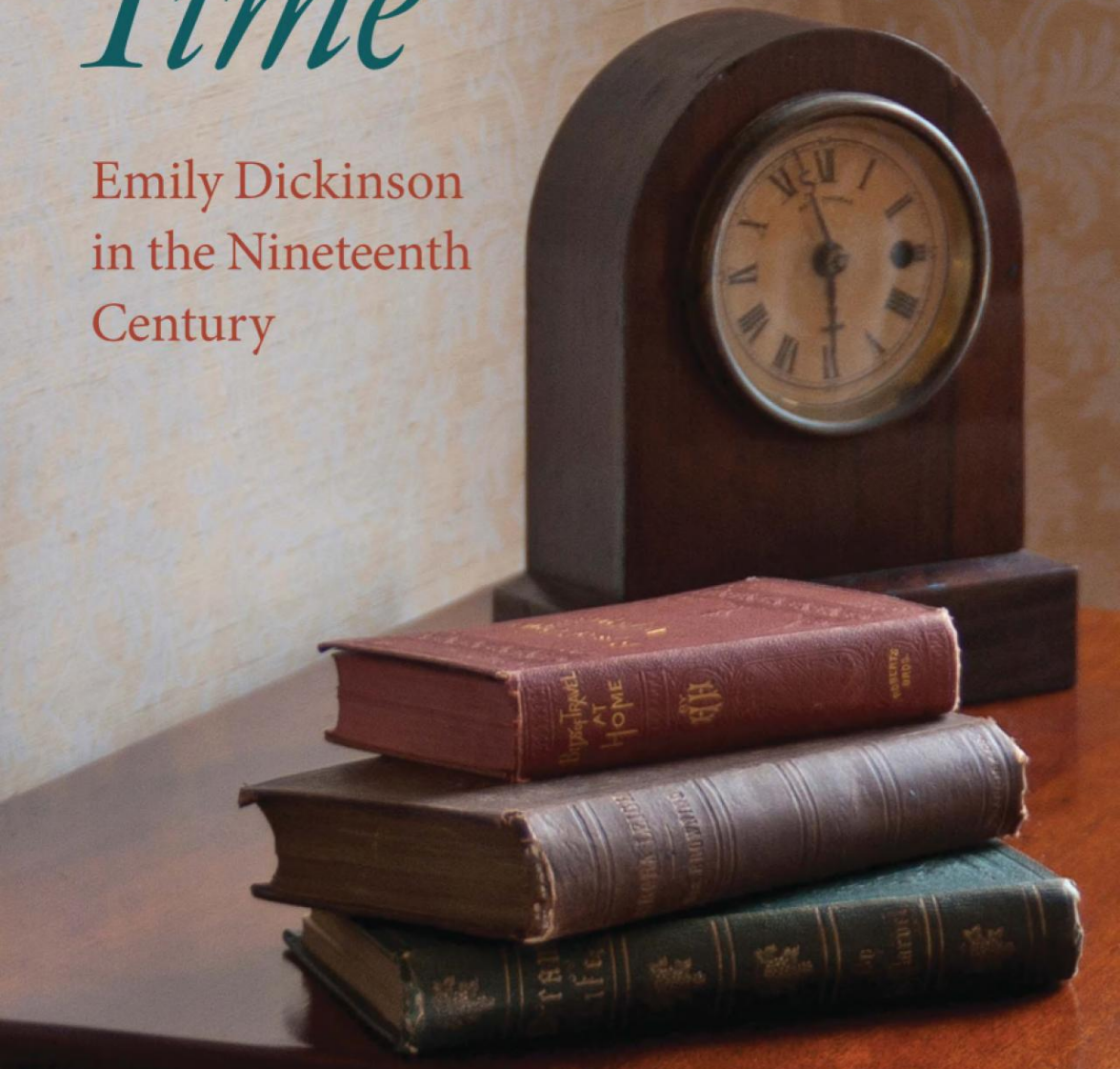
Reading in Time

Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century



Cristanne Miller

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ALTHOUGH QUICKLY written, this book both builds on ideas about Dickinson I have been developing since graduate school and has enjoyed the assistance of numbers of people that would imply a longer period of gestation. First my deep thanks to the University at Buffalo for granting me a year's leave to conduct the required research and write a draft of the book, and to the English Departments at both Harvard and Boston Universities for extending affiliate faculty status to me during 2009–2010—extended to 2010–2011 by Harvard to enable my continued use of their library facilities. Thanks also to Leslie Morris, curator of Modern Books and Manuscripts at the Houghton, and the reference librarians at the Houghton, especially Susan Halpert, for assistance in making materials available to me. I am also grateful for the enthusiastic support of Bruce Wilcox, director of the University of Massachusetts Press.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AM	*Atlantic Monthly*
EDJ	*The Emily Dickinson Journal*
EDL	Emily Dickinson's Lexicon, http://edl.byu.edu/lexicon.
EDR	Emily Dickinson Family Library, Houghton Library, Harvard University
EmEL	Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures,* edited by Joel Porte. Library of America, 1983.
F	*The Poems of Emily Dickinson,* edited by Ralph Waldo Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1998). Unless otherwise indicated, poems are cited as Dickinson writes them in her manuscript books, with the number Franklin assigns.
Fas	Fascicle, a bound manuscript booklet made by Dickinson
L	*Letters of Emily Dickinson,* edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1958). Letters are cited with the number Johnson and Ward assign.
LOG	Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* Walt Whitman Archive, http://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1855/whole.html.
S	Set, Dickinson's unbound folded pages, constituting a manuscript booklet
SR	*Springfield Daily Republican,* newspaper subscribed to by the Dickinsons
WFH	*Words for the Hour: A New Anthology of Civil War Poems,* edited by Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

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Reading in Time

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1

Reading in Dickinson's Time

> The secret of the poetic art lies in the keeping of time.
> Robert Duncan, 1961

Almost a Heroine
AM June 1862

Emily Dickinson wrote the large majority of her poems during and in at least partial relation to antebellum culture and the Civil War, partaking in popular discourse, experimenting with form in ways congruent with her peers, and both accepting and experimenting with basic genre assumptions of her era. To the extent that Dickinson's poetry responds to its cultural context, it is primarily to this period, not the postbellum decades, and indeed Dickinson's poetry marks the culminating peak of experiment with stanzaic and metrical structures in short-lined verse popular during this period. As this study documents, Dickinson's writing practices also change remarkably after 1865. While one might chart several different kinds of changes in the poet's writing practices from those I trace here, the shifts in her writing, retaining, and circulating of poems that occur around 1865 are dramatic and notable, making it reasonable to think of Dickinson as writing in two major periods—earlier and later.[1] In this book, I focus on the earlier period, and especially on her prolific years between 1860 and 1865.

I began this project of reading "in time"—that is, historically and with attention to Dickinson's rhythms and forms—by asking myself what counted as reasonable evidence for responding to the essentially unanswerable questions about Dickinson: how did she compose? why did she keep manuscript books and how did she use them? how did she conceive of the poem, specifically the lyric poem? why did she choose not to publish? These questions led me through many books in the Dickinson family library housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard and then back to Dickinson's manuscript books and other poems that she retained in her possession. Where others might have looked primarily to biography or theory, my questions led me to an increased alertness to patterns in Dickinson's writing, circulating, and

retaining poems and in the material she was reading. At least in the years up through 1865, such patterns indicate that we learn most significantly about her poems of this period through careful attention to the poems she retains. This focus on the poems she kept stands in direct contrast to arguments like Marietta Messmer's that "it is her letters and letter-poems—rather than her (fascicle) poems alone or in isolation—which seem to be most representative of Dickinson's fundamental choices about literary production" (3). Generally, the patterns of writing, circulation, and retention I have found in Dickinson's poems, and what I have learned from reading her schoolbooks, personal library, and periodicals, point toward the correction of some assumptions and the rethinking of some scholarly hypotheses about Dickinson's aesthetic and practices. My goal here is not to claim definitive answers in place of hypotheses but to provide different kinds of information by asking more rigorous questions of the material we already know well and suggesting new contexts for thinking about it. I trust that the practices I document and my hypotheses will generate both new questions and further study.

First and foremost, I argue that Dickinson was vitally engaged with multiple aspects of her culture—literary, social, cultural, religious, and political—a fact altogether congruent with her physical reclusiveness and her periodic claim that her life and thoughts did not follow normative grooves.[2] Faith Barrett, Paula Bennett, Paul Crumbley, Jed Deppman, Virginia Jackson, Mary Loeffelholz, Domhnall Mitchell, Aife Murray, Daneen Wardrop, and Shira Wolosky are among the critics who have contributed recently to scholarship in this area. Unlike these scholars, I focus primarily on what we learn from her periodical reading and from attention to the formal properties of poems we know Dickinson read with enthusiasm. She wrote in an innovative and idiosyncratic response to contemporary styles, events, and idioms while sharing their cultural base. Moreover, while most of her poems were never circulated, she seems to have written with a contemporary audience in mind that was (or would have been, to the extent that the audience remained imagined) alert to her allusions to news and popular authors as well as to culturally central texts like the Bible and Shakespeare. Newspapers, periodicals, popular song and poetry, and the most famous poets of her day provided plots, phrases, metrical and stanzaic forms, and other stimulus for her writing.

While Dickinson sometimes, especially in early letters and poems, used quotation marks to indicate such allusion, more often her borrowing was thoroughly absorbed within her own thinking; as she writes to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "[I] never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person" but when she does become conscious of such borrowing "I do not let go it, because it is mine" (L271). Once made her own, words and ideas no longer belonged to others who used them first. As I discuss in Chapter 4, this at-

titude toward lifting or recirculating what is useful resembles general attitudes of the antebellum culture of reprinting, as analyzed by Meredith McGill. Dickinson is less directly influenced by the individual writers of her time than she is an absorptive reader: everything goes into the mix of her own fertile imagination and becomes "mine," as she says.[3] Chapters 2, 3, and 4 contribute to understanding Dickinson's receptive reading and refashioning through attention to the genres and formal structures of her poems in relation to those of her contemporaries, in particular the genres of the lyric, ballad, and free verse. Chapters 5 and 6 explore especially Dickinson's periodical reading as providing a basis for her revisions of popular American Orientalism and, in 1860, focus on foreign travel as the impetus for becoming a poet, and on the range of her poetry written in response to the Civil War.

Evidence illuminating Dickinson's conceptions of the poet and poem comes from her poems, letters, what we know she read, and the more nebulous influences of the dominant institutions in her life: schools, the church, and her family. Substantial scholarship already exists on Dickinson's reading of the Bible and a few authors like Shakespeare, Emerson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Scholarship is currently underway on Dickinson's reading of other favorite writers, such as Robert Browning, George Eliot, and the Brontes.[4] Other critics have shown that even ostensibly intimate phrases of letters are sometimes directly lifted from popular literature—for example, her phrase "My business is to love" appears in *Miss Gilbert's Career,* a novel written by Josiah Gilbert Holland, the husband of one of her closest friends and co-editor of the *Springfield Republican*. Two aspects of her self-description to Higginson echo descriptions in stories by Harriet Prescott (Spofford) and Rose Terry (Cooke) published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.[5] Scholars are also now beginning to take seriously the influence of periodicals on Dickinson's verse, in particular the *Republican* and the *Atlantic,* both publications to which her family subscribed. As a devoted reader of newspapers and periodicals, she was a more than usually active observer of the cultural energies of her time.

The Atlantic Monthly is of particular importance to my study because its contributions best represent what I believe was the level of Dickinson's aspiration for her art and she began reading it with its first issue in November 1857, shortly before beginning to preserve her own poems in fascicles in 1858. Dickinson's letters demonstrate that she was familiar with the *Atlantic*'s contents and that she knew who had written many of its anonymously published stories, essays, and poems—that is, what has appeared as blanket anonymity to twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers was more of an open secret to her and to many nineteenth-century readers. Starting in December 1860, the back or front matter sometimes listed the journal's regular contributors; a February 1860 cover lists authors published in the previous and the current issue; and some

issues contained articles "by the author of" work that is advertised under "Literary Notices" in that or another issue's back pages with the author's name. From December 1862 on, the *Atlantic* also published a bi-annual index of contributions, including names of authors—except for those few pieces published truly anonymously. In April 1862, Dickinson knew that Higginson had written the "Letter to a Young Contributor" because she recognized his style from earlier essays. The *Atlantic* was also particularly hospitable to women writers, including contributions from several female novelists, poets, and essayists in its pages.[6]

More significant to the question of evidence for judging what mattered to the maturing poet, not all pages of Dickinson family copies of the *Atlantic* were cut, indicating that neither Emily nor any other member of her family read those essays; for example, the entire volume of April 1863 is uncut. Scholars claiming that Dickinson knew particular essays simply because they were published in the *Atlantic* will need to check whether relevant pages of the journal were cut to know whether Dickinson might in fact have read them.[7] Among the essays with cut pages, some contain marks of having been read, including a few virtually certain to indicate the poet's own enthusiasms and revealing something about her style of reading. At the trivial end, some pages in the issues between 1857 and 1865 have smudges, perhaps from spills, ash, or dead bugs; the February 1861 cover was used for a math problem; and two pages were used to blot fresh ink (November 1861 and 1862): some letters are visible but no words can be read. More significantly, the essay "Elizabeth Barrett Browning" by Kate Field (September 1861) has been excised—evidently by Dickinson, a conclusion based on her known love of Barrett Browning and proclivity for cutting things out of texts.[8] Two Civil War poems have more than one passage, or stanza, marked in pencil—one by Oliver Wendell Holmes in March 1862 and another by Josiah Holland in August 1864—and two stories are marked with light pencil, including a February 1861 installment of "The Professor's Story," also by Holmes.[9] Moreover, one of Sam Bowles's calling cards, dated "Amherst Sunday Oct 21," calls attention to "page 615—2d paragraph left column / page 616 lst paragraph" of a November 1860 installment of this story; this card was left in the November issue. Both paragraphs describe a woman's performative mourning apparel through literary comparison: "Gray's Elegy was not a more perfect composition"; she is "the very picture of artless simplicity,—as represented in well-played genteel comedy" (615, 616). While we cannot know whether these marks or this card are Dickinson's, they match those made in books we know she read enthusiastically and coincide with her known interests, including an interest in constructing speakers of apparently "artless simplicity" (see Chapter 4). The card also provides clear evidence that Dickinson and her friends shared passages they enjoyed with each other.[10]

Dickinson's well-known cut-outs appended to a few letters, and sometimes to scraps of paper on which she later drafted poems, make it highly likely that she was also the person who cut two phrases out of an 1862 essay by Harriet Prescott, providing a retrospective on the career of Elizabeth Sara Sheppard. Dickinson outlines rectangularly in pencil and then cuts out the phrase "'Almost a Heroine'," a few pages later also outlining and then incising the running header for the essay, "The Author of 'Charles Auchester'" (763, 769). There is no record of what she did with these cut-out phrases, but one could imagine that in the middle of 1862, two months after having first written to Higginson, Dickinson felt herself to be at the height of her poetic powers, hence may have felt a kind of adventurous hopefulness, in addition to her frequently discussed sorrow over the war. Her clipping of these words suggests some identification with them, which in turn suggests that she may at least occasionally have seen herself as the protagonist of her own story. This phrase may particularly have appealed to her because the capitalized "Almost" provides a tongue-in-cheek check on the larger claim ("Heroine"), making it self-ironizing as well as potentially grand. Here is a fact (the cut-out) about which we can only know that Dickinson is likely to have been responsible for it. The more we learn about what are either probably or indubitably her marks and cuttings, the firmer basis we will have for interpretive speculation about what they imply.

