To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Anna Dunlap Higgins entitled "'A Sudden Feast': The Domestic Life and the Poetry of Emily Dickinson's Prose." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Dorothy M. Scura, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

"A SUDDEN FEAST":
THE DOMESTIC LIFE AND THE POETRY
OF EMILY DICKINSON'S PROSE

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Anna Dunlap Higgins

August 1995

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to
Mary, Shadie, and Lucille
for the grace they have given to my image of home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe much appreciation to Dorothy Scura, my dissertation director, and to the poet Arthur Smith who served on my committee. Dr. Scura has never once failed to extend patient and wise advice. I value her intelligence, sympathy, and generosity more than I can say. I have been honored, too, to have worked with a poet. Dr. Smith has been an invaluable mentor, listening to my ideas and directing my attempts to articulate them on paper. I owe gratitude, also, to committee members George Hutchinson and Russell Buhite for their efforts. Each has given me careful attention and brought to the readings of my work unique insights. Lastly, I thank William H. Shurr for selecting me to be his assistant editor on *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Working with him introduced me to Dickinson scholarship and to many Dickinson scholars as well. Few graduate students get such an opportunity, and I am greatly appreciative.

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Marybeth, and Art. Each has offered delight and encouragement in his or her own way. None of my friends ever slowed in their belief in me, John Bond shared a biologist's view on a couple of issues, and Dinah has happily stored the many copy disks I felt necessary to stash in her office. Peter and Mary carefully proof-read the manuscript and offered helpful advice. To Lynne Z. Basssett, curator of Historic Northampton, and, especially, Carol Birtwistle, curator of the Emily Dickinson Homestead, I owe appreciation for interviews and personal tours given over the past three years.

My husband, Peter Jude Higgins, receives a special gratitude for what has often seemed to me his superhuman understanding. His intelligent insights guided me many times; his loving faith in me gave encouragement; and his wit kept me sane and our home a place of laughter amidst stacks of paper and books.

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ABSTRACT

This New Historicist-based study examines the relationship among Emily Dickinson's prose, her poetic vision, and the domestic life. Chapter one provides an overview of three strands of Dickinson scholarship: the history of commentary on the poetic nature of the letters, the criticism that speaks of Emily Dickinson's life at home, and the scholarship that focuses on Dickinson and domesticity. Ultimately, my work brings these three approaches together, an investigation of the domestic woman poet's life and experience of poetic insight as they are revealed in the poetic passages of her letters.

Chapter two examines the link between nineteenth-century ideals about household "system and regularity" and poetry. Dickinson's letters indicate that she often achieved revelation in the midst of domestic duties, that they acted as a gateway to poetic perception. Her descriptions of such flashes of insight suggest an experience that is a time out of time, an enraptured moment of higher consciousness not unlike those experienced in tantric meditation or mystical vision. Here, however, the mantra is the ceremony of daily pattern. Chapter three examines specific domestic images, arguing that Emily Dickinson's poetic sensibilities led to a unique relationship between woman and duty. The

result of this alliance is prose rich in metaphors which reveal Dickinson's wit, the general truths she perceived in diurnal tasks, her emotional life, and the poetic vision she experienced at home. Chapter four investigates a particular duty: the performance of the tasks of domestic manners. Examining poetic passages in letters sent to answer kindnesses and to comfort and console others, I argue that through this branch of household governance, Dickinson investigated the nature of need and love. Chapter five focuses on the poet's articulation of her experience of home, an expression often made in metaphor. Looking first at her correspondence with Thomas Higginson and then at her images of home in various letters, I suggest that Emily Dickinson's life at home was invested with sacredness and poetic inspiration.

PREFACE

The first five years of the 1990s have seen an increase in interest in the letters of Emily Dickinson, and with that development has come a discussion of editing practices. As Thomas H. Johnson explains in the definitive Harvard edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, the poet's autograph prose manuscripts are located in over a dozen libraries. He notes, too, that a fair number are owned privately. Any reader wanting to quote directly from the holographs will have much work in order to do so. In this summer's *Emily Dickinson Journal*, Martha Nell Smith expresses the opinion of the Dickinson Editing Collective that a "hyper-media archive" of the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson be created so that all scholars have access to these rich materials, and to the equally rich study they represent. I feel certain all readers interested in the poet would second the Collective's view. I provide these comments as preface to my work because in quoting from the Harvard edition of the letters, I enter the debate. My work with William H. Shurr on *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, of course, introduced me to the issues involved when scholars attempt to edit using the Harvard works. As Suzanne Juhasz, editor of *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, notes in this summer's edition, "The publication of . . . *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1993 provoked,

although it did not inaugurate . . . attention to editing and the letters" (vii). There is much to benefit from being at such a place in this important dialogue, for since the publication of *New Poems*, there has been a wealth of provocative discussions and essays on the nature of prose. Although in my study of the domestic imagery I do not offer insights about editing Dickinson's handwritten manuscripts--an aspect of Dickinson study Juhasz refers to as "the literal textuality" of Emily Dickinson--I hope it will add to the overall discussion of the nature of the poet's prose.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The poet Emily Dickinson wrote countless letters. Although many, possibly hundreds, have been destroyed or lost, more than a thousand are extant.[1] The richness of these letters, their poetic nature even, has been noted since they were first published in November 1894. Yet historically they have been important to Dickinson scholarship mainly as a source for biographical information or background for assumptions about the canonical poetry.[2] One hundred years after the first publication of the poet's prose, however, the field of Dickinson study is opening up as scholars stake out their critical territories in analyzing the literary value of these texts. The province of this study is the relationship between the poet's domesticity and the poetic nature of her correspondence.

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[1]See Thomas H. Johnson's introduction to her collected letters (xv-xxvii).

[2]The canon was established by Thomas H. Johnson via the Harvard editions of the poet's work. In adhering to accepted practice in Dickinson scholarship, all quotations from the letters and poems are taken from these editions and will be designated with a capital "L" and the Johnson-assigned letter number for the correspondence and with only the Johnson-assigned poem number for the poetry. Throughout the dissertation, I will maintain the poet's punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Unless otherwise indicated, I quote from Johnson's three-volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* and from his three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

Emily Dickinson's art evinces a woman poet's experience of the domestic life. Traditionally, studies defined such a life in negative terms. Explicitly or implicitly, many studies portray duties within and devotion to the home as deleterious forces. Other scholarly works slight the poet's domesticity by ignoring the link between her domestic life and art. There is need, then, for a study that continues the investigations into the poetic nature of the prose and also examines the connection between this particular poet's experience of home and her creation of art. Such is the agenda of the present work.

In examining the intimacy between domesticity and art, I draw on the nineteenth-century uses as well as the current definition of the term "domesticity." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines domesticity as the quality or state of being "domestic." A word that is itself complex, "domestic" signifies, first, residency in a house; second, familiarity or "at homeness"; third, of and or belonging to the house, including residency and the affairs of the household; fourth, a place of origin that is not foreign, the fact of being indigenous, home-produced, or homemade; fifth, attachment and devotion to home, family, and household duties; and, six, a member of a household with another. Along with such significations, the term "domesticity" also denotes home or family life, devotion to

home, homeliness, and household affairs. All of these meanings were current during Dickinson's life.

Studies of "the cult of domesticity," also referred to as "the cult of true womanhood," reveal that for a nineteenth-century America concerned that its women exhibit certain "true woman" qualities, the term especially connoted three areas of expectation: residency, duties, and enhancing qualities. Perhaps residency needs no explanation. Simply, the "true woman" is home-oriented and prefers to be there above all other places. Representing the second area of expectation are the household duties, methods by which one made home better. Along with housekeeping tasks such as cooking, sewing, and cleaning, the duties of the nineteenth-century woman included the dispensing of cheer and comfort, nursing and tending to the sick, and consoling the grief-stricken. Lastly, the "true woman" was expected to enhance herself by growing flowers, actually a part of her duties since giving flowers away falls under the rubric of comforting; by practicing her drawing room skills of "fancy" sewing, playing an instrument or singing; by reading, if she were careful in her selection; or by letter writing, also a part of a woman's duties since many letters intend to support, cheer, or console (Welter 162-74).[3]

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[3]At this point, the terms of the cult of domesticity/true womanhood have become the bywords of literary studies (especially new historical and/or feminist works) of the nineteenth century. Other than its *OED* derivation, my definition is derived from the first study to delineate the cult fully, Barbara Welter's "The

Perhaps the most well-known fact about Emily Dickinson's life is that the thousands of letters and poems she wrote were created by a woman who never left her family home, whose life is, in fact, the epitome of the nineteenth-century ideal of the domestic life.[4] She was born in 1830 in the family home (built by her grandfather and known locally as "the Mansion") on Main Street in the rural New England village of Amherst, Massachusetts, to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson.[5] With her parents, an older brother, Austin, and a younger sister, Lavinia ("Vinnie"), she dwelt on one side of the two-story center-hall house until 1844 when her father purchased another just blocks away on Pleasant

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Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," to be discussed at more length later in this chapter. Class and race, of course, affect any woman's relation to the cult. For a discussion of Dickinson's class, see, for example, Betsy Erkkila' *The Wicked Sisters*. For an examination of the (dis)union of the African-American woman and the cult, see especially Laurie Kaiser's "The Black Madonna: Notions of True Womanhood from Jacobs to Hurston." Also, a work such as Nancy Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood* is invaluable to an understanding of the manner in which domesticity could be an imprisoning experience for women.

[4]There are few exceptions to this declaration. Biographers have concluded that other than a few trips to the homes of relatives in her childhood and adolescence, the poet left her home under a dozen times. (See especially Richard B. Sewall's two-volume *The Life of Emily Dickinson* and Cynthia Griffin Wolff's one-volume *Emily Dickinson*.) One exception important to note are the poet's 1864 and 1865 trips to Boston for treatment for what seems to be exotropia ("walleye"). For more information on the poet's eye problem, see Martin Wand and Richard B. Sewall's "'Eyes be Blind, Heart Be Still'"; Wolff's literary biography (164-65 and 581 n.2 *passim*); and Sewall's biography (606-07n *passim*).

[5]Samuel Fowler Dickinson (1775-1838) was one of the founders of Amherst College and later its treasurer. His dedication to the latter role eventually led to his bankruptcy and, thus, the loss of the family home. Although there is little information extant on any other grandparent, the poet's paternal grandfather left behind a fairly extensive record. See Wolff (13-35) and Sewall (28-43).

Street.[6] This second home (razed in the twentieth century) was of the traditional New England rectangle design, that is, two-story clapboard with adjacent buildings and a central fireplace. The family lived there for fifteen years. In 1855, the poet's father, a successful lawyer in the village, was able to purchase the family home, and in the fall of that year, the Dickinsons returned to the house on Main Street (formerly known as the "Mansion," now referred to as "the Homestead"). To this home had been added a two-story wing to the east, a small conservatory to the south, and an ell with a veranda facing west and a porch facing east.[7] Although Austin Dickinson married in 1856, his home (christened "the Evergreens") was situated on the eastern end of the Main Street property, and he, his wife Susan Gilbert Dickinson, a girlhood friend of the poet's, and their three children (Edward, Martha, and Gilbert) were intimately

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[6]The extended family (including the tradition of two or more families sharing one house) is discussed in Jane Nylander's *Our Own Snug Fireside* (3-53). See too Wolff's literary biography, 11-136; Sewall's biography, 29n (on the various references to the house on Main Street as the "Mansion" and the "Homestead"), 322, and 466-67; and Leyda, 331-52 *passim*. Edward Dickinson was born 1 January 1803; Emily Norcross Dickinson, 3 July 1804; William Austin Dickinson, 16 April 1829; and Lavinia Norcross Dickinson, 29 February 1833.

[7]The best sources on Amherst during Dickinson's lifetime are Whicher, Bingham (*Home*), and Longsworth (*World*), and on the Dickinson homes themselves, Bingham (*Home*), Bianchi (*Face*), and Mudge. Mudge's work is an invaluable source, also, for information on individual rooms and on the remodeling. However, with regard to this issue there is much guesswork. As Carol Birtwistle, present curator at the Homestead, tells me, because there have been so many occupants and because records are so sparse, we will perhaps never know exactly what changes were made when. The changes I list are the ones historians are quite certain about.

involved in the daily activities of the Homestead. Since neither the poet nor her sister married and since both resided in the family home until their deaths, Emily Dickinson's domestic life was one in which the family unit remained intact until the death of her father in 1874, her mother in 1882, and her own in 1886.[8]

Dickinson Scholarship and the Letters of a Poet

It was in those two houses that the poet Emily Dickinson created the more than one thousand letters that have been gaining critical attention.[9] With one exception, however, no study examines the metrical lines or images embedded within the prose.[10] None connect these poetic qualities with Emily Dickinson's domesticity. Beginning with the initial publication, there has been commentary on the artistic quality of the letters. Mable Loomis Todd, editor of the 1894 edition (as well as a 1931 second edition), was, in fact, inundated with celebratory notes containing declarations such as this one from an enthusiastic reader in

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[8]A son of Austin Dickinson's died in 1883. Austin Dickinson himself died in 1895 and Lavinia Dickinson in 1899.

[9]Exceptions to this claim, of course, are those letters written while the poet was away from home.

[10]I am referring to the study by Robert Lambert, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Jamaica Plain: "I like her prose better than her poetry for much of it is poetry. Did ever poet approach her art more awesomely!"(Bingham, *Ancestors'* 313)[11] Reviews were almost as glowing, the 23 November 1894 *Boston Daily Advertiser*, for instance, declaring the two-volume set to be "the books of the year" (317). And over and over again, reviewers noted the poetry of the prose, that the "letters are mines of jewels, among which may be found gems of priceless lustre" (318). Most succinctly, *The Evening Post* claims that the "tendency . . . of Miss Dickinson's prose to fall into the favorite rhythm of her poems is, whenever observable (and it occurs constantly), the best evidence of the naturalness of her orphic outpourings" (318).

There was even discussion between Dickinson's editors and family during the 1890s regarding the publication of a "Birthday Book," a popular kind of daily reminder with piquant quotes for each day, that would reprint lines extracted from the letters since no other poet's prose lends "itself better than Emily's to a selection of epigrams" (Bingham *Ancestors'* 201).[12] In her collection of the poet's work, Dickinson's

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[11]Other than such correspondence, Mable Loomis Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, also prints in her *Ancestors' Brocades* many contemporary reviews. See, too, her listing of early reviews of the poems (406-415).

[12]Although these are Bingham's words, she is providing her mother's reaction to Lavinia Dickinson's suggestion to create such a book.

niece and posthumous editor Martha Dickinson Bianchi hints at the poetic quality of her aunt's letters simply by adopting her mother's preference for referring to texts such as the canonical "One sister have I" as "little notes" (*Life* 52). In fact, both she and Mable Loomis Todd's daughter Millicient Todd Bingham published works that reveal their appreciation of both the prose and the poetry. In her 1932 *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*, Bianchi prints both poems and prose passages in revelation of the life, and in her 1945 *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson*, Bingham recounts in great detail the publishing "debut" of both the poems and the letters. Although both of these women wrote biographical studies that determinedly place the poet in her domestic life, neither is concerned specifically with the link between that life and the poetry of the prose.

Commentary regarding Emily Dickinson's blending of genres would seem to be especially the province of editors of her opus since anyone attempting to print these texts must deal with her original approach to genre. And, indeed, Thomas H. Johnson, editor of the definitive Harvard editions of the poet's manuscripts, provides relevant annotation regarding this matter. Specifically, he offers the insight that by the 1860s the poet's letters "both in style and rhythm begin to take on qualities that are so nearly the quality of her poems as on occasion to leave the reader in

doubt where the letter leaves off and the poem begins" (*Letters* I:xv). Despite this cogent observation, Johnson put aside such "doubts" and separated the manuscripts into genre-specific volumes. His 1951 three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (associate editor Theodora Ward) presents the 1,775 poems that he established as Dickinson's complete canon. His 1958 three-volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* prints the 1,049 texts that exist as completed and mailed letter holographs and the 124 extant "prose fragments," lines jotted on scraps of paper which Johnson deemed to be fragmentary pieces of prose.[13] In order to create the canon, Johnson cast into typeset the poems of the "fascicles" (small volumes of poetry made by the poet), the loose poems discovered with those, and the ones included in the poet's letters.[14] In compiling these last manuscripts, Johnson extracted not only the poems written by the

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[13]Exceptions to the description "completed and mailed holographs" include those letters to a few recipients who refused to provide complete texts but did agree to dictate or transcribe portions to Mable Loomis Todd, a handful of transcriptions of originals at some point lost but recorded by various editors and scholars before their disappearance, and a few rough drafts that may or may not have ever been finalized. These volumes also, of course, do not include any manuscripts discovered after their publication dates, such as the Lyman "snatches" published by Johnson or the letters recently discovered and published by Polly Longsworth. The count for the "prose fragments" refers to those lines published by Johnson and Ward in an appendix to their edition of the letters. Whenever he deemed such lines to be "rough drafts" of letters, Johnson printed them not in the appendix but in the notes at the end of the letter. An example of this method can be found with letter 965.

[14]For a history of the discovery and publication of Emily Dickinson's fascicles, see Franklin's *The Editing of Emily Dickinson*, his two-volume *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (in particular pages 215-28), and Bingham's *Ancestors' Brocades*.

poet on a separate sheet of paper and enclosed with a note, but also those written on the same sheet(s) but in some way differentiated from the text of the letter. As many scholars have noted, Johnson ignored a few poems and actually excavated several other "poems" that were written by the poet in prose format.[15] Thus, Johnson simultaneously erased the poet's original approach to genre and added confusion where none had existed. Ultimately, for Johnson, the correspondence between poetry and letter presents a publishing dilemma, not an area for literary study.

Not until the late 1960s, in fact, did a scholar see the possibility for an extensive analysis of the poetry of Emily Dickinson's prose, so often commented on by early reviewers, editors, and the general reading public. Robert Lambert's 1968 dissertation "The Prose of A Poet: A Critical Study of Emily Dickinson's Letters" is the first book-length work to claim the rights of art for these texts, which he defines as "so compressed" that they nearly "crack" into poetry (v).[16] He extends this definition by

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[15]Although textual scholars agree that there are roughly half a dozen of these excavated poems, Dickinson's line spacing and indention idiosyncrasies make an exact count quite impossible. An example of the former is letter 41, and of the latter is poem 2.

[16]Because it is intended to be an introduction, I am skipping over David Higgins' 1967 *Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet and Her Prose*, a work that promotes itself as a "study of Emily Dickinson's life as revealed in her prose" and that does note the poetry of the prose. In fact, in his introduction, Higgins proffers a description of the poetic quality--which he calls "oddities"--of the poet's prose. To him, what is significant in these texts is her conscious recognition of the signature aspect

asserting that "much of what [Johnson] prints as prose is actually unrhymed, metrical verse usually following the eight-syllable, six-syllable, eight-syllable beat of common meter" (vi). Lambert's is thus the one exception mentioned previously: he focuses almost entirely on non-canonical poetry. Cogent as his analysis is, however, he tends ultimately to devalue this art. Lambert suggests that in order to overcome what he defines as the poet's "suspicion" of prose, she wrote letters in a "semi-poetic, heavily accented metrical style" that incorporated two forms of embedded poems (168). Accordingly, his dissertation turns to a study of these two forms. The first he labels "gatherings," lines appearing just prior to a poem but separated from the prose text and functioning as an introduction or as a "warm up for writing poetry." Lambert names the second form of embedded poem "semi-stanza." These are the more lengthy embedded poetic lines, designated "semi-" because, as Lambert argues, Dickinson herself "did not regard them as poetry" (168-95). Such a reading seems to slight the artist's perception of the potential of prose. A woman who crafted numerous drafts of most letters, even one-line gift enclosures, seems much more of a conscious artist, who, like the quilter,

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of her letters, thus explaining why she often did not sign them or signed only with a riddle. He also points, for example, to the appearance of aphorisms; overstatement, understatement, and paradox; archaisms and localism; Elizabethan turns of speech, and New England colloquial "oddities." Despite these insights, Higginson announces at the end of these introductory comments his intent to move on to the life (3-24).

knowingly incorporates many varied scraps in order to produce the most spectacular pattern possible.

The next extensive study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson's letters presupposes both the artistry of the prose and the poet's awareness of her manipulation of genre, though ultimately the focus is canonical. Cristanne Miller's 1986 "'A Letter is a Joy of Earth': Dickinson's Communication with the World" is an insightful probe into the poet's prose style.[17] In it, Miller proposes that the correlation between the letters and canonical poetry verifies that Emily Dickinson wrote poetry as a means of communication, not obfuscation as is often assumed. The

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[17]The large gap in time between the work of Lambert and Miller does not denote a complete absence of scholarly interest in the letters, even in the poetry of the prose. Again, this aspect is frequently mentioned, regardless of approach. For instance, although her focus is canonical, in Sharon Cameron's 1979 *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, she defines the letters as "metrical compositions" and points to the "characteristic features" which they share with the canonical works (12). There are also studies which appeared in this gap of time that focus on other aspects of the correspondence. For instance, Vivian Pollak's 1969 dissertation *Emily Dickinson's Early Poems and Letters* examines the development of both the poet's mind and art through an analysis of stylistic traits. Lillian Faderman's 1975 "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Susan Gilbert" surveys the correspondence to the poet's friend and future sister-in-law, in particular the ways in which it illustrates the poet's homosocial/homoerotic language use and temperament (an especially important reading because it set the stage for studies by such critics as Rebecca Patterson, Margaret Homans, Adalaide Morris, Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Louise Hart, and Paula Bennett). The title of Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt's 1979 "A Developing Self as Revealed through the Royalty Imagery in the Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson" provides a concise statement of purpose. Such variety of approach has continued. Suzanne Juhasz's 1984 "Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters" investigates the nature of the relationship between letter style, intent, and recipient. And Martha Nell Smith's 1992 *Rowing in Eden: Re-reading Emily Dickinson* proposes that the poet's letters are the means through which Emily Dickinson became a "self-published" poet.

canonical poetry, Miller avows, carries a message that Dickinson wanted understood, just as her letters do. For Miller, this analogy is most vividly illustrated, first, in the "close correspondence" between the language of the letters and that of the poetry and, second, in the recurrence of the metaphor of the poet as letter writer (as in the canonical "This is my letter to the World"). In expounding on her assertion that the poet herself perceived this "close correspondence," Miller invokes the poet's methods of composition, in particular the appearance in both genres of complicated lists of variant words and phrases, as well as the poet's use in poetry and prose of compressed, metaphorical and non-referential language, inverted and elliptical syntax, coined words, and ungrammatical syntax. Alleging that Dickinson actually felt more effective expressing herself in meter, Miller tenders the supposition that the poet "is most apt to write in meter when she is responding to a crisis or is particularly upset" (32). Miller does not, however, pursue this cogent analysis with regard to the ways in which it speaks to the context of the letters wherein poetry appears, often sent to support or comfort the correspondent. She proffers her insights about the prose especially in order to illuminate the canonical poetry.[18]

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[18]Along with other critics' work, Miller's essay also anticipates William Shurr's *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (discussed later in this section). Miller writes of an 1864 letter (L 288): "The hymn or 'common' meter and rhyme of most of Dickinson's poems seem so natural to her that she falls into their

In her 1992 "Corresponding Worlds: The Art of Emily Dickinson's Letters," Sarah Wider insists that Emily Dickinson particularly prized prose, and she pointedly focuses on the letter context. Designating the letters as craft, an "artful blend" of genre, Wider explains that the poet valued prose especially for its "expansiveness." As she avows, a "flexible form that could be shaped to suit every occasion, the letter provided Dickinson with a way of establishing common ground between herself and her correspondents" (19). For Wider, the letters established "a meeting place of words created from correspondent forms of expression" (19). In such a view, the boundaries between prose and poetry are blurred. Consequently, Wider's own commentary blurs the distinction between poems "visually represented" and those that are embedded (an act that makes it difficult at times for a reader to know to which she refers). In her judgment, Dickinson's "artful blend" accomplishes five purposes for the poet. First, the insertion of poetry into prose creates "unconventional closings" that mix well with the indeterminate nature of the overall text. According to Wider, Dickinson introduces poetic language also as a means of addressing two correspondents in the same letter--for example, writing in the same note consoling prose to the bereaved addressee and an elegy in honor of the deceased. Further, the

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rhythm in the middle of a paragraph, without marking it as verse" (32).

poetry functions as a "designated representative" for something Dickinson would like to enclose with the note (a hummingbird, for example) but for whatever reason cannot. Wider proposes, also, that the poetry of the letters is an enactment or dramatization of the prose, bringing the latter more fully to life. Finally, what Wider specifies as especially important, the poetry is a means of assuring the letter's private nature. Overall, for Wider, Dickinson's letters themselves "'dwell in Possibility'" by "opening prose into poetry and extending poetry into prose" (35). In such a study, the letters are indeed works of art in and of themselves. Sarah Wider never loses sight of their importance. Nevertheless, her concern is with the poetry in the letters, extracted by Johnson and established as canonical.

Wider's declaration that verses not "visually represented" in the letters are nevertheless "readily distinguishable by the mind's ear" set the stage for the 1993 publications of Lewis Turco and William H. Shurr. For Turco, a reader admittedly attracted to what is modern in Dickinson's approach to genre, the letters offer neither the publishing obstacles they do for Thomas H. Johnson nor the basis for analysis they do for Lambert. To him, the possibilities are even more limitless. His *Emily Dickinson, Woman of Letters: Poems and Centos From the Lines in Emily Dickinson's Letters* prints poems that are partly the poet's prose and

partly Turco's own poetry. According to his introductory account, Turco was so stimulated by the poetic nature of Dickinson's prose that he excavated lines so that he could craft poems around them, separating these "collaborative poems" into two categories. Those poems that he defines as "found" poems are the ones he "made entirely from lines culled from various parts" of sundry Dickinson letters. Those that he refers to as "true collaborations" are a mixture of lines from both Dickinson and Turco. In such blending, Turco hopes to draw attention to the poet's writing not seen by the public at large and to assimilate her "tone and style" so as to make his own lines "indistinguishable from her quotations" (5). In essence, then, Turco's aim is to gain more notoriety for Dickinson's prose and for his own poetry. Although his text also includes four essays by Dickinson scholars, his work is not a study of the poetic lines embedded in the letters and ultimately takes attention away from them since only readers familiar with the correspondence are readily able to recognize the original lines.[19]

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[19]The four essays which conclude Turco's work are Jeanne Holland's "'Knock with/tremor': When Daughters Revise 'Dear Father,'" which suggests that the poet "revises" the oedipal construct depicted in the title poem (which was sent as a letter) through gaps and silences, thereby illuminating the "problematics of feminine subjectivity, the limitations of logos (the Father's law), and the erasure of the mother's body" (85-97). In the second essay, "The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire: Emily Dickinson's Letters and Poems to Susan Dickinson, 1850-1886," Ellen Louise Hart argues for the "constancy" of the poet's homoerotic love for her sister-in-law. In doing so, Hart points out what she defines as the weakness of past criticism's dealing with this relationship, focusing particular attention on letter

Although his text offers some analysis, William H. Shurr's stated purpose is to "delight" readers with the poetry of Emily Dickinson's prose. His *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* extracts 498 "new poems" from the poet's letters, formatting them to resemble the canonical works and offering them as "authentic additions" to the established canon. In presenting these "new poems," Shurr organizes his text into five chapters that divide the culled lines according to their poetic form and meter and to their state of completeness. "The Epigrams" chapter introduces "a new genre" to the Dickinson canon, 195 examples of what Shurr designates the "freestanding fourteener epigrams."[20] The title chapter offers 129

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921 and editors' mis-representations of it as a letter and not as a (love) poem (99-128). David W. Hill's "Words Doing: Dickinson's Language as Autonomous Actions" examines the "language-events" in several Dickinson letters in order to demonstrate how the poet was able to "summon up . . . drama" (129-46). His points can thus profitably be compared to Wider's claims about Dickinson's "enactment" or "dramatization" (as well as to Elizabeth Phillips' *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*, Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, and Gilbert's "Nun" because these also pay particular attention to the poet's ability to "summon up drama"). Lastly, in Marta Werner's "The Shot Bird's Progress: Emily Dickinson's Master Letters," Turco's readers are given one last example of intertextuality and fragmentation as Werner's disconnected, incomplete paragraphs enact acts of writing and reading, thus speaking to Dickinson's own signature indeterminacy, as well as to Turco's pleasure in this aspect of the poet's writing (147-52).

[20]The designation "new genre" refers to the fact that few readers as readily associate Dickinson with epigrams as they do with the hymn meter lyric of four-line stanzas. There is, of course, a long history of readers, reviewers, and critics making note of this genre in Dickinson's opus. The most extensive example is found in Karl Keller's chapter on Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson in his *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty*, wherein he ranks Dickinson as one of America's most memorable epigrammatists. He, in fact, provides a "simple anthology" of her aphorisms to support such a claim. See his chapter "The Unused Universe: Emily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson" (148-83). His "anthology," the first of its kind, is located on pages 172-78.

"new poems" that Shurr judges "complete and finished" and able to "stand by themselves, free from any context in the letters" (38). "Tetrameter, Trimeter, Riddles, and Such" offers what the chapter title implies, a miscellaneous selection of 130 variously metered lines. The penultimate chapter presents seventeen "workshop . . . poems that are *almost* finished--poems in which prosaic lines intrude, or the meter goes dead, or lines seem missing in stanza formations" (84). The last section, "Juvenilia, Sources, and the Growth of a Poet," prints "many new materials for determining the origins of Dickinson's poetic practice" (92). In justifying his practice of removing lines from the correspondence, Shurr explains that because Emily Dickinson published only through her fascicles and letters, readers cannot know her intent with regard to the embedded lines he defines as "new poems."[21] For Shurr, these lines should be extracted because "it is questionable whether the letters--written to specific individuals concerned with the minutiae of everyday life--are really suitable context for these poems" (10). For him, the poetic lines "seem

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[21]As briefly mentioned in the preface to this work, there is in Dickinson scholarship a (quite heated) discussion regarding the poet's intent, specifically as it relates to editing practices. Although many critics such as Martha Nell Smith, David Porter, Ellen Louise Hart, Paula Bennett, and, of course, William Shurr have added to the dialogue, no one, perhaps, has examined the ways in which formal publication distorts the reading of Emily Dickinson's manuscripts as passionately as has Susan Howe. For her, the recognition of signature aspects of the poet's work (what some have defined as "accidentals") such as spacing, margination, and lineation is crucial for understanding the poet's intentions. See Howe's seminal "Some Notes on Visual Intentionality in Emily Dickinson."

to transcend such limiting contexts" (10). Only when they are extracted and printed as "isolated" and "freestanding poems" can readers truly appreciate their artistry. Ultimately, Shurr's text calls into question Johnson's judgments concerning what is and what is not canonical poetry. Like Johnson, however, his primary concern is editorial.

Such a focus is especially apparent in Shurr's suggestion that because the letters are "concerned with the minutiae of everyday life," they are unsuitable context. His edition of "new poems"--lines that Turco entitles "found" poems, Wider designates as "not visually represented," and Lambert refers to as "semi-stanzas"--does not examine the poetry of Emily Dickinson's prose for its relationship to the poet's daily domestic life. None of these studies have that issue as their focus. Yet, it is in her daily life that Emily Dickinson created the lines Turco embellishes, Wider and Lambert analyze, and Johnson and Shurr print. Thus, a study that links the art to the domestic life of the poet seems a logical step.

Dickinson Readers and the Poet at Home

Every study of Emily Dickinson is ultimately an investigation into the "everyday life" of living at home, if for no other reason than the fact that the poet never resided anywhere else. However, few scholars survey

that life for the ways in which it positively affected her art. Some even ignore her domesticity despite its central place in her life. None examine the relationship of that home life to the poetry of the prose. Of course, ever since the 12 November 1890 publication of the first edition of poems, there has been intense curiosity concerning Emily Dickinson's experience of home. The titles of the first reviews, even, suggest such interest. They also reveal the nature of that wonder. Some of these are "The Strangely Isolated Life of Emily Dickinson," "A Melancholy Fidelity," "A New England Nun," "A New England Recluse," and "Glimpses of a New England Muse."[22] As these titles show, many readers focused on the poet's reclusion. The publication of the letters was, in fact, anxiously anticipated. Hopes ran high that they would explain the manner in which a "strangely isolated," "melancholy," reclusive "New England Nun" could possibly write such powerful poetry. Even William Dean Howells admitted to Mable Loomis Todd that he looked forward to the release of the letters and any "revelations of personality" that they might make (qtd. in Bingham, *Ancestors'* 310).

Once the letters were published, there was disappointment in the number of personal details that readers apparently felt these texts should

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[22]These reviews are from the *Standard Union* [Brooklyn], Sept. 26, 1981; *Commercial Advertiser* [New York], Aug. 23, 1893; *Telegraph* [Philadelphia], Dec. 8, 1894; *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 30, 1894; and *New York Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1895. See Appendix II of Bingham's *Ancestors' Brocades* (406-11).

contain. One reviewer, in particular, felt discouraged by not finding what he wanted in these sources. He writes of the letters, "they do not give much biographic information, and indeed there was apparently pathetically little to give." Since this same reviewer judged the poems as evidencing a "sensitiveness that eventually developed into a morbid aversion to society and finally into eccentricity bordering on insanity," one assumes he combed the letters for proof of instability (qtd. in Bingham, *Ancestors'* 317-18). Around the same time, a Washington, D.C. woman published a story about Emily Dickinson that proposed to explain the poet's odd life and why she (consequently) wrote. Simply, this woman offers, Emily Dickinson had "met her fate" when she fell in love but was forbidden by her father to marry.[23] Thus began the search for the hidden event (often articulated in the singular) that must have happened in order to "transform" a woman into a reclusive poet, something one reader claimed must have been a "bloodless tragedy . . . enacted" behind the closed doors of the Dickinson family home.[24]

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[23]There are perhaps countless versions of this story. This particular one is printed in Bingham's *Ancestors' Brocades* (76). The reactions of Mable Loomis Todd, Austin and Lavinia Dickinson, and Millicent Todd Bingham are also given in this text (75, 97-98, 321, and 383-84). See, too, Bianchi's points concerning the poet's meeting her "fate," in *Face to Face* (47-53).

[24]I refer here specifically to Whicher's use of the term "transformation" (see, for example, page 492) though many critics have used it. The phrase concerning the "bloodless tragedy" is taken from Bingham's *Ancestors' Brocades* (76).

Coming as they did before the rise of feminist scholarship, such searches ignore the fact that Emily Dickinson was a woman poet, that the woman did not somehow mysteriously "transform" herself into a poet. The tendency for decades, in fact, was to separate woman from poet, as though they were mutually exclusive entities. Something happened, such readers allege, that turned a woman into a poet, more specifically some "tragedy" "transformed" a woman with an otherwise "pathetically" uneventful life into a powerful poet. George Whicher's 1938 *This Was a Poet*, long considered a "classic" work, actually divides the study of Dickinson into two parts, biography and literature. Following the lead of the woman in Washington (and the many local stories hers signifies), he proposes that the one tragic event had been a forbidden love, the only link between biography and art which receives his concentrated attention. For Whicher, Dickinson's writing poetry was a compensatory reaction to womanly failure. As he offers, "Perhaps as a poet she could find the fulfillment she had missed as a woman" (113).[25] In such a study, the domestic life has little to do with art.

John Cody's 1971 psychoanalytic study *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* likewise posits Dickinson's failure at

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[25]As briefly mentioned previously in the notes, Whicher's sections on Amherst, Amherst Academy, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and village conditions during the poet's life remain valuable sources (3-21, 39-57, and 58-78).

womanhood (caused by her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother) as the source of poetry. Cody also separates woman's domestic life from art and woman from poet. As he explains,

> It was Mrs. Dickinson's failure as a sufficiently loving and admirable developmental model that set in motion the series of psychological upheavals which were unmitigated misfortunes for Emily Dickinson *the woman* . . . . With reference to Emily Dickinson *the artist*, one cannot speak of misfortunes . . . . For . . . the sequence of internal conflicts . . . and the final psychotic breakdown all conspired . . . to make of Emily Dickinson a great and prolific poet. (484-85)

Thus, Cody sums up what he asserts is the "transformation of woman into poet" (493).

The home life intimated in this passage is also communicated in Cody's 1989 preface to another scholar's psychoanalytic study. There, he offers a rationale (somewhat contradictory to his earlier arguments) for Dickinson's home-centeredness, a condition he claims made her escape from the domestic life impossible. He writes, "It was Emily Dickinson's cognitive and emotional makeup, that and that alone, and not her culture, or her family, or her education, or her religion, or financial constraints, that blocked her access to the kindred spirits" of literary artists such as

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "kept her from the recognition and appreciation she craved" (Garbowsky 11).[26] Cody's final slight to a woman poet's experience of domesticity appears when he ponders a different kind of life for Emily Dickinson. He muses in this same preface, "One is led to consider what her life might have been had she been free of the inhibitions imposed" by the "anxieties and insecurities" that kept her at home (13). In illustrating this hypothesis, Cody compares the poet's life (or his definition of it) to that of Helen Hunt Jackson and Delmira Agustini, lives spent in "the open world." Interestingly enough, Cody argues that Agustini found in her ultimately fatal departure from home that "she could not do without the structure and routine imposed by her mother . . . . could not control herself. Her mighty imagination and unbridled emotions took her over completely" (15). Cody never considers the possibility that perhaps Emily Dickinson's home life offered some type of "structure and routine," be it deleterious or beneficial. For him, Emily Dickinson's home-centeredness suggests only illness, a condition that left her in the years post-1860 "Loveless, excluded, almost burned out as a poet, and reduced to the status of a queer, hypochondriacal, and depressed old maid" (*After* 438). Such a judgment impoverishes Cody's study because it ignores hundreds of extant manuscripts that reveal the

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[26]In his prognosis, Cody lists no fewer than twelve illnesses which "suggest themselves" as possibilities.

vitality of both the poet's love for family and friends and, importantly, a poetic sensibility that lasted until the time of her death.[27]

When Thomas H. Johnson published his *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* in 1976, he did not psychoanalyze her or pass judgment on her "womanhood." In his claims, he also appears to separate himself from the kind of divisive approach visible in Whicher's study. He states that because there are so few "sketches" of Emily Dickinson by contemporaries, readers must necessarily "discover her in the letters and poems"(22). He thus sets out to find her. Such an approach would seem to require a survey of the alliance between this woman's domestic life and her texts. Yet, as Johnson explains, he was driven in his research by two distinct guiding questions: "What was Emily Dickinson like?" and "As a poet, what was she trying to do?" He wants to know the woman, and then the poet. In attempting to answer these two questions, in fact, Johnson divides his work into three parts because, as he asserts, "for Emily Dickinson there were three worlds," that of nature, her "estate" of friends, and "the world of unseen and unheard"

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[27]. *After Great Pain* has been attacked frequently, and often intensely, by feminist and new historical critics for Cody's Freudian (ergo sexist) readings, for his ignorance of the condition of women during Dickinson's lifetime, and for his presentation of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson as caricature. Particularly cogent, and varied, are those by Suzanne Juhasz in her introduction to *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson* (2-4) and Jean McClure Mudge in her *The Image of Home* (27-28, 34-35, and in the notes, pages 234-35 and 237).

(3). Her life as a woman poet residing in the home is barely touched upon, even though Johnson defines her attachment to her home and family as ultimately "compulsive" (24) and the self-reliant, autonomous environment of that household commendable (31).[28] In general, he slights a life spent at home. He writes:

> The home in which Emily was born she elected to make in a physical sense exclusively her life. She was *therefore* at times intolerably lonely, and gained a sense of freedom by unburdening herself to outsiders like Higginson who would be understanding but not inquisitive in their responses. Saying to such a person that one's father read lonely and rigorous books, or that one's mother did not care for thought, was intended to stir sympathy for one's isolation. (31 emphasis added)

For Johnson, then, because Emily Dickinson remained in her family home, she was "therefore" lonely. The possibility that the domestic life benefited the poet in some way is not considered. In this analysis, it is merely reclusion.

In passionate retaliation of such portrayals, Adrienne Rich's 1976 "'Vesuvius at Home': The Power of Emily Dickinson" grants positive

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[28]For what Johnson does have to say about the poet's family life, see especially chapter two, pages 21-44.

attention to the poet's home life. According to Rich, Emily Dickinson was not at all the lonely woman desirous of sympathy that Johnson paints, and certainly not a failure of womanhood. For her, the poet's reclusion within the house is a conscious choice, a "strategy" even.[29] Rich resolutely maintains Dickinson's awareness of her power as an artist; the poet's decision to remain at home was, in Rich's estimation, intimately tied to that occupation. As she asserts, "Given her vocation . . . [Dickinson] determined to survive, to use her powers to practice necessary economies . . . . a figure of powerful will . . . whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household" (Gilbert, *Shakespeare's* 101). In short, her domestic life was a "life deliberately organized on her terms" (102). With this essay, Dickinson scholarship takes a momentous step toward reconnecting Dickinson to her gender and to her domesticity by illustrating how a life at home could benefit a woman poet, although Rich limits that connection especially to "one room," the upstairs bedroom which so many studies designate as the site of the creation of the poet's texts.

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[29]Susan Juhasz addresses the concept of "strategy" in her brief introductory history in *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*. As she explains, "Feminist critics have repeatedly pointed to the conflict that a woman wanting to be a poet must necessarily experience between the social role of woman and the work of poet. [Feminist scholars] have labelled [a woman writer's] 'retreat' a strategy: a move into a space where she could 'select, apportion, focus, examine, explore, [and] satiate herself exactly as she wished and needed to do, such that poetry could result. In the outer world, this manner of control would have been impossible'" (8).

As is suggested by the mere existence of Rich's assertion regarding the nature of the domestic life, an important transition had been taking place in literary scholarship since the time of Whicher's portrayal: feminist studies. Since, as Suzanne Juhasz explains, "The central assumption of feminist criticism is that gender informs the nature of art, the nature of biography, and the relation between them," with the onset of this branch of analysis, Emily Dickinson's gender began more and more to play a part in critical investigations of her art (*Feminist* 1). As Rich's essay argues, so did her home. In fact, a woman's place in the home, her "sphere" as it was denominated in the nineteenth century, established itself as the crucial aspect of women writers once Barbara Welter published her seminal 1966 "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." In this essay, Welter surveys the ideology of "domesticity/true womanhood," breaking it down into the four "cardinal virtues" of the "true woman," piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[30] In

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[30]Piqued by her growing awareness that nineteenth-century writers used the term "true womanhood" "as frequently as writers on religion mentioned God," Welter turned for explanation and definition to hundreds of women's magazines, gift books, religious tracts and sermons, cookbooks, contemporary novels and poems, extant diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies. The result of such investigations is the first work to articulate the ideology that created and supported the concept of the "true woman." Works coming in the wake of Welter's examined the effect of the cult's pressures on women. Watershed works focusing primarily on poets include (in chronological order), Suzanne Juhasz's *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition* (1976); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) and *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (1979); Margaret Homans's *Women Writers and Poetic Identity:*

answer to Welter's analytical presentation of such virtues, Elsa Green insists in her 1972 "Emily Dickinson was a Poetess" that the poet's work must be "approached as a woman's art based on female experience" (70). Accordingly, she advises critics not to compare Dickinson with the great male writers of the American Renaissance but to take into consideration her woman's life. On this subject, she writes,

> Emily Dickinson *was* a female. She knew it and we know it. She did not, in fact, inhabit the same milieu which influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson and his puritan forebears . . . . Emerson was not raised to celebrate piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as divinely-commanded attributes of himself. (67)

Such a liberating explanation would seem to imply that the domestic life

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Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson (1980); Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900* (1982); and Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986). (Gilbert and Gubar's focus is not poetry, but their insights are considered important to all genres.) All of these studies begin with the supposition that the extra-ordinary situation of all women in a patriarchal literary tradition--and world--must inform a reader's understanding of authorial manipulation of form and technique. All pay particular attention, then, to the ways in which women who wrote under the constraints of the "true woman" ideology went about finding a voice in the male sphere of writing for publication. As these critics make clear, women writers were under cultural imperatives to write only those works that re-enforced the ideology of true womanhood: the good woman persona or protagonist was pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. What these critical works also reveal are the ways in which many women writers subverted the cult's prescriptions and constraints by, for example, narrative disruption, "stealing" traditional (male) literary strategies such as irony and ambivalence, and, as in Dickinson's case, non-publication.

would be privileged, but Green's focus is primarily on the risks of inculcation, on the ways in which "by simply *choosing* the vocation of poetess, Emily Dickinson risked psychic and social penalties unknown to her masculine predecessors" (67).

