9. "This – was my finallest / Occasion –": Fascicle 40 and Dickinson's Aesthetic of Intrinsic Renown

Published by

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/33585.

👉 For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/33585
“This – was my finallest / Occasion –”

Fascicle 40 and Dickinson’s Aesthetic of Intrinsic Renown

Paul Crumbley

After completing Fascicle 40 in early 1864, Dickinson ceased binding her manuscript books and two years later entered a four-year period of infrequent writing that Ralph W. Franklin has characterized as “without fascicles or sets or even many poems” (Poems 26). This is the same period during which the volume of Dickinson’s correspondence declined to a level Thomas H. Johnson has described as “the smallest by far that Emily Dickinson is known to have written during her mature years” (Letters 448). My approach to Fascicle 40 anticipates this future lull in production by reading the poems it contains as consistent with a transitional phase in Dickinson’s development as a poet. To clarify this dimension of the fascicle, I position it within an ongoing meditation on the public life of poems that was part of Dickinson’s thinking as early as 1863 when she transcribed “Publication – is the Auction” (Fr788) and appears to have concluded by 1877 when she responds to Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s poem “Decoration” with a poem of her own in which she states that true poetic achievement may be “Too intrinsic for Renown –” (L583).

That Dickinson should contemplate the nature of publication and authorial fame during the months she assembled Fascicle 40 makes sense for the simple reason that she had created a substantial body of work capable of standing on its own, but her language also reflects sensitivity to widely publicized copyright debates that repeatedly raised questions about the political, legal, and philosophical foundations of literary ownership. These public debates provide a broad cultural context that is helpful
in interpreting Dickinson’s concern with authorship at the moment she was completing her fortieth manuscript book and thinking back over the approximately 251 poems or letter-poems that she is estimated to have sent by the end of 1864 as part of her correspondence (Franklin, *Poems* 1547–57). The circulation and limited print publication of these poems, which achieved a kind of high point in 1864, might also have led Dickinson to realize that her poems had lives of their own. A number of the fascicle’s poems support this possibility by indicating Dickinson’s wish to observe her poems and determine how they were being absorbed by the world around her. For this reason, these poems and indeed the whole of Fascicle 40 can be read as Dickinson’s dawning recognition that she wanted her work to enter the life of language itself, invisibly fusing with the thoughts of others.

Despite the presence of this thematic consistency, though, I do not read the six bifolia and twenty-one poems that make up Fascicle 40 as forming a coherent narrative. Instead, I build on Sharon Cameron’s argument that “if there is a story in the fascicles, it is told discontinuously” (*Choosing* 56). Cameron identifies “‘returned to’ moments” that “function as variants of something, though what is being returned to and departed from is never, within the limits of one lyric entity, fully in view” (56). Following Cameron’s lead, I do not attempt to resolve meaning definitively but rather tease out one of many potential variants, this one gaining support from public debate surrounding the disposition of literary property and Dickinson’s relationship to her poems as revealed in her life and letters. As Eleanor Heginbotham has stated in her book on the fascicles, “context shapes interpretation” and it is not “illogical to see what proximate poems can tell us about each other” and what they “suggest about the concerns of the author at the moment she bound them together” (xi).

The fascicle binding is of course significant, as it is that which sets the fascicle apart as a distinct literary gathering and allows for the sense of proximity that Heginbotham mentions. In my reading of the fascicle, however, I take direction from Franklin’s early observation that the bifolium sheet was Dickinson’s primary “unit” of composition (*MB* xii) and treat each sheet as representing a greater coherence than the fascicle as a whole. Fascicle 40 thus emerges as a gathering of six sheets constituting twenty-one bifolia poems that cluster around central issues related to reading and writing, circulation and reception, and departures from conventional modes of conduct, all of which are appropriate for a poet formulating an aesthetic directed to intrinsic rather than public renown. The first bifolium is primarily concerned with reading, reception, and distribution. These poems present a speaker who reads “Bulletins all Day / From Immortality” (Fr820), one
Crumbley, “‘This – was my finallest / Occasion –’” 193

who imagines how best to reach an audience in “Wert Thou but ill – that / I might show thee” (Fr821), and a speaker who envisions the management of her poems as the harvest of a crop she describes as “In Consummated Bloom – ” (Fr822). The second bifolium identifies “A nearness to Tremendousness –” that one poet/speaker attains by refusing the “Laws” of literary convention described as “Contentment’s quiet Suburb” (Fr824). Speakers in the third sheet pursue a new obsession that replaces the security of “Wealth” and “Station” (Fr827) with the risky circulation of flowers that symbolize poems. The next bifolium, the fourth, vastly expands the temporal context for assessing personal achievement, looking beyond “The Admira ... / Contempts – of time –” (Fr830; MB 987). The fifth sheet concentrates on the problem of reader reception, imagining how “I shall be perfect – in / His sight –” (Fr834; MB 991). The fascicle’s sixth and final bifolium positions fame beyond acceptance or rejection in the present moment and anticipates a “Hint of Glory” (Fr838). The speaker of this concluding poem enters the darkness of night with “Faith” in “a Revolution” to come that will reveal “New Horizons” (Fr839).

Major events shaping Dickinson’s life in 1864 would have sharpened her sensitivity to the brevity of life and the impossibility of controlling the public response to her poems. Edward Hitchcock died in February and Thomas Wentworth Higginson entered the second year of his military deployment to South Carolina. Letters provide evidence of personal anxiety provoked by the continuation of the Civil War and the eye treatments that took Dickinson to Boston in February and again from April through November. As Karen Dandurand has noted, 1864 also marked the “the unparalleled publication of five of [Dickinson’s] poems within two months” (257).

More important than the number of poems may be the fact that “Flowers – Well – if anybody” (Fr95) appeared in four different settings and “Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple” (Fr321) in three, making for a total of ten print publications, by far the most of any year.5 Dandurand identifies the likely significance this reprinting of poems would have held for Dickinson: “she probably would have seen that two of her poems were reprinted and would have understood what this implied—that the poems might reappear again, in other newspapers: they had become ‘public property’” (257). The most reprinted of her poems, “Flowers – Well – if anybody,” considers the impossibility of explaining what poems are, stating instead that they operate according to a “system of aesthetics” the speaker describes as “Far superior to mine.” The appearance of this and other anonymously published poems in settings Dickinson had not selected and could not control would have heightened her awareness that poetry acquires new life.
through readers. There is “Too much pathos in their faces,” the speaker of “Flowers – Well – if anybody” admits, “For a simple breast like mine –.”

Dickinson’s recognition that she had so little direct influence over the success or failure of her poems gave rise to letters in which she blends artistic concerns with expressions of anxiety over the outcome of the Civil War. Her fluctuating and intertwined emotions are vividly conveyed in a letter to her nieces Louise and Francis Norcross in which she conflates public grief brought on by the war with the appearance of a new poem by Robert Browning. Dickinson begins this letter that was probably written in 1864 by acknowledging, “Sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began” (L436). She then mentions that the new poem by Browning reminded her of her own poetry: “I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous.” This conjunction of loss and future promise characterizes the general mood of Fascicle 40 where multiple poems contemplate the poet’s release of poetry that passes into the larger world and the uncertainty of artistic reward that comes from the world’s reception.

Dickinson incorporated the first stanza from the poem that opens the fascicle—“The only news I know” (Fr820)—in a June 1864 letter to Higginson that similarly juxtaposes anxiety and promise:

I wish to see you more than before I failed – Will you tell me your health?  
I am surprised and anxious, since receiving your note –  
The only News I know  
Is Bulletins all day  
From Immortality. (Poems 776–77)

In this instance, Dickinson’s anxiety appears most directly related to Higginson’s health. Her own eye problems appear to have intensified her desire to “see” Higginson; the phrase “before I failed” reflecting her current diminished vision. The sense of promise implied by “Bulletins . . . / From Immortality” is notably dampened by the likelihood that Dickinson intertwines newspaper reports from the front announcing the heroic sacrifices of soldiers with information she receives about the public life of poems like “Flowers – Well – if anybody” (Fr95).

Many scholars have remarked on Dickinson’s reflective state of mind during the time that she was working on Fascicle 40. Alfred Habegger describes Dickinson’s stylistic development as moving away from “present, extreme, and exclamatory feeling” toward “a story line in which the speaker
Crumbley, “‘This – was my finallest / Occasion –’” gives a respectful account of what she has achieved” (472). Writing specifically of 1864, Habegger delineates a time of transition that might easily apply to artistic self-awareness: “In 1864 we begin to see poems registering a sense that the struggles of youth and early maturity are over” (482). To substantiate this point, Habegger cites “The Admirations – and Contempts – of time –” (Fr830), the twelfth of the twenty-one poems in Fascicle 40.

James R. Guthrie’s extensive study of Dickinson’s visual impairment details the single most significant physiological development contributing to the reflective and anticipatory mood so pronounced in the fascicle. Indeed, it is difficult not to agree with Guthrie’s argument that “illness itself [was] a governing factor in Dickinson’s development as a poet” (Vision 4). The part of Guthrie’s careful analysis that most directly applies to the position I am developing here has less to do with the direct influence of her illness, however, than with his acknowledgment that during this period of her life Dickinson was actively thinking through her relationship to her poems, especially in terms of ownership. In an illuminating discussion of “It sifts from Leaden Sieves –” (Fr291), Guthrie explains that through a revision of the poem that took place between 1862 and 1865, Dickinson significantly altered the poem’s logic in order to emphasize “the mechanism of poetic language rather than the poet’s controlling vision” (151). Guthrie’s conclusion that Dickinson removed “the presence of her own body from [the poem] so that it could assume a life of its own” parallels my own sense that Fascicle 40 investigates the lives poems achieve independent of the poets who compose them.

Páraic Finnerty agrees with Guthrie that Dickinson’s visual impairment and the treatment she underwent informed her view of the public life of poems, only for him Dickinson’s understanding of language is directly linked to a shift in her relationship to Shakespeare that also took place at this time. Noting that Dickinson’s “public engagement with Shakespeare, and much of her praise of him, comes after her eye trouble in the mid-1860s,” Finnerty argues that Dickinson openly praises Shakespeare only after the era of her own greatest production was over (132). The preceding years of intense creativity mark a period when Dickinson does not mention Shakespeare precisely because for her Shakespeare was a living presence with whom she collaborated as she would “a literary friend” (137); her dearth of references reflects Dickinson’s intimate engagement with his work. Finnerty points out that Dickinson shared this approach to collaboration with other nineteenth-century American women who similarly “transformed Shakespeare, developing his plots and characters to address issues important to them as women” (116). According to this logic, Dickinson “demonstrates
the expected knowledge of Shakespeare’s works by imaginatively transforming them.” Such reasoning equates fame with intrinsic renown by linking literary influence to the absorption of authorial language rather than the naming of authors and discrete literary texts. Accordingly, the appearance of references to Shakespeare that surface in Dickinson’s writing after her eye treatments suggests that in the years following the completion of Fascicle 40 her attitude toward Shakespeare altered and she became more willing to acknowledge his influence. Fascicle 40 might in this context coincide with the end of a phase when Dickinson viewed herself as establishing a body of work capable of influence equal to Shakespeare’s and the beginning of active reflection on the world’s reception of that work.

The third bifolium provides what may be the clearest examination of the poet’s relationship to her poems that I consider a primary preoccupation of the entire fascicle. It contains “I hide myself – within my flower” (Fr80C), the one poem that also appears in another fascicle, and concludes with “Between My Country – / and the Others –” (Fr829), another poem in which flowers play a prominent role as metaphors for poetry. These poems communicate the poet’s concealment in her poems and the way poems connect the poet to other people. The second flower poem’s closing lines state that “Flowers – negotiate / between us – / As Ministry.” Read in the company of these two poems, the first poem in the bifolium, “All forgot for recollecting” (Fr827), describes the sudden alteration of consciousness that takes place with the discovery of new love or when a poet chooses a new relationship with readers.

```
All forgot +for recollecting +through
Just a paltry One – All forsook, for just
A Stranger’s
New Accompanying –

+Grace of Wealth, and + Grace of Rank – and – Grace of Fortune
Grace of Station
Less accounted than
An unknown +Esteem +content
possessing –
Estimate – Who can –

Home effaced – Her
faces dwindled –
Nature – altered small –
```
Crumbley, “‘This—was my finallest / Occasion—’”

Sun – if shown – or
Storm – if shattered –
Overlooked I all –

Dropped – my fate – a
timid Pebble –
In thy bolder Sea –
+Prove – me – Sweet – if +Ask
I regret it –
Prove Myself – of Thee –

We are told that all is forgotten for “just a Stranger’s / New Accompany-
ing”; even “Home” is “effaced” for “An unknown Esteem.” The passage of
poetry into another’s world is most directly established in the fourth and
final stanza where the speaker describes having “Dropped – my fate – a /
timid Pebble – / In thy bolder Sea –,” after which she waits for the lover or
reader to “Prove – me – Sweet – if / I regret it – / Prove Myself – of Thee.”
One function of these lines would be to declare that the speaker now awaits
her reader/lover’s response in order to assess the ultimate value of her efforts.
Of particular interest is the metaphorical proposition that even the most
passionate of embraces might yet render success or failure difficult to deter-
mine; after all, how noticeable could even the most profound impact be
when it involves a pebble entering the sea? As Dorothy Huff Oberhaus has
pointed out, the modifier of “Sea” is “bolder,” “a verbal play on “boulder”
that further accentuates the insignificance of the pebble (110). Such imagery
might also evoke the perplexity of a poet who wonders how to measure suc-
cess when the desired outcome is immersion in language.

Dickinson once again uses the pebble metaphor in an April 1882 letter
she sent Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers after he requested poems for
publication. In that letter, she asks Niles to “accept a Pebble” (L725), refer-
ing to “How happy is the little Stone” (Fr1576E), the poem she enclosed.
The poem presents the stone as “rambl[ing] in the Road alone” where “A
passing Universe put on” her “Coat of elemental Brown,” an inauspicious-
seeming act that Dickinson casts as fulfilling the poem’s “absolute Decree /
In casual simplicity –.” Her language tells Niles that her poem is already in
the world—though in a manner entirely unlike the commercial publication
he has in mind. More to the point, even, she informs him that her poem
has already achieved success, even though its fame is casual and simple, not
attached to public renown. The reference to a pebble in Fascicle 40 may
indeed express a like belief in intrinsic renown, only at this earlier stage of
her life the fame she contemplates is presented as a future possibility rather than an accomplished fact.

The release of poems into the world that is taken up in the two flower poems and alluded to through the pebble reference is further explored in the remaining bifolium poem where the speaker appears to be addressing her poems, expressing anxiety about letting them go. She opens by acknowledging the comfort her creations have given her:

Had I not This, or
This, I said,
Appealing to Myself,
In a moment of prosperity –
Inadequate – were Life – (Fr828)

A speaker similar to Dickinson casts her eyes over the poetic output of many years and declares that the poems that fill her manuscript books have given her life meaning. Extending the metaphor of a poet-to-poem conversation to the next stanza, Dickinson uses quotation marks to present the poems she has just addressed as responding with voices of their own:

“Thou has not Me,
nor Me” – it said
In moment of Reverse –
“And yet Thou art industrious –
No need – had’st Thou – of us –”?

One of the first things to notice here is Dickinson’s careful use of pronouns. Initially, the language framed in quotation marks is associated with a singular “it” (as in “it said”) that may refer to the speaker’s “Life” mentioned at the very end of the preceding stanza. At the same time, though, the speaking entity identifies itself as composed of two “me’s,” presupposing more than one speaker. The final two lines then present this speaking entity as addressing the speaker as “Thou” and defining itself as “us,” thereby thoroughly frustrating any efforts either to separate or conjoin singular and plural speakers. The simplest solution to this conundrum is to treat the lines as a riddle that asks what it is that can be both singular and plural, part and not part of the self. Given the poet-to-poem trope of the first stanza, we might conclude that the poems alluded to as “This” and “This” in the first
line of the poem correspond here to “Me” and “Me,” urging the conclusion that poems are simultaneously part of and not part of the poet who creates them. If indeed the poems are speaking to the poet, they are informing her that they have in some crucial sense always been part of the larger world. More importantly, even, they ask what possible need she might have for them given that she is “industrious” and in theory capable of producing more. The point being that the proper function of the writer is to write, not cling to the products of past writing.

This emphasis on the act of writing, rather than its material outcomes, provides the focus for the final two stanzas of the poem. Here the poet declares that future growth depends on not letting completed poems get in the way of her desire to write:

My need – was all I had –
I said –
The need did not reduce
Because the food – exterminate –
The hunger – does not cease –

But diligence – is sharper –
Proportioned to the chance –
To feed upon the
Retrograde –
Enfeebles – the Advance –

The logic that so aggressively binds these two stanzas turns on the perception that writing, like hunger and diligence, is a need that is never absolutely satisfied. Just as food can “exterminate” appetite temporarily but fails to eradicate hunger, so too do poems meet the immediate need of the poet but not eliminate the desire that fired that need in the first place. More to the point, the poem seems to be saying that past poems constitute a form of “Retrograde” accomplishment that diminishes poetic power (“Enfeebles”) if mistakenly viewed as a continued source of artistic nourishment. It would be far better to sharpen one’s diligence through responsiveness to “chance.” If we take the speaker of the poem to be a poet, then the function of the poem is to convey the poet’s discovery that her poems have lives of their own and that her particular development as a poet is best achieved by dedicating herself to new writing rather than asserting ownership over her past
creations. The poem’s closest approximation to perfect end rhyme links “chance” to “Advance,” accentuating recognition that attentiveness to the unpredictable and unprecedented is crucial to future artistic growth.

To explain what Dickinson might have had in mind when referring to poems that are not the possession of the poet and that succeed through lives of their own, it helps to look briefly at the copyright debates that significantly shaped nineteenth-century American culture’s definition of authorial ownership. Dickinson would have known that throughout the course of her life American authors sought to extend proprietary rights over literary productions by claiming that notions of property based on the writings of John Locke justified their doing so as an extension of natural rights. One of the most active proponents of authorial copyright was Noah Webster, who, as an Amherst resident of considerable fame, author of the dictionary owned by Dickinson’s family, and grandfather of Dickinson’s friend Emily Fowler, would have brought this debate close to home. Siva Vaidhyanathan states in *Copyrights and Copywrongs* that Webster was instrumental in establishing the Copyright Law of 1831 that extended copyright protection from fourteen “to twenty-eight years (renewable for fourteen more)” and that he was a tireless advocate for “perpetual copyright protection” (45). Driving efforts like Webster’s was the conviction that authors ought to enjoy the same natural rights to property ownership that the legal system associated with the ownership of landed estates or other forms of material property.

Through a series of copyright acts that began with the 1790 Copyright Act and—as far as Dickinson is concerned, included the 1831, the 1851, and the 1870 Copyright Acts—the American judicial system increasingly sided with authors, extending protection for literary property based on the Lockean understanding of natural law, according to which ownership is founded on the principle that individuals own their bodies and can acquire additional property by investing the labor of their bodies in the natural world. Melissa J. Homestead succinctly describes the legal status of authorship based on Locke:

Thus, according to Locke, man acquired property rights by mixing his labor with common materials, and civil government had a fundamental duty to protect those property rights acquired through labor. Advocates of copyright transformed Locke’s laboring body and hands into the author’s laboring mind. Similarly, they transformed Locke’s material objects removed from the state of nature and made a man’s own through physical labor (such as trees transformed into lumber to build a house)
into words and ideas from the common store transformed by the author’s intellectual labors of invention, arrangement, and selection into works of literature. (26)

The writer’s mind derives its power to acquire property from the precedent provided by the labor of an isolated and thereby original body. Critically, the focus on originality made possible through isolated acts implies that authority for the ownership of literary property depends on the privacy of individuals whose labor generates products that bear the imprint of a unique, natural, and unmediated self. As a consequence of this reasoning, the productions of authors were viewed as the unencumbered expressions of the private self.

Virtually all scholarly accounts of the nineteenth-century copyright debate acknowledge that the core issue was how to balance public access to knowledge with the need to provide authorial incentives. Much of the nineteenth century was absorbed in very public debates surrounding revisions of the copyright law that sought a legal distinction separating a collective intellectual commons from the particular expressions of ideas achieved by individual authors. Legal scholars Monroe E. Price and Malla Pollack describe “the complexity of copyright in a free society” as posing a particularly vexing legal challenge: “how does one calibrate a legal structure so as to provide adequate incentives for creativity without, at the same time, discouraging the inventive scholarship that comes from the exploitation of existing ideas?” (452). What may well have concerned Dickinson most was the manner in which copyright legislation that was proposed as a means to liberate authors from slavery within a highly exploitative commercial marketplace inadvertently restricted authorial freedom by narrowing the scope of literary expression.

This is precisely what took place by means of a circular logic that applied all too often to nineteenth-century female authors who were entering the literary marketplace in unprecedented numbers. In her discussion of the Copyright Act of 1909, Homestead identifies a broad-based restriction of authorial expression that had perhaps inadvertently accompanied the publication industry’s advocacy of copyright from the time it was first enacted. She explains that the expansion of authorial protection initially arose from the mistaken expectation that legal protection would lead to “increased freedom and power for authors,” when in fact “publishers instead increasingly ‘managed’ authorial production” (259). Based on their assessments of market demand, “publishers increasingly intervened in the artistic process” so that what seemed at first an “expansion of author’s
rights was thus ultimately a triumph of corporate interests” (259). In other words, authorial representations of the private self came under increasing pressure to conform to publicly accepted views of private experience.

Stacy Margolis addresses this specific topic in *The Public Life of Privacy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* where she argues that during this period writers—in this case, novelists—consciously explored the way public assumptions about the private self, or what she terms “publicness,” acted “as a condition of intelligibility” (14). As I hope my preceding description of Fascicle 40 indicates, Dickinson drew attention to this very issue by concentrating attention on the distinct experiences of individual readers, rather than conformity to publicly determined values and actions. In an important sense, the concept of intrinsic renown requires the perception that language acquires power as it is informed by the distinct circumstances of individual readers. Thus, in “All forgot for recollecting” the speaker forsakes “All” that is familiar “for just / A Stranger’s / New Accompanying −.” There is no sense of language imposing or confirming conformity; rather, language is distinguished by ceaseless mutability. As the speaker of “Had I not this – or / This, I said” concludes: “To feed upon the / Retrograde – / Enfeebles the Advance −.”

In her efforts to extricate her own writing from public constructions of privacy, Dickinson reveals her sympathy for the utilitarian side of the copyright wars that questioned the founding of literary ownership on originality. Fundamental to the utilitarian position was the view that authorship was an activity understood as “communicative and participatory” (Rice 92). Utilitarians viewed authors as pursuing their craft by drawing on the circulation of ideas already present in the public domain, adding to that store of ideas through participation that was fundamentally public in nature. In the eyes of utilitarians, copyright was a legal device designed purely for the purpose of providing authors incentives that would then increase the public circulation of ideas. Thomas Jefferson presented a classic utilitarian summary of authorship in an 1813 letter to Isaac MacPherson:

> “If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of everyone, and the receiver cannot dispose himself of it.” (quoted in Vaidhyanathan 23)

In opposition to this view, copyright advocates magnified the material dimension of authorship, giving particular weight to the literary product
of the writer’s labor. As the speaker of “Had I not This, or / This, I said” makes plain, however, an important reason for Dickinson’s resistance to copyright was her recognition that the language authors use to construct their art has a public life that cannot be separated from the private experience of the author.

The clearest example of Dickinson’s calculus for breaking the grip of publicly defined versions of privacy and shaping an aesthetic that privileges the unpredicted but actual experiences of readers appears in “Publication – is the Auction” (Fr788), a poem probably composed around 1863—the year before her creation of Fascicle 40. More than any other poem in the Dickinson corpus, “Publication – is the Auction” provides insight into the mind of the woman writer who imagines how best to elude entrapment in the authorial body demanded by copyright. The poem’s concern with ownership and the body may also be understood as Dickinson’s effort to think through the implications of property rights in general and the extent that ownership and economic slavery are intertwined. In this poem, what begins as a dismissive rejection of the commercial motive for publication quickly becomes a much more thoughtful assessment of democratic poetics, the literary marketplace, and the limits of authorial property rights:

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would
rather
From Our Garrett go
White – unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who
gave it
Then – to Him Who bear
It’s Corporeal illustration – sell
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price –
The analysis of publication conducted through this poem passes through three phases, each of which constitutes a specific authorial option. Taken together, these alternative postures, or voices, focus the poem’s discussion of publication on the issue of originality, or what Mark Rose describes as the “doctrine of originality” that arose “as a central value in cultural production . . . in precisely the same period as the notion of the author’s property right” (6). Rose’s observation that “the representation of the author as a creator who is entitled to profit from his intellectual labor came into being through a blending of literary and legal discourses” (6) affirms the primary role attributed to privacy as a necessary adjunct to original creation. It is in response to this assertion of privacy that Dickinson speaks most powerfully in this poem.11

All three of the perspectives sketched in the poem treat as a given the role that economics plays in imagining approaches to publication. The opening stanza presents a speaker who appears to disdain the economics of publication while paradoxically retaining confidence in the larger system of exchange; the problem she cites is one of taste that carries with it implications of class and gender. A genteel woman would never permit her private writing to enter the marketplace, but perhaps the demands of poverty would justify such degradation. In this case, the speaker grants that donning the commercial female body may be justified for those whose need is great, but that the process of accepting the public determination of that body is a form of commodification and hence slavery that the speaker will not accept for herself. In a curious inversion of the “author-slave analogy” that Homestead associates with the arguments in favor of copyright (9, 49–51), Dickinson presents copyright as enabling authors to profit by their labor, but in doing so entering economic slavery by assuming a commercialized female body.12 Beginning the poem in this way may obliquely signal Dickinson’s own contemplation of commercial publication during the early years of fascicle composition, an option that she distances herself from through the speaker of this poem.

The voice that opens the second stanza is more contemplative; this speaker appears to weigh her initial judgment, then reject it as unsuited to her particular preferences. She chooses not to be enslaved within the body of the conventional female author, but signals her refusal by an act of denial that reifies the economic and legal system that negatively defines her. The language of the stanza holds open the possibility that the speaker is rethinking her position even as she declares it. When she uses the plural pronouns “We” and “Our,” she conflates the royal “we” with the idea that she is acting for others. This speaker anticipates her fate at the hands of publishers
and openly admits her distaste for such an outcome. She understands all too clearly that to “invest – Our Snow” would be to “invest” in both the monetary sense and in terms of dress—it would require tainting the pure snow of the insufficiently “public” and hence unintelligible female subject by assuming the guise of conventional female authorship. The problem is that her disdainful refusal to pursue publication here results in a form of inaction that potentially perpetuates the protocols of property and ownership she finds so distasteful: she remains secluded within property she perceives as safe (“Our Garret”) and takes into that retreat property that she believes she can protect in the interest of herself and others (“Our Snow”). At this point in the poem, the repetition of the word “White” in line 7 significantly magnifies the racial implications of such a choice, suggesting that the speaker subscribes to a racist ideology that understands creation as supporting the race-based privilege of whites. Such a position is ultimately unacceptable not only because it fails to make the actual experiences of women publicly intelligible but because it also reveals the speaker’s complicity in the cultural definition of nonwhites as “Other.” This the speaker cannot do because she is altogether too aware that her interest in publication is motivated by a desire to escape the category of “Other” imposed on women writers who stand outside the protocols of print culture. The logic of the first two stanzas demonstrates that the speaker’s inaction perpetuates the auction of the female writer by placing unintelligible women in the same category of “Other” that denies the humanity of nonwhites. Karen Sanchez-Eppler makes this point in a different but related context when she writes that Dickinson “does not project her fears onto the bodies of some poor ‘Other,’ safely cordoned off by class or race. Rather, she recognizes this dangerous body as her own” (130).

The third and fourth stanzas introduce yet another voice that builds on the first two by continuing in the idiom of capitalist discourse but with the added twist of suggesting that items of greatest value can never be the property of distinct individuals. Instead, the body is presented as the vehicle for “Thought”—a commodity that receives value prior to embodiment through the agency of “Him who gave it”—that originates in an invisible source that exceeds the apprehension of “Him Who bear[s] / It’s Corporeal illustration.” Read in the context of copyright debate, this source of thought acts as a divinely inspired intellectual commons out of which the “Royal Air” emerges as the utilitarian circulation of “Heavenly Grace.” The body is not the creator of literary property after all; instead, the body is the vehicle for already created “Thought” and therefore incapable of becoming the locus for private and hence original creation. 13
The injunction delivered in the final seven lines instructs those authors who must seek commercial publication in the honest and democratic fulfillment of their duties. If sell they must, they are to “sell / The Royal Air”; that is, the contents of the “Parcel” and not the parcel. This is a direct reversal of the basis for copyright that presents authors as justified in marketing the particular expression they give to ideas extracted from the intellectual commons. Such a finely drawn distinction between the corporeal poem and the message conveyed through linguistic embodiment demands that the article of value is not human creation but “Heavenly Grace”; not the body but that which is never more than partially embodied or always emerging out of invisibility. The alternative would be to market the body and thereby “reduce . . . Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price,” to engage in a form of misrepresentation that erases knowledge of the true source of value.¹⁴ Elevating the body of the poem above its message and then reifying the body as message consolidates a publicly intelligible female body that retroactively casts as “Other” all deviations from that body. The marketplace requirement that value be placed in the textual body affirms a form of ownership that confuses the true origin of thought with the human artifice that served as its momentary habitation. To market the artifice, the poem tells us, is to presume the power to make static the circulation of thought that is the primary utilitarian aim of publication in a democratic culture.¹⁵

Dickinson’s insistence that the textual body function as a vehicle for the circulation of thought and not the foundation for authorial control is very much at the heart of her June 1877 letter to Higginson that contains her poetic rejoinder to his poem “Decoration.” To appreciate her response, it is necessary to understand that Higginson’s poem is about the memorializing of the dead on what we now call Memorial Day. Significantly, his speaker chooses to place flowers on the untended grave of a nameless woman rather than add yet another bouquet to the tombs of men who perished in battle during the Civil War. Dickinson’s words, “Lay this Laurel on the One / Too intrinsic for Renown –” (Fr1428C), similarly affirm the honor due those whose contributions are great but largely undetected. In her careful analysis of this letter and the poem it contains, Mary Loeffelholz concludes that Dickinson “demonstrated to Higginson both the care with which she read him and the ingenuity with which she rewrote him” (“Decoration” 677). In other words, Dickinson’s poem accomplishes what the speaker of “Publication – is the Auction” says good poetry ought to do: transmit meaning from one reader to another so that no particular reader misapprehends it as personal property. With this gesture, Dickinson simultaneously honors Higginson by giving new form to the thought his poem
Crumbley, "‘This – was my finallest / Occasion –’" illustrates and shows her acceptance of fame as absorption in the language of others.

The poem I take my title from addresses the difficulty the poet faces when seeking to confirm this version of fame. “The first Day that / I was a Life” (Fr823) opens the second bifolium with the sudden discovery that the end to life may not be an end after all. When viewed in the context of a “tenderer Experiment,” life may in fact persist:

The first Day that
I was a Life
I recollect it – How
still –
The last Day that
I was a Life
I recollect it – as well –

’Twas stiller – though
the first
Was still –
’Twas empty – but
the first
Was full –

This – was my finallest
Occasion –
But then
My tenderer Experiment
Toward Men –

“Which choose I”?
That – I cannot say –
“Which choose They”?
Question Memory!

The speaker’s immediate qualification of the statement “This – was my finallest / Occasion –” that appears in the third stanza is unavoidably perplexing. Having declared in the first two stanzas that her life has reached its end (“The last Day that / I was a Life”), why does the speaker suddenly arrest her train of thought as if she has just remembered something she had overlooked? “But then / My tenderer Experiment / Toward Men –,” she muses, recalling an ongoing experiment, not a life that has ended. Hints
as to what this “tenderer Experiment” might be appear in the final stanza, where the speaker enters a conversation with herself that directly associates the experiment with choices made by the speaker and an unspecified “They.” First she asks a question in quotation marks, “‘Which choose I?’” as if asking herself whether she chooses the view that her life has in some sense ended, or the alternative view that her life continues as part of the experiment. Her response is that she “cannot say –,” an admission that she quickly follows with yet another question in quotation marks: “‘Which choose They?’” This question is then succeeded by a final command not in quotation marks: “Question Memory!” These words indicate that whether her life has ended or not depends on choices made by others and that the success of the experiment will depend on information held in memory.

Read within the context of other poems in the fascicle, together with Dickinson’s understanding of the role readers play in the circulation of thought, the poem states that the speaker’s decision about the continuation of her life now rests with readers. As Oberhaus has explained, the speaker “longs for readers for her ‘Experiment Toward Men’ and cannot be certain if she will ever have them” (20). What makes her experiment an experiment is its innovative and risky departure from publicly determined versions of the private self; what makes it “tenderer” is its dependence on readers and its embrace of the unconventional or illegible features of their experience.

A surprising number of poems in this fascicle cluster around the idea that the poet must rely on the choices of others to determine whether the tenderer experiment has succeeded; many also propose that because success can be hard or impossible to detect, some degree of uncertainty may be inescapable. As previously noted, “All forgot for recollecting” (Fr827), the first poem in the third bifolium, explores the question of which actions and what forms of recognition endure. The closing stanza suggests that the speaker has risked all on entering the memory of another, admitting that she “Dropped – my fate – a / timid Pebble – / In thy bolder Sea –.” That personal actions can be justified through their power to inform the lives of others is reiterated in the second poem of the fifth bifolium, where the speaker describes actions that are absorbed by others but bent to purposes different from those that originally motivated them. This speaker begins by stating, “He who in Himself believes – / Fraud cannot presume” (Fr835)—a rejection of the publicly legible or fraudulent private self—and concludes that such a belief “Cannot perish, though / it fail / Every second time – / But defaced Vicariously – / For Some Other Shame.” This is to say that the reader who experiences the poem’s power to evoke shame may indeed displace the poet’s shame with her own, but entry into the life of the reader
is what matters, not retention of the poet’s identity. “Wert Thou but ill – that / I might show thee” (Fr821), the second poem of the first bifolium, concentrates on ways to capture the attention of a lover or a reader.16 This speaker repeatedly addresses a specific “Thou” with the aim of identifying a need she might meet and by that means win admission into the other’s life. “Wert Thou but stranger / in ungracious country – / And Mine – the Door / Thou paused at,” she states in the second stanza; in the third she imagines yet another need she could meet: “Accused – wert Thou / and Myself – Tribunal –.” The poem concludes with the speaker stating, “No Service hast Thou, / I would not +achieve it –” (“+attempt”). We could say that the speaker in this poem emphasizes the importance of identifying the reader’s need, where the speaker of “Had I not This, or / This, I said” places greatest emphasis on the poet’s need.