Such marks and cuttings in the *Atlantic* and other evidence about Dickinson's reading practices definitely indicate that Dickinson was an interactive reader, at least sometimes responding physically to reading she enjoyed. She was also apparently not a great respecter of the sanctity or integrity of printed literature, or perhaps of any textuality. Martha Nell Smith reads Dickinson's cuttings from the Bible, a *New England Primer,* and her father's copy of Dickens as "irreverent . . . opportunities" for Dickinson "to exert control over expression by remaking supposedly fixed utterances and thereby challenge authorities"; Dickinson "overturns the dicta of her day" ("Poet as Cartoonist" 71, 72). Dickinson seems, however, to have had no more respect for the textual integrity of ephemeral periodicals like the *Atlantic* or texts owned by non-patriarchal others than for the Bible or her father's books, given the extensive pencil markings and page-folding almost certainly made by her in books owned by her mother, her brother, and her best friend and sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, and in books of her own.[11] Moreover, we now know that many nineteenth-century Americans exchanged books with marked passages and kept scrapbooks with cut-out articles and written-in items. Dickinson writes: "A Book I have – a friend gave – / Whose Pencil – here and there – / Had notched the place that pleased Him –"; cutting from and marking in books was a widespread cultural practice, not unique

to her or her family ("Death sets a Thing significant" F640).[12] Dickinson family copies of the *Springfield Republican* have not been kept so we cannot know whether Dickinson similarly marked, folded, or cut articles from the daily newspaper, but references in poems and letters indicate that she kept current in national and international news.[13] Her willingness to mark and cut out lines or phrases that interested and amused her call into question whether she regarded all texts—including copies of her own poems—to be fair game for her own and others' plunder and transformative use.

While others have written about particular aspects of Dickinson's usage or style that change over the years, there has been relatively little attention to changes in the formal properties of her poetry. After mapping the stanzaic and metrical structure of every entry in Franklin's 1998 reading edition of the *Poems*, I have found that Dickinson writes in an extraordinary variety of rhythmic forms, many of them inconsistent within a single poem, and some written distinctly in the loosened rhythms of ballads or even, a few, in free verse, rather than in the stricter syllabic count of hymn meters (see Chapter 3). These patterns vary over the years—despite some continuous characteristics, like Dickinson's compressed syntax, disruptive use of dashes, wide-ranging registers of diction, and use of radically disorienting metonymy and metaphor. After 1865, Dickinson writes a smaller percentage of poems that are formally innovative (although some late poems are radically innovative in form) and, starting in 1865, she writes an increasing percentage of poems that are four lines or shorter (around 22 percent in 1865).[14] It is partly for this reason that the later work is less innovative, since much of her radical play with formal structures occurs through the disruption of established rhythmic patterns within a single poem, as I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4. After 1865, Dickinson writes a greater proportion of verse in fully realized alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter (8686)—again, no doubt in part because the poems are shorter, but she is also choosing to write in fewer distinct forms, centering more on hymnal Common Meter.[15] In short, while hundreds of her poems can (as the cliché goes) be sung in whole or part to "The Yellow Rose of Texas" or any other simple ballad tune, this is true for far fewer than half of her poems written through 1865 and only around half after that date. Moreover, especially in her most productive years, Dickinson writes in as many as twenty to forty distinct stanzaic patterns per year, not including the poems that shift from one pattern to another, use variant lineation within an established pattern, or conclude with truncated lines or stanzas.

After 1865, Dickinson's writing of poetry drops precipitously. According to Franklin's dating, she wrote 295 poems in 1863, 98 in 1864, and 229 in 1865. She then wrote ten poems in 1866; twelve in 1867, eleven in 1868, and eleven again in 1869. Thereafter, she never wrote more than forty-eight poems in a

year and in several years her output was in the teens or twenties—that is, she was often writing one or two poems a month, on average, rather than a poem every one or two days, and many of these later poems were only a few lines long. During the twenty-one years from 1866 until the end of her life, she wrote 669 poems. In the eight years leading up to 1866, however, Dickinson had written 1120 poems, 937 of them since 1861, or around 63 percent of the poems she would write in her life (52 percent since 1861).[16] These numbers cannot be exact since Dickinson did not date manuscripts and there is only indirect evidence for most dating: dates of letters, occasional references, and the approximated date of handwriting in a poem's earliest extant copy—although the striking changes in her handwriting over the years provide good evidence for general dating of these copies. Everything we know about her mode of composition and copying, however, suggests that at least through 1865 the poet typically copied poems to retain or circulate fairly soon after writing them. Although dates must be less certain for her poems written after 1865 and not retained in clean copy, Dickinson also circulated far more of her poems during these years, and many of those have been dated by recipients. We can, then, treat Franklin's dating with reasonable certainty, at least within the year assigned. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that Dickinson's primary output occurred between 1860 and 1865, and that there are marked changes in her patterns of writing after 1865.

Similarly, it is only between 1860 and 1865 that Dickinson retains almost every poem she writes. Both Johnson's and Franklin's editions include poems that Dickinson circulated but did not herself preserve, hence that we have only through her letters.[17] In 1861, she saves around 91 percent of the poems we know that she wrote; in 1860 and 1862, around 98 percent; between 1863 and 1865, Dickinson saves 99 percent of her poems. In contrast, after 1865 she saves an average of 77 percent and in several years less than this: she saves 68 percent of the thirty-one poems written in 1876, a mere 56 percent of the thirty-four poems written in 1883, 62 percent of the thirteen written in 1885, and one of the two poems from 1886.[18] After 1865, Dickinson circulates a higher percentage of her poems than during the war, even though she also continues to send out poems written during her earlier more productive years. After 1875, she never circulates less than 34 percent of what she has written, and in some years she circulates as much as 59, 70, or 100 percent (in 1883, 1884, and 1886 respectively), all but one poem within a year or two of its composition—as judged by the earliest extant draft. Between 1861 and 1865, in contrast, she circulates only between 15 and 37 percent of her poems (with an average of 24 percent), some long after initial composition.[19] Rather than writing primarily poems of irregular structure preserved in fair copy in carefully constructed booklets and shared with no one, after 1865 Dickinson

increasingly writes very short poems in regular meter and circulates them without keeping a copy. We have 119 of Dickinson's poems written after 1865 only because she mailed them to people who kept them, not because she preserved copies herself. Moreover, after 1866, around 62 percent of the poems she circulates are five lines or shorter, and many are occasional or seasonal.

As I discuss in the following chapters, these patterns have significant implications for the ways we understand Dickinson's particular conceptions of the poem, her writing practices, and her attitudes toward publication over the course of her lifetime. We cannot reasonably, for example, use patterns of her writing from the late 1870s and 1880s to explain the very different patterns of composition, preserving, and circulating her poems in the early 1860s, when she writes most of her poems. On the other hand, generalizations about Dickinson's creative process based on poetry written between 1860 and 1865 will describe her writing not just of the majority of her poems but also the very great majority she deliberately retained and that are obviously not occasional and more than five lines long. While one might also distinguish poems of 1858 to 1860 from those of 1864 and 1865, or in other shorter periods (as I do in Chapter 5, through attention to poems of 1860), my primary interest here is in reflecting on major patterns of her writing through 1865 and significant differences that take place thereafter. The idea that Dickinson writes a foundationally hybrid poetry, responsive to the materials on which she writes or in interaction with such materials, depends entirely on her preservation of drafts and fragments after 1865—as Marta Werner notes in speculating that in her late years Dickinson discards the idea of a finished poem.[20] Since the poet saved very few drafts during the years of her most extraordinary productivity, we must conclude either that they meant nothing to her during this period or that she only later began writing on envelopes, cooking wrappers, and other fragments of paper—whether or not such a practice is epistemologically significant.

Dates matter. Aife Murray's scholarship on the correlation between Dickinson's astonishing productivity in the 1860s and domestic help in the house also makes this crucial point (*Maid* 10, 78–81). Yet reliable domestic help alone does not persuasively account for differences in her ways of composing, copying, and circulating poems. For example, although (as Murray informs us) the Dickinsons had steady servant help from December 1856 until October 1865 (Margaret Ó Brien Lawler), Dickinson preserves no poems of her own until 1858 (81, 244). Though Murray claims that Dickinson "steadily averaged about seventy-five poems and letters per year" after 1869, when after an almost four-year hiatus the Dickinsons again have long-term domestic help (Margaret Maher), taken alone this average disguises the fact that Dickinson does not reach this number of combined letters and poems per year until 1877 and that

in every year after 1869 she writes more letters than poems as well as shorter poems than previously, less often preserved. Both letters and poems require time to write but not an intense urge to write verse. Murray's claim that the poet writes more compositions on scraps of paper like shopping lists and food paper after 1869 than before also cannot be proven since we cannot know whether she first begins writing on scraps then or only preserves scraps because she is no longer making fair copies.[21] When Dickinson returns sporadically to making sets between 1871 and 1875, she rarely saves drafts for poems copied into sets. Such tabulation of domestic help also does not account for the marked decrease in the intensity of experimentation with metrical and stanzaic forms after 1865. Murray's research on the relationship between Dickinson's productivity as a writer and periods when the family enjoyed the reliable ongoing employment of a maid significantly establishes the poet's closeness to household rhythms and must be a factor contributing to the sudden drop in her productivity with Ó Brien Lawler's departure in October 1865, but no generalization based on patterns of Dickinson's life after Maher enters the household in 1869 can account for her productivity in the preceding decade. Nonetheless, such scholarship underlines the importance of attention to dates and context when generalizing about Dickinson's writing.

Dickinson's enthusiasm for antebellum literature was far warmer than that of most twenty-first-century readers. Reading her poems in tandem with those she read in school books, published volumes, and periodicals makes it clear that her poetry is also closer formally to that of her peers than has been assumed. While there is considerably more attention to popular nineteenth-century verse now than there was a decade ago, many critics still dismiss it as more or less uniformly dismal. Lyndall Gordon's recent biography refers to periodical poetry by Dickinson's contemporaries as "sentimental tosh," and to literary editor Fidelia Cooke as "clueless about poetry" because of the selections she makes for the *Republican,* echoing Richard Sewall's earlier claim that the newspaper's taste was "thoroughly conventional" (Sewall, "Perfect Audience" 207; Gordon 10).[22] Shannon Thomas agrees, and implies the same of the *Atlantic* (62). Both the *Atlantic* and *Republican,* however, published poetry by John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and other well-known poets regarded as innovative in their time, and the *Atlantic* published one poem of Whitman's. Despite her enthusiastic reading, Dickinson at times represented herself as outside the mainstream, perhaps because she was unconscious of aspects of her indebtedness to popular literature, while consciously adapting, playing off of, or manipulating others. Her own exaggerations of her individuality ("the only Kangaroo among the beauty"), however, need not be ours.[23] Put differently, one can acknowledge her distinctness

without seeing her as unique or anomalous to a culture that in fact seems to have provided her with profuse and powerful models.

A corollary critical assumption holds that there is little change between antebellum and post-bellum poetry, and that what little difference there is lies in increased tendencies toward innovative forms and the acceptance of more widely varied styles of verse in the second half of the century. Certainly by the 1890s American poetry had begun to take on strong signs of modernist concision, skepticism, and irreverence formally and in its topics and diction. Even casual reading of the poetry volumes Dickinson and other family members owned and the poetry published in the periodicals the Dickinsons subscribed to, however, reveals that the antebellum period enthusiastically embraced a variety of innovative formal structures, including poems with a high degree of structural irregularity (see Chapter 2). While much verse of the period is predictable in its language and sentiments (as is much verse in every age), many poems are not. More important, the antebellum period lionized poets who were masters of sonic harmonies and rhythm. Dickinson's sensitivity to nuanced variation in metrical forms and interest in formal innovation were encouraged by her school books, by her reading at home, and by literary commentary in journals like the *Atlantic*. Moreover, many if not most of the stanzaic forms Dickinson used can be found in poetry by at least one of her contemporaries in a venue she would have known.

The evidence of her reading and of her contemporaries' writing establishes that Dickinson was an enthusiastic and appreciative reader of the literary culture of the 1850s and 1860s; hence her decision not to publish is unlikely to have been based primarily on the idea that formal elements of her work would not be accepted or would be radically rewritten by interfering editors, as I discuss in my conclusion. Scholarly claims that Dickinson's most significant sense of the poem is that on the page and that she collages her handwritten words with visual elements are in part the topic of my Chapter 4, where I find that Dickinson writes a poetry of implied orality and that her writing out of poems is their least stable aspect. This textual instability corresponds to other aspects of her poetry—such as its epistemological and syntactic openness, experimentation with metrical norms, inclusion of variant words on fair copies, and revision over the course of several years. Such factors point to the conclusion that at least through 1865 Dickinson's poetic is more crucially attuned to the ear than to the eye.

The idea that Dickinson's poetic is foundationally epistolary is also seriously challenged by evidence revealing the patterns of Dickinson's circulation of poems to her contemporaries, before and after 1865, as previously indicated. During her most creative years, Dickinson shows no one the great majority of poems she writes. Perhaps more surprising is that Dickinson

circulates no poems with direct mention of the Civil War, few that invoke the war indirectly, and relatively few of her poems most frequently anthologized and regarded as among her most important for understanding her thought and art today. Knowing that she never circulated the majority of her most serious poems suggests that her inclusion of poems in letters may often be more conventional than has been thought. Franklin hypothesizes that when retained and circulated copies of a poem are written at about the same time, Dickinson typically circulates the poem before entering it into a fascicle or set (page 20). He provides no evidence, however, that this is the case—that is, we cannot generally know that circulating a poem is a step toward Dickinson's deciding to keep it rather than following a decision that it will be retained. Over the course of her lifetime, we have a record of 530 poems that Dickinson sent to friends, family, and acquaintances. Of these, she sent 90 to more than one person, some to several people.[24] It is indeed striking that Dickinson frequently sends poems that constitute the entire message or that are accompanied by at most a line or two of prose. Toward the end of her life, she is sending such missives to many people. At the same time, Dickinson's repeated sending of the same poem to more than one person indicates that she regarded her poems as isolatable from a particular personal or epistolary context and is therefore unlikely to have considered them generically as a "letter." Her patterns of revision—often several years after having preserved a copy—point to the same conclusion, namely, that she composes, revises, and uses her poems in ways she does not treat prose.[25]

Most debate on Dickinson's letters has focused either on their aesthetics or on the look of manuscript pages. Most prominent has been the defensive position that the letters are of a quality and significance to be regarded as "art" in and of themselves and that their artfulness is "poetic." Scholarship focused on the manuscripts is summarized in the introduction to the recent volume *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters* edited by Jane Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie: "many poems consistently merged with their prose context, thus forming letter-poems or poem-letters" (ix).[26] As noted earlier, however, Domhnall Mitchell's precise measurements of Dickinson's manuscripts reveal that she consistently began first lines of poetry with capital letters and spaced lines of poetry differently from lines of prose on the page, although these distinctions break down in the last three or four years of her life, as her handwriting becomes extremely large and loose (*Measures* 177). My reasoning leaves aside all question of the look of the manuscript page and instead focuses on Dickinson's different patterns of use of poems and letters.

