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Emily Dickinson:

The Unorthodox Epistolary Writer

by

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INTRODUCTION: LETTER WRITING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By writing letters Emily Dickinson did not do anything extraordinary. Communication in the era before social media was conducted exclusively by mail -- paper mail. Strict rules underlay this common practice which was even part of school curricula (Hardie vii). Dickinson corresponded with her friends and relatives in the fashion of the middle-upper-class nineteenth-century women, who were assigned letter writing to "maintain fellowship over distances" (Barton & Hall 19) as their "sex excel[led men's] in the ease and grace of epistolary correspondence" (ibid 33). It was part of the epistolary etiquette of the times that letters should be characterized by "emotion and sincerity" -- female attributes -- and not by "reason and wit", which were allowed for the male (ibid 10). The scope of available subjects, however, was rather limited, as women's affairs and consequently their news usually amounted to nothing more than accounts of issues restrained to the domestic sphere. Their letters conveyed the microcosm of their household to the cosmos of the public sphere.

Dickinson spent almost all of her life confined in Amherst, a town of Puritan origin. New Englanders held personal discipline, self-improvement, obedience, and duty of extreme importance. Middle-upper class women were granted some sort of education, which they had to "solicit as a favor and not to extract it as right" (Wayne 74). Schools prepared them for their role as wives and mothers who would shoulder the "great task of renovating the world" (ibid 74). Whatever ambition they might have should be "quelled" (Epstein 74) since it was incompatible with the "private station" they were born to (ibid). If they were to be cherished by their husbands, they had to be "thoughtless" and "accommodate [themselves] to [their] husband's position" (ibid 52). Domesticity, male superiority, and female confinement to the private sphere were promoted by the contemporary power system through the expert discourse of men and ministers. The instillation of controlling habits and the continuous striving to emulate valued and favored images meant that women had practically no choice in constructing a self of their own, but subject themselves to those paradigms.

Letters were the main means of communicating and letter writing was not a laughing matter; rather, it was an art. Letter-writing manuals warned senders to be careful as letters are "witness[es]" to one's character (Barton & Hall 121) so they had

to display "proper decorum and taste" (ibid 117). They had to be composed in compliance with the rhetoric of letters (Westlake 70) which dictated every aspect, from layout to epistolary style as they were considered "a mirror of a person's mind" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xviii) and could either make or break the sender's social status. This art was considered an "ornament of education" (Dilworth v) and as a school subject it enabled the expert authorities to inculcate "properties of piety and virtue" to the young (*Classical English Letter-writer* iv). Letters as a "universal instrument of government and society" (Thorold 7), "used for the glory of God" (ibid 8) became the vehicle of propagating modes of conduct, standards of morality and accepted behavior, prescribing what was proper so they ultimately functioned as what Louis Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" and function as interpellators of performative heteronormativity. Consequently, subjects might obtain false consciousness since they understand themselves to be naturally produced, failing to discern their subjection to the hidden power of ideology; "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection".[1] In other words, letter-writing manuals instilled and consolidated certain codes of behavior, functioned as a "cultural capital" (Barton & Hall 10) which imposed "cultural strictures about self – presentation" (Smith & Watson 42) and consequently self-formation, and thus served as a means for the internalization of dominant moral values, preserving and reinforcing social hierarchies.

I argue, however, that Dickinson exploits and uses the letter, a means of interpellation, to avoid interpellation and transform the conventionalities of the letter into a new genre, which I here call poetic epistolarity, that is, letters divested of triviality and ephemerality, and invested in poetic elements. This dissertation examines the fragmented corpus of her letters, the epistolary universe Dickinson constructs to trace the system of power that strives to discipline her spirit through the prescriptive epistolary norms and the ways in which she evades it by transforming the epistolary genre. Her letters, uncharacteristic of nineteenth century epistolarity, as they do not comply with most letter-writing rules, become her instrument of

[1]. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm.

undermining the system of power from within. I suggest that while she takes advantage of letter writing which affords her with the opportunity to map her own world and people it with the addressees that correspond to her manifold personality, she transgresses and violates every rule and instruction on proper letter writing that stands in her way to resist subjection to the existing hierarchies and social order. Dickinson's way out of the stifling epistolary framework is employing what Michel de Certeau calls "transverse tactics" to manipulate the space she is confined in, "a terrain organized by the law of foreign power", the property of the proper, being constantly on guard for cracks in its structure so as to "turn forces alien to [her] to [her] own ends" (De Certeau 38). She undermines the cultural values set upon her by transforming them and creates a space in which she can find ways of using the "constraining order of the place or of the language" (ibid 30), the established vocabulary and syntax, to her own ends for the epistolary extension of her idiosyncratic poetic style. Although letter writing entailed adopting the established behavior, for Dickinson it becomes a weapon against these very manners. Over the years, Dickinson ceases to cling to the letter of letter writing and, although she tends to her epistles to the letter, she codifies them not only into markers of her poetic spirit but into poetic epistolarity, a literary genre.

Only a fraction of the letters Dickinson sent survives -- Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward include 1049 letters in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* -- as most of them were destroyed after the recipients' deaths according to nineteenth-century epistolary etiquette. In her letters, which span almost her entire lifetime, Dickinson's course to maturity as well as her constant quest for answers to existential matters can be traced. My work examines a great number of letters in their entirety, so that the means through which Dickinson rebels against conventions and achieves her idiosyncratic aesthetics are highlighted. Copious short or extant extracts of letters are cited for a thorough analysis which aids my attempt to corroborate how her innovations lead to the creation of a new genre.

My work will examine several books from the Dickinson library as well as several of her schoolbooks which played an important role in her epistolary development. Domesticity and the way it affected women as regards their access to education and personal growth will also be explored as it set a stifling framework within which Dickinson was obliged to move. I will also examine a considerable number of letter-writing manuals, either taught at schools as prompts for composition

or included in every book of social etiquette or magazine available to Dickinson. These manuals set another rigid framework, that of epistolary conventions which dictated every single aspect of letter writing from layout to content. As such, they functioned as what Michel Foucault calls normalizing agents, prescribing, and delimiting the possible options, leading to the construction of docile bodies (1979, 138). I will attempt to exemplify and elaborate on the ways in which they branded letter writers, aiming at normalization by the exertion of disciplinary power. Dickinson refuses to play by their binding rules and become subjected to the limitations and restrictions of the epistolary genre; rather she bends them to lift their control and remove their restraints, unfettering herself from the generalization they impose. The only way to defy Foucauldian power is from within and Dickinson confronts it by making use of its own weapons in order to achieve "a degree of plurality and creativity" (De Certeau 30). While Dickinson takes advantage of the rigid epistolary framework which affords her with a socially acceptable way of communicating her reflections and ensures a wide audience, her particular epistolary practice becomes "the crack […] in the surveillance of the proprietary powers" (ibid 38) which Dickinson exploits; she uses the means of interpellation to avoid interpellation. She moves within the socially and culturally set epistolary frame and through the "internal manipulation of [the] system of language [and] established order' (ibid 21), she undermines its normative performativity. I will also explore the structural, pragmatic, and semantic divergences which lead to her restructuring of the rhetoric of letters as Dickinson's epistolary epiphanies transform the commonalities of a conventional composition into an innovative piece of writing. I will also attempt to analyze Dickinson's understanding of the metaphysical properties of the letter as well as her deconstruction of hierarchies from what could be called a Derridean perspective.

This endeavor is not without its methodological problems. Dickinson's body of correspondence was salvaged after her death but not in its entirety. Following the publication of the first volume of Dickinson's poems in 1890, there was a public demand for more poems as well as an insatiable desire for more details regarding her life. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and coeditor of the first edition of the first volume of Dickinson's poems, urged Mabel Loomis Todd, the editor of the first edition, for the publication of another volume containing both poems and prose. Being the recipient of numerous letters himself, he was

enthralled by them as they were "quite as marvelous as" her poems. "Such things I find in her letters!" he wrote to Todd: "'The Madonnas I see are those that pass the House to their work, carrying Saviours with them' is not that one of the take-your-breath - away thoughts?" (Bingham, 1945, 81) He read several of them, "things never likely to be published" (ibid 122) to a group of friends and to the College Club (ibid 128) without censoring them. He also published an article entitled "Emily Dickinson's Letters" in the October issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1891. He had previously sent the proof to Austin Dickinson, who considered the publication of the letters "against his taste because they put Emily in a false position", but "did not feel strongly enough about it" to forbid their printing (Bingham, ibid 167). Their reception convinced Higginson of the success a volume with her letters would have even before the publication of the second volume of poems. Todd agreed that "some of Emily's letters *must* be published" (ibid 84) although she approached the letters with "dread […] lest the deep revelations of a peculiar shy inner life might so pervade them that in true loyalty to their writer none could be publicly used" (Todd as qtd in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1896, vi). In an episode of the War of Houses, or the feud between Susan Dickinson (Austin Dickinson's wife) and Mabel Loomis Todd (Austin's lover and Dickinson's editor), the former accused Higginson of "le[ading Dickinson] before the curtain" violating her wishes as she "hated her peculiarities and shrank from any notice of them as a nerve from the knife" (Bingham, 1945, 86). She claimed that Higginson pushed Emily into the forefront, contrary to Dickinson's diffident disposition and her "deep realization" that "for her as for all of us women not fame but 'love and home and certainty' are best" (Bingham, 1945, 86). Susan mentioned her daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who did not allow her to send Higginson one of her poems due to "a most feminine horror of print" (ibid 118). Susan also claimed that she would have published a volume at her own expense for private reading only (ibid 85), but for Higginson's characterizing the poems and "passages from early letters […] un-presentable" (ibid). Ironically, nearly half a century later, Bianchi accused Todd and Higginson that "the most interesting part of [Dickinson's] genius suffer[ed] eclipse" because they were "timorous" (Bianchi, 1932, xi). Thomas Niles, the publisher of the poems, who also had several letters in his possession, considered the publication of her "lucubration […] undesirable" (Bingham, 1945, 51). Even Todd and Higginson wavered about the rightness of the venture. Higginson, who had suggested publishing the letters, sent Todd the entire correspondence apart

from some letters he considered too personal to print, as he feared that they might give the wrong impression about Dickinson. Todd was overwhelmed with the responsibility to edit the letters, that is, to censure them, lest they revealed Dickinson's "inner and hitherto inviolate life" (ibid 192) which might not be compatible with the strict contemporary Puritan values. It was Dickinson's siblings, though, who insisted on the publication of "every word Emily ever wrote" (ibid).

This wish triggered a quest for the discovery and collection of Dickinson's letters, which was a formidable task. Todd and Lavinia spared no effort to locate the letters and cajole the recipients so that they consent to their publication. The task was challenging because of what Millicent Todd Bingham called a social convention with "the force of a Polynesian taboo" (Bingham, 1945, 189): Victorian customs dictated that letters should be destroyed right after the funeral of their possessors without discrimination or inspection of their contents. Lavinia herself had burnt all the letters Emily had in her possession after her death, paying no attention to the identity of the senders, many of whom were eminent personalities. What is more, the publication of the letters of a deceased person was considered a sacrilege. Todd and Lavinia contacted Emily's recipients or their descendants or they visited them to secure not only the letters but their consent to the publication of the correspondence. However, often, the response they received was that the surviving relatives had destroyed Emily's letters at the deceased recipient's request. Fortunately, several of Dickinson's correspondents were still alive at the time and, under the spell of her intriguing prose, had kept her letters. Even so, Dickinson's letters could have been misplaced or even lost, as in the case of George Gould, one of Austin's classmates in Amherst College, who treasured a "cherished batch… kept sacredly" among his other valuables (ibid 254), but lost it during a removal. Many of those who still had Dickinson's letters in their possession were reluctant, however, to hand the letters in, either because they believed that "to deal in personalities' was an offence to good taste" (ibid 190), or because they did not wish "to see their name in print" (ibid 283).

Disregarding the stern Victorian customs, several of the recipients realized the literary value of the letters and, though hesitantly, decided to allow their publication. They sent, what Anna Kellog, the heir of Elbridge Bodwin, a young lawyer practicing in Edward Dickinson's office, called the "mementoes of your gifted sister, written in the early days – when she was full of fun and tease" (Bingham, 1945, 206). Before consenting, however, most of the recipients stipulated that all personal references

should be eliminated. The Norcross sisters, Dickinson's cousins, had a voluminous correspondence in their possession but they were adamant in their decision not to allow anyone to read them:

> I cannot send the letters …because my sister and I are not willing that anyone even Vinnie should have the free reading of them. Many of them have whole sentences which were intended for no eyes but ours and on our account as well as Emily's no one else will ever read them. This we consider our right and we must insist upon it. (ibid 283)

The Norcrosses were eventually convinced to transcribe whichever parts they thought appropriate and hand them to Todd, warning her that although they either "copied almost as they are", or "made extracts", they "must retain the privilege of reading them to you" (ibid). Even the printing of their names was abhorrent to them, so they asked her to "call them letters to her cousins L- and F- [which] is enough" (ibid 284). The original manuscripts were destroyed after their death according to the same ritual which led them to burn the total correspondence of their mother, Lavinia Norcross, with Emily Dickinson at the time of her death.

Even Mrs. Strong, aka Abiah Root, Emily's school-friend, who had "never forgotten [Dickinson's] extraordinary compositions" (Bingham, 1945, 188), and practically initiated this search by offering Emily's letters to Todd, agreed with Todd's suggestion the letters be addressed to Mrs. APS and the salutation begin with Dear A- (ibid 207). Samuel Bowles's son presented the letters on condition that his mother's name would not appear, and all mentions to persons or situations would be omitted, as he did not "wish [his] mother given publicity in connection with letters so personal and private as these"; his wish, however, came at odds with his family's involvement in "the printed page" of the Republican (ibid 252). He requested that the names of his brothers and sister were substituted by son or daughter and asked to examine the proofs of the letters before he consented to their publication. Maria Whitney, Bowles's friend, and Dickinson's acquaintance via letters, asked Todd to have a final saying before the publication so as to be sure that certain passages that seemed "undesirable" to her were not included (ibid 258). Todd believed that scattered sentences removed from their contexts enfeebled the value and the significance Dickinson meant to convey and opted not to publish such letters

altogether. She did, however, include fragments of Dickinson's letters to Austin, consisting of a few sentences in some cases, which were probably thought to shed light on Dickinson's life in the way her siblings and the editors considered fit.

Prior to selecting what the recipients considered inoffensive, decent extracts of the letters, Todd faced two major challenges: deciphering and transcribing the letters on the one hand and dating them on the other. Dickinson's handwriting was either "microscopic" (Bingham, 1945, 207), requiring a total of fifteen pages in copying just three of the original foolscaps, or practically illegible. The accuracy of transcription was challenged by Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of capitals which blurred the ending or the beginning of sentences. What is more, the transcription of Dickinson's letters by some of her recipients was rather illegible, posing another problem for Todd. The lack of any chronological order of the manuscripts handed to her provided no clue as to their dating. Dating could be relied neither on stationery, since Dickinson could use the same writing paper over the years, nor on postage stamps or envelops, since generally they were not preserved. Her earliest letters were dated, though very vaguely, while the later were not. Unless their recipients had written the date on the original manuscript itself, there was no clue of the time they had been written. Todd refers to "the detective work" she had to do to assign places and dates to the letters, as Dickinson's "singularly uneventful life" (Bingham, 1945, 192) made time-stamps elusive. She solicited Austin and Lavinia's help to establish dates on many of them, but she had also to resort to the addressees in an attempt to elicit information about the goings-on of the letters such as the dates of births or deaths, festivities or weddings and so on. This "rag-picking method" (Leyda 1:xiii) was not always successful; the recipients might not have been able to recollect precisely certain events or, even worse, they misdated them, as in the case of the Norcross sisters who could recall neither the exact year Dickinson was in Boston for her eye treatment nor the duration of her stay there. Abiah Root could not recall the names of their mutual friends, so any positive identification was impossible. Dickinson's frequent inclusion of poems, written at a prior time in a later letter, muddled the waters and rendered the dating ambiguous. The development of Dickinson's style over the years, evident in her poetry as well, along with the variations of her handwriting, provided a guide to the chronological arrangement of the letters. However, the destruction of the manuscripts Todd had transcribed in 1894 at the death of their possessors renders any cross-examination and verification impossible.

The critical response to the letters' publication varied. On the one hand, it was viewed as a violation of trust and the President of Amherst College was appalled by the idea that the correspondence of "that innocent confiding child" had been brought to the public, recalling Helen Hunt Jackson's reference to Dickinson's aversion for "print[ing] a piece of [her] soul" (Bingham, 1945, 166). An article in *The Springfield Republican* right after their publication mentioned that: "It is certain that she never meant a line of these letters to be printed. Now that they are between covers, in plain print, which the vulgar may read, we feel that the shy and elusive creature is intruded upon, and for our part we are inclined humbly to beg pardon" (ibid 317). Their literary value, however, forced even the skeptics, who had "the helpless dead -- and she a woman" in mind, to acknowledge that they were "glad [they had been] brought out" (ibid 317). Others wavered between the "conviction that these letters are a precious legacy of a genius" and "the equally strong feeling that they were the abnormal expression of a woman abnormal to the point of disease" and that their "publication by a friend and a sister [was] not the least abnormal thing about them". However, the very same critic hailed them as "the best evidence of the naturalness of her orphic outpourings" (Bingham, 1945, 318). Despite Dickinson's "morbid aversion to society [and] eccentricity bordering insanity [the] letters are mines of jewels […] thesaurus of verse of rare quality and permanent worth" (ibid 318).

As the publication of private letters was not only considered a "breach of faith, […] betrayal of personal and family concerns" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xi), but also an unnecessary tactic since only "a tithe" (ibid) of them were considered worthy of being preserved, the fact that Dickinson's recipients kept her letters, and ignoring what epistolary etiquette held as a sacrilege offered them for publication is indicative of the correspondents' realization of the exceptional qualities that characterized the letters; divergent from conventional letters, they were infused with poetics.

Scholarship on Dickinson in general is another thorny field, as it attempts to explain a cryptic and multifaceted persona who remains a notorious enigma even today. On the one hand, scholars present Dickinson as a troubled soul, the daughter of a tyrant father and a submissive mother (Cody 53). As a result, Emily suffered from severe psychological problems which led to several psychotic breakdowns (ibid 296). She was "partially cracked" (Leyda 2:263) and her "occasional autistic utterances would pass as poetic obscurities" (Cody 353). Ignorant and unwise friends mistook

"the morbidness of her hysteria for a peculiarly artistic nature" (Lowell qtd in Pollak 25). She was an "eccentric spinster" (Martin, 2002, 1) who conceived herself as a "martyr" (Pollak 55) and retreated into the shelter of her house to avoid the "demands made from society" and to "secure herself" (Martin, 2002, 12) "against the Treason of Progress" (Pollak 163). She suffered from "extreme social shyness" (ibid 26) and the "virgin recluse" (ibid 63) was deeply and unrequitedly in love with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who was her mentor and editor. Dickinson was "a little hussy" with "loose morals" and, on top of that, "insane, too" (Habegger 591), since she fell in love with Judge Lord; she spent the last twenty years of her life in "domestic imprisonment", which meant that she was "cut off from history […] idle and impotent" (Pollak 103). She wrote to "gain relief from great personal tensions" (Griffith 296), "parroting English colonial discourse until 1885" (Murray qtd in Smith, 2002, 32) while "her behavior was absurd at best, at worst waspish […] distraught […] intolerable" (ibid 165). She was "cracked without a doubt" (ibid 166), living in a "private hell" (Gelpi 16).

On the other hand, she is thought to be a heroic genius sacrificing herself for the improvement of society. Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, New England in a Puritan patriarchal society. She was the "most perfect flower of new England Transcendentalism" (Aiken qtd in Martin, 2002, 33), a "heroic voice, untouched by plutocracy" (ibid 37) who opted to reject "society and its patriarchal values" (Gilbert & Gubar qtd in Martin, 2002, 45). She retreated to "understand life" as she "required solitude" (Martin, 2007, 40). Her anger at "female subordination" (Gilbert & Gubar 45) made her resist "disruptive social and political forces" (Pollak 147) and her withdrawal from society was "the highest order of culture" (ibid 157), through which Dickinson "maintained power against materialism" (ibid 157). Her reclusion was an "act of self-assertion and autonomy" (Martin, 2007, 77). She was "determined to survive" (Rich qtd in Wolff 169) and she employed voices which consisted an "intrinsic unit in the midst of diversity" (Wolff 177). As she was "too ethereal for daily life" (Ward, 1961, 96), Dickinson flirted with crossing "the border of sanity" and during a period "it must have been only with the great difficulty that she could withstand the disintegrating forces that assailed her" (ibid 55).

Unconventional though the above summation of the critical work on Dickinson might be, it is indicative of the vast spectrum of various perspectives on her life and work. The literature surrounding Emily Dickinson is extremely

voluminous and incredibly diverse. Since the first publication of her poems in 1890, a plethora of studies have been published aiming at demythologizing "the Myth of Amherst" (Seawall, 1974, 216), solving the riddle of this "enigmatic being" (L 342b) explicating and rationalizing her "wayward" lifestyle by shedding light on "the Shadow Lady of Amherst" (Farr, 1992, 114), and facilitating the interpretation of her poems and letters. However, the attempt to refute one myth triggers numerous others; the attempt to solve the riddle poses countless new questions casting shadows instead of dispersing them. Jay Leyda argues that, although the modern interpreter of Dickinson's work is able to spot the devices she employs, they run the risk of using them as their own so that they can prove their point, investing the poems and the letters with the meaning that supports their theory (Leyda 1:xxii). As a result, Dickinson emerges as a virgin and a hussy, a rebel and a slave, a victim, and a manipulator, compliant and defiant, sane and insane, weird and peculiar, depressed, repressed, oppressed, and revolting. Critics take various stances: feminist, psychoanalytic or formalistic, to name just a few, but given the polyvocality of her work, their attempts often led to "reductionisms" (Schultz, 2005, 10).

John Cody, for example, using Freudian psychoanalysis, argues that her childhood and her difficult relationship with her mother led to several nervous breakdowns, evident in her work, which determined her attitude towards her life and her obsession with death. In this way, however, as William Schultz argues, Cody "neglects later formative processes and influences" (2005, 10) and limits his interpretation to her early years which, significant though they maybe, are not the only key to one's personality. In his attempt to link clues with missing information, he resorts to reconstruction, that is, the invention of "psychological facts inferentially" (ibid) to fill the gaps at the absence of verifiable evidence concerning Dickinson's life. The findings of his study comprise a pathography to the extent that he reduces the "complex whole of personality to static psychopathological categories and symptoms" (ibid) failing to consider changing social, familial, or cultural influences. His interpretation seems to endorse patriarchal beliefs and is anachronistic in echoing beliefs that prevailed two centuries ago.

Feminists highlight the fetters Dickinson's social and gender identity bind her with and criticize her father for being "a remote, powerful and grim patriarch" (Martin, 2002, 46) who forced Dickinson to revolt against "her tyrannical husband/father", claiming that Dickinson longed "to be delivered from his fierce

requirements" (ibid). Edward Dickinson was a product of his time though, trapped in the same social conventions as Dickinson, so his attitude must be examined in the framework of the Victorian New England traditions. The typical American man of that era was always serious, did not indulge in light conversation and read his Bible and his newspaper (Barker-Benfield 22), a stereotype that has prevailed regarding Edward Dickinson. He might have felt embarrassed by Emily's unconventional lifestyle but he "never threatened her even later on when the chosen" (Bianchi, 1932, 24) solitude of his brilliant daughter must have been a "blow to his worldly pride" (ibid 25). His death overwhelmed Dickinson and her "husky whisper 'Where is he? Emily will find him!'" (Leyda 2:227) haunted those who heard her.

The deep affection Emily Dickinson showed to her female friends and especially to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert, has led Martha Nell Smith to conclude that their friendship might have been "prototypically lesbian" (Smith qtd in Martin, 2002, 59) adding that "the censorship of Dickinson's papers at the end of the century suggests that her passionate friendship with Sue was not simply innocent" (Smith, 1992, 23). Nevertheless, the extensive omission of paragraphs or even pages from the first editions of the letters is not confined only to Susan Dickinson. Any references to family affairs or to any friend or acquaintance, including several female friends, are also omitted. For example, Letter 159 to Austin Dickinson, published in 1894, was drastically shortened. References to Susan as well as to Lavinia's illness, their preparations for their trip to Washington, or their neighbors are excluded. Undoubtedly, Dickinson loved Susan, whatever the nature of her love might be. Dickinson referred to Susan in three different ways in the same letter. Longing for Susan's return, she called her "Susie, my child", "my absent Lover" and "my Sister" (L 96). Apart from Susan Dickinson, letters in a similar vein were addressed to Jane Humphrey or Emily Ford. Polly Longsworth remarks that these "letters do not far exceed the nineteenth century tolerance for intimacy between unmarried females" (Longsworth, 1990, 93).

Although Dickinson's letters were originally published as supplementary to her poems, they also stand on their own. They have been characterized as a new hybrid genre, "letter-poems" (Martin, 2002, 60) and Dickinson is considered to have assumed the role of "author, editor, publisher" circulating her poetry among her selected addressees (Howe 147). They have been studied alongside or in contrast to her poems so that common ground is established. They are also considered her

"stylistic workshop" (Eberwein qtd. in Leiter, 340), in which she experiments with the artistic strategies (ibid) she makes use of in her poems. The poems she incorporated into the letters lead Martha Nell Smith to argue that Dickinson was the publisher of her work in the letters and Domhnall Mitchell claims that Dickinson delimited and controlled the social circle to which she circulated her work so that she could spread her poetry and ensure literary survival (Martin, 2002, 166). According to Christanne Miller, this practice can be viewed as "deceptively personal" (Miller 13), since Dickinson used to send the same poem to different recipients, for example, the "Humming Bird" was addressed to five of her correspondents (L 602, 627, 675, 770, 814). Sarah Wyder argues that the letters and the poems are linked thematically and constitute an integral part of her creation (Leiter 341).

Dickinson's letters could function as an archive of her life, an autobiography, but for the fragmentary depiction of her life and their manifold mutilations and dismemberments. The extent of her corpus is indeterminate since only a fraction of it escaped destruction after her death. Leyda estimates that "behind each known, it is safe to speculate on 10 unknown or lost" letters (Leyda 1:xxiii). The daughters of H. Seelye, the President of the Amherst College, counted 75 letters from Emily Dickinson in their father's desk before they burnt them. Susan Dickinson "destroyed such letters as she considered [them] confidential" before she died (Bianchi, 1932, 149). The extremely small number of the surviving letters as compared to the estimated total renders the (auto)biographical approach problematic. What is more, there are time gaps, years to which few, if any, letters are ascribed. One can only speculate about the criteria on which recipients destroyed, preserved, or handed certain letters to the editors. Although Lavinia urged for the discovery and publication of her sister's letters, she did not present any of the years she attended Ipswich Seminar. Joseph Lyman preserved seven "snatches" from her letters, which according to Richard Sewall show Dickinson "relaxed and even-tempered. The pulse is normal, the eye clear and [they are] directed outward" (Sewall, 1965, vi). He assumes that Lyman kept these specific ones because he wanted to write "an essay or article on her or even some fictionalized version of her life" (ibid 79). Dickinson's letters would have been doubly exploited in this case. Lyman may have intended to take advantage of her fame and Sewall tries to contest contemporary beliefs on Dickinson's mental instability by presenting these letters as evidence against the rumors. Elizabeth Holland's daughter mentions letters that may have got lost or destroyed during

removals and letters that were “chosen for safe keeping” (Ward, 1951, 48), indicating a procedure of editing or even censoring. The niece of Judge Lord denied that he was romantically interested in Dickinson and would not even consider looking for letters. Although Dickinson corresponded with Reverent Charles Wadsworth, the alleged cause of her withdrawal, only one letter has been published and it seems that there was not even an attempt on the part of the editors to recover the rest.

Moreover, what has survived has undergone radical censorship. The corpus that escaped annihilation is badly disfigured. Before its publication, it underwent extensive tampering. A great part of it was physically amputated by clipping off parts or even whole pages to exclude references to individuals alive at the time of the publication (L 80, Picture 1).

Picture 1: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1852 March 7, in Box 7, Folder 30, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:17123/asc:17127.

Todd transcribed whole letters and returned the originals to their possessors. While preparing the edition of the letters, she clipped off several parts or even pages containing such references and sent the remaining to the editor. She kept the clippings in an envelope, and after the destruction of the original manuscripts she attempted to place them back with the letters they belonged to. Doing this proved extremely difficult -- not much better than wild guessing. Additionally, the corpus was maimed by editors excluding paragraphs to eliminate "the shock of form or of content the reader could absorb" due to "irregularities of usage and roughness of expression" (Bingham, 1945, 46). The abuse, manipulation and arbitrary exclusion of specific parts or their rearrangement wiped away Dickinson's intents as well as layout, handwriting and punctuation, fundamental aspects of her letters, and violated the integrity of her corpus. This fragmentary, arbitrary, and incessant revising and restructuring of the letters to make them appropriate for the public or for the various editors' needs, what Leyda calls "major censoring surgery" (1:lix), renders the compilation of a biography problematic; this shortcoming was pinpointed even right after the first publication of *The Letters* in 1894. The *Boston Herald* reviewer claimed that "there is very little biography in these letters, but throughout they are revelations of her spiritual and emotional life" (Bingham, 1945, 317); while his counterpart in *The Telegraph* in Philadelphia focused on her uneventful life, noting that "they do not give much biographic information, and indeed there was pathetically little to give" (ibid 318).

Even if the full corpus was intact and available, it could not provide the basis for a biography since Dickinson used the letter as a means of circulating a tailored image of herself, focusing mainly on her ideas and personal stance on life. The letters have undergone heavy editing by none other than Dickinson herself who, contrary to epistolary rules, made several drafts before sending a letter. This practice eliminated spontaneity and questions Dickinson's sincerity in presenting herself. What is more, the fact that the correspondence presented relies only on the pole of the sender obscures the circumstances on which the letter was written and leads to assumptions and conjectures usually unfounded and far-fetched. In short, despite the voluminous literature concerning Dickinson's poems, the corpus of her letters has not been thoroughly examined, not even as autonomous literary work. In fact, so far, Dickinson's letters have widely been employed alongside her poetry so that analysis

of her poems can be corroborated by or founded on biographical evidence drawn from her letters. They have also been cited extensively so that thematic units concerning Dickinson's views, such as religion or afterlife, are demonstrated and studied.

My work analyzes Dickinson's epistolary corpus diachronically and holistically. My study focuses on the structure and the content of the letters in juxtaposition to nineteenth-century epistolography etiquette and attempts to prove that what is called a Dickinson letter lacks most of the epistolary qualities or the conventional properties of a conventional letter. I consider her letters the site on which her dissension from both the epistolary and the social norms is reflected, and I attempt to map out the steps of her differentiation throughout her life as evident in the composition of her letters. To that effect, I have organized this research into three chapters. The first chapter will present the literature regarding epistolarity. Besides its practical communicative purpose, correspondence in the nineteenth century was essentially the means of maintaining social order and as such it was governed by stringent laws regarding every aspect of the compilation of a letter. Letter-writing manuals exerted disciplinary power and dictated that special care should be taken concerning the choice of paper and ink, the proper folding, the placement of its various parts on the paper, the margins as well as the penmanship. The situational conventions called for specific and stylized responses, consequently invention and expression were strictly tailored. The style had to be neither too eloquent nor too simple and the letter writers had to bear always in mind that the letter served as their proxy. As such, it mirrored their personal traits and any negligence could jeopardize their social status and/or disgrace them, so it was crucial to follow the norms. In the case of female letter writers, extra care was necessary so that they did not trespass the boundaries domesticity imposed; they should refrain from challenging male superiority or claiming a different position from the one granted to them by the male. The chapter thus will establish the restrictive framework within which Dickinson found herself creating, and against which she exercised that creativity transgressively but brilliantly.

The second chapter explores this transgressive creativity in terms of its divergence from within the epistolary framework. Emily Dickinson employs the letter as a means of communication, but it soon becomes evident that she rejects its normative power. Her innovative approach to letter writing can be divided into two periods. During the first phase, which covers her youth, her recipients are delimited to

members of her family or of her social environment, despite her unlimited involvement in almost every activity shared by her peers. Dickinson moves within a given context, that of epistolary practice and its conventions and, though she makes use of it, she challenges it relentlessly. These familiar or friendly letters are characterized by toying, experimentation with, undermining and ultimately rejection of epistolary rules. The second chapter examines a wide selection of letters that highlight the ways in which, in a poetic version of teenage rebelliousness, Dickinson wages epistolary guerilla warfare not only on the epistolary system, but on the system of power she is confined in without ever leaving their framework.

Chapter three deals with the development, per se, of Dickinson's unique epistolary style. During what I call the second phase of her epistolary development, while withdrawn from the Ladies' Sewing Society of her village, Dickinson reaches out to the world, to men or women of Letters, men in charge of publications which form the public opinion and women who stand by them. This phase coincides with her maturity, comprises of friendly letters or notes, and is characterized by the establishment of her trademark epistolary style. The differentiation of the recipients mirrors not only the extent of her involvement with the community, which is inversely proportional with the bulk of her correspondence in each phase, but also Dickinson's use of the letter as a pulpit or a stand to make her stance known to her correspondents without making any attempt whatsoever, even to pretend, that she pays attention to the rules. In this chapter, I compare and contrast conventional letters with Dickinson's differentiation and violation of almost every epistolary rule which lead to the development of her innovative letter as a literary work. Since she writes letters for writing's sake, as Roman Jacobson puts it, focusing on the message for its own sake, she transforms the referential function of the conventional commonalities of the letter into poetic, evident in several aspects of her letters.

CHAPTER ONE

WRITTEN TO THE LETTER: THE IMPORTANCE OF LETTER WRITING

In the eighteenth century, letter writing constituted a "transgression of an amorphous new social group", namely "the middling sort" (Dierks qtd in Barton and Hall, 31), which consisted of "professionals, shopkeepers, trades people, independent artisans, skilled workers [and] urban people" (Epstein 3). Mainly immigrants, they claimed their incorporation into society and the securing of a higher status through familiar letters -- letters among relatives and friends. By appropriating, redefining, and refining the conventions of letter writing, which was an activity characteristic of the "better-sort" (Dierks qtd in Barton and Hall, 164), they challenged power and asserted the "air of good breeding" (Dilworth 3) it invested the correspondents with.

To understand the importance of this appropriation, it should be made clear that, in the nineteenth century, letters were the main means of maintaining familial and social bonds and transacting business. "Coming into [the addressee's] presence through the medium of the letter" (Thorold 85), the sender reached for the absent relative, friend, or acquaintance to communicate news and kindle love and affection. According to Samuel Johnson's metaphysical assertion, correspondence was "next to the power of pleasing with presence" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* iv) so the correspondents sought for "spiritual communion" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxi) granting or drawing delight by the reassurance that they were not forgotten. Considered one of "the strongest connecting links of common life" *(New Letter-writer* v), the letter could provoke various emotions, even in cases where the sender "little th[ought] of what a change in [the recipients'] lives a sheet of paper [was] to bring" (Thorold 7). The understanding was that the recipient would be delighted, even flattered, by the thought that the sender had taken time to write a few lines for their eyes only; the familial or friendly bond would be strengthened by this individuality which brought "a joy with which a stranger intermiddleth not" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xi). Letters were not only "mementoes of affection and kindness" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* xii) but they also functioned as substitutes for visits, when

various social occasions called for one; negligence to write on such occasions was "gross impoliteness" (*New Letter-writer* 118). The arrival of a letter as a communication device signaled an important event and its reading marked a social occasion, since the members of the family gathered to have the letter read to them aloud and the letter was afterwards handed round friends, relatives, even neighbors.

The development of the railway system, the penny postage, the inexpensive writing material, and education in the nineteenth century contributed to the proliferation of letters. Letter writing offered "comfort, blessing and solace" to the poor (Chesterfield 4) while it amused and pleased the middle and higher classes (ibid 5). It was a social obligation, triggered by "pleasure, interest and duty" (Westlake 8), "used for the glory of God" (Thorold 7). Any "responsible being" (ibid 9) had to partake in the happiness of their intimates or acquaintances and sympathize with their afflictions, rendering letter writing a "definite moral action" (ibid 58) which required self-denial (ibid 84). Any failure to initiate letter writing, or to respond to a received letter in due time, was deemed unsociable and a sign of ill-breeding. Negligence in showing interest in one's parents or friends was tantamount to "pure indolence" (Thorold 34) since "the arrival of the letter bag [was] the great event of the day" for them (ibid 27). Unanswered letters could lead to misunderstandings or alienation, and they were considered an insult (Young 32). Small paper, large handwriting, and large spacing were legitimate methods of filling a paper and send even a few words as a reply. Besides friends and relatives, it was common for "men of literary culture, […] cultivators of the liberal and fine art" (Chesterfield 27) to correspond when they considered each other as equals. They exchanged several letters to get acquainted with each other and if/after they felt at ease, they could meet in person. Although letters are private writings, at the late nineteenth century they were considered as both private correspondence "expressing the inner feelings of the writing subject and as public documents to be shared with a literary circle" (Smith & Watson 196).

1.2. The Rhetoric of Letters

A letter is a "written conversation of a well-educated man [sic] who expresses his thoughts correctly in diction, adopted to his subject and observes an exact propriety in relation to his correspondent" (Peyre-Ferry 18). Consequently, thorough knowledge

of the "art of expressing thought and feeling in letters with clearness, force and elegance", the Rhetoric of Letters, (Westlake 70) was of paramount importance. It consisted of invention, which preceded the actual writing, and expression, the rules that were to be applied. Invention involved that the sender found a topic, arranged their ideas, and then set to writing. In social or private letters, intended only for those to whom they were addressed (Westlake 12), invention was easier since it was a "recapitulation, […] a history of the transaction" (ibid 86); previous questions had to be answered, points made on the letter received had to be commented on and any new subjects could be introduced. Nevertheless, "amassing a previous store of brilliant or profound ideas" (Houghton 324) was discouraged, since it hindered the unpremeditated flow of thoughts, deemed an essential characteristic of a good letter. Although the writer might be at a loss for fine words at first, believing that they should write something grand, writing could be an easy task if they imagined that their friend was with them. As the physical body of the letter was restricted, the writer had to imagine their conversation was brief, concentrate on needful and important subjects, while mentioning trivial matters in passing. Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield suggested various ways of presenting ideas and arguments. The writer should leave a margin on the left, number them from the most to the least important, and start writing taking their list into account. In that case, however, the letter would have a very "tame, feeble [and] unimpressive" ending (Chesterfield 10). Alternatively, they could number their topics inversely, from the least interesting to the most interesting one. In this way, they could conclude with the most important subject, making a favorable impression on the recipient. Otherwise, they could combine the "descending and then the ascending scale, from superior object to inferior and vice versa" (ibid 10). As a result, their letter would have a good beginning and an equally or even better ending "calculated to leave a clear and strong importance on the mind of the reader" (ibid 11).

The instructions on the compilation of a letter are in accordance with the Gricean conversational maxims, named after Paul Grice, the philosopher of language, who maintained that these cooperative maxims govern every human interaction. In observance with the maxims of quantity and relevance, the writer had to select their subjects carefully and avoid elaborating on trifling matters so that the recipient would not lose their patience. Verbiage was to be avoided and the words should fit the subject in the same way a "dress should fit tightly not hang around the ideas like a

lady's loose gown" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxiii). The writer should peruse the letter and, if they found it awkward, they had to erase any superfluous word, an act which, though a "suicidal sort of task" (Chesterfield 14), eased the tedious style of the letter. Long letters "served as anodynes or at least as soporifics" (Chesterfield 68) and they were not welcome. Recipients "recoil[ed] from a 'folio of four pages'" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 5) and they would either read them at a glance or they would not read them at all. Excessive length was a sign of selfishness as the "superficial scribbler" filled the letter with "insipid trifles [and] silly conceits" (Hardie 229), disregarding the recipient's time and patience altogether. Replies had to correspond "in length, subject arrangement and style with the letter that call[ed them] forth" (Westlake 124). In addition, careful selection of thoughts and ideas as well as their arrangement were extremely important to avoid "tack[ing] on at the end as an afterthought or a postscript" (ibid 72) anything of importance. Postscripts had to be avoided even when writing to an intimate friend as they constituted a "glaring impropriety" (ibid 87) revealing the writer's disrespect. In accordance with the maxim of quality, letter-writers should be cautious and refrain from narrating a piece of news without being able to verify its validity as it could "injur[e] the[ir] reputation" (Peyre-Ferry 27).

The maxim of manner was to be observed during the second step, expression, and the writer had to pay attention to several elements. Although letter-writing manuals claimed that it was just a mechanical application of the epistolary rules, it was actually complicated. The sender had to mind their spelling, concerning "letters, the elements of written words", diction, "words, the elements of sentences", construction, "sentences, the elements of discourse", punctuation, "division of discourse" and style, "the special properties of discourse, the means by which it conveys moods and emotions from one mind to another" (Westlake 124).

Correct spelling was extremely important, and several letter-writing manuals included rules as spelling mistakes were "an actual crime" (Cooke 433). Capitals should be used only in proper nouns and at the beginning of a sentence. Using capitals indiscriminately was a common mistake by those who wished to display their penmanship and was a "proof of [their] ignorance (*Martine's Sensible Writer* 21).

Diction was the choice of words which had to "bear the most civil meaning through good-natured disposition" (*The Complete Letter-writer* 33). The letter as a means of communication was "conversation reduced to writing" (*Aids to Epistolary*

Correspondence 4) and as a result, it rejected the formal diction of the books. Since ideas were the basis of the letter and words functioned as accessories to it as it was "thoughts and not words to be communicated" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xii), receiving "labored composition [was] highly disagreeable" (ibid xx) and "excit[ed] pity" (Bureaud-Riofrey 315) for the sender. Affectation of learning was a blemish while the display of education was considered pride, a sin. Any display of fine or pompous words was incompatible with the ease and simplicity that characterized letters. The most suitable words were the first that came to mind as they sounded more natural, indicative of "humility rather than a vain conceit" (*The Complete Letter-writer* 16). Prolonged pondering on the best word could lead to loss of spontaneity and obstruction of the pen. Bombast, that is, trivial ideas expressed in high sounding, long words was considered ridiculous, indicative of the writer's emotional deprivation and self-centeredness. However, careful choice of words and their arrangement did not detract from the required naturalness of the letter. On the contrary, they were called for, due to the premeditation allowed for the writing of a letter. This choice should be based on purity, that is, the inclusion of strictly English words of "native growth" and the exclusion of "exotic transplanted from foreign languages or raised in the hotbeds of affectation and conceit" (Peyre-Ferry 236). The use of lexicons was discouraged; the writers should become familiar with the best epistolary writers, instead. The writer had to refrain from using either "insignificant" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* 162) monosyllables or long, incomprehensible words. Simple words when combined "became inextricably complex" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xiii). Display was a "fault of great weight" and "far-fetched words and studied phrases [were] unacceptable as legitimate ornaments" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 6). The writer who used words alien to common use was a pedant, "guilty of emphatic formality" (Peyre-Ferry 20). Dictionary words, that is, long "Latinized" words of Saxon or Roman origin were to be avoided since they transfused a "pedantic air" (Westlake 78), a "stiffness" which disgusted the reader (Peyre-Ferry 238) and rendered the language cold and formal. Their indiscriminate use by the ladies was considered a vice (*The London Universal Letter Writer* vi) so they were encouraged to use "'home words'" (Westlake 78). For instance, Sunday was preferable to Sabbath and talk to converse. In addition, neatness, "happy choice of what is most delicate and refined in common conversation" (Peyre-Ferry 237) concealed the effort taken to compile the letter and

revealed the writer's good upbringing. Furthermore, diction had to be characterized by propriety or precision and clearness. Words should represent exactly the ideas which conveyed the writer's meaning according to "the custom of […] good society" (Bureaud-Riofrey 372) with the least ambiguity. Letter-writers were discouraged from neologisms which revealed "a cultivated but barren mind" (ibid 316) and led to the corruption of the language. The richness of vocabulary did not call for new words and what is more, few letter writers were skillful at coining new ones. Unless a lady "played with words ingeniously […], the reader "[would] laugh at her" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 137). Whereas sound was not as important as sense, it could not be disregarded since sounds were the "vehicle of our ideas" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xix). Words that were difficult to pronounce were "harsh and painful to the ear" (ibid xxxx) and the mind "revolt[ed] by disagreeable sounds" (ibid xxix). Smooth and liquid sounds, suitable blending of soft vowels and strong consonants in due proportions transfused harmony and their "musical cadence" (ibid xxx) could convey pleasant ideas. Long words were considered more musical due to their blending of long and short syllables and the succession of sounds which pleased the reader. Elegance imparted by sonorous, forcible words and dignity imparted by the proper use of tropes and figures to express great ideas were thought to contribute to sublimity (Bureaud-Riofrey 349).

Another essential property of well-constructed sentences and thus of the construction of the letter was harmony, achieved by blending long and short sentences which constitute paragraphs, the elements of discourse. "Style periodique" consisted of long sentences the members of which were linked and depended on each other in such a way that their meaning was grasped at their close. They could be pompous, "oratorical […] grav[e] and dignif[ied]" (Bureaud-Riofrey 376), so this style was not particularly suitable for letter writing which laid emphasis on clearness. Short sentences, the "style coupé", (ibid 376) were preferable as they were more powerful and straightforward. Unless sentences of various lengths were intermixed, the letter would be "fatiguing" (ibid). The less important words should be placed at the beginning of the sentence while the longest and most sonorous word should be at the end of the sentence; a preposition or an insignificant word should never "fall at the close" (Northend 31). Every paragraph should relate a different and disconnected topic or incident and be distinct from the next one although it was a mistake to divide the letter into too many paragraphs, of one or two sentences each. A letter that ran on

"like a stream without stops, with no division into paragraphs" and included unrelated subjects in the same paragraph, allegedly a characteristic of letters written by women, was considered "ridiculous" (Chesterfield 21) as the recipient would fail to comprehend it. Although the length of the paragraph could vary, long "slovenly and embarrassed constructions" (Hardie 20) were considered not only perplexing to understanding and tiresome, but they obscured the main thought of the paragraph as well. The next fault to lengthiness was the uneven transition from one paragraph to the other and their connection in a "loose, indigested manner", a sign of "narrow conception, [and] unpardonable negligence" (Peyre-Ferry 234) which permeated the paragraph with "a sense of disorder" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xxvi). The use of "joints and hinges" (ibid xxviii) such as relatives, pronouns and copulatives led to cohesive sentences contributing to the coherence of the letter.

A good letter writer had to "know his dictionary and grammar" (Cooke 432) since correct grammar, spelling, style, and punctuation invested them with respectability; their neglect was "a blast", a sign of "stupidity" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xiv). Grammatical mistakes were considered "unpardonable", (Cooke 433) rendered the letter incomprehensible and fixed upon the writer "the stamp of illiteracy" (Westlake 79). "False grammar" incurred "sarcasm on the education of the defaulter" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xv) and writers of "ordinary education [were] inexcusable [to] err" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxi). Mistakes led to their being "pitied, laughed at [and] sneered at" (Chesterfield 20), since ungrammatical letters revealed "ill-breeding, vulgar education" (*The London Universal Letter Writer* iii).

Punctuation was the "marshaling and arranging the words of the language" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 17), the proper division of discourse and it was essential to the perspicuity of the letter. Punctuation marks were equivalent to the pauses an orator would use in speech. Dashes indicated sentences "abruptly broken off" (*New Letter Writer* 120) either from hesitation or some interruption. They denoted separation and could signal the unexpected transition from "grave to comic style" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 32). Women had the tendency to pay little or no attention to punctuation, so their letters were "puzzling, […] ludicrous" compositions (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxi) and amounted to a "'mere farrago of nonsense'" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 139); yet the senders were "pardoned" (Hardie 19) on account of their nature. Putting a dash under an important

word was an acceptable method of drawing attention to it but when it became a habit it was an eyesore which "mar[red] the beauty of a page" (Westlake 44). This "defac[ing]" (*Martine's Sensible Writer* 18) constituted an affront to the reader who might as well read the underlined word and skip the rest.

Style was the peculiar way writers expressed their thoughts by means of language, while at the same time they preserved their individuality. Letters were a peculiar kind of composition; as a "conversation carried upon paper" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxii), its style was "half- colloquial, half literary" although each kind of letter observed different style (Westlake 83). Letters written purely for entertainment had no set subject or style, so rules had to be applied on account of their wider variety. Yet, their style was a matter of controversy; they could be either "model[ed] by the sonnet" and offer pleasure to the reader by means of "the soft calm of mellifluence" or modeled by the epigram through "pointed sentences and forcible periods" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* 179).

Epistolary style should be conversational or familiar, albeit more concise, yet, never poetic (*The Secretary and Complete Letter Writer* 17). Style was "the dress of thoughts" (Cooke 452) so "homely [or] vulgar" style meant that thoughts were "dressed in rags". The letter was to be "attired as a woman, short coated [and] closely coached" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* 31). Mere conversational style was not an element of a good letter, though, as words "[had] no longer wings to fly away from observation" (Peyre-Ferry 230) and grammar mistakes, loose construction or unsuitable diction which went unnoticed in speech were exposed to plain view. The familiar style did not entail writing in a casual way. It should exhibit a good command of the language (Cooke 453) or resemble the simple style of the Bible (Peyre-Ferry 251) without falling into "servile imitation" (ibid 250), indicative of a sterile mind. The simplicity of the style ensured intelligibility and since "muddy sentences" revealed a "muddy brain" (Westlake 80), letter-writers were advised against either a "rugged and enigmatical style" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 5) or an extremely concise one which led to obscurity. Writers should write in a florid style, that is, easily intelligible, sparingly ornate, and delightful to the reader (Brady 251). A "plain, sensible man" would refrain from "running astray after 'the butterflies of the language'" while a "blockhead" (*The Young Lady*'s *Own Book* 121) would express themselves in "Cambyses' vein" (ibid). However, when it lacked moderation, the florid style could be "too rich and gaudy in proportion to the subject" (Bureaud-

Riofrey 319). When the writers "cloth[ed]" their letter with the whole array of their verbal acquisitions they appeared as if they wore their "whole wardrobe at once" covering the figure with "a mass of drapery" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 5).

Alternatively, they could write in the genteel style which comprised following nature and writing with ease without pedantry or affectation (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xvii) since the key to a successful letter was "observ[ing] industrious negligence" (Peyre-Ferry 240). Originated by the early Puritan preachers, a sign of refined spirit, genteel style breathed an air of aristocratic quality and combined elegance and "rational formality" (Lynch 121). Simplicity and naturalness, however, required a "florid [and not] consumptive appearance" (Peyre-Ferry 238). Ornaments were paramount in "reliev[ing] dryness", rendering a composition pleasant and not fatiguing (Bureaud-Riofrey 285). Although premeditation allowed for careful selection of ideas and their arrangement, affectation was condemned. The adoption of a temperate style which admitted more ornaments than simple style, concealed "art, study and awkwardness" (ibid 318) by uniting elegance, moderate use of ornaments, and grace. It could be either neat, which allowed for figures of speech, yet not those "of the highest or of the sparkling kind", or elegant which allowed for more ornaments without any excess (ibid 318).

Besides being a means of communication, the letter was also considered "a work of art" (Westlake 73) so both geniuses, the ability of creating, and imagination, the ability of embellishing, triggered either by contemporary situations or by reflection, had to be applied. Imagination, "met among the polite masters of morality" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xxxx) could also be creative. Although it resulted from current circumstances, it also borrowed from past experiences and embellished them by fancy, drawing attention to specific members of the composition. The combination of genius and imagination led to lyric poems or beautiful compositions. Allusions, metaphors, and similes should draw from nature and, if well chosen, they could function as "tracks of light" (ibid) facilitating comprehension. Their aim was to demonstrate or explain by means of familiar images, yet "the transcription of ideas out of the intellectual world into the material" (ibid) should be pleasant and coherent. "Bestow[ing] a kind of existence […] to objects which are not to be found in the living" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xxxii) extolled the wonders of nature and God and was an indispensable part of poetry. Words had to be chosen with the utmost care if they represented things as "a

pebble must be polished with care […] to be valued as a diamond" (ibid 179). In addition, trivialities, which resembled weak buildings, required decoration, if they were to be admired. Allusions of "pictorial, poetical [or] mythological relation" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 17), when easily understood, were considered elegant while metaphors that occurred naturally embellished the letter; broken metaphors were an "unexceedable blemish" (*The London Universal Letter Writer* iii). A simile should be used only when the writer could "wield it with ease" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 121) and alliteration was a legitimate ornament on condition that it was used sparingly and in good taste. So were comparisons provided their terms were perfectly united otherwise they were considered blemishes. Antithesis added a lively tone unless it was used frequently and rendered the letter enigmatical. Puns were strongly discouraged since they were considered vulgar. Quotations from poets and/or "sprigs of poetry" (*The London Universal Letter Writer* v) were an "unpardonable affectation" (Brady 2) since they attributed pedantry to the letter and shrouded vice with the "witchery of song" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 338).

Epistolary style also depended on the intimacy the correspondents shared and the relation in which they stood regarding their social station. The best epistolary style coincided with epistolary decorum, that is, the exhibition of the proper respect for "religion, decency and all the laws and customs which [were] not opposed to morality" (*Young Lady's Own Book* 263). The elderly had to be addressed with reverence in a lofty style, the superiors in a dignified and serious manner; a familiar, light tone was considered indecent. Parents had to be addressed in a dutiful manner, friends affectionately while a courteous, frank, and clear style was appropriate for every recipient. Excessive politeness was considered pretentious and a sign of meanness. Not observing the principle of decorum or failing to consider the recipient's mental capacities amounted to offence and the sender was derided. If the recipient was inferior, the sender could act at his discretion although adopting a familiar or free style would render them contemptible. However, they would not experience embarrassment since the inferior's "censure [was] not formidable [and their] opinion was of little weight" (Peyre-Ferry 26); another division which not only served the contemporary social hierarchies but strengthened them as well.

Apart from the person addressed, style depended heavily on the situation that prompted correspondence as well as the nature of the subject and determined the mood of the letter. According to Samuel Johnson, unfamiliar occasions necessitated

the use of unfamiliar language. Elevated sentiments or thoughts required lofty style and allowed for "figurative distortion of the phrase" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* 177). Treating a serious subject in the same light style as relating a funny incident was considered absurd as was addressing a relative or an intimate friend in a lofty style. "Untimely jest" (Peyre-Ferry 26) could estrange a close friend and any comment that ran counter to the recipients' virtues or opposed to their opinions as well as the slightest sign of irreligion to the pious was met with disgust. When advising, the language should be serious and great, when requesting, modest, when consoling, compassionate, when empathizing in prosperity, cheerful, when sympathizing in adversity, mournful. If great events were to be related the writer should function as a historian, explaining the reasons and exploring the consequences in a serious style. If a dispute was to be established or solved, all details should be cited with the aid of the syllogistic method, adopting a persuasive style. If the writer aimed at gaining a benefit or averting an unpleasant consequence, rhetorical schemata had to be employed. If the writers were not talented, they should adjust their style to their skills, otherwise they would write "gaudy and ridiculous" letters (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 121), and their "grievous errors" would expose their "foolish affectation of genius" (Peyre-Ferry 22).

1.3. Epistolary Complexities: Between Absence and Presence

According to Janet Altman, the letter writer maps the temporal, spatial, emotional, and intellectual coordinates (Altman 119) and invites fellow travelers according to their "shifting values, selves and self-perception" (ibid 57) to an "epistolary pact" (ibid 89). The letter is a metaphor -- carrying over -- of "the parousia of the sender" (Barton & Hall 18) to chosen recipients or/and addressees. A letter can be a portrait of the sender -- probably idealized so that they save face -- or a mask. "The real I", (Smith & Watson 59) the writer, inscribed as they are in the social network, carries over "the narrated I", (ibid 60) the "impress" (L 27) of themselves to the reader. They can "re-present" their portrait or wear a mask as a weapon (Altman 186) depending on the addressee, whose "specific 'you' alters the experience of the I" (ibid 91). Since the letter constitutes a signifier of the repressed message (Muller, 1988, 146) it can be "cathartic" (Altman 39) by becoming the vehicle of outpouring emotions to passive

confidants (ibid 50), functioning as a "crutch" (ibid 39) to aid the writer's recovery of greater stability. At the same time, it can become an instrument of *anagnorisis* (ibid 92), or recognition, through the rereading of one's own letters before sending them. The writer switches to the reader position and interprets or/and censors their text in an act of self-discovery (ibid 94).

In addition, the letter can render absence into presence and serve as a bridge either between the correspondents or between spatial and temporal gaps. However, it can also serve as a barricade which alienates or retains the distance between them by "cloud[ing] issues" (Altman 33) that they had better be left undivulged. The letter functions as "a distance breaker" or a "way-paver" (ibid 19) between two poles: the sender and the receiver, the writer and the reader, the author and the addressee, whose absence/presence is mutually interchangeable and annulled. Serving as an intermediary (ibid 37), the letter attempts to efface the very gap that brought it to surface. Temporal or spatial coincidence of the poles is impossible since they move at different levels as if they reside in "parallel universes" (ibid 132). The present sender writes a letter in the absence of the recipient which will be received by a present reader in the absence of the writer.

This exchange of presence/absence is not the only one. "Temporal polyvalence" (Altman, 118), *Erzahltzeit* (time of narration) differs from *Erzhalte Zeit* (time of narrated action) (ibid 123) as well as from the time the narration is read, and though present time remains a pivot (ibid 118) its projection into the future is not consistent. The writer's anticipated future conflates into the reader's present while "resurrection or reconstruction of the past" (ibid 42) aims at retaining a common referential point with which they will be able to identify and reschedule their next step into time. The present is not confined to what happens now but what has already happened or what will happen, depending on the position of the sender/receiver, thus it is constantly both annulled and deferred. In this sense, a letter could be considered as a gift, "already gone, remaining always to come" (Lucy 43). A letter has the property of "nowhereness" and as a symbol of absence is and is not wherever it may be (Muller, 1988, 79). The sender's/recipient's parallel universes traversed by a letter acquire meaning in the same way subjects are constituted by their traversing of the signifying chain (ibid 62).

This seemingly incessant temporal and spatial displacement, the "itinerary of the signifier" (Muller, 1988, 57) "determines subjects in their acts […] and social

acquisitions" (ibid 63) while at the same time the deferred arrival of a letter invests it with Derridean *diffèrance*. The letter, like the meaning, is constantly en-route, acquiring its meaning in reference to either or both poles of communication. The sender's letter-text contains traces from the recipient's letter that initiated the correspondence and vice versa. These displaced traces interweave the two texts which in turn weave, through spacing -- that is, relating each element to and about the other -- a shared world of referential points which serve as codes for the sender/recipient determined by their relationship. However, the intentionality of the sender may not be interpreted as intended by the recipient, thus the binary oppositions, which seemingly exclude each other, are at large, depending largely on decoding. Decoding of a message signals another act of *diffèrance* since it triggers the encoding of a new one (Derrida, 1981, 27); by occupying the position of encoder/decoder alternately, the epistolary dyad shapes and shares a world.

Letters are characterized by what Jacques Derrida calls "adestination": they are meant to arrive somewhere but not necessarily at their intended destination (1987, 29). Thus, their reception and interpretation can vary immensely and rarely coincide with the sender's intentions; in that case, even if the letter has indeed reached its destination, it is actually considered as not arriving at all (ibid). Written in a specific context, in a specific spatial-temporal occasion, the letter arrives out of this context and consequently its content may be misunderstood and certainly misplaced. *Diffèrance* and meaning depend on spatial and temporal difference which in the case of letter writing is constantly shifting, providing different points at time and space which in turn engender new forms of *diffèrance* and consequently of meaning. Letters are invested with the "non-presence of the other" (Derrida, 1976, 76), be it either the recipient's physical presence at the time of writing or the sender's at the time of reading. This presence is "inscribed within the sense of the present" (ibid) which in turn differs at the various stages of writing, sending, delivering, receiving, and reading a letter, deferring the arrival of both the letter and its meaning. However, this procedure of alteration and succession of temporal and spatial zones, the status of the letter as to-be-sent, already-sent, to be-read, already-read transform it into a Derridean trace since it envelops both the past and the present, depending on the holder's position. As a trace, a letter embodies the inscription, erasure and mingling of identity which is shaped "in terms not of gathering by of a divergence" (Derrida, 1992, 40). What is more, the alteration of the agent as writer-of-the letter, proof-reader-of it,

sender, reader-of the received-letter, decoder-of it and potential writer of another, this "sequence of differences" (Derrida, 1976, 70) resembles the construction of a sign by traces which provides meaning and ultimately communication.

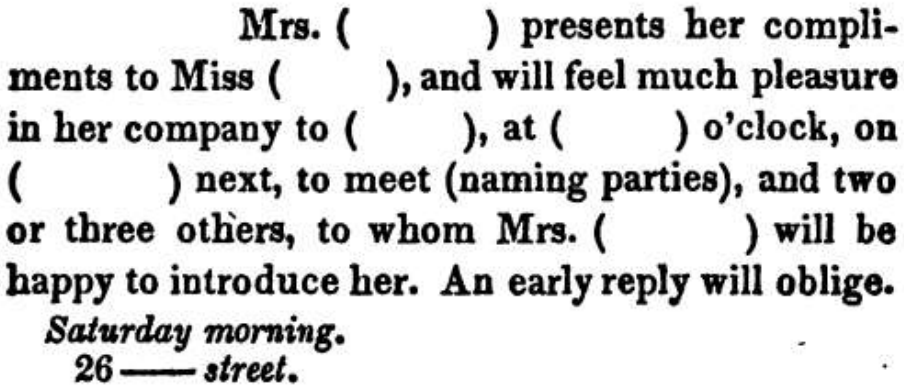
1.4. Situational conventions

Letters were considered "life of trade, fuel of love, pleasure of friendship, food of politician, entertainment of the curious", (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* XIII) indispensable on every social occasion as well as on business matters and were classified as private and public letters. The former ones were intended only for those to whom they were addressed (Westlake 12) and were subdivided into social, business, and miscellaneous letters. Social letters were prompted by affection, and they could fall into several categories. Public letters were essays or reports "intended for the public but addressed to some individual" (Thorold 14). Literary men were in the habit of writing on "set subjects with the secret or avowed purpose of benefiting the world by their epistolary lucubration" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xii) and their letters could be addressed to "nobody except everybody" (ibid xiv). Those letters were "regular treatises" (ibid), compiled as skillfully as the rest of their works. Making use of the epistolary properties, the writer could treat various subjects in a more personal and familiar style than an essay would allow.

1.5. Letter-writing manuals

Letter writing covered every aspect of social and business life, so doing it "ill [was] a shame" (*The Complete Letter-Writer*, 1778, 31). Those who did not know how to compose a letter "felt their deficiency […] severely" (*The Fashionable Letter Writer* xii) and as result, "curious and amusing publications technically called Letter-writers" (*The Young Lady's* x) mushroomed on both sides of the Atlantic. They were also school textbooks and abounded with copious rules regarding the compilation of a letter, furnishing their readers with numerous model letters. Some went even further;

The American Lady's and Gentleman's Modern Letter Writer provided gap-filling models to be completed accordingly by its readers.



Mrs. ( ) presents her compliments to Miss ( ), and will feel much pleasure in her company to ( ), at ( ) o'clock, on ( ) next, to meet (naming parties), and two or three others, to whom Mrs. ( ) will be happy to introduce her. An early reply will oblige.

Saturday morning.

26 —— *street.*

Picture 2. An example of these models from *The American Lady's* 7.

However, such models were not universally approved. Chesterfield claimed that they were absurd, since they resembled "ready-made shirts [which should] fit every subject that may require clothing" (Chesterfield 8) and James Hardie maintained that it was absurd to have young teenagers write on subjects with which they were not acquainted: instead, they should be given or invent topics suitable for their age (Hardie vii-viii). However, the models he included in his book, especially compiled for "the young and rising generation", serve exactly the same purpose of providing a certain framework to be followed. He claimed that letter writing constituted the "most useful branch of education" (ibid iv) because it inculcated moral, social, and patriotic values, protecting "boy[s] and young lad[ies]" from evil and keeping them "in the path of virtue" (ibid vii); what he denounced is the selection of topics, not the practice itself.

Letter-writing instructions were an indispensable part of books on social etiquette, too. These books listed countless "binding rules" (Young 17) of society which promoted "peace, harmony and good-willing" the disregard of which "beget bad morals" (ibid) as is evident from its title: *Social Etiquette or Manners and Customs of Polite Society containing rules of etiquette for all occasions, including calls; invitations; parties; weddings, receptions; dinners and teas; etiquette of the street; public places, etc., etc. forming a complete guide to self-culture the art of dressing well; conversation; courtship; etiquette for children; letter writing; artistic home and interior decorations, etc.* It is noteworthy that parts or even whole pages

from manuals were included verbatim in social etiquette books and vice versa, safeguarding that no reader could escape the nexus of epistolary conventions and their interpellative institutional power.

The importance of letter writing was emphasized by Benjamin Franklin, who stated that "The Boys should be put on Writing Letters to each other on any common Occurrences, and on various Subjects, imaginary Business, &c. containing little Stories, Accounts of their late Reading, what Parts of Authors please them, and why" (Northend 28). The "Art of Epistolary Writing" (*Classical English Letter-writer* A4) was a school subject, and it was considered practically the most important of all kinds of compositions. As "the greatest boon of education" (Cooke 429), it was an "attainment of great importance" (*Classical English Letter Writer* A4) aiming at furnishing students with the "power of committing [their] thoughts to writing in a clear and agreeable manner, attained by rules and practice" (Hardie vii). In addition, it was regarded as an effective way of mastering the use of language, improving expression, and acquiring vocabulary. It was believed that even accomplished writers benefited from letter writing to a great extent since "exercise in penmanship, spelling, grammar, diction […] gives ease, grace and vivacity of style" (Westlake 70). Every branch of education, besides reading, writing and grammar, was conducive to writing letters "with interest, information, elegance" (Hardie 227). As a privilege and an "accomplishment" (Brady xvi), it signaled the gradual admission of the young into the adult world through an innocuous practice which would not "put their morals at risk" but it would "inculcate principles of piety and virtue" *(Classical English Letter-writer* iv). The young had the opportunity of getting acquainted with the affairs of the world so that they could incorporate into society actively and not "stand idle spectators of mankind" (ibid A4).

As an academic achievement, letter writing marked a shift in position, an advance in personal development as well as the complete assimilation of the letter-writer into the norms it prescribed. Franklin believed that schools were "instruments for promoting the social order, the patriotism, and the Christian morality" (Northend 34). The school, as a normalizing agent, aimed at "reproduc[ing] the dominant culture and work[ing] on its behalf" while textbooks were "guardians of tradition" (ibid 42). The American society of Franklin's time strove for the creation and consolidation of a national identity, therefore variation of any kind was unacceptable since it undermined this effort.

1.6. Formal conventions

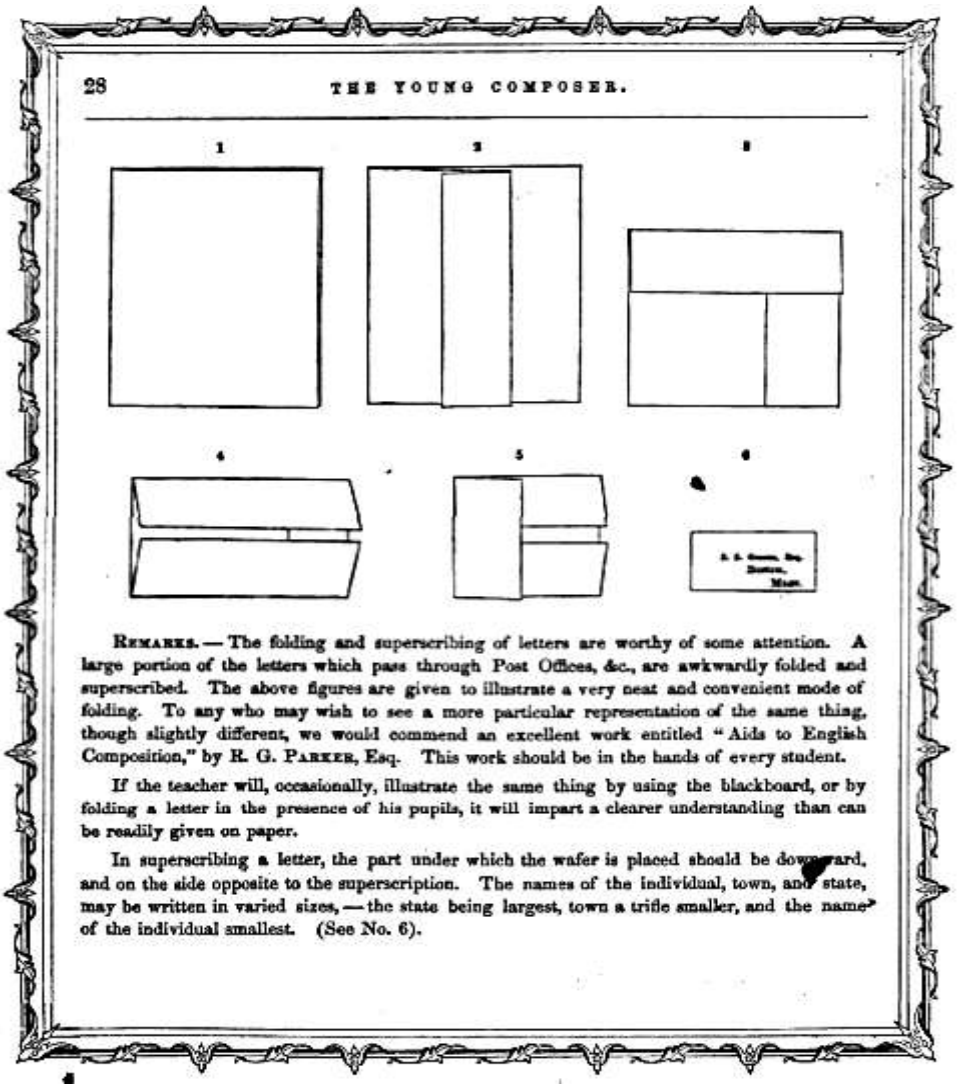
In addition to offering "rational entertainment" (*The New English Letter-Writer* xix), letters were written as a fulfillment of the duty to promote spiritual welfare (*Classical English Letter-writer* xii), so besides the intelligence they communicated, letters had certain "moral qualities" (*The Fashionable American English Writer* 175). Considered "the wheels on which the world moves" (Thorold 6), letters were crucial to the social standing and "Respectability and Success in [the] life" (*The Young Lady* title page) of the individual. Consequently, knowledge of social customs was fundamental to safe navigation through the rocks of epistolary conventions. As "mirrors of the writer's mind" (*Appleton's Complete Letter* xvii) and "representatives of [the] person" (Thorold 120), letters could either make or break the "road to fortune" (Chesterfield 30). Sending a sloppy letter corresponded to appearing "in the company of refined people with swaggering gait, soiled linen and unkempt hair" (Houghton 291). A letter provided writers with an ample scope of demonstrating their mental facilities and the style and diction of a letter revealed the "intellectual and moral culture" (Westlake 8) of the sender; it actually functioned as a "photograph of the writer" (Chesterfield 6) and it could either draw the sender and the recipient together or alienate them, putting the letter writer's social status in jeopardy. As a document, a letter could be preserved forever, "kept and pondered […] long after the writer is in the dust" (Thorold 10), exposing potential violations of propriety, indecorous addresses, unpleasant twists of character, marring, thus, the sender's reputation. Letters which disclosed family secrets or indecorous behavior should be destroyed at once so as to protect the interested party in case they "f[e]ll into strange hands" (ibid 76).

