

SINGING OFF CHARNEL STEPS: THE WAR POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON
AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

by

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(Under the Direction of Douglas Anderson)

ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are not known primarily as war poets. However, Dickinson addressed the American Civil War in both her letters and in a substantial number of poems, while Barrett Browning wrote extensively about the Risorgimento, the struggle of the Italian states for independence and unification during much of the nineteenth century. The first chapter of this project treats Dickinson's letters that refer to the war, revealing how the poet engaged with this conflict in her correspondence with her Norcross cousins, Samuel and Mary Bowles, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In the second chapter, Dickinson's war poetry is examined in detail. These poems about the soldiers who fall in battle and those who mourn them do not present a coherent political view, but rather suggest multiple stories and meanings. The third chapter includes poems less directly related to the war: poems about peace, revolution, patriotism, race, and the wars within nature and within ourselves. These works show how integral the Civil War was to Dickinson's world view. The fourth and final chapter investigates Barrett Browning's political and martial poems, focusing on three areas: her hero-worship, her position as an English poet writing about Italy, and her treatment of gender in these works. An examination of these themes illuminates the complexity of Barrett Browning's Risorgimento poetry and the extent to which she wrestled with the political, philosophical, and social issues the Risorgimento brought to the fore. Though the two poets produced war poetry that often looks quite different, both approached war and politics from a similar angle. Both were keenly interested in the human heart, representing what Emerson terms "The republican at home" and wishing for a state based on "the principle of right and love." Dickinson was greatly influenced by Barrett Browning; both "sang off charnel steps," but believed fervently in humanity and its possibilities.

INDEX WORDS: Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, War poetry, Nineteenth-century poetry, Women's literature

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DEDICATION

To Mike, always

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INTRODUCTION

[. . .] Sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines.

'Tis dangerous to value, for only the precious can alarm. I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished – till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous. (L298)

Emily Dickinson wrote these words to her Norcross cousins in December 1862, the year after the Civil War began and Elizabeth Barrett Browning died. She wonders why losses suffered by a nation and an individual do not stun them into silence, until she recalls what certainly was never far from her thoughts – that her writing springs from that loss. Emily Dickinson read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's war poetry and even quotes from it in an earlier letter to her cousins. Dickinson identifies herself here as a poet of war too. It is a role born of "sorrow," but its "power" is indeed "stupendous."

Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are not known as war poets. One can hardly imagine Thomas Wentworth Higginson including war in his original groupings of Dickinson's poems, and only a handful of critics since Higginson suggest that the American Civil War is a major subject of her poetry. Politics and war were definitely major subjects of Barrett Browning's poetry. She wrote extensively about the

Italian Risorgimento, the struggle to free the Italian states from foreign and papal influence and unite them in a single nation that lasted most of the nineteenth century. This poetry, however, was not well received at the time it was published, and it has not yet attracted the full attention it deserves. Firmly establishing war as an integral part of Dickinson's and Barrett Browning's work is vital to a more complete understanding of these poets. The lens through which they are viewed is still too narrow. With some important exceptions, critics simply have not focused enough attention on their political and martial work.

Dickinson biographers Richard Sewall and Alfred Habegger firmly establish the supposedly elusive link between Emily Dickinson herself and the Civil War.¹ Dickinson's father Edward was a respected Whig politician in Massachusetts. Habegger explains his politics at the time of the Civil War as well as his daughter's knowledge of public life (400-401). Sewall affirms that Dickinson had a detailed grasp of Thomas Wentworth Higginson's political activities concerning abolition and women's rights from her extensive reading of periodicals, most notably her friend Samuel Bowles's Springfield Republican. Dickinson was in contact with Higginson as he traveled south to command a black regiment in South Carolina, and she was also aware of her brother Austin's paying a substitute to take his place in battle. More importantly, the deaths of the Adams boys, acquaintances of the Dickinsons, and of their friend Frazar Stearns, whose father was a president of Amherst College, deeply affected Emily Dickinson and her family (535-36). Habegger acknowledges that the war touched Dickinson, and he mentions some of the letters in which she addresses it, but he does not discuss any poems

in this context. Sewall reduces her extensive, complex war canon to a few letters and some “marvelous little elegies” (536) for sons of Amherst who perished in battle.²

Other critics, even those interested in history, completely remove Dickinson from it. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, in a study focusing on abolition and feminism, views the enslavement of Africans and the oppression of women in Dickinson’s poetry “not as politics but as imagery” (129). “Her poetry flamboyantly insists on privacy, on its internalization of social concerns” (11), Sánchez-Eppler argues, concluding that Dickinson is “actively antipolitical” (130). Joanne Dobson similarly claims that “A discussion of Dickinson and public issues is to some degree a discourse in negative terms, a chronicling of what isn’t there” (78), and she asserts that “Only a few remarks can be found in her letters, and the poetry is almost entirely free of public reference” (78). Dobson is largely correct when she writes that Dickinson “shows no attempt to transform objective reality” (86) – Dickinson certainly was not a social reformer. But that does not mean she was oblivious to any “objective reality.” Finally, Betsey Erkkila takes feminist critics to task for “(re)privatizing” Dickinson (1) and argues for rehistoricizing her. Yet according to Erkkila, “Not only did she set herself against the abolitionist, reformist, and democratizing energies of the times, she also set herself against the public and political engagement of her father” (7). Erkkila views Dickinson’s politics as reactionary, branding her an anti-democratic, classist, racist xenophobe, and she barely mentions the Civil War, the most significant historical event in the poet’s lifetime.

A second group of critics views the war as merely a metaphor in Dickinson’s poetry. For them, Dickinson internalized the war, and therefore the martial elements of her work become another key to her psyche. Daniel Aaron was the first to voice this

opinion. He believes that the war made Dickinson even more of a recluse, while it also “inflamed her imagination, illuminated old enigmas, touched her deeper sympathies” and “coincided with her private anguish” (355). In a similar vein, Barton Levi St. Armand argues later in his very thorough study of Dickinson and her culture that

The War between the States was another outward and visible sign of Dickinson’s own silent and inner torment, which had begun long before the firing on Fort Sumter. It brought all the opposites of her consciousness together in a fierce conjunction that could truly be called “metaphysical.”
(99)

St. Armand explains that Dickinson worshiped at the altar of the “Sentimental Love Religion” (80) of her time, a religion in which “romantic love” is the means to salvation (89). He says that the “American call to arms gave the sentimental gospel of love and consolation a strident urgency, imparting to it the flavor of a holy war” (100), which “pitted the last vestiges of patriarchal Calvinism against the new legions that preached matriarchal romance” (103).³ Thus, the Civil War is the “epic background” (103) for Emily Dickinson’s internal conflicts. By focusing on the “metaphysical” aspects of the war, Aaron and St. Armand rightly remind Dickinson’s readers that she, like all great poets, absorbed and transformed external reality through her imaginative powers, creating a unique language to convey inner truths. Metaphors are a poet’s business. But Emily Dickinson also lived in her historical moment, and she commented on its significant events because they were important to both the external and internal aspects of her life.

A few critics do view the Civil War as one such event. The first to insist that she wrote war poetry was Thomas Ford, who offered readings of a few of those poems in a

1965 article. Noting her extreme productivity during the war years, he argues that “the knowledge of death seemed to act as a stimulus to her writing, and the knowledge of casualties in battle acted to increase her awareness of death, which in turn roused her creative energy” (199). His identification of actual war poems was groundbreaking. Years after this article, Elizabeth Phillips feels prompted to ask, “Would the successful poem be any more meaningful if there were a footnote explaining its connection to a war?” (51). By recognizing that Dickinson wrote war poetry, Phillips argues, one sees Dickinson’s ability to transform not only her own feelings but those of others into works of art (52); she does not address the importance of acknowledging that Dickinson was interested in history as well. Phillips then proceeds to offer very brief readings of a handful of war poems. In his 1990 study, Benjamin Lease also argues that Dickinson was touched by the war. But he too views Dickinson as absorbing the war more so than reacting to it, arguing that

Dickinson’s suffering over the departure of her beloved minister [Charles Wadsworth] because of the war, her concern about her Preceptor’s [Higginson’s] dangerous involvement, her horror over the slaughter on the battlefields, her awareness of the war fever gripping the nation (and Amherst) – all these feelings are incorporated into poems that reflect a similar struggle [. . .] (80)

Like Phillips, he then reads a few of Dickinson’s war letters and poems.

The only book-length analysis of Emily Dickinson and war is Shira Wolosky’s 1984 Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War. She rightly notes that Dickinson’s work “when approached without the assumption of her complete isolation, can be seen as profoundly

engaged in problems of the external world, and aggressively so” (xiii). Like Sewall, Wolosky discusses the “political circles” Dickinson lived in (35), and she stresses, like Ford, the magnitude of Dickinson’s poetic output during the war years. She is the first critic to argue for the existence of a “sizable number of poems directly addressing the war” (37), and she emphasizes the extent to which “violence infused [Dickinson’s] world” (38). But Wolosky also asserts that “Far from remaining detached from the civil conflagration, Dickinson internalized it” (38-39), and it is here that one first sees that Wolosky’s primary interest is in the internal conflicts the war reflects, not in Dickinson’s reaction to the war as such. She is also deeply interested in Dickinson’s interrogation of the “theodicean structure” of “the justification of loss by gain, of evil by good” (65), and she reads many of Dickinson’s war poems exclusively from this perspective. Her work is a milestone on this subject, but it still does not stray too far from the criticism that preceded it.

In a recent article attempting to reposition Emily Dickinson in literary history, Margaret Dickie identifies the limitations of Wolosky’s approach, which focuses heavily on the “metaphysical” and “tends to spiritualize the war” (188). Dickie argues that “the war had a reality of its own that not only touched the poet but overwhelmed her imagination” (188). Further,

The speed, the suffering, and the unbearable loss of the war deaths are the subjects of many of her poems in which she puts aside religious issues and probes the psychological reality of the war experience. Mourning and guilt at surviving when so many were killed are also her subjects, as she

turned her attention to the catastrophic impact this war had on every citizen. (188)

According to Dickie, Dickinson tells the war “slant,” as she “writes about war by writing about something else” (188). Dickinson values the “private over the public, the individual over the social, the psychic over the political, the sectional over the national, the fragment over the whole” (189) in her war poetry. The public, political, and national figure in Dickinson’s war poetry more than Dickie acknowledges, but she is the only critic who comprehends just how “real” Dickinson’s war poetry was, “how deep her understanding of [war] was” (189). To Dickie, Dickinson illuminates the Civil War as a “lived experience” (194) which aided in “rescuing her from the sentimental religion of romance” (195); St. Armand also believes the war helped in this effort. This article, more than any other, makes perfectly clear why reading Emily Dickinson as a war poet is imperative.

It is equally imperative to view Elizabeth Barrett Browning in this light. Barrett Browning wrote political poems before her marriage, but her move to Italy with Robert Browning made her a war poet. Her residence in that country coincided with a crucial period in the Risorgimento. She witnessed the uprisings of 1848-49 and lamented their failure. Though she remained keenly interested in the Risorgimento for the next ten years, she was particularly excited when Napoleon III of France came to Italy’s defense against Austria; and she was extremely disappointed by his perceived capitulation at Villafranca. She followed closely the careers of Piedmont’s King Victor Emmanuel II, his minister Cavour, and the republican military leader Garibaldi, and she died just after most of Italy was united in one kingdom.⁴

Barrett Browning was personally and professionally committed to the Risorgimento. She devoted her long poem Casa Guidi Windows to the subject, as well as all but one poem in her volume Poems before Congress, and half of her collection Last Poems. Yet for a long time there was very little critical emphasis on this poetry. The reasons for the void begin with what Flavia Alaya identifies as a scholarly “need to define Robert’s politics by contrast with those of Elizabeth” and the “tendency to mythologize the political contrast between the Brownings” (6). According to this myth, Robert Browning disapproved of both his wife’s political views and their appearance in her poetry, his calm, measured thinking standing in stark contrast to the histrionics of Elizabeth. Thus, her political rants were dismissed. In addition, Marjorie Stone explains that in her political poetry Barrett Browning “assumed the prerogative of polemical cursing traditionally monopolized by male prophets and a male God” (186). Though many women before Barrett Browning wrote public poetry, critics often discouraged women in Victorian England from addressing politics. Thus Barrett Browning’s treatment of it resulted in “the exclusion of Barrett Browning’s many historically significant political poems from the Victorian literary canon for more than a century following her death in 1861” (Stone 186).

Recently, critics have begun to examine Barrett Browning’s Risorgimento poetry. Some have chosen to focus on the image of Italy in Barrett Browning’s work, rather than on the politics of that nation. Sandra Gilbert, for example, argues that Italy always has been a “symbolic text” (209). She notes that as the peninsula became more chaotic, the vague vision of Italy sharpened, revealing the picture of a country that symbolized the “fallen woman” (210). Gilbert argues that Barrett Browning attempted to “transform

Italy from a political state to a female state of mind” (210), and both she and Alaya agree that Barrett Browning effected her own personal risorgimento through her interest in the renewal of Italy. Certainly, Barrett Browning did a great deal of healing in Italy, but Gilbert’s view reduces Italy to a symbol, when, for Barrett Browning, it was a real country with real problems that deeply engaged her. Alaya and Helen M. Cooper also believe that Barrett Browning rejected the image of Italy as victim and attempted to create for Italy “a new mythos” (Alaya 15).

These critics do not read Barrett Browning’s Risorgimento poetry in much detail. Gilbert delves deeply into Barrett Browning’s relationship to Italy, but after briefly discussing Casa Guidi Windows, she provides detailed analysis only of Aurora Leigh. Alaya argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s political work is worthy of attention, but then examines Robert Browning’s political poetry instead. In her book-length study of Barrett Browning, Cooper offers a reading of Casa Guidi Windows that recognizes a number of its central themes. She does not discuss any poetry which succeeds Aurora Leigh, however. Angela Leighton’s work on Barrett Browning provides a good example of this critical tendency. Leighton rightly points out that Barrett Browning’s

poems about Italy are often racked and contorted works, both thematically and metrically, as if the problems of Italy, instead of being an opportunity to harp on the song of woman’s creativity, confronted her with the grotesque facts of real, unaesthetic suffering. (109)

But she then takes only a quick glance at Casa Guidi Windows, after calling it “not one of her best works” (110).

Other critics read Barrett Browning's war poetry but do not fully acknowledge its complexity. In Arms and the Woman, Cooper, Munich, and Squier assert that Barrett Browning's poetry epitomizes "the conflict between women's acceptance of the roles men have assigned to them in the war story and women's challenge both to those roles and to the privileging of that story, with its traditional focus on men at the front" (14). They also point out that Barrett Browning breaks the silence that women often were told to maintain on the subjects of war and politics. And yet they argue that in doing so she merely recounts "the canonical war story" (15), equating men with war and aggression and women with peace and love. This view oversimplifies Barrett Browning's war poetry. Deborah Phelps also believes Barrett Browning played the woman's part in the war story perfectly. She argues that

In much of the poetry dealing with foreign issues, the dramatic situation consists of an emotionally involved woman proscribing and denouncing, but always sequestered from direct relation to the world of action outside her window. (227)

According to Phelps, no matter how hard Barrett Browning tries, she simply tells the same old story about the powerless woman confined to an extremely "small sphere of influence" (229). Phelps accepts the long-held view that only the men who live through battle can write about war authentically. Yet the war works of noncombatant male authors have been accepted as "real," and clearly there are war stories beyond combat that are worth telling. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's war poems include the stories of both men and women, some powerful and some powerless, but most interesting and complex.

Two notable exceptions to this critical trend are Dorothy Mermin, who examines a few poems in Poems before Congress and Last Poems as well as Casa Guidi Windows closely, and most recently Katherine Montwieler, who analyzes Poems before Congress in great detail. Both scholars recognize the importance of a woman's voice in these poems in which Barrett Browning asserts a woman's right to speak publicly about public matters. Montwieler's work is particularly helpful because she reads so many poems in that long-neglected volume.

Among Barrett Browning's individual Risorgimento poems, "Mother and Poet," from which Emily Dickinson quotes in one of her war letters, attracts more attention than any other poem in either Poems before Congress or Last Poems, perhaps with the exception of "A Curse for a Nation," Barrett Browning's attack on slavery in the United States. Critics who have read this poem have not recognized fully the extent to which the speaker wrestles with the role of a woman, mother, poet, and patriot during wartime. This poem is central to Barrett Browning's war canon, and will be examined in detail later. Casa Guidi Windows is also now attracting the attention it deserves. Esther Schor's recent interpretation of this poem treats it seriously and thoroughly, identifying it as a poem with ambitious political aims. Schor argues that Barrett Browning seeks "to evoke a poetics of politics, a praxis of political agency designed to humanize a desolate landscape peopled by inscrutable popes and dukes on the one hand and unconscious crowds on the other" (306). It is a poem, she asserts, in which Barrett Browning "addresses an urgent need to claim political agency" (309), agency which is situated "in her act of [poetic] vision and vehement revision" (310). Leigh Coral Harris's reading of the poem focuses on Barrett Browning's revision of the Italian myth, again highlighting

the poet's ambitious political agenda. Finally, Tricia Lootens not only offers a reading of this poem, but also discusses Barrett Browning's place in the history of Victorian patriotic poetry. Indeed, Barrett Browning produced a body of political poetry that merits thorough examination for its breadth and depth.

A study of Dickinson's and Barrett Browning's war poetry joins an important conversation, but why study them together? The two at first seem antithetical in poetic practice, a view voiced by a number of critics over the years.⁵ Gary Stonum is among the many scholars who attribute Barrett Browning's influence to her status as "a successful woman poet" (39) who "died just at a time when Dickinson's poetry was beginning to flourish" (40) – not to Barrett Browning's talent as a poet. "As a woman with an international reputation, Elizabeth Barrett Browning helped to confirm Dickinson in her poetic vocation" (124), according to Vivian Pollak. Christanne Miller concurs, and Karl Keller argues that by studying Barrett Browning, Dickinson was "trying to learn how female self-consciousness confronted the marketplace" (329). When her favorite woman poet died in 1861, Dickinson was only thirty years old and on the verge of her most creative period as a poet.⁶

There is no question that Emily Dickinson greatly admired Elizabeth Barrett Browning and was inspired by her work. George Whicher argues that "Toward Elizabeth Barrett Browning indeed she became almost an idolater" (245), and Stonum notes that "Dickinson expressed greater and more persistent admiration for Barrett Browning than for any other writer, except possibly Shakespeare" (35). Several critics have addressed in particular Dickinson's love for Aurora Leigh and its subsequent influence on her poetry. John Evangelist Walsh links sixty Dickinson poems to passages in Aurora Leigh with

“echoes of at least an additional fifty hovering just out of reach” (108). He calls these parallels “similarity or borrowing (or plagiarism, but whisper it soft)” (108), a charge which other critics have refuted. Moers, for example, insightfully comments that the parallel poems serve as “arias in rhyme to break up the onrushing blank verse recitative of Aurora Leigh” (60). Writing long before Walsh and Moers, Rebecca Patterson astutely notes that Dickinson took the “raw material [of Aurora Leigh] into the laboratory of her own mind” (23).

These last two observations come closest to describing Barrett Browning’s effect on Dickinson. The best evidence of this influence comes from Dickinson herself, who wrote about it in at least three poems and in a number of letters. In a letter to Samuel Bowles, she requests, “Should anybody where you go, talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us – and if you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head for me – her unmentioned Mourner –” (L266). In “Her – ‘Last Poems’ –” (Fr600), Dickinson writes that “Silver – perished – with her Tongue –” (3) and that “Not on Record – bubbled Other – / Flute – or Woman – so divine –” (4-5). In the final stanza, she concedes that her sorrow is but slight compared to that of Robert Browning:

Nought – that We – No Poet's Kinsman –
 Suffocate – with easy Wo –
 What – and if Ourselves a Bridegroom –
 Put Her down – in Italy? (14-17)

More important than her expressions of grief, though, is her acknowledgement of the influence. “I think I was enchanted” (Fr627), Dickinson writes about reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning; when she read her, “The Dark – felt beautiful –” (4). She writes,

I could not have defined the change –

Conversion of the Mind

Like Sanctifying in the Soul –

Is witnessed – not explained – (21-24)

Reading this poetry is a religious experience for Dickinson. Barrett Browning's “Tomes of solid Witchcraft” (29) induce in Dickinson a “Divine Insanity” (25).

Barrett Browning not only inspired Dickinson but also influenced her poetry. Dickinson and Barrett Browning seem like very different poets in both style and substance, and they often are. Both poets experiment with both language and form, producing very unruly verse, but their innovations are often different.⁷ While Barrett Browning was writing a novel-poem, Dickinson was perfecting her brief, intense lyrics with their unusual syntax, punctuation, and enjambments. They both wrote about the subjects that nearly all lyric poets explore, chief among them love and death. Barrett Browning was, however, a much more worldly poet than Dickinson, and she wrote about the political and social issues of her day with enthusiasm and ease. Dickinson dealt with such issues more often than readers generally realize, but she refrained from delving into the details. In Richard Sewall's words, her comments on public events “show acute understanding, however tersely or obliquely expressed” though “She was never discursive on these matters” (10).

But Dickinson did write poems inspired by lines from Aurora Leigh and other Barrett Browning works, and her unique word choices and sentence structure surely come partly from the older poet. And though they approached politics and war differently, both were intensely interested in the workings of the heart – both when it was broken and when it was full of love’s possibilities. In their martial poetry, Dickinson examines the hearts of soldiers and those who mourn them, while Barrett Browning looks not only at the grieving heart but looks for a leader with the right kind of heart. War is a particularly appropriate field in which to compare two poets who wrote so eloquently about love and loss. There is a similarity in their perspective and sensibility that has not been fully acknowledged.

A brief look at one complete poem by each woman as well as a few excerpts from others illustrates this point. Here, first, is an 1844 sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning titled “Grief.”

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
 That only men incredulous of despair,
 Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
 Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
 Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,
 In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare
 Under blanching, vertical eye-glare
 Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
 Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death –
 Most like a monumental statue set

In everlasting watch and moveless woe
 Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
 Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:
 If it could weep, it could arise and go.

Immediately, the reader catches a glimpse of what Dickinson learned from Barrett Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was not afraid to alter words and syntax to create her own unique poetic language, and Dickinson took that kind of experimentation to new heights. Words like “passionless” and “desertness” could easily appear in a Dickinson poem. The line, “Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet” also represents a change in diction, but here Barrett Browning simplifies her language, with a direct and very moving address to the reader that looks forward to later poets.

Here is a poem from Dickinson on the same topic with a similar tone.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions, `was it He, that bore,
 And `Yesterday, or Centuries before`?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 A Wooden way
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – (Fr372)

Dickinson's version is more concise, but that fact does not preclude comparison. These poems approach grief and pain from the same perspective. It is silent and "stiff," and the mourner is "like a monumental statue" or "like a stone," completely paralyzed. In Dickinson's version there is the possibility of a "letting go" – maybe of the pain or maybe of one's sanity – but also a possibility of not even surviving the loss; in Barrett Browning's, the "marble" will remain immobile until "itself crumble to the dust beneath." These poems paint a very similar picture of a person in deep mourning.

Other poems by both women echo these sentiments with varying degrees of intensity. In the sonnet "Substitution" from the same series, for example, Barrett Browning's speaker asks, "What hope? what help? what music will undo / That silence to your sense?" (5-6) – the silence that descends after the loss of a loved one. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," (Fr340), Dickinson describes the sounds of that service, but writes, "And I, and silence, some strange Race / Wrecked, solitary, here –" (15-16). Clearly, for both poets, "Pain – has an Element of Blank –" (Fr760) that seems nearly unbearable. And, though at times their speakers do cry out in pain, the reticence and paralysis inherent in their view of true anguish are important aspects of their poetry.

Emily Dickinson first refers to the Civil War and the anguish it brought to the nation in her letters. Examining those letters before moving to the poems that evoke war makes sense for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the nature of the

letters themselves. Though like all correspondence in that they were written to communicate with another person, Dickinson's letters are stylistically unique. They often read like poetry cleverly disguised as prose, not only because of the rhythm of the language but also because the language is nearly as spare as it is in her poems. Further, she places lines and stanzas from poems within her letters and also sends poems as letters. The line between her poetry and prose, then, is far from clear. But the letters also represent a particular state of mind conveyed to a particular correspondent, and in that way they are invaluable in the background they provide in reading the poems; they allow us to read Dickinson reading the war. The first chapter analyzes Dickinson letters that refer to war and politics, grouping them by their recipient.

The next two chapters treat her war poetry. The two major subjects of these poems are how the soldier felt as he faced death and how those on the homefront faced mourning that death. Though political issues make brief appearances in the poems, for the most part Dickinson eschews such detail. These are suggestive works that tell war stories but never in a straightforward way. They also deal with topics other than war, and sometimes "two conflicting stories are told simultaneously" (Cameron 26). The complexity and the range of the poems reveal the deep and often contradictory feelings the Civil War evoked in Dickinson.

In other poems she deals with war and conflict in general. Dickinson writes about the difficulty of achieving peace and about its illusory nature. She also pens two intriguing poems about revolution and patriotism and one about race – all themes with a Civil War connection. Finally, Dickinson writes countless poems that employ martial imagery to illuminate the wars she witnessed in nature and the wars within our own

natures. Reading a sampling of these poems is helpful in understanding just how central the Civil War was in her work. It became nearly inseparable from all the conflicts that interested her.

Emily Dickinson explores these conflicts while largely avoiding overtly political statements; Elizabeth Barrett Browning embraces the openly political stance. The final section of this work investigates many of Barrett Browning's political and martial poems. With her keen interest in politics, Barrett Browning delves deeply into the details of the Risorgimento, a conflict driven very much by the personalities and actions of a small group of leaders. Barrett Browning struggles with her own admitted hero-worship of these men and at times with their betrayal of Italy and her. A second major thread running through her Risorgimento poems is Barrett Browning's own interesting position as an English poet living somewhat in exile in Italy and exploring Italian politics. Barrett Browning never stops turning back toward the country she largely left behind, exhorting its politicians and people to help her beloved new home. Finally, Barrett Browning's war poems also explicitly probe another topic only implied in Dickinson's work: the relationship between women and war. Barrett Browning uses a variety of female characters to come to terms with the role a woman does, and should play during war. She is acutely aware of the losses and gains specific to her gender, and she grapples with their artistic implications.

Not only does this study seek to broaden the way in which Dickinson and Barrett Browning are viewed, but it also may help expand the view of nineteenth-century women's poetry and particularly their war poetry.⁸ This poetry should not necessarily be defined by what Cheryl Walker calls the "aesthetic of silence" (21); the typical

“frustrated, renunciatory, fantasizing, conciliatory posture” (58) hardly dominates the public poems of these two poets, and many others. Studying war poetry by any woman in any historical period hastens the end of the reign of domestic concerns as ruling women’s poetry.⁹ Studying nineteenth-century women’s war poetry is particularly helpful in this endeavor, since this was supposedly the age of both the angel in the house and the poetess. Susan Brown notes that “The language and precepts of domestic ideology have to some degree distracted historians from remarking on the extent to which women’s participation in public life broadened from the early decades of the nineteenth century on” (189). She affirms that “a poetess was very much a public woman” (190), countering the more narrow views of earlier critics.¹⁰ Further, in surveying the work of American women writers of the early nineteenth century, Nina Baym concurs with this argument. She finds many women who wrote about history, and she notes that they

were demolishing whatever imaginative and intellectual boundaries their culture may have been trying to maintain between domestic and public worlds. They were claiming on behalf of all women the rights to know and opine on the world outside the home, as well as to articulate their knowledge and opinions among the public. (1)

The debate about women’s poetry is complicated, as are those specific to Dickinson and Barrett Browning, and examining poems dealing with public matters adds something interesting and useful to these discussions.

Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning write different kinds of war poems that will provide very useful models for examining other women's war poetry of the nineteenth century. Though Barrett Browning’s poetry attempts to attain the ideal

through overtly political poetry while Dickinson's strategy is more subtle and personal, both artists reach for the same goal eloquently articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "renovating the State on the principle of right and love" (570). Emerson writes that "The power of love, as the basis of a State has never been tried" (569), but he believes "that thousands of human beings might exercise towards each other the grandest and simplest sentiments, as well as a knot of friends, or a pair of lovers" (571). Both Dickinson and Barrett Browning represent "The republican at home" (557), struggling with war and politics, wishing better for humanity. Both poets sing off chancel steps, and only by studying these songs can we truly know their voices.

Notes

¹ Another Dickinson biographer, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, rarely links the poet with the Civil War. Wolff argues that Dickinson

did not study the issues of her time analytically, as a philosopher might – sifting through evidence and testing arguments. Possessed of supreme intelligence, she was capable of such work; however, her strength lay elsewhere. For Emily Dickinson, the pressing concerns that would loom large in American’s sense of communal identity were experienced internally: for Emily Dickinson, these were not public issues, but questions of existential importance. How best to “be” was the strenuous and informing concern of her life [. . .] that finds passionate expression in her poetry. (9)

² According to Sewall, Dickinson “has been accused of holding herself aloof from all such matter, as befits Emily Dickinson the legendary recluse.” He argues that she did not “shut these matters out of her life” but rather that “she had to come to terms with them in her own way” (535). He does not, however, elaborate on what her way was exactly.

³ According to St. Armand, the Civil War forced the country “to choose between the two Christs of Julia Ward Howe’s ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’” (103). Was He merciful or not? If not, how could so many men who died for the cause be shut out of heaven for “lack of a public profession of religion” (103). The war also “forced Dickinson to confront her complex relationship to a Christ-like Master” (103) and coincided with the eye ailment for which Master “was responsible” (104), St. Armand

argues. Finally, he notes that “all these concerns were epitomized by the early death of the son of the president of Amherst College” (104), Frazar Stearns, who died in the war. The effect of Stearns’s death on Dickinson is explored in detail in the first chapter.

⁴ John Gooch’s The Unification of Italy provides an extremely useful overview of the complicated history of the Risorgimento.

⁵ In one of the first articles linking the two poets, Betty Miller writes in 1956 that, “In the manner, matter, and quality of their poetry, no two women could have been more dissimilar” (574). Ellen Moers offers an insightful discussion of Barrett Browning lines that inspired Dickinson in her influential Literary Women (1976). Yet she concludes that “between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson there was no affinity whatever but their sex” (55); Dickinson, she argues, is a “metaphysical” poet, while Barrett Browning is a “witty” and “earnest” reformer (62). Other critics are more disparaging of Barrett Browning in their assessments. Gary Stonum calls Dickinson Barrett Browning’s “opposite” in style and theme since Barrett Browning is “one of the most unrepentantly Victorian writers” (36). Jack L. Capps, who like Moers acknowledges Barrett Browning’s influence on Dickinson, expresses his hope that Dickinson learned more from the other Browning (87).

⁶ Obvious similarities in the two poet’s lives also may have led Dickinson to Barrett Browning. Miller notes that both were reclusive women; they had weak mothers and were “always ready to attribute to [their] father[s] the impossibility of leaving the family circle” (576). Both certainly loved letter writing, with the ability a letter afforded to control encounters with others. And both harbored a “morbid anxiety” about their loved ones (579). But after she met Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett left her home,

father, and nation, while Dickinson remained in her house in Amherst for most of her adult life.

⁷ Though she does not illustrate the point, Diane Bogus writes in a brief article that "no one speaks about the Browning-like exactnesses that exist in the work of Dickinson" (39), though Moers alludes to it. There are definitely moments in Barrett Browning's poetry that remind one of Dickinson's spare verse.

⁸ Women's war poetry in general has not yet received the attention it deserves. There are two main reasons for this neglect. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier point out that "the culturally endorsed split between warlike man and peaceful woman" (xv) has been a main culprit. But they rightly note that "women's role in relation to war is much more complex and often complicitous than such essentializing suggests" (xv). Susan Schweik suggests that it is the gulf between men's and women's experiences that explain this critical oversight; the assumption has been that because only men experience war in the trenches only they can write about it – at least authentically (6).

And it is important to remember, particularly in light of these assessments, that Dickinson and Barrett Browning were certainly not the first women to write compelling poetry about war or politics. Women always have addressed these topics. One finds, for example, some very early samples of such poetry in Joyce Fullard's anthology of British women poets from 1660-1800. Carol Barash argues for the importance of political poetry by seventeenth-century women in her study of poetry from 1649-1700, and Moira Ferguson does the same for women poets of the next hundred years.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Anne Bradstreet, the first known "American" woman poet, wrote political poetry. Both Pattie Cowell's and Sharon M. Harris's anthologies of early American writers, for example, include political poems. There are even examples of long poems written about the American revolution by women, such as Mercy Warren's work on the Boston Tea Party.

⁹ It is interesting how many of today's feminist critics create anthologies that privilege the private over the public. For example, Cheryl Walker's anthology of nineteenth-century American women poets and Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds's Victorian anthology still largely focus on domesticity.

¹⁰ For example, Alicia Ostriker notes that though the century saw an explosion in the number of women writing in America, "the cultural restrictions on them became crippling" as a result of the "inspirational images of angel womanhood with the 'separate sphere' of domestic life which was supposed to be exclusively feminine" (10). According to this argument, the revolutionary artist found herself facing the angel in the house, wondering what kind of poetry such a creature would write. She largely wrote "female poetry," or the sentimental poetry of feeling; Emily Watts contends that "The poetess as we know and despise her" was born (28).

CHAPTER 1

LETTERS FROM THE HOMEFRONT:

“WAR FEELS TO ME AN OBLIQUE PLACE”

The Leaves are flying high away, and the Heart flies with them,
 though where that wondrous Firm alight, is not “an open secret –” What a
 curious Lie that phrase is! I see it of Politicians – Before I write to you
 again, we shall have had a new Czar – Is the Sister a Patriot?

“George Washington was the Father of his Country” –

“George Who?”

That sums all Politics to me – but then I love the Drums, and they
 are busy now – (L950)

Richard Sewall notes that this excerpt from an 1884 letter that Emily Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland is “sometimes taken as her rejection of all interest in politics” (620). To some degree, Sewall counters this view: “The larger world [. . .] appears in these later letters [to Holland], although the slant and fleeting references scarcely convey what seems to be a vivid interest in matters of politics and contemporary history” (619).¹

These lines do clearly communicate Dickinson’s keen interest in both this world and what lies beyond it. In 1884, Grover Cleveland, whose “open secret,” according to his political adversaries, was the existence of an illegitimate son, was about to be elected “Czar.”² Dickinson definitely was interested in “Politicians” and the language of politics,

but she is more interested here in the question of what we can know. She does not know where the “Heart” ultimately “flies” nor even the comparatively insignificant truth about Cleveland’s “open secret,” and she jokes that she does not know George Washington. But the playfulness of jokes about Washington, imperial presidents, and political ignorance is juxtaposed with the seriousness of her assertion about the “Drums,” or the drama of national life. They are “busy” now and she is busy listening to them. Her attention to the heart, as Emerson’s explains, is not antithetical to her interest in the state.

The drums that beat the loudest during Dickinson’s lifetime were those of the Civil War, and she addresses the war directly in her letters as well as her poems. The references to the war in her correspondence, however, are not extensive. Her “war” letters number only about a dozen; Dickinson wrote many more poems about the war. This disparity makes some sense when one considers her family’s, friends’, and correspondents’ connections to the war. Such links are hard to find. With the exception of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson, to our knowledge, did not write to a soldier or to anyone intimately related to one. Though active in the politics of the Civil War, her father did not fight, nor did her brother. Her male relatives and friends also did not join the Union army, and she did not have as correspondents the widows, children, and others left behind.

That certainly does not mean Dickinson did not have anyone with whom she could share her thoughts about the war. References to current events are sprinkled throughout her letters, and references to the Civil War in particular appear, almost without exception, in letters to Louisa and Frances Norcross, Samuel and Mary Bowles, and, of course, Higginson.

This study includes nearly all of these letters, excerpted for the most part in their entirety. They are divided by correspondent and arranged in chronological order.

Richard Sewall illuminates Emily Dickinson largely through her letters to important correspondents, focusing on one relationship in each chapter about her adult life.

Arguing for the primacy of Dickinson's relationship with her sister-in-law Sue, Martha Nell Smith examines all of the letters and poems that arise from that one bond to further our understanding of the poet's life and work.³ This organizational method is also useful for a study of a specific theme in the correspondence, since what she says and how she says it clearly depend very much on her audience. We can understand Dickinson's epistolary response to the Civil War best, then, by looking at her treatment of it in letters to specific correspondents. In these letters, the reader catches a glimpse of her wrestling with issues surrounding the war and then framing that response.

Dickinson's first comments on the war come in letters to her Norcross cousins, Louisa and Frances. Sewall explains that with them "Emily assumed the role of mother, offering the girls complete, uncritical love and perpetual welcome" (628). In these letters to "Fanny" and "Loo," the reader sees quite plainly Dickinson's impulse to protect and comfort her young cousins; yet, the most extensive and detailed war writing Dickinson produced is addressed to these girls. She reports and describes the deaths of two soldiers, Sylvester Adams and Frazar Stearns, to the Norcross cousins. The letter about Stearns is particularly difficult. She might have felt obliged to pass along this news to them, but the content and style of these letters alters the general estimation of the cousins as well as many common critical notions about Emily Dickinson and the Civil War. They are both stark and sentimental and combine straightforward narrative with

heart-wrenching emotion in a way finely tailored to her audience. One sees such skill in only the finest writing about war, and it seems natural that this writing would come from a poet deeply concerned with death and mourning. Dickinson also told her cousins that an awareness of death makes one alive to the possibilities of what we can be; what she knew she could be was a poet, and her response to the war, therefore, would be primarily poetic.

The second group of letters referring to war conforms more closely to generally-held ideas of Dickinson as indifferent to the nation's great conflict. Dickinson tosses a few flippant comments about the war into a group of letters to Samuel Bowles and his wife Mary. Examining the letters as a whole, though, rather than simply taking the comments out of context, reveals a very different tone. Dickinson's comments to Samuel and Mary appear as she tells both of them that she misses them and wants only the best for them, therefore drawing an implicit connection to the soldiers whose safety is the concern of so many. Samuel Bowles, as Sewall and other scholars note, provided for all the Dickinsons, and for Emily in particular, a link to the outside world, so allusions to the war in letters to him seem quite natural. With these references, Dickinson reveals that she will respond to the war in her own way, not that which has been prescribed by others. Her attitude is often detached, but that detachment does not imply indifference, and might in fact help her create poetry out of the war experience.

Perhaps Dickinson's most interesting comments on the Civil War appear in letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. An ardent and active abolitionist, Higginson served as the commander of a regiment of black soldiers in South Carolina. His link to the war, then, was much stronger than even that of the worldly Bowles. The letters to Higginson

are similar to those sent to Bowles in that parts of them seem cold. But here Dickinson is also genuinely concerned about Higginson's well-being. For the first time, she has a very close friend and correspondent who may well die in battle. She sympathizes with him and tries to comfort him in these letters. She seems at once detached and concerned. And it is to Higginson that she writes that war seems "oblique," in a way describing her own approach and attitude toward it. In her correspondence, she often treats it indirectly or "tell[s] it slant" (Fr1263); it is not an acute experience for her, but instead permeates her experience. In a Higginson letter, she explains that in some ways it is the "only News" she "know[s]" (L290), and the ways she tells it to others is quite unique.

Dickinson's treatment of the Civil War in her letters is as unique as her correspondence itself. Like the poems, Dickinson's letters have been the subject of close critical attention nearly since the poet became known to the world. In a recent study, William Merrill Decker calls Dickinson "the boldest, most inventive, most critically astute nineteenth-century letter-writer in English" (142) and "arguably the greatest theoretician of letter writing to be met with in American letters and literature" (142). Agnieszka Salska affirms that "The letters' literary merit and link with the poems were recognized from the very beginning of the history of Dickinson's publishing" (163), beginning with a group of letters and poems to Higginson that he himself published in the Atlantic Monthly in October 1891 (163). In fact, a substantial number of Dickinson's letters were published in various forms before Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward's 1958 three-volume edition made nearly all the correspondence available (164). Her letters, then, have inspired readings from the late nineteenth-century to the present.⁴

The explosion of criticism of the poems in the late twentieth century applies, to a lesser extent, to the letters as well. Its focus is shifting, though, from the earlier treatments. The most recent and one of the few book-length studies of the letters is Marietta Messmer's A Vice for Voices, a work which leads the charge against autobiographical interpretations of the letters. Messmer explains that the first reviews of the letters were negative because of "implicit expectations about epistolary writing as unmediated confessional discourse, or autobiographical revelation" (6). This was not conventional correspondence. Messmer then proceeds to take nearly every present-day critic to task for falling into what she views as the same trap. Decker and Elizabeth Hewitt are also skeptical of the biographical emphasis; Hewitt writes that most critics "are still reading her letters...as testimonies to an elusive life" (27), and Decker notes the practical problem that "the stories told by the letters remain ambiguous for purposes of biography" (142).

In a chapter examining the letters in The Emily Dickinson Handbook, Salska asserts that "the crucial fact emerging from the research is a growing recognition of the fluidity of borders between the writer's poetry and prose" (164). Salska goes on to argue that Dickinson employed "a mode of writing that altogether destabilized divisions between poetry and prose" (178). Messmer and many other critics reject the gulf between letters and poems that the publishing process and a parade of critics have created.⁵ No matter how one identifies them – Hewitt calls them "lyrical letters" (44), Paula Bennett "poem-letter[s]" (88) – Emily Dickinson surely has created a genre unlike any other.

Finally acknowledging this unique genre allows critics to argue the importance of the letters as they never have before. Salska asserts that “The importance of Dickinson’s correspondence for any appreciation or study of her work cannot be overestimated; her epistolary output constitutes an intrinsic part of her literary achievement” (163). She is among the critics who want us to read each letter as “an art work itself” (Wider 20). Messmer, who is adamant that the letters are “literary works, on a par with her poetry” (11), argues most forcefully for the primacy of Dickinson’s letters. She believes that since the letters are “sites for exhibiting finalized versions of contextualized lyrics,” then the letters are “Dickinson’s central form of public artistic expression” (3). Decker, however, remains steadfast in his more conservative stance that we “examine the letters as letters” (143).

What makes Dickinson’s correspondence so fascinating and problematic is that readers must acknowledge both their epistolary and literary nature. “The letter is generically distinct,” explains Hewitt, “not because it is written in prose, but because it documents a written attachment between one person and another” (42). Emily Dickinson wrote letters that look like prose on the page but are actually in meter; and she included a large number of poems within the text of her letters and within the same envelopes with her letters. But these features of her correspondence do not change the fact that Dickinson wrote each letter to a fellow human being with whom she was trying to communicate and whom we, over a century later, can identify (with the notable exception of the Master letters).

Yet relatively few of Dickinson’s letters communicate with either her contemporary or future readers in a commonplace way. Hewitt declares, “To receive a

lyrical letter from Emily Dickinson is to not know whether you have received the most exclusive and intimate of documents, or the most anonymous and inclusive of texts” (44). Anyone who studies Dickinson’s letters undoubtedly feels, like Erika Scheurer, that ‘To read her is to be clasped firmly by the shoulders and looked in the eye, but kept at arm’s length” (87). The letters are anything but the straightforward rendering of events and reactions to those events that we generally expect from correspondence. They are often as dense as her poems and packed with much of the same “emotional intensity” (Salska 166). They are obviously a “means not only of interpersonal communication but also of self-expression” (Salska 165) for the poet. Hewitt advises reading the letters with the same “textual scrutiny” as the poems – not as “references to ‘real events’” (46). But this advice ignores the fact that the letters did refer constantly to “real events.” Critics can downplay the biographical significance of her letters, but they cannot deny that it exists; these letters are still about a woman living during a certain period in history. Dickinson’s style, though, often obscures her historical circumstances.⁶

One of those elusive and allusive “real events” through which Dickinson lived was the Civil War. What, then, should be the critical framework used to examine the letters that refer to the war and issues related to it? Perhaps the best approach identifies the letter as correspondence and as literature; the two are not mutually exclusive. That “her poetry and prose increasingly became not only exchangeable in their functions but formally permeable to each other” (Salska 178) is often true, but Dickinson never stopped writing poems that did not appear in letters and she never stopped writing letters that were far from poetic. Each piece of writing must be examined in its context, or multiple contexts, and analyzed accordingly. The only way to interpret the Dickinson letters that

deal with the war is to bear in mind the complexity of the literary form she created.

