1. In March 1855 the poet, returning from an extended family visit to Washington, D.C. was taken to the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia to hear the Rev. Charles Wadsworth preach. Wadsworth was one of the city’s most famous preachers. With his “deep base tones, reserved emotional power, and luminous language, combined with his original exposition of Old School Presbyterian thought,” he “produced an unforgettable effect….He impressed believers and unbelievers alike, including Mark Twain, who heard him in San Francisco.” (Habegger, 330)

2. Wadsworth was 16 years older than Dickinson, and married. The fascination he seems to have had for her was complexly erotic and ideal—the sort of “reverent eager friendship that intellectual girls often give to a man much older than they.” [see the heroines in the novels of the Bronte sisters and of George Eliot, favorites of E.D.] (Habegger 330) Dickinson characterized him as “strong, tragic, unknowable,” a Man …of Sorrow.” Reading about him after his death in 1883, she said “I have had a Letter from another World.”

3. It seems likely that E.D. corresponded with him, after 1855, until his departure for California in March 1862, but all correspondence between them was destroyed, with the exception of one brief and discretely pastoral inquiry from him about her distress in relation to her brother’s health.

However, there survive three draft letters in E.D.’s handwriting addressed to an unnamed. “Master” These drafts seem to have been followed by mailed final copies (internal references suggest) but these too do not survive, nor does the identity of the recipient.

4. Thomas Johnson, the Editor of Dickinson’s Letters dates the first of these “Master” letters (Letter 187) as “about 1858”; the second (233) as “about 1861”; and the third (248) as “early 1862?”

The first Master Letter is proper and not at all passionate or unsettled in tone. It suggests a prior correspondence. The second however is much more intense. Written to someone outside New England, it suggests (pleads) that he come to Amherst. The general tone of the letter is urgent, even volcanic, in its expression of naked neediness. More unsettling, probably, to Wadsworth (if he was indeed the ultimate recipient) than the (naïve and girlish) adulterous provocations was her thinly veiled idolatry: ‘

“One more drop from the gash that stains your Daisy’s bosom—then would you believe? …God made me, Master, I did not be—myself….He built the heart in me. Bye and bye it outgrew me and like the little mother with the big child—I got tired holding him. I heard of a thing called ‘Redemption’—which rested men and women. You remember I asked you for it—you gave me something else. I forgot the Redemption [in the Redeemed—I didn’t tell you for a long time, but I knew you had altered me—I] and was tired no more…."

The third Master letter begins in distress that something in the second has deeply offended the recipient—perhaps this heretical suggestion that Dickinson had sought Redemption but fallen in love, not with Christ the Redeemer, but with his spokesman. She seems to have experienced some decisive and devastating rejection from him of her plighted loyalty: “Wonder stings me
like the Bee—...I’ve got a tomahawk in my side but that don’t hurt much....Her master stabs her
more—Won’t he come to her—or will he let her seek him, never minding so long wandering if
to him at last.”

Dickinson’s distress was sealed when it was announced in the Philadelphia papers in January
1862 that the Rev. Charles Wadsworth had accepted another pastorate and was moving to
California.

Here is the considered reflection of one Dickinson scholar—her biographer Alfred Habegger—
on the significance of this fraught relationship for her personal development and for her art:

“There was a man, probably a minister; he was married and in other ways out of reach and
unsuitable; his feelings for her had little in common with hers for him; she knew little about him
and began to project her powerful desires and fantasies on him; their correspondence became
increasingly troublesome; they met, perhaps in 1860, perhaps only once…but in the poems she
wrote afterward [In the wake of this crisis, in the years 1862-3 alone, she wrote an incredible 522
poems!] she returned again and again to this impossible relationship, developing its latent
elements in fantastic ways.

“Whether or not Wadsworth was the man, this romantic crisis was the necessary and climactic
phase of Dickinson’s long-delayed maturity and of the huge demands she made on intimates.
This was the event that forced her to think about the satisfactions she could reasonably expect in
life and the compensatory goals she might plausibly achieve. By 1863 when she wrote in
passing of ‘the heart I former wore’ (F757), she had come to regard the crisis as her life’s
transforming event.” (My Lives Are Laid Away in Books, 421-422)

J. 1286
I thought that nature was enough
Till Human nature came
But that the other did absorb
As Parallax a Flame—

Of Human Nature just aware
There added the Divine
Brief struggle for capacity
The power to contain

Is always as the contents
But give a Giant room
And you will lodge a Giant
And not a smaller man.  c. 1873

Dickinson’s mature poetry makes more room for the drama of human relationships, for the
unspeakable anguish that can afflict consciousness, and for the unexpected invasion of the
authentically experienced “Divine” as opposed to the “fine fabrication” of bourgeois “Faith.”
Emily Dickinson wrote a good many “love” poems, some no doubt inspired by others with whom she shared intimacies in her correspondence, like Samuel Bowles and Susan Gilbert Dickinson. These below seem to trace the tragic romance she imagined with Wadsworth: they use language and imagery associated with the clerical estate, Puritan theology, and the Bible.

