldering Pier –
Just as the Granite crumb let go –
Our Savior, by a Hair –
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{45} Loeffelholz’s study of Dickinson’s love poems (\textit{The Value of Emily Dickinson}, chapter 2) offers a concise but perceptive analysis of this aspect of Dickinson’s poetry. Among other things, she underscores the risks involved in a number of these poems and reminds us that it is a mistake to read them in only vocational terms (49ff).
A second more, had dropped too deep
For fisherman to plumb –
The very profile of the Thought
Puts Recollection numb –

The possibility – to pass
Without a moment’s Bell –
Into Conjecture’s presence
Is like a Face of Steel –
That suddenly looks into our’s
With a metallic grin –
The Cordiality of Death –
Who + drills his Welcome in – + nails (Fr 243 A)

At the center of the poem is an experience of “Horror”—unspecifed but clearly seismic. The first line, though, situates itself after that moment, and in so doing, the poem as a whole exemplifies a feature that is widely considered characteristic of Dickinson’s work: writing from the moment after a significant (even traumatic) experience. David Porter, who was the first to develop this insight at length, writes that for Dickinson, the “crucial affair [...] is living after things happen. It is a preoccupation with afterknowledge, with living in the aftermath” (Idiom 9). He cites over eighty poems that exemplify what he calls Dickinson’s “engrossment in the afterward,” and he makes it clear there are plenty more (“Crucial,” 280, 290).

In 1861, however, this move is still new—it is, in fact, still in the making, and in several poems finalized this year, we can see Dickinson discovering new ways to make the most of such moments. The issue is partly wrapped up in lines 7 and 8—“The very profile of the Thought / Puts Recollection numb”—because here Dickinson signals the dilemma inherent in such poems. If experience numbs recollection, the poem must surely stop, or fall short, or at least stagger.

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46 Porter’s study, which remains the most comprehensive, appeared first in his essay “The Crucial Experience” (1974) and then, in slightly edited form, as the first chapter of The Modern Idiom (1981). See Brantley (chapter three), Stonum (73-74), Pollak (206-9), and Cameron (106-112).
47 Such a retrospective stance is not entirely new in 1861. We have seen how “Just lost, when I was saved!” (copied in 1860) locates itself immediately after a moment that remains undefined and open to interpretation, and Porter points to several poems from 1859 (Fr 122 and 124) as early examples.
Other poems do just that (e.g. “That scalds me now! That scalds me now!”), but as we have seen, Dickinson is newly intent on rendering such moments. In part, this is a question of finding an adequate language, but it is also, perhaps more fundamentally, a matter of deciding what that language will be marshalled to do. Will the poem gaze back at the event? Or will it linger in the moment of postexperience itself? The power of “That after Horror – that ’twas us –” lies precisely in its inability to look away from what has just happened. The arc of the poem enacts the way we are drawn back to what has happened, which is to say that, while it begins in the moment after, this poem is mostly devoted to finding language that will adequately render the experience itself.

In a poem copied onto a sheet at roughly same time, Dickinson’s answer to this question—whether to gaze back from the moment of aftermath or bring that moment to life—is different. It begins,

How many times these low feet staggered –
   Only the soldered mouth can tell –
   Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
   Try – can you lift the hasps of steel. (Fr 238, lines 1-4)

This poem offers the progression in reverse. We begin by looking back—presumably (as the rest of the poem makes clear) at the life of a “housewife,” recently deceased—and by the end of line 1, you might expect the poem to continue its backward gaze and to consider that life at length. Instead, in lines 2-4, and indeed for most of the poem, it leaps to a later time, the moment when this “Indolent Housewife” is “in Daisies – lain!” That is to say, the poem turns away from looking back: it embraces (finds language for) not the life that came before but the moment after that life, the moment when we find ourselves face to face with the corpse, making it a classic example of Porter’s poems of “aftermath.” As was the case in “That after Horror – that ’twas
us,” the poem toggles between two different ways of perching itself in that moment of after, only this time it moves from the act of looking back to the moment that comes later.

These two poems, then, respond differently to the challenge of writing about a recent experience: a poem might focus on finding the language needed to convey the way it felt, or it might focus on the “afterresonance” (another of Porter’s coinages [“Crucial” 281]). In the years and poems to come, Dickinson will explore both strategies. Poems like “A weight with Needles on the pounds” (Fr 294), “’Twas like a Maelstrom with a Notch” (Fr 425), and “He fumbles at your Soul” (Fr 477) look back and present the inner experience of such events; by contrast, poems such as “I got so I could hear his name” (Fr 292), “I felt my life with both my hands” (Fr 357), and “After Great Pain, a formal feeling comes” (Fr 372) commit wholly to that moment of afterexperience. These poems bring to life what can be felt, what can be set into language, but their concern is the life that manages, somehow, in spite of everything, to continue on.

