CRISTANNE MILLER

Emily Dickinson’s Letters: A Preview

Editing a new volume of Dickinson’s letters and what Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward called “Prose Fragments” (“PF”) is a huge task, and a very exciting one. This essay offers a brief summary of ways that the 1958 Johnson and Ward edition is out of date; the major changes in inclusion of documents, conception, redating, and revision of letter and prose presentation in the new edition of letters being prepared by Domhnall Mitchell and myself (forthcoming with Harvard University Press, probably 2023); and one new discovery from working with the manuscripts that we find particularly exciting. This edition is in every way a joint project. Johnson and Ward co-edited the 1958 Letters, yet Ward is designated as “Associate Editor”—even though Jay Leyda consulted mostly with her in preparing his Years and Hours, suggesting that he regarded her as the better resource. With Domhnall Mitchell and myself, there is no “primary” or “associate.” This is a Miller/Mitchell edition—names arranged alphabetically. Mitchell also has read and commented on drafts of this essay.

Johnson and Ward performed a major service to Dickinson studies in their work of manuscript assimilation, detection, and textual scholarship, as was appropriate for the mid-twentieth century. We are in their debt. We also want to acknowledge our debt to Mabel Loomis Todd for her heroic work in collecting letters soon after Dickinson’s death—without which most of them would almost inevitably have disappeared—and all other editors of the poet’s letters, especially those leading up to the 1958 Letters.¹ Our new edition proceeds from the fact that the Letters of 1958 is now woefully out of date. Since 1958, around twenty-eight new letters have been discovered or reconstructed. This list includes many letters already published in some form—such as those to Joseph Lyman, Abiah Root,
Emily Fowler Ford, Perez Cowan, Edward Everett Hale, and the Norcrosses—and a handful that we are publishing for the first time—including one to Dickinson’s uncle William Dickinson, a letter to Jane Bates, and various notes.2 We have also located manuscripts thought to be missing, for example two in the possession of Sister Mary James Power in Milwaukee. It will be the most important work of our edition to publish previously unknown letters, letters previously not transcribed from original manuscripts, and to collect published but previously uncollected letters within a single edition. Of similar importance, Johnson and Ward print only a fraction of Dickinson’s letter-poems, those letters that include no prose preface or conclusion, just a poem. We will include all letter-poems that contain any mark of being letters—that is, that contain either an address or a signature, even if Dickinson writes that address on the verso of her page, as she often does with Susan Dickinson. According to our counts, Dickinson signs the great majority of her letter-poems—or at least of those we know or can strongly surmise were circulated in the mode of a letter, without prose context; we classify 188 manuscripts as letter-poems, addressed or signed, in addition to the twenty letter-poems printed by Johnson and Ward. In the case of an additional eighty-three poems, because the manuscripts have been lost and the transcripts provide no or inadequate contextualizing information, we cannot know whether the poems were enclosures, set in a letter, or sent independently of any prose—let alone, whether addressed or signed. We include neither these poems nor the around fifty five (many to Susan) that are written on manuscripts without any prose context and are unaddressed and unsigned.

Together, these additions and that of previously uncollected or unpublished letters will both transform a reader’s sense of Dickinson’s range of writing to already known correspondents and include new correspondents, for whom only letter-poems remain extant—for example, Gertrude Vanderbilt.3 It will also represent more accurately what we might call the modes of Dickinson’s correspondence—from early chatty letters, to witty valentines, to a broad range of epistles (epigrammatic, erotic, informational, consolatory), to poems without a prose frame.

Perhaps second in importance is the dating of letters, which in the 1958 edition is predictably behind current scholarship. Some redating has been done by critics, biographers, and editors such as Jay Leyda, Alfred Habegger, and Ralph Franklin, but we are also radically redating several letters and some complete correspondences—including those on which others have worked extensively.
Redating has been primarily Mitchell’s work. It is enabled in part by the Ebenezer Snell meteorological records of weather in Amherst. These records were available in 1958 but no previous editors have used them as extensively as we do; because Snell recorded observations three times a day, starting in 1835, they provide a detailed grid for charting Dickinson’s own notes about the weather.¹ When Dickinson dates a letter “Wednesday” and describes a heavy snowfall for the preceding three days, Snell’s records allow us to confirm it was (for example) Wednesday 17 January (not 3, 10, or 24) in a particular year. The existence of archives such as America’s Historical Newspapers and availability of Lavinia’s diaries also enable much greater precision in reference to events and publications mentioned in the letters than Johnson and Ward provide. Peripheral correspondences, such as those between Samuel Bowles and Austin and Susan, also offer important information, allowing us to date some letters more precisely than previous work has shown—for example, we are updating Alfred and Nellie Habeggers’ work on Samuel and Mary Bowles’ travel, and hence also their correspondence with Dickinson.