Although both the letter and the tongue were considered "interpreters of the mind" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* 8), the former had "the advantage of premeditation" (ibid) and should be flawless. The sender had to be extremely careful not to offend or hurt the feelings of the receiver since the letter was deprived of any paralinguistic features such as "the gleam of the eye and the tone of the voice", which could soften the utterance (Thorold 7). The spatial and temporal difference of letters meant that the sender had ample time to vent off their anger before writing something about which, even if they later regretted, they could not retract since letters were

"lasting records" (*The Complete Letter-Writer* 1778, 9). It also gave the chance to the sender of "rebuking [more] sharply" in pen than "by word of mouth" (Thorold 44) while at the same time it prevented the outburst of quarrels since the correspondents did not share the same spatiotemporal coordinates. This difference connected the letter to the past, since the correspondents "travel[ed] back […] to speak face to face" (ibid 83) as well as to the "unseen, unknown future" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xviii).

It is therefore understood that writing a letter constituted a serious ritual, starting with the choice of paper, which relied heavily on and perpetuated social hierarchy. The paper had to be of fine quality, pressed and cut in the quarto form, as coarse paper indicated a coarse mind and inspired coarse thoughts (Houghton 18). The poor, however, were excused from this requirement, a distinction which accentuated their inferiority rather than took their poverty into account. When writing to equals or inferiors, the choice of paper depended on the sender's good taste. In the case of superiors, though, quarto fine-gilt post paper was a prerequisite. Men should use white commercial paper while ladies could use thick white or creamy-tinted paper, of smaller size. Although the use of ornate paper was discouraged, the selection of a favorite odor to scent their paper slightly was permissible. In case of mourning, the paper should bear a black border, the width of which corresponded to "the nearness of relationship and the recentness of the bereavement" (Houghton 294). The use of foolscap paper was inexcusable and senders had to apologize in case they used it. The sheet of paper should not be ruled or it would "prevent the discipline of the hand" (ibid 294). Plain paper was considered more stylish and allowed the sender to write as much or as little they pleased. The handwriting had to be straight so the writers were advised either to draw lines with a ruler, which they would rub off later, or to place a heavily ruled paper underneath and use it as a guide. Sending a page torn in half was considered extremely impolite as it denoted that the recipient was not worth a whole sheet, hence indicating disrespect and inattention. Jet black ink was of good taste while red or fancy-colored ink should be avoided. The envelope should be of the same tint as the paper, never buff. Thin envelopes were discouraged, as the contents would be discernible. The letter should be folded so that the edges were evenly pressed to give it a neat appearance and it should be inserted in the envelope in such a way that when the letter was taken out it would be the right end up. Folding should be done perfectly the first time, or the marks of refolding would be visible and

would indicate carelessness. “Intricate or fantastic” folding indicated a “vulgar mind” (*Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* xxvi). Wafer could be used only to equals or inferiors. The following is from *The Young Composer* and provides instructions for the correct folding.



28 THE YOUNG COMPOSER.

1 2 3

4 5 6

REMARKS. — The folding and superscribing of letters are worthy of some attention. A large portion of the letters which pass through Post Offices, &c., are awkwardly folded and superscribed. The above figures are given to illustrate a very neat and convenient mode of folding. To any who may wish to see a more particular representation of the same thing, though slightly different, we would commend an excellent work entitled "Aids to English Composition," by R. G. PARKER, Esq. This work should be in the hands of every student.

If the teacher will, occasionally, illustrate the same thing by using the blackboard, or by folding a letter in the presence of his pupils, it will impart a clearer understanding than can be readily given on paper.

In superscribing a letter, the part under which the wafer is placed should be downward, and on the side opposite to the superscription. The names of the individual, town, and state, may be written in varied sizes, — the state being largest, town a trifle smaller, and the name of the individual smallest. (See No. 6).

Penmanship was equally important. Careful writing was a sign of respect for the recipient and special care should be taken so that blots, erasures, signs of “indecisiveness” (Thorold 84) or interlineations, indicative of “laziness and carelessness” (*The Fashionable American Letter writer* 163) would not “disfigure” (Cooke 435) the body of the letter. In addition to being “disgusting” (Peyre-Ferry 36), they constituted an inexcusable affront to the recipient’s good taste. Neat handwriting promoted an individual’s “elevation to the world” (*The Fashionable American Letter writer* xviii), so making a rough draft, correcting, improving, and transcribing it, was common practice; when it became a habit, though, it impended “facility and dispatch

in writing" (*Classical English Letter-writer* xi). Abbreviations as well as contractions were not only irritating, as the recipient had to strive to decipher them, but indicative of the sender's half-heartedness to write the letter. "Awkward, careless, badly written" (Westlake 12) letters were said to resemble store bills; the fewer, the better (ibid 42).

Given the strictness of the above, it can be inferred that any differentiation from the proposed and imposed layout, any sign of individuality was seen as disfiguring the homogeneity of the body of the letter; integration was praised at the expense of heterogeneity, which was branded as defacing, vandalizing the property of the proper. The strategy of letter writing delimited its terrain by describing the proper body of the material letter and inscribing it with margins which entailed drawing a framework into which the physical body should move without trespassing onto the blank space. What is more, it called for paragraphs, language structures with definitive beginnings and endings so that it enveloped and enclosed the subject, while the prescription of refined ways of folding the letter-body led to the confinement of the sender into the fold of the normative establishment. The dictation of even the appropriate seal both protected the integrity, the non-violation of the body-letter, and functioned as a symbol of the letter-self, the subject, marked by and sealed up in the existing hierarchies and social order the proper had secured.

1.7. Epistolarity as a discipline

Michel de Certeau argues that a controlling subject employs a strategy, that is, the manipulation of power relationships, and delimits a place, marks it as separate from external surroundings which comprise potential targets or possible threats, and secures it as its base so it can build on previous acquisitions and prepare future ventures. The proper, as de Certeau calls it, the "triumph of place over time" needs space to get a foothold. Place outweighs time since, through "panoptic practice", the proper can "transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and 'include' them within its scope of vision". Consequently, it can anticipate future movements, exerting thus absolute control over time by reading space (36). The power of the proper to secure its own place endows it with the ability to transform uncertainties into readable spaces. Schoolbooks in the nineteenth century Victorian New England were rife with disciplinary discourse, shaping the American

identity, safeguarding the prevalence of moral -- or even moralistic -- values, favoring certain characteristics and lifestyles inscribing what Michel Foucault calls disciplined bodies; bodies that "bear the emergent subjectivity that is the multifaceted effect of regulating discourse" (1971, 82). I argue that the practice of letter writing was a similar strategy of the proper seeking to delimit its property and perpetuate its power through manuals and guides on letter writing. Letters thus, became the vehicle of propagating modes of conduct, standards of morality and accepted behavior. Letter writing aimed at dragging the child into the system of power by "teach[ing] particular and circumscribed behavior" (Schultz qtd in Barton & Hall 110).

According to Foucault, power, the system of relations which defines the "field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized", enabling certain options while inhibiting others, aims at refashioning identity by imposing values and beliefs that the subject believes they are their own (1983, 220-21). Habitual compliance to the norms leads to their internalization and the habit-invested bodies conceive this imposed construal as their own. To achieve this, authorities who hold the power (of discourse) exert "binary division and branding" so that the "normal person" can be identified (Foucault, 1979, 199). Adoption of this classification and the desire to be normal redefines one's subjectivity and turns them into docile bodies (ibid 138). Normalizing judgment does not entail complete criticism or condemnation but negative assessment by comparison to a favored paradigm (Prado 63). To this aim, letter-writing manuals functioned as a "cultural script" which imposed "cultural strictures about self – presentation" (Smith & Watson 42) and consequently self-formation. *Letters written to and for particular friends, on the most important occasions. Directing not only the requisite style and forms to be observed in writing familiar letters; but how to think and act justly and prudently […]*, the title of a letter-writing manual, is a characteristic example. Published in 1746 in England but widely used in the USA in the nineteenth century, it contains 174 model letters, which are "rules to think and act" (Richardson A3); of these, only 41 are meant for women and revolve around the fulfillment of their duties to, and submission to the will of, paternal or spousal authority emphasizing the limits and the obligations "which both nature and Gratitude lay [them] under" (ibid 129) and the avoidance of "snares" (ibid A3) that would threaten their moral integrity. The rest of the letters addressed to men deal mainly with handling financial matters, behaving properly towards seniors and dissuading them from bad habits, such as drinking or

"love of Music" (ibid 90). It provides would-be letter writers with a rigid framework of a set procedure that function as a criterion, ruling out any deviation from its regulatory grasp. It marks occasions, that is, the making of actuality, as Derrida puts it, which is, "actively produced, sifted, invested, performatively interpreted by numerous apparatuses which are factitious or artificial, hierarchizing and selective, always in the service of forces and interests to which 'subjects' and agents (producers and consumers of actuality) are never sensitive enough" (2002 4). Through defining which topics, register and style were appropriate, certain codes of behavior were instilled and consolidated, preserving and reinforcing social hierarchies. In addition, the observation required does not only refer to the subject's observing, complying with, and ultimately subjecting to the rules of letter writing, but also denotes close watching and studying of the subject as an object. The subject-object is compelled "to think and act" in a specific way since their "manners" are constantly scrutinized within the established panopticon. The title of *The Complete Letter-Writer*, another letter-writing manual which contained "a variety of […] LETTERS for *Examples*" is telling. The model letters provided examples, that is, general rules and impelled a pattern which had to be imitated. By establishing a system of relations, which enables certain options while inhibiting others, the Foucauldean power aims at refashioning identity by imposing values and principles until they become habit.

However, example also implies castigation inflicted on those who deviate from the acceptable pattern and the warning to those who might consider doing so by making an example of the deviants. By stamping them as "blockhead[s]" (*The Young Lady's Book* 121) or "fop[s]" (*The Complete Letter-writer,* 1778, 9), it seeks to exert a corrective role and safeguard the "universal reign of the normative" (Foucault, 1995, 304). Violations of the epistolary rules lead to the letter writer's condemnation either by earthly or divine justice: "Defaulters" (*The Fashionable* xv) were found "guilty" (Peyre-Ferry 20) of "crime[s]" (Cooke 33), their "fault[s] (Northend 3) were not "legitimate" (Thorold 34), caused "disorder" (*The Fashionable American Letter writer* xxvi), and resulted in the offenders' being sentenced to expulsion and isolation from the law-abiding epistolary and social community, since they were "stamped" (Westlake 79) with "vice" (*The Young Lady's* 338). True to the Foucauldian model of the manifold carceral, the "new form of law: a mixture of legality and nature, prescription and constitution, the norm" (1979 324), their depravity was not only condemned by a Judge, of normality as it is, but by God as well, since instead of

"humility" (*The Complete Letter-writer,* 1778, 38) they displayed "conceit" or "pride" (ibid), one of the seven deadly sins. Their arrogance which made them stray from the beaten track incurred an "anathema" (*The Young Lady's* 147) on them and was "unpardonable" (Hardie 2), not only by human law but by divine law as well. Violators were expelled from the good society which treated "vulgar" (Hardie 3) or "offensive" (ibid 234) correspondents with "sarcasm" (*The London Universal* vi), as they showed themselves not "well-bred" (ibid 30) but "ludicrous" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxi) and "stupid" (*The Fashionable American letter writer* xiv). The invocation of divine and earthly jurisdiction and punitive authority empowered the precepts of the manuals and shrank the field of possibilities, leading to what Foucault calls the invented soul (1979, 29).

This stifling framework necessitated the use of what de Certeau calls tactics (29-32), the art of the weak. They make use of the space delimited by, belonging to, and controlled by the other and they are forced to move within this enemy territory lurking for timely openings, fissures in foe surveillance from which to strike blows, taking advantage of the fact that the visibility and the size of the power makes it stiff, hard to maneuver. However, lacking space, tactics cannot capitalize on their victories. Not having their own terrain, they lack perspective, and their dependence on random moments to trick the proper strips them of power. The proper employs strategies, actions which, having obtained a place of power, can elaborate theoretical places such as systems or discourses to articulate physical places in which their forces can be distributed to support one another. The weak employ tactics, procedures which through clever utilization of time change the organization of the space and introduce a play in the foundations of power. That, as the present work aims to show, is what Emily Dickinson did with the world of epistolary convention.

1.8.Women in Dickinson's world: between domesticity and literacy

Women were considered better suited for writing letters on account of their supposedly easy and unstrained flow of thoughts, characteristic of the simplicity a letter should be governed by. Given that this fact was not stated to their credit but derived from their alleged inferior intellectual standing, one can infer that the

women's place in the epistolary universe was doubly constrained by conventions. Letter writing propagated the established, oppressive views on women's proper behavior, education, and marriage, as is evident from the title of one of the numerous manuals: *The Young Lady's Book of Classical Letters, consisting of Epistolary Selections designed to Improve Young Ladies and Gentlemen in the Art of Letter Writing. And in those Principles which are necessary for Respectability and Success in Life. With Introductory Rules and Observations of Epistolary Compositions.* A closer look at the life of American women of the nineteenth century is essential as Dickinson questioned every aspect of it in her letters through questioning the normative epistolary etiquette at the same time.

Of Puritan descent, New Englanders held personal discipline, self-improvement, obedience, and duty of extreme importance. Acquiring wealth, power and fame was a sign of success albeit available only to men, and those who could not make it in their homeland moved to the West to seek their fortune. Marriage for men occupied "the periphery of their life" (Barker-Benfield 46); if and when they decided to marry, they sought a meek, obedient woman who would not "distract [them] by engaging [their] passions" (ibid 38) and belonged to them "by nature, Law and Gospel" (Epstein 61). For women, however, marriage seemed to be the only road, even though in the nineteenth century, there was a shift in women's position: in the eighteenth century rural economy, women shared the labor and responsibilities of the family, but along with the wealth brought in by commerce and the ensuing mobility with the new century, came a change in roles, and women became passive consumers, losing access to the most energetic part of nineteenth century life and being confined to home, the "natural barrier" (Barker-Benfield 30) that separated them from the outside world, that "alien jungle" (ibid 29).

"True" women, with a "noble Christian character" (Houghton 175), who valued housekeeping and despised "literary attainment, or variety and riches [that is,] glitter for gold" (ibid 177), were hard to find. Deemed "idle, vile, useless thing[s]" (ibid 178) without determination and self-control, women supposedly lacked self-sufficiency. As their mind was "constitutionally less stable than that of man" (*The Young Lady's* 53), they were thought to lack knowledge and good sense. Women were "excused from professional knowledge" (ibid 56) as they would never be employed; neither were they "expected to understand the mysteries of politics" (ibid 113) in order to be fit to govern. They were taught that knowledge was a "folly," and

it did not constitute a desirable or requisite virtue when it came to find a husband since men preferred women who were "proficient in housewifery to smatterers in science" (ibid 33). Middle-upper class women were granted some sort of education, which they had to "solicit as a favor and not to extract it as right" (Wayne 74). This favor however, entailed a form of subjugation, as "girls'" education defined a certain behavioral frame, imparted it to women and instructed them not to trespass it. Education should be "appropriate to each sex" and girls should be taught "the laws of physiology and hygiene" (ibid 189), but any other subject would be "unnatural [and] physiology [would] protest" (Young 188). To this end, there should be a differentiation between teaching boys or girls so that the latter do not strain their mental capabilities and lose their sanity.

Schools prepared women for their role as wives and mothers who would shoulder the "great task of renovating the world" (Wayne 74) and familiarized them with the "vices and dangers of society" (Barker-Benfield 42), so that they were imbued with the conviction that it was to their best interest to avoid venturing into it. The ideology of femininity cajoled them in the benefits of domesticity since it offered them not only an enviable status, but protection from all evil as well. The acquisition of any knowledge entailed neither "elevat[ion] of [their] station", nor should it be "an excuse" for neglecting their assigned duties (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 57). Education was meant to teach them their "place, […] [to be] content with [it] and […] satisfied with [their] lot" (ibid). They were educated in what was expected of them and, as Alexis de Toqueville remarks, they were "educated to submit themselves to the cloister of their honest duty -- marriage" (qtd. in Barker-Benfield 36). Although they were taught that freedom and independence were the highest social values, they also learnt that these were reserved only for men. They were expected to show "moral courage, a rare endowment" (Young 181) that is "to act with perfect independence of the opinion of others" (ibid) on the condition that they did their duty: submitting, looking pleasant, and avoiding speaking their minds. Any other form of independence or desire for it was offensive, "unfeminine, contrary to nature", alien to sensible women who were "conscious of [their] inferiority" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 280). In any case, women withdrew from their studies earlier than men; most of them did not complete their courses.

Alongside education, a whole literary genre in the form of manuals, pamphlets, or books, flooded the market with the sole aim of instructing women on

how to stick to proper and accepted behavior and manage the household in a more effective way. They even included lists with suitable books that did not "poison" the female mind "secretly", exerting greater influence than "bad associates" (Young 188). Reading whatever fell into women's hands posed grave dangers as there was a plethora of "useless and pernicious books" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 98) which corrupted their moral principles by presenting false views of life. In addition, fancy distorted the nature of virtues and women tended to admire characters they ought to despise. Poetry, especially, excited their sentiments which revolted and threatened the purity of their heart (Sprague 81). It is evident that these manuals, along with schoolbooks, functioned as interpellators of performative heteronormativity, prescribing what was proper not only for females but for males as well, instilling in both genders what they were to expect from each other.

Whatever ambition women might have should be "quelled" (Epstein 74), since it was incompatible with the "private station she was born" (ibid). As "an ornament of man in his happier hours" *(The Young Lady's Own Book* 312), they had to "accommodate [themselves] to [their] husband's position" (ibid 52) if they were to be cherished by them. Ministers and religion convinced them of the male superiority and the sanctity of their assigned role. Their task was republican motherhood (Wayne 72), that is, raising the next generation of obedient citizens by "mak[ing] the child know it is not to think for itself" (Barker-Benfield 31). Not only were they subjugated and expected to bear their submission ungrudgingly, but they were also required to pass this "skill" over to the next generation as well. They bore the heavy emotional burden of being responsible for making home a "haven from the storm of democratic competition" (ibid 30), as well as for "provid[ing] the moral fiber for a whole people" (ibid 40). The "throne of a woman [was] her domestic circle" (Bureaud-Riofrey 62) and they should accept it without protestations since it was assigned to them by Providence. As it was the woman and not the man who would make the sacrifice, they had to "be plastic [themselves] to mould others" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 14). "Speak[ing[their minds" was a "grievous mistake" which horrified their listeners (Young 81) as much as taking active part in religious debates or being "meddling or important" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 168). "Too much fluency and animation in a discourse" ran contrary to modesty and being passionate rendered a woman "one of the most disgusting sights in nature" (ibid 201). They had to relinquish their "right of self-control" (ibid 170) and they were in no position to complain about any male

harshness or misbehavior, since their husband's well-being depended on their "proper adherence to their roles" (Wayne 3). Self-sacrifice, self-denial, and patience characterized the Angel in the House and practically relegated woman to a mechanical, unfeeling automaton dedicated to the welfare of everybody else but her own. In the first half of the nineteenth century, married women were deemed "dead to the law", had no legal rights, no properties and were represented by their husbands (Epstein 79); in 1860, a woman in Amherst, Elizabeth Packard whose religious views were not approved of by her husband, was sent to an Insane Asylum after a physician had taken her pulse and declared her insane (Lombardo 248). Independence was considered "unfeminine" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 20) and offensive, since it opposed nature; so if women were sensible, they had to be conscious of their inferiority and feel gratitude for male support.

Even so, marriage was thought the best, if not the only alternative -- the other being dissipation (Epstein 75) -- for a woman, but a husband was not always easy to procure, since not only was there a surplus of women in New England in the nineteenth century (Barker-Benfield 14), but women were considered "perennial dangers" and marriage a "malady" (ibid 9) as they spoilt the man's chances of enjoying life without setbacks, worries, or concerns (ibid 10). Nevertheless, bleak as the prospects of a spinster might look, their number increased steadily, occasionally even by choice, with 19% of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary graduates, of which Dickinson might have been one, choosing not to marry (Wayne 74). Spinsters were mainly white, middle-upper class women who had some formal education and were financially secure. Louisa May Alcott claimed that "loss of liberty, happiness and self-respect [we]re poorly repaid by the barren honour of being called Mrs." (ibid 6). Spinsters in the nineteenth century New England were a commonplace and participated in female activities alongside married women.

Either married or spinsters, women ran the same chances of becoming mentally ill. Failing to comply with society's prerequisites regarding their social role, women "put in jeopardy [their] peace of mind" and faced social exclusion (Barker-Benfield 43). They had to realize that only by succumbing to "the established usages of [their] contemporaries" (ibid) would they be able to fit in. Lack of self-control and self-denial was conducive to mental disease and insanity was "located particularly in women" (ibid 52) and, ironically, they were thought to be brought about not by confinement, but instead by the "general and powerful excitement of the female

mind" (ibid 53). What is more, education was thought to "suppress their finer sensibility" and the effort to make women as "capable as men" (ibid) went against nature as it destabilized their nervous system. Instead of converting nervous energy into affection, education strained their qualities of mind and resulted in insanity (ibid 54). "Increased mental activity of women" caused nervous diseases (Brown 172) and whatever engagement in activities that did not fall into woman's nature was "degenerative" (ibid 179). "Headaches, nervousness, propensity to fatigue or excitement" were symptoms of hysteria (ibid 65) and housekeeping duties or rest cures (ibid 66) which included constant bed restraint and confinement to house (ibid 175) or in darkened rooms (Epstein 86) aimed at restoring health so that women could resume their duties. Intellectual activities were strongly discouraged as they resulted in nervous exhaustion or other undiagnosed illnesses (ibid 86).

As women were believed to be the "moral guardians" (Wayne 101) of society, wasting time doing nothing but reading novels was a sign of "shrink[ing] from personal effort". Instead, they ought to participate in the "sphere of usefulness'' (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 170), which included societies which collected food, clothes and money and distributed them to the poor, the orphans and the widowed. They also took active part in the Revivals of Faith by assuming the role of "exhorters" (Wayne 51) or "agents of Christ" (Epstein 48) urging others to convert and be saved. This led to the feminization of the religion (ibid 50), which became an arena for women to exert some limited power over their husbands and society in general. Religion had instilled the women with the guilt of the original sin; they were a priori sinners just because of their gender and they strove to exonerate themselves from it. During revivals they were encouraged to conduct "self-examination" and conclude that they were "hypocrites" (Epstein 55). Zealous ministers attributed the misgivings a woman might have to her "wicked" nature and dismissed her as a sinner who "harbor[ed] rebellion against God" (ibid 56). They insisted that her opposition was "the workings of a depraved nature" (ibid) and they made her feel as if she was "the most vile, unworthy sinner on earth" (ibid 57). Such was the pressure that some women considered even suicide on the face of the guilt and the sense of "wickedness and criminality" they were made to feel (ibid).

It is noteworthy that domesticity and female confinement to the private sphere was promoted not just by the contemporary power dogma of male superiority – the expert discourse, who were male and usually ministers - but by women as well.

Several magazines and manuals for women, edited by women, praised the "virtues of staying home" and promoted heroines who had chosen "the empire of home" (Brown 178). This is indicative of the internalizing the "carefully orchestrated value-laden understanding of the self" (Prado 55) and the compliance of the oppressed to the value system of the oppressor, what Foucault calls the political technology of the body (1979, 26). The instillation of controlling habits and the continuous striving to emulate valued and favored images meant that women had practically no choice but construct a self compatible with those paradigms.

As can be understood from all the above, this cultural framework limited even more the -- already etiquette-hemmed -- universe of women's expression in letter writing, or writing in general. It is no wonder, then, that women engaging in writing of any sort experienced what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar called the "anxiety of authorship"; "conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist by definition inappropriate to their sex" (Gilbert & Gubar 51) and a sense of overstepping their domain in meddling with masculine activities. Although women writers could claim a terrain in the publishing business, it was confined to publications on efficient housekeeping and promoting the ideal of the Angel in the House. *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most influential women's magazine of the nineteenth century, aimed at convincing women of the priority their domestic duties had; at the same time, it constituted a forum in which women could publish their stories, essays or poems. However, it was widely believed that their vanity would be flattered, making them consider themselves scholars, capable of "limn[ing] the immortal forms of beauty" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 20). Aspiring literary fame, a woman would supposedly distance herself from "feminine grace" and fancy that she emulated "manly vigor" (ibid 50) as "the disciple of Wollstonecraft [who] threw off her hat, called for a boot-jack" and by "affecting the manners of the other sex" (ibid 50) would assert an equal station to men. Although women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern or Louisa May Alcott were extremely popular, there was a strong opposition from men of letters who considered that the very definition excluded women.

Nevertheless, women writers in the nineteenth century slowly gained enough power to deal with subjects outside their immediate circle, like political or anti-slavery issues and critique of gender roles, posing a threat not only to the literary status quo but to the social as well. However, letter writing was considered harmless,

so it was the only sector all expert discourses agreed women had to be familiar with. Although the best correspondents were believed to be "the sterner half of creation" (Cooke 430), they were too engrossed with business so the art of letter writing "[fell] into feminine hands […] the leisure class" (ibid). The ability to express themselves clearly without pretension had to be "inculcated in every establishment" (*A New Letter Writer* vii). Talent combined with mingling in good society attributed ease in writing and prevented them from mistaking "boisterous familiarity for heartiness" (ibid V). Their letters were characterized by "innocent hilarity" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xvii) as they presented "the first fruits of their thoughts" (ibid), since they wrote as if they were to appear amongst their family, without even using the "crisping iron to adjust the hair" (Hardie 240). Suppression of any "undue emotion" (Young 215), such as anger or disappointment, was a sign of good breeding, while enthusiasm led to "wandering of the mind, bordering on delirium, which exaggerate[d] realities and embodie[d] shadows" and it was considered a "malady" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 307). They were believed to be unable to grasp a subject in its entirety and express it with precision and brevity. In addition to their supposed negligence of punctuation and grave grammar mistakes, their letters could be "puzzling [and] ludicrous" (*Appleton's Complete Letter* xxii). Paradoxically, men claimed that women excelled at letter writing due to their "innocent hilarity in letter writing" (ibid xviii) and they gallantly forgave them for their allegedly appalling grammar, disorganized thought, or arrangement, which women supposedly could not help as it derived from their gender. However, setting low standards and condescension was not exactly praise; on the contrary it imparted and consolidated the notion that women were incapable of aiming higher.

This oppressive normative framework, assigning strict rules regarding domesticity and letter writing was meant to discourage any divergence and was reluctant to allow for any novelties. Emily Dickinson, however, having realized its workings, strove to release herself from its confinement, totally indifferent to the social expulsion this bold differentiation could entail.

CHAPTER TWO

EMILY DICKINSON'S EPISTOLARY UNIVERSE

Emily Dickinson is depicted as a recluse; however, her voluminous correspondence disclosed after her death reveals that she never severed herself from the community. On the contrary, she spun an epistolary web which reached out to numerous correspondents. The time span of the letters, covering nearly her entire lifetime and the scope of the recipients, ranging from her neighbors to well-known editors, is astonishing. She is known to have corresponded with 105 recipients; in her adolescence, trivialities or gossip were the springboard to serious existential matters, while in her maturity she dealt with extremely significant and excruciating spiritual matters including love and death. Whether notes scribbled on any scrap of paper available to her, addressing the grief or the joy of a relative or a friend, or accompanying a bouquet of flowers from her garden or one of her famous cakes; short tender appeals for intellectual companionship and acceptance or long obscure addresses seeking literary appraisal or encouragement, letters constituted Emily's umbilical cord with the world she had pushed out. "My letter as a bee goes laden" (L 133), wrote Dickinson to Elizabeth Holland, one of her confidants, and indeed her letters were loaded with much more than just news. In accordance with the nineteenth-century mode of communication, she constructed an epistolary universe of discourse in which she enjoyed the circularity of correspondence. Each letter was an agent, since it was authorized to act as "a little messenger" (L 98) for, or in the place of, the sender. Dickinson adapted the conventional epistolarity to her needs which exceeded mere communication. Apart from letters in the conventional definition of the term, Dickinson used the epistolary practice to forward letter-in-a-letter letters, poem-in-a-letter letters, poems-as-letters and visiting card-letters. She used the letter as a medium to make her poetry known to a very carefully chosen circle of readers as well as voice her concerns and notions on fundamental issues. In most of her letters she incorporated poems either in the body of the letter with no break and no differentiation as to the layout or after the body of the letter but before the signature. Dickinson enveloped her poems in epistolarity; the sheet became her stage. Words she wanted stressed stand alone on a line separate from the others, the line breaks force

the reader to pause before and after reading them and each line holds a syntactic or/and semantic unit. In this way, she had the control of both the form of her work and the scope of the readership. She benefited from the letter as a communicative device, but she was not engulfed by the epistolary norms; on the contrary, she emerged not only intact but groundbreaking as well.

Dickinson initiated a multi-layering and overlapping epistolary network; the primary network comprised her intended addressees to whom she communicated her message. She also founded a personal postal network, comprised of private postmen, friends, relatives, and children who functioned as mediators and delivered her letters as physical objects. The intended addressees were not only beneficiaries, but they were interpreters and mediators as well, since they constructed another network communicating Dickinson's palimpsest, that is, her intentions at the time of writing the letter, their own receiving and interpreting it, as well as their transcription or recitation of the letter even to addressees unintended by Dickinson. Her personal mailmen were persons she could trust as regards their confidentiality and their reliability. Amherst at the time of Dickinson was a provincial village whose residents indulged in "gossip and scandal" (Leyda 1:107) and she wrote to Bowles "The Paper wanders so I cannot write my name on it" (L 420). She was not the only one who wanted to avoid having her affairs be the talk of the town. Emily Fowler, one of her friends, asked one of her correspondents to address the letters to her father to evade the villagers' prowling eye while Jane Hitchcock, Lavinia's schoolmate, asked Austin to enclose his letter to her in one sent to Lavinia. Mail could very easily be lost or directed to the wrong address and Mr. Nim's, the postmaster's, inefficiency was Lavinia's frequent target of complaint. Dickinson made use of the traditional mail by either sending the letters directly or in care of somebody else, but she also forwarded her letters through relatives, friends, or their staff. They were the "bearer of notes and messages" (Jenkins 36) and considered the task assigned them by the Myth of Amherst a privilege. Timothy, their stableman, was "Miss Im'ly's slave" and so was Dennis or Pat whom she charged with dispatching her [letters] in the politest way: "Pat would it be much out of your way …?" or "Dennis would you be too tired to…?" (Bianchi, 1932, 20) Having the "opportunity of [being of] service" to her was relished by elderly relatives such as Luke Sweetser or George Montague: "Will Cousin George be so kind as to address and mail the enclosed to Dr Holland […]" (L 713) "will

Cousin, if walking today, please call as I have trifle for Cousin Sarah, which I fear to entrust to what Gilbert calls the 'Cloudy Man'" (L 716).

Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin's lover who became the editor of Emily's poems and letters, wrote to her parents that "[Emily] and her sister live, in a great measure, in their correspondence with friends" (Leyda 2:443). Her recipients acknowledged that they were beneficiaries as they greatly appreciated receiving one of Dickinson's letters. Samuel Bowles wrote to a friend that he "had the present of a bottle of wine this week from a woman with an affectionate note" (Leyda 1:368). He always indulged in "her lovely and characteristic notes" (Bianchi, 1932, 149), even anticipated them as his request to Susan reveals: "When next you write tell Emily to give me one of her little gems!" (Leyda 2:68). After receiving a note which accompanied a bouquet, Perez Cowan, one of Dickinson's cousins, wrote in his diary "They were very fine indeed heliotrope -- hyacinths -- verbena -- geranium fuchsia etc. & sent with it one of the nicest notes worded" (ibid 87). Receiving a letter from Miss Emily was a remarkable occasion. Todd wrote in her diary after receiving a note from Dickinson "I shall always keep this odd note – so strong, so full of meaning and so poetical. […] This letter made me happier than almost any other I have ever received. It fairly thrilled me" (Leyda 2:379). Eudocia Flynt noted in her diary "Had a letter from Emily Dickinson!!!!!" (ibid 62) Although Helen Hunt Jackson was a native of Amherst, she became aware of Dickinson's literary value through her letters to Higginson (Leyda 2:111). Joseph Lyman wrote to his mother in 1856 that "all my other friends when they love me write me some of them long and beautiful letters like Miss ED in Amherst" (Seawall, 1965, 1). The reception of one of Emily's letters by the Hollands was "an occasion of excitement for the whole family" (Ward, 1951, 25). They all gathered to have it read by one of the girls who asked for Elizabeth Holland's help to decipher Dickinson's handwriting. Although they were unable to comprehend the contents of the letter fully as "some of Emily's expressions were beyond [their] understanding" (Ward, 1951, 25), they treasured them. MacGregor Jenkins, a small child during Dickinson's late years, "stored away among the priceless treasures of a turbulent and exalting childhood" the notes he received from Dickinson, intuitively realizing their importance (Jenkins 50) as is evident from -- even the limited -- fame Dickinson enjoyed during her lifetime. Given that her letters and her poems share the same subject matter and are both embellished by elaborate figures of speech, as will be shown further on, a quick reference to Dickinson's literary acceptance by her

contemporaries is illuminating as to the motives of her correspondents' treasuring her letters.

2.1. Dickinson's fame enclosed and circulated in letters

Although it is largely claimed that Dickinson's work and her poetic genius were discovered posthumously due to Lavinia's fervor and Todd's diligence, it appears that they were an open secret. The "Two Editors of Journals [who] came to my Father's House, this winter - and asked my for my Mind" are mentioned in her second letter to Higginson as early as 1862, indicative of the fact that the entire family was aware of her vocation and did not disapprove of it as well as of the fact that her work must have circulated for a while before the editors learnt about it. In a letter to Edward Dwight, she apologized for a "*misenveloped*" letter containing poems, sent to him by mistake "I have the friend who loves me -- and thinks me larger than I am -- and to reduce a Glamour, innocently caused -- I sent the little Verse to *Him*" (L 246). In 1867, John Burgess, a graduate who attended the Commencement at the Homestead, noted that Dickinson was considered a "real poetess by nature" (Leyda 2:125), while three years later Higginson mentioned that "Dr Stearns says her sister is proud of her" (Leyda 2:153).

What is more, in the 1870s, the identity of the author of the *Saxe Holm's Stories*, romances between a married man and a woman, which were published initially in various magazines and later by *Scribner's*, was speculated upon. Several writers, among them Mark Twain, were thought to have written them; Helen Hunt Jackson, who was the author, denied it fervently. Dickinson seemed to be the "solution to the Saxe Holm problem" (Leyda 2:296), as she fitted the characteristics attributed to Holm: "in the writings there is a noticeable lack of incident and confinement to quiet, household affairs. […] She seems to feel a kinship to the natural world, is as exquisitely sensitive to the feelings produced by birds and flowers, and is as familiar with their ways and language as if she were indeed one of them […] Her expressions are often quaint and old-fashioned […] gems of thoughts and felicitous expressions […] products of long, quiet thinking […] timidity and shrinking, a person long shut out from the world and living in a world of her own […] devoted to literature and flowers" (Leyda 2:296). *The Amherst Record* newspaper claimed that

"The person referred to by *the Union* we suppose is the daughter of the late Hon. Edward Dickinson, a lady of superior culture and education and who has for many years secluded herself from society for the purpose of indulging in literary tastes and pursuits" (ibid 297). Although *The Springfield Republican* refuted this claim as they "happen to *know* that no person by the name of Dickinson is in any way responsible for the Saxe Holm" (ibid), the familiarity of the journalists with Dickinson's work is striking. Such profound knowledge of her themes and diction indicates that her work had already circulated widely by the 1870s and she was considered a remarkable writer. The scope and the depth of her poems, however, cannot have been fully realized since when her poem *Success is counted sweetest* was published in *The Mask of Poets,* it was attributed to Emerson. By 1872, her reputation must have grown as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who knew Higginson, asked Dickinson for some poems.

Of Miss P----- I know but this, dear. She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my chirrup more. Perhaps she stated it as my duty, I don't distinctly remember, and always burn such letters, so I cannot obtain it now. I replied declining. She did not write to me again -- she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch. (L 380)

Phelps was a voluminous writer, and her best-known work was *Gates Ajar*, which depicted afterlife as a place where families reunite and live in all earthly comforts along with their pets forever. She was also an advocate of temperance and women's emancipation. It seems impossible for Dickinson not to remember what the letter was about, so the phrasing of the request must have struck her as odd. The ironic tone of Dickinson's remark indicates strong opposition to Phelps' views. However, it is unclear whether she mocks Phelps' stance on the afterlife or whether she challenges women's roles because the word 'humanity' could refer either to all human beings or to the trait of compassionate disposition.

By 1881, Dickinson had established herself as "the Myth", as Todd notes, and "her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely but no one ever sees her" (Leyda 2:357). A year later, Todd wrote to her parents "Her poems are perfectly wonderful, and all the literary men are after her to have her writings published" (ibid 361). Dickinson had been repeatedly asked for permission to publish her poems. Helen Hunt Jackson pressed her: "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of

your verses in it -- and I read them very often -- You are a great poet -- and it is wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy" (L 444). She also told Dickinson she wanted to become her "literary legatee & executor" (L 937a). She also talked extremely highly of Dickinson's poems to Thomas Niles, urging him to persuade her to publish her work. He wrote to Dickinson: "If I may presume to say so, I will take instead a M.S. collection of your poems, that is, if you want to give them to the world through the medium of a publisher" (L 813b). Niles was not the only editor whom Dickinson knew, however. She was closely related to Samuel Bowles and Josiah Holland of the *Springfield Republican* and Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Samuel Bowles was indicated as the Master of the three titular letters by some scholars, possibly because he called her reciprocally his "Queen (Recluse)": "If I amaze[d] your kindness -- My Love is my only apology. To the people of 'Chillon' -- this -- is enoug[h] I have met -- no othe[rs.] Would you -- ask le[ss] for your Queen -- M[r] Bowles? Then -- I mistake -- [my] scale" (L 249). They seemed to share the same concerns as she "never forg[ot his] spiritual longings" (Leyda 1:366) and respected each other. She addressed him as a Dear friend, valuable as her "Friends [were her] Estate" (L 193). Bowles longed for her work and admired her ingenious approach. After he had read the poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass", he "was said to have exclaimed 'How did that girl ever know that a boggy field wasn't good for corn'".[2] As a matter of fact, the *Springfield Republican* published or reprinted some of her poems; her poem "Nobody knows this little Rose" (JP 35) was published on the 2nd of August 1858 (Dandurand 51), while poems published in New York editions were reprinted in the *Republican*. Specifically, the poem "Blazing In Gold and quenching In Purple" (JP 228) was published in the *Drum Beat* on the 29th of February 1864 as was her poem "Flowers -- Well -- if anybody" (JP 137) on the 2nd of March of the same year. Both poems were reprinted by the *Republican,* (daily and weekly) while the second was reprinted by the *Boston Post*, too (ibid).

Dickinson was also closely acquainted with Josiah Holland, the coeditor and editor of *Scribner's Monthly* and one of the most popular writers of his time. However, he was not appreciative of women writers. In an article in the *Springfield*

[2] http://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/higginson/jnp986.html, last visited 15/12/20.

Republican entitled *Employment for Women*, Holland attacked women who had such aspirations or deviated in any way from the established gender-dependent duties, obligations, or possibilities: "You feel hurt if you are asked to mend a coat or wash the dishes, do it poorly and sulkily and then go and write some stuff you call poetry about your Unanswered Longings or Beautiful Visions or what not! You ought to be in short allowance of ink and paper till you have learned to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself!" (Leyda 2:103) His description fits Dickinson for the first part; she did grudge with the household but certainly her work was not stuff, as Holland derogatorily referred to women's poetry, but profound studies which he fell pitifully short to grasp. He also claimed that women "take a literature turn and not content with any number of epistles to female acquaintances send in contributions to the press which the friendly and appreciative editor kindly and carefully returns or loses or fails to receive" (Holland 95). His harsh critique fell on deaf ears as regards Dickinson who was not mortified in the least; as a matter of fact, she included poems both to the joint letters to him and his wife and to his personal ones. She challenged his religiosity and his scorn for women writers by sending him a poem in one of her letters. After she had expressed her joy for his "repaired health" and his "reared Fames", she pondered on death and afterlife, challenging once again his piety: "We hope that you are happy as far as Peace is possible, to Mortal and immortal Life -- for those ways 'Madness lies'" (L 544). Her Shakespearean quote from *King Lear* (Act-III, Scene-IV, Lines-17) did not remove the doubt, as it was uttered when Lear was at risk of losing his mind and unable to comprehend his daughters' behavior. In a similar vein, any attempt to comprehend the mysteries of life and death might lead to insanity. She also incorporated the poem: "They held their Wick above the West," defying his harsh condemnation. Holland also maintained that "imagination of girls is active to an unhealthy degree and false views are endangered" (Holland 149) and suggested menial employment to prevent this. Dickinson made no attempt to normalize her style and deprive it of its uniqueness. One of her most imaginative descriptions of snowfall is addressed to him: "I come in flakes, dear Dr. Holland, for verily it snows, and as descending swans, here a pinion and there a pinion, and anon a plume, come the bright inhabitants of the white home" (L 181).

Although Holland had encouraged many new writers, he did not consider Dickinson's work fit for the press. In 1872, he confided in Emily Ford, Dickinson's old friend: "I have some poems of hers under consideration for publication – but they

really are not suitable – they are too ethereal". To Ford's remark that they were "concentrated", he replied that they "remind[ed him] of orchids, air-plants that have no roots in earth" adding he "dare not use them" (Leyda 2:193). On the contrary, Emily Ford had "refuse[d] to disappear in the limbo of unrecognized genius" (ibid 191) by printing her poems, one of which was entitled *My Recreation* and addressed "To the Public" thus: "I am no poet and I know it. / But if a wild bloom lingers/ within my loving fingers/ from the woods I joyfully bring it" (ibid). One can only wonder at the editor who dared to use this one.

Dickinson's reluctance to fit into the conventional norms and sacrifice her artistic integrity for the sake of the aforementioned -- rather short-sighted -- public led her to stand out by enclosing her intellect in a medium that was bound to be read and appreciated: the letter, albeit entirely different, a transformation of the prosaic, referential function of the letter into poetic.

2.2. Dickinson's letters as metaphors of her self

What is in a letter for Emily Dickinson then? "So long as a bodily interview is denied us we must make letters answer" (L 8), writes she to Abiah Root, personifying letters as a means of reaching the absent recipient through its presence. She writes "letters that go in post-offices-and ride in mail-bags-paper, and ink letters" as well as "queer -- little silent ones -- very full of affection -- and full of confidence -- but wanting in proof -- therefore not valid --" (L 30). Whatever their form, their purpose remains the same, though: they are "little messengers" (L 98) that envelop in an envelope the sender's "mind alone without the corporeal friend" (L 330) to "impel shapes to eyes at a distance" (L 656). The letter becomes her hologram, it acquires human parts, lips that kiss the correspondents (L 94, 472), eyes that tear (L 196), hands that knock on the doors of those who suffer lest they intrude (L 243); in short, she "consign[s] [her]self" (L 866) through them and they become the symbol of her presence in absence. Dickinson does send the letter as a "representative of [her] person" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 7) in a physical sense, evident in the somatic dimension with which she invests it. She "come[s] and see[s]" (L 111) her recipients though she doesn't "bring [her] body with [her] (ibid) as she "come[s] in [her] pencil" (L 506), she "ring[s] the front bell" (L 78) "sit[s] and chat[s] away" (L 111). The letter is an

agent, acting on her behalf; it is her letter-body present in the absence of her physical body. During her withdrawal, letters function as her representatives in the event of funerals, weddings, or illnesses; she "consign[s] [her]self" (L 866) and "t[akes] the hand of [her] friend's friend, even apparitionally" (L 967). In 1866, Maria Avery Howard notes "The day I left she sent me by a servant the lines

> [We'll pass without the parting
>
> So to spare
>
> Certificate of Absence --
>
> Deeming where
>
> I left Her I could find Her
>
> If I tried --
>
> This way, I keep from missing
>
> Those that died.] (P 996)

with an oleander blossom tied with black ribbon to say goodbye instead of coming to do it herself" (Leyda 2:122).

In epistolary terms, the letter as a metaphor carries over the "*parousia* of the sender" (Barton & Hall 18) to the receiver, thus affording them with the possibility of "chatting with the semblance" (L 66). During the first phase of her correspondence, Dickinson is greatly concerned by the spatiotemporal/corporeal proxy shift but she handles it in rather conventional ways. In having delayed replying to Susan Dickinson's letter, she mentions that she "ha[s] never left [her] so long before" (L 72) while she signs a letter to Austin "If it wasn't 12 o'clock I would stay longer" (L 90). As if in a time machine, she is transferred to Austin's bedside in Boston while he is sick: "I'm afraid that dreadful pain will keep you wide awake all this dreary night, and *so* afraid am I, that I steal from happy dreams and come to sit with you" (L 66). However, she voices her frustration at the limited possibilities of the letter begging Susan to "be corporal, it would so comfort me!" (L 70) or lamenting to Austin "how farcical it seems to sit here a writing", acknowledging though that "thanks to a being inventing paper and pen they are better far than nothing" (L 63). Dickinson is aligned

with the metaphysical determination of being as presence which privileges an eternal textual present moment in time.

Conceiving presence/absence in a metaphysical way, she equates the absence of the physical body that triggers the letter to a "grave that opened and swallowed" (L 30) her correspondents and longs for "new life [and] new strength" letters give to her (L8) the moment she receives the letter-body, reincarnated into a body-letter: "If you were here" she writes to Abiah, "I would tell you something – several somethings which have happened *since* you went away, but time, and space, as usual, oppose themselves, and I put my treasures away *till* 'we two meet again'" (L 31) (emphasis added). The conditional she uses highlights the impossibility of their spatiotemporal coexistence. Her here constitutes both a spatial and a temporal stasis which opposes that of Abiah's and keeps them apart. However, originating from this fixed position on the linear time scale, she moves back and forth in time and attempts to nail common referential points. Through a backward span, she moves to the spatial source and links the end of their concurrence by pinpointing the beginning of the gap *since* Abiah's absence and bringing it forth to her present. At the same time, she moves forward in time, spanning the remaining temporal space *till* their spatiotemporal coordinates synchronize in the future. Dickinson perceives time textually and by temporizing and spacing, she joins the alternating spatial and temporal dots and con-textualizes the time linearity to make sense of it; the present moves constantly onwards alternating absence/presence, engendering *différance*, that is, meaning and communication. Her letter becomes what Derrida calls a trace, enveloping both the past and the present, which attempts to span the temporal and spatial gap that separates the correspondents. Dickinson writes to Abiah: "Whenever you look at [the seal] you can think I am looking at you at the same time" (L 7), temporalizing presence while Abiah is obliged to spatialize it, if they are to share some common referential point with which they can identify repeatedly as the time word whenever denotes. "Your precious letter, Susie, it sits here now, and smiles so kindly at me, and gives me such sweet thoughts of the dear writer" (L 85), she writes to Susan, and she has to reverse the procedure; the agentive letter-body becoming space of time is called to render absence into presence. Letters are a "depository of the time" (Thorold 28); they function as time deictics because of their referentiality. Journal letters are considered the best as they inform their recipients of the entire goings on that transpired at the sender's spatiotemporal situation; although they have expired at the

recipients' spatiotemporal frame, they are present in the future, becoming time of space, drawing together the poles of epistolary communication through "memory of which the emblem perished" (L 130). Although such conceptions of the spaciotemporal workings of letter writing are quite new, Dickinson appears instinctively aware of them, or/and plays with them consciously, in her letters. Dickinson's letters function in the same way as novels do, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it in his *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*. They constitute a *chronotope*, the "organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel, the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 250). Dickinson deconstructs the metaphysical determination of being as presence the moment she resorts to it; her *chronotope* constitutes a "center for concretizing representation" (ibid): "Here I am, ain't you happy to see me?" (L 48) she greets her brother Austin, eliminating and conflating spatial and temporal axes.

` However, her great concern, the deferral and annulment of the message the spatiotemporal differences entail, remains: "*Can* I console so far off, wont the comfort waste in conveying, and be *not*, when my letter gets there?" (L 35), she asks one of her friends, Jane Humphrey. Jane's 'there' juxtaposes with her 'here', the spatial difference is aggravated by the temporal discrepancy which results in the pointlessness of the intended message as it is transferred out of a shared or intended place and time. Conscious of the tampering and possible nullification that the alteration of spatiotemporal axes incurs, Dickinson attempts to reassure her brother: "Austin, you mustn't care if your letters do not get here just when you think they will -- they are always new to us, and delightful always, and the more you send us, the happier we shall be" (L 115). Even if the reason that triggers the compilation of the letter has ceased, the letter itself constitutes the corporeal presence of his corporeal absence and as such it fulfills its purpose. It is another link in the chain of their uninterrupted bond, a renewal of their epistolary pact which ensures their inclusion in it.

The epistolary chain could be broken either by letters getting lost or by adestination. Although the Dickinsons made extensive use of the conventional mail, the rail mail or even friends or relatives, "good angel[s] passing [Austin's] way" (L 53), who carried their letters from one place to the other, they had many of them lost or sent to the wrong address: "Where all those letters go – our's and your's -, and Susie's, somebody surely knows, but we do not" (L 130). Many of their letters were

readdressed and forwarded again and again before and if they reached their recipients. Even so, their reception did not actually entail correct interpretation. Characterized by adestination, they could be misunderstood or not understood at all. Dickinson sends a letter to Abiah who has avoided her after her refusal to convert:

> Very likely, Abiah, you fancy me at home in my own little chamber, writing you a letter, but you are greatly mistaken. I am on the blue Susquehanna paddling down to you; I am not much of a sailor, so I get along rather slowly, and I am not much of a mermaid, tho' I verily think I will be, if the tide overtakes me at my present jog. Hard hearted girl! I don't believe you care, if you did you would come quickly and help me out of this sea, but if I drown, Abiah, and go down to dwell in the seaweed forever and forever, I will not forget your name, nor all the wrong you did me! (L 69)

Dickinson sees the trajectory of the letter as a metaphor for her plodding in the river, the boundary between civilization, that is, interpellation, and the Other. Despite Dickinson's alluring, siren letter, the power of her words falls on deaf ears as Abiah is not seduced; even if the letter gets to its destination, she might fail to reply to it, letting the body-letter drown, which becomes evident in the way Dickinson sees herself struggling to draw Abiah's attention and be restored back to epistolary safety. Given the rather problematic understanding between them, the meaning as well as the physicality of her letter is going under, it gets swallowed up or rejected.

2.3. Dickinson's application of De Certeau's transverse tactics for evading the strategies of letter writing

Was Dickinson familiar with the contemporary epistolary rules and epistolary literature? Several books on both subjects were available in her father's library and she was taught Samuel Philips Newman's *Practical System of Rhetoric*, which included instructions on letter writing, during her studies in Mount Holyoke Seminary. Her schoolbook included several conventions which were also part of several letter-writing manuals and social etiquette books and cautioned the letter writer against "the cant of the vulgar, the verbosity of the pedant, the sickening refinement of the sentimentalist" (Newman 185). Private letters should be

characterized by “unrestrained flow and carelessness of conversation and preciseness and formality of dignified composition approaching the former” (ibid 184). It seems that this book influenced Dickinson; the instructions on “a plan [which] is a species of scaffolding to aid us in erecting the building. When the edifice is finished, we may let the scaffolding fall” (ibid 24) is the foundational metaphor on which she built and elaborated poem 729:

The Props assist the House

Until the House is built

And then the Props withdraw

And adequate, erect,

The House support itself

And cease to recollect

The Augur and the Carpenter –

Just such a retrospect

Hath the perfected Life –

A Past of Plank and Nail

And slowness – then the scaffolds drop
Affirming it a Soul – (P 1142)

Indoctrinating books in the form of letters with the aim of inculcating women readers with the proper female principles were among the numerous books on the subject on the shelves of the Dickinson family library. Dickinson was given *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter* by her father. The book was written by William Sprague, a pastor, addressed to his daughter, whom he regards “as the representative of young females in general” (Sprague vi) and consists of letters on various subjects such as “Religion, Christian Zeal, Independence of Mind, Improvement of Time, Preparation for Death, Education” and so on, functioning as an

interpellator of performative heteronormativity, since he aims at "elevat[ing] the standard of female acquisitions and female character" (ibid vi). He introduces most of his precepts with "I wish you to" but most frequently with "I do not wish you ever to" or "On no account would I consent to" which constitute definite commands, not advice but an order, even though this is his "legacy to a motherless child" (Sprague iii). He considers "scarcely possible that […] higher branches of education [would] come into direct use" in the life of a woman (ibid 55) and cautions women against too much study which would lead them to "the grave [which was] ready" for them (ibid 41). He warns against "a talking female", that is, women who engage in conversation about religion depriving themselves of their "native loveliness", and he expresses the hope that "the cause of truth will [never] require the polemic influence of females" (Sprague 201). Sprague condemns any departure from domestic life as women are made to follow and not to lead and any differentiation means trespassing the boundaries of female propriety. Sprague's advice to his daughter to spend most of her time at home since "the mind by being constantly conversant with the ever varying scenes of social life loses the command of its own power" (ibid 155), echoes in Dickinson's comment to her brother Austin: "*we* meet our friends, and a constant interchange *wastes tho't* and feeling, and we are then obliged to *repair* and *renew*" (L 54). Regarding letter writing, Sprague concedes that "your sex greatly exceeds ours" (53) and he argues that letters are "in every respect representatives of our persons" (ibid 120). He gives advice on the invention and the expression of the letter as well as on the epistolary style which should be that of an "elegant conversation" (ibid 53).

Reverent John Bennett compiled *Letters to a Young Lady*, another of Dickinson's books, "to rouse young ladies from a vacant and insipid life […] to recall them from visionary novels and romances into solid reading and reflection" (Bennett 3). Dickinson rephrases his intention to a letter to Austin, mentioning that letter writing "would be a pleasant method of employing [her] liesure time & keep [her] mind from vain & foolish thoughts in the leisure time before mentioned" (L 17). Her mocking tone is evident in the deliberate spelling mistake which could refer to something only the siblings could understand and the facetious repetition of leisure time. Some days earlier she asked him to assure their father that she would "try to follow his precepts" (L 16) and this could be the answer to the male authority expressed both by her father and the expert. Bennett argues that education seriously harms females as schools do not provide girls with domestic qualifications. He

recommends that ladies get a feminine knowledge which requires neither time nor "comprehensiveness of mind" (ibid 80) and "does not bring wrinkles"; the only they have to do is to embellish the ideas which men's "solid judgment and superior vigor" (ibid 79) put forward. He makes a binary division characterizing "learned women […] a proverb of reproach" who are detested by men (ibid 77) and stamp the pious and decent ones with an "indiscriminate stigma" for not indulging in "unwomanly" fields such as politics, philosophy, or metaphysics. He continues employing the tactic he condemns by stigmatizing such women devoid of principles as "monsters", without piety who can never be pleasing (ibid 12) putting the future prosperity of men and the whole nation at risk. Unfortunately, he adds, girls do not have as many renowned characters to emulate as boys charging women for what men, himself included, have done over the centuries: the restriction of the available field of possibilities for women, their belittlement at every possible occasion and ultimately their condemnation for their failure to surpass the certain socio-cultural understanding of their own selves men imbue to them. His opinion of women reading or writing poetry which "ruflle[s] the mind" (ibid 98) echoes Dickinson's ironic comment to Higginson about her father: "He buys me many Books -- but begs me not to read them -- because he fears they joggle the Mind" (L 261). Letter writing could not be omitted from the book. Bennett uses the same phraseology as most of the other letter-writing manuals mentioning that "your sex much excels ours" (bid 81); a desirable excellence attributed to women who are also endowed with vivid imagination and sensitivity. Whereas men pay attention to every aspect of the Rhetoric of the Letters, women's sentiments effuse the page haphazardly, a trait which, despite being defective, is not condemned. A good epistolary style is a mechanical habit and letter-writers should read widely to cultivate it.

Father's Legacy to his Daughters, another of the Dickinsons' books, deals with "Religion -- Conduct and behaviour -- Amusements -- Friendship, love, marriage"; the writer, Dr Gregory, a male expert, attempts to inculcate his orphan daughters with qualities "which render [them] most respectable and most amiable in the eyes of [his] own sex" (Gregory 8). Spurred by "paternal love" (ibid 6), he claims that women are not "domestic drudges" but companions (ibid).

These books function as strategies and aim not only at children but indirectly at parents as well, prescribing proper upbringing. By assuming the position and the role of a father, the writers are invested with authority, becoming judges of

normality for both parents and their children. The former consider the well-being of their children of paramount importance, and they are led to believe that unless they abide by these instructions, they will be responsible for their children's spiritual or physical demise.

Dickinson seems to be well acquainted with the epistolary rules and limitations, as it is evident from her letters. However, even by mentioning their existence, which should be taken for granted and not commented on, she deviates from their framework while she seemingly follows them. She writes to Abiah Root: "You must forgive me, indeed you must, that I have so long delayed to write you, & I doubt not you will when I give you all my reasons for so doing. You know it is customary for the first page to be occupied with apologies & I must not depart from the beaten track, for one of my own imagining" (L 23). In another letter, she claims that "My writing apparatus is upon a stand before me, and all things are ready" (L 7), recreating in the letter the instructions by manuals which stated that a desk stand in a "well- lighted corner" in a corner devoted to letter writing, furnished with all the necessary equipment should be ready for the letter-writer lest their motive or inspiration be "damped" if they had to look everywhere for pen and paper (Cook, 1896, 436-7). Thus Dickinson consciously poses as an illustration from a letter-writing manual, as the following one which comes from the first page of the *American Fashionable Letter Writer*:

At the conclusion of the same letter, she urges Abiah not to show the letter to anyone as was the custom, because she feels that she has not lived up to the standards of a good letter as far as handwriting and content is concerned: “I have looked my letter over and find I have written nothing worth reading. However, you must excuse it on the plea that I have written in great haste – Don’t look at the writing and don’t let anyone see the letter”. This sentence was excluded in the first edition of the letters, and one wonders whether Todd considered it insignificant, or she was fully aware of the epistolary negligence and deviation implied.

Dickinson makes further, extensive use of ideas expressed in these books, which she elaborates on or probes deeper. In a letter to her brother, Austin, she writes: “We miss you more and more. I wish that we could see you, but letters come the next -- write them often” (L 108), echoing a manual: “To speak to those we love is the greatest satisfaction we are capable of knowing. The next is being able to converse with them by letter (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xiii). In 1871 she writes “To be remembered is next to being loved, and to be loved is Heaven, and is this quite Earth” (L 361). Writing to him after his recovery from an illness, she voices her concerns about his emotional well-being: “Glad to know you were better -- better physically, but who cares for a body whose tenant is ill at ease? Give me the aching body, and the spirit glad and serene, for if the gem shines on, forget the mouldering casket!” (L 54), building on a rhetorical question -- itself echoing the teachings of religion -- in one of the manuals: “what is your body, but a temporary receptacle for an immortal mind? It is but the casket; the jewel is the soul (Bennett 5). On another level, she could refer to the physical letter as the casket that bears the gems of affection and intelligence of the sender. In a letter to Thomas Higginson, the editor of the Atlantic, she states that “A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend”, which builds on a contemporary notion that “Minds alone seem to mingle, unembarrassed by the bodily presence” (*Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* xxi) through correspondence. In a letter to her uncle Joseph Sweetser, where she juxtaposes the blooming of nature to their family or health problems and ponders about life and death, she finishes with “I hardly know what I have said – my words put all their feathers on – and fluttered here and there” (L 190), phrasing which echoes -- ironically, since she overturns its notion -- a manual urging letter writers to mind their diction, as “words have no longer wings to fly away from observation” (Hardie 230).

There are essential differences between the early and late phase of Dickinson's correspondence regarding both the face and the Rhetoric of the Letters. However, there is common ground regarding her abidance by epistolary decorum, that is, respect for the rank, position, or age of her recipients with whom she is not well acquainted, those she wants to keep at a distance or merely to impress. A letter sent to Reverent Hale to enquire about Benjamin Newton's death (L 153) is indicative of the epistolary rules she abides by. The face of the letter is consistent with the rules as the date is noted down, the salutation and the complimentary close are in an appropriate formal way, the paragraphs are divided and the transition from one to the other is smooth. Dickinson apologizes for violating the epistolary rules as far as addressing a stranger is concerned, but the style is formal, "respectful not familiar" (Westlake 84), and the diction is adapted to the situational aspect of the letter. Several invitations sent to John Graves, one of her cousins, and Henry Emmons, an Amherst College student, are in the form dictated by letter-writing manuals."Brief messages on transient and local interest" (Houghton 325) in "all matters of ceremony" (*American Fashionable Letter Writer* 326), notes are more formal, written in the third person. Dickinson invites John Graves to spend the evening at her house writing "I wonder if Cousin John has a lesson to learn this evening?" (L 101), verbalizing the request in an "elegant and unexceptionable" way (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 15) to "convey civil inquiries (ibid) suitable among equals or persons "slightly acquainted" (Houghton 326), though her requesting his company is phrased in a rather unusual way. She sends a letter to Thomas Higginson to introduce herself and ask for his guidance in the established formal way. By a letter of introduction, a friend introduced an absent individual. These letters were never sealed as this was a "gross breach of etiquette" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxvi) and they were brief without any exaggeration regarding the qualities of the person introduced. Senders had to be extremely careful as to the bearer of the letter since they vouched for the holder, and they would be responsible for any harm done. It should be sent along with a card bearing the name and the address of the person introduced. As was the custom, Dickinson sends an unsigned letter and she encloses another envelope enclosing a card with her name; she is simultaneously the agent of introducing herself in the letter and the person introduced in the card and distanced, by this formal gesture, from the letter writer. She initiates a life-long correspondence with him, a common practice

among “literary culture, men of letters” (Chesterfield 27) who esteem each other as equals, which Dickinson obviously believes is the case, contrary to the injunctions about feminine humility in those same manuals.

It becomes apparent that an orthodox letter writer had to abide to a plethora of rules so that their letters did not deviate from the accepted norms, which would result in their being epistolary and social outcasts. Yet Dickinson violates these rules, often while seeming to observe them to the letter. During the first phase she uses the armaments of the system she fights against. During the second one, she creates a new, unorthodox genre out of defiance and manipulation of the very rules she is meant to follow.

2.4 First phase: Dickinson’s divergence from within the epistolary system

Vey early on, Dickinson realized both the communicative value of the letter and its interpellative power. Her unorthodox letter writing is divided into two phases. In her youth, letters provide her with the opportunity to interact with her social circle, while she counteracts the etiquette restrictions by turning them on their head at the same time she ostensibly remains loyal to them. Dickinson employs tactics; by making use of, but not internalizing, the imposed language, she remains within the terrain of the proper and subverts it by using it to ends foreign to it. Appropriation and internal manipulation of the normative space/system of the established representations and its verbalization constitute what De Certeau calls ways of operating which allow her to leave her own imprint of acts, an antidiscipline (De Certeau xv). Dickinson creates a space in which she can find ways of using the “constraining order of the place or of the language”, (ibid 30) the established vocabulary and syntax to her own ends, and develops her idiosyncratic style which matures during the second phase of her correspondence.

Although a letter was considered a “picture of your heart” (Dilworth 3), it became more of a symbol of a person’s social status and character, enclosing the writer into the strict and inflexible structures of the epistolary conventions. In the early phase of Dickinson’s epistolary activity, the letters she exchanges with her correspondents are seen as “symbols traced upon paper” (L 15) which substitute for her physical presence. However, her letter is not a representative of an idealized self

as dictated by letter writing manuals; she carries over to her correspondents the "impress" (L 27) of her real self, disregarding the epistolary convention which maintain that letter writers should save face since letters, as "photograph[s] of the writer" (Chesterfield 6), could affect the "Respectability and Success in [the] Life" (*The Young Lady's*, front cover) of the individual. "I have been introducing you to me in this letter so far" (L 31), writes Dickinson to her close friend Abiah Root. The syntax of the sentence is telling as regards the concurrent intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity. By making evident that she is simultaneously the subject and the agent of her intro-duction to Abiah, she both brings herself to knowledge and leads Abiah to the I that Dickinson wants to illustrate. In the early period of Dickinson's letter writing her letters constitute a metaphor of her presence in absence, according to the contemporary definition of the letter as a metonymy of her character. However, she reverses its performative power; by exposing the rules she is meant to follow unquestionably, she brings them to the fore only to break them. In this sense, she is performing as an agent rather than acting on an imposed and internalized value system as a subject. Dickinson's divergence from every epistolary prescriptive norm is, as will be shown, both indicative of her complete disregard of the imposed need of tailoring a self suitable to the models put forward by the manuals and her playful meddling with them.

2.5. Dickinson's divergence regarding the physical form of the letter

Sprague's *Letters,* given to Emily Dickinson by her father, included epistolary rules stating that "letters speak for us" (Sprague 120), highlighting the importance of the flawless face of a letter. It is evident from the very first letter Dickinson writes at the age of twelve that she is familiar with both the framework of letter writing as she incorporates cliché phrases in the introduction: "As Father was going to Northampton and thought of coming over to see you I thought I would improve the opportunity and write you a few lines" as well as in the conclusion: "and I can think of - Nothing more to say - I shall Expect an answer to my letter soon". However, she seems to pay no attention to its interpellating influence as there is no full stop, whatsoever, no division in paragraphs while there are several interlineations. In addition, she doesn't write any

date on the letter as the rules dictated; instead of her complete address she would just write the name of the town: Amherst. The omission of the time and place might be a premature effort to eliminate spatiotemporal differences and unite with her brother. Then her aunt Elizabeth, her father's sister who lived with them at the time, would add the date and complete the address. In her second letter to Austin, she uses standard epistolary phraseology to address him as she "improve[d] the opportunity to write [him] a few lines", mentions twice that she could "think of nothing more to say" yet she rambles on not failing to inform him of the garden, his clothes, her teachers, some neighbors, the horse, and finishes off with a standard complimentary close followed by a postscript about some more relatives, her friends and their boyfriends. At another time, Abiah Root remarks that Dickinson "had written [her] more affectionately than wont" (L 91). Dickinson playfully states that she simply does not care for her opinion: "I know you will laugh and say I wonder what makes Emily so sentimental - But I don't care if you do, for I shant hear you" (L 5) and plays by Abiah's rules only to violate them blatantly. In a letter to her in 1848, she starts off quite conventionally. There is the usual salutation: "My dear Abiah," a perfectly conventional beginning: "You must forgive me […] that I have so long delayed to write you" followed by the reason for this delay as "it is customary" and the statement that she "must not depart from the beaten track for one of [her] own imagining", since letters should be written "to the Judgment, not Imagination". (Richardson A3) Right afterwards, however, she does depart for one of her "flowers of speech" (L 31) by giving an elaborate account of her being dragged back home from school due to her illness. Austin marched to South Hadley with very specific orders from the headquarters, that is, their parents, to take her back. It was a losing battle; her attempts to overpower him wielding the only weapons available, words or tears, were to no avail and Austin vanquished her. As soon as she finishes it, she delegates this description to a "ludicrous account" and in regret for her diversion she continues diverting, relating her stay at home with irony and sarcasm:

> Father is quite a hand to give medicine, especially if it is not desirable to the patient, & I was dosed for about a month after my return home, without any mercy, till at last out of mere pity my cough went away & I had quite a season of peace. Thus I remained at home until the close of the term, comforting my

parents by my presence, & instilling many a lesson of wisdom into the budding intellect of my only sister. (L 23)

Given that the young should respect and obey their parents blindly, this sarcastic reference to her father borders irreverence; in addition, included in the letter that is meant to convey a picture of her character it is quite contrary to epistolary etiquette. Another retreat to the epistolary framework and she laments for the "advantages she has not improved", the time unwisely spent, she mentions her books, as reference to the current reading was a must-include subject as recommended by manuals, wondering at the same time "Am not I a pedant for telling you what I have been reading?" Her comment in the form of a question serves as a declaration, illustrating her opinion of the imposed limitation in the choice of subjects. She closes off quite conventionally "Ever your own affectionate" but then she rebels again. She signs off as Emilie E. Dickinson for the first time, a fashion she would attend till 1861, perhaps adopting an effete formality, congruous with the expected female gaiety and refinement whereas she does everything in her power to overturn it by her epistolary incongruities.

