

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE TELEGRAPH

by

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FOREWORD

I wished in this study to explore the possible inter-relations between two apparently unrelated subjects: telegraphic communications, on the one hand, and Emily Dickinson's poetry, on the other. I have supplied no more than a sketch-outline of telegraphic history, in the knowledge that others have done much more on this subject than I could do, and in order that I might provide the minimum background required for my discussion of Emily Dickinson and of the "electromagnetic environment".

I think it will be clear that the new "environment" had evolved to some extent before anyone turned to it for practical scientific, economic or artistic purposes. For this reason, perhaps, the term "environment" is misleading or not completely defined in my study. But because of its vagueness, the human environment is a useful term for denoting a social, scientific, philosophic, artistic and personal situation which is in process of conscious and unconscious development. It might be generalized that any change in environment precedes by some time its recognition and exploration. I do not wish to suggest causal relationships, therefore, where clearly none exist. To say that the electric telegraph "caused" the phenomena I refer to as "electric environment" would be quite untrue, and would in fact mock my own conclusions. Similarly, it would be possible to begin this enquiry with the examination of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and show from this how the electric environment shares the attributes of that poetry. My chief interest is to demonstrate how these attributes or qualities are shared by the two quite different expressions of their environment;

the list of attributes of the electric environment is also, I think, a survey of the characteristics of the Dickinson poetry. A summary of such qualities would include: the sudden acceleration, in processes, in communication, and in personal "tempo"; an accompanying simplification and unification; a decline in emphasis on the visual sense and corresponding re-assertion of "total field", or of balance between the audile, tactile, etc.; a relocation of the individual from his position of objective and non-involved "outsider" to a participatory role.

Note on the Primary Text:

The three volume Johnson edition of Emily Dickinson's poetry, which reproduces the original texts even to her spelling mistakes, has been used in this study for all citations of Dickinson poetry. Idiosyncrasies - such as the spelling of "its" as "it's" - have been retained from that edition, as has capitalization of many internal nouns and some verbs and adjectives. The dating and numbering of verses according to Johnson will be found with the quotations in most cases, eg:- (No. 1062, p. 749), which in Johnson's edition is poem No. 1062, on page 749. Dating is often vague, due to the fact that most of the ca. 1775 poems were discovered only after the death of Emily Dickinson. Her letters, her handwriting style, and other considerations have influenced the dating estimates.

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I. ELECTRICITY AS MEDIUM: the Idea of an Electric Telegraph

The Lightning playeth - all the while -
But when He singeth - then -
Ourselves are conscious He exist -
And we approach Him - stern -

The word "telegraph", although now generally accepted to mean "electric telegraph", actually has countless connotations and could suggest signal fires, the smoke-signals of hollywood indian fame, the beaten drum or log of the "jungle telegraph", various heliographic devices for signalling with light, semaphores such as those used in France and elsewhere until the mid-nineteenth century, the wireless-telegraph of the twentieth century, or - the reader can no doubt supply other applications for the word. All telegraphic devices share one characteristic at least; that is, the transmission of intelligence at speeds considerably greater than are possible by physical movement and contact. The components of the word "telegraph", suggesting movement "over a distance" of "written or visual" information, force a particular and unviabale bias upon the present usages: it might be argued that the name is vestigial from a previous environment or attitude. In fact, the root origins of the word have little to do with its present use, although their influence was felt, in a sense, by the early practical experimenters with the medium.

The electric telegraph must be distinguished in this discussion from the later, twentieth-century development of the radio-telegraph; the electric telegraph depends for its operation on wires joining distant sending and receiving stations.

It would be impossible to establish certainly who first conceived the idea of electrical transmission of intelligence, or just where this

occurred, or when. Men had seen the effects of magnetism and electrostatic attraction long before Christ, in China, in Greece, and probably elsewhere. Written records of experiments appear - perhaps quite naturally - only in the seventeenth century, which seemed to be a time of suddenly increasing interest in such things, although this impression may be a result partly of the increase in published matter. At any rate, by the beginning of the seventeenth century several experimenters in Britain alone had explored magnetism, while others showed that many materials have a slight attraction, or pick up light objects, when rubbed (given an electrostatic charge). Cabeo, about 1629, wrote a theory of electrostatic attraction, and von Guericke sometime before 1650 built a static-electricity machine - merely a sulphur pellet or ball which he rubbed by hand.¹ Although these experiments did not aim at transmitting intelligence, that idea must have developed about the same time in some unrecorded imagination, for Dr. Thomas Browne in his Pseudodoxia Epidemica discussed at length certain reports circulating at the time, about the sympathetic movements induced in widely separated magnetic needles. The belief seems to have been that two needles, if properly magnetized at the same time by the same lodestone, would cause each other to rotate in sympathy, stopping in identical positions. Information could therefore be transmitted by the use of two identical dials marked with the alphabet. Dr. Browne - apparently by personal experiment - found no basis for this supposition.²

A century later however, in 1753, a letter appeared in the Scots Magazine describing a practical electric telegraph system of twenty-six wires, one for each letter of the alphabet, an electrostatic "generator" and a detector. The sender could connect any of these wires, releasing a charge which indicated by spark or other device at the receiver-end. The letter, signed only 'G.H.', is credited to the experimenter Morrison.

Morrison's system would have been an extremely complex, cumbersome and expensive one, as the twenty-six lines and static-electric energy source suggest. However, to arrive at this working plan at all, Morrison must have profited from the many discoveries made by researchers between 1600 and the time of his Scots Magazine letter. By 1748 two vital facts had been demonstrated about electricity: that it could be transmitted by wires over large distances (Grey, 1727; Dufay, 1733) and that it could be stored for extended periods as a charge in the Leyden jar. After the experiments of Grey and Dufay, those of Watson combined the ideas of transmission and storage, and incidentally of later telegraph lines, by transmitting the charge from a Leyden jar over two miles of wire suspended on poles. Other similar demonstrations followed, but without the intention to transmit information by these methods.⁵

After the appearance of the Scots Magazine letter, and with the Leyden jar as further impetus, many experimenters seem to have turned from purely theoretic research to the problem of an electric telegraph. About ten years after Morrison, Bozulus wrote his suggestions for a system using two wires instead of twenty-six, and employing a code. In 1774 Lessage constructed and operated a telegraph based on the more complex Morrison design. Comond about 1787 made startling advances using just one wire, as well as a code. The Voltaic cell or battery, built by Volta about 1800, introduced a new area of investigation: the electric current. All earlier experiments had been done with the static electric charge from a friction-type generator; the battery gave a continuous current which could be regulated, and turned on or off at will. Soon after Volta's discovery, inventors had tried the first battery-operated telegraphic transmissions (Salva, Spain, ca. 1805; Soemmering, 1809), using as their receiving apparatus a flask of water into which electrodes were inserted; these emitted bubbles when the circuit was closed and a

current flowed.

The battery was decisive in two respects in the development of telegraphy and in other electric and electronic research; it provided for the control of electricity - according to the familiar relationship $I = \frac{E}{R}$ - and it allowed the early development of the electromagnet, which would have been difficult or impossible without a continuous current. Oersted about 1819 demonstrated the close relationship of electrical and magnetic phenomena by his discovery that a magnetized iron needle could be influenced if brought into the field of a current-carrying wire. Theoretical studies had already been done on magnetic fields by the French physicist Coulomb who formulated his "inverse-square law" of field strength about 1785. Following Oersted's experiments, Schweigger found that the influence of current on magnetic needle was increased considerably if the wire was looped several times rather than straight. A short time later Ampere wrote his proposal for a telegraph with an electric-magnetic receiver. He envisioned a pair of wires (a full circuit) for each letter transmitted, which made the plan unmanageable. Schilling was able to refine Ampere's system and use fewer wires (1832) and other experimenters (Gauss, Weber, Steinheil, etc.) soon simplified the device further or introduced new innovations. A.L. Albert, in his book Electrical Communication, describes one improvement by Gauss and Weber as "employing a suspended bar magnet with an attached mirror which reflected a beam of light as a signal detector."⁴ It is interesting to note that this apparatus is virtually a galvanometer, the device used to record sound on motion-picture film (optical tracks), and to make experiments in the laboratory.

The German Steinheil probably deserves as much as anyone the title "Father of the telegraph", for in combining and refining upon

the work of others, he produced plans for the telegraph, though in a somewhat cruder form, of Morse's later design. Steinheil established that the earth could be used as the second "line" of an electric circuit - now referred to as "ground" - and also experimented with various types of receiving apparatus including, as Albert records in his book (already cited), "a code of dots...on paper moved by clock-work, acoustically by means of needles which struck bells, and visually by observing the motion of needles."⁵

Another candidate for the "Father" title should be mentioned; this was a young Englishman named Francis Ronalds, who already⁷⁷ had performed many of the classic experiments with electrostatic energy and, in 1815-16 constructed his own telegraph line. Geoffrey Hubbard, in his history of British telegraphy Cooke and Wheatstone and the Invention of the Electric Telegraph, describes Ronalds' system as

a real telegraph. For this he used a shorter line of five hundred and twenty five feet threaded through glass tubes. The joints between tubes were covered by larger tubes, each joint being sealed with soft wax. The whole line was set in wooden troughs filled with pitch and was buried in the ground.

Through this line he signalled by the use of clock-work dials run synchronously; the wire was kept permanently charged so that two pith balls hung on silk threads from the end of it repelled each other, and as the sender's dial showed the letter he wished to send he earthed the line so that the two pith balls fell together.⁶

The Ronalds system, "a real telegraph" which performed its maker's communication requirements, was probably the last attempt at telegraphy with electrostatic energy. The voltaic cell had already made such experiments obsolete, and Ronalds' failure to encompass the later continuous-current developments in his plans only indicates the much more general tendency of experimenters to ignore their contemporaries.

The discovery, about 1820, of the electro-magnetic induction effect, made simultaneously by Faraday in England and Henry in the United States, provided the final theoretic and practical knowledge necessary to the perfection of the Steinheil apparatus, and of the designs of Wheatstone and Morse. From the beginning however, the "failure in communication" among other researchers hindered them also, for while all necessary work had been done and had appeared described in some small journal or report (Steinheil's was not published until 1838), Wheatstone - and to a greater extent Morse - worked in a peculiar isolation from such published developments, each re-tracing for himself the steps toward synthesis of electric and magnetic components.

Geoffrey Hubbard in his book on Cooke and Wheatstone suggests 1837 as the critical year in world telegraphy. He describes the event, as though the telegraph were the mechanical voice of the Zeitgeist:

It was more of a General Release than a First Night; the year 1837 was the year of the telegraph the world over. It had to be invented, and if one person would not invent it, it would get itself invented by somebody else. Not content with Samuel Finley Breeze Morse in America (and that was a curious enough choice) it selected the ill-matched temperaments of William Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone in England. It was an invention with a wry sense of humour.

II. Wheatstone, Morse: 'BUCCANNERS OF BUZZ'

And we approach Him - stern -

With Insulators - and a Glove -
Whose short - sepulchral Bass
Alarms us - tho' His Yellow feet
May Pass - and counterpass -

Charles Wheatstone might be called a "gentleman experimenter" or even "gentleman scientist" of nineteenth-century England, whose interests and experiments were not at all limited to electrical communications. In 1835, for instance, he delivered a paper before the British Association in Dublin, on the spectral analysis of incandescent light, in which he claimed "We have here a mode of discriminating metallic bodies more readily than by chemical examination and which may hereafter be employed for useful purposes."⁸ He foresaw, in other words, the technique of spectro-analysis. His investigations and experiments included also the measurements of the velocities both of light and of electricity. Although his findings on the subject were shown by later work to be greatly in error, he established procedures of use to later researchers, and the thinking reflected by his methods reveals the scientific "change-of-mind" that accompanied the exploration of electro-magnetics.

For some time prior to 1837 Wheatstone had been interested in electric communication. In collaboration with William F. Cooke, a businessman and amateur inventor, he had developed a rather clumsy apparatus using a deflected-needle receiver and six pairs of wires for transmission. Wheatstone's knowledge of electromagnetism was limited. In 1837 he met two Americans who illuminated this area for him; the Professors Henry and Bache visited Wheatstone's laboratory. Hubbard

summarizes the situation as follows:

Henry was an authority on electromagnets, and his visit undoubtedly taught Wheatstone a lot about the practical design of electromagnetic devices. Up to this time he had been very much in the dark; like Cooke he had not been too sure of the best way of employing electromagnetic force....⁹

Henry made his visit in April 1837; in the same year Cooke and Wheatstone built a line of telegraph from Euston to Camden Town, and used as receivers a newly-designed apparatus of the electromagnet, visual-recording type. This line, and other early British telegraphs, went into the service of the railroads after its first demonstration stages; its slow receiving mechanisms, as well as other considerations, made it too expensive for use by the general public. Hubbard writes of telegraphic mail:

For most people the word is still associated with tragedy, bereavement, or an exceptional happening. As a means of communication it was both expensive and laconic; never after the first years to Slough could one send unlimited orders for whitebait and sausages for a shilling. At so much a word a language was born, and it quickly became a language whose very brevity heightened its impact.¹⁰

It was not only the slowness, but also the inaccuracy and the need for "laconic" brevity, that made British telegraphs unpopular to many prospective users. Perhaps illogically, the written-message type of reception produced error-ridden telegrams which were sometimes useless to their recipients, and were always annoying. Transmission lines, too, were unreliable. As late as 1853 the Times manager Mowbray Morris wrote to his Times Berlin correspondent, "I do not confide much in the telegraph, and I would it had never been invented."¹¹ Railroads were the first real customers of British telegraph, but slowly other patrons were forced by circumstances into accepting it. Garnier (1832) and Havas (1835) among others, operated news-gathering agencies which relied partly on the new medium. The permanent submarine cable

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between England and France, finally laid in 1851, did much to turn the news-agencies away from pigeons or other methods, and toward the telegraph.

