

# Dickinson's Misery

A THEORY OF LYRIC READING



Virginia Jackson

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## Beforehand

SUPPOSE YOU ARE sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box. You open the box and discover hundreds of folded sheets of stationery stitched together with string. Other papers in the bureau drawer are loose, or torn into small pieces, occasionally pinned together; there is writing on a guarantee issued by the German Student Lamp Co., on memo paper advertising THE HOME INSURANCE CO. NEW YORK ("Cash Assets, over SIX MILLION DOLLARS"), on many split-open envelopes, on a single strip three-quarters of an inch wide by twenty-one inches long, on thin bits of butcher paper, on a page inscribed "*Specimen of Penmanship*" (which is then crossed out) (fig. 1). There is writing clustered around a three-cent postage stamp of a steam engine turned on its side, which secures two magazine clippings bearing the names "GEORGE SAND" and "Mauprat." Suppose that you recognize the twined pages as sets of *poems*; you decide that the other pages may contain poems as well. Now you wish you had kept the bundles of letters you burned upon the poet's (for it *was* a poet's) death. What remains, you decide, must be published.<sup>1</sup>

Let this exercise in supposing stand as some indication of what now, more than a century after the scene in which you have just been asked to place yourself, can and cannot be imagined about reading Emily Dickinson. 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. As many readers have noticed (or complained), the hermeneutic legacy of Dickinson's posthumous publication is also first of all a "sorting out": so J. V. Cunningham remarked after what he diplomatically called "an authoritative diplomatic text" of Dickinson's extant corpus appeared for the first time in 1955, that "it is easier to hold in mind and sort out the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of George Eliot, for they have scope and structure."<sup>2</sup> In the pages that follow, Cunningham's response will come to seem symptomatic of the century's ongoing attempt to construct the scope of Dickinson's work, to make out of the heterogeneous materials of her practice a literature "to hold in mind" and to hand down—to sort her various pages into various poems, those various poems into a book.

But what sort of book? The frustration of readers like Cunningham is also their invitation, for the syntax perceived as missing from the "almost

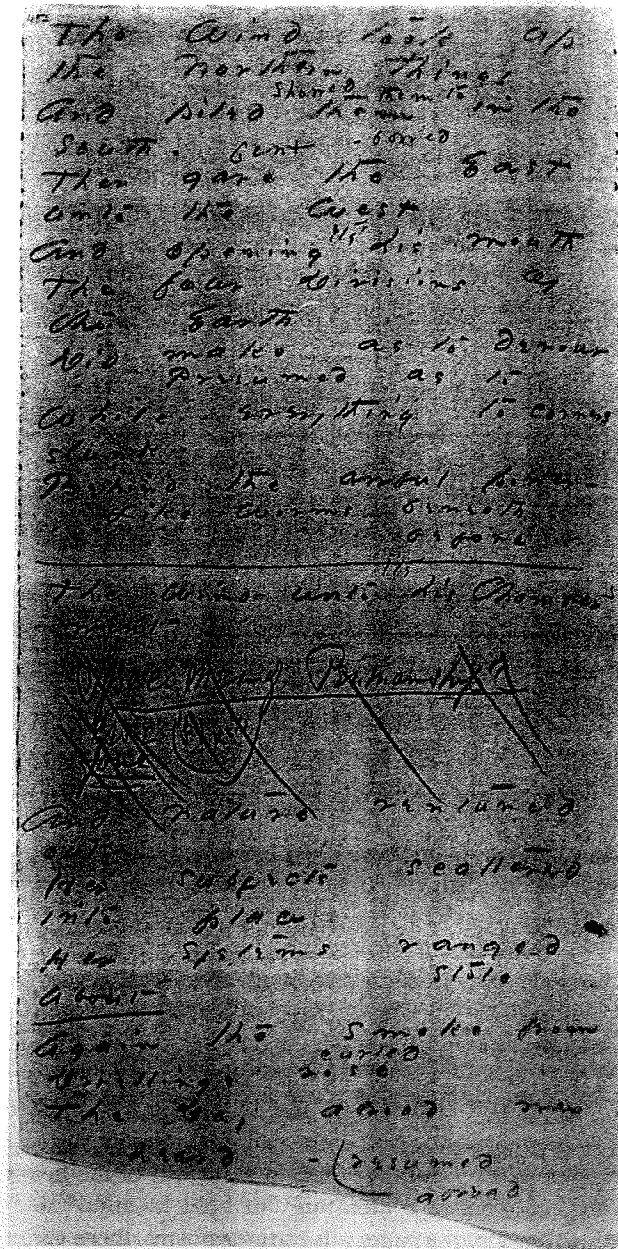


Figure 1. The text that Dickinson penciled on Mary Warner's penmanship practice sheet is now Franklin's poem 1152, "The wind took up the northern things." Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 452).