Dickinson pays little or no attention to the required conventional face of the letter regarding choice of paper, penmanship, and layout. The envelopes addressed to Austin usually contain letters from all the members of the family but her mother, whose aversion for letter writing was a standing joke in the family as is evident from the following excerpt: "Mother was much amused at the feebleness of your hopes of hearing from her - She got so far last week once, as to take a pen and paper and carry them into the kitchen, but her meditations were broken by the unexpected arrival of Col Smith and his wife, so she must try again - I'm sure you will hear from her soon" (L 128). Each writes on a separate piece of paper, but Dickinson imposes her presence even via a foreign body, as in the case of one of Lavinia's letters on the verso of which she urges Austin to visit them in a playful way "Come home naughty boy!" An envelope is sealed with a wafer which challenges the recipient to Guess (picture 3), to which Dickinson adds "if you can" teasingly before she sticks it (picture 4).

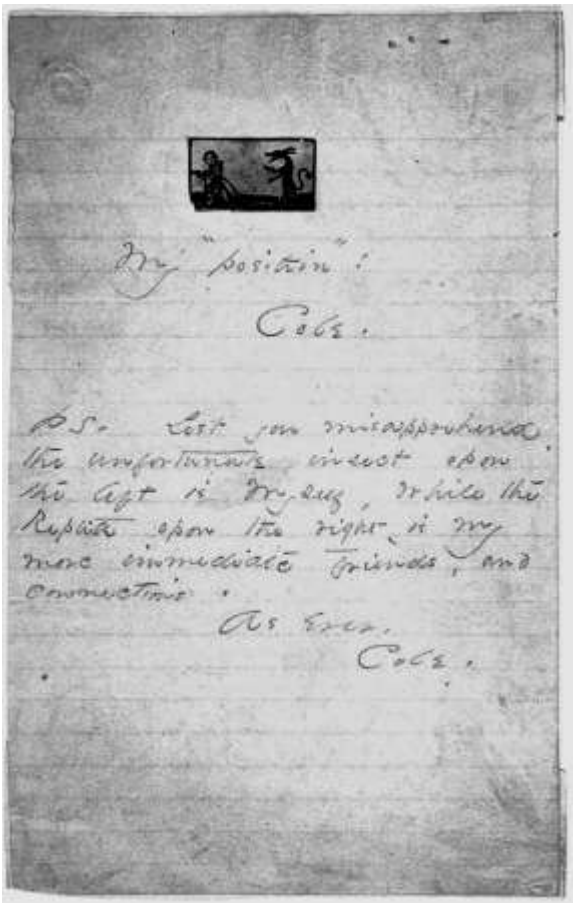
Pictures 3-4: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1847 December 11, in Box 6, Folder 91, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:17543>.

Although "beautiful paper without ornaments" (*A New Letter-writer* 117) should be used, Dickinson would adorn the paper with extra-verbal signs, such as drawings or clippings and transform it to a multimedia presentation, along with enclosed flowers or leaves, which constitute part of the message. In a letter to Abiah, she encloses a "geranium leaf" to induce her friend to start a herbarium (L 6) and in another she draws a hand and adds: "the little dove will bear the letter safely" (L 5). She incorporates a poem in prose in one of her letters to Austin, indistinguishable in form from the letter but distinct as far as rhyme is concerned. In addition, she encloses a separate sheet on which she inscribes her wish to see him soon, "We'll meet again heretofore some summer's morning" (L 58), along with a pressed leaf, probably one of "the few lingering leaves [which] seem anxious to be going and wrap their faded

cloaks more closely about them as if to shield them from the chilly northeast wind" (ibid). Alternatively, it could be the "leaf ever green," of the poem she integrates in the body of her letter.

In a letter to Susan Dickinson (picture 5), she violates several rules on a single page (L 214). Firstly, although plain paper should be used, she adorns the paper with a clipping from a *Primer*. The drawing represents the letter T in the alphabet accompanied by the sentence: "Young Timothy learnt sin to fly" and shows a youth chased by a wolf-like creature. The connotations become manifest when the situation is explained. Good manners specified that evening calls should not be prolonged after ten o' clock. Having committed a social transgression by staying at her brother's house till after midnight, her father went over the hedge to call her back to order. Her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, describes the event adding that Dickinson "drooped and disappeared before him like the dew, without a sound, but with a wicked glance or gesture to assert her unreconcilement to the proceedings" (Bianchi, 1971, 64). Secondly, letter-writers, even when writing to an intimate friend, should avoid postscripts as they constituted a "glaring impropriety" (Westlake 87) and revealed the writer's disrespect. However, the postscript is actually the body of the letter, serving as a caption or an explanation to the picture. Imaginary signatures were considered distasteful, but she signs as Cole, which could refer to either Thomas Cole or his sister Sarah Cole. They were both painters and Sarah made a name for herself after her brother had died. She could refer either to her letter as a handiwork or to her aspiration of making a name for herself. The whole letter is indicative of her playful, naughty personality, and before one claims that she felt at ease with her sister-in-law so she might as well break some rules, it should be stated that this letter is not the only one. Not only is Letter 33 a poem-as-a-letter to William Cowper Dickinson, an Amherst College tutor, but it is also illustrated (See Picture 6 below). A clipping precedes the lines, adding a paralinguistic dimension to them by appending visual to verbal representation and extenuating the message. The first line "Life is but a strife" precedes a clipping which depicts a family trying furiously to keep off some dogs. Their attempt to beat them back denotes that they consider them hostile. Dogs were believed to be psychopomps, escorts of the dead to the underworld, therefore the strife could be the human's struggle to push them back and avoid death. The second line "T'is a bubble" precedes the clipping of three children who blow bubbles, indicative of the blissful playfulness of the children and the flimsiness of life just like the

bubble. The next line "T'is a dream" precedes two clippings. The first one is from *The New England Primer*, depicting a person seemingly sleeping but the caption of the *Primer* reads "Xerxes did die and so must I", implying that he is dead which could lead to the assumption that the little boat of the fourth clipping combined with the last lines could refer to the ferryman Charon, who leads souls down Acheron to Hades. From this perspective, the poem is a palimpsest; the clippings are superimposed on both the page and the words and transfer the message of the poem-letter-illustration to another message, similar to the soul's transfer from the world of the living to that of the dead, and juxtaposing the innocence of childhood suggested by the primer and the little poem to the adult morbidity of the awareness of mortality. This act of creative vandalism is indicative of Dickinson's appropriation of published literature to ends that were completely different from the proper ones. Her tactic of manipulating its representations affords her with the chance to bring several notions together, reinvest the imposed language with new meaning and create a new terrain for her own representations.



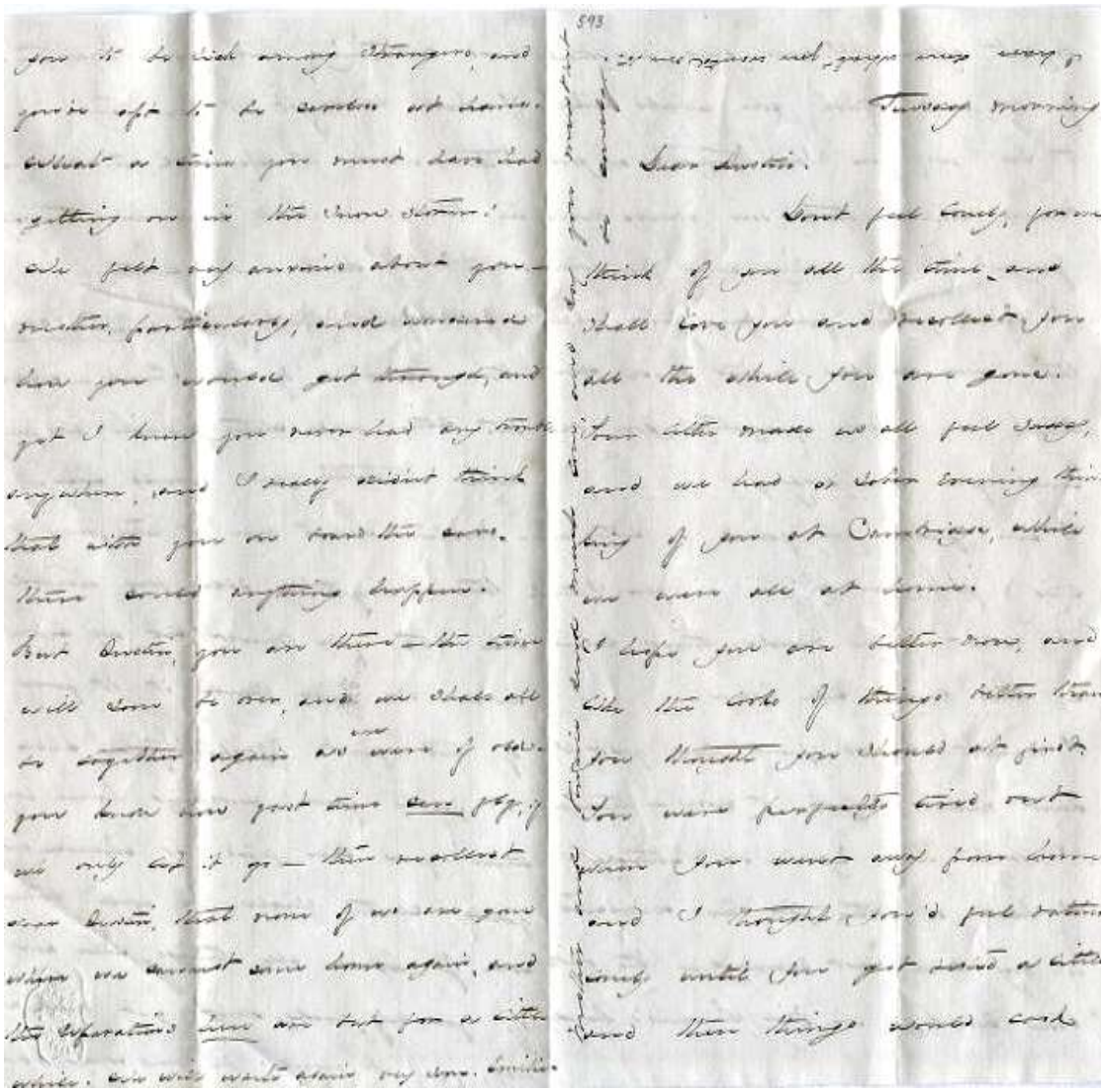
Picture 5: H B114; L 214

Picture 6: L 33 (to William Cowper Dickinson)
Yale, Bingham Series V, Box 106, Folder 663

Epistolary conventions stated that the letter should not be written on both pages, or else the recipient could get the impression that they were not worth a whole page. The introduction should include the salutation, that is, the title of the recipient, their name and address, written "at the marginal line, that is, from one fourth of an inch to an inch from the left edge of the sheet" (Houghton 298). In familiar letters, the salutation could be incorporated into the first line of the body. In that case, it should start one sixth of the distance from the left edge to the right" (ibid 298). Writers should leave a perfectly even margin, neither too wide nor too narrow, on the left side of the paper indicative of the "production of a well-bred person" (*The London Universal Letter Writer* vii). On large paper, it should be one inch wide, on note paper, three eighths of an inch. Dickinson's early letters, however, look as if they suffocate; the space of every page of the letter is swamped. Not only does she write on both pages but on every space available on the surface of the page. The body of the letter, "the sweet inclosure," may have been a terrain reserved for the correspondents but at the same time it is a confinement that strangles her, it is too bounded for her to "bring the deeds of the rough and jostling world" in (L 107). According to specific instructions, Dickinson ought to confine herself within the margin of the body of the letter and avoid trespassing on the margin, which functions as a physical border, an enclosure for the words, where the flow of the utterance is limited, slowed down, restrained, and constrained. Her thoughts, impressed on paper, have to be tailored to fit within this barbed wire of margin. Her words, however, sprawl over the margins, on every corner, on the folds, they are set free, she roams the page, and the body of her letter becomes overpowered by her exuberant personality. In most of her letters to Austin, the page is inscribed in every possible way. Despite Austin's repeated attempts to bring her back on epistolary track and her statement that "with reference to your coming, I arrange my tho'ts in a convenient shape" (L 49), she audaciously and blatantly disobeys and makes her thoughts overrun the frame of the letter, which should be her shaping frame of mind.

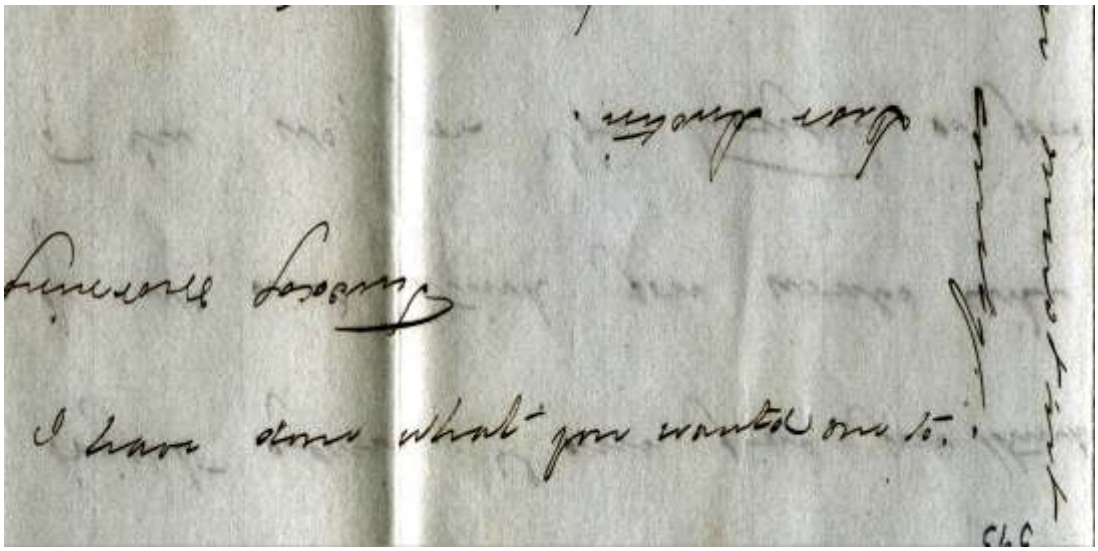
The proposition should begin under the end of the salutation, one sixth of the way across the line from left to right (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* 302). If the body had to continue on the second page, care should be taken so that it did not begin above the address on the first. Dickinson's letters, however, do not abide by any of the above rules. The main body of letter 104 lies horizontally from edge to edge in a minute handwriting, while postscripts transverse the space of the letter, written

vertically or upside down, and above the salutation and the date. In some cases, the identity of the second pole of the communication and the time of writing the letter are indistinguishable among or around the *post*script, which *pre*cedes them though written at a *subsequent* temporal instant on the top of the *opening* space of the letter instead at the spatiotemporal physical *close* of it. In this way, time has come a full circle; the time she set off writing, anterior to the postscript, is annulled/deferred since the postscript moves the whole procedure a step further in the sender's present forwarded even closer to the recipient's present (picture 7, L 104). In addition, this overwriting, if seen visually, looks like embracing Austin, bringing him into the warmth of the household annulling both space and time.



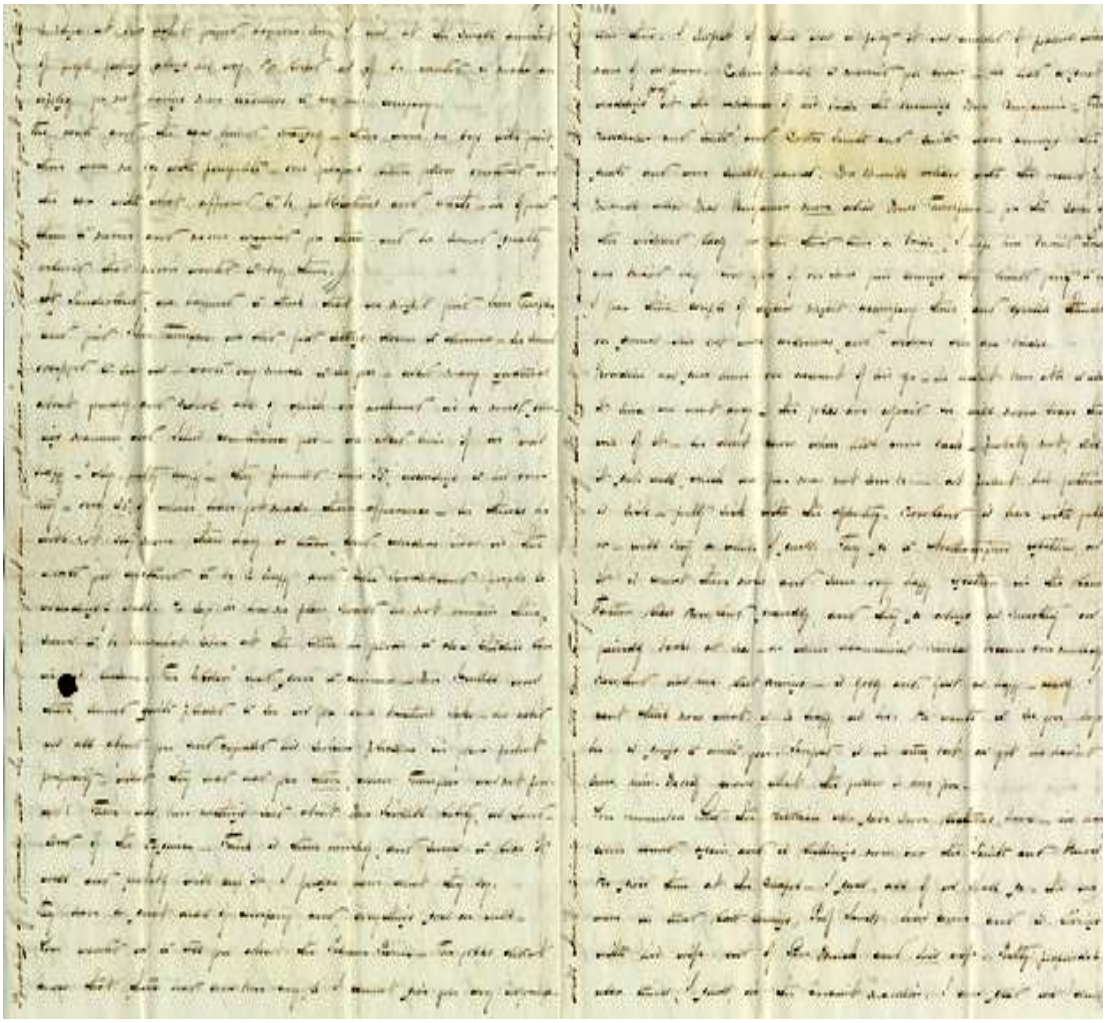
Picture 7: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1853 March 8, in Box 7, Folder 40, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7691>.

This overwriting practice cannot be always attributed to lack of space; in some cases, the last page of the letter is blank, or it bears but Austin's name and/or address. This additional function of the letter as an envelope could envelop anything written above or below the address providing more space if necessary. In some cases, a message written in an unorthodox way, upside down at the top of the page, must be the answer to the most pressing question asked and its position ensures that it will be the first information on probably the most important issue the recipient will read the moment they open the envelope. "I have done what you wanted me to" (Picture 8, L 104) she writes to Austin, and obviously this assurance counts more than the body of the letter which revolves around trivial and conventional issues.



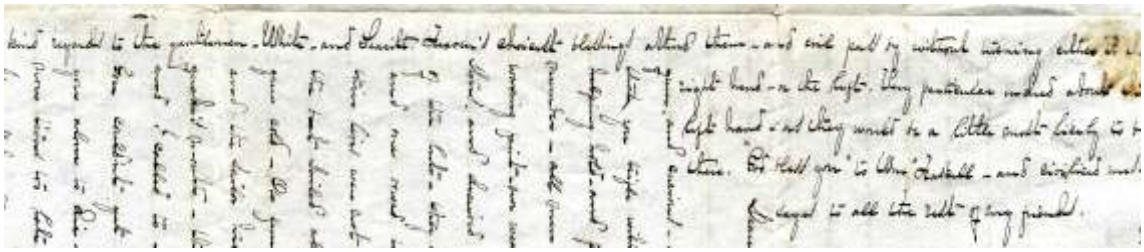
Picture 8: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1853 March 8, in Box 7, Folder 40, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7691>

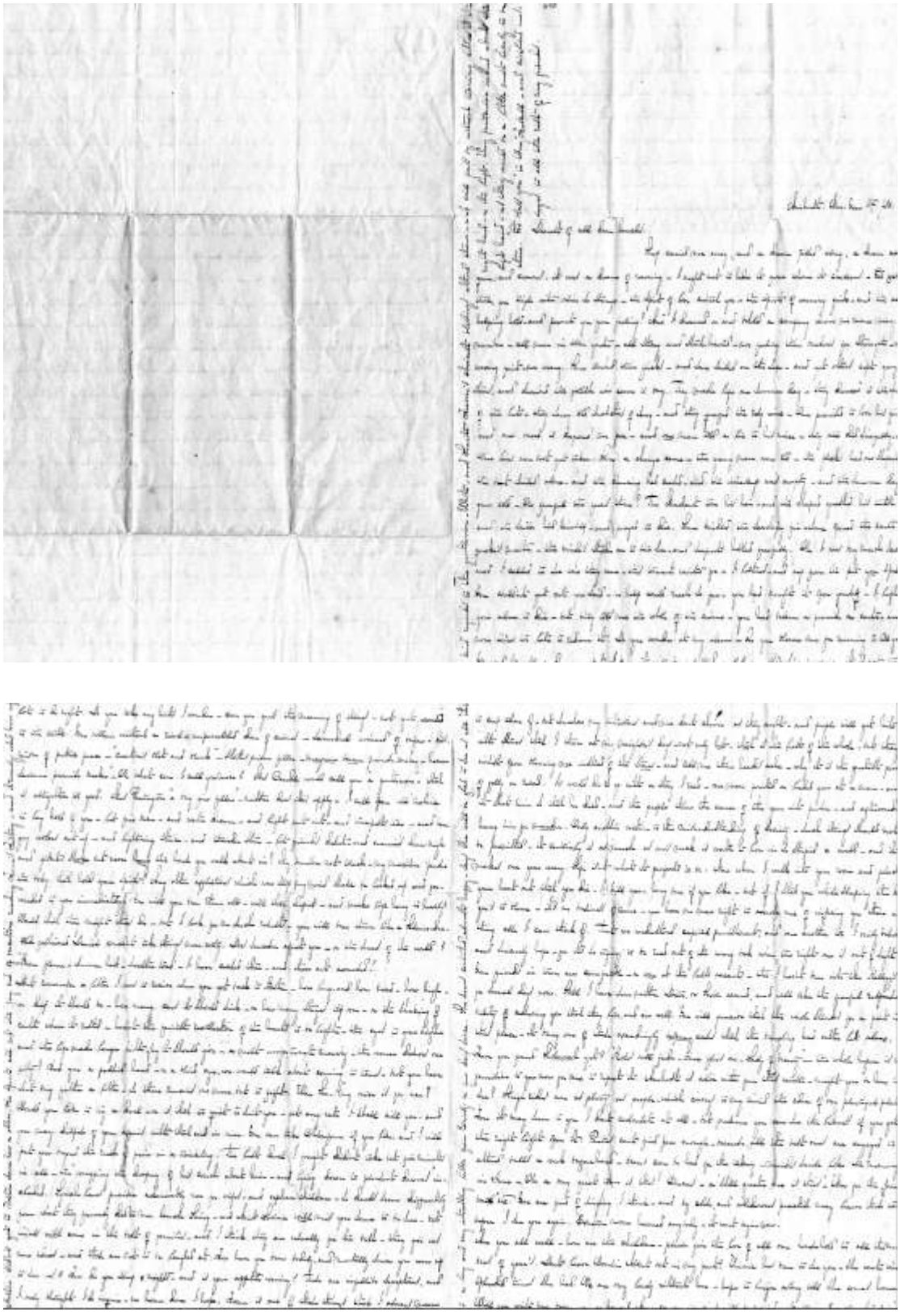
In other cases, postscripts seem to spring from the bottom of the page up to its top, reminding swaying tentacles of vine, parasites on the body of the letter, added in a hurry at the end since they convey the typical wishes, farewells, and occasional requests to Austin which, although they are practically the reasons for sending a letter, they are marginalized in the margin of the body of the letter (picture 9, L 52).



Picture 9: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1851 September 23, in Box 7, Folder 9, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:3809>.

A letter to her uncle Joel Norcross is another characteristic example. Although the last page is completely blank, she squeezed the body in the other three and affixed the postscript above the salutation (Picture 10, L 29).





Picture 10: Emily Dickinson letter to Joel Norcross, 1850 January 11, in Box 8, Folder 12, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:1236>.

The body of the letter should be not only aligned in compliance with the rules, but confined and monitored in between regulatory margins and Dickinson claims that she writes on "a fabric somehow obdurate" (L 888). The conventions as delimited terrain are definitely too narrow to hold her exuberant personality so she spreads out. She trespasses the stifling borders of the body of the letter at will; her body-letter is not contained, she overflows her paper from edge to edge, from top to bottom, she invades the blank space, makes "a space for [her]self and sign[s] [her] existence as an author on it" (De Certeau 31).

Although a long letter was not welcome since it could "tax the reader's patience" (Cooke 453), Dickinson does not seem to agree with the manuals and the early letters are extremely extensive. For her, a good letter is "a long, long letter" (L 6) and she asks Austin for "a letter just about *three days* long [which] would make [her] happier than any other kind of one" (L 58), while she seems dissatisfied with him whenever he does not send her a letter "lengthy enough to suit [her]" (L 25), feeling her worth demeaned in proportion to the little time he would spend. Dickinson is fully aware of the transgression involved and she asks William Cowper Dickinson to "pardon [her] lengthiness if it not be unpardonable" (L 27); however, she is not particularly daunted by the consequences her transgression might entail. At the beginning of one of her letters, she warns Abiah to get ready for a "long siege in the shape of a bundle of nonsense" (L 5). After having filled pages with trivia and gossip, she adds somewhere in the middle of the letter "I am trying to think of some news to inform you" and continues chattering for some more pages before she finally asks Abiah not to allow anyone read it since "folks will wonder who has got so much nonsense to tell". Some pages back, however, she clearly states that she does not care if Abiah laughs at her since she is not going to heed her. This statement can be found in several other cases too, as in a letter to Austin in which the defiance is expressed as a "hope [he] won't laugh at anything" (L 153). This wording echoes playfully the deterring strategies of the letter manuals which warned the letter writers to stay on track as any deviation, no matter how insignificant, would result in their being "worth of ridicule" (Peyre-Ferry 20) and jeopardize their inclusion to both epistolary and social community.

Her handwriting, though neat, is microscopic, and the division in paragraphs is nonexistent, in defiance to the rules that maintained that a letter which ran on "like a stream without stops, with no division into paragraphs" and included unrelated

subjects in the same paragraph was “ridiculous” (Chesterfield 21). The same applied to the uneven transition from one paragraph to the other, and their connection in a “loose, indigested manner”, a sign of “narrow conception, [and] unpardonable negligence” (Hardie 233) which permeated the paragraph with “a sense of disorder” (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xxvi). Begging no pardon, Dickinson relishes what is considered chaotic; in her youth she compiles paragraphs which occupy half or most of her sheet, stacking irrelevant information and jumping from one subject to the other in the same paragraph in rapid succession. Her first letters resemble a flood of words; no full stop whatsoever, no attempt to divide her text into paragraphs, one thought upon the other and dashes, countless dashes.

And then, she seems to comply. In her subsequent letters, there are paragraphs, only they are not distinct parts, relating to one point. Rather they are heaps, different topics in rapid succession, loosely related or unrelated at all. Paragraphs can occupy pages as if Dickinson tries to squeeze or extract as much information as possible within the limited space of a letter. She moves to and fro within it, alternating moods and emotions and the range of the illocutionary force of the body of her text is eruptive.

> I attend singing school. Mr. Woodman has a very fine one Sunday evenings and has quite a large school. I presume you will want to go when you return home. We had a very severe frost here last night and the ground was frozen - hard. We all had our noses nipped a little. the Lady’s Society meets at our house tomorrow and I expect we shall have a very pleasant meeting. If you was at home it would be perfectly sure. We wish much to hear from you, and if you have time I wish you would write a line and send by Mr Baker. Mother wishes if your stockings are any of them thin, that you should do them up in a little bundle & send them by Mr. Baker. Accept much love from us all. (L 4)

If every paragraph should be a “complete relation of an incident […] a distinct statement from what follows” (Chesterfield 22), then Dickinson is at great fault. The ten sentences that comprise this paragraph relate five different incidents. Dickinson was fourteen at the time and the above paragraph reminds a strained effort to enumerate all the news panting for breath for fear she might forget something.

Although it was imperative to bind the letter to spatiotemporal specifics as events proofs hang upon the date of a letter (Cooke 465), Dickinson either mentions neither of them, or she dates the letter mentioning only the day, "Sunday morning" for example, adjusting the spatiotemporal gap of the two communicative poles. In her early letters she includes some time reference to the time she has *not* heard from her correspondents, linking their temporal zone to hers only to emphasize how long overdue their letter is. The letter-body is extracted not only from its physical spatiality but from the temporal circularity as well, since it is present on the sender's Sunday in the absence of the recipient. There is no special need for mentioning the full date in letters to her brother as the circularity and the frequency of their correspondence is unfailing. Although she dates some of her early letters to him or to other recipients, she writes down just the day and the part of the day she is writing in -- Saturday morn, or Sabbath Eve. No mention of the month, of the exact date. It might as well refer to the Saturday she sends the letter or the one the addressee gets theirs. On rare instances, the place is mentioned: South Hadley, or Amherst. The occasion that triggers them, then, could take place anywhere. Most of her letters lack greeting and begin with a sentence which might as well answer the question: Where have you been, Emily? What have you been doing? How is it going? Some of the beginnings of letters written till 1856 are: "I have just come home from church" [Austin] (L 46), "I'm just from meeting, Susie" (L 154), "We are just through dinner (L 53), "we are waiting for breakfast (L 58) "they are cleaning house today" (L 93)". "Just" synchronizes her instant in time with the recipients, while the progressive aspect emphasizes the fact that the activities are ongoing, still in progress, they have not been completed yet, if the recipients hurry, they might as well participate. Similarly, references to the weather "I can't come in this morning because I am cold" (L 78) or "Just as I write it snows" (L 139) seem as if she and her recipient were face to face talking casually, time and space obliterated. In other cases, the weather becomes an ally; it is the weather that spans the spatiotemporal distance and she transverses it so that they can both "hear [the rain's] patter, patter, patter" (L 56); even though their spatial poles differ, they can at least share the same temporal point which affect both simultaneously.

The letter is she, being carried over, as if Dickinson travelled through time and place to meet her addressees. When the absence is palpable and overwhelms her, however, she places the greeting apart from the body-letter to accentuate the lack of

presence, juxtaposing here/now, now/then. In these cases, the body of her letter, reaches the recipient directly, unobstructed by blank spaces, integral by escaping divisions. The names of the recipients are embedded in the first sentence and mentioned frequently throughout the letter, sometimes preceded by Dear, the typical greeting which should have occurred at the beginning. The boundaries of a letter are thus obscured and eliminated; time is produced textually, allowing Dickinson's live streaming interaction with her intended readers. Besides bringing her recipients into her temporal/spatial zone, she pops into their habitat: "I am here - ringing the big front door bell, and leaving a note for you" writes she to Emily Ford, one of her friends (L 78). "Dont tell them, *will* you Austin; they are all asleep soundly and I snatch the silent night to speak a word to you. Perhaps *you* are sound asleep, and I am only chatting to the *semblance* of a man ensconced in warmest blankets and deep, downy pillows" (L 66) she writes to Austin, and in the limited space of a short paragraph, she both drags him to Amherst asking him not to reveal their secret coexistence, and also bursts upon him in Boston, too. The whole family is enclosed in this extract as is time and space, blanketed in an ersatz spatiotemporal co-occurrence.

While the introduction should include the salutation, that is, the title of the recipient, their name and address, Dickinson incorporates the name of her recipient in the first line of the proposition and she starts some of her letters with conjunctions either to coordinate sender/receiver or continue conversation as in this case: "And what will dear Jennie say", (L 86) or to resume a chat which paused a moment ago: "Well, Austin – dear Austin- you got back" (L 145). While the conclusion should consist of the complimentary close, that is, a phrase of respect and the signature, the full name of the writer legibly, in a larger hand than the body of the letter, and "confirm what premised" as well as containing "cordial expressions of respect esteem affection (C*lassical English Letter Writer* x), Dickinson uses it as another way of physically eliminating time and space: "Good night, I am going to sleep" (L 70) "It is late – Goodnight –Vinnie is snoring" (L 47). "Vinnie lays down the Spade to caress you" (L 1000) writes she to her nephew. In other cases, she apologizes for making the recipient "tired now with [her] incessant din" (L 63).

It becomes evident that though Dickinson makes use of the medium of the letter, she does not play by its rules. Her transgressions and the manipulation of the body of the letter are indicative of her usurpation of this normative means and its

transformation into an experimental terrain for Dickinson to set her own idiosyncratic rules.

2.6. Dickinson and belated replies

Familiar correspondence, a subdivision of private, social letters, comprised domestic and letters of friendship. Family letters were triggered by "common concerns of life" (*The Complete Letter Writer,* 1762, 9) and revolved around daily routine, informing the recipient of minor or more important domestic events. They should be sent "at stated periods" so that "all fruitless expectation [and] anxiety" could be avoided (Chesterfield 40); failure to comply was considered "great disrespect" (Sprague 134). Edward Dickinson urges Austin repeatedly to "write [him] once or twice a week regularly" (Bingham, 1955, 346). Austin himself urges his sisters: "Girls – write often. Letters are meat and drink. They are the best thing you can do for me" (Leyda 1:288). Dickinson takes his advice at face value and the flow of her letters to him is uninterrupted throughout his studies. She sends the letter as the proxy of her person and she apologizes in the event of her belated response, worrying that Austin might "be looking for [her] and wonder where [she is]" (L 82).

Delayed replies to letters were impolite and the reasons for the delay had to be included in the introduction. The writer could admit that they had neglected to respond and ask for forgiveness. Dickinson considers herself "so faithful a correspondent" (L7) and she tries to be punctual in sending letters to Austin and her friends. However, this is not always possible, and she confesses herself "guilty of negligence" (L 8), echoing the cliché letter-writing manuals which stated that the effectiveness of a letter of excuse depended on its timing which, combined with the sincerity of the expression, could grant forgiveness. In accordance with the epistolary rules, she resorts to excuses regarding her health, her studies, and her epistolary duties as she has "4 other letters to answer" (L 10). "I had no time and I thought as all the other girls wrote you, my letter if I wrote one, would seem no smarter than anybody else, and you know how I hate to be common. There, haven't I made a fine lot of excuses?" (L 5) she writes to Abiah and asks her to "heartily forgive [her] for [her] long delay".

The magnanimity she asks for, however, she is not willing to show. For Dickinson the letter is a loan; the recipient is a debtor (L 17), they owe (L 10) a letter to her. Dickinson urges her friend Jane Humphrey to "write to her" as the act of writing -- not the content of the letter -- is worth "more than a mine of gold" for her (L 3). She also sees the letter received as a proxy for the sender, and she writes Jane Humphrey how "very sweet and cheering to hear [her] voice once more" (L 86) is. She urges or even admonishes her friends in a similar vein, as in the case of Abiah, whom she asks for a letter which would be the tangible assurance of Dickinson's presence in Abiah's absence and vice versa: "Send me a paper so as to let me know you think of me still though we are separated by hill and stream" (L 6). She also claims that a letter has salutary effects on her as it "cheers [her] up", giving her "new strength" (L 8). After several persistent though unsuccessful attempts to persuade Dickinson to convert, Abiah stops replying to her letters, and Dickinson wonders "what had sealed [Abiah's] lips towards [her] and implores for a letter which would assure her that Abiah has not broken the chain. When Susan is not punctual or, even worse, does not send any letters over a long period of time, "lone little Emilie" wonders whether she has offended Susan in any way and beseeches her "to take [her] usual pen and trace affection for [her] sad, bad Emilie" (L 103). Susan's failure to correspond with Dickinson forced Lavinia to complain to Austin that this long epistolary silence "ha[d] made E. very unhappy and [Lavinia] so vexed" (Bingham, 1955, 268).

Dickinson is "not prepared for not receiving a letter" (L 60), and the disruption of the epistolary chain on the part of her correspondents either leads to harassment or incurs her wrath. This stormy reaction is against the epistolary etiquette which warned letter writers to refrain from being "exacting [and] fretfully complain that they are forgotten" as they would "confer a benefit on all who belong to them by practicing a little more control over a thoughtless and babbling pen" (Thorold 31). Dickinson's pen is acidic, it is the unfaithful correspondents that violate her trust who are at fault, and they are fiercely assaulted and sentenced to relentless mockery. She considers her being "overlooked" (L 48), an indictable epistolary transgression, a "Breach of Promise" (L 108), which leads her to punish them through violent verbal outbreaks. In some of her earliest letters, she warns Abiah to be punctual "to save [Dickinson from] the commission of some terrible deed" (L 9). Joel Norcross, one of her uncles, used to forward the family letters to Austin and spent time at their house. The sisters

considered him a chattering, self-centered person and Lavinia writes that she "got tired of hearing about Ego altogether. He [is] informed on no other subject" (Leyda 1: 276). Although they were on friendly terms given his young age, when he once neglected to send Dickinson a letter, she ironically employed a vehement extended metaphor drawn from letter-writing manuals which considered defiance of any epistolary convention a serious sin, to make him "stop sinning now" (L 29). Dickinson commences her letter with an apocalyptic vision of scurrying biblical figures who, alerted from their gay and sinful lives, try frantically to escape from a cataclysmic catastrophe which is described in terms of the Second Coming: "Some kindled the scorching fire -- some opened the earthquake's mouth -- the winds strode on to the sea -- and serpents hissed fearfully"; Joel Norcross is pictured in a pit, probably in Hell with the damned, and cries for help. Dickinson turns a deaf ear; on the contrary, she calls him names, enumerating any conceivable punishment for his sin of fracturing "the great circle of duty in which every responsible being lives and moves before God" (Thorold 9). Parroting epistolary rules about the joy the reception of a letter gives in contrast to the insult of negligence, she challenges him to a mock-heroic duel seeking reparation. To restore her epistolary honor, she wields her pen as her sword; her words inflict back-to-back slashes on the transgressor. After having assaulted him with any possible weapon, she retreats and informs him of the health of friends and relatives before she relapses into another pattern. She recites "Roses will fade – time flies on – Lady of Beauty", a line of a *carpe diem* hymn which, although not stated, concludes "Weep when you must, but now be gay, Life is too short to be sighing on" and she delineates Amherst bursting with life and swarming with the young entertaining themselves (L 29). She concludes her letter conventionally, sending her regards, but then she unconventionally scribbles some more greetings vertically above the salutation on the first page and two non-essential postscripts on the second and third page from the bottom up. Dickinson deviates several epistolary rules regarding both the face and the rhetoric of the letters in a roguish reply; though she charges her uncle with epistolary transgression, she quite consciously and twinkly employs epistolary divergence to sentence him to mockery.

After graduating from Amherst College, Austin taught at Sunderland, a few miles from Amherst. He often neglected his epistolary duties to the family though, and Dickinson spent the whole day "thinking of how I would break the seal and how gallantly I would read when my letter came, and when it *didn't* come I found I had

made no provision for any such time as that but I won't chide you Austin" (L 60). This is indeed a rare instance of forgiveness because she usually considers Austin's negligence a "*protracted* insult [that] no man can bear" and challenges him to "fight with her like a man and let [her] have a fair shot" (L 49). However, she does not wait for him to pick up the glove before she begins attacking him verbally. Austin "let [his] parents think [he is] too busy to think of them or too important to care" (Thorold 34) so she rebukes him severely. She urged for his "com[ing] home Naughty boy" a week earlier but in vain and now she portrays Austin as a king who should "doff his crown, and lay down his lofty scepter" urging him to remember that "Kings sometimes have fathers and mothers" (L 37). Austin as another Jupiter situated in Olympus, "hurling lightnings at [his] relations" while she and father are going to the Cattle show where "School Masters and Monkeys" are sold "half price". The equation of teachers, Austin's profession at the time, with monkeys sounds rather provocative and insulting. She calls him to "come down" as he is appointed a member of the committee "on the Beast with Seven Horns", a brilliant connection of the horned cattle at the show with the one of Revelation during which Dickinson hopes Austin will be punished for his epistolary wrongdoings.

On another, similar occasion of brotherly epistolary negligence, Dickinson's chiding of Austin is indicative of the way she toys at will with letter writing etiquette and the elevated ease with which she transforms trivial daily issues to extended metaphors. By epistolary standards, his behavior is "unsociable [and] indolent" (Thorold 32-34) and the only reason she would overlook it would be his having been killed on his way to Cambridge to get his watch or his being so ill that delirium prevented him from writing; outrageous excuses that expose the hypocrisy of the norms that required an excuse no matter how flimsy it was, even if it was a blatant lie. Dickinson and Susan are sure that he is not to be found in this or in the next world and set off on a crusade to find out his whereabouts.

> Oh how you would have laughed to have seen us flying around - dodging into the post office and insisting upon it we had a letter there, notwithstanding poor Mr Nims declared there was nothing there - then chasing one another down to our office to Bowdoin, and telling him we knew all about it - he had got the letter and was hiding it, and when he took oath he had not, plunging into the street again, and then back to the house to communicate the result of our

> forlorn proceedings - and mother - oh she thought the bears in the wood had devoured you, or if you were not eaten up, you were such a monster of thoughtlessness and neglect! but it's all over now, and Thank God you are safe! (L 144)

Dickinson squeezes space and time in one long complex sentence describing the whole search in a string of dependent clauses, words move breathlessly, gasping to catch up with her as the actions succeed one another rapidly, and so the wave of reproach sweeps over Austin who does not even know what has hit him. And then quite suddenly, it ebbs, and she goes on to talk about old times and Susan and his collar and their father and sign off. She chides Austin for having them worry, confuting any excuse that he might make in a highly exaggerating manner.

For Dickinson, the disruption of the epistolary chain is more important than abidance to the rules, which do not mean much to her, anyway. Though her failure to suppress "undue emotions, anger or disappointment [is not a] a mark of good breeding" (Young 215), and she should take care that affection is shown in a decent way without "running into bombast, extravagant adulation or unreasonable and absurd protestations" (Aster VII), her urge to her correspondents for the reception of a letter is voiced in extraordinary ways as her desire for communication infringes rules and regulations.

2.7. Dickinson's divergence regarding invention and expression

The letter as a means of communication was "written conversation" (*The Secretary* 16) and as a result, it rejected the elevated diction of the books. The most suitable words were the first that came to mind as they sounded more natural, indicative of "humility rather than a vain conceit" (*The Complete Modern Letter Writer* 16). Prolonged pondering on the best word could lead to loss of spontaneity and obstruction of the pen. Dickinson assures her brother, who is tasked by the norms to prevent her from any "loose and ungrammatical manner" of letter writing (*The Complete Letter-Writer*, 1778, viii), that her letter is "extempore, [she has] no notes in [her] pocket" (L 165). However, the surviving scraps and drafts refute her; the multiple lexical alternatives and the extensive editing and rewriting of her letters invest her letters with "industrious negligence" (Hardie 240). She is caught red-

handed using the same sentences or even whole paragraphs in letters to various recipients: “Tonight the crimson children are playing in the West and tomorrow will be colder” is a characteristic example, included in letters to both Elizabeth Holland and Susan Dickinson, which proves that she does have notes in her pockets. Although her first letters, with their gossipy nature and the transition from one subject to the other rapidly and seemingly incoherently, resemble a chatty conversation between friends who “sit down to talk” (Sprague 114), the letters from her early teens on are carefully structured compositions. Dickinson includes incidents, persons, or figures of speech only if they fit the pattern of the letter she constructs, and not based on news.

Invention in familiar letters was supposed to be an easy task since the sender had to answer any questions posed and inform the recipient of the current domestic affairs. However, the frequency with which the Dickinsons communicated with each other made invention difficult. “You importune me for news,” writes Dickinson to Austin, “I am very sorry to say, ‘Vanity of vanities’ there’s no such thing as news – it is almost time for the cholera, and then things will take a start” (L 43). Dickinson complains to Austin that “I’m telling all the news Austin, for I think you will like to hear it. You know it’s quite a sacrifice to tell you what’s going on” (L 141). However, she sounds insincere since she indulges in what Lavinia calls “a most graphic description” of their daily routines and Austin writes to Susan: “[Emily] writes to me every week – and always something I like to read” (Leyda 1:218).

Letters exchanged between the Dickinsons was their way of retaining their family circle intact even when one of them was absent. Dickinson is in perfect accordance with epistolary norms, which dictate that letters between siblings should be characterized by “the tenderest, holiest, most sympathetic affections” (Peyre-Ferry 39) and the sender should ease the loneliness the absent recipient might feel by bridging both the temporal and the spatial gap: they should write about “the simplest details, how [their] favorite horse or cat is getting along, how the old trees and vines look when they blossom” (Westlake 93), provide the recipient with a vivid picture of home and alleviate the pain of separation. Although Dickinson abides by this epistolary rule to make her brother feel more at ease and sends him “talking letters” (Westlake 93), as if they were present and spoke with the recipient, she transgresses the norm regarding the style. Since the letter is considered “conversation reduced to writing” (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 4), the style must be unadorned, and naturalness is considered its chief merit. Any figure of speech, unfamiliar with small

talk, attributes awkwardness, and stiffness to the letter as the "end was perverted by the means" (*The Complete Letter-Writer,* 1762, 34). Words had to "drop from [the] pen as they would from [the] mouth" (ibid VII) since simple words were better suited to express emotions. Dickinson does not abide by this rule, either and endows domestic details with her unique style, turning them into a vivid, playful rustic scene.

> The Horse is looking finely, better than in his life, by which you may think him *dead* unless I add *before*. The carriage stands in state all covered in the chaise-house - we have *one foundling hen* into whose young mind I seek to instill the fact that "Massa is a comin!" The garden is amazing - we have beets and beans, have had *splendid potatoes* for three weeks now. Old Amos weeds and hoes and has an oversight of all thoughtless vegetables. (L 49)

Her playful pun with the well-being of their horse is discouraged by the rules as it constitutes a "dangerous weapons in the most skillful hands when indiscriminately" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xxvi*)* and what's more, Austin is not very receptive to Dickinson's humor, especially about his favorite horse. Though she conducts a small talk, her selection of adjectives to modify the trivial everyday life is definitely not consistent with the rules requiring the "peculiarities in ordinary speech" (Young 208) in familiar letters. Neither are its anthropomorphosis and its interaction with the rest of the household so that all get ready for "Massa's" arrival, for Austin.

In accordance not only with the epistolary rules but with her idiosyncratic way of picturing everyday life, she details the goings-on of the family painstakingly, in an affectionate but humorous way. She does not fail to inform him even about Vinnie's cats and fills her letters with everything she believes can make him feel less homesick. After one of his short visits, Dickinson writes that the family is pensive and depressed. "We are rather a crestfallen company to make the *best* of us, and what with the sighing wind, the sobbing rain and the whining of nature *generally***,** we can hardly contain ourselves" (L 42). The sadness of separation is transposed to or reflected by the natural elements which partake to the general melancholy. Dickinson goes on to picture Lavinia playing the piano, who, however, must need practice because Dickinson states that "Vinnie seems much grieved, and I really suppose I ought to betake myself to weeping. I'm pretty sure that I *shall* if she don't abate her singing"

(L 42). Then it is their mother who is trying to get her "ice cold" feet warm but Dickinson fears that she runs the risk of "icification or ossification". She concludes this idyllic family scene, reassuring Austin that they are safe against any threat as "Father takes care of the doors, and mother of the windows, and Vinnie and I are secure against all outward attacks". It sounds as if they were medieval maidens walled up in the family castle with their parents-custodians securing their social honor and this satirical description of her family runs contrary to the dutiful attitude and respect that ought to be shown to parents.

The same loving irreverence is directed towards her brother. After recounting her father's disapproval of her staying out late in rather melodramatic terms, "mother and Vinnie in tears, for fear that he would kill me" (L 42), she stresses the influence Austin exerts on her even in his absence. She gets ready to look for him, but she doesn't as "I think I was held by some invisible agent, for I returned to the house without having done any harm". The exaggeration of both her intention and Austin's invisible agency as a normalizing judge is underlined by the very next sentence "If I had'nt been afraid that you would 'poke fun' at my feelings, I had written a *sincere* letter, but since the 'world is hollow, and Dollie is stuffed with sawdust,' I really do not think we had better expose our feelings". What is interesting here is the use of tenses. Dickinson expresses an imaginary situation in contrast to reality; the impossibility of her requirement to have been or be realized and both her regret for and her complain about it by using the appropriate tense in the if-clause. However, she fails to use perfect conditional, which would refer to the unfeasible result, to complete the utterance. Instead, she uses another past in the past to talk about an action, something she actually did. She loves her brother as he is one of the few who can understand her, but she is obliged to fend off his continuous attempts to normalize her. Austin considers it his brotherly duty, having been interpellated himself, to reprimand his sisters in case they deviate the etiquette. Often apologizing for writing in a hurry, Dickinson sends him "a few of her thoughts for inspection" (L 60) or warns him she "write[s] just as it happens, so [he] mustn't expect any style" (L 165). She draws his attention to her "spel[ling] a word wrong in this letter, but I know better, so you needn't think you have caught me" (L 159) although there seems to be no actual spelling mistake in the entire letter. She might be teasing him for his hairsplitting – prompting him to check the letter over and over to find the mistake. Lavinia, on the other hand, thanks him "for [his] good advice concerning letter

writing and hope[s] to profit by it", asks for his forgiveness for any epistolary deviation, "promise[s] the next shall look better" while she begs him "not to ridicule" her letter (Bingham, 1955, 89). Usually, Austin reprimands them when they are out of epistolary order. Lavinia is not always receptive to his directives as this letter reveals: "If you can't read my writing Austin perhaps twill do no good to say anything to you. I really don't understand your inability to read what has always been called plain. I think you must be growing blind. I would advise you to consult Dr Reynolds speedily else secure a pair of Father's glasses which have proved themselves 'uncommon'" (Bingham, 1955, 203).

Acting as an interpellator regarding epistolary conventions and female modesty, Austin has attempted to bring Dickinson back on track several times and set her epistolary skills right, as it is evident from her responses which lack the frontal and rather aggressive tone that characterize Lavinia's. Rather she confronts his attempts to normalize her in a slant way, challenging his male authority. He criticizes one of her letters which "did not suit [him]" (L95) and Dickinson hurries to defend her "talking away as they should if [they]'d been together" blaming Lavinia's failing to write her "note of news for which [Dickinson] had starved [her] own". One could only wonder at this obvious discrepancy. What was so inappropriate and had to be excluded if it was the usual trivia? And surely, he did not rely on her for learning the local news, as is evident from one of his letters to Susan: "Emily's letter came and told me of what they were thinking at home, a little of you Sue and a little about the comet – nothing about the exhibition. I don't know she knew there was one!" (Bianchi, 1932, 102) Although Dickinson sends Austin journal letters, sometimes, against his understanding of the qualities of a good letter, she "take[s] a little place to describe a thunder show which occurred yesterday afternoon" (L 89), evident of her interest in the nature around her and not in the Amherst people.

Austin complained that he doesn't "comprehend [her], he want[s] a simpler style" (L 45). Although the letter that triggered his corrective response does not survive, one can guess that Dickinson may have deviated from what manuals call "requisite style" and the "prudent" mode of thinking (Richardson 3), which was said to render letters nonsensical, unimportant, lacking in thought and judgment. She might have failed to produce the "inventory of [her] time," which Austin had asked for (L 20), or she might have strayed from the reportorial style, which was expected from her. Austin wrote to Susan on the 26th of June 1851 that Dickinson sent him "a

sort of Canaan letter […] but she was high up to give [him] any of the monuments of the Earth" (Leyda 1:203). He must have made his opinion known to Dickinson herself because some days later, on the 29th, she picks up the glove.

> I strove to be exalted thinking I might reach *you* and while I pant and struggle and climb the nearest cloud, you walk out very leisurely in your slippers from Empyrean, and without the *slightest* notice request me to get down! As *simple* as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple - I'll be a little ninny - a little pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I'll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter. (L 45)

Boosting his male ego, she exalts his virtues and his skills and belittles herself by writing in the very same way he asked her not to, in a highly elevated style. After praising his epistolary style for being "grand" as his letter was "long, and also […] funny", "worth a score of fans and many refrigerators", she warns him that their "queer[ness]" and their hilarity put the family at risk amidst the summer heat. She confronts her brother's scolding with sarcasm and in an extremely connotative way; she practically turns his arguments on their head. It is he who sits in the Empyrean, the celestial dwelling place of gods, detached from the earthly goings-on and addresses her, who is located among the plant and animal life, among a series of humble and unimportant terrestrial creatures. Austin condescendingly deposes her from her "old stand [where she was] happy as a queen" and sends her down among the birds except that the birds stand for the soul and represent loftiness of spirit, thought and imagination, which obviously Dickinson believes they are her realm. She claims that by requesting a simpler style he relegates and derogates her into "a little ninny, a pussycat" but, if necessary, she could be a Red Riding Hood, symbol of transgression, with a Rose bud in her hair, a symbol of wayward and carefree maidenhood. The last sentence of the paragraph is an order given by a queen to her subjects as Dickinson has never really been toppled from her throne; Austin is to wait for her orders. Undoubtedly, he did not have Red Riding Hood in mind when he was trying to bring her back on track. The only order Dickinson is given, she disobeys. She does not follow the trodden path, and she strays as she always does regarding whatever norms are imposed on her, defying imperiously the risk of being eaten by the Big Bad Wolf lurking on the other side of the prescriptive norms.

Lavinia is in line with Austin, as some days later she writes him "Emilie has fed you on air so long that I think a little 'sound common sense' perhaps wouldn't come amiss. Plain English you know such as Father likes" (Leyda, 1:203). She also blames her sister for her own failing to send him a letter, as she meant to send "quite a long letter this time but Emilie has got the start of me and told you all the news so I shan't say but a little" (Bingham, 1955, 237). Austin considers himself an excellent letter writer; his family and especially his father boost his confidence excessively: "Father says your letters are altogether before Shakespeare, and he will have them published to put in our library" (L 46) Dickinson informs Austin rather mockingly; reading one of his "grand letters" (L 113) was a ritual for the family. Edward "puts on his spectacles and reads them o'er and o'er as if it was a blessing to have an only son" (L 108) writes Dickinson, and, although the underlying envy is not enough for her relationship with Austin to go sour, she is rather bitter at her sidelining both as a woman and an author. However, she never misses the chance to tease him and make fun of his efforts to normalize her. In sending him some of the choicest, juiciest fruit, not only as a token of their love but as a bond with home, Dickinson mentions ripe apples which "with [*his*] approbation […] will not only *pick themselves*, but arrange one another in baskets, and present themselves to be eaten" (L 48). She mischievously hints at his attempt to discipline her by depicting the apples marching and dressing at his order even when he is not present. On another occasion her father prevents her from sending Austin "an *apple* for [his] private use" as he considers it "rather small" (L 49), leaving Dickinson wondering which her father calls small, insignificant: her "noble self" or the apple, though she disagrees to both. She refuses to accept the contemporary social branding imposed even by the male members of her own family and despite her love for them she criticizes their attitude in such a slant yet brilliant way they, for all their male superiority, seem unable to grasp, violating one more rule that urged letter writers to "beware of exhibiting more intellect" than their correspondents (Houghton 323).

2.8. Dickinson and Religion

According to epistolary decorum, care should be taken so that the letter writer "regulate[d] the sentiments contained in [their] letter by the principles of [their]

correspondent" so that they were not "offended by anything injurious to their virtues or opposed to their opinions" (Peyre-Ferry 26). Christian faith and piety being a demand more than a standard in nineteenth-century America, one would expect that sentiments of spite or atheism, or even religious skepticism would be kept out of the stationery page. That is not the case with Emily Dickinson, however. Regarding the stipulation for not putting a correspondent on the spot, Abiah's constant demand on Dickinson to convert constitutes a repeated offence to the latter's feelings and opinions to the extent that Abiah does not respect Dickinson's decision no matter how disagreeable it is. Very early, Dickinson proclaimed that she is "not a christian" (L 10) boldly and explicitly, but Abiah does not take no for an answer. Dickinson shows her discontentment by replying in a repetitive pattern, giving her no ground for negotiating this issue and making clear that she is not to be reasoned against. She even hints at Abiah that "I will no longer impose my own feelings even upon my friend" (L 23), but it is doubtful whether her friend understands her insinuation. Dickinson hits back at her in Abiah's battleground with her friend's weapons. Although she asks Abiah to "excuse her quoting from Scripture" when she tries to explain her reasons she claims "it was so handy in this case [she] couldnt get along very well without it" (L 8) and her letters to Abiah abound with biblical quotations. In most cases she violates the Commandment "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7) by applying it to the most inappropriate situations only to voice her dissention: "Wonder if God is just -- presume he is, however and t'was only a blunder of Matthew's" (L 133). Another Commandment she violates is "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Bingham says that on Sabbath "whatever you did contrary to custom was behind closed doors" (1955, 124), so if a letter was written on Sunday it was dated Saturday or Monday. Even Susan apologizes to her brother with "I never write letters Sabbath night" (Leyda 1:312); but Dickinson either dates her letters Sunday or Sabbath, or she explicitly challenges Abiah's piety by lamenting for the limit it imposes on the invention of her letter.

> As I told you, it is Sunday today, so I find myself quite curtailed in the selection of subjects, being myself quite vain, and naturally adverting to many worldly things which would doubtless grieve and distress you; much more will I be restrained by the fact that such stormy Sundays I always remain at home, and have not those opportunities for hoarding up great truths which I would

> have otherwise. In view of these things Abiah, your kind heart will be lenient, forgiving all empty words and unsatisfying feelings on the Sabbath day ground which we have just alluded to. (L 69)

Not only does she skip the Sunday church meeting, but she spends her time writing a letter which is not an inventory or an account of her time as Abiah has repeatedly asked her to, but a highly poetic letter. Her mocking tone about the great truths she does not hoard becomes evident in her inversion of the terminology used by the ministers. What Abiah has to forgive is Dickinson's empty words and unsatisfying feelings, while clearly this is Dickinson's own opinion about the church. Dickinson has always had a way of making some of her recipients believe she holds them, or certain subjects esteemed by them, in the highest regard while she is poking fun at them.

Dickinson has good occasion for poking that fun: "There is quite a religious awakening among our people & strong hopes are entertained by Mr. Colton & many in the church that we are about to have a revival" writes Samuel Mack to Rebecca Robins, Amherst residents, in 1841 (Leyda 1:70). Over the next years, Mr. Colton, the minister, aimed at "arous[ing] the professors of religion" (Leyda 1:80) and through fervent sermons, such as "Christians weep over sinners. […] What must I do to be saved" (ibid 70), blasted his congregation into piety. The sharp binary division of the churchgoers into the pious and the damned, with the entailing branding and shaming of those who did not comply with this soteriological approach, made the majority of the parishioners "r[i]se and solemnly renew[…] their covenant with God and with one another" (ibid 75).

Besides the Church, schools, another branch of the Ideological State Apparatuses, gave "particular attention to the formation of the moral and social as well as intellectual character of [their] pupils", as the leaflet distributed to the parents of Amherst Academy students assured them. Apart from the cultivation of principles motivated by and adjusted to the religious and social standards of the time, the curriculum of the Academy which Dickinson attended included several textbooks on Rhetoric, Intellectual Philosophy as well as William Paley's *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*. Whereas ministers and teachers adopted the Calvinistic view of the original sin and called for repentance, adhering to the Scriptures as truth bearers and condemning any deviation as wrong

and sinful, Paley's Theology is apologetic. Using the watchmaker analogy, he attempts to prove the teleological argument. By drawing analogies between the functionality/intentionality of the watch and the intelligent agent behind its construction, he argues that nature constitutes a reliable indicator of intelligent design and the best explanation of God's existence as well as his benevolence. His approach is to inquire by the light of natural reason, that is, the human cognitive power of knowing God without resorting to any revealed truths in the Bible. Although his aim is to prove the existence of God, his detachment from the letter of the law of the Scriptures is a bold differentiation from the Calvinistic approach which claims that the disputation of the Bible undermines a believer's faith. The inclusion of Paley's textbooks in the school curricula of religion-oriented educational institutions such as Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary comes in sharp contrast with the general feel of questioning the faith in faith, that is, beyond reason by means of the revealed truth. Textbooks such as *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* by Paley and *Analogy of Religion to the Constitution and Course of Nature* by Joseph Butler taught at Mount Holyoke appeal to reasoning and attempt to disconnect religious doctrines from the dogmatic nature of the Scriptures and connect them with evidence drawn from nature, within the human cognitive field, rendering them more credible and acceptable even to the skeptics. Despite this approach upheld by the school textbooks, human depravity, the belief that everyone is a sinner from their birth due to their fallen nature, continues to constitute the main dogma Miss Lyon, the head teacher, as well as the rest of the teaching staff supported by means of which they exerted tremendous pressure on the students to confess their vanity and sins and become Christians.

Apart from the experts, ministers or/and teachers, who urged for conversion, letter writing, as a means of interpellation, could be, and was, made to serve the same purpose in a covert way which made their persistent, sly peer pressure more effective. Letters of edification were considered the most blessed, yet the most difficult to compile since they were written with "a distinctly religious and moral purpose" (Thorold 45). After praying, the writer should find a reason for writing and refer to the extent their faith benefited their souls so that the recipient would convert and participate in the building up of the "city of God" (ibid 48). By doing so, the senders would materialize God's plan and they would be "kings and priests to God" (ibid 48). The sender was advised to "please and edify, make [their] letters mementoes […] of

an earnest desire to promote their welfare both in this world and in the world to come [which was] an important duty and one of the greatest pleasures that a pious and feeling mind can enjoy" (*Classical English Letter-writer* xii). However, care should be taken lest their "motives were too apparent" and the recipient "flung the letter hastily into the fire" (ibid 48). The letter-sermon should not include any reproach or signs of exhortation; rather it should emphasize the "vanity of this world" and Christ's benevolence so that it functioned as a "seed into their heart" (ibid 50).

Dickinson has been in the line of fire of many of her friends' attempts to convert her, but she resorts to tactics to avoid what seems to her an "impos[ition] [of their] feelings even upon" her (L 23). In replying to letters of edification or to letters regarding religion, Dickinson abides by the epistolary rule that dictates adaptation to the personality of the correspondent and their capacities by making extensive use of biblical allusions and quotes as well as paraphrases or even citations of sermons or moralistic texts. She pushes catechism back using her correspondents' armaments; however, most of the surviving letters or the extracts which refer to this battle were not published until after over half a century had passed from her death.

2.8.1. The Great Awakening in Amherst

During the second Great Awakening which took place in the 1790s and early 1800s, Lavinia, Susan, Mrs. Dickinson, Austin even Edward Dickinson confessed their faith, as did most of Dickinson's schoolmates and friends. Dickinson does not follow their example; on the contrary, she has serious objections both as regards to the motives that initiated conversion and its purpose. She considers it a life-changing experience but not necessarily in the way its supporters claim. In a letter to Abiah at the age of fifteen, in which she warns Abiah about her "get[ting] into a philosophizing strain," she assigns roles (L 5): Abiah has to be Plato and Dickinson Socrates, the Greek philosopher who applied the Socratic Method and challenged others to do their own critical thinking by posing a series of questions to which his interlocutor could provide no satisfactory answer. Socrates was aware of his own absence of knowledge and interrogated established views and popular opinions. He was charged with impiety and corruption of the Athenian youths and was sentenced to death. In the same extremely long letter, Dickinson uses Socratic irony, with the letter echoing conventional beliefs only to deride them. She writes that Abiah's "soliloquy on the

year that is past and gone was not unheeded" and goes on to iterate this trite moralistic belief which interpellated Abiah echoes, that time not devoted to religious and social duties incurs great damage on morals. She asks Abiah, who functions as her accuser or juror, not to laugh at her "sentimentality", while it is common beliefs shared and promoted by Abiah she reiterates. Dickinson questions and mocks them, taking no notice of Abiah's foreseeable criticism because as she says, "I don't care, I shan't hear", in the fashion of Socrates who remained firm despite his facing exile at the best or even death. Socrates maintained that an unexamined life is not worth living and during his trial he counter indicted the prosecutors and his fellow citizens for lack of self-examination; Dickinson, pondering on religion, overturns the self-examination proposed by the current religious doctrines, aimed at the recognition of the conviction of sin. Her use of *elenchus* -- the Socratic method of hypotheses elimination so as "to wake men out of their dogmatic slumbers into genuine intellectual curiosity", as Richard Robinson claims in his Plato's Earlier Dialectic (Robinson 17) -- challenges Abiah as a mouthpiece of the prescriptive norms, as is evident in her being assigned the part of Plato. Unlike Socrates, who maintained that philosophical inquiries should be available to all ages, allowing the young to challenge existing beliefs, Plato argued that the *elenchus* should be limited only to the mature to protect the elders from falling into contradictions and prevent the young from disputing existing orthodoxies. Abiah has already internalized the religious and conventional principles and Dickinson can be charged both for impiety and for corruption as she constantly undermines established dogmas.

Conversion was primarily a female battleground; Victorian women felt it was their duty as the moral guides and pillars of the society to restore faith and spread conversion to their immediate circle, family, and acquaintances. Apart from having been assigned some sort of command in running their "empire of home" (Epstein 178), religion purportedly provided them with another opportunity of challenging male authority and arrogating a more substantial power which extended beyond the domestic sphere. In New England, during Dickinson's childhood and early teens, the agents of Christ met and "ha[d] an hour of prayer for females, […] an hour of weeping and strong supplication" (ibid 59) in an effort to save the impenitent and bring them back to the Christian path. The aim of these meetings as well as church meetings was to make sinners confess their corruption, repent, and be saved. Dickinson writes to Abiah:

> Last winter there was a revival here. The meetings were thronged by people old and young. It seemed as if those who sneered loudest at serious things were soonest brought to see their power, and to make Christ their portion. It was really wonderful to see how near heaven came to sinful mortals. Many who felt there was nothing in religion determined to go once & see if there was anything in it, and they were melted at once. Perhaps you will not believe it Dear A. but I attended none of the meetings last winter. I felt that I was so easily excited that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself. Many conversed with me seriously and affectionately and I was almost inclined to yield to the claims of He who is greater than I. (L 10)

In this letter, which is the first of the surviving ones showing her attitude towards religion, Dickinson initiates her guerrilla tactics to evade interpellation, tactics that she would employ for the entire first phase of her correspondence on all subjects. Regarding religion, she is confined in the domain of the property of the proper, but she trespasses it without ever leaving it by turning the weapons of the power against itself so that she creates a space for her own expression of dissuasion. At the beginning of this extract, she describes a typical church meeting of the time in a strong and rather pompous tone, reminiscent of a pastor preaching from the pulpit. Having, however, confessed her disadvantage in the face of such fervor, she turns around and accuses religion of trying to mislead her, to deceive her by manipulating her emotions, turning the notion that she, as a susceptible sinner, is deceived on its head. According to religion, it is Satan who is supposed to deceive and corrupt humans by appealing to their passions and affections, depriving them of the kingdom of Heaven, and not vice versa. Instead, she suspects the power of the religious brainwashing for clouding her judgment and she fears that if she finds her savior the way she is asked to, she will lose herself.

Abiah, Abby Woods, and Emily Fowler were some of her correspondents who having internalized religious interpellation, attempt to interpellate Dickinson as well: "I am not unconcerned Dear A. upon the all important subject, to which you have so frequently & so affectionately called my attention in your letters" (L 13), she writes to Abiah. Her friend has converted and, probably feeling accountable for "rescu[ing] from destruction" a friend "wandering unconsciously on the verge of a precipice, and

liable every moment to an irrecoverable and fatal plunge" (Sprague 203), tries to extract Dickinson "from the midst of [her] folly" (Epstein 48) and talk her into the necessity of becoming a Christian. Although there is no way of knowing the exact wording of Abiah's letters since they were destroyed, one of Dickinson's to her bears striking resemblances to the aforementioned plea: "I have bitterly to lament my folly -- & also my own indifferent state at the present time. I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice, from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help from above" (L 11). Dickinson capitalizes on the exhorters' wish by parroting it, while at the same time she makes of the conversion vocabulary something entirely different from what the strategies of the proper have in mind. This mishmash of religious and catechistic jargon strip the extract of any genuine reference to Dickinson's feelings or to her course of action, something which allows her to leave her own imprint of acts, "an antidiscipline" (De Certeau xv). The letters of this period on the "all important subject" of religion are characterized by this tactic which allows her to remain other though externally assimilated by the system, as seen in the following extracts. Wielding the religious jargon employed by ministers and probably Abiah herself, and echoing John (7:38), Dickinson underscores the importance conversion has for salvation only to reject it, completely disregarding advice concerning vigilance against sin: "I determined to devote my whole life to his service & desired that all might taste of the stream of living water from which I cooled my thirst. But the world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice" (L 11). Dickinson cleverly twists the biblical verse "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38), transforming the river of the Bible to an actual stream and completes the profanity by linking it to pagan mythology endowing it with the qualities of the sirens, the mythological creatures that lured sailors to their destruction.

