



THE CULTURE OF CORRESPONDENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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In 1997, Kevin Costner directed and starred in a movie called *The Postman*, a post-apocalyptic epic set in the year 2013. In a world where the U.S. government no longer exists and civilization appears utterly destroyed, apparently by nuclear warfare, Costner wanders a blighted landscape, sustaining himself by performing bits of Shakespeare for small communities of people he encounters on his travels. One day he happens upon an abandoned U.S. Post Office truck. Seizing an opportunity for a con more effective than Shakespearean performance, Costner dons the uniform of a dead postal worker, hoists a mail bag over his shoulder, and sets about pretending to deliver the mail as a representative of an un-eradicated U.S. government. To his own surprise, Costner's postman has a powerful effect upon the people he meets, rekindling their memories of life before the great disaster and gradually becoming a symbol of hope for national renewal. Soon enough, he takes to giving speeches in which he reminds his listeners of a lost world full of neighborhood mail carriers, clad in uniforms just like his. "Getting a letter," he tells one crowd, "made you feel like you were a part of something bigger than yourself." Their patriotism and communal spirit rekindled, the people rise up to defeat the movie's bad guys: a powerful ad-hoc army led by a malevolent tyrant.

The Postman was a box-office flop, almost universally panned by critics, who found the film ponderously long, pretentious, and excessively melodramatic—all of which most critics blamed on Costner's own egotism and grandiloquence. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times*, for example, called the film "a bald-faced exercise in cinematic self-deification." But mostly, Holden objected to the movie's "mawkish jingoism," finding its central conceit—"the delivery of mail [as] a metaphor for rebuilding civilization"—particularly worthy of ridicule. After all, Holden implies, what could be more preposterous than "impassioned group recitations of the letter carrier's oath delivered by teen-agers with the fervor of the Pledge of Allegiance in an American Legion hall"? (1)

Of course, it's not surprising that the notion of an important link between the postal service and civilization, mail delivery and national belonging, would seem rather absurd at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Texting and email have all but replaced the personal letter; "snail mail" brings us mainly bills and junk advertizing. The post office has become (unfairly, I would submit) a running national joke: the very symbol of government inefficiency and ineptitude that even furnishes us a term—"going postal"—for the anger, despair, and violence that result from bureaucratic incompetence and the soul-deadening modern workplace. Nevertheless, with the exception, perhaps, of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, whose alienation and eventual death may also have been the result of working for the U.S. postal service (in the Dead Letter Office, no less!), for most of the first half of the country's existence, the postal service *was*, in fact, seen as an institution with a vital role to play in the building of civilization. The delivery of the mail *was* considered crucial to fostering national fellow-feeling. Mawkishly jingoistic or not, Costner's *The Postman* has deep roots in U.S. history.

Consider, for example, an 1843 magazine article published in the *New Englander*—a fair specimen of many, many others just like it—titled, "The Post-Office System, as an Element of Modern Civilization." In it, the writer argues that

among those things separating the savage from the civilized states is “The power of holding communication with those at a distance with whom we are connected in relations of business or friendship, and of making such communications as exact, infallible, and direct, as the nature of human language will admit” (9). In fact, the postal service is a more remarkable advancement than even the steam engine or the printing press—and not just because it helps to facilitate commerce. More importantly, it promotes, even makes actual, what the historian Benedict Anderson would much later call “imagined communities.” The *New Englander* continues:

There is a man whom you have never seen, far off in the woods of Michigan, or on the prairies of Wiskonsan. Though you have never seen him, you have heard his name and his place of residence; and you wish to ask him a question, or to employ him to render you some service there. You make a few marks . . . on a piece of paper. You drop that piece of paper into a box in a public office a few rods from your own dwelling, and give yourself no farther care about it. In a few days, without any more ado on your part, you get your answer. (13)

Such panegyrics to the postal service were commonplace in nineteenth-century America, the historical equivalent of the way in which enthusiasts of technology today often extol the democratizing potential of the internet and social media. Consider the near-utopian rhetoric employed in an identically titled article on the post office from *The Yale Literary Magazine* in 1851:

Can we with omniscient eye, search every heart that has been and is to be moved to its depths by tidings greeting it through the post office? Of every mind which has been thus enlightened and quickened? [. . .] Can we sum up the joys enhanced; the woes alleviated; the lives, and fortunes, and honor saved; the demands of justice satisfied; the good principles implanted; the temptations neutralized; the knowledge disseminated; the improvements suggested and carried out in every branch of human industry

and science; the certainty and speed added to the powers of government; the mighty check held upon those powers by the people in free lands, and the strong impulses given to the love of liberty in lands not free? and all by the operation of this great system! (338)

Similarly, in 1859, the *United States Democratic Review*, probably the most powerful journalistic organ promoting U.S. nationalism during the antebellum period (it's the journal in which the term "manifest destiny" was first coined), called the postal service the nation's "highway of thought" (236) and "the pioneer of civilization" (238). Even Alexis de Tocqueville, that keenest of observers of nineteenth-century American society, remarked (on numerous occasions) on the power of the post office in helping to create a coherent American national identity. Here Tocqueville offers a variation on the theme expressed by Kevin Costner's postman:

The post, that great instrument of intercourse, now reaches into the backwoods . . . There is not a province in France in which the natives are so well known to one another as the thirteen millions of men who cover the territory of the United States. While the Americans intermingle, they assimilate; the differences resulting from their climate, their origin, and their institutions diminish; and they all draw nearer and nearer to the common type. (437)

Thus, what might at first glance appear to be the most private of literary genres—the letter—was during the nineteenth-century thought to serve a great public interest. As the literary scholar Elizabeth Hewitt has argued in her book *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865*, "letters constitute a crucial site by which democratic theory passes into social practice" (6). Personal correspondence becomes "the means by which both national and familiar consensus are to be established" (7). Letter-writing, in other words, binds disparate individuals and groups together into a union; the mail is what puts the *United* in the States of America.

Although none of the contributors to *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, edited by Cindy MacKenzie and Oakland University Distinguished Professor and Professor Emerita of English Jane Donahue Eberwein, takes up explicitly the cultural context I've been describing, the volume as a whole does illuminate the manifold ways that letter-writing involves what Hewitt calls "social mediation" (2)—establishing relations between individual writers and readers, senders and recipients. After all, letters are nothing if not a form of social intercourse. But what *kind* of social intercourse is a letter? A letter can impose upon or intrude, invite, solicit, or entreat, alienate or sympathize, wound or comfort, disclose or conceal. A letter implies reciprocity and exchange, while at the same time, it is, as Dickinson herself puts it, "thought that walks alone." A letter is both private and public: the place where one might reveal a secret to another, or the place where someone else is with you (textually) in your solitude. A letter marks both a presence and an absence: one's words stand in for one's physical person—Herman Melville once began a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne by saying, "This is not a letter, or even a note—but only a passing word said to you over your garden gate" (Melville 199). And a letter is both like and unlike other forms of written—of literary—communication: a poem, an essay, a novel, a play, an oration. But how?

Emily Dickinson's extant correspondence—comprising over a thousand letters—demonstrates the richness of the epistolary form in especially remarkable ways. This is not only because Dickinson's letters are so numerous and, well, just so good—by turns witty, clever, baffling, moving, poetic, and audacious. It is also because Dickinson's correspondence is marked by conspicuous gaps and lacunae: composition dates aren't always clear; in some cases, the identity of the intended recipient is unknown; and very few of the letters Dickinson received from others exist, making the correspondence frustratingly one-sided. What's more, Dickinson's letters frequently defy, in all kinds of ways, basic conventions of letter-writing. It is not clear whether many of the existing letters she wrote were

ever even sent (or intended to be sent); others that she probably did send exist only in draft form; and her most famous letter—asking the editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson whether he was “too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive”—did not even contain a signature, much to the bafflement of its recipient. Add to this the fact that many of her letters are themselves poems, or at least sound (and look) like poems, or contain poems or snippets of poetry. Indeed, since Dickinson did not, with only a handful of exceptions, “publish” her poems in any traditional sense, her correspondence served for her as an alternative form of publication. Thus it is far from clear where Dickinson’s poetry ends and her correspondence begins; indeed, it’s far from clear whether, in Dickinson’s case, making distinctions between her career as a poet and her life as a correspondent is useful or illuminating at all.