These poems that position themselves in a moment of aftermath will become an essential part of Dickinson’s poetry in the years to some. If you know Dickinson’s later work, you will likely think of such familiar first lines as “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (Fr 372) and “It was not Death, for I stood up” (Fr 355) as occasions when Dickinson’s poetry likewise embraces a moment of postexperience, leaving the event itself unspecified but leaving no doubt as to the consequences. To this list, we can even add poems that seem to indicate their occasions more clearly, such as “I heard a fly buzz – when I died” (Fr 591) and “’Twas just this time, last year, I died” (Fr 344). As the first poem with “after” in its first line, “That after Horror – that ‘twas us” marks a moment of deepening exploration and understanding of the ways a poem might position itself in relation to the intense events she is increasingly drawn to write about.
Lest we think things are falling neatly into place for this young poet in the months after she turns thirty, the evidence from her workshop in 1861 suggests otherwise. Dickinson seems always to eschew the linear, and her evolution as a poet is no exception. Yes, the deepening sense of vocation and the emergence of poems that evoke moments of transformation speak to a quickening of poetic energies, and yes, the poems we have studied (whether they introduce new dimensions into her work or refine existing strategies) speak to sharpening skills. But if we pause to look around, her workshop holds a couple of surprises, particularly as it relates to her practice of preserving her own poems.

For one thing, in this same year, Dickinson can still take on the voice of a child or of speakers “with low, meek, or humble states of being” (Habegger 366-7).\(^48\) We find it at times in how the poems navigate the world (what we might call their worldview) and at times in the very language of the poem (the voice itself). Eberwein notes that “Dickinson’s poems on radical insufficiency were concentrated during the years from 1860 to 1863” (Strategies 62), which is to say, they overlap directly with the empowered bridal poems and the manifesto-like affirmations of singing. The poem that is most iconically identified with Dickinson—“I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Fr 260)—with its delightfully bold but innocent voice, dates from late 1861, but so does the erotically charged “Wild night! Wild nights!” which begins,

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    Wild night! Wild nights!
    Were I with thee
    Wild nights should be
    Our luxury! (Fr 269)
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It ends, “Might I but moor – tonight / In thee!”

Together, all of this conjures an odd confluence of Emily Dickinsons. We are once again face to face with the daughter escorted home by her father around the same time she had penned

\(^{48}\) Habegger is writing about the preponderance of such poems in 1859, but the terms apply for what we see later.
“These are the days when Birds come back,” the young woman who runs from Mr. Chapman but longs to talk with him about books. In terms of the poems, though, this leads to a small but important insight regarding her development as a poet. Where other poets typically progress from one stage to another of their careers, leaving behind the old while embracing the new, Dickinson’s path is different: her progress is not from one to another distinct phase but from a smaller to a larger palette of poems. Her breakthrough is not one of shedding an old skin but, rather, of learning (or deciding) to wear many and varied skins.

A second unlikely development in Dickinson’s workshop concerns the handwritten manuscripts themselves: around this time, we see a dramatic increase in the number of variants, those occasions in the manuscripts where Dickinson offers more than one word, phrase, or line for a particular spot in a poem. Their proliferation is all the more surprising because by mid-1860, Dickinson seems to have settled into a steady, consistent process. The fascicles of 1860 are made of just one kind of stationery, which Franklin describes as “wove, cream, lightly ruled” (MSB 92). She makes copies in ink; the handwriting is neat and small; after each poem, she draws a horizontal line. She punches two holes through four (or, in one case, five) sheets and binds them with thread. She “works steadily,” as Franklin puts it, and the results very much resemble “a finished product” (Variorum 20). When something needs to be changed after being copied onto one of these early sheets, whether because Dickinson changes her mind or because she errs in the act of copying, Franklin notes that she “used clean erasure, not overwriting or crossing out, and deftly squeezed in omitted letters.”

49 Franklin writes of this moment that, as she “copied poem after poem onto uniform sheets of stationery, she destroyed earlier versions, so that today few worksheets [Franklin’s word for rough drafts] survive for poems included in the fascicles. Each bound unit replaced multiplicity and confusion” (MSB ix-x).
Franklin is right, I believe, when he suggests that the main motive behind the creation of sheets and fascicles was “to reduce disorder” in her workshop. Before the fascicles, there were the sheets, and before the sheets, there were any number of drafts on loose slips or sheets of paper, an accumulation of (quite possibly) many years. So while the sheets and fascicles seem like a beginning to us, in the real time of her unfolding writing practice, they are more accurately thought of as a culmination: Fascicles 5 through 8—identical in construction, nearly identical in length, and consistent in stationery and formatting—are where the arc of her early years of writing seem finally to land (Franklin MSB xi; Variorum 20-21).