Women were made to believe that, although they considered themselves moral and pious, they were actually "rake at heart" (Bennett 11), self-deceived as they believed that refraining from lying or stealing meant they were free form sin. Rather, they were hypocrites as they were absorbed in worldly affairs and led a "careless and stupid life, strangers to God and Christ" (Epstein 55). This undermining of the women's ethical power provided ample excuses for male transgression. Dickinson, however, perceives rakishness as a virtue, and does not dismiss the physical world

that easily: “But I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a s[tran]ger -- to the delightful emotions which fill your heart. I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections” (L 13). Dickinson is fully aware that her declaration clashes with the contemporary beliefs about the destructiveness of the world’s “seductive flatteries, its pestilential maxims, its unhallowed practices” (Sprague 303). She has been warned that “the spirit of the world is directly opposed to the spirit of the gospel” and she has been advised to battle with all earthly pleasures in the name of God so that she rises to heaven and does not go to the grave unprepared (ibid). Yet, her perfect confidence in God’s promise for something to come is not enough for her to relinquish what now is. It might ultimately lead to destruction on the rocks of religious beliefs, but the world for Dickinson extends beyond the limits faith imposes. Some months earlier, Dickinson sent Abiah a letter in which, apart for a reference to her “omi[ssion] to do which might have cheered a human heart, or whispered hope in the ear of the sorrowful, and how many things have we done over which the dark mantle of regret will ever fall” (L 9), she makes no mention of religious issues. She assumes, however, the part of “Eve, alias Mrs. Adams”. For a deeply religious individual as Abiah, this reference must be confounding. Eve was responsible for the fall of man, the reason for Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden and for the total depravity, that is, the sinful nature of every person born to them. Putting the blame on Eve allowed men to draw their right to “rule over” women (Genesis, 3:16) and perpetuate their dominance based on the same argument even at the time of Dickinson. Dickinson is Eve insofar as she has already started questioning God’s design, which is an act of defiance analogous to Eve’s. Dickinson disputes revealed theology as the forbidden fruit for her is the acquisition of knowledge in purely epistemological terms, disentangled from the text-based beliefs, the cultural scripts available, as well as the social models for female propriety. And she has no qualms about stating that in her letters.

Conversion was the first step to a pious life, devoted to God and exhorters claimed that one should “remember [their] Creator in the days of [their] youth” (Sprague 17) and abstain from “the worship of the Mammon” (McIntosh, 65). Dickinson writes to Abiah:

> I know that I ought now to give myself away to God & spend the springtime of life in his service for it seems to me a mockery to spend life's summer & autumn in the service of Mammon & when the world no longer charms us, "When our eyes are dull of seeing & our ears of hearing, when the silver cord is loosed & the golden bowl broken" to yield our hearts, because we are afraid to do otherwise & give to God the miserable recompense of a sick bed for all his kindness to us. (L 11)

Although she seems aligned to the prevailing notion of "improving time" (Sprague 22) by citing the argument, the implications of her way of operating are entirely different. The instruction aims at preventing early habits of irreverence from becoming a way of life depriving salvation, while Dickinson spurns the hypocrisy of eventually resorting to God because of impotence and fear of death. However, she goes a step further by questioning not only giving herself away to God in exchange of salvation in a kind of give-and-take transaction, but the ultimate effectiveness of this surrendering as well. She mentions the funeral she has witnessed by her window and while she extols the deceased for her faith, she doubts whether she will be compensated in heaven where the dead must be now "according to all human probability" (L 11). There is a chance, not a proof or a certainty for this and even so this likelihood has been transferred second hand to the believers. Dickinson inquires faith by reason but she is not comfortable with its conclusions. Paley argues that God's existence and benevolence is inferred by its analogy reflected on nature, but this is merely an argument, open to dispute or refutation. It is one of the many probabilities Dickinson ponders and it seems that she has yet to find a satisfactory answer. Her unbelief is evident in the way she addresses deity. She writes to Abiah: "I think of Dear Sarah & yourself as the only two out of our circle of five who have found a Savior" (L 11). The use of the unmarked indefinite article indicates that Dickinson has no knowledge of the entity in question. The Savior Abiah mentions cannot be uniquely identified; he could be generic, one of the many claiming to save sinners satisfying Abiah's imposed need to find one.

The emotional crisis of a conversion, provoked by ministers who considered women guilty of the original sin by birth and gender regardless of their flawless ethics, and consequently exerted tremendous psychological pressure, led to converting

women being “greatly affected and in tears” as the only way to “relieve […] [their] distress of mind” (Epstein 52). Women resorted to “crying to God for mercy” (ibid 56) after having conducted self-examination and realized their unworthiness. An echo of this induced hysteria is found here:

> Under any other circumstances I should have answered your letter sooner. But I feared lest in the unsettled state of your mind in regard to which choice you should make, I might say something which might turn your attention from so all important a subject. I shed many tears over your letter -- the last part of it. I hoped and still I feared for you. (L 10)

Read out of context, this extract might as well be addressed to Dickinson by Abiah in one of her efforts to make her friend confess her faith which is at last successful. However, it is the other way around and they seem to have swapped roles. Dickinson is in tears but not in contrition, she has not relieved the distress of her mind. It is not her impenitence she weeps for, but Abiah’s imminent decision to be made while her mind is unsettled, and her critical thinking clouded by teachings. The nature of her hopes and fears is ambiguous; on a first reading they could express her genuine anxiety about her friend’s emotional struggle and its outcome; on another she might express her hope that Abiah will not submit to the claims of Christ unconditionally, although Dickinson fears that her friend will ultimately do so. In sharp contrast, Dickinson appears settled and determined and she distances herself from Abiah, giving her space to make her own decision unaffectedly, an indirect critical insinuation that she has been denied that courtesy.

2.8.2. Dickinson at Mount Holyoke Seminary

In 1846 Dickinson commenced her studies in Mount Holyoke Seminary run by Miss Lyon who aspired to “provide mates for the missionaries sent out to the foreign fields” (Bianchi, 1971, 22). Catechism and conversion of her students through persuasion, psychological coercion, or even extortion were part of the school curriculum and Lyon held meetings daily, branding the students according to their willingness to convert, stigmatizing the ones who did not submit themselves to God as vain and hardhearted sinners who made “various excuses […] for not now seeking salvation & submitting to Jesus” (Leyda 1:134). On her entering the Seminary,

Dickinson was "put down 'no hope' [along with] a large class of this character" (ibid 124) and she writes to Abiah: "There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject" (L 20). The clear distinction between the many of the first sentence and the I of the second is indicative of Dickinson's own branding. She challenges the binary opposition and favors standing apart from and outside of the ark, which allows her a broader scope of defining her subjectivity in contrast to those that are led to the fold, and kept together in a delimited field of possibilities. Standing out, on the other hand, entails a stigma and Lyon warns the students of the "danger of being at last a 'castaway'" (Leyda 1: 149) as they are characterized by "exceeding hardness & depravity of the heart" (ibid 125). Dickinson writes that in case they fail to fulfill any of the prerequisites, "a black mark stands against [their] names" (L 18), reminiscent of the "black catalogue of sins" believers had to compile before their conversion (Epstein 57), and she continues in a highly ironic tone, that they are classified as "'exceptions' as they [are] called scientifically [t]here" (L 18). Lyon conducted religious meetings after tea: "At 4½. We go into Seminary Hall. & receive advice from Miss. Lyon in the form of a lecture" (L 18) writes Dickinson; during these homilies Lyon aimed at "help[ing the students] in seeking the salvation of their souls" (Leyda 1:123). She took advantage even of a dying student without remorse to achieve her goals: "[Emma Washburn] still lingers with us. Her greatest desire this morning is to persuade her impenitent friends to flee to Christ. Lyon exhorted each to listen to the voice in which God is now addressing us – especially would she entreat the impenitent to heed this call" (ibid 145). Dickinson took a critical stance and though she had no option but to attend these sermons, she stood aloof. Her roommate Emily L Norcross writes that "ED appears no different. I hope I might have good news to write with regard to her. She says she has no particular objection to becoming a Christian and she says she feels bad when she hears of one and another of her friends who are expressing a hope but still, she feels no more interest" (Leyda 1:134). At some point, she was "among the number" of those who "attended a meeting in the evening [as they] felt unusually anxious to choose the service of God" (ibid 136). This meeting, however, failed in dispelling any doubts she might have and one of the teachers notes that in a subsequent meeting "One was not there who had been before. She wrote no note" of justifying her absence as requested (ibid 137). Years later,

Clara Newman notes that when "Miss Lyon asked all those who wanted to be Christians to rise" Dickinson remained seated as "the wording of the request was not such as Emily could honestly accede to" (ibid 136). Dickinson told her "with a twinkle in her eye 'they thought it queer I didn't rise. I thought a lie would be queerer'" (ibid). Being a Christian meant that she would have not only to admit a sin she had not committed but that she was morally degenerate as well and repent for her alleged depravity. Dickinson opted to stand against these presuppositions she could not honestly accept as they clashed with her reason; her comparing them to the widely believed reversed queerness. However, she gives no such reflection to Abiah when she writes about it:

> I have neglected the one thing needful when all were obtaining it, & I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter. Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all important subject, but I am not happy, & I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up & become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. I had a long talk with Abby while at home and I doubt not she will soon cast her burden on Christ. (L 23)

Dickinson again makes use of the arguments and the phraseology of the proper, but only for parroting and/or mocking moralizing teachings, as in the last phrase she makes it clear she considers this an unburdening on someone else, an easy way out from the hardships of intellectual vigilance. By citing the standard arguments at length while being a member of the "other class" and not of the "Christians" (Leyda 1:124) she links herself to them by contrast, indicated by the use of the disjunctive. This letter, written over two years after the first one about religion, offers nothing new. Remove the dates and all the letters analyzed so far could have been written at any time. Having undergone tremendous pressure from every possible means of interpellation, Dickinson insists on describing the situation with the other's language only to deride it. She deviates from the collective approach to religion from the start and remains adamant along the way. The "golden opportunity" she mentions has been imposed on her countless times and she invariably rejects it. The deep regret

she feels has been expressed countless times and yet never does she do anything to repair it.

By 1854, she has already "puzzle[d] the public exceedingly" (L 30), the prying villagers have "already set [her] down as one of those brands almost consumed -- and [her] hardheartedness g[o]t [her] many prayers" as she didn't "attend [the Sewing Society meetings" -- notwithstanding [her] high approbation" (L 30). After a church meeting Dickinson writes: "I'm just from meeting, Susie, and as I sorely feared, my 'life' was made a 'victim'" (L 154). The members of the congregation must have stared at her, scrutinizing her; her putting quotes around the words life and victim could imply either the uneasiness or the amusement she felt. Judging by the irony that underlines her references to the members of the congregation, the latter seems more probable.

> After the opening prayer I ventured to turn around. Mr Carter immediately looked at me -- Mr Sweetser attempted to do so, but I discovered nothing, up in the sky somewhere, and gazed intently at it, for quite a half an hour. During the exercises I became more calm, and got out of church quite comfortably. Several roared around, and, sought to devour me, but I fell an easy prey to Miss Lovina Dickinson, being too much exhausted to make any farther resistance. (L 154)

The exaggeration of her depiction of the churchgoers as felines lurking to leap onto her is indicative of the prying villagers, lying in wait for the target of their idle talk. It is also extremely interesting that she uses a depiction that echoes the Bible: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8), only to invert it. While she is considered infidel, thus evil, it is the churchgoers who are invested with devilish traits.

The aforementioned letters connect her with the judges of normality only to distance her from them; Dickinson's education as means of interpellating conversion was completed without success since she did not confess her faith; she did not conform while at Mount Holyoke Seminary. Neither did she compromise anywhere else.

2.8.3. Dickinson back in Amherst

Most surviving letters of the period of her studies in Mount Holyoke are addressed to Austin who shows little interest in religion and so she makes no mention of it. It is also noteworthy that Abiah stops responding to her letters for a lengthy period, probably because of Dickinson's unorthodox views or of her stubbornness not to be saved against Abiah's best judgment. After her return to Amherst, she corresponds mainly with Austin firstly in Endicott, where he teaches, and later in Boston; Susan Gilbert, her future sister-in-law; as well as several of her former school friends. Religion remains a thorny issue, but Dickinson stops playing defense and takes the offensive.

The first surviving letter to Abiah after a two-year silence is an amalgam of natural and supernatural, reality and imagination, explicit and implicit meaning as well as a conflation of both earth/heaven and temporal differences. Biblical times, places and figures are followed by antiquity and contemporary ones fraught with symbolism, with God, Abiah and herself intertwined in a "curious trio, part earthly and part spiritual two of us -- the other all heaven, and no earth. *God* is sitting here, looking into my very soul to see if I think right tho'ts" (L 31). The biblical verse "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3) is merged with Paley's natural theology, which equates the eye with a telescope. Dickinson elaborates further on that metaphor in her poem "I never felt- at Home – Below", which refers to omnipresent God whom Dickinson would avoid if she could but for his surveillance of her and the imminence of Judgment Day:

> […] but they say
> Himself – a Telescope
> Perennial beholds us –
> Myself would run away
> From Him – and Holy Ghost – and All –
> But there's the "Judgement Day!" (P 413)

The trinity Dickinson contrives consists of distinct, separate entities and spatiotemporal dimensions which brought together stand as one, a likening to the properties of the letter with which she aims at communicating with her friend by

writing that "I have been introducing you to me in this letter" through elaborate metaphors. God the Father appears in all his grandeur and she doesn't "dare to look directly at him for fear [she] shall die" (L 31). She stands at Mount Sinai, and she is unable of grasping the full manifestation of his glory as "no man sees [God] and live[s]" (Exodus 33:20), implying that seeing, that is, knowing God is impossible for her. Abiah is the second entity of the "trinity" Dickinson describes, solemn and dressed in black, and as such she could be God the Son, Jesus Christ, who struggled to make sinners reconcile with God and be saved, in the same way Abiah attempts to convert Dickinson. The third entity is Dickinson herself, who reserves the part of the Holy Spirit, the source of inspiration and interpretation, which bestows wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Although she has mentioned the omnipresence of God, she states she is not afraid of him "for [she] tr[ied] to be right and good, and he knows every one of [her] struggles".

Dickinson then tells how her imaginary self steps down from Mount Sinai, unable or unwilling to be illuminated by the divine truth, another Moses yet one who fails to receive the Ten Commandments, and she roams Amherst where she needs to confront a creature, that is, a cold which departed from Switzerland: the origin of Calvinism which was the prevalent dogma in America at the time. She describes her falling sick in terms of being possessed by this creature; it has "pounced upon a thin shawl [she] wore" while she went out at night, symbolic of death, sin or evil, "attracted by the gaiety visible in the street" which echoed the debauched reveling before the Judgment of the earth described by the prophets: "The gaiety of tambourines ceases, The noise of revelers stops, The gaiety of the harp ceases" (Isaiah 24:8). The creature which might as well be Abiah's persistent and pestering crusade to convert Dickinson "commenced riding -- I stopped, and begged the creature to alight, […]. It would'nt get down, and commenced talking to itself – 'cant be New England -- must have made some mistake, disappointed in my reception, dont agree with accounts, Oh what a world of deception, and fraud -- Marm, will [you] tell me the name of this country -- it's Asia Minor, is'nt it. I intended to stop in New England'". Dickinson continues mentioning that she has tried to ignore it but to no avail as it "put[…] both arms around my neck began to kiss my immoderately, and express so much love, it completely bewildered me" by its stifling affection which sounds like a rape. "If it *ever* gets tired of *me* I will forward it to *you* - you would love it for *my* sake, if not for it's own," writes Dickinson and continues with a parody of her

family dressed in pajamas getting ready for what reminds one of the Last Judgment: “it will tell you some queer stories about me -- how I sneezed so loud one night that the family thought the last trump was sounding, and climbed into the currant-bushes to get out of the way -- how the rest of the people arrayed in long night-gowns folded their arms, and were waiting”. Back in her room in Amherst she assures Abiah that her story is a fiction, aimed at “lead[ing] astray foolish young women”. This is a nice way of Dickinson’s saying right to Abiah’s face that she considers her friend foolish as she has succumbed to the prescriptive religious and social norms unconditionally and, above all, unquestioningly. Not only does Dickinson allow herself to be subjected to the “invisible tyrants” (Sprague 232) of imagination being “responsible to God for the indulgences of a vain imagination” (ibid 233), but she challenges Abiah’s piety and modesty, a move which is considered an excessive epistolary fault. Letter writers are advised against the “slightest symptom of irreligion [which might] disgust [their] correspondent (Peyre-Ferry 27). Dickinson disputes Abiah’s religiosity relentlessly, indifferent to any repulsion her friend might feel, provided of course she could interpret the story. The “wicked story” she narrates is a “flower of speech” which “both make[s] and tell[s] deliberate falsehoods” (L 31) and should be avoided in the same way snakes should be. Dickinson’s retreat and apology are not sincere as she continues to lay siege to Abiah. She claims that the bite of the big serpent, which is to blame for Man’s succumbing to temptation and expulsion from Paradise, significant though it may be, it is a commonplace issue. In the same letter, she claims that the snake is misunderstood and underestimated, and she takes their side probably because she is viewed as an impenitent sinner doomed to hell due to her yielding to temptation and refusing to convert. For her, the biblical snake is not the instrument of Satan; it is an innocent creature of nature, and Dickinson’s preference to “little green ones that slide around by your shoes in the grass -- and make it rustle with their elbows --” must sound scandalous and provocative, to say the least, to the churchy Abiah. And to bewilder her even more, Dickinson offers to provide her with some information on snakes so that she can make up her mind which snake to choose although she “would'nt influence *[her]* for the world!” In case Abiah fails to understand that her efforts to talk her into confession are a lost cause, Dickinson adds that “I remember your warnings sometimes -- try to do as you told me sometimes -- and sometimes conclude it's no use to try; then my heart says it *is*, and new trial is followed by disappointment again”. She signs off her letter mischievously as “Your

very sincere, and *wicked* friend, Emily E. Dickinson" and the incompatible traits in a single sentence underline the discrepancy between what Dickinson holds herself to be as opposed to what she is for Abiah. This binary opposition, nature to religion, along with the many others resulting from the religious branding of the times, enables the understanding of self as no pole can exist without the other. Dickinson and Abiah's personal traits become meaningful only when they efface each other. Dickinson challenges the sincerity of the pious and favors the frankness of the wicked, resignifying the dominant terminology by viewing it from a purely natural point of view, and creating a new hierarchy.

Dauntless, Dickinson adopts the prevailing phraseology ascribing "exceeding wickedness and criminality" of unconverted women (Epstein 55) only to proclaim that "wicked - but I was - and am - and shall be-" (L 30), a declaration of independence as such, her firm diachronic stance evident in the tense deictic and her decision to remain this way using shall, definitely. In the same letter to Jane Humphrey, she ascertains that her friend is "out of the way of temptation" but her company with Dickinson is bound to "contaminate" her. However, she feels no remorse and, by paraphrasing the Bible,[3] she states that "out of a wicked heart cometh wicked words," asks for forgiveness, and goes on echoing a Psalm[4] to liken the heart to an abandoned, dusty place. She urges Jane to "let us sweep it out – and brush away the cob -- webs – and garnish it – and make it ready for the Master!" only to go on to describe in every detail the "frolic, comprising charades – walking around *indefinitely* – music – conversation -- and supper" in Amherst, entirely incompatible with a repentant sinner who must refrain from secular affairs, pray and ask for forgiveness. Dickinson's propositional attitude to God is probing; she boldly poses metaphysical questions about God's design, even his existence. She fails to conceive why suffering is the precondition to strength and states that "We *must* "suffer -- and be strong. *Shall* we be strong -- wont suffering make weaker this human -- it makes stronger not *us* -- but what God gave, and what he will take -- mourn our bodies ever so loudly. We do not know that he is God -- and *will* try to be still -- tho' we really had rather complain" (L 30).

Women were advised to "avoid all books and all conversation that tend to shake [their] faith", as well as "go no further than Scripture for [their] religious

[3] "An evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil" (Luke 6: 45).
[4] "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 50:10).

opinion" (Gregory 16). Dickinson abides to these instructions and resorts to the Bible only to manipulate it so that she can make her points. She confronts Abiah turning her weapon, the Scripture, against itself and against Abiah's self-deceit. "I will try not to say any more -- my rebellious thoughts are many and the friend I love and trust in has much now to forgive -- I wish I were somebody else -- I would pray the prayer of the 'Pharisee', but I am a poor little 'Publican'; 'Son of David' look down on me!" (L 39) she writes in a deceivingly humble tone. Publicans were despised tax collectors while Pharisees studied and taught the law and they considered common people religiously unclean; however, in the well-known biblical parable (Luke 18:9-14), it is the Pharisee that Christ condemns as a hypocrite, while he blesses the humble Publican. Abiah as another Pharisee, self-righteous and confident that her virtue according to the letter of the law sets her apart and above Dickinson, reprimands her for her rebellious thoughts. Nevertheless, Dickinson's prayer is finally that of the Publican, who lays his heart open and asks for mercy, having realized his unworthiness. Dickinson refers to Christ as the Son of David, a rare invocation to Jesus in the Bible, used by two blind men who asked him to restore their sight,[5] and a Canaanite woman who asked for the release of her daughter by demons.[6] Provided she really believes the biblical stories, she could ask Jesus to restore her sight and dispel the darkness that bars her from salvation. Yet her identification with the Publican suggests that her humble ways are already a way to salvation. Addressing Abiah rather condescendingly as "My dear girl", she goes on to praise her for her good deeds and employing contemporary clichés she writes:

> You are growing wiser than I am, and nipping in the bud fancies which I let blossom - perchance to bear no fruit, or if plucked, I may find it bitter. The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea - I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but Oh I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness - Christ Jesus will love you more - I'm afraid he dont love me any!

[5] And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. (Mark 10:48).

[6] And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." (Matthew 12:23).

Dickinson does not merely admit but she underscores her branding as wicked. In the above extract she echoes the biblical verse about the depraved: "But the wicked *are* like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt" (Isaiah, 57:20). Abiah is wise enough to avoid the epistolary sin of "indulg[ing] fancy and expos[ing herself] to perpetual disappointment and disgust" (Gregory 76). Dickinson, on the other hand, acts against common sense; she cannot affect "discipline of imagination" even if she is "mislead into very dangerous errors" (ibid).

2.9. Dickinson and women's roles

The upbringing and education of a young lady of the nineteenth century should aim at "teach[ing] her to know her place" (The *Young Lady's Own Book* 41). They had to master practical subjects so that they were not just "pleasant, animated playthings" (Sprague 34), provided they kept in the limits of their assigned sphere and fulfilled their assigned duties; any trespassing was considered unfeminine. In a letter to Abiah, who functions as a normalizing judge on both religious and female issues, Dickinson describes such women and especially her teachers or schoolmates "of this stamp" as "prim, starched up young ladies […] perfect models of propriety and good behavior" (L 6). At just fifteen years of age, she has already done her own branding. Reversing the model which produces "obedient daughter[s]" (L 20), she asks Abiah not to yield. "Don't let your free spirit be chained by them" (L 6). Her urge cuts both ways. She condemns appearances over substance, which was the prevalent norm at the time, and warns her friend against the danger of losing her individuality and being assimilated in a society which assigns women the duty to "govern [their] moods, look pleasantly and speak kindly" (Young 217). There is a sarcastic tone, though. Abiah has already been chained, interpellated by this model and attempting to normalize Dickinson as well. Still her efforts are unsuccessful since Dickinson keeps expressing her disinclination to comply with the required standards, claiming that she will "be the belle of Amherst" (L 6), an "ambition" which runs contrary to contemporary notions of prudence, as belles are "foolishly vain, think of nothing, and care for nothing beyond personal display" (Sprague 139). The underlying irony and Dickinson's favorite device of investing herself or her actions with the very traits she stigmatizes is in action once again.

Good female education consisted of practical skills so that women could run their house and govern their family. Not at ease with this female mission, she writes to Abiah about two little girls "Very promising *Children* I understand. I dont doubt if they live they will be ornaments to society. I think they are both to be considered as Embryos of future usefulness" (L 7). She refers to stages in age development reversely; her first reference to them as children pertains to a later stage in their physical development, followed by a prior one, embryos precede children age-wise. However, her time ordering is correct; brought into the society they constitute embryos; the political technology of their body will result in their subjugation to social institutions and their confinement of women in the domestic sphere and Dickinson often derides the shadow female kingdom. On the forthcoming marriage of her beloved teacher, Miss Adams, Dickinson seems entirely indifferent to Adams' fiancé as she does not mention him even once and she expresses her regret for the shift in her teacher's life: "I cannot bear to think that she will never more wield the sceptre, & sit upon the throne in our venerable schoolhouse, & yet I am glad she is going to have a home of her own & a kind companion to take life's journey with her" (L 15). The attributes are inversed; it is single life and teaching, a situation considered very precarious and inferior in the society of the times, that offers Adams a royal position of self- (and pupil) governance, in contrast with the dim and rather unpromising prospect of sharing a home with an unnamed husband and becoming his "rational entertaining companion" (Bennett 80).

Marriage for Dickinson is a "translation" and she writes to Emily Ford: "Dear Emily, when it came, and hidden by your veil you stood before us all and made those promises, and when we kissed you, all, and went back to our homes, it seemed to me translation, not any earthly thing, and if a little after you'd ridden on the wind, it would not have surprised me" (L 146). Marriage seems to Dickinson like letter writing; the bride is riding the wind on her way to the groom-recipient. Whether she will be received or not is conjectural in the same way the meaning of the letter is. In a rather short letter, in which she calls her friend by her first name eight times, Dickinson stresses the loss of individuality marriage entails, and evident in Ford's hiding behind the bridal veil. From then on, she will be "Mrs. Ford of Connecticut" and Dickinson reiterates the name given to her before marriage in an attempt both to accentuate Fowler's individual identity and prevent her from forgetting it by being

engulfed by her marital name. In addition, Dickinson considers marriage a modification, not as development, but as transformation -- Ford will have to alter, as "adaptation is the secret of [woman's] influence. It is the woman and not the man to make the sacrifice" and be "plastic" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 2). Dickinson refers to Ford's departure for her new home with finality similar to that of dying. She paraphrases the verse "I can go to her, but she cannot come back to me" claiming that she cannot recall its exact wording or its source probably because it comes after the biblical "But now he is dead" (2 Samuel 12:22). And the icing on the cake is her citing a verse from a hymn entitled "How blest the righteous when he dies" followed by mentioning Ford's father who "looked so solitary [and] lonely" which does not seem to apply. In one of Lavinia's letters to Austin, however, she remarks that "Mr. Fowler is very much overjoyed" (Bingham, 1955, 327). The description of the separation because of marriage sounds like an obituary, and those who are left behind mourn instead of wishing happiness to the young couple.

It is clear from the above that Dickinson considers marriage in patriarchal terms, as a loss of autonomy, a malady which fetters and humiliates women. Most men were motivated by the spirit of adventure, and they were unwilling to make sacrifices so as to "preserve [their] mineral-mine fantasy" (ibid 15). Ik Marvel's Bachelor, one of Dickinson's favorite books claimed that: "I and my dog [Carlo] and my books and my pen will battle through bravely and leave enough for a tombstone" (Barker-Benfield 10); besides the homonymous dog, Marvel and Dickinson shared the same stance to marriage. Alexis de Toqueville observed that male individualism led the American man to "isolate himself from the mass of his fellows, withdraw into the circle of society and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the rest of society to take care of itself" (Brown 2). "By Birth a Bachelor" (L 350), Dickinson assumes this masculine attitude to marriage and pursues an individualistic course, aided by domesticity which functions not as a barrier but as a shelter for her to establish and preserve her identity. Dickinson is involved in housework and in the introduction of a letter to Abiah, she refers to Genesis, her genesis of "Twin loaves of bread [which] have been born into the world under my auspices – fine children – the image of their *mother* – and here my friend is the *glory"* (L 36). Her maternal pride over her bread-children parodies the creation of humankind: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27) which, being familiar to devout Abiah, could constitute

blasphemy for her. Yet Dickinson feels the need to provide an explanation for doing a chore; it is not out of duty or pleasure, rather out of necessity. The illness of her mother requires Dickinson's filling for her, which she does grudgingly, as she is confined at home and cannot ride with one of her friends. She cites sermons on banishing all worldly pleasure in favor of duty and salvation and likens her situation to the temptations Christ faced: "I had read of Christ's temptations, and how they were like our own, only he didn't sin I wondered if one was like mine, and whether it made him angry – I couldn't make up my mind; do you think he ever did?" Talking about temptations that Christ faced and His potential human reaction to them could be considered disrespectful and scandalize Abiah, especially when compared to housework. Dickinson, however, is angry, and she concludes that "the wicked world was unworthy such devoted, and terrible sufferings, and came to my various senses in great dudgeon at life, and time, and love for affliction, and anguish", equating Christ's Passions to her inability to have fun with her friend.

Dickinson mentions several cases of her doing chores around the house in the letters, but she makes it clear that she detests them: "I think I could keep house very comfortably if I knew how to cook. But as long as I dont, my knowledge of housekeeping is about of as much use as faith without works, which you know we are told is dead" (L 8). When writing this to Abiah, she is lying, as her bread and cakes were said to be delicious. However, housework seems not to be her favorite line of duty and she grumbles to Abiah again:

> I have been at work, providing the 'food that perisheth', scaring the timorous dust, and being obedient, and kind. *I* call it kind obedience in the books the Shadows write in, it may have another name. I am yet the Queen of the court, if regalia be dust, and dirt, have three loyal subjects, whom I'd rather relieve from service […] Father and Austin still clamor for food, and I, like a martyr am feeding them. Would'nt you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring my "Omar's beard" I never was in such plight. *My* kitchen I think I called it, God forbid that it was, or shall be my own -- God keep me from what they call *households*, except that bright one of 'faith'! (L 36)

By juxtaposing the title to its substance, Dickinson dismisses the royal office with which the domesticity crowned women; if reigning over the household meant doing battle with such an insignificant foe as dust and providing for the hunger of others while neglecting the "food that endureth", that is the spirit; she thanks them, but she will pass. She describes the situation in religious terms; as a martyr, she is in bonds asking for deliverance, however, it is not deliverance from temptation or sin; rather from the mundane duties that hinders her from tending to her spiritual needs.

These needs were not considered legitimate though. Reading or any other intellectual activity was in the periphery of the leisure activities a woman could enjoy as they were supposedly "miserably fitted for any of the purposes of practical life" (Sprague 83). Imagination was thought to be stirred in a "feverish state gain[ing] ascendancy over the Judgment" (ibid 83) which led to corruption so that "many a poor girl [was led] to ruin" (Bennett 38). Dickinson though warned against the "fatal poison" imagination or reading novels could inject, makes extensive use of it even in her letters to both Abiah and Austin who functioned as judges of normality.

Boasting of her being "a very wise *young lady*", underling her current standing in the society or its expectations from her and not any personal traits, she urges Austin to be aware of imagination after his having read the *Arabian Nights*: "I hope you have derived much benefit from their perusal & presume your powers of imagining will vastly increase thereby. But I must give you a word of advice, too. Cultivate your other powers in proportion as you allow Imagination to captivate you!" (L 19) In a rather mischievous way, Dickinson switches places with her reproachful brother, juxtaposing his potentially pernicious reading with her own. Harmless but unsuitable for females, subjects such as "Chemistry, Physiology & quarter course in Algebra" were in contrast to the male notion that, for women, "it is scarcely possible [algebra] will come into direct use" (Sprague 55). The only legitimate field for women in which elementary mathematics would be of use was in domestic economy and they were advised to "let no one ever have just occasion to say, in respect to any pecuniary transaction of [theirs], that it has not been perfectly liberal and honorable" (Sprague 69). Once again, Dickinson mocks the very qualities she claims she has been endowed at school. While she was a student at Mount Holyoke Seminary, Edward Dickinson must have offered an allowance, which Dickinson did not accept:

> Tell Father, I am obliged to him much, for his offers of '*pica*uniary' assistance, but do not need any. We are furnished with an account-book, here & obliged to put down every mill, which we spend & what we spend it for & show it to Miss. Whitman every Saturday, so you perceive your sister is learning to keep accounts in addition to the other branches of her education. (L 17)

On receiving one of Austin's letters, Dickinson "engrossed in the history of Sulphuric Acid!!!!!" (L 22) exercised every female virtue before opening it.

> I deliberated for a few moments after it's reception on the propriety of carrying it to Miss. Whitman, your friend. The result of my deliberation was a conclusion to open it with moderation, peruse it's contents with sobriety becoming my station, & if after a close investigation of it's contents I found nothing which savored of rebellion or an unsubdued will, I would lay it away in my folio & forget I had ever received it. Are you not gratified that I am so rapidly gaining correct ideas of female propriety & sedate Our Deportment? (Ibid)

Dickinson refers to conventions maintaining that "nursing a sickly extravagant sensibility" (Bennett 111) disturbs the peace of mind "with fanciful affronts" (ibid) but she assures Austin mockingly that she will do exactly the opposite. It seems that the study of Sulphuric Acid has made her caustic; she accuses Austin of "dangerous sentiments", whereas it is the other way round. Dickinson either proclaims that she stands in rebellion, or she is accused of rebellious thoughts and Austin is trying to make her gain ideas "becoming [her] station", exercising his right or duty to normalize the females of the family claiming that he is just trying to protect them. This becomes evident in a letter Austin sent to Susan after she protested for his disapproval of her reading a book which he considered "unhealthy – an oppressive, disease laden atmosphere […] a story full of only wretchedness & misery – true hearts separated – of human souls destroyed" (Leyda 1:275). The rather odd modification sedate Dickinson used in her letter therefore is clearly aimed at him. Their differentiation becomes obvious on the face of this letter which shows no sign of female propriety regarding epistolary conventions. There are postscripts written from

the top to the bottom of every single page as well as a large paragraph written vertically above the salutation. Dickinson seals the letter with a wafer, a strongly discouraged practice, which reads “believe me”, a rather cheeky suggestion after her teasing him.

She challenges Austin’s propriety unremittingly, and in replying to one of his letters she writes “I was highly edified with your *imaginative* note to me & think your flights of fancy indeed wonderful at your age!!” (L 24) The problem lies with two opposite notions in the same sentence; edification aimed at providing instructions for the improvement of moral and religious character, but imagination was considered hardly the suitable means for this. On the contrary, it was condemned as the source of all evils and the corruption of principles. Although it is impossible to know the content of Austin’s letter, this might be Dickinson’s slant way of criticizing its pedantry which could be inferred by her mischievous attempt to be precise “We are enjoying this evening what is called a ‘northeast storm’ -- a little north of east, in case you are pretty definite” (L 42).

On receiving a letter from Austin, who was at Endicott School in Boston where he spent a year teaching, Dickinson addresses him in an extremely formal way, maybe suitable to the prestige of his position or mocking it, asking him to “permit [her] to thank [him] for it, and to request some more as soon as it is convenient, permit [her] to accord with [his] discreet opinion” and expresses her pride for his “dissenting” opinion. “Father perused the letter and verily for joy the poor man could hardly contain himself […]. Fearing the consequences on a mind so formed as his, I seized the exciting sheet, and bore it away to my folio to amuse nations to come” (L 44), writes Dickinson to Austin and her mockery at both male members of the family as to the boring or droll internalization of the prevailing norms in their “formed” minds is omnipresent. Her father would “‘transfer [the letter] to the *Paper’* to tell this foolish world that one man living in it dares to say what he *thinks* – nor heeds if some dog bark” (L 44). She goes on to describe their father’s reaction to Austin’s opinions in a highly exaggerating manner, echoing the Gospel verses about Jesus Christ’s death “encomium followed encomium -- applause deafened applause -- the whole town reeled and staggered as *it* were a drunken man -- rocks rent -- graves opened -- and the seeds which had'nt come up were heard to set up growing -- the sun went down in clouds -- the moon rose in glory -- Alpha Delta, All Hail!”. The force that these extremely short sentences convey is consistent with the huge change their father

thought Austin's ideas would bring to the world. The highly rebellious opinion that Austin has voiced was his dissatisfaction with Jenny Lind's, the famous contemporary singer, performance. This heretic view is enough for Dickinson to portray him as Christ. Austin, the Son of Edward, the dissenter, dares to mess with the popular artist dauntless to his possible crucifixion because of his views. Dickinson pokes fun not only at the significance of Austin's intervention but at her father's exaggerated pride on his son's dissuasion from the public opinion on a singer while they have both been interpellated as far as extremely more important issues are concerned.

Although both sisters adore their brother and do everything in their power to accommodate his needs, there is a clear distinction between their relationships. Lavinia, more practical and down to earth, turns to Austin asking for countless favors, from buying her music scores to an ottoman for the corner of their dining room. She chides him whenever he does not send them a letter or does not run for one of her errands, but their relationship is one of acceptance of his male superiority and Lavinia's dependence on him. It is noteworthy that she calls him Austin Rooster at the beginning of one of her letters and signs off as Vinnie, Alias Chick (Bingham, 1955, 358-59). Dickinson considers herself equal if not superior to Austin, accepting and returning his brotherly love and rejecting his masculine efforts to bring her on the beaten track. Her realization that they are "unlike most everyone, and therefore more dependent on each other for delight" (L 114) does not deter her from expressing her unwillingness to bend to his/society's model of feminine propriety. Their bond is one of deep understanding and complete trust, a bond exclusively between the two of them: "I dont love to read your letters all out loud to father -- it would be like opening the kitchen door when we get home from meeting Sunday, and are sitting down by the stove saying just what we're a mind to, and having father hear" (L 116) she writes him and this exchange of thoughts is their strongest link even in absence. Edward Dickinson did not know what to make of her; "Father's real life and mine sometimes come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt" (L 65), she writes to Austin, and it seems that Edward was not in a position to bring her back on track. He was extremely fond of her and his way of reprimanding her was ignoring her, as Bianchi stresses "her father evidenced displeasure by taking his hat and cane, and passing out the door in silence leaving an emptiness indicative of reproof, a wordless censure to her more devastating than any judgment day" (Bianchi, 1971, 17). Dickinson mentions his

admonitions mischievously, indulging in a game of intellectual power in which she is invariably the winner as she emerges without a scratch:

> Father was very severe to me; he thought I'd been trifling with you, so he gave me quite a trimming about "Uncle Tom" and "Charles Dickens" and those "modern Literati" who he says are *nothing*, compared to past generations, who flourished when *he was a boy*. Then he said there were "somebody's *rev-e-ries*," he did'nt know whose they were, that he thought were very ridiculous, so I'm quite in disgrace at present. (L 113)

Dickinson makes fun of her father several times, but her tone is affectionate. Her fear of him is counterfeit; she undermines his authority mockingly, though her love for him is genuine. What is more, the books she mentions were in their library, purchased by none other than Edward himself. Bianchi underlines the "element of drollery in her, the elfin, mischievous strain 'whimsy' 'playing naive' for sheer glee of her game – 'elfing it' we called the sport" (Bianchi, 1932, 63). Her relationship with her father was one of deep affection but she never spared the chance to tease him; Bianchi says that her "attitude to him [was] one of taking liberties or mock awe" (ibid 63).

> I again crept into the sitting room, more dead than alive, and endeavored to *make conversation*. Father looked round triumphantly. I remarked that "the weather was rather cold" today, to which they all assented -- indeed I *never witnessed* such *wonderful unanimity*. Fled to my mind again, and endeavored to procure something equally agreeable with my *last happy remark*. Bethought me of Sabbath day, and the Rev. Mr Bliss, who preached upon it -- remarked with wonderful emphasis, that I thought the Rev. gentleman a very remarkable preacher, and discovered a strong resemblance between himself & Whitfield, in the way of remark -- I confess it *was rather* laughable, having never so much as seen the *ashes* of that gentleman -- but oh such a look as I got from my rheumatic sire. You should have seen it -- I never can find a language vivid eno' to portray it to you. (L 79)

The above incident seems far-fetched; Dickinson was at perfect ease to converse with most of her father's law assistants who made their visits to the Homestead and spent most afternoons there talking about mutual friends or various books which circulated among them as Dickinson's introductory sentence "I send you the book with pleasure, for it has given me happiness, and I love to have it busy, imparting delight to others" (L 136) or her request for their return reveals "I look in my casket and miss a pearl – I fear you intend to defraud me"(L 162).

One of the suitable subjects to be elaborated in letters was reading approved books; books that did not lead women astray but kept them down to earth so that they could fulfill their duties. Dickinson mentions her schoolbooks to Abiah as well as some of the books that had just been published. However, she is not satisfied with books that are "not great, not thrilling – but sweet and true" (L85). She knows that they are popular and that Susan "would love them" but they "dont bewitch [her] any" as "There are no walks in the wood -- no low and earnest voices, no moonlight, nor stolen love, but pure little lives, loving God, and their parents, and obeying the laws of the land; yet read, if you meet them, Susie, for they will do one good" (ibid). The division she draws reflects the one drawn by the norms; "judicious friend select parts" and recommend them to women so as to protect them from books "of immoral tendency" (Sprague 79). What Dickinson prefers falls into the inappropriate reading for women, that is, "light and foolish reading" considered "evil" against which women were strongly advised (ibid 292).

Reading poetry was not suitable for women, let alone writing poetry. Every letter manual that respected itself considered it as its duty to warn them against "passion for poetry [as] dangerous" (Bennett 111) as it "inspires a romantic turn of mind inconsistent with the solid duties and proprieties of life" (ibid). What is more, women were considered unable to achieve excellence as "Muses live upon a mount" and "climb[ing] to the heights of Parnassus" (ibid) was a rather unattainable feat for women. Writing poetry despite the explicit warnings against it was gaining ground at the time, forcing Nathaniel Hawthorne to protest to his editor that "America is now given to a damned mob of scribbling women" who hindered the successful circulation of his own works since "the public is occupied with their trash" (Wayne 174). Men did everything in their power to monopolize writing and dissuade women from doing the same. Austin Dickinson wrote poetry and sent some of his work home, making Edward proud of his only son and Dickinson accusing him of "getting away [her]

patent" (L 110). Written in 1853, a time when she has already started writing poems, encouraged by Benjamin Newton, this letter serves as both a reminder and a warning. She has already circulated her poems and Austin must have been aware of his sister's poems since she has already sent him at least one poem incorporated in her letter. However, Austin invariably urges Dickinson not to write "essays" that she concludes that are "rather too much for [him]" (L 113), bringing her down to earth and to her appropriate position. Her reaction is vehement; she orders the Muses to get lost as they are redundant. Austin has surpassed and overshadowed them; he has ascended the Olympus women cannot even aspire to. As a new Pegasus, the winged stallion, synonym to poetic inspiration he heads for the belletristic heaven. She carries coals to Newcastle and informs him that she is "in the habit [her]self of writing some few things" and half-mockingly half-seriously threatens to "call the police" for usurping her place. It is she who climbs up, not Austin, whose fate must be the same as Bellerophon's who thinking himself equal to the Olympian gods mounted Pegasus to reach them, thus bringing about his fall and death because of his hubris. Austin is liable to the same hubris; his "Greenville" cannot be compared to Dickinson's profundity. Having accused him to be a usurper, she retreats and relegates her claim to "folly", the favorite male wording for women acting out of their sphere and promises to "try to be sensible" before he gets "quite disgusted". Despite all opposition, Dickinson delimits her sphere; it is the sphere of poetry which Austin invades without legitimate reason.

In contrast to poetry, needlework, embroidery, drawing, music and gardening were approved female activities which occupied the time and prevented women from indulging in "sinful pursuits" (*The Lady's Young Own Book* 41) endangering their moral integrity. In addition, employment was considered a "grand preservative of health and innocence" (Bennett 123) as women "for want of exercise f[e]ll into thousand temptations" (ibid 109). Both Dickinson's parents did their best to protect her from the evil by keeping her busy:

> You asked me if I was attending school now. I am not. Mother thinks me not able to confine myself to school this term. She had rather I would exercise, and I can assure you I get plenty of that article by staying at home, I am going to learn to make bread tomorrow. So you may imagine me with my sleeves

> rolled up mixing Flour, Milk, Saleratus &c with a deal of grace. I advise you if you dont know how to make the staff of life to learn with dispatch. (L 8)

Dickinson's discomfort at her obligatory involvement in household chores becomes evident in her making fun of her mother's decision to substitute the school's confinement to that of their kitchen's where she can teach her female tasks. Although baking bread and making sweets was one of her lifelong duties and pleasures, she did not seem to enjoy the rest of the chores. She writes to Abiah that she is an "exile from school two terms on account of [her] health" (L 14) and she "kept [her] good resolution for once in [her] life, and have been sewing, practising upon the Piano, & assisting mother in household affairs". Her aversion of chores and her "prefer[ence] for pestilence" (L 318) did not excuse her of her share of housework, though it deprived her of valuable time to read and write. Her frustration at being forced to occupy with tasks she does not wish to, be it housework or charities to satisfy the inexorable public opinion, overwhelms her and she writes to Jane Humphrey:

> For what need had *I* of sympathy -- or very much less of affection -- or less than they all -- of friends -- mind the house -- and the food -- *sweep* if the spirits were low -- nothing like exercise to strengthen -- and invigorate -- and help away such foolishness -- work makes one strong, and cheerful -- and as for society what neighborhood so full as my own? The halt -- the lame -- and the blind -- the old -- the infirm -- the bed-ridden -- and superannuated -- the ugly, and disagreeable -- the perfectly hateful to me -- all *these* to see -- and be seen by -- an opportunity rare for cultivating meekness -- and patience -- and submission -- and for turning my back to this very sinful, and wicked world. (L 30)

She fails to comply with proper feminine behavior which demands women never to foam in anger (Bennett 134), "never slam a door or stamp noisily" (Young 239) and "government [their] temper" (Bennett 77) as "angry look is more destructive to a female than an high scorbutic flush or the small-pox" (ibid 18). She writes to Susan: "I am naughty and cross, this morning and nobody loves me here; nor would you love me, if you should see me frown, and hear how loud the door bangs whenever I go through" (L 85). She has another major flaw, too. She is not able to restrain her

feelings and remain composed. She confides in her "dear child" Abiah that "when my feelings come, I permit them to overcome me when perhaps I ought not" (L 69).

Austin rebukes her for any unwomanly behavior. She complains that he has always considered her a fool "I suppose I am a fool -- you always said I was one, and yet I have some feelings that seem sensible to me, and I have desires to see you now that you are gone which are really quite intelligent" (L 44). She refutes his reprimand firmly assuring him that "Dont take too much encouragement, but really I have the hope of becoming before you come quite an accountable being!" (L 44) echoing manuals which urge women to follow their precepts, or they are "unworthy of [being called] an accountable being" (Sprague 291). She is more interested in the salvation of the mind rather than of the soul, perceived either in a Calvinistic sense or a Foucauldian one; she has already resisted any regeneration of her soul in the way ministers or exhorters mean since such soul would be the product of constraint and punishment, an invented soul. She hopes for "an eleventh hour' in the life of the mind as well as such an one in the life of the soul – grey haired sinners are saved – simple maids may be wise, who knoweth?"(L 44) Neither does she desire the wisdom derived from submission to the principles that could enable her to be an accountable being, evident in the use of the modal may, denoting possibility and not certainty as well as the rhetorical question at the end which sounds quite unconvincing and unfeasible.

2.9.1. Women in the public sphere

Given the prominent position of Edward Dickinson in the public and political life of Amherst -- he served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the Massachusetts Senate before he was elected as a Whig to the United States Congress in 1853 -- it is no surprise that the Dickinson house was the epicenter of Amherst's social and political life. Not only did both sisters along with their mother organize the various formal receptions Edward held, such as the Commencement, but they participated in them. Congressmen, the Presidents of Amherst College, Editors, Judges were among the guests, and it seems that Dickinson discussed with them freely on every subject. Bianchi claims that she "astonished some of her father's friends by her insight into men and affairs" (Bianchi, 1971, 45) which ran contrary to woman's

role at that time. Considered unable to conceive politics or any serious subject, women were advised not to "speak their mind [as it was a] mortification to hearers (Young 81). Rather, they should pay attention to men who had superior knowledge and understanding and avoid "anything that appears like active interference" (Sprague 265). Since "political reform" was not in the "province of females to take a decided part" (ibid) they had better remain silent during a conversation. Dickinson protests to that exclusion and during her studies at Mount Holyoke Seminary, she asks her brother about the outcome of the Mexican war and the identity of the candidate for President adding that "I don't know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance" (L 16). In the same letter, she worries lest their field is bought by a "loco" and she informs Austin of her "wise determination" not to feel homesick. She asks him to assure their father that she "will try to follow his precepts" and signs off with a very condescending "Be a good boy & mind me" in the fashion of their father's admonition, assuming the power position. On another occasion, she wonders "Why cant *I* be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention? - dont I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law?" and concludes that she doesn't "like this country at all, and [she] shant stay here any longer! 'Delenda est' America, Massachusetts and all!" (L 94)

Her opposition to the female duty of "exploring tour of mercy in her immediate neighborhood" (Sprague 263) and their "keep[ing] within proper limits" as "political reform is not a province for females to take a decided part" (ibid 264) is evident in a so-called valentine letter to George Gould which Johnson describes as "typical of the nonsense ED could evoke for such occasions" (Johnson & Ward 93). Entirely atypical regarding its content -- the editor referred to it as "caus[ing] the high blood 'run frolic through the vein'" (Leyda 1:167) -- it constitutes a war cry against the current social situation. Instead of addressing a sweetheart in an emotional way to secure his amatory attention, Dickinson addresses the readers in a fierce way to awaken them from the stagnation prevailing in the American society: "We will talk over what we have learned in our geographies, and listened to from the pulpit, the press and the Sabbath School" (L 34) she writes, questioning text- or faith-based beliefs. The pulpit and the Sabbath School, conduits for catechism and indoctrination, constitute hugely influential normalizing agents, which she resists. Appalled by "the world [sleeping] in ignorance," she urges for "pull[ing] society up to the roots" by radical changes in every strata of social life. Dickinson invites her readers from every

position they might be in to join her in sweeping away the wrongdoings of society and reforming it in any way each one could. She is "Judith the heroine of the Apocrypha", who questioned the rightness of the Jewish male leaders' decision not to defend themselves but surrender to king Nebuchadnezzar. In an unprecedented boldness, Judith urged them to "set an example for [their] kindred" (The Book of Judith 8:24) only to be ignored. Spurred by their refusal, she decided to act independently. Pronouncing that "the Lord [would] deliver Israel by [her] hand" (ibid 8:33), that is a woman's hand, she contrived a plot to eliminate the Assyrian general and after her succeeding in beheading him, the Israelites took heart and pushed the enemy away. In the same vein, Dickinson's letter is a fervent call for action so that the ills of the society are eradicated. Since male authority fails to rise to the occasion of reformation, it is she, a female, who steps out of her assigned sphere, reversing the norm that women should follow rather than lead and attacks the established order which simply perpetuates injustice and inequality.

2.10. Dickinson and her interaction with Nature

Thinking Dickinson outside nature is unthinkable; the familiar or letters of friendship of the first phase of her correspondence are rife with references to it. Though it was essential the "picture of home with all its dear associations" (Westlake 93) be conveyed so as the pain of separation is eased, this description should be characterized by "naturalness" (ibid 92), with such "figures of speech" admissible "under like circumstances in conversation" (ibid 84). However, for Dickinson nature is a feast for the senses and she wishes to transfer and share it with her correspondents, carrying them into her world or carrying it to them, through vivid language and metaphors. In a transcendentalist sense, this world is an organic whole, where mind and matter coexist. Dickinson, immersed in this sensory universe corresponds to the qualities Emerson attributes to a poet: "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eyes can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (Porte 11). She deviates from the epistolary rules and endows "information of the less important occurrences of life" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xvi), characteristic of the familiar letters, with poetic qualities by "the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds' her (Thoreau 99).

She eyes grapes with purple "robes of kings […] not a tint more royal" than them, she savors these kings in "the first instance on record of subjects devouring kings", she touches peaches with "coats of velvet and down", (L 53), she attends "the orchestra of winds" while they "perform their strange, sad music" (L 60), "shy little birds say[ing] 'chirrup chirrup'" (L 86) and she smells the air "fragrant with forest leaves and bright autumnal berries" (L 59). Nature speaks to her and she answers back; their relationship is one of close contact and deep understanding. She misses her absent ones, but she is not alone; the "Earth mourns, too, for all her little birds" (L 73) Nature always mirrors her moods and emotions and in her early letters the description of an event or an intense emotion is preceded or followed by an analogous natural phenomenon: "The clouds are cold and gray – I think it will rain soon – Oh I am so lonely" she wrote to Austin (L 59). Over the years, she develops a unique graphic description not only of nature and the elements but of her interaction with them.

In the first phase of her correspondence (1842-1855), Amherst is "a real Eden" (L 131) and nature is confined to her garden and her immediate surroundings, indicative of her moving within a predetermined domain as regards what is expected from her. However, Dickinson makes out of this fenced terrain something like Thoreau's Walden. She longs to "drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, […] if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it" (Thoreau 93). She follows the changing of the seasons, the blossoms ripening, the birds' twitter and her depiction is reminiscent of Thoreau's structure of *Walden*. However, her imagery varies according to the recipient and the stage in her letter-writing procedure. Letters written to Abiah, for example, contain scarce references to nature; she often mentions her garden, a symbol of enclosure in which nature is subdued and ordered, reflecting the contemporary socio-cultural values with which Abiah is instilled and with which she tries to imbue Dickinson. She watches the changing of the seasons and the respective life cycle in the trees of their orchard; "a gay leaf falling" (L 57) and then "few lingering [ones] anxious to be going" (ibid) give their place to "cherry trees full in bloom, and the half opening peach blossoms, and the grass just waving" (L 122) ripening into "peaches with coats of velvet" (L 53). Outside the fence of their garden lies the earth, changing attire every season. "The air is as sweet and still, now and then a gay leaf falling -- the crickets sing all day long -- high in a crimson tree a belated bird is singing -- a thousand little painters are ting[e]ing hill and dale" (L 57) making Dickinson marvel at the autumnal beauty

and lamenting for her brother's absence which deprives him of "sharing these pleasures with [them] -- the fruit should be more sweet, and the dying day more golden -- merrier the falling nut, if with [him they] gathered it and hid it down deep in the abyss of basket". The highly poetical, sensory language she uses not only enhances the splendor of the scene she describes but brings Austin back to Amherst as well; he is sitting beside her at the threshold of Paradise, watching the sunset, relishing the luscious fruit and listening to the crickets and the nuts swirling to the ground. Nature resounds with tweets and human beings indulge in this idyllic glimpse of a serene Eden full of color which comes in stark contrast with the city where Austin is. "No doubt the streets are muddy, and the sky some dingy hue, and I can think just how every thing bangs and rattles, and goes rumbling along thro' stones and plank and clay!" (L 80) Although she uses sensory verbs in this extract too, the overall feeling is one of commotion and turbulence. The auditory pandemonium of things, shattering and falling apart and the subsequent disintegration, in a ghost city where no human presence is felt combined with the visual gloominess is rattling. Dickinson, as epistolary writer, is supposed to extol home in contrast to foreign places; however, besides aligning with the transcendentalist criticism of industrialization, she employs a style which is far from descriptive, indicative of the beginning of her converting the standard epistolary style into her own poetic one.

The advent of winter reminds her of "some poor old lady who by dint of pains has bloomed e'en till *now*, yet in a forgetful moment a few silver hairs from out her cap come stealing, and she tucks them back so hastily and thinks nobody *sees*" (L 58). Winter stands for old age and dying as well as emptiness and stagnation and Dickinson projects her feelings of separation and loneliness on it. However, her depiction of winter as a woman tempers the severity of the traditional "Old King Frost" that could "snatch […] any of [her flowers] in his cold embrace" (L 5). On the contrary, the earth on spring is rejuvenating, reborn: "The big, brown Earth is busy, arraying herself in green -- first she puts on pantalettes, then little petticoats, then a frock of all colors, and such sweet little stockings and shoes -- no, they are not shoes, they are least little bits of gaiters, laced up with blossoms and grass. Then her *hair*, Jennie, perfectly *crowned* with flowers" (L 86). Consistent though this description of springtime as a crowned woman to the common symbol may be, the originality and vivacity of the picture of spring getting ready for her outing on earth is striking and reveals Dickinson's development as a writer and poetess around the 1850s.

Above her hangs the sky, the celestial sea where “clouds are sailing” (L 80); the stage where the sun and the moon enter and exit affecting the earthly goings on. Clad in hues borrowed from the sun, the firmament turns into a “beautiful red, bordering on a crimson, and rays of a gold pink color were constantly shooting off from a kind of sun in the center” (L 53) or it is “all dotted with gold” (L 103), indicative of its supernatural forces in power. The sky stoops and “frown[s] (L 58) sympathizing with Dickinson during her beloved’s absence but “she […] smile[s] and look[s] happy, and [is] full of sunshine” (ibid) in alignment with their return.

Gradually she eliminates both the distinction and the distance between her and nature, while uniting the concrete with the abstract. Celestial and terrestrial boundaries are distinct, but the natural elements brought to life interplay with her. Dickinson adds another innovation to the dry wording of familiar letter writing: she infuses it with poeticity and transfers her closeness to Nature to her recipients.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SECOND PHASE, DICKINSON'S DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW GENRE

The second phase in Dickinson's correspondence, starting in 1855, is signaled by several events; the most important of which are her brother's marriage to Susan, the family's moving to the house in Main Street, her mother's illness, and Benjamin Newton's death. These changes have a profound impact on Dickinson, evident in her complete abandonment of even seemingly keeping in line with the norms. This second, lengthy period, consistently characterized by her elusion from normalization and performativity, is a constantly evolving era, shaped by the changes in Dickinson's life. Even though Dickinson takes advantage of the letter as a communicative device all too often, she is "done with guises" (L 559), and she occasions its content and norms at will. Her correspondence with Josiah Holland, the coeditor and editor of *Scribner's Monthly* and one of the most popular writers of his time, is a characteristic example. In their correspondence spanning over three decades, Dickinson usually addresses his wife but sometimes both of them, or just him. She was aware of his views as a copy of his *Titcomb's Letters to Young People, Single and Married* was in her library. Taking no notice of his professional identity, which might secure the publication of her poems, Dickinson defies epistolary etiquette by paying no attention to his views regarding women in general and female writers in particular. Holland claims that while it is difficult for a man to "become a 'little child'" and submit to God's will, as he is "conscious of power [and] possesses the pride of manhood", a "godless woman is monstrous", as in obeying Jesus' orders she is "obliged to but little violence at all", submission being her natural position (Titcomb 159). Dickinson challenges this notion in every single one of the surviving letters to him. "How many barefoot shiver I trust their Father knows who saw not fit to give them shoes" she writes to him, charging God with mercilessness, while elsewhere she wonders whether "God t[ook] care of those at sea" (L 207). Holland also claims that such a woman is "a voiceless bird" (Holland 160) instead of a "consoler of the world" (ibid 161) but Dickinson has an answer to that too:

> Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love. I found a bird, this morning, down -- down -- on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears? One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom -- "My business is to sing" -- and away she rose! How do I know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened, and applauded her unnoticed hymn? (L 207)

Not only does she have a voice but utterly indifferent to approval or disapproval, she expresses it in her own way. For Dickinson, singing is equivalent to writing poems that can soothe those in grief. In a poem to her cousins when their father died, she includes a poem with the line: “Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray” (L 278).

Besides paying no heed to epistolary norms, Dickinson does not even trouble herself with giving a pretext or making an excuse for this defiance; neither does she explain it. She feels no need to apologize for her deviation, whereas even Helen Hunt Jackson, author of *Ramona*, an extremely popular contemporary novel, who was considered unconventional, writes to her: “I ought to be ashamed and should be if I had not got past being ashamed of my delinquencies in the matter of letter writing” (L 573a). Despite Hunt’s pretentious disregard for etiquette, her non-apology constitutes one; her acknowledgement of the laws of epistolary etiquette, evident in her use of the word delinquencies, which entails transgression, speaks volumes of her guilt of defying them despite her articulated boldness to violate them. Conventions are of no importance to Dickinson, they are non-existent; even her allusion to them will validate them; it is the message conveyed in her letter and the impression it creates on her recipient and their feelings that is of paramount importance for her, and she appeals to them in an extremely unique way. Rejecting even Hunt’s indirect way of apologizing, Dickinson writes to Elizabeth Holland: “What must you have thought that no one wrote? My Will did write immediately, but friends who were boarding at the Hotel claimed every moment that Duty could give till this Moment's Mail” (L 723). Dickinson expresses her sincere concern for potentially having hurt Holland’s feelings by her belated response not through some ceremonial, ready-made apologies but in a straightforward and sincere way. Making use of *apostrophe* as if Holland were just beside her, Dickinson voices her heart-felt disquiet for neglecting to reply and explains the reason why. It is not the breach of epistolary etiquette that bothers

her but her genuine anxiety or even embarrassment for what Holland might perceive as neglect.

By the 1850s, Dickinson relies much more heavily on the medium of the letter to maintain friendly or social relationships from a distance; yet, when it comes to epistolary rules, by 1855, Dickinson has already invented several ways of "manipulat[ing] and divert[ing] the strategies of letter writing to her advantage and has "constituted a second layer interwoven into the first" making it function on another register (De Certeau 30). Although she makes use of correspondence, governed by strategies, she adjusts it to her ends; she "metaphorize[s] the dominant order", as De Certeau puts it, and she remains "other" by "diverting it without leaving it" (ibid 32). She establishes her own epistolary pattern, and is at large to use "rhetorical alterations (metaphorical drifts, elliptical condensations, metonymic miniaturizations etc)", that is, tactics, to elude the vigilance of grammar over "the propriety of terms" (ibid 39) imposed by the strategies. In the following chapter, I will show how Dickinson creates a new genre; that of poetic epistolarity, by stripping the letter both of its conventional form and function and by infusing it with her epiphanies. I will also show the ways she transforms the letter, the "written conversation [that] admits every style but poetic" (*The Secretary* 16), into what Higginson called "singular poetic correspond[ence]" (L 342a), the ways she invests the letter whose "chief charm [is] individuality" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* ix) with universality as well as the ways she batters down the spatiotemporal boundaries inherent within the notion of the letter, rendering it thus diachronic.

3.1. Dickinson and situational conventions

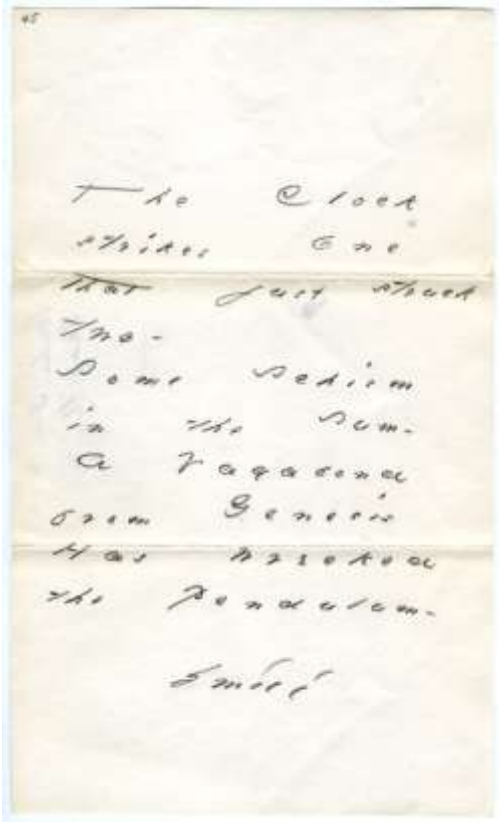
At the age of 25, when the second phase commences, Dickinson is still single while most of her friends have got married and moved away; even Austin and Susan, with whom she used to correspond during the first phase, are engrossed in their domestic cares after their engagement in 1853 and their marriage in 1856. Their "side" (L 271) does not have much in common with Dickinson's own quests and desires, who already declared to Austin her poetic vocation in 1853. Gradually as well as quite normally, her correspondents alter radically. Besides corresponding with most of her

relatives, friends and neighbors, Dickinson starts corresponding with the Hollands; Samuel Bowles, the publisher and editor of *The Springfield Republican*; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an author, abolitionist and editor of the *Monthly Atlantic*, Helen Jackson Hunt, Thomas Niles, publisher for Roberts Brothers publishing houses, Otis Lord, Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, the Clark Brothers, Charles Wadsworth's close friends. Since letter writing involves communicating with individuals whose interests are of a corresponding nature, Dickinson's careful selection of recipients is nothing extraordinary. However, this array of eminent figures and/or kindred spirits which complement her familial circle is indeed extraordinary in scope.

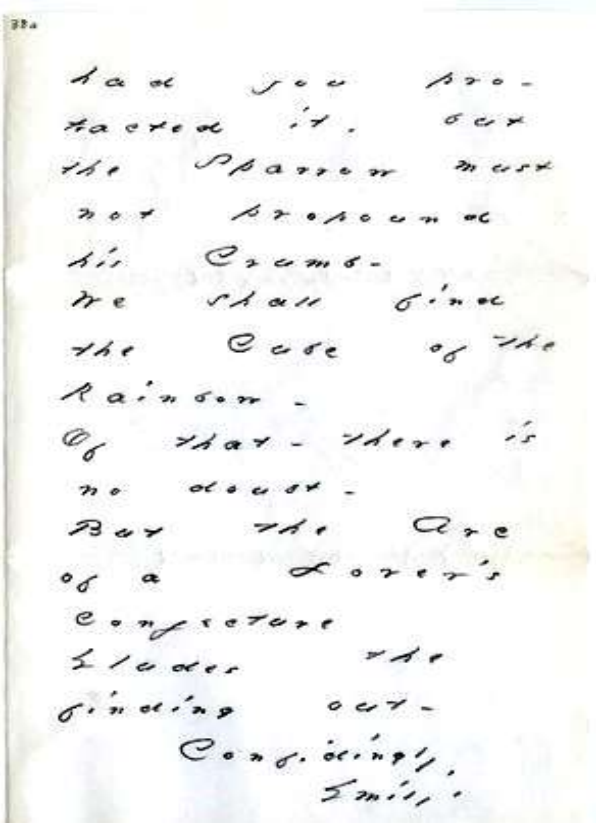
What is even more extraordinary, however, is that they do not exactly serve as the second, interactive pole in the epistolary procedure; rather, they function as Dickinson's audience, each in their appropriate field, so that she can communicate not news bound to temporality, which is normally the purpose of the letter, but her ponderings on nontemporal truths. The letter becomes a form of fiction; Dickinson creates not only the character of the author but she also anticipates a fictional idealized recipient and creates an artificial, though fact-based, *chronotope*, as Bakhtin claims in his *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics*. Her correspondents constitute her readership, she has selected them to entrust them with, besides her letters, her poems, unaltered and uncensored by conservative editors who are unable to appreciate them. Even Higginson, who edited the first edition of her Poems after her death, presses her to conform to the contemporary notions about the qualities of a good poem as he believes that "Every editor is therefore compelled to 'insist that his contributors' should make themselves agreeable, whatever else they may do" (Higginson 78). Dickinson, however, does not wish to be pleasing and defies his attempt to normalize her. She writes to him that "While my thought is undressed -- I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown -- they look alike, and numb" (L 261). Following the contemporary poetic conventions entail depriving Dickinson of her uniqueness; the vitality of her work outgrows any acceptable formal Gown and any attempt to normalize it anesthetizes it, depriving it of force or liveliness. Dickinson voices her relief in a letter to Otis Lord: "speaking to you as I feel, Dear, without that Dress of Spirit must be worn for most, Courage is quite changed" (L 790).

Reading parts of letters was a quite common practice; even Dickinson herself was in the habit of it. “John Emerson is in the sitting room with Emilie reading parts of Eliza Coleman’s letters”, wrote Lavinia to Austin (Leyda 1:273). Dickinson is fully aware that her letters are read among friends; the letter becomes the terrain where she can be the poet and publisher of herself without the need of an editor. The poetical character of the letter along with the inclusion of poems in it is their deliberate dissemination to a carefully selected readership. Besides sending only poems with her name at the end of them (see picture 11), she would frequently incorporate poems in her letters, at times indistinguishable from letters as far as layout is concerned (picture 12). She often embellishes the body of the letter, as in a letter to Elizabeth Holland (picture 13).

A Poem-Letter
(Picture 11)



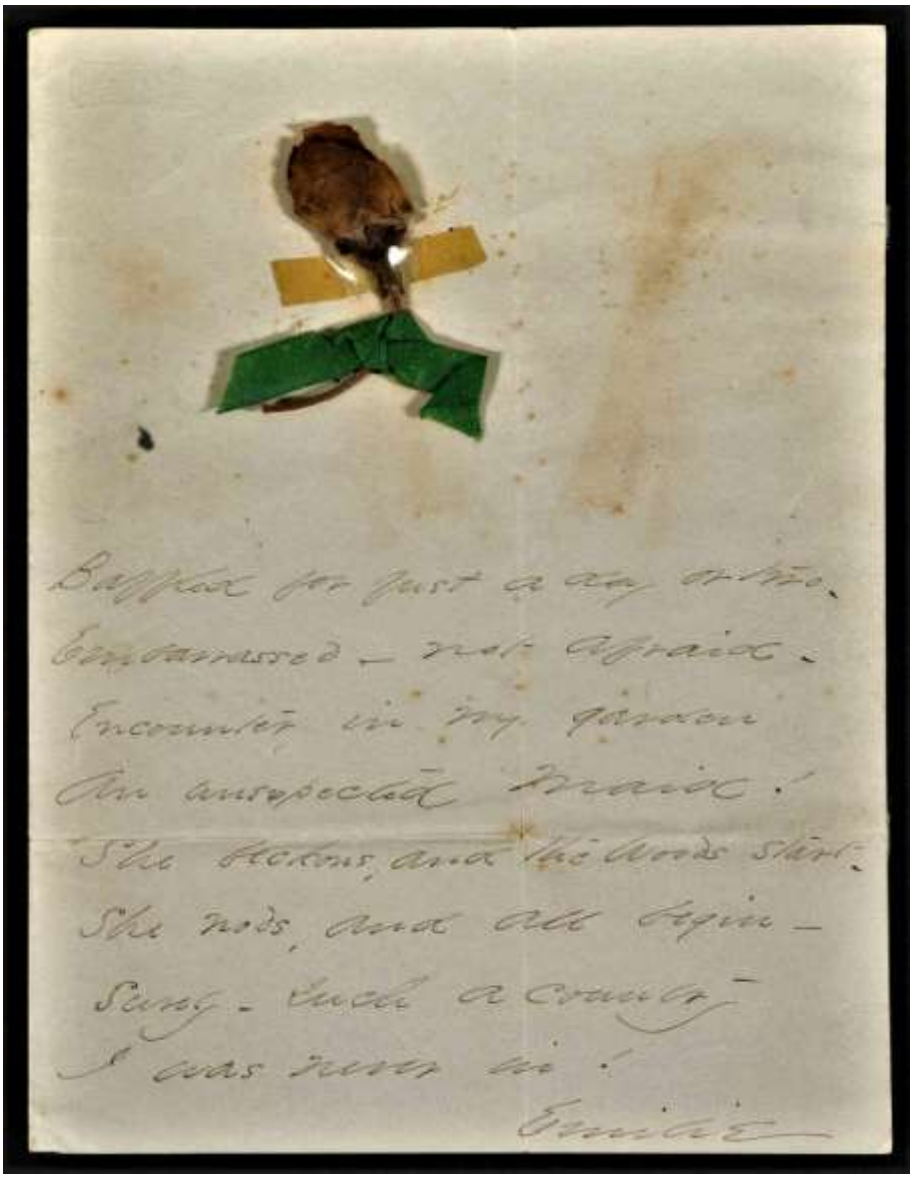
Poem embedded in the letter,
indistinguishable from the prose (picture 12)



Picture 11: Emily Dickinson letter to Sarah Tuckerman, 1880 January, in Box 1, Folder 38, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:12950>.