1,800 items in the collected poems" is theirs to supply. We might say of the range of Dickinson's texts considered together what Norman Bryson says of the objects in trompe l'oeil painting, that they may "present themselves as outside the orbit of human awareness, as unorganized by human attention, or as abandoned by human attention, or as endlessly awaiting it."<sup>3</sup> Yet of course what this comparison to painting suggests is that such an effect is just that: Dickinson's "items" have been successively and carefully framed to give the impression that something, or someone, is missing. While the recovery of Dickinson's manuscripts may be supposed to have depended on the death of the subject, on the person who had, by accident or design, composed the scene, the repeated belated "discovery" that her work is yet in need of sorting (and of reading) may also depend upon the absence of the objects that composed it. These objects themselves mark not only the absence of the person who touched them but the presence of what touched that person: of the stationer that made the paper, of the manufacturer and printer and corporation that issued guarantees and advertisements and of the money that changed hands, of the butcher who wrapped the parcel, of the manuals and primers and copybooks that composed individual literacy, of the expanding postal service, of the modern railroad, of modern journalism, of the nineteenth-century taste for continental literary imports. All of these things are the sorts of things left out of a book, since the stories to be told about them open out away from the narrative of individual creation or individual reception supposed by my first paragraph. This is to say that what is so often said of the grammatical and rhetorical structure of Dickinson's poems—that, as critics have variously put it, the poetry is "sceneless," is "a set of riddles" revolving around an "omitted center," is a poetry of "revoked . . . referentiality"—can more aptly be said of the representation of the poems as such.<sup>4</sup> Once gathered as the previously ungathered, reclaimed as the abandoned, given the recognition they so long awaited, the poems in bound volumes appear both redeemed and revoked from their scenes or referents, from the history that the book, as book, omits.

Take for example the second number in the "authoritative diplomatic text" to which Cunningham referred, Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts*. The poem is printed, with its comparative manuscript note, as follows:

There is another sky,  
Ever serene and fair,  
And there is another sunshine,

Though it be darkness there;  
 Never mind faded forests, Austin,  
 Never mind silent fields—  
 Here is a little forest,  
 Whose leaf is ever green;  
 Here is a brighter garden,

Where not a frost has been;  
 In its unfading flowers  
 I hear the bright bee hum;  
 Prithce, my brother,  
 Into *my* garden come!

MANUSCRIPT: These lines conclude a letter, written on 17 October 1851, to her brother Austin. 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.

Once “arbitrarily established” as a lyric in 1955, these lines attracted a number of close readings—the response a lyric often invited after the middle of the twentieth century. By 1980, the lines had circulated for a quarter of a century as “a love poem with a female speaker,” which is to say that they were read according to a theory of their genre that included the idea of a fictive lyric persona.<sup>5</sup> Feminist criticism took up the problem of metaphorical gender in the lines, and several critics placed them back into the context of the letter to Austin, but after its publication as a lyric, the lines were not again interpreted (at least in print) as anything else (though they had been published as prose in 1894, 1924, and 1931—and were again published as a poem “in prose form” in Johnson’s own edition of Dickinson’s letters in 1958).<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, Harvard issued a new edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in both variorum and “reading” versions, now more authoritative and more diplomatic, thanks to the detailed textual scholarship of R. W. Franklin. Franklin’s edition does not include the end of Dickinson’s 1851 letter to her brother as one of the 1,789 poems in the reading edition, but he does list it in the variorum in an appendix of “some prose passages in Emily Dickinson’s early letters [that] exhibit characteristics of verse without being so written” (F, 1578). As the manuscript of the letter attests (fig. 2), the lines were indeed not inscribed metrically, though they can certainly be read as a series of the three- and four-foot lines characteristic of Dickinson. Interestingly, Franklin prints the text as a series of such lines, thus printing what has been read rather than what was written, what may be interpreted rather than what may be described—though he also marks the

you have... you would say... a little forest...  
 never mind faded forests, Austin,  
 never mind silent fields—  
 here is a little forest,  
 whose leaf is ever green;  
 here is a brighter garden,  
 where not a frost has been;  
 in its unfading flowers  
 I hear the bright bee hum;  
 prithce, my brother,  
 into my garden come!

Figure 2. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, 17 October 1851. The “poem” appears at the bottom of the page. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 573, last page).

difference between interpretation and description by making a section in his book for poems that he does not include as poems. Is the end of Dickinson's early letter, then, after 1998, no longer "a love poem with a female speaker"? Was it never such a poem, since it was never written as verse? Was it always such a poem, because it could always have been read as verse? Or was it only such a poem after it was printed as verse? Once read as a poem, can its generic reception be unprinted? Or is that interpretation so persistent that it survives even when the passage is not described as a poem?

The many answers to these questions could be posed as statements about edition (the many ways in which Dickinson has been or could be published) or statements about composition (the many ways in which Dickinson wrote). While the fascinating historical details of Dickinson's production and reception will be central to this book, I will be primarily interested in what such details tell us about the history of the interpretation of lyric poetry (primarily in the United States) between the years that Dickinson wrote (most of the 1840s through most of the 1880s) and the years during which what she wrote has been printed, circulated, and read (from the middle of the nineteenth through the beginning of the twenty-first century). In view of what definition of poetry would Dickinson's brother have understood the end of his sister's letter to him as a poem? Did it only become a poem once it left his hands as a letter? According to what definition of lyric poetry did Dickinson's editor understand the passage as a lyric in 1955? What did Dickinson's editor in 1998 understand a lyric poem to be if it was not the passage at the end of the 1851 letter? Can a text not intended as a lyric become one? Can a text once read as a lyric be unread? If so, then what is—or was—a lyric?

