Writing in Time
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Among the mysteries that have grown up around Emily Dickinson—"The Myth" as she is sometimes called—none is more tantalizing than the meaning of the three documents anointed over the years as the "Master Letters". While scholars, especially Dickinson’s editors, have shaped them into a constellation of conjecturable meanings, they remain deeply strange. So let us begin with what we know. We know that these three texts remained among Dickinson’s papers probably from the late 1850s and early 1860s until her death in 1886 and that they survived both the multiple purges performed presumably by Dickinson herself—as she destroyed drafts of many works after making fair copies—as well as the posthumous destruction of her personal correspondence carried out by her sister, Lavinia, around May 1886.

Beyond these few details, the record becomes somewhat more opaque. The precise location and arrangement of these three documents, especially in relation to the forty fascicles and the hundreds of unbound manuscripts of poems and fragments left among Dickinson’s personal effects at the time of her death, is not precisely known and may never be. In her uncorroborated and conflicting Ur-narratives of discovery, Lavinia first spoke of finding approximately seven hundred of her sister’s poems hidden away, or only sheltering, in a locked box somewhere in Dickinson’s bedroom. She later revised this account, claiming that she had recovered all of the writings—more than twice the number originally cited—at one time. The first account, with a sealed box at its center, has the ring of a fable; the second, though seemingly closer to the truth, still tells us nothing about Dickinson’s classification system or if such a system even existed. According to Mabel Loomis Todd, when rumors circulating in the early 1890s seemingly alluded to a missing cache of Dickinson’s "remarkable prose compositions", Lavinia once again searched “the house from top to bottom” but turned up nothing further—no journal or diary, not a single remnant of additional writing.

Were these three documents, then, found among the groups of writings Lavinia referred to as poems? And if so,

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5  R. W. Franklin, introduction to Master Letters, p. 5.
6  In a letter to her friend Mrs. C. S. Mack written on 17 February 1891, Lavinia Dickinson wrote, “I found (the week after her death) a box (locked) containing 7 hundred wonderful poems – carefully copied”; see Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), p. xxxix. If the report is accurate, the poems Lavinia discovered were almost certainly those in the fascicles, but where were the others?
7  Mabel Loomis Todd, ed., Letters of Emily Dickinson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. xvi. Todd believed that Lavinia had found several groups of writings at slightly different times.
is their site of discovery, among Dickinson’s verses, a clue as to how Dickinson regarded them as well as the other fragmentary writings, many from the later years, that may also have lain with them and that, to some ears, sound along different points on the continuum from prose to verse? Does this potential proximity among her poetic works suggest even their influence? In the end, these questions cannot be answered definitively, and we must be satisfied with knowing only what documents Dickinson (or, rather, history) saved and not where or why these were saved while others were discarded.

The transmission history of the three drafts is also a matter of some conjecture. Franklin notes that Mabel Loomis Todd was aware of the existence of the documents by the early 1890s. Jay Leyda, who dealt extensively with Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, during the long journey of these manuscripts from Bingham’s private collection first to the Folger Library and then to the Amherst College Archives, believed the documents had passed from Lavinia Dickinson, who inherited all of Dickinson’s personal possessions, to Todd around 1891. Still, a great many documents, not just these three, were handed over at the same time, and thus the transmission history of the three documents, even if it is correct, does not offer conclusive evidence of their identity as a distinct constellation. In Emily Dickinson’s Home (1955), where Bingham prints the documents in full for the first time and has an opportunity to clarify this history, she does so only partially. Bingham notes that unlike the other family papers printed in Home, the documents printed in Part V, which include these three manuscripts, were turned over to her mother not in the early to mid-1890s by Austin Dickinson but at a different time and, she implies, by a different source.

Given that Lavinia seems to have controlled those Dickinson manuscripts stored within the family home, the Homestead, did she alone know of the existence of these drafts before giving them to Todd, and, if so, what did she know and when? Had she read these works that still startle us in their strangeness, or did the mounting internal pressure she felt to bring all her sister wrote into the light lead her to let go of them precipitately, without first examining them? According to Leyda, Lavinia often marked manuscripts with a cross or x, yet there are no marks by a hand other than Dickinson’s on these three documents, no sign of another’s close perusal, with the exception of two tiny notes clarifying two words in A 829 that were almost certainly made by Bingham when she prepared transcriptions for Home. But whether Lavinia read them or not, she seems to have yielded them to Todd without any special instructions and without contextualizing or differentiating them from the hundreds of other manuscripts she also put in Todd’s care ca. 1891.

For all of the uncertainties attending their discovery and transmission, in 1891, the construction of them as the “Master Letters”—that is, as three “letters” to a man identified as “Master”—was at this moment yet to come. It is not too much to say that print determined their classification as letters and, more importantly, as correspondence and that print also ultimately defined the “Master” documents as an inviolate trinity.

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8 Todd’s inclusion of six sentences from A 828 in Letters of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894), confirms her early knowledge of these works. Martha Nell Smith believes the “Master” documents first passed from Austin Dickinson’s hands to Todd’s, but I have not found evidence to confirm this; see Martha Nell Smith’s Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson (Austin: Texas University Press, 1992), p. 109.

9 Leyda’s cataloguing records for the “Master” documents in the Amherst College Archives & Special Collections include the note LND to MLT: 1891? His understanding of the transmission history probably derived from Millicent Todd Bingham’s family narrative. Leyda is a crucial figure for our understanding of Dickinson’s writings, and all readers are indebted to his work, part biography, part compendium, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960). Among the many works included in Years and Hours are the three epistolary “Master” texts. Here, though, Leyda’s aims are more biographical than textual, and his transcriptions of the “Master” documents offer only redacted versions of each one. My references to Leyda are generally to his more textually oriented cataloguing notes on the “Master” documents rather than to this published work. In my notes on the history of the dating of these documents, however, I include both the dates on Leyda’s cataloguing notes and the dates he proposed in Years and Hours.

10 In the chapter of Emily Dickinson’s Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955; hereafter cited as Home) devoted to the manuscripts, Bingham writes simply, “It was while the 1894 volumes were in preparation that the letters in this book (except the Sweeterse collection and those in Part Five) were given to my mother by Emily’s brother, William Austin Dickinson. They were all the family letters he had left, or all he could find, after fire destroyed his office and most of his historical records during the blizzard of March 11–14, 1888” (p. 48). Of the transmission history of the “Master Letters”, printed in Part V of Home, Bingham writes only, “Among Emily Dickinson’s fragmentary manuscripts were found drafts of three letters in writing of this period” (p. 420). Did the fragmentary manuscripts constitute a discrete group?

