2005

Dickinson's Facing or Turning Away

Mary Cappello
University of Rhode Island, mcapp@uri.edu

Citation/Publisher Attribution
CAPPELLO, MARY. "Dickinson's Facing or Turning Away." *Southwest Review*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2005, pp. 567–584. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43472482.
Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/43472482

MARY CAPPELLO

Dickinson's Facing or Turning Away

> *. . . although our interviews were chiefly confined to conversations between the brilliantly lighted drawing-room where I sat and the dusky hall just outside where she always remained, I grew very familiar with her voice, its vaguely surprised note dominant.*[1]

Is it more awkward to face or turn away?

If social decorum makes for hallucinated relations between people in space, Emily Dickinson sought to counter such fabrications with a trenchantly real body of work. Dickinson's orientation was seaward: "The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea—," she reports in an early letter, "I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!"[2] A letter written in the 1860s to her beloved sister-in-law and partner in composition, Susan Huntington Dickinson, admits a lifelong practice of navigating unsteadiness:

> You must let me
> go first, Sue, because
> I live in the Sea
> always and know
> the Road—
> I would have drowned
> twice to save
> you sinking, dear,
> If I could only
> have covered your
> Eyes so you would'nt
> have seen the Water—

Dickinson's orientation was seaward, and her preference was to stand inside a hallway, outside the reach of vision, when a visitor came to call. It wasn't that she lived in a beyond, frolicking in the

waves of some perilous delusion that left no time for others. No. Standing unseen in a hallway was how she wished to meet you. To face you was both too much (how could two infinities hope to touch?) and too little (greeting occasioned a repetition of the known; proscriptive encounters were exceedingly lean). Face-to-face meetings made for the predictable awkwardness of following social form: the sentence punctuated with the proper lilt, the teacup steadied, the hands held like closed wings in the lap, the hand lifted to greet and bid good-bye, the body sitting neither too lightly nor too heavily upon a chair. All of this *curtailed* conversation, whereas the awkward encounter with a person out of sight, but there, offered the possibility of a meeting of minds, a whisper in the dark of truth, a voice listened hard for and heard.

Dickinson's awkward game is an invitation to teeter—now a floorboard squeaks; to linger—I can't rely on visual cues to take my turn to speak. For disembodiment, we must turn to contemporary culture —the telephone, the internet—but in an encounter with Dickinson, one body feels the presence of the other on either side of the wall. Not a disembodied voice in the hallway, Dickinson's is a *differently* embodied voice. To hear you better, I look at the ceiling, I look at the floor, I look at the picture your voice draws for me, more present by being both out of sight and there. I close my eyes to take you in. Proximate, I yearn for you to speak again.

If modes of decorum prevent communication, sitting out of sight opens it up. "The precondition for all true intimacy is distance." This is how Diana Fuss summarizes one part of Dickinson's complex poetics of space. Fuss studies Dickinson's relationship to the space of her house at a time when the elite domicile was poised to become both compartmentalized and haven-like: a transitional moment in which the house was not yet considered a bastion of privacy but was on its way to being one. A public-ness still flowed through the rooms of the Dickinson Homestead, and rooms were never wholly given over to a single or separate use. Dickinson emerges as both a novel inhabitant of shifting space and a poet-architect who thinks, for example, with doors, and who questions repeatedly the terms by which intimacy is understood. Fuss suggests that Dickinson's strange form of colloquy was a way of training her interlocutor to perceive her as a poet. Dickinson stages the persona "poet" because of the

impossibility of radical poet finding a home in a female form. Presenting herself to a visitor, Dickinson risks being reduced to "woman." Standing out of sight inside the hallway, she hopes to be received as "poet."

In her efforts to perfect an awkward idiom, Dickinson relies on the slip or miss or pause; on near and off rhyme; on dashes like sudden trap doors for you to fall through; on identity mis-taken. Here's the astonishing beginning of a poem on self-doubt, a poem that takes the awkwardness of not knowing if one is alive as its opener:

> I am alive—I guess—
> The Branches on my Hand
> Are full of Morning Glory—
> And at my finger's end—
>
> The Carmine—tingles warm—
> And if I hold a Glass
> Across my mouth—it blurs it—
> Physician's—proof of Breath—
>
> I am alive—because
> I am not in a Room—
> The Parlor—commonly—it is—
> So Visitors may come—

Here we might conclude that the mistake of being in a hallway tells her she's alive. To reside in the parlor is tantamount to social death (it's where socially sanctioned encounters occur) and literal death (it's where they lay the body out). It's the place where people come

> And lean—and view it sidewise—
> And add "How cold—it grew"—
> And "Was it conscious—when it stepped
> In Immortality?"
>
> I am alive—because
> I do not own a House—
> Entitled to myself—precise—
> And fitting no one else—

In other words, a grave.

