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**Virginia Jackson: Dickinson's Misery**

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## Beforehand

SUPPOSE YOU ARE sorting through the effects of a woman who has just died and you find in her bedroom a locked wooden box. You open the box and discover hundreds of folded sheets of stationery stitched together with string. Other papers in the bureau drawer are loose, or torn into small pieces, occasionally pinned together; there is writing on a guarantee issued by the German Student Lamp Co., on memo paper advertising THE HOME INSURANCE CO. NEW YORK (“Cash Assets, over SIX MILLION DOLLARS”), on many split-open envelopes, on a single strip three-quarters of an inch wide by twenty-one inches long, on thin bits of butcher paper, on a page inscribed “*Specimen of Penmanship*” (which is then crossed out) (fig. 1). There is writing clustered around a three-cent postage stamp of a steam engine turned on its side, which secures two magazine clippings bearing the names “GEORGE SAND” and “Mauprat.” Suppose that you recognize the twined pages as sets of *poems*; you decide that the other pages may contain poems as well. Now you wish you had kept the bundles of letters you burned upon the poet’s (for it *was* a poet’s) death. What remains, you decide, must be published.<sup>1</sup>

Let this exercise in supposing stand as some indication of what now, more than a century after the scene in which you have just been asked to place yourself, can and cannot be imagined about reading Emily Dickinson. What we cannot do is to return to a moment before Dickinson’s work became literature, to discover within the everyday remnants of a literate life the destiny of print. Yet we are still faced with discerning, within the mass of print that has issued from that moment, what it was that Dickinson wrote. As many readers have noticed (or complained), the hermeneutic legacy of Dickinson’s posthumous publication is also first of all a “sorting out”: so J. V. Cunningham remarked after what he diplomatically called “an authoritative diplomatic text” of Dickinson’s extant corpus appeared for the first time in 1955, that “it is easier to hold in mind and sort out the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of George Eliot, for they have scope and structure.”<sup>2</sup> In the pages that follow, Cunningham’s response will come to seem symptomatic of the century’s ongoing attempt to construct the scope of Dickinson’s work, to make out of the heterogeneous materials of her practice a literature “to hold in mind” and to hand down—to sort her various pages into various poems, those various poems into a book.

But what sort of book? The frustration of readers like Cunningham is also their invitation, for the syntax perceived as missing from the “almost

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452 The Wind took up  
 The Northern things  
 And piled them <sup>Shoveled them to</sup> in the  
 South - bent - bowed  
 Then gave the East  
 unto the West  
 And opening his mouth  
 The four divisions of  
 the Earth  
 did make as to devour  
 presumed as if  
 while writhing to corners  
 slunk  
 Perhaps the awful bones -  
 Like worms smooth -  
 before

---

The wind unto his Chamber  
 went -  
~~"The Wind unto his Chamber  
 went -  
 like worms smooth -  
 before"~~

And nature ventured  
 out -  
 Her subjects scattered  
 into place  
 Her systems ranged  
 about  
 About  
 Again the smoke from  
 whistlings <sup>curled</sup> rose  
 the sea, ahead was  
 heard - presumed  
 ahead

Figure 1. The text that Dickinson penciled on Mary Warner's penmanship practice sheet is now Franklin's poem 1152, "The wind took up the northern things." Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 452).

1,800 items in the collected poems" is theirs to supply. We might say of the range of Dickinson's texts considered together what Norman Bryson says of the objects in trompe l'oeil painting, that they may "present themselves as outside the orbit of human awareness, as unorganised by human attention, or as abandoned by human attention, or as endlessly awaiting it."<sup>3</sup> Yet of course what this comparison to painting suggests is that such an effect is just that: Dickinson's "items" have been successively and carefully framed to give the impression that something, or someone, is missing. While the recovery of Dickinson's manuscripts may be supposed to have depended on the death of the subject, on the person who had, by accident or design, composed the scene, the repeated belated "discovery" that her work is yet in need of sorting (and of reading) may also depend upon the absence of the objects that composed it. These objects themselves mark not only the absence of the person who touched them but the presence of what touched that person: of the stationer that made the paper, of the manufacturer and printer and corporation that issued guarantees and advertisements and of the money that changed hands, of the butcher who wrapped the parcel, of the manuals and primers and copybooks that composed individual literacy, of the expanding postal service, of the modern railroad, of modern journalism, of the nineteenth-century taste for continental literary imports. All of these things are the sorts of things left out of a book, since the stories to be told about them open out away from the narrative of individual creation or individual reception supposed by my first paragraph. This is to say that what is so often said of the grammatical and rhetorical structure of Dickinson's poems—that, as critics have variously put it, the poetry is "sceneless," is "a set of riddles" revolving around an "omitted center," is a poetry of "revoked . . . referentiality"—can more aptly be said of the representation of the poems as such.<sup>4</sup> Once gathered as the previously ungathered, reclaimed as the abandoned, given the recognition they so long awaited, the poems in bound volumes appear both redeemed and revoked from their scenes or referents, from the history that the book, as book, omits.