While earlier surface-features of telegraphic development were similar for England and America, the later events in America deviate significantly. Samuel Finley Breese Morse was America's "Buccaneer of Buzs", to use Emily Dickinson's phrase. Morse was a well-known portrait painter - had founded the National Academy of Design, New York - was a close friend both to artists and inventors of the time, and is also responsible for "bringing photography to America". As a young man studying painting in England and Paris, Morse appears to have made friends with men as dissimilar as Coleridge, Lafayette, and the Danish sculptor Thorwaldsen. His ambition, until later in life, concerned art exclusively and he expressed the desire to be not merely the greatest portraitist of his time, but a painter comparable to the fifteenth-century masters: "to rival the genius of a Raphael, a Michael Angelo, or a Titian," Morse wrote in correspondence to a friend.¹² The young Morse acquired a number of patrons in America, people whose purchases and support probably helped in part to send him on two study-excursions to Europe. His patron Philip Hone, a New York businessman, commented in peculiar and evocative terms on Morse's work. Carleton Mabie in the Morse biography The American Leonardo records the remark:

When Hone in due time examined several of the European productions of Morse...he concluded that the sunny skies of Italy had not warmed their imagination. There was no poetry about Morse's painting, Hone wrote, "and his prose consists of straight lines, which look as if they had been stretched to their uttermost tension to form clothed-lines."¹³

The somber or brown tones of Morse's work which Hone found unwarmed "by the sunny skies of Italy" were the style and fad of an age. From

the prevalent tones of its portrait-painters to the brown glasses worn by many Americans, the United States of the eighteen-twenties to the eighteen-fifties "saw brown". Morse was not alone.

Arrived in London for the first time, Morse wrote a letter to his mother, concluding with the remark, "I wish that in an instant I could communicate the information; but three thousand miles are not passed over in an instant, and we must wait four long weeks before we can hear from each other." The biographer Carleton Mabee reports that, "on re-reading the letter many years later, Morse wrote in the margin: 'Longing for a telegraph even in this letter'."¹⁴ From the beginning of his association with the telegraph, Morse's comments show a particular interest in the instantaneous aspect of electrical communication. The idea seems to have occurred to him first during some outdoor excursions in France on his second European voyage. According to Mabee, Morse visited a French semaphore installation near Paris. The semaphore - at the time called telegraph - was better than the mails, Morse is reported as saying, but in America "this will not be good enough. The lightning would serve us better."¹⁵ Morse had long been interested in sciences generally; had been fascinated by the scant knowledge which he had of electricity; had gone to lectures on the subject, including one on electromagnetism by Prof. James Freeman Dana before the Athenaeum. Mabee writes of this lecture that

in the audience together, unknown to each other, were three persons who were to be associated in harnessing the electro-magnet to human needs: Morse, Joseph Henry, and Leonard Gale. Electricity was now so much on [Morse's] mind that a description of the flowing of electricity through wire would occur to him as an illustration in an art lecture.¹⁶

The event which influenced Morse most, however, was probably the meeting which took place after his visit to the French semaphores, on ship back to the United States in October 1832. A.L. Albert's account suggests

that

a fellow passenger showed Morse an electromagnet and performed a number of experiments with it. Also, in discussing Faraday's work on induction, Morse learned that the speed of electricity was considered almost instantaneous. Thus he concluded that, if he could arrange a satisfactory detecting device, signals could be rapidly transmitted between distant points. Accordingly, while still on shipboard, Morse designed his first set.¹⁷

Soon after his arrival in New York Morse began work on his telegraph. The first instruments were mechanical and visual-recording types. The sending apparatus was a switch operated by sliding a notched bar under its contacts. Morse devised a numerical code, and each notch of the bar indicated a number which was recorded by electro-magnetically operated stylus on the receiver. Morse's system also required two lines for completion of the circuit. He experimented during these first years without assistance and in isolation; an isolation so total that he worked, as Mabee records,

believing that he was not only the first to attempt to use electromagnetism in transmitting intelligence, but also the first to use any kind of electricity at all. The essential idea sprang Minerva-like from his brain....¹⁸

From the moment on the ship when he first conceived of electric communications, Morse thought of himself as the pioneer. In the American Leonardo Mabee writes,

He thought he had taken the word "telegraph" - then used to refer particularly to semaphore telegraphs - and placed it beside the word "electric" for the first time in history. ¹⁹

This, at any rate, is the legend which Morse did nothing to dispel.

On his return from Europe Morse had taken a teaching post at New York University, which allowed him space for his telegraphic research. Three years after, in 1835, he had completed an operating system in his rooms, but although he demonstrated this to some of his colleagues, he seems to have left further work in abeyance due to the pressures of

other activities. Morse among other notable American painters submitted designs for decorations in the rotunda at the Capitol. He also entered a mayoralty race. He does not seem to have been upset by his failure in this minor political venture, but when congress awarded the Capitol commissions to other lesser artists, Morse was badly hurt. His main interest was still his painting, and the telegraph assumed the role of "bread-winner", to provide an income by which he might continue his art. The decline of the Patron, in American painting, made it imperative that he find some substitute. If it were necessary to establish Morse's relative position as artist, we might reflect that he was regarded as "Master" by some of those painters who were awarded Capitol contracts; that he was founder of a large institute of art and design; that he had been an "official" portraitist to many of the country's governing heads and dignitaries; that his portrait of Noah Webster was used for over a century as the frontispiece to the Webster dictionary. But contemporary esteem does not help Morse even in his own time. He was, according to Lewis Mumford's chronicle of the period Brown Decades, one of the last practitioners of the "tradition":

Though the portrait tradition was carried into the nineteenth century by Samuel F.B. Morse, who was no mediocre artist, his concern with the invention of the telegraph can partly be explained by the disappointing lack of patronage that attended his career as a painter.²⁰

Morse himself seems to have blamed the single incident of the Capitol rotunda contract, and in particular one committee member, John Quincy Adams, for his decline as painter. But the shift of attention from art to telegraphy was slow, and for years after his first telegraphic experiments Morse continued to think of himself as a painter. Habs in his American Leonardo writes that "It was not Adams with his single blow but the telegraph with its sustained demands on his time and devotion that finally killed him as a painter."²¹

Without the Capitol commission to occupy him, and perhaps also influenced by occasional newspaper reports of other telegraph inventions, Morse returned in 1837 with renewed determination to his own experiments. Early in that year - Hubbard's "year of the telegraph" - he took into his confidence Professor Leonard Gale, who by autumn of 1837 had become Morse's business partner. Leonard Gale, it will be recalled, had attended the Athenaeum lectures on electromagnetism given by Dana, the same talks that Morse heard after his second European voyage. Of Prof. Gale, Mabee writes simply:

Considering his important role in telegraph history, he achieved surprisingly little fame; this may be in part because he is the only one of the four partners who did not leave a mass of papers for the benefit of prying historians.²²

Elsewhere in The American Leonardo, however, Mabee comments; "Gale's chief service to Morse was to call his attention to the studies of Professor Joseph Henry of Princeton."²³ At any rate, with the assistance of Gale, and Henry's discoveries, Morse soon demonstrated an improved telegraph to his university protégés. This took place September 2, 1837, and during the demonstration a young student named Alfred Vail wandered into the room. Within three weeks Vail too had become a partner, and was given the responsibility of building working models of sender and receiver, to be exhibited before Washington officials. But as to the many technical innovations which from now on appeared with amazing frequency, it will be difficult to attach authorship with any accuracy. As Mabee explains the partnership:

According to their agreement, any telegraph inventions or improvements by any of them became their joint property. They always called their instruments the Morse telegraph....²⁴

Several of these innovations should be noted. For instance, Morse's first code was a cumbersome one of numbers, which when received had to

be translated into words. By January 1838 the number system had been dropped and a simple letter code, composed of dots and dashes recorded on a moving strip of paper, had been substituted. At this time also Morse seems to have developed the relay, which he intended as a kind of "booster" to be inserted at intervals in the line when the original signal grew weak.

Morse's object, in making application to congress for assistance, was that the government should take over full responsibility for the telegraph. Morse and his partners were willing to develop the facility rather in the position of public servants. All Morse rights and patents would be turned over to the government for a reasonable consideration. So the first demonstration of telegraph before the House Committee on Commerce in the Capitol was for Morse a problem in salesmanship. This first command performance brought curious reactions, some of which Maboo describes in his American Leonardo:

"The world is coming to an end," Vail heard some say.
 "Where will improvement and discoveries stop?" others asked, bewildered by the new railroads, and now by lightning to carry words.
 "Time and space are now annihilated," was the far-seeing conclusion of one visitor. His comment was to be on the lips of millions.²⁵

In spite of the efforts and the apparent generosity of the Morse group, however, congress failed to respond, either with the money required for a telegraph line, or with the interest necessary to taking control of telegraphy. Not until 1843 was Morse successful in petitioning for his grant and beginning the first American electromagnetic telegraph line, from Baltimore to Washington along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad right-of-way. The line was to be laid underground, and the contract for laying it went to engineer Ezra Cornell, later founder of Cornell University.

Possibly the erratic news from England of Cooke and Wheatstone's underground line was responsible for Morse's decision. If so then here was another instance of "bad communication", for the Wheatstone plan had not been entirely successful. Morse's attempt was even less so, and after ten or twelve miles had been completed the insulation proved defective when tested. Upon discovering the fact Morse went immediately to Ezra Cornell whose specially-designed plow was in one operation digging the trench and laying cable in it; Morse must have feared the public reaction to failure of the telegraph, and asked Cornell to think of some temporizing strategy. Cornell deliberately steered his machine into a rock, breaking the blade and halting work on the line. Cornell then salvaged the used wire, and the following spring, 1844, completed the line using poles and insulators.

The first important service, performed even before the completion, of this Baltimore-Washington telegraph, was to carry the news and results of the Democratic convention held that year in Baltimore. This early success perhaps convinced many doubters in congress; it certainly convinced several groups of potential customers. Robert Luther Thompson in his book Wiring A Continent, reports "Among the first to patronize the telegraph were the lottery men."²⁵ Thompson lists other patrons also:

Brokers were another group who quickly realized the value of the new invention. As early as March 3, 1846, the New York Herald complained that certain parties in New York and Philadelphia were employing the telegraph for speculating in stocks.²⁷

The best customer of the early telegraph was the press. Before the Magnetic Company's line was even completed the subject of the relations of the telegraph to the press was carefully discussed by the Magnetic Board.²⁸

The Magnetic Telegraph Company was founded May 15, 1845, in the midst of an enormous line-building campaign which covered most of the

eastern United States. By this time, in spite of Morse's reluctance and the better intentions of three of the partners, "business" was taking over from exploration or invention; Morse's fourth partner, Senator F.O.J. "Fog" Smith could state with assurance:

Money is the only earthly influence to compete with money, and it has the power, in spite of moral considerations, to make itself heard, felt and obeyed wherever directed.²⁹

For a time Morse continued to urge the government into direct control of telegraphs, but he found himself fighting his own partner "Fog" Smith in this, and not merely outside interests. He now envisioned a world-wide network of telegraph, including transoceanic cables. Here again Morse apparently felt that "he was the first that ever burst" upon the notion of underwater lines. But as Albert's book Electrical Communication points out, "The possibility of submarine telegraphy was suggested by Salva in 1798,"³⁰ some time before Morse had begun to think about electric telegraphs. While he imagined such developments, however, other companies were growing up everywhere around him, and he began to lose sight of his invention behind mountains of financial arrangements, legal actions and patent disputes which the telegraph could not span for him.