As if to round out her reflections on the relationships poems maintain with poets and readers, Dickinson’s speaker in “Fitter to see Him, I / may be” (Fr834), the first poem of the fifth bifolium, worries that she might lose a reader or lover who once admired her because she has changed so much in his absence. “I only must not grow / so new / That +He’ll mistake – and ask for me / Of me” (“+He”), she cautions herself in the fifth stanza, only to repeat her concern in the next: “I only must not change / so fair / He’ll sigh – +’the Other – She is Where’?” (“+Real One”). In the end, though, the speaker reconciles herself to the possibility that the “He” she seeks to please may “perceive the other / Truth / Opon an Excellenter Youth.” Without denying the pain such a loss would provoke, the speaker affirms the growth that has ultimately led her away from the lover or reader when she states that what she has become is “The Beauty that reward / Him +most –” (“+best”). What matters in the end is that the inspiration the other provided has led to the further development of the poet’s art; the reader’s failure to keep pace with the poet’s growth is secondary to heightened artistic accomplishment. Here again, the poet’s or lover’s need is given emphasis, suggesting that through the poems in this fascicle Dickinson is exploring ways to assess the lives poems enter once they are part of a larger world that includes both the poet and readers of the poems.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that a number of the poems in the same fascicle deal specifically with the question of new birth and how best to embrace it. In the fourth bifolium, Dickinson assembles what might well be her most dazzling effort to track the poet’s initial motivation and the personal experience that attends poetic creation. Taken together, the four poems transcribed onto this sheet represent movement from intellectual contemplation of death and new life to immediate, subjective entry
into the process of change itself. The first poem, “The Admirations – and / Contempts – of time –” (Fr830), alludes directly to Christian resurrection through reference to the “Open Tomb” that simultaneously signals Jesus’s death and his return to life. The poem does not, however, treat this event as the original precedent for experiences to come. Instead, Jesus is presented as embodying a broad pre-existing principle that the speaker draws on to justify an artistic transformation that will cast present experience in a wholly new light. “Dying,” she observes in the first stanza, provides “as it were / a Hight” that “Reorganizes Estimate” so that “what We saw / not / We distinguish clear –.” Death, we are told, yields an elevated perspective that enables an expanded view of experience. This is different from recumbence in the bosom of the Lord and the peace of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Here it is tempting to say that this speaker’s determination to face new life directly, without the mediation of Christ, echoes the position of the speaker in “‘Unto Me? I do not / know you –” (Fr825), the third poem of sheet 2, who denies knowledge of “Jesus – late / of Judea –.” Rather than accepting Jesus’s offer to convey her to heaven where he tells her she can “Occupy my +House” (“+Breast”), she chooses not to respond.” Like that earlier speaker, this speaker is more concerned with the journey new life offers than arrival at a point of rest. By means of “Compound Vision,” that she defines as “The Finite – furnished / With the Infinite,” the speaker imagines casting her vision “Back – toward Time – / And forward – / Toward the God of Him –.” At this point it becomes possible to interpret death as not a passage from time to timelessness but another kind of death altogether, one that retains the experience of time by placing the perceiver both in and out of it. If we view what is being described not as literal death but as the poet’s release of poems that enter the stream of time, we can also imagine that the speaker is describing what happens to the poet who contemplates intrinsic renown and who writes poems that expand the linguistic commons. Her personal compound vision would in this case include reflection on the entry of her poems into history plus her belief that in doing so her words contribute to the inspiration of future poets.

The next poem in the bifolium, “Till Death – is narrow / Loving –” (Fr831), further develops the concept of compound vision by exploring the proper role of poetic imitation and the way a writer integrates in her own writing the influence of those who preceded her. The poem explains that each new work retroactively affirms a history of poetic influence that binds the poet to the past at the same time that it directs that influence forward toward artistic expression appropriate to the future poet’s historical moment. Framed in this manner, the poem presents the poet’s compound vision as
looking both ways—toward time and toward eternity. This is achieved when life is modeled on the conduct of another whose death so diminishes mortal experience that art becomes a means of expressing the beauty now absent. The first line of the poem, “Till death – is narrow / Loving –,” establishes the poem’s focus on an expansive love not bound by the span of a particular life. Unlike Christian marriage vows where the words “until death do us part” focus attention on the duration of mortal life only, Dickinson’s language pointedly affirms that the poet’s reach cannot be so neatly confined. The speaker instructs us that escape from such constraints may be accomplished by imitating “He whose loss / procures you / Such Destitution that / Your Life too abject for / itself / Thenceforward imitate –.”

According to Páraic Finnerty’s line of argumentation, these words of Dickinson’s could be applied to her own relationship with Shakespeare, as Shakespeare remained forever alive for Dickinson because his genius continually inspired fresh creation: “Despite acknowledgements of Shakespeare’s ‘firm’ and fixed genius, he remained ‘just published’ because readers redeployed him, his plays becoming displaced by that which had more contemporary or personal relevance” (Finnerty 116). Dickinson’s deep respect for Shakespeare’s ability to meet the artistic needs of his own historical moment provokes her effort to fill the gap she senses in her day. She goes about this through imitation of the thought that flowed through his language, not his style. Therefore, as Finnerty puts it, “while [Dickinson] shows deference to Shakespeare’s thoughts, the poet modifies, fragments, and adds to his lines, converting his iambic pentameter into her own preferred hymnal meter” (121).

In the final stanza of “Till Death – is narrow / Loving,” Dickinson’s speaker describes the process of imitation as advancing until the poet assumes “Resemblance perfect.” At this point mortal imitation fuses with spiritual reach so that the poet imitator becomes an extension of the thought the poet precursor gave voice to in the past. Addressing the aspiring poet directly, Dickinson’s speaker observes that when such resemblance is attained, “Yourself, for His pursuit / Delight of Nature – abdicate.” When the poet of the present imbibes the creative spirit of past creative genius, she turns her attention to the infinite. Nature, or the world of the living moment, becomes a lens through which eternity is freshly framed. The solid rhyme that links “imitate” of stanza 2 with “abdicate” of stanza 3 further establishes the message that proper imitation includes a shared dedication to the future. One might even say that such imitation does indeed “Exhibit Love – somewhat” (the final line of the poem) because the momentary illustration of that love always meets the needs of the present even as it
extends to the works of poets to come. Thus, the poet’s compound vision brings the past into the present as a means of achieving what the speaker of “The Admirations – and / Contempts – of time –” described as looking “forward – / Toward the God of Him –.”