Picture 12: Emily Dickinson letter to Sarah Tuckerman, 1880 January, in Box 1, Folder 38, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:12950>.

An embellished poem-letter (picture 13)



Picture 13: Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. https://library.harvard.edu/collections/emily-dickinson-collection Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886. Baffled for just a day or two [first line] A.MS.s.; [Amherst, 1860] 1s. (3p.) Houghton Library, Cambridge, Mass. Houghton Library - p. 1, J 110, Fr 66).

Dickinson holds tight to the means of letter writing to reach out to a wide circle of friends and relatives on a wide range of social occasions as she gradually stops going out. Samuel Bowles comments on Dickinson's relationship with the world: "I have been in a savage turbulent stage for some time – indulging in a sort of […] disgust at everything and everybody – I guess a good deal as Emily feels" (Leyda 2:78). Dickinson's niece, Martha Bianchi remarks that Dickinson was considered an "eccentric" (Bianchi, 1932, ix), and she really was in the strict meaning of the term, as she deviated from the circular path that enclosed the rest, she was located outside its center. According to Austin, as early as in her twenties, and during her trip to Washington, Dickinson "became confirmed in her opinion of the hollowness and awfulness of the world" (Leyda 1:213). She made the choice to be herself and separated herself from the nameless mass that dictates which possibilities are eligible. She writes to Kate Scott: "All we are strangers -- dear -- The world is not acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted with her! -- Do you hesitate? and Soldiers oft -- some of us victors, but those I do not see tonight owing to the smoke. -- We are hungry, and thirsty, sometimes -- We are barefoot -- and cold -- Will you still come? Then bright I record you!" (L 203) Dickinson's boldness to be herself "could only be explained as a symptom of mental disturbance" (Leyda 1:xxvii) by the villagers. Judging normality by the contemporary socio-cultural standards, Dickinson led an abnormal life, and she was the subject of speculation and gossip both during her life and after her death. "It puzzled women who wore sensible stuff dresses why she wore white" (ibid) notes her niece in a book written half a century later during which little had changed regarding sensibility and normality as Bianchi perceives it. Bowles, however, perceives her distancing as the creation of a personal heaven and remarks: "To the Queen Recluse my especial sympathy that she has 'overcome the world' – Is it really true that they ring 'Old Hundred & Alleluia' perpetually in Heaven – ask her" (Leyda 2:76). It seems that Dickinson was reluctant to go with any type of conventionalities and felt the need to differentiate from them at every level including epistolarity.

Her withdrawal and isolation have been amply discussed and various explanations have been given for her stance, which seems unnatural by any century's standards. Her lifestyle did not make sense even to literary people; Helen Hunt Jackson writes to her after she has visited her: "[I feel] as if I ha[d been] very imperti[nent that] day [in] speaking to you [as] I did, accusing you of living away

from the sunlight and [telling] you that you [looke]d ill, which is a [mor]tal price of ill[ness] at all times, but re[al]ly you look[ed] so [wh]ite and [mo]th-like[!] Your [hand] felt [l]ike such a wisp in mine that you frigh[tened] me. I felt [li]ke a [gr]eat ox [tal]king to a wh[ite] moth, and beg[ging] it to come and [eat] grass with me [to] see if it could not turn itself into beef! How stupid" (L 476a). Higginson is not an exception to the rule, though Dickinson may have decided to write to him because he seems to realize the poet's need to isolate so as to focus on her creations undistracted. In the article that triggered Dickinson's first letter to him, he mentions that Balzac "shut himself up till the book was written, perhaps two months, absolutely excluding everybody but his publisher" (Higginson 76), however, he is unable to really gain an understanding of her. At times, he seems to get to grips with her way of life and writes to her:

> I think if I could once see you & know that you are real, I might fare better. It brought you nearer e[ven] to know that you had an actual [?] uncle, though I can hardly fancy [any?] two beings less alike than yo[u] [&?] him. It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live s[o alo]ne, with thoughts of such a [quali]ty coming up in you & even the companionship of your dog withdrawn. Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you -- so perhaps the place does not make much difference. (L 330a)

After his first visit to Amherst, he writes to his wife that his visit "equaled [his] expectations", noting that Dickinson said "many things which [his wife] would have thought foolish & [he] wise -- & some things [she] wd. hv. liked" (L 342a), but she wonders: "Oh why do the insane so cling to you?" referring to Dickinson (Johnson & Ward 519). Higginson himself writes to his sister that he has "one imaginary letter from my partially cracked poetess at Amherst, who writes to me and signs 'Your Scholar'" (ibid 570). However, if Higginson sees insanity, it might be that he interprets it otherwise: in one of his articles, entitled *The Eccentricities of Reformers*, he claims that "this tendency of every reform to surround itself with a fringe of the unreasonable and half-cracked is really to its credit and furnishes one of its best disciplines" (Leyda 2:213). Obviously, Higginson can neither fully comprehend nor demonstrate Dickinson's uniqueness to his relatives and

acquaintances; he may even fear of being criticized for associating with a person that does not fit the contemporary standards of accepted behavior. Yet MacGregor Jenkins, one of the children whom Dickinson was fond of, notes that her intuitive attachment to children and her "me[eting] them on their ground with a frank equality of community" (62) disproves what contemporarily "the world fancies a disconsolate wrath of a woman living a life of solitary and morbid sorrow" (ibid 63).

Although the terms recluse and withdrawn theoretically might indicate spatial gap and lack of contact, in the case of Dickinson they are practically false. Dickinson's volume of surviving letters and the estimated total of her correspondence are the undisputable proof that she is immersed in society and its goings-on. She is extremely active and deeply engaged in any social event or any occasion, partaking in joy and sympathizing in grief. Jenkins notes that Dickinson "possessed and used spiritual tentacles that searched out and knew the secrets and needs of the hearts about her" (57). She has not opted to shut *in* her house cutting *off* all ties; she has opted to shut *out* "Men and Women" -- [who] talk of Hallowed things, aloud -- and embarrass my Dog -- He and I dont object to them, if they'll exist their side" (L 271). However, she always stands *by* to cross *over* to assist them in her way, not in her physical person but "apparitionally" (L 967), by proxy, her letters, which substitute her in every minor or major occurrence in her correspondents' lives and act on her behalf.

Dickinson's reliance on the instrumentality of the letter as a conventional means of communication is counteracted by the unconventionality of its form. Utmost nonconformity characterizes the sum of her notes or letters sent on conventional cases, which becomes evident if one compares letters written according to epistolary etiquette and Dickinson's divergent letters. She does follow the prescribed norms as regards the situational conventions and their conventional invention, since she always sends letters when the occasion calls for them, and takes her recipients' interests into account. However, she violates rules regarding epistolary etiquette regarding expression; she does not follow any model whatsoever. For example, on the occasions she commences or ends her letters expressing her thanks or apologies, she does it in an absolutely unique way. This becomes evident in the following letters which both she and Lavinia sent to Elizabeth Sarah Tuckerman, a neighbor, in the very same envelope. "Do 'Men gather Grapes of Thorns?' No -- but they do of Roses -- and even the classic Fox hushed his innuendo, as we unclasped the little Box -- Sherbets untold, and Recollection more sparkling than Sherbets! How wondrous is a Friend, the gift of

neither Heaven nor Earth, yet coveted of both! If the 'Archangels veil their faces,' is not the sacred diffidence on this sweet behalf? Emily" (L 883). And this is Lavinia's: "Beloved friend Accept gratitude from one who loves you -- I saw you pass with your company just at evening yesterday and almost ran out to catch you both -- tell Mr. T. -- what a narrow escape he had! The chance may come when he'll not be so fortunate! I long to see you -- I hope this bad weather will not harm you. I shall look for you as soon as the sun shines -- Love for you both -- Vinnie" (Leyda 2:416-7). The only similarity the sisters' letters share is the use of dashes. Dickinson, as usual, omits the salutations and the complimentary closing. Although both express gratitude and fondness, Lavinia's cliché diction renders her letter extremely naive compared to Dickinson's; Vinnie's letter appears terribly off-hand and shallow despite her correctness regarding epistolary conventions. Her introduction is consistent with the norms, yet so is Dickinson's except for the elaborate diction. By citing a biblical verse (Matthew 7:16) regarding the recognition of true prophets by their acts, Dickinson assures Sara Tuckerman that her exquisite gift verifies the saying, as it does justice to the sender and is well worth their friendship. Lavinia's letter is temporally bounded, as is evident from the time deictic words 'yesterday' and 'will', in contrast to Dickinson's letter which, although triggered by a particular occasion, is extended into time becoming universal through her elevation of a simple token of affection into the merits of true friendship. What is more, Lavinia's longing for the couple extends to the next day; Dickinson's, to eternity.

3.1.2. Thank-you notes

Sent as a response to a courtesy granted, letters of thanks had to be simple and "dictated by heart" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 11). The obligation felt should neither be exaggerated nor undervalued. Dickinson's sending notes along with flowers or delicacies or sending thank-you notes after having received similar tokens is by the book. Not a single note, though, is written by the book as she considers thank you "those wasted words" (L 823). Dickinson embellishes the trivial note sent along with some gift with a vivid imagery: "We are snatching our jewels from the frost, and ask you to help us wear them, as also the trinkets more rotund, which serve a baser need" (L 578), transforming even common everyday objects such as flowers and

apples into rare and priceless tokens. A conventional thank-you letter would read something like: “Accept my sincere thank for the beautiful book” (Westlake 68). Dickinson’s thank-you letter to Lucretia Bullard, one of her aunts and wife of Asa Bullard, the editor of several periodicals such as *The Sabbath School* (Leyda 1: xxxiii), commences with a poem and it is only nearly at the end of it that she expresses her appreciation, as if the main reason for writing the letter is for the sake of circulating or publishing one of her poems: “The lovely flowers embarrass me,/They make me regret I am not a Bee -/Was it my blame or Nature's? Thank you, dear Aunt, for the thoughtfulness, I shall slowly forget” (L 1047).

Another example of Dickinson’s deviations becomes evident when her thank-notes are compared to one of Higginson’s letters to her: “My wife wishes to thank you very much for your note and sweet rosebuds” (L 476b). He goes on to describe their new house and give her some of his advice that Dickinson never takes seriously. On a similar occasion, she sends a note to Ellen Mather which consists of just one sentence: “Permit me to duplicate the presumption --” (L 697). A simple “thank you for your gift and I send you something in return” would be sufficient for everybody but Dickinson. Mather must have sent her some gift during her illness in April 1881, a gesture which could have been considered a presumption, given that she had just got married to Professor Mather and was not acquainted with Dickinson. In just six words, Dickinson acknowledges the receipt of the gift, gracefully welcomes the one-sided initiation of the epistolary chain, and adds a new link by sending her something, as the duplication implies.

Sending a thank-you letter for a birthday present received was good manners and the following is a model letter:

> My dear brother, Your beautiful birthday gift almost reconciles me to the fact that I am today a year older than I was last May. How did you know what I wanted? Surely some good angel must have whispered the secret to you. However, that may be, you exactly suited my taste and I thank you with my whole heart. Your loving sister. (Westlake 68)

Mabel Loomis Todd sent a panel of Indian pipes she had painted to Dickinson and, although it was not a birthday present, Dickinson’s thank-you letter bears some resemblance to the above:

> That without suspecting it you should send me the preferred flower of life, seems almost supernatural, and the sweet glee that I felt at meeting it, I could confide to none. I still cherish the clutch with which I bore it from the ground when a wondering Child, an unearthly booty, and maturity only enhances mystery, never decreases it. To duplicate the Vision is almost more amazing, for God's unique capacity is too surprising to surprise. I know not how to thank you. We do not thank the Rainbow, although it's Trophy is a snare. (L 769)

The basic ideas of the model letter are elaborated by Dickinson and the simplistic invocation of angels who informed the girl's brother of her preferences is taken a step further as well. Dickinson recalls memories triggered by the painting which tie her childhood with her maturity, the real flowers of her youth with Todd's "duplicate", the gift with the thank-you letter, the sender with the receiver; each couple laid in different spatiotemporal layers yet inextricably united into "an unearthly booty".

Despite being sick in the autumn of 1880, Dickinson keeps up with her correspondence. Not only does she thank several friends and neighbors for their concern, but she does it in her inimitable way. "Is not the sweet resentment of friends that we are not strong, more inspiriting even than the strength itself?" (L 672) Saying thank you for your interest, I am growing better, or something of this sort would be enough. Dickinson, however, transforms the thank-you note into a literary work; it becomes a rhetorical question, characterized by literary devices: *alliteration* of 's' and 't', *polyptoton* in repeating 'strong' and 'strength' as well as expanding a simple social note to a gesture that aids her convalescence.

Even a thank-you note for a new recipe for graham bread offers Dickinson a chance to blend various literary ingredients and present an extraordinary fusion:

> Thank you, dear, for the quickness which is the blossom of request, and for the definiteness -- for a new rule is a chance. The bread resulted charmingly, and such pretty little proportions, quaint as a druggist's formula -- 'I do remember an apothecary.' Mother and Vinnie think it the nicest they have ever known, and Maggie so extols it. (L 735)

Dickinson expresses her thanks by means of an aphorism about prompt replies. She extends the *antonomasia* of recipe as a rule in likening it to a formula whose ingredients and proportions must be accurate for "charming results". Graham bread, Sylvester Graham's invention, is made of whole wheat, coarsely ground without any yeast but with the use of molasses. Graham, an advocate of moral reform and temperance, proposes daily exercise, the consumption of fruits and vegetables, cold showers, and baths. Dickinson's reference to the making of this special bread is oddly complemented by an allusion to Romeo recalling an apothecary from whom he intends to buy poison and commit suicide. That apothecary has an array of odd, miscellaneous bits and pieces in his shop, reminiscent of the various elements of Graham's recipe for preventing impure thoughts and leading a healthy life according to the teachings of the Bible. Dickinson's linking his dietary plan to poison is indicative of her dismissal of his puritan model of life, at the same moment she piously thanks her friend for sharing the goods.

3.1.3. Birthday wishes and congratulatory notes

Sending birthday wishes was another branch of the social letters which, as one of the model letters suggested, would read: "Dear Nettie Remembering that your birthday is at hand, I send you this little painting as a token of my love, together with wishes for many happy returns of this day. Your friend" (Cooke 459). Dickinson does send birthday cards, but their contents are unusual, to say the least. On Susan's fiftieth birthday she sends the following letter-poem: "Birthday of but a single pang/ That there are less to come -/ Afflictive is the Adjective/ But affluent the doom" (L 679). The reminder of aging, life's passage and ultimately death is not exactly the kind of a wish one expects for their birthday. Unsettling though it might sound, it could function as a *carpe diem* urge, a strong push to the realization that "the time to live is frugal -- and good as is a better earth, it will not quite be this" (L 498).

Sending congratulatory notes on weddings was imperative but, although it was common to congratulate men and their relatives on the wedding, it was highly inappropriate to do so when writing to the newly wed wife. The norm was to "offer all manner of good wishes for future happiness but be sure not to congratulate" (Cooke 458). A typical letter of this kind is as follows: "Dear Jack. And so they were married

and ‘lived happy ever after’ of course. At least that is what you and Mrs. Julia anticipate of this present time and is what I knowing you both do confidently predict. Accept my heartfelt congratulations, and believe me Your true friend” (ibid 457). As has already been stated, Dickinson is not a fan of marriage as she seems to endorse the opinion published in *The Springfield Republican* in 1862, according to which marriage impedes or even stifles creativity, evident in George Elliot’s “glory [which] has departed. Happy marriage and rest from doubt and scandal take the passion out of women” (Leyda 2:47). Consequently, her congratulatory letters give anything but congratulations; rather they either implicitly or even explicitly lament the loss of sovereignty of females and their subjugation to unworthy males.

On the engagement of Alice Mather to the Reverend Williston Walker, Dickinson sends the following note: “May it have occurred to my sweet neighbor that the words ‘found peace in believing’ had other than a theological import? With happy congratulations” (L 1032). Besides congratulating Alice, disregarding the exegetic norms which dictate otherwise, Dickinson equates marriage to faith in God; in order to be “fill[ed] with all joy and peace” one has to yield to God’s will “in believing” (Romans 15:3). In a similar vein, since women’s “position is one of subjection […] laying herself the duties of her sex” (Westlake 130), Alice should succumb to her husband if she wants a harmonious married life. On the marriage of her cousin, Eugenia Hall, Dickinson sends the following: “Will the sweet Cousin, who is about to make the Etruscan Experiment, accept a smile which will last a Life, if ripened in the Sun?” (L 1021) Her reference to the Etruscans is quite noteworthy since Etruscan women differed from their Greek or Roman contemporaries. Their public and social engagement was extraordinary, and they were able to inherit property and retain their surname. Dickinson probably suggests that Hall should claim Etruscan rights, yet her view of marriage as an experiment, a trial-and-error procedure, renders the outcome ambivalent or even foresees its failure. Hence the conditional “if ripened in the Sun”, perhaps exhorting the new bride not to spend all her time indoors, entombed in domesticity.

Dickinson’s letters abound in references to her recipients’ spouses in “curiously direct phrase[s]”, as Helen Hunt remarks (L 601a). Referring to William Jackson, Helen Hunt’s second husband, she initially calls him “the man [Hunt] live[s] with” (ibid), as if his identity is of no consequence; he is just a man sharing the same house with her, stripping him of the status and weight a church mystery binding the

two would give him. Later, after Hunt's death during her search for his address to send her condolences, Dickinson refers to him as "the friend of my friend" (L 1008). The only time she refers to his relationship to Hunt but without naming him once again is in a letter to Higginson "Mrs. Jackson […] brought her husband to me" (L 574). Despite the great impression he has made on her, as Higginson recalls, the diction and the structure of the sentence are odd, as if William Jackson has been driven to meet Dickinson on a leash. Elizabeth Holland's son-in-law is the "Stranger", "the Consort" that visits the Homestead with his wife Kate (L 936); the very title accentuates the superiority of his wife as a queen and his inferiority as the royal spouse. Alternatively, he is the "Gentleman with the long Name" which Dickinson misspells, gets corrected and offers a rather childish and quite unconvincing excuse for apology: "Orthography always baffled me, and to N's I had an especial aversion, as they always seemed unfinished M's. Will dear Mrs. 'Van Wagenen' excuse me for taking her portentous name in vain?" (L 806) Actually, she does not apologize at all, on the contrary she calls Kate's husband unpleasantly deficient in some way and addresses Kate modifying the biblical verse as if she were the God whom Dickinson begs for forgiveness. Husbands are shadows behind Dickinson's correspondents and their only importance is their relations with the people Dickinson loves, evident in her remark about Van Wagenen "'Mr. Bridegroom' as Gilbert calls those sacred ones" (L 801). Annie Holland's husband must be more tolerable to Dickinson, as she refers to him either as "Annie's friend" or as "a lovely face to sit by in Life's Mysterious Boat" (L 802), judging by a picture Elizabeth Holland sent her, acknowledging some sort of companionship between the couple. However, her letter to Holland for Annie's engagement is quite uncharacteristic of a congratulatory letter:

> Thank you for apprizing us of the sweet Disaster in your family, which I trust you will meet as you meet all, with sunny heroism -- and present our beatific congratulations to Annie. -- To flee from the "Family Tree" is an innovation, but Birds are predatory -- I am glad that you feel so sweetly toward the invading powers -- If the "Ark of the Lord" must be "taken," one has a choice in the Foe. (L 723)

Despite her liking or rather not disliking him, his engagement to Annie is not a happy occasion to be celebrated evident in the *oxymoron* of the sweet disaster; rather

it is an invasion of Foes that profane what is most holy; the integrity of the family tree is compromised, and Holland has to muster all her strength and cope with it stoically. For Dickinson, a spouse is always a stranger who intrudes in the intimate family circle. She keeps calling Higginson's second wife, with whom she has never corresponded, a Stranger in contrast with his first, whom she calls "your friend" in most of her letters. Dickinson's fondness for Samuel Bowles' son is extended to his wife whom she calls his "Loved Confederate" (L 1008) or "Woman of [his] Heart" (L 1012), attributing to their relationship deep affection besides companionship.

3.1.4. Letters of sympathy

Sympathizing with the afflicted was a social duty and the person in distress ought to thank all those that stood by them. Helen Hunt Jackson acknowledges Dickinson's concern for her broken leg by writing to her "Thanks for your note of sympathy" and describing her current situation (L 976a), a gesture which, although consistent with the epistolary norms, sounds rather reserved. About a month before her death, Dickinson writes to C. Clark: "Thank you, Dear friend - I am better. The velocity of the ill, however, is like that of the snail" (L 1040). The immediacy of her response resembles a live conversation. It comes as an answer to Clark's question: "How are you doing? Are you OK?" connecting them and resonating with gratitude for his concern. Alliteration of "l" and internal rhyme in "snail-ill" along with one of her aphorisms transform this short note into a poem, despite the gravity of her situation.

3.1.5. Dickinson's condolence letters

Letters of condolence were sent in the event of a loss, grief or mourning only by relatives, near or intimate friends. They had to be sent shortly after the tragic event and they had to be brief but sincere. They were meant to comfort, console and sympathize with the afflicted although a reply was not to be expected soon. In fact, they might even "remain unnoticed" (Westlake 105) although the recipient needed to know that they were "not utterly alone" (Thorold 22) in their bereavement. Regarding invention, writing a letter of condolence was considered an easy task, since the

subject was specific, and the letter had to be restricted to offering sympathy. It had to be neither too short, indicating that the recipient was unworthy of the time spent on writing, neither too long as it could be tiresome. The polite motives of the sender could forgive any clumsiness and prevent the letter from being "resented as an intrusion" (Thorold 22). The construction of the letter allowed any form although the writer had to follow certain steps, offering encouragement at first, then inquiring about the emotions of the mourners and finally referring to the loss cautiously, by eulogizing the deceased and consoling the bereaved. "Maddening iteration" (Cooke 456) on the loss and its ensuing grief as well as blaming the mourners explicitly or implicitly was strongly discouraged since it would inflict more pain. Any appeal to reason to lessen the grievance was considered not only inappropriate but futile as well. So was the resort to philosophy or common sense as it "could do little, philosophy can do nothing" (Thorold 25). The Bible was the only safe way of consoling the mourners. Mentioning the promise of Resurrection could aid the mourners come to terms with death offering them the hope of meeting their lost ones "at a better world" (Chesterfield 49) and most of the letter writing manuals placed special emphasis on the resignation with which the sufferers should accept the loss. An appropriate letter of this kind would be the following:

> Sister Darling – I cannot write what is in my heart for you to-day; it is too full – filled with a double sorrow, for you and for myself. Tears blind me; my pen trembles in my hand. Oh! To be near you! to clasp you in my arms! To draw your head to my bosom and weep with you! Darling, God comfort you, I cannot! S." (Westlake 107)

After the death of Frank Gilbert, one of Susan's brother, Dickinson drafts the following letter to be sent to Thomas Gilbert, another of Susan's brothers: "There is little to say, dear Mr Gilbert, when the Heart is bruised. How hallowedly Macbeth said, 'that sort must heal itself,' yet a grieved whisper from a friend might instruct it how" (L 986). Instead of reminding him of the better world awaiting the believers and addressing God's power to heal, as was the norms, Dickinson resorts to Shakespeare, whose authority to comfort she considers sacred, pushing aside all religious convictions, like the villain she cites.

Although the poles of epistolary communication are distant, Dickinson uses "the letter's power to connect" (Altman 22) in letters of condolences, which aim at "making sorrow less" (L 859) and turns the letter into a story of her own loss, a fiction, endowed with poetic qualities. She writes to her aunt: "I come softly and bring no noisy words […] I will only kiss you and go far away" (L 338). Her letters do not exactly offer sympathy for an ordeal alien to her out of duty or pity; she does not offer consolation as an onlooker. She claims that "for the comprehension of Suffering One must one's Self have Suffered" (L 416) and she empathizes with them by sharing the tale her own grief with them, making them feel that there is somebody somewhere who has undergone the same anguish, somebody who has the authority to assure them that their beloved will be in Paradise and their sorrow will gradually wear off. "I had a father once" she writes to Sabra Snell (L 474). This single phrase, without any formalities of salutation whatsoever, is Dickinson's way of empathizing with the bereaved from the position of one who has already experienced the loss and can fathom its impact. It is also, however, the usual way to begin a story, "once (upon a time)", suggesting that instead of the platitudes of formal consolation, she means to bring a *paramythia*, the Greek word for both "consolation" and "fairytales."

Dickinson's cartography of death is dreadful, designed "plank [by] plank" (P 136) by both the certainty of death and the uncertainty of afterlife. When it comes to comforting the bereaved, however, she absconds from the darkness of her Universe and sneaks into that fairytale parallel Universe where, despite the grief, there are "no fading leaves, no dying friends" (L 62) but "that brighter sunshine above -- beyond -- away --" (L 98). Leaving aside her distrust for afterlife and her deep concerns about the mode of existence of the dead, she assures her aunt Kate Sweetser, after her son's death at the age of thirty-five: "I know we shall certainly see what we loved the most" (L 338). She does so not once but three times in a single sentence. She declares faith that they will reunite with their beloved by using the words "knows," "shall," and "certainly." On another occasion, when one of Judge Lord's nieces drowned in Walden Pond, Dickinson sends a letter of condolence to Abbie Farley, Lord's niece: "What a reception for you! Did she wait for your approbation? Her deferring to die until you came seemed to me so confiding -- as if nothing should be presumed. It can probably never be real to you" (L 1006). Undoubtedly, Dickinson means to comfort Farley by saying that at least she managed to say goodbye to her cousin before she died, but the beginning of the letter is odd for a condolence letter, to say the least. She

continues "'An envious Silver broke' was a passage your Uncle peculiarly loved in the drowning Ophelia. Was it a premonition? To him to whom Events and Omens are at last the same?" Dickinson likens the circumstances of the girl's death to those of Ophelia's, bringing her together with Judge Lord by means of his favorite extract. Lord had died a year earlier, and Dickinson, who is unconvinced about afterlife, implies that he had the chance to experience what the living could only presume.

Dickinson does another about-face regarding her topography of death in the letters of condolences in which she deconstructs her deconstructed metaphysical concepts. For her, Heaven is the Hades, her father is imprisoned in a "soft prison" behind "sullen bars" (L 432), "invented by the King of Down" (L 432), reminiscent of what the Bible describes as "down to the bars of the pit" (Job 17:16). This apocalyptic notion, however, runs contrary to the redemptive allusions in her letters of condolences. Her cousin Henry Sweetser had been ill for a long time before he died, and Dickinson refers to him as a prisoner, echoing the Bible "The LORD looseth the prisoners" (Psalms 146:7) and Wadsworth who claims that while Man is alive, he is "a prisoner waiting the order for execution" (Wadsworth 5). She also brings hope by adding that Henry is set free by his Redeemer who paid the ransom for his Liberty, echoing Deuteronomy: "But God will ransom my soul from the Power of Sheol for he will receive me" ((*English Standard Version*, Psalms 49:15), thus positioning Henry in Eden. Her Heaven might be unchartered, even non-existent, but when it comes to consoling, it is next door. She writes Elizabeth Holland that her dead husband is in "no solitude but [in] neighborhood and [with] friends" (L 732).

According to epistolary etiquette, all high-flown words or pleasantries were deemed inappropriate since it was as if the writer "smil[ed] at a funeral to display a beautiful set of teeth" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 9). Disregarding them altogether, Dickinson either includes one of her poems in the letter or makes her entire letter into a poem. Her aim is to ease the "bleeding beginning every mourner knows" (L 670) and does what she knows best: she sings. Her diction in the letters of condolences is far from cliché, it is elaborate, rich in connotations and allusions. "Vinnie says your martyrs were fond of flowers. Would these profane their vase?" (L 404) she writes to Eliza Read whose two boys were drowned. In a single word, *martyrs,* she alludes to three different notions. Firstly, she equates the boys to Christian martyrs who die a terrible death for believing in Christ, conquer death and meet their savior as a reward. Secondly, martyr means witness in Greek and Christ

said to the Apostles: “But ye shall receive power […] and ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8). The children, therefore, have been blessed by God and can assist others to be saved. In addition, the Apostles went two by two so that the truth of their testimony was corroborated. Read lost both her boys and Dickinson attempts to ease her grief by attempting to prove that it was part of God’s plan. The use of the verb “profane” accentuates their ascension and sanctification.

One of the most idiosyncratic elements of Dickinson’s letters of condolences is their resemblance to *epitaphios logos*, the classical funeral oration. Carried out at the gravesite, these epideictic orations thrived in ancient Athens and aimed at eulogizing the dead of the war and exhorting their relatives to copy their virtues. Death was deemed the confirmation of *areté*, virtue, and dying at a young age, at the height of one’s strength and beauty, was considered a beautiful death. The event of death as such was obscured; the ephemeral nature of body was opposed to the lasting glory of the dead. The orator, who was an eminent and well-respected citizen, reified “the *έργα* [grand and honorable deeds] of the warrior with special emphasis […] on vocabulary of sight and signification” (Derderian 173) and did not aim at paying his condolences to the relatives of the dead or feeling pity for their situation, but at comforting them by extolling the dead’s bravery and lasting glory. Orations are elaborate discourses, in which the orator displays their eloquence and their mastery in the structure of arguments and their power of persuasion. As such, Dickinson’s compilation of *epitaphios* contributes to the poetic element of her letters since they are characterized by elevated style.

Dickinson compiles such eulogies to honor the deceased whom she holds in high esteem, Samuel Bowles, Dr Holland, her nephew Gilbert Dickinson, or to comfort the bereaved she respects, like Fanny Boltwood or Thomas Higginson. It is interesting that the *epitaphios* in memory of Bowles is not addressed to his wife, Mary, but to his son and to Susan Dickinson. She does send a deeply moving and highly compassionate letter of condolence to Mary Bowles but not an oration which is indicative of Dickinson’s careful differentiation in terms of intimacy and esteem.

Dickinson sends a condolence letter to Fanny Boltwood after her 34-old-year son has died which, unless regarded as a funeral oration, seems inappropriate since she congratulates his mother: “To thank my dear Mrs. Boltwood would be impossible. That is a paltry debt -- we are able to pay. It is sweet to be under obligation to my School Mate's Mother. I thought that the flowers might please him, though he made

like Birds, the exchange of Latitudes. It is proud to believe that his Privilege so far surpasses Ours. Let me congratulate his Mother" (L 363). At the beginning of the letter, one thinks that Dickinson thanks Boltwood for some favor she conferred or for some token she sent. At the end one infers that the unnamed male mentioned in the letter has achieved a coveted goal and the letter congratulates his mother for his feat. Extracted from context, that is, the knowledge that Boltwood's son is dead, this letter aims at praising the dead and comforting his mother by alluding to the better world and mentioning that he had just migrated to another latitude, waiting for her.

The *epitaphios* sent to Higginson (L 519) in the event of his wife's death consists of an amalgam of biblical and mythological allusions. A single word triggers multiple layers of meaning and connotations. "She reminded me of Thermopylae" Dickinson writes about the deceased. Thermopylae, the Hot Gates, is a narrow coastal passage in central Greece, where a handful of resolute Spartan warriors led by King Leonidas confronted the outnumbering Persian army and fell after three days of violent fighting. Although it was a defeat, it stands universally for courage and self-sacrifice. In Christian terms, death is considered the last enemy to be fought (1 Corinthians, 15:26), and Dickinson implies that Higginson's wife fought this losing battle bravely: "Did she suffer -- except to leave you? That was perhaps the sum of Death" she continues. After fighting for three days, Higginson's wife entered the gates of Heaven which are as narrow as Thermopylae, implying that, although "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew, 7:13-14), the deceased managed to find it. Dickinson both eulogizes the dead for her righteousness and comforts Higginson by extolling her courage at the hour of death and assuring him of his wife's entering Heaven. She does not preach on resurrection, one word does it all: Thermopylae.

Contrary to the epistolary rules that dictated that "all pleasantry should be banished" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 9) from letters of condolence, the style of Dickinson condolence letters is high and they are adorned with any figure of speech Dickinson thought it fit to serve her end: relate her own tale of loss and offer sympathy. Yet Dickinson seems to have realized at that point that the only constant in her Universe is Death but despite her losing so many of her beloved friends and relatives she overturns above/below hierarchy. "Immortality is only inferential" (L 942) she concludes two years before she died, "we are permanent temporarily" (L 962). She states in a letter to Maria Whitney that "*hav[ing] been* made alive is […] a

chief thing" (L 860, emphasis added), completely reversing the biblical verse "in Christ *shall* all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22, emphasis added). Dickinson finally neutralizes the metaphysical hierarchy and believes that "Who has not found the heaven – below– will fail of it above" (L 845).

3.2. Dickinson and the face of the letter

3.2.1. Salutations and farewells

Besides Dickinson's disregard for the epistolary rules regarding the face of the letter, she takes no heed to the prescribed constituents of the body of the letter, either. Most of her letters lack salutation; when one is included, though, it is placed on the conventional position on the page. Several letters contain a greeting, though the name of the recipient is replaced by their relation to Dickinson as it seems to be more important than their own identity. Most of them are addressed as friends, Elizabeth Holland, her confidant, is addressed as Sister, while she addresses Mary Bowles, with whom she has never been especially at ease, by her proper name. She addresses the clergymen by their title: Reverend Forrest F. Emerson, is addressed as "Dear Clergyman" and the Jenkins as "My Mr and Mrs Clergyman" (L 423) or "Mr. and Mrs. Pastor" (L 526). In their case, their professional identity overshadows the personal; she treats them homogenously as representatives of a religion she'd rather not think herself related to by blood or practice.

The complimentary close constitutes an indication of "courtesy, respect or endearment according to circumstance" (Westlake 44) and precedes the signature. Dickinson does not usually write a complimentary close; only one fourth of her letters include one. However, when she does use one, she falls in line with the norm regarding the adjustment of the close to the recipient. Hunt, Niles, or Higginson sign off their letters in quite a conventional way; Hunt closes her letters by "Always cordially yours" (L 573a), "Yours ever" (L 573b), "Yours always" (L 573c) and Niles signs off "Yrs very truly" (L 573d) since both are acquaintances of Dickinson's and not close friends. Dickinson's response is congruous to this rule, retaining the distance between them. This practice is not unusual; however, the endings proposed by the manuals include some sort of binding between the correspondents evident in the

possessive adjective yours which is invariably used in every possible variation. Charles Dickens signs off as "Ever your affectionate friend", Thomas Jefferson as "Yours affectionately and forever" and John Adams closes a letter to his wife by writing "I am, my dearest friend, most affectionately and kindly yours" (Westlake 45). Despite the cliché undertone of these endings, the bond between the epistolary dyad reinforced by the possessive determiner yours, accentuates familial or friendly bonds and attributes proximity and intimacy, which constitutes the goal of letter writing. Dickinson includes this possessive adjective only in ten letters out of nearly 900 of the second phase; in most of the letters, she distances herself from the recipient of her letter by shunning any such tying. She is just Emily or Emily Dickinson, standing apart from any family or friendly links.

It is interesting then that Dickinson includes a possessive adjective to designate her relationship with Higginson – she signs off "Your Scholar" – which, although both know it is not real, they keep it going. Higginson, on the other hand, signs off as "Your friend T. W. Higginson" (L 405a) or "Ever your friend T. W. Higginson" (L 476b) as "I certainly feel that I have known you long & well, through the beautiful thoughts and words you have sent me" (L 405a). Dickinson's handling of her relationship with Higginson is evident in her salutations and closings of her letters. Dickinson takes no notice of his advice whatsoever, but his willingness to engage in her master-scholar game gives her outlet to another audience; in a sense, she has already published her work before Todd edits and Higginson prints it in 1890. Unlike her first letter to him, the rest are signed, though not uniformly. At the beginning of their correspondence and during what could be termed as a probing period, she signs off as his friend and writes her full name or just her surname, with the uppercase 'D' resembling a fusion of 'E' and 'D'. As they get to know each other better, he addresses him "Dear friend" and signs off as his "Scholar", a rather incongruous pair of greeting and closing; addressing him as Preceptor or Master would suit far better her definition of herself in relation to him as designated by the closing. However, the word scholar she uses is rather ambiguous. According to her Dictionary, it could refer either to a disciple, one who is under the tuition of a preceptor or to one of high attainments in literature (Webster 2: 539). Although she pretends that she uses it with the first definition, actually she considers herself a master in her field. The mismatching in the way she addresses him reflects their relationship; for Dickinson, Higginson is a lifelong friend, and after her making her

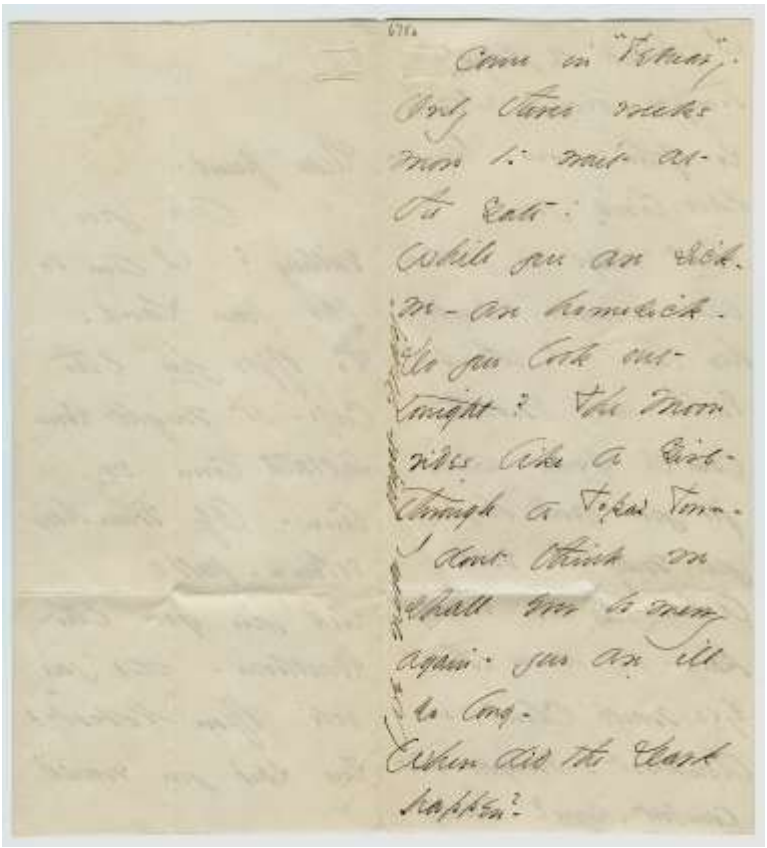
position clear regarding her work and her unwillingness to change anything, Higginson is a person she can turn to when in emotional difficulty. She "felt it shelter to speak to" him (L 533) after her father or Bowles died or when her mother was paralyzed, for example. He is also a literary friend, "her safest friend" to whom she can "flee so often" (L 476) to consult on her work when it comes to publication issues. It is also noteworthy that after signing off in her capacity of scholar, she never writes her name beneath it since their relationship is unique and there is no need to identify herself by her name.

"Lovingly" is by far the commonest close Dickinson uses, followed in frequency by "with love" or "with affection". However, she does not always sign off conventionally. She uses a variety of adverbs in her complimentary closes, which reflect her mood at the time of writing the letter. They state the reason for her writing the letter which should have been stated at the introduction; the adverbs that Dickinson uses provide the context for her letter. She closes her belated response to a problem Sarah Elizabeth Tuckerman faced with "late but lovingly" (L 895), "timidly" in her first letter to Todd's parents (L 944) "reverently" (L 864) to Bowles the younger in his engagement, "sacredly" to Benjamin Kimball, Lord's executor of his will (L 968) "smilingly" in a thank-you letter to her cousin Eugenia Hall (L 1001), "with love and wonder" to Maria Whitney pondering on her mother's death and afterlife (L 815), "with fresh remembrance" to Bowles the younger who visited Austin and reminded her of his father's voice (L 761).

Contrary to the epistolary rules which held that a letter should be signed properly and that imaginary signatures were an "anathema against good taste" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 146), Dickinson omits signing many of her letters and uses imaginary names in others. Jenkins recalls that although most of her letters were unsigned, "there was no need to sign a name to them. It was not difficult to identify anything that came from her. It had a character of its own and was unlike anything else in the world of letters" (Jenkins 60). She closes a letter to Higginson as "Barabbas" apologizing "if possible I offended you"; hers "but just the Thief's Request" (L 282). In an apparent thank-you letter to Cornelia Sweetser, Dickinson signs off alluding to a biblical figure. "Sweet friend, Why is it Nobleness makes us ashamed -- Because it is so seldom or so hallowed? The Pitcher shall be an emblem – 'Rebecca'" (L 836). Addressing her blood relative as a friend, Dickinson stresses the intimacy she feels towards her that exceeds familiar bonds and alludes to Rebecca's

kindness to offer Isaac's servants a pitcher of water. In this way, she elevates some polite gesture her aunt might have done to a sacred and momentous deed. She signs off a note to her nephew Ned Dickinson as "Brooks of Sheffield". She sends him some of the year's first maple sugar and signs off by the name of a Dickens character in *David Copperfield*, who remains nameless throughout the story, adding a conspiratorial feature to her offering Ned a delicacy. Unless the specifics tied to a situation are known, many of the notes or letters do not make sense. One of these was sent to Ned after his father bought a new horse. "Phoebus – 'I'll take the Reins'. Phaeton" (L 642). Ned is deified as the god of Sun and Dickinson assumes the position of his son who is unable to control the horses of his father's chariot and gets killed. It might serve as a word of warning to Ned who, on another occasion, is said to have run away with the horses, which lead Dickinson to sign off as "Dick-Jim-", the names of the horses (L 604).

In a letter to Bowles, Dickinson sends her regards to his wife in the most unconventional way; not only does she send them in a postscript, which shows "disrespect in neglecting it in the body" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 16) but the sentence is written from the bottom of the last page up (Picture 14, L 247).



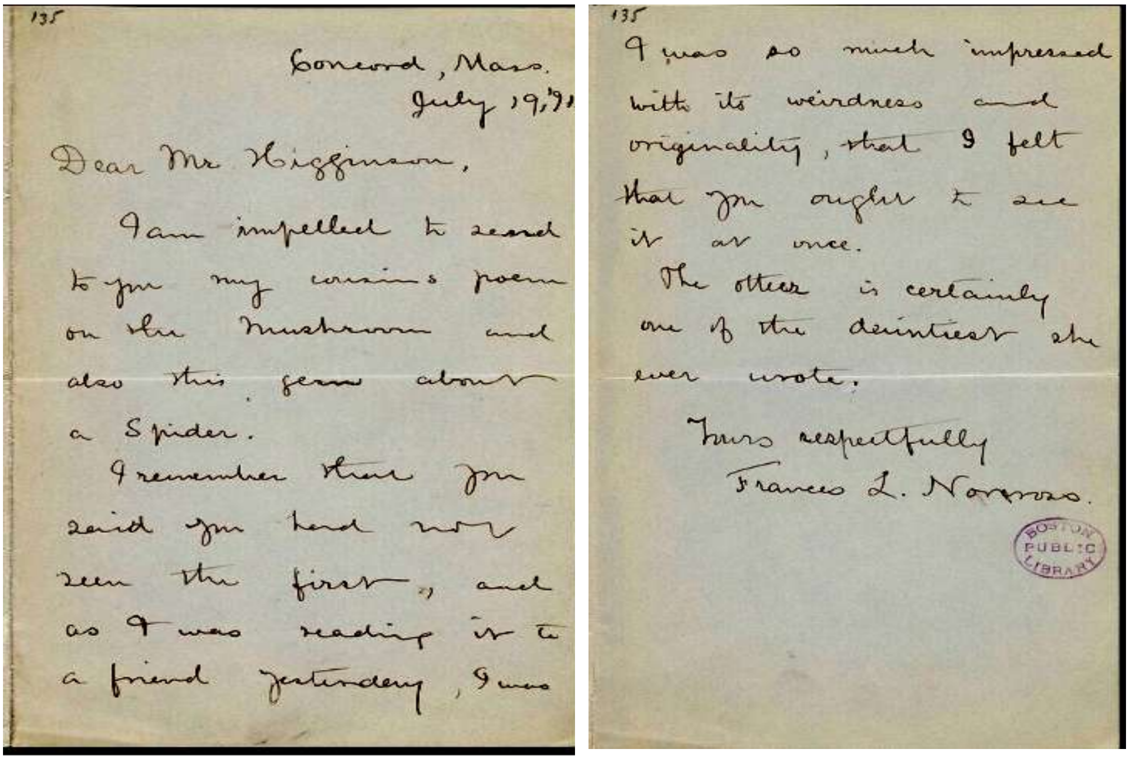
To make it more improper, Dickinson aggravates the "confession that the matter is of so slight consequence as to have escaped the mind" (Westlake 87) by using the space for something forgotten to declare that "we never forget Mary".

Picture 14: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1862 January 11, in Box 8, Folder 47, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:2465>.

Since salutations and complimentary closes serve the referential function of the letter by making the identities of addresser-addressee known and tying them with specific spatiotemporal specifics or specific circumstances,, that is specific context, Dickinson's differentiation and creation of opaque texts transforms this function to poetic as she focuses primarily on the message "for its own sake" (Jacobson 69).

3.2.2. Layout of the letter

"This is my letter -- an ill and peevish thing, but when my eyes get well I'll send you thoughts like daisies, and sentences could hold the bees" (L 301), Dickinson writes to her Norcross cousins; the metaphor is indicative not only of the letter as the projection of herself, but of its elevation into a fragrant orchard of words, landscaped and tended tenderly. The meticulous care of spacing and placement of words on the face of the letter, evident in her manuscripts, can be best understood when contrasting one of her letters with conventional ones. A letter sent by Francis Norcross to Higginson abides to every norm regarding letter writing (Picture 15): The body of the letter is divided into three parts: the Aristotelian *exordium* or introduction, the narrative or proposition, and the conclusion (Brady xiv). In the exordium, the date of the receipt of the letter that initiated the reply is mentioned to confirm delivery so that the sender is not "guilty of offensive inattention" (*Aids to Epistolary Correspondence* 16). The proposition states the reason for writing with accuracy and clarity. The conclusion includes expressions of affection, esteem, consideration, or reverence in accordance with the character and the social status of the recipient, as well as confirmation of what is stated in the proposition. In the same vein, Mabel Loomis Todd abides by all epistolary rituals in her letters to Higginson regarding the publication of Dickinson's poems, as the facsimile shows (Picture 16):


135

Concord, Mass.
July 19, '91

Dear Mr. Higginson,

I am impelled to send to you my cousin's poem on the Mushroom and also this gem about a Spider.

I remember that you said you had not seen the first, and as I was reading it to a friend yesterday, I was

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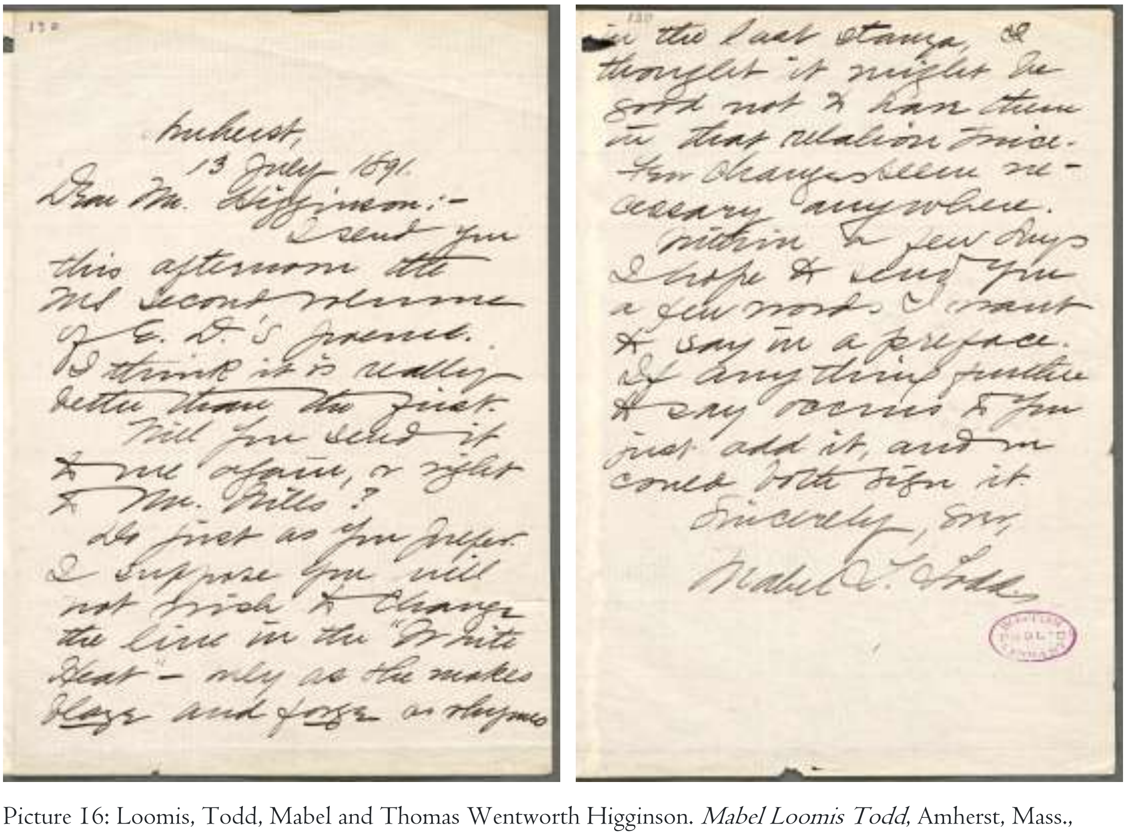
I was so much impressed with its weirdness and originality, that I felt that you ought to see it at once.

The other is certainly one of the daintiest she ever wrote.

Yours respectfully
Frances L. Norcross.

Picture 15: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Lavinia Norcross Dickinson. *Frances Lavinia Norcross, Concord, Mass., autograph letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 19 July 1891*. 19 Jul 1891. Web. 26 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mz73k>.


Amherst,
13 July 1891.

Dear Mr. Higginson:–

I send you this afternoon the MS second volume of E. D.'s poems. I think it is really better than the first.

Will you send it to me again, or right to Mr. Mills?

Do just as you prefer.

I suppose you will not wish to change the lines in the "White Heat" – only as she makes blaze and forge as rhymes in the last stanza, I thought it might be good not to have them in that relation twice. No changes seem necessary anywhere.

Within a few days I hope to send you a few words I want to say in a preface. If anything further to say occurs to you just add it, and we could both sign it.

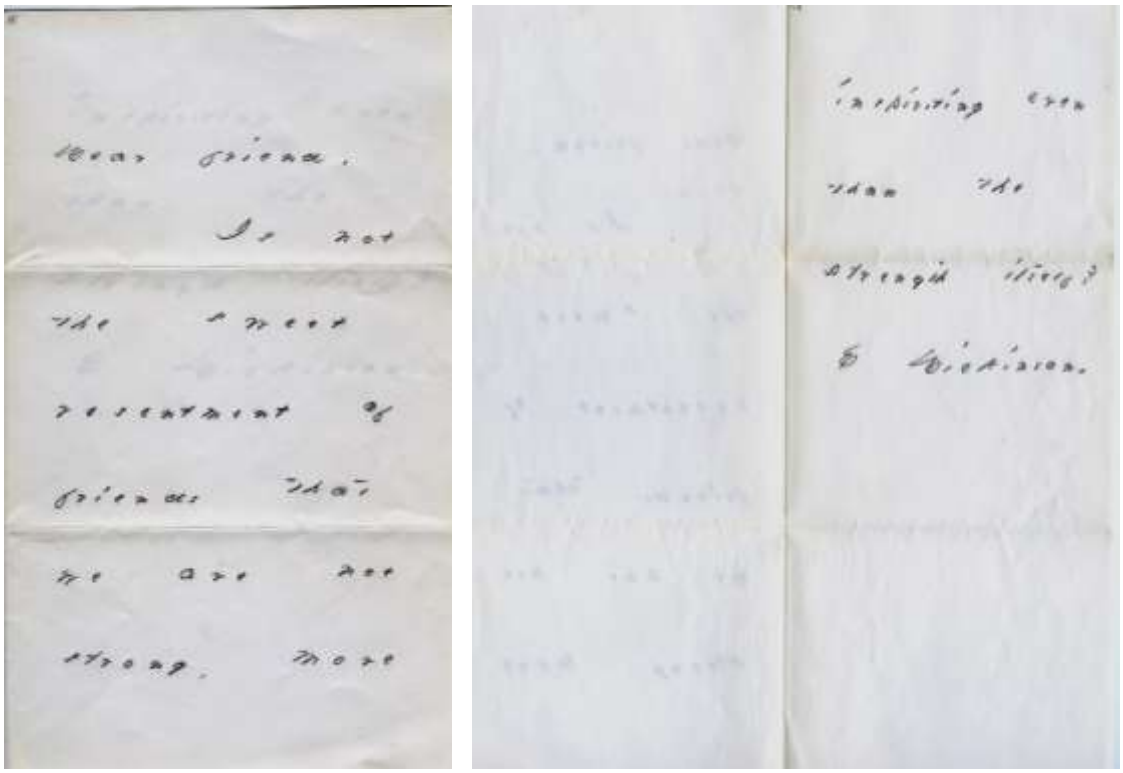
Sincerely, sir,
Mabel L. Todd

Picture 16: Loomis, Todd, Mabel and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. *Mabel Loomis Todd*, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higgins*on, July 1891.July 1891*. Web. 27 Jun 2021. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/2403596704/in/album-72157604466722178/ >.

Holding that "Space is as the Presence" (L 378), Dickinson positions the words on the page in a very deliberate way as will be shown below. Her meticulous placement of the words on the page, evident in her letters and similar to that of her poems, defies the epistolary rules which prescribe even the width of the margins on the page with the precision of tenths of an inch, the trespassing of which is "beyond the limits of taste" (Houghton 303). She writes to Joseph Lyman:

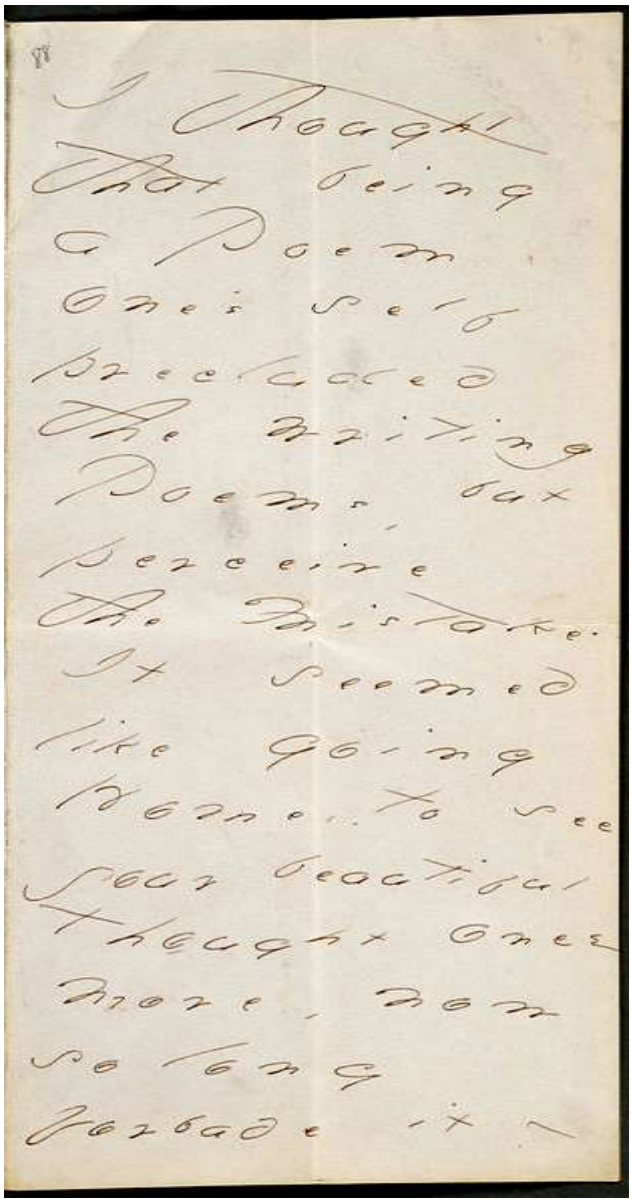
> We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I dont know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire. (qtd. in Seawall, 1965, 78)

In her letters, either two or three words sit on each line, on many occasions just one; each word is placed far apart from the next, standing isolated but conspicuous (Picture 17, L 672).



Picture 17: Emily Dickinson letter to Abigail Ingersoll Cooper, 1880 October, in Box 1, Folder 15, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:15510>.

In Dickinson's letters, the layout of the words on the lines reminds of parsing with each of the functional parts occupying a line (Picture 18, L 413). This technique forces the reader not only to parse, that is to look at the parts closely, but it dictates a particular way of reading since reaching the end of the line one withdraws momentarily before they go on to the next, isolating thus the information Dickinson packs each line with.

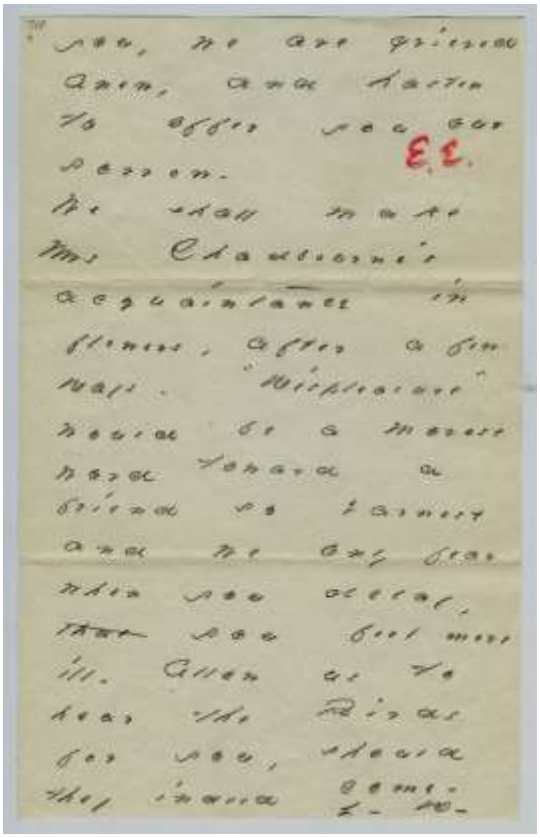


I thought
That being
a Poem
one's self
precluded
the writing
Poems but
perceive
the mistake.
It seemed
Like going
Home to see
Your beautiful
Thought once
More now
We long
Forbade it --

Picture 18: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, June 1874.* Jun 1874. Web. 27 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq977z739>.

In cases of anaphora or epistrophe, Dickinson arranges the words in complete symmetry as in the poem included in letter L 745 (picture 19); the words of most of her later letters are perfectly aligned both horizontally and vertically, resembling texts in Chinese ideograms or hieroglyphics (for example L 804, picture 20).

Sweet Pirate
of the heart,
Not Pirate
of the Sea,
What wrecketh
thee?
Some spice's
Mutiny --
Some Attar's
perfidy?
Confide in
Me --
Emily (Picture 19)

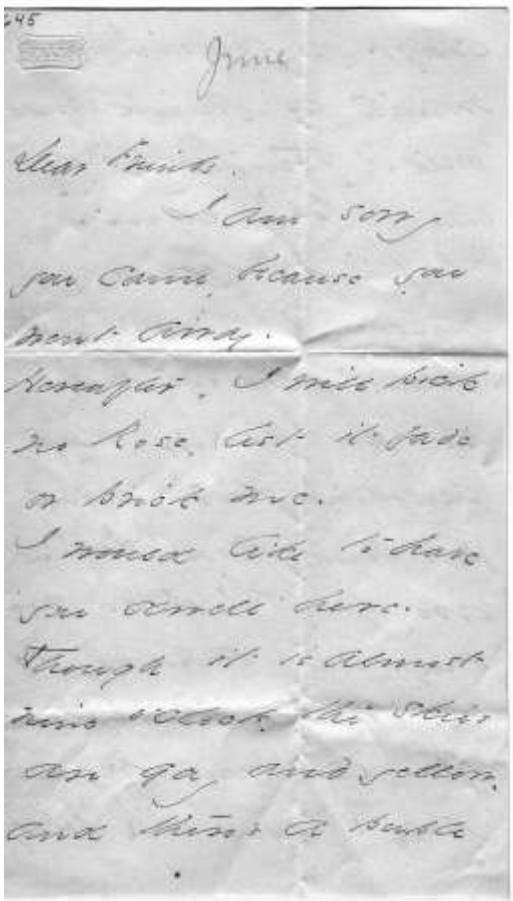


you, we are grieved
anew, and hasten
to offer you our
sorrow.
We shall make
Mrs. Chadbourne's
acquaintance in
flowers, after a few
Days. "Displeasure"
would be a morose
word toward a
friend so earnest
and we only fear
when you delay,
that you feel more
ill. Allow us to
hear the Birds
for you, should
they indeed come.
E--D--(Picture 20)

Picture 19: Emily Dickinson letter to Sarah Tuckerman, 1882 January, in Box 1, Folder 42, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:16887/asc:16890>.

Picture 20: Emily Dickinson letter to James D. Clark, 1883 February, in Box 8, Folder 92, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:16202>.

All the lines start from about the same space on the left side of the page, even the embedded poem, which makes the division of the letter in paragraphs and their layout when printed questionable at best. There are parts after which there is considerable space left at the conclusion of the last line of what could be considered a paragraph, so the division seems plausible. However, on other occasions there is no evident break between the preceding and following lines, questioning Johnson's decision to start a new paragraph, for example in L 189 (Picture 21). Though there is no margin at the beginning of each paragraph, there is a sizable gap at the end of the lines which could correspond to Dickinson's introducing a new paragraph on the next line.



Dear Friends.

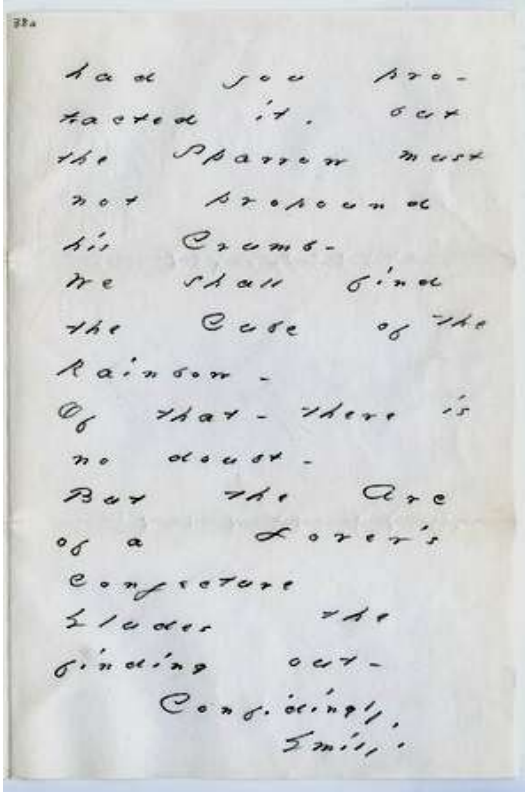
I am sorry you came, because you went away.

Hereafter, I will pick no Rose, lest it fade or prick me.

I would like to have you dwell here. Though it is almost nine o'clock, the skies are gay and yellow, and there's a purple (Johnson's layout p 334).

Picture 21: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1858 June, in Box 8, Folder 17, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:4994>.

The same applies to the inclusion of poems which, in their vast majority, are not separated from the main body of the letter by a blank line, neither do they resemble a poem by being placed somewhere in the middle of the page. On the contrary, they are impossible to tell apart from the rest of the body of the letter (for example Letters 319, 489, 628, 677, 960). (Picture 22, L 628).



had you protracted it, but the Sparrow must not propound his Crumb --

We shall find the Cube of the Rainbow --

Of that -- there is no doubt --

But the Arc of a Lover's conjecture

Eludes the finding out --

Confidingly,

Emily --

(L 628 Johnson's transcription p 655)

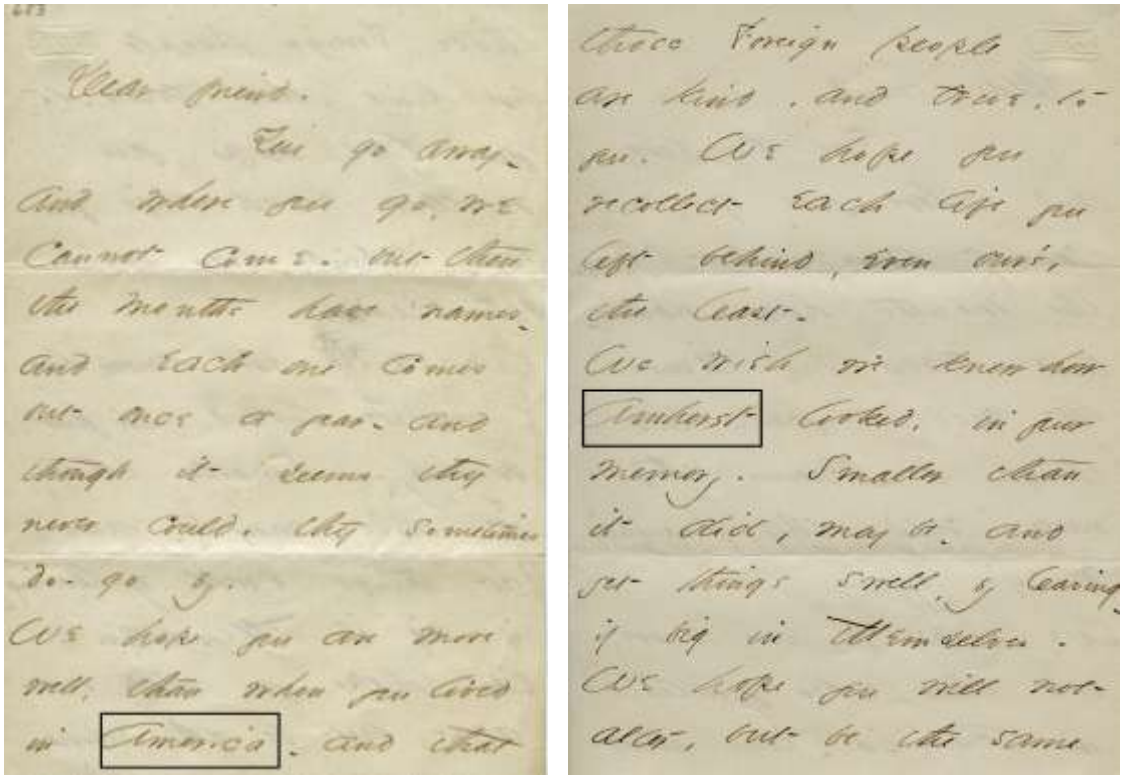
Picture 22: Emily Dickinson letter to Sarah Sigourney Tuckerman, 1880 January, in Box 1, Folder 38, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library.
< https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:12950>.

By no means accidental or casual, the placement of the poems on the page indicates that letters and poems are intertwined and complement each other. The meticulous care Dickinson takes to position the words of her letters on the page converts physically the lines of the prose which should be arranged into sentences and paragraphs and occupy the full length of the line into the verses of a poem whose lines do not go so far as the natural close of the page consistently. This arrangement

resembles the distinctive and recognizable look of poetry and constitutes the visual marker of the poeticity of Dickinson's letters.

Careful examination of Dickinson's manipulation of the page indicates that she handles it as a physical stage on which she places the actors, the words, whose semantic value is highlighted, enhanced or supplemented by the theatricality of their arrangement on her physical production. Large spacing between words might indicate that she manipulates the physicality of the page to arrange the words so that they become the picture of spatial estrangement and temporal disconnection.

During Bowles's trip to Europe, their separation is evident on the pages, too. Her inability to be at a synchronous spatiotemporal space is voiced on the first page where she attempts to count time away till his return to Amherst on the second page, where she is left wondering whether memory, being a-temporal and a-spatial, can serve as a common referential point and bind the two places together in the same way the physical pages of the letter do (Picture 23, L 266).

