

“THE POETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE”: THE SUBLIME AS AN AESTHETIC
FORCE IN THE LYRIC POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON AND ANNETTE VON

DROSTE-HÜLSHOFF

by

SUSANNE SILVIA NAVARRE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“The Poetics of Everyday Life”: The Sublime as an Aesthetic Force in the Lyric Poetry
of Emily Dickinson and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

By SUSANNE SILVIA NAVARRE

Dissertation Director:

Dr. William Galperin

Emily Dickinson’s and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s poetry of the everyday is transfigured by the sublime. The dissertation uses close reading to stress form, suggesting that poetic practice cannot fold into the group mind-set of much late twentieth-century feminist literary criticism which tended to analyze women’s writing in isolation as symptomatic of issues pertaining to gender. The dissertation places these writers firmly in their cultural and historical contexts, establishing parallels between Dickinson’s and Droste’s milieus. Both authors demonstrate aspects of late-Romanticism / Biedermeier-Romanticism, a reaction or taming of early-Romantic excesses. Thus the dissertation points the direction of women’s writing away from gendered formations exclusively, to broader concerns pertaining to culture and society which include but are not limited to gender contingencies.

I dedicate this work to my mother, Edna Kliem, who believed in me and simply let me read; to my grandmothers, Martha Bode and Margarethe Kliem, and to my father, Jürgen Kliem, and grandfather, Kurt Kliem, whose enthusiasm for nature and poetry inspired my own. My husband Roy deserves thanks for his love and support at all times, as do my sons, Luke and Dominic, who have so enriched my life.

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Chapter One:

“Practice, not Subjects”: The Sublime and “Women’s Poetry” in the Nineteenth Century.

This was her latest masterpiece of guile:
 She set up a great loom in the royal halls
 And she began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
 The yarns endless, and she would lead us on . . .
 Homer. The Odyssey

One of the pleasures of literature is surely the unexpected twists and turns, rhetorical or narrative, leading us on and into the text. Penelope’s textual act is precisely such a surprising move as she weaves her way out of marriage to the suitors. She too practices mētis (“cunning-intelligence”), the heroic value we famously associate with Odysseus. In its conflation of craftiness and craft, of practical and textual cunning--text deriving from the Latin verb texere, “to weave”--her act has an additional political edge. As Penelope plots her way out of other plots, such as paternally-arranged marriage, text and culture connect unequivocally: hers is a tactical exercise in reading the circumscribed moment and rewriting that scene, making for a powerful mode of resistance as she alters the narrative course from within her means of symbolic practice. Where we might expect acquiescence in the politically weak, instead we find its opposite.

It is this notion of practice that Michel de Certeau alerts us to and it makes for a meaningful reading of oppositional acts in literature. Although de Certeau posits a theory of agency for the common person in The Practice of Everyday Life, his approach is not complicit with recent critical practice. His is not a theory of subjectivity but a theory of practice in which female agency may otherwise be construed. Accordingly, his focus is on “modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles” (xi). He suggests that an active practice or poiēsis (an

“art or ‘way of making’”[xv]) should supplement “representation” and “behavior” (xii), even in quotidian contexts. For example, “the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this time and with these images” (xii).

Unlike the more tendentious subjectivity theories, which have as their central unit the individual human being, or, by extension, the group, such production is a non-anthropocentric force. It is politically tactical, though not because of an individual’s decisions and schemes, but due to the use readers and consumers of culture make of hegemonic structures by injecting their own symbolic practice into the scene. It is from this position of oppositionality that the “tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong . . . lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (de Certeau xvii). As Ian Buchanan points out, de Certeau’s method of looking for the underlying “cultural logic” of signifying practices is dialectical (98). In place of subjects or individuals, his study “concerns an operational logic whose models may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive” (xi). What this suggests is that forces beyond the individual’s agency are at work. There is no doubt that real human subjects effect rhetorical twists and turns. However, the act itself is “immemorial” (xix), belonging to culture in general and not to a deliberate act of the individual human being’s will.