III. Effects: the New Nervous System

Upon the Ropes - above our Head -
 Continual - with the News -
 Nor We so much as check our speech -
 Nor stop to cross ourselves -

While Morse went abroad to find new lands for telegraphic development, America began to adjust to - and in some cases assess, consciously and critically - the effects of his invention. American newspapers and press services, unlike their English counterparts, had adopted the telegraph almost as it was built. The American railroads, on the other hand, resisted for some time the new electric medium while the British made extensive use of it. There were individuals who from the beginning opposed the telegraph, suggesting it was a toy or a piece of mystical apparatus belonging to the black arts and mesmerism. One of these men, congressman Cave Johnson of Tennessee, a few years later became administrator of United States telegraphs. There were individuals also who opposed the telegraph for other reasons, and the London Times editor Mowbray Morris was one of these. Morris had several reasons for his dislike and distrust of telegraphy. From his first contact with the medium he found it inaccurate and, according to the History of the Times, made this clear to his foreign correspondents. He wrote, "I have no faith in the French telegraph, nor have I any confidence that your messages by that route will be correctly forwarded."³¹ Added to this inefficiency Morris saw another objection, which he also expressed in letters to correspondents: as late as 1871 he wrote, concerning telegraphic news, that it was "much increased of late, and I hope to do yet more. We are restrained, however, by the great cost of the use of the wires, which in many places is all but prohibitory."³² Morris was forced to accept telegraphic news by the pressures the

independent news agencies created in supplying "Extraordinary Express" news to all papers, large or small. From the History of the Times account, it would appear that cost and inaccuracy were objections of secondary interest to Morris, however. As the Times' History puts it:

The triumph of the telegraph necessarily modified the functions of the foreign correspondent. In the past Morris had always laid stress on the importance of literary quality in dispatches for publication; there was now some danger that the need for more rapidity might supersede other qualities altogether. The older correspondents were slow to adapt their technique to new requirements, and both Morris and MacDonald had some difficult years helping them to learn the new art.³³

In spite of his literary considerations Morris was forced to acknowledge what the History refers to as "the public's appetite for speed regardless of significance."³⁴

Morris was only temporarily successful in impressing his "literary preference" upon the shape of telegraphic news; he might have been even less so if British telegraphs had not been of the visual-recorder type. Early in the commercial development of American telegraphs the visual apparatus was abandoned in favour of a much faster and more accurate technique, auditory "reading" by the operators.³⁵ or the operators. Albert, in Electrical Communications, comments that "the method of reading the Morse dot and dash code message from sound rather than from tape was perfected by Vail in 1844."³⁵ Whether or not Vail first thought of the method, it became popular through use by the operators themselves and in spite of objections from company directors, who at its inception published rules forbidding the practice. Whatever its origins, sound-reading became general quite early in the development of American telegraphy. It must have contributed both to the economy and to the accuracy of transmission; it must also have reacted very quickly upon the language of telegrams, establishing what Hubbard calls the "Incoptic" telegraphic style.

Several considerations, of which economy was certainly an important one, were involved in the almost immediate adoption of the telegraph by American newspapers. In the many small telegraph companies which appeared throughout the United States after 1845, ex-newspapermen could be found everywhere in executive positions. William M. Swain, one of the original incorporators in the Magnetic Telegraph Company, and Amos Kendall, chief promoter of the company, were two of these. It would appear that in America, therefore, cooperation between the two media did not depend on secondary inducements such as the civil war, and the independent press services. Newspapers had, in fact, undergone an important change parallel to, and after 1845 aided by, the telegraph. This alteration occurred in the printing process itself, and the object of it was greater efficiency and speed. In his study,

Five Hundred Years of Printing, S.H. Steinberg comments:

Three hundred and fifty years elapsed after Gutenberg's invention before any basic change was made in the technique of printing. There was no difference between the humble press on which Gutenberg printed the 42-line bible, and the presses for the accommodation of which John Vanbrugh designed the spacious Clarendon Building in 1713.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth, Steinberg writes, "the printing trade underwent a wholesale alteration." Suddenly a great number of inventions and modifications appeared which, Steinberg notes,

resulted in increasing the output per press and per man-hour beyond the wildest dreams of earlier printers while at the same time reducing the cost³⁶ of production and the price of the finished product....

All of this innovation, mechanical and electric, soon intruded upon the front page as the Times' Howbray Morris had feared it would, but in a manner which Morris perhaps did not foresee.

In his book American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960, Frank

Luther Mott discusses the shape of the early nineteenth-century front page. A great lag existed between events in Europe, for instance, and their appearance in American papers:

news from abroad could be published in America only about two months after it "broke" in London, or three months after an event in Warsaw. This extensive time-lag had a tendency to change the concept of news, originally thought of as new, especially as it applied to foreign reports: the element of timeliness in that concept tended to be subordinated to the idea of an orderly printing of the record long after the event as a matter of historical interest.³⁷

In fact, not only foreign news but all news appeared in this orderly procession down several identical columns of the page. In the second half of the nineteenth century newspapers became de-historicized and assumed some of the mosaic or, as McLuhan puts it, cubist make-up that characterizes the modern front page. Trans-atlantic telegraph cables bringing current events from every part of the world made such a mosaic temporally possible; the adoption of plate-type printing processes in favour of the old moveable type columns allowed mechanically for such alterations.

Ozenfant in his Foundations of Modern Art summarizes generally the tendency which has been noted in electrical and mechanical invention from the late eighteenth century onward:

The trend towards efficiency leads to synthesis. For example, in the past, a confused pluralism ruled over the sciences.... Nowadays they tend to merge into electromagnetics, a monism with innumerable attributes.³⁸

This "pluralism" was noted by the physicist Max Planck as a feature of classical scientific method; in his examination of early twentieth-century developments, The Philosophy of Physics, Planck wrote that scientists, on the scheme of classical mechanics,

continued to apply the principle of divide et impera. After the actual events had been separated from the measuring instruments bodies were divided up into

molecules, molecules into atoms, and atoms into protons and electrons. Simultaneously space and time were divided into infinitely smaller intervals.³⁹

The unifying tendency of "electromagnetics" which opposed this taste for proliferation and subdivision was at work already when inventors, before Morse and Wheatstone, combined the magnet and the electric current to produce the telegraph's working-mechanism. In physics, the unifying principle continued to operate. The French physicist Paul Langevin, writing about 1910, described the conflict as between two quite different modes of existence:

Nous assistons en ce moment à un conflit de ce genre entre deux conceptions du monde particulièrement importantes et belles: la Mécanique rationnelle de Galilée et de Newton d'une part et d'autre part la théorie électromagnétique sous la forme adulte que lui ont donnée Maxwell, Hertz et Lorentz.⁴⁰

For Langevin the conflict did not confine itself to physics; electromagnetics gained ground everywhere, proving itself not merely theoretically: "rien ne peut mieux montrer l'origine empirique de ces notions que leur adaptation progressive, non terminée encore, aux données de plus en plus subtiles de l'expérience humaine."⁴¹ When the spectator at Morse's telegraphic demonstration cried that "space and time are now annihilated," M. Langevin would have agreed with him, but only insofar as mechanical space and time had been tampered with. "Notre espace et notre temps étaient ceux exigés par la mécanique rationnelle."⁴² Langevin continues,

Le mécanisme impliquait la conception ancienne, l'Electromagnétisme en exige une nouvelle dont rien ne nous permet de dire qu'elle sera définitive.⁴³

The "new conception" requires a new conceptualization and a new language: "la réflexion y est particulièrement délicate et ne pourra être aidée que par la formation d'un langage adéquat."⁴⁴ Langevin has left what is still perhaps the most forceful testimonial to the

unifying character of "Électromagnétisme"; in his essay *L'Évolution de l'espace et du temps*, from which I have been quoting, he states:

L'Électromagnétisme est aussi remarquablement adapté à son domaine primitif que la Mécanique rationnelle a pu l'être au sien.... L'Électromagnétisme constitue une discipline, un mode de pensée tout à fait à part, tout à fait distinct de la Mécanique, et doué d'une force d'expansion étonnante puisqu'il s'est assimilé sans aucun effort l'immense domaine de l'Optique et de la valeur rayonnante devant lequel le mécanisme était resté impuissant, et qu'il y provoque chaque jour des découvertes nouvelles. L'Électromagnétisme a conquis la plus grande partie de la Physique, envahi la Chimie et groupé un nombre immense de faits jusque là sans forme et sans lien.⁴⁵

The nineteenth-century experimenters with electromagnetism and the telegraph were primarily interested in the speed of electrical communications, as the experiments of Wheatstone and the correspondence of Morse indicate. But as Einstein and others saw, late in the century and early in the twentieth, very high velocities threatened the classical mechanics developed from Newton's groundwork. The relativity theories of Einstein can be viewed as an attempt to preserve the main hypotheses of the Newtonian mechanics, principally the assumptions concerning causality.

Speed was not exclusively the property of the electromagnetic "domain"; as was mentioned earlier, mechanical apparatus also progressed or was developed with a view to increasing output rates and speeds of processes. But the swiftness of electrical communication seems to have influenced the public; songs as well as newspaper reports had a part in this influence. Linemen of rival companies, stringing parallel lines in a race from city to city, sang Reid's ballad,

Boys! bear along the lightning thong
Down the C-hi-o.
Four thousand miles already up,⁴⁶
And thousands more to go.

And the machine despite many advances was severely limited in its capacity for velocity-development; ultimate speed belonged to

electricity. Accommodating the new instantaneous medium however was a problem to which few people paid much attention; and those who recognized the need, attempted to fit electricity into the existing mechanical structure. Not only in the sciences but elsewhere, the old structure would not conform to new design. Carleton Mabee in The American Leonardo comments:

Like his predecessor Cadmus, the inventor of the Morse alphabet found that his work produced confusion. From his dragon's teeth had sprung an army of companies that fought among themselves, fought the sewer, and fought the public whom they were created to serve.⁴⁷

This warring of rival companies is too involved for a discussion such as the present one, and has been chronicled in detail by Mabee, and particularly by Thompson in his Wiring A Continent. The result of so much economic combat, in which the ultimate goal was total control of US telegraphs, is indicated by Thompson's observation:

With the reorganization of the New York & Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company in February 1854, the turning point had been reached. That concern now embarked upon a career of conquest which has seldom been equalled in corporate history.⁴⁸

The New York & Mississippi Valley became, in 1855, the Western Union Telegraph Company which with two or three rivals, such as AT&T, very quickly overcame the first tendencies toward proliferation and, in the world of corporations, set the precedent for "electromagnetic unification". The remarks of Gardiner C. Means, in his essay Collective Capitalism and Economic Theory, are particularly useful:

The modern corporation has undermined the preconceptions of classical economic theory as effectively as the quantum undermined classical physics at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁹

The economist Scott Buchanan, writing in The Corporation and the Republic, notes the corporate tendency toward "mixing" or uniting of formerly separated modes: "The political, economic, and social

phenomena of the twentieth century are marked by the mixing and confusion of corporate forms and functions.... There is no longer an unincorporated frontier."⁵⁰ Buchanan speculates further,

Such a mixing and confusion of corporate forms may be comparable to the breakdown of the villages and the drift to the great cities which have marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries....⁵¹

In fact, "such a mixing and confusion" goes contrary to the "drift to the great cities", or trend toward centralization, of the nineteenth century. The corporation is in a sense the moveable and intangible village or factory, a product of decentralized communication systems. That the telegraph performed this service, American newspapers very soon recognized, as Thompson shows in a note:

In the autumn of 1852 the New York Herald, discussing a recent allusion in congress to the need for removing the Federal Capital from Washington to some location nearer the geographical center of the country, explained that it was now without point. "Some years ago, there were good grounds for supposing that the seat of government would be removed to a more central location, but telegraphs have entirely superseded the necessity for any such movement."⁵²

The newspapers, as has been noted, were among the first victims of levelling and decentralization; the telegraph made small dailies and weeklies in distant communities independent of, and as "up-to-date" as, the large city papers. When coupled with an independent news agency - Reuters, American Press, etc. - the small or distant newspaper lacked nothing that the larger more "central" daily could offer.

It will be obvious by now to what extent the nineteenth-century vocabulary, with terms such as "centre" and "decentralized", "institutional" and "corporate", "mechanical" and "electromagnetic", has become inadequate for the discussion even of the nineteenth century. The incautious use of this terminology leads to a picture,

like that drawn by Spengler with his inescapable expressionist painter "Zeitgeist", of some electromagnetic monster scarifying the mechanical landscape and skulking away toward the future leaving the a burnt-out skeleton of the old system behind him. Whether we can accept such aberrant structures as real or desirable is a matter of choice and of language. Unfortunately language, in the care of nineteenth-century poets, did not develop and adapt itself to cope with its situation. With few exceptions, the artists of that century in America ignored some of the most pressing influences on their society; the main exception was the New England poet, Emily Dickinson.

PART TWO

I. Emily Dickinson

I had no portrait, now, but am small, like
 the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the
 Chestnut Bur - and my eyes, like the Sherry
 in the Glass, that the Guest leaves -

(Emily Dickinson: Letters)

The Dickinson family had lived in New England since the late seventeenth century, and at least two generations of Dickinsons had occupied the house in Amherst, Mass., where Emily was born, December 10 1830. The parents were Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Edward was in turn the son of Samuel Fowler Dickinson, founder of Amherst Academy (1814). Emily was the second of three children; a brother, William Austin, was born in 1829 and a sister, Lavinia Norcross, in 1833. Beginning in 1840, Emily attended Amherst Academy. Public schools were not graded at this time but the Academy offered the equivalent of a complete pre-college education. All of the Dickinson children attended the Academy before continuing with studies elsewhere. Austin subsequently became a lawyer in the tradition of father and grandfather. Emily's academic career was more brief; in 1847-48 she attended the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Mass., and then gave up further formal academic training.