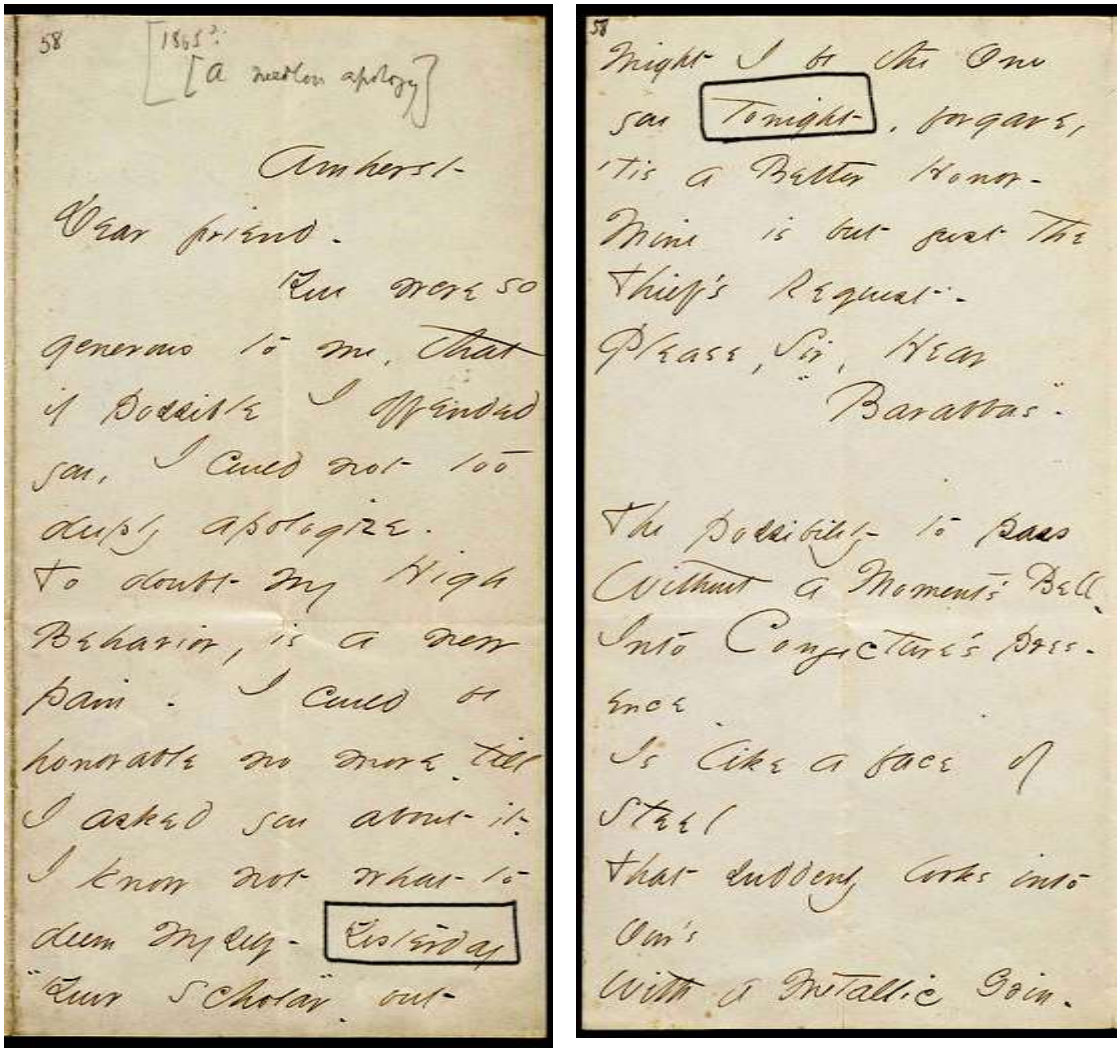


Picture 23: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1862, in Box 8, Folder 55, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7879/asc:7883>.

Reverend Wadsworth "stepped from [his] pulpit" to the next page to catch "the train" to Amherst (L 766) and Dickinson delimits her privacy distancing herself from

those who “speak about hallowed things aloud and embarrass [her] dog” by placing them on “their side”, on a separate page (L 271).

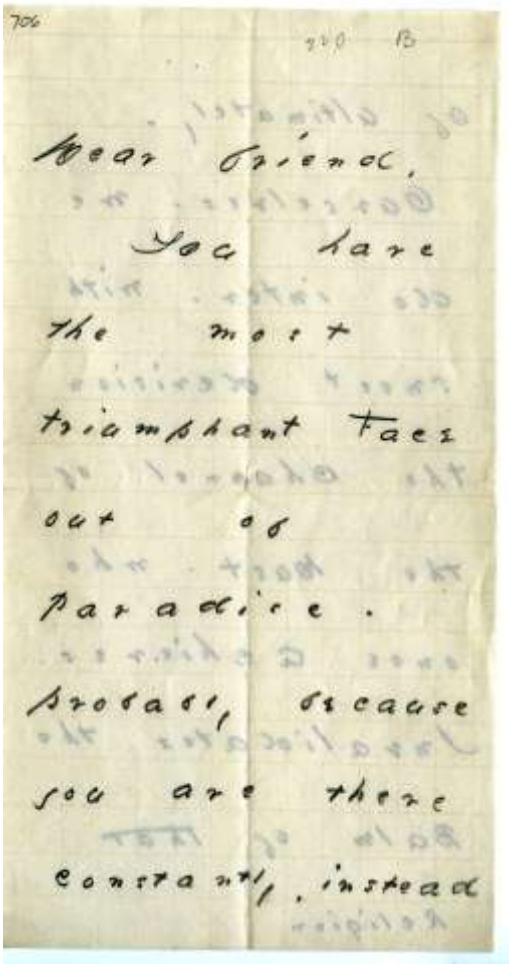
Time is also spatially distinct; in a letter to Higginson, which he characterizes as “a needless apology”, she distinguishes the unpleasant situation of his “doubt[ing] [her] High Behaviour” which puts her apprentice into jeopardy as of “Yesterday” and asks him to turn a new leaf and give her another chance “tonight” on the next page (Picture 24, L 282).



Picture 24: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst Mass., autograph letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, about 1863.* 1863. Web. 28 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq977x76x>.

Both place and time seem misplaced in a letter to Bowles on the first page of which she positions him in “Paradise […] constantly” on account of his “triumphant Face”. As a consequence, Paradise is misplaced, as it seems to be accessible from

earth spiritually; the last word of the page, “instead”, points to the substitute or the alternative, the religious Paradise and afterlife, on the next page, as she places him there “ultimately” (Picture 25, L 489).



Dear friend

You have

The most

triumphant face

out of

Paradise

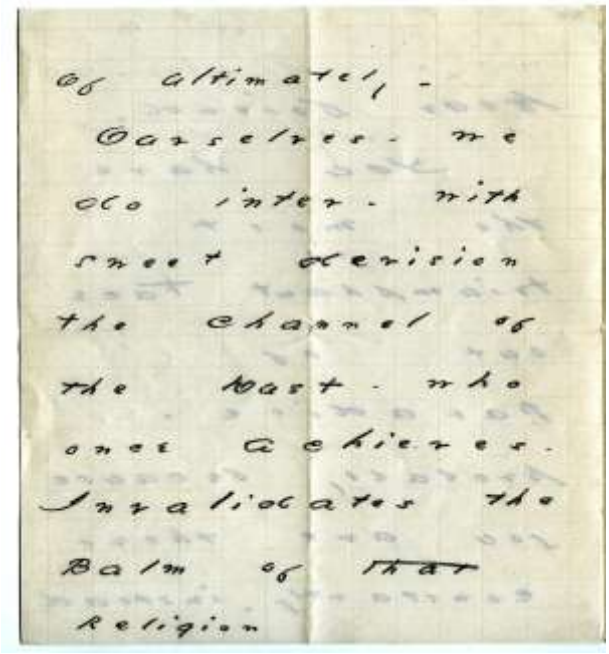
probably because

you are there

constantly instead

Picture 25: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1877, in Box 8, Folder 78, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:13202>.

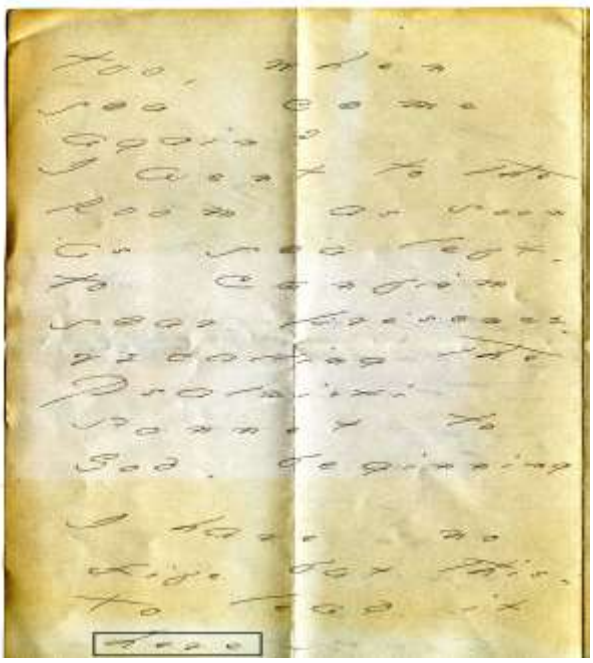
However, this subsequent time, for which all believers should prepare their souls, is not combined with the consolation of immortality; on the contrary, it is on the same page with “The Channel of the Dust” which “invalidates the Balm of that Religion”, because to her Paradise -- ironically -- is not complete without the physical presence of her loved ones. The same meddling extends to the letter as the poem, starting with Ourselves, is indistinguishable from it, since there is no stanza break or clear verse lines (Picture 26).



of ultimately
Ourselves - we
do inter - with sweet derision
The Channel of
the Dust - who
once achieves -
Invalidates the
Balm of that
Religion

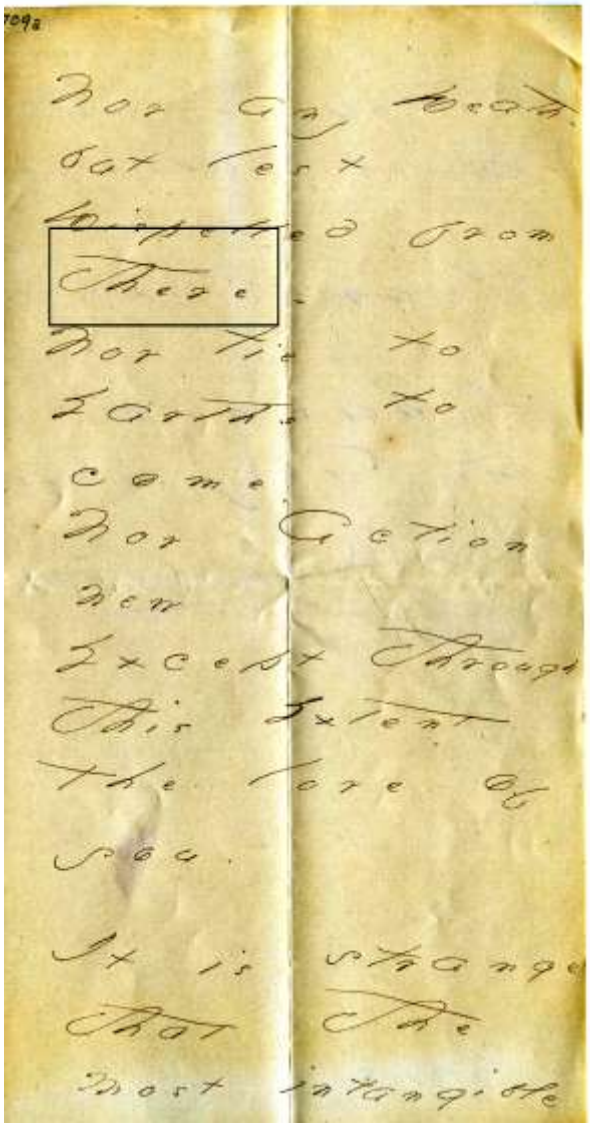
Picture 26: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1877, in Box 8, Folder 78, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:13202/asc:13205>.

Dickinson cares for Bowles' fragile health, his family, and she confides in him her distrust in revealed theology and her doubts about afterlife. In one of her letter-poems (Picture 27, L 515), she naughtily presents her poem as "the Psalmist's sonnet to God" equating herself to the former and Bowles to the latter. The layout of the poem on the page is interesting and it might explain her aversion for the print which would normalize her manuscripts.



too, when
you come
again?
I went to the
Room as soon
as you left,
to confirm
your presence --
recalling the
Psalmist's
sonnet to
God, beginning

I have no
Life but this --
To lead it
here --

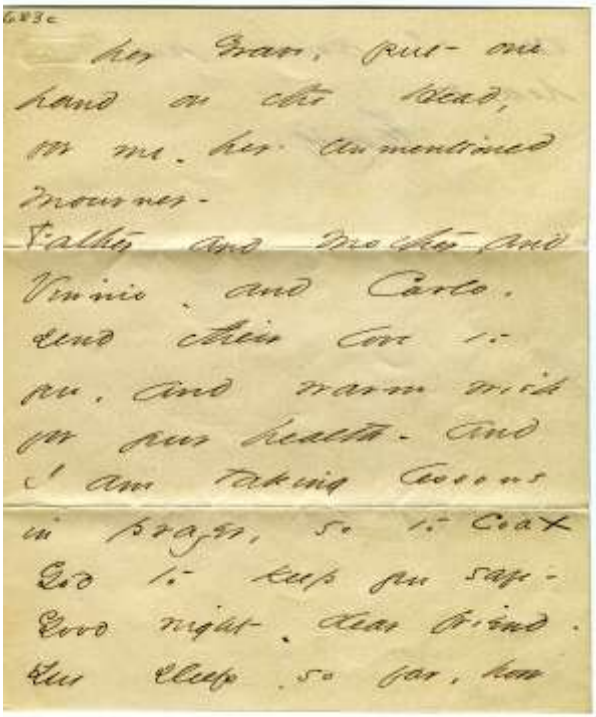


nor any Death –
but lest
Dispelled from
there --
Nor tie to
Earths to
come,
Nor Action
new
Except through
this Extent
The love of
you.
Is it strange
that the
most intangible

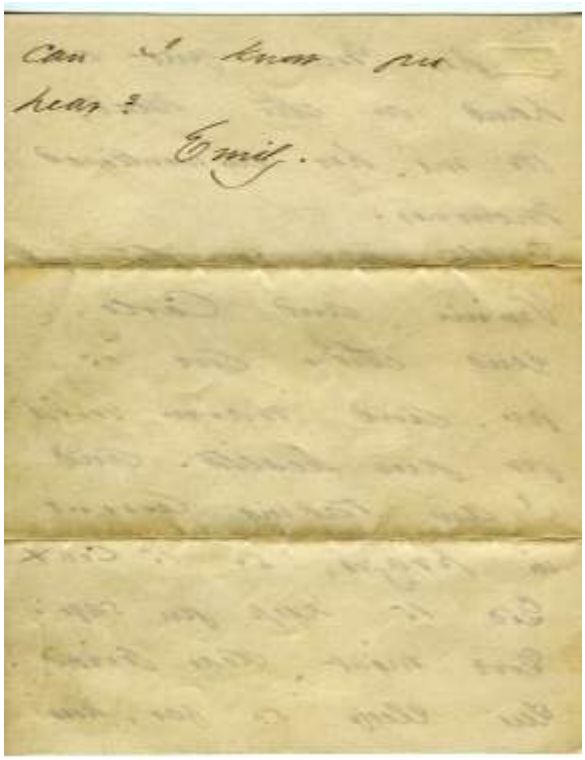
Picture 27: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1877, in Box 8, Folder 81, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:15969>.

Dickinson lays the proximity of the present "Life here" on a different page from the "Death there" to set them apart, and she has these place deictic words stand alone on the line as signposts on the course of human life. Despite her large handwriting, there is enough space for more words on the same line; it seems however, that she distinguishes the spatial or temporal units of her poem on different lines. The last four lines are of equal length and boil down to one word: 'you', around which the whole poem seems to revolve.

Different spatiotemporal zones mean uncertainty and Dickinson positions Bowles on one page saying goodnight and wondering on the next (Pictures 28-29, L 266):



Good night- dear friend.
You sleep so far how



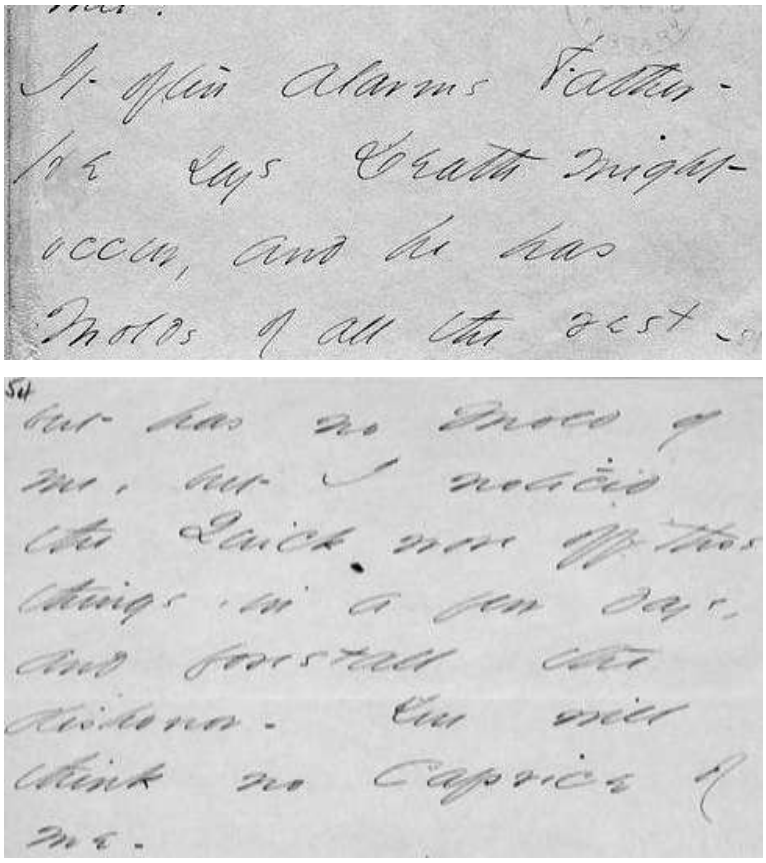
can I know you
hear?
Emily.

Pictures 28-29: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 186 in Box 8, Folder 55, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7879>.

Leaving the question word on the previous page indicates her indifference to the way in which she will be assured; what is of paramount importance is her close-ended question, begging for a positive answer which will denote presence. This pressing inquiry dangles on the top of the last page, accentuated by the blank space below which constitutes the most significant part of her letter, tantamount to his absence and silence in not answering her entreaty.

Pages could also function as a physical space for the arrangement of her differentiation or distancing from others by writing on consecutive yet separate pages connecting her dissenting views with the use of the conjunction 'but'.

In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson refers to her aversion to having her photograph taken, differentiating herself from the rest of her family by placing them on one page and herself on another starting with the conjunction 'but' to indicate her deviation from the family habits (Picture 30, L 268).



It alarms Father --

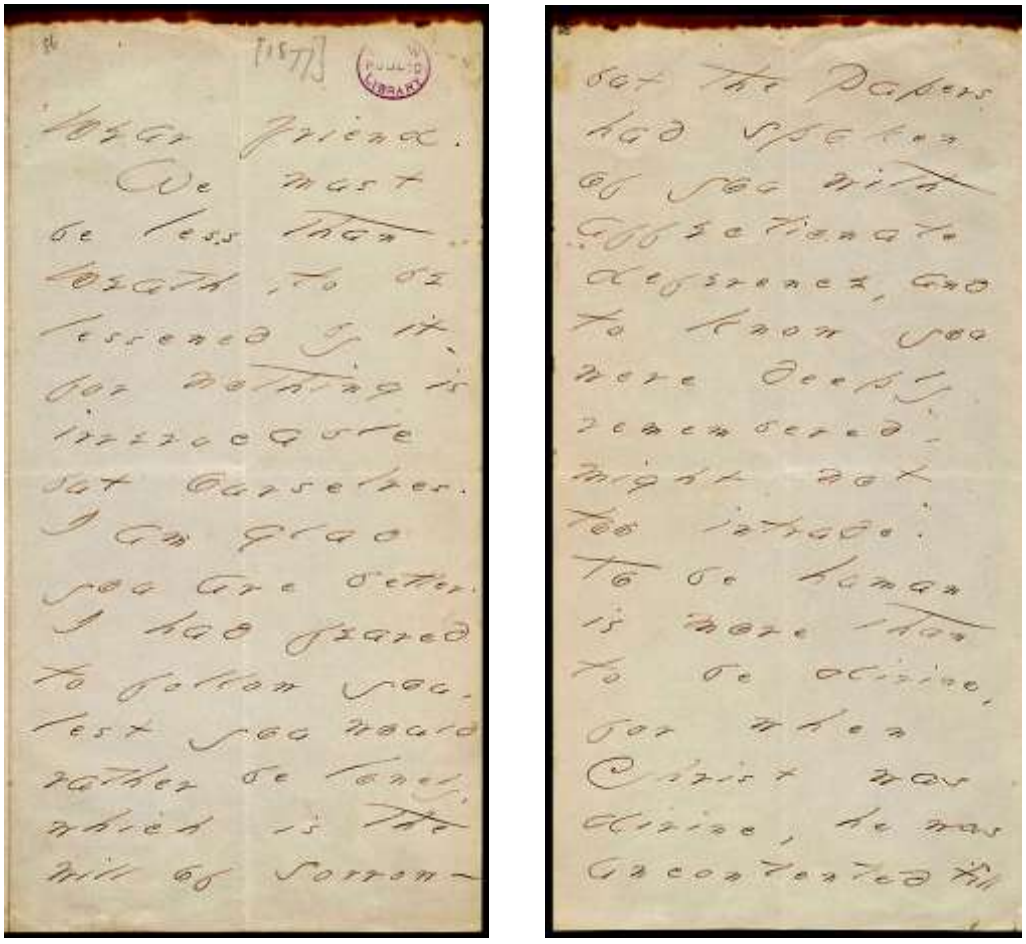
He says Death might --

occur, and he has
Molds of all the rest --

but has no Mold of
me but I noticed
the Quick wore off those
things, in a few days,
and forestall the
dishonor -- You will
think no caprice of
me --

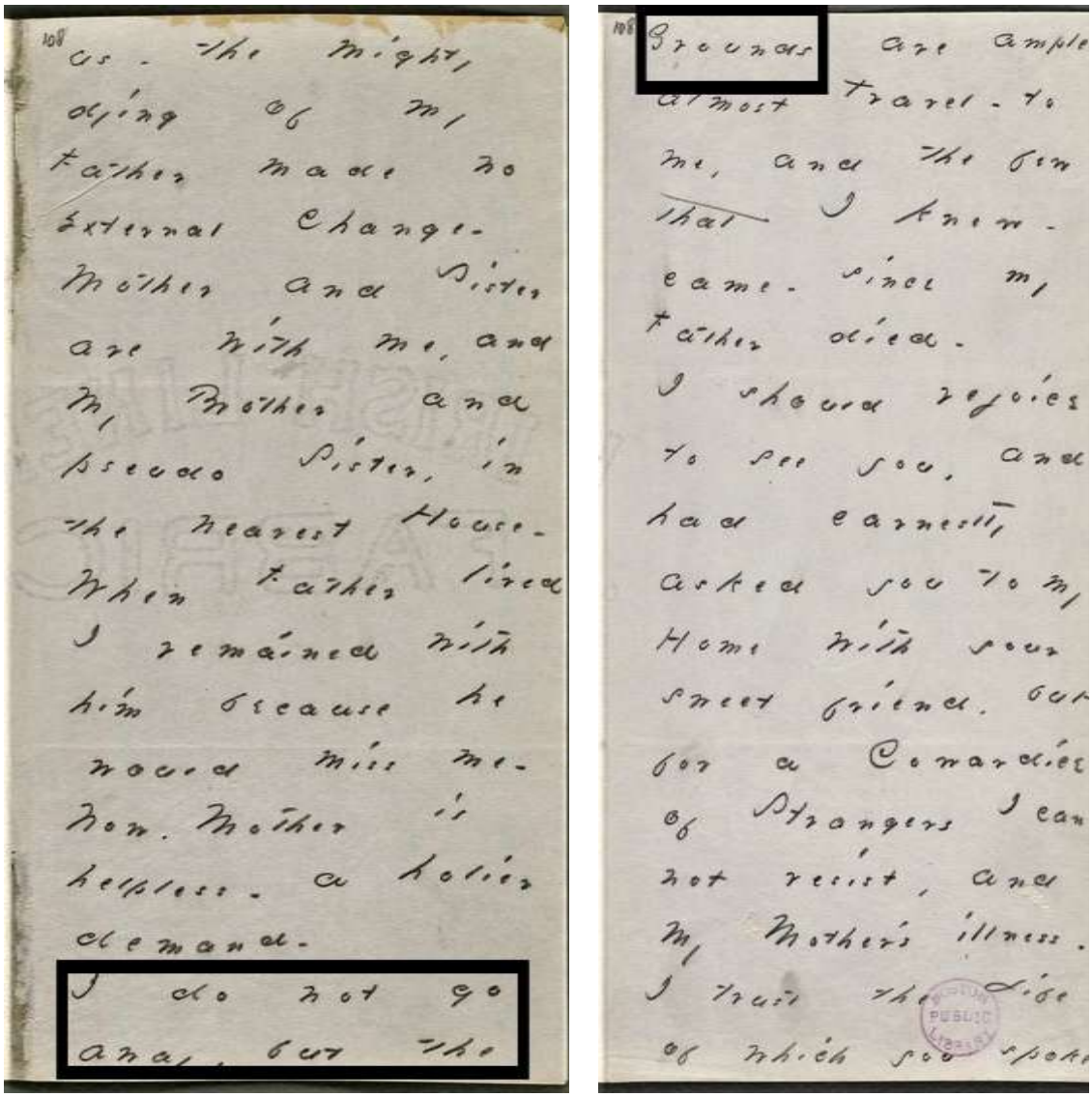
Picture 30: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Your Scholar (Emily Dickinson), Amherst, Mass., autograph letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, July 1862.* Jul 1862. Web. 28 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mv79m>.

On the first page of a letter of condolence to Higginson, she abides by the conventional courtesies and acknowledges that mourners should not be disturbed, yet she starts the second page with 'but', stating her disregard for and deviation from the letter of the epistolary rules in favor of her genuine concern for him (Picture 31, L 519).



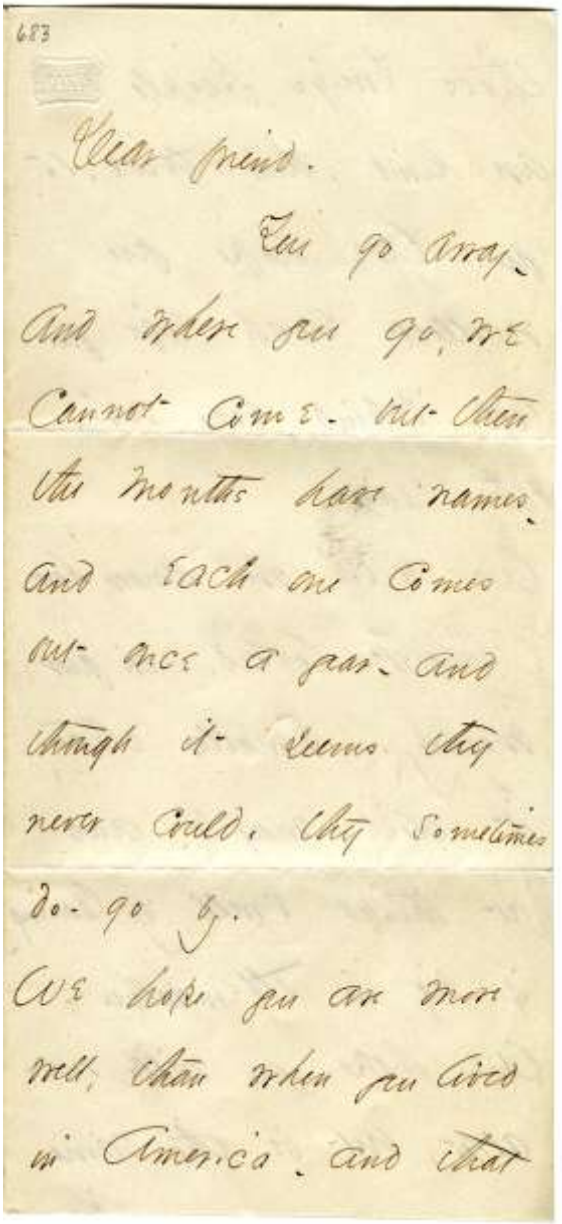
Picture 31: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, September 1877*. Sep 1877. Web. 28 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq9781193>.

At the bottom of the page of another letter to Higginson, she refuses to leave Amherst and states that "I do not go away" delimiting her space on the physicality of the page only to break away to the "Grounds" of the next page through the use of 'but' which opens up the new space provided or/and created by Dickinson, evident in her manipulation of it as she adds that they "almost travel -- to me" (Picture 32, L 735).



Picture 32: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Your Scholar (Emily Dickinson), Amherst, Mass., autograph letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, about 1881*. 1881. Web. 28 Jun 2021. https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq9781478.

Moreover, Dickinson exploits the smaller division of the page, the lines, to similar ends. Whereas pages stand for wider aspects of time and space, the lines hold smaller spatiotemporal units. They set correspondents or members of the family apart or bring them together to accentuate respectively their proximity or their remoteness, either physical or emotional. In a letter to Bowles she writes (L 266, Picture 33):


683

Dear friend.

You go away

and where you go, we

cannot come – but then

the Months have names-

and each one comes

but once a year – and

though it seems they

never could, they sometimes

do – go by

We hope you are more

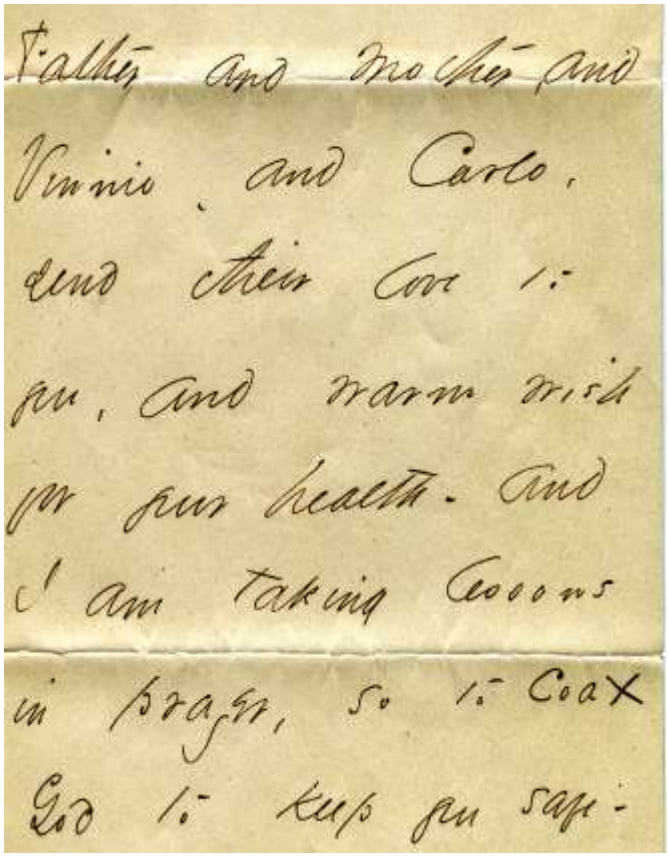
well, than when you lived

in America and that.

Picture 33: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1862, in Box 8, Folder 55, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7879>.

His departure occupies the first line of the letter, whose physically distanced start signifies the geographical space between them, as a proposition which sounds like an accusation and in the second line both Bowles and she coexist only to underline the separation evident from the verbs ‘go’ on the second referring to him and ‘come’ in the third referring to her. They function as place deictic words to underline separate spatial directions, placed thus on separate lines to accentuate the gap. The disjunctive ‘but’, however, retains the temporal link between them. Though

spatially and physically separate, they can be linked through time the passage of which is a-spatial, thus commonly shared, and evident in the absence of any referential personal deictic. In the same letter, she sent her family's regards positioning each member on separate lines (Picture 34). She positions herself, a dash, and a line apart from the rest, even from Carlo, to underline that she does something more than the rest, she resorts to God despite her obvious disbelief evident in the word coax which points to "persuad[ing] by flattery and fondling" (Webster 1:318), a most irreverent tactic, to invoke His help.



Father and Mother, and

Vinnie, and, Carlo
send their love to

you, and warm wish

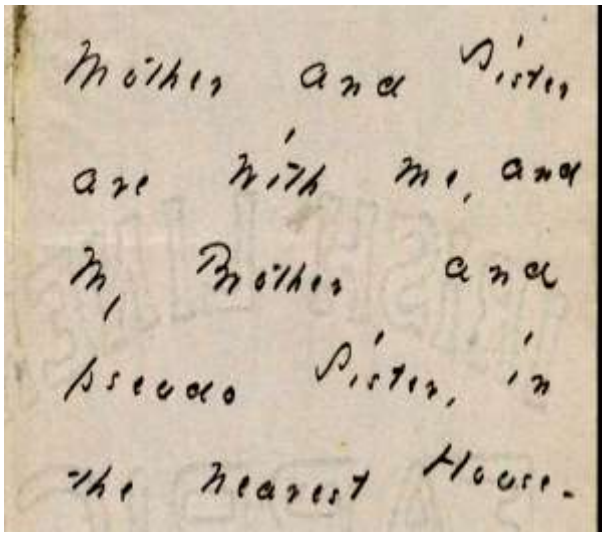
for your health – and
I am taking lessons

in prayer so to coax

God to keep you safe.

Picture 34: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, 1862, in Box 8, Folder 55, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7879>.

The arrangement of her family members on the lines of a letter to Higginson in 1881 mirrors the alienation between them (Picture 35, L 189). The relationship between Austin and Susan is the worst possible, the magic of "Jerusalem", their house, used to be invested with for Dickinson is lost, relegating it to a mere residence, not a home; and the replacement of 'Susie' or 'Sister' with 'pseudo' is indicative of the strain in their relationship.



Mother and Sister

are with me, and

my Brother and

pseudo Sister in

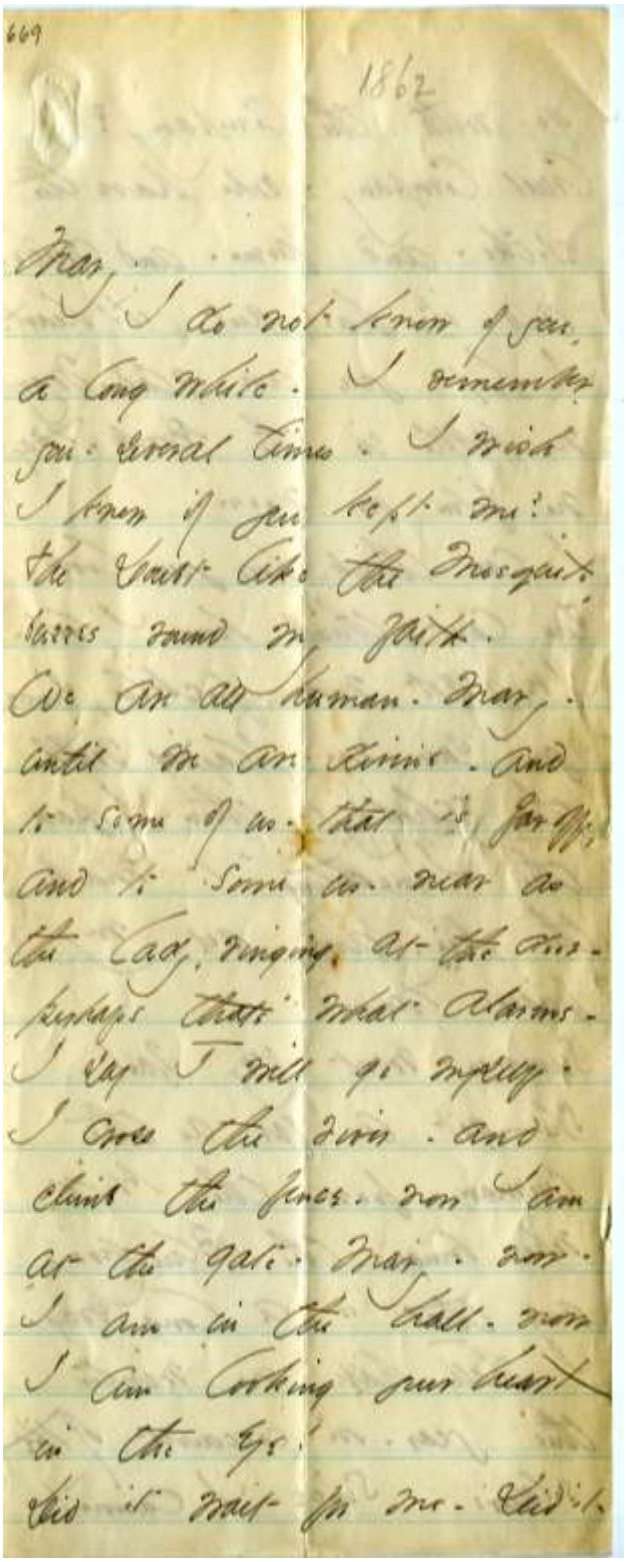
the nearest House --

Picture 35: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Your Scholar (Emily Dickinson), Amherst, Mass., autograph letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, about 1881*. 1881. Web. 28 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq9781478>.

Dickinson stands alone on a line though she mentions her sister and mother on a separate line. The use of "are with me" is also interesting: it is their coexistence that matters instead of their residence. Referring to her brother's house as a near space, but showing no relation to her, suggests that Austin and Susan are merely present in the same location; she constitutes the center of her universe, and they merely revolve around her.

A series of actions or emotions triggered are joined with the copulative and, the common way to join them, indeed. However, what is striking is that the conjunction is placed at the end of the line building up the event line by line. *Polysyndeton*, the technique of using several coordinative conjunctions in a sentence to slow up the rhythm, both stresses each action separately as a single event and attaches it to a string of events culminating in the last one. Dickinson makes use of this literary device not only structurally but visually as well. She uses the lines as a ladder, each step of which brings her closer to Mary Bowles who failed to reply to Dickinson's letters. Dickinson commences her letter stating that Mary's letter is long overdue and voices her concerns about the continuance of the epistolary thread. Instead of starting the letter at the top of the page, Dickinson leaves it blank, indicative of long epistolary silence and consequently absence and places the salutation further down the page,

setting the sentences at the beginning of her letter apart from each other (Picture 36, L 235).


669

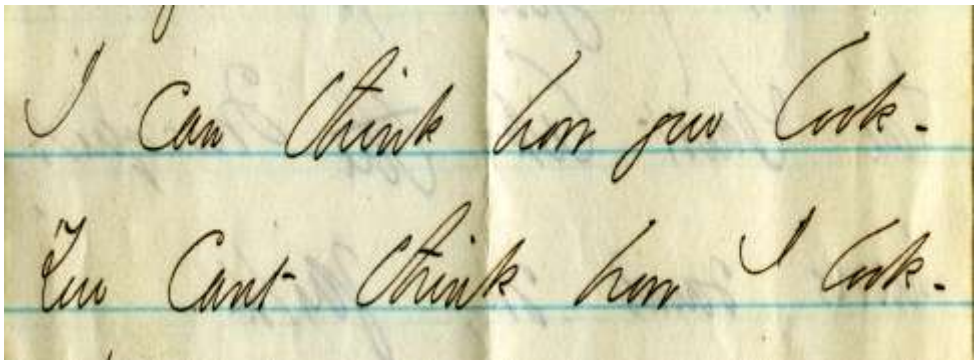
1862

Mary.

I do not hear from you
a long while. I remember
you several times. I wish
I knew if you kept me?
"The Dust like the Mosquito
buzzes around 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 at 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!

Picture 36: Emily Dickinson letter to Mary Bowles, in Box 8, Folder 41, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:4408>.

The sizeable gap between them accentuates each one; Mary Bowles needs to pause after reading each one before continuing to the next. The last sentence of the first paragraph voices Dickinson's concern in religious terms; her hope that the link between them is unbroken is equated to faith however assailed by the mosquito dust, the mortal, human qualms. Another long break before the next paragraph starts, which goes on for nearly the entire of the rest of the page. After claiming that life is precarious on account of death, which may occur at any time, Dickinson traverses spatiotemporal boundaries approaching Mary Bowles line by line, from Dickinson's kitchen to Bowles' gate, till she finally stares at her very soul. The use of the temporal now at the end of each spatial stride conveys an urgency that escalates line by line, till its imminence becomes rather pressing, to say the least, as it resembles an ominous advance, especially since she has immediately before equated the lady at the door with death. To enhance the picture of the confrontation, Dickinson lines up her troop of words as if they stand against a mirror, the one exactly below the other (Picture 37).

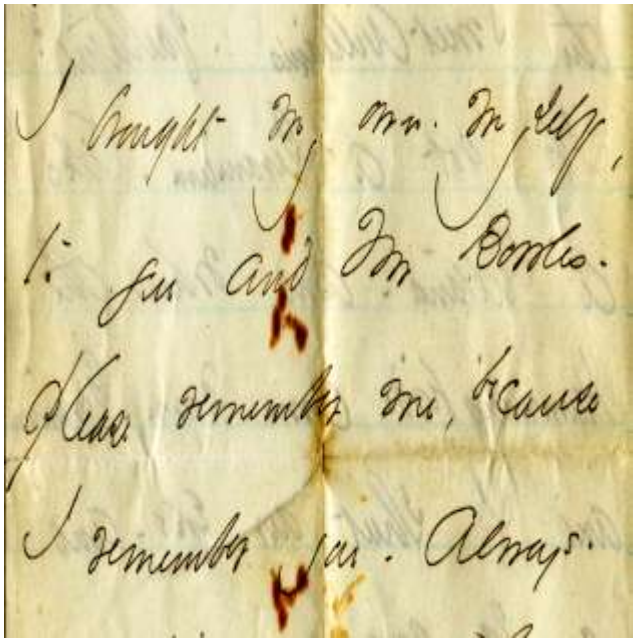


Picture 37: Emily Dickinson letter to Mary Bowles, in Box 8, Folder 41, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:4408>.

"I can think how you look. You can't think how I look". *Antimetabole*, which entails subjects switching places with objects, and the negation in the second sentence mean that Dickinson succeeds in surpassing physical objects to reach Bowles, whereas Mary cannot do the same.

Mary Bowles' long overdue reply has been the subject of her letter all along. She has not acknowledged the receipt of Dickinson by means of her letter which she mentions at the beginning of it by "I wish I knew if you kept me", and nearly at the end by "I brought my own [love] – myself". Dickinson becomes simultaneously the

agent and the patient of her action in addition to moving one more step closer to bridge the gap evident in her placing herself and Bowles in different lines, by using the verb bring which implies carrying from one place to the other as well as the word Myself which stands for her physical presence. (Picture 38):



I brought my own – myself

to you and Mr Bowles.

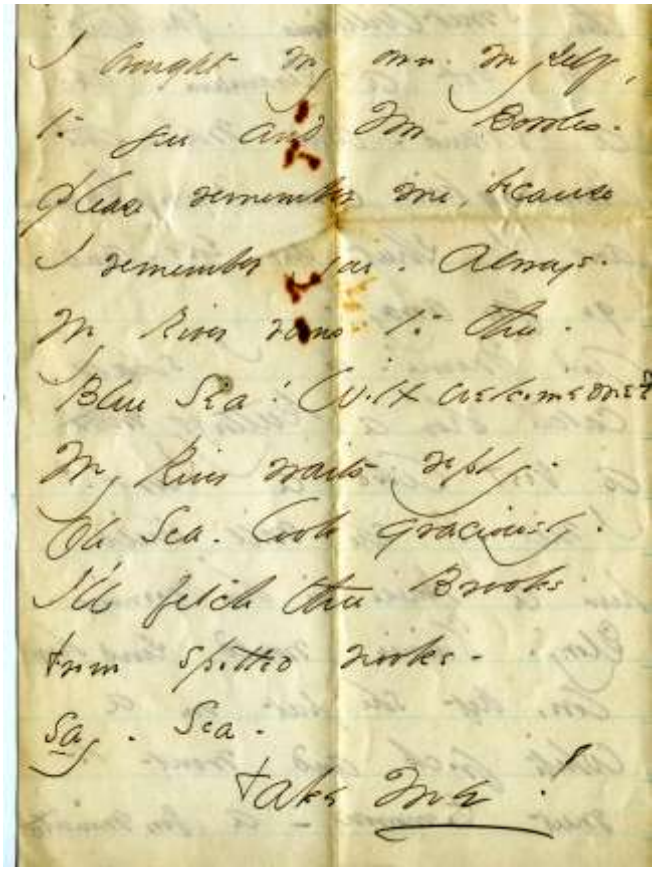
Please remember me because

I remember you – Always

Picture 38: Emily Dickinson letter to Mary Bowles, in Box 8, Folder 41, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:4408>.

Even though their physical distance is evident in the first two lines on which they are placed separately, it is annulled by the plea on the third line where remembrance becomes a form of contact. The fourth line substitutes a conventional closing of the letter -- typically set apart from the corpus of the letter proper -- with the justification for the unifying request she makes in the line above ("because"), rendering her closing/separation indivisible from the above, and from them.

Dickinson and her letter coincided, and she encloses a poem which though indistinguishable in form from the rest of the letter built on the River theme she has already used, urging her to pick up their correspondence (Picture 39).



I brought my own – Myself

to you and Mr Bowles […]

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 nooks –

say – Sea –

Take *me*!

Picture 39: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, in Box 8, Folder 41, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:4408>.

Her plea does not seem to make much of a difference though, since Dickinson has to urge Mary Bowles again "for just a word with [her] own hand" (L 253) forcing the latter to wonder "why you write - so" (L 262). Dickinson replies: "Because – I cannot help it – I like to have you know some care so when your life gets faint for it's other life -- you can lean on us -- We wont break, Mary. We look very small -- but the Reed can carry weight" (ibid).

In a similar vein she writes to Bowles, who is abroad:

> 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 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 Northampton, 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. (L 272)

Dickinson's physical presence on the paper through her handwriting eliminates her absence and enables her to travel through time and space to meet Bowles. Painfully aware of the "Sea" between them, she tracks the steamer that took him away in an attempt to wipe away the ocean that separates them. Dickinson carries the macrocosm of Nature, the Hills, the flowers and the bright autumnal Skies, over to him in an effort to retain a shared referential point, her cosmos that, regardless of the seasonal changes, is permanent, always waiting for him to come back to her. Time is inextricably bound with space, and it is chopped away through a peculiar countdown: its passing is not measured by the linear succession of days or months but by the changes in nature forming milestones towards Bowles' return. Time is too abstract and immaterial for her to handle; she has to materialize it in its concrete symbols. The Grape, the Pippin, the Chestnut, separated with dashes yet squeezed into the same sentence, resemble a rapid time lapse and constitute tangible proofs that time has indeed passed, that his coming back gets closer. The projection of her spatiotemporal zone into his and vice versa makes them coincide, even apparitionally, and she constructs an a-temporal, a-spatial niche, a *chronotope*, in which the epistolary displacement is annulled so that they can see each other; he has already returned and rings her bell. Her attempt to coordinate their spatiotemporal zones obscures or even eliminates the boundaries both of the physical world and of the epistolary cosmos and produces time textually. Unlike time in the poem, "If you were coming in the Fall," which opens up to infinity, in this letter, time moves painfully slowly, closing steadily in his return, "[Him]self".

> 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, til my fingers dropped
Into Van Dieman's Land,

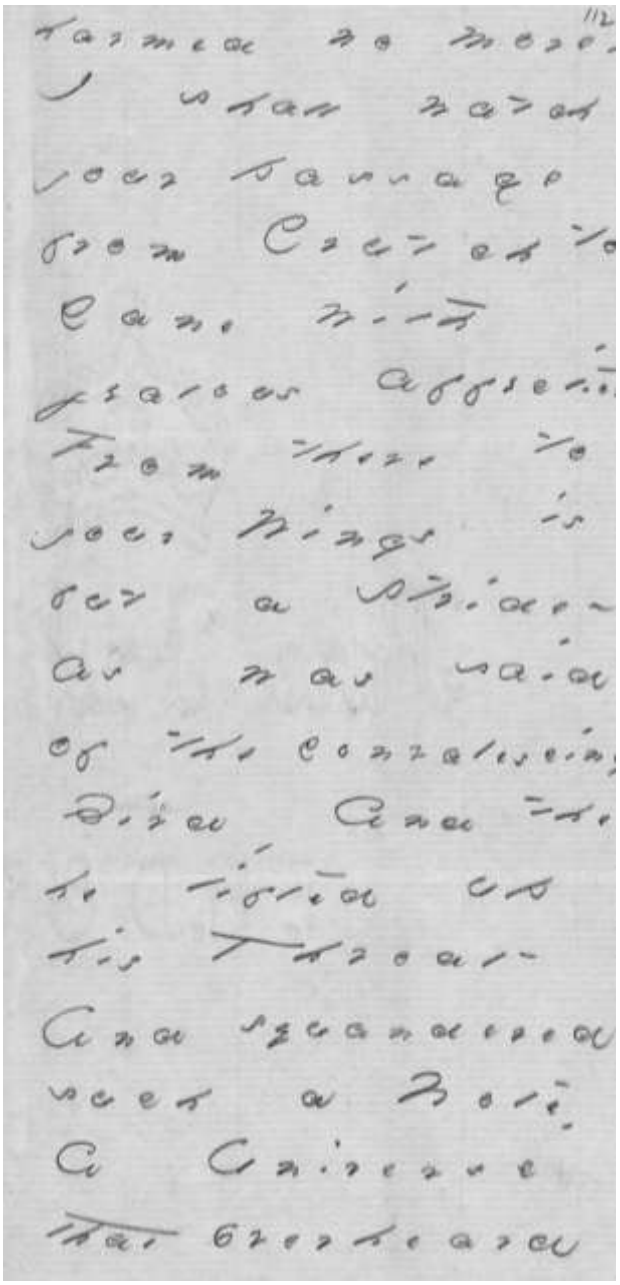
If certain, when this life was out---
That yours and mine, should be
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity---

But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee---
That will not state--- its sting (P 511)

In both the letter and the poem, the absence of a loved person is unbearable, and Dickinson attempts to measure the time till their get-together. However, the persona of the poem, though willing to wait till eternity, feels uncertainty buzzing around and is in a constant uneasiness as she can neither tell the time that the much anticipated (re)union will take place nor if it will actually take place. In the letter, however, though the temporal point is given, it does not alleviate the separation or the longing which urges Dickinson to come up with reachable time segments to ease her frustration.

In a letter to Helen Hunt Jackson to wish her recovery, Dickinson transforms the lines of her letter to a runway for Jackson to muster strength and stand on her feet again. Referring to the accident and the stoicism with which Jackson coped with it on the first page as a past calamity, Dickinson proceeds into present and future time by

starting the second page with the wish that Jackson will be “harmed no more” (Picture 40, L 937). She continues by describing what seems to be a Bird’s lift off the ground, placing each phase on a different line:



I shall watch
your passage
from Crutch to
Cane with
jealous affection.
From there to
your Wings is
but a stride
-- as was said
of the convalescing
Bird and then
he lifted up
his Throat
and squandered
such a Note
A Universe
that overheard
[is stricken by it yet.]

Picture 40: Jackson, Helen Hunt, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter signed to Helen Hunt Jackson, September 1884.* Sep 1884. Web. 27 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq978155z>.

The last two words of her letter in prose are the first of a poem which starts right after it, with no line break discernible whatsoever, adding another link to her

recovery. The horizon of Jackson's recovery extends both spatially and temporally, with Dickinson propelling her slowly but steadily into the air.

Dickinson's configuration of the physicality of the page into presence/absence, separation or closeness is indicative of her perception of it as her hologram. The more she closes herself in her Father's House, the more she opens herself to her beloved ones outside her kingdom; besides imagination, it is letters that aid her in traversing its boundaries; they become the vehicle that transport not only her but her correspondents as well in and out of her self-contained cosmos, sweeping the apparitional epistolary society she has constructed off its feet and carrying it into her Fairyland.

3.3. Dickinson's letters as metaphors of her self

In her early letters of the second phase of her correspondence, Dickinson seems to acknowledge several epistolary limitations as noted by letter manuals. A letter writer has to "imagine [they had] an interview with the absent but limited within few minutes", select the most important information, and include anything else that might "be interesting if time and paper allow" (*New Letter-writer* xiiii). Besides the spatiotemporal discrepancy between the correspondents, the physical body of the letter imposes further spatial restrictions depriving them of the chance to "converse with pen in hand" (Houghton 323) unlimitedly. Dickinson "thought it value to hear [her correspondent's] voice even at so great distance" (L 441), yet their getting in touch through a letter is lacking compared to their presence: "Interview is acres, while the broadest letter feels a bandaged place" (L 360). Another shortcoming of the letter as a means of getting in contact with her beloved is that letters are "less than spoken words for the gleam of the eye and the tone of the voice are wanting" (Thorold 6-7). Even though the letter can feign presence, it lacks certain paralinguistic features that complement or enhance the actual human contact, and Dickinson is all too aware of this. After Perez Cowan's sister's death, Dickinson sends him a condolence letter, but she remarks that "The subject hurts me so that I will put it down, because it hurts you. We bruise each other less in talking than in writing, for then a quiet accent helps words themselves too hard" (L 332).

To envelop the sense of non-presence of her addressees in her sense of present and vice versa, Dickinson toils to deconstruct the presence/absence hierarchy by employing several techniques, which either adapt or change drastically what is dictated by the norms. The introduction serves as a means of bridging the gap between this specificity and a typical introductory sentence reads: "Your welcome letter my very dear friend arrived today" (Westlake 35). Dickinson, on the other hand, writes to Elizabeth Holland: "To 'gain the whole World' in the Evening Mail, without the baleful forfeit hinted in the Scripture, was indeed achievement -- and I was led resisting to Bed, but Vinnie was firm as the Soudan --" (L 979). The welcome letter of the conventional beginning is transformed into the key to epistolary Paradise. It becomes the means of unifying the material World of the Bible or the physical body-letter with the spiritual world, that is, the presence-in-absence of the sender through it, which is "indeed "achievement".

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the USA, whose letters are included in letter-writing manuals as extraordinary specimens, writes to his daughter Martha: "I was happy, my dear Patsy, to receive on my arrival here your letter informing me of your good health and occupation" (Westlake 89). The separate spatiotemporal specifics of the epistolary dyad are clearly indicated, and his letter constitutes a link between them, serving the exact purpose of the medium. Dickinson writes to her aunt Cornelia Sweetser: "Your little Note dropped in upon us as softly as the flake of Snow that followed it, as spacious and as stainless, a paragraph from Every Where -- to which we never go --" (L 951). Her aunt's letter originating from the everywhere blends place and time and its arrival concurs with the snow, around Dickinson's universe, its purity erasing origin and history, thus equalizing spatiotemporal differences. Dickinson's equation of the letter to short-lived snowflakes underlines its ephemeral nature regardless of the joy it brings to its recipients.

Another common introductory sentence used to bridge the spatiotemporal gap between correspondents before they proceed to the body of the letter is: "Since I last wrote to you strange things have occurred" (Westlake 35). Dickinson begins a letter to her cousin Perez Cowan: "It is long since I knew of you, Peter, and much may have happened to both, but that is the rarest Book which opened at whatever page, equally enchants us (L 386). Although Dickinson adopts the cliché thought, she expands and envelopes it into a broader scope, that of their entire lifetime, which in turn functions as an aphorism applicable to every individual. Higginson closes one of his few

surviving letters to Dickinson: “I always am glad to hear from you and hope that your New Year may be very happy” (L 405a) a formal, ready- made closing, devoid of any individuality and personal touch. Dickinson starts a letter to her aunt Catherine Sweetser by referring to “Aunt Kate and the Sultans have left the Garden now, and parting with my own, one recalls their sweet companionship” (L 668), going on to the flowers of her garden which “perished with beautiful reluctance, like an evening star”. After mentioning the condition of her invalid mother and Lavinia, she makes a full circle by uniting the beginning and ending of her letter, initiating yet another by appealing for “News of your Sultans and yourself, would be equally lovely, when you feel inclined. Blossoms have their Leisures” (L 668). This circle encloses the message of the letter and endows it with a highly personalized tone which can abide by an epistolary law regarding the “individuality” of the letter as “message from one we love or esteem sent expressly on an errant of kindness to ourselves” (*Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* iii). However, this epistolary compliance runs contrary to Dickinson’s defiance of conventionality. Her aunt is aware of Dickinson’s not going out, yet it sounds as if she has tried to find some time to visit her aunt and has to resort to writing a letter only because she has failed to do so. Dickinson draws Cornelia Sweetser not only into a common spatiotemporal epistolary point by “com[ing] with [her] pencil” but into the world Dickinson has created for herself, inviting her to a game of pretending not only on epistolary terms but in real life as well.

Besides modifying the norms, Dickinson makes use of various ways of addressing her recipients to efface distance. She starts several letters asking her recipients a question as if addressing them face-to-face: while in Cambridge for her eye treatment she begins a letter to Vinnie: “Does Vinnie think of Sister?” (L 296) The immediacy of the question, of the apostrophe, is counterbalanced by the detached tone of avoiding the first and second person pronouns, which underlines the distance between them and voices Dickinson’s anxiety. Asking Elizabeth Holland for forgiveness for the latter’s misunderstanding of the date that Austin will visit them, she starts her letter with the plea: “Will my little sister excuse me?” (L 491) and in a condolence letter to Perez Cowan on the death of his little daughter she wonders: “Will it comfort my grieved cousin to know that Emily and Vinnie are among the ones this moment thinking of him with peculiar tenderness and is his sweet wife too faint to remember to Whom her loved one is consigned” (L 716). This way of

phrasing would suit a formal note written in the third person, sent as a request or invitation and not a letter, let alone one written on extremely personal circumstances. Dickinson, however, obliterates not only the typical introductions but the spatiotemporal gap between them, and by adding urgency and immediacy she strides beyond the epistolary limits over to her beloved asking or offering emotional togetherness. She also employs rhetorical questions at the beginning of some letters; in a letter to Higginson after his long epistolary silence she wonders: "Must I lose the Friend that saved my Life, without inquiring why?" (L 621) Her question, which functions as a negative assertion, is pressing as she practically demands for the resumption of the broken epistolary chain. In a thank-you letter to Sarah Elizabeth Tuckerman she wonders: "Is it that words are suddenly small or that we are suddenly large, that they cease to suffice us, to thank a friend?" (L 556) In this case, Dickinson employs this direct address to convey the depth of her feelings and initiate or engage in some sort of conversation with her neighbor. The immediacy and promptness of addressing her recipients with a question involves both poles of the correspondence interacting as if they were talking in person.

Another means of Dickinson's using the introduction to draw the epistolary poles together is opening her letters with sentences that conventionally close them: "With a kiss and a Flower" (L 699), "With untold thanks" (L 847) "Ned, with indignation" (L 570), so that the recipient's last remark or gesture becomes her first response. She even begins by directly answering questions asked in the recipient's present-now past, evident in the quoting marks: "Yes, little Sister, we 'thought of you'" (L 678), or suggesting her current disagreement with a previous statement made in another temporal-spatial zone: "But Susan is a stranger yet" (L 530). The two distinct temporal-spatial poles are merged, though they retain the other as other, producing difference. In the same vein, imperatives at the beginning of several letters such as "Don't cry dear Mary" (L 216) or "Stay with us" (L 829) indicate immediacy and physical proximity. Dickinson makes use of shared referential points which form a code with her correspondents from the first line of her letter. Sentences like "I find it friend – I read it – I stop" (L 171), "I can't explain it, Mr Bowles" (L 219), "Don't do such things dear Sue" make sense only to those addressed, as the reader is unable to comprehend what they refer to.

Even so, Dickinson's greatest concern regarding the constraints imposed by spatiotemporal difference does not abate. Acknowledging them, she writes to Bowles:

“My voice is not quite loud enough to cross so many fields, which will, if you please, apologize for my pencil” (L 205); the only she can do is to “wish [her Norcross cousins] were with me, not precisely here, but in those sweet mansions the mind likes to suppose” (L 394). The letter is the means through which she endeavors to annul absence and visualize presence in absence in the same way she tries to handle it in her youth: “when Flowers annually died and [she] was a child, [and she] used to read Dr Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence - assuring [her] they lived” (L 488). The distinction between the epistolary poles and their difficulty in coexisting torment her and she writes:

> Don't tell, dear Mrs. Holland, but wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes, and in it as I read today, I found a verse like this, where friends should “go no more out” and there were “no tears,” and I wished as I sat down to-night that we were there -- not here -- and that wonderful world had commenced, which makes such promises, and rather than write you, I were by your side, and the “hundred and forty and four thousand” where chatting pleasantly, yet not disturbing us. (L 185)

However functional the letter might be, the correspondents are set apart and Dickinson envisages uniting with her friend in the word-to-come. However helpful letter writing might be, though, spatiotemporal discrepancy leaves its marks: “I send you a flower from my garden – though it dies in reaching you will know it lived when it left my hand” (L 512). Despite her frustration about this divergence, she keeps sending letters -- however outdated it might be -- as they offer solace any time: “Our little Note was written several days ago, but delayed for Vinnie. Perhaps it's circumstances cease. Tears do not outgrow, however, so I venture sending. Landscapes reverence the Frost, though it's gripe be past” (L 351).

A letter is by definition make-believe presence; correspondents acknowledge spatiotemporal difference and absence and attempt to efface the gap through the letter. Dickinson does not break new ground regarding this key epistolary property; however, the ways in which she attempts to obliterate the epistolary limits are indeed groundbreaking. According to the metaphysics of presence, writing in any form is considered as the subordinate term of the oppositional hierarchy concerning the determination of being. In this sense, letters, written at the absence of the recipient,

are marked by what Derrida terms secondariness which constitutes a lapse from firstness (Lucy 87). However, as Derrida argues, everything begins in representation as representation, that is, re-presentation of a presence that comes first. Representation constitutes a fine example of secondariness, as there is no pure origin or identity outside effacement and substitution. It is not presence that is originary but *diffèrance*. Dickinson's letters as the simulation of her presence, enveloping the past, her presence at the time of writing the letter, and the present, her re-presence at the time of her recipient reading it, constitute a trace that through *diffèrance* attempt to span the temporal and spatial gap that separates the correspondents. It is noteworthy that she uses the verb 'write' at the introduction of her letters fewer than ten times in the nearly 900 hundred letters of this period. She was not very keen on using it during the first phase either, though she used it twice as much in just 177 letters. This is not accidental; Dickinson perceives the letter as the metaphor, a proxy self, and she beams herself up, through spatiotemporal boundaries to her recipient. Dickinson does send the letter as a "representative of [her] person" (*Aids in Epistolary Correspondence* 7), evident in the somaticity with which she invests it. She does not exactly write what she wants; she goes to her recipients and tells them in person, she even "consign[s] [her]self" to Elizabeth Holland (L 888). Dickinson acknowledges the spatiotemporal gap between them, evident in the spacing between the greeting -- when one exists -- and the body of the letter, reflective of her demarcation of her private space apart from them. Yet, when they face a problem, often, she "hasten[s] to [them]" (L 516) promptly, omitting any greetings and addressing the situation directly. Dickinson transcends spatiotemporal boundaries and is present in any difficulty her correspondents might have as in the case of Mary Bowles' third stillborn child "The waves are very big, but every one that covers you, covers us, too. Dear Mary, you can't see us, but we are close at your side. May we comfort you?" (L 216) In several of her letters she "come[s] to comfort" her recipient or "tell[s] [them] how glad" she is (L 244), and, if necessary, she "hasten[s]" to them "because no moment must be lost when a heart is breaking" (L 536). After ceasing to "cross [her] Father's ground to any House or town" (L 330), the letter becomes her main link to those fenced out. She continues to "come *with* [her] Pencil" (L 536) and she "tell[s her] pencil to make no noise and [*they* would] go to the House of a Friend" (L 888 emphasis added). The pencil transcends its function as an instrument of inscribing words on a sheet of paper, and it becomes both the vehicle, her time machine, and her

escort with which she visits her correspondents. She writes to Edward Dwight after his wife's death:

> We thought for sorrow -- perhaps you had rather no one talk -- but we had rather go away -- when our friend is *glad* -- We never like to leave the eye that is full of tears -- and if too -- it be one that always looked so kind on us -- that makes it harder -- I suppose your friend -- the Stranger -- can comfort more than all of us -- but that is Dusk -- to me -- and so I knock tonight -- on that far study door -- that used to open kindly -- but if you'd rather see no one -- you need not say "Come in". (L 243)

It sounds as if Dickinson stands at the door asking permission to enter the house in person, but for the deictic words "that far" which betray the spatiotemporal difference. The lack of any lexical chain pertaining to epistolary procedures and the use of one consisting of agentive, present tense verbs pertaining to an actual visit instead, that is, 'talk', go away, knock, see, come in, enhance both the immediacy and the urgency of the letter; the next thing one can do is to go open that door. The same applies to a letter written to her aunt Catharine Sweetser after her son's death: "I stayed from you, but I thought by today, perhaps you would like to see me, if I came quite soft and brought no noisy words. But when I am most sorry, I can say nothing so I will only kiss you and go far away" (L 338). In this case, Dickinson enters the house and not only expresses her sympathy but physically kisses her aunt as well. In other cases, she refrains from visiting even in a non-physical way as she "knew [Mr. Bowles who was sick] needed light – and air – so [she] didn't come" (L 241). Yet, she is quick to offer her sympathy to anyone who is in distress as in the case of Mrs. Hills whose house was burnt down during a fire: "We are ignorant of the dear friends, and eager to know how they are, and assure them that we are near them in these grieved hours" (L 639).

Dickinson feels the need to apologize for "com[ing] so often -- now -- [she] might have tired" (L 247) her correspondents and she asks them to "excuse [her] for staying so long" (L 825). She expresses her fear that she might "disturb" her correspondents (L 723) because she knows from personal experience that "when I am most grieved I had rather no one would speak to me" (L 338); this experience forces her to apologize for writing to Charles Clark whose brother, Wadsworth's friend, is

seriously ill since “a sick Room is at times too sacred a place for a Friend’s Knock” (L 821). However, despite the fact she “had feared to follow [Higginson after his wife died], lest [he] would rather be lonely”, she feels it imperative to let him “know [he was] deeply remembered” (L 519). However, Dickinson who values her private space more than anything considers even this imaginary transfer a violation and she asks for her recipients’ forgiveness either because she “trespass[es] the sorrow” (L 765) or “the gratitude” (L 766) or even because she simply “knock[s] on their door” (L 825). The boundaries she has drawn in her personal life become evident in her diction; trespassing is unlawful and not only one’s territory, but their rights are infringed as well. Dickinson, who has demarcated and guarded her private space vigilantly, considers any uninvited entrance into it as an offence and respects her recipients’ wish for guarding their own. Even when she dares to “disturb [them] by inquiry aloud” (L 826) she hurries to leave as she “fear[s she] fatigue[s]” them (L 776) or she “fear[s she] detain[ed] them (L 280). Time is equally important as one’s right to privacy and Dickinson apologizes for “trespass[ing] upon [their] thronged time” (L 1018).

Traditionally, every epistolary pole is situated in their terrain and tries to convey their side of the daily routine, asking for news of the other in an effort to come closer. However, Dickinson conflates epistolary territories, invading into her correspondents’ location there which clashes with her own here at the very time of her writing a letter; she pops out of it the moment they open the envelope and prompts an instantaneous cause-effect sequence of events. She pops in her recipients’ ground and tampers with their perception of time and place in various ways. “I must just show you a Bee, that is eating a Lilac at the Window. There -- there -- he is gone! How glad his family will be to see him!” (L 502) she writes to Elizabeth Holland directing on the first level, her friend’s attention to the Bee in Dickinson’s here but on a subsequent, directing the letter flying as a bee to Holland’s there. Alternatively, she merges the two poles by taking advantage of the weather elements. She urges Josiah Holland to look out of his window; if he does, he will see her as “I know [snowflakes] fall in Springfield; perhaps you see them now - and therefore I look out again, to see if you are looking” (L 181). Snowfall enables them to synchronize their coordinates and be together, if not spatially at least temporally. “We have very cold days -- since you went away -- and I think you hear the wind blow, far as the Brevoort House -- it comes from so far -- and crawls so -- Dont let it blow Baby away” (L 244) she writes to Mary Bowles and the howling of the wind which comes to Dickinson’s specifics

extend to Bowles', rendering them points on a shared spatiotemporal linearity. She writes her aunt Nellie Sweetser: "If you will lift your little Hands I will surely fill them, though not agree to let them go, but to that, your Lovers would not consent" (L 823), bridging the spatiotemporal difference between them. The only thing her aunt has to do is stretch out her hands and Dickinson will reach and touch her. Besides fusing her spatiotemporal zone with that of her correspondents', the letter-body is a metaphor of her physical body. "I have no sweet flowers to send you" she writes to Mary Bowles so "I enclose my heart; a little one, sunburnt, half broken sometimes, yet close as the spaniel, to it's friends" (L 196). On another occasion, she beams herself up to the Bowles' household and urges them: "Dear Mrs Bowles, dear Mr Bowles, dear Sally, Sam, and Meme, now all shut your eyes, while I do benediction!" (L 213) Dickinson transcends the boundaries like a "Poor Plover" and perches on a tree outside the Norcross' house begging them: "Now, my love, robins, for both of you, and when you and Vinnie sing at sunrise on the apple boughs, just cast your eye to my twig" (L 215). Alternatively, she encloses flowers or insects as in the following "Fly from Emily's window for Loo. Botanical name unknown" (L 340) provided "the Letter consents, a Fabric sometimes obdurate" (L 888).