11 If Leyda’s records are correct, Lavinia Dickinson gave more than three hundred manuscripts carrying poems, letters, and fragments to Mabel Loomis Todd ca. 1891. For a complete inventory of these materials, see Leyda, Box 32, Amherst College Archives & Special Collections. Lavinia also seems to have passed manuscripts on to Todd in 1888, 1889, and 1892. It is possible that further study of the transmission histories of these documents may yield information about Dickinson’s original groupings of materials.
Early Printings

By tracing the itinerary of the documents through the press, it is possible to detect quite precisely the early moment of their clothing-cloaking in a specific genre as well as the subsequent moment(s) of their coalescence as a constellation. As Franklin explains in his summary of the publication of these three documents, the texts were not published together and in full until 1955, when Millicent Todd Bingham printed them in Home. Before this, as he observes, no biographical or critical studies were informed by an awareness of their existence. It is equally true to say that after 1955, no study could have avoided a knowledge of them. The first printed trace of their existence, however, came in 1894, when Mabel Todd printed a few scattered lines from two leaves of one document—A 828—in her edition of Letters, largely stripping them of their punctuation and capitalization, then apparently deliberately misdating the lines as from ca. 1885:

... If you saw a bullet hit a bird, and he told you he wasn’t shot, you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word. Thomas’s faith in anatomy was stronger than his faith in faith. ... Vesuvius don’t talk — Ætna don’t. One of them said a syllable, a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it and hid forever. She couldn’t look the world in the face afterward, I suppose. Bashful Pompeii! ...  

In 1931, Todd reprinted the identical lines in her expanded edition of Letters, retaining the same misleading date in the headnote. In this edition, however, edited jointly with Millicent Todd Bingham, one of them has added the following opaque footnote: “This letter seems to be out of place. The original draft is in the handwriting of the early 60’s.” In Home, Bingham held that Todd failed to wholly correct the record or print additional passages in deference to Austin and Lavinia’s wishes. While this may have been the case in 1894, by 1931 both Lavinia and Austin had been dead for over thirty years, and it is difficult to imagine that the same need to comply with family wishes still guided Todd’s editorial decisions. Indeed, the paratexts to Todd’s 1931 Letters hint at a different, more complex story about both Todd’s proprietary relationship with Dickinson’s textual remains and her anxiety about losing her status as the medium through which Dickinson allegedly spoke to the world.

By 1931, biographical accounts of Dickinson were beginning to be widely available, a circumstance that seems to have unsettled Todd. In the preface to her expanded Letters, Todd follows a brief review justifying the policies governing her editorial ethos in the 1894 Letters with a sharp critique of the life-studies that have arisen between that edition and the present one: “Now, after thirty-seven years, the Emily legend has assumed a shape unrecognizable to one who knew her. Her life is revamped to suit the taste of the times, and Emily herself has all but vanished in the process.” A few pages later, in the introduction to the second edition, she sounds this theme again: “For several years, it seems, a feeling has been growing among students of Emily’s life that something is wrong. Their picture of her in her setting is not altogether true.” To correct this distorted image of Dickinson, Todd first advises a “return to [original] sources” or at least to those sources almost touching the originals: “The careful reader would turn back to my early volumes [emphasis added] if he wanted to find the real Emily”. Almost immediately, however, she concedes the unlikelihood of this prospect: “But that is too much to expect.” Temporally estranged from Dickinson and overly keen to trade an understanding of Dickinson’s inner life as it is manifested in her writing for clues regarding her outer existence, Dickinson’s biographers, Todd implies, are necessarily denied the access to the terrain of Dickinson’s spirit that Todd has enjoyed. To the biographers’ tactics, a “conjuring”

12 See Franklin, introduction to Master Letters, pp. 5–7.
13 See Todd, Letters (1894), pp. 422–23; Todd includes this passage in section IX of volume 2, a section containing letters “To Mr and Mrs Jenkins, Mrs Read, Mrs W. A. Stearns, Mrs Edward Tuckerman, Mrs Cooper, Mrs Davis, Mrs Hills, Mrs Jameson, Mr Emerson, Maggie Maher, Mr and Mrs Montague, Miss W. F. Stearns, Mr J. K. Chickering, Mrs Sweetser, Mr Niles, Miss Carmichael, Dr and Mrs Field, Mr Holland, ‘H. H.; Miss Hall, Mrs Crowell, and Mrs J. C. Greenough”. Why she chooses to include the lines in this grouping of letters is unclear. The same arrangement is repeated in Todd’s Letters (1931).
14 See Todd, Letters (1931), p. 411n10. Although there is no way of knowing, it seems likely that Bingham either added this note herself or that Todd added it when she or Bingham noticed the discrepancy in the handwriting.
15 See Bingham, Home, p. 421.
16 For a much more critical interpretation of Todd and Bingham’s construction of the “Master” narrative, see Smith’s Rowing in Eden, pp. 97–127.
18 Ibid., pp. xxii–xxiii.
19 Ibid., pp. x, xiii, xiii.
of Dickinson that is quick to mistake the singular in their subject for the pathological, Todd resolutely contrasts those of the textual editor who remains silent in order to let the subject speak for herself: "I have said nothing hitherto".  

In her preface, Todd seems to suggest that the editorial ethos of her 1931 Letters both builds on her 1894 edition and, where necessary, corrects it. In 1894, Todd's deference to the wishes of the letters' then living recipients (and at times even to the imagined wishes of the dead) sometimes required the omission of large portions of Dickinson's letters in Todd's possession. In the 1931 Letters, Todd pledges to redress these omissions, "to supply missing parts", and to "restore not only entire letters but also passages from others deleted forty years ago". By the final lines of the introduction to the second edition, Todd suggests that the process of restitution is complete; she has, even against her better judgment, given up her cache of secrets: "And so I finally assume my share of responsibility in further exposing the depths of Emily's unfathomable heart [...] [The letters published here] only add to the grandeur of her stature, but even so, her words carry a sting as I write: 'As there are apartments in our own minds which we never enter without apology, we should respect the seals of others'".  

