Writing in Time

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n unmarked and now unrecoverable hours in the years between ca. 1858 and ca. 1861, Dickinson wrote these works on leaves of paper that she saved for the remainder of her life. Because she saved them, we hold one vital clue to the missing foreground of her experimentation in the fascicles and in her later work. This experiment is not a language experiment only, but one, laid bare by the presence, either explicit or implicit, of an address, in writing to another: not to a particular other—though it may originate with the image of someone actual in the world, and A 827 may be a trace of that beginning—but to another describable only in writing and perhaps only fully real in the time of composing. Each of these works, whether composed in prose or verse or through their interlacement, employs its own tactics for addressing the other and for giving voice to the one who speaks-writes the text. If, at times, the “Master” documents claim synthetic ties one to another, at other times there may seem to be nothing unifying in their arrangement except their testimony to a textual experience that our usual, confining registers struggle to convey.

While the edition’s representation of these five texts is designed to restore them as far as possible to the times of their unfolding, in the commentaries that follow, I suspend the larger, time-bound argument I have been making for the “Master” constellation as a whole to attend more intimately and more speculatively to Dickinson’s different modes of proceeding simultaneously in and against an established language: her own, her time’s, and certainly ours. Transcribing Dickinson’s writings offered me one way of following her. In transcribing the “Master” documents, I literally made my hands the channels for Dickinson’s written syllables, tracking her not only word by word but also moment by moment. The process of transcription encouraged my embodiment of these works and sometimes even imparted the feeling that I was keeping time with Dickinson. In the wake of the transcription process, however, a new sense of estrangement surprised me: the documents had been altered by my search for them and by my translation of them into a new medium. In the course of pursuing her, I had turned back into an outsider, and the documents appeared veiled again. Yet while the tangible, immediate connection I had formerly enjoyed with these writings had been broken, the distance in which they appeared opened a freer space in which to imagine and interpret them. My wish in the commentaries is to convey something of both experiences—that of the transcriber, who by means of a faithful tracking within each document may fleetingly collapse time and disclose the singular gait of Dickinson’s thought, and that of the belated reader, who
by walking among her lines and strikethroughs and
variants in an untimely hour may reveal something of
the mystery of our rapt connection to these documents
as their now living interlocutors.

My commentaries do not lay claim to any special
jurisdiction over the domain of Dickinson's "Master"
documents, and they are but one of many possible paths
through them. The commentaries follow the edition
proper so that they may be unfastened from it and return
to their first form as loose pages from my own reader's
notebook, fragments from my private archive.

“What door – what / Hour –”

**Dickinson, from Fr 1537B**