Virginia Jackson, Dickinson's Misery (1st half) (Princeton UP, 2005)

CHAPTER TWO

Lyric Reading

"My Cricket"

In the issue of the *Springfield Republican* for March 23, 1864, a small notice announced that

> In Flatbush, N.Y., last Sunday, William Cutter, a farm laborer, attempted to shoot Anne Walker, a servant in Judge Vanderbilt's family. He fired twice, one of the balls passing through her sleeve and the other lodging in her hip. Cutter also shot at Mrs. Vanderbilt, who ran to the assistance of the girl, inflicting a very severe, and probably mortal wound in the abdomen. Cutter's attentions to Miss Walker had been discarded by her, and hence his attempt at revenge.[1]

The account was reprinted from the *Brooklyn Eagle;* Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Springfield Republican,* forwarded the *Eagle* article to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, commenting that "it is all horrible, & tears, & tortures, & sets all fundamental ideas afloat." Vanderbilt was Susan Dickinson's friend from school, and the interest of her personal connection to the victim was enhanced when the incident became a public event—so public that when Vanderbilt survived, Henry Ward Beecher reportedly called her the "visible evidence of spiritual life."[2] In September 1864, Emily Dickinson wrote to Susan, "I am glad Mrs.—Gertrude—lived—I believed she would—Those that are worthy of Life are of Miracle, for Life is Miracle, and Death, as harmless as a Bee, except to those who run—" (L 2:294).

To Gertrude Vanderbilt herself, whom she had never met, Dickinson addressed several lines. She may have sent verses to Vanderbilt because of Vanderbilt's friendship with Susan Dickinson, or perhaps because through that connection three Dickinson poems had just appeared in the *Drum Beat,* a paper published during the two weeks of a fund-raising fair sponsored by the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair for the Benefit of the U. S. Sanitary Commission (to improve conditions for Union troops).[3] In making transcripts in 1891 of the lines sent to Vanderbilt, Mabel Loomis Todd echoed Vanderbilt's private involvement in public matters when she noted that they were "to Mrs. Vanderbilt, after she had met with a serious accident at the close of the war—."[4] Todd's confusion of private and public events, accident and intention foretold the fate of Dickinson's letters to

Susan's Brooklyn friend: the four of which Todd made transcripts were all published as poems over the next sixty years.[5] Two of the letters seem to refer directly to Vanderbilt's "serious accident" and recovery. One of them was published as a letter in 1894, 1924, and 1931, and then as a poem in 1955 (J 830):[6]

> To this World she returned
> But with a tinge of that—
> A Compound manner,
> As a Sod
> Espoused a Violet,
> That chiefer to the Skies
> Than to Himself, allied,
> Dwelt hesitating, half of Dust—
> And half of Day, the Bride.
> Emily

Another has never been published as a letter, and was first published as a poem in 1945 (BM 193):

> Dying—to be afraid of Thee—
> One must to thine Artillery
> Have left exposed a friend—
> Than thine old Arrow is a Shot
> Delivered straighter to the Heart
> The leaving Love behind—
> Not for itself, the Dust is shy.
> But—Enemy—Beloved be—
> Thy Batteries divorce—
> Fight sternly in a dying eye
> Two Armies, Love and Certainty,
> And Love and the Reverse—
> Emily

Dickinson then copied both sets of lines onto the sort of bifolium sheets she had formerly bound in the fascicles, but after 1865 apparently arranged without binding.[7] Did the copies of the letters no longer refer to Vanderbilt? Were they ever specifically addressed to Vanderbilt? Once lifted out of the fabric of personal and public sociability in which they were originally embedded—away from Vanderbilt as cause célèbre, from the scandal of the rich white woman's dangerous employees, from Vanderbilt's implication in the war and related social causes, from Susan's friendship with her, from Dickinson's presumption of intimacy with Vanderbilt (though not with her servant) through her intimacy with Susan,