Dickinson never sends a prose letter to more than one recipient—although she occasionally repeats an isolated phrase. She also sends several poems—sometimes with just an address at the top of the page and a signature afterward,

if even that—to one or more persons without retaining a copy. For example, in 1861, Dickinson sent a note addressed "Mr. Bowles" and containing as its entire missive the lines: "The Juggler's *Hat* her Country is – / The Mountain Gorse – the *Bee's* –" (F186); in 1869, Dickinson sent Sue the quatrain, "The Work of Her that went, / The Toil of Fellows done – / In Ovens green our Mother bakes, / By Fires of the Sun –" (1159), without address or signature; in 1876, she sent a note signed "Emily" to her pastor, Jonathan Jenkins, or his wife Sarah, consisting of the quatrain: "To his simplicity / To die was little fate / If Duty – live – / Contented, but her Confederate." (F1387 B)—concluding a letter to Higginson with the same lines at about the same time (L449). She retained no copy of any of these lines for herself. Most of Dickinson's uses of such poems (or letter-poems) were like these: brief occasional or aphoristic expressions, fitting entirely nineteenth-century practices of acknowledging gifts, expressing consolation or affection, or clothing any astute observation in verse. This is especially the case after 1866, as previously indicated. Dickinson also sent apparently intimate verse to more than one person. For example, she mailed a poem beginning "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light," (F1624) to Sue after the death of her son (and Emily's adored nephew) Gilbert in 1883, and then sent the same lines two years later to Higginson in response to George Eliot's death (L868, L972). No copy of these lines remains among her papers. Given this doubled use, these lines cannot be understood restrictively as a private message, in the way we expect of letters, as a genre. Like poems, they are meaningful beyond a single context.

Because she sent so many poems to more than one person, at times to as many as six or seven, we know that for her a poem was separable from its initiating context—personal or textual. Moreover, the fact that she did not send the majority of her poems (and the vast majority of her most serious poems) to anyone supports the hypothesis that the letter and the poem were for her, for the most part, distinct genres. It is certainly significant that the language of Dickinson's letters shares many of the characteristics of the language of her poems, and that she circulates so many poems. The patterns of such circulating and the kinds of poems generally sent, however, indicate that before 1866 she was writing relatively few missives that could be considered letter-poems or poem-letters; hence this practice cannot be taken as a model for understanding her composition or aesthetic generally.

To my mind, Dickinson regarded the poem as an essentially aural structure, which could be performed or mapped in distinct and various ways in writing—a conclusion supported by ways that Dickinson writes about poetry, about the poet, and by the extreme significance of aural or sonic features to her verse. The written poem, like the spoken poem, is a performance, whether as dramatic lyric, meditative or philosophical speculation,

apostrophe, or occasion of direct address.[27] As Jed Deppman has persuasively argued, Dickinson also used poetry as a way of thinking through a variety of subjects. Consequently, she writes poems that present contrasting perspectives on a large number of subjects—another aspect of performance, or dramatic presentation. Similarly, while Dickinson's use of multiple registers of language and wildly diverse linkages through metonymy or metaphor make some poems highly allusive, almost all her poems provide at least some narrative, epistemological, or psychological point of reference and make good sense within the context of their historical moment, just as they are typically comprehensible at the level of syntax.

Especially with a poet like Dickinson, the test of any pattern or theory is its usefulness in reading the poems, individually and as a whole. The following chapters of this book focus largely on Dickinson's writing practices or broad cultural points of engagement rather than on individual poems, although each chapter engages with particular poems and Chapters 5 and 6 analyze distinct topical subsets of her poetry. Every chapter assumes that attention both to Dickinson's reading and to her patterns of writing and circulating verse is revelatory. For the remainder of this chapter, I turn to interpretation of a single poem to demonstrate ways that attention to historical context and to patterns of Dickinson's language can matter in reading her poems.

"The Black Berry – wears a Thorn in his side –" (F548) was apparently never circulated and exists only in fair copy as inscribed in Fascicle 27 in the summer of 1863, as was typical of poems she wrote during this year. There Dickinson proposes two alternatives for the word "offers" in line 3, both of which maintain the iambic meter and line length she first writes out in the poem; she does not later revise the poem in any way.

	syllables	beats		
The Black Berry – wears a Thorn in his side –	10	4		
But no Man heard Him cry –	6	3		
He offers His Berry, just the same	9	4	[spices	flavors
To Partridge – and to Boy –	6	3		
He sometimes holds opon the Fence –	8	4		
Or struggles to a Tree –	6	3		
Or clasps a Rock, with both His Hands –	8	4		
But not for sympathy –	6	3		
We – tell a Hurt – to cool it –	7	3		
This Mourner – to the Sky	6	3		
A little further reaches – instead –	9	4		
Brave Black Berry –	4	3		

Written in a loosened ballad meter, this poem shifts to a different structure of beats in its final quatrain, calling the reader's attention to this moment in the poem (see Chapter 3 on meter). The first stanza contains multiple unstressed syllables between beats; the second stanza maintains the same rhythm of 4343 beats but without variation from its iambic meter; and the last stanza shifts to a 3343 beat structure, again with the looser rhythms of the ballad measure in the final two lines—where Dickinson includes extra unstressed syllables between beats in the penultimate line, then reduces the final line to just four syllables.[28] Both in its rhythms and in its tale of private suffering loosely analogous to Jesus' crucifixion, this poem resembles several poems of the period. Similarly, the poem's speaker resembles the apparently artless speaker of traditional ballads, in its use of simple narrative and diction (see Chapter 4).

The single line that most marks this poem as Dickinson's is the first line of the final stanza, the line responsible both for the shift in stanzaic structure (away from the 4343 established pattern) and for the shift outside the narrative of the "Brave" berry. With "We – tell a Hurt – to cool it –," Dickinson alters the focus of this poem from a tale of martyrdom to the question of how one chooses to deal with pain: if telling "cool[s]" a hurt then it is most painful to suffer without speaking.[29] The "Berry" is either silent or unheard, or both: the speaker's claim that it is unheard by "Man" implies that the sufferer of this poem may complain in a way heard by God or some other non-human entity. The poem ends with the berry's eschewal of sympathy—an action presented as its striving to reach "further" or higher but also as an act of isolation. This berry creates ("spices," "flavors") and "offers" himself, in anthropomorphized form, to animal or human hunger without complaint either for being eaten or for the pain of wearing "a Thorn in his side –," acts that are presented indirectly as choices that refuse the comfort of human community based on "tell[ing]."

This poem received little attention until recent readings that interpret the "Black Berry" as referring to African Americans.[30] Given its composition in 1863, Dickinson's writing of "Black Berry" rather than *blackberry,* and the anthropomorphism of presenting the berry as a human-like sufferer, such an interpretation has obvious appeal. A reader of the phenomenally popular 1851 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* as Dickinson was, would have been familiar with the trope of the black man as Christian martyr to slavery's torment. Put into more precise historical context and the patterns of Dickinson's writing, however, this reading becomes improbable as a primary interpretation. Every detail of this poem makes sense in relation to blackberries, which grow wild on extremely thorny vines in the mid and late summer throughout New England, and in relation to a romanticized Christian martyrdom but not to any human subject. Dickinson's conceit makes the berry itself rather than the

picker the one who suffers from its thorns. Like Christ, the "Black Berry" "offers" his fruit to others, asking not even "sympathy" for himself, but merely reaching "to the Sky" as if to some spiritual salvation.

Neither the story of creative (or fruitful) production while under such torment nor Dickinson's concluding reflection about silence would seem to have much to do with African Americans or racial politics by the summer of 1863. While Dickinson herself may have heard relatively few or no African Americans speak in person about the suffering of slavery, such suffering was depicted repeatedly in the *Springfield Republican* and (less often) in the *Atlantic,* and had been for years—although with greater intensity and frequency since the war began. The *Republican* ran frequent articles on escaped slaves, on the treatment of slaves in various parts of the South, and on particular incidents having to do with individual slaves or slave-owners. Moreover, by the summer of 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation had freed slaves in the Confederate states and African Americans were now fighting in the Union armies—as Dickinson well knew; Higginson had been commanding the First South Carolina Volunteers, a regiment recruited from former slaves, since November of 1862. In other words, by mid-1863, the suffering of the enslaved was not a silenced or silent tale. This was instead a historical moment for focus on the strengths and intelligence of people of African descent, as Dickinson knew from her periodical reading.[31] Moreover, Dickinson does not use the adjective "Black" to describe people of color in any letter or poem until 1881, when she refers to a new servant as a "Black Man" (L721).[32] National attitudes toward African Americans changed in the nearly twenty years between 1863 and 1881. The latter period was more openly racist in the Northern states, as David Blight and other historians have argued, given the repressive and nostalgic politics dominant in the North following the war and especially following Reconstruction.[33] Dickinson may have intended her "Black Berry" as a Christian romanticization of the formerly enslaved, but the allusion is not persuasive as a primary anchor for understanding the poem and seems to me more likely as an unintended potential allusion in what is otherwise a largely playful poem about blackberries.[34]

In seeking evidence for a reading of the poem understanding the berry as African American, one would also need to ask whether other of Dickinson's poems, or poems by her contemporaries, reveal associations among (black) berries and African Americans. Dickinson does anthropomorphize an animal as a black man in another poem also written in 1863: the line "No Black bird bates His Banjo –" must allude to African Americans, since no bird plays a banjo and stereotyped black men do, as depicted on sheet music for minstrel tunes Dickinson owned ("It makes no difference abroad –"; F686).[35] On the other hand, only berries, bees, and birds are "Black" in Dickinson's

poems—all common sights in New England—and there was no strong association of berries with people of color in popular culture as there was with banjos and crows.[36]

In "It makes no difference abroad –," Dickinson reflects that "The Seasons – fit – the same –" no matter what disasters are occurring in the human world. As evidence, she refers to several aspects of nature, each time using a metaphor inappropriate to the thing described: "Mornings blossom . . . flowers – kindle . . . Brooks slam . . ." In this context, the alliterative "No Black bird bates His Banjo – / For passing Calvary –" fits the established pattern of natural indifference to human suffering. The racist or (as Sandra Runzo argues) trickster image of the black minstrel varies Dickinson's portrait of blooming, flaming, and lustful nature to include the bird/musician, abetting a derogatory stereotype of black people as always cheerful, or at least as appearing always cheerful to cultural outsiders, since it is not stated why the bird refuses to "bate[] His Banjo" for an unidentified sufferer.[37] Moreover, because the focus on the "Black"-ness of the bird rests largely on Dickinson's writing "Black bird" as two words rather than the usual one, one must note that Dickinson always writes "Blue Bird" equally distinctly and that she anthropomorphizes animals and other life forms in hundreds of poems; in other words, anthropomorphization is not reserved for birds or plants standing for (and dehumanizing) African Americans.[38] The possibility that Dickinson manipulates racial codes based on historical context opens ranges of reference previously unconceived, but many of her poems suggest multiple avenues of conjecture that veer away from or outright contradict the primary statement or narrative of the poem, typically through the isolation of single metaphors, words, or phrases. Such interpretation may enrich our understanding of Dickinson and her culture but should not, to my mind, overwhelm or ignore the poem's obvious directions.[39]

Read in its entirety and with attention to its historical context, "The Black Berry – wears a Thorn" seems to me primarily concerned with the fact that telling a hurt "cool[s]" its pain, therefore reflecting on the choice a sufferer makes who eschews the possibility of such sharing. From the beginning of this poem, the anthropomorphized "Black Berry" makes choices: he "wears" his thorn, rather than being pierced by or inflicted with it; he "offers" his fruit without protest—either at his thorn or at the fact that "no Man heard Him cry," suggesting that he is unheard, or that he cries when no one can hear him, or that he seeks succor or support only from the inanimate: the fence, a tree, a rock, the sky. "We," presumably "we" people, unlike this berry, talk when we are in pain. "We – tell" somebody, and presumably (at least when we are lucky) we "clasp[]" something besides a rock "with both [our] Hands." This berry is "Brave" but pathetic. If it alludes to African Americans, it is already

anachronistic, since the bravery of African Americans in 1863 was actively in the news and loud, as they fought in battles such as the much publicized charge at Fort Wagner (July 1863). There is, moreover, a kind of playfulness in this tale of excessive martyrdom enacted by the delicious berry that would seem out of place in a poem on racial politics in 1863 and tone-deaf in a way inconsistent with other of Dickinson's poems—although this is always a possibility with issues of cultural sensitivity. Particularly during the Civil War, as I discuss in Chapter 6, Dickinson takes on a variety of tones and situational or dramatic perspectives for considerations of death and suffering, from the irreverently playful to the profoundly grim. While a few poems consider questions of race or speak from positions suggestively including newly freed men and women, none portray a distinctly African American speaker or articulate explicit sympathy for the (previously) enslaved.

The following chapters focus on the dynamics of sound, form, and thought in Dickinson's poetry in ways that mark it as distinctly lyric, as understood by her immediate predecessors and contemporaries, and on patterns of her borrowing or adoption of popular poetic forms, modes, and idioms. Dickinson is a poet of patterns, not of systems or codes. She does not use particular formal structures (say shorter- or longer-lined poems, particular metrical or stanzaic structures, more or less innovative forms, or dramatic rather than reflective or descriptive lyrics) for particular topics, moods, or themes.[40] Her practice is more nuanced, variant, and complex than any codifying theory. The chapters detailing lyric properties of Dickinson's writing, her borrowings from ballad form and aspects of the ballad speaker, her use of Orientalist idiom and travel metaphors, and her experimentation with various popular modes in Civil War poems do not constitute a grammar of forms or seek to depict Dickinson as always writing from a particular aesthetic or cultural perspective. Instead, they provide information about patterns of practice that enable greater attentiveness to the unique intersections of form, sonic quality, speaking position, cultural resonance, and content in individual poems, based on what we know about Dickinson's poems and what we know of the cultural and historical moment in which she wrote them.

Scholarship of the last thirty years has transformed critical perception of the Dickinson poem. Whereas in 1980 the Dickinson poem was regarded as at least relatively stable and entirely iconoclastic in having been bound into handsewn manuscript booklets and circulated through letters to friends, it is now known to be unstable in primary ways and to have taken popular and common form: handsewn manuscripts and private portfolios were typical modes of stabilizing, collecting, or preserving writing of various kinds; self-authored poems were frequently circulated by post and in private manuscripts; and poetry was frequently quoted or written impromptu in every

kind of writing, including personal letters.[41] By refocusing attention on the patterns of Dickinson's writing, copying, and circulating of poems during her period of most prolific creativity, and on the poems themselves as testimonials of what Dickinson cared for most when writing, this study seeks to provide new information for understanding the structures most significant to Dickinson's poetry, how she thought of her activity as a poet during her most prolific years, and the relation of her writing to that of her antebellum contemporaries. Through such focus, it hopes to shift the terms of popular and scholarly debate by creating more precise and detailed frames for reading Dickinson as a learned and enthusiastic participant in many of the cultural discourses of her century.