To give three examples, we have redated a letter to Austin previously printed as autumn 1844 to 14 October 1844, thanks to the Snell weather records and the Williston Seminary catalogue for the year ending 12 August 1845 (JL4).⁵ A letter to Emily Fowler Ford, which Dickinson dates as “Thursday morning” and which Johnson and Ward dated “about 1851” and placed first in that year’s correspondence (JL40), has been redated as 11 December 1851, again thanks to Snell’s records and to Vinnie’s extensive record of visits between Emily Fowler and the Dickinson sisters: 11 December is the only Thursday in 1851 that makes sense of the other references—to weather and to the young women seeing each other. In 1876, Dickinson wrote to Abigail Cooper mentioning a fire that destroyed much of the Palmer Block—a large building on Main Street, containing many businesses and in which Edward and Austin Dickinson had offices. Previously dated “about 1876,” we have redated this letter (JL462) to mid-March 1876, since the Amherst Record dates the fire as 13 March and Dickinson appears to be writing about an event that has recently occurred. Redating letters creates a new understanding of the narrative of Dickinson’s life, not just within particular correspondences but across her range of letter writing, as it remains to us. We have discovered no new correspondents—thanks to the excellent collecting and scholarship of those who have preceded us—and we suspect that now, almost 150 years after Dickinson’s death, it is unlikely that new caches of letters will be discovered. Similarly, our redating provides important framing information for considering Dickinson’s
relationships with individuals but rarely requires major reconsideration of a relationship narrative. The one instance in which such reconsideration may come into play involves already challenged claims that Dickinson composed letters and love poems to Bowles, as her “Master.”*6 Our redating, extending others’ work, indicates that the claims are impossible: Bowles received his first letter from Dickinson in late July 1859, not “about June 1858” (JL189)—that is, considerably after spring 1858, when she composed the first of the three so-called “Master letters.”*7 Similarly, we redate “If she had been the Mistletoe” (M 48, Fr60) from “early 1859” to December of that year—a letter-poem not included in the 1958 Letters. Bringing together letters, letter-poems, and all available scholarship on dates of Dickinson’s correspondences will enable a more accurate understanding of many of Dickinson’s relationships. Our volume will tell a new story, not transforming the basic understanding of Dickinson’s life but certainly altering some of its contours.

A volume of letters tells its story through several features in addition to the primary content. Mitchell and I are giving extensive attention to the apparatus of our volume—in particular, to updating several Johnson and Ward assumptions about gender and class. For example, as was conventional in the 1950s, they refer to all women by their husbands’ names: “Mrs. Josiah Holland” rather than “Elizabeth”—even though Elizabeth is Dickinson’s intimate friend (often addressed as “Sister” or “little sister”). What is the first name of “Mrs. Henry Hills,” or of “Mrs. Edward Tuckerman”? Johnson and Ward provide no easy access to the information that their names are “Adelaide” and “Sarah,” respectively. The 1958 glossary gives information primarily or exclusively about men—although Dickinson’s relationship may be only with the women of these families. One finds “Edward” and “Frederick Tuckerman” but no “Sarah.” For the Sweetser family, they list “Catherine Dickinson Sweetser” and “Charles,” “John,” and “Luke” but not “Abby” (Mrs. Luke Sweetser) or “Cornelia” (Mrs. J. Howard Sweetser)—to whom Dickinson wrote (there are no extant letters for Charles, John, or Luke). Abigail Cooper received 27 letters, but the glossary lists only her husband, James Sullivan Cooper—who, to our knowledge, received none; the bibliography gives more information about her husband and sons than about Abigail. Only unmarried women, Dickinsons, other very close relatives (for example, the Norcrosses), girlhood friends, and Mabel Loomis Todd receive their own glossary entries—although for some Dickinson women, the glossary entry says only “See [husband’s name]”—for example, for Lucretia Gunn and Elizabeth Dickinson.
This bias significantly erases the importance of Dickinson’s correspondence with women in her life, especially in her last decade, when she is engaged in warm correspondence with many neighborhood women. These women preserved her notes, often endorsing them with her name and a date of receipt. They recognized that Dickinson was a writer of importance during her lifetime, and they willingly contributed their saved letters to Todd for her 1894 *Letters*, thereby contributing actively to the frame through which we can now view her life.

Calling women by their given names and presenting them in relation to their own life choices and accomplishments provides more appropriate framing for particular correspondences. It can also contribute to greater accuracy. As one example of such accuracy: Johnson and Ward name “Loo” Norcross as “Louise”—although their glossary acknowledges some dispute about the “spelling” of the first name. In his 2001 biography, Habegger established that this niece’s name is “Louisa.” Most scholarship coming out even now refers to “Louise,” because it relies on the 1958 *Letters*. Similarly, even feminist work continues to refer to “Mrs. Hill,” “Mrs. Tuckerman,” or even “Mrs. Holland,” although very few women or men would regard “Mrs” as the appropriate signifier of a woman’s identity today and despite the decades-long intimacy Dickinson carried out through scores of letters and poems with Elizabeth Holland in particular.8

Class assumptions also come into play: in Johnson and Ward’s glossary and annotation of letters, biographical information focuses almost exclusively on professionally active men. Granted, this information is important because Dickinson was part of a well-known, well-educated family, with a father who was both a lawyer and a significant Massachusetts politician and a brother who was also a lawyer and community leader. She circulated among highly professional people, as an acquaintance or friend. At the same time, her letters are filled with mention of merchants, shopkeepers, servants in the Dickinson or other households, and people of various classes in her community. While (partly because of Harvard’s page-limits) we will keep our annotation brief, we attempt both there and in the glossary to identify people across the entire range of her life-engagement.9 Dickinson also circulated in a non-professional world, of dress-makers, pharmacists, glove-merchants, Indigenous basket weavers, at least one itinerant berry seller, and people working in her family’s kitchen, garden, or barn.

Dickinson’s early letters to Austin are especially full of information about births, marriages, illness, and death across Amherst’s social classes. With some
regularity, Dickinson tries to think of “news” to send Austin, and more than once she and Vinnie discuss who will send him such information. On 1 October 1851, she writes, “Vinnie tells me she has detailed the news – she reserved the deaths for me, thinking I might fall short of my usual letter somewhere. In accordance with her wishes, I acquaint you with the decease of your aged friend – Dea Kingsbury – He had no disease that we know of, but gradually went out” (JL53). In 1852, she writes:

I infer from what you said, that my last letter didn’t suit you, and you tried to write as bad a one as you possibly could, to pay me for it; but before I began to write, Vinnie said she was going to, and I mustn’t write any news, as she was depending upon it to make her letter of, so I merely talked away as I should if we’d been together, leaving all the matter of fact to our practical sister

—who never got around to writing before Emily’s letter was mailed (JL95). That Austin would scold because he received no local “news” from Emily indicates powerfully how much this exchange was part of the family bond. Austin, Vinnie, and Emily shared a strong interest in the life of the entire community.\(^{10}\) Reading correspondence between Austin and Vinnie, or among other Dickersons and their friends, also allows us to include the occasional postscript written by Emily in others’ letters—for example, on the back of a 14 October 1850 letter from Vinnie to Austin, she added “Come home Naughty Boy!! Emily.” This admonition will appear, for the first time, in the annotation for the 27 October letter Dickinson writes to Austin, the next extant letter in their correspondence following her pert note (JL37).

Either Mitchell has, or I have, looked at the manuscript for nearly every letter still extant—with the exception of those in private hands that we have not been able to access and a few that COVID-19 has prevented us from traveling to see. (We hope to visit a number of libraries in 2021.) In our transcriptions, we find frequent instances where Johnson or Ward miss a word, misread a word, or misrepresent a manuscript. In an 1883 letter to Susan (JL799), for example, Johnson and Ward transcribe a medication Dickinson requests as “The little Vial I still have, labeled ‘Mere - Sol, Hahn’”; their “Mere” followed by a dash should be “’Merc” followed by a period. Dickinson requests a homeopathic solution called “Mercurius solubilis Hahnemann.”\(^{11}\) Some instances of change are trivial: Johnson and Ward add two paragraph breaks to their transcription of a letter to Elizabeth
Holland (JL487). Others are more substantial: for example, some “letters” to Otis Lord consist of drafts reconstituted as if a single letter, in ways that do not follow the manuscript evidence as we see it—although we acknowledge the challenge of printing this material, since some Lord drafts have passages cut out or have been cut into pieces.\footnote{12}

The presentation of letters written to Dickinson is also confusing in the 1958 edition. Three letters from Helen Hunt Jackson to Dickinson, for example, are grouped under a letter from Dickinson to Maria Whitney (numbered JL573 a, b, & c), in which Dickinson mentions to Whitney that she has seen “Mr and Mrs Jackson of Colorado,” although nothing else in the letter has to do with Jackson, much less Dickinson’s correspondence with Jackson. This placement positions three letters that Jackson wrote over a period of nine months in a context irrelevant to them. In contrast, we will present letters to (or about) Dickinson with a number relating to that correspondence, not with a Dickinson letter number and secondary alphabetic designation. This will enable readers to see letters to Dickinson on or around the date they were written. The Table of Contents also will represent each of the extant letters from Jackson to Dickinson with its own date and page number, for example:

Jackson, Helen Hunt

3 (shortly after 10 October 1876): p.

Similarly, letters about Dickinson containing information important to a correspondence or a particular composition will be listed as such; for example, “Cooke, Fidelia Hayward to S. Bowles (early 1861)”—a note Cooke writes Bowles about a poem Dickinson sent him. All letters to (or significantly about) Dickinson will be listed in the Table of Contents under the letter writer’s name.

While Johnson and Ward always state in their annotation whether a letter manuscript is incomplete, in draft, or “missing” (indicating that only a
transcript remains), we make such distinctions more obvious by placing “Draft” or “Transcription by [transcriber’s name]” at the beginning of a letter. It should be clear before a reader begins to read that, for example, an 1885 letter to Helen Hunt Jackson exists only in multiple drafts (JL976), or that several of the letters to Abiah Root exist only as transcribed by Todd. Some drafts represent letters that were clearly part of an active exchange, judging from other letters in the correspondence or their direct response to an interlocutor, but others bear little or no such evidence. Our annotation—again, unlike Johnson’s and Ward’s—is not interpretive. Deciding what the evidence of a letter or draft means is the reader’s (or the critic’s) job. Ours is to make clear the evidence we work from.

Representing any author’s handwritten documents in print typically involves some interpretation. Evidence from other nineteenth-century letters and manuscripts, however, provide useful guidelines for printing Dickinson’s letters. More than Johnson and Ward, we place Dickinson’s handwriting in the context of nineteenth-century handwriting conventions. Dickinson marked paragraphs (and lines of verse) following conventions legible to her peers but not to many current readers—namely, by leaving lateral space at the end of a row of script, not by indenting the new paragraph’s first line. Consequently, the typical North American reader’s attention to the left margin for signs of indentation provides little evidence of her method. Nineteenth-century punctuation is often casual and variously inscribed, with reverse commas, dashes, and elongated (sometimes slanted) lines rather than dots—for example, above the letter “i” or as periods.13 Such elongation occurs in Dickinson’s script especially when she writes in pencil. A late letter to Catherine Sweetser (JL897, spring 1884) includes several non-standard marks—a comma drawn below a letter rather than following it (see “person”); others distinctly below the line of script (following “deserve” and “circumference”); and long slanted marks above some “i”s. As is typical for Dickinson, non-standard placement and representation of punctuation in this letter are interspersed with standard presentation and placement. Here Johnson and Ward depart from Dickinson’s paragraphing practice in that they mark a new paragraph following the page turn (after “each”)—although there is no right-hand margin space preceding the page turn to indicate a new paragraph [see figures 1 and 2]. Our transcription of these two pages indicates in brackets where our transcription differs from theirs:
Your account of the Lilies was so fresh I could almost pick them, and the hope to meet them in person, in Autumn, thro' your loving Hand, is a fragrant Future [–] I hope you are well as you deserve, which is a blest circumference, and give my love to each [–] [no new paragraph] Aunt Libbie just looked in on us, and I go to make her a Dish of Homestead Charlotte Russe –

Always,

Emily [–]

To specify a repeated point of difference in transcription: they regard the high, slanted mark after her signature as a period. This is a mark Dickinson uses frequently after her name; we represent it as a dash.

Especially from around 1847 to 1851, Dickinson uses a plethora of periods in her letters to Austin. In one 1847 letter (JL17), she uses a double period after a mid-sentence “Grandmother” (represented in Letters as a period then comma) and periods after the names “Frink,” “Jacob,” and “Holt”; she also uses periods after both “Brother” and “Austin” at the beginning of the letter and after “sister” and “Emily” in her signature. In this same letter, an unusually long mark after “Mrs” appears as a period in Letters; we call it a dash. We do not alter Dickinson’s
usage, but in our introduction we let readers know that such things probably had no interpretable significance for Dickinson or her correspondents. The use of excessive periods was highly unlikely to have signaled anything to Austin about his younger sister’s meaning; similarly, the accent-like dash after her signature was unlikely to have carried significance. We do not attempt to reproduce the look, the visual aura, of a manuscript page but to reproduce Dickinson’s handwriting in print, according to our understanding of her writing habits, nineteenth-century conventions, current editorial practice, and standards of clarity for a twenty-first-century reader— informs by our own research and others’ scholarship.

There have been no new major developments in dating Dickinson’s handwriting, but Franklin’s observations about Dickinson’s script have been helpful, and Mitchell has spent hundreds of hours noting when Dickinson makes certain kinds of letters, capitalizations, or punctuation across the decades of her writing. As indicated, at times, we interpret marks differently from previous editors. For example, both Johnson and Franklin tend to interpret reverse commas (that is, marks low on the line of script and slanted downward to the right) as dashes; we regard them as commas—and note that Bowles and Jackson also use reverse commas, as does Lavinia. Dickinson is not drawing letters or punctuation as a visual artist; she does not make marks precisely. She often writes quickly and her habits change. Any printing of Dickinson’s manuscripts requires interpretation as to some punctuation and capitals. While we maintain Dickinson’s idiosyncrasies of style, spelling, and form, we also use common sense: for example, a mark that might be called either a dash or a comma that immediately precedes a new sentence would, reasonably, not be a comma. On the other hand, if Dickinson marks punctuation clearly, we do not change it to make it conform to any logic or syntactic norm.

One of our most exciting discoveries in work on this edition involves what Johnson and Ward designated “Prose Fragments” and placed at the end of their volume (abbreviated PF). While some of the sentences or passages they position here are indeed found on scraps of paper and written in rough hand, others are written on full or cut pieces of stationery, and on one document Dickinson neatly copied five phrases or reflections on a ledger page—albeit with some marginal alternatives (see figure 3). Remarkably, she here records pieces of prose in the general way she recorded poems: that is, she collects them on one page and draws lines between them. Johnson and Ward’s PFs are not for the most part “fragments.” Most are fully conceptualized phrases or statements—as one sees on this ledger page. Transcribed literally (with reference to the visual page and the Johnson/Ward PF numbers), this page reads:
Figure 3. AC 888. Late 1870s, PF 110, 72, 80, 111, 89
The Grass is the Ground’s Hair, +and it is singed with heat – Mrs Gamp would say – [in margin:] and it curls like a Girl’s, in the damp wind – (PF110)

+Dim is the Heavenly prospective that enlivens some +weary – [in margin] +which (PF72)

I dont keep the Moth part of the House – I keep the Butterfly part – (PF80)

The Leaves are very gay – but we know they are elderly – ‘Tis pathos to dissimulate, in their departing case – (PF111)

Mansions of Mirage – (PF89)

While one might debate how the marginal “which” fits the syntax in the second passage, three of the five passages recorded are without alternatives, and the alternative belonging to the first is a memorable phrase in its own right. The second passage appears to have alternatives for its initial word: “Dim is” or “weary is” or perhaps even “which is” (although “which” seems more likely to provide an alternative for “that”; Dickinson does not always mark places for potential alternative consideration). The statement is not resolved, but it is also not in and of itself a fragment, unless one imagines it beginning with “which.” Johnson and Ward represent this line as “Dim is the Heavenly prospective that enlivens some which weary”—also a possibility, but not the only one, and a possibility that represents the statement as ungrammatical, or incomplete.

Dickinson also drew lines under other of her collected pieces of prose, as she does under many poems in her fascicles, although sometimes she has torn or cut off the writing above or below her drawn lines. A passage probably recorded about 1885 and used in slightly altered form in a letter to Susan (JL1024) appears on a torn sheet of paper that at one point also contained other writing. The recto side reads “Emerging from an Abyss and entering it again – that is Life, is it not?” (PF32, AC#752). Immediately underneath this statement is a line dividing it from whatever was written below—now torn off, leaving visible only the top of the word “Could” below the line.15 A bifolium page containing (among other writing) a rough draft to “Dear friends” includes a line across the page between two passages. Johnson and Ward speculate that the drawn line “represents space intended for a
poem” (PF28)—perhaps a poem also sent to Thomas Niles, since Dickinson writes his name on another part of this page. The draft begins, “Dear friends I cannot tint in Carbon nor embroider Brass, but send you a homespun, rustic picture I certainly saw Saturday”—with reference to a “storm” and concluding, above the drawn line, “Please excuse my needlework – ” (AC#767). Certainly it is possible that the line marks a space for insertion, perhaps of a poem. The language above the line echoes phrases she uses elsewhere for her poems (a picture, needlework). The line, however, may also mark discrete passages. As in other cases, we will represent the page as Dickinson wrote it, not speculate on what her line means.

More spectacularly, Dickinson again collects five statements on a narrow strip of paper, with lines drawn between passages to mark the end of one and beginning of the next (AC#887). Because she wrote some of these passages with varying orientations to the page (as it were, upside down or vertically), she did not in each case require a line to mark a statement’s end. As in the other case where Dickinson combined five statements on a single page, here Johnson and Ward radically disrupt the order in which Dickinson copied or wrote these statements, numbering them PF 36, 57, 62, 69, and 85.

We believe that Johnson and Ward’s “prose fragments” are in fact a repository of ideas or language Dickinson wanted to preserve—sometimes consisting of a reflection several sentences long and sometimes consisting of a single memorable phrase. Some have rhythmic qualities or even slant rhyme, just as many of her letters contain meter or rhyme. This seems to be language that Dickinson imagined she might use in either letters or poems—and indeed the preserved phrase “grasped by God” (PF76) does appear, slightly altered, in the poem “Drowning is not so pitiful” (M 662, Fr1542)—as Magdalena Zapedowska has analyzed. As early as 1854, Dickinson wrote to Austin, “This is truly extempore, Austin – I have no notes in my pocket”—suggesting that she is already engaged in her habit of saving phrases or longer statements for some future use (JL165). “Notes” would seem to designate memorable phrases as much as, or more than, a draft as such, and if Austin knew she collected “notes,” this sounds as though her habit of writing down language to use later in some context was practiced openly within the family. It is far less likely that she drafted actual letters while circulating among family members.

Repetition also suggests Dickinson’s interest in preserving memorable thoughts and phrases. For example, on a piece of brown wrapping paper, she writes “Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes ^often have – many times^ have – A something
overtakes the Mind – ” (PF30, AC#851). (The carets, ^ ^, mark alternatives that Dickinson writes above or below a word or line; in this case, Dickinson considers “often have” and “many times” for the first written “sometimes have.” As is the case here, in writing alternatives, Dickinson sometimes repeats words in her alternative phrasing that do not change—here “have” repeated after “often” but not after “many times.”) On another page, she repeats part of this thought, in a very different context: “We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse – A something over takes the mind – we do not hear it coming” (PF119, AC#879). Dickinson’s repeating her articulation of a psychological experience in two completely different contexts strongly suggests that she saved pieces of prose without a particular composition or context in mind.16 Contrary to Johnson’s claim, there is no evidence that Dickinson wrote drafts for “most” letters—although she clearly drafted some and seems to have drafted letters to certain correspondents more than to others, especially late in her life.17 Both Johnson and Franklin interpret some retained manuscripts, written in clean hand on stationery, as drafts, although they could also be letters begun and then discontinued—perhaps because of a handwriting mistake; apparently because of her frugality in saving paper of all kinds, Dickinson retained partially written pages (as she also retained used envelopes, wrapping paper, and other paper scraps) for potential further use. A discontinued letter may provide information about a correspondence if no related letter was sent (or saved), but a discontinued letter is not a draft. In their Prose Fragments section, by combining preserved passages with what are explicitly drafts of letters along with discontinued fair-hand initial portions of a letter, Johnson and Ward give the impression that they are all drafts or fragments rather than, in several cases, passages she chooses to retain for uses not yet determined.

Indeed, in several cases, Johnson and Ward make these saved passages more fragmentary than Dickinson did. One sees this clearly in the case of manuscripts where Johnson and Ward disperse statements that Dickinson wrote contiguously—as occurs with the ledger page of five prose statements (see Figure 3). Here Johnson and Ward assign PF numbers that have no apparent logic or reference to the manuscript. In another case, Johnson and Ward separate statements Dickinson wrote on the recto and verso of a page as PF64 and PF73, although in our view the statements have a clear continuity. On the recto she wrote: “Eve gave ^left^ her pretty Gowns to the Trees – but they dont ^wont^ always wear them”; on the verso: “A sufficing enchanting wardrobe –” (AC#852). We combine these as a single (recto/verso) unit of prose.
In our edition, we will move statements that also appear in a letter to that letter’s annotation—indicating Dickinson’s independent preservation of the passage, whether or not it constitutes a draft. The remaining prose passages—beginning with one written in the 1850s, including several from the 1870s, and concluding with several from the 1880s—will be clustered as Dickinson wrote them, placing recto and verso writing consecutively, and they will be organized by date, to the extent possible. Again, we feel that this different conception and presentation of her retained prose gives a significantly different sense of Dickinson as a writer. Her retained prose functions like a thought-book or writer’s notebook, preserving language she may have wanted to use in more than one correspondence or context.

Our goal is to produce an edition of the letters that is up to date with knowledge about extant manuscripts, twenty-first-century editorial methods, and Dickinson scholarship. Because few scholars consult beyond the 1958 Letters when they are reading or quoting particular correspondences, misinformation has continued to circulate long after critics and biographers have corrected it—as to names, dating, extant correspondences, and the order or other particulars of individual letters. Our edition will bring all such information within a single cover and additionally contribute substantial new information and ways of understanding her writing through the letters and our new presentation of her preserved prose passages.

As a respondent to a panel on “Scholarly Editing Now” at the 2020 Modern Language Association meeting, Jerome McGann suggested that the current editorial goal should be to produce “determinative,” not “definitive,” editions—that is, editions that recognize that their editorial work inevitably addresses particular historical audiences and audiences with particular interests (scholarly, popular, artistic, avant-garde). While this edition will in every way replace the Johnson and we hope that it will address the needs of multiple audiences, we of course know that other more specialized editions of letters may serve more useful purposes for some audiences and that our edition will, too, eventually be revised or replaced. Similarly, we trust that scholars will continue to make new discoveries about Dickinson’s correspondence, its context, her correspondents, and even her manuscripts. Nonetheless, we hope our new edition will be useful and a joy to many readers for a very long time.
Notes

1. See Mabel Loomis Todd’s *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. For a list of other major publications of Dickinson’s letters, see the *Emily Dickinson Archive*, under “Resources”: www.edickinson.org/resources.

2. Scholars and biographers who have contributed to the publication or redating of previously unknown or incomplete letters (and are not mentioned elsewhere in this essay) include Ralph W. Franklin, Alfred Habegger, Ellen Louise Hart, Myra Himmelfloch and Rebecca Patterson, Polly Longsworth, Richard Sewall, Marta Werner, and Melissa White. In *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart regard the poet’s letters and poems as a single genre, after 1858, and present them without differentiation. See also *Emily Dickinson’s Correspondences: A Born-Digital Textual Inquiry*, edited by Martha Nell Smith and Lara Vetter.

3. In 1864 and 1865, Dickinson sent three poems as letters to Vanderbilt; this is the only correspondence extant to Vanderbilt, although she mentions him in a letter to Susan Dickinson. All three poems are in the Miller and Franklin editions: “To this World she returned” (M 449, Fr815A), “Dying – to be afraid of Thee –” (M 441, Fr946B), and “Further in Summer than the Birds –” (M 534, Fr985A).