Thus, in 1979, when Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar delve into the situation of the nineteenth-century woman writer and the ways in which her work evidences a struggle between the prescriptive edict to be "the angel in the house" and her own self-image as "monster," they do not fail to look closely at the role of domesticity and the toll it takes on a woman's psyche.[31] In essence, their *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* documents the artist's self-portrayal/self-image as "madwoman in the attic." With regard to Emily Dickinson, they look into the manner in which a woman who seemed to contemporaries "so timid, even so neurotically withdrawn," a "gentle spinster" who lived all her life at home, was able to appropriate the traditionally male genre of poetry (582). In doing so, they applaud this woman's power. Yet, according to their

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[31]In their use of the terms "the angel in the house" and "the madwoman in the attic," Gilbert and Gubar are referring to the image of "angel" and "monster" that they see as pervading British and American literature. In fact, so insistent a part of ideology that all women writers "must examine, assimilate, and transcend the[se] extreme images . . . which male authors have generated" (17). According to Gilbert and Gubar, it is because of these images that women have perceived themselves as either angelic or monster-like.

thesis, in trying to resolve the angel/monster dilemma and its link to the plundering of male language structures, "Emily Dickinson herself became a madwoman--became . . . both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic trapped in a room in her father's house)" (583). In order to survive, the poet turned her life, they argue, into a "gothic/romantic" drama, herself into the lead actress. In their portrayal, the poet's domestic life entailed the donning of various "costumes" in order to play the roles of child, woman in white, and spinner/spider, Dickinson thereby "haunting" her own home and "her own mind" in order to have a voice in a man's house (622).[32] This voice, purchased at great psychic cost, becomes the voice of the poet. The attention Gilbert and Gubar give to domesticity rests on subversive acts. In their reading, Emily Dickinson chose to be "a childlike Nobody" in "Nobodaddy's house" rather than the alternative, "a wifely nobody in a husband's house" (591). Such a reading certainly applauds Dickinson's imaginative powers, but it also devalues this unmarried woman poet's participatory experience of the home.

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[32]Gilbert and Gubar break down the image of woman in white into the various "roles" of "'little maid' in white, a fierce virgin in white, a nun in white, a bride in white, a madwoman in white, a dead woman in white, and a ghost in white" (621-22).

Because she feels criticism slights the poet's specific feminine experience, Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg examines the poetic appropriation of the "daughter construct," a literary approach that stems from the poet's real position in her family.[33] In fact, in reacting in her 1982 *When the Writer is a Daughter* to another reader's judgment that the early Dickinson letters are too full of domestic detail to be important, Mossberg asserts,

> "domestic detail" is not incidental or even antithetical to her poetic achievement. Perhaps for other writers it could be argued that the world of the house is but a transient stage in their literary development, having superficially little to do with the formation of their poetic sensibility and evolving career. But Emily Dickinson had no years other than her domestic ones.(35)

Again, Dickinson's domesticity is at the fore of scholarly investigation. Yet, according to Mossberg, Emily Dickinson is a powerful woman quite literally afraid of her domestic role. *When the Writer is a Daughter* argues determinedly for readings that examine Dickinson in her place within the home, but it also portrays Dickinson as believing that she cannot be both

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[33]This study is also especially important for its insistence on the importance of Dickinson's relationship with both parents, versus, say, David Griffith's focus on only Edward Dickinson or John Cody's on Emily Norcross Dickinson.

domestic woman and poet. Referring to this dilemma, Mossberg claims of Dickinson's self-identification, "She is a poet, not a woman; she knows she cannot be both" (87).[34] In her view, Dickinson rejects traditional female values and destiny, performing her domestic work as "dutiful daughter" in resentment and writing poetry in "secrecy and defiance" (12). The result, according to Mossberg, is the famous strategic withdrawal and regression into childhood, actions which rescue Emily Dickinson from the threats of a patriarchal world and give her the metaphors for her "aesthetics of renunciation and pain." In praising survival techniques, such a reading implicitly assumes Dickinson had no alternative but to reject domesticity and to resort to subversive childish behavior, indeed to childhood, in order to exist as a poet in the home. The resultant life is isolated, alienated, pampered, childlike: Emily Dickinson suffering from a "Cinderella complex," Emily Dickinson as "Yankee Princess" or "Peter Pan," as "Alice of Amherst."[35]

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[34]Mossberg defines a domestic woman as Emily Norcross Dickinson, a definition I feel is too limiting. In Mossberg's designation, a woman (as happened to the poet's mother) might not even live through domestic work, much less have time to create poetry. Her claim, as it is designated, is valid.

[35]Mossberg is reacting especially to the popular image of Emily Dickinson as impossibly sweet, innocent, and mild, as a child-woman. She seems simply to want to round out the picture, to show that the poet could be devilishly stubborn and whining. For her, the freudian premise that anyone who claims "I have no mother" and who transforms her father into a "comic tragic buffoon" in her letters, but who appropriates and re-creates ("dresses up" in the costume of metaphor) the voice of each in her poetry most certainly has a mother and father. To Mossberg, the "daughter construct" is a momentous aspect of Dickinson's life and

Ex-curator of the Homestead Cynthia Griffin Wolff begins her 1988 literary biography *Emily Dickinson* by reminding readers that it is in her home (Wolff tends to conflate the two houses) that "Emily Dickinson's story begins and ends" (10). Thus she joins the growing numbers of scholars who attempt to locate Dickinson in her particular history.[36] In response to the speculation concerning Dickinson's reclusive domesticity, Wolff replies:

> The arena allowed to a woman for the exercise of her talents was mostly defined by the domestic sphere (and it is perhaps a supreme irony that, more than a century later, people conclude that Emily Dickinson must have been peculiar precisely because she thus constricted herself). (167)

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poetry and intimately connected with the life she spent "withdrawn into her home," especially because the "primary relationship with her parents was never transcended" (10). That she stayed at home and remained concerned all her life with family routines and with her parents seems true. What I take issue with in Mossberg's analysis is the definition of that kind of life, the quality of life experienced by Dickinson in her home. Note that Mossberg's reference to Dickinson's "Cinderella complex" and her pose as "Alice of Amherst" occurs in her 1983 "Emily Dickinson's Nursery Rhymes."

[36]Because of this fact, because of the genre of her work, and because her feminist leanings are more closely akin to the currents of Dickinson scholarship today, I have selected for my review Wolff's literary biography over Sewall's definitive biography. She is more and more cited as the definitive biographical source, although many scholars continue to rely on Sewall.

She proposes, simply, that the poet's reclusion be defined along the lines of Lavinia Dickinson's famous declaration of its being "only a happen." In Wolff's view, the fact that Dickinson became "phobically" housebound was not decided by one "dramatic tragedy" but through "many separate, small decisions." The reclusive nature of such a life was only a strategic happen, so to speak, for art's sake. Despite her rationale for Dickinson's home-centeredness, Wolff defines that life particularly as "an absence" of "significant event." She does not examine the domestic life for its correlation to the art. For her, it is the absence of event, the "simplicity" of Dickinson's life that "served" her poetry best. In relating her view of the poet's life to the focus of the literary biographer, she writes:

> To be sure, in fashioning a biography of "Emily Dickinson," one must begin with the child and the young woman, with the family and environment and culture that shaped her thought and defined the options available to her. However, little by little, *as the woman becomes Poet*, biography must shift its principal focus from the person to that Voice of the verse, for it was in her poetry and not in the world that Emily Dickinson deliberately decided to "live." (168 emphasis added)

Thus, in Wolff's study, the woman becomes poet through a mysterious transformation--a transformation that suddenly negates the importance of home, so crucial in fashioning an interpretation of Dickinson's art.

Sounding somewhat like the early reviewers, Maryanne M. Garbowsky proposes in her 1989 *The House without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia* that the "mystery of Emily Dickinson" has captivated readers for so long because her life "reads like a fairy tale . . . a young woman dressed in white confined to her father's house" (17).[37] She intends "to discover the secrets hidden in the dark corners of that Amherst house" (17). Especially reacting to biographers like Wolff and Sewall who claim the poet "chose" to stay home, Garbowsky presents the first extended study of the revelation of agoraphobia in the texts of Emily Dickinson.[38] This illness, she argues, is the reason for the poet's particular domesticity, not artistic strategy. For Garbowsky, the poet's "disorder colored" her life at home, leaving her a "prisoner," pursuing an "abnormal life-style," her duties within the house a "martyrdom." Home, the argument goes, is the site wherein Dickinson lives out the agonies of "documented" panic attacks. Home is

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[37]All accounts of Dickinson's wearing white place her at around thirty years of age.

[38]Garbowsky's prognosis includes other illnesses as well. In her quite reader-friendly discussions of agoraphobia, she breaks the illness into four components that she then traces in the poet's life (39-48 *passim*).

"constrictive," devoid of warmth, affection, and approval. The family relations within that home are probable causes of the agoraphobia, and certainly, Garbowsky insists, the source of Dickinson's "learning" phobic tendencies.[39]

Thus, after a century of commentary, scholarship seems to return to a judgment that portrays Emily Dickinson's life at home as "pathetic," as evidencing some "bloodless tragedy." Thanks to feminist studies, there are now few analyses that separate gender and art, that forget that Emily Dickinson was a "woman poet" (they, in fact, coined that ubiquitous term). Also, because of the ground-breaking research of historians such as Barbara Welter, few scholars can ignore the impact of the ideology of domesticity on the poet. For many critics who focus on this historical fact, Dickinson was a woman poet struggling in a world governed by patriarchal language and restrictions that demanded that her

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[39]According to Garbowsky's study, agoraphobia stems from childhood experience. She blames the father/daughter and mother/daughter relationships in the poet's life for the illness. I particularly take issue with the almost caricature-like depiction of family life: Edward Dickinson is a monster, Emily Norcross Dickinson is a hypochondriac, the home atmosphere "oppressive," and the children are kept in "fearful submission" (50). In such a reading, Dickinson's letters and poems are treated as "case notes," letters to accompany flowers to Emily Fowler (Ford) become evidence of "social anxiety," (35) and the poet's comment that when she is alone at night in the house her furniture does the polka as "organic brain disfunction" (72-73). Also, Garbowsky relies on Johnson's canonical chronology for documenting the stages of the illness, thus assuming copy date always connotes composition date. Perhaps Dickinson did suffer from agoraphobia, although diagnosing someone who has been dead for a century seems problematic. Again, I mainly take issue with the quality of the life led at home as Garbowsky presents it. The manuscripts do not seem to support such a narrow interpretation.

language stay in its sphere, where it belonged. There has now been a couple of decades of much-needed revisionist work. Adrienne Rich, in fact, broadened the construct "woman poet in a patriarchal world" to incorporate this particular poet's existence in the domestic life. As Garbowsky's research suggests, however, some scholars continue to impoverish their investigations by failing to examine the positive ways in which Dickinson's living out the dominant ideology's prescriptions for domesticity affected her art, her poetry and her prose. Again, Emily Dickinson was not just a nineteenth-century woman poet; she was a woman poet who daily experienced life in the nineteenth-century home. Her extant manuscripts reflect this fact.

The Study of Domestic Imagery

In the history of Dickinson scholarship there are critics whose works concern themselves with the fact of her residence, more particularly with Emily Dickinson's poetic representations of domesticity, though none examine the poetry of the prose. Writing for *The Boston Cooking School Magazine* in the decade following the first publication of the poems and letters, the poet's cousin Helen Knight Wyman reacts in her "Emily Dickinson as Cook and Poetess" especially to Thomas

Higginson's 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* article, in particular to his now famous comments about meeting the poet. She seems bothered by his separation of "poetess" and domestic life.[40] Accordingly, she sets out to close this gap. She does so first by offering two of the poet's recipes. Wyman then points out that the poet always answered kindnesses (a cult directive) with poetry.[41] Last, she insists that Emily Dickinson was involved in both poetry and the domestic life. She writes, "Even though her mind might be occupied with 'all mysteries and all knowledge,' . . . her hands were often busy in most humble household ways" (15).[42] For a late twentieth-century reader, Wyman herself seems ultimately to slight the significance of this insight by erasing the physical nature of the woman whose hands were so busy. For example, she writes of the poet's love of birds and its revelation of the similarity between woman and bird, "so frail and 'elusive,' sprite like almost was she" (15). Nevertheless, in the decade after the general reading public was able to

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[40]Chapter five surveys these comments in detail. The one to which Wyman especially reacts has to do with Higginson's recording the poet as having said, "suggestively," that she prepared the family's puddings.

[41]Because one of these appreciation poems is non-canonical, it seems as though Wyman is preparing to venture into the poetry of the prose. However, this particular poem is separated from the text of the note. It is one of several that Johnson did not include in his definitive edition (see letter 1047). The nature of Dickinson's answering kindnesses and its link to the poetry of the prose is discussed in chapter four.

[42]Such a comment anticipates those in the present work, especially those found in chapter two.

peruse Emily Dickinson's texts, a female relative insists on a reading that privileges domesticity, "Emily Dickinson as Cook and Poetess."

In the mid-twentieth century, after the publication of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's famous textbook, Dickinson studies examined closely all kinds of images, including domestic ones. However, true to the critical atmosphere then dominant, these works fail to grant attention to the--irrefutably domestic--life which produced those images. For example, in her 1949 *The Imagery of Emily Dickinson*, Ruth Flanders McNaughton deals briefly with domestic images in Dickinson's canonical poetry, tendering a cogent insight that the poet's chief source of imagery comes from the "world of everyday experience," particularly nature, and that "Next in importance are those [images] drawn from the domestic and feminine life of the household" (10). Yet, this discussion disconnects the poet from her particular domestic life by espousing, for example, the view that the poet's interest was only in "observation," that, for instance, Emily Dickinson "was not especially interested in food or in the art of cookery" (11). Such an analysis supposedly explains the "fact" that there is so little imagery relative to that domestic art. The letters suggest that this reading is not valid.[43] Although McNaughton details a handful of canonical domestic images, insisting that they are "Especially indicative of

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[43]In fact, such imagery is the impetus for much of Sandra Gilbert's scholarly work and poetry.

Emily Dickinson's femininity" and her ability to "see" things which men would dismiss as insignificant, her approach is not one that is concerned with investigating those findings more fully as they relate to the woman poet Emily Dickinson.

Likewise, the critical approach of Emily Louise Herring's 1962 Master's thesis, "Domestic Images in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson" separates the art and life. As Herring explains, "This study of the [canonical] poetry does not attempt to make any inference about the life" (22). What she does offer is an examination of the four "principle" effects of the domestic images. For Herring, such imagery produces realism (for example, the real fact of lamps that need lighting) and thus leads to a second effect, the dramatizing of daily life. Third, this particular imagery creates in the canonical poetry a playfulness and quaintness. And, last, Herring argues, it allows contrasts to be established.[44] Although this study presents some sound readings, it does not offer insights regarding the poet's particular domesticity or its relationship to her art. It tends to be mere tabulation, precisely, in fact,

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[44]Herring apparently deems it necessary to apologize for many of the poems from which she takes her imagery. For her, these images make Dickinson "less of a serious poet." As the agenda of this dissertation suggests, I disagree with such a claim.

what her second chapter is.[45]

In her 1968 *The Voice of the Poet*, Brita Lindberg-Seyersted also submits a somewhat brief but cogent breakdown of the literary effects of the poet's canonical domestic imagery. According to this analysis, Dickinson's domestic imagery makes the concept of death more comprehensible, creates a colloquial sound, provides metaphors for natural phenomena, and "concretizes" metaphysical abstractions. However, since it is not Lindberg-Seyersted's primary concern to illuminate fully this particular type of imagery, her analysis of this area is hurried. Most importantly, the New Critical approach leads to the omission of analysis that addresses the relationship between, say, "concretizing metaphysical abstractions" and the poet's particular experience of a life spent at home.

Written over a decade later, Jean McClure Mudge's 1975 *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home* focuses book-length critical attention on Emily Dickinson's particular domesticity and its connection to her writing. Specifically, she probes the poet's use in canonical poetry of the image of house or home as a way to articulate her "spatial inscape." Because of her role as a curator in the Homestead, Mudge is able to

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[46]In general, Herring's tabulation is thorough. However, because it is not based on knowledge of what duties women at that time were involved with, it ignores several key ones, such as gardening and writing social correspondence.

provide a wealth of details about the home where Dickinson lived from 1830-1840 and from 1855 until her death in 1886--details, she suggests, illuminate Dickinson's poetics. Working from the assumption that a child's early encounters with the concrete world form his or her psyche in ways that are of lasting importance, Mudge argues that Emily Dickinson's canonical poetry illustrates Thomas De Quincey's thesis "that one's mind is profoundly affected by discrete, felt experiences in concrete environments" (xv). In her work, Mudge makes use of psychoanalytic interpretation, Eriksonian gender-specific concepts of interior and exterior space, and close readings in order to support her view that the poems evidence a "consciousness of space," that they at times even limn a particular space in the family home. In her examination of domestic imagery, which she points out is second in frequency only to scientific vocabulary, Mudge proposes that images gleaned from the poet's residing in the architectural structures she called "home" shaped and appear in the poems concomitantly with the articulation of emotions and thoughts.[46] They thus reveal simultaneously Dickinson's outer landscape and her

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[46]In her appendix, Mudge provides a "selected" list of the poet's "vocabulary of space," which includes the tabulation of terms specific to a home. Regarding this listing, Mudge offers a cogent warning that the recurrence of a certain word does not necessarily reflect the importance that the term held in Dickinson's art or mind. Mudge offers as an example the word "circumference," a term that appears only seventeen times in the poet's canon but that plays a crucial role in her poetics. According to Mudge's tabulations, the terms home and house and their cognates appear in 210 poems, approximately 12% of the canonical poetry (230).

"inscape." For instance, a canonical work such as "I dwell in Possibility--" provides a "visual *and* figurative view of the poet's inner and outer worlds" (5, emphasis added). In essence, then, Mudge moves from a discussion of the particulars of Emily Dickinson's home life to analysis of consciousness and canonical poetry. Assuming that fascicle copy date always equals composition date, her work finally becomes comparative: the fact that the poet copies poems into fascicles at the Homestead is evidence for Mudge that she "was led away from the Pleasant Street house as if she had been a captured slave," her manuscripts manifesting a "psychobiologic cry for a place to call her own home" (76; 83). Once at the Homestead, the theory goes, the poet experienced homelessness and thus turned inside to her "consciousness of space" in order to find a home. Mudge thus portrays the woman Emily Dickinson as ultimately homeless, something an examination of the imagery of the later letters (and even poems) does not seem to substantiate.

More limited in scope than Mudge's approach, Sandra Gilbert's 1983 "The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood" focuses on the canonical "poet-cook" metaphor.[47] In this study, Gilbert recommends a partial acceptance of the contemporary reminiscences that treat the poet as the reclusive "myth

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[47]Gilbert notes that this imagery occurs in both "poems and letters" but focuses only on the canonical poems.

of Amherst." Readers should do so, Gilbert argues, because Dickinson herself was responsible for much of the substance of that myth. Gilbert thus grants a certain amount of credence to the views the poet's contemporaries held regarding her domesticity, most succinctly articulated in Mable Loomis Todd's famous letter to her parents describing Emily Dickinson as "the *character* of Amherst."[48] According to Gilbert, ever since the initial emergence of these stories, "drama, domesticity, and Dickinson" have become "inseparable" (23). In short, for this Dickinson scholar, an important part of the poet's domesticity is "drama." In fact, of this drama and the contemporary reminiscences that reflect it, Gilbert writes:

> all these observers were responding to a process of self-mythologizing that led Dickinson herself to use all the materials of daily reality, and most especially the details of

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[48]The pertinent passage in Todd's November 1881 letter as Gilbert quotes it reads, "I must tell you about the *character* of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people call the *Myth*. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson, & seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, & viewed it by moonlight. No one who calls upon her mother & sister ever see her, but she allows little children once in a great while, & one at a time, to come in, when she gives them cake or candy, or some nicety, for she is very fond of little ones. But more often she lets down the sweetmeat by a string, out of a window, to them. She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one *ever* sees her. Her sister, who was at Mrs. Dickinson's party, invited me to come & sing to her mother sometime . . . . People tell me the *myth* will hear every note--she will be near, but unseen . . . . Isn't that like a book? So interesting" (22).

> domesticity, as if they were not facts but metaphors, in order to recreate herself-and-her-life as a single, emblematic text, and often, indeed, as a sort of religious text--the ironic hagiography, say, of a New England Nun. More specifically, . . . Dickinson structured this life/text around a series of "mysteries" that were distinctively female, deliberately exploring and exploiting the characteristics, even the constraints, of nineteenth-century womanhood so as to transform and transcend them. (23)

According to this analysis, Dickinson mythologizes her life and herself by transforming both into the stuff of a Gothic novel. She becomes the mysterious woman in white who renounces the world, a priestess who performs the "mysterious rites" of cooking and giving gifts.[49] Thus, by using the texts of others, especially the romance novelists, and the quotidian duties of her own life, this "magician of the ordinary," as Gilbert christens the poet, mythologizes herself and the domestic actions of her life. But perhaps Dickinson's transformations were much less gothic. That Dickinson believed that a "life of any worth is a continual allegory" is certainly probable; that she "ambitiously undertook" to live--by creating--a life that was an allegory, that "she herself, the 'real' Emily Dickinson, was

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[49]Gilbert also surveys "mystery as puzzle," the poet's transforming of a lover, real or imagined, into poetry.

as much a 'supposed person' as the so-called 'Representative of the Verse'" seems less certain (33). In Gilbert's view, Dickinson believed that her white dress was a "costume" and that self-mythologizing was integral to her domestic life. Perhaps Emily Dickinson simply lived her life, not consciously shaping that life into a gothic mystery but examining the mystery of the ordinary existence that she found at home.

In her 1986 study "Subverting the Cult of Domesticity: Emily Dickinson's Critique of Women's Work," Gertrude Reif Hughes also examines canonical poetry and in doing so speaks of the poet's life. Although she does not depict the poet's mythologizing herself as part of her domestic activity, Hughes does portray the poet's "outer life"--that part wherein she fulfilled the cult's "expectations with almost parodic fidelity"--as drama by claiming it is "like so many of her tropes" (16, 18). Since in her view the ideal of submissiveness subsumes the other three requisite "true woman" edicts of piety, purity, and domesticity, Hughes feels that Dickinson's "parodic fidelity" allowed her to obey the letter but defy the spirit of the cult (17). According to this reading, the poet subverted, even usurped, the "seminal role" of male, because to this poet "Female submissiveness was spectacularly uncongenial" (17). Dickinson refused to adhere to the cult, all the while seeming to; the product of such duplicity is poetry that deconstructs patriarchal limitations and the

cult's ideals. A canonical poem such as "I tend my flowers for thee--," then, reveals "oppressive [male] rule," and "The last Night that She lived" satirizes contemporary consolation literature. As her title intimates, Hughes' impetus in focusing on domesticity is to reveal Dickinson's "criticizing and transcending" patriarchal codes, her "incipient feminist consciousness" (20).[50]

Like the New Critical scholars, Hughes provides insightful commentary on domestic imagery. However, she chooses to focus primarily on Dickinson's straining against the prevalent ideology, not on Dickinson's poetic presentation of the domestic life, her transformation of the acts and items of her everyday life into a domestic poetry. As feminist scholarship rightly insists, such studies are imperative for an understanding of a minority voice in a hegemonic society. Now that

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[50]Comments made by two other Dickinson scholars offer important insights on this subject of Dickinson's "incipient feminist consciousness." Joanne Dobson declares in her 1989 *Strategies of Reticence* that "It would be inspiring, but not . . . realistic, to believe that Dickinson sprang into poetic utterance as a full-fledged and sophisticated feminist/modernist; there is little in her life or letters to encourage that belief" (xv). For Dobson, Dickinson is often subversive, subverting, in particular, the Victorian "code of reticence" in order to express her "passional life" which does not encode the ideals of the cult. But she is not, Dobson argues, a feminist. Dobson suggests, too, that many canonical poems are slighted by critics because "they do not provide what most modern critics desire from Dickinson--a modernist, existentialist, feminist poetic vision" (3). Suzanne Juhasz argues in her "Writing Doubly: Emily Dickinson and Female Experience" that Dickinson's language is not only subversive but, rather, an "expression . . . of the ontological situation of women in patriarchal culture" (6). For Juhasz, "To bring together the simultaneousness of life in the dominant and muted cultures is to textualize doubleness" (14). In her analysis, Dickinson's poems evidence both duplicity and duality.

critics such as Rich, Gilbert and Hughes have laid the foundation for evasive strategy and subversion, another step can be taken.[51]

Merging Three Critical Histories

As the divisions in this chapter suggest, there are three distinct areas of Dickinson scholarship relevant to the present study; the next step is to merge them. There is a rich history of critics' taking note of the poetic quality of Emily Dickinson's prose. In their editorial work, both Johnson and Shurr underscore this characteristic. Lambert, Miller, and Wider all agree that there are embedded areas in the letters that become intense, charged with elements that are manifest in the canonical works. None concern themselves specifically with the domestic imagery and detail of these areas.

When scholarship turns to the daily life of the poet, the letters lose their place as art. They are source, a storehouse to which one goes to pick up this or that fragment of the furniture of Dickinson's life. Unfortunately, this method often results in evidence that is taken out of

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[51]In covering Dickinson scholarship, I have in no way attempted to discuss each study that mentions Dickinson's poetic letters, her residency, or her domestic language/imagery. Most scholars note these. I have addressed those that give extensive attention to these areas, that (as with Cody) have received vehement scholarly reaction, or that are considered (in some circles if not in all) classics. Simply, no work examines all three areas of concern. That is my agenda.

context, readings that ignore the letter as a whole or remove detail from its place in the letter, and, significantly, the life that the letter reveals.[52] In a way, of course, all Dickinson biography and literary biography is a study of her domestic life. No one denies that Emily Dickinson lived her entire life in her family home. Many studies, Mossberg's for example, examine that life for hints that will illuminate canonical poetry. Others, Cody's for instance, study the poems in order to understand the life. Still others, such as Johnson in his literary biography, set forth their opinion concerning the reason that Emily Dickinson remained at home or regarding a particular aspect (especially popular is loneliness) of such reclusion. The fact of her domestic life is not questioned.

Emily Dickinson was a home-centered woman poet, and her poetic experience of life is inextricable from her poetic experience of domesticity.

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[52]For example, in her *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer is a Daughter*, Mossberg misreads the 23 January 1850 letter from Emily Dickinson to Jane Humphrey (55). In one particular portion of this letter, the poet refers to her mother's advice (advice echoed in the domestic manuals of the day) about ridding oneself of the blues. The poet writes: "mind the house--and the food . . . work makes one strong, and cheerful--and 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 . . . ." (L 30). Mossberg claims that in this passage Dickinson is referring to her mother when she speaks of the "halt," "lame," et cetera. Although it is somewhat confusing, the syntax does not support such a reading, nor does the context. The mother suggests that the daughter's domestic activity or a visit to one of Amherst's shut-ins will help her feel better. The poet does not agree, and in expressing her disagreement has some fun with cultural prescriptions. (On the "opportunity" that these duties represent, see, for example, Catharine Beecher, 112-19, 120-133, 156-169, and 225-235.)

Thus, the "purposeful" life that Emily Dickinson led is intimately connected with her daily immersion in household routines and patterns because she did not chose to live "in the world" or only "in one room"; she chose to live in her "own dear home."[53] Too often in Dickinson studies that home is presented almost in caricature, a monstrously vaporous, stifling, and gloomy place. Dickinson's experience of home becomes "gothic romance." And a woman, "normal" in youth, is transformed into Peter Pan, the woman in a fairy tale, an invalid, a victim. Clearly, scholarship is beyond the days of studies such as Whicher's, when literary analysis was strangely isolated from the life from which art arose. But the quality of the life that subsequent scholarship presents is too dark. The poet, as the authors of the 1993 *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* argue, is almost always depicted as "Dickinson the tragedienne" (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 1 *passim*).

When post-New Critical approaches focus on the poetic presentation of that domestic life (works, for example, by Mudge, Gilbert, and Hughes), Emily Dickinson's domesticity is still portrayed in a negative light. Perhaps, as is the case with Mudge, it is handled this way because

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[53]The first two quotes are Rich's; the third is Wolff's. The phrase "my own dear home," with various emphases added, appears often in the poet's letters, especially when she was first separated from it while attending Mount Holyoke. See, for example, letter 18, in which this phrase appears three times, the word "home," no less than a dozen times altogether.

the author simply has a different purpose, for example, situating Dickinson's sense of place within a philosophical framework. Perhaps the slight is part of the critical strategy intended to show Dickinson's majority power despite her minority status. Gilbert certainly maintains the empowerment of the domestic life, although her work still evidences a "madwoman" thesis. As such, Emily Dickinson's very real life of dishes, bed pans, and piles of mending become drama, the very clothes on her back costumes. For Hughes, Emily Dickinson subverts the domestic life, becoming "more woman" than her culture requires in order to deconstruct its patriarchal values.

Certainly, it is not "wrong" to focus on canonical poetry or the subversive tactics of a woman artist in a hegemonic society. Those investigations are essential. In his watershed *Beneath the American Renaissance*, David Reynolds suggests that "Dickinson critics would do well to turn their attention to the cultural forces that liberated Emily Dickinson" (413). In differing ways, most of the critics reviewed have intended to do just that. But there is more to do. Chances are Emily Dickinson wrote as many letters as she did canonical poems, if not more. She produced many works that are, as Wider also claims, artistic mixtures of the genres of prose and poetry. The so-called "prose fragments" are, in fact, almost indistinguishable from the rough draft poems. In her life at

home, Dickinson experienced sudden instants of perception, and she jotted them down. Sometimes those insights were fashioned into a format recognizable as poetry, and sometimes they became flashes of poetic insight that illuminate the landscape of a letter. Significantly, such flares often speak to a woman poet's experience of domesticity.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson was not "transformed" into a poet by some "bloodless tragedy" but, simply, was born with a poet's sensibility and as she aged examined the life she found herself living. Whatever else she discovered at home, a retreat from patriarchy, a haven from a rejecting lover, illness, she also found ritual, vitality, and meaning. Indeed, the very structure, methods, and demands of the prescriptive domesticity that shaped her life at home enriched Dickinson's poetic gift. The poetry of her prose reveals this. Specifically, her letters suggest that the domestic life provided Emily Dickinson with the gateway to poetic perception, images with which she could express herself, duties that sharpened her poetic sensibility, and a life-long experience that proved to be "fit atmosphere" for poetic investigation.[54]

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[54]The quotation is from the obituary written by Susan Gilbert Dickinson, discussed in the afterward of this work.

Overview of Study

As a beginning point in the examination of this woman poet's experience of the domestic life as it is articulated in the poetic passages of her letters, chapter two takes issue with critical portrayals that separate woman poet from domesticity. The chapter provides a brief history of Emily Dickinson's particular role in the domestic circle, what her specific duties seem to have been, and how she fit into the running of the household. Afterwards, there is a review of the governing of that household as it relates to the ideology of housekeeping and its most pervasive prescription, "system and regularity." Accordingly, included in this section is a brief chronicle of the domestic manual and its influence on the orchestration of the nineteenth-century household and, importantly, on Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson's attitudes and methodologies. The third portion links Emily Dickinson's poetic sensibility, in particular her gift of sudden insight, to the prescriptions of "system and regularity." Several canonical works are reviewed in this section because they offer a vocabulary for speaking about poetic vision and its alliance with domesticity. The final section of the chapter focuses on the revelation in the letters of the poet's experience of domestic duty.

Ultimately, chapter two argues that the patterns of domestic life provided Emily Dickinson with a gateway to poetry.

Chapter three extends the argument that connects woman poet and domestic life. Specifically, it is an investigation of the domestic imagery found in the poet's letters and the ways in which the duties of housekeeping lent Dickinson a metaphoric language through which she could express her devotion to others and to her art. The chapter begins with an overview of the symbolic nature of household regulation as it was articulated in the domestic manuals and played out in the Dickinson home. From her own tasks and from her family's attitude about work within the home, the poet learned to see domestic duty as more than a mere round of chores. In her home, they were symbolic of the devotion family members felt for one another. Perhaps it makes sense, then, that Emily Dickinson appropriated a language of domestic duty in order to express herself. The letters reveal especially that she turned to such imagery in order to express her wit and the general truths she apprehended in her everyday tasks and to verbalize her emotions and her poetic experience of home.

Turning from the imagery of domestic duty, chapter four looks closely at letters that are themselves a manifestation of the poet's carrying out the duties of home, in particular those of domestic manners.

The chapter first offers a definition of this nineteenth-century term. In essence, domestic manners are the codes through which parents teach their children to interact with others. They teach human kindness. The following section provides a brief overview of the Dickinson family's approach to domestic manners. And following this history is an argument concerning the poet's particular approach to such manners. Emily Dickinson was a poet, and she experienced domestic manners as a poet. The manuscripts she crafted and the ones written about her record a uniquely artistic performance of the duties of domestic manners. Last, the chapter divides into an examination of two types of notes, those sent to answer kindnesses done for the poet or her family and those written to express sympathy. Chapter four ultimately examines the manner in which her domestic life taught Emily Dickinson about human nature and about love. As in each chapter, such lessons are often articulated in the poetic language of the poet's prose.

The final chapter in this study focuses on Emily Dickinson's life-long poetic exploration of her experience of home, which she images in her letters as both sacred and particularly conducive to poetry. Functioning as an introduction to this final chapter is a brief overview of the poet's correspondence with Thomas W. Higginson, the man she chose as a confidant (though certainly not her only one), to whom she

could address her quests into the nature of both home and poetry. Although Higginson never quite understood all Dickinson had to say, the letters to him are rich sources for her presentation of the life of a woman poet residing at home. The remaining portion of the chapter continues to trace such investigations, without focusing on a single recipient but with particular attention to the poetry of the prose. Many of the passages in Emily Dickinson's letters that are charged with intensity, insight, and metaphor intimate her definition of home. These letters reveal that for this woman the domestic life was both a sacred and a poetic experience.

Chapter 2

"Work might be electric Rest":

The Woman Poet and the Domestic Life

Scholars familiar with the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson have long noted their physical connection with the domestic life. Prose fragments and drafts of letters and poems are jotted hurriedly on scraps of household paper--the verso of market lists, the instructions for lighting a kerosene lamp, bills, book wrappers, used envelopes, old letters, and even recipes. Too, the poet used her darning needle and thread to create her poetry volumes. She also often edited with her scissors and pins, clipping lines from draft letters or pinning scraps into her fascicles.[1] In the 1976 collection of the poet's recipes, the guides from the Dickinson Homestead offer a cogent insight concerning the image of wind kneading grass in the canonical "The

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[1]For instance, almost all of the prose fragments are scraps of paper; poem 1147 is on the verso of a kitchen memo; 1149 is two scraps of paper pinned together; 1326 is a scrap of wrapping paper; 1527 is on the back of instructions for lighting a kerosene lamp; 1559 is on the verso of a discarded envelope. Prose fragment 68 is a "fair copy" clipped from an existing text. Set six of the fascicles contains two scraps which are pinned to its pages (Franklin, *Manuscript Books*).

Wind begun to knead the Grass--." They suggest that perhaps the poet "seized this thought in the very act of preparing her own dough" (Brose et al 6).[2] Such images abound, all hinting at the possibility that Emily Dickinson "seized" imagery while performing household duties. In fact, many of these images are embedded in lines that are jotted hurriedly in pencil on scraps of household paper. Part of a pencil draft from 1870 reads: "The Lightning is a yellow Fork / From Tables in the sky" (1173). An 1876 pencil draft on the verso of a canceled letter claims, "A Saucer holds a Cup / In sordid human Life / But in a Squirrel's estimate / A Saucer holds a Loaf" (1374). Quickly jotted lines from 1877 record an afternoon rain shower and end by announcing that "Nature was in her Beryl Apron / Mixing fresher Air--" (1397). Two 1878 pencil scraps pinned together begin with the lines, "To mend each tattered Faith / There is a needle fair" (1442).

Despite such apparent links, there is a tendency in Dickinson scholarship to assume that domestic life is antithetical to art. John Cody, for example, ponders hypothetically what Emily Dickinson could have become had she only "escaped" the domestic life. Jean McClure Mudge asserts that the "upkeep" of the household "postponed the ecstatic life" (84). Barbara Clarke Mossberg portrays the poet as

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[2]In all, there are six versions of this poem. Not all versions contain the word "knead." See *Poems* (II: 624-25).

taking off her apron in order to write poetry. Emily Dickinson's letters suggest otherwise. For instance, her correspondence indicates that 1853 was particularly difficult for the Dickinson women. In that same year, Emily Dickinson confesses in a note to her brother that she is writing poetry. In 1870, the poet describes for her correspondent her involvement in housekeeping. She writes: "I think the bluebirds do their work exactly like me. They dart around just so, with little dodging feet, and look so agitated" (L 339). In that same year, the number of letters increases dramatically, and more and more they are rich in poetic language. Emily Dickinson did not have to take her apron off in order to be a poet. One 1854 letter suggests that for a poet occupied with household duties an apron or work dress is, in fact, quite important. In the note, Dickinson warns her brother not to "expect any style," insisting "this is truly extempore, Austin--*I have no notes in my pocket*" (L 165 emphasis added). This comment is telling. First, the mere brevity of the mention suggests that Austin Dickinson was familiar with his sister's habit of having notes in her pocket. The fact that she makes this claim only once in the extant letters establishes the rarity of the event. The missive implies that she usually does have notes in her pocket and can therefore create letters that are not completely extempore. The present study begins

with the assumption that Emily Dickinson often came to poetic insight as she functioned in the daily rounds of housekeeping, frequently jotting down the vision on a scrap of paper and depositing it into her pocket perhaps in hopes that later she could develop the image more fully.

Since the early 1970s, feminist-based literary criticism has been involved in the important work of closing the gap between gender and art, woman and poet. Now what is needed in order to re-create and to examine the historical circumstances of this artist's text production is to place that woman poet firmly within the nineteenth-century domestic life. Far from being divorced from art, Emily Dickinson's participation in the household was intimately connected to her poetic insight. Ironically, many of the scholars who define the domestic life in somewhat negative terms come close to articulating the reason this is so. For instance, Mossberg claims that Emily Dickinson was "submerged" in the "mindless routine of 'domestic detail'" (*When* 57). David Higgins avows that "aside from her writing," the poet's life at home was "merely a round of chores" (4). William Sherwood defines the poet's daily life as "overwhelmingly one of pattern and process" and "unending drudgery and routine" (8). What none of these critics appreciates is that that "routine," the "round" of unending "pattern

and process" shaped this poet's art as much as did hearing Watt's hymns at every church meeting. In the mid-1970s, the guides from the Homestead provided a provocative hint: the poet garnered images "as" she kneaded bread. To go one step further, Emily Dickinson's opus--especially her letters, prose fragments, and scraps--suggests that her state of receptivity was heightened by the domestic life. Three years before her death, Dickinson jotted lines on a strip of paper that had been used as a book wrapper. The final two lines read: "But Work might be electric Rest / To those that Magic make--" (1585). It is going too far perhaps to suggest that Emily Dickinson would not have been a poet had she divorced herself from household cares, or, certainly, that she always enjoyed domestic duties. What is plausible is that the rounds, the patterns and processes of the domestic life, acted as a gateway for poetic vision because such repeated acts lend themselves to meditation. When she was engaged with her repetitive duties, the poet's mind was open to sudden insight, to epiphany. The process, in fact, suggests in its form tantric meditation, but here the mantra is not a pattern of mystical words but the ceremony of daily pattern. Such a state might indeed be "electric Rest."

"Em is an excellent housekeeper": Dickinson's Role in the House

One reason that Millicient Todd Bingham felt compelled to write her 1955 *Emily Dickinson's Home* was to right a wrong she believed her mother, Mable Loomis Todd, had inadvertently committed with regard to the poet's biography by leaving out much of the domestic detail in the first edition of the letters. Of her discussions with her mother concerning the exclusion of certain parts of the poet's correspondence prior to publication, Bingham mentions the "personal affairs" deemed "too trifling to print." Of the decision not to publish such passages, she writes, "This may have been a wise editorial policy in 1894, but it has the disadvantage of presenting a lopsided picture. Trivial details often give a sense of reality." Ultimately, Bingham claims, Mable Loomis Todd "must be held in part responsible for the widely held notion that Emily Dickinson sat upstairs in a rocking chair writing poetry while others carried on the work of the household." She concludes her point by insisting, "Nothing could be further from the truth" (*Home* 47-48). Thus, the intent of *Emily Dickinson's Home* is to re-create the life that such "personal" and "trivial" details reveal, to remind readers that, for instance, a nineteenth-century woman's household activities were carried out in

"layers of skirts which swept the floor, often measuring as much as ten yards around the bottom" (113).

Barbara Clarke Mossberg claims in her 1982 study of Emily Dickinson, "unlike her father and brother she did not even have to work" (*When* 3). In her 1990 work, Paula Bennett describes the poet as "airily placing the burden of household duties on the obliging backs of others" (*Woman* 12).[3] Bingham's corrective step is as important now as it was in 1955. Requisite to any theories concerning the intimacy between art and domesticity is a familiarity with Emily Dickinson's particular involvement in the domestic life. Of course, the poet herself was influenced by the very codes of reticence that led to so many of the extractions in the first place. She, in fact, often apologizes in her letters for "the personality" whenever she senses she has focused too much on the details of her daily life. Thus,

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[3]This comment is puzzling. Following the lead of Wendy Martin, Bennett's work places the poet within the women's literary tradition and celebrates her female relationships. According to Bennett, "Dickinson's relationships with women sustained and protected her throughout her life" (*Woman* 14). Nevertheless, her reading of the prose fragment "I dont keep the Moth part of the House--I keep the Butterfly part--" (PF 80) leads her to conclude that the poet placed "the burden of household duties" on others. (Of course, others have read the line similarly. See, for example, Bingham's *Home* 119.) For Bennett, it is important to note, such action is part of a strategy to protect the self from "the actual rigors of a nineteenth-century middle-class woman's everyday life" (13). I agree with much of Bennett's reading of the nurturing and supportive quality of the poet's female relationships and find her overview of contemporary women's literature intelligent; we do, however, differ on this particular point. My reading of the "Butterfly" prose fragment appears later in this chapter.

primary evidence is scattered. However, for every decade of her life past the first, there is enough evidence to suggest that from childhood to death Emily Dickinson was immersed in the routines of domestic life and that she did her part in running the home.

For the years before 1842 (the year of the first extant letter), there are only hints. Nevertheless, they abound. For instance, beginning with her earliest correspondence, Emily Dickinson devotes attention to the orchestration of a nineteenth-century rural household, both to activities she is responsible for and those with which she is connected though not personally accountable. Such notation reveals that by eleven Dickinson had a fairly thorough understanding of the ins and outs of the barnyard, garden, and household. Because the earliest letters were composed before the poet grew into the Victorian habit of reticence, they are rich with domestic detail. Especially to her brother who was attending Williston Seminary in Easthampton, she reports the status of home vegetable, grain, dairy, and fruit production. According to her 18 April 1842 note to him, "the Hens lay finely" (L 1).[4]

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[4]Bingham reminds her readers that the homes in Amherst at this time were independent farms (*Home* 61-65). Catharine Beecher's *Treatise* is an invaluable source for contemporary guidelines and information about dairy, vegetable, and fruit production (385-433). She also discusses cows, poultry, pigs, and horses, the animals known to have been owned by the Dickinsons (434-41). For the most current research concerning these matters,

By eleven, Emily Dickinson was also already involved with domestic activities inside the house, those duties that were the women's particular care.[5] Along with being responsible for a large stand of houseplants (for which she was the primary care giver all her life), she was involved with home clothes production and upkeep and the duties of keeping house. There is evidence intimating that she had shown a particular affinity for flowers as early as the age of four, had been assisting in the house since the age of four or five, and

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see Jane Nylander's *Our Own Snug Fireside* (183-221 and passim). Her study is crucial to any examination of Emily Dickinson's domestic life because Nylander's work is based on the records of women in western Massachusetts and of socio/economic levels comparable to Dickinson's. Polly Longsworth's *The World of Emily Dickinson* provides insights through its pictorial record of Amherst immediately prior to, during, and after the poet's years. She concentrates, of course, on photographs pertinent to the Dickinson family. There is one extant photograph of the Pleasant Street home (the source for these early letters), although it does not include the barn (21). Longsworth does, however, reproduce Martha Dickinson Bianchi's drawing of the Dickinson barn as she remembers it from the home on Main Street, which aids a reader in conceptualizing a barn from this time period (55).

[5]The ideology of separate spheres not only kept women working in the home, it divided the duties of home. There was women's work and men's. The Dickinson women seem to have been involved in the running of the gardens, orchard, and barnyard, especially in the early years; however, the evidence of exactly what they did is scant. Beginning in 1858, there were hired men around the house who tended to the outdoor work, although the women seem always to have been involved with the gardens, tending the flowers being entirely their responsibility. For a brief history of the hired men and women working for the Dickinsons, see Thomas H. Johnson's edition of the letters (III: 959-60). For contemporary guidelines regarding household duties, see Beecher's guidebook (337-76). Nineteenth-century house chores are also examined by Nylander 103-162; Susan Strasser 50-124 and 202-223; Walter Buehr 18-24 and 47-67; and Bingham, *Home* 112-19.

sewing since the age of seven.[6] At some point early on, she became the family member responsible for mending, asserting in a letter written during her fifteenth year that "the ghosts of out-of-order garments" cried for vengeance upon her "defenceless head" (L 14). As was the case in most households comparable to Dickinson's, seamstresses were hired by day to cut and fit patterns for outer garments. The poet and her mother and sister, however, were responsible for sewing all seams, any "fancy" additions such as ruffles, and all alterations and mending. They hand-knit the family's stockings and socks, and produced all undergarments, nightwear, and household linen.[7]

By fourteen, Emily Dickinson felt comfortable in claiming in a letter to her girlhood friend Abiah Root that she could easily "keep house," if only she knew how to cook. She provides this qualifier as

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[6]See Leyda I: 28 and 40. For contemporary guidelines about children's work, see especially Beecher's *Treatise* (225-235) and Lydia Maria Child's *Frugal Housewife* (1-4 and 91-98). Child's is especially important since, as will be discussed later, the Dickinsons are known to have owned it.