These letters, then, are part of both a piece of correspondence and a work of art she chose to create.

Another problem that plagues the critic when reading Dickinson's correspondence is that of voice. Does the voice we hear in these letters actually belong to Dickinson herself? Nearly every critic who writes about her quotes her brother's comment about the letters to Higginson: "Emily definitely posed in those letters" (Sewall 538). Suzanne Juhasz argues that "the `posing' tells us as much about the real person as some kind of absolute candor would" (170). To Juhasz, "the mode [of the letters] is seduction, because Dickinson's letters are always love letters" (171), but she notes the tension between the "lover" and the "poet" in Dickinson (173). A number of critics focus on the parts Dickinson plays in order to build and, as Cristanne Miller notes, "control relationships" with specific correspondents (36).⁷ Scheurer moves this argument further along by pinpointing the "oral qualities" of Dickinson's letters and "the closure" that accompanies that orality (90). She writes that "the oral and textual traits of her letters combine to create a dialogic voice – at once enigmatic, in perpetual flux, and rooted in the person, the body, the concrete moment in time" (87). Messmer also believes that the letters contain many "voices that engage in an intergeneric dialogic exchange" for the purpose of "critiqu[ing] prevailing gender constructions" (18).⁸ Finally, Decker notes that Dickinson "understands the performative character of discourse that says `I'" (143), but nonetheless finds a "core narrative of her letters": Dickinson "identifies separation, the condition in which letters are written, as the fundamental sorrow of human life and forecasts reunion in this life or another, as the ultimate redemption" (144).⁹ Both Decker

and Elizabeth Hewitt recognize Dickinson's "anxiety about the precariousness of communication" and her focus on "failed correspondence" (Hewitt 30).¹⁰ Yet Bennett argues that "despite the constancy of her changes [. . .] few poets in history have been more fully situated within their writing, more present in their texts, than Emily Dickinson" and that Dickinson actually "speaks in her own voice" (88). Although she overstates the point a bit, Bennett rightly acknowledges that an Emily Dickinson letter can never be confused with one from any other correspondent.

Clearly, the point underlying each of these scholars' arguments, no matter what the specific focus, is that Dickinson's voice (as well as her genre and her biography) is quite elusive. Sometimes the reader feels quite strongly that the "real" Emily Dickinson is speaking, only to have that person change or slip away suddenly. While the letters do represent Dickinson's attempt to speak to someone, that speech often includes play – and poetry. This set of letters is no exception. Further, separation from and lack of communication with her family and friends are among Dickinson's fundamental concerns, and they merge naturally with the subject of the Civil War; indeed, many families waited anxiously day after day for word from the men at the front, fearing the literal and figurative dead letter. In her letters from the homefront, Dickinson writes about mourning soldiers who have died and her choice to respond to fear and pain through her poetry. She does not shy away from discussing these issues even when she writes to Higginson on the battlefield. Her aim in these letters is not to promote a political stance; her interest instead lies in discovering how we survive trauma. Dickinson survives by "sing[ing]" and sometimes even laughing from those "charnel steps."

“’tis least that I can do, to tell you”: Letters to Louisa and Frances Norcross

The letters in which Emily Dickinson addresses the Civil War most directly and at greatest length were mailed to her Norcross cousins. According to Dickinson’s most recent biographer Alfred Habegger, “Those who believe the Civil War had no impact on the poet haven’t read her Norcross correspondence” (399-400). Louisa and Frances were the daughters of Emily’s maternal aunt Lavinia, with whom she was particularly close. “When Aunt Lavinia died in 1860,” Sewall writes, “Emily simply transferred her affection to the girls, then aged eighteen and thirteen” (627). She began writing to them in 1859, and they are the recipients of her last known letter, her epitaph “Called back,” written in May, 1886 (L1046).

Unfortunately, Louisa and Frances thought that respect for their cousin’s memory meant destroying all her correspondence with them (Sewall 627). They did, however, copy excerpts and send them to Mabel Loomis Todd. Here is what remains of Dickinson’s first letter to them referring to the war:

[. . .] Your letter didn’t surprise me, Loo; I brushed away the sleet from eyes familiar with it – looked again to be sure I read it right – and then took up my work hemming strings for mother’s gown. I think I hemmed them faster for knowing you weren’t coming, my fingers had nothing else to do [. . .] Odd, that I, who say “no” so much, cannot bear it from others. Odd, that I, who run from so many, cannot brook that one turn from me. Come when you will, Loo, the hearts are never shut here. I don’t remember “May.” Is that the one that stands next April? And is that the month for the river-pink?

Mrs. Adams had news of the death of her boy to-day, from a wound at Annapolis. Telegram signed by Frazer Stearns. You remember him. Another one died in October – from fever caught in the camp. Mrs. Adams herself has not risen from bed since then. “Happy New Year” step softly over such doors as these! “Dead! Both her boys! One of them shot by the sea in the East, and one of them shot in the West by the sea.” [. . .] Christ be merciful! Frazer Stearns is just leaving Annapolis. His father has gone to see him to-day. I hope that ruddy face won’t be brought home frozen. Poor little widow’s boy, riding to-night in the mad wind, back to the village burying-ground where he never dreamed of sleeping! Ah! the dreamless sleep!

Did you get the letter I sent a week from Monday? You did not say, and it makes me anxious, and I sent a scrap for Saturday last, that too? Loo, I wanted you very much, and I put you by with sharper tears than I give to many. Wont’ you tell me about the chills – what doctor says? I must not lose you, sweet. Tell me if I could send a tuft to keep the cousin warm, a blanket of thistle, say, or something!

Much love and Christmas, and sweet year, for you and Fanny and papa.

Emilie.

Dear little Fanny’s note received, and shall write her soon.

Meanwhile, we wrap her in our heart to keep her tight and warm. (L245)

This letter is dated December 31, 1861, about nine months after the war began. Bearing in mind that, as with nearly all letters to the Norcross household, portions of the letter have been expurgated, we still are able to examine an extraordinary emotional performance. The context of the passage about the Adams boys is interesting. It is placed squarely in the middle of two paragraphs expressing some annoyance at Louisa for canceling a visit to Emily and neglecting to write, as well as anxiety for Louisa's health. Dickinson's concerns about the widow Adams's loss fit quite seamlessly into a letter about her concern for her family. Dickinson also acknowledges her own strong need to control her relationships. She cajoles and comforts in this letter, but she wants to reserve for herself the right to say the "no" she cannot bear to hear from others. Her reaction to Louisa's declining to visit also emphasizes control; it is a cold, contained kind of grief. She does not cry hot tears, but rather wipes "sleet" from her "eyes." (The possibility of Frazer Stearns's face coming home "frozen" echoes this description.)

Then Dickinson moves from her own smaller sorrow to a mother receiving the news of her son's death and to much larger issues about grief and war. Dickinson writes the second sentence in the paragraph, "Telegram signed by Frazer Stearns" itself in the style of a telegram. That particular mode of communication fascinated Dickinson, as did much technology, and its use for reporting a soldier's death appears later in her writing about the war. Next she tells Louisa that Mrs. Adams has been unable to leave her bed since learning of the death of her other boy in October. Now, on the last day of the year, the widow learns that she is childless. Dickinson conveys the painfulness of the phrase "Happy new year" for hearts like that of Mrs. Adams, but she qualifies it by writing "step

softly.” The new year will come and time will pass; others must “step” albeit “softly” toward Mrs. Adams and she eventually must step through her door and resume her life.

Dickinson takes the next lines, “Dead! Both her boys! One of them shot by the sea in the East, and one of them shot in the West by the sea,” from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Mother and Poet” in her Last Poems. It is a dramatic monologue spoken by Laura Savio, both of whose sons were killed in the wars of the Italian Risorgimento. Savio is herself a patriotic poet, now embittered and unwilling to champion her nation’s cause. The appearance of this voice in this context adds a new level of complexity to the passage. Savio is furious with herself for instilling a love of country in her sons, and her outrage may speak for Mrs. Adams. But “Mother and Poet” is also about a female poet whose society views motherhood as the only appropriate work for a woman. Savio rejects that view, becoming a mother and a poet, but questions her vocation when she is robbed of her children. Thus a debate about a woman’s place in society and the place of a woman poet in a nation at war appear obliquely in this letter. Dickinson was obviously not a patriotic poet as Barrett Browning and Savio were, but there are moments in her poetry and prose when she expresses her love of country. And though she never could have written Aurora Leigh, she did explore the woman question in her own way. Wars force societies to look at that question in a whole new light. Finally, as is true of “Mother and Poet,” much of Dickinson’s art is born from loss. The most interesting implication of this Barrett Browning quote may be the question of what kind of art comes from the losses experienced during a war. In later letters, Dickinson indicates that she will express herself in her poems, but her poems do not look like those of any other poet.

This passage is not only about sorrow for Mrs. Adams but also about fear for Frazer Stearns, a friend of the Dickinson family. Dickinson is afraid his “ruddy face” will return to Amherst “frozen” – a stark contrast in temperature and color, the hot-blooded youth coming home cold and icy.¹¹ Reminiscent of a Romantic poem, her closing returns to Sylvester Adams “riding to-night in the mad wind, back to the village burying-ground where he never dreamed of sleeping!” Dickinson moves away from the physicality of death to the “dreamless sleep,” evoking Hamlet’s mortal fears, perhaps softening the blow of this death. Sewall notes that “As always, a particular death led her to death in general” (631). Barton Levi St. Armand mentions this letter too, noting how its “sentimental language” reflects typical Victorian representations of death (105). This passage is generally more reportorial than sentimental, but the allusions and clichés Dickinson includes serve a purpose. Dickinson was always aware of her audience, and she believed that the sentimentality here was appropriate and perhaps even necessary for young Fanny and Loo.

Dickinson’s anxiety for Stearns was well-founded. Less than three months after this letter was sent, the son of William Augustus Stearns, president of Amherst College, was killed in battle. Dickinson tells both her cousins the news in a letter which appears to be devoted entirely to Stearns.

Dear Children,

You have done more for me – ‘tis least that I can do, to tell you of brave Frazer – “killed at Newbern,” darlings. His big heart shot away by a “minie ball.”

I had read of those – I didn't think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him. Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face! He fell by the side of Professor Clark, his superior officer – lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms, asked twice for water – murmured just, "My God!" and passed! Sanderson, his classmate, made a box of boards in the night, put the brave boy in, covered with a blanket, rowed six miles to reach the boat, – so poor Frazer came. They tell that Colonel Clark cried like a little child when he missed his pet, and could hardly resume his post. They loved each other very much. Nobody here could look on Frazer – not even his father. The doctors would not allow it.

The bed on which he came was enclosed in a large casket shut entirely, and covered from head to foot with the sweetest flowers. He went to sleep from the village church. Crowds came to tell him good-night, choirs sang to him, pastors told how brave he was – early-soldier heart. And the family bowed their heads, as the reeds the wind shakes.

So our part in Frazer is done, but you must come next summer, and we will mind ourselves of this young crusader – too brave that he could fear to die. We will play his tunes – maybe he can hear them; we will try to comfort his broken-hearted Ella, who, as the clergyman said, "gave him

peculiar confidence.” [. . .] Austin is stunned completely. Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do.

Love from

Emily. (L255)

Sewall unequivocally states that this letter’s “detail and intensity of feeling should lay to rest the notion of her indifference to such matters” (631). Clearly, the war invaded Dickinson’s life. There is also no question that this letter “is one of her finest” (Sewall 631).

Dickinson tells her cousins that she is about to relay the story of a “brave” soldier. As in the previous letter, this is generally not a sentimental, sanitized version of a soldier’s death. Frazar’s “big heart” was “shot away by a `minie ball” – a much more graphic image than it seems at first. She again reveals her technologically modern eye when she mentions her reading about the guns used in the Civil War. Her description of Stearns’s funeral procession through Amherst is a strikingly spare passage. She alludes to Alfred Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” in the lines “Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face!” Benjamin Lease believes that this reference makes “clear [. . .] that Dickinson could not share Tennyson’s view of the slaughter at Balaclava – could not be satisfied about Frazar’s fall, about the fall of young men on battlefields throughout the land” (72). Similarly, Paul R. Cappucci argues that Stearns “seems a general symbol of patriotism’s destructive potential” (264) in Dickinson’s writing. But there is no clear anti-war sentiment in this letter. Rather, this is a poignant account of a soldier who was ready and willing to die for his country. Those who remain behind suffer; of that there is no doubt. Stearns’s death in itself,

however, evokes little anger or pity in Dickinson here. In Tennyson's poem, the purpose of which simply is to "Honour the Light Brigade" (54), the only hint that the charge may be futile is in the line "All the world wonder'd" (31). The only place in Dickinson's letter where the tone changes comes very near the end: "Austin is stunned completely." Thomas H. Johnson asserts that Dickinson employs her brother "as a cover" when she makes a similar statement in a letter to Samuel Bowles (399). Sewall explains that Emily Dickinson's "grief is deep, but it is also composed; she herself is not 'stunned.'" (632). Perhaps it is Austin who is overwhelmed by this death, while his sister can calmly depict Stearns's fall.

The Norcross girls do not see Frazar riding "Into the valley of Death" (7); there is no "Cannon" (18) in this letter. But Dickinson does describe his death to her little cousins: he "lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms, asked twice for water – murmured just, "My God!" and passed!" St. Armand argues that "The details of young Stearns's death [. . .] are related as clinically and as mordantly as any sentimental eulogist could wish," and that this letter "indicates an unquenchable desire to unlock the secrets of his very soul [. . .] to stare directly upon the marmoreal face of death"(106). He also calls her description of his death a "terse retelling of the passion according to Saint Matthew," with Frazar transformed into "the rigid centerpiece of a military pieta" (107). This is an interesting assessment of the passage, but the allusion to St. Matthew is more complicated than St. Armand implies. In the gospel, Jesus "cried with a loud voice [. . .] 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46), while Stearns "murmured" only "My God." Stearns might have had complete confidence in God in his final moments or he might have been expressing the doubt to which even Jesus Himself

succumbed. Dickinson does not attempt to solve the mystery of the remark.

Unquestionably, she is fascinated by the details of death, and she describes death in war in this letter and a number of poems, sometimes mixing clinical or sentimental elements.

But the Stearns letter is for the most part a straightforward telling with just a few poetic flourishes and literary allusions that are all the more arresting for their scarcity.

Dickinson does identify soldiers' sacrifices as Christ-like here and in other war letters and poems, but such a comparison is not necessarily sentimental.¹²

The next section in particular illustrates how little sentimentality creeps into this letter. Sanderson does not make a coffin for Stearns, but rather "a box of boards." The description is as stark as the object itself. The details of Sanderson covering the body with a blanket and rowing "six miles" with the box as well as Colonel Clark crying "like a little child" are also moving. Finally, Dickinson mentions the rather gruesome face that "Nobody here could look upon Frazer – not even his father. The doctors would not allow it." This section is anything but sanitized.

As in the Adams letter, we hear an echo of Hamlet as Stearns goes "to sleep from the village church" as "Crowds came to tell him good-night" and "choirs sang to him." Dickinson plays the part of Horatio bending over Hamlet's body, saying "Good night, sweet prince, / and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (V.ii.359-60). She then notes that the "brave" boy has an "early-soldier heart," by which she may mean that he is not yet jaded. The last sentence returns to the mourners, and it is perhaps the most striking in the letter: "And the family bowed their heads, as the reeds the wind shakes." Reeds bend but do not break; they connote flexibility and strength – no matter what the wind, the war, or God brings.

The tone of the last paragraph is less consistent. “So our part in Frazer is done,” Dickinson writes matter-of-factly, but she does not turn away from this sorrow yet. She wonders if he can hear “his tunes,” musing as she does so often about the afterlife. She mentions Ella, the woman who loves him, noting that “we will try to comfort” her. Austin, too, requires consoling, since he seems more affected by Stearns’s death than Emily is. She closes, finally, with words of advice and comfort common in her letters to Louisa and Frances: “Let us love better, children, it’s most that’s left to do.” Or at least these words seem to comfort; they also express a sense of fatigue that does not enter this letter until the very last moment. Though this letter is much more about others’ sorrow, one senses that the war is weighing on her.

Emily Dickinson wrote two other letters to her Norcross cousins near the same that mention the Civil War, but they are quite different from each other in tone. The first is a collection of fragments dated “Spring, 1861” which Johnson believes are not from a single letter. (He notes that the letter is addressed to both Louisa and Frances, but that the fourth part was written to only one of the cousins.) The last fragment had to have been written after June 29, 1861, the date of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s death, and it mentions the war in its last line (Johnson 376). Though these fragments may well be from different letters, they appear together in Todd’s edition. Quoting them in their entirety, then, lends the last line as full a context as possible.

[. . .] Send a sundown for Loo, please, and a crocus for Fanny. Shadow
has no stem, so they could not pick him.

[. . .] D----fed greedily upon Harper's Magazine while here. Suppose he is restricted to Martin Luther's works at home. It is a criminal thing to be a boy in a godly village, but maybe he will be forgiven.

[. . .] The seeing pain one can't relieve makes a demon of one. If angels have the heart beneath their silver jackets, I think such things could make them weep, but Heaven is so cold! It will never look kind to me that God, who causes all, denies such little wishes. It could not hurt His glory, unless it were a lonesome kind. I 'most conclude it is.

[. . .] Thank you for the daisy. With nature in my ruche I shall not miss the spring. What would become of us, dear, but for love to reprieve our blunders?

[. . .] I'm afraid that home is almost done, but do not say I fear so. Perhaps God will be better. They're so happy, you know. That makes it doubtful. Heaven hunts round for those that find itself below, and then it snatches.

[. . .] Think Emily has lost her wits – but she found 'em, likely. Don't part with wits long at a time in this neighborhood.

[. . .] Your letters are all real, just the tangled road children walked before you, some of them to the end, and others but a little way, even as far as the fork in the road. That Mrs. Browning fainted, we need not read Aurora Leigh to know, when she lived with her English aunt; and George Sand "must make no noise in her grandmother's bedroom." Poor children! Women, now, queens, now! And one in the Eden of God. I guess they

both forget that now, so who knows but we, little stars from the same night, stop twinkling at last? Take heart, little sister, twilight is but the short bridge, and the moon (morn) stands at the end. If we can only get to her! Yet, if she sees us fainting, she will put out her yellow hands. When did the war really begin? (L234)

Though only the last section is definitely from the letter that asks when the war began, the other pieces are worth discussing briefly since they may represent at least some of Emily Dickinson's thoughts from the same period. The Norcross sisters grouped these passages together for some reason. Habegger concludes from these fragments that the cousins "had begun to receive the poet's darkest thoughts (395), and there is perhaps some of that here. The "sundown" and "shadow" of the first fragment appear to move in that direction, but this shadow "has no stem" so Fanny and Loo cannot "pick him." This is an enigmatic sentence, but it seems to imply that the shadow has not taken root; and we know that the cousins will not take it home with them. Such a thought actually dispels darkness. On the other hand, a God who, to Dickinson's annoyance and amazement, is so frugal He refuses to grant man "little wishes" appears, as does a "Heaven" that steals happiness. But Dickinson does not rage against this God. Rather, she pities someone so "lonesome." She concentrates on those here on earth who desperately want to help each other and who are quick to forgive each other. And, as her joke about losing "her wits" affirms, Dickinson herself is a survivor; she had better be in this "neighborhood." Sewall notes that this section may refer to "her supposed breakdown of about this time" but he rightly notes that it "seems to tell more about that resilience of her wit and the sustaining discipline of the Dickinson home" (631).

Again, these letters are not “war” letters. The reader feels the war looming, however, in the image of the “demon” one becomes “seeing pain” but being powerless to assuage it and certainly in the sight of angels weeping. Dickinson writes of “little wishes” but she subtly and brilliantly suggests larger ones. These passages also set the mood for the fragment that addresses the war in such an unusual way. She begins the last fragment in her customary mode, reassuring her cousins that their trials and tribulations are perfectly normal. Louise and Frances’s “letters are all real,” Dickinson writes – a very interesting sentence in the context of the sentence that ends the letter. This paragraph is very much about what we know to be real. Sewall notes that “Apparently, one of the girls, probably Louisa, had complained of certain restrictions at home” which prompted Dickinson “to tell about two other girls who had known similar troubles” (630). The examples she chooses are not any ordinary girls, but rather two of the most famous feminist poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Sand. What Dickinson knows about these women is how circumscribed their worlds were (as is her own, though largely by choice). Yet these “children” grew up to be “women” and then “queens,” the same kind of literary monarchs that Dickinson wishes to be. We think that Dickinson will end this letter in the same way that she ends other letters to the Norcrosses: “Take heart, little sister, twilight is but the short bridge, and the moon (morn) stands at the end.” Frances Norcross could not decipher Dickinson’s handwriting well enough to know if Dickinson wrote “moon” or “morn” (Letters 376) but both follow twilight. Dickinson suggests here that Barrett Browning, already in “Eden,” is reaching back to help the women who follow her, who may be “fainting” as she did.

It is only in the last sentence that Dickinson actually names war. “When did the war really begin?” seems to appear from nowhere, and certainly we can never know for sure to which war or wars Dickinson is referring. But this question is not completely unrelated to the lines that precede it. The image of the “fork in the road” appears in one of Dickinson’s war poems in the context of soldiers either marching to heaven or marching home.¹³ The reference to Aurora Leigh reminds readers that Barrett Browning was a poet who was keenly interested in politics, and that Dickinson was keenly interested in her. And the image of twilight travelers, about to collapse, begging for assistance, evokes the plight of the soldier. In Sewall’s words,

Just what she meant by ‘the war’ – specifically whether she meant anything larger by it than Louise’s private war – is hard to tell. The possibly national, even cosmic, implications would indicate that she, too, was involved. (631)

It is difficult to believe that anyone writing the word “war” in the summer of 1861 was not at least obliquely referring to the Civil War. She would have been aware, too, that her cousins probably would read that word and think of the national conflict. Though clearly Emily Dickinson was interested in her own and others’ inner wars, Sewall rightly notes that she was “involved.” The question itself is an interesting one because it suggests that whatever war this is began before she might have thought and has been going on for a while. She, the women who appear in the passage, and even the country have been embattled for some time. This question suggests that war has saturated Dickinson’s consciousness, though she may have more actively absorbed it and then transformed it through her poetry.

The last war letter Dickinson wrote to the Norcross cousins also has been cut, but this remains:

[. . .] Sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines.

'Tis dangerous to value, for only the precious can alarm. I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished – till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps. Every day feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous. (L298)

Johnson dates this letter 1864, noting that Robert Browning's Dramatis Personae was published that year (437), but Habegger notes that Jay Leyda places it in December, 1862 because of "an announcement in the Republican of a new poem by Robert Browning" (400). The dating is important because "it shows that, on the eve of her most productive year, 1863, the poet made the connection between the war and her growing powers," Habegger argues (400). Similarly, Shira Wolosky notes that in this letter Dickinson "places her own concerns in the context of the national trauma through which she was then living" (36). She argues further, though, that Dickinson's "image of the world as an uncertain and treacherous place becomes, in the context of war, less pathological" and that "the war magnified disorders she already sensed" (36). These observations, though perhaps true, obscure the fact that Dickinson is responding to the war as such, and is contemplating how people, and particularly how poets, respond to it.

This passage, just like the other letters to Louise and Frances, is more complex than it first appears. The first paragraph conveys a palpable feeling of hopelessness. We must assume from all we know of Emily Dickinson that she is among the “few persons” whose “estate” has been one of “sorrow,” and that she doubts the palliative effect of the “anguish of others.” But the passage also says something quite specific about mourning the deaths of soldiers during wartime. One would expect that there would be a strong bond among the many families who experienced losses, and that their numbers would provide them with some strength and comfort. Dickinson, however, realizes that mourning is an intensely private journey, and that others’ pain will not expedite it. Though she tried to assuage the grief of nearly anyone she knew who had experienced a loss, Dickinson understood that there really was no shortcut to grieving.

Her next statement makes all the more sense then: love is “dangerous.” She then invokes one of the most famous love stories, which happens to involve one of her favorite poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Naturally, Dickinson would be “astonished” that the man who wrote that he loved Elizabeth Barrett in his very first letter to her could write anything at all after her death. But, then “I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps,” Dickinson writes, and so appears one of her most arresting phrases.¹⁴ The poet’s beautiful and ethereal song has its unlikely launch from the concrete “steps” of the charnel house. And “charnel” is a word that suggests war. Charnel houses contain piles of bones, reminding the reader of piles of corpses on a battlefield or the mass graves they filled. But there is classic Dickinson understatement here too. She never forgot that her poetic project was really no “smaller” than that of the

Brownings. Though she often focuses on the smaller moment, her themes are as large as they come.

Interestingly, the letter ends on a completely different note. The days suddenly seem “mightier,” and human “power” is “more stupendous.” Sewall identifies this “surge of spirit” (632) as both “motherly encouragement” and “self-encouragement” (633). In addition, the ending reveals the extent to which contemplating her art could energize her. It seems jarring to move so quickly from the carnage of war to such optimism; for this critics have denounced her detachment. But perhaps Dickinson is not so much distancing the experience of the war as acknowledging the power of words, feelings, and life itself.

In a long letter she wrote the cousins about a month after their father’s death orphaned them, Dickinson asked, “Will it please them to know [. . .]”

that father has built a new road round the pile of trees between our house
and Mr. S[weetser]’s, where they can take the soldier’s shirt to make, or a
sweet poem, and no man find them, but the fly, and he such a little man.

(L279)

Dickinson yokes together the “soldier’s shirt” and the “sweet poem”; indeed, they are the only two objects the vague “they” produce. One implication of this passage is that a poem can be a contribution to the war effort, a way to express oneself. It is what Emily Dickinson makes, and she must do so in solitude, even in secret.

In these poems to her cousins, Emily Dickinson reports the facts of two soldiers’ deaths in detail and also refers to the Civil War in more oblique statements and passages. She reveals her interest in death and mourning, of course, but she also expresses

confidence in her own and others' power. She is confident and reassuring here; she is less so with Bowles and Higginson.

“how failure in a Battle – were easier”: Letters to Samuel and Mary Bowles

Louise and Frances Norcross, though not recluses, did not live in the “real” world the way Samuel Bowles did. The longtime editor of the Springfield Republican, Bowles's business was the world's business, so, as Sewall notes, he “was good for the non-traveling Dickinsons” (466). He was a friend to all the Dickinsons, particularly Austin and Sue, and Sewall calls his relationship with Emily Dickinson “one of the most important in her life” (463). She sent him thirty-five letters and almost fifty poems, partly because, Sewall argues, “she was deeply in love with him” (473). Habegger, on the other hand, says of this relationship, “It was not love, or love exactly, but whatever it was it brought out some of her most intense writing” (376). Sewall suggests that the other explanation for this correspondence was “professional.” Dickinson wanted Bowles to help her publish her work (475). Finally, Dickinson's letters to Bowles came at a time when her “metaphoric expression” turned into “an almost private code” (Sewall 463). The letters to his wife Mary are in the same vein.¹⁵

Since the correspondents are different, the references to the war in these letters are different too. The Bowles are not young girls in need of reassurance, but rather are likely to provide it to Dickinson herself. This actually frees her to explore the war in a way she could not with her cousins.

Dickinson's earliest mention of the Civil War in the Bowles letters appears in a letter to Mary, dated by Johnson about August, 1861. The full text follows.

Mary.

I do not know of you, a long while – I remember you – several times – I wish I knew if you kept me? The Dust like the Mosquito buzzes round my faith.

We are all human – Mary – until we are divine – and to some of us – that is far off, and to some [of] us – near as the lady, ringing the door – perhaps that's what alarms – I say I will go myself – I cross the river – and climb the fence – now I am at the gate – Mary – now I am in the hall – now I am looking your heart in the Eye!

Did it wait for me – Did it go with the Company? Cruel Company – who have the stocks – and farms – and creeds – and it has just it's heart! I hope you are glad – Mary – no pebble in the Brook – today – no film on noon –

I can think how you look – You cant think how I look – I 've got more freckles, since you saw me – playing with the schoolboys – then I pare the “Juneating” to make the pie – and get my fingers “tanned.”

Summer went very fast – she got as far as the woman from the Hill – who brings the Blueberry – and that is a long way – I shall have no winter this year – on account of the soldiers – Since I cannot weave Blankets, or Boots – I thought it best to omit the season – Shall present a “Memorial” to God – when the Maples turn—

Can I rely on your “name”?

How is your garden – Mary? Are the Pinks true – and the Sweet Williams faithful? I’ve got a Geranium like a Sultana – and when the Humming birds come down – Geranium and I shut our eyes – and go far away –

Ask “Meme” – if I shall catch her a Butterfly with a vest like a Turk? I will – if she will build him a House in her “Morning – Glory.” Vinnie would send her love, but she put on a white frock, and went to meet tomorrow – a few minutes ago. Mother would send her love – but she is in the “Eave spout,” sweeping up a leaf, that blew in, last November. Austin would send his – but he don’t live here – now – He married – and went East.

I brought my own – myself, to you and Mr Bowles. Please remember me, because I remember you – Always.

My River runs to thee –

Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?

My River waits reply –

Oh Sea – look graciously –

I’ll fetch thee Brooks

From spotted nook –

Say – Sea –

Take Me! (L235)

This is a long and complicated letter, and some of its metaphors always will remain elusive. It is a letter that reminds us how intimate her correspondence really was.

The war makes an appearance, but the relationship between Dickinson and her reader, a very private relationship, stands at the core of the letter. Dickinson surely tried to seduce Mary Bowles with her letters, as Juhasz says she attempted to seduce all her readers. The letter bears more than a passing resemblance to the one she writes Louise Norcross concerning the Adams boy's death; with the change of seasons, we are reminded of death coming as surely as winter. And as in the Adams letter, Dickinson is a bit lonely, which perhaps explains her attempt to form a bond with Mary Bowles in the first place; Decker writes that Dickinson always equated "absence" with "death" (166). Here, though, the war, the cause of so much of both, invades and perhaps even pervades Dickinson's thoughts.

Though she was quite aware of it already, the war surely reminds Dickinson that death will be "ringing at the door" at any time. Her image is of a "lady" knocking, perhaps a neighbor, but it also suggests the messengers who delivered the news of lost soldiers to door after door during the Civil War. The nearness of this experience rightly "alarms" her, perhaps making her more determined to hold friends like Mary close. Such bonds are far more important than "stocks" or "creeds," as is Mary's tranquility. Dickinson wishes "no pebble in the Brook – today – no film on noon –" for her friend.

But the world cannot be kept completely at bay. Dickinson tells Mary that she has been "playing with the schoolboys" before she comments on "the soldiers." Dickinson certainly realizes that those schoolboys soon could be soldiers themselves. The inclusion of this detail lends support to the idea that her comments on the war here are not quite as aloof as they first appear. The line "I thought it best to omit the season" may seem flippant, even tinged with annoyance, but it actually reveals Dickinson's ironic

wit. The seasons surely will advance even though Dickinson will not contribute “Blankets” or “Boots” to the war effort, as will the soldiers themselves. Such a comment does not mean Dickinson did not care at all about the fate of these men. Habegger reports that “unlike many patriotic women, she refused to help make bandages (402), but Dickinson was busy making something else. Further, readings of this paragraph, such as Habegger’s, as proof of Dickinson’s apathy have ignored its more serious and intriguing close: “Shall present a “Memorial” to God – when the Maples turn – ” Her “Memorial” for the soldiers, and for the “Summer” they have left behind and the autumn that they are approaching, will be her poetry. As she wrote to her cousins after the death of their father “Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray” (L278). She tells Mary Bowles in this letter that she will respond to the plight of the soldiers, but in her own way and in her own time.¹⁶ The response, though, will be addressed “to God,” perhaps suggesting that God needs to be confronted with this “Memorial.” The phrase “present a ‘Memorial’ to God” also can be read as meaning that Dickinson will memorialize God Himself. This is also interesting since it implies that God is gone, as is the summer and the soldiers, so she now must remember Him.

The rest of the letter reinforces the themes Dickinson introduces earlier. She wants to be able to “rely” on Mary’s “name.”¹⁷ Here, she reminds us that Mary’s namesake is the mother of Jesus. St. Armand notes that Dickinson “turned to Marianism as a means of solving the spiritual dilemma” of Calvinism (93). She imagined Mary interceding between the individual and the stern Calvinist God, and she sought a similar compassion from Mary Bowles. She even may have viewed her at times as an intermediary between herself and Samuel Bowles. She may have wanted more attention

from him than he gave her. At the close of the letter, Dickinson also seems to want more attention from her family than she is receiving. Vinnie is too occupied with religion, her mother with other meaningless endeavors, and Austin with his wife and work. So she entreats Mary Bowles, “Take Me!”

Mary Bowles was important to Emily Dickinson. She corresponded with Mary long after Samuel’s death, and in this letter she reveals her thoughts about both the world within the walls of her home and without. Yet however much Emily Dickinson tried to seduce Mary Bowles, “it was clear from the start that Samuel was the one who counted for Emily” (Habegger 380). Samuel Bowles was the one who counted more for other Dickinsons as well, which complicates the following letter to Bowles even further.

Dear friend.

Will you be kind to Austin – again? And would you be kinder than sometimes – and put the name – on – too – He tells me to tell you – He could not thank you – Austin is disappointed – He expected to see you – today –

He is sure you wont go to Sea – without first speaking to Him. I presume if Emily and Vinnie knew of his writing – they would entreat Him to ask you – not –

Austin is chilled – by Frazer’s murder – He says – his Brain keeps saying over “Frazer is killed” – “Frazer is killed,” just as Father told it – to Him. Two or three words of lead – that dropped so deep, they keep weighing –

Tell Austin – how to get over them!

He is very sorry you are not better – He cares for you – when at the Office – and afterwards – too – at Home – and sometimes – wakes at night, with a worry for you – he did’nt finish – quite – by Day – He would not like it – that I betrayed Him – so you’ll never tell. And I must betray Sue – too –

Do not think it dishonorable –

I found out – accidentally – that she -- was trying find out – if you had a little Drinking Flask – to take abroad with you – I would like to serve – Sue – and if you will tell me by Monday’s mail – whether you have one – and promise me – for her sake – not to get one – if you hav’nt – I can fix the telling her –

Mary sent beautiful flowers. Did she tell – you?

Austin hopes his errand will not tire you. (L256)

Johnson believes we should substitute the name Emily for Austin here. Sewall too argues that “she used Austin’s name for her own throughout, either to be arch or for purposes of disguise” (492). But Austin, Sue, and Emily were all so taken with Bowles that assigning particular thoughts and words to particular Dickinsons becomes difficult. Each member of the family seeks Bowles’s favor, and none want him to leave for Europe, as Johnson says he was set to do in the beginning of April (399). And, like everyone in Amherst, all were mourning the loss of Frazar Stearns. But the specificity of the description of “Austin’s” grief, like the later detail of Austin thinking of Bowles “when at the Office,” leads one to believe that Emily really is devoting at least some of this letter to her brother’s extremely intense emotions rather than her own. And, for a young man of

similar background to Stearns, not to mention one who should have been on the battlefield himself, this particular death would have been very hard for him to accept.

And Emily Dickinson's depiction of the shock and disbelief that overpower someone upon first learning of a friend's death is very real. "Austin is chilled," she writes. His "Brain," as if it were separate from him, repeats the words "just as Father told it – to Him." The description of this pain, of the "words of lead – that dropped so deep, they keep weighing –" and the entreaty to "Tell Austin – how to get over them!" are much more intense than anything we find in the letters to Louisa and Frances. The possibility that Dickinson's content and tone changed radically when she changed addressee does exist, but she was certainly capable of expressing strong feelings to her young cousins. It seems more plausible that this anguish belongs a bit more to Austin than to Emily. This is also the first time that Dickinson refers to a wartime death as "murder," again, a total departure from the letter to her cousins. Perhaps this word expresses Austin's opinion more than her own, but the fact that she could paint two such starkly different pictures of Stearns's death – the fall of a brave soldier versus the murder of a mere boy – suggests a sympathy with both views.

The rest of the letter also touches subtly on the war. The image of Austin and/or Emily "wak[ing] at night, with a worry for you" certainly evokes the kind of all-consuming anxiety experienced by those who had loved ones at the front. And Dickinson's obsession here with issues of honor and betrayal displays her tendency to take issues of war to her own private battlefield. Nonetheless, this letter is very concerned with Dickinson's need to find a way to help her brother and herself deal with the tragedy of the Civil War. Her references to the war in these letters to Mary and

Samuel Bowles are different from those to Louisa and Frances Norcross because Mary and Samuel have much more power and control in their relationship with Dickinson than do the Norcross girls. To them, Dickinson is the older and wiser cousin, whereas from Samuel and Mary Bowles, Dickinson seeks friendship and reassurance. The nature of these relationships helps shape the nature of her comments on the war.

Probably about the same time she wrote to Bowles about Stearns, according to Johnson, she sent this poem to him, addressed as a letter.

Dear Mr. Bowles.

Victory comes late,
 And is held low to freezing lips
 Too rapt with frost
 To mind it!
 How sweet it would have tasted!
 Just a drop!
Was God so economical?
 His table's spread too high
 Except we dine on tiptoe!
Crumbs fit such little mouths –
Cherries – suit Robins –
 The Eagle's golden breakfast – dazzles them!
 God keep his vow to "Sparrows,"
 Who of little love – know how to starve!

Emily. (L257)

Johnson suggests that this poem may have been written for Frazar Stearns, supporting that claim with a quote from a letter that Bowles wrote to Austin and Sue: “and then the news from Newbern [a battle won by the Union] took away all the remaining life. I did not care for victory, for anything now” (400). Sewall notes that it may represent Dickinson’s “controlled exasperation at Bowles’s and the Republican’s meager and belated reception of her work” (492).¹⁸ Though there is ample evidence that Emily Dickinson often felt that she herself was subsisting on mere “Crumbs,” the Civil War context of this poem/letter is clear. The “freezing corpses,” writes Shira Wolosky, coupled with “victory delayed” solidify this context (61). It clearly echoes her descriptions of Stearns’s frozen face and of water being held to his lips in the earlier letters to her cousins. For her, though, “Not Newbern [. . .] but the whole structure of divine/human interchange is the poem’s subject,” because “victory denied in combat is made the figure for every sustenance denied God’s creatures” (62), Wolosky argues.

But there is another twist to this poem. Frazar Stearns by all accounts was satisfied with the crumbs he received from God’s table. Sewall posits that Dickinson is telling Bowles here that she will survive no matter how little he gives her (492), and one could argue that the same would have been true for Stearns. Bravely marching into battle, he was prepared to take whatever God was about to dish out, so to speak. St. Armand reports that Stearns told his father that he was more than willing to sacrifice his life for his country (114).¹⁹ Certainly, Wolosky’s point about God’s penuriousness is a good one; after all, Dickinson does ask, “Was God so economical?” But she also realizes that the Robin literally cannot stomach the Eagle’s “breakfast.” In this letter, the “golden” repast “dazzles” smaller birds, but when Dickinson copied this poem into the

fascicles, she changed the word to “strangles.” The beauty of this bounty would certainly “dazzle,” but it becomes deadly when Dickinson rewrites the poem. The possibility remains that, as difficult as it was for some to accept, Stearns may have gotten what he really wanted, or what truly suited him. Wolosky argues that the promises that “not a sparrow shall fall to the ground without the Father” and that “all who have faith shall feast at Christ’s table” have been broken (62), but it is possible to look at the table and turn away. It is possible that the sparrow, though it may fall, is satisfied.

The next comments Dickinson makes to Bowles about the war bear a striking resemblance to those she makes to Mary.

Dear Mr. Bowles.

Vinnie is trading with a Tin peddler – buying Water pots for me to sprinkle Geraniums with – when you get Home, next Winter, and Vinnie and Sue, have gone to the War.

Summer a’nt so long as it was, when we stood looking at it, before you went away, and when I finish August, we’ll hop the Autumn, very soon – and then ’twill be Yourself. I dont know how many will be glad to see you, because I never saw your whole friends, but I have heard, that in large Cities – noted persons chose you. Though how glad those I know – will be, is easier told.

I tell you, Mr. Bowles, it is a Suffering, to have a sea – no care how Blue – between your Soul, and you. The Hills you used to love when you were in Northhampton, miss their old lover, could they speak – and

the puzzled look – deepens in Carlo’s forehead, as Days go by, and you never come.

I’ve learned to read the Steamer place – in Newspapers – now. It’s ’most like shaking hands, with you – or more like your ringing at the door, when Sue says you will call.

We reckon – your coming by the Fruit.

When the Grape gets by – and the Pippin, and the Chestnut – when the Days are a little short by the clock – and a little long by the want – when the sky has new Red Gowns – and a Purple Bonnet – then we say, you will come – I am glad that kind of time, goes by.

It is easier to look behind at a pain, than to see it coming. A Soldier called – a Morning ago, and asked for a Nosegay, to take to Battle. I suppose he thought we kept an Aquarium.

How sweet it must be to one to come Home – whose Home is in so many Houses – and every Heart a “Best Room.” I mean you, Mr. Bowles.

Sue gave me the paper, to write on – so when the writing tires you – play it is Her, and “Jackey” – and that will rest your eyes – for have not the Clover, names, to the Bees?

Emily. (L272)

She addresses the Civil War in the very first paragraph of the letter, matter-of-factly stating that “next Winter” her sister and sister-in-law will “have gone to the War.” Habegger finds this to be proof that Lavinia and Sue possessed “more martial feelings” (402) than Emily. This may well be true, but there is a tinge of sadness here because she

cannot join them. This letter, like so many of Dickinson's, is about loneliness.

Dickinson may well wish she could join them, if not prevented by her natural reticence.

She absolutely feels isolated from her sister and sister-in-law.

That inescapable part of Dickinson's nature is even more apparent in the next paragraph in which she contemplates Bowles's large coterie of friends. This man, whom she equates with her own "Soul," is sought by many, but the closest she can come to him is the "Steamer place – in Newspapers." Then, as in so many letters, she describes the changing of the seasons, here from summer to fall, and is "glad that kind of time, goes by" so the time of Bowles's return will arrive.

Quickly, Dickinson returns to the subject of the war. The line "It is easier to look behind at a pain, than to see it coming" refers both to her own situation and that of the soldier. She wants to be able to look back on Bowles's absence, not forward to it, just as the soldier would much rather look back on battle. That comment makes the following lines seem all the more out of place, for Dickinson seems a bit put out with this soldier who wants flowers to take with him into battle. She does not say if she gave him the bouquet, but writes, "I suppose he thought we kept an Aquarium." This extremely odd comment seems to have nothing to do with flowers at all. Dickinson tells Higginson that "All men say 'What' to me" (L271), and certainly that is the reader's response to this statement. She may have been struck by the absurdity of taking flowers into battle, despite the understandable impulse to bring something beautiful. She may seem detached because she must distance herself from the difficulty of sending soldiers off into battle. Dickinson may be subtly expressing her sympathy with the soldiers with the line "How sweet it must be to one to come Home," but none of these possibilities really help unravel

the very bizarre “Aquarium” reference. Perhaps it merely means that the colorful and exotic nature of an aquarium reminded her of nosegays, and that such flowers seem not to fit with either the soldier’s or her own environment.

