

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE PROBLEM OF GENRE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation seeks to bridge the gap between literary and cultural approaches that has long been a hallmark of Dickinson criticism. By returning to the materials that Dickinson used when constructing her fascicles, to the cultural practices that she adopted and rejected in the process, and to the specifics of her writing and binding process, this dissertation argues that her manuscripts raise, instead of resolve, questions about genre and nineteenth-century poetics. The opening chapter undertakes a material analysis of the fascicles. By focusing not just on how texts are read, but on how they are made, it demonstrates that the fascicles are markedly different from the commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks into which nineteenth-century women ordinarily copied verses, as well as from homemade hymnbooks, diaries, and collections of sermons. The second chapter explores Dickinson's fascicles in relation to her letter-writing practices, analyzing where the two practices intersect and highlighting the ways in which Dickinson relied on the existence of both to rethink the formal structures and the rhetorical strategies of her poems. The third chapter explores Dickinson's poems on

death, analyzing how the fascicle form undoes the expectation of closure that is intrinsic to the elegy proper and arguing that the structure of the fascicles—as internally-divided clusters of poems that accumulate across the sheets—allows Dickinson the latitude she needs to return to the scene and subject of mourning over and over again. The final chapter reads Dickinson’s fascicles in relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, analyzing how the two poetic projects respond to a Wordsworthian notion of poetry that sutures the past and present together. Throughout, this dissertation treats Dickinson’s writing practices as integral to her poetics, seeking to move beyond literary histories that focus on the poet’s finished product to analyze the struggle with genre that is visible in the poet’s process.

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Introduction

What Are Dickinson's Fascicles?

Between 1858 and 1864, Emily Dickinson copied and bound over eight hundred of her poems into forty homemade books. Mabel Loomis Todd was the first to use the word “fascicle” to describe these books, but she was the last one to see them in this form, because she unbound them in order to publish the poems as individual lyrics. For most of the twentieth century, readers would know Dickinson as the writer of hundreds of small, often cryptic individual poems. R. W. Franklin's reconstruction of the fascicles in 1981 gave scholars their first published access to Dickinson's original groupings, raising new questions about her writing process, intentions, and poetics. Since then, critics have generated various readings of these materials: some treat the fascicles as autobiographical narratives or as lyric sequences, while others analyze the dominant tropes and images that run throughout each fascicle.¹ Instead of proceeding from the assumption that the fascicles are meant to be read as books of poetry, this dissertation looks anew at these objects in order to argue that they are sites of discontinuity and experimentation. In returning to the fascicles, I not only shift attention from Dickinson's individual poems to the generic consequences of her poetic practices; I illuminate the ways in which her poetry and poetics were in dialogue with those of her contemporaries.

One of the things that has been missing from the tradition of criticism on the fascicles is an analysis of what these objects can tell us about Dickinson's compositional practices. By looking closely at these forty fascicles—each of which measures

¹ For the major studies of the fascicles, see Ruth Miller, Shurr (*Marriage*), Rosenthal and Gall, Cameron (*Choosing*), Oberhaus, and Heginbotham. See the section, “Reading the Fascicles: A History of Criticism,” in Chapter 1 for my analysis of these studies.

approximately five inches across by eight inches long and each of which is composed of paper that is mostly cream, either wove or laid, with light ruling—we can see that making the fascicles was a detailed and time consuming process.² Dickinson made clean copies of her texts onto folded sheets of stationery, stacked these sheets, made two holes through them along the left-hand margin, and bound them together with string (fig. 1). She did not do this with everything she wrote during these years, and she did not copy and bind the pieces as they were written. Consequently, texts that were written in different years sometimes appear in the same fascicle, and in several instances the same text appears in more than one fascicle.³

Each fascicle contains between four and seven folded sheets of stationery, yet in several fascicles Dickinson also included single leaves and slips of smaller paper, in most cases to include the end of a text or its variant words. Dickinson most often marked the end of each entry and the beginning of the next with a portion of blank space, a single line drawn horizontally across the page, or simply the beginning of a new page. Her entries often consume more than one page of the same folded sheet, but only once did Dickinson allow a text to continue onto the next sheet.⁴ She did not number, title, or

² All material observations about the fascicles come from Franklin's comments in his introduction to *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* and from my first-hand experience with the fascicles housed at the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College and the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Many thanks to the Emily Dickinson International Society for providing me first with a graduate research fellowship and later with the Scholar-in-Amherst Award, both of which enabled me to work with the fascicles at Amherst. Many thanks to the Mellon Foundation for providing me with a grant to work at the Houghton Library.

³ See Heginbotham for a detailed analysis of the poems that appear in more than one fascicle.

⁴ While Franklin argues that this occurs in two places (Fascicles 2 and 33), the mutilation of Fascicle 2 that took place after Dickinson's death makes it impossible to deduce this about that fascicle. I discuss this situation at length in Chapter 1.

otherwise mark the fascicles themselves or the texts that appeared in them. When she was finished copying and binding, she destroyed her earlier drafts.⁵

By returning to these materials and to the writing practices that they make visible, I aim to look anew at these objects and to open up some of the questions that previous literary analysis has closed down. For instance, what does Dickinson's curious and insistent practice of making fascicles have to do with the forms and central concerns of the poems she copied and bound in this way? How does the existence of the fascicles change our understanding of her rich and varied correspondence? How did she use these assortments of poems that are both flexible and tightly bound to experiment with the limits of genre? By attempting to answer such questions, I have placed myself in the bizarre position of reader and interpreter of texts for which Dickinson may have never imagined such an audience.

This dissertation would not be possible without the existence of four books on Emily Dickinson: R. W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (1990), Martha Nell Smith's *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (1992), and Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005). Each of these studies has taken Dickinson's fascicles seriously; each has also raised important questions about nineteenth-century writing and reading practices. It is through exposure to this scholarship—scholarship that at the most basic level questions the ways in which we read and why—and through the necessary act of drawing boundary lines between my work and theirs that the crucial work of this dissertation is done.

⁵ There are a few instances in which Dickinson retained an earlier draft, but out of the over eight hundred texts bound in the fascicles, this occurred only a handful of times.

My initial fascination with the fascicles was produced in response to Franklin's reproductions of them. To open his two-volume edition of Dickinson's manuscripts is to be transported back in time to Dickinson's desk and allowed to look over her shoulder as she copied her poems onto the folded sheets of stationery. Subsequent trips to the archives, though, revealed the disparity between the tidiness of Franklin's edition and the messiness of Dickinson's actual process and product. Because Franklin reproduces facsimiles of the fascicles in an enormous two-volume book, his edition does not convey how little these objects actually look like books. This disjunction led me to question how Dickinson actually made them and what cultural and literary practices she was appropriating when she did this.

Cameron's study of the fascicles depends heavily on Franklin's work as her book takes seriously—possibly for the first time—the question of the identity of the fascicles. Unlike the analyses that came before hers, Cameron does not search for a theme or a story that gives Dickinson's fascicle project a sense of coherence or purpose.⁶ Instead, Cameron suggests that we read the relation between fascicle poems the same way that we read the relation of Dickinson's variant words and phrases to the poems to which they are attached. By treating the binding of poems into fascicles as an extension of Dickinson's practice of choosing not to choose between variants, Cameron links one set of Dickinson's compositional practices to another. I have taken inspiration from Cameron's determination to see Dickinson's poetic practices as intimately bound up with her writing practices, but unlike Cameron, I do not assume that these poems are the lyrics or lyric sequences that she takes them to be. In my analysis, Dickinson's writing practices reveal

⁶ In the most radical case of narrative reading, Shurr (*Marriage*) interprets the whole fascicle project as a story of a secret affair and marriage.

that she was thinking about and challenging these very generic categories and assumptions.

Whereas Cameron argues that the fascicles are Dickinson's most important texts, Martha Nell Smith focuses her analysis on Dickinson's letters and letter-poems. Analyzing the writing that Dickinson and her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, passed back and forth over the hedge, Smith highlights the ways in which Dickinson took herself seriously as a writer, "publishing" her work in what critics have tended to regard as private contexts. Smith's attention to this primary relationship in Dickinson's life forces readers to revise their image of Dickinson as the most solitary of poets whose poetic practices were so idiosyncratic as to defy contextualization. My analysis of Dickinson's various (and often conflicting) compositional practices builds on Smith's groundbreaking intervention, for her highly nuanced readings of both Dickinson's situation and the texts she created have suggested that Dickinson's writing can most fruitfully be read in the context of her contemporaries.

While Cameron has focused on the poems in the fascicles and Smith has focused on the letters, Jackson has complicated Dickinson criticism by arguing that we can never really know what it was Dickinson was writing. According to Jackson, twentieth-century criticism has turned Dickinson into the lyric poet that we consider her today, as critics have engaged in a "lyric reading" of Dickinson's highly eclectic texts and purified her poems for the purposes of literary analysis. Jackson's reading of what has happened to Dickinson's texts in the hands of literary critics suggests that a major disjunction exists between the texts that Dickinson's wrote and the texts that we read. By bringing this

disjunction to light, Jackson has invited scholars to rethink the assumptions about genre that they bring to bear on Dickinson's texts.

Each of these studies highlights the objects that Dickinson made and in doing so suggests that the process of composition does not exist purely in the imagination but in specific material practices. Through a detailed analysis of Dickinson's writing, copying, and binding of her texts, I hope to show that an analysis of these practices provides us with the opportunity to situate Dickinson's writings within the history of nineteenth-century verse copying and book-making without ignoring the essential aspects of form and poetics that have always made her poems so powerful to her readers. In the pages to come I will investigate a variety of material textual objects—the folded pages that actually comprise the fascicles, the pages that incorporate fascicle texts but are external to these bounded objects, and the letters and enclosures that circulated within Dickinson's circle of acquaintances at the time that she was making the fascicles. These materials will allow us to see the cultural and historical meanings embedded in Dickinson's practices as well as the formal—and specifically generic—complexities of her larger poetic project.

Instead of assuming that we already know what Dickinson's fascicles are, my dissertation seeks to disrupt the reader's relationship to these texts and to the critical apparatus that can be brought to bear on them. When such a disruption occurs—should it occur successfully—the reader is forced to reassess the nature of the thing he or she are reading without necessarily relying on the generic categories that would otherwise help him or her make sense of it. This project does not enter into the debate over how we should define “genre”—as, for instance, rules, species, patterns of textual features, or reader conventions—but seeks to show that each of these assumptions about what genre

is has been inconsistently yet enthusiastically applied to the fascicles.⁷ While one might argue that it is impossible to read without a prior sense of a text's genre, as any act of reading is necessarily informed by a reader's generic expectations, I hope to show that returning to the scene of composition and construction is one way of rethinking our assumptions about the various literary and nonliterary genres that Dickinson engaged as she made her fascicles.⁸

Each chapter tackles a different issue raised by Dickinson's construction of the fascicles. Each also proposes a way of reading the fascicles that has not before been addressed by Dickinson scholarship. The first two chapters focus on the material format of the fascicles and the poems that Dickinson copied and bound into these groupings. I begin by foregrounding the individual, folded fascicle sheets onto which Dickinson copied her poems, arguing that this practice was informed by but is also quite different from nineteenth-century conventions for copying verses and for making books by hand.⁹

⁷ According to Beebee, these are the four standard ways for defining genre (3). He goes on to propose his own theory, which is that "generic differences are grounded in the 'use-value' of a discourse rather than in its content, formal features, or its rules of production" (7). Jameson also argues that a text's "use" affects its genre when he writes, "Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural object" (106). While several considerations of the fascicles—including, most prominently, Franklin's analysis of these manuscripts—have attempted to make sense of their use-value to Dickinson, this approach has not affected the standard reading of them as books of lyric poems.

⁸ Culler, in particular, has argued that genre is always present, especially in the mind of the writer: "To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising" (116).

⁹ In my analysis of Dickinson's relationship to the other literary and cultural practices of her time, I have kept in mind the words of Howell and Prevenier: "Often, historians will privilege evidence that seems to point to a recurring picture, to add to a story that seems familiar or repetitive. Always, however, this is a risky choice. In some sense, all events are unique, and every fact about an event is unique" (84). This is very much in line with Geertz's theory that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description. Cultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence, else we would not call them

After identifying the sheet as Dickinson's primary unit of construction, I go on to argue that we can read the poems on that sheet not only as taking up similar thematic concerns, but also as addressing the formal relationship between part and whole that structures each fascicle. In the second chapter I take up the relationship of Dickinson's fascicle manuscripts to her letters. The fascicles and the letters have long been considered alternate contexts, instead of interrelated, mutually-informing ones, for reading Dickinson. Investigating the intersection of the fascicles and letters not only reveals Dickinson's sense of the fluid relationship between epistolary prose and verse but highlights the fact that the fascicles are not the isolated and sealed-off objects that literary analysis has taken them to be.¹⁰

While the first two chapters think about the genre of the fascicles in terms of their material format, the next two chapters address the literary ideas about genre that Dickinson engages when she makes the fascicles. My third chapter reads the elegies that Dickinson copied onto her fascicle sheets and argues that when Dickinson stitched these sheets together, she was balancing the genre's requirement for consolation with her own desire to avoid poetic closure. Through reading a series of elegies that Dickinson copied across the sheets of a particular fascicle, I argue not only that the fascicle form lends itself to Dickinson's critique of the elegiac tradition but that taking Dickinson's intervention seriously allows us to rethink the genre itself. My final chapter places Dickinson's fascicle project in conversation with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's extended

systems... Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe" (17-18).

¹⁰ For instance, see Dickie's worry that attention to the fascicles poses a problem for feminist critics who have been "working to bring her out into the world, to place her in the context of other women poets or of her male contemporaries, to examine her craft, her experiments with language, her finish" (321). According to Dickie, Franklin's reconstruction of the fascicles seals Dickinson off by "recreat[ing] the poet in her workshop" (321).

poetic project, *Aurora Leigh*. While *Aurora Leigh* is a narrative poem and the fascicles are not, both projects struggle with the poetic and non-poetic genres they are engaging and particularly with the lyric convention of using memory to bring together a speaker's past and present selves. As both projects react to Wordsworth's famous moment of recollection in "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," they both reveal their own desire to experiment with generic parameters.

Faced with a growing body of Dickinson criticism that turns to her manuscripts in order to generate new readings of Dickinson's texts, several scholars have worried over the potential for a fetishization that is perhaps unavoidable. This trend has been characterized most eloquently yet most disturbingly by Melanie Hubbard: "A kind of fantastic certainty is being attributed to manuscript scholars, who now know, it seems, the answer to the question, What is a Dickinson poem. It is as if we no longer need to edit—we can simply reproduce her work in facsimile. Or, better—since 'reproducibility' is suspect in this post-industrial, post-print age, only a pilgrimage to the archives will suffice. And, there, at last (despite a certain winsome disarray), will be Emily herself, all her intentions intact: that shimmer, that presence. That's the fantasy, as destructive as it is sublime" (53). Throughout this dissertation I have been suspect of "reproducibility" insofar as I question all versions, editions, and reproductions of Dickinson's writings; I continually comment on the deforming and reforming problems of hindsight; and most importantly I argue that the manuscripts will not offer final answers to our questions about Dickinson. But because Dickinson's texts have been edited in ways that do not reflect her conflicting and multi-layered compositional practices, I have had no choice but to return to her manuscripts. What I have found there, though, is not, in Hubbard's

words, “Emily herself,” but aspects of her writing practices that are not reflected in the printed versions of her texts or in the literary analysis that works with them.

Does this mean that the only way to study Dickinson’s writings is to make a pilgrimage to the various archives over which her manuscripts have been scattered? Does this mean that if such a trip is inconvenient—as it would be for, say, a class of undergraduates in a large lecture class on American literature—there is no use in taking up the printed versions of Dickinson instead? I mean to imply neither of these things, for as I have felt quite acutely, even when we hold the manuscript in our hands, we quickly realize that the fantasy of returning to some originary moment of composition is only a fantasy. And even when facsimiles or hypertexts of Dickinson’s manuscripts can be easily accessed by the average reader, it will be the job of Dickinson criticism to assess the complex story that is told by these manuscripts and that has been obscured by the existing transcriptions of them. For this story is not the one we know about an agoraphobic woman sitting in her room, writing poems for herself, and binding them into keepsake books. It is a story about circulation and transmission, about genres broken and remade, about defiance and exchange.

Chapter One

Rethinking the Fascicles: Dickinson's Writing, Copying, and Binding Practices

This dissertation opens with a question—What are Dickinson's Fascicles?—that it never truly answers. This is not a revelation of its failure, but an admission of its methodology. Because each chapter looks closely at manuscripts that complicate previous understandings of Dickinson and her writing practices, this project explores a variety of reading possibilities that her documents make available. If, in the end, the fascicles continue to escape classifications at every turn, it will be this very avoidance that opens up new questions—questions that allow for a reexamination of the materials themselves, the assumptions that have been made about them, and the discourses that are most useful when discussing both.

This opening chapter launches us into this journey by discussing the various ways in which the fascicles have been read and by arguing that renewed attention to Dickinson's process and materials turns many of these readings upside down. I will investigate some of the materials—poetic and non-poetic, mass-produced and homemade—that circulated in Dickinson's time and that can lead us to understand the fascicles better. After looking closely at the ways in which Dickinson's construction of these objects resembles, revises, and departs from the material practices of her culture, I will read an individual fascicle sheet in depth, because as we will see shortly, it was the sheet and not the collection of sheets that was Dickinson's primary unit of construction. It is here that we will be able to locate Dickinson's formal preoccupations with the relation

of part to whole, with the problems of narrative and sequence, and with the poetic unit's mode of invoking authority.

Reading the Fascicles: A History of Criticism

Since R. W. Franklin's 1981 publication of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, a number of scholars have asked important questions about how these materials can both widen and shift our understanding of the Dickinson lyric. Each treatment of the fascicles looks at them from a different and often new angle: while some argue that individual fascicles tell specific narratives, others consider that taken together, all forty fascicles construct an even larger story. Scholars who perform non-narrative readings locate dominant tropes, themes, and ordering mechanisms that place the fascicles within various poetic traditions or that isolate particularly significant features of the fascicles. One of the great byproducts of Franklin's reconstruction has been the disparate critical and methodological approaches that scholars have taken in relation to these materials—approaches that were not available to Dickinson critics in the ninety years between the dismantling and reconstruction of the fascicles.

Franklin is responsible for our access to the fascicles, yet knowledge of the objects themselves even in their disarray garnered a certain amount of attention prior to his publication of them. Ruth Miller, for example, dedicated the last chapter of her book, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (1968), to an analysis of the fascicles, where she argues that each fascicle contains poems that express a range of emotions. This allows her to label the fascicles as “dramatic” (249) in nature. In Miller's formulation:

Each is a narrative structure designed to recreate the experience of the woman as she strives for acceptance or knowledge, is rebuffed or fails because of her limitations, but then by an act of will, forces herself to be patient in order to survive, fixes her hopes on another world where Jesus and God await her, and remains content meanwhile with herself alone (249).

Miller draws diagrams of this pattern, showing how even if the terms within each fascicle are slightly different, the structure of each is consistent. Although Miller's theory is now regarded as faulty because she was not working with the texts as ordered by Dickinson, she prompted interest in these documents and opened the possibility for further investigations.

In his introduction, Franklin comments on studies like Miller's when he discusses the great critical interest in the fascicles "as artistic gatherings—as gatherings intrarelated by theme, imagery, emotional movement" (ix) that existed prior to his reconstruction of them. But Franklin declares himself less interested in these readings than in investigations that might explain "why she assembled the fascicles—by what principles and for what purposes" (ix). Franklin regarded the fascicles as Dickinson's "own form of bookmaking" (ix), and by representing them through facsimile copies, he hoped to show how "the manuscripts of this poet resist translation into the conventions of print" (ix). Literary interpretation, along the lines of Franklin's argument, should be reserved for texts in print.

Another way that Franklin resists Miller's schematizing of the fascicles is to declare that Dickinson's motives were essentially anti-literary: he argues that Dickinson made the fascicles "to reduce disorder" (ix) and to make a "record from which [she] made copies to send to friends" (x). While Franklin would later revise this second claim—for when making his variorum edition of the poems seventeen years later, he

came to see that Dickinson often sent poems in letters *before* binding them in the fascicles—his sense of the fascicles as essentially unartistic and merely useful has been present from the beginning. Interestingly, almost every critic after Franklin—every reader who picks up his version of the fascicles to read—has leveraged his or her disagreement by performing the most literary of readings.

Only two years after Franklin's edition went to press, William H. Shurr narrativized the fascicles in his book, *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (1983). Like Miller, he argues that the fascicles tell a story. In Shurr's reading, this story is of a unified persona's "awakening love, a moment of commitment and bliss in the anomalous marriage, a lifetime of separation and terrible emptiness conceived as their 'Calvary,' and the hope for ecstatic reunion beyond the grave" (23). In performing this reading, he argues for multiple internal thematic structures within each fascicle, as well as an overarching structure that allows one to read *across* fascicles. That same year, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall published *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (1983), a book that discusses Dickinson's fascicles in relation to the principles and development of "the new genre" (45) of the modern poetic sequence. Unlike Shurr, Rosenthal and Gall resist narrativizing the fascicles and acknowledge that "the work of Dickinson can hardly be reduced to a monotonous formula... This was not a matter of repeating the same exemplary tale over and over" (48). Yet in doing so, Rosenthal and Gall simply provide a new set of generic parameters for reading the fascicles—parameters that allow readers to think about the relationship of the individual parts to the whole, about the process of accumulation, and about the possibility of "a reciprocal or double sequence" (49).

Early considerations of the fascicles tended to fall into one of these camps—narrative or sequence, unity or chaos—and laid the groundwork for the more complicated theoretical work that Sharon Cameron would eventually do in *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (1992). Cameron takes up the complexity that Rosenthal and Gall acknowledged and argues boldly and convincingly that Dickinson's variants—variants within poems, and poems in the fascicles as variants of each other—are non-exclusive alternatives, that there is no single speaker in the fascicle poems, and that “unity is not produced by reading Dickinson's lyrics in the fascicle context” (4). Cameron makes these points on her way to asserting that the fascicles “embody the problem of identity” (4). Her work sparked a frenzy of thinking about the fascicles in the early nineties, when several articles on the fascicles were published and an MLA panel entitled “Unfastening the Fascicles” was organized.¹¹

Despite this brief surge of interest, these conversations soon dwindled and some scholars returned to making arguments about the fascicles that more closely resemble the earlier critical approaches. A book-length study of Fascicle 40, Dorothy Huff Oberhaus's *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method & Meaning* (1995), reads a “deep structural and thematic unity” (3) in the fascicles, arguing that “the key to discovering this unity is in the poems' allusions to the Bible, their allusions to one another and to preceding fascicles, and their echoes of the early Christian meditative tradition” (3). Eleanor Elson Heginbotham's *Dwelling in Possibilities: Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson* (2003) retreats from such a guided reading, arguing instead that “reading poems closely in their fascicle context, that ‘great voyage of discovery,’ is both an inward journey into

¹¹ The MLA papers can be found at www.iath.virginia.edu/dickinson/fascicle/fascicle_index.html.

the heart of the individual poems and an outward one into the possibilities inherent in the new entity the collected mass becomes” (21). She provides readings of the eight fascicles in which “duplicate poems” appear, arguing that their inclusion in different fascicles changes the identity of the poems themselves (45).¹²

While this critical history is clearly rich and varied, each of these readings has been made possible precisely because their writers made one crucial assumption—namely, that the fascicles are books of poems. This may at the outset seem like a logical assumption. Besides whatever criteria we use to identify a poem as a poem—whether it has meter or metaphor, whether it employs some system of lineation—Dickinson herself framed and sent much of what is contained in the fascicles *as poems* to her various correspondents.¹³ And the uniformity of the physical structures into which these “poems” were copied—the fascicles are all relatively the same size and shape, and they all contain the same type of writing (insofar as there are no instances of newspaper clippings or words written in another’s hand)—invites one to treat them as forty instances of the same thing. From this evidence it is not such a leap to consider them “books of poems.” This is precisely the assumption that Dickinson’s sister, Lavinia, made when she chose, instead of burning them, to find a way to get them into print, and the one that Mabel Loomis Todd made when she called them “little ‘volumes’” (Bingham 17). Yet no matter how logical all of this might seem, there is still something unsettling about a body of critical

¹² While Heginbotham argues for meaning in these duplicated poems, Franklin simply attributes their existence to the fact that Dickinson must have not destroyed that worksheet and therefore copied it again later on (*Manuscript Books* xv-xvi).

¹³ While I cite this as a reason to think that they are poems, it’s also important to recognize that the context in which the textual object appears can be seen to alter its genre, an idea that I pursue in depth in the next chapter. For instance, while Dickinson refers to a piece of writing within a letter as a poem, one could argue that that same piece of writing in a different setting is not a poem or in some way resists that classification.

work that doesn't speculate about whether these objects might be something other than books of poems. Assuming their status as such makes it very hard to ask what *kinds* of texts—even if we do read them as “poems” in the general sense—Dickinson was writing and copying.

A handful of critics has thought about Dickinson in relation to issues of materiality, textuality, and genre, yet this thinking hardly ever makes it into the books that take the fascicles as their focus. (It would seem that in order to deem the fascicles worthy of study in their own right, their generic status and history has to be always-already assumed and solidified.) For example, over two decades ago, Barton Levi St. Armand posed the possibility that Dickinson's fascicles were actually portfolio poems, the manuscript expressions that Emerson had called for in his 1840 essay, “New Poetry” (3-5).¹⁴ St. Armand invites a future investigation of Dickinson's material writing practices when he writes, “This art was not exclusively literary in nature but originated in Dickinson's situation as a nineteenth-century woman who was a part of a community where many nonliterary or nonacademic arts were practiced” (9).¹⁵ Yet few critics took up the call.

¹⁴ Emerson's essay was published in *The Dial* in October 1840. In it he writes: “Only one man in the thousand may print a book, but one in ten or one in five may inscribe his thoughts, or at least with short commentary his favorite readings in a private journal” (137). Into this journal, according to Emerson, the writer would copy “confessions,” “faults,” “the imperfect parts, the fragmentary verses, the halting rhymes” (139). It is interesting to note that while Higginson and Todd were responsible for getting the poems into print, they did adopt Emerson's notion of portfolio poetry, as in his “Preface” to the *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), Higginson referred to the poems as “flashes of wholly original and profound insight” (v).

¹⁵ While St. Armand's insight is initially liberating, he seems to digress from his own critical inclination when he compares the fascicles to published renditions of what he regards as products of a portfolio culture, generically pigeonholing Dickinson in his next paragraph: “Dickinson's poetry was in fact in the popular tradition of the portfolio or sketchbook, pioneered by Washington Irving through his persona as Geoffrey Crayon, author of *The Sketch Book* (1819), and epitomized by such mid-nineteenth-century best-sellers as Sarah Parton's *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853)” (5).

More recently, Susan Howe in *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (1995) has argued that the manuscripts “should be understood as visual productions” (141) and that “the physical act of copying is a mysterious sensuous expression” (141). Along the same lines, Mary Loeffelholz, in curating an exhibition on Dickinson at the Houghton Library and therefore facing the task of presenting them to a viewing audience, found herself rethinking what kind of materials the fascicles actually are (1999). In her latest book, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (2004), Loeffelholz tackles the divide between literary and cultural studies that makes such a question so hard to answer. Here she argues that nineteenth-century American women’s poetry “can and should be read in ways that bridge the gap between ‘internal’ formalism and ‘external’ historicism, between close readings of works and analysis of their historical conditions and possibility” (4).¹⁶

Each of these studies acknowledges that the material form of the fascicles problematizes their generic classification. In doing so, they anticipate or take up Jerome McGann’s call to think about the text as something made instead of something interpreted. In reference to this problematic, McGann argues:

Today, texts are largely imagined as scenes of reading rather than scenes of writing. This ‘readerly’ view of text has been most completely elaborated through the modern hermeneutical tradition in which text is not something we *make* but something we *interpret* (4).

¹⁶ Along these lines, Susan Miller has argued that when we read someone’s writing, what is revealed to us are “the intersections of social vectors, forces that produce discursive actions that have simultaneously material, aesthetic, and ideological consequences” (2).

It is precisely this “readerly” approach (which McGann and others have sought to invert) that limits most criticism on the fascicles—criticism that has foreclosed upon the various questions about genre that the material form of the fascicles raises.¹⁷

One of the most recent critics to attend to the issue of Dickinson’s materials is Donahall Mitchell in *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (2000) and *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (2005). Because Mitchell is primarily interested in “how and why [Dickinson’s] poetry relates to the social spaces and languages that surrounded it in nineteenth-century Amherst” (*Monarch* 2), he explores her composition practices, measuring in centimeters the words and spaces on her pages. Yet even Mitchell’s interest in nineteenth-century culture and Dickinson’s composition practices are not brought to bear on the fascicles. Along the lines of earlier readings, Mitchell’s chapter on the fascicles in the earlier book shows how one poem is a “parodic revision of the first” (*Monarch* 186), how a poem is like or unlike the poems that have come before it, how a subsequent poem can change our reading of a previous one, and how the poems in the fascicles “endlessly revise each other” (*Monarch* 189). In executing such readings, he accepts their status as lyrics—or, as he calls them, “dramatic lyrics”—that can be read and interpreted without reference to their material context.¹⁸

¹⁷ Later in his introduction, McGann clarifies what he means by “make.” He writes: “We must turn our attention to much more than the formal and linguistic features of poems or other imaginative fictions. We must attend to textual materials which are not regularly studied by those interested in ‘poetry’: to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all of those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to ‘poetry’ or ‘the text as such’” (13). While I do not take up all of these elements here, I do attend to some of them.

¹⁸ Mitchell calls these poems “dramatic lyrics” instead of simply “lyrics,” which, he argues, posit the writer as their speaker (*Monarch* 190). For Mitchell, the fascicle “constitutes a species of lyric cubism,” which he characterizes as such: “A subject or loosely linked topic is seen (separately but not always sequentially) from the perspective of differing ideas, emotions, or personae, all of which have their own integrity and all of which interact to a greater or lesser degree with each other. The overall effect is cumulative, which is not to say that the poems enact a narrative, develop toward a conclusion, or represent a totality of positions with regards to the subject that either generated their composition or provided Dickinson (as editor) with a

Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005) offers one way out of this critical impasse. Jackson argues that from the very beginning of Dickinson reception we have been *trained* to think of the fascicles as volumes or books of lyric poems. She argues that

while the national as well as the gendered, sexed, classed, and (just barely) raced identities at play in Dickinson's writing have been examined to different ends in recent criticism, the generic lens they must all pass through has been treated as transparent (11).

Although Jackson eventually turns her focus to what this would mean about the writing that comprises the fascicles, she begins by asking readers to look closely at the structure that Dickinson chose.¹⁹ Jackson highlights the practice of copying and sewing together handwritten texts that young women of Dickinson's time had been trained to do in their schools and homes. By providing two examples of such texts—a hand-sewn school notebook made by a contemporary of Dickinson's at Mount Holyoke and a notebook belonging to a Boston family of the time—she argues that Dickinson's act of constructing the fascicles is derived from certain cultural practices of the time and doesn't necessarily indicate that they are books of poems.

By looking toward other texts of the time that resemble the fascicles, Jackson opens the critical conversation, forcing her readers to ask questions about genre that

principle of grouping them together after they were written. Rather, they seem to exist in a relationship to each other that can be compared to that of characters in a work of prose fiction, some of whom may be conjectured as being closer to the author's own position than others, but none of whom can be treated as being coterminous with her or with truth" (*Monarch* 192).

¹⁹ Jackson argues that if the fascicles aren't books of poems, then it is possible to read the materials inside as something other than simply lyrics. Her argument runs: "If lyrics are private performances in public, 'sudden flashes' of present-tense immediacy, and utterances addressed to future interpreters, then Dickinson's manuscripts are not lyrics. Though the fascicles were for the most part, as far as we know, collections of Dickinson's own verse, they were collections from different occasions, various correspondences. They undo each criterion of lyric discourse by reversing it: they take public materials into privacy; their material, artifactual circumstances and, often, their figurative content emphasize temporal difference rather than simultaneity; if they are now addressed to literary interpreters, Dickinson is not the one who inscribed the envelope" (60).

extend beyond the debate between narrative and sequence. While Jackson is primarily interested in reading practices, I will focus on nineteenth-century writing practices in order to show that beginning with the artifacts themselves, as well as with some of the other materials that circulated in Dickinson's culture, presents the reader with an opportunity to ask questions about Dickinson, her poems, and her practice that go largely unasked in more hermeneutical studies. For instance, what other practices was Dickinson absorbing, rejecting, and altering as she made the fascicles? What can these practices tell us about her relationship to the materials that were available to her? Was the process of making the fascicles as wholly unusual and exceptional as we have imagined it to be? In what new methodological and rhetorical directions might an investigation into these materials point us? In the end, can understanding Dickinson's process of writing and construction help us understand what *kind* of objects the fascicles are, and, by extension, what *kind* of poems these might be? By asking these questions, I hope to build on McGann's argument that "reading itself can only be understood when it has assumed specific material constitutions" (5) and begin to bridge the divide between the literary and cultural fields that, as Loeffelholz has pointed out, is a marker of Dickinson studies.

In the next section, I will explore some of the generically and non-generically designated texts that circulated widely within Dickinson's culture, that employed material practices with which she would have been familiar, and that in some way—visually, experientially, or compositionally—resemble the fascicles. By studying these materials in relation to the fascicles, we will see that Dickinson is both less and more unique than we have previously thought, as she is engaged by and resistant to many of the writing, copying, and binding practices by which she was surrounded. In the end, I do not mean to

argue that the fascicles actually are one or another of these types of texts—for that conclusion seems just as reductive as the assumption that they are books of poems—but instead hope to show that where we begin with our thinking about genre often dictates the sorts of questions we are able to ask about these and other texts. In this case, understanding how Dickinson made the fascicles reveals that she was working with a particular unit of construction—the fascicle sheet—and that in doing so she was already thinking about the very problems of narrative, sequence, fragmentation, and genre that Dickinson scholars have been struggling with for over a hundred years.

Verse Copying and Homemade Book-Making in Nineteenth-Century America

Critical treatments of Dickinson's manuscripts imply that no one else ever copied and kept her own writings. Yet as several new studies have made clear, many nineteenth-century American women of Dickinson's culture and class were deeply absorbed in the practice of writing, copying, and preserving their own and others' verses.²⁰ And as St. Armand and Jackson have both pointed out, copying texts—particularly lines of verse—was a common practice among specific contemporaries and acquaintances of Dickinson. Kept most often in plain, hardcover, store-bought books, passages of prose and poetry were carefully chosen and copied for the purposes of preservation and referral. Nineteenth-century American women copied favorite poems, prose passages, morally instructive quotations, sketches of flowers and birds, diary entries, and their original

²⁰ See Bennett (*Poets*), Loeffelholz (*From School*), and Richards. In the introduction to Chapter 4, I discuss the major argument of each of these books.

compositions into what were then and are still now called “commonplace books.”²¹ The commonplace book has been around since antiquity, but some scholars have argued that in the nineteenth century it took on this particularly eclectic quality, as its contents were most often taken from diverse sources and copied by the owner’s hand.²² This was a pedagogical practice: young women were often taught that copying down verses, for instance, would aid in their own moral development. It was also a domestic practice: usually a single person sat down to record her compiled material within the privacy of the home.

These commonplace books have a striking visual correspondence to the fascicles. Commonplace book-makers often drew lines between the poems and prose passages that they included, a practice that Dickinson also adopts in her fascicles (fig. 2). Miss Bradlee, for instance, whose commonplace book dates from 1820 to 1828 and includes, among others, the compositions of Mrs. Hemans, Percival, Byron, L. E. Langdon, and Mrs.

²¹ This observation comes from the wide array of mid-nineteenth-century commonplace books housed at the American Antiquarian Society. Unless otherwise noted, all original documents referred to in this section—aside from the fascicles themselves—are part of its collection. I am grateful to the Society for providing me with a month-long fellowship that allowed me to study these documents and especially to Tom Knowles for his generous attention to my project and requests. While Emerson and Thoreau remain some of the most famous keepers of literary notebooks and commonplace books, in general men were more likely to record business transactions and keep records than to copy poetry and prose passages. Additionally, whereas today we might think that the difference between including other people’s writings and not doing so makes all the difference as we seek to differentiate commonplace books from Dickinson’s fascicles, nineteenth-century commonplace books often overlooked the importance of this distinction. Because many commonplace book keepers did not give author attributions to entries, the notion of authorship as such is suspended. Therefore, a reader unfamiliar with either the book keeper’s work or with the published materials of the day could misconstrue all of the contents as one or the other or a mismatched combination of both.

