

EMILY DICKINSON'S FUTURES: ENJAMBMENT DEGREE ZERO

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I come to you once again from the region of Emily Dickinson's late work, the writings of the 1870s and 1880s, and, more specifically, from the remote precinct of Dickinson's fragments. Like the limit-texts of other writers—Kafka's *Conversation Slips*, Pascal's *Pensées*, and Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*—Dickinson's fragments are essentially private writings, belonging more to the space of creation than communication. Never prepared for publication, perhaps never intended to be read by anyone other than the scriptor herself, they are not "works" so much as traces of thought-in-writing. It may have been the extreme vulnerability of these texts, discovered and probably partly destroyed by chance, that initially led me to assemble them in *Radical Scatters: An Electronic Archive of Emily Dickinson's Late Fragments and Related Texts*. Yet the fragments never coalesce into a unified collection; indeed, no editor can hope to bring about their harmonious synthesis. For if, at times, one or two or even several act as "strange attractors" drawing near to one another, forming a small constellation, at other times, each appears as a separate, antinomic text, far away from the others, unassimilated and unassimilable to a totalizing figure. At last, it is as if the uncertainty of the fragments' provenance commits them to the openness of an equally uncertain future. Freed from the forty bound manuscript volumes, those accumulated libraries of Dickinson's poetic production, they fly outside the codex book to the lyric's many ends.

In the close readings of three fragments drawn from the late archive that follow, the contingent, disjunctive nature of the fragments and their relationship to one another is reflected in readings that are themselves

often contingent, disjunctive, and necessarily piecemeal. Concerned with language and risk, these few fragments serve as my point of departure for a reading—as yet only imagined—of the roughly one hundred surviving fragments in which I defer a definitive analysis of these texts in favor of the opportunity to describe their simultaneous falling together and apart.

I. “WHAT A HAZARD”

In her late writings Dickinson almost never speaks of language unaccompanied by alarm: “What a | Hazard | a Letter | is—When | I think of | the Hearts | it has Cleft | or healed I | almost | wince to | lift my Hand | to so much | as as a | superscription | but then we | always Ex | cept | ourselves— [overleaf] or | Scuttled and | Sunk” (A 809).

Fragment A 809, found among Dickinson’s papers after her death, has filiations to two other documents, both letters written in 1885. In one, sent to an unidentified recipient, the lines of A 809 are slightly altered: “What a | Hazard an | Accent is! | When I think | of the Hearts | it has scuttled | or sunk, I al- | most fear to | lift my Hand | to so much | as a punctua | tion—” (A 802). In the other, sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the lines conclude a letter seeking information about Helen Hunt Jackson, reported “on the point of death” by *The Springfield Republican*: “Dear friend— | I was | unspeakably | shocked to | see this in | the Morning | Paper— | She wrote me | in Spring | that she could | not walk, but | not that she | would die— | I was sure | you would know— | Please say it | is not so— | What a Hazard | a Letter is! | When I think | of the Hearts | it has scuttled | and sunk— | I almost fear | to lift my Hand | to so much | as a Super- | scription. | Trusting that | all is peace | in your loved | Abode— | With alarm— | Your Scholar—” (BPL Higg 116).

In the nineteenth century, advances in the harnessing of electricity made

What a
 Nazard
 a letter
 is - when
 I think of
 the Harts
 it has left
 or heard I
 all most
 mine to
 left my hand
 to so much
 so as ex
 superscription
 but then we
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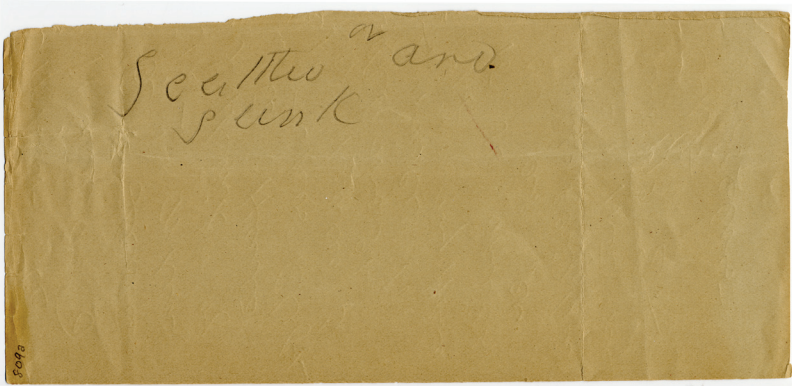


Figure 1: A 809. About 1885. Lines composed in pencil on both sides of a fragment of a torn book dust jacket now measuring 21.7×10 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson; and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

communications “swift as lightning, subtle as ether” (Peters 5). Yet the letter, even before mechanical or electronic means allowed it to mimic the angels, has always arrived suddenly. “How it seeks us out, how it aims at us!” writes H el ene Cixous, “and more often than joy, it is some death it brings us” (11). The letter halts our breath.