If we look more closely, however, there are small signs that the copying process is not as straightforward as it might seem. For one thing, her handwriting slowly gets larger, and soon, there is perceptibly more space between words.50 More noticeably, in the summer of 1859, Dickinson lists her first variant in the margin of a poem that is otherwise a clean, fair copy in ink: next to the word “home,” which ends the fifth line of the poem, Dickinson inserts a “+” and the word “rest” (MSB I: 86). Thus, the line in question might read either “Her heart is fit for rest” or “Her heart is fit for home.” For the first time, the revision and copying process yields a poem that can be said to exist in two different versions, depending on which alternative is adopted. The same thing happens again on four occasions in 1860.51

50 The larger handwriting leads to the kinds of unexpected line breaks that are celebrated by Howe, Hart, Smith, and others. While each line and poem should be studied individually, I follow Franklin, Mitchell, and others in not taking such line breaks to be constitutive of meaning.

51 Twice, Dickinson interlines an alternative directly above the word it might replace: “Signor” above “Savior” and “a familiar” above “an accustomed” (MSB 111, 117). Before binding these two sheets and two others into Fascicle 7, she goes further and adds a slip with two variant lines for “She died – this is the way she died.” (MSB see 120-121; Variorum notes to Fr 154). Still another kind of unresolved alternative appears in Fr 146, also copied onto a sheet in 1860: here, after the first three stanzas, Dickinson inserts “Or” between the third and fourth stanzas. The space between stanzas is the same as elsewhere, so it appears to be a later insertion. Johnson and Franklin take the fourth and fifth stanzas to be alternatives for the second and third stanzas, meaning the poem as copied contains two distinct versions of a three-stanza poem (MSB 112-113; notes to Fr 146)
Then, as we know, something halts her course. In the second half of 1860, only five poems emerge from her workshop, including two we have already seen: the passionate but pensive “Did the Harebell loose her girdle” (copied in pencil in the second half of 1860) and the deferential but devoted “Mute – thy coronation” (copied neatly in pencil onto a loose fragment of paper). These two poems are all the more remarkable for the fact that Dickinson never returns to them, never copies them onto a sheet, and thus never includes them in a fascicle. If we add a third poem that we have seen—the faithful outcry of “Just lost, when I was saved!”—we again get a sense of the many directions Dickinson’s writing is facing during the second half of 1860.

Her snow-filled birthday comes and goes; news of the war comes and stays. Early 1861 brings the second Master letter and poems such as “A Wife – at Daybreak I shall be,” “I taste a liquor never brewed,” and (soon after) “I shall know why – when Time is over.” Dickinson is once again copying sheets, and she initially picks up where she left off. There are eight sheets that Franklin dates to “early” or “spring,” 1861, and they resemble what has come before: folded sheets, punched holes, knotted thread. Also consistent is the occasional, but only occasional, appearance of variants: in these eight sheets from early 1861, there are only two such cases, bringing the total number before the summer of 1861 to at best (depending on how you count them) a half dozen.

Returning now to the second half of 1861, the thirteen (labeled “summer,” “late,” or “second half” of 1861 by Franklin) are characterized by a steady increase in the number of variants. In these thirteen sheets and leaves, there are thirteen variants, ranging from single words to whole lines. (It is here, for example, that we find the leaf containing “That after Horror

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52 See Franklin’s notes to Fr 131 through 135 (Variorum I: 171-175). These poems were either sent with letters at this time or copied and retained as loose poems. Three (Fr 131, 132, and 135) were later copied onto sheets and bound into fascicles.
– that was us” with “nails” in the margin as an alternative for “drills.”) Dickinson has yet to work out a system for such moments: on some occasions, she interlines an alternative just above or below where it might fit; on others, she simply adds the line to the margin. Sometimes, she inserts a “+” to indicate the spot, sometimes not. On one occasion, she fills the gap between the first and second stanzas with an alternative for an earlier line and uses a “+” to mark both the spot and the alternative. If the inclusion of alternatives has previously been sporadic, it now averages one per sheet.