[7]During especially demanding times, for example, preparing for the 1854 Washington D.C. trip taken by Emily Norcross and Lavinia Dickinson, five to six additional women came into the house to assist. Beecher's work is especially helpful for an understanding of contemporary procedures about cutting, sewing, and mending (377-84). See, too, Bingham, *Home* 112-19; Nylander 150-82; Strasser 125-44 (which actually refers to the Dickinson household); Buehr 103-16; and the poet's letters, for example 157 and 158 (which mention specific seamstresses). Note that although men's clothing was being produced more and more out of the home, women still produced their "nice" waistcoats, shirts, and most of their collars and shirt bosoms.

an introduction to the announcement that she will learn that art the following day (L 8). Over the years, Dickinson apparently became quite adept at baking, winning an award for bread in 1856, gaining a reputation in her community later in life for her Charlotte Rousse and gingerbread, and taking on full responsibility for this aspect of food preparation, ultimately securing a cellar closet designated as her own for the storage of her desserts (Bianchi, *Face* 6).[8] In addition to assisting with meal production and baking, the poet's particular kitchen chores included setting and clearing the table and washing dishes.[9] The latter duty, in fact, necessitated years of using what

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[8]Dickinson won the second place ribbon for her rye and Indian bread at the yearly Cattle Show (Leyda I: 345). Many contemporaries make mention of the poet's breads, gingerbread, and desserts. See, for instance, MacGregor Jenkins' *Friend and Neighbor* (31-33, 40 *passim*) and Bianchi's *Face to Face* (6, 15, 146 *passim*). Emily Dickinson's success with bread is especially impressive given the conditions under which she baked. As Child stresses in her manual, "It is more difficult to give rules for making bread than for anything else; it depends so much on judgement and experience" (76). There were seasonal factors to consider, the quality of the yeast, and the constant maintenance of the fire--a variable made more difficult since the only indication of temperature was to place the hand in the oven and count how many seconds it could be held there. For contemporary advice about cooking, see Beecher's *Treatise* (70-92). Child's text is composed mostly of recipes, with cooking hints scattered throughout. For research into this area of women's lives, see Nylander 183-220; Strasser 11-49; Buehr 25-46 and 68-74; and Bingham *Home* 112-19. The works of Nylander, Strasser, and Buehr also include photographs which assist a twentieth-century reader to conceptualize the operation of many appliances, from nineteenth-century cook-stoves, to egg beaters and coffee grinders.

[9]The nineteenth-century domestic manuals were particular about every household duty, especially those concerning the handling of dishes since such work could affect the health of the family as much as could food preparation. For the precise methodologies, see especially the works of Beecher (350-57) and

she referred to as her "prescription," a mixture of glycerin and water that doctors prescribed for dish-pan hands. Thus, as she claims in the letter to Root, by her mid teens, Emily Dickinson could indeed keep house.

In her pubescent and early-teen years, Emily Dickinson was also writing a great deal of the family correspondence.[10] Too, she was active in her community, at that time considered part of one's domestic duty.[11] Calling was not a pastime; it was a way of life and important to the women's roles in the home. At any time during the day, women from other houses might drop in and sew with the

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Nylander (113-16).

[10]This comment is in no way meant to imply that the other Dickinsons failed to write. Both her brother and father seem to have been prolific correspondents. Simply, no one in her family felt compelled to write as often as Emily Dickinson did. She, in fact, speaks often of her intense need to respond quickly to letters she and the family receive and to express appreciation for the kindness of others or condolence for those who grieved--a topic to be taken up in chapter four of this study.

[11]Specifically, from the earliest extant letter, Dickinson could rattle off the village illnesses and deaths, a prime topic of conversation at this juncture in the history of America. Since the Dickinson home on Pleasant street was adjacent to the cemetery, she and her entire family knew even about the funerals of those people with whom they were not closely acquainted. Interestingly, the poet's letters evidence a particular sensitivity to the condition of women in her community, recounting, for instance, those wives and mothers who had died and left daughters to run the home. At this early point in her life, Emily Dickinson is already aware of the toll the domestic life takes on her gender. See, for example, letter 6.

Dickinson women.[12] Around tea time, and especially immediately following it, neighbors visited with one another. The Dickinsons' house eventually became so popular to callers that both sisters complained about the "flocks" of "Old ladies" who descended on them--unannounced though expected, as was the practice.[13] Although she continued to accept select visitors up until her final illness, in her twenties the poet began to refuse to participate in calling; yet, as she became more and more reclusive, she took on more and more of the duties of the family's social correspondence. Still, in the 1840s, Emily Dickinson was involved fully in keeping house and in attending to all of her social responsibilities.

Letters written in the early 1850s provide glimpses of the patterns such involvement began to take. Apparently, the poet's daily routine began with her "department," the pre-dawn and early-morning

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[12]For instance, among her own generation, Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) dropped in often before her marriage to Austin Dickinson to sew with his sisters in the late afternoon and seems often to have joined them for coffee sometime in the late morning hours after she was an in-law. See, for instance, letters 102, 156, and 315.

[13]The quotation is from Lavinia Dickinson's diary entry for 19 February 1851 (Leyda I: 194). In its entirety, the line reads, "Old ladies flocked from far & near to our house this afternoon." In fact, her entries for January and February (important months for calling in this area of the United States) show clearly how taxing such duties could be. See, too, the poet's letters (145, for example). For contemporary procedures concerning social duties, see Beecher's *Treatise* (120-33 and 263-67) and Bingham's *Home* (303-19). Nylander's work is especially helpful for understanding the ideology governing hospitality rituals in western Massachusetts (221-60).

tasks for which she was for many years solely responsible. Three letters to Austin Dickinson in particular suggest the nature of these chores. In a May 1852 letter dated "Monday morning. 5.oc.," the twenty-one-year-old woman announces that she has already "made the fires, and got the breakfast," adding that she has an opportunity to write since "the folks wont get up" (L 89). One from December 1853, dated "Wednesday morn" "6 o'clock," begins similarly: "I've got the fires made and waked the individuals, and the Americans are conquering the British on the teakettle . . . . Will now proceed to get breakfast consisting of hash and brown bread--Dessert--*A*[pple] *sauce*" (L 145). Finally, a March 1854 letter written late at night tells of such events for two days. Dickinson writes on Tuesday about Monday, "I rose at my usual hour, kindled the 'fires of Smithfield,' and missed you very much in the lower part of the house--you constituting my principal society, at that hour in the day." Of Tuesday, she claims only, "Today has passed as usual" (L 165).[14]

By five or six in the morning, then, Emily Dickinson had lit her own tallow candle (if needed), performed her toilet (in winter, using

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[14]In both houses, the kitchen was on the ground floor with the parlors; the bedrooms were on the second. Dickinson notes, too, that she "worked until dusk."

icy water) and dressed.[15] She probably had laid her bed open to air and gone downstairs to light the oil lamps (by the 1870s, kerosene) and to stoke the fire in the kitchen (and, perhaps, in the dining room).[16] Next, she probably had gone down to the cellar with a bucket to draw water from the pump to begin preparing breakfast.[17] When breakfast was prepared, or almost completed, she would have "waked the individuals" with what Lavinia Dickinson described as her "shrill" wake-up call. After breakfast, she would clear the table and wash the dishes.

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[15]According to both the prescriptive literature and current research, the times one rose in nineteenth-century New England varied depending on the season. For instance, when currant picking time came, the Dickinsons were in the orchard by four in the morning (Leyda I: 207). In her prescribed schedule, Beecher advises rising between four and five in the warm months and rising in winter once there is sufficient light. She recommends retiring in warm months between nine and ten, and in winter early enough to get eight hours of sleep (109). Child also advocates early rising (87). Regarding personal hygiene, see Beecher's guidebook (47-69 and 100-07) and Nylander's study (144-48). Nylander's work also provides an insight into the effect winter had on all duties of the day (74-102).

[16]On the importance of airing the bed, see Beecher (116 in particular). For candle production and lamp upkeep and use, see Bingham, *Home* 113; Beecher 303-07; Child 88; Nylander 106-13; and Buehr 87-94. For information concerning building and stoking fires, see Beecher 297-307; Strasser 50-66; Bingham, *Home* 113, 118 and passim; and Buehr 25-31. Because Edward and Austin Dickinson rose about the same time and because the men's particular duties included gathering wood, it is reasonable to assume that sometimes the poet's work was lightened by coming downstairs to a kitchen with lamps already lit, firewood piled neatly outside the kitchen door, or the water brought up for her from the cellar (or, pre-1840, from the barn).

[17]On well (and privy) conditions and usage in the pre-indoor plumbing home, see Bingham, *Home* 113-14; Beecher 292-95; Buehr 80-86; Nylander 113-16; and Strasser 85-103.

Details for the pattern of the rest of the poet's daily routine during the 1850s are not as abundant as are those concerning her "department." However, based on what mention she does make and on both the evidence of contemporary domestic manuals and current research, a schedule for this portion of the day can also be pieced together. The rest of the morning hours seem to have been dedicated to the chores referred to in guidebooks as "domestic exercise," duties such as straightening, making beds, sweeping, and dusting that would increase the heart rate.[18] Next came the preparation for the noon meal, when all the women probably worked together. After the dishes were clean, Dickinson pursued the less aerobic duties of the afternoon. Her particular ones seem to have been sewing, gardening (tending houseplants and flowers both in the conservatory and outdoor garden), and baking.[19] During the afternoons, there appears also to have been time for personal pursuits. For Lavinia Dickinson, it was the opportunity for her daily nap; for the poet, it was the time

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[18]Note that as a bachelor Edward Dickinson himself kept his room straight and tended to his bed. Relative to "domestic exercise" in general, see especially the advice provided by Beecher (112-19). She also discusses the particular "care of chambers and bedrooms" (358-65).

[19]The letters reveal that the poet habitually performed afternoon sewing duties with Lavinia Dickinson. She seems also to have often cooked with her mother and the live-in domestic. However, the letters indicate that she routinely gardened alone.

she could spend writing final drafts of letters, and, perhaps, poems.[20]

Dickinson's correspondence reveals that at some point in the afternoon she began the preparation for tea--in western Massachusetts at this time, a meal taken late in the afternoon or early evening and often heavy enough to be the final meal of the day.[21] Since "idle hands" were not suffered in women of the nineteenth century, duties continued even into the evenings, although the seasons affected the routine. Winter evenings at home were spent in front of the fire, one woman perhaps entertaining the family with her "parlor skill" of piano playing or by reading to the others. A woman not involved in such activity, however, sewed or attended to correspondence. She did not just sit unemployed. At any time of the year, of course, the evening schedule could be altered for social activities like lectures, frolics, or sleighing.[22]

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[20]In an extant letter, Lavinia Dickinson claims that a daily nap is as essential to her health as is her daily bath (Bingham, *Home* 297). The poet frequently mentions in notes that as she writes, her sister is napping. See, for example, letters 418 and 432.

[21]Dickinson occasionally mentions her habit of "getting tea" (preparing the meal referred to as "tea") and then stepping outside to watch the sunset. See, for example, letter 103.

[22]According to accounts in both primary and secondary works, nineteenth-century New Englanders found "domestic amusements" as important as work. See Bingham, *Home* 120-24; Beecher 250-62; Nylander 221-60; and Buehr 139-45. The letters of the 1840s and 50s especially reveal the nature of evenings in the Dickinson

Such activities composed the routine of Emily Dickinson's daily domestic life into her twenties. Of course, there were particular times that for an entire day or for several days on end the regular diurnal patterns were disturbed. In general, no one labored on Sunday.[23] Also, there were complete days devoted to specific tasks, for example, a day of washing clothes and a day of ironing.[24] There were seasonal duties such an candle making, maple sugaring, and slaughtering.[25] Perhaps the most well-known disruption to the routine of nineteenth-century home life--one that contemporary texts and cartoons designate as the most dreaded and "saddest event" of the year--was housecleaning days. This yearly (or bi-yearly) "abomination of desolation" was so fracturing to the patterns of domestic life that it was frequently alluded to as the "general housewrecking process" (Strasser 62). The poet herself referred to it

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home.

[23]According to the ideology of the day, Sunday was a hallowed day. As Beecher insists, all work had to be finalized on Saturday (including meal preparation) so that Sunday could be a day of rest (149), as dictated by God's "system and regularity."

[24]See Bingham, *Home* 112-19; Beecher 100-05 and 308-36; Nylander 143-62; Strasser 104-24; and Buehr 61-7 for information on these formidable tasks.

[25]For more information concerning candle making, see Beecher (297-307) and Nylander (109-11 and passim). Nylander speaks about maple sugaring (208-09) and slaughtering as well (193-95 and 202-05). See Dickinson's comments on their going maple sugaring (L 88).

as a "pestilence."[26] Of course, daily patterns were interrupted also for happier events such as Thanksgiving, the Commencement Tea, and the Cattle show.[27]

After the Dickinsons moved back into the larger house on Main Street in 1855, Emily Norcross Dickinson's health, frail since 1850, worsened.[28] Her weakness, of course, meant a shift in the poet's routine, indeed in the entire household's. As the poet's letters testify, for the first year or two in the Homestead, Lavinia and Emily Dickinson "ke[pt their] father's house" (L 182). Apparently, it was at

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[26]Dickinson's comment is from the 1860s. Susan Strasser, in fact, quotes Dickinson's famous pestilence remark as an example of the humorous way with which women dealt with the impact of this most unsettling period of the year. She also includes contemporary cartoons wherein family members are chased by all manner of brooms, pails, and scrub brushes (61-66). Noting Beecher's commentary on this particular subject would be too extensive; she mentions yearly or bi-yearly maintenance with regard to almost every aspect of housekeeping. See, also, Bingham, *Home* (117) and Nylander (120-22).

[27]There is extant a November 1851 letter wherein Austin Dickinson speaks at length of the family's celebration of Thanksgiving and of his love of it, (Leyda I: 226). See, too, for example, the poet's letter 63. Jane Nylander discusses New England's particular love of Thanksgiving, (261-82). The Dickinsons hosted the annual August Amherst College Commencement Tea, the event of the Amherst year. Because of the tremendous work involved, the poet eventually regarded it as "some vast anthropic bear, ordained to eat me up" (L 264). See, too, for example, letters 224 and 281. The Cattle Show is discussed in a note later in this chapter.

[28]Sewall provides a survey of Emily Norcross Dickinson's illnesses (80-81n).

this point that the first live-in domestic joined the household.[29] Margaret O'Brien worked for the Dickinsons from 1856 until 1865; Margaret ("Maggie") Maher, from 1869 until the death of the last remaining immediate family member. Thus, although the poet and her sister intermittently ran the household without the assistance of Emily Norcross Dickinson during the latter half of 1850, two hands were added to the sum total, an important addition considering Edward Dickinson's growing importance as a prominent lawyer and political figure.[30] There is no evidence that--excepting times of physical incapacity--any Dickinson woman simply stopped doing her part in the house. Once there was a domestic, there were simply more women amongst whom the duties could be divided. In fact, although she ultimately felt so close to the family that she referred to Emily Norcross Dickinson as "mother" and to the house as "home," Margaret Maher records in a letter her shocked surprise at the involvement of the Dickinson women. She writes in one of her semi-literate notes:

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[29]The Dickinsons had placed an ad for a domestic in 1850, a year in which the poet's mother's health had not been good and her sister was away at school (Leyda I: 170). But no one was hired.

[30]For more on Edward Dickinson's law practice and both his state and national representative seats, see especially Wolff (13-65) and Sewall (44-73).

> all that is in the house is very fond of me and dose every thing for my comfort in fact the are to kind to there help . . . . there is one grate trouble that I have not half enough of work so that I must play with the cats to Plase Miss Vinny you know how I love cats[.][31]

In general, in the years 1856 to 1875 the duties seem to have been divided thus. Along with working side by side with the women on the duties of keeping house and meal preparation, Margaret O'Brien and, in her turn, Margaret Maher performed the more physically demanding chores, the laundry, the ironing, and the churning. With Emily Norcross Dickinson, they tended to the stove-top cooking, the frying and boiling, perhaps as well as the roasting (*Home* 115). Both the poet and her sister seem to have continued their particular duties. The poet baked, washed dishes, cared for the conservatory and outdoor garden, and perused her sewing and her

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[31]Other than the initial capital, the ellipsis, and terminal punctuation, the passage is quoted precisely as it is printed in Leyda's study (II: 136-37). Women's education was certainly not all it should be, the immigrant woman's even less. A letter written by Maher after the poet's death is particularly insightful for an understanding of the bonds that formed between the women (Sewall I: 266-67).

"department."[32] Lavinia Dickinson did the marketing, purchasing items not produced by the Dickinson women or on the property, such as corsets, wicks, kerosene, sugar, spices, coffee, and tea. She also ran errands to the post office and the seamstresses.[33] She was known particularly among family and friends for her diligence concerning the chores of keeping the house clean. According to her sister, who feared Lavinia Dickinson worked too hard, she was considered "standard for superhuman effort erroneously applied" (L 254).[34]

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[32]After her eyes had healed somewhat, the poet announces in an 1865 letter that she can once again perform her dish washing duties (L 311). Dickinson still rose early. Before his death in 1874, she woke her father for the train. She always baked bread, but she may have shared other pre-dawn duties with Margaret Maher. Although the outdoor garden seems to have sometimes been the responsibility of Lavinia Dickinson, the poet often mentions tending to it also. See, for example, letters from the 1840s, 50s, 60s, and 70s (L 13, 165, 180, 195, 228, and 412). Jenkins notes seeing her in the garden with a red blanket (perhaps the one now on display in the Homestead) spread under her knees (89-90).

[33]As early as 1852, the poet's sister mentions in a letter that "the folks make me do all the errands" (Bianchi, *Home* 234). Leyda reproduces several purchase records from Cutler's Drygoods. See, for example, II: 232 and 244-45.

[34]The poet also often applauds her sister's diligence, describing her in 1880 as "more hurried" and working "in more distinguished ways" than the current presidential candidates (L 667). In 1881, she describes her "as spectacular as Disraeli" (L 696). The comment about her sister's "superhuman effort," especially the fact that it is "erroneously applied," is often cited as evidence that the poet did not do any housework. While Dickinson's comment may suggest a difference in the women's approaches to household maintenance, it does not communicate a refusal to do her part. The letters she wrote in her mid thirties from Boston clearly reveal her concern over the burden her absence causes the women left behind. (It is equally clear that Lavinia Dickinson thinks it "strange" that the poet cannot do her share.) She pleads in these letters that the women delay any work that can wait for her return. When she does return, she documents her

After Emily Norcross Dickinson suffered her temporary but permanently disabling paralysis in 1875, someone was needed to care for her full time. Although it is clear that both sisters nursed their mother, the poet appears to have been the primary care giver. Thus, from the mid 1870s until her mother's death in 1882, the routines shifted again as the poet and the other women tried to manage both the usual duties without Emily Norcross Dickinson and attend to the added work her illness entailed.[35] Dickinson notes during these years that her customary--and loved--duties in the conservatory and outdoor gardens are performed only when she "can be spared" (L 412). She, in fact, describes her position between her helpless mother and hurried sister as "a Gymnastic Destiny--" (L 685). Perhaps the most notable increase in her duties during this time concerned the social correspondence. Beginning with her father's death in 1874 and increasing as her mother's health declined, Emily Dickinson's social responsibilities expanded drastically. Often what began as an expression of appreciation for kindnesses extended to the

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recovery in her correspondence by listing the duties to which she is able to return. Such documentation was a life-long habit. She mentions often that she is "better and working." See especially the Boston and recovery letters: 289, 293, 295, 296, 302, 308, 309, and 311.

[35]Dickinson prepared meals for her mother recommended by the manuals. See, for instance, her letter 779 and Child's guide (32). Regarding contemporary guidelines for the sickroom, see especially Beecher's *Treatise* (236-44).

family continued as warm neighborly communication which included swapping recipes and notes and giving gifts of food, bulbs, and flowers. More than half of the extant letters are written after 1874, and a large portion of these are notes written to extend the family's regards.

Other than the added burden of the sickroom, a division of duties within the Dickinson household seems to have remained constant until the poet's own invalidism, intermittent beginning in 1880 and becoming almost incapacitating for the last two years of her life. Yet even in the final years, it is clear she continued to do her part. She, in fact, sympathizes in 1884 with the Norcross cousins for their household difficulties by claiming, "housekeeping . . . *is* a prickly art" (L 907 emphasis added). The 1880 census, the last during the poet's life, records for her occupation, "keeps house."[36] No scholar ever disputes that the poet's early years, her teens and early twenties, were an "endless round" of "prickly" duties. Few readers doubt the

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[36]According to Leyda's research, the 1850 census is the first extant one to list the Dickinsons. It is interesting to note that the first year the census lists occupation instead of income, Susan Gilbert Dickinson is filed as "W[ithou]t Occupation, but Emily Norcross Dickinson is recorded as "Keeping House." See Leyda (I: 180, II: 12, II: 149, and II: 324).

sincerity of Joseph Lyman's claim that "Em is an excellent housekeeper."[37] Nevertheless, in the scholarship there is an innuendo, if not an outright declaration, that such duties suddenly came to a halt when the poet began to write poetry.

Of course, one of the reasons such assumptions about Emily Dickinson's daily housekeeping duties can be made is that over the years her references become brief and metaphoric. Actually, this alteration--with the telling exception of the use of metaphor--is exactly what would be expected from a woman immersed in the routine patterns of domestic duty. As historical studies of nineteenth-century domestic life make clear, the fact that as she aged, Emily Dickinson provided fewer precise details about housekeeping chores does not mean she failed to do any. She also rarely mentions that she writes thank you and condolence notes, but she wrote hundreds. Such reticence makes the written record of her life similar to that of most other women of her time, class, and place. According to Jane Nylander's research into the lives of women in western Massachusetts, young women first learning how to run a house note in their letters or journals the burdens with which they are just

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[37]Lyman is discussed more fully later in this chapter. The quotation is from page 14 of Sewall's edition of Lyman's letters, transcriptions (portions of letters from the poet), and "snatches" (short, unfinished essays about the poet).

beginning to deal. Both the poet and her sister acted thus. Only on rare occasions, Nylander explains, do older women write anything beyond a brief mention of the daily duties of housekeeping, and never about certain tasks such as emptying chamber pots. Nylander points out that such a void in the primary texts of these women suggests the habitual, routine nature of this work (116-18). Making particular note of diurnal chores would be like mentioning that one chewed during the day's meals. The fact that Emily Dickinson eventually stops providing a history of her "department" or recounting what she did "as usual" as she did in the early letters to her brother (who was homesick and apparently enjoyed hearing about the patterns of home) actually indicates her deep involvement in them. To another woman, she need only write "you see I was delayed" or "I must leave you" in order to convey that household cares called. Her female correspondents especially understood this.

Ideology, "Manual Mania," and the Poet's Parents

The words the poet selects when she does refer to her household duties--"my department," "as usual," and "usual route"--are telling: they provide the twentieth-century reader with a glimpse of

the nature of the nineteenth-century woman's domestic work. In Jane Nylander's introduction, the terms "routine," "pattern," and "rhythms" appear over and over again. Hers is a study of the "daily" domestic lives of women, of the "patterns" and "rhythms" of domesticity, of the "rituals" of the family's interactions with each other and the community. Of the "new domestic rituals" of this period in New England's history, she writes:

> As the nineteenth century progressed, there was a definite increase in the general standards of cleanliness--which, of course, resulted in more work . . . . The increase in housework resulted in a change in the way both housewives and household help structured their time, with much more being given over to the repetitive tasks of housekeeping. (105)

In fact, according to Nylander, the adoption of these "domestic rituals," or established systems of performing repetitive tasks, helped alleviate the burden and the stress caused by the new cultural demands. Thus, Nylander reasons, an "understanding [of] the routines of everyday life itself [is] the basis for understanding the New England home" and the people residing in it (x).

Of course, because the primary record--diaries and letters--is so scattered, such a comprehension requires analysis also of those sources to which the women themselves turned. Fortunately for the twentieth-century reader, the literary marketplace was full of such texts. Most often a collection of recipes in the late eighteenth century, the domestic manual underwent a transformation at the turn of the century.[38] By the time Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson were setting up house in the late 1820s, these manuals provided the nineteenth-century woman with what their authors deemed the most efficacious methods for performing every household task. There may be differing opinions concerning the perfect herb to enhance the flavor of sausage, but the most successful of these texts agree on the main tenet of nineteenth-century domestic economy: system and regularity. Two of the most popular and influential household manuals during the poet's formative years were Lydia Maria Child's 1830 *The Frugal Housewife* (later entitled *The American Frugal Housewife*) and its number one competitor, Catharine Beecher's 1841 *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*.

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[38]For the history of cookbooks in America, see Nylander (211-13) and Adelaide Hechtlinger (33-34). Each overview extends into the nineteenth century and reflects this transformation. For a review of the historical use of manuals, see Jay Mechling's "Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers."

Beginning its impressive publishing history by going through a dozen editions in only three years, Child's work was continuously re-printed through 1850. One of the chapters, "Odd Scraps for the Economical," was even published separately in a stereotype edition entitled "Domestic Economy" with instructions that it should be "hung like a map" in the kitchen to ensure regularity (Nylander 213).[39] Mostly a compilation of recipes and household advice, the back section of *Frugal Housewife* is dedicated completely to "Hints." It is, in fact, a previously published essay consisting of six essays that provide a methodology for tending to, for example, furniture, family finance, and, importantly, the "education of daughters." For Child, "There is no subject so much connected with individual happiness and national prosperity as the education of daughters" (91). Accordingly, her essay provides guidance on raising daughters properly. "The greatest and most universal error," Child cautions, "is, teaching girls to exaggerate the importance of getting married" (91). The correct method is teaching them "domestic education," a term that signifies the means by which a woman trains a daughter in "domestic habits." Child insists that requiring domestic education is crucial because

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[39]Nylander mentions in her notes that she had the opportunity to see a copy of this broadside. It was discovered, she explains, in the pantry of a late eighteenth-century Vermont home, "where it had apparently been for many years" (298 n.102).

ultimately it is "the way to make them [daughters] happy" (92). To experience the home as "the sphere of woman's *enjoyments* as well as of her *duties*," the argument goes, a daughter must learn to run a house (95). Child introduces her work with the one piece of information she feels is needed to acquire such knowledge. She writes,

> The true economy of housekeeping is simply the art of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing be lost. I mean fragments of *time*, as well as *materials*. Nothing should be thrown away so long as it is possible to make any use of it. (3)

All duties must be systematically performed, and there must be regularity to those chores. Otherwise, there can be no frugality, of time or materials.

Reprinted annually through 1857, Beecher's manual was adopted for use in the Massachusetts public school system one year after its publication.[40] Her governing thesis concerning domestic economy can be summed up with two words: system and regularity. "There is nothing," Beecher stresses again and again, "which so much

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[40]In her lifetime, Beecher published almost a dozen such domestic guides. See Kathryn Kish Sklar's introduction to *Treatise* (v-vi) and her *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*.

demands system and regularity, as the affairs of a housekeeper, made up as they are of ten thousand desultory and minute items" (18). Accordingly, her book offers advice to the housekeeper regarding the proper methodology for organizing her house, her family, her time, and her pots and pans. In fact, *Treatise* provides detailed steps for the proper way to perform every household chore. Beecher furnishes a methodology for making a bed, sweeping a room, dusting mahogany furniture, starting and stoking a fire, cooking soup, setting a table, clearing a table, washing dishes, stitching a hem, doing laundry, dying a cloth, starching a shirt, curing a cold, killing a mouse, caring for a lamp, cleaning piano keys, lubricating a hinge, propagating a houseplant, pruning a tree, growing asparagus, running a barnyard, situating a privy, and building a house. In her chapter entitled "On Habits of System and Order," Beecher even offers what she believes to be the best schedule for every day of the week (142-55).[41]

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[41]As this partial listing suggests, *Domestic Economy* is a formidable resource. Beecher's knowledge--accumulated from personal experience and interviews with everyone from neighbors to the men and women settling the frontier--is impressive. As her twentieth-century biographer Kathryn Kish Sklar argues, *Treatise* is significant for its political import. She writes, "Beecher's manual was the first to depict the full behavioral details and to present the full ideological argument of the spiritualized, specialized, and politicized view of motherhood that we associate with the Victorian era and have come to call 'the feminine mystique' in our own time" (*Domestic* vi). For her, Beecher is an especially important historical figure because she interpreted the changes caused by the industrial revolution in ways that fostered a belief in the importance of women (see her "Catharine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*: A Document in Domestic Feminism").

For both Beecher and Child, part of system and regularity is a division of labor because no one woman can do it all and survive. True to their theses, both warn that delegation first and foremost should be based on a thorough knowledge of those living in the house. Beecher warns, for instance, "form all plans and arrangements in consistency with the means at command, and the character of those around" (137). Small children should become an active part of the patterns of household maintenance by knitting garters, suspenders, and stockings; by doing patchwork, braiding straw, making table and floor mats; and by weeding and gathering from the garden (Child 3-4; Beecher 225-35). All unmarried daughters living in the home should attend to the early-morning duties of caring for beds (both airing and making up), sweeping, and dusting furniture and floors. Such "domestic exercise," the manuals argue, teaches them to regulate a house, and it ensures good health. In the afternoons, daughters should attend to other household tasks such as the starching and "nice" cooking (Beecher 112-19; Child 91-98). For both Child and Beecher, a daughter's mastery of domestic economy is far more important than worrying over marriage prospects because a woman without these abilities will not survive the demands of married

life and because even unmarried women often find themselves keeping a house.[42]

That Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson adhered to the ideals of domestic economy seems certain. First, the advice given by Lydia Maria Child and furthered by Catharine Beecher was an important part of the dominant ideology. The 1828 *Virginia Housewife* is introduced with an essay entitled "Method Is the Soul of Management" (qtd. in Nylander 212). The 1842 *Farmer's Almanac* cautions, "It is for the man to provide, and for the wife to take care and see that everything within her circle of movement is done in order and season; therefore let method and order be considered important. A place for everything and everything in its time and place are good family mottos" (qtd. in Hechtlinger 100). An 1869 *American Woman's Home* argues for methodology in washing dishes (Hechtlinger 44). The summer 1888 *Peterman's Magazine* reprints as sage advice for its readers "A Household ABC," which includes under the letters "A," "K," and "L" the following: "As soon as you are up,

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[42]Both share stories of daughters who are ill prepared for marriage--in other words, for the full burden of a household. Although such mention takes place throughout their studies, see especially 41-5, 112-19, and 225-35 in *Treatise* and 91-98 in *Frugal Housewife*. Note that whereas Beecher insists that institutional education must incorporate the methods of system and regularity, Child defines domestic education as "two or three years spent with a mother, assisting her in her duties; instructing brothers and sisters, and taking care of their own clothes" (92).

shake blankets and sheet," "Keep your rooms always neat, tidy, and clean," and "Let dust on the furniture never be seen" (qtd. in Hechtlinger 130). The domestic axioms of the day almost always concerned system and regularity. As Nylander asserts, "Lydia Maria Child, like Eliza Leslie, Catherine Beecher, and so many others who would come after them, sought to introduce regularity and economy into kitchens that already knew the virtues of both" (213).[43] She insists, too: "There is no question that most people aspired to a clean house in perfect order. As was true in England, people in New England associated cleanliness with moral purity, and women measured themselves, and were measured by others, by their success in achieving this ideal" (105). Even advice manuals such as *Miss Lesli's Cookery* (1858) that were mostly recipe collections cautioned men to select their women carefully. Referring to a woman uneducated in domestic economy, Miss Lesli warns, "Let no man marry such a woman" (qtd. in Hechtlinger 36).

The poet's father actively participated in what Beecher's twentieth-century biographer, Kathryn Kish Sklar, defines as the "manual mania" of the day and purchased at least two domestic

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[43]Nylander fluctuates in her spelling of Catharine Beecher's first name, Catharine and Catherine. Although the Schocken edition prints the name with an "e" on the cover page, Sklar spells it with an "a."

manuals, Child's 1830 *Frugal Housewife* and the Reverend John Abbott's 1833 *The Mother at Home*. As numerous scholars have noted, the pages of both are well worn. Of course, domestic guidebooks often passed from woman to woman. It is certainly possible that the Dickinson women read more than these two texts, although at this point no other such work is extant in the Dickinson library. (Cataloging has just begun at the recently acquired Evergreens.) Regardless, as is revealed by both the research of Jane Nylander, Susan Strasser, and Barbara Welter and the publication history and popularity of these works, the ideals they articulate were the by-words of the day.

There is also the family's socio/economic level to consider. As Jane Nylander explains, "middle-class respectability demanded" an imposing "level of daily household care" (120). In her explanation for the immense popularity of the domestic manuals, Nylander even employs Edward Dickinson as example. According to her, the financial instability of America was the primary cause of the emergence and explosion of this kind of text. At a time when few families felt secure financially, the methods of domesticity offered some form of control. If one's home environment could be regulated, if one could expect things to be done in a certain way, there was

control. Edward Dickinson's own father had experienced bankruptcy. Nylander suggests that his purchase of Child's work reflects his desire to have some sense of control. Although Edward Dickinson became more and more financially secure, these ideals were an important part of ideology and would have affected his ideas about home. As Nylander notes, those who had finer houses were even more precise and methodic. Mahogany furniture and Brussels rugs--items the Dickinsons owned--were treated ceremoniously (121-22).[44]

Edward Dickinson's courtship and engagement letters are the strongest proof of his philosophies concerning domestic economy. Of course, they also suggest that he is at the same time measuring Emily Norcross's potential for meeting his standards.[45] Along with maintaining current ideas concerning women's moral superiority (the "angel in the house" ideology), Edward Dickinson supported--in fact, published on--the newest demands for women's education.[46] Like

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[44]The best sources for information about particular items in the poet's home are Mudge's *The Image of Home* and the cookbook edited by Brose, Dupre, Kohler, and Mudge. Extant pieces are housed at Harvard and at the Dickinson Homestead.

[45]Edward Dickinson met Emily Norcross January 1826. They courted until June, at which time he wrote his formal proposal of marriage. After a long engagement, they were married 6 May 1828 in the Norcross home. Vivian Pollak's *A Poet's Parents* prints all extant courtship and engagement letters of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson.

[46]Regarding such publications, see Vivian Pollak's *A Poet's Parents* (93 n.1) and Wolff's biography (118-21 *passim*).

Beecher, of course, he felt that a woman's education must impel her to "cultivate the domestic virtues."[47] In inviting Emily Norcross to the Cattle Show in Northampton in 1826, his strategy is clear. After describing the show as "a great rarity of fine specimens of domestic industry & skill," he asserts, "it would be creditable to any Lady to imitate [these accomplishments]--and I consider it as an honor to any female to have her name publicly announced as having obtained a premium for her excellence in any branch of domestic economy" (Pollak, *Parents* 142-43). After he experienced fatherhood, Edward Dickinson's standards seem to have become more insistent. He writes to his wife in 1838:

> The duty which devolves upon us, of bringing up our little children as they should be, is an important one--and we can not realise too deeply, our obligation to study the *best* course--and adopt the *best* methods of instruction & government--& set before them the *best* example for imitation. (Leyda I: 43 emphasis added)

For the nineteenth century, the "best" course was, as Edward

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[47]This phrase appears throughout Pollak's edition. See, for instance, Edward Dickinson's letters of 15 May 1826, 12 July 1826, and 27 January 1826.

Dickinson himself proclaims, a "good knowledge of domestic economy" (Pollak, *Parents* 30).

There are fewer manuscripts in Emily Norcross Dickinson's hand. But in those that exist, it is clear that she, too, adhered to prescriptive domestic ideals. One letter reveals, in fact, that she is comfortable with her ability to meet Edward Dickinson's requirements. To her fiance's hint that she will need a "girl" to help around the house, Emily Norcross responds immediately that she "shall not consent to it at all" (Pollak, *Parents* 206). At that time, she was already running a household of eight and apparently was determined to prove herself in yet another house, and to do things her way. Another time, when her husband-to-be begins selecting the floor coverings, Emily Norcross writes to let him know in no uncertain terms what her preferences are, what, more precisely, is the correct way to floor a home. She writes in this March 1828 letter,

> Slate is rather to [sic] dark. I presume your painters know what is suitable, light led [sic] color or somthing [sic] similar would answer for the chambers and the space below. The floor in the front room you [should] not paint at all as a carpet sets [sic] much better without it. (Pollak, *Parents* 199)

She is knowledgeable about household governance, and she confidently voices her opinions about the proper way to do things.[48] With an invalid mother, a father who was a prominent citizen in Monson, Massachusetts, and five siblings to tend to, Emily Norcross rarely had time for correspondence.[49] Yet she writes immediately in these two cases. Clearly, if she were to leave a house that was already orchestrated in the way she preferred in order to govern another, it would be set up in a certain manner.[50]

As evidence of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson's adherence to contemporary domestic ideals, there is also the record of those who wrote about them. Joseph Lyman, a friend of Austin

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[48]Compare Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson's letters concerning setting up a house with Beecher's sections on home construction and set up (268-96 and 337-41). See, too, Nylander's study (118-19).

[49]Pollak offers the argument that Emily Norcross Dickinson, in fact, controlled the relationship with gaps and silences (xvii-xxviii).

[50]My strategy here differs from many studies because I grant equal influence to both parents. That Edward Dickinson was determined to have his home a certain way and that he had no qualms about voicing such opinions has long been an accepted part of Dickinson studies. Regardless of Edward Dickinson's rhetoric and purchases (of the manuals), the fact remains that he was absent from home a great deal, whether because he was up the street at his office or because he was out of town. As "the mother at home," it was especially Emily Norcross Dickinson who influenced the habits, principles, and temperament of her household. Biographical approaches to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson include the Sewall and Wolff biographies of the poet. Clark Griffith's dark portrayal of Edward Dickinson is one of the most famous, as is John Cody's of Emily Norcross Dickinson. Studies which carefully divide their attention evenly between the two parents are those of Mudge and Mossberg.

Dickinson's who lived with the family in 1846, is such an example. While in the process (as Edward Dickinson had been in 1826) of selecting the proper woman to marry, Lyman often recalls Emily Norcross Dickinson (and her daughters), describing her as "a rare and delicate cook" (Sewall, *Lyman* 14). Such a judgement is telling, first, because he is aware of contemporary requisites for womanly behavior and, second, because he and his wife themselves authored a domestic manual.[51] Both neighbors and the local newspapers also mention Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson with regard to domestic ideals. In particular, her generosity is noted on numerous occasions, as is her success at hosting the annual Commencement Tea and her exceptional horticultural and domestic abilities.[52] Along with facts about his political career, mention of Edward Dickinson's involvement with civic events (in particular his organizing these events) finds its way into the local papers. Each member of the family was mentioned at least once with regard to awards he or she won at the yearly Cattle

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[51]It has long been suggested that his manual is based on Lyman's experience in the Dickinson household. For this reason, the editors of *Profile of the Poet as Cook* use several of his recipes, specifically his Charlotte Russe, graham bread, rye and Indian bread, and glaze (the poet frequently glazed her bread).

[52]See, for example, Bingham's *Home* 114-15 and 192; Bianchi's *Face to Face* 88 *passim*, Leyda's *Years and Hours* I: 282, and 373, and II: 81; Sewall's *Life* I: 74-90; Sewall's *Lyman Letters* 14; Brose *et al*, *Profile*, 7, 9, 10, and 16; and the poet's letters (for instance, L 343).

Show.[53] Several family stories focus both on Edward Dickinson's firm belief in the tenets of domestic economy and on his family's efforts to maintain a perfectly ordered house. Martha Dickinson Bianchi repeats one such story told to her by Lavinia Dickinson of the "mock panic" that would ensue in the house when the women knew the father was walking up the driveway. According to the story, each woman ran in a different direction "to be sure nothing was amiss--no cat in a forbidden chair, the morning newspaper folded and in its

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[53]For example, published in either the local *Express* or the *Springfield Republican* were the following notices for awards and judging committees for the Cattle Show for the years 1850-1856. Emily Norcross Dickinson won awards in the category of Butter and Cheese in 1850, and fruit in 1851; she served on the Butter and Cheese committee in 1851 and on the fruit in 1852 (Leyda I: 215 and 255). Edward Dickinson was Chairman of the invited guests committee for 1851, President of Ceremonies in 1851, on the invited guests committee again in 1852, and titled that year President and Secretary of the Cattle Show (I: 215 and 220). (That last year, mention of him appears, too, with regard to his winning the congressional nomination to represent the sixth district of Massachusetts.) Austin Dickinson was Chief Marshal of the show in 1853, won in the category of Honey in 1854, in "Carriage horses in pairs" in 1855, and in "Horses" in 1856; he served on the committees in each category the year after he won the awards (I: 285, 333, 337, 344, and 349). (In 1855, the newspapers announced, too, that he and his father formed a partnership.) Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) won in the Honey category in 1854 and the fine arts and fancy articles in 1855, serving on the committees of each the year following the awards (I: 335 and 344). Lavinia Dickinson won in the fine arts and fancy articles category in 1854 and the bread in 1855, also serving on the consequent committees (I: 335 and 344). And Emily Dickinson won in the category of Rye and Indian Bread in 1856 and served the following year on the committee (I: 345 and 349). The committees appear to have had four or five people on them. For descriptions of the Cattle Show, see, for instance, Leyda I: 182, 220, 256-57, and 336.

place--no omission" that would upset Edward Dickinson who would be "looking for peace and rest in his orderly home" (*Face* 21).[54]

To read the Dickinson manuscripts is, in fact, to hear echoes of the advice provided in the important manuals of the day. Much of the regulation of their house fits prescriptive advice. Edward Dickinson chose cheerful colors for the kitchen and buttery, the rooms in which the women would spend much of their time. The family placed writing tables near windows in order to take advantage of natural light. What information is extant concerning their 1855 addition to the house on Main Street adheres to Beecher's suggestions. The poet's father kept important papers in a soup tureen in the dining room where they could be collected quickly, something the domestic guides recommended as a wise thing considering the number of homes destroyed by fire. In summer, they put asparagus ferns in the open Franklin stoves, an idea suggested by the domestic experts.

The division of duty in the Dickinson household also echoes the manuals' advice. The poet and her siblings began their domestic

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[54]Although she appears usually to have supported her sister and mother's efforts in these matters, it seems the poet sometimes thought Edward Dickinson went too far with his perfectionism. No other story exemplifies this as well as "the plate story," as it has now become known. As the tale goes, in response to her father's complaint regarding a chipped plate that she continued to place before him at the dining table, Emily Dickinson took the offending item outside and shattered it on a rock. She explained her action later by saying that it would "remind" her not to make such an error again (Bingham, *Home* 112).

training early, and each had his or her particular chores, ones recommended in the manuals of the day. The family followed the tenets of both early rising and "domestic exercise," the cause of the poet's declaration when she was fourteen that she "get[s] plenty of that article" (L 8). The poet's letters document that she and her sister "keep house" by "regulating" it and that their mother is "wont" to "tour" the second floor on Sunday evenings in preparation for the week's work. "Maggie" Maher makes butter once a week. Most of the patterns begun when the poet was in her teens appear to have continued, so much so that any disturbance in the routine led to comment by the poet. She describes such a change in 1877, for instance, by declaring that she has been "Wrenched from my usual Route" (L 525) Indeed, many of the poet's letters suggest that "system and regularity" were as important in the Dickinson house as they were in most households of that time and place.[55]

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[55]Regarding the color choices for paint, see Beecher (273 *passim*). See Beecher, too, for the placing of furniture, including the placement of tables (337-65). Nylander also makes note of this habit (128). Beecher has an entire chapter on home construction (268-96). Child provides the recommendation for important papers (17). Nylander mentions the custom of placing plants in fireplaces and stoves in the warm months (127). Edward Dickinson often mentions his young children's particular tasks when he writes home (Leyda I: 39 *passim*); Lavinia Dickinson felt she was "head of the committee on arrangements" in the house; Austin Dickinson refers to the family as sitting around the fire, "each one attentive to his or her peculiar duties" (Leyda I: 133 and Sewall I: 96). Maher's comment is in Leyda (II: 140), and the poet's comment on "regulating" the house and on her mother's habit of assessing the house is in *Letters* (L 182 and 159 respectively).

The Poet, the Gift of Sudden Insight, and Domestic Method

That Emily Dickinson documents less precisely her particular work as she ages makes the record of her life similar to that of other women in like circumstances. There is, of course, one important difference: Emily Dickinson was a poet, and she experienced the domestic life with the sensibility of a poet. Susan Strasser speaks of a blending that took place for women residing in the home. Whereas men's work was outside and thus separate from home, "women's work remained intertwined with the rest of their lives" (6). Work and living were inextricable.[56] In giving Emily Dickinson an environment controlled by system and regularity, the domestic life shaped her poetry as much as it did her days.