Take for example the second number in the "authoritative diplomatic text" to which Cunningham referred, Thomas H. Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts*. The poem is printed, with its comparative manuscript note, as follows:

2

There is another sky,  
 Ever serene and fair,  
 And there is another sunshine,

BEFOREHAND

Though it be darkness there;  
Never mind faded forests, Austin,  
Never mind silent fields—  
*Here is* a little forest,  
Whose leaf is ever green;  
Here is a brighter garden,  
  
Where not a frost has been;  
In its unfading flowers  
I hear the bright bee hum;  
Prithee, my brother,  
Into *my* garden come!

MANUSCRIPT: These lines conclude a letter, written on 17 October 1851, to her brother Austin. ED made no line division, and the text does not appear as verse. The line arrangement and capitalization of first letters in the lines are here arbitrarily established.

Once “arbitrarily established” as a lyric in 1955, these lines attracted a number of close readings—the response a lyric often invited after the middle of the twentieth century. By 1980, the lines had circulated for a quarter of a century as “a love poem with a female speaker,” which is to say that they were read according to a theory of their genre that included the idea of a fictive lyric persona.<sup>5</sup> Feminist criticism took up the problem of metaphorical gender in the lines, and several critics placed them back into the context of the letter to Austin, but after its publication as a lyric, the lines were not again interpreted (at least in print) as anything else (though they had been published as prose in 1894, 1924, and 1931—and were again published as a poem “in prose form” in Johnson’s own edition of Dickinson’s letters in 1958).<sup>6</sup>

In 1998, Harvard issued a new edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in both variorum and “reading” versions, now more authoritative and more diplomatic, thanks to the detailed textual scholarship of R. W. Franklin. Franklin’s edition does not include the end of Dickinson’s 1851 letter to her brother as one of the 1,789 poems in the reading edition, but he does list it in the variorum in an appendix of “some prose passages in Emily Dickinson’s early letters [that] exhibit characteristics of verse without being so written” (F, 1578). As the manuscript of the letter attests (fig. 2), the lines were indeed not inscribed metrically, though they can certainly be read as a series of the three- and four-foot lines characteristic of Dickinson. Interestingly, Franklin prints the text as a series of such lines, thus printing what has been read rather than what was written, what may be interpreted rather than what may be described—though he also marks the

you turn. You would say that a strong sur-  
 prise if you were sitting here - the post had  
 been long and the few lingering leaves  
 seem anxious to be going and wrap their  
 faded robes more closely about them as if  
 to shield them from the chilly northeast wind.  
 The earth looks like some poor old lady who  
 by dint of paint and thorn can tell you  
 get in a joyful moment or two silver hairs  
 from out her cap come straggling, and she tucks  
 them back & hastily and thinks nobody but  
 the cold air comes to feathers and little boys  
 with their hands in their pockets are whistling  
 is by to keep warm. Don't think that she  
 they will prove to the day when you come home!  
 She will smile and look happy, and be full of  
 sunshine then - and even should the power of  
 her hair returning, there is another she can  
 seem and fair, and there is another sun-  
 shine, etc. It is darkened there - never moist  
 faded growth. Another ever moist silent fields  
 here is a little frost whole leaf is ever green  
 here is a brighter garden - where not a post  
 had been, in its unperfected flower I hear  
 the night too hum, just as my Brother, with my  
 garden around him very off sister.

Figure 2. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, 17 October 1851. The "poem" appears at the bottom of the page. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 573, last page).

difference between interpretation and description by making a section in his book for poems that he does not include as poems. Is the end of Dickinson's early letter, then, after 1998, no longer "a love poem with a female speaker"? Was it never such a poem, since it was never written as verse? Was it always such a poem, because it could always have been read as verse? Or was it only such a poem after it was printed as verse? Once read as a poem, can its generic reception be unprinted? Or is that interpretation so persistent that it survives even when the passage is not described as a poem?