Amherst was situated less than a hundred miles from Boston. Even before the arrival of the railroad Emily's father Edward took part in state affairs: representative in the General Court, 1838-39, and a delegate to the Whig convention of 1852 in Baltimore. In 1853 he was elected a representative to the Thirty-third Congress, ending in

1855. Emily thus had contact of an intimate sort with the legal and political life of the community. Since both father and brother Austin were active in the Amherst and state business development - railroad, college, etc. - Emily also became familiar with and acquired some of the vocabulary of these interests. Her literary contacts, in fact, are the least obvious of all influences on the young Miss Dickinson. She did have these, however. Perhaps the first was with a young man named Benjamin Franklin Newton, made while she studied at Mount Holyoke. Newton must have seen some early evidence of her literary aspirations, and encouraged her in writing verse. It would be impossible to say to what extent she wrote at that time; many young people wrote verses, often in the form of letters or valentines to each other. Emily Dickinson's first published piece, in the Springfield Republican of February 20, 1852, was a mock valentine. Thomas H. Johnson's edition of The Poems of Emily Dickinson lists only five poems as certainly written before 1858. According to this record, then, she was not working seriously on her verse at the time of her meeting with Ben Newton. But her relationship with this young law apprentice from her father's office began a series of personal attachments to certain friends whom she singled out as "mentors" or "masters". To these she often wrote as though she were placing her literary life in their care. She was acquainted with the editor of the Springfield Republican, Samuel Bowles; she maintained a friendship with the Rev. Charles Wadsworth; she also corresponded with a noted critic and literary figure of the period, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In spite of her various earnest appeals, to Higginson particularly, for literary help, Emily Dickinson seems never to have taken any advice that might have been given. After 1858, when her output of poetry became so prodigious, she ignored not only suggestions for improvements and revisions, but

almost all requests to publish her verse, as well.

In 1848, her college year, Emily Dickinson sat for a daguerreotype -- probably the only photograph of her -- and became one of the thousands of Americans whose images were preserved in this way during the first years after Samuel F.B. Morse imported the French invention. She seems not to have been impressed with the photographic process, however, for when asked later to supply a portrait, she registered some disapproval and wrote the description, quoted at the head of this section. Her father too may have disapproved of the photograph; "It often alarms Father --" she wrote, "He says Death might occur..."⁵³ It is not clear whether Edward Dickinson feared the photograph or feared that one of his family might die leaving no likeness. Emily's comments concerning her father are often ambiguous, in fact. Some critical biographies have made much of Edward's sternness, his New England Puritan bearing, his habit of impressing himself upon the family. He was certainly the stronger personality if compared with his wife, Emily Norcross. Yet he was not so tyrannical that the children were unable to assert themselves. The father's taste in literature was too restrictive for the children, and so with the help of friends they acquired and read "forbidden" books, hiding them in the piano or elsewhere when Edward was about. As they grew older, Austin solved the parental problem by moving away; Emily and Lavinia, both of whom lived at home, learned tact. Emily anyway seemed to find her father much less unwavering than some biographers suppose. She wrote

When much in the Woods as a little girl, I was told
that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a
poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along
and met no one but Angels, who were far shy of me, than
I could be of them, so I hav'nt that confidence in fraud
which many exercise.⁵⁴

She made her own life, without any revolutionary noise, and without

slighting those who offered advice.

In 1856 Austin Dickinson married Susan Gilbert, a school-friend of Emily, and the two women began a lasting and close relationship. In the course of this friendship, Sue saw a good deal of Emily's verse and discussed it with her, although Sue had no more than the normal reader's interest in the work. Emily Dickinson often included poems in her already "verse-letters", sending these at first to a select and small group of correspondents, but after the early 1860's, including poems to almost everyone she wrote to. Johnson, in his Emily Dickinson, An Interpretive Biography, refers to her later correspondence as follows:

In later years almost all poems were intended for enclosure in letters to friends. It was the receiving and sending of letters that now constituted her "estate," and on them she lavished as much care as she had earlier devoted to her poems, writing them in first draft, correcting, polishing, then dispatching the finished copy.⁵⁵

Susan Gilbert received a large number of these letters. If her critical assistance to Emily - as expressed in her letters - was small, she did provide other help, particularly in supplying Emily with books from her library. George F. Whicher's critical biography, This Was A Poet, notes that "Sue's library contained volumes of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Heine, and others,"⁵⁶ and Emily had taken a year of German at college, indicating that she acquired some background in that literature. Whicher continues, "Except for Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Browne her deepest literary affinities were with the nineteenth century."⁵⁷ It is in fact difficult to make any conclusions, either from her library or from her letters, about her "literary affinities". The research into this aspect of Emily Dickinson's affairs has had the intention of giving her a solid and respectable literary position, without which - so many critics seem to feel - she could not have written her own verse.

A similar concern has been shown for her religious background,

especially by those critics interested in placing her poetry as religious verse. At Amherst Academy between 1840 and 1847, and quite probably also at Holyoke, Emily Dickinson was urged to "convert" and accept God in the spirit of a mid-nineteenth-century New England school. Special meetings were held for those students - difficult cases - who could not easily declare their belief. Emily seems to have attended these meetings. The head-mistress of the seminary showed concern for those few wayward girls who in spite of special assistance, failed to meet the spiritual challenge. It appears that Emily Dickinson remained a "hold-out". After her single year at Mount Holyoke the matter was dropped.

In 1852 Emily Dickinson had written to her brother in Boston, "we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it's pretty much all real life."⁵⁸ By 1858, however, she had begun to collect her verse into hand-written and loosely threaded booklets. Johnson places about fifty poems in that year; in 1859 almost one hundred; sixty-five in 1860, eighty-five in 1861, and three hundred and sixty-six in 1862. At the same time - that is, beginning about 1858 or 1860 - she began what has been called her "recluse" existence, her "withdrawal" or her "hermitage". Her isolated way of life, more pronounced from the late 1860's onward, has confused critics who tried to reconcile the spinster poet recluse and the diffuse worldly imagery of the poetry. But while she obviously withdrew from physical contact Emily Dickinson established and multiplied her correspondence, keeping in touch through what she herself characterized as "my letter to the world" - engaging in a kind of early modern broadcasting, if on a limited scale.

Although she wrote extensively after 1858, she offered almost:

nothing for publication. In March 1862 Bowles published, in his Springfield Daily Republican, a single poem bearing the title "The Sleeping" - a name perhaps given to it by Bowles himself. Shortly after the appearance of this piece, the Unitarian pastor, writer and critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson published a note in the Atlantic Monthly entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor", directed at young poets who may or may not have sent their work to the magazine for publication. Higginson received many replies to his "Letter", one among them a brief letter from Emily Dickinson. She included some poems, and the note began "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" She continued, "Should you think it breathed - and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude -".⁵⁹ A correspondence began between Higginson and Emily which lasted until her death. In the earlier letters she asked Higginson often, "Will you be my Preceptor?" But it would appear that, from his first letter, she was more interested in a correspondent than in his advice. In her second letter to Higginson she remarks on his suggestions about her poetry, "Thank you for the surgery - it was not so painful as I supposed." She also writes him a capsule description of her family:

I have a Brother and Sister - My Mother does not care for thought - and Father, too busy with his Briefs - to notice what we do - He buys me many Books - but begs me not to read them - because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious - except me - and address an Eclipse, every morning - whom they call their "Father."

In his first letter to her, Higginson apparently asked about her age, her reading, her influences, and Emily replied:

You inquire my Books - For Poets - I have Keats - and Mr and Mrs Brownings. For Prose - Mr Ruskin - Sir Thomas Brown - and the Revelations.

(Johnson in his edition of the Letters notes that although she often mentions the Brownings, she never again in correspondence refers to

Browne or Ruskin, and only twice again to Keats.) As if answering some inquiry concerning her poet-acquaintances, she tells Higginson,

When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me
Immortality - but venturing too near, himself - he
never returned - Soon after, my Tutor, died - and
for several years, my Lexicon - was my only comp-
anion - Then I found one more - but he was not
contented I be his scholar - so he left the Land.⁶⁰

Biographers have supposed that the "friend, who taught me Immortality" must be Ben Newton, who died in 1853 of consumption after leaving Amherst. Emily Dickinson had remembered him very well, for after his death she wrote to his pastor in Worcester, Edward Everett Hale, "Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home." She excused her inquiry, "You may think my desire strange, Sir, but the Dead was dear to me, and I would love to know that he sleeps peacefully."⁶¹ No definite identification has been offered for the second "Tutor" mentioned in her letter to Higginson. Emily Dickinson was able to establish what were apparently very close friendships, and almost by her correspondence alone. I have already cited Johnson's remarks on her letter-writing habits; John B. Pickard's Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation speculates on her withdrawal:

Perhaps the shock of Newton's death had occasioned this desire for solitude. At any rate Emily was increasingly Jealous of her limited privacy. She kept in touch with the outside world through correspondence, constantly redrafting letters and lavishing care upon their style to create notable touches or originality and wit. Of two visitors she wrote: "They had been taking a walk. I think any sentiment must be consecrated by an inter-
view in the mud. There would be certainly, a corres-
pondence in depth."⁶²

That Emily Dickinson engaged in such "correspondence in depth" and that she recognized it as such, is important to a study of her work, especially if the study were to be a biographic interpretation. For her letters lead biographers to search out lovers who might have evoked such highly-charged passages as she sometimes wrote to her friends.

Pickard, in the work cited previously, says of her in the 1860's, "The woman was changing, slowly moving toward the love crisis whose white heat was to forge her untempered spirit,"⁶³ and his phrases with their particular bias and suggestiveness are similar to those of other writers on the subject.

The man many believe to have been the object, in later life, of Emily Dickinson's unfulfilled love, was the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1860 to 1862, and for many years a friend to the poet. The Dickinson letters to Wadsworth have not survived and this fact may add to the speculation on their relationship. Probably the two met in 1855 while Emily was in Philadelphia on a visit; she may have heard him deliver a sermon. According to Johnson in a note on recipients of letters, Wadsworth became "one of the leading pulpit orators of his day."⁶⁴ Early in 1862 Wadsworth moved to California where he became pastor of Calvary Church, San Francisco. There is evidence that he visited Emily Dickinson once before this move, in 1860, and at least one more time ten years after his return from California in 1870.

Through her friend Samuel Bowles of the Springfield Daily Republican Emily Dickinson made another literary acquaintance, Dr. Josiah Gilbert Holland. This gentleman had qualified as a physician in college, although he soon left the profession and became involved in journalism and publishing. In 1849 he began an association with Bowles on the Republican, and in 1870 founded Scribner's Monthly, which he edited until 1881, the year of his death. His books were well-known and popular, and he published much. Holland's wife became an even closer friend to Emily Dickinson; Elizabeth Luna (Chapin) Holland was one of the correspondent-friendships "in depth" - Emily referred to her as "sister" - and the two women are said to have

been similar in personality and temperament. Elizabeth Holland seems to have responded generously to Emily's emotional needs, in a way which another close friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert, could not.

Emily Dickinson's reticence concerning publication of her work has already been remarked upon. Opportunities to publish were not lacking; on at least one occasion Emily found herself pursued by individuals eager to print her poems. The popular poet and short-story writer Helen Hunt Jackson probably encountered Emily Dickinson's verse through T.W. Higginson, who lived near her Rhode Island home for a time. Johnson's biographic notes to the Letters state that Helen Jackson "had seen a few of ED's poems," and was the only contemporary who believed that ED was an authentic poet."⁶⁵ Emily received a request from Mrs. Jackson for verse to be published in an anonymous collection, including work by unknown as well as established poets, entitled the "No-Name" series. Although she corresponded with "H.H.", Emily ignored the request repeatedly. When the volume finally appeared, a Dickinson poem was included - without permission - and in the game of guessing which the book incited, Emerson was generally agreed to be the author of her poem. This poetic piracy by Helen Jackson did not stop Emily Dickinson from continuing a correspondence with her, and forming another friendship of life-long duration. Helen Jackson died in 1885, having asked not long before to be Emily's literary executor.

The few poems published by Bowles in the Springfield Republican appeared, like that in the "No-Name" volume, anonymously. Very early in her acquaintance with T.W. Higginson he advised her against being too hasty to appear in print. She answered him, indicating that she had already made the choice, "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' - that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin."⁶⁶

In spite of this reticence toward print, she was willing and even anxious to have her work read. Perhaps she saw early in her career that the judgement of print - a particular kind of "publication" - was not the one to which she wished to submit. Her choice of the personal letter as carrier or medium for her verse would offer her all the advantages, and few of the disadvantages, of publishing. Certainly, her few experiences with editors indicate a great lack of sympathy for the Dickinson idiom on the part of these gentlemen. The poetry as printed looked very different from the original; in almost every case punctuation was altered, words substituted and even rhymes and whole lines tampered with by editors who wished the poem to appear in a proper, literary form. Very little significance has been placed by critics on this divergence of interests between author and editors; yet one of the basic qualities of the poetry is involved, its anti-literary nature, with its deliberately non-typographic habits of rhythm, line structure and punctuation.

II. Emily Dickinson. New England, and Later Life

Although her life after 1864 became increasingly withdrawn, at least from direct physical contact, Emily Dickinson showed no decline of interest in community activities. Her descriptions of local events suggest merely that she preferred to watch rather than participate. When in 1853 her father opened the new railroad at a special celebration called "New London Day", she watched from a distance and described the activities in a letter to her brother Austin:

The New London Day passed off grandly - so all the people said - it was pretty hot and dusty, but nobody cared for that. Father was as usual, Chief Marshall of the day, and went marching around the town with New London at his heels like some old Roman General, upon a triumph day.⁶⁷

Charles Anderson, in his book Emily Dickinson's Poetry, Stairway to Surprise, remarks on the difference in attitude toward the mechanical, and specifically the railroad, between Emily and her father Edward. "To her father railroads symbolized the beginning of a new era," Anderson suggests, and he notes Emily Dickinson's poetic treatment of the train, in "I Love to see it lap the miles", etc:

but in her poem there is no suggestion of the standard nineteenth-century praise of material progress. There are no passengers or freight on her train, and no meaningful route; it simply roars around its circuit and then comes docilely home.... Even Thoreau, the age's sharpest critic of economic materialism, was more romantic when he described the iron horse in Walden....⁶⁸

Elsewhere Anderson refers to "Her cartoon of the railway train," in contrasting her attitude with that prevalent in her social environment.

The railroad with its locomotives was, Anderson writes, "the most spectacular symbol of progress in that age."⁶⁹ George F. Whicher's book This Was A Poet also comments on the aesthetic difficulties of "the machine age," the mid-nineteenth century:

To conventionally minded writers the machine age brought nothing that they could assimilate. They preferred to ignore it or to recognize it only in protest. Thoreau, it is true, could take a dreamy pleasure in the hum of telegraph wires, the aeolian harp of industry, but he balked at the Atlantic cable. Whitman's voracious chants swallowed the cable...and even sought an imaginative hold on "the strong light works of engineers," the Suez Canal and the transcontinental railroad. But his recitative faltered before the locomotive...⁷⁰

Whicher characterizes the period as one in which "truth, in the most literal and narrow sense, had come into its own."⁷¹ The poet was confronted by two possibilities, Whicher maintains; he might, "remembering poetry's former glory, wring [his] hands at its neglect and wonder what to make of a diminished thing." Or on the other hand he might "absorb the spirit of the age and stumblingly at best attempt to create an aesthetic to match it." Whitman had tried to do this, Whicher suggests, and "Emily Dickinson with entire unconsciousness contributed to the same result. She was very much a child of the age...."

Whicher, like other Dickinson critics, is justified in noting and exploring the social environment as reflected in Emily Dickinson's poetry. The differences between Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson may also supply useful information. But to view the period as "the machine age," in which the artist was "a child" controlled by a set of established conditions, would be to create an inadequate picture of the environment. I have already noted a number of the social and scientific alterations which took place in mid-nineteenth-century New England. The nature of the New England town, during Emily Dickinson's life, underwent such changes. Johnson in his Interpretive Biography writes:

Although by 1820 mercantile centers like New Haven, Hartford, and Springfield might have been largely freed from the domination of a Puritan past, such was by no means true of the smaller, more northerly valley towns. They still remained economically independent microcosms, where almost every family owned its own land and house, grew its own fruit and vegetables, and kept enough stock to supply the household with eggs, cheese, and salt pork. It was a very circumscribed world.⁷²

What Johnson ascribes particularly to "Puritan past" is actually a more general situation, European as well as American. Even before the railroads broke into this "circumscribed world" of New England villages there was a movement toward centralization and specialization, in which communities became noted for particular commodities, and the production of these became centred, drawing skilled craftsmen from elsewhere. Amherst, with its Academy and College - founded by Emily Dickinson's grandfather and father, respectively - became for a time a centre for higher education. The Amherst College enrolment, in 1836, was second only to Yale, and higher than that of Harvard. Fisheries and ship-building were two important industries in Massachusetts, both of which suffered from the fluctuations of market demands. While the cottage industries comprised the greater part of iron production, this industry developed to some extent, but when a cheaper supply became available from large iron centres near power and ore, Massachusetts foundries soon closed or became specialists in precision parts for which their craftsmen were particularly suited. The first steps toward mechanization of processes affected small communities favourably; even the smallest of textile manufacturers, for instance, could apply the new machines to their production. But the movement from the home to the small factory was only a preliminary to the more significant move toward industrial cities, an adjustment which made the home dependent entirely on the factory.

Finally, railroads in the 1850's annexed hundreds of communities

to the large industrial centres, making the towns little more than distant consumer-suburbs of the cities.

In contrast to this centralizing tendency, whose physical manifestation was the railroads, there followed a less obvious reversing tendency. Electrical communications made possible a less-centred society. Mechanization with its physical requirement of "place" made centres industrially necessary. The electrical environment, symbolized by the telegraph, de-emphasized the particular geographic position; management, for example, need not be in the same building or the same town as the production facilities. Industry still supplied the employment for thousands of workers whose place was dictated by the location of factories, but both industry and the public began to function increasingly as socially mobile beings. The more business and industry became a matter of electrical communications, the less physically-centred their structure became, and the less physically centred, the more heavily reliant on electrical communications, in a seemingly absurd cycle.

It has been noted that many communities were affected by the railroad even before being connected by rail. In a similar way these communities were aware of and affected by telegraphic communications before they were included in the network of lines. Long before 1861, the year of the Amherst telegraph line, Emily Dickinson had written to her brother Austin, "You know you can telegraph father if you would like to,"⁷³ and shortly afterward, also to Austin, "I shall telegraph to him soon!"⁷⁴ Johnson, in a note to his edition of the Poems, records that Emily had written two short pieces of verse on a telegraph form. She must have recognized very early, from her position in an influential business, political and legal family, how the economic and social environment was changing. Much of her verse in fact reflects

the "reaching out" which Robert Luther Thompson noted in his summary:

The business man, the banker, the broker, and the capitalist were enabled to operate upon a constantly broadening basis, as it became feasible to reach out over hundreds or even thousands of miles and obtain intelligence within a matter of minutes.⁷⁵

One of Emily Dickinson's few physical contacts with the world beyond Amherst, and probably her last, was her visit in 1863 to Boston, where she placed herself in the care of a Dr. Henry Williams for the treatment of her eyes. These treatments continued until April or May of 1865. The exact nature of her eye-ailment is not known, but she had complained of the light on snow, and the brightness of her house. The doctor forbade her either books or writing materials, during her stay in Boston. After 1865, however, the condition seems to have disappeared, for she never in her correspondence complains of it again. Once, early in 1866 when writing to Higginson, she remarks that she was supposed to visit the doctor for an examination, but apparently she did not keep this appointment. In the same letter to Higginson she mentions the publication by Samuel Bowles of her poem "The Snake", which Bowles had edited rather heavily. She writes to Higginson, "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me - defented too of the third line by the punctuation.... I had told you I did not print." Her remarks here concerning both punctuation and print reveal how deliberately she used her peculiar atypographic form.

That Bowles should edit her poem for his Springfield Daily Republican is indicative of the licence used by many editors in printing material with the proper format. Bowles, as George F. Whicher suggests in This Was A Poet, was successful in "provincial journalism" but failed to adapt to the city newspaper; he once "for six months...tried journalism in Boston, but it would not do. He was the product of a region and was born to be its spokesman."⁷⁶

A similar regionality has been attributed to Emily Dickinson.

She in some of her verse furthered this notion:

Because I see - New Englandly -
The Queen, discerns like me -
Provincially - (No. 285, p. 204)

But the lines^{are} somewhat ambiguous, in Emily Dickinson's particular way, about the matter of provincialism. And it has been in part this problem of Provinciality or seclusion which has coloured many critical studies of the Dickinson poetry.

Emily Dickinson's life after the 1860's appears to have been marked by her increasing seclusion, the decrease after 1864 of her productivity, and the deaths of many of her close friends. The seclusion reached such an extent that, when she occasionally received visitors, she seemed terrified by the prospect of a confrontation and often sent a note of excuse from her bedroom. Casual callers might catch a glimpse of white gown hurrying past an open door. When not evading visitors, she took charge of housework, cooking, caring for "Father", and the writing of correspondence. In secret, she also worked on her poetry. Sometime in June 1884 Emily Dickinson collapsed while preparing a cake, and the doctor left a not very medical diagnosis: "Revenge of the nerves."⁷⁷ She had stored away, by Johnson's numbering, 1775 poems, some unfinished, some work drafts covered with revisions, some rewritten from earlier poems. Not even her sister Lavinia knew either the extent or the nature of Emily's poetry, hidden away in drawers and boxes.

Emily Dickinson died on May 15, 1886.

PART THREE

Emily Dickinson and the Telegraph

I. Emily Dickinson's Poetry. the Language of Crisis.

The Doom's electric Moccasin
That very instant passed -

Hubbard, in his discussion of early telegraphy and the public, made the following observation, quoted previously:

For most people the word is still associated with tragedy, bereavement, or an exceptional happening. As a means of communication it was both expensive and laconic.... At so much a word a language was born, and it quickly became a language whose very brevity heightened its impact.

Although Hubbard is no doubt partly correct in ascribing this "impact" to a brevity necessitated by costs, he in no way explains why brevity itself should create such impact. The telegraphic message undeniably assumed a meaning divorced from its particular contents, a meaning which, for example, would not attach to the same message in letter form. Even in Canada and the United States, where telegraphic "mail" could be sent much more cheaply than in England, a telegram was an "exceptional happening", in Hubbard's words. Two principal factors combined to make it so; the sparse language of telegrams, and the immediacy of this very rapid form of communication, by which a distant correspondent learned of events almost as they happened. The message of the telegraph was urgency - or, to use Emily Dickinson's word, crisis. This message, and the often mundane subject of such crises, are reflected in Emily Dickinson's poems, little bullets of verbal energy emanating from local and personal moments of crisis. Many lines of her poetry are charged with crisis; for example, "Glass was the Street - in tinsel Peril", which seems to promise some disaster. But the poem continues,

Glass was the Street - in tinsel Peril
Tree and Traveller stood -

(No break)

Filled was the Air with merry venture
 Hearty with Boys the Road --

(No. 1498, p. 1034)

The language here suggests a verbal snapshot; the "crisis" depends on the charged words, such as "Peril", and the very brief moment of time which is the poem's subject. When, about 1880, she wrote this first stanza, Emily Dickinson had learned thoroughly the craft of news-reporting in verse. Even in her earliest work however she experimented with lead-lines conveying urgency or crisis:

A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!
 Your prayers, oh Passer by!
 From such a common ball as this
 Might date a Victory!

(No. 42, p. 35)

Most of her poems, in fact, are delivered as bits of news, in which the idea of crisis is more or less evident. In 1862 she wrote a three-stanza poem about personal crisis, beginning

It struck me - every Day -
 The Lightning was as new
 As if the Cloud that instant slit
 And let the Fire through -

(No. 362, p. 288)

On several other occasions Emily Dickinson returned to the image of lightning striking, to achieve the effect of the crisis of revelation, an emotional experience or awakening of perception.

The term "crisis" appears in only four or five poems, but her use of it suggests her awareness of various connotations of the word. Further, she seems to have explored crisis as though it were a new way of looking at events. In 1864 she wrote

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

(No. 889, p. 656)

A second poem, written about the same time, begins

'Twas Crisis - All the length had passed -
 That dull - benumbing time
 There is in Fever or Event -

(No. 984, p. 688)

Both of these verses mention at some point the moment of death in connection with crisis. In a late, incomplete fragment Emily Dickinson tried to give the subject a less sombre treatment:

Crisis is sweet and yet the Heart
Upon the hither side
Has Dowers of Prospective -
Surrendered by the Tried -

(No. 1416, P. 982)

To make a commonplace of Crisis was, however, contrary to her usual treatment of the subject and of the technique. The "news" of her poetry might concern death, or merely a butterfly; her language creates a meaning independent of the particular subject. The poem is, by its language, the "news carrier" and that which creates the crisis. This attitude toward language or medium is clearly stated in at least one of Emily Dickinson's "crisis poems":

But when the News be ripe -
Presents it - in the Act -
Forestalling Preparation -
Escape - or Substitute -

Indifferent to Him -
The Dower - as the Doom -
His Office - but to execute
Fate's - Telegram - to Him -

(No. 672, p. 519)

The association of "News" (and "Telegram") with the "moments of crisis" as effects of the medium rather than of the content is, I think, plain in this fragment. The message carried by the "News" is unimportant to the effect produced, which is a crisis "Forestalling Preparation -/ Escape - or Substitute". The "News" itself, as if personified, is a medium to which "The Dower - as the Doom" implies merely some "indifferent" message to be delivered. This attitude toward the poem or song - as a form having a life and effect of its own - can be found everywhere, implicitly or explicitly, in poetry. The Provençal love lyrics show indications of it, as do the Italian songs of the quattrocento (Guido Cavalcanti in the late thirteenth century had already written appeals

to his own verses, asking sympathy from them for his love-afflicted soul).⁷⁸ But Emily Dickinson's intentions, or rather that of her language, appears to be quite different from those of earlier poets; her technique is to shock or startle the reader from the languid state that Cavalcanti's songs, for example, seem to desire. Crisis results from a sudden shock to the emotions, the senses, the intellect, or to all of these. As George Whicher remarks, the Dickinson poetry "is a continual stimulus to mental alertness," and "does not encourage a dreamy half-attention on the reader's part."⁷⁹ Even in a verse about a common occurrence -- such as that already quoted, about boys and sleds -- the careful selection of charged words, and the condensation or "economy" of expression suggest something abrupt, singular and "exciting" in the most general sense of that word. The second stanza of that poem begins

Shot the lithe Sleds like shod vibrations
Emphasized and gone

(No. 1498, p. 1034)

The subject of these two lines is an event of a moment; the language with its abrupt beginning on "Shot" and its imagery ("shod vibrations") heightens that momentary quality beyond any sense of the actual event. Crisis is an instantaneous affair:

'Twas Crisis - All the length had passed -
That dull - benumbing time
There is in Fever or Event -
And now the Chance had come -

The instant holding in it's claw

(No. 948, p. 688)

The ambiguity of the stanza quoted allows of various interpretations of the "Crisis"; certainly, however, it concerns some violent stimulus which breaks into "That dull - benumbing time" and occupies only "The instant" as opposed to "All the length" or duration of "Fever or Event". (The second stanza continues by suggesting a choice between life and death, which does not however decrease the ambiguity of the "Crisis".) Such

moments of crisis can be found everywhere in the Dickinson poetry, and not always applied to human subjects. The image of a clock stopping supplied Emily Dickinson with the conceit for one of her finer verses:

A Clock stopped -
Not the Mantel's -
Geneva's farthest skill
Can't put the puppet bowing -
That just now dangled still -

An awe came on the Trinket!
The Figures hunched, with pain -
Then quivered out of Decimals -
Into Degreeless Noon -

(No. 287, p. 206)

"A Clock stopped", written in 1861 - the same year that the telegraph came to Amherst - suggests a rather different aspect of the momentary occurrence or Crisis, namely that of a shock so severe as to cause "awe" and "pain". Even in her earliest verse Emily Dickinson resorted to fear and pain as expressions of her "telegraphic" little crises:

A darting fear - a pomp - a tear -
A waking on the morn
To find that what one waked for,
Inhales the different dawn.

(No. 87, p. 71)

The "darting fear" becomes dissipated in this stanza, through the last three lines, but more often the effect of a "crisis" or sudden communication is violent and serious, like that shown by the clock which fell into an "awe" or trance. A number of verses from her most productive period, between 1860 and 1863, illustrate with what seems a quite specific imagery the kind of violent effect "the News" can have. For example:

He scanned it - staggered -
Dropped the Loop
To past or Period -
Caught helpless at a sense as if
His Mind were going blind -

(No. 1062, p. 749)

Emily Dickinson wrote also of her own "fear" of the reaction to "the

News":

I sued the News - yet feared - the News -
That such a Realm could be -

(No. 1360, p. 940)

The violence of certain experiences she referred to as "maiming" or being physically "struck", as "robbery" and of course as a kind of "death" or "murder", as in this long poem from ca. 1864:

Struck, was I, nor yet by Lightning -
Lightning - lets away
Power to perceive his Process
With Vitality.

Maimed - was I - yet not by Venture -
Stone of solid Boy -
Nor a Sportsman's Peradventure -
Who mine Enemy?

Robbed - was I - intact to Bandit -
All my Mansion torn -

(No. 925, p. 676)

A later stanza of this same verse remarks, "Best I love the Cause that slow me -", without however resolving the ambiguity surrounding the particular kind of experience to which the poem refers.

The effect of an Emily Dickinson poem, when it is successful, and of a telegram - as Hubbard noted concerning its "urgency" - are similar although obviously the "causes" of that effect are quite different. The deliberate style which creates Emily Dickinson's effects results from a great deal of poetic experiment, in which chance plays only a minor part. Some remarks of Hubbard, concerning Wheatstone's experiment to measure the speed of electricity, may provide an interesting, if limited, analogy:

The three problems of measuring the same time at both ends of a long distance, of measuring a very small time interval, and of maintaining the required accuracy in the measure of that interval were all solved, by the simple devices of bringing the two ends of the wire to the same place, using a revolving mirror, and controlling its speed by the syren, the sense of touch guided by that of hearing. It is beautiful because the means employed are the simplest and most direct consistent with the aim to be achieved; the aesthetic of the

Bauhaus rather than the Baroque, but a valid aesthetic for all that.⁸⁰

Hubbard admires the Wheatstone experiment for the simplicity or "economy" of its method of exploration - its "Bauhaus aesthetic" - but he makes a point too of the apparent break with previous scientific tradition in relying on "the sense of touch guided by that of hearing," in place of more usual, visual techniques of measurement. Wheatstone's innovations were deliberate, but only insofar as the problem demanded; he did not deliberately set out to break with any scientific preconceptions. Emily Dickinson's explorations with her particular poetic language confronted her with a similar problem, that is, one in which the solution required her to break with previous "typographic" concepts of how poetry "should look" on a page. It was not accident but an awareness of new exigencies that brought electrical experimenters, and artists as well, to change their methods and their emphases. Douglas Duncan, writing on Emily Dickinson (in 'Writers & Critics' series), saw with what care the Dickinson poetry was structured:

Her "typical" style of laconic utterance concentrated in short metres was not a spontaneous expression of the New England temperament but a style consciously created and chosen in preference to others. She had, in fact, an ear for many kinds of music other than that which she made her own.⁸¹

Few recent critics have failed to accommodate themselves in some way to what Donald Thackrey, in his essay Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry, calls her "shorthand system of poetic language."⁸² But if we accept that Emily Dickinson developed this "style of laconic utterance" deliberately, then we must accept also that she was to some extent aware of the uses to which she had put her language - that is, she was aware of what effect she wanted her language to create. I have shown, I think, some reason for supposing that the "Crisis" is a part of this intentional effect. There is further reason for associating the changing scientific

and social "environment" with her poetry, the discussion of which I will leave to a later section on her subject-matter or "themes".

Those authors who, like Hubbard, have written chronicles of the early telegraphs, have all noted in one way or another the intimacy or involving nature of that medium as compared to the newspaper or the letter. This greater involvement is not general - letter and newspaper too create involvement - but is of a particular sort, and concerns the immediacy of the telegraph, by which information or "News" seems to reach its destination instantaneously and "jolt" the recipient. A similar immediacy can be found in the Dickinson poetry, leading to the reader's involvement in the verse. Her technique for achieving such an effect includes the creation of her "Crises" - as I have already shown - and also her selective and, as Thackrey termed it, "shorthand system of poetic language". It is worth noting that several of Emily Dickinson's critics - from among her contemporaries as well as from recent authors - find her poetry "non-literary". Douglas Duncan, in his book on Emily Dickinson, writes that

Her poetry was spontaneously American in so far as it tended to be "non-literary" and therefore to reveal the habits of mind and even the colloquial usages of a distinctively American environment.⁸³

Higginson, to whom Emily Dickinson had turned for critical assistance, found her work "anti-literary" in a number of respects - her rhyme, her form, her grammatical structuring all seemed to him undisciplined. George F. Whicher reflects something of this attitude in his comment, "Her penchant for the subjunctive was a personal idiosyncrasy, from which she might have been saved, to the advantage of her poetry, had she been willing to submit her work to the discipline of type."⁸⁴ In retrospect, it would appear that poetry, and critics, had become "type-bound" and that Emily Dickinson, like Donne, preferred to defy this convention by publishing her poems in letters - a practice which

she enlarged upon especially in her later years. The fact that her "style" was found "non-literary" or "anti-typographic" suggests that the intentions - or better, the effect - of her poetry were at variance with those of most verse of the time.

Whicher, in his remark just quoted, objects to Emily Dickinson's strange use of "the subjunctive"; other critics have remarked upon the way she omits articles. These two aspects of her language, when examined, show clearly how she treated language in order to make it at once more compact, dense, and involving. The prose-sentence - or the sort of language spoken daily - stripped of its less-important freight such as articles, is everywhere in the Dickinson verse. A random example is:

Best Witchcraft is Geometry
To the magician's mind -
His ordinary acts are feats
To thinking of mankind.

(No. 1158, p. 810)

The ordinary reduction of language to a telegraphic message "at so much a word," in Hubbard's phrasing, is evident here. The omissions consist merely of a "the" before "Best" and "the" or "the way of" before "thinking". It is relatively simple for any reader to add or infer these omissions, as Time Magazine's style shows. The Dickinson use of "the subjunctive" presents a more interesting study, however. Consider the two following examples:

Step lofty, for this name be told
As far as Cannon dwell

Eclipses be predicted
And Science bows them in.

In cases such as these the subjunctive is the infinitive without a modal auxiliary. The effect is certainly "anti-typographic" as Whicher pointed out - though not so much so that printers failed to accommodate themselves to it - but for a legitimate purpose. To make a sensible

reading of these two fragments, one must supply some modal auxiliary as follows:

Step lofty, for this name [will, shall, can] be told
As far as Cannon [will, can] dwell

Eclipses [can, may] be predicted
And Science bows them in.

This technique, of course, introduces ambiguity or uncertainty into the reading of the verse. But it is precisely this ambiguity which forces an intellectual and sensory involvement in the poem: intellectual in that the reader supplies alternative meanings to the lines, sensory in that the reader must supply minor rhythmic alterations. Such involvement is certainly not "conscious" and applies more clearly to the better verse.

It is true that Emily Dickinson also used the subjunctive as such, for the sake of brevity and rhythm:

Could bounty but remain
Riches were good -

Too few the mornings be,
Too scant the nights.

The subjunctive here is the briefest verb-form she could find. At times she combined the two uses of this form, and obtained an elegance not often surpassed in poetry:

Elijah's journey to portray
Expire with him the skill

The sense of the verb is "let the skill expire with him" or alternatively "the skill will, or must, expire with him." The elegance is that of mathematics, or of much oriental verse. This refinement or condensation of the verb led Emily Dickinson at times to the complete omission of such non-active verbs as "to be":

Death's Waylaying not the sharpest
Of the thefts of Time -

The reader must often supply not only some modal auxiliary, but the

specific tense, or temporal qualification of the verb, in reading the Dickinson verse. She often implies, for example, the future or past tense by the simple present, a "technique" which has become prevalent in prose and has perhaps always been used in speech:

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication -
Me - of Me?

Here the lack of specific past or future is obvious; of possible readings, both "How can this be" and "How will (or shall) this be" give a future "tense" to the stanza. Much of Emily Dickinson's temporal ambiguity reads more naturally, because of its similarity to speech:

Until the Desert knows
That Water grows
His sands suffice

The expanded reading would be "His sands will - or will have to - suffice". At times, her vagueness concerning the verb in a phrase or sentence seems to have no reasonable solution, other than a rhythmic one. This situation arises from some examples of the present participle when we try to "solve" them:

Her invitation broad
To Whosoever famishing
To taste her mystic Bread -

The line appears to imply merely "Whosoever is famishing", and the only gain in her phrasing seems to be the avoidance of the weak verb "is". Other instances of Emily Dickinson's participial structuring show to what great advantage she was able to use such uncommon forms, however. A four-stanza poem, of about 1863, on publication will illustrate this:

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

(No. 709, p. 544)

The third and fourth lines stop the reader, make him consider, and

require some sort of interpretation or decision on his part before he may comfortably continue. I doubt that most readers who make this effort would actually supply a verbal alternative or "explanation", but certainly some intuited meaning - such as "Poverty - can be the only justification for..." - must occur to us before we can "get the sense of the stanza" and continue.

The examples I have considered of Emily Dickinson's language are only isolated instances of a technique that pervades her work. That this meticulous use of language was in fact a deliberate technique and not merely an idiosyncrasy is clearly shown in a poem written about 1868. Emily Dickinson portrayed the poet in a kind of "dialogue" with words:

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried -

(No. 1126, p. 790)

The continual search for techniques of condensation led her to take risks, with language and with sense, that a publishing poet might have avoided. Such exploration produced also a great deal of repetition, some of which involves variations on phrases, reminiscent of the troubadour tradition:

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -

(No. 937)

The Dust behind I strove to join
Unto the Disk before -

(No. 992)

She often took up a single word, experimented with it, and then abandoned it, as for example the word "solder" in two consecutive verses, dated about 1862:

You cannot solder an Abyss
With air.

