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“Eastern Exiles”: Dickinson, Whiggery and War

“Practices of citizenship involve both public-sphere narratives and concrete experiences of quotidian life that do not cohere or harmonize.”

—Lauren Berlant, “The Intimate Public Sphere”

The 17 October 1861 edition of *The Springfield Daily Republican* excerpts a fiery letter from one-time Whig representative to Congress Edward Dickinson.<sup>1</sup> Writing to decline the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor, Dickinson’s epistle offers a particularly Whiggish view of the relationships between emancipation, constitutionality, and war:

Let us in this exigency repudiate political vagaries and fancies; let us denounce, as subversive of all constitutional guarantees, if we expect to reconstruct or restore the Union, the heretical dogma that immediate and universal emancipation of slaves should be proclaimed by the government, as the means of putting an end to the war; and the rather to hope and pray that, in the good providence of God, emancipation may be one of the blessed results of the war. Let us sustain the national administration in its policy, as avowed, with all our heart and might; let us unitedly gird ourselves for the terrible contest in which we are engaged, and resolve to “fight on and fight ever” *under the constitution*, “until the sway of the constitution and the laws shall be restored to all portions of our country.”

Replete with all the rhetorics of late Whig party politics and all the requisite inconsistencies and illogics of anti-slavery Whig politics in particular,<sup>2</sup> Edward Dickinson's letter speaks volumes about the political milieu in which Emily Dickinson came of age. Of greater interest, however, is a response to Edward Dickinson that appeared two days later in the 19 October *Springfield Daily Republican*. Attributed to "Warrington," the *Republican's* Boston correspondent, the response savages the elder Dickinson with a surprising verve and pith:

Mr. Dickinson's letter is an amusing document . . . A more childish exhibition of petty partisan feeling has not been given this year. If Mr. Dickinson makes such frivolous conditions to his loyal and patriotic desire to serve the state, it is quite fortunate for its interests that he concluded to decline. But he ought at least to speak respectfully of the men who nominated him. If they could so disguise their contempt for fossil politicians as to ask him to take the office of lieutenant governor, they surely gave the best evidence of their desire to abandon old party quarrels and prejudices . . . Why, he belongs to a class of men, very worthy and honest, but whose every political idea and prediction had been so completely proved foolish and frivolous and false, that no sensible body of men, of *any* party, would think of going to them for political advice.

Following an elaborate comparison to Edward Everett—of Bell-Everett and Gettysburg Address fame—Warrington goes on to conclude that, "The difference between [Mr. Everett] and Mr. Dickinson is the difference between a patriot and a partisan, a liberal and a bigot, a man and a mouse."<sup>3</sup>

This heated epistolary exchange renders immediately intelligible the partisan politics that ravaged the northern political sphere at the same moment the first battles of the Civil War began ravaging the hills of Virginia, South Carolina, and Kentucky. Warrington's decidedly public rebuke marks an urgent denunciation of Edward Dickinson's latter day Whig politics and his assiduous, often idealistic political positions. Characterizing Dickinson as behind or out of touch with the tumultuous times, a "fossil politician" given

to “petty partisanship” and beholden to “old party quarrels and prejudices,” the letter most importantly locates Edward Dickinson’s staid Whig politics within his whirligig political moment: a confusing, chaotic political terrain in which political parties emerged, rose, converged, and disappeared with an alarming frequency. Placing Edward Dickinson amongst what Mark E. Neely, Jr. has called the “astonishing political conflicts that emerged within the North during the [American Civil War]” (4), Warrington’s missive chides Edward Dickinson for remaining resolutely a Whig, too true perhaps to the “true Republicanism of the Whig party.”<sup>4</sup>

During his lifetime, Edward Dickinson’s name rarely appeared in print without an accompanying “Whig” rhetoric—the signifiers “Edward Dickinson” and “Whig” never straying far from one another. Edward Dickinson: a man eulogized as “a grand type of a class now extinct—An Old-School-Gentleman-Whig,”<sup>5</sup> “a true whig in every sense of the word . . . ever ready to sacrifice personal preference to the good of principle,” someone “always look[ing] toward the right, and with indomitable perseverance pursu[ing] it.”<sup>6</sup> Edward Dickinson: a man “well known throughout the District as an unflinching whig—one whose political principles require no chemical test to ascertain their strength, and the ardor of whose feelings is not regulated by the temperature of the weather.”<sup>7</sup> Edward Dickinson, who, at the Whig National Convention of 1852 gained renown for voting 53 consecutive presidential ballots for 70-year-old Whig emblem Daniel Webster<sup>8</sup>; “a firm, straight Whig, a pure citizen.”<sup>9</sup> Edward Dickinson: a man who served as a Whig in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1838 and 1839; in the state senate in 1842 and 1843; and in the 33<sup>rd</sup> National Congress in 1854-1855.

Beginning here with a particularly Whiggish biography of Edward Dickinson, this essay will tell a story about the centrality of the rise and fall of the American Whig party to the poetic projects of Emily Dickinson. Through several necessarily speculative and gestural readings, the essay charts relationships between Edward Dickinson’s political poses and positions and Emily Dickinson’s politico-poetic poses and positions. Though careful not to conflate Edward and Emily Dickinson’s individual political investments, the essay argues that we cannot understand either Edward *or* Emily Dickinson

outside of the context and discourse of latter day Whig party politics. Given a series of recurrent rhetorics that reveal “Whiggery” to be an important thematic concern in Emily Dickinson’s immediate antebellum, bellum, and postbellum writing, it is time that Dickinson studies reconsider and reconceptualize the poet’s complex relationship to her immediate political milieu, and, in turn, the relationship of that immediate political milieu to the coming of the American Civil War.

