

Reading the Fascicles of
Emily Dickinson
Dwelling in Possibilities

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OHIO STATE

*Like this to dance - like this to sing -
 People open that my sister's green -
 I ask, facts over my own brown.
 I wait by your favorite hills
 Announcing my own other color.
 And I am drawn!*

**Dickinson's
 Fascicles**

304

*As if I asked a common alms,
 Found on my wayward hand,
 A stranger offered a kingdom
 And I perceived a dance -
 As if I asked a common alms
 And it were mine?
 And if I asked for purple dials
 And she should give me lawn!*

*She slept beneath the
 Remembrance
 I touched her
 She recognized
 Put on the
 And*

**A
 Spectrum
 of
 Possibilities**

*The feet of
 With eyes
 The crowd
 The base
 The lips
 Long year
 till you
 practice.*

*Deeds are
 Crotched
 Pinnacles -
 Pedestrian
 Signal
 Larceny -
 Quail -
 To crown*

*My figure
 From far*

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“Looking at Death, is Dying”

Fascicle 16 in a Civil War Context

PAULA BERNAT BENNETT

This is pure deixis, a reality that can be projected only in the world of language. . . . It is hermetic language and the poems themselves become hermetic enclosures.

—David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (120, 121)

For all that “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (F340)—the subject of the above epigraph—is among Dickinson’s most powerful poems, David Porter’s frustration with it is more than understandable. Few Dickinson poems, if any, so tease the reader with emphatic statement after emphatic statement, leaving question after question in its wake. Set up as a single, clause-filled, dash-joined, non-sentence, this poem veils not just its subject but its speaker. S/he could be an observer or the corpse itself. If an observer, who? If the corpse, how could it “feel” its own burial? Then there are the other questions. Are we, for example, to take this funeral (occurring in the brain, after all) as real, or is it a trope for something else? What? Where is the speaker? What “Wrecked” him/her there? To what does the “Plank in Reason” refer, and what does its breaking signify? What sort of “plunge” does the speaker take, and what sort of “World[s]” does s/he pass on the way down? Have the worlds always been there, or are they the consequence of some (unidentified) event that is the poem’s occasion? What does the speaker mean by “Finished knowing – then”? Is this an allusion to death? To insanity? To an inability to make sense of things? To unconsciousness? Is the speaker describing some sort of epistemological crisis or a spiritual one, a loss of faith perhaps? Why does the poem not end (i.e., have a period instead of a dash), especially if the speaker’s consciousness (“knowing”) does (i.e., is “Finished”)?

As those familiar with Dickinson criticism know, scholars have answered these questions in myriad ways, each using his or her own interpretative framework—biographical, new critical, psychoanalytic, religious, feminist, and so forth to support their claim. Feminist interpreters have pointed to Dickinson's struggle with the gender issues of her day, a struggle that led her, they believe, to the brink of madness if not over it. Other scholars have forwarded other kinds of cultural or biographical contexts. Some have argued that death here is a metaphor for madness, others that both death and madness are ways of talking about consciousness or about loss of faith, or even, as Karen Ford does, about language's failure (69-70): "I, and Silence, some strange Race / Wrecked, solitary, here." Some treat the funeral as "real," if imagined, others as a placeholder for something else, experiences, for instance, that numb one out or bring one to the verge of suicidal despair. The breaking of a "Plank in Reason" has been taken as a figure for psychotic breakdown by John Cody (29) and failed faith by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who astutely points to the literalized "plank of faith" in the religious iconography of the period (227-32). More mundanely, Judith Farr believes the poem describes "a fainting spell," with the speaker moving "from feeling to not knowing" (*Passion* 90-91). Sharon Cameron thinks "Funeral" is about ambivalence in making a thought unconscious (*Choosing* 141-44). With an unusual amount of hard evidence behind them, both Barton Levi St. Armand (*Her Culture* 108, 109) and Elizabeth Phillips (50-54) tie the poem to the death of Frazar Stearns at the battle of New Bern in March of 1862—a death that rocked not just the Dickinson family but the entire town of Amherst. I will return to Frazar Stearns shortly.

That so many specialists have read "I felt a Funeral" so diversely speaks directly to the interpretive problem lying at the heart of Dickinson's poetry, namely its indeterminacy—the absence of any sort of stabilizing framework by which her meanings can be contained. Absences, as David Porter writes, are constitutive in Dickinson's writing, "at every level: morpheme, word, phrase, poem, text, corpus, and the life as its matrix" (*Modern idiom* 5). Because they are, and because, as Porter, Cristanne Miller, and others, have argued, they require that the reader collaborate with the poet if they are to read her at all (see Miller, *Grammar*, 15-19; Porter, *Modern Idiom* 43-47; Crumbley, *Winds* 11-14), these absences make Dickinson a fabulously rich poet to explore. As she herself recognized in the slyest of puns, her verse is a "reduceless Mine" (Fr1091). But as the pile-up of interpretations for "I felt a Funeral" suggests, they also make her a very tricky read. This is not because one can go "wrong"—Dickinson being dead, how is "wrong" to be determined?—but because, given collaboration's role in the reading of her

work, it is so fatally easy to think oneself “right,” projecting onto the scrim of her verse one’s own meaning.

Given Dickinson’s indeterminacy, it is more than understandable, therefore, that scholars had hoped, with the publication of R. W. Franklin’s 1981 facsimile edition of the fascicles—or “manuscript books,” as he rather misleadingly calls them—that they, being self-chosen, would provide the very frameworks for interpretation her poems otherwise lack. Despite the varied and otherwise excellent work of scholars such as Dorothy Oberhaus, Eleanor Heginbotham, and Sharon Cameron, however, this has not come to pass.¹ On the contrary, although our readings of individual poems have been greatly enhanced by scholars’ focus on the plays of similarity and difference among the fascicle poems themselves, the fascicles’ status as free-standing interpretive units (that is, as “books”) remains as contested as ever.² For many, the present writer included, treatments of the fascicles as independent, self-contained thematic structures only seem to multiply—this time over whole groups of poems—the temptations to projection to which, as Robert McClure Smith argues in *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*, all Dickinson scholars are of necessity prone, the present writer—one of Smith’s targets—included (1–18, 190–92).

In this chapter I will not speculate, therefore, on Dickinson’s intentions when putting the poems in Fascicle 16—“I felt a Funeral’s” fascicle—together. Short of finding hard evidence to the contrary, there is simply no way to know why she did what she did, be it with respect to the selection of poems, their arrangement, or her overall intentions for the fascicle as a whole. But taking St. Armand’s and Phillips’s reading of “I felt a Funeral” as my starting point, what I will do is show how the poems in this fascicle, all of which Franklin dates in or about the summer of 1862, can be united in relation to something else instead, namely the Civil War. In doing so, I am *not* claiming that all these poems were necessarily written with the Civil War in mind, let alone that they are consciously arranged in such a way as to say something specific about it—or about Stearns’s death. Rather, I will argue that by reading them *through* the Civil War context that “I felt a Funeral” establishes, and, in particular, in relation to the horror that Stearns’s death elicited in Dickinson, her family, and friends, one can find in them such unity as the fascicle possesses. This is the accidental unity of a set of poems that were written at a particular point in time when death (the single unifying thread binding the poems themselves) had overwhelming resonance for their author as for her society as a whole.³

In taking this approach, I hope to model an alternative way into the fascicles, one based on the assumption that if there are commonalities among

fascicle poems, they are not the product of Dickinson's wish to make books, but rather the consequence of their being created by a single author, writing in a specific time, with specific concerns in mind. This approach will do nothing to solve the interpretive problems posed by Dickinson's indeterminacy in Fascicle 16 or elsewhere. To my mind, such problems are inseparable from her poetry's greatest strengths and are, therefore, a given of her verse. But as I hope to demonstrate, without making more of the fascicles than they are, insofar as these groupings bring various poems together, they can provide rich interpretive contexts for the poems they contain. And, at least where Fascicle 16 is concerned, this in itself can have a formidable impact on how we understand her in ways that reading these same poems in isolation from each other cannot have.

Reading Fascicle 16 through "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"

For all the centrality of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" to my reading of Fascicle 16, I will not discuss the poem here since I discussed both its indeterminacy and its Civil War context elsewhere, as have others as well.⁴ However, I should say something at least about why I believe it is a Civil War poem and that Frazar Stearns's funeral was its occasion. The supporting evidence for both these contentions, first brought forward by St. Armand and by Phillips, can be found in the highly detailed letters, dated late March, which Dickinson wrote to her cousins, Loo and Fanny Norcross, and to Samuel Bowles. In them, Dickinson describes Stearns's death and her own family's, especially, her brother, Austin's, shocked response to it. Phillips's argument, in particular, that "I felt a Funeral," with all its dislocations and desolations, may in fact represent less Dickinson's own response than that of Austin, whose deep distress greatly perturbed the poet, seems to me to have considerable merit, and my own thinking about the poem is heavily indebted to her work. Most persuasive are the numerous verbal echoes between "I felt a Funeral" and Dickinson's letter to Bowles. "Austin is chilled," Dickinson wrote. "[H]is Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer [*sic*] is killed' – 'Frazer is killed,' just as Father told it – to Him. Two or three words of lead – that dropped so deep, they keep weighing" (L256, 399). To me, these similarities—" [H]is Brain keeps saying" / "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "words of lead" / "Boots of Lead," "dropped so deep" / "dropped down, and down"—are simply too compelling to ignore.

At the same time, however, I would stress that this is not the only way in which "I felt a Funeral" can, or, more importantly, *should*, be read, any more than I think my readings of Fascicle 16's other poems are in any way definitive either. (Readers, for example, will see that I owe a great deal to Cameron's discussion of Fascicle 16, even though she never mentions the Civil War and our interpretations of particular poems often differ radically as a result.) But what I do want to demonstrate is what happens when, using "I felt a Funeral" as one's starting point, one reads the remaining fascicle poems with the Civil War and Stearns's death in mind. Whether or not Dickinson explicitly wrote the poems in Fascicle 16 as war poems, they were by Franklin's dating all written or, at the least, copied out by Dickinson about the same time (about summer, 1862), a time when Stearns's death would have still been relatively fresh in her mind. Intentionally or not, they all bear the impress of the war and of his death on her, whether or not we choose to read them in other ways as well, and this is how I shall approach them here.

By Franklin's account, Fascicle 16 consists of eleven poems: "Before I got my eye put out —" (Fr336B), "Of nearness to her sundered Things" (Fr337), "Tie the strings to my Life, My Lord" (Fr338), "I like a look of Agony" (Fr339), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), "'Tis so appalling — it exhilarates" (Fr341), "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" (Fr342), "When we stand on the tops of Things" (Fr343), "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (Fr344), "Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?" (Fr345), and "He showed me Hights I never saw —" (Fr346B). Of these, only one, "I like a look of Agony," is reprinted in Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller's Civil War anthology, *Words for the Hour*.⁵ To my knowledge, no other poem in the fascicle aside from "I felt a Funeral" has been associated with the Civil War. Yet, one way or another, all these poems engage war's defining product—death. Significantly, they do so, moreover, with a consistency not to be found in other fascicles, not even Fascicle 19, which also contains a poem closely associated with Stearns, "It dont sound so terrible — quite — as it did" (Fr384), nor Fascicle 24, which Hogue describes with such passion as a poetry of witness to the war itself (40–46).⁵

Yet tightly bound thematically as Fascicle 16's poems are, they diverge just as dramatically when it comes to the positioning of their various speakers.⁶ By my count, four have posthumous speakers, two of whom are or seem to be soldiers, but all of whom, one way or another, address the relation between life and afterlife. Of the seven remaining poems, five, including "I felt a Funeral," have observer-speakers, who meditate on death from the outside, be it the experience of dying or death's impact on the living.

The positioning of the remaining two speakers is less clear, but their subject—how to deal with fear in the face of death—points to their being soldiers also. As far as I can tell, the poet's thinking about death does not evolve over the course of these poems, nor is there any narrative thread connecting them beyond the emphasis on death itself. Rather, as Leigh-Anne Marcellin observes of Dickinson's war poetry generally, the poet seems determined "to hold every position" (73), sometimes speaking for herself, sometimes having soldiers speak, sometimes voicing the thoughts of other noncombatants (see also Friedlander, "Battle of Ball's Bluff," 1582–83). Through all these works, one thing is clear, namely that in them, Dickinson is grappling one way or another with what it meant to let oneself die, to "choose" death (Cameron, *Choosing* 147), a choice to which Stearns's death at twenty-one undoubtedly gave added poignancy—and point. In volunteering, Stearns chose death over life.⁷ Fascicle 16's poems seem to rethink that decision in light of its bitter conclusion, producing a poetry of what Wolosky aptly calls "endless disputation," in which nothing is really resolved ("Public and Private" 116). Since the positions Dickinson's speakers assume in these poems often contradict each other, for purposes of clarification I shall pair the poems off for analysis. Given the randomness of the fascicle's arrangement of poems, I do not think these pairings represent Dickinson's intention, nor will I address them in this way. Their presence simply reflects the workings of her mind, a mind, as Cameron, Wolosky, and so many others have demonstrated, that was given to testing and sustaining contradictory alternatives in multiple ways.⁸