The many answers to these questions could be posed as statements about edition (the many ways in which Dickinson has been or could be published) or statements about composition (the many ways in which Dickinson wrote). While the fascinating historical details of Dickinson's production and reception will be central to this book, I will be primarily interested in what such details tell us about the history of the interpretation of lyric poetry (primarily in the United States) between the years that Dickinson wrote (most of the 1840s through most of the 1880s) and the years during which what she wrote has been printed, circulated, and read (from the middle of the nineteenth through the beginning of the twenty-first century). In view of what definition of poetry would Dickinson's brother have understood the end of his sister's letter to him as a poem? Did it only become a poem once it left his hands as a letter? According to what definition of lyric poetry did Dickinson's editor understand the passage as a lyric in 1955? What did Dickinson's editor in 1998 understand a lyric poem to be if it was not the passage at the end of the 1851 letter? Can a text not intended as a lyric become one? Can a text once read as a lyric be unread? If so, then what is—or was—a lyric?

The argument of *Dickinson's Misery* is that the century and a half that spans the circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry chronicles rather exactly the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation. To put briefly what I will unfold at length in the pages that follow: from the mid-nineteenth through the beginning of the twenty-first century, to be lyric is to be read as lyric—and to be read as a lyric is to be printed and framed as a lyric. While it is beyond the scope of this book to trace the lyricization of poetry that began in the eighteenth century, the exemplary story of the composition, recovery, and publication of Dickinson's writing begins one chapter, at least, in what is so far a largely unwritten history. As we have already begun to see, Dickinson's enduring role in that history depends on the ephemeral quality of the texts she left behind. By a modern lyric logic that will become familiar in the pages that follow, the (only) apparently contextless or sceneless, even evanescent nature of Dickinson's writing attracted an increasingly professionalized at-

tempt to secure and contextualize it as a certain kind (or genre) of literature—as what we might call, after Charles Taylor, a lyric social imaginary.<sup>7</sup> Think of the modern imaginary construction of the lyric as what allows the term to move from adjectival to nominal status and back again. Whereas other poetic genres (epic, poems on affairs of state, georgic, pastoral, verse epistle, epitaph, elegy, satire) may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narratives, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions and narratives for their interpretation (it is hard to understand “The Dunciad,” for example, if one does not know the characters involved or have access to lots of handy footnotes), the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading. This is not to say that there were not ancient Greek and Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval, Provençal, Renaissance, metaphysical, Colonial, Republican, Augustan—even romantic and modern!—lyrics. It is simply to propose that the riddles, papyrae, epigrams, songs, sonnets, *blasons*, *Lieder*, elegies, dialogues, conceits, ballads, hymns and odes considered lyrical in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century were lyric in a very different sense than was or will be the poetry that the mediating hands of editors, reviewers, critics, teachers, and poets have rendered as lyric in the last century and a half.<sup>8</sup>

As my syntax indicates, that shift in genre definition is primarily a shift in temporality; as variously mimetic poetic subgenres collapsed into the expressive romantic lyric of the nineteenth century, the various modes of poetic circulation—scrolls, manuscript books, song cycles, miscellanies, broadsides, hornbooks, libretti, quartos, chapbooks, recitation manuals, annuals, gift books, newspapers, anthologies—tended to disappear behind an idealized scene of reading progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression. While other modes—dramatic genres, the essay, the novel—may have been seen to be historically contingent, the lyric emerged as the one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency, perhaps not intended for public reading at all. By the early nineteenth century, poetry had never before been so dependent on the mediating hands of the editors and reviewers who managed the print public sphere, yet in this period an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated by those hands or those readers began to emerge and is still very much with us.