²² Havens highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the nineteenth-century commonplace book, at times even referring to them as “hybrid commonplace books/scrapbooks” (90), while others (see Crane) have argued that earlier books foreground the process of “gathering” and “framing.” I have resisted using the term “scrapbook,” as it implies the inclusion of clippings, a practice that I will discuss later in this section. Havens argues that clippings were widely used in Victorian commonplace books, thereby blurring the boundary between the commonplace book and the scrapbook; according to the holdings at the American Antiquarian Society, however, this practice may have been less widely embraced in America. For a more specific look at the immediate pre-history of the nineteenth-century American commonplace book, see Lockridge and Stabile.

Barbault, all written out in Miss Bradlee's own hand, draws dark and distinct lines to mark the end of one entry and the beginning of the next (fig. 3).²³ Not all commonplace book-makers drew lines of this sort, but most of them somehow marked the end of one entry and the beginning of the next. For instance, in her commonplace book, which she kept from 1839 to 1899, Frances A. Gage employed a short, squiggly marker between her entries.

While many of Dickinson's contemporaries copied poems into commonplace books, others did so into autograph albums. Autograph albums originated in sixteenth-century Germany and became very popular in the 1830s and 1840s in America. According to Todd Gernes, autograph albums never changed their purpose or format too drastically, as they were always blank books into which the compiler, as well as her friends and family, copied prose, poetry, and drawings (1). A fancier relative of the commonplace book, an autograph album often featured a cover embossed with gold and stamped with a title meant to appeal to its mostly female owners. Its pages were sometimes red or green or blue, with gold edges.

In some albums, like the anonymous one entitled "Flowers of Genius," the owner used the right-hand pages to copy her original compositions and the left-hand pages to produce thematically corresponding drawings (fig. 4). Yet others, like "The Dream," kept in 1846, housed letters, poems, and quotes written to and not by its owner. Into "The Dream," friends of the album owner, "Ellen," many of whom she knew at Charlestown Seminary, wrote poems to her, signed their names, and copied important and instructive passages and quotes. Most albums of the time resemble "The Dream" in that they include the writings and thoughts of others, addressed to the keeper of the album. This is a major

²³ Some of these poems include author attributions, while others do not.

difference between the commonplace book and the autograph album, yet there are instances in which it is hard to distinguish one type of book from the other, instances in which the writer, copier, and keeper of the passages are not clear.²⁴

Unlike the fascicles, which as far as we know Dickinson never showed to others, many hands touched these albums.²⁵ Like our present day practice of yearbook signing, these albums often circulated among the compiler's friends and visitors. Entries would often include an opening inscription to the compiler (i. e. "To Mary"), a poem or prose extract (usually without attribution), and the copier's name, date, and hometown. Scholars who have studied the autograph album tend to focus on its communal aspect, arguing that these books are essentially a record of friendships and affections. For instance, Alice S. Fowler argues that the autograph album "attests to the human need to be in relationship with one another and to be remembered" (iv), whereas Gernes makes the more complicated argument that these sorts of connections provide a resistance to the passage of time, as they "memorialize the present as a stay against the future" (3).

If the boundary between commonplace books and autograph albums sometimes becomes murky, the third kind of book into which women copied verses, the scrapbook,

²⁴ For instance, it is unclear whether the three bound volumes in the Page Family Notebooks are commonplace books or albums. They contain original poems, poems of published authors, and poems written (and copied) by friends.

²⁵ In his biography of Dickinson, Habegger suggests that she may have circulated some of her manuscripts among very close friends (316). Habegger's main example of this, however, occurred during Dickinson's friendship with Henry Vaughan Emmons in 1852, predating her making of the fascicles by six years. Martha Nell Smith (*Rowing*) also argues that the fascicles may have circulated. She suggests that Helen Hunt Jackson might have had one in her possession as late as 1875. Smith quotes one of Jackson's letters to Dickinson as her source: "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it" (L 444a). In this case it is impossible to decipher if Jackson is referring to a fascicle or not, but my subsequent analysis of the fascicles implies that we should be skeptical of the idea that the fascicles would be described this way. It was only after Dickinson's death that a number of people read, touched, and marked these fascicles. According to Franklin, the following people wrote on the fascicles: Susan Huntington Dickinson, Mabel Loomis Todd, Mary Lee Hall, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Millicent Todd Bingham, and, possibly, Lavinia Dickinson (*Manuscript Books* xvi-xvii).

threatens to subsume them both. Like the commonplace book and the autograph album, the scrapbook is made out of fragments—of materials, voices, and sources. Yet the scrapbook’s fragmentary nature is at its core. Instead of copying out their favorite poems and prose passages, either for themselves or for a friend, the scrapbook makers often varied their process, sometimes copying but more often clipping and pasting. The clipping process necessarily meant that even more diverse material could be included; thus, all kinds of texts, from long articles and wedding announcements to intricate drawings or engravings, were included in these books.

Dickinson was surrounded by women who engaged in all of these practices, and her own composition methods and decisions must have been at least partially informed by them. For instance, late in life Dickinson’s sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, kept a book in which she copied some of her own poems as well as the poems of others, and she saved clippings that recorded personally important events, postcards sent to her from abroad, and notes written by other people.²⁶ Like Sue, Dickinson copied and clipped some of the materials that appeared in print around her, materials that Lavinia is sure to have burned. But remnants and evidence of Dickinson’s clipping practice still exist. On the back flyleaf of her Bible, Dickinson copied the poem “The Bible” by Dr. Jacob Holt, which was published in the *The Hampshire and Franklin Express* in June 1848, and added to it the phrase, “Composed by Dr. J. Holt during his last sickness.”²⁷ Along with this poem she also pasted into her Bible two lines from Holt’s obituary that she had

²⁶ Susan Huntington Dickinson’s book is currently housed in the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Collection in the John Hay Library at Brown University, where it is labeled a “commonplace book,” although it is clearly pushing against this generic classification. A hypertext of the book’s cover and pages, with some helpful transcription are available at http://www.emilydickinson.org/susan/tshdcpb_cov.html.

²⁷ According to Capps, this was the Amherst newspaper that Dickinson read. It was first called *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, then *The Hampshire Express*, and finally *The Amherst Record* (134).

clipped from a Boston newspaper. Jack Capps has shown that “considerable evidence exists that [Dickinson] habitually clipped and saved many of those items that interested her and sifted through them at later dates in search of materials uniquely suited to her purpose” (140).²⁸ Whether or not Dickinson kept a proper scrapbook is less important than that she was aware of and engaged in many of the practices—and presumably meanings—of the scrapbook culture that surrounded her.²⁹

Though it is clear that the fascicles are not scrapbooks, they share the qualities of being made up of carefully chosen materials.³⁰ As a consequence, when attempting to read these scrapbooks, the reader encounters more problems of interpretation than when she reads a commonplace book or album—many of the same issues, interestingly, that puzzle fascicle readers. As Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler have argued in *The Scrapbook in American Life* (2006):

Readers can temporarily impose a logical pattern on a scrapbook’s contents, but any interpretation is bound to be as inconstant and ephemeral as the scrapbooks themselves. In fact, no scrapbook can present meaning without the collaboration of a reader, yet no reader (aside from the scrapbook maker) knows enough to interpret it authentically and definitively (24-25).

²⁸ Capps deduces this from the retained documents that indicate a lost clipping, from the fact that she sometimes referred to things she clipped, and from the fact that she often included a phrase or reference to an article, poem, or cartoon that she would have encountered years before incorporating it in her own writing (140-142).

²⁹ St. Armand has argued that Dickinson did keep a scrapbook, although his point moves beyond the simple reality of this to argue that this affected her poetics: “There is ample evidence from her published letters that Dickinson herself kept a scrapbook of clippings from national magazines, local newspapers, and illustrated books, which she used to ornament some of her own manuscripts, turning them into emblem letters and emblem poems” (26). He also argues that the scrapbook kept by Dickinson’s friend, Mary Warner, can act as “a guiding anthology of ideas, models, and patterns that furnishes us with the prototypes, stereotypes, and archetypes of Dickinson’s time” (31).

³⁰ While Franklin has argued that the fascicles were Dickinson’s way “to reduce disorder” (*Manuscript Books* ix) and to make “a systematic and comprehensive record of completed poems” (*Manuscript Books* x), we do know that poems from disparate years appear in the same fascicle and that many poems never make it into a fascicle. Therefore, even if Dickinson was making order, it is clear that she was not merely collecting all of her writings; she was “choosing” what to include and not to include, and where specifically to include the chosen pieces.

Scrapbooks and Dickinson's fascicles share very little in common visually, but they pose a similar critical and interpretive conundrum.

Such similarities between the fascicles and commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks might have led early viewers of the fascicles to assume that the fascicles actually were these things or some variation thereof; yet it is important to recognize some of the crucial ways in which they are different. Besides the obvious differences between the process and purpose of these books for presenting poetry, the feature that most distinguishes the fascicles from these other types of books is that they are all nameable, definable artifacts that were actively marketed to the community of mid-nineteenth-century American women. While commonplace books and scrapbooks were sometimes made by hand, for the most part all three types of books were part of the mass-market and commercial culture of the time. Despite the fact that Dickinson had probably learned how to copy poetic texts into hardcover blank books during her time at Mount Holyoke, she chose not to do so when making her fascicles.³¹ Why, then, when blank books were widely available, did Dickinson choose to make her own?

The fact that nineteenth-century commonplace books were most often readily available and inexpensive hardcover blank books radically distinguishes them from the fascicles.³² The same is true of the album, yet the commercialized nature of albums was even more marked. They were not merely mass-marketed and more ornate; a whole industry cropped up around them. By the early 1880s, enough people were keeping these

³¹ Jackson makes this argument about Dickinson's Mount Holyoke education (88).

³² There are a few examples of homemade versions of these books from this period. Tucker et al. refer to pre-Civil War scrapbooks that were homemade and then sewn together by the maker, a local bookbinder, or a stationer (8). The collection of Goddard Family Papers includes several of Emily Goddard's homemade commonplace books.

albums to warrant the publication of pamphlets like “The Album Writer’s Assistant: Being Choice Selections in Poetry and Prose, for Autograph Albums, Valentines, etc.”³³ This pamphlet presents a collection of verses appropriate to copy into someone’s autograph album should one be asked to make an entry and not have a text in mind. The “Introductory” essay of the pamphlet expresses the purchaser’s need for such a service:

There are few persons who have not at some time in life been solicited by their friends to write in an Album; but how frequently has it been the case that the person asked has found it utterly impossible at the moment either to draw from the well of their own thoughts the sentiment they desired to express or to call to memory any appropriate wishes to make more effective the expression of their own thoughts by introducing a graceful and suitable quotation (1).

Commercial paraphernalia also existed for the scrapbook, for as Tucker et al. point out, by as early as 1835 a serial called “The Scrapbook” describes the hobby in detail (8). Additionally, an advertisement on the last page of the “The Album Writer’s Assistant” reveals that both albums and scrapbooks were being mass-marketed at the time of its printing (fig. 5).

Their hand-sewn and therefore unmarketable nature is what makes the fascicles difficult to define. While the texts that Dickinson copied in the fascicles look like the material of commonplace books and albums, and while the fascicles may raise the same sorts of questions about intention and fragmentation that scrapbooks do, the way in which they were made affects their status and genre. Dickinson constructed the fascicles herself, using already folded pieces of purchased stationery, copying her own writing onto them, stacking the pages, and sewing them together with her own hands. It is these details that make all the difference when rethinking the fascicles.

³³ This pamphlet is undated, but according to the New York City Directories, J. L. Patten & Co. was at 47 Barclay Street (the address that appears on this pamphlet) only from 1878 to 1883.

One of the reasons why more scholars haven't compared the fascicles with other materials from Dickinson's time has to do with the way our libraries and archives are organized: while one can search for commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks, no keyword will bring up fascicle-like materials. This is one of the ways in which, could Dickinson watch us scrambling today, she—a woman whose life and work trumped categories and classifications—might feel quite satisfied. The fascicles do have both precursors and relatives. However, these texts have been either unrecognizable or recognizable as something so different from the fascicles that they have not invited comparison. One way into these comparisons is to think about the defining feature of the fascicles—namely, their hand-sewn nature.

Sewing pages together to form handmade books was hardly a widespread practice in the nineteenth-century. It was more common in the eighteenth century, when blank bound books were rare and expensive. Yet individuals continued to sew pages together in the nineteenth century, some for financial reasons, others because it suited what they were writing, and still others for personal or aesthetic reasons. One type of text that was often stitched or sewn in this fashion is the diary. For example, between 1827 and 1848, Ichabod Cook made twenty-four volumes of his ongoing diary. What's unusual about his entries is that while he used them to record the events on his farm and his involvement with the local church, he made them in verse, most often composing one quatrain per day. The opening entry of the very first volume reads:

5 mo. 23 A very rainy day to day,
 And wet attending meeting;
 By that our beasts have stores of hay,
 And we by this have eating.

While there are moments in the diaries when he varies his style, this is the form he maintained for over twenty years.

Cook at first made his volumes by taking three large folded sheets of paper, stacking them, and stitching them all the way up the left hand margin. Although his pages are much larger than those Dickinson used in the fascicles and he stitched all the way up the margin instead of punching two holes, their processes are almost identical. Like Dickinson, Cook copied, stacked, and sewed—in that order. But while the form and content of Cook's entries stayed largely the same, his method of making these volumes quickly changed. For his second volume, he nested his pages into each other in order to create forty-eight surfaces on which to write, placing the title "Memorandums" and the "Volume" number on the cover, and stitching the pages together with fewer, wider stitches.³⁴ Cook continued to use this method for the rest of the time that he was making his diaries. What is significant about his shift in method is that by the second volume, Cook had clearly decided how long he wanted each volume to be, as he did not limit himself to one volume per year and did not mind starting a new volume in the middle of a year.

Unlike Cook, most diarists who made their own books used one volume per year. Ruth Henshaw Bascom, for instance, wrote and bound her diaries between 1789 and 1848, starting each one on the first day of the new year. Like the standard diary or

³⁴ I presume that Cook nested individual sheets that he folded once (meaning, that he inserted the sheets inside each other), instead of creating signatures. To create a signature one takes a much larger piece of paper, folds it many times, and cuts the pages at their tops (Gaskell 51). Both processes result in the same product, but I suppose that Cook nested individually folded sheets because we can see from his first volume that he already had access to paper cut this size. Dickinson neither made signatures nor nested pages—in Franklin's words, "the sheets, copied separately, were not inserted inside each other but were stacked and then stab-bound" (*Manuscript Book* xi-xii). In the case of the Bascom and Gilman, it is less clear whether they made signatures or nested individually folded sheets. I will refer to their products—"nested sheets"—as opposed to the method by which each got there. Gaskell also uses the words "tucked" and "quired" to describe these types of sheets (82).

almanac entry, Bascom often marked the day and month on the left-hand side and then wrote a line or two about that day's events. She noted the weather, her activities, and her husband's sermon topics, as well as her travels and the visitors she received. Bascom did not write her entries in rhyme or meter, yet her diaries come closer than Cook's to physically resembling the fascicles—at least, upon first glance. Most strikingly, they are very similar in size: Bascom's diaries vary from anywhere between four to six inches across by six and a half to seven and a half inches long, while almost all of the fascicles measure five by eight inches. Like Cook, Bascom produced nested pages; unlike Cook, at the end of the year—her marker that a particular volume was done—she sewed all of her groupings together.

Both the Cook and Bascom diaries resemble the fascicles because they were handmade and because each writer's developing method is visible in the artifacts themselves. Yet even though these objects were both stitched by their authors, Cook and Bascom imposed different parameters on their productions. Bascom limited her volumes to the length of year, therefore producing some often very messy stitchwork (oddly enough, since she was a seamstress), as she attempted to sew very different sized groups of sheets together (fig. 6). Cook, in deciding in advance on a certain length that a volume should be (and therefore avoiding the sewing mess that Bascom encountered), limited himself by space; as a result, his diaries fracture the expectation that each year's narrative would be contained in its own volume.

The fact that Cook and Bascom nested sheets, either by folding a larger sheet several times and cutting the tops or by inserting individually folded sheets into each other, reveals that these writers imagined themselves to be constructing volumes of some

sort, adopting and conforming to the standards that printed materials had modeled for them. Dickinson's process of stacking folded pages and then sewing them together creates a very different type of object—one that unlike the others and unlike a printed book can be unbound and remain readable.

The type of nineteenth-century text that was most often handwritten, stacked, and sewn was the sermon. Ministers throughout New England in the early- and mid-nineteenth century wrote their sermons on pieces of folded stationery and, when they were finished, stacked these sheets and sewed them together (fig. 7). By stacking pages, ministers were freed of the need to know ahead of time how long a given sermon was going to be. This way they neither ran out of paper nor wasted it, a common result of nesting pages. Additionally, the sermon writer could go back and remove or revise parts of the sermon while keeping all sections intact. If the pages had been nested, it would have been impossible to remove an extract, forcing the writer to copy out the entire section all over again. In the end, the individual sermon could be taken to where it was being delivered. Upon returning home, the minister could preserve it with his other sermons, yet also keep it separate. Often the date and place appear at the top of the first page, marking the sermon's difference from the others.³⁵

How strange it is that the commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks that contain poetry bear few physical resemblances to the fascicles, while these handmade books look more like fascicles but contain no poetry. Indeed, there are very few examples of where poetry and handmade sewn texts—that is, items that fit the

³⁵ A comparison of sermons to Dickinson's fascicles is much more problematic and complicated, because certain things that are known about sermons are relatively unknown about Dickinson's fascicles. While every sermon has a clear beginning and end, as well as clearly designated stages throughout, the structure of the fascicles continues to elude their readers at every turn. My purpose here is simply to point out the ways in which they physically resemble each other.

designation “book of poems” that critics have been so quick to give to Dickinson’s fascicles—meet. Of the two examples I have encountered of hand-sewn pages that do contain poetry, neither Caroline Gilman’s homemade collection of her original poems nor Emily Goddard’s few sewn pages of her copied poems look like the fascicles. Gilman’s manuscript of six folded, nested sheets, all sewn together at the margin, measures slightly larger than a fascicle. The cover is now missing, and the poems inside are marked as such by their titles and dates of composition. She begins each new poem on a new page and is content to leave blank space where necessary. From this, it is clear that Gilman believed that what she was doing was making a book of poems.

Emily Goddard, on the other hand, is a more complicated case. Her poems are found on loose sheets of various sizes, on folded stationery with two holes at the margin, and on larger sheets nested and sewn together. Among all of her poems, original compositions that were handwritten as well as those that were printed and clipped from newspapers, there are only two sheets of stationery that have been folded, written on, stacked, and sewn, just like Dickinson’s fascicles. Still, Goddard presents what she was making as a book of poems in ways that Dickinson doesn’t. She gives each entry a title; she provides a date (of original composition or of copying, we cannot be sure); and, most significantly, even though she stacks these two folded pages, she begins a poem at the end of the first folded page and continues it on the second. Either Goddard bound the two pages before she began copying, or she knew that what she was making would be larger than one folded sheet.

Unlike Goddard, Dickinson did not allow poems to spill over from one folded fascicle sheet to another. Franklin has noted that this happens in only two of the forty

fascicles (Fascicles 2 and 33), but I would argue that because of the mutilation of Fascicle 2 that took place after Dickinson's death, leaving the fascicle practically unreadable, we can be certain that it occurred in only one instance. Dickinson usually contained any spillover by inserting a single sheet or pinning in a slip of paper, indicating that she was not—at least initially, as she was copying—thinking about the relationship between sheets or between the individual sheets and the whole.³⁶

In summary, while critics have categorized the fascicles as books of poems, this is not because they resemble nineteenth-century handmade books of poems. Such books are in fact rare, as poetry was most often copied into bound commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks. Yet even when authors did bind their own pages together, they did so in a very different way than Dickinson did. Because Dickinson stacked her sheets instead of nesting them, she did not necessarily have the unit of the book in mind. Her writing, copying, and binding practices permitted her to construct each sheet individually and allowed the sheets themselves to be unbound and yet still remain intact. In other words, my analysis of contemporary writing, copying, and binding practices suggests that Dickinson's unit of construction is actually neither the individual poem nor the fascicle but rather the individual folded fascicle sheet. While it is tempting to read all of the writings in one fascicle as related to each other, and they very well might be, as Dickinson did eventually choose which sheets to bind together, the most significant relationships in any fascicle exist between and among writings on the four pages of the same folded sheet. In the next section, I will look at an example.

³⁶ According to Franklin, spill-over onto single sheets occurred in Fascicles 16, 18, 21 (two instances), 24, 28, and 35 and spill-over onto pinned in slips of paper occurred in Fascicles 7, 16, and 19 (*Manuscript Books* 1413).

Dickinson's Fascicle Sheets

Although Dickinson wasn't constructing books of poems, she was nonetheless writing poems. Yet she might not have been writing the kinds of poems that we have always thought she was writing. While some fascicle sheets contain poems that are thematically similar or that build on each other to create the sense of a story, for the most part individual fascicle sheets do not engage in either of these thematic or narrative projects. Instead, taking the fascicle sheet as Dickinson's primary unit of construction allows us to understand that she had a more nuanced idea about the relation of one poetic text to the next. In this final section, I will look closely at one individual fascicle sheet as a way of showing that Dickinson's fascicle poems are often absorbed by a central problem that is then deployed and redeployed but rarely resolved over the course of the sheet.

While recognizing the sheet as Dickinson's primary unit of construction suggests a number of reading possibilities that were not before open, perhaps more importantly it forces the critic to rethink, revise, and articulate (possibly for the first time) his or her relation to the text that is being read. In Walter Benn Michaels's introduction to *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004), he argues that implicit in a move to pay attention to the materiality of Dickinson's writings is a rejection of any interest in the writer's intentions and a dependence on the subject position of the reader to construct meaning. In other words, according to Michaels, if you think the text consists of its physical features, then you think meaning is determined by its readers. While this formulation is helpful insofar as it makes a crucial link between materiality and readers,

in making this connection Michaels argues that it is impossible to factor the writer's intention into an interest in materiality. As he says earlier in this very article, to treat Dickinson's poems as material objects is to declare oneself as not interested in Dickinson herself (5).

Yet the methodology that I have employed in the first two sections of this chapter has proven otherwise, as I have treated the fascicles themselves as material objects and not texts. I have paid attention to the physical characteristics of the things and not the words as they appear in certain orders, and at the same time I have drawn on an interest in Dickinson herself—what she was or was not doing and was or was not influenced by. In this way, I hope to have shown that an analysis of the material object can incorporate a theory of intentionality but a different kind of “intention” than we may be used to. I have not drawn attention to Dickinson's intentions as a way of understanding her biography any better but as a way of interpreting her materials, her writing practices, and the cultural and literary landscape within which she was working. Whereas a theory of intention often works in one of two ways—either an understanding of the writer is used to interpret the text or an understanding of the text is used to decode the writer's intentions—I hope to have shown that an analysis of the material object can lead to an understanding of intention that exists outside of this binary. An analysis of the fascicles themselves shows that Dickinson *intended* to make sheets and not books, but in the end this tells us just as much about the texts and the period in which she wrote—the topic I will now turn to—than it does about Dickinson herself.

Related to Michaels's argument that an interest in intention is incompatible with attention to the material object is his belief that material analysis necessarily treats the

objects as objects/drawings/non-texts and that when we focus on physical and material features, we cannot also be interested in if these things are, say, poems or not. Dickinson herself is Michaels's best critic here, as the fascicles demand of their reader attention to the very kinds of details that make them seem un-text like (page breaks, string, folded stationery), but as we will see now, the words that appear within, alongside, and in relation to these physical details ask their reader to take them on as poems. As I said earlier, their status as poems is not being debated here. What I hope to highlight is the ways in which treating the fascicles as physical objects can change our perception of what kinds of poems these are. This, in turn, can help us understand how Dickinson's poems respond to ideas about poetry that are circulating in her culture.

I have chosen to read the first sheet of Fascicle 7 because it raises some of the very questions about the status of the poetic object with which this chapter is concerned.³⁷ My reading will engage the poems on this sheet *as poems*, not because I have accepted them as such without question but because, as we shall see, they take up specifically poetic problems, calling into question the history, forms, and methods of Dickinson's own poetic practice. Dickinson does not do this with all fascicle sheets, but in enough of them she foregrounds the status of the poems that she copies onto them that an investigation of this particular sheet provides us with an introduction to some of the issues that were crucial to her when she undertook this project.

The first sheet of Fascicle 7 contains five poems that Dickinson marked as distinct from each other but that, given my discussion in the previous section, we can now see are also related (fig. 8). "A little East of Jordan" (Fr 145), "All overgrown by cunning moss"

³⁷ Franklin numbered the fascicles for the critic's convenience; Dickinson never supplied or referred to the fascicles by any numbering system.

(Fr 146), “A science – so the Savans say” (Fr 147), “Will there really be a ‘morning’?” (Fr 148), and “Great Caesar! Condescend” (Fr 149) are poems that have been separated from each other and examined in relative vacuum over the years.³⁸ While the reader of the fascicle sheet might read the poems in the order in which they appear, this is not the only reading option. When treating the first sheet of Fascicle 7, I wish to begin in the middle, because the third poem raises a set of issues about representation and authority that the poems surrounding it take up. Here, Dickinson writes:

A science – so the Savans say,
 “Comparative Anatomy” –
 By which a single bone –
 Is made a secret to unfold
 Of some rare tenant of the mold –
 Else perished in the stone –

So to the eye prospective led,
 This meekest flower of the mead
 Opon a winter’s day,
 Stands representative in gold
 Of Rose and Lily manifold,
 And countless Butterfly!

(Fr 147)

This poem critiques a system whereby a part can be made to stand in for the whole. This is apparent in the first two lines—in their tone, pacing, and use of the word “so” (l. 1).

These lines criticize the very naming that the text engages in, of using the term “science” (l. 1), with all the authority that it conveys, and expresses skepticism about the “Savans”

³⁸ The following symbols will be used throughout the remainder of this dissertation: “Fr” refers to texts as they appear in Franklin’s 1998 variorum edition of the poems. “F” refers to the fascicle number that Franklin assigned in his 1981 facsimile edition of the manuscript books. “J” refers to the texts as they appear in Johnson’s 1955 variorum edition of the poems. “L” refers to the letters as they appear in Johnson and Ward’s 1958 edition of the letters.

(l. 1) who are the holders of knowledge.³⁹ The poem's skepticism roots itself in the underlying scientific assumptions that the remainder of the first stanza discloses: in this branch of science, according to the poem, it is the singular piece of anatomy, "the single bone" (l. 3), that is taken to represent the secret of the world, a secret to which our access has been otherwise denied.

Dickinson was no stranger to science and scientific language. Her early letters reveal that she studied botany and geology at Amherst Academy, and Alfred Habegger has recently pointed out that while at Mount Holyoke she developed an aptitude for chemistry and physiology (192-5). Nina Baym has calculated that more than 270 of Dickinson's poems use scientific language, with words associated with botany, chemistry, astronomy, electricity, arithmetic, and physiology used most frequently (133-4). Given her interest in using this language, it should be no surprise that Dickinson mounts a rhetorical challenge to the core tenets of these branches. For here she uses the language of geology to express her skepticism regarding, on the one hand, the idea that secrets can ever be truly disclosed and, on a deeper level, the proposed mode of cracking those secrets.⁴⁰ This poem, while clearly fascinated by its own claims, mocks the idea

³⁹ In a poem that Franklin dates from the summer of the same year, Dickinson uses this word—"Savans"—again, this time as a way of characterizing figures of authority who "classify" artifacts and knowledge. The opening stanza of this later poem reads:

If the foolish, call them "*flowers*" –
Need the wiser, *tell*?
If the Savans "Classify" them
It is just as well!

(Fr 179, ll. 1-4)

Here the speaker's tone, as well as the parallel created between the actions of the foolish and the actions of the savants, establishes a mistrust of scientific naming that the "wiser" (l. 2) understand better.

⁴⁰ The notion that a secret could be revealed easily would have been absurd to Dickinson, as so many of her poems narrate the impossibility of revelation. See "'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (Fr 425), "Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue –" (Fr 782), and "The last Night that She lived" (Fr 1100). For instance, in the eleventh entry of Fascicle 21, she writes, "The Star's whole secret – in the Lake – /Eyes were not meant to know" (Fr 450), here preserving the right of nature to keep secrets from its readers.

that a bone, a physical specimen left over from bygone days, could reveal or even begin to reveal a hidden truth. This is further emphasized by the use of the word “made” (l. 4), as the poem attributes this process of making to scientists and their method of study. In other words, scientists as they are presented here construct revelation. Dickinson’s incorporating of this language of construction and artificiality highlights the difference between constructed meaning and natural existence.⁴¹

As in many of Dickinson’s poems, the second part works to comment on the first, through what initially seems like a parallel or metaphorical treatment of the same issue.⁴² Whereas the bone was the representative figure in the opening, now it is the flower or as Dickinson implies with the “This” of line 8, the bone can now be seen *as* the flower. But this flower is the “meekest flower of the mead” (l. 8), probably the most beautiful line of the poem and one that echoes the end of Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” Interestingly, this echo calls attention to Dickinson’s poem as a poem. In Wordsworth’s poem the flower clearly works as a symbol:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.
(ll. 203-206)

For Wordsworth, the flower exists in order to reveal or give rise to “thoughts” (l. 206).

Despite its status as “the meanest flower” (l. 205), it has a symbolic power. Set in a

⁴¹ Baym’s reading of this poem varies significantly from mine, as she reads it as an articulation of Dickinson’s reaction against the notion of comparative anatomy that Mary Lyon, founder and principal of Mount Holyoke, applied in her ideas about femininity and domestic labor. Ultimately, Baym argues that Dickinson is questioning future life: “As the single bone unfolds the whole perished organism to comparative anatonists, so the ‘eye prospective’ sees rose, lily, and ‘countless Butterfly’ in a winter flower” (142).

⁴² When it was first published in *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1929), there was no stanza division.

winter landscape, Dickinson's flower also exists as the antithesis of nature and beauty that we normally associate with flowers. And like Wordsworth's, this flower in its mean state is representative of all that has come before and will come again, of all that is not present at the moment: "Of Rose and Lily, manifold, / And countless Butterfly!" (ll. 11-12)

As Wordsworth's poem suggests, it is a common poetic strategy to take a thing (say, a flower) and make it stand in for something else (say, an emotion, a state of being, something that is not present, many things that are only associatively related).

Wordsworth implicitly theorizes this move in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) when he argues for "the plainer and more emphatic language" (597) of his rustic poetic speaker. He argues that in rural occupations "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (597). He uses these men, who "hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (597), to initiate a theory of language that would come to dominate his and later generations and that would take the natural object as a symbol for the larger forms of nature and humanity.

While Dickinson's poem exists precisely because these relations are possible, her opening stanza reveals that she is wary of using such a poetic strategy. Isobel Armstrong has argued that such a difference in approach can be attributed to gender, for female poets may have approached the power of symbol in very different ways than male poets. In Armstrong's formulation:

Symbol separates an object from that which we see in male romantic poetry, but not in women's... [I]n general women's lyric prefers to work through iteration, repetition, and parallelism, resorting to synonymy and even tautology, as it searches for a predicate rather than moving to symbolic assertiveness (17).

Although Dickinson does not directly address her swerve from this tradition in the content of the poem, its form forces the reader to question his or her tendency to endow symbols with power—to associate flowers, as it were, with love, spring, birth, or any other of the topics with which they are typically linked. Instead, her critique makes us ask: What if we looked at the “meekest flower of the mead” (l. 8) not as representative but just as it is, in its natural relations to the other aspects of the world? What would we then see? Dickinson suggests that the bone and flower might have other functions if they were not always used to represent the very sort of commonplaces about nature, humanity, and poetry that her own poem seems to resist. In other words, Dickinson asks her reader to question what it would be like to refuse metaphor as we know it, especially a metaphor so powerful that it could be used to close one of the most famous poems of the previous generation. In other words, by staging the loss of the comparative, Dickinson refuses the power of synecdoche to conjure a unified world.

“A science – so the Savans say” instructs us to be wary of representation, whether it be of a bone standing in for lost history or a flower standing in for the cycle of seasons. While this is not overtly a poem about poetry, it questions the logic of synecdoche, a fundamental poetic tool that Dickinson had at her disposal and used regularly. In questioning its power, Dickinson aligns and distinguishes herself from many of the poets and poetic theorists of her time who often embraced this device. For instance, Emerson would have agreed with Dickinson’s skepticism about the possibility of man unfolding nature’s secrets, as he wrote in the opening chapter of *Nature* (1836): “Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection” (9). Despite this, he was deeply invested in

the power of symbols and in the relationship between nature and language. Each of his three opening rules in his chapter on language—“1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit” (20)—depends on the existence of such signs and symbols. Such a theory allows Emerson to lay claim to a sense of the unity of all things, connected not only through the syntax that binds each rule together but through his sense that language is the instrument that reflects this unity best:

Herein is especially apprehended the unity of Nature,—the unity in variety,—which meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things make an identical impression. Xenophanes complained in his old age, that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. He was weary of seeing the same entity in the tedious variety of forms. The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth. A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world (29-30).

Not only does each part reflect this whole, but in Emerson’s estimation this whole is always perfect and faithfully rendered. The correlation of parts to the greater whole is necessary, and in his later chapter, “Prospects,” Emerson subordinates the role that the multitude (or in Dickinson’s language, the “manifold”) plays in relation to this unity:

When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity. I cannot greatly honor minuteness in details, so long as there is no hint to explain the relations between things and thoughts (43).

Emerson’s bestowing of the power of representation onto each facet of nature was a defining move for him and the school of transcendentalist thinkers around him. When Whitman wrote “Song of Myself” in response to Emerson’s call for an American poet, he complicated many of Emerson’s ideas but ultimately articulated a similar embrace of the

small standing in for the big, as can be seen in almost every section of the 1855 poem.

For example:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,
 And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of a wren,
 And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
 And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
 And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
 And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,
 And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels,
 And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the farmer's girl boiling
 her iron tea-kettle and baking shortcake.

(ll. 662-669)

While Whitman lingers on the details of the world, especially on that last image of the girl, he treats each instance of nature as representative and yet as equal to all the others.

While Dickinson shares Whitman's "no less than" preoccupation, she differs from his Emersonian embrace of unity. Dickinson celebrates the "manifold" (l. 11) without letting it resolve into a unity or a whole, always questioning the notion that nature and language can reveal anything—or everything, in Whitman's formulation.

In the same way that the first stanza of "A science – so the Savans say" creates a context in which the second stanza can be interpreted, the poems that precede and follow it on the fascicle sheet create a context for understanding it and its implications. The two poems that come before "A science – so the Savans say" are important because they initiate, deepen, and complicate some of the issues that come into play later. A striking resonance exists between the opening of "A science – so the Savans say" and the opening of the first poem on the fascicle sheet:

A little East of Jordan,
 Evangelists record,
 A Gymnast and an Angel
 Did wrestle long and hard –

Till morning touching mountain –
 And Jacob, waxing strong,
 The Angel begged permission
 To Breakfast – to return!