2

Lyric Strains

> Who is a poet but he whom the heart of man permanently accepts as a singer of its own hopes, emotions, and thoughts? And what is poetry but that song?
>
> George W. Curtis, 1863

> As all the Heavens were a Bell,
> And Being, but an Ear,
>
> "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," F340

Genre criticism is dominated by transhistorical definitional distinctions, albeit distinctions determined by the critical assumptions of the period in which they are made. This makes sense; a genre must be inclusive in its defining characteristics. In contrast, while poets may set themselves a particular generic task (to write a sonnet, an ode, an epic), their engagement with form is distinctly embedded in a historical moment and their understanding of genre is historically and locally framed. To read a genre historically in relation to a particular poet's work, therefore, requires knowing when we retroproject contemporary genre, or other, expectations for reading upon earlier norms and how our norms differ from those of, say, the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. Since the rise of New Criticism, nineteenth-century American poetry has been read almost wholly through retroprojected norms. At the level of genre, those norms stem from finely articulated taxonomies for the lyric poem based on British romantic poetry and German and British romantic aesthetics. At the level of literary study, those norms have more to do with the general predispositions of twentieth-century criticism than with either the aesthetics or, more important, the practice of nineteenth-century American writers.[1] This chapter proposes an alternative approach to mid-nineteenth-century poetry in the United States, more inductive than deductive and identifying characteristics of the lyric through study of the practice of a particular time and place. It asks not what a lyric "is" but how the lyric was written and understood in the 1840s and 1850s through examining the reading we know Dickinson engaged in from childhood to young adulthood, thereby mapping how she (or

any New England poet) would have been likely to understand the lyric in the late 1850s, when she began writing poetry in earnest.

No major genre is a definitively set or coded form. As Wai Chee Dimock puts it, genres are like "runaway reproductive processes," always changing, morphing, compounding, and receiving input from other genres (1378). Poetry is particularly "supple" in this receiving, she notes. The lyric was perhaps the most supple of all, in that for centuries it seemed to be defined as a kind of default mode including dozens of poetic types—the ode, elegy, paean, psalm, dirge, and short dramatic poem, to name a few—and in effect encompassing all poetry not constituting a play, novel, or epic. According to Gérard Genette, and unlike other poetic genres whose distinct taxonomies can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the lyric as such was first defined in the late eighteenth century, and even eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories were not restrictive of form.[2] In the twenty-first century, many innovative poets seek to redefine the lyric in ways reminiscent of its earlier inclusiveness. Lyn Hejinian writes that the lyric has "maximum vertical intensity (the single moment in to which the idea rushes)" and is focused not on "expression" but on an "interest in free knowing"; "Writing forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves" (*Language of Inquiry* 44, 235, 42). Julia Bloch writes that "lyrical musicality" and "sonic texture," or the formal features of "address and sound get us closer to a working formulation [of the genre] for the contemporary moment" than "theoriz[ing] individual acts of speech" (37). Brian Reed writes that in work of "the twenty-first century avant-garde" genres "cease to be defined by disciplinary rules of inclusion or exclusion; they become jumbled [and "labile"] archives of examples and habits of reading" (157). This chapter, in part, creates such an archive of examples from the mid-nineteenth century in order to clarify the extent and inclusiveness of its lyric strains.

Following this exercise in criticism both enforces greater accuracy for thinking about a genre in a particular moment of time and revolutionizes the way we need to understand Dickinson's writing in relation to that of her contemporaries by revealing patterns of verse and thought at odds with continuing stereotypes of early nineteenth-century poetry. First, antebellum American verse cherished originality, often described as wildness, and encouraged what we might call a fluid relationship between European or traditional forms and innovative poetic practice. Dickinson grew up reading poetry of (for that time) experimental and at times markedly irregular forms; her own numerous variations from standard ballad and hymn meter are in tune with this aspect of her contemporaries' poetry, although they push farther in the degree and frequency of the irregularity and combine these features with a strikingly original compression of syntax and meaning. Second,

Dickinson's education at Amherst Academy encouraged by rule and example the idea that form should be driven by content, not by any kind of rule. Third, nineteenth-century American definitions of and references to "lyric" rarely mention subjectivity, address, or temporality—the characteristics centering virtually all twentieth- and twenty-first-century discussion of this genre.[3] Instead, despite the fact that nineteenth-century American poets and critics were well versed in British (and, typically, German) romanticism, they tended to understand the lyric in relation to song, which is to say sound, music, harmoniousness, "Beauty." Lyric, in short, was scarcely distinguished from the lyrical. Reading Dickinson with attention to the properties of lyric valorized by her contemporaries returns us to features of her verse currently largely ignored or interpreted simplistically: in particular the sonic qualities of rhythm, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and repetition.

The aspect of nineteenth-century American verse most often overlooked or thinly understood by current readers is the formal. For Dickinson and her peers, poetry was an art conceived in relation to rhythm, figure, and sound, although these elements were regarded as secondary to the extent that they were assumed to enable the thought and feeling of the verse. The metrical structures and properties of sound of Dickinson's poems both link her more closely to the art of her generation than has been acknowledged and distinguish her as a great poet. Although aesthetic norms had changed by the end of the century, Dickinson's poetic practices remained within the formal range extolled as exemplary according to the praise her poems received when they were first published in 1890—in contrast to the widely held assumption that Dickinson was roundly condemned by her first reviewers. As Willis Buckingham summarizes, within the decade following the publication of *Poems,* five hundred commentaries on Dickinson's work appeared in print, most of them written by critics on average fifteen years her junior—that is, readers educated in the 1860s and 1870s, not, like her, in the 1840s and 1850s ("Poetry Readers"). One of the two most frequently used words in these reviews was "genius"; moreover, despite the fact that these reviewers were primarily of a younger generation, Buckingham asserts that their "desired poetical goals remain thought and feeling, to the poetic expression of which some critics believe song and sound are indispensable." "When Dickinson is faulted," in these 1890s reviews, "it is almost always for her technical irregularities," and yet, Buckingham notes, "a surprising number of nineties reviewers, admitting the absence of conventional metrics, nevertheless rejoiced in her *wilding* music" (166, my emphasis). In her own day, this appreciation would have been less "surprising"—and indeed the fact that Dickinson was compared to ninety-five other writers in these early reviews indicates that she was far from unique in bending conventional forms.[4]

In 1862, Thomas Wentworth Higginson does not condemn Dickinson's verse as being out of line with that of their contemporaries: he calls it "spasmodic"—the name given to a group of radical and controversial poets Dickinson admired—including Keats, Shelley, Byron, Barrett Browning, the young Tennyson, De Quincy, Alexander Smith, and Emily Bronte.[5] Dickinson's admiration of both the Brownings, Keats, and Tennyson is well known; she also extolls Smith's "exquisite frensy," claiming that his *Poems* contains "some wonderful figures, as ever I met in my life," although they "are not very coherent"—all characteristics of the Spasmodics (L128, 19 June 1853). Similar writers were described by Henry James as belonging to an "Azarian School" of writing, named after Harriet Prescott Spofford's novel *Azarian*.[6] Dickinson praised Spofford's early stories to Susan Gilbert, precisely the stories James protests against in his 1865 review.[7] Spofford herself later comments that she stopped writing in this style because "the public taste changed. With the coming of Mr. Howells as editor of the *Atlantic* [in 1866], and his influence, the realistic arrived. I doubt if anything I wrote in those days would be accepted by any magazine now."[8] Even in the 1890s, enough of a taste for poetry that played against standard metrical and rhyming forms remained (or had developed anew), however, for sales of Dickinson's *Poems* to reach 10,000 by 1900, not including an additional 10,000 cumulative sales of the second and third series of her poems and a volume of letters.[9]

Despite decades of cultural and historical criticism to the contrary, Dickinson is still frequently described as anomalous and unique in her formal aesthetic, hence (with Whitman) as a solitary forerunner of modernist and later avant-gardist poetics. Because the majority of nineteenth-century verse maintained a type of diction, syntax, and descriptive detail that sounded stilted or overblown to the twentieth-century ear and because it focused on topics and emotional registers already dropping from high regard by the end of the nineteenth century, other aspects of this verse have also inaccurately been heard as stodgy or without significant variation. A reader of the nineteenth century, accustomed to sentimentality and the diction of neo-classical, Romantic, and Victorian verse, however, would have perceived an impressive variety of formal structures, topics, tonal registers, and types of audience addressed. Although it seems counter-intuitive, mid-nineteenth-century innovation in the lyric functions as a direct forerunner to modernist rejection of fixed form and poetic closure, as practiced generally and especially as combined in Dickinson's poems with terse philosophizing and great syntactic compression. Dickinson's contemporaries offered her useful models for manipulating popular forms and experimenting with ways of understanding the relation of language, thought, and patterned form.

Dickinson grew up in a world of verse—from prayers in the *New England Primer* and the verse alphabet she rewrote with the names of her friends to hymn-singing in church and an extensive range of poetry owned by her family and bearing marks of her attention.[10] Although pentameter verse had the greatest status, short-lined verse was ubiquitous during the antebellum period. Even narrative poems like Longfellow's *Hiawatha* or serious British verse like Tennyson's "In Memoriam," use tetrameter, or sometimes a looser 4-beat line, and the most popular short-lined form was the ballad or ballad-style poem that used some variation of 3- and 4-beat lines. Narrative poems were popular during this century and poets blended lyric and narrative properties in various ways. In 1789 in England, Wordsworth and Coleridge touted their blending of lyric and narrative genres in *Lyrical Ballads*. In the United States, Dickinson enthusiastically recommended Longfellow's 1847 *Evangeline* to a friend in an 1848 letter, and both it and his 1855 *Hiawatha* sold thousands of copies. In the same letter, Dickinson also mentions that she is reading Tennyson's verse narrative *The Princess*.[11] Later, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1857 *Aurora Leigh* was among her favorite poems. Dickinson also marked extensively "Spasmodic" poet Alexander Smith's popular 157-page poem "A Life Drama" (1852), and two other long poems (around 35 pages each) by Barrett Browning, "The Poet's Vows" and "A Vision of Poets." Although not fictional, James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* evidently also entertained Dickinson, since it is extensively marked.[12] Poe could not have been more mistaken in his 1850 essay "The Poetic Principle" when he claims that the "long poem" will "never be popular again" (*Selected Writings* 465).

Dickinson wrote no long poems and there is little evidence that she conceived of her poems in significant relation to thematic or narrative clusters or sequences, given that she never revised fascicle booklet arrangements in the way she does the wording of individual lyrics.[13] She nevertheless experiments in her poems with the boundaries of narrative, dramatic, and lyric properties, all of which undermine the notion of a personally subjective lyric speaker and hence also of the lyric poem as a private reflection, "overheard" by its readers—as John Stuart Mill put it in 1833.[14] As is frequently noted, many of her poems use the diction of gothic or sentimental fiction, and her admiration of Robert Browning and of long narrative poems may have influenced the dialogic quality of her verse. In contrast, there is little acknowledgment of the very wide variety and number of dramatic lyrics that Dickinson composed in her experiments with lyric strains. Long poems typically contained several set pieces: riddles, songs, dialogue, apostrophes, elegies—again a fluidity of boundary that may have inspired Dickinson's lyrics. Because lyric theorizing is particularly active at present, I linger on the implications of current genre criticism for thinking about Dickinson's poetry.

If the lyric expresses in its intensest form the subjectivity of the poet him or her self (the most common definition), or follows any of the more complex equations having to do with time, deixis, and address developed in the mid and late twentieth century, then Dickinson's multiple definition poems and patently fictitious uses of the pronoun "I" must call into doubt whether her poems are lyric—leading to claims like Virginia Jackson's in *Dickinson's Misery* that Dickinson does not in fact write lyric poems.[15] Lyric has indeed become nearly synonymous with "poetry," as Jackson argues, but this is not a new phenomenon. New is only the distinctly narrowing effect of such synonymity during the twentieth century.[16] Marjorie Perloff goes so far as to say that interest in poetic sound has been dampened by the "continuing dominance of Romantic lyric theory, with its equation of 'poetry' and 'lyric,' coupled with an understanding of 'lyric' as *the* mode of subjectivity—of self-reflexiveness, the mode in which a solitary I is overheard in meditation or conversation with an unnamed other" ("Sound of Poetry" 750). In contrast, in the early and mid nineteenth-century United States, "lyric" described any poetry that was not distinctly dramatic, epic, or narrative, that was harmonic or musical in its language, or that was conceived as song. Dickinson's poetry fit this model.

Gender also significantly affects critical definition of lyric in ways directly linked to Dickinson's era and poetics.[17] The scholars contributing to Laura Mandell's *Poetess Archive Journal* and database represent nineteenth-century writing in relation to "the poetess tradition." Mandell focuses on the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century production of poetry "written in what came to be designated an 'effeminate' style, whether written by men or women" and primarily associated with female poets who called themselves or were called poetesses; in the United States the dates for such identification and practice are given as 1773 to 1865 (Archive "Introduction"). Mandell frequently refers to "poetess" verse as "flowery" and "sentimental," noting that it uses "easily imitable forms" (primarily ballad-style).[18] More specifically, under "Uses of the Archive," she claims:

> There are a number of poetic conventions characterizing the poetess tradition: artificial diction, tetrameter and trimeter metric systems, conventional and apparently uncritical sentiments, direct quotation of other poets, salient rhyme schemes, linguistic transparency, and a focus on the themes of patriotism and domesticity. The term thus links gender to poetic style. As feminine, the poetess tradition has been continuously maligned. An early nineteenth-century reviewer remarks that female poets 'disregarded the high art of poetry.'