(No. 546)

And then - be soldered down
Without disclosing what it be

(No. 547)

She appears never to have used the word again. Many words, images or phrases became a fixed part of her vocabulary on the other hand. The effect of her experimenting - to produce repetition or redundancy over a period of time - contrasts strongly with its purpose in any individual verse, where she used "Experiment", as she called it, to reduce and condense. Thomas H. Johnson, in the introduction to his edition of the poems, discusses the implications of the many final, semi-final and rough drafts of Emily Dickinson's work, from which some idea of her own editorial technique can be had. "Above all," Johnson writes, these drafts "show her filing her lines to gain that economy of expression which, when achieved, is the mark of her special genius."⁸⁵

There is another reason for the apparent redundancy or repetition in the Dickinson poetry, when viewed in bulk, and it is perhaps as important a reason as is her constant experimentation. As I have noted, Emily Dickinson "published" her work by letter; she often altered a single poem several times in order to send it by mail to different recipients, thereby creating a number of variations on a verse.⁸⁶

Many of the observations I have made concerning Emily Dickinson's language could be made, *mutatis mutandum*, about her punctuation. The same experimenting seems to have taken place, and such trials would appear, over a period of time, to have led to an increasing use of her "anti-typographic" system of dashes or hyphens. Almost any poem contains an example, but the later verse serves better to illustrate the qualities of her punctuation:

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly - but We - would rather
From Our Garret go
White - Unto the White Creator -
Than invest - Our Snow -

Thought belong to Him who gave it -
 Then - to Him Who bear
 It's Corporeal illustration - Sell
 The Royal Air -

In the Parcel - Be the Merchant
 Of the Heavenly Grace -
 But reduce no Human Spirit
 To Disgrace of Price -

(No. 709, p. 544)

It is obvious from the punctuation of the first line that typographic, or grammatic, design is not the only one involved in Emily Dickinson's punctuating technique. The hyphen after "Publication -" appears to indicate a pause, or at the least an emphasis on the word which it modifies. A similar value must be inferred from the hyphen following "Poverty" in the first stanza, and from that after "Then" in the third. The hyphen ending line two, on the other hand, seems to put a full stop to the phrasing, or in other words replaces a period. The hyphen at "Possibly - but..." in stanza two might replace a comma, or a semi-colon, while that following "We" in the same line stands, again, for no typographic mark.

The hyphens indicate, as nineteenth-century punctuation marks had ceased to do, the directions to the reader for some sort of oral reading of the verse. The pause or emphasis at "Publication" is followed by a single (spoken) line, "is the Auction Of the Mind of Man -", where the phrase stops. The third and fourth lines of the first stanza reproduce not only the same punctuational (oral) effect but also the same rhythm. The stanza, if read as a group of phrases, suggests very strongly a condensed and highly charged speech; much of Emily Dickinson's verse, even the less successful poetry, conveys this effect. Conversation, or the spoken word, seems to have been her primary interest where matters of communication were concerned. About 1877 she wrote

Could mortal lip divine
 The undeveloped Knight

Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with the weight.

(No. 1409, p. 978)

It was her aim, not only to charge the written language of poetry with as weighty a "freight", but to do so by re-asserting the close connections between speech and verse. The punctuation, as we have seen from a single example, assisted in this by forcing an oral rather than a completely silent, visual "scanning" of her verse. The reader must, in short, make a muscular as well as an intellectual effort to accommodate himself to her poetry.

The dash or hyphen suggests a hurried and informal writing - just the sort of writing one might expect in a hasty letter to a near friend. A poem, written about 1862, in which the poet seems to speak directly to her letter, lists some of the qualities of Emily Dickinson's "verse-notes":

Going to Him! Happy letter!
Tell Him -
Tell Him the page I did'nt write -
Tell Him - I only said the syntax -
And left the Verb and the Pronoun out -
Tell Him just how the fingers hurried -
Then - how they waded - slow - slow -
And then you wished you had eyes in your pages -
So you could see what moved them so -

(No. 494, p. 376)

I do not mean to suggest that the verse, or her letters, were actually written in this great haste, but rather that the poetry often gives such an impression. She has indeed "left the verb and the pronoun out," but certainly not through haste. The "informality" and the "impatience" of the verse help to strengthen those poetic effects which I have been discussing, and which Emily Dickinson apparently valued more highly than she did the effect of polished and sophisticated, or "literary", verse. The "haste" alone, in her verse, would be sufficient to impart some of the "crisis" quality discussed earlier. Even those poems where no

Crisis explicitly appears, the breathless and racing phrases impart urgency to otherwise very common subjects. The voicing, rather than a visual scanning, of the verse tends to involve the reader further in the Dickinson intimacy, and her punctuation necessitates this voicing. A hyphen can suspend the movement both of the eye and of the voice, to accentuate a word and at the same time create a dramatic pause, suggestive of "crisis". We have seen this technique already in the verse on publication; when it is combined with Emily Dickinson's "telegrammatic encoding" the effect can be extremely powerful:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

(No. 465, p. 358)

It struck me - every Day -
The Lightning was as new
As if the Cloud that instant slit
And let the Fire through -

It burned Me - in the Night -
It Blistered to My Dream -

(No. 362, p. 288)

Although her general tendency seems to have been away from any standard punctuation, many poems include both the hyphen and the more accepted marks:

I reason, Earth is short -
And Anguish - absolute -
And many hurt,
But, what of that?

I reason, we could die -
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?

I reason, that in Heaven -
Somehow, it will be even -
Some new Equation, given -
But, what of that?

(No. 301, p. 222)

The standard punctuation appears to be less successful, however, in suggesting a muscular or tactile quality, as well as an oral one, to

the verse. And Emily Dickinson was certainly interested in the sense of touch, as she was in the voice, as an aspect of her poetry.

In a late poem she wrote:

The Music in the Violin
Does not emerge alone
But Arm in Arm with Touch, yet Touch
Alone - is not a Tune -

(No. 1576, p. 1086)

Like the nature of the telegraph, the nature, or technique, of Emily Dickinson's poetry signals a turning-away from the heavily-visual accent of most nineteenth- and eighteenth-century poetry, science and general experience, toward a reaffirmation of sound and touch, two senses which had become neglected at least two centuries before Emily Dickinson began to write. That her techniques of language, punctuation and rhythm should reflect some alteration in perceptual emphasis is perhaps the most important point of this study. However, it must be noted also that her themes often show directly or indirectly a certain awareness of such a change. Those themes that concern the particular interpretation taken here deserve at least a brief scrutiny.

II. Emily Dickinson's Poetry: the Themes

When Emily Dickinson wrote

Upon the Ropes -- above our Head --
Continual -- with the News --

she was noting one characteristic -- the "continual" -- of the "iconography of the telegraph," as well as an aspect of her own poetry. This flow of perpetual news could not help but create a peculiar situation when injected into a society which had been used to sporadic news-reports, many of them concerning events long past by the time of reception. If we think of the communication of news -- by letter or newspaper -- as a sort of "crisis", not necessarily an objectionable one, then it must be obvious that the "continual" news of the telegraph created an effect of more or less continuous "crisis" or, in less sensational terminology, a somewhat heightened communications-awareness. Perhaps this heightened awareness and response creates a back-ground "noise level" into which more and more severe "crises" must be injected, in order to give the conscious impression of communication. We have, according to acoustical engineers, a similar situation today regarding background noise level; because of the heightened noise-level especially in large cities, a certain "deafness" results, which can be overcome only by louder and more piercing sounds. It is not the intention of this study to speculate on such questions as the origins of contemporary "crisis-psychology", except where these speculations concern the poetry of Emily Dickinson. It is interesting to note in passing that Scott Buchanan, in his essay cited earlier, makes an association between the origins of "corporation" and certain "family crises".⁸⁷

Emily Dickinson too seems to have explored, not only by her verse techniques but in her subject-matter or "themes", the notion of crisis as severe perceptual or neural experience or "shock". A word which she

used often in this connection was "pain", whose ambiguity is obvious when we reflect on some of its common meanings - "emotional" pain, "pain of parting", physical pain, etc. About 1862 she wrote on the theme of "great pain" as follows:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -

(No. 341, p. 272)

The suggestion is that "great pain" - which here is ambiguous - causes a stunning or numbing of "the Nerves" which "sit ceremonious". The sense of time, at least concerning the pain, or painful experience, is lost, so that "The stiff Heart" which has suffered this stunning pain "questions was it He" that actually experienced such pain, "And Yesterday, or Centuries before". The stunned or pained organism continues to function mechanically, but sensation is lost and a "stupor" or "Quartz contentment, like a stone" replaces the ordinary state of consciousness. The actual pain, or intense experience, is lost to the memory, and is "Remembered, if outlived" only by some sign or symbol of the experience, as "the Snow" and the "Freezing person".

Severe experience, or "pain", for Emily Dickinson was not always numbing or stupefying, however; in many poems it gives rise to a kind of rebirth or revelation which some critics have regarded as religious. Certainly, the theme of religious or spiritual revelation can be inferred from some of her poetry. But she wrote verses also in which the subject

is clearly a sensory experience of some kind. About 1865 she made a four-stanza verse which could be interpreted in either of these ways:

I heard, as if I had no Ear
Until a Vital Word
Came all the way from Life to me
And then I knew I heard.

I saw, as if my Eye were on
Another, till a Thing
And now I know 'twas Light, because
It fitted them, came in.

I dwelt, as if Myself were out,
My Body but within
Until a Might detected me
And set my kernel in.

And Spirit turned unto the Dust
"Old Friend, thou knowest me,"
And Time went out to tell the News
And met Eternity.

(No. 1039, p. 736)

The final stanza gives some sense of the intensity of these experiences, with its allusion to "News". But the main interest here seems to be in the visual, audible and tactile existence of the poet "before" and "after" some unnamed vital perception has taken place. We might speculate from the first two stanzas that the "thing perceived" was the act or medium of perception itself, since "a Vital Word" made her aware that she heard, and "a Thing" that she discovered was light made her aware of her own vision.

It would be safe, I believe, to state that most of Emily Dickinson's poems about perception and "pain" suggest a severe rather than a mild experience. She explored the effects on the sense of space and time of such experience:

Pain - expands the Time -
Ages coil within
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain -

(Stanza break)

Pain contracts - the Time -
 Occupied with Shot
 Gamnuts of Eternities
 Are as they were not -

(No. 967, p. 699)

The poem suggests generally that pain - the severe or profound experience - creates its own temporal "field" or reference. There is nothing particularly new in this theory, but it runs counter to the Newtonian mechanic which views time as invariant or absolute. Emily Dickinson's view of time as subject to experience must be regarded also as "anti-historic" in that she places many "Ages" or temporal events together simultaneously "within the minute circumference of a single brain." The severe "pain" re-organizes experience so that "Gamnuts of eternities are as they were not." Experience itself is a chance organization imposed upon the mind, according to a poem written about 1864:

Experience is the Angled Road
 Preferred against the Mind
 By - Paradox - the Mind itself -
 Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite - How Complicate
 The Discipline of Man -
 Compelling Him to Choose Himself
 His Preappointed Pain -

(No. 910, p. 668)

In a similar poem of the same period, she seems to suggest that

"experience" is a series of crises or "perilous steps":

I stepped from Plank to Plank
 A slow and cautious way
 The Stars about my Head I felt
 About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
 Would be my final inch -
 This gave me that precarious Gait
 Some call Experience.

(No. 875, p. 650)

But a life of "Crisis" tends, as I suggested earlier, to numb the nerves and senses except where further violent experience occurs. Emily

Dickinson seems to have understood this, for she wrote about it in more than one verse. About 1863 she made a poem beginning

I lived on Dread -
To Those who know
The Stimulus there is
In Danger - Other impetus
Is numb - and Vitalless -

(No. 770, p. 584)

The specific nature of Emily Dickinson's crises or bullets of experience is often ignored while she concentrates on the effect of such experience. But the effects themselves are not constant, so that one verse may show the numbing of the nerves, and another the revivifying of them, by crisis. A two-stanza verse written about 1862 comments on the numbing or annihilating of memory by severe experience, then suggests that such experience also sensitizes the "perceptions" to new experience:

Pain - has an element of Blank -
It cannot recollect
When it begun - or if there were
A time when it was not -

It has no Future - but itself -
It's Infinite contain
It's Past - enlightned to perceive
New Periods - of Pain.

(No. 650, p. 501)

Where the poet names the particular experience involved, there is a wide variety of type, from bereavement or death, to love, to some purely sensory or "revelatory" experience. The poems about some sensory experience or revelation are of particular interest to this study, and Emily Dickinson left many of these. About 1862 she wrote

I saw no way - The Heavens were stitched -
I felt the Columns close -
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres -
I touched the Universe -

(No. 378, p. 300)

The stanza gives a sense of major or general readjustment - "The Earth reversed her Hemispheres" - and the only sense called upon is that of touch; vision appears to be defective for the poet "saw no Way". This

theme, together with its peculiar sensory imagery, recurs in other verses, regardless of date. About 1864, for example, Emily Dickinson wrote:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -
As if my Brain had split -
I tried to match it - Seam by Seam -
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -
But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
Like Balls - upon a Floor.

(No. 937, p. 682)

As in the preceding poem, there seems to be a special attention to the sensory imagery; here however it is sound rather than touch which is evoked. The "Heavens...stitched" and the "Seams" of the brain supply curious and ambiguous conceits, the former describing the world or heavens as put-together, the second suggesting an attempt to put the "Brain" together. The effect, in this second verse, of the splitting or re-organization is to destroy "Sequence" - a curious image when we recall that Newtonian mechanics relied heavily on cause-effect as a sequential phenomenon. In an earlier poem Emily Dickinson had been more explicit about the connection between "Reason", the senses, and her "reorganizations of estimate" as she once termed them:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My Mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

(Stanza break)

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down -
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing - then -

(No. 280, p. 199)

This verse appears to use the "Funeral" and dying images in connection with the "death" of a certain state - of mind, of perception, or of thought. From the first stanza it seems that "Sense" - and particularly the sense of hearing - is attempting to establish itself in the "Brain". The primitive "beating" of "A Service, like a Drum" threatens to "numb" the mind. The second-last stanza reinforces this idea of sound, by the simile "As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear," which is reminiscent of the previously-examined verse in which "Sequence unravelled out of Sound". From the last stanza we might infer that the "Box" - the covering or controlling force of the "Mind", which gives way - is in fact "Reason", which when its "Plank" is broken allows or requires some re-evaluation of perception and of "knowing".

