Not 'me – but a supposed person': Emily Dickinson's Non-Referential Correspondence

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Abstract: This essay takes issue with the notion of Dickinson as *the* poet of privacy and argues that her conception of authorship involved a concentrated effort to break traditional conventions and assumptions regarding private communication and literary production. The uniqueness of Dickinson's poetry stems from its cryptic, deceptive, and fierce simplicity, and she achieves the illusion of simplicity through a meticulous attention to diction. Dickinson consciously works with the established notions of public and private during the nineteenth century, and uses the assumed simplicity of the distinction to develop a "new department" of prose and poetry that centers on manuscript construction and circulation. Dickinson's manuscripts reveal a sustained commitment to breaking the generic conventions of lyric poetry and epistolary prose. Readers since the nineteenth century have searched within Dickinson's correspondence for a static, autobiographical "I" in order to make the lyric "I" of her poetry more clear. However, assuming a static "I" proves problematic in both genres. Readers have sought an explanation of the poetry in Dickinson's biography, and they often turn to the letters as evidence, but a static voice in the correspondence proves to be an illusion. In contrast to the spontaneous, natural, and emotional letters that proper nineteenth-century women were supposed to write, Dickinson makes private communication artful. Dickinson's body of work represents a meticulous exploration into the power of un-occasional, non-referential prose and poetry.

In Emily Dickinson's copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays: Second Series*, the following section of "The Poet" is marked: "We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can use them yet with a terrible simplicity. It does not need that a poem be long. Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word" (Capps 116). The uniqueness of Dickinson's poetry stems from its cryptic, deceptive, and fierce simplicity, and she achieves the sense of newness that Emerson calls for through a meticulous attention to diction. I would argue that Dickinson consciously works with the established notions of public and private during the nineteenth century, although these notions remain prevalent in the twenty-first, and uses the assumed simplicity of the distinction to develop a "new department" of prose and poetry that centers on manuscript construction and circulation. In addition to the "terrible simplicity," Dickinson's sublimity is rooted in the non-referential nature of her poems, or what Robert "Weisbuch has aptly called a 'sceneless' poetry [in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (1981)]" (Miller 15). The conception of Dickinson as a private, unstudied poet stems from the myth that developed in the 1890s, but it is a notion of Dickinson that remains today—she wrote

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poems for herself and never understood herself as a poet. But Dickinson's manuscripts reveal a sustained, detailed effort to create prose and poetry that toys with the reader's assumption of a static, autobiographical "I." Since the first single-author volumes were printed in the 1890s, readers have remarked that the verses are both "strangely impersonal" *and* "exceptionally personal" (Buckingham 8, 17). Dickinson consistently manipulates generic assumptions, focusing in particular on lyric poetry and epistolary prose. The letters experiment with addressee and voice, and blur the distinction between prose and poetry, public and private. Marietta Messmer describes Dickinson's process as a "third space," while Cristanne Miller remarks Dickinson manipulates distance as well as intimacy (15). The commitment to scenelessness in her correspondence and her poetry indicates that authorship for Dickinson involves an intense focus on the building blocks of written language in order to alter and manipulate the text's and the reader's relationship to the established generic constructions of her time. In addition to toying with genre, Dickinson concentrated on manuscript circulation to re-define the traditional distinction drawn between private communication and literary production.

In Emerson's essay, "New Poetry," which was published in the October 1840 edition of *The Dial*, he asks, "is there not room then for a new department in poetry, namely, *Verses of the Portfolio*?" (221). While T.W. Higginson would later write in the 1890 Preface to the first printed volume of Dickinson's poetry that her work belongs "emphatically to what Emerson long since called the 'Poetry of the Portfolio,'—something produced absolutely without the thought of publication," Emerson's definition of this "new department" is not so simplistic (Buckingham 13). Emerson argues the "democratical tendencies" of America created a "revolution in literature" that gives "importance to the portfolio over the book." This "revolution" is "a more liberal doctrine of the poetic faculty than our fathers held . . . [who] denied the name of poetry to every composition in which the workmanship and the material were not equally excellent" (220). New poetry consists of "verses of society," rather than "the festal and solemn verses which are written for the nations" (220). While Emerson does contend such verses are "not written for publication," the defining characteristic is the lack of "finish which the conventions of literature require of authors." However,