One can say with more certainty that complicated references to the Civil War continue to appear in letters that are about missing her family and friends, even those like Vinnie and Sue who were not an ocean away. She is jealous of someone like Bowles for whom “every Heart” has “a `Best Room.”” In the odd closing to the letter, she asks “for have not the Clovers, names, to the Bees?” Dickinson certainly wants to be one of the people who is important enough to Bowles to have a name, as important as the unnamed “Her,” Mrs. Bowles. But here, too, the reader is reminded of the war, of the nameless soldiers like the one who knocks on Dickinson’s door. Someone knows his name – but not Emily Dickinson. This letter, perhaps more than any other discussed thus far, reveals how complex Dickinson’s relationship to the war was. She engages with it, but the extent and nature of that engagement is difficult to pin down.

Oddly, when Dickinson’s invitation to see Samuel Bowles finally arrives, she declines. She explains her unusual reaction to his visit in the following letter which again mentions the war.

Dear friend.

I did not need the little Bat – to enforce your memory – for that can stand alone, like the best Brocade – but it was much – that far and ill, you recollected me – Forgive me if I prize the Grace – superior to the Sign. Because I did not see you, Vinnie and Austin, upbraided me – They did not know I gave my part that they might have the more – but then the

Prophet had no fame in his immediate Town – My Heart led all the rest – I think that what we know – we can endure that others doubt, until their faith be riper. And so, dear friend, who knew me, I make no argument – to you –

Did I not want to see you? Do not the Phebes want to come? Oh They of little faith! I said I was glad that you were alive – Might it bear repeating? Some phrases are too fine to fade – and Light but just confirms them – Few absences could seem so wide as your's has done, to us – If 'twas a larger face – or we a smaller Canvas – we need not know – now you have come –

We hope often to see you – Our poverty – entitle us – and friends are nations in themselves – to supersede the Earth –

'Twould please us, were you well – and could your health be had by sacrifice of ours – 'twould be contention for the place – We used to tell each other, when you were from America – how failure in a Battle – were easier – and you here – I will not tell you further –

Perhaps you tire – now – A small weight – is obnoxious – upon a weary Rope – but had you Exile – or Eclipse – or so huge a Danger, as would dissolve all other friends – 'twould please me to remain –

Let others – show this Surry's Grace –

Myself – assist his Cross.

Emily – (L277)

This letter in which she says she need not defend her actions is actually an elaborate justification and rationalization for her refusal to see Bowles. And though this argument constitutes the bulk of the letter, the war is still on her mind here. In order to explain her reaction, she has to portray herself as far superior to the rest of her family. She is more enlightened since she “prize[s] the Grace – superior to the Sign” and she is far more generous since she “gave my part that they might have more.” Yet Dickinson assumes Bowles understands her because his “faith” surpasses that of the other Dickinsons, yet she continues to argue her point.

As she does in so many letters to Bowles and certainly to Higginson, Dickinson portrays herself in this letter as insignificant and deprived. Yet she also wants to be the indispensable friend, the good soldier who carries Bowles’s “Cross.” She magnifies the importance of her relationship with him, writing, “friends are nations in themselves – to supersede the Earth.” This line expresses Dickinson elevated view of intimacy between loved ones, but the comparison to nations in particular may reveal that the Civil War was in the back of her mind as she wrote it. We must view friends as nations, strong and enduring, because they are all we have, she argues; however, like nations, friends can become estranged and even go to war.

This statement makes more sense in light of her comment that “failure in a Battle – were easier” with Bowles than without him. Bowles, both in a personal and professional capacity, helped interpret the outside world for the Dickinsons. The Union was failing at this point in the war, and so the war continued, and certainly Dickinson’s inner struggles continued. Bowles was often a comforting presence in the midst of such struggles.

Emily Dickinson writes letters to Mary and Samuel Bowles which reveal her unique reaction to the Civil War. The pain of Frazar Stearns's death still looms, and Dickinson looks to Bowles to ease that pain. But Dickinson is generally more detached in these letters, perhaps for much the same reason a general might be detached – in order to be productive. Dickinson did not go to war like Vinnie and Sue, but she did go, in her own way.

“The only News I know”: Letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Surpassed in notoriety by only the Master letters, Emily Dickinson's correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson is perhaps the most interesting of her career. And it is in her letters to Higginson that one would expect most to find passages relating the Civil War since he is the only active soldier to whom she wrote; in 1862, he became the commander of the first black regiment of the Civil War, the First South Carolina Volunteers, composed of former slaves. Though an ardent abolitionist, his formal occupations were Unitarian minister and writer. It was his “Letter to a Young Contributor” in the Atlantic Monthly that most inspired Emily Dickinson to seek his counsel. “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (L260), she asked Higginson on April 15, 1862, and, though he answered her many times, by 1863 his primary focus was war.

Thus, in February 1863, she wrote him the following letter, which Sewall calls “her most extended comments on the war as such” (536).

Dear friend

I did not deem that Planetary forces annulled – but suffered an Exchange of Territory, or World –

I should have liked to see you, before you became improbable. War feels to me an oblique place – Should there be other Summers, would you perhaps come?

I found you were gone, by accident, as I find Systems are, or Seasons of the year, and obtain no cause – but suppose it a treason of Progress – that dissolves as it goes. Carlo – still remained – and I told him –

Best Gains – must have the Losses' Test –

To constitute them – Gains –

My Shaggy Ally assented –

Perhaps Death – gave me awe for friends – striking sharp and early, for I held them since – in a brittle love – of more alarm, than peace. I trust you may pass the limit of War, and though not reared to prayer – when service is had in Church, for Our Arms, I include yourself – I, too, have an “Island” – whose “Rose and Magnolia” are in the Egg, and it's “Black Berry” but a spicy prospective, yet as you say, “fascination” is absolute of Clime. I was thinking, today – as I noticed, that the “Supernatural,” was only the Natural, disclosed –

Not “Revelation” – 'tis – that waits,

But our unfurnished eyes –

But I fear I detain you –

Should you, before this reaches you, experience, immortality, who will inform me of the Exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid Death, I entreat you – Sir – It would bereave

Your Gnome –

I trust the “Procession of Flowers” was not a premonition – (L280)

Although Dickinson commented on the Civil War to many friends and in a variety of contexts, Sewall rightly points out that this instance is more significant. Certainly the opening of the letter acknowledges the extent to which the Civil War changed the “World.”²⁰ She did not believe that “Planetary forces annulled;” the question here is annulled what? Annulled Higginson? Or annulled their friendship? The choice of a legal term is interesting here, in that a marriage is annulled just as the Confederacy sought to dissolve its bond with the Union. Then Dickinson notes that these “forces” have “suffered” an “Exchange of Territory, or World – .” War involves such exchanges, and Dickinson herself is feeling the effects of Higginson’s exchange of northern for southern territory.

The next line is among the many examples of one that could easily be read as indifferent but is instead much more complicated. She calls Higginson “improbable,” an unusual word choice; but, she may be joking about his use of the word in an earlier letter or about a reference to Higginson in the newspaper. It is possible that she also has in mind that it is improbable that he will return to Massachusetts alive. Then Dickinson

famously states that “War feels to me an oblique place.” “Oblique” denotes slanted or indirect and also can mean morally questionable or perverse. Herself the master of obliquity, of the slanted truth, Dickinson may be speaking here of her own lack of direct contact with the war, particularly as compared to Higginson, as well as of the war’s moral perversity. But both the war and her attitude toward it are oblique – difficult to understand and analyze. As she wrote to Higginson earlier, “My Business is Circumference” (L268), not precision.

She ends this paragraph wondering if there will be “other summers.” This is one of many instances in the letters referring to the war in which she asks if a month or season will come. Dickinson is acutely aware some of us, perhaps even Higginson, will not see the summer, but that it will come nonetheless.

But death for Dickinson always seems like a terrible “accident,” as does Higginson’s departure. She also mentions losing “Systems” and “Seasons” as a result of a “treason of Progress,” perhaps implying that the progress of the nation, of the American system, may be necessary, though it “dissolves” much “as it goes.” Then she tells Carlo, her dog, that “Best Gains – must have the Losses’ Test – / To constitute them – Gains – ” This might make more sense to Carlo than to Emily, but, contrary to Wolosky’s opinion, Dickinson at times believes that statement to be perfectly true. It is an idea that, like meeting during another summer, might comfort Higginson. But the presence in this letter that will cheer Higginson most is that of Carlo, Dickinson’s “shaggy Ally.” She tells her imperiled friend that despite the accidents of war and death, she and Carlo are still here, and that in some ways life goes on as usual.

Dickinson makes her final direct reference to the war after she explains the “alarm” rather than “peace” she feels for her loved ones for fear of losing them. Certainly, there is an undercurrent of anxiety here since Higginson is in danger. The line that follows, “I trust you may pass the limit of War,” is another that renders this letter so intriguing. Does she mean the boundary of the war or the limitation in perspective that the war imposes on those who fight in it? And does she mean he will pass it by living or by dying? She is purposely oblique. Then she tells Higginson that she is praying for him as part of “Our Arms.” Higginson is literally the arm of those who are home safe in church on Sunday while he is off fighting. But “arms” is a wonderful word because it is at once peaceful and martial; those on the homefront want the soldiers back in their arms. Finally, she reminds him that it is only “our unfurnished eyes” that render the “Supernatural” inexplicable. She reminds someone in difficult circumstances that there is much we do not understand now but might eventually, again offering him some solace.

Dickinson ends the letter as she began it, describing an “Exchange” of one state for another. She wants to know if Higginson exchanges the mortal for the immortal. Sewall categorizes the tone of this closing as one of “mock formality on a subject that for a soldier is anything by an amusing possibility” (561), but the final sentence is more complex and baffling. “Could you, with honor, avoid Death, I entreat you – Sir – It would bereave” is quite difficult syntactically. She seems to be urging him to avoid death if he can do so honorably, but the antecedent of “It” in the last phrase is unclear. Of course, Dickinson would mourn his death, but perhaps she would mourn the loss of his honor more. Her postscript about the “premonition” again reminds us that she is anxious about him.

The next martial letter from Dickinson to Higginson is concerned with her honor in its prose section and with the war in the poem with which it ends.

Dear friend –

You were so generous to me, that if possible I offended you, I could not too deeply apologize.

To doubt my High Behavior, is a new pain – I could be honorable no more – till I asked you about it. I know not what to deem myself – Yesterday “Your Scholar” – But might I be the one you tonight, forgave, ’tis a Better Honor – Mine is but just the Thief’s Request –

Please, Sir, Hear

“Barabbas” –

The possibility to pass

Without a Moment’s Bell –

Into Conjecture’s presence –

Is like a face of steel

That suddenly looks into our’s

With a Metallic Grin –

The Cordiality of Death

Who Drills his welcome – in – (L282)

The first part is a plea for forgiveness for some unnamed offense. The poem, actually the closing lines (10-16) of “That after Horror – that ’twas us” (Fr243), seems to have nothing to do with that appeal. She calls this “the Thief’s request” and signs the name of a thief, Barabbas, the prisoner who was released instead of Jesus (Buttnick 353). This is

a fascinating allusion in light of the poem that follows. Barabbas is forgiven but Jesus is condemned to die; Dickinson seeks forgiveness and then describes a death. Further, Dickinson describes it in martial terms. The “face of steel” that sports “a Metallic Grin” is a gun, so Dickinson evokes, particularly for Higginson, a soldier about to be shot. He is the Christ to her Barabbas, about to die while she goes free. She may also be warning Higginson to practice Christ-like magnanimity just in case he is about to be shot. Dickinson did not need the Civil War to heighten her awareness of omnipresent death, but the war might have made her more aware of the importance of preserving one’s honor, both as an end in itself and also because death makes repairing one’s honor impossible.

Discovering in June of 1864 that both she and Higginson are wounded, Dickinson pens her final letter to him with war as the backdrop.

Dear friend,

Are you in danger –

I did not know that you were hurt. Will you tell me more? Mr Hawthorne died.

I was ill since September, and since April, in Boston, for a Physician’s care – He does not let me go, yet I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself –

Carlo did not come, because that he would die, in Jail, and the Mountains, I could not hold now, so I brought but the Gods –

I wish to see you more than before I failed – Will you tell me your health?

I am surprised and anxious, since receiving your note –

The only News I know

Is Bulletins all day

From Immortality.

Can you render my Pencil?

The Physician has taken away my Pen.

I enclose the address from a letter, lest my figures fail –

Knowledge of your recovery – would excel my own –

E – Dickinson (L290)

Dickinson is much more forthcoming about her emotional state than in the first letter she wrote to Higginson while he was fighting in the war. She is “surprised” and “anxious” upon hearing that he has been hurt, and she also reveals that she feels trapped by her own condition.

The snippet of poetry that she includes is perhaps the most simple, elegant, and moving statement on the war to appear in any of her correspondence. She writes only the first three lines out of a dozen (Fr820), but this small portion is rich in itself. These lines can easily be written off as yet another sign that she never could escape the crushing weight of death, but such an interpretation ignores the purpose of these lines in this particular letter. Dickinson here is explaining to Higginson how the noncombatant experiences the war. The “Bulletins,” or telegraphs, that dominate life on the homefront list the names of the war dead. There is both whimsy and black humor in the word itself, which contains the words “bullet” and “in.” And, literally, the only “News” in the papers is that of death on the battlefield. This letter conveys plenty of pain specific to Emily

Dickinson. She feared for her eyesight and the effect her condition would have on her life and work – on the ability of others to “render [her] Pencil.” But she also expresses the pain that permeates life during the Civil War. As she wrote in her second letter to Higginson on April 25, 1862, “I sing, as the boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid –” (L261)

Dickinson’s “war” letters to Higginson express a mature understanding of her own pain and that inflicted by the war. She writes to Higginson while he is on the front lines to comfort him but also to share with him her own anxieties. Most importantly, she tells him that she will approach these matters obliquely, as is consistent with her artistic vision.

“The Drums keep on for the still Man”: Politics in Dickinson’s Letters

A discussion of Dickinson’s letters concerning the war cannot close without a coda mentioning the presence of politics in those letters; where, one might ask, are the people, places, and events of this era? Richard Sewall writes that in Emily Dickinson’s oeuvre one finds very little reference to the Civil War, and certainly not to the specifics of it. He states that there is

Nothing about issues, about slavery or the Union, nothing specific about victory or defeat or any of the heroes on either side. It was not that she shut these matters out of her life; she had to come to terms with them in her own way. (536)

Yet he also argues that, “Her animadversions upon a host of worldly matters, from the Civil War to the Stock Exchange, show acute understanding, however tersely or

obliquely expressed” (10). He explains that “She was never discursive on these matters” but that she “packed a whole complex of observation and insight into a single metaphor,” which was the result of an “original observation, sharp and shrewd” (10). Yet the “heroes” and the “issues” do make a few appearances in Emily Dickinson’s letters, and they are worth noting because they contribute to our understanding of this “shrewd” observer’s reaction to the war.

First, Dickinson addresses her father Edward’s politics in two notes. She is playfully derisive of his political affiliations in the following passage from an 1860 letter to Louisa and Frances Norcross.

Won’t Fanny give my respects to the “Bell and Everett party” if she passes that organization on her way to school? I hear they wish to make me Lieutenant-Governor’s daughter. Were they cats would pull their tails, but as they are only patriots, I must forego the bliss [. . .] (L225)

Habegger explains that as the nation headed for war, “Edward Dickinson continued to flirt with the small Constitutional Unionist party” of John Bell and Edward Everett, which “tried to cool the sectional conflict by simply reaffirming the Union and the Constitution” (401). Habegger argues that the “odd mixture of disdain and respect [in this letter] resembles her father’s mixed signals” (401) on the war, and that Emily Dickinson’s “position relative to the war was as oblique and conflicted as her father’s” (402). Dickinson did not always mock politics and patriots, but here she does pull back the curtain to reveal them as schoolboys scuffling on a playground. This does not mean she had no appreciation for the gravity of the issues at stake, but rather that she took issue with the gravitas the politicians assigned themselves.

The next year, Dickinson wrote to her brother Austin

Father said Frank Conkey – touched you –

A Burdock – clawed my Gown –

Not Burdock's – blame –

But mine –

Who went too near

The Burdock's Den –

A bog – affronts my shoe –

What else have bogs – to do –

The only Trade they know –

The splashing Men!

Ah, pity – then!

'Tis Minnows can despise!

The Elephant's – calm eyes

Look further on! (L240)

Again, we see an example of Dickinson's political humor. She is playfully warning her brother to steer clear of the "Burdock's Den" and the "splashing Men." Although she urges him to adopt the "Elephant's – calm eyes," she herself does not mind spending some time in the "Bog." In fact, it amuses her.

Then in May of 1865, Dickinson again writes to her sister that

Loo wishes she knew Father's view of Jeff Davis' capture – thinks
no one but He, can do it justice.

She wishes to send a Photograph of the Arrest to Austin, including
the Skirt and Spurs, but fears he will think her trifling with him. I advised
her not to be rash. (L308)

These are passing comments in a long letter that includes all kinds of tidbits for Vinnie.

She does not express her own interest in politics here, but rather Louisa's; her interest lies more in subtly poking fun at her family – and in laughing at the rumor of Jefferson Davis being captured in women's clothes.²¹

Finally, on November 18, 1864, Emily closes a letter to Lavinia from Cambridge with “The Drums keep on for the still Man, but Emily must stop” (L297). Johnson explains that there was a “torchlight procession” to honor Lincoln's reelection a few days earlier (436). She later tells Elizabeth Holland how she loves those drums, and some of that sentiment is implied here. And her description of Lincoln as “still” is so absolutely beautiful and fitting that it surely could not have been written by someone who was not interested in him and his particular historical moment.

Ten years after the Civil War ended, Emily Dickinson wrote to her cousins

I have only a buttercup to offer for the centennial, as an “embattled
farmer” has but little time.

Begging you not to smile at my limited meadows, I am modestly

Yours. (L436)

Johnson notes that the Norcrosses lived in Concord, where “The Minute Man” statue was dedicated in April 1875. Written on it are Emerson’s words from “Concord Hymn” commemorating the “embattled farmers” who “fired the shot heard round the world” (539). Dickinson ridicules any identification of herself with those farmers, and laughs at her own “limited meadows.” The irony here is that she above all others always understood the expansive range her nearly unlimited literary power gave her. That range included the Civil War. In letters to her Norcross cousins, she primarily explores the deaths of individual soldiers, particularly Frazar Stearns. Her aim is to inform and reassure them, but she mingles sentimental expressions with disturbing details, never shying away from describing the pain the deaths of these soldiers caused. She also implies that her primary response to the war is poetic, a theme she further develops in letters to Samuel and Mary Bowles. Her correspondence with them covers a number of aspects of the war, including Stearns’s death again and Bowles’s role as a solid presence in the face of uncertainty. These letters include oddly aloof comments on the war, in which Dickinson resists conventional ways of responding to the war. She insists on uniqueness. Finally, her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, himself a soldier, express more anxiety than do those to the other correspondents. Dickinson, good friend that she is, also attempts to comfort him, while at the same time pondering how “oblique” a place war could be. Her relationship with the war and its “news” was nevertheless intense. Emily Dickinson was definitely “embattled” in her own way.

Notes

¹ Sewall catalogs a number of references to various current events, including “the peace settlement of the Russo-Turkish War,” “President Garfield’s assassination,” and “the Sudanese crisis of 1883-85” (620). He argues that this particular letter reflects “a bit of skepticism about the American democratic process, where the vote of an ignoramus counts as much as a Dickinson’s” (620). She may be laughing at the electorate, but she probably is laughing too at her own perceived isolation from the world.

² During the presidential campaign, Cleveland was accused by a Buffalo newspaper of “fathering an illegitimate child and sending the victim of his lust to the insane asylum” (Welch 36). Cleveland admitted paternity though he might not have been the father, and did pay for the mother to be sent to an institution after she had a breakdown. Interestingly, Higginson was one of the public figures who defended Cleveland (Welch 37-38).

³ In Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson, Martha Nell Smith argues for the primacy of Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law Sue, and she addresses the blurry line between letter and poem in Dickinson’s oeuvre, as well as the problem of autobiography that one always runs up against when reading Dickinson. And in Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson, Smith puts her theory into action by editing a volume of what Sue herself called Dickinson’s letter-poems (xxv).

⁴ Marietta Messmer includes an overview of early criticism of Dickinson’s letters in the introduction to A Vice for Voices (6-8).

⁵Other critics who share this view include Paula Bennett, Sarah Wider, S. Jaret McKinstry, and Elizabeth Hewitt.

⁶Some critics divorce Dickinson's letters from real events completely. Cristanne Miller says that "She increases the given distance of epistolary correspondence through a near total lack of reference to the events of her everyday life and by striking various poses" (33), and that she only refers to "death and illness with any regularity" and then only "elliptically" (34). Lori Lebow, like so many critics, believes that few "current affairs" appear in her text since she wants "to universalize experience in order to enhance relevance to a wide audience" (90). She further states that Dickinson's "domestic and inter-personal focus concentrates on the human concerns that transcend time-related and transient socio-political dramas," and that this explains her "continuing appeal" (90). Finally, McKinstry argues that Dickinson's writing "often cloaks meaning by using words to disguise rather than invite referentiality, to obfuscate any relationship to the world" (196).

⁷In an early study of the letters, David Higgins points out that "Dickinson was audience-conscious" and thus "carefully adapted each correspondence to her estimate of the reader's capacities" (5).

⁸McKinstry, like Messmer, proposes a feminist interpretation of Dickinson's letters. She writes that "Undoubtedly Dickinson's letters should be read as something between autobiography and poetry, a unique genre that Dickinson creates in order to balance the poetic self-expression demanded by her art and the female self-expression demanded by her society" (193). Further, Dickinson "balances the reticence of the female voice with the speaking (male) poet's voice in order to escape from the

restrictions of gender and genre” (197). Certainly, Emily Dickinson bridled at gender “restrictions” at times, but it is not a foregone conclusion that she would have viewed letter writing as a particularly feminine pursuit.

⁹The (perhaps permanent) separation imposed by death definitely dominates many of Emily Dickinson’s letters. And Dickinson consistently attempts to comfort those who are mourning their deceased loved ones; Decker identifies “condolence” as the “most consistent single purpose of Dickinson the letter writer” (166). Janet W. Buell argues that “As bereavements gathered in her own life,” her letters and poems no longer expressed a “desperate, sometimes angry, quest for explanation” but rather “a journey toward acceptance of mystery, an acknowledgement that the unknown provides unexpected consolations” (331). Similarly, Robert Graham Lambert posits the idea that over time “She shifts from emotional dependence to psychological independence, from seeking solace to offering comfort: as Emily grew older, she matured emotionally and spiritually” (207). David Porter, on the other hand, in an examination of Dickinson’s letters to Higginson, argues that the poet was forever vexed that “The promise of life is everywhere denied by the evidence of death”; she had no “philosophical center to hold her steady amid the problems of the dust” (86). Emily Dickinson was probably one of the people least likely to accept fully the “mystery” of death and God’s part in it, but there is certainly more of a calmness in her later work.

¹⁰Hewitt asks the interesting question, “Does Dickinson’s peculiar hybrid style of combining lyric and letter, then, frame the isolated lyric with the connective tissues of the epistle?” and “does poetry emerge out of the incapacity to tell? Or does the letter attempt to correct the potential failure of the lyric to tell? (43). She concludes that

“Dickinson is well aware of the pitfalls of her hybridized mode, and her lyrical letters to Bowles consistently announce the difficulties of securing any kind of correspondence” (44).

¹¹ St. Armand argues that in this letter “Dickinson’s sentimental language here follows the conventions of the Victorian *ars moriendi*, while at the same time it betrays a bizarre kind of death wish in relation to Stearns himself” (105). Though her focus on Stearns is interesting, St. Armand seems to be overstating the case here. He also writes that

The Gothic melodrama of her lament for the ‘Poor little widow’s boy,’ with whom as a spiritual orphan she identified herself, is eclipsed by her chill vision of the ‘frozen face’ of Frazar Stearns, converting him into one of those marble figurines of the early dead that we have seen were a staple of popular consolation verse (105).

St. Armand’s description of the passage as Gothic makes sense, but Dickinson may not be comparing Stearns to a statue by calling his face “frozen.” She is writing during the winter, so the corpse literally would have frozen. Here she continues to describe the deaths in very real terms. His assertion that Dickinson had a “wish” or even a “premonition” (105) that Stearns would die also seems a bit of a stretch. She may have been thinking of him mostly because of her brother’s relationship to him.

¹² St. Armand develops at length a complicated theory that Frazar Stearns was a powerful symbol in the Sentimental Love Religion Emily Dickinson adhered to. He argues that “She totally internalized Frazar Stearns’s death, and dwelt on his marmoreal apotheosis in order to compensate for her own obscure Antietams of the spirit” (113).

¹³ See “Our journey had advanced –” (Fr453).

¹⁴ Sewall notes that “the central concern of her life,” her poetry, “is barely touched upon” in the letters to Louise and Frances, but that her writing “may have been assumed as common knowledge between them” (628). This letter supports that idea.

¹⁵ Oddly, Habegger marvels that Dickinson sent the “stolid” and “unresponsive” Mary Bowles “some of her most confidential, ingenious, and moving productions, many of which presented the writer as quite powerless” (379). He asserts that her “withdrawn and prickly tendencies were aggravated by chronic asthma” (378) and refers to her as “unresponsive” (379), but he offers no evidence to support this view. He may be repeating her husband’s opinions; in a letter to Austin, Samuel Bowles apologizes for his wife’s “peculiarities” and explains that “Her very timidity and want of self-reliance gives her a sharper utterance” (Sewall 472). Perhaps Dickinson saw something in her that others did not.

¹⁶ Habegger addresses in detail the question of whether Emily Dickinson knowingly contributed any poems to the war effort by offering them for publication in periodicals printed for that purpose. Karen Dandurand believes that she did, while he recounts an instance where she seemed to refuse (402-403).

¹⁷ Habegger notes that the section of this letter that mentions “Meme,” or Mamie, Samuel Bowles’s daughter, “is hopelessly obscure if the allusion is missed” (384), like so many passages in Dickinson’s letters. Bowles printed a poem in the Republican written by Mary Clemmer Ames for Mamie, and it describes the little girl wearing a crown of morning glories (384).

¹⁸ Habegger strongly disagrees with Sewall on the question of Emily Dickinson pursuing publication of her poems in the Springfield Republican. He asserts that “Nothing would have been easier for Dickinson than to find a publishing outlet,” given her connection to Bowles and his newspaper, which in spite of the opinions of Josiah Holland, “was always confronting barriers and crossing boundaries and seeking a vital new woman’s voice” (389). He argues that Dickinson refused the Republican, not vice versa. The truth may lie somewhere in between Habegger and Sewall, for as much as private circulation of her poems may have suited Dickinson’s character, she was an undeniably ambitious poet in many ways.

¹⁹ St. Armand quotes from a letter Frazar Stearns wrote to his father: “I am very sure I am quite ready to die an ignominious death, as a private or officer, or do anything for our beloved country.” St. Armand also writes that another soldier called Stearns “the noblest soldier that the world ever afforded” but “too brave for his own good” (114, from Adjutant Stearns, 140). He links Stearns’s desire to die in battle with the Calvinist question that might have been on Dickinson’s mind: “Was he willing to die?” (106).

²⁰ Wolosky notes that Dickinson may allude to the war changing the world in two other letters. To Edward Dwight she writes in 1862, “The World is not the shape it was” (L246), and to her sister Lavinia in 1864, “now the World is dead” (L296). Another example appears in an 1862 letter to Bowles: “When did the Dark happen?” (L247).

²¹ According to Clement Eaton, Jefferson Davis was “seized in a raglan, which happened to be his wife’s, and she threw a shawl over him. The cartoonists represented him as fleeing in feminine disguise” (261).

CHAPTER 2

THE CIVIL WAR POEMS:

“SEESAWING – COOLLY – ON IT”

Emily Dickinson does not write what one generally would describe as “war letters.” Writing letters from the front is certainly not an option for her, and she never expounds upon her experiences on the homefront. She never discusses any specific issue or battle in detail. She does refer to the Civil War, however, both directly and obliquely in letters to a number of correspondents written during the conflict. To her Norcross cousins and to Samuel Bowles, she responds to the death of a soldier who was her brother’s friend, and to Higginson, she responds to her own friend’s decision to join the Union army and to the news that he is wounded in battle. In all the letters, she addresses her family’s and friends’ response to the war and begins to frame her own.

Naturally, she responds with her poetry. Dickinson writes dozens of poems dealing with the Civil War, and, again, her treatment of war is sometimes straightforward and sometimes “slant.” As is true of her correspondence, searching these poems, even the ones that obviously address a war experience, for a coherent, unified position on the Civil War is fruitless; it does not exist. And such an approach ignores Dickinson’s artistic impulse and temperament. In the introduction to Choosing Not Choosing, Sharon Cameron discusses the kinds of criticism Emily Dickinson’s poetry has inspired as well the poetry that has confounded it. She identifies two categories of criticism:

“normalizing” and “theoretically sophisticated” (21). The first “domesticates” Dickinson’s poetry, claiming that “the poems make no sense or the sense that they make is completely unproblematic,” while the second “discovers in Dickinson a poetry stripped of referentiality,” a “paradox purified of content” (20).¹ Shira Wolosky’s reading of the war poems, by far the most detailed, falls squarely in the “normalizing” category. Though she offers some interesting interpretations, her analysis is too narrow for two reasons. First, she admits almost no context for the poems other than war. Emily Dickinson was interested in the Civil War and she wrote poems about it, but those poems suggest themes and even contexts beyond war as well. As a rule, Dickinson poems imply and suggest, challenging the reader at every turn to consider new interpretive paths; the war poems are no exception. Second, almost without exception, Wolosky reads this poetry as challenging both war and God. She believes that Dickinson saw the horrors of war as an unacceptable part of God’s plan. Dickinson’s war poetry, however, does not present a political or theological agenda. Daneen Wardrop calls the world of Dickinson’s poetry “a historically saturated if politically devoid realm” (59), a view which moves toward a more productive approach to examining history as it appears in Dickinson’s art. She notes that the poet “involves herself in her culture by way of infusing culture into her art” (62), and she suggests that we as readers should “steep ourselves in her particular ambiguity of cultural occurrence” (63).² Indeed, it is her unique and ambiguous response to her historical moment that is absolutely fascinating.

If there is no master narrative, then how does one characterize Emily Dickinson’s distinctive “war” poetry? Wolosky and other critics suggest that her reaction was extreme – that she was shocked and appalled by the events of the Civil War. This was

simply not the case. The speakers in the following poems, whether they be soldiers, mourners, or the poet herself, remain calm and contemplative despite the enormous strain under which they find themselves. No matter how “embattled” they or Dickinson herself may seem at times, these speakers and their poet seem to be doing surprisingly well. That is not to say that there is no pain or grief in these poems, or no sense of horror. As Margaret Dickie affirms, “Dickinson [. . .] seemed oddly cognizant of how the felled soldier might feel” (192). But for the most part, Dickinson is able to consider a number of themes that arise in traditional war poems, such as the plight of the soldier, the price of victory, and even the role God plays in this drama, dispassionately. That does not mean she was indifferent; her letters certainly prove otherwise. She observes events from afar, and is still able to be fully engaged and to comment on them astutely.

Yet one can never disregard what Wardrop calls “the indeterminate Dickinson, the poet of intimations” (61). The poet comments about the war in these works, but she also implies other contexts and meanings. Dickinson was not overwhelmed by the war, but it invaded her consciousness, she absorbed it, and there it mingled with other concerns. Just as she does not choose to tell a single, consistent war story, she does not choose to confine these poems to just that story. As Cameron points out, “two voices often punctuate the poetry as do double stories” (24) and often “two conflicting stories are told simultaneously” (26).³ Cameron explains how in many aspects of the poetry, Dickinson is “choosing not to choose”: it is an open question how to read lines syntactically (25-26) and even how to read individual words, points that are “reiterated in the question mark with which so many of her poems conclude” (28).⁴ Questions are indeed at the crux of Dickinson’s artistic method, and the reader should enjoy wrestling

with those she asks specifically in her war poems. She examines the war from multiple and even contradictory positions in her poetry, employing a variety of voices. The “heteroglossia” Cameron argues is at the core of her art (29) allows Dickinson to write about war and about other experiences at the same time, thus creating a particularly interesting kind of war poem.

For Dickinson, war was an experience without geographical or even temporal boundaries. This is an important point because of the difficulty of dating the composition of her poems. Both Thomas H. Johnson’s and Ralph W. Franklin’s editions of the poetry arrange it chronologically, despite that difficulty.⁵ They largely ignore the fascicle groupings that Cameron and others believe to be vital, though scholars certainly can look at Franklin’s manuscript books to discover those fascicles. These editions also disregard other aspects of the poems lost in the translation to print.⁶ Franklin believes that most of poems identified here as war poems were written during the war years, and both he and Johnson note that the early 1860s seem to have been Dickinson’s most creative years.⁷ But readers simply will never know if she read an account of a battle in a newspaper and then immediately sat down at her desk to write. Complicating the matter further, the war poems are scattered throughout many fascicles and were sent in letters to a wide variety of correspondents. Based on the number of letters and poems that deal directly and indirectly with the war or politics, it is safe to surmise that the life of the nation figured in her consciousness throughout her life, infiltrating that famous solipcism with which she has been labeled. And so “directly and indirectly Dickinson wrote poetry that detailed the psychological reality of the war years in which her imagination worked so fervently” (Dickie 196).

In “Robbed by Death – but that was easy –” (Fr838), the speaker describes “Staking our entire Possession / On a Hair’s result – / Then – Seesawing – coolly on it –” (13-15). Dickinson writes about individual speakers who seem about to lose their “entire Possession,” and she writes about the nation’s Civil War gamble as well. But no matter what the stakes, these Dickinson’s speakers are “Seesawing – coolly.” They ask pointed questions, but it is a calm kind of inquiry. Dickinson was much more involved in the world outside her home and outside her mind, but, as Wardrop reminds us, we should “guard against contorting her poems to fit a received assumption concerning involvement” (61). The poems that follow prove just how singular her involvement was.

We think of death on the battlefield as war’s central experience. It was long assumed that only those who faced this possibility truly understood war. Emily Dickinson did not live through battle, but she lived with the war and certainly with death, and she imagined death in battle in a series of poems. Some of these poems’ speakers seem to be the soldiers themselves, while others are mourners and still others more detached observers. In each of these lyric snapshots, we view death through the lens of war. Yet in each case, Dickinson also shifts the angle, revealing or suggesting something to her readers that they did not expect to see.

The following poem is a good starting point for this inquiry because it can be linked directly to a letter she wrote to Samuel Bowles soon after Frazar Stearns was killed in battle. Its war context is obvious, but its speaker’s attitude is not.

It dont sound so terrible – quite – as it did –

I run it over – “Dead”, Brain – “Dead”.

Put it in Latin – left of my school –
 Seems it dont shriek so – under rule.

Turn it, a little – full in the face
 A Trouble looks bitterest –
 Shift it – just –
 Say “When Tomorrow comes this way –
 I shall have waded down one Day”.

I suppose it will interrupt me some
 Till I get accustomed – but then the Tomb
 Like other new Things – shows largest – then –
 And smaller, by Habit –

It’s shrewder then
 Put the Thought in advance – a Year –
 How like “a fit” – then –
 Murder – wear! (Fr 384)

Franklin, among other critics, notes that Dickinson “used words that parallel the poem” (409) in the letter to Bowles that Johnson dates March, 1862.

Austin is chilled – by Frazer’s murder – He says – his Brain keeps
 saying over “Frazer is killed” – “Frazer is killed,” just as father told it – to
 Him. Two or three words of lead – that dropped so deep, they keep

weighing –

Tell Austin – how to get over them! (L256)

Of course, this is the letter in which Dickinson may be using her brother as a mask.

Assuming that the pain is primarily Austin's, and that his grief inspired the poem, it is interesting to note how there is a much greater sense of anguish in the letter than in the verse. This poem could represent Dickinson's advice to her brother on how "to get over" his friend's death, as she describes a speaker coming to terms with such a shocking event. The speaker might also be a soldier like Stearns himself coming to terms with the possibility of his own "murder."

Whoever he or she may be, this speaker's mourning process is interesting. First, the speaker uses what he remembers from school to translate death into rote Latin as an attempt to discipline this disorderly concept, or, as Ford writes, by "subjecting it [. . .] to the order of language" (202). He then suggests another kind of discipline, that of a schoolmaster hitting a boy with a ruler; "under rule" may mean both subjected to rules and the "rule" that stings the students. Ironically, he may actually be attempting to subdue sudden, violent death through violence. The speaker also tries to "Shift" it or look askance at it, so it will seem less threatening. He finally uses the age-old one-day-at-a-time method of dealing with the experience, comforting himself with a platitude. But "waded down" implies that the speaker is weighted down by this arduous task of dealing with death.

Dickinson's speaker then describes how these morbid thoughts will "interrupt" him until he grows accustomed to them, until they become "Habit." One senses some

irony and bitterness in this concession that in a “Year” the idea of death will “fit” like a well-worn garment. St. Armand and Ford both read this poem as Dickinson’s attempt to accept Stearns’s death, as St. Armand writes, to “school’ herself to the surprise” (107). Ford reads the question “Should one adjust to death in war?” (202) in this poem, and believes that the word “murder” is Dickinson’s answer. But the speaker, like the “Tomb,” may be “shrewder” than these critics acknowledge. Despite the irony, even this death, in time, will seem familiar; it will “fit.” The speaker seems to have come to this realization calmly.

A speaker who seems to be among soldiers who are facing death seems similarly resigned.

Our journey had advanced –

Our feet were almost come

To that odd fork in Being’s Road –

Eternity – by Term –

Our pace took sudden awe –

Our feet – reluctant – led –

Before – were Cities – but Between –

The Forest of the Dead –

Retreat – was out of Hope –

Behind – a Sealed Route –

Eternity's White Flag – Before –

And God – at every Gate – (Fr453)

This poem is not one mentioned by the critics who find war poems in Dickinson's oeuvre. It instead seems at first to be a standard Dickinsonian contemplation of death and immortality. Suzanne Juhasz, for example, argues that "The metaphor of journey is omnipresent" in Dickinson's poetry and "Eternity is the goal"; the question for Dickinson is "its direction, the location of eternity" (133). In Lyric Time, Sharon Cameron also reads the poem as an exploration of the boundaries of death and eternity.⁸ Indeed, everyone eventually arrives at this fork in the road, at which they may meet God and the souls who have passed before.

But certain clues suggest that this poem may be more than generic exploration of the last leg of life's journey. Rather, it also presents a portrait of soldier on his last legs. This speaker is not alone, but calls this "Our journey," as he and his comrades face not just defeat on the battlefield this day but the ultimate defeat – death. The emphasis here is on marching; Dickinson uses the word "feet" and "pace," and it is a slow and "reluctant" pace since it may lead to their demise. Soldiers march from place to place, and, quite literally, a "Forest" of corpses often lay between those places.⁹ This language suggests a war scenario. Dickinson continues to employ martial terms when she writes that "Retreat" is "out of hope," perhaps implying that it not hopeless, but rather completely out of the realm of hope.

Near its close, the poem takes an interesting turn. These men seem to have no choice but to surrender to "Eternity," since their escape "Route" is "Sealed." And yet it is eternity that holds up its "White Flag" to the soldiers, yielding to them. At last, there is

God waiting to open “every Gate.” The soldiers, then, are victorious. The speaker of this poem may move through the peculiar geography of eternity reluctantly, but one also senses his “awe.” Again, every reader of “Our journey had advanced –” is traveling along the same road, but Dickinson’s suggestion that the speaker is a soldier opens new interpretive paths. For the Civil War soldiers who found themselves looking at that “odd fork” rather frequently, this poem suggests a peaceful end for their journey.

A soldier also trudges toward eternity in the following poem, though it ends before he reaches it.

From Blank to Blank –

A Threadless Way

I pushed Mechanic feet –

To stop – or perish – or advance –

Alike indifferent –

If end I gained

It ends beyond

Indefinite disclosed –

I shut my eyes – and groped as well –

’Twas lighter – to be Blind – (Fr484)

The war context of this poem is apparent; pushing “Mechanic feet” surely describes moving a cannon forward. This speaker also reminds the reader of the men in the previous poem who unwillingly “pushed” their own “Mechanic feet” forward. Men, indeed, are supposed to act like machines themselves during war, and eventually they, as

though they are moving “From Blank to Blank,” feel nothing at all. This speaker does not care if he wins or loses, lives or dies. Dickinson describes his journey as “Threadless,” an interesting word choice. She may have had the classical allusions of the thread of life spun by the Fates or the thread that leads out of the labyrinth in mind, both of which imply that this speaker is cut off or hopelessly lost. It may also apply to his psychological state, a feeling that he has lost track of what he is doing and is just going through the motions.

The second stanza raises more questions about this experience. We do not know exactly what “end” the speaker imagines achieving, and the “It” in the next line has no clear antecedent. This experience does end “beyond” something – but what? Wolosky argues that the word “beyond” in this poem does not mean “the other world” but rather “beyond what the poet can gauge” (23). Since there is no “end” to this journey, “movement becomes impossible” (23). The poem’s language suggests, however, that the speaker can imagine a place beyond this journey in which the “Indefinite” will be revealed. In the meantime, the speaker is still moving forward, but he is doing so with his eyes closed. Wolosky describes this poem’s final lines as “a subtle Dickinsonian inversion of the familiar religious paradox by which external darkness may be spiritually bright” (23).¹⁰ It is a play on this idea, but not a reversal. The speaker has surrendered to a difficult experience and now will wait for the “Indefinite” to become less so. Though the speaker is groping his way through an arduous journey, and Dickinson suggests war as one such journey, by the end of the poem his burden is “lighter.”

Dickinson’s poems in which speakers consider the meaning of victory and defeat in battle are similar to the two preceding poems, approaching the problem calmly and

philosophically. The next poem, however, also contains a haunting depiction of a battlefield which stands alone in Dickinson's oeuvre.

My Portion is Defeat – today –
 A paler luck than Victory –
 Less Paeans – fewer Bells –
 The Drums dont follow Me – with tunes –
 Defeat – a somewhat slower – means –
 More Arduous than Balls –

'Tis populous with Bone and stain –
 And Men too straight to stoop again –
 And Piles of solid Moan –
 And Chips of Blank – in Boyish Eyes –
 And scraps of Prayer –
 And Death's surprise,
 Stamped visible – in stone –

There's somewhat prouder, Over there –
 The Trumpets tell it to the Air –
 How different Victory
 To Him who has it – and the One
 Who to have had it, would have been
 Contenteder – to die – (Fr704)

The second stanza of this poem, though poetically rendered, is as painful an account of war's human toll as any written by a soldier standing on a battlefield. Wolosky states that this description "could not be more concrete," though she also believes that the poem "does not entirely exclude the metaphoric level" (56).¹¹ Her depiction of the battlefield is vivid, but it is certainly not Wilfred Owen's war landscape. Dickinson is impressionistic, while war poets like Owen assault their readers with the real. In "Dulce Et Decorum Est," for example, Owen describes a soldier who has been gassed, with blood that has "come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --" (22-24). Dickinson, on the other hand, writes in brilliantly suggestive and imprecise metaphors. She gives us "stain" for blood, as if these men are marked by guilt or sin. She tells of "Men too straight to stoop again," reminding the reader that these soldiers have been marching upright for too long and that they literally will never bend again if they end up in the grave. Dickinson is at her most moving with "Piles of solid Moan" and "Chips of Blank – in Boyish Eyes –" conveying both war's anguish and its effect of rendering mere boys devoid of thought and feeling. When death finally comes it is still sudden, and it is "stamped" both in the "stone" faces of the dead and later on their tombstones.