> And marked my Girlhood's name—
> So Visitors may know
> Which Door is mine—and not mistake—
> And try another Key—

Let's hope I am mistaken, these stanzas cleverly imply, taken for someone other than the name on a grave, not easily recognized and opened: to be awkwardly encountered is to know I am alive.

> How good—to be alive!
> How infinite—to be
> Alive—two-fold—The Birth I had—
> And this—besides, in Thee!

In an erotics of reading, according to these last lines, Dickinson is born in us, if only we take her for someone else.

Dickinson doesn't cower in the dark without a clue, without a candle in her hallway habit or in her poetry. She commands space and invites you to be discomfited along with her. When the visit is over, she tells you so by sending a servant into your space with a flower, a glass of sherry, or a verse, presumably on a tray. And here's where her awkward antics lose a little luster in the telling because if anyone remains truly disembodied in the endlessly proliferating scholarship on Emily Dickinson's life and work, it is her Irish immigrant servants. Outside of the dedicated work of Aife Murray to reconstruct their lives, readers rest content with forgetting the servants and picturing Dickinson as the individual genius, an American original, a quirk. But the body of a servant announces the end of Dickinson's peculiar form of meeting; the bodies of the servants afford space for her to make her poetry; the hands of the servant remove her slops from the room in which she sleeps and writes. They see her face to face, they nurse her when she is sick. Because art is never made in the dark, in the lone, perhaps we should refer to the poet as Emily Dickinson Maher. Maggie Maher was one of Dickinson's lifelong servants.

Maybe Dickinson didn't consider her servants personages enough to engage them in her experiments in awkwardness. What's troubling is that they were required. Maybe radical awkwardness always

entails a prop, and the support, even the subservience, of others. Or, maybe Dickinson employed them as cohorts and in this sense sought them out as kin: she, the awkward exile, they, the awkward immigrants. See the seven pall bearers, the Irish male immigrant servants: at her request, they are the ones who carry her tiny body in its coffin on their shoulders, according to her directions, *out the back door.* It's intimate and uncanny, this work she charges them with even to the end. Did her choice make for a "modest," an "unobtrusive" funeral? Or was the act a glaringly awkward statement? Or a way of saying that she, too, was a servant in the house: the immigrants served her so that she could serve poetry. Beguiling heft. Pleasurable release.

Seamless interpretations aren't possible in an encounter with Emily Dickinson's work. The quest for a key to fit the lock of her verse is useless as a defense against the awkward fumbling that her words incite. If we have to embrace awkwardness in order to receive her poems' unexpected gaps and turns, does this mean that her poems have the power to embarrass us? The humility of the voice, I suppose, might make us feel awkward in its presence—not exactly guilty but gangly, and drawn. Drawn toward the awe that is there, at awkwardness' cresting, something breaking at a juncture of delicacy and jab. And if I blush to read her, it is for the way that she giddily strips me of my sense.

Dickinson stands out of sight when visitors come to call because "—they talk of Hallowed Things aloud—and embarrass my Dog."[3] A Newfoundland. Named Carlo. Whose understanding of her proved to her she could not elude others. A certain relation to language embarrasses Dickinson, but, she, too, embarrasses her visitors with her intensity. Does Dickinson stand in the hallway so as not to embarrass you, no longer to embarrass Higginson, famous for his description of a rare face-to-face visit with Dickinson: "I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much," he wrote to his wife, "without touching her she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."[4]

There's a poem that begins with the line, "I was the slightest in the house—." At its cresting point, in even tones that cut through the page with the poignancy of their certitude, we read, "I could not

bear to live—aloud—/The Racket shamed me so—." (From a lesser writer, we might expect "alone," "for long," "anymore," "without . . . " Dickinson's "aloud" sticks, and resounds.) The poem seems to issue from embarrassment and self-abnegation, a retreating smallness sure to make a feminist reader cringe. But that's only if we take Dickinson at her word, only if we forget that Dickinson refused to announce herself in favor of announcing herself *otherwise*. Then the poem reads as one of the most divinely beautiful odes to disempowerment and sweet withdrawal, then the poem appears ironically loud:

> I was the slightest—in the House—
> I took the smallest Room—
> At night, my little Lamp, and Book—
> And one Geranium—
>
> So stationed I could catch the mint
> That never ceased to fall—
> And just my Basket—
> Let me think—I'm sure
> That this was all—
>
> I never spoke—unless addressed—
> And then, 'twas brief and low—
> I could not bear to live—aloud—
> The Racket shamed me so—
>
> And if it had not been so far—
> And any one I knew
> Were going—I had often thought
> How noteless—I could die—

A riotous, noisy, distracting, discordant clash of loud sounds, a jarring brass band of pots and pans clanging and it's not New Year's Eve. A racket. To live in the language bequeathed her by the culture, to live in the voice of a nineteenth century American woman was embarrassing and ugly and undesirable to Dickinson. This doesn't mean that she was subdued and quiet, refined or meek or mute. The prodigious number of poems and letters that issued from her pen was

anything but small or still. Dickinson pursued the *power* in restraint over and against empty hubbub. But there's more: the voice of her poems isn't the voice of her female acculturated coil—the merest in the house. The voice she wrote in was the voice as yet unheard by visitors. The voice, like a bat's navigational cry to human ears, out of range. It was a voice out of range because of the primacy placed on the eyes as reigning faculty. A voice unheard, out of range, and in search of a body.

The single lyric is that voice. Try to hear it—you can't without access to an extra sense.

The body that it finds, that Dickinson made for it, is the self-sewn volumes, called fascicles, the collected work.

The body that it seeks and finds is yours and mine when we read her—the reconfigured body of the reader awkwardly attuned.

To be awkwardly attuned, must we face, or turn away, and how does anyone know finally that she is looking, squarely, or turned around, not seeing at all? Maybe the truth is off to the side, and one must, like my friend following eye surgery, awkwardly point one's head toward ten o'clock for at least 24 hours in order to see it.

So much shows: on your face, in a courtroom—how much or little you have to face up to; in a bedroom—how comforting or disconcerting your dreams; in a classroom—indifference or puzzlement or that glassy indecision about where to focus your gaze lest the teacher notice you. The tear withheld: young face, who has returned your gaze till now? "No one," you reply, "so much as this book, this author has." And on the street, the faces look where they are going, and if not, diminish their stride. I cannot tell if the person—with the long light hair and puffy chest, the soft face and large delicate hands—is a man or a woman. I am sitting in my car, he is walking down the street. I am imagining him a man by day, a woman by night when he turns his head and smiles at me, as if to say, "you're right, I'm one of you." I smile back.

To save face is to conquer embarrassment or cover-up an untoward act. An awkward face is one that doesn't match a situation or one that gives you away. My thoughts more than not appear on my face especially during meetings when I'm supposed to be focused on the minutiae at hand, and the person who is talking thinks my face is a

response to his report, about which, now he is sure, I disagree, and it's hard to explain my face away because I neither agree nor disagree—I haven't heard.

Faced with a difficult issue, how do you proceed? I remember at age eleven buying a book called *Creative Problem Solving* in the dollar bin at the local five-and-ten-cent store. I thought it would give me the resources I needed and lacked. That it would prepare me for high school or college.

Turning away might mean to look elsewhere, to insist on a different emphasis, to attend a margin, to highlight a fringe, to spend a day eating nothing but desserts at hourly intervals because you want to change the clock to meet a longing, to make the clock-face care about you rather than pin you with its hands, your body on its wrack, winding. The face of the clock brightens with each forkful. This is awkwardness's happy offshoot. Not that other turning away, turning as an act of tortuous refusal. Funny how rarely that brand of looking away diminishes pain. Sidestepping a pain that the mind can't meet, avoidance produces awkwardness, a life spent dodging a threat only apparent to oneself but unnamed. The sidestep can take the form of a graceful lilt—and there's the sadness in it—the pain and the awkwardness denied, like the boy whom Emily Dickinson cites who whistles by the graveyard to cover his fear. Sometimes when I'm afraid, I begin to skip, by which I don't mean miss a step but fly like a carefree baby on the loose or Donald O'Connor dancing up a storm and down a street.