Gradually, Dickinson makes use of her senses as instruments through which she spans the epistolary gap. She can reach her cousin Perez Cowan, who is an ordained Minister, through hearing which enables her to span the distance between them and attend his preaching "We can almost hear you announce the Text, when the Air is clear and how social if you should preach us a note some Sunday in Recess" (L 386). Hearing helps her coordinate with Maria Whitney, one of Bowles acquaintances, too, "I shall miss saying to Vinnie when we hear the Northampton Bell -- as in subtle states of the West we do -- "Miss Whitney is going to Church" -- though must not everywhere be Church to Hearts that have or have had -- a Friend? (L 643) In addition, having access to the same newspapers at the same temporal frame gives Dickinson the sense of sharing the same spatial frame as well and she writes to Elizabeth Holland: "When I look in the Morning Paper to see how the President is, I know you are looking too, and for once in the Day I am sure where you are, which is very friendly" (L 721). In other cases, her recipients are dragged into her spatiotemporal frame even though it is she who is supposed to share theirs as a sender. She invites her cousin Louise to come to Amherst "since it snows this morning, dear Loo, too fast for interruption, put your brown curls in a basket, and come and sit with

me" (L 199). During a very cold winter, she writes to Elizabeth Holland: "I hope you brought your open Fire with you, else your confiding Nose has ere this been nipped" (L 901) which constitutes a complete reversal; in both cases Dickinson is the sender, the one who should project her presence into the recipients' sphere. However, the phrasing denotes exactly the opposite: it is the receiver who is dragged into the sender's and shares Dickinson's spatiotemporal specifics. And sometimes, even, the metaphor goes so far that it is the physical that drags the text along: "The little notes shall go as fast as steam can take them. Our hearts already went. Would we could mail our faces for your dear encouragement" (L 329).

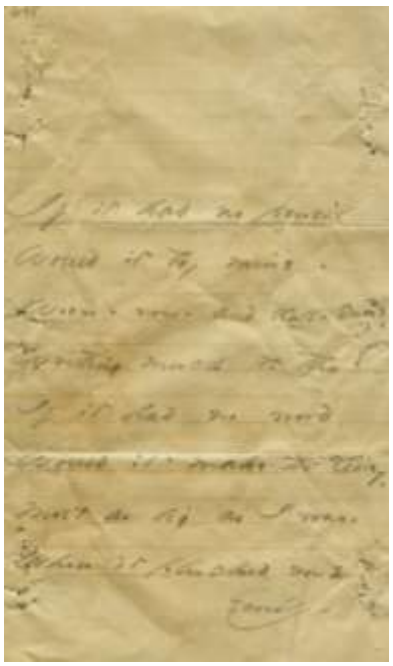
While Dickinson uses agentive, dynamic verbs, indicative of a deliberate doer or an initiator of the action, to project her presence via a body-letter in the absence of her physical body into the recipient's presence, receiving a letter is described with verbs of perception; she holds the position of the recipient subject. Dickinson does not hear *from* her senders but hears them directly as if in person; alternatively, she sees them inscribed on the paper; it is they who come to her now. "How pleasant it seemed to hear your voice. Why didn't you speak to us before?" (L 181) she writes to Elizabeth Holland, and she thanks Louise Norcross for one of her letters: "It was sweet and antique as birds to hear Loo's voice" (L 337). Over the years, although she continues using sensory verbs to acknowledge the reception of a letter, her diction evolves mirroring her staying apart from her correspondents. Although it is common to begin a letter by writing, for example, something like "it seemed real nice to see a little of your handwriting again – and so like you are the words" (Leyda 2: 217) as one of her correspondents, Adelaide Hills, did, Dickinson goes even further. She does not see the individual handwriting; it is the individual themselves she sees. She writes to Mrs. Jenkins, the pastor's wife, "It was pathetic to see your Voice instead of hearing it, for it has grown sweetly familiar in the House, as a Bird's" (L 501). The spatiotemporal split between Dickinson's seeing the letter, that is, reading it and Mrs. Jenkins' thoughts voiced on it becomes evident. Instead of hearing her as was the case before, that is, naturally during their conversation, there is a temporal lapse, indicative of spatial gap, too. "It seemed like going Home to see your beautiful thought once more" (L 413), she writes to Higginson and besides the spatiotemporal fissure evident in the two different stages in the letter's compilation and reading it, Dickinson uses metonymy, Higginson's thoughts stand for him.

Conventional letters not only acknowledge the spatiotemporal difference but they should make it perfectly clear: a heading including the name of the sender, "that by which an insulated individual is known on Earth and summoned in Judgment" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xviii), is to be written conspicuously along with a place, that is the "locality where […] generation had lived and will live" (ibid xviii), as well as the date, "the visible memorial of one of the day which came in its course and went" (ibid xix). Dickinson's letter is entirely incompatible to these prerequisites as she blurs this distinction and creates a *chronotope:* "the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 89). A *chronotope* is a characteristic of the novel; another indication that Dickinson trespasses the confinements of the epistolary genre and transforms her letters into fiction.

3.3.1. Dickinson and belated replies

Dickinson's notion of the letter to presence/absence works two ways as belated replies from her correspondents are treated as a painful disruption of the epistolary chain. During the first phase of her correspondence, Dickinson is very exacting as to the punctuality she expects from her correspondents. In the second, however, she is much less pressing. Not receiving a letter from them triggers some appeal or request to the negligent correspondent, but the forcefulness of her early demands is gone. Instead, is it melancholy or even fatalism that leads her to write to John Graves, one of her cousins: "Ah John -- Gone? Then I lift the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay another in, unto the Resurrection -- Then will I gather in Paradise, the blossoms fallen here, and on the shores of the sea of Light, seek my missing sands" (L 186)? She called Susan a Phantom shortly before, asking her "If it is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love in; but if it *lives* and *beats* still, still lives and beats for *me,* then say me *so*" (L 177). She alters the Phantom phraseology slightly in a letter to Mary Haven before the latter left Amherst: "Thank you for recollecting me in the sweet moss -- which your memory, I have lain in a little box, unto the Resurrection" (L 192). Dickinson uses the word phantom in a letter to Elizabeth Holland to allude to the non-corporeal communication that a letter entails (L 195): "You should have seen the fields go – gay little entomology! Swift little entomology! Dancer, and floor, and cadence quite gathered away, and I, a phantom, to

you a phantom, rehearse the story! An orator of feather unto an audience of fuzz, -- and pantomimic plaudits" (L 195). Her letter constitutes her phantom, contrasted to the immediate vividness of the buzzing fields. She describes the advent of autumn in her letter, signaled by the departure of the birds; this spatiotemporal change resembles the course of the letter which, originating from Dickinson to Holland, would transverse the gap. However, the severance of epistolary ties seem too final for her, a death per se. Replying to Kate Scott, one of Susan's friends, Dickinson reprimands her for her failure to retain the link but assured her that she had not "'dislimn[ed]'" as "Distinctly sweet your face stands in its phantom niche –- I touch your hand -- my cheek to your cheek -- I stroke your? vanished hair, Why did you enter, sister, since you must depart?" (L 222). Yet she has not given up expecting a letter from Scott, which becomes evident in Dickinson's oxymoron of her recalling the apparition in a tactile mode, touching and stroking. In the same letter, Dickinson does not accept Scott's excuses on the grounds that they are "quite unavailable" for a Lynx like her; she likens herself to the solitary, stealthy wild cats with the exceptional hearing and sight, and Kate to a Condor, the vulture fed on carcasses, as Dickinson wonders: "Had not its heart been torn enough but *you* must send your shred?" (ibid) This is the only obliquely aggressive letter Dickinson sent at the beginning of the second phase of her correspondence. Another oblique suggestion or urge is addressed to Samuel Bowles, to whom she sends one of her pencils in case he lacks one to write to her (P 921):



If it had no pencil,

Would it try mine –

Worn – now – and dull – sweet,

Writing much to thee.

If it had no word –

Would it make the Daisy,

Most as big as I was,

When it plucked me?

Picture 41: Emily Dickinson letter to Samuel Bowles, in Box 8, Folder 67, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:5717>)

Besides the obvious connotation of sending Bowles the means of writing back to her, the pencil stands for Dickinson's artistic brush, so to speak, as well as for her artistic individual skill; the symbol along with the poem-letter accentuate the poeticity of her epistolarity.

Gradually, she sounds pressing only when she is really concerned about her correspondents' health, as in the case of Elizabeth Holland's delay to answer:

> I write to you. I receive no letter. I say "they dignify my trust". I do not disbelieve. I go again. *Cardinals* wouldn't do it. Cockneys wouldn't do it, but I can't *stop* to strut, in a world where bells toll. I hear through visitor in town, that "Elizabeth Holland is not strong." The little peacock in me, tells me not to inquire again. Then I remember my tiny friend -- how brief she is -- how dear she is, and the peacock quite dies away. Now, you need not speak, for perhaps you are weary, and "Herod" requires all your thought, but if you are *well* -- let Annie draw me a little picture of an erect flower; if you are *ill*, she can hang the flower a little on one side! Then, I shall understand, and you need not stop to write me a letter. (L 269)

In that case, Dickinson privileges a picture of nature over words, undermining the letter and opting for transforming it to something natural, as for example, by personifying it.

Not receiving a letter from her correspondents widens the gap between them and, Dickinson having identified the letter with presence, as seen before, entails she cannot "see" them, as in the excerpt where she asks the Norcrosses to "never hide so long from your seeking Cousin" (L 925). Dickinson sees the letter as a metonymy of herself, evident in her urge to Perez Cowan to "recall me too to your other Sisters, who tho' they may have *mislaid* me I can always find and include me to your sweet Wife" (L 386, emphasis added). Occasionally Dickinson resorts to irony, only less often and in a less cutting way now, as after not having received a letter from Elizabeth Holland, she writes to her: "I hesitate where you are, but decide to indite my Letter to my Sister in 'Alexandria Bay,' as the Irishman does to his 'Mother in

Dublin'" (L 502). Her sarcastic reference to the stereotype of the Irish accentuates her diminution of status to a bumpkin by the unawareness of Holland's whereabouts. On another occasion, Dickinson reprimands her for not writing, only in the most indirect way: "The vitality of your syllables compensates for their infrequency" (L 492) and asks for the resumption of their broken communication in a quite gracious way: "Had I only a Postal, with your Smile, I should sleep safer" (L 475). Generally, she inquires why she has not received a letter only in the cases she fears something has happened to those she cared for.

For Dickinson, the letter is the proxy of its sender; any delay equates to the disruption of the epistolary chain in the way she sees it: her correspondents fail to coordinate their spatiotemporal specifics with hers and be in her presence, negating the *chronotope* she has created for their coexistence.

3.4. Are Dickinson's letters public or even letters?

The profound topics Dickinson handles in her letters along with the way her recipients are treated as her audience might lead to the conclusion that her letters are what the manuals call public, intended for the public but addressed to some individual (Westlake 14). In this case a memorandum of the topics should be taken, and the order of presentation should be prepared thoroughly. However, the intention of publishing one's letters, which entail that the public eye is considered, deprives the letter of its naturalness by clogging it with too many "turns and quibbles upon the sound of words" (Brady 248). Westlake claims that "the writer adopts th[e] form [of public letters] because it gives personal interest to what they say and because it admits of a more familiar style of treatment than a formal essay" (Westlake 14). Newman also claims that several authors "assume the form of letters in their publications" (Newman 184), texts of various genres which, while seemingly addressed to individuals, are in fact written for the public. He adds that "dropping the addresses prefixed to them, they differ in no respect from the essay or dissertation" (ibid 185).

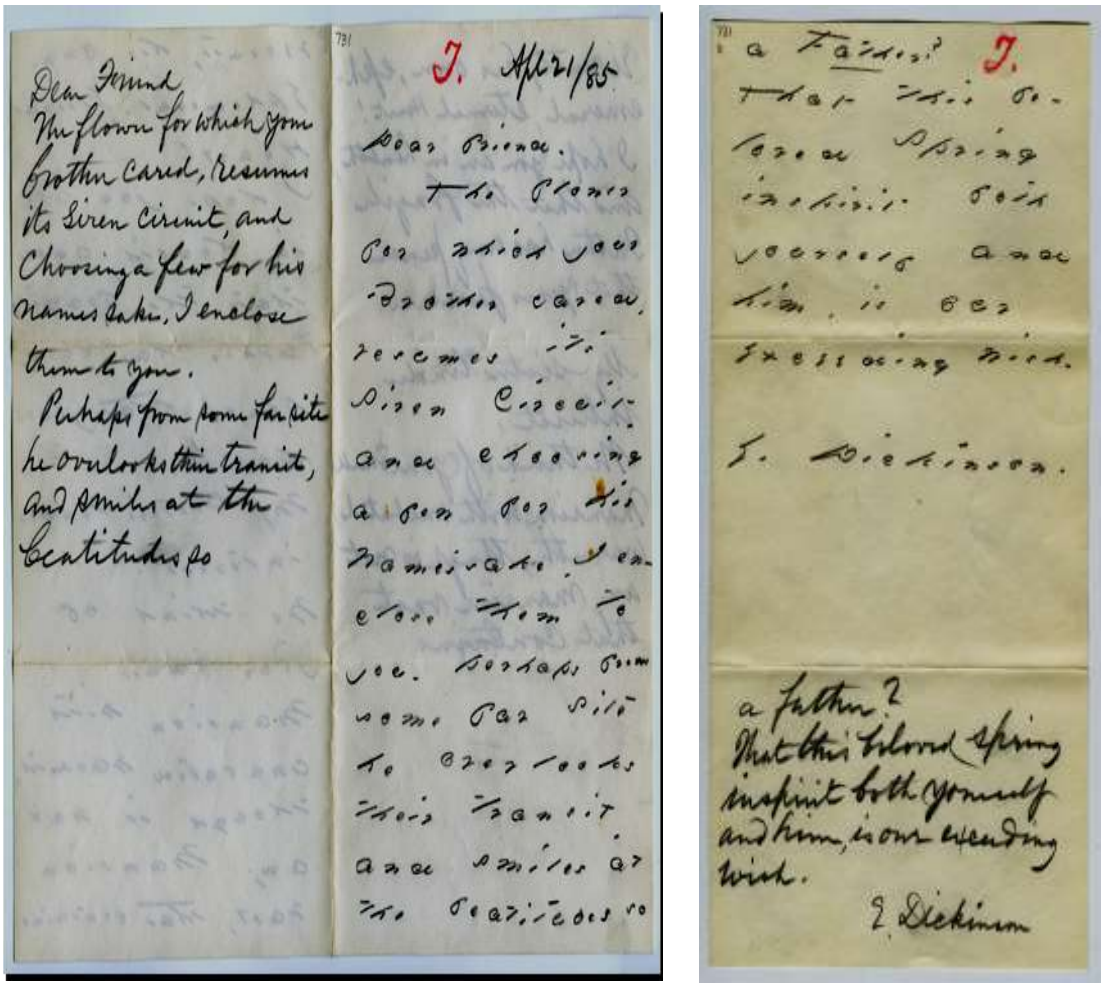
Are Dickinson's Letters public letters then? To begin with, they are not even letters in the conventional form. Stripped of spatiotemporal specifics and of personal deixis in their majority, and deviating from all epistolary norms, they cannot be classified as letters in the strict sense of the term. In addition, their style is not more familiar than an essay as Westlake proposes, as they are characterized by poetic

qualities, completely uncharacteristic of letters. They are neither essays nor dissertations as Newman suggests, since these literary pieces are "in part argumentative, and in part persuasive – such as is adapted to defend and enforce the opinions of a writer on any subject he [sic] would present to the considerations of his readers" (Newman 17). A good essay, he remarks, consists of an introduction, a proposition followed by arguments to support it and a conclusion. Though Dickinson's Letters do resonate with her personal stance to various fundamental issues, their structure does not comply with Newman's plan. Instead of introducing a topic and arguing about it, Dickinson states her propositional attitudes to it in the form of aphorisms, generic sentences whose truth must be taken at face value. What is more, her letters are an amalgam of narrative, descriptive and argumentative writing which defies its straightforward classification. Thus Dickinson's epistolarity becomes her arena of challenging epistolary conventions and transforming the prosaic utilitarian form of the letter into lyrical poetry.

3.5 The universal character of Dickinson's letters

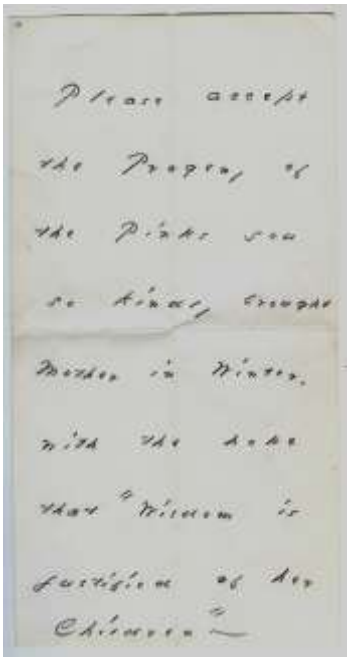
Contrary to the contemporary belief that the letter is "connected with the past, future unseen unknown" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* XIX), rendering correspondence strictly unsuitable for "universal entertainment and instruction" (ibid XI), Dickinson's mature letters function, as Derrida would put it, in the absence of every determined addressee (Derrida, 1982, 375). Both Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Johnson, who edited her Poems and Letters, mention that they had to date a great number of them based on differences in her handwriting.

In the 1850s and 1860s, there is a noticeable differentiation as regards both her handwriting and the layout of her letters. The early minute handwriting that sprawled on the pages is replaced by a considerably larger one, which dominates the page, not by rushing in all directions and occupying every inch of it, but by lolling about on each line. As already mentioned in the first phase of Dickinson's correspondence, it took Todd eight pages to transcribe just three or four of Dickinson's. The tables are turned from the mid-1850s onwards; the five pages of her letter to J Clark, one of Wadsworth's acquaintances, are transcribed in just one page. The transcripts Todd made on the body of some of Dickinson's letters are also indicative (Picture 42):



Picture 42: Emily Dickinson letter to Charles H. Clark, 1885, April, in Box 9, Folder 12, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. < https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:11937>.

Dickinson's handwriting changes considerably not only compared to that of her youth, but over the years of the second phase which might partly have to do with her eye problems. Up to nearly the end of 1870s, Dickinson's handwriting is cursive and large, slanting to the right of the page. The strokes of the letters are descending, and the words look as if they moved downwards to the end of the line, pointing to it and adding an urgency to reach it. Her frequent use of capital letters, which is against epistolary norms, is commented on by Jenkins, one of the children who carried her letters; "She made free use of capital letters, a thing we noticed with delight as it defied all the rules of the copy books with which we were familiar" (Jenkins 61).



Picture 43: Letter 43 (1851) Picture 44: Letter 418(1874) Picture 45: Letter 647 (1880)

Picture 43: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1851 June 15, in Box 7, Folder 1, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:8453>.

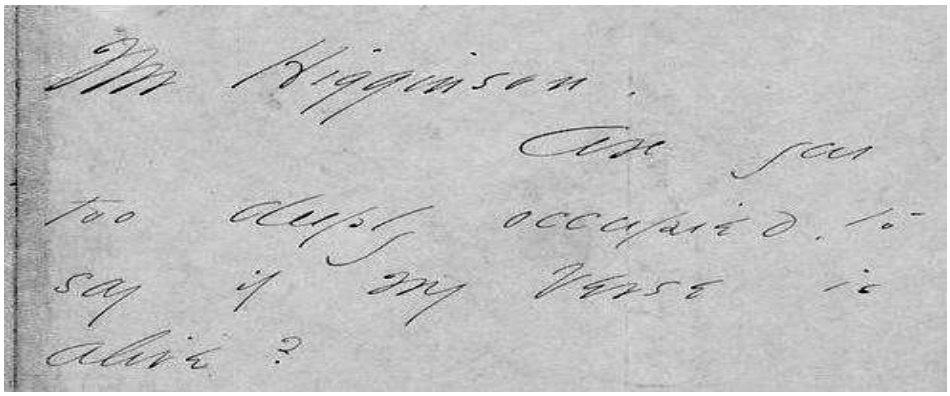
Picture 44: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, July 1874.* Jul 1874. Web. 27 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq977z80q>.

Picture 45: Emily Dickinson letter to Abigail Ingersol Cooper, about 1880, in Box 1, Folder 14, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:1959/>.

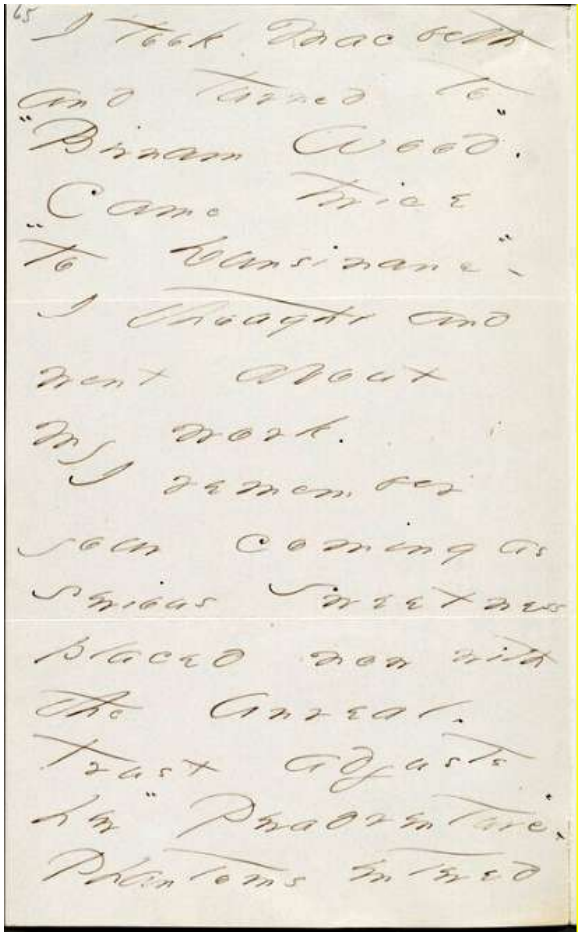
Her "I", that is, her ego, is conspicuous, set apart from the other words, and remains so throughout the second phase, unlike other letters that change. It seems reclining on the line as if she herself rests on a chaise lounge supervising the parade of the words on the lines.

Her capital 'A' is a Lower case-shaped 'a', indicative of an effort to "distinguish himself as an original person, of apparent naturalness and simplicity". [7] It slants rightwards, and it is open at the top, indicative of desire for communication and determination, according to graphology (Picture 46, L 260).

[7] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-analysis-letter-a/ last visited 28/7/21.



Picture 46: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 15 April 1862.* 15 Apr 1862. Web. 27 Jun 2021. https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/kh04mv60w.



Her 't' resembles an 'x', formed by long strokes as if they were swords; the bar leaning rightwards covering the rest of the word and touching the line (Picture 47, L 621). According to handwriting analysis, the descending bar indicates a person who "holds on to his ideas and beliefs".[8] When 't's coexist in a word by being the first and the last letter, for example in that or thought, they share the bar which crowns the whole word. The same applies to words that contain two 't's as in without; an indication of "quickness and ingenuity, ability for summarization, simplification, impatience and impulsiveness".[9]

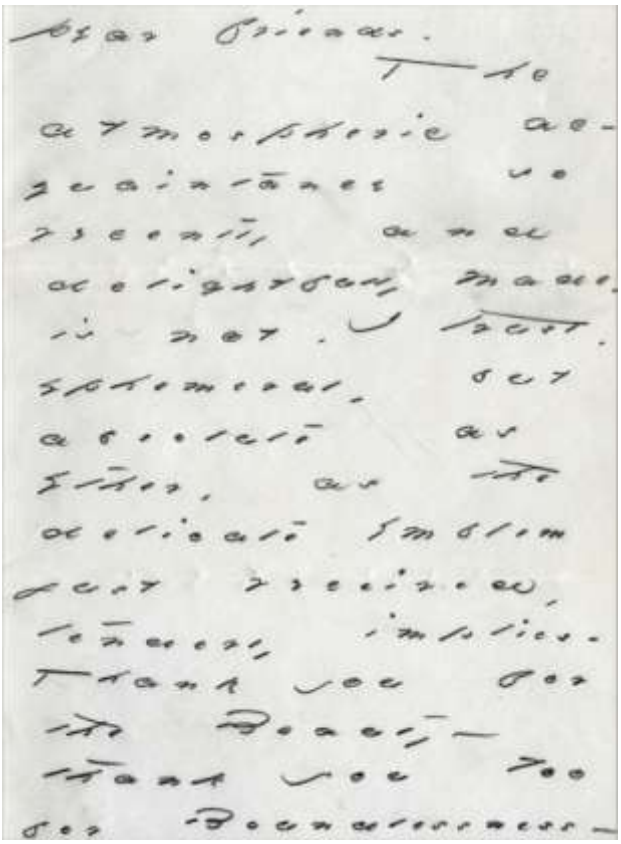
Picture 47: Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, and Emily Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson, Amherst, Mass., autograph*

[8] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-analysis-letter-t/ last visited 28/7/21.
[9] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-analysis-letter-t/ last visited 28/7/21.

letter signed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 27 September 1870. 27 Sep 1870. Web. 29 Jun 2021. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/fq977z37f>.

Although words are not connected to each other, the slanting of the letters of each word conveys a desire for connection with and proximity to the next. Jenkins notes that "all every letter is separate and alone standing bravely by itself as it were ready to assume all the responsibility of being where it is" (Jenkins 60).

Later, however, her handwriting changes considerably once again. From the calligraphic cursive handwriting of the first phase of Dickinson's correspondence "the model to imitate, what the norm dictates, the normative aspects of the Superego",[10] to the gradual development of her individual cursive handwriting up to roughly 1878, she then regresses to print writing, the very way schoolchildren are taught to write. Letters still slant to the right, less noticeably, though, indicative of "exaggerated dramatization in feelings […] exaggerated value for situations or people, loss of control, impulsiveness, passion, desire to call attention"[11], and each word seems to be isolated from its adjacent ones, indicative of "introversion and a tendency to isolation".[12]



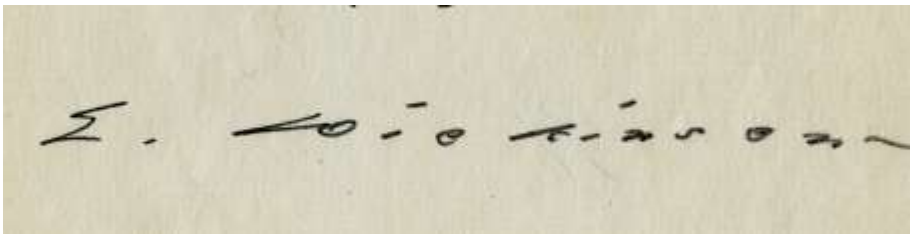
This "disconnected writing" reveals that the person "does not allow feelings come out spontaneously" and this observation is consistent with her meticulous drafting and editing her letters. This moving back to print writing deprives her handwriting of the angles or garlands that dominate the page and make the letters twirl and swirl on the page; the strokes are shorter, and her letters are smaller, rounder and much more legible, which according to handwriting analysis is a sign directly related to mental and "affective clarity of each

[10] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-interpretation/ last visited 28/7/21.
[11] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/slanted-handwriting/ last visited 28/7/21.
[12] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-interpretation/ last visited 28/7/21.

individual".[13] The bar on her 't' is outside the stem, on the left, indicative of introversion (Picture 48, L 953).

Picture 48: Emily Dickinson letter to Mr. and Mrs. E. J. Loomis 1884 November 19, in Box 9, Folder 68, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:7069.

The initial of her first name, E, resembles a Greek sigma or "two concave arcs. This capital E looks like two eyes staring at something and it denotes a keen observer". [14] The capital D of her surname looks as if it bent under this influence, sweeping along the rest of the letters (Picture 49, L 569). Both E and D resemble the way these letters are formed in Greek which "is a sign of culture, a literary-oriented individual […] usually found among intellectuals and people with high IQs".[15]



Picture 49: Emily Dickinson letter to Austin Dickinson, 1852 March 7, in Box 7, Folder 30, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:12758/asc:12761.

It is extremely noteworthy that Dickinson's handwriting mirrors her personality and the changes she has gone through over the years with an incredible precision. What is even more noteworthy, however, is that this traceable evolution and differentiation, affected by temporality, does not affect the content of the letters which is a-referential and a-temporal. Their printed form makes it impossible to tie the majority of Dickinson's letters to specific occasions but even this differentiation in handwriting does not help much Johnson and Ward in dating her letters. On rare occasions do they date some letters based not only on Dickinson's handwriting but on their content which is reminiscent of another letter, as with letter 467 to Susan:

[13] https://www.handwriting-graphology.com/handwriting-interpretation/ last visited 28/7/21.
[14]http://EzineArticles.com/1127460 last visited 28/7/21.
[15] http://EzineArticles.com/1127460 last visited 28/7/21.

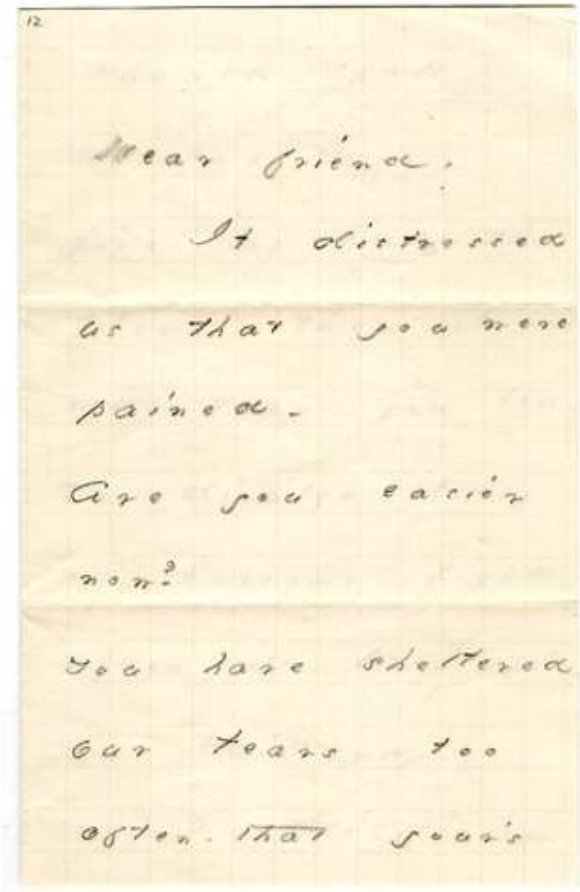
“placed here because somewhat echoes” the previous one (Johnson & Ward 558). Nearly all her recipients supersrcibed the date on the manuscript, an intercession which, despite facilitating the classification of the letters chronologically, violates Dickinson’s intent to extract her letters from temporal linearity. On the rare occasions there is some time reference; e.g Wednesday, Johnson and Ward opt for excluding hers and retaining the date given by her recipients, normalizing thus the edition of the Letters as a genre, strictly dependent on spatiotemporal specificity.

As opposed to conventional letters whose “chief charm is their individuality” (*Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* ix) bound to the spatiotemporal specifics and poles, the charm of Dickinson’s Letters is their universality, evident in several aspects.

It is said that "events and proofs of the greatest importance have hung upon the date of a single letter (Cooke 465) consequently the date of the receipt of the letter that initiated the reply should be mentioned in the introduction to confirm delivery. However, Dickinson invariably absconds from stating the date of the letter received. In her early letters she includes some time reference to the time she has *not* heard from her correspondents, linking their temporal zone to hers only to emphasize how long overdue their letter is. Later, the epistolary sender-receiver alteration becomes less clear; apart from the letters triggered by somebody’s death, some illness or a calamity, the rest are indefinite links in the epistolary chain. Although it is imperative to bind the letter to spatiotemporal specifics, Dickinson hardly ever mentions either of them rendering it a suspended step in time; the letter, released from its entrapment into spatial-temporal context, is free to be inscribed as a trace in an infinite chain with no origin and no end. What really matters to Dickinson is to establish a common place by merging spatiotemporal zones, to create a fictional heterotopia. The union of the correspondents and their placement in a shared time and space creates a time capsule for them to interact, unrelated to calendar or geographical location. The general omission of person, time or place deictic words unhinges her letter from the present and the specific occasion that prompts it making the letter repeatable, showing its potential meaning to be Derridean *diffèrance*. Events function as stimuli for Dickinson who, after mentioning them in passing, generalizes inserting them into a universal chain of events, isolating them from their time-location microcosm and enclosing them into a grander pattern, a macrocosm. For Dickinson the properties of the letter are summated in the following excerpt:

> The last April that father lived, lived I mean below, there were several snow-storms, and the birds were so frightened and cold they sat by the kitchen door. Father went to the barn in his slippers and came back with a breakfast of grain for each, and hid himself while he scattered it, lest it embarrass them. Ignorant of the name or fate of their benefactor, their descendants are singing this afternoon. As I glanced at your lovely gift, his April returned. (L 644)

Though the seed of her father's kindness is physical and has perished with him, the memory of it is seeded in her mind and through memory she can relive it at any time. Natural life, the letter as exchange of news, may perish but the letter as reflection on whole life, as a fiction of life lasts indefinitely. In a letter to Abigail Cooper, a neighbor, Dickinson tries to comfort her for an unidentified, unnamed misfortune as what seems to matter is the results of a past action that overshadow the present (Picture 50, L 606).



should fall

unsolaced –

Give us half the

Thorn - then it

will tear you less

- To divulge itself

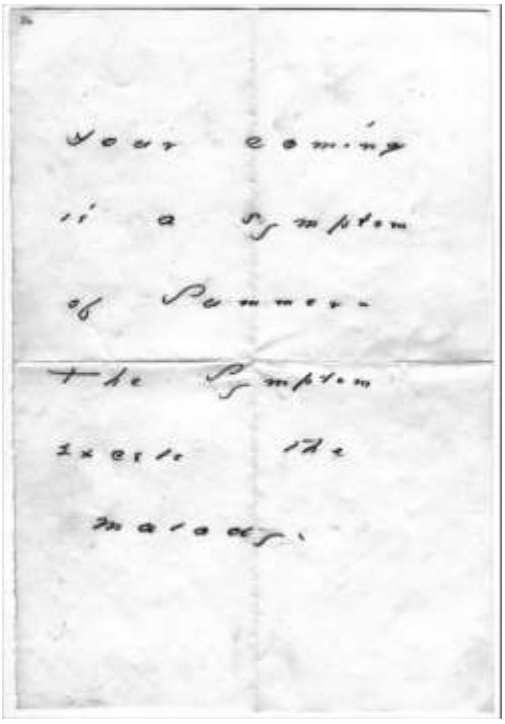
is Sorrow's Right

- never - its presumption.

Picture 50: Emily Dickinson letter to Abigail Cooper, 1879, in Box 1, Folder 12, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:10672.

The structure of the letter, which consists of four extremely short paragraphs -- the first two comprise just one sentence -- constitutes a temporal ordering and remind a journey into time, from past to eternity. Dickinson treats time both referentially and semantically. The pivotal now of the second paragraph stands alone on the line; the past precedes in the first paragraph as it always does in the temporal linear dimension, while what follows in the next concerns the future actions. The present time moves continuously forward. What Dickinson needs to do is to span it or even better conflate it. The subsequent use of the present perfect tense connects the event and the two correspondents. Dickinson and Cooper are drawn closer in time; past and present are fused which enables Dickinson to offer Cooper her sympathy in person, directly, evident in the use of imperative, which constitutes not only a request but also performs an act, that of sharing Cooper's burden. She then extends this single event onto the linear line, elevating it to a universal condition by having an infinitive, a non-finite verb, without a subject, transforming a fixed-in-time subjective experience into a timeless, objective truth, applicable to every similar situation regardless of time and people.

Since some of her letters contain no salutation or close, neither the sender nor the recipient are specified; they are also completely a-temporal and a-referential; consequently, they could have been or be addressed to anyone on a similar occasion. The following is a note sent to Sara Tuckerman (Picture 51, L 588) after she visited Dickinson as Johnson conjectures (Johnson & Ward 633).



Your coming

is a symptom

of Summer –

The Symptom

excels the

malady.

Picture 51: Emily Dickinson letter to Sarah Tuckerman, 1879, in Box 1 Folder 36, Emily Dickinson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:1013.

It is noteworthy that only some 170 out of the nearly 900 letters from the second phase begin with the pronoun I, and they mainly comprise condolence or thank-you letters. The omission of person deictics is indicative of her attempt to release them from a specific person or occasion, extending thus to any person or occasion. Interestingly, only 20 out of 160 of the letters of the last 2 years of her life begin with I. From the remaining, 112 contain the pronoun I only nearly at the end of the first sentence or paragraph indicative of Dickinson's positioning herself away from the rest or putting the needs of others first. Alternatively, she omits personal reference so that her letters, either in their entirety or in parts, function as aphorisms, universally applicable, irrespective of spatiotemporality.

Dickinson makes use of numerous sentences which are a-contextual, a-temporal and a-spatial, what Jacques Derrida calls iterable (Lucy 111). The introduction of a letter to Susan Dickinson reads: "A promise is firmer than a Hope, although it does not hold so much – Hope never knew Horizon" (L 871). Dickinson sent this letter shortly after her beloved nephew's Gilbert death to console Susan. She might refer to the promise of resurrection which allegedly is bound to happen and the boundless hope of it actually taking place. She goes on: "Awe is the first Hand that is held to us -- Hopelessness in it's first Film has not leave to last -- That would close the Spirit, and no intercession could do that -- Intimacy with Mystery, after great Space, will usurp it's place -- Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness" (ibid). Although she expresses her uncertainty of the validity of this hope, or even promise, as she is in the dark, she assures Susan that time will soothe her pain and bring her closer to discover what happens after death. Though Dickinson voices her individual stance, the recipient of this letter could have been anyone, at any time thanks to its universal character. In a letter to Mary Bowles, while her husband was in Europe, Dickinson writes: "When the best is gone – I know that other things are not of consequence – The Heart wants what it wants – or else it does not care" (L 262), a statement that could refer to any yearning or anticipation and the frustration felt at their deferral.

Numerous letters begin with a nonfinite infinitival clause as the subject of the sentence. This structure which lacks number or person, free of any limitations, is rare in ordinary speech but common in quotes or poetic speech. It is also the usual way of defining words and as such quite common in dictionaries. Dickinson makes use of them either in the introduction of her letters or in their body. She writes to Higginson who is travelling to Europe at the time: "To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations though Friends are if possible an event more fair" (L 381). Dickinson intersperses her letters with infinitival clauses as a way of laying down the definitions of events or states from her own perspective, compiling thus her personal dictionary. Her definition of travelling is laid down as: "To shut our Eyes is Travel" (L 354), of life: "To live is endowment" (L 399), of the value of togetherness: "To know that there is shelter, sometimes dissuades it's necessity" (L 1003) and of mourning: "to relieve the irreparable degrades it" (L 538). By using subject-less verbs as subjects Dickinson embraces all subjects; by using infinite tense-less verbs, that is, verbs that do not indicate temporal location, she transgresses time; by using verbs

abstracted from real action which express potentiality she describes past-present-future experiences. These aphorisms are impervious to temporality and are addressed not only to the intended reader, the recipient, but also, as it were, to seemingly unintended addressees who must have been her intended ones all along.

Another way Dickinsons introduces her letters is the use of a that-clause. This sentence could answer a what-question, eliminating different spatiotemporal specifics and function as an apostrophe to negate absence. It also constitutes a way of packaging information in the subject position and adding any comment in the other part. In declining an invitation to visit Springfield (Johnson &Ward 494), Dickinson writes to Holland: "That so trifling a Creature grieve any I could hardly suppose -- though with Love all things are possible" (L 370). Her apology, through her usual way of underplaying herself, precedes the remark that she does not intend to sadden Holland and is followed by another of her aphorisms, hedging the contemporary disappointment by investing her refusal with a timeless comment. After Helen Hunt Jackson's death, Dickinson sought her husband's address to send her condolence. She turns to Samuel Bowles, Jr and writes: "That your loved Confederate and yourself are in ceaseless peace, is my happy faith" (L 1008), transferring her hope and wish for Bowles and his wife's well-being and happiness at the very beginning of the letter as it constitutes the most significant part of it.

Dickinson's sentences tend to be generic, applicable to present, past and future and expressing a general truth, an axiom concerning a whole unrestricted class of individuals, as opposed to any individual, creating opaque contexts which could apply collectively. These laconic truths, though triggered by a specific occasion and addressed to a specific recipient, are of universal application and constitute her entries in the dictionary of notions the way she perceives them. After one of Elizabeth Holland's visits to Amherst, Dickinson writes to her: "Parting is one of the exactions of a Mortal Life. It is bleak -- like Dying, but occurs more times. To escape the former, some invite the last. The Giant in the Human Heart was never met outside" (L 399). Though the stimulus is very specific and personal, Dickinson unhinges it from any individual or temporal restrictions by using generic sentences and a nonfinite infinitival one, transforming it, thus, to a universal truth with which every individual can identify. On commenting on the bells ringing for the death of Frazer Stearns during the Civil War about a month after the death of her friend, Eliza Dudley, she writes to her cousins: "No part of the mind is permanent. This startles the happy, but it

assists the sad" (L 362). This concise proposition has aided many a grieved mourners ever since it was written, traversing the specific event for which it was firstly uttered. After John Dudley got married, but not to Louise Norcross, Dickinson tries to console her: "An ill heart, like a body, has its more comfortable days, and then its days of pain, its long relapse, when rallying requires more effort than to dissolve life, and death looks choiceless" (L 380). This depiction of anguish, derived obviously from personal experience, sounds quite reassuring; the soreness will ultimately abate regardless of the excruciating feeling that it will last forever. Since the cause of this pain is not mentioned, it can extend to any ordeal and offer relief to anyone in distress.

On many occasions, the majority or even the entirety of the letter consists of nonfinite infinitival clause, that-clauses or generic sentences. She writes to Sara Tuckerman: "To see is perhaps never quite the sorcery that it is to surmise, though the obligation to enchantment is always binding -- It is sweet to recall that we need not retrench, as Magic is our most frugal Meal. I fear you have much happiness because you spend so much. Would adding to it -- take it away or is that a penurious question? To cherish you is intuitive -- As we take nature, without permission, let us covet you" (L 565). Though the situational convention is unknown, this letter is not actually a letter, as its context is opaque, stripped of any reference to the situation that triggered it, to the temporal specifics or to the identity of either the sender or the recipient, failing to meet any of the criteria that define a letter. The personal pronouns could refer to anybody, and though the writer of this piece of prose evidently express affection the context is unrestricted, applicable to any token of fondness.

Dickinson undermines the specifically spatiotemporally bound letter stripping it from its limited application to a sole addressee, that is its referential meaning, and creates an opaque context; what really matters for Dickinson is the words of the message for its own sake, the communication draws attention to itself, consequently the function of her letters is poetic.

3.6. The poetic character of Dickinson's letters

Samuel Philips Newman, whose *Practical System of Rhetoric* Dickinson was taught at Mount Holyoke, claims that in letter writing, "formal ornaments of style should be

rarely introduced [and] managed with uncommon skill [so as] not injure the simplicity" (185). Not being "plain [or] sensible" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 121) to avoid embellishment in her letters, Dickinson does "run astray after 'the butterflies of the language'" (ibid) and makes extensive use of tropes. Contrary to the epistolary rule that dictates that "grammarians or lexicons" should be avoided (Houghton 322), so that the simple style of the letter is not compromised, Dickinson's multiple lexical choices indicate that, while writing her letters, she follows a procedure similar to that of her poems; in fact, it seems that she does not make any distinction between her poems and her letters as regards meticulous compilation and diction. Apart from their poetic qualities, which will be elaborated further on, the subject matter of many letters is reminiscent of poems despite her statement to Higginson: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse -- it does not mean -- me -- but a supposed person" (L 268). This claim must be critically examined. How does the projected self combine the letters and the incorporated poems based on personal experiences? In some cases, she elaborated on the letter's subject matter in a poem closely linked to it as if the purpose for the letter was to enclose her poems.

One of Dickinson's most frequently dealt subjects is death, to which she refers as Darkness or night. After Higginson's first wife's death in 1877, she writes to him "Danger is not at first, for then we are unconscious, but in the after -- slower -- Days -- Do not try to be saved -- but let Redemption find you - as it certainly will -- Love is it's own rescue, for we -- at our supremest, are but it's trembling Emblems --" (L 522). After Josiah Holland's death in 1881, Dickinson writes to his wife "After a while, dear, you will remember that there is a heaven -- but you can't now. Jesus will excuse it. He will remember his shorn lamb" (L 731). Three years later, her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert dies of typhoid fever, Dickinson attempts to console Susan: "The first section of Darkness is the densest, Dear, After that, Light trembles in –" (L 874). Dickinson attempts to comfort her: "bleeding beginning that every mourner knows" (L 670). This accumulated, painfully earned wisdom of nearly a decade is summated in the following poem written in 1862, long before the losses we know that devastated her, which leads to the conclusion she experienced a similarly devastating loss before:

> We grow accustomed to the Dark —
> When Light is put away —

As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Good bye —
A Moment — We Uncertain step
For newness of the night —
Then — fit our Vision to the Dark —
And meet the Road — erect —
And so of larger — Darknesses —
Those Evenings of the Brain —
When not a Moon disclose a sign —
Or Star — come out — within —
The Bravest — grope a little —
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead —
But as they learn to see —
Either the Darkness alters —
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight —
And Life steps almost straight. (P 1145)

Dickinson claims, "that we have each a *pair* of lives, and need not chary be, of the one "that *now* is" –" (L 184). This predilection, however, does not prevent her from pondering about afterlife. On the death of one of Elizabeth Holland's relatives, Dickinson writes to her: "I trust we are grateful for the Life that sees -- and steps -- and touches, if it is only the thrilling preface to supremer things --" (L 678). Dickinson attempts to console Holland by citing the theological notion of afterlife; she introduces the main sentence with the verb 'trust' which denotes faith or confidence, yet the conditional in the next sentence puts the realization of what she trusts at stake. In the same vein, she ponders on the notion of life being the preface and not the conclusion of existence in the following poem.

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—

It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy, don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
To guess it, puzzles scholars—
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown—
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul – (P 373)

The first line of the poem is a statement with the period at the end underlining Dickinson's positive and unquestionable declaration. The rest of it, however, constitutes a questioning of this initial thesis as well as a deconstruction.

In a letter to Cowan a year after his daughter's death, Dickinson attempts to console him by repeating Paul's notion of afterlife. "May I remind you what Paul said, or do you think of nothing else, these October Nights, without her Crib to visit? […] 'And with what Body do they come?'/ Then they do come, Rejoice! What Door -- what Hour -- Run -- run -- My Soul! / Illuminate the House!" (L 671) The development of her viewpoints and attitude to life as recollected by her relatives and friends, traced throughout her letters is inscribed in her poems, too, creating an inextricable bond between them. Martha Bianchi noted that after Edward Dickinson died, Emily "wonder[ed] where he could be" and was tantalized "in her search for a clue to what and where he was and 'what kind' he had become" (Leyda 2:227). The exact phrasing can be found in many of her letters; she writes to Louise Norcross "I dream about father every night, always a different dream, and forget what I am doing daytimes, wondering where he is. Without any body, I keep thinking. What can that

be?" (L 471) a mystifying question the answer to which she sought during her whole life.

Dickinson refers to God as jealous in a letter to Susan, during the latter's visiting her sister in Geneva with her children: "My love to 'Captain Jenks' [her nephew's nickname] who forbore to call. If not too uncongenial to the Divine Will, a Kiss also for Mattie. 'God is a jealous God'" (L 397). The Bible claims that "for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14) as "he admits of no rival or competitor in worship; he will not give his glory to another god, or one so called". [16] Dickinson played with the ambiguity of the word, using jealousy as the very human emotion of anger provoked by "uneas[iness] through fear" that the affections of a person he loves" have withdrawn (Webster 2:6) and she elaborated on bestowing God with human, not exactly positive qualities, in the poem: "God is indeed a jealous God --/ He cannot bear to see/ That we had rather not with Him/ But with each other play" (P 1719).

Dickinson urges Elizabeth Holland to "pardon [her] sanity […] in a world insane" and asks her to love her as she "had rather be loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven" (L 185). In this case, Dickinson's sanity consisted in not accepting religious beliefs considered to make others "sane." Her dismissal of conforming to societal rules and practices so that she avoids being characterized insane were the theme of many of her poems, too.

Much Madness is divinest Sense --

To a discerning Eye --

Much Sense -- the starkest Madness --

'Tis the Majority

In this, as all, prevail --

Assent - and you are sane --

Demur -- you're straightway dangerous --

And handled with a Chain -- (JP 620)

[16] https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/exodus-34-14.html last visited 1/1/21.

The permanence of the written word that could hurt the correspondents led manuals to advise letter writers for "greater caution necessary in using the pen than using the tongue" (Chesterfield 68). Dickinson acknowledges the power of the letter both as a communicative device and as content. She writes to Lousie Norcross: "What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because 'unloaded,' but that touched 'goes off'?" (L 656) Her concern is echoed in her poems too:

> There is a word
> Which bears a sword
> Can pierce an armed man—
> It hurls its barbed syllables
> And is mute again—
> But where it fell
> The saved will tell
> On patriotic day,
> Some epauletted Brother
> Gave his breath away (JP 8).

3.6.1. Letters as Art

Newman claims that "words answer the same purpose as pictures" as "they bring up to the mind objects and thoughts designed to represent" (Newman 103) and Dickinson cannot agree more. She considers her "mental products" (L 669) paintings or works of visual art and in one of her Prose Fragments she writes: "Dear friends I cannot tint in Carbon nor embroider Brass, but send you a homespun rustic picture I certainly saw in (at) the [height of the storm] terrific storm (awful storm). Please excuse my needlework – (PF 28). Although this fragment cannot be tied to spatiotemporal specifics, the picture she sees and sends in the form of a poem could be Poem 824: "The Wind began to knead the Grass" or the following letter, part of which is about a

storm: “We have had no rain for six weeks except one thunder shower, and that so terrible that we locked the doors, and the clock stopped -- which made it like Judgment day” (L 471). Dickinson has always considered diction to be an art of work and she asks Susan: “Do I paint it natural -- Susie, so you think how it looks?” (L 85), she writes in an effort to convey her feelings to her. In a letter to Abigail Cooper, who has moved from Amherst, she sends this letter: “And will you in exchange, accept a View of my House, which Nature painted White, without consulting me -- but Nature is ‘old-fashioned,’ perhaps a Puritan” (L 706). She must have enclosed a poem along with the letter and Johnson conjectures that it was “It sifts from leaden sieves”. The word view implies a visual image but Dickinson, as a masterful artist, conveys the image through words as if she painted it. In closing one of the letters to Bowles, she expresses fondness and affection in painting terms to depict her feelings more vividly: “I must do my Goodnight, in *crayon – I meant* to – in Red. Love for Mary” (L 259).

3.6.2. Letter drafts

Making a draft was advisable so that the recipient would not be offended by negligence evident in erasures or blots. This practice, however, should be limited because, if it became a habit, it constituted a “great hindrance to facility and dispatch in writing” (*The Classical English Letter Writer* X) and obstructed the easy flow of the letter which was its main characteristic. Among the papers on Dickinson’s desk found after her death, there were several letter drafts, and, in some cases, it is these that survive and not the actual letters, as is the case with the Master Letters or the ones to Otis Lord. “Amass[ing] a previous store of brilliant or profound ideas to dispose as occasion requires” (Houghton 324) is strongly discouraged when writing letters but it is a necessary condition for writing literary pieces, a technique that Dickinson employs at will. She obviously stores her material and uses it when she deems it appropriate. Most of the extracts that she has used multiple times appear in letters that are chronologically adjacent, given that Johnson’s dating is valid. One of her letters to Sarah Jenkins consists of only one sentence so its context must be inferred: “Were the Velocity of Affection as perceptible as it's Sanctity, Day and Night would be more Affecting” (L 485), while in the very next letter to Higginson she incorporates the sentence to underline her intention to write a letter to Mary Higginson soon. She incorporates the sentence: “We cannot assist each other’s night” on two occasions

under similar circumstances. After Bowles' death she includes it in a letter to Maria Whitney, a mutual friend (L 537); she also sends it to Higginson after the death of his first wife (L 553). In other cases, Dickinson makes use of a sentence even more than a decade later; in one of her early letters to Higginson, she writes: "A Letter always seemed to me like Immortality, for is it not the Mind alone, without corporeal friend?" (L 330), a rhetorical question she repeats to James Clark (L 788). However, the context differs, as in the former she goes on to claim that "Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone -- I would like to thank you for your great kindness but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold". Dickinson appears to favor the letter, as it enables her to be released from the conventionalities associated with actual visits and social etiquettes and focus on the essentials of intellectual and spiritual communication. In the second case, the sentence in question is preceded by "The Letter from the skies, which accompanied your's, was indeed a Boon". Clark was one of Charles Wadsworth's acquaintances and sent her some of his writings for which Dickinson thanks him. Wadsworth died in 1882 and indeed his Mind outlived his corporeality. Dickinson also adjusts these stored fragments to suit the occasion as in the case of a reply to Abigail Cooper who sent either a letter or some flowers on Edward Dickinson's tenth anniversary of his death: "How can one be fatherless who has a father's friend within confiding reach?" (L 905) Her note consists of just this sentence with no salutation or signature, with which she thanks Cooper for her courtesy. She uses it again, slightly changed, and incorporates it in a condolence letter to Jeanie Greenough after her mother died. "I wish I could speak a word of courage, tho' that Love has already done. Who could be motherless who has a Mother's Grave within confiding reach? Let me enclose the tenderness which is born of bereavement. To have *had* a Mother - how mighty!" (L 1022) Although both are triggered by the loss of a parent, the former denotes some distance from it and focus on the relationship between the living which helps Dickinson to cope with it, while the latter refers to a recent death. Greenough has to come to terms with absence, the Grave, before she can go on. Dickinson uses the same wish to close her letters to Maria Whitney and Higginson. She writes: "I hope you have the power of hope, and that every bliss we know or guess hourly befalls you" (L 537); since the manuscript to the former is missing and this extract is preceded by elliptical dots, Dickinson's exact intention, besides wishing her, cannot be inferred.

Dickinson's careful compiling of her letters, her storing and her using of excerpts according to the situational conventions is one more indication that she treats her letters in the same meticulous way as her poems as she does not distinguish between the two.

3.6.3. Figures of Speech

Dickinson's poems and letters are inextricably bound; consequently, her epistolary style is invested with poetic qualities. Letters were meant to "convey to others intelligence which [the correspondents] would not be able on account of distance or otherwise personally to impart" (Hardie ix), and as such their style had to be simple, deprived of any flourishes which were readily and harshly condemned as affectation. Newman maintains in his *Practical System of Rhetoric* that letters should be "artless in expression" while their "phraseology [should be] easy, idiomatic, simple" (Newman 185). A typical letter should read:

> It seemed real nice to see a little of her handwriting again – and so like you are the words – Mr Hills is off to Boston to night on the 'dreadful Central Railroad' question and I am alone for a little while. […] I do enjoy Henry going to Amherst -& particularly his coming home & telling me of you all – how you are what you talked about – how you looked & what you are doing – I try not to have him omit anything – I feel as if I had seen you when he tells me so much. How are your Father & Mother and sister – How I should love to see you all. (Leyda 2: 217)

This letter, sent by Adelaide Hills to Dickinson, is aligned with the conventions prescribing that "the nearest it approaches to conversation the more fluently and naturally it will read" (Hardie xiii). Dickinson, however, does nothing but disregard this rule, composing her letters as if they were poems, rife with figures of speech. Perfectly welcome, yet often startling, the letters are cherished by her recipients, even if they are unable to fully understand them, as they reveal her warm and joyful personality. Eliza Coleman, commenting on Dickinson's "beautiful letters," notes that "her Amherst friends […] wholly misinterpret her" (Leyda 1: 319).

Letters involve being written by a specific sender, addressed to a specific receiver, on a specific occasion, at a specific time. This specificity is emphasized by all letter-writing manuals; Appleton, for example, states that letters are "uttered at the time, in the place and in the occasion that called them forth" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xi). Violating these prerequisites blemish the letter while stamping its sender as an epistolary outcast. Dickinson's letters of the second phase though, usually violate either one or all of the above parameters, rendering her prose anything but a letter triggered by and confined to specificity. Although the purpose of a letter is to inform one's correspondent about the latest news by a "recapitulation [and] begin with reference to the letters it respond[s], connect[s] and ma[kes] a history of the transaction" (Westlake 86), mature Dickinson's letters do not report recent events or present previously unknown information; their function is not referential, they are not "talking letters" (Westlake 93). Writing a letter for her is not just a relay of information or a fulfillment of duty: she does it her way. The prescribed conversational or familiar epistolary style should be endowed with the "peculiarities in ordinary speech" (Young 208) and dismiss "poetic" style (*The Secretary* 17). In contrast, Dickinson's epistolary style is poetic; her prose is characterized by elements of poetry. She writes letters for writing's sake, as Roman Jacobson puts it, she "focus[es] on the message for its own sake" (Jacobson 69), transforming the referential, conventional function of the letter into a poetic one, evident in several aspects of her letters.

Style is "the peculiar manner in which a writer expresses his [sic] thoughts by words", it constitutes a "picture of the ideas of the mind and the order in which they exist there" as "style is the man himself [sic]" (Newman 140). Dickinson seems to endorse his claim and she writes to Higginson: "The name of the little Book I do not quite decipher – '-- and Prairie'? Should you perhaps tell me, I think I could see her Face in that" (L 593). Higginson's second wife, Mary Potter Thacher, had written a book entitled *Seashore and Prairie,* which Dickinson holds to be tantamount to the writer herself and to getting to know her. As Dickinson's letters abound in rhetorical and literary devices, indicative of both the meticulous attention she pays to the compilation of a letter and her treating of them as literary works, impossible to differentiate from her poems, there is no way of distinguishing between Dickinson's two fields of creation. Consequently, one should refer to a homogenous style in both genres and approach Dickinson's letters in the same way as her poems.

A piece of Newman's advice that Dickinson takes at face value is the "use [of] words with correctness and skill, selecting always the best term" (Newman 2). Her almost obsessive quest for the choice of the best term is evident on her drafts as she is conscious of the power of the words; at times they can soothe or entertain with their "wiles" (L 555), at others they can affront or afflict, so "we must be careful what we say. No bird resumes its egg" (L 379). Words for Dickinson gauge "the temperature of [the] Mind[…]"and externalize it by "chill[ing] and burn[ing]" (L 798) the individual with their force. A "Master", whose advice Dickinson never takes, is Higginson. In his article in *The Atlantic* that triggered their correspondence, he offers the commonplace advice regarding compilation of any kind of text, including letters. He encourages his readers to be precise, terse, lucid, and prefer English words instead of "either Latin or Anglo-Saxon" (Higginson 81) ones in the fashion of letter-manuals. He makes some points, however, which might have persuaded Dickinson that he can appreciate her work. He exalts the power of the words claiming that "a single word may be a window from which one may perceive all the kingdom of the earth and the glory of them. Oftentimes, a word shall speak what accumulated volumes have labored in vain to utter; there maybe years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence" (ibid 75). Even though his observation epitomizes Dickinson's poetry perfectly, he was unable to grasp the power of her diction at that time. In the article that caught Dickinson's attention, Higginson claims that it is "a delicious, prolonged perplexity […] to cut and contrive a decent clothing of words for them, as a little girl does for her doll, -- nay, how many new outfits a single sentence sometimes costs before it is presentable" (Higginson 76). Referring to the words as the dress of thoughts was a common allusion; letter-writing manuals abounded in such references and letter writers were advised to "plac[e their] thoughts in the most simple and intelligent dress" (*The London Universal* ii). Despite Higginson's claim that he considers diction extremely significant, in this particular extract his is horrendous. Downgrading a vital procedure to a child's play, it becomes even more pathetic when compared to Dickinson's description of her quest for the right word "I hesitate which word to take, as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest, but recall that Earth's most graphic transaction is placed within a syllable, nay, even a gaze --" (L 873). For Dickinson, words do not correspond to certain things in the world to the exclusion of others; on the contrary, they carry individual experiences and understanding with them as "a word is inundation when it comes from the sea" (L

965) and they take on meaning when they are read, transforming into worlds: A word is dead, when it is said/some say - /I say it just begins to live/ that day (L 374).

While expression as part of the rhetoric of letters was considered significant for the successful conveyance of moods and emotions, it was downgraded to a "subject of mechanical detail subject to rules easily understood and applied" (Westlake 72). Apparently, this application fostered by manuals and taught at school led to uniformity and hindered originality which was considered uncalled for or even inappropriate in letter writing. Dickinson's letters, characterized by inconformity and originality, are outside this box. She makes extensive use of devices and would often combine several of them in the same sentence. Even in simple, short notes Dickinson employs stylistic devices as one mischievous note sent to her nephew Ned along with a treat: "Omit to return Box -- Omit to know you received a Box" (L 549). Even on a trivial situation like this, and in just two lines she manages to employ two literary devices: her telegraphic note makes use of *anaphora* at the beginning of both sentences with the urge "omit to" and *epistrophe* by repeating the word "box' at the end, forming a circle of secrecy to cover up their conspiratorial exchange.

Dickinson employs *cacophony* to convey jarred emotions triggered either by death or separation. In a letter to Higginson, she writes: "The degradation to displease you, I hope I may never incur" (L 488). The cacophony at the beginning of the sentence created by the repetition of the letters d, g, t, and p mirrors the unpleasantness Higginson would feel it if she annoyed or offended him but the assonance at the end of it with the repetition of the sound er enhance the meaning of both words which function as a promise to him. In another letter to Higginson to console him on the death of his first wife, Dickinson writes: "With sorrow that Joy is past, to make you happy first, distrustful of it's Duplicate in a hastening World" (L 516). The cacophony that runs through almost the entire sentence with the repetition of the harsh consonant blend 'st', forcing the reader to stop and take a breath after pronouncing 's' and before uttering 't', echoing thus the separation and disjoining of the blend of the couple, further enhanced by the repetition of 'd' and 'p' in the words distrustful and duplicate which reflect the discord between the happiness he did have and its promised, potential replacement in another world.

In a note to Adelaide Hills, which Johnson conjectures was sent at Easter in memory of Hills' dead child, Dickinson writes: "We think of you and know you think of us. To come -- from Heaven -- is casual -- but to return -- eternal" (L 599).

Dickinson employed *antimetabole* which transverses time and place and interchanges them, transferring thus their mutual consideration and love. The second sentence is an *antithesis* as arrival is opposed to departure and the impermanence of life on earth is contrasted to life eternal that death signals, in an effort to console Hills by assuring her that her child is indeed alive in Heaven. In a letter to Jenkins, the former pastor at Amherst, Dickinson wrote:

> Mrs. Holland pleased us and grieved us, by telling us your Triumphs. We want you to conquer, but we want you to conquer here – […] You are gone too long -- The Red Leaves take the Green Leaves place, and the Landscape yields. We got to sleep with the Peach in our Hands and wake with the Stone, but the Stone is the pledge of Summers to come -- Love for each of you, always, and if there are Lands longer than 'Always,' Love also for those -- These are Sticks of Rowen for your Stove. It was chopped by Bees, and Butterflies piled it, Saturday Afternoons. (L 520)

The antithesis of pleasure and grief in the first sentence along with the *mesodiplosis* of us highlights the intensity of Dickinson's contradictory feelings. She proceeds with amplification stressing her pleasure of Jenkins' welfare along with her disappointment for their absence. Her longing to see them is expressed in assonance in "gone too long"; the long vowel 'o' echoes the protracted time that has passed since they last met, which is further intensified by the *synecdoche* of the next sentence. Autumn and Summer are represented by one of their visual parts, the leaves that change colour, as well as by the condition of the vegetation and trees. The *anadiplosis* of stone highlights the end of the natural or even life cycle which simultaneously triggers the beginning of another. The extent of her fondness is reflected in the *hyperbole* of the Lands of Always by transforming time into space; as it is the latter that keeps them apart, she spans it through time, shared by both in the changing of seasons as well as in their union in the afterworld. The sound of the axe falling on the wood in the word "chopped" is heard through the long vowel 'o' followed by the cacophony consonant blend of 'pt'; 'o' mirrors the swing of the axe, 'p' echoes the strike and 't' the wood cut in pieces. Jenkins is the only clergyman Dickinson esteems and she is careful not to affront his religious views. Rowen is "the second crop of grass in a season" (Webster 2:508), signaling the end of summer and

harvesting, possibly a reference to the close of life and the proximity of death. The anthropomorphism of bees, symbols of the winged messengers to the next word, sends her message and love to them who are in another world as far as she is concerned, and butterflies, symbols of the immortality of the soul and its free fluttering after rebirth, preparing for winter, reflect the souls' preparation for afterlife.

In a letter to Susan, Dickinson writes: "Where we owe but a little, we pay. Where we owe so much it defies Money, we are blandly insolvent. Adulation is inexpensive except to him who accepts it. It has cost him -- Himself" (L 541). The beginning of the first two sentences is identical, an anaphora, but the continuation is antithetical; the small monetary debt is counterbalanced by the great priceless debt of love which is characterized by cacophony: the letters b, d, s, and t in blandly insolvent create discordance and thus, an unpleasant feeling. Cacophony in the repetition of 'x' in inexpensive, except and accept further highlight the discordance between the debt and its repayment. The next sentence is a *symploce* as the adulation of the beginning is repeated in the form of a pronoun at the end. The anadiplosis of the next sentence is further intensified by the chain repetition in him and the capitalized Himself. Chain repetition characterizes the entire letter as Dickinson employs a variety of monetary terms to term invaluable feelings.

Dickinson employs stylistic devices in a letter to Josiah Holland to express her relief for his recovery: "We rejoice in your repaired health, though it grieves us that repairs should be necessary in a Structure so able -- yet when we recall that the 'Soul's poor Cottage, battered and dismayed, lets in new light through chinks that time has made,' your predicament becomes one of congratulation. You seem to have reared Fames as rapidly as Houses, and we trust, of more lasting ingredient, though the Abode without a Nail, has its consternations" (L 544). Dickinson employs the device of *zeugma* twice in this extract as well as antonomasia. Holland's body is depicted as a structure in need of repairs and his recovery is paired with that. She employs zeugma to refer both to his acquisition of fame and a house, though she hints at the ephemerality of the former. Dr. Holland's body is likened in theological terms to the Biblical tent or the abode in which the soul lives, and her reference to the abode without a nail echoes the Biblical notion of the house not made with hands. However, she highlights the price mortals have to pay for it. Dickinson brings together mortal with immortal body, fame and obscurity, by binding them with the same verb, thus highlighting their being opposite sides of the same coin.

In a letter to Olive Gilbert Stearns, wife of Professor Stearns, Dickinson writes: “I hope no bolder lover brought you the first pond lilies. The water is deeper than the land. The swimmer never stagnates” (L 612). Consonance, assonance as well as cacophony run through the sentence; the repetition of l and o sounds which bind the words together is intercepted by the harsh ‘b’, and ‘d’ in the word ‘bolder’, a quality in which Dickinson hopes nobody else can surpass her. The internal rhyme achieved by the repetition of ‘er’ in the words bolder, lover, water, deeper, swimmer, and never unify the extract and add a musical effect abruptly ended by the cacophony in stagnates.

After Elizabeth Holland underwent an operation for the removal of one eye, Dickinson sends her the following letter: “To have lost an Enemy is an Event with all of us -- almost more memorable perhaps than to find a friend. This severe success befalls our little Sister -- and though the Tears insist at first, as in all good fortune, Gratitude grieves best” (L 377). She expresses her relief for Holland’s health, despite the loss of her eye, in an antithesis; Holland may have lost it but at least she has overcome the ordeal. The *oxymoron* of this “severe success” is further accentuated by the oxymoron of “Gratitude grieves” rephrasing the notion she expressed in her youth that “’There is no rose without a thorn’ to me” (L 22) in a more profound and literary way.

After her mother’s death, Dickinson writes to Elizabeth Holland: “The dear Mother that could not walk, has flown. It never occurred to us that though she had not Limbs, she had Wings -- and she soared from us unexpectedly as a summoned Bird” (L 770). She employs *auxesis* to depict her mother’s transition from earth to the sky, from life to death, from proximity to distance. The limbs she did not have are transformed into wings and despite her inability to walk she flew away.

Dickinson writes to one of her aunts: “Sweet Mrs. Nellie comes with the Robins. Would she remain with the Robins April would need no Codicil, but Mrs. Nellie has Wings -- Hours -- have Wings -- Riches -- have Wings -- Wings are a mournful perquisite -- A Society for the Suppression of Wings would protect us all” (L 550). At the beginning of the extract Dickinson employs epistrophe as the phrase with the Robins is repeated; epistrophe is also employed in the next three sentences as the phrase have Wings is recurrent at the end of all three. She then goes on to employ anadiplosis as the next sentence begins with Wings. The alliteration and consonance that run through the extract with the repetition of the letters s, r and w is counteracted

by the cacophony in the same words, that is, ‘t’, ‘p’, and ‘g’, indicative of the constant transposition and evanescence of life inherent in its beauty. The fluttering of the word wings from one sentence to the next reflects the passage of time, leading to the wish for a joint venture to stem its tide.

Dickinson employs epistrophe frequently and in a letter to her cousins she writes: “I hear robins a great way off, and wagons a great way off, and rivers a great way off, and all appear to be hurrying somewhere undisclosed to me” (L 387). Movement takes place “a great way off”, yet around her pivotal I. The auditory and not visual stimuli she gets reflects her simultaneous immersing in what is going on around her and her standing “a great way off”, illustrating perfectly Emerson’s definition of a poet who is “rare because he is exquisitely vital and sympathetic and at the same time immovably centered” (Emerson 63).

Dickinson seems to have followed Newman’s advice regarding rhetorical schemata; he claims that “the omission of conjunctions and the subsequent division of the discourse into short sentences” is preferable as “what is expressed in short sentences stands out more prominent and distinct” (Newman 157). In a letter that Johnson conjectures that Dickinson apologizes to Elizabeth Holland for refusing an invitation to visit her in Springfield she writes:

> Some must seem a Traitor, not because it is, but it's Truth belie it.
> Andre had not died had he lived Today.
> Only Love can wound --
> Only Love assist the Wound.
> Worthier let us be of this Ample Creature.
> If my Crescent fail you, try me in the Moon --
> This will make no difference in the daily dearness?
> You will keep the same Face and myself no other Heart, with the slight repairs Thought and Nature make --
> In adequate Music there is a Major and a Minor --
> Should there not also be a Private? (L 370)

Dickinson makes use of at least one literary device in each of the laconic sentences of the letter. The first sentence of this extract constitutes an oxymoron as the truth is disproved and not verified by its truthfulness. The next sentence referring

probably to John André, a British Major who was hung for espionage during the American Revolution is also simultaneously an antithesis and a *tautology* possibly to reinforce the oxymoron of the previous sentence. The next two sentences use symploce, as they begin with the same words, i.e. "Only Love" and end with the same, i.e. "wound." However, they are also antithetical, as that which injures becomes the healer. She continues with a *hyperbaton* as she violates the syntactical order; the complement is placed at the beginning for drawing attention and adding emphasis to the desired quality both she and Holland should possess. The next sentence is an auxesis, as she moves from the crescent of the conditional to the moon of the main clause, from the smaller to the biggest. As she has described love as ample, she asks Holland to accept its greatest expanse, the Moon, even though Dickinson refuses to grant her the small token of it, evident in the crescent, her visit. She continues with a rhetorical question claiming forgiveness, and in the next sentence she uses a zeugma to bring Holland's face and her heart together. What is more, she begins and ends her letter with the same notion; "That so trifling a Creature grieve any I could hardly suppose" and ends "I could wish to know, be it by a Trifle, that you name me still" encompassing her recipient into a shared circle of communion and love.