Not so, said cunning Jacob!
 “I will not let thee go
 Except thou bless me” – Stranger!
 The which acceded to –

Light swung the silver fleeces
 “Peniel” Hills beyond,
 And the bewildered Gymnast
 Found he had worsted God!
 (Fr 145)⁴³

This poem opens in a tone of earnest storytelling, but because the second line reveals the identity of those storytellers as “Evangelists” (l. 2), earnestness is replaced with skepticism. As we know from some of Dickinson’s more famous treatments of biblical stories, like the poem that begins “The Bible is an Antique Volume” (Fr 1577) or the later stanzas of “If the foolish, call them flowers” (Fr 179), this questioning stance was a favorite of hers, especially when it came to the ways in which people blindly receive religious story and doctrine. The poem implies that because this knowledge has not been accessed directly but instead has been “record[ed]” (l. 2) by “Evangelists,” the poem is wary of its truth-value. In the same way that the speaker is simply at the mercy of what “Evangelists” have chosen to record for her, Jacob is blind to the situation in which he finds himself. God’s identity is unknown to him, and he is therefore left to

⁴³ While I am primarily concerned with the fascicle version of each text, it is worth noting the textual controversy that exists around this one. In early 1860, before copying it into the fascicle, Dickinson sent a copy to Sue, a copy that was never found but from which Sue’s daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, published it in *The Single Hound* (1914). Many critics have noticed the vast differences between the two versions, reading them as Dickinson’s, not Bianchi’s, revisions. For example, see Ellis. Because Dickinson did not make such intense revisions this early in her career, because she came back after it was copied in the fascicle to suggest the variant “Signor” for “Stranger” (l. 11), and because we know that Bianchi changed many of Dickinson’s poems before she published them, I concern myself only with the fascicle copy and remain wary of criticism that takes up the earlier version.

make blunder after blunder. While this poem tells quite accurately the story we find in Genesis 32, it is the poem's questioning of the story that is the important intervention. Dickinson does not choose to rewrite the story, as many later women poets chose to do with biblical text; instead, she plants the idea in her reader's mind that this story may not have happened in this manner. Therefore, the first sheet of Fascicle 7 deploys the nuances of tone to draw our attention to our own instinct to receive knowledge passively.

Whereas in the first and third entries of this fascicle sheet the speakers prompt her reader to question received knowledge, Dickinson's formal tactics create a sense of indeterminacy at a very different level in the intervening entry. Written around the fifth anniversary of Charlotte Brontë's death, "All overgrown by cunning moss" (Fr 146) was written in remembrance of one of Dickinson's favorite writers. It appears that this poem was first written in a five-stanza form, but after copying it onto the fascicle sheet, Dickinson went back and added an "Or" between the third and fourth stanzas:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of "Currer Bell"
In quiet "Haworth" laid.

The Bird – observing others
When frosts too sharp became
Retire to other latitudes –
Quietly did the same –

But differed in returning –
Since Yorkshire hills are green –
Yet not in all the nests I meet –
Can Nightingale be seen –

Or
Gathered from many wanderings –
Gethsemane can tell
Thro' what transporting anguish
She reached the Asphodel!

Soft fall the sounds of Eden
 Opon her puzzled ear –
 Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,
 When “Bronte” entered there!
 (Fr 146)

It seems as if Dickinson did not plan on including the “Or” when she started copying the poem, as there is no extra room left between the third and fourth stanzas. Editors have been worrying over how to print it ever since. In 1896, it was printed in its five-stanza form, with no “Or” indicated. In 1960, it was printed as a three-stanza poem, using stanzas 1, 4, and 5. The latest version, Franklin’s 1999 reading edition of the poems, prints the first three stanzas, ignoring the “Or” and the existence of the two additional stanzas.

Because of Dickinson’s addition of that “Or,” the identity of this poem has been up for dispute and subject to infinite interpretations—interpretations that I will take up in depth in my third chapter on Dickinson’s elegies. What I hope we can see here, though, is that in light of the poems that exist on either side of it, the formal indeterminacy of “All overgrown with cunning moss” raises a reading problem that reflects the sheet’s engagement with ideas of authority, storytelling, and definitive naming. Once the “Or” was squeezed between these stanzas, the poem became several very different poems at once, all with disparate themes and tones. This is one of the earliest moments in Dickinson’s career in which she is thinking about what constitutes the identity, integrity, and whole of the poem. When she wrote it out the first time, in its five-stanza form, it told a narrative, from the bird’s deciding to take its leave through its arrival in heaven. But at some point Dickinson decided that the poem need not narrate the whole story in this manner, that it might be more compelling not only if the experience were more

fragmented but if she and the reader had to choose between the fragmented experience and the whole. Dickinson's revision intensifies this fascicle's preoccupation with received knowledge precisely because it opens up other options to its readers, allowing them to construct the story they desire as they go along.

The first three entries of Fascicle 7 talk back and forth to each other on the issue of received and constructed knowledge. Each poem questions and challenges authority, be it of religion, poetic form, or science. Of course, we can never escape the fact that as the poet constructs this very skepticism of received knowledge, she inhabits the position of authority herself. This fascicle sheet therefore begins to implicate the poet as one of the figures of authority with whom she is concerned, as she is seen actively manipulating both form and voice. But the very form of the fascicle itself reminds us that this complication is not lost on Dickinson.

In the poems that Dickinson includes on this opening fascicle sheet, we can see her trying out (and in the process accumulating) various relationships between the authority figures of her texts and the speakers who ostensibly address these figures. In the final two entries on this sheet, she does this by employing a child or childlike speaker, one whose gender is often made explicit. Dickinson illustrates the ways in which an inexperienced, deferential figure can begin to question one who holds the answers. In doing so, her speakers reveal the ways in which they regard and ultimately tackle the authority of the poem itself.

This childlike speaker emerges in the fourth poem, yet this poem is full of the most aggressive irony thus far, an irony that was more subtly deployed in the poems that appear earlier on the sheet:

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!”
 (Fr 148)

Spoken in what seems like a naïve child’s voice, this poem begins by asking a series of simple questions to an absent figure. Claiming ignorance, the speaker needs someone to whom she can pose her questions. Yet while the first stanza makes the speaker seem naïve, the second reveals a certain imaginative expansion on her part, as she begins to see the world in visual metaphors. Here, “morning” (l. 1) is figured as an animal of sorts, which has physical details and a story of origin. While these opening stanzas introduce us to a voice that speaks first from a child’s and then from a poet’s perspective, the last stanza reverses this move.

The adult who utters the opening lines of the final stanza mocks the “Scholar” (l. 9), “Sailor” (l. 9), and “Wise Man” (l. 10) to whom she speaks, but she also mocks herself as the poser of questions. Her question, at the most basic level, is a simple one and one that will be answered naturally with the passing of time as the sun will eventually rise. Yet her claim of ignorance and deference in the presence of these male figures who she believes have the answer reads as a critique of them, as their very existence has forced her into such a position. Dickinson often used the natural world to raise

epistemological questions, yet here we see her taking an ironic stance. Her speaker is stripped of her confidence in the face of nature and subject to a male authority that claims it can link words—notice the quotes around “morning” (l. 1) and “Day” (l. 2)—to natural phenomena. These lines were first published on May 18, 1891 in *St. Nicholas*, a popular magazine for children in late nineteenth-century America. Read in this context, this poem is obviously a children’s lyric; but in the fascicle context, this reading ceases to be possible (or, we might argue, never was possible) because it forces the reader to begin to group together a certain cast of characters from the sheet—Evangelists, God, Savans, Scholar, Sailor, Wise Man—who are unquestioningly endowed with authority and whom the speakers urge us (through their shifts in tone) to question.

Like “A little East of Jordan” and “A science – so the Savans say,” this poem employs an ironic tone while always maintaining the possibility to be read literally. In each case, the literal reading is the one that both needs and accepts the word of authority, positioning it above what nature and intuition can disclose. Read together, the poems reveal the irony that Dickinson attaches to a given speaker’s dependence on a human interpreter. Yet it is this dependence—conveyed even ironically—that allows her, as we saw earlier, to distance herself from critique. For example, in the final two lines of “Will there really be a ‘morning’?,” the speaker becomes the child of the earlier stanzas by referring to herself as “a little Pilgrim” (l. 11). Taken on its own, this stance saves the poem from the scathing critique of male-centered knowledge that it borders on in the previous lines. Yet in the fascicle context, this critique is heightened, as it is the childish posturing that is more acutely under attack.

The final poem on the first sheet in Fascicle 7 continues to comment on figures of authority. In one very convoluted sentence, the speaker addresses Caesar, asking him to take a flower from the hand of Cato's daughter:

Great Caesar! Condescend
The Daisy, to receive,
Gathered by Cato's Daughter,
With your majestic leave!
(Fr 149)

As Dickinson would have most likely known, Caesar and Cato were lifelong enemies. Cato's daughter Portia, whom her father married first to his political ally, Biblius, and then to his nephew, Brutus, was never known to have had a deferential moment like this with Caesar, yet Dickinson imagines it here. In constructing the fantasy of this scene, Dickinson has inserted a female player into a war story and has her offer a symbol of truce and kindness. In light of the texts that have come before it and in light of Dickinson's decision to place these lines here, in a space that could have fit a longer entry, this poem deepens the ironic tone of the fascicle sheet, mocking two powerful male figures who spent their lives forcefully opposing the beliefs and actions of the other. In this one simple sentence, the poem makes the story of their heroic lives smaller than what history books record.

As I hope to have shown, copying these five poems onto a fascicle sheet allowed Dickinson to create an alternative world in which parts do not simply reveal a whole and in which one need not take the word of authority—even the poet's authority—over personal knowledge. By placing these poems next to one another on the sheet, Dickinson creates a set of associations that alter and deepen their meaning and status. While the fascicle sheet ultimately hands the power back to Dickinson as writer, binder, and reader

of the materials at hand, Dickinson uses this format to extend, question, and even undermine the authority that an individual lyric or a sequence of lyrics might otherwise assume.

Taking the fascicle sheet as Dickinson's primary unit of construction allows us to rethink the formal issues that arise when poems are grouped together and speak back and forth to each other in non-uniform ways. Cameron has also produced readings of texts on the same fascicle sheet, but she insists that such an analysis extends to a reading of the *entire* fascicle. She argues that rereading "two poems in proximity within the fascicle, poems no longer quite discrete, requires a rereading of *all* the poems in the fascicle and of the fascicle as a whole" (*Choosing* 96, italics mine). She is also interested in the connections between a poem that ends one fascicle and the poem that begins the next, as well as the relation between proximate fascicles.⁴⁴ Cameron's groundbreaking analysis makes my own possible; she was the one to establish that the fascicles need to be read and that they allow us to identify larger poetic problems that have to do with boundedness, intertextuality, and identity. Nevertheless, a closer look at Dickinson's compositional process suggests that connections across fascicles are not Dickinson's primary concern. If, as I have argued, the fascicles do not ask to be read like books, then our decision to read the fascicles as books of poems becomes visible as a choice—one that gave editors and scholars a structure through which they could understand, interpret, and produce readings of Dickinson's texts.

⁴⁴ In addition, Cameron often talks about what a certain portion of the poems in a given fascicle are doing, without consideration for where they are placed in the fascicles. This enables her to speak very broadly about how certain fascicles work. For instance, she writes: "If Fascicle 13 established the existence of loss as a natural phenomenon, Fascicle 14 explores its felt manifestations—its manifestations for persons who contest it" (*Choosing* 102).

One of the great ironies here is that when Franklin first presented the fascicles to a reading public, he stressed the importance of the fascicle sheet. Explaining Dickinson's shift from using half-sheets to using smaller slips of paper to accommodate a poem's spillover, he wrote, "Her unit, which in one sense had always been the sheet, became more so" (xii). From the very beginning, this idea of the sheet as the unit of construction was present in Dickinson criticism, yet like so much of Franklin's analysis, it has been either misread or disregarded as critics have attempted to perform narrative and thematic readings that span an entire fascicle. While Franklin based his editorial theory on Dickinson's accommodation of spillover, and I have done so from her method of stacking folded sheets, we both advocate a return to the fascicle sheet, curious about the sorts of reading options it makes possible.

Several objections to my theory may arise. For instance, many of these poems were also placed in letters, sometimes as poems and sometimes as prose, seemingly undermining the privileged relationships granted by their placement within the fascicles. For as Mitchell has argued, "that Dickinson was happy to send individual poems from fascicles to correspondents seems to allow for the possibility that they could survive on their own as autonomous aesthetic objects" (*Monarch* 38). But, I would argue, instead of further separating Dickinson's letter-writing and fascicle-making practices from each other, attention to the fascicle sheet brings them closer together. (This is a connection that I will explore in depth in Chapter 2.) For instance, in his 1998 variorum of Dickinson's poems, Franklin argues that while we once thought that Dickinson made the fascicles first and then copied poems into her letters, she actually worked the other way around,

sending them far and wide before sitting down to copy them onto fascicle sheets (19).⁴⁵ Whether or not one considers Dickinson's correspondence as a kind of workshop she engaged in before copying reader-tested versions onto the fascicle sheets, this sequence of events shows that she often moved from treating poems separately, and in groups determined by a letter's addressee, to treating the relations between poems as central. Making the fascicle sheets may have been informed by her initial move to isolate and cluster poems in her correspondence. Additionally, Dickinson often wrote letters on folded sheets of stationery, and while she didn't bind these sheets together, a single letter was sometimes written on more than one folded sheet. (Unlike an unbound fascicle, the reader of a letter would be able to determine for him or herself the order of the sheets.) While critics have long treated either the letters or the fascicles as Dickinson's privileged mode of composition, this material similarity suggests that these two practices are not as different as we have previously thought.

Additionally, we cannot ignore the fact that Dickinson did eventually bind these sheets together. While looking at Dickinson's method of construction in relation to her contemporaries' handmade books reveals that, at least initially, she treated the fascicle sheets independently of one another, she also imagined the sheets in relation to each other. But when a reader locates the sheets that make up a fascicle, marking where each begins and ends, it is the breaks that are built into the fascicle form and not the unity across sheets that become visible. It is these breaks that force the reader to stop and start again, that disrupt the inclination to read a fascicle from start to finish, making it difficult to read the fascicles as narratives or uninterrupted lyric sequences. Additionally, once it is

⁴⁵ While for the most part this is true, there are instances, especially in Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson, when she sent poems that had already been copied into fascicles.

clear that the sheets were composed individually and without the whole fascicle in mind, the reader not only sees the breaks that occur between sheets but recognizes that Dickinson could have stacked the sheets in any way she wished. In other words, poems in the fascicles are much more loosely grouped together than previously thought. Dickinson's method of copying and binding allowed for the easy reordering as well as the shortening or lengthening of a fascicle, the result of which, while not producing radically different objects, does produce a different reading experience.

One way of feeling the looseness of this form is to notice that in several instances Dickinson copied a single poem—and, on two occasions, two poems—onto single leaves or half-sheets of stationery that she bound into the fascicles.⁴⁶ While in most of these cases these leaves were bound into the center of the fascicles, thereby indicating that Dickinson was aware of what came before and after them, on one occasion it seems as if Dickinson placed a leaf as the last entry in a fascicle. Franklin situates “The face I carry with me – last –” (Fr 395) as the final entry in Fascicle 19, but Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith have pointed out that the leaf on which this poem has been copied was folded in thirds, as if for sending, and “Sue” has been erased from the verso (102).⁴⁷ Depending on how one reads this situation, a complex relation of poem/leaf/sheet to

⁴⁶ For the individual poems copied onto single leaves, see “What is – ‘Paradise’ –” (Fr 241) in Fascicle 9; “I came to buy a smile – today –” (Fr 258) and “A Clock stopped –” (Fr 259) in Fascicle 11; “Unto like Story – Trouble has enticed me –” (Fr 300) in Fascicle 12; “The feet of people walking home” (Fr 16) in Fascicle 14; and “Knows how to forget!” (Fr 391) and “The face I carry with me – last –” (Fr 395) in Fascicle 19. For the two instances in which Dickinson copied two poems on single leaves see “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Fr 260) and “I held a Jewel in my fingers –” (Fr 261) on one leaf and “It is easy work when the soul is at play –” (Fr 242) and “That after Horror – that ’twas us –” (Fr 243) on another leaf, both of which were bound into Fascicle 11.

⁴⁷ Many thanks to Martha Nell Smith for pointing this manuscript out to me. For other instances in which Dickinson's manuscripts have been altered, see “Mutilations: What was Erased, Inked Over, and Cut Away” at <http://www.emilydickinson.org/mutilation/index.html>. In his variorum, Franklin also notes the folding and the erasure, but he continues to place this poem at the end of Fascicle 19, stating that Dickinson “retained the manuscript and bound it into the fascicle” (419). Interestingly, this sheet is housed with Fascicle 2 at the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College.

fascicle emerges. If Dickinson copied this poem for Sue but decided not to send it, erased Sue's name herself, and bound it into the fascicle, or if she sent this poem to Sue and later retrieved it, erasing Sue's name and binding it into the fascicle, then it is clear that "The face I carry with me – last –" was probably not written with the other poems of Fascicle 19 in mind. But because Dickinson eventually bound it with them, a complex relation now exists between this poem and its fascicle context. In the case that Dickinson did not bind this leaf in herself—that is, if Mabel Loomis Todd took the poem from the Evergreens and bound it in or if Franklin is wrong in his placement of it—then reading "The face I carry with me – last –" as part of Fascicle 19 is even more problematic. I point to this example not only because it proves how important the breaks between sheets are but because it highlights the fact that sheets were eventually and most often by Dickinson bound together. The fact that Dickinson's stitches once existed between the sheets invites readers to move from one sheet to the next. Even when reading Franklin's facsimile versions of the fascicles, one must keep track of where each sheet ends and the next one begins, as his edition makes it easy to read through the whole fascicle without an awareness of the breaks that exist between sheets. In other words, while attention to the sheet highlights the breaks in the fascicle, it also focuses on the stitches that hold them all together. It is this tension between the breaks and the stitches that is the primary concern of my third chapter.

While Dickinson was clearly absorbed with her fascicle project for many years, she did eventually abandon it. She would soon be writing individual poems, parts of poems, and sometimes only a scattering of words onto the backs of kitchen lists, advertisements, and bills. Because Dickinson destroyed almost all of the drafts that

preceded her fascicle copies, we do not know if she had always worked this way and simply chose to abandon making fair copies and binding them into fascicles or if her later work represents a change in method. Either way, she stopped copying and binding these texts together, an act that suggests a change in her approach to her poetry. What is most interesting, though, is that between these two stages of her writing life, she continued copying her texts onto fascicle sheets yet abandoned binding them to each other. While Dickinson bound sheets into fascicles between 1858 and 1864, she continued copying poems onto loose, folded sheets through 1865 and then again between 1871 and 1875, the year of her mother's stroke, after which Dickinson was consumed by her role as caregiver and nurse.

By focusing on the sheet, readers will find that Dickinson formally addresses her own resistance to both the static lyric moment and the all-encompassing narrative. By presenting clusters, groupings, and pairings of texts, the act of making the fascicles allows Dickinson to rethink the boundaries between individual texts while simultaneously withholding sequence or narrative models. Although readers cannot help bringing their assumptions about poetry to these texts, as my readings above have clearly done, they can rethink the ways in which they approach the larger structures into which Dickinson placed these texts. Shifting the way we think about the format of the fascicles will eventually lead to a reexamination of the poems themselves.

Material textual analysis of Dickinson's writing process is most useful when it raises rather than answers questions about genre and the boundaries of the literary. Attending to the construction of the fascicles rather than taking them as settled objects puts into focus, for instance, Dickinson's struggle with narration and groupings, with

flexibility and breakage. By looking at the joints that hold the fascicles together, we can begin to ask new questions about the relationship between part and whole in Dickinson's writing, about the formal territory between lyric and narrative poetry, about problems of mobility and duration in the poems themselves. Defamiliarizing Dickinson's fascicles is the first step to asking what kinds of poems Dickinson wrote and how they are connected to those of her contemporaries.

Chapter Two

Managing Multiple Contexts: Dickinson, Circulation, and the Limits of Poetry

While Dickinson copied over eight hundred poems onto folded sheets that she bound into fascicles, this was by no means the only place that she copied her poems. She enclosed and embedded poems in her letters; wrote them on sheets, envelopes, and scraps that she retained for herself; copied them onto unbound fascicle sheets that are now known as “sets”; and drafted them on the backs of kitchen lists, advertisements, bills, and other pieces of household paper. While recent criticism has begun to address several of these alternative material contexts for her poems, most critics continue to treat Dickinson’s poems either individually or as part of the fascicles. In her study of Dickinson’s late manuscripts, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (1995), Marta Werner suggests that Franklin’s facsimile edition of Dickinson’s fascicles, the very text on which my study depends, is largely responsible for the recent emphasis on the fascicles, as she argues that it “offers a portrait of the artist as bookmaker” (3). According to Werner, “what is central—that is, canonical—is what was/is bound in a book” (3).

Werner takes issue with the move to canonize the poems that appear in the fascicles, but in the process she makes a critical assumption about what the fascicles are—namely, books. This very assumption, I would argue, allows the critic, editor, and reader to treat the fascicle as more important, more “central,” than Dickinson’s other contexts for her writings. In my first chapter, I contested the idea that the fascicles are books in order to disrupt many of the assumptions that readers have brought to bear on

these objects. I asked Dickinson's readers to reconsider the materials she used to make the fascicles and her specific methods for copying and binding. I asked them to rethink what kinds of poems Dickinson copied into her fascicles and how these poems are related to each other. Yet while dislodging the idea of the fascicles as canonical in the way that Werner has characterized them, I have drawn the very kind of attention to the fascicle poems that she criticizes, for it is their particular status as "fascicle poems" that has invited my attention.

That most Dickinson critics approach the fascicles as if they are books is not news to anyone. This assumption has been on the surface of all writing about Dickinson. In this chapter, through looking at several of Dickinson's other material contexts, I will address more concealed assumptions about Dickinson's poems and practice. I would argue that Werner's issue with the fascicles is not really that they have been considered books but that their status as such has allowed Dickinson critics to treat them as special and favored objects that exist separately from, and often in opposition to, Dickinson's other writings. Several decades of Dickinson scholarship supports this notion, as critics and editors have always chosen where to place their emphasis—traditionally the choices have been on the fascicle poems, the letters, or the late scraps—and they have consistently justified their choice by sequestering each from the others.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Higginson and Todd first gave priority to the fascicle poems in the three 1890s editions of Dickinson's poems, as they took the majority of their selections from these editions. A history of the critical reception of the fascicles, which began in the 1960s but did not become prominent until the 1980s and 1990s (after Franklin's reconstruction of them), has been documented in Chapter 1. An emphasis on the letters began with their first publication in 1894, but critical studies of the letters still make up only a fraction of Dickinson criticism. Several recent studies that have treated the letters are Messmer's discussion of all of the letters; Martha Nell Smith's focus on the letters, poems, and letter-poems Dickinson sent to Sue; and several treatments (mostly by biographers, including Cody, Sewell, and Wolff) of the "Master Letters." Not much has been made of the late scraps until very recently, most notably by Werner and Hubbard.

Yet Dickinson maintained a more fluid and complicated relationship between her writings than the history of criticism would lead us to believe. Not only did she write and place poems in multiple material contexts, but she often took the same or similar texts and, over a period of many years, as she copied them in disparate places, altered the status and identity of the original texts. In this chapter I will tell the story of one such text. As I narrate the various shifts in context that take place over a twenty-seven-year span, I will draw attention to the ways in which Dickinson's method of shifting the physical placement of what was once a fascicle poem raises important questions about the intersection of context and genre. For instance, if a piece of writing presents itself as a poem in one context, then must the same words in the same order continue to be a poem once it has been placed in a different material context? How is the genre of a piece of writing affected when it is put to different uses at different historical moments? Can returning to a writer's manuscripts reveal something about the identity and status of texts that can't be recognized in the more accessible printed and edited versions? And what difference, if any, does recontextualization make to the generic ambitions and status of a text?

Conversations about Dickinson and genre are usually limited to debates about the centrality of her poems versus her letters. History has dictated this, as Dickinson was first presented to the reading public as a poet, and only later, with the 1894 publication of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, as a letter writer. Yet as with most editions of writers' letters, the publication of Dickinson's letters was intended to supplement the public's knowledge of this mysterious poet, not to present another literary genre in which she worked, and it is only in the last twenty-five years that critics have begun to treat her letters as a mode of

writing that offers something other than an explanation for her poems.⁴⁹ And thus debates began over whether Dickinson herself more warmly embraced the writing of poems or of epistolary prose. Proponents of her poetry have often cited the fact that several of Dickinson's own poems theorize the difference between the two genres, stressing what poetry offers her that prose cannot. "They shut me up in Prose –" (Fr 445), for instance, is a poem that likens prose to a "Closet" (l. 3) that her captors place her in to keep her "still" (l. 4). "I dwell in Possibility –" (Fr 466) pictures "Possibility" (l. 1) and "Prose" (l. 2) as two different kinds of houses, the first of which has more windows, better doors, the sky as its roof, and all the best visitors. Even though, in these instances, Dickinson seems to equate prose with structures of containment, champions of her letters are quick to note that she wrote over a thousand letters in prose and often celebrated this form of epistolary prose in such poems as "Going to Him! Happy letter!" (Fr 277), "This is my letter to the World" (Fr 519), and "A Letter is a joy of Earth –" (Fr 1672).⁵⁰ Indeed, many of her

⁴⁹ Early announcements of the book, like the one which appeared in the *Boston Herald* on November 27, 1894, present it as something that lovers of her poetry will appreciate simply because it reveals more of her actual life: "Those who have been interested in Emily Dickinson's poems, and the number is very large, have been eager to see her letters, which contain all the prose she is known to have written. In the poems there was a somber and even weird outlook upon this world and the next. They were written in a mood which was unusual, if not really strange, but they expressed the reality of her life, and it is in their unhackneyed character and strange fervour that they have attracted general attention. These letters have been collected with great difficulty, and it would seem as if some of them were too trifling for publication, but, inasmuch as they contain the only record of her life, they will be received with special interest by the large number of persons who are attracted to her poems" (Buckingham 362). Another (from the *Worcester Spy* on December 2, 1894) begins: "*Emily Dickinson's Letters*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, as is the case with letters of many other unique personalities, are very slightly interesting as letters, and very deeply interesting as reflecting Emily Dickinson" (Buckingham 374). Other reviews remark on the vulgarity of printing her correspondence. In "Along the Literary Wayside" (from the *Springfield Daily Republican* on December 2, 1894), the writer expresses that it is "somewhat painful to read...[since] it is certain that she never meant a line of these letters to be printed" (Buckingham 372). In "Emily Dickinson's Letters" (from the *Chicago Herald* on December 8, 1894), Mary Abbott writes, "it is not only a mistake, but a mean trick to publish private correspondence" (Buckingham 377).

⁵⁰ In his notably positive portrayal of Dickinson as letter writer, Decker writes: "Conventional as Dickinson in many ways is, in others she is the least conventional correspondent that one could imagine, meriting full consideration as the boldest, most inventive, most critically astute nineteenth-century letter writer in English. Although she could never have entertained such a notion about herself, she is arguably the greatest

poems actually address the very kinds of problems inherent in poetic form. For example, “Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music” (Fr 905) presents the lyric as the site of the speaker’s death, as the music can be extracted only once the bird has been killed.⁵¹ Even in “This was a Poet” (Fr 446), a poem that celebrates the poet as one who “distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings” (ll. 3-4), this poet is not the speaker of this poem but one whose presence makes the speaker feel her own “ceaseless Poverty” (l. 13).

This is, of course, a flawed opposition. The debate over whether Dickinson was a better poet or letter writer and over which type of writing she took greater pleasure in is faulty from the start, for like most writers, Dickinson had a complicated relationship to her own forms and modes of writing. Additionally, such discussions make it seem as if Dickinson had only two ways of writing and that these were stable and unproblematic categories for her to write in and that they remain so for us to read in. Throughout her life, Dickinson wrote letters, poems, letter-poems, scraps, drafts, and combinations of all of the above. Instead of deciding that Dickinson did one thing better than another, instead of deciding what it was Dickinson set out to do when she sat down to compose, and instead of deciding ahead of time that we know how to tell the difference between the various ways in which she wrote, this chapter returns to several of her manuscripts in order to open up the questions that these assumptions close down. Investigating the ways in which a single text was made and shaped, spliced and remade, overhauled and reformulated allows us to ask how we can define the shift in a text’s context—by a

theoretician of letter writing to be met with in American letters and literature” (141-142). While Decker’s assessment is aesthetic, Messmer argues that Dickinson’s letters are the most important part of her literary output precisely because they are her only “systematically ‘authorized’” (2) texts.

⁵¹ See Jackson’s reading of this poem (185-190), in which she argues that the “text stages its own reading in sadomasochistic terms” (187).

change in its physical placement, in its audience, in its function or use—and how issues of genre are implicated in such a shift.

But first a clarification: Any consideration of Dickinson's texts that aims to tell a complete story is haunted by the fact that there may have been manuscripts that were destroyed, lost, or withheld, and that what we have is probably only part of the story. For instance, we know that there were often pre-fascicle drafts that Dickinson usually destroyed once she copied a poem onto fascicle paper. For this reason, when I talk about the fascicle as the "first context," I mean that it is the first surviving context but recognize that the fascicle was not the site of the poem's initial composition. Additionally, we know that Dickinson often made drafts of her letters, which she destroyed once she made a copy suitable for sending. More problematically, we know that certain correspondents—for instance, her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross—were selective about which of Dickinson's letters and poems they chose to share with her editors. The Norcross sisters also edited and transcribed many of her writings themselves instead of handing over the originals. For this reason, it is hard to know the extent of what Dickinson sent them and what these documents looked like. And for many, the most difficult thing to get around is the fact that many of Dickinson's manuscripts were mutilated, erased, and destroyed by a person or persons. (Most fingers point at Dickinson's brother, Austin Dickinson, and one of her first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd, the woman with whom Austin was having an affair, both of whom had something at stake in tempering Dickinson's expressions of affection for her sister-in-law, Sue.)⁵² For all of these reasons and others, we can never tell the complete story of a Dickinson poem, reading it through its various drafts and

⁵² For a thorough discussion of the role that Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd have played in the reception of Dickinson's poems and letters, see Martha Nell Smith (*Rowing*).

documenting all the people and places to whom it may have been sent. What we can do is identify trends in what happened to texts and try to understand those trends in light of the specific materials she used and the modes of circulation she employed. The three contexts that I will discuss in this chapter may not be the only three that existed, but paying attention to them will allow us to understand some of the ways in which Dickinson worked, what her methods reveal about her relationships to the things she wrote, and what happens—formally, generically, and physically—to her poems over time.

In the summer of 1858, Dickinson copied what we have come to call the poem “As if I asked a common alms –” (Fr 14) onto the second sheet of Fascicle 1. In the first section, I consider the placement of this poem on this sheet and present a variety of ways of reading its inclusion in this fascicle. Although Dickinson would devote herself to making more fascicles over the next several years, she returned to Fascicle 1 many times, copying out some of its poems again and again. She returned to “As if I asked a common alms –” four years after first copying it in the fascicle and copied almost exactly the same words into her third letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Because Higginson would eventually become one of Dickinson’s first editors, much has been made of their early correspondence. While insights about Dickinson’s motives in contacting Higginson and his subsequent modes of encouraging and discouraging her literary pursuits abound, very little has been said about Dickinson’s decision to copy this poem within the prose of her letter to him. Twenty-three years later, Dickinson made two drafts, one much longer than the other, of a letter in which the words from this same poem constitute a letter of thanks to a now-unknown friend.

Through investigating these three very different material contexts, I argue that the details and circumstances of a given text's circulation can provide us with new ways of thinking about Dickinson's fascicles, about the relationship of poems and epistolary prose, and about the limits of poetry. When we look closely at Dickinson's writing practices, we recognize that we can never think about the fascicles without the letters and vice versa.

The First Context: Fascicle 1

Onto the final page of the second sheet of Fascicle 1, squeezed between the last stanza of "There is a morn by men unseen –" (Fr 13) and the whole of "She slept beneath a tree –" (Fr 15), Dickinson wrote the following lines (fig. 9):

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)

In the context of the poems that appear on this fascicle sheet, the moment of wonder expressed in these lines exists as only one of many in which something has been glimpsed or cherished, only to be relinquished in the end. The sheet begins with "I had a guinea golden –" (Fr 12), a poem that sings of the many things that have been lost—"a guinea golden" (l. 1), "a crimson Robin" (l. 9), and "a star in heaven" (l. 17)—all in an effort to relay a "moral" (l. 25) about "repentance" (l. 33) and "consolation" (l. 35). In the

next poem, “There is a morn by men unseen –” (Fr 13), other absences are similarly called up. In this instance, though, the poem draws a picture of a “mystic green” (l. 20) on which the dead live, a place of “dance and game” (l. 4), “a wondrous scene” (l. 13) of which one longs to be a part. Coming directly after these two poems, “As if I asked a common alms –” need not be read as the tentative imaginings of one who has never before been flooded by the dawn but instead as a moment in an ongoing process of the reclamation of lost experiences and as an articulation of that reclamation, as a poem that can deftly navigate the move between its own sense of innocence and entitlement. The short poem that follows it on this sheet, “She slept beneath a tree –” (Fr 15), underscores these recuperative acts, as here, through touch, the poem animates a sleeping (or dead, or not yet born) creature. Therefore, reading the inclusion of “As if I asked a common alms –” on the fascicle sheet provides both the referents and emotional setting that we need to understand it as a meta-reflection on loss.

If the poem is one thing when taken on its own and another thing when read among the other poems on the sheet onto which it was copied, it is still another thing when read in the context of the whole fascicle. The first fascicle is particularly interesting, not simply because it is the first or because it takes up these issues around loss, but because of the methods Dickinson used when copying these poems, because of the ways in which Dickinson used it as both a storehouse for some of her earlier poems and for others that she would circulate to several correspondents much later, and because of the subsequent editing and publication of the poems in it. A brief look at each of these aspects of this fascicle will provide an overview of the first context for this poem.

The most striking thing about the first sheet of the first fascicle has to do with the ways in which Dickinson's various editors have, in deciding how to print these poems, inadvertently highlighted some of the very questions about the relationship of part to whole that I argued in the first chapter should be central to any consideration of the fascicles. Because Dickinson did not draw lines before or after the poems on this sheet, her editors have had to decide for themselves where the poems begin and end. In doing so, they have debated what is a stanza of a poem and what is a whole poem. For instance, in 1891 Higginson and Todd printed the first four lines on the first page of this sheet as the first stanza in a three-stanza poem, but in 1999 Franklin printed them as the first whole poem in the fascicle. Franklin argues that there are eleven poems on this opening sheet, while, in 1955, Johnson had decided there were seven.

The absence of lines between poems on this opening sheet creates a fluidity between poems that doesn't exist on other fascicle sheets. It allows readers to wonder how these poems are related and to hold open the idea that multiple and conflicting relations between poems or pieces of poems can exist at once. For instance, even if we read the opening page as containing three separate poems and not as three stanzas of the same poem, the lack of lines in the blank space between them allows the reader to make connections more easily between them (fig. 10). For instance, the "departing blossoms" (Fr 21, l. 3) at the top of the page are recalled during the "procession" (Fr 22, l. 5) toward death that occurs at the center of the page, and the "prayer" (Fr 22, l. 8) that accompanies this procession is echoed by the "Amen!" (Fr 23, l. 3) at the bottom of the page. These sorts of resonances are not limited to the stanzas/poems that Dickinson's editors have

argued over but occur on each individual page of this first sheet and across the four pages of the sheet.⁵³

All of the stanzas of the poems that were copied onto this opening sheet are preoccupied with the end of summer, with the death of nature that will soon occur, and with the speaker's struggle to ward off this robbery and simultaneously produce ways of coping with its inevitability. If one thinks about the fascicles as narratives, one might wonder why this sheet didn't come at the end, for it was the last one that Dickinson copied and the only one that addresses an actual ending. But the poems in the fascicles do not necessarily exist in narrative relation to each other, and given their very nature as clustered groups of poems set in indeterminate relation, we might also see it as fitting that this fascicle opens in a place where the poem's sense of the future is threatened. In other words, the opening sheet does not introduce the change from summer to fall that the other sheets then pick up. Instead, it worries over without resolving many of the issues that the end of summer raises.