And here I think of that line oft-quoted in High School yearbooks, the Thoreauvian paean to independence, about the man who can't keep pace with his companions, and how he should step, is it, to the drumbeat that he hears. And if the drumbeat is that of fear? I think one comes to strike bargains with fear, to draw up pacts and treaties, appeasements or traps, that the relationship has to be constantly reinvented, but fear doesn't simply vanish, even if it isn't presently felt. Fear has the power to blunt other feelings and here's where awkwardness comes in: instead of asking *what are you feeling?*, awkwardness asks *how or what are you numbing?* There's an ice pack on your butt when you'd like to be kissed there, no "ifs" or "ands." The place where you sit or rest, rise or fall, the hopeless hapless platitude of what it comes down to.

To face equals to feel. Is that true? Or, can facing occlude feeling where facing means commanding, mastering, admitting, confessing, where facing is to answer the call of one's training, numbly accepting. It seemed impossible to "face death," though each of us tried, and so often in peculiarly self-immolating ways. Did you ever have that feeling that if one switch were to be turned off, maybe even one that's been hounding you like a switchback, that if this one were to go, so would they all? Or that a need to close up shop, if you indulged it, wouldn't induce rest but death?

Tears on a face, or tears (as in openings, breaks). Extravaganza of solitudes. Solitaires. Extravaganza of vagaries faced and made solid, given form, breathed life into, the poem's ground and sound. Intensities marshaled. Pages face, they follow, they lead, they meaningfully work, closed, they superimpose, and, open, disposition, dispossess one another, they regulate the contours of a book, they peel and parch and evenly blot, they kiss. Face me so I can feel your face, or should I come to it from behind with my hands open and my eyes shut? When the darkness passes, the head lifts, is lighted, can be lit again—the face half-hidden in darkness, the face asleep in the dark, the face lit by neon under erasure, the face illuminated in autumn amber light.

Emily Dickinson was an odd one, there's no doubt about it, not exactly an oddball, more like an odd fellow and a maker of oddments. She exploited space, margins, and gaps in her letters and her poems, often with the effect of producing an aesthetic of suspension and thresholds. She also manufactured strange envelopes which she filled with unexpected content. Consider the following letter:

> Dear Sue—
> Your little
> mental gallantries
> are sweet as
> Chivalry, which
> is to me a
> shining Word
> though I don't
> know its meaning—
> I sometimes re-
> member we are

to die, and
hasten toward
the Heart which
how could I woo

This part of the letter is enclosed in an envelope of sorts, since, in either margin, the following menacing lines appear:

In margin on right side
in a rendezvous where there
In margin on left side
is no Face? Emily—

The letter is hard to figure in pointed and poignant ways—what's a "mental" gallantry? Why describe them as chivalrous if you don't know its meaning? Because, of course, Dickinson uses words like things, she likes the way the word "Chivalry" shines. Then a gap is introduced, as though the letter's sentiment were interrupted, stopped in its tracks by thoughts of death. Longing, a hastening is announced, but the object to which the I is drawn, that Heart, seems to push and pervert the sentence that follows into a terse and inverted syntax that leaves us reeling back and forth between the acrostic "how" and "woo": "how could I woo." All of this is then framed by a cryptic envelope—a rendezvous where there is no Face. There are so many enfoldings here, and one risks, in undoing them, unraveling the poem/letter. (In fact I often find that at the center of Dickinson's poems lurks a taut rosebud that we are not meant to force open).

Would Susan Huntington Dickinson, as lover, have been able to fill in the gaps? Would Susan have been unusually receptive to Dickinson's codes, the wholly original recipient of total understanding? I'm afraid not, because Dickinson's work neither yields to nor seeks to fit. This is nowhere more apparent than in the manuscript pages where, following poet Susan Howe's cue, we can heed the literal not just the immanent gaps between words. Try reading a Dickinson poem with those handwritten spaces between words restored, those gaps that are edited out by anthologizers, and you come to feel as though you are in the presence of a nineteenth century John Cage. Dickinsonian blanks, one surmises, don't wish to be filled. Dickinson requires us to dwell in awkward silence and stir. The ear

cranes after such pauses; the poem tolls as much as it sings; and, the voice of the poems read in manuscript has less of the lilt that we associate with Dickinson's song and more of a longing. Those deliberate spaces make for a poetry of stillness and yawp, where "yawp" falls somewhere between a yawn and a yell. Each pause tempts interruption by all that language otherwise bars.

