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J. Max Barry

DePaul University, JBARRY12@depaul.edu

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*Reaching for a Connection: Hand Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poems*

A Thesis

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Partial Fulfillment of the

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By

J. Max Barry

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

DePaul University

Chicago, Illinois

## *Introduction*

The image of the hand is important to Emily Dickinson scholarship as both a symbol in her poetry and as a symbol in the criticism that comments on it. While the former will be the primary focus of the present study, the latter was its original inspiration. The hand used as a metonymic representation of the author, as it appears in theoretical studies, is an especially useful lens through which to view Dickinson's writing. Roland Barthes describes the modern text as if the author's "hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins" ("The Death of the Author," 223). While Dickinson was considered by some to be a modernist predecessor and was an almost exact contemporary of Mallarmé (Barthes' seminal French modernist), the importance of handwriting, the material of the text, and the private "hand-to-hand" distribution of her poetry represents a stark contrast to Barthes' modern author (Erkkilä, 14 and Aiken, xv).<sup>1</sup> Dickinson's hand, as described in scholarship, is intimately attached to her voice.

Yet since her first publication, Dickinson's readers have expressed a desire to connect to the author behind the text more intimately, as if the hand that authored it were, in some way, absent. In a preface to "Sic transit gloria mundi"—Dickinson's second earliest poem, and one of a select few that was published in print during her lifetime—the editors of *The Springfield Daily Republican* addressed this desire in relation to the metonym of the author's hand directly:

The hand that wrote the following amusing medley to a gentleman friend of ours, as "a valentine," is capable of writing very fine things, and there is certainly no presumption in entertaining a private wish that a

correspondence, more direct than this, may be established between it and the Republican.<sup>ii</sup>

While the tone of this preface is “playfully impersonal,” the editor’s request to know the author more personally presages a central concern of Dickinson scholarship (Jackson, 137). With Dickinson, perhaps more than any other American author, the figure behind the text guides interpretation of her poetry, while concurrently remaining tantalizingly elusive. More specifically, the critical debate that carries over to the present moment of Dickinson studies has been framed by the symbolic problem of connecting, disconnecting, or imagining a connection of the authorial hand to the text.

With R.W. Franklin’s 1981 publication of the facsimile edition of Dickinson’s poems came increased scholarly attention to Dickinson’s “hand.” A series of foundational studies followed that took various positions on how much importance to attach to the holograph. Each forwarded unique hermeneutic methodologies, often used to present socio-political stances through the presentation of the figure of Emily Dickinson. Martha Nell Smith argued that the facsimile edition forces the reader to make individual interpretations of the facsimiles—urging them to create a “dance mix” (56), and coining the “lesbian rules” of “pliant and accommodating principles for judgment” (79)—both implicitly and explicitly attaching a hermeneutic system of truth to a patriarchal academic practice (1). Susan Howe—who writes that the essays included in the *Birth-Mark* “are direct and indirect results of my encounter with *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*”—argued all interpretations of print editions of Dickinson were misinterpretations (1).<sup>iii</sup> She writes, “An idea of the author of Emily Dickinson—her symbolic value and aesthetic function—has been shaped” by Johnson’s long-held standard edition of Dickinson’s poems (131). Howe argues that only through the original

hand of the author, as reproduced in the holograph, can one view the authentic Dickinson: a figure she aligns to a series of American antinomians. Walter Benn Michaels responds to Howe in *The Shape of the Signifier*, arguing that authorial intention and meaning cannot be separated. In doing so, he diminishes the importance of the holograph. Lastly, in this brief list of important studies, Virginia Jackson proposes a hermeneutics that falls in the middle of Howe and Benn Michaels. Jackson's deconstruction of lyric idealization of Dickinson proposes a return to "*Beforehand*."<sup>iv</sup> By reconstructing the original material text and imagining the exchange of that text through a series of hands, Jackson exposes editorial practice that presented Dickinson as an isolated figure that handed her "private utterances" directly to her future reader (204). Jackson's *Beforehand* represents a moment in Dickinson's textual history before lyric idealization imagined the text as a direct encounter with the authorial hand.

The symbol of the hand in Dickinson's poetry runs in close parallel to the symbol in scholarship. Jackson writes, "The historical form and *figurative* content of Dickinson's writing suggests that it should" be mediated through the lens of the "hand-to-hand economy of the written correspondence" (163).<sup>v</sup> Thus, the present study will analyze how hand imagery—a form of figurative content—functions in Dickinson's poetic oeuvre. I will argue that the hand imagery illustrates Dickinson's essential motivation to write. Whereas the symbol of the hand in scholarship represents the readers' attempts to connect to the author to the text, the symbol in the verse describes Dickinson's reciprocal attempt to connect to her reader through her verse. Moreover, I will argue that Dickinson conceived of the writing and exchange of her verse as a temporary substitute for a lost connection to an impersonal, Puritan God. The "hand" poems describe Dickinson's

disillusionment with a God who was not immediately present, and the subsequent recourse to human companionship most powerfully felt through a mediated, textual relationship carried out in verse.

According to S.P. Rosenbaum's 1964 concordance, the word "hand" or "hands" appears 112 times (the 87<sup>th</sup> and 257<sup>th</sup> most common words, respectively) in just over 100 poems.<sup>vi</sup> As would be expected in such a large sample of poems, these hands do not describe a single subject. They are the hands of spiders, the wind, clocks, "something quieter than sleep," God, and, of course, men and women. The present study will not attempt to describe the entire spectrum of the hands' function across Dickinson's complete poetic oeuvre. For example, it will not consider the large subset of anthropomorphic nature poems. Rather, it will be restricted to an analysis of poems where the image of the hand illustrates speakers' attempts to establish connections with various figures opposite them.

The first section will analyze "hand" poems that describe the speaker's relationship to God. These poems will illustrate Dickinson's disillusionment with a Puritan conception of God with whom she cannot relate. I will argue that Dickinson could not *grasp* –i.e. she could not poetically conceptualize her understanding of—a hand of God that traditionally asserted its presence powerfully through the concept of sin. The argument will take into account both biographical evidence of Dickinson's religious upbringing, as well as her verse's allusions to Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The first section will also demonstrate how human companionship, as represented by the relationship between the speaker and her addressee, can lead to the satisfaction of a desire for an immediately felt connection left

unfulfilled by a relationship to God.

Dickinson's recourse to human companionship may be surprising considering her famous reclusiveness, but recent scholarship has worked to deconstruct the idealized figure of the isolated, despairing poet.<sup>vii</sup> Moreover, scholars continue to emphasize how Dickinson connected with her loved ones through textual correspondence. The second section will begin the discussion of how successfully a relationship mediated through a textual correspondence satisfied Dickinson's desire to connect intimately with another person. Through the image of the hand, one can view the speakers of the second section's poems reaching for a connection to figures on the opposite side of the text. However, these figures occupy a similar position to the absent God depicted in section one of this thesis. The relationships described are either lost to the past, or too heavily mediated to allow a satisfactory form of immediacy. The speakers reach to connect to the hand of their loved ones through the textual correspondence, but as the figure is once again absent, are left dissatisfied.

The third and final section will describe how Dickinson's verse mediates relationships that successfully satisfy a desire for immediacy. The section will first consider how Dickinson imagines the limited capacity of the written page to mediate a relationship with God. It will then build on Jackson's argument that Dickinson's poetry functioned as an intersubjective space where reader and author establish an intimate connection through the exchange of material objects in an epistolary correspondence. I will use the symbol of the hand to demonstrate how Dickinson conceived of the material exchange of the text as way to achieve a sense of immediacy with her reader. The speakers in the third section succeed where those from the first and second section fall

short. Unlike the speakers in the first and second sections, who reach for the hand of absent figures only to find reminders of lost connections, the speakers in the third section successfully connect to their readers through the material body of the text. The combination of text and material allow the reader to feel immediately connected to the author through the creation of an intersubjective space where they meet and share the pleasure of interpreting the text of the poem.

Many recent influential studies of Dickinson focus on hermeneutic problems concerned with establishing correct protocol for interpreting her verse through the lens of the material body of the text. Through the study of the material, these studies arrive at conclusions about what the text means. The present argument proceeds from an analysis of the symbolic value of the hand, to conclusions about how that figurative content comments on the material reception of the verse. Neither starting point is more valid than the other, as the textual and the material bodies of Dickinson's verse are inseparable. Whether one begins with a consideration of the handwriting, hand-making, and hand-delivery of Dickinson's text, or with the function of the hand as a symbol that describes connections made to other people, one arrives at the same conclusion. The material body of the poetry enhances the symbolic value of the text. The significance of the symbol of the hand cannot be separated from a consideration of the text's value as an object one can, to put it in Dickinson's words, "Carry in the Hand."



## *I. The Divine Hand*

At its most basic level, the symbol of the hand functions as a point of connection between two people. Taking a person's hand in one's own is a symbol of companionship and understanding. However, as would be expected, the hand of God does not function in the same way as a human hand in one's relationship to the divine. In "A Lesson in Grammar," Magdalena Zapedowska describes how the touch of God's hand in Dickinson's poetry can both affect "the individual's rapturous submission to the Deity, his/her utmost humility in the face of God's infinite power," and represent a "dreadful token of surveillance, confinement, or death" (25, 27). In both instances, the hand of God is only present in the moment of conversion or arrival of death.<sup>i</sup> Except for these rare instances, God's hand is not within reach. His presence is not immediately felt. The poems in the following section depict speakers reacting to this absence.

Dickinson's uncertain relationship to God is reflected in the tone of her theological "hand" poems, which can be striking in both their intimacy and their apparent formalism. They can be both familiar to a modern reader, or something that is uncomfortably fixed in nineteenth-century culture. Generally, the discomfort comes from either the pronounced meter—it is a common quip that all of Dickinson's poems can be spoken to the rhythm of "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star"—or the particular brand of theology. Dickinson's self-identification as a "psalmist" blurs the distinction between meter and theme, which proves disorienting when borderline heretical statements are composed in hymn-meter (Oberhausen, 59).<sup>ii</sup> However, the greater the sample size of poems one considers, the clearer it becomes that the tension between formalism and intimacy are not unrelated. It reflects a larger tension that defines Dickinson's

relationship to God. Dickinson is by no means a secular poet; her poems are deeply involved with issues central to the Protestant faith. On the other hand, she is definitely not a Protestant poet; so many of her poems express doubt that borders on heresy. Rather, Dickinson cannot be definitively categorized as one or the other. As will be shown, the “hand” poems in the following section illustrate a rejection of a specific aspect of the Protestant faith. God is not dead to Dickinson, but the rare assertions of his presence do not satisfy her need to experience divine significance in everyday life.

The section will begin by analyzing Fr1649 “Back from the Cordial Grave I drag thee,” a poem that describes a speaker offering her hand to a dying companion who waits for God to extend his hand. Fr1649 demonstrates Dickinson’s opinion that God is inattentive to human suffering (a sentiment echoed by Fr292, “I got so I could hear his name —” discussed in section two), and that human companionship, represented by taking another person’s hand, can provide temporary relief from anguish. I will then proceed into a discussion of a pair of poems that suggest a specific reason Dickinson did not feel God’s presence immediately in her everyday life. I will use Fr1581, “Those dying – then,” and Fr1067, “Crisis is a Hair” to demonstrate Dickinson’s rejection of a Calvinist theological system where one connects to God through sin and the threat of damnation. Further, I will comment on how Dickinson’s poetry reflects and adjusts the imagery described in Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” I will then discuss biographical evidence of Dickinson’s lifelong crisis of faith. This will help deconstruct the idea that the chronological order of Dickinson’s poems suggests a straightforward progression towards a rejection of God. The section will conclude with Fr352, “They leave us with the Infinite,” to demonstrate how

Dickinson's expressions of dissatisfaction with God's presence, as represented by his oddly shaped hand, are present in an early poem.

Dickinson wrote Fr1649 in 1884, two years before she died. It is the latest dated example of a poem where the word "hand" appears:

Back from the Cordial Grave I drag thee  
 He shall not take thy Hand  
 Nor put his spacious Arm around thee  
 That none can understand.

Considered as the last example from this subset of poems, Fr1649 ostensibly represents a remarkable expression of doubt that traces a trajectory from belief to the dismissal of God. In other words, chronologically, it appears to represent a final, definite instance of Dickinson's rejection of the Christian religion. The speaker addresses an unidentified person who can be described as having one foot in the grave, waiting for death to reach out to her in the figure of God. By describing the grave as "Cordial," the speaker highlights the irony of the perspective of her addressee. This person considers the grave to be a salutary, invigorating place, or as Webster defines it in his 1844 dictionary, as both "1. Proceeding from the heart; hearty; sincere; not hypocritical; warm; affectionate; as we give our friends a cordial reception...With looks of cordial love—*Milton*," and as something that is "2. Reviving [to] the spirits; cheering; invigorating; giving strength or spirits; as *cordial* waters."<sup>iii</sup> The connection of the root of the word to the heart highlights the contradiction of the addressee's perspective. She considers the grave a place of life and expects the hand of God to appear, rescue, and revivify her.

While Fr1649 does describe a type of disillusionment, it does not represent a complete rejection of God. Rather, it dismisses a specific conception of God as an

impersonal deity that does not extend his hand to a suffering person. The addressee, who the speaker attempts to free from the pitfalls of a traditional conception of Puritan pleasure deferred, waits for God to extend his hand and rescue her from suffering. This is a particularly difficult task because the addressee imagines a connubial relationship to God: in death, God will take her hand in marriage.<sup>iv</sup> The speaker assures her that this will not occur, “He shall not take thy Hand.” In the next line, the speaker continues to focus on the impossibility of a physical relationship through a subtle application of catachresis, “Nor put his spacious Arm around thee.” Dickinson commonly associates the divine with expansiveness, and her use of the adjective “spacious” highlights the inhumanness of the “Arm.” In doing so, the speaker brings into view the problematic logic that the arrival of God, what the final poem of this section calls the “Infinite,” provides no human comfort. The speaker further confronts the flaw of the addressee’s logic by juxtaposing the expanse of the divine arm with the enclosure of the grave. The comfort provided by God’s arm and hand is that which opens up the coffin, pulling the soul from the narrow confine into the heavens. The speaker considers this a false comfort, and wants to direct the addressee’s attention away from death, back to life.

In order to convince her addressee to accept the human comfort of her hand, the speaker adopts a mock religious tone. She imitates God’s voice by using the archaic pronouns “thee” and “thy,” and defuses the gravity of the addressee’s fixation on death with humor. In this way, the speaker again brings the otherness of God to the attention of the addressee. In doing so, she suggests that the divine hand provides no human comfort because it is comprehensible only in death, “That none can understand.” By adopting the tone of God, the speaker assumes a mock authority that offers the immediate comfort of

the human hand as a substitute for the deferred arrival of God's hand. The hand that drags the addressee from the grave is a human hand that offers a corporeal comfort, one that can be felt and understood while alive, rather than the alternative of waiting for death to deliver the incomprehensible reward of the afterlife.