The essays Eberwein and MacKenzie have assembled in *Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters* negotiate these and other problems presented by Dickinson’s correspondence in individually distinctive, fruitful, and at times startling ways. The particular contributors to the volume are uniquely suited to the task. Oakland University’s own Professor Jane Eberwein needs no introduction here, of course, though it’s at least worth reminding ourselves that in addition to her many published essays on Dickinson, her 1985 book *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* remains a genuine classic of Dickinson scholarship and her 1998 *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* is an indispensable resource for students and scholars alike. MacKenzie is a Dickinson scholar of importance as well, the author, perhaps most notably of *A Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson* (the compiling of which must have been a formidable task indeed). Most of the remaining contributors are likewise heavy Dickinsonian hitters, all of them of them authors of significant monographs on Dickinson’s work or life, and several of them contributors to the marvelous, innovative *Dickinson Electronic Archives* projects.¹ The bulk of the contributors are also long-standing members—and in some cases, as with Eberwein,

founding members—of the Emily Dickinson International Society.

These credentials are worth mentioning not only because they indicate the very high level of accomplishment, talent, and expertise that typifies each of the individual essays in the book, but also because they make for a book that is particularly cohesive. The book reflects the interchange of scholars, who, as Eberwein and MacKenzie note in their introduction, “engage in a mutually enlightening conversation with each other and with all those who have treasured the experience of reading [Dickinson’s] poetry and prose” (4). By the same token, the contributors do indeed approach Dickinson’s correspondence “with eyes and ears open to new possibilities and eager to learn from each other’s findings” (5). I strongly suspect that Eberwein wrote those two passages herself; they are (if I may) vintage Jane, reflecting both her relentless congeniality and her admirable sense of academic inquiry not as a competition, but as a shared enterprise in learning and exploration. Having said that, I also wonder—as I’ll briefly discuss at the end of this review—whether the book might have benefitted (or at least pointed in some alternative directions) from the perspectives of a few scholars coming at Dickinson’s letters from radically different positions.

But that’s a very minor matter and is in no way meant to imply that the contributors’ views of Dickinson and her letters or their particular approaches to reading them are anything less than revealingly diverse. The essays examine not just biographical matters (exploring Dickinson’s relationships with literary friends, with relatives, even with lovers), but also take up questions about Dickinson’s art and poetics (especially the relationship between her letters and her poetry). Further, the essays explore a number of the cultural contexts (domestic culture, sentimental culture, conventions of mourning and marriage) that inform Dickinson’s epistolary practice. In doing so, these essays demonstrate with clarity and critical sophistication that inquiries into Dickinson’s correspondence yield much more than mere “background” information or bi-

ographical insights of dubious value for understanding her poetry. Instead, they help to deepen our sense of the wellsprings of Dickinson's art, which was the result not just of singular genius, but also of years spent refining her language use while communicating with others about, and while conducting, life's affairs: baking bread, tending a garden, sending gifts, reading books, comforting loved ones, feeling loss and passion. Or to put this another way, they show us that poetry was not the only art Dickinson made.

Cynthia MacKenzie's essay, "'This is my letter to the World': Emily Dickinson's Epistolary Poetics," perhaps most explicitly makes the case for an enlarged sense of what counts as Dickinson's art. Noting that the "generic fluidity between Dickinson's poetry and letters" (13) has long been accepted by Dickinson's scholars, MacKenzie examines "the extent to which fundamental elements of Dickinson's poetics emerge from and are inflected by the properties of epistolarity" (13). In particular, MacKenzie argues that the kind of "riddling" so frequent in Dickinson's poetry derives from her letter-writing practice—and, to an extent, from the properties of letters themselves: "Built into the writing of letters," MacKenzie claims, "is a riddling element created by both a deliberate and an unconscious textual self-construction that never fully discloses the self" (16). The practice of carefully controlling self-disclosures in her correspondence becomes for Dickinson a central feature of her poems, which themselves often reveal—powerfully, as in the experience of epiphany—by carefully withholding.