Susan Stewart has dubbed the late eighteenth century’s highly mediated manufacture of the illusion of unmediated genres a case of “distressed genres,” or “new antiques.” Her terms allude to modern print culture’s attempts “to author a context as well as an artifact,” and thus to imitate older forms—such as the epic, the fable, the proverb, the ballad—

while creating the impression that our access to those forms is as immediate as it was in the imaginary modern versions of oral and collective culture to which those forms originally belonged.<sup>9</sup> Stewart does not include the lyric as a “distressed genre,” but her suggestion that old genres were made in new ways could be extended to include the idea that the lyric is—or was—a genre in the first place. As Gérard Genette has argued, “the relatively recent theory of the ‘three major genres’ not only lays claim to ancientness, and thus to an appearance or presumption of being eternal and therefore self-evident,” but is itself the effect of “projecting onto the founding text of classical poetics a fundamental tenet of ‘modern’ poetics (which actually . . . means *romantic* poetics).”<sup>10</sup>

Yet even if the lyric (especially in its broadly defined difference from narrative and drama) is a larger version of the new antique, a retro-projection of modernity, a new concept artificially treated to appear old, the fact that it is a figment of modern poetics does not prevent it from becoming a creature of modern poetry. The interesting part of the story lies in the twists and turns of the plot through which the lyric imaginary takes historical form. But what plot is that? My argument here is that the lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that become the practice of literary criticism. As Mark Jeffreys eloquently describes the process I am calling lyricization, “lyric did not conquer poetry: poetry was reduced to lyric. Lyric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry’s authority was reduced to the cramped margins of culture.”<sup>11</sup> This is to say that the notion of lyric enlarged in direct proportion to the diminution of the varieties of poetry—or at least that became the ratio as the idea of the lyric was itself produced by a critical culture that imagined itself on the definitive margins of culture. Thus by the early twenty-first century it became possible for Mary Poovey to describe “the lyricization of literary criticism” as the dependence of all postromantic professional literary reading on “the genre of the romantic lyric.”<sup>12</sup> The conceptual problem is that if the lyric is the creation of print and critical mediation, and if that creation then produces the very versions of interpretive mediation that in turn produce it, any attempt to trace the historical situation of the lyric will end in tautology.

Or that might be the critical predicament if the retrospective definition and inflation of the lyric were either as historically linear or as hermeneutically circular as much recent criticism, whether historicist or formalist, would lead us to believe. What has been left out of most thinking about the process of lyricization is that it is an uneven series of negotiations of many different forms of circulation and address. To take one prominent example, the preface to Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) describes the “ancient foliums in the Editor’s possession,” claims to

have subjected the excerpts from these manuscripts to the judgment of “several learned and ingenious friends” as well as to the approval of “the author of *The Rambler* and the late Mr. Shenstone,” and concludes that “the names of so many men of learning and character the Editor hopes will serve as amulet, to guard him from every unfavourable censure for having bestowed any attention on a parcel of Old Ballads.”<sup>13</sup> Not only does Percy not claim that historical genres of verse are directly addressed to contemporary readers (and each of his “relics” is prefaced by a historical sketch and description of its manuscript context in order to emphasize the excerpt’s distance from the reader), but he also acknowledges the role of the critical climate to which the poems in his edition *were* addressed.<sup>14</sup> Yet by 1833, John Stuart Mill, in what has become the most influentially misread essay in the history of Anglo-American poetics, could write that “the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.”<sup>15</sup> As Anne Janowitz has written, “in Mill’s theory . . . the social setting is benignly severed from poetic intentions.”<sup>16</sup> What happened between 1765 and 1833 was not that editors and printers and critics lost influence over how poetry was presented to the public; on the contrary, as Matthew Rowlinson has remarked, in the nineteenth century “lyric appears as a genre newly totalized in print.”<sup>17</sup> And it is also not true that the social setting of the lyric is less important in the nineteenth than it was in the eighteenth century. On the contrary, because of the explosion of popular print, by the early nineteenth century in England, as Stuart Curran has put it, “the most eccentric feature of [the] entire culture [was] that it was simply mad for poetry”—and as Janowitz has trenchantly argued, such madness extended from the public poetry of the eighteenth century through an enormously popular range of individualist, socialist, and variously political and personal poems.<sup>18</sup> In nineteenth-century U.S. culture, the circulation of many poetic genres in newspapers and the popular press and the crucial significance of political and public poetry to the culture as a whole is yet to be appreciated in later criticism (or, if it is, it is likely to be given as the reason that so little enduring poetry was produced in the United States in the nineteenth century, with the routine exception of Whitman and Dickinson, who are also routinely mischaracterized as unrecognized by their own century).<sup>19</sup>