There are two crucial things about this growing habit of including variants in what otherwise appear to be “final” versions of the poems. The first is perhaps a cautionary note, and here I enter into conjecture. Based on my study of images and reproductions of these manuscript pages—and I have seen only copies and digitized images, not the originals—it is apparent that at least some of the variants are in a different script. It is clearly Dickinson’s handwriting, and the difference may derive (as Franklin notes of annotations in the Master Letters) from the use of a different pen or pencil, perhaps even a differently sharpened pencil. But even if that is the case, there remains an outstanding question: exactly when did Dickinson add these variants to her drafts? As far as I know, no one has studied the dating of the variants separate from the texts proper, and it may well be impossible, given the sometimes cramped, sometimes harried nature of the margins and interlined spaces. But it seems important to keep in mind that any attempt at a chronology is necessarily tentative: exactly when she decided that these neat drafts in ink might contain variants remains uncertain.53

The second point is that, once here, the variants are here to stay: by 1862, Dickinson’s tendency to include variants explodes into a widespread habit. If we turn to Fascicle 12 and

53 We face a similar problem with the length of the fascicles. Fascicles 9, 10, and 11 grow longer than the first eight fascicles, being comprised (respectively) of seven, five, and eight sheets. But we cannot date the binding.
exclude the first sheet (which was copied in 1861), we find it contains forty-one variants on the six sheets and one leaf in handwriting from 1862 (MSB 231-256; Miller Preserved 137-147).\textsuperscript{54} Some poems contain dozens, meaning that the number of possible “poems” (assuming one poem consists of selecting, in each case, one of the variants) seems to increase exponentially.

To some readers, Dickinson has by now begun to write a new kind of poem, one that cannot be contained in our usual framing of the lyric.\textsuperscript{55} At the other extreme are the views of Franklin, who considers poems with variants to be unfinished (Introduction 22). Dickinson herself (in her correspondence) and Susan (when she sends poems to periodicals) always chooses one of the variants.\textsuperscript{56} The most interesting interpretation of this phenomenon comes from Melanie Hubbard, who convincingly shows that the practice was widespread. She finds examples of other nineteenth-century texts, e.g. in texts for speeches, where alternatives are listed even on fair-copied pages (“Word” 40-42). Hubbard traces the practice to the commonly held view that word choice was paramount, a view that she in turn connects to prevailing views of language and composition which Dickinson would have encountered in her textbooks. “Dickinson’s consistent generation of variants,” writes Hubbard, “stems from the urgent impetus of the rhetorical theories she and her peers imbibed” (“Word” 54). Hubbard’s argument highlights the absolute importance of finding the right word.

\textbf{To make sense of the changes in Dickinson’s workshop practices, we need to once again consider the moment before us not as the beginning of something new but as a step that follows previous steps.} I sometimes wonder if those of us writing today can imagine the

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\textsuperscript{54} For a thoughtful reading of this Fascicle 12, see Loeffelholz (“What is a Fascicle” 30-34).
\textsuperscript{55} See Cameron, who famously argues that Dickinson’s inscription “troubles” our definition of the lyric (5).
\textsuperscript{56} Johnson’s and Franklin’s Variorums do indicate variants. But until Miller’s Emily Dickinson’s Poems As She Preserved Them, no reading edition of Dickinson’s poetry had included them.
age of handwritten manuscripts, particularly as it relates to the making of “fair copies.” To anyone writing before the years of word processors, copying a poem was labor intensive. Syllable by syllable, word by word, line by line—to copy a poem by hand is to face anew and either reaffirm an earlier decision or revise it. In either case, the process is one of discernment. Certainly, even when copying by hand, we might (mindlessly) recreate the text exactly as it was, but we are invited to revisit the poem, to re-hear it. Slowed by the process of the hand moving across the page, the act of copying is necessarily one of engagement. If more than a few days have passed, you might even hear it in fresh ways, notice things you had not noticed before, and find yourself newly alert to what you like, to what makes you cringe, and even (at times) to affects you have created without intending to.

In the midst of all this, the emergence of variants tells us something about what is and what is not changing in Dickinson’s workshop. Specifically, the fact that they emerge as early as 1859 and are recur in 1860 indicates that, from early on, Dickinson was not averse to including such gestures in her sheets and fascicles. What changes—visibly in 1861 and then dramatically in 1862—is not her openness to alternate readings but her awareness of, suddenly, so many possibilities for a poem. What changes is that she now has more ideas than will fit into a particular spot in a poem. The years of apprenticeship—and this does not strike me as odd in any way—have opened her eyes and ears to all that is at stake in even the seemingly small decision about a word. If she had one word to do all the things she imagined being done, she would have chosen it. Indeed, everywhere where there is no variant, she has done just that.