Todd died of a cerebral hemorrhage less than a year after the 1931 publication of Letters. Her last edited volume of Dickinson's writing is structured by a tension between disclosure and concealment that often characterizes publications of private documents, particularly by editors close to the author. Yet in the end, and especially in relation to the three documents gathered here, she withheld far more than she revealed, and no one—that is to say no outsider—could have guessed the extent of what was still missing. In this moment, a moment that will never come again in Dickinson studies, the figures of the archivist and the editor were virtually forged—even driven—together. In the 1890s, Todd had possessed an archive of documents that she alone could open, and she managed that archive with a unique measure of control over what would be known about Dickinson and what would remain veiled. Even so, this singular concentration of power was under continual threat. For the 1931 Letters, she had opened, though we do not know how far, the cache of documents to her daughter. Her private storehouse, moreover, did not hold an infinite number of documents, and each publication depleted it further. Perhaps, in the case of the "Master" documents, Todd failed to print them in full in order to safeguard her status as insider, as the intimate commentator of a once little-known life now increasingly in the searching light of biographers and interpreters of Dickinson's poetry. The presentation of a brief fragment from a single work maintained the mystique of both the poet and the editor/archivist. At that moment, we do not know that Todd has access to more that she is keeping in reserve. Perhaps something of that editorial reserve is revealed in a haunting moment towards the end of the introduction to the second edition of Letters (1931) when Todd seems to make a concession to the invasive biographers who invent where they cannot find evidence. To those contemporary readers unable to map the terrain of Dickinson's "spirit" as it is manifested in her manuscript writings, Todd offers a copy of the only known image of Dickinson's face "taken from life" when she was probably sixteen years old: "Of the topography of her face at all events this untouched photograph of a daguerreotype is a faithful representation". Yet Todd's insistence on the "untouched" purity of the image and upon its "faithful representation" ultimately argues the case for a knowledge she did not directly possess: the face in the daguerreotype is one that Todd herself never saw "in life", her first glimpse of Dickinson's features coming only at the poet's funeral. Does Todd's offer of a piece of evidence, at once artifact and facsimile, that she cannot fully possess, except in the most belated and material of senses, signal a discomfortingly incomplete anagnorisis about her own distance from Dickinson—and, more to the point, from Dickinson's most private textual remains? The hiddenness of the "Master" documents, the complex and often inexplicable density of the drafts, must have left her much as they leave us today: desirous of their context and meanings and touchstones...  

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20 Ibid., p. xii.
21 Ibid., p. x.
22 Ibid., pp. xxiii–xxiv.
23 Ibid., p. xxiii.
24 Biographer Lyndall Gordon (Lives Like Loaded Guns (New York: Viking, 2010)) confirms, "Mabel saw Emily Dickinson for the first time in the open coffin at the funeral" (p. 228).
in Dickinson’s world and works. Todd’s deft—or only unconscious—substitution of the daguerreotype image for the full presentation of the documents in her possession allows her to bypass the more difficult bibliographical truth about her limited knowledge of the ”Master” documents she only very partially conveys to Dickinson’s readers.

As always, another reading is possible of Todd’s motives for withholding what we have come to know, but which she did not name, as the ”Master Letters”. In this reading, Todd’s decision to print only a few fragmentary lines from a single document itself wrenched out of context reflects her awareness that among Dickinson’s textual remains were documents that could not be readily classified but that would, eventually, be reduced by classification. Between 1894 and 1931, it may be that Todd resists a line of descent into the biographical interpretation of Dickinson’s works that will later link Dickinson to a ”Master” and connect a series of highly disparate drafts to the single genre of ”the letter” and a bold experiment in prose and verse to the certainty of a ”correspondence” with a human interlocutor.

One reading may not cancel another. Todd’s fear of losing her control over Dickinson’s textual body and her desire to represent the radical nature of Dickinson’s oeuvre may be interlaced strands in her editorial work. However, the evidence supplied only by Todd’s partial revelation of one document ensures that in 1931, the ”Master” documents had yet to enter literary history. The ”Master” narrative cannot be traced to Todd’s door.

At Todd’s death, her private archive of Dickinson’s unpublished manuscripts kept allegedly in a Chinese camphorwood chest, now missing for over fifty years, fell to her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham. In 1932, Bingham, the first woman ever to receive a doctoral degree in geology and geography from Harvard University, was forty-two years old. She had recently held academic appointments at Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College lecturing on geography. But her immersion in the patterns of climates, landforms, vegetation, soils, and water had already been interrupted in the late 1920s, when Todd solicited her help in preparing the 1931 Letters along with a new edition of Dickinson’s poems—the work that would eventually be published in 1945 as Bolts of Melody.

With the publication of Bingham’s Home in 1955, Bingham seems to fulfill Todd’s call in 1931 for a ”return to sources”—for textual purity. In the same moment, however, Todd’s claims for insider knowledge of Dickinson are also concluded: the camphorwood chest has at last been emptied by Bingham.

As the first edition to print largely complete transcripts of the three documents that would soon be known as the ”Master Letters”, Bingham’s Home is in many ways the pivotal publication in the history of these documents. As a comparison of the manuscripts with Bingham’s transcriptions shows, her work exhibits a fair degree of textual accuracy, reporting—with a few notable exceptions—the words as Dickinson inscribed them on paper, though very often erring in the representation of Dickinson’s variants and overwritten text. In response to the challenge of dating the documents and construing their order in relation to one another, Bingham proceeds with caution. Beyond hazarding a date of ”about 1861” for one of them, she notes only that Dickinson’s handwriting in the remaining two appears to be consistent with that found in documents datable to the early 1860s, a crucial period of emotional turbulence in Dickinson’s life, she hypothesizes, but also one “about which very little is known”.

25 In After Emily: Two Remarkable Women and the Legacy of America’s Greatest Poet (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), Julie Dobrow traces the history of the camphorwood chest, noting how, at her mother’s insistence, Millicent Todd Bingham moved the locked chest around from household to household long before re-opening it and publishing the remainder of its contents. Strangely, the chest seems to have been permanently lost after Bingham’s death in 1968. Dobrow’s own search for the chest was unsuccessful; see especially chapter 12, ”Bringing Lost Poems to Light”, pp. 245–71, and chapter 16, ”Unpacking the Camphorwood Chest”, pp. 342–62.

26 See also Franklin’s collation of substantive differences between Dickinson’s manuscripts and Todd’s, Bingham’s, Leyda’s, and Johnson’s transcriptions in Master Letters, pp. 47–48. It is worth noting that Bingham’s inclusion of a facsimile of perhaps the most complex (both stylistically and genetically) of these documents—A 828—offers the careful reader the opportunity to compare manuscript and transcript.

27 The document Bingham dates to 1861 is A 828; her dating agrees with Leyda’s, Franklin’s, and my own; see Bingham, Home, p. 417. In her 1949 essay ”Emily Dickinson’s Handwriting—A Master Key”, Bingham avowed an intimate connection between Dickinson’s handwriting and her inner life: ”For the changes which with the passing years took place in Emily Dickinson’s writing parallel the drama within. […] In other words, a style of penmanship dates a poem. The poem reflects an inner experience. And so, after a chronological scale has been constructed and tested for accuracy, and the probable time of composition of all available manuscript-poems determined within a year or two, […] then will a biographer for the first time have firm ground on which to stand” (The New England Quarterly 22, no. 2 [June 1949]: 229–34).
To offset to some degree the apparent absence of recoverable context for these exceptional drafts, Bingham draws on her instincts and formal training as a geographer to think contextually. Like the 1856 topographical map of Hampshire County included in Home to provide the reader with a sense of the coordinates of Dickinson’s world, here Bingham presents a catalogue of recorded events both personal (marriages and deaths) and political (the Civil War) between 1861 and 1862. She believes that out of these events the drafts may have arisen, concluding, “The effect of shock after shock throughout many months, against the background of fratricidal strife, is enough to explain her distress”.28 Yet at the close of her introduction to these documents, Bingham steps back even from this conclusion, casting doubt on the three works as an identifiably distinct constellation, on their address to a single identifiable interlocutor, and on Dickinson’s intentions regarding them: “But whoever the man, or men – for all three letters may not be addressed to the same person – here is further evidence that for Emily Dickinson her own heart was her most insistent and baffling contendent [. . .]. Here then are the letters which pose more questions than they answer”.29