Dickinson menaces: I remain stuck at the place where she announces, on either side of a love-letter verse, "a rendezvous where there is no Face." It seems like a horrifying prospect—a meeting with Facelessness, and I don't know if it means to picture an encounter with God, faceless non-human; with the beloved, whom she cannot bear to face; or, as a friend of mine suggests, with chivalry itself, a knight's face obscured by a helmet. It seems like a horrifying prospect, but I suspect that for Dickinson it signals some possibility of bliss.

To meet without facing. Is it more awkward to face or turn away?

There is one poem by Emily Dickinson in which facing and awkwardness literally appear together. It makes me gasp, this poem; it almost makes me cry:

> If I'm lost—now—
> That I was found—
> Shall still my transport be—
> That once—on me—those Jasper Gates
> Blazed open—suddenly—
>
> That in my awkward—gazing—face—
> The Angels—softly peered—
> And touched me with their fleeces,
> Almost as if they cared—
>
> I'm banished—now—you know it—
> How foreign that can be—
> You'll know—Sir—when the Savior's face
> Turns so—away from you—

The awkward gazing face is a lost face, unfocussed, without an object; the awkward gazing face is present and searching, but risks/fears gaps and absence. The face is awkward because it knows so

little and wants so much. It is awkward because it is daring to look even though meaning is beyond it. It is awkward because it's a baby face believing there is love to be found in the Face of the Maker and that the Maker can be found by it, wants to be Found by its puny self that seems to say "please?" It's Dickinson's version of Munch's *The Scream*: not a face of mutating horror unleashed but of wide-eyed vulnerability. "Once" in its life, its gaze was returned by tender Angels who not only "softly peered" but also touched the speaker with their fleeces. Who wouldn't wish for a softly peering reply to her awkwardness, and the consolation of a downy stroking by angel interlocutors?

The key word here is "Almost"—"Almost as if they cared," because this speaker doesn't believe that she really can be rescued from her awkwardness, or that angels would have any reason to single her out for saving.

In the world this poem emerges from, Dickinson's family, friends, peers, and other loved ones were claiming to be "found" right and left. Religious revivals and conversion experiences abounded; "submission" to the Higher Power was the order of the day. But the movement and its fervency failed to awaken or convince Dickinson—she turned away from its consolatory power and the seductiveness of its delusions. Dickinson's refusal to "serve" the idea of the wholly comforting and possibly paralyzing returned gaze, her opting for awkwardness as a condition that one need learn to work with and live through, is loudly announced by the seemingly tiny detail at the end of her Jasper-gated poem where both a rhyme is refused between "be" and "you"—the match of course would be "be" and "Thee"—and a subservience to another person, some Sir, who would claim a higher authority in being saved but whom Dickinson will not humble herself to.

What Dickinson faced, over and against the gaze of a reconciling God, were numerous uncanny strangers; her poems often record the effects of her looking into an abyss. It's quite possible that Dickinson found the abyss less frightening, less disarming than the face of another person.

The range of her attentions brings to mind the idea of a purview; of the limits of what a self can accommodate (which realities, which truths); and the notion of absent presences. Dickinson's poetry

extends the purview or the normal range of the seen; it tests the boundaries of accommodation; and it admits and faces the absent presences in the room.

Often enough, the persona, even the "voice," produced by a Dickinson poem, is accompanied by a stranger, and scores of the poems address uncanny visitors to the domestic space. "Alone, I cannot be—," one poem begins, "For Hosts—do visit me—/Recordless Company—/Who baffle Key—." The wind enters another poem, and the host is hard-pressed to welcome formlessness into the borders of her home or of her verse, but she finds a way to accommodate strange formlessness, finds a peculiar language to represent the unrepresentable when she writes:

> No Bone had He to bind Him—
> His Speech was like the Push
> Of numerous Humming Birds at once
> From a superior Bush—

The wind is accommodated in the space between the words, even the plosives, the phonemes that distinguish "Push" from "Bush." In a particularly modern piece of verse, "In Winter in my Room," Dickinson imagines the entry of a worm into her room which the speaker attempts to bind with a string, but the leash only occasions a terrifying transformation of the worm into a snake, now "ringed with power." Tethers, often enough in Dickinson, never simply oppress, or exert power but produce power, engender it. What grows even more startling than the bound worm's power in this poem, though, is the transformation at the level of language required to accommodate the fearsome absent presence in the room—for these poems of domesticity undone always suggest the extent to which familiarity requires a degree of pretense and denial of its other in order to be maintained. At a heightened moment of terror in the poem, the snake faces the speaker, the speaker faces the snake, and the poem turns into a highly modern Cubist piece of verse:

> I shrank—'How fair you are'!
> Propitiation's Claw—
> 'Afraid he hissed

Of me'?
'No cordiality'—
He fathomed me—
Then to a Rhythm *Slim*
Secreted in his Form
As Patterns swim
Projected him.