> though we should be loath to see the wholesome conventions, to which we have alluded, broken down by a general incontinence of publication, and every man's and woman's diary flying into bookstores [. . .] when a writer has outgrown the state of thought which produced the poem, the interest of letters is served by publishing it imperfect, as we preserved studies, torsos, and blocked statues of the great masters. (221)

Verses of the portfolio are not simply written without any thought toward publication; rather, they are "confessional" poems written as "unpremeditated translation[s]" of one's

"thoughts and feelings into rhyme," and then *not* edited and polished to fit traditional poetic conventions (220).

The important point is that print does not necessarily indicate merit, and although the portfolio verses can be published "imperfect," there still must be poetic excellence for these verses to be enjoyed. Emerson refers to portfolio poetry as "a certain private and household poetry," contrasting it with work by "men of genius," and yet "we are sure that some crude manuscript poems have yielded us a more sustaining and a more stimulating diet, than many elaborated and classic productions" (223). Dickinson's work exemplifies a commitment to writing poems that would fall under Emerson's category of "new poetry." Although 1890s readers believed Dickinson to be "unstudied," we know now that she was a dedicated, meticulous, and extremely well-read devotee of poetry and prose. It seems safe to assume that the apparent lack of "workmanship" speaks of an intentional toying with genre and conventions, as opposed to the "cluelessness" assumed by high-brow critics. The printed reviews of the 1890s editions reveal that popular readers appreciated Dickinson's "imperfect" poetic constructs; in fact, several reviewers referred to her poetry as "a new species of art," rather than just a new "department" (Buckingham 29).

However, editorial decisions, selections, and mythologies did much to make Dickinson's work appear written "absolutely without the thought of publication," and her workshop reveals the production of poems that are the *opposite* of portfolio verses. Her meticulous attention to diction, line-breaks, grammar, and capitalization is revealed only in the manuscripts. Her efforts to re-write stanzas to better suit Susan Gilbert, Dickinson's sister-in-law, were not seen in the nineteenth century. The so-called "fascicles" disprove the idea that Dickinson's poetry consisted only of "unpremeditated" translations of fleeting thoughts and feelings to which she never returned or revised.[1] While Dickinson's work can be considered portfolio verses as Emerson describes them, her poetry fits too with the work of "men of genius," for whom

> to act on the public is always a secondary aim. They are humble, self-accusing, moody men, whose worship is toward the Ideal Beauty, which chooses to be courted not so often in perfect hymns, as in wild ear-piercing, or in silent musings. Their face is forward, and their heart is in this heaven. (222)

After Dickinson's death, her sister, Lavinia, found the "forty bound fascicles and enough unbound fascicle sheets for several others – plus the worksheets, indeterminate drafts, and

[1]The fascicles are a relatively recent area of study within Dickinson scholarship. Despite the efforts of R.W. Franklin, the most recent and most significant editor of Dickinson's work, to re-establish the fascicle sequence in *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), he believes the fascicles are merely a means of keeping order, rather than booklets of poetry. The early fascicles had very few "unresolved readings," but by "Fascicle 9, in early 1861, they would have been unsuitable for circulation. The transcription, though in ink, was less careful, and the texts, now with unresolved readings, were not intended for others" (20).

miscellaneous fair copies Mabel Todd called 'scraps'" (Franklin, *Manuscript Books*, x). The worksheets and indeterminate drafts can be seen as "unpremeditated." They are often random stanzas, typically in pencil and written on whatever Dickinson had available—envelopes, shopping lists, or irregular scraps of paper that had been discarded.[2] Dickinson's fascicles represent more "finished" poems—they are copied in ink "on sheets of letter paper already folded by the manufacturer to produce two leaves" (x). Dickinson's opus of fascicles and "scraps" represents the two opposing approaches to poetry that Emerson outlines in "New Poetry," although I cannot be sure that Dickinson's process was influenced by this specific essay.[3]

Dickinson's work blends the confessional with the meticulous, and the attention to detail, particularly powerful in the fascicles, shows how her poetry often achieves the appearance of "unpremeditated" verses, particularly when regularized in print editions such as those of the 1890s. This achievement critiques the nineteenth-century gendered distinctions between literary production and non-literary forms of communication. Dickinson would have noticed Emerson's opinion regarding the relation between women and authorship. For example, in "Beauty" from *Conduct of Life*, Emerson describes "a beautiful woman" as "a practical poet, taming her savage mate, planting tenderness, hope and eloquence in all whom she approaches" (*The Complete Writings* 611). In "Success," which explores the accomplishments of Americans, Emerson writes,

> we have seen an American woman write a novel of which a million copies were sold, in all languages, and which had one merit, of speaking to the universal heart, and was read with equal interest to three audiences, namely, in the parlor, in the kitchen and in the nursery of every house. (707)

Even though "of all American authors whom she read, Emily Dickinson can be most closely associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson," she remains a *poetess* and thus incapable of being "the man of genius" and the Poet for America Emerson sought (Capps 113). It seems to me that the fascicle poems represent a concentrated effort to explore the minute details required to create poetry, such as diction, line-breaks, line order, and, perhaps most importantly, the surrounding context created by other poems. Dickinson's correspondence provided a socially-sanctioned space to learn and then break the rules of epistolary prose,

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[2] For the most detailed study of Dickinson's later writings, drafts, and fragments, see Marta Werner's *Open Folios*.

[3] My research has not revealed whether or not Dickinson read *The Dial.* There is no record of the Dickinson family's subscription to it, and I could not find the essay reprinted in any of the periodicals we know the Dickinson family read, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's*. I have been unable to locate whether or not Emerson defines "verses of the portfolio" in his later work; at this point, it seems the essay only appeared in *The Dial*. However, it may have been common knowledge at the time since Higginson's simplistic definition of "Poetry of the Portfolio" is repeated throughout the 1890s reviews.

as well as a means to "publish" her poems in a way that countered the burgeoning print press. In the correspondence, Dickinson toys with the conventions of communication and experiments with the generic assumptions inherent in epistolary prose and lyric poetry. The correspondence helps us understand how Dickinson accomplishes such powerful, "sceneless" poetry, and she uses this particular space to experiment because it was deemed an appropriate form of female writing.

The conception of Dickinson as a "workshop poet" is relatively new. Some scholars, most notably Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart, have argued for the integral role Susan Gilbert played in Dickinson's writing life. Sue moved to Amherst in 1850, and became engaged to Austin, Dickinson's brother, in November 1853. They were married in July 1856 and moved next door to Dickinson (Johnson 939). While necessities of print and the assumptions of readers' expectations result in poems separated from the letters, the poet's literary approach was quite different. According to Hart's and Smith's *Open Me Carefully*, by the mid-1850s Dickinson's "writings to Susan expand from conventional letters to what Susan refers to as 'letter-poems' as she later compiles her book of Emily's writings. These 'letter-poems' are letters that look and sound like poems; they are also poems addressed to Susan that read like letters, or messages" (65). Dickinson's practice of sending poems to Sue began in the late 1850s, and "Dickinson's poems, letters, and letter-poems to Susan give us a rare glimpse into the poet's process of writing and revising. They also indicate that Susan, herself a published writer of poems, reviews, essays, and stories, was Emily's primary reader, the recipient of both drafts and finished poems" (xii).

The main evidence for collaboration among Sue and Dickinson is the surviving letters concerning "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124A-G). While the *Springfield Republican* printed a version of the poem on March 1, 1862 (Fr124A), Dickinson sends the poem to Sue with an altered second stanza and the signature line,

> Perhaps this verse would
> please you better – Sue –
> Emily.

Susan replies: "I am not suited / dear Emily with the second / verse –". Dickinson revises the second stanza again, returning it to Sue and asking, "Is <u>this</u>, <u>frostier</u>?" (Hart and Smith 96-100). The version included in Fascicle 6, however, closely resembles the version printed in the *Republican*, which indicates that while Dickinson revised and sent the stanza to Sue, she retained what seems to be the earliest version of the poem in fair copy without any variants in the fascicle (see also Franklin 159-164). In Fascicle 10, Dickinson records the poem again in fair copy and includes the two alternate stanzas that she had sent to

Sue.[4] An 1864 letter by Samuel Bowles to Sue also supports the idea that Sue was active in Dickinson's workshop: "Speaking of writing, do you & Emily give us some gems for the '*Springfield Market,*' & then come to the Fair" (Smith, *Rereading Emily Dickinson*, 156). While Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson would become the primary editors of Dickinson's poetry in the 1890s, Sue "was the first to introduce it to Mabel Loomis Todd, for in 1882 the latter records in her diary: 'went in the afternoon to Mrs. Dickinson's. She read me some strange poems by Emily Dickinson. They are full of power'" (Smith 155). Martha Nell Smith details the ways in which Sue may have been the one sending Dickinson's poems to periodicals, and the few surviving letters from Sue to Dickinson indicate Sue's interest in printing both Dickinson's and her own poetry: "Has girl read Republican? / It takes as long to start our / Fleet as the Burnside" (Smith & Hart 96). Sue seems to refer to "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," which appeared with the title "The Sleeping" in the *Springfield Republican* (March 1862). "The Sleeping" is followed by "Shadow of Thy Wing," a poem that Hart and Smith indicate could be Susan's (96).[5]

Although overwhelming evidence does not exist to prove Sue and Dickinson worked together to get a "Fleet" of their poems printed in periodicals, we do not know how many of the manuscripts and letters have been lost, and thus we will only ever have part of the story. Although many have postulated why only a handful of Dickinson's poems appeared in print during her lifetime, an integral component to the discussion is the distinction between "printing" and "publishing." Scholars have noted that Dickinson's refusal to print may be due to notions of female propriety. Judith Farr carefully analyzes Sue's obituary of Dickinson, noting that "to be a Felicia Hemans, earning one's living by the pen, was not to be a proper lady in the nineteenth century; and thus Sue is careful to emphasize that Emily Dickinson was a gentlewoman, who believed as a Victorian lady should that 'a woman's hearthstone is her shrine'" (11). According to Clara Newman Turner, a niece of Dickinson's father, Dickinson remarked in her "own words that she did not deem it 'feminine' to publish" (Sewall 265). However, as Judith Farr notes, "since there is no evidence that Dickinson considered her revered Elizabeth Barrett Browning unfeminine . . . her remark to Clara, if correctly recalled, is puzzling" (11). The lack of a definitive statement—one which we can determine to be Dickinson's true opinion rather than one of the poses she so often adopted—means the debate about Dickinson's relationship to print will continue. It seems reductive, however, to believe Dickinson chose manuscript construction and circulation *only* because she was a woman who did not pursue print due to issues of propriety. In addition, Martha Nell Smith explains that Dickinson and Sue did not use "print" and

[4] For Eleanor Heginbotham's discussion of how "duplicates" operate within the fascicles, see her Chapters Three and Four.

[5] See "Writings by Susan Dickinson" in the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*. <http://www.emilydickinson.org/susan/shadow.html>. For more details about the relationship between Sue and Dickinson, see Smith's Chapter Five in particular, which she titles, "To Be Susan Is Imagination: Dickinson's Poetry Workshop." Smith's chapter examines "the surviving correspondence between Emily and Sue in order to further understanding of the latter's participation in Dickinson's literary project" (158).

"publish" as synonyms, even though the tendency today is to do so.[6] For Dickinson and Sue, "publish" is used "in the special sense 'to tell or noise abroad' (*OED*)" (15). "Printing" indicates "mass reproduction and distribution of poetry" (224n12). I agree with Martha Nell Smith's observation from nearly two decades ago that Dickinson "'published' herself in her letters and in the forty manuscript books (or fascicles) left in her drawer" (2). More recently, Marietta Messmer has shown that Dickinson's genre-blurring enables her "to keep the 'publication' of her 'literary' works (i.e., the dissemination of her poems and letter poems) within the socially sanctioned confines of letter writing" (48).

While I believe Dickinson was much less isolated than nineteenth-century readers imagined, I describe Dickinson's writing method as a workshop because of the term's invocation of process, revision, and experimentation. This workshop has three main components—the fascicles, the letters, and the later "scraps," or what Marta Werner describes as "radical scatters" —and it is more complicated than just moving a poem from one place to another. Dickinson's workshop is a compositional space where she experimented with different communicative means. The fascicles, for example, verge on traditional books while breaking the conventions of print. The fascicles highlight the power of context, but they have confused editors since the 1890s because they are *not* traditional books—there are no page numbers, no table of contents, very few titles, and no signature of their author. Contrary to R.W. Franklin's belief that the fascicles were Dickinson's means of keeping order,[7] contemporary scholars have convincingly argued for the presence and significance of internal poetic sequences within individual fascicles, but the debate continues about how to approach them. However, there is much work left to be done before we can categorize them, and we may find that they "continue to avoid

[6] For example, R.W. Franklin uses the term "publish" throughout his introduction to the 1998 variorum, and he most often means Dickinson did not print: "Although Emily Dickinson did not publish, at least ten of her poems came before the public during her lifetime, each of them anonymously, chiefly in newspapers" (1).

[7] Franklin also describes Dickinson's writing process as a "workshop": Dickinson's "workshop did have rules for destruction, though their purpose was orderly preservation. The primary one was that when working drafts were copied to a later form, such as a fascicle, the drafts were destroyed. Thus, none of them survives for the twenty-seven poems in Fascicle 1, with one exception, a rare one since it is the only worksheet for a poem in the forty fascicles" (11). Franklin uses the term to mean the ways Dickinson copied, kept track, and organized her poems. In contrast to Martha Nell Smith, Franklin thinks of Dickinson's workshop as the poems she kept to herself. Franklin writes, "throughout her life, Emily Dickinson sent fair copies of poems to people around her" (14). In his introduction to the 1998 variorum, Franklin uses "stemma" to represent Dickinson's workshop process, which is how Dickinson went from "worksheet" to "intermediate draft" and then to "copies sent" in a letter or "retained" (19). The stemma changes depending on whether or not a poem appears in the fascicles. Franklin is a very detail-oriented editor, and he organizes Dickinson's process in order to understand her intentions, particularly with regard to the fascicles. He expresses confusion about why Dickinson would place a poem written at an earlier time in a fascicle that is clearly, due to the type of paper, bound at a different time. Franklin considers Dickinson's fascicles as a way to keep order, rather than as artifacts with poetic significance, and he appears to think of Dickinson's workshop as a completely private. For example, he describes the "three variant fair copies" of "Morns like these we parted" (Fr18) as "having, during her lifetime, a history outside her workshop" (18); "two of them [were] of [a] privately public occasion" since a copy was sent in a letter to Dickinson's Norcross cousins and another copy was sent in a letter to Sue.

classification at every turn" (Socarides 89). Dickinson's construction of the fascicles seems to foreclose the possibility of clear, simple, easy classification, and this defiance of category appears intentional. While Dickinson was uninterested in following print conventions, it seems safe to assume she was aware of them. Similarly, Dickinson manipulated nineteenth-century epistolary conventions, focusing particularly on eradicating indicators of time and place, which makes both her poems and her letters non-referential.[8] Dickinson's fascicles and correspondence served as her primary means of publication, which allowed her to circumvent the standards of print. Letter writing also "provide[d] Dickinson with an effective strategy for fusing the 'private' aspect of personal(ized) correspondence with the 'public' aspect of circulating her poems among a larger—albeit strictly defined and controlled—audience" (Messmer 47).

Despite the "defined and controlled" circulation of Dickinson's poems among a relatively small group of family and friends, Dickinson's central aim, in both epistolary and poetic production, is to provide the illusion of specificity. Cristanne Miller argues that Dickinson's circulation of poems within letters, particularly since she often sent the same poem to different recipients, means the "poems mailed in letters may be deceptively personal," yet these poems "were not conceived solely in the light of a single friendship" (13). Dickinson's manuscript circulation, which contrasts with literary production in print, reflects her commitment to manipulating the inherent assumptions inherent of lyric poetry and epistolary prose. In both genres, there is an assumed relation between the writer and the reader—the "I" is understood to refer to the poet or letter-writer, while the "you" seems to refer to the reader. If a poem is sent to a specific person, then "the poem seems to be occasional, referring to particular events and the private relationship between writer and reader" (13). However, Dickinson consistently ensures the absence of concrete references; in the poems and the correspondence, assuming the "I" is Emily Dickinson proves problematic. For example, Miller discusses what appears to be a "highly personal" message to Samuel Bowles: "Dear Friend / If you doubted my Snow – for a moment – you never will – again – I know" (L792). Dickinson included the poem, "Through the strait pass of suffering – / The Martyrs – even – trod" (Fr187). Miller explains that

> the poet made a fair copy of this poem for herself before she mailed it to Bowles, and she mailed another copy of the same poem to Sue. The multiple copies suggest that the poet's primary intent in writing the poem was not to present herself as a martyr to Bowles or to point to any single occasion, whatever the impetus for sending him the poem might

[8] Messmer's first chapter does an excellent job of showing how Dickinson consciously altered the epistolary conventions set forth in mid-nineteenth-century manuals. Messmer's evidence reveals how the manuals designated the "'artless,' daily, occasional missives" as appropriate for women, who "seemed naturally predisposed to write good, 'emotional' letters," while men were better suited to produce "literature" (30).

> have been. In the letter to Sue, the poem would seem to have a different reference and perhaps significance. (13-14)

The context provided by a letter seems to provide a concrete reference, but this is an allusion. The poem may appear to be written for Sue or for Bowles, but the "poet's primary intent in writing the poem" is impossible to pinpoint. Similar to the non-referential poetry, Dickinson's correspondence ignores the conventions that make a letter occasional. Nineteenth-century manuals stressed the importance of the letter-writer's signature and "the identification of date and place of writing" (Messmer 38-39). Dickinson often omits a signature altogether, places it on a separate card, or incorporates it into the poem (39). While her early letters specify the date and place, "toward the end of the 1850s, Dickinson becomes increasingly more creative in her modification of temporal and spatial indicators, frequently omitting one or the other (her letters to Higginson, for example, are often only dated 'Amherst') or both" (40).

In addition to creatively manipulating epistolary conventions, Dickinson's correspondence reveals a consistent blending of verse and prose. Cristanne Miller argues that "letters and poems appear to be complementary forms of the same kind of communication for the poet" (10). Dickinson's approach to poetry is remarkably similar, often seamless, to her approach to letter writing:

> In some letters Dickinson changes from prose to verse in mid-sentence, as if both were the same medium. [. . .] In other letters Dickinson lifts lines from finished poems and incorporates them into her prose. (10-11)

For example, the first poem Dickinson dispatches is addressed "Susie," and sent to Susan Dickinson in March 1853 when she was in Manchester, New Hampshire (Franklin 57). In the letter to Susan, Dickinson opens with, "Write! Comrade, write!" Franklin lists the poem that follows, "On the wondrous sea / Sailing silently" (Fr3A), as Dickinson's third overall poem. A later copy, slightly altered from the one sent to Sue, appears in Fascicle 1, which Franklin dates as about 1858 (*Manuscript Books* 2). This format continues throughout her life, and "more than six hundred manuscripts, representing a few over five hundred poems, had been sent to others" (Franklin 29). Franklin's estimation includes poems as letters, such as the above example, which is a letter to Sue as well as a poem Dickinson copied into a fascicle, and poems sent along with letters, such as the enclosures Dickinson sent in her first letter to Higginson.[9]

[9] Franklin writes, "one cannot say exactly how many manuscripts she produced for these 1,789 poems," which is to date the amount of poems Dickinson wrote if only one version is counted for each poem, "but the number may have been twice what we know, as many as 5,000 manuscripts, instead of 2,500" (28-29). For details about who received which poems, see Franklin's Appendix Seven, 1547-1557.

Dickinson's early letters blend poetry and prose, both by including quotes or paraphrases from the work of others and by collapsing the distinction between her own prose and poetry. In a September 1845 letter to Abiah Root, for example, Dickinson writes, "but as long as I don't [know how to cook], my knowledge of housekeeping is about as much use as faith without works, which you know we are told is dead. [. . .] Since I wrote you last the summer is past and gone, and autumn with the sere and yellow leaf is already upon us" (L8). Johnson notes that

> this is the earliest known letter in which Dickinson paraphrases lines from the Bible and from Shakespeare, the two sources to which she returns again and again throughout her life for quotation or allusion. [. . .] The scripture source for the first is James 2.17: "faith, if it hath not works, is dead." The second is from *Macbeth* V, iii, 22-23: "My way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf." (23)

Dickinson incorporates Shakespearean lines and Biblical verses to describe the monotonies of ordinary life—an icon of male literary production is used to describe the change in seasons, while Scripture is used to mock her housekeeping abilities. The frequency of literary allusion in Dickinson's work was not studied until the mid-twentieth century, most notably in *Emily Dickinson's Reading* (1966), and earlier scholars or reviewers perceived Dickinson as unaware of literature. We know now, of course, how much she read, but her homage to previous works is not always high praise. Here, Dickinson uses Shakespeare and Scripture for a pedestrian discussion, and this very early example shows the beginning of a sustained commitment to blending the literary with the everyday. Dickinson's incorporation of serious texts and authors into "women's work" represents her interest in collapsing the distinction between poetry and prose as well as (public) literary production and (private) communication.

One of the earliest letters that Johnson argues contains a prose-poem is an October 1851 letter to Austin:

> Don't think that the sky will frown so the day when you come home! She will smile and look happy, and be full of sunshine *then* – and even *should* she frown upon her child returning, there is *another* sky ever serene and fair, and there is *another* sunshine, tho' it be darkness there – never mind faded forests, Austin, never mind silent fields – *here* is a little forest whose leaf is ever green, here is a *brighter* garden, where not a frost has been, in its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum, prithee, my Brother, into *my* garden come! (L58)

Johnson explains, "the poem at the end of the letter is printed here, as Dickinson wrote it, in prose form" (150). Franklin does not list this as one of Dickinson's 1,789 poems, although it does appear in Appendix Thirteen of the 1998 variorum: "Some prose passages in Emily Dickinson's early letters and notes exhibit characteristics of verse without being so written" (1577). Franklin lists eight of these "prose passages," including the one from L58 above, and he records the verse as beginning with "there is *another* sky." The passage was published as prose in Todd's 1894 version of the *Letters* and as poem number two in Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 version of the *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1578). The tendency of editors to separate the poetry from the prose represents the commitment most readers have to distinct literary genres. In contrast to Dickinson's preference for manuscript circulation and construction, the conventions of print consistently require clear demarcations between poetry and prose. The translation of Dickinson's work into standardized literary products—the 1890s editions as well as Johnson's and Franklin's more recent editions—requires simplification, while Dickinson's workshop refuses to follow generic distinctions. Dickinson's workshop investigates the inherent complexities of communicating through written language by creating non-referential, un-occasional texts.

Until quite recently, Dickinson's letters have been read to discover the events of her life and the inner workings of her mind. Even Johnson's 1958 scholarly edition, which did not exclude any known letters, treated the letters as a separate, distinct genre of writing that served to provide biographical contexts for the poetry. Of the letters, Johnson remarks, "they are the expression of her unique personality. [. . .] Though she never wrote about herself after adolescence, the letters nevertheless are always self-portraits, written by one who has observed herself frankly and with no self-pity or regrets" (xxi). In the nineteenth century, the idea of Dickinson's poems as "self-portraits" had been established by 1890s prefaces and reviews, and Mabel Loomis Todd's 1894 edition of the letters aimed to offer Dickinson's "self-portrait" in prose. Todd seems to hope her edition of the letters will dispel the conception of Dickinson as a somber, weird person:

> Emily Dickinson's verses, often but the reflection of a passing mood, do not always completely represent herself,—rarely, indeed, showing the dainty humor, the frolicsome gayety, which continually bubbled over in her daily life. The somber and even weird outlook upon this world and the next, characteristic of many of the poems, was by no means a prevailing condition of the mind. (xxv)

Through the letters, Todd intends to reveal more of Dickinson so readers will not think her as "weird" as the poems indicate. Todd exacts a distinction between the letters and the poems, aligning the letters with journal-writing: "As she kept no journal, the letters are the more interesting because they contain all the prose which she is known to have written" (xxv).

The poems are "weird" because readers of lyric poetry assume the "I" of the poem is the voice of the poet, and Dickinson apparently knew this—she uses "I" more than any other word.[10] In 1862, Dickinson writes to Higginson: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person" (L268). Despite this statement, Higginson's widely-repeated Preface to the first edition establishes Dickinson's poetry as truly and honestly confessional—they were designed not only without a thought towards publication, but to be kept locked in a box. Even without the nineteenth-century packaging, readers have sought an explanation of the poetry in Dickinson's biography, and they often turn to the letters as evidence. But a static voice in the correspondence is an illusion because Dickinson makes private communication artful:

> Dickinson is able to transfer the letter from the sphere of (womanly) duty to the realm of (male-dominated) literary production. At the same time, by endowing her 'poems' with epistolary properties, she is able to legitimize a genre primarily reserved for men (poetry) through the use of the (for women) socially acceptable epistolary format. (Messmer 48)

In contrast to the spontaneous, natural, and emotional letters that proper nineteenth-century women were supposed to write, Dickinson explored the power of un-occasional, non-referential prose and poetry. Recent scholarship provides a better understanding of Dickinson's relationship to the epistolary techniques of her time.[11] It is clear Dickinson manipulates the standard conventions, and this rule-bending, genre-breaking approach prepares and influences the poetry of the fascicles and the later "radical scatters." Readers since the nineteenth century have searched within the correspondence for a static, autobiographical "I" in order to make the lyric "I" of the poetry more clear. But assuming a static "I" proves problematic in both genres.

In his 1998 variorum, R.W. Franklin compiles all available details in order "to present a separate text for each known manuscript," and the separation of poems from letters, the standardization of line breaks, and the arrangement of poems in chronological order follow Franklin's assertion that "this edition is based on the assumption that a

[10] The *Concordance* to Dickinson's poetry reports that "I" is the most common word—it appears 1,682 times (Rosenbaum 865).

[11] The critical essays in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters* reveal the varied and complex approaches that Dickinson's letters offer. There remains, of course, the tendency to read the letters to discover Dickinson's opinions, such as Judith Farr's essay, which explores Dickinson's views on marriage. However, the correspondence provides ample room for new and interesting ways of reading. For example, Eleanor Heginbotham explores the letters as Dickinson's "book club;" Martha Nell Smith argues for the importance of what she terms Dickinson's "technology of audience;" and Ellen Louise Hart examines how Dickinson's manuscripts exhibit spatial prosody. Others use nineteenth-century cultural mores to understand Dickinson's approach to writing letters of condolence, as is explored by Karen Dandurand and Jane Donahue Eberwein. Dickinson's letters can also be incorporated into an understanding of "women's culture," as Stephanie Tingley addresses, or "gift-based circulation," which is the focus of Paul Crumbley's essay.

literary work is separable from its artifact, as Dickinson herself demonstrated as she moved her poems from one piece of paper to another" (27). While Franklin's plethora of details appears overwhelming and complicated at first, his editorial approach is far more simplistic than Dickinson's workshop, where she manipulated the boundaries between verse and prose. Dickinson's manuscripts reveal her understanding of the importance of diction, and her sustained efforts result in poems ripe with a "terrible simplicity." Readers since the 1890s have generally understood this simplicity as unstudied—the poems were small, neat packages focused on interiority because she wrote "without the thought of publication." But Dickinson's meticulous attention to diction implies the prevalence of "I" is not accidental, nor does it necessarily signify that the poet's central concern is her own mind. As Cristanne Miller points out, "the poems stem from her life, but they do not point to it; there is no direct reference to a particular act of the poet or even necessarily to her real voice in the statement or voice of a poem" (15). By circulating her poetry in manuscripts, Dickinson successfully used a space reserved for women to produce what seems to be lyric poetry, yet the poems toy with the assumed understanding of the "I" and the "you." Dickinson seems interested in the gendered spheres of communication, which designated confessional and "household" writing as the domain of women, while literary production belonged to men. Dickinson was aware of the distinction drawn between the ways men and women were thought to communicate, and her workshop reveals a reaction to these distinctions. Her literary production is cloaked in "women's work," and her "private" communication represents an experimental space focused on breaking conventions. For decades, Dickinson was deemed the poet of privacy because readers of lyrics assume the "I" is the confessional voice of the poet, particularly if readers assume those poems remained "locked up" during the poet's life. The "terrible simplicity" of Dickinson's poems, combined with the jarring, unexpected non-referentiality, produces a "new species of art" that defies generic constructs and simplistic demarcations between written communication and literary production.

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