Essay Reviews

THE INCIDENTAL DICKINSON

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Reviewing Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 variorum edition of The Poems of Emily Dickinson in the pages of The New England Quarterly, Jay Leyda advised that Johnson's "edition should be exploited soon by the braver members of English departments"; the commentator then concluded his generous praise for Johnson's accomplishment with prophetic words: "No edition of Emily Dickinson's poetry, not even this splendid variorum, should be dismissed as final. For verse that is, in her term, 'alive,' this would be impossible." Leyda was right on both counts. Of the three works before me now, two—R. W. Franklin's new variorum edition of Dickinson's poems and Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's Open Me Carefully, a selected edition of Dickinson's correspondence, in poems and letters, with her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson—represent radically different editorial solutions to the still vexed question of how to bring Dickinson's manuscript writings responsibly into print. The third, The Emily Dickinson Handbook, a collection of review essays on significant topics in Dick-

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incoln studies, assesses the ends to which scholars have read Dickinson's writing in the little more than a century since it began to be published under her name.

Franklin's variorum *Poems* is in every way a splendid successor to Johnson's pioneering edition. Because he had access to the original manuscripts and was not, like Johnson, forced to work mainly from photostats, Franklin enjoys some conspicuous empirical as well as theoretical advantages over his precursor. Being able to view and handle the manuscripts has allowed Franklin to reconstruct Dickinson's fascicles—the hand-sewn books into which she copied her poems from the late 1850s through the mid-1860s—with much greater accuracy than was possible for Johnson, an achievement earlier made available to scholars in Franklin's 1981 facsimile edition of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* and presented in an appendix to the new variorum *Poems*. The labors of first Johnson and then Franklin in this editorial task were considerable. For example, a set of manuscript pages originally transmitted together as "Packet 10" in the manuscripts given to Harvard by Alfred Leete Hampson—beginning with the poem "The feet of people walking home" and ending with "Give little anguish"—was redistributed by Thomas Johnson to no fewer than three different fascicle books, numbers 10, 23, and 26 in his counting. Franklin in his turn reassigned the Packet 10 poems to two fascicles, 13 and 14, with individual poems ranging in estimated dates of transcription from late summer 1858 to autumn 1862. The new variorum *Poems*, however, unlike Franklin's earlier *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, presents the poems not in their reconstructed fascicle order but according to the date of the earliest known manuscript of individual poems; thus, "The feet of people walking home," although bound into Fascicle 14 in 1862, appears in the new variorum among the poems of 1858, the date of its two earliest manuscript versions. It was one of these 1858 manuscripts, in Franklin's reconstruction of events, that Dickinson would pick up, four years later, and bind into the middle of Fascicle 14, preceded by poems first transcribed in early 1862 and followed by poems from autumn 1862.

Franklin's most significant single departure from Johnson's earlier work, however, derives from a difference in editorial theory rather than empirical practice or resources. Franklin's *Poems* treats all the surviving manuscript versions of a poem as equivalent, whereas Johnson had given priority to one version, a practice Leyda's 1956 review had even then characterized as woefully "antique." For some of Dickinson's poems with complex textual histories, especially those she sent
to many recipients during her lifetime, the ramifications of this fundamental editorial decision are extensive. A poem like "Further in Summer than the Birds," which even in Johnson's edition occupies four pages in three versions, expands in Franklin's Poems to six pages and six versions in all, from the earliest and fullest surviving copy, sent to a friend in 1865, through versions sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1866 and Thomas Niles in 1883, and a final copy sent to Mabel Loomis Todd, in which Dickinson enclosed an actual cricket (still preserved in the Amherst College library)—meek member of the poem's "minor Nation." Franklin's earliest version of "Further in Summer" also shows that the two-quatrains poem with which Johnson ended his variarum Poems, "The earth has many keys," available to Johnson only as published in Millicent Todd Bingham's 1945 collection Bolts of Melody, was originally the final two stanzas of "Further in Summer."