In another essay, "Alliteration, Emphasis, and Spatial Prosody in Dickinson's Manuscript Letters," Ellen Louise Hart also considers the artistry of Dickinson's letters. Hart advances the intriguing thesis that Dickinson's manuscript letters—unlike those that have been transcribed—can be read in terms of their "visual strategies of spatial arrangement to produce precisely articulated sound, to create rhythm, and to direct interpretation through emphatic stress" (214). Hart's "diplomatic transcription[s]" (214) of Dickinson's poems preserve the line

breaks of the original manuscripts. In this way, Hart discerns a conscious “prosody” in Dickinson’s prose—one that perhaps blurs the generic boundaries between prose and poetry. If one of the virtues of attending to the letters in manuscript form, in Hart’s view, is to give us a greater sense of how “the visual accentuates the acoustic” (214), Martha Nell Smith extends this focus on the letters’ original material existence, rather than their later transcriptions, by paying attention to “the containers in which Dickinson placed her letters” (240)—their envelopes, their stationery, the other items enclosed along with them. Among other things, Smith’s fascinating approach alters our understanding of what it means to “publish” one’s writings.

Indeed, for the most part, letters were Dickinson’s preferred mode of publication for her poems, while her family and friends were her preferred readership. Two essays in the collection take up this mode of circulation. Paul Crumbley’s “Dickinson’s Correspondence and the Politics of Gift-Based Circulation” seeks to understand Dickinson’s frequent inclusion of poems in her letters as an expression of “gift culture,” and its conventions of “acceptance and reciprocity” (30). For Crumbley, Dickinson’s gift-based circulation represents an explicit rejection on her part of “the tribunal of print convention” in favor of the gifts’ “power to unite distinct sovereign selves” (50). Stephanie A. Tingley similarly places Dickinson’s letters in the context of “nineteenth-century Amherst’s women’s culture of gift-giving” (57) within which Dickinson developed what Tingley calls a “poetics of exchange,” where “words often served as the equivalent of sending cookies to a shut-in or paying a social call” (58). Not only do Crumbley and Tingley, among others, challenge the old image of Dickinson scribbling poems in total isolation. Taken together their essays—and others as well—reveal that Dickinson’s poetry was the result of collaborative relationships the poet herself actively sought and cultivated.

Among the essays that most strikingly demonstrate Dickinson’s sociability—although in very different ways—are

Eleanor Heginbotham's "What are you reading now?: Emily Dickinson's Epistolary Book Club" and Jane Eberwein's "Messages of Condolence: 'more Peace than Pang.'" Using the frame of the modern book club (while acknowledging that there were indeed also nineteenth-century versions of the book club), Heginbotham explores Dickinson's discussions of her reading with her many correspondents. Eberwein's elegant essay traces Dickinson's development writing in that most difficult of genres: the condolence letter—a topic also touched upon in Karen Dandurand's essay on Dickinson's relationship with her Aunt Kate Sweetser. From youthful letters, chatty and self-involved to mature letters, as moving and powerful as her poetry, Dickinson's letters of condolence "provide rich insight into [her] thoughts on life, death, and immortality—often rendered in metaphors central to her imagination" (102), while also demonstrating Dickinson's compassion and her particular form of participation in "her century's sentimental culture of mourning" (113).

As compelling as Dickinson's thoughts on mortality were, Dickinson's ideas (and experiences) of love, marriage, and passion, are the subject of two of the most fascinating (to my mind) of the collection's many terrific essays. In "Emily Dickinson and Marriage: 'The Etruscan Experiment,'" Judith Farr uncovers a fascinating story behind a cryptic remark Dickinson made in a letter to her cousin Eugenia Hall on Eugenia's wedding day: "Will the sweet cousin," Dickinson asks, "who is about to make the Etruscan Experiment, accept a smile which will last a Life, if ripened in the Sun?" Historicizing this peculiar reference, Farr tells a story about the cultural meanings in nineteenth-century America of smiling wedded Etruscans, a story that reveals a great deal about the poet's own attitudes toward marriage—an institution in which she herself, for reasons about which we can only speculate—never participated. Which is not to say, of course, that Dickinson never experienced romantic love or erotic passion. James Guthrie's intricately woven, deftly argued, and perceptive essay, "Heritable Heaven: Erotic Properties in the Dickinson—Lord Correspondence,"

explores Dickinson's playful and at times sexually frank correspondence with Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice Otis Phillips Lord. Moving from the complexities of interfamilial tensions over relationships and finances to nineteenth-century property law and careful readings of some of Dickinson's most enigmatic metaphorizing, Guthrie examines how Dickinson and Lord conducted the epistolary portion of their romance via—of all things—a “language of estate law,” (a language at times charged with eroticism) that they found “congenial for describing the future they hoped to spend together.”