At the risk of making a long story short, it is fair to say that the progressive idealization of what was a much livelier, more explicitly mediated, historically contingent and public context for many varieties of poetry had culminated by the middle of the twentieth century (around the time Dickinson began to be published in “complete” editions) in an idea of the lyric as temporally self-present or unmediated. This is the idea aptly expressed

in the first edition of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* in 1938: "classifications such as 'lyrics of meditation,' and 'religious lyrics,' and 'poems of patriotism,' or 'the sonnet,' 'the Ode,' 'the song,' etc." are, according to the editors, "arbitrary and irrational classifications" that should give way to a present-tense presentation of "poetry as a thing in itself worthy of study."<sup>20</sup> Not accidentally, as we shall see, the shift in definition accompanied the migration of lyric from the popular press to the classroom—but for now we should note that by the time that Emily Dickinson's poetry became available in scholarly editions and university anthologies, the history of various genres of poetry was read as simply lyric, and lyrics were read as poems one could understand without reference to that history or those genres.

The first and second chapters of this book will trace the developing relation between lyric reading and lyric theory in the United States over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by focusing on the circulation and reception of Dickinson's remains. What makes Dickinson exemplary for a history of the lyric in which I wish to chronicle a shift in the definition (or undoing) of the genre as an interpretive abstraction is that there is so little left of her. Yet, as we shall also see, the persistent sense that something *is* left—those handsewn leaves, those pieces of envelopes pinned at odd angles—keeps recalling modern readers to an archaic moment of handwritten composition and personal encounter, a private moment yet unpublicized, a moment before or outside literature that also becomes essential to modern lyric reading in post-eighteenth-century print culture.<sup>21</sup> As Yopie Prins has written, "if 'reading lyric' implies that lyric is already defined as an object to be read, 'lyric reading' implies an act of lyrical reading, or reading lyrically, that poses the possibility of lyric without presuming its objective existence or assuming it to be a form of subjective expression."<sup>22</sup> This is as much as to say that while any literary genre is always a virtual object, there may be ways to read the history of a genre on the way to becoming such an object. Still, as Prins implies, the object that the lyric has become is by now identified with an expressive theory that makes it difficult for us to place lyrics back into the sort of developmental history—of social relations, of print, of edition, reception, and criticism—that is taken for granted in definitions of the novel.<sup>23</sup> The reading of the lyric produces a theory of the lyric that then produces a reading of the lyric, and that hermeneutic circle rarely opens to dialectical interruption. In his famous version of "lyric reading," Paul de Man cast such an interruption as theoretically impossible: "no lyric can be read lyrically," according to de Man, "nor can the object of a lyrical reading be itself a lyric."<sup>24</sup> While this is as much as to say (as de Man went on to say) that "the lyric is not a genre" (261) in theory, *Dickinson's Misery* shows how

poems become lyrics in history. Once we decide that Dickinson wrote poems (or once that decision is made for us), and once we decide that most poems are lyrics (or once that decision is made for us), we (by definition) lose sight of the historical process of lyric reading that is the subject of this book. Precisely because lyrics can only exist theoretically, they are made historically.

Since most of that historical process has taken place in relation to Dickinson in the United States, the subtitle of this book could be “American Lyric Reading,” but it is not the national identity of the lyric imaginary that Dickinson comes to represent that I want to emphasize here. As we shall see, for over a century readers of Dickinson have been preoccupied with her work’s exemplary American character, and that aspect of the public imagination of Dickinson will be central to the pages that follow. There *is* an account of the lyricization of specifically American poetry to be written, especially since there has been no comprehensive view of that history since Roy Harvey Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry* in 1961. Pearce takes for granted that Puritan epitaphs, elegies, anagrams and meditations, Republican epics, satires, dialogues in verse, pedagogical exercises, versified commencement addresses, protest songs, contemporary ballads, odes, and commemorative recitation exercises can all be read as lyrics—indeed, one might argue that it is lyric reading that makes possible the “continuity” of Pearce’s title. Such a close affiliation between lyricization and Americanization will come to seem familiar in these chapters, though there is much to be said about the relation between national and generic identity that will fall outside the chapters themselves. I will be arguing that while the national as well as the gendered, sexed, classed, and (just barely) raced identities at play in Dickinson’s writing have been examined to different ends in recent criticism, the generic lens they must all pass through has been treated as transparent.<sup>25</sup> This book attempts to make the only apparently transparent genre through which Dickinson has been brought into public view itself visible. Some of the work of doing so might at times seem microscopic, since it entails a focus not on big ideas—poetry, America, person- and womanhood—but on the small details on which those ideas precariously (though surprisingly tenaciously) depend.