Bingham’s representation of these documents differs in important ways from their appearance in later editions by Johnson and Franklin. Most importantly, her grouping of the documents reflects a marked circumspection about their origins and relationships to one another. Although Bingham does wonder, “Who could have inspired such letters as these?” it is not the documents’ attachment to a specific “Master” figure but rather the site of their location among Dickinson’s surviving papers, specifically “among Dickinson’s fragmentary manuscripts”, and their link to the early 1860s—a period otherwise largely devoid of drafts—that associate them with one another. Moreover, though Bingham printed them together for the first time in Home, the three documents were not yet set apart as a distinct constellation but still imagined as part of the larger drift of bibliographical outliers in Dickinson’s archive.30

Bingham’s Home was ready for publication by 1950. Had the three drafts entered literary history at that moment, the course of their reception and interpretation might have been quite different. Home is in fact a site of multiple losses, not only private losses but excruciatingly public ones as well. During the early 1950s, Bingham’s literary rights to publish the materials contained in Home were challenged, and the presses stopped. In an uncanny repetition of editorial history, just as Todd’s work on Dickinson’s writings had been halted for more than thirty years by a lawsuit filed in 1898 by Lavinia Dickinson against Todd contesting her right to a tiny piece of land deeded to her by Austin Dickinson as partial payment for her editorial labor on Dickinson’s poems, so Bingham’s publication of Home was delayed for almost five years by legal troubles with Harvard University, which ultimately claimed ownership of all of Dickinson’s writings.

The resolution of Harvard’s legal challenges and the publication of Bingham’s Home had a complex genesis. While Todd’s death in 1932 may have perhaps put in motion the history that follows, the death in 1943 of

28 See Bingham, Home, p. 420. Among the specific events Bingham alludes to here are the marriage of John Dudley, thought by some to have been dear to Dickinson, and Eliza Coleman in June 1861; the birth of Dickinson’s nephew Ned in June 1861; the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in June 1861; the civil war of Samuel Bowles in October 1861; the death of Frazer Stearns in the battle of New Bern in March 1862; the Bowleses’ departure for Europe in April of 1862; Dickinson’s first contact with Thomas Wentworth Higginson in April 1862; and the Rev. Wadsworth’s departure for California in June 1862. 29 Bingham, Home, pp. 421–22. Although Bingham is in the most direct line of descent—she inherits the documents from Todd, who likely received them from Lavinia Dickinson—her knowledge about them is limited. She did not know—as we still do not know—the history of the documents’ composition, their exact place within Dickinson’s private archive, the circumstances of their discovery among her papers after her death, or even how and when they passed into Todd’s hands. She did believe that the documents were not given to her mother by Austin Dickinson, however, and thus Lavinia is probably the unnamed source referred to in Home.

30 Although it is impossible to reconstruct Dickinson’s original archival arrangement of her writings, we can say with certainty that the three “Master” drafts were not handled by Dickinson in the way that the much later drafts and fragments associated with Judge Otis Lord, a family friend with whom Dickinson was in love in the final decade of her life, seem to have been. Like the “Master” documents, these drafts were never discarded, nor were fair copies of them ever recovered. Yet unlike the “Master” documents, the identity of the addressee is known to us and the transmission history of the documents is at least partly traceable. According to Bingham, Todd received the Lord fragments in the 1890s from Austin Dickinson, to whom Dickinson herself may have entrusted them; they were, moreover, grouped together in “a used brown envelope, addressed in an unknown hand to ‘Miss E. C. Dickinson, Amherst, Mass.’” and bearing “canceled stamps an issue of the 1880s”; see Bingham’s Emily Dickinson: A Revelation (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 1. Todd seems to have treated the contents of the envelope as a sacred trust, and in passing them on to Bingham, who ultimately published them in A Revelation, she conveyed their transmission history. Had Todd known anything about the relations between the three “Master” drafts, or had the documents been physically associated with one another when they came into her possession, or had they been conveyed to her by Austin Dickinson, she almost certainly would have communicated these details to Bingham.
Martha Dickinson Bianchi, heir to Susan Dickinson’s share of Dickinson’s manuscripts, was the most immediate catalyst, prompting new questions about the value of finding a permanent home for all of Dickinson’s papers. In this moment many players suddenly appeared to claim a stake in the proceedings. Among the institutions interested in acquiring the hitherto private archives of Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham were the Library of Congress, the Houghton Library, and the Amherst College Library; among the individuals with equally formidable investments in Dickinson’s manuscripts were William McCarthy, Gilbert Montague, and William Jackson, all associated with Harvard, as well as Charles Cole, then president of Amherst College.

In retrospect, it is clear that by the 1950s, the end of the privately owned archive was already at hand. What is less obvious but especially significant for the editorial fortunes of the “Master” documents is that the systematic, institutional effort to control Dickinson’s textual remains at that moment was linked to the advent of the New Bibliography with its commitment to a more objective methodology founded on less reductive transcriptions of originals and W. W. Greg’s notions of copy-text. In the five years that Home languished unprinted at Harper & Brothers, Harvard readied one of its own to assume the mantle of editorship of all Dickinson’s writings. Thomas H. Johnson’s star was rising. In many ways, literary history was as much an agent in his rise as Harvard. Johnson, a Harvard-prepared scholar of American literature who had worked with Perry Miller on the American seventeenth century, was an embodiment of the new form of editor imagined by the New Bibliography—an academically based textual scholar associated with a library, a university, or a university press. The insider status of intimate commentator in the world of Dickinson that Bingham had enjoyed was now being deeply challenged by this new, seemingly more objective and methodologically consistent specialist. For his part, Johnson began his tenure as Harvard-appointed editor by casting doubt on the work of all of Dickinson’s earlier editors: “We have no assurance that any of Emily Dickinson’s works now in print is an accurate transcription of her original writing”.