While Mandell does not conflate this tradition of writing with the lyric, the association between lyric and the short-lined forms she describes is strong,

hence she implies that the lyric also is a primarily "effeminate" or female-associated genre during the nineteenth century. Margaret Dickie makes this association explicit, arguing that the lyric's "brief, repetitive, and figurative" properties "articulate a sense of the self as particular, discontinuous, limited, private, hidden" (537, 539). Hence she claims that the genre as a whole is "publicly degraded," a form associated with women and "considered insufficient to express the grandness" of the U.S. or of American individualism (537, 539).[19] In contrast to Mandell, Paula Bennett argues that the "poetess" model was far more pervasive in Britain than in the U.S. and that it does not accurately represent even early nineteenth-century American poetry, let alone that written over a period of ninety years (*Public Sphere*). Similarly, Shira Wolosky stresses the range of political, religious, and otherwise public, socially significant and acclaimed poetry written by women during this century (*Poetry and Public Discourse*).[20]

The gendering of genre is an under-theorized aspect of genre criticism. For at least two centuries, the lyric has been associated in broad terms with Sappho and the feminine just as the epic has been associated with masculine heroics and makers (Keller and Miller; Prins, *Victorian Sappho*). Perhaps because of the popularity of nineteenth-century poetry, there has also been some conflation of verse with popular culture generally. Critics like Andreas Huyssen have persuasively argued that political and aesthetic discourse in the late nineteenth century gendered mass culture as feminine. Indeed, the nineteenth-century popular imagination increasingly regarded all artists and writers, not just lyric poets, as feminine. Powerful cultural spokesmen pushed back against this characterization. Early in the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott masculinized the ballad tradition by collecting Scottish martial ballads. Longfellow attempted to professionalize the calling of the poet in part by establishing the poet as masculine (Rubin 29).[21] An 1860 review of Lowell's *Fresh Hearts that Failed Three Thousand Years Ago* calls "The Brave Old Ship, The Orient" a "truly masculine poem, full of vigor and imagination" (760). David Atwood Wasson compares one of Whittier's poems to a battle in its importance—surely the most masculinizing analogy possible: "'Barbara Frietchie' is the true sequel to the Battle of Gettysburg, is that other victory which the nation *asked* of Meade the soldier and obtained from Whittier the poet" (338). In the same spirit of devaluing stereotyped femininity, an anonymous reviewer praises a volume of poems by Anne Whitney for its:

> absence of all 'female' lamentations. [Whitney] evidently does not belong to the sisterhood of weeping poetesses. She does not cry out on every page that she is a woman, and particularly distressed, abused, and wretched, solely on that account. There is no arrogant vaunting of strength, no sickening display of 'weakness,' no

> questioning, no apologizing for thinking, or doing, because she is a woman . . . but as a soul she addresses herself to souls in a higher region, alike independent of sex or condition. ("Poets and Poetry," *SR* 2 July1859)

Gender association with the lyric functioned differently for men like Longfellow or Whittier, who had an investment in the public status of the profession of the poet, and for women like Dickinson, for whom there was no question of public professionalism. Moreover, from Dickinson's perspective, writers such as Tennyson, Longfellow, Bryant, Lowell, and Whittier were lionized by an adoring public, not demasculinized. Lyrics were also used to espouse the most serious and public causes of the 1840s and 1850s—for example, abolition. And poetry remained the most prestigious literary form throughout the nineteenth century. Even when Oliver Wendell Holmes characterizes the "glittering lyric" as gleaming "like a diamond on a dancing girl," he calls his own poems "Lyrics" and describes "Anacreon's numbers" as "glid[ing]" from "Saxon lips," using an ethnic designator signifying masculine prowess and pointed reference to Anacreon, not Sappho, as the great classical lyricist.[22]

It is clear from her correspondence and from her poems on poetry that Dickinson regarded the poet as powerful and poetry as an expression rivaling divine epiphany in its ability to inspire, not as effeminate. In 1851 she writes to Sue that "we are the only poets"—clearly a mark of their distinction, not their limitation or weakness (L56). In "reckon[ing]" the worth of poetry, Dickinson compares it with the Sun, Summer, and the "Heaven of God," then concludes "Poets – All –," or that poets are above the rest (F533). "To pile like Thunder" represents poetry as "coeval" with love and as having the same power on a reader as "see[ing] God" (F1353). Such effusions do not point toward her regarding poetry as a secondary genre. For Dickinson, all language has power, and language that "live[s]" through the crafted forms of poetry rivals the force of divinity and nature: poetry "stun[s] . . . With Bolts – of Melody!" (F348).[23] When Dickinson represents herself as a poet or constructs figures of creative force in her poems, she often uses feminine metaphors, and primary elements of her diction come from domestic or otherwise feminized spheres or respond to gendered constructions of the natural (Miller, *Poet's Grammar* 158–59, 166–70). Similarly, her favored form is a brief short-lined variant of popular ballad or hymn structures—albeit typically without the other elements identified by Mandell as "effeminate." As a genre, however, poetry for her is synonymous with acts and conditions of power.

Perhaps Dickinson chooses indeterminate reference in many poems to prevent the possibility of friends or future readers identifying her with the personalized "sisterhood of weeping poetesses," instead blending impersonal forms like definitions, philosophical speculation, and dramatic lyrics with

poems of distinct but unplaced sentiment and experience.[24] In 1862, Dickinson writes to Higginson that her "I" is "the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person"—that is, she rejects the position of expressing personal subjectivity in her poems (L268).[25] A few years earlier, in 1856, Julia Ward Howe similarly distinguishes the "I" of her verse from personal expression: in her poem "The Lyric I," Howe writes that "The philosophic I, is not / The I that any man may meet / On errands of familiar use, / Or held to greetings in the street . . . Is not the I that wastes the meal, / And leaves hiatus in the shirt" (6). Both Howe and Dickinson make this categorical distinction unapologetically and with the assumption both that the distinction needs to be made and that it does not require elaboration.

Giorgio Agamben surprisingly echoes nineteenth-century American understanding of the lyric in writing that poetry exists "only in the tension and difference (and hence also virtual interference) between sound and sense"; "verse is the being that dwells in this schism":

> *it is as if, having met each other, each of the two movements [language's movement toward sense* and a *discourse . . . moving from comprehension to sound] then followed the other's tracks, such that language found itself led back in the end to language, and comprehension to comprehension. This inverted chiasm—this and nothing else—is what we call poetry. This chiasm is, beyond every vagueness, poetry's crossing with thought, the thinking essence of poetry and the poeticizing essence of thought.*[26]

This definition of poetry as moving simultaneously toward both concrete properties of language and comprehension resembles the focus of Dickinson's peers on the qualities of "Beauty" and "Truth," also called "argument" or "sense," in poetry. An appreciation of nineteenth-century American aesthetics requires a decisive return to "Beauty" or "sound," that is, the lyrical aspect of the lyric poem, and acknowledgment that didactic and philosophical argument were fully compatible with "lyric" practice.

Arguing from Dickinson's readings of philosophy, schoolbooks, and lexical debates, Jed Deppman proposes that Dickinson's poems of thought, or of trying-to-think, constitute a "new generic shape for the lyric" (62). This new poetic form attempts to "force the mind to do something extremely difficult"—as in "I tried to think a lonelier Thing / Than any I had seen –" (F570), or "I think To Live – may be a Bliss" (F757), or "I many times thought Peace had come" (F737).[27] According to Deppman, Dickinson felt that "lyric poetry was the best language game in which to pursue . . . difficult projects of thought" (5). As Erika Scheurer puts it, Dickinson "sets up an exploratory mode of discourse—*the mind thinking,* not the mind *having thought*" ("Epistolary Voice"). My research indicates (as do Deppman and Scheurer) that Dickinson had ample models in the mid-nineteenth century for thinking of

poetry—and in particular the relatively brief, short-lined poem—as a genre open to formal experimentation and "projects of thought."[28] She foregrounds this process of thinking in a way that makes it effectively new, but both thinking and sonic qualities ground nineteenth-century definitions of the lyric.

Dickinson writes about "poetry," not the "lyric," a word she never uses in extant letters or verse. Mid-nineteenth-century educational texts, common reference, and poetic practice, however, provide a sense of the contours of the lyric as she is likely to have understood it. Richard Green Parker's *Aids to English Composition* consists of numerous short sections defining genres, rhetorical figures, tropes, and aspects of grammar and punctuation including examples and exercises for the student under each category.[29] He defines the lyric briefly and restrictively as "that kind of poetry which is written to accompany the lyre, or other musical instrument. The versification may either be regular, or united in fanciful combinations, in correspondence with the strain for which it is composed" (284). This definition is followed by entries on the ballad, ode, sonnet, cantata, epigram, logogriph (riddle), madrigal, pastoral, elegy, and epitaph, among others. Parker later states that "The higher species of poetry embraces the three following divisions, namely: 1. Tales and Romances. 2. Epic and Dramatic Poetry. 3. Didactic and Descriptive Poetry" (294) but defines "Romance" in relation to minstrel verse, and gives Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" as examples of descriptive poems, as well as noting "another class of poems, uniting the didactic and the descriptive classes, . . . which are called the Sentimental" (295, 298, 299). In short, while the lyric is not listed as a "higher species of poetry" two of the three "higher" categories are presented as including poetry associated with lyric.[30] In some ways Dickinson strained the boundaries of the contemporary lyric, but those boundaries were capacious.

Parker's definition of lyric is consistent with other definitions of the time, although general usage of the word was more inclusive. For example, Dickinson's 1842 Webster's defines "lyric poetry" as "such as is sung to the harp or lyre," mentioning Anacreon, Alcæus, Stesichorus, Sappho, and Horace as "distinguished" practitioners (EDL). Pond's Murray's *Grammar,* also used at Amherst Academy, describes the "three objects of verse" as "melody, harmony, and expression" (202).[31] In an 1831 *Church Psalmody,* editors Lowell Mason and David Greene write at length on "lyric poetry" both as "Matter" and "Structure" in their preface, in ways that clarify the musical reference in Parker, Webster, and Pond's Murray's *Grammar:* "The aim of all lyric poetry," Mason and Greene write, "should be to express *emotion,* and the *sentiments* should be such as are adapted to this end. This is the original and natural office of all poetry; and it is more especially the natural office of all poetry which is designed to be used in connection with music. Poetry itself

is the language of emotion; and that only is good lyric poetry, which requires the aid of music to produce its full effect." The authors then distinguish merely "didactic" hymns that "preach," despite the fact that they can be set to music, from those that "sing": "This forcibly bringing syllables and notes into contact, and pronouncing them together, is not singing, any more than noise is music"—that is, the lyric quality of the hymn inheres in the poem's harmonic strains, not in setting it to notes. Mason and Greene later describe Isaac Watts, whose compositions make up a good percentage of their volume, as having "written more good psalms and hymns of a highly lyrical character, than any other author, . . . [and] probably . . . nearly half of all the valuable lyric poetry in the language" (viii). On the secular side, the *Atlantic Monthly* provides a similar definitional range. Over half the uses of the word "lyric" appearing in its first twelve issues suggest something harmonious or graceful and the others are basically interchangeable with "poetry" that is not specifically a drama, epic, or verse novel.[32] A June 1860 review praises a poem as the best in the volume because it is "embodied with true lyric feeling" (760); W. L. Symonds writes that modern literature begins with troubadour songs: "Europe became vocal in every part with fantastic poems, lyrical in the South epical in the North" (132). In an 1863 retrospective on "Longfellow," George W. Curtis writes, "Who is a poet but he whom the heart of man permanently accepts as a singer of its own hopes, emotions, and thoughts? And what is poetry but that song?" (770). According to these uses, the lyric included tavern singing, occasional poems, and sea ballads as well as more elite verse associated with music, feeling, and beauty.

Emerson and Poe, poets significant to Dickinson during her youth, see lyric qualities as definitive of all poetry, although not surprisingly, they evaluate what constitute lyric qualities and their importance to the poem differently. In "The Poet," Emerson distinguishes a "writer of lyrics" or mere "lyrist" from a "poet," proposing that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem"—a passage on a page Dickinson appears to mark in her own volume by folding it in half (EDR 21; *EmEL* 450).[33] Poets should be both "children of music" (presumably "lyrists") and "Language-maker[s]" for whom thought drives the rhythm (*EmEL* 450, 456–57). Consequently, meter-making "argument" is not simply rational or didactic; it is based on an "abandonment to the nature of things"; "the poet knows that he speaks adequately . . . only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or 'with the flower of the mind'" (459), inspired by and creating "Beauty" (468). Or as Emerson writes in "Nature," borrowing from Keats's famous lines, "Whilst thus the poet animates nature with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and

relations of things to the empire of thought. . . . The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both" (*EmEL* 36). Thought, then, is indivisible from "music" or "Beauty" for the poet.

Emerson's poem "Merlin" makes much the same argument: the poet "shall not his brain encumber / With the coil of rhythm and number; / But, leaving rule and pale forethought, / He shall aye climb / For his rhyme." The poet's "mighty line" can "bereave[] a tyrant of his will"; it makes "the wild blood" of the reader "start"; but the poem must discard "efficacious rhymes" to reach this power (*Poems* 182, 180, 183). Similarly, in his 1841 "Lecture on the Times," Emerson complains that in "the current literature and poetry" the "thinker gives me results, and never invites me to be present with him at his invocation of truth, and to enjoy with him its proceeding into his mind"; Emerson wants thought or argument that are in process, precisely the form Deppman claims that Dickinson creates in her poems (*EmEL* 165–66). Understanding the importance of an active intelligence within the poem, for Dickinson and some of her contemporaries, may also help to distinguish her work from the "poetess" model ridiculed by Mark Twain, whose Emmeline Grangerford "could rattle off poetry like nothing. She didn't ever have to stop to think" (140).[34]

In partial contrast, in "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle," Poe defines "poetry" as synonymous with the lyric. A poem, he claims, cannot last longer than it would take one to read in a "single sitting." Consequently, *Paradise Lost* is "essentially prose"; "a long poem does not exist" (*Selected Writings* 455, 464).[35] Moreover, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem" (455)—or, as he puts it in another essay, we "correctly deduce the *novelty,* the *originality,* the *invention,* the *imagination,* or lastly the *creation* of BEAUTY . . . as the essence of all Poesy."[36] This claim underscores the primary argument of Poe's "Principle" and primary point of contrast with Emerson: for Poe, the true "heresy" among nineteenth-century writers of poetry is that "the ultimate object of Poetry is Truth" or "*The Didactic*" ("Philosophy" 468). While Emerson is suspicious of the "jingling serenader's art" or merely musical poem, and calls Poe "the jingle man," Poe subordinates all else to the aesthetic.[37]

Like Emerson, Dickinson regards the process of thinking as central to her poetry—an idea she may have grown up with: her father writes in an 1828 piece in the *New England Inquirer* that "Wordsworth is one of the few poets who will be read in the next generation" because "[a]long with the delicious melodies which he pours forth, he has *thought* on every page" (in Fisher and Rabe 52). In her poems, Dickinson ponders whether one can, or dares to, articulate truth; "Tell all the truth but tell it slant – . . . The Truth must dazzle

gradually / Or every man be blind –" (F1263), she famously writes.[38] A form like the lyric that proceeds by "meter-making" or slant "argument" may have been ideal for her attempts to process and communicate "truth." The speaker who "preached about Breadth till it argued him narrow" also preached "of Truth until it proclaimed him a Liar / The Truth never flaunted a sign –" (F1266A).[39] Unlike opinion, "Truth, outlasts the Sun –" (F1495) but it is frightening: "The truth I do not dare to know / I muffle with a jest." (F1750). Facing truths, for her, is as much a narrative as a philosophical activity; historical or biblical tales, parables, and anecdotes from daily life allow contemplation that does not necessarily lead to conclusive thought. For example, in "Tell as a Marksman – were forgotten" (F1148) she relates the story of William Tell, one of several stories of European national liberation heroes popular in her day. William Cullen Bryant's version of this story, "William Tell. A Sonnet" (marked in the table of contents of his *Poems*), predictably stresses Tell's "great work to set thy country free"; Dickinson's tale is far less clear about what point it moves toward.[40] While neither Emerson nor Dickinson understands truth in the form of Poe's italics, as "*The Didactic*," they see part of the work of poetry as provoking and engaging in risky thought.