We have seen this characteristic of her writing, her ongoing willingness to re-think something, to offer a different take. She can write poems that clearly prefer the love available in this world and poems that look ahead to the love that will come in the next; she can express faith
and doubt; she can boldly declare that this life is not “conclusion” and she can exclaim she is but a “speck upon a ball.” To Dickinson, each new poem and (in the copying process) each new version of each poem is a fresh undertaking. Dickinson’s variants similarly present moments of re-thinking, only here, the site of re-thinking is a precise moment in a particular poem. As such, they are simply a record of the poem’s possibilities, a record that makes complete sense if we recall the practice of copying that necessarily accompanied the presence of a poem on a page. We need to recall that any future version of the poem will have to be copied anew. Much like we saw in the case of punctuation, different performances of the poem might best be served by one or another of the available options, but unlike those marks of emphasis and rhythm, it was evidently imperative to Dickinson to have those options at her fingertips, and she had a ready-made format in which to do it.

As a record of possibilities, the poem on its sheet is necessarily other than the hypothetical poem on the pages of a book. Franklin’s sense that the poems with variants are “unfinished” is appealing because, in every case that I know of, Dickinson chooses just one alternate when sending these poems to correspondents. That fact alone offers powerful evidence that she envisioned the poems as eventually containing just one of the listed options. On this view, the presence of variants on a neatly copied page seems odd to us because we have in our heads the template of a finished poem; thus, these poems with their occasionally head-spinning number of variations must be either unfinished or radical. But “unfinished” misses something, too, and I prefer to see them in terms of what they have achieved: as a record of the poem’s possibilities, they are as finished as they need to be. In a culture of handwritten...
manuscripts, where there is always a copy to be made, there is in the end perhaps nothing all that surprising about such a record.

What, in the end, are Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts? They are a poet’s record of her own poems. What more needs to be said? They record possibilities for more than one version of the poem, sometimes explicitly (in the case of variants) and sometimes implicitly (in the case of punctuation and emphasis which, as we have seen, is always open to revision). To characterize the sheets in this way is to carve out a space for Dickinson’s copying as a private practice that is nevertheless public-facing: private, in that these are copies made for herself, for future use; public-facing, in that Dickinson had what she needed to make copies for others. The sheets (and, I would argue, any copies or scraps that she retained) are essentially a poet’s notebook. I do not mean that she has embraced the act of not deciding, as some have argued. But at the meeting place of her copying practices and her evident inclination to re-think almost anything, the sheets and other writings in her possession are just that, sheets and writings in her possession. In the age of handwritten manuscripts and copying to which she belonged, they were complete, even if, as I believe, she would have settled on one version of each poem in some future (imaginary) moment of publication.

Before leaving Dickinson—she has a lot of writing to do, after all—I want to look at one last poem that captures something essential of the lyric practice I see emerging in 1861. By now it should be clear that Dickinson’s development or breakthrough is a tale too fraught (by her practice and by the archive) to tell emphatically, and this poem is in conversation with many that have preceded it in terms of poetics. Having spent time with the poems and Dickinson’s habits in her early years of writing, we are poised to read this poem well. At some point in the
spring of 1861, Dickinson copies the following poem onto the bottom of a cream-colored sheet with blue lines, which was in turn included as the final page in Fascicle 9.

Some – keep the Sabbath – going to church –
I – keep it – staying at Home –
With a Bobolink – for a Chorister –
And an Orchard – for a Dome –

Some – keep the Sabbath, in Surplice –
I – just wear my wings –
And instead of tolling the bell, for church –
Our little Sexton – sings –

“God” – preaches – a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So – instead of getting to Heaven – at last –
I’m – going – all along! (Fr 236 B)

On the surface, the poem is simple, its theology unthreatening, so much so that it was published in *The Round Table* in March, 1864, where it was titled “The Sabbath.” On that occasion, the punctuation and capitalizations were normalized, and “getting” in line 11 was replaced by “going” (notes to Fr 236). Higginson and Todd considered the poem sufficiently traditional to be included, titled “A Service of Song,” in *Poems* (1890).

The first stanza yields a clear set of oppositions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chorister</td>
<td>Bobolink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dome</td>
<td>Orchard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The worldview espoused in the poem, with its glimpse of a “natural” religion, would have been familiar to nineteenth-century readers. To Calvinism’s insistence on our (and nature’s) depravity, a tradition of writing had responded that held nature up as Godly and, in some cases, as God’s own book. The easy ballad meter (only line 5 breaks the pattern of syllables and stresses) counters the weighty gloom of orthodoxy with an almost jovial rejoinder. Salvation, the poem
argues, can be found alone, in nature, without scripture. In his reading of the poem, Reynolds
dubs it a poem of “redefinition” because it takes familiar concepts and recasts them “along
totally secular lines” (171).