The argument of *Dickinson's Misery* is that the century and a half that spans the circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry chronicles rather exactly the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation. To put briefly what I will unfold at length in the pages that follow: from the mid-nineteenth through the beginning of the twenty-first century, to be lyric is to be read as lyric—and to be read as a lyric is to be printed and framed as a lyric. While it is beyond the scope of this book to trace the lyricization of poetry that began in the eighteenth century, the exemplary story of the composition, recovery, and publication of Dickinson's writing begins one chapter, at least, in what is so far a largely unwritten history. As we have already begun to see, Dickinson's enduring role in that history depends on the ephemeral quality of the texts she left behind. By a modern lyric logic that will become familiar in the pages that follow, the (only) apparently contextless or sceneless, even evanescent nature of Dickinson's writing attracted an increasingly professionalized at-

tempt to secure and contextualize it as a certain kind (or genre) of literature—as what we might call, after Charles Taylor, a lyric social imaginary.<sup>7</sup> Think of the modern imaginary construction of the lyric as what allows the term to move from adjectival to nominal status and back again. Whereas other poetic genres (epic, poems on affairs of state, georgic, pastoral, verse epistle, epitaph, elegy, satire) may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narratives, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions and narratives for their interpretation (it is hard to understand "The Dunciad," for example, if one does not know the characters involved or have access to lots of handy footnotes), the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading. This is not to say that there were not ancient Greek and Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval, Provençal, Renaissance, metaphysical, Colonial, Republican, Augustan—even romantic and modern!—lyrics. It is simply to propose that the riddles, papyrae, epigrams, songs, sonnets, *blasons*, *Lieder*, elegies, dialogues, conceits, ballads, hymns and odes considered lyrical in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were lyric in a very different sense than was or will be the poetry that the mediating hands of editors, reviewers, critics, teachers, and poets have rendered as lyric in the last century and a half.<sup>8</sup>

As my syntax indicates, that shift in genre definition is primarily a shift in temporality; as variously mimetic poetic subgenres collapsed into the expressive romantic lyric of the nineteenth century, the various modes of poetic circulation—scrolls, manuscript books, song cycles, miscellanies, broadsides, hornbooks, libretti, quartos, chapbooks, recitation manuals, annuals, gift books, newspapers, anthologies—tended to disappear behind an idealized scene of reading progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression. While other modes—dramatic genres, the essay, the novel—may have been seen to be historically contingent, the lyric emerged as the one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency, perhaps not intended for public reading at all. By the early nineteenth century, poetry had never before been so dependent on the mediating hands of the editors and reviewers who managed the print public sphere, yet in this period an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated by those hands or those readers began to emerge and is still very much with us.

Susan Stewart has dubbed the late eighteenth century's highly mediated manufacture of the illusion of unmediated genres a case of "distressed genres," or "new antiques." Her terms allude to modern print culture's attempts "to author a context as well as an artifact," and thus to imitate older forms—such as the epic, the fable, the proverb, the ballad—

while creating the impression that our access to those forms is as immediate as it was in the imaginary modern versions of oral and collective culture to which those forms originally belonged.<sup>9</sup> Stewart does not include the lyric as a "distressed genre," but her suggestion that old genres were made in new ways could be extended to include the idea that the lyric is—or was—a genre in the first place. As Gérard Genette has argued, "the relatively recent theory of the 'three major genres' not only lays claim to ancientness, and thus to an appearance or presumption of being eternal and therefore self-evident," but is itself the effect of "projecting onto the founding text of classical poetics a fundamental tenet of 'modern' poetics (which actually . . . means *romantic* poetics)."<sup>10</sup>

Yet even if the lyric (especially in its broadly defined difference from narrative and drama) is a larger version of the new antique, a retro-projection of modernity, a new concept artificially treated to appear old, the fact that it is a figment of modern poetics does not prevent it from becoming a creature of modern poetry. The interesting part of the story lies in the twists and turns of the plot through which the lyric imaginary takes historical form. But what plot is that? My argument here is that the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism. As Mark Jeffreys eloquently describes the process I am calling lyricization, "lyric did not conquer poetry: poetry was reduced to lyric. Lyric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry's authority was reduced to the cramped margins of culture."<sup>11</sup> This is to say that the notion of lyric enlarged in direct proportion to the diminution of the varieties of poetry—or at least that became the ratio as the idea of the lyric was itself produced by a critical culture that imagined itself on the definitive margins of culture. Thus by the early twenty-first century it became possible for Mary Poovey to describe "the lyricization of literary criticism" as the dependence of all postromantic professional literary reading on "the genre of the romantic lyric."<sup>12</sup> The conceptual problem is that if the lyric is the creation of print and critical mediation, and if that creation then produces the very versions of interpretive mediation that in turn produce it, any attempt to trace the historical situation of the lyric will end in tautology.

Or that might be the critical predicament if the retrospective definition and inflation of the lyric were either as historically linear or as hermeneutically circular as much recent criticism, whether historicist or formalist, would lead us to believe. What has been left out of most thinking about the process of lyricization is that it is an uneven series of negotiations of many different forms of circulation and address. To take one prominent example, the preface to Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) describes the "ancient foliums in the Editor's possession," claims to