Harvard’s tactic worked. When Home was finally issued in the early spring of 1955, it was virtually eclipsed by the nearly simultaneous publication of Johnson’s Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography and his The Poems of Emily Dickinson, including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts. Johnson’s promise of a scholarly edition of Dickinson’s letters soon to follow rendered Bingham’s publication of selected letters almost irrelevant. Moreover, while Johnson’s professional acknowledgment to Bingham in his variorum—“I acknowledge the courtesy of Mrs. Millicent Todd Bingham in making available for study and photostating all of the large number of manuscripts of Dickinson poetry in her possession”—positioned her as a custodian rather than an editor of the work, Thomas J. Wilson’s note in the “Publisher’s Preface” to the same volume canceled Bingham’s stakes in Dickinson’s manuscripts entirely: “It must be stated here that The President and Fellows of Harvard College claim the sole ownership and sole right of possession in all the Emily Dickinson manuscripts now in possession of Mrs. Millicent Todd Bingham, and all the literary rights and copyrights therein”. Bingham’s work was essentially over. In the final dark turn in her personal relationship to Dickinson’s papers, the documents Bingham last relinquishes to the Amherst College Library, including the three “Master” drafts, confirm her—and Todd’s—status as outsiders. The documents do not belong to her any more than to the host of unknown, unprivileged readers who follow in her wake, turning their leaves without ever quite touching them, reading what traces they can.

In 1960, referring to her years of work on Dickinson’s papers, Bingham wrote, “I have been trying to think what has motivated me all along. I have thought it was loyalty to my mother’s wishes, whether or not I agreed with her objectives. But I think it is rather the wish to rectify an injustice. It may be that I cannot change this drive until I am destroyed by it”.

33 Wilson was the director of the Harvard University Press during this time; see his “Publisher’s Preface” in Poems (1955), p. xii.
34 Quoted in Dobrow, After Emily, p. 323. The passage is from Millicent Todd Bingham’s “Journal”; 13 November 1960, Millicent Todd Bingham Papers (hereafter cited as MTBP), VII. 130–37, Sterling Library, Yale University.
broken, Bingham dedicated herself to protecting the “forest-covered island” that had been her mother’s sanctuary and to amassing, ordering, and preserving the more than seven hundred boxes of her own family’s papers that currently lie in the archives of the Yale University Library.35 Neither project, however, seems to have brought her the sense of resolution she was seeking. In the end, the geographer-turned-editor and, ultimately, archivist seemed to harbor an ever-present sense of disaster. And when, a few years before her own death in 1968, Bingham made the following observation, it seems possible that she was imagining not only the future fate of her mother’s green island but also the unlikelihood that any human artifact—any piece of paper carrying a message—was anything other than ephemeral: “Man can now be ranked with earthquakes and tidal waves as a geological agent of destruction, one potentially even more powerful now that the atom is at his disposal. The people in the country must realize what is happening, for the hour is late”.36

In the Hour of the New Bibliography

The next time the “Master” documents see the light of print is in Thomas H. Johnson’s magisterial three-volume Letters of Emily Dickinson, published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in 1958, the promised companion to his 1955 three-volume edition of the poems. Although many of Dickinson’s earlier editors had by default used her manuscripts as base texts, Johnson’s training as a textual editor in the tradition of W. W. Greg—Greg’s “The Rationale of Copy-Text” was first published in Studies in Bibliography in 1950–195137—would have led him to grant paramount authority to Dickinson’s manuscripts, using them as copy-texts whenever possible in his editions. Greg’s work would also have prepared him to approach the manuscripts with a fine eye for both Dickinson’s “substantives”—those readings “that affect the author’s meaning or the essence of his expression”—and, especially, her “accidentals”—that is, “spelling, punctuation, word-division, and the like, affecting mainly [the text’s] formal presentation”.38

In the main, the lineaments of Johnson’s Letters (1958) reflect the principles of the New Bibliography rigorously and thoughtfully applied. No earlier edition of Dickinson’s letters is guided by such high aims—“All autograph letters are presented in their verbatim form”39—and no earlier edition exhibits so wide or deep an understanding of the textual condition and cruxes inherent in Dickinson’s manuscripts. It is puzzling, then, to find a marked discrepancy between theory and practice in Johnson’s representation of the “Master” documents. His transcriptions offer only a somewhat more accurate rendering of the texts than those prepared by Bingham, and, like Bingham, Johnson fails to distinguish clearly between variant and canceled readings and obscures individual and distinct moments in Dickinson’s compositional process.40 Of course, the representation in print of Dickinson’s handwritten productions was, and still remains, challenging. In addition to the limits of what typographical characters in a given type font can convey of Dickinson’s often idiosyncratic but meaningful letterforms and punctuation, editors from Todd to Johnson were beholden to print standards and conventions that ultimately reduce the range of Dickinson’s handwritten markings, and poetic expression, to a common set of diacritics and indicators. And though Johnson seemed methodologically bound to represent Dickinson’s punctuation more faithfully, he would still have been limited by the print technology and graphological conventions of the

35 The island referred to here is Hog Island, off the coast of Maine, where Todd died. Between 1908 and her death in 1932, she spearheaded efforts to preserve Hog Island from a series of environmental threats, including clear-cutting. Millicent Todd Bingham later donated the land to the Audubon Society.
38 Ibid., p. 21.
39 Thomas H. Johnson, “Notes on the Present Text”, in Letters (1958), p. xxv. In Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), my first foray into the world of scholarly editing, I put the case against Johnson’s Letters (1958) bluntly: “Driven on by the desire to establish a definitive, or ‘fixed,’ text […] a scholar-editor ends up domesticating a poet […]”. The gold imprimatur — emblem or face of Harvard’s authority stamped across the blue binding of Johnson’s Letters (1958) — is a false witness” (5). Now chastened by a quarter century of thinking about how to edit Dickinson’s writings, I feel called to return to the scene of Johnson’s editorial project to offer a more nuanced account of the challenges he faced in carrying out his work.
40 For instance, while Bingham’s transcription of A827, the most straightforward of the three “Master” documents, exhibits three substantive departures from the text of Dickinson’s manuscript, Johnson’s transcription of the same document exhibits four substantive departures from the text. For an overview of these differences, see Franklin’s appendix to Master Letters, pp. 47–48.
genre imposed by presses in the 1950s.