J. 293
I got so I could take his name—
Without—Tremendous gain—
That Stop—sensation—on my Soul—
And Thunder in the Room—
I got so I could walk across
That angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I turned—how—
And all our Sinew tore—
I got so I could stir the Box—
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath—
As Staples—driven through—
Could dimly recollect a Grace—
I think, they call it “God”—
Renowned to ease Extremity—
When Formula, had failed—
And shape my Hands—
Petition’s way,
Tho’ ignorant of a word
That Ordination—utters—
My Business, with the Cloud,
If any Power behind it, be,
Not subject to Despair—
It care, in some remoter way,
For so minute affair
As Misery—
Itself, too vast, for interrupting—more—
c.1861

J. 356
The Day that I was crowned
Was like the other Days—
Until the Coronation came—
And then—‘twas Otherwise—
As Carbon in the Coal
And Carbon in the Gem
Are One—and yet the former
Were dull for diadem—
I rose and all was plain—
But when the Day declined
Myself and It, in Majesty
Were equally—adorned—
The Grace that I—was chose—
To Me—surpassed the Crown
That was the Witness for the Grace—
‘Twas even that ‘twas Mine—c.1862

J. 322
There came a Day at Summer’s full,
Entirely for me—
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections—be—
The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new—
The time was scarce profaned, by speech—
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament
The Wardrobe—of our Lord—
Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this—time—
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast—as Hours will—
Clutched tight, by greedy hands—
So faces on two decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands—
And so when all the time had leaked,
Without external sound
Each bound the Other’s Crucifix--
We gave no other Bond--
Sufficient troth, that we shall rise--
Deposed, at length, the Grave--
To that new Marriage,
Justified—through Calvaries of Love—1861

J. 365
Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?
Then crouch within the door--
Red-- is the Fire’s common tint--
But when the vivid Ore
Has vanquished Flame’s conditions,
It quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the light
Of unanointed Blaze.
Least Village has its Blacksmith
Whose Anvil’s even ring
Stands symbol for the finer Forge
That soundless tugs—within--
Refining these impatient Ores--
With Hammer, and with Blaze
Until the designated Light
Repudiate the Forge--

J. 511
If you were coming in the Fall,
I’d brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.
If I could see you in a year,
I’d wind the months in balls--
And put them each in separate drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse--
If only Centuries delayed,
I’d count them on my Hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into Van Dieman’s land.
If certain, when this life was out--
That your and mine, should be

I’d toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity—
But now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee--
That will not state-- its sting. 1862

J. 640
I cannot live with You--
It would be Life--
And Life is over there--
Behind the Shelf
The Sexton keeps the Key to--
Putting up
Our Life—His Porcelain--
Like a Cup—
Discarded of the Housewife--
Quaint—or Broke--
A newer Sevres pleases--
Old Ones crack—
I could not die—with You--
For one must wait
To shut the Other’s Gaze down--
You-could not—
And I—Could I stand by
And see you—freeze--
Without my Right of Frost--
Death’s privilege?
Nor could I rise—with You--
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus’--
That new Grace
Grow plain—and foreign
On my homesick Eye--
Except that You than He
Shone closer by—
They’d judge Us—How--
For You—served Heaven—You know,
Or sought to—
I could not—

Because You saturated Sight--
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be--
Though My Name
Rand loudest
On the Heavenly fame—

And were You—saved--
And I—condemned to be
Where You were not--
That self—were Hell to Me—

So We must meet apart--
You there—I—here—
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are—and Prayer---
And that White Sustenance--
Despair-- c. 1862

J. 341
After great pain, a formal feeling comes--
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like tombs--
Th stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round--
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought--
A Wooden way
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— c. 1862

J.258
There’s a certain Slant of light
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us--
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings are—

None may teach it—Any--
‘Tis the Seal Despair--
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air—

When it comes the Landscape listens--
Shadows—hold their breath--
When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
On the look of Death-- c.1861

A likely consequence of Dickinson’s exaltation and subsequent “Despair” at the possibility of a romantic union that could meet the demands of her imagination would seem to have been periods of profound psychic trauma. The following (frequently anthologized) poems render such experience with uncanny objectivity and verbal mastery.

J. 269
Pain—has an element of Blank--
It cannot recollect
When it begun—or if there were
A time when it was not—

It has no Future—but itself--
Its Infinite contain
Its Past—enlightened to perceive
New periods—of Pain. c. 1862