But the poem is complex in ways I have yet to see explored, largely because of how the
act of definition is handled over the course of the three stanzas. If the oppositions of stanza 1 are
clear, what of the oppositions in stanza 2?

Some […] in Surplice I, just wear my Wings
tolling the Bell for Church our little Sexton sings

“Surplice” belongs unambiguously to the world of churches, but do wings belong
unambiguously to home? Here, the established categories begin to slip. These “Wings” are
clearly metaphorical, and they borrow as much from the world of churches and angels as they do
from the world of birds (the bobolink) and poetry (the poet’s wings). As such, “Wings” muddies
the easy oppositions found in stanza 1. The same can be said of “our little Sexton”: we know this
is the Bobolink, but the familiar-sounding “our little” borrows some of the familiarity associated
with home to describe an official church position.

Overall, the oppositions laid out with similes in the first stanza are revived in the second
stanza through metaphor. But instead of the sharply articulated contrast between what “some” do
and what “I” do, both speaker and bird are rendered in the language of the church, so that the
categories of “Home” and “Church” are loosened, blurred. We reach the third and final stanza
with a sense that the early oppositions are not so easy, that the words we are using are not so
straightforward:

“God” – preaches – a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
In this third stanza, the very words in use ("God," "Clergyman," and "Sermon") are being redefined right before our eyes: "God" and "Clergyman" now mean the bird, and "Sermon" now means the bird’s song, even as they retain their old meanings. The worlds have merged, the words have grown, and the blurring of what were initially two easily opposable lists is nearly complete.

The final couplet completes the act of redefinition. Our usual understanding of the word "Heaven" (as it is used in church) must expand for the sake of the final two lines: while retaining part of its original meaning (its positive associations, its status as desired), it has also been reframed as a daily experience rather than a final destination. The significance of the word "getting" (Dickinson’s choice in both of the copies in her hand) versus “going” (the emendation apparently made by the editors of The Round Table) now becomes clear:

So – instead of getting to Heaven – at last –
I’m – going – all along! (Fr 236 B)

The poem contrasts two views of spiritual practice, with “getting to” or attaining heaven on the one (traditional) hand, and “going – all along –” to heaven on the other (unorthodox) hand. The pair of dashes around “at last” also invite direct comparison, or contrast, with “going,” which is likewise bracketed by dashes: the insistence is on the present unfolding process rather than the static moment of arrival: on this view, going trumps at last. Even as the poem has worked to elide two opposing categories, it has worked to establish a new kind of opposition, this time having to do with practice: “getting to… at last” versus “going…all along.”

As we experience the poem in real time, then, moving in step with the present tense voice, we reach the end of the poem to find the two seemingly opposing worlds have blended. The categories of the first stanza, loosened in the second stanza, have been fused in the third. To put the matter in terms of our earlier categories, we might ask, In which column do we put
“God”? What about “Clergyman,” “Sermon,” or “Heaven”? In each case, the answer would be that the term belongs in both columns: the poem which began with a foundation of contraries has worked to undermine them. In just twelve lines, one way of seeing the world has been replaced by another.

Despite the veneer of simplicity, this poem is complex at the level of poetics. In particular, we might note how each stanza works differently. Stanza 1 uses syntax (some do this, I do that) and similes (Bobolink for Chorister, Orchard for Dome) to lay out the poem’s argument at the sentence level. Similes are a personal device, in the sense that even as two items are likened, we as readers are aware of the likener, of the speaker who is taking stock of the world and reckoning with similarities and difference. The second stanza leaps from simile to metaphor, and the blurring of categories creates a world where what was previously observed to be separate is now experienced as similar. Then, in the third stanza, this rich and complex overlapping of the two worlds becomes complete: the oppositions laid out in stanza 1 are dispelled in stanza 3. By embracing the new possibilities that come with each new stanza, this poem demonstrates a poetic nimbleness that will undergird many of Dickinson’s later poems.

Such a poem demonstrates a keen awareness of how the present tense can be put to use in a lyric poem. Like her practice of apostrophe, though, it is hardly a new invention. Both, as Culler reminds us, are as old as the lyric itself. Both ebb and flow as the lyric moves through time. What we see in the particular cases of particular poets is how they bring one or the other of these practices fruitfully into their own writing. In Dickinson’s case, to the extent that it grows naturally out of her earlier writings, it demonstrates a consolidating comfort with (and understanding of) the power to be found in the unfolding of the poem, something achieved by a kind of inward apprenticeship; to the extent that she gleaned certain aspects of her poetics from
her reading of other poets, it demonstrates her habit of keen reading in a form of outward apprenticeship. She has, we might say, been “getting there all along.”