The speaker here is fathomed by the thing she sought to tame, fully faced and plumbed by the uncanny other, and the result of being fathomed by the ejected strange is a radical relation to language—the poetry, the poem that the snake becomes.

What makes being faced awkward is the possibility that someone will see, or see through you; or, in fathoming you, vanquish you; or worse, see but fail to acknowledge you; or claim to have seen nothing. Dickinson admits strange intimacies into her poems, into her purview, and so submits to awkwardness in order to produce art. But Dickinson's presence in light of her forays into awkwardness, her inhabitance of awkwardness, or her dance with awkwardness, is never wholly clear or true. One glance at Dickinson's life and especially at the relation she had to her work reveals a complex fort-da game, a many webbed dome of disclosure and secrecy.

People seemed to know and not know that Dickinson wrote poems.

The person who came to edit the first volume of her poems, Mabel Loomis Todd, never actually saw Dickinson.

Dickinson rarely left her house.

Dickinson left her house in the form of thousands of letters that she penned in her lifetime.

Dickinson eschewed print culture in favor of her hand bound handwritten volumes.

Unlike the work of contemporary lyric poets, the aim of Dickinson's art wasn't self-expression, but an exploration of self with a capital S —the production of a Self through art but also an inquiry into its conditions of possibility.

The Irish immigrant servants afforded Dickinson a degree of privacy required by her to write, but that privacy, that space within which she needed to reside in order to create, was also something that she took.

Writing is implicitly a public act.

Dickinson hid her poems in a trunk.

After Dickinson's departure, her poems came to light. After Dickinson's death, her poems became present.

The Dickinson persona is one of a there not-thereness. Each time I read a poem of Dickinson's, I think I glimpse her reappearance, and each time she reappears, on either side of an absence, a pause, or a gap, she is more unexpected, more subtle, more different, more alarmingly grotesque.

This leaves me with a vexing question: why couldn't Dickinson and her poetry be present simultaneously? Why couldn't she accompany her verse into the public sphere? Why couldn't the poetry be made public until after she had disappeared? What awkwardness was she afraid would ensue? I picture Dickinson, without the protection of conversion, living life nakedly. On March 12, 1853, she wrote to Susan Huntington Dickinson: "... so you see when you go away, the world looks staringly and I find I need more vail." I picture Dickinson living in her body and her work without recourse to the defenses that others claimed so easily. This doesn't mean that she was helpless, but that she was trying for a fuller sense of being, less relentlessly, less assuredly, less restlessly armed. Dickinson didn't want her verse to return to her—for us to seek her there, or to *be* returned to her, in the form of a package that had missed its recipient. Larger than any room or any self, it would have vanquished her. I picture Dickinson slipping out the back door of her own party, her own show, leaving us to wonder if what she's left us with, this abounding presence, is the stranger or the self. Leaving us to face together what she faced alone.

In one of Dickinson's most famous poems, "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me—," the poet imagines her future reader not as a set of eyes, not as a face that will be struck dumb by her verse, but as a set of (unseen) hands:

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me—
> The simple News that Nature told—
> With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

Committing her poems to future readers' hands, she requests this dance; she hopes, it seems, for an intimacy in place of an awkward gawking. But a Dickinson poem is never this easy to receive, it certainly rarely holds a reader's hand, and Dickinson's figuring of hands opens an awkward gulf between our very own faces and our very own hands, the face and the hand of the owner out of synch.