A “superscription” may be an address or direction for a letter written on the outside of an envelope. Yet the superscription of an address does not guarantee that a letter will reach its destination. The addressee may have moved away or exchanged worlds. “I almost fear to lift my Hand.” Six days after the news report, Hunt Jackson was dead.

Before—or was it after? no, it was certainly before—Dickinson wrote the fair-copy letter postmarked August 6, 1885, to Higginson she wrote the unaddressed, undated fragment A 809. Undated: Dateless. For the fragment does not belong to a relative time—before, after—but only to the hour or instant of its inscription. Quick, a pencil. As if bodily gesture were continuous with spiritual attitude, the handwriting of A 809 is unusually distorted. Large, recklessly formed letters suggest that Dickinson was writing under duress or in total darkness. In the second line the word *H A Z A R D* stretches across the manuscript. “What a Hazard a Letter is—” In the late writings it is language—the Word itself—that is hazarded.

Rather than pursue the genetic relations between the fragment and the letters in which it appears as a trace, I want to follow Dickinson to the place where all such relations break off. To the fragment. To language on its edge.

Like the late H olderlin of whom Zimmer reported, “he writes as soon as he has something to write, whether on a piece of paper or a scrap of wood,” in the 1880s Dickinson seems to have written immediately and

on whatever was near to hand (Froment-Meurice 49). A 809 is inscribed vertically on the torn-away flap of a book's dust jacket. Here, language appears not along the horizontal plane of communication between human beings, but as the vertical join to the divine. The double play of Dickinson's variants—"superscription" / "salutation"—signifies the fragment's links to the mystical. Here the line of vision slants upward to the right—as in an annunciation: "What a Hazard a Letter is—"

When A 809 appears in the letter to Higginson, it *reappears* as a citation. A human hand writes it, quotes it in a human context. But the hand that scribbles the text in the dark is transfixed only by words that wake her and that come from something outside her. The blur of the fragment—its illegibility—is the blur of a hand writing a voice it is hearing.

"What a Hazard a Letter is—" But this is not the end of the message. Right beside the peril of language is the joy of language. "*I almost* [emphasis added] wince to lift my Hand to so much as a superscription," Dickinson says. "*I almost* fear," "*I hardly* dare," she repeats (emphases added). And then the hand rises and she writes. In the very moment when the Heart is cleft or healed, in a single pencil stroke, she accepts the wager language is. "A single | ~~one~~ a thrill can | end a life or | open it | ~~anew~~— | forever" (A 871v). The alarm that attends language is also arousal. The joy bursts out.

Like Pascal's famous wager, Dickinson's fragment A 809 describes an ontological situation in which there are in fact no options. Though language is a hazard—the "most dangerous of goods," by Hölderlin's claim—it is finally the only connection we have to each other and to that which is beyond us. We must take our chances, we must hazard language. As in the Pascalian wager, moreover, in Dickinson's it is the inward space of the Heart—cleft, scuttled, sunk, healed—that is the site of the risk.

Found among her papers after her death, the fragment is evidence that

she knew she could not both embrace the hazard language is and remain “ex-cepted” from it. In the end, Dickinson would wager everything—the literally thousands of manuscripts scattered in her room, the thousands more scattered beyond it—upon it.

A “superscription” is a heading or a signature. “What a Hazard a Letter is,” written in pencil on a crumpled and torn scrap of paper, paradoxically serves as the only possible superscription to Dickinson’s undated, undressed, and untitled oeuvre.

II. “WE DO NOT HEAR IT COMING—”

Among Dickinson’s fragments of the 1870s and 1880s are several that allude to the end of the world. A few, like the following fragment, look back on the end from such a great distance that the ended world looks infinitesimal—as tiny as the tiny scrap of paper on which Dickinson scribbled the lines: “Pompeii— | All its occupations | crystallized—Every-
body | gone away—” (A 331).

More often, however, Dickinson writes of the end of the world—the *paradiso terrestre*—in the present absolute:

The consciousness of | subsiding power is | too startling to be | admitted
by men—but | ~~best~~ comprehended by | the meadow over | which the
Flood has | quivered, [~~quivered~~—rumbled—] when the | waters return
to | their kindred, and | the tillage [acre—] is left | alone—. (A 444a)

It is very still in the | world now—Thronged | only with Music, like the
| [overleaf] Decks of | Birds— | and the Seasons | take their hushed |
places like figures | in a Dream—. (A 822/A 822a)

331
 Pompeii -
 All its occupations
 like
 crystallized - Every one
 gone away

figure 2: A 331. Last decade. Lines composed in pencil on a fragment of laid, off-white stationery now measuring 3.4 × 12.6 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