Flanking this portrayal are two stanzas in which a soldier surveys a battlefield, contemplating his own defeat. He describes it as "a paler luck than Victory," and the words "pale" and "luck" are both interesting choices. A "pale" shade of a color is lighter and more subdued, and "luck" describes an arbitrary, chance outcome. So if defeat is only a "paler luck," then victory does not seem particularly desirable, and defeat may not be tragic. In fact, defeat is only "a somewhat slower – means –" – but a slower means to

what end? Is it a means to the “Paeans” one receives for fighting in a war, or a means to being hit with the minnie “Balls” that killed the men who fought in the Civil War?

Dickinson does not provide the answer to this question, but she does present a speaker for whom defeat is not a very distressing outcome.

In the final stanza, the soldier gazes at the victorious, noting that they are only “somewhat prouder.” The defeated are proud too, perhaps. Or maybe neither side is particularly proud; it is, after all, only “Trumpets” that “tell” that pride. Then Dickinson injects the wonderfully ambiguous line “How different Victory / To Him who has it.” This may be an interrogative – how different is victory for the victor? Are those who triumph really ecstatic? Or does it only seem that way when you are the one who would have been “Contenteder” to die victorious than survive defeated? This poem resists simplistic conclusions.

The consideration of victory and defeat in “My Portion is Defeat – today –” is reminiscent of an earlier poem Dickinson sent to her sister-in-law in 1862. She also copied this poem into a fascicle and made a separate fair copy of it. The poem is not about the Civil War, but about the struggle between the British and French for control of Canada. To Susan Dickinson, she sent this version.

“Wolfe” demanded during Dying

“Which Control the Day”?

“General, the British” – “Easy”

Answered Wolfe, “to die” –

“Montcalm”, his opposing Spirit

Rendered with a smile –

“Sweet”, said he – “My own Surrender

Liberty’s forestall –” (Fr482)

Wolfe and Montcalm both died after their 1759 battle on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec, but Wolfe died victorious. Dickinson calls Montcalm his “opposing Spirit,” therefore calling attention to the generals’ inner lives, not their movements on the battlefield. Yet she also places both their names in quotation marks, which may suggest that she is most interested in what they represent as types. The reader may be invited to substitute other names. “Montcalm” loses the battle and his life, calling these defeats “Sweet.” Is his death desirable because he has failed in battle, and he does not want to live to see “Liberty” obstructed? There certainly seems to be irony in Montcalm’s “smile.” As in “My Portion is Defeat – today –,” we see here a man calmly considering the meaning of victory and defeat as well as life and death in battle. In the fair copy of this poem that Dickinson did not include in a fascicle, she makes a significant change which renders the poem even more intriguing. She substitutes “beguile” for “forestall.” Now liberty has not been thwarted, merely, but cheated, foiled, and even diverted or charmed. The connotations of the “beguile” are much richer, and this final choice seems much stronger, lending a tinge of bitterness to Montcalm’s ironic amusement. Montcalm may even feel that his surrender is itself a deception that belongs to liberty – that he has somehow been victory’s victim. The syntax of this poem, as it is with so much of Dickinson’s work, is extremely difficult to untangle. It is as if Dickinson herself is beguiling us, forestalling interpretation. We cannot unravel this grammar and are

therefore forced to admit that we cannot know the meaning of this defeat or the fate of liberty. The ultimate outcome here, particularly for the “spirits,” will remain hidden from us.

Emily Dickinson is not always as inscrutable as “Montcalm.” The speaker of this next poem survives battle and then draws more definite conclusions about its meaning.

My Triumph lasted till the Drums
 Had left the Dead alone
 And then I dropped my Victory
 And chastened stole along
 To where the finished Faces
 Conclusion turned on me
 And then I hated Glory
 And wished myself were They.

What is to be is best descried
 When it has also been –
 Could Prospect taste of Retrospect
 The Tyrannies of Men
 Were Tenderer, diviner
 The Transitive toward –
 A Bayonet’s contrition
 Is nothing to the Dead – (Fr1212)

The first stanza seems a straightforward reporting of survivor's guilt from a victorious soldier. The speaker feels triumphant at first, then "chastened" as he studies the "finished Faces" of the dead. The "Conclusion" that he sees in these faces, he reports, "turned on me" as perhaps his ideas about war have changed. Now he wishes he were among the dead, and not left behind, alone.

Oddly, the final stanza feels like a moral appended to explain the speaker's experience. The "I" and "they" disappear, and a new voice speaks. If we could see the future and alter our behavior, we could pass from our human condition to one more divine, the voice concludes.¹² There is hope here for movement toward a "Transitive," a positive change. "A Bayonet's contrition" comes too late for the "Dead," but perhaps they did not die in vain.

This poem leads perfectly into one in which the speaker, this time a civilian, also expresses survivor's guilt. The poem is a tribute to the soldiers who die for a cause, but the speaker's position on the cause itself is equivocal.

It feels a shame to be Alive –

When Men so brave – are dead –

One envies the Distinguished Dust –

Permitted – such a Head –

The Stone – that tells defending Whom

This Spartan put away

What little of Him we – possessed

In Pawn for Liberty –

The price is great – Sublimely paid –
 Do we deserve – a Thing –
 That lives – like Dollars – must be piled
 Before we may obtain?

Are we that wait – sufficient worth –
 That such Enormous Pearl
 As life – dissolved be – for Us –
 In Battle's – horrid Bowl?

It may be – a Renown to live –
 I think the Men who die –
 Those unsustained – Saviors –
 Present Divinity – (Fr524)

According to Margaret Dickie, Dickinson conveys “the woman’s traditional guilt as the survivor” here (193). Certainly the first two lines convey that sentiment, but the poem quickly becomes less conventional. The phrase “Distinguished Dust” in the first stanza reads like a bit of black humor; a person can be renowned or remarkable, but his dust cannot. And dust cannot be distinguished from dust. For Dickinson, the grave is the great equalizer, where “Death’s large – Democratic fingers / Rub away the Brand” (Fr836). But these soldiers have separated themselves by dying for their country, a fact to which their gravestones testify.

The speaker asks what seems a logical question in the next three stanzas: are those for whom the soldier fights worth such a great sacrifice? The poem may appear at first to take a stand against war, but upon closer inspection is much more complicated. Even this poem reveals a speaker “Seesawing – coolly,” refusing to be pinned down to a firm position. Dickinson notes that “The price is great” and asks if those who benefit from the sacrifice “deserve” to do so. Though she may question the “worth” of those who survive, she never actually questions the end itself. The speaker seems satisfied that “Liberty” is worth dying for. She also calls the soldier a “Spartan,” implying that he was a well-trained soldier who went to war willingly, and she notes that the price for that decision was “Sublimely paid.” The speaker implies that he did not ask the questions she does. These are not the words one typically finds in an anti-war poem.

On the other hand, this poem certainly does not celebrate war. The soldier’s life is “put away [. . .] in Pawn for Liberty.” Presumably, “we” exchange the life for the liberty, God is the one who is paid. It is an odd and somewhat disconcerting transaction. The idea of “lives” that “like Dollars – must be piled” in order for us to receive our part of the bargain is also arresting. Sewall emphasizes that Dickinson was a keen observer of the world around her and that her comments on current events tend to be brief but insightful (10). The word “Dollars” illustrates his point perfectly. Dickinson was surely intelligent and well-informed enough to know that the Civil War was fought over secession and slavery, but the South required slaves for economic reasons. It did not want to submit to federal control of its economy. This is also an interesting comment in light of Austin’s purchase of a substitute to take his place in battle. Austin’s pile of

money prevented his own body from being added to the pile. Certainly someone as obsessed with honor as Dickinson would have had some qualms about Austin's actions.

The striking image of the "Enormous Pearl" that is "dissolved" in "Battle's – horrid Bowl" is particularly worth noting. In Pliny's Natural History, he relates a story about Cleopatra wagering with Antony that she can spend an enormous sum of money on a banquet. She proceeds to dissolve her pearl earring, one of the two largest pearls in the world, in a bowl of vinegar and then to drink it (9.58.119-121). Cleopatra's drink also was thought to be an aphrodisiac (Wedek 65). The pearl of "life" is much more precious to Dickinson than the earring was to Cleopatra, and Dickinson chooses the word "horrid" to describe the "Bowl" of "Battle." Yet the drink Cleopatra imbibes has magical, transformative powers, rendering the drinker open to love and desire. The image, then, also suggests that war may bring a more positive transformation for those who survive it, and maybe even for the soldier himself.

Dickinson ends the poem traditionally enough by comparing the fallen men to "saviors." But even here she makes interesting choices. It seems unusual that living would be "Renown." Rather, it is the soldiers and their leaders who should be renowned. Yet obviously one can achieve other kinds of fame and distinction only if one lives beyond the battlefield. This seeming contradiction is followed by a description of the soldiers as "unsustained – Saviors –" who "Present Divinity." Unlike Christ, they are unresurrected saviors, not sustained by God the way Christ was. They are not divine like Christ, but they do "Present" an example of "Divinity" and they do save those like the speaker. They may even present divinity to God Himself. Wolosky rightly points out

that the kind of “glory” men like the ones in this poem attain “achieves strange twists, even in affirmative poems” (72). Such twists are Emily Dickinson’s hallmark.

“They dropped like Flakes –” compares the soldiers not to saviors but to snow, stars, and rose petals, again revealing affection for them. And the poem ends with a similar sentiment.

They dropped like Flakes –
 They dropped like stars –
 Like Petals from a Rose –
 When suddenly across the June
 A Wind with fingers – goes –

They perished in the seamless Grass –
 No eye could find the place –
 But God can summon every face
 On his Repealless – List. (Fr545)

The subject here is not the death of a single soldier, but of entire fields of men. But the metaphors at the beginning of the poem are beautiful, peaceful, and completely traditional.¹³ Elizabeth Phillips rightly calls it “a hauntingly beautiful tribute” (55) to the fallen soldiers. The images do suggest the staggering number of casualties, since we picture snow blanketing a landscape and stars filling the sky. Yet there is no hint of anger or fear, even when the “Wind with fingers” appears. This act of nature may at first seem violent, since these men are dead, but it really is not. It is nothing like the “Frost” in “Apparently with no surprise” (Fr1668), that “beheads” a “happy Flower” at “play”

while an “Approving God” watches. The wind in this poem is not so vicious. It seems to touch the soldiers lightly, perhaps lifting them gently from the battlefield.

Wolosky does believe the wind here is violent, and she reasons that “If the same attitudes prevail with regard to violent conflict as do with regard to her constant concerns, this suggests that degree to which violence had infused her world rather than that her sense of violence was quotidian”(38). Consequently, in this poem “nature is a figure for the violence of war” while in others “the violence of war is a figure for nature” (38). Wolosky does not confront the complexity of this particular poem, in which nature is peaceful, not violent. Also, she presents a false dichotomy when she contends that the violence typified by the war invaded Dickinson rather than merely supporting the view she already had of her environment as often cruel and brutal. Multiple truths about Emily Dickinson’s relationship to violence can exist simultaneously. First, violence and death were, for her, everyday, “quotidian” events before, during, and after the Civil War. Second, the pain that was particular to that event did assault and occupy her psyche. That is why, as Wolosky herself asserts, the war appears in Dickinson’s work in so many forms, both subtle and glaring. Her sensitivity to these matters led Dickinson to comment on the war directly and transform it imaginatively. The war could be a metaphor and an historical event.

The phrase “Wind with fingers” suggests the religious theme of this poem developed in the final stanza. God may well be driving that wind. He appears at the end of the poem, recalling every soldier’s face though no human “eye” can locate these men. They have become part of the “seamless Grass,” a seamless part of nature, which, again, is a fascinating and tranquil image. A seam is the line or mark where two things have

been joined, and the grass on a battlefield would be littered with such furrows. Seams suggest battle lines, graves, and even the scars or wounds on the soldiers' bodies. But Dickinson calls the grass seamless, perfect and whole as only God could make it. The "List" God is holding is a reference to the lists of the dead that were circulated during the Civil War, like the "Bulletins" in "The only news I know" (Fr820), and the names on this list are "Repealless." Dickinson creates an adjectival form of the verb "repeal" that makes the last two words of the poem very difficult to say, slowing the reader down and calling further attention to this odd word. God's decisions about who lives and dies cannot be changed; his laws and the laws of nature cannot be repealed. "The list is final, unalterable, irrevocable" (201), Ford declares, while also suggesting that Dickinson was uncomfortable with this idea. Both he and Dickie believe that this ending "falls back upon traditional religion" (201), or as Dickie describes it, "the false comfort of faith she tacks on at the end of the poem" (193). In these closing lines of this poem, though, the speaker does not seem at all angry, but rather calm and matter of fact. Perhaps comfort is not false. These men's lease on life has been repealed by God, but He may be looking at each face quite lovingly. There is nothing simple about this seemingly straightforward brief poem.

The comparison of soldiers dying in battle to flakes dropping on the ground appears again, this time in a poem about the irony of death in battle.

He fought like those Who've nought to lose –
 Bestowed Himself to Balls
 As One who for a further Life
 Had not a further Use –

Invited Death – with bold attempt –

But Death was Coy of Him

As Other Men, were coy of Death.

To Him – to live – was Doom –

His Comrades, shifted like the Flakes

When Gusts reverse the Snow –

But He – was left alive Because –

Of Greediness to die – (Fr480)

This soldier seems to be alive for no other reason than his “Greediness to die.” Playing a cruel joke, death simply will not claim this man. Interestingly, the speaker does not tell us, however, that he wants to die a hero for the cause. We do not know why he equates living with “doom,” although a logical guess might be that events at home have left him feeling that he has nothing to live for. Certainly he does not desire a life beyond the battlefield. So he tries to give himself to death, to “bestow” himself to those minnie “Balls,” but this suitor remains “coy.”¹⁴ As in “They dropped like Flakes –,” the wind, that instrument of nature and God, may reverse the fortunes of his fellow soldiers as it changes the direction of the snowflakes, but he remains untouched by that force. Without taking a theological stance, this poem contemplates how little control we have over our fate. Its Civil War context is interesting, but it also reminds the reader of other speakers in Dickinson’s poetry who seem to have no “further use” for a “further Life.”

In another poem, Dickinson writes about a man who may solve this problem by actually committing suicide.

He scanned it – Staggered –
 Dropped the Loop
 To Past or Period –
 Caught helpless at a sense as if
 His Mind were going blind –

 Groped up, to see if God were there –
 Groped backward at Himself
 Caressed a Trigger absently
 And wandered out of Life – (Fr994)

We do not know the antecedent of “it,” so we do not know at what this man is looking. But “scan” seems to suggest a page, so he might be reading a letter or a list. It is also possible that he might simply be looking out at the landscape in front of him. The reader is also not sure if what he sees causes him to “stagger.” The poem is wonderfully ambiguous about the speaker’s circumstances, but specific about his mindset. He has “Dropped the Loop” that tied him “To Past or Period.” He is both disoriented and disengaged. He is “Caught helpless” by this turn of events, whatever it may be, and he cannot think clearly – His “Mind” is now “blind,” much like the speaker of “From Blank to Blank” describes himself. Some kind of suffering has plunged this man’s mind into darkness, a startling way to convey the depth of his sorrow.

In the final stanza, we learn that this man is dying. He “Grope[s] up” toward God, who may or may not be there, and then when he turns back to himself he “caress[es]” the “Trigger” of a gun before dying. This is the part of the poem that suggests a suicide. Another possibility, however, is that speaker is a soldier, who always has a gun at hand and whose death might not be at his own hand. The fact that he caresses that trigger is interesting, because this act is so tender. The only connection this man has to anything is to the gun. Otherwise, he is alone, awkward and dazed, as evidenced by words such as “Staggered,” “Dropped,” “Groped,” “absently,” and “wandered.” This poem does not have a strong link to the war of the poems discussed previously, but the psychological state of the speaker recalls those with more obvious Civil War ties. The poem suggests multiple stories, but its unpinning of pain and violence suggests that the war might provide the backdrop for one of them.

The scene of “If any sink, assure that this, now standing” is more obviously the war, but that does not make its story and syntax any easier to untangle. The movement of the poem is similar to “He scanned it – Staggered –” in that the vague first stanza is followed by a much more specific closing. Yet that ending does not provide real closure in either work.

If any sink, assure that this, now standing –
 Failed like Themselves – and conscious that it rose –
 Grew by the Fact, and not the Understanding
 How Weakness passed – or Force – arose

Tell that the Worst, is easy in a Moment –
 Dread, but the Whizzing before the Ball –
 When the Ball enters, enters Silence –
 Dying – annuls the power to kill – (Fr616)

The twisted sentence structure of the opening lines leaves the reader wondering what kind of experience is being described. A reasonable paraphrase might be that the speaker is assuring those who “Failed” that the one person or thing still “standing” somehow dropped down in the past. “It,” again, has an unclear antecedent, but there seems to be the suggestion here that the “Fact” of something rising has been instructive. The speaker, however, does not seem to comprehend completely how to harness “Force” as opposed to “Weakness.”

Then, suddenly, the terms of this poem become specifically martial. It now seems “easy” for the speaker to “tell” about the “Worst” part of an experience, which is the “Dread” that comes with the “Whizzing before the Ball,” the fear of death or some other horror. Then we are left with “silence,” and the knowledge that “Dying – annuls the power to kill.” Reading this work exclusively as a war poem, Wolosky argues that this ending “reinforces the irony” that “The only justification of death in war is that it precludes more murder” (88). The “Silence” of death clearly offers the soldier some relief. Wolosky’s analysis, however, is not completely persuasive because it again assumes that Dickinson is taking a very political stand. The speaker of this poem may be a soldier who is left standing after a battle; if so, that soldier admits that he can no longer kill other young men if he himself dies. But the speaker does grow with the help of some

force, and there is also a mysterious power in the “Silence” that would follow being hit by a ball.

The poem also invites completely different interpretations. In writing about Dickinson’s “humor of excess,” Christanne Miller notes the “the bizarre magnification of [. . .] the voraciousness of her desires” that we see in some of Dickinson’s poems, which work “to destabilize notions of the good woman” (104). This poem may suggest some of this sexual “Force,” though here rather than reveling in it she must survive it. The speaker, then, might be a woman speaking to other women rather than a soldier speaking to his comrades. The poem’s last line would then suggest the violent love we see in the Master letters and many of Dickinson’s poems rather than the violence of the battlefield. And, of course, as in a poem like “Our journey had advanced –,” this work might present a speaker who is moving toward eternity. What is not in doubt is the speaker’s attempt to come to terms with an experience that includes survival, but also “Dread” and “Silence.” Dickinson never names that experience, but only hints at what it might be.

“When I was small, a Woman died” (Fr518) considers the death of a soldier, just as many of the previous poems do. For the first time, however, we meet a mother who has lost her son; interestingly, the mother dies first.

When I was small, a Woman died –
 Today – her Only Boy –
 Went up from the Potomac –
 His face all Victory

To look at her – How slowly
The Seasons must have turned
Till Bullets clipt an Angle
And He passed quickly round –

If pride shall be in Paradise –
Ourself cannot decide –
Of their imperial conduct –
No person testified –

But, proud in Apparition –
That Woman and her Boy
Pass back and forth, before my Brain
As even in the sky –

I'm confident, that Bravoes –
Perpetual break abroad
For Braveries, remote as this –
In Yonder Maryland –

In Johnson's edition of the poems, he identifies the poem's occasion as the death of Francis H. Dickinson, supposedly the first young man from Amherst killed in the Civil War. Franklin disputes this claim on a variety of grounds, and he concludes that a real model for this soldier simply may not exist since "none of the casualties for the Amherst

area occurred in Maryland” (527).¹⁶ But what is important about this poem is not their historical identities, if they have them, but rather how Dickinson imagines this woman and her boy.

If the speaker was “small” when the boy’s mother died, then presumably he grew up without a mother. This hardship is followed by his own early death; somewhere near the Potomac River, he joins his mother, with “His face all Victory.” This is an interesting observation. The speaker tells us here that he looked victorious, not that he was victorious. His face says that he is happy to have died for his country. The scene then shifts to heaven, where the mother has waited what feels like forever to see her son again. Noting the “odd expansion and contraction of time that crises effect,” Dickie calls attention to the importance of the “speedy bullet” in this poem (192). In the second stanza, certainly the contrast between the time the woman waits and the time that her son’s “passed quickly round” is extreme. But the emphasis here is not on the speed of the bullet, but on the random nature of his death. This boy dies simply because a bullet, by chance, “clipt” a particular “Angle.” Death, for Dickinson, always may be about to knock on the door.

The remainder of the poem explores the emotions felt by this pair once they meet in heaven. “If pride shall be in Paradise – / Ourselves cannot decide,” is the disclaimer with which the speaker begins. No one knows the “imperial conduct” of the dead, but the speaker seems certain that those she is describing are now kings and queens. As these two ghosts “Pass back and forth, before [the speaker’s] Brain,” only “in Apparition,” they do appear to be as “proud” as royalty. Wolosky reads this stanza as testament to the fact that “A promise of paradise does not resolve the poet’s doubts” since it is “much less

certain than the fact of death it attempts to explain” (43). The speaker of this poem seems more to wonder about the behavior of those who have reached the afterlife, rather than to doubt whether it exists at all.

In the poem’s concluding stanza, the speaker insists that somewhere there is praise for this woman and her son. But three words in this short quatrain – “abroad,” “remote,” and “Yonder” – suggest that there is a great distance between the “Bravoes” and the “Braveries.” Both the bravery on the battlefield and in heaven are literally remote from Dickinson, and we are not quite sure where “abroad” actually is. The speaker also suggests an emotional distance from the mother and son, since we never really can understand their feelings. On the other hand, Dickinson lists two variants for “remote”: “just sealed” and “proved,” which turn the discussion away from distance. And the word “Yonder,” though it implies somewhat far, does not mean too far; it makes Maryland seem like it lies over the next hill. In the Johnson edition upon which scholars relied for so long, the editors chose the alternative “Scarlet” for “Yonder,” imbuing the landscape with the stain of blood rather than distancing it.

Both words are fascinating if one believes that Dickinson was winking at the reader when she chose “Maryland,” or Mary’s land, as the site of the boy’s death. Barton Levi St. Armand discusses the Marianism embraced by writers such as Dickinson and Harriet Beecher Stowe “as a cure for the cold vacancy of the New England theology” (93). This boy may have died in Maryland, but now he finds himself in a land of a mother’s mercy and love. St. Armand argues that Dickinson “becomes in her poems [. . .] the bereaved anguished Mother of the crucified Christ” (94), and here she writes about a mother who is reunited with her son through his death. “Yonder Maryland” may

mean the eternal resting place the mother and son now inhabit, and “Scarlet Maryland” reminds one of the Protestant distrust of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Even the last two words of this poem suggest a multiplicity of meanings.

Finally, there is a possibility that this poem is not about a young soldier but rather about another Civil War casualty – Abraham Lincoln. Dickinson mentions Lincoln in at least one letter and writes two other poems that seem to be elegies for the fallen president. If Franklin’s 1863 dating is inaccurate, then this poem too might refer to a leader who was victorious in war and who would have felt proud of that accomplishment. He certainly deserved “Perpetual” praise he received. The particular circumstances of the death described in this poem also remind one of Lincoln, since he was assassinated in Washington D.C. which is, of course, on the Potomac, by a man whose shot “clipt an Angle” that proved fatal to the president. Also, Lincoln’s mother died when he was nine years old (Winkle 14). This poem may be a unique tribute to Lincoln as well as an interesting consideration of the “conduct” of those in “Paradise.”¹⁷

“Robbed by Death – but that was easy” (Fr838) is also about losing a loved one, but its tone is very different.

Robbed by Death – but that was easy –

To the failing Eye

I could hold the latest Glowing –

Robbed by Liberty

For Her Jugular Defences –

This, too, I endured –

Hint of Glory – it afforded –

For the Brave Beloved –

Fraud of Distance – Fraud of Danger,

Fraud of Death – to bear –

It is Bounty – To Suspense's

Vague Calamity –

Staking our entire Possession

On a Hair's result –

Then – Seesawing – coolly – on it –

Trying if it split –

The speaker in this poem bears no resemblance to the mother who proudly greets her brave son in heaven. This speaker has been “Robbed” of someone she loves, for the “Jugular Defences” of “Liberty.” The word “Liberty,” as in the poem “It feels a shame to be Alive – ,” seems quite vague, as if it is just the term one uses for what one fights for; much more specific is the bloodshed that results from defending it. With more bitterness than we have seen in other poems dealing with the war, the speaker here notes that the death she “endured” results in merely a “Hint of Glory.” The poem seems at first a rather direct attack on a war that forces families who send the men they love into battle to bet everything on a chance outcome – and then leaves them “Seesawing – coolly” on that chance, waiting to see if their hopes are dashed.

But Dickinson is rarely direct. The speaker also relates showing the “latest Glowing” to a “failing Eye.” Having battled what must have been a fairly serious eye ailment, Dickinson understood the importance of the light for “failing” eyes. Death, however difficult, has shown someone the light. The stanza delineating all the kinds of fraud perpetrated on this speaker is also problematic. Dickinson here suggests two opposite meanings for these phrases. On one hand, “Distance,” “Danger,” and “Death” might have deceived both the soldier and the speaker by seeming less threatening than they actually were. But the tricks they played are preferable to “Suspense’s / Vague Calamity,” to the anxiety of the unknown. On the other hand, the phrase “Fraud of Death” implies that death itself is a fraud or impostor. This poem reveals the hope that distance, danger, and death are really less ominous than we think.

These opposite meanings of the “fraud” serve as an example of the “Seesawing” Dickinson describes in the final stanza. The description is literally of standing on a hair to see if it “spit.” Of course, to “split hairs” means to attempt to draw distinctions too finely in order to make an argument. Perhaps there is a hint here that the speaker’s argument is too strained. Reading this speaker and this poem is much more difficult than it first seems. The phrase “Seesawing – coolly” accurately labels the movement in this and so many Dickinson war poems. These poems present multiple and often conflicting accounts of an experience, sometimes an experience the reader cannot even identify, in a very calculated manner. Words, phrases, and sentences in Dickinson’s poems are themselves similar to seesaws, moving interpretatively in one direction and then the other, with the reader seeming to teeter in the middle, feeling like the entire apparatus is about to splinter.

Even Dickinson's much more accessible poems about mourning incorporate this seesawing. The following poem seems rather straightforward.

To know just how He suffered – would be dear –
To know if any Human eyes were near
To whom He could entrust His wavering gaze –
Until it settled broad – on Paradise –

To know if He was patient – part content –
Was Dying as He thought – or different –
Was it a pleasant Day to die –
And did the Sunshine face His way –

What was His furthest mind – of Home – or God –
Or What the Distant say –
At News that He ceased Human Nature –
Such a Day –

And Wishes – Had He any –
Just His Sigh – accented –
Had been legible – to Me –
And was He confident until
Ill fluttered out – in Everlasting Well –

And if He spoke – What name was Best –

What last

What one broke off with

At the Drowsiest –

Was he afraid – or tranquil –

Might He know

How Conscious Consciousness – could grow –

Till Love that was – and Love too best to be –

Meet – and the Junction be Eternity (Fr688)

This poem immediately calls to mind Dickinson's account of Frazar Stearns's death, not only in content but in tone. We do not know the relationship between the speaker and the deceased, but we know she is intensely interested in his final moments, as Dickinson was in Stearns's. We also cannot be at all certain that the subject of this poem is a soldier, but the single word "Home," suggests that this man may have died on the battlefield far from his loved ones.¹⁸ Knowing everything about his final moments would actually mend and break the speaker's heart simultaneously, since "dear" means both tender and costly. Of this poem, Margaret Dickie writes that Dickinson "could also admit her distance from the war, taking up the mourner's hopeless desire for knowledge of the death of a loved one" (193). Certainly, the sense of distance from this dying man is undeniable, and the wish for complete understanding of this death indeed would be "hopeless." But the most interesting aspect of this poem is how full of hope it is, despite its subject matter. What

little knowledge she has is precious to her, and she seems confident that this man is now “settled” in “Paradise.”

While often seemingly conventional, the poem includes small details that make it far from ordinary. For example, the speaker’s hope that there was someone to whom “He could entrust His wavering gaze” is lovely. She knows he can only be “part content,” also a moving phrase, and she notes the very “Human Nature” that might lead him to wonder how people will react to the news of his death. And she wants to know of whom he was thinking, perhaps wondering if her “name” was among those he spoke.

Though the poem consists mainly of questions, the speaker is certain that “Just His Sigh – accented – / Had been legible – to Me –”. She is confident that she can read this one particular clue. And though she is less sure in the poem’s final stanza that he will reach “Eternity,” she is very hopeful that he will, and she outlines clearly what eternity would be – the ultimate in love. The idea may seem sentimental, but Dickinson revitalizes it through her unique expression. Within him, a “Conscious Consciousness” just “Might” be able to “grow” until “Love that was – and love too best to be – / Meet”, at the “Junction” of “Eternity.” The descriptions are far from formulaic. It is interesting that the speaker asks so many questions but is so sure of her power to interpret his “Sigh,” and that she can describe this idea of eternity so clearly without being sure that this man reaches it, or even perhaps that it exists at all. And a variant in the last line suggests a slightly different twist on her definition of eternity. Dickinson writes the alternate “mean” for “be,” implying that the presence of this unique love may signify eternity, rather than actually being eternity. The difference may seem slight, but Dickinson delighted in splitting such hairs.

Examining the two brief elegies Dickinson most certainly wrote for Abraham Lincoln reveal the poet's ability to seesaw on a subject. They are quite different kinds of poems.

A Sickness of this World it most occasions

When Best Men die.

A Wishfulness their far Condition

To occupy.

A Chief indifference, as Foreign

A World must be

Themselves forsake – contented –

For Deity (Fr993)

We learn in the Retreating

How vast an one

Was recently among us –

A Perished Sun

Endear in the departure

How doubly more

Than all the Golden presence

It was – before – (Fr1045)

Elizabeth Phillips suggests the first poem may treat Lincoln's death, while the second "is clearly a meditation on the president's martyrdom and a tribute to his greatness" (54).

The words that strongly hint toward Lincoln as the subject of the first poem are "Best Men," a superlative that could refer only to a very select group. When such men die, the speaker argues, "A Sickness of this World it most occasions." The key word in this line is "occasions." The speaker does not mean that Lincoln's death reflects a sick world, but rather that it causes the world's illness. And it sickens those in the world, who suddenly wish they were dead too. The speaker then speculates that the world must be "A Chief indifference," not like a home but rather "Foreign," for such men to "forsake" it. This may be a comment on how the speaker believes Lincoln looked at life after enduring the war years, or it may again be a description of the speaker and those like her. She may have moved from feeling sick to feeling indifferent because of this tragic turn of events. Lincoln may have departed this world "contented," exchanging it "For Deity" even when the nation needed his leadership so desperately. This speaker has not recovered yet from the loss, but neither has she sunk into complete despair. Again, the tone is calm, even as the speaker addresses this difficult loss.

The second poem is more accessible. In the first line, the word "Retreating" is an apt choice since it reminds one not only of Lincoln's retreat from life but also of the retreat of the Confederacy and of the war itself. Dickinson did not write "his Retreating" but rather "the Retreating," leaving the identity of what is withdrawing wonderfully ambiguous. Now that the Civil War is over and Lincoln himself is gone, the nation

realizes how “vast” Lincoln was, and how vital, “A Perished Sun.” St. Armand explains that for Dickinson the sun was “a living representation of the deity” (261). He argues that she was obsessed with the sunset or the “death of the sun” (278) because it is the time “when the secret of that Holy Ghost who lay beyond the landscape was literally closest to the earth” (264). The sun’s death also symbolizes “a magnificent outpouring of the lifeblood of the Redeemer” (275), so the sun associated with both God and his son. Thus, calling Lincoln a “Perished Sun” is quite significant; Dickinson associates him with both God Himself and Christ, whose death redeemed all of mankind. The “departure” of this great man has “Endear[ed]” him to the nation even more. “Endear” is a more intimate term, and it personalizes the deified Lincoln’s “Golden presence.” This is certainly a moving tribute to the president, but it is not nearly as simple as it first appears. If Dickinson often searched for “some sign, some ghost behind the veil of this phenomenon that could indicate to her with any finality the ultimate destiny of the immortal soul,” just as she searched “the dying faces of her friends, relatives, and loved ones” for such a sign (278), then Lincoln’s death might also be a sign that both she and the nation must strive to interpret.

All of these poems reveal how Dickinson constantly opens her poems – and, indeed, individual word and phrases within them – to numerous possibilities. She evokes and suggests, always leaving her speaker searching for new meanings as she searched the dying sun. This final poem is one of her most suggestive.

At least – to pray – is left – is left –

Oh Jesus – in the Air –

I know not which thy chamber is –

I'm knocking – everywhere –

Thou settest Earthquake in the South –

And Maelstrom, in the Sea –

Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth –

Hast thou no arm for Me? (Fr 377)

This poem does not look like a war poem. The phrase “Earthquake in the South” would strike anyone looking for references to war in Dickinson’s work, but others would gloss right over it, reading this piece as one of her many comments on theology. While initially interpreting the poem as “arising from the darkest center of the 1858-62 experience” (501), Richard Sewall presents its war context late in the biography. He explains that Otis Phillips Lord and Henry Ward Beecher were commencement speakers at Amherst College in the summer of 1862. “Both were strong for the war, the Union, and the Constitution,” Sewall writes, but Josiah Holland expressed a “vigorous preference” for Beecher in an article in the Springfield Republican (646). According to Holland’s report, Beecher explained that he felt compelled to address “the questions of the hour which are passing through a storm and an earthquake: the storm in the North, and the earthquake in the South” (646).

Sewall then suggests, “If Emily Dickinson’s appeal to ‘Jesus Christ of Nazareth’ actually owes a line to Beecher’s rhetoric” then “her agonized poem can be read in a new and illuminating context” (647). He notes that Otis Lord in his speech “had reminded all Amherst of Frazar Stearns’s death only fourth months before.” Further, Beecher might

have upset Emily Dickinson even more by mentioning the possibility of a draft, which naturally would threaten her brother Austin. Sewall concludes that “The poem, itself a prayer, might have been Emily’s answer” to Beecher and the call for prayer he might have made that day (647).

Sewall does not move beyond these few hints to offer a reading of this work as a war poem. It seamlessly weaves together the historical and personal; it is about the state of the union and the psychological state of the speaker. The repetition of “is left” makes the speaker seem simultaneously insistent and distracted. And, “left” has two meanings: prayer may be left to do or left behind. Jesus is somewhere in the “Air,” meaning all around us, on everyone’s mind, or in a melody or song. The poem itself may be a kind of air. But for someone who seems present, Jesus is awfully inaccessible, for no matter where the speaker “knocks” she cannot find Him. The second stanza implies that this search is prompted by the Civil War, the “Earthquake in the South” which Jesus had some hand in starting. Finally, the speaker asks Him, “Hast thou no Arm for Me?” “Arm,” of course, suggests the arm Jesus might offer her to lean on, as well as armaments. She may be asking him for comfort and protection, or perhaps for the means to fight her own battle. The speaker of this poem may be not even be a she, but rather a soldier seeking help on an actual battlefield. It is difficult to determine the speaker’s attitude toward “Jesus Christ of Nazareth,” a savior who seems to be missing in action, in this prayer which may be calling for an abandonment of prayer. The speaker may not even be particularly bothered by the “Earthquake” and “Maelstrom,” but only by the lack of personal attention. This is an intriguing poem that suggests a war story, among other narratives. It epitomizes Dickinson at her most evocative.

Emily Dickinson told her friend Elizabeth Holland that she loved the drums, the passions of national life, though she did not take political stands. The following poem expounds upon that statement.

Inconceivably solemn!

Things so gay

Pierce – by the very Press

Of Imagery –

Their far Parades – order on the eye

With a mute Pomp –

A pleading Pageantry –

Flags, are a brave sight –

But no true Eye

Ever went by One –

Steadily –

Music's triumphant –

But the fine Ear

Winces with delight

Are Drums too near – (Fr414)

The “gay” sights of flags and parades are also “Inconceivably solemn,” and they “Pierce” and “press” on the observer. The “Pomp” and “Pagentry” are “mute” yet also “pleading,” imposing a kind of “order” and perhaps ordering the eye to interpret them in a particular manner. This poem is about what the “true Eye” sees and the “fine Ear” hears, not those of the common observer. This speaker is far from common, so she wavers instead of passing the flag “Steadily,” and she “Winces with delight” at the sound of military music. The speaker seems enthusiastic about all this martial “Imagery,” yet warns the reader to admire them carefully.¹⁹

The final question of this poem, “Are Drums too near –,” sums up the complexity of Emily Dickinson’s major war poems. Clearly, the sound of those drums inspired her to write a substantial body of work examining the deaths of soldiers from the point of view of those who died and sometimes from that of those who were left behind. These poems are extremely difficult to categorize; the reader should leave the questions like “Are Drums too near” open, as the poet herself does.

Notes

¹ In Choosing Not Choosing, Cameron presents a theory of Dickinson's variants and fascicles, arguing that "words that are variants are part of the poem outside of which they ostensibly lie, as poems in the same fascicle may sometimes be seen as variants of each other" (5-6). Cameron is obviously very much interested in the text, seeking to answer the questions, "how is the poem delimited? What is the poem?" (5) by examining the manuscripts of the poems in their fascicle contexts. Thus, she takes the "normalizing" brand of criticism to task, arguing that it "transcends the text by smoothing out its problems or claiming that they are incomprehensible" (20). She faults "theoretically sophisticated" criticism because "It has transcended the text at the moment of epitomizing it" (20).

² Wardrop coins a term for the way Dickinson "infuse[s] elements of culture, refracted, fragmented, drawn through the oscillations of the unconscious, into her poems" (54). She calls it "intussusception," and defines it as the "process by which Dickinson draws into herself the cultural and historical field of events, later to emerge in refracted and apolitical syntax and language, subject to the rules of fortuitous accident that guide the lyric impulse" (54). Wardrop's comments fall into line, for the most part, with those of the many critics who believe that Dickinson internalized the war; "Dickinson writes with culture impinging on identity, but identity as the final product" (57), according to Wardrop. Dickinson did absorb her culture, but she also commented on it.

³ Cameron argues that Dickinson "characteristically does not choose between the story ostensibly being told and the story actually being told" (26), and she does not "acknowledge the existence of double stories" and thus "predicate[s] a seamless

belied by what is being voiced” (26-27). Though clearly Cameron has a point here, it certainly does not hold true for all of Dickinson’s poems. In many, she tells “two conflicting stories” (26) quite openly.

⁴ While Cameron’s primary focus is Dickinson’s “refusal to choose” between variants (21), she also notes that the poet does not choose how or if “certain experiences can be mapped – can be made comprehensible in terms of geographies or exteriors” (27). She also calls attention to “the discrepancies between the boundedness implied by the quatrain form and the apparent boundlessness implied by the variant” (28).

⁵ There are a number of key problems with Franklin’s method of dating Dickinson’s poems. He explains that he first attempts to date them using “definite association” (37), as an enclosure in a letter for example. This, however, does not speak to the time a poem was actually written. He also examines the different kinds of stationery a poem appears on, believing that they “follow patterns” (37). Finally, he makes judgments based on changes in her handwriting. The second two methods, of course, are more imprecise. Dickinson may have had particularly changeable handwriting, and she may have used different types of stationery during the same time period. Franklin admits that in working with the fascicles, “the dating is of documents, not necessarily of the composition of poems” (39), but even the dating of fascicles is difficult. Presenting the poems in chronological order in both his variorum and reading editions lends a definitive nature to the dating which it simply should not have.

⁶ Cameron argues that the reader must know the placement of a poem within a fascicle to truly understand it; “the material placement of a poem is essential to discerning its identity” (6). Certainly, the many placements of Dickinson’s poems

enhance our understanding of their “identity,” and this placement is lost in Franklin’s arrangement. Further, the variants become much less prominent in this arrangement; they and the original enjambments of the manuscript are reported after the poem. Franklin’s theory about the line breaks is that “Available space ordinarily determined” them (34), but this too is a guess.

Finally, Cameron takes Franklin’s order of the poems within a fascicle as a given when this too is an educated guess. In his introduction to The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson, Franklin explains that one of his sources for determining the order is “an eight-page list” made by Mabel Todd which “When understood, indicates the order of poems within fascicles so represented” (xiii-xiv). Even this evidence requires interpretation, and Franklin’s other methods are less reliable. He examines the “soiling” on pages, as well as “smudges” and “defects” in the paper to reassemble the fascicles, as well as “puncture patterns” and “stress effects” on the paper from opening and closing these little books (xiv). Certainly, this is evidence that should be examined, but his degree of certitude about the order of the poems seems too high.

⁷ Franklin notes that “Her peak year, long thought to be 1862, was 1863, when she copied or wrote nearly three hundred poems” while 1862 saw about two hundred (25). Again, we probably will never know for sure which year it was.

⁸ Cameron believes that this poem “adds a new element to the customary sequence, a ‘beyond’ to death [. . .] and relocates the crucial boundary point not at the moment of death but rather after it” (110). She notes the “speaker’s recognition that ending itself, neither stable nor certain, remains subject to perpetual re-definition” (111). She reads “God’s presiding presence” at the end of the poem as having “not so much its

own meaning as an effect of obliterating discrete meanings,” as they have been “Swallowed up in the enormousness of colorlessness and divine presence” (112). Her reading is fascinating, but certainly among the possibilities suggested by this poem is that God reveals meaning when we enter “Eternity.”

⁹ Cameron comments on “The two opposite connotations of ‘Before—’ (meaning ‘prior to’ and ‘in front of’),” arguing that they “afford a mimetic parody of the poem’s pattern of intersecting ‘identities’ that, upon scrutiny, turn out to be different, as ‘Eternity—’ is, for example, different from death” (111). But Dickinson may simply be placing her speaker in the place between the “Cities,” specifically “The Forest of the Dead.”

¹⁰ Wolosky places this poem in a chapter in which she treats Dickinson’s “linguistic discontinuity,” her tortured syntax, which Wolosky believes “represent a confrontation with incoherence” but “concomitantly a resistance to it” (2).

¹¹ Consistent with her overall thesis, she focuses on the “scraps of Prayer,” noting that the North and South each “claimed divine sanction for its cause” (57). Wolosky argues that Dickinson always “sympathized with the defeated” and never could rejoice at triumph (59), especially in light of her disgust with the religious hypocrisy the war brought to the fore.

¹² Wolosky reads this poem, as she does “My Portion is Defeat – today –” as proof that Dickinson “denounced suffering and death, even after victory” and that Dickinson was highly suspicious of the idea that there is a divine plan that, if known, would somehow explain “The Tyrannies of Men” (51).

¹³ Wolosky interprets these images differently: “The comparison of battle to snow and wind, far from making the death of soldiers seem more natural, makes nature seem sudden and frightening. The mundane world of falling leaves and passing time was, to Dickinson, discontinuous enough” (37). But the snow, stars, and roses are beautiful to Dickinson, and even the wind is not exactly violent.

¹⁴ This poem has some interesting variants. Dickinson lists “shy” as an alternate for “coy,” which makes Death seem less like a suitor. Also, she considers two alternates for “Greediness,” “urgency” and “vehemence,” which present the speaker in a slightly different light.