Consider, for example, one overlooked detail in the history of reading Dickinson—a bit of ephemera that tempts while it also resists lyric reading. Like so many of Dickinson’s letters, the rather long 1851 letter to Austin that closes with the lines that Johnson “arbitrarily established” in 1955 as a lyric and that Franklin then decided were not a lyric contained an enclosure: a leaf pinned to a slip of paper inscribed “We’ll meet again and heretofore some summer ‘morning’” (fig. 3). The “little forest, whose leaf is ever green” to which the lines-become-verse point is and is not the

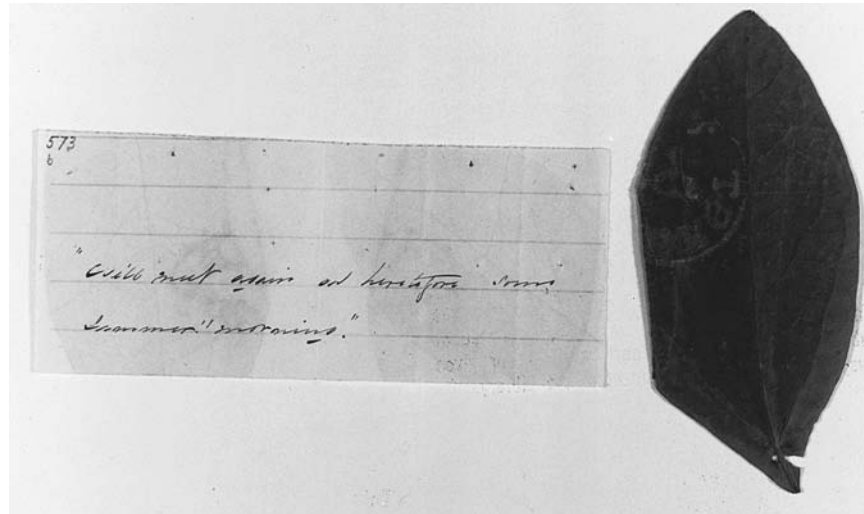


Figure 3. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, 17 October 1851. The postscript was pinned where the hole appears in the leaf at the bottom of the picture; the postmark on the leaf matches the postmark on the envelope that contained it. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 573, enclosure).

leaf that Austin held in his hand, and that difference is the enclosure's point. Whether or not the lines at the end of the letter are printed as a lyric, the now-faded leaf that left its imprint on the line attached to those lines cannot be printed—though it is here, for the first time, reproduced, and thus unfolded from Dickinson's letter and folded into the genre of literary criticism. Now addressed not to Austin but to my anonymous reader (to you), not the leaf itself but a copy of its remains, Dickinson's enclosure becomes legible as a detail of a literary corpus. Or does it? While for Austin the leaf popped out of the letter as an ironic commentary on the time and place the familiar correspondents did not but may yet have shared (if only on the page, or between quotation marks) on the October day when the letter was sent ("some summer 'morning'"), by the time that you (whoever you are) encounter the image of the leaf in this book about Dickinson you will understand it instead as a reminder of what you cannot share with Dickinson's first readers, an overlooked object lyrically suspended in time. What may seem lyrical about it is the apparent immediacy of our encounter with it: editors and printers and critics and teachers may have transformed Dickinson's work into something it was not intended to be, but a leaf is a leaf is a leaf. Yet Dickinson's message pinned to the leaf asks its intended reader to understand that a leaf taken out of context is not self-defining; it won't remain "ever green" but will (as it has) fade to

brown. Dickinson could not have foreseen that the faded leaf would end up in a college library, or that her intimate letter to her brother would one day be addressed to the readers of the 1955 *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. She could also not have foreseen that the leaf in the library would bear the trace of its transmission stamped by a hand not Dickinson's nor any reader's own. *Dickinson's Misery* is about the way in which the confusion between the pathos of a subject and the pathos of transmission evoked by the leaf rather accurately predicts the character of the poet who will come to be read heretofore as Emily Dickinson. This book is also about the way in which that confusion has come to define, in the last century and a half, not only an idea of what counts as Dickinson's verse but of what does and does not count as literary language—and especially of what does and does not count as lyric language. Let the postmark on the leaf that mediated the encounter between Dickinson and her intimate reader also stand for the institutions that exceed as they deliver literature—modes of cultural transmission that make even an old leaf legible.

My title, *Dickinson's Misery*, is intended to gain significance as this book progresses. As my account of the historical transmission of Dickinson's writing takes us further and further away from a direct encounter with that writing, "Dickinson's Misery" may evoke the pathos not of Dickinson herself but of her writing as a lost object, a *texte en souffrance*.<sup>26</sup> Yet while Derrida may be right that writing always goes astray—or is, by definition, disseminated in order to become literature—*published* writing does not wander away on its own: it is directed and addressed by some to others. In my first chapter, "Dickinson Undone," I will consider recent editorial attempts to release Dickinson's writing from the constraint of earlier editorial conventions and to rescue the character of that writing from institutional mediation—even from the constraint of the codex book itself. I will argue that recent attempts to liberate Dickinson from the unfair treatment of editorial hands are dependent on an imaginary model of the lyric—a model perhaps more constraining, because so much more capacious, than those Dickinson's early genteel editors supposed. The aspects of Dickinson's writing that do not fit into any modern model of the lyric—verse mixed with prose, lines written in variation, or lines (like the one pinned to the leaf) dependent on their artifactual contexts—have been left to suffer under the weight of variorum editions or have been transformed into weightless, digitized images of fading manuscripts made possible by invisible hands. In my second chapter, I will measure the distance between the circulation of Dickinson's verse in several spheres of familiar and public culture in the nineteenth century and the circulation of ideas of the lyric in academic culture in the twentieth century. The more we know about the circumstances of the nineteenth-century composition and reception of

Dickinson's poems, the less susceptible they seem to the theories of lyric abstraction that emerged in twentieth-century critical culture. From genteel criticism to New Criticism to de Man's lyric theory to the pragmatic backlash against literary theory and the new lyric humanism, ideas of the lyric in the century during which Dickinson's work proliferated in print constructed and deconstructed the genre in which Dickinson's writing has been cast, but in doing so they tended to widen rather than close the distance between that genre and that writing. The remaining chapters then attempt to bridge that distance, or to claim that Dickinson's work may help us to do so. In my third chapter, I will compare Dickinson's figures of address—her sociable correspondence—to the forms of address that have been attributed to her texts as a set of lyrics. In my fourth chapter, I will explore Dickinson's forms of self-reference, especially literal or physical self-reference, in the context of nineteenth-century American intellectual culture and in the context of twentieth-century feminist discourse. In my final chapter, I will bring those modern feminist concerns to bear upon the nineteenth-century sentimental lyric, an often forgotten genre of vicarious identification that itself may span the distance between Dickinson's writing and the image of the poet she has become. In all of the chapters, my concern will be to trace the arc of an historical poetics, a theory of lyric reading, that seeks to revise not only our understanding of Dickinson's work but our contemporary habits of poetic interpretation.

*Dickinson's Misery* tries to do many things, but one thing it does not try to be is a reception history. Scholars have already compiled excellent critical histories of Dickinson's reception, though there is much more to be done, especially on the history of Dickinson's popular readership, yet that is not my project in this book.<sup>27</sup> Here I am interested instead in the models of the lyric that governed Dickinson's edition and reception. I could have chosen to chronicle those models strictly chronologically—the aesthetic model of the 1890s, the Imagist model of 1914, the modernist model of the 1920s, the culturally representative model of the 1930s, the pedagogical model of the 1940s, the professional model of the 1950s, the subversive model of the 1960s, the conflicted model of the 1970s, the feminist model of the 1980s, the materialist and queer models of the 1990s, and the public sphere and cyberspace models of the beginning of the twenty-first century—but as this list suggests, such a chronology quickly devolves into a thematic catalogue of types of lyrics while leaving the generic character of those lyrics relatively stable. This book instead combines reception history, book history, literary history, genre theory, and one genealogy of the discipline of literary criticism to destabilize an idea of the genre of which Dickinson's work has become such an important modern paradigm. Editors, reviewers, teachers, and readers may make up versions of a genre to

#### BEFOREHAND

suit their place and time, but they do not do so from scratch. My subtitle, "A Theory of Lyric Reading," is meant to suggest that genre is neither an Aristotelian, taxonomic, transhistorical category of literary definition nor simply something we make up on the spot to suit the occasion of reading. What a reading of Dickinson over and against the generic models through which she has been published and read can tell us about the lyric as a genre is indeed that history has made the lyric in its image, but we have yet to recognize that image as our own.