4. The Precincts of Play: Fascicle 22

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The twenty-three poems that comprise Emily Dickinson’s Fascicle 22 were written on sheets of letter paper folded once during manufacture to create four pages or writing surfaces each; like many of their kind, six of these folded sheets were then stacked on top of, but not nested inside, each other by Dickinson before being sewn together to form a single volume. The difference in construction is potentially significant: sheets folded within each other might suggest that the poems existed as linked elements in a planned and organic structure; pages placed on top of each other do not necessarily suggest any such set of relations. The distinction is similar to that between photographs in an album or computer folder and those in an exhibition or book: the former are developed and inserted, or digitally transferred, simultaneously for convenience of storage; the latter are displayed in a certain order after a lengthy process of editing and compilation. What binds poems in a fascicle, arguably, is string, and the accident of their being completed at the same time, rather than prior design.

This essay takes at its starting point the position that poems in fascicles do not have to be read as part of a cumulative and organic totality: they do not even have to be read together at all. Of the twenty-three in this fascicle, for example, only three were sent to Dickinson’s friends (two, separately, to Susan Dickinson, and a third to Samuel Bowles). This is a pattern that is consistent for the poems in fascicles generally: though Dickinson enclosed many poems in her letters (and sometimes as letters or notes), she did not distribute whole fascicles or even excerpted sequences. The implication
seems to have been that Dickinson herself did not find it necessary for the poems to be read in the context of their manuscript collation.¹

An alternative view of the fascicles is to see them primarily as material archives (a form of keeping things in order), and an argument supporting this, though a more contentious one, is that they coincide with the years of Dickinson’s greatest production. In the early years with few poems (1854–57), there are no fascicles, while in years with a total of 1,116 (1858–65), there are forty fascicles and approximately ten sets.⁶ After 1865, when the production diminishes again, the sets become much more intermittent: there are none at all until 1871, and then nine from 1871 through 1875, at which time they cease to be made.⁷ This is not conclusive evidence, but taken together in aggregate with other factors suggests that the argument for the fascicles as archives is just as compelling as, and certainly less speculative than, any other.

Nevertheless, it seems difficult to imagine that so many poems written at around the same period by a single person could not have some kind of connection: in any existence, there are concerns and interests that last a lifetime, as well as shorter phases of enthusiasm. And as Eleanor Heginbotham writes, one does not have to subscribe to a theory of the fascicles as “one large finished architectural structure” so much “as offering delight in discovering the poet/editor’s play within individual books” (Reading ix). Heginbotham goes on, rightly in my view, to distance herself from the very few scholars who offer more fully comprehensive explanations of the fascicles—as narratives of Christian conversion or secular passion, for example—but it can be allowed nonetheless that such preoccupations do emerge, albeit more intermittently. In the fascicle under discussion there is the loss (through parting or death) of a lover, relative, or close friend in Fr461 (“We Cover Thee – Sweet Face”), for instance, as well as the prospect of religious election in Fr467 (“A Solemn thing within the Soul”).⁸ There are convergences in the imagery too: the lines “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling – / Sometimes – scalps a Tree” from Fr457 (the second in the sequence) are very similar to the scalping of the Soul in an alternative reading for Fr477 (the twenty-second in the sequence). Such connections need not be understood as integral elements in a motivated and large-scale structure of meaning (fascicles are not chapters in a novel), but they do suggest at least the possibility of smaller thematic or imagistic pockets of coherence that reward closer attention. Limiting our readings to the fascicles alone, however, runs counter to our responsibilities as critics to seek the richest interpretations available—for Dickinson’s use of imagery raises questions that are most adequately answered when we look inside and outside the
fascicles. Since the word “scalp” does not appear in any of Dickinson’s other poems, for example, it seems clear that its deployment may be local and immediate rather than structural or symphonic, occasioned (for example) by climatic or historical events—a lightning storm at the time of composition, for instance, or the ongoing and tumultuous Dakota conflict in the latter half of 1862. In the reading of Fascicle 22 that follows, then, the intention has been to tease out and comment on patterns of imagery within and across poems, but also to trace some of their potential trajectories in other contexts, other precincts of play—biographical, literary, and historical.

I

Of the twenty-three poems in this fascicle, eight have four quatrains, six have two, and one has eight: of the remaining eight poems, most have at least one quatrain. In 1862, as for much of her writing life, Dickinson’s standard unit of composition was the rhyming quatrain, a form she inherited and developed from ballads and, especially, from church hymns: as Martha England argues, “the hymns of Watts became involved with Emily Dickinson’s vocal chords, fingers, diaphragm, and lungs very early in life” (129).9 The meter in such poems is mostly iambic, though there is considerable variation and even some notable exceptions: Fr457, “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling” is predominantly trochaic, for example, and Fr459 has a truncated second line that is sufficiently unusual to warrant further comment:

“Why do I love” You, Sir?
Because –
The Wind does not require the Grass
To answer – Wherefore when he pass
She cannot keep Her place.