Wisely reluctant as he is to assign final intent to any particular variant of a Dickinson poem, Franklin is much bolder than Johnson ever was in establishing a boundary between Dickinson's poetry and her prose. On the "slippery matter" of the "borderline between Dickinson verse and Dickinson prose," as Leyda complained in his 1956 review (p. 244), Johnson seemed simply to have exercised his own independent aesthetic judgment: in other words, he dignified two- or three-line passages as poems when he thought they had some claim to meter and when he especially admired them, and when he did not, he ignored them or printed them as "prose fragments" in his 1958 edition of Dickinson's Letters. In Franklin's edition, however, a passage must, in at least one of its potentially multiple manuscript versions, observe Dickinson's conventions for expressing poetry (capitalizing first words of lines, beginning runover lines on the left margin without capitalization but with blank space at the end) to be characterized as a poem. With reference to these criteria, Franklin adds to Dickinson's canon seventeen poems not included as such by Johnson and subtracts five texts he had designated as poems, among them the famous passage from Dickinson's letter of 17 October 1851 to her brother Austin, which segues from its chatty opening pages into a closing verse challenge—"prithee, my Brother, into my garden come!" With new poems added, some subtracted, some separated that Johnson had combined and some combined that Johnson had separated, Franklin gives us a Dickinson who wrote 1789 poems all told, in contrast to Johnson's familiar total of 1775.

No editorial scholar myself, I provisionally accept that Franklin's rearrangement of the fascicles brings us closer to an accurate dating
of variants of individual poems and to an understanding of which poems Dickinson grouped with other poems and when she bound some (but not all) of those groups into fascicles. I appreciate Franklin’s seventeen new poems as well as the different poems that emerge from the separation and combination of stanzas long read in other contexts—indeed, I itch to revise the ending of a chapter in my own 1991 book on Dickinson that relied on Johnson’s representation of “The earth has many keys” as an independent poem. Taking Franklin at his word, though, what difference does the sum of his departures from Johnson make—especially for readers who may not be Dickinson specialists? What reasons may such readers find for braving the ever more complicated byways of Dickinson textual scholarship rather than sitting down with Johnson’s 1955 variorum Poems, if housed in the local library, or Johnson’s 1960 reader’s edition of Dickinson’s Collected Poems, still in print and more easily accommodated than either variorum on most bookshelves and, for that matter, within most budgets?

In Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson, Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith make the case that Franklin has not gone far enough in departing from Johnson’s editorial techniques to bring forth the most radical implications of Dickinson’s writings for a wider reading public. In Hart and Smith’s view, the Dickinson we have come to know, from the early posthumous collections through Johnson’s and even Franklin’s variorum editions, has been all too tendentiously edited: edited to make her writings conform to nineteenth-century standards of verse decorum, to make them answer to conventional generic distinctions between poetry and prose, to obscure their radical experimentation with the material media of writing, and to obliterate the life-long importance for Dickinson of her highly charged erotic and poetic interchanges with her sister-in-law in the house next door, Susan Dickinson.

Hart and Smith’s volume of the poet’s writings to Susan aims to unedit Dickinson on all these counts. Open Me Carefully prints texts we have understood as poems alongside, and with no typographical distinction between them, texts conventionally designated as letters. Although, to call attention to their origins in Emily and Susan Dickinson’s familiar correspondence, Hart and Smith’s title for their volume names all the texts as letters, the page layout of Open Me Carefully treats the texts written after the late 1850s as poetry: Dickinson’s line breaks are faithfully reproduced as is her distinctive punctuation and capitalization. Open Me Carefully also provides facsimiles of a few se-
lected texts, which allows readers to glimpse Dickinson's shifting handwriting from March 1853—in the early poem sent as a signed note to Susan, "Write! Comrade—write!"—through a signed note-poem of the 1880s, "To be Susan / is Imagination." Hart and Smith have designed their volume to honor the book of Emily's writings that Susan Dickinson apparently wanted to assemble immediately after the poet's death—a volume of letters and verse "more full and varied" (p. xvi) than Dickinson's eventual editors Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson thought feasible. Hart and Smith's hope is to represent Dickinson's writing—and the relationship with Susan that they believe generated it—in a form that "can now, more than a hundred years later, finally speak for itself" (p. xix).