from Bowles's familiar address to Susan and his editorial and personal involvement with the Dickinsons (especially Emily), from the way friends made their way into newspapers and newspapers made their way into homes, from the coincidence between the war and Vanderbilt's "accident"—the lines no longer seem to refer to an historical occasion. Without the signature, and printed as they now appear in Franklin's edition, they look like lyric poems.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, whatever the lines *were* before they were collected and published, their existence in modern volumes may mean that the lines now *are* lyrics—at least for the purposes of interpretation. In this chapter, I will consider one of the most curious purposes of lyric interpretation during the period in which Dickinson's poems have appeared in print: a great deal of lyric reading in the twentieth century attempted to restore lyrics to the social or historical resonance that the circulation of lyrics as such tends to suppress. And since, from the perspective of modernity, that interpretation is always a recovery project, the resonance that reading restores to lyrics—especially to Dickinson's lyrics—tends toward pathos. Thus when some of the lines that begin "Dying—to be afraid of Thee—" became Poem 831 in Johnson's 1955 edition of Dickinson's *Poems*, Shira Wolosky could write in 1984 that in the poem, martial "conflict becomes an image of Dickinson's inner strife concerning an afterworld," and so conclude that Dickinson's poetry was not just "private and personal" but engaged in the suffering and dilemmas that characterized (Northern) intellectual life during the Civil War.[8] If one begins with the poem in print and if one assumes that a poem is the visible evidence of inner life, then it does seem as if the "Artillery," the "Shot, the "Batteries," and the "Armies" are figures borrowed from the period's literal strife as vehicles of personal expression. Yet if one begins with the Vanderbilt incident, Dickinson's expression may seem no less personal, though its vehicles will seem less figurative. Dickinson's language may aggrandize domestic violence into political and metaphysical contest, but such exaggeration is part of the point of the letter to Vanderbilt—it makes explicit the associations that Bowles and Beecher and Todd all implied. Yet once the letter becomes a lyric, and once the lyric is printed and opened to lyric reading, those public and private associations and their literal and figurative certainties are reversed.

Versions of the other two letters to Vanderbilt take up the confusion between literal reference and lyric reading even more explicitly—and, as we shall see in this chapter, in ways that are telling for the history of lyric interpretation in the United States in the last century. The ambitious modern theories of the lyric that emerged in the twentieth century may be far removed from the circumstances of Dickinson's writing, and far removed

from (if implicit in) most practical criticism of Dickinson, but they all, in different ways, took up the problem of the lyric's removal from modern culture; to return to Grossman's phrase in *Summa Lyrica*, they all aimed to construct "a culture in which poetry is intelligible" (207). The assumption behind such theoretical construction is always that we no longer live in such a culture. But Dickinson did. In another note sent to Vanderbilt, of which only Todd's transcript survives (fig. 12), the verse was "intelligible" to its addressee precisely because its literal referent was enclosed in the envelope:

> They have a little odor
> That to me is metre, nay 'tis poesy
> And spiciest at fading celebrate
> A habit of a laureate.
> (F 505)[9]

If Vanderbilt understood the wit of the lines in relation to an enclosed bouquet from Dickinson's garden or conservatory, then how do we understand the lines without the enclosure? Dickinson herself opened the question when she copied the lines into a fascicle (fig. 13), though of course if the fascicles were personal collections, she would have known the original referent.[10] Millicent Todd Bingham was the first to publish the lines as verse in 1945 in her book defending her mother's editorial work on the Dickinson manuscripts, though it is perhaps significant that she used them as an epigraph to a chapter entitled "Creative Editing."[11] We could decide that the exact referent for the pronoun makes no difference—that when printed as Poem 88 in *Bolts of Melody* or Johnson's Poem 785 or Franklin's Poem 505, the point of the lines is that "metre" and "poesy" (or "melody") are metaphors. But they only become metaphors when they are no longer puns on the relation between flowers and poems, a relation that, as Vanderbilt and Dickinson and any other nineteenth-century reader would know, usually worked the other way around (so that "flowers" would be a term used to refer to poems rather than "poems" becoming a term one uses to refer to flowers).[12]

If comparisons between Dickinson's printed lyrics and their manuscript forms merely continued to yield reversals of literal and figural fortune, they would be worth making, but they would not be very suggestive for a theory of modern lyric reading. Yet several versions of the lines in the fourth letter to Vanderbilt suggest much more than such a reversal: the history of their familiar circulation as well as the history of their publication and later reception open into the central issues in twentieth-century lyric theory—indeed, the story of their transmission exemplifies the emergence of the lyric as a creature of modern interpretation and its shift

Figure 12. Mabel Loomis Todd's transcript of the note to Gertrude Vanderbilt that is now Franklin's poem 505. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. Tr. 59c).

Figure 13. "Fascicle" copy of lines in fig. 12, lower half of page. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. No. 81-9, verso).

toward personal and cultural abstraction. That story began rather modestly when, in the summer of 1865, Dickinson sent some of the most beautiful lines she ever wrote to Flatbush:

> Further in Summer than
> the Birds—Pathetic from the
> Grass—a Minor Nation
> celebrates it's unobtrusive Mass—
> No Ordinance be seen—
> So gradual the Grace
> A pensive Custom it
> becomes Enlarging loneliness—
> 'Tis Audiblest, at Dusk—
> When Day's attempt
> is done and Nature nothing
> waits to do but terminate in Tune—
> Nor difference it knows
> Of Cadence, or of
> Pause—but simultaneous as
> Same—the Service emphasize—
> Nor know I when it
> cease—
> At Candles, it is here—
> When Sunrise is—that
> it is not—than this, I know
> no more—The Earth has many
> keys where Melody is not
> Is the Unknown—
> Peninsula—Beauty is Nature's
> Fact—but Witness for Her
> Land and Witness for Her
> Sea—the Cricket is Her
> utmost of Elegy, to Me—[13]

If, as I suggested in the last chapter, birdsong represented for Dickinson and for the period as a whole a lyricism unattainable by the human poet, then we might say that the cricket's song is even "further" removed from the capacity of human expression than is the nightingale's or skylark's or bluebird's. By this logic, the crickets can express what the writer cannot, or can, as part of nature, themselves become the signs of seasonal wane, of summer's passing. Thus these lines, unlike the lines in the other letters to Vanderbilt, do not seem to refer to any historical circumstance or literal enclosure known to the two women. On the contrary, their theme of sea-

sonal change as well as their use of the cricket as poetic figure place them squarely in the abstract temporality and figurative referentiality of the lyric.

Or so it now seems to us. As it happened, another set of lines that were published in the *Drum Beat* twelve days before Vanderbilt was shot bear a relation to the lines now known to most readers of Dickinson's poems as "Further in Summer than the Birds." In the first edition of Dickinson's *Poems* in 1890, Higginson and Todd gave the following lines the title "Indian Summer," though they were entitled "October" in the final issue of the *Drum Beat* issued on March 11, 1864:

> These are the days when birds come back,
> A very few, a bird or two,
> To take a backward look.
>
> These are the days when skies resume
> The old, old sophistries of June,—
> A blue and gold mistake.
>
> Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee!
> Almost thy plausibility
> Induces my belief,
>
> Till ranks of seeds their witness bear,
> And softly, through the altered air,
> Hurries a timid leaf.
>
> Oh, sacrament of summer days,
> Oh last communion in the haze,
> Permit a child to join!
>
> Thy sacred emblems to partake,
> Thy consecrated bread to take,
> And thine immortal wine!
> (F 122 [B])

Whether or not Vanderbilt was responsible for the *Drum Beat* publication of Dickinson's poems, both she and Dickinson would have read the poem reprinted above in that paper.[14] If Dandurand and Franklin are right that the lines that begin "Further in Summer than the Birds" were sent to Vanderbilt late in the summer of 1865, then they would have been written over a year after the lines about late season birds were published in 1864. Like the crickets in the later lines, the birds in the lines that appeared in the Brooklyn paper are signs of change—though the fall birds are misleading, seeming to signal summer rather than winter. What is striking when one

puts the lines next to one another (something no editor of Dickinson has done) is the somewhat inappropriate language of Christian ritual that characterizes both sets. The language is "somewhat inappropriate" in the sense that in the *Drum Beat* poem, what is frankly called a "mistake" in the sixth line becomes a "sacrament of summer days" in the thirteenth; in the lines that begin "Further in Summer than the Birds," the "unobtrusive Mass" celebrated by the "Minor Nation" of Crickets is a strangely elaborate figure for cricket song. In both the poem published in the *Drum Beat* and in the lines sent to Vanderbilt in 1865, the activities of birds and crickets are described as highly ritualized Christian observance—so highly ritualized that they seem absurd activities for even anthropomorphized birds or crickets.[15] If in the romantic lyric birdsong was (and it was) a figure for the native culture of nature, in Dickinson's lines birds and crickets clearly do not belong to the culture of "sacrament," "communion, "Mass," and "Ordinance" used to describe them. Dickinson's lines place Christianity, cultural iconography, nature, and writing at odd angles to one another.

That incongruity would have been important in the United States in 1864 and 1865. We need only recall once again that most popular of Union Civil War poems, "The Battle-Hymn of the Republic," to see that "[w]hile God is marching on" in Howe's call to arms, "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored," the apostrophe to the "sacrament of summer days" in Dickinson's *Drum Beat* poem does not suppose that those days' "immortal wine" is anything but an autumnal illusion. Now, since the lines appear to have been first sent to Susan Dickinson in the 1850s, it is unlikely that Dickinson originally intended them to resonate with the discourse that intensified with the war; it was only their accidental publication in 1864 in a paper devoted to the Union cause that made the untimely "sacrament of summer days" potentially analogous to a divinely sanctioned ray of hope in a darkening season.[16] And if the beginning of the last year of the war was a hybrid season, then the summer after the end of the war was a season of stark contrasts. The immense relief that the war was over was followed so swiftly by Lincoln's assassination and the registration of such enormous national loss (including the loss of the identity of "the nation" itself) that, as Louis Menand has written, martial victory seemed to have come at the cost of "a failure of culture, a failure of ideas."[17] If Dickinson did send the lines that begin "Further in Summer than the Birds" to Vanderbilt in the summer of 1865, then the "Minor Nation" of crickets observes an Old World Catholic "Custom" unavailable to the ravaged modern Protestant culture of Dickinson's place and time.[18] Unlike the suffering modern American postwar nation, the pathos of the crickets' "Minor Nation" finds coherent cultural expression; their natural ceremonies may be invisible, and they

may not be metrical, but the last lines describe them in the rhetoric of classic nationalism (". . . for Her Land . . . for Her Sea . . .") as the Earth's "Elegy." Yet while the elegy is apt, the sacramental language used to describe it is evidently not: is "a Minor Nation" a nation at all? Is an "Ordinance" that cannot be "seen" still a rite or statute? Is a "pensive Custom" no longer a custom because no longer ingrained habit? Is a "Tune" without "Cadence" or "Pause" a song?

Those questions may be rhetorical, but the last lines sent to Vanderbilt, beginning "The Earth has many / keys," appear to reverse their direction, or put them to rest. In these lines, human "Melody" cannot be imposed on nature, which is suddenly (and strangely, after having been made into a Catholic nation with its own customs) "the Unknown— / Peninsula—." As Joanne Feit Diehl has pointed out, Dickinson's lines may echo Keats's sonnet "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket" and its opening assertion that "[t]he Poetry of the earth is never dead."[19] If so, however, then unlike Keats's cricket by the hearth, Dickinson's cricket does not sing of nature's persistence within culture but of a natural death that culture cannot repair. That reversal of the first lines' emphasis might be why Bingham printed them separately as Poem 139 (Johnson followed suit in 1955 and made "The earth has many keys" the last poem in his collection, Poem 1775, an error that led several later interpreters to treat the poem invented by a modern editor as Dickinson's own last poem).

Now, the cricket's elegy may be or may have been simply the elegy of summer's passing, and its elevated or outlandish description no more than that. Yet the summer of 1865 was full of elegies for nature that were elegies for the culture lost with Lincoln and the war. Whitman's great pastoral elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" may now be the best known of such poems, a spring elegy on the occasion of the events of April 1865, and the most beautiful lines ever written on the relation between seasonal redemption, Christian myths of resurrection, and cultural reformation. Yet there were many less distinguished elegies published that summer in the aftermath of the war. In the July 1865 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* a sonnet appeared, bearing a somewhat out-of-date title:

ACCOMPLICES.

Virginia, 1865.

The soft new grass is creeping o'er the graves
  By the Potomac: and the crisp ground-flower
  Lifts its blue cup to catch the passing shower;
The pine-cone ripens, and the long moss waves
Its tangled gonfalons above our braves.

Hark, what a burst of music from yon wood!
The Southern nightingale, above its brood,
In its melodious summer madness raves.
Ah, with what delicate touches of her hand.
With what sweet voices, Nature seeks to screen
The awful Crime of this distracted Land.—
Sets her birds singing, while she spreads her green
Mantle of velvet where the Murdered lie,
As if to hide the horror from God's eye![20]

The war over, "accomplices" seems the wrong word for the signs of natural recovery the sonnet describes. Yet, as becomes (all too) clear in the closing sestet, the grass, flowers, moss, and birds of postwar Virginia are in cohoots with the Union's former enemies by themselves regenerating a pastoral scene to "screen" the war's casualties. "The Murdered" appear all the more murdered (as opposed to, say, *fallen* in battle) in contrast to the apparent peace of the pastoral scene.[21] Not the instruments of divine will (like Howe's "grapes of wrath") but attempts "to hide the horror from God's eye" (still identified with the wounded Union's perspective), the sonnet mourns the fact that natural expression is not cultural expression—or if it is, it is the expression of the wrong culture, the wrong poetry of the wrong earth. "The Southern nightingale" could not exist in nature in North America, but as romantic poetic figure it becomes the laureate of "this distracted Land," a rough analogy to the cricket's function as "Witness for Her / Land" in Dickinson's lines. Unlike "The Earth" in "Further in Summer than the Birds," however, Virginia in 1865 was, according to the sonnet, still removed and led astray from the Union, a condition that nature could not repair. The problem in the *Atlantic* sonnet is that nature is not naturally elegiac; "its melodious summer madness" is the wrong tune for the cultural season, or for what will now, the poem suggests, count as the perspective empowered by the state to decide that the South's actions were criminal.

The perspective of the sonnet itself is not hard to locate: as a rather elaborate combination of Italian and Elizabethan forms in Wordsworth's modern mode (including couplets within as well as at the end of the sonnet), the poem claims the privilege of its high-middlebrow *Atlantic* publication (a rough equivalent to the contemporary weekly *New Yorker* poems) to present what later in the century in another genre the same magazine would call "local color." In contrast, in Dickinson's 1865 lines to Vanderbilt, "Beauty is Nature's / Fact" rather than the sign of individual or cultural pathos, though "the Cricket" can still seem the "utmost of Elegy, to Me—."[22] That last prepositional phrase, signed "Emily" in the original

manuscript, qualifies the problem of whether nature actually mourns and makes it a matter of personal, rather than cultural, perspective. The question is then how that personal perspective circulates, of what forms it takes, of what culture it may create.

We do not have a record of Vanderbilt's reply to Dickinson's "Further in Summer than the Birds," if she wrote one. We do know that Dickinson sent a similar set of lines to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, perhaps also in 1865, but that manuscript has been lost. In 1866, Dickinson sent some of the same lines to Higginson (figs. 14a, 14b), accompanied by a note:

Carlo died—
E. Dickinson
Would you instruct me now?[23]

Carlo, Dickinson's Newfoundland dog, would have been about sixteen years old in 1866.[24] Since her first letter to him in 1862, Dickinson had been asking Higginson for "instruction" in writing, so perhaps she meant to present her lines as evidence of her attempt to write an elegy. But an elegy for what, or for whom? If Vanderbilt might have understood the lines sent to her in 1865 in the context of the aftermath of the war, did Higginson understand them as an elegy for a dog? In the version of the lines sent to Higginson, neither the invocation of national witness in the final lines to Vanderbilt nor the word "elegy" appears:

Further in Summer
than the Birds
Pathetic from
the Grass
A minor nation
celebrates
It's unobtrusive Mass.
No Ordinance be
seen
So gradual the
Grace
A pensive Custom
it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquest felt
at noon
When August
burning low

Insect Sounds?

Further in Summer
Than the Birds
Pathetic from
the Grass
A minor Nation
celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be
seen
So gradual the
Grace
A pensive Custom
it becomes

Enlarging Loneliness.

Figure 14a. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1866. Boston Public Library/Rare Books Department, Courtesy of the Trustees (Ms. AM 1093, 22).

Antiquest felt -
at Noon
When August
burning low
Arise this spectral
Canticle
Repose to typify

Remit as yet
no Grace
No Furrow on the
Glow
Yet a Druidic
Difference
Enhances Nature now

Figure 14b. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1866. Boston Public Libaray/Rare Books Department, Courtesy of the Trustees (Ms. AM 1093, 22).

Arise the spectral
Canticle
Repose to typify

Remit as yet
no Grace
No Furrow on the
Glow
Yet a Druidic
Difference
Enhances Nature now[.]

Since Dickinson sent the lines to Higginson in late January 1866, they certainly did not refer to a current natural season, and if they may have resonated with a cultural season in the summer of 1865, then that resonance must have been fainter in the winter of 1866. Dickinson's rather abrupt note to Higginson at the beginning of 1866 was actually the first letter she had sent to him since she had written to him in early June 1864, after learning that he had been wounded in battle in July 1863 and had left the Union army in May 1864.[25] Dickinson herself was in Cambridge under the care of a doctor for eye trouble in 1864; she had written to Higginson to ask if he were "in danger," commenting that "Carlo did not come, because he would die, in Jail" (L 290). Thus the letter of 1866 picks up the thread of the dog's health, but may also continue the oblique reference to the consequences of the war. The lines to Higginson that differ from those in the letter to Vanderbilt not only take out the earlier explicit reference to "elegy" but place the consequences of seasonal change earlier and further within the discourse of natural sympathy than did the lines to Vanderbilt. The first new line, "Antiquest felt," puns on the Old World "Mass" and "Ordinance," but shifts the language of outmoded "Custom" to the realm of individual sensibility, and that shift also changes what the ritual of the crickets is said to "typify." The symbolic function of cricket song has moved away from the register of natural national "witness" in the lines to Vanderbilt; in the lines to Higginson, the still vaguely Catholic "Canticle" represents midday "Repose." But whose repose? The abstraction of the lines to Higginson align the day's apex with individual pathos and then align both with an even older, more culturally misplaced religious rite, a "Druidic / Difference." The lines are certainly more abstract than were the lines sent to Vanderbilt, but the relation between natural and cultural expression—or the problem of what form expression should take—has become more acute.

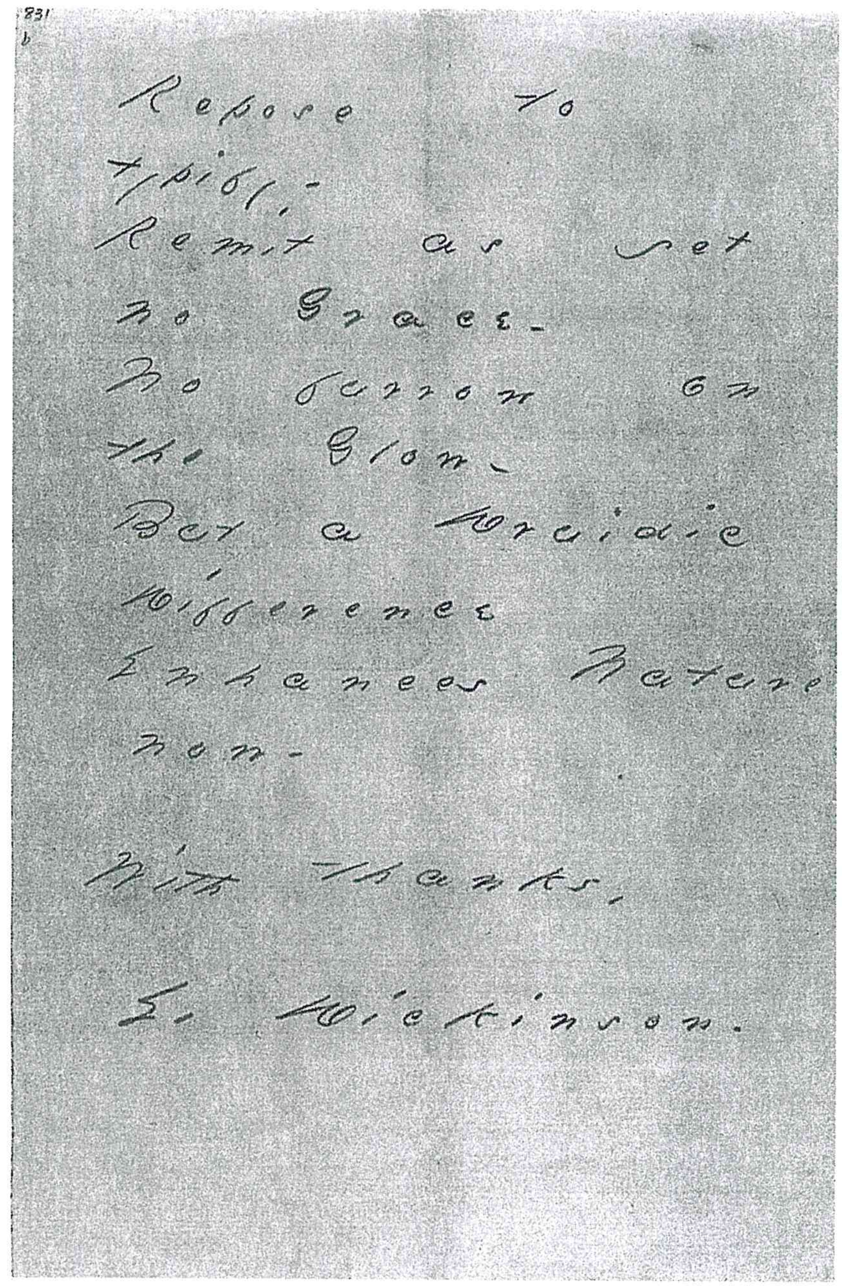
If that problem may have attached itself to the historical climate in the seasons just after the war, or even to the death of Carlo in 1866, it would

have presented itself very differently seventeen years later when Dickinson sent the lines she had sent to Higginson to Thomas Niles. Niles was the chief editor at Roberts Brothers, the publisher that would issue the first volumes of Dickinson's poems in the 1890s. He had initiated a correspondence with Dickinson in 1878, after he had published a Dickinson poem in the anonymous collection *A Masque of Poets*.[26] In 1883, Dickinson wrote to thank him for a copy of the Roberts Brothers' edition of Mathilde Blind's *Life of George Eliot*, writing, "I bring you a chill Gift—My Cricket and the Snow" (L 813). She then included the lines she had sent to Higginson in 1866 in the letter before her signature (figs. 15a, 15b, 15c), and separately enclosed the lines that became "It sifts from Leaden Sieves—" (F 291). Though Niles apparently addressed Dickinson several times, asking for "a M.S. collection of your poems, that is, if you want to give them to the world through the medium of a publisher" (L 813b), she sent only what she called such "gifts," naming them as if they were the objects they described: "My Cricket and the Snow," or "the Bird . . . a Thunderstorm—a Humming Bird . . . a Country Burial" (L 814). Dickinson's objectification of her writing mirrored her own practice of including objects with or within the writing; like the pressed flowers, dead insects, assorted clippings, or illustrations that often accompanied the lines she addressed to particular correspondents, the "gifts" sent to Niles were marked by the singular rather than the commodity form—or at least that is the way Niles himself seems to have understood Dickinson's intention. "I am very much obliged to you for the three poems which I have read & reread with great pleasure," he wrote to Dickinson in 1883, "but which I have not consumed. I shall keep them unless you order me to do otherwise—" (L 814a). The intimacy supposed by the exchange of the singular object obliges its recipient to keep it, and his relationship to the giver, to himself.[27] But we know that the verse Dickinson referred to as "My Cricket" was not a singular object—on the contrary, it was a text she had circulated to various correspondents over the course of over sixteen years. By sending it to Niles, a publisher she would never meet, did she not intend to widen those conditions of circulation, to go public? If the difference between a singular object and a commodity is the exchange value of that object, then we would have to say that by sending her verse to Niles, Dickinson was potentially increasing the exchange value of her writing, or bringing it closer to the commodity form.[28]

Yet as history would have it, not until seven years later, after her death, did Niles and Roberts Brothers publish in what Austin Warren would later call "slim grey volumes" the verse that Higginson would so emphatically characterize as "something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind"

Figure 15a. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Niles, 1883. Todd's transcript of lines, which she copied onto the verso of the first sheet of the letter, is visible in the photograph above; Todd also penciled in the later title. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED mss. 831, 831a, 831b).

Figure 15b. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Niles, 1883. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED mss. 831, 831a, 831b).


831
b

Repose to
[illegible] -
Remit as yet
no Grace -
No Furrow on
the Glow -
Yet a Druidic
Difference
Enhances Nature
now -
With thanks,
E. Dickinson.

Figure 15c. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Niles, 1883. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED mss. 831, 831a, 831b).

(*Poems* 1890, iii).[29] Whatever Dickinson's own intentions may have been, the fact that Niles chose not to publish her poems until they could be circulated as if not intended for public circulation increased their commodity value beyond anyone's expectations. The practical editor of that first edition, Mabel Loomis Todd, transformed Dickinson's reference to her lines into a penciled title, and lineated the poem directly on the manuscript (fig. 15a). Whatever genre we might assign to Dickinson's lines during the years they were exchanged between Dickinson and various individuals, they became lyrics in 1890. The maze of particular practical-social relations to which they pointed before they were published as lyrics became a much more abstract and simplified social relation after publication determined their genre.

Before that happened, however, Dickinson sent the lines that she had sent to Vanderbilt and Higginson and Niles to one other person. Although Dickinson could not have known it in 1883, the woman to whom she addressed this last manuscript (figs. 16a, 16b), Mabel Loomis Todd, would become the first and in many ways most influential hands-on editor of Dickinson's poems. Todd would be the one to take apart the fascicles, to make transcripts of lines in various correspondences, to sort most of what Todd later wrote "looked almost hopeless from a printer's point of view."[30] Yet Todd's familiarity with Dickinson's manuscripts began after Dickinson's death; since Todd was Dickinson's brother's lover, Dickinson's sister-in-law and lifelong intimate, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, the recipient of most of the manuscripts Dickinson herself circulated, did not share most of her cache of manuscripts with Todd and Higginson. By late summer 1883, the affair between Austin Dickinson and Mabel Todd had been going on for about a year, long enough for it to have become a matter of social concern; when Todd was spending the summer of 1883 in New Hampshire, the letters between the two alternated between businesslike "cover" letters and passionate secret confessions that they asked one another to "destroy."[31] One such enclosure of August 1883 from Austin to Mabel is a small scrap of paper:

Can you endure this silence longer?
I cannot
I said too much when I said you needn't write
'Tis too dreadful
Do speak[32]

It was during this time of separation and tension between her brother and Mabel Todd that Emily Dickinson sent the lines that begin "Further in Summer / than the Birds—" to New Hampshire addressed formally to "Mrs. Prof. Todd," signing them "Brother and Sister's Emily, with love—."

Further in Summer
than the Birds -
Pathetic from the
Grass -
A minor Nation
celebrates
Its' unobtrusive
Mass.

No Ordinance
be seen -
So gradual
the Grace
A gentle Custom
it becomes -
Enlarging Loneliness.

Figure 16a. Emily Dickinson to Mabel Loomis Todd, 1883. Courtesy Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED mss, 66, 66a).

66a

Antiquest felt
at Noon -
When August
burning low
Arise this spec-
tral Canticle
Repose to typify -

Remit as yet
no Grace -
No furrow on
the Glow,
But a Druidic
Difference
Enhances Nature
now -
Brother and Sisters

Emily with Love -

Figure 16b. Emily Dickinson to Mabel Loomis Todd, 1883. Courtesy Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED mss, 66, 66a).

Enclosed within the lines was a small square of white paper, and enclosed in that square was a dead cricket, which has miraculously survived in the archive in disarticulated fragments (fig. 17). If the reference to "My Cricket" in the letter to Niles may have suggested that Dickinson had begun to reify her writing in view of a wider, less personal circuit of exchange, then her enclosure of the cricket in the intimate exchange of the lines addressed to more intimate correspondents suggests a very different view of their range of reference, or of the pathos they may have expressed for their reader.