In her study of Emily Dickinson's "personae and performance," of the "conscious literary uses she made of [her] life," Elizabeth Phillips offers an insightful comment concerning the domestic imagery

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[56]It is crucial to keep in mind that this blending was not necessarily a positive outcome. In her book-length discussion of the social, demographic, and economic changes of post-Revolutionary War America and the resultant complex of attitudes we now call "the cult of domesticity," Nancy Cott perhaps articulates best the negative aspects of such blending. She writes: "Domesticity as a vocation meant . . . that woman's work-role imitated man's while lacking his means of escape. If man could recover from his work 'at home,' woman's work was 'at home.' She provided for his relief. Since her sex-role contained her work-role, for her there was no escape" (74).

in the canonical poems. She writes:

> we cannot determine precisely the effect that the feel of thread in a needle or the aroma of the famous bread in the oven had on Dickinson's sensibility. Nonetheless, whether working or thinking between the writing of poems, she could never be quite detached from what she was doing. The kinetic response, the kinesthesis, alert attention required in household chores that allow one at the same time to go on thinking or dreaming--all carry over into the poetry. She does not separate herself from what she *writes* any more than she can entirely separate herself from the act of making a garment or a loaf of bread. (7)

For Phillips, this alliance is the reason that "readers often assume that she [Emily Dickinson] is her own subject" (7). Perhaps the link is even more correspondent. Phillips claims "we cannot determine precisely" Dickinson's response to her work in the home. Yet, perhaps there is some indication. By the time Emily Dickinson claims in 1853 to be in "the habit" of writing poetry, she had been immersed in the routines of the domestic life for twenty-two years; by the time she jots down the lines "Work might be electric Rest / To those that Magic make--,"

the tasks for which she was responsible had been done repeatedly for four decades. The patterns of the domestic life--of always washing first the "nicest articles," then any dishes that are greasy, then the milk-pans, buckets, and tins, and then the roaster, gridirons, pots and kettles; of mixing rye and Indian bread "as stiff as you can knead it"; of grinding coffee; of stirring custard till it thickens; of grating spices; of always turning the sheets so the head never rests where the feet do; of repotting houseplants--all become ingrained.[57] At some point, involvement becomes meditative, the ritualistic nature of such acts freeing the mind. As Dickinson claims in her 1870 bluebird analogy, she and the bluebirds "dart around *just so*."

Such is true even of the classic meditative rituals. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, the use of mantras function to lead the mind and body into a trance-like state. By means both internal (the repeated mantra) and external (a given ceremonial procedure), the devotee of tantric meditation experiences universal vitality, impelling him or her into contact with the God Head. In fact, the physiological phenomena occurring during *kundalini* yogic methods offer explanation for Emily Dickinson's particular receptivity. During the systematized movement toward meditation (basically, removal of psychic

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[57]The quotation is from Child (77).

distraction, calming the body via control of the posture and breathing, and concentration), the *kundalini* or latent energy force situated at the base of the spine is activated. As it moves up the spinal cord, it energizes each of the major *chakras*, or centers of psychic energy. Once the *kundalini* reaches the brain, *samadini* is achieved. In this state, the usual subject-object distinction is lost, and a feeling of at-one-ness or complete peacefulness results.[58]

Clifton Wolters, twentieth-century translator of the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich, offers a definition of the mystical experience that also sheds light on the poet's domestic life. He writes:

> The mystical experience consists in a conscious, deep, and intimate union of the soul with God who has taken the initiative therefor; while the soul, on its part, has prepared itself, normally according to an accepted pattern of asceticism. (25)

Emily Dickinson's practice of asceticism has been pursued.[59] Her ritualistic--perhaps even hypnotic--experience of domestic duties has not. The letters in particular suggest that the poet achieved the

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[58]See Agehananda Bharati's *The Tantric Tradition* and Surendranath Dasgupta's *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*.

[59]See, for example, Vivian Pollak's "Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson's Poetry."

mystical susceptibility of *samadini*, of the spiritual purification and illumination of the mystics. Wolters notes that "all the great visionaries are women," which to him "suggests the possibility that there is something in the feminine make-up which renders it peculiarly sensitive to such visitations" (27). He notes, too, that many of the great anchoresses employed themselves with embroidery and needlework (25). Speculating on gender-specific mystical experience is not in the province of this study. However, perhaps instead of the recitation of mystic words, the practice of yogic stages, or, as in the case of Julian of Norwich, the gazing on a crucifix, Emily Dickinson's mantra was something like the employment of medieval anchoresses. Her mantra was perhaps the ritual of daily pattern.[60]

For this poet, the experience of diurnal duties and the subsequent meditative state seem often to lead to poetic perception, sudden instants of vision by which the landscape of the everyday is transfigured by the apprehension of and the merging with the patterns of life and time. For a scholar such as Charles Anderson, the extant scraps are "absent minded scribblings" on "odd shapes of paper" (xii-xiv). A more precise description seems to be that they reflect sudden

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[60]For more on the mystical experience, see Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, W.T. Stace's *Mysticism and Philosophy*, David Knowles's *The English Mystical Tradition*, and Elmer O'Brien's *Varieties of Mystical Experience*.

instances of perception, experienced when Emily Dickinson's mind was freed by the ritualistic involvement with repetitive, systematic duty. Three canonical poems in particular provide a vocabulary for speaking about such an experience. First, there is the 1883 "The farthest Thunder that I heard," which reads:

The farthest Thunder that I heard
Was nearer than the Sky
And rumbles still, though torrid Noons
Have lain their missiles by--
The Lightning that preceded it
Struck no one but myself--
But I would not exchange the Bolt
For all the rest of Life--
Indebtedness to Oxygen
The Happy may repay,
But not the obligation
To Electricity--
It founds the Homes and decks the Days
And every clamor bright
Is but the gleam concomitant
Of that waylaying Light--

The Thought is quiet as a Flake--

A Crash without a Sound,

How Life's reverberation

It's Explanation found-- (1581)[61]

The greatest poets have claimed that the vision of the poet is one that can perceive the miraculous in the mundane. In these lines, Dickinson speaks of receiving such vision: the poem documents her coming into contact with the universal, sharing with the patterns and vitality of life and time. The poetic experience, the lines say, is a movement into time before time, before the bolt and the reverberations, to the essence of existence. This verse notes, too, that while poetic vision is a sudden blinding flash that illuminates the landscape of life and time, it illuminates only for the poet. And that illumination changes the poet's vision forever. Not that the landscape is altered, it is charged with light because the poet can now see. In other words, the bolt, the poetic vision, reconstitutes the ordinary, not by literally reshaping it but by altering perception. The poet sees the miraculous that is inherent in the mundane. As she describes it in another poem, after the bolt, not only did "The Days--to Mighty Metres stept--" but

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[61]This poem exists in several states. The earliest is an 1881 rough draft; there is also this more finished 1883 version, and the last are excerpts placed by the poet in two letters of 1881 and 1884. See *Poems* (III: 1089-91).

"The Homeliest--[was] adorned" (593). The rumbles still continue, the more murky elemental experience; in an instant, the poet could again feel the bolt, the sudden vision of an illuminated landscape.[62]

Such a gift "founds" the life of the poet. It organizes her living and gives significance to the things around her. The energy of that bolt--and it is important that she appropriates elemental forces here--explodes the profane to reveal its sacred contents. Another poem describes this electric experience by tracing it more extensively, showing both what happens before the lightning-like epiphany and after it strikes:

> The Lassitudes of Contemplation
>
> Beget a force
>
> They are the spirits still vacation
>
> That him refresh--
>
> The Dreams consolidate in action--
>
> What mettle fair (1592)

Here again is sudden vision. The inertia, the languor of contemplation

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[62]Wolters tenders an insight about mystical experience that provides a provocative footnote to this poem. He writes, "in nearly every case the memory of the first divine 'touch' persists, to haunt the recipient who longs for, while he dreads, another such visitation. If it comes, and comes again, the soul becomes more sensitive and able to deal with it, and the reactions of a puzzled mind and body are less worrying" (26). Such a passage seems to describe Dickinson's life-long sensations about the bolt.

produces an energy (a "force") that, while it provides a lull in her spirit's activity (the "still vacation"), is at the same time recharging ("refreshing") the spirit. As these lines suggest, the state of mind and spirit needed for such sudden vision or epiphany is of a dual nature: the "Lassitudes of Contemplation" and the consolidation "into action." Significantly, the lines seem to document their own creation. They are written on a strip of torn paper measuring twenty-one inches long and three-fourths of an inch wide and are in the poet's hurried hand writing. The physical evidence of the manuscript--the quickly torn scrap on which the poet hurriedly jotted down these words--suggests that the poem itself was the result of the "Lassitudes of Contemplation" that begot "a force."

The third poem is assigned by Johnson to 1862, one of the years biographers refer to as the "crisis" period (ca. 1858-1862). By establishing the stages that induce languor, this poem takes up where "The Lassitudes of Contemplation" leaves off. It reads:

I tie my Hat--I crease my Shawl--
Life's little duties do--precisely--
As the very least
Were infinite--to me--

I put new Blossoms in the Glass--

And throw the old--away--

I push a petal from my Gown

That anchored there--I weigh

The time 'twill be till six o'clock

I have so much to do--

And yet--Existence--some way back--

Stopped--struck--my ticking--through--

We cannot put Ourself away

As a completed Man

Or Woman--When the Errand's done

We came to Flesh--upon--

There may be--Miles on Miles of Nought--

Of Action--sicker far--

To simulate--is stinging work--

To cover what we are

From Science--and from Surgery--

Too Telescopic Eyes

To bear on us unshaded--

For their--sake--not for Our's--

Therefore--we do life's labor--

Though life's Reward--be done--

With scrupulous exactness--

To hold our Senses--on-- (443)[63]

For a woman poet involved day in and day out in the patterns of domestic life, "Lassitudes of Contemplation" were likely concomitant with hemming a stitch, washing a dish, or placing flowers in a vase. Perhaps one of Dickinson's contemporaries was on the mark when she declared, "There is composure at home; there is something sedative in the duties which home involves" (qtd. in Welter 162). Dickinson's poem suggests the loss of subject-object distinction in the yogic method. "Existence . . . stopped." Regardless of the interpretation of the "crises" of this period--and thus the import of the center of the poem--Dickinson's lines reveal a woman poet's submersion in domestic detail: going through repetitive actions while also listening to the great tick of the mantle clock and coming to some kind of poetic vision, an apprehension of the larger significance of the

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[63]This version of the poem was established by Ralph Franklin when he reconstructed the fascicles. In Johnson's canon there are four lines inserted before the line "Therefore--we do life's labor--" which, according to Franklin's analysis do not belong there. There is an editing mark on those four lines that the poet often used that seems to suggest that she did not intend for them to be part of "I tie my Hat--I crease my Shawl." See Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (I: 553-55).

daily. Taken together, the three poems, dating from 1862 to 1884, reveal Emily Dickinson's decades long investigations into the nature of the poet's vision. Significantly, in each examination, there are both patterns--the reverberations, the lassitudes, the tying of a hat precisely--and there is insight--the sudden illumination, the dream's consolidation into action, the stopping of existence.

Sudden Insight and the Letters of a Domestic Poet

In her study, Jane Nylander notes that women of western Massachusetts rarely mention their daily work. She also points out that when the women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were immersed in spinning, their journal entries increased significantly (174-82). A similar phenomenon is discernible in the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson. The years 1853 and 1870 are telling examples, for in those years the poet worked like the bluebirds but wrote voluminously. Further, her letters chronicle an examination into the nature of the "Lassitudes of Contemplation" and the bolt of sudden insight. Such an investigation is clearly the province of the canonical poetry. But it is also the particular art of Emily Dickinson's letters, for it is here that the process of poetic insight and its relation

to the domestic life is most clearly and vividly communicated. An 1850 letter to Abiah Root is one such record. Of her domestic role in the house, the nineteen-year-old poet writes,

> I have been dreaming, dreaming a *golden* dream, with eyes all the while wide open, and I guess it's almost morning, and besides I have been at work, providing the "food that perisheth," scaring the timorous dust, and being obedient, and kind. (L 36)

The letter was begun in ink on 7 May and then interrupted by the busy household schedule until 17 May when the poet returned to her ink stand. At the time it was drafted, Dickinson was heavily involved in tending the house. Lavinia Dickinson was attending school in Ipswich, Emily Norcross Dickinson was ill, and there was no live-in domestic. Dickinson's note is, in fact, a mixture of complaint and poetic boasting about running the house. She begins by claiming that she is writing under circumstances "at once glorious, afflicting, and beneficial." According to the letter, she has just taken bread out of the oven, "Twin loaves of bread . . . just born into the world under my auspices--fine children--the image of their *mother*." She then announces, "and *here* my dear friend is the *glory*." She explains that the "affliction" is a reference to her mother's illness, confessing that

this alteration leaves her "lonely." She claims that her correspondent should be able to identify the "beneficial" conditions under which she writes. Since Root was also a nineteenth-century female learning the woman's sphere, she probably could guess. Just in case, the poet supplies the answer: "winning the spirit of patience[,] the genial house-keeping influence stealing over my mind, and soul."

Apparently, duties interrupted her soon after this witty commentary on the cult's definition of the benefits of hard work. When the poet returns, she reports that Emily Norcross Dickinson is still ill, she herself continues to run the house alone, and Edward and Austin Dickinson "clamor for food." However, she also informs Root that while she has been "at work," she has been "dreaming." Here is the dual existence. The repetitive rounds of tending to the house--the food, dust, and sickroom--lead to a meditative state wherein she "dreams." The very term with which she describes the "Lassitudes of Contemplation" is here clearly linked to domestic duties. Such duties serve as the springboard for the hypnotic, trance-like state she describes as "dreaming."[64]

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[64]This letter is also frequently quoted as proof of Emily Dickinson's dislike of housework, which ultimately led, the argument goes, to her refusal to participate. I think she is genuinely struggling with the demands placed on her at this time; however, I see the declarations in this letter, "I am yet the Queen of the court, if regalia be dust, and dirt" and "God keep me from what they call *households*," as humorous commentary on a very

In an 1855 letter to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson), the poet speaks again of her engagement in the repetitive duties of her home and the concomitant experience of meditation. This time, she also shares the illumination. She writes:

> for Susie, it steals over me once in a little while, that as my fingers fly and I am so busy, a far more wondrous Shuttle shifts the subtler thread, and when *that's* web is spun, *indeed my* spinning will be done. (L 177)[65]

At the time Dickinson composed this letter, she was extremely busy preparing clothes for a visit to Washington, D.C.. Although it was Sunday and the poet was seated at one of the writing tables with her ink stand, she recreated for her correspondent her experience of

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real and often humorless occupation. Considering the conditions under which she was working, perhaps the wonder is that she could find the opportunity for wit. Jane Nylander mentions women's dealing with the demands of housework through humorous complaint in her study of households in western Massachusetts (130, 143 *passim*). For a view that associates Dickinson's demand to be saved from "what they call households" (since she is running one, she cannot be referring to her particular situation as a daughter in a household) with her refusal to accept conventional women's roles, see Wolff's literary biography (93-104). Another study that adds new insights to this issue is *Comic Power*. In their introduction, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith review and expand the insights of Nancy Walker concerning women's humor. For Walker and the authors of *Comic Power*, the fact that women's humor is so rarely recognized is directly related to domesticity. As they note, "women's wit typically has its broadest field of play in all-female spheres like the kitchen or the parlor (8). Dickinson's wittiest lines, the "pestilence" one, for example, are in letters to other women (and occasionally in those to her brother), perhaps because she felt that audience would especially understand her kind of humor.

[65]The emphasis is Dickinson's.

sewing during the week. Once again, she describes her "dreaming." This time, she expresses the dual nature of her work through a particular domestic metaphor: a woman's spinning a pattern as correspondent to the larger mystery spun by the "more wondrous Shuttle." Here is the interruption of the subject-object relationship that the yogic method seeks, the direct relation with God that the mystic desires. As the passage reveals, Emily Dickinson's sewing and her apprehension of the larger significance behind her own movements are simultaneous, the ritualistic pattern of the former acting as a gateway to the latter. The state of being receptive comes out of engagement with repetitive duties, however the image of the "far more wondrous Shuttle" is read. Her line could refer to time's passage and her friend's return. It could be a more general statement, her perception that concomitant to that which is seen there is that which is unseen, the mystery behind physical facades. Regardless, the perception "steals over" her "as" her "fingers fly."

This dual existence, performing ritualistic duties that lead to a meditative state and to sudden perception, is recorded throughout the poet's life. Each documentation invests the ordinary with significance. Here, the commonplace movements of a woman's hands reflect universal patterns. Emily Dickinson's receptive nature

allowed her to become aware of the sacredness of all things. Again, the landscape which is illuminated in "The farthest Thunder that I heard" was always there. The sudden revelation of a poet's vision penetrates the darkness which, to borrow from Wordsworth, "the shades of the prison house" had created. After her mother's death in 1882, Emily Dickinson writes to her cousins, "I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea *while I do my work*" (emphasis added).[66] The unseen is only imperceptible when the vision is clouded. Any moment can be transfigured by the apprehension of the timeless patterns of existence and the sharing of that vitality. Poetic perception allows the poet to see the eternity that "sweeps around" her. Such vision comes "while" the poet is engaged in repetitive household "work."

Emily Dickinson chronicles such acts of insight in her letters, the medium through which she often expresses her poetic experience of the domestic life. An 1880 note suggests that for this poet, it was a proper medium. She writes:

> What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the

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[66]My source for this quote is Leyda, who prints the entire line, just as it appears in the first edition of the letters (II: 386). Johnson uses ellipses instead of the words "while I do my work" (L 785).

> 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)

For Dickinson, writing letters is an "awful power," the documentation of the explosiveness of each moment, possible only if the letter writer is capable of apprehending the possibilities inherent in "each instant." This "if" is a crucial one. "Each instant" has the potential to "go off," not because the viewer "loads" it with significance but because it is inherently "loaded" with meaning and awaits the "touch" of perception and the "awful power" of a pencil for articulation. It awaits the susceptibility of a poet. This passage is especially telling since it is rich in metaphor. Emily Dickinson's language becomes poetic as she discusses the nature of the poet's perception. The moment is transmuted. The alchemy is poetry, converting "instants" of the day into matters of life and death. What the investigation in this letter finally suggests is that poetic perception illuminates the terrain of all moments and all things and that a letter has the potential for "arresting" such vision.

Once poetic expression is considered, Emily Dickinson's account of everyday domestic life never falters. Later in life, she no longer recited precisely what constituted her "department" or her "route"; nevertheless, she recorded a poet's experience of home, one in which eternity swept all around. Ultimately, Dickinson's letters reveal yet another link with the dominant domestic ideology. Contemporary manuals advise maintaining the proper household atmosphere, insisting that if women orchestrate the house in the correct manner--with neatness and order, obtained through system and regularity--children will carry with them always "thoughts of the holiness of home" (Abbott iii-v). This is so because "The Creator of all things is a Being of perfect system and order; and to aid us in our duty . . . he has divided our time, by a regularly returning day of rest" (Beecher 147). According to these guidebooks, the actions of a woman who knows that "all events of her nursery and kitchen" are ordained by eternal system and regularity and who regulates accordingly are sacred.[67]

These manuals recommend, then, that the woman running a house bridge the gap between physical and spiritual: although the

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[67]The quote is from Beecher's *Domestic Economy* (141). For commentary on the nineteenth-century vision which saw God in all events and acts, see Wolff's literary biography (93-104).

woman who keeps house manages a real building that daily requires hours of physically exhausting work, she must invest that house with sacredness. The regulation of dust should never hinder the apprehension of the divine. Such prescriptive advice probably speaks to the realities few nineteenth-century women. What Emily Dickinson's letters reveal is that she bridged the gap. While preparing meals for those in the household who "clamor for food," she "dreams." "As" she "spins," she envisions the universal enormity behind the movements of her own fingers. And, while she works, she senses not only the dust but the immortality that swirls around her. Emily Dickinson's letters intimate that she bridges the gap between the material and numinous by apprehending each moment's meaning, her pencil recording the explosion of insight that illuminates the landscape before her. As she avows, "Apprehensions--are God's introductions--."

Conclusion

There is extant an 1882 scrap of paper measuring two by six inches on which is jotted in pencil, "The little sentences I began and

never finished--the little wells I dug and never filled" (L 748).[68] It is certainly probable that performing duties at home interfered with Emily Dickinson's having time to set up her ink stand and to finalize her manuscripts. Yet, "little *sentences*" jotted down on pieces of paper--just like this one--came to her in that chore-filled domestic life. Her participation in the duties of home provided Emily Dickinson with a gateway through which she could experience sudden insight. Significantly, she calls such flashes of insight "little sentences." There is extant, too, a line jotted on a scrap of paper which reads, "I dont keep the Moth part of the House--I keep the Butterfly part" (PF 80). Perhaps this line speaks to the manner in which Dickinson functioned in active domesticity, the manner in which she could be so busy and yet write so many "little sentences." A moth burrows and destroys, and during the daylight hours, the hours of housekeeping, it is completely inert. A butterfly--itself a symbol of transmutation--moves from flower to flower, extracting all the nourishment it can. Such is the province of the poet.

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[68]Mable Loomis Todd was certain that this line was sent to her along with flowers or a verse. Because it is written in what he defines as the poet's "hurried hand," Thomas H. Johnson believes she is mistaken. He also disagrees with Todd's transcription. See *Letters* (III: 725).

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke warns his young correspondent, "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place" (19). Lydia Maria Child reminds her readers that good housekeeping is "simply the art of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing is lost." Emily Dickinson's letters and prose scraps in particular reveal that she kept "the Butterfly part" of the house, not by excluding herself from its activities and burrowing in her bedroom but by partaking in the vitality it had to offer, and by extracting all the nourishment she could. And what it proffered was system, regularity, and wasting nothing. In an 1873 letter, Dickinson writes:

> I can not see my soul, but know 'tis there--
> Nor ever saw his house, nor furniture--
> Who has invited me with him to dwell;
> But a confiding guest, consult as well,
> What raiment honor him the most,
> That I be adequately dressed--
> For he insures to none
> Lest men specifical adorn--

Procuring him perpetual drest

By dating it a sudden feast. (L 382)[69]

Her "Butterfly" prose fragment does not say she fails to keep house at all. It defines that activity in a special way. "Work might be electric Rest / To those that Magic make--." Through the ritualistic nature of domestic duty, Emily Dickinson experienced a meditative state, and in that receptive state, she apprehended the momentousness and vitality of daily life. Under such conditions, some "little sentences"--jotted down and then perhaps deposited in a pocket--did not become final drafts. Emily Dickinson's manuscripts document an experience of poetic insight that came too quickly for adequate "raiment." Such vision came to a woman poet functioning in the domestic life, the gateway to a sacred and "sudden feast."

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[69]Johnson designates this portion of the letter, which is formatted as a poem, as the canonical "I cannot see my soul but know 'tis there" (1262).

Chapter 3

"Half a transport--half a trouble": The Poet's Experience of Household Duties

The domestic manuals of Emily Dickinson's day promoted the symbolic value of household duties. For some, they were the means by which mothers ensured daughters' good health and happiness. For others, the attitude toward and the performance of daily tasks ultimately shaped the nation. Proper regulation of the house, so these guidebooks argue, even echoes the system and regularity of God. Cleanliness, therefore, is next to Godliness. Lydia Sigourney assured women that the work of maintaining a house was personally beneficial. "The science of housekeeping," she argues in her *Letters to Young Ladies*, "affords exercise for the judgment and energy, ready recollection, and patient self-possession, that are the characteristics of a superior mind" (qtd. in Welter 164-65). Other contemporaries insisted that embroidery stimulates good taste and that knitting promotes serenity and economy. The repetitive nature of diurnal tasks was promoted, too, as encouraging patience and perseverance (Welter 165).

In a line underscored by Emily Dickinson in her copy of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous woman poet claims, "The works of women are symbolical" (I.456)[1] They represent, she argues, women's unceasing efforts to please men. But another passage reveals that the link between woman poet and household tasks is even more intimate. This section reads thus:

> Then I sate and teased
> The patient needle till it split the thread,
> Which oozed off from it in meandering lace
> From hour to hour. I was not, therefore, sad;
> My soul was singing at a work apart
> Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm
> As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight
> In vortices of glory and blue air.
>
> And so, through forced work and spontaneous work,
> The inner life informed the outer life. (I.1049-58)

Emily Dickinson seems also to have performed "forced work and spontaneous." In letters written as early as 1850, she hints that such

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[1]Leyda prints three passages the poet marked in her second copy of Browning's work (II: 338). See, too, the work done by Jack Capps on Dickinson's reading (84-86 *passim*).

was the case. As she explains in 1855, it is "as" her "fingers fly" that the insight about the "far more wondrous Shuttle" "steals over" her. In 1859, she makes a similar declaration. In writing to her cousin Louise Norcross, she notes that she has been sewing by the window. Outside, the snow is falling, "quite a fairy morning," as Dickinson describes it. She announces, too: "I often lay down my needle, and 'build a castle in the air'" (L 199). Once again it is "as" she is involved with the repetitive movements of sewing that she experiences the "Lassitudes of Contemplation." The letter intimates that "Behind the wall of sense," Emily Dickinson built "castles."

Scholars have noted that Emily Dickinson's language--most focus especially on that in the canonical poetry--is laden with images of the domestic life. In her 1983 article, Sandra Gilbert examines particularly the appearance of culinary imagery. She argues cogently that "the mysteries of the kitchen, the view from the kitchen window, and the mysteries of art seem to have been *almost* inseparable" (*Nun* 38 emphasis added). The next step is to investigate the ways in which art and duties seem indeed to be inseparable. The letters of Emily Dickinson suggest that she approached her household work with the sensibilities of a poet. Because her "inner life informed the outer life," tasks were more than mere chores. They were the means by which she "built castles in the air." The

sensation was perhaps similar to the meditative state or the receptivity that the great mystics have sought. In some manner, the poet's subject/object relation to the duties at hand was disrupted. "Behind the wall of sense," Emily Dickinson achieved poetic vision while carrying out her work, and the result--articulated in the imagery of domestic cares--was self- expression. Quite often the poetry of her prose transforms the terminology of the household into a language of revelation. As such, to alter Aurora Leigh's comment, the "inner life" invested the "outer" with significance. In these domestic metaphors, Emily Dickinson reveals her wit, the general truths she perceived in diurnal tasks, her emotional life, and the poetic vision she experienced at home.

Domestic Duty, Symbolism and the Dickinson Household

Consciously or unconsciously, the Dickinson family seems to have valued the symbolic worth of domestic duty in ways similar to those put forth in the advice literature of the day. The poet's early complaint about "getting plenty" of domestic exercise hints at one of those ways. Evidently, Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson viewed household maintenance as a means of shaping children and inculcating certain values. In actively seeking the "best method" and the "best course of

instruction" for raising children, her father purchased one of the top-selling domestic manuals. In this guidebook, Lydia Maria Child argues that children should not be allowed to "romp away their existence." They should be "made useful" and taught "to consider every day lost in which some little thing has not been done to assist others" (3-4).

Emily Dickinson's correspondence reveals her saturation in nineteenth-century ideology. She is aware of acting in an "unholy" manner whenever she pursues activities that cause her to skimp on domestic duties, and she claims she "do[es] no good" when physically unable to work.[2] In accordance with the cultural dictate that home be made as cheerful as possible "so that brothers, husbands, and sons would not go elsewhere in search for a good time," Dickinson claims by 1850 that she attends to the culinary arts "from a desire to make everything pleasant for father, and Austin" (L 36).[3] She selects the same adjective ("pleasant") that her father used so often in the family's early manuscripts.[4] True to her desire "to make everything pleasant," Dickinson wrote to her brother almost weekly whenever he was away,

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[2]Although there are other examples, I quote specifically from letters 30 and 295. In the earlier one, Dickinson's tone suggests the possibility that she is repeating admonishment she has heard but does not yet accept. In the later text, the thirty-three-year-old woman seems genuinely distraught not to be of assistance.

[3]The domestic advice I quote here is from Welter's work (163).

[4]These letters are discussed in chapter four.

referring to such correspondence as her "precious ministrations" (L 62).

Her letters, in fact, document the work that each woman does for the men. For instance, in October 1851, the poet informs her brother, "I have heeled the lamb's wool stockings, and now and then repaired some imperfections in the destined shirts--when you *wear* them, you must'nt forget these things" (L 53). Of Lavinia and Emily Norcross Dickinson, she writes in another letter, "Mother feels quite anxious to know about your *clothes*, washing, ironing, &c. Vinnie suggests in connection that she may sometimes occur to mind when you would like collars washed" (L 45). She speaks, too, of her mother's planning a special Sunday dinner for a visit Austin Dickinson was unable to make. She lists all the food their mother prepared, "thinking in her kind heart," Dickinson explains, "that you would be so hungry after your *long ride*" (L 141). The poet reports, too, in her correspondence on kindnesses done for Edward Dickinson that the women feel will "please him" (L 157). According to the poet's letters, the women in this household recognized the role they played in the men's lives. Emily Norcross Dickinson, the poet declares to her brother in an 1851 letter, sends "her love and your waistcoat, thinking you'll like the one, and quite likely *need* the other" (L 54). Household duties represent devotion--a devotion to making things

pleasant for the men, a task the poet calls "precious ministrations." Elizabeth Barrett Browning speaks of such acts, noting that men (that is, the patriarchy in general) often de-value or ignore such "precious ministrations." As Aurora Leigh also hints, for the poet the "outer life" could be "informed" by the "inner." For Emily Dickinson, "precious ministrations" could be the means for achieving empathy. An understanding of another--an essential part of the essence of poetry--is engendered in such actions.[5]

In many ways, domestic work also symbolized the women's devotion to each other because domesticity both established and then nurtured their bonds.[6] As the poet claims of her bed-ridden mother's

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[5]The lesson revealed here is the subject of chapter four.

[6]The point suggested here about female relationships and domesticity is akin to the central ideas of many important feminist studies of Emily Dickinson. Joanne Dobson, for instance, claims that "domesticity offered women [of Dickinson's day] a secure identity, a definition of who they were." She also argues that the poet's sense of self as a "private, domestic woman, sanctioned by the cultural ideal, most likely played a significant role in her increasing seclusion within the home and her decision not to publish," especially since, as Dobson argues, the "identity of professional writer" caused anxiety for the poet (41, 43). Wendy Martin, too, offers an insight on the poetry written by nineteenth-century women that is relevant. She writes, "Their poetry celebrates the life of this earth and demonstrates their commitment to nurturance rather than dominance." According to Martin, their poetry also "elaborates their vision of a loving community of women that forms the basis of a countertradition to the androcentric society in which they lived" (3). Likewise, in her study of Dickinson's place as a woman poet in a nineteenth-century community of women, Paula Bennett states, "Based on shared domestic values, especially the values of mutuality and nurturance, Dickinson's relationships with women sustained and protected her throughout her life" (*Woman* 14). Wendy Barker's argument concerning the poem "Through the dark sod" is also of interest. Since the poem portrays a flower's wrestling to feel the sun, while keeping its roots firmly in place, it can be read,

"little pleasures," the ill woman especially appreciates the "devotion of home," the care the poet and her sister give her (L 668).[7] Both Jane Nylander and Susan Strasser maintain, in fact, that home was the particular location of female bonding precisely because of the hours women spent working together over sewing projects or hot stoves and caring for other family members and for each other. Even if one or more of the women were absent, such studies show, domestic chores still connected them since they often thought about the absent one, tending to associate work with times spent together and specific tasks with certain women. Of course, such is the case also because one woman's absence meant more work for the others. From the early family manuscripts, there is evidence of a link between the Dickinson women, household maintenance, and the concern they felt for one another. For instance, when the thirteen-year-old poet was in mourning over the death of her girlhood friend Abby Wood and went to stay with relatives in Boston, both parents wrote letters that speak of domestic duty in a

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Barker suggests, as symbolic of the woman artist's position: the flower's use of the feminine (the ground) in order to tolerate and even enjoy the masculine (the sun) offers "metaphoric solutions to the problems posed by a severely dominant sunlight." As such, the poem articulates the strategies of female creativity (120-22 *passim*). Any empowerment suggested in the complex woman and domesticity means for some scholars, for example Ann Douglas, a false sense of power, ultimately delimiting and detrimental to women (and to priests, who also felt their power waning in post-Revolutionary War America).

[7]Although it is not clear, the poet may refer also to Margaret Maher.

special way. Not only does her mother write--something she neither cared for nor often had time for--she claims: "I leave all my affairs this morning to say a few words to you" (Leyda I: 86). In such notes, she mentions that she leaves her duties because, as she claims, "I know you will be glad to hear from us" (Leyda I: 86). In another letter, Emily Norcross Dickinson seems especially concerned with reassuring her older daughter that the younger sister is doing fine without her, and she does so by speaking of the tasks the women share. She informs her daughter:

> Lavinia was quite feeble the morning you left us, but you will be happy to learn that she has improved quite fast. She is now able to assist me considerable, she is very kind and gets along better without you, than I thought she would. (Leyda I: 86)

These letters seem to hint at the formation of Emily Dickinson's empathic sensitivity. In her actions, Emily Norcross Dickinson acts as example: she thinks of others.

Despite the usual portrayal, Edward Dickinson also sensed this particular bond and comments in his letters on the younger sister's condition by reassuring the poet of her domestic accomplishments. In one, he assures his older daughter of her sister's ability to "take hold" quickly, to learn easily a new household task, even boasting that in

keeping house Lavinia Dickinson is "so independent, that she don't say a word about you. She means to brave it out" (Leyda I: 87). The parents' letters suggest both that Lavinia Dickinson at first could not work well without her sister and that they perceived their absent daughter's need to know the status of her younger sister. The letters are similar when Emily Norcross Dickinson was absent, although she left home almost as rarely as did the poet. In such cases, the daughters were the ones who apprehend what the mother needs. In their letters, they assure her that she should enjoy herself and not worry about their tending the house alone. Lavinia Dickinson writes, for example, "I'm very glad to have you so happy & hope you'll stay as long as you desire. We get along nicely with out you" (Bingham, *Home* 248). The poet comments any time her mother is absent on how "lonely" and "queer" it is for her not to be a part of the daily routine, and she, too, always takes time to mention that "we get along very well."[8] As these letters reveal, the patterns of domestic life were intimately linked in the women's minds with the place they played in it as a unit and their relationship to one another.

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[8]There are numerous examples. See, for instance, letter 132. See, too, another of Lavinia Dickinson's letters (*Home* 308). The Boston letters are particularly telling examples because they so clearly demonstrate Dickinson's concern about the women at home (L 289, 293, 295, 296, 302, 308, 309, and 311). The poet also often mentions working particularly hard so that Emily Norcross Dickinson can go for a carriage ride or a visit (see, for example, letter 135).

The poet's letters hint at yet another value that nineteenth-century ideology assigned to household work. Most women created all day. Unmade beds, raw foodstuffs, and dirty furniture were transformed into something neat, healthful, and shining. Such transformations are suggestive of art. From her investigations into nineteenth-century domesticity, Barbara Welter comes to the conclusion that the "proper management of the home was a surprisingly complex *art*" (165 emphasis added). Such a view is prevalent, too, in the contemporary literature. For instance, Lydia Maria Child maintains of the counsel in her domestic manual, "The true economy of housekeeping is simply the *art* of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing is lost" (3 emphasis added). And Catharine Beecher promises her readers that the advice she gives regarding domestic governance comes from those women "who are among the most *accomplished* in their sphere" (45 emphasis added). Manuals like Beecher's present individual household chores as artistic endeavors requiring intricate steps. Tending dishes was one domestic function that, according to the advice literature, demanded grace. Domestic economy had no room for women who were careless or artless with china. Setting the table properly was an art, especially because good housekeepers and those who appreciate good housekeepers "observe the manner in which a table is set, more than any thing else."

Such individuals find "few things . . . more annoying, than . . . a table askew" (Beecher 353). Mending and darning, too, are presented as requiring artistry. As Martha Dickinson Bianchi explains, "Darning a stocking was an art, the aim being to make the darn indistinguishable from the fabric" (*Face* 117).

Thus sanctioned by the prescriptive texts--and countless county fair awards committees--the nineteenth-century woman found that her household provided her the forum wherein she could function as a particular kind of artist. Emily Norcross Dickinson's butter was famous for being a "work of art" (Bianchi, *Face* 14). Lavinia Dickinson's letters are full of commentary regarding the "improvements" she makes in the home's decor, as well as her purchasing requests of hat racks and ottomans which she tended to inflict on Austin Dickinson while he lived in Boston.[9] The artistry of Susan Gilbert Dickinson's dinner parties was well known.[10] The poet herself frequently described the work of women

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[9]See, for example, Bingham's *Home* (234, 249-50, and 307).

[10]See Sewall's biography (91-127, 161-234). Susan Gilbert Dickinson recorded in her "Annals of the Evergreens" an insight about one of her dinner parties that suggests her awareness of the artistry of hosting. She writes, "Fresh asparagus, and salad from our own garden and hotbed, made an appetizing garnish . . . . Arbutus filled the center of the table, bright sunshine looked in at all the windows, as if eager to rival the sparkle of talk within" (Brose *at al* 12). Clearly, this woman felt her party a great success, the details of the artistry of the meal and the table and flower arrangements as important to record as the "sparkle" of conversation. Her "Annals of the Evergreens" is unpublished and is located at the Houghton Library, Harvard.

in terms that suggest artistry. For instance, she describes the common phenomenon of shipping a few things to her brother thus: "There were all your clothes in such beautiful order, and a cake of new maple sugar, and mother had with her own hand selected and polished the apples, she thought it would please you so" (L 118). In this letter, Dickinson underscores the fact that the missing clothes had been in "such beautiful order." They were in such a state, of course, because of the women's work, their efforts with washing pails, irons, and needle and thread, and because of their attention to detail, their care with selecting and polishing apples and their meticulous folding and packing. By writing about these things and taking time to describe them and the creative processes they signify, the poet communicates her estimate of the value of the women's artistry.[11] Miscellaneous things were not simply tossed into the valise. The women sent the items because they knew doing so would communicate to Austin Dickinson their devotion. Their attention to detail--to having clothes in "beautiful order" and fruit polished--suggests their devotion to domestic art.

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[11]Gertrude Reif Hughes comes to a similar conclusion in her reading of the canonical "Don't put up my Thread and Needle" (617). According to Hughes, Dickinson's reference to her poems as flowers and to herself as seamstress "suggests a female poetics in which processes and products of womanly work serve as metaphors for her poetry itself and for her attitudes to the conventions that prescribe and evaluate her daily life. By equating domestic activities with those of a poet, she implies that she values sewing and gardening as highly as poetry" (19).

"She sweeps with many-colored Brooms": Domestic Imagery

Emily Dickinson's manuscripts reveal the poet's awareness of the larger significance latent in the mundane, the "loaded" moments that await the poet's touch. An 1861 poem expresses such perception in the language of a special kind of domestic art:

> She sweeps with many-colored Brooms--
> And leaves the Shreds behind--
> Oh Housewife in the Evening West--
> Come back, and dust the Pond!
>
> You dropped a Purple Ravelling in--
> You dropped an Amber thread--
> And now you've littered all the East
> With Duds of Emerald!
>
> And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
> And still the Aprons fly,
> Till Brooms fade softly into stars--
> And then I come away-- (219)

At a time in the history of America when, as both Catharine Beecher and,

in our own century, Susan Strasser and Jane Nylander insist, most women were physically worn out early in their thirties from the work of maintaining a household, the thirty-year-old Dickinson copied into one of her self-published volumes a poem that expresses her insights about the creative powers and the stamina of the housewife. Her language, in fact, transforms the duties of sweeping, dusting, sewing, and doing laundry into art, the housewife into an artist. In this poetic transformation, the straws that the housewife's broom leaves behind and the colors she adds to her loom become the refracted lights that streak across clouds during certain sunsets. Dusting, sewing, and hanging up laundry lend images to represent the glistening of sun on leaves. Dickinson ends the poem with imagery that equates the sunset's fading with the cessation of the housewife's activity. Dickinson herself comes away only after the poetic experience dissipates.

In 1862, the poet recopied these lines, altering the final stanza before sending the poem to her sister-in-law. The revised stanza reads,

> And still She plies Her spotted thrift
>
> And still the scene prevails
>
> Till Dusk obstructs the Diligence--
>
> Or Contemplation fails.

The sunset imagery remains basically the same: its beauty wanes until it

fades completely. The last two lines are especially telling. The final line of the 1861 version seems to give the speaker's perspective, the one who "comes away" when she can no longer experience the housewife or the sunset. The perspective of the 1862 version is a little more ambiguous. She is the one who has thoughtfully observed the housewife and the sunset, or she is the housewife who has worked with "diligence" but can no longer see to do so. Regardless of the version, while the "Contemplation" continues, so does the beauty of the sunset, the art of the housewife.

This poem seems to speak of the poet herself. The creative powers of the "Housewife in the Evening West" belonged to Emily Dickinson. While residing in her home and performing her domestic duties, she was at the same time transforming broom strokes into the colors of the sunset, life into art. Clearly, she did so here in this fascicle poem: while her poetic experience--her "Contemplation" of the "Housewife"--lasts, so does the poem. Her letters hint that she did so often. Thus, she goes beyond cultural ideal. She not only recognized the prescriptive value of household work, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's character, her "inner life informed the outer." Ultimately, the sensibilities of the poet transformed domestic duty into poetic language, images that

suggest her involvement with household governance and that reveal her poetic insights.

Often this expression discloses her wit. In such instances, a letter enumerating the additional work the nineteen-year-old poet has to do also contains a line wherein Dickinson says of her complaining, "Out of a wicked heart cometh wicked words--let us sweep it out--and brush away the cob-webs" (L 30). Examples abound. For instance, several times, when speaking of her aunt Elizabeth ("Libbie") Dickinson, the poet turns to the household for language to describe a woman who was, according to the poet, "the only male relative on the female side" (L 473). In an 1863 letter, Dickinson defines "Aunt Libbie's" effect: "The trees stand 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" (L 286). Of a woman she has yet to meet, the poet informs a correspondent, "She looks a little tart, but Vinnie says makes excellent pies after one gets acquainted" (L 343).

Such witty appropriation also appears in notes wherein the poet is performing acts of domestic manners. For example, an 1851 gift enclosure to Elbridge Bowdoin sent with a lamp mat Dickinson made reveals the twenty-year-old artist's familiarity with the tools of weaving and her sense of humor. The note reads:

> I weave the Lamp of *Evening*--but fairer colors than *mine* are twined while stars are shining.
>
> I know of a shuttle swift--I know of a fairy gift--mat for the "Lamp of *Life*"--the little Bachelor's wife! (L 41)

Dickinson weaves a puzzle that Bowdoin must unravel in order to discover the meaning of the "fairer colors" and the "shuttle swift." She does so in a language profuse in the terminology of the very domestic task she performed to create the gift.

Such domestic manners notes are plentiful.[12] An extant prose fragment--evidently a gift enclosure, sent perhaps with one of the poet's signature leaf bouquets--reads: "I send you natures Mittens--they need a little mending[.] I could not match the Color here but you have wiser shelves--" (PF 38). This scrap garners imagery from Dickinson's particular duty of mending. Apparently, it came to her before she sat down with her ink stand to prepare a final draft, perhaps even while she sewed. An 1883 "thank-you" note is similar in approach. It reads:

> To have woven Wine so delightfully, one must almost have been a Drunkard one's-self--but that is the stealthy franchise of the demurest Lips. Drunkards of Summer are quite as frequent as Drunkards of Wine, and the Bee that comes

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[12]In fact, such notes are the subject of chapter four.

Home sober is the Butt of the Clover. (L 838)

It is doubtful that Emily Dickinson was the "Butt" of any domestic duty. She seems never to have missed the opportunity to imbibe in the language of household care.

Frequently, Dickinson's letters become loaded with domestic images as she articulates conventional wisdom, thus suggesting the manner in which her poetic sensibilities animated the things and activities of home. An 1872 letter to Louise Norcross, for example, speaks of the nature of love. The poet writes, "Affection is like bread, unnoticed till we starve, and then we dream of it, and sing of it, and paint it, when every urchin in the street has more than he can eat" (L 379). In this rather extensive simile, the poet compares affection to bread. On one level, the lines address a physical truth. As long as there is enough food ("bread"), the satisfaction of appetite is taken for granted. Emily Dickinson seems to suggest, too, that love that is consistently available is often taken for granted, its value realized only when it is taken away. An extant prose fragment also derives its imagery from the poet's efforts to nourish others. On this scrap of paper, the poet has written, "The appetite for silence is seldom an acquired taste" (PF 106). Here, a commonplace Dickinson perhaps learned through years of offering glasses of her home-made wine or other foods is appropriated in order to voice her insight

about human nature. She seems to have discovered over the years that not everyone finds solitude palatable. One is born with a taste for it.