Onto the second sheet, Dickinson copied four poems that she marked as separate from each other with lines drawn between them. These four poems are longer than the ones on the opening sheet, and the first one in particular ("I had a guinea golden –") calls attention to its status as a piece of writing by referring to itself as both a "story" (l. 25) and a "ditty" (l. 29). The poems on this sheet exist in a very different register from those on the opening sheet, for each of these, as I discuss above, are preoccupied with the things that have been hidden from the speaker, with imaginary places that she cannot go, and with the power that others have over her and that she (as the one who creates the

⁵³ Along with the first three poems, the sixth and seventh were combined, and the ninth, tenth, and eleventh were combined in *Bolts of Melody* (1945).

language in which to render them in relation to her) has over them. Each poem balances and turns on this relationship and in this way asserts itself more than the ones on the first sheet do. For instance, the first poem on the sheet moves from being a “mournful ditty” (l. 29) to being one that condemns he who has taken away her “missing friend” (l. 26). While the second poem (“There is a morn by men unseen –”) does not condemn another, it goes from imagining the details of the heaven that men cannot see to a desperate call for death. The third poem (“As if I asked a common alms –”) also imagines places and experiences that the speaker has not and cannot inhabit, yet her relationship to these places and her reaction to what this imagining provides her with is, as we shall see throughout this chapter, deeply conflicted. In this light, the ability that the fourth poem (“She slept beneath a tree –”) has to transform the “Cradle mute” (l. 3) into a creature who can “see” (l. 6) is particularly powerful.

While many of the poems on the third sheet are preoccupied with questions about absence that have also been raised on the first two sheets, these poems worry specifically over how one might be able to measure (and therefore retain) what is slipping away or is permanently beyond one’s reach. Yet as the poems attempt these measurements, they also recognize that their methods for measuring are inadequate, or as the speaker of “The feet of people walking home” (F 16) says, “My figures fail to tell me” (l. 17). The second poem, “It’s all I have to bring today –” (Fr 17), enacts and stresses the inadequacy of these methods most dramatically as it asks the “you” (l. 5) of the poem to “count” (l. 5) but then presents items—“This, and my heart, and all the Bees” (l. 7)—that are uncountable. In the third poem, “Morns like these – we parted” (Fr 18), multiple things

“vanish” (l. 1) and “depart” (l. 6), and in the fourth, “So has a Daisy vanished” (Fr 19), the speaker imagines both the losing and the finding of those she loves.

The fourth and final sheet of Fascicle 1 does not resolve the issues of loss, absence, desire, cyclical decay, and death that were raised on the sheets that were eventually bound before it. Instead, this last sheet opens up even more territory between these issues. Two of the poems imagine a boat out at sea; the first figures both the boat’s wreck and its success, and the second narrates its eventual arrival on shore. Another two poems address the problem of summer’s end, but in one summer continues endlessly and in the other the end has already been reckoned with. Images of flowers dominate the poems on this sheet, but now it is the human who has picked the flower and been responsible for its death.

While there are several overarching themes, issues, and perspectives that dominate the poems in Fascicle 1, the poems clustered together on each sheet are markedly different from each other. These differences have been flattened and obscured by recent criticism on the fascicles that does not observe where sheets begin and end. While Dickinson’s editors have always marked this detail in their transcriptions of her manuscripts, critics have consistently read across sheets and in doing so have given the poems in individual fascicles more coherence and unity than actually exist. For instance, Heginbotham refers to the “innocent and almost merry... flower-filled context” (117) of Fascicle 1, reading the setting of “a woodsy garden” (120) and a narrative that begins with “the autumn of the gentian and [moves] to the summer of the rose” (120). Cameron does not physically situate the poems in the way that Heginbotham does but instead generalizes about the sorts of questions she thinks the fascicle as a whole asks: “Is death

part of nature or does it mark the end of nature? Can death be redeemed in nature or can it only be rectified by immortality?” (*Choosing* 85) Cameron can produce such questions only by reading across sheets and by treating all of the poems as a coherent unit.

Additionally, in Paul Crumbley’s unpublished paper on Fascicle 1 he characterizes the “particular concern” facing this fascicle’s speakers and connects it to the “stylistic devices that interrupt syntactic closure” (1).

When the critics above read Fascicle 1 in these ways they not only ignore the breaks that exist between sheets, but they imply that the poems exist, first and foremost, in relation to each other. While this may be a helpful shift away from reading Dickinson’s poems as isolated lyrics, it creates another problem, for it overlooks the fact that Dickinson placed many of these poems in several material contexts. Even if the multiple contexts that a poem was copied into are acknowledged (as they are, for instance, in Heginbotham’s study, which treats the poems that were copied into multiple fascicles), readings of the fascicles as unified and stable literary objects allow the fascicle context to emerge, to return to Werner’s term, as the most “central” one. As I discussed in my opening chapter, one of the most fascinating things that the reception of the fascicles has revealed is the enormous gap between, on the one hand, the historical evidence that Dickinson’s materials provide about what kind of objects they are and how they functioned in nineteenth-century culture and, on the other hand, the twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics’ need to read them as literary texts that were not subject to historical and cultural forces.

Before I turn to the second place that “As if I asked a common alms —” was copied, it is important to note that Dickinson did not create additional copies of all her

poems, nor did she do so in a consistent way. As far as we know, only seven of the twenty-seven poems in Fascicle 1 were copied elsewhere, and each one was treated differently. For example, sometimes Dickinson made an additional copy of a poem shortly before making the fascicle copy and sent it to one of her many correspondents. (Whether she was using her correspondence to test out a version of a poem before it was copied in the fascicle or was copying poems into the fascicles in order to keep a record of the poems that she was circulating we cannot know.) In the case of Fascicle 1, this occurs with “Frequently the woods are pink –” (Fr 24), which was sent to Sue, and with “Morns like these – we parted” (Fr 18), which was sent to both Sue and the Norcross sisters. In other cases, Dickinson made an additional copy or two at the time that she made the fascicle copy, yet she decided not to send it. For instance, she made two additional copies of “The feet of people walking home” (Fr 16) around the time that she copied it into the fascicle, but she retained both copies. Four years later, she bound one of these copies into Fascicle 14, and the other copy remained unbound for the rest of her life. Even though she had this copy with her, Dickinson made a fourth copy several months after making the first three drafts and sent it to Sue. She did something similar with “Nobody knows this little rose” (Fr 11), which we know must have been sent to someone around the same time that she made the fascicle copy, because it was printed in the *Springfield Daily Republican* that summer; two years later Dickinson made another copy that she retained. In the case of “*Oh if remembering were forgetting –*” (Fr 9) Dickinson initially made only her fascicle copy but a year later made another copy that she sent to Samuel Bowles. As we can see, most additional copies of poems were made around the same time as or shortly after the fascicle copy was made, but in the case of one poem in this fascicle, “On

this wonderful sea” (Fr 3), Dickinson had sent a copy to Sue five years before making the fascicle copy.

Recounting these shifts makes the circulation of Dickinson’s poems visible in a way that it hasn’t been before. Yet recounting the fact of them is not enough, as this obscures a crucial aspect of this circulation that has to do with the objects themselves. For as Dickinson shifts what was once a fascicle poem from one material context to another, she often strips it of the very qualities that allow us to recognize it as a poem in the first place. Tracking Dickinson’s poems through their other-than-fascicle contexts allows us to see that how important the letters are to the fascicles, and vice versa.

The Second Context: The Dickinson-Higginson Correspondence

Four years after copying “As if I asked a common alms —” into Fascicle 1, Dickinson sent these lines to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. By the time she did so, the two of them had already exchanged two letters each. Dickinson had read Higginson’s article, “Letter to a Young Contributor,” in the April 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and had promptly written to ask: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” In this opening letter (L 260), Dickinson does very little to introduce herself but instead asks, in several ways, if he would read her poems and offer her some guidance. Since Higginson’s article had done exactly this by offering practical advice to unpublished writers, Dickinson was contacting him now, it would seem, in the hopes of receiving a personal response to her particular poems. She states exactly what she thinks her problem is—“The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none

to ask”—and expresses both her inability to judge her own work and a deep loneliness, two issues she will return to numerous times in her future correspondence with him. With this letter she enclosed five additional pieces of paper: four poems that are individually copied out on separate pieces of stationery and a small card with her signature on it. While she will continue to enclose poems in her letters to Higginson in the coming years, she will not do so with her signature again.⁵⁴

The first four poems that Dickinson chose to send to Higginson were “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –” (Fr 124), “The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –” (Fr 304), “We play at Paste –” (Fr 282), and “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –” (Fr 204).⁵⁵ While Dickinson had been sharing her poems with several other correspondents over the previous several years, these enclosures reveal that Dickinson was treating Higginson as a different sort of recipient, as she normally sent poems out into the world before she copied them onto fascicle stationery. But in this case, three of the four poems enclosed for Higginson in this first letter had already been copied into fascicles, and one of these had, through Dickinson’s correspondence with Sue, already gone through several drafts.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Whether she did this with her signature in order to distance herself from the content of the letter, to imply that her letter can be regarded as an actual visit from her, or purely as a formality, we will never know. Mann argues for the first option, linking this act with her other strategies in this letter: “The mention of her fear of betrayal in the last sentence, the appeal to Higginson’s sense of honor, and the shielding of her name in its own envelope can suggest her profound shyness, her state of tension about her work, her particular modes of secrecy” (41). Messmer points out that this is the only instance in which Dickinson used “Emily” in her signature to Higginson and argues that by placing it on the inserted card she conceals her gendered identity (121). Higginson himself interpreted the inclusion of this card as the “shy writer [’s]” desire “to recede as far as possible from view” (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 185).

⁵⁵ While Johnson and Ward suggest that Dickinson may have enclosed a poem in her letter of January 11, 1862 to Samuel Bowles, this poem has never been identified and therefore the enclosures to Higginson have, for a long time, been considered her first.

⁵⁶ “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (Fr 124) had been sent to Sue in three different states of revision, had been published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on March 1, 1862, and had been copied into both Fascicle 6 and Fascicle 10. (For the rich history of the writing, revision, and publication of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” see Franklin (*Poems* 159-164) and Hart and Smith (97-100).) “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –” (Fr 204) and “The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –” (Fr 304) had been copied into

Dickinson followed a similar protocol in her second letter, although this letter is longer and more substantial, now offering some information about herself that Higginson seems to have requested (L 261). She writes from her “pillow” (as she is alluding to either the fact that she had been literally ill or her need to recover from his response), thanks him for the criticism of her poems, and states several times that she is in continued need of his guidance: “While my thought is undressed – I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown – they look alike, and numb.” She says that she has been writing “verse” for only one or two years (something we now know is untrue) and that it was spurred on by a “terror.” She writes of her books, her old tutor, and her dog. She tells of her brother, sister, mother, and father and their religion. She (now famously) says that she has heard that Whitman is “disgraceful,” and that while two editors have asked for her “Mind” (a term she used in her first letter as well), she has again been unable to assess her work herself. While Dickinson seems to be providing Higginson with what he must have asked for in his letter (her final sentence reads “Is this – Sir – what you asked me to tell you?”), she does not stray very far from her initial goal, which is to convey a sense of her need for his guidance. And just as she had done in her first letter, Dickinson encloses individual poems with this one. This time there are three of them, “There came a Day at Summer’s full” (Fr 325), “Of all the Sounds dispatched abroad” (Fr 334), and

Fascicles 10 and 14 respectively, the first in early 1861 and the second in early 1862. In both of these cases the fascicle versions contain both variants that Dickinson took up when copying out the versions she sent to Higginson. The earlier version of “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –” appears as four stanzas with a line between the second and third stanzas, indicating that Dickinson may have thought of it as two poems or considered the later stanzas as variants; additionally, the “that” in l. 11 was a “which” in the fascicle version. The earlier version of “The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –” was copied into the fascicle with variants interlined above three words, all of which were used in the later version: “nearest” for “maddest” (l. 1), “Lifts” for “Spreads” (l. 9), and “bewildered” for “defrauded” (l. 10). “We play at Paste –” (Fr 282) is the only poem that had not already been copied into a fascicle and may not have been sent to anyone prior to its inclusion in this letter. According to Franklin, three years later Dickinson made a fair copy of this poem on embossed notepaper with the heading “Emily” and signature “Emily,” although it was not folded or sent (*Poems* 300).

“South Winds jostle them –” (Fr 98), all of which had already been copied into the fascicles and one of which, “South Winds jostle them –,” had already been sent to two of her other correspondents.⁵⁷

In his two-volume biography, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), Richard B. Sewall presents specific reasons why Dickinson would have included each of these seven poems in her early letters to Higginson. Sewall states that Dickinson was sending “samples of her work, presumably to show its variety and range and something, as in the short poems, of its purpose and method” (546), but he also matches the topics of these poems to those of Higginson’s recent essays with which Dickinson would have been familiar (544-553). For instance, Sewall argues that Dickinson sent Higginson “We play at Paste –” because it

agreed, on one level, with his emphasis [in “Letter”] on the necessity of constant revision, or practice, in literary composition and, on a higher level, echoed the idea in his final paragraph that the whole human exercise was merely preparation for the divine (544-5).

In making such connections, Sewall implies that Dickinson was writing these poems with Higginson in mind. While Marietta Messmer’s recent study of Dickinson’s letters does not argue that these poems were written expressly for Higginson, she implies this nonetheless by never mentioning their previous contexts and by arguing that Dickinson chose them for a very specific reason: “A contextual reading of Dickinson’s letters in conjunction with all poems enclosed with those letters reveals how each gesture of self-denigration is carefully counterbalanced by a gesture of self-affirmation” (123). But

⁵⁷ Although Higginson said the enclosures were “Your Riches, taught me, poverty –” (Fr 418) and “A bird came down the walk” (Fr 359), Johnson decided otherwise, and Franklin concurs with Johnson’s assessment. “There came a Day at Summer’s full” had been copied into Fascicle 13, “Of all the Sounds dispatched abroad” into Fascicle 12, and “South Winds jostle them –,” in addition to having been sent to Louise and Frances Norcross as well as Thomas Gilbert, had been copied into Fascicle 5.

locating the existence of the earlier drafts of these poems reveals that they were not written for him. While it is possible that Dickinson sent Higginson these poems in particular because she felt that they matched well with his interests, it is most likely that she simply wanted to send previously drafted and fine-tuned poems to the man whom she would soon ask, “Will you be my Preceptor?” (L 265). She hoped he would be a new type of reader for her, one who read, wrote, and gave out advice professionally, and it should not be surprising that Dickinson would have wished not only to impress him, but would have employed a different method for engaging and soliciting his response.

By the time Dickinson sent her first letter to Higginson, she was primarily placing her poems in two contexts: in her fascicles and in her letters to Sue. As Louise Ellen Hart and Martha Nell Smith have documented in *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (1998), starting in the mid-1850s Sue became Dickinson’s primary correspondent. Dickinson sent Sue not only poems but also “letter-poems,” letters in the form of poems that were often written on small leaves of stationery, usually presented without introduction, and accompanied simply by Dickinson’s signature at the bottom. Because Dickinson did not share an intimacy with Higginson, it seems fitting that when she decided to enclose some of her fascicle poems to him, she did not send him “letter-poems” but instead employed the materials and methods that she used when making her fascicles. For instance, while “South Winds jostle them –” was short enough to take up the front side of a single leaf, the other two poems that Dickinson enclosed in her second letter were written on all four pages of folded stationery, like that used in the fascicles. Despite the fact that these enclosed poems were written on slightly smaller paper, they resemble what a fascicle sheet would

have looked like before it was bound.⁵⁸ Yet by not filling the extra space with another poem and by not binding the pages together—by not, we might say, sending Higginson a fascicle—Dickinson marks the enclosures of her first and second letters as separate poems in a way that she doesn't in the fascicles proper. In other words, the enclosures in her early letters to Higginson show that Dickinson had already conceived of at least three different yet related modes of relation between poems: poems as bound to each other in the fascicles, poems *as* correspondence (in the case of the letter-poems to Sue), and poems as individual enclosures that were sent together in the same envelope.

Agnieszka Salska argues that when Dickinson writes to Higginson, for the first time, she “separates her artistic concerns from her emotional involvement and attempts to test the response to her poetry of a reader who was personally unknown to her but professionally well established” (175). While this may have been true of her first two letters, Dickinson's emotional involvement with Higginson becomes quite acute by her third letter (L 265), as she now presents herself as someone who is desperate for his attention. Raising the stakes, she writes at greater length about her dead tutor and implies her need for a new one. Using medical terms, she says that her poems relieve her of her “palsy” and refers to the fact that Higginson “bled” her in his earlier letter. She figures Higginson not only as a doctor who can relieve her physical ailments but also as one who might cure her mental disorders: she says that his words “cooled [her] Tramp” and that

⁵⁸ The stationery that these enclosed poems were copied onto is four and a half by seven inches, as opposed to the five-by-eight-inch fascicle paper. It is interesting to note that Dickinson's actual letters were also written on pieces of folded stationery. The first letter was written on the first two pages of a folded piece of stationery, but because her second letter is longer, Dickinson was forced to use two sheets of folded stationery. As with her making of the fascicles, Dickinson did not nest these sheets together but instead wrote on all four pages of one folded sheet before moving onto the next. While she would have had to stack one on one top of the other so that Higginson could follow the narrative of her letter, she did not bind them together. Unlike the fascicles, in which the binding dictates the order, in a letter, the logic of the sentences tells its reader which sheet comes next.

she thinks his friendship would give her “control.” This letter is Dickinson’s third attempt to get Higginson to sign on as her mentor, as she asks him once again to help her find her way: “The Sailor cannot see the North – but knows the Needle can –.”

It is clear from this letter that while Dickinson is being melodramatic in her responses, she had registered or at least wants to convey that she registered an intense reaction to Higginson’s response to her poems. She writes that his second letter brought her “pleasure” but that it also “surprised me, and for a moment, swung.” She addresses his criticisms methodically, in turn revealing to later readers that in his letter he must have suggested that she delay in publishing, that the “gait” of her poems is “spasmodic,” and that they are “uncontrolled.”⁵⁹ Dickinson gives in to each of these points and plays the role of the deferential student, figuring herself as a small and silent creature asking for his friendship: “Would you have time to be the ‘friend’ you should think I need? I have a little shape – it would not crowd your Desk – nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries –.” And then, in this letter, she sends no enclosures.

Instead of sending Higginson poems in the form to which he had become accustomed, Dickinson copied the lines that begin “As if I asked a common alms –” near the end and within the body of her letter. Ever since Higginson published this letter in the October 1891 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, readers have treated this letter as one that has a poem inserted near the end: each reproduction of the letter sets the poem aside, marking

⁵⁹ While Dickinson’s letter allows us only to imagine what Higginson’s response to her poems must have been like, we do have more accurate evidence of his dislike of them, because he wrote to James T. Fields the day after he received Dickinson’s first letter. “I forsee that ‘Young Contributor’ will send me worse things than ever now. Two such specimens of verse as came yesterday & day before – fortunately not to be forwarded for publication!” (Sewall 544).

it as separate from the letter itself yet still a part of the letter's overall fabric.⁶⁰ For instance, fig. 11 shows the way that Johnson and Ward printed the letter in 1958, a transcription that took its cue from earlier publications and that has dictated how all subsequent readers of the letter have thought about Dickinson's insertion of her poems *into* her letters.

When we read Johnson and Ward's version of Dickinson's letter, the lines of poetry are no longer informed by and related to the poems in the fascicle; instead, they have been lifted out of that context and have been put to a different use. One way to read the inclusion of this poem might be as Dickinson's attempt to get Higginson to read one of her poems without necessarily taking a scalpel to it; if it is included in the letter itself, it might not be as open to his critique, which, although requested, had turned out to be harsh. Another way to read its inclusion is as another mode of self-presentation. For instance, in the letter itself Dickinson presents herself as helpless without Higginson, going even as far as to say that the language to finish her letter has failed her, yet we might read her staging of a break into poetry at this moment as a way of highlighting her capacity for spontaneous poetic production, possibly testing out a version of lyric articulation of which she thought Higginson might approve.⁶¹ While Higginson himself might have fallen for this strategy, Dickinson's later readers know that this was purely a performance, as we have access to what Smith characterizes as Dickinson's "pages-long

⁶⁰ Between the copies that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891 and Johnson and Ward's *Letters of Emily Dickinson* in 1958, this letter was reproduced in three different publications, all of which set the lines beginning "As if I asked a common alms —" apart: on pp. 303-304 of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1894), on pp. 240-241 of *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1924), and pp. 274-275 of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1931).

⁶¹ Robert Graham Lambert has read this in a different way, arguing that Dickinson had been so moved by Higginson's offer of his hand in the dark that she could no longer write in prose and therefore "shifted into the imagery of poetry": "The poem, then, functions to link her letter to his. Higginson's hand reaches out and Emily's hand receives gifts beyond measure from it" (131).

revising strategies in order to make scriptures that appear to be spontaneous pleadings” (“Suppressing” 103). A third way of reading the poem’s inclusion is as a way for Dickinson to abstract her relationship with him. By shifting from the relation between the “I” and “You” in the letter to the “I” and third-person interlocutor of the poem, Dickinson gets to imagine a fictional scenario in which Higginson will present her with the sort of revelation that the poem describes and the letter has implied she desires. In other words, she has asked him time and time again to offer her guidance, and in this poem she generates the concrete images of the “Kingdom” (l. 3) and the “Dawn” (l. 8) that he might bring her.

In transcribing the letter, Johnson and Ward assume that Higginson would have registered this shift. According to Mitchell, any of Dickinson’s correspondents would have noted the difference between poetry and prose, as the distinctions between the two were a matter of convention: “they exist as systems of codes which work because other readers have previous knowledge of their existence and regulate their responses to any given text accordingly” (*Measures* 51). It logically follows that Higginson in particular would have read a letter and a poem differently. But what if the letter doesn’t mark the shift from prose to poetry as starkly as the printed version implies? When we turn to the manuscript of this letter (fig. 12), an option that is still available only to those who make an appointment at the Special Collections at the Boston Public Library, we see that the line between the letter and the poem is less dramatic than the transcript suggests.⁶² When we look at the manuscript itself, we can see that each of the previous editors of this letter

⁶² Many thanks to Eric Frasier and the staff of the Special Collections at the Boston Public Library, who made these documents available to me. Readers will soon have access to hypertexts of the manuscripts of Dickinson’s letters at www.emilydickinson.org, a website devoted to presenting images and transcriptions of each of her letters as well as their textual, compositional, and publication histories.

has made certain decisions about what constitutes a paragraph break, an indent, and a line break. These are decisions that, I would argue, are all informed by their prior knowledge of this piece of writing as a poem that was copied into Fascicle 1. If they hadn't been predisposed to recognize this writing as a poem, they may very well have not marked it as such or would have begun marking poetic lines earlier, as Dickinson dips in and out of regular measure several sentences earlier and is already leaving blank space at the right-hand margin.⁶³

Although Dickinson indents the first line of the first paragraph after the salutation "Dear Friend," elsewhere she indicates a new paragraph by leaving space at the end of the last line of the previous paragraph.⁶⁴ When we reach the part of the letter that includes the lines beginning with "As if I asked a common alms —," these breaks become more obvious and occur at almost every line, leading most editors to deduce that what once signaled a paragraph break now indicates a line break.⁶⁵ But there is no clear break between the letter and the poem here, as Dickinson does not leave any vertical space between them, nor does she indent the poetic line the way the printed versions would lead us to believe she did.

⁶³ This begins with the line, "You think my gait 'spasmodic'." Starting with "The Sailor cannot see the North —," Dickinson is already employing her indication of a paragraph or line break. Note also how the space after "Dark" is larger than the space after "can," yet Johnson and Ward do not indicate a paragraph break here.

⁶⁴ For instance, see the spaces after "tongue" at the bottom of the first page, "relieve" at the bottom of the second, "better" in the middle of the fourth, "Tribunal" at the bottom of the fourth, "Galleries" in the middle of the fifth, and "me" at the bottom of the fifth. Johnson and Ward also think that breaks are signaled by the spaces after "first" in the middle of the third page, "Fin" at the bottom of the third page, "Sir" at the bottom of the fourth page, and "can" at the top of the sixth page, but these spaces are less substantial.

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that in Dickinson's fourth letter to Higginson she uses similar spacing—spacing that Johnson interprets as paragraph breaks and not the marking off of an embedded poem.

For over a hundred years editors have assumed that because this was once an individual poem, it must always be one. The few critics who grapple with this poem generally treat it as such and do not acknowledge any other way of reading these lines. Heginbotham, for example, not only refers to the version in the fascicle and the version in the letter as “the same poem” (123) but suggests that the letter-context provides a clue to what the mysterious “alms” are in the *earlier* fascicle-context: reading backwards allows her to define the alms as related to Dickinson’s desired “recognition of her poetic gifts and skills” (123). When discussing the Dickinson-Higginson correspondence, Sewall completely ignores the fact that this poem had been copied into a fascicle four years earlier and reads it in the same way that he reads the enclosed poems of Dickinson’s earlier letters, as expressions of her investment in issues with which he is engaged (555). But as we have already seen, when Dickinson wanted to display her talents in verse to Higginson, she enclosed individual poems. In her third letter she was for the moment not interested in doing that.

The point of my return to this manuscript is not to argue that Dickinson didn’t copy lines of poetry into her letter, but to challenge the idea that these two categories—epistolary prose and poetry—are always as stable and identifiable in Dickinson’s writing as we have thought. Dickinson’s editors have long recognized how complicated this issue is and have often disagreed about the status of a given piece of writing. For example, in February 1851, Dickinson sent a short letter to Elbridge G. Bowdoin (fig. 13) that was printed as a two-paragraph prose letter in 1931 and 1958. But in 1993, when William Shurr published *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, a collection of what he calls “the prose-formatted poems” (2) that Dickinson included in her letters, he prints this letter as a

seven-line poem. While Shurr goes in search of “poems disguised in the letters as prose” (3), the very next year Franklin includes the second paragraph of this letter in the thirteenth Appendix to his variorum of the poems, which he introduces by writing, “Some prose passages in Emily Dickinson’s early letters and notes exhibit characteristics of verse without being so written” (1577).⁶⁶ Shurr and Franklin both acknowledge that this letter is prose, but they also print it (or, in the case of Franklin, the second part of it) as poetry. While Franklin is more self-conscious about his choice (relegating it to an Appendix and stressing the text’s status as prose), Shurr believes that Dickinson herself *meant* it to be a poem, that she was simply “indifferent as to whether she wrote out her poems in their traditional format or as prose” (5), and that such “poems...should be added to the canon and studied in their rightful place there” (2). While the editorial history of this letter reveals that debate about Dickinson’s writing practices is alive and well, the current solutions to these questions not only seem inadequate (print it one way or the other), but in light of Shurr’s ideas foreclose the very investigation of the relationship between context and genre that I am undertaking here.

In an attempt to cut through these debates about Dickinson’s genres, Mitchell argues that Dickinson consistently marked the difference between poetry and prose. By measuring—literally in centimeters—the horizontal and vertical spaces that Dickinson

⁶⁶ Franklin includes eight such entries in this Appendix (*Poems*). Each has a rich and complicated editorial history. For example, the second (which is housed at the Robert Frost Library) is taken from Dickinson’s October 17, 1851 letter to Austin. In this case, Johnson lineated the final sentences of this long letter and included them as a poem in his 1955 variorum of the poems, noting his role in turning the prose into poetry: “ED made no line division, and the text does not appear as verse. The line arrangement and capitalization of first letters in the lines are here arbitrarily established” (3). In his edition of the letters three years later, he prints them as prose and notes, “The poem at the end of the letter is printed here, as ED wrote it, in prose form” (150). Because it was included in the Johnson’s variorum of the poems, there was no need for Shurr to publish it as a “new” poem in 1998, yet because Franklin includes it only in his Appendix and does not give it a number, it is not considered to be one of the 1,789 poems of Franklin’s latest and most authoritative-to-date count.

left in her manuscripts, Mitchell argues that Dickinson's writing and copying practices reveal that she was not only aware of generic boundaries but upheld them. Mitchell insists that a "rigorous and sustained cross-referencing provides us with a set of procedures, a critical apparatus, by which to measure the extent to which contemporary critical approaches to Dickinson's autograph procedures can accurately be formulated as corresponding to the poet's own purposes" (*Measures* 55). Such a methodology is invaluable, and I use it in my own assessments of Dickinson's manuscripts. By using Mitchell's method of measurement, we can recognize, in a way that we wouldn't without his intervention, that Dickinson's method of leaving spaces changes when she gets to the sixth page of her letter to Higginson. But but by relying solely on the physical structure and visual layout of Dickinson manuscripts in order to make his assessments, Mitchell misses a crucial point. Why must this mean that Dickinson is copying a "poem" here? Why must the text retain the generic identity that it had in its previous context? Mitchell expresses frustration with critics who explore Dickinson's interest in challenging and suspending the boundaries between poetry and prose, yet his methodology actually enables them to see that in the process of shifting from fascicle to letter, the lines beginning "As if I asked a common alms –" are themselves changing.

The inverse methodology is to treat Dickinson's texts as so blended that they deserve a new generic category altogether: for instance, Smith and Hart's "letter-poems" or, more recently, Elizabeth Hewitt's "lyrical letter." What this approach acknowledges is that, in Hewitt's words, "correspondence is a constitutive aspect of Dickinson's poetic discourse" (146). Instead of feeling the need to choose between Dickinson the private poet and Dickinson the social correspondent, these three critics treat the two discourses as

interconnected in her own writing. But as should be clear by now, these new generic categories, while opening up room between Dickinson's poems and letters, still depend heavily on assumptions about what a Dickinson poem is and what it will always be, regardless of context.

In order to understand Dickinson's approach to genre, it is easy to fall into the trap of stabilizing the very genres that Dickinson herself may have been undoing. This process seems wholly convenient to the project of literary criticism, which, as Virginia Jackson has argued, turns Dickinson each and every way to justify its cause (125). But if we take up the materials Dickinson produced in lieu of those that have been transcribed and printed for us, what we find are Dickinson's own instances of stabilization, instances that help us better understand her third letter to Higginson. A look at the ways in which Dickinson worked before she contacted Higginson reveals that when Dickinson copied poems that she wanted read *as poems* into her letters, she often marked this quite clearly. For instance, in her letter to Mary Warner Crowell on April 20, 1856, Dickinson copied verses by Pierpont, indicating their status as poetry by beginning and ending the poem with quotes, by making clear breaks between each of the stanzas, and by leaving significant space between the end of the poem and the beginning of her letter (L 183). When copying her own poems, she employs similar methods. In three early instances in which Dickinson indicates to Sue that what she is sending her are poems, Dickinson indicates the shift by leaving space between her prose and the poem, by making each stanza distinct from the next, and by indicating, even when there is no room to keep a line intact, where each line begins and ends.⁶⁷ In each of these cases, there is no mistaking

⁶⁷ See L 74a and 74c in which Dickinson copies various pieces of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –" (Fr 124), L 173 in which Dickinson copies "I have a Bird in Spring" (Fr 4), and L 198 in which Dickinson

what a reader is reading. But in the case of Dickinson's third letter to Higginson, she blurs these lines.

Additionally, when we look at the surviving letters of many of Dickinson's female contemporaries, including Abby Cooper, Lucy Putnam, and her own sister-in-law Sue, we can see that distinguishing between poetry and prose was a convention upheld in women's mid-century epistolary practices. While some critics have argued that letter writing manuals of the time urged their writers to be as clear as possible in their correspondence, I am hesitant to assume that Dickinson would have either read these (she did not own any as far as we know) or followed their rules, for they were specifically targeted at middle-class women who were at least partially interested in moving up the social ladder. But we do know that during her time at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson studied Samuel Phillips Newman's *A Practical System of Rhetoric*. Newman writes at length about the importance of proper transitions in all forms of composition, transitions that Dickinson, at least in terms of genre, is not interested in highlighting.

If Dickinson was not copying the poem that once appeared in Fascicle 1 as a poem in this letter, then what was she doing? What does a blurring of or shift in modes make possible for Dickinson at this moment in her correspondence with Higginson? What terms get renegotiated when she moves from one type of writing to the other yet withholds from her reader any marker by which he or she can register or interpret this move? In order to answer these questions, we need to think again about the manuscript of Dickinson's letter, for what she is doing when she sends this letter, what Higginson is doing when he reads it, and what both of their assumptions are about the experiences the

copies "Sleep is supposed to be" (Fr 35). Many thanks to Leslie Morris and the staff of the Houghton Library at Harvard University, who gave me access to these unpublished manuscripts.

other is having are present in the materials of the exchange. In *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (1998), William Decker argues that “far from being extrinsic to the text, the materiality of the letter exchange is an abiding component in the poetics and narrative of epistolary relations” (38). As opposed to the volumes of transcribed and printed letters, manuscripts remind later readers of the fact that an actual person is, in Decker’s words, made

intensely present to correspondents in the form of hand-inscribed letter sheet that arrives to the relief, dread, ecstasy, annoyance, or indifference of the recipient, across a vastly variable spatial and temporal expanse that contributes its own decided (if often irrecoverable) inflection to the letter’s initial meanings (38).

It is precisely the presence of this actual person, and of the “I” that Dickinson creates for herself through the writing of letters and letters that embed pieces of poems in them, that is essential here.

In Dickinson’s fourth letter to Higginson she explains that the “I” of her poems is not meant to represent her, a declaration that is now both widely quoted and quickly forgotten. In her words: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L 268). Dickinson states her position quite firmly here, but in doing so she reveals that her letters, on the other hand, do present an “I” that corresponds to the actual person at the other end of the correspondence: the very “I” in her sentence of disavowal is meant to be Dickinson and *not* a “supposed person.” No matter how much critics want to make of the literariness of Dickinson’s letters or of the various masks and personae she assumes when writing them, the fact is that letters hold her “I” more faithfully to her historical personage. Decker’s definition of the letter highlights this very aspect of its existence, as he argues that letters are at the most basic level “inscribed artifacts that at some point in their history are meant to pass in

accordance with some postal arrangement from ‘I’ to ‘you,’ and that inscribe the process by which the ‘I’ personally addresses a specific readership” (144). I draw attention to this issue of the “I” because it seems to me that one of the crucial things that happens when Dickinson embeds “As if I asked a common alms –” into this letter is that she does away with the shift from historical to fictive discourse that an enclosed or even inserted poem implies. In other words, the message, tone, and implication of this letter are different depending on our reading of the presence of an inserted poem or the presence of lines of a previously written poem now incorporated into the prose.

According to Dickinson, the “I” of the letter is the particular woman who is answering Higginson’s questions and asking for his help, but the “I” of the poem is not this same woman. The new “I” of the poem is distanced from the requests that Dickinson has made in her letter. The conditional with which “As if I asked a common alms –” opens then present the “I” in a state of fictive imagining for which Dickinson is not fully responsible. But because the poem is not set apart and because the letter seems to have been built around the incorporation of this poem into its very grammatic and thematic structure, any difference between these two “I”s collapses.⁶⁸ By allowing these lines to function as part of the letter, Dickinson manages to control, if for a moment, the ground on which both she and Higginson stand. When we read the letter as one that has a poem inserted in it, I suggested that the poem offers up an abstracted version of their relationship by turning Dickinson into a “supposed person” and Higginson into an unnamed interlocutor. But if we read as part of the letter, this is no longer true, for

⁶⁸ See how she moves from “If” in the prose to “As if” in what was once the poem to “But” in the final line of prose. Notice her reliance on the trope of direction early on in the letter, before employing the word “Orient” and therefore calling on its multiple meanings.

Dickinson retains her identity as the one who says “I,” and she addresses him as a “Stranger.” These lines, then, read as a critique of Higginson.

You will recall that Dickinson spends much of this letter both defending herself against Higginson’s criticism and asking him for a combination of guidance and friendship. Upon first glance, her desires don’t seem to line up logically, but this is all part of the complex rhetorical strategy that Dickinson employs throughout her correspondence, in which she pulls people close and pushes them away at the same time. In this case, when she embeds “As if I asked a common alms –” she activates this push and pull at a formal level. In the context of the letter, these lines now read ironically, for the implication is that all she has asked him for is the equivalent of “common alms” and as a result she has been “bewildered” and “shatter[ed]”. (Note that the word “flood” in the fascicle version has been changed to “shatter.” This was not indicated as a variant in the fascicle and is the only word that has been changed.) Clearly Dickinson wants something different from Higginson, as these lines, especially with their use of the word “should,” project her own sense of entitlement. And when she turns, in the final sentence of her letter to write, “But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson?” her “But,” as well as her use of the word “Preceptor” (meaning, most commonly at the time a teacher or instructor), attempts to reorient Higginson precisely toward her desires. If we read these lines as part of the letter, we can see that Dickinson’s frustration with Higginson’s response to her is palpable. By taking lines that were once poetry and turning them into a portion of her letter, Dickinson allows herself to inhabit the “I” of her poem and make its once-abstract critique her very own.

Yet at the same time, and in light of the fact that these lines are almost exactly the same as those copied into the fascicle four years earlier, it is important to ask why she used them here instead of critiquing Higginson in new language. I would argue that while this letter expresses frustration with the terms of her relationship with Higginson, the fact that these lines were once poetry and continue to employ regular meter and rhyme, tempers this very frustration. In other words, instead of being direct about her disappointment, Dickinson redeploys these lines to express what might be too difficult to express in new language. By turning to what was once a poem, Dickinson manages to level her critique while also pulling back from the force of it.

It may seem obvious that a poem enclosed in a letter and a poem incorporated into the prose of a letter are very different things, but this distinction has rarely been made and most critics have treated the two modes as the same. For instance, Messmer argues that “in several instances, the enclosed *or* incorporated poem communicates part of the letter’s message, in this way becoming an integral part of its ‘letter’ context and assuming a function traditionally associated with epistolary rather than poetic discourse” (42, emphasis mine). Messmer consistently argues that they participate, unlike the criticism that polarizes the poems and the letters, in “an intergeneric dialogic exchange” (18) with one another; yet, in spite of treating poems and letters as related to each other, she does not differentiate between the ways in which Dickinson’s manuscripts reveal the various modes by which she employed poetry in her letters. This collapse of Dickinson’s methods allows Messmer to argue that in the case of Dickinson’s letters and poems to Higginson, the two modes do very different things: “the ‘prose’ parts of her letters tend to reinforce Dickinson’s gender and power ambivalence, while the ‘poems’ more frequently acquire a

subversive function” (116). Because Messmer treats these two genres as connected yet distinct in Dickinson’s practices, she ultimately argues that Dickinson’s correspondence “resists any facile alignment with traditional nineteenth-century ‘personal’ and ‘private’ women’s letters” and that “her letters ultimately appropriate elements of ‘literary’ and ‘fictionalized’ discourses” (184). But as we have seen, it is precisely this ‘fictionalized’ discourse that is suppressed when Dickinson embeds a poem so fully into her prose that her own reader would not register the shift in genre.

As we can see, by embedding what was once a poem into a letter, Dickinson was experimenting with new ways of communicating. According to Decker, in an age of migration and mobility that placed correspondents at greater spatial and temporal distances from each other, letters provided nineteenth-century Americans with the fiction of immediate and intimate contact (3-5). While this desire for closeness can be felt in the content of so many of Dickinson’s letters, especially the letters to loved ones when they traveled out of town, we have yet to recognize how her manipulation of a given text’s format contributes to the ways in which she actively controls the distance between her (as “I”) and her reader (as “you”). Dickinson would later articulate (to Higginson, of all people) the tension that exists when people who exist at a physical distance from each other must write instead of speak face to face: “a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one” (L 470). Twelve years earlier, as Dickinson was playing with closing down the space between her epistolary “I” and her poetic “I,” she was already experimenting with several of these inflections. She was striving after neither the one lyric voice nor the one intimate voice of the letter writer to her recipient, but instead beginning to harness the

potential of all those voices in between, voices that might pull her reader closer to her and push him away at the same time.

Because Higginson is more closely allied with the poems that Dickinson sent him as enclosures, we tend to overlook the details of this moment in their correspondence.⁶⁹ But returning to Dickinson's manuscripts we see that she took several opportunities to embed poems into her letters to him. Dickinson rarely did this with her other correspondents, as both Sue and Samuel Bowles, the two people to whom Dickinson sent many poems over the course of her life, were more likely to receive poems *as* letters.⁷⁰ Unlike her relationship with these two familiar and intimate friends, Dickinson met Higginson only twice in the twenty-four years that they corresponded, and in this state of physical anonymity she played with the boundaries between genres that allowed for a redefinition of the historically specific "I" of her letters and the distanced, aestheticized "I" of her poems.

When we treat these lines as a poem that has been lifted out of one context and inserted into another, we not only misread this letter as one of extreme deference; we fail

⁶⁹ For instance, in Messmer's otherwise comprehensive study of Dickinson's letters, and especially of Dickinson's letters to Higginson, she makes no mention of "As if I asked a common alms –."

⁷⁰ Dickinson's hundreds of poems-as-letters to Sue can be found in *Open Me Carefully*. Dickinson also sent many poems as letters to Samuel Bowles; see, in particular, L 219, L 220, and L 250. In the case that she did include a poem within the prose of a letter to Bowles, Dickinson was careful to mark it as a poem. For instance, the manuscript of L 251 indicates that Dickinson attempted to hold each line of the "Through the strait pass of suffering" (Fr 187) intact, and when she had to turn the line, she left the rest of that line blank. She also indented the beginning of each stanza. This is also true of the manuscript of L 252, which has "Speech – is a prank of Parliament –" (Fr 193) in it. One of the manuscripts that presents a more complicated story is that of L 229 in which the beginning of "Would you like a Summer? Taste our's –" (Fr 272) seems to be a part of the prose of the letter, but four lines down Dickinson begins marking the lines as those of poetry. So in this case, while it is more difficult to know where the poem begins, it is clear from the manuscript that Dickinson marks it as a poem. In the case of L 275 Dickinson does include lines that, the next year, she will copy into Fascicle 28 as the last stanza of "My first well Day – since many ill –" (Fr 288), but this is different from taking a previously existing poem and copying it as prose. It is also worth noting that neither Bowles nor Higginson ever received drafts of poems the way that Sue did. Martha Nell Smith writes: "The many drafts of poems forwarded to Sue over the entire course of Emily's decades-long writing career make visible Sue's role as consultant, collaborator, confidante" ("Suppressing" 112).

to see the ways in which the inclusion of what was once a poem affects the letter into which it was incorporated, as well as the fact that the letter in turn changes the identity of the poem itself. I am not suggesting that this poem requires a new generic label in this new context but rather that as part of this new material context, it takes up several of the properties of both the poem that it was and the letter that it becomes, ceases to be fully either, and embraces a playful and powerful position in the space between these culturally sanctioned discourses.

The Third Context: Unfinished Drafts and the Un-Writing of Poems

Whereas the many editors of Dickinson's third letter to Higginson foreclosed their readers' awareness of the issues I hoped to highlight in the last section, what Dickinson did the next time she returned to these lines has caused even greater confusion. Twenty-three years after beginning to think about the relationship of the poetic and the epistolary, after changing the poem's context and therefore beginning to alter its genre, Dickinson again revisited the lines of poetry that she had copied into Fascicle 1 and copied them as part of a letter that she addressed to an unidentified recipient. Today we have the first two pages of this letter and another, shorter draft of its opening. Whether Dickinson ever sent a version of this letter, and to whom it was addressed, we will most likely never know.

The letter begins with a declaration of thanks, indicating that it may have begun as a conventional note acknowledging the receipt of a sent item. In this case, the item is a photograph of a mother and child. While Dickinson seems to appreciate this gift, she quickly mentions an additional item (a "Book") that has been promised to her by the

sender, referring to her state of “famine” without it. In this way, what looks like a note of thanks is also a note meant to remind her friend that further items need to be sent. It is not clear what her cryptic next sentence (“Thank you for the Grave – empty and full – too –”) refers to, but what we can see from it is that Dickinson is balancing her sentences, grateful for one thing and in need of another, acknowledging the presence of a grave both empty and full. In this context, the lines beginning “As if I asked a common alms –” further express a balance between gratefulness and critique. In the fascicle context, these lines portray a speaker’s accumulating sense of despair in the face of all that is beyond her reach and continually slipping away; in the Higginson-letter context, they both fantasize about what a mentor might be able to provide and chastise him for providing the wrong things; in this latter context, they no longer refer to these abstract desires and real experiences but refer to the emotions experienced upon having received an actual gift without the promise of another.

When Dickinson first wrote this poem, she could not envision all of the people to whom she would send it and all of the ways in which she would render it. Back in 1858 when she first copied the lines into Fascicle 1, she may never have imagined another context for it, for unlike some of the other poems in that fascicle that she had already sent to various readers, this one, as far as we know, had no other reader. But by returning to it over this twenty-seven-year period and copying it out to at least two different correspondents, she indicates that something about these lines is both widely applicable and yet particular enough to be used in highly specific circumstances. And yet this practice of sending the same text to multiple people is not limited to this example, as Dickinson did this many times with many different poems over the course of her life.

Jackson has argued that this tendency allows us to see one of the crucial differences between how Dickinson treats manuscript poems and letters, for

by sending versions of the same manuscript to several persons, Dickinson herself indicated that the lines were not intended for one reader—as, say, a personal letter might be—but could circulate independently of particular readers or a particular material context (63).

While we may normally think of letters as the objects that are circulated, here we can see that Dickinson's methodology turns poems and even the fascicles into the more circulated items.

This being said, as this particular poem becomes part of the fabric of her letters, it also ceases to be as easily circulated. By fixing the lines within her letters, she removes them from the fascicle context, which, as we have seen, is easy to return to and excerpt from, and places them in particular moments of material exchange from which are harder to extricate. One of the ways that Dickinson achieves this is by embedding the lines of poetry into her letter in such a way that they cannot be detected as poetry. Once the lines become part of the letter, they take on a particular significance that, in this case, is not dictated by Dickinson's desire to shift the relationship of herself (as "I") to her reader (as "you"), as in her letter to Higginson but is influenced instead by the culture of gift exchange in which she and her correspondent are participating. It was common for women of Dickinson's culture and class to send flowers, drawings, pictures, and books to each other, and we know that she often participated in these types of exchange. Yet because nothing in the first two pages of this letter indicates that Dickinson was sending an object to her friend in return, we might see her turning to one of her poetic objects in order to share it. What is particularly interesting about this moment of gift exchange is

that Dickinson's manuscript reveals that she was concealing the very gift as she presented it.

As we can see from the document itself (fig. 14), Dickinson's handwriting has become larger, and although she continued to leave horizontal space above paragraph and line breaks, she had become even less concerned with maintaining the integrity of what was once the poetic line. Because Dickinson did not retain earlier drafts of her poems after she copied them into a fascicle, Dickinson probably returned to Fascicle 1 in the year before her death in order to copy these words. Yet as she recopied the words of this poem into this new context, she consciously ignored much of her earlier punctuation; depending on how we read, she either created new line breaks or did away with them completely.

While all three printed versions of this letter grapple with the difficulties that these changes introduce, each one establishes it as a poem that is unrelated to this new context of gift exchange. In Johnson's 1955 variorum of the poems, he transcribes these lines as prose, with no line breaks, but by including only the lines that start with "As if I asked" and end with "Dawn –," he divorces them from the letter and ends up treating them like a poem nonetheless. Three years later, when Johnson and Ward published *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Johnson changed his reading and arranged what he previously considered prose into four long lines of poetry, this time including the rest of the letter around it but, as he did with the letter to Higginson, indenting these particular lines. In Franklin's later variorum of the poems, he includes only the line "Thank you for the Grave – empty and full – too –," deleting the rest of the letter context and then, like Johnson, reproducing the text as a poem in four long lines. As with the case of the letter

to Higginson, one of the reasons why Johnson and Franklin may have treated this piece of the letter as a poem is that it was already known as such and could therefore be found among the prose. In doing so, they continue to hold the categories of poem and letter stable.

If we want to treat these lines as those of poetry, it seems to me that neither Johnson nor Franklin's versions reproduces the poem correctly, for if we observe the breaks at the end of each line, the poem would look like this:

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 should
 Lift it's Purple
 Dikes, and
 Shatter me with
 Dawn –

If Dickinson had wanted to retain the line breaks from her previous version of this poem, she wouldn't have included "and" at the end of the lines "a Kingdom, and" and "Dikes, and" as well as the "had" at the end of "the Orient had." From this transcription we can see Dickinson's lines becoming shorter and starting to bleed together. Yet this does not mean that the rhythm and meter of the lines have been lost, for half of them appear as two-foot lines. If we treat these as Dickinson's intended new lines breaks, then we also notice the playful and surprising one-stress lines of "Morn" and "Dawn," perhaps even

interpreting them as moments of metrical and visual experimentation that Dickinson undertook late in life.

The result of this transcription and interpretation is to create a picture of Dickinson's late works as those in which her lines get shorter, her meter gets more jagged, and she starts to look much like the kind of modernist poet that she is often thought to have anticipated. But the only way to produce this reading is to divorce it from the circumstances of its copying and circulation. This produces the very kind of "lyric reading" that Jackson argues has been practiced by all of Dickinson's editors, readings that "actively cultivated a disregard for the circumstances of Dickinson's manuscripts' circulation" (21). According to Jackson, "by being taken out of their sociable circumstances, those manuscripts have become poems, and by becoming poems, they have been interpreted as lyrics" (21).

In an effort to look anew at what Dickinson wrote in this draft of this letter, let us entertain the idea that what was once a poem is at least up until the very end part of Dickinson's letter. This is how the whole letter would look if we treated her breaks as paragraph breaks:

Dear Friend,
 But of what shall I first speak – The beautiful Child, or it's deep
 Possessor, or the little "Book" it is famine to read till I have obtained it.
 Thank you for the Grave – empty and full – too – 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 should lift it's Purple Dikes, and shatter me with Dawn –
 Your Letter much impressed me – Your every suggestion is
 Dimension Thought is the Knock which

What's visible in this transcription of the letter is that Dickinson was clearly copying these words from a version that had them lineated as poetry, for she observes the break

after “Morn” as if she has forgotten that she is not copying it as lines of poetry. Because this is a note of thanks, it is most likely that Dickinson did send some version of it, yet this slip from prose to poetry may be the reason that she did not send this version.

One way of understanding my second transcription of Dickinson’s letter is to recognize that in her later years Dickinson often returned to her earlier poems and began to “un-write” them. She most often did this onto pieces of scrap paper that she retained for herself. Sometimes Dickinson isolated a stanza or two of a previously longer poem and copied just this shorter section out. She did this with “These are the days when Birds come back” (Fr 122), which in 1859 she had both sent to Sue and copied into Fascicle 6 as a six-stanza poem; in 1883, Dickinson wrote out the first two stanzas on a leaf of paper and drew a line at the bottom as if to indicate an end. She also did this with “A Drop fell on the Apple Tree –” (Fr 846), which she had originally copied as a four-stanza poem into Fascicle 38. Nine years later she wrote a new version of lines seven and eight on the inside of a partial slit envelope bearing Mrs. Holland’s name at the same time that she copied out a whole new version of the last two stanzas and sent them to Sue.⁷¹

In these cases, Dickinson shortened her previously longer poems and changed selected words in these stanzas. In other cases, Dickinson returned to an earlier poem and began the work of fully rewriting it. For instance, in 1863 Dickinson had copied “Two Butterflies went out at Noon –” (Fr 571) into Fascicle 25, but when she returned to it fifteen years later, she painstakingly reworked almost every line of it. The fascicle version of this poem is copied in three quatrains, but when Dickinson returned to it later, she did away with these stanzas. She began her new draft with the same two opening lines, but then every line after that opening is different. The manuscript (fig. 15) shows

⁷¹ This envelope also carries two lines from the poem “‘Remember me’ implored the thief” (Fr 1208).

that even these new lines were not sufficient, as Dickinson adds a number of variants in the margins and on the back page of the sheet. By the time she is done, she has presented six different versions of the eighth line, seven of the sixth line, and nine of the seventh line. In the end, there are more variants than there are lines of the poem. The poem does not emerge from these variants but instead is swallowed up by them and becomes a cluster of possibilities no longer readable as poetry.

What I wish to argue here is that Dickinson's act of incorporating an earlier poem into a much later letter is another example of the ways in which she revised, rewrote, and un-wrote those texts that were once the poems of her fascicles. In this case, though, she does not shorten or revise it; rather, she makes the poem *into* her letter, an experiment that she had initiated twenty-three years earlier in her letter to Higginson. To look at Dickinson's late manuscripts is to encounter a writer who is not simply generating new texts but someone who is revising her old ones in order to undo and redo what she has made before, to imagine their forms anew, to put them to new purposes, and to press up against the limits of poetry.

It is important to acknowledge that the kinds of readings I have argued for here are meant to be suggestive and not definitive. My impulse to read Dickinson's move across material contexts, while largely informed by my work with her manuscripts, also comes out of a desire to present an alternative way of thinking about Dickinson's experimentation with the boundaries between genres that have been previously obscured. As I have discussed throughout this chapter, while critics have recently acknowledged the instability of Dickinson's genres, only two ways of reading this instability have emerged:

we can either go in search of ways to measure the difference between Dickinson's poetry and prose, or we can read the two modes as so blended in Dickinson's practices that we should do away with all attempts at finding her own markers and simply construct our own.

One of the reasons why these approaches come up short is that each has approached the problem from only one angle. Part of what I have attempted to do here is to employ a methodology that looks across Dickinson's materials and practices, that takes seriously issues of historical and cultural context while also paying close attention to issues of poetic form. Whether one agrees or disagrees with all of the particular pieces of my argument—that the genre of texts shifts when their material contexts change, that the blending of poetry and epistolary prose allows for a reorientation of the "I's" discursive register, that Dickinson's late manuscripts reveal a poet in the act of un-writing her poems—is not the most important thing. What does matter is that Dickinson's writings have been presented, described, and analyzed as part of the complex contexts in which they were written and in which they circulated. There is nothing about Dickinson's writings that invite hermeneutical stasis, and it is attention to these contexts that will provide the way out.

The title of this chapter is "Managing Multiple Contexts," and by now it should be clear that the job of "managing" belongs not just to Dickinson but to those of us who edit, read, interpret, and study Dickinson's works. Taking one of Dickinson's pieces of writing and following it through the various contexts in which it was placed and the multiple forms in which it has been rendered can lead the critic down rabbit holes from which she may never emerge, for in many cases, text leads on to text, and one is always

haunted by all that lies beyond in the form of what has been erased, suppressed, and lost. One of the pleasures of studying Dickinson's texts comes from an immersion in these details—details from which we are eventually able to abstract something about both her relationship to those texts and their status more broadly.

In a chapter that seems to have had little to do with the fascicles, I hope to have illuminated several important things about them. First, even though Dickinson made the fascicles for only six years at the beginning of her writing career, they were present in her writing processes until the very end of her life. Second, by treating her fascicle poems as definitive texts, critics have overlooked the fact that a certain degree of flexibility was built into the fascicle context, allowing Dickinson then to deploy these poems in new ways. If the poems had been fixed in the fascicles, Dickinson would not only have been unable to place them in new material contexts, but she would not have been free to alter their generic properties. Finally, while several critiques of recent studies of the fascicles have discussed them as what Werner calls “enclosed textual space[s]” (12), I hope to have shown that the various modes of puncture and circulation that Dickinson employed renders the fascicles far more porous than we have previously thought. Several critics have considered how the fascicles are punctured through Dickinson's inclusion of textual variants, but I have thought about the actual terms and conditions of the circulation of texts in, out, and alongside the fascicles.

In these two opening chapters I have explored many of the details of Dickinson's manuscripts in order to argue that the fascicles are not the self-enclosed books that we have previously thought them, first by thinking about the ways in which she made them, and second by thinking about the ways in which she circulated the texts within them. In

the next chapter I will turn to a generic reading of the fascicles as I take up the elegies that Dickinson copied and bound in them. By placing Dickinson's elegies within both the high literary and sentimental traditions of her day, as well as within the context of familiar elegies exchanged among her female contemporaries, I will explore the ways in which the structure of the fascicles—as internally divided clusters of poems that accumulate across the sheets—allows Dickinson the latitude she needs to return to the scene and subject of death over and over again.

Chapter Three

The Poetics of Interruption: Dickinson, Death, and the Elegiac Tradition

At the beginning of this dissertation, I argued that the fascicles do not ask to be read as books and that close attention to the ways in which Dickinson made them indicates that the fascicle sheet was actually her primary unit of construction. By focusing on Dickinson's methods of writing, copying, and binding, I defamiliarized these objects and asked my reader to reconsider not only the fascicles themselves but the strategies other readers have used to interpret them. In this chapter I will return to my initial questions about the relationship between materiality and genre by pursuing a generic reading of Dickinson's fascicle poems that declare themselves as elegies proper, that are more loosely elegiac in nature, and that take up the topic of death in the broadest sense. Through thinking about these poems and the ways in which Dickinson bound them together in the fascicles, this chapter will argue that attention to the fascicles makes visible the importance and function of both high literary and familiar elegy in the nineteenth century and the ways in which Dickinson understood this genre. As we investigate the loosely knit clusters that comprise the fascicles, we can see that this material form enabled Dickinson to develop a relation to elegy that has been largely obscured by histories of the genre and by readings of Dickinson's individual poems about death. Dickinson uses the structure of fascicles radically to expand time and space in these poems, making consolation impossible. In doing so, she alerts us to the struggle over closure that lies at the very heart of the genre.

Before Higginson and Todd had even published the first edition of Dickinson's poems in 1890, they had both written on separate occasions of the subject of death in her work. In Higginson's "An Open Portfolio," published in *Christian Union* on September 25, 1890, he writes, "She shrinks from no concomitant of death" (Buckingham 7). In Todd's "Bright Bits From Bright Books," published in *Home Magazine* in November 1890, she writes, "The poems pertaining to death and eternity are the most weird and characteristic" (Buckingham 12). They went on to emphasize these poems in all of the 1890s editions of Dickinson's poems by titling one of the four sections "Time and Eternity" and placing most of Dickinson's musings on death there. Early reviewers like Charles Goodrich Whiting, writing for the *Springfield Republican*, comment on this section, saying that in it "the writer is much struck with the pomp of death, which makes so much of those who in their lives were of small consequence" (Buckingham 21). Twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers continue to be drawn to these poems as they grapple with Dickinson's often-unnerving relation to the topic of death.⁷²

In spite of this critical attention to the theme of death in Dickinson's poems, very little work has been done on her elegies proper or on the problem of distinguishing between her elegies and her other poems about death.⁷³ Even in transhistorical analyses of the elegiac tradition, scholars have turned a blind eye to the ways in which Dickinson takes up the genre.⁷⁴ This may be due to the fact that, as Virginia Jackson has argued,

⁷² See, in particular, Ford, Kher, and Ernst.

⁷³ See Sudol on the ways in which Dickinson's elegies address the issue of immortality; Petrino on Dickinson, Sigourney and the child elegy; Rizzo on Dickinson's "elegiac modes" (mostly treated in her letters); and Deppman on the "elegiac frame" in Dickinson's "Of Death I try to think like this" (Fr 1588).

⁷⁴ Sacks treats the American elegy only in his epilogue, admitting that "to undertake a study of the American elegy would be to open yet another book" (312). In the few pages that he then devotes to this subject, Sacks mentions Dickinson only briefly and in relation to his idea about the American elegy's

everything Dickinson wrote quickly came to be regarded as lyric; once subsumed by this category, other interpretive possibilities became impossible. But the elegy was a distinct genre in the nineteenth century, one that was neither synonymous with lyric poems nor engulfed within this category. To misread Dickinson's elegies as lyrics is to erase both a piece of the genre's history and the histories of the poems themselves. When thinking about a given writer's engagement with a particular genre, Jonathan Culler observes:

To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising (116).

Here the context and genre are that of the elegy, not lyric, and we will soon see that Dickinson was well aware of the specific traditions, parameters, and uses of this particular genre in the nineteenth century.

That being said, the elegy is neither monolithic nor stable, something we know Dickinson knows as she takes it up in several different, and sometimes competing, ways. For instance, Dickinson did not title or date her poems and therefore makes it difficult to locate the occasions for many of her poems, occasions that are necessary for the writing of elegies.⁷⁵ Secondly, Dickinson took up the topic of death so often and in such various ways that it is difficult to define exactly which are her elegies and which are simply her

"strong compulsion toward originality and privacy" (313). In his study of British and American elegies of the twentieth century, Ramazani considers Dickinson an early practitioner within "the tradition of self-mourning" (30), whose poems of self-elegy are precursors to those by Stevens, Hughes, Auden, and especially Plath. Cavitch does the most comprehensive study of the genre in the American context. He sheds new light on Puritan elegies in particular, but as his study concludes with Whitman, he does not treat Dickinson.

⁷⁵ Jackson has argued that unlike a lyric, an elegy "may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narratives, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions and narratives for their interpretation" (7).

poems about death. Thirdly, Dickinson engages the genre in very different ways, writing elegies for friends and relatives that she circulated as well as high literary elegies that, as far as we know, no one ever read. Each of these aspects of her practice calls attention to the ways in which Dickinson makes it difficult to perform a generic reading of her poems and, at the same time, makes it possible for us to see that the category of genre must exist, for our purposes, in unstable but nonetheless useful ways.

It's true that attempting to nail down the precise definition and parameters of any genre is a difficult task, especially when the aim of one's project is not to prescribe generic features but instead to open up questions about the boundaries and limits of our thinking about genre. This is particularly challenging when thinking about elegies because they have existed as long as any other poetic genre and they have had a history of both being embedded in other genres (for instance, in pastorals and epics) and overlapping with others (for instance, with the epitaph). Yet analyses of the elegy have attempted to identify some of the crucial aspects of the genre that allow it to be marked as such. For instance, in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985), Peter Sacks tracks the elegy through several of its transformations from the Renaissance to the present, arguing that all elegies across historical periods are defined by a common project. Adopting Freud's model for successful mourning, Sacks defines the project of elegy as one in which the speaker must separate from the dead and desired love object and reattach to a substitute, thus completing the proper work of mourning. In order for this to happen, according to Sacks, the poet must submit himself to the language required to write the poem.

For Sacks, elegies both register and take as their subject this act of psychological submission. While Sacks's theory continues to dominate the field, several other critics have theorized that it is not the psychology of the speaker but the formal characteristics of these poems that mark the genre. For instance, early elegies were often framed as songs sung in the presence of a listener; modern elegies often take up issues such as nature's cycles, the possibility of resurrection, and the professional and literary space opened up for the poet by a fellow poet's death; and contemporary elegies often register an anger at God and a sense of helplessness in the face of mass death.

Any look across the history of elegies and elegiac writing is bound to come up with even more of these identifying characteristics. Because the elegy, in the broadest sense, mourns for one who has died, any number of tropes, issues, and formal characteristics can be folded into the genre. Yet Dickinson, who wrote so many poems about death, is rarely regarded as a poet who has anything to add to the history of the genre. During the years in which Dickinson made the fascicles, she wrote a tremendous number of poems in which she meditated on the topic of death, in which she mourned for both human and abstract losses, and in which she detailed the actual process and aftermath of a loved one's passing. Sometimes she sent these poems as condolences, thereby engaging in the conventions of nineteenth-century mourning, and sometimes she did not. But in both cases, Dickinson often copied these poems onto folded pieces of stationery and bound them together. It is this act of copying and binding to which this chapter will turn, for in it we will see Dickinson's intervention in a genre that on the one hand she took up with highly conventional vigor and on the other she challenged through formal experimentation.

Dickinson's "Or": "All overgrown by cunning moss"

In early 1860, Dickinson copied one of her own poems inspired by Charlotte Brontë's death onto what would later become the first sheet of Fascicle 7. After she copied the five stanzas that begin with the line "All overgrown by cunning moss" (Fr 146), Dickinson went back and inserted an "Or" between the third and fourth stanzas (fig. 16). For over a hundred years, the insertion of this "Or" has prompted editors' debate over how this poem should be printed and read. When Todd first published this poem in the 1896 edition of Dickinson's poems, she ignored the "Or" and printed it as a five stanza poem:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of "Curren Bell"
In quiet "Haworth" laid.

The Bird – observing others
When frosts too sharp became
Retire to other latitudes –
Quietly did the same –

But differed in returning –
Since Yorkshire hills are green –
Yet not in all the nests I meet –
Can Nightingale be seen –

Gathered from many wanderings –
Gethsemane can tell
Thro' what transporting anguish
She reached the Asphodel!

Soft fall the sounds of Eden
Upon her puzzled ear –
Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,
When "Bronte" entered there!

This presentation of the poem was repeated in all the editions of the poems published in the first half of the twentieth century: *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1924), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1930), and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1937). Not until Johnson published his variorum edition in 1955 did readers know there was an “Or” included in the manuscript. Five years later, when Johnson published his reading edition of the poems, he took Dickinson up on the option that he thought her “Or” implied and printed it as a three-stanza poem, using stanzas 1, 4, and 5:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of “Curren Bell”
In quiet “Haworth” laid.

Gathered from many wanderings –
Gethsemane can tell
Thro’ what transporting anguish
She reached the Asphodel!

Soft fall the sounds of Eden
Opon her puzzled ear –
Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,
When “Bronte” entered there!

In Franklin’s 1998 variorum, he indicates the existence of the “Or” but prints stanzas 4 and 5 as a variant to stanzas 1 and 2, a perspective that he maintained when he printed the poem as stanzas 1, 2, and 3 in his reading edition the following year:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of “Curren Bell”
In quiet “Haworth” laid.

The Bird – observing others
When frosts too sharp became
Retire to other latitudes –
Quietly did the same –

But differed in returning –

Since Yorkshire hills are green –
 Yet not in all the nests I meet –
 Can Nightingale be seen –

By including the word “Or” between stanzas 3 and 4, Dickinson created several poems that her later readers would be forced to parse. In the same way that every editor has to choose how to print this poem, every reader has to choose how to read it. Not only are there Todd’s, Johnson’s, and Franklin’s competing versions, but as the manuscript shows, there is also the option to read the “Or” as indicating a choice between stanzas 3 and 4, therefore producing two additional options—a poem made up of stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 4, and one made up of 1, 2, 4, and 5. Additionally, the “Or” can be read as signaling that stanzas 4 and 5 constitute an alternative poem in its own right. Finally, one can read the poem as all five stanzas and the “Or.”

One way to approach this “Or” is to think of it as one of Dickinson’s variants—one of the words, phrases, and on occasion stanzas that Dickinson included at the bottom of her page, interlined above the line, in the margin of her poems, or attached to the fascicle sheet on a separate slip of paper. Sharon Cameron has offered several ways of reading these variants. According to Cameron, one way of understanding a variant is as a choice to be made; another is to see both the original text and the variant as part of the poem. In Cameron’s third formulation, the variants “are meant to be experienced *as* variants, and so one is also meant to be experiencing the necessity of choosing between them” (*Choosing* 41).

Cameron’s attention to Dickinson’s variants implies their importance, and yet her analysis suggests that it doesn’t always matter what the “Or” is asking its reader to choose between. In other words, Cameron puts less stress on the content of the choice

than she does on the theoretical questions that the situation of choice raises. While Cameron's analysis is enormously useful for rethinking Dickinson's relationship to her own poetic process, the "Or" in "All overgrown by cunning moss" warrants specific attention because it marks the first time that Dickinson used an "Or" between her stanzas. Dickinson appears to have begun using variants in early 1861, with Fascicle 9. The fact that Dickinson's first "Or" in a fascicle occurs at the level of the stanza, instead of the line, suggests that Dickinson may have been already actively thinking about how what constitutes the poem proper is visible in the poem itself.⁷⁶ Since an additional way of understanding the variants is as indicating the possible ways that Dickinson could copy a poem on different occasions to different recipients, a topic that I discussed at length in Chapter 2, we can also see that Dickinson may have been thinking about the situations in which such a poem would warrant alterations.

In order to understand the work the "Or" does in this poem, I will track the ways that each version of the poem plays out. In the five-stanza version that Todd printed in 1891, the poem opens in the present and describes the gravesite of Charlotte Brontë, who, Franklin notes, died five years before this poem was written (187), placing the reader within a scene of natural and artificial containment, where "moss" (l. 1) and "weed" (l. 2) function much as the "cage" (l. 3) does to hold her subject in. In the second stanza a "Bird" (l. 5) appears, seemingly out of nowhere, yet we soon understand that this stanza provides an explanation for the first stanza's grave scene. The second stanza narrates an

⁷⁶ The only extraneous writings that appear prior to Fascicle 9 are instances of single word variants that were added during revision. According to Franklin, "The first appearances of extraneous writing are in Fascicle 5, where an omitted reading was transcribed in ink as an alternative, and in Fascicle 7, where for two poems an alternative was added in pencil" (*Poems* 20). The instances in Fascicle 7 that Franklin references here are not the two "Or" moments that I discuss at length in this chapter.

event that occurred in the past: the bird flew away with the other birds when nature indicated it was time to do so. The third stanza completes this explanation by showing that while nature then indicated that it was time for the birds to return, this specific bird did not, therefore allowing the speaker (whom we finally meet as an “I” (l. 11) in this stanza) to know of its death. In the fourth stanza, the poem undertakes a different, more omniscient explanation, suggesting the “transporting anguish” (l. 15) that this bird lived through in its time between life and death. And the fifth stanza imagines the result of this process: the bird’s arrival in “Eden” (l. 17) or “Heaven” (l. 19). The graveyard scene of the first stanza is explained by the four stanzas that follow it, as they narrate the totality of the bird’s experience.

It appears that once Dickinson was finished copying the poem, she returned to it and inserted the “Or” between stanzas 3 and 4. (We can assume this because the space that the “Or” is made to fit in is the same size as the spaces between the other stanzas.) Dickinson’s insertion of the “Or” disrupts the temporal ordering of the poem’s experience, a narration that both Todd and Franklin retained when they published the poem as stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and as 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Every possible reading introduced by the “Or” fractures this narrative movement. If we read the poem as stanzas 1, 4, and 5, we are denied the figure of the bird, nature’s cycle of death and rebirth, and the “I.” Additionally, choosing between stanzas 3 and 4 to make a four-stanza poem either denies the reader knowledge of the bird’s failure to return or of the transporting anguish through which it lived. Either way, the temporal wholeness created by the five-stanza form is disrupted.

Whether one understands the problem that has ensued from the insertion of the “Or” as a result of Dickinson’s intentional playfulness or of her practical methods for including variants, certain questions remain: Why did she begin her life-long practice of using “Or”s with this particular poem? What is it about the poem itself that warranted an interruption that would leave the question of its identity in suspension? Dickinson’s interruption by means of the “Or” is deeply linked to the subject of her poem, as it grapples with the ways in which one can narrate the experience of loss and provide an explanation for that loss. Parsing out each of these versions reveals the complicated set of relationships that exists in this poem between and among death, closure, consolation, and time. Dickinson’s “Or” probes the issues that rest at the heart of the elegiac tradition and at nineteenth-century notions of genre.

Consolation, Closure, and Time: Dickinson and the Elegiac Tradition

Before turning to the relationship between “All overgrown by cunning moss” and the fascicle in which it appears, I will place this poem within the larger tradition of elegiac poetry, as this generic tradition proves to be crucial to the ways in which Dickinson both writes individual poems and constructs the fascicles. Dickinson’s turn to images of nature and the dead bird, as well as her use of quotes around the terms “Carrer Bell” (l. 3) and “Brontë” (l. 20), which names her subject, at least partially, as one of literary inheritance, reveals that she was not only aware of the history of elegiac verse, but she was interested in Brontë as a figure to mourn within this tradition. Brontë herself had written several elegies, many of which had been printed in *Poems by Carrer, Ellis,*

and Acton (1846). While Dickinson's interest in Brontë's novels is evident from her letters, we also know that she had read her poems, as she sent a copy of this book to Samuel Bowles in 1864 and to Thomas Niles, in 1883.

Dickinson seems to have read one poem, "Mementos," quite closely, as she echoes Brontë's words in her own elegy for Brontë. "Mementos" begins with two stanzas that document the things that a woman, now dead, has left behind for the living to sort through. As the speaker makes her way among "this mass of ancient treasures" (l. 5), "fans of leaves" (l. 9), "crimson shells" (l. 10), and "tiny portraits" (l. 11), she notices that on top of these "relics old" (l. 18) has grown "green and antique mould" (l. 20). In the third stanza she explains:

All in this house is mossing over;
 All is unused, and dim, and damp;
 Nor light, nor warmth, the rooms discover –
 Bereft for years of fire and lamp.
 (ll. 21-24)

The opening line of Dickinson's poem, "All overgrown by cunning moss," takes Brontë's words, "All in this house is mossing over" (l. 21), recycles them, and pays homage to the poet herself. Dickinson's moss covers a grave and Brontë's moss has grown in a house, but both appear at a site associated with a woman's death. Grammatically, both lines begin with the same "All," yet Brontë's "All" is the subject of her sentence, while Dickinson's subject extends beyond the line, leaving her "all" to function descriptively. This is not Dickinson's only swerve from Brontë's template, though, as Dickinson picks up Brontë's phrase "mossing over," separates these words from each other, cuts the end off of "mossing" to make "moss," extends "over" to make "overgrown," and inverts the order in which they appear. Both lines, as well as Dickinson's process of generating the

second from the first, foreground the simultaneous sense of growth and decay that the presence of moss implies. As Dickinson pushes Brontë's more standard subject-verb line by suspending both subject and verb, and as she shifts the victim of the moss from a house to a gravesite, Dickinson performs her own cunning act of poetic competition.

This act of literary recycling whereby Dickinson inhabits the position, as writer and elegist, that Brontë once inhabited, whereby Dickinson's words are both the same as Brontë's and different, is a typical move for an elegy to make; the elegist often acknowledges the position newly granted to him or her through the death of a poetic predecessor. True to generic form, the poem expresses grief over the loss of a public figure, yet in doing so personalizes that experience. Dickinson's poem turns its human subject into a bird, something that earlier elegies, such as Shelley's "Adonais," had done: "Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale, / Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain; / Not is the eagle, who like thee could scale / Heaven, and could nourish in the sun's domain" (ll. 145-8).⁷⁷ Dickinson's poem opens in the enclosure of the graveyard but by the end has removed its subject from these weeds and moss and has placed her among the angels in heaven. Because this poem acknowledges the death of a literary predecessor, uses the image of the bird, and ends in an ascent to heaven, it declares itself as a traditionally Romantic elegy. Yet Dickinson's preoccupation with how the poem is going to get from its beginning to its end, how it is going to navigate time in the face of death, and how it will and will not come to an end itself throws that very tradition into question.

⁷⁷ Dickinson also did this when describing those who had recently died. For instance, in November 1882, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. J. G. Holland of her mother, who had recently died: "The dear Mother that could not walk, has *flown*. It never occurred to us that though she had not Limbs, she had *Wings* – and she soared from us unexpectedly as a summoned Bird –" (L 779).

The sense of consolation that most elegies aim to conjure depends heavily on conventions of closure. Sacks proposes that closure in the elegy occurs through reattachment to another object, yet elegies written in different historical moments and out of different cultural and religious traditions have varying requirements. In pastoral elegies, this closure was promised by the framing device, as both the singer of the elegy and his listener knew that the poem would end in a way similar to how it began. For instance, in Theocritus's "Idyll I: The Death of Daphnis," a conversation between Thyrsis and a goatherd both precedes and follows Thyrsis's lament.⁷⁸ Milton broke the convention in "Lycidas" by employing an opening frame without returning to it in the end. He did not turn his back completely on the genre's expectation of consolation, however, but shifted it into the content of the poem when he wrote, near the end "Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more, / For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead" (ll. 165-166).

The image of resurrection with which "Lycidas" closes became the central trope in Puritan elegies but was later abandoned by the Romantics, whose poems, according to Abbie Finlay Potts in *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (1967), rely on the trope of *anagnorsis*, or revelation, in order to produce consolation. These poems attempt to discover meaning where it has not yet been revealed, and the speaker and reader are subsequently consoled when this new knowledge is embraced. Yet the devices that produce consolation in Romantic elegies are weaker than the ones that have come before, and in this period elegies begin to struggle to achieve consolation.

⁷⁸ For more on the pastoral elegy, see Ellen Zetzel Lambert. While she argues that the frame provides the genre with structured consolation, she also emphasizes the elegist's act of placing his or her sorrow within particular settings and locations.

This struggle—one that we will see Dickinson engaging in and offering her own way through—is one that proliferates throughout twentieth-century elegies and in postmodern elegiac anti-closure, where the possibility of consolation is often fully rejected.⁷⁹

While one could argue that Dickinson employs elegiac closure when she moves the bird to heaven, the central work of “All overgrown by cunning moss” is achieved by its refusal of formal closure and by its destruction of the possibility of a coherent reading experience. As we saw in our reading of how the poem makes its way from beginning to end, Dickinson positions herself, her reader, and the poet she mourns in states of multiple beginnings and middles where ending is not possible. In her book *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968), Barbara Herrnstein Smith defines closure as “the sense of finality, stability, and integrity” that the poem extends to its reader, “an effect that depends primarily upon the reader’s experience of the structure of the entire poem” (viii). The pleasure we get from closure, she argues, comes from the way a poem has set up our expectations for it.⁸⁰ In an effort to account for the different modes of achieving closure, Smith examines the formal devices used in sonnets and certain stanzaic forms, thematic devices such as temporal sequencing, and the special yet widespread use of puns, parallelisms, and allusions to closure. In doing so, she assumes that all poems seek this closure and that a failure to use these devices and achieve these ends is a sign of

⁷⁹ For more on twentieth-century elegies that refuse to offer any consolation to their readers, see Ramazani.

⁸⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith uses I. A. Richards’s formulation that “a poem begins by creating a linguistic problem whose solution by language will be the attainment of its end” (168). Additionally, she distinguishes between this problem, as it exists in novels and dramas, and as it appears in poems. She argues that whereas the action or events dictate the endings of novels and dramas, a poem ends at “a point of stability that is either determined by or accommodates the poem’s formal and thematic principles of structure” (35).

weakness. Yet it is precisely this dependence on closure that gets read back into poems, especially elegies, and to which Dickinson's poem for Brontë draws attention.⁸¹

Implicit in my discussion of poetic closure and the ways in which it is approached in the poems that take death as their subject is a necessary concern with poetic time. Critics have long theorized that as linguistic objects that are uttered either in the minds of their readers or out loud, poems exist in time, that their form itself is a temporal one. Herman Salinger, for instance, has argued that "poetry, along with but also over and beyond all forces of language, is rhythmic in essence, is of the very stuff and matter of Time" (157). Yet when critics come to investigate how poems manipulate and thematize time, they often find themselves arguing that the form constitutes a departure from time, as the lyric poem embodies time standing still or the arresting of time, as it becomes an articulation of experience ripped out of time. It is this idea of the poem as the object that can stop time that Dickinson's elegies make us rethink.

In her first book on Dickinson, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979), Cameron highlights the issue of time, arguing that while it is essential to understand a poem's temporal structures and suppositions, so too must we grasp the speaker's conception of time itself. According to Cameron, Dickinson's speakers try to "stop time dead" (24), attempting "stasis" as the poems "slow temporal advance to the difficult still point of meaning" (25). Some poems, Cameron argues, "seek a way out of

⁸¹ Grossman takes this argument one step further when he argues that "closure (the frame) identifies the central practice of English poetry" (99), solidifying not only the poem's, but the critic's, need for closure as a stabilizing force and interpretive tool. Additionally, Bahti writes: "Poems end. They begin, and they end. In between beginnings and ends are the middles—the means—of getting from the one to the other" (1). While Bahti's formulation is for the most part probably right—poems *do* begin and end—his move to highlight this feature of the genre suggests that without a formal ending (or at least the assumption of an ending), one might not know how to treat these texts. In other words, Bahti highlights just how much rests on the formal convention of poetic closure that we often take for granted.

time, a reprieve from it” (57). Still others are “arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history” (71) or constitute a “breathing space, a necessary ‘time out’” from action (90), employing, along the way, Dickinson’s desire to “blank out time” (169). Dorothy Nielsen takes this assumption of stopped time one step further when she writes that the text of lyric poems “parallels a monument, so that lyric’s characteristic suppression of both its temporal progressions and its relation to historical time allows the text to symbolize permanence” (125).

Dickinson herself was keenly aware of both the poem’s temporal form and its ability to halt time, but in “All overgrown by cunning moss,” she disrupts both the temporal progression *and* the timeless moment that the lyric is thought to embody. These disruptions are not single handedly produced by her insertion of the word “Or;” rather, the “Or” works with other elements of the poem—for instance, with the image of the bird and with the poem’s sounds—to dislodge the temporal order to which the poem might otherwise succumb. For instance, while the image of the bird might otherwise create the sense of a timeless moment (in the sense that the image reduces time and action to a still point), the formal indeterminacy created by the “Or” fractures the potential for this “timeless moment.”⁸² For just after the image has been solidified, the “Or” provides the alternative route that the bird was not allowed in the poem. While she “differed in returning” (l. 9) (in other words, she was denied the choice to return) within the story that the poem narrates, the form produces an alternative ending. The “Or” provides the bird

⁸² Welsh discusses the ways in which a central image in a poem often provides the whole poem with a sense that time and action have been caught in a “timeless moment.” He argues that embedded in this image is the illusion of narration, such that images of the past are brought into the present, but that the effect of this is one of “dynamic stasis,” or “peripeteia” (movement caught at the still point of a turn). Along a similar line, he argues that an image often works by reducing and encapsulating into itself *as instantaneous* a wide arc of time.

with a way out of the “dynamic stasis” that the poem might have otherwise produced for it.

By producing a formal alternative to the stasis and timelessness that can be regarded as deathlike in itself, Dickinson questions the notion that a poem—and especially a poem that takes death as its subject—can ever really make time stand still. Even as this poem is uttered in time and draws attention to sounds as they occur in the poem itself, Dickinson is challenging the notion that either stopped time or temporal movement are representable in poetry. First, and as is clear when one reads the poem out loud, the insertion of the “Or” asks the reader to enter into a temporal loop, where she must hold the past and present sounds in mind, while simultaneously placing the future sounds next to and not in front of her. This mimics the experience of return, the very thing that is denied to the bird in the poem, and allows the reader to undergo this revision to her own temporal order, where the beats within poetic language are normally meant to carry her forward. Additionally, the poem declares itself to be preoccupied with sounds themselves: the quotes around “Carrer Bell” (l. 3), “Haworth” (l. 4), and “Brontë” (l. 20) at least partially ask the reader to regard them as spoken. The poem also draws attention to issues of quietness: “Haworth” is “quiet” (l. 4) in the first stanza; the bird retired “quietly” (l. 8) in the second stanza; and, most interestingly, when the speaker seeks out the bird in the third stanza, the aural dimension of the scene has disappeared and the speaker resorts to saying that the bird cannot “be seen” (l. 12), a strange move given the way a bird normally makes its presence known. In the fifth stanza, sounds have returned: “Soft fall the sounds of Eden” (l. 17). But now it is the bird who is the listener, and this is clearly a new role for it has a “puzzled ear” (l. 18). Throughout the poem there is a

rejection of the very sound that might otherwise provide it with the aural dimension that implies temporal movement. As we can see, “All overgrown by cunning moss” is absorbed by these temporal issues and by the ways in which poetic form and experimentation with that form necessarily disrupt them.

Unlike the disruptions to generic conventions that “All overgrown by cunning moss” undertakes, other elegies by Dickinson and the majority of those by her female contemporaries produce the very consolation that the genre required. For instance, when Dickinson sent an elegy to a friend or neighbor who had just lost a loved one, she did not challenge the genre’s conventions in the way I have just discussed. “All overgrown by cunning moss” is different, because at least as far as we know, this poem was never sent to anyone, and as we have already seen, it is actively engaging a high literary tradition by invoking Brontë and her poetry. But a look through mid-century anthologies of American women’s verse yields hundreds of examples of the more conventional, culturally sanctioned elegies that women were writing and by which Dickinson was surrounded. For instance, in Rufus W. Griswold’s *Gems from American Female Poets* (1842), a gift book owned by the Dickinson household, we find Elizabeth Margaret Chandler’s elegy for dead Revolutionary War soldiers in “The Battle Field”; Emma Embury’s “Stanza: On the Death of the Duke of Reichstadt”; Amelia B. Welby’s “On the Death of a Friend”; Julia H. Scott’s poem about the death of her child, “My Child”; Mary E. Lee’s “Lines to the Dead”; and Caroline M. Sawyer’s “The Warrior’s Dirge.” Chosen by Griswold to represent the best of American women’s verse, these poems all produce consolation. For Griswold, the best poems by women were those pieces marked by “the purest moral character,” verses that were “distinguished for propriety and beauty of thought, and

harmonious versification” (x). His selections also uphold the generic traditions in which they are working.

Amelia B. Welby's "On the Death of a Friend" is representative of the elegiac verse contained elsewhere in this anthology.⁸³ The poem consists of six tightly woven stanzas of twelve iambic tetrameter lines. The poem begins by looking toward certain elements of nature—the star that the dead friend loved best and the waves of the "shadowy-mantled seas" (l. 6)—that make the dead person present in the speaker's thoughts. It is these elements of nature that instigate the remembering and that produce the awakening of the poet's feelings:

For never does the soft south wind
 Steal o'er the hushed and lonely sea,
 But it awakens in my mind
 A thousand memories of thee.
(ll. 21-24)

Throughout the poem the dead friend is securely situated in heaven or, as the poem puts it, “in purer air” (l. 38). It meanders back through their time together on earth and bemoans the separation of their “kindred hearts” (l. 30), recalling the June in which they shared a particularly intimate moment before her friend died. In the final stanza, Welby calls on the cycle of the seasons to provide her with the reassurance that June will return, allowing her once again to be filled with the memories that allow her to mourn:

There are some hours that pass so soon,
 Our spell-touched hearts scarce know they end;
 And so it is with that sweet June,
 Ere thou wert lost, my gentle friend!
 Oh! How I'll watch each hour that closes
 Through Autumn's soft and breezy reign,

⁸³ According to Walker, “among American women poets, [Dickinson] probably knew something of Maria Brooks, Lydia Sigourney, Maria Lowell, Caroline Gilman, and Amelia Welby” (*Nightingale* 87). Walker bases this on the fact that Samuel Bowles had sent Sue and Austin a copy of *The Household Book of Poetry* (1860), which is likely to have been shared between the households (*Nightingale* 165).

Till summer-blooms restore the roses,
 And merry June shall come again!
 But ah! While float its sunny hours
 O'er fragrant shore and trembling sea,
 Missing thy face among the flowers,
 How my full heart will mourn for thee!
 (ll. 61-72)

Welby cannot resurrect her friend, but she still provides herself and her reader with a sense of consolation that comes from her mastery of time. Each year June will return, the speaker's heart will become full, and the dead friend will be remembered. This system is as tight as the poem's form, or at least the poem makes it appear this way. No alternative is proposed, and the poem ends with the consolation that comes from formal closure.

Many nineteenth-century elegies follow a similar pattern, though there are exceptions to this rule. Paula Bennett has argued in *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (2003) that as part of the burgeoning spiritualism movement, several female poets attempted to keep the door open between the living and the dead, using their poems to commune with the dead. Bennett argues that Sarah Piatt and Dickinson in particular ended their poems inconclusively in order to leave "the question of the afterlife open, forcing readers to confront the epistemological conundrum that death is" (150). By grouping together women poets who work in similar ways, Bennett is implicitly arguing for a female literary countertradition, one that I will discuss at length in the next chapter. In contrast, Dickinson's, Brontë's, and Welby's widely different approaches to the elegy suggest that while Dickinson read and often admired the poems of her female contemporaries, she often took the opportunity to re-imagine the forms in which *both* male and female poets were working.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ For more on the discussion about the "female elegy," see Schenck, Loeffelholz (*Boundaries*), and Zeiger. Schenck argues that "the female elegy is a poem of connectedness" (15) and that women elegists "achieve

While Dickinson was surely interested in probing the “epistemological conundrum” to which Bennett points, her deferral of closure points to the fact that she is more than simply grappling with what death means. Dickinson’s “Or” suggests that she is particularly eager to fend off the closed-circuit, fully-explainable world that a strong sense of closure retrospectively produces. By interrupting the temporal movement of the poem, Dickinson fractures the cycle within which the poem exists: while the seasons fulfilled their cycle of death and rebirth, the bird did not. Dickinson embraces the very fracture that death produces, a fracture that is so common in elegies and so quickly explained away through the formal closure that brings consolation. The manuscript of “All overgrown by cunning moss” suggests that Dickinson took this notion of fracture to a formal level when she employed an “Or”-poetics that compelled her to return, time and again, to the scene of death.

Reading Between the Sheets: Fascicle 7 and the Poetics of Interruption

One way of understanding “All overgrown by cunning moss” and its “Or” is to put it in the context of the other poems that appear on the same fascicle sheet. This act of contextual reading, which I discussed at length in Chapter 1, produces an understanding of the connections that exist between the poems on this sheet and deepens our sense of what is going on in each one. But attention to the fascicle sheet as Dickinson’s primary

poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead, whereas male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own” (15). In contrast, Loeffelholz argues that “not all women accede to their gender identification in exactly the same degree of connectedness” (153). She goes on to point out the problems with relying too heavily on the idea of connectedness, as “difference and otherness inhabit connectedness” (153) and “connections can be dangerous” (154). Although Zeiger does not enter directly into this debate about connectedness, she does argue that women do not create a monumental countertradition, as they do not completely repudiate continuity with the mainstream elegiac tradition.

unit of construction does not limit readers to the sheet on which a poem appears; instead, it also allows readers to think about the *relationship* of the sheets to each other, a relation that Dickinson leads us to treat as particularly important when she binds them together. In other words, if Dickinson set out to make not a book but to make smaller groups or clusters of poems that she then placed in relation to each other, then how can we read the nature of these relations? What do these groupings make possible for Dickinson as she takes up the elegy?

In writing both formal elegies and poems that take up the themes and tropes of elegy, Dickinson investigates poetry's ability to represent the complicated nature of loss as it exists at the very limits of comprehension. By then grouping together and dispersing these poems across the sheets of a given fascicle, Dickinson forces her reader to experience the moment of death over and over again, making the loss the poems articulate forever unresolved. Reading through a fascicle with an awareness of where each sheet begins and ends forces a reader to halt at the edges of each, respecting Dickinson's thresholds and wondering about the nature of these interruptions. One might argue that when Dickinson bound her sheets together with string, she imposed on her reader a certain linear reading experience. But because these sheets could be unbound and reordered, and because Dickinson surely played with their order herself, the fascicle sheets declare themselves to be both connected to and separate from one another. Much like the "Or" that Dickinson placed within "All overgrown by cunning moss," one can read an implied "Or" at the edge of each fascicle sheet, an "Or" whose function it is to revise what has come earlier, multiply the possibilities, and forestall closure.

Although “All overgrown by cunning moss” is the third entry on the first sheet of Fascicle 7, it is the first in the fascicle to take up the issue of death. What follows on the next two sheets are additional poems about death, poems that we are encouraged to read as related to one another because of the structure of the fascicle. “She went as quiet as the Dew” (Fr 159) and “She died—*this* was the way she died” (Fr 154) deepen, revise, and contradict the work done in “All overgrown by cunning moss,” as both take up the subject of loss in ways that the first poem initiated. Both poems resituate the speaker in relation to the scene of death, rewriting the moment of the dead one’s departure, rethinking how to articulate absence, and staging their own “Or” moments. These extended treatments of the subject of death continue to involve the reader as they open up even more reading options. As the “Or” that resides inside “All overgrown by cunning moss” gets implicitly redeployed at the edge of each fascicle sheet, it forces its reader to grapple with the formal problems that death poses for poetry.

Whereas Dickinson figures the subject of “All overgrown by cunning moss” as a bird who “Retire[d] to other latitudes” (l. 7), the third poem on the second sheet presents another way of rendering this death:

She went as quiet as the Dew
From an Accustomed flower.
Not like the Dew, did she return
At the Accustomed hour!

She dropt as softly as a star
From out my summer’s eve –
Less skillful than Le Verriere
It’s sorer to believe!

(Fr 159)

In this poem, the dead woman has departed and not returned when expected, but the poem has narrated the experience differently. This poem begins with the woman’s death,

with her going, as it were, from nature in the most natural way: in the same way that the dew leaves the flower, so the woman has left this world. But in the next two lines, this sense of natural process is disrupted by the recognition that were she actually the dew, she would have returned. This structure echoes the bird's departure and non-return in "All overgrown by cunning moss." Additionally, the repetition of "Dew" (ll. 1 and 3) and "Accustomed" (ll. 2 and 4) as well as the words "a familiar" written, as a variant, above the first "Accustomed," produces disruption at the level of form (fig. 17). The reader has the option to stop, read the variant, and figure out how to treat it in relation to the line proper.

Just when the reader has registered the formal disruption that occurs because of death, the poem switches gears. Whereas the dead woman was imagined as "Dew" in the first stanza, she is figured as a "star" (l. 5) in the second, therefore presenting the reader with a metaphorical variant, an option to see her in one or both of these ways. The speaker imagines herself as the owner of the summer's eve from which the star/dead woman departs, once again situating herself as the mourner and elegist who in this case has a hard time believing that this woman is gone. The two stanzas present a choice, much like the choice that the added "Or" of "All overgrown by cunning moss" implied, as this poem also allows two options to exist simultaneously.

The implication at the end of "She went as quiet as the Dew" is that the speaker, while cognizant of the facts, struggles to accept that the woman is dead. It might not then be surprising that on the third sheet of this fascicle, we find a poem that reimagines and rearticulates once again a similar moment of death. The first two treatments of this woman's death concern the process by which she left and how one can make sense of that

leaving. This third attempt, “She died – *this* was the way she died,” the fifth poem on the third sheet, leaves behind the tools of poetry previously employed and now seems to *speak* the poem in a somewhat exasperated tone (fig. 18):

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)

As if all other considerations have not gotten it right, this poem attempts it this time in plain, straightforward language, closing this opening line uncharacteristically with a period. What occurs in the first line, “She died” (l. 1), is blunt, yet what happens after that first dash wraps meaning back into the form of the poem. “This” (l. 1), in its italicized state, refers to the speech act of the speaker (or the written document of the writer, and through it we are able to recognize that “this”—the story and our access to it—is a secondhand account that can never be the actual process of death itself. Dickinson intensifies this sense of our belatedness in the second line, which does not narrate “the way she died” (l. 1), because now she is already dead: “And when her breath was done” (l. 2). As in the other two poems, the dead woman takes her leave of this world and heads up, towards a heaven where the angels live and that the speaker—again, the “I” (l. 7) is revealed late in the poem—realizes she can only imagine.

With the exception of the opening line, this poem can be read in the tradition of some of the sentimental elegies written by Dickinson’s female contemporaries. But Dickinson added two variant lines to this poem after she had copied it onto the fascicle

sheet, a move that, as we have seen, defers closure and undermines whatever consolation the poem might otherwise have produced. Inserted between the leaves of this sheet and eventually bound into the fascicle when binding time came was a slip of paper carrying the words (fig. 19):

Or
 “Bernardine” Angels, up the hight
 Her trudging feet Espied –

Not only is Dickinson’s method for including this “Or” different from that in “All overgrown by cunning moss,” but these two lines are variants for lines that occur in the middle of the poem. The effect, then, is not the same as that of the “Or” in “All overgrown by cunning moss.” Dickinson’s use of more sophisticated diction and syntax in this variant creates a tension between the simplicity of the earlier lines and the complexity of the later option. While this “Or” does not revise the narrative movement of the poem, it does create a visual interruption as the slip sticks out at the reader and initially leaves him or her unclear about its status, about where it should be applied, and about how it should be read. Only after reading all of the poems on the interior of this sheet can the reader figure out where these two lines are meant to fit. Once situated, they puncture the tightness of what we might consider to be the poem proper.

Cameron makes what seems like a similar argument about the relation of poems to each other within the same fascicle. While she primarily reads the relations between proximate poems on the same sheet, between a poem that ends one fascicle and the one that begins the next, and between two proximate fascicles, she also argues for “associations within fascicles where poems are not physically proximate” (*Choosing* 105). According to Cameron, “non-proximate poems are nevertheless related as variants

of each other. Such poems do not exactly develop from each other so much as they repeat and modify aspects of each other” (*Choosing* 105). In other words, Cameron has extended her analysis of the variants within a poem in order to show the ways in which poems in the same fascicle might be read as variants of each other.⁸⁵

By situating the three poems about death in Fascicle 7 within the elegiac tradition, we can see that the result of all of this repeating and modifying is the deferral and possible rejection of closure. By then locating the sheet as Dickinson’s primary unit of construction, we can more precisely understand how these acts of repetition and modification are deployed. If, as I have argued, an “Or” can be read to exist at the threshold of each fascicle sheet, the threshold upon which the reader is periodically perched, then the result is the experience of reliving the same dark moment over and over again. Locating Dickinson’s unit of construction as the fascicle sheet allows us to track Dickinson’s control of these redeployments, iterations which don’t necessarily “repeat and modify” for their own sake but which perform the unending nature of grief as it is felt within the same or similar occasions.

I have called this Dickinson’s “poetics of interruption” not simply because the actual “Or”s that she includes in her elegies make the reader halt and reread, therefore undermining the genre’s move towards consolation, but because once we understand that the fascicle is not a book but rather a collection of individual sheets, the reader is also forced to stop at the edge of each. Without attention to the sheet, one might argue that elegies dispersed throughout a fascicle work purely cumulatively, but as I have noted

⁸⁵ While Cameron’s analysis of the fascicles is the most extensive to date, she is not the only one to suggest that poems in the fascicles can be read as variants of each other. For instance, Mitchell has also argued that poems in the fascicles “endlessly revise each other” (*Monarch* 189). But neither of these analyses specifically addresses the unit of the sheet, the poems’ placement on these sheets, or the relationship of sheets to each other.

throughout the dissertation, multiple moments of hesitation and interruption are built into every fascicle. These interruptions allow poems to compete as they accumulate. And it is precisely the tension between the breaks and the stitches, between the ends of the sheets and the reader's desire to read through those endings, that is central to one of the genres in which Dickinson was deeply engaged during the years in which she made the fascicles. Dickinson's elegies and the generic tradition to which they belong are saturated with the very issues of breakage, connection, and finality that the fascicle form employs and disrupts. By binding together sheets, many of which re-imagine a similar scene of death and the complicated emotions that the speaker lives with in its aftermath, Dickinson formally interrupts the experience of mourning, as time is looped, the scene is relived, and the possibility of consolation through closure recedes.

Interrupting the Journey: "Because I could not stop for Death – "

"All overgrown by cunning moss" is concerned with the death of another and therefore comes closest to the elegy proper, but Dickinson also wrote a number of poems in which it is not clear who or what is dead; poems that tackle the topic of death, the possibility or impossibility of death, and various figures for death; and poems articulated in the voice of the dead. In her 2003 article, "Corpse Poem," Diana Fuss undertakes an analysis of this last kind of death poem, of "poems that deploy the strange literary device of a speaking corpse" (1). Distinguishing this type of poem from both the epitaph and the elegy, Fuss mounts a historical argument about the emergence of corpse poetry in the early nineteenth century and its development into the present. Fuss argues that this form

allows Dickinson the latitude to mourn for the living instead of just for the dead while also granting her the ability to die without actually dying. In the terms we have been using, we can see then that a “corpse poem” imposes closure where it doesn’t exist and refuses closure where it should.

While Fuss points us toward this formulation, attention to the fascicle form can take us even further, for Fuss ultimately treats only the isolated poem, arguing that poetry is the appropriate vehicle for a corpse precisely because of its formal properties, properties that the fascicles, as we have already seen, undermine. Fuss writes: “In its isolated, fragmented, and unnatural form, poetry resembles a Yeatsian ‘rag and bone shop.’ The broken physicality of verse aligns poetry, more than any other literary genre, with corporeal disintegration” (27). But as we have seen, Dickinson’s fascicles contest this formulation in their physical existence of individual sheets that are bound to one another as they work both with and against this idea of the “isolated,” “fragmented,” and “broken” form.

I pause over Fuss’s argument not simply because she isolates one of Dickinson’s essential modes, but because when we turn to Dickinson’s fascicles we can see that these “corpse poems” are actually types of elegies that are working in conjunction with other elegies bound along with them. In the opening poem of Fascicle 23, “Because I could not stop for Death –” (Fr 479), Dickinson combines a treatment of death with an “Or” that disrupts the poem’s experience of time. This “Or” acts as a formal and temporal interruption within the individual poem, one that is then deployed over and over again in the spaces between several other poems in the fascicle.

In 1862, Dickinson wrote the following lines on the first page of the first sheet of Fascicle 23:

Because I could not stop for Death –
 He kindly stopped for me –
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess – in the Ring –
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
 We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
 The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
 For only Gossamer, my Gown –
 My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground –
 The Roof was scarcely visible –
 The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity –

(Fr 479)

Whether the narrator of the poem did not have time to stop for death, possibly because of her “labor” (l. 7), or whether she was physically or emotionally incapable of it, this “kindly” (l. 2) civil figure stops for her, an action that one might see as a strange one to open both a poem and a fascicle. But this stopping is the very thing that sets the action in motion, as the three figures of narrator, Death, and Immortality huddle together in the

carriage and begin their journey.⁸⁶ The two stanzas that follow are structured by the movement of the carriage through space and time: as it “slowly drove” (l. 5), it passed the school with its children, then the fields, and then the sun. Just when the reader thinks that he or she is getting a tour of this town at dusk, Dickinson interrupts the linear progression of time by inserting an “Or” (l. 13).

By the time we get to the “Or” in the poem’s crucial fourth stanza, the narrator has entered the carriage, begun her journey, and passed a variety of landmarks on her drive through town. Having already passed the “Setting Sun” (l. 12), she revises her own narrative: “Or rather – He passed Us –” (l. 13). At this moment we realize that she is grappling with her memory of how the events occurred, of how both space and time were ordered in this death scene. The pause at “Or” brings the carriage to the stopped position with which the poem began and allows the sun to move past it. While the “Or” in “All overgrown by cunning moss” is a more drastic insertion that changes the structure of the poem, both “Or”s reveal crucial hinges in their poems, moments when temporal progression is disrupted.⁸⁷

While the journey seems to continue in the very next stanza, as the poem returns to using the “We”s (ll. 5, 9, 11, and 12) that opened so many earlier lines, Dickinson

⁸⁶ When this poem was first published, in *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), the editors gave it the title “The Chariot.” In doing so, they highlighted the idea of the journey being taken here.

⁸⁷ Cameron also writes of the disruption that this stanza causes to the poem’s journey: “But just as after the first two stanzas, we are again rescued in the fourth from any settled conception of this journey. As we were initially not to think of the journey taking place out of the world (and hence with the children we are brought back to it), the end of the third stanza having again moved us to the world’s edge, we are redeemed from falling over it by the speaker’s correction: ‘Or rather – He passed Us.’ It is the defining movement of the poem to deliver us just over the boundary line between life and death and then to recall us. Thus while the poem gives the illusion of a one-directional movement, albeit a halting one, we discover upon further scrutiny that the movements are multiple and, as in ‘I heard a Fly buzz when I died,’ constitutive of flux, back and forth over the boundary from life to death” (*Lyric Time* 125). While Cameron reads this disruption as a reflection of Dickinson’s relationship to the life/death divide, I have argued that we can also read it in relation to her preoccupation with the formal expectations of the genre in which she is working.

retains the stasis temporarily achieved by the “Or” as the earlier anaphora “We passed” (ll. 9, 11, and 12) is modified to “We paused” (l. 17). Now they encounter a grave (whose we do not know), and with the repetition of “Ground” (ll. 18 and 20), the reader’s attention is drawn downward and away from the horizon toward which the speaker had before been moving. In a final, dizzying temporal move, the last stanza reveals that this journey occurred in the distant past, yet the time between that past moment and the moment at which the poem is articulated feels shorter than the day in which the actual journey took place or, we might say, shorter than the length of time it just took for the reader to read the poem. Because of this, the poem is recast in this time warp, as it is clearly uncertain about what register of time is most accurate. Dickinson’s interruption of temporal progression halfway through the poem by means of the “Or” sets the stage for this later sense of circular time.

In *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1924), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1930), and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1937), Dickinson’s editors left out the fourth stanza of this poem. In excising this problematic stanza from the poem, not only are the confusion over who passed whom and that unnerving chill deleted, but the journey continues in a seamless manner: after passing the setting sun, the travelers pause in front of the house. This route to (or through, or after) death is an easier one, as the poem never stops to question the way in which the journey took place. As we saw in the handling of “All overgrown by cunning moss,” editors have been quick to treat Dickinson’s “Or”s as an editorial choice for them to make. Even here, in a poem in which the “Or” is clearly the first word of a line and not a

later addition between stanzas, Dickinson's editors have chosen to read it as a variant stanza (fig. 20).

What is obvious to later editors, starting with Johnson, who have had access to Dickinson's manuscripts, is that this is not simply a variant stanza (for instance, which stanza would it be a variant of or for?) but an integral part of the poem. The "Or" in "Because I could not stop for Death –" interrupts the forward movement of the poem, thereby challenging the notion of a journey toward death that occurs unproblematically in time. By looping time back on itself in order to revise the speaker's memory of the journey, the poem halts. This stasis anticipates the final stanza's grappling with time, and, together these two moments work to distract the reader from the fact that this journey does not seem to end. The narrator of the poem never gets out of the carriage, and it is never made clear whose body is in the ground. In the final lines Dickinson alludes to the beginning of the journey when "the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity" (ll. 23-24) and therefore avoids the deathlike finality that would be implied by the journey's—and the poem's—terminus.

Throughout the rest of Fascicle 23, Dickinson renders a variety of death scenes. Across all six of the sheets, Dickinson copies poems—"He fought like those Who've nought to lose –" (Fr 480), "'Wolfe' demanded during Dying" (Fr 482), "Most she touched me by her muteness –" (Fr 483), "The Whole of it came not at once –" (Fr 485), "Presentiment – is that long shadow – on the Lawn –" (Fr 487), "You constituted Time –" (Fr 488), "The World – feels Dusty" (Fr 491), "The Day undressed – Herself –" (Fr 495), and "The Beggar Lad – dies early –" (Fr 496)—that narrate the process of death, wonder about the nature of the afterlife, and present the figure of death. Yet among and

often between these poems are others that are not about death. Understanding the fascicle's relationship to these other poems and how the "Or" carries over the poems that don't address death directly is crucial to understanding Dickinson's generic intervention.

In the last poem on the second sheet, "From Blank to Blank –" (Fr 484), Dickinson narrates a journey toward an "end," but it is not clear that this end is death. In a series of stunning echoes of her earlier poem that begins "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –" (Fr 372) and in a list of "or"s, "From Blank to Blank –" highlights the sense that an experience of nearing an end can be rendered only in multiple and often conflicting ways:

From Blank to Blank –
 A Threadless Way
 I pushed Mechanic feet –
 To stop – or perish – or advance –
 Alike indifferent –

 If end I gained
 It ends beyond
 Indefinite disclosed –
 I shut my eyes – and groped as well
 'Twas lighter – to be Blind –
(Fr 484)

This poem undertakes a journey, but this time there is no subject and the speaker has no guide, thus following "A Threadless Way" (l. 2) or, as the variant states, "Course" (fig. 21). Without any organic sense of where to go, the poem has to push its own feet. The feet have been rendered "Mechanic" (l. 3), but so has the action of pushing them. The poet at some level declares her own poetic feet and her process of making them "Mechanic" and the poem opens into a creative wasteland, "Blank" and "Blank" (l. 1) existing as stand-ins for the language that would be present under other circumstances. Where the poem is going and how it will get there no longer matter, and as we learn in

the next line, getting there doesn't really matter either. The poem states that "To stop – or perish – or advance – / Alike indifferent –" (ll. 4-5), and with these "or"s Dickinson highlights a situation in which what looks like choices are actually not choices at all. To stop would be to stop the present movement; to perish would be to stop this movement and any further movement; to advance would be to move forward. What the poem is doing at the moment is not clear. From the outside, these actions seem to be anything but "Alike" (l. 5), as each one produces a different outcome. But as we will see in the second stanza, none of these ways of approaching this journey will bring it to its close. The journey exists only as the speaker's own mind moves around the options: "To stop – or perish – or advance –" (l. 4).

In the second stanza, the poem addresses the issue of ending directly: "If end I gained / It ends beyond" (ll. 6-7). One reason why it doesn't matter which of the first stanza's options is taken, is that none of them will lead to any true end. In this case, then, the "I" decides to shut her eyes (therefore making the journey even more impossible) and grope her way along. Absent any desire to reach the end, the journey becomes the point, but this is now a journey that has no visual features, for the speaker is "Blind" (l. 10). Without the landmarks that the narrator of "Because I could not stop for Death –" encountered, this "I" will be unable to chart her own progression or, paradoxically, to mark stasis. In this way, "From Blank to Blank –" narrates a very different kind of journey, one that the end of "Because I could not stop for Death –" projects as a possibility. Whether the "I" of "From Blank to Blank –" is already dead or is groping toward her own death we cannot know, but we can see that she rejects the temporal markers that go along with any narration of experience. She is not stopped and she is not

advancing. In light of the knowledge of death that surrounds this poem, Dickinson and the poem as her vehicle reject both stasis and narration.

By halting individual poems from moving sequentially from beginning to end, by interrupting this expected movement and creating a formal and temporal loop both inside and outside the poem, Dickinson draws her reader's attention to just one of the many ways elegies are always on the brink of breaking the rules about time and closure to which the tradition often adheres. By then re-creating the indeterminacy established in the individual poem over and between the poems on the fascicle sheets, Dickinson raises further questions about time, progression, and endings. When we think about the subject of death she has taken on in so many of these poems, we see that in the same way that a literal death often confuses our sense of time; for instance, we struggle to understand how one thing has ended while other things continue. A poetic rendering of this experience can grapple just as profoundly with these questions. Dickinson's elegies and elegiac poems and sometimes even the ones between those poems in the fascicle take their formal cues from the very disjunctions that death poses. In doing so, they end up using and often rejecting the expectation of both narrative movement and time stopped that poetry—and especially elegiac poetry—is thought to capture in its form. What we find in the fascicles—within the individual poems, in the spaces between them, and in their accumulations—is such a deep engagement with the questions of time that it causes time itself to loop, therefore foreclosing the possibility of closure and consolation that we often see as intrinsic to the very poems that rely on them most.

Space as Interruption: "There'll be that Dark Parade –"

Not all of Dickinson's poems about death include an "Or." In this final section I will turn to the opening poem of Fascicle 27, where we can see another form that Dickinson's interruptions take. My analysis of Fascicle 7 highlighted the ways in which Dickinson extends the "Or"-poetics that she employs within her poems to the spaces between her fascicle sheets. I showed how this move is related to Dickinson's understanding of the different strands of the elegiac tradition that she was engaging. My analysis of Fascicle 23 turned to a poem that does not position itself as a traditional elegy in the way that Dickinson's poem for Charlotte Brontë does but that addresses instead the issue of death in relation to the speaker herself. Here I focused on the ways in which Dickinson uses an "Or" within the poem to restructure the experience of the poem, an experience that in this case relies deeply on the poem's navigation of time. In this final section I will begin by looking at the first poem on the first sheet of Fascicle 27 and then turn to several of the poems that Dickinson copied as the first poems on the remaining five sheets of this fascicle. In doing so, I hope to illuminate an additional way that Dickinson formally navigated the topic of death and the necessary investments in closure, consolation, and time that come with it.

The opening poem on the first sheet, "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (Fr 547), narrates the experience of observing a house in the aftermath of death and in the process foregrounds a host of issues that the poems on the subsequent sheets will take up at various and sometimes competing registers:

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today –
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have – always –

The Neighbors rustle in and out –
 The Doctor – drives away –
 A Window opens like a Pod –
 Abrupt – mechanically –

Somebody flings a Matrass out –
 The Children hurry by –
 They wonder if it died – on that –
 I used to – when a Boy –

The Minister – goes stiffly in –
 As if the House were His –
 And He owned all the Mourners – now –
 And little Boys – besides.

And then the Milliner – and the Man
 Of the Appalling Trade –
 To take the measure of the House –

There'll be that Dark Parade –

Of Tassels – and of Coaches – soon –
 It's easy as a Sign –
 The Intuition of the News –
 In just a Country Town –
 (Fr 547)

Unlike most elegies, which focus on the specific aspects of the human who has died, this poem represses the dead person and instead highlights the house in which the death occurred. Each stanza is concerned with a different aspect of how one knows that a death has taken place. The opening stanza focuses on when the death occurred and on the position of the onlooker: she is “Opposite” (l. 1) to the scene of death, in that she is across from it but also in that she is living. The second stanza presents the relation of inside and outside, of the space in which death occurred to the world around it: the neighbors move between these two spaces, the doctor leaves the inside for the outside, and an unseen person opens a window from the inside, thereby allowing air to flow

between the two spaces. In the third stanza we finally encounter a reference to the dead person only for this person to be referred to as an “it” (l. 11). Whereas everybody else in this poem has a profession (“Doctor” [l. 6], “Minister” [l. 13], “Milliner” [l. 17], and “Man of the Appalling Trade” [ll. 17-18]) or status in relation to others (“Neighbors” [l. 5], “Mourners” [l. 15], and “Boys” [l. 16]), this dead person has no identity. The fourth stanza addresses the issue of ownership as it positions the minister as the one who owns the house, the mourners, and the boys. If the minister owns, the auctioneer measures, and between the fourth and fifth stanzas everything is accounted for and ready to be assigned to the highest bidder. In a closing move to formalize her knowledge of death, the poem addresses the “Dark Parade” (l. 20) that will “soon” (l. 21) occur. Each of these aspects of the house and town exists as a “Sign” (l. 22) of the very incident that has been kept out of the poem.

While the poem is preoccupied with illuminating each of these signs, two moments disrupt the poem’s desire for clarity. The first is the unsettling line at the end of the third stanza: “I used to – when a Boy –” (l. 12). This line can be read in several ways: the “I” is a man who is referring to what happened when he was a boy; an actual boy (as well as, but not with, the minister) is going—across the stanza break—into the house; the “I” is mocking the minister by referring to him as a “boy,” as if in the space of the dash the boy becomes a minister; or the “I” sees a boy, but the presence of the minister interrupts the speaker’s thought and she then turns her attention to him. There is no correct way to read this unsettling line and thus all of these explanations exist simultaneously. The second disruption occurs in line 20 (“There’ll be that Dark

Parade –”) as Dickinson sets this line off by itself, thereby breaking the pattern of quatrains that she had established for the poem. In both cases, Dickinson unsettles the ease with which the rest of the poem is attempting to communicate the knowledge of death that can be gained through attention to the mundane material and obvious signs of it.

I want to pause on the “Dark Parade” for a moment because as with the editing problems caused by the “Or” in “All overgrown by cunning moss” and the fourth stanza of “Because I could not stop for Death –,” this line created difficulties for early readers and editors of the poem. When Todd published this poem in the 1896 *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, she printed this line as the last line of the fifth stanza, thereby creating a six-stanza poem. Linda Grimes has also noted that editors of anthologies who include this poem often make this alteration, one that, in Grimes’s opinion, “weakens the total impact of the poem” (219). Besides just “regulariz[ing] that stanza,” and therefore giving the poem “a uniform appearance,” Grimes argues that this editorial practice erases Dickinson’s “specific reason for the separation... eliminating the special nuance of meaning that Dickinson achieved in her original” (219). In Grimes’s view, “the funeral procession, ‘that Dark Parade,’ will occur after the measurement of the house and will literally separate itself from the house” (219).

Grimes’s attention to Dickinson’s act of separating this line is important because it reflects the growing trend in Dickinson scholarship to settle what the poems mean by turning to her manuscripts. Yet this kind of attention to the manuscripts does not come without some resistance. In his 2001 article, “The Grammar of Ornament: Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts and Their Meanings,” Domhnall Mitchell warns readers against

overemphasizing the details of Dickinson's manuscripts. Calling an autograph poem "a playground for performative ingenuity" (480), Mitchell questions approaches that, in his opinion, make too much of "line arrangements, the shapes of words and letters, and the deployment of blank spaces" (479). Mitchell seeks to show how proponents of this approach often ask an incomplete set of questions about the texts they are studying and therefore produce "new" readings of Dickinson's poems that, while claiming a definitiveness that comes from their association with the manuscripts, are actually arbitrary. Mitchell reminds us that Dickinson, like most other writers, made choices casually, and that our desire to derive meanings from the details embedded in her manuscripts can often produce inaccurate analyses.

Mitchell's intervention is useful insofar as it demands of scholars who study manuscripts a highly rigorous methodology. He reminds us that reading Dickinson's intentions is a tricky endeavor and that there are usually several ways to understand why Dickinson included or excluded a certain detail, why she used a certain type of paper with a specific embossment or advertisement on it, or why she wrote a given poem when she did. His critique throws Grimes's method of analysis into question. But if we can agree that the manuscript indicates that Dickinson did indeed separate this line from the others (fig. 22), how can we interpret this decision? How can we decide which interpretation is most valid?

While Mitchell questions certain approaches to the manuscripts, he doesn't address why critics have gotten themselves in this bind in the first place. In an effort to see afresh the poems that Dickinson was writing, critics studying her manuscripts have attempted to distance themselves from the poems as they have been printed. Yet in spite

of having done so, they still take the writing in these manuscripts to be the very lyrics for which “line arrangements, the shapes of words and letter, and the deployment of blank spaces” could matter only in the first place. This is the very problematic that Jackson articulates when she argues that once Dickinson’s poems were printed as poems, it became impossible to read them as anything else: “What we cannot do is to return to a moment before Dickinson’s work became literature, to discover within the everyday remnants of a literate life the destiny of print. Yet we are still faced with discerning, within the mass of print that has issued from that moment, what it was that Dickinson wrote” (1).

Yet I hope to have shown throughout this chapter that attention to Dickinson’s fascicle sheets can provide readers with a way of reading her poems that stems from her own material practices and does not necessarily offer corrective readings of individual poems.⁸⁸ In other words, in setting off the line “There’ll be that Dark Parade,” Dickinson interrupts this poem at the moment when it moves from present to future (“There’ll” [l. 20]) and erases the distinction between inside and out (all, even the dead body, are now outside). Additionally, turning to the fascicle allows us to see that the “Dark Parade” that is raised in this opening poem gets played out across the sheets that are bound to it.

Paraded across, among, and between the opening poems on the next five sheets, all of which begin with a poem about death, is a variety of Dickinson’s approaches and resistances to writing about such a topic. If “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite

⁸⁸ Cameron uses the fascicle context, if not the manuscript details, to offer a corrective reading of “Because I could not stop for Death –.” By referencing other fascicles and some of the other poems in Fascicle 23, Cameron argues that attention to the fascicle context can change the actual meaning of the poem, allowing one to see, in this case, “that the speaker’s journey may not be solitary, not because she is accompanied by the abstract figures of death and immortality, but perhaps rather because she is accompanied by a lost lover here personified as death” (*Choosing* 32). Whereas Cameron uses the other poems in the fascicle to propose a different interpretation of the individual poem, I have been highlighting a series of formal and material issues that do not alter the meaning of the individual poems.

House” attempts to make the “Intuition” (l. 23) of death concrete by relaying the details that are visible to an outsider, then “I measure every Grief I meet” (Fr 550), the first poem on the second sheet, does a similar thing but from a different position. The narrator of this poem not only becomes the very measurer disdained in “There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,” but she relies heavily on her capacity to measure and compare as she weighs the various sources of grief, of which death is only one. Unmoored to any particular story of grief, this uncharacteristically long poem looks at a variety of kinds of grief, questioning its nature and speculating about its relationship to the unnamed one that it carries with it. When it comes to the topic of death in the seventh stanza, Dickinson writes: “The Grieved – are many – I am told – / There is the various Cause – / Death – is but one – and comes but once – / And only nails the Eyes –” (ll. 24-27). What is confusing about this characterization of death is the implication of death’s effect: it comes only once, implying it is final, but at the same time it “*only* nails the Eyes” (italics mine). When the eyes are nailed, the subject becomes blind, as we already saw in “From Blank to Blank –,” but the other senses continue to function.

While “I measure every Grief I meet” speculates on the various causes of grief and is not conclusive in its assessment of death as one of them, the first poem on the third sheet, “There is a Langour of the Life” (Fr 552), narrates the actual process of death. In this poem, death is the thing that comes after pain, “When the Soul / Has suffered all it can –” (ll. 3-4). The second stanza makes concrete what it feels like to be in this state and drifting toward death: “A Drowsiness – diffuses – / A Dimness like a Fog / Envelopes Consciousness – / As Mists – obliterate a Crag” (ll. 5-8). By the end of the poem this “it” (l. 11) is dead, as the “Surgeon” (l. 9) declares “There’s no Vitality” (l. 16). Again

Dickinson comes right up against the idea of death as final, but the stanza of fog and mists allow the dead one to continue existing in the image of the crag.

To summarize: The first poem on the first sheet narrates what happens after someone in a small town has died; the first poem on the second sheet wonders, in philosophical terms, how one can see the effects of death on the living; and the first poem on the third sheet narrates the process of death, from the perspective of the dying person and the surgeon who is present. What we have here is a variety of ways of approaching the topic of death, as each one exists in a different relation to the event. In the first poem of the fourth sheet of this fascicle, Dickinson provides her reader with another approach. “It’s Coming – the postponeless Creature –” (Fr 556) figures death as a creature and narrates its journey to the person it will take with it. In other words, this poem provides a prelude to all the experiences of death that we have already encountered across the sheets of Fascicle 27.

Just when we think there are no other ways to address this subject, we read the opening poems on the two final sheets. The first poem on the fifth sheet, “Did Our Best Moment last –” (Fr 560), anticipates death without making it concrete, as the speaker addresses the topic only incidentally by way of wondering why we are not “given” (l. 4) ecstatic moments in life. The answer follows: “’Twould supersede the Heaven” (l. 2), and through this the poem imparts the belief that death will bring with it the joy we lack in life. The first poem on the sixth and last sheet of this fascicle, “She hideth Her the last –” (Fr 564), does not directly address the issue of death either, but in its references to “The Closing of Her Eyes” (l. 4) and “low apartments in the sod” (l. 7), implies just how close death is to the living.

Reading across the fascicle sheets in this way, with an eye to the topic of death that is foregrounded in the very first poem, the reader is left with a better understanding of the “Dark Parade” that interrupted the experience of the opening poem. Embedded in the image of the “Dark Parade” and in its status as a broken-off piece of poetic stanza is the knowledge of what will happen in the future, of the predictability of death rituals, and of the poem’s desire to turn time around and resist the expected movement to the grave. As the interruption registered at the level of form in the opening poem is deployed over the course of the fascicle, the other sheets take up the invitation to think about different ways to render the experience of death.

This chapter has recorded the story of a poet whose themes, materials, and generic concerns converge on the scene of her copying and binding. My analysis of this process has focused on the poems in Fascicles 7, 23, and 27 and how the moments of interruption within and between them shed light on Dickinson’s relationship to the elegy in both its traditional form and its contemporaneous manifestations. But Dickinson’s generic intervention is not limited to the work she did in these fascicles, and as one might expect, the fascicles are not forty instances of the same thing. During the years in which Dickinson bound the fascicles, she worked in a variety of ways, developing and altering her relationship to the elegy and the issues that writing about death raises. Despite these variations, ones that readers will also encounter in Fascicles 3, 13, 16, and 20, one thing remained the same: Dickinson often employed the sheet in order to render the experience of death and mourning as one that does not end and to undermine the sense of consolation that is found in both high literary and familiar elegies. As Dickinson redeploys scenes of

death throughout a given fascicle, she forces her reader to relive time and again the unexplainable experience of death.

In the introduction to this chapter I suggested that deciding whether a poem was an elegy was not an inquiry that I would pursue, as the ways in which Dickinson brushes up against the genre are often just as interesting as the moments when she takes it on explicitly. While I still believe that any consideration of Dickinson's poems about death will have to navigate these generic waters carefully, I have drawn attention to a specific way in which Dickinson approaches the genre. This, in turn, may provide us with new ways of thinking about how elegy itself works. In other words, whether they embrace, break, or alter the move toward consolation that occurs in poetic time, elegies, especially as they are taken up in Dickinson's various forms, have the potential to rethink radically the very closure that is meant to give them their identity.

It is, of course, impossible to say whether Dickinson intended to undertake the generic intervention that I have laid out. What we can say, though, is that Dickinson intended to make clusters of poems and she intended to place these clusters in relation to each other. What emerges from these acts is a picture of Dickinson in the act of rethinking what it means to write about death and what it means to bring an elegy to its close. While it is far-fetched to imagine that Dickinson had conceived of this particular generic intervention in full before copying and binding her sheets, I hope to have shown that her method of constructing the fascicles was at some level guided by her sense of the poetic traditions that she was engaging.

When read as printed lyrics, "All overgrown by cunning moss," "Because I could not stop for Death —," and "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" not only appear

stripped of their formal complexities, but they appear without the materials surrounding them that might instruct a reading of those complexities. Even when read in the context of their fascicles, where connections between and among the poems become available, these poems will, according to Jackson's logic, most likely continue to be read as if they were printed lyrics. While turning from the individual poem and the book of poems to the sheet does not do away with this hermeneutic circle, for one can imagine a theory of the sheet that is just as closed as a reading of the lyric, attention to Dickinson's sheet reorients the discussion toward the materialities of Dickinson's writing. As the above readings have meant to make clear, attention to Dickinson's materials allows a lyric reading to go only so far, for there is a moment in each of my readings in which I can no longer employ the tools that I have to read them as lyrics. Recognizing these limits necessarily broadens the scope of what can be brought to bear on the poems and on what kinds of interpretive moves the reader can make. Attention to the sheet entails engaging Dickinson's poems on their own terms, probing the details of her process, asking what work her various interruptions are doing, and attempting to place this work within the historical, material, and generic contexts in which they were written. As Dickinson's poems reveal themselves to be engaging specific generic traditions, and as these traditions are taken up and modified through her choice of medium, Dickinson's poems cease to be simply lyrics without histories.

Chapter Four

Fractured Selves: Dickinson, Barrett Browning, and the Problem of Recollection

Throughout this dissertation I have drawn attention to the issues raised by a material analysis of Dickinson's manuscripts and the writing practices that they make visible. In the first chapter I argued that attention to Dickinson's fascicle sheets asks her readers to revisit the assumption that the fascicles are books of poems to be read either thematically or narratively. In the second chapter I explored the uneasy relationship between Dickinson's letters and poems—poems that she sent as enclosures in her correspondence, inserted into her letters as poems, and embedded into her letters as prose—and how these material contexts affect a given text's genre. In the third chapter I situated Dickinson's poems of death and mourning within the tradition of elegiac poetry that she and her contemporaries engaged while simultaneously showing that the way in which she copied and bound these particular poems together is a crucial part of her relationship to the genre. In this final chapter I will extend my analysis of Dickinson's fascicles by considering the ways in which the non-alignment of speakers in the fascicles allows Dickinson to develop an alternative to a Wordsworthian idea that poetry can suture together the past, the present, and the future. I will argue that Dickinson used the fascicles to experiment with lyric conventions, exploring the potential offered by the fascicles' greater length to develop split subjects that refuse the wholeness that recollection offers them. Like many of her female contemporaries—including, most visibly and radically, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—who turned to longer forms in order

to explore the limits of lyric conventions, Dickinson used the fascicles to explore a version of poetic subjectivity that exists in a state of fragmentation.⁸⁹

The scholarly consideration of nineteenth-century women's writing began in the late 1970s and early 1980s with Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) and Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* (1982). In recent years, however, critics have begun to produce a growing body of criticism that regards nineteenth-century women's poetry as something more than a forgotten literature that is in need of recovery but that is also always on the brink of being forgotten again.⁹⁰ Most recently, Paula Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), Eliza Richards's *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (2004), and Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American*

⁸⁹ Walker categorizes all poetry by nineteenth-century women as "ambivalent, personal, passionate lyrics" (*Nightingale* xi), and she argues that "lacking authority in this culture, American women poets have still spoken, but they have spoken obliquely, sometimes in cramped forms, and often without the confidence to range widely" (*Nightingale* xiii). The anthologies of women's verse that followed embraced this assumption about female poets and lyric form, as they recovered and reprinted the very "cramped forms" that were possible to reproduce in these contexts. For instance, even in Bennett's introduction to her massive and diverse anthology, she refers primarily to the "lyric genres" (*Nineteenth-Century* xliii), in which these women worked. But by the time Dickinson began constructing her fascicles, several extended poetic projects by her American female contemporaries had been undertaken, published, and widely-received by both American and British readers. While I do not discuss them in this chapter, see, for instance, Lucretia Davidson's posthumously published "Amir Khan," which appeared in 1829; Maria Gowen Brooks' *Zophiël; or the Bride of Seven*, which was published in 1833; and Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "The Sinless Child: A Poem in Seven Parts," which was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1842. These are all examples of book-length poems that not only defy the parameters of the lyric utterances that we normally associate with nineteenth-century women poets, but in their extended forms often fracture the female speakers and subjects that are forced to inhabit these shorter forms.

⁹⁰ The only book appearing before Gilbert and Gubar's to address this writing was Emily Stipes Watts's *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (1977). But this study was less interested in a critical engagement with these texts than in spearheading the effort to return the poems themselves to print. The publication of several anthologies would follow, including those edited by Walker (*Nightingale*), Gray, and Bennett (*Nineteenth-Century*). While these anthologies undoubtedly provided access to poetry that in most cases had been forgotten for over a century, what they lacked was attention to the historical, cultural, and material contexts in which the poems had been produced, published, and received.

Women's Poetry (2004) have broadened our understanding of the social, literary, and educational contexts in which nineteenth-century women poets produced their poems.

Bennett revises a literary history that had focused on women circulating their poems in private contexts; instead, she argues that women poets were drawn to the rich and varied world of magazine and periodical publishing, an environment in which their poems thrived.⁹¹ Richards's study focuses on Edgar Allan Poe and the circle of poetesses whose poems he often used as models for his own and who sometimes mimicked his. By interpreting these poems "in terms of their circulation within social networks" (2), Richards "offers a way to understand the collusion of genius and mimicry in the nineteenth-century lyric and its legacies" (1). While declaring itself to be a work of recovery, Loeffelholz's eloquent and nuanced treatment of seven female poets accomplishes far more in its analysis of

a broad shift in the social locations in which American women gained access to authorship in the genre of poetry: a shift from reading, reciting, writing, and publishing poetry in the didactic context of primary and secondary schooling to reading, reciting, and publishing poetry in the emergent later nineteenth-century venues of autonomous high culture, like the salon (4).

I enter this conversation through my interest in Dickinson's manuscripts, my abiding sense that there is more work to do on the compositional practices of women poets, and my attraction to thinking about Dickinson in a transatlantic context. Placing Dickinson's fascicle project in relation to Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* will allow us to see that these nineteenth-century female poets were struggling with the poetic forms

⁹¹ Although Bennett opens this book by retracting her dismissive comments about nineteenth-century women's poetry in her 1990 book, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, she still argues that when studying Dickinson one need not take the terrain of other women's poetry into consideration because Dickinson construed her situation as one of isolation, even if it wasn't. Part of what I maintain in this dissertation is that attention to Dickinson's manuscripts and writing practices allows us to see that she did not construe her situation as one of isolation.

available to them and the version of female poetic subjectivity that could be rendered in them. In both of their extended poetic projects, Dickinson and Barrett Browning give themselves room to explore what it would be like to have poetic speakers who, despite their insistent return to their own pasts, refuse the identity that a matching up of past and present produces.

It is well known that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of Dickinson's favorite poets. Even though the two women never met or exchanged letters, Dickinson eagerly read all of Barrett Browning's poems and is rumored to have known Barrett Browning's most famous poem, *Aurora Leigh*, almost by heart. Dickinson and Sue extensively marked the copy of the book they passed back and forth between the houses.⁹² Dickinson wrote three now-well-known elegies after Barrett Browning's death: "Her – last Poems" (Fr 600), "I think I was enchanted" (Fr 627), and "I went to thank her" (Fr 637). One critic has argued that as many as sixty-four Dickinson poems have their origins in Barrett Browning texts.⁹³ In addition to celebrating Barrett Browning in her own poems, Dickinson indicated her reverence for this poet in her letters. In April 1862, when Higginson inquired about the poets she read, Dickinson mentioned only three: Keats and both Brownings (L 261). In August of that year, she offered to send Higginson one of the three copies of Barrett Browning's portraits in her possession (L 271).⁹⁴ When Samuel Bowles was preparing to embark on a trip to Europe around this same time, Dickinson wrote to him of Barrett Browning: "and if you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head

⁹² Dickinson's marked-up copy of *Aurora Leigh* is currently housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

⁹³ See Swyerski on this research by J. E. Walsh (78).

⁹⁴ In this letter, Dickinson wrote to Higginson, "Person's sent me three –," therefore indicating that several of her correspondents knew of her admiration of Barrett Browning.

for me—her unmentioned mourner” (L 266). Eight years later, she sent a picture of Barrett Browning’s tomb to Higginson’s wife (L 342b).

Several critics have explored Dickinson’s fascination with Barrett Browning and the many similarities between the two poets. In *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (1992), Betsy Erkkila presents Barrett Browning and Dickinson as women working out of and in reaction to the same poetic tradition, mapping the ways in which the two of them constitute the beginnings of a female literary countertradition. In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers tracks the specific influence Barrett Browning had on Dickinson. Still others compare the choices and merits of the two writers. For instance, in *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (1981), Joanne Feit Diehl writes that Barrett Browning “more explicitly acknowledges the problem of being a woman poet” (29) than Dickinson did. In this chapter I will extend the work of these early feminist critics by exploring Dickinson and Barrett Browning’s similar fascination and struggle with the notion that poetry has the power to order experience through recollection. Both Dickinson in her broken yet sutured fascicles, and Barrett Browning in her epic poem that wrestles throughout with its own choice of form respond to Wordsworth’s famous moment of recollection in “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.”⁹⁵ By staging moments of return in which the past and the present don’t

⁹⁵ Many scholars have discussed Barrett Browning’s complicated relationship to Wordsworth. See Shumadine, who argues for the connection between Wordsworth’s “Lines Left Upon a Seat...” and Barrett Browning’s “The Poet’s Vow.” Her point is ultimately that Barrett Browning “accepts, rejects, extends, refines Wordsworth’s ideas about the role of the poet, making it her own” (40). Later in her article, though, Shumadine goes on to argue that “one of the great strengths of Romanticism, for women poets, is its insistence on the validity of individual consciousness” (41). While I agree with the “validity” part of her argument, she does not tackle the ways in which “individual consciousness” might mean different things or be formulated in widely different ways. See Woolford for a documentation of the relationship between Barrett Browning and Wordsworth. He discusses a very positive review of Wordsworth’s poems that Barrett Browning published in 1842, the many letters in which she refers to him very fondly, and the fact that she hung a portrait of him in her room, under which she wrote. Woolford dates Barrett Browning’s

line up, these poets present poetic speakers for whom this disjunction is ultimately productive.

Wordsworth's poem concerns the passage of time between two trips to the same location, for his poem opens, "Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!" (1-2). The title and opening lines of Wordsworth's poem stress the issue of time not only by marking the present moment of writing but by using the word "again" (ll. 2 and 4) several times. This word marks the scene itself as a double, and much of the poem is preoccupied with figuring out how the past moment and the present moment fit together. The similarities the speaker observes between past and present landscapes emphasize that it is his inner world—his thoughts, perspective, and self—that has changed.⁹⁶ The speaker connects the two moments in time by addressing how the landscape existed to him when it was not physically present and what sort of work it did on his mental state. For instance, he claims the river was therapeutic because remembering the landscape created certain feelings and moods in him that made him able to see the world more clearly.

This ability to see has changed the speaker, and although he claims "I cannot paint / What then I was" (76-77) in the fourth stanza, he goes on to compare the sort of man he was five years ago with the person he is now. As the stanza comes to a close, he links past and present together through the landscape upon which he is looking:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold

ambivalent feelings about Wordsworth to the mid-1840s. Woolford argues for Barrett Browning's ultimate disengagement from Wordsworth, but he also acknowledges that this disengagement is incomplete (53).

⁹⁶ Certain critics (see Levinson in particular) have pointed out just how much Wordsworth's landscape would have actually changed over these years.

From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye and ear, both what they half create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.

(ll. 103-112)

This move to integrate his past and present selves—to make himself “still” (l. 103)—is a result of the pressure that the poem exerts from its very first lines, a pressure on the human speaker to explain the passage of time.

In the final stanza, the speaker famously turns to the silent person who has been with him all along, thus revealing that this moment of reflection has not occurred in solitude. When the speaker turns to his sister and says “May I behold in thee what I was once” (l. 121) he once again draws the reader’s attention to the goal of the poem, which is to create a physical and emotional situation in which he will be able to identify visions of his former self, in which his past will align with his present. By the end of the poem, the speaker has succeeded in aligning the past and the present.⁹⁷

Wordsworth achieves this matching up of selves not by collapsing time but by addressing the difficulties that the passage of time presents. It is not always clear that this speaker will be able to connect his present and past states, as he spends much of the poem bemoaning the difference between himself as the “roe” (l. 68) who “bounded o’er mountains” (l. 69) and the “man” (l. 71) he has become. Because most of the poem is

⁹⁷ While I have argued that this matching up of past and present selves occurs in the poem, not all readers interpret the poem this way. For instance, Brennan argues that the image of the Abbey should point us to the opposite conclusion: “Though he would like to believe that nature has provided him with a framework for integrating his past youthful self with his present disappointed one, this hope proves false. He does not find the glory of his own previous relationship to nature in the ruin before him. Just as the visual culture that was England in the late Middle Ages cannot be recreated today, so Wordsworth knows that he cannot resurrect his early life experiences from the bits and pieces that memory yields. Wordsworth’s youthful past, like the Gothic glory that was Tintern Abbey, has been irrevocably lost” (15).

taken up with a description of the ways in which these two creatures relate differently to the landscape that is once again at hand, the speaker's suturing of these parts of himself together in the final stanza highlights the power of poetic form.

As we will see in the pages to come, both Dickinson and Barrett Browning were fascinated by Wordsworth's final move. They both interrogate the poetry that Wordsworth makes us think guarantees union, asking most pointedly what happens when the past and present don't line up. Their challenge to Wordsworth's account of how poetry works is visible in their own scenes of recollection, and their interrogations result in poetic projects that are themselves fractured at the level of form.

Splitting the Self: Dickinson's Fascicle Speakers

Dickinson's fascicles often introduce a split between their speakers' past and present selves that is rendered irrevocable not only within the individual poems but by the fascicle itself. When we look closely at the fascicle sheets, we can see that Dickinson often creates a speaker for her poems, one who is far from unified and rarely narrates her way from one point to the next unproblematically. When this same speaker is employed in multiple poems on a fascicle sheet, it is not that the speaker does not learn things as the cluster of poems unfolds, but any move toward revelation that might make this speaker's sense of herself or her past experiences coherent is usually undermined by the form in which Dickinson is working. When the speakers of poems on the same sheet are different, the disjunctions between them are often presented as temporal ones. In other words, in its very breaks and stitches the fascicle itself provides Dickinson with the

opportunity to play with the notion of poetic subjectivities that do not depend on the idea that the past and present must be reconciled.

Let's look, for example, at the first sheet of Fascicle 15. This fascicle begins with a poem that relives and questions a past moment of trauma. Initially the speaker expresses a desire to articulate and resolve the split that currently exists within her, but this desire is almost entirely disavowed by the end of the poem:

The first Day's Night had come –
And grateful that a thing
So terrible – had been endured –
I told my Soul to sing –

She said her strings were snapt –
Her Bow – to atoms blown –
And so to mend her – gave me work
Until another Morn –

And then – a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled it's horror in my face –
Until it blocked my eyes –

My Brain – begun to laugh –
I mumbled – like a fool –
And tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day –
My Brain keeps giggling – still.

And Something's odd – within –
That person that I was –
And this One – do not feel the same –
Could it be Madness – this?

(Fr 423)

This poem begins in a place of wordlessness as the speaker, having experienced a thing so terrible that it cannot even be named in the poem, has to coax her "Soul" (l. 4) into song. She has set herself to this task of "mend[ing]" (l. 7) throughout the night, when, come morning, an additional "horror" (l. 11) hits, this time doing away with her vision. In

this state of blindness and dumbness, the speaker's "Brain – begun to laugh" (l. 13), and she herself likens her state of mumbling to that of a "fool" (l. 14).

The split that occurs in this poem, though, takes place not just between the speaker who understands her situation and her fool part but in her comprehension of the time frames in which this very split took place. As in "Because I could not stop for Death –" (Fr 479), the speaker of this poem reveals that while this experience occurred in the past, it continues to resonate with her in the present. In this case, the physical and psychological effects of the trauma are here "still" (l. 16). And in the last stanza she acknowledges that it is precisely the disjunction between her past and present selves that continues to assert itself, forcing her to wonder in the present if the problem is actual "Madness" (l. 20). The idea that "Madness" is the only explanation for why her past and present selves feel so different might seem absurd to the reader of this poem, for we understand that she has lived through an experience that warrants this kind of radical dissociation from her former self. The multiple allusions to an unnameable thing make clear that this experience was truly terrifying: there is the initial terrible "thing" (l. 2) that occurred in the past, the "something" (l. 17) odd that now exists within her, and the "this" (l. 20) at the very end of the poem that makes reference to the feeling that the speaker is experiencing, to the poem that she has articulated in response, or to the blank space Dickinson leaves between the poems on the fascicle sheet.

Intrinsic to the speaker's experience of pain is a distortion of perception that she cannot resolve but with which she ultimately allows the poem to conclude. Gary Lee Stonum has argued that this poem "seems motivated by the desire to express an occasion of great suffering and also by the need to gain some control over this suffering" (174). I

would insist, however, that it is precisely the speaker's own lack of control that gives rise to the important question about "Madness" with which the poem ends. And it is, of course, this very question that propels the speaker into the blank space that follows this poem on the page and only eventually and possibly reluctantly into the next poem on the fascicle sheet.

If we turn to the manuscript of this poem, what we see is that Dickinson copied the first four stanzas onto the first page of the sheet and the fifth stanza onto the second page of the sheet (fig. 23). Dickinson's standard practice was to then draw a horizontal line after the end of the poem and to copy another poem below it. But in this case, while she did draw the line, she left the rest of the second page blank. Dickinson did only remotely similar things in three instances prior to copying this sheet.⁹⁸ Dickinson copied two poems onto sheet 5 of Fascicle 12, leaving blank space after the end of the first one on the second page and after the end of the second one on the fourth page. But in Fascicle 12 she drew a line after each of the poems and then used some of the space below it to include several variants (fig. 24). She employs a similar practice when making the first sheet of Fascicle 13, but in this case the first poem takes up two full pages, with the concluding stanza, the horizontal line, and the variants appearing on the third page. (The second poem takes up all of the fourth page.) In both of these cases blank space is being reserved for existing variants and probably for any future variants. The only case in which Dickinson does not use the space for variants is on the fifth sheet of Fascicle 13,

⁹⁸ In assessing which manuscripts employ and reflect a similar process, I have not taken into account the single leaves that were bound into Fascicle 9, 11, and 14, where the second side is left either mostly, or in some cases, completely blank. I have also not included the strange example of the third sheet of Fascicle 4 onto which three poems were copied, the second one ending on the fourth page, followed by no horizontal line, a chunk of blank space, and the third poem. The absence of the horizontal line after the end of the second poem suggests that Dickinson was possibly reserving the right to add another stanza to the end of the poem.

where the first poem takes up two full pages and the very top of the third page, the rest of the third page is left blank, and the second poem appears in full on the fourth page. Yet in the case of this sheet, Dickinson copied a poem, “There came a Day – at Summer’s full –” (Fr 325), in which she interlined several variants at the time of copying (fig. 25). One therefore might interpret her move to save blank space at the end as a result of her sense that there might be more variants to come. (Indeed, in the 1870s Dickinson did return to this poem, making several revisions to both the poem and its variants, although she interlined these as well.) In the case of “The first Day’s Night had come –” Dickinson included no variants at the time of copying or at any later point.

By recognizing that Dickinson’s method for copying “The first Day’s Night had come –” is different from what she had done before, I am once again asking what a consideration of the manuscripts themselves can tell us about Dickinson’s writing practices and by extension her poetics. When we see that leaving blank space was not Dickinson’s standard practice, then we can recognize it as a choice that she made in relation to this specific poem. This blank space may reflect Dickinson’s own wondering about what might be able to follow this poem. Are not a silence and a pause necessary in the face of such an experience? When the self is fractured in this way, perhaps there is simply nothing left to say. Perhaps there is no secure place from which to recommence.

Whereas several critics have argued for the relationship between “The first Day’s Night had come –” and other Dickinson poems (even other poems within Fascicle 15), its relation to the blank space that follows it and to the poem that eventually shares this fascicle sheet has not yet been explored.⁹⁹ The poem that follows on the third and fourth

⁹⁹ See, in particular, Rosenthal and Gall, who write that this poem presents a “sensibility” “unspecified as to sex or other external characteristics, staving off madness and chaotic disintegration in the wake of some

pages of the sheet explores in a formally repetitive way the previous poem's preoccupation with time and madness:

The Color of the Grave is Green –
 The Outer Grave – I mean –
 You would not know it from the Field –
 Except it own a Stone –

To help the fond – to find it –
 Too infinite asleep
 To stop and tell them where it is –
 But just a Daisy – deep –

The Color of the Grave is white –
 The outer Grave – I mean –
 You would not know it from the Drifts –
 In Winter – till the Sun –

Has furrowed out the Aisles –
 Then – higher than the Land
 The little Dwelling Houses rise
 Where each – has left a friend –

The Color of the Grave within –
 The Duplicate – I mean –
 Not all the Snows c'd make it white –
 Not all the Summers – Green –

You've seen the Color – maybe –
 Upon a Bonnet bound –
 When that you met it with before –
 The Ferret – Cannot find –

(Fr 411)

The speaker of the first poem has ended by asking an urgent question, one that the second poem does not answer. The first poem provides the emotional situation within which the speaker of this next poem must operate. The speaker of this poem is searching for a way

unnamed catastrophe" (53-4). They link this sensibility to that in the final poem of the fascicle, "I had been hungry, all the Years –" (Fr 439), one they characterize as "a psyche stunned into numbness after devastation" (54). They also treat the first three poems in the fascicle as a sequence, observing neither the end of the first sheet nor the blank space that appears after the first and second poems. These readings are a result of their theory that narrative development exists in the fascicles such that "separate poems within the same surge and float of feeling reinforce one another and grow into an encompassing, unified body" (47).

to describe the various graves that she has encountered but that a stranger might not recognize. She is alone in her knowledge of them and rummages around for the language that might make them visible. In other words, this second poem neither resolves the question of madness nor provides an explanation for why it exists.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, if there were such an explanation, the state Dickinson's speaker describes wouldn't, we might argue, be madness.

The return to the painful events that the first poem narrates is reflected in the formal repetitions of the second. In "The Color of the Grave is Green—" the speaker treats the notion of disjointed time formally, as the poem itself, in its three parts of two stanzas each, each of which repeats and deviates from the previous one, enacts the very sort of repetitive giggling referred to in "The first Day's Night had come —." The grave is described in three different ways, yet the result is neither a full picture of the grave nor a clear choice for the most accurate rendering. Each one is markedly different: in the first, a stone marks the place where a dead body is present; in the second, nature is the great discloser; and in the third, the grave is presented metaphorically as the "Grave within" (l. 17). The speaker does not come to any conclusion and certainly doesn't resolve the urgent question about the nature of madness that was posed in the first poem. Instead, she probes these disjunctions, in turn revealing that resolution is neither desirable nor possible. The temporal and emotional disjunctions that she has experienced prove to be linguistically and formally productive.

¹⁰⁰ Because Cameron is more interested in the relationship between the first and third poems in this fascicle, poems that appear on different fascicle sheets, she comments only briefly on this poem's relationship to the first, arguing that it specifies the cause of the previous speaker's madness as death (*Choosing* 108). But when we treat the fascicle sheet as a unit unto itself and not as writing on the way to something else, to some greater whole, we can see that the relationship here is not one of explanation.

The first sheet of Fascicle 15 defines “Madness” as the experience of not being able to align one’s past and present selves. In its own break from lyric conventions it also reveals this state as a poetically productive one. While some Dickinson critics have considered her speakers to be stable and unitary, most recognize that a fractured speaking subject is a central part of her poetics.¹⁰¹ For instance, Helen McNeil writes, “If Walt Whitman is the American poet of wholeness, Emily Dickinson is the American poet of what is broken and absent. She knows herself, but she knows by experience how the self breaks upon encounter with the way things are” (9). If McNeil reads Dickinson’s broken selves as a reaction to the world in which she lives, Virginia Jackson reads them as a challenge to the practice of “lyric reading.” Jackson suggests that while it is precisely this division of the self from itself that is “the signature characteristic of the subjectivity Dickinson bequeaths to literary history” (223), the cause of this splitting is less pressing than the disruptions that such self-splittings create for our ability to read the poems as lyrics.

Jackson’s reading of Dickinson’s fractured speakers in generic (as opposed to biographical) terms opens up new space in which to consider Dickinson’s poems in relation to the cultures of reading and writing in which they existed. In order to understand Dickinson as a product of and participant in her time, it is important to treat her poetic productions as if they were not simply the isolated lyric poems we have always assumed them to be. Instead, when we shift our focus to look at the complexity of Dickinson’s fascicles, we can see her attempts to rethink the idea that poetry must hold one’s past and present in solution. In the next section I will explore some of the ways in which she was not alone in doing this.

¹⁰¹ For an extensive reading of Dickinson’s speakers as unified, see Stonum.

Aurora Leigh and the Poetess

While Dickinson spent six years copying her poems into fascicles, Elizabeth Barrett Browning spent even longer grappling with the form of what would come to be her most well-known poem, *Aurora Leigh*. “I am waiting for a story,” Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to Robert Browning in February 1845, ten years before she began *Aurora Leigh* (*Letters 1899*, I, 32). During this time, she was intensely preoccupied with generating a narrative that she would tell in verse: “But people care for a story—there’s the truth!,” she wrote to Mary Russell Mitford just two months earlier. She goes on:

And now tell me,—where is the obstacle to making as interesting a story of a poem as of a prose work... Conversations & events, why may they not be given as rapidly & passionately & lucidly in verse as in prose... Might it not be done, even if I could not do it? & I think of trying at any rate (*Letters 1983*, III, 49).

Barrett Browning struggled with the generic hybridity of her text, a fact supported by the many different generic labels—verse novel, epic, narrative poem, novel-epic, big poem, dramatic monologue, novel, and “novel-poem” (Barrett Browning’s own term)¹⁰²—assigned to *Aurora Leigh*. Nevertheless, the standard critical move is to disregard the complicated question of genre and treat the text as more story than verse.¹⁰³ In the most radical instances, the verse is simply treated as a means to the story’s ends.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² See *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846* (vol. 1, 31) for the letter in which Barrett Browning uses this term.

¹⁰³ Narrative critics and theorists of the novel have mapped the structure and analyzed the characters in *Aurora Leigh*. See Reynolds, who lays out what she calls the “narrative parameters” (5) for the poem.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, Tasker argues that “sexual matters were much easier to write about in verse” (36) and that “long, sustained passages of verse about matters of the spirit and the body...in prose form would appear more diffuse, disconnected, or self-indulgent” (36).

Yet as far as we know, Barrett Browning never considered writing this book in prose. While she was anxious to find the “story,” putting it into verse was hardly an afterthought.

Possibly for this reason, *Aurora Leigh* has a complex, circuitous, and often meandering plot line. Broadly speaking, it is a poem whose narrator tells the story of her own development from a young girl into a popular writer of her day. Born in Italy and raised in England, Aurora is brought up by a stern aunt after the death of her parents. Upon declining a marriage proposal from her British cousin Romney Leigh, who has dedicated his life to social issues and reform, Aurora embraces a life of independence in which she is free to create art. Living as a writer in London, Aurora becomes entangled in Romney’s affairs when she learns that he plans on marrying a woman of the lower classes, Marian Erle. A complicated plot ensues: Marian leaves Romney at the altar and is later found in Paris with her child after having been drugged and raped in the streets; a conniving Lady Waldemar is revealed to have been behind Marian’s downfall because she was in love with Romney herself; and Aurora slowly comes to realize that she has loved Romney all along. After returning to Italy with Marian and baby in tow, Aurora is reunited with a blind and humbled Romney, whom she is finally able to love.

While Barrett Browning’s letters indicate that she was largely preoccupied with the poem’s political content, the poem itself highlights the generic struggle that was being enacted in its lines.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the poem Aurora raises the problem of poetic form,

¹⁰⁵ When Barrett Browning had written between five and six thousand lines of the poem, she wrote to her close friend and relative, John Kenyon, to explain it. She wrote: “An autobiography of a poetess—(not me)... opposing the practical & ideal lifes, & showing how the practical & real (so called) is but the external evolution of the ideal & spiritual—that it is *from inner to outer*... whether in life, morals, or art—A good deal, in this relation, upon the social question, & against the socialists—A good deal, in fact, about everything in the world & beyond” (*Aurora Leigh* 330-331).

thereby calling attention to the very form she has chosen for the poems that she writes as well as the one we are reading. “You miss / The form, through seeing the light” (1, 958-959), Aurora writes on the brink of revelation, and she goes on to criticize all of the “ancient forms”: “cold wire-drawn odes,” “bucolics,” “didactics,” “counterfeiting epics,” “elegiac griefs,” and “songs of love” (1, 985-993). By presenting her reader with a heroine who is preoccupied by the question of what form is right for her, Barrett Browning challenges her own readers to think about the form of the poem they are reading.

The generic struggles that Barrett Browning voices both in her letters and through the character of Aurora Leigh are connected to her interrogation of memory and self-splittings that are also central to Dickinson’s fascicle project. As we saw in the opening poems of Fascicle 15, the way in which a speaker introduces herself often highlights how vexed the articulation of selfhood can be. *Aurora Leigh* opens with a scene in which Aurora is analyzing the very act of writing with which she is engaged:

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others’ uses, will write now for mine, —
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is.
(1, 1-8)

Aurora writes these words and the first five books of the poem from the perspective of her twenty-seven-year-old self. Here we learn that she is a writer of prose and verse, books that have tired her out and made her cross because they have been for other people’s “uses” (1. 3). In contrast, she asserts that this poem will be for her use. Yet as

soon as she makes this clear, she splits her self, creating a “better self” (l. 4) for whom the poem will be written. In doing so, Aurora creates a reader for her text, one whose presence preserves the private significance of the text while also making it readable.

While the first four lines establish Aurora’s vocation, purpose, and reader, the rest of the stanza is a simile for this situation. By equating writing and painting, she imagines that she is painting a portrait for a friend. Here, the “better self” (l. 4) is distanced even farther from Aurora, as it now becomes a human who is given a physical and emotional presence. As if this move from split-self to other person were not strange enough, this “friend” (l. 5) is now imagined as a former male lover. And this man, who possesses the painting, does not display this portrait of his past love but keeps it to himself “in a drawer” (l. 6), and takes it out periodically after time has passed and he no longer feels love for her. While we might expect this man to take out the portrait of his old love in order to remember her, here the lines disrupt this expectation and reveal that he looks at it “to hold together what he was and is” (l. 8). The opening stanza’s final move to invert our expectations can be explained only partially by the fact that it is a simile. In truth, since the lover/friend/better self is really a part of the writer herself, this closing statement makes sense: she is writing the book “to hold together what [*she*] was and is.” But this does not account for the fact that Aurora employs several layers of distance, seeing herself as writer, painter, friend, and male lover in order to justify the writing of the text.

Aurora takes a scenario of viewing—which, through the simile, seems self-consciously analogous to reading—to argue that this text will allow her to create a coherent identity for herself, to synthesize her past and present versions of herself into a defined, speaking “I.” Yet by opening this generically hybrid poem this way, Barrett

Browning expresses a degree of skepticism about the idea that a poetic speaker can match the past and the present up into something unified and coherent.

Throughout her long poem, Aurora repeatedly depicts female subjectivity as internally fragmented. Sometimes this is an internal fragmentation; at other times it takes the form of a proliferation of doubles, metaphors, and aliases that are external to Aurora. We see this early on when Aurora attempts to create an identity for the mother she never knew out of a portrait painted after her death. As she imagines her mother as “dauntless Muse,” “loving Psyche,” “still Medusa,” “our Lady of the Passion” and “Lamia” (1, 155-161), her attempt to construct a coherent identity that will fuse subject and object is undone by her own imaginative proliferation. In the same way that her mother represents a vanishing figure that exists in a multiplication of always-fragmented identities, so Marian comes to be the living version of this figure. During Aurora’s narration of Marian’s history, Aurora reflects on the ways in which representing others causes her to misrepresent them, fracturing their identities in the process. When Aurora writes, “I tell her story and grow passionate. She, Marian, did not tell it so” (3, 846-847), she acknowledges the gap between them, and in Book 4, when coming to the close of Marian’s history, Aurora admits the great distance between them as speakers:

She told the tale with simple, rustic turns,—
Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase
Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
The thing I understood so, than the thing
I heard so. And I cannot render right
Her quick gesticulation, wild yet soft,
Self-startled from the habitual mood she used,
Half sad, half languid,—like dumb creatures (now
A rustling bird, and now a wandering deer,
Or squirrel against the oak-gloom flashing up
His sidelong burnished head, in just her way

Of savage spontaneity,) that stir
 Abruptly the green silence, holier, more profound;
 As Nature's general heart confessed itself
 Of life, and then fell backward on repose.
 (4, 151-167)

Despite the fact that Aurora translates Marian's uneducated speech into poetry, she is still interested in preserving the difference between herself as the poet and Marian as her subject. When she writes, "I have rather writ / The thing I understood so, than the thing / I heard so" (ll. 154-156), she not only distances herself from Marian, but she calls attention to the gaps and breaks that exist whenever a poet attempts to represent the backstory of another. The temporal difference between Marian's history and Aurora's turning it into verse results in a fracture to Marian's identity. While one might think that Aurora's telling of Marian's past would help to make Marian whole in the present of its telling, this section culminates in Aurora's description of Marian as many creatures at once: a "rustling bird" (l. 161), a "wandering deer" (l. 161), and a "squirrel" (l. 162). As with Aurora's mother, Marian's subjectivity has been both constituted and fractured by Aurora's telling of her tale.

One of the things that is interesting about Aurora's depiction of Marian is that it reflects the situation that the nineteenth-century female poet often found herself in as she wrote poems that depicted the subjectivities of others. Early on Barrett Browning uses Romney to launch a critique of women's poetry. In responding to nineteenth-century separate spheres ideology, Romney asserts his desire to see Aurora universalize the human condition:

You play beside a death-bed like a child,
 Yet measure to yourself a prophet's place
 To teach the living. None of all these things,
 Can women understand. You generalize

Oh, nothing!—not even grief! Your quick-breathed hearts,
 So sympathetic to the personal pang,
 Close on each separate knife-stroke, yielding up
 A whole life at each wound; incapable
 Of deepening, widening a large lap of life
 To hold the world-full woe. The human race
 To you means, such a child, or such a man,
 You saw one morning waiting in the cold,
 Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up
 A few such cases, and, when strong, sometimes
 Will write of factories and of slaves, as if
 Your father were a negro, and your son
 A spinner in the mills. All's yours and you,—
 All, coloured with blood, or otherwise
 Just nothing to you.

(2, 180-198)

It is Aurora's inability to "generalize" (l. 183) that bothers Romney most, as he sees this as a sign that she is not truly interested in helping the people with whom he is most concerned. Romney reads Aurora's decision to choose individual subjects and personalize them as a fault not only of her gender, but also, I would argue, of her genre. Although Romney doesn't say it directly, one of the reasons why he thinks Aurora is "incapable / Of deepening, widening a large lap of life / To hold the world-full woe" (ll. 187-189) is that she is writing the kind of female-authored lyrics that were circulating widely in the magazines, periodicals, and anthologies of mid-century Britain. Aurora's and Romney's argument about poetry ends up revealing Barrett Browning's preoccupation with how Aurora—and, by extension, female poets—represent female poetic subjectivities.

Any of *Aurora Leigh*'s readers would have been able to identify Aurora as a contemporary poetess. Felicia Hemans and L. E. L. were the very embodiment of the term, as they were the most widely published and popular female Victorian poets of their day. Their poems were published not only in women's gift books but also in all the

popular magazines and newspapers. While these poems were praised mostly for their domestic and sentimental values and tropes, recent critical studies have begun to consider the social and even political work that these poems accomplished—work that, I would argue, they accomplish by embracing the very fracture within their female speakers that Aurora at first claims she wants to resolve. In other words, while it is true that the poetess emerged as a category of person in the 1820s and 1830s, an empty frame through which a stereotyped woman could be voiced, it is also true, as Yopie Prins has argued in *Victorian Sappho* (1990), that “‘the Poetess’ is not a stable term, but a contested category with controversial and often contradictory implications for the public performance of womanhood” (209).¹⁰⁶

Aurora represents this problem, yet Romney’s reading of her disregards these contradictory implications—and the political dimension—of Aurora’s poetry. Victorian women like Aurora and Barrett Browning found themselves in a bind, surrounded by a culture that instructed them to write private and domestic lyrics, yet these are the very kinds of poems of which a figure like Romney is critical. In his position as mouthpiece for Barrett Browning, his criticism alerts the reader to the very limits placed on women’s poetry. One can look at any number of mid-century women’s conduct books to find the kind of instruction that Romney is trying to steer Aurora away from. The advice given in the *Female Writers: Thoughts on Their Proper Sphere and on Their Powers of Usefulness* (1842) serves as a perfect example of this:

All that is beautiful in form, delicate in sentiment, graceful in action, will form the peculiar province of the gentle powers of woman...we can follow one solitary soldier as he drags his wounded limbs beneath the sheltering hedge; and while we mark his glazing eye, we can read with woman’s keenness, the thoughts of wife,

¹⁰⁶ For more on the poetess, see “The Poetess Archive” at <http://unixgen.muohio.edu/~poetess/PAJournal/>. This website is devoted to publishing poems by and scholarship about American and British poetesses.

children, and home, which are playing around his heart... we cannot range through heaven and hell with the fiery wing of our glorious poet Milton; we cannot ascend to the height of the great argument, and justify the ways of God to Man.

(*Aurora Leigh* 338-9)

As this extract from *Female Writers* suggests, women were meant to stick close to home; while they may venture forth to “follow the soldier,” they are prohibited from “rang[ing]” physically, emotionally, or philosophically afield. A similar sentiment was directed at American women poets by Griswold. In praising Frances Osgood, he argues that her poems are successful precisely because “she had no need to travel beyond the legitimate sphere of woman’s observation” (29). Romney’s critique of Aurora sees her in precisely these terms, and he is frustrated by what he reads as her willingness to enact these gender stereotypes:

—Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doting mothers, and chaste wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you,—and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.
(2, 220-225)

According to Romney, in order to be a great poet, Aurora must imagine something more than the “personal pang” (l. 185). Yet what Romney fails to see about Aurora’s poetry is that it is not simply personal—that’s a stance she denounced in the opening book. Indeed, there is a deeply political dimension to the ways in which her poems inhabit—and eventually fracture—the subjectivities of others.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Along slightly different lines, Armstrong argues that the political work of women poets is accomplished in their writing of “affective poetry.” She defines this as “a poetry about wanting, about desire always in excess of its object, and which constantly redefines its object” (28). She argues that it is inherently social because “to know about wanting is to understand the social importance of desire, which is one of the vectors of change... desire floods into the social, deriving as it does from the psychic experience that keeps us alive” (28).

Dramatic monologues are a mode of lyric utterance that highlights both the creation and the impossibility of unified subjectivity. It is in this particular form that the subjectivity of the speaker is most at stake, as we can see in the more famous male authored ones of the period such as “Ulysses” (1843) and “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855). While most readers are not as familiar with L. E. L.’s “Sappho’s Song” (1824), Caroline Norton’s lyric sequence *Voices From the Factories* (1836), Charlotte Brontë’s “The Missionary” (1846), Eliza Cook’s “Song of the Ugly Maiden” (1845), and Speranza’s “The Voice of the Poor” (1864), they are all poems spoken in the voices of their subjects, subjects who strive to create a unified sense of themselves but who eventually abandon this goal in favor of a more complicated and fragmented existence.

While the poetess’s tendency to write through the voice of the abandoned woman or the starving child has often invited domesticating readings in which marginalized voices are thought to be fully constituted, recent scholarship has begun to attend to the fragmentation that these dramatic monologues enact. In her article, “‘...As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I’: Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet,” Kate Flint argues that despite the now-stereotypical perception, “nineteenth-century women poets characteristically established identity not so much in terms of confessional, emotive, autobiographically personalized subjectivity as through forms of imaginative projection” (156). Flint goes on to suggest that in attempting to create a sense of coherent subjectivity, women poets end up painting a picture of unstable selfhood at every turn. She argues that by continually enacting the declaration “I does not mean I,” a declaration that both Barrett Browning and Dickinson famously make in letters about their poetry,

fragmentation inevitably results.¹⁰⁸ In their essay, “Lyrical Studies,” Jackson and Prins have also argued quite convincingly that this sense of fragmentation prevails. They observe more particularly that the failure is inherent in the lyric form, as the form itself continually stages the disappearance of its female speakers.

By talking in the voices of other women or disenfranchised peoples, the poetess stages her attempts to acquire the very subjectivity that she has been taught exists in the lyric. This is precisely what Barrett Browning does when she creates a speaker who is as interested in her own self-splittings as she is in those of the characters around her. Aurora opens her own long poem with a declaration that she expects the act of writing poetry to provide her with a way to hold her past and present selves together; later she attempts to provide this, through sentimental identification, for the women she represents. As we will see in the next section, both the shortcomings and the impossibility of such a desire eventually reveal themselves to her when she is faced with the disjunction between past and present that the passage of time produces. It is in this space that she discovers her own ability to produce poetry.

Returning Home

Dickinson and Barrett Browning both registered their skepticism about the function that memory plays in poetry by extending the forms they wrote in and fracturing the subjectivities of their speakers over space and time. They both also include specific

¹⁰⁸ Barrett Browning refers to *Aurora Leigh* as “an autobiography of a poetess—(not me).” In July 1862, Dickinson wrote to Higginson, “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person” (L 268).

moments in their poetic projects that read like direct responses to Wordsworth's famous moment of return in "Tintern Abbey." As they both narrate a return to a former home, these poets encounter and are halted by the problem of the passage of time that Wordsworth's poem resolves. And it is what they do in this state of impasse that makes all the difference.

After finding a destitute Marian and baby, Aurora sets out with them for Italy. Returning to Aurora's homeland is the only thing that makes sense to her, as she is now dedicated to her poetry and to caring for these two creatures. After several days in Italy, Aurora embarks upon a monumental return as she decides to visit the site of her childhood home:

I rode once to the little mountain-house
 As far as if to find my father there,
 But, when in sight of't, within fifty yards,
 I dropped my horse's bridle on his neck
 And paused upon his flank. The house's front
 Was cased with lingots of ripe Indian corn
 In tessellated order, and device
 Of golden patterns; not a stone of wall
 Uncovered,—not an inch of room to grow
 A vine-leaf. The old porch had disappeared;
 And, in the open doorway, sate a girl
 At plaiting straws, her black hair strained away
 To a scarlet kerchief caught beneath her chin
 In Tuscan fashion,—her full ebon eyes,
 Which looked too heavy to be lifted so,
 Still dropt and lifted toward the mulberry-tree
 On which the lads were busy with their staves
 In shout and laughter, stripping all the boughs
 As bare as winter, of those summer leaves
 My father had not changed for all the silk
 In which the ugly silkworms hide themselves.
 Enough. My horse recoiled before my heart—
 I turned the rein abruptly. Back we went
 As fast, to Florence.

(7, 1118-1141)

The speed with which Aurora travels by horse is stressed in the opening lines of the passage by the regular iambs and tumbling prepositional phrases, bringing both Aurora and her sentence to a halt. Here she stops, sees, and describes the scene in front of her. She begins by describing the outside of the house, stressing the crowded appearance of things, implying the vine leaves that once grew there by referring to the present state in which there is “not an inch of room to grow / A vine-leaf” (ll. 1126-1127). Next, she looks at where the porch had once been, and in this empty space Aurora sees a human figure, a girl who momentarily exists as her double. This identification is quickly undercut by both the girl’s appearance—she is dark, Tuscan, clothed in traditional dress, and doing peasant work—and by the fact that she does not return Aurora’s gaze. Instead of looking back at Aurora, the girl is watching a group of boys in the trees. This potential moment of self-reflection is finally disrupted when Aurora turns to see the destruction of what was once her father’s cherished property. “Enough” (l. 1139), Aurora states, and turns and leaves.

The disjunction between Aurora’s memory of this important place and its present state is not resolved along the lines of Wordsworth’s model. Instead, it is the disjunction itself that pushes Aurora forward. Recognizing the irreconcilability of her past and present is what finally allows her to become the poet she has been struggling to be. A similar thing happens on the opening sheet of Dickinson’s Fascicle 21, where, much like in both Barrett Browning and Wordsworth’s poems, the speaker returns to the place she once called home. Unlike these other poems, though, Dickinson’s registers a real terror at the thought of encountering a former self.

In “I – Years – had been – from Home –” (Fr 440) Dickinson’s speaker stands before the door of her old home, contemplating what to do now that she has arrived. In this moment of the past confronting the present, the present confronting the past, and the chaos that ensues from this potential matching up of selves, the poem reveals not simply its skepticism about the possibility of a coherent self but a deep fear of it:

I – Years – had been – from Home –
 And now – before the Door –
 I dared not open – lest a face
 I never saw before

Stare vacant into mine –
 And ask my Business there –
 My Business – just a Life I left –
 Was such – +still dwelling there?

I fumbled at my nerve –
 I scanned the Windows o’er –
 The Silence – like an Ocean rolled –
 And +broke against my Ear –

I laughed a Wooden laugh –
 That I – could fear a Door –
 Who Danger – and the Dead – had faced –
 But never +shook – before –

I fitted to the Latch – my Hand –
 With trembling Care –
 Lest back the Awful Door should spring –
 And leave me – in the Floor –

I moved my fingers off, as cautiously as Glass –
 And held my ears – and like a Thief
 +Stole – gasping – from the House.

+fled +Remaining there +smote –
 +quaked –

(Fr 440)

The speaker’s initial fear is of the moment of disassociation that will occur by first seeing a stranger’s face and second by having to say that she left a “Life” (l. 7) there. She

wonders in clipped, polite, feminine language if her “Life” is “still dwelling there” (l. 8), as if she could have been in two places at once, as if she could have been separated from herself or some part of herself for this long without ever having to confront this problem. This is established by the fact that she recognizes the passage of time, as we can see in the opening line, yet she also imagines some sort of temporal loop, one that would allow her former self to have continued to reside in this home while her other self went abroad.

Dickinson opens this fascicle by having her speaker refuse to open a door, and in doing so she foregrounds her own refusal to succumb to the pressure on the speaker to be made whole by the form in which she resides. If we read this as an isolated lyric poem, we expect Dickinson’s speaker to lift the latch and investigate the problem of her fractured self; even if we read it as the opening poem in a book of poems, a similar expectation follows. In either case, the presumptive autonomy of the lyric form would allow her to resolve the temporal and emotional conundrum presented at the opening of the poem—one that she seems, very much like Aurora in Book 1, to wish to resolve. But instead it is this speaker’s fear of reunion that ends up driving the poem. She goes on to reveal such a deep preoccupation with the material boundaries around her (door, windows, latch, floor, glass) that they actually become a part of her; she acquires a “Wooden laugh” (l. 13). Yet she ultimately refuses to cross into them fully. She therefore boycotts the revelation and connection that might come from confronting this other “Life,” refusing the coherence that would come from the closed-circuit reflection she initially sought. The poem ends in an image of wordlessness that has arisen from the possibility of confrontation and potential union with this former self.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Yet, of course, the poem doesn’t even really end there, as Dickinson returned to it twice, both times including more words to the poem. While the additions are all synonyms for the words in the stanzas

Recognizing that this poem is not an isolated artifact but is connected to the other poetic materials around it, we are able to see that the poem itself, as well as the fascicle, poses questions about unity and fracture that we might otherwise overlook. For instance, at the end of this poem, the speaker's attempt to inquire about her "Life" is aborted and the poem leaves us without a speaker, an odd move for a form that is supposed to give rise to voice. But it is not simply that the speaker has disappeared; first, she has voluntarily closed her ears—an important move in a genre that is so invested in sound. The speaker is left deaf and "gasping" (l. 23)—again, the very opposite of what we assume about the speaker of a lyric poem. By the time the speaker has come to articulate the poem, the action that we assume occurs after the experience itself, words have returned to her, although the copious dashes in the first two lines make them read like gasps themselves. What can we make of a poem that fractures and dissolves voice instead of constituting it?

Because the fascicle form troubles the relationship between parts, it is important to look at what comes next, at what is uttered out of this place of wordlessness. Are we introduced to a new speaker? Does the speaker of "I – Years – had been – from Home –" subsequently find her voice? Is the writing that follows affected by this opening move? Ultimately, Dickinson chose to place only one other poem on this fascicle sheet. The third and fourth pages of this sheet are consumed by the poem "You'll find – it when you try to die –" (Fr 441), a poem that is also preoccupied, albeit differently, with the notion of splitting the self:

proper, her inclusion of "remaining" for "still dwelling" (l. 8) shows Dickinson pressing on the issue of time that the poem as a whole worries over. Additionally, in light of the fact that the speaker pays such close attention to the material boundaries inside the poem, it is interesting to note that she punctures the physical boundaries of the poem proper by inserting these variants.

You'll find – it when you try to die –
 The easier to let go –
 For recollecting such as went –
 You could not spare – you know.

And though their places somewhat filled –
 As did their Marble +names
 With Moss – they never grew so full –
 You chose the newer names –

And when this World – sets further back –
 As Dying – say it does –
 The former love – distincter grows –
 And supersedes the fresh –

And Thought of them – so fair invites –
 It looks too tawdry Grace
 To stay behind – with just the Toys
 We bought – to ease their place –

+times –

(Fr 441)

This poem offers instructions to a “you” (l. 1) who will one day find himself or herself trying to die.¹¹⁰ The speaker warns that it is easier to go through with death if one doesn’t “recollect” (l. 3) those one has loved. Yet as in “I – Years – had been – from Home –,” the poem ends up performing the opposite of what it set itself up to do. The speaker spends the rest of the stanzas describing why it is so hard not to recollect, explaining that the universe and human nature are such that recollecting actually becomes the more appealing option. The speaker experiences a split between what she thinks the “you” should do and what she in the moment of writing/speaking finds possible to do herself.

¹¹⁰ The notion of “trying” to die struck the first publishers of this poem as wrong. When it first appeared in print, in the *London Mercury*, on February 19, 1929, the word “try” was changed to the more predictable and comfortable “come.” According to Franklin’s variorum edition of the poems (464-465), this change remained through the next three reprintings of the poem—in *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1929), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1930), and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1937).

By advising the reader/listener of her poem not to “recollect” and at the same time showing the difficulty that arises from taking this position, the speaker is necessarily commenting on her own role as the speaker of the poem. “I – Years – had been – from Home –” enacts this problem at its core: it attempts to recollect and then sabotages this attempt. What appears next on the fascicle sheet is a speaker who is necessarily distanced from the trauma of the previous poem, a speaker who is philosophizing about the very problem she has just confronted.

In “You’ll find – it when you try to die –” we hear an older, wiser, and more stable voice, one that provides an alternative position for Dickinson’s speaker. She is concerned with the issue of remembering and confronting the past that was addressed in “I – Years – had been – from Home –” but in a whole new way. This difference highlights the fact that Dickinson’s fascicle sheets do not necessarily employ the same speaker in all of the poems. Instead, when these speakers are different, they learn from and define themselves in relation to each other—an act that generally results in an awareness of the fractures within oneself.

This shifting of perspective occurs throughout the rest of the fascicle, as the remaining poems pick up on the initial speaker’s refusal, performing over and over again scenes of aborted beginnings, inverted expectations, and moments when a boundary or division fractures both the speaker’s sense of herself and, in true Dickinsonian fashion, her syntax.¹¹¹ Much like the fracture that dominates Dickinson’s fascicles is the

¹¹¹ We see this most radically in the now-famous poem, “They shut me up in Prose –” (Fr 445) the sixth poem in the fascicle. Here the speaker likens the events of today—being shut up in prose—to a memory from childhood, when she was placed in the “Closet” (l. 3) in order to keep her “still” (l. 4). Unlike the earlier speakers who struggle with their relationship to the past, this one immediately knows how she feels about the situation. She declares that it was in this space that her brain was most active, and she compares the ridiculousness of this scene to one in which a bird is put in the pound for “Treason” (l. 8). But by likening herself to Shelley’s image of the lyric speaker, Dickinson’s speaker reveals the absurdity of the

increasingly split figure of Aurora who by the end of her poem becomes disembodied and foreign to herself. Directly after her return to her old home, Aurora produces an image of the dissolution of subjectivity:

I did not write, nor read, nor even think,
But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,
Most like some passive broken lump of salt
Dropt in by chance to a bowl of oenamel,
To spoil the drink a little, and lose itself,
Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.
(7, 1305-1310)

At the very moment when we might expect Wordsworthian resolution, Aurora embraces an absorbed and dissolving self. It is in this state that she finally takes pleasure in the success of her latest book and is able to articulate and convince Romney of the instrumental nature of her poetics. Aurora's embrace of her increasingly fractured self and outlook is reflected not only in the content of the poem but in its form, as the second half more closely resembles a journal while the first half looks more like an autobiography. Aurora has shifted to writing as life occurs, gathering together the often conflicting events, emotions, observations, and selves from day to day yet not producing a sense of wholeness and meaning in retrospect.

image, because, as bird, she is now in a position to look down upon her own captivity, therefore viewing it while also abolishing it. In doing so, Dickinson reveals that it is not the enclosure but the ability to stand in two places at once, inside and outside the self, witnessing the boundary between these selves and choosing not to reconcile them, that is at the very heart of the lyric stance. In the remaining poems of this fascicle we find a man trapped beneath fallen trees, his rescuers frantically searching for the boundary between them and him (Fr 447); the two figures of Truth and Beauty who try to figure out their relation as they are "lain / In an adjoining Room –" (Fr 448, ll. 3-4); and a speaker who, seeking Eternity, first has to pass through "the Forests of the Dead –" (Fr 453, l. 8). At every turn the speaker is confronted with a boundary, and she refuses each one for fear of the collapse into the confines of wholeness and completion that come with conventional lyric subjectivity. Yet, as I have said, because we cannot make large claims about the ways in which material on different fascicle sheets are related to each other, we must be wary of assigning whole fascicles a singular purpose or theme.

While many readers have found Aurora's agreement to marry Romney at the end of the poem unsatisfying,¹¹² I would like to suggest that Barrett Browning's presentation of a Victorian poetess who revises the goals and actions of the lyric speaker, redirecting her towards fracture instead of unity, is where the real work of this poem is done. By opening with a stereotypical yet already distanced and riled call for unified subjectivity, by staging Aurora's failed attempts to attain it for herself and the female figures that she renders in her poem, and by ultimately producing a fracture that emerges as more personally, politically, and poetically productive, Barrett Browning reveals that the poetess is actively thinking about the sorts of restrictions and expectations that have been placed upon her.

Aurora Leigh argues that not only is coherent, lyric subjectivity a fiction but that the poetess is already all too aware of this. On the other side of the Atlantic, Dickinson was not simply trying to further prove Barrett Browning's point but instead, was actively celebrating (a move that Barrett Browning seems ambivalent about) the individual lyric's inability to hold a speaker's past and present together. When we turn to a poem like "I – Years – had been – from Home –" and its fascicle context, we can see that Dickinson is not only refusing to constitute her speaker through conventional means but that whether she knew it consciously or not, she was rewriting Aurora's moment of return to her childhood home and in the process challenging Wordsworth's even more famous moment of return.

¹¹² For example, Case writes, "Herein lies one of the most recalcitrant discomforts of *Aurora Leigh*. Even after its sources and purposes have been traced, the contradiction between Aurora's initial 'I loved him not, nor then, nor since, nor ever' and her later 'I loved you always' remains as unsettling to modern feminist readers as it was to that early reviewer, for it points to a deeper contradiction between Aurora's self-confident, biting insight for her right to vocational self-determination, and her abject retroactive repudiation of that right after her reunion with Romney" (31).

This chapter has read Dickinson through Barrett Browning and read Barrett Browning through Dickinson as a way of thinking about how the fascicles are related to the poem that probably had the greatest influence on them. Not only did Dickinson know the lines of *Aurora Leigh* by heart, but she had taken within herself Aurora's struggle to become a poet, registered the terms that Aurora used to navigate her journey, and marked the importance of breaking open the lyric form. When we look closely at how these two poets put their poems together and at the similar preoccupations that such undertakings reveal, we can begin to see that as Dickinson works through the problem of recollection, she creates a productive space for her many fractured speakers to reside.

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