Forces operating beyond the subject is a notion that dates back, at the very least, to the increasing secularism and nascent Darwinism of the nineteenth century and to Nietzsche’s revolutionary writings. Nietzsche’s emphasis on forces, not subjects in The

Will to Power (1883-1888) marks a radical theoretical shift as he questions the logic that distinguishes our western intellectual heritage: ¹

‘Subject,’ ‘object,’ ‘attribute’--these distinctions are fabricated and are now imposed as a schematism upon all apparent facts. The fundamental false observation is that I believe it is I who do something, suffer something, ‘have’ something, ‘have’ a quality. . . . Only because we have introduced subjects, ‘doers,’ into things does it appear that all events are the consequences of compulsion exerted upon subjects--exerted by whom? Again by a ‘doer.’ (Nietzsche 294, 297)

Nietzsche is critical of “our inability to interpret events otherwise than events caused by intentions” (295), otherwise than grandly egocentric world views, and he is wary of bringing it all back to the single originating source (self, God, the other). Instead of thinking in opposites and binaries, Nietzsche suggests motion and an infinite capacity for creative activity:

Will to truth is a making firm, a making true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. ‘Truth’ is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered--but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end--introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining--not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the ‘will to power.’ (298)

As Elizabeth Grosz notes, Nietzsche’s theory of forces elicits a reassessment of the victim mentality: placing blame for one’s (object) position entirely on an external human subject exerting his dominance suddenly begins to sound suspect:

Rethinking the concept of subject and the subject/object relation in terms of force means profound transformations in all related concepts--of objects, of the social, of action and agency. It is no longer a subject that takes before it an object on which to enact its desire or will; rather, forces act through subjects, objects, material and social worlds without distinction We have a theoretical choice. Either we can subscribe to a theory of the subject which strives to have its identity affirmed through relations . . . of desire . . . or recognition Alternatively, we can subscribe to a theory of the impersonal . . . a politics of acts, not identities

. . . in which inhuman forces, forces that are both living and nonliving, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the level of the human are acknowledged and allowed to displace the centrality of both consciousness and the unconscious. (Grosz Time 189-90)

Although poetic craft is not addressed, I would venture to say that processus in infinitum, by definition, *is* the work of poetry. Inherited vocabularies are adopted and adapted in unfixed and unpredictable sets of possibilities and potentialities. As Albert Gelpi has observed of Emily Dickinson, “a good indication of her formalism is her insatiable and unabating interest in the wiles of words . . .” (147). And, as Dickinson was the first to note, poetic form is possibility (“I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose -” P. 657), contingent upon endless variables that have little to do with a fixed “subject” or self prescribing and authoring, and even less with our latter-day critical determinings. Rather, one would imagine that the creative process rests in the manuscript culture of arranging and rearranging, potentially ad infinitum, words into lines of sound, a perspective to which Virginia Jackson, for instance, has given voice in her historically mindful observance of Dickinson’s manuscript culture with all of its attendant nineteenth-century idiosyncrasies.

Poetry, by its very nature, is crafted by users of language who make rhetorical turns that fit the constraints of form. In the process, the poet (the “user” or “consumer” in de Certeau’s words [xiii]) becomes a reader of hegemonic symbolic structures. For example, in nineteenth-century poetry of the sublime written by women, the discourse of eighteenth-century aesthetics is read and undergoes a poiēsis in the act of crafting a poem. In addition, any oppositional practices in poetry involve the active participation of the reader, who is simultaneously being challenged and motivated by the poem’s rhetorical moves, as an act which de Certeau refers to as the “manipulations . . . related to

the ways of changing (seducing, persuading, making use of) the will of another (the audience)” (xx). This is not to say that such a theory of poetry is invested in form per se. As Paul de Man points out, to privilege form over content (or the inverse) is always reductive since the very concept of form and meaning is founded on a seductive inside-outside, “box” metaphor of literature (4-5) that artificially fixes the actual ambiguity and insubstantiality of rhetorical language. De Certeau’s method is not based on such a binarism and therefore escapes that model’s likelihood “to enter into the easy play of chiasmic reversals” (de Man 5). Practice rather embraces a conflation of the social and formal, represented by “users” of culture and the rhetorical respectively. The simultaneity of the act defies simplistic inside-outside polarities. It is my aim to test this theory of “practice, not subjects” on the nineteenth-century poetry of Emily Dickinson and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff in the belief that, by effecting the possible through rhetorical acts which are more encompassing than the voluntaristic notions of individualism or collective agency, the value of women’s poetry, far from being reduced to gender-neutral production that is otherwise pre- rather than proto-feminist, may be appreciated in its irreducible particularity.