Two notes to Susan Gilbert Dickinson are also telling. One written in 1874 begins simply with the words "Never mind dear" and then continues to an aphorism: "Trial as a Stimulus far exceeds Wine though it would hardly be prohibited as a Beverage" (L 428). Since these lines compose the entire note, context cannot be known. Whatever the particular "trial" was, the implication seems to be that affliction activates as much as does alcohol when it first enters the blood stream. For a poet who claimed that she often "sang off charnel steps," such evidently was indeed the case. Another provocative aphorism sent to Susan Gilbert Dickinson in 1880 reads, "Great Hungers feed themselves, but little Hungers ail in vain" (L 652). Although there is no context, the line seems to express a philosophy that those who truly want something will achieve it, while those who feel such a desire less intensely will do nothing to attain their goal. Coming from one woman who gave nourishment to family members who "clamored for food" to another, the imagery reveals, too, the general truths Dickinson perceived in her own domestic duties.

Although kitchen responsibilities seem most often to provide the poet with the language needed to express her insights--perhaps because she spent so much time attending to them--other chores lend imagery too.

In 1880, the poet sent a one-line note to her sister-in-law that reads, "A Spell cannot be tattered, and mended like a Coat--" (L 663). There is no context. Perhaps the "Spell" is the friendship the women share. If so, perhaps Dickinson declares that the "Spell" of friendship is not made of a material that can be torn, or torn and then repaired. Or, since Dickinson once in a while refused Susan Gilbert Dickinson's visits and invitations, it is possible the poet offers another explanation. The "Spell" or enraptured states she experienced at home could not be recreated if torn asunder. Perhaps she had declined the interruption a visit would cause and then wrote in explanation. Regardless of the context, the line exhibits the poet's recognizing in her duties of tending to the family's clothes an analogy for explaining the nature of "Spells." Their fabric is such that needles and thread cannot restore.

"And still the Aprons fly": Revelations of Self

Some of the most telling domestic imagery appears in letters wherein Emily Dickinson expresses her emotional life. Such images reveal that the poet perceived in her household duties a poetic expression for the inner experience of life. Two of the most prevalent images seem to be those garnered from the poet's duties of tending to the home fires and of

nourishing others. "Getting the fires," as Dickinson called her early-morning duty, was certainly one of the most important tasks of her "department" because the stoves provided both heat and nourishment. In fact, because cooking was the central daily activity of the nineteenth-century home, the lives of women especially were determined in many ways by their fireplaces and stoves, in cold weather and warm. As Susan Strasser explains, women's "lives revolved around their work and around the fireplace or stove" (47). The home fires, then, were an intimate part of the domestic duties that shaped the lives of nineteenth-century women. They were also an important aspect of the intimacy of family life. As both Strasser and Jane Nylander argue, the fireplace and the stove acted as centripetal forces in the home, drawing the family into a central area, a function that intensified during cold seasons. Of course, the fires meant work, too. In her discussion of the nineteenth-century woman's "most time-consuming" duty, Millicent Todd Bingham points out that the fireplace and stove occupied so much of women's lives not only because they were the means of cooking and the source of heat but also because the fires themselves were so much work to maintain. Constant attention was needed because the fires were affected by so many forces beyond the control of the woman--wind movement, for example, the hardness and dryness of the wood, and what Bingham refers to as other

"atmospheric vagaries" such as humidity. In essence, Bingham claims, "the management of the fire was a constant worry" for the nineteenth-century woman (*Home* 114).

Emily Dickinson was responsible at least during the early to mid 1850s for stoking the fires in the mornings.[13] As one of the household cooks, she also had to maintain them. At night and during the cold months, she sat close by the fire to sew and write.[14] Especially during the 1850s, the poet's letters evince her immersion in an environment in which the home fires played a pivotal role. They reveal, too, her conceiving in the fires a means of expressing personal truths.[15] In some

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[13]Especially with regard to this duty, once Dickinson is no longer recording for her brother the day's "usual" events, documentation regarding her participation in household duties occurs less frequently. It is certainly possible that Margaret O'Brien and Margaret Maher, in her turn, took over this duty from the poet in the mid to late 1850s. Such would perhaps explain the decrease in imagery of the home fires in letters written after this period. Also, with the move to the Homestead, it appears the family enjoyed the comforts of having stoves in the bedrooms, making the entire house more comfortable. Such a change could also factor in the amount of this kind of imagery. As Carol Birtwistle, curator of the Dickinson Homestead, has explained to me, assumptions about the number of fireplaces and stoves in the home can only be guesswork. Tenants and renovations make precise dating difficult. See the works of Mudge and Longsworth for photographs of the original Franklin stove from the poet's bedroom (90 and 130, respectively). Also, Mudge reprints the 1915 floor plan which designates the location of fireplaces at that date.

[14]The fireplace was, in fact, used by all members of a family as a source of light. Note that the very domestic manual owned by the Dickinson family warns not to read by "too dazzling a light" such as an oil lamp would provide (Child 88).

[15]Mudge offers a relevant insight regarding this kind of imagery in her examination of Dickinson's "inscape." Specifically, she argues that the poet associated certain areas with particular people, for example the hearth and garden with Austin Dickinson and the front door stoop (on Pleasant Street) with her future sister-in-law (48-66). Cynthia Griffin Wolff

of the earliest extant letters, she seems especially to be aware of an analogy between security and the home fires (L 22). In a December 1851 letter to Austin Dickinson, she muses on the effect that a fire has on one's awareness of the comforts of home. She writes:

> you know there *are* winter mornings when the cold *without* only adds to the warmth *within*, and the more it snows and the harder it blows, brighter the fires blaze, and chirps more merrily the "cricket on the hearth." (L 65)

As Jane Nylander's work with contemporary diaries reveals, the woman whose responsibility it was to tend to the early-morning duty of stoking the fires bore the "worst impact of the cold winter mornings" (78). The fact that Dickinson's line becomes more and more intense suggests poetic vision. As she thinks of the "warmth" of the morning fire--something that, given her "department," she could particularly appreciate--her language falls into meter and rhyme. She recognizes the value of the fires. The line hints that beyond their importance to the physical welfare of the family, the home fires have an emotional effect that Dickinson perceives as shifting with the outside landscape. The colder it becomes, the warmer the fire feels. The fact that Dickinson quotes from the

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tenders the analysis that in many canonical poems, Dickinson "turn[s] a great many seemingly trivial routines of the home [she refers specifically to fire and heat] into signs of the simple dignity with which housewives mediate between the family and the hostilities of God's natural forces" (207).

popular maxim about the cricket manifests her knowledge that the culture at large recognized that force too.[16] In fact, to borrow Jane Nylander's terminology, many of the poet's letters image home as "a place where the fire never went out" (6).

Highly suggestive are the passages in the letters of the 1850s wherein Emily Dickinson's duties of tending the fires provide her with a language to express the intensities of love. For instance, in a letter to her close friends Josiah and Elizabeth Holland, Dickinson confesses that "it is cold tonight, but the thought of you [is] so warm, that I sit by it as a fireside, and am never cold any more." The poet wrote this note in the autumn of 1853, a time when her correspondence documents that she is the first one up in the morning to feed the fire and prepare breakfast and a time of year when summer's uncomfortable fires became fall's luxury. Thus, she focuses on the warmth of the fire. Because the line shows the poet as "never cold any more," its imagery also depicts Dickinson as one of the vestal virgins. She, too, tends a sacred fire that burns perpetually. Her altar, however, is not dedicated to Vesta but to love.

In this letter to the Hollands, the poet makes a declaration that provides a hint concerning the manner in which such poetic vision occurs.

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[16]As Jane Nylander points out, the kitchen fires of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century became one of the "domestic icons" of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century visual art and poetry (6).

She writes:

> If it wasn't for broad daylight, and cooking-stoves, and roosters, I'm afraid you would have occasion to smile at my letters often, but so sure as "this mortal" essays immortality, a crow from a neighboring farm-yard dissipates the illusion, and I am here again.

Apparently feeling she must explain this comment, Dickinson writes, "And what I mean is this--that I thought of you all last week, until the world grew rounder than it sometimes is, and I broke several dishes" (L 133). In these passages, the poet seems to explain how her tendency towards musing is punctuated by the interruptions of a duty-filled day, how "Brooms fade softly into stars." The ending, in fact, anticipates the closing lines of the 1861 "She sweeps with many-colored Brooms--." Once the poet's poetic revery--the "Lassitudes of Contemplation"--is interrupted, once she is "here again," "Brooms" and "illusions" fade.

The note to the Hollands claims that before being disturbed by the rooster, before her meditative state dissipated, Dickinson was "essaying immortality." Such a declaration underscores the spiritual nature of her busy day and also associates thinking of the Hollands--and writing down those thoughts--with "essaying immortality." What Dickinson implies but does not state is that her household work is also punctuated by her

"essays." Here is the duality of the poet's domesticity: an experience of the physical and spiritual worlds at once. Because she approached life at home as a poet, farm life is "Contemplation" punctuated by poetic insight, even if at times the former interrupts the "Diligence." Her musing about love, which she defines in this letter as a sacred act, occurs while she carries out her domestic duties (in this case, to the detriment of the Dickinson china).

A letter transcribed by Joseph Lyman also contains imagery of the home fires.[17] In this note, the poet apologizes to her absent friend for her delay in answering his correspondence. She promises him, "When you know that the fires never burned low on the hearth stone of remembrance you will forgive us" (Sewall, *Lyman* 52). The domestic manuals of the poet's day provide many hints for maintaining a fire so that it "never burns low." Besides the very real risk of death, there were inconveniences and less-threatening discomforts to worry about. As a contemporary diarist notes about the performance of chores in the nineteenth-century home, "plates set to drain in the process of dishwashing froze together" (Nylander 75). As one of three women

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[17]Because we have only Lyman's transcriptions, dates are based on guesswork. Lyman left New England in March 1851, and he spoke of the Dickinson family and their correspondence to him often in letters he wrote in the early and mid 1850s. For a history of this important figure and what appears to be his life-long friendship with the poet, see Sewall's collection of the Lyman manuscripts.

running a home, Dickinson made sure that the home fires never burned low. In fact, as the first woman to come into the kitchen in the mornings, she especially knew this concern. The note to Lyman demonstrates Dickinson's perceiving in such a vital duty a way to speak of her feelings for her friend. In this elemental, life-sustaining force, she apprehended a way to express her love.

Other letters contain similar language. For example, in 1859, the poet assures Catherine Scott Turner (Anthon) whom the poet met the previous autumn, "I remember you as fires begin" (L 209). And in December of 1859, she thanks Mary Bowles for a note, writing,

> You send sweet messages. Remembrance is more sweet than Robins in May orchards.
>
> I love to trust that round bright fires, some, braver then me, take my pilgrim name. (L 212)

Again, the poet focuses on the warmth of the fires and on love that continues unceasingly, that never burns low. Here, however, it is she who seems to be the "pilgrim" before the altar and her friend the one who tends the flame.

An 1858 letter evinces Dickinson's habit of expressing distress about a loved one in the same kind of imagery. In this letter, the poet claims that much has happened since she last spoke to the uncle with

whom she is corresponding. The second sentence becomes intense, metrical even as she describes the change: "Summers of bloom--and months of frost, and days of jingling bells, yet all the while this hand upon our fireside. Today has been so glad without, and yet so grieved within" (L 190). Dickinson does not explain this passage. Evidently, she refers to the continuation of her mother's critical condition.[18] Later in the letter, Dickinson speaks further concerning the warm spring weather, so it seems probable that her opening recounts--in metaphor--the months since she last spoke to her uncle. Summer ("Summers of bloom") and then winter ("months of frost" and "days of jingling [sleigh] bells") have passed. As is the case with the 1851 letter to her brother, Dickinson seems once again drawn to the contrast of "without" and "within." Despite the passage of time, Emily Norcross Dickinson remains ill; consequently, the household continues in a winter of grief. The poet's imagery reveals, then, that her mother's condition affects Dickinson's experience of "within" and "without." And she admits this feeling metaphorically with language she seems to believe will convey the nature and magnitude of her concern.

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[18]This reading of Dickinson's meaning when she states "this hand upon our fireside" is the conventionally accepted one. (See Johnson's footnote to the letter.) The poet frequently reported the family's health, and other biographical sources and manuscripts from this date (including notes written by the poet) suggest that she refers to Emily Norcross Dickinson, the only family member then gravely ill.

In expressing her emotional life, the poet often turns also to imagery from the duties of nourishing others. At a time when consuming a meal often immediately preceded the preparations for the next, the demands of the kitchen--tending the fires and also providing nourishment--shaped a woman's day. During the poet's life, Amherst homes were independent farms, the women on these farms actively involved in the production of the family's food, as well as the process of transforming those raw materials into meals. A partial listing of the work that faced the preparers in the Dickinson kitchen would include the following: hogs, chickens, and turkeys raised at home were slaughtered and then prepared by the women; fish from the market or creek had to be scaled or shelled and then cooked; home-grown fruits and vegetables were gathered and then transformed into a meal, made into wine and jellies, or canned (the latter two processes requiring such arduous tasks as four-in-the-morning currant picking and the seeding of grapes and figs); rye grown by the Dickinsons was transformed into breads and cakes (the Dickinsons took their grain to a mill); green coffee from Cutler's Dry Goods was roasted and ground; whole spices were shredded, and rough flour, also purchased at Cutler's, was sifted; eggs gathered from the barn were converted into meals or desserts; and cows raised on the property were milked, and that

milk was churned into butter or made into cheese.[19] Such backbreaking transformations were necessary in order to provide nourishment for the nineteenth-century family, a production arduous in itself and made more so because it took place in homes without running water and electricity.

Emily Dickinson's experience of such domestic activities seems to have been the setting of poetic insight. The result is a poetic language rich in domestic imagery gleaned from the duties of the kitchen. Like Dickinson's real-life responsibilities, such poetry continued throughout the poet's life. An 1858 note to Samuel Bowles is an early example. A portion of this note reads:

> I hope your cups are full. I hope your vintage is untouched. In such a porcelain life, one likes to be *sure* that all is well, lest one stumble upon one's hopes in a pile of broken crockery. (L 193)

The lines suggest the cooking and dish-handling realities of Emily Dickinson's life.[20] She nourished others. She often made homemade

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[19]For an understanding of the industrial changes occurring that would affect food preparation in the Dickinson home, see especially the studies by Nylander, Strasser, Buehr, and Bingham.

[20]A few critics mention such images. For example, Jean McClure Mudge argues that Dickinson's use of cup imagery in letters to Bowles signifies her romantic crises (176-87).

wine, which she stored in the cellar.[21] She was responsible for the Dickinson china--a duty so established that her niece mentions in passing that the china cabinet with its red shelves loaded down with the white and gold fine porcelain and the brilliant blue and white pattern of the everyday china was "a likely place to catch up with Aunt Emily for young or old" (Bianchi, *Face* 25).

The note to Bowles is difficult to explicate. The context makes it clear that the poet was both thanking him for a gift and asking for his health and for that of his family. Her tone throughout suggests that she knew that all was well and that she could safely close with a whimsical request that Bowles pass on her "Blessings" and her "kisses." Most importantly, the note manifests Dickinson's apprehension of her duties of nourishing others and handling fragile china as a means of expressing her concern for her friends. She wants Bowles completely satisfied--his cups full and "vintage" wine (perhaps a cellar full) undepleted. She speaks, too, of herself, her vision that life is fragile and exquisite and that the hopes she holds about friends are often shattered by the realities of so

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[21]I refer here specifically to the cellar at the Homestead. However, almost all homes at this time had a cellar for the storage of foods and beverages. It is probable that the Pleasant Street home had one as well, as it was so common. *Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet as Cook* reproduces pictures of the Homestead cellar cupboard and wine-cellar, as well as the Dickinsons' rose glass decanter set, silver serving tray, porcelain, and serving platter (Brose *et al* 8, 13, 19).

delicate an existence. For a poet in the habit of "essays into immortality," a crow from the barnyard can shatter the "illusion."

An 1861 letter to this same friend carries similar imagery. In it, Dickinson writes, "We offer you our cups--stintless--as to the Bee--the Lily, her new Liquors--" (L 229). According to her imagery, the poet wants to quench her friend's thirst. Again, she wants him satisfied. In yet another letter, Dickinson expresses her fears that she is at that time unable to give Bowles what he needs.[22] She writes, "I am so far from Land--To offer *you* the cup--it might some Sabbath come *my* turn--Of wine how solemn--full!" (L 247). Taken together, these two metaphoric passages add both sensuality and sacredness to Dickinson's poetic articulation of the analogy she sees between her duties of handling dishes and providing nourishment and her own feelings and needs with regard to friends. In the first passage, she creates a simile that reveals the connection she sees between the lily's willingness in giving its pollen and the pleasure she receives by being the one to give Bowles what he needs of nourishment. And in both passages, Dickinson portrays herself as being the one to offer and to fill Bowles' cup (versus the 1858 wish that Bowles' "cups are full," the responsibility of filling them given to no one in particular). Offering metaphorical cups was for Emily Dickinson a

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[22]The letter does not specify what it is Bowles needs.

means of nourishing, and as such, it recalls the central duties of her domestic day. Her letters ennoble such tasks because they reveal the poet's apprehension of the significance of the acts she performed. The fact that it will be a "Sabbath" when she will be able to offer Bowles a cup "Of wine how solemn--full!" suggests the poet's awareness of the sacredness that inheres in such an act. Nourishing others, especially with cups of wine, echoes the means by which Christians partake of the divine. The poet tenders both cup and wine, offerings both sensuous and sacred.

Emily Dickinson continued all her life to turn to duties of the kitchen for a vocabulary to express her emotional life. For instance, in empathizing with Louise Norcross's concern for the seemingly hopeless condition of an ill friend, the poet provides advice in an 1871 letter. She writes, "Go to the 'wine-press,' dear, and come back and say has the number altered" (L 360). Dickinson counsels her cousin to recall that from the weight of the press comes wine, not immediately perhaps, but ultimately. As she seems to imply in the 1874 aphorism about "Trial as a Stimulus," from the heaviness of burden an intoxicating yield is extracted. She appears to confess in the note to her cousin that because Edward Dickinson had been seriously ill the winter of 1870-71, she, too, has

known "terror." Evidently, Dickinson had been to the wine-press herself. She seems here to want to show another the way.

The poet also often expressed her emotional life through a language of specific food items--many are ones she prepared. For instance, a letter to Samuel Bowles comments on his 1875 visit, something he regularly did in August but in 1875 also did in Spring. The poet confesses in this missive, "It was so delicious to see you--a Peach before the time, it makes all seasons possible and Zones--a caprice" (L 438). Clearly, this passage recalls the extraordinary act of eating fruit out of season. For Emily Dickinson, such a luscious sensation becomes a way to articulate the unexpected pleasure of seeing her friend. Also, in Dickinson's imagery, the peach out of season and Bowles' surprise call alter the landscape of personal experience, as her mother's illness had placed a "hand upon our fireside." Imbibing in such startling delights as peaches and friends enhances "possibility." As the metaphors of this letter illustrate, the resultant "caprice" leads to poetry.[23]

Other examples of such imagery abound. An 1875 note to the Norcross cousins acts as a gift enclosure for a box of "lemon drops." According to Dickinson, "It is fair that the bonbons should change hands, you have so often fed me" (L 442). She then recalls specifically the

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[23]It is interesting to note that Dickinson once commented on poaching peaches and their tasting like "magic" (L 340).

cousins' kindness in 1864 and 1865 when she stayed with them while receiving eye treatment from her Boston optometrist. In this metaphoric passage, confection expresses devotion and gratitude. In an 1878 letter to Otis Lord, Dickinson images herself as the bread she so often baked, writing, "It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread." As the family member to prepare bread, Dickinson surely knew that crust develops from its more immediate contact with the heat of the oven, its function to protect the delicate inner dough as it bakes. Dickinson perceives in this transformative process that she herself performs a means of saying "No" to Lord. She, in fact, turns to this imagery right in the middle of an extensive meadow metaphor wherein she explains why she must say "No" to Lord's offer, which is unspecified in the letter.

Apparently, Emily Dickinson felt capable of explaining that she must keep the "Bars" to the "Stile" shut for Lord's own "sake." She can also assure him that when the time comes she will "lay you in the Moss." But when she needs words to explain what answering his "hunger" would do to her, she turns to her knowledge of bread baking. To describe a transformation within herself, the transformative domestic duty she performs offers a language, a language that also suggests the poet's apprehension of the sacredness inherent in such daily acts. Like the cup

she will one day give Samuel Bowles, the "Crust" which she would like to offer Lord is "divine." The letter speaks, then, of carefully preserving the facade--of bread and of woman--because it is holy. Conscious of the fact that her letter is sensuous and yet also "speak[s] of God," Dickinson justifies her prose by claiming that "Cupid taught Jehovah to many an untutored Mind" (L 562). For a woman with a poet's sensibility, from both the Old Testament God and bread-making comes a language of love.

A one-line 1880 note to Susan Gilbert Dickinson reveals similar imagery, garnered from everyday work to speak of the marvelous. The note reads, "'Thank you' ebbs between us, but the Basis of thank you, is sterling and fond--" (L 661). The family manuscripts show plainly that the two Dickinson households borrowed or shared from one kitchen to another. Here, the poet seems to speak of the futility of trying to keep up with the notes of appreciation for such reciprocity. The metaphor in this note suggests that Emily Dickinson recognized in the physical items of home a connection to this kind of gratitude, and a way to express such a feeling. Of all flatware, sterling is the most precious, as of all manners of lace-making, fond produces the most exquisite. This passage displays Dickinson's perception of the nature of the specific thankfulness the women felt for one another, the "basis" of which concerned the sharing of food and the borrowing of household items, perhaps, even sterling and

lace, the very items that Dickinson here appropriates for her imagery. By equating appreciation with sterling silver flatware and fond lace, Dickinson speaks also to the precious--and very real--nature of the women's dependency on one another and to her own involvement in the domestic processes these items represent.

"Housewife in the Evening West": Revelations of Poetic Experience

In Book V of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, the woman poet provides her aesthetics of poetic vision. According to her, the poet

> should have eyes
> To see near things as comprehensively
> As if afar they took their point of sight. (V.184-86)

For Aurora Leigh, the "commonplace" of everyday life is fit subject matter for the poet. She speaks specifically of history, the present's inability to see the things at hand as important, and turning instead to the monuments of the past. She seems to argue, too, that the poet is able to see as one perceives the individual undulations of a mountain range only at a distance. Such vision seems to have belonged to Emily Dickinson. Although she performed them everyday, was "near" them, Dickinson's eyes apprehended the rich patterns of diurnal domestic cares. And she

shares those revelations in letter after letter, in a language laden with domestic imagery. Such articulation makes manifest the poet's immersion in daily household activities--most prevalant are her duties of sewing and gardening--and the ways in which she saw "near things as comprehensively / As if afar."

The contemporary literature has much to say about sewing tasks in particular because more than any other duties, these lent themselves to what Beecher defines as the "disconnected" nature of the housekeeper's day. While breads baked, custards cooled, and guests chatted, or after a day's work, stitches could be taken. According to her letters, in her girlhood Emily Dickinson pursued "ladies fancy" sewing as the art to which she gave any spare moment.[24] And she admits, too, that clothing in need of repair cries out for her attention. Thus, her duty and her pleasure involved sewing. With regard to gardening, a partial list of the

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[24]Examples are everywhere in the earliest letters. See, for instance, letter 3 wherein the poet complains because she has no time for sewing. Several Dickinson scholars discuss sewing imagery in the canonical works. For instance, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Dickinson's use of both the metaphor of a spider's spinning its web and the more obvious sewing metaphors found in poems such as "Dont put up my Thread and Needle--" express ambiguity, are "simultaneously positive and negative." They also claim that Dickinson is a conscious literary artist who is anxious to communicate with the world is also fearful of doing so adequately in a male-dominated world. So, Gilbert and Gubar suggest, she turns to domestic imagery as a strategy (638-42). Barbara Clarke Mossberg offers readings of several sewing images. For instance, she sees the metaphor in "This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life" as the poet's juxtaposing "environmental catastrophe and feminine solutions" (29). See, too, the ideas of Gertrude Reif Hughes, noted earlier in this chapter.

plants and flowers grown at the Dickinson home provides some indication of the work required by the poet and, as is the case with sewing, the ways in which such involvement could easily spill over into poetic language.[25] Outside were nasturtiums, pansies, sweet peas, lilies of the valley, hyacinths, daffodils, marigolds, peony hedges, roses on arbors, honeysuckle and various other wild flowers, grapes, fruit trees (peach, cherry, plum, figs, and pear), an apple orchard, and a grain and vegetable garden. Although the flowers in the conservatory varied--especially since Dickinson and women in the neighborhood frequently shared bulbs and cuttings--the poet's main stand apparently consisted of carnations, crocuses, primroses, cape jasmine, heliotrope, jessamine bud, gilliflowers, mignonette, verbena, geraniums, fuschia, sweet alyssum, and several varieties of ferns.[26] The poet comments that she tends flowers and

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[25]As mentioned in chapter two, Dickinson was the primary care giver of the conservatory. The manuscripts indicate that she was also always involved with the outdoor garden, although she referred to it a few times as "Vinnie's garden." After her frequent mention in the early letters of assisting in picking the fruit, references to such duties become less frequent and more metaphoric. It is difficult to know how involved she was personally, though her interest never waned. She often notes when the yard men mow or pick fruits.

[26]I list the flowers only at the Homestead simply because there is little documentation extant on the Pleasant Street outdoor garden and since there was no conservatory there. With regard to Dickinson's conservatory flowers, Jean McClure Mudge has identified "cape jasmine" as gardenia (*Home* 148). Mudge also discusses the place the conservatory played in Dickinson's "inscape." For her, it is a "halfway house for Emily." It was, according to Mudge, "an arbitrary but appropriate setting for Emily's musings about theology, philosophy, and poetry" (145). Her work also gives details on the configuration of the conservatory and reproduces the one extant photograph of the Homestead before the conservatory was torn down (145-72). Another

houseplants when she "can be spared." Thus, like the fancy sewing she pursued as a young woman and the sewing duties she continued to perform, Emily Dickinson fit gardening around her other duties of meal preparation and housekeeping.

An April 1850 letter is an early example of the revelations the poet shared in a language rich with imagery from these duties. The nineteen-year-old Dickinson admits in this note to Jane Humphrey, "I have dared to do strange things--bold things, and have asked no advice from any, I have builded beautiful temples, yet do not think I am wrong" (Leyda I: 173).[27] This confession has long been seen as Dickinson's coded notice that she is writing poetry--in three years she would announce to her brother that she had "been in the habit" of writing poetry. After her vague declaration to Humphrey, the poet quizzes her correspondent about her reading of the foregoing riddle:

> What do you weave from all these threads, for I know you

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scholar who gives extensive attention to flower imagery in Dickinson's canonical works is Paula Bennett. Although her *Woman Poet* is not concerned with the poet's domestic duties per se, she examines Dickinson's "almost mystical" response to nature. For Bennett, this response represents the ways in which Emily Dickinson turned away from patriarchal strictures and conceptualizations in searching for more female answers to life and time.

[27]I quote from Leyda instead of Johnson here because his is the preferred reading of several biographers. See, for example, Wolff's note on the rationale for quoting from Leyda on this letter (568 n.63). Johnson's reading is "I have heeded beautiful tempters" (L 35).

> hav'nt [sic] been idle the while I've been speaking to you, bring it nearer the window, and I will see, it's all wrong unless it has one gold thread in it, a long, big shining fibre which hides the others--and which will fade away into Heaven while you hold it, and from there come back to me. (L 35)

Dickinson appropriates the physical details of weaving and ladies' "fancy" work, embroidery perhaps, in order to speak of her poetry and of her realization of a connection between these two arts. With both, she seems to say, she can create beauty, a woven piece of art or a "temple." What appears especially to link these pursuits is the golden thread, an aspect of each art that inheres in the work. It is, in fact, sacred: such an element brings the two women together and into contact with "Heaven." The fact that Dickinson images Humphrey as examining her metaphoric hint as she would her needlework only intensifies the merging in this passage of the realities of domestic duty and poetic creation. The letter seems to imply that the tapestry that Dickinson weaves is in a hieroglyphics that another woman is likely to understand. She will know to "bring it nearer the window," to examine its rich patterns. Perhaps these "temples" are somewhat like the "castles" Dickinson mentioned to

her cousin in 1859. Both are "built in the air" by the poet while she works in her home.

Another letter of 1850, this one to Abiah Root, has also long been interpreted as one of the poet's early coded confessions of her career. She claims in metaphoric language: "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" (L 39).[28] The poet seems to indicate that letting "fancies blossom" is something she should not do, a comment reminiscent of her declaration to Humphrey that she is pursuing "bold things." Nevertheless, she seems willing to take the risk. The letter speaks, then, of an extraordinary path in the vocabulary of ordinary and culturally sanctioned feminine duty. It suggests, too, that Emily Dickinson envisioned a link between the process by which she propagated the family fruit trees and that by which she was nurturing her sensibilities. She seems to have wanted the "fancies"--a description perhaps of her meditative "Lassitudes"--to continue in profusion.

Dickinson's letters continue to show a blending of domestic duty and poetry until the poet's death. These passages hint at her recognition of the artistry of both the housewife and the poet. For example, in an

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[28]See Wolff's analysis of Dickinson's comments here. For Wolff, the poet refers to other females as "women" and as "growing up" when they choose the paths culturally sanctioned for them, especially conversion to Christ, marriage, and motherhood (178-200 *passim*).

1862 letter sent to accompany a flower for a woman who was a guest at the Commencement Tea Party, Dickinson writes, "You and I did'nt finish talking. Have you room for the sequel in your Vase?" She then provides Flynt with a version of her fascicle poem "All the letters I can write," the first lines of which continue the association articulated in the Root letter.[29] The poem begins thus:

> All the letters I could write,
>
> Were not fair as this--
>
> Syllables of Velvet--
>
> Sentences of Plush--
>
> Depths of Ruby, undrained-- (L 270)

Although Dickinson modestly denies in these lines that she can create as well as nature, she writes a note to Louise Norcross three years later that claims she can. She apologizes for the quality of the letter, insisting, "This is my letter--an ill and peevish thing, but when my eyes get well I'll send you thoughts like daises, and sentences could hold the bees" (L 301). She seems certain that when she is functioning as she ordinarily does--a condition that would include tending to housework--her letters are as bewitching as any flower in her garden. In fact, in making this

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[29]Because handwriting analysis establishes the date for both of these versions as circa 1862, there is no way to know which version she copied down first. It is possible, then, that the poem came to Dickinson as a way to express herself, to "finish talking," to Flynt.

declaration, she appropriates a metaphor gleaned from caring for the outdoor garden. Thus, as she voices this assertion, she creates poetry, "Syllables of Velvet" and "Sentences of Plush." In one letter, she allows the flower to represent her; in another, her words symbolize flowers. Again, there is a blending which seems to indicate Dickinson's apprehension of a connection between the sensation she has when she studies her flowers and when she considers her writing.

There is an extant prose fragment from the last decade which has long been considered a gift enclosure sent to accompany one of the poet's storm poems. Its language recalls the Humphrey letter written as much as two decades earlier. The scrap reads,

> I cannot tint in Carbon nor embroider Brass, but send you a home-spun rustic picture I certainly saw in (at) the [hight of the storm] terrific storm (awful storm). Please excuse my needlework-- (PF 28).[30]

Dickinson selects "carbon" and "brass," the colors and sounds of a thunderstorm, as she would chose yarns in order to craft an image that describes her creation--the process and the gift. The result is a metaphor that displays her recognition of a link between the art of sewing and of writing poetry. The enclosed gift seems to be another tapestry whose

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[30]The words in parentheses are Dickinson's variants; those in brackets are words she crossed out.

images will tell the story of the storm as the great Medieval tapestries do of epic battles and heroic feats. Dickinson's reference to the poem as embroidery and "home-spun" is an appropriation of more sewing imagery that points to the domestic nature of her artistic expression. Both her sewing and her writing take place in her home. The fact that the lines are in prose fragment form intensifies this relationship. The very nature of the scrap--its rough-draft state--suggests the possibility that it came to her suddenly as she functioned in the household. She hurriedly jotted down the insight with the paper and the imagery nearest at hand.[31]

Perhaps Emily Dickinson even set down her mending work in order to jot these lines down, as she claims to do often in letters. Of course, there is no way of knowing if such were the case. Other letters, too, hint at the poet's participation in domestic duty as she experiences insight. In such correspondence, Emily Dickinson seems to share her experience of poetic vision, her "Lassitudes of Contemplation" which "beget a force," ultimately resulting in the letters themselves. For instance, in the summer 1858 letter that speaks of "the hand upon our fire side," Dickinson shares

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[31]Although this prose fragment exists on a sheet of paper, versus, say, the back of a grocer's bag, it is an example of what Johnson designates "ED's unformed, worksheet jottings." She did write in ink the name "Thomas Niles," but the remainder is in pencil, as is the pencil draft of a letter to Thomas Higginson which is on the verso. Thomas Niles received a letter from the poet in March 1883, with a copy of "It sifts from Leaden Sieves," which she referred to as "chill gift" and "the Snow." There are no similarities between that letter and this prose fragment. If this scrap were created as a cover letter to her gift of "It sifts from Leaden Sieves," she must have decided against sending it.

with her uncle sensations that recall those expressed in "The farthest Thunder that I heard." A portion of this letter reads:

> I would you saw what I can see, and imbibed this music. The day went down, long time ago, and still a simple choir bear the canto on.
>
> I dont know who it is, that sings, nor *did* I, would I tell!
>
> God gives us many cups. Perhaps you will come to Amherst, before the wassail's done. Our man has mown today, and as he plied his scythe, I thought of *other* mowings, and garners far from here. (L 190)

This letter was written at night ("Friday night"), as were most final-draft letters not composed between duties or during the quiet of the afternoon. Dickinson was intensely involved in domestic duty in the 1850s. Her description here suggests that she was working near a window, perhaps the one in the sink room from which she seems often to have peered, as even the neighbors recalled. She was frequently seen "standing in rapt attention" at the kitchen window (Jenkins 37). As in the 1855 "as my fingers fly" letter, the passage recounts an experience that happened prior to the letter-writing process, that seems to have happened as she went about her daily tasks, perhaps even as she washed or dried dishes. What is clear is that "as" the man "plied his scythe," she came to insight, and

she shares that revelation in a letter containing imagery of the domestic life.

In the summer 1858 "I hope your cups are full" letter to Samuel Bowles, Dickinson writes:

> The men are mowing the second Hay. The cocks are smaller than the first, and spicier.
>
> I would distill a cup, and bear to all my friends, drinking to her no more astir, by beck, or burn, or moor! (L 193)[32]

Although the poet does not date this note, she tells Bowles "Good night." So, again she is writing at the end of the day and recalling her experience of hearing the mowing. In the letter to her uncle, her cup imagery comes before her recounting of the experience of the mower. Here, the sensation both follows and immediately precedes a poetic line, one that is metaphoric and metrically charged. She is repeatedly connecting domestic imagery with a poetic vision she experienced while functioning in her home.

There is extant a prose fragment that also speaks to the revelation recorded in these two letters, although it lacks the cup imagery. The writing has been stricken but is still decipherable, and on the verso is the hastily written canonical "Back from the cordial Grave I drag thee"

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[32]Johnson extracted the prose line "I would distill . . . or moor!" and created canonical poem number 16.

(1625). The crossed out scrap reads, "The mower is tuning his scythe" (PF 112). A domestic manual such as Child's recommends that housekeepers "preserve the backs of old letters" and other used bits of paper because they could be put to other uses (Child 15). Simply Dickinson's habit of using each side of this paper suggests the poet's immersion in household matters: she was a frugal housekeeper.

Handwriting analysis determines the prose fragment as an example of the poet's hurriedly jotted writing. The last manuscript extant which reports the sound of the mower seems to have been jotted down just as it occurred to the poet in the midst of her day. The other two documents were written months apart at a time when documentation makes it impossible to deny her deep involvement in housekeeping. All reveal that in listening to the scythe, Emily Dickinson experienced something beyond what was perceptible to the ear. With regard to the prose fragment, merely the selection of the verb "tune" suggests Dickinson's poetic experience of what she heard and recalls the poet's lines about "imbibing music" and the "choir" that "bears the canto on." She heard not the common sound of a scythe but the tuning of a musical instrument. In the letter to her uncle, Dickinson specifically notes that "as" the man "plied his scythe" a revelation came to her about "other garners." Her note to Bowles falls into metrical metaphor. Taken together, these manuscripts

establish the poet's habit of going about her daily tasks and experiencing poetic insight, the meditative moment wherein the sound of a mower triggers poetic transformation. The language in which Emily Dickinson expresses such instances is charged with rhythm and with the imagery of daily chores.

Other such letters exist. Three written in the 1860s and 70s speak to the poet's approach to gardening and to the articulation of her revelations. In an August 1861 letter to Mary Bowles, the poet reports, "I've got a Geranium like a Sultana--and when the Hummingbirds come down--Geranium and I shut our eyes--and go far away--" (L 235). This line follows a rather commonplace question that asks Bowles how her garden grows. The poet apparently provides this sensual simile as a way of answering the question with regard to her own garden.[33] However, the passage intimates more than the status of her geranium. It announces that while tending to gardening duties, Emily Dickinson is receptive to transport, the enraptured, contemplative moment where the subject/object relationship breaks down and the poet apprehends a link between herself and another. Here that other is a "Geranium like a Sultana." Dickinson thus provides a report on ordinary everyday duties in

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[33]The evidence is extensive that the poet kept geraniums in her conservatory. The hummingbirds are either part of her metaphor or she refers to the outdoor garden.

language that intimates the extraordinary experience of enrapture.

Often when Emily Dickinson mentions the flowers that she tends, she provides a personal history of her sensation of an enraptured state. For instance, an 1873 letter to the Norcrosses communicates Dickinson's empathic relationship with flowers. She writes, "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). The line expresses the nature of both flowers and spiritual receptivity. The "career" of both is the progression, or transport, from bulb to bloom to "faded" blossom to bloom again. Although the flower cannot articulate its ecstasy, the poet can; in fact, she does so in a language that reflects her "Contemplation" of flowers.

In an 1876 letter to Thomas Higginson, the poet commends her friend on the publication of his first book *Outdoor Papers* (1863), which Dickinson seems to have read recently. In this collection are essays on flowers. Evidently commenting specifically on one of those, she writes, "I had long heard of an Orchis before I found one, when a child, but the first clutch of the stem is as vivid now, as the Bog that bore it--so truthful is transport--" (L 458).[34] This passage recalls her experience of the "Crash

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[34]Note that Dickinson claims next, "Though inaudible to you, I have long thanked you." The syntax and punctuation make it unclear whether she refers in the first phrase ("though inaudible to you") to her "I had long heard" statement or to ones that follow. However, the claim at least hints at Higginson's failure

without a Sound." As is true of that first strike by the bolt, the poetic experience of the orchid is still vivid. As she claims in "The farthest Thunder that I heard," all other "gleams" are "concomitant." Poetic experiences like the one described there and in the geranium letter "deck" her days. As is the case with the "as my fingers fly" and scythe manuscripts, the poet apparently felt the need to share such experiences--and to share them in the language of the domestic life. All of these notes suggest that because she approached her household duties with the sensibility of a poet, Emily Dickinson was receptive to ecstasy, to moments so "truthful" they are vivid for decades to come.

The gardening letters document such moments, empathic instances wherein the poet apprehends something beyond the beautiful facade of the flowers. In that heightened state, she seems to recognize, in fact, something akin to her own sensations. The dilemma for the poet is to articulate what is so mystical, so evanescent even. As Rilke claims, "Most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered" (17). As the poet's letters reveal, a cock's crow could at any moment cause the enraptured state to dissipate. Visions could become a pile of broken crockery. A prose fragment from the poet's last decade reads:

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to hear everything Emily Dickinson shares with him, a topic to be discussed in chapter five.

We must travel abreast of Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse--

A something overtakes the mind--we do not hear it coming (PF 119)

Her letters show that Emily Dickinson's gardening provided this poet a language with which she could overcome the problem Rilke describes for his young correspondent: insights gathered from tending flowers could express "inexpressible" poetic revelations, the "something" that "overtakes the mind" while the poet performs her daily tasks. The result is a body of manuscripts which invest ordinary, daily activities with significance.

Two years before she died, Emily Dickinson once again turned to her duties of nourishing others in order to express that "something." In this March 1884 correspondence, Dickinson thanks the Norcross cousins for the note of comfort they sent after Otis Lord's death on March 13. Closing the letter, the poet writes, "Till the first friend dies, we think ecstasy impersonal, but then discover that he was the cup from which we drank it, itself as yet unknown" (L 891). When Emily Norcross Dickinson died, the poet confessed to apprehending the "Eternity" that "sweeps around me while I do my work." In 1880, she asked the cousins, "what is it instructs a hand . . . to impel shapes to eyes at a distance," adding

that "not a pencil in the street but has [the] awful power" to capture the "loaded" moments of life. In the letters containing garden and sewing imagery, Emily Dickinson conveys her perception of the immortality, the sacredness that infuses all actions and things. Her "ecstasy" is an enraptured instant wherein meanings are revealed. It is a time out of time, an experience of higher consciousness wherein she shares in the vitality of the sound of the scythe and the transport of her geraniums in her garden. In her contemplative enrapture, she sees past the physical facade of flower and sound to apprehend "other garners," the God who "gives us many cups," and the fact that the cup of ecstasy is one she drinks from daily.

Her letters reveal that it is as a poet involved in daily activities that Emily Dickinson recognizes this fact. On a snowy day in 1851, she sent flowers accompanied by a note to her childhood friend Emily Fowler (Ford), writing, "whatever word of love, or welcome kindly, you would extend to *me*, 'do even so to *them*.'" She points out that although the flowers she sends in her place are small, they are "*so* full of meaning, if they only mean the *half* of what I bid them" (L 61). Here, with her signature appropriation of Biblical quotation, Dickinson establishes the flowers as her representatives. In an 1873 letter to the Norcross cousins, the poet claims, "I open my window, and it fills the chamber with white

dirt. I think God must be dusting" (L 387). Perhaps Dickinson has opened her window(s) to "air" her bed. If so, it is possible her metaphor is drawn from the dust in the air that looks white when seen in the sunlight. Regardless of the literal referent for the "white dirt," Emily Dickinson here portrays God as performing the very duty she and countless other women perform. Her letter reveals a provocative transformation: she creates an image that turns God into a housewife, domestic duties into those performed by God.

In sending a gift of bulbs to a neighbor in 1875, the poet writes,

> That a pansy is transitive, is its only pang.
>
> This, precluding that, is indeed divine.
>
> Bringing you handfuls in prospective, thank you for the love. Many an angel, with its needle, toils beneath the snow. (L 435)

These lines also articulate Dickinson's vision of the housekeeper. Here, she is imaged as a flower: both toil, one with sewing needles and one with petals, before they are born again. The spring she died, Emily Dickinson asked in a thank-you note, "If we love Flowers, are we not 'born again' every Day . . . ?" (L 1037). Her domestic language reveals poetic experience. Flowers go in her place because they are "so full of meaning," signifying her own transport. White dirt is dust from God's

cleaning rag because the divine inheres in all moments. A pansy is an angel because its sensations seem to the poet to be neither completely earthly nor Heavenly. They are transport.

The 1884 note of appreciation sent to the Norcrosses signifies that Emily Dickinson once again became aware of the "cup"--not because it was gone and then returned. As she claims, there may be times when the "Dusk obstructs the Diligence-- / Or Contemplation fails," and thus the cup is "unknown." But then she "discovers" it was there all along. Over and over again, the extant letters suggest that such revelations nourished the woman poet Emily Dickinson. They seem indeed to be the cup from which this "Housewife in the Evening West" drank.

Conclusion

The prescriptive literature spoke of household work in a fashion that suggested its symbolic value. It transformed girls into "true" women. It functioned as a sedative. It promoted good health. It made the nation strong. It was art. For many women, such claims probably seemed far from their daily reality. The Dickinson family apparently accepted to some degree the values promoted by ideology. Household chores were ways to provide "precious ministrations." They also represented the women's

devotion to each other. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse poem, then, "the works of [the Dickinson] women are symbolical." To the poet in the family, such occupations became even more: as was true for Aurora Leigh, Emily Dickinson's "inner life informed the outer." In 1859, Dickinson copied into one of her fascicles a poem that begins with the following lines:

> Flowers--Well--if anybody
> Can the extasy define--
> Half a transport--half a trouble--
> With which flowers humble men. (137)

When Emily Dickinson claims in 1883 that "Work might be electric Rest / To those that Magic make--," she does not deny that she refers to "Work." Neither does she when she speaks of gardening in the 1859 canonical "Flowers--Well if anybody." Her flowers are "trouble"; they are "transport," too. They represent both "forced" work and "spontaneous." This poem evinces the poet's ability to see the essence of the things of everyday, to "see near things . . . comprehensively."

The letters of Emily Dickinson reveal that in such transport she came to poetry. The correspondence is laden with domestic imagery--images wherein the poet shares her inner experience of life. In 1853, she claims at the beginning of a post script, "my yarn is not quite spun" (L

108). In 1855, she offers her devotion to the Hollands by declaring, "I love to have the lamps shine on your evening table" (L 181). After Margaret O'Brien retired from her employ at the Dickinson house, her replacement yet unknown, the poet describes her discomfort thus: "I winced at her loss, because I was in the habit of her, and even a new rolling pin has an embarrassing element" (L 311). Dickinson refers to an unpleasant overnight guest as "the starch" (L 331). Her correspondence offers telling definitions: a "mutual plum" is a letter written to two people (L 321), a kind letter is "sweet as fern" (L 394), the effort to write less frequently is an attempt to "stem Nature" (L 487), the anticipation of a friend's visit is a "tomorrow" in the "cupboard" (L 860), to remember others is to "reserve an ottoman" in the heart for them (L 199; L 201), an autumnal yard is an "Everglades of Rugs" (L 951), and a butterfly is "an ell of rapture to an inch of Wing--" (L 723).

