Managing Multiple Contexts
Dickinson, Genre, and the Circulation of Fascicle 1

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It is impossible to write about Fascicle 1 without writing about beginnings. Even though Dickinson did not number the fascicles herself, it seems clear from the research conducted by R. W. Franklin when editing *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, that this was, indeed, the first fascicle that she made.¹ There is the suggestion of beginnings all over the place: It includes a copy of one of Dickinson’s earliest surviving poems, which she had sent to her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, in 1853; it contains a copy of, as far as we know, the second of Dickinson’s poems to appear in print; and it employs a strategy for indicating the end of one poem and the beginning of the next that Dickinson initially used but soon discarded. Additionally, the paper that she used to make this fascicle does not appear in any other fascicle. All of this might lead us to treat Fascicle 1 as exceptional—as a first attempt or testing ground for what would later become a methodically executed practice for copying, sewing, and keeping her poems. Since we now know that Dickinson would go on to make thirty-nine more of these over the course of the next six years, it is practically impossible not to treat this fascicle as the extraordinary beginning of what would eventually become one of the most famous poetic projects undertaken by an American poet.² Yet this is precisely what this essay will aim to do.

I believe that there is a certain fascination with and emphasis placed on Dickinson’s act of beginning her fascicle project because it allows the critic to designate the fascicle poems as those that demand of their readers
a different kind of analysis. Because there is a moment at which Dickinson began this project and a moment at which she ended it, we are able to set this period of her writing apart and, by delimiting the scope of our analysis, take control of at least one stage of this prolific writer’s oeuvre. Doing so has allowed critics to locate the controlling themes, tropes, and speakers of the fascicle poems as well as produce new readings of these poems in the context of the poems that surround them in the fascicle. This last intervention has been particularly popular, as it generates often-clarifying interpretations of poems whose meanings have previously eluded readers. This occurs in relation to Fascicle 1 when, for example, Dorothy Huff Oberhaus writes that we might read the first poem as a “mock-elegy for summer” in a fascicle that indicates that “the poem’s central focus is the protagonist’s own vow to die” (58). In the end, not only are new readings of poems produced, but critics sometimes go on to suggest—and often quite differently—how we might characterize a whole fascicle, or the entire fascicle project, or both.

While these approaches may give us new ways of thinking about the poems within the fascicles and a greater understanding of the identity of the fascicles themselves, this essay will suggest an alternative approach—one that draws us closer to the fascicles only by way of traveling away from them. Because the history of criticism on Dickinson’s fascicles tells us that they are private, enclosed objects that Dickinson almost certainly did not share with her family, friends, and many correspondents, it may, at first, seem counterintuitive to think about all that existed just beyond their edges. Yet I want to argue that Dickinson’s actual writing practices invite such an approach, since many of the texts that she copied into the fascicles she also copied into a variety of different literal, material contexts. Instead of treating the fascicles as private sites that are divorced from the other material contexts in which Dickinson copied her poems, such an approach demands that we place a variety of diverse compositional methods in relation to each other. Doing so will allow us to see that Dickinson treated what she copied into the fascicles as mobile and flexible texts, whose ambitions, uses, and even genre could change when the opportunities presented themselves.

One of the arguments for why a consideration of the fascicles is essential to Dickinson scholarship is that, without them, we are reading individual poems that may not actually be individual poems at all. In other words, the physical context of the poems (where they were copied) matters because there may be something intertextual occurring within a fascicle that we don’t have access to when we read the poems individually. But when the
poems are read in their fascicle context, does our method of reading actually change? In other words, while we may be able to say more confidently what a given poem is “about,” there seems to me little difference in our actual reading practice whether we are treating a poem singly or in the context of, say, twenty other poems. What we are reading are still poems; now there are simply more of them. One might say, then, that turning to the fascicle does not actually expand how we read Dickinson, but actually further entrenches the New Critical practice of divorcing poems from anything that appears or occurs outside of the poems themselves. The result, at its extreme, is that the fascicles serve as the context that actually closes down reading possibilities, precisely because they satisfy (and therefore secure) the approach that was used to read Dickinson long before we even knew there were fascicles to read.

In the face of this, I want to propose that we read the opposite of what is fixed and private. I want to read circulation. Unlike Dickinson’s editors who, according to Virginia Jackson, “actively cultivated a disregard for the circumstances of Dickinson’s manuscripts’ circulation” (21), I want to draw attention to the texts that were copied into fascicles but that also found their way into, among other places, letters, envelopes, newspapers, and apron pockets. This is not simply about recording the fact that these texts travelled between spaces and were often read widely, although they certainly were. It is about the stakes of not reading this way, for, as Jackson has asserted, “by being taken out of their sociable circumstances, those manuscripts have become poems, and by becoming poems, they have been interpreted as lyrics” (21). How, then, might we read Dickinson differently when the concept of circulation is made central to our approach to the fascicles in particular?

A quick overview of the other contexts that Dickinson created for the texts of Fascicle 1 reveals that it is both impossible to regard these fascicle versions as in any way resolved or definitive and impossible to regard the fascicle itself as enclosed or private. As far as we know, at least eight of the twenty-two texts in Fascicle 1 were given some other material context besides that of the fascicle. I say “as far as we know” because any consideration of Dickinson’s texts is haunted by the fact that there may have been manuscripts that were destroyed, lost, or withheld, leaving us with only part of the story. At the very least, then, the poems that ended up in Fascicle 1 were also, at some point, pre-fascicle drafts written on small pieces of torn paper; texts retained in Dickinson’s possession; texts copied into other fascicles; texts that ended up in print; texts that ended up in transcribed form; texts sent to Sue, Bowles, Higginson, the Norcross sisters, and several
unidentified recipients; and texts that were embedded into Dickinson’s letters. This is a far cry from the “enclosed textual space” with which we have come to mark the identity of fascicles (Werner 12).

Tracking Dickinson’s fascicle poems through their other-than-fascicle contexts, with attention to the sometimes-minor and sometimes-major changes that she made to them, to the materials on which they were copied, and to the society of readers (sometimes intentional and sometimes not) that encountered them, makes urgent certain questions about genre that are otherwise obscured. For instance, if a piece of writing is presented as a poem in one context, then must the same words in the same order continue to be a poem once it has been placed in a different material context? How is the genre of a piece of writing affected when it is put to different uses at different historical moments? Can returning to a writer’s manuscripts reveal something about the identity of a text that can’t be recognized in the more accessible printed and edited versions? What difference, if any, does recontextualization (either by the writer or editor) make to the ambitions, status, and meaning of a text?

In order to address these questions, I am going to look closely at the circulation of several of the texts that Dickinson copied into Fascicle 1. I have not chosen the texts in Fascicle 1 at random, for their status as poems copied into this fascicle endows them, as we have seen above, with a sense of importance for having come first. Yet at the same time I want to make clear that these or similar questions can be asked about most of Dickinson’s texts. While this is only one way to tell a story about the fascicles, my analysis aims to model a critical approach in which a focus on circulation leads to new ways of thinking about what Dickinson wrote. This is an approach that the fascicles themselves don’t merely make possible, but that, as touchstones in a story of composition and circulation, they actually invite.
that Dickinson did not copy all precirculated poems together but instead dispersed them throughout a fascicle. Whether Dickinson was using her correspondence to test out a version of a poem before it was copied in the fascicle or was copying poems into the fascicles in order to keep a record of the poems that she was circulating, we do not know.

While knowledge of the fact that Dickinson circulated these four poems might lead us to deduce that the fascicles did not contain wholly private poems, the mass distribution of one of them really drives this point home. Dickinson may have only intended Sue to read “Nobody knows this little Rose –,” but many more people than just Sue actually did. Printed on August 2, 1858, in the *Springfield Daily Republican*, this poem was titled “To Mrs.———, with a Rose. [Surreptitiously communicated to The Republican.]” and ran between a report of “Interesting Foreign Items” and the ever-eclectic column of “Special Notices,” which included advertisements for everything from “Sir James Clarke’s Female Pills” to the services of “Pomeroy & Ross, Undertakers.” While Dickinson slightly altered the punctuation between the draft that she sent to Sue, the version that she copied onto the fascicle sheet later that summer, and the fair copy that she made two years later and retained, for the most part this poem stayed the same. Here is the fascicle version:

Nobody knows this little Rose –
It might a pilgrim be
Did I not take it from the ways
And lift it up to thee.
Only a Bee will miss it –
Only a Butterfly,
Hastening from far journey –
On it's breast to lie –
Only a Bird will wonder –
Only a Breeze will sigh –
Ah Little Rose – how easy
For such as thee to die!

If we take the title supplied by the editor as a record of fact, then we can assume that this poem was once accompanied by a dead (or dying) rose and that the poem and rose together made their journey from Dickinson’s garden or desk or pathway near her house into the possession of the mysterious “Mrs.———.” This poem-flower combination might have travelled in an envelope or might have been delivered by hand. Either way, the title
asks the reader to assume that an actual rose was once part of the life of this poem that can only, because of the poem’s appearance in a mass-produced newspaper, represent the rose through reference to it.

The first line of the poem, “Nobody knows this little Rose –,” then, is more true than Dickinson may have originally meant it to be, for it is no longer that we do not “know” (as in, cannot decipher the thoughts of) this rose, but we truly cannot “know” (because we have never met) this flower. This later situation of printing that Dickinson probably did not imagine for this text can only now be read as analogous to the situation it depicts, for the poem presents an “I” who has made an otherwise overlooked rose known in the same way that “The Republican” has made the poem (and the anonymous poet) known only because of the fact that someone of hidden identity “surreptitiously communicated” the poem (and, presumably, the situation under which this someone came into possession of it) to the newspaper. In this way, the title supplied by the newspaper does more than simply tell the reader how the poem came to be printed in its pages; it also turns the rose into a metaphor for the poem itself and therefore turns these lines into the most poetic of poems. Like the rose that has been stripped of the identity that it might have had (“It might a pilgrim be”), this now widely circulated poem (the Springfield Daily Republican had a circulation of four thousand in 1858) is no longer an artifact of meaningful exchange between friends or lovers.7

In light of this, we might return to the notion with which I began and which this essay is attempting to complicate—namely the idea that the fascicles are enclosed spaces whose poems benefit from our reading them in relation to each other. If we follow that practice with “Nobody knows this little Rose –” then we lose the very component of this text’s history that makes it so interesting: its status as an object of exchange between real people. Ironically, though, while the printing of this poem supplies us with this piece of its history and identity, it also urges us to suppress that knowledge, as it turns these lines into a poem about how mass circulation kills the circulated object. For, in the poem itself, the rose is missed by every element that used to surround it—“Bee,” “Butterfly,” “Bird,” and “Breeze”—and the blame for this situation of grieving is clearly placed on the one who picked (or published) it. To read these lines this way is to treat them as constituting a poem that has a message to convey to readers of a printed poem.

The result of reading “Nobody knows this little Rose –” purely in its fascicle context or purely as a printed object is to miss the space in between, where Dickinson gave a copy to Sue, possibly (although probably not) in anticipation of her giving it to someone else. To watch, then, what Sue did
with it and how the new material context of the newspaper changed it into a poem that looks as if it is addressing the very situation of its publication is to see how circulation affects the text itself. This allows us to see what we wouldn't otherwise have access to, which is that these lines address a situation of encounter and reading, albeit one that is far more intimate than the one staged by the *Springfield Daily Republican.*

Since the case of “Nobody knows this little Rose –” shows us what one particularly loaded and interesting version of pre-fascicle circulation looks like, I want to turn now to two texts that Dickinson circulated after having copied them into the fascicle. She did this with several poems in this fascicle: “The feet of people walking home” (Fr16) (which she sent to Sue), “Oh if remembering were forgetting –” (Fr9) (which she sent to Bowles), and “As if I asked a common alms –” (Fr14) (which she sent to Higginson and possibly to an unidentified recipient). In these cases, Dickinson redeployed texts that she had committed to her fascicle sheets, using the situation and opportunities that circulation presented to different ends.

In the summer of 1858 Dickinson copied the lines that begin “As if I asked a common alms –” onto the final side of the second sheet of Fascicle 1 (fig. 14):

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As if I asked a common alms –
And in my wondering hand,
A stranger pressed a kingdom –
And I – bewildered stand –
As if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a morn?
And it sh'd lift its purple dikes
And flood me with the Dawn!
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Many readings of this poem deal with the fascicle version I have transcribed here, forgetting (or never knowing, or not caring) that four years later Dickinson sent these same words in this same order to Higginson, and that twenty-two years after that she copied them in a draft of a letter to an unidentified recipient. Unlike what happened to “Nobody knows this little Rose –,” what happened to this poem is entirely in Dickinson’s hands. What isn’t in her hands is how we have chosen to read (and render) that.

By the time Dickinson sent Higginson the letter in which “As if I asked a common alms –” appears, they had already exchanged two letters each. Dickinson had read Higginson’s article “Letter to a Young Contributor” in the April 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and had initially
written to ask: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” She accompanied this opening letter (L260) with four poems: “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –” (Fr124), “The nearest Dream recedes – unrealized –” (Fr304), “We play at Paste –” (Fr282), and “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –” (Fr204). Three of these poems had already been copied into fascicles, and one of these had, through Dickinson’s correspondence with Sue, already gone through several drafts. Her second letter was accompanied by three poems—“There came a Day at Summer’s full” (Fr325), “Of all the Sounds despatched abroad” (Fr334), and “South Winds jostle them –” (Fr98)—all of which had already been copied into the fascicles and one of which had already been sent to two other correspondents.

Each of these seven poems had been copied out on separate sheets or leaves of stationery and enclosed, along with a letter and other poems, in an envelope. But in the case of her third letter, Dickinson did not copy “As if I asked a common alms –” onto a separate piece of paper. Instead, she included it in the body of her letter proper. Unlike the version of this letter that Johnson and Ward published in 1958 (which indents the poem and leaves white space above and below it), the manuscript of this letter reveals that Dickinson was far less interested in marking the shift from prose to poetry and back again to prose. Previously, when Dickinson had wanted Higginson to read her poems, she marked them as such by including them separately. Even when, in her correspondence with others, she copied a poem into a letter, she marked it as a poem. For instance, in three early instances in which Dickinson sent her poems to Sue, she indicated this by leaving space between her prose and the poem, by making each stanza distinct from the next, and by indicating, even when there was no room to keep a line intact, where each line begins and ends. While in each of these cases there is no mistaking what a reader is reading, here it is entirely unclear.

Unlike other critics, I am not interested in marking what genre Dickinson was writing in at this moment nor am I interested in coming up with a new generic category—like the “lyrical letter” or the “letter-poem”—for this text or portion of text. What I am interested in is how Dickinson uses the opportunity of a letter to take what were once lines of a poem and deploy them in a very different way. When thinking about this poem in its fascicle context, the question of the text’s “purpose” or “use” seems wholly unanswerable. But in her letter to Higginson, Dickinson presents what were once lines of a poem in order to communicate something to him—something that the prose of her letter attempted to say, but didn’t (or couldn’t) say clearly enough. In this way, the context of epistolary
Figure 14. Fascicle 1, “As if I asked a common alms —”
The fish of Europe walking home,
With gayer standards grey,
The crows into the trees,
The violets of the snow.
The edges of the ling
Long years of exoctic tone,
still the river joy, the Barron
Walking singing in the shelf.
Dams are the river's paintings,
Painted from the sky.
River, the Evelyn's angry
Patriarch once, as the Ser.
"Sight to the morning's breeze
Serenely clean.
Under, but our fast attention
To immortality.

My finger's point I tell you
Now for the tongue Eus.
discourse—and the imminent circulation of that discourse—provides Dickinson with the opportunity to play with the boundaries between her prose and her poetry.

In this letter Dickinson both continued to ask Higginson for guidance in the ways of writing poetry and defended herself against the criticism that he had leveled against the poems she had already sent. This must have been, to say the least, a very awkward position for her. Faced with this situation, Dickinson turned to a poem that she wrote four years earlier, long before she knew she would ever write to Higginson, and embedded these lines into the end of her letter. In doing so, she both articulated a forceful critique of him for what he had provided her with and softened the blow of that critique by presenting it (if he were reading the letter out loud) in regular meter and rhyme.

Given that this is a letter in which Dickinson represents herself through her use of “I” and that she has not marked the shift from prose to poetry, we can read the “I” in the phrase “As if I asked a common alms” as Dickinson herself. This is not a stretch, since the letter is all about what she has asked for in the past and what she continues to ask for from this actual reader. This “as if” is, of course, a bit of a jab at Higginson, for the “stranger” from whom these “common alms” have been requested has wholly misread the situation and instead quite inappropriately provided a “kingdom.” The result is a state of bewilderment. As if, then, this situation demanded a further metaphor, Dickinson wrote that it is comparable to her having asked for “the Orient” and having instead been “shatter[ed]” with “the Dawn.” We can understand what Dickinson was doing here only by reading these lines as part of her letter—something that an analysis of the manuscript itself makes possible, but that a focus on its transcription or on the poem’s earlier existence as a fascicle poem obscures.

In short, Dickinson’s manipulation of this text’s format and genre can be read as her way of controlling the distance between her (as “I”) and her reader (as “you”). We know that this is something she thought about over the course of her life because twenty-two years later Dickinson again revisited the lines that she had copied into Fascicle 1 and copied them as part of a letter that she addressed to an unidentified recipient (L964), this time largely ignoring her earlier punctuation and, depending on how you read it, either doing away with line breaks altogether or creating much shorter lines. In this case, the context of the exchange is different than it had been with Higginson, for here she is acknowledging the receipt of and thanking someone for a photograph of a mother and child that had been sent to her. At the same time, though, she mentions a “Book” that has been promised
to her by the sender and refers to her state of “famine” without it. When she then embeds “As if I asked a common alms –” into the prose of her letter, she is clearly playing with how to balance her own sense of gratefulness and her own persistent desires.

While we might understand Dickinson using these lines in her letter to Higginson in the context of that specific friendship, I want to suggest that we think about this later case in terms of how Dickinson often returned to her fascicles later in life. She had stopped making them in 1865, but it is clear that she not only read them but rewrote parts of them over the next two decades. Whether Dickinson revised or redeployed what once had been fascicle texts, she often copied these several times, returning to them sometimes over a huge span of years, and creating a variety of different material contexts for them. In doing so, Dickinson indicated that while there is something that seems deeply personal about her texts under given circumstances, they are often widely applicable texts. Yet even when she actually circulates these texts, at the same time inviting us to question the role that circulation plays in the making and remaking of a text, their identity as fascicle poems is precisely the thing that forecloses these reading possibilities.

While we might debate whether Dickinson meant to circulate “Nobody knows this little Rose –” as widely as it was eventually circulated, there is no question that she wanted various people to read “As if I asked a common alms –,” and that she wanted them to read it in various forms. In both cases a public circulation occurs because Dickinson handed or sent these texts to someone else. In the case of the next text I will discuss, Dickinson engages in a different form of circulation, one that takes place not just between people, but between fascicles themselves.

When Dickinson first copied the lines that begin “The feet of people walking home” into Fascicle 1 she also made two additional copies, both of which she retained for herself. Four years later, she sewed one of these into Fascicle 14, and the other copy remained unsewn for the rest of her life. Even though she most likely had this retained copy with her, Dickinson made a fourth copy several months after making the first three and sent it to Sue with the heading “Darling” and signed “Lovingly, Emilie.” This situation raises some questions: Why would Dickinson copy this text so many times, and why would she place two quite similar versions of it in two different fascicles? Eleanor Heginbotham has offered the most extensive study of what she calls Dickinson’s “duplicate poems,” ultimately reading them as redeployments that affect the fascicles into which they have been copied. Of “The feet of people walking home” she writes, “Although almost identi-
cal in words and form, the poem’s two differing contexts (the two fascicle groupings) offer possibilities for revision in interpretation” (116).

If we treat the fascicles as “bound” objects—most critics use this language of “binding” to describe how Dickinson joined her individual, folded fascicle sheets together—then it is easy to see how we might read each fascicle as a kind of book, where each poem is essential to the ones that surround it, and where interpretation is exactly what is at stake. For instance, when writing about the context that Fascicle 14 provides for “The feet of people walking home,” Heginbotham characterizes what is happening here, in contrast to the context that Fascicle 1 had provided: “this setting suggests that the poem, more innocent and almost merry in its flower-filled context of Fascicle 1, may be reflective of the frustration of a speaker (or speakers) struggling with frustration and loss” (117). Sharon Cameron employs a similar approach when she writes, “By the logic which reveals that the integrity of an entity is dictated by the fascicle binding, the same words copied in different fascicles must be understood to constitute two discrete poems. The difference is reflected in the disparate constructions of the meaning of the two utterances that become available. For instance, in Fascicle 1 ‘The feet of people walking home,’ copied in 1858 and then bound, exists in a grouping that asks about the relation between nature, death, and immortality” (85).

Such readings—while enormously helpful if we are interested in understanding the identity of each fascicle—assume our critical investment in the fascicles as aesthetic objects with strict (and therefore readable) boundaries. What I want to suggest, instead, is that we read the situation as far less fixed than this, for, in reality, fascicle sheets were hardly “bound”—they were sewn together with string, often years after the actual sheets had been copied. And in the case of “The feet of people walking home,” this was a far messier situation than the existence of two neatly made fascicles. There were four copies of this text that existed among Dickinson’s papers around the same time, and she tried each of them out in various contexts—among the other texts copied onto a fascicle sheet, alone on a leaf of stationery, alone on a leaf of stationery that she sewed in between folded fascicle sheets, and as a note that she sent to Sue. In other words, there is something about this text that prompted Dickinson to produce different versions of it and to try out how it might work as a part of different kinds of material objects.

The version that Dickinson copied onto a sheet that she eventually sewed into Fascicle 1 reads:
The feet of people walking home
With gayer sandals go –
The crocus – till she rises –
The vassal of the snow –
The lips at Hallelujah
Long years of practise bore –
Till bye and bye, these Bargemen
Walked – singing – on the shore.

Pearls are the Diver’s farthings,
Extorted from the sea –
Pinions – the Seraph’s wagon –
Pedestrian once – as we –
Night is the morning’s canvas –
Larceny – legacy –
Death – but our rapt attention
To immortality.

My figures fail to tell me
How far the village lies –
Whose peasants are the angels –
Whose cantons dot the skies –
My Classics vail their faces –
My faith that Dark adores –
Which from it’s solemn abbeys –
Such resurrection pours!

Dickinson altered some of the punctuation in the other drafts and, in the case of the version that she sent to Sue, she put it in quatrains. But other than that, this text remained relatively the same throughout its many drafts, indicating that Dickinson was not engaging in a revision process. Instead, I would like to suggest, she was multiplying its fairly similar versions precisely to see which of the possible material contexts might fit (or answer, or complement) it best.

Given the content of this text, it should not surprise us that Dickinson tested it out in various places. Combining a performance of waiting for death with a series of metaphors about distance and ignorance, this is a strange text that has neither a clear message nor an emotional center. Instead, it is composed of various attempts to see, hear, name, measure,
and know—all of which end in a form of failure. That is not to say that it is itself a failure, but instead that because of this, it is ripe for the multiple kinds of circulation to which Dickinson subjects it. By circulating the text, even within contexts that are for her eyes only, she tests it out—in isolation, as part of different groups, and as a message.

On the one hand, my point is that to study just the fascicles, or to study an individual fascicle, is to miss all of this. But on the other hand, I am not rejecting the fascicles as units of study, for I only achieved my prior point by reading deeply into the fascicle itself. Along those lines, and in conclusion, I want to turn to one last text from Fascicle 1, one that, as far as we know, Dickinson did not circulate. That being said, it is related to the three texts that I have considered in this essay precisely because it is part of the same fascicle. In other words, if I was not thinking about Fascicle 1 as a unit worthy of attention, I might never have connected them, and yet I want to suggest how such connections can be surprisingly fruitful, albeit not in the way we might expect.

“If those I loved were lost” (Fr20) is the “one exception,” according to Franklin, to Dickinson’s practice of destroying her pre-fascicle “worksheets” (11). Eventually copied into Fascicle 1, this text was originally written on a scrap of stationery that had been folded vertically at its center such that it had four panels on which Dickinson could write (fig. 15). Despite having this room, Dickinson contained this draft on the first side only, where she wrote:

If those I loved ’s were lost The Crier note would voice would tell me – If those I loved were found, the bells of Ghent would sing, Did those I loved repose, The Daisy Would impel me – Philip questioned eager I, my riddle
When bewildered – bore his riddle
in –

One of the things that this draft makes visible is that Dickinson grappled with certain moments in these lines more than others. She was unclear whether she wanted the “Crier” to sound a “note” or use his “voice,” and

**Figure 15.** Pre-fascicle draft of “If those I loved were lost.”
she seems entirely unsure whether Philip actively “questioned” or whether he was passively “bewildered.” What is also interesting about Dickinson’s revision to the final move is that in the crossed-out version the “I” owns a riddle that he or she bears and in the not-crossed-out version the “I” does nothing and the riddle belongs solely to Philip.

While it is, indeed, fascinating to see Dickinson struggling with her word choice (I find myself absorbed by thinking about the difference between “note” and “voice,” given that one marks the Crier as particularly birdlike while the other suggests he is human), I want to shift our attention to the material on which Dickinson copied these words. As I noted earlier, Dickinson had three other panels on which she could have written these words, yet she crams them all in here. Right from the start she is preserving space, for, on the second line, she places what we now think of as the beginning of a next line, “The Crier,” right after “were lost.” This is our first indication that in an initial draft Dickinson didn’t seem to care about indicating what she had in mind as later line breaks, that she had not yet conceived of where her lines would break, or that these were not yet “lines” when she wrote them here. Now that we know the poem that she copied into Fascicle 1—the one that exists both in manuscript and transcription with clearly marked line breaks—it is almost impossible not to read the space between “lost” and “The” as a silent beat that would later become an actual line break. But if we can rid ourselves of that habit and read the words that appear on this panel of a scrap, then what we can see (and hear) is that as the thought proceeds, it catches a rhythm, one that will later manifest visually as line breaks. In other words, the poem that begins “If those I loved were lost,” as it would be copied onto the third sheet of Dickinson’s first fascicle, had a pre-life not as a poem, per se, but as words set down as prose.

Dickinson’s choice of material to set these words on tells us that something contradictory is happening here. On the one hand, had she wanted to indicate line breaks, she had ample room to do so, as the other three panels remain blank. But on the other hand, by folding this scrap of paper, Dickinson limited herself to a small column of space, making it difficult for her to indicate line breaks had she wanted to. What’s important, though, is that Dickinson chose this very particular kind of material, one that provided this tension between thoughts set down as prose or verse.

While “If those I loved were lost” seeks to name the very kind of communication that will bear utterly necessary information, these lines were never sent to anyone (either in draft form or fascicle form), as far as we know. Yet from this early draft, before it had the chance to be solidified
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as a fascicle poem, we can see that Dickinson’s compositional practice was highly attuned to the role of circulation in the making of a text. The summer that she wrote this pre-fascicle draft, “Nobody knows this little Rose –” was published in the *Springfield Daily Republican*, an event that would show Dickinson that what one intends as intimate is actually often utterly public. She would also write “As if I asked a common alms –,” a poem that would later be incorporated into her prose, reversing the process by which “If those I loved were lost” came to have distinct lines. And while we do not have access to any kind of pre-fascicle draft of “The feet of people walking home,” the number of copies that she made is itself a bearing of her message, even if, as in the case of “If those I loved were lost,” she doesn’t know exactly what that message is.

If a study of the fascicles limits itself to what is actually contained within them, then the eclectic kind of work that Dickinson was doing as she made and remade these texts is obscured, for most of this work gets done in pre-fascicle and post-fascicle drafts, not in the fascicles themselves. That being said, if we never look at the fascicles as units of composition that are ripe for analysis, then we miss seeing how Dickinson’s sometimes disparate-seeming preoccupations (in process as well as content) are often clustered together. While I am advocating for a reading of the fascicles that takes these issues into account, it is important to acknowledge that the kinds of readings I have argued for here are meant to be suggestive. My impulse to read Dickinson’s move across material contexts, while largely informed by my work with her manuscripts, comes out of a desire to present an alternative way of thinking about Dickinson’s fascicles and her experimentation with the poetic conventions and generic boundaries they make visible.

In an essay that has spent very little time looking at the fascicles themselves, I hope that my emphasis on circulation has illuminated several things about them. First, even though Dickinson made the fascicles for only six years at the beginning of her writing career, they were present in her writing processes until the very end of her life. Second, by treating her fascicle texts as definitive, we overlook the fact that a certain degree of flexibility was built into the fascicles themselves, a flexibility that allowed Dickinson to deploy these texts in a variety of ways. If they had been fixed in the fascicles, Dickinson would not only have been unable to place them in new material contexts, but she would not have been free to alter their properties and purposes. Third, by turning to the non-fascicle texts that are related to the fascicle-texts, we are confronted with Dickinson’s actual
correspondence in a way that we normally treat separately. Thinking about the relationship of Dickinson’s letters and poems is crucial, precisely because it allows us to break free of having to choose between Dickinson the private poet and Dickinson the social correspondent. And finally, while Dickinson’s fascicles have been characterized as enclosed spaces, I hope to have shown that the various modes of puncture and circulation that Dickinson employed renders the fascicles far more porous than we have previously thought. One of the most fruitful things about looking closely at Fascicle 1 is that we can see that all of this was present from the very beginning.