That feminist theory was for so long during the latter decades of the twentieth century invested in the female subject is understandable, given the historical oppression of women and the long canonical neglect of much women’s writing. For ostensibly political (revolutionary) reasons, the first generation of feminist literary critics thought of subjectivity as a collective category. Thus the groundbreaking feminist literary criticism produced in the seventies took the historical female subject as its discourse and women were identified as a “subculture”, a group of mutually supportive writers (Showalter 15).

Experientially and thematically focused readers of texts by women, Ellen Moers, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Elaine Showalter, as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar all argue to varying degrees that women writers exist on an “imaginative continuum” produced by the social realities of life under patriarchal stricture (Showalter 11). As crucial as their work was to making women’s writing visible, this wave of feminist literary criticism tended to conflate de Certeau’s notions of “representation” and “behavior,” leaving too little to the vagaries of practice. Patriarchal contexts, the dominant order of representation in Western culture, are countered on their argument with behavioral expressions of rage, disease and confinement in ways that are unanimous and trans-historical. Metaphors of limitation, seen to be remarkably common and continuous, are expressed in images of walking and transgressing boundaries, and expressions of anger or barely-repressed revolt, for which the madwoman in Jane Eyre has become an emblem, are deemed typical of women’s writing in the nineteenth century. Thus, at the extreme end of these behavioral readings, Ellen Moers’s early text calls Virginia Woolf “the most brilliant of all critics of women’s literature, and the most sensitive to its quality of womanly rage” (14).

Literary texts are thus broadly seen to reflect the experience of the socially and homogenously defined gender category “woman,” whose literature in turn is invoked as a political tool. Moers writes that the “novel and the poem were women’s only instruments of social action in the early nineteenth century: literature was their pulpit, tribune, academy, commission, and parliament all in one” (20). Similarly, Spacks’ search for “the themes that have absorbed female minds during the past three centuries as recorded in literature written in English” (6) is less aesthetic than it is social, and her interesting thesis that “women dominate their own experience by imagining it, giving it form,

writing about it” is not always supported by close readings of the potent forms she identifies as peculiar to such literature (322). This expansive yet exclusive approach to female writers continues in Showalter’s tellingly titled A Literature of their Own. Showalter writes that, in addition to biological and cultural bonds that make for common experience, “women novelists’ awareness of each other and of their female audience showed a kind of covert solidarity that sometimes amounted to a genteel conspiracy” (15, 6) and notes that “[as] the works of dozens of women writers have been rescued . . . the lost continent of female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature” (10).

Although it was strategically critical for feminist practice to recover neglected female texts, Showalter’s “Atlantis” metaphor reinforced the assimilative tendencies of a “politics of the subject” approach to women’s literature because it related gender unproblematically to a universal and continuous monological narrative. This assimilation operated on multiple levels, the first being an anachronistic critic-driven absorption of *all* women’s writing, disregarding, as many critics have noted, not only biographical and cultural differences, but also the specificity of genre. All the survey studies listed above focus on the novel as the ideal medium for social expression, possibly in consequence of what Stuart Curran has identified as a generic affinity between social or Marxist criticism and the realist novel (222). Toril Moi, for her part, has been critical as well of the “realist” approach which “believes that a text should reflect the writer’s experience” (4). Moi’s objection is that Showalter seems skeptical of aesthetic innovations such as Virginia Woolf’s modernism, and uncovers in that brand of feminist criticism a bias for forms which reflect social conditions directly. As a result, “there is detectable within