One of Martha Dickinson Bianchi's reminiscences offers insight to such poetic visions. She writes of days spent in the kitchen with her aunt:

> There was no greater delight than to watch Aunt Emily cook --"helping" her she called it. She was rather *precieuse* about it--using silver to stir with and glass to measure by. Her utensils were private, those exquisite moulds from which her

> wine-jelly slipped trembling without a blemish in the pattern of a rose or sheaf of wheat; and the round bread pans she used to ensure crust in baking her father's "daily bread" for which he asked each morning at Family Prayers. An imaginary line was drawn about all her "properties" which seemed to protect them against alien fingers--lent a difference in taste to the results she produced. Her technique was as precise as that of a musician playing scales. She never trusted to her imagination there--never gave herself a chance to get a quarter of a teaspoonful of Eternity in by mistake, as she gravely explained, though I caught a twinkle in her eye, when she was concocting that wine-flavored delight she called "Homestead Charlotte Russe." (*Face* 15)

Although Bianchi reads it as merely play, Dickinson's comment about the "Eternity" slipping into the custard is telling. The twinkle in the poet's eye reflects, perhaps, the awareness that for her such was possible. All her life, she nourished others. When she defines her inner experience of the outer world, she does so by insisting that "God gives us many cups." The letters of Emily Dickinson suggest that for her immortality could be an ingredient in a custard because it "swept" all around her "while" she

worked. Her tasks were half travail and half ecstasy. When she articulated her inner experience of life--her wit, her emotions, her insights, and the "something that overtakes" the mind--she did so in a language that reflects her outer life of household duty. Emily Dickinson's domestic imagery reveals her immersion in domestic work and her experience of transport.

Chapter 4

"the Staple of Heaven--here": The Woman Poet and the Lesson of Domestic Manners

In her lifetime, Emily Dickinson created hundreds of letters as notes of appreciation, as enclosures for gifts, and as expressions of comfort and condolence. In the last decade of her life alone, she composed approximately two hundred such missives. Some of the last letters she ever wrote, in fact, are of this nature. Most are rich with hauntingly eloquent and provocative lines. Some are metrical. An 1859 gift enclosure brags in perfect fourteener meter, "Many can boast a hollyhock, but few can bear a *rose*!" (L 203). Others reflect poetic insight, if not poetic meter. An 1872 note sent to cheer a convalescing friend praises her bravery, insisting that, "It is the Meek that Valor wear too mighty for the Bold" (L 377). An 1882 note of appreciation claims, "All we secure of Beauty is it's Evanescences--" (L 781). Some are laden with metaphor. A note sent to an ill neighbor includes the line, "Morning without you is a dwindled Dawn--quickend toward all celestial things by Crows I heard this Morning" (L 981). All of these letters are intimately connected with the domestic life because they are manifestations of the poet's duties, the performance of the tasks of domestic manners.

Although countless Dickinson scholars have in some fashion been drawn in their analyses to the poet's domestic manners, none has identified them as such, nor has anyone studied them specifically or the relationship between these duties and Emily Dickinson's gift of poetic insight. Some studies, George Whicher's for instance, portray Dickinson--or "Emily" as they usually call her--intimately, as though she were a family member, friend, or neighbor. No such study acknowledges that it is doing so, however. Cristanne Miller offers a description of Dickinson's canonical poetry that suggests a rationale for such intimate portrayals. She proposes that, "In the poems as in life, she [Dickinson] is oracularly chatty, a neighbor who invites you in, and then speaks to you elliptically from behind her closed door" (32).[1] Some readers feel, then, as though they have paid a call on the poet, although they may be unsure of the meaning of all that she has said. In his biography, Richard Sewall, too, hints at the poet's domestic manners by claiming that she was "extraordinarily sensitive to the vicissitudes, physical and spiritual" of those around her (145). He notes a perceptive tenderness.

What is needed is a study that pays particular attention to the manner in which Emily Dickinson functions as hostess or deals with the shifting physical and spiritual health of those around her. As is the case

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[1]For Miller, such actions function both to reveal and to conceal the "real" Emily Dickinson.

with the household duties such as tending to the dishes and gardening, her approach is both like and unlike other women's. Emily Dickinson's experience of the duties of domestic manners is that of a poet. The letters demonstrate that these responsibilities are in fact intimately connected with the growth of her poetic sensibility. They taught her poetic vision. Such notes suggest that in the very act of thanking and comforting, Emily Dickinson often experienced, to borrow her terms, the "Bolt" of sudden perception. When she did, the landscape illuminated for her was that of human nature. Ultimately, the correspondence reflects that through domestic manners the poet investigated the essence of human need and human love.

The Duties of the Domestic Manners

In her chapter entitled "Domestic Manners," Catharine Beecher defines such manners as benevolent actions in personal intercourse with others, actions by which we "endeavor to promote the comfort and enjoyment of others, and to avoid all that gives needless pain" (120). Domestic manners teach what Christ taught: selflessness, loving others as ourselves, and doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. Such is a learned behavior. Accordingly, Beecher's chapter prescribes

methods for achieving and maintaining good will. For Beecher, the importance of home in this training cannot be overemphasized. She is insistent: individuals learn domestic manners at home and early in life. Although the term may seem to imply that this charity is expected only in the household, it actually includes both a devotion to the home environment and to the family's relations within the larger community. As Beecher explains, "every man and every woman are under obligation to devote some portion of time to perpetuating and increasing family *and* neighborhood friendships, and to sustaining the various claims of domestic hospitality" (264 emphasis added).

Despite the inclusive nature of this remark, there is a clear sense in the literature that the burden of carrying out the duties of domestic manners fell especially on the women of the family. In illustrating such gender specification, Barbara Welter cites a popular mid-nineteenth-century essay entitled "The Domestic and Social Claims on Woman" that communicates the prevailing attitude that women are in some way especially well-suited to "promoting the comfort and enjoyment" of others, to "perpetuating and increasing family and neighborhood friendships," and to "sustaining the various claims of domestic hospitality." Quoting from the essay, Welter explains that for the nineteenth century, the "true dignity and beauty of the female character"

leads her to a "right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance" of domestic responsibility, including the duties of domestic manners (162). The women of the family were, Welter continues, "expected to dispense comfort and cheer," not only to family members but to neighbors and acquaintances (163).

Specifically, in order to fulfill such obligations beyond the home, daughters were taught to tend to the tasks of receiving and paying calls and of keeping up with the various necessary social correspondence. Especially important to domestic manners is the performance of "answering kindnesses." Beecher, in fact, reminds her readers that young people, daughters in particular, must be taught "always to acknowledge every act of kindness and attention, either by words or manner" (127). Equally important to "promoting comfort and enjoyment" and to "sustaining the various claims of domestic hospitality" was the work of comforting. The woman of Emily Dickinson's day was expected to act as nurse and to nurture others, tending to the physical and spiritual needs of those in her own home and in the community. As Barbara Welter points out, because women were regarded in the nineteenth century as inherently nurturing, they were considered particularly adept in the sick room. As she explains, "The sickroom called for the exercise of her [the true woman's] higher qualities of patience, mercy and gentleness as well

as for her housewifely arts. She could thus fulfill her dual feminine function--beauty and usefulness" (163). Intimately connected to her expertise in tending to those needing encouragement, the nineteenth-century woman was esteemed by the dominant ideology as especially proficient in consoling. This is so, Gertrude Reif Hughes argues, because woman was then perceived as possessing a "preternaturally emotive talent for responsiveness" (22). In fact, to assist the "true woman" in fulfilling the obligations of consolation, the markets were saturated with books to which she could turn for the appropriate poetic lines to include in her sympathy notes.[2] In essence, the contemporary prescriptive literature advised that in training girls to be "true women," a mother could no more ignore her daughter's dealings with family members and neighbors than she could her handling of a broom or dishcloth.

Domestic Manners and the Dickinson Household

Although we can never know for certain the extent to which Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson stressed them, there is evidence

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[2]Hughes also discusses Dickinson's relationship to this literature (22-25). As with her analysis of household duties, Hughes especially focuses on the poet's subversive tactics. Thus, although she sees some similarity between Dickinson's canonical death poems and those in the contemporary literature, for Hughes the poet's "departed drastically" (23).

that domestic manners were highly valued in the Dickinson household. First, what we know about the role these parents played in society strongly supports such a conjecture. As a prominent lawyer, the treasurer of Amherst college, a member of the General Court of Massachusetts, a United States congressman, and an active member in his church and town, Edward Dickinson was an important and respected figure in the Amherst community and beyond. He was nominated for such various posts as chairman of the local Cattle Show and lieutenant governor of the state. His home was a social magnet, drawing visits from other high ranking academic, judicial, and political figures. A listing of the family's closest friends includes judges, lawyers, editors, and preachers.[3] Along with being a devoted wife and mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson was what her times told her she should be, an excellent housekeeper and a gracious hostess and neighbor. She won awards for her home-crafted arts and edibles; she was often thanked publicly in local newspapers for her generosity; she orchestrated and hosted the annual Commencement Tea Party that for decades was considered the event of the year; she was a faithful member of her church; she often visited and did kindnesses for friends, those in need, and those less fortunate; and she managed what

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[3]At the time of Edward Dickinson's funeral, the Amherst business district closed down, and a crowd overflowed the house and had to sit in chairs on the lawn (Leyda II: 225-26; Binachi, *Face* 84).

was by all accounts a well-run household. The assumption of the importance of domestic manners to such people at such a time in New England's history is a valid one.

Moreover, many of the Dickinson manuscripts support this supposition. For example, as is the case concerning domestic education and household regulation, Edward Dickinson's letters often disclose his adherence to prescribed tenets of and methodologies relating to domestic manners. In a May 1826 letter, for instance, he pronounces his opinion that women should "cultivate . . . the graces of society," which he defines here as practicing benevolence, comforting the afflicted, "pour[ing] the balm of consolation into the spirit" of those needing it, and making the happiness of others of utmost importance (Pollak, *Parents* 16).[4] The letters written after he was married demonstrate that Edward Dickinson's convictions stayed the same, even when he dealt not in the ideals of courtship but in the realities of family life. In his almost daily correspondence during an absence in 1838, for example, he voices over and over again one particular piece of fatherly advice: the children should "always be kind & pleasant" (Leyda I: 41); they must be "pleasant to each other, & try to make it pleasant and happy at home" (Leyda I: 43). Clearly, Edward Dickinson wanted to teach his children domestic

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[4]See, too, the letters of 12 July 1826, 22 October 1826, and 27 January 1828 in Pollak's edition.

manners. Although she was not the oldest child, as the older girl, Emily Dickinson was reminded in such correspondence to "be pleasant to your little brother [who was actually her older brother] and sister and help all get along as pleasantly as you can" (Leyda I: 39). The burden was thus placed on her to lead the other children in domestic manners, to teach them to think of others--a function that is particularly telling with regard to a study of her letters.

Although less numerous than those written by her husband, Emily Norcross Dickinson's letters reveal a similar concern. When the poet visits in Boston in 1844, for example, her mother writes her absent daughter, briefly mentioning that she "trusts" that her thirteen-year-old daughter is helping run the house (Leyda I: 86). The very brevity of this reference suggests the faith Emily Norcross Dickinson had that, without being told to do so, her daughter would know that she should help the other women, that she should be not a burden but a comfort to them. The mother often encouraged her daughter to visit the ill and less fortunate, and she frequently prompted her to draft notes of appreciation, either to express the poet's own gratitude or, especially later in life, to voice the family's. In 1854, for instance, Emily Dickinson writes to thank her brother for making a dish drainer, noting in particular that "Mother said I must tell you" of her thankfulness (L 156). This last lesson was so

early and so deeply instilled, in fact, that throughout her life, the poet herself reminded others of their manners concerning letter writing.[5] With regard to social correspondence, she assumed her mother's role.

Family legend offers a humorous account that reflects both Emily Norcross Dickinson's dedication to the "claims of social hospitality" and her daughter's wit with respect to such zealous devotion. According to Martha Dickinson Bianchi's version of the story, one night when guests dropped in unexpectedly to spend the night, Emily Norcross Dickinson was quite "anxious for their every comfort." Perhaps because she had not regulated the house for guests, her attentions were apparently somewhat disorganized, and profuse. It seems she offered first this and then that. Evidently, the jumble of solicitations irritated the poet, and, as Bianchi recounts, she turned to her guest and "cried--'O Mrs. Holland, don't you want to hear me say the Lord's prayer? Shouldn't you like me to repeat the Declaration of Independence? Shan't I recite the Ten Commandments?'" (Leyda II: 482). Certainly, Emily Norcross Dickinson was concerned about domestic manners.

The daughter whom Edward Dickinson reminded so often to be "pleasant" and Emily Norcross Dickinson taught to helpful, appreciative,

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[5]One such early example is the letter written by the Dickinson children's aunt Elizabeth Dickinson to Austin and enclosed with the poet's 1 May 1842 letter to her brother (L 2).

and hospitable eventually grew to be reclusive. Yet she also became the family member to bear much of the burden of the Dickinsons' social correspondence, a significant aspect of domestic manners. In her youth and early twenties, Emily Dickinson fulfilled her responsibilities by paying and receiving calls. Although an obligation she often enjoyed, visiting had its challenges. The language of an 1850 letter suggests the nature of some of these calls. According to the note, those whom the nineteen-year old was advised to visit included "The halt--the lame--and the blind--the old--the infirm--the bed-ridden--and superannuated--the ugly, and disagreeable" (L 30). Even the gregarious Lavinia Dickinson often felt the demands of hosting inflicted upon the Dickinson women by the large number of callers received at the Dickinson home. After the railroad came through Amherst in 1853, the "flocks" of visitors became even more numerous and, worse, more unpredictable, each train possibly bringing more company to be fed and entertained. As the poet claims in a note to her brother regarding this situation, "we live in constant fear of some other visitation--" (L 128).[6]

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[6]Although she often did refer to herself in the third person, the context makes it clear that by the term "we" the poet means all of the Dickinson women, perhaps even Edward Dickinson. Martha Dickinson Bianchi mentions the crowds of callers at the poet's home and the burden placed on the women (*Face* 107). Bingham even entitles one of her chapters, "Costs of Hospitality" (*Home* 303-19).

Beginning with the 1855 move back to the Homestead and the serious decline of Emily Norcross Dickinson's health, two shifts occurred. The poet began more and more to refuse invitations to leave her home or to accept visitors, and she began to take over some of her mother's responsibilities. She fulfilled the obligations of social hospitality, not by paying and receiving calls as her sister continued to do, but by sending gifts and notes. After her father's death in 1874 and again after her mother's paralysis one year to the day later, the number of people with whom Emily Dickinson corresponded socially increased significantly as she became the Dickinson family member to assume the majority of social correspondence. Thus, although Emily Dickinson more and more limited the number of people she would visit or receive, she never refused her duty as the one to ensure the "perpetuation and increase of neighborhood friendships" and the "comfort and cheer" of those in her community. She remained accountable, approaching the obligations of domestic manners in her own unique way.

Domestic Manners and Poetic Expression

That Emily Dickinson took such responsibilities very seriously is evident in her manuscripts. Frustrated in 1881 because a letter meant to

comfort someone had not been taken to the post office, Emily Dickinson declares in a note, "I feel so punctual hearted I think I cannot wait" (L 687). In the same year, a gift arrived at the Homestead without an accompanying note. In describing how discombobulated she felt because she did not know whom to thank, the fifty-year-old poet insists in another letter, "Jacob versus Esau, was a trifle in Litigation, compared to the Skirmish in my Mind--" (L 743). These two reactions communicate the intensity with which this woman engaged in the duties of domestic manners. Many of the manuscripts written by people who knew the poet document not so much this urgency as the singularity with which Emily Dickinson approached her work of benevolence. Austin Dickinson comments on several occasions on the weekly letters written to him while he was absent from home, writing, for instance, "Emily's letters to me are . . . . always something I like to read--Vinnie pencils a line occasionally--generally when she happens to *want* something" (Leyda I: 218). To him, the older sister thinks of him, the younger of herself. Although they were often just what he wanted to hear, Emily Dickinson's letters to her brother evidently often caused consternation. He wanted "simpler" letters. He, in fact, mentions to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) in 1851 that he received "a sort of land of Canaan letter from Emily yesterday--but she was too high up to give me any of the monuments on earth" (Leyda I: 203). Lavinia

Dickinson read the letter to which her brother refers, responding, "Emilie has fed you on air so long, that I think a little 'sound common sense' perhaps wouldnt [sic] come amiss [--] *Plain english* you *know* such as Father likes" (Leyda I: 203). Clara Newman Turner, the poet's cousin, recalls Dickinson's efforts to express the family's appreciation for her attendance at the funeral of Emily Norcross Dickinson in 1882. In particular, Turner seems to remember the manner in which the poet thanked her. She writes, "On our way to the train, we stopped at the door just a moment and Emily, calling me *behind* the door, looking pale and worn with her anxious waiting and grief, said she just wanted to thank Mr. Turner and myself for coming so far 'to speak to Mother.' 'She cannot thank you herself today, you know, but some other day'" (Leyda II: 383-84). Turner's punctuation and emphasis suggest the singularity she found in this exhibition of gratitude.

Such accounts illustrate the nature of Emily Dickinson's approach to domestic manners: for her, such obligation was more than mere fulfillment of duty. The work of benevolence became a significant means of self-expression. In letters to her brother, she released her imaginative powers. In thanking her cousin, she disclosed her shyness. Often the self that was revealed was the poet. Although she did not always join them in the parlor, Emily Dickinson exhibited the "graces of society" and

"devoted time to sustaining the claims of social hospitality" in her own poetic way--often having gifts of glasses of wine or sherry, plates of home-baked cookies, flowers, or poems ready for or presented to visitors of the Homestead. One of Lavinia Dickinson's guests, for instance, recalls visiting in the 1880s and receiving "in the midst of luncheon" what she describes in her reminiscence as a "strange wonderful little poem lying on a bed of exquisite heartsease in a bow" (Leyda II: 322). An 1852 letter from the poet to her brother provides insight here. In this missive Dickinson speaks of her attentions to a sick friend. Specifically, she reports that when she is not actually with the sick friend she is "thinking of something to carry her" (L 71). Emily Dickinson did not send down a simple note to Lavinia Dickinson's guest welcoming her to the Homestead. She must have been in the back of the house or upstairs "thinking of something" to give her. Realizing she could place the poem on an "exquisite" arrangement of heartsease tied with a bow is an instance of sudden insight. It is a creative act, a poetic gesture, even.

The writer of an 1881 article in the *Christian Register* applauds Dickinson's creativity in presenting the poem "My country need not change her gown" with a homemade flag, "three bits of braid, red, white, and blue, pinned together with a thorn!" (Leyda II: 349). As a gift, Dickinson gave the canonical "The Dandelion's pallid Tube" accompanied

by a pressed dandelion tied with a scarlet ribbon (1519).[7] Clara Newman Turner tells of the poet's giving her nephew gifts by tucking them inside his boots and in the pockets of the clothing he accidentally left at the Homestead. She filled the boots with bouquets, and on the jacket pockets, she pinned notes, hinting to tiny gifts hidden inside (Leyda II: 481).[8] To Samuel Bowles the younger, Dickinson once sent flowers by early train with a note reading only, "Dawn and Dew my Bearers Be--" and signed "Ever, Butterfly" (L 1013). There are, in fact, few contemporary records of Emily Dickinson's giving gifts and notes that do not also provide extensive details about the presentation, whether it was a dead bee presented with a poem about a bee (L 712) or a tiny note rolled around the stem of a flower that had then been tucked into a large bouquet to which was attached a letter hinting about the hidden message.

MacGregor Jenkins writes extensively of his childhood memories of playing on the Dickinson grounds, the poet's domestic manners coloring much that he recalls. His 1930 *Emily Dickinson, Friend and Neighbor* is,

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[7]See Johnson's editorial note.

[8]Referring specifically to these forgotten boots and articles of clothing, Sandra Gilbert claims, "if boots can hold flowers and pockets can hide raisins, then it is no wonder that the flesh may be a word and words may be 'esoteric sips / Of the communion Wine' (1452)--sacramental signals of mysterious power and energy. It is no wonder, either, that such power is not to be found by questing through distances but instead is lodged 'at home,' in an ordinary bedroom" (*Nun* 39). For Gilbert, Dickinson's poetic gifts to her nephew are part of her mysterious, even mystical, creation of a "life/text."

in fact, a primary source of the poet's now-famous habit of lowering baskets of home-baked treats, raisins, flowers, and notes from her second-story window to the children playing below. Although Jenkins mentions Emily Dickinson's customary remembrance of neighborhood and village birthdays and miscellaneous anniversaries, he especially focuses on her goodwill toward children. He insists, "She wanted us to be happy, helped to make us so" (59). Like many contemporaries, he provides minute details about the gifts the poet frequently prepared for the children. He notes her habit of placing flowers or other decorative items on her small gingerbread cakes; of letting notes float down from her upper-story window; of lowering baskets filled with cookies or small cakes; of preparing elaborate bouquets for delivery. He provides the most direct comment on domestic manners when he declares of Emily Dickinson, "She always wanted to share" (123). In explaining her singular approach to such beneficence, Jenkins writes, "Miss Emily saw to it that her messages never came to us in a direct or conventional manner. This would have robbed them of half their significance and thrill. She was child enough to know that" (52).[9]

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[9]There is no doubt that Jenkins has an agenda. He is writing against the view that Dickinson was an embittered recluse, unconcerned with people or the world. However, his text offers many details that can be confirmed by other sources, including the poet's recipe for gingerbread. Some memories, such as his decision on one occasion to eat all the raisins the poet gave him at one time, simply do not seem to be the kinds one would fabricate.

Jenkins recalls, too, the poet's habit of observing and commenting on the children's punishments. For instance, in an August 1881 missive to Jenkins and his friends, the poet appropriates the language of an adult's verbal accusation: "Dear Boys--Please never grow up, which is 'far better'--Please never 'improve'--you are perfect now" (L 717). This note especially speaks to the reason the children adored the poet. Unlike the scolding adult who apparently knew the boys could act "far better" and thus advised them to "improve" their behavior, Emily Dickinson advises them always to experience life with child-like enthusiasm and honesty. Jenkins' vivid memories of the manner with which Dickinson presented gifts and notes reveals the creative way she approached domestic manners. He defines it as being "child enough" herself. Instead of the odd habits of a recluse, as some contemporaries viewed such acts, the presentations to Jenkins and his playmates communicate the poet's insights concerning the nature of children. Secret meetings at the back door or in the pantry, a slowly descending basket whose contents could for a while only be guessed were the perfect presentations for imaginative children who saw mystery in the everyday. For Dickinson, these gifts were more than mere raisins, notes, or cookies. They evoked the magic of a child's experience of life.

Like Jenkins, in her reminiscences Martha Dickinson Bianchi also vividly recalls her aunt's signature presentation of notes and gifts. Often, Bianchi relates, at the end of the work day a cardboard box would appear. Inside would be "three tiny frosted, heart-shaped cakes, or some of her [the poet's] chocolate caramels--with a flower on top, heliotrope, a red lily, or cape jasmine--and underneath always a note or a poem." Expounding on such deliveries, Bianchi claims: "No one loved to share as she [the poet] did. Fresh-laid eggs, young chickens roasted by Maggie, the cake or wine-jelly of her own making--all went the same path with a nosegay on top to bless them--Aunt Emily's own grace" (*Face* 9, 42). Bianchi's reminiscence is telling not only because it exemplifies yet again Emily Dickinson's "endeavoring to promote the comfort and enjoyment of others," but because it underscores the passion with which she approached such acts. As all of these reminiscences testify, the poet's engagement with domestic manners led her to what can only be described as a respect for a child's honest and receptive experience of the world, a state that she considered "perfect." There were, as the basket-lowering suggests, limitless ways that Dickinson found to "increase and perpetuate friendships" with children because they could so easily experience the poetry of her offerings.

Domestic Manners: "Answering Kindnesses"

This receptivity is evident not only in Emily Dickinson's approach to "promoting the comfort and enjoyment" of children but in all such acts. In fact, the poet often asked children who played in her yard to deliver gifts, "thank-you" notes, and letters of comfort and consolation to grown-ups in the neighborhood. Perhaps she did so because, as she claims in an 1883 note, "The ravenousness of fondness is best disclosed by children." This is so, she insists, because "the early spiritual influences about a child are more hallowing than we know." For Dickinson, "The angel begins in the morning in every human life"; thus, another way to grace a presentation was to have children "disclose" it (L 824). They could convey its passion. Moreover, the selection of children as couriers suggests that the poet perceived a special quality, a sacred element even, in the acts of giving and receiving. An 1858 fascicle poem points to this significance:

> It's all I have to bring today--
> This, and my heart beside--
> This, and my heart, and all the fields--
> And all the meadows wide--
> Be sure you count--sh'd I forget

Some one the sum could tell--

This, and my heart, and all the Bees

Which in the Clover dwell. (26)

The poem communicates Dickinson's apprehension of the essence of giving. Perhaps, as the lines seem to indicate, she was in the very act of conferring a present of flowers. What is clear is that Emily Dickinson investigated the nature of the act she so often performed. It seems, in the terms of tantric meditation, that as she engaged in the act of giving, the distinction between subject and object blurred. In the resultant higher consciousness, she shared in the vitality of offering. In that heightened empathic state, she perceived what it meant to give. The vision was poetry, words that speak of the essence of giving. "It's all I have to bring today--" suggests epiphany, the realization that although the gift is small, perhaps even a single flower, it signifies more than itself. The flower carries "This, and my heart, and all the Bees / Which in the Clover dwell." A gift shares its own beauty, but it also symbolizes the donor's love and something even beyond that, "all the meadows wide." As Bianchi's reminiscence about the tiny decorated cakes illustrates, a gift connotes grace. It is a manifestation of the ravenousness of fondness.

The poet seems to have experienced many such revelations--often, significantly, as she fulfilled her responsibilities of "answering

kindnesses." Emily Dickinson's letters of appreciation suggest that she frequently felt the "Eternity" that "sweeps around," not only "while" she worked with dishcloths or needles but as she performed the duties of domestic manners. She was a poet. She accepted gifts and tokens of tenderness as a poet. Thus, when she became engaged in expressing her own or her family's appreciation, she came into direct relation with the essence of giving and receiving. The landscape that was illuminated in such instants was the spirituality inherent in these acts. They are the reverberations of the ultimate acts of giving and receiving, those of Christ in the Christian mythos. In writing to the Galatians, Paul defines Christ as one "who gave himself for our sins" (1:4). In *Nature*, Emerson recommends that the person who would be a poet must have a mind open to the "influence" of all things. Dickinson's letters of appreciation indicate that her mind and soul often achieved the receptivity that the world's great poets, mystics, and meditative devotees strive for. They intimate that while she thanked, the moments of her day were transfigured by an apprehension of and a sharing in the universal patterns and the vitality of that act. In an experience of higher consciousness, the site of poetic vision, she apprehended Christ-like actions in human deeds. This is poetic insight. Even her nomenclature in these missives often reflects such poetry. In expressing gratitude to Elizabeth Holland, for

instance, candy is imaged as "Rose-colored Butterflies, threaded on a Stem--with Antlers of Green, and three Branches of Golden Rod, though not like the Field's" (L 743); on another occasion, it is "The lovely little Bronzes in the Lace House" (L 589). For sweets sent by relatives to Emily Norcross Dickinson, the poet thanks the donor for the "buttons of spice for coats of honey" (L 691). Indeed, there are few times when the gift itself is not transformed in the poet's metaphor-filled "thank-you" notes. Most frequently, Dickinson's insight is expressed in the form of an aphorism.

Representing the Dickinson household in 1871, the poet thanks neighbor Adelaide Hills for kindnesses done for Lavinia Dickinson and for herself.[10] In doing so, she perceives a connection between the hallowed nature of domestic manners and the sacredness inherent in everyday life. As Dickinson explains in this note, she thanks Hills for "the care of Vinnie and the delight you have given all in delighting her." Hills has "promoted the comfort and enjoyment" of others, and for that the poet expresses appreciation. Apparently, Hills also sent with the returning sister a gift for the poet, about which Dickinson admits that she "especially acknowledges the sweetness done [herself]." In Hills' generosity, especially the recollection which stimulated it, the poet sees a

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[10]Lavinia Dickinson had just returned from a visit to the Hills' winter home in New York.

blessedness. She writes, "To be remembered is next to being loved, and to be loved is Heaven, and is this quite Earth? I have never found it so" (L 361). These lines are rich with significance. In them, the poet reveals her apprehension of the meaning behind the acts Hills has performed. This is not "quite Earth" because Emily Dickinson apprehends the spirituality that invests such human deeds. In Hills' thinking of others, the poet senses reverberations of Christ's love, the love that, according to the Christian mythos, first made earth more like Heaven.

An 1878 letter sent to thank neighbor Eliza Stearns for candy sent to the Dickinson family also speaks of such sacredness. The note reads,

> The seraphic shame generosity causes is perhaps its most heavenly result.
>
> To make even Heaven more heavenly, is within the aim of us all.
>
> I was touched by the little fence dividing the devotions, though devotion should always wear a fence, to preempt its claim.
>
> Why the full heart is speechless, is one of the great wherefores. (L 572)

To "promote comfort and enjoyment" is to experience a little of Heaven here on earth--which, for the poet, is inherently sacred. When Dickinson

expresses this insight, she does so in metaphoric aphorism: "To make even Heaven more heavenly is within the aim of us all." Likewise, feeling the shy embarrassment, the "seraphic shame," of receiving a gift is a way of coming into touch with the hallowedness of earthly existence. Both acts transmute the daily into divine because they are selfless behaviors. Such is the essence of domestic manners; such is the nature of Christianity.

In this vision, even the dividers that separate the candies are transformed metaphorically, their significance illuminated. Giving candy is imaged as an act of worship (a "devotion") which one should seize in order to claim one's rights to the grace of giving. The gift itself is drawn here as a form of worship and a symbol of the dedication to the values of domestic manners. In declaring "To make even Heaven more heavenly, is within the aim of us all," Dickinson also comments on the ease with which one can fulfill the duty of giving delight. As it is within everyone's "aim" to tender confections, it is within everyone's aim to enact blessedness. The poet ends the letter by sharing her realization that finding oneself at a loss for words when confronted with such signs of benevolence is one of life's great mysteries and one of its great causes, its "wherefore." In its entirety, the lines suggest Emily Dickinson's receptive state. As she thanked, her "seraphic shame" brought her into

awareness of the sacred nature of human acts. And by writing down those perceptions, she ennobles her domestic manners duties because she captures in poetic words the hallowed nature of such everyday deeds.

Other letters suggest similar experiences of epiphany. For instance, another "thank-you" note to Adelaide Hills communicates Dickinson's perception that gifts symbolize the donor's remembering the person to whom the gift is given. In expressing the family's appreciation for Hills' yearly Christmas gift, the poet confesses in 1879,

> I think Heaven will not be as good as earth, unless it bring with it that sweet power to remember, which is the Staple of Heaven--here. How can we thank each other, when omnipotent?
>
> You, who endear our mortal Christmas, will perhaps assure us. (L 623)

These lines express Dickinson's realization that the principle, the "staple" or basic element, of the sacredness of everyday life is thinking of others. Such human action resounds with the reverberations of Christ-like deeds, thinking of others more than oneself. In the act of fulfilling her duty and "answering kindnesses," Dickinson steps into the universal current of a magnanimous influence. This is a mystical moment. The resultant metaphor suggests the dual nature of such moments as Emily Dickinson

experienced them. She was a woman poet concerned with staples--if the gift was a staple such as bread or roasting hens, gifts the poet is known to have given, she was concerned, too, with expressing gratitude for staples. As a poet, she was also occupied with perceiving sacredness. Ultimately, the letter asks which promotes more enjoyment, Heaven or the heaven we experience on earth by enacting kindness, by "endeavoring to promote the comfort and enjoyment" of others.

An 1884 letter to neighbor Sarah Cushing Tuckerman also focuses on the nature of those who remember others. Dickinson writes:

> 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 vail their faces," is not the sacred diffidence on this sweet behalf? (L 883)

The letter is rich in metaphor, Biblical allusion, and reference to Aesop's tales. The introductory quotation is from the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Christ cautions those assembled below to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7.5-20). The following lines are more ambiguous. Clearly, the

line from Matthew came to Dickinson when she received the box, but it is unclear if she opened a box of grapes and thus seized the connection to Biblical imagery or if she received roses and now transforms them in her metaphor in order to make a point. Regardless, the note acknowledges that as the Dickinson women opened their gift, even the "classic Fox" of Aesop's "sour grapes" tale hushed his veiled commentary. They found the present delectable. Whatever they really were (grapes or roses), "grapes" are transformed into sherbet, a fruit juice and water mixture of Eastern derivation that is often cooled with ice and carbonated with sparkling water.[11] More effervescent than the "sherbet," the note insists is the "Recollection." Tuckerman's act of remembering is the most brilliant element of the gift. This insight then stimulates the poet's apprehension of the nature of remembering. The aphorism insists that a friend recollects others; such action signifies "neither Heaven nor Earth." The deed is uniquely human ("neither Heaven"), but its significance removes it from the purely physical ("nor Earth"). By quoting next from the vision of Isaiah, the poet portrays such human behavior as being of such a magnanimous nature that it causes seraphim to blush.[12] The letter reveals that when Dickinson received Tuckerman's gift, she recalled

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[11]Although there is no recipe in Child's cookbook for sherbet, the OED shows British usage as early as the seventeenth century.

[12]See Isaiah (6.1-3).

the words of Christ, a classic Greek tale, and a prophet who recounts his vision of Heaven. Ultimately, it communicates her apprehension of the spirituality inherent in the act of giving, her recognition that such a deed is not a false prophet but a true glimmer of Christ-like action.

One extant note of appreciation exists in prose fragment, rough draft, and final form. It is an especially important sequence, first, because it, too, articulates Dickinson's perception of the spirituality inherent in giving and, second, because it chronicles the development of a kind of poetry. She writes in the 1877 final-draft note, also to Sarah Cushing Tuckerman:

> Accept my timid happiness. No Joy can be in vain, but adds to some bright total, whose Dwelling is unknown--
>
> The immortality of Flowers must enrich our own, and we certainly should resent a Redemption that excluded them--
>
> Was not the "Breath of fragrance" designed for your cheek solely?
>
> The fear that it was--crimsons my own--though to divide it's own Heaven is Heaven's highest Half. (L 528)

Again, Dickinson feels a shy happiness, the "seraphim's shame," the "archangels' diffidence." She has experienced timidity and wants Tuckerman to know why. No pleasure (no "joy"), she explains, bestowed

on another is without significance because all delight given to others is part of the sacredness of giving, the part of "Heaven--here" because such action is emblematic of the ultimate act of giving. The line beginning "The immortality of Flowers" deepens and clarifies the imagery of these first lines since it links gifts, especially the gift of flowers, with Heaven and the grace of Heaven. The line also suggests Dickinson's reaction to the flowers themselves, specifically, her seeing into their essence. Their process of death and rebirth typifies our own, so they are the perfect symbolic present because they remind us of our own "Redemption" and of the Heaven we experience here in processes of rebirth such as spring. The poet then asks if the bouquet were not, in fact, a gift for Tuckerman herself. The poet's belief, her "fear," that this is the case causes her to blush--"crimson" playing on Dickinson's blushing, on the comment about Tuckerman's cheek, and, perhaps, even on the color of the flowers. But this alarm also makes her that much more appreciative. In her alliterative, metaphoric last line, Dickinson equates both Tuckerman and her act with Heaven. The poet's mentioning the "immortality of Flowers" seems even more significant now: as gifts, flowers represent the spirituality inherent in giving and in the one who gives.

The penciled prose fragment version of this letter reads, "Accept my timid happiness--no Joy can be in vain but adds to some bright

(sweet) whose dwelling" (L 528n).[13] Apparently, a portion of the note intended to "answer" an act of kindness flashed into Dickinson's mind before she was able to sit down with her ink stand to compose the letter. The first sentiment was triggered perhaps by a note or verbal message wherein Tuckerman said something like, "this is a small gift but it will be a breath of fragrance in your home." In answer, the poet seems to have experienced an insight into the nature of all gifts. No selfless act such as this is small. Like the "loaded" moment that waits to "go off," giving to others is a part of the overall sacredness of everyday life. It, too, lies "loaded," waiting to be perceived. In the act of carrying out her domestic manners duties of "answering kindnesses," Emily Dickinson perceived that hallowedness because in her own reaction--"seraphic" and "archangel-like"--she, too, becomes part of this sacredness. Giving and receiving, her notes suggest, are both hallowed acts because they resonate the deeds of Christ. When Dickinson accepted a gift, she appears to have been acutely aware of the echo. The poetry of her language suggests, in fact, that she shared in the vitality of such universal reverberations.

When Emily Dickinson or her family received a note or gift, the poet seems to have probed deep into the meaning of the act. In that investigation, she apprehended the sacred nature of giving. As she claims

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[13]The word in parentheses is Dickinson's variant.

in yet another letter of appreciation, "To give delight is hallowed--perhaps the toil of Angels, whose avocations are concealed--" (L 769). The performance of the duties of domestic manners is the "toil of angels" because those deeds reflect that part of human nature which is heavenly. Her letters intimate, then, that in the grace of giving, human behavior mirrors Christ's deeds and admonitions. The Tuckerman letter for which there is extant a prose fragment indicates that the poet examined the nature of the gift too. This fragment recalls the 1858 canonical lines: a present itself may be small, all that the donor "has to bring today," but its symbolic nature is vast. Her notes of appreciation suggest that Emily Dickinson learned about the nature of giving in the act of receiving. In these letters there are areas that are emotionally charged, that seem flashes of insight that illuminate the significance of human deeds. As was true for Mother Julian of Norwich, the landscape that was illuminated in those revelations was love.

Domestic Manners: "Promoting Comfort"

An 1864 canonical poem speaks specifically of Emily Dickinson's duties of "promoting comfort" and "dispensing cheer," and although it is not considered one of her strongest, its theme is telling. The lines read

thus:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking

I shall not live in vain

If I can ease one Life the Aching

Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin

Unto his Nest again

I shall not live in Vain. (919)

In her thirty-third year, Emily Dickinson felt that a poem expressing her urgent desire to give succor to others should be included in her self-published volumes.

In her *Face to Face*, Martha Dickinson Bianchi touches on the poet's duties of easing "one Life the Aching." She writes, "Her sympathy with each one of us [in the family] was inexhaustible. My father went to her, just as we all did, for response to many moods" (40). In her lifetime, the poet wrote many comforting and consolatory notes in performance of her domestic routine, offering solace to those in her family, to neighbors, and, even, to strangers. As is the case with her approach to the tasks of "answering kindnesses," there is a sense of urgency in this correspondence. Early on, consoling others became important to Emily

Dickinson. To Jane Humphrey whose father was ill in 1850, the nineteen-year-old poet writes from her busy household, "It would be very precious to *me* to . . . be a strong arm you might lean on" (L 35). To her cousins in mourning in 1863, such longing is expressed thus: "When you have strength, tell us . . . what we may do for you, of comfort, or of service" (L 278). Of Susan Gilbert Dickinson's ill brother, she writes to her sister-in-law in 1884, "Love for your suffering Brother, whose I am each moment, could I in any way refresh him and for each in the loved Home--Tell me any service and my Heart is ready--" (L 949).

Some letters are quite cheery. To Samuel Bowles, then suffering from sciatica, the poet writes in 1861: "My little Balm might be *o'erlooked* by wiser eyes--you know--Have you tried the Breeze that swings the Sign--or the Hoof of the Dandelion? I own 'em--Wait for *mine*!" (L 241). She boasts that she can cure her friend, her metaphors perhaps recommending an outing in nature. Although the letter is light in spirit, it still suggests the approach of a poet. Specifically, in the act of "dispensing comfort and cheer," Dickinson appears to have come to poetry, not just to the poetic idea of a stroll in nature but to metrics reminiscent of her fourteener; to rhyme, "Sign, Dandelion, mine"; to alliteration, "Balm/Breezes" and "swings/Sign"; and to assonance, "o'erlooked/Hoof."

Although rarely as metrical, Emily Dickinson's letters sent to comfort others often contain passages that are heightened with passion and intensity. Like the notes composed to express appreciation, they are often comprised of aphorisms that intimate poetic vision. And what they reveal is that while performing such duties--thus, in the act of comforting--Dickinson investigated the nature of pain, need, and consolation. Again, her discoveries illustrate her belief that all moments await the poet's pencil to reveal their significance. At some point early in her life, comforting and consoling others became much more than a routine task dictated by society and parents. It offered lessons on human nature--on what it meant to hurt, what it meant to need comfort, and what it meant to offer succor. The duties of domestic manners taught Emily Dickinson the ability to experience as her own the feelings of others. In that regard, it was just as mystical as the reveries she fell into as she performed household chores. At this higher level of consciousness, the subject/object distinction blurred and Dickinson sensed the spirituality inherent in the configuration of consolation. Once again, she stepped into the sacred current of life and time, partaking of its vitality. In that passionate exchange, the materiality of the act she performed was transformed. The result was a passage that invests the ordinary with extraordinary significance. At some point, the domestic manners

responsibilities of comforting and consoling became an intimate part of her life's work as poet.

An 1870 letter to Elizabeth Holland especially reveals Emily Dickinson's investigations into the nature of pain, the stimulus of consolation. After pointing out that she had heard only recently of Holland's suffering, Dickinson admits that she is apprehensive because she fears her missive is late. She addresses this situation immediately, writing, "Our little Note was written several days ago, but delayed for Vinnie. Perhaps it's circumstance cease. Tears do not outgrow, however, so I venture sending." Dickinson's tone hints that she is genuinely concerned about failing to get the note mailed earlier. She understands pain and wants to show support for her friend. It seems in this heightened empathic state she came to poetic vision, which she utters in metaphoric language: "Landscapes reverence the Frost, though it's gripe be past" (L 351). Specifically, her aphorism speaks to the nature of pain. The line argues that pain alters the terrain of the soul, even if the one hurt experiences a little spring. In the fulfillment of the duty of domestic manners, of letting Holland know that the Dickinson family was thinking of her, the poet seizes a metaphor that speaks to the lingering effects of pain, a line that indicates, too, a state of empathy and insight.

Dickinson returns to this issue in 1873 as she attempts to comfort Francis Norcross. Here, she goes one step further. A portion of this letter reads: "I suppose the wild flowers encourage themselves in the dim woods, and the bird that is bruised limps to his house in silence, but we have human natures, and these are different" (L 385). The letter reveals that while engaged in the act of comforting, Emily Dickinson recognized an element particular to human nature that stimulates the need for comfort. An 1881 note brings together the insights of the 1870 and 1873 letters--and their relationship to the duties of domestic manners. In this note, also to Elizabeth Holland, recently widowed, the poet writes, "The hearts that never lean, must fall. To moan is justified" (L 742). The context indicates that Dickinson is afraid that Holland is so concerned with tending to and comforting others that she forgets to tend to herself. The poet's first aphorism attempts to remind her friend that everyone needs to seek comfort. Doing so is not weakness, the lines aver; on the contrary, failing to do so weakens, even fells, us. Dickinson claims in her second aphorism, "To moan is justified." The need to reveal pain is valid. If such behavior is justifiable, the same must be true for the one who listens to the moan.

An 1868 letter makes it clear that such is the case. And it hints that the second lesson the poet learned in her duties of domestic manners

concerns the essence of that very responsibility. In this letter to the Norcross cousins, Dickinson pleads with them to share their hardships with her, regardless of the fact that she, too, is troubled. She writes, "Tell us all the load. Amherst's little basket is never so full but it holds more. That's a basket's cause." Her metaphoric language continues as she insists, "Not a flake assaults my birds but it freezes me" (L 329). Thus in the midst of expressing concern for and a desire to comfort her cousins, Dickinson's prose becomes passionate, the lines garnering imagery from the domestic environment the three women know so well. The note expresses, too, Dickinson's perceiving all the Norcrosses' pain as important. She wants them to share all with her. Somewhere she has learned that pain is relative. Each flake that hits a bird is an assault to that particular bird. From this empathic state, she considers her own role. It is a "basket's cause" to hold "all the load." The domestic manuals designate as a woman's particular duty the "load" everyone else carries. According to these sources she must try to lighten such weight, regardless of her own burdens. In this letter, Dickinson accepts that function. She even creates a metaphor out of such obligation, transforming herself into a household item constructed to ease the burden of the domestic woman. The easing of another's pain at the expense of one's own echoes a source other than the domestic manuals. Such an

act is suggestive of Biblical mandate. In particular, Dickinson's note reveals that in carrying out her duties of domestic manners she learned to loved others as herself, and to do unto them as she would have had others do unto her.