The role of such forces in shaping Johnson’s *Letters* (1958) is significant. In this case, however, there is another more immediate explanation for the unusually high rate of error in Johnson’s transcriptions of the "Master" documents. By the time Johnson’s edition of *Letters* (1958) was published, the vast majority of Dickinson’s manuscripts had found permanent homes at either Harvard’s Houghton Library or the Amherst College Library, the two institutions that today remain, along with the Boston Public Library, the major repositories of her manuscripts. In 1950, however, at the onset of Johnson’s editorial project, many manuscripts were still in private hands. While the sale of Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s share of the manuscripts, including approximately 1,000 of Dickinson’s poem manuscripts as well as some 300 autograph letters, to Harvard was well underway, the approximately 850 poem manuscripts as well as numerous fragments and 350 autograph letters remained under Millicent Todd Bingham’s control until 1956 when she gifted them to Amherst College.41

As noted earlier, the passage of Dickinson’s manuscripts from private hands into institutional repositories was marked by conflict and delay, factors that may well have affected Johnson’s work. To fulfill the promise of a scholarly edition of the letters, Johnson needed unimpeded access to all of Dickinson’s manuscripts, and such access was not possible. Never once during the preparation of his edition of Dickinson’s *Letters* was Johnson able to view all of Dickinson’s autograph letters and drafts together or to engage in the intensely comparative work that liberal access would have allowed. Instead, Johnson was often limited to examining small batches of photostatic copies of the manuscripts. Moreover, while we know that Bingham allowed Johnson direct access to many of the Dickinson manuscripts still in her control at the time, it is likely, especially given the circumstances, that she also might have withheld access to at least some and that these “some” almost certainly included the three epistolary "Master" drafts. Everything indicates that Johnson’s access to these three drafts was belated. The private correspondence between Jay Leyda and Theodora Ward, Johnson’s research assistant, confirms this delay, setting the date of

that access to sometime *after* April 1955, when Johnson would have seen them first not in manuscript but in print in Bingham’s long-delayed edition, *Home*. Johnson’s direct access to the documents themselves would have been even later and thus either very late in the process of preparing his edition or perhaps not even until after it was already in the hands of the printer (1957). Paradoxically, Johnson’s less-than-fully accurate transcriptions of the "Master" documents may be read as part of the collateral damage of the Harvard suit and the manuscripts’ uneasy transition from private to public space.

Transcriptional errors, though galling to the editors who commit them and disorienting to the readers who parse them, are errors of a second, or lower, order. Once discovered, they can be corrected in a new printing. But Johnson’s lack of early access to the three core "Master" documents had still more profound implications for his representation of them and, ultimately, for their place in literary history. Johnson’s scholarly aims in *Letters* (1958) were not limited to providing an accurate text. As he writes in the acknowledgments to the 1958 edition, he conceived of the edition as an extension of the "narrative begun in the 1955 edition of the poems, and […] the interpretive biography issued likewise in 1955". Together these three works were, in Johnson’s words, to “set forth the story of Emily Dickinson’s life and writing as fully as I know how to tell it.”42 The mandatory de-coupling of biography and textual scholarship seemingly called for by the New Bibliography (in tandem with the New Criticism) remained unfulfilled. On the contrary, in Johnson’s presentation of the "Master" documents, the biographical impulse often crossed with, and sometimes overtook, the bibliographical one.

As early as 1954, that is, before having firsthand knowledge of the surviving "Master" documents, Johnson was weaving a narrative regarding a "Master" figure in Dickinson’s life. In Johnson’s biography, this narrative finds its final form as a story of secret and unrequited love. Taken as fact during Johnson’s day and for decades afterwards, the outlines of this story are by now well known. In Johnson’s reading, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1850 to 1862 and a married

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41 At this point, Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s share of Dickinson’s manuscripts was controlled by Alfred Leete Hampson.

man, was the hidden object of Dickinson's love. It was Wadsworth's long delayed departure from the East on 1 May 1862 in response to a call from the congregation of the Calvary Church in San Francisco, a call that had reached him in December 1861, that precipitated, in Johnson's estimation, both Dickinson's "most dangerous emotional crisis" and her most significant poetic breakthrough. "To Emily Dickinson", Johnson conjectured in his interpretive biography, "Wadsworth's departure was heart-rending. The distance was so appallingly vast that his removal [. . .] seemed to her a living entombment. [. . .] It was at this time that she began to dress entirely in white, adopting, as she calls it, her 'white election'."43 In Johnson's biographical narrative of Dickinson, this very crisis that supercharged her verse with emotion gave her a deepened sense of purpose: "Wadsworth as muse made her a poet."44

Johnson's far-reaching conclusions are surprising given the limits of the textual evidence at his disposal. "The only certain early fact", Johnson writes in chapter IV ("The Poet and the Muse") of his biography of Dickinson, "is that [Charles Wadsworth] called on [Dickinson] in Amherst in 1860" and then again "twenty years later, in the summer of 1880."45 Beyond these two documented encounters during their lives, Johnson could add only two pieces of evidence: one brief pastoral letter almost certainly written by Wadsworth—neither dated nor signed, the stationery nonetheless bears the crest "CW"—to Dickinson (misspelled "Dickenson") to convey to her his distress over a message received from Dickinson regarding an unnamed "affliction" and a handful of letters written by Dickinson to close associates of Wadsworth's after his death in 1882.46 Of these, the brief but poignant correspondence with Wadsworth's lifelong friend James D. Clark and, in the month before her own death, a handful of letters written by Dickinson to close associates of Wadsworth's after his death in 1882.46 Of these, the brief but poignant correspondence with Wadsworth's lifelong friend James D. Clark and, in the month before her own death, with Clark's son, Charles H. Clark, are most suggestive of her continued emotional connection to the clergymen.

At this juncture, however, the trail of direct evidence goes cold, and Johnson's biographical account takes two strange turns. First, he bases his narrative of Dickinson's relationship to Wadsworth on what he presumes is missing—that is, the many (lost) letters at once "emotional [. . .] in matters touching upon the soul's affections" but also "somewhat disembodied" that Dickinson may have written to Wadsworth and conveyed to him via "covering notes" forwarded by familiar family correspondents.47 Second, he uses the very absence of tangible evidence as proof of his claims: "Except to her sister, who never saw Wadsworth, and to Samuel Bowles, whom she seems to have made her confidant, she mentioned Wadsworth to no one. That fact alone establishes the nature of her emotional turmoil. To name Yaweh is to reveal the unmentionable. The curtains of the Ark of the Covenant must remain drawn."48 From this point forward, Johnson probes the poems for tangential and circumstantial evidence of the relationship, turning specifically to the poems of "'marriage' and renunciation that were written late in 1861 or early 1862" and show "the extent to which her overwrought feelings were poured out."49

The seductive beauty of biography, akin perhaps to that of the lyric itself, lies in its ability to give the reader an experience she can enter and feel close to. In many ways, Johnson was a profound reader of Dickinson's writing, and his readerly powers are at their finest in his annotations to the poems introduced in chapter IV of his biography. Beginning with the poems of 1858, where, Johnson writes, "She had begun to let the form of her verse derive from the images and sensations that she wished to realize",50 the itinerary he traces shows Dickinson "striking out" from the meters of the hymnodists into more and more ecstatic but only apparently irregular forms until she ultimately arrives in 1862 at a "new order of love poem":51 Johnson's subtle ear catches the variations in her metrical forms—her combinations of Nines and Sixes, Nines and Fours, Sixes and Fours; her slight use of vowel rhyme, imperfect rhyme, and suspended rhyme; and the effects of her dashes where periods might have conventionally been

44 Ibid., p. 80.
45 Ibid., p. 76.
46 The original manuscript of Charles Wadsworth's letter to Dickinson is in the Emily Dickinson Collection of the Amherst College Library Archives & Special Collections; it is also reprinted in Johnson's *Letters* (1958), L 248a. The most relevant letters to James D. Clark and his son, Charles C. Clark, include the following, all printed in *Letters* (1958): L 766, L 773, L 776, L 788, L 804 (to James D. Clark); L 1059, L 1040 (to Charles H. Clark).
47 Johnson, *An Interpretive Biography*, pp. 80, 77. There is no material evidence of these "cover notes".
48 Ibid., p. 77.
49 Ibid., p. 82.
50 Ibid., p. 84.
51 Ibid., p. 91.
employed—noting “where her intent is realized the attar becomes haunting and unforgettable”.52 The exceptional virtuosity of Johnson’s reading carries us forward until we almost collide with his conclusion:

At some period late in 1861, when she came to know of Wadsworth’s impending departure, she was evidently panic-stricken. She had become increasingly skillful and productive. Would she ever in fact be able to write again? [. . .] The effect on Emily Dickinson during the early spring seems to have been quite different from what she expected.53 Her creative abilities, rather than decreasing, enormously multiplied. Yet even as this was happening, she seems to have been deeply apprehensive lest each day’s composition be the last.54

Given the intensity of Johnson’s focus on Wadsworth as Dickinson’s “Master” and “muse”, today’s reader of Johnson’s 1955 interpretive biography cannot but be struck by the absence of any reference to the three “Master” documents save in a footnote. In all likelihood, the footnote was added very late in the editorial process and only after Johnson had “discovered” transcriptions of the “Master” documents in Bingham’s Home in April 1955.55

Johnson’s experience of “discovering” the existence of the three core “Master” documents in a last-minute reading of Bingham’s Home and on the verge of his own biography going to press must have been a profoundly ambivalent one. On the one hand, the three epistolary drafts must have seemed like the missing link in his argument, the very textual evidence he had so long been seeking. On the other hand, the nature of the manuscripts, their material condition as unsent and, in two cases, heavily revised drafts found among Dickinson’s own papers, potentially disrupted the narrative in which he was already deeply invested. Moreover, Johnson’s ignorance of the documents’ existence and his secondhand access to them first via a rival edition threatened his authority. For a brief moment in 1955, Insider and Outsider—Johnson and Bingham—exchanged places.

Jay Leyda, who worked more directly than Johnson with Bingham, knew of the documents’ existence and, though not at liberty to share them with Johnson, had warned him to postpone publication of his biography.56 The following passage in a letter written on 2 April 1955 by Leyda to Johnson’s research associate Theodora Ward just one month before Johnson signed the foreword to his biography corroborates this point and clarifies the timeline:

After all, Tom [Johnson] has never cared to hold up his schedule for anything, no matter how vital, the coming information promised to be. I begged him to hold off completing the biography until he had seen ED’s Home (out by the end of this month, I believe), but his reply [. . .] made it clear that nothing could change his mind about anything.57

Leyda’s letter is a cautionary tale for all scholars—new materials may suddenly knock at one’s door. At the same time, we can only speculate that Leyda’s withholding of his knowledge of the “Master” documents from Johnson, though clearly required by his alliance with Bingham, may have stemmed in part from his concern over how Johnson might (mis)use them to further his argument about Wadsworth’s role in Dickinson’s life. As early as 3 January 1954, Leyda had openly aired his skepticism about Johnson’s conjectures about romantic interests between Wadsworth and Dickinson in a letter to Ward:

Seriously, though, the weakness for me in Tom’s argument (aside from the lean on Whicher, which offends me more than it does you) is that there is not the faintest scrap of evidence to connect Wadsworth with the “volcanic eruption”

52 Ibid., p. 93.
53 Note that the spring Johnson refers here to is that of 1862, the time immediately following Wadsworth’s departure, rather than the spring of 1861, when Dickinson probably wrote her final “Master” draft.
54 Johnson, An Interpretive Biography, p. 96.
55 The likelihood that the note was a late addition is underscored by the fact that there are only two notes in Johnson’s entire biography, both in chapter 4. The content of the first note suggests that Johnson has only recently seen the printed versions of the “Master” documents in Home and that he has not had time to fully integrate them into his argument—and for good reason. The rawness of the “Master” documents conflicts with Johnson’s description of the “disembodied” letters he imagines Dickinson composing to Wadsworth.
56 In 1960, Leyda would publish his own work on Dickinson, Years and Hours, in which he includes the three epistolary “Master” documents. Ralph W. Franklin reviews Leyda’s treatment of these documents in his edition of Master Letters. Since Leyda’s aims in Years and Hours are more biographical than textual (see note 9), I do not treat this extraordinary resource as a significant edition.
57 This passage is drawn from private correspondence between Jay Leyda and Theodora Ward, 1951–1957, housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University; see the Theodora Ward Papers, MS Am 2380, Folder 2.
of 1861–62—no hint that she was yet in correspondence with him—nothing to justify all Tom’s bald naming of Wadsworth as the subject of the poems he thus annotates—not even enough to justify your term of “probable cause.” Possible—at most.58

And in his letter of 2 April 1955, Leyda adds, “Dr. Wadsworth has now died — and this leaves Tom that much more free to pursue C[harles] W[adsworth] as the beau of Emily’s life. For him there would be no question in those Master letters. Everything is grist for the Wadsworth mill”59

The conditions by which one account enters literary history over another that remains undeveloped are almost always clearer in retrospect. The biographical narrative Johnson advances in 1955 regarding Wadsworth’s role in Dickinson’s life and writing may impact his framing, chronology, and perhaps even his classification of the “Master” documents in Letters (1958) in important ways. Once Johnson gained access to the “Master” documents—first in their printed forms in Bingham’s Home and soon after in their original manuscript form—he might have undertaken a full review of the textual evidence he had amassed to make his claims about Wadsworth as Dickinson’s muse, subjecting both the evidence and his original narrative to new questions. Instead, Johnson read the “Master” documents, with their uncertain history of composition, discovery, transmission and their ambiguous relations to another, as the apotheosis of that narrative, fitting them into it rather than allowing them to disrupt it in any way.