[Showalter's] literary criticism a strong, unquestioned belief in the values . . . of traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal individualist kind" (6). Gilbert and Gubar went even further, applying criteria of the realist novel to reading poetry. They wrote that "the one plot that seems to be concealed in most of the nineteenth-century literature by women . . . is in some sense a story of the woman writer's quest for self-definition" (76). Like their readings of women novelists, Dickinson's poetry is discussed by them in terms of a collective project, an overall purpose of self-expression: she finds her own story through her writing. Her poetry is read as a "plot," a poetic version of the gothic novel in which women represent their ideological constraints so that "just as Catherine is trying to find her own story in the fictionalized corridors of Northanger Abbey, Dickinson was trying to find metaphoric equivalents of her life in the female gothic she covertly read in her 'father's house' and overtly dramatized in her own verse" (585). However, the fragmented form of Dickinson's poetry--signaled at the most visual level by frequent breaks in the text--and the difficulty and ambiguity of her imagery often undermine such visions of wholeness and renders novelistic terminology particularly unsuitable to her artistic practice.

A further side-effect of politicizing the female subject was the moral valuation of women as naturally more commendable than men, an assessment Moers clearly had in mind when she wrote of the "heroic age" of women. Adriana Craciun rightly calls this a dangerous strategy "because it . . . pursues an ideal of the autonomous female deep subject outside masculine power and violence, an ideal that is itself power's most productive effect" (47). Judgments of the female subject as benevolent are not really subversive, she argues, because they tend to replicate precisely the romanticized

ideologies--rigid gender distinctions for instance--that such evaluations are committed to resisting in the first place (47). Approaches that focus on the female subject for their reading methods tend to be equally evaluative and risk being unproductive as a result. The more dialectical non-anthropocentric approach de Certeau has in mind--involving practices contestatory by virtue of being rooted in forces entirely separate from the evaluations of subjects by subjects--is helpful in avoiding such ineffectual tendencies.

As most of us know, the most trenchant intervention on the part of feminist identity theory has been to challenge the Freudian and Lacanian phallogocentric paradigms which associate women with a position of lack. In their early work, both Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva assert a difference between the sexes based on the female, maternal body which signifies duality and fluid identity rather than androcentric singularity. With a nod to her French feminist counterparts, Margaret Homans's tellingly titled Women Writers and Poetic Identity examined not so much the human story behind the troubled text (as Moers and others had done), but diagnosed the identity crisis debilitating the female writer. Where her compatriots had focused on the collective tradition of women's writing, Homans analyzed the anxieties of self the woman poet faced when competing in a genre so discursively masculine. She set out to address the effect of identity politics, of writing *as* a woman poet in the masculine context of Romantic poetry, noting that "the Romantic tradition makes it difficult for any writer to separate sexual identity from writing" (3) and that the exclusive practices of literary heritage and experience are formative in the development of the female poet's career. She writes:

To be for so long the other and the object made it difficult for nineteenth-century women to have their own subjectivity. To become a poet, given these conditions, required nothing less than battling a valued and loved literary tradition to forge a self out of the materials of otherness. It is not

surprising that so few women succeeded at this effort, very few even conceived of the possibility of trying. (Homans 12)

Informing this discussion of literary identity politics was the subjective and familial model of psychoanalysis. The thinking was that, since femininity, historically and culturally, is associated with nature--the subject matter driving masculine experiences of a generative self in Romantic ideologies--women cannot relate to Nature as a literary signifier of feminine otherness with quite the same ease as can their male counterparts. Homans's analogy, the relationship of daughter-poet to Mother Nature, takes on all the trappings of Freud's family romance:

If the figure of the powerful poet of the past is the father . . . then the mother is surely the Mother Nature represented as the object of that poet's love. Freud tells us that it is the father-son conflict that provokes growth and creativity in the son. His view of the mother-daughter relation is somewhat different, but for the women poets this is surely the major formative conflict. The women poets must cast off their image of themselves as objects, as the other, in the manner of daughters refusing to become what their mothers have been. (14)

The use of psychoanalysis as political analysis is something that has pervaded feminist thought, especially in its second wave. Literary critics like Homans responded in particular to powerful prescriptive narratives such as Freud's oedipal complex. However, superimposing a familial analogy as mired in binarisms and gendered terms as Freudian psychoanalysis has been situates women's poetry firmly in the subjective, experiential and, I would argue, essentialist realm, and into an economy, moreover, of authority and supplication, without questioning how form and language might themselves be invested in the possibilities of intervention and authority by women. Although I am not denying that the "self-conscious search for poetic identity" as it was "constantly negotiated within the poetry and poetics of English Romantics" (Ross 3) is not in itself a valid historical

topic, my question is whether the politics of identity is the best model for reading women's poetry when that approach only succeeds in reproducing the very conditions that such a critique is leveled against, namely the foreclosure of possibility and the elimination of any difference apart from opposition in a strictly binary sense.