Fr1649 serves as a jarring expression of disillusionment with an impersonal God to whom Dickinson cannot connect. Considered in isolation, it only offers a general commentary on how fixating on God distracts one from the immediate comfort of a human relationship. The analysis of the next series of poems will further specify the cause of Dickinson's disillusionment as a refusal to engage with God through a Calvinist theological system constructed around sin. Jane Donahue Eberwein writes, "[Dickinson's] writings reveal little consciousness of sin; she seems never to have accepted the fundamental premise of the fall" (78). However, although there is little explicit evidence of sin, when compared to traditional Calvinist texts, some of Dickinson's poems appear to intentionally elide, or revise, the rhetoric of sin.

Fr1581 is another late poem that expresses a similar type of unfocused doubt as Fr1649, albeit with more dramatic images:

Those—dying then,  
 Knew where they went—  
 They went to God's Right Hand—  
 That Hand is amputated now  
 And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief  
 Makes the Behavior small—  
 Better an ignis fatuus  
 Than no illumine at all—

None of Dickinson's "hand" poems depict doubt as graphically as Fr1581. The image of an amputation is so graphic, it is hard not to read it as the end of Dickinson's lifelong progression towards atheism. As Eberwein writes, this poem has led a number of scholars to associate Dickinson with writers that predicted the nineteenth-century, Western decline of religion:

Biographers read "Those – dying then" as her response to losses Dickinson shared with others of her time. James McIntosh situates the poem in context of "the undoing of Amherst orthodoxy," while Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that "the drift away from God was generational, the phenomenon of an increasingly secular America." Roger Lundin extends this perspective to embrace thinkers and creative artists generally, linking Dickinson to Melville, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche among "the first to trace the trajectory of God's decline" throughout the Western world. (68)

Yet, as Eberwein goes on to show, Dickinson's faith is not easily qualified along the lines of these writers. Rather,

Dickinson's writing, then, brilliantly expresses the tensions between doubt and faith in the nineteenth-century Western world, as evangelical Protestant orthodoxy shook when subjected to unsettling intellectual and cultural pressures. (69)

As will be shown, the amputated hand of Fr1581 does not serve as a simple symbol of the death of God, but rather a focused rejection of a specific aspect of Calvinist theology. To illustrate who "Those-dying then" refers to in Fr1581, it is helpful to look at another Dickinson poem, Fr1067, "Crisis is a Hair," that depicts a relation to God through an allusion to a famous Calvinist text.

To a twenty-first-century reader, Fr1067 may not appear to be a religious poem. As presented below, it seems to be simply a definitional poem that "exist[s] in an effort to clarify an internal state" (Cameron, *Lyric Time* 34). While it is surely the case that the

speaker attempts to clarify the state of crisis, I will argue that the poem does so through allusion to and adjustment of the imagery in Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Crisis is a Hair  
Toward which forces creep  
Past which - forces retrograde  
If it come in sleep

To suspend the Breath  
Is the most we can  
Ignorant is it Life or Death  
Nicely balancing -

Let an instant push  
Or an Atom press  
Or a Circle hesitate  
In Circumference

It may jolt the Hand  
That adjusts the Hair  
That secures Eternity  
From presenting - Here -

For the twenty-first-century reader, the intrigue and power of Fr1067 comes through a progressive stabilization of the metaphor that mirrors the poem's subject. The first line presents a disconcerting equation of two nouns—"Crisis" and "Hair"—opposed on the poles of a five-syllable line to emphasize their difference. The poem never unpacks this definition. Instead, it proceeds towards a description of the "forces" that threaten the hair. The image is unstable in that the metaphor really could mean anything for at least the first stanza. Crisis could be explained to be a hair in that it is an infinitesimal distance, a close shave, the difference between a bullet striking the head and a bullet's narrow miss. There are only vague clues that hint at the direction the poem will head. Perhaps "forces" brings

to mind a pull, and the description of these forces approaching and passing the hair suggests caution to avoid touching a sensitive object. In the second stanza, the suggestions become more pronounced. By beginning with the infinitive “To suspend,” the poem offers that the central image may be an object suspended on the end of the hair. However, it immediately retracts this image by concluding the line with “To suspend the Breath,” destabilizing the pendulous image through a pun on the phrase “A hair’s breadth.” The pun both distracts from a clarification of the metaphor and heightens the aura of sensitivity by adding the slight forces of a lung’s breath to the picture. To complete the nicely weighted stanza, the last line explicitly underlines the tension of uncertainty associated with the force of “Life,” but more importantly, “Death,” that the hair is “nicely balancing.” How it achieves such balance remains ambiguous. Using the word “balancing” contributes, once again, to the sensitivity of the hair, but does not congruously relate to any picture of how a hair could balance something, unless perhaps there is a tiny person walking a tightrope. By the third stanza, the opacity of the metaphor finally yields to the application of some precise images. The first, “Let an instant push,” evokes a brief horizontal force, like that applied to the back of a child on a swing. The second, “An Atom press,” once again evokes a tiny push. The third, “Or a Circle hesitate/In Circumference,” is slightly more enigmatic, but succeeds in associating a pendulum’s motion to the picture. By the concluding stanza, the metaphor has been carefully primed for exposure. By waiting to introduce the image of the hand until the final stanza, the tension of the unclear metaphor continues down the length of the poem, mirroring the tension of a strand of hair, weighted on one end, lifted in the air by two pinched fingers. The weight is not that of “eternity,” but that of the life held in suspension



that can be jolted free if any force causes the hand to lose its careful hold. The final word, “Here,” completes the association of form and metaphor by emphasizing the spatial distance on the page at the end of the poem from the beginning, traveling from there to here.

The above reading, however, does not explain why Fr1067 comments on conservative theology. It is probably the case that the confluence of form and theme borders on anachronism when held next to the text that its imagery references. The nineteenth-century contemporary of Dickinson would have almost certainly, immediately recognized a reference to Edwards’ sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. And consider here more particularly. (504)

The nineteenth-century reader would have quickly recognized Fr1067 as an allusion to this passage from Edwards’ famous sermon. This would have mitigated the value of progressive exposure of the metaphor. To Dickinson’s contemporary reader, the first line “Crisis is a Hair” would have been a familiar image, and the intrigue would then have been in the adjustments Dickinson made to the language.

Fr1067 replaces Edwards’ fire-and-brimstone imagery with neutral adjectives, switching the focus of the metaphor away from the consequences of sin. Both pieces

describe forces threatening to sever a fragile thread, but where Edwards uses flames, Dickinson uses undefined “forces,” along with “Breath,” and “Atom[s].” In effect, Fr1067 suggests that crisis can affect a human life for natural reasons having nothing to do with the state of sin of the person. What is more, Edwards describes the Hand of God as impervious and separate from the natural world. Whether or not God drops the sinner depends on “only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up” (Edwards 503). The forces described in Fr1067, however, “may jolt the Hand,” causing it to drop the thread. While such a description of the fragility of life and its susceptibility to crisis agrees with Edwards’ picture of an indiscriminate, angry God, it does so without blaming the crisis on the state of the sinner. In both pieces, death can come quickly and without warning, but in Dickinson the arrival at “Eternity” is again neutral. The speaker does not care whether she exists in a state of sin when eternity arrives “Here” at the end of the poem. She exists “Here” contemplating a fear of God arriving at any moment, but not in fear that God could cast her down into hell.<sup>v</sup> The “here” that Edwards wants “you” to consider is one where every moment is an opportunity for the sinner to accept Christ as redeemer. Every moment one rejects this faith and is not cast into the “great furnace of wrath” is the consequence of God’s sadistic pleasure of dangling the person over the pit (Edwards 504).

The above analysis of Fr1067 portrays Dickinson as actively resistant to traditional Calvinist conceptions of how one relates to God. Within this context, “Those—dying then” referred to in Fr1581 points to a recent New England past where a person’s state of sin was at the front of their minds. They “knew” they were going to

“God’s Right Hand” because their “behavior” reflected a preoccupation with how to live without sin.

Those—dying then,  
 knew where they went—  
 They went to God’s Right Hand—  
 That Hand is amputated now  
 And God cannot be found—

Although the first stanza appears overtly atheistic, the meaning changes when considered with the departure from a not too distant religious past where God was viscerally present in Calvinist rhetoric of damnation. The speaker in Fr1581 does not relate to “Those” who share a connection to God based on a doctrine of sin. That particular “Hand” is amputated, and in the first stanza, the speaker does not have an alternate way of connecting to the divine.

The second stanza, however, shows that the speaker is not describing the death of God, but instead the end of a particular way of relating to God, to which she offers an alternative:

The abdication of Belief  
 Makes the Behavior small—  
 Better an ignis fatuus  
 Than no illume at all—

The amputation of God’s hand “Makes” an alternate means of connection possible, one that does not depend on a distant authority that can neither be found nor understood. The speaker shifts her focus away from the large hand and towards the writing of poetry, the “Behavior small.” The alliteration that cuts across the first two lines contrasts the gravity of the first stanza. The second stanza also resumes Dickinson’s familiar 8-6 meter in four

lines modeled on the hymn. The first stanza has the 8-6 meter, but the first line cut in two mirrors the amputation that the speaker will then describe. The poem becomes a substitute for the larger “Belief,” as the speaker creates a personalized system of belief represented by the written word. It can be understood because it is human, instead of impersonal and administered from above.

The speaker recognizes that it is presumptuous to claim that her system of relating to the divine can replace God, the old patriarch, and in offering her new way of accessing divine meaning, resolves once again to humor. Through the use of “*ignis fatuus*”—or fool’s fire, an eerie, natural bioluminescent light that Webster describes as a “meteor”—the speaker shows that the small behavior of writing a poem can produce a natural sense of wonder in the world.<sup>vi</sup> In relation to the fire from the pit of hell, the “fool’s fire” is small. It is, however, a naturally occurring phenomenon that gives a sense of wonder, as if there is a divine presence visible in the moment.

The last stanza of Fr1581 is both modest and deferential, but has an underlying hint of boldness. By using a Latin word instead of the “vulgar” alternatives “Will with the whisp, and Jack with a lantern,” the speaker subtly mocks authority asserted through high language. The stanza’s meter draws out the syllables of “*fatu-us*” to fit the four-foot pattern, and begins to sound more like “*fatuous*”—“*Fatuous*... 1. Feeble in mind; weak, silly, stupid; foolish,” rather than “2. Impotent; without force or fire; illusory; alluding to the *ignis fatuus*.”<sup>vii</sup> The speaker implies that her own behavior of writing is a fatuous exercise, but the Latin word play makes it clear that such a claim is tongue-in-cheek. The poem provides access to divine illumination through natural, human means, and suggests

that while the human hand is not equal to God's hand in providing meaning, it at least has some power in devising a personal sense of wonder in the moment.

Fr1581's depiction of the amputation of God's hand appears to be a stark description of the failure of God to connect to the nineteenth-century individual. But, as was shown, the poem describes the end of a particular manner of connecting to the divine, and points towards an alternate way of accessing spiritual meaning through an appreciation of smaller pleasures of the moment. I will show in the third section how this progression away from the overwhelming public connection to God to a private expression of faith shared between loved ones takes the form of the written poem. Before doing so, it is important to reiterate that the "abdication of Belief" represents a rejection of a particular manner of connecting to the divine, not a complete rejection of religion.

Even though it appears that Fr1649 and Fr1581 document a biographical progression towards a rejection of God, they in fact represent a performance that Dickinson had been giving since she was young. Dickinson famously recoiled from public expressions of belief. Perhaps the best-known event illustrating this doubt occurred during Dickinson's first year at Mount Holyoke Seminary. As Vivian Pollack describes, Dickinson's teacher, Mary Lyon, applied an auspicious label to her new student:

Throughout the school year, the subject of giving oneself up and for Christ was emphasized; Miss Lyon held separate meetings for those who had "professed faith," those who had a "hope," and those who had "no hope." Emily Dickinson was one of eighty "No-hopers" when she entered; by the end of the term, only twenty-nine remained, including herself. At one point, Miss Lyon asked all those who wanted to be Christians (and hence to fast on Christmas) to rise. Emily was one of those who remained seated. (34)

Dickinson's late poems of doubt then should be viewed as mature articulations of a way religion was practiced. She enjoyed adopting roles in her letters and poems (Miller 92), and, perhaps, by remaining seated Dickinson took pleasure in playing the role of the forsaken Christian. Yet as the consistency of expression of doubt throughout Dickinson's oeuvre shows, this moment is a more clear illustration of Dickinson not accepting religious practice where a public profession of faith is the price of admission.<sup>viii</sup>

Dickinson favored a personal conception of divinity where religiosity was present in the moment, accessible through personal expression of the divine through poetry.<sup>ix</sup>

Fr352 "They leave us with the Infinite," a poem Dickinson wrote in 1862, demonstrates an earlier expression of the shift of focus away from an unknowable God and towards a human connection.

They leave us with the Infinite -  
 But He is not a man,  
 His Fingers are the size of Fists -  
 His fists, the size of men -

And whom he foundeth with his Arm  
 As Himmaleh, shall stand -  
 Gibraltar's everlasting shoe  
 Poised lightly on his Hand,

So trust him, Comrade -  
 You for you, and I, for you and – me  
 Eternity is ample,  
 And quick enough, if true.

Fr352 and Fr1581 share not only a first word, but also a first line whose subject is death. The speaker of Fr352 does not openly name death or God. Rather, she severs he whom Edwards refers to as an "infinite God" into short hand. The three nouns in the first line share a common ambiguity. The speaker communicates the event of death clearly, but

leaves the referents open to interpretation. In doing so, the addressee that later appears can personalize the meaning according to his own conception of the divine. The poem avoids falling into restricting definitions of faith, a tactic emphasized by the depiction of God's hand in the lines that follow.

Fr352 suggests that death brings one into contact with the divine whose distinctive, if not only, quality is its unimaginable enormity. By stating, "He is not a man," the speaker of Fr352 emphasizes how a traditional depiction of God as a man does not appropriately encompass the "Infinite." Like the line "Crisis is a Hair," the line "His Fingers are the size of Fists" is disorienting. However, the quality of disorientation differs. "Crisis is a Hair" unsettles the twenty-first century reader because it compares a significant event to a small object whose function in the metaphor is obscure. "His Fingers are the size of Fists" would unsettle a reader from any century. It offers a size comparison between "Fingers" and "Fists" that is odd: a fist will always be bigger than the fingers that compose it. The comparison is visually awkward in that it compares a cylindrical shape to a spherical shape. Lastly, it is affectively disturbing because a delicate finger is compared to a destructive fist. The multiple layers of instability in the comparison visually depict how the "Infinite" is not a man. The "Infinite" cannot be understood as a human, one cannot relate to it or hold hands with it, and one cannot ultimately grasp its meaning, especially through anthropomorphic renderings of divine influence. In offering an unstable image of God's hand, the picture is similar to Fr1581's amputation. Fr352's next line returns some stability to the comparison. "His fists, the size of men" makes the comparison slightly more manageable. If one leaves out the middle figure of the spherical fist, it is easy to imagine fingers the size of men. They are simply

really big fingers. The fist, however, cannot be ignored. Fr352 communicates both enormity and incomprehensibility of the “Infinite” through the set of figures of the metaphor.