Dickinson’s achievement is to tap powerfully and skillfully into the resources that are always there for the lyric poet. In this, she joins the long tradition of poets who have likewise taken what they needed from both their direct inheritance (from poets) and their indirect apprenticeship (to the form of the lyric itself). Poets from time out of mind have put apostrophe and the present tense to good use, and around the same time that Dickinson is coming of age as a poet, Whitman is doing so in his own way: he, too, will raise apostrophe to the foreground, and his poems will (in their enumerations and lists, in their references to his own act of writing and loafing) work to bring the present tense moment around him to life.

But Dickinson’s way is inward, her present tense is the mind at work, and to judge by the poems she writes, she is intensely interested in bringing that moment to life. “Stop just a minute – let me think!” she writes in one poem (Fr 266), and “Repeat it slow” she asks in another (Fr 170) she begs in another, just as in her early letters she was given to exclaiming “I hardly know what I have said” (L 190) or “my pen is not swift enough to answer my purpose at all” (L 9).

To Dickinson, thought is fast. Her response, though, is not to slow down but to speed up, as if, done right, captured accurately, the language of the poem might present the unfolding of thought in all its grace or graceless speed. We have seen something of this pace in the effusiveness of her early letters. With the advantage of hindsight, we can say that as she moves from her early to later letters, and more generally as she moves from her epistolary prose to her writing in poetic form, she loses something of the effusiveness but nothing of the pace.58 Because say what you will about a Dickinson poem, rarely does the reader get ahead of the

58 The most thorough treatment of Dickinson’s poems as “thinking” poems is Deppman’s.
poem: the language seems designed to keep us just on the cusp of its unfolding, with the dashes and commas combining to provide pauses, hesitations, and gestures of emphasis along the way. As a result, we are brought into the moment of the poem, the present tense of its unfolding. As Peggy O’Brien writes, “There is no poet […] who lives more on the edge of every single second than Emily Dickinson” (469).

Put another way: If you were going to create a body of poetry that honored the lyric as a present-tense experience, you would, if you could, invent precisely the poetics that Dickinson develops in her work and that we have been tracing all along—the quick pace, the leaps, the commas and dashes that hold it together while pushing us along without letting us stop, the effort to keep up with the pace of thought and to set it down in language. You would want, too, something of the intimacy of letters and the safety to think aloud, to seemingly follow the thinking where it wants to go. Of course, Dickinson did not sit back and decide all this. Rather, to go by her poems as evidence, the language she was drawn to was all of these things. It is what lyric language sounded like to her: metered, fast-moving, filled with the stops and starts that characterize the cusp of experience.

What we see powerfully in “Some – keep the Sabbath – going to church –” is just how much can be done, or dared, in the duration of even a short, short poem, a dare that is prefigured in many of the poems we have already seen. But the wonder is that even in the past tense Dickinson can achieve such effects. As one last example, consider the fully past-tense “He was weak, and I was strong – then –” (Fr 221). Among the things this poem does, I like to say, is bring the present tense subtly to life.

“The present tense?” a student will ask. “But all the verbs are in the past tense.” Sure, I will insist, but the poem is in the present tense, right?
What I should say is, the experience of reading this poem is in the present tense, but that is too weak, because in a superficial way, every time we read a poem, we are bringing it to life in the present tense. But a good poet does more than that, and Dickinson is clearly aware of the way a poem’s form can shape its performance, which is to say, the experience of a reader who brings it to life. In this case, our experience of the poem is underscored in ways that we feel but might not at first notice. Here is the poem again with the number of syllables listed:

He was weak, and I was strong – then – 8
So He let me lead him in – 7
I was weak, and he was strong then – 8
So I let him lead me – Home – 7

'Twas’nt far – the door was near – 7
'Twas’nt dark – for He went – too – 7
'Twas’nt loud, for He said nought – 7
That was all I cared to know. 7

Day knocked – and we must part – 6
Neither – was strongest – now – 6
He strove – and I strove – too – 6
We didn’t do it – tho’! (Fr 221) 6