Poems with Posthumous Speakers

If scholars are now largely agreed as to the polyvocality of Dickinson's verse, that is, her use of multiple voices in her poems, they have said much less about her invention of multiple speakers, speakers, that is, who are *separate* and *distinct* from herself. This may be because while polyvocality does not of necessity rupture the lyric contract between author and reader,⁹ poems spoken by imagined persons other than the author do. Or it may simply be because such poems, poems Dickinson scholars have been calling "dramatic monologues" but which are more rightly identified as "dramatic lyrics,"¹⁰ can be, and in Dickinson certainly are, very difficult to identify, especially in the absence of unequivocal clues. Whatever the case, it was my realization that the speaker of "Twas just this time, last year, I died" (Fr344) *was* invented and that the poem was therefore a dramatic lyric that did the

most, after "I felt a Funeral" itself, to shape my thinking about Fascicle 16 as a whole. Like "Before I got my eye put out —," "Tie the strings to my Life, my Lord," and, arguably, "He showed me Hights I never saw —," "'Twas just this time" deploys a posthumous speaker. And, superficially, at any rate, the poem looks very much like those many other "posthumous" poems in which Dickinson's own dead self presumably speaks, poems such as "I often passed the Village" (Fr41) and "Because I could not stop for Death —" (Fr479). But read with an eye to the fascicle's Civil War context, the poem becomes susceptible to a very different interpretation. In this interpretation what we hear is not the voice of the poet's dead self, but that of a young soldier, one who, to judge by the poem's internal evidence, died in the first Battle of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), the year before. As it was this recognition of the poem's status as a dramatic lyric that convinced me of the importance of the fascicle's Civil War context, I begin with it and with why, for all the poem's apparent similarity to better-known posthumously spoken works,¹¹ it is, in fact, a very different kind of poem.

As in "'Twas just this time," so in "I often passed" and "Because I could not," Dickinson uses a travel metaphor to draw the line between the living and the dead. However, her handling of this metaphor is vastly different in the latter poems. In "I often passed," a very childlike speaker, who identifies herself through her relationship to "Dollie" (that is, to Susan Gilbert Dickinson), having died "Earlier, by the Dial, / Than the rest have gone," is taken past her old school to a place "stillier than the sundown" and "cooler than the dawn" (Fr41). There she lies, waiting for "Dollie" to join her. In this poem, Dickinson places herself squarely at the center of the work—this was her school, "'Dollie'" was her beloved friend, the journey that divides them was her journey. Identifying "Dickinson" as the speaker of "Because I could not stop" is trickier because both the speaker and the journey, while more detailed, are also more abstract. Of the speaker, we learn only of her clothes (and, indirectly thereby, her gender). Of her journey, we are told, that she "passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess — in the Ring — / We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain — / We passed the Setting Sun." Like one of the remote if beautiful figures of the dead on an ancient Greek stele—and distinctly unlike the speaker in "I often passed the Village"—this speaker has lost all touch with the time-bound. For her "'tis Centuries — and yet / Feels shorter than the Day / I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity" (Fr479). Yet, like the speaker of "I often passed," the course of her journey is the same and its endpoint—a remote place of peace and quiet—is the same also so you could say that this is the same speaker only grown up, making both speakers surrogates for their author.

None of this holds true for the speaker of "Twas just this time, last year" (Fr344). For one thing, although neither of the other two speakers sets out to die, having died, they both accept their fate with equanimity. Indeed, despite her youth, the speaker of "I often passed" seems to prefer death to life, looking eagerly forward to the time when "Dollie" joins her. In both poems, therefore, Death seems, at the least, an acceptable alternative to life, which neither speaker seems to miss all that much. Not so the speaker of "Twas just this time," making the tone of this poem very different. Not only was this speaker unready to die, but even after death, he clings to the memories of the life that once defined him, evincing a tenderness and need neither of the other two speakers display. Carried to his resting place, he dates his death by the rustling of corn in tassel and thinks "how yellow it would look - / When Richard went to mill." He remembers "how Red - Apples wedged / The Stubble's joints between -" and how the "Carts went stooping round the fields / To take the Pumpkins in -." Harvest done, he wonders who in his family will "miss [him], least," and on Thanksgiving, would his father "multiply the plates - / To make an even sum" and whether his missing stocking will "blur the Christmas glee."

Where, that is, the female speakers of the other poems recall nothing of their human community save the schools they attended, the speaker of "Twas just the time" remembers everything: the chores he carried out, the people with whom he worked, the holidays he and his family celebrated. Not only that, but farm boy that he is, he remembers all this with seasonal precision, continuing to follow even after death the agricultural calendar that governed his and his family's life. Beginning with the corn (which in New England ripens in late July), he counts down the "lost" months of his last (imperfect) year: corn ripening July through August, apples reddening from September through October, pumpkins harvested from late October through November, when finally Thanksgiving is held, and December comes, with Christmas rounding out the year. At this point, the pain of his loss becomes so unbearable, he turns to looking forward to that "perfect year" when his family—something neither of the other two posthumous speakers give a thought to—will join him in the afterlife and the circuit of his life will once more be complete (Fr344).

Precisely because human connections are so limited in "I often passed" and "Because I could not," there is little or no pathos in these poems. But in "Twas just this time," pathos is everywhere—the sadness of a life un-lived, symbolized by the unnatural disruption of the agricultural year and by the broken circle of family life—making hurt the poem's primary affect. But since the poem is spoken by a farm boy, this was undoubtedly

Dickinson's point. Farm boys, a goodly number as young as fifteen, made up the bulk of the armies on both sides of the war, and poets other than Dickinson also made much of this fact, using these young men's innocence and bravery and the pathos of their loss in order to underscore the terrible sacrifice asked of them and their families. That Dickinson should try her hand at such a poem at such a time is not surprising. As Benjamin Friedlander has recently argued in his highly persuasive "Dickinson and the Battle of Ball's Bluff" (1591-97), Dickinson was not only aware of the Civil War poetry published in local newspapers like the *Springfield Republican*; she wrote in response to it. Like Dickinson's, many of these poems are deeply sentimental, sometimes having the soldier tell his own story from the grave, sometimes having a fellow soldier, a family member, or the poet him- or herself telling his story for him.¹²

If the speaker of "'Twas just this time" is death's unwilling victim, the speaker of "Tie the strings to my Life, My Lord," is for no observable reason other than his own personality positively jaunty about dying. Speculating, it seems that Dickinson decided to give voice here to another soldier-type, one who, as a veteran army man rather than a young recruit, had become fatalistic about his prospects both in this life and in the afterlife.¹³ Certainly, from his sly reference to riding "to the Judgment / And it's partly down Hill" (a winning line if ever there was one), this speaker, unlike the farm boy, was well-acquainted with the world. Not only is he unfazed by what now confronts him (Judgment), he seems downright eager for something new even if that "new" is life after death. Bidding a breezy goodbye "to the Life I used to live," and throwing a kiss to the Hills—a delicate allusion, perhaps, to sexual adventures—he's off to try, as he says, "by [his] own Choice and Thee [God's]" the next world, having got done with this one (Fr338). That he does see himself as having a choice strongly suggests that like Stearns, he volunteered, making not just his lack of regret, but even more, his lack of self-heroization, that much more impressive. From the way this speaker presents himself, it is clear no long funeral train or town turned upside down will attend his burial. He was a soldier and in war's lottery, death was his share. That's all.