In fact, such a vast amount of women's poetry was published in the period from 1780 to 1835--over 800 English and American women poets are listed in James Jackson's Annals of English Verse--that one is almost compelled to change one's reading of foreclosure and victimization to one of production and practice along with their various contingencies. Seeing androcentric aesthetics as merely one discourse among many others, and as part of a larger dialogue, widens the playing field. According to Stephen Behrendt, for example, both women *and* men were defining Romanticism together in ways that the artificial demarcation into first and second-generation male poets cannot begin to accommodate:

Romantic writing, whether poetry specifically or written discourse generally, emerged from and participated in a *dialogue* in print. . . . Not only in the works of female and male poets but also in the public reception of those works, the period covering roughly the first twelve to fifteen years of the nineteenth century reveals a surprising continuity in the nature, substance, and direction of British poetic production. (41)

It is this widening of influence that Marlon Ross and Nancy Armstrong also have in mind when they argue that the domestic discourse of women's writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was part of a larger network of influence. Women were writing novels, for instance, and dictating a new order of social relations based on an "emotional network of relationships" (Armstrong 4). Ross argues, for example, that Felicia Hemans' poetry of affect actually expands our understanding of the period in its

equal emphasis (albeit one ostensibly resisted by male poets) on “domestic affections” (Ross 308).

Ross is thus surely right when he widens the terms of the discussion, situating both male and female writers in a suddenly expanded force field of Romantic ideology. However, there is a paradox attending such overtly ideological readings of women’s poetry at the expense of their rhetorical practices: if the subject is not the individual agent but the subject of ideology itself --an “individual manifestation of historical processes” rather than an “individual psyche” (10)--then it becomes difficult to avoid reflective readings that do not “remain caught in the ideology that is being contested, whatever its overt theoretical or political assertions” (Miller 17). The unique and individual aspect of literary language, “the excess of language . . . over transparent meaning,” then risks becoming part of the hegemony identified by the critic as historical, rather than working oppositionally--an effect J. Hillis Miller reserves exclusively for deconstructive or rhetorical reading practices (17, 18). When Ross for example personifies ideology as an overpowering agent he commits himself to the agency of ideology which, as he describes it, “whispers to Wordsworth that he must be masculine in various subtle ways that take the form of assumption [and] screams to Hemans that if she is to write poetry and succeed she must *not* be masculine; she must find ways to be feminine while engaging in an activity that is marked by ideology as masculine” (11). Under Ross’ pen, it is the period ideology that produces identity crises for its writers and, not surprisingly, the poetry reflects these contingent issues unequivocally. Thus Hemans’ oeuvre, Ross argues, consists of a reworking of the conflict between domesticity and public fame precisely because of the ideological circumstances of her life as a woman

(289). Regardless of Ross' attempts to widen the sphere of influence he is still working in the realm of subjectivity, albeit a historically and ideologically situated one.

After the group-based feminist theories of the seventies, subjectivity-as-agency began to take center stage. Feminist literary criticism remained invested in recuperating female agency for political purposes, but the very definition of the central term "woman" was challenged by the deconstructive reading practices of postmodernism. Some critics like Patricia Waugh and Kate Soper articulated the fear that postmodern theories of the fragmented subject signaled a loss of material-cultural power so painfully and recently gained. For women, historical recovery trumps impersonal postmodernist conceptions of subjectivity: "If women have traditionally been positioned in terms of 'otherness,' then the desire to become subjects (which dominates the first phase of post-1960s feminism) is likely to be stronger than the desire to deconstruct, decenter, or fragment subjectivity" (Waugh 360). Many other critics have embraced the agency heralded by the focus on a politics of identity, however tenuously formed and culturally performed it may be. Jacqueline Rose, for example, finds psychoanalysis a useful narrative for understanding the tenuous formation of subjectivity since it is "one of the few places in our culture where it is recognized . . . that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all" (354). Where earlier critics had sought solidarity and sisterhood, constructivist theories that view the subject as discursively produced through our entry into the symbolic realm of language (Lacan) or our ideological interpellations (Althusser) unsettle this easy identification with the group. Identity politics assumes that our subject positions are not a natural given, or prior to culture, but that to speak "as a woman" necessarily rehearses a cultural position rather than an essential one.