Open Me Carefully opposes itself directly, then, to one of Franklin's guiding editorial principles in his variorum Poems, his belief that the distinction between poetry and prose was one that Dickinson herself observed in her own writing by, as outlined above, obeying two out of the three most familiar conventions for expressing verse: the treatment of initial and runover lines. Franklin therefore feels justified in regularizing Dickinson's lineation in her poetry rather than reproducing her line breaks literally, as Hart and Smith choose to do. At stake in these contrasting editorial practices is not only the difference (assuming we want to make one) between poetry and prose but the nature (assuming it has one) of poetry itself. For Franklin, Dickinson's qualified observance of conventional rules for expressing poetry in manuscript, coupled with her still more qualified observance of conventional rhyme and meters, indicates, as he put it in his now well-known letter of 1985 to poet and Dickinson critic Susan Howe, that "the form lurking in [Dickinson's] mind is the stanza." Privileging that form, Franklin overrules Dickinson's line breaks and, in each poem's apparatus, treats them as among the "incidental characteristics of the artifact" (p. 35), that is, the surviving physical document of a given poem. As opposed to Franklin's facsimile edition of The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, the variorum's central "aim is to present the multiple texts of poems, not their documents or artifacts" (p. 36), on the assumption that "a work is separable from its artifact" (p. 27).

For Hart and Smith along with Susan Howe, by contrast, there is no "incidental characteristic" of a Dickinson artifact or, at least, no a

priori rule for separating the incidental from the significant. All the visual characteristics of Dickinson's manuscripts are at least potentially significant, even—in well-known readings by Smith and Howe, who were recently taken to task on the point by Dohmnall Mitchell—her squiggly capital “S” in a poem about the sea. Dickinson’s line breaks, Hart, Smith, and Howe assume, definitely cross the threshold of significance and should be faithfully preserved in print. Indeed, replying to Franklin’s suggestion that Dickinson composed her poetry in stanzas, Howe vigorously proclaims the non-accidental character of poetry’s visual appearances: “As a poet, I cannot assert that Dickinson composed in stanzas and was careless about line breaks. In the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form—moves on a rigorous line.”

As a historical scholar, not a poet, I find myself uncomfortable with arguments from authority of this kind. The control of Dickinson’s editing by what Howe calls “gentlemen of the old school” and Harvard University is, indeed, “a feminist issue,” as Margaret Dickie headlines it in her essay on “Feminist Conceptions of Dickinson” in The Emily Dickinson Handbook. But can feminist criticism find no better means for opposing those gentlemen than the intuitions of Poetry’s high priestess, issued from its secret precinct? Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith do not claim to speak for Poetry but only to free Dickinson’s writing to “speak for itself,” a much more modest kind of editorial positivism than Franklin’s but editorial positivism nonetheless. In the end, thankfully, Franklin joins Hart and Smith in acknowledging the theoretical considerations that editors must, practically speaking, forget while doing their work. For Franklin, those considerations urge the “continuing utility” of standard typography vis-à-vis the positivist claims of the visual image: “Even with digital images, where the poems are in pixels, an editor will need typography to explain the relationship of images and to transcribe the texts, confirming what the eye sees but may not understand and disclosing what the eye, unaided, cannot detect” (p. 28). For Hart and Smith, theory requires that they recognize that Dickinson’s manuscripts do

not speak for themselves in print even at their most unedited, that editors always mediate them: "We call it as we see it, acknowledging that some of the fun of working with this writer's manuscript art, translating it into print, is the pleasure of interpretation and debate" (p. xxiv).

In the interests of interpretation and debate, then, I would like to present for comparison some representative transcriptions from Franklin's variorum Poems and Hart and Smith's Open Me Carefully. What are the "incidental characteristics" and what the positive events of Dickinson's writing? And which transcription best succeeds at seducing unwary readers into the possibilities of Dickinson textual criticism? Let my reader (hampered, to be sure, for lack of original manuscripts or facsimiles) call it as she sees it:

The incidents of Love
Are more than it's Events—
Investment's best expositor
Is the minute Per Cents—

[Poems, poem 1172, version B, dated c. 1870]

True to their respective editorial theories, Franklin rearranges Dickinson's loosely written lines into a tight quatrain, while Hart and Smith preserve Dickinson's lineation, its widely spaced words and lines strung down the manuscript's small sheet of stationery. For Hart and Smith, Dickinson's closing signature is part of the text; Franklin consigns it to the apparatus. Both versions deliberately abstain from normalizing Dickinson's idiosyncratic orthography, but the editors seem to have seen something different as they transcribed it: Franklin saw, and dutifully recorded, "it's"; Hart and Smith saw "its,'" a form not to be found in any dictionary. Likewise, Franklin saw a lower-case "expositor," Hart and Smith an upper-case.