have subjected the excerpts from these manuscripts to the judgment of "several learned and ingenious friends" as well as to the approval of "the author of *The Rambler* and the late Mr. Shenstone," and concludes that "the names of so many men of learning and character the Editor hopes will serve as amulet, to guard him from every unfavourable censure for having bestowed any attention on a parcel of Old Ballads."<sup>13</sup> Not only does Percy not claim that historical genres of verse are directly addressed to contemporary readers (and each of his "relics" is prefaced by a historical sketch and description of its manuscript context in order to emphasize the excerpt's distance from the reader), but he also acknowledges the role of the critical climate to which the poems in his edition were addressed.<sup>14</sup> Yet by 1833, John Stuart Mill, in what has become the most influentially misread essay in the history of Anglo-American poetics, could write that "the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude."<sup>15</sup> As Anne Janowitz has written, "in Mill's theory . . . the social setting is benignly severed from poetic intentions."<sup>16</sup> What happened between 1765 and 1833 was not that editors and printers and critics lost influence over how poetry was presented to the public; on the contrary, as Matthew Rowlinson has remarked, in the nineteenth century "lyric appears as a genre newly totalized in print."<sup>17</sup> And it is also not true that the social setting of the lyric is less important in the nineteenth than it was in the eighteenth century. On the contrary, because of the explosion of popular print, by the early nineteenth century in England, as Stuart Curran has put it, "the most eccentric feature of [the] entire culture [was] that it was simply mad for poetry"—and as Janowitz has trenchantly argued, such madness extended from the public poetry of the eighteenth century through an enormously popular range of individualist, socialist, and variously political and personal poems.<sup>18</sup> In nineteenth-century U.S. culture, the circulation of many poetic genres in newspapers and the popular press and the crucial significance of political and public poetry to the culture as a whole is yet to be appreciated in later criticism (or, if it is, it is likely to be given as the reason that so little enduring poetry was produced in the United States in the nineteenth century, with the routine exception of Whitman and Dickinson, who are also routinely mischaracterized as unrecognized by their own century).<sup>19</sup>

At the risk of making a long story short, it is fair to say that the progressive idealization of what was a much livelier, more explicitly mediated, historically contingent and public context for many varieties of poetry had culminated by the middle of the twentieth century (around the time Dickinson began to be published in "complete" editions) in an idea of the lyric as temporally self-present or unmediated. This is the idea aptly expressed

in the first edition of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* in 1938: "classifications such as 'lyrics of meditation,' and 'religious lyrics,' and 'poems of patriotism,' or 'the sonnet,' 'the Ode,' 'the song,' etc." are, according to the editors, "arbitrary and irrational classifications" that should give way to a present-tense presentation of "poetry as a thing in itself worthy of study."<sup>20</sup> Not accidentally, as we shall see, the shift in definition accompanied the migration of lyric from the popular press to the classroom—but for now we should note that by the time that Emily Dickinson's poetry became available in scholarly editions and university anthologies, the history of various genres of poetry was read as simply lyric, and lyrics were read as poems one could understand without reference to that history or those genres.

The first and second chapters of this book will trace the developing relation between lyric reading and lyric theory in the United States over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by focusing on the circulation and reception of Dickinson's remains. What makes Dickinson exemplary for a history of the lyric in which I wish to chronicle a shift in the definition (or undoing) of the genre as an interpretive abstraction is that there is so little left of her. Yet, as we shall also see, the persistent sense that something is left—those handsewn leaves, those pieces of envelopes pinned at odd angles—keeps recalling modern readers to an archaic moment of hand-written composition and personal encounter, a private moment yet unpublicized, a moment before or outside literature that also becomes essential to modern lyric reading in post-eighteenth-century print culture.<sup>21</sup> As Yopie Prins has written, "if 'reading lyric' implies that lyric is already defined as an object to be read, 'lyric reading' implies an act of lyrical reading, or reading lyrically, that poses the possibility of lyric without presuming its objective existence or assuming it to be a form of subjective expression."<sup>22</sup> This is as much as to say that while any literary genre is always a virtual object, there may be ways to read the history of a genre on the way to becoming such an object. Still, as Prins implies, the object that the lyric has become is by now identified with an expressive theory that makes it difficult for us to place lyrics back into the sort of developmental history—of social relations, of print, of edition, reception, and criticism—that is taken for granted in definitions of the novel.<sup>23</sup> The reading of the lyric produces a theory of the lyric that then produces a reading of the lyric, and that hermeneutic circle rarely opens to dialectical interruption. In his famous version of "lyric reading," Paul de Man cast such an interruption as theoretically impossible: "no lyric can be read lyrically," according to de Man, "nor can the object of a lyrical reading be itself a lyric."<sup>24</sup> While this is as much as to say (as de Man went on to say) that "the lyric is not a genre" (261) in theory, *Dickinson's Misery* shows how

poems become lyrics in history. Once we decide that Dickinson wrote poems (or once that decision is made for us), and once we decide that most poems are lyrics (or once that decision is made for us), we (by definition) lose sight of the historical process of lyric reading that is the subject of this book. Precisely because lyrics can only exist theoretically, they are made historically.

Since most of that historical process has taken place in relation to Dickinson in the United States, the subtitle of this book could be "American Lyric Reading," but it is not the national identity of the lyric imaginary that Dickinson comes to represent that I want to emphasize here. As we shall see, for over a century readers of Dickinson have been preoccupied with her work's exemplary American character, and that aspect of the public imagination of Dickinson will be central to the pages that follow. There is an account of the lyricization of specifically American poetry to be written, especially since there has been no comprehensive view of that history since Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* in 1961. Pearce takes for granted that Puritan epitaphs, elegies, anagrams and meditations, Republican epics, satires, dialogues in verse, pedagogical exercises, versified commencement addresses, protest songs, contemporary ballads, odes, and commemorative recitation exercises can all be read as lyrics—indeed, one might argue that it is lyric reading that makes possible the "continuity" of Pearce's title. Such a close affiliation between lyricization and Americanization will come to seem familiar in these chapters, though there is much to be said about the relation between national and generic identity that will fall outside the chapters themselves. I will be arguing 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.<sup>25</sup> This book attempts to make the only apparently transparent genre through which Dickinson has been brought into public view itself visible. Some of the work of doing so might at times seem microscopic, since it entails a focus not on big ideas—poetry, America, person- and womanhood—but on the small details on which those ideas precariously (though surprisingly tenaciously) depend.