The second stanza depicts a future connection with God in terms of stability. In this manner, the first and second stanzas contrast each other in both imagery and language. God’s arm is a stabilizing force. As Eberwein writes, “Dickinson knew from childhood that she was expected to emulate the sainted neighbor who ‘relyed wholly upon the arm of God & he did not forsake her’” (L11) (68). The “Arm” as a stabilizing force is reinforced when the second line of the stanza compares the godly man’s stance to “Himmaleh.” The stanza imagines a future beyond death, brought into unsettling proximity in the first stanza, as a connection to divinity. This divinity is large like the “Infinite,” but focuses on the presence of the divine on earth. The power of the divine is present in the huge mountain whose name plays on the gendered pronoun “Him.” The infinite is once again not a man, but a divine presence in the natural world. The second stanza suggests that after death, one will connect with the “Infinite” that runs through everything that the unnamed God created. By not naming this God outright, the poem emphasizes how this connection cannot be understood as a connection to a person. The soul, a word that Dickinson uses without reservation, will expand to encompass a power where it can hold the immovable rock of Gibraltar in his hand. The infinite power that one connects with after death can move mountains, but such power cannot be wielded when alive.

The shift to archaic language in the second stanza lightens the gravity of death’s proximity. Like in Fr1649, the speaker adopts a biblical tone. By assuming a God-like



voice, the speaker directs the attention away from an “Infinite” that cannot be grasped. Making light of the ultimate male authoritarian God brings “us” back into contact with one another, and reserves the connection with the divine for the future where one “shall stand.” Instead of using additional words to complete the eight-foot meter of the first line of the second stanza, the poem stretches out “found” into “foundeth.” In doing so, the poem maintains a hymn-like structure and language, but adapts the structure to personalize its effect. The second stanza occupies the middle of the poem, representing a transition away from the overwhelming incomprehensibility of the “Infinite” and towards the comfort of a human-to-human connection that occupies the last stanza.

The conjunction “So” that begins the concluding stanza indicates that the previous conception of the “Infinite” was a proposition the speaker made to the addressee. Deconstructing the anthropomorphic rendering of the “Infinite” as a “Man” is unsettling. Anthropomorphism makes an inhuman concept familiar, something that can be grasped. As if the speaker recognizes that such an idea is uncomfortable, she continues to refer to the “Infinite” with a gendered pronoun. In Fascicle 17, “him” is lowercase, but in the “fair copy” composed earlier in the year, “Him” is capitalized. This difference nicely reflects the speaker’s uncertainty of how to categorize the “Infinite” in a way that is familiar yet maintains a sense of its otherness. The “trust” shows the speaker urging her friend to accept that the “Infinite” exists and will present itself in a way that is comprehensible when life is over. But the speaker emphasizes that in the moment, “trust” in the divine presence is something reserved for the individual, “You for you.” By using the second person, the speaker reminds her addressee that “you” exist only in relation to the “I.” The “I” of the speaker puts trust in the connection between “you and me.” Yet the

line could be read as eliding the speaker's trust in God—"And I [will trust him], for you and—me—" suggesting that the divine must always be considered when describing the relationship between two people, even if God is not in plain sight. The poem concludes by returning to the idea of the largeness of "Eternity." Its final definition is something to be left until after life. The living should focus on the real connection between two people. The human hand is comforting, recognizable, and comprehensible, while the divine hand is foreign, terrifying, and ultimately, too big to understand.

Fr352 ends on a note of doubt, "if true." Its disassembly of the divine hand foreshadows the amputation in Fr1587, and resonates with the finely tuned note of doubt that rings particularly clear throughout the "hand" poems. Dickinson's poems do not illustrate a world without God, but a moment in history that is looking for a better way to define divinity. Dickinson's divine "hand" poems divert attention away from a focus on a paternalistic relationship to God, and towards a sense of the divine in the connection between two people. God was not dead to Dickinson by any means even after she wrote about the divine amputation. She dismissed a particular way of connecting with God that diminished the value of human relationship. Dickinson personalized her faith, and focused on a connection based on understanding that did not agree with a conception of God whose hand existed at a distance. She argued for a tangible sense of the divine in the moment that could be understood in the connection between people. As will be shown, Dickinson regarded her poems as a substitute for a divine connection.

## *II. Severed Connections and Dissatisfaction*

As I argued in the first section, the hand of God poems focus attention away from the divine, and point towards human relationships. The speakers describe how the hand of God cannot be taken and cannot be related to on a human level. They suggest that the understanding of God as an anthropomorphized figure represented by the metonymic symbol of the hand distracts from a human-to-human relationship that can actually be grasped. Dickinson connected to other people through writing, and the sections that follow will progress towards an analysis of Dickinson's poetry as a means of forging an immediate connection to other people—one that provides the most satisfying substitute for the impossible connection with God. In the poems that appear in section three, the site of the page will be shown to act as an intersubjective site where reader and author meet and metaphorically take each other's hand.

In section two, I will begin by looking at a set of poems where the image of the hand appears, but describes relationships between people who no longer share a direct connection. The author and reader are separated by not only distance, but time as well. The connection that once existed has faded. In these poems, the text is the medium through which the relationship continues to exist, but it does not represent a suitable container for meaning. The meaning of the word is no longer immediate. These poems do not describe direct relationships with another person in the present, but relationships that once existed, or exist exclusively in the case of Fr569, in the medium of writing.

In each of the three poems in this section, the relationship takes place through different levels of mediation. The contact between the speaker and the other person is indirect. Ultimately, none of these poems offer a solution to the problem of how to

overcome the distance that separates the speakers from the figure on the other side of the page. They suffer from a similar pain of disconnection from an absent figure that the poems from the first section illustrate through the figure of God. But where the poems from the first section offered a human hand as a substitute for the lack of the divine connection, the poems from this section consider whether the written word can satisfy the speakers' desire for an intimate connection. They articulate how a relationship that takes place over a distance gradually loses its original significance. In other words, neither the divine hand of God nor the imagined comfort of the physical hand of a loved one respectively satisfy either section's speakers' need for a substantial, lasting connection that can be felt in the present.

What is more, the poems of this section demonstrate the degradation of significance over time. When the person on the other side of the correspondence is no longer present, the meaning of the objects that symbolize the correspondence becomes less clear. Significance fades with the dissolution of the medium through which the parties experience the relationship. The analysis will begin with a vivid illustration of the "failed" preservation of an epistolary relationship with a loved one in Fr180 "In Ebon Box, when years have flown." It will then proceed to Fr292 "I got so I could hear his name —", which when paired with Fr180, operates as its unofficial sequel. Fr292 illustrates the emotional response to the "death" of the author on the other side of the epistolary exchange. As will be shown, the significance of the residual texts from the correspondence change from representations of love to representations of pain. Further, Fr292 subtly illustrates how this pain registers physically in the speaker's body through her hand. The section will conclude with a poem that illustrates a speaker's imagined

relationship to the author of a book in Fr569 “A precious - mouldering pleasure - ’tis.” Fr569 again illustrates a speaker attempting to establish an intimate connection with a person who is not physically present. However, since the connection to the author exists exclusively through the material of the book, the failure to fulfill the desire of an immediate connection takes the form of dissatisfaction rather than pain. There is pleasure in the meeting of the antique book, but only heavily mediated pleasure that teases the speaker. Fr569 is valuable to the present argument in that it demonstrates how a text can *potentially* mediate the pleasure of intimacy with another person. It will facilitate a transition into the last section, which will describe poems where the text serves as a satisfactory substitute for the pleasure of an immediate connection.

In the three poems that constitute the majority of this section, hands play a central role. The word “hand” appears once in each poem, but in each piece the hand has an underlying presence that asserts a subtle but substantial significance. The subject of the poems is not the hand, and the speaker is not particularly interested in describing the hand in any special way. Nonetheless, the hand is essential to poems such as these that illustrate how the physical reception of an object influences meaning. The hand is what allows for the text to be read. Without the hand, the speakers would not be able to read the letters of the first two poems and the book of the last poem. They enable the speakers to try to make a connection to the author on the other side of the page.

The first poem of this section is also the earliest. Dickinson wrote Fr180, “In Ebon Box, when years have flown,” in 1860, and bound it into Fascicle 8. Although other poems in Fascicle 8 have variants, Fr180 has none. This makes the poem easier to interpret, but it does not mean that no significance is lost in the print version.

Specifically, there is one entertaining detail of the holograph that is lost in both the reproduction below and the various editions in which it appeared. As the Franklin variorum indicates—“*Division 12 hand!*”—the fascicle page break occurs at the word “hand.” While we likely would want to stop short of assuming that Dickinson predicted that the room on the page would run out just at the moment her reader would turn it, and although exclamation points end every stanza, it is possible to imagine that the coincidence inspired the third stanza’s emphatic punctuation. For the most part, the text of the fascicle and the text reproduced below are the same:

In Ebon Box, when years have flown  
 To reverently peer,  
 Wiping away the velvet dust  
 Summers have sprinkled there!

To hold a letter to the light -  
 Grown Tawny – now - with time -  
 To con the faded syllables  
 That quickened us like Wine!

Perhaps a Flower's shrivelled cheek  
 Among it's stores to find -  
 Plucked far away, some morning -  
 By gallant - mouldering hand!

A curl, perhaps, from foreheads  
 Our Constancy forgot -  
 Perhaps, an Antique trinket -  
 In vanished fashions set!

And then to lay them quiet back -  
 And go about it's care —  
 As if the little Ebon Box  
 Were none of our affair!

It is particularly useful to begin an analysis of Fr180 at the line where the word “hand” appears, since it marks a critical moment in the narrative progression of the poem. As Manheim puts it, “The speaker reaches for thoughts of the once-beloved giver, but finds only a severed hand” (2). While such a description is a bit too macabre for the tone of the poem as a whole, it captures how the image of the hand illustrates the central motif of the piece: the speaker longs for an immediate connection to the absent lover that the objects in the “Ebon Box” formally represent. Yet, calling it a “severed hand” does a disservice to the adjectives modifying the noun. Specifically, the speaker reaches for a “gallant—mouldering hand.” While the different senses of “gallant” provide interesting insight into the identity of the absent author—“courtly; civil; polite and attentive to ladies; courteous”—the root, as described in Webster’s 1844 dictionary, gives better insight into the present argument, “Fr *gallant*; Sp. *Galante*; It. *Id.* This word is from the root of the W. *gallu*, to be able, to have power; Eng. *Could*; L. *gallus*, a cock. See *Could*, *Call*, and *Gala*. The primary sense is to stretch, strain or reach forward.”<sup>i</sup> The word “gallant” is intimately related to the “hand” it modifies. It not only describes the identity of the author, but it subtly reinforces the central idea of the poem that the speaker reaches for a connection through the medium of the objects of the exchange. The next adjective, “mouldering,” illustrates how the speaker no longer conceives of the absent figure intimately. Webster defines “Moldering” as “Turning to dust; crumbling; wasting away.”<sup>ii</sup> The significance of the hand is no longer colored absolutely by romantic affection. As Manheim puts it, “Surely the hand that “Plucked” the flower was not *yet* ‘mouldering’ when it made the initial presentation” (2). Rather, the memory of the hand brought to mind by the objects in the Ebon Box has become a reminder of mortality.

Having described how the “hand” functions *in vitro*, I will now consider how the poem as a whole describes the loss of intimacy through the “mouldering” significance of the objects in the box. Through her description of objects whose physical bodies degrade with time, the speaker outlines the important point: the significance of the bond created through the correspondence relies on the physical medium of exchange. After time has passed, and the connection shared between the two people is lost, the meaning of the symbols fades. By imagining opening the Ebon Box and handling the objects, the speaker fantasizes about reconnecting to the bygone person. The hand of the speaker takes the objects out of the box so that she can relive the experience of the physical relationship, but finds objects that have aged. With age, the original significance has dwindled. The act of handling the objects and interpreting them metaphorically revives the person from the past through the vivification of the objects. However, since the objects’ original significance is inseparable from the physical medium, she discovers that the box’s contents have changed from symbols of love to emblems of nostalgia. At one point in the past, before “years have flown,” those objects mediated a relationship between two people who interpreted them as symbols of affection. The exchange of objects connected them across distance and time, allowing them to share an intimate connection to each other without being physically present. However, in the moment described in Fr180, the speaker and the author can no longer connect intimately, as the objects that mediated the relationship have withered in both matter and significance. In effect, the poem is essentially about mourning. What at first appears to be a poem about the resurrection of the lost love, becomes, in the end, a poem about loss.



A letter is the first object the speaker removes from the box. It is barely legible, and the speaker needs “To hold [it] to the light” to read the words. Metaphorically, the significance of the letter has faded. The author’s hand on the page, like the hand of line 12, has aged. The speaker can no longer immediately connect the significance of the word to the author’s meaning. The hand needs to perform an additional action to fill them again. The words are illuminated and brought back to life. The hand performs a sort of divine resurrection on the letter. The adjective “tawny”—“Of a yellowish dark color, like things tanned, or persons who are sun-burnt”—reinforces this idea that the letter’s significance ages with time.<sup>iii</sup> The letter is like skin. The speaker holds the letter to the light “To con the faded syllables.” As seen through the word “con,” the light allows the speaker to reconnect with the author momentarily. She is able “to know” the syllables again, “In the sense of know, *con* signifies to hold or to reach.”<sup>iv</sup> This suggests that in the past, before the letters had faded, the words on the page represented an intimate bond between two people that felt almost like an immediate, physical connection. The last line of the stanza, “That quickened us like Wine” evokes the taking of communion, supporting a sense of a union of word and body. With the passage of time, the immediacy of the written word grows “Tawny,” and its original significance can only be momentarily resurrected.

The subsequent objects out of the box further illustrate how the immediacy of significance degrades with the aging of the physical medium. Consequently, the objects no longer function as a medium through which the two correspondents can feel a physical connection to each other, as if they held their loved-one’s hand. The second object out of the box demonstrates a connection to the absent person through anthropomorphism. The

“Flower’s shriveled cheek” suggests a conflation of the object and the person who “plucked” the flower. The significance of the “Flower,” like the “mouldering” person who sent it and the “Tawny letter,” has switched from a symbol of love and connection to a symbol of death and disconnection. The next object, a “curl,” has changed in a similar way. What once served as physical reminder of intimacy, “leads not to a head or face, but only a detached ‘forehead’ that is ‘forgot’ as soon as it is named, as if the face recedes from memory before the very effort of recall” (Manheim 2). The “Antique trinket” does not remind the speaker of the hand that wore a ring or the lapel that wore a pin, but of “vanished fashions.” These objects, then, were originally significant representations of the absent person’s body, but over time they changed into significations of the body’s absence.

As opposed to the poems that will follow in the final section of this thesis, Fr180 is not important because its interpretation depends on the material circumstance of the poem and its exchange. As will be shown, Virginia Jackson’s methodology suggests that the reader imagine himself to be a recipient of the physical object of the poem. In doing so, the reader and the author/speaker create meaning that they hold between themselves. Fr180, rather, *describes* that dynamic. It illustrates how the speaker and her absent lover, as opposed to the author and the reader, once created meaning that they held between them through an epistolary relationship.