4. Ebenezer Snell continued these records until his death in 1876, at which time his daughter Sabra continued them. On Ebenezer and Sabra Snell, see Martha Ackmann, *These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson* and Marta Werner, “The Weather (of) Documents.”

5. All letter quotations are taken from Mitchell’s and my transcriptions—in which we represent Dickinson’s underlining as such rather than as italics. Because our edition is still in process, letters are referred to by Johnson-assigned numbers (JL). Our edition will also include an index with cross-reference to Johnson’s numbering. For letter-poems, the index will cross-reference Franklin and Miller editions.

6. Among the critics regarding Bowles as the primary candidate for the (perhaps entirely fictional) person Dickinson refers to as “Master” are Sewall (*The Life of Emily Dickinson*) and, more recently, Judith Farr.

7. Like Habegger, Himmelfloch and Patterson conclude that Bowles’s first correspondence from Dickinson was in 1859, not 1858 (Habegger indicates summer 1859 [My Wars 381]). Bowles did visit Amherst in June 1858 but he did not return with his wife, who was included in the “Dear Friends” of Dickinson’s first letter, until late 1858. Only at this point does Bowles refer to meeting Austin’s “sisters.” We also redeate two other letters from early in this correspondence, from late August 1858 to late August 1859 (JL193) and early April 1859 to September or October of that year (JL205).

8. Johnson and Ward’s Appendix 3 also lists letters to “Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland,” not distinguishing which were sent to Elizabeth alone—although the great majority of these letters were exclusively to her, not to mention the over thirty letters Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth after Josiah’s death in October 1881.

9. Our glossary will be more complete than Johnson and Ward’s. Also, our annotation will be briefer than theirs because the contours of Dickinson’s life have become much better known since 1958; we do not include simple biographical information or speculation. Mitchell contemplates publishing a companion volume to our edition, providing greater detail about redating and about the relationship of correspondents and people mentioned in letters to Dickinson and her family.

10. In other examples: 15 June 1851, Dickinson writes her brother, “You importune me for news” (JL43); on 10 May 1852, she writes, “Vinnie will tell you all the news, so I will take a little place to describe a thunder shower which occurred yesterday afternoon” (JL89).
11. *Mercurius* solubilis Hahnemann was a homeopathic mercurial preparation devised by Samuel Hahnemann (known as the founder of homeopathy) as a substitute for the corrosive mercurial salts previously used to treat syphilis; Hahnemann’s preparation was also used in the form of tablets against cough, cold, and flu.

12. See Werner, *Open Folios*, on the Lord drafts. Some of the Abiah Root correspondence is similarly mutilated. Todd transcribed the letters and several of the manuscripts were destroyed. She then cut up her transcripts, excerpting passages she did not want to use in the 1894 *Letters*, and while her primary transcripts (incomplete because of excisions) remained at Yale, the excised passages reside at Amherst College. Johnson follows Todd’s 1894 printing, with some additional passages from the Amherst fragments. In 1995, Franklin reconstructed these letters, working from earlier Todd transcripts at Yale, restoring some passages previously omitted and changing the order of Johnson’s presentation.

13. Spelling was equally un-standardized. Interestingly, Bowles (like Dickinson) at least occasionally writes “opon” for “upon” and “ancle” for “ankle.”

14. For an instance of Lavinia’s use of a reverse comma, see 23 January 1885, Lavinia to Clara Newman Turner and Anna Newman (Houghton, MS Am 1118.7).

15. The verso of this page appears to have been a longer statement, but its prose is written so that the tear interrupts all written lines on the page, never leaving more than two consecutive words legible before the torn edge.

16. Such repetition is not unique to preserved prose passages. Dickinson also repeats phrases in several letters, just as she sends poems—or parts of poems—to more than one correspondent.

17. Johnson writes that after around 1860, “Many, if not most of [Dickinson’s letters], were now written first in rough draft and then recopied” (Introduction, xix). Relative to the number of letters she circulated, very few drafts remain, which raises the question of evidence for Johnson’s (influential, often repeated) claim.


*Works Cited*

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:


Todd, Mabel Loomis. *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Boston, Roberts Brothers, 1894.