Consider, for example, one overlooked detail in the history of reading Dickinson—a bit of ephemera that tempts while it also resists lyric reading. Like so many of Dickinson's letters, the rather long 1851 letter to Austin that closes with the lines that Johnson "arbitrarily established" in 1955 as a lyric and that Franklin then decided were not a lyric contained an enclosure: a leaf pinned to a slip of paper inscribed "We'll meet again and heretofore some summer 'morning'" (fig. 3). The "little forest, whose leaf is ever green" to which the lines-become-verse point is and is not the

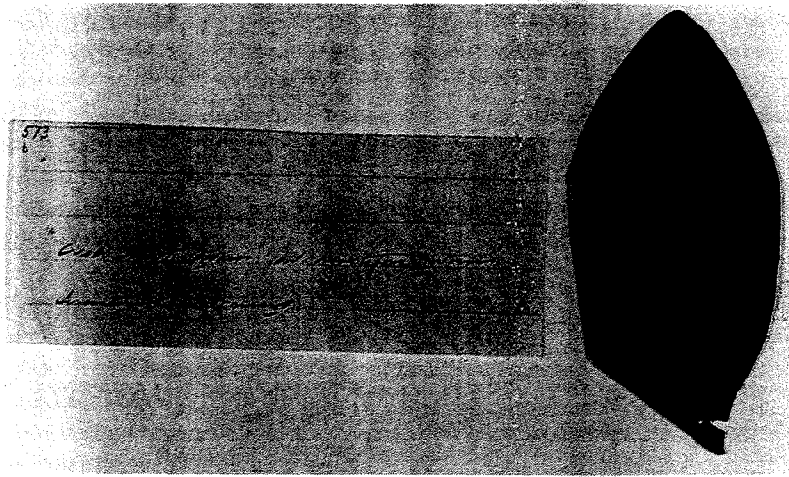


Figure 3. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, 17 October 1851. The postscript was pinned where the hole appears in the leaf at the bottom of the picture; the postmark on the leaf matches the postmark on the envelope that contained it. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 573, enclosure).

leaf that Austin held in his hand, and that difference is the enclosure's point. Whether or not the lines at the end of the letter are printed as a lyric, the now-faded leaf that left its imprint on the line attached to those lines cannot be printed—though it is here, for the first time, reproduced, and thus unfolded from Dickinson's letter and folded into the genre of literary criticism. Now addressed not to Austin but to my anonymous reader (to you), not the leaf itself but a copy of its remains, Dickinson's enclosure becomes legible as a detail of a literary corpus. Or does it? While for Austin the leaf popped out of the letter as an ironic commentary on the time and place the familiar correspondents did not but may yet have shared (if only on the page, or between quotation marks) on the October day when the letter was sent ("some summer 'morning'"), by the time that you (whoever you are) encounter the image of the leaf in this book about Dickinson you will understand it instead as a reminder of what you cannot share with Dickinson's first readers, an overlooked object lyrically suspended in time. What may seem lyrical about it is the apparent immediacy of our encounter with it: editors and printers and critics and teachers may have transformed Dickinson's work into something it was not intended to be, but a leaf is a leaf is a leaf. Yet Dickinson's message pinned to the leaf asks its intended reader to understand that a leaf taken out of context is not self-defining; it won't remain "ever green" but will (as it has) fade to

brown. Dickinson could not have foreseen that the faded leaf would end up in a college library, or that her intimate letter to her brother would one day be addressed to the readers of the 1955 *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. She could also not have foreseen that the leaf in the library would bear the trace of its transmission stamped by a hand not Dickinson's nor any reader's own. *Dickinson's Misery* is about the way in which the confusion between the pathos of a subject and the pathos of transmission evoked by the leaf rather accurately predicts the character of the poet who will come to be read heretofore as Emily Dickinson. This book is also about the way in which that confusion has come to define, in the last century and a half, not only an idea of what counts as Dickinson's verse but of what does and does not count as literary language—and especially of what does and does not count as lyric language. Let the postmark on the leaf that mediated the encounter between Dickinson and her intimate reader also stand for the institutions that exceed as they deliver literature—modes of cultural transmission that make even an old leaf legible.