On close inspection, the poem actively deemphasizes the importance of the speaker’s individual identity, making it difficult for the reader to imagine himself in conversation with her. From the beginning, the poem grammatically directs the focus away from the speaker. The initial clause is an inverted adverbial prepositional phrase,

with the verb following the preposition. Such grammatical legerdemain makes the absence of any subject in the first stanza an after-thought. Throughout the length of the poem, the “I” of the speaker remains hidden in the infinitives: “To . . . peer; to hold; to con; to find; to lay.” The first person appears, but only in the plural “us” and “our.” These first person plurals represent a private relationship between the speaker and her loved-one that the reader cannot know or actively participate. The poem describes a past relationship, rather than establishing a relationship with a reader, whether he is from the nineteenth century or the twenty-first.

The infinitives described above, plus the repeating “Perhaps,” illustrate the speaker’s reluctance to open the container, as if it were a Pandora’s box of emotions. On close inspection, the entire poem is cast as a speculation. The speaker does not actually remove the letter, but only considers doing so at a future time. Setting up the poem as speculation suggests an interesting detail about the effect of reading on the physical medium of a text. To touch actually hastens the disintegration of the objects. As Fr180 describes, in order to connect with the person through reading the letter and looking at the objects, the speaker must remove those objects from the protective black “Box.” To read the letter, the speaker must expose it to the light as well as the oils on the speaker’s hand, which the black container protects against. By not reading the letter and not touching the objects, and instead only speculating about the action, the speaker can slow down the deterioration. However, such reluctance to read the text of the relationship demonstrates how what once symbolized a connection to a loved one can change into a symbol of the pain of separation. In the last two lines, the speaker fantasizes about the possibility that she can dissociate herself from the relationship, “As if the little Ebon Box/Were none of

our affair.” In not opening the box, the speaker preserves the memory of the relationship, and delays experiencing the pain of departure. But as shown above, the details of the fantasy demonstrate her understanding that within the box, the objects still “moulder.”

The next poem in this section, Fr292 “I got so I could hear his name” describes the pain of separation from a loved one. Compared to Fr180, it is much more direct in its description of the speaker’s emotional reaction to loss. As mentioned above, the present analysis will treat Fr292 “I got so I could hear his name” as a thematic sequel to Fr180. The two poems are not directly sequential in time or fascicle order. Dickinson wrote Fr180 in 1860 and included it in Fascicle 8. She wrote Fr292 two years later in 1862, and bound it into Fascicle 12. However, the poems are very similar in the speakers’ descriptions of their loss of intimacy. The most apparent similarity is the appearance of a box filled with letters:

I got so I could hear his name -  
 Without - Tremendous gain -  
 That Stop-sensation - on my Soul -  
 And Thunder - in the Room -

I got so I could walk across  
 That Angle in the floor,  
 where he turned so, and I turned - how -  
 And all our Sinew tore -

I got so I could stir the Box -  
 In which his letters grew  
 Without that forcing, in my breath -  
 As Staples - driven through -

Could dimly recollect a Grace -  
 I think, they called it "God" -  
 Renowned to ease Extremity -  
 When Formula, had failed -

And shape my Hands -  
 Petition's way,

Tho' ignorant of a word  
That Ordination - utters -

My Business, with the Cloud,  
If any Power behind it, be,  
Not subject to Despair -  
It care - in some remoter way,  
For so minute affair  
As Misery -  
Itself, too great, for interrupting - more -

One can imagine that the speaker in Fr292 has “got” to a time “when years have flown,” when she is then able to take the objects out of the Ebon Box. The poem once again describes a lost connection to a loved one. However, instead of a speaker reaching “for the thoughts of the once-beloved giver” only to find a disembodied hand, the first three stanzas of Fr292 describe a subsequent stage of emotional separation (Manheim 2). The speaker has “got” to a place where she can reach “for the thoughts” without, as Cameron puts it, a “fusion of agonizing physical and emotional pain” (*Lyric Time* 60). Fr292, as opposed to Fr180, describes more than just an epistolary correspondence, but also memories of the physical relationship that the speaker shared with the now absent figure.

Fr292 emphasizes the physical persistence of the feeling of connection to the lost loved one. The first line as it appears in Fascicle 12 demonstrates the different ways the relationship survives into the present. The text as printed above—“I got so I could hear his name”—focuses on the persistence of sound. The variants, however, “think” and “take” show that the relationship exists in both the mind, and more importantly for this argument, in a tangible thing that one can grab. Although “I got so I could take” can be interpreted in both the sense of “tolerate” and as an allusion to “Take his name in vain” (*Lyric Time* 60), the line also resonates with the phrase, “take his hand.”

The importance of the physical connection of the hand continues subtly throughout the poem. In the second stanza, the speaker describes the tearing of the “Sinew,” a muscle or ligament that connects parts of the body. The variant to the previous line in the fascicle also adds to the persistence of a physical connection. “When he turned so, and I turned, how” also reads as “When he turned so, and I let go.” The memory of the separation from the individual is therefore related to the physical separation of two hands. The tactile emphasis continues when the speaker describes how she “got so she could stir the Box.” The odd use of “stir” suggests “disturb,” “stirring up” as in a storm, as well as the image of the speaker literally putting her hand in the box and “stirring it” like a soup. The latter image works well with the remainder of the stanza. The former consequence of stirring the box of letters was a sharp pain like “A Staple—driven through.” Although Dickinson leaves it up to the reader to determine exactly what the staple went through, it makes sense that the hand was injured. One could imagine that the letters were stapled, and that the speaker describes the literal piercing of her skin. No matter if such is definitively the case, the next stanza subtly reinforces the idea that the pain of the lost connection registered like a physical sensation of pain in the hand.

Through the phrase “Renowned to ease extremity” in the fourth stanza, the speaker illustrates both how the end of the human relationship registers in the body, and how the divine “Force” is inadequate because it cannot ease corporeal pain. The word “Extremity” can be interpreted to mean several things. Firstly, it can mean “*extremity* of pain or suffering.” “Extremity” can also mean “The utmost point or side,” emphasizing that the pain is a consequence of the distance between the speaker and the other person. Lastly, “Extremity” means, “The utmost parts. The *extremities* of the body, in *painting*

and *sculpture*, are the head, hands and feet; but in *anatomy*, the term is applied to the limbs only.”<sup>v</sup> This could be read as healing the pain of the “Staple,” or as the healing of the torn “Sinew.” Thus, the poem demonstrates how the pain of the lost relationship lingers in the memory as a corporeal wound. The speaker’s pain persists in the feeling that the connection of the relationship had been physically severed. “Extremity” is simultaneously distance, pain, and the appendage with which two people physically connect.

Like the speaker from Fr1581, the speaker of Fr292 expresses a dissatisfaction with a “God” with whom “they” once shared a more immediate relationship. But as if the hand “Renowned to ease Extremity” were severed, the speaker laments God’s inability to ease the pain of her lost loved one. The fascicle variants in the stanza, moreover, illustrate a problem with a conception of “God” that has no power to assuage pain in the body. The first variant, “Grace/Force” emphasizes the importance of the feeling of divine power. “Grace” is relatively passive when compared to “Force.” It cannot be felt, or “recollected,” as vividly. The interplay of the meaning of these two terms highlights the speaker’s disappointment with a “God” whose hand cannot be felt, whose presence cannot physically soothe human suffering. The last fascicle variant in stanza four replaces “Formula” with “Filament.” In doing so, the poem opposes an abstract concept—“Formula”—and a material object—“Filament.” The variant stresses the idea of a physical bond that connects the separated lovers. The “Formula” of the correspondence establishes a substantive connection through the material of the text.

Fr292 appears to be progressing to a resolution of the pain of separation through communion with “God,” but as shown above, the resulting connection to the divine is

inadequate. Once again, the speaker of Fr292 illustrates her uncomfortable relationship with this absent “God” through the “Hands” that she “Shape[s]” “Petition’s way.” The phrase symbolizes the speaker’s “ignorance” of the religious convention. She imitates a pose of petition, but does not connect the act to a conscious understanding of how this position unites her to “God.” The shape of her hands imitates a sign of piety, but cannot verbally communicate why the performance is significant. “Ordination[’s]” explanation is not clear to her. It is a muffled “utter[ance].”

The final stanza of the poem restates the speaker’s grievance that God cannot diminish the pain of separation. The speaker describes her uncertainty by questioning whether “God” exists “behind” “the Cloud.” She again expresses her doubt by depicting an absent authority whose “Power” does not apply to her individual pain. Divine comfort is “remote,” at a distance, and provides no immediate comfort. The phrase, “So minute affair/as Misery” is close to an oxymoron. The meaning of misery to “God” is small, while to a person it is huge. The speaker has lost a connection with her loved one. This pain causes her to turn to “God” for help, but she finds that he cannot relate. Their conceptions of the significance of human misery do not agree with one another, and “God” is not present, or at least available, to do “Business” with her.

Fr292, as a whole, follows the trajectory of the greater argument of the first two sections of this thesis in reverse. The speaker mourns the loss of a loved one to whom she once felt intimately connected. That feeling is strong enough that she felt a bond which existed even when physically separated from the person. The end of the relationship, either through death or some other circumstance that finalized the separation, causes the speaker pain, and forces her to seek recourse. She looks to “God,” but does not find him



present or capable of assuaging the pain of loss. He is an absent authority that has no “Business” with human suffering. The poem presents no final solution to the problem.<sup>vi</sup> The speaker appeals to “God” for help to ease the pain of separation, but realizes that “God” is not, ultimately, present to intercede on her behalf. The poem is a narrative of disillusionment, then, and provides no satisfying solution. Fr292 does not offer closure, but describes a speaker searching for a new way to establish a significant connection.

The final poem of this section, Fr569 “A precious mouldering pleasure ’tis” describes the act of reading as an encounter with an anthropomorphized book. Specifically, through the image of taking the book’s imagined hand, the speaker illustrates the importance of a physical connection to the material object for interpretation. Through the material object of the text, the speaker establishes a moderately satisfying connection to the figure on the opposite side of the textual relationship. However, the poem is also an important illustration of the limit of the significance of the written word when the writing does not represent a direct connection to the author. The following version of Fr569 is taken from the 1890 edition of Dickinson’s *Poems*. The reason for using this version will become clear below:

X.

IN A LIBRARY.

A precious, mouldering pleasure 'tis  
 To meet an antique book,  
 In just the dress his century wore;  
 A privilege, I think,

His venerable hand to take,  
 And warming in our own,

A passage back, or two, to make  
To times when he was young.

His quaint opinions to inspect,  
His knowledge to unfold  
On what concerns our mutual mind,  
The literature of old;

What interested scholars most,  
What competitions ran  
When Plato was a certainty.  
And Sophocles a man;

When Sappho was a living girl,  
And Beatrice wore  
The gown that Dante deified.  
Facts, centuries before,

He traverses familiar,  
As one should come to town  
And tell you all your dreams were true;  
He lived where dreams were sown.

His presence is enchantment,  
You beg him not to go;  
Old volumes shake their vellum heads  
And tantalize, just so.<sup>vii</sup>

Fr569 can be described as an explanation of why it is meaningful to consider the material of a piece of literature. The poem describes two distinct ways that a book can be interpreted: through scholarship and through pleasure. The speaker favors the latter method of interpretation. I will argue below that the speaker's description of reading the book illustrates only a partial satisfaction with this sort of reading, one that lacks the type of immediate significance that Dickinson's own writing can achieve. But before proceeding to that analysis, I will analyze the second method of interpretation: the scholarly approach.

The description of “What interested scholars most” occupies the entire third and fourth stanza of the poem. Scholarship, as the poem describes it, is the work of reconnecting the original significance of a piece of literature that has been lost with time. As the speaker of Fr569 suggests, the scholar is “interested” in arriving at a “certainty” associated with the physical person of the author. He wants to connect the significance of a work to the moment of time when the author lived. The speaker associates the scholarly interest in establishing a concrete definition of meaning in literature to a fascination with the physical person of the author. The scholar wants his work to seem as if he lived in a time when “Sophocles [was] a man” and “Sappho was a living girl.” The scholar’s interest in Beatrice’s “Gown” as a deified object suggests that Dante’s words somehow preserved Beatrice’s body with his verse. Dante’s writing immortalized Beatrice through the description of her clothes, allowing for the scholar to connect to the moment in time when the author composed his work. In other words, the fixed meaning of a piece of literature interests the scholar. The author, in the eyes of the scholar, immortalizes his or her subject. With scholarly diligence, that original “certainty” can be revealed. False meaning can be stripped away. The pleasure of the scholar can be equated to undressing the subject to reveal the naked truth of the author’s original intention.

In order to demonstrate an unveiling of this truth, I will show how a scholarly analysis can “undress” Fr569. The task of the scholar as described in the poem is to find certainty, but the particular methodology of such scholarship is left unsaid. Dickinson’s work is particularly responsive to the analysis of editions of her poems. As was stated, the version of Fr569 reproduced above comes from a print edition of Dickinson’s poems. In its first appearance in the 1890 edition of *Poems*, as will be shown, Fr569 was printed

in a form that matched lyric expectations better than the fascicle version. It could be said that the editors dressed up the poem to meet a lyric audience. Even so, having been fixed to match lyric expectations, the critical reception of *Poems* did not meet universal acclaim. Especially in England, critics took the rhyme to task, from Andrew Lang's attack on her grammar and rhyme, to what Maria Stuart calls a broader English "emphasis on form—on Dickinson's transgressions against poetic and linguistic orthodoxy" (Stuart 83). The reception of the poems would have been even harsher if the 1890 edition published the text of the fascicle version. Instead of reproducing the entire poem, I will only include the stanzas where the difference between the two versions stands out the most:

His quaint opinions – to inspect –  
 His thought to ascertain  
 On Themes concern our mutual mind –  
 The Literature of Man –

What interested Scholars – most –  
 What Competitions ran –  
 When Plato – was a Certainty –  
 And Sophocles – a Man –

It is clear why the former version took precedence in the 1890 edition over the texts that appeared in the fascicles and in a letter to Sue. In 1890, the third stanza reads, "His quaint opinions to inspect,/His knowledge to unfold/On what concerns our mutual mind/The literature of old." Rather than the fascicle version's back-to-back use of the same end-rhyme, "Man," Todd and Higginson favored the novel rhyme scheme. In the language of the poem, the editors essentially dressed the poem up, or, to put it differently, dressed the author figure up by fixing her versified voice to meet the expectations of a lyric audience.

With similar intent, the editors titled Fr569 “In a Library.” Such a title paints the picture of a figure isolated in silence, a good approximation of what many have imagined the ideal lyric poet’s preferred habitat. Considering the poem’s sexual undertones (a discussion of flirtatiousness in Fr569 will follow shortly) such a title is fairly hilarious. What exactly did happen in that library? Although the dressing up of the poem obscures the “original” meaning, allows the scholar the opportunity to undress the “certain” meaning through analysis of the different versions.