1. *“Against my Whig feelings”:  
Whiggery and the Intimate Public Sphere*

“The Whig party died of too much respectability and not enough people.”<sup>10</sup> This near Miltonic commonplace—“fit audience though few”—elegantly encapsulates the experience of latter day Whigs like Edward Dickinson during and after the Civil War. Following the demise of the Whig party in the mid-1850s, “straight,” “unflinching” Whigs like Edward Dickinson were, in the language of one of Emily Dickinson’s most provocative verses, “Eastern Exiles,” political refugees sequestered in their mostly northeastern seclusion (Fr326). Through the whole of the Civil War and a good deal of Reconstruction, Whigs like Edward Dickinson watched in horror as, to quote Dickinson’s declination letter, “political vagaries and fancies” came to be doxa, and “the heretical dogma that immediate and universal emancipation of slaves should be proclaimed by the government” was espoused and then adopted in 1863. As historian Michael Holt notes, however, following the cessation of Civil War hostilities, “former Whigs, most of whom had languished out of office during the late 1850s, landed on their [political] feet” (984), assuming that they had migrated to one of the many political alternatives that rose and converged in the immediate antebellum years (e.g. the Republican, Constitutional-Union/Bell-Everett, and Know-Nothing parties). As witnessed by his 1861 declination letter—and to some degree by his more politic declination of the Bell-Everett nomination for governor in 1860—Edward Dickinson, resolute to the end, never left the Whig party, and, as a result, never “landed on [his political] feet.”

After being a mainstay of Massachusetts' politics from 1838 and to 1855, Edward Dickinson removed himself rather suddenly from the political sphere following an embarrassing but not unexpected defeat in the 1854 election for Congressional representative. In the wake of the 1854 Know Nothing revolution that pushed him out of office in the first place, Dickinson ran again as a Whig in the 1855 election, an unprecedented and perhaps swaggering political move that is of a piece with the Whig idealism Michael Holt describes as a "seemingly endless capacity for self-delusion, their pathetic propensity to cling to pie-in-the-sky fantasies in the face of unwelcome realities" (Holt 971). Except for declining nomination for governor and lieutenant governor in 1860 and 1861 respectively, Edward Dickinson was out of the political spotlight for some 13 years, and out of elected political office from 1854 to 1873, when he was elected to the General Court of Massachusetts.

Such a narrative of self-imposed exile, of stubborn adherence to principle, of active withdrawal from publicity may seem all too familiar to scholars of *Emily Dickinson*. Indeed, Edward and Emily Dickinson's narratives of exile, adherence, and withdrawal seem nearly concomitant: Emily Dickinson's rhetorical "withdrawal from the world" recapitulating and nearly coinciding with Edward Dickinson's withdrawal from political life. Put simply, Edward Dickinson removed himself from politics at nearly the same moment Emily Dickinson began writing poems with a rhetoric of privatism, withdrawal, and remove. While we should be careful not to make too quick a claim to causation or homology here, we would do well to put pressure on these coincidences by noting a series of moments where Emily Dickinson makes both direct and indirect references to her father's political affiliation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, explicit references to Whig party politics occur throughout Emily Dickinson's letters. Ranging from brief asides, such as a 23 February 1845 letter to Abiah Root ("Please send me a copy of that Romance you was writing at Amherst. I am in a fever to read it. I expect it will be against my Whig feelings" L5<sup>12</sup>), to complex political allegories (e.g. L97, the "I shall probably be a snail" letter, which followed Edward Dickinson's election to Congress in 1852; the letter/poem "A Burdock – clawed my Gown – , " goading brother Austin

about his political rival Ithmar Frank Conkey: L240), Emily Dickinson's epistles show a recurrent interest in and deployment of the Whig party.

Nowhere is Emily Dickinson's interest in her father's political party more evident than in a particularly tender letter sent to Austin Dickinson while Edward was a delegate to the Whig National convention in Baltimore, June 1852:

[Father] writes that he "should think the whole world was there, and some from other worlds"—he says he meets a great many old friends and acquaintances, and forms a great many new ones—he writes in very fine spirits, and says he enjoys himself very much. I think it will do him the very most good of anything in the world, and I do feel happy to have father at last, among men who sympathize with him, and know what he really is. (L95)

One is struck here by Emily Dickinson's seemingly subtle understanding of her father's peculiar political plight. By the poet's account, Edward Dickinson's very health seems at stake in his finding political sympathy at the convention ("it will do him the very most good of anything in the world")—Edward Dickinson's long ("at last") political isolation ameliorated by that powerhouse discourse of mid-nineteenth century America: sympathy ("among men who *sympathize* with him"). Through the charged tropes of Emily Dickinson's letter one senses the urgent nature of Edward Dickinson's political commitments, tied as they were to Dickinson's very sense of himself: "what he really is"—or, better, tied to his daughter's sense of who he is. Thus the 20 June 1852 letter affirms not simply that Emily Dickinson was aware of her father's political engagements and commitments, but that she knew those engagements and commitments *intimately*, was herself able to at least empathize with his long-held desire to find fellow-political-feeling.