Holmes represents the lyric as giving body to "thought" in his March 1858 "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," his regular *Atlantic Monthly* feature. Quoting his fictional "friend, the Poet," Holmes writes: "A lyric conception . . . hits me like a bullet in the forehead. I have often had the blood drop from my cheeks when it struck . . . then a sudden flush and a beating of the vessels in the head, —then a long sigh, —and the poem is written." This poem is not "impromptu," however, since Holmes's fictional poet immediately distinguishes between the poem "written" and the poem "*copied*"—between what he calls the poem's "soul" and its "body" that "men read and publishers pay for." The poem's soul is "born in an instant in the poet's soul," but it exists only "potentially" in that state and cannot with certainty be copied into "stanzas" (614). Moreover, the poem comes "as a thought, tangled in the meshes of a few sweet words,—words that have loved each other from the cradle of the language, but have never been wedded until now" (614). Presumably, the poem's thought cannot be disentangled from that original and "sweet" combination of words as they are written into the requisite "stanzas" or meter. Julia Ward Howe also suggests that thought is a provenance of the lyric poem; in the last lines of "The Lyric I" she hopes her poem will be "a boon / For all who weep, and think, and love." Parker's *English Composition* claims that "True poetry consists in the idea, and it may be presented even in the form of prose. It addresses itself to the imagination and to the feelings" (245–46n). As these various accounts suggest, the mid-nineteenth-century American conception of the lyric was not based on formal, optative, or topical exclusions but had to

do with concepts like music, beauty, the imagination, and thought. The poem referred to as lyric was typically brief, beautiful or musical, and articulated its point in a fitting and "sweet" form, combining words "never . . . wedded until now." In his preface to Dickinson's 1890 *Poems,* Higginson similarly praises both the "glimpses of a lyric strain" and her poems' "main quality . . . of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar is an impertinence" ("Preface" vi).

While Dickinson's originality is manifest both in the thoughts or expressions of her poems and in her formal inventiveness, there was a general proclivity for innovation in short-lined verse in every publishing venue she knew during her youth and through her period of greatest productivity. To return to Dickinson's schoolbooks, Ebenezer Porter's *Rhetorical Reader* provides a selection of 59 poems or poetic excerpts among its elocutionary exercises, the majority of which (34 out of 59) use pentameter lines.[41] The twenty-five shorter-lined poems or excerpts, however, occur in twenty-two distinct formal patterns, differentiated by line length, construction of verse stanza, and rhyme scheme, with some following no consistency in proceeding from one stanza to the next. This plethora of forms and level of inconsistency are utterly at odds with twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of nineteenth-century verse. While such inventiveness is associated historically with the ode, many of these examples share no other feature of this form.[42] As Parker's textbook put it in defining "lyric," their "fanciful combinations" are "united" through the poem's rhythmic strain and its narrative or argument (284). Charles Sprague's "Fathers of New England," for example, consists of five stanzas of 20, 14, 10, 20 and 18 lines respectively. The arrangement of line lengths varies in each stanza and the rhyme scheme varies from couplets and abab sequences to aabccb and abba, also in varying sequences and patterns in each stanza (Porter 215–17). Fitz-Greene Halleck, another American author, writes the frequently anthologized "Marco Bozzaris" in stanzas of varied lengths and varying rhyme schemes, using a tetrameter base, but concluding each major syntactic unit with a trimeter line. The first stanza has eleven lines and rhymes ababccdeeed, while the second has fourteen lines and rhymes abccaabddefffe, and so on (122–23).[43] Fifteen of the twenty-two examples of short-lined verse represented in Porter's instructional *Reader* combine distinct variations of iambic or trochaic trimeter, tetrameter, and catalectic meter.

Breaking away from ruled forms, a practice associated with natural "wildness," figured largely in American aesthetics. According to Sandra Runzo, "wild" and "irregular" Irish music was highly popular in the early nineteenth

century (chap. 2). Part of the popularity of ballads was their "natural" style—characterized by Sir Walter Scott as providing "emancipation from the rules" of dramatic unities and strict verse form, and "reliev[ing] from shackles" poets who followed their model "to present life in its scenes of wildest contrast, and in all its boundless variety of character" (45).[44] In this 1830 essay, Scott stresses the bold and sublime "wildness" of the ancient forms. In the *Atlantic,* Lowell ridicules poems with predictable rhyme and meter, and Holmes calls them "pious plums."[45] Charles Halpine praises Tennyson as having a muse "wild and wilful . . . defiant of rules, and daringly insubordinate to arbitrary forms" such as the sonnet or "other such Procrustean moulds into which poetic thought is at times cast"; he could write well only when allowed full innovative rein, Halpine declares (463).[46] Curtis's review praises Longfellow's "Saga of King Olaf" as using "every variety of measure, heroic, elegiac, lyrical" in telling "the wild old Scandinavian tradition" (773). In 1854 Henry David Thoreau famously proclaims, "I love the wild not less than the good" and Whitman's 1855 argument for free form is in this sense entirely in step with the times; as he writes in his "Preface," "The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush" (*Walden* 149; *LOG* v). The *Springfield Republican* strongly endorsed *Aurora Leigh* by printing lengthy sections of the poem on the first page of its 1 January 1857 issue, commenting that the poem will not be popular because "its materials are drawn from a realm of thought which is bathed in too subtle an atmosphere for common breathing, and from forms entirely unfamiliar to the common eye." And indeed Barrett Browning herself echoes Emerson's call for a poet to follow a meter-making argument, not "form" itself:

> What form is best for poems? Let me think
> Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
> As Sovran nature does, to make the form;
> For otherwise we only imprison spirit,
> And not embody.[47]

Barrett Browning here champions some element of formal experimentation, in lines markedly varying from iambic pentameter. As these examples demonstrate, Porter is not alone in representing poems of varied and irregular forms as exemplary, thereby implicitly instructing students to write in innovative forms, trust their "spirit," or be "defiant of rules"—at least in short-lined verse.

Other instructional texts echo Porter's implied message and his selection. As previously noted, Parker's *English Composition* not only asserts that "true poetry" adheres in the "idea" of the poem but distinguishes between "perfect" and "allowable" rhymes, thereby encouraging at least some deviation from strict rhyming practice, and indeed many of Dickinson's peers use slant

rhymes (245–46).[48] William H. McGuffy's popular *Reader* contains fewer but equally varied short-lined poems. These include an unrhymed poem by Robert Southey in which every stanza has a different arrangement of line lengths, varying from 6 to 10 syllables, an excerpt from William Collins's "The Passions," even more varied in stanza lengths and line lengths within stanzas, and ten biblical passages written in unrhymed, unmetered verse lines of highly varied length.[49] Rufus Griswold's 1843 *Readings in American Poetry,* "designed principally for the use of schools," suggests that American authors may have been particularly apt to write in short-lined verse with a loose metrical norm and variant rhyme scheme (3). Out of the 130 poems in this collection, 68 are short-lined, and of the remaining 62 written partly or wholly in pentameter or longer lines, 15 contain as many short lines (usually trimeters) as long. These "essentially American" poems, "in spirit as well as by origin," favor tetrameters, followed closely by variations on the ballad meter combination of tetrameter and trimeter. Again, the inclusion of six poems highly irregular in stanza length, meter, and rhyme scheme indicates that irregularity is compatible with excellence and, in this case, "essentially American" spirit. Irregularly structured poems appear in standard elocutionary readers from the time Dickinson entered school through the period when she had written the majority of her poems. The impression Dickinson or any other teenager learning from such readers would receive is that poetry is written in multiple forms and that short-lined and relatively brief poems allow for particularly fertile formal innovation. They would also infer that formal innovation is admirable and contributes to the excellence of the poem.

Dickinson's reading at home would only have strengthened these lessons. The family's 1849 volume of Bryant's *Poems*—which includes pencil markings throughout the table of contents and on several poems—contains many short-lined poems, and several poems with lines of varying length: "Hymn to the North Star," for example, has lines from six to twelve syllables in a 6-line stanza (EDR 246). Out of the eighty-three poems in Adelaide Anne Proctor's *Legends and Lyrics,* all but seventeen are short-lined, and several of those seventeen combine long and short lines—for example lines of alternating three and eleven syllables in "Because" or ten and four syllables in "A Comfort" (EDR 405)—a pattern Dickinson also experiments with, for example, in "One Crucifixion is recorded – only –" (F670).[50] Next to Dickinson, Longfellow is the master of his age in metrical inventiveness, and his 1850 collection of *Poems* contains eight poems of highly irregular form—differing line lengths, stanza lengths, rhyme schemes, and organization of line lengths within stanzas. Longfellow also uses the greatest variety of forms, from poems written entirely in lines of four to six syllables ("Afternoon in February") to the long-lined "To the Driving Cloud," which constructs its 6-beat lines from a combi-

nation of dactyls and trochees, in ballad style. In this volume's eighty-two poems not including "Translations" or a verse novel and verse drama, Longfellow uses thirty-nine distinct forms, and he repeats only eight metrical patterns in the whole volume.[51] Longfellow's interest in formal innovation and irregularity is marked in his headnote to "The Elected Knight" a poem "translated from the Middle Ages," where he remarks that "The irregularities of the original have been carefully preserved" (*Poems* 193).[52] This is a far cry from current critical assumption that nineteenth-century editors as standard practice edited out "irregularities."

Holmes, another favorite poet of Dickinson's, writes frequently in a variety of short-lined forms. In his 1851 *Poems,* the section titled "Lyrics" includes eighteen distinct metrical structures, most in some variety of tetrameter and trimeter in quatrains or double quatrains; only six poems in this section include lines ten syllables or longer. Bayard Taylor's *Romances, Lyrics, and Songs* (1852) includes twenty distinct metrical forms in sections titled "Lyrics" and "Songs and Sonnets"; these forms range from the sonnet and ballad to poems like "Love and Solitude," which combines lines from four to twelve syllables in inconsistent patterns with irregular rhyme schemes, and rhyming lines of different lengths (EDR 311). In an 1853 volume of Tennyson's *Poems,* Dickinson marks a poem with a very unusual sequence of line lengths: "Song" has 12-line stanzas with line lengths running 885(10)(10)3958(10)89 syllables, and a rhyme scheme of aabccbbadefe. A few pages later, the poem "Adeline" contains stanzas of irregular length (from nine to sixteen lines) and an irregular rhyme scheme.[53] Similarly, Barrett Browning's 1852 *Poems* includes poems with variable stanza and line lengths—for example, "Isobel's Child," a heavily marked poem, contains stanzas varying from two to fifty-three lines.[54]

Dickinson's newspaper reading similarly supported the lessons of her schoolbooks and favorite volumes of poetry that innovation and formal irregularity were sanctioned. The *Republican* frequently published poetry in its pages, especially on Saturdays. In the first five months of 1857, it printed a majority of poems using some version of a 4-beat line, or combination of 3- and 4-beat lines. Eight of these poems are irregular in both sequence of line length and stanza lengths (those that observe stanza divisions), and typically use irregular or no rhyme—like "The Sweet Uses of Adversity," a 23-line poem with lines of three to thirteen syllables, without rhyme (16 May 1857). "Lost and Won" by J. W. N. Jr. has seven stanzas varying in length from two to eight lines, differing line-lengths within stanzas, and various rhyme schemes (10 January 1857); "Deborah Lee," by the pseudonymous Fuzzy Guzzy, has irregular stanza length (from six to eleven lines), line lengths (from 5- to 10-syllables), and no rhyme (21 February 1857).[55] And Dickinson would surely have appreciated a poem printed on the same day as her "The Sleeping" ("Safe in their

Alabaster Chambers –"), namely Emily Judson's "Growing Dark," where a lizard

> . . . ventures boldly out,
> And looks about,
> And with his hollow feet
> Treads his small evening beat,
> Darting upon his prey
> In such a tricksy, winsome sort of way,
> His delicate marauding seems no sin.
> . . . .
> The beetle's drone
> Turns to a dirge-like solitary moan;
> Night deepens, and I sit, in cheerless doubt, alone.
>
> (*SR* 1 March 1862)

This poem moves from lines of four to twelve syllables in an irregular pattern, following both the movements of small creatures and thoughts of the speaker. The *Republican* publishes poems by famous writers (Longfellow, Whittier, Barrett Browning, Byron, Shelley, Schiller) and unknowns, such as "Dubioso" and "Flirtuoso," who exchange love poems on 7 and 14 February.[56] My point here is that every venue in which Dickinson read poetry during her youth at least occasionally printed poems using non-standard metrical forms, including some verse of irregular meter and rhyme scheme.[57] Much if not all of this verse would have been understood within the broad category of "lyric."

In "Listening to Dickinson," John Shoptaw maps the fertile variation of Dickinson's metrical patterns in 1863, the year of her most active writing, observing that Dickinson "often invent[ed] a meter for a poem and us[ed] it just that once. The number of poems Dickinson composed in 1863 in patterns rare or unheard of in religious or secular lyric poetry, including her own, surpasses even those [she writes] in common meter"—the form Dickinson used most often (39). Reading her varied forms in conjunction with the contemporary verse she was reading, however, reveals that Dickinson's forms were not at all "unheard of"; such variation was presented as a model in rhetorical readers that sold thousands of copies in hundreds of editions throughout her youth and adulthood. Dickinson's poetry was unusual in its radical concision and disjunction, its yoking of strikingly disparate realms of thought or registers of language through metonymy and metaphor, and in its social, philosophical, and religious acuity. Before 1866, she also uses irregular forms for many of her poems. The practice of formal innovation and her understanding of form in relation to sense or argument, however, was thoroughly a product of her time.

From her early schooling, Dickinson would have understood the genre of poetry to be almost infinitely capacious and fluid as to subject matter,

address, tone or register of language, and form. Early to mid-nineteenth-century poets apparently regarded especially the short-lined, non-narrative poem as a free field for experimentation. Dickinson's poetic, then, is not striking because it is formally innovative; her innovations simply occur in a larger percentage of her poems and result in better poems because they link more profoundly a "trying to think" or "meter-making" process with highly crafted properties of rhythm and sound. And I would say this is not just because Dickinson is a better poet but because she is a better *lyric* poet, as she would have understood these terms—that is, Dickinson's poetry achieves its thinking and effects through the work of its music, or rhythms and sounds.

Dickinson indicates in several poems that for her sound is a, if not the, key element of poetry and that it is directly linked to thinking and feeling. "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear – / We actually Hear / When We inspect –" she writes (F718). In "The saddest noise, the sweetest noise," the poet concludes, "An ear can break a human heart / As quickly as a spear. / We wish the ear had not a heart / So dangerously near." (F1789). In an 1873 letter, she writes, "The Ear is the last Face" (L405), and later writes again of the "ear of the Heart" (L807, 1883). In "I think I was enchanted," the effect of reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems is at first "Lunacy of Light" but then the poet fills three stanzas imagining the "Titanic Opera" of all creatures in nature and "Days" stepping to "Mighty Metres" (F627). Similarly, in "I cannot dance opon my Toes –," the poet demonstrates "Ballet Knowledge" by parodying that highly visual art before celebrating her verse as having the fullness of "Opera" (F381 B). Most famously, she defines poetry as the sound of a storm: "To pile like Thunder to it's close / Then crumble grand away . . . would be Poetry –" (F1353). In "I would not paint – a picture –" she explains "Nor would I be a Poet –" because "It's finer – Own the Ear –"—or, better yet, combine creativity and "Ear" hence "stun myself / With Bolts – of Melody!" (F348). For Dickinson, as for most readers and writers of the mid-nineteenth century, poetry electrifies through the "Ear." The musicality of Dickinson's verse and the importance of music to her conception of poetry have been commented on by others—especially Judy Jo Small and Sandra Runzo, who writes that music is Dickinson's "trope for the quintessence of life, for the source and harmony of the self" (Runzo, ms 45). In a 1933 review of Dickinson's letters, Marianne Moore refers to "the behavior of an ear that lives on sound" as characterizing Dickinson's verse (*Prose* 292). For nearly a century, composers have demonstrated their sense of her poems' musicality by setting them to music. The critical turn toward cultural studies and historicism since the 1980s and the more particular turn toward materiality as a point of focus in Dickinson studies have downplayed the importance of sound to her verse. Reading Dickinson's poetry

according to the primary concerns of her own era, however, requires attention not just to poetic form but to elements of form that manifest themselves aurally.