"I felt my life with both my hands/To see if it was there." In these lines, Dickinson figures a person not exactly encountering herself with her hands in an act of self-making or undoing—in either case as a defense against awkwardness—but as a response to a fundamental question about the matter of embodiment. Dickinson doesn't locate the "life" that the hands are feeling in the body, and thus the lines' startlingly uncanny effect. I suppose we could picture this figure hugging or pinching herself, drawing a foot up to a mouth the way she did as a baby, but the lines don't offer that closure. Instead they posit "my life" as something awkwardly poised outside of and away from the body, scarily abstracted. Dickinson didn't write—I searched my rooms for *signs* of myself to see if I was there, I read my poems up and down to find me loitering there. To see oneself may be easier and less likely even to produce awkwardness than to feel oneself, since the latter suggests a fundamental split that must ever be negotiated even as we might pretend it doesn't exist. That split might look like this: each one of us "has" a self, or, rather, "is" a self, and each one of us can "feel" or be cognizant of that self. (The self feeling the self. The self encountering the self. At the same time that one proceeds as though one were self-same.)

The emphasis on feeling the self and being the self simultaneously doesn't edge us into the area of an observing ego, self-consciousness, or, at a pathological register, "schizophrenia." It seems more to do with the matter of being in some *abstract* sense (the being that inheres in an inner life) and being in an embodied sense (the being that inheres in physiology). It's not, though, the famous mind/body split that Dickinson's

couplet turns us toward, but something more like the hand/matter split, the hand/life split, maybe even the hand/writing split.

People study Dickinson's hand/writing these days to uncover an aesthetic; they contemplate the folds in letters made by hands one hundred and fifty years ago to discern how cherished or troubling the letter, how often it was handled and therefore re-read. (But maybe those folds don't reveal how much a letter was read but how much it was "worried"). Readers "worry" over Dickinson's manuscripts to the point of fetishizing them—which would suggest that the absences their materiality provokes is really too anxious-making for us postmoderns.

Dickinson may have been enamored of hands—she certainly fashioned hands in her poems in delicate, bizarre, and playful ways. When she remembers finding favorite flowers, she describes mostly, in letters, not the sight of the flower, its shape, color or scent, but her "clutch" of it. She remembers the first time she felt, gathered, handled it—or how, we might conclude, it held her since "clutch" makes possible a feel of push/pull longing. She writes into being "vacant Hands," and "Hempen Hands," "narrow" and "childish Hands." She imagines a time "when Formula, had failed . . . /And shape my Hands," and "The spider" who "holds a silver Bell/In Unperceived Hands." This is all well and good, even a lovely celebration of hands, capitalized, hands grappling, groping, attached and detached, mysterious and feelingful. But "Hands" can never figure easily or "poetically" in Dickinson's work once a reader has encountered the image Dickinson offered of her own hands that she gave in a letter to Susan Huntington Dickinson—

> Take back that
> "Bee" and "Buttercup"—
> I have no Field
> for them, though
> for the Woman
> whom I prefer,
> Here is Festival—
> When my Hands
> are Cut, Her
> fingers will be
> found inside—

Emily Dickinson: socially awkward poet known for her brilliant sublimation of debilitating shyness into an aesthetic of reticence.

Emily Dickinson: socially awkward poet, awkward because of her inability to feign, to hide; who might come to be known for her ghoulish graphicness. Dickinson was a graphic poet, a hand/writing who answered the piercing light, glint for glint.

1. Millicent Todd Bingham quoting Mabel Loomis Todd, Dickinson's brother's lover, and one of Dickinson's first posthumous editors, in *Ancestor's Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), 12.
2. Quoted in Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 104.
3. Quoted in Maryanne M. Garbowsky, *The House Without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia*, (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 63.
4. Quoted in Diana Fuss, "Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10.3 (Fall 1998), 21.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Scholars to whose work on Emily Dickinson I am especially indebted in these pages include Sharon Cameron on an aesthetic of "choosing not choosing"; Diana Fuss on Dickinson, space, and the architecture of the Homestead; Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith on the letter-poems that passed from Emily Dickinson to her sister-in-law and companion author, Susan Huntington Dickinson; Susan Howe on the manuscript space of the poems; Aife Murray on Dickinson's servants and her relationships with them, most especially with Maggie Maher, as well as the detailed contours of keeping a New England house in the mid-19th century; and numerous biographers of Dickinson not least of whom is Cynthia Griffin Wolff, her magisterial study of Dickinson's life in the context of the Second Great Awakening. All citations to poems refer to the *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, edited by R. W. Franklin (Massachusetts: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). Letters to Susan are drawn from Hart and Smith's edited volume, *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Paris Press, 1998), and appear here in the following order: letter #113, #242, #16, and #102.