My title, *Dickinson's Misery*, is intended to gain significance as this book progresses. As my account of the historical transmission of Dickinson's writing takes us further and further away from a direct encounter with that writing, "Dickinson's Misery" may evoke the pathos not of Dickinson herself but of her writing as a lost object, a *texte en souffrance*.<sup>26</sup> Yet while Derrida may be right that writing always goes astray—or is, by definition, disseminated in order to become literature—*published* writing does not wander away on its own: it is directed and addressed by some to others. In my first chapter, "Dickinson Undone," I will consider recent editorial attempts to release Dickinson's writing from the constraint of earlier editorial conventions and to rescue the character of that writing from institutional mediation—even from the constraint of the codex book itself. I will argue that recent attempts to liberate Dickinson from the unfair treatment of editorial hands are dependent on an imaginary model of the lyric—a model perhaps more constraining, because so much more capacious, than those Dickinson's early genteel editors supposed. The aspects of Dickinson's writing that do not fit into any modern model of the lyric—verse mixed with prose, lines written in variation, or lines (like the one pinned to the leaf) dependent on their artifactual contexts—have been left to suffer under the weight of variorum editions or have been transformed into weightless, digitized images of fading manuscripts made possible by invisible hands. In my second chapter, I will measure the distance between the circulation of Dickinson's verse in several spheres of familiar and public culture in the nineteenth century and the circulation of ideas of the lyric in academic culture in the twentieth century. The more we know about the circumstances of the nineteenth-century composition and reception of



Dickinson's poems, the less susceptible they seem to the theories of lyric abstraction that emerged in twentieth-century critical culture. From genteel criticism to New Criticism to de Man's lyric theory to the pragmatic backlash against literary theory and the new lyric humanism, ideas of the lyric in the century during which Dickinson's work proliferated in print constructed and deconstructed the genre in which Dickinson's writing has been cast, but in doing so they tended to widen rather than close the distance between that genre and that writing. The remaining chapters then attempt to bridge that distance, or to claim that Dickinson's work may help us to do so. In my third chapter, I will compare Dickinson's figures of address—her sociable correspondence—to the forms of address that have been attributed to her texts as a set of lyrics. In my fourth chapter, I will explore Dickinson's forms of self-reference, especially literal or physical self-reference, in the context of nineteenth-century American intellectual culture and in the context of twentieth-century feminist discourse. In my final chapter, I will bring those modern feminist concerns to bear upon the nineteenth-century sentimental lyric, an often forgotten genre of vicarious identification that itself may span the distance between Dickinson's writing and the image of the poet she has become. In all of the chapters, my concern will be to trace the arc of an historical poetics, a theory of lyric reading, that seeks to revise not only our understanding of Dickinson's work but our contemporary habits of poetic interpretation.

*Dickinson's Misery* tries to do many things, but one thing it does not try to be is a reception history. Scholars have already compiled excellent critical histories of Dickinson's reception, though there is much more to be done, especially on the history of Dickinson's popular readership, yet that is not my project in this book.<sup>27</sup> Here I am interested instead in the models of the lyric that governed Dickinson's edition and reception. I could have chosen to chronicle those models strictly chronologically—the aesthetic model of the 1890s, the Imagist model of 1914, the modernist model of the 1920s, the culturally representative model of the 1930s, the pedagogical model of the 1940s, the professional model of the 1950s, the subversive model of the 1960s, the conflicted model of the 1970s, the feminist model of the 1980s, the materialist and queer models of the 1990s, and the public sphere and cyberspace models of the beginning of the twenty-first century—but as this list suggests, such a chronology quickly devolves into a thematic catalogue of types of lyrics while leaving the generic character of those lyrics relatively stable. This book instead combines reception history, book history, literary history, genre theory, and one genealogy of the discipline of literary criticism to destabilize an idea of the genre of which Dickinson's work has become such an important modern paradigm. Editors, reviewers, teachers, and readers may make up versions of a genre to

suit their place and time, but they do not do so from scratch. My subtitle, "A Theory of Lyric Reading," is meant to suggest that genre is neither an Aristotelian, taxonomic, transhistorical category of literary definition nor simply something we make up on the spot to suit the occasion of reading. What a reading of Dickinson over and against the generic models through which she has been published and read can tell us about the lyric as a genre is indeed that history has made the lyric in its image, but we have yet to recognize that image as our own.

## CONCLUSION

the first industrial chocolate manufacturer and exporter in France). The lines or words or note or fragment,

necessitates  
celerity  
were better  
nay were  
in memorial  
may  
to duller  
by duller  
things

are inscrutable, since everything that would explain them is missing.<sup>2</sup> What is missing is in turn what lyricizes the notion of the unread lines, or the private circumstances of an imaginary inscription on mass-produced print. Cornell frames what cannot be published, and in doing so turns toward its public the twentieth-century abstraction of the lyric, an idea of expression more telling than the poem that was never there.

## Notes

### BEFOREHAND

1. In a letter to Mrs. C. S. Mack in 1891, Dickinson's sister Lavinia wrote, "I found (a week after her death) a box (locked) containing seven hundred wonderful poems, carefully copied" (17 February 1891; cited by Thomas H. Johnson in his introduction to *The Poems* [J xxxix]). This citation is one source for my narrative, though the tone and several of the details are drawn from Millicent Todd Bingham's sensationally partisan account of the "discovery" and publication of the poems in *Ancestors' Brocades*. Evidently, Dickinson's sister did burn many of her extant papers though there is nothing in the will directing her to do so. That Lavinia thought that the destiny of the poems was to appear "in Print," as she put it, is clear from her many letters to the poems' first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson, and to the publisher, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers. Since these letters, the journals of Loomis Todd (in the Yale University Library) and the notes of Higginson (in the Boston Public Library) offer various versions of the manuscripts' recovery, my narrative is intentionally selective. A lucid narrative of the manuscripts' recovery and edition is offered by R. W. Franklin in his introduction to his edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Susan Dickinson, the recipient of the greatest number of Dickinson's addressed manuscripts, did not write her own version of the story of the manuscripts' recovery, but her daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, gives another wonderfully partisan account of that family's matrilineal transmission of the manuscripts in the introduction to *The Single Hound*. For that family's history of manuscript transmission, see Martha Nell Smith's and Ellen Louise Hart's introduction to *Open Me Carefully*. My account is a pastiche of these sources, and it is liberally influenced by my own experience of "discovering" the diversity of Dickinson's less carefully copied manuscripts (which may or may not have been in the locked box).