The abrupt switch to the third line reflects just as sudden a change of attitude to the opening question: it would seem as if the speaker begins to attempt a response, then breaks off out of reluctance, or flirtatiousness, or because the question is deemed inappropriate or unanswerable. Since the wind does not demand an explanation from the grass, she submits, the Master should not expect one from her. And indeed the rest of the poem continues to furnish examples of potentially overwhelming natural forces (wind, lightning, sun) that initiate a reaction in natural and human objects
(grass, an eye, and finally the speaker) without asking for a reason. There is a logic governing the use of these images that is very like “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day”: there, the speaker first rejects the opening comparison on the grounds of incompatibility (“Thou art more lovely . . .”), before cataloguing a series of anti-metaphors that always, but obliquely, contain a human referent that serves as a reminder of the beloved’s presence and superiority (“too hot the eye of heaven shines,” as opposed to her or his eye, for example). The speaker of Dickinson’s poem declines to profess love, then, but does not deny attraction, for there are human elements to the series of natural metaphors that she deploys nonetheless: the Wind in the first stanza is male, and the stirred Grass female, for instance. The third stanza is typical of this oscillation between evasion and admission:

The Lightning – never asked an Eye
Wherefore it shut – when He was by –
Because He knows it cannot speak –

The male is still identified as a force of nature, but the eye that closes (an instinctual reaction to a sudden fright; a response to something forbidden; an attempt to conceal the information that is disclosed through an eye too closely scrutinized) occupies a more neutral territory: the structural framework of the comparisons suggests that it is female, but the speaker twice invokes the third person neuter (“it”) instead. There is more than one reason for this: an eye may be human, but it is not an agent, a person; or it may be that the eye belongs to a bird or an animal; or perhaps it is symbolic. In addition, the speaker is moving from the apparent recoil and displacement of the first stanza towards her own feelings in the last (“The Sunrise – Sir – compelleth Me”), from externalized nature to the personal, and “it” therefore serves as a bridge—for though there is an obvious human referent for the eye, a secondary meaning invokes flowers or plants, some of which close their petals in the kinds of weather that precede storms.10

The imagery of lightning in the poem links it with Fr457 (“Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling”) and Fr477 (“He fumbles at your Soul”), and therefore provides an interesting test case for the thesis that Dickinson’s poems reward those who read them in the context of their fascicle appearances. And yet, aside from the shared image, the poems would appear to have little in common: “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling” commemorates a devastating but unspecified instance of hurt or loss; “‘Why do I love you?’” seems more like a ludic and amorous exchange (it refuses to supply a reason for love, but indicates a powerful emotional and physical response
nonetheless); and the experience described in “He fumbles at your Soul” is both indeterminate and hard to read in terms of tone (is this a positive or negative experience, or one that suspends those kinds of categories?).

The eye that “cannot speak” in Fr459 is another in a series of images that appear to avoid disclosure and reveal something at the same time: while it is true that the eye cannot literally speak, it can provide very complex information through movement—closure suggests fear of some kind, or modesty, or even intense enjoyment; looking away or not looking at all suggests embarrassment or rejection; resting the eyes on someone implies interest, warmth of affection, or scrutiny. Although the primary impetus of the description may be local to the poem itself, there are several poems in this fascicle that contain references to “eye,” “eyes,” and to an “[eye]lid”: in Fr458, Fr463, and Fr471, for example, the closure of the eye in the latter signaling death, and in Fr467, which describes the scrutiny of a Creator examining the Soul or Being. The “Windows” of Fr466 (“I dwell in Possibility”) connote the ability to observe and gather information that is afforded by language and poetry, while the first and eighth lines of Fr472 (“’Tis good – the looking back on Grief”) play on a discrepancy between the private and the public, between hidden pain and outwardly routine behavior or appearance. Indeed, this play with what can be seen and not seen is foregrounded in Fr474:

You love the Lord – you cannot see –
You write Him – every day –
A little note – when you awake –
And further in the Day,

An Ample Letter – How you miss –
And would delight to see –
But then His House – is but a step –
And mine’s – in Heaven – You see –

The verb “see” is repeated incrementally here—that is, with slight variations, and three times. The first two instances are related to the organs of sight: the “you” that is addressed in the poem writes notes to a lover she cannot see (line 1) but would like to (line 6), whereas the speaker has no such possibilities, either because her lover, or the most important figure gendered as male in her life (God, Christ), is in Heaven, or because she herself is in Heaven and cannot write, visit, or hope to see. (The disappearance of “Neighbors” to “Heaven” also challenges sight in much the same way in the poem that
follows, Fr476. Indeed, in Dickinson’s poems generally sight is a precious but vulnerable attribute of life on earth. One of the first signs of death is the closing or “Film upon the eye” described in Fr458 but also elsewhere, perhaps most famously in “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died,” a poem from F26, composed around the summer of 1863.) The “You see” that closes the poem is related to acquired knowledge, however: it means something along the lines of “it is now possible for you to understand”—and is not a reference to sight in any literal sense. In addition, the fifth and sixth lines are grammatically incomplete, for the verb “see” at the end of the sixth is missing an object or complement: it should be followed by “her” or “him,” and the lack of specificity or completion has the effect of making the absence of the lover more apparent and even acute. Indeed, what is partly moving about the poem is that “you” appears six times in eight lines, whereas the personal pronoun is absent: while the identity of “you” is fairly stable, the speaker is represented only through the possessive—what belongs to her but is apart, and not who she actually is. The self is also, then, absent from the poem—or at least not fully, not avowedly present—in much the same way that the Lord is: indeed, her only partial presence is an effect of his absence.

The very first poem in the fascicle also relies on ocular imagery:

A Prison gets to be a friend –
Between it’s Ponderous face
And Our’s – a Kinmanship express –
And in it’s narrow Eyes –

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deal us – stated as Our food –
And hungered for – the same – (Fr456)

The verb “stated” in line 7 probably means less the past particle of “expressed verbally” than “regular, fixed or repeated,” an adjectival form in a component with a missing “as” at its head (as stated as Our food). The literal situation is open to various forms of reconstruction, but the ponderous face might represent the thick wall of a cell, with the “narrow Eyes” and “appointed Beam” either the window or an aperture in the door through which a warden can view the prisoner: since the “eyes” are all that are visible to the inmate, the “Beam” can be understood too as an imagined smile. The “narrow Eyes” might suggest windows first and foremost, partly because they are plural, and partly because of the conventional association between
windows and eyes: Webster’s 1828 definition of the former gives “windows of mine eyes” as one of its examples, and Mandeville was drawing on a long-established practice when he wrote that “the Eyes are the Windows of the Soul” in 1723. But that the reference might be to an aperture in the door is allowable because of the element of time: the Beam is as regular as the food that is delivered during the day, and the eyes that look through the contrivance are also implied (eye-beam being common even in the poetry of Donne and others). On the other hand, the regularity could be that of the sun shining through the windows each morning at approximately the same time (and Beam is just as likely to suggest sun as eye). Dickinson does not mention human eyes directly, but this is not quite the 1787 Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham, the “all-seeing” prison where the inmate is under constant surveillance without the reciprocal ability to see the observer: perhaps what we can say is that in a space where she is otherwise and permanently deprived of company, Dickinson’s speaker is forced to invent the illusion of eyes and a face in order to humanize her environment and preserve her sanity.

Pursuing Dickinson’s ocular imagery within the precinct of the fascicle itself does not lead to fully satisfactory conclusions, but it does open up links to other aspects of Dickinson’s reading (Webster, Donne, Mandeville) and society (Bentham’s thinking continued to have an influence in the nineteenth century, on the architecture of both prisons and asylums). Another possibility, first suggested by James Guthrie, is that the eye imagery relates to Dickinson’s documented problems with her health (Emily Dickinson’s Vision 70–71). From April to November 1864, and again in 1865, Dickinson was treated for unspecified eye problems in Boston. During this first period, she wrote to Higginson: “I was ill since September, and since April, in Boston, for a Physician’s care—He does not let me go, yet I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself –” (L290, early June 1864). Of course, Fr456 was written two years earlier, in 1862, but in that year Dickinson admitted in a letter to Higginson that she had had a “terror since September” (L261)—a terror which Guthrie speculates might have been of “blindness or of near-constant confinement” (65). In the most recent Dickinson biography, Alfred Habegger questions such a literal cause for the eye imagery, and writes instead that the terror was less discrete:

The terror since September, a profound and systemic and ongoing state lasting through the winter, was the thing Dickinson had been booked to fall into. It may have begun with a moment when “the meaning goes out of things,” as she put it in one of her jottings, but its essence was a recognition
of something permanent: the disconnection between her heart’s absolutism and the realities of life. Painful and transforming, it brought a final sense of isolation, abandonment, rejection (436).

The prison, then, was Dickinson herself: as Guthrie says, she was “her own prison, prisoner, and imprisoner, as well as fellow-sufferer and potential liberator” (71). There is a temptation, particularly with this poet, to read lyrics as personal history in disguise, but in this case there does appear to be an overlap between the outward circumstances of Dickinson’s life (the carefully managed and gradual withdrawal in her late twenties from people other than her immediate family, household staff, and a few friends) and the situation of a speaker whose prison may be little other than a room: one is reminded again of Dickinson’s reported statement to her niece, locking the bedroom door, that “It’s just a turn – and freedom, Matty” (Bianchi, Face to Face 66).

Among the more fascinating stanzas in “A Prison gets to be a friend” are the fourth and fifth:

We learn to know the Planks –
That answer to Our feet –
So miserable a sound – at first –
Not ever now – so sweet –

As plashing in the Pools –
When Memory was a Boy –
But a Demurer Circuit –
A Geometric Joy –

If one assumes that the speaker of the poem—like most of Dickinson’s speakers—might be a woman, then the phrase “Memory was a Boy” seems curious: so too, though in a slightly different way, is the choice of “plashing in the Pools” as a contrast to the prison cell. The reasons for the latter may be partly formal (the alliterative echoes that are set up in the progression from “Planks” through “plashing” to “Pools”: there are a number of such sounds in the poem as a whole), partly for sensory contrast (planks are hard, water is soft), and partly for opposing similarities (pools are limited spaces, too, but clearly not to the same degree as a cell or room). “Memory was a Boy” suggests a time when the speaker was not aware of all of the dimensions, sexual and social, of gender differentiation—perhaps because for much of the nineteenth century younger boys and girls both
wore long skirts that were called petticoats. As a child, then, the speaker was not overly conscious of differences between boys and girls—and perhaps not even conscious that she herself was not a boy, or could not behave like a boy. The implication would seem to be that she is now painfully aware of such differences—and indeed that her present isolation has been brought about because of them. In other words, her attraction to, or for, another man or woman has led to her isolation, be it perceived or actual: the room is a prison because she is prevented from being with the lover, due to death or social disapproval or accident (the lover is already married; the lover is another woman; the lover is not aware of her interest). The innocence of the past is compared to the knowledge of the present: the pool represents a sentient experience or time less determined and fenced in by social mores.

Whether we think of the child paddling or swimming in water, the contrast is clear: feet free of constrictive shoes, in sand and water, are very different from feet forced daily to walk a narrow round of planks; free too is the body of the swimmer, embraced by water, and released from the restraints of clothing. There is often a relaxation or suspension of the normal rules of behavior for children when they are around water: they can splash and dive and jump without attracting the negative attention of parents (for very often being in a pool would suggest a break from normal routines—a holiday or day out, for example). By contrast, the present is characterized by the suppression of joy, of recklessness, of indulgence—and of the capacity for sentient pleasure that emerges during physical maturity. The reward for her present captivity is supposed to be in Heaven (which presumably is like the pool in affording escape from restriction), but the speaker seems less than convinced that the reparation will be sufficient or even apt.

The idea of maturity being equated with socialization and childhood with freedom is a central tenet of Romantic poetry, and receives one of its most important expressions in Wordsworth's “Resolution and Independence.” But as Guthrie points out, the possibility of the poem itself as a confined space within which imaginative freedom can be exercised is also suggested by the words “feet” and “Measure” (the latter a variant for “Circuit” in the fourth stanza): he might also have mentioned the reference to “sounds” in a poem that contains a great deal of approximate alliteration (Prison, Ponderous, Planks, Pools, plashing, Posture) and the use of verbs that foreground communication as compensation for confinement (express, stated, answer). Guthrie refers to Wordsworth's 1807 Sonnet beginning “Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room; / And hermits are contented with their cells,” which includes the following lines:
In truth the prison, unto which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground; (Wordsworth 199)

Wordsworth was, among other things, using this conceit to situate himself in a larger tradition of English poets including Donne (“We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms,” from “The Canonization”) and Keats (“If by dull rhymes our English must be chain’d,” with its reference to the “fettered” sonnet and the need to find a form to “fit the naked foot of Poesy”): Dickinson is doing no less. The fascicle yields evidence that by 1862 she knew that her vocation was poetry: “Without this – there is nought –” (Fr464), “I was the slightest in the House” (Fr473), and in the next fascicle, “Fame of Myself, to justify” (Fr481), suggest a preoccupation with long-term fame, and with the immortality conferred upon the writer by posterity. But perhaps the most pertinent poem in light of the present discussion is “Myself was formed – a Carpenter” (Fr475), in which the speaker describes an outsider, a judge of some kind, who comes:

To measure our attainments –
Had we the Art of Boards
Sufficiently developed – He'd hire us
At Halves –

The art of boards suggests both carpentry and acting or performing on the stage, and by extension creative performances in general. Dickinson’s speaker rejects—as another would in “Publication is the Auction”—short-term gain or recognition for her work: “We – Temples build” she says in the end, linking her craft with that of Donne and Keats and Wordsworth, and providing further insight into “I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose” (Fr466). The comparison of poetry with carpentry is an interesting one, not least because it enables us to read into the “Art of Boards” a form of compensation for the pain described in “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling”; as trees are transformed into planks of wood, from which buildings are raised, suffering is changed into the no less permanent structures of art.

“A Prison gets to be a friend” has its own reference to “the Planks / That answer to our feet,” of course, and the poem’s perhaps most important intertextual reference is to another Romantic writer, Lord Byron: as a number of critics have pointed out before me, an important gloss on “A Prison
gets to be a friend” is his “The Prisoner of Chillon” (1816), which Dickinson alludes to in several poems and mentions directly in four letters, including one in 1861 and another in 1862, the estimated date of her poem’s composition.19 Once again, “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling” (Fr.457) shows Dickinson improvising on the work of other writers—and pursuing the trail of that engagement leads us outside the confines of the fascicle where they first begin.

At one level, the poem can be thought of as a dramatic lyric, with Dickinson speaking in character as François Bonivard, imprisoned in the Castle of Chillon between 1530 and 1536 and kept underground for the last four years of his captivity.20 That would provide a slightly more literal explanation for why the speaker contrasts his present confinement with a childhood past when as “a Boy” he plashed in pools (and the contrast might have been occasioned by Chillon’s location at Lake Geneva in Switzerland: the great lake is the site of a prison, whereas the small pool is an arena for endless play). But there are differences as well: Byron’s speaker walks on a floor of stone, Dickinson’s on a floor of “Planks”; Byron’s speaker is imprisoned with two of his brothers, Dickinson’s is on her own; Byron’s speaker is a champion of religious freedom, Dickinson’s does not seem to have a cause; Byron’s speaker is released at the end of the poem, Dickinson’s is not (except, by implication, through death).

The disparities can be explained away to some degree. Though the floor is different in each case, for example, the detail of the walking is similar: in Byron’s poem, he includes a footnote (the second) to the effect “that in the pavement the steps of Bonivard have left their traces,” while in Dickinson’s the Planks “answer to our feet”—which may suggest a series of sounds as much as visible imprints, but does imply reciprocity. Both brothers die in Byron’s poem (the entire family appears to have been killed in actuality), and it could be argued that Dickinson chooses to concentrate on the last stage of Bonivard’s captivity, when he is on his own, because of her predilection for brevity. Byron’s Chillon talks about his father, his mother, and his brothers: the only suggestion of a sibling in the Dickinson poem is the younger self mentioned in stanza 4—but finding “kinship” is clearly an important element in the speaker’s attempt to preserve her humanity. The two poems differ mainly in the details in this respect, because Byron’s speaker moves from finding solace in the company of his two brothers to recording the horror of not being able to “move a single pace” or “see each other’s face.” In Dickinson’s poem, the speaker is alone and able to move about with some degree of freedom (as Bonivard eventually would after the death of his two brothers), but the twin elements of “face” and affilia-
tion are present in the first stanza, where the prison is given the attributes of a human countenance and the relationship between prisoner and cell is reconfigured as kinship. The speaker assigns human traits to inhuman objects precisely because an enforced solitude robs her of an important emotional dimension—the need for the comfort and solace that comes with other human presences.

But perhaps the crucial disparity between the poems is that Bonivard is advanced as a champion of religious freedom, whereas the motive for victimizing Dickinson’s speaker—her cause, as it were—is never explicitly stated. “Liberty” is mentioned in Byron’s prefatory “Sonnet on Chillon,” in contrast to “the chainless Mind”: the word is repeated in line 306 of the poem proper. In Dickinson’s version, “Liberty” is similarly capitalized but seems to stand less for a set of political ideals or principles than more simply for the opposite of confinement. The ending is typical of the poem’s revision of the original: Byron’s speaker declares that the “heavy walls to me had grown / A hermitage—and all my own” (lines 377–78), but accepts his release; Dickinson’s speaker appears to have no prospect of being granted freedom except through death.

Going out of the fascicles—to biography, to literary history, to other poets—in order to see different ways in which to approach a poem’s possible meanings yields insights that are just as compelling as any approach based on a reading of the poem in relation to others in the fascicle or in the fascicles as a whole. For instance, the proximity of “Eyes” (line 3) and “Beams” (line 5) creates an intriguing set of associations that are anchored in the following passage from Matthew 7, where Christ speaks:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. 2. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. 3. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? 4. Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? 5. Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye. (King James Version, Matt. 7:1–5)

As mentioned before, the crime for which Dickinson’s speaker suffers imprisonment is never stated, and although there is pain, there is no direct expression of the speaker’s innocence or guilt either. The echoes from the Bible suggest not only that the speaker’s misdemeanors are relatively minor but also that those who condemn her are guilty of worse.
Where this approach to the poem differs from those who approach the fascicles as narratives is, first, that the identification of a recurrent set of images (in this case, that of eyes) does not reveal a motivated consistency (a single theme, for instance) and, second, that the imagery can be related to moments and events outside both the poem and the fascicle. There is a difference, in other words, between finding many lyrics that have the word “eye” and deducing from this that problems relating to seeing or being seen represent a linked element in a collective structure of meaning. The truth is that ocular images are fairly common in Dickinson’s general lyric vocabulary, and that they are not used here in any clearly systematic way.21

II

One of the principal arguments for studying the fascicles (though not generally the sets) in their entirety is the premise that they constitute an essentially autobiographical narrative in metrical form: to ignore this possibility is to deny perhaps the most important reason for Dickinson’s writing and nonpublication.22 The danger of such an approach is that one either reduces the grounds for interpretive engagement (one is always relating poems to a larger purpose), or that the poems become interesting primarily for people who are interested in a narrative of conversion or deferred love. Oberhaus, for example, writes that the fascicles show that Dickinson “staked all on a single goal: the hope of being among the sacred sheep at the Judgment” (157), while Shurr shows how they reveal both “her achieved sense of professional identity as a poet” and a realization that Wadsworth, whom he identifies as a secret lover and father of her child, “had removed himself so abruptly and totally—all the way across the continent—that their separation was for all practical purposes permanent, at least in this life” (84–85). If one is not interested in exploring these aspects of Dickinson’s life, the narratives also become less compelling.

Other challenges remain, for there are often poems that are complex and intractable in and of themselves: they do not yield their meanings easily, if at all. Who of us can say with certainty that we know exactly what “Because I could not stop for Death” means? And if we do not know, how are we to fit it into a larger scheme of meaning? Does that intractability represent a failure on the part of the poet—an inability to rein in difficulties and subordinate them to the larger goal of the narrative? Or is the difficulty an attempt at reproducing in the reader some interpretive or theological or emotional challenge experienced by the author at a particular point in time? Does the resolution of the conversion narrative as some have formulated it
undermine the seriousness of such challenges: in other words, does the sense of election mean that, like a problem in a Hollywood movie, we are briefly perturbed but reassured by the inevitability of a happy ending?

An advantage to studying the fascicles is practicality: the poems there comprise approximately half of the 1,789 that Dickinson is estimated (by Franklin) to have written, and confining oneself to these represents a considerable reduction in the amount of critical reading. For students and teachers (and increasingly for a number of researchers, beginning with Sharon Cameron), studying one or two fascicles is a manageable way of expressing general truths about Dickinson’s formal practices and concerns. In class, one can certainly see an argument for limiting discussions to a fascicle or two—though to look at a list of a fascicle’s contents leads one inevitably to think of what other poems the class is missing.

If the poems really do cohere as a single project, then it has to be admitted that more than 120 years after her death, very few people have read Emily Dickinson as she herself might have wanted. The reasons are partly related to the history of her publication by others: up until 1955, she was read in incomplete editions. Even Johnson’s three-volume *Variorum* presented the poems in a sequence based on the estimated chronology of their composition: the poems as they exist in the fascicle order today were arranged in the following sequence by Johnson: J652, 314, 479, 480, 481, 482, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 483, 658, 484, 659, 485, 660, 486, 487, 488, 489, 315, and 1076. Until the publication of the fascicles in Franklin’s *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), then, most non-specialists would have read the poems out of the order of their manuscript collation. Even after that date, nonfascicle orderings have predominated, because most people are introduced to Dickinson via anthologies—at school, and especially at colleges and universities—and the selections are usually nonsequential. Of the poems in Fascicle 22, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (6th edition) includes three out of the total twenty-three (“Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling”; “He fumbles at your Soul”; and “Myself was formed – a Carpenter”); the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (5th edition) has none. Thomas H. Johnson’s selected edition, *Final Harvest*, included seven (“Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling”; “He fumbles at your Soul”; “She dealt her pretty words like Blades”; “‘Why do I love’ You, Sir?”; “I was the slightest in the House”; “Myself was formed – a Carpenter”; “He fumbles at your Soul”; and “I dwell in Possibility”), but these do not appear in the order of their autograph collation.

The point is not to allow the shortcomings or limitations of previous editions and anthologies to decide whether to read fascicles or not now; rather, the existence of the fascicles challenges us to think through our own
criteria when choosing which poems we want to read, teach, and discuss. Anthologies, indeed, bring up questions of quality or relevance that many Dickinson scholars like to avoid, but the logic of selection is that some poems are more central than others—either because they are more characteristic of her imagery, her formal practices, her preoccupations as an artist, her biography, her sexuality, or her relationship to social and literary history. Comparatively few of the poems in this fascicle have been found worthy in any such regard—perhaps in part because there is a great deal of what might be deemed verbal sketching: Fr462, especially, and Fr469, for example (“Of being is a bird” and “My Garden – like the beach”) appear like exercises, first attempts at coming up with and extending possible comparisons that do not go beyond the identification of similarity (a bird is like down, but down with music; if a garden is a beach, then flowers are its pearls). Fr464, “A long – long Sleep,” seems like an earlier and less complex version of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” with its emphasis on sleep in conjunction with references to “stone” and “Noon.”

In terms of quality alone, a poem that is consistently selected for anthologies is the following version of Fr477, and it offers an interesting test case for determining whether a poem widely acknowledged to be of the highest quality can provide an indication or not of organic unity within a single fascicle or across the fascicles in general:

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys –
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by Degrees –

Prepares your brittle substance
For the ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so – slow –

Your Breath – has chance to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble cool –
Deals One – imperial Thunderbolt –
That peels your naked soul –

When Winds hold Forests in their Paws –
The Firmaments – are still –
Again, the drawbacks of studying the fascicles in and of themselves become clear: this poem is linked through its imagery to Fr457, “Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling,” but it says very different things. The earlier poem talks of a potentially devastating wound; this one describes an experience that may be positive or negative, or that may suspend or otherwise combine those categories in new ways. Seen in the context of the fascicle alone, one might be more inclined towards reading the poem as negative in tone, and the interpretive rewards are generally limited: other contexts yield different perspectives and a greater appreciation of the poem’s merits.

The peeling of the soul (the verb is “scalp” in an earlier version) and the references to shifting temperatures tally with a statement attributed to Dickinson by Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry” (L342a). Indeed, Dickinson’s most positive responses to the writing and speaking of others often involve a rendering of the experience in almost physical terms—a propensity she seems to have shared with her sister-in-law Susan, who wrote of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (Fr124C) that it was “remarkable as the chain lightening” and of Fr124B that “I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never can again” (answer to L238).26 And as Alfred Habegger points out, Susan’s image of the lightning was repeated in “I would not paint – a picture–” (Fr348), where the speaker longs for “the Art to stun myself / With Bolts – of Melody!”27

Though the experience being described here can be almost anything—sexual, literary, religious, even natural (the definitions of “thunder-bolt” in Webster’s include both a shaft of lightning and an act of “fulmination; ecclesiastical denunciation”)—it was certainly not unusual for sermons to be composed, and reacted to, in similar ways: the Dutchman Wilhelm Zepper compared the start of the sermon to “the opening bars of a piece of music” in his Ars Habendi et audiendi conciones Sacras.28 It was Perry Miller who described a strain of preaching among early Puritans as a kind of “holy violence in the pulpit,” and the speaker of “He fumbles at your Soul” (Fr477) reports an encounter that meshes with both sets of metaphor: the “Hammers” in line 7 may take up again the image of piano music established by the reference to “Keys” in the first stanza, but they are also tools capable of dealing a blow to the body (301).29

A preacher Dickinson is known to have admired was Charles Wadsworth, and Richard Sewall records a review from the New York Evening Post
that compared him to Summerfield but also contended that “Wadsworth’s style, it is said, is vastly bolder, his fancy more vivid, and his action more violent” (2: 450–51). Sewall notes that George Whicher (in This Was a Poet) assumed that “He fumbles at your soul” was about Wadsworth, but goes on to point out that Dickinson “had heard other great preachers and had been ‘scalped’ by them” (Sewall 2: 451). Edwards Amasa Park (1808–1900), Professor of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics at Amherst College from 1835 to 1836, was one of them: in a letter to her brother Austin, also quoted by Alfred Habegger, she responded to a sermon on Judas delivered by Park at Amherst’s First Church on November 20, 1853.

I never heard anything like it, and don’t expect to again, till we stand at the great white throne. . . . And when it was all over, and that wonderful man sat down, people stared at each other, and looked as wan and wild, as if they had seen a spirit, and wondered they had not died. (L.142)

Dickinson’s response is not unique: Dr. Richard Salter Storrs wrote (in a memorial) that Park’s listeners often left “astonished, humiliated, with excitement in our minds, and shivers along our whole system of nerves” (Storrs 12). Park is useful for a number of reasons, not because he delivered a memorable sermon in Amherst that Dickinson attended and approved of, but because he provides insights into both the delivery and the reception of good sermons, insights that intersect with Dickinson’s description of the unnamed event in Fr477 (Guest xlviii). Advising ministers on how to address their audience, Park warned that if “the words which we proclaim do not strike a responsive chord in the hearts of the choice men and women who look up to us for consolation,” then they were doing something wrong (Storrs 95). And he continued: “If we leave the sensibilities torpid, it needs a larger infusion of those words which Christ defined by saying, they are spirit, they are life. If it merely charm the ear like a placid song, it is not the identical essence which is likened to the fire and the hammer” (ibid).

The experience described in “He fumbles at your Soul” echoes the kind of reception Wadsworth and Park sought to provoke: it is not defined as such, but likened to other, violent, sensations and phenomena. And note too that the response described in the third stanza is physical first (“Breath”): only in the next line is the “Brain” engaged, and then not as a means of analyzing and making sense of information, but as something that is subjected to sensory extremes and even oppositions (to “bubble” suggests boiling, for example; a “Thunderbolt” brings additional light as
well as heat, but the “Winds” of the next stanza in combination with “cool” in line 10 imply colder temperatures).

The idea that successful writing somehow bypasses reason—but not the imagination or the affections—in order to strike home, aligns Dickinson’s poetic method more broadly with nineteenth-century theological debates on linguistic usage that had their origins in New England Puritan discussions of how best to address an audience. The two sides of the debate are most conveniently summarized in the title of Park’s “The Theology of the Intellect and That of the Feelings,” a discourse given before the convention of the Congregational Ministers of New England, in Brattle Street Meeting House, on May 30, 1850. Park was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and a connection between them was often established by his critics: David Nevins Lord (1792–1880) accused him of having been guided by “the neologists of Germany,” and Charles Hodge named Schleiermacher in a widely publicized critique of Park’s most celebrated sermon. Though Über die Religion was not translated fully into English until 1893, the ideas of Schleiermacher and other German theologians circulated—not without contention—in Amherst during the first half of the nineteenth century, partly because German language and culture occupied a much more central role in American life than it does now, and partly because some of its college students and teachers had spent time in areas of Germany associated with the latest developments in theological thinking.