Even were one unable to distinguish poetry from prose in Dickinson's letters through her patterns of capitalization and spacing, there is in all but a few exceptional cases a difference between the aphoristic concision or even playful brilliance of her prose and the consistent concentrated sound patternings of her verse. The central property of all her poems is their structural, aural, rhythmic, syntactic patterning. From a nineteenth-century perspective, Dickinson's poetry would have been "lyric" because her thoughts were articulated through significant patterns of rhythm and sound—the "sweetness," "beauty," and originality of their language, their "words that have loved each other from the cradle of the language, but have never been wedded until now." While talking about sound is a little like talking about humor—to analyze it can kill its effect rather than demonstrate its power—I will attempt to demonstrate the extent to which sound directs the emphasis of Dickinson's "Titanic Opera" (F627).[58]

Readers of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," (F340) debate the extent to which the brain's "Funeral" is metaphorical; they argue that it refers to death, a migraine, a psychic break, or Dickinson's witness of an actual funeral—perhaps Frazar Stearns's, who was killed in the Civil War. Similarly, critics debate the meaning of the poem's inconclusive final "then –": does it mark the utter collapse of life or sense, or does it suggest some unpredictable next step in its sequence of perceptions? The poem, which was never circulated, does not answer any of these questions, but it does create a clear point of greatest aural emphasis that may affect understanding and that, I think, would have been perceived more readily as key to the poem in an age that read lyrically, or with attention to the way sound directs reader attention, than in our age, which reads for the most part with attention to narrative, biography, page space, or in relation to theory. Moreover, the poem's point of greatest aural emphasis identifies hearing with consciousness.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,]Crash –
And Finished knowing – then –]Got through –

This poem is written in alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter, rhyming abcb—with the exception of the second stanza, which has 7686 syllables. Its iambic metrical norm, however, is repeatedly syncopated by two-syllable words with a falling rhythm—not just the repeated "treading – treading" and "beating – beating" but nearly every two-syllable word in the poem, from the opening "Funeral" (which functions metrically as a two-syllable word *fun'ral*) and "Mourners" to the final "Finished knowing." Consequently, the poem is dominated by falling beats (trochees) in an overall design that is consistently iambic.

The poem plays these rising and falling rhythms against each other brilliantly. The rhythmic counterpoint may suggest the disjunction of traditional forms and experience: because the meter is iambic, every trochaic word necessarily crosses a foot boundary, such that its first syllable ends one iambic foot and its second less-stressed syllable begins the next iamb, creating a kind of urgency of falling rhythms against the highly regular rising undertone. Simply marked, the poem's rhythms read:

I félt | a Fún|eral, ín | my Bráin,
And Móurn|ers tó | and fró
Kept tréad|ing – tréad|ing – tíll | it séemed
That Sénse | was bréak|ing thróugh –

And whén | they áll | were séat|ed,
A Sér|vice, líke | a Drúm –
Kept béat|ing – béat|ing – tíll | I thóught
My mínd | was gó|ing númb –

And thén | I héard | them líft | a Bóx
And créak | acróss | my Sóul

With thóse | sáme Bóots | of Léad, | agáin,
Then Spáce – | begán | to tóll,

As áll | the Héav|ens wére | a Béll,
And Bé|ing, bút | an Ēar,
And Í,| and Síl|ence, sóme | stránge Ráce
Wrécked, sól|itár|y, hére –

And thén | a Plánk | in Réas|on, bróke,
And Í | drópped dówn, | and dówn –
And hít | a Wórld,| at év|ery plúnge,
And Fín|ished knów|ing – thén –

This play of dual rhythms is made more complex by a number of pauses within metrical feet (between the initial relatively unstressed and concluding relatively stressed syllable), which also syncopate the basic rising rhythm. Such interplay might suggest the suppleness of traditional forms: iambic meter does not break down in the presence of falling word rhythms and frequent pauses. Or the dual rhythm might hint at the paradox of the speaker's extraordinary lucidity in describing a process of mental collapse, or the tension pushing against such lucidity. Or there may be no meaning as such at all in this patterning, which enacts the heaviness appropriate to a funeral in its repeated polysyllabic words of falling rhythm while maintaining a syntactic urgency and general metrical upbeat supporting its narrative of suspense. Sound patterns are not translatable as interpretive argument. Nonetheless, the iambic pulse, with its syncopating and heavier counter-beat, the repeated line-initial "And [then]," and enjambment across line and stanza boundaries ("Space – began to toll, // As all the Heavens were a Bell . . .") make the poem's narrative forceful and tense, while the multiple pauses slow the reader's progress.

The only exceptions to this pattern in which all two-syllable words have a falling rhythm occur in stanza 3, with a surprising three two-syllable words with a rising rhythm that occurs within foot boundaries: "across," "again," and "began." Not coincidentally, other elements of sound manifest growing intensity in this stanza. It ends with an enjambed line, contains the poem's first spondee ("same Boots"), and accelerates the repetition of "s"s leading to the poem's climax. Stanza 3's quicker and lighter beats and enjambed final line speed us into the mysterious stasis of stanza 4, beginning with its first two words of liquid expansiveness and wonder: "As all . . ." Stanza 4 is aurally, rhythmically, syntactically, and metaphorically remarkable. Each line contains a strong internal assonance and the long third line contains two such echoes: Heavens/Bell, Being/Ear, I/Silence *and* strange/Race in line 3, and solitary/here in line 4. Following the previous stanza's "same" and "Space," this stanza re-

verberates with long *a*'s (strange Race . . . solitary), *s*'s (Heavens, Silence, some strange Race, solitary) and *r*'s (strange Race / Wrecked, solitary). Most remarkably this stanza includes five relatively stressed syllables in a row: "some strange Race / Wrecked, solitary . . ."

Stanzas three and four together build to an extraordinary climax, where the long vowel sounds and liquid word endings beginning with "Space – began to toll" make the lines (and the experience) seem to stretch out in a timeless way. In the midst of the poem's sequential narrative ("And when . . . And then . . . And . . . And"), we enter a realm of paradoxically heard space rather than time, where the experience of alienation is so profound it seems biological: "Being" ceases to be human and becomes instead metonymic, an "Ear," a category of listening, or perhaps of solitude: "I" becomes racially indistinguishable from "Silence." Moreover, its open vowel ("I") registers as a mere subset of the longer word and larger category, I / Silence. This stanza's spondees climax, however, not with "Silence" or "Race" but with "Wrecked"—a word reminding the reader that this state has not been chosen. Listen to these two stanzas again:

> And then I heard them lift a Box
> And creak across my Soul
> With those same Boots of Lead, again,
> Then Space – began to toll,
>
> As all the Heavens were a Bell,
> And Being, but an Ear,
> And I, and Silence, some strange Race
> Wrecked, solitary, here –

After the word "Wrecked," the rhythm pauses with the comma and then decrescendos: "solitary" lets us down easily with its multiple relatively unstressed syllables, and the concluding deictic "here" grounds us reflectively in our own—not just the speaker's—present. We, too, may be "Wrecked" "here," in the solitude of our own obsessions or pain.

The final stanza, in this aurally focused reading, is distinctly anti-climactic. The narrative resumes: "And then." The moment of epiphany has passed. We have now only to witness the results: reason gives way—a result we could have predicted. Dropping "down, and down" seems logical, and although each "plunge" brings some further "World" or revelation, none is as extraordinary as having been arrested in alienated "Being" with "Silence." And "then"—well, then whatever it is that occurs when we at least temporarily "Finish[] knowing." Aurally, the poem does not ask us to linger on this inconclusive ending but instead on that earlier uncanny, suspended and highly stressed moment of clear "knowing." Consequently, it suggests that what matters most when you feel a funeral in your brain is not what happens afterwards, or how closely this

feeling resembles actual funerals, but the moment of psychic awareness, of intensified consciousness, that such a feeling inevitably leads to—that moment when we feel fully our own astonishing and dislocated strangeness, an experience focused in that internal chamber receptive only to sound.

While the concept of "Being" as "but an Ear" is unique to this poem, Dickinson's interweaving of sound patterns with epistemological reflections recurs. Dickinson has an extraordinary versatility in creating patterns of sound that build to points of felt but not easily explicated emphasis. In "I felt a Funeral," repetition, enjambment, metrical variation, assonance, and alliteration combine to stunning effect in portraying an uncanny moment of consciousness. Dickinson uses similar techniques in "The Soul selects her own Society –" (F409), a poem that reaches its climax in its final stanza, where the speaker moves from generalizing about the agency of all souls ("The" soul) to reminiscing about a particular extreme example:

The Soul selects her own Society –	
Then – shuts the Door –	
To her divine Majority –	]On
Present no more –	]obtrude
Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –	
At her low Gate –	
Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling	
Opon her Mat –	]On her Rush mat
I've known her – from an ample nation –	
Choose One –	
Then – close the Valves of her attention –]	lids –
Like Stone –	

While all souls choose, only the exceptionally selective close out all but "One" intimate companion. The poem ends in a tone of wonder at the possibility of such extremity.

The tonal force of this poem's final stanza results from metrical variation and sound play. Whereas lines 1 and 3 of each stanza maintain between eight and ten syllables throughout the poem, lines 2 and 4 reduce from the 4-syllable line of stanzas 1 and 2 to a 2-syllable spondee in stanza 3: "Choose One . . . Like Stone – "—each word a monosyllable and capitalized. Equally contributing is the crescendo of assonance and rhyme. In this poem, long lines conclude with syllabic rhyme: each ends in a polysyllable rhyming on its final syllable, respectively "y"; "ing"; and "tion." In contrast, the short lines end with monosyllables and a stronger rhyme, although the rhyme is full only in the first stanza. By the time we arrive at the poem's last word, "Stone," we both notice the lack of full rhyme with "One" and hear full rhymes with "Stone" reverberating

from earlier in the poem: "own" and "known." Moreover, the poem contains repeated long *o* sounds: Soul/own/Society/Door/no/more/notes/low/known/close/Stone—the dominant tone in a remarkable eleven out of the poem's fifty-two words. The last word resonates, then, with a sound pattern that has been echoing since the first line of the poem, and that dominates the first stanza (Soul, own, Society, Door, no, more). Like a stringed instrument that vibrates sympathetically to certain pitches, these key words of the first line vibrate sonically all the way to the end. "Stone" also vibrates with the poem's echoing *n*'s—in the last stanza alone: "One," "known" "an," "nation," "Then," and "attention." *O* is the most open of sounds. Paradoxically, its repetitions lead to a chilling state of closure: the Soul's autonomous self-possession in selecting its community of intimates is as absolute as the grave; the heart is a living entity to those whom it selects but "Like Stone" to all who remain outside its "attention."

Assonance and word rhythms play a role of extraordinary significance in Dickinson's lyric strains, although they have not received much attention in critical literature on her work. Another poem never sent to anyone, "Wild nights" (F269), gains some of its force from the repeated long *i* and monosyllables in those two opening words, echoed in the three long *i*s of the poem's penultimate line: "Might I but moor – tonight – / In thee!" Carol Maier illuminates the power of such a pattern through her discussion of a Spanish translation of (or poetic response to) this poem, beginning with the words "noche loca" (crazy night), a translation that does not literally reproduce "Wild nights" but which Maier persuasively argues is more forceful than the literal "noches tempestuosas" because its repetition of the long *o* and of word structure (in Spanish, the grammatical trochees of *noche loca*) more closely imitates Dickinson's assonance and structural repetition in "Wild nights" (85).

In other poems, full rhyme is a more significant element in the poem's lyric effect. Also never circulated, "A Toad, can die of Light –" (F419), maintains no consistency in line or stanza length or in syllables or beats per line, which vary from two to ten and two to five, respectively. Its strong rhyming and aural effects, however, link the stanzas and culminate in a powerful cadence:

	rhyme scheme		
A Toad, can die of Light –	a		
Death is the Common Right	a	]mutual –	equal –
Of Toads and Men –	b		
Of Earl and Midge	c		
The privilege –	c		
Why swagger, then?	b		
The Gnat's supremacy is large as Thine –	d		

Life – is a different Thing –	e	]Another
So measure Wine –	d	
Naked of Flask – Naked of Cask –	f(f)	
Bare Rhine –	d	
Which Ruby's mine?	d	

In the first stanza of this poem, the rhyme of lines 3 and 6 cuts across three sentences to create an aural chiasmus (bccb, Men Midge privil*ege* then) leading up to the pentameter line at the end of this stanza—which sounds wonderfully contemptuous in its length and its introduction of a new rhyme sound ("Thine") but also echoes the strong vowel (the long i) of the first two lines. This contemptuousness is also suggested by the repeated short *a* in "swagger" and "Gnat" and polysyllabic elongation, first in the 3-syllable "privilege," then in the 4-syllable "supremacy." From the perspective of sound, Dickinson is absolutely right to keep "Common" rather than the variants "mutual" or "equal"; their liquid sounds and longer vowels would interfere with the crispness of the poem's opening hard syllables (*To*a*d c*an *d*ie Ligh*t D*eath *C*ommon Righ*t To*a*d*s) echoed later in "Toads," "Mi*dg*e," "different," "Naked," "Cask," and "Flask."

Like the last line in the first stanza, the first in the second begins without a rhyme: "Life – is a different Thing –." Even while proclaiming difference, however, this line echoes the syntactic structure (X is Y) and sounds of the preceding line: the "l" of "large" and "i" of "Thine" in "Life" and the "th" of "Thine" in "Thing." "Thing" at the end of the line sounds oddly conclusive, because of the lack of rhyme, and perhaps because it returns us to the opening trimeter line-length. From this point on, the poem makes an increasing number of aural connections. The second stanza rhymes edf(f)dd—picking up and repeating the sound of the final pentamenter line of stanza one, bringing the conclusively final and unrhymed word of that stanza and line of thought into a new set of rhymes. Line 10 contains internal rhyme and dashes that make it sound like a pair of dimeter lines and move quickly, exactly the opposite of the final 2 lines, where Dickinson writes what would more normally have been a trimeter (with internal rhyme) as two poetic lines. Dickinson probably separates these final short phrases onto two rows of print because "Bare Rhine" concludes the rhyme, thought, and syntax begun two lines earlier and could therefore logically conclude the poem; as I discuss in Chapter 4, she follows syntax and rhyme in splitting metrical lines. In contrast, the phrases "Naked of Flask – Naked of Cask –" repeat the same thought and phrase structure. The question of the final line is syntactically independent, hence also more unexpected—perhaps the reason Dickinson gives it its own line. Yet it returns us to the "u" of "supremacy" in "Ruby" and consolidates the long "i's" that the poem has been playing with throughout (die, Light, Right, Why, Thine, Life,

Wine, Rhine, mine). What the speaker claims through these rhymes is her "Life" ("mine"), not her death. In a poem written during the Civil War, at a time when martyr deaths were mourned and glorified repeatedly in public forums, and in a religious culture that saw mortal life as merely preliminary to afterlife, Dickinson may be asking "Why" glorify death?