¹⁵ Wolosky explains that in the opening lines “a negative term is balanced against a positive one meant to vindicate it;” namely, “Descent is linked to ascent, failure to resurgence” (87) in a very complicated restatement of the last shall be first. Wolosky cites a change in the second stanza. She argues,

Consistency with the first stanza demands that this dread gunfire should be vindicated by some positive term. This term, however, proves to be simply death. This represents another permutation in a theodicean structure. The negative term has given way, not to a positive one, but to a term more negative still. (88)

Though the experience related in this poem has its “negative” aspects, the poem as a whole does not seem nearly as angry and bleak as Wolosky suggests.

¹⁶ Franklin’s note on this poem serves as an excellent example of how his certainty about his own dating leads him to draw conclusions about the poems that may not be true. He writes that this poem cannot be about Francis H. Dickinson “killed at the

battle of Ball's Bluff, Virginia, 21 October 1861" because "With few exceptions, poems from 1861 entered the fascicles before 1863," and he believes that "When I was small, a Woman died –" was copied into Fascicle 24 that year (527). Assuming that is true, why did she have to write a poem about an 1861 event in 1861? Is it not possible that remembering this event could have inspired her to write a poem about it later? (He also believes that Dickinson did not start using the word "Ourself" before 1862, so, again, the poem could not have been written in 1861.) As Franklin himself points out at the end of the note, this poem may not be about a particular soldier, or it may be about someone not yet identified.

¹⁷ As addressed earlier, one cannot be absolutely certain of the order of poems within a fascicle. But Dickinson did copy poems on the same sheet of paper that had been folded in the middle. "When I was small, a Woman died –" (Fr518) was copied on the same sheet as "This is my letter to the world" (Fr519), which may suggest a different speaker for that poem than the poet herself. Perhaps the lines "Sweet – countrymen -- / Judge tenderly – of Me" (7-8) should be read quite more literally than they have been in the past. Another interesting example is "Heaven' has different Signs – to me –" (Fr544), the poem copied next to "They dropped like Flakes –" (Fr545). Here, the speaker explains how she sees "Heaven" in nature's "Signs" (1), just as God is behind the "Wind with fingers" in the second poem.

¹⁸ Suzanne Juhasz believes that the man is not a soldier but rather Christ. She argues that the poem reveals Dickinson's "perception of the disjunction between Christian myth and ordinary experience" (142). Attempting to come to terms with this "disjunction," she "tries to humanize Christ, asking to know the quotidian facts of his

experience” (142). Juhasz concludes that “the poem as a whole fails at its expressed goals” because the questions remain unanswered, leaving only “speculation” (143). However, the gospels reveal so much information about Christ’s death that many of these questions, such as the one about the last name he spoke, do not seem to fit that particular death.

One can understand, however, why a poem might seem to be about a soldier’s death and Christ’s death. Clearly both gave their lives for a greater cause. Elizabeth Phillips, for example, believes that “A Dying Tiger – moaned for Drink – ” (Fr529) and “He gave away his Life – ” (Fr530) are about Frazar Stearns’s death. The first may, as she argues, be taken from the story of his asking for water before he died, but the second seems to be about Christ’s death rather than Stearns’s.

¹⁹ Phillips notes that in this poem “the observant author mediates between the external events and their impact on the perceiver of them”(58). She also argues that the “poem’s theme, the awareness of solemnity [. . .] also evokes the sense of foreboding in the pageantry and fanfare with which soldiers went off to war once upon a time” (58). These statements are absolutely true.

CHAPTER 3
DICKINSON'S WORLD OF WAR:
"THAT CAMPAIGN INSCRUTABLE"

The lyrics examined in the last chapter are set, for the most part, in the war. Labeling them as war poems is not meant to preclude the possibility of other contexts or meanings. Emily Dickinson's art is wonderfully evocative, and even the language of the poems that seems most confined breaks out into some new direction. Recognizing the Civil War context of those works is vital, however, because that context largely has been ignored or misinterpreted. The war story is an important aspect of this poetry, revealing a poet very much in tune with her time.

Of course, Dickinson could never tell that story straight. Margaret Dickie and numerous other critics assert that the poet "locates herself on a slant with her subject" (188). Dickie also believes that Dickinson finds her place in the "literary history of war writing by substituting funerals for the military, romance for warfare, psychic horror for the ineffable disaster of the Civil War"; Dickinson "writes about war by writing about something else" (189). The poems investigated in this chapter often fit into this category of works that comment on war obliquely. Yet they are often too complex for even this formula. Emily Dickinson also uses the war both as a metaphor and as a tool for understanding other experiences and phenomena. Daneen Wardrop suggests that rather than asking what Dickinson had to say about events like Gettysburg, we should ask "what

she let these historical events say for her as they arose in refracted pieces in her poetry” (63). Both questions are important and can be pursued simultaneously, but the second is particularly important to this group of poems. War often appears in a poem that tells the story of other conflict, comments on it, and then becomes a part of that story. In addition, Dickinson continues here to tell those “double stories” (Cameron 24), writing about war and “something else.”

The poems that follow, then, are further removed from the battlefield. They do not contemplate death in battle and its aftermath; they are of war rather than in it. The war infiltrates countless Dickinson works spanning a wide variety of subjects, but all are poems of war. In one group, Dickinson writes about the difficulty of achieving peace, touching on the thorny issue of ending a war while also suggesting more private interpretations of that term. Two patriotic poems in Dickinson’s oeuvre clearly are informed by war and, like some of her letters, reveal her political sensibilities. Finally, though the issues that brought the country to war in the first place only seldom appear in Dickinson’s work, the theme of race does take center stage on occasion. One of her poems addresses it quite specifically.

Dozens of Dickinson’s poems are saturated with martial language and imagery. These poems tend to fall into two categories: poems about inner battles and poems about wars that occur in nature. The primary focus of these poems is not the Civil War; yet, the war metaphors so dominate some of them that they become as much about violent conflict as they are about something else. Often, Dickinson’s martial metaphors are so stunning and precise that they cannot help but comment on war as well as on the poems’ ostensible subjects. Studying these more “slant” war poems strengthens the view of

Emily Dickinson as a writer who was interested in the inner world and the one outside and in how the two impinged upon each other. Her complicated negotiation between them defines much of her poetry.

Dickinson indirectly addresses the difficulty of ending the civil conflagration that is consuming the nation, or has consumed it already, in this poem.

You cannot put a Fire out –
 A Thing that can ignite
 Can go, itself, without a Fan –
 Opon the slowest night –

You cannot fold a Flood –
 And put it in a Drawer –
 Because the Winds would find it out –
 And tell your Cedar Floor – (Fr583)

These lines echo the “Earthquake” and “Maelstrom” of “At least – to pray – is left – is left –” (Fr377) with its “Fire” and “Flood.” Here, though, the speaker is much less impassioned; she calmly observes that once a conflict such as a war has begun, it needs very little fuel to continue to grow. To “put a Fire out” is to extinguish it and “go” can mean burn, but interestingly “put out” is also literally to send out of a house, and “go,” of course, means leave. Thus, the speaker subtly suggests the possibility of simply removing the “Fire” rather than putting it out. In either case, it is clear that even on the “slowest,” or quietest and most uneventful “night,” this “Fire” is present.

The second stanza is particularly striking because its images are so domestic. The idea of “fold[ing]” a flood and placing it in a “Drawer” like a piece of clothing or paper, at first seems absurd. Yet it was commonplace for Dickinson literally to fold floods of words in both letters and poems and then place them in her bureau “Drawer.” There are floods and fires within individuals that do not dry up and cannot be snuffed out easily. This is true of Dickinson’s poetic fire, and her flood of words did not remain hidden in that drawer. The “Winds” definitely took them. Those winds also remind the reader of the one that picked up the men from the battlefields with its “fingers” (Fr545). Here the winds find out the hiding place of this flood and “tell your Cedar Floor.” The ground, then, upon which we stand, may soon be swept away by the water. The domestic image is, of course, also wonderfully appropriate in a poem with implications for a civil war. There is the implication here of a house divided, of a sense of betrayal. Thus, this poem suggests conflict within the country and the individual, but also within the family; such battles are commonplace even on “the slowest night.” This is certainly not the pithy little poem it first appears. Rather, it reveals the difficulty of subduing all kinds of “Fire.”

Dickinson confronts the obstacles to peace again in the following work.

A Tooth upon Our Peace

The Peace cannot deface –

Then Wherefore be the Tooth?

To vitalize the Grace –

The Heaven hath a Hell –

Itself to signalize –

And every sign before the Place –
 Is Gilt with Sacrifice – (Fr694)

This poem may appear to be Dickinson's repudiation of the "pattern of Christian theodicy, in which ultimate salvation justifies not only the suffering of this world, but the world's Author" for which Shira Wolosky argues throughout her book (67-68).¹ But it actually supports that "theodicy." The syntax of the first stanza may seem to signify the opposite of what it actually means. There is, indeed, a "Tooth" on the "Peace," but even that cannot "deface" it. The speaker asks why this blight upon peace exists, this sharp object that can cause such discomfort. Her answer is to "vitalize the Grace," to show us "Heaven." The suggestion here is that we cannot know heaven without hell. The part of the poem most skeptical of this conclusion would seem to be the last two lines. Once we can see heaven, we read "sign[s]" in front of it that are "Gilt with Sacrifice." But sacrifice is not necessarily a negative term, a point that Wolosky does not consider. Further, the word "Gilt," more so than any other, complicates the poem. "Gilt" reminds us of the "guilt" we hope will disappear when our sins are forgiven by Christ, whose "Sacrifice" opened those gilded gates of heaven for mankind. Heaven certainly softens the bite of the "Tooth." Dickinson also may be alluding to the soldiers' ultimate sacrifice which is a "Tooth" on any peace, and which prompts the survivor's guilt she writes about in a number of poems. In just these few lines, Dickinson revitalizes a traditional Christian consolation and suggests the war that brought it to the fore.

A more personal look at peace appears in the following work.

I many times thought Peace had come
 When Peace was far away –

As Wrecked Men – deem they sight the Land –
 At Centre of the Sea –

And struggle slacker – but to prove
 As hopelessly as I –
 How many the fictitious Shores –
 Or any Harbor be – (Fr737)

Because of the emphasis on the “I” in this poem, rather than the “we” implied in the preceding one, these lines seem more like a meditation on achieving a personal sense of peace rather than peace after a time of war. However, Dickie argues that it “express[es] the feeling of a war-weary population” (194) as well. The personal and the historical are suggested here.

This poem’s connection to a fascinating letter sheds further light on its meaning. Its fourth line begins a letter to her sister-in-law written in September 1864 when Dickinson was being treated for her eye problem in Boston.

At Centre of the Sea –

I am glad Mrs – Gertrude lived – I believed she would – Those that
 are worthy of Life are of Miracle, for Life is Miracle, and Death, as
 harmless as a Bee, except to those who run –

It would be best to see you – it would be good to see the Grass, and
 hear the Wind blow the wide way in the Orchard – Are the Apples ripe –
 Have the Wild Geese crossed – Did you save the seed to the pond Lily?

Love for Mat, and John, and the Foreigner – And kiss little Ned in
the seam in the neck, entirely for Me –

The Doctor is very kind –

I find no Enemy – Till the Four o’Clocks strike Five, Loo will last,
she says. Do not cease, Sister. Should I turn in my long night I should
murmur “Sue” – (L294)

There is, as Dickie asserts, a public dimension to this poem. The desire for peace after several years of a war that was supposed to be mercifully brief would have been very strong. The image of “Wrecked Men” who feel they are “At Centre of the Sea” provides an apt description of soldiers at war. The second stanza then yokes the speaker’s emotions to those of the men as she notes their “struggle” becoming “slacker” as she becomes more “hopeless” herself. It is an interesting turn that the men do not struggle harder when they think they see land because they know and want to “prove” how many “fictitious shores” there are.² Interestingly, this strategy makes perfect sense for soldiers who would never fight harder if peace were around the corner. They would just try to survive.

The last lines of the poem imply that “Shores” and “Harbor[s]” are hard to find. Though we do not know if this poem was written after June 3, 1864 (though we know the letter was), the possibility of a connection to the Battle of Cold Harbor, near Richmond, Virginia on that date, is worth mentioning. The Confederate troops were so entrenched that many Union soldiers lost hope before the battle ever began; one officer “noticed men calmly pinning their names and addresses on their coats so their bodies could be identified” (Heidler 465). The losses for the Army of the Potomac were horrific,

“infecting it with what amounted to ‘Cold Harbor Syndrome’” (Heidler 466). The speaker of this poem is describing her own form of that syndrome.

That sense of merely surviving is palpable in Dickinson’s letter to Sue. She is just surviving living in Cambridge and dealing with the “Doctor,” however “kind” he might be. She misses the landscape of home, and the people in her own safe “Harbor,” as is so clear in the detail of kissing Ned’s little neck “seam.” That detail is fascinating. It is as if she is kissing his jugular vein, perhaps even his very lifeblood. The neck is a warm and delicate part of the body, so it is a spot that calls attention to life and its fragility. It is a detail that fits with her mention of “Gertrude’s” survival, affirming as she does so often that “Life is a Miracle.” She refers here to Sue’s friend Gertrude Vanderbilt, who “was shot in the intestines while trying to protect a servant from a stalker; she wasn’t expected to survive” (Habegger 464). Dickinson also compares Death to a Bee that is “harmless [. . .] except to those who run.” This last assertion recalls the soldier in “He fought like those Who’ve nought to lose” (Fr480) except that he runs toward death and it flees. Finally, Dickinson writes that although she “find[s] no Enemy,” she is, indeed, living through a “long night,” and she misses her friends. Therefore, “I many times thought Peace had come” comments on war and Dickinson’s own personal battle – and on the possibility that those conflicts will end with peace.

The meaning of this last “peace” poem is even more elusive.

Peace is a fiction of our Faith –
 The Bells a Winter Night
 Bearing the Neighbor out of Sound
 That never did alight. (Fr971)

Like the previous work, these lines expose peace as “a fiction,” something we believe in because we have “Faith,” not because it is real. This first line also does not seem to speak well of other kinds of faith. The metaphor the speaker then uses to illustrate this point conveys how beautiful and intimate a fiction peace is. The sound of the bells on the neighbor’s sleigh or carriage is lovely; but this neighbor’s visit a wish, a dream. The speaker does not despair, however, despite that sentiment, but rather seems resigned. This poem just sketches an idea and an image. Though the first line reads like a conclusion, the poem never really concludes. We do not know why this neighbor “never did alight;” the “Winter Night” suggests death and perhaps the absence of God, but the poem asks questions without providing answers.

These poems about the elusiveness of peace touch on the war without actually naming it, just as three other poems touch on political subjects relevant to the war, again without actually naming it. The first treats the subject of race, an implied topic in other poems, but explicit here.

Color – Caste – Denomination –

These – are Time’s Affairs –

Death’s diviner Classifying

Does not know they are –

As in sleep – all Hue forgotten –

Tenets – put behind –

Death’s large – Democratic fingers

Rub away the Brand –

If Circassian – He is careless –

If He put away

Chrysalis of Blonde – or Umber –

Equal Butterfly –

They emerge from His Obscuring –

What Death – knows so well –

Our minuter intuitions –

Deem unplausible (Fr836)

Though this poem does not vehemently condemn racism or other forms of prejudice, it does dismiss them as “Time’s Affairs.”³ The “classifying” that this speaker attributes to death is “diviner” than human distinctions. Death simply does not know or care at all for race, class, or religion; in fact, its “Democratic fingers” go so far as to “Rub away the Brand” of such labels. The word “Brand” is interesting since Dickinson knew that slaves were often branded, and though probably not much comfort to slaves, Dickinson affirms that death will free them. Death is not only “careless” in the sense of clumsy, but also could not possibly care less if the dead are “Circassian” (Caucasian) or Negro, if their “Chrysalis” is “Blonde” or “Umber”; all are “Equal Butterfly.” “What Death – knows so well” and the speaker clearly is trying to convey is that these distinctions really do not matter. At present, “Our minuter intuitions – Deem” this reality “unplausible,” but Dickinson suggests that “Intuition” is smaller than death’s “diviner” knowledge.⁴ This is not to suggest that Dickinson never felt any of the fears or prejudices which may have

been common to women of her class and race. This poem, however, does not provide evidence of such feelings. This is one of Dickinson's more accessible poems, conveying fairly simply a coherent philosophy about difference and death. But the story it tells is obliquely a war story too, since it suggests slavery.

Dickinson wrote a poem about "Revolution" in which her speaker also espouses a philosophy, one that seems to be restating Thomas Jefferson's position on this topic. Jefferson wrote to James Madison on January 30, 1787 that "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical" (417).

Revolution is the Pod
 Systems rattle from
 When the Winds of Will are stirred
 Excellent is Bloom

But except it's Russet Base
 Every Summer be
 The entomber of itself,
 So of Liberty –

Left inactive on the Stalk
 All it's Purple fled
 Revolution shakes it for
 Test if it be dead – (Fr1044)

Like seeds falling from a “Pod,” new and improved “Systems” grow from revolutionary war. The nature metaphor is particularly appropriate, since summer’s “Russet Base” – perhaps the ground as it appears during the fall – reminds us that bloodshed is the base on which so many governments are built. The speaker finally warns that “Liberty” will be the “entomber of itself” unless revolution revives it. Expressing the opinion that a little revolution now and again is necessary and desirable seems peculiar near the time of the Civil War, a conflict that began when the South decided to free itself from the Union. The North sought freedom for the slaves. The relationship between revolution and liberty during the Civil War, then, was complicated, as it is also in “Revolution is the Pod.” Forces fighting for liberty may have to put down a revolution; liberty may have to wake up to defend itself. This poem represents something rare in Emily Dickinson’s art, since it is an overtly political poem, but even here Dickinson refuses to reveal her hand completely. This political statement is quite broad, and still somewhat enigmatic.

Dickinson wrote a patriotic poem late in her career that is similarly intriguing. In a November 1880 letter to Higginson, she writes, “I have promised three Hymns to a charity, but without your approval could not give them” (L674). This poem was one of those “Hymns.” Thomas H. Johnson surmises that the poems were for “The Annual Sale of the Mission Circle, for the support of children in India and other Far Eastern countries” (680). Radically departing from her custom, she even gave it a title, “My Country’s Wardrobe.”

My country need not change her gown

Her triple suit as sweet

As when 'twas cut at Lexington
 And first pronounced "a fit."

Great Britain disapproves "the stars;"
 Disparagement discreet, –
 There's something in their attitude
 That taunts her bayonet. (Fr1540)

This poem, like the last, glances backward at the War for Independence. It praises the "stars" on the American flag that "taunt" Great Britain's "bayonet." The speaker not only mocks Britain by implying that it is the opposite of "Great" (it was also literally smaller after losing the American colonies), but jokes about British discretion; there is really nothing "discreet" about a "bayonet." And there was nothing discreet about Britain's rule of India at the time.

These lines also joke about gender. The United States is a girl who looks "sweet" in her well-fitting "gown." Despite the "her" in the second stanza, Great Britain seems to play the part of the boy with the bayonet. Though appearing to be "sweet," the United States has an "attitude," and though "discreet," Great Britain has that "bayonet." Dickinson recognizes the countries' diplomatic dance, and she describes it in gendered terms.

The "stars" also recall the Civil War since they are the part of the American flag that symbolizes the states, so many of which recently seceded. There were also stars on the Confederate flag, of course. The "attitude" of the stars, therefore, might be

problematic for other reasons. “My country need not change her gown” is a patriotic and playful poem that reveals Dickinson’s wide-ranging interests and her sense of humor.

Dickinson probes issues of peace, prejudice, and politics. These poems are not exactly what one thinks of as war poetry, but they do illuminate a mind that was informed by the war and even, to some extent, by politics. They are the kind of work produced by a poet who found these issues stimulating and absorbed them.

Other poems demonstrate how Dickinson’s work was infused with war and violence by describing inner conflicts in martial terms. Wolosky points out that Dickinson’s entire world was saturated with violence, and Dickie notes that “the reality of war flooded Dickinson’s imagination” (188). That imagination, in turn, produced poetry that reveals a special awareness of war. The existence of such poems does not diminish the importance of the works in which she commented directly on soldiers and those who mourned them. Rather, they strengthen the impact of those poems by reminding the reader that the mind that created them was very much at home with war.

The number of poems suggesting that an internal conflict is somehow like a war is large, but the following examples tell something about both the historical and psychological battles Dickinson witnessed and endured. Franklin suggests that the following lines were written before 1861, but Dickinson surely recognized that the stage was set for war long before that year.

Bless God, he went as soldiers,
His musket on his breast –
Grant God, he charge the bravest
Of all the martial blest!

Please God, might I behold him
 In epauletted white –
 I should not fear the foe then –
 I should not fear the fight! (Fr52)

This soldier may be a saint or Christ Himself, and the battle for which the speaker prepares may be a battle for her own soul or the souls of others. The soldier urges the “bravest” to fight with him, and the speaker, if she could only see this most “blest” soldier, could do so. This inner conflict is not nearly as dark and painful as so many Dickinson describes; its posture is one more of self-encouragement and eagerness to please, perhaps to “Please God.” She views the conflict, though, in martial terms.

Near the same time, she wrote a poem in a similar tone comparing each day to a war.

A Day! Help! Help!
 Another Day!
 Your prayers – Oh Passer by!
 From such a common ball as this
 Might date a Victory!
 From marshallings as simple
 The flags of nations swang.
 Steady – my soul! What issues
 Opon thine arrow hang! (Fr58)

Dickinson often compares natural phenomena to war, particularly in the poems that conclude this chapter. For her, the sunset that she witnesses every day and the changing of the leaves each autumn often appear as bloody battles. In this case, however, it is not how the day looks but the day itself which may bring some momentous event, some “Victory.” The speaker is preparing to “marshal” herself to face great “issues,” and she compares her own “simple” battles to the kind that involve nations.

Wolosky is the only critic who notices that this poem employs “the rhetoric of war and the conflict of issues” that, by this time, had become part of the nation’s vocabulary. But Wolosky misreads this speaker’s reaction to the day, arguing that it reflects Dickinson’s belief that “she lived in a world altogether unpredictable and terrifying” (39).⁵ Dickinson is acutely aware of our vulnerability to chance calamities, but she also believed strongly in a world of possibility. Dickinson was also acutely self-aware, and here she wryly notes her own weakness. The poem’s hyperbole lends it a humor and irony that Wolosky fails to notice. While yelling “Help! Help!” and calling for the “prayers” of bystanders, she undoubtedly realizes that she is not quite facing the challenges of a nation at war. There is a certain happy hysteria in this poem, a bit of a struggle between laughing at oneself and taking oneself too seriously. This poem looks at inner turmoil from a very interesting angle.

Dickinson employs similar irony in this poem.

My friend attacks my friend!

Oh Battle picturesque!

Then I turn Soldier too,

And he turns Satirist!

How martial is this place!
 Had I a mighty gun
 I think I'd shoot the human race
 And then to glory run! (Fr103)

In this case, the war between two people inspires Dickinson to write a “martial” satire. The speaker mocks this “Battle picturesque” that she witnesses, and her own impulse to become a “Soldier” herself. The idea of “shoot[ing] the human race” for fighting and then “run[ning] to glory” is funny, but there is, of course, a tinge of seriousness here. This poem also was written at a time when “friend[s]” and even brothers were literally attacking each other; it describes a “civil” war in the shadow of the Civil War. And, war is horrible enough to make nearly anyone feel misanthropic. Indeed, the statement “How martial is this place!” could be both amusing and frighteningly accurate. The lighter and more serious stories in this poem stand side by side.

The speaker’s mood turns darker in a series of poems in which the battle turns inward again.

To fight aloud, is very brave –
 But gallanter, I know
 Who charge within the bosom
 The Cavalry of Wo –

 Who win, and nations do not see –
 Who fall – and none observe –

Whose dying eyes, no Country

Regard with patriot love –

We trust, in plumed procession

For such, the Angels go –

Rank after Rank, with even feet –

And Uniforms of snow. (Fr138)

This is the first in a series of intense and moving poems about painful inner demons, a “Cavalry” of mental anguish. Wolosky counts this among the works that “undoubtedly suggest that some outward battle is before the poet if only as a foil to the traditional imagery in which soul and angels are soldiers of God” (55). There is also no doubt that Dickinson’s “imagination makes her own world in the image of the world of war” (56). This poem seeks recognition of the momentous nature of the inner battle, and it uses war imagery to bolster that argument. The speaker already acknowledges the importance of the soldiers whose “Country / Regards [them] with patriot love,” but she also understands how difficult it is to “charge within the bosom / The Cavalry of Wo.”

The speaker suggests a different, even more important kind of soldier in the second stanza. She affirms her “trust” in that “plumed procession” of the “Angels.” This army truly inspires her. The final image in this poem is particularly evocative. The angels are dressed in white, in “Uniforms of snow.” This description recalls how the “Freezing persons, recollect the Snow” in “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –” (Fr372), yet also of the soldiers falling like snowflakes in “They dropped like Flakes –” (Fr545). The angels seem natural and beautiful, but the coldness that comes with “great

pain” lingers. Thus, this final line brings together the angels, the soldiers, and the speaker in a single, startling image suggesting multiple, complex battles.

Dickinson presents some of the same ideas in this poem.

The Battle fought between the Soul

And No Man – is the One

Of all the Battles prevalent –

By far the Greater One –

No News of it is had abroad –

Its Bodiless Campaign

Establishes, and terminates –

Invisible – Unknown –

Nor History – record it –

As Legions of a Night

The Sunrise scatters – These endure –

Enact – and terminate – (Fr629)

Wolosky rightly notes that “the personal is foremost does not obviate the fact that [. . .] the bodiless campaign within the poet’s soul had an objective counterpart in physical and palpable warfare” (xviii). Wolosky also argues that the poem “particularly insists on its private nature” (xvii), but privacy here is complicated. “No News” or “History – record” this battle, but the speaker alters that fact by recording this “Bodiless Campaign” on paper, thereby lending it form and making it concrete, embodied.

Sharon Cameron argues that “Dickinson is also choosing not to choose between the suggestion that certain experiences can be mapped – can be made comprehensible in terms of geographies and exteriors – and the suggestion made by the same poems that such experiences cannot be” (27). One sees that struggle occurring in this poem. Here, Dickinson attempts to describe the “Invisible,” to make the “Unknown” known using metaphors of war and nature. But much of the geography of the experience remains a mystery. We do not know, for example, whom the “Soul” is fighting, only that it is “No Man” so it is presumably internal. We do know something of the movement of the battle, however. First, the “Campaign / Establishes – and terminates –”; then, in the final stanza, it is compared to the “Legions” that “endure – / Enact – and terminate –”. The repetition of “terminate” may imply its opposite. The speaker may fight this battle repeatedly, and survive it again and again. Finally, “Legions of a Night” is a very important image, as it suggests not only insidious armies attacking the soul, but also the dark night of the soul experience that the speaker describes here. “The Battle fought between the Soul,” like so many of these kinds of Dickinson poems, masterfully employs martial imagery to create a complex internal battlefield.

The battle becomes even more deadly, and the line between real and imagined warfare more difficult to mark, in this poem.

’Twas fighting for his Life he was –
 That sort accomplish well –
 The Ordnance of Vitality
 Is frugal of it’s Ball.

It aims once – kills once – conquers once –
 There is no second War
 In that Campaign inscrutable
 Of the Interior. (Fr1230)

It is not until one reaches the last lines of this poem that one realizes that it may not be about a war fought on a battlefield. Wolosky notes that the “Interior” conflict seems “modeled on exterior combat” and that “Each conflagration mirrors the other” (40). Certainly, Dickinson noted similarities among all kinds of conflicts, internal and external. This poem, though, does describe a “Campaign inscrutable / Of the Interior” that is so intense that it can best be compared to the life and death struggles of the battlefield. War is the most appropriate lens through which to view this experience.

On the other hand, this speaker seems to describe a “Campaign” of the body, more than of the mind or soul. The man whose experience is depicted is “fighting for his Life,” suggesting that he might be a soldier who is battling sickness or injury resulting from the war. One cannot help believing that there is something very physical happening here, a battle within the body. And it is a battle that must be fought with particular skill since life is “frugal” with its ammunition. It must be aimed very carefully. As in “The Battle fought between the Soul” (Fr629), Dickinson attempts to define the conflict, but still insists that it is “inscrutable.” What is not in doubt is its mortal nature.

In “Of Tribulation – these are They,” we return to the battles of the “plumed procession” described in “To fight aloud, is very brave – ” (Fr138). Dickinson enclosed a version of it that was slightly different from the fascicle copy in a letter to Higginson in July 1862. In the copy for Higginson, Dickinson added the quotations marks to

“Surrender” and “Defeat”; Franklin notes too that “The final word was enlarged for emphasis” in this version.

Of Tribulation – these are They,

Denoted by the White.

The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank

Of Victors – designate –

All these – did conquer –

But the Ones who overcame most times –

Wear nothing commoner than Snow –

No Ornament, but Palms –

“Surrender” – is a sort unknown

On this superior soil –

“Defeat” – an Outgrown Anguish –

Remembered, as the Mile

Our panting Ankle barely passed,

When Night devoured the Road –

But we – stood – whispering in the House –

And all we said – was “Saved”! (Fr328)

Wolosky notes on numerous occasions “In Emily Dickinson’s work, militant imagery appears in religious contexts, reflecting the rhetoric of her age” (54), and she calls

attention to the presence of that rhetoric in this poem. That imagery indicates that the primary story told by this poem is the story of those who have been “Saved!” particularly those clothed in “White.” As in “To fight aloud, is very brave—” (Fr138), the speaker compares their clothing to “Snow,” noting here that they “Wear nothing commoner than Snow.” In this case, snow is common, but not too common. It is still an “Ornament” like the “Palms” that denote victory. Palms also were laid on the road before Jesus as he was entering Jerusalem just before the crucifixion (John 12.12-18), a reference that certainly fits this interpretation of the poem. Wolosky rightly places this work among those in which “The afterworld [. . .] offers consolation to Dickinson” (72), and she probably sent it to Higginson to comfort him too.⁶

This poem does evoke victorious saints who triumphantly march to heaven, but the relationship between the speaker and these conquering souls is quite complicated, as is the martial motif in the middle of the poem. The speaker comments on an army of God as it passes by, comparing it to a group of conventional soldiers who have “Outgrown” the “Anguish” of “Defeat.” “Defeat” and “Surrender” are in quotes because the speaker is not using these terms in their usual context; “this superior soil” is not a battlefield. Yet this army does recall failing, “as the Mile / Our panting Ankle barely passed, / when Night devoured the Road.” The word “Our” unexpectedly places the speaker in the group of those who have been “Saved,” when she seemed before that point to be quite separate from them. It is though all of a sudden she was swept up in the narrative and the journey, or perhaps in remembering her own “Tribulation.” The final two lines are confusing because, again, it is hard to know if the speaker has been saved herself, is imagining that she has been saved, or is simply watching these blissful souls

from her “House.” In a poem about religious experience, however, the confusion makes sense; it is a realm in which we do not know anything with absolute certainty.

The “panting Ankle” is by far the most striking detail of the poem, and it suggests a much stronger link to the Civil War than any mention of victory and defeat. A “panting Ankle” describes the intense fatigue of running, particularly running barefoot, as a slave might while attempting to escape. Thus, another narrative is implied here, that of the “Tribulation” of fleeing a master. This story is also suggested in the details of running after dark, perhaps even in the “Snow,” toward a “House” where one is “Saved!”, a house that sits on “superior soil.” Heaven, of course, is also “superior,” and it is interesting to equate the end of the slave’s journey with reaching heaven and wearing white. The speaker makes clear, however, that no matter who “They” are exactly, they have “overcome” and deserve their reward.

Dickinson sent this poem to Higginson in the letter in which she famously states, “My Business is Circumference,” calls herself “the only Kangaroo among the Beauty,” and cautions, “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (L268). All of these often-quoted, enigmatic statements caution Higginson and future readers that characterizing this kangaroo’s unusual verse will be not be easy. “Of Tribulation – these are They,” is an excellent example of Dickinson’s unique vocation.

The preceding group of poems illustrates how the war’s terminology and imagery invade Dickinson’s writing on various kinds of inner conflict. Both the historical Civil War and the wars within herself and her “supposed person[s]” were central to her life and work, and these two types of conflict influence and inform each other. Dickinson

followed the war and commented on it because it was important to her. But the world that Dickinson watched from her window was nature, and it too fed her imagination. This world, too, was often violent, and she describes that quality in martial terms in a substantial number of poems. Examining those works further highlights Dickinson's unusual relationship with war and nature.

One natural phenomenon Dickinson portrays as violent is the sunset. Here, its appearance provokes "martial stirrings" in the speaker.

The Sun kept stooping – stooping – low!

The Hills to meet him rose!

On his side, what Transaction!

On their side, what Repose!

Deeper and deeper grew the stain

Upon the window pane –

Thicker and thicker stood the feet

Until the Tyrian

Was crowded dense with Armies –

So gay – So Brigadier –

That I felt martial stirrings

Who once the Cockade wore –

Charged, from my chimney Corner –

But Nobody was there! (Fr182)

Before reading this poem and those that follow, it makes sense to revisit St. Armand's explanation of Dickinson's attitude toward the sun and sunset. He notes that "Not only did Emily Dickinson's room in her father's house in Amherst face west, but she had a superb and unimpeded view of the Pelham Hills from the cupola that topped the whole mansion" (264). For Dickinson, the sun represented God, and the sunset in particular was "the closest that the human could come unto the divine" (292). Thus, she considered "daily observance of the setting sun as an almost holy duty, an obligatory vespers" (264). On the other hand, "Because of the ambiguity of her transforming passion for Phoebus, the sunset for Dickinson means war as well as peace" (274).⁷

Both are implied in this poem. The meeting of "Sun" and the "Hills" in the first stanza really might be an encounter between God and an observer, or God and nature. At first, the speaker and the "Hills" are in a state of "Repose" as they watch this "Transaction" of the sun setting. The word "transaction" implies some sort of exchange, but the hills seem passive. This first stanza also subtly hints at the possibility of a sexual exchange between the active "Sun" and those passive "Hills." Both the natural world and mankind do take in the sunset each day.

The nature of the sunset soon changes. "Tyrian" here suggests the crimson or purple dye made in the city of Tyre, and it seems that brilliant sunset appears to be "dense with Armies" which amass at the speaker's window. They are not threatening but "gay" and then "Brigadier," which implies a temporary rank or position. This inspiring display is, after all, fleeting; when the now "Charged" speaker charges, he finds himself alone.

The armies have retreated, and it is night. St. Armand reads this poem as evidence that “Dickinson as an artist here remains confined, shut off from a full experience of the sunset by staying inside rather than outside and keeping to her chimney corner, behind her sheltering pane of glass, until it was too late to enjoy a full communion with the secret of the evening sky” (265). He further argues that “The more Dickinson held herself back [. . .] the more brutal and threatening the meaning of this phenomenon became” (265).

The sunset appears quite “brutal” in other poems but not in “The Sun kept stooping – stooping – low!” And the speaker here is not the poet herself. This speaker is older, and most likely a man, who at one time sported a “Cockade,” the ribbons worn on a hat as a badge of an office or party. Now confined to his “chimney Corner,” he is no longer politically active. But the sunset, perhaps representing armies of God, spurs him to action. Though there is no one for him to fight, the mood of this poem is still exuberant. Certainly, the end of this poem suggests loneliness; the speaker is past his prime and he has fought his battles. He now looks toward what St. Armand terms the “west of eternity” (265). But there is no denying or perhaps even subduing the effect that martial sunset has had on him. Dickinson uses images of nature and war to make some very interesting comments on this character and his “transaction” with his past – and with God.

Two other poems merge the natural and martial in even more complex ways, revealing more clearly how Dickinson wrestled with the wars she witnessed. The first describes autumn. St. Armand believes that Dickinson associated the sunset that was so

vital to her with the “reluctant, bittersweet harvest time” of autumn (278). We can certainly see similarities between the two here.

The name – of it – is “Autumn” –

The hue – of it – is Blood –

An Artery – upon the Hill –

A Vein – along the Road –

Great Globules – in the Alleys –

And Oh, the Shower of Stain –

When Winds – upset the Basin –

And spill the Scarlet Rain –

It sprinkles Bonnets – far below –

It gathers ruddy Pools –

Then – eddies like a Rose – away –

Opon Vermillion Wheels – (Fr465)

In an article devoted almost entirely to this poem, Tyler Hoffman makes an interesting case for a very specific connection between it and the Civil War. Noting the date of the Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862, and the time Johnson guesses the poem was composed (also 1862), he posits that “Autumn” stands for “Antietam,” the bloodiest battle of the war.⁸ He bases this assumption not only on the dates but on what he terms the “linguistic contours” (4) of the words and on Dickinson’s use of quotation marks “to call attention to the word as a linguistic entity” (5). He concludes that this “periphrasis is

a strategy Dickinson employs to avoid confronting directly the unpleasant reality of war” (6), even though most of the poem “does not allow us to see past the horror of war” (7) as it “focuses exclusively on the repulsive aftermath of battle” (8). He also believes that the landscape Dickinson describes in the poem is a “strikingly accurate” depiction of that particular battlefield and the surrounding land.⁹ Both his argument about the similarities between sounds of the words “Autumn” and “Antietam” and between the two landscapes must be subjected to some skepticism, however. Dickinson might have enjoyed the way the word “Autumn” suggests “Antietam,” but that she chooses “Autumn” because “Antietam” represents horrors of which she cannot speak is unlikely. And the land near Antietam looks very much like any number of places she would have seen regularly in the Connecticut River valley of central Massachusetts. That this description suggests a battlefield is true, but it may not be Antietam. Finally, it is worth reiterating that scholars probably will never know if Dickinson wrote this poem before or after that particular battle.

Hoffman’s reading of the final stanza of this poem affirms his own belief that women cannot write authentic war poetry, though he ascribes that opinion to Dickinson. He notes that the “Bonnet,” which belong only to women, are “dripped on, not drenched” in blood, which “underscores the emotional and physical distance” between herself and the war (13). And he interprets the last two lines, which describe “the rose’s departure from the landscape” as expressing “her inability to relate fully to the experience of the soldier” (13). He argues that it is not fall that is leaving, but the battle leaving her consciousness.

While recognizing the pitfalls of “totalizing fictions about the poet-civilian’s ability to identify with the war,” one can hardly read this or many of Dickinson’s other martial poems as merely flitting about the “circumference of war” (Hoffman 16). Some battle or battles served as the model for this bloody landscape, and the speaker cannot escape its carnage. Hoffman argues that Dickinson purposely calls attention to how physically and psychologically removed she is from the war when she is actually pointing out that no one is removed from this horror. The “Shower of Stain” falls on us all; even the bonnets are bloody. Dickinson completely collapses the distance between this horrific scene of war and the relative safety of home. Eventually, the autumn foliage “eddies like a Rose – away –”, rolls away on “Vermillion Wheels.” These images are much softer than those that begin the poem. The violence of the poem’s earlier descriptions is still problematic; the tension between the “Great Globules” and the “ruddy pools” remains.

The poem, then, clearly comments on war. “‘Autumn,’” encased in quotation marks, is another name for war, the landscape a battlefield. The scene resembles a corpse of someone who has suffered a violent death.¹⁰ Those “Winds” that have appeared in a number of poems here “spill” the blood on everyone, and perhaps the “Vermillion Wheels” that usher out the violence are leaving a trail behind. But the season itself is also among this poem’s subjects, its blood-red foliage fading as winter comes. One must consider the possibility, particularly in relation to this reading, that the “Artery” and “Vein” in the poem are still pumping the landscape’s lifeblood; spring will follow winter. The progression of the seasons calls to mind St. Armand’s reading of the sunset as a symbol of Christ’s death, and the sunrise as “a type of the Resurrection” (275). St.

Armand believes that for Dickinson “the red of the sunset was [. . .] an ambiguous, inextricable commingling of love and death, triumph and defeat, exhilaration and abasement,” and that autumn held “a similar explosion of sacrificial crimson” (286). This possibility adds yet another interpretative dimension. Dickinson may view this landscape as an emblem of Christ’s body and blood. “The name – of it – is ‘Autumn’ –” is among the best examples of those works in which Dickinson responds to the Civil War among numerous other subjects. It is brilliantly evocative.

The following poem describes the sunset in similar terms.

Whole Gulfs – of Red, and Fleets – of Red –
 And Crews – of solid Blood –
 Did place about the West – Tonight –
 As ’twere specific Ground –

 And They – appointed Creatures –
 In Authorized Arrays –
 Due – promptly – as a Drama –
 That bows – and disappears – (Fr468)

The reference to “specific Ground” as well as the specific horror of the “Fleets” and “Crews” of blood ground this poem in the world of battle. And again, the speaker is a student of the wars of nature and of man. The soldiers, just like the sunset, are “appointed” and “Authorized” to play their roles, and then they vanish. Hoffman’s argument to the contrary, Dickinson is a close and careful observer of both, not a distant one, and she feels “Authorized” to comment on them, though she is not God, their

author.¹² Despite their violence, sunsets and battles too have dramatic beauty, and Dickinson searches for their meaning. Poems like this and the preceding one represent a complicated negotiation between nature and war and the actors and audience in these dramas. As she affirms in “The only news I know,” she is interested in life and death dramas: “If other news there be – / Or admirabler show – / I’ll tell it You – ” (Fr820).

A complex poem like “A still – Volcano – Life –” seems to struggle with natural, psychological, and historical wars simultaneously.

A still – Volcano – Life –
 That flickered in the night –
 When it was dark enough to do
 Without erasing sight –

A quiet – Earthquake style –
 Too subtle to suspect
 By natures this side Naples –
 The North cannot detect

The solemn – Torrid – Symbol –
 The lips that never lie –
 Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –
 And Cities – ooze away – (Fr517)

The language of this poem is unusually fertile, suggesting that a Volcano, a person, and even an entire land are about to explode. Dickinson obliquely refers to the Civil War in

the lines describing the Northern “natures” that cannot feel the impending “Earthquake.” She again borrows the language of Henry Ward Beecher’s Amherst commencement speech in which he calls the war an “earthquake in the South” (Sewall 646). She employs the evocative “Symbol” of the volcano as a figure for the war’s violence, nature’s violence, as well as the individual’s capacity for violence. The word “torrid” implies lust, and the coral-colored lips suggest a woman; so, perhaps the poem describes a woman who explodes.¹³ Finally, when those “hissing Corals,” the lips that “never lie,” open and close, then “Cities – ooze away.” The destruction of these cities returns the reader at the very end of the poem to a scene reminiscent of the devastation wrought by war. The lips that “never lie” may suggest someone who chooses his words very carefully, someone whose speech holds enormous power, perhaps like a general who can order the destruction of entire cities. This poem is full of contradictions – a “quiet” and “subtle” earthquake and volcano, a “solemn” and “Torrid” symbol for example – and we never will understand completely what kind of “Life” Dickinson had in mind when she wrote it. The meanings suggested here just “flicker” like the light from the volcano.¹⁴

Dickinson reminds her readers here that she knows something about nature that others do not.

There’s the Battle of Burgoyne –
 Over, every Day,
 By the Time that Man and Beast
 Put their work away –
 “Sunset” sounds majestic –
 But that solemn War

Could you comprehend it

You would chastened stare – (Fr1316)

As St. Armand observes, “Only those who were fully intimate with nature could understand the passion of the sun as a participatory ritual rather than a mere meteorological conflict of color and cloud” (276). And the view of the “slaughter of the sun” expressed in this poem was “natural” for Dickinson (287). For this speaker, an intimate observer of the scene, the sunset is a battle waged every day. She compares it specifically to British General John Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga, the decisive battle of the Revolutionary War. The sunset is momentous, as was that battle, but significantly, Dickinson renames the battle. It is not Saratoga, but rather Burgoyne; she identifies it by its loser. The observer and the reader, she suggests, should be humbled like the general. We cannot fully understand this phenomenon, nor can even the speaker, but she at least recognizes its importance. “Chasten” can mean discipline or subdue but also purify; perhaps purification would be the result of our comprehension of this divine event, this “solemn War.” The sunset, in this case, is not “majestic” but rather seems like a defeat of the sun that then ushers in the night. Here, the martial references in the poem speak for Dickinson in interesting ways.