Henry Boynton Smith (1815–77), whose style of preaching impressed Dickinson like none before him, was Professor of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics at Amherst College between October 1847 and December 1850, and “had studied in the universities of Halle and Berlin” (where Schleiermacher had taught, respectively, in 1804 and 1810). Lyman Coleman (1796–1882) was married to Emily Norcross Dickinson’s first cousin, Maria Flynt: a former graduate of Yale, student of theology, and minister of the Congregational Church in Belchertown, he had been a pupil of August Neander in Berlin before becoming principal of Amherst Academy (from 1844 to 1846), where Emily Dickinson took German with him. The Colemans and their daughters, Olivia and Eliza, were close friends of the Dickinson sisters.

The Rev. George Henry Gould (1827–99), an early family and personal friend, was another minister who “had an ear for music—the ‘music of words.’” Like Boynton Smith, Gould was uninterested in “the formal proclamation of abstract Christian doctrine,” and believed that the language of the Bible was such that words were “far oftener used in a figurative than in a literal sense.”
By the phrase “word of life,” the apostle plainly refers to the Holy Scriptures, or more specifically, perhaps, to the gospel of redemption through Christ. Various terms are used by the inspired writers to designate the Bible. It is called God’s law, his testimony, his commandment, statutes, oracles, and the like. The New Testament writers frequently refer to the Scriptures, under the terms, “word of truth,” the “word of prophecy”; and here Paul uses the expressive phrase, “the word of life,” or the life-giving word. The great fact is thus implied, as it is constantly assumed throughout the Scriptures, that God published his written truth for the simple purpose of generating spiritual life in the hearts of men. The Bible, then, is an instrument to accomplish a purpose.

For Gould, the truths of the Bible lie “inert and inanimate on its written pages”—they have to be given life in human hearts through the skill of the preacher. And such sentiments are echoed in Dickinson’s linguistic practice and are a theme in some of the poems—most notably F1577, “The Bible is an antique Volume” (Gould 156). In that poem, the line about sin being a precipice that “Others must resist” (either because sin is not difficult for the speaker to avoid, or because the speaker does not believe that the dictates of Christian morality apply to her or to him), and the general tone of the poem as a whole, are reminiscent of Mark Twain’s report of a sermon given by Wadsworth, “when he gravely gave the Sunday school books a blast and spoke of ‘the good little boys in them who always went to Heaven, and the bad little boys who infallibly got drowned on Sunday’” (Sewall 452). Like Wadsworth, Dickinson is not interested in terror as the mechanism by which to bring about faith. And like Wadsworth, Dickinson’s speaker at the end of that poem commits to the idea of “Warbling,” thus opposing poetry to overly literal interpretations of (or dependence on) the Bible: faith lies in the direction of enchantment, not fear. The method of the poem is parallel to its message: Dickinson seeks metaphorical, or local and contemporary, equivalents to the original stories (Eden becomes the family Homestead, from which the Dickinson family was temporarily ousted in 1840, only to return in 1855), and not dogmatic interpretations of what they mean (there is no talk of crime and its aftermath, for instance). And this emphasis on storytelling, on music, on the imaginative deployment of language and the suspension of analysis and dogma in the service of belief, links Dickinson to a number of important nineteenth-century theologians who responded to German High Criticism by accusing its proponents of failing to understand that the Bible was the vehicle not of absolutely literal but of figurative truths. More importantly, it gives us a sense of Dickinson as a poet of the moment—of the lyric now rather than the lyric novel.
From Amherst in the 1860s to Germany in the late 1700s: from one fascicle to another; from the unnamed audience of the poems to the specific historical personalities who received some of them in letters; from lyric performance to literary history; from poetry to nineteenth-century theological debate about linguistic usage; Dickinson’s poems traveled, and continue to travel, a long way beyond the hand-sewn margins of her autograph anthologies. Those anthologies will and must always be valuable and even precious—as records of her working methods and as places where her hand once moved and wrote. Nonetheless, the fact that Dickinson was willing to free individual poems from fascicles in order to send them to her correspondents allows for the possibility that they could survive on their own as autonomous aesthetic objects. Dickinson’s preferred form of circulation during her lifetime was to enclose poems singly, or in small clusters of three and four, in letters or as freestanding notes, and this would appear to weaken any arguments for the fascicles as integral and deliberate selections. The poems are not satellites whose significance depends primarily on their relation to other centers of gravity—biographical, historical, or literary material: they continue to have an independent force of their own.