444
 3
 The consciousness of
 subsiding power is
 too startling to be
 admitted of men - our
 best comprehended of
 the meadow over
 which the flood has
 quivered, when the
 waters return to
 their kindred, and
 the wreckage is left
 alone -

 Comprehended perhaps
 of the meadow, over
 which thousands have
 quivered - tumbled -

figure 3: A 444a. About 1879. Lines composed in pencil on a fragment of wove, white stationery embossed Weston's Linen and now measuring 12.5 × 10.1 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson; and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

822
It is very still in the
world now - Thronged
out, with music like the

Weeks of
Rivers -

822a
And the seasons
take their heaped
places like figures
in a dream -

figure 4: A 822. About 1885. Lines composed in pencil on two fragments of paper pinned together. The first fragment is composed on a piece of torn, off-white wrapping paper and measures 3 x 16.7 cm.; the second fragment is composed on a torn and cut section of brown wrapping paper and measures 16.1 x 10.6 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson; and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

In these late, barely lyrical writings, the acceleration of all the trends pointing to the destruction of existing conditions ends in solitude and stillness. In the washed-over landscape of these texts there are no longer any spatial or temporal reference points to orient us. It is not day or night or summer or fall or winter or spring. It is not anywhere or nowhere. It is only now. A present so dilated that it reminds us—is this possible?—of the conditions of eternity. Not surprisingly, these fragments alluding to the end of the world are not addressed to a person in particular and may not be to any person at all. They have no interlocutor. They take the grammatical form of hieratic statements. What speaks in them seems more like language speaking than the nearer sound of a human voice.

At the end of the world, we ask, “What happened?” and the question brings us face to face with a paradox: it is only possible to ask, “What happened?” because the end of the world is never the end.

In the following fragment, now called A 879, a call for vision is answered by the end of the world that is both recollected and still awaited at the text’s close:

We must travel | abreast with | Nature if we | want to know | her, but
where | shall be obtained | the Horse— | A something | over takes the
| mind—we do | not hear it | coming. (A 879)

As in the fragments cited above, all points of orientation, all traces of the local have been swept from the scene. From this abstract landscape, the “I,” too, has departed, replaced by a more anonymous witness, the “we” who is almost already no one. In the opening line of the fragment, Dickinson seeks the medium that will carry us through Nature at Nature’s own speed. The prerequisite for knowledge—the revelation of Nature—is velocity. Yet just as the search is to begin—even *before* it can begin—the “we” of the fragment is overtaken by a “something” that “comes” from the outside

879
 No must travel
 a breast, with
 nature if m
 want to know
 best out where
 shall be obtained
 the horse- something
 a possibly
 over takes the
 mind - m to do
 not hear it
 coming

figure 5: A 879. Last decade. Lines composed on a cut fragment of off-white wrapping measuring approximately 12.5 x 14.5 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson; and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

and that outpaces both language and Nature. While the literal ear never hears a sound of approach, the speculative ear has the feeling of opening in the uncanny quiet of a world light-years from this one: “And Nature is a Stranger yet” (J P 1400). *What happened when the world ended?* In the wake of the end of the world where there is such tranquility another more disquieting doubt steals forth: *Did it happen? Did anything happen?* The exceptional beauty of the fragment may be inseparable from its radical hesitation in the face of this question.

What “comes” and “overtakes”? *Come up hither and I will show thee things which must be hereafter. . . . Come and see. . . . Come and see. . . . Come and see. . . . Come and see. . . .* (Revelation). To “overtake” means to “cross a space. . . to come upon something unexpectedly, suddenly, or violently. . . .” (OED). The concordances to Dickinson’s poems and letters that catalog her uses of the word “overtakes” along with its many cognates, *overwhelmed*, *overturned*, *overpowered*, *overmastered*, *overflowed*, suggest that in the 1880s, the experience of being overtaken is most often associated with the experience of engulfment—by darkness, by the tide, by grace. Yet the “something” that “comes” and “overtakes” is never specifically identified in A 879. “It” is the expectation of a name that is still missing, a pronoun that stands in for an absent noun.

The fragment that neither names the “something” that “comes” nor offers a narrative of this coming reveals instead the structure of this event. The opening phrase—“We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse—” is at once enjambed with and estranged from the closing phrase—“a something overtakes the mind—we do not hear it coming”—by a dash that initiates the braking action of caesura, what Hölderlin called the “anti-rhythmic suspension” of temporal progression, and creates the breach through which the unnamed “something” enters. The abrupt enjambment of the phrasal units coupled with the action of the caesura brings about a negative movement whereby

the witness who seeks the divine horse on which to ride alongside Nature is suddenly carried to another world. While the opening cadence of the fragment is composed in the conditional mood, the closing cadence is cast in the present tense. The witness who seeks is overtaken in the course of the search. Here the abolition of time—the empty transport figured by the dash—is alternately experienced as the loss of language and engulfing *parousia*: “In lieblicher Blaue . . . / In lovely blue . . .” (Hölderlin 249).

What comes? *Come up hither and I will show thee things which must be hereafter. . . . Come and see. . . . Come and see. . . . Come and see. . . .* At the end of Dickinson’s work, in a fragment on the end of the world, we come to an austere definition of poetry. A 879—so far misclassified by Dickinson’s editors as a “prose aphorism”—is in fact verse contracted to its most essential elements: caesura and enjambment. The strangeness audible in A 879, however, is the effect not (only) of its austerity but of its alliance with the outside and the yet to come. The “something” that “comes” and “overtakes the mind” also overtakes the measure of poetry itself. The tension between the semantic and metrical limits that initially structures the fragment at last gives way to an exact concordance of sense and sound. The final line of the fragment—“we do not hear it coming”—breaks off, opposed not with another line, but with the air of future itself. A 879 is a verse with “neither more nor less but an impossible measure.” The “it” of “we do not hear it coming” is also a sound we have never heard before. Enjambment degree zero.

III. “A SOMETHING OVERTAKES THE MIND”

The impossible measure audible in poetry’s enjambment with the future is also audible in the event of reading. Around the same time Dickinson inscribed the text on A 879—it is not known whether before or after—she jotted down the following lines on a jagged piece of wrapping paper:

851
Did Joe ever
read one of
her Poems back-
ward, because
the plunge from
the front over-
turned soul,
I sometimes
often have-
man, times have
a something
over takes the
mind.

Figure 6: A 851. Last decade. Lines composed in pencil on a fragment of a cut brown wrapping paper measuring 16.3 × 11.7 cm. Reproduced by permission of the publishers from *THE LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Copyright 1958, 1986, The President and Fellows of Amherst College; 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson; 1960 by Mary L. Hampson; and by permission of the Amherst College Library Archives and Special Collections.

Did you ever | read one of | her Poems back- | ward, because | the plunge
from | the front over- | turned you? | I sometimes [often] [many times]
have— | A something | overtakes the | Mind—. (A 851)

The precise nature of the relationship between A 879 and A 851 is not known. Dickinson may have composed one as a variant of the other or they may have arisen independently and only encountered—recognized—each other in the collision of their final lines. The relation between them, however, is rhythmically emphasized before this moment. The turn—the caesura—that structures A 879 is repeated in A 851 where the advent of the “something that overtakes the mind” breaks the fragment into two.

To offset the dangers of reading—the headlong plunge into reading’s abyss—Dickinson employs the tactics—the *measures*—of more prudent readers. Like the proofreader verifying his copy, or the prosodist scanning lines to locate missing feet, she tries reading from end to beginning. Perhaps it is this strategy that allows her, in A 851, to momentarily recover the use of personal pronouns: the “I” initially addresses a “you”—as if there were such a thing as a community of readers, as if reading might still be a shared experience.

Come and see . . . Come and see . . . Come and see . . .

Yet even as the “I” addresses the “you,” intimately, confidingly, they are about to be overtaken and parted—from each other, from themselves. “The mystical relationship with the book,” writes Roger Chartier, “can be understood as a trajectory in which several ‘moments’ of reading succeed one another: the installation of an alterity that provides a basis for the subjective quest, the unfolding of a sense of joy, . . . and, at the end of process, cessation of reading, abandonment of the book, and absolute detachment” (5). The reader who spends all her attention on the meter and measure of the poem is suddenly overtaken by the measurelessness

of reading itself. *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that bear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand* (Revelation). The reader who has given herself over to the poem suddenly has no place of her own but joy, no time of her own but the aporia of reading.

As in A 879, the arrival of the “something” that “overtakes the mind—” shifts the fragment from the past to present tense. Yet the enjambment of A 879 and A 851 complicates the temporality of both texts: has the horse arrived before the poem is read from back to front? Has the plunge overturned the speaker only after the “I” has gone missing at the end of the world? In the evacuated landscape, words stand alone and magnified.

The author of the “Poems” to which the “I” refers is not named. Like the “it” that “comes” and “overtakes the mind,” “She” is the expectation of a name that is always missing, a pronoun that stands in for an absent noun. Only reading backwards—proofreading—will reveal a proper name. The reading that “overtakes the mind,” by contrast, “frees the [poem] from its author [and its interpreter] . . . from all intention and allows it for the first time to be what it is” (Frey 264). *What happened? Where are we?*

The experience of reading Dickinson describes in A 851—disorientation, worldlessness—is also the experience of Dickinson’s own readers more than a century after her death. While we work to classify and analyze her late writings—to put them in order—“A something overtakes the mind—”

“we do not hear it coming.”

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