One final poem comparing war and nature that merits an in depth look is a poem perhaps from the late 1870s or early 1880s. The version of it below was, Franklin notes, “prepared for a recipient” in 1883.

Their Barricade against the Sky

The martial Trees withdraw,

And with a Flag at every turn
 Their Armies are no more –

What Russet Halts in Nature's March

They indicate or cause,
 An inference of Mexico
 Effaces the Surmise –

Recurrent to the After Thought

That Massacre of Air –
 The Wound that was not Wound or Scar,
 But Holidays of War – (Fr1505)

This poem makes a fitting end to a discussion of Dickinson's blending of war and nature – or of the particular attention she pays to nature's wars – because its references seem, as Dickinson herself would say, so oblique. This is another poem describing autumn, and it begins with an uncomplicated comparison between a retreating army and the leaves falling from the trees. But the language and syntax of the poem become thorny in the second stanza. The speaker suggests that "Armies" of leaves either "indicate" or "cause" certain "Halts in Nature's March." Clearly, winter and the death that it often suggests are coming. But the "inference of Mexico" in the next line is mysterious. Dickinson might have simply had the colors and heat of Mexico in mind, and might also have had the nation's actual war with that country in mind, adding another aspect to the martial metaphor. The poem becomes even more difficult with this "inference" obliterating the

previous idea altogether. Perhaps the bright and vibrant colors of the season relegate winter to a mere “After Thought.” Finally, the “Massacre of Air,” like the wind in so many of Dickinson’s martial poems, makes its appearance, placing the leaves on the ground. This reminds the speaker of a “Wound” or “Scar,” and also suggests that the trees are wounded by the loss of the leaves.

The final line of the poem is the most intriguing. The phrase “Holidays of War” contains the striking juxtaposition of “Holiday,” a time of joy, with “War,” an event that brings sorrow. These words certainly suggest the paradox of autumn; its extreme beauty ushers in the desolation of winter. At the same time, they suggest the paradox of war we see in a poem like “Inconceivably solemn!” (Fr414) Dickinson both loves and fears war’s “pleading Pageantry.” And it follows the speaker’s assertion that the “Wound” she sees is actually not a “Wound or Scar,” which is an interesting equivocation when one again considers the “Holidays of War.” The poem evokes war and nature as well as the struggle of interpreting the world we see. It is a wonderful example of Dickinson wrestling with her perception of that world.

Emily Dickinson’s “Success – is counted sweetest” (Fr112) is not generally considered a war poem.¹⁵ Reading it after one considers Dickinson’s immersion in a world of war, however, leads to new interpretive avenues. This is the version she sent to Higginson in July of 1862.

Success – is counted sweetest
 By those who ne’er succeed –
 To Comprehend a Nectar

Requires sorest need –
 Not one of all the Purple Host
 Who took the Flag – today –
 Can tell the Definition – so clear – of Victory –
 As He – defeated – dying –
 On whose forbidden ear –
 The distant strains of Triumph
 Burst – agonized – and Clear!

This poem highlights the problems of perception. Success is considered sweeter, but there is no guarantee that it actually is all that sweet. Surely, it is difficult “To Comprehend a Nectar” without actually tasting it. And to “tell the Definition” of something is not the same as to know it. The “distant strains of Triumph” seem “clear” but they are quite “distant.” Therefore, the meaning of “Victory” in war, or any other victory including that of immortality, is simply not clear to us. Interpreting history, or nature, or a host of human experiences is extremely difficult. Yet again, Dickinson tells multiple stories and notes the difficulty of telling the truth.

In Emily Dickinson’s martial poems, whether they be about peace or politics, wars within nature or human natures, she challenges what we think we see and know, just as she does so successfully in “Success – is counted sweetest.” And perhaps the most accurate observation one can make about Emily Dickinson and her relationship to the Civil War is that it challenged her to question even more intensely the world that she perceived. In a poem about facing the ultimate “Foe,” about fighting her last “Battle” against death, she writes “My Wars are laid away in Books” (Fr1579). It is indeed a

difficult but worthwhile challenge to study the “Books” to try to comprehend those many “Wars.”

Notes

¹ Wolosky believes that in this poem,

Dickinson suggests that the journey through sorrow to redemption may be an unnecessary peripety. Its value eludes her, and its reward does not outweigh the rigors demanded of it – rigors that seem superfluous. (67)

The poem, however, is much more positive.

² Dickinson writes an alternative last line for this poem: “Before the Harbor be” as opposed to “Or any Harbor be.” The first, interestingly, seems optimistic; the speaker believes the harbor will be reached. Conversely, the second implies that the “Harbor” might be “fictitious,” like the “Shores.”

³ Betsy Erkkila uses this poem to support her theory that Emily Dickinson believed in “a natural social order of class and race” and dreaded the democratic forces that threatened that order (10). She concedes that this poem “gestures toward a ‘large’ and essentially utopian social order in which ‘All Hue’ will be ‘forgotten,’” but that ultimately “the speaker’s ‘minuter intuitions’ have led her to ‘deem’ democracy ‘unplausible’ and indeed rather horrifying not only within but beyond social time” (11). This interpretation is not supported by the poem’s language.

Erkkila also uses the poem “The Malay – took the Pearl –” (Fr451) as evidence for her argument. As with “Color – Caste – Denomination –”, she rejects readings of this poem that claim it advocates “an essentially egalitarian spiritual order” in which all people “have access to the ‘Jewel’ of God’s grace” (11). Instead, she notes that it was “written at the time of the Civil War” and “appears to describe a historical situation in which others, specifically black others, are making gains, while the speaker, an aristocrat,

is being `undone’” (12). This is a very difficult poem that surely resists such a straightforward reading.

⁴ Dickinson also addresses the democracy of death in the following poem.

Not any higher stands the Grave
 For Heroes than for Men –
 Not any nearer for the Child
 Than numb Three score and Ten –

 This latest Castle equal holds
 The Beggar and his Queen
 Propitiate this Democrat
 A Summer’s Afternoon! (Fr1214)

In addition, “A Chilly Peace infests the Grass” (Fr1469) mentions that everyone “From whatsoever Sea” will themselves be in the grave at some point, and it uses words like “Peace” and “Allies” that obliquely suggest war.

⁵ “Day followed day, each a threat, disconnected from the other,” and Dickinson’s “own survival [. . .] depend[ed] no less upon the `common ball,’ the random shot, which could change the balance of battle for actual soldiers” (40), according to Wolosky’s account. But the day in this poem is not threatening, and the “ball” Dickinson refers to is a dance, not a piece of ammunition.

⁶ Sewall wonders if this poem and another Dickinson sent to Higginson with that letter, “Success – is counted sweetest” (Fr112)

presented the paradox of victory in defeat in a way perhaps a military man (whom a friend described a few months later as marching proudly at the head of his troops in Worcester “like a piece of cast-iron happiness”) would understand. Whether Emily intended any irony cannot be known; she may have picked up something of this view of Higginson from the public prints. (557)

Sewall also suggests that “Of Tribulation – these are They” is “perhaps another way of thanking him for his saving hand in the dark” (557).

⁷ St. Armand explains that Dickinson divided time into sunrise, noon, sunset, night; “Since Dickinson collapsed time into a sundial rather than into a clock, each specific time of day was haunted by its own particular holy ghost” (278). As sunset symbolized autumn, “sunrise stood for the promise of spring; noon for the fulfillment of summer” and “night for the long keeping time of winter” (278).

⁸ Franklin dates the poem in late 1862 and places it in Fascicle 22, but does not offer any more specific information about it.

⁹ Hoffman cites contemporary accounts of Antietam that describe the “ravines, ridges, hollows, rises” of the “terrain around Sharpsburg, the town through which Antietam Creek flows” (10). He notes that “Dickinson reveals the depth of her newspaper readings by depicting a ‘Hill,’ ‘Alleys,’ and, perhaps most significantly, a ‘Road,’ all coursing with blood” (11). In this horrific battle, “the Sunken Road (later renamed ‘Bloody Lane’) – proved the site of some of the most grotesque violence of the battle” (11). The similarities are interesting, but not completely convincing.

¹⁰ Christanne Miller offers another reading of this landscape. She views Dickinson as “mistress of the excess and of the grotesque” (103), and notes that “In her most radical poems of humorous excess, Dickinson [. . .] literally deconstructs the female body, littering pieces of it around the landscape of her mind” (118). She believes that in this poem the landscape is a “non-gendered” body “cut open for surgery or dissection” (130); however, the “bonnets” may “suggest that women are somehow linked to this landscape,” and “One might even imagine a link to menstruation” (131). Finally, she rightly notes that although the poem’s closing seems “harmless,” the violence of the opening lines leaves the reader with an “uneasiness” (131).

¹² Hoffman comes to the same conclusion about this poem as he does about the previous one: “Ironically, although Dickinson is not ‘Authorized,’ as these ‘Arrays’ of troops are, to full access to the fighting, her ‘authoring’ of this poem allows her to remark on her passive station” (16). Wolosky, on the other hand, reads it as “a traumatized view of sunset” in which the war “serves as the model in terms of which Dickinson perceives the day’s decline and which renders that decline terrible and fearful” (38). Dickinson is aware that the sunset can be “terrible,” but she is not “traumatized” or “fearful.”

¹³ Christanne Miller argues that the “multiple suggestive aspects of female sexuality in the final stanza’s images” indicate “the centrality of the body in imagining this Life’s eruption” (119). In particular, she notes that “In a grotesque metonymy, a woman becomes mouth – or that other dangerous and lipped female orifice – spewing violent destruction” (119-120). Though the body may not be quite as central as Miller suggests, the poem does deal with issues of gender and power.

¹⁴ This poem, not surprisingly, has a number of interesting variants, including “endangering” for “erasing,” “smouldering” for “subtle” and “slip,” “slide,” and “melt” for “ooze.” Dickinson did not choose the stronger “smouldering,” but her choice of “ooze” makes the poem seem much more grotesque and violent than the other words.

¹⁵ This often-interpreted work is one of many in which Dickinson argues that “Experience of the worst [. . .] heightens the experience of the good” (Wolosky 84). Wolosky does admit that this poem may be linked to the war, and she concludes that “the agony of defeat, the loss of life, speak stronger than does the comprehension gained thereby” (84) in this poem. Further, she notes that critics who believe that it means the opposite have fallen into the “snare” Dickinson set for them (85). But, as always, there is another story to this poem.

CHAPTER 4

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S ITALIAN WARS:

“THIS COUNTRY SAVING IS A GLORIOUS THING”

So, if patriotism be a virtue indeed, it cannot mean an exclusive devotion to our country's interests, – for that is only another form of devotion to personal interests, family interests, or provincial interests, all of which, if not driven past themselves, are vulgar and immoral objects. Let us put away the Little Peddlingtonism unworthy of a great nation, and too prevalent among us. If the man who does not look beyond this natural life is of a somewhat narrow order, what must be the man who does not look beyond his own frontier or his own sea?

I confess that I dream of the day when an English statesman shall arise with a heart too large for England [. . .] (315)

In these lines from the “Preface” to Poems before Congress, Elizabeth Barrett Browning could well be describing her own “heart.” Though she could not answer the call for a political figure who looks beyond his own shores, she did indeed respond to her own call for a poet who does so. The unique circumstances of her life brought her from England to Italy, and from soon after her 1846 marriage until her death in 1861 it became her home. Thus, she naturally assumed an interest in Italy's national affairs, particularly since she lived there during an important period in the Risorgimento.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's interest in Italian politics was much more than casual. She wrote very openly in both letters and poems about her intense desire for Italy to free itself from both foreign and papal influence and knit its various states into a single democratic nation. Looking back on her career before she settled in Italy, her point of view is not at all surprising. After marrying Robert Browning, she became quite cosmopolitan, settling in Florence in 1848 but residing for various periods in Paris and Rome among other cities. Even before leaving her native land, she was far from provincial. Earlier poems such as "The Cry of the Children" (1843) and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1846) look out at the world, calling attention to political issues and social ills both within her nation and abroad. A poet who tackled child labor in England and slavery in the United States surely would not turn away from the plight of Italy.

An analysis of Emily Dickinson's war poetry still must begin with the argument that she did indeed care about the world outside her window. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, on the other hand, actually witnessed events of the Risorgimento unfold outside the window of Casa Guidi, her home in Florence. Named for this experience, her first Risorgimento poem Casa Guidi Windows proclaims that Italy's future leader will find "This country-saving a glorious thing" (I, 860). Barrett Browning found it quite satisfying herself. Over the years, she becomes increasingly vocal in defending her right to comment on the Italian wars for independence and unification. The lingering question is not, then, if the political poetry exists but rather what it tells us about both Italy and Barrett Browning. Further, one wonders why poetry that engages so powerfully with history has been nearly obliterated from literary history.

Before addressing these two related questions, however, one naturally asks how Dickinson's and Barrett Browning's war poetry could possibly be connected. Dickinson has not been considered a war poet because of the oblique nature of the works that approach that topic. Dickinson's poetry is not devoid of all political statement, and it does at times comment directly on the Civil War, but it does not advance a consistent political position. Dickinson also never writes in detail about political issues or figures of the Civil War era. Rather, she tells her war stories as she is tackling other topics, and she always tells them slant. Barrett Browning's war poetry seems quite different. It focuses heavily on her speakers' and her own reaction to the people and politics of the Risorgimento. Barrett Browning analyzes the history of the Italian struggle in great detail, often with the purpose of convincing her readers to support the movement and its leaders. This characterization of the poetry does not mean that Barrett Browning is simple and straightforward and Dickinson complex. Both poets produced works in which "voice is at odds with itself" (Cameron 27), but their internal battles are different. Dickinson's tightly-woven lyrics most often reveal conflicted speakers, while the expansive fabric of Barrett Browning's Risorgimento poetry is more revealing of a confident yet often conflicted poet.

This analysis highlights the challenge of reading the two poets' work, and particularly their war poetry, together. The change may seem jarring to the reader at first. But as we saw in the comparison between Barrett Browning's "Grief" and Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –" (Fr372) in the introduction to this study, the two poets are not nearly as dissimilar as the reader initially may think. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry most certainly influenced Emily Dickinson, and the Barrett Browning

poem that probably had the greatest impact on Dickinson was Aurora Leigh (1856). Ellen Moers notes that Dickinson knew that work “almost by heart” (56), and she believes that Dickinson wrote some lyrics “to underline and elaborate the emotional content of something that happened in Aurora Leigh, rather than in her own life” (59). On the other hand, Moers also suggests that Dickinson “reassembled for her own purposes” many of Barrett Browning’s metaphors (62). A third possibility is that Dickinson often both commented on a Barrett Browning poem and used its metaphors in a new way in the very same work. Issues of inspiration and influence are often quite complicated, but one hears echoes of Barrett Browning in Dickinson’s language, metaphors, and even her subject matter. Moers calls attention to “an unscrupulous mishmash of images” in Barrett Browning that “appealed mainly to eccentric lady writers, like Emily Dickinson” (41) and to the “remarkably Dickinsonian phrases” (60) that appear in Aurora Leigh. One sees evidence of those startling images and phrases in the following examples of the poets’ work. In the first excerpt from Aurora Leigh, Aurora has met Marian Erle in Paris and is leading her to a place where they can speak privately. Aurora thinks they will be discussing Romney, while Marian knows that she will tell Aurora not only about Romney, but about her rape and subsequent pregnancy.

Not a word

She said, but in a gentle humbled way
 (As one who had forgot herself in grief)
 Turned round and followed closely where I went,
 As if I led her by a narrow plank

Across devouring waters, step by step;

And so in silence we walked on a mile. (VI, 478-484)

Here is the “aria in rhyme” (Moers 59) that these lines inspired in Dickinson.

I stepped from Plank to Plank

A slow and cautious way

The Stars about my Head I felt

About my Feet the Sea –

I knew not but the next

Would be my final inch –

This gave me that precarious Gait

Some call Experience – (Fr926)

After the reader knows Marian’s particular “grief,” the meaning of her walking on “a narrow plank / Across devouring waters” is clear. She feels like she has been drowning in those waters, but Aurora tries her best to save Marian. Dickinson responds to this moment in Barrett Browning’s novel-poem with a lyric that links walking on “precarious” planks with “Experience.” Dickinson clearly knew about Marian’s horrible “Experience,” but her poem veers away from that horror with the curious line “The Stars about my Head I felt.” There is an optimism in that line that Marian never expresses, but that Aurora herself represents. There is also a sense that the next step may be the speaker’s last, and that realization haunts Dickinson’s poetry perhaps even more than Barrett Browning’s.

The passage that follows presents an even more intriguing example of the poets' close but complicated relationship. Here Marian describes the conversation with Lady Waldemar that leads her to part with Romney.

She told me tenderly (as when men come
 To a bedside to tell people they must die),
 “She knew of knowledge – ay, of knowledge knew,
 That Romney Leigh had loved her formerly.
 And she love him, she might say, now the chance
 Was past – but that, of course, he never guessed –
 For something came between them, something so thin
 As a cobweb, catching every fly of doubt
 To hold it buzzing at the window-pane
 And help to dim the daylight. Ah, man’s pride
 Or woman’s – which is greatest? most averse
 To brushing cobwebs? (VI, 1078-1089)

Jack Capps notes how “The final stanzas of the Dickinson poem [influenced by this passage] are similarly concerned with fading light and the doubt raised by the buzzing fly” (85).

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air –
 Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset – when the King
 Be witnessed – in the Room –

 I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable – and then it was
 There interposed a Fly –

 With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz –
 Between the light – and me –
 And then the Windows failed – and then
 I could not see to see – (Fr591)

Marian Erle believes that this particular conversation with Lady Waldemar and the events it precipitates have left her dead. In these lines, she actually is describing her own death, and it is that “fly of doubt” that kills her by coming between her and Romney’s “light.” Dickinson’s actual deathbed scene is very much influenced by Marian, though the “uncertain” buzzing may be coming between Dickinson’s speaker and God rather than between a woman and a man. Finally, the wonderful “I could not see to see” reminds the reader of those “cobwebs” that Barrett Browning’s characters have such difficulty “brushing” away.

In “Died. . .”, an interesting elegy for the Risorgimento’s great diplomat Cavour, Barrett Browning returns to this image: “Dust’s his natural place? / He’ll let the flies buzz round his face” (27-28). This poem, like so many of Dickinson’s, affirms that we will all return to dust, but it is also a poem that mourns a hero. Dickinson’s war poetry mourns Lincoln as well as the common soldier, and it is in these elegies that one begins to see the similarities in their martial work. Despite their widely differing levels of political activism, they approach the subject of war through the heart. Not only do they both concentrate on the broken heart, but they celebrate the heart’s incredible capacity for love. Barrett Browning tells her country, “I dream of the day when an English statesman shall arise with a heart too large for England,” just as Dickinson tells her cousins about Frazar Stearns’s “big heart” (L255); Dickinson affirms that, despite the “Sorrow” of the Civil War, “Every day feels mightier, and what we have the power to be, more stupendous” (L298). Barrett Browning and Dickinson do produce different kinds of war poems, but both are guided by the heart’s “principle of right and love” (Emerson 570).

Armed with those principles, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrestles with the political situation in Italy. She attempts to read the events occurring outside her window, but that is not always the easiest of tasks. The Risorgimento was an extremely complex movement; according to Denis Mack Smith, historians even argue about how to date it (1). The concept of a united Italy was born long before 1800 (2), but it was “the ideas of the French Revolution” that shook the peninsula (5). After the Napoleonic wars ended, however, Italy was far from being independent or unified. Rather, “In 1815, Italy consisted of eight different states” which were “under the direct or indirect control of Austria” or else “were ruled by conservative, absolutist kings” (Gooch 1). Further

complicating matters was the papacy, which sought to maintain its hold on Rome and its surrounding land (Smith 3). For the Risorgimento to be successful, these obstacles had to be surmounted and “the different enthusiasms of patriots had to be united” all “without stirring the Great Powers [. . .] into repressive intervention” (Gooch 1). Various revolts broke out in parts of Italy in 1820-21 and again in 1831, but they lacked any “unifying ideology” and thus failed (Gooch 10).

The uprisings of 1848-49 were more successful in furthering the aims of the movement, and it is these events that prompted Elizabeth Barrett Browning to write her first Risorgimento poem. Casa Guidi Windows (1851) primarily looks at Tuscany’s reaction to the turmoil of these years. On February 15, 1848, Tuscany’s Grand Duke Leopold II granted the citizens a constitution (Gooch 10). By February of the next year, however, Leopold, fearing the republicans who were gaining power in Tuscany, “pretended he was merely going out in his carriage for an afternoon’s drive and, much to everyone’s astonishment, he never returned” (Martin 337). Freedom for the region was short-lived, however. After King Charles Albert of Piedmont, Italy’s strongest state, was defeated by Austria at the Battle of Novara in March of 1849, Leopold and other monarchs returned, escorted by Austrian troops (Martin 348).

Barrett Browning returns to political poetry in 1860 when she pens Poems before Congress. This work centers on France’s Napoleon III, who came with his army to help King Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont overthrow Austrian rule in 1859. The king’s minister Cavour had secured Napoleon III’s aid in exchange for territory and a marriage between his nephew and Victor Emmanuel’s daughter the year before (Gooch 26). Following a string of victories, Napoleon III brokered a peace with Austria which left

most of Italy under Austrian or papal governance (Gooch 28). This “peace” offered by the Treaty at Villafranca was a bitter disappointment to supporters of the Risorgimento like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and she expresses her bitterness in these poems.

By the time Barrett Browning was writing Last Poems, published posthumously in 1862, her dreams for Italy were nearly realized. Her home of Tuscany voted along with three other states in central Italy to join with Piedmont in March of 1860; Napoleon III allowed this annexation in order to gain Nice and Savoy for France (Gooch 29). Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Risorgimento’s great leader on the battlefield, freed Sicily and Naples from their rulers, and those states also joined Piedmont. Italy was “formally” born on March 17, 1861 with Victor Emmanuel as its king (Gooch 32); Barrett Browning died on June 29 of that year. It was not until 1870, however, that Venetia and Rome became part of the new nation (Gooch 37). Barrett Browning’s final words on Italy revisit Villafranca but also look toward Italy’s brighter future.

Barrett Browning’s poetic responses to the Risorgimento are organized around a central theme: the search for a hero to lead Italy’s struggle to become a free nation. In her political and martial poetry, she probes these “heroes” in great detail. The tension in her poems often lies in her attempt to reconcile a strong desire to believe that the heroes will be true to her beloved Italy with the knowledge that they are mere mortals with numerous character flaws and with interests other than Italy’s. She first pins her hopes on Duke Leopold of Tuscany in Casa Guidi Windows as she literally watches him through her window, but he obviously disappoints her. In her next group of poems, she turns to Napoleon III, struggling mightily to maintain her confidence in him after

Villafranca. Finally, she examines Victor Emmanuel, Cavour, and Garibaldi, whose actions are more laudable than those of Leopold or Napoleon.

It is in this aspect of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento poetry that one perhaps discovers the first clue as to why this work has nearly vanished from critical view. Understandably, many of the first English readers of the poetry held different opinions of these political figures, particularly France's Napoleon III, though there was also a great deal of sympathy among the British for Italy's cause. And certainly there is a complicated relationship in Victorian poetry between, on the one hand, the critics who castigated women for addressing political questions, on the other, a tradition of women who wrote about history. It seems natural, then, that the reception of the political poetry at the time of its publication would be largely negative. In fact, Tricia Lootens points out that in these works Barrett Browning "explicitly intensified the instabilities and subversive potential of her early conceptions of feminine sainthood" (127). Barrett Browning had been idealized, but when this literary saint turned sinner, "criticism [of her later poetry] often had recourse to a vocabulary of demonic possession" (Lootens 128).¹ Its limited reception since feminist criticism has revived interest in a host of women poets, both canonical and obscure, is more puzzling. While Dickinson's critics largely have insisted on her radical privacy, Barrett Browning's criticism until recently tended to ignore the radical politics of her later poetry, as if it were somehow unseemly or unpoetic. Recently, however, the Risorgimento poetry, particularly Casa Guidi Windows, has begun to attract the attention it deserves.

Even more difficult for the critics is the specific content of these political poems, particularly the near worship of powerful men that dominates many of them. Naturally,

feminist scholars might find this aspect of her work disappointing, and therefore not wish to address it. But in the interest of sketching a fully-realized portrait, this side of the poet cannot be ignored, and a careful reading of it reveals that it is more complex than it appears at first. This poetry's struggle with the heroes of the Risorgimento probably mirrored the changing opinions of the men and women who thought and wrote about these events; indeed, men have written poems throughout history that express great admiration for leaders, admiration that sometimes was not fully deserved and had to be rescinded. Further, though Barrett Browning often writes more as an Italian than an English patriot, the patriotic and even bellicose nature of this poetry places it in a category rejected by many twentieth-century critics. In "Victorian Poetry and Patriotism," Lootens notes that "For literary critics who anticipated or experienced the devastation of the First World War, there was something peculiarly 'Victorian' – and peculiarly suspect – about patriotic poetry" (255). At first, Barrett Browning herself is hesitant to endorse war despite her patriotism, but as she becomes more impatient with the pace of change in Italy, she becomes solidly in favor of it. She comes to realize that it may be the only way for Italy to win its freedom.

This section first will examine Elizabeth Barrett Browning's political poetry with an eye to its heroes, revealing that her engagement with them is quite complicated. The second major source of tension within this work is inherent in Barrett Browning's position as poet. Barrett Browning is not an Italian patriot writing patriotic poetry. Her role is complicated significantly by the fact that she is an English poet living in Florence writing as an Italian patriot. Further, as Esther Schor and other critics have noted, Barrett Browning's audience is not primarily the Italians but rather the English, specifically those

in power who she feels have not lent the proper support to the Italian cause.² She writes about Italian and French leaders, but she writes for the English leaders who, to her, are morally bankrupt. Her residence in Italy places her in both a position of strength and of weakness as she scolds and goads these political figures; her strength is her intimate acquaintance with Italy but her weakness is her increasing distance from England.³ As Leigh Coral Harris writes in reference to the unusual Casa Guidi Windows,

As a resident primarily of Tuscany from 1846 until her death in 1861, as a woman who bore her only child in the Casa Guidi, as a female poet married to a male poet, as an Italian republican in spirit while remaining a citizen of a Britain that was far from being a republic, Barrett Browning inhabited an intellectual and cultural frontier that required this liminal form of poetic expression. (110).

Aiming an attack at England, though, provoked criticism from English reviewers, particularly since she launched it as an exile who was not a political player in the traditional sense.⁴ But for Barrett Browning, the poet is extremely powerful, and she believes her words can have a profound effect.

Finally, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's political poetry is very much informed by her gender. She was a woman poet daring to tackle forbidden topics. There are moments in her Risorgimento poetry when she certainly struggles with what it means to be a woman war poet. Complicating the matter further, the conflicts she writes about occur in Italy, a country that was already identified in countless literary works as a beautiful but helpless woman, perhaps the ultimate damsel in distress. As Dorothy Mermin points out, the young Elizabeth Barrett could not imagine herself merely as the damsel (64), and the

mature Mrs. Browning could not burden Italy with that image. Elizabeth Barrett Browning knew Italy must become her own knight in shining armor, though she also called for other nations to come to its aid. But Barrett Browning provides much more than an example of one woman poet's grasp of the events that shaped her world; she specifically targets the intersection between politics and war and gender in her poetry by writing a number of Risorgimento poems in which female characters play an important role. Some of these women are sentimental and others more unconventional, hinting at the more expansive part women can play in national dramas. Finally, the already complex relationships between women and poetry and war become more tangled when motherhood is added to the mix. A woman who writes about armed conflict or participates in it some other way finds herself in a more complicated position when she has literally provided the corporeal arms that will carry the nation to victory.⁵ Although many poems touch on this topic, "Mother and Poet" from Last Poems merits particular attention. It is a dramatic monologue spoken by an Italian patriotic poet whose sons die for Italy's freedom. More than any other work, this fascinating, complex, and moving poem explores what it means to be a poet, patriot, woman, and mother at a time of excruciating stress.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Heroes: "Up springs a living man"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning introduces Casa Guidi Windows, her first Risorgimento poem, with an apology:

This poem contains the impressions of the writer upon events in Tuscany of which she was a witness. "From a window," the critic may

demur. She bows to the objection in the very title of her work. No continuous narrative nor exposition of political philosophy is attempted by her. It is a simple story of personal impressions, whose only value is in the intensity with which they were received, as proving her warm affection for a beautiful and unfortunate country, and the sincerity with which they are related, as indicating her own good faith and freedom from partisanship.

Of the two parts of the poem, the first was written nearly three years ago, while the second resumes the actual situation of 1851. The discrepancy between the two parts is a sufficient guarantee to the public of the truthfulness of the writer, who, though she certainly escaped the epidemic “falling sickness” of enthusiasm for Pio Nono, takes shame upon herself that she believed, like a woman, some royal oaths, and lost sight of the probable consequences of some obvious popular defects. If the discrepancy should be painful to the reader, let him understand that to the writer it has been more so. But such discrepancies we are called upon to accept at every hour by the conditions of our nature, implying the interval between aspiration and performance, between faith and disillusion, between hope and fact. (249)

She closes this unusual introduction with the hopeful declaration, “The future of Italy shall not be disinherited” (250), certainly a truthful statement about her belief in the future of her new home. But nearly every line that precedes the closing is either misleading or patently false. The poet absolutely provides “an exposition of political

philosophy” in Casa Guidi Windows. As one might suspect, the poem does not read like a John Stuart Mill essay. But Barrett Browning clearly explains Italy’s precarious political situation and strongly supports its freedom throughout the poem. She further argues vigorously for foreign nations, particularly England, to step forward to aid Italy. There is certainly no “freedom from partisanship” here, and the poem is far from “a simple story of personal impressions,” though it includes them; in fact, it is rather daunting in its complexity and ambition. As Mermin argues, the introduction belies “The carefully articulated analysis of the political situation and of the artist’s political responsibility” in the poem (165).⁶ Barrett Browning calls attention to her distance from the events she describes, as “She bows to the objection” that she is merely an onlooker. She collapses the distance between herself and Italy, however, through those very powers of observation, as well as through the depth and breadth of her knowledge of the politics and, finally, through the “intensity” of the verse.⁷

She then, interestingly, apologizes in advance for the hero-worship which she assumes will rankle her readers. Proud that she was not deceived by Pope Pius IX, who initially appeared to support the burgeoning Risorgimento, she does admit to admiring unduly the Duke “like a woman.” Removing gender from the equation for the moment, one wonders to what extent she really does regret her portrayal. Certainly, as one realizes reading the poem, Barrett Browning would prefer to have been correct in her assessment of Leopold. But there is optimism in this introduction, and in the body of the poem itself, that simply will not die, and that hope for Italy cannot be disentangled from hope for its leaders. As the profound lines that conclude the second paragraph tell us, “the interval between aspiration and performance, between faith and disillusion, between hope and

fact” is a fact of life, for both the poet and the statesman; they are the “conditions of our nature.”

Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke explain that the occasion that inspired the first part of Casa Guidi Windows was the celebration in Florence on September 12, 1847 of the Duke Leopold’s assenting to the creation of “a National Guard, although to grant this was a direct defiance of Austria, which had threatened to occupy any Italian state presuming to have such a desire” (407). Thus, the people took to the streets

To thank their Grand-duke who, not quite of course,
Had graciously permitted, at their call,
The citizens to use their civic force
To guard their civic homes. (I, 458-461)

The Tuscans interpret this act as a fortuitous sign, as “The first torch of Italian freedom, lit / To toss in the next tiger’s face who should / Approach too near them in a greedy fit” (I, 465-467). As she watches the procession move past her window, she focuses on the people, “IL POPOLO, – / The word means dukedom, empire, majesty, / And kings in such an hour might read it so” (I, 499-501). This invocation of the people’s power serves as a warning to Leopold and other royalty. They “might” heed this warning, but if they do not, will there be consequences? There is lingering doubt in this poem and later works about the strength of Italians’ will. It is no accident that Barrett Browning describes what she witnesses as an “orderly procession.” She later questions the people’s ability to remain “orderly” and organized enough to achieve this lofty goal, and in her poetry seeks “To prove the level of Italian veins / Towards rights perceived and granted” (I, 469-470). She asks,

Can she [Italy] count

These oil-eaters with large live mobile mouths

Agape for macaroni, in the amount

Of consecrated heroes of her south's

Bright rosary? The pitcher at the fount,

The gift of gods, being broken, she much loathes

To let the ground-leaves of the place confer

A natural bowl. (I, 199-206)

Barrett Browning wants these lowly “ground-leaves” to save Italy, and she seems to believe they are capable of doing so. She refers to Italians as large-mouthed “oil-eaters,” but she is adapting the language of bigotry to suit her own rhetorical purposes rather than necessarily endorsing that characterization. She wants Italy to look to its own people, not view them as hapless. Yet there is a hint here that she is a bit skeptical herself – that she is attempting to convince herself as much as she is her audience.⁸

The problems with “il popolo” partly explain Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s emphasis on heroes. She argues that “one clear word would draw an avalanche / Of living sons around her, to succeed / The vanished generations” (I, 197-199); but one word from whom? Barrett Browning suggests both the political leader and the poet must speak. Indeed, the two may even become one in the same, as the leader must have much of the poet in him and the poet must become a leader herself. Casa Guidi Windows first suggests that Leopold might be a viable leader. Barrett Browning concedes that “the liberal Duke’s excess” (I, 543) was not excessive in its liberality. It was a good start, as

was the sight of “banners” that were “Inscribed `Live freedom, union’” (I, 555). She adds,

Nor was it ill when Leopoldo drew
 His little children to the window-place
 He stood in the Pitti, to suggest
They too should govern as the people willed.
 What a cry rose then! Some, who saw the best,
 Declared his eyes filled up and overfilled
 With good warm human tears which unrepressed
 Ran down. I like his face; the forehead’s build
 Has no capacious genius, yet perhaps
 Sufficient comprehension, -- mild and sad,
 And careful nobly, -- not with care that wraps
 Self-loving hearts, to stifle and make mad,
 But careful with the care that shuns a lapse
 Of faith and duty, studious not to add
 A burden in the gathering of a gain. (I, 557-571)

This is Barrett Browning’s most extensive commentary on the duke, written before he betrays his people by allying himself with Austria, and it is characteristic of her later treatments of leaders. First, she uses his children to humanize him, and, interestingly, they gaze out a window just as she does. She specifically identifies herself with the child singing “O bella libertà” (I, 2) at the beginning of the poem, but she is also like Leopold’s children, attempting to make sense of this spectacle. Barrett Browning wants the children

to learn respect for the people, just as she is teaching herself greater respect for them, and she wants to believe the accounts of the duke's tears. She is cautiously searching for a very human hero here, scrutinizing his "face" for the right qualities of character. And she tries very hard to be hopeful, noting that he is no "genius," but may have the "look of careful pain" (I, 575) so important to a good leader.⁹

It is, however, abundantly clear to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that Leopold will not lead Italy, or even Tuscany, to freedom. She explains that she is searching for someone much stronger:

We want thee, O unfound
 And Sovran teacher! if thy beard be grey
 Or black, we bid thee rise up from the ground
 And speak the word God giveth thee to say,
 Inspiring into all this people round,
 Instead of passion, thought (I, 765-770)

The emphasis here is on "thought" rather than action; she seeks a "teacher," not a patriot or general. Esther Schor explains that Barrett Browning "calls for an idealized, masculine teacher-savior, an Evangelical parson" who must "assume the divine task of soul-making" (315). While conceding that Barrett Browning's view is generally "democratic," she argues that "it holds fast to a rather conservative ideal of moral authority" and relegates the "people" to merely the "instrument by which he [the teacher] does God's work" (315). This teacher must "build the golden pipes and synthesize / This people-organ for a holy strain" (I, 813-814). The relationship between the leader and his followers in Casa Guidi Windows is more complicated, though, and requires much more

delicate negotiation on Barrett Browning's part. The people may be "simple, blind and rough" (I, 599) but they are also "real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong" (I, 49) for whom Barrett Browning has the utmost sympathy and in whom she places enormous confidence. In addition, she certainly does not believe that this hero must himself be a nobleman. She speculates on who he might be:

And if a common man achieved it? well.
 Say, a rich man did? excellent. A king?
 That grows sublime. A priest? Improbable.
 A pope? Ah, there we stop, and cannot bring
 Our faith up to the leap, with history's bell
 So heavy round the neck of it – albeit
 We fain would grant the possibility
 For thy sake, Pio Nono!" (I, 861-868)

The progression of this passage proves that Barrett Browning actually expects Italy's great leader will come from "common" stock. She is, in many ways, conservative, as Schor notes, but is perhaps becoming less so. Her own inclinations as well as Italy's peculiar situation make the right leadership crucial, and we witness her wrestling with the nature of that leadership in this first of her Risorgimento poems. She is asking a lot of someone and she knows it: whether "Pope, prince, or peasant" (I, 1047), "what we want's a perfect man, / Complete and alive" (I, 1041), for "Heroic daring is the true success" (I, 1215).

Despite that "daring" on the part of many Italians in the late 1840s, the uprisings across Italy failed as they had earlier. The second part of Casa Guidi Windows recounts

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's bitter disappointment at Duke Leopold's return to Florence accompanied by Austrian troops. Leopold betrayed not only his own people, but also "thinkers" (17), "hoppers" (18), and "poets" (19) like Barrett Browning. In this section of the poem, she asks why he bothered to make the promises he did. After all,

It was understood

God made thee not too vigorous or too bold;
 And men had patience with thy quiet mood,
 And women, pity, as they saw thee pace
 Their festive streets with premature grey hairs.
 We turned the mild dejection of thy face
 To princely meanings, took thy wrinkling cares
 For ruffling hopes, and called thee weak, not base. (II, 43-50)

This is an interesting passage because she admits here that both men and women misread the duke. Barrett Browning so often attributes her own miscalculations to her gender, but the men too "had patience" with Leopold because they hoped he would be true to his word. She reiterates that Leopold is a man of modest abilities; this she knew from the beginning. Now she regrets that she thought better of him, and she asks for forgiveness: "I bow my soul and knee. / Absolve me, patriots, of my woman's fault / That ever I believed the man was true!" (II, 63-65) Again, she assigns the blame to her gender – and her pregnancy.

I saw the man among his little sons,
 His lips were warm with kisses while he swore;
 And I, because I am a woman – I,

Who felt my own child's coming life before
 The prescience of my soul, and held faith high, –
 I could not bear to think, whoever bore,
 That lips, so warmed, could shape so cold a lie. (II, 93-99)

Her explanation of her fault seems straightforward, but the passage is actually a dissection of a complicated relationship. Barrett Browning is angry that she “put faith in princes” (II, 75), and has therefore betrayed the people herself (thus her supplication before patriots). She sees the duke as a father figure to his subjects, and also focuses on Leopold's fathering of his own children. While insisting on the weaknesses particular to women, she also feminizes Leopold by portraying his affectionate relationship with his children. The role of parent is clearly elevated in Barrett Browning's mind, so how, she asks, can Leopold be a good father yet such an abominable leader? Barrett Browning's political thinking is clouded by her gender, she contends, but she also argues for the values underpinning that thinking. As Helen Cooper asserts, “Barrett Browning determines that loyalty to a child is not a sentimental limitation of woman's thinking but an honorable standard” (139). Finally, one senses when reading her indictments of her gender that she might be protesting a bit too much. Surely, she is, to some extent, posing as the emotional new mother while most of the time writing like any man watching the Risorgimento unfold might do.¹⁰

The second part of the poem, like the first, reveals Elizabeth Barrett Browning's wrestling with her own opinion of the Italians themselves. She describes the patriotic fervor she witnessed three years earlier (II, 100-147), and then rather sarcastically describes how “we failed in duty” (148), we who “did not fight / Exactly” (154-155). In

Part I, Barrett Browning preferred that no one actually fight for Italy's independence; "Heavens forbid / That we should call on passion to confront / The brutal with the brutal" (I, 673-675), she exclaims. Here she is idealistic in the extreme, imploring all nations to live Christ's example. After she sees the light of revolution extinguished, however, she scorns the Tuscans for not taking up arms against Austria.

"What, desert herewith

Our wives and mothers? – was that duty? tush!"

At which we shook the sword within the sheath

Like heroes (II, 173-176)

She even proclaims, "Ye played like children, – die like innocents" (II, 322), and she calls for "stern analysis" (II, 536) of the problems with the people. But, as before, she vacillates, following her indictment with the justification that "an ignorance of aims" (II, 213) is all that prevents the Italians from becoming one free people. She also interprets the Tuscan reaction to Leopold returning with the imposing Austrian soldiers sympathetically; "none wept, none cursed" (II, 355) because "They had learnt silence" (II, 358), as surely other oppressed peoples have. Barrett Browning's account, then, is certainly not the "simple" story she claims it will be. Far from facile in its content, Casa Guidi Windows presents an intelligent and complex analysis of both the heroes and the people who followed them in the drama of the Risorgimento. Her vision is not obscured by the window in front of her; she views the situation with a great deal of clarity and, when she suspects her own bias, attempts to come to terms with it.

Near the end of the poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning returns to the theme of the hero, this time choosing Piedmont's King Charles Albert. When he lost his battle with the Austrians at Novara, he

stripped away

The ancestral ermine ere the smoke had cleared,
 And, naked to the soul, that none might say
 His kingship covered what was base and bleared
 With treason, went out straight an exile, yea,
 An exiled patriot. Let him be revered. (II, 700-705)

Paying particular attention to his "discrowned head" (II, 717), Barrett Browning asserts that a patriot and hero can come from nobility, despite the example of Duke Leopold.

Esther Schor asks what happens if no great "teacher" materializes, and she replies that "A skeptical answer might be that the poet would settle, simply, for a sovereign" (315-316).¹¹ The example of a "sovereign" that Barrett Browning provides here, however, is not a simple one. A large part of Charles Albert's heroism lies in his willingness to be "discrowned"; he does not value his royalty more than his country. Yet undoubtedly royalty does hold some appeal for Barrett Browning, and, from a practical standpoint, it lends a potential "hero" enormous power. Finally, she continues to be deeply interested in the character of the heroes of Italy's past, present, and future. She wants to see Charles Albert "naked to the soul," so his motives will be completely exposed; she does not want any more dissembling like the duke's. Charles Albert may not have been the patriot Barrett Browning portrays; by some accounts, he was more interested in acquiring

territory than in winning the war (Gooch 14). However, he did give the throne to his son, who later would work much harder for the good of both Piedmont and Italy.

At the close of Casa Guidi Windows, Elizabeth Barrett Browning has not lost her faith in heroes or in the people. She takes up the torch again, eight years later, in Poems before Congress. Schor inserts this parenthetical after her discussion of Charles Albert's sovereignty: "(Indeed her resolute defense of Louis Napoleon following the infamous Peace of Villafranca would become the centerpiece of the enduringly unpopular Poems before Congress.)" (316)¹² This statement implies that the unfavorable opinions of this volume have endured for good reason, and Schor provides a probable explanation when she names the book's major subject – support for Napoleon III. Rather than simply ignoring these poems or dismissing them as the work of a fanatical or hysterical woman, one should actually read them within their historical context to determine what Barrett Browning says about the French leader.¹³ She places her faith in him because he is one of the few foreign leaders who shows interest in Italy's freedom. While support for Italy exists in other places, France actually commits troops to the cause. Thus, Barrett Browning views him as Italy's best hope. More importantly, by pledging and providing aid to Italy, Napoleon III does what Barrett Browning's own country refuses to do, much to her chagrin. Finally, just because she vigorously defends him does not mean she never expresses any disappointment or frustration with him. Supporting him is a struggle. Ultimately, however, she comes to believe that he fought for Italy as hard as he could, and she deeply appreciates his effort, though it fell short of the goal.