Yet "Life" is a curiously objectified "Thing"—albeit a different kind of thing from Death. According to the analogy with wine, "Life" intoxicates; it is a kind of artisanal or artistic product varying in quality according to the skill of its maker and the luck of contingencies, like the weather. Logically, then, the value of life is far from intrinsic; it is made, a "Thing," a product of effort, knowledge, work, often cooperative labor, perhaps devotion. Again, following the analogy with wine, Dickinson may imply that one person's "Ruby" cannot be utterly distinguished from another's. Like vintners depending on others to produce their wine, we are implicated in the "Bare Rhine" of our neighbors. Clearly, Dickinson uses "Rhine" for the rhyme with "wine" and "mine," but the geographical marker for wine also encourages the idea that we do not produce the quality of our lives sui generis. As Dickinson says in "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –," we "discern[] . . . Provincially" according to where we "grow" or were "born" (F256). Rhymes emphasize these implied connections: *Thine, Wine, Rhine,* and *mine* interlink questions of community or co-dependency (thine/mine) with the principal words of the first line of each stanza: *Light* and *Life*. This trajectory of sound pulls "Thine" away from comparison with the dying gnat's "supremacy" to the question of choice: confronted with life at its most "Naked" and "Bare," what quality do you choose? How do you distinguish your "Life," or "Wine," from the animal "Common Right" to "die"? That which gives life (light) "can" as easily lead to death, the poem implies, but for an individual's determination to make "Life" indeed a "different Thing." This is a brilliant, and brilliantly simple, poem in its multiple political, cultural, and ontological implications, structured in two stanzas of iambic meter and insistent rhyme, syncopated by inconsistent line lengths. The dominant rhythmic figure of the poem is chiasmus or inverted parallelism, repeated in the UsuS stress patterns at the beginning of lines 2, 8, and 10 and repeated in the second half of line 10, as well as in the chiastic rhyme pattern of lines 3 through 6 and 9 through 11 (Men, Midge, privilege, then and Wine, Flask, Cask, Rhine).[59] Chiasmus is a pattern of return, balance. While the poem ends with a question, it also suggests the possibility of order through its building consonance of rhythm and sounds. And this order is associated not with an afterlife or with spiritual or doctrinal truths but with the pleasure and labor of "Life."

Dickinson is a poet of sounds. Where Marianne Moore defines poetry through an organic metaphor as "'imaginary gardens with real toads in

them,'" Dickinson may, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," in effect define poetry as language that brings us to the experience of "Being [as] but an Ear" (*Becoming Marianne Moore* 73). Reading Dickinson requires affiliation with that "Silence" of attentive listening, which alone situates us in the moment, in the poem's "here," although any reader's response to a poem will inevitably move out from that "here" to the "And then" of his or her contextual understanding, often being struck by lines that both illuminate ways of thinking and implant tunes in our brains. Such reading is encouraged by approaching Dickinson as a poet of lyric strains in the implied definitions of her century, whether or not in relation to critical definitions of ours.

Dickinson's poetry is not Poe's—that is, "Beauty" is not for her "the sole legitimate province" of the poem. Dickinson also goes farther than Emerson: her poems not only contain a "meter-making argument" but an argument that typically functions in ways as unpredictable or "defiant of rules" as her metaphors and verse forms. Who could guess that "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,"—a surprising enough conceit from the start—would lead to a moment of isolated racial identification with "Silence," yet the logic of the poem feels equally astonishing and right, perhaps in part because of the tense urgency of its rhythms and sounds. Another poem begins with the definitive statement that "This World is not conclusion." (complete with line-end period) but concludes with a striking metaphorical admission that we will always doubt this conviction, and the paradoxical combination of a full rhyme with an open dash: "Much Gesture, from the Pulpit – / Strong Hallelujahs roll – / Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul –" (F373). A poem ostensibly about beetles or June bugs that drop from the ceiling in summer contains the unanticipated reflection that "A Bomb opon the Ceiling / Is an improving thing – / It keeps the nerves progressive / Conjecture flourishing –" (F1150). Another begins with its speaker irritated by spiders in what appears to be an outhouse: "Alone and in a Circumstance / Reluctant to be told / A spider on my reticence / Assiduously crawled"; then with one of those astonishing and logical turns, it becomes the occasion for a profound meditation on God's role in what she calls the "Larceny" of the "marrow of the Day"—the substance that gives meaning to and enables competent functioning in our lives. "[W]hat redress can be," she asks, "For an offence not here nor there / So not in Equity – / That Larceny of time and mind / The marrow of the Day / By spider, or forbid it Lord / That I should specify –" (F1174). Dickinson not only engages in a process of thinking in her poems; uncharacteristically for the nineteenth century, she also truncates and compresses that process so radically that the syntax and sound of every line or stanza plays a dramatic role in developing its force or logic.

If we read genre through a process that is both definitional and historically sensitive, we hear not just Dickinson's nineteenth-century verse but also twenty-first-century innovative engagement with lyric differently and in ways that may inform each other. As suggested earlier, the romantic/post-romantic genre definition has been aggressively challenged, and is being newly theorized. In 1988, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten's "Politics of Poetry" manifesto criticizes the "narrowness and provincialism of mainstream literary norms" that have held up "the personal, 'expressive' lyric . . . as the canonical poetic form," and in 1999 Marjorie Perloff declares that poets like Silliman and Susan Howe "have no interest in the closural first-person metaphoric model of mainstream poetry." "[P]erhaps *the* cardinal principle of American Language poetics," Perloff states, "has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry" ("Language Poetry" 419, 405).[60] Some of this writing emphasizes sound. Elizabeth Willis muses that "If the lyric's defining characteristic is the priority of its sonic patterns . . . then it depends on being heard; it hangs everything on the presence and engagement of its audience . . . a social context of which the writer is a part" ("Lyric Dissent" 229, 230). More recently, in a discussion of the lyric in Buffalo, New York, Myung Mi Kim stated that for her the most urgent question about the lyric was what work it enabled the poet to do. In writing, she looks for the "opening" in that "combinatory system" we call language that allows for innovation or newness—a statement that calls to mind Dickinson's claim in "I dwell in Possibility –" that poetry is "A fairer House than Prose –" because it is "More numerous" of windows and doors (F466).[61] According to Kim, lyric involves "sounding," and "sounding" is an "event" or "activating force." Because sounding occurs "at the cusp of the viable and the as yet unavailable," lyric has the "potential to create a language-based, rhythmical space for the viable [or, Kim says, "maybe for the unviable"] as part of a cultural and historical process"; to this extent, lyric in effect "creates ontological openings." Giving even greater emphasis to sound, Denise Riley regards the lyric as "thought being made in the ear" (66).[62]

Obviously, Dickinson is not a twenty-first-century experimentalist poet; Kim's vocabulary would have been foreign to her in the same way that Holmes's diction of sweetness is to us. Nonetheless, such comments may provide a more useful vocabulary for articulating how the genre of lyric enabled certain kinds of work for Dickinson in the late 1850s than now-canonical definitions of the romantic/post-romantic lyric insofar as they emphasize dynamics of sound, form, and thought rather than expressions of individual subjectivity or a particular relation to time. And such comments may also reveal ways in which Dickinson's verse continues to be useful as a model for

reading (and writing) contemporary lyric verse—not because she anticipated later formulations but because the practice of poetry in her era allowed openings in some ways similar to those of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century innovative poetries.

Dickinson wrote to Higginson that she "could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled [her] Tramp" (L265) and later to her cousins: "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray" (L278). Such messages suggest that the lyric ("Bells" / "sing[ing]") enabled work Dickinson could do in no other way. Given what we are learning about the surprisingly progressive quality of her education and the formally innovative poetry she read as a girl, it appears that she found a particular openness to innovation in the lyric strains of short-lined verse that made it the most capacious mode of "sounding" her thought (Kim), or through which to "generate and shape knowledge of the world" (Dimock 1383). Lyric strains may have linked Dickinson, in her writing practice, not just to other women who wrote poetry in her age, or to those men and women to whom she mailed poems, but generically with the wide range of poets she had read who were also experimenting with lyric verse. Wai Chee Dimock suggests that the stability of traditional genres helps prevent a fixation on originality; for Dickinson, it may have been the combination of traditional aspects of the lyric poem and her contemporaries' innovative manipulations of lyric form that made the short-lined lyric such a fitting genre for working at that "cusp" of the "viable and the as yet unavailable," as Kim says, or in her own words "trying to think" in ways that enabled her to "stun [herself] / With Bolts – of Melody!"

3

Hymn, the "Ballad Wild," and Free Verse

Bear with the Ballad –
"Sang from the Heart, Sire," F1083

As the previous chapter demonstrates, although a great variety of verse was considered lyric, from sea chanties to verse of highly irregular rhyming and stanzaic structure, the lyric poem as such was not a much discussed genre in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. In contrast, the ballad had been the topic of active public debate for decades by the time of Dickinson's youth. Following the late eighteenth-century ballad revival in the British Isles, with its defining impact on Romantic poetry, the ballad had become a popular form for imitation and experiment—no doubt spurring the American enthusiasm for departures from set form, especially for short-lined poems. While there is ample evidence that Dickinson wrote with the rhythms of hymns in her ears, several aspects of her verse suggest that a more accurate formulation would be that she wrote in relation to song. Song, in this context, includes the hymns and ballads she sang, the poetry she read, and the popular music she played on the piano.[1]

I do not mean by this that Dickinson imagines her poems literally as sung or even as oral—in distinction to their significant aurality: Dickinson knew traditions of oral and communal poetry like the ballad through a combination of print and recitation or song, and she understood the integrity of the page. At the same time, her poetry leans strongly toward what might be called a secondary or written orality: like Robert Browning, Whitman, and others of her contemporaries, she creates the fiction of a speaking presence with great attention to inflections and rhythms of speech, but speech that she assumes will be known primarily through the page (see Chapter 4).[2] Many prose writers of the 1840s and 1850s experimented with dialect and regional idioms—famously in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in travel or humorous sketches—and dialect poetry was written frequently during the Civil War. Dickinson writes in an idiom familiar to her New England ear, combining the verve and idiosyncracies of speech with the measures of song, perhaps one reason

for her apparent simultaneous delight in the patterned opportunities afforded by short-lined verse and in the loosening or disrupting of those patterns to make her language more "alive."[3]

There is a long tradition of permeable boundaries between poems and songs: songs have "lyrics" and poems are often set to music or titled "Song" or "Hymn"—as in Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" or Bryant's "Song of the Stars" and Emerson's "Hymn: sung at the completion of the Concord monument, April 19, 1836"—all poems Dickinson knew.[4] Writing of the "lyrical productions" selected for his poetry anthology *Songs of Three Centuries,* John Greenleaf Whittier exclaims that "the last century has been prolific in song" (*Whittier on Writers* 202). Dickinson herself frequently refers to poems as songs and imagines birds as like poets in "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –" (F256), "The Robin is the One" (F501C), "The Birds begun at Four o'clock –" (F504 B), "The Robin for the Crumb" (F810 B), and "At Half past Three, a single Bird" (F1099 B), to give just a few examples of poems where birds produce "reports," "Miracle," "Chronicle," or "Experiment." Michael Cohen writes that in the early nineteenth century "songs, stories, and poems come from a surprisingly wide array of sources" and "cannot be located precisely in any one cultural domain." Ballads in particular, he argues, constitute a hybrid form of oral and print cultures and a "'folk' form" that was associated with medieval troubadours but often used contemporary events as subject matter ("Peddlars" 12, 28).[5] Both ballads and hymns reveal aspects of their oral base as sung, shared, and shaped communally.

The extraordinary fertility of Dickinson's stanzaic and metrical forms arises from these intersections of elite and popular, printed and sung, religious and secular short-lined forms prevalent in the 1840s and 1850s. Her experimentation with loosened meter, shifts in stanzaic form mid-poem, and testing of free verse rhythms also reveals the influence of the eighteenth-century ballad revival as it had filtered into American popular poetry. Following this revival, fascination with traditional ballads brought renewed interest in the accentual rhythms of medieval verse and a vogue for imitating such forms. According to Albert Friedman, the ballad revival broke the "tyranny" of the iamb in the nineteenth century by (re)introducing poets to the option of tri-syllabic substitution for the two-syllable foot (248–49, 346).[6] Sir Walter Scott claimed that James Macpherson's 1760 collection of Ossian poems gave "new tone to poetry throughout all Europe."[7] Goethe, Robert Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Tennyson were influenced by ballads; Wordsworth wrote that ballads "emancipate 'new poets'"; Christopher North wrote that "perhaps none of us ever wrote verses of any worth who had not been more or less readers of our old ballads" (Friedman 292).[8] In the United States, Whittier claims that the "sturdiest and homeliest Scottish simplicity"

of ballads has been among the key influences on "the modern lyric" (*Whittier on Writers* 205). Steve Newman more strongly states that the ballad changed lyric poetry by transforming it from "polite" into "imaginative writing" (1).[9] Since the early nineteenth century, poets and scholars have seen the ballad revival as having a transformational effect on nineteenth-century lyric verse, including a loosening of metrical form. Dickinson used the ballad's forms and associations as both a foil and a model for her own innovative and dramatic lyric poems.

Michael Cohen identifies the ballad as "arguably the most important genre in nineteenth-century poetic discourse" in the United States; before the Civil War, the ballad was understood to include not just adventurous or uncanny tales but also didactic verse ("Whittier" 3).[10] Contemporary ballads could be contemplative, sensational, satirical, political, or comic, and were extremely popular for reading and recitation and as set to music and sung. The *Springfield Republican* published many poems in ballad form—such as Luella Clark's "On a Sunny Summer Morning" set to music by Carl Hanse, and the traditional "Love me little, love me long," first published in 1659.[11] During the Civil War, a good part of the poetry that was published and most popular song was described as "ballads."[12] This included poems of widely variant formal properties; for example, poems shaped more like what we might call an ode (with stanzas combining lines of varied length, devised to fit the poet's mood or refrain) were called "ballads." Such loose nomenclature leads Cohen to hypothesize that the term "ballad" was used as a "sign of [the poet's] ability to reach thousands of readers" and of "a poetic culture only indirectly under the control of legitimating social forces" ("Whittier" 26).[13] Certainly at the level of practice, early and mid-nineteenth-century American literary culture showed less concern with formal definition and more with a broad conflation of qualities for omnibus genres like the lyric and ballad.

Dickinson's exact repetition of short-lined accentual-syllabic patterns in many poems stems from the kind of regularity required for the communal singing of hymns. In contrast, her use of a looser running rhythm or accentual (as opposed to accentual-syllabic) meter follows the model of balladic verse. These models are distinctly different in structuring principles even though often not in description or practice. Neither the hymn nor the ballad models an interrogation of philosophical questions but their easy rhythms, pungently idiomatic address, and loose narrative structures seem to enable Dickinson's densely metaphorical and epistemological turns. Fluctuating between the precise tunes of hymns, the ballad's "wild" looseness, and her own musical sense of cadence in language, Dickinson's poems and process of composition are illuminated by understanding more about both her musical practice and the musical culture of the United States during her formative years.[14]