Another site of explicit Whiggery comes in a postscript to a letter from Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert, dated a few days earlier, 11 June 1852:

Why can't I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?—  
dont I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and  
the Law? Then, Susie I could see you, during a pause in the  
session—but I dont like this country at all, and I shant stay  
here any longer! “Delenda est” America, Massachusetts and  
all!

open me carefully  
(L94)

A justly celebrated fragment that finds Emily Dickinson at her most swaggering, this postscript forges a space for queer political action, placing as it does a scene of female-female communion within the decidedly masculine space of a political convention, and incites a provocative play of public and counterpublic. Most importantly, through the force of her rhetorical questions—an important speech act of sorts—Emily Dickinson both performs and reifies her knowledge of Whig party politics (“dont I know all about...”). To answer those rhetorical questions: “Why cant [Emily Dickinson] be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?”: because of the strictures of patriarchy and mid-century gender bias. “[doesn't she] know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law?”: indeed, as witnessed by the above correspondence, Emily Dickinson *did* know “all about” Whig party politics.

Whiggish references such as these beg us to ask not if but *how* Emily Dickinson knew “all about” the Whig party, Daniel Webster, the tariff, and the like. By way of answering such a question, two axioms about best practices in Dickinson studies may be of use. Axiom one: Dickinson studies has long been obsessed with the physical space of the Dickinson Homestead. As witnessed by Diana Fuss' brilliant “Interior Chambers,” the brisk Amherst tourist industry, and the proliferation of images of the Homestead—to name but three indices—the poetics of Dickinsonian space hold great allure for readers and scholars of the poet. Axiom two: through various biographical studies such as Jack Capps' *Dickinson's Reading* and Benjamin Lease's *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Books and*

*Men*, Dickinson studies has done well to tend to the print culture and public sphere the poet engaged. Reconstructing subscription lists, personal libraries, and intertextual references, these histories draw on assumptions about a quasi-Habermasian public sphere in order to show Emily Dickinson's readerly engagements with her world.

Regrettably, Dickinson studies has yet to consider the ways such a poetics of space enabled another *non-print* public sphere: what we might call an "intimate public sphere." As used in Lauren Berlant's searching collection of essays, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, the phrase "intimate public sphere" characterizes a form of "citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere. No longer valuing personhood as something directed toward public life, contemporary nationalist ideology recognizes a public good only in a particularly constricted notion of simultaneously lived private worlds" (5). To parse this a bit, Berlant's intimate public sphere is the result of complex set of nationalist ideologies in which participation in the public sphere is always already determined by and *in* private, often familial, spaces. Berlant's "intimate public sphere" comes as the result of "patriotic traditionalists" attempts to market "a core nation whose survival depends on personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian" (4). For Berlant, such a redefinition of citizenship, public life, and public good is insidious: "Downsizing citizenship to a mode of voluntarism and privacy has radically changed the ways national identity is imagined, experienced, and governed in political and mass-media public spheres and in everyday life" (5).

As a result of this insidiousness, Berlant is at pains to distinguish her "intimate public sphere" of the "U.S. present tense" from Jürgen Habermas' "intimate sphere" of eighteenth-century Europe, a far more benign because much more fantastical historical phenomenon. For Habermas, the "intimate sphere" was at once a foundational and mythical element of the emergence of the public sphere. On one hand, Habermas sees the emergence of an eighteenth-century public sphere as "an expansion and at the same time completion of the intimate sphere of the conjugal family" (50); on the other,

he understands that this “intimate sphere of the conjugal family” was predicated on individuals’ *desire* to view themselves “as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity—as persons capable of entering into ‘purely human’ relations with one another” (48). Needless to say, Habermas remains deeply suspicious of any such claims or aspirations to independence and “purely” human relations: “Although there may have been a desire to perceive the sphere of the family circle as independent, as cut off from all connection with society, and as the domain of pure humanity, it was, of course, dependent on the sphere of labor and of commodity exchange—even this consciousness of independence can be understood as flowing from the factual dependency of that reclusive domain upon the private one of the market” (46).<sup>13</sup> For Habermas (and his devotees) even the most intimate of acts conducted in the “private” space of a conjugal family were thus “always already orientated to an audience (*Publikum*)” (49). Even one’s very sense of subjectivity—“the innermost core of the private” (49)—is in some sense a public construction since subjectivity “always already” presumes an audience.

While Berlant is theorizing a “U.S. present tense” and while Habermas is theorizing an eighteenth-century past tense, there seem clear resonances between the Dickinson Homestead and the intimate public spheres theorized here. That is, given the preponderance of rhetorics of the “conjugal family,” “practices of everyday life,” “independence,” “family circle,” “quotidian,” “personal acts and values,” in both Berlant and Habermas, Dickinson studies seems a particularly promising site for readings of *intimate public spheres*.<sup>14</sup> By synthesizing Habermas and Berlant’s not-at-odds definitions into a rubric for reading the public sphere institutionalized at the Dickinson Homestead, we gain partial (if fantastical) access to the manifold ways Emily Dickinson’s intimate experience of everyday life managed to be both private *and* public.