The substitution of the rhyme “unfold/old” for “ascertain/Man” in the 1890 version provides insight into the way the speaker presents the scholarly treatment of the author figure. “Unfolding” suggests a process that reveals, but the poem is careful not to depict the process of reading as an exposure. The effect of the replacement of the “faulty” verse figuratively covers up the poem to deny the exposure of the author’s flaws. However, in doing so, a valuable point of entry for scholarly interpretation is also concealed. The repetition of “Man” is a seam that the scholar can pull on. By tugging on it, the lyrical identity of the speaker falls away, leaving in its place the figure of the historical nineteenth-century woman, Emily Dickinson. More exactly, it reveals a historical figure challenging a canonical system of literature dominated by “Man,” where women authors struggle to gain a place.<sup>viii</sup>

The scholarly seam of the lyrically flawed “Man” ends the third and fourth stanza of the fascicle version, and brackets the first two representatives of the literary canon. The awkward non-rhyme could be interpreted to characterize Dickinson as a woman who was uncomfortable with the hierarchies of the nineteenth century. “When Plato—was a Certainty” is a strange distinction that makes some sense within a casual understanding of

Plato as the father of Western thought. Just around the time Dickinson was writing, Nietzsche was writing works that would challenge many long held philosophical concepts. Most importantly for literary theory, Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God would lead, almost a century later, to Barthes' announcement of the death of the author. Fr569 could be used to indicate Dickinson's participation in this critical debate. Dickinson may have been responding in general to the large upheavals of Darwinian evolution and the Industrial Revolution, figuring that these theories upset the entire philosophical tradition of the West, making Plato no longer a "Certainty." Though these general speculations may apply to some interpretation of the poem, a scholarly investigation of how Dickinson read Plato provides a more "certain" explanation of the significance of the line, "When Plato - was a Certainty."

Dickinson encountered Plato's work in an edition whose language indicates uncertainty. The Houghton Library indicates that the Dickinson family owned the 1859-61 *Platonic Dialogues* edited by William Whewell. The edition is drastically different from what the modern reader encounters. For example, Whewell's edition includes the famous cave scene near the end of the text in a section called a "Digression." This section combines both translations and summaries of Plato's ideas. For example, after the translation of the cave, Whewell writes: "We can hardly doubt, I think, that when he speaks of the truly enlightened man being drawn down from his divine contemplations..." (301). Rather than present the reader with a text that impersonates the original voice of Plato, Whewell did not hide his own uncertainty—"We can hardly doubt, I think"—about truth. The speaker of Fr569 describes the scholar's interest in establishing an immediate connection to the author. The echo of the poem's "I think"

reads ironically, parroting Whewell's expression. Yet, the speaker's tone is not overtly antagonistic with respect to scholars. She rather expresses her own preference for a more intimate relationship to the book. The "I think" of the poem demonstrates the speaker's affinity to a scholar who embraces uncertainty in his language. This comparison of the verse to a book from the Dickinson family library attaches a "certain" meaning to the line in Fr569 connected to Dickinson the author.

An interpretation of the reference to the next figure in Fr569's literary lineage, Sophocles, can be performed in a similar manner. "And Sophocles—a man—" once again may refer to the physical person of the Greek author. Read through this lens, Fr569 responds to an introductory scene from *The Republic* that resonates with Dickinson's language. Book I of Benjamin Jowett's 1892 edition reads, "Sophocles,—are you still the man you were?" (593) The passage where this question is found treats the subject of how men's sexuality changes with age. Socrates remembers Sophocles disavowing the notion that the diminishment of pleasure with age is a bad thing. He prefers to describe it as a pleasant diminution of the grip of a "mad and furious master." Reading the line from Fr569 in the context of Jowett's edition aligns nicely with the poem's underlying critique of the sexuality of interpretation, a discussion to be resumed below. However, the same passage from the edition that the Dickinson family owned does not line up as well with Fr569. Whewell's edition reads, "I was once present when Sophocles was asked by one whether he was still capable of sensual pleasure: and he said, 'Man, do not use language so irreverent. I congratulate myself that I have survived such desire; it is like escaping from a rabid and furious master'" (Whewell 9). No matter the edition, the positioning of Sophocles after Plato pairs nicely with Book I's remarks about aging and sexuality. With

regards to interpretation, Fr569 suggests that the act of reading an “Antique Book” is a mediated form of intimacy. It is not the “Bliss” that appears often in Dickinson’s poems. Rather, it is diminutive pleasure conceived of in a way once again echoing Whewell’s *Republic*, “I have great pleasure in conversing with very old people. It seems to me that one may inquire of them, as of persons who have already passed along a road which we, too, may have to travel” (9).

Carleton Lowenberg states that there is no evidence that Dickinson read Sophocles’ tragedies. Rather, he argues, she would have been familiar with his work through A.E. Sophocles, the author of one of Dickinson’s childhood textbooks. The double identity of the name Sophocles, both the Greek playwright and the nineteenth-century textbook author, partially explains the poem’s emphasis on the time when he was a “man.” Coupled with the above reading of a mediated encounter with Plato, Sophocles again straddles the line between past and present. A.E. Sophocles, as namesake to the Greek and Greek scholar, serves as a fitting symbol for the poem’s critical theme: reading a book is a heavily mediated encounter with a personified author figure. This personification sometimes looks like an unmediated encounter—a trick exemplified by the coincidence of the name, Sophocles. But in the end, the encounter with the past is always mediated. Scholarly “competitions” looking for certainties strip a text bare in search of the original body of the ancient author. Fr569 suggests that the only truth that they find is that all bodies “moulder,” and beneath the robes of the book there is a figure that is not even the original author, but a modern version with the same name.

Karen Richardson Gee is an example of a scholar who reads Dickinson in the manner described in Fr569. In her article, “‘My George Eliot’ and My Emily Dickinson,”



Gee, like Fr569's scholars, attempts to establish "certainties" about Dickinson by describing her textual relationship with one of her most admired writers. Gee also uses, like the speaker of Fr569, a lyrical tone that does not hide the pleasure she takes in reading Dickinson. Gee describes the process of scholarly exposure as follows: "We study Dickinson to discover the reality behind the person we have imagined, reading biographies and criticism, visiting her home, examining her manuscripts. I always hope that she will somehow reveal herself to me through these objects she touched or knew, as well as the words she wrote" (25). She aligns her own interest with Dickinson's fascination with George Eliot, aka Marian Evans, as follows: "She wanted to eliminate the 'perhaps' in her knowledge of Evans, replacing it with certainty" (32).

The act of getting to know the "real" author through scholarship yields both positive and negative results. Dickinson expressed this apprehension about scholarship through the association of death with print. She considered Marian Evans "*my* George Eliot" only by accepting the totality of the definition of death. Dickinson's lurid imagination associated the printed obituary with a casket. It is a splendid metaphor for Dickinson's understanding of how an author's writing relates to the figure of the author. The author symbolically resides in the word when she is alive, imbuing it with significance. While living, the meaning of the word is fluid; it can change as the author publishes new work or reveals information about what she wrote. When she dies, the words become fixed in their meaning with regard to the author. She no longer produces new works that describe what she meant, or directly comments on her intention when writing a certain piece. All intention becomes speculative. Real meaning—"certainties" in scholarship—is based on historical evidence. Dickinson was aware of how this

evidence stands in for the real author. Like the dissolving body in the grave, the original significance of the word becomes disassociated from the historical person. The author figure that succeeds the living author exists only as a representation in the reader's mind, what is Dickinson's "my George Eliot," and Gee and Susan Howe's, "my Emily Dickinson." In the logic of the poem, the result of the scholarly stripping bare of the author figure can be violent and shocking. She is exposed to be either a "mouldering," desiccating body or a void, both reminders of death.

Gee provides valuable insight into the meaning of the poems through historical investigation, but she relies on a conception of authorship that Fr569 describes warily. Gee ends her article with an image of Dickinson in heaven conducting an interview for the multitudes, revealing the truth about her life. In heaven, the meaning of all of Dickinson's poems will be clear, according to Gee's argument. But this conception of heaven does not agree with Dickinson's idea of it. Based on representations of the afterlife in her corpus, I doubt that Dickinson would agree that language is necessary in heaven at all. In *Lyric Time*, Cameron provides a remarkable account of how Dickinson associates language with loss while discussing Fr962 "A Light exists in Spring":

The attempt to make otherness over into one's own image, to foist upon it one's language, is its desecration, is its death. Loss is the something human that wants to paint the world in its own colors. Loss is longing in search of an object and, at least in this poem, it settles on the language that betrays it. For language can neither repair the space between the speaker and the light nor reproduce the light in comprehensible terms. (181-182)

The need to identify the world with language is a human, mortal characteristic. There is no need for it in heaven. The God depicted in the bible uses language in a different way than humans. As will be discussed at length below in "Just as He spoke it—from his

Hands—”, the divine word and object are one, existing simultaneously. Gee describes Dickinson’s scholarship about George Eliot positively, but Dickinson did not consider the act without considering the consequence of asking too much of an author, or the printed word that represents her, once she has passed away.

The fourth and fifth stanza’s description of the scholar’s search for the objective body of a text’s truth is relatively dispassionate. The poem’s greater part attends to the speaker’s affinity for subjective interpretation. Pleasure is inherently a personal experience, and the speaker further emphasizes the subjectivity of interpretation by describing the “precious,” “mouldering” qualities of the book. The pleasure is impermanent, ephemeral, and valuable within the moment that will inevitably diminish and disappear with time. Taking the book by the hand recognizes that the value of the text, what results from reading, cannot be possessed. It is only grasped, i.e. understood, and then released. The opportunity for grasping the text diminishes as time passes. The chance to understand becomes more difficult, the text less willing to yield its story. It needs a bit of a revivifying stroll to unstop its mouth. With such an old text, the scholarly attempt to uncover an objectified truth seems unrealistic.

The scholar’s “interest” treats the text as if it were timeless. Such a perspective reflects a general definition of lyric poetry as offered by Cameron: “I have suggested that the contradiction between social and personal time is the lyric’s generating impulse, for the lyric both rejects the limitations of social and objective time, those strictures that drive hard lines between past, present and future, and make use of them” (*Lyric Time* 206). However, Fr569’s personification of the text as an old man, i.e. a text whose expressive value diminishes with time, opposes the ideal lyric author figure. Sappho, for

example, who scholars are interested in as a youth, represents a lyric poet who exists outside of time. Jackson argues that Sappho's poetry, within the lyric genre, functions differently from how she would prefer to regard Dickinson's poetry. Jackson argues that the signification of Sappho's pronouns do not directly refer to individuals but to a general future audience, while Dickinson's often depend on direct referents (119). Fr569 describes an awareness of how the ageing material of the text symbolizes its temporality, and that meaning cannot but lose such significance. The "Antique Book"—anthropomorphized as an elderly author figure, gendered male—is far from what one would imagine an encounter with Sappho would feel like. The speaker does not imagine the act of reading as a direct meeting with the poet, but a mediated encounter through an editor that personifies the text. Such is an utterly non-lyrical interpretation.

Fr569 presents the reader interacting with a text that experiences a reciprocal pleasure to the reader's. The pleasure that the text experiences—which I will not call the pleasure of the text for reasons that will become clear—is necessary for a productive reading experience. The old book of Fr569 needs to be revived by a stroll down memory lane, reminding it of the time when it possessed a young, potent body. This is the speaker's role. By getting the blood flowing through the old skin, the book's productive value is momentarily restored. The distinction that the book figuratively experiences pleasure is an important reminder of the subjectivity of the author figure. What he presents is a picture of a world with which he was "familiar." This familiarity again connotes the intimacy of the telling of a story, where one relates a personal perspective to another, validating a dream as "true" through the transmission of an experience of pleasure. The reader is able to assert what a text means only as far as one's

personal, subjective understandings of a text make sense. Such assertions can appear like an objective representation if one does enough work, but ultimately resists final definition.

The meeting with the “Antique Book” is intimate, but stops short of the erotic, only depicting physical connection through the “take[ing]” and “warm[ing]” of the hand. This functions as a pun on the authorial hand: the subjective presence of an author that marks her work as her own. This intimate point of connection establishes a relationship with the reader, and allows access to meaning in the text. The text in Fr569 is an erotic body, one that figuratively experiences pleasure, and engenders subjective meaning in the mind of the reader. The text as a stand-in for the symbolic representation of the body of the author (an idea that will be explored further in section three), mediates the relationship between author and reader. Through the material of the text, the reader experiences a connection to the author, who took pleasure in the idea of the text reaching the hands of his reader. An objective undressing of the text is for the pleasure of the reader only. It does not take into consideration the author’s desire to connect with another person. In the context of Fr569, the book will not yield its meaning without an intimate connection to the reader. The scholar’s “interest,” when compared to the speaker’s pleasure, is relatively fruitless in the end. Fr569 suggests there is no pleasure of the reader without the pleasure of the text.

In his early career, Roland Barthes argued that a text could be analyzed sentence by the sentence to yield an objective truth that existed independently of any figure of an author. By the time he wrote *The Pleasure of the Text*, he had incorporated subjectivity into a discussion of how a reader encounters a modern text. The pleasure to which he

refers is not the pleasure the text experiences, as in Dickinson's poem, but the pleasure the reader experiences as the text consumes her in language. The classic text relies on tmesis—a style of reading that skips through a book in order to read only what is interesting (10-11)—that results from the reader's desire to undress the narrative truth. The modern text does not rely on narrative exposure, but on the obliterating power of language at the level of the sentence. The author figure is absent, as each word, Barthes argues, serves as a point of entry into the deconstructive power of bliss. The pleasure of the text, however thoroughly based in subjective interpretation, leads to an awareness that no author exists behind the word. The sentences are disconnected from a speaking voice, and can be interpreted by whatever subject position provides access to meaning. This does not contradict Barthes' earlier structuralism, because such a death of the author through subjectivity then leads to objective analysis of a discernable subject position.

Like Fr569, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes associates the scholar's text with the physical body:

Apparently Arab scholars, when speaking of the text, use this admirable expression: *the certain body*. What body? We have several of them; the body of anatomists and physiologists, the one science sees or discusses: this is the text of grammarians, critics, commentators, philologists (the pheno-text). (16)

Both Barthes and the speaker of Fr569 align "certainty" with the corporeal body. Barthes' list of literary professionals are interested in the object. He does not bother with the figure of the author—he assumes that "there is not, behind the text, some active (the writer)" (16). However, Barthes implicitly positions scholarly interest in the text as that which investigates the real body of the author. After all, biographical information is practically

unavoidable in scholarly discussions as a source of meaning for all texts, no matter the critical lens.

Barthes differentiates what can be discussed—the words of the text—from the body of bliss—the pleasure experienced while reading the text. The body of bliss aligns with the speaker of Fr569's interests:

We also have a body of bliss consisting solely of erotic relations, utterly distinct from the first body: it is another contour, another nomination; thus with the text: it is no more than the open list of the fires of language (those living fires, intermittent lights, wandering features strewn in the text like seeds and which for us advantageously replace the '*semina aeternitatis*,' the '*zopyra*,' the common notions, the fundamental assumptions of ancient philosophy). Does the text have a human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need. (16-17)

Fr569 imagines the poetic speaker's interaction with the "Antique Book" like the sexual satisfaction of her non-sexual desire. This is facilitated by the depiction of an "Antique Book" as an old man, past his sexual prime. Still, the body of the book produces meaning in the reader. The coupling is asexual but productive, allowing for a meeting with the author without the sexuality. The poem describes a connection with the "Antique Book" as a slow encounter, one that revels in the language rather than stripping it bare like Barthes's description of reading for narrative. Fr569 locates the generative function of the text in the material body of the language, one that creates a subjective pleasure different from anything that can be discussed or exposed. Through this lens, the speaker of Fr569 reads the "Old Volumes" as if they were modern texts. In doing so, she spares the author exposure. The pleasure of language takes precedence over the pleasure of truth, which

with the “Antique” texts proves unfulfilling. Yet the alternative would be to expose the truth of the old bodies preserved centuries past their expiration date.

To bring the discussion back to the central theme of this paper’s argument, the speaker of Fr569 describes an intimate connection with the author of the anthropomorphic book. Like Fr180 and Fr292, the speaker of Fr569 reaches for a connection to the figure on the other side of the page. Instead of finding a “disembodied hand” or the sharp pain of disconnection, she finds a hand to hold in the “Antique Book.” However, the book still leaves the speaker dissatisfied, as the final stanza illustrates:

His presence is enchantment –  
 You beg him not to go –  
 Old Volumes shake their Vellum Heads  
 And tantalize – just so –

The book lets go of the speaker’s hand and leaves with an apologetic shake of his head. The speaker is left “tantalized,” teased, and desiring a more intimate connection. The pain of separation is not as intense as that described in Fr292, but the speaker once again is left desiring greater satisfaction. The figure on the other side of the page, after all and in the end, is not a real person, but a being made out of vellum.

The final section of this thesis will discuss poems that resolve the various forms of dissatisfaction described above. The poems will differ from those discussed in the previous two sections in that they will not describe reaching for a connection to an absent figure. Instead, the poems are the objects that are held between two people, through which an intimate connection can be made across a distance of a page.



### III. Mediation and Successful Connections Between Reader and Author

Here I turn us to a series of “hand” poems that describe the problem of poetic representation. As a text cannot ultimately mediate man’s relationship with the divine, it does not offer a solution to the speakers’ dissatisfaction with an absent, impersonal God described in the first section. Nor can it serve as a permanent, immediate connection between two people; it does not solve the problem, described in section two, of how the sense of physical immediacy to another person once signified by the text degrades with time. Rather, this section will demonstrate how the written word serves as a temporary substitute—a form of immediacy—that connects people through the creation of shared significance. In other words, the site of the page functions as an intersubjective space where reader and writer meet, allowing for a provisional resolution to the problem of mediation.

The section will then move to demonstrate how the exchange of the handwritten poem is a defining quality of the establishment of meaning, as the process of exchange, or imagining that exchange, activates the significance of the poem. This argument builds on Virginia Jackson’s suggestion that “the hand-to-hand economy of written correspondence is to mediate our future reception of Dickinson’s writing” (163). In other words, the significance of Dickinson’s writing cannot be separated from the physical material of the text because the page has a limited “economy” of meaning. The greater argument of this paper furthers Jackson’s argument by suggesting that although the page is limited in what it can hold, it better satisfies the desire for an immediate connection than the relationship with an absent God, as described in section one, and the severed, or heavily mediated, connections with absent figures on the other side of the page, as

described in section two. As Jackson writes, the “letter,” what here is considered to be a text exchanged in an epistolary correspondence, “substantiates the otherwise purely metaphorical relation between writer and reader. It embodies the separation between their two bodies” (134). In the language of this paper, the exchange of the physical poem allows for the author to reach out and find more than a disembodied hand. The poem provides a real sense of immediacy, akin to the connection of two bodies that the speakers from the previous sections desired but lacked. Yet, as Jackson suggests, the letter “is not a metaphor, this third, literal body is also always insufficient, radically contingent” (134-135). The poem as an object considered through the lens of the “hand-to-hand economy of the epistolary exchange,” temporarily satisfies the speakers’ desire for immediacy, but does not finally resolve the problem of mediation.

Jackson’s argument weighs in on long-waged scholarly debate over how to interpret Dickinson’s writing. Most importantly, she aims to deconstruct critical methodologies that categorize Dickinson as a lyric poet. A discussion of this debate is important to this argument, as it has thus far demonstrated, and will continue to demonstrate, Dickinson’s concern with how to mediate her relationships to God, loved-ones, and the reader. As Jackson writes of Dickinson’s poems, “The maze of particular practical-social relationships to which they pointed before they were published as lyrics became much more abstract and simplified social relation after publication determined their genre” (87). The lyric poem “circulated as if not intended for public circulation,” as “private language addressed, lyrically, to all of us,” imagines an author figure writing in isolation, only concerned with establishing a connection to a reader with whom she shares no intimate relationship (87, 165). This thesis has attempted to show how

Dickinson's speakers are concerned with the problem of mediating relationships with figures other than the future reader. I have tried to build on Jackson's argument by tracing Dickinson's desire to connect with her reader through a specific symbol of her poetry. In doing so, I have argued that the origin of Dickinson's material poetic practice is related to personal faith, and a parallel desire to fill the need for spiritual meaning by making an intimate connection with her loved-ones through verse. In this sense, I have attempted to create a fuller sense of Dickinson the author as a historical person intimately involved in a community of readers.

Also important to the present argument is the debate between Walter Benn Michaels and Susan Howe, both of whom Jackson refers to on multiple occasions in her study. Benn Michaels and Howe fall on opposite sides of the Dickinson interpretive spectrum. In *The Birth-Mark*, Howe argues that Dickinson's "visible handwritten sequence establishes an enunciative clearing outside intention while obeying intuition's agonistic necessity" (136). She then writes, "Words are only frames. No comfortable conclusion. Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, mass. These poems are representations. These manuscripts should be understood as visual productions" (141). Howe treats the manuscripts as unique, artistic works whose original meaning has been significantly mediated by a range of editors with varying experience. She identifies the original holograph as the definitive source of a poem's meaning. Benn Michaels responds, "Once we become interested in what we see, in what the text makes us think of, we become in principle...indifferent to the question of what a text means" (*The Shape of the Signifier* 8). Benn Michaels repeats his defense of authorial intention made in *Against Theory*, in order to further an argument concerning subject politics.

However, his argument in coordination with Howe's, is useful in that it establishes the poles of authorial intent between which the present argument falls. The current section's emphasis on the object of the written text aligns with Howe's insistence that the holograph is a valuable source of meaning. However, by imagining the exchange of the written manuscript as an object in the written correspondence, *à la* Jackson, one must consider that the text holds some amount of meaning. The word is not an empty frame, as it holds significance between two people. Nor is the only value of the text fixed completely to the author's intention, as the poem that is unsure of its destination, and consequently to whom it is addressed, is not finally fixed to authorial intent.

The poems of this section will demonstrate the extent to which a poem can successfully mediate a relationship between people. The first poem, Fr436 "I found the words to every thought" will describe a speaker struggling with the problem of how to mediate a relationship to the divine, and her frustrations with the limitations of the written word to do so. This will lead into a discussion of Fr953, "Just as He spoke it from his Hands," which demonstrates Dickinson's view of the poem as a physical embodiment of her thought that allows reader and author to exist in close proximity. The section will conclude with Fr557 "I send Two Sunsets —", a poem that demonstrates how the written word provides a temporary substitute—a form of immediacy—that connects people through shared significance. Importantly, Fr557 focuses on the exchange of the handwritten poem as a defining quality of creating significance, as the process of exchange activates the significance of the text.

The first poem of this section, Fr436 "I found the words to every thought," describes the limitation of the written word. In the poems from section one, the speakers

articulate dissatisfaction with an absent deity to whom they could not connect, most vividly illustrated by the amputated hand of Fr1581. However, section one demonstrated how this “abdication of Belief” did not articulate a total rejection of God, but a frustration with an impersonal relationship. The speakers then described how human companionship could offer an alternative satisfaction of the need for a connection. Most clearly in Fr1649, the speaker offers her hand as a substitute for God’s hand. In Fr352, the speaker describes the consolation of human companionship as an alternative to a relationship to a God whose hand cannot be imagined clearly, understood, and therefore grasped. The third section will proceed towards a description of how Dickinson used her poems to establish the sense of an immediate connection to another person through the written word. But before proceeding to poems that best describe this sense of immediacy, Fr436 provides an important reminder of Dickinson’s awareness that the practice of writing and the exchange of a poem cannot entirely resolve the problem articulated in section one. A poem cannot mediate a relationship with God. In other words, it cannot provide an immediate point of contact with God, but can, as will be demonstrated by the poems that follow, allow for a mediated relationship between two people that provides a temporary substitute.

I found the words to every thought  
 I ever had but One –  
 And that – defies Me –  
 As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun  
  
 To Races – nurtured in the Dark –  
 How would your Own – begin?  
 Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal –  
 Or Noon – in Mazarin?

Fr436 describes the problem of mediating certain relationships in language. The speaker presents the word as a physical object that can be “found.” Thoughts are stored in the mind, retrieved, and placed on the page. The speaker can reach into her mind to retrieve all the “words,” except the “One” associated with the divine, which cannot be grasped. In Dickinson’s greater oeuvre, there is a recurring theme of divine presence that cannot be encountered, comprehended, or fixed on the page. To take one example, Dickinson’s later poem, Fr1205 “Immortal is an ample word,” illustrates the paradox of representing the divine. The idea of “Immortality” is by definition fixed and will exist forever, but on the page the word has a distinct volume. It is “ample,” full with meaning, “When what we need is by.” The definition of the fixed concept of immortality depends on human need, which changes the meaning of the word on the page.

Like Fr1205, Fr436 describes divine presence through its resistance to being mediated in writing. The speaker uses the “Sun” to demonstrate the difficulty of representing the divine. The authorial “Hand” cannot “chalk the Sun” because it has no texture. It leaves no trace, not even its outline, because its spatial boundaries are entirely visual to the human subject. Secondly, the sun moves slowly across the sky, and its movement prevents it from being traced on the paper. Yet, the word can approximate the sun through the suggestive shape of the “O” of “One.”

The speaker appeals to a different culture for help. Who exactly she means by the “races—nurtured in the Dark” has less importance to this argument than these peoples’ alternate practice of representation. The speaker suggests that their medium may better represent the “One” unfound thought than the ink at her disposal. Cochineal is “an insect...gathered and put in a pot, where they are confined for some time, and then killed

by the application of heat. These insects thus killed form a mass or drug, which is the proper cochineal of the shops. It is used in giving red colors, especially crimson and scarlet, and for making carmine.”<sup>i</sup> Mazarin is both “a deep blue color” and “A particular way of dressing fowls.”<sup>ii</sup> Both colors are made or associated with animal life, which the speaker speculates has a better chance of representing the thought than dead ink.

Although ink, “A black liquor or substance used for writing, generally made of an infusion of galls, copperas and gum-Arabic,”<sup>iii</sup> possesses some of the same animal quality in its gall, the lack of color prevents it from representing the light of the “Blaze.” Black ink is harder to read in the dark than vibrant color. The speaker suggests, then, that her medium of ink on the page has less capacity for representing the “One” thought than other mediums that use colors that are vibrant with life.

In *Choosing Not Choosing*, Cameron considers Fr436 within the context of the other poems of Fascicle 15. She argues that “reading poems in the fascicle context specifies subjects for poems and even in some cases their antecedents” (34). In the case of Fr436, she connects the “One” with “the fascicle’s three central topics (not having the lover, not knowing [the lover], madness [because of not knowing or not having the lover]) without being definitively identified with any one of these” (36). While Cameron limits the possibility of the subject to a relationship with an absent lover, she chooses to ignore the association between the divine and the “Sun,” “Blaze,” and, as most clearly demonstrated by Fr544 below, “Noon”:

“Heaven” has different  
 Signs – to me –  
 Sometimes, I think that Noon  
 Is but a symbol of the Place –

Although she does not consider the subject of Fr436 to be the speaker's relationship to God, Cameron's reading provides an important insight: Dickinson articulates a dissatisfaction with an absent lover in similar language that she describes a dissatisfaction with an absent God. Neither relationship can be entirely mediated through language. The speaker of Fr436 cannot find the words that allow for an immediate connection to either the absent God described in section one, nor the absent lovers described in section two. There is a limit to the amount of significance that a page can hold. As Jackson puts it, "'Sheets of paper' hold...only what can be written, read, held" (135). Although the written word cannot fully mediate a relationship between two people or between God and a person—the page cannot bring one into immediate contact with the "Blaze" of love or with the divine light of "Noon"—the series of poems that follow will show how Dickinson conceived of the practice of writing and exchange of her poetry among loved-ones as the most effective satisfaction of the desire for an immediate relationship.

Fr953, "Just as He spoke it from his Hands" illustrates how a poem, as Jackson puts it, "substantiates the otherwise purely metaphorical relation between writer and reader. It embodies the separation between their two bodies" (134):

Just as He spoke it from his Hands  
 This Edifice remain –  
 A Turret more, a Turret less  
 Dishonor his Design –  
  
 According as his skill prefer  
 It perish, or endure –  
 Content, soe'er, it ornament  
 His Absent Character



I will argue that there are two ways to interpret Fr953 that Dickinson juxtaposes to demonstrate how a poem provides a sense of immediacy between author and reader. Firstly, I will look at the poem through its overt biblical allusion. The speaker considers how her body— “This Edifice”— “ornament[s]” the “Absent Character” of God. In other words, the human body is an embodiment of God’s word. Appropriately to the theme of this argument, the speaker contemplates her relationship to God by meditating on “Turrets.” On the body, the cylindrical form of a “Turret” can describe several things. However, considering that the speaker is mainly interested in God’s hands, it makes sense that she considers how her turret-like fingers exist exactly as God spoke them into being. “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his *own* image.”<sup>iv</sup> In regard to the creative act of God, Fr953 is most interested in the relationship between language and the resulting object. God spoke and “man” came into being. There is no difference between the word and the object. There is no gap in significance between the word and the idea. A way to describe this in a phrase would be a catachrestic rendering such as Dickinson offers, “He spoke it from his Hands.” This intentional misattribution of the function of hands draws attention to the unique creative power of God.

This primary lens informs the secondary lens that compares the creative act of the author to the creative act of God. The author, “Just [like]” God, creates “This Edifice” of the page, as if she spoke it from her hands. The word is an embodiment of the author’s mind, as if she “found the words” to her thoughts, and placed them on the page as she spoke them. Through this lens, the turrets represent the letters on the page. The missing turrets are then a missing “s” after “remain,” “prefer,” and “endure,” and the “v” from the

middle of “soe’er,” which appears on the fascicle without apostrophe. The author assumes the role of God in the purposefulness of her admissions on the physical page. There are no errors, as the errors are evidence of the original design.<sup>v</sup> The page embodies the speaking voice perfectly, simultaneously, and each word is tied directly to the author’s meaning. The page embodies the author’s thought.