Before leaving these two poems, I should note that in neither work does the speaker mention passing a school on his death journey. In however small a way, this puts Dickinson's notorious class prejudices in a somewhat different light. For the speakers of "I often passed" and "Because I did not," schools obviously loomed large in their minds, and their concern for schooling, which helps mark them as Dickinson surrogates, also establishes their bourgeois class status, a status neither the farm boy nor the old soldier

possesses. Dickinson thus shows some sensitivity in recognizing that for them, even if they went to school, the latter was not an important part in their lives. Both men are depicted as ordinary humanity, genus *Americanus*, and Dickinson pays tribute to this fact by giving them poems that are most remarkable for the clarity of their diction and honesty of their thought. As such, their poems also represent what nineteenth-century sentimental verse could do at its finest. Although the thousands of men for whom these two speakers stand died unheralded, Dickinson gives them a memorial and an eloquence of their own. If one reads these poems in the usual way, identifying "Dickinson" with the speaker, all this is lost, diminishing, I would submit, the kind of poet she was.

The voice Dickinson uses in the remaining two posthumously spoken poems is far more complex, suggesting that their personae are more closely tied to Dickinson herself. Both these poems have also received far more scholarly attention than have the soldier poems. In *Choosing Not Choosing*, for example, Cameron barely gives a line or two to each of the soldier poems while devoting whole pages to "Before I got my eye put out" and "He showed me Hights." Nonetheless, although there is no clear evidence that the last two poems are spoken by soldiers, nor written with the Civil War consciously in mind, their themes fit in with the overall Civil War thematics of the fascicle itself. As Cameron argues of Fascicle 16's thematic structure generally, both these poems are about "death, vision, and choice." But where Cameron has Dickinson handling these themes in the abstract, I would suggest we look at them in relation to their historical context and, in particular, in relation to those discourses of religious consolation which in Dickinson's day took literally St. Paul's promise of new sight in the afterlife.¹⁴ In "Before I got my Eye put out –" (Fr366), Dickinson interrogates the nature of this new sight, what in "The Tint I cannot take – is best –," she calls the "[o]ther way – to see –" acquired in the grave (Fr696). In "He showed me Hights," she focuses on the choice so many made when they voluntarily gave up their lives, exchanging one way of seeing for another. Reading the two poems this way will foreground the profound ambivalence toward the afterlife that I believe dominates each poem's conclusion, not to mention Dickinson's work as a whole, and which may well have made the rituals of sentimental consolation around the Civil War dead profoundly troubling to her, adding pain to pain.¹⁵

In "Before I got my eye put out," Dickinson identifies blinding with dying and dying with a new way of seeing, a way of seeing so powerful that, ironically, should one experience it while alive, the speaker says, it would strike you dead. Behind this rather bizarre logic lies the doctrine of accom-

modation, first elucidated by medieval theologians and later taken up by Calvin as a foundation stone of reformed biblical interpretation. In brief, the doctrine of accommodation posits that since the finite cannot contain the infinite, God made creation as a reduced version of himself that we might safely experience his magnitude through the (lesser) magnitude of the material world around us (think "All Forests – Stintless stars"). Only after death, when the soul is freed from its mortal casing, can we experience this magnitude without accommodation: an extrapolation of St. Paul's promise that after death we will see "face to face" (King James version, 1 Cor. 13:12). That this is the soul's situation in "Before I got my eye put out" seems clear. Where Dickinson diverges from theology is that for her the infinite which her speaker now apprehends in its absolute fullness is not God (God is not mentioned in the poem) but, ironically, the natural world itself, that very world God presumably created as a reduced, and hence secondary, mirroring, of himself.

What Dickinson is doing here is similar to what Sarah Piatt does in her poems on child death. The speaker's child in Piatt's elegies may well be in heaven, but what the speaker wants is her child in the flesh. Without this, no spiritual compensation can ever soothe the mother's pain.¹⁶ For Dickinson's speaker, also, post-mortem visions of God's own majesty, no matter how awe-inspiring in themselves, can never compensate for what is lost. On the contrary, once dead, the speaker is irrevocably denied possession of what she learned to love most: the material nature defined in "the Motions of The Dipping Birds – / The Morning's Amber Road." Craving more than ever what she can now never have, the speaker is left "with just my soul / Opon the window pane – / Where other creatures put their eyes – / Incautious – of the Sun." While the poem seems to celebrate the speaker's new apprehension of God and his "creation," this image of her "soul / Opon the window pane" (Fr336) makes her sound more like a prisoner than part of that joyous community of the dead which, blinded by God's light, does not realize its loss. Read this way, the poem's concluding stanza is bitter indeed, God's revelation of his plenitude something of a twisted joke.

If there's validity to this interpretation, then this might help clarify the speaker's enormous ambivalence in "He showed me Hights, I never saw –" (Fr346B). Allegorical in nature, this poem is among Fascicle's 16's most obscure texts. Its complications are significantly multiplied, moreover, by the fact that Dickinson sent another version of the poem, with pronouns reversed, to Susan Gilbert Dickinson (Fr346), inevitably shadowing the Fascicle 16 version with the poet's frustrated passion for her sister-in-law, relevant or not. Finally, and relatively rare in a Dickinson poem, the speaker

also has an interlocutor, one who, from the little she says of him, could be God or Jesus, a lover, death or even the devil—all male figures who, with the exception of the last, play important roles in Dickinson's verse. Whoever/whatever he is, he is clearly out to tempt the speaker, offering her sights she never saw—not just "Hights" but "secrets" "Morning's Nest / The Rope of Nights were put across." These are transcendent visions, as Judith Farr observes, not unlike those in the paintings of Frederick Church and Thomas Cole, artists whom her brother favored, and who depicted heavily romanticized landscapes on religious themes (Farr, *Passion* 158–59. See also St. Armand, *Her Culture* 251 and Appendix B).

In keeping with this visionary setting, the poem's controlling figure is that of mountain climbing, which the interlocutor urges the speaker to do. If she does, he says, she will witness the creation ("Morning's Nest") first-hand. This seems to suggest that she will see all things *sub specie aeternitatis* as God sees them, without accommodation, from beginning to end, morning to night, all at once. This is a heady but, as we have seen, a possibly fatal, invitation,¹⁷ and for two stanzas, the speaker manages to resist it, unable to "find [her] 'yes.'" This speaker has no wish to rise above the world or to exchange her earthbound perspective for a sublime one. But in the final stanza, things get fuzzy. Depending on how one identifies the interlocutor, and what one assumes is the speaker's choice, the outcome is altered in different ways. "And then," the speaker explains, "He brake His Life – and lo, / A light for me, did solemn glow – / The steadier, as my face withdrew – / And could I further 'No'?" This could suggest that the interlocutor's final ploy to win the speaker's "Yes"—one her apparent withdrawal pushes him into—is to unveil himself (his light) fully to her. At this, she halts, saying—or asking rhetorically—"And could I further 'No'?" which could be read as a statement of acquiescence (F346B).¹⁸

But is it? Or, put another way, if it is, why does the speaker frame her "Yes" as "No"? As Cameron observes, the final line in fact leaves her choice hanging: perhaps she does, perhaps she doesn't (*Choosing* 149–51). Why? If, indeed, the fascicle "variant" of the poem is, as Farr argues, another love poem only with the pronouns reversed, then the difference between the two poems is inconsequential: the point of the poem remains "renunciation" (159). But what if, as Cameron suggests, the poem is not a variant (that is, essentially the same poem, with some words changed) but a second, stand-alone version (82), and what if in this other version the interlocutor is not the speaker's lover but God, or death or the devil, that being who thrice subjected Jesus to temptations, the last of which comes perilously close to the offer the interlocutor makes to the speaker in Dickinson's poem (Matt.

4:1–10)? Then what the speaker decides not only touches on Fascicle 16's principal themes but does so with devastating effect. For now the poem is not about giving oneself to love but about the speaker's willingness to give up her life for whatever the interlocutor is offering, which could be heaven, but which could also be hell.¹⁹ And it is on this note of irresolution that the poem ends. Noble and naïve, Stearns rushed off to war telling his father, "If I can save my country better by dying now than living I am ready for it" (quoted in [Stearns] 73). Dickinson's speaker is more wary, and for good cause. For whatever else the light signifies, unless it is love, the speaker must die to have it, taking on faith that the promises of the promised end do not end in the grave—or worse.

Poems Spoken by (Noncombatant) Observers

Of the remaining seven poems, five have speakers who comment on death without, presumably, being at risk of death themselves: "Of nearness to her sundered Things" (Fr337), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" (Fr342), "When we stand on the tops of Things –" (Fr343), and "I like a look of Agony" (Fr339). In "Of nearness to her sundered Things" (Fr337), a sentimental speaker contemplates the spiritual bonds between the living and the dead. In "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand," a distinctly unsentimental speaker considers the total absence of such bonds. In "When we stand on the tops of Things –," the speaker weighs the value of positioning oneself above the fray, and watching "Things" from a treetop's (or eagle's) perspective. In "I like a look of Agony," the speaker gets down and dirty, claiming to prize the agony of death because unlike all other human emotions, death agony cannot be feigned. Insofar as these poems seem almost wilfully determined to undo each other, they reinforce Cameron's emphasis on Dickinson's strategy of "choosing not choosing" as a key element in fascicle structure. But as Marcellin observes, multipositionality is true of Dickinson's verse in any case, certainly where the war was concerned, so the fact that these noncombatants take contradictory positions is to be expected. What is surprising is the adaptability of Dickinson's style, which allowed her to negotiate her way around and about such sharp lines of difference, a phenomenon I have already touched on in my discussion of her posthumously spoken poems and will explore further here.²⁰

Of the poems spoken by observers, "Of nearness to her sundered Things" is by far the most conventional, and the one that seems most likely

intended to represent the thoughts of ordinary persons coping with the pain of lost loved ones. In it, Dickinson draws heavily on spiritualism, a pseudoscientific, quasi-religious discourse, whose materialist version of the afterlife gained enormous popularity during the war years.²¹ For this speaker, the dead are literally always with her: "The Shapes we buried, dwell about, / Familiar, in the Rooms / Untarnished by the Sepulchre, / The Mouldering Playmate comes – / In just the Jacket that he wore – / Long buttoned in the Mold." Indeed, these spiritual "Apparitions" are so strongly present that by the poem's conclusion, it is the speaker who feels "unreal." They "Salute us, with their wings – / As we – it were – that perished – / Themselves – had just remained till we rejoin them – / And 'twas they, and not ourself / That mourned" (Fr337).²² By the summer of 1862, two of the Civil War's ten bloodiest battles, Shiloh and Fort Donelson, had occurred and given the interminable lists of the dead that, like some giant tsunami, poured off the presses after each major Civil War battle, that Dickinson's speaker would feel comforted, rather than appalled, by being surrounded by "Apparitions," makes unhappy sense.²³

In "Of nearness to her sundered Things," the speaker has what might be called a positive relation to her dead, whose quasi-materiality, as it were, allows them to be spiritualized and sentimentalized at once. The relation between the living and the dead in "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" is just the opposite. For one thing, the speaker of the latter poem is not talking specifically about her own dead, but rather about the dead in general, those who go "noteless . . . / Until a sudden sky / Reveals the fact that One is rapt / Forever from the eye."²⁴ For another and far more important, once dead, these people are permanently cut off from the living. They are now "Members of the Invisible, / Existing, while we stare, / In Leagueless Opportunity, / O'ertakeless, as the Air." When the speaker asks rhetorically, "Why did'nt we detain Them?" what we get by way of response is vintage Dickinson: "The Heavens, with a smile, / Sweep by our disappointed Heads, / Without a syllable –" (Fr342). In this poem, the separation between earth and heaven is as absolute as it was porous in "Of nearness," and there is no possibility of comfort coming from the latter quarter as a result. On the contrary, all that "Of nearness to her sundered Things" gives by way of comfort, "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" rescinds. While the countless thousands who died in the Civil War may still "live" on another plane, from a sublunar perspective, be they noted or unnoted, we have no way of connecting to them.

Although both "Of nearness to her sundered Things" and "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" deal with the same theme—the relation between

the living and the dead—they do so from opposite perspectives. This pattern of opposition also holds true for the remaining pairs of poems: “When we stand on the tops of Things –” and “I like a Look of Agony” on the one hand, and “Afraid? Of whom am I Afraid?” and “’Tis so appalling, it exhilarates –,” on the other. In these pairings, Dickinson uses her poems to test out conflicting positions, some of which may reflect her own thoughts, the rest of which, like “Of nearness,” seem more likely to be positions she attributes to others. As a result, there is a striking amount of variation from poem to poem stylistically as well as thematically and in terms of the speaker’s position. Indeed, “When we stand on the tops of Things,” which I will discuss first, could even be said to double these possibilities since in itself it permits two diametrically opposed readings. In one, the poem represents Dickinson’s attempt to theorize something that she herself was not—namely a person without fear. In the other, she appears to be satirizing just this latter sort of person, the person who, standing “on the tops of Things,” can see all but feel nothing. Both readings focus on one of the dominant motifs of the fascicle as a whole—albeit not one Cameron identifies—fear. But where the first reading (Cameron’s) assumes the poet is writing in praise of fearlessness, the second critiques fearlessness as an affect of uninvolvedness. My reading will assume that the poem deals with the Civil War and should be read ironically; Cameron, as noted, reads the poem from the alternative perspective (*Choosing* 83–84n. and 147–49). Given the poem’s complexity, it is certain that there are other strong readings for this (in all honesty, tortured) poem that we both have missed.

The argument of “When we stand” can be summarized as follows. “The Perfect”—those whose souls have no “flaw[s]”—are recognizable by their lack of fear. “When [they] stand on the tops of Things – / And like the Trees, look down,” they do not “wink.” They see things clearly (“The smoke all cleared away”). “[L]ike the Hills . . . / No lightning, scares” them, and because nothing frightens them they are “Sound,” and their soundness, or what Cameron calls their “integrity” (148), helps keep the world alight: “The Stars dare shine occasionally / Opon a spotted World – / And Suns, go surer, for their Proof, / As if an axle, held –.” In short, their fearlessness not only enables them to see things, as Cameron says, as a “totality,” but it keeps the world going as well: the “Stars” “dare” (at least “occasionally”) to shine down “Opon” our “spotted World” and the “Suns” continue in their circuit “As if an Axle, held” (Fr343). These are large claims, but are we supposed to believe them? Should we believe them, given the two qualifiers—“occasionally” and “As if”—that Dickinson slips into her final stanza? Does she really hold such an aggrandized view of the pontifications of the uninvolved as this poem seems to suggest she does?

The problem with taking the poem's argument seriously, I would suggest, lies precisely in its predication of fearlessness—and hence clarity of vision—on distance, be that distance physical, intellectual, or psychological. From the tops of trees, it is easy to look down on even a battlefield and not wink.²⁵ One has no dog in the fight. Blood does not spatter in one's eyes. In her essay on the eagle's perspective in Dickinson's Civil War poetry, Renée Bergland notes that "to see close at hand is to see warts and all but to see from an eagle's perspective you can imagine 'the ideal'" (148), and Oliver Wendell Holmes appears to have been of this mind, in a postbellum lecture, praising Civil War poetry that was "able to 'lift the world and the life of today into the spaceless and timeless ideal'" (quoted in Bergland 134). Similarly, Emerson, Bergland notes, advised studying things from a distance to see their ideal forms (148). But Dickinson was the author who wrote "I like a look of Agony," and what that gruesome scrutinizing of the body in pain suggests is that to study death and dying, that is, war, from a distance is to study nothing at all. To know it, one has to be there—in the lightning and the smoke,²⁶ in the confusion and pain. Otherwise, one's clarity, like one's "fearlessness," is no more than a function of one's safety, making a mockery of both the men who died and of war itself, which may be many things but none of them "ideal."²⁷

However one chooses to read "When we stand," what is clear is that Dickinson adopts a very different relation to "Things" that make one "wink" in "I like a look of Agony," a poem which, if nothing else, confronts the reader up close and personal with those very details that seeing from the "tops of Things" makes impossible to see:

I like a look of Agony,
 Because I know it's true –
 Men do not sham Convulsion,
 Nor simulate, a Throe –

The eyes glaze once – and that is Death –
 Impossible to feign
 The Beads upon the Forehead
 By homely Anguish strung. (Fr339)

In sharp contrast to the convoluted argument in "When we stand on the tops of Things –, " this poem's argument could not be more direct and unambiguous.²⁸ This is either a noncombatant speaking, possibly the poet herself, or a soldier looking down on (or remembering how it felt like to look down on) an enemy he just killed, and describing the death throes

with unadorned precision, rather like a gun talking about its latest victim. So plain is the poem that there is only one metaphor in it, "the Beads upon the Forehead / By homely Anguish strung." Otherwise, it is as close to prose in its diction and syntax—and in its total lack of passion—as Dickinson ever gets. Dickinson apparently wanted to be sure that the poem's point got across. But what is the point? And why, to cite a line from another Fascicle 16 poem, did she choose to use such a "Bald – and Cold" (Fr341) voice in making it?

If, as I have argued, Dickinson produced Fascicle 16's poems not just in response to the Civil War but specifically in response to Frazar Stearns's death, she may well have wanted to puncture the idealizing aura in which the details of his death—a death that itself occurred far from Amherst—were publicly cast. Under the inspiration of one of his professors, Stearns, the beloved son of the president of Amherst College, was among the town's first volunteers, and it was at this man's feet that the twenty-one-year-old gave up his life for the Union cause. That was the public, highly romanticized story. In her letter to her cousins, Fanny and Loo Norcross, Dickinson appears to describe the funeral in the language of similarly romanticized heroism:

'tis least that I can do, to tell you of brave Frazer [*sic*] – "killed at Newbern," darlings. His big heart shot away by a "minie ball."

I had read of those – I didn't think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him. Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face! He fell by the side of Professor Clark, his superior officer – lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms, asked twice for water – murmured just, "My God!" and passed! . . . They tell that Colonel Clark cried like a little child when he missed his pet, and could hardly resume his post. (L255, 397–98)

On the surface, at any rate, Dickinson appears to join her community in shocked grief at Stearns's death, making the letter something of an elegiac memorial.

However, as I have discussed elsewhere (see "Emily Dickinson and Her Peers" 293–94), there's an edge to Dickinson's letter that undermines its elegiac intentions if such they were. There is, for one, too much archness and too much emphasis on the pathos of a childlike Frazar, hit by a "minie ball,"²⁹ dying at his professor's feet. Frazar, his bereaved father declared, in a gesture of patent self-comfort, "fell doing his duty as a Christian soldier"

(quoted in St. Armand 112). Such a sentiment might have eased a father's heart, but it's doubtful that it would have eased Dickinson's, who openly flouted duty-doing throughout her life, refusing even to participate in the war effort (L235, 377). And then there is the nod to Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" ("Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him"). Dickinson seems to be paying tribute to Tennyson's poem, but is she? Or is she parodying it, indirectly suggesting thereby that "big-hearted" Frazar, like the light brigade's doomed members, blindly followed his superior's orders (and inspiration) straight into the grave. As Bergland observes, Dickinson was not a "joiner" nor given to blind patriotism (136). Stearns, her antithesis, was, and she told her Norcross cousins, he was "too brave that he could fear to die" (L256, 398). A man whom St. Armand describes as a "pragmatic Irish private" (114) put it more bluntly, commenting that for all his nobility, Stearns was "too brave for his own good" (quoted in [Stearns] 140).³⁰

It is hard to know how deep Dickinson's outrage at the romantic trappings in which Amherst wrapped Stearns's death actually went. Certainly, her description of the memorial service has an edge, being far too neatly packaged: "Crowds came to tell him good-night, choirs sang to him, pastors told how brave he was" (L255, 398). In substituting the isolated and suffering body of "I like a look of Agony" for Stearns' heroic corpse, at least in her own mind, was she then paying her respects not to what never was but to what was—"The Beads upon the Forehead / By homely Anguish strung"? And could that help explain the chilling graphicness of the poem itself? Stearns was so mutilated, Dickinson tells Loo and Fanny, that the doctors refused to let even his father see him in his coffin. Apparently they did not trust that the distanced and removed President Stearns, who had exhorted his son to join up (St. Armand 112), would have the self-containment not to wink. Having died away from Amherst, Stearns brought the horror of war home with him in his coffin. Dickinson's poem memorializes what no one wanted to see.

Poems Spoken by Combatants

By my reading of Fascicle 16, only two dramatic lyrics are unambiguously spoken by living soldiers: "Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?" (Fr345) and "'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –" (Fr341). Fear is at the center of both poems. In the former, the speaker insists that his religious faith has enabled him to triumph over fear. In the latter, the speaker also claims to have triumphed

over fear. However, not by asserting his faith—he mocks such professions. Rather, he has done so by stamping out hope in himself. Both poems thus touch on the single issue that seems to have troubled Dickinson the most, namely that having chosen to go to war, soldiers effectively chose death over life. This was a choice that Dickinson, with her doubts about the afterlife and her visceral wariness of publicly supported causes—a wariness blatant in her treatment of the memorial services for Stearns—had substantial difficulty understanding, let alone supporting. In the poems, both speakers have reached a point where fear of dying has finally trumped the willingness to fight and both are struggling to find some way to deal with the emotional fallout of this realization, one turning to faith, the other to a mocking form of rage. Although some readers may disagree, I think the man of faith gets the worst of it here.

The problem with the speaker of “Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?” (Fr345) is a common one: he protests too much. That is, given how firmly he states his religious convictions, one cannot help but wonder whom, exactly, he is trying to convince. True, Dickinson herself has a number of poems in which what appears to be her own voice makes similarly adamant professions of faith—“I never saw a Moor” (Fr800) for example—but these poems are dispersed through her oeuvre and do not seem to be at significant odds with what surrounds them as a result. Not so with “Afraid!” Reading the poem in the context of a fascicle containing a mere eleven poems, most of which, one way or another, raise grave doubts about the nature, and even the possibility, of an afterlife, the faith-based rebuttals that the speaker in “Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?” uses to quiet his fears cannot help but have a hollow ring. Indeed, the very emphaticness with which he renders them raises doubts in itself. If, as he claims, he has nothing to fear—not from death, or life, or from what comes after (resurrection)—why ask the question at all? The more he insists, the more fearful he sounds, the entire poem becoming what looks like a futile exercise in self-comfort as he rehearses the answer to each question like a child committing his catechism to memory:

Afraid? Of whom am I afraid?
 Not Death – for who is He?
 The Porter of my Father’s Lodge
 As much abasheth me!

Of Life? ’Twere odd I fear a thing
 That comprehendeth me

In one or two existences –
Just as the case may be –

Of Resurrection? Is the East
Afraid to trust the Morn
With her fastidious forehead?
As soon impeach my Crown! (Fr345)

Whether modelled on someone Dickinson knew (Stearns, perhaps, who also agonized about religion), or created as yet another fictive "type," this soldier-speaker is very different from the posthumous speakers of "'Twas just this time" and "Tie the strings of my Life." For one thing, his diction ("abasheth," "comprehendeth," "fastidious," "impeach") marks him as well educated; for another, his family is well off. His father owns a "Lodge," which comes complete with its own "Porter."³¹ This speaker can, moreover, ponder scholastic distinctions such as whether life and afterlife are one life or two, and then, with a sophisticated wave of his hand, brush the issue away. However, all these "advantages," if that is what they are, do him little good on a playing field leveled by death. On the contrary, where Dickinson's posthumous soldier-speakers exhibit the confidence of an uninterrogated faith, this speaker asks question after question. For such a man, as Dickinson knew from her own plight, the doubts that nibble at the soul were unlikely to be stilled with schoolroom logic.³² Yet he appears to have nothing else to fall back on. He is, you could say, too educated for the gut-level situation he is in, putting all his assertions into doubt.

Doubts about the possibility of both the afterlife and resurrection have a profoundly different impact on the speaker of "'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –" (Fr341), the poem that brings my discussion of Fascicle 16 to an end. "'Tis so appalling" is a terrifying poem, the more so because its goal is to look terror straight in the face (and not wink). In its echoes of Edgar's aside in *King Lear*—"And worse I may be yet. The worst is not / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'" (4.1.27–28)—it reminds us that the human limits of pain are set at that point when one has nothing left to lose, and everything ceases to matter, life included. Because this poem marks the culmination of many of the issues raised by Fascicle 16's poems, I will quote it in full:

'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –
So over Horror, it half captivates –
The Soul stares after it, secure –
To know the worst, leaves no dread more –

To scan a Ghost, is faint –
 But grappling, conquers it –
 How easy, Torment, now –
 Suspense kept sawing so –

The Truth, is Bald – and Cold –
 But that will hold –
 If any are not sure –
 We show them – prayer –
 But we, who know,
 Stop hoping, now –

Looking at Death, is Dying –
 Just let go the Breath –
 And not the pillow at your cheek
 So slumbereth –

Others, can wrestle –
 Your's, is done –
 And so of Wo, bleak dreaded – come,
 It sets the Fright at liberty –
 And Terror's free –
 Gay, Ghastly, Holiday! (Fr341)

As with “I felt a Funeral”—and to a lesser degree—“Before I got my eye put out,” “’Tis so appalling” raises a pile of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. Among the most basic: who is the speaker, where is he, and what occasioned the poem in the first place? These questions seem especially pointed here since, unless one believes Dickinson at least half-mad, the degree of terror the poem displays is simply way out of proportion to whatever we know she experienced in life. Not even the breakup of a deeply felt love affair, or the excruciating pain attendant on the realization of lost faith, could elicit the kind of “appalling” and “exhilarating” experience of “over Horror” that the speaker describes, at least not unless she were Sylvia Plath. And I will not deny that there are a number of Plathian moments in the poem: “To know the worst, leaves no more dread,” “Suspense kept sawing so –,” “The Truth, is Bald – and Cold,” “we, who know, / Stop hoping now –” “Looking at Death, is Dying,” “Others can wrestle – / Your's, is done.” And like Plath’s last poems, these lines all seem to lead irreversibly to the quietist solution of death as the only possible remedy for the pain living

in fear engenders. Standing on the tops of "Things" in such a situation will get one nowhere.

But Plath's tragedy was itself in overplus and certainly exceeded anything we know of Dickinson's situation even at its worst. The speaker of this poem is *in extremis*, has lost all hope, and urges others to do the same. Just as grappling with Ghosts is the only way to "conquer" them, so, he argues, accepting "The Truth," "Bald – and Cold," that is, without any form of consolation or hope, is the only way to wrestle Death down. "Looking at Death, [may be] Dying" but it also frees one from "Fright," albeit by setting "Fright" loose to rule as it will. This is not only a full-frontal rebuttal of all the consolations offered by the soldier-speaker in "Afraid! Of whom am I Afraid?" and the observer-speaker of "Of nearness to her sundered Things." It is a terrifying conclusion. For this speaker, however, it is also the only way to survive—if embracing death's "Bald – and Cold" "Truth" is indeed survival. "If any are not sure –," the speaker adds, with no small degree of contempt, "we show them – prayer – / But we, who know, / Stop hoping, now." This is the legend Dante placed over the gates of hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" (canto 3, line 9). And is not war a type for hell?

With these lines, the composite speaker of Fascicle 16's poems reaches bottom. It is a bottom free of God, heaven, hope. Prayer is for those who can't deal with the Truth. That is the "Terror" set loose at the poem's conclusion to enjoy its "Gay, Ghastly, Holiday"—the terror of a world in which Death is the only "Truth," and hopelessness, the only way to deal with fear. When Dickinson said in 1864 that she "sang off charnel steps" (L298, 436), it was the Civil War dead she had in mind. Whether spoken, as I believe, by a soldier or by Dickinson *in propria persona*, or by some other persona she had in mind when writing it, "'Tis so appalling – it exhilarates" is such a song. It is certainly understandable why it was not published until 1935. Reading it in a Civil War context at least helps explain how she could have written it at all, though the poem's hard-nosed position in its second stanza is not softened a whit thereby. War, I would suggest, taught Dickinson to look at the one thing she feared most—Death and tell its truth as she saw it, "Bald – and Cold."

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, in choosing to discuss Fascicle 16 in terms of paired poems I am not suggesting nor do I believe that Dickinson deliberately set the fascicle up this way. There are many other ways in which these poems

could be arranged for analysis, and I suspect that those reading this chapter have already found other patterns that make more sense to them. I chose this particular route because it was the most useful for me, allowing me to foreground the very kind of oppositional thinking in Dickinson of which Cameron rightly makes so much. Even if not by design, the poems in Dickinson's fascicles play off each other, and off given sets of ideas or themes, and it greatly enriches one's reading of them to view them in this way.

But I differ from Cameron in two important respects. First, in exposing the multiple contradictions and oppositions in Dickinson's work, Cameron wished to stress what she calls the heteroglossia of Dickinson's voice, a heteroglossia she contrasts to the "unitary self" (and voice) of a poet such as Walt Whitman (*Choosing* 21–24). I believe such privileging of Dickinson in opposition to Whitman does a disservice both to Whitman and to the complexity of the culture in which both poets lived and of which their verse is a part as well as a reflector. When Emerson said that "a foolish consistency" was "the hobgoblin of little minds," and Whitman said "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes,"³³ both men were speaking of, as well as to, a culture rife with contradiction and oppositions that one can see reflected in their works. Indeed, one need only explore the century's rich periodical and newspaper culture to know that nineteenth-century U.S. culture itself was heteroglossic, literally as well as figuratively, robustly so. And like many other poets of her period, from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Sarah Piatt, Dickinson, who was an avid reader of both periodicals and newspapers, brought that heteroglossia into her verse.³⁴

No less important for me here, Cameron's ascription of multiplicity to Dickinson's poems still lodges diversity within the poet's own persona. The result is an implicit upholding of that "lyric contract," so fundamental to any reading of the romantic lyric, which, in the absence of any signals to the contrary, identifies the lyric speaker with the poet herself, albeit a poet who speaks (as it were) with many tongues.³⁵ But while Fascicle 16 contains a number of poems that may fit within this rubric (e.g., "Before I got my eye put out —," "I felt a Funeral," "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand," "I like a look of Agony," and "He showed me Hights I never saw —"), it also contains a substantial number in which the connection between poet and speaker seems clearly severed. If these latter poems contribute to the overall heteroglossia of Dickinson's writing, they also suggest that she adopted performative identities, stepping outside the circle of her own mentation to (re)create the thoughts of those manifestly unlike herself. As I read these personae: a New England farm boy, a battle-hardened veteran, a woman

who has lost too many loved ones to death, an onlooker on war, whose distance from it allows him to idealize it, a soldier struggling to keep hold of faith in the face of fear, and a soldier who has given up all hope whatsoever and no longer fears anything.

From Lord Randal's mother and Burns's "Holy Willie" to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Runaway Slave," this kind of dramatic or performative poetry was, in fact, deeply embedded in the British tradition and undoubtedly traveled to the American colonies in the first boats. By the nineteenth century, it had gained enormous popularity in both literatures, and Dickinson's use of the dramatic lyric thus fits in well with nineteenth-century poetic practice. As a hybrid form between drama and lyric, the dramatic lyric was exploited not just by poets when writing what might be thought of as otherwise "traditional" lyrics (e.g., ballads and songs), but by abolitionists and other politically oriented writers who wished to create empathy for their subjects. Dickinson's handling of this genre in Fascicle 16 lacks such a political edge, but it does not lack the drive to create empathy itself. This is why the presence of these poems in Fascicle 16 gives this fascicle such stunning importance. These poems suggest a kinder, gentler Dickinson, one who was clearly engaged in the travails of others. Indeed, "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" ranks in my mind as one of the finest sentimental poems of that very sentimental century. It is a quintessential example of what sentimentality at its best could achieve. But in turning to the dramatic lyric at all, Dickinson was recognizing and acknowledging in her verse differences and possibilities among others—not just in herself. That is what I have endeavored to demonstrate here by pairing her poems, showing in the process how very different from "Dickinson" many of her speakers are and greatly extending thereby and hopefully complicating what we take to be the scope of her verse, and the nature of its concerns.³⁶