Since so much of what we “know” about Emily Dickinson’s engagements with a nineteenth-century public sphere originated in or were directed toward her family sphere, the keyword *intimate public sphere* allows us to ask a series of questions about how the “private world” of the Homestead enabled Emily Dickinson access to that public sphere. What were the topics of conversation around the Dickinson Homestead? What anecdotes were to be had in the

library, conservatory, front and back parlors? What rumors could be heard between the kitchen, pantry, and dining room? By virtue of her father and brother's decidedly public lives, Emily Dickinson's house was necessarily a *political* house; a house in which the politics of the day were, one assumes, discussed with some regularity. To be sure, we can only speculate about such discussions, yet the inaccessibility of the Dickinsonian intimate public sphere cannot and must not inhibit our ability to *ask after* them.<sup>15</sup> In short, we must think through what Betsy Erkkila has dubbed Dickinsonian "House Politics" before we can hope to place Emily Dickinson within her proper political context ("Art," 138-144). In so doing, we must not forget what we already know about the ways political discussions circulate in the intimate spaces of the family and the home. (We might think here of the intimate spaces in which politics are discussed in many contemporary American homes: at the dinner table, in front of the television, lying in bed). To return to the question posed above, Emily Dickinson knew "all about" the Whig party, Daniel Webster, the tariff, and the like *both* through the print media she engaged on a daily basis and through the circulation of conversations, anecdotes, and rumors that flooded her intimate public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Any responsible study of Dickinson's engagements with the "world that never wrote to" her, must tend to both of these sources.

2. *"How many leagues of nowhere / Lie between them now"*

While the paucity of extant Edward Dickinson correspondence makes a thoroughgoing comparison of father-daughter rhetoric impossible, one uncanny rhetorical convergence is worthy of attention. Cajoled into accepting the Whig nomination for Congressional Representative in 1855, Edward Dickinson wrote that, "My inclination would lead me to avoid the publicity of being a candidate for office."<sup>17</sup> While a discourse of publicity was not uncommon for the period, it is nonetheless striking to see a rhetoric of "publicity"—and specifically a rhetoric of avoided or deferred publicity—coming from the father of Emily Dickinson, a poet too often defined by the politico-poetic poses her texts struck: for example, "Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man –" (Fr788 [1863]); "Don't tell! they'd advertise

us – you know!” an alternate line from “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Fr260 [1861]). As numerous critics note, the language of withdrawal or removal proliferate in Dickinson’s poetry leading up to and during the Civil War. Consider

Safe in their alabaster chambers  
Untouched by morning,  
And untouched by noon,  
(Fr124A [1859])

Indeed, throughout the war, the Dickinsonian text continually thinks though the ethics and efficacy of withdrawal: “We grow accustomed to the Dark –/ When Light is put away –” (Fr428 [1862]); or,

To put this World down, like a Bundle –  
And walk steady, away,  
Requires Energy – possibly Agony –  
’Tis the Scarlet way  
(Fr404 [1862])

When we encounter withdrawal in Emily Dickinson’s poetry we understandably privilege *Emily* Dickinson’s biography, conflating ever so slightly the relationships between poet, speaker, and poetic subject. Yet, such a privileging of *Emily* Dickinson’s biography also limits our understanding of the texts’ exploitation of personae and polyvocalism. Could Emily Dickinson’s rhetoric of withdrawal emanate from a persona roughly approximating her father? Could these verses be speaking of or to *Edward* Dickinson’s experiences in and out of the political spotlight? In light of both their biographies, that by 1862 *both* Emily and Edward Dickinson had to some extent put a “World down, like a Bundle” and walked “steady away” seems a given. Emily Dickinson’s poetic (or poeticized) withdrawal is profoundly timely, resonant precisely because it doubles Edward Dickinson’s withdrawal from the local and national political spheres. As such, we might ask, could these poems of remove thematize a withdrawal from the political sphere (a la Edward Dickinson) just as ably as a withdrawal from “public” life (a la Emily Dickinson)? Most urgently, could these poems thematize a

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*shared* experience of withdrawal and remove? Such questions remind us to attend to the ironic preponderance of plural pronouns in these poems of removal and withdrawal: “we,” “their,” “us,” “our.” Though such pronoun use furthers the claims to universalism so many critic-readers of Dickinson prefer, here we might ask, in what sort of seclusion do the speakers and poetic subjects of these poems find themselves?

To this end, an oft-mentioned, much-interpreted poem of withdrawal from early in the war—and thus early in Edward’s political seclusion—is rendered through a telling rhetoric:

The Soul selects her own Society –  
Then – shuts the Door –  
To her divine Majority –  
Present no more –

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –  
At her low Gate –  
Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat –

I’ve known her – from an ample nation –  
Choose One –  
Then – close the Valves of her attention –  
Like Stone –

(Fr409A [1862])

Often taken to be a personal-poetic manifesto for *Emily* Dickinson, the poem couches its dramatic removal in terms of specifically national election (“divine Majority”; “from an ample nation – / Choose One”) perhaps resonant with *Edward* Dickinson’s withdrawal from political life. Similarly, we would do well to pay close attention to a poem like Fr115B (1859).

Ambition cannot find him –  
Affection does’nt know  
How many leagues of nowhere  
Lie between them now!

(Fr115B [1859])

For Edward Dickinson, the degree of his removal from political life after 1855 was profound. Once a regular on the pages of both *The Springfield Daily Republican* and *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, Edward Dickinson (cf. “him”) found himself less and less often in the pages of local periodicals, further and further away from “publicity,” “ambition,” and “affection,” and more and more subject to the capricious winds of political change that would find one “Yesterday, undistinguished! / Eminent Today.”