Which of these editorial differences count as incident, which as
Event? To put the question in another and possibly more fruitful way: how does this poem (assuming it wants to be one) want to be loved? To take the poem at its own word, the best part of love lies in incident, the best part of interpretation—exposition—in the smallest increments of detail. Perhaps Hart and Smith's version, then, takes the prize for respecting incident in the form of Dickinson's incremental way of compiling her poem visually, in units as small as a single syllable. Their translation of Dickinson's manuscript art preserves "Love" in singular splendor in the second line but also assigns to Love a morphologically impossible plural-singular possessive pronoun—"its'"—in the fourth line. If this poem, as do many others in Dickinson's oeuvre, turns on the relation of part to whole, in this case the relation of minutely plural incidents to the singular Love comprising them, does this impossible pronoun signal the transcendent overcoming of part and whole in Love or graphically indicate the unstable textual medium in which such overcomings are both posited and undone?

The reader may sense a deconstructive fit coming on in this reading. In his fine review essay on "Dickinson and Literary Theory" in The Emily Dickinson Handbook, Roland Hagenbüchle observes—in the course of seeking to account for how surprisingly little interest strictly deconstructive critics have taken in Dickinson's writing—that "with Dickinson, the deconstructive act has already been performed by the poems themselves" (p. 379). Although Hagenbüchle's is not an entirely original observation, it is still eminently useful; I bring it up here because the differences between Franklin's and Hart and Smith's editorial translations of Dickinson's manuscript strikingly complicate, deconstruct I wince to say, Hagenbüchle's basic terms. Is the apostrophe hovering above "its" part of "the poem itself" (in the classic New Critical phrase which hardly any American poststructuralism seems, in the end, able to do without)? Is the signature? What relation is there between "the deconstructive act," so singularly posited by Hagenbüchle, and the minutely plural incidents of editorial decision making? What has either to do with love?

Along with Hagenbüchle, I'd prefer Emily Dickinson's words on this subject over anyone else's. But again, her editors—all of them unquestionably engaged in a labor of love—must represent her manuscript words in print. To further comprehend what's at stake in those representations, let's examine another Dickinson work that comments on, but differently values, the relationship between "Event" and "incident" or, as this text has it, "Accident":
Morning
might come by Accident—
Sister—
Night comes
by Event—
To believe the
final line of
the Card would
foreclose Faith—
Faith is Doubt.

Sister—
Show me
Eternity, and
I will show
you Memory—
Both in one
package lain
And lifted
back again—

Be Sue, while
I am Emily—
Be next, what
you have ever
been, Infinity—

[Open Me Carefully, letter-poem 246, dated to the 188os]

In Hart and Smith's representation of it, this manuscript flows seamlessly from its rhymed, although metrically irregular, opening four lines, through its middle sentence, and into its strongly metered and rhymed closing, punctuated by paired apostrophes to "Sister" Susan Dickinson. So convincing is this manuscript as a coherent artistic whole that Hart some years ago used it as her central illustration in an influential essay on Dickinson's letters and poems to her sister-in-law. There Hart argued that Thomas H. Johnson's discomfort with the passionate exchanges, rather than any intrinsically poetic or prosaic qualities of the writing, may have determined the exclusion of "Morning," and other works sent to Susan, from Dickinson's poetic canon. Furthermore, Hart asserted, to deny "Morning" status as a poem contributes to biographical censorship: "[A]s long as this poem is not available to students, teachers, and general readers, as long as scholars and critics relegate the text to the categories 'insignificant' and 'unreadable,' one more piece of evidence that Dickinson loved Susan all
her life and designed a future in which to extend and transform that love is removed from view."4

Applying his own editorial criteria for distinguishing Dickinson’s prose from her poetry, however, Franklin views the manuscript differently. Although he acknowledges his debt to Ellen Hart for plucking the letter-poem out of Dickinson’s manuscripts and introducing it into her poetic canon, what emerges in Franklin’s variorum as a poem is this:

Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory—
Both in one package lain
And lifted back again—

Be Sue, while I am Emily—
Be next, what you have ever been, Infinity—

[Poems, poem 1658, dated c. 1884]

Franklin reads the second “Sister” of Dickinson’s manuscript as Dickinson’s own closing signature, thus resolving the text into two distinct generic parts: a letter, which addresses Susan Dickinson as “Sister” and closes with Dickinson’s mirroring subscription of herself as “Sister,” followed by a poem of five lines. Letter and signature are indicated, although not fully quoted, in Franklin’s apparatus for the poem. In Franklin’s rendering, the five-line poem is Event and the rest of the text Accident, belonging to a different realm of historical or biographical contingency than the literary realm in which the poem is lain for editorial Eternity.

Ironically, perhaps, it is in Hart and Smith’s full text that this letter-poem’s voice of love, unlike the voice of “The incidents of Love,” suggests the superiority of Event to Accident—the very distinction that drives Franklin’s editorial theory rather than Hart and Smith’s. It matters, though, for both editorial theory and for Dickinson’s theory of love that the opposite of Accident in this text is Event rather than, say, design or intent. As printed in Open Me Carefully, “Morning”—written when Dickinson was a woman in her fifties to a woman whom she had loved in one way and another, by then, for some thirty years—reads as Dickinson’s late reply to one of the favorite genres of love poetry, the aubade; instead of lamenting the day that comes all too soon

to separate young lovers, this letter-poem celebrates the coming of love's night. Love's morning is opposed to its night as accident is to event: accidents are neither anticipated nor intentionally significant, whereas events are always significant, if not always anticipated or intended. To borrow and alter the terms of Ellen Louise Hart's reading of this manuscript, night is not entirely a "future" that can be "designed," and in that quality, we all know, lies some of its eventful appeal. (Around 1882, by Franklin's dating, Dickinson sent Susan a variation on the familiar prayer: "Now I lay thee down to Sleep— / I pray the Lord thy Dust to keep— / And if thou live before thou wake— / I pray the Lord thy Soul to make—"). Love may initially befall its subjects (Dickinson would have known accident's etymology) out of nowhere, but its endurance entails the more complex collaboration between contingency and will that makes Event come out of (and again, Dickinson would have known event's etymology) what has come before—or that allows Dickinson in her fifties both to will and to accept that she and Sue be who each has become.

As a theory of love, perhaps Dickinson's letter-poem is beautifully obvious; but perhaps we're less used to reading her theories of love as theories of editing (an omission that also marks studies of her great American contemporary Walt Whitman). In its original, complete text, "Morning" embodies a more flexible and more time-bound account of authorial intentionality than that implied by the anxiously positivist moments of either Franklin's or Hart and Smith's editorial theory, an account of intentionality that comes best into view when comparing Franklin's edition to Hart and Smith's rather than in settling on either one. Significance or Event in "Morning" is retrospectively embraced at least as much as it is prospectively willed. Unlike Susan Howe in her response to Franklin, Dickinson in this letter-poem—as in much of her later writing, and in contrast to the vocational claims she sometimes staged in earlier work—seems strikingly unanxious about asserting the authority of Poet or subscribing her writing within the precincts of Poetry. To my mind, the manuscript of the letter-poem to Susan does not call for nor preserve the positivist distinction between poetry and prose on which Franklin's variorum relies. What makes the letter-poem still more interesting, however, is that by the same token it does not respect the expressivist distinction between poetry and prose—the rigorously sacralized authority of the intentional line—on which, it seems to me, Hart and Smith, following Howe, implicitly rely.

