For more than half a century, the story of Emily Dickinson’s “Master” documents has been the story of three letters to an unknown individual. In the first scholarly edition to present the texts to twentieth-century readers (1958), Thomas H. Johnson could not positively identify the addressee but conjectured that he was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. Some twenty-eight years later, the editor of the second scholarly edition, Ralph W. Franklin, eschewed such conjecture regarding the precise identity of the addressee but reasserted the documents’ identity as correspondence and evidence of “a long relationship, geographically apart.”¹ Both editions present the documents as stray, even random survivors from a much larger body of letters now likely lost forever. But perhaps even more significantly, both editions see gaps in the textual record as reason to close off further inquiry, leaving the documents in the mystery of their seeming unconnectedness.

What if, instead of imagining the “Master” documents as part of the drift of what has been lost, we seek to restore them in relation to what remains?

Writing in Time: Emily Dickinson’s Master Hours tells the story of the documents themselves and of a set of related documents as well as the history of their strictly documentary character and transmission. Although three of the documents were cast by Dickinson tendentially in the form of letters, reading them as purely epistolary creates many unnecessary problems and distractions. Interesting new questions arise when we begin to study the materials at their primal documentary level. Are they letters in the usual sense? What emotional and intellectual crises do they involve and what

---

¹ See Thomas H. Johnson’s The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), and R. W. Franklin’s The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 1986). For Johnson’s election of Wadsworth as the likely addressee of these documents, see his headnote to the letters 1858 to 1861. Franklin’s claim about the documents’ identity as correspondence appears in the introduction to his edition (p. 5).
textual itineraries may be tracked through them? Indeed, how many "Master" documents exist? In what ways do they touch other works around them in time and space? What poems arise, what correspondences begin or end alongside them, and what works emerge in the lacunae that separate them? Did they continue to exert a hidden but powerful influence, inflecting even Dickinson's late works? What do they have to say to us—in our time?

My inquiry is not a quest to discover the identity of a "Master". Interesting as that question is and has long been, I want to shift the focus elsewhere. The material documents themselves and their transmission and critical history are highly provocative and suggestive as such. To study both closely is to discover the traces of entangled narratives that are at least as rich and strange as the biographical conjectures we have inherited from a difficult editorial and critical past. Created in a brief but significant moment of time, ca. 1858 to ca. 1861, they throw significant new light on how Dickinson was trying to imagine the course and shape of her poetic life.

At the heart of Writing in Time is a new facsimile edition of five "Master" documents, the three more epistolary works traditionally associated with the grouping and two poems recoverable under the "Master" rubric. The edition's form is material and philological: it does not proceed against the grain of previous speculation but against speculation itself and the over-determination of the documents' critical history and interpretation. Rather than forging explications in favor of one or another interpretation, the edition's aim is to establish as rigorously as possible the texts carried by the documents and their manifold and even contradictory complexities. In the textual apparatus preceding the facsimile edition, I seek to track and explore the evolution of the documents' material, ramifying characteristics and connections as they follow no single trajectory and run towards no certain end. In the pages following the edition, I close with a series of commentaries that, although still attentive to the edition's philological and material emphasis, enact my own metamorphosis from editor to executant. Inevitably, editing these documents entailed learning them by heart and so affording them what George Steiner has called "an indwelling clarity" and agency within my own consciousness. These "Reading Hours" reflect my investment in a process of interpretation that involves an answerability to documents that now seem to me like "gifts bearing destinies".

Ultimately, Writing in Time comprises an experiment in what I would call—looking back at an intense process of bibliographical analysis of a few documents Dickinson kept close in her care and custody like a poetic mooring until the end of her life—intimate editorial investigation. It reconceives the editorial enterprise as a critical meditation and devotional exercise. Here each sphere of inquiry—historical, textual, philological—seeks a maximum act of attention and detailed focus in order to touch upon the mysteries that these radiant documents both make visible and keep hidden.

The debt I owe to the many readers—feminists, poets, materialists, and editors—who have intercepted these documents before me is wide and deep. What follows neither repeats nor forecloses their contributions but offers a new way of approaching these documents whose provocative significance has long been recognized. It is, I hope, a new reading in and for a new hour.

**MARTA WERNER**
Loyola University, Chicago

---

2 See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 9. In the first section of this work, "A Secondary City," Steiner sets out his imagination of a "politics of the primary" (p. 6) and defines hermeneutics as "the enactment of answerable understanding" (p. 7).


4 The wealth of readings of the "Master" documents is hard to overstate. Three lines of descent—embodied respectively by an editor, a poet, and a scholar—are especially important to me. My first debt is to R. W. Franklin, whose editorial work on Dickinson is without peer; a second debt is to Susan Howe, whose scholarship combines in a singular way close material reading with the coordinates of poetry; and my third debt is to Sharon Cameron, whose probing of the structure of identity and its dissolution in Dickinson's work is central to my thinking about Dickinson's writings inside and outside the fascicles. The larger sweep of my debts to others can be seen, in part, in the bibliography. Most importantly, I am indebted to Jay Leyda, whose early endeavor to re-imagine Dickinson's writings in their layered contexts in *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (2 vols.; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960) is recalled, in part, in the title and form of this edition. Leyda's extensive, often handwritten notes on the Dickinson manuscripts housed at the Amherst College Archives & Special Collections were invaluable guides to the documentary record. It should go without saying that my debt to Thomas H. Johnson, with whom I have so often differed, is also very great. It was Johnson who first cut the editorial path we continue on: while he was the first, I will most certainly not be the last to travel on it and change its course.