2. J. V. Cunningham, "Sorting Out: The Case of Emily Dickinson," in *The Collected Essays*, 354.

3. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 140.

4. See Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, 19; Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 1:xxi; Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 129.

5. For the 1980 reading, see Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, 194. Homans goes on to critique the strictly metaphorical interpretation that results when the lines are printed out of context, but she reads the lines lyrically nonetheless, and builds an argument about the relation between prose and poetry based on them: "Because the rhyming lines seem to grow spontaneously out of prose, they appear (whether or not Dickinson contrived the effect) to represent the untutored origins of poetry, as if poetry originated in imitation of nature" (195).

6. Mabel Loomis Todd, ed., *Letters of Emily Dickinson*; Martha Dickinson Bianchi, ed., *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*; Mabel Loomis Todd, ed., *Letters of Emily Dickinson*; Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

7. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, for the abstraction of the social imaginary. According to Taylor, "the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (2). Taylor follows Cornelius Castoriadis, who uses the term to refer to "the final articulations the society in question has imposed on the world, on itself, and on its needs, the organizing patterns that are the conditions for the representability of everything that the society can give to itself" (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 143). He also follows (as do I) the work of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. On this logic, the lyric would be one such organizing pattern that takes distinctive shape in nineteenth-century print culture and shapes the growth of American literary criticism in the twentieth century.

8. Alistair Fowler puts the observation most succinctly when he warns that "lyric" in literary theory from Cicero through Dryden is "not to be confused with the modern term" (*Kinds of Literature*, 220). We will return in the next two chapters to the lyricization of postromantic poetry—and especially to the lyricization of Dickinson's writing as modern poetry. The phenomenon is aptly characterized by Glenn Most in an essay on ancient Greek lyricists:

Some of us . . . may wonder what other kind of poetry there is besides the lyric. For a number of reasons it has become possible in modern times to identify poetry itself, in its truest or most essential form, with the lyric. . . . This is not to say that satires or poems for affairs of state have altogether ceased to be written; but these tend to be relegated to a secondary rank, whereas the essence of poetry is often located instead in a lyric impulse.

See Most, "Greek Lyric Poets," 76. As we shall see, the "number of reasons" to which Most alludes remain to be historically enumerated more carefully. The problem, of course, is how to do that. W. R. Johnson solved the problem in *The Idea of the Lyric*: by claiming that the lyric is transhistorical, a transcendent idea. M. H. Abrams made a start for a more historical approach to the nineteenth century in his "The Lyric as Poetic Norm" in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 84–88, but surprisingly few scholars have extended his scant comments there. As we shall see, among those who have done so are Douglas Patey, whose "'Aesthetics' and the Rise of Lyric in the Eighteenth Century" is invaluable for its history of the lyric's ascendancy to "truest or most essential form"; Seth Lerer, "The Genre of the Grave and the Origins of the Middle English Lyric"; Mark Jeffreys, whose "Songs and Inscriptions: Brevity and the Idea of Lyric" makes a start for the difference between Renaissance genres and modern lyric ideas; and Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*.

9. Susan Stewart, "Notes on Distressed Genres," in *Crimes of Writing*, p. 67. It should be said that not only does Stewart not include the lyric as a "distressed genre," but she considers distressed genres opposed to avant-garde genres, since "the avant garde is characterized by a struggle against generic constraints" while "the distressed genre is characterized by a struggle against history" (92). Thus implicitly for Stewart the distressed genre would be reactionary and the avant-garde resistance to genre progressive. In chapter 2, we will return to Stewart's character-

ization of the lyric as both antigeneric (or avant-garde) and antihistorical (or distressed).

10. Gerard Genette, *The Architext*, 2. Genette's rereading of what he eloquently describes as the *lectio facilior* of finding the lyric where it was not in Plato and Aristotle should revise many accounts of modern poetics. Especially suggestive is Genette's conclusion that "modes and themes, intersecting, jointly include and determine genres" (73).

11. Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," 200. Jeffreys's essay is particularly valuable for its exposition of the ways in which "the recent struggle to clear away New Critical poetics and to make room for a postmodernist poetics" (203) has often made the mistake of aligning the lyric itself (whatever that is, and Jeffreys is quite aware that generic definition is the question) with a reactionary critical ideology. For an earlier suggestive discussion of the problems entailed by the modern critical elevation of the lyric (and especially the critical abstraction of the romantic lyric), see Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License*.

12. Mary Poovey, "The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism," 436. Poovey's argument depends on the version of the romantic lyric as formal structure as outlined by Clifford Siskin in *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (particularly in "Present and Past: The Lyric Turn," 3–63), and thus is itself the product of a critical fiction of the lyric rather than of any particular lyric (a situation that proves her point).

13. Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, xv–xxiii.

14. For an account of the history of literary history in the eighteenth century, see Jonathan Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770*.