An 1879 letter to Abigail Ingersoll Cooper investigates and discusses both the nature of need and those who give of themselves. Dickinson writes,

> It distressed us that you were pained--
>
> Are you easier now?
>
> You have sheltered our tears too often--that your's should fall unsolaced--
>
> Give us half the Thorn--then it will tear you less--To divulge itself is Sorrow's Right--never--its presumption. (L 606)

In creating a note to ease whatever trial the poet felt Cooper was experiencing (Cooper herself could not recall when asked by Mable Loomis Todd), Emily Dickinson came to an insight about the nature of "dispensing comfort and cheer." In this letter, she speaks first of the reciprocal aspect of consolation. She was comforted by Cooper and now wants to return the kindness, in other words, to do unto Cooper as Cooper has done unto her. The last line hints at yet another revelation wherein the poet apprehends the essence of her duty. She writes in this

aphorism: "To divulge itself is Sorrow's Right--never--its presumption." To share sorrow with others, to "divulge" sorrow, is a "right." As she did with Francis Norcross, Dickinson again validates need. Also, the fact that "divulging" is not presumption but justifiable desire is suggestive of domestic manners. The prescriptive literature told the nineteenth-century woman that there would always be those who needed her comfort and cheer. These duties taught Emily Dickinson to expect that others would turn to her. Clearly, she learned that lesson, investing it with significance by upholding the validity of domestic manners and by transforming them into poetic language that reveals the hallowed nature of such responsibility.

After suffering through her father's death in 1874, Dickinson spoke in her letters of comfort with particular acumen.[14] As representative of

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[14]Countless critics have discussed the significance death plays in the poet's canonical poetry, and in her life. None discuss it in relation to the poet's approach to domestic manners. A few who make points that add to my own are as follows. Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the metamorphoses going on at the time--and revealed in consolation literature--of God not as the Puritans depicted him but as a "Creature of caring, even motherly generosity." According to Wolff's work, Dickinson's condolence notes echo this "domesticated religion" (70, 260-70 *passim*). In her ***Woman Poet***, Paula Bennett also examines the phenomenon of the feminization of God and its relation to Emily Dickinson's canonical death poems. Ultimately, her analysis reveals the poet's critique of both the harshness of the Puritan ancestral theology and the ineffectiveness of the contemporary and more sentimental conception of God (51-83). Gertrude Reif Hughes examines the manner in which Dickinson's consolation writing "transcends" existing genre strictures for consolation literature. She comments particularly on the contemporary belief in the nineteenth-century woman's adeptness at handling the dying and death and on the fact that women were responsible for, one, the writing of condolence notes in a family and, two, the recounting of the death-bed scene if it were known, since at this time

the Dickinson family, the poet thanks Abigail Ingersoll Cooper, then a stranger to Dickinson, for her sympathy. In the letter, the poet articulates an insight that would resound in almost every consolation note she crafted after this date, and again it is constructed as an aphorism. She writes: "For the comprehension of Suffering One must ones Self have Suffered" (L 416). As Dickinson speaks of the need to answer Cooper's kindness in extending comfort, she sees into the nature of those who attend to such duty. Especially after experiencing a need for comforting, one is able to recognize that need in others. Emily Dickinson's letter reflects her apprehension of the reciprocal nature of domestic manners, and in this empathic moment, she creates passionate, insightful language.

An 1878 consolation letter to the widowed Martha Gilbert Smith shares another such revelation. Dickinson opens her letter with an aphorism: "A faithful 'I am sorry' will sometimes save the Heart--when every other Savior fails--" (L 577). This poetic line expresses Emily

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consolation literature had become much more "preoccupied not just with the last scenes and earthly resting places of the dead but with their celestial destination and doings" (63). If one knew the final moment, the theory argued, one would know the destination of the dead because only those who were saved could die peacefully. Hughes points out that Dickinson's letters which either related or requested information concerning final moments are in some ways like those of her contemporaries. In her essay on consolation in the writings of Emily Dickinson, Janet Buell maintains that the poet's canonical consolation poems show her "gradually relinquish[ing] her hectic questioning" about religious matters (326). Although I agree with Buell on this point, our view of the nature of the poet who sent these poems and notes differs. For Buell, Dickinson remained all her life cloaked in "virginal solitude," her main imaginative influences being male muses (326).

Dickinson's realization that when words are truly honest, they--even more than religion--can soothe because they are human deeds. Here is the poetic vision. The words of another person soothe because the one consoling shares the same human nature. It is those who have suffered themselves who comprehend suffering. Because Dickinson offers the "faithful 'I am sorry,'" she hints that she speaks from empathy. She feels she understands what Smith needs--perhaps because in fulfilling their duties of domestic manners, others have offered to her the "faithful 'I am sorry.'" This line recalls both Biblical as well as cultural admonition, although in Dickinson's language, it is more poetry than injunction.

An 1879 series of sympathy notes written to a mother whose infant died reflects the poet's struggle between the urgency to offer solace, the "Savior" and "faithful 'I am sorry,'" and her own empathic pain. In one of the first notes to Adelaide Hills, Dickinson writes only, "'Come unto me.' Beloved Commandment. The Darling obeyed" (L 595). These soothing lines reveal the poet's focus on the baby's gaining of immortality. They are celebratory. The baby seems only to have gone from one home to another. Dickinson immediately sent another note. This one observes that the child was not aware of its own mortality. But it also reveals the poet's musing about the finality of death and, thus, the unending nature of grief and the part consolation plays in such

endlessness. The note reads, "The power to console is not within corporeal reach--though its' attempt, is precious. To die before it feared to die, may have been a boon--" (L 596). These lines capture Dickinson's insights into this domestic duty. The aphorism offers the insight that although human empathy cannot erase loss, the attempt to comfort another with reminders of the blessing of death is a "precious" deed. Dickinson investigates the nature of the very act with which she is engaged. Out of her empathy, she proffers consolation.

Soon after, the poet drafted yet another note. She offers, "The only Balmless Wound is the departed Human Life we had learned to need. For that, even Immortality is a slow solace. All other Peace has many Roots and will spring again. With cheer from one who knows" (L 597). The closing line is especially telling because it reveals her capacity to experience as her own the feelings of another. The final note in the series opens with lines that reiterate the empathic nature of domestic manners. It begins, "We think of you and know you think of us." Again, the thinking of each other is precious. In the next line, Dickinson offers an insight which stems from an empathic state, a vision beautifully articulated as an aphorism. She promises Hills, "To come--from Heaven--is casual--but to return--eternal" (L 599). The line offers consoling vision. It claims that although the soul's journey to earthly form occurs at

uncertain times and is subject to chance, the return to the spiritual form, and to the heavenly home, is not contingent upon time relations. The words focus on the soul's immortal nature: it has existed prior to birth and will always. The baby but returns to the state from which it came, its residency for all time, the past and the future. In this two-line note, Dickinson offers both human love and eternal revelation.

This dual solace is more and more apparent in the 1880s. She reminds the widowed Elizabeth Holland in 1881 that "Heaven is but a little way to one who gave it, here" (L 729). In the act of consoling, Dickinson articulates a cause for celebrating. By focusing on the heavenly quality of Josiah Holland, the poet's letter emphasizes his proximity. She reminds Holland that her husband's empathy was emblematic of divine acts. Her line celebrates, too, the sacredness that infuses physical life. Josiah Holland, Dickinson insists, was always a part of Heaven. He was the "staple of Heaven--here." To the niece of the deceased Judge Otis Lord, Dickinson writes in August of 1885 yet another passionate line, one that reads like a toast to the departed, commending him on his success in attaining immortality. The complete line reads, "To him to whom Events and Omens are at last the same" (L 1006). While his physical life continued, immortality was omen. Now for Lord, eternity is "Event." Her

lines remind the niece that the "Eternity" that swept around Lord while he lived is even more intimate now.

Some of Emily Dickinson's most poignant and poetic consolatory lines are contained in sympathy notes sent to her sister-in-law when the poet's eight-year-old nephew died of typhoid fever in October 1883. In perhaps the most passionate of those she sent, the poet writes,

> The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled--
>
> How simply at the last the Fathom comes! The Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us--
>
> Gilbert rejoiced in Secrets--
>
> His Life was panting with them--With what menace of Light he cried "Dont tell, Aunt Emily"! Now my ascended Playmate must instruct *me*. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee!
>
> He knew no niggard moments--His Life was full of Boon--The Playthings of the Dervish were not so wild as his--
>
> No crescent was this Creature--He traveled from the Full--
>
> Such soar, but never set--
>
> I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies--His Life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy--

Dawn and meridian in one.

Wherefore would he wait, wronged only of Night, which he left for us--

Without a speculation, our little Ajax spans the whole-- (L 868).[15]

In the act of constructing a note meant to console, Emily Dickinson achieved insight. The fact that these apprehensions are articulated in poetics illuminates her experience of empathy--a state of higher consciousness, a place for vision and poetry. The entire letter is metrically charged. It also exhibits signature elements of the poet's canonical works: unorthodox rhymes, "knew" and "no" and "Dervish" and "his," for example; alliteration, "Knew no niggard," "such soar," and "were wild," for instance; consonance, such as the t's of "prattling preceptor"; and assonance, as in "full" and "boon." The poetics of this letter suggests the intensity of her pain. She experiences Susan Gilbert

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[15] Although in poor health, Dickinson had ventured over to the Evergreens to be with Gilbert as he lay dying, but she became nauseated at the smell of disinfectant and, thus, was in bed herself when he died early the following morning and she constructed this missive. This letter has drawn a great deal of critical attention. The study whose points are closest to my own is Brita Lindberg-Seyersted's *The Voice of the Poet*. Although she and I draw attention to several of the same poetic elements, the letter is not her focus and is, therefore, only briefly mentioned (20-21). In *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, William Shurr extracts most of the lines (he stops prior to "his Requiem ecstasy") to include in his edition of "new poems." Like Lindberg-Seyersted, he, too, discusses this letter's poetic nature, noting in particular that it begins with pentameters and then breaks into quatrains (41-42).

Dickinson's feelings as her own because, in part, her own were quite close in nature. The letter is more of a sharing than many of the others: she hurts deeply, with Susan Gilbert Dickinson, not only for her.

The lines are also celebratory consolation, a plethora of emotions and epiphanies the poet experienced when her nephew died. They voice the aunt's vision of the dual nature of her nephew's life and death. Specifically, Emily Dickinson's use of imagery that is both sacred and profane communicates a tribute to the essence of Gilbert's life, in particular to the sacredness the poet perceived in his passionate response to everyday life, his playfulness even. In fulfilling her duty to console, Dickinson seems to have attained revelation: she recognizes Gilbert's passions and ecstasies in all of life's vital occurrences and experiences. She sees his "sweet velocity in everything that flies." Once again, there is a bolt of insight, the landscape is illuminated, and Dickinson apprehends the "Eternity" that "sweeps around" her. The lines are rich also with imagery of light and darkness, again descriptive of poetic insight. As his passionate living consisted of a pure vision (a "Menace of Light") so, too, does his death, an existence "wronged" only of the obfuscation of adult vision and the darkness of doubt. In living ardently and fully, Gilbert was both "Dawn and Meridian," both the beginning and the point of strongest light or vision, the point of full splendor. His death simply grants him

even more scope since he now "Spans the whole." Thus, while Dickinson's lines reflect her own poetic vision, they celebrate, too, Gilbert's vantage.

In giving solace, Emily Dickinson investigated the nature of consolation, the nature of life and death, and the relationship among all three. To soothe is to emphasize the proximity of corporeal to the spiritual. As she claims in another note to her sister-in-law, "Intimacy with Mystery" eventually "usurps" the place of hopelessness (L 871). One becomes accustomed to having "Eternity" sweep around, to apprehending those who have died in the vitality and passion of all that is alive. The poet's culture told her to "dispense comfort and cheer" to those in need. For Dickinson, giving solace also seems to have been a gateway to poetic vision. Her letters suggest that as she gave such mandated relief, she experienced insights, many of which function in the correspondence as consolation, reminding those who ache that the missing ones are actually still near. Over and over again, the lines reveal Dickinson's examination of the performance of the duties of domestic manners. Specifically, while consoling, Emily Dickinson apprehended the validity of both the need to express pain and the need to give solace. Concerning the latter, the letters reveal her awareness that those who do not moan, fall. The notes reflect, too, her vision of the sacred nature of

providing comfort. She recognizes that human consolation cannot cancel loss. That kind of pain is "balmless." However, the "attempt" to help another is precious because it is a human act, empathic and yet emblematic. In an 1882 note to Adelaide Hills, thanking her for her kind acts after the death of Emily Norcross Dickinson, the poet again shares her perception concerning the essence of such domestic manners and those who enact them. She avows, "Even the simplest solace, with a loved aim, has a heavenly quality" (L 783). The line constitutes the entire note and perhaps especially addresses Hills' concern that her solace is "simple." Dickinson assures her neighbor of the spirituality of any solace lovingly given. The note reveals that Emily Dickinson perceived a sacredness in the everyday duties of domestic manners. To proffer succor is to tender a little "Heaven--here." It is to offer oneself. As Dickinson claims in an 1872 note,

> Only Love can wound--
>
> Only Love assist the Wound. (L 370)[16]

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[16]Dickinson indents each of these lines. They are located, in fact, in the midst of several one-line paragraphs. Johnson did not extract any of them for the canon.

Conclusion

It is significant that one of the most passionate and poetic of Dickinson's consolation letters celebrates the receptivity of a child. Such responsiveness seems always to have been a state Emily Dickinson found "perfect"; it was, certainly, a gift bestowed on the poet as well. Perhaps answering kindnesses and extending comfort and consolation seem to the twentieth-century reader to be acts of human kindness. And, indeed they are. It must be remembered, however, that kindness is learned in childhood. Children are instructed to "be nice," to say "thank you," to share toys. The situation was the same for the nineteenth-century child. The prescriptive advice detailed in contemporary domestic manuals merely gave such instruction a specific name that the twentieth century rarely uses. The extant manuscripts of Emily Dickinson suggest the extent to which such domestic manners were taught in her home, indeed that such instruction penetrated this poet's psyche. Clearly, she learned kindness. As the poet aged, she took on more and more of the duties that manifest such manners. It has been pointed out for decades that, as she aged, her fascicle poem production slowed. Dickinson's poetic skills were not, as David Higgins claims, "dried up" (59). The poetic state in which Emily Dickinson encountered domestic life and the intensity with which she

approached the duties of home produced literally hundreds of rich, passionate, often poetic, letters. Many of them were composed in the final decades of her life. Her artistry had not dried up; it was revealing itself in another medium.

Martha Dickinson Bianchi referred to her aunt's poetic presentation of gifts as "Aunt Emily's own *grace*," a term the poet uses in an extant prose fragment that reads, "As one noble Act makes a whole neighborhood tender with the new or forgotten Grace possible to each--" (PF 1). Perhaps "grace" is an accurate word, then, to define what Emily Dickinson found in the duties of domestic manners. In "answering kindnesses" done to her and sending notes of comfort and consolation, this poet experienced what she imaged as the bolt of sudden perception, the moment's "going off" like a loaded gun. She heard the universal reverberations of life because the acts of giving and receiving are the essence of spirituality. Ultimately, she discovered grace. What she perceived in that cosmic echo was the sacredness--the poetry too--of everyday experience because human deeds of love are often emblematic of Christ-like acts. In one letter she muses, "I often wonder how the love of Christ, is done--when that--below--holds--so" (L 262). In the act of performing the duties of domestic manners, Emily Dickinson operated

under the influence of divine love. She, in turn, investigated the nature of that sacred favor.

Emily Dickinson seems to be expressing as much in the "noble act" fragment. The influence of one noble act--one note drafted in appreciation of the kindness of another, or to express comfort, cheer, or consolation--can awaken an entire neighborhood to the potential for domestic manners, which symbolizes the grace in us all. In an 1878 note, Dickinson writes, "Till it has loved--no man or woman can become itself--Of our first Creation we are unconscious--" (L 575). Enacting domestic manners taught the poet love, and taught her about her own grace. The first creation is unknowable; yet, the shaping of the soul by domestic manners is illustrated in human acts of love. As she claims in her 1879 note to Adelaide Hills, such deeds are "the staple of Heaven--here." Domestic manners were something her parents and the dominant ideology taught the poet. Ultimately, they became for her a means of experiencing poetic epiphany. The lesson such responsibilities taught was the recognition of sacred acts in the human deeds of giving and receiving. In such a state of empathy, she saw the illumination of the landscape of human experience, her own revelations of the nature of love.

Chapter 5

"Diviner Crowd at Home": The Woman Poet and The Investigation of the Domestic Life

After his sisters' 1851 visit to his Boston boarding house, Austin Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) of the two country dwellers' experience of the city.[1] According to their brother, while the younger sister enjoyed "herself, as she always does among strangers," Emily Dickinson simply "became confirmed in her opinion of the hollowness & awfulness of the *world*" (Leyda I: 213). Perhaps for this poet, any existence that estranged her from home would be hollow and awful because it would alienate her from the routines that seem to have become the rituals through which she apprehended the pattern of life and time and shared its vitality. The domestic life entailed days of endless chores and responsibilities. Her letters suggest, however, that for Emily Dickinson, her life at home was also invested with sacredness and poetic inspiration. As such, any study attempting to recreate this poet's text production

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[1]The two sisters actually stayed at their aunt's house (September 6 through 22). However, they were with their brother enough for him to write when they left that they "stayed with me" and "I feel lonely now *without* them" (Leyda I: 213).

must focus on her residence, on her experience of home.[2]

Too often Emily Dickinson's home and the life she experienced in it are presented by critics, to borrow Rilke's words, in terms of poverty, poorness, and indifference. To the early reviewers, for instance, the poet's domestic life was the site of some "bloodless tragedy"; to later readers, it was the site of incarcerating repression, regression, unrequited love, and sickness. Over and over, the part home played in shaping the poet is defined in terms which slight or ignore its positive influence on her art. Beginning especially with Adrienne Rich's "'Vesuvius at Home,'" there have been contrasting voices, those who commend the poet's life at home, who have seen it as a strategy even, a vantage from which a subversive battle could be launched on patriarchal constructs of all manner. There yet remains more to investigate. None of the studies that pay particular attention to the poet's home focus primarily on the letters. But it is here especially that Dickinson reveals her experience of the domestic life. Scholars such as John Cody and Barbara Clarke Mossberg who present home in a somewhat negative light also portray the poet's final years negatively. She comes across as a mere shadow of her former

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[2]See Jean Mudge's *The Image of Home* for her arguments regarding the poet's feeling out of place as a woman and as a writer--feeling, Mudge suggests, "homeless." Also, her fifth chapter locates Dickinson's imagery of home in the context of Biblical, Elizabethan, and contemporary usage (116-72). Her sixth chapter focuses on the poet's reaction to the move back to the Homestead, according to Mudge, a traumatic change (173-96).

self. Yet the correspondence provides a different picture.

The letters do not indicate that Emily Dickinson's poetic vision failed. In the 1860s, 70s, and 80s, she was simply channeling her creative forces in different ways than she had in 1858-62, the years when one-third of her canonical poems were copied down. The increasing richness and poetry of the prose hints at the possibility that more and more Dickinson was recording her flashes of insight in her correspondence instead of in her fascicles, which she stopped producing in the 1870s.[3] Especially in revelations about her experience of the life spent at home, the sudden bolts of insight are still evident. Emily Dickinson's letters reveal that until her final illness she investigated the nature of the life she lived at home, its sacred essence and its connection with poetic vision.[4]

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[3]Franklin's *Manuscript Books* provides an extensive year-by-year analysis of the fascicle production. For him, the "poetic drive" was spent after the 1860s (xiii).

[4]My work in this chapter is in no way intended to imply that all women experienced nineteenth-century domestic life as Emily Dickinson did. A popular maxim of the day quoted by Mudge reveals how limiting cultural dictate could be: "A woman should leave her house three times--when she is christened, when she is married, and when she is buried" (326 n.31). This adage suggests why studies that examine the subversive element in women's writing are especially crucial. I believe Emily Dickinson's remaining at home was a choice, an economic possibility not available to many women. The issue here is choice. Two general studies on this topic that are both broad and particularly insightful are Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct* and Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman* (discussed in chapter two).

"I find ecstasy in living": the Higginson Correspondence

Thomas Wentworth Higginson's 1890 *Christian Union* and 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* pre-publication articles on Emily Dickinson's poems and letters established him as the first Dickinson scholar. His words have affected Dickinson studies now for over a century. Because of his importance to the poet, because of his place in the scholarship, and, especially, because of the prominence in the poet's letters to him of commentary on the domestic life, any study of Emily Dickinson's experience of home begins with him. Ultimately, the Dickinson/Higginson correspondence is a history of this woman's attempt to define her domesticity and this man's inability to understand that definition.[5] According to her response, in Higginson's very first letter to his prospective protege, he asks not only about her age, education, and reading habits but about her "Companions" (L 261). Apparently, after he

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[5]Examining the poet's home through the Dickinson/Higginson manuscripts does offer challenges. First of all, texts are mainly in the poet's hand. Johnson's *Letters* gathers seventy-one Dickinson-to-Higginson letters and three Higginson-to-Dickinson. Higginson's letters have to be assumed by her responses. As has been pointed out by countless Dickinson scholars--by Higginson himself, in fact--another challenge in this correspondence is the fact that not everything Emily Dickinson wrote to Thomas Higginson about herself meshes with what we know from other sources. Regardless, she seems often enough to have shared with Higginson feelings and facts about her life that are indeed supported by other sources. Such certainly seems to be the case with regard to much of what she related about her poetic philosophy and its relation to home.

discovers that along with a brother, sister, mother, and father these companions are "Hills . . . and the Sundown--and a Dog," Higginson drafts in his second letter a comment about Dickinson's living in the "Dark." Although she quotes his choice of words in her answer, the poet takes the issue no further (L 265). However, when Higginson repeats the very same term yet again in his third note, she evidently felt compelled to address his word choice.[6] She quizzes him thus in her July 1862 missive: "You said 'Dark.' I know the Butterfly--and the Lizard--and the Orchis--Are not those *your* Countrymen?" (L 268). Dickinson attempts here to illustrate to Higginson the manner in which the everyday things of her domestic life are poetic stimulation. In fact, she will try time and time again, often in language that is rich in metaphor, to illustrate the vitality of her home life and the manner in which that existence leads to her perceiving the divine in the daily. And, over and over, Higginson will equate the poet's residing at home merely with reclusion, failing to see how butterflies, lizards, and orchids could be fit companions for a poet.

In his fourth letter, Higginson seems to have again quizzed Emily Dickinson about staying at home. It seems that he found it incomprehensible that she did not need the intellectual stimulation that

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[6]Of course, Higginson's choice of words could simply mean that to him Dickinson lives in the dark since he has not seen her. However, she clearly does not read it this way.

being around other people afforded him. In her answer, the poet once again tries to paint the companions of home. She declares,

> Of "shunning Men and Women"--they talk of Hallowed things, aloud--and embarrass my Dog--He and I dont object to them, if they'll exist their side. I think Carl[o] would please you--He is dumb, and brave --I think you would like the Chestnut Tree, I met in my walk. It *hit my notice suddenly*--and I thought the Skies were in Blossom--
>
> Then there's a noiseless noise in the Orchard--that I let persons hear-- (L 271 emphasis added)

As she did in the July letter, Dickinson limns her experience of the things that she encounters in a life spent at home. More particularly, she articulates epiphany: the chestnut tree "hit [her] notice suddenly." One can imagine Emily Dickinson silently frozen in her tracks, her entire being sensing the essence of the tree. In that moment of greater awareness, the skies were "in blossom" because she is gifted with an instant of insight through which all the things around her are transfigured. For that moment, the poet saw more than the physical facade of the tree.

Her recalling the tree leads her to speak also of the "noiseless noise" in the orchard that only she can hear. It is important that the poet does not tell Higginson exactly what she saw when she felt the sky was

in blossom, nor does she tell him precisely what a "noiseless noise" sounds like. She is narrating the instant of perception, not what is perceived. She is establishing her experience of epiphany, the "Lassitudes of Contemplation" begetting "a force." Such an enraptured, meditative state and its consequent illumination can occur, the letter claims, beneath a tree or in her orchard. In this state of concentration, when most of the world is blocked from consciousness, she hears a "noiseless noise." She informs Higginson that she "lets" people hear this "noiseless noise"--perhaps by translating it into poetic language, as she does in this very note. Such "noise" symbolizes the "Crash without a Sound," the instant wherein she senses life's reverberations, her soul partaking in the richness and mystery of its echoes. The epiphany is made manifest, then, in her intensity, in the poetry of this particular piece of prose. As such, this confession also illuminates her opening dismissal: around Emily Dickinson, ordinary companions, the "Men and Women" of Higginson's letter, could speak of "Hallowed things, aloud," by carelessly commenting on the autumnal color or the quiet of an orchard. For those people who "exist" only in the physical, on "their side," these things are pretty. For Emily Dickinson they are mystical. Perhaps if one is able to transcend ordinary human knowledge and intuit the sacredness of trees and orchards, a Newfoundland (Carlo) is the best companion. His wordless

sensory experience of life would not disturb the resonance.

After learning why she had not heard from Higginson for awhile, Emily Dickinson sent a letter in February 1863 to her correspondent in his new capacity as the commander of an African-American regiment.[7] In promising to pray for her friend's safe return, Dickinson again illustrates the nature of her domestic life. She assures Higginson that she has a place where she can worship, an "Island," as she defines it, whose "prospective" is blackberries. In this "church," the vision of what is to come is not revealed through Biblical words or a preacher's sermon but is made manifest through nature. She declares, "I was thinking, today--*as I noticed*, that the 'Supernatural' was only the Natural, disclosed--" (emphasis added). She then indents and writes,

> Not "Revelation"--'tis--that waits,
>
> But our unfurnished eyes-- (L 280)[8]

Unlike the earlier letter to Higginson, in this note Dickinson narrates her

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[7]For a discussion that argues against the tradition of seeing Dickinson as secluded in her home, completely immersed in her self and unaware of current events like the Civil War, see Shira Wolosky's *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*. This work not only negates any such reading of the poet, but also provides cogent analysis of a rich pattern of war imagery. The recently discovered Emily Dickinson letter, also, shows her awareness and empathic involvement with the war. See Longsworth's "Upon Concluded Lives."

[8]These two lines were extracted by Johnson as poem 685. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's suggestion in her critical biography that the poet's "crises" was caused not by unrequited love but the fear of losing her eyesight becomes particularly significant with respect to such lines as these.

experience of epiphany and shares the vision of that moment of sudden insight. This poet does not simply look at nature. She "notices" it, and in that flash, the essence of what lies before her eyes is illuminated, and she is witness to the spirit which invests all of life and time. Her indented lines then explain the vision: "Revelation" is not so much some future showing forth of God and His will but the ability to perceive what is before the eyes. To eyes that are "unfurnished," those not appointed with the power to distinguish "Revelation," a garden full of berries is just that. Dickinson's vision, however, is ample. True to Emerson's claim in *Nature* concerning the nature of the poet, Emily Dickinson recognizes that the things around her are the currents of the Universal Being made manifest. The supernatural is disclosed now for those who will "notice" it. For a poet gifted with this kind of vision, garden berries are Revelation, the consecrated communion vessels through which she partakes of divinity, not out in the world of "Men and Women," but on her "side" at home.[9]

Despite the rich life disclosed in this letter, Thomas Higginson continued to quiz the poet concerning her remaining at home, behavior he clearly associates at this point only with reclusion. He wonders in an

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[9]Dickinson expresses a similar idea in the canonical "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" (324), a poem she sent to Higginson.

1869 letter, for example, how she can "live s[o alo]ne" with "such luminous flashes" as occur to her, and in letter after letter he asks her to come to Boston, as "All ladies do," since only in a place such as that can like minds meet at readings and lectures.[10] To some degree, he discerns her gift of sudden insight, of "luminous flashes"--he defines it, in fact, in language akin to her "Bolt." Nevertheless, he fails to comprehend its relationship to the life she leads at home. Perhaps no other manuscripts document so well this inability as do the words recorded by Higginson regarding the call he paid the poet in August of 1870. They are particularly telling, for after this visit he never again questioned the poet about her choice to remain at home.[11] Other than a record in his diary that the meeting was a "remarkable experience, quite equalling my expectation" and a line in a postscript to his sisters that he "had a nice aftn & evng with my singular poetic correspondent," Higginson's account

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[10]Both of these quotes are from the extant Higginson letter of June 1869. The brackets are Johnson's (L 330a).

[11]There is evidence, however, that he spoke of the poet's seclusion to others and that they sometimes mentioned it to him. See Johnson's editorial notes to letters 405 and 481. A letter of February 1876 seems to answer another question by Higginson about her living situation. Dickinson writes in this note, "You ask me if I see any one." The context makes it clear, however, that she responds to Higginson's concern about her mourning (for her father). She still feels a lot of pain, and her correspondent wonders if she has shared it with anyone (L 450). The context does not seem to imply, then, that he is questioning her domesticity but quizzing her about her mental health. The point I attempt to make in this section is not that Higginson stopped seeing Dickinson's domesticity as a mystery but that he sensed something that led him to refrain from asking her about it.

of that August visit exists in two sources. The first are two letters to his wife written immediately after the visit and the accompanying attachments that contain a dozen or so miscellaneous quotations and commentary.[12] The second is an article he wrote in 1891 for the *Atlantic Monthly*. These texts are tremendously important, not only because they are so often quoted in Dickinson studies but because Higginson records--unknowingly perhaps--much that has to do with the poet's domestic life and its relationship to her poetic sensibility.

He begins the first letter to his wife by describing the overall environment of Emily Dickinson's home, referring in particular to its domestic governance. Specifically, he informs his wife, "if you had read Mrs. Stoddard's novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves." Then he immediately adds, "Yet I only saw her."[13] This appended comment is crucial. Higginson draws his conclusion after having seen "only" the poet. In some way, this brief meeting illuminated an empowering aspect of the Dickinson household, the autonomy and self-government "each member" felt. After briefly

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[12]Both of these texts are published in Johnson's edition of the poet's letters as a note to letter 342.

[13]Note that Higginson's remark also reveals his knowledge--whether conscious or subconscious--that Dickinson is not restrained in any way by any member of her family: each member "runs his or her own selves." It is of interest to note also that when Higginson recounts this story in 1891, after having been in the house three times, he mentions, too, that it was "exquisitely neat," further proof of the "regulation" in the poet's home (452).

describing the physical characteristics of the Homestead itself, Higginson then provides a description of the poet's physical appearance (according to him, childlike) and demeanor (also childlike) and a brief overview of the meeting.[14] Finally, Higginson provides snatches of their conversation.

Much of what he records pertains to her life at home. For example, a portion of the sheet of notes he attached to the first letter reads thus:

> "How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street)[.] How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning"
>
> . . .
>
> "I find ecstasy in living--the mere sense of living is joy enough."

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[14]Higginson's description has played a considerable role in Dickinson scholarship, often being quoted, for instance, as evidence that the Dickinson home was limiting and antagonistic to poetic experience. The now-famous passage reads thus: "A step *like a pattering child's* in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer--with no good feature--in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shaw. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of *childlike way* into my hand & said 'These are my introduction' in a *soft frightened breathless childlike* voice" (emphasis added). From the evidence of the extant Dickinson dress and the fact that her casket measured only five feet and six inches, we can assume that the poet was petite; thus her step might well have been quite soft. There are enough details in contemporaries' reminiscences to give at least some credibility, too, to his description of the way that Dickinson talked, though perhaps "breathy" or "soft" are more precise--and less judgmental--descriptive terms than "childlike." To see the manner in which this description can be read as exemplifying Dickinson's psychological health, see especially the works of John Cody and Barbara Clarke Mossberg.

> I asked if she never felt a want of employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor[.] "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time" (& added) "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough"
>
> She makes all the bread for her father only likes hers & says "& people must have puddings" this *very* dreamily, as if they were comets--so she makes them.[15]

The letter and attachment drafted the following morning contain two other items that speak to Dickinson's domestic life. They are quotations from the poet: "Could you tell me what home is" and "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled."[16] Higginson ends this second missive with the confession, "I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so

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[15]This passage is quoted as it is printed in Johnson's edition of the letters. The ellipsis indicates my omission, and for ease of reading I have inserted two bracketed marks of punctuation. The quotation marks and emphasis are Higginson's.

[16]This text is also the source of the famous stories about the poet's learning to tell time and retrieving the books hidden under the piano stool. Since I am not focusing on Edward Dickinson, I omit these, though they do speak to her home environment. For Higginson's later declaration that the story about the hidden books was a "yarn," see Bingham's *Ancestors' Brocades* (309-10). See, too, his *Atlantic Monthly* comments concerning the poet's remarks that "she had never heard him [Edward Dickinson] speak a harsh word" (452). For two studies that deal (very differently) with the issues surrounding these stories, see especially the works of John Cody and Barbara Clarke Mossberg.

much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her. She often thought me *tired* & seemed very thoughtful of others." The very fact that he recorded so much of this brief meeting suggests how powerful, even overwhelming, it was for Higginson. He admits, in fact, to experiencing some kind of weakness in the poet's presence, mentioning specifically that it is his "nerve power" that is affected. Higginson's metaphoric language suggests that he sensed the poet's siphoning his energy. Dickinson's expressing a concern that he was tired hints at her perception of the loss of energy that Higginson admits to his wife--an acumen, it is interesting to note, important to a good hostess. As she did with chestnut trees, the family hearth, and her own acts of domestic manners, the poet apprehended something beyond Higginson's facade.[17]

In 1891, Higginson provided a final analysis of this interview in an *Atlantic Monthly* article. He states there, "The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life." Commenting on the impossibility of so quickly understanding Emily Dickinson, he avows, "She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview" (452-53). Despite this cogent insight, in

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[17]Dickinson's informing him in her next letter that he "asks great questions accidentally" suggests she perceived even more than this man noticed.

defining her and her life at home with the terms "excess of tension" and "abnormal," Higginson offers a solution to the enigma. What he gleans in 1891 from his 1870 notes is that something was wrong, unnatural, odd, and strained about Emily Dickinson's domestic life. Higginson's comments need closer examination. Such a review is called for especially because his rewrite of the meeting is laced with terms such as "undoubtedly," "it is possible," and "it would seem." Higginson is assuming--twenty years after the fact--how he felt; he does not clearly recall. His own perceptions and the quotes he chose to record in 1870 (perhaps also the fact that he never again questioned Dickinson about staying at home) suggest that in some way he had discerned or was drawn to the richness and vitality of the Dickinson home environment.[18]

More particularly, although Higginson's 1870 manuscripts disclose his (perhaps unconscious) awareness of the poet's passionate experience of home, her finding "ecstasy," when he re-assesses his notes in 1891 in preparation for writing the *Atlantic Monthly* article, he deems her life at home as manifesting an "excessive tension" and "abnormality." He apparently reviewed his record of the exchange concerning her "employment" and her definition of a home life wherein baking puddings

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[18]For another contemporary manuscript that speaks of some mysterious power of the Dickinson home that Higginson fails to recognize at the time or to recall in 1891, see his 1886 funeral notes, in which he claims of the poet's home that it had an "atmosphere of its own, fine & strange" (Leyda II: 475).

for others is invested with a comet-like significance and thinking is the best reason for getting dressed in the morning.[19] In 1891, he mentions that the poet spoke in aphorisms and that she refers to puddings "timidly and suggestively." He simply does not link all his insights, that this woman poet's life of baking bread and pudding and tending to those who appear tired is inextricably connected with speaking in metaphor.

Higginson reports to his wife early in the first 1870 letter that the poet said "many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise--& some things you wd. hv. liked." It is impossible to know which of the poet's words he deemed to be those his wife would find foolish and those she would like. Nevertheless, he maintains that the comments his wife would find foolish--perhaps, for instance, asking someone what home is or claiming one had no mother--he found wise. Surely, what Higginson means here is that some of the poet's comments may appear nonsensical but actually express wisdom. They are, then, some type of poetic expression that, like an oxymoron, contains more truth than is at first apparent. If so, then Higginson appears to enjoy Dickinson's way of speaking metaphorically. Perhaps the poet's metaphors were an attempt on the poet's part to convey in poetry the life she lived. Her asking

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[19]I make the claim that Higginson "reviewed" his notes based on the fact that the 1891 article quotes verbatim much of those texts.

Higginson for a definition of home, followed by her denial that she has a mother, are perhaps responses to his oft-repeated questions concerning her remaining at home, an existence he could not fathom. Perhaps with these comments, the poet once again attempts to meet Higginson on common ground. Surely, his past failure to accept her contentment at home indicated to the poet a difference of definitions. This man's concept of a life spent at home was far different from the poet's experience. Could he, then, tell her what home is?[20]

Almost as if she anticipated Higginson's 1891 judgments, Emily Dickinson wrote a "thank-you" letter to Higginson after their 1870 visit that offers an illustration of the poet's experience of home that seems more straight-forward than her "suggestive" and aphoristic comments about pudding and living. In expressing her appreciation for the call, the poet narrates the manner in which she contemplated their visit after it ended. Dickinson declares simply, "I thought and went about my work" (L 352). Here certainly is a clear articulation of her experience of home. Thinking, that act which gives her the strength to get dressed in the morning, goes on as she performs household duties, tasks which are so habitual that she can think and go about her work. The 1874 note

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[20]Note that Higginson never expressed shock at hearing the poet's claim that she has no mother. Throughout their correspondence, the poet shares touching stories about home and about both of her parents. For his part, Higginson apparently often inquired for their health.

expressing appreciation for Higginson's second and final visit provides a similar portrait of her involvement in the household. A portion of this letter reads thus:

> I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me.
>
> He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none. There remained this shelter after you left me the other Day.
>
> Of your flitting Coming it is fair to think.
>
> Like the Bee's Coupe--vanishing in Music. (L 405)

Dickinson's language in this passage communicates a definition: her "awful Mother" is her spiritually charged experience of home. After an event, Higginson's calls, for instance, a bee's departure, or a communion with the "Countrymen" of her estate, butterflies, berries, puddings, Emily Dickinson re-lives the encounter as she "goes about her work." She hears after she sees. It is when Higginson leaves that Dickinson thinks about their chat, and in that stillness she hears the "music" of his visit. This poet "runs Home to Awe," to her poetic meditations, when anything befalls her because it is the "Mother" of her poetry. It is the manner in which the moments of her domestic life are transfigured by her apprehension and ecstatic sharing of the timeless pattern of existence.

Ultimately, it is the means by which she can nurture herself. Surely no other mother could be so sheltering, so present.

Despite all this woman told or wrote to Thomas Higginson concerning the hallowed nature of her life at home, he failed to understand how a poet could remain, as he phrased it, "so alone" at home. Although after 1870 he never again asked her how she could possibly live as she did, his manuscripts reveal that he lost whatever appreciation he grasped during the call he paid that year.[21] After the last visit in 1874, for instance, he records in a letter to his sisters that he had recently seen his "eccentric poetess Miss Emily Dickinson who *never* goes outside her father's grounds." He still defines home differently than the poet. For him, it is merely limiting, reclusive behavior. He focuses on her "never going off the place & never seeing any visitor." In this same letter, he also quotes the poet as saying "there is always one thing to be grateful for--that one is one's self & not somebody else," adding afterwards his wife Mary Channing Higginson's response that she found the declaration "singularly out of place in E.D.'s case." He also describes the poet thus: "She (E.D.) glided in, in white, bearing a Daphne odora for me, & said under her breath 'How long are you going to stay.'" Of this

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[21]Excluding the comments made at the time of the funeral.

entrance, he writes only, "I'm afraid Mary's other remark 'Oh why do the insane so cling to you?' still holds" (L 405n).

In essence, Higginson's letter reduces to insanity Dickinson's poetic presentation of her favorite flower (a manifestation of her domestic manners) and, importantly, her assurance that she is exactly who she wants to be. In all, then, the Dickinson/Higginson correspondence evidences a failure by these two people to meet on common ground regarding the poet's experience of the home. They defined it differently. Although he briefly--perhaps even unconsciously--glimpsed its vitality, its force, perhaps even its mystic qualities, Higginson was finally unable to understand what the domestic life gave to Emily Dickinson. In his eyes, remaining at home was merely reclusion, the poet herself "partially cracked."[22]

Emily Dickinson & the Poetry of Home

Emily Fowler Ford once characterized the poet in a manner that is of interest. Of Emily Dickinson, Ford claims, "She had a demure manner which brightened easily into fun, *when she felt at home*, but among strangers she was rather shy, silent and even deprecating" (Leyda II: 478

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[22]The "partially cracked" comment is printed in Johnson's edition of the letters as a note to letter 481.

emphasis added). In Ford's usage, the word "home" connotes feeling that one is comfortable because in a known environment. According to one of her closest girlhood friends, when not surrounded by familiarity, the poet was silent. Ultimately, the site wherein Emily Dickinson experienced the familiar was her family home. It was there that she "brightened into fun." It was there that she found a voice. In 1864, a time when Thomas Higginson was repeating over and over his queries regarding the poet's staying "so alone" at home, Dickinson copied into one of her fascicles a poem that she also sent to her bewildered mentor. It reads thus:

> The Robin is the One
> That interrupt the Morn
> With hurried--few--express Reports
> When March is scarcely on--
>
> The Robin is the One
> That overflow the Noon
> With her cherubic quantity--
> An April but begun--
>
> The Robin is the One

That speechless from her Nest

Submit that Home--and Certainty

And Sanctity, are best (828)[23]

On one level, these lines vividly depict a particular bird, the robin, whose calls, though infrequent, are heard first in March and then "overflow" the air by early April. According to the poem, the bird is "speechless from," when away away from its home.[24] Perhaps Emily Dickinson describes herself here. In her manuscripts, she frequently images herself as a bird, and she also often refers to sharing poetry with others as singing to them.[25]

Like the robin, Dickinson interrupted her busy mornings with a "hurried--few--express Reports" which she mailed to correspondents or saved to redraft for her fascicles. According to her claim (quoted in chapter two) that she worked like the bluebirds, as the day progressed

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[23]There is no way of knowing if the poem existed first as a fascicle poem and was then extracted for Higginson, or if it were created for him and then added to the fascicles. Although there is no record that the poet gave a copy to her, Susan Gilbert Dickinson claims to quote the poet after her death with words which seem to be from this poem. In a letter to Higginson commenting on her hesitancy to see the poet's private poems in print, Susan Gilbert Dickinson claims that her sister-in-law felt "Love and home and certainty are best" (Bingham, *Ancestors'* 86).

[24]The word "from" is ambiguous. Since the bird submits that "Home--and Certainty / And Sanctity are best," it seems "speechless from her Nest" indicates to me an inability to sing when away from the nest.

[25]Such examples appear throughout the letters. See, for example, letters 39, 278, and 380.

Emily Dickinson began to "dart around just so," tending to this or that domestic chore. Perhaps as she became more and more immersed in the patterns of her routines, her "songs" became more and more frequent. Her "furnished" eyes perceived the mystery of the everyday things around her, and her pocket, perhaps, filled with poetic scraps. Most importantly, Dickinson "submits" in this poem that for the bird that sings, home is "best" because it provides a place of shelter and familiarity, a place that is certain, true, dependable, and undeniable, a place that is sacred. Ultimately, this poem speaks to Emily Fowler Ford's description. It intimates that what Emily Dickinson needs in order to "sing" is "Home--and Certainty and Sanctity."

The letters of this poet present a lifelong history of the poet's speaking of home in this manner. Their richly poetic language suggests not impoverishment or "bloodless tragedy" but that home was a nourishing site for this particular poet. Although she continued to portray her domestic life for Higginson, Dickinson drew such representations for numerous correspondents. From the earliest letters to her brother to those sent to lifelong friends and even to neighbors, Emily Dickinson's correspondence reveals that she investigated the nature of the poet's experience of home. What these letters ultimately communicate is that for this poet, "Home--and Certainty and Sanctity, are best." Such a

verdict is expressed in an October 1851 letter to her brother--written only weeks after her return from visiting him in Boston and summarily pronouncing the world "hollow and awful." This correspondence suggests Dickinson's musing over the difference between the domestic life and her concept of her brother's experience away from home. Concerning their respective lives, she declares, "Duty is black and brown--home is bright and shining" (L 57). Unlike later in the poet's life when amply detailed letters are more scarce, the 1850s is a decade for which there is much textual evidence of Dickinson's active participation in the home duties. At this point in her life, she is laboring arduously among the things of home every day except Sunday--the letters to Austin Dickinson are, in fact, a manifestation of the duties of domestic manners, the poet's attempt to "dispense comfort and cheer" to her homesick brother. Regardless of the intensity of her work, she here equates the notion of "duty" with Austin Dickinson's function, not with what she does. Although it seems that she certainly knew that the term "duty" implied (among other connotations) housework, accountability within the home was in some fashion "bright and shining." Beyond was dark. The very manner in which she expresses this judgement implies the vitality she discovered at home: when she articulates her experience of home, she does so in a language that is charged with metaphor. Perhaps she even

appropriates her imagery from the domestic life, home as life polished to its most natural luster.