This is most evident in Johnson’s dating and ordering of the letters. For example, based on Ward’s analysis of Dickinson’s handwriting, Johnson revises Bingham’s dating of the earliest document (A 827) as from the early 1860s to “about 1858” and assigns the plausible date of “about 1861” to the second document (A 828). This re-dating accords with the available textual evidence. However, Johnson’s rationale for the dating of what he takes to be the latest of the three documents, A 829, to “early 1862?” is contrary to the same evidence and riven with contradictions. In the note that follows this text, Johnson first writes that “Accurate dating is impossible” and further that

“The letter may have been written earlier” but then claims that “the characteristics of the handwriting make the present assignment reasonable” (L 248n). Since handwriting is very often the methodological basis for dating Dickinson’s undated manuscripts, why would that same methodological tool fail to attain a reasonably accurate dating for the document now deemed by Johnson as “impossible” to date? What (unidentified) textual markers or external evidence exist to suggest that the document may have been composed at an earlier date? And if this evidence exists, why does Johnson nevertheless settle on the date of early 1862? Here it seems likely that it is not the evidence of handwriting alone but rather the force of Johnson’s biographical narrative that ultimately predetermines the chronological placement of this text. So positioned, moreover, as the final document in the sequence, this radically disjointed, unaddressed, and unsigned draft, composed in a handwriting equally reckless in character, becomes both a privileged witness and a material embodiment of Dickinson’s anguish in the days preceding Wadsworth’s departure from the East.

Johnson the biographer and Johnson the textual scholar appear in conflict again in his decision to place Wadsworth’s one extant message to Dickinson immediately after the text of A 829 in Letters (1958). While Johnson confesses to the arbitrary nature of this decision in a note—“The solicitous pastoral letter is placed here because it follows the last of the ‘Master’ letters, and because the present assumption is that ED thought of Wadsworth as ‘Master’. Actually the letter may have been written at a quite different time” (L 248n)—his positioning of the letter in the body of the edition powerfully suggests that Wadsworth’s message is a response to Dickinson’s disordered and unsent draft.

Johnson’s inability to reconcile fully the roles of editor and biographer plays out in his treatment of the “Master” documents in his 1958 Letters. While Johnson seeks to integrate the three documents he became fully aware of only after the publication of his biography, the reader must also negotiate between two registers, the textual and the biographical, resisting the powerful undertow of the latter in order to see the texts as Dickinson left them.

While the personal approaches of editors to the textual and material evidence available to them are rarely reviewed or even acknowledged in the editions they

58 Ibid., Folder 4.
59 Ibid., Folder 2.
construct, these approaches necessarily inform their scholarly methodology and impact in very real ways the conduct of their editions. In this context, both Leyda’s private observation and Ward’s more generous response seem indicative of the methodological tensions and results inherent in Johnson’s narrative in his Dickinson biography. Leyda raises this concern:

\[\text{Johnson} \text{ in fact always seems more disturbed than delighted by troublesome new evidence. He loves neat, finished shapes—and I have to suppress my wish to knock them down.}\]  

Ward, in contrast, dispassionately identifies the essential difference between Leyda’s and Johnson’s methods of using evidence. For Johnson, evidence becomes the foundation on which the narrative rests; for Leyda, it becomes the building blocks out of which the narrative develops:

\[\text{You and he have entirely different ways of working. You have felt put off sometimes because he does not want to deal with details until they are needed to fill in his constructive plan. You start with the details and build up.}\]

Editions are not only time-bound artifacts reflecting the attitudes and values—literary and otherwise—of the moments in which they are conceived and constructed but also deeply human ones. Johnson’s mantra in regard to his editorial project—“Our tools are method only”—is a wishful one, but it cannot be entirely true. In approaching their work on the “Master” documents, Todd, Bingham, and Johnson each applied the methods of their historical moments, but none dealt with these manuscripts in a merely technical or objective way. However, it would not have occurred to them—and least of all to Johnson, whose scholarly distance from Dickinson and training in the tenets of the New Bibliography seemed protection enough against the personal—to wonder about their unspoken desires and stakes in the editorial projects they engaged.

The questions they did not ask are our inheritance: Why do I make editions? What passions—of mine, of others—do they serve? In what ways do the editions we create have a life beyond us, and what effect do they have on the lives of readers and the shape of literary history?

Homage to Ralph W. Franklin

In the years that followed the simultaneous publication of Johnson’s edition of Dickinson’s poems and his biography, the narrative of Dickinson’s poetic growth and her disappointment in love became more and more difficult to uncouple. This is the case even in R. W. Franklin’s centennial edition of The Master Letters published in 1986 by Amherst College Press and which begins, “These three letters, which Emily Dickinson drafted to a man she called ‘Master,’ stand near the heart of her mystery.”

Falling between Franklin’s colossal labors on The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson (1981) and The Poems of Emily Dickinson: A Variorum Edition (1998), The Master Letters is a slim, elegant volume containing facsimiles of the three core manuscripts accompanied by spare, precisely rendered diplomatic transcriptions. Franklin’s edition establishes an accurate text of the documents, revises their earlier editorial orderings, and conjectures more precise dates of composition based on new analyses of Dickinson’s handwriting. In the headnotes preceding each of the three works, he presents information on the physical attributes of the manuscripts, including notes on paper types, measurements, and folding patterns; on the medium—ink or pencil—in which Dickinson composed and, in places, revised the text; and on the stages of composition of each work.

To an outsider to the world of scholarly editing, the simplest explanation for Franklin’s brief foray into the region of Dickinson’s letters may be that he was commissioned to edit them by the Amherst College Press, that his edition was, in short, a work for hire. To the denizen of the complex issues of editing works that never found their way into print in the author’s lifetime, one can be virtually certain that something else drew him to the project. Did he wish to leave one beautiful clue as to what a complete

60 Ibid., Folder 2.
61 Ibid., Folder 3.
63 I am grateful to textual scholar and Whitman critic Matt Cohen for articulating these questions and bringing them forward into our discipline.
64 Franklin, introduction to Master Letters, p. 5.
facsimile edition of Dickinson’s letters might have looked like had he undertaken it? Did he perhaps, as more and more I have come to believe, sense a connection—however slant and even slight—between the enigmatic documents that constitute the three “letters” and the intimate and ultimately private packets of poems Dickinson composed between 1858 and 1864?

In a 2001 letter to the head of the Amherst College Archives, Franklin, who had already reconstructed Dickinson’s fascicles in a massive scholarly edition of more than 1,400 pages, wrote of *The Master Letters*, “Of all my scholarly efforts, this one might have the most energetic life”. 65 The very same letter opened, “I know of nothing to change in the Master Letters”.

Paradoxically, perhaps, it is the almost luminous clarity and textual accuracy of Franklin’s 1986 edition of *The Master Letters* that allows us to take up new questions about them. While deeply indebted to Franklin’s edition, in this new edition, I leave the “Master Letters” behind in order to re-imagine our responsibilities as readers and editors of the “Master documents”: these documents that may or may not be letters; these documents that may or may not have been addressed to someone in particular; these documents that were belatedly intercepted and opened by us; these documents that, though they seem to allow the dead to speak to the living again, at last present beautiful and overwhelming obstacles for decoding.

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65 See Franklin’s 5 December 2001 email message to Daria D’Arienzo, then head of Archives & Special Collections, Amherst College Library, in the Amherst College Press correspondence files.