In a letter to Elizabeth Holland after her father died, Dickinson writes: "Chastening -- it may be -- the Lass that she receiveth. My House is a House of Snow -- true -- sadly -- of few. Mother is Asleep in the Library -- Vinnie -- in the Dining Room -- Father -- in the Masked Bed -- in the Marl House" (L 432). In the first sentence, the hyberbaton and the odd word structure mirror both the jumbling of her psyche at that time and her perception of her father's death as some kind of divine punishment to her, which dominates her thoughts. The next sentences use an *asyndeton*; the lack of conjunctions to bind the sentence members together reflects the disruption and the void her father's death caused to the family.

In a letter to Mary Bowles, probably thanking her for flowers and a cutting of ivy, which must be associated with Samuel Bowles, Dickinson writes: "How lovely to remember! How tenderly they told of you! Sweet toil for smitten hands to console the smitten! Labors as endeared may engross our lost. Buds of other days quivered in remembrance. Hearts of other days lent their solemn charm. Life of flowers lain in flowers -- what a home of dew! And the bough of ivy; was it as you said? Shall I plant it softly?" (L 609) Dickinson begins her letter by repeating "how" in successive sentences, an anaphora, both as a stylistic device and as a reference to the flowers

received, which link the correspondents and their divergent spatiotemporal specifics. She continues with *diacope*, repeating the word 'smitten' after the intervention of some words to highlight the reciprocity of their condition. The epistrophe (the coming back) of the next two sentences in the repetition of other days mirrors Dickinson's longing and nostalgia for a shared past which was better. Another diacope in the repetition of flowers makes them stand out as an important token highlighting their being appreciated by Dickinson, and she continues with an apostrophe; she addresses Bowles as if she were present asking for instructions concerning the cutting of ivy, which obviously bore significant meaning for both, annulling the spatiotemporal difference both between them and between the deceased Samuel Bowles whom the ivy enabled them to recall.

Dickinson depicts the conflicting views of Austin and the members of his family employing antimetabole: "Austin said he was much ashamed of Mattie -- and she was much ashamed of him, she imparted to us. They are a weird couple" (L 492). The turning about of the subjects, which nevertheless stand in opposition, is indicative of the chasm between them and of their difficulty in standing side by side. Referring to Austin's relationship with Susan, Dickinson writes: "Austin said he should write you, and that Sue w'd too -- but he is too overcharged with care, and Sue with scintillation, and I fear they have not" (L 492). The parallelism that characterizes this extract by the recurrence of syntactic similarity with dissimilar endings mirrors their lack of convergence and dissimilar ends.

When in 1879 a fire threatened to burn Amherst to the ground, Dickinson wrote to her cousins:

> Did you know there had been a fire here, and that but for a whim of the wind Austin and Vinnie and Emily would have all been homeless? But perhaps you saw *The Republican*. We were waked by the ticking of the bells, -- the bells tick in Amherst for fire, to tell the firemen. I sprang to the window, and each side of the curtain saw the awful sun. The moon was shining high at the time, and the birds singing like trumpets. Vinnie came soft as a moccasin, "Don't be afraid, Emily, it is only the fourth of July". […] I could hear buildings falling, and oil exploding, and people walking and talking gayly, and cannon soft as velvet from parishes that did not know that we were burning up. And so much lighter than day was it, that I saw a caterpillar measure a leaf far down in the

> orchard; and Vinnie kept saying bravely, "It's only the fourth of July". It seemed like a theatre, or a night in London, or perhaps like chaos. The innocent dew falling "as if it thought not evil," ... and sweet frogs prattling in the pools as if there were no earth. As seven people came to tell us that the fire was stopped, stopped by throwing sound houses in as one fills a well. […] Vinnie's "only the fourth of July" I shall always remember. I think she will tell us so when we die, to keep us from being afraid. (L 610)

Dickinson starts her narration about the fire with hypophora. She asks her cousins whether they have been informed about the fire, and then she proceeds to answer her own question by guessing that they must have already read it. Her apostrophe brings them to Amherst to listen to her story. The next sentence is an anadiplosis, since she repeats the last word of her sentence, i.e. bells, at the beginning of the subsequent one, and she also employs a polyptoton as she repeats fire in firemen, that is, words of the same root with a different ending. The massive blaze is depicted as the sun which along with the moon conveys an eerie feeling; the visual imagery is further intensified by the auditory one and the anthropomorphism of the birds which, instead of chirping, are blowing trumpets, as if they were the Angels signaling Judgment Day. Dickinson's quoting of Vinnie's assurance conveys immediacy to the event as well as differentiation from her sister's attempt to allay her fears. Vinnie's assurance is repeated throughout the letter like a poetic or musical motif, and constitutes an anaphora, adding an earthly, reassuring tone to the unearthly scenery Dickinson portrays. Her description of the apocalyptic scene is intensified by her employment of polysyndeton, which puts the emphasis on each action separately in between the conjunction -- like brushstrokes that enhance the picture of the fire. Her employment of present participles adds motion to the auditory imagery as well as rhyme. The gay conversations of her description come to stark contrast with the gravity of the situation and can be interpreted only in comparison to Revelation and people sinning and/or disregarding eternal punishment. An oxymoron in the cannon which roared soft as velvet from neighboring villages draws an auditory line between the conflagrations Amherst experiences that night, as if it belonged to the third of the earth that was destroyed by fire according to Revelation, and the surrounding areas which remained intact. The uncanniness is enhanced by the illumination of darkness by the fire which enables her to catch a glimpse of a caterpillar in the distance.

Amidst “the chaos”, some frogs, symbols of both sin, evil, worldly pleasures, and recreation as well as resurrection, endowed with anthropomorphic traits, keep chattering, unmindful of the apocalyptic scenes that surround them. In another anadiplosis of ‘stopped’, Dickinson culminates her description while Vinnie keeps attempting to dispel Dickinson’s fears by reiterating her statement about the celebrations for the fourth of July. Dickinson’s remark about Vinnie’s repeating it before her death could be tantamount to the religious lulling to the believers regarding death, as they are told not to be afraid since they will not really die but become transplanted in a better world and live forever.

On the birth of Higginson’s daughter, Dickinson sends him a letter: “I am very glad of the Little Life, and hope it may make no farther flight than it's Father's Arms -- Home and Roam in one -- I know but little of Little Ones, but love them very softly” (L 728). Her wish is characterized by alliteration and consonance; ‘l’ and ‘f’ are recurrent in the sentences as is assonance in ‘home’ and ‘roam’, in ‘life’ and ‘flight’. She also employs *antanaklasis* by using ‘little’ in two different ways: as a quantifier and an adjective. She also makes use of epistrophe by using one at the end of two consecutive sentences.

Dickinson employs antanaklasis in a letter to Holland: “Had we known the Doctor was falling, we had been much alarmed, though Grace -- perhaps -- is the only height from which falling is fatal” (L 678). The deterioration of his health is linked to religious concepts of sin and punishment through the joint use of falling, but Dickinson implies that the religious aspect of falling, which is more significant, will not affect Holland, a pious man.

Dickinson makes extensive use of internal rhyme and alliteration in her letters; she addresses her nephew “Ned-Bird-” (L 398), she writes to Higginson: “I fear your brother was dear to you” (L 371) – violating yet another rule which explicitly forbids all flourishes in letters of condolence – and to Elizabeth Holland “I was thinking of thanking you” (L 391).

Dickinson’s imagery comprises all five senses and in most cases they are either misapplied or fused as her style is characterized by *synesthesia*, that is the association of one sense in terms of another. She writes to Joseph Sweetser, one of her uncles: “There is a smiling summer here, which causes birds to sing, and sets the bees in motion. Strange blooms arise on many stalks, and trees receive their tenants. I would you saw what I can see, and imbibed this music” (L 190).

Despite her describing a visual image, she wishes her uncle could indulge the auditory and kinesthetic aspect in terms of taste, to sip the indulgence of seeing the spring's buzz.

Sound is her favorite plaything as she tampers with it meddling sounds made by animals or objects. The ripple of the brooks sounds like a "s[o]ng from the Bobolinks" (L 189) and her niece's friends sound like the resonating alliteration in a "*Mob* of *Bob*olinks" (L 845 emphasis added). In a letter to Elizabeth Holland, all senses are merged and defamiliarization sways perception: "Ned tells that the Clock purrs and the Kitten ticks. He inherits his Uncle Emily's ardor for that lie. […] The Wind blows gay today and the Jays bark like Blue Terriers. I tell you what I see. The Landscape of the Spirit requires a lung, but no Tongue. I hold you few I love, till my heart is red as February and purple as March. Hand for the Doctor" (L 315). Dickinson allies with her five-year-old nephew and mischievously poses as his Uncle. In the fashion of this misinterpretation and childish look at things, Dickinson swaps sounds and sexes; the contentment of the cat is transferred to the clock which happily counts time and the rhythmic beats of the clock to the cat, possibly because the "new pussy […] catches a mouse an hour. We call her the 'minute hand'" (L 473). In addition, the jays do not chirp; Dickinson portrays their raucous and aggressive nature by having them bark like guard dogs. Despite describing auditory imagery, Dickinson claims that she depicts a visual one; hearing is translated into sight. Another example of synesthesia in this extract is her colored feelings; they are red, indicative of the outburst of passionate emotions, and purple, symbolic of truth. She is in the habit of expressing feelings through colors and on another occasion, her anxiety over Vinnie's health fades the bright red color the world used to be: "Vinnie is sick to-night, which gives the world a russet tinge, usually so red" (L 207). Russet, as an earth tone color obscures the vitality and energy indicated by red as it is linked to the frailty of human nature and ultimately death. In addition, russet as a kind of cloth or garment is indicative of humility or lower class. The royal red attire of nature is tainted and replaced by the one worn by monks.

In another letter to Holland, Dickinson mingles senses and images once again: "After you went, a low wind warbled through the house like a spacious bird, making it high but lonely. […] Friday I tasted life. It was a vast morsel. A circus passed the house -- still I feel the red in my mind though the drums are out. […] The lawn is full of south and the odors tangle, and I hear today for the first the river in the tree. You

mentioned spring's delaying -- I blamed her for the opposite. I would eat evanescence slowly" (L 318). Dickinson wants to experience every chunk of transience little by little, frustrated that time goes by quickly, and so she prolongs her exultation by "synaestheticizing" it anew in colors, throbbing and passionate, offering a long-lasting elation. In this extract, she describes nature in a completely unorthodox way as she fuses space and senses. Dickinson believes that it is not what individuals just perceive but what they make out of it that matters; the perception of visual stimuli may precede but it is their process that ultimately leads to our insight: "The Ear is the last Face. We hear after we see" (L 405).

Besides auditory images, Dickinson meddles with gustatory ones; welcoming Samuel Bowles, who visits Amherst earlier than his usual attendance of the Commencement in August, she writes: "It was so delicious to see you -- a Peach before the time, it makes all seasons possible and Zones -- a caprice" (L 438). Perceiving his presence as an out-of-season fruit which invalidates time, Dickinson expresses her pleasure with and indulgence in seeing him not on visual but gustatory terms. On another occasion, she uses an adjective connected to taste, trying to apologize for not seeing Susan who paid a visit to her during her illness: 'I would have liked to be beautiful and tidy when you came -- You will excuse me, wont you, I felt so sick. How it would please me if you would come once more, when I was palatable" (L 383). Palatable denotes being "agreeable to the taste" (Webster 2:245); her illness had obviously left her weak, unlike her usual self, and she cannot or will not see Susan till she feels better. The intense emotions she feels for her friends and her anticipation for their letter lead her to write to Maria Whitney: "The ravenousness of fondness is best disclosed by children. ... Is there not a sweet wolf within us that demands its food?" (L 824) The excessive yearning for communication is like a wolf which, being on the verge of perishing because of lack of nourishment, nibbles her heart; the longing for news from Whitney attacks her relentlessly, asking to be satisfied.

Dickinson's alternative sensing of the world in terms of taste or temperature extends to mild weather phenomena. "A mellow Rain is falling. It wont be ripe till April -- How luscious is the dripping of February eaves! It makes our thinking Pink" (L 450). Punning on the word mellow which could refer to the melodious rainfall and the subsequent cleansing and regeneration, she employs it in its sense of ripeness and describes the sound of this quiet rain in gustatory terms, melting them into a feeling

that is pink, the color of playfulness, youth, and innocence. The weather conditions she includes and details in her letters are in accordance with her feelings which she describes in meteorological terms: “It is warm you are better, and was very cold all the while you were ill” (L 888) she writes to Elizabeth Holland, conveying her feelings through climatic conditions. Voicing her longing to see the Hollands, she writes: “This is September, and you were coming September. Come! Our parting is too long. There has been frost enough. We must have summer now, and ‘whole legions’ of daisies” (L 207). The disproportion of the seasons to what they mean for Dickinson is indicative of her equating presence to summer and absence to inclement weather, irrespective of months tied to exactly the opposite weather conditions. She feels sorrow and distress as if a natural element exposed to harsh weather: “Dear Fanny has had many stormy mornings; … I hope they have not chilled her feet, nor dampened her heart” (L 891). The atmospheric conditions reflect her anxiety and fear over Vinnie’s health: “Poor Vinnie has been very sick, and so have we all, and I feared one day our little brothers would see us no more,[…] We have had fatal weather -- thermometer two below zero all day, without a word of apology” (L 245); the frosty weather stands for the threat of death. Her grief is metaphorized in terms of rain or snow. The sickness of her favorite aunt “brings mist” to her; mist being the symbol of uncertainty, the remembrance of a dead friend “filled [her] eyes with the old rain”, indicative of her misery and depression on account of his loss (L 246), she “brushed the sleet from [her] eyes” (L 245) when in distress and her mother “slipped from [their] fingers like a flake gathered by the wind” (L 785), accentuating the ephemerality and frailty of human life. After her nephew Gilbert’s death, she writes to her cousins: “The little boy we laid away never fluctuates, and his dim society is companion still. But it is growing damp and I must go in. Memory's fog is rising” (L 907). The grief she feels is unabated and shrouds her in its veil, preventing clear thinking, blurring the world around her, and ultimately engulfing her.

In addition, Dickinson feels through materials; after one of her aunts’ visits, she remarks: “Their bombazine reproof still falls upon the twilight, and checks the softer uproars of the departing day” (L 656). Her complete disparagement of her aunts’ attitude and beliefs is reflected on the adjective modifying reproof; bombazine is a black twill fabric from which mourning garments are made. Since Queen Victoria, dressed in bombazine, is related to moralistic principles, Dickinson expresses her own reproof for her aunts by associating their preachy stance with the

image of the prudish British Queen as well as unnaturally hastened darkness. On another occasion, she refers to Susan using a material in lieu of her traits: “His Mama just called, leaving a Cashmere print” (L 315). Cashmere was considered the epitome of warm softness and elegance at that time as it was a fashion statement, showing not only good taste but wealth as well. In that case, the impression Susan’s appearance makes on Dickinson is more lasting and vivid and seems to supersede the intellectual interaction they used to indulge in. Projecting the materials and fashion elements into the heat caused by ironing it, she writes to her cousins: “Maggie is ironing, and a cotton and linen and ruffle heat makes the pussy's cheeks red” (L 340).

It is not only senses and feelings that interweave but fragrances as well. Dickinson swaps scents; in a letter to Eugenia Hall she writes: “The lovely flower you sent me, is like a Little Vase of Spice and fills the Hall with Cinnamon” (L 435). Cinnamon was so rare and highly-prized that wars were fought over it; it was used as a currency so it was considered a most choice gift, fit for royalty or even deities. Dickinson’s substitution of the fragrant odor of flowers with the pungent aroma of cinnamon exalts Hall’s token of flowers to a most exceptional and unique present.

This fusion of senses is shared by all the living organisms in Dickinson’s world. “Would it interest the children to know that crocuses come up, in the garden off the dining-room? and a fuchsia, that pussy partook, mistaking it for strawberries” (L 279) she writes to her cousins, as domestic animals are anthropomorphized and partake in every occasion on equal terms.

> The Hens came to the Door with Santa Claus, and the Pussies washed themselves in the open Air without chilling their Tongues -- and Santa Claus himself -- sweet old Gentleman, was even gallanter than usual -- Visitors from the Chimney were a new dismay, but all of them brought their Hands so full, and behaved so sweetly -- only a Churl could have turned them away -- And then the ones at the Barn, were so happy -- Maggie gave her Hens a Check for Potatoes, and each of the Cats a Gilt Edged Bone -- and the Horses had both new Blankets from Boston. (L 682)

Dickinson wandered in her Fairyland accompanied by birds, hens and cats: as she writes to Maggie, her maid, while she was away: “All are very naughty, and I am naughtiest of all. The pussies dine on sherry now, and humming-bird cutlets. The

invalid hen took dinner with me, but a hen like Dr. T[aylor]'s horse soon drove her away" (L 771). Vinnie's cats are not only anthropomorphized but their look is transferred onto nouns as adjectives: "Vinnie and Grandma and Grandpa and Maggie give their love. Pussy, her striped Respects" (L 398).

Dickinson is aware that her unique way of perception is s unconventional, thus incomprehensible and reprehensible by the contemporary standards: "The Birds are very bold this Morning, and sing without a Crumb. 'Meat that we know not of,' perhaps, slily handed them -- I used to spell the one by that name 'Fee Bee' when a Child, and have seen no need to improve! Should I spell all the things as they sounded to me, and say all the facts as I saw them, it would sent consternation among more than the 'Fee Bees'" (L 820). The bird she refers to is a phoebe, a passerine tyrant flycatcher, whose song is "raspy, two-parted that gives them their name: "fee-bee." It lasts about half a second. They also sing a variant of this song with a stutter or two between the two syllables; this is more often heard during or after aggressive interactions".[17] Dickinson substitutes their taxonomy name with the sound she hears, retaining her first impression unaltered by conventional knowledge. Her fresh and idiosyncratic look at things is startling compared to the conventional perception of the world through the prism of given definitions, which dictate thinking and thus limit understanding. Newman claimed, long before Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics was published, that "each word in a language becomes the particular symbol of a particular object by conventional agreement" (Newman 106). However, he maintains that this agreement prevents "barbarism" (ibid) and claims that usage outside this grid of socially acceptability is improper and disreputable (ibid 107). Though Dickinson applies his advice regarding poetry to her letters, she breaks out from the framework which assigns meaning, opting for experiencing and expressing the world as she sees it, paying no attention to the consternation she causes. Dickinson is the bee and her pun with the word 'fee', which according to her Lexicon is synonym to feud meaning possession, property (Webster 1:662), an "estate held by a person in his own right and descendible to the heirs" (ibid 663), allots the Bee, associated with the Muses and endowed with eloquence, its own space and thus the liberty to take to the air and flutter at will.

[17] https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Phoebe/sounds last visited 10/4/2021.

Dickinson's deviation of the epistolary conventions is enhanced by the deviation from ordinary language the use of figures of speech entail. She rejects the prosaic style of a conventional letter and adopts schemes and tropes that both increase the effectiveness of her words and infuse it with poetic characteristics. The literary devices Dickinson makes use of create visual pictures and enhance the vitality of her ideas, transforming the epistolary genre into poetic.

3.7. Dickinson's encapsulated and anthropomorphic Nature

According to Newman, a good writer should be "a man [sic] of thoughts accustomed to observe accurately the phenomena in natural world [and] scenes of life (Newman 6). Dickinson is indeed a keen observer; however, she perceives nature anew, eschewing what Victor Shklovsky calls habitualization, and removing "objects from the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky, qtd in Lemon and Reis, 20) by defamiliarizing them. Increasing the difficulty of perception by not naming the objects and referring to things outside their normal context, she creates art in a desensitizing way so that her readers can "recover the sensation of life" and are "ma[d]e [to] feel things" (ibid 21). She replaces the "unconsciously automatic knowledge" of a thing by the startling visions she creates in a "game of nonrecognition" (ibid 26), impeding its perception and producing the greatest possible effect.

She achieves a renaming of the concrete and the abstract by recreating the Paradise humans were expelled from; she embeds a self-constructed, orderly landscape in what she perceives as encroaching outer disorder. As the Creator of her own universe, she creates it "In the name of the Bee --/And of the Butterfly -- And of the Breeze -- amen!" (P 18) and configures it by planting, pruning, weeding or uprooting so as to make it fit to her perception of cosmos. Although she claims that she "was reared in a garden" (L 206), indicative of the enclosure and the subjection she is meant to succumb as a female poetess, she breaks away from the security it offers and coins her "own forest -- where [she] play[s] every Day" (L 472). She wanders around the "Landscape of [her] Spirit" (L 315), projected onto Nature, as she herself has designed it and feels free to luxuriate uncontrolled without any cultivation. Above her the "Skies in blossom" (L 264) in spring or in "Red Gowns – and a Purple

Bonnet" (L 272) in late autumn are brought lower; their boundlessness is bounded, and their shapelessness takes on familiar shapes. The horizon of her landscape is delineated by the Hills and Mountains around her which surround and safeguard her cosmos and whose transience and evanescence is reflected on their stillness and eternity; temporality is projected on their spatiality. The changing of seasons is mirrored on their changing of attire. Contrary to the conventional rustic association of autumn with grapes and fruit, Dickinson creates new associations: "the Hills are full of Shawls, and I am going every Day to buy myself a Sash" (L 333).

In addition, she challenges the notion of the flawed female. George Lakoff claims that metaphors are the principal means of understanding, for they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality (Lakoff & Johnson 160), functioning as "self fulfilling prophecies" (ibid 157). Political, religious, or social authorities impose them so that they define "what we consider to be true" (ibid 160). Letter writing manuals attributed female characteristics to imperfect letters; "Awkward, careless, badly written" (Westlake 12) letters bore characteristics from the female sphere: "glitter of ornament […] the crisping iron to adjust the hair, [the] paint, [the] artful washes to heighten the complexion" (Brady 240), the connotations of which are pretense and vanity which along with shallowness are ascribed to women, constructing their gender. Dickinson attributes female characteristics to nature; in fact, nature is an imposing stately woman and she transposes nature's sublimity to women: "There is something fine and something sad in the year's toilet" (ibid). She imagines winter landscapes "take off their purple frocks, and dress in long white nightgowns" (L 228). Dickinson comments on the seasonal transitions, but her reference to the annual alteration and succession of seasons strips the gloomy and pessimistic associations of winter to old age, death, or stagnation. So, instead of the trite, pastoral depiction of winter as an old man, Dickinson portrays a woman who takes off her purple attire, indicative of royalty and imperial power, and retreats dressed in her pure night clothes till spring comes. By assigning feminine traits to the "mountains that touched the sky" (L 189), Dickinson equates them with Mother Earth and elevates the earthly nature of humans, uplifting them to the spirituality, enlightenment, and infinity of the sky, bringing them closer or even into the unapproachable Heaven. The underlying conviction that these seasonal changes constitute merely a stage in the rotation of the year, which axiomatically precedes spring or the renewal of life, inserts them into an infinite cycle of existence, highlighting the female that gives birth and

perpetuates life. The cycle of nature becomes Dickinson's calendar and she measures "time -- that cuts -- at every step" (L246) by the blooming or falling of vegetation and the migration of birds. She asks Louise Norcross to "tell Fanny and papa to come with the sweet-williams" (L 206), or she melancholically gauges the time that has passed since she last saw Higginson: "When I saw you last, it was Mighty Summer -- Now the Grass is Glass and the Meadow Stucco, and 'Still Waters' in the Pool where the Frog drinks" (L 381).

"Clover walls" (L 653) wall in her Eden; clover as the druidic symbol of Earth, Sky and Sea or the Christian including body, soul and spirit enclose her, walling off the uninitiated. Dickinson's perception of the constituents of nature is outlined in a poem: "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, / One clover, and a bee. /And revery. /The revery alone will do, / If bees are few" (P 1779). Inside the walls lies a "Prairie before the Door […] gay with Flowers" (L 653), where these "little Beings […] only 'on a furlough' from Paradise" (L846) above, spend their leave in her paradise below. The flowers in the hothouse Dickinson had cajoled her father into building for her are under her parental support: "I'm just from the frosts, Jennie, and my cheeks are ruddy and cold -- I have many a Bairn that cannot care for itself, so I must needs care for it, on such a night as this, and I've shrouded little forms and muffled little faces, till I almost feel maternal, and wear the anxious aspect that careful parents" (L180). Oftentimes, she has to "comfort [them], till now their small green cheeks are covered will smiles" (L 302.) Although the "arbutus is making pink clothes, and everything alive" (L 339), in spring and autumn vegetation keeps Dickinson "very busy picking up stems and stamens as the hollyhocks leave their clothes around" (L 771). She has also to do some sewing as "Vinnie says there is a tree in Mr. Sweetser's woods that shivers. I am afraid it is cold. I am going to make it a little coat. I must make several, because it is tall as the barn, and put them on as the circus men stand on each other's shoulders" (L 372). Dickinson capsules cosmos and peoples it with anthropomorphic creatures, another figure of speech which, however, is in this matter truly alive to her. In her edenic capsule "Birds [are her] sweet neighbors" (L 633); their residence is the trees which "receive their tenants" (L 190) in the spring. In autumn, "Men are picking up the apples to-day, and the pretty boarders are leaving the trees, birds and ants and bees. I have heard a chipper say 'dee' six times in disapprobation. How should we like to have our privileges wheeled away in a barrel?" (L 656) she wonders, empathizing with them. Dickinson is left

behind, but she is not alone; “the Robins have all gone but a few infirm ones and the Cricket and [she had to] keep House for the Frost” (L 398). In summer, however, “robins, […] – and giddy Crows – and [...] a bumblebee […] a kind of Cockney, dressed in jaunty clothes” (L 184), “butterfl[ies] with a vest like a Turk” (L 325) as well as “Jays in blue Pelisse” (L 882), chaperon Dickinson and carry her around in “the Bee’s coupe” before it “vanishes in music” (L 405) to attend a musical as “the Bluebirds are singing cherubically, and all the Colors ‘we know or think’ are prancing in the Trees” (L 946). At other times, she hurries to her music lessons since she “stud[ies] music now with the jays, and find[s] them charming artists” (L 665) or listen to a “Choir invisible assembl[ing] in [the] trees” (L 951).

This investment of non-human with human qualities is proposed by Newman, too, who claims that “properties of intelligent and animated beings ascribed to inanimate [are] frequent in poetical productions” (Newman 97). It constitutes another element that invests Dickinson’s letters with lyricism and differentiates them from the conventional letters of her time. She animates Nature giving not only a “very specific way of thinking” about it, but also a way of “acting towards it” (Lakoff & Johnson 35). It is neither a detached nor an apathetic bystander; they interplay intermittently as she interacts with each and every living organism and inorganic element. Dickinson carries her emotions over to nature or nature is carried over to her, eliminating both the distinction and the distance between them, making a leap and uniting the concrete and the abstract. She writes to Mabel Loomis Todd, when the latter was in Europe: “I write in the midst of Sweet-Peas and by the side of Orioles, and could put my Hand on a Butterfly, only he withdraws” (L 1004). In the visual imagery she constructs, the overhanging fragrant sweat peas along with the chirping of the orioles depict a bubble-like haven enclosing her and interrelating her even with the butterflies she fails to catch.

Dickinson projects her feelings and intellectual thoughts onto, or expresses them through, Nature. All single organic or inorganic elements as well as humans are interwoven into an inextricable bond, interplaying and exchanging qualities at will. Their beauty and the miracle of life they represent astonish her: “Blossoms are so peculiarly consecrated – that there is no Language sufficiently sanctifying to indorse them” (L 537). Though she is at a loss for words to praise them, they deputize for her: “Let me thank the little Cousin in flowers, which without lips, have language” (L 1002). This language is soothing, and she can send them on her behalf without

disturbing the recipient: “Intrusiveness of flowers is brooked by even troubled hearts. They enter and then knock -- then chide their ruthless sweetness, and then remain forgiven” (L 549). Her plants sympathize with her and when she agonizes over Otis Lord’s illness, all her “flowers were draped” (L 751). Her sadness for her friends’ “going will redden the maple -- and fringe the Gentian sooner, in the soft fields” (L 192); a direct reflection of her disappointment and melancholy on the vegetation around her. She finds no better way to describe her emotional turbulence than liken her to a tree caught up in a gust: “I remember a tree in McLean Street, when you and we were a little girl, whose leaves went topsy-turvy so often as a wind, and showed an ashen side -- that's fright, that's Emily. Loo and Fanny were that wind, and the poor leaf, who? Won't they stop a'blowing?” (L 264) Her uneasiness and annoyance with one of her aunts’, Elizabeth Currier, protracted visit who must have been excessively domineering as Dickinson calls her “‘the only male relative on the female side’" (L 473), is mischievously transferred to nature: “The trees stand right up straight when they hear her boots, and will bear crockery wares instead of fruit, I fear. She hasn't starched the geraniums yet, but will have ample time, unless she leaves before April” (L 286).

Not only does Dickinson anthropomorphize fauna and flora, but she invests them with definitive symbolism. The birds that fly in the skies of her universe are indicative of her spiritual longing and lofty intellectuality. Birds are her counterparts; they even stand for her as, apart from being talented musicians, they are endowed with artistic creativity as well; they are gifted in poetry, though hampered by external factors as “it rains badly, and the little poets have no umbrellas” (L 340). Sometimes the avian talent for poetry is exchangeable for that of letter writing: “[robins] are writing *now*, their Desk in every passing Tree, but the Magic of Mates that cannot hear them, makes their Letters dim” (L 890); Dickinson sympathizes with their perseverance despite the obstacles they face, as she too has to face similar impediments in writing her “letter to the world/that never wrote to [her],--” (P 66). She writes to her Norcross cousins: “I think the bluebirds do their work exactly like me. They dart around just so, with little dodging feet, and look so agitated. I really feel for them, they seem to be so tried” (L 339). Bluebirds are voracious insect eaters and clear gardens from pests quickly and efficiently. She describes her frustration, probably with the household chores or any other social obligations she is obliged to do, in terms of the birds’ flapping. By investing the bluebirds, traditionally symbols of

the impossible, with human traits, she blurs the distinction with herself. Ironically, human traits are referred to by metonymies linked to objects (in L 656, she says of a visiting lady and an aunt, respectively, “I think they lie in my memory, a muffin and a bomb”), while animals are personified. On just one occasion do birds fail to sympathize with her and partake in her grief: after her father’s death, Dickinson is startled at her world-mates indifference and coldness: “The birds that father rescued are trifling in his trees. How flippant are the saved! They were even frolicking at his grave” (L 442).

3.7.1. Dickinson’s (imaginative) travels

Though imagination was not the proper guide when writing a letter as “connect[ing] in language things which separated in reality [was] improper” and letter writers should take “great care to avoid violation of this rule” (*The Fashionable American Letter writer* xxvii), imagination has always constituted a desirable aspect of literary works. Newman claims that “imagination assists in the cultivation and improvement of taste” (44), “with the design of interesting or pleasing excite emotions or beauty or grandeur” (ibid xvii). Dickinson follows his instruction and her distinctive lyric depictions of the world around her speak volumes. Imagination is for Dickinson a vehicle that facilitates not only the metaphor as a literary device but her own metaphor in and out her world. She believes that “as it takes but a moment of imagination to place us anywhere, it would not seem worthwhile to stay where it was stale” (PF 66). All she has to do is “shut [her] eyes [and] travel” (L 354). Birds, her escorts in her quests, like “the Humming Birds and Orioles [which] fly by [her] as [she] write[s]” (L 825), and flowers are her passport to transport and bliss: “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” (L 235). Dickinson sees no need to “travel to Nature when she dwells with us” (L 321) “I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town” (L 330] Dickinson writes to Higginson, yet she is lying. Though the hills demarcate the frontiers of her self-designated cosmic order, they are essentially transparent, as she can cross them and reach the world outside at will, by “ma[king] a balloon of a Dandelion” (L 212) and voyaging outside her capsule. She soars across “Skies in blossom” (L 271), watching the “Sunrise on the Alps” (L 321), she wanders through “topaz town[s] (L 247) along with the shiny moon, she “loom[s] up from

Hindoostan" (L 107), "drop[s] from an Appenine" (ibid), plunges into the Abyss only to emerge stronger" (L 1024) and she has but to "lift [her] hands to touch the 'Hights of Abraham'" (L 352). Seated at her "throne" (L 696), not only does she reach the four corners of the earth and fathoms heaven, but she also brings them back into her front yard. By encapsulating the world outside of her own into her own, she has "but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles" (L 315). A routine minor transaction that Vinnie does is all she needs to transfer to New York and its Stock Exchange: "It rains in the Kitchen, and Vinnie trades Blackberries with a Tawny Girl -- Guess I wont go out. My Jungle fronts on Wall St" (L 320). Time and place are immaterial for her, practically non-existent.

Dickinson resides in time rather than place; the temporality of the seasonal changes constitutes her locality, and she writes to Clark: "Spring is a strange Land when our friends are ill" (L 825). In her capsule, "Eden has no number, nor street" (L 1017), so time and place are irrelevant to calendars, time zones or geographic coordinates. They either fuse or are interchangeable: "It is also November. The noons are more laconic and the sundowns sterner, and Gibraltar lights make the village foreign. November always seemed to be the Norway of the year" (L 311), she writes to Elizabeth Holland. Latitudes intersect and the visual spectacle, created by the Northern Lights in Norway, which is best visible in November, is relocated to the usually overcast November Amherst. The short day and the eerie thick veil of Aurora Borealis are redirected to Amherst in the form of the ghostly atmosphere of the hazy November dusk, penetrated or illuminated by lights, probably on the hills around Amherst. Dickinson forges a novel spacetime in whose continuum temporality usurps or coincides with spatiality; time is treated as universal and its passage as irrelevant to location, ultimately unifying coordinates and enabling Dickinson to step in and out her spacetime as desired.

In addition, Dickinson reflects the goings-on of the outer world into hers, revealing her deep interest in them and disproving the myth of her severance from her times. Familiarity with "passing events, with the whole circle of life and science" (Newman 14) is a requirement for a good writer, which Dickinson meets. She keeps constantly informed about the political situation and alludes to it in many of her letters. She cunningly pretends, in the fashion of Portia, the heroine from the *Merchant of Venice,* that she is "an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticèd" (Act 3, Scene 2,160), unaware or even uninterested in the current state of affairs and she

writes to Elizabeth Holland: "'George Washington was the Father of his Country' – 'George Who? That sums all Politics to me'" (L 950). However, several references disprove her. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland during a heat wave in August 1881, she writes: "We have an artificial Sea, and to see the Birds follow the Hose for a Crumb of Water is a touching Sight. They wont take it if I hand it to them -- they run and shriek as if they were being assassinated, but oh, to steal it, that is bliss -- I cant say that their views are not current" (L 721). The violation of the selectional restriction by replacing drop by crump as well as the auditory and kinetic havoc in her self-governed word, created by her attempt to quench the birds' thirst, reflects the disorder caused in the United States by thieving politicians.

Dickinson makes imaginative links between foreign places or events and domestic ones. She is well-informed of the Greek Revolution of 1821, and when Frazer Stearns gets killed in the Civil War, she writes: "'We conquered, but Bozzaris fell'. That sentence always chokes me" (L 362), the line taken from the poem "Marco Bozzaris" by Fitz-Greene Halleck, an American author, about the Battle of Kefalovryso, an attack against the Turks in which Bozzaris was heroically killed. References to the ongoing political situation as well as to the various legislative acts abound in her letters. In an apparent thank-you letter to Abigail Cooper she writes: "The Keeper of Golden Flowers need have no fear of the 'Silver Bill'. An Indies in the Hand, at all times fortifying, is peculiarly so -- perhaps -- today. Midas was a Rogue" (L 543). The Bland–Allison Act of 1878 required the U.S. Treasury to buy a certain amount of silver and put it into circulation as silver dollars.[18]

3.7.2. Dickinson's faith through Nature

Dickinson rejects the harsh God of the revealed religion which maintains that "God has actually revealed in the Bible [where] the diligent and candid can discover" Him (Hopkins 107) and approaches the sacred truths of religion with sacrilege. For her, the Bible was nothing but a "told story" (L 266) and in a letter-poem to her nephew Ned she condenses the main points of the "tale" of the Bible; the setting, the characters, heroes and villains, the plot, the conflict and the moral:

[18] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bland%E2%80%93Allison_Act last visited 25/04/2021.

The Bible is an antique Volume --
Written by faded Men
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres --
Subjects -- Bethlehem --
Eden -- the ancient Homestead --
Satan -- the Brigadier --
Judas -- the Great Defaulter --
David -- the Troubadour --
Sin -- a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist --
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome --
Other Boys are "lost" --
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller --
All the Boys would come --
Orpheus' Sermon captivated --
It did not condemn -- (L 753)

In this poem, Dickinson voices her rejection of the divine origin of the Bible and questions both the authority of the Scriptures and even the existence of God, echoing thus the arguments of "a cold, speculative, subtle set of skeptics, who attack first principles" (Hopkins 17) by claiming that the sacred texts are but a "fiction, fabricated by adroit impostors" (Griffin 97). Dickinson describes the Bible as an antique, age-long passage which is obviously outdated and fails to cater for the contemporary intellectual or spiritual needs or keep up with scientific advances. It is written not by God himself but by men whose identity is obscure and whose authorship is controversial. As they have vanished with the passage of the time, they can bear no immediate witness whatsoever, not even of secondhand knowledge, their testimony is mere hearsay; the validity of the Scriptures derives from their long-established use, their being canonical. What they write has been suggested to them, that is, they have been "offered [new ideas] to the mind or thought" (Webster 2:716) which they have cultivated or shaped. What is more, these suggestions are not made by the Holy Spirit but by Spectres, apparitions or ghosts that perturb the mind and influence thought. She presents Satan as the second in command; the villain is Judas

while David praises God for his glory and power. Sin is the precipice where danger looms for those who oppose God's eternal law; "others", not Dickinson, ought to resist its gravitation so as not to drop away to hell. Real believers are scanty while many people have strayed from Eden, which interestingly coincides with her home, the Homestead. The plot is remarkable, Dickinson remarks, but not captivating, rather deterring. The threat of doom and condemnation does not exactly serve as a persuasive sermon capable of making the lost find their way back. If it were Orpheus, the ancient Greek musician and poet who descended the underworld and returned his melodious music could turn even the stone-hearted into believers.

Dickinson does not endorse the teachings of natural religion either, which claim that God's existence is reflected in and proven by "the moral and religious teachings of the nature" which "actually teaches us our duties, laws and tendencies" (ibid). Minot Judson Savage claims that "when I look upon some little flower bursting through the sod, I am looking directly into the secrets of God's beauty and God's taste" (Savage 26). This, to his mind, provides concrete, scientifically proven evidence, for His existence as "it is a truth of the living, working God, right before my eyes to-day; and I can prove it now, and I can prove it to-morrow, just as well as it was proved yesterday; so that there is no possible chance for contradiction or conflict as to whether it is true or not" (Savage 25). Dickinson, on the other hand, does not draw comparisons between flowers and God to infer His existence but she compares them to humans only to envy them: "The career of flowers differs from ours only in inaudibleness. I feel more reverence as I grow for these mute creatures whose suspense or transport may surpass my own" (L 388). Instead of manifesting God's glory, flowers are unconscious and unaffected by His Will, their perishing and what it entails: "I often wish I was a grass, or a toddling daisy, whom all of these problems of the dust might not terrify" (L 182). Transcendentalists are in the same line as natural theology since they consider that the beauty of the nature is the reflection of the divine. Emerson's transparent eyeball enables him to transcend the individual barriers, join the Oversoul, the united human soul in which God resides, and become "part or particle of God" (Porte 10). Dickinson's transparent eyeball does enable her to transcend spatial and temporal barriers, but she remains on earth and unites with none other but nature itself. She claims that "the open Air -- That is nearest Heaven" (L 866); however, it is nature and not God that resides in every soul. "Travel why to Nature, when she dwells with us? Those who lift their hats will see her, as devout do

God" (L 321) she goes on. And she sees more in it: "Science is very near us -- I found a megatherium on my strawberry" (PF 102). A megatherium fossil was collected by Darwin during his voyage with the HMS Beagle and was one of the steppingstones of his theory of evolution. Dickinson sees a long gone megatherium, a Greek word for great beast, in her own garden on the plainest and humblest of fruits. Where the devout sees the creationism of God, Dickinson sees the evolution of nature and its grandeur which, associated with Darwin's object of study, diverges from religion and embraces science. For Dickinson, nature is grand but in an entirely different, possibly pagan, way; it is the chthonic Gaia or Demeter. Instead of the celestial God's distant glory, she feels that "Nature is our eldest mother" and her female anthropomorphic image is immersed in simple daily life, eliminating the patriarchal, stern notion of a harsh God, ready to punish. It is a lady "tak[ing] off [her] purple frocks and dress in long white nightgowns" in winter (L 228), or "la[ying] her supple Glove in its Sylvan Drawer (L 477), so "intima[te]" with "her children that she addresses them as 'comrades in arms'" (L 648). Dickinson observes the transitional phases of the cycle of life in the hills which changed color: they "are red -- are gray -- are white -- are 'born again'!" (L 207) but she glorifies its beauty and not God. Believing that the "'Supernatural' is only the Natural disclosed" (L 280) she observes creation taking place annually and, she applies religious symbols to earthly rebirth in an idiosyncratic way: "There is a Dove in the Street and I own beautiful Mud -- so I Know Summer is coming. I was always attached to Mud, because of what it typifies" (L 492). Contrary to the theological view of mud or dust as the symbol of mortality and thus its lowly character as opposed to higher notions of immortality, Dickinson cherishes it; on the one hand, it stands for the heaven "in the hand" that "supersede[s]" the heaven "in the bush" (L 193). On the other, as union of earth and water, it stands for transition and transformation as well as the means of emergence of substance and thus creativity and creation. She observes birth, life, death in her Garden; Death's presence is felt during his claiming of her Garden, and she complains that "I trust your Garden was willing to die -- I do not think that mine was -- it perished with beautiful reluctance, like an evening star" (L 668), projecting the brevity and the evanescence of life on her flowers. However, as a "Lunatic on Bulbs" (L 823) and their potentiality for rebirth, she refers to her garden as if it was a grave and the dead lay inside awaiting resurrection: "my garden is a little knoll with faces under it" (L 207). Though flowers are associated with transience, Dickinson considers their circular course, their

"reluctan[t] perish[ing]" (L 668) but the beginning of a new life cycle, as they "resume [their] Siren Circuit" and their "transit [is] Ephemeral -- Eternal" (L 983). Despite their fleeting nature, it is them that constitute a constant since they outlast humans; Dickinson concludes that "changelessness is Nature's change" (L 948), it is humans who are transient while the circularity of vegetation annuls time points on the linear timeline which fragments and separates them. She writes to Samuel Bowles's son: "A Tree your Father gave me bore this priceless flower" (L 935); the tree as a synthesis of earth and heaven bridges the time gap as well as the gap Bowles's loss has caused, bringing dead and alive, present and absent together.

Nature is considered "the only temple that God himself has consecrated" and His presence is felt everywhere: "in sun and star, and sky and cloud, and ocean and earth, and grass and flowers and trees, and human nature, -- I am looking directly into a revelation of God" (Savage 26-7). What Nature reveals to Dickinson, though, is not the perfection of God in the fashion of natural theology or the Transcendentalists but luring beauty, linked to human passions: "Flowers are so enticing I fear that they are sins -- like gambling or apostasy" (PF 74), pleasures forbidden by God as hardly elevating the individual to the divine; apostasy being linked to the effort "by searching [through science] find out God" (Griffin 80) and is condemned. Even Banishment from the Garden of Eden is counterbalanced by the beauty of nature, negating thus God's punishment which Dickinson questions anyway: "Expulsion from Eden grows indistinct in the presence of flowers so blissful and with no disrespect to Genesis, Paradise remains" (L 552). She identifies earth with "Paradise [which she] never believe[s] to be superhuman site" (L 391). She claims that "to know whether we are in Heaven or on Earth is one of the most impossible of the mind's decisions, [and] but I think the balance always leans in favor of the negative -- if Heaven is negative" (PF 114) yet Dickinson has made up her mind. "Paradise is of Option" she writes to Higginson and whether she refers to obeying the Commandments and secure it or choosing the spatiotemporality of it is obvious. Earth belongs to humans in the same way "Blossoms belong to the Bee, if needs be by *habeas corpus*" (L 227); it is theirs even if God considers it an unlawful detention. She sees no need for "Eden [the garden] of God" (L 234), as her garden is her Eden. Bethesda, the house of Mercy where Jesus healed a paralyzed man, is just outside; she simply has to look out "Vinnie's Garden from the Door [which] looks like a Pond, with Sunset on it. Bathing in that heals her. How simple Bethesda is!" (L 521)

Jerusalem is next door, at Austin and Sue's house when friends gather and spend enjoyable evenings: "I think Jerusalem must be like Sue's Drawing Room, when we are talking and laughing there, and you and Mrs. Bowles are by" (L189). Even Second Coming takes place in her house during "one thunder shower […] so terrible that we locked the doors and the clock stopped – which made it like Judgment Day" (L 471). Her window hosts a "permanent rainbow", symbol of Resurrection, just "by filling [it] with Hyacinths" (L 882) and she sees her beloved dead all around her: "Dear 'Mr. Sam' is very near, these midwinter days. When purples come on Pelham, in the afternoon we say, 'Mr. Bowles's colors'" (L 536) Earth and Heaven merge; she does not aspire upwards, but she brings Heaven down. Besides making up her mind as to where Paradise lies, she makes up her own heavens replacing Holy Men with Flowers which are not "quite earthly. They are like the Saints" and make her "feel more at Home with them than with the Saints of God" (L 417). If "Roses and Pansies" await her instead of the "Great Crowd of Witnesses", a paraphrase of Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 12:1, who having borne testimony for their faith constitute examples for the believers concerning faith,[19] "there would be less to apprehend" (L 417). Loving the tenants of her Heaven, Birds and Blossoms, is "economical [as] It saves going to Heaven" (L 455). No wonder then, that she considers "*His* Paradise superfluous" (L 185) (emphasis added) and their domains distinct. In analogy to nature, her Eden is assailed by external forces; "three dazzling Winter Nights have wrecked the budding Gardens" (L 901) just like God, a rival, "By his intrusion God is known" (L 575) which transforms her heaven into a "World of Death" (L 195) The death of her beloved makes her wonder "Which Earth are we in? *Heaven*, a Sunday or two ago -- but this has also ceased" (L 750). Dickinson sets apart her earthly Paradise from "[God's] sky" where her family could be put by Him "to live with him forever" (L 86) or the theological one as she has doubts for its existence; for her the "only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest [she] ha[d] seen in June and in it are my friends -- all of them -- every one of them -- those who are with me now, and those who were 'parted' as we walked, and 'snatched up to Heaven'" (L 185). Paradise for her is a union of beloved persons regardless of space or time, of their being alive or dead. It is not a location; rather a peaceful and blissful

[19] https://biblehub.com/commentaries/hebrews/12-1.htm last visited 21/11/20.

state, “a Summer’s Picture, which is not yet molted by the Snow” (L 566), that is Death.

3.8. Dickinson’s cartography of death and afterlife

Dickinson’s tantalizing quest as to where the dead go is reflected in her letters which also serve as a metaphor of life and death, presence and absence. A letter requires two communicating poles and its presence presupposes the absence of one of them. Dickinson herself makes the distinction: “A letter […] is the mind alone without corporeal friend” (L 330). Thus, epistolarity is essentially founded on an ersatz death, with the “departed letter” (L 43) serving as the physical metonymy of both the “departed” addressee and the remaining, but distanced, addresser. Accordingly, Dickinson ascribes somatic properties to the letter, transforming it to a letter-body and she described it in onto-theological terms: “A letter always feels to me like immortality” (L 330) Dickinson remarks, since the mind, the spirit having been released from the “garments of mortality” (Irvine 11), that is, its entrapment into spatial-temporal context, is free to be inscribed as a trace in an infinite chain with no origin and no finish. Lack of presence of the receiver necessitates the letter-body but the body-letter lacks the presence of the sender because of the interchange and annulment of the absence/presence of the poles of the epistolary dyad. Another key property of the letter-as-trace which becomes relevant here is, according to postmodern views of epistolarity, that of *adestination* (Derrida, 1987, 29); it is meant to arrive somewhere but not necessarily at its intended destination. This problem torments Dickinson, as she has her doubts about the afterlife where her dearly departed, like letters, should be “delivered”: “We don’t know where she is” she writes after her mother’s death “tho’ so many tell us” (L 785). She yearns to get a plausible answer to her question: “Where are they now?” Unconcerned about the impression she would make as “any presumption against a future life is a presumption against religion” (Butler 106), she addresses a minister, Washington Gladden, demanding once again an answer to her question: “‘Is immortality true?’” (L 752a) She must have implied that the notions of afterlife and immortality are used to ease the fear of the dying as he protested: “God forbid that I should flatter one who is dying with any illusive hope”. Dickinson must have also made remarks which the minister considered offensive, as he writes: “Say what you will about” Jesus Christ but he is unable to

offer her "absolute demonstration […] of this truth" only "a thousand lines of evidence converge toward it. It is all I can say" (ibid). Afterlife and immortality were handled in the same way the existence of God was: by analogical reasoning or resort to casting the burden of proof to those who questioned it. The best ministers could do was to infer through moral arguments based on Christian faith which Dickinson seems to lack, so their arguments are weak. They are dead letters, and she writes to Higginson: "To see you seems improbable, but the Clergyman says I shall see my Father –" (L 593), highlighting her disbelief and rejection of these creeds.

In a deconstructive sense, Dickinson's letters become, instead of conventional tokens of presence and consolation, the site of her tackling with the hierarchy of presence/absence, life/death, and immortality/mortality in her effort to piece Life and Death together. She is the only constant in a structure that changes constantly. Earth and Heaven are variables in her Universe; Death displaces Life, desperation out places hope, certainty changes place with uncertainty in an incessantly interchangeable succession. Her metaphysical epistolary Universe exists on both a vertical (above/below) and a horizontal (here/there) level. Initially, below is characterized by temporality rather than spatiality, it is the "earth [which] is short" (L 50) the "probationary term of existence" (L 11). The dead follow a vertical route upwards; they ascend, they are "transplanted from earth to heaven" (ibid) or go "to rest" (L 39) peacefully. Above is a "far different world", the Biblical Paradise, "the orchard of pleasure and fruits" (Smith, 535) where the dead "gather flowers in the immortal spring" (L 86), it is the "Judgment Seat" (L 10) where spirits, although "disembodied" (ibid), are "preserved" (L 35) and await to be reunited with those who still "linger" (L 57) below. Although she employs onto-theological terms and her attitude to death seems to be aligned with the established notions of Heaven and the afterlife, when writing about the death of Sophia Holland she voices her skepticism by stating that her friend is "in heaven with the savior" (L 11) "according to all *human probability*" (L 11, emphasis added).

Her skepticism grows deeper as "One and another, and another – […] pass away!" (L 60) and Below is characterized by spatiality and partition. Dickinson marks her territory, where her parents and all her beloved live (L 91) and which is distinctly separate from the above, "his sky" (L 86), the distant seat of the "Redoubtable God" (L 311) who moves downwards, descends, not to save Man this time, but to "maraud" (L 371) her "occasional Heaven here" (L 107). Although she employs a metaphysical

dualistic opposition, her hierarchy clashes with metaphysics; it is the human presence that is privileged over the divine and not vice versa. The violence, indicated by the verb to "maraud," is exerted not by the governing – present – term of her hierarchy, human, but by the subordinated – absent – one, God. Despite being traditionally the center, the presence of God occupies the margin position and seeks to overturn the hierarchy and brings about the absence of what Dickinson designates as the center, the human.

Dickinson conceives presence in terms of the perceptual world, evident in her diction: Her Universe is "Life that sees and steps and touches" (L 779) and houses the "dear form[s]" (L 678) while the other half, Heavens is a "farther life [with] no face" (L 859), "without any body" (L 471). Being the dominated term in the hierarchy as absence, the "Undiscovered Country" (L 750) is "a place we have never seen" (L 329) and Dickinson can only surmise by balancing the two terms. Her comparison of the actual, present life to the one promised in afterlife lead to the prevailing of the former:

> The Life we have is very great.
> The Life that we shall see
> Surpasses it, we know, because
> It is Infinity.
> But when all space has been beheld
> And all Dominion shown
> The smallest Human Heart's extent
> Reduces it to none. (L 354)

The first verse, laid in one line, constitutes a generic proposition whose truth is indisputable. The beauty of the simplicity of life is evident in Dickinson's diction; it is "very great", which is simple and rather ungrammatical. Dickinson states that "We know' that the future life exceeds it; a highly contradictory claim given that the future is unknown. This statement is laid in three different lines; the subject on a different line from the verb as well as separate from the explanation. The truth of the statements, however, is at doubt or even invalidated by the introduction of the next verse by the disjunction but which signifies Dickinson's dissention. Future life may be superior but only because of its vastness, which nevertheless can be enclosed in a

dainty human heart. The Kingdom and the Glory of the Bible are overcome by the Power of love at the present.

Heavens is distant, “those great countries in the blue sky of which we don't know anything” (L 217), its spring is only “rumored” (L 891). In a letter to her cousins, after her nephew’s death and her severe illness, she ponders:

> The going from a world we know
> To one a wonder still
> Is like the child's adversity
> Whose vista is a hill,
> Behind the hill is sorcery
> And everything unknown,
> But will the secret compensate
> For climbing it alone? (L 907)

The “present world” is believed to be a “state of moral discipline for another” in the same way childhood prepares for “discipline for mature age” (Butler xlv), and Dickinson refers to the hill that separates the world humans know from “one wonder still” and obstructs the view so that what lay behind is “unknown”. Behind this blockage lies sorcery, “witchcraft, divination, the power of commanding evil spirits” (Webster 2:639), rather incompatible with the rewards of Heavens promised to the righteous and penitent. Dickinson wonders whether climbing, that is being a good Christian, is worth the trouble even after all the losses and ordeals she has suffered.

For Dickinson, the loss of the body and its functions mean severance of these fundamental mental functions which ultimately distinguish “percipient and sentient nature” (Upham 125). Life is tantamount to consciousness, and she writes to Mary Bowles that she would mourn for Bowles’ death “while consciousness remains” (L 567). Considering consciousness “the only home of which we now know” she ascribes spatial aspects to a mental state but much as she desires it, she is unable to annul temporal and ascribe eternal ones: “That sunny adverb had been enough, were it not foreclosed” (L 591) she goes on. Juxtaposing the Biblical verse which locates the dead “in the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), she writes to Maria Whitney “I still hope that you live, and in lands of consciousness” (L 830). The burning issue for her then is “the Extension of Consciousness after Death” which her reasoning thinks

improbable. In 1878, in a letter to the Hollands, Dickinson expresses her conviction that mental abilities are retained forever: “How unspeakably sweet and solemn -- that whatever awaits us of Doom or Home, we are mentally permanent” (L 555). She twists the Pauline biblical verse which defines the body as home and death as its loss and goes on with a profane, for the pious, declaration: “‘It is finished’ can never be said of us”. The verse about Jesus’ last words on earth reads: “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost” (John 19:30). Dickinson juxtaposes Jesus’ human nature which came to an end and extends it to total obliteration in contrast with the rest of the humanity who will go to the other life as “man with a human body; man with a human intellect; man with a human heart” (Wadsworth, 1869, 235). It seems, however, that Dickinson really mocks the assurances based on probabilities made by natural theology which contradict not only the ones made by the Bible’s teachings about “rais[ing] in spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44) but themselves as well, as they elsewhere claim that it is a “grosser error to suppose that aught of the imperfect or carnal goes with the human heart to its immortal sphere” (Wadsworth 232). Three years before her death, in a letter to her Norcross cousins it is obvious that she remains unconvinced: “That we are permanent temporarily, it is warm to know, though we know no more” (L 962).

Mind is tantamount to consciousness and reasoning for Dickinson, and in a letter to Higginson she asserts that it is unlikely to perish, as the mortal body will: “we know that the mind of the Heart must live if it's clerical part do not” (L 503). For Dickinson the letter has “a pair of lives” (L 184) as humans do. Despite her disbelief in immortality in theological terms, her belief in the immortality of the intellect renders the letter, which preserves it, intellectual afterlife. The letter-self, being her icon, secures her literary immortality; mindful that it is to “be kept and pondered, perhaps printed and circulated long after [she would be] in the dust” (Thorold, 10), she minds it to the last detail, endowing it with immortal poetic qualities.

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson’s letters span her entire lifetime as she wrote the first one at the age of ten and the last one shortly before she died, at the age of fifty-six. They could function as an archive of her life, an autobiography, but for their manifold mutilations. The extent of her corpus is indeterminate, since part of it was burnt after her death in

compliance with the epistolary etiquette and was irrevocably lost. The corpus that escaped annihilation, an estimated 10% of the original, is badly disfigured since it underwent extensive tampering before its publication. A great part of it was physically amputated by clipping off parts or even whole pages to exclude certain references that could kindle the Feud of Houses, that is, the vendetta between Susan Dickinson on the one hand and her husband's lover and editor of the letters, Mabel Loomis Todd, on the other. Additionally, the corpus was maimed by the exclusion of paragraphs that did not fit the image of the secluded spinster promoted by the editors. What's more, the body of the letters was abused and manipulated by transcription as some of the recipients agreed to the publication of Dickinson's letters on condition that they themselves would select and transcribe the parts they considered decorous and not offensive to her memory. The arbitrary exclusion of specific parts or their rearrangement wiped away Dickinson's intents as well as layout, handwriting and punctuation, fundamental aspects of Dickinson's letters, and violated the integrity of her corpus.

Dickinson's letters have been studied alongside or in contrast to her poems so that common ground be established. They are also considered her "stylistic workshop" (Eberwein as mentioned in Leiter, 340), in which she experimented with the artistic strategies (ibid) she made use of in her poems. In addition, they have been used as a biographical source on which to ground several theories regarding her life or her mental stability. However, the extremely small number of the surviving letters as compared to the estimated total renders this approach problematic, since the scope of her correspondents is limited and there are years of which few, if any, letters survive. In addition, the fact that the remaining letters have undergone heavy editing by none other than Dickinson herself who, contrary to epistolary rules, made several drafts before actually sending a letter, eliminates spontaneity and questions Dickinson's sincerity in presenting herself.

Emily Dickinson's preoccupation with letters started off rather conventionally. She corresponded with her friends and relatives in the fashion of the middle-upper-class nineteenth century woman, who was assigned letter writing to "maintain fellowship over distances" (Barton & Hall, 19) as her "sex excels [man's] in the ease and grace of epistolary correspondence" (ibid 33). Nineteenth-century epistolary conventions and etiquette, however, were extremely rigid and letters were the means of safeguarding the prevalence of moral -- or even moralistic -- values, perpetuating

the existing hierarchies and, most importantly, prescribing the proper gender roles. Letters as a "universal instrument of government and society" (Thorold, 7), "used for the glory of God" (ibid 8) became the vehicle of propagating modes of conduct, standards of morality and accepted behavior. The model letters provided examples as a rule and impelled a pattern which had to be imitated. By establishing a system of relations which enables certain options while inhibiting others, the Foucauldean power aims at remanufacturing identity by imposing values and principles; habitual compliance to these norms leads to their internalization and to habit-invested, docile bodies. However, example also implies the punishment inflicted to those who deviate from the acceptable pattern and the warning to those who might consider doing so by making an example of the deviants. By stamping the deviants and branding letters as acceptable or not, it seeks to exert a corrective role, to normalize.

Emily Dickinson, a self-proclaimed "faithful correspondent" (L 7), was taught the limitations and restrictions of correspondence and initially moves within their frame. She takes advantage of domesticity to make room for her artistic development and uses all the epistolary conventions adroitly with the sole aim of having them serve her aims. However, that is only a front too thin to contain Dickinson's boundless talent and intellect. She employs transverse tactics and transforms the letter into her arena of toying with conventions, and particularly into a Trojan horse through which she undermines masculine tradition. Confronted with the epistolary conventions, she seizes them, appropriates them till she ultimately turns them against themselves and deconstructs them. I suggest that, while she takes advantage of letter writing, which affords her with the opportunity to map her own world and people it with the addressees that correspond to her manifold personality, she transgresses and violates rules and instructions on proper letter to resist subjection to the existing hierarchies and social order, thus using the letter, a means of interpellation, to avoid interpellation.

Her correspondence appears here divided into two phases, an early and a mature one, according to the ways she handles the medium of the letter. In the second chapter about the first phase of Dickinson's correspondence, I argue that she is ostensibly on the beaten track; however, she refuses to play by the epistolary binding rules and become a product of discourse; rather she bends them to lift their control and remove their restraints, unfettering herself from the generalization they impose. Confined in "a terrain organized by the law of foreign power", as Michel de Certeau

puts it, she has to get around them by establishing her individual syntax in a constraining language system imposed on her. Despite the pressure exerted on her to convert and her brother's efforts to make her "gain correct ideas of female propriety & sedate deportment" (L 22), she strays and creates a newfound form of correspondence by writing off the rules that do not serve her purpose. She does send the letter as a "representative of [her] person" (*Aids in Epistolary Correspondence* 7), evident in the somaticity with which she invests it. She "come[s] and see[s]" (L 111) her recipients, she "ring[s] the front bell" (L 78) "sit[s] and chat[s] away" (L 111). However, Dickinson does not comply with the rhetoric of letters risking being "stamped" (Westlake 79) with "vice" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 338) and being treated with "sarcasm" (*The London Universal* VI). She pays little or no attention to the face of the letter regarding choice of paper, penmanship and layout as her letters deviate from the expected neat letter. "Slovenly scrawl" (Westlake 42) was discouraged, however Thomas Higginson is daunted by her "fossil-bird tracks" (Eberwein 11). She writes in every available space of the paper, even upside down and adorns the paper either by drawing or by clippings. This defacement of the face of the letter is considered by the contemporary standards disgusting; in any case, it startles the recipient at the opening of the envelope. According to the epistolary rules, a letter had to refrain from running on "like a stream without stops, with no division into paragraphs", including unrelated subjects in the same paragraph or else it was "ridiculous" (Chesterfield 21). The same applied to the uneven transition from one paragraph to the other and their connection in a "loose manner", a sign of "unpardonable negligence" (Brady 234) which permeated the paragraph with "a sense of disorder" (*The Fashionable American Letter Writer* xxvi). Begging no pardon, Dickinson relishes what is considered chaotic; in this first phase, she compiles paragraphs which occupy half or most of her sheet, stacking irrelevant information and jumping from one subject to the other in the same paragraph in rapid succession. The letter as a means of communication was "written conversation" (*The Secretary* 16) and as a result, it rejected the stately diction of the books. Prolonged pondering on the best word could lead to loss of spontaneity and obstruction of the pen. Dickinson assures her brother that her letter is "extempore, [she had] no notes in [her] pocket" (L 165). However, the surviving scraps and drafts refute her and reveal extensive rewriting and meticulous lexical selection. Disregarding rules regarding politeness,

Dickinson launches frontal attacks against those that do not reply to her letters as promptly or as extensively as she deems she deserves.

Domesticity, male superiority and female confinement to the private sphere were promoted by the contemporary power system; the expert discourse, who were male and usually ministers. The instillation of controlling habits and the continuous strive to emulate valued and favored images meant that women had practically no choice in constructing a self, but for a compatible one with those paradigms. To this aim, prescribed writing by letter writing manuals functioned as a "cultural script" which imposed "cultural strictures about self – presentation" (Smith & Watson 42) and consequently self-formation. Conscious that she "puzzle[d] the public exceedingly […] set down as one of those brands almost consumed" (L 30), though undaunted by her branding as not normal, Dickinson resists being transformed into a docile body. "[Her] business is to sing" (L 269) and she would "persist in writing and [they] may in laughing at [her]" (L 31), deviating from the prescribed occupations women were entitled to. On the contrary, she expresses either her compassion or even her scorn for those who get married and settle as she believes they trade their personal freedom for a worthless marital situation. Another thorny issue for Dickinson was religion as she has to fend off constant pressure for conversion in the form of edification letters sent by her friends. She does not push their catechism back overtly; rather, using their own religious jargon, she fires back at them, cunningly leading them to believe that she is seriously considering her options and lamenting her folly while she never intends to do so.

In the third chapter I examined the second phase of her correspondence. As Dickinson experiences several losses and gradually withdraws from the world, the letter becomes even more of an agent, acting on her behalf; it is her letter-body present in the absence of her physical body. She constructs an epistolary universe of discourse and letters function as her representatives in the event of funerals, weddings or illnesses; she "consign[s] [her]self" (L 866) and "t[akes] the hand of [her] friend, even apparitionally" (L 967). Letter writing both encloses her to this circularity and gives her the opening she requires for adapting the conventional epistolagraphy to her needs which exceeds mere communication. She benefits from the letter as a communicative device but she is not engulfed by the epistolary norms; on the contrary, she emerges not only intact but groundbreaking as well. Dickinson differentiates from and violates almost every epistolary rule while she develops her

innovative letter as a literary work, since she writes letters for writing's sake, as Roman Jacobson puts it; by focusing on the message for its own sake, she transforms the referential function of the conventional commonalities of the letter into poetic, evident in several aspects of her letters. Aspiring for her letters to "be kept and pondered, perhaps printed and circulated long after [she would be] in the dust" (Thorold 10), she appropriates conventions to her own ends and develops her own style, by restructuring the rhetoric of letters and transforming the commonalities of a conventional composition into an innovative piece of writing, that of poetic epistolarity. Contrary to the conventions which prescribed conversational or familiar epistolary style endowed with the "peculiarities in ordinary speech" (Young 208) and dismissed "poetic" style (*The Secretary* 17) Dickinson's style is poetic. Not being "plain [or] sensible" (*The Young Lady's Own Book* 121) she does "run astray after 'the butterflies of the language'" (ibid) and makes extensive use of tropes. She employs figures of speech at discourse level, such as hypophora, anaphora, epistrophe, symploce, hyberbaton as well sonic devices, including alliteration, assonance, cacophony, and internal rhyme to name but a few. It is noteworthy that several of these devices can coexist not just in the same letter but in the same sentence as well.

Although the purpose of writing a letter was to inform one's correspondent about the latest news, mature Dickinson's letters do not report recent events or present previously unknown information; they are not referential, "talking letters" (Westlake 93). Writing a letter for her is not a relay of information and although she sends letters on various social occasions to fulfill her duty, she does it in a way that reminds more of poetic fiction. Instead of focusing on faithfully transcribing her news, Dickinson simply mentions them in passing and then generalizes on them, inserting them into a universal chain of events, isolating them from their time-location microcosm and enclosing them into a grander pattern, a macrocosm. A letter is the attempt to span the temporal and spatial gap that separates the correspondents. Dickinson realizes that "time and space […] oppose themselves" (L 31) and she writes to Abiah: "Whenever you look at [the seal] you can think I am looking at you at the same time" (L 7) temporalizing presence while Abiah is obliged to spatialize it, if they are to share some common referential point with which they can identify. Violating the epistolary rule that prescribed that the date of the receipt of the letter that initiated the reply should be mentioned in the introduction to confirm delivery, Dickinson invariably

absconds from stating the date of the letter received. Although it is imperative to bind the letter to spatiotemporal specifics, Dickinson either mentions none of them or she dates the letter mentioning only the day, "Saturday morning" for example, muddling the spatiotemporal gap of the two communicative poles. The epistolary sender-receiver alteration is not clear; apart from the letters triggered by a death, some illness or a calamity, the rest are indefinite links in the epistolary chain.

Contrary to the contemporary belief that the letter was "connected with the past, future unseen unknown" (*Appleton's Complete Letter Writer* xix), rendering correspondence strictly unsuitable for "universal entertainment and instruction" (ibid XI), Dickinson's mature letters function, as Derrida puts it, in the absence of every empirically determined addressee (Derrida, 1982, 375), Higginson, who edited the first edition of her Letters, admits dating most of them relied heavily on differences in her handwriting, based on temporality, and not by their a-referential, a-temporal content. The general omission of time or place deictic words unhinges the letter from the present and the specific occasion that has prompted it, putting it to uses other than relating the sender's reality. In addition, Dickinson makes use of numerous introductory sentences which are a-contextual, a-temporal and a-spatial. Her sentences tend to be generic, applicable to present, past and future and expressing a general truth, an axiom concerning a whole unrestricted class of individuals. Numerous letters begin with an infinitive clause as the subject of the sentence. These aphorisms defy temporality as they are not marked for subject or tense and they could refer to any given time or occasion, addressed not only to the intended reader, the recipient but, as it were, to seemingly unintended addressees who must be her intended ones all along.

It is obvious, then, that Dickinson's letters cannot be classified neither as private, since they subvert each and every aspect of familiar correspondence, nor as public, since they are not essays in a formal style. Her letters are an entirely different kind of epistolarity; endowed with poetic qualities and applicable to any addressee at any time, they open up a new genre, that of poetic epistolarity.

The relationship of Dickinson's letters to her poems regarding subject matter requires further study and analysis so that the connection between them is highlighted. In addition, further study is necessary to establish the procedure she followed in

selecting poems to be included in her letter and whether she adapted the poem to the letter she enclosed it in, or vice versa.

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