Line by line, stanza by stanza, the poem contracts. This poem that narrates a slow then lasting process of coming together, of two collapsing into one, of a “He” and “I” merging into a “we” in the final stanza—the poem itself collapses in on itself so that “parting,” that feeling of two entities pulling away from each other, seems impossible. As the lines get shorter, we experience, however imperceptibly, the kind of merging and perhaps even some of the constriction that the poem articulates. Strive as we might, there is no escaping the increasingly narrow lines. At the same time, the number of dashes that interrupt lines (i.e. not counting dashes at the end of lines) goes from two to three to six; if we add commas to the count, we go from four to four to six pauses. As the lines get slightly shorter, the breaks become slightly more common, resulting in a reading experience that slowly falls into itself, very much like the two beings in the poem.
This is the wonder of the lyric poem, and it points to the resources available to a practiced poet. To say that Dickinson is able to create a palpable sense of the unfolding moment with or without the (literal) present tense of verbs is to say she is adept at wielding the tools of the lyric. This is what lyric does: rhythm, sound, and form insist that our reading of a poem is an experience that transcends the simple communication of content: we feel the leaps, the concision, the patterns of sound, the hesitations, and the moments of emphasis each time we read (or perform) the poem. Moreover, those effects underscore our experience of the poem each time we read it anew. In Culler’s words, the power and the incantatory effects of poetic language contribute to a dimension of the lyric that is “ritualistic,” which in turn emphasizes that the lyric is made not for communicative purposes but for re-performance—i.e. our reading of it. On this view, the lyric becomes the “iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special ‘now,’ of lyric articulation” (226). With her variants prepared, her punctuation poised, her lines and stanzas crafted to move fast despite the stutterings of thought encountered along the way, Dickinson is ready for the next performance, which is to say the next copy, while we, each time we read a particular incarnation of a poem, breathe deep and bring our own performance of it to life. Dickinson sings, and we sing along. Briefly, when we read, Dickinson’s present tense and ours coincide.
Coda

Sometimes, when I read Fr 633 aloud—to students in a class, say, or at a poetry reading—I read the first stanza, then pause:

I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –
I felt the columns close –
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres –
I touched the Universe –

Among the many things to marvel at in these lines is the authority of the “I,” willing to appropriate the words of Jesus (“I am the Way”) in order to articulate a sense of cosmic aloneness, not with a scalded cry but with measured reflection. This is not outright skepticism: the claim is not that there is no heaven (nor that Jesus is not the Way) but that heaven is inaccessible, is once again “what I cannot reach.” The poem asserts an existence that rumbles on without the certainties afforded by full-fledged faith: as in so many areas of her life and art, Dickinson claims part of what the culture offers as a perch from which to sing. Whether the columns are hosts of angels who close their ranks or the solid pillars awaiting a push from Samson, the path ahead is bleak. But the tone is not bleak: this is an “I” with the power to move and act. Earth reversed its Hemispheres? Well, I touched the Universe.

Where some Dickinson poems conjure moments of pain or transformation that are personal, here it is the Earth that undergoes a change, turning (as I imagine it) upside down. Far from being nudged toward dissolution or chaos, though, this “I” is able to reach out and “touch the universe,” which I am tempted to say is the most thrilling moment, for me, of the many thrilling moments in Dickinson’s poetry, but I cannot because of what comes next: the dash and the line ending and the stanza break that conspire to leave us hovering, momentarily, in that space of possibility and wonder—what kind of power is embodied in that “touching”? I can sit for a long time imagining it, first as an inward sounding, then as an outward reaching, but
however I imagine it, the “I” at the center of it all continues to amaze me—before the pause ends and the poem offers what truly is the most remarkable moment, for me, in all of Dickinson’s poetry, the leap from that touch to what comes next:

And back it slid – and I alone –
A speck upon a Ball –
Went out upon Circumference –
Beyond the Dip of Bell –

In other poems, the things that slide include bolts, hours, guillotines, the moon, and saffron (Fr 1017, 325, 593, 311, 1733). The wonder of the universe sliding back, of that touch leading to an opening, is that it permits “I alone” to step forward to see what can be seen from this newly accessed point—in five short lines, this poem has charted a journey into the heart (or is it the outer rim?) of existence. There is no “Way,” but there is a path, and this “I” is on the path. What I find thrilling about the second stanza as it unfolds is the way it combines an all-too-human sense of aloneness (“I alone – / A speck upon a Ball”) with a sense of power and possibility as the “I” steps out on this journey, undaunted.

Were we to continue—we would need hours—we could do many things: focus on words like “circumference,” on images like “Dip of Bell,” or on the startling metaphor of “speck upon a Ball.” We could pursue the way Dickinson might have understood the words “Universe” and “Hemisphere” and in what way the earth she so loved was, to her, a “Ball.” Any of these steps would continue the conversation fruitfully, generatively. Better yet, though, we might just read the poem, read it once, twice, a few times, so that its movement becomes ours, its breath becomes our breath, and the step from Jesus to speck – from closing columns to Ball to (finally) that place of possibility that lies Beyond the Dip of Bell – opens to us as well.
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