Emily Dickinson used the image of death not only in the physical or corporeal context but also as a correlative for the mind's or senses' reaction to the severest experiences. In a poem of uncertain date she made this use explicit:

I watched her face to see which way
 She took the awful news
 Whether she died before she heard
 Or in protracted bruise
 Remained a few slow years with us

(No. 1667, p. 1136)

Death - a peculiar, mechanical "death" - is associated in a few verses with the disruption of normal time or perception, in such a general way that the world itself seems to be involved. I have quoted one such verse already, beginning

A Clock stopped -
 Not the Mantel's -
 Geneva's farthest skill
 Can't put the puppet bowing -
 That just now dangled still -

(No. 287, p. 206)

Another such verse, again with the clock as central image, was written at a much later date and consists of four carefully-worked lines:

The Clock strikes one that just struck two -
Some schism in the Sun -
A Vagabond from Genesis
Has wrecked the Pendulum -

(No. 1569, p. 1081)

Emily Dickinson, in her sensory and "revelation" poems, usually gave the reader's imagination full play; one may interpret in a number of ways these "tele-cryptograms", and speculate on the force that might have stopped her "non-Genevan" clock, or "wrecked the pendulum". In a late poem, however, dated by Johnson as 1881, she left no doubt at all about the "lightning" by which she had been "struck":

The farthest Thunder that I heard
Was nearer than the Sky
And rumbles still, though torrid Noons
Have lain their missiles by -
The Lightning that preceded it
Struck no one but myself -
But I would not exchange the Bolt
For all the rest of Life -
Indebtedness to Oxygen
The Happy may repay,
But not the obligation
To Electricity -
It founds the Homes and decks the Days
And every clamor bright
Is but the gleam concomitant
Of that waylaying Light -
The Thought is quiet as a Flake -
A Crash without a Sound,
How Life's reverberation
It's Explanation found -

(No. 1581, p. 1089)

It would be superfluous to provide a paraphrase. But certain of the characteristics of this verse should be noted as recurrent in many of her other poems. The image of lightning striking appeared in a verse as early as 1862, when she wrote:

It struck me - every Day -
The Lightning was as new
As if the Cloud that instant slit
And let the Fire through -

(No. 362, p. 288)

In both of these poems we find the suggestion that the effect of this "Lightning" has lasted long after the poet is "struck". In the later, longer verse, she claims that it "Struck no one but myself", and much of her earlier "revelation" poetry carries hints of this purely personal, yet simultaneously quite public, experience. The final lines of the longer poem revert to sound-imagery rather than that of light to explain the effect of the "Lightning":

The Thought is quiet as a Flake -
A Crash without a Sound,

Earlier in the verse she puts sound- and visual-imagery together to suggest that this "Lightning" is the source of "every clamor bright".

As I noted earlier, Emily Dickinson occasionally wrote of "revelation" - in one form or another - as though it were a sensory or perceptual affair. In a fragment written about 1863, she made this quite clear:

Not "Revelation" - 'tis - that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes -

(No. 685, p. 530)

Her fascination with perception - and more broadly, with communication - becomes quite evident from an attentive reading of the poems. Donald E. Thackrey, in his study Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry, states that she "frequently uses terms of language and communication to describe something entirely different from communication in the ordinary sense of the term."⁸⁸ However, as Thackrey also notes, much of Emily Dickinson's imagery, drawn from a very broad experience, is related to communication in the contemporary sense of the word. Thackrey writes, "Even natural objects were described in terms implying human communication."⁸⁹ Her use of subjects such as birds, the bee - which one poem terms "Bucaneers of Buzz" - snow, wind, and the seasons in general, in association with communication is too large an area of study for this discussion. Some specific kinds of communication,

however, deserve examination.

I have already noted Emily Dickinson's technique of publication by correspondence. There is evidence in her verse to support the supposition that she favored the letter above all other "media". A poem dated about 1862 describes her reaction to "a Letter" when she receives it:

The way I read a Letter's - this -
'Tis first - I lock the Door -
And push it with my fingers - next -
For transport it be sure -

And then I go the furthest off
To counteract a knock -
Then draw my little Letter forth
And slowly pick the lock -

Then - glancing narrow, at the Wall -
And narrow at the floor...

(No. 636, p. 489)

Certainly the tone of this verse is facetious, yet it suggests the privacy, the intimacy and the high regard in which she held her correspondence. In a later poem (about 1866) she compared the letter and the telegram, making her preference clear:

Myself can read the Telegrams
A Letter chief to me
The Stock's advance and Retrograde
And what the Markets say

The Weather - how the Rains
In Counties have begun.
'Tis News as null as nothing,
But sweeter so - than none.

(No. 1089, p. 769)

Not long before her death - perhaps in 1885 - she wrote a couplet in praise of the Letter:

A Letter is a joy of Earth -
It is denied the Gods -

(No. 1639, p. 1123)

By the time she wrote these lines, she was including poems in many, if not in most, of her letters. But as early as 1862 she had plainly stated the connection between her poetry and the Letter:

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

(No. 441, p. 340)

This first of two stanzas makes a number of important associations - that of the "Letter" with her poetry, that of "News" with both letters and verse.

Emily Dickinson avoided publication, yet she "published" freely by the more intimate medium of correspondence. One of her less-common themes, the machine, suggests by her treatment of it a possible explanation for her "print-shyness". The machine reached its apex for Emily Dickinson with the clock, as several verses testify. She does write of other mechanical devices - the locomotive, for example - but it is the time-keeping machine which provides her with the most inclusive or "archetypal" and impressive images. We have already noted several of these in previous discussion. Relatively early in her active period - about 1861 - she had written:

A Clock stopped -
 Not the Mantel's -
 Geneva's farthest skill
 Cant put the puppet bowing -
 That just now dangled still -

An awe came on the Trinket!
 The Figures hunched, with pain -
 Then quivered out of Decimals -
 Into Degreeless Noon -

Although this "Clock" is left ambiguous, the suggestion is that it concerns something larger or "farther" than the machine itself. The sense of the two stanzas is that some "machine-world" or system has "dangled still". The lines concerning "Decimals" and "Degreeless Noon" are suggestive of Langevin's and Planck's observations about Newtonian science, which fractured or made decimals of all phenomena in order to measure and study them. The second stanza suggests the sudden end, by some "pain", of this belief in division and subdivision, or what Planck

termed "divide et impera". Almost all of Emily Dickinson's machine-images concern the stopping or "death" of the machine. Four lines written about 1862 compare this death-of-the-machine to church-bells:

When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins -
 The Positive - of Bells -
 When Cogs - stop - that's Circumference -
 The Ultimate - of Wheels.

(No. 636, p. 486)

These lines too contain some hint at the "awe" of the last verse examined. The wheels which stop, related vaguely to a religious service, achieve "Circumference" - a word which Emily Dickinson used occasionally to denote a state of expanded consciousness or revelation on the part of the poet.

Many allusions to the machine contain a certain patronizing tone; words such as "puppet" and "trinket" suggest this. In her poem about a train, Emily Dickinson wrote as though the machine were a pet or toy:

I like to see it lap the Miles -
 And lick the Valleys up -
 And stop to feed itself at Tanks --
 And then - prodigious step

 Around a Pile of Mountains -
 And supercilious peer
 In Shanties - by the Sides of Roads -

(No. 585, p. 447)

These lines, it must be recalled, describe what was the newest and most powerful - and fastest - form of physical transport. Their tone is somewhat "supercilious", to use the term by which she herself dismisses the railway. The final stanza of the four hints at the "iron-horse" cliché:

Then - prompter than a Star
 Stop - docile and omnipotent
 At it's own stable door -

In spite of such words as "omnipotent" and "prodigious", the poem

gives no sense of the awe with which many other nineteenth-century poets witnessed the appearance of the locomotive. But Emily Dickinson seems to have been much more impressed by the telegraph, in those very few verses where she mentions it more or less explicitly:

The Lightning playeth - all the while -
But when He singeth - then -
Ourselves are conscious He exist -
And we approach Him - stern -

With Insulators - and a Glove -
Whose short - sepulchral Bass
Alarms us - tho' His Yellow feet
May pass - and counterpass -

Upon the Ropes - above our Head -
Continual - with the News -
Nor We so much as check our speech -
Nor stop to cross Ourselves -

(No. 630, p. 485)

The use of the word "singeth" in the first stanza has various secondary implications. Emily Dickinson's friends - notably Helen Jackson - usually referred to her poetry and the work of writing as "singing". The form "singeth" instead of "sing" has a rhythmic use in the line, but hints also at the language of hymns, suggesting some vaguely religious or revelatory connotation. In the final stanza, this revelatory inference is clearer in the line "Nor stop to cross Ourselves", which can be interpreted "although this amazing News moves continually above our heads, we take no notice of it, we pay it no sign of respect." The second stanza suggests clearly the audible or "heard" rather than "seen" nature of the electric medium. It is the "short - sepulchral Bass" which alarms us, not the "Yellow feet".

The characteristics and effects of "media" - not only of the telegraph, but of the most basic ones such as light and sound - had from her earliest writings occupied Emily Dickinson's attention. I have suggested that the "revelation" of which she often wrote was at least partly a matter of perception. Further, I have tried to show

that her poetry suggests strongly a sense of some major upset in the apparatus or mode of perception - not only of her personal experience but of her society's as well. She sometimes characterized this crisis in perception and -consequently - in society, -by expressions such as "pain" or even "crisis" itself. The most severe "pain" or crisis leads in her poetry to "death", a death which is not always physical or corporeal dying. One of her most powerful conceits for the change in her world appears in a poem dated about 1864; she writes of the "death" and sensory "reorganization" as if she looked from "an Open Tomb":

The Admirations - and Contempts - of Time -
 Show justest - through an Open Tomb -
 The Dying - as it were a Night
 Reorganizes Estimate
 And what We saw not
 We distinguish clear -
 And mostly - see not
 What We saw before -

'Tis Compound Vision -
 Light - enabling Light -

(No. 906, p. 666)

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33. History of The Times. p. 455
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35. Albert, p. 5. See also Thompson, p. 250: "With constant practice and experience had come skill, so that by 1849 many telegraph operators were finding the 'extraordinary feat' of taking their messages by sound to be quicker and more efficient than the former method of translating the dispatch slowly from a strip of paper upon which it had been recorded. Under the old system a copyist wrote out the message as it was translated by the operator, after which it was handed to a second clerk whose duty it was to copy it on official company telegraph blanks. Most officers and superintendents, apprehensive of error, had vigorously opposed sound reading at its inception, and in some cases, had made the practice grounds for dismissal. But despite their early strenuous protests, the ease, efficiency, and economy of sound reading gradually became apparent, and by 1860 a buzzer instrument

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78. See, for example, Guido Cavalcanti, Canzone etc. I reproduce
one or two fragments here, of a single song by Guido (c. 1255-
1300):

Perch'i'no spero di tornar giammai,
ballatetta, in Toscana,
va tu, leggera e piana,
dritt'a la donna mia,

(No break)

che per sua cortesia
ti fara molto onore.

Tu porterai novelle di sospiri,
piene di doglia e di molta paura;
* * *

se tu mi vuo' servire,
mena l'anima teco,
* * *

Deh, ballatetta, alla tua amistate
quest'anima che trema raccomandando:
mensala teco nella sua pietate
a quella bella donna a cui ti mando.

(Because I do not hope to turn again,/ little song, to
Tuscany/ go lightly, softly,/ straight to my lady,/ who by her grace/ will do you honour.
You'll carry the news of sighs,/ of grief and strong fear;
* * *

if you want to help me,/ take my soul with you,
* * *

Oh song, to your sympathy/ I commend my trembling
soul:/ take it with you, in its pitiful state/ to
the lady for whom I make you.)

Verses or "Envoys" of the type beginning "Go, my song," or "Go little bill" are not uncommon in Middle English and in the Provençal lyrics.

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81. Douglas Duncan, Emily Dickinson. (Writers & Critics series, No. 046) Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1965. p. 40

82. Donald E. Thackrey, Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry. (Thesis, University of Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1954). repr. in Emily Dickinson, A Collection of Critical Essays. ed. Richard B. Sewall. Spectrum No. S-TC-28, 1963. p. 59

83. Duncan, p. 40

84. Whicher, p. 235

85. Johnson, Introduction to Poems, p. xxxiv

86. See Johnson, loc. cit.

87. See Scott Buchanan, p. 19. Buchanan seems to favour a theory of Sir Henry Maine who, as Buchanan writes, "in his half-forgotten classic, Ancient Law, seems to have made the best judgement, guess and myth though it may be, about the origin of the corporation in the Roman Republic. He judges that it arose on those frequent occasions of crisis when the father

of the family died, and the family...had to be reorganized in order to perpetuate the property and the civil functions of the members of the family."

88. Thackrey, p. 57

89. Thackrey, p. 57

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