Fr953 applies to the debate over the holograph mentioned in the introduction of this section. The speaker, taking the side of Susan Howe, considers the holograph to be a sacred object, one whose true meaning comes through an appreciation of the author’s meaning just as she spoke it. The holograph, as opposed to a print reproduction, proceeds directly from the author’s hand to the page. Moreover, the “Edifice” of the page suggests a hollow structure—“a frame”—that embodies the “Absent Character” of the author’s thought.<sup>vi</sup> Just as Howe imagines that the holograph allows the reader an almost immediate contact with Dickinson the author, the speaker of Fr953 imagines “This Edifice” of the page allows her reader a similar immediacy to her.<sup>vii</sup>

However, as Jackson suggests, Dickinson’s writing, the body of the poem or the letter, “is not a metaphor, this third, literal body is also always insufficient, radically contingent” (134-135). The text may be a direct embodiment of the author’s thought from the speaker of Fr953’s perspective, but from the reader’s perspective, the body is “radically contingent” on how much the page can hold and who holds the page (135).

Following Jackson’s lead, Dickinson best compensates for this “insufficiency” through imagining the reception of the physical text in the epistolary exchange in which Dickinson famously participated. Jackson offers that the text becomes an intersubjective space. Referring to (L 1:77), Jackson writes, “It is the page itself that offers a

communion that displaces in that moment what earlier in the letter she has called ‘*their* meeting.’ Their meeting takes place in church; our meeting takes place in ‘the church within our hearts’” (133). The final poem of this section will demonstrate how imaging the poems in the “hand-to-hand economy of the written correspondence” activates the poems significance in a way that allows the reader and the author to share an immediate connection. Through a form of mutual understanding where the reader understands the text through the material of the epistolary exchange, Dickinson most successfully bridges the “separation between bodies.” It is through this method of exchange and interpretive strategy that Dickinson finds the most effective solution to the problem of mediation described in the first two sections.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the final poem, I will take a moment to explain why Jackson’s suggestion that “the hand-to-hand economy of written correspondence is to mediate our future reception of Dickinson’s writing” relates to the present argument. Jackson’s “hand-to-hand economy” functions along the lines of Foucault’s “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (“What is an Author,” 118). Instead of having an overwhelming amount of possible interpretations of one of Dickinson’s poems or letters—“cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations” (118)—the “hand-to-hand economy” restricts the reader’s understanding of the text to what one could imagine the author, Emily Dickinson, attempting to communicate to her nineteenth-century epistolary correspondent. In doing so, Jackson suggests that the twenty-first-century reader imagines himself as a recipient of the physical manuscript—“reading Emily Dickinson here and now, ours are the unseen hands” (165). This methodology requires interpreting the physical manuscript, and in some cases,

reconstructing the original state of a poem.<sup>viii</sup> The remainder of this section will follow Jackson's suggestion, and analyze a poem within the context of its physical state in the epistolary correspondence. This interpretive strategy will demonstrate how the text of a poem, its material form, and its reception inform each other to provide a sense of immediacy that the speakers from the first two sections desired, but could not access.

In section one, the speakers of the poems describe a relationship to an absent God to whom they cannot relate. In section two, the poems illustrate failed attempts at making a connection to an absent lover or figure on the other side of the page. The first poem of this section, Fr436, illustrates the limitations of the written word to mediate certain types of relationships—specifically one's relationship to God, or as Cameron suggests, to an absent lover to whom the speaker cannot connect. The second poem, Fr953, opened up the possibility that written verse, as an embodiment of the author's thought, could mediate the relationship between author and reader in a way that felt as if they were in each other's immediate presence. This immediacy was found to be contingent, but suggests that Dickinson imagined that the practice of writing a poem allowed some satisfaction of her desire to mediate an intimate relationship with another person. The last poem of this section, Fr557 "I send Two Sunsets" will demonstrate how a consideration of the text within the context of its material exchange provides the best satisfaction of that feeling of contingency. The poem appears in Franklin's variorum as follows:

I send Two Sunsets –  
 Day and I – in competition – ran –  
 I finished Two – and several Stars –  
 While He – was making One –  
 His Own is ampler – but as I  
 Was saying to a friend –

Mine – is the more convenient –  
 To Carry in the Hand –

The way in which Fr557 demonstrates the significance of the written text is not immediately apparent. However, as presented above, Fr557 *outlines* how a poem serves as a meaningful connection between an author and a reader. The speaker describes two value systems that are “in competition,” whose significance is judged by the quality of the opposing sunsets. “Day,” with whom the speaker competes, offers a sunset that is comparable to the untraceable sun described in Fr436. In both poems, the speaker describes its singular significance suggested by the capitalized “One”: impressive offerings that dazzle by their “Blaze” and their “ample[ness].” Fr436 searches for a medium that is capable of representing the “One” thought associated with the sun, but can only speculate as to whether there is some culture unknown to her that possesses a dye that can encapsulate divine presence. Taken literally, the speaker of Fr557 succeeds in finding a way to mediate a sunset and send it to an unspecified recipient.

Of course, the “Sunset” offered by the speaker of Fr557 is a metaphor, most evidently, for a poem. The speaker has not literally figured out how to trace the sun. Rather, by describing the poem as a “Sunset,” the speaker opposes the value of her creation, the poem, to that offered by an impersonal figure that exists at a remove. In the end, the speaker favors her sunset because it is “convenient/To Carry in the Hand.”

In order to further assert the superiority of her “Sunset,” the speaker of Fr557 ironically assumes the role of the divine creator, similar to the way in which the speaker of Fr1649 imitates God’s voice. In this context, the speaker associates the sun with “He,” the God of the Bible, who created the sun and stars: “*he made the stars also.*”<sup>ix</sup> In adopting the role of “mak[er],” the speaker suggests that the smaller, personal creation

represents a divine offering whose value is comparable, if not superior, to what can be offered by a divine figure. The opposition set up in Fr557 illustrates the larger argument of this paper in microcosm: the connection established with the reader through the poem best satisfies the desire for an immediate, personal connection found lacking in impersonal relationships, be that with an absent God or a lost loved-one. Whereas the relationships to the absent figures of section one and two are defined by the speakers' separation from them, Fr557 describes how the author and reader can experience a more immediate connection through the poem.

Yet, while Fr557 *outlines* how a poem can serve as a divine object that satisfies a desire to connect immediately to the reader, it is not self-evident how the poem itself accomplishes this feat. What is more, one could consider that the poem fails to establish a connection to the reader because of its deficiency as a lyric. The genre, as Jackson describes it around the time “Dickinson began to be published in ‘complete’ editions,” presented “an idea of the lyric as temporally self-present or unmediated” (9). The lyric, which “one could understand without reference to [...] history or [...] genre,” allowed the reader to imagine that he shared an immediate connection to the author through the text of the poem (10). Any perceived errors in the text disrupted the sense of immediacy between reader and author, as Jackson demonstrates through her critique of New Critic Yvor Winters’s analysis of a Dickinson poem:

The one “defect” that Winters finds in Dickinson’s artistry are two small lines “in the author’s personal grammatical shorthand.” Winters quickly dismisses the lapse as “minor,” but his remark speaks volumes by the time we get to this reading’s stunning conclusion: the “personal” touch interferes with the critic’s own personal identification with the poem’s portrait of isolation. What matters for Winters’s reading of the poem is not

when it was written, how it was written, or who read it—in fact, for the image of literary isolation he wants to find in the poem, it is just as well that he does not know any of that. If he did, the lines would seem insufficient as a lyric. (95)

It is probable that Winters would have faulted Fr557 for its insufficiency as a lyric as well. The problem with the text is most clearly seen through the number “Two.” If the speaker sent “One” sunset, it would be easy to argue that the sunset is the poem itself. But because there are “Two,” the poem’s meaning is not adequately self-enclosed. In other words, it cannot easily be explained through a strict close-reading analysis, *à la* Paul de Man’s treatment of Baudelaire in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric.” There is the possibility that the “Two Sunsets” are the two stanzas. Each stanza is a “finished” entity. Although it is disguised a bit by the first line break after the fifth syllable, Dickinson composed the poem in her traditional 8-6 ballad verse. One could argue that the complete sunsets are the two 8-6 pairs connected by a slant rhyme.

The above argument falls apart with the grammatical inconsistency that appears in the last two lines of the poem: “Mine – is the more convenient/To Carry in the Hand.” If the speaker sends “Two” sunsets, then the phrase “Mine—is” does not agree with the referent, “Two.” In this sense, Dickinson’s reputation as a lyric poet is at stake. The error dispels the aura of a text that the reader can claim to immediately understand and subsequently experience an unmediated connection to the author.

However, like the seam of Fr569, that was followed in section two to a deeper understanding of the poem’s historical significance, the “errors” of Fr557 lead to another point of entry into the meaning of the poem. The opening provided by the inconsistencies of the numerical count encourages the reader to investigate the question of what exactly

the “Sunsets” represent. One way to accomplish this is to follow Jackson’s suggestion to view the poem through the lens of the epistolary exchange. After doing so, as will be shown, the significance of the poem changes drastically. It no longer serves as a way for the reader to experience an *unmediated* relationship to the author through the poem, as was the ideal conception of the lyric author. Rather, it allows the reader and author to experience an intimate connection to one another through the media included in the epistolary exchange. To put it in Jackson’s words, the material site of the page “becomes an intersubjective space...that offers a communion that displaces in that moment what earlier in the letter she has called ‘*their meeting*’” (133).

Crucial to appreciating how the “communion” occurs in Fr557 is a detail Franklin notes in the variorum about the original presentation of the poem. One version of the poem that Dickinson wrote in 1863 was a part of an epistolary correspondence with Susan Huntington Dickinson, Emily’s childhood friend, sister-in-law, and, as suggested by Martha Nell Smith, lesbian lover (25). In the variorum, Franklin points to a notation on the text that the poem was “Sent with brilliant flowers” (558). This detail, coupled with the knowledge that “her poetry...was often enclosed...in bouquets that made the poem concealed at the flowers’ center and the flowers themselves one message,” dramatically changes the meaning of the poem (Farr 3). The interpretation of the “Two Sunsets” is no longer restricted to the page. At least one of them refers to the bouquet sent with the poem.

As Judith Farr describes, Dickinson compared flowers to sunsets on more than one occasion:



Just as Dickinson is able to conceal herself in a “Calyx,” just as a flower can transmogrify itself into her, the whole world may be regarded as a flower. So entirely did that image serve Emily Dickinson as a means of exploring reality that she twice described one of the most dramatic and important natural events—sunset—in floral language. (200)

Farr does not include Fr557 as a poem that “described... sunset—in floral language.”

Technically, it does the reverse. It describes flowers in the language of a sunset.

However, the link between sunsets and flowers remains a significant detail of Fr557.

Without the additional information of the pairing of the poem with the physical bouquet,

it is difficult to imagine how the poem could be a sunset. Does the speaker think that

rhyme, verse, and diction light up the mind with beautiful colors like the sun at dusk?

Does the speaker consider her poem to evoke the same emotional response as a sunset?

Does she equate a sadness about a disconnect between reader and author with

associations to the sunset? Perhaps all of these readings apply, but the simpler

explanation comes by associating the colors of the sunset with the colors of the flowers.

Moreover, the addition of the note about flowers clarifies what Dickinson means by,

“several Stars.” To Dickinson, as Farr reports, “the five- or six- pointed flower of the

white jasmine resembles an asterisk or star” (47). Or perhaps, Dickinson could be

referring to another flower. As Osborne points out, in Fr117, Dickinson writes,

“‘Arcturus’ is his other name -/ I’d rather call him ‘Star’!” (67).

Farr’s analysis of Fr787, one of the sunset poems, applies well to Fr557:

The sunset is a bloom that is “stated” over the mountain by whatever natural force created it, an echo of St. John’s gospel in which “the Word” creates the world. Sunset is also “stated” in the poem itself since Dickinson links two acts of creation here, the one that produced a natural sunset and the one she produces as a creator of her poem [...] She decides

in favor of the poetic reproduction because it can be kept, while nature's sunset can never be repeated. (203)

As described above, the speaker of Fr557 adopts the role of divine creator when she describes "making" the sunsets. But in Fr557, there is the added element of the bouquet of flowers. There is a three-way exchange of significance between the sunset, the bouquet, and the poem. The sunset can represent impermanence and death. As St. Armand writes, "Dickinson studied the death of the sun with as much intensity as she brought to the scanning of the dying faces of her friends, relatives, and loved ones" (278).<sup>x</sup> The bouquet serves as a reminder that a sunset is also a natural phenomenon full of color whose beauty is impermanent and will fade. The poem is a more permanent "reproduction" of beauty in verse. It is the lasting, textual evidence of the bouquet and the sunset. It allows for the otherwise ephemeral sunset to be possessed, and overcomes the impermanence of the flowers whose color will fade. However, the significance of the poem cannot exist apart from the flowers and the sunset. Its significance depends on the poem's inclusion in an epistolary exchange. Its value thus is greatest when imagined within the hand-to-hand exchange of the poem and the bouquet.

As Osborn argues, Dickinson's "work is about how text and material long to become close" (68). What is more, the longing of the text that Osborne describes correlates to a longing of the author to become close to her reader. Osborne writes, "Sending a poem with a packet of flowers to a friend is one way to bring words and the world they model into closer proximity" (68). By pairing the "brilliant flowers" with Fr557, Dickinson creates an intersubjective space on the site of the page where her reader interprets the word "Sunset" as both poem, bouquet, and the natural phenomena in the sky. This not only brings the "words" and the "world they model" into closer proximity,

but also Dickinson and her reader through a sense of mutual understanding. Osborne continues, “Living verse, for Dickinson, is words that enact the instability between words and things” (70). In this sense, the speaker of Fr557 succeeds where the speakers in the second section come up short. Through the instability of the word created by the relationship of text and material, the text establishes a connection to the reader in a way that seems alive. Whereas the speakers of Fr180 and Fr292 reach for a connection to the loved one and find only disembodied hands, dead flowers, and reminders of the pain of separation, in Fr557, Dickinson presents her reader with “living verse” which her recipient can “Carry in the Hand.”

If one considers the poem paired with a bouquet of flowers as a part of an epistolary exchange, the pronoun referents also change.<sup>xi</sup> Instead of the “He” in Fr557 representing “Day” or God, the possibility presents itself that “He” is an actual person. Most likely, “He” refers to Austin Dickinson, Sue’s husband, with whom Emily Dickinson can be said to be in “competition” for Sue’s affection. One could imagine Emily and Austin—who “shared a commitment to social improvements that included gardening and horticulture” (Farr, 15)—each making a bouquet to send to Sue. Emily Dickinson, then, enhances the significance of her bouquet with the inclusion of the poem.

By imagining Fr557 as passing from hand to hand—from the hand of Dickinson, to the hand of her reader, be that Sue or the modern day reader—the poem becomes significant as an object that satisfies a desire to connect with another person. By viewing the poem through the lens of the hand-to-hand economy of the epistolary correspondence, one can see Emily Dickinson attempting to establish a connection with her reader. In this, one can also see how the practice of writing and exchange of the poem provided a

satisfaction of her desire to connect immediately and intimately with another person. As was argued in section one, Dickinson first sought to satisfy this desire for immediacy through her relationship with God, but found it lacking; the evidence of the relationship could not be mediated. Section two included scenarios where Dickinson attempted to establish meaningful connections through epistolary and textual relationships, but was frustrated by the quality of the mediation. This final section describes Dickinson's most successful way of connecting with her reader through the exchange of the physical text. The media through which Dickinson communicated her thoughts made her words immediately satisfying, as if the reader and author were in each other's presence. The site of the page functioned as an intersubjective space where Dickinson intimately connected to another person in a way that she could not connect with an impersonal, absent deity, or a loved one from the past.

## *Conclusion*

The short scope of this thesis discussed a small but significant set of Dickinson's "hand" poems. In total, approximately ten of the 100 or so poems that include the word were discussed at length. That short selection of poems brought a central theme of Dickinson's poetry into view. It was the lens through which one could see Dickinson's attempt to connect with various figures in her life. It traced her unsuccessful efforts to connect more immediately with an absent God and suggested that her dissatisfaction with "His" absence caused her to seek a more immediate comfort with the people in her life. I then suggested that Dickinson most successfully connected with her loved-ones through the writing and exchange of her verse, allowing an intimate connection that provided a meaningful, temporary substitute for the absence of divine presence described earlier. Her engagement with other people through writing allowed Dickinson to establish deep connections with her loved ones through a powerful sense of immediacy. In his discussion of Dickinson and nineteenth-century gift-giving practices, Manheim writes:

Dickinson remained deeply engaged with her friends and with a wider community of correspondents throughout her life, but once she became a poet, most contact took place through the inventions she embedded in her poems and letters...there does seem to be a sense in which she sacrificed social immediacy in order to offer the vehicle of broader and darker communion than her readers could otherwise engage. (23-24)

In the poems reproduced above, speakers often illustrate their desire for communion through the image of a hand reaching out to connect with a figure opposite them. In Dickinson's greater oeuvre, reaching is a common theme. Rosenbaum notes 36 instances of the words "reach," "reached," "reaches" and "reaching." Reaching generally symbolizes dissatisfaction with an inability to

overcome the distance between the speaker and the other figure. Zapedowska argues poems which “focus...on the connection with others” constitute the “sentimental paradigm” of Dickinson’s poetry (“Dickinson’s Delight” 9). While greatly admiring Jackson’s study characterizing Dickinson as a sentimental poet, Zapedowska encourages her reader to consider other ways of viewing the author. She prefers to view Dickinson as a poet who commonly writes about delight. Specifically, she cites the sense of touch—“The most primary sensation that allows unmediated contact with external reality”—as a source of enjoyment and an individual sense of connection of the self to the world (6). I mention this in order to acknowledge that the present study limited itself to a specific paradigm that aligned mostly with Jackson, and that the image of the hand, as a relatively common symbol, does not simply fit into one characterization of Dickinson’s poetry.

The hand, after all, is an image that appears in Dickinson’s verse at various instances where the word “hand” is not used. For a complete discussion of the image, one should take into account poems that include a wide variety of words associated with the hand. “Fingers,” “fist,” “thumb,” “grasp,” “reach,” “touch,” “feel,” and “caress” are all words that could be analyzed within a discussion of hands. Some of the poems where those words appear would fit into the sentimental paradigm, some would fit into the paradigm of delight, and some would not fit into any predefined category.

In some ways, the present analysis of hand imagery was necessarily an exercise in limitation. The “hand” poems discussed above could be combined into

a variety of other groupings. By categorizing these poems as “hand” poems, I in effect created an artificial grouping along the lines of the original editors of Dickinson’s verse. As Jackson and others argue, the lyrical categories that appeared in the 1890 edition of poems—“Life,” “Love,” “Nature” and “Time and Eternity”—are problematic in retrospect. They create a false sense of Dickinson’s intention to speak about subjects that can be immediately understood—regardless of historical, social, or material evidence—by an imagined future reader.

Selecting the “hand” as the subject served as a tacit reminder of the subjectivity of any interpretation. A scholar’s claim to objectivity—what Dickinson would call “certainty”—cannot be separated from the lens through which he considers the text. The category of “hands” framed a discussion of Dickinson’s desire to connect with her loved-ones through the written text, but, hopefully, the frame self-consciously acknowledged its own subjective categorization of her poems. It allowed me, the modern reader, to connect to Dickinson through my own understanding of her intention to connect with her contemporary reader.

However, the frame itself proved to be a point of difficulty. In choosing a symbol as its subject—rather than a historical, social, or theoretical subject—I struggled at times with how to write about Dickinson’s work. For example, I encountered the problem of how to refer to the first person figures in the poems. For the most part, I referred to them as speakers in an attempt to remain attentive to the word of the text. Yet, as the argument progressed towards a discussion of the material object, it became more and more difficult not to refer to the speaker as Emily Dickinson. Moreover, current methodology, Jackson’s in particular,

encourages calling the speaker Emily Dickinson, albeit in a manner that deconstructs the conventional lyric figure.

I also experienced difficulty distinguishing the symbolic value of the hand in the poetry from the symbolic value of the hand in the criticism. The introduction offered that these two hands ran in close parallel, and that the symbolic hand in Dickinson's verse anticipates—or to use Jackson's language once again, "The...figurative content...suggests"—that her reader interpret the text through a consideration of its material form. It is possible that this confusion was a result of Dickinson's awareness, as expressed through her poetry, of her reader's appreciation of the text as an extension of her living hand. The group of poems that describes the text as a living embodiment of the poet is an important subset of Dickinson's oeuvre that the present study touched on only briefly. Most vividly, Dickinson uses the imagery of the Eucharist—as in Fr1715 "A word made flesh is seldom"—to describe what she considered her most effective verse. While the discussion was beyond this paper's scope, Dickinson's use of the Eucharist to describe a conflation of word and text would prove valuable in the discussion of authorial subjectivity. An author who explicitly considers her handwritten word to be an embodiment of her thought provides an added dimension to a discussion of the connection of the authorial hand to the page.

Dickinson is the ideal author to discuss topics central to literary theory. First and foremost, she has an incredible, expansive collection of writing for a scholar to study; there are two distinct bodies of work—prose and verse—that inform one another, blur generic categories, and historicize her writing in a



moment of literary history of unparalleled importance. Dickinson's decision to "publish" her poetry in a relatively anachronistic manner, while her contemporaries courted the burgeoning printing presses of the nineteenth century, allows contemporary scholars to speculate about the effect of print publication on interpretation. Her verse anticipates the critical debate concerning authorship, both foregrounding the importance of the hand of the author in interpretation, while expressing, in her verse, concepts central to structuralist and poststructuralist theory: the amputation of the Author-God's hand, the deconstruction of patriarchal social/literary hierarchies, and an awareness of how the reception of her work will inevitably become less true to her real identity as a nineteenth-century poet, and more a reflection of editorial hands that framed her work for public consumption.

However, because Dickinson's verse aligns so well with theoretical questions, it is often difficult to analyze her writing without falling into the trap of reading solely through the lens of theory. This thesis attempted to avoid that trap by analyzing Dickinson's verse through a symbol in her poetry. Yet the argument—which progresses from an analysis of Dickinson's disillusionment with an absent God, to that of the reader-author relationship, to a focus on the importance of the material text and intersubjective interpretation—unintentionally reflects the trajectory of Dickinson scholarship, and literary theory in general. While this is somewhat problematic, I consider it a relatively small consequence of choosing the symbol of the hand as my subject.

Within the last few months, one more major obstacle to the study of Dickinson was overcome with the release of the new Emily Dickinson Archive (<http://www.edickinson.org/>).<sup>i</sup> Through this searchable database—complete with an extensive collection of high quality images of original manuscripts and the text of the poems as they appear in each successive edition—one can, more so than ever, view Dickinson’s original holograph as if one had access to the original manuscripts. The website presents the best opportunity for a reader of Dickinson to interpret the original media of her poetry. The zoom and flip options make it seem as if one were manipulating the physical poems themselves. Yet even with this new, unprecedented access, the reader must put in the work of imagining these texts within the epistolary correspondence.<sup>ii</sup> The significance of Dickinson’s writing still cannot be separated from the physical presentation of her poems and letters to her loved one’s. Simply considering the holograph in isolation, without imagining, for example, the objects that accompanied them, ignores the important detail that Dickinson connected to her reader through a medium of exchange, where the physical presentation of the text affected the interpretation of the written word, and vice versa. While the new archive notes that Dickinson sent Fr557 “I send Two Sunsets—” with a bouquet, it is still left to the reader to pair the text and the flowers in his imagination in order to correctly interpret the poem. Doing so reintroduces the figure of Emily Dickinson into “maze of particular-practical social relationships” that subsequent editorial and critical work concealed (Jackson 87). Dickinson poems, then, are valuable not because they are examples of “the idealized universe of gilded pages” associated with impersonal,

lyric Author-Gods (Jackson 134). Rather, they are significant as intimate extensions of the author's hand that establish a deep, immediate, and invaluable bond with a close community of nineteenth-century readers.

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*Notes to Introduction*

<sup>i</sup>Conrad Aiken, in his introduction to *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, writes, “Her genius was, it remains to say, as erratic as it was brilliant. Her disregard for accepted forms or for regularities was incorrigible. Grammar, rhyme, meter—anything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought or freedom of utterance” (xv).

<sup>ii</sup>This quote is transcribed as it appears in the Franklin variorum (53).

<sup>iii</sup>*The Birth-Mark* references Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story. The shape of the birthmark is a hand.

<sup>iv</sup>Jackson’s alternate title for her preface.

<sup>v</sup>My italics.

<sup>vi</sup>While Rosenbaum’s concordance corresponds to Thomas H. Johnson’s variorum edition of Dickinson’s poems, which has been displaced as the authoritative edition by Franklin’s variorum, it continues to serve as a useful tool for Dickinson scholarship. Moreover, it provides an accurate count of the number of times the word “hand” appears in Dickinson’s oeuvre.

<sup>vii</sup>In her article, *Citizens of Paradise*, Zapadowska “undermine[s] the frequent opinion that Dickinson is predominantly a poet of longing, anguish, and despair” by arguing that Dickinson’s separation allowed her to be “sensitive to each and every aspect of human experience” (88).

*Notes to Section I*

<sup>i</sup>Zapadowska, citing Perry Miller, writes, “for New England Calvinists, conversion was the sole moment of the individual’s direct contact with God” (“A Lesson in Grammar” 25).

<sup>ii</sup>Fr1581, “Those dying then,” discussed later in this section, is the most striking example of a poem that can be read as a heretical statement composed approximately in hymn-meter.

<sup>iii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810288?buttons=y>

<sup>iv</sup>In her article, “‘Arguments of Pearl:’ Dickinson’s Response to Puritan Semiology,” Joanna Yin describes Dickinson’s critique of deferred reward as a greater rejection of patriarchal social relations that define both one’s relationship with God and husband. She writes, “Instead of passively waiting to be given something of worth by a male, whether it be God, father, or husband, the female robin/poet creates it herself” (75).

<sup>v</sup>In 1865, the year Dickinson wrote the poem, she had just returned from eye surgery in Amherst (Pollack 24). It was the last time Dickinson would leave home. The crisis of Fr1067 may refer to this particular instance.

<sup>vi</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810521?buttons=y>

<sup>vii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810421?buttons=y>

<sup>viii</sup>Greg Miller describes Dickinson’s resistance to religious public performance: “Unlike many of her closest friends, she refused to participate in a public confession of sin and profession of faith” (87).

<sup>ix</sup>Karl Keller argues that while New England Puritanism exemplified by Edward Taylor and Jonathan Edwards, is “a major source of *her* esthetics,” Dickinson’s poetry is also “one of the most remarkable bodies of protest literature we have *against* New England

religion.” Further, he writes, “[Dickinson] tended to reject creeds, ministers, and church in favor of simple introspection and a more pleasant existence” (66, 77).

### Notes to Section II

<sup>i</sup>Webster, <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/44810046?n=412&printThumbnails=no>

<sup>ii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810641?buttons=y>

<sup>iii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810948?buttons=y>

<sup>iv</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810267?buttons=y>

<sup>v</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810412?buttons=y>

<sup>vi</sup>Cameron discusses this poem within the context of its narrative structure (*Lyric Time* 58-61), arguing that it breaks down towards the end, offering no closure.

<sup>vii</sup>The 1890 version is reproduced above as it appears in the Emily Dickinson archive: [http://www.edickinson.org/editions/3/image\\_sets/91200](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/3/image_sets/91200)

<sup>viii</sup>For one of the most influential discussions of Dickinson and the obstacles of the nineteenth-century female poet, see Gilbert and Gubar’s, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*. They write, “Enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, these literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call ‘Patriarchal poetry’” (xi).

### Notes to Section III

<sup>i</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810251?buttons=y>

<sup>ii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810621?buttons=y>

<sup>iii</sup>Webster, <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/44810545?buttons=y>

<sup>iv</sup>Emily Dickinson’s bible,

<http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/24025603?n=15&imagesize=1200&jp2Res=.25&printThumbnails=no>

<sup>v</sup>The scope of this short study does not have space for an extended discussion of a nineteenth-century reader’s conception of the bible as the direct word of God. For two relevant studies, see Jan-Dirk Müller’s article: “The Body of the Book: The media transition from manuscript to print,” and Paul C. Gutjahr’s, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880*, especially Chapter 3, “Purity.”

<sup>vi</sup>The last two lines of Fr953 boarder on an oxymoron: how can “Absence” be “ornament[ed]?”

<sup>vii</sup>In the preface to the recently released book, *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*, Howe describes Dickinson’s later poems as “Points of contact by ear, touch, and sight” (7).

<sup>viii</sup>At various points in her study, Jackson presents photographs of manuscripts poems and letters paired with—to name a few objects—a leaf, a pencil, and a dead cricket. Jackson acknowledges that the recreation of the original material state cannot mean what it originally meant to Dickinson’s first readers, but still carries important significance in the interpretation of the poem. As Jackson puts it, “Editors and printers and critics and teachers may have transformed Dickinson’s work into something it was not intended to be, but a leaf is a leaf is a leaf” (12).

<sup>ix</sup>Text from Dickinson’s bible.



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<sup>x</sup>Cited by Farr, 200-201.

<sup>xi</sup>A letter that Jackson uses as an example to demonstrate Dickinson's "hand-to-hand economy" further strengthens the link between Fr557 and the epistolary exchange: "no sunset here, no stars; not even a bit of twilight which I may poeticize—and send to you" (134).

*Notes to Conclusion*

<sup>i</sup>See Erkkila, "The Emily Dickinson Wars," for a discussion of the historical origins of the ownership dispute over Dickinson's manuscripts and the effects this "war" had on critical interpretation of her writing.

<sup>ii</sup>The original Electronic Dickinson Archives (<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/>) is still a valuable resource for analyzing the poems within the context of the original epistolary correspondence. It is password protected, but Jackson, conveniently, published the password in *Dickinson's Misery* (48).