The distinction between poetry and prose is not, I think, eventful in
this letter-poem's text; what is eventful is reading, retrospection, re-
reading. "Morning" dramatizes the extent to which loving Susan Dick-
inson was for Emily Dickinson a matter of keeping a complicated, dif-
ficult, life-long faith with her own writing, recorded in packets and on
sheets ("The Pile of Years," a late poem begins) that she laid down
over many years and evidently, from time to time, lifted out to read
again. Hart and Smith have done Dickinson scholarship, and quite
probably the wider audience they hope to reach, a service, for they
have presented the full range of Dickinson’s writings to Susan, com-
piled in one affordable and beautifully produced volume, which read-
ers can read and re-read again and again. If it gains the readership it
deserves, Open Me Carefully ought to dispel the version of Dickin-
son’s life, still current in much scholarship (let alone popular mythol-
ogy), in which Susan Dickinson, when she figures at all, figures as a
prolonged, late-adolescent crush which gradually subsided with
Susan’s marriage to Austin and Dickinson’s yearning for a mysteri-
ously unavailable male “Master.”

As Jay Leyda rightly complained in his 1956 review, Thomas John-
son’s 1955 variorum Poems uncritically consulted the “Master” narra-
tive of Dickinson’s life in dating—and, implicitly, interpreting—Dick-
inson’s manuscripts; Johnson did not hesitate, for instance, to tie
Dickinson’s unaddressed “Master” letters to events in the life of
Philadelphia minister Charles Wadsworth, Johnson’s biographical
candidate for Dickinson’s beloved. Believing that “the tendency to
read the poems as autobiography should be combated not reinforced
by the editor” (p. 245), Leyda found not just this particular identifica-
tion but the theoretical assumptions behind it deeply suspect. Hart
and Smith, these several decades later, would largely agree with
Leyda’s critique of Johnson’s editorial methods, and they would add a
ringing condemnation of Johnson’s editorial and biographical hetero-
sexism. But Open Me Carefully does not hesitate to root Dickinson’s
writing in biography—not always the same thing as reading the poems
as autobiography, but close: Hart and Smith aim to “relate the human
story behind this most generative of literary and emotional unions”
(p. xxi). And like Johnson’s editorial “Master” narrative of Wadsworth,
Hart and Smith’s alternative narrative of Emily and Sue (as diehard
Dickinsonians know, “The Book of Emily and Sue” was for some years
the working title of Open Me Carefully) can be challenged.

Some readers who wholeheartedly subscribe, as I do, to Hart and
Smith’s reconstruction of Dickinson’s life-long emotional and erotic
bond with Susan will nevertheless find their editorial representation
of the relationship a bit flat. Their understandable eagerness to
counter pathologizing or dismissive accounts of Emily and Susan’s
love leads them to rid it of its elements of turmoil, distancing, jealousy
and envy, identification and rivalry, anger and recovery. Along with
Smith and Hart, I think of Dickinson’s relationship with Susan as both
erotic and “generative,” but these other elements seem to me part of
what made it so. Reading a late text like “Morning” in view of the en-
tire preserved correspondence between Dickinson and Susan, I’m re-
minded of James Joyce’s character Richard in Exiles as he speaks to
the woman he loves: “I have wounded my soul for you—a deep
wound of doubt which can never be healed. . . . It is not in the dark-
ness of belief that I desire you. But in restless living wounding doubt.”
Dickinson kept faith with her “Sister” in the midst of such doubt, I
suspect—beautifully so by the time of “Morning.” Open Me Carefully
presents itself as a corrective to mutilated and censored versions of
Dickinson’s life as well as her texts, and it is all that and more. But it
does not attempt to print the entire extant correspondence between
Dickinson and Susan; nor, I think, does it sufficiently interpret what it
does print. It glances away from the Dickinson who once, in
Franklin’s credible reconstruction of “Now I knew I lost her” (poem
1274), copied an unfavorable poem about Susan into a fascicle and
then mutilated it by removing the poem. As an even more ruthlessly
self-editing twentieth-century poet reminds us, such omissions are not
accidents.

Hart and Smith’s claims for Susan’s importance in Dickinson’s life
and work extend to naming her as Dickinson’s collaborator, indeed (as
in Smith’s essay on “Dickinson’s Manuscripts” in The Emily Dickinson
Handbook) her sometime “coauthor.” Noting that from “the late
1850s on, Emily . . . [was] regularly sharing drafts and inviting feed-
back” from Susan, Hart and Smith go on to speculate that “It is likely
that this relationship is reciprocal, and that Susan sends Emily her
own poems for critique as well. One example of this process is pre-
served in the . . . exchange of various versions of Emily’s poem ‘Safe in
their Alabaster Chambers’” (p. 64). As several essays in The Emily
Dickinson Handbook testify, this famous exchange, in which Dickin-
son rewrote the original second stanza of the poem in response to
Susan’s judgment that it was not quite as “frosty” as the first, has be-
come something of a litmus test among Dickinson critics for loyalty to
Hart and Smith’s closely meshed biographical and textual interpreta-
tion of Dickinson’s writings. To loyalists, the exchange illustrates
Susan’s very practical writerly assistance to Dickinson as well as Dick-
inson’s loving gratitude for Susan’s intelligent recognition: “Your praise is good—to me—,” Dickinson wrote back, “Because I know it knows—and suppose—it means—.” To doubters, on the other hand, it’s a serious inconvenience that Hart and Smith’s one example is, to the best of current knowledge, the only extant example of Susan’s “coauthoring” contribution to Dickinson’s work. To be sure, as Hart and Smith point out, nineteenth-century private correspondence was often destroyed through neglect or intent, and reasoning from absence is dangerous. Still, count me here among the doubters, including R. W. Franklin, who on textual grounds takes the position that the manuscripts Dickinson sent next door to Susan, even in this one preserved exchange of criticism, were fair copies rather than the messier working documents of Dickinson’s poetry workshop.

An even more fundamental question for Open Me Carefully as a work in both editorial theory and biography is well posed by Suzanne Juhasz in “Materiality and the Poet,” the concluding and, I think, in some ways the bravest essay in The Emily Dickinson Handbook. Taking note of Open Me Carefully in concert with other editions of Dickinson’s individual correspondences now progressing along similar lines, Juhasz takes issue with their shared assumption “that the particularity of the intended audience or recipient determines the identity of a poem or body of writing” (p. 435). As she points out, Dickinson often sent versions of the same poem or phrase to different correspondents, and in many recoverable instances it seems not that the biographical occasion generated a poem later committed to an independent fair copy but that Dickinson interpreted the biographical occasion through the prism of words already written: “The external contexts or referents or recipients can vary, because they are not the originary occasion for these lines of poetry; they are, rather, stimuli and echo” (p. 435). This is the Dickinson of Franklin’s editorial practice in the new variorum Poems, which steadfastly refused to declare any one recipient or any one version of a poem primary.

The central Event Franklin memorializes in the variorum Poems is not Dickinson’s relationship to any one correspondent but rather her changing relationship, over time, to her own writing. As her letter-poem “Morning” implies, revisiting her own writing must have been one of Dickinson’s primary modes of keeping her life-long faith with Susan Dickinson; but as Franklin’s variorum documents, she certainly did so for other recipients of her work, other people whom she loved—and, surely, for herself. Franklin responsibly eschews the sort of speculative biographical dating and arranging of manuscripts in
which Johnson from time to time indulged; abstaining from pegging Dickinson's writing to biography, Franklin provides instead a biography of the writing. The biographical subject reconstructed in his splendid introduction is a poet who methodically destroys worksheet drafts in transferring them to fascicles, who lays in stocks of paper when anticipating a creative period and, once in one, works steadily, and who revisits and reorders her work at intervals. Franklin's account registers the familiar biographical traumas of the Dickinson myth from a careful distance, in terms of their effects on Dickinson's "poetry workshop." From Franklin's reconstruction, we learn that Dickinson settled into her fascicle making practices in 1858–59 and worked steadily at them until the summer of 1860, when production was mysteriously interrupted in the workshop. Returning to fascicle making in 1861–62, she relaxed her approach: she included alternate readings of fascicle poems and left some poems outside fascicles in fair copies. She continued to produce fascicles at a great rate until 1864, when eye trouble prompted her to spend a few months in Cambridge, near a doctor who was treating her. She took retrospective stock of her work in early 1866, as she seems to have done in 1861 and 1862 as well, when she compiled the poems she sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson along with an inquiry about whether her verse were alive. Retrospection in 1866 "was appropriate," Franklin concludes, "for the beginning of 1866 marked the effective end of fascicle making. Something that had begun in 1858, seen disruption in 1860 and renewal in 1862, disruption in 1864 and return in 1865, had ended for her" (p. 26).

Abstinent as Franklin's narrative of Dickinson's writing is in biographical terms, it does of course reflect biographical as well as aesthetic judgments, and like the more overt biographical and aesthetic judgments of Hart and Smith in Open Me Carefully, Franklin's judgments can be challenged. Along with Johnson, although without Johnson's reasoning backward from events in someone else's life to events in Dickinson's writing, Franklin tells the story of Dickinson's writing through a version of the "Master" narrative. In his version, reconstructing the "Master" crisis involves not the external evidence of Wadsworth's going to California but the alignment of several kinds of textual evidence within the corpus of Dickinson's manuscripts: the second two "Master" letters that he dates to 1861 and the "Master" poems that began to be written—but not, unusually for Dickinson at this time, incorporated into fascicles—in late 1860, one of which ("Title divine—is mine!") Dickinson sent to Samuel Bowles in 1861.
“In some uncertain way,” he concludes, these texts “stand near the disorder that came into her workshop from late 1860 until early 1862.”

Franklin’s emphasis on the “Something” that “ended” for Dickinson in 1866 reflects his implicit biographical endorsement of the familiar crisis narrative of the Dickinson myth along with his editorial and aesthetic investment in Dickinson’s 1858–66 fascicles, her “manuscript books,” as his 1981 edition called them with deliberate emphasis on their intentional finish, as the productive peak of Dickinson’s career. Open Me Carefully, by contrast, gives us a version of Dickinson’s life without the crisis narrative, whether attributed to a male or female love object. Along with Marta Werner in her 1995 Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios, Hart and Smith value Dickinson’s later writings as potentially even more interesting and more experimental than the bound fascicles, an aesthetic position in marked opposition to Franklin’s.

Setting Open Me Carefully and Franklin’s variorum Poems side by side, I find myself drawn to the mute epitaphic pathos of Franklin’s life of Dickinson’s writing, his spartan deferral of the human biographical subject in favor of the vicissitudes of the text. “Something”—no more can or need be specified—“had ended for her.” At the same time, though, I’m reminded of a late Dickinson poem, scribbled in pencil on a scrap of writing paper—no fascicle, no fair copy—that lovingly ironizes exactly that epitaphic pathos. To borrow Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s term for women’s modernist writing, this is truly writing beyond the ending:

“Go tell it”—What a Message—
To whom—is specified—
Not murmur—not endearment—
But simply—we obeyed—
Obeyed—a Lure? a Longing?—
Oh Nature—none of this—
To Law—said Sweet Thermopylae
I give my dying Kiss—

[Poems, poem 1584, dated c. 1882]

In all of literary history, Dickinson could hardly have located a more canonical instance of writing thought to speak for itself than Simonides’ epitaph for the three hundred of Thermopylae. (“You ask me what my flowers said—then they were disobedient—I gave them messages,” Dickinson had written many years ago, in the first “Master” letter of 1858.) This poem’s conceit is that the epitaph can re-
spond to the speech of an interlocutor and that once coaxed into di-
logue it will break down its laconic reserve to say just a little more
than Simonides made it say for itself. To let Dickinson’s writing
“speak for itself” is also Hart and Smith’s wish for their edition of
Dickinson’s writings to Susan. What does this poem have to say about
that editorial wish?

In his review of Johnson’s 1955 variorum Poems, Jay Leyda offered
a judgment that even today sounds strikingly progressive and up-to-
date (except that the seven published poems have now grown to ten):
“More than any romantic factor, it was the exertion of editorial con-
trol, over the known seven poems published in the poet’s lifetime,
that influenced her decision to withdraw from ordinary publication
methods” (p. 241). Leyda applauded Johnson for giving up some
forms of control, such as normalizing capitalization, spelling, and
punctuation, and scolded him for retaining others. In their different
ways, Hart and Smith as well as Franklin strive to relinquish even
more editorial control over Dickinson’s writing than did Johnson. On
the evidence of “Go tell it” and of other writings, however, I suspect
that Dickinson would forgive her past and present editors their per-
petual rediscovery that there is always more to editing her writing
than allowing it to speak for itself. I hope that Franklin’s variorum
Poems and Hart and Smith’s Open Me Carefully will lure new readers
as well as those long familiar with Dickinson’s work into the multiplic-
ities of her manuscript writings.

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