In fact, Judith Butler argues against any essential gender categories outside cultural discourse, rendering both the “unity” of first-phase feminism and the fundamentalism of identity politics in the second phase illusory and delimiting for the “cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up” (371). She points to the benefits for feminist practice of moving beyond the fixed subject:

The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very ‘subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate. . . . If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of policies would surely emerge from the ruins of the old (Butler 372).

Butler sees even the binary self-other epistemology as a “discursive tradition” rather than an essential order (368). Since there is no pure identity prior to culture, she argues, we all perform our identities and this performance can itself be a form of resistance: “The critical task is . . . to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. . . . The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat . . .” (371).

Performance is possibility, according to Butler, whereas identity politics can be reactive and repetitive in their particular oppositional gestures. However, it is not clear in the end that performance offers any possibilities of incisive change. Performance is, after all, always a rehearsal, intended for an audience and therefore dependent on an “other” to which it is performing. In fact, it is hard to imagine how performance escapes identity

politics when it so deliberately plays with them. And, inasmuch as performance is a form of agency, that term is still conceived as singular: all women, presumably, are involved in acts of gender performance regardless of how subversive or oppositional they hold themselves to be.

In this challenge to identity politics I am hardly alone. The recently published “Companion to Emily Dickinson” juxtaposes literary-historical research--Virginia Jackson’s authentic reading of Dickinson’s lyric form, for instance--with equally historical material histories of the everyday and the domestic, replacing feminist essays which previously had sought to read texts as exemplary of “female consciousness.” Many feminist critics have heeded the call to “engage in criticism and self-criticism, to scrutinize, question, and, if necessary, discard old ideas” (Felski *Literature* 5). Along these lines, Susan Lanser reviews varying feminist approaches to the emblematic feminist work “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a text by now “canonized” and frequently anthologized, confessing that “although--or because--we have read ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ over and over, we may have stopped short, and our readings . . . may have reduced the text’s complexity to what we need most: our own image reflected back to us” (420). Lanser is interested in tying aesthetics and political critique in more nuanced ways, suggestively noting that “literary works both reflect and constitute structures of gender and power” (417).

It is upon such critiques of binary thinking in feminist theory that I wish to build, arguing that it is Dickinson’s and Droste’s poetical practices, rather than the subjective ones, which are most productive of the possibility that politically-based criticism inclines, as the former enjoys a level of independence from both individual agency and the

demands of audience. As Susan Wolfson's astute reading of the interinvolved discourses of ideology and poetry, challenging the "dichotomizing of form and matter" (19), registers, performativity need not be aligned with any particular human agency: her "concern is with [the way] social and political critiques deem any interest in the local plays of poetic form irrelevant or ideologically tainted as an old New Critical fetish--a judgment often accompanied by limited, even reductive, accounts of how poetic texts *perform*" (2 my emphasis). Instead of the theatrical human performative act of identity politics, which Butler and others would have women engage in, she shows how poetic form itself can be performative of ideological contexts. Thus, against the always tendentious "critic's agency" she pits "poetic agency" (3). Similarly, E. Warwick Slinn probes "the extent to which poetry proffers a meaning unique to its own process, a meaning and cultural signification which is not merely reflective or repetitive of established hegemonic meaning" (60).

To be sure, readings which focus purely on the internal workings of poetry do risk swinging the pendulum in the opposite direction, wishing for more than the poem actually effects in cultural space. But a theory of poetry-as-practice can avoid discussing subjects, linguistics, or culture in isolation, recognizing instead a logic of how the act of producing a reading of, and from within, an established cultural scene can effect change. As long as feminist theory is tied to subjectivity theories it remains caught in a servile relationship between self and other, one governed by contestatory fictions such as the oppression of the female subject by the male subject. In contrast, poetic language is not centered around the individual and may therefore exceed it in ways that prove by turns to be trenchant subversions of cultural prescriptions.

The sublime in women's poetry is an example of such a poetic practice best read against the tendencies of anthropocentric identity politics. In fact, the sublime is already conceived as a non-human *force* in its principal texts, Longinus' On the Sublime, Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and in Kant's Critique of Judgment. One can also trace this element of forces not subjects, which Longinus establishes and the eighteenth-century theorists follow through, in the rhetoric of being "transported" to a different state. Thus Longinus writes that "sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery" (100), a force capable "almost of outstripping the speaker himself" (129). Similarly, for Burke the defining moment of the sublime is passivity before the sublime or terrifying entity, and the grammatical turns of his definition emphasize how the human mind is worked on and overwhelmed by superhuman forces:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror . . . Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (53)

The sublime may thus be understood as a force which supplants intentionality with the passivity of inadvertently discovering and transfiguring the real through what are still metaphoric processes. Weiskel deliberately invokes Longinus when he writes that the sublime was "a stunning metaphor" and that one "cannot conceive of a literal sublime. Already in Longinus, *hypsos*, or height, is metaphor . . . we are uplifted as if instinctively, and our proud flight exalts our soul *as though we had created* what we merely heard" (4). There is, in other words, no recourse to the sublime, as the famously non-descriptive

“sense sublime” in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” reminds us, except through language. The sublime is a figurative mode.

This idea of the sublime as a linguistic or metaphoric force resounds in the reflections of modern poets on their craft. It is often strangely resonant, albeit in milder format, of Longinus’ sublime in which “the poet will be ‘daemonized’, or possessed by a power which seems to be merely mediated by the text or the scene he reads” (Weiskel 32). John Hollander, for instance, underscores the tenuousness of agency in the act of writing when he observes that poetry “can be what emerges through a complex structure of channels and falls and pools carefully contrived and yet yielding always to discoveries occasioned by the act of construction” (10). Similarly, Alicia Ostriker finds the discovery of metaphor an unpremeditated and joyful event:

The metaphor is given, comes, like an act of grace, into my consciousness. It enters with a leap and a bound. Though I may have been sweating for it . . . the search is irrelevant--it may appear without a search; and . . . any amount of search may fail to produce it. Two objects now are present; I joyously recognize their illuminating affinity, as something which really exists already in the world and was attending discovery. (159-60)

Both poets employ passive constructs such as “discoveries occasioned” and “attending discovery” to describe the labors and rewards of the task which, it appears, are not brought about entirely through personal volition and deliberation. The notion of creative process as practice, and meaning as determined in the act of the craft, overlaps with the rhetoric of the sublime which too describes human subjects acted upon in a rhetorical moment.

Although Burke emphasizes the passive subject, his Enquiry is nevertheless rooted in human affect. Kant, on the other hand, wants to establish a general standard, a criteria of judgment that confirms humanity, rather than merely the individual human

emotions Burke writes about. While resonant with the affected subject, Kant's definition therefore includes references to a detached judgment as the hallmark of the sublime:

For although we found our own limitation when we considered the immensity of nature and the inadequacy of our ability to adopt a standard proportionate to estimating aesthetically the magnitude of nature's *domain*, yet we also found, in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard that has this infinity itself under it as a unit . . . In the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us. This keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded, even though a human being would have to succumb to that dominance [of nature]. (121)

When Burke emphasizes the sublime effects on the "human being" as if they really exists (in Frances Ferguson's words, he "treats mental images . . . as if they were objects themselves" [1]), Kant stresses what is uneigentlich ("not actual or essential") about the sublime, and this extends to making it an effect *of* "humanity" not an effect on the "human being."²

Differentiating oneself personally from the overwhelming powers of the sublime in nature means going beyond the empirical to the "supersensible" faculty of mind and judgment which connects one to a general category of thinkers rather than individual feelers. The subjective element, so prominent in Burke's empirical account of the sublime, is complicated in Kant's formalist rendition. Where the former is a relativist since the "individual subject relates to objects by turning itself into measuring stick--Galbeit one that . . . alters its self-estimation often enough to necessitate continual revisions of what counts as less or more powerful than it is" (8), Kant believes in a priori standards of judgment that do not change with each individual. Kant has often been misunderstood as an avatar of solipsistic engagement, a supreme proponent therefore of

the Romantic ideology. However, as Ferguson points out, Kant introduces a “disinterestedness of aesthetic experience” (64) that is in fact dislodged from pleasure and from subjects (with their senses and desires) and suggests rather a more general, a priori and cerebral faculty. A disinterested force, Kant’s sublime overcomes the individual, nature and even the self; the individual subject is not the cause of the sublime. Nothing that can be measured by our senses is sublime, Kant deduces, because scale is always relative (Critique 94). Arguing for a sensus communis, the sublime under Kant’s pen has representative value and is not to be confused with individual subjects embroiled in their own senses, drives and responses. Nor is the sublime to be located in any physical natural object. Rather, the power of the sublime resides in its ability to bring into being forces that are *like* the forces in nature, volcanoes, oceans and so forth, but that now are at our human disposal. Although Nietzsche was critical of Kant, on this point the thinkers both point in the direction of possibility, of forces that drive us in ways that are not tied to any individual subject’s senses, ideas, or dogmas.

Perhaps for this reason, the Kantian sublime has often been read as a theoretical exemplar of freedom and opposition to reified positions, so that even Francois Lyotard thinks of the sublime as “the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms” (81). It is a hedge against totalitarianism, calling for a “war on totality . . . [for] witnesses to the unrepresentable” (82). That poetics and power coexist in the sublime is a notion not lost on feminist critics who want to recuperate its “empowerment, transport, and the self’s strong sense of authority” for women’s writing (Yaeger 192). But such a notion of kinetic power, rhetorically speaking, must lead us to ask two questions: whether the sublime as a source of authority, but in a peculiarly

receptive or quietistic form, was available for women writing poetry in the mid-nineteenth century and, if not, how it was that women were able to write the sublime at all.

Couched in exclusively masculine terms of identification by Burke and Kant in the eighteenth century, the sublime appears to be inimical to women who were, after all, identified with the subordinated and more gender-appropriate “beautiful”. In Burke’s schema, the sublime is associated with an elevated mind, power, individuality and depth, while the beautiful is limited to the body, to “qualities of the mind” consisting of “softer virtues” that are social and connective (100). Most debilitating of all, the beautiful is tied to bodily “surface” (105) instead of depth. Since metaphors are cultural, Burke’s analogy is telling. It effects a discourse that occludes women from the ontological and practical sphere of the sublime. While the gendered argument is explicit in Burke, it is less so in Kant’s Critique, although Barbara Freeman argues that this is merely a repression of what is otherwise made more explicit in Kant’s precritical Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and the Beautiful. There he writes that “the fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is beautiful understanding, whereas ours should be a deep understanding, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime. . . . Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense” (78, 9). Michelle le Doeff argues that such gender divisions are typical of a historical moment, rather than a universal phenomenon. While “Plato had not felt the need to theorize about the sexual distinction of education in his day . . . it seems that references to women’s incapacity for theory begin to proliferate from the eighteenth century onwards. The whole period establishes and reestablishes divisions and distinctions . . . And a sexual division of faculties, aptitudes, and

intellectual destinies was connected with these distinctions” (184). Little wonder, then, that critics like Anne Mellor and Barbara Freeman believe the mode in its original masculine mode to have been discursively closed to women.

Freeman sees the eighteenth century theories of the sublime as allegories for deeply entrenched cultural gender biases. Her critique of the Kantian sublime rides on establishing an analogous relationship between the imagination and the feminine, and she does this by drawing on the cultural stock constructions of female sexuality propagated by the eighteenth-century French writer, Marquis de Sade, and Freud. To the former she attributes “the notion of women as sexually passive vehicle who awaits a violent penetration” and to the latter the castration complex in which woman’s lack is central to constructing a male-centered theory of the unconscious. Both line up with Kant’s representation of the imagination as passively awaiting reason and being aware of its own inadequacy in the face of it (73). Her antithetical reading of Kant thus rests on its internal misogynistic structure: