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Citation

Loeffelholz, Mary. 2000. What is a fascicle? Reading Emily Dickinson's manuscript books. Harvard Library Bulletin 10 (1), Spring 1999: 23-42.

Permanent link

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What is a Fascicle?

Mary Loeffelholz

“Fascicle” is the name that Emily Dickinson’s first significant editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, gave to the homemade manuscript books, forty such books in all into which Emily Dickinson copied about 800 poems during the years 1858 through 1864. Dickinson constructed the fascicles by writing out poems onto small sheets of stationery already folded in two by their manufacturer (as Miss Manners still advises ladies to buy their stationery today); she then stacked several such sheets on top of one another, threaded a piece of string through the two spaced holes on the left margin of the stack, and tied the whole assembly together. Occasionally she varied this basic pattern by binding single sheets, or more accurately half-sheets, into the gathering of bifolia; and there are a few other odd pieces of stationery in the corpus of the fascicles. But this was the general recipe for a Dickinson fascicle.

Although not a term coined by Dickinson herself, “fascicle” has remained stubbornly alive in Dickinson criticism. Not to everyone’s satisfaction—one contributor to a recent MLA panel on the fascicles complained that “fascicle” was a “frankly ugly and pseudo-technical name for a beautiful phenomenon in poetry,” and Ralph Franklin’s 1981 edition of the fascicles call them *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*—but fascicles they generally remain.¹ My own vote would be for letting the fascicles continue to be “fascicles.” Even though Dickinson herself never spoke of her manuscript books as “fascicles,” she was a student of Latin easily good enough to have appreciated Mabel Todd’s coinage. Occasionally used in the book trade as a term for a piece of a larger work published in sections (for instance, a part of a dictionary or encyclopedia that may be issued in parts over years), “fascicle” derives from the Latin *fascis* or bundle. “Fascicle” is also used in botany, where Dickinson in all probability could have encountered it, to describe gatherings like those of pine needles into clumps. Calling Dickinson’s manuscript gatherings “fascicles” rather than “books” usefully keeps in mind certain aspects of their fashioning that distinguish the fascicles from standard bound books: not only the strings visibly binding them together (some of them still preserved in the Houghton Library), but perhaps more importantly, the fact that Dickinson did not assemble the fascicles in

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¹ On the ugliness of “fascicle,” see Richard Bray, “Why Thoughts Are Better Than Music, or Emily Dickinson’s Fascicle 18 as a Lyric Sequence” (1997), available online through the Dickinson Electronic Archives Project at

<http://www.jefferson.village.virginia.edu/dickinson/fascicle/bray.html>; R.W. Franklin, *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

signatures—that is, in the technical language of bookmaking, she did not place folded sheets inside one another and then bind them down the middle, perhaps the most obvious way of making a small blank booklet out of stationery, but rather stacked them one on top of another separately.

These details of the fascicles' construction suggest much about how Dickinson came to write and collect them. But they also matter significantly for the history of the fascicles and how we come to have preserved them. Such confidence is hard to come by and perhaps even harder to justify. Perhaps only one fact about the fascicles can be stated with certainty: a fascicle is a *reconstruction*. Mabel Loomis Todd, who gave the fascicles their name, was apparently the last person to see them intact. The fascicles came to Todd from Dickinson's hand—but only after passing first through the hands of Dickinson's sister Lavinia, who found them after her death, and Susan Gilbert Dickinson, the first person to whom Lavinia appealed in seeking to have Dickinson's poems in literary periodicals after her death, and imagined but never herself compiled or published a volume of Dickinson's writings that would include letter as well as poems. After two years of waiting on Susan Dickinson's efforts, Lavinia Dickinson asked Mabel Loomis Todd to try her hand.

Mabel Loomis Todd was, to say the least, not a professional editor, still less a professional curator cataloging Dickinson's manuscripts with a view toward their preservation. Struggling with the difficulties of Emily Dickinson's handwriting, of which she had only seen a few brief examples in Dickinson's lifetime, Todd at first experienced her editorial task chiefly as the business of persuading her reluctant co-editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that there were enough worthy poems in the fascicles to publish in the form of a small book without embarrassing either Emily Dickinson's posthumous name or Higginson's literary reputation. Higginson would largely agree with Todd on the merits of the poems she chose, and was doubtless more surprised than she by the sensational reception that greeted their first published volume of Dickinson's poems in 1890. In the course of ordering the poems for Higginson's skeptical eye and preparing them for the printer, however, Todd not only marked and crossed out words on the manuscripts, but at some point apparently disassembled some of Dickinson's manuscript books—which was probably easier for her to do in part exactly because Dickinson had assembled what Todd called "fascicles," stacks of folded leaflets, rather than books in signatures. (With signatures, texts of more than one page often run onto completely different pieces of paper, and the same piece of paper may contain pieces of text that are widely separated in the book as bound. One cannot take a signature apart and still read the text on its four individual leaves consecutively. Not so with a fascicle.)

It is largely owing to Mabel Loomis Todd's first editorial efforts that Emily Dickinson became an author in the sense of Michel Foucault's famous essay of 1969, "What is an Author?": that is, the "author-function" became attached to her writing in the 1890s, turning the "millions of traces left by someone after [her] death," as Foucault puts it, into literary "works" with a unity and authenticity guaranteed by their attribution to the author's proper name.² Once the author-function was attached to "the poems of Emily Dickinson," Todd's early editorial work—including, along with her dismemberment of the fascicles, her

² Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38, esp. 116-18.

alteration of Dickinson's words and punctuation—became in its turn a crime against the author-function, a mutilation that cried out for undoing in the interests of recovering the original and authentic Dickinson corpus. And so textual critics of Dickinson, beginning with Todd herself, have been trying to put the fascicles back together ever since. To make the shortest possible work of the further manuscript history of the fascicles: when the Houghton Library in 1950 finally acquired the manuscripts of most of the poems Dickinson transcribed into her fascicles, they arrived as “packets” in the order and with the index numbers given to them by Mabel Todd in 1891. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward re-shuffled that first reconstruction of the fascicles extensively in the course of compiling their 1955 variorum edition of Dickinson's poems.³ More recently, Ralph Franklin in his 1981 *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* reconstructed Johnson and Ward's reconstruction, shifting a few poems into different fascicles, redating many more, and reordering the entire sequence of the fascicles as units. Some of Franklin's 1981 dates shifted once again in Franklin's 1998 new variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.⁴ The packets originally received by the Houghton now constitute the basis of thirty-four reconstructed fascicles; the manuscripts of the remaining six now reside at Amherst College.

As Franklin's variorum *Poems* was going to press, the Houghton decided to mount an exhibition—the first significant exhibition ever assembled—of the Library's Dickinson materials, in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Emily Dickinson International Society. As a board member of the Society, I was invited to serve as guest curator for the exhibition, eventually entitled “Emily Dickinson: a Life in Writing, 1830-1999.” Given the wealth of the Houghton's Dickinson collections, the task of selecting materials for the exhibition was initially daunting and became almost more, not less so as the work went on, with every item selected prompting glancing thoughts of others. It was clear from the outset, however, that the exhibition had to do justice to the fascicles, which constitute the heart of the Houghton's Dickinson collection, rivaled in quantity and interest only by the Library's gathering of letters and loose poems sent to Susan Gilbert Dickinson. By anyone's reconstruction, the fascicles testify to the most productive years of Dickinson's life, including the staggeringly productive years of 1862 through 1863, during which Dickinson composed and committed to the fascicles something like five hundred poems. To decide on exactly what fascicles to include in the exhibition and display them, however, I had to proceed on some idea of what a fascicle was and why the fascicles mattered. What could an exhibition hope to show viewers about a fascicle? What is to be seen in a fascicle?

Readers of all persuasions certainly have seen all kinds of things in the fascicles, in both their 1955 and their 1981 reconstructions. To some readers, the fascicles encode a love story complete with a secret marriage and a pregnancy.⁵ To some, they encrypt the proper name of a secret lover, ripe for decoding by the

³ Thomas H. and Theodora W. Ward, eds., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).

⁴ On the history of the fascicle manuscripts, their disassembly and reconstruction, see R.W. Franklin's Introduction to *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, and R.W. Franklin, *The Poems of Emily*

Dickinson, variorum edition, 3 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), Introduction.

⁵ See William H. Shurr, *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

attentive eye.⁶ To other readers, each fascicle enacts in its own way a religious narrative that ends in conversion.⁷ To some readers, the fascicles are a form of self-publication devised by Dickinson as she wrestled with her hopes for and disillusionment with the nineteenth century's published forms of literary fame; to others, they participate in a distinctively nineteenth-century, feminine, and middle-class form of private writing, "the poetry of the portfolio."⁸ To still other readers, the fascicles, embody a radical poetics inhabiting the very center of, yet not bounded by, the genre of lyric poetry.⁹ And so on.

Some of these versions of the fascicles seem to me more interesting and more plausible than others. All of them, however, turn out to be rather difficult to put on display in an exhibition. While we were mounting the exhibition, the Houghton's Curator of Manuscripts, Leslie Morris, invited a member of Harvard's publicity staff in for an advance look. As she later told me, Dr. Morris took the publicist over to see some of the visual highlights of the exhibition: the cut-outs from Dickens that Emily Dickinson used to illustrate the poem "A poor torn heart" when she sent a copy to Susan Dickinson; the rosebud she attached to a poem sent to her friend Elizabeth Holland. The publicist surveyed these gems for a moment, turned to Dr. Morris, and said: "Is this as visual as it gets?" If these Dickinson manuscripts offered rather little to the publicist's visual eye, the fascicles in the exhibition probably offered even less. From one perspective, then, the fascicles presented a problem to the curator for lack of visual drama. We did put in the original string Dickinson used to bind fascicle 12—it has a provocatively red thread running through it—but otherwise these were not the most colorful cases in the exhibition.

Moreover, from a more scholarly perspective, the fascicles have recently somewhat yielded center stage, in Dickinson textual criticism, to other forms of Dickinson's manuscript writings. Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart, for example, have focused considerable attention on Emily Dickinson's exchanges of manuscript letters and poems with Susan Dickinson.¹⁰ In doing so, Smith and Hart have certainly aimed to rescue the biographical relationship between Emily and Susan Dickinson from decades of censorship and misrepresentation motivated at least in part by homophobia. But they have also made persuasive arguments for how raising this correspondence to biographical prominence also changes our overall sense of Dickinson's poetics. Smith and Hart's Emily Dickinson is above all a poet of familiar correspondence, rooted in the domestic intimacies of almost daily epistolary exchanges. She is a generic innovator, the

⁶ A view energetically defended by Bill Arnold in *Emily Dickinson's Secret Love: Mystery "Master" Behind Poems* (Lake Worth, FL: PPB Press, 1998).

⁷ See, for instance, Dorothy Huff Oberhaus, *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

⁸ Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), and Barton Levi Saint Armand, *Emily Dickinson and her Culture: the Soul's Society* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3-9, following Higginson's original application of a phrase of Emerson's to Dickinson.

⁹ M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: the Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁰ See Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Ellen Louise Hart, "The Encoding of Erotic Desire: Emily Dickinson's Letters and Poems to Susan Dickinson, 1850-1886," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 9 (1990): 251-72; and Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, eds., *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1998).

practitioner of a new poetic form, the “letter-poem.” She is an erotic poet who took pleasure not only in composing her poems but in circulating them in manuscript form with her beloved Susan. The intimacy of handwriting, the opportunity to include with the manuscript poem tokens of love and wit—like rosebuds and clippings—and to play on the relationship between token and poem: all these are intrinsic rather than accidental, Smith and Hart argue, to Dickinson’s poetics. (And since the Houghton’s collections are rich in such manuscripts sent between Emily and Susan Dickinson, viewers of the exhibition were able to test Smith and Hart’s reading of these manuscript writing on their own impulses.)

Productive as it is in both poetic and biographical terms, this approach to Dickinson’s manuscripts by its very nature tends to downplay the fascicles. As far as scholars know, Dickinson never showed the fascicles to anyone else, including Susan, during her lifetime. Addressed to and exchanged with no one, the fascicle manuscripts signally lack the hand-to-hand erotic charge that Smith and Hart find in Dickinson’s epistolary poetry. Still another influential approach to Dickinson’s manuscripts, although different from Smith and Hart’s, likewise de-emphasizes the fascicles in favor of other Dickinson manuscript forms. Marta Werner especially has helped pioneer appreciation for what Werner calls Dickinson’s “open folios” or “radical scatters.”¹¹ Werner prizes those manuscripts, many of them from Dickinson’s later life, that are neither bound into fascicles nor addressed to a particular recipient. Many of these manuscripts are written on scraps of paper as miscellaneous as used envelopes, the backs of packages-wrappings, or narrow strips of paper like those used to bind shirts come back from the laundry. Some of them seem to play with the physical boundaries and previous uses of the “writing surfaces” Dickinson finds at hand. Most of these late “radical scatters” are held by Amherst College rather than the Houghton, but the Houghton’s draft of a late poem, “Crisis is Sweet” (included in the exhibition)—with its lines running up and down the page in variations almost impossible to committee to the printed page—suggests something of their experimental quality.

Marta Werner’s version of Dickinson’s manuscript poetics clearly differs from Smith and Hart’s; where they locate the central meanings of Dickinson’s poetry in its address to a determinate reader, Werner actively prefers the manuscripts that lend themselves to Derridean dissemination. Like Smith and Hart, however, Werner tends to downplay the fascicles; by comparison to Dickinson’s other forms of manuscript writing, the fascicles are neither as open as her “open folios” nor as scattered as her “radical scatters”—nor, finally, as radical in their departures from the conventions of print. Werner has aptly commented that Ralph Franklin’s facsimile edition of the fascicles presents us with a “portrait of the artist as bookmaker”;¹² along with Smith, Hart, Susan Howe, and many other recent critics, Werner locates the most interesting Dickinson outside her manuscript “books.”

¹¹ See Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), a print edition of some of Dickinson’s late fragments, and Marta Werner’s CD-ROM edition, *Radical*

Scatters: An Electronic Archive of Emily Dickinson’s Late Fragments (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

¹² Werner, *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios*, 3.

Different as they are in other respects, almost all these cutting-edge approaches to Dickinson's manuscripts value in them what might be called a poetics of contingency. Different readers construe the poetics of contingency differently; for Smith and Hart what matters most are the contingencies of biographical occasion and epistolary exchange, while for Werner the most exciting contingencies are those in which the medium of Dickinson's handwriting overlays, counterpoints, inverts, and disseminates the media of its "writing surfaces" and the various prior inscriptions they bear. Still, for both these approaches Dickinson's most interesting manuscripts embody certain kinds of exchanges with the contingencies of the world outside her own head and hand.

It seems no coincidence, then, that the most brilliant recent reading of Dickinson's fascicles, Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing*, should be a reading passionately opposed to the poetics of contingency. For Cameron, there is absolutely no question that the fascicles—not letters, not letter-poems, not loose poems, not radical scatters, but the fascicles—embody everything that is central and radical in Dickinson's manuscript poetics. What makes the fascicles so special, in Cameron's view, is that they deliberately contest their readers' very ideas of what constitutes a lyric poem. As she puts it, "Dickinson's fascicles trouble the idea of limit or frame on which . . . our suppositions of lyric fundamentally depend."¹³ By virtue of their placement in the fascicles, Dickinson's individual poems are no longer individual—no longer the self-contained "well-wrought urns" familiar from New Critical accounts of the lyric. A fascicle, as Cameron sees it, is not just one well-wrought urn after another. The variant word choices Dickinson so famously provides *within* poems render the boundaries of particular poems uncertain; moreover, Cameron argues, within the fascicles entire poems stand as variants for one another, taking up different positions without choosing a final resolution among them. Even beyond that, she suggests, entire fascicles can be read as variants of other fascicles. One fascicle may explore choosing, another, not choosing; in the relationship between the two fascicles, Dickinson invites her reader to choose not choosing. Poems and fascicles are not, Cameron believes, bound together in any narrative sequence. They tell no story, whether of lost love, religious conversion, or anything else. They "do not depend on a chronology, or sequentiality, per se."¹⁴ The fascicles and their poems do not say *first A, then B*; they say *A and/or B*. And in doing so, Cameron believes, the fascicles present the reader of Dickinson with "interiority itself—interiority without either origin or outside. To read Dickinson in the fascicles is to encounter an interiority found as if it were our own."¹⁵

Cameron's reading of the fascicles is extraordinarily rigorous and subtle, and its potential implications for exhibiting Dickinson's writings is very challenging, for Cameron stringently rejects exactly the aspects of Dickinson's manuscripts that most interest readers like Smith, Hart, and Werner. Smith and Hart prize the manuscripts' direct address to a familiar reader, whereas the fascicles, in Cameron's account of them, speak for but not to a reader;¹⁶ strictly speaking, an interiority without an outside has no one to send its writing *to*. Cameron might

¹³ Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing*, 5.

¹⁴ Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing*, 101.

¹⁵ Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing*, 187.

¹⁶ Cameron, *Choosing not Choosing*, 186.

also say, versus Marta Werner, that the fascicle's interiority knows no outside whereon its writings might be scattered. An interiority without an origin or outside, if that is what the fascicles embody, is a different sort of poet from Werner's manuscript Dickinson, who delights in opening up her poetic inspiration to the accidents and opportunities of everyday material life. If the fascicles, in Cameron's view, undo the individual lyric poem as free-standing, well-wrought urn, the fascicles taken as a group nevertheless constitute a kind of expanding cosmos, one that has no boundary, no inside and no outside, but nevertheless curves back on itself at every point.

Suppose the Houghton's exhibition of Emily Dickinson's writings were put together rigorously on Cameron's principles. What would it have looked like? Logically speaking, such a collection might not have had anything in the cases with the fascicles but the fascicles themselves, since Cameron holds that the fascicles are a cosmos; they provide the necessary and sufficient context for their own reading. In Cameron's view, it would not be especially important or informative to know that Dickinson, for instance, sent certain individual poems within a fascicle to her friends. It is the fascicle that can teach us how to read poems extracted from it, not the extracted poems and its circumstances that teach us how to read the fascicle. Likewise, if the fascicles embody "an interiority without an origin or outside," materials that suggest historical and literary contexts for them would not help us in reading them, so such an exhibition might not have chosen to juxtapose the fascicles with those kinds of materials. Even more strongly, a Dickinson exhibition organized on Cameron's principles might well have had nothing in it but the fascicles: that would be one very powerful way of asserting their boundless self-sufficiency as a manuscript cosmos.

In the event, we did not organize "Emily Dickinson: A Life in Writing" on this rigorous plan; Dickinson's fascicles taken as a group occupied two cases out of the exhibit's ten, not the whole room. The exhibition was organized roughly chronologically, oriented to important periods and changes in Emily Dickinson's relationship to writing. Thus "A Life in Writing" began with Dickinson's early schooling in letters—her primer, her dictionary—and her earliest writings, her letters to family and friends; proceeded through her early exchanges of poems with friends, into the fascicles, then into the loose poems and letters of her final two decades, and finally into the posthumous publication of her work. To exhibit the fascicles in this context was to place them in a narrative, to give them a beginning and an ending, to imply that chronology and narrative sequence may well matter for understanding the fascicles. And I think they do matter, for many reasons: not because the fascicles in their biographical order disclose the story of a secret love affair, but because in them, over time, Dickinson explored what poetry *in this form* could do for her, what she wanted from it, what it might or might not do for other readers. This exploration probably had everything to do with love, but still the story of the fascicles—insofar as they have one—is not the story of a love affair *per se* but the story of putting love and perhaps other things *into writing*. And then what became of this writing, both in Dickinson's lifetime and in the posthumous life of the fascicle manuscripts.

So "A Life in Writing" implied a narrative for the fascicles, but the exhibition was not strictly chronological. In addition to the fascicles on display as a group, there were a few other fascicles in other cases, outside of chronological sequence.

These fascicles were displayed so as to show individual poems, not the whole fascicle, and displayed in relation to materials from outside the fascicles. Thus Dickinson's herbarium, open to the page with the fringed gentian, was accompanied by a poem from fascicle 8, "if the foolish, call them 'flowers'" (MS Am 1118.3 [14b], Franklin 179) and another from fascicle 24, "God made a little Gentian" [MS Am 1118.3 [70c], Franklin 520). Dickinson's Bible was juxtaposed with a poem about the exile of Moses from Canaan, "It always felt to me—a wrong," from fascicle 24 (MS Am 1118.3 [19], Franklin 521). Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," from fascicle 18, with its famous "Feet, mechanical," going round in grief, lay beside a copy of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* from the Dickinson family library (EDR 3.5.17) opened to section 5, where someone—quite possibly Emily Dickinson herself—had placed pencil marks alongside Tennyson's lines about poetry's "sad mechanic exercise / Like dull narcotics, numbing pain."

As against Sharon Cameron's reading of the fascicles, then, "Emily Dickinson: A Life in Writing" implied that the fascicles may not be the necessary and sufficient context for reading their individual poems, that the fascicles do not necessarily embody an "interiority without origin or outside" but rather engaged themselves in very interesting ways with worlds outside. My own critical sense of the fascicles, reflected in the design of "A Life in Writing," is that they, like Dickinson's manuscript letters and her "radical scatters," answer in their own way to a poetics of contingency. The fascicles may not have been written on scraps of advertisements, Dickinson may not have shown them to anyone else, but I think they do as a group change over time; respond to provocations outside of Dickinson's own interior; and rework texts, including Dickinson's own, not included in the fascicles themselves. And, I think, the composition of the individual fascicles may perhaps be looser and more open to contingency than most readings of the fascicles have yet allowed for, *without* this necessarily diminishing their importance as significant groupings. Viewers of "A Life in Writing" were invited to test these possible readings of Dickinson's fascicles not only against the several fascicle poems scattered throughout the exhibition, but also and especially against the four fascicles framed as a group at the exhibition's center.

The earliest fascicle included in "A Life in Writing," fascicle 12 in Franklin's reconstruction, is marked by biographical and textual contingencies so large they deserve to be called traumas. This fascicle stands out among the forty in being put together out of very disparate pieces of stationery and written over a comparatively long stretch of time;¹⁷ small wonder, then, that earlier efforts to put the fascicles back together distributed parts of this fascicle into three separate packets as Harvard received them in 1950. Viewers of the exhibition were able to see only the middle of this fascicle as Franklin reconstructed it; four folded sheets inscribed with a total of thirteen poems, all of them transcribed in early 1862 (the grouping eventually received by the Houghton as Mabel Todd's packet 20). In its entirety, the fascicle as Dickinson assembled it and Franklin reconstructs it

¹⁷ Franklin observes that the final three leaves in fascicle 12 were all torn from one larger sheet and then folded, unlike the manufactured stationery bifolia in the rest of

the fascicle and, indeed, in all the other of Dickinson's manuscript books: "These sheets are without parallel in the fascicles" (*Manuscript Books* 1:226).

begins with a sheet containing another seven poems copied about a year earlier, in early 1861, and ends with three more sheets containing another six poems, copied out in 1862 but perhaps a few months after the middle group of poems. If Franklin's detective work is correct, then, we may imagine Emily Dickinson sitting down at some point in or after early 1862, sorting through a pile of manuscripts accumulated over more than a year's time, and deciding to collect certain older poems together with two groups of more recent poems to make this fascicle. She put some of the old poems on top of the more recent, stabbed holes into the whole stack, and threaded it together. What was she thinking as she did that? What did Dickinson think a fascicle was when she made this one?

No one can really answer that question, of course. What can be said, though, is that the two longest poems from 1862 center group of this fascicle are both of them about surviving emotional trauma and putting it into writing. The first of these poems, "I got so I could hear his name," narrates the speaker's partial recovery from a love affair that the poem itself describes only indirectly, by means of the remains or inscriptions to which the speaker must habituate herself in order to go on with daily life:

I got so I could *hear his name
Without—Tremendous gain—
That Stop-sensation—on my Soul
And Thunder—in the Room—

*think—take—

I got so I could walk across
That Angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I *turned—how
And all our Sinew tore

*let go

I got so I could stir the Box
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath—
As Staples-driven through—

(MS Am 118.3 [109a], Franklin 292)

The second of these poems names the interval between the moment of emotional crisis and the written poem as one year. The speaker in this poem has language for *how long it has been* since that moment, but struggles for words to name what that moment was, or what the interval between them and now *means*.

One year—jots what?
God—spell the word! I-can't—
Was't Grace? Not that—
Was't Glory *That—will do....
Spell slower—Glory

*”Twas just you—

Such anniversary shall be—
Sometimes—not often—in Eternity—
When *farther Parted, than the common Wo—
—Look—feed upon each other's faces—so—
In doubtful meal, if it be possible
Their Banquet's *real

*sharper

*True

I tasted—careless—then—
 I did not know the Wine
 Came once a World—Did you?
 Oh, had you told me so
 This thirst would blister—easier—now—

 So—Twelve months ago—
 We breathed—
 Then dropped the Air—

(MS Am 1118.3 [12a], Franklin 301)

The fascicle poems that intervene between these two extended retrospective narratives repeat some of their imagery in smaller compass. The two poems that directly follow “I got so I could hear his name” on the first sheet of this part of the fascicle, for instance, pick up the earlier poem’s piercing image of “Staples”:

A single Screw of Flesh
 Is all that pin the Soul
 That stands for Deity, to mine,
 Opon my side the Vail—

(MS Am 1118.3 [109X], Franklin 293)

—the second poem begins, followed by

A Weight with Needles on the pounds—
 To push and pierce, besides—
 That if the Flesh resist the Heft
 The puncture—Cooly tries—

It seems as if Dickinson began this leaf with the long narrative poem and then turned one of its central images, the staple, into two shorter poems, each one shorter than the last, that segue from narrative into definition. And what the third poem defines is a torture machine—a torture machine, moreover, that uncomfortably echoes the means by which Dickinson assembles her own fascicles.

Both the manuscript *form* and the thematic *content* of fascicle 12, then, seem to be wrestling with the difference between 1861 and 1862. Something happened in 1861 the anniversary of which is marked in this fascicle, not only in what these poems say but in the way the fascicle itself combines poems from 1861 and 1862.

What happened, then, between early 1861 and early 1862? Among other things, Emily Dickinson wrote two of her famous “Master” poems to an unknown recipient. The American Civil War began. Susan Dickinson gave birth to her first child, a son. Susan and Emily Dickinson had several exchanges over one of Dickinson’s poems, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” which eventually appeared in the March 1862 *Springfield Republican*. Dickinson’s correspondence with the *Republican*’s editor, Samuel Bowles, intensified markedly over this year, both in terms of the poems sent to him and the tenor of Dickinson’s letters. In April of 1862, somewhere around

the time the last of the poems for fascicle 12 were copied, Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asking him if her verse “breathed.”¹⁸

Which of these biographical contingencies, if any, matter for understanding fascicle 12? The well-worn biographical controversies over Dickinson’s life, and especially over what may be called, for shorthand’s sake, her emotional “Master” crisis of 1861, will probably shape any reader’s attempt at a full reading of fascicle 12.¹⁹ What I would like to understand, however, is first of all the form of this fascicle—and then, perhaps, what the form of this fascicle might contribute to our understanding of the biographical controversies. How is the emotional core of fascicle 12 altered in our reading of it by Dickinson’s decision to bind it inside two other sets of poems, transcribed at different times? Like the core group of leaves, the last group of poems is varied in length and intensity. Among this last group, the poem that stands in terms of both length and mood, inviting comparison with the two long crisis narratives of the central group, is “Of all the Sounds despatched abroad” (MS Am 1118.3, Franklin 334A)—a soaring poem of affirmation in which the Speaker claims the “phraseless Melody” of the wind as her “inheritance . . . Beyond the Art to Earn.” Structured as an ambitious romantic ode,²⁰ in its fascicle context this poem reads as a glorious elaboration of an earlier, shorter poem in the center group of the fascicle, “It’s like the Light—”:

It’s like the Light—
A fashionless Delight—
It’s like the Bee—
A dateless—Melody—

It’s like the Woods—
Private—Like the Breeze—
Phraseless—yet it stirs
The proudest Trees—

(MS Am 1118.3 [112b], Franklin 302)

¹⁸ For suggestive timelines of biographical and events in Dickinson’s life, see Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974) and Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960). For Dickinson’s letter to Higginson and his reply, see Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1958), II: 403.

¹⁹ To instance just a few pivotal contributions to the biographical debates: Thomas H. Johnson, in *Emily Dickinson*:

An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), for many years enshrined the Reverend Charles Wadsworth as the leading candidate for Dickinson’s distant, hopeless love. More recently, Richard Sewall’s *Life* settled upon Dickinson family friend and *Springfield Republican* editor Samuel Bowles as the prompter of Dickinson’s distress in these years, and R. W. Franklin’s edition of *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 1986), pointed in the same direction. Betsy Erkkila’s “Homoeroticism and Audience: Dickinson’s Female

Master,” in Martin Orzeck and Robert Weisbuch, eds., *Emily Dickinson and Audience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 161–80, names Susan Gilbert Dickinson as the object of Dickinson’s crisis of the early 1860s; some other biographical readers who place Susan Dickinson at the center of Emily Dickinson’s emotional life, however, object to the very structure of the biographical crisis narrative and attempt to read the Master letters and poems in terms closer to those of a rhetorical exercise than literal autobiographical truth (see, for instance, Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, 99–127, for a detailed reply to Franklin’s Master Letters). For further comment on the biographical debates and their possible future directions, see Mary Loeffelholz, “Prospects for the Study of Emily Dickinson,” *Resources for American Literary Study* 25.1 (1999): 1–25.

²⁰ For a more extended reading of this poem in the generic context of the romantic ode, see Mary Loeffelholz, *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 139–41.

It's as if Dickinson in composing the end of this fascicle sought consolation for the movement in the earlier leaf of the fascicle from "It got so I could hear his name" to "A Single Screw of Flesh" and "A Weight with Needles on the pounds." Where the earlier sequence of poems works from large to small and from narrative pain to distilled pain, the movement from "it's like the Light" to "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" is expansive, taking us from writing as a torture machine to writing as magnificent consolation music.

But that is not the last word from fascicle 12. As Dickinson finally assembled it in 1862, fascicle 12 begins, interestingly, with a well-known poem that was published in May 1861 in the *Springfield Republican* from a verse originally sent to Susan Dickinson: "I taste a liquor never brewed" (Franklin 207). This too is an expansive poem—"Inebriate of air am I, And debauchee of dew"—perhaps too expansive, protesting too much. Or so Dickinson may have implied in revisiting the poem as she bound still another manuscript version into what became fascicle 12; for the final poem of this fascicle, much less well known than "I taste a liquor never brewed," is "Her smile was shaped like other smiles." Here Dickinson describes a woman whose smile

wears it's merriment
So patient—like a pain—
Fresh gilded—to elude the eyes—
Unqualified, to scan—

(MS Am 1118.3 [77X], Franklin 335)

Placed as it is, in concluding opposition to "I taste a liquor never brewed," this poem leads me to ask whether Dickinson wrapped the emotional core of fascicle 12 in two forms of self-censorship: the obvious and culturally authorized self-censorship of the woman who smiles as her heart breaks and confides her pain only to her private writings, of course, but perhaps also the more paradoxical self-censorship of the unpublished poem's "Fresh gilded" merriment, an open secret to eyes unable to "scan" either Dickinson's face or her irregular, intense poetic measure.²¹

The Civil War has already been nominated as an historical contingency that may have impinged on Dickinson's construction of the fascicles. As Dickinson scholars have long been aware, the years of her greatest productivity as a poet, 1862–63, coincided with the bloodiest years of the American Civil War. Is there such a thing, I wanted "A Life in Writing" to ask its viewers, as a Civil War fascicle in Dickinson's writing? Critics have been looking for traces of the Civil War in Dickinson's poems for some years, and with special urgency since the historicizing imperative of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s overtook Dickinson criticism. There is now a degree of critical consensus that certain individual poems make eminently good sense as responses to the war: when Dickinson writes, for instance, in a poem from Spring 1863 (bound into fascicle 24), that

²¹ The fascicle context for "I taste a liquor never brewed" thus generates a possibly darker reading of the poem than readings that take the poem, in isolation, either as

a jubilant revoicing of Emersonian pleasures in nature or—more recently—as a jubilant plunge into the experienced or imagined pleasures of oral sex.

It feels a shame to be Alive—
 When Men so brave—are dead—
 One envies the Distinguished Dust—
 Permitted—such a Head—

 The price is great—Sublimely paid—

 Do we deserve—a Thing—
 That lives—like Dollars—must be plied
 Before we may obtain?

 Are we that wait—sufficient worth—
 That such enormous Pearl
 As life—dissolved be—for Us—
 In Battle's—horrid Bowl?

(MS Am 1118.3 [158X], Franklin 524)

It seems impossible, here and now, not to understand this as a Civil War poem.

There are also a few compelling arguments in print and, now, on the Web that some of the larger thematic patterns in Dickinson's writing, such as her challenges to theodicy and her explorations of captivity and wounding, may have been prompted by her reflections on the war,²² although Dickinson's famous obliquities of reference are as difficult here as elsewhere in her poetry. There has been some very useful critical attention paid to the one local Amherst event of the war, the death of Austin Dickinson's classmate Lieutenant Frazer Stearns, that Dickinson is on record as having anguished and pondered over.²³ There has not, however, been much systematic published effort devoted to connecting the manuscript branch of Dickinson studies, especially studies of the fascicles as a distinctive poetic form, to the historical question of the Civil War's impact on her writing.²⁴ In putting together "A Life in Writing" I asked myself, then: Did Dickinson produce a Civil War fascicle as distinct from individual Civil War poems embedded in fascicles?

Viewers of "Emily Dickinson: A Life in Writing" were invited to judge for themselves specifically whether Fascicle 23 answers as a Civil War fascicle, and more generally whether historical contexts like Frazier Stearns's death—and the written memorials it produced—are helpful in understanding Dickinson's fascicles. Lieutenant Stearns died at the battle of Newbern, in March 1862; his father

²² On Dickinson's Civil War as challenge to theodicy, see Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); on the possible impact of Civil War imprisonments, see Kirsten Gruesz's on-line contribution, "Imprisonment and Confinement in Whitman and Dickinson," to the FIPSE teaching archive-in progress on Whitman, Dickinson, and the Civil War, general editors Kenneth Price and Martha Nell Smith, available through the Dickinson Electronic Archives at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/dickinson/articles.html>. On Dickinson and wounding, see Marta Werner's on-line contribution, "The Corpora of the Text: Scenes of Writing, Embodiment, and Wounding in Dickinson and Whitman," at the same site.

²³ See especially Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, 104-15.

²⁴ Leigh-Anne Urbanowicz Marcellin's brief essay on "Emily Dickinson's Civil War Poetry," *Emily Dickinson Journal* 5.2 (1996): 107-12, glances in this direction, as does Faith Barrett's "Inclusion and Exclusion: Fictions of Self and Nation in Whitman and Dickinson," *Emily Dickinson Journal* 5.2 (1996): 240-46. Marta Werner's online "The Corpora of the Text" asks the same question of the fascicles that "A Life in Writing" did—is there a Civil War fascicle?—and nominates fascicle 24 as a candidate.

published his memorial volume for his son later the same year, around the same time that Dickinson transcribed the poems in fascicle 23. Are there connections? The fascicle's second poem, "He fought like those who've naught to lose," might be read as narrating the invisible war career of Stearns's antithesis, an unknown soldier who wants to throw his life away but seemingly for that very reason can't make the bullet find him that would do it:

He fought like those who've nought to lose—		
*Bestowed Himself to Balls		*He gave himself
As One who for a further Life		
Invited Death—with bold attempt—		
But Death was *Coy of Him	*shy	
As Other Men, were Coy of Death.		
To Him—to live—was Doom—		
Him Comrades, shifted like the Flakes		
When Gusts reverse the Snow—		
But He—*was left alive Because	*remained	
Of *Greediness to die—	*Urgency	Vehemence

(MS Am 1118.3 [165b], Franklin 482B)

Reversing the erotics of the famous opening poem of the fascicle, "Because I could not stop for Death—," this poem has the human being courting a Death who coyly retreats from his desire. According to his father's memorial volume, Frazer Stearns, not unlike Dickinson herself, struggled in early adulthood over his own inability to commit himself to a profession of religious faith. Death in battle conferred upon Stearns's anguish the retrospective meaning that Death withholds from the combatant of this poem.

The fourth poem of fascicle 23, "Wolfe demanded during dying," is ostensibly an historical vignette out of the previous century's French and Indian War but may also traffic in or comment upon the popular and long-lived mythology of the Civil War as a war of kinsmen, tragic and noble in the degree to which it pitched morally symmetrical protagonists against one another:

Wolfe demanded during Dying	
"Which controlled the Day?"	
General—the British—"Easy—	
Answered He—"to die"—	
Montcalm—His opposing Spirit	
Rendered with a smile—	
"Sweet," said He, "My own Surrender	
Liberty's—Forestall—"	

(MS Am 1118.3 [166a], Franklin 482B)

Other poems that follow in this fascicle, however, reflect ironically on the grandiloquence with which Generals Wolfe and Montcalm reciprocally moralize their deaths:

The World—feels Dusty
When We stop to Die—
We want the Dew—then—
Honors—taste dry—

Flags—vex a Dying face—
But the least Fan
Stirred by a friend's Hand—
Cools—like the Rain—

(MS Am 1118.3 [168c], Franklin 491)

—says one poem, from the perspective of the dying, while the poem on its facing leaf counterposes yet another perspective to this one:

Rests at Night
The Sun from shining,
Nature—and some men—
Rest at Noon—some men—
While Nature
And the Sun—go on—

MS Am 1118.3 [168b], Franklin 490)

The voice of this poem, disembodied and impersonal, defers the grammatical subject of its sentences by the poetic device of inversion, foregrounding the verb held in common among Sun, Nature, and Men, “Rest.” If some night while (the poem implies) other men keep watch, if some men rest out of turn at noon, the poem utterly refuses to share their human perspective or to differentiate their experience as human subjects from that Sun and Nature.

Is fascicle 23 a Civil War fascicle? It seems to me that any full account of the fascicles in the context of the Civil War must respect their determined resistance to exactly this question. In both its Civil War context and its fascicle context, for instance, “Rests at Night” resonates as an anti-epitaph, one that refuses not only the consolations of deathbed grandiloquence as practiced by Wolfe and Montcalm, but also the anonymously dignified deathbed human cravings of “The World—Feels Dusty.” When Dickinson in February of 1863 learned that her “preceptor” Thomas Wentworth Higginson had gone off to war in command of a black regiment, she complained in magnificently abstract terms of the risks he had assumed: “I should have liked to see you before you became improbable. War feels to me an oblique place.”²⁵ In its entirety, fascicle 23 treats this “oblique place” obliquely, counterposing war’s dusty world to a very different home front that flaunts its indifference to war in several poems.²⁶ On the home front, it is still possible to write poems like “The Wind did’nt come from the Orchard—today—” (MS Am 1118.3 [169b], Franklin 494B) in praise of the “sweet pauses of Hay” and “Odors of Clovers” that perfume a June afternoon, haunted by the reaper though it may be. And yet fascicle 23 opens upon death—

²⁵ *Letters*, II:423

²⁶ For further reflections on Dickinson’s home front during the war, see Werner, “Corpora.”

“Because I could not stop for death”—and closes upon dread: “I lived on Dread.” How can you tell the living from the dead in either poem? This *is* an oblique place, whether it is the home front or the battlefield.

The second two fascicles exhibited in “A Life in Writing” were chosen in part because they seem oriented toward rather different concerns from the earlier two fascicles; whatever writing practices the fascicles share, they are not condemned to repeat the same thematics each time. Both of these later fascicles, in my reading, engage questions of publication and audience more directly and insistently than do the earlier two fascicles. Franklin dates the earlier of the two, fascicle 25, to approximately summer 1863, and the later, fascicle 37, to sometime in late 1863. By the summer of 1863, Dickinson had been corresponding with Thomas Wentworth Higginson for more than a year; she continued to send him poetry and he continued to be uneasily fascinated with the poems and their writer, while discouraging publication. The following year, however, would see the largest burst of published poems in Dickinson’s lifetime: between February and April, five poems appeared in various Eastern periodicals, many or most of them probably from manuscripts forwarded to the editors by Susan Dickinson.²⁷ Dickinson may well have spent the second half of 1863 in suspense over whether to abide by or defy Higginson’s verdict on publication; the evidence suggests at least that whatever her own ambivalence about the verdict, at least Susan Dickinson wanted her to defy it.

The biographical context may help explain why fascicle 25 so conspicuously opens under the sign of the book:

A precious mouldering pleasure—‘tis—
To meet an Antique Book—
In just the Dress his Century wore—
A privilege—I think—

His venerable Hand to take—
And warming in our own—
A passage back—or two—to make—
To Times when he—was young—

His quaint opinions—to inspect—
His thoughts to ascertain
On themes concern our mutual mind— The Literature of Man—

Was interested Scholars—most—
What Competitions ran—
When Plato—was a Certainty—
And Sophocles—a Man—When Sappho—was a living Girl—

And Beatrice wore
The Gown that Dante—deified—
Facts Centuries before

²⁷ See Franklin’s list of poems published in Dickinson’s lifetime in *Poems*, vol. 3, 1531–32, and his comments on the individual poems published in 1864: “Flowers—Well-if anybody” (Franklin 95), “These are the days when birds come back” (Franklin 122), “Some keep the Sabbath going to church” (Franklin 236), “Blazing in gold and quenching in purple” (Franklin 321), and

“Success is counted sweetest” (Franklin 112). These are all comparatively early poems, rather than poems out of the fascicles Dickinson was compiling in late 1863 and early 1864, suggesting that Susan Dickinson—and just possibly other recipients of Dickinson’s poems—pulled them out of accumulated manuscripts for sending to editors.

He traverses—familiar—
As One should come to Town—
And tell you all your Dreams—were true—
He lived—where Dreams were born—

His presence is enchantment—
You beg him not to go—
Old Volumes shake their Vellum Heads
And Tantalize—just so—

(MS Am 1118.3 [85], Franklin 569b)

Does Dickinson imagine herself in the competition of elite letters? How are we to see this manuscript book in light of its opening hymn to the printed word? Dickinson did in a certain sense “publish” this poem; she sent a manuscript copy to Susan, now lost, in addition to recording it in fascicle 25. How she imagined the manuscript books tantalize later readers, however—if she did—remains unspoken.

A later poem in this fascicle, “I’m singing every day / ‘If I should be a Queen, Tomorrow’” (MS Am 1118.3 [87a], Franklin 575) reads as a kind of Cinderella publication fantasy, its “Rustic” speaker looping up her apron and “perch[ing her] Tongue / On Twigs of Singing—rather high—” against the day when she will be summoned by her proper courtly rank. Is this fantasy serious? Perhaps not; further on in this fascicle Dickinson transcribed a poem that she also sent to both Susan Gilbert Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend
Or the most agonizing Spy
An enemy could send

Secure against its own
No treason it can fear
Itself—it’s Sovereign—of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe—

(MS Am 1118.3 [88b], Franklin 579C)

It was Susan Dickinson who by then had engineered the publication of several of Dickinson’s poems, and Higginson to whom Dickinson had appealed for his judgment as an editor. This poem seems to tell each of them that Dickinson chooses to abide her judgment in the court of her own opinion, not that of publication.

This private court is not necessarily an easy audience to face, nor does it exclude all external comparisons. Not only does the opening of the fascicle invite comparisons with Sappho and Dante, the poem immediately following “The Soul unto itself,” as if to relativize the Sovereign solipsism of the previous poem, advises us that

We see-Comparatively—
The Thing so towering high
We could not grasp it’s segment
Unaided—Yesterday—

Morning's finer Verdict
 Makes scarcely worth the toil—
 A furrow—Our Cordillera—
 Our Appenine—a knoll— . . .

(MS Am 1118.3 [88c], Franklin 580)

The terror of the writer's private court (probably any writer anywhere, not only Dickinson as a poet in manuscript) lies precisely in seeing comparatively, without being able to fix the value of one's own work even relatively; as later in the poem, gnats and giants keep changing places by tricks of perspective. Perhaps this private manuscript court, however, given its reversals of perspective, invites us to compare Dickinson's manuscript poems with the fragments of Sappho, her fascicles in the epic of Dante, and see what the exchange yields us.

The last fascicle included in "A Life in Writing," fascicle 37, also returns to questions of publication and audience, most famously in the poem that proclaims "publication" to be "the Auction / Of the Mind of Man" (MS Am 118.3 [59b], Franklin 788). "Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature— / Gravitates within," says another poem in the fascicle, choosing "the solitary prowess / Of a Silent life" (MS Am 1118.3 [60a], Franklin 790). The rejection of *publication*, however, doesn't end the question of *audience* for fascicle 37. There is, as in fascicle 25, the audience of one's own court, and here as the earlier fascicle, that court is no lenient one, says the final poem in this fascicle:

My Soul—accused Me—And I quailed—
 As Tongues of Diamond had reviled
 All Else accused Me—and I smiled—
 My Soul—that Morning—was My friend—

Her favor—is the best Disdain
 Toward Artifice of Time—or Men—
 But Her Disdain—'twere lighter bear
 A fingernail of Enamelled Fire—

(MS Am 118.3 [60X], Franklin 793)

And the poem just before this one imagines, for one oblique moment, two strangers locking eyes in a crowd. This poem's key words, "audience" and "countenance," thread themselves through the entire fascicle:

So the Eyes accost—and sunder—
 In an Audience—
 Stamped—occasionally—forever—
 So may Countenance

Entertain—without addressing
 Countenance of One
 In a Neighboring Horizon—
 Gone—as soon as known—

(MS Am 1118.3 [60X], Franklin 792)

Here, I think, Dickinson strains to imagine the almost unimaginable: the reader of her unpublished fascicle writings, which might or might not “stamp” themselves on other eyes once she committed them to a future in which she as their author would be “Gone—as soon as known.”

Viewers of “Emily Dickinson: A Life in Writing” were not able to see “So the Eyes accost—and sunder—” in Dickinson’s own hand, because Dickinson transcribed this poem on the inside leaf of the sheet containing “Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature”; in showing the one poem, the exhibition was precluded from showing the other. This was also the case, of course, with the other fascicles included in the exhibition; none of them could be viewed in their entirety. Now that the exhibition has come down and its materials have been returned to the archives, it is all the more worth bearing this caution in mind: the curator of an exhibition, no less than the writer of an essay, must always be suspected of over-reading the design of Dickinson’s fascicles in order to generate the design—of exhibition or essay. The curator’s work looks and in some respects, I think, genuinely is more undesigning than the essay-critic’s; if not the whole of any one fascicle, at least viewers of “A Life in Writing” could see something of four fascicles for themselves and ignore, or not, the curator’s explanatory captions.

“A Life in Writing” was mounted in the midst of very lively controversies over the place of manuscript studies in Dickinson criticism, controversies well aired through 1999, not only at the Emily Dickinson International Society conference that occasioned the exhibition but also in print by reviewers of Franklin’s new variorum *Poems*. Critics oriented to Dickinson’s manuscript production are arguing, with ever-greater millennial urgency, the importance of seeing exactly what Dickinson wrote.²⁸ This is, of course, exactly the desire ministered to by an exhibition of Dickinson’s manuscript writings. Yet Dickinson’s poems themselves imply in their many ways that *reading* always, at the risk of over-reading, exceeds what can be *seen*; the question is how, and by how much. This is the question asked, I think, by another poem from fascicle 37 that, along with “So the Eyes accost—and sunder—” was hidden from sight in “A Life in Writing” by the practical exigencies of exhibition design:

Four Trees—opon a solitary Acre—
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action—
Maintain—

The Sun—opon a Morning meets them—
The Wind—
No nearer Neighbor—have they—
But God—

The Acre gives them—Place—
They—Him—Attention of Passer by—

²⁸ For a dissenting critique of Dickinson manuscript studies, see Domhnall Mitchell, “Revising the Script: Emily Dickinson’s Manuscripts,” *American Literature* 70 (1998): 704-37; for evaluations of the manuscript controversies and various editorial approaches to

Dickinson’s writings, see Mary Loeffelholz, “The Incidental Dickinson,” *The New England Quarterly* 72 (1999): 456-72, and Loeffelholz, “Prospects.”

Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply—
Or Boy—

What Deed is Their's unto the General Nature—
What Plan
They severally—retard—or further—

Unknown—(Franklin 778)

Four trees that “Maintain”: a verb originally deriving, as Dickinson would have known, from the Latin *manu tenere*, to hold in hand. An unusual word choice in the context of this poem, “maintain” gathers yet more weight in its fascicle context, since Dickinson carries the word over from the final line of the previous poem on the same sheet:

Life, and Death, and Giants—
Such as These—are still—
Minor—Apparatus—Hopper of the Mill—
Beetle at the Candle—
Or a Fife's Fame—
Maintain—by Accident that they proclaim—

(MS Am 1118.3 [56X], Franklin 777)

The Hopper, Beetle, and Fife “proclaim” themselves and, so, “Maintain” themselves. Their published lives (Or noisy deaths, like the Beetle's at the Candle) contrast in this poem with the stillness of “Life, and Death, and Giants,” but also—in the following poem—with the four trees standing in the “solitary Acre,” which also “Maintain,” although without proclaiming. Without proclaiming, Dickinson's four trees maintain themselves for reading; whether in Dickinson's manuscript or the posthumous life of print, they may be taken in hand.

Four trees; four fascicles; ours to read.