Exhibiting and exploring the dense texture, the thick layers of personal, cultural, and linguistic signification, that so often characterize Dickinson's correspondence, Farr and Guthrie perhaps best exemplify the animating spirit of *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters*, the simple question that the editors insist “lies the heart of this project” (5): “What would it be like to receive a letter from Emily Dickinson?” Even more than a hundred years later, reading a Dickinson letter addressed to someone else (known or unknown) can be a rather exhilarating, if baffling, experience. For that reason alone, Eberwein and MacKenzie's book is worth perusing. Readers unfamiliar with Dickinson's biography might want to have one of the many biographies (or Eberwein's *Dickinson Encyclopedia*) handy as a companion. But the volume also reads enough like a biography itself—albeit a non-comprehensive, group-authored one—to be of much more than passing interest to a general audience. Models of assiduous scholarship and lucid (jargon-free!) prose, the essays here (and again, I can't help but think a good measure of credit on that count is due to the guiding hand of my English department colleague) manage to be both cutting-edge (in pointing toward new directions in the study of correspondence) and refreshingly accessible to readers both within and without the academic study of literature.

Indeed, the general reader coming to this collection might well be struck most powerfully by what nearly every essay shows to be Dickinson's abiding and quite active sociability. The poet had a wide circle of friends and correspondents, a va-

riety of relationships with both men and women, family members and friends, and a not unordinary, if also not terribly broad, range of experiences. Of course, it is also the case that the numerous biographical and critical studies of Dickinson over the last half-century or so demonstrated all of this long ago. For that reason, students and scholars of nineteenth-century U.S. literature might find the reminders (not infrequent in this volume) of how these essays challenge the Dickinson-as-recluse image to be slightly perfunctory, or maybe just an understandable habit among Dickinson scholars.

From this latter view—of knowing, going in, that Dickinson was not a mere recluse squirreled away in the attic writing her poems—I was struck by some things that *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters* does not address. I mention these things, however, not as a criticism of the volume, but only as an extension of it, a glance toward what further examinations of Dickinson's letters might yield. At any rate, one thing the volume, by and large, does not address is politics. Slavery and the Civil War (to mention the two most important political matters during Dickinson's lifetime), for instance, are almost entirely absent from these essays. And while this may well be simply a result of the fact that Dickinson herself rarely addresses (explicitly, at least) political questions in her correspondence, the omission is nevertheless striking, especially given that the correspondent who looms largest in the volume, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was (as all of the volume's contributors well know) one of the most radical abolitionists and political reformers of the period (interested readers should consult Brenda Wineapple's 2008 joint biography of Higginson and Dickinson, *White Heat*).

Absent, too, are broader ideological questions of the sort that many scholars of U.S. literature and culture have devoted a great deal of energy to over the last 30 or so years from the perspectives of feminism, imperialism, nationalism (think: *The Postman!*) colonialism, and race, to name a few. I wonder, in this regard, how more ideologically-minded critics and scholars would read and view this archive of correspondence? For-

tunately, answers to that question may well be (and to some extent are) forthcoming thanks to the previously mentioned *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, where some scholars have already begun the kinds of inquiries mentioned above. And finally, the collection also raises interesting questions about the study of authors' correspondence more generally. That is, it is unquestionably the case that these essays "highlight exciting new directions in the study of Emily Dickinson's letters" (9). But do they also offer new directions for the study of other authors' correspondence? (I think the answer to that question is a resounding yes.) How are Dickinson's epistolary practices and the insights those practices yield different from or similar to other key figures in American literary history? What can be gained from considering Dickinson's correspondence alongside the correspondence of writers like Emerson and Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne, or the many U.S. women writers similarly immersed in sentimental culture? Such questions testify to the book's strengths, to the fact that it provokes further thought, and importantly, more opportunities for scholars "to learn from each other's findings." And that, of course, is what Jane Eberwein and her collaborators value most.

NOTES

¹ Readers should check out this magnificent resource, available at www.emilydickinson.org. *Note bene*: if you use this site for research, be sure to correctly cite it.

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