The final two poems of the fourth bifolium continue the third-person investigation of compound vision taken up in the first two poems but do so by exploring the ways poetic creation alters the outward and inward life of the poet. In the first of these, “‘Tis Sunrise – little Maid – / Hast Thou” (Fr832), Dickinson treats the subject of the poem, the little maid, as if she were a poet who has abdicated nature, as advocated by the speaker of the previous poem. Central to the poem is what appears to be the maid’s sudden departure from established patterns of daily behavior that have been regulated by the stations of the sun. Whether it be morning, noon, or night, the maid is described by the speaker as behaving contrary to convention. In the first stanza, “‘Tis Sunrise” and the maid has not assumed her “Station in the Day”; in the second, the speaker wonders that even at “Noon” the maid is “sleeping / yet”; and in the third stanza the speaker discovers that for the little maid night has somehow displaced morning: “That Night should be to thee / Instead of Morning. . . .” Over the course of the poem’s three stanzas, the speaker gradually realizes that the little maid has died, but the speaker’s response to this death, and hence the nature of the death itself, is highly unusual. At first the speaker appears caught by surprise, but by the end she expresses regret at not having been included in the maid’s “Plan to Die”: “Hadst / thou broached / Thy little Plan to Die – / Dissuade thee, if I c’d not, Sweet, / I might have aided – thee –.”

Given the previous two poems’ focus on the relationship between dying and the acquisition of vision, and this poem’s presentation of death as part of a plan, we might conclude that a newly acquired vision has led the maid to abandon mortal life, but this may not be entirely what Dickinson has in mind.

The appearance of the word “industry” at the very end of the first stanza resonates with the word “industrious” that appeared in “Had I not This or / This, I said” where it referred to the poet/speaker’s writing of poems. Treating that poem as a point of reference for this one, we might conclude that when the speaker here urges the little maid to “Retrieve thine industry –,” she means that the maid should continue writing poems. In this case, the poem can be read as an outside observer’s reflections on a poet’s decision to stop writing poems, or as a poet’s contemplation of how an outside observer might respond to her own decision to stop writing poems. What might finally be most significant about this poem is that the speaker overcomes
her opposition to such a plan and ultimately expresses support. It may be acceptable, the poem tells us, for the poet to end her life as a writer.

The fourth and final poem of this fourth bifolium provides an explanation of why the poet is attracted to the possibility of bringing her writing to an end. “Pain – expands the Time –” (Fr833) explains that the interior experience of the poet is fraught with pain produced by the departure of precursor poets and the present poet’s uncertainty that her efforts to fill the gap created by that absence will succeed. The expansion of time that is the subject of the first stanza presents pain as the poet’s experience of her role as the outer edge of history that advances through the narrow seeming confines of her own mind:

Pain – expands the Time –
Ages +coil within +lurk
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain –

The poems bearing the coiled ages of the past that the poet has released (“Shot”) into the world—have so far yielded only silence. Dickinson's vari-
ant of “Triplets” for “Gammuts” draws additional attention to the musical and prosodic character of the encapsulated eternities that poems are, while the variants of “flit – show” for “Are” magnify the hard truth that time’s fleet passage has so far shown an absence of detectable renown. This, then, is the pain of the poet who circulates poems with the knowledge that word of her success may never be forthcoming.

That such an understanding of poetic circulation and, ultimately, fame equates success with absorption and results in invisibility is a matter taken up in the final poem of the fascicle, “Unfulfilled to Observation –” (Fr839).

Unfulfilled to Observation –
Incomplete – to Eye –
But to Faith – a Revolution
In Locality –

Unto Us – the Suns
extinguish –
To our Opposite –
New Horizons – they
+embellish –
+Replenish
+Fronting Us – with Night.
+Turning Us – their Night.

If the poem can be read as the statement of a poet reflecting on the fate of her “tenderer Experiment,” then it describes the poet’s recognition that poetry is given new form and meaning in the experience of her readers. Such poetry may well be “Unfulfilled to Observation” and “Incomplete – to Eye” while achieving fulfillment through a revolution in locality that situates meaning in the mind of the reader. That is what the first stanza tells us; the second implies that such an outcome is natural. Just as suns pass from one hemisphere to another, illuminating “New Horizons” for others whose lives we may never witness, so poetry defines new horizons, enabling others to discover new worlds while the poet confronts the night that precedes her next creation. By insisting on the motion of the sun, Dickinson magnifies the continuum of light and dark, day and night, so that even the poet’s darkness is linked to the illumination of others and the ultimate return of light that will show the poet new horizons. Unlike the little maid who refused to “Retrieve [her] industry” in “’Tis Sunrise – Little Maid,” this speaker remains industrious, writing on as a poet whose faith in the power of her words sustains her in the face of undetectable renown. The variant of “Replenish” for the word “embellish” in the seventh line here reinforces this first-person speaker’s confidence in the promise of a new day.
I will leave the fascicle here, not because I have exhausted it, or even fairly scratched the surface, but because the final poem of the fascicle so clearly articulates the concern with endings and beginnings that is central to my reading of the fascicle. This concluding speaker captures the general attitude Dickinson may well have adopted as the era of her greatest poetic productivity was drawing to a close and she wondered what the ultimate outcome would be. Through the speakers of Fascicle 40, Dickinson unflinchingly declares that when poetry contributes most directly to the deepest spiritual and artistic aspirations of the poet’s historical moment, it does so by entering the linguistic lives of readers and becoming intrinsic to their cultural self-understanding. Perhaps she saw then that the preservation and control of her poems ran contrary to her aim of releasing them into the world and allowing them to enter the lives of others. This realization may have led Dickinson to stop binding her poems after completing her fortieth fascicle, to write on unbound sheets in 1865, and to scale down her writing to the extent that she probably produced no more than ten and twelve poems per year from 1866 through 1869 (Franklin, Poems 1533). These new poems, and those to come after 1869, would pursue new directions, as might be expected, but that is another story.