This is to say that while the problem of lyric reference might seem to have been what was at stake in the preceding pages, the overlapping or incongruous details, seasons, public and private histories, battles and pets, sex scandals and insect remnants, books, newspapers, and all sorts of familiar letters that surrounded the lines later published as a Dickinson lyric could not be said to be what the lines are "about." In fact, those contingencies may never have been the subject of the lines, but in any case they could only have formed part of what the lines *were* about; that is, the stories that could be unfolded from them may or may not have been relevant to the lines' potentially miscellaneous subjects (and objects) in the past. Once the lines were published and received as a lyric, those several and severally dated subjects and objects and their several stories faded from view, since the poem's referent would thereafter be understood as the subject herself—suspended, lyrically, in place and time.

That lyrical suspension may seem to be where Dickinson's lines on the cricket were always headed, detaching themselves over and over from whatever circumstances clung to them and readily attaching themselves to others. Yet, as we shall see, one of the most interesting aspects of twentieth-century critical thought about lyric subjectivity was the lack of such particular attachments; for literary theory in the United States in the twentieth century, the isolated lyric subject tended to become a social, even an historical and cultural, abstraction. In Dickinson's case, that meant that the densely woven fabric of social relations from which her verse was removed when it was edited and published as a series of isolated lyrics was replaced by a theoretical concept of "the social" as such; the lyric subject then became the personification of that concept. So, for example, when David Porter wrote in 1981 that what was by then Johnson's Poem 1068 "is a masterpiece in the art of the aftermath," he did not mean the aftermath of Vanderbilt's accident, or of the Civil War, or of any particular summer, or of Higginson's wounds, or of Carlo's death, or of Dickinson's brother's love affair, or of the life and death of a cricket, but Dickinson's own "preoccupation with afterknowledge, with living in the aftermath."[33] That preoccupation, in turn, typified for Porter "an extreme,

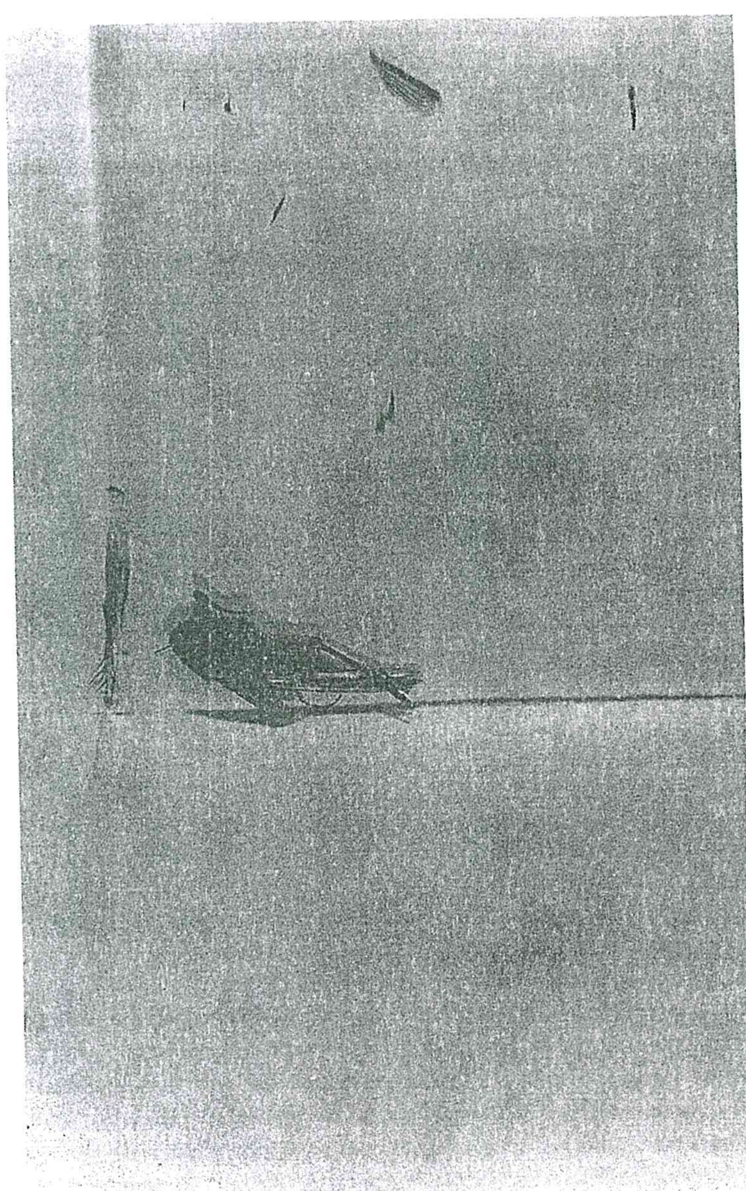


Figure 17. This cricket (now dismembered, though artfully rearticulated by the photographer) was enclosed with fig. 16 in the small square of paper on which it is pictured, and on which it has left its mark. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED. ms 66, enclosure).