Days later, Dickinson writes again. In the middle of a passage that informs the absent brother how much he is missed, in other words, as she comforts him by reminding him of home, her language becomes charged with rhythm and rhyme. She asks, "where is the youth so bold, the bravest of our fold, a seat is empty here--." Dickinson then attempts to create for her brother the scene before her. According to the poet, she sits in the warm kitchen, the fire blazes, the kettle whistles, the cat purrs, chilled flies cling to the walls, and the breakfast warms on the stove while Edward Dickinson goes to see a neighbor who has offered the family some of his kindling. Evidently, at this point in her missive, the poet looks out the kitchen window and decides to describe that scene as well. As she relates, cows low on their way to the barn, and little boys, their hands crammed in their pockets, whistle in an attempt to ward off the cold. Last, she paints for him the brilliant autumnal display in the woods behind their home and on the mountain ranges around Amherst, claiming that she goes out every day to encourage the leaves to hold on for a little while longer.

Evidently concerned that the homey scene she has provided will sadden the brother now separated from home, the poet tenders a

promise--one that becomes rhythmic as she attempts to comfort and cheer him by anticipating the conditions of home when he returns. She writes:

> [The sky] 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! (L 58)[26]

The metaphor is ambiguous. The garden could symbolize her love, where all is warm and "ever green." It possibly represents a great deal more. Her letter has described more than "silent fields." Dickinson has also painted for her brother the warm kitchen, a place particularly reminiscent of their morning "departments" and chats. Days after claiming that home is "bright and shining," she assures her brother that a "*brighter* garden" awaits his return. It is certainly possible that the garden which the image

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[26]Although the letter is drafted as prose, Johnson extracted from "There is another sky" to "come!" and created a canonical poem (2).

offers is the overall home environment--warm kitchen, chilled flies, and autumnal riches.

In a third note sent to Austin Dickinson in October 1851, the twenty-year-old poet again muses on her brother's absence, relating to him how often that evening as she watched the fire burn she thought about his being away from home. Such reflection leads Dickinson to contemplate the nature of the domestic life she enjoys. What she communicates is the connection she perceives between "Home--and Certainty and Sanctity." She proclaims,

> Home is a holy thing--nothing of doubt or distrust can enter it's blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on and one and another forsake, in whom you place your trust--here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of *any* can utterly destroy--smaller it is indeed, and it may be less fair, but fairer and *brighter* than all the world beside. (L 59)

In this declaration, Dickinson judges home to be sheltering, reliable, inviolate, sacred. In explication, she admits that "indeed" she is not speaking literally. The poet declares her awareness that home is not actually Eden. It is significant, however, that as she attempts to define what home is, her language becomes metaphoric. Apparently, only

poetry can meet her language needs. Ultimately, the passage suggests that the domestic life is an inviolate place of comfort and shelter. It is a part of the Heaven experienced on earth. All three of these notes were written shortly after the poet returned from her stay in Boston. At this point in her life, then, she has seen "all the world beside," or as much of it as she cares to, and recognizes its tarnished state (she again includes the "bright" image). In 1851, Emily Dickinson prefers what she conceives to be the edenic experience of the domestic life. Each time she begins to voice this sensation, her language becomes metaphoric and rhythmic. In articulating the "bright" and sacred essence she perceives in home, she comes to poetry, the song of her home.

A May 1852 letter also speaks to the poet's sense of her home life. Once again, Dickinson sets the scene. It is five o'clock in the morning, and she has already made the fires, "got breakfast," and given that "shrill" wake-up call that Lavinia Dickinson disliked so much. The poet now anticipates the hard day before her. Nevertheless, she concludes her letter by asking her brother who is away from home, "would'nt you change your dwelling for my palace in the dew?" (L 89). Here is Emily Dickinson's poetic vision. She sits at the kitchen table, taking a moment's respite between chores, yet she perceives a connection between where she abides and a dew-drenched palace. Frequently,

Dickinson appropriates similar imagery.[27] The moisture that forms on cool bodies during the pre-dawn hours seems often to signify for her a sacred satiation. Dickinson's usage in the letter to her brother suggests that in the midst of her early-morning ritual of work, she pierces the surface of physical reality, seeing into the mystery of what she does and where she is. Although home is a place of early rising and hard work, of duties that are unending, her letter hints that for her it is also the source of satiety, of nurturance, freshness, and blessedness. The very fact that her language becomes metaphoric as she describes her experience of her "department" expresses its effect as the site of poetic inspiration. She approaches her experience of the domestic life with the vision and intensity of a poet; in turn, her sensibility is nurtured in that life. The result is imagery that transforms a physical building that demands unceasing labor into a mystical palace, the anchorage of a poet.

A year later, Austin Dickinson admits in a letter to his sister that he is writing poetry. The poet responds by confessing the same "habit" and by sharing her belief that their upbringing

is, in fact, the source of poetry, that it has predisposed them to the role of poet. It reads,

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[27]The most famous example of such usage in the letters is the "man of noon" missive to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) (L 93). The image also appears in the canon. See, for example, "I went to Heaven--" (374) and "The World--feels Dusty" (715).

> And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm. Out of the way Pegasus, Olympus enough to him, and just say to those 'nine muses' that we have done with them!
>
> Raised a living muse ourselves, worth the whole nine of them. (L 110)[28]

Her syntax is ambiguous. The phrase "Raised a living muse ourselves" could refer either to Austin Dickinson or to the poet herself. Either way, she declares that the atmosphere of the Dickinson home is fit environment for poetic creation. And she utters this claim in metrics.

An 1855 letter traces such origin even further. In this note, Dickinson informs her correspondent, "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). Dickinson's pronouncement is rich with connotative possibility. In this declaration, she seems clearly to refer to the snowfall, but she is also the one, quill pen in hand, who "comes in flakes." Her language implies that she refers also to her own rhythmic and metaphoric words which descend to the page, "pinion" by "plume." Further, the letter hints at the holiness of home and at its relationship with poetry. Dickinson's

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[28]Several critics, such as Wendy Martin in her *American Triptych*, see this passage as expressing the poet's jealousy over her brother's being treated as a favorite in the house, his easier place in the larger world, and, in this poem particularly, his usurpation of her poetic role.

snow-laden "white home" perhaps symbolizes the ultimate origin of insight: spirituality, the higher consciousness of an enraptured state. As water is transformed into crystallized shapes when it meets cold air and then falls to earth as snow, the poet's vision is transfigured by a moment's merging with the mystery of life, and words form that then fall to the page as rhythmic metaphor. As such, the words themselves are symbolic of the spiritual home or origin of poetry, and they share its sacredness. According to Emily Dickinson's image, Heaven is as close as the snowflakes in the air, or the words on a page.

The image of home in another letter drafted around the same time reiterates her vision of such heavenly origination. It speaks, in fact, both to the poetry of the "white home" letter and to later imagery through which the poet communicates her ideas of an afterlife. The second line of this 1855 letter composed in Washington, D.C., states simply, "I am not at home--." Short as it is, this declaration sets the tone for the rest of the letter, as Dickinson describes herself "wander[ing] . . . into many new ways." Of all these "new ways," however, the only one she shares--and Dickinson makes a point of saying that it is the only one worthy of sharing--is her visit to Mount Vernon. More specifically, the only detail she focuses on is touching the front door latch and thinking of Washington's returning home and how after that he raised a latch to the

"brighter wicket" of his eternal home. Apparently, this comment triggers a reflection on the familiarity of home and old friends, probably because she is surrounded by the unfamiliar. And when she voices these thoughts, she does so in language that is metaphoric. Dickinson writes, "Thank God there is a world, and that the friends we love dwell forever and ever in a house above" (L 179). The passage figures death as a new residency. Once again, the interplay of physical and spiritual, or snowfall and poetic creation, is articulated in metaphor. By imaging Heaven as another home, Dickinson diminishes the boundary between the living and the dead. In a world invested with spirituality, there is a vital relationship between words, the dead, and the living.

An 1858 letter to the unidentified "Master" contains similar imagery that expands the poet's 1851 pronouncement that "Home is a holy thing." In her twenty-seventh year, the poet writes,

> The Violets are by my side, the Robin very near, and "Spring"--they say, Who is she--going by the door-- Indeed it is God's house--And these are gates of Heaven, and to and fro, the angels go, with their sweet postillions-- (L 187)

The lines seemingly are a celebration of the coming of spring, written as the poet sits at one of the several writing tables situated near a window. The context reveals, however, that the poet is actually quite ill, so ill, in

fact, that she is forced to stop writing because, as she confesses, "this pain denies me." She mentions, too, that she is writing at night, perhaps even propped up in bed as was her wont. Certainly, the passage may still refer to the coming of spring. Under the circumstances, however, it is just as possible that it celebrates Dickinson's experience of home. As a poet open to the significance that invests all things, she is aware of the meaning beyond the surface of the everyday. For her, doors--even cups and "thank-you" notes--become the "gates of Heaven" because they are the gateway through which she apprehends the spiritual essence of life. With such perception, her own family members could be "angels," flurrying about, in and out of her room with trays and necessities.[29] "Indeed it is God's house" because Emily Dickinson's vision allows her to see the mystery of the mundane and to partake of its vitality. The result, once again, is rhythmic metaphor.

Two letters drafted almost a decade later for Elizabeth Holland expand on such mystical vision. In the first, the poet communicates her awareness of the inspiration she finds at home. In this 1866 note she declares, "My flowers are near and foreign, and I have but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles" (L 315). This passage refers on one level

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[29]There is a letter wherein the poet uses similar imagery to describe the birds. In that note, the birds "reign" nearer the window. So, it is possible her transformation here is like that one (L 395).

perhaps to the fact that from Dickinson's dining room writing desk she had but to cross the floor of her father's study to stand in the midst of the flowers in her conservatory, perhaps specifically her carnations that were famous in the neighborhood and that filled the Homestead with their spicy aroma. But the rest of the letter offers hints that Dickinson is also speaking metaphorically. Referring to Susan Gilbert Dickinson's recent departure, for instance, the poet claims that she left behind a "Cashmere print," and concerning the outside world, she asserts, "The Wind blows gay today and the Jays bark like Blue Terriers." These comments invite Holland to see the metaphor in the Spice Isles image. Dickinson creates a metaphor that documents the manner in which home and the things of home were inspiration enough, and were, recalling the early Higginson letters, fit "companions" for a poet.

Only months later, the poet sent Holland another note that records her experience of the domestic life. In doing so, it illuminates the poet's "crossing" to the Spice Isles. After announcing that she recently "saw the sunrise on the Alps," Dickinson asks, "Travel why to Nature, when she dwells with us? Those who lift their hats shall see her, as devout do God" (L 321). The poet offers an explanation for the kind of "travel" a poet takes. Because she is able to see the mystery and significance beyond surface reality, all places are within her. She offers, then, a

vision akin to her "notice" of the chestnut tree. While residing at home, she dwells in nature, in the Spice Isles, in the Alps, and, especially, in God's house. As those who believe they can experience God do sense his presence, so those who desire to partake of nature's beauty have only to "notice." According to Dickinson's letters, the essence of those things around her, chestnut tree or flower, simply waits to be perceived. Every moment is "loaded" with spiritual significance. There is no need for her to search or to "travel."

Emily Dickinson could not know in 1866 that in the two following decades she would appropriate the image of home in order to express her "travel" into grief. Over and over again in her correspondence the poet shares her investigations into the deaths of her parents and the effect they have on her concept of "a bit of Eden." She begins an 1874 letter to the Norcrosses by acknowledging (in a bit of hyperbolic domestic manners) that she has failed to correspond for so long that she fears her cousins may not remember her. Then confessing, she writes of her father's death, "I cannot recall myself. I thought I was strongly built, but this stronger has undermined me" (L 414). Likewise, in an 1882 letter, she claims of her mother's death, "Plundered of her dear face, we scarcely know each other" (L 782). The poet survived the death of both parents. With those losses, the foundation of her home life was shaken,

her domestic rituals and patterns irrevocably altered. While relating the story of the family's learning of her father's death, she declares that she knew "we were all lost," a perfect expression for her own intense feelings of bewilderment once the two people who first created her "bit of Eden" no longer resided there (L 414).

As these confessions suggest, Emily Dickinson no longer seems certain she can find herself, much less anything else that she knew. Of her father, the poet writes simply but in metaphor, "Father does not live with us now--he lives in a new house" (L 414). She announces that every day she takes him the best flowers from her garden, only to admit, "if we only knew he knew, perhaps we could stop crying." Also, in several letters the poet worries about her mother's whereabouts and her own relationship to her. All she knows is that "we bear her dear form through the Wilderness" (L 777), a phrase she repeats precisely in another letter.[30] The poet recalls for her correspondents the last meal she prepared for her mother and the kindnesses done for her by others. She confesses too, "That the one we have cherished so softly so long, should be in that great Eternity without our simple Counsels, seems frightened and foreign" (L 779). Thus, although she concedes that Edward Dickinson's "new house" is "better" than the one in which he had lived

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[30]In this second note, however, she changes the verb tense: "bear" to "bore" (L 788).

and that she "trusts" that her mother "has *flown*," she seems immediately to qualify any such comforting statements. She worries because Edward Dickinson "moved after gardens were made" and thus has no flowers and that her mother goes without her daughter's counsel.[31]. As even her letters of appreciation imply, Emily Dickinson knew what it was to experience "Heaven--here." For decades, her home had been an inviolate sanctuary wherein God dwells, wherein poets are nurtured. She had been accustomed to being able to take her father handfuls of "prospective," of the sacredness and mystery of life. All her life, she had worked side by side with her mother. In her last years, she offered her her "counsel" and tended to her "dear little wants." The fact that she can no longer perform such acts is clearly disturbing to the poet. Dickinson ends a note about her father's death by articulating her sense of the uncertain foundation upon which she now resides: "I cannot write any more, dears. Though it is many nights, my mind never comes home" (L 414). In a letter about her mother, she writes a (canonical) poem wherein she confesses she is

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[31]Dickinson's "without our simple Counsels" letter is important because it underscores the alteration that evidently took place in the relationship between these two women once Emily Norcross Dickinson was forced to be less concerned about being the perfect domestic woman. The poet explains to Elizabeth Holland, "Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child, the Affection came--" (L 792) and to Maria Whitney, "All is faint indeed without our vanished mother, who achieved in sweetness what she lost in strength" (L 815). Dickinson's use of "we" and "our" could refer also to the "counsel" of Lavinia Dickinson. The context is ambiguous.

"Homeless at home" (L 815).[32] As her correspondence suggests, before her parents' deaths, home had seemed to her a place of familiarity and certainty; it had seemed inviolate. What she feels now is unfamiliar, "peculiar--pathetic--and Antediluvian."[33] Her mind cannot come back to those things she knew. The patterns, rituals, certainty, the sacredness have been deeply disrupted. To express such feelings, she turns to the image of home.

Other letters extend this imagery. In fact, in letters about her father apparently written months (if not a year) apart she does so in almost identical imagery. A one-line 1875 note to Sarah Cushing Tuckerman reads, "It was so long my custom to seek you with the birds, they would scarcely feel at home should I do otherwise, though as *home itself is far from home* since my father died, why should custom tire?" (L

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[32]The poet also uses similar imagery in a canonical poem written in a letter about the death of Otis Lord. There, the poet is imaged as a bird, now "Crumbless and homeless." Significantly, when she continues, she notes that she searches for "The Birds she lost--" (L 890).

[33]This quotation refers to the poet's experience of her brother's visit at the Homestead. She continues by claiming, "We missed him while he was with us and missed him when he was gone." Then she adds, "All is so very curious." Dickinson ends the letter by attending to the duties of domestic manners. She thanks her friend for kindness, which she promises, "helps me up the Stairs at Night, where as I passed my Father's Door--I used to think was safety" (L 432). Clearly, what had been her sense of home, what had been familiar, is now "curious." The poet's letters and Austin Dickinson's diary entries indicate that the two continued to be very close until the poet's death, but when the patterns of life were altered, once what seemed inviolate was violated, every aspect of her experience of home seemed "antediluvian," tainted.

433 emphasis added). Context has to be surmised. Perhaps Dickinson refers to her neighbor's habit of rising early (with the birds) and the poet's own habit of seeing her in the early hours. She may refer to Tuckerman's receiving each year some of the poet's early spring flowers. What seems clear is that Dickinson moves from the use of the word "home" as symbolic of the birds' feeling of familiarity to a vision about her own home. "Home itself is far from home": home is no longer familiar, no longer what it used to be. The pattern of "custom" and ritual has been disturbed. Perhaps the note expresses the poet's promise that although everything has altered, she will still recall this friend, as she has in the past. Nevertheless, for Emily Dickinson, nothing is as it was, birds, neighbors, or home.

In the second letter containing this same imagery, the poet first answers Thomas Higginson's questions about Emily Norcross Dickinson's poor health.[34] In sharing her feelings about her mother's condition, the poet admits that she is glad that "what grieves ourself so much--can no more grieve" her father, whom the ill widow mistakenly believes is still alive. She then thanks Higginson for writing, letting him know what a comfort his consolation has been. This is especially so, she claims, because "Home is so far from Home, since my Father died" (L 441). The

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[34]This letter follows a two-line note from the poet wherein she informed Higginson of her mother's stroke.

very fact that this line is repeated, with only a couple of changes, suggests how precisely Dickinson felt that it expressed her feelings. Home simply does not seem like home. As the poet claims in a letter about her mother's death that also extends well-wishes for her correspondent: "I hope you are stronger than you were, and that all is safe in your unspeakable Home. Oh, Vision of Language!" (L 782). Evidently, when Emily Dickinson worked through the grief of her parents' deaths, the "Vision of Language" that best articulated the state of her soul was the image of home.

The poet never completely suspended her investigation into the changes brought about by the deaths of her father and mother. Yet she continued to share another "vision," that life-long one that posits the domestic life as the origin of poetry. An 1876 letter, also to Thomas Higginson, documents her residing at home with some of the "companions" most fit for her sensitivity. In this note, she writes,

> A mellow Rain is falling.
>
> It wont be ripe till April--How luscious is the dripping of Febuary eaves! *It makes our thinking Pink--*
>
> It antedates the Robin--bereaving in prospective that Febuary leaves-- (L 450 emphasis added)

What the lines reveal is poetic insight. They suggest the poet's

engagement with the world around her: the sounds of rain dropping off the eaves "makes" her "thinking Pink." This image captures the point at which her imagination colors. As such, it recalls her earlier declaration to Higginson that she "thought and went about her work." What Dickinson recognizes in the moment of insight captured in these lines is that the rain signifies an end to anticipation. Once spring arrives, there is no more anxious waiting for it. The moment just prior to the flower's bloom, the instant "thinking [becomes] Pink," is the most vital and rich with new beginnings.[35] The fact that her expression of that moment is so rhythmic demonstrates that richness. At that instant, poetry begins.

An 1879 scrap to Otis Lord also establishes the power that the image of home continued to hold for Emily Dickinson in later years. It reads, "You spoke of 'Hope' surpassing 'Home'--I thought Hope *was* Home--a misapprehension of Architecture--but then if I knew" (L 600).[36] Since there is no context, Judge Lord's comment about "'hope' surpassing 'home'" can only be hypothesized. Since Dickinson spoke

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[35]Significantly, Dickinson's closing line incorporates an image of home as a metaphor that articulates the comfort the poet feels when she thinks of Higginson. The line reads, "I often go Home in thought to you" (L 450). She can sense the feeling of familiarity that one feels when in the company of a friend simply by thinking of Higginson--while remaining in her home.

[36] It is interesting to note that Dickinson seems to have cut these lines out of an existing draft. Whatever her intention, the words clearly held enough significance for the poet to want to keep them.

with this friend about the death of her father (and, later, her mother), perhaps Lord's remark was in answer to one of the poet's recurring musings about Edward Dickinson's whereabouts and her concern regarding the quality of life in his "new house." If so, Dickinson repeats her friend's declaration that "hope" of what is to come, faith, then, is the only solace for those living because the eternal "home" cannot be known. Dickinson seems to feel that hope is home, although she admits hers may be a "misapprehension of Architecture." Her "thought" is that hope is the known; it is where the spirit resides. Faith and familiarity are the same. This scrap seems to suggest that Dickinson is once again thinking and writing about the sacredness of the life she experiences in the here and now. For her, "Hope is Home" because it is the part of eternity that is experienced here.

Until the end of her life, Emily Dickinson disclosed her vision of home as secure and hallowed. For example, in an 1881 letter written primarily to thank her cousin Francis Norcross for a recipe, Dickinson also responds to a comment about the cousins' present boarding house. She asserts, "To know of your homes is comforting. I trust they are both peace."[37] The poet's language then becomes metaphoric as she begins

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[37]Considering the context and the reference to "Loo's room," the words "homes" and "they" seem to signify that each cousin has her own room at the boarding house. It is noteworthy that in many letters, Dickinson reveals a similar interest with her cousins' orphaned home life. Often, her imagery implies her concern even

to contemplate the nature of home, and, consequently, the reason she feels it is so comforting to know of the cousins' experience of their domestic situation. She writes in explanation, "Home is the riddle of the wise--the booty of the dove" (L 737). To the wise, home is riddle, something not necessarily solved but always enticing and luring. (Perhaps here is the rationale for Dickinson's asking Higginson for his definition of home; she wanted to know the manner in which he would solve the riddle.) And for those who are more dove-like, who follow their instincts and nest, so to speak, without trying to understand, for those, then, who feel safe without worrying why, home is equally seductive. Dickinson's metaphor suggests that she sensed that home could not be fully defined. What it offers is both bountiful and ineffable.

Perhaps the most telling lines are written later in this same year in notes wherein the poet seems to recommend her approach to the life at home to a baby. Two 1881 congratulatory notes to Thomas Higginson on the July birth of his daughter Margaret Waldo speak of the father/daughter relationship. Both paint the father's home as the site of

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if she does not openly discuss their situation. For example, in an 1880 letter, the poet describes the activity she sees in the back yard of the Homestead as the hired men pick fruit. Dickinson's language hints at her other concern: "Men are picking up the apples to-day, and the pretty *boarders* are leaving the trees, birds and ants and bees" (L 656 emphasis added). She goes on to say that those boarders are upset over losing their homes, a feeling she surely harbored concerning the cousins' precarious state.

mystery and of imagination, and in both the poet's language becomes metaphoric. The first missive, sent when Dickinson learned of the successful delivery, announces the poet's relief and her wish that the baby "may make no farther flight than it's Father's Arms--Home and Roam in one" (L 728). Since Dickinson confesses that she had had misgivings about the birth, her use of flight imagery communicates her hope that the baby remain healthy and that its farthest "trip" involves not a flight into immortality but from her cradle into Higginson's arms, which the poet defines as being both familiar and unfamiliar, simultaneously shelter and adventure. Here is the "travel" Dickinson spoke of in her 1866 letter to Elizabeth Holland that asked "Travel why to Nature?" She wishes for Margaret Waldo to have what she herself has in her own father's house. Her family home is both shelter and adventure, routine and imagination, "home and roam" in one because it is the site of her receptivity.

The next letter apparently answers one sent by Higginson wherein he informed the poet that Margaret Waldo had been ill but is better. Evidently, he had also commented on the poet's grief over her father's death and her mother's illness. After Dickinson consoles Higginson for having worried about the baby, she informs him about the conditions of her domestic life. She writes, "We dwell as when you saw us--the mighty

dying of my Father made no external change--Mother and Sister are with me, and my Brother and pseudo Sister, in the nearest House--When Father lived I remained with him because he would miss me--Now, Mother is helpless--a holier demand--." Perhaps because she knows her continuing at home is a source of puzzlement for Higginson, the poet immediately adds, "I do not go away, but the Grounds are ample--almost travel--to me." Dickinson also sends her wishes that the baby's life will be full of "Bliss," and she closes with the rhythmic and metaphoric aphorism, "It is solemn to remember that Vastness--is but the Shadow of the Brain which casts it--" and the indented lines

> All things swept sole away
>
> This--is immensity-- (L 735).[38]

The aphorism is rich in possibility. Dickinson could perhaps be complimenting Higginson, saying, in essence, that the daughter (the "shadow") is "vast," but as the father (the "brain") and creator, source and origin (that which creates the shadow, then), he is even more capacious. She also could be advising Margaret Waldo. According to the poet's counsel, in order for the child's life to be "bliss," Margaret Waldo has only to desire it because the vastness of our life is created in us. As her 1866 "Travel why to Nature" letter claims, we determine our own

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[38]Johnson extracted the indented lines and created the canonical poem number 1512.

bliss or misery, as the devout see God simply by lifting their eyes and "noticing" Him. According to Dickinson's letter, the grounds of her home are travel--"this is immensity" because the poet can create universes while residing at home. Vastness is of the mind. Two extant prose fragments from Emily Dickinson's last decade extend the imagery of the Higginson letter. One (actually the first line on a page crowded with prose lines) reads, "As it takes but a moment of imagination to place us anywhere, it would not seem worth while to stay where it was stale--" (PF 66). The fragment is telling. First, it shows the poet's experience of the domestic life, a place wherein she could sense certainty and "travel," thus "home and roam" without ever leaving. Second, it comments on the estimation of those like Thomas Higginson who judged her domesticity as "stale." The prose fragment connotes Dickinson's sense that home was not dull or commonplace but alive and rich with possibility. It may have been a place of routine, but to a poet aware of the nuances of life and receptive to enraptured states wherein the spirituality that abides in all moments and all things is exploded like a gun, such repetition was the catalyst for epiphany and poetry. If it were not, Dickinson's line asks, why would she stay?

The other prose fragment continues this theme. It reads, "Paradise i[s] no Journey because it (he) is within--but for that very cause though--it

is the most Arduous of Journeys--because as the Servant Conscientiously says at the Door We are (always--invariably--) out--" (PF 99).[39] In defining "Paradise," Emily Dickinson garners details from her domestic life, even the very details of her reclusion (the domestic's role of answering the door and saying that the poet is out), in order to speak metaphorically of the soul's dark hour. In essence, this imagery communicates Dickinson's engaged participation in her home. If the rounds of ritualistic routine were to stop, so would the poetic epiphany. If Dickinson were to leave home or if she were "in" to all visitors and thus had her habits of "thinking as she worked" interrupted, she would inevitably be "out" to mystical transport. She needed the shelter, the custom, the sacred ritual she found at home in order to open her eyes and ears to the intimations of immortality that surrounded her at home.

In the letters of Emily Dickinson, home is presented as a "bright and shinning" "palace" wherein the poet felt complete. According to the imagery of the prose, it was the breeding ground, in fact, of poets, the poet's own language becoming charged with metrics and metaphors when she spoke of it and when she appropriated it as an image to articulate her emotions. True to her "furnished" vision, home is also revealed as "a Holy thing." Similar to her simultaneous experience of the

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[39]The parentheses indicate Dickinson's variants. The bracket is mine. Johnson prints the second word as "in."

"Lassitudes of Contemplation" and the manipulations of her own hands on the threads of her sewing project, the letters present home as simultaneously conducive to poetic revelation and as sacred. From such holy ground she seems to have launched her investigations into the nature of home itself, of loss, and of the "architecture of hope." Such examinations study the essence of poetic creativity and at the same time lead to poetry. The fact that Dickinson so often expressed the sanctity she found at home intimates the sacred nature of poetic origin. As she once explained, "Eternity . . . sweeps around me . . . while I do my work." It was as close as a snowflake, as near as the poet's words. To such a sensibility, paradise is certainly no journey.

Conclusion

The prescriptive literature of Dickinson's day claimed that a woman who left home "lost" not only her "happiness" but also "her power, that almost magical power" that the woman's sphere provided her (Welter 173). For many nineteenth-century women, the domestic life was probably limiting. But in letters that span four decades Emily Dickinson provides glimpses of the vitality of the life she spent at home. Thomas Higginson asked the poet if she did not feel "a want of employment"

living as she did. His wife found the poet's assurance that she was exactly as she wanted to be "singularly out of place in E.D.'s case." As valuable as they are, works such as Barbara Clarke Mossberg's *When the Writer is a Daughter* portray the poet as occupied mainly with attempting to "escape" the female life. Often such studies seem particularly to devalue the poet's occupation in the house in the years after the prolific "flood years," something Higginson's comments do for her entire life. John Cody describes Dickinson in the years after 1860 as "Loveless, excluded, almost burned out as a poet, and reduced to the status of a queer, hypochondriacal, and depressed old maid" (438).

In her introduction, Mossberg defines a part of the "mystery" of the poet thus:

> She wore white, kept to her room or the upper floors of the house unless no one was about, and wrote poetry at night. The stream of voluminous, gushy letters of her early years dwindled to a trickle of aphoristic telegrams as the years progressed. (8)

Such portrayals are curious. They seem to imply that Emily Dickinson, as the concerned Millicent Todd Bingham phrases it, sat and rocked all day in her room. Mossberg claims that Dickinson wrote poetry at night. Indeed, she probably did find the evenings the best time for the careful copying

that is evident in the fascicles, not because she was "almost burned out as a poet" but because that is when the day's duties were done. Since she did stop attending to social duties by participating in calling, those hours could be spent writing. Further, such a reading as the one quoted above does not address the hundreds of extant scraps nor does it take into consideration much that the poet wrote in the final two decades.

The letters reveal that in the 1870s and 80s the poet "worked hard," her days "full of work" (L 695). The duty-filled days led her to describe her own involvement in household regulation as similar to that of the bluebirds (L 339), a darting here and there, or like a "troubled Top" spinning without reprieve (L 525), or a gymnast (L 685) practicing domestic acrobatics. She shared recipes with women in the community, requesting theirs whenever family members heard of something they wanted to try (L 369, 545, 734, and 835). The 1884 day she lapsed into unconsciousness, she was in the process of making a cake with Margaret Maher (L 907). During years when she herself was ill, she cared for her mother, a woman who eventually could neither walk nor raise her head (L 494, 574, 666, and 668). In these years, she continued her usual work, tending flowers only when she could be "spared" (L 412) and corresponding with neighbors, friends, and family before, during, and after the performance of diurnal chores. From what would be her own death

bed, she fulfilled the duties of domestic manners, sending notes and gifts to neighbors and relatives (L 1041; L 1044). Yet in many of the late letters, she speaks specifically of the power of the woman at home. In the midst of her domestic labors, Emily Dickinson defines herself as "Xerxes" (L 390) and as "Head of the Nation" (L 721). She has fun with the national news by claiming of the labor strikes that she is "not yet 'thrown out of employment'" (L 401). These are the years when she applauds the power of the women in her domestic sphere (L 542; L 667), comparing them to the presidential candidates and describing the division of duty within her own home as the "sweetest jurisprudence" (L 545).

Throughout the years of hard work, her domestic duties remained intimately connected with the words she recorded. She reports in one letter that she had been forced to read an article thus: "I snatched a Line at a time--taking it with me as I worked, and then returning for another--" (L 738). In order to describe the severity of an 1880 storm, she claims--in two separate letters--it was "came near enough to untie My Apron--" (L 689; L 690). Letter writing was often interrupted by the "kettle," (L 962) or for days on end when household work called, and notes to women ended suddenly with only "I must leave you" (L 691). The notes are often brief because she has "only a moment" (L 666) between chores. Nevertheless, more than half of the extant letters were written in the

years after 1874. It is during these final decades, in fact, that she defines a letter's power to capture the meaning which inheres in all moments (L 656).

Many of the letters of the 1870s and 80s also reveal the poet's experience of the domestic life. In correspondence wherein she points out that she is "working hard," she pronounces, too, that life is an "exquisite" "spell" (L 389). An 1878 letter seems to have been written while the poet watches the sunset from a table near a window. It also includes a poem that is now a part of her canon (L 544). She is sewing with Lavinia Dickinson in 1881 when she comes to the idea to write a letter (L 692). One 1883 note describes looking out the window and seeing the horses and realizing they were the color of what she was preparing. She sent the delicacy as a gift (L 837). The final decade is the one in which she feels that immortality "sweeps around" her "while" she does her work (L 785), when she claims that "To live is Endowment" (L 399), that the "Madonnas" she sees are those in the street on their way to work (L 460).

As Emily Dickinson claims, "maturity only enhances mystery" (L 769). The 1870s and 80s are the years--as much as those between 1858 and 1862--when she felt, as she claims in 1873, that she must at all times be prepared for "a sudden Feast" (L 382). Dickinson's poetic

exploration of the experience of home, an experience she images as both sacred and especially conducive to poetry, continued all her life. She thought and went about her work. A line in the Amherst town clerk's 1886 records filled in by Austin Dickinson offers commentary regarding Higginson's questioning the poet whether or not she felt a "want of employment." The line on the certificate contains only the word "Occupation." Once Austin Dickinson completed the form, it read, "Occupation: At Home." Emily Dickinson remained at home, where she found "magical power." She did not feel a want of employment because, as she claims, "at home," "Occupation--This-- / The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise--" (657). For much of her life, Emily Dickinson had to defend such an occupation, her "shunning Men and Women." In fascicle poems like the 1862 one that she copied for Susan Gilbert Dickinson in 1863 (perhaps in declining an invitation to the Evergreens) she tried to explain the vitality of the mystical life she led and why she felt the need to stay at home. The poem reads,

> The Soul that hath a Guest
> Doth Seldom go abroad--
> Diviner Crowd at Home--
> Obliterate the need--

And courtesy forbid

A Host's departure when

Upon Himself be visiting

The Emperor of Men-- (674)

Paradise is within; there lives the diviner crowd. The poet never needed to follow Higginson's advice and sojourn to Boston for intellectual and spiritual inspiration. In fact, she informed him in 1866 "To escape enchantment, one must always flee. Paradise is of the option" (L 319).[40]

Emily Dickinson's experience of domesticity transfigured her home into "God's house" because she was gifted with a vision that apprehended the timeless pattern of life and that shared in its vitality. As she claims in 1870, "Home is the definition of God" (L 355). She had "furnished" eyes and could "notice" in sudden instances of intense perception the sacred nature, the mystery, of the mundane things of home. When she busied her hands with the routines of her domestic life, her mind was still engaged with that sacred essence. In this way, habits became rituals, home itself a vast hieroglyphic by which she learned about love, human nature, immortality, and poetry. Perhaps Higginson came

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[40]Johnson's editing is puzzling here. See his edition of the letters (L 319) and his canonical "Paradise is of the option" (1069).

closer to describing the poet than is often thought when he referred to her as a "nun."[41] In the life this anchoress found herself living at home, Emily Dickinson discovered certainty and sacredness and poetry. Ultimately, the poet's divine revelation was that "Paradise" is "no Journey." For Emily Dickinson, there was a "Diviner Crowd at Home."

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[41]This reference is in the 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* article.

Afterword

Questioned in 1877 by guests at the Homestead why she did not "induce" her sister to get out of the house more often, Lavinia Dickinson replied simply, "But why should I? . . . She is quite happy and contended as she is. I would only disturb her" (Leyda II: 273). Compelled to re-visit this issue after the 1894 publication of the letters when the "Emily met her fate" story appeared in print, the poet's sister wrote in response:

> Emily's so called "withdrawal from general society", for which she never cared, was only a happen. Our mother had a period of invalidism, and one of her daughters must be constantly at home; Emily chose this part and, finding the life with her books and nature so congenial, continued to live it, always seeing her chosen friends and doing her part for the happiness of home. (Sewall I: 153)

In the biography still considered by some as definitive, Richard Sewall closes this exchange by claiming that regardless of her sister's declaration, Emily Dickinson's particular reclusion "could hardly be called natural by any standard, nineteenth or twentieth century" (154). The sister's comment is dismissed.

Martha Nell Smith reprints the following portion of the obituary written by Susan Gilbert Dickinson and published in the *Springfield Republican*, 18 May 1886:

> One can only speak of "duties beautifully done"; of her gentle tillage of the rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into the heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her subtle chemistries; of her tenderness to all in the home circle; her gentlewoman's grace and courtesy to all who served in house and grounds; her quick and rich response to all who rejoiced or suffered at home, or among her wide circle of friends the world over. This side of her nature was to her the real entity in which she rested, so simple and strong was her instinct that a woman's hearthstone is her shrine. (*Rowing* 210)

Only one line in Jay Leyda's reproduction from this editorial focuses so closely on the poet's particular duties of household governance and domestic manners. It reads: "There are many houses among all classes into which her treasures of fruit and flowers and ambrosial dishes for the sick and well were constantly sent, that will forever miss those evidences

of her unselfish consideration" (II: 472-73). Leyda cuts the section Smith chose.

Emily Dickinson informed Thomas W. Higginson in unambiguous language that she was "grateful" to be exactly who she was, that she "never thought of conceiving" of the "slightest approach" to a "want of employment" in her home, and that she found "ecstasy in living." Yet the record this man left of his relationship with the poet especially documents his preoccupation with the fact that she "never" went "outside her father's grounds" and his sense that she was "partially cracked." For varying reasons, readers have distrusted the words of two of the most important women in the poet's life and those of the poet herself. In doing so, biographers, editors, and literary scholars have slighted important aspects of Emily Dickinson's art: she was a woman poet involved in running a nineteenth-century home. According to her sister-in-law's obituary that life manifested richness and "grace," an existence wherein "duties [were] beautifully done."

However any given reader views domestic work, Emily Dickinson approached such chores as a poet, and with a poet's sensibility. Surely for each artist there is a source of creative power, some mantra or ritualistic ceremony or sacred place that triggers communion with the vitality of life and time--a phrase, a crucifix, a Walden pond. The

admonition of Rainer Maria Rilke quoted earlier bears repeating:

> If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place.

What has been judged mundane or unimportant or, even, symptomatic of the "partially cracked," may have been for Dickinson a gateway to "riches," a catalyst to art. This poet's manuscripts--the poems, letters, and prose fragments--are evidence that she was "poet enough to call forth" the richness, grace, and beauty of the domestic life. Dickinson may well have suffered a heartbreak or from a phobia of some type, but such does not negate the power that her opus suggests. While she worked at home, as she herself describes in the letters, she achieved poetic insight. Yet criticism often fails to recall the magnitude of her poetic vision, to see that diurnal tasks functioned as catalyst. They were the same duties that so many women of the nineteenth century performed. As agent for poetic alchemy, they remained the demanding and tedious work of scrubbing dishes and setting dishes in particular patterns on a dining table, of mending torn garments and stirring puddings over a hot stove in the summer's heat. Yet when Emily Dickinson approached them, the environment shifted. Perhaps to an observer the

performance of her hands as they worked with fabric and thread or spoons and pans was just that, the fulfillment of a duty. The poet's niece doubted that immortality could fall into her aunt's batter. But perhaps to this poet, who could recognize riches, repeated tasks were a gateway to vision.

In her social history of housework in America, Susan Strasser tells of Mathilda Larson, an eighty-year-old woman raised on a farm in North Dakota. Of her research into the lives of nineteenth and twentieth-century women of the ilk of Mathilda Larson, Strasser writes:

> Oral historians often interview subjects who consider their lives of little importance, believing history to be a matter of presidents and generals and kings. For Mrs. Larson, as for other housewives, humility finds daily reinforcement in a society that measures value in money and holds the work of those who earn no money to be without value. In a society where most people distinguish between "life" and "work," women who supervise their own work at home do not seem to be "working." This devaluation appears on all levels, from Mathilda Larson's incredulity at being interviewed to conventional social intercourse ("Is she working?") to the

> economist's numerical expression of national well-being, the gross national product. (4)

Historically, women's lives have been gauged by their lack of the qualities that exist in men's lives. Emily Dickinson's life is often measured by absences. Thomas Higginson felt she lacked employment. Early reviewers determined that the biography of this "Strangely Isolated" "Recluse" was "pathetically" void of significant event. In the early and mid-twentieth century, George Whicher and John Cody concluded that the poet's life was a failure in womanhood. For Cody, her art manifested symptoms that revealed her to be "loveless," "burned out," and "reduced to the status of a queer, hypochondriacal, and depressed old maid." More recently, Maryanne Garbowsky describes the poet as lacking freedom; she is a prisoner in her home.

Perhaps many of Emily Dickinson's contemporaries felt as did Mathilda Larson. Perhaps, like Aurora Leigh, the poet herself recognized the ways in which the patriarchal world tended to weigh her life. To me, Emily Dickinson's life at home also represents poetic power of the greatest source, the ability to "find ecstasy in living." Her manuscripts document ecstatic moments experienced among needles, thread, pots, and pans. Traditionally, history has given little room to the story of the woman in the home. Social historians like Kathryn Kish Sklar in the

1970s, Susan Strasser in the 1980s, and Jane Nylander in the 1990s have been working to revise history, to show a (her)story that history overlooked. Jane Nylander examines artists' representations of nineteenth-century "domestic icons" such as the kitchen hearth. For her, such artists "understood that the details of everyday life might be considered trivial, yet they also understood that the intimate world of the home is at the core of human experience" (5). Willa Cather recognized an art form long ignored in history but captured by artists such as those to whom Nylander refers, such as Cather herself:

> The farmer's wife who raises a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house and on the side runs a truck garden and a chicken farm and a canning establishment, and thoroughly enjoys doing it all, and doing it well, contributes more to art than all the culture clubs. (Bennett 167)

Along with the social historians who value the stories of such domestic artists as Cather here describes, literary scholars have been involved in revisionist work. Early in the 1970s, Elsa Green began the movement toward a redefinition of Dickinson; from the mid 1970s to 1990, the works of scholars such as Suzanne Juhasz, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Margaret Homans, and Paula Bennett firmly established the

concept of "woman poet." Others within that time frame have made significant revisions. David Reynolds and Joanne Dobson are of the school that insists on the value of examining Emily Dickinson's work in the light of her historical condition and her place in a wide range of women writers--the ilk of Helen Hunt Jackson and of "Mrs. A. J. Graves" and Fanny Forester. Adrienne Rich's famous article argues for the power of home. In her analysis, Dickinson's life in the domestic sphere exemplifies what the poet termed "Vesuvius at Home." Critics like Gertrude Reif Hughes and Sandra Gilbert bring the focus even closer. In their studies, extant manuscripts document the strategies and mysteries of this woman poet's function with thread and cake pans.

With my own work, the revisionist investigation continues. I examine the prose of the poet because I believe it is here that such a study begins. In her *Strategies of Reticence*, Joanne Dobson provides insights that suggest the reasons for extending revisionist discussions into the analysis of the letters of Emily Dickinson. Specifically, she explains the ways in which women's writing was delimited in the nineteenth century so that personal experience--especially a woman's "passional life"--was excluded. As she points out, in such restrictive practices, "Genre was a determining factor." Women chose literary forms according to the level of revelation they intended to make. In the nineteenth

century, Dobson argues, women expressed themselves freely only in literary forms less entrenched in patriarchal custom. As she explains in her analysis of genres wherein women in the nineteenth century did and did not reveal themselves:

> It must be noted that these genres--the essay and the local-color sketch--are not the ones traditionally most closely associated with expression of *personal* feeling and experience. The genres of poetry and the novel, more traditionally "literary," and more amenable to the in-depth presentation of women's lives and feelings, are where the constraints on feminine expression most clearly reveal themselves in marked omissions and evasions. These genres, particularly poetry, were problematic for women writers. They, more than other modes of expression, checked women's liberty in the creation of persona or protagonist and limited the inventiveness of their style. (10)

The point Dobson's study stresses over and over again is the remarkable fact that Emily Dickinson's canonical poetry "provides the most comprehensive and immediate experience of individual passion created by any American woman writing in the nineteenth century" (xiii). Although Dobson does not mention letters in her genre analysis or in this particular

declaration of Dickinson's feat, it is in her prose, too, that we see Emily Dickinson's passion.

In her obituary, Susan Gilbert Dickinson makes two statements that are particularly relevant. First, she points out that to Emily Dickinson "life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality." Second, she claims that for the poet, "the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work" (Leyda II: 473). The letters of Emily Dickinson are valuable sources for study because they evince the poet's sense that "life was aglow," that "Eternity" swept all around. They reveal, also, that home was "fit atmosphere" for the poet, and that prose was "fit" medium for the expression of a poetic revelation experienced in the domestic life. Dickinson scholarship includes a tradition of viewing that domestic life as the site of "bloodless tragedy," repression, illness, heartbreak, powerlessness. The letters of Emily Dickinson call for studies that focus, too, on the poet's strength, on her determination to stay where she "never conceived" of feeling a "want of employment." Her correspondence is rich with a domestic imagery that articulates this poet's passion: her approach to ritualized housework and the concomitant sudden flashes of apprehension that illuminated the landscape before her; the lessons that domestic life taught her about life, love, and poetic vision; and the certainty, sacredness, and poetry she found at home.

Certainly, the letters reveal that at home Emily Dickinson performed demanding work. At the Rockefellar Folk Art Center in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, the curators share with visitors the philosophy of "Aunt Jane of Kentucky." According to "Aunt Jane,"

> Piecin' a quilt's like livin' a life . . . . The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut 'em out and put 'em together . . . to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the calico. ("Colonial" 26)

Dickinson wrote about a "Housewife in the Evening West," about the "trouble" and the "transport" of the domestic life. Perhaps assessments that measure the poet's art as revealing a "poor" and "indifferent" experience of home do not tell the whole story. To me, Emily Dickinson seems much more like "Aunt Jane," an artist who knows how to piece together a beautiful work of art out of the fabric of everyday life--and who recognizes her power to do so. The poet claimed in her letters that "as" she sewed and "while" she worked in the home, she experienced revelation. She found ecstasy in living. The imagery of Emily Dickinson's prose suggests that for this woman poet the experience of the domestic life and the performance of everyday duties could become at any moment the gateway to a rich and "sudden feast."

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