The poem in which Barrett Browning expresses her deep esteem for Napoleon III with the greatest emotion and enthusiasm – and with very little reservation – is the one

that opens the volume, “Napoleon III. in Italy.” The troubling aspects of this poem should not be brushed aside. Barrett Browning must first legitimize this newly proclaimed “Emperor” (1) of France in order to justify her high regard for him. She therefore declares that “millions” of French citizens voted for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte to become Emperor Napoleon III. In December of 1851, Napoleon III did grant the citizens of France universal suffrage, but he also disbanded the assembly and “submitted his coup d’état to the country in the form of a new constitution” (Martin 410-411). The constitution reinstated the assembly but granted it no authority (Martin 411). Barrett Browning portrays herself as the one who, “reverencing the people” (43) respects “the great conclusion of their will” (47), when the people had very little choice in the matter. It is the will of the people of Italy that Barrett Browning is most interested in; when she repeats the lines “Emperor / Evermore” throughout the poem, it is for them. She does admit that she is suspicious and even fearful of his now royal position when she writes,

I was not used, at least,
 Nor can be, now or then,
 To stroke the ermine beast
 On any kind of throne
 (Though builded by a nation for its own),
 And swell the surging choir for kings of men – (56-61)

She decides, however, that Napoleon III has separated himself from “the purple throng / Of vulgar monarchs” (65-66) by offering to help the Italians. She anticipates the criticism that she is coddling a tyrant, but her position is that he is the “Sublime Deliverer” (94) of her beloved Italy. It is practical position: Napoleon III may have the

“beast” in him, but he must be “stroke[d]” for the good of Italy. Yet it is also a disturbing, and quite sexual metaphor that calls into question her admiration for this emperor. Some may call him “Autocrat” (293), but she maintains that “a ruler incarnate of / The people must transcend / All common king-born kings” (295-297). So Napoleon III becomes a better king for not being born of one; “The people’s blood runs through him,” (301), she writes, and “Creates him absolute” (303), which is quite an interesting way of viewing monarchy. Because his rule is endorsed by the people and he himself is of the people, his near “absolute” power is justified. Again, the reservations implied in her strenuous protest of the title “Autocrat” must be viewed through the lens of her love for Italy. “Shout for France and Savoy! / Shout for the helper and doer” (229-230), is Barrett Browning’s charge, and France is an integral part of that equation.

As with Duke Leopold, Barrett Browning calls attention to Napoleon III’s face, to humanize him for her audience.

He is moved, you see,
 He who has done it all.
 They call it a cold stern face;
 But this is Italy
 Who rises up to her place!
 For this he fought in his youth,
 Of this he dreamed in the past;
 The lines of the resolute mouth
 Tremble a little at last.
 Cry, he has done it all! (270-279)

She must read his face for her readers and challenge the prevailing opinion that he is “cold” and “stern.” Noting the passion he has always had for Italy, she describes him finally overcome by emotion; she wants us to “Cry” out that he is great because he himself cries for Italy. She qualifies this reading, however, by observing that “he is strange, this man” (286), and she actually compares him to “(A wind in the dark that ran / Through a chink where there was no door)” (288-289). It must surely be “The people’s instinct” (287), and her own too, that would trust such a man. The phrase “wind in the dark,” implies that he is mysterious and a bit frightening, someone who sneaks into the house through a “chink.” It also recalls the winds in Dickinson’s poems. Her “Wind with fingers” (Fr545) has the power to lift soldiers from the battlefield, and her “Winds” are also capable of informing “your Cedar Floor” of the “Flood” that cannot be contained (Fr 583). Napoleon III, too, holds much power that Barrett Browning hopes he will use wisely. He is far from simple, nor is Barrett Browning’s opinion of him.¹⁴ But most importantly, the man is a “miracle” (315), because, unlike other leaders of nations, “his meaning is straight” (334). He fits her definition of great because he “uses his greatness for all” (381). Thus, she ends the poem with this tribute to him:

– That he might have had the world with him,
 But chose to side with suffering men,
 And had the world against him when
 He came to deliver Italy.

Emperor

Evermore. (413-418)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's immediate interest lies in Italy, but Napoleon III's noble actions make him the kind of leader she would admire no matter what people he chose to "deliver." He is the honest and altruistic ruler she views as the model.¹⁵ Thus, the poem is not just an homage to a leader but also a work that defines what a leader should be. It is as much a tribute as it is an argument. In Casa Guidi Windows, Barrett Browning moves from the duke's characteristics to those traits that Italy's "teacher" must possess, and even in her disappointment she believes that teacher will emerge. In "Napoleon III. in Italy," there is a similar movement from what she thinks Napoleon III is to what all rulers of nations should be. Therefore, Barrett Browning's worship of heroes is more a search for them.

In "A Tale of Villafranca," Barrett Browning's speaker, whose position is much like the poet's, admits to her young son that Napoleon III was not quite as committed to Italy's cause as she originally thought. Here we see the tension between belief and bitterness that marks the rest of the poems Barrett Browning writes about him. Her belief is evident in the second stanza, where Napoleon III conceives of the idea of rescuing Italy much as God conceived of the world.

A great man (who was crowned one day)
 Imagined a great Deed:
 He shaped it out of cloud and clay,
 He touched it finely till the seed
 Possessed the flower: from heart and brain
 He fed it with large thoughts humane,
 To help a people's need. (8-14)

Yet this man who seems to have nearly divine power cannot withstand, according to Barrett Browning, the pressure of other nations, specifically the congress of nations to whom these poems are supposed to be addressed. That congress, however, never occurred as a result of a disagreement between France and Austria.¹⁶ Napoleon III's "great Deed" is one that "threatens plainly the great Powers" (45); hence, he capitulates. This is Napoleon III's justification, as conveyed by the poet to the child.

"The world is many, – I am one;
 My great Deed was too great.
 God's fruit of justice ripens slow:
 Men's souls are narrow; let them grow.
 My brothers, we must wait." (66-70)

Napoleon III found himself in a difficult position after his series of victories against the Austrians. First, Solferino was an extremely bloody battle, and "both Napoleon and Franz Josef were profoundly shaken by the numbers of the dead and the agonies of the wounded" (Martin 502). In addition, he was losing support for the war among his own people partly because of the "dangerous political and religious problems it was producing in Italy." Napoleon III did not want all of Italy to be free. Finally, he was facing probable intervention in the war by Prussia (Martin 503). The poem does not reveal these specific threats to Italy and France but provides the rather vague explanation that the time is not yet right, that men are not yet ready – indeed, all of Europe is still against it. These lines certainly deflect any blame from Napoleon III himself. Barrett Browning is much angrier with those who oppose him or who stand silent. The poem's final lines, however, express extreme despair.

Ah child, look up into the sky!
 In this low world, where great Deeds die,
 What matter if we live? (82-84)

Here she does not mention how the death of such “great Deeds” came to pass, but one senses that the speaker believes that Napoleon III could have done more to save them. Even in a poem addressed to a child, whose mere presence often provides a sense of purpose and hope, she can write, “What matter if we live?” – not if “I” live, but “we,” meaning mankind. This hero was not heroic enough to free Italy, a cause to which she imagines no reasonable opposition.

Barrett Browning’s admiration of France’s new Napoleon is seriously qualified for the first time in “An August Voice,” the last work in Poems before Congress in which he appears. More than a character here, Napoleon III is the poem’s speaker. But characterizing the tone of this work is difficult. On one hand, it clearly criticizes France’s leader for making peace with Austria, its very title employing the word “august” ironically; neither his words nor he himself are noble in these circumstances.¹⁷ On the other hand, Napoleon III himself is bitter because he feels he must sign the treaty and must now tell the Italians to return their aristocratic leaders to power. He also reveals signs of frustration with the Italians themselves for remaining too passive in the face of such threats to their freedom.¹⁸ This poem, perhaps more than any other, reveals that Elizabeth Barrett Browning does not blindly worship this “hero” or any other. Rather, she wrestles with her positions and constantly reevaluates them, sometimes within the same poem.

All but one of the stanzas of “An August Voice” begins with the question “You’ll take back your Grand-duke?” and most end with those words in the form of a statement. From the opening lines throughout the whole of the poem, Barrett Browning reminds the reader that the emperor finds himself in a precarious position. He appears to be asking the Italians to “take back” their dukes, but they really have little choice in the matter. He appears to want them to accept these terms, but he would prefer Italy decide its own fate. Further, while the sarcastic lines in this poem are spoken by Napoleon III, one senses that this bitterness belongs more to the poet than to the speaker. A reader who comes to this poem after Casa Guidi Windows and the earlier Poems before Congress, cannot help but suspect that the “August Voice” here is the voice of the poet, and her mission is to expose the leaders’ lack of credibility. The speaker in this dramatic monologue, then, is extremely complex and reveals the complexity of the events and personalities surrounding Villafranca – and the complexity of Barrett Browning’s reaction to them.

Nearly every line of this work draws attention to the outrageous nature of the entreaty “You’ll take back your Grand-duke?” First, it is really not a question at all. When Napoleon III tells the Italians, “I made a treaty upon it” (2) and “I promised the Emperor Francis / To argue the case by his book” (11-12), one realizes that he is in essence telling them to return the duke to power. The poem is bursting with irony because Napoleon III and, even more so, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, know that Leopold is not worthy of this power. She writes, for example, that the duke will “swear to [the constitution] over again, / Providing an `easy solution” (7-8). The words “easy solution” in a poem about Italian politics are particularly amusing. The French emperor sarcastically says of Leopold, “He is not pure altogether” (19) since he abandoned the

promises he made to the Tuscans in 1848, and “There are some thing to object to” (38), such as the fact that he “cheated, betrayed, and forsook” his people (39). It is possible too that Napoleon III would like the Italians to object and continue to fight for their own cause.

The poem continues in this vein, ironic statements followed by descriptions of the duke’s utter lack of character, for the first seven stanzas. But it turns in the eighth, which begins differently.

Pray take back your Grand-duke.
 – I, too, have suffered persuasion.
 All Europe, raven and rook,
 Screeched at me armed for your nation.
 Your cause in my heart struck spurs;
 I swept such warnings aside for you:
 My very child’s eyes, and Hers,
 Grew like my brother’s who died for you.
 You’ll call back the Grand-duke? (64-72)

Here Napoleon III truly enters the poem as a character; the reader hears his voice for what seems like the first time. The first half of the poem is a direct attack on the duke and on the French emperor, but then the emperor fights back. He has not merely been convinced, but rather has “suffered persuasion,” with “All Europe” against him despite his deep loyalty to Italy. Napoleon III becomes human again in this stanza; the reference to his child is Barrett Browning’s customary sign that she trusts someone. He also recalls how his brother died for Italy’s cause and how he himself “had an epaulette shot off”

(85), unlike the cowardly duke. But Napoleon III does not lose his life, or an arm or a leg, but merely an “epaulette.” The inclusion of this small detail suggests that this leader may not be willing to make personal sacrifices that others have made for Italy.

Finally, the poem’s complicated politics as well as its highly-charged emotions are crystallized in the final stanza:

You’ll take back your Grand-duke?
 Observe, there’s no one to force it, –
 Unless the Madonna, Saint Luke
 Drew for you, choose to endorse it.
 I charge you, by great Saint Martino
 And prodigies quickened by wrong,
 Remember your Dead on Ticino;
 Be worthy, be constant, be strong –
 Bah! – call back the Grand-duke!! (100-108)

There are hints earlier in the poem that Napoleon III does not want the Italians to “be sheep, and dutiful” (94), but rather wishes they would resist; Barrett Browning writes in the second stanza that the duke “Has very strong points; -- although / Your bayonets, there, have stronger” (16-17). The implication here might be that if the Italians had fought harder, Napoleon III would not have been forced to propose the treaty. In this last section, we see more of that sentiment as he asks the Italians to “Remember your Dead” by being “strong.” He also tries to deflect criticism from himself by arguing that “there’s no one to force” them to accept the duke. Clearly, his actions and those of Austria are far more relevant to the situation than any “Saint.” But all his arguments fall apart in the

frustration of the last line. Through the fault of many, the Grand-duke is about to return. Elizabeth Barrett Browning acknowledges these faults and attempts to come to terms with them in this complex poem describing a difficult moment in Italian history.

She revisits this moment in the first political work in Last Poems, “First News from Villafranca.” Interestingly, she is more critical of Napoleon III here than in “An August Voice.” Then, she turns away from him and toward other heroes for the rest of the volume. The heroes who emerge after France has played its part are Italians: Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont, his minister Cavour, and Garibaldi. She celebrates them perhaps a bit more cautiously than she does Napoleon III at the beginning of Poems before Congress, but she consistently highlights the main actors in the drama of Italian independence. And she reminds her readers in an elegy for Cavour, as Emily Dickinson does so often, that all human dramas ultimately have the same ending.

“First News from Villafranca” expresses the speaker’s anger at the outcome of French intervention. From the very first lines, “Peace, peace, peace, do you say? / What! – with the enemy’s guns in our ears? / With the country’s wrong not rendered back?” (1-3), her outrage is apparent. “Are we all blind / Or mad with the blood shed yesterday?” (9-10), she asks, noting the irony of a situation in which “Because we triumph, we succumb” (15). As was true of Poems before Congress, there is no equivocation here about war-making. She is not “Still dreaming peace meant liberty” (35). She indicts the “pair of Emperors” (16) who “sign and seal our cannons dumb” (18), for the first time seeming to blame Napoleon III as much as Franz Joseph for Villafranca. Briefly, she retreats from that position with the line “(One of whom is a man, beside)” (17), but then she launches into her most pointed and sustained attack on him:

No, not Napoleon! – he who mused
 At Paris, and at Milan spake,
 And at Solferino led the fight:
 Not he we trusted, honoured, used
 Our hopes and hearts for . . . till they break
 Even so, you tell us . . . in his sight. (19-24)

In this, her last poem about him, she states, in simple and direct terms, that Napoleon III has betrayed Italy, thereby “break[ing]” the people’s hearts. The peace he has declared is a “lie” (26), just as surely as he lied to the Italians when he told them he would free them from Austrian domination. Of course, the speaker in this poem is describing the “First News” of the peace treaty, and upon reflection the French leader’s position seems more reasonable. But this particular stanza should remove any doubt that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was deceived by her loyalty in her opinion of Napoleon III. She did generally remain loyal to him, and she earnestly sought a hero to help save Italy, but her main interest was always just that – the good of her new home.

The final stanza of this poem expresses the extent of the injustice of Villafranca in very interesting, powerful, and Dickinsonian terms.

Peace, you say? – yes, peace, in truth!
 But such a peace as the ear can achieve
 ’Twixt the rifle’s click and the rush of the ball,
 ’Twixt the tiger’s spring and the crunch of the tooth,
 ’Twixt the dying atheist’s negative
 And God’s Face – waiting, after all! (37-42)

The metaphors for this “peace” that does not soothe the ear, but rather assaults it, appear in slightly different forms in Dickinson’s letters and poems from the Civil War period. To Higginson, Dickinson writes that the threat of a sudden death “Is like a face of steel / That suddenly looks into our’s / With a Metallic Grin” (L282). She describes for him that moment when one is waiting “for the rush of the ball.” And in one of her most enigmatic war poems, “If any sink, assure that this, now standing – ,” she writes, “Tell that the Worst, is easy in a moment – / Dread, but the Whizzing before the Ball – ” (Fr616).¹⁹ Dickinson, too, was fascinated with this space between the expectation of doom and its arrival, particularly in martial circumstances.

The last comparison, though, is particularly striking because it equates “God’s Face” with the “ball” and the “tooth.” Of course, Christians would not imagine that His face is as threatening as the tiger’s, but the sight of that face would still surely be overwhelming. The appearance of this interesting comment on God again reminds the reader of Dickinson. Further, the speaker finds herself in the position of the atheist, the non-believer who is still “waiting, after all” to see the true hero’s “Face.” She hopes that hero ultimately will make his appearance.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not see the face of the true hero before her death, but she witnessed the heroism of two men. The first was King Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont, whose ambition for himself and Italy were a strong force behind the Risorgimento. The second was Giuseppe Garibaldi, who fought for Italy many times, freed Sicily and Naples, but never achieved his goal of wresting Rome away from the pope (Gooch 30-34).²⁰ Though Victor Emmanuel did not rule all of Italy in 1861, he was well on his way to doing so, as is evident in the poem Barrett Browning wrote for him,

“King Victor Emmanuel Entering Florence, April 1860.” Here she refers to him repeatedly as “King of us all,” and she calls the day of his arrival in Florence “our beautiful Italy’s birthday” (17). Much as she describes the heroes of earlier works, Barrett Browning notes Victor Emmanuel’s gravity, but insists that his emotions are not far from the surface.

Grave he rides through the Florence gateway,
 Clenching his face into calm, to immure
 His struggling heart till it half disappears;
 If he relaxed for a moment, straightaway
 He would break out into passionate tears – (25-29)

He seems “the true man” (34), all the more ideal because of that “struggling heart.” Of course, Napoleon III also seemed to fit this mold, so this time Barrett Browning must be more cautious. In the final stanza, she writes that he is “Grave,” as are many “noble men” (57), because “Deeds unfinished will weigh on the doer” (58). Barrett Browning knows that, though she labels him “True King of us all” (64), he has not yet achieved that goal. The poet tempers her enthusiasm by reminding her readers and herself that the job is not yet finished; he must remain true.²¹

Two final poems again remind the reader that hero worship is rarely simple. Garibaldi presents a more complicated case than Victor Emmanuel. As Garibaldi was fighting for Sicily, Cavour feared that his “acts might well provoke Great Power intervention and lose Piedmont the good will she enjoyed” (Gooch 30). Rome was a particularly thorny issue because France, a Catholic nation, sought to keep it for the papacy. Therefore, in order to appease Napoleon III, Victor Emmanuel helped to prevent

Garibaldi from taking back Rome for Italy (Gooch 30-36). Garibaldi was “fiercely democratic and resolutely nationalistic” at a time when “these ideals could not be easily reconciled” (Gooch 37).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was well aware of this complexity. In a letter to her sister-in-law from about June 1860, she writes that

We are all talking and dreaming about Garibaldi just now in great anxiety. Scarcely since the world was a world has there been such a feat of arms. All modern heroes grow pale before him. It was necessary, however, for us all even here, and at Turin just as in Paris, to be ready to disavow him. The whole good of Central Italy was hazarded by it. If it had not been success it would have been an evil beyond failure. The enterprise was forlorn rather than a forlorn hope. The hero, if he had perished, would scarcely have been sure of his epitaph even. (398)

Thus, Garibaldi’s situation is an interesting variation on the theme of hero worship.

Barrett Browning and others who clearly do admire him must betray their hero for the good of Italy, even though they agree with Garibaldi’s aims. In an odd twist, the people would have had to “disavow” their own leader if he had not successfully taken Sicily and Naples.

The poem “Garibaldi,” then, resembles those she writes about Duke Leopold’s and Napoleon III’s betrayals, except this time the hero is betrayed by the people and by Victor Emmanuel. Garibaldi’s “lion-heart” is “sick” (2) because of the “foul trick” (5) played on him. Barrett Browning describes him holding his sword, a teardrop falling on it, his heart broken, musing about man’s injustice to man. But he does not “break his

sword upon before the King” (30), as some speculate he will, but rather he remains faithful to Victor Emmanuel even when the king is disloyal to him. He does not have the “fine brains” (34) to deceive others, he says, as he pledges himself to the king.

“My King, King Victor, I am thine!

So much Nice-dust as what I am

(To make our Italy) must cleave.

Forgive that.” Forward with a sign

He went. (49-53)

He is incapable of surrendering and must continue to try to “make our Italy.” Indeed, Barrett Browning ends the poem with the question, “You’ve seen the telegram? / Palermo’s taken, we believe” (53-54). Though Barrett Browning understands Victor Emmanuel’s position and even sympathizes with it, as is apparent in her letter, she also admires and empathizes with Garibaldi. He speaks the words in this poem that the poet herself believes; he prays that “men’s wisdom is not craft; / Men’s greatness, not a selfish greed” (13-14). Her attitude toward Garibaldi is as complicated as the political and military situation surrounding him.

Finally, Barrett Browning writes “Died. . .,” an unusual elegy for Cavour, the man who worked tirelessly behind the scenes for years to secure Italy’s independence.²² The poem actually describes a conversation between the speaker and someone who does not share her high opinion of Cavour. The poem also is written as she is reading his obituary, that piece of writing which lays out a person’s life in black and white. The knowledge of Cavour’s death brings both the speaker’s “praise” for him and her friend’s “blame” (2) to an abrupt halt. There is nothing left to say but

Dead. Man's "I was" by God's "I am" –

All hero-worship comes to that.

High heart, high thought, high fame, as flat

As a gravestone. Bring your Jacet jam –

The epitaph's an epigram. (21-25)

In the poem's final lines, the speaker warns,

Be abstinent in praise and blame.

The man's still mortal, who stands first,

And mortal only, if last and worst.

Then slowly lift so frail a fame,

Or softly drop so poor a shame. (36-40)

Barrett Browning does not refrain from commenting on leaders such as Garibaldi and Cavour, but here her speaker calls for controlling the impulse to criticize. We are all mortal no matter what our station in life. Dickinson affirms this sentiment in several of her poems, including "Color – Caste – Denomination –," her most obvious comment on race. There, "Death's large – Democratic fingers / Rub away the Brand –" and its "diviner Classifying" does not know the distinction men draw on earth (Fr836). And in a line that sounds even more like Barrett Browning, Dickinson writes "Not any higher stands the Grave / For Heroes than for Men –" (Fr1214).

This speaker asks, "Dust's his natural place? / He'll let the flies buzz round his face / And, though you slander, not protest?" (27-29). Of course the answer to those questions is yes. Just as Garibaldi calls himself "So much Nice-dust," Cavour has returned to his "natural place." In "It feels a shame to be Alive –", one of Dickinson's

poems about survivor's guilt, the speaker muses, "One envies the Distinguished Dust / Permitted – such a Head –" (Fr524). Even someone as "Distinguished" as Cavour will become dust, indistinguishable from other dust. Finally, we have heard that fly buzzing in Aurora Leigh and in Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –" (Fr591), signifying doubt. Here perhaps one finds less doubt; Cavour will no longer brush those flies away, just as he will not object to any "slander."

Here, as Barrett Browning's own life is about to end, she reminds her readers of what she has known all along about the nature of "All hero-worship." She also reminds those who form strong opinions about heroes that both they and their "carping" (27) will meet the same end as Cavour. As much as Elizabeth Barrett Browning passionately wrestles with the politics and wars of the Italian Risorgimento, and most notably with the leaders who drove it, she never loses sight of that fact that it all will be erased by "God's 'I am.'" Though it is informed by God's word, her complicated struggle is merely mortal.

An English Poet Speaks for Italy: Barrett Browning's "jarring of the national sentiment"

In December of 1859, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes to Mrs. Martin from Rome that some friends "upbraid me with having put myself out of my 'natural place'" (358). She then wonders, "What is one's natural place?" and, after noting that it often lies "within the crust of all manner of prejudices," concludes:

Circumstances, the force of natural things, have brought me here and kept me; it is my natural place. And, intellectually speaking, having grown to a certain point by help of certain opportunities, my way of regarding the

world is also natural to me, my opinions are the natural deductions of my mind [. . .] Still I do beg to say both to you and to others accusing that Italy is not my “adopted country.” I love Italy, but I love France, too, and certainly I love England. (358)

She then restates the point she makes in the preface to Poems before Congress that we should identify ourselves primarily by our principles, not by our nationality. Her beliefs cross all borders.

Clearly, Barrett Browning was no longer English in quite the same way she was before she began living in and identifying with Italy. Yet, as this letter explains, she cannot transfer completely her allegiance from England to Italy. This mixed identity complicates her role as a poet, and particularly as a political poet whose aim is to persuade. When it comes to England, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is both an insider and an outsider; she is one who understands England as a native but now sees it with new eyes. She is in a kind of exile, but for personal rather than political reasons. Yet the politics of England so infuriate her that she often writes like a public figure who has been banished from the land of her birth. Her status as an English woman actually allows her to criticize England in a way that no foreigner could, because her attack is intimate and very personal. She hardly can believe that England can look on her beloved Italy with so little favor – that a land that offers considerable freedom could refuse to help Italy gain its freedom. On one hand, Barrett Browning’s perspective allows her to assess the situation differently than most English or Italians can; on the other hand, her love for Italy turns every aggressive or indifferent act of England into a bitter betrayal, perhaps not always fairly. There is no doubt that nationality plays a significant and fascinating role in Barrett

Browning's Risorgimento poetry. She carefully walks the line between Italian partisan, alternately admonishing and encouraging the people of that nation, and English exile doing the same to the English. Her goal in both cases is to save Italy, and Barrett Browning exercises every option available to her to further that cause.

Surveying Victorian patriotic poetry, Tricia Lootens observes that "as a political state, it [Italy] would provide inspiration for reimagining England and Englishness" (260). Similarly, in The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination, Maura O'Connor points out that the fascination with saving Italy was part of an impulse to save England. O'Connor explains that her goal is

to show how influential the romance of Italy was in the project of imagining a bourgeois, liberal, and, above all, English social order during a critical historical period when class society was being reconfigured and the parameters of national identity were being renegotiated in Britain (1).

She notes that "No place on the European continent has captivated the English imagination so completely and for so long as the Italian peninsula" (13), and interest in it and ideas about it reflect feelings about what it is to be English.²³ According to Lootens, "for no other poet perhaps did the Risorgimento unite deeper, and more immediate concerns" (261), and these concerns were both personal and political.

After marrying Robert Browning, of course, Elizabeth Barrett Browning "lived in ambivalent, partially self-imposed exile in Italy; and as Barrett Browning's later poetry gained in political explicitness, her criticisms of British policies became increasingly harsh" (Lootens 260-261). Barrett Browning's romance with Italy, coinciding with her

romance with Robert, was very much about not only her view of England but also her desire to change its view of the world.

A poet with such lofty goals surely must also believe that the poet plays an essential role in history. Barrett Browning believed a poet can change the course of history with her words, and, for Barrett Browning, “no cause was dearer [. . .] than that of peoples oppressed by foreign domination” (Hayter 127). Alethea Hayter argues that “The figure of the hero-poet, martyred in the cause of freedom, combined all Mrs. Browning’s dearest ideals” (127). Thus, the theme Katherine Montwieler identifies for Poems before Congress is that of all Barrett Browning’s political poetry: “the ability, right, and obligation of women writers to speak out against miscarriages of justice” (108), and “to possess and to utter political opinions” (109). Esther Schor reads Casa Guidi Windows similarly, arguing that “Barrett Browning addresses an urgent need to claim political agency [. . .] for herself as a poet” and “does so by meditating on the resonance between poem making and nation making” (309). She further posits that “the poet’s agency lies not in her [political] participation [. . .] but rather in her act of vision and vehement revision” (310), assigning to the poet “radical powers of prophecy” (319). Both critics note that Barrett Browning asserted the power of the poet but recognized that that power was not unlimited. The poet is still part of the audience, but her powers and observation and language can profoundly influence those who act on the political stage.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s unique relationship with her two nations has considerable bearing upon the identity of the audience she targets with her political poetry. Schor, again referring to Casa Guidi Windows, explains that “The Italians are but one of her audiences; her other one is middlebrow Victorian England, whom the poet

exhorts to take up the Italian cause.” Barrett Browning “makes a subtle appeal to mid-Victorian Britain between the two Reform Bills by figuring the anti-imperialist Italian cause as itself a reformist enterprise” (306). One could argue, however, that England is not merely “one of her audiences,” but rather the primary audience for Casa Guidi Windows, Poems before Congress, and the handful of Risorgimento poems that were included in Last Poems. Barrett Browning often seemed to write for an audience familiar with Italy, but not nearly as knowledgeable about it as she was – that is, for the informed and worldly English citizen. That is not to say that she never wrote for the purpose of informing or influencing Italians or even citizens and leaders of other nations. She was, however, a prominent English poet who knew that the vast majority of her readers came from her native land. Her political poems also contain personal reflections, but her thoughts and feelings always serve as an example of how other principled and particularly how other Christian Englishmen and women should think and feel themselves. Barrett Browning “wrote as a Christian female patriotic poet” (Lootens 260).

It is instructive in considering Barrett Browning’s identity as a poet to return to her protestation in the preface to Casa Guidi Windows that no “exposition of political philosophy is attempted” in that poem. Not only does she explain her “philosophy” of the hero, but she expounds upon the moral framework that will lead England and other nations to act righteously and responsibly toward Italy. The first time she addresses England, it is in the context of her argument for a nonviolent struggle. Early in her advocacy for Italian causes, she tries to steer the nations of the world away from war. As Hayter notes, she wanted England to “abandon all wars of aggression and reign by example, not by force” (128). Her first appeal specifically to England follows:

And so with wide embrace, my England, seek
 To stifle the bad heat and flickerings
 Of this world's false and nearly expended fire!
 Draw palpitating arrows to the wood,
 And twang abroad thy high hopes and thy higher
 Resolves, from that most virtuous altitude!
 Till nations shall unconsciously aspire
 By looking up to thee, and learn that good
 And glory are not different. Announce law
 By freedom; exalt chivalry by peace;
 Instruct how clear calm eyes can overawe,
 And how pure hands, stretched simply to release
 A bond-slave, will not need a sword to draw
 To be held dreadful. O my England, cease
 Thy purple with no alien agonies,
 No struggles toward encroachment, no vile war!
 Disband thy captains, change thy victories,
 Be henceforth prosperous as the angels are,
 Helping, not humbling. (I, 707-725)

This earliest address to England is interesting because it is different in both nature and force than later demands. Here Barrett Browning wants England to extinguish the "world's false" flames, and shoot arrows of "hope" out into the world. Those arrows are a very masculine and sexual image, as if England must shoot its moral arrows and spread

its seeds of principle around the globe. She describes a more moral imperialism here. The idea that “good / And glory are not different” is one she will espouse again and again, but at this point the “good” is synonymous with peace and purity. England must act like the “angels” in order to free the “bond-slaves[s]” in places such as Italy.

Later in Part I, Barrett Browning appeals directly to the rest of the world to help Italy, but for reasons that have nothing to do with altruism. “Help, lands of Europe! for, if Austria fight, / The drums will bar your slumber” (I, 1104-1105), she writes, thus reminding them to consider their own self-interest rather than Italy’s well-being, a practical and worldly argument. She implies that “if Austria fight,” it may disturb the peace of more of its neighbors than just Italy. But Barrett Browning does not explain that argument any further, nor does she remind the world community to do the right thing. Rather, she asks, “Had ye curled / The laurel for your thousand artists’ brows, / If these Italian hands had planted none?” (I, 1105-1107), and then expands that argument quite a bit. She explains how nations like France and England would have considerably fewer artistic achievements were it not for Italy, and thus they owe Italy this small favor. This perhaps is the argument of the artist and even the poet, but it is certainly not the argument of the Christian poet-prophet, of the “maker” of the world around her, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning generally envisioned herself.

The much more common attitude toward England and its politics surfaces in Part II and remains prominent in her poetry until the end of her career. Suddenly, a peaceful, distant example of righteous freedom is not what she thinks Italy needs. The situation is so dire that it requires direct intervention, not only diplomatic but also most likely military. Non-violent opposition no longer seems like a viable option. According to

Hayter, “peace should not simply be a safe ignoble calm, preserved for the sake of trade and prosperity” (128). And in Barrett Browning’s words:

A cry is up in England, which doth ring
 The hollow world through, that for ends of trade
 And virtue and God’s better worshipping,
 We henceforth should exalt the name of Peace
 And leave those rusty wars that eat the soul (II, 373-377)

These lines begin the most powerful section of Casa Guidi Windows. Barrett Browning admits, “I, too, have loved peace” (II, 379), but not that peace that endures while

the slave’s despair
 Has dulled his helpless miserable brain
 And left him blank beneath the freeman’s whip
 To sing and laugh out idiocies of pain. (II, 393-396)

The “blank” here reminds the reader of the soldier who trudges “From Blank to Blank – ” and is “indifferent” to his fate (Fr484), and even more of the “Chips of Blank – in Boyish Eyes – ” on the battlefield (Fr704) in Dickinson’s poems. For the slave, soldier, or for an oppressed people, “blank” is an appropriate description. On behalf of “Annihilated Poland, stifled Rome, / Dazed Naples, Hungary fainting ’neath the thong” (II, 416), she cries out for “peace which is no counterfeit!” (II, 424) “I would have / Rather the raking of the guns across / The world” (II, 400-401), she writes, than “peace which is not fellowship / And which includes not mercy” (II, 399-400), which “admits / Of outside anguish while it keeps at home” (II, 411-412). Now that she has changed her mind about peace, she believes that England must too. Though she may be in physical exile from

England, her intellectual and emotional bond with that nation is still quite strong. She and England should be of one mind; she wants to be a voice for the land of her birth.

That does not mean, however, that she will hesitate to assail it for its “Fair-going” ways (II, 578). Elizabeth Barrett Browning is not pleased with “Imperial England” (II, 578) with its focus on material objects rather than people. Hayter calls her “impartial voice” a “salutary pinprick” to England which was “ballooning up into prosperity and self-satisfaction” (135). Barrett Browning, with much irony, describes the nations of the world displaying their impressive commodities at the Crystal Palace exhibition and then asks, “Have you nothing best, / Which generous souls may perfect and present, / And He shall thank the givers for?” (II, 632-634) She mentions various scourges that plague humanity and then asks, “Hast thou found / No remedy, my England, for such woes?” (II, 640-641) Barrett Browning clearly understands that “great nations have great shames,” (II, 648), but she believes that her words can shame them into acting more nobly.

O gracious nations, give some ear to me!
 You all go to your Fair, and I am one
 Who at the roadside of humanity
 Beseech your alms, – God’s justice to be done.
 So, prosper! (II, 652-656)

The speaker at first sounds hopeless, but one must listen carefully to her words. She is very much in command, though she begs for “alms” by the “roadside.” Her words are powerful and righteous, and she expects that nations eventually will listen. “Poets are soothsayers still” (II, 739), she asserts, and so someone surely will heed her warning.

Introducing a motif that appears in later Risorgimento poems, Barrett Browning considers the question of her son Pen's nationality at the close of Casa Guidi Windows. She calls him "my own young Florentine" (II, 743), which he literally was since he was born in Casa Guidi. Pen, though, is not Italian, and Barrett Browning soon points out his "brave blue English eyes" (II, 747). Pen is an embodiment of both Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning's hybrid nationality. He symbolizes the conflicts with which his mother wrestled when she considered the politics of Italy and England. Therefore, she asks this "blue-eyed prophet" (II, 757), to guide her with his innocence and his optimism at this most difficult time in Italy's history. "Such cheer I gather from thy smiling, Sweet!" she writes, adding "The self-same cherub-faces which emboss / The Vail, and lean inward to the Mercy-seat" (II, 781-783).

The cautiously optimistic note she strikes at the end of Casa Guidi Windows builds toward the angry crescendo of Poems before Congress in 1860. Its preface, as Montwieler affirms, is meant to provoke her English readers. She anticipates their criticism because their nation is the object of so much of her own ire. In the very first paragraph of the preface, she writes,

if the verses should appear to English readers too pungently rendered to admit of a patriotic respect to the English sense of things, I will not excuse myself on such grounds, nor on the grounds of my attachment to the Italian people and my admiration of their heroic constancy and union. What I have written has simply been written because I love truth and justice quand même [. . .] (314)

This passage is interesting because it implies that the English will be displeased not only with the content of the poetry but also with its style. She understands the “English sense of things,” and that she will offend it. Refusing to accept that “patriotism means flattery of one’s nation in every case” (314), Barrett Browning believes nations must consider if their actions, or lack thereof, “will hurt a people farther off” (315). Before the reader has perused even a single poem, she chides England for its “non-intervention,” as she yearns for “an English statesman [. . .] with a heart too large for England” (315). Only “then shall the nation be glorious” (315), and poets will not have to “justify [. . .] so little jarring of the national sentiment” (316). Again, this is the opinion she expresses in the second part of Casa Guidi Windows; but now, with a little help from Napoleon III, Italy’s future looks a bit brighter. It is not so hopeful, though, that England is released from its responsibility. Barrett Browning, acting as the conscience of her nation from afar, intends to hold it accountable.

She does so in the poems that follow. “Napoleon III. in Italy” praises the French emperor for his intervention in Italian affairs and does more than imply that England should do the same. The poet is at the height of her powers here, employing the “voice and verse, / Which God set in me to acclaim and sing” (48-49) to commend France and encourage the rest of the world. Julia Markus explains that Barrett Browning “believed poetry was a form of action” (32), and this poem is one of her most forceful acts. Barrett Browning anoints Napoleon III with “the poet’s chrism” (82) and with the words, “An English poet warns thee to maintain / God’s word, not England’s” (84-85). Lines such as these bolster the argument that this poem is nearly as much about what England did not do as what France did. It is the shadow theme lurking here. Napoleon III “Finds not his

country in quarrels / Only to find her in trade, –” (367-368). “Believing a nation may act / Unselfishly” (374-375) rather than “for a cause of finance” (377), Barrett Browning, speaking for Napoleon III, skewers the England of the Crystal Palace. She expects more from her country than commercial fairs and glorious shopping.

Similarly, in “A Tale of Villafranca,” Barrett Browning blames the rest of the world, including England, for this most unsatisfactory “peace.” France’s intervention “threatens plainly the great Powers’ (45), who want to protect their right “to sell a race, or buy, / Protect and pillage, occupy,” (33-34). In this poem, as in Casa Guidi Windows, Pen is a symbol of the mixture of different peoples. If we all could know what it is like to be of a different race or nationality, Barrett Browning argues, the world would be a better place.

They say your eyes, my Florentine,
 Are English: it may be.
 And yet I’ve marked as blue a pair
 Following the doves across the square
 At Venice by the sea. (73-7)

Pen is, again, the Florentine with the English eyes, but even those eyes are not so different than the Italians’. Barrett Browning is simply reminding her readers that we are all fellow human beings and ought to act as such.

The poet develops that idea more fully in the penultimate poem in the volume, “Italy and the World.” What Elizabeth Barrett Browning seeks here is

no more England or France!
 But one confederate brotherhood planting

One flag only, to mark the advance,
 Onward and upward, of all humanity. (47-50)

She wants all the nations of the world to unite in this effort. She singles out England for criticism, however, because she is disappointed that it is not leading the “advance.”

Though she does not mention its name, she has England in mind when she writes

For civilization perfected
 Is fully developed Christianity.
 “Measure the frontier,” shall it be said,
 “Count the ships,” in national vanity?
 – Count the nation’s heart-beats sooner. (51-55)

Certainly, nations other than Great Britain possess large empires and impressive navies, but England is first among them. Since England is abdicating its responsibilities, Barrett Browning calls on Italy to “Lead and teach us” (81). And she attacks England directly later in the poem, when she refers to “underhand diplomatical tricks” (89), many of which she believes England perpetrated against Italy.²⁴ She also writes that “Viewing England o’er Alp and sea. / I loved her more in her ancient fashion” (97-98) since now England refuses to help its neighbor. Barrett Browning believes that England’s “patriotisms” (126) are those of the “egotist” (118), while they should be those of the “Christian nation” whose motto is the “last shall be first while the first shall be last” (139). Her job as a poet of conscience is to address this wrong.

In Last Poems, Elizabeth Barrett Browning tackles this theme one more time, and in her last poem on England’s involvement with Italy, she is perhaps most enraged. She follows the title “Summing up in Italy” with the words “(Inscribed to Intelligent Publics

out of It),” thus specifically addressing her “intelligent” English readers. In the body of the poem, she refers to a “speech in the Commons” (9) in which Parliament learned of the abysmal conditions of Italians jailed by the Austrians, the report of which deeply moved many English, according to Porter and Clarke (370). She also mentions “The official despatch, which commits you / From stamping out groans with your heel” (11-12), which Porter and Clarke explain is a reference to a communication between an English diplomat in Vienna and one at home in which he voiced opposition to Piedmont’s fight for freedom (371). With biting sarcasm, she writes that England is quick to commend acts of bravery, “But saviors of nations! – ’tis pretty, / And doubtful; they may be so wicked:” (23-24). She simply cannot believe that the English politicians do not trust Napoleon III, Cavour, King Victor Emmanuel, and others struggling to free Italy. And she sums up her own poem with this barb aimed at both the leaders and the literary press of her native land:

(To sum up as thoughtful reviewers),
 The moral of every great deed is –
 The virtue of slandering the doers. (70-72)

This statement applies to both the English lords who “slander” men like Garibaldi and, of course, the “thoughtful” critics who slander Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Like the Italian patriots she so admires, Barrett Browning attempts to perform a “great deed” by supporting Italy and encouraging other nations, particularly Great Britain, to do the same. Both she and they encounter considerable resistance, but that does not diminish the attempt.

In the very last poem in her last volume, Barrett Browning creates a dialogue between the North and the South in which she lists the attributes of each. The poem actually commemorates Hans Christian Andersen's 1861 visit to Rome, and he appears in the poem after the South asks for a "seer" (26), "For a poet's tongue of baptismal flame, / To call the tree or the flower by its name!" (28-29). This is her definition of a poet. By seeing clearly, the poet can offer an insightful interpretation of the world around her. But Barrett Browning does not see as others do, because she is, as she calls Charles Albert in Casa Guidi Windows, an "exiled patriot" (II, 705). This complicates her position; she is not Italian, nor is she quite as English as she once was. But her patriotism and her passion for Italy inform the blistering attack on English policy in her Risorgimento poems. She wants England to look at Italy as she does – like a citizen of the world.

Woman, "Mother and Poet," and Patriot: Gender in Barrett Browning's Risorgimento

The first words Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes about the Risorgimento in the preface to Casa Guidi Windows call attention to her gender. Every theme in this poetry is affected by her identity as a woman poet. She knows, for example, that reviewers and readers will attribute her hero-worship to her gender; in the advertisement to Casa Guidi Windows, she confesses that she "believed, like a woman, some royal oaths" (249). But this admission seems aimed at placating her audience, since she certainly does not retreat from her search for a hero in her later poetry. As she writes more and more about Italy, she does not hesitate to claim for herself a vital role in shaping the future of a nation. Perhaps most audacious is the criticism she aims at England in an attempt to change its

policy toward Italy. Though she watches the Risorgimento unfold outside her window, separated from the action by the glass and also by her nationality and gender, she chooses to engage with history and to participate in it as fully as she can.²⁵

Barrett Browning provides much more than an example of one woman poet's grasp of the events which shape her world, however. She specifically targets the intersection between war and gender in her poetry. She chooses to explore the roles that women can play in politics and war through the characters who appear in her works. She also wrestles with gender issues in her portrayal of Italy, a nation consistently compared to a beautiful but doomed woman. Finally, Barrett Browning became a mother very near the time she began writing about Italian politics, and as she grows into that role, she and her child become characters in the Risorgimento poems. Just as Elizabeth Barrett Browning the woman poet is a palpable presence in her work, so too is Barrett Browning the mother. That is not to say, however, that every speaker and mother in these poems is Barrett Browning and every child Pen, but the poet's life does influence her artistic choices. Her treatment of gender begins in Casa Guidi Windows and continues through a number of poems in Poems before Congress and Last Poems. But it is the final poem she writes on the subject, "Mother and Poet," which is the key to her war canon. In it, Barrett Browning insistently asks if a woman can be a poet, a patriot, and a mother, all at once. Her answers in "Mother and Poet" as well as in earlier poems about women and war are much more radical and problematic than even her most political and feminist critics may suspect.

Barrett Browning highlights her own gender and its effect on her writing in the advertisement to Casa Guidi Windows, but in the body of that poem her references to it

are much more oblique. The most significant female character in the poem is Italy itself, a country which has been figured as feminine throughout literary history. Moers asserts that “In the history of Victorian Italophilia no name is more prominent than that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning” and that Barrett Browning’s “ideas about Italy as the place for a woman of genius” influenced her decision to live there (201). The “most important answer” to the question “Why Italy for women?” is found in Madame de Stael’s Corinne, or Italy, which establishes Italy as the place where women can be free both socially and artistically (Moers 201). Thus, what Moers identifies as the “myth of Corinne,” or “the fantasy of the performing heroine” (174) who is “crowned with the laurel wreaths of genius” (179), greatly influenced Barrett Browning and other women writers.²⁶ The only actual women in Casa Guidi Windows, however, are Garibaldi’s wife Anita, who makes a brief appearance near the very end, and Barrett Browning herself, both as a poet and a mother. At first, all three of these feminine figures seem helpless: Italy is the nation that cannot save itself; Anita Garibaldi is the wife who dies, pregnant, fleeing Austrian troops with her husband; and Barrett Browning is the poet who only can survey the scene through her window with her baby son. All three, however, begin to rise from their status as passive victim or mere bystander to take a more active role in the Risorgimento, and to encourage others to do so as well.

Indeed, the second stanza of the poem identifies the feminine stereotypes with which Italy has been associated in order to expose the damage such images have caused. Barrett Browning writes about how poets in the past have called Italy

childless among mothers,

Widow of empires, ay, and scarce refrained

Cursing her beauty to her face, as brothers
 Might a shamed sister's, – “Had she been less fair
 She were less wretched;” (I, 22-26)

Italy has been associated with the lonely, barren woman, the “childless” mother or the widow, since she cannot give birth to her own freedom, but her seductiveness also draws comparisons to the fallen woman. Surely, it is her own fault that she is in such a deplorable position, for everyone wants to possess her. But Barrett Browning realizes that this is merely “Some personating Image wherein woe / Was wrapt in beauty from offending much” (I, 30-31); such impressions of Italy are “void,” as “are all images / Men set between themselves and actual wrong” (I, 43-44). Clearly,

'tis easier to gaze long

On mournful masks and sad effigies

Than on real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong. (I, 46-48)

Barrett Browning asks those who claim to care for Italy to help that country, but she also implores Italy to look to her citizens, her “living sons” (I, 198) to save her, so Italy is no longer just “the poet’s pensioner” (I, 207). This poet wants to play a part in rescuing Italy, but Barrett Browning recognizes that Italy ultimately must come to her own rescue. She cannot continue to languish in the very limited roles assigned to her. Helen M. Cooper argues that the young boy singing of “libertà” is Barrett Browning’s new symbol for the nation (130), and Gilbert contends that Barrett Browning “imagines Italy ultimately redeemed by the voices and visions of mothers and children” (143). There is truth in both of these arguments, but a poet’s argument is often more complex than the critics’. Barrett Browning understands that Italy has many identities, and that it will only

become a coherent political entity through the commitment of men, women, and even children both within and outside its borders.

Barrett Browning is certainly among those committed to the Risorgimento, but she is also committed to her personal maternity, a role she emphasizes in the second part of Casa Guidi Windows. In the passage quoted near the end of the discussion of hero-worship, she explains that because she “felt my own child’s coming life before” (II, 96), she could not believe that Leopold, a father of small children, could betray the people whom he is obligated to protect. Again, she argues here that because of her gender, and because of the unique experience of motherhood, she does not perceive people and events as men do. Barrett Browning does not specifically state that she has learned from earlier misjudgments, but clearly she takes and will continue to take her own biases into account when she forms and analyzes her opinions. She is telling her readers in this passage that she embodies a new kind of political poet – a woman poet who can knit the political and personal together in the fabric of a new kind of poem.

Her newborn eventually takes his place at the center of her consciousness, but not to the exclusion of her other interests. This is apparent in an episode she describes late in the poem. Her baby’s nurse informs her that the Austrians are marching into Florence with the Duke: “‘Be still,’” I answered, ‘do not wake the child!’” (II, 293), adding that he should “sleep on, while he may, / Through the world’s baseness” (II, 296-297). However, she then tells the reader exactly what those Austrians look like and how much their arrival upsets her. While loudly proclaiming the “faint heart of my womanhood” (II, 406), she belies those words by cajoling and cursing as vigorously as any male poet; she would “Rather the raking of the guns across / The world” (II, 401-402) than a peace

that leaves a people suffering. Finally, when she feels dejected by Italy's continuing difficulties, she can find solace in looking at her son. "Such cheer I gather from thy smiling, Sweet!" (II, 781), she writes to him at the end of the poem, affirming Pen's place in her world view.

But another mother appears very briefly in Casa Guidi Windows, and she hints at an even more complex role for women in war and politics. She is Anita Garibaldi, who, though pregnant, unexpectedly joined her husband as he is fighting to save the newly-established Roman Republic in 1849 (Holt 172). George Martin notes that Anita, whom Garibaldi met in Brazil, was called an "Amazon" because of her "extraordinary physical stamina" (252), and he relates the story that she was once escaped from the Brazilian army by "swimming rivers in flood, crossing the desert without food and galloping through hostile pickets" for four days until finally returning her husband (254). In Rome, however, she joined him for the last time. Garibaldi and his men were forced to flee the city, heading north toward Venice. They tried to flee by sea, but were attacked and forced to return to shore. Near Ravenna, they were taken from house to house "through the patriotic underground" until Anita "died in Garibaldi's arms as he carried her upstairs" in one of the hideouts (Martin 365). Barrett Browning writes movingly about the sacrifice of this woman

who, at her husband's side, in scorn,
 Outfaced the whistling shot and hissing waves,
 Until she felt her little babe unborn
 Recoil, within her, from the violent staves
 And bloodhounds of the world, – at which, her life

Dropt inwards from her eyes and followed it
 Beyond the hunters. (II, 678-685)

This woman literally turns her face toward the “bloodhounds” pursuing her, though she is six months pregnant. Barrett Browning admires her bravery, but her death is agonizing.

Perhaps ere dying thus,
 She looked up in his face (which never stirred
 From its clenched anguish) as to make excuse
 For leaving him for his, if so she erred.

He well remembers that she could not choose. (II, 689-693)

The phrase “leaving him for his” is confusing; she is leaving him for the next world and perhaps she is leaving him because of his fight. But fighting seems to have been an integral part of who she was, as was true of Garibaldi. Perhaps this is why “she could not choose.” Leigh Coral Harris argues that here “‘Italy enchained’ gives way to a real revolutionary woman on the battlefield,” but that “the haunting description of her experiencing the death of her fetus [. . .] moderates our admiration [. . .] because we recognize the maternal price of Italy’s freedom” (122).²⁷ Barrett Browning is describing a new kind of female hero in this passage, but to become a hero Anita pays a high price. The death of the mother and child is painful but necessary.²⁸ In “Mother and Poet,” Barrett Browning examines a similar situation in much more detail and with even greater complexity.

Anita Garibaldi, despite some attempt on Barrett Browning’s part to sentimentalize her, is a complex character whose fate is distressing, a destabilizing presence in Casa Guidi Windows. The women who appear in Poems before Congress are

less so, though they subtly point toward the more complex women of Last Poems. Female characters are prominent in two poems, “The Dance” and “A Court Lady.” The first poem tells the story of a group of “Florence Beauties” (7), the “noblest” (26) of whom asks a group of French soldiers to dance with them. This woman wishes to honor them for their service to Italy, and Barrett Browning reports that “The request / Was gravely apprehended as addressed” (29-30). Indeed, “it might have been a Mass, and not a dance” (40), when these “daughters of our princes” (38) joined the “gallant sons of France” (39). Barrett Browning portrays the dance in both solemn and sentimental terms. Finally,

With burst of overflowing

Feeling – husband, brothers, Florence’s male youth,

Turned, and kissed the martial strangers mouth to mouth. (47-50)

Then, those observing this spectacle feel as though “God had spoken somewhere since the morning, / That men were somehow brothers” (58-59). The women in this poem exercise a very interesting sort of power. At first, they merely mediate between the men of Italy and France, but the act of mediation they perform is quite significant in the eyes of the poet. Because these women reach out to the French, who not only are of a different nationality but also of a different class, the men are able to acknowledge the depth of their gratitude toward those soldiers. These women seem merely to prompt the men to express their emotion. There is also an obvious homoerotic element in the poem that places the women in the position of mediating between the men sexually. The bond between the Italians and French, however, serves a vital political function. Barrett Browning, then, employs female sentiment to advance typically male politics. As

Montwieler observes, “The poem [. . .] shows the power of women’s words even while it portrays the boundaries of women’s actions” (121); men must actually fight this war.

Similarly, “A Court Lady” casts a woman in the roles she most often plays during wartime, comforter and nurse. In her letters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning addresses Florence Nightingale and her vocation, concluding that it is not an employment that will advance the cause of women’s rights.²⁹ There is no hint of that opinion in this particular poem, however, which begins with a description of the ideal woman. She is royal and resplendent in her “silken robe” (8) and jewels, and she is “more true as woman and wife, / Larger in judgment and instinct, prouder in manners and life” (5-6) than any other woman as well. Arriving at a hospital, she proceeds to speak kind and profound words to wounded men from various regions of Italy and France. Perhaps this woman represents the Italy that is to come, since Barrett Browning writes that she “smiled like Italy” (20) upon one of these dying soldiers. “A Court Lady” is definitely a sentimental work that serves the political purpose of allowing Barrett Browning to restate her opinions about the plight of Italy’s various regions. But, as Montwieler notes, women “can flirt or mother or comfort – and each of these gestures can be as politicized as their speakers wish them to be” (124). This “Court Lady” certainly does make political statements. The poem also briefly mentions a different role played by a woman during wartime, one central to “Mother and Poet.” When the lady reaches the bed of the Tuscan soldier, she speaks of his mother standing “in the piazza, searching the List of the slain” (32). The lady, who is “Kind as a mother herself” (33) blesses her, but that mother’s pain seems too overwhelming a subject to be contained in this particular poem. Barrett Browning would confront that later.

Women figure prominently in a number of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Last Poems as well. In "The King's Gift" and "Nature's Remorses," they are fairly one-dimensional.³⁰ Two other poems, dramatic monologues spoken by strong female characters, reveal a more complex relationship between women, war, and politics. "Parting Lovers" and "Mother and Poet" deal directly with the sorrow women must bear in time of war and the difficulty of reconciling one's patriotism with that pain. In "Mother and Poet," the relationship is complicated even further because the patriotic woman in question is also a patriotic poet, therefore openly engaging with politics. The first poem is a prelude to the second, and the second is the grand finale of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's exploration of gender, poetry, and politics.

"Parting Lovers" tells the story of a woman who feels she must tell Giulio, the man she has been admiring, that she loves him because he is about to march into battle. This leads her to muse that "daughters give up more than sons" (52) in wartime. She observes that since the fighting began

Many a plighted maid and wife
 And mother, who can say since then
 "My country," – cannot say through life
 "My son," "my spouse," "my flower of men,"
 And not weep dumb again. (46-50)

This is clearly a very difficult trade to make – my "country" for my son or husband. It will cause her "To hear the door-latch stir and clink / Yet no more you!" (59-60). That is a startling image, and the speaker is rightly afraid she will do more than imagine it. She exclaims,

Dear God! when Italy is one,
 Complete, content from bound to bound,
 Suppose, for my share, earth's undone
 By one grave in't! – as one small wound
 Will kill a man, 'tis found. (61-65)

Yet despite her anger and fear, she gives her lover to Italy.

And thus, of noble Italy
 We'll both be worthy! Let her show
 The future how we made her free,
 Not sparing life . . . nor Giulio,
 Nor this . . . this heartbreak! Go. (71-75)

The “heartbreak,” however, lies at the heart of the poem. The speaker wants to prove her patriotism, that she is “worthy” of a free Italy, but her pain may overshadow the nobility of the sacrifice. Barrett Browning explores that pain more fully in “Mother and Poet,” questioning how high a price one should pay for one’s country. Men pay with their lives, but women pay with the rest of their lives, a fact that troubles the speaker and the poet.

Lauro Savio, the speaker of “Mother and Poet,” pays a very high price for Italy’s freedom – the lives of both her sons. Barrett Browning does not create a fictional grieving mother for her dramatic monologue in this case. Savio was a patriotic poet from Turin who, according to Porter and Clarke, lost one son at the battle of Gaeta in the south of Italy and the other at the Neapolitan stronghold of Ancona (380). She is not the typical matriarch. Savio is a powerful, political woman who participates in war as both a mother and poet, as the title indicates. And she has played a particularly crucial role in the

affairs of her fledging nation because she is a singer of war songs. Despite Savio's powerful position, "Mother and Poet" at first may appear stereotypical in its treatment of women and war, since she is a mother grieving over the loss of her sons. She may seem to resemble the epic mothers whom Cooper, Munich, and Squier describe, engendering war by supplying the army with patriotic men only to revert to the classic position of peace-loving woman.

Indeed, this is how Laura Savio has been read by most critics. In her book-length study of Barrett Browning, Cooper argues that "Mother and Poet" represents Barrett Browning's reexamination of the pro-war stance she took in earlier works such as Casa Guidi Windows. She compares Savio unfavorably to Anita Garibaldi, who fights alongside her husband and dies as a result of that choice; for Cooper, Savio does not meet that standard (143). Dorothy Mermin, too, argues that the poem "casts a harsh revisionary light on the incitements to political ardor which make up so much of Barrett Browning's later works" (238). Mermin contends that after witnessing the effects of love and loyalty for country, Savio, "is sick of sacrifice, patriotism, and poetry: having seen the consequences of her song, she will sing no longer" (238). The position Savio actually states in the poem, however, is not nearly so extreme. Deborah Phelps presents an opposing view, arguing that Savio sees her sons merely as means to an end, a vehicle for achieving an independent Italy. She views the poem as a "monologue of betrayal," and more an expression of "the patriot's political disillusionment rather than [. . .] of maternal loss" (231). This conclusion, however, is refuted by the language of the poem, which focuses heavily on Laura Savio's almost unbearable pain upon learning that her sons have been killed. Cooper, Munich, and Squier, like Phelps, argue that Barrett Browning

generally recounts “the canonical war story” as the “the poet-mother arming her warrior sons” (15), and they feel she is too quick to send men into battles that women would themselves refuse to fight. But they ultimately assess “Mother and Poet” in the same way most of their fellow critics do, as a rejection of woman as advocate for war. Lootens is a notable exception, pointing out that Savio, even after her sons die, “still speaks with a patriotic voice” (263).

Again, the poem is not so clear-cut. Laura Savio is a powerful and courageous woman who is deeply involved in the affairs of her nation and is probably herself more than willing to die for its survival. The poem is curiously devoid of a father; it focuses completely on the strength of the family matriarch. Sandra Gilbert rightly places Savio in the category of women who “seem almost to propose an ontology of female power” (211), and she identifies Savio as a symbol of the insurrection against Austria. Yet she is more than an emblem of the uprising – she is also a participant, as both a mother and poet.

As “Mother and Poet” opens, however, the reader learns that Savio has lost the first designation, and thus she is eager to reject the second. The subtitle of the poem “(Turin, After News from Gaeta 1861)” reads like a dateline, lending the poem immediacy, as if Savio at this moment hears that her second son is dead. The poem begins:

Dead! One of them shot by the sea in the east,
 And one of them shot in the west by the sea.
 Dead! both my boys! When you sit at the feast

And are wanting a great song for Italy free,
 Let none look at me!" (1-5)

The first two lines of this poem are quoted by Dickinson in the letter she writes to her cousins about the death of the Adams boys (L245). Dickinson never lost a son, but she knew grief, and she describes the pain of losing a loved one to war in "Robbed by Death – but that was easy –" (Fr838). Though that poem does not express the anger of "Mother and Poet," the single word "Robbed" reminds one of how Laura Savio feels. Barrett Browning immediately focuses on Savio's shock and pain, and her reaction specifically as a poet. It is easy to misread this first stanza, as it is the entire poem, as a pronouncement of her unwillingness ever to write any kind of poetry again. There is no indication that she has ceased caring about the freedom of her homeland entirely. She simply no longer wishes to write about it. She cannot write the victory song for this battle because "The east sea and the west sea rhyme on in her head / For ever instead" (9-10). Creating a work of art while feeling this pain seems impossible; the pain has become her poem. Mermin would deem this a sign of Barrett Browning's "reluctant acknowledgement that great poetry might, after all, come [. . .] not from participation in male superiority and cultural dominance, but from exclusion and pain" (245). Barrett Browning is not at all loathe to admit that poetry comes from pain, as much of her work makes clear. Rather, she simply refuses in her political poetry to deny that it can come from engaging with history as well.

Savio then immediately begins exploring what it means to be a woman poet in the first place. "Yet I was a poetess only last year," she asserts, "And good at my art, for a woman, men said" (6-7). She never provides her own opinion of her art, but she implies

that she gives herself more credit than “men” do, since their low regard for women colors their opinions. She then refers to herself not as a poet but as “this woman, this, who is agonised here” (8). Clearly, losing her sons has made her seem alien to herself, not as secure in her identity as she once was. Thus, she probes the identities that seemed once to fit her perfectly, those of poet, mother, and patriot. She asks,

What art can a woman be good at? Oh, vain!

What art is she good at, but hurting her breast

With the milk-teeth of babes, and a smile at the pain?

Ah boys, how you hurt! you were strong as you pressed,

And I proud, by that test. (11-15)

Here, Savio “bitterly asserts that a woman’s art should be motherhood” (238), in Mermin’s view. But there is quite a difference between the words “should” and “is.” Barrett Browning does not allow her speaker to argue that women should be mothers and nothing else. The question of what women can be good at seems “vain” because motherhood is the only profession truly open to them; the question is drenched in irony. “What art’s for a woman?” (16) she repeats at the beginning of the next stanza, and again answers that it is motherhood, specifically “to feel all their arms round her throat, / Cling, strangle a little!” (17-18). Savio questions her vocation as a poet, but she does not idealize her other job as mother. As Sandra Donaldson points out, Barrett Browning expresses profound ambivalence about motherhood in this poem and others. When her nursing babies bite her, the pain is eased by the thought of both her boys’ and her own strength. But it still hurts, just as their “arms round her throat” both “cling” and “strangle.” On the other hand, motherhood also allows her “To dream and to doat” (20).

Barrett Browning destabilizes the position of mother in “Mother and Poet,” thus enabling her to question more effectively assumptions about women, their poetry, and the war in which sons inevitably die.

Savio also recognizes that it is a mother’s job to teach her children, but she now regrets her lessons. As a mother who is also a patriot, she instills in them a love of country. She explains,

To teach them . . . It stings there! I made them indeed
 Speak plain the word country. I taught them, no doubt,
 That a country’s a thing men should die for at need. (21-23)

“And when their eyes flashed . . . O my beautiful eyes! . . . / I exulted” (26-27), she confesses. Certainly, she is telling the literal truth here. She molded them in her own image; their eyes are not only hers in the genetic sense, but also because she sparked the look of anger she sees in them. But the fact that she admits no other influences on her sons’ patriotism makes the reader question her reliability. After a child’s death, no matter what the circumstances, parents blame themselves. Surely, Savio was not the only one to teach her sons patriotism, and, as a political activist, she would have been well aware of the many voices urging Italy’s youth to fight for their country. She berates herself for allowing them to go to war, but even had she forbidden them, they probably would have gone anyway.

Just as the reader encounters both the devoted and the ambivalent mother and both the dedicated and frustrated poet in this work, the reader also meets both the idealized and the real war. “At first,” Laura Savio receives “gay letters moiled / With my kisses, – of camp-life and glory” (31-2), letters that assure her they will return soon

“With their green laurel-bough” (35). Although many mothers would want to believe such fictions, the reality of war is a stranger delivering the news of a dead child in the midst of a victory celebration; “I fell down at his feet / While they cheered in the street” (39-40), she recounts. Yet she truly believes that her son is a hero. She does not become disillusioned, but rather writes, “my grief looked sublime / As the ransom of Italy” (41-42). As a patriot, she is willing to pay a certain price. Two sons, though, would be too high a price, so Savio convinces herself that her second son will be safe. She imagines him comforting her in her old age, “recalling the time / When the first grew immortal, while both of us strained / To the height he had gained” (43-45). And her remaining son reassures her, though his letters are “shorter, sadder, more strong” (46). She should remember that her son is “saint” (49) who is now “aware / Of a presence that turned off the balls” (51-52) and who knows that his mother can “bear” (53) his loss.

The “next news from Gaeta” (57) is more than she can bear. The telegram says “Shot. / Tell his mother” (57-58), and now Savio realizes that “No voice says ‘My mother’ again to me” (59). This initial reaction seems natural, but her further reflections on her second son’s death are more unusual and disturbing. She argues:

Both boys dead? but that’s out of nature. We all
 Have been patriots, yet each house must always keep one.
 ’Twere imbecile, hewing out roads to a wall;
 And, when Italy’s made, for what end if it done
 If we have not a son? (71-75)

She outlines a very practical argument here that a free and united Italy with no sons to lead it (and to perpetuate the family bloodline) seems absurd. Certainly, she already

made it clear that she can bear the loss of one son, but this very sensible idea that Italy will do just fine if “each house” is left with one son seems hard to believe. She feels overwhelming grief upon learning that her first boy has died, as would any parent no matter how many children remained. Savio must believe she made a deal with fate, that it could have only one of her children, but then it reneged on that bargain. It is as if she knows that she will have to sacrifice for Italy, but she just does not want to sacrifice too much. This section provides more evidence that “Mother and Poet” does not at all represent a repudiation of patriotism or even war, but does admit their hardships.

The poem explores the emptiness of Laura Savio’s life without her children, not the emptiness of Italy’s aspirations. When she calls out for Christ, it is not to implore him to stop the violence but to explain how “we common mothers” (68) can endure the deaths of our sons. She still writes passionately about expelling “the fair wicked queen” who enjoys the “sport” (77). She still wants to see “Venice and Rome keep their new jubilee” (81) and Victor Emmanuel wear “Italy’s crown on his head” (84). She simply admits that she can no longer participate fully in the celebration; this is the time “When you have your country from mountain to sea” (83), she explains, “(And I have my Dead) –” (85). Pointing to heaven, she tells her countrymen that “My country is there” (87) where her “brave civic Pair” (89) will “disfranchise despair!” (90). This is not to suggest that the speaker does not temper her patriotic fervor to some extent. She does not curse the war, or disavow the cause, but she is not the patriot or the person she once was. As if slightly embarrassed by her outburst, she calmly and matter-of-factly states, in the penultimate stanza,

Forgive me. Some women bear children in strength,
 And bite back the cry of their pain in self-scorn;
 But the birth-pangs of nations will wring us at length
 Into wail such as this – and we sit on forlorn
 When the man-child is born. (91-95)

This is a speaker – and a poet – who understands that the body and the body politic are intimately related. Conceiving children contributes to and even is necessary for the often violent creation of nations. Laura Savio does not suggest that the Italian revolution be aborted, but she cannot sing at the height of her pain. Therefore, the poem ends with a stanza nearly identical to the opening; “You want a great song for your Italy free” (99), she concludes, “Let none look at me!” (100)

Cooper, Munich, and Squier claim that “The dualities of front and homefront, militaristic male and pacifist female that Barrett Browning maintained while privileging home and motherhood over war have traditionally structured – and so perpetuated – the war story” (16). “Mother and Poet” refutes this argument. Barrett Browning does not choose hearth and home over war. She questions the opposition between them and reveals how they are not nearly as distant as one might think, therefore complicating traditional notions of these concepts. Savio knows that the homefront is the front, the place where any war is first fought. Moreover, she refuses to become a pacifist or privilege motherhood above all other experience even after the trauma of her sons’ deaths. She does come to know the personal price of being a patriotic poet, but it does not extinguish her love of country. Thus, she clearly comprehends the difficulties of being a poet, a woman and mother, as well as a patriot in a time of war; she recognizes

the complexity of each of these roles and will not reject any one of them. Navigating such treacherous ground was a fact of life for women like Savio and Barrett Browning. It is precisely why Barrett Browning is even more than a pioneer in the line of women war poets. She is a visionary who questions all of the standard assumptions about politics and gender, but refuses to replace them with equally facile ones.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's entire body of work is a testament to the complexity and the possibilities of women's political poetry. Barrett Browning unabashedly writes about the many battles of the Italian Risorgimento in Casa Guidi Windows, Poems before Congress, and in much of Last Poems, and in reading this important poetry a number of themes emerge. Most prominent among them is Barrett Browning's search for heroes from both within and without to lead Italy to freedom and unite it under one flag. While some of the poems may seem at first like examples of mere hero-worship, Barrett Browning's oeuvre actually contains more balanced observations and analysis of the leaders involved as well as an acknowledgement of the emotions their actions prompted in patriots like Barrett Browning. But while she passionately seeks true heroes for Italy, she writes with equal passion about the failure of her own homeland to provide such heroes. Thus, a second thread running through her Risorgimento poems is her unique and somewhat precarious position as an English poet writing about Italy, but most often for an English audience in whose response she is often disappointed. But it is a position that allows her to argue forcefully for a new kind of national consciousness and for a foreign policy which take into account the good of nations other than one's own. She becomes the poet as philosopher, proscribing how all people, but particularly the English, should

view the world; they should view it like her son, she concludes, a Florentine with English eyes. Finally, there is no theme in Barrett Browning's political poetry that is not touched by gender issues. Gender does not, however, remain on the periphery. Barrett Browning meets it head on by openly writing about the problems caused by gendering Italy and by her own status as a woman poet. Her poems about politics and war also contain female characters, both real and fictional, and through them Barrett Browning is able to explore the various ways in which women engage with history despite the limitations imposed upon them. The culmination of this work is "Mother and Poet," a masterpiece among her poetry, political or otherwise. Here she brings themes of patriotism and gender together in a complex work that reminds readers that politics can be a woman's, and a poetic genius's, life's work.

Notes

¹ Gardner B. Taplin's biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning provides overviews of contemporary reviews of the poet's Risorgimento poetry. He notes that a number of reviews of Casa Guidi Windows criticized its "diffuseness" and "its poor choice of subject matter" (240). Though not all the reviews were negative, most expressed the opinion that women should not write political poetry; interestingly, the only one that praised the subject noted that it was able to "coexist" with the poet's femininity (241). Helen Cooper specifically catalogs the ways in which these reviews focus on gender issues (126-127). Poems before Congress, on the other hand, attracted the savage reviews Barrett Browning expected it would; "Almost all the reviews objected to her point of view and felt that contemporary political events were not fitting material for poetry" (375), Taplin writes. Lootens surveys and analyzes the criticism of this volume; she concludes: "Metaphorically attempting to exorcise the visceral, often bitter passion of Poems before Congress from the glorious figure of England's poetic queen, reviewers invoked a canonical counterheroine capable of momentarily possessing their ideal" (128). She cites a number of critics who argue that Barrett Browning must have been possessed by evil spirits or out of her mind when she wrote these poems (128).

² Both Schor and Mermin argue that Casa Guidi Windows is aimed toward an English audience. "She speaks most directly to her own country," Mermin writes, "where she is most likely to be heard" (169). In Poems before Congress, however, she addresses her English audience more frequently and directly.

³ Taplin points out that Barrett Browning "greatly underestimated England's help to Italy" (219). As he explains the events which inspired her Risorgimento poetry, he

also details the actions of the British government meant to aid Italy, most of which Barrett Browning did not know.

⁴ Alethea Hayter notes that “Her opinions were very much in advance of her time, an age of growing and aggressive national feeling, and they made her very unpopular indeed with many Englishmen” (136-137). She was thus castigated by critics in England and even her own siblings.

⁵ Certainly, women literally conceive war by giving birth to the men who fight it. Cooper, Munich, and Squier explore this idea, but they most admire texts which “pose the possibility of contraception – a closing off of the war text – to allow for other figures, alternative discourses” (19), and they suggest that “Contraceptive choice can symbolize the refusal of complicity in the war system” (20). Their critical framework leaves little room for a figure like Barrett Browning, who taught her son to be an Italian patriot, favored war to free Italy, and wrote “Mother and Poet,” a poem that explores the intersection of war, poetry, and motherhood in complex ways.

⁶ Mermin rightly believes that Barrett Browning wrote this advertisement “to disarm in advance” the criticism the poem would elicit, but that “the poem is neither foolish nor naïve,” as that advertisement suggests (166).

⁷ Harris writes that the windows actually “link the spectacle with the spectator” (117) and that Barrett Browning “undermines conventional gendered notions of what it means to witness and write ‘From a window’” (117). She also makes a good point that the windows “Literally and figuratively [. . .] operate as the liminal space creating a new paradigm through which a politically potent and culturally re-imagined Italy can emerge” (116). Other critics, however, view Barrett Browning as far too removed from the events

taking place during her stay in Italy. Helen Groth, for example, calls her “A boundary figure living vicariously through the lens of the windows that frame and delimit her perspective” (51), and she believes that the glass “keeps the self-preserving division between viewer and viewed in place” (49).

⁸ Schor explains that “the Italians were a people still on the farther shore of the Enlightenment” (314), a point Barrett Browning understood well. The literacy rate in Italy even in 1870 was abysmal, Schor explains, so the people were particularly prone to “manipulations of petty dukes” (315).

⁹ Other critics have challenged the notion that Barrett Browning’s hero-worship in Casa Guidi Windows is excessive. Cooper notes that she does not perceive either the duke or the pope “with unalloyed enthusiasm” (134), and calls her description of Leopold “a measured estimation” (134). Mermin also argues that Barrett Browning’s support of the duke is “hardly immoderate” (167) and that she was not alone in her search for a hero. And Julia Markus calls the description of the duke “informed with reservations” (xxvi) that are “held in abeyance by the joy of the hour” (xxviii).

¹⁰ Cooper also argues that Barrett Browning’s “‘woman’s fault’ is neither inferior intelligence nor excess of sentiment, but erroneous belief in man’s honor and capability to rule” (139). Hence, the fault lies more with the men than with herself.

¹¹ Schor suggests another possibility, “one that invokes an accord between poesis (or the making of art, generally) and national making” (316). She believes the poem proposes that “enlightenment may be shed by the dead” (316), specifically the dead poets and other artists Barrett Browning invokes. Indeed, Casa Guidi Windows is also a poem about the political poet’s relationship with those who have come before her.

¹² Katherine Montwieler astutely asks, “Why was this particular collection so threatening to nineteenth-century critics and how has it remained so uninteresting to late twentieth-century feminists that it has earned the dubious honor of being condemned or ignored?” (106) Of course, the “answer” is “politics” (106). Montwieler goes on to analyze “the intersection of gender and politics” in the volume (107).

¹³ It is interesting that, with the exception of Montwieler, many recent critics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry characterize her as hysterical because of her enthusiasm for Italy. Margaret Forster, her most recent biographer, calls her political poetry “informed and sincere” (335), but also describes how she “collapsed, abandoning all pretense that she was well” after Villafranca (336). Forster also accuses her of making her sister “Henrietta’s illness a metaphor for Italy’s struggle” (348) and generally caring more for Italy than for her family. Mermin too asserts that “What almost did destroy her balance of mind” was Villafranca, which literally sickened her (230). Clearly, there is some truth to what these and other critics contend; Barrett Browning herself writes in an 1859 letter that “these public affairs have half killed me. You know I can’t take things quietly” (323). Yet, one must ask if a man who was passionate about politics would be portrayed as teetering on the edge of madness. As Julia Markus writes in her introduction to Casa Guidi Windows, Barrett Browning’s “political poetry” cannot be “reevaluated until she is exonerated from these false assumptions” (xix).

¹⁴ Critics such as Taplin who believe that the “portrait” Barrett Browning paints of Napoleon III “flatters its subject almost beyond recognition” (373) tend to oversimplify both the poem and certainly the volume. Interestingly, Montwieler’s analysis of the poem veers away from Napoleon III, and she asserts that “The real hero of

the poem is not the emperor at all, but the triumphant speaker who claims the role that England never awarded Barrett Browning” (115). Barrett Browning becomes the “poet laureate” of Italy in this poem (115).

¹⁵ Hayter notes the seeming incongruity in that Barrett Browning, “this liberal republican, this fiery critic of oppressive empires, had an ardent admiration for both the first and third Napoleon” (128). She suggests that “the secret of this extraordinary hero-worship” was that “poets, however democratic and anti-monarchist, cannot help but being fascinated by actions which compose well into literary shape” (128); Napoleon was attractive for his “artistic temperament” (129). Hayter also writes that Barrett Browning’s “early references to him [Napoleon III] were disparaging,” but then he decided to help Italy (129). Thus, Barrett Browning produced “Napoleon III in Italy,” what Hayter calls “the most provocative and execrated of all her political poems” (130).

¹⁶ Taplin explains that “The congress to which Elizabeth referred in the title [. . .] was supposed to have taken place in January [of 1860] at Paris” (371), but it never happened. Austria chose not to attend after it realized that France planned “to urge that the congress reduce the Pope’s territory and leave him only Rome” (371).

¹⁷ Beneath the title appears the line “‘Una voce augusta’—Monitore Toscano.” Thus, “An August Voice” was the motto of a Tuscan newspaper.

¹⁸ Montwieler argues that Barrett Browning “must adopt another voice” to lay any blame on Italy (116). She also notes Barrett Browning’s criticism of Napoleon III himself here, “by casting him as Italy’s complaining rejected lover” (117).

¹⁹ In one of many other Dickinsonian echoes of these lines, the poet describes how

The Cat reprieves the mouse
 She eases from her teeth
 Just long enough for Hope to tease –
 And mashes it to death – (Fr485)

²⁰ Garibaldi fought for the freedom of Sicily and Naples and then in essence gave them to Victor Emmanuel on October 26, 1860 (Gooch 32). He tried to take Rome in August of 1862, but was prevented from doing so by the king's army (Gooch 34). In 1867, he made his final attempt, but was defeated at the Battle of Mentana on November 3 (Gooch 36).

²¹ Another poem adds humility to Victor Emmanuel's list of favorable traits, which might be a reaction to her disillusionment with Napoleon III. "The Sword of Castruccio Castracani" tells the story of a visit the king paid to the town of Lucca, where he seems distracted as he toured its sights. But when he is given a sword that had been saved for the man who would deliver Italy, "his heart overboiled till it spilt" (40), as he "exclaimed, 'This is for me!'" (37). He views this object as an extremely precious gift because it is meant for a "patriot" whose "pure civic blood" will "Wipe away the foe's and make good, / In delivering the land by the sword" (34-6), according to the people of the town. Because of this man, Barrett Browning feels herself part of "a great Italy freed, / With a hero to head us, – our King!" (47-48).

²² Hayter finds it "ironical" that Barrett Browning "so greatly revered Cavour" (134), since he was the supreme diplomat and Barrett Browning "had no grasp of how the business of government and diplomacy is carried on" (134). To her, "the affairs of nations could be settled by simple dramatic solutions," and "She expected all good rulers

and statesmen to be as single-minded and disinterested as herself” (135). She may have grasped it, but chose to ignore it here for rhetorical purposes.

²³ As Helen Groth notes, “Italian politics [. . .] became a ‘Clarifying mechanism’ through which English cultural commentators, journalists [. . .] writers, and artists reflected on the nature of Englishness” (37).

²⁴ Again, Barrett Browning was not aware of the support England did offer Italy. John Gooch notes that Lord Henry Palmerston, elected British prime minister in 1859, was “anti-Austrian” and also wanted Piedmont to keep France in check. He hence “was now willing to give Piedmontese ambitions active support” (27). He refused to negotiate a peace treaty in 1859 when Napoleon III asked him to because he did not want to thwart Italian aspirations he supported (Martin 503). And, on October 27, 1860, Lord John Russell sent a “dispatch” in support of Italian unification and independence that helped keep other powers from opposing Italy. However, these acts should not diminish “the fact that, while at times British governments had talked in favor of their [the Italians’] national movement, Napoleon had led French soldiers into the Po valley to die for it” (Martin 623).

²⁵ Helen Cooper notes that women did not have access to the reading rooms where men gathered to look at newspapers, so Barrett Browning “received the news mediated through male eyes and voice” (128). Cooper thus concludes that “As a woman, her involvement in political affairs had to be amateur and primarily conversational” (128). Another way to look at the situation, however, is that her political poetry is amazingly well-informed given the constraints.

²⁶ O'Connor also discusses the Corinne myth and how it shaped English ideas about Italy (28). Thus, descriptions of Italy by English writers are highly "gendered," and its "feminization helps explain why [. . .] Italy was a place revered and scorned, celebrated for its beauty and misfortune" (32). Italy actually becomes "a dignified, if slightly flawed, bourgeois woman, half Italian and half English" (109). Both O'Connor and Gilbert also point out that Italy becomes, for the English, "a land where one could be free to be oneself" (O'Connor 29), with Gilbert focusing on the way in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning "enacted and re-enacted her own personal and artistic struggle for identity" (134), her own risorgimento through her writings about Italy's Risorgimento. The images of Italy Gilbert focuses on in Barrett Browning's poetry, however, tend to be rather conventionally feminine – the Italy she describes is the "nurturing mother," the "home of art," but also still the "dead, denied, and denying woman" (210). Dorothy Mermin, Flavia Alaya, and Helen M. Cooper suggest greater possibilities for Barrett Browning's poetry of Italy, arguing that she rejects such images for their weakness and pessimism and attempts to create for Italy "a new mythos" (Alaya 15). Similarly, Leigh Coral Harris believes that Italy "lies politically subjugated not only by the Austrian empire but also by those British dreams of mythic Italy" (116), and that Barrett Browning's poetry moves Italy "from mythos [. . .] to nationalized logos as a unified, independent political reality" (109), hence "connecting aesthetic to politics" (113).

²⁷ Interestingly, Mermin calls Casa Guidi Windows "a song of motherhood" (173), rightly pointing out that "the poem's themes converge in images of parents and children" (171). She reads the Anita Garibaldi episode, however, as "a story of paternal

failure and maternal love” (172). Surely, both Anita Garibaldi and her husband have failed as parents, though they eventually triumph as patriots.

²⁸ Lootens notes the descriptions of the landscape near the end of the poem, concluding that “Carnal and female, the Italian landscape has been sown with patriots’ graves as with dragons’ teeth” including those of Charles Albert and Anita Garibaldi (260-261). But, she argues, there is hope for the future, represented by Pen and even by land itself: “With this shocking equation of a swelling, moving, and pregnant body, soon to gush new life, and the unquiet Italian earth, under which patriots rest and moles tunnel, Barrett Browning literalizes and nationalizes ‘Mother Earth’” (262).

²⁹ In an 1855 letter, Barrett Browning writes that she views nursing as a “most imperfect solution of the ‘woman’s question,’” and that “If a movement at all, it is retrograde” (189). She argues that the men who bow before women “carrying lint” would, “if they stir an inch as thinkers or artists from the beaten line” then “curse the impudence of the very same women and stop there” (189).

³⁰ In “The King’s Gift,” Garibaldi’s daughter is singing a “Verse from that hymn of our hero’s, / Setting the souls of us ringing” (6-7). Though she is merely a young girl, her voice can move men, just as Barrett Browning’s could. But the poem is not so much about her power as about her and her father’s reaction to the gift of a jeweled necklace sent by King Victor Emmanuel. She is dazzled by the gift, but, shooting a “Sly look” (15) at her father, asks him if she can “sing on as well as Venice, / Yet wear such a flame at her throat?” (16-17). Garibaldi decides that since Victor Emmanuel is “no king like another / But verily noble as we are” (25-26), that this gift will not corrupt his daughter. Therefore, he encourages her to “sing, till all start to their feet, a / New verse ever bolder

and freer!” (23-24). Though the poem’s main concern is class, little “Teresita’s” voice does have power, and does not want to diminish that power by appearing materialistic. Victor Emmanuel cannot pay her for her songs; they must come from the heart.

“Nature’s Remorses” is about a very different noble woman, the wife of King Francis of Naples, from whose grip Garibaldi eventually frees that city. But as her husband is forfeiting his power to the burgeoning Italian republic, this nameless queen retains her dignity; “Only the men in that hour were weak” (42), Barrett Browning wryly comments. Though shielded from “daylight issues of events” (12), she “braved the shock and the counter-shock / Of hero and traitor, bullet and knife” (45-46) admirably. Barrett Browning mounts an interesting defense of this former queen, who is “Conscious of dignities higher than yours” (54), arguing that in losing her temporal power she discovers her true womanhood. “Nature” (73) feels “remorseful” (75) for its treatment of the queen, and therefore

Rescues the womanhood, nearly eluded,
Shows her what’s sweetest in womanly fate –
Sunshine from Heaven, and the eyes of a child. (76-78)

These final lines hardly comprise a feminist manifesto, and, as in “The King’s Gift,” the poet is more concerned about class than gender. The queen must learn to make due with the blessings of the peasant. But Barrett Browning does paint a portrait here of a proud woman who, despite her limitations, is capable of surviving war and expanding her horizons.

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson probably wrote the following poem about Elizabeth Barrett

Browning:

Ourselves were wed one summer – dear –

Your Vision – was in June –

And when Your little Lifetime failed,

I wearied – too – of mine –

And overtaken in the Dark –

Where you had put me down –

By Some one carrying a Light –

I – too – received the Sign –

'Tis true – Our Futures different lay –

Your Cottage – faced the sun –

While Oceans – and the North must be –

On every side of mine

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,

For mine – in Frosts – was sown –

And yet, one Summer, we were Queens –

And You – were crowned in June – (Fr596)

Gary Stonum identifies the clues suggesting that the poem is about Barrett Browning, chief among them her residence in a “Cottage “ that “faced the sun” (41). He concludes, however, that “the speaker appears undecided” about how much she is like this “Queen” (42); in his view, the poem ends with “a nervous or abrupt recognition of distance” (43). But this poem points out far more similarities than differences between the two poets. Both “received the Sign,” perhaps that which belongs only to “Queens.” And though Barrett Browning’s “Garden led the Bloom,” Dickinson surely suspects some of the “Frosts” in Barrett Browning’s past. Most importantly, the two poets are “wed,” not only to their vocation but also to each other.

The existence of a poem such as this one almost requires us to examine Dickinson and Barrett Browning together. One of the most fascinating aspects of both poets’ work is their interest in war, and investigating that subject yields illuminating results. Dickinson is not the ahistorical and apolitical poet that she has been labeled. She treated the Civil War in her letters and poems, sometimes pointedly and other times obliquely. There is no consistent theme or narrative and certainly no political stance linking these works. What does link them is their tone of calm inquiry, both about war and other topics. Dickinson is a complex poet of implication, not explication.

Barrett Browning, on the other hand, was not afraid to voice her convictions in her poetry. She sought a hero to lead Italy’s Risorgimento, and she scrutinized the various candidates for that position. She fervently believed England ought to help in this struggle, and she said so plainly and frequently. Not surprisingly given the polemical

nature of her verse, Barrett Browning commented directly on the challenges faced by women as they entered the political arena. Her treatment of all of these themes is quite complicated.

Yet the two poets were not all that dissimilar. Each was what Emerson called “The republican at home” (557), captivated by the world outside, but always most intrigued by the hearts and minds inside us all. Dickinson most often seeks to reveal what is hidden in those precious hearts and minds, while Barrett Browning wants to change them, to make them more divine. Indeed, the divine is a vital part of the songs both poets sing from the charnel steps. Neither poet knows of an “admirabler show” than “Immortality” (Fr820).

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