In addition, a rhetoric of defeat recurs with a startling frequency in Emily Dickinson’s earliest verse—verse written, we think, during the late 1850s, after the grand demise of the Whig party and Edward Dickinson’s two major political defeats. Some of these verses are aphoristic, deceptively trite, bootstrap-pulling affairs:

We lose – because we win –  
Gamblers – recollecting which –  
Toss their dice again!”  
(Fr28 [1858])

or, “Best Gains – must have the Losses’ test – / To constitute them – Gains” (Fr499 [1863]). Others seem broad rationalizations of defeat:

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!  
(Fr112C [1859])

In verses such as these, defeat is experienced not in isolation but in clear view of others' victories. Might such verses be, among many things, not-so-oblique references to the experience of defeat brought on by the failures of both Edward Dickinson's election bids and his political party? In the case of "Success is counted sweetest," might the "distant strains of triumph" evoke the political successes other political parties achieved following the failures of the Whig party?

At least one of these lyrics of defeat offers provocative resonances with such failures:

I never lost as much but twice –  
And that was in the sod.  
Twice have I stood a beggar  
Before the door of God!

Angels – twice descending  
Reimbursed my store –  
Burglar! Banker – Father!  
I am poor once more!

(Fr39 [1858])

Edward Dickinson, perhaps apostrophized by line seven's "Banker – Father!" exclamation, had "never lost . . . but twice" in Whig elections: once in 1854 and again in 1855, just a few years before the composition date both Johnson and Franklin have assigned the poem. One could certainly offer an aggressive reading of the rhetoric of "sod" at line two, marking perhaps a subtle intertext to the discourse of "free soil"—a discourse Edward Dickinson was intimately familiar with given his strong advocacy against the Kansas-Nebraska Act while congressional representative to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Congress.<sup>18</sup> In many important ways, the issue of "free soil," the "Free-Soil" party, and the Kansas-Nebraska act's "popular sovereignty" solution did in fact spell doom for the American Whig party, and concomitantly, Edward Dickinson's political career. In a calculus perhaps too complex to limn here, Michael Holt counts the debate over and passage of the "Nebraska act" as a major cause of the downfall of the Whig Party: "The Nebraska act thus badly damaged intersectional comity in the party, although some Whigs in both sections continued to hope that it

might be restored in time for the 1856 election” (957). Here then we find an example of Emily Dickinson’s verse being engaged not simply with a rhetoric of defeat but with a rhetoric of defeat wholly resonant with the American Whig Party.

The following, little-read poem also arguably betrays a deep investment in Whiggery:

Papa above!  
Regard a mouse  
O’erpowered by the Cat!  
Reserve within thy kingdom  
A ‘Mansion’ for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards  
To nibble all the day,  
While unsuspecting Cycles  
Wheel solemnly away!  
(Fr151B [1860])

The poem begins emphatically with a paternal trope, as the speaker draws “father’s” attention to a scene of defeat. “Regard” as a verb here is appropriately ambiguous; read as a directive to “take note of” the Mouse, the poem becomes merely a humorous revision of a religious set piece. If, however, we gloss “regard” with a bit more care, the poem opens up in intriguing ways. “Regard” also signifies “to look to, have a care of or for,” “to consider, take into account,” and “to take heed of.” Given these additional definitions, line two’s directive might be more didactic in nature: to take heed of the lessons the Mouse-cum-“Rat” offers “Papa.”

In lines three and four the poem reveals its central conceit: a parody of John 14:1–3: “Reserve within thy kingdom / A “Mansion” for the Rat!” Exaggerated by the trite “Cat-Rat” rhyme at lines 3 and 5, such a perversion of religious rhetoric renders the verse sardonic, even slightly blasphemous, beginning as it does not with God-the-Father but with God-the-Papa, and suggesting that a “Rat” should have a place reserved in heaven. In turn, the stanza break after line five marks a seeming shift from the earthly to the ethereal, imagining the Rat care-free and “Snug in seraphic Cupboards.”

While this poem surely offers us Dickinson at her most playful, it may also offer us Dickinson at her most political. If we concede the indeterminacy of “regard,” allowing for the possibility that the directive is for something more than mere observation, then the poem can be read parabolically: something to the effect of “it is a far, far better thing the Mouse-cum-Rat does now.” In particular, we must trouble over the poem’s final two lines: “While unsuspecting Cycles / Wheel solemnly away!” Evoking at once images of revolution and cycles of history, progress, and fate, the lines remind the reader of the world the Mouse-cum-Rat has left behind. Tellingly, the poem does not actively mourn the fallen Mouse-cum-Rat; instead, the poem offers solace in the fact that said Mouse-cum-Rat will find peace in the afterlife, in celestial cupboards where it is able “To nibble all the day.” Free of worldly concern, our Mouse-cum-Rat thus transcends that world’s machines and machinations, which “solemnly,” “unsuspecting[ly]” go on turning, regardless of the Mouse-cum-Rat. Reading the poem aggressively, we might suggest that as the speaker draws “Papa’s” attention to the Mouse-cum-Rat, Emily Dickinson draws her father’s attention to the parable that Mouse-cum-Rat offers. As such, we can interpret this poem as a parable of the benefits of remove from a political sphere, of the peace and fulfillment to be found in the “seraphic Cupboards” of political seclusion; as an assurance that the Massachusetts political machine continues to function with or without Edward Dickinson.<sup>19</sup>

“Papa above!” was written (we think) in 1860, the same year that the Bell-Everett/Constitutional Union party nominated Edward Dickinson for lieutenant governor, and, by extension, nominated Emily Dickinson for lieutenant governor’s daughter. In a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross, dated mid-September 1860, the poet writes, “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 I would pull their tails, but as they are only patriots, I must forgo the bliss . . . / Love to Papa” (L225). The import of this letter is two-fold: first, the epistle tellingly attaches a discourse of patriotism—a particularly contested discourse during the period, one not to be used lightly—to the Bell-Everett party. Given that the Bell-Everett party was the closest political

cousin to the Whig party, such a declaration of “patriotism” offers a sinewy if subtle political commentary.<sup>20</sup> Second, the letter shows that Dickinson had taken to representing the Bell-Everett party as a cat in 1860.<sup>21</sup> This letter enables a near allegorical interpretation of the poem/parable: having witnessed the Bell-Everett party “o’erpowering” a potential nominee, the speaker chides her “Papa/Father” to heed the lesson, remain out of the “unsuspecting Cycles,” and stay “snug” in political repose.

*3. Some things we mean when we say  
“Emily Dickinson’s Civil War Poetry”*

Dickinson studies has come a long way since David Porter’s 1981 claim that “there is no Civil War in the flood of poems from the war years” (115). Recent studies by Lawrence Berkove, Benjamin Friedlander, Tyler Hoffman, Maurice Lee, and Leigh Anne Marcellin, and others all affirm the persistent presence of the Civil War in that flood of poems. The preceding has offered a series of speculative and gestural readings of Whig party rhetorics and resonances in an attempt to both reactivate “Whig” as a keyword in Dickinson studies and chart relationships between Edward and Emily Dickinson’s political and politico-poetic poses and positions.<sup>22</sup> But this essay’s title promised “Dickinson, Whiggery, and *War*.” Where then is the war in all this Whiggery?

When we say we want to read the Civil War in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, what precisely do we mean? Do we want to hear the most overt songs of war: e.g. “My friend attacks my friend!” (Fr103 [1859]); “A slash of Blue! A sweep of Gray!” (Fr233B [1861])? Do we want poems we can historicize, a la the Frazar Stearns poem, “It dont sound so terrible – quite – as it did – / I run it over – ‘Dead’, Brain – ‘Dead’” (Fr384 [1862])? Are we looking for bloody battles: “The name – of it – is ‘Autumn’ – / The hue – of it – is Blood – “ (Fr465 [1862]); “Whole Gulfs – of Red, and Fleets – of Red – / And Crews – of solid Blood –” (Fr468 [1862]) or “He fought like those Who’ve nought to lose – / Bestowed Himself to Balls” (Fr480 [c. 1862])? Is it mourning we desire:

*ColemanHutchison*

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

(Fr518 [1863])

“It feels a shame to be Alive – / When Men so brave – are dead –” (Fr524 [1863]), “I’m sorry for the Dead – Today –” (Fr582 [1863]), or, “To know just how He suffered – would be dear – / To know if any Human eyes were near” (Fr688 [1863])?

As witnessed by both recent Civil War historiography and recent American history, once the decision to “go to war” has been made, there is often a great deal of ideological pressure to ensure that politics *as such* recede, that the various spectacles of patriotism and battle that make war “just what it is” eclipse political partisanship, machination, and debate. Once a war begins—the logic goes—citizens should put aside any and all political acrimony, rally around the nation’s flag, and support its gallant troops, regardless of the degree of those citizens’ belief in the cause of the war. In wartime there is no room for partisan rancor. Once war is “over,” then politics may take center stage again; political debates about the “justness,” motivation, and outcomes of the given war may then rise and converge; war can once again become political. Such a restricted conceptualization of war not only ignores the experience of nearly every modern war but also elides the profoundly political nature of the pursuit of war, and, in this specific case, limits our understanding of the profoundly social nature of Emily Dickinson’s art. If instead we heed Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum “War is Merely the Continuation of Policy by Other Means” we achieve a much more nuanced understanding of the interpenetrations of the martial and the political: “We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried out by other means” (87).

Given this sense of war as “merely” a “continuation of political intercourse,” Dickinson studies would do well to ask, what does “Civil War poetry” look like? Could “Civil War poetry” include poems that, in one way or another, address the political intercourses and discourses that led to or

perpetuated war? If so, then poems “about” the demise of the American Whig party seem strong candidates for the office of “Civil War poetry.” After all, by Michael Holt’s account, the demise of Whig party in the late 1850s was among the most important “links in the chain of causation” that led to the onset of the American Civil War (984). Is “The Soul selects her own Society –” a Civil War poem? What about “Papa above!”? Both “We grow accustomed to the Dark” and “To put this World down, like a Bundle” evoke the political seclusion that occasioned the demise of the Whig party, and, by extension, heralded the coming of the war. (Tellingly, these poems also date from 1862, the first full year of the American Civil War). If war can never be divorced from politics, then we need a definition of “Civil War poetry” pliable and capacious enough to include the above poems with their resonances and rhetorics of Whig party politics.<sup>23</sup>

Such a definition would significantly expand the scope of Emily Dickinson’s Civil War poetry and potentially revise the ways we conceive of her wartime poetic project. Accepting this definition, might we consider the following a Civil War poem?<sup>24</sup>

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 –  
It’s 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 [1863])

Given its emphasis on the battles of the “Soul” and its renunciation of both corporeal and social bodies (“bodiless”; “No man”), the poem seems, at first glance, yet another of Emily Dickinson’s “timeless” spiritual mediations. Upon

closer examination, however, this poem seems quite *timely*, its spiritual gestures eminently political. Read in terms of the Dickinson's chaotic political milieu, the poem becomes a weighty meditation on the personal, political, and ideological battles that accompanied and occasioned the physical battles of the American Civil War. What does it mean, after all, to write a poem that references "Battles prevalent" in 1862-1863, when "News" of the Civil War abounded, both here and abroad?<sup>25</sup> When "History" is recording bloody battles and campaigns at a fevered pitch, what does it mean to champion the "Invisible – Unknown" battles and "Bodiless Campaigns"? One could certainly read this poem in terms of the battles of the "Soul" that raged in the "hearts and minds" of northerners and southerners alike during this period. More locally, one could read this poem in terms of the battles a man now removed from the political spotlight fought with himself—"No man"—over the justness of war, the dialectics of victory and defeat, the cycles of historical progress. Such battles, the poem's repetition remind us, recur; they "endure – / Enact – and terminate" like the cycles of "Night" and "Sunrise."

To read the poem in this way is to conceive of a Civil War poetry that may have very little to do with actual physical combat. In poems such as this, the Civil War is intelligible not only in martial imagery but also in themes of defeat, loss, and struggle, and in references, however oblique, to the personal, political and ideological battles that raged alongside the physical ones. To conceive of Dickinson's war poetry in these terms is to read the poems aggressively, yes, but also with a constant awareness of the poet's uncommon proximity to the war: her "Preceptor" one of the "Secret Six" who funded John Brown's raid on Harpers' Ferry and a colonel of one of the first African-American regiments in the Civil War; her father a stalwart member of a political party whose debates about constitutionality and slavery helped occasion the war. When we have looked for the Civil War in the "flood of poems from the war years," perhaps we have been looking for the wrong thing, forgetting, as we are wont to do, Clausewitz's "other means." Given all of the above, we can also—and should also—approximate Emily Dickinson's relationship to the American Civil War in terms of Holt's "chain of causation" and the perplexing and incestuous political milieu of latter-day Whig Party politics.

### Notes

1. My thanks to Rob Smith and Paul Crumbley for their interest in and patience with my work, and especially to Betsy Erkkila for getting me into all this Whiggery in the first place. This essay is in memory of my father, James Donald Hutchison, whose own conservative politics were a source of constant frustration and loving debate.
2. As Alfred Habegger notes, “As [Dickinson] and other conservative Whigs recognized, our founding document, a product of negotiation and compromise, did in fact legitimize slavery. What he and they could not face was that this feature represented a catastrophic original flaw” (293).
3. It should be noted that the *Republican* seems to have been ambivalent about Dickinson’s nomination from the outset. Yet, the pith of “Warrington’s” response may register the fact that the newspaper and its correspondent had misjudged or underestimated the level of Dickinson’s “partisanship.” The 2 October 1861 *Republican* proclaimed, “Mr. Dickinson, if we know him, does not differ with the republicans in sentiment at all, and has not differed in years.” As evidenced by the declination that would follow, the *Republican* did not know Edward Dickinson very well at all. In a letter to Salmon Portland Chase, dated 23 January 1860, Dickinson declared:

I do not sympathise with the Republican party in Mass[achusetts]—although I am a Republican, upon the true principle of republicanism—the present dominant party in this State being composed of Know Nothings, and ultra abolitionists and some whigs, & more democrats—The real, true anti-slavery party, is the Whig party—30, or 40,000 of whom have not voted, for years past; because they would not vote for Know Nothingism, by name or by the *name* of Republicanism . . . We have been dragged through the depths of radicalism, for the last six years, and the bone & sinew of Mass[achusetts], will be, in fact, are aroused and indignant at the oppression which has been exercised towards the most deserving portion of our citizens, and, in my opinion, there is strength enough here, to place ourselves in a position to deserve more respect than we have had, since the overthrow of every thing good by the K[now].N[othing]. party (quoted in Bingham, 569).

4. Following Betsy Erkkila's influential, "notorious" "Emily Dickinson and Class" argument, Habegger notes, "Not being a career politician whose livelihood depended on getting elected, Edward did not have to adjust to changing views on the bitterly divisive issues associated with slavery" (293). While this is certainly true, and while Habegger does well to underscore the class ideologies and material conditions that undergirded Dickinson's political positions, I want to be careful here not to reduce the complexity of Edward Dickinson's politics to mere class convenience or convention.
5. Clara Newman, quoted in Sewall, 60.
6. *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, 10 September 1852, quoted in Bingham, 526-527.
7. *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, 27 September 1850, quoted in Leyda, i. 180. Also, "slow and conservative," a man whose "attachment to whig ideas and the whig party did not enable him to conform to the reconstruction of parties." 7 November 1873 *Boston Journal*, quoted in Leyda, ii. 209-210.
8. Time has not been kind to Edward Dickinson's act of "blue-blooded" Whiggery. Michael Holt recently decried the "ostrich-like stubbornness of the blue-blooded Websterites in the Massachusetts delegation to the Baltimore national convention . . . [n]aïve and amateurish gentlemen . . . [who] lacked hard-headed realis[m]" (958-959). Though Holt does not mention Dickinson by name, his act surely evinces this sort of "stubbornness."
9. *The Springfield Daily Republican* 13 December 1853, as quoted in Leyda, i. 259.
10. Edward Stafford, quoted in Holt, 951.
11. Before recuperating "Whig" as a keyword for Dickinson studies, we must be clear about the complex significations of said keyword. "Whig" was a rather promiscuous signifier during the period. As a noun, it signified any of the following: "a yokel, country bumpkin," "a rebel," and, "a member of a party formed in 1834 from a fusion of the National Republicans and other elements opposed to the Democrats; it favoured a protective tariff and a strong national or central government, and was succeeded in 1856 by the Republican party"; as an adjective, it signified "of, pertaining to, or characteristic of a Whig or Whigs: holding the opinions or principles of a Whig." As we proceed, we will

want to leave in play all these significations; however, this essay understands “Whig,” “Whiggish” and “Whiggery” to first and foremost signify the Whig *Party*: a party formed in 1833-1834 and committed to the tenets of republican self-government, political liberty, and public virtue.

12. One must heed Johnson’s concerns about the textual stability of this letter. See his textual note, page 12.
13. Such skepticism seems to me of a piece with recent readings of class and race in Dickinson. See, for instance, Erkkila, “Class,” and Stonely.
14. In deploying Berlant’s “intimate public sphere” in this way, I am clearly taking her theory “traveling,” pushing the metaphorical nature of the phrase, and adapting rather freely her terminology for a post-Reagan America.
15. Suffice it to say that a phenomenology of such an intimate public sphere proves at best speculative, and that the lack of material traces of such conversations, anecdotes, and rumors pose a series of methodological quandaries.
16. As the crucial work of Martha Nell Smith reminds us, Dickinson’s question “dont I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law?” comes as a postscript to an erotically charged letter to Susan Gilbert labeled “open me carefully,” forcing us to think in particularly intimate terms about this intimate public sphere.
17. Letter to A.L. Soule, dated Amherst, 29 October 1855, quoted in Bingham, 397. Since all the Edward Dickinson correspondence quoted in this essay was printed or reprinted in the *Springfield Daily Republican* or *The Hampshire and Franklin Express*, we can assume that Emily Dickinson had access to these letters since they were in circulation in her intimate public sphere.
18. See Bingham, esp. 352-356, 559-564.
19. In Franklin’s “A” version of this poem, “pompously” replaces “solemnly” at line 9, accentuating the sense of distance between the poem’s speaker and these “unsuspecting Cycles.”
20. One should note that Dickinson maintains a safe distance here from the politics she comments upon: she merely *eschews* the bliss of pulling the tails of the party

wonks; she does not dismiss or condemn the desire to do so. In turn, given the inscrutability of tone in the letter, one may wish to read “patriots” ironically.

21. Dickinson used “mousey”—or at perhaps feline—images to describe her father more than once. As an anonymous reader for this journal reminded me, Dickinson would later describe her father as “the best Mouser” (L397). As noted above, in the scathing “Warrington” editorial that appeared only a few months *after* the composition of this poem, Edward Dickinson was called—quite publicly—a “Mouse” to Edward Everett’s “man.”
22. Alfred Habegger has offered a pithy if reductive estimation of this daughter-father relationship: “Emily Dickinson interpreted her father’s insistence on the ‘high, strong ground’ and his resolute political isolation as signs of noble character. Seeing him in this way furnished a model for defining and taking control of her own emerging fate. His fixities authorized her own, and most of all with respect to her life’s work. A central and enabling idea in her poetry is that loyalty persists beyond hope of reward. Another is that greatness is tragic and solitary” (Habegger, 299). As I hope the preceding suggests, there is much, much ground to cover here, and a proclamation like this—no matter how elegantly worded—simply will not suffice. Close measured readings must be undertaken in order for the dynamics outlined here to become clear.
23. In her trenchant study, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*, Shira Wolosky suggests that Dickinson’s wartime poems were above or outside of political partisanship: “she scrupulously refrained from taking sides. She sympathized with the defeated without partisanship” (58-59). The sort of study I am advocating here would need to rethink the definition of “partisanship” and would need to take seriously the specific *party* politics that informed and impelled the war.
24. “The Battle fought between the Soul” bears striking thematic resemblance to “To fight aloud, is very brave – / But *gallanter*, I know / Who charge within the bosom / The Cavalry of Wo –” (Fr138), a poem written, we think, in 1859 or 1860. The reading practice I am advocating here would need to tend to this poem as well. Even though it pre-dates the war, the poem seems quite Whiggish in its rhetorics and resonances, and, given its martial imagery, seems something of a portent of the war to come. After all, by 1859-1860 secession and/or war seemed to many a too-real possibility. See, for instance, Frederickson, 36-50 and Melville’s “The Portent. (1859.)” and “Misgivings. (1860.)” in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*.

25. See, for instance, Grover.

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J *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1955. Citation by poem number.

L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958. Citation by letter number.

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