15. John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," 345.

16. Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*, 19. Janowitz's book is the model of the sort of scholarship that *should* be done in nineteenth-century American poetry, especially since the public negotiation of what have been misunderstood as romantic ideals of the lyric was that poetry's stock in trade.

17. Matthew Rowlinson, "Lyric" in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, 59.

18. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 5. See Curran's wonderful "Prolegomenon: A Primer on Subtitles in British Romantic Poetry," with which he prefaces his book for a lesson in antilyricization.

19. This is an exaggeration, but not much of one. In 1996, Joseph Harrington suggested that American literary studies since the 1950s has taken the view that "American poetry is not American literature" precisely because American literary studies bought "into a New Critical ideology of poetry" ("Why Poetry is Not American Literature" 508). Recently, that mistake has begun to be corrected: Kirsten Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture* does more to give an idea of Bryant and Longfellow in the period than most books that actually focus on the North American nineteenth century, and Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon* makes nineteenth-century American women's poetry into American literature. See also John D. Kerkering's recent *The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-*

*Century American Literature* and Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*.

20. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, xi-xii, vi.

21. The printed lyric's nostalgia for preprint forms of the genre might be attributed to Bakhtin's observation that genre is a repository of "undying elements of the archaic"; although a genre "lives in the present . . . it always remembers the past, its beginnings" (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 106). One might only add to Bakhtin's general point that if a genre cannot itself "remember" its history, readers have to invent one to remember for it.

22. Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 19. Since "lyric reading" is an historically theorized process that Prins and I have thought out together (lyrically), her ideas on the subject will frequently subtend my own—more frequently, I fear, that I will be able to note often or explicitly enough in this book. For an explicitly co-written statement of some of these ideas, see Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "Lyrical Studies."

23. Michael McKeon's is the classic form of an historical definition of genre in relation to the definition of the novel. According to McKeon, genre "cannot be divorced . . . from the understanding of genres in history . . . [T]he theory of genre must be a dialectical theory of genre" (*The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* 1). In *Lyric Generations*, Gabrielle Starr argues that McKeon's dialectical history of the novel should include the lyric since, according to Starr, in the eighteenth century "the lyric mode is transformed by a history ostensibly not its own"—that is, by the history of the new print genre of the novel (1). Still, even in a history that is the history of the interaction and mutual revision of genres, the problem of what a generic form is before and after its revision (that is, what a literary form is when it is removed from the history that makes it into a literary form) remains. The closest thing to McKeon's book so far for the lyric form is Janowitz's *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition*. Something like it is needed for American lyric, and something like McKeon's recent anthology on *Theory of the Novel* is needed for the theory of the lyric.

24. Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 254. We will return to the difficulty (or, as he would put it, impossibility) of de Man's version of lyric reading in chapter 2.

25. Two recent versions of the Americanization of the lyric's only apparent transparency are Elisa New's *The Line's Eye* and Angus Fletcher's *A New Theory for American Poetry*. See my review of New's book in *Raritan*. Because both New and Fletcher embrace all poetry as essentially lyric, they both extend that embrace to include a lyricization of a national literary tradition.

The notable exception to the prevailing tendency to read Dickinson as if her lyricism were itself transparent is the work of Sharon Cameron, from *Lyric Time to Choosing Not Choosing*. Cameron's critical importance to the present study will become obvious in the chapters that follow.

26. My use of the phrase "texte en souffrance" is a shorthand allusion to the debate between Derrida and Lacan, which centered on Lacan's claim at the end of his seminar on Poe's "The Purloined Letter" that "the sender . . . receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter,'

may, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (*The Purloined Poet: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, 35; Derrida's argument, "The Purveyor of Truth," is also included in this volume).

27. There are some excellent reception histories of Dickinson, but there is much more to be done; Buckingham's is the only history so far to give serious attention to the popular reception. See Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells, eds., *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*; Karl Lubbers' *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution*; Willis J. Buckingham's *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s*.

## CHAPTER ONE: DICKINSON UNDONE

1. T. W. Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor"; "Emily Dickinson's Letters," 444.

2. "No such experience as this in the case of an unknown poet has been reported in New York City, at least in the present generation." This clipping is unmarked in Mabel Loomis Todd's scrapbook, Mabel Loomis Todd Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

3. The precedence of print to handwriting in the nineteenth-century United States—or at least in New England—is a longer story than I can tell here. For suggestive beginnings on the subject, see Meredith McGill, "The Duplicity of the Pen," and her *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, as well as Patricia Crain, *The Story of A*.

4. Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition*, 87. For commentary on McGann's view, see Margaret Dickie, "Dickinson in Context," 325.

5. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 81. Warner's apt phrase for one of the aspects of the phenomenology of lyric reading I describe is actually a way of summarizing his citation of my argument about the lyric, though the idea behind the phrase represents the way in which he has advanced my original ideas on the subject.

6. The lines were printed for the first time in *Bolts of Melody* in a section entitled "Poems Incomplete or Unfinished," given a number in the volume (618), and arranged as two quatrains without variants and missing one line:

When what they sung for is undone  
Who cares about a bluebird's tune?  
Why, resurrection had to wait  
Till they had moved a stone.

As if the drums went on and on  
To captivate the slain—  
I dare not write until I hear—  
when what they sung for is undone.

Bingham does not explain why she both arranges the lines as a poem and does not print them as such, except to say that "the above fragment was written after 'A pang,' but both are in the writing of the eighties" (BM, 308). Bingham's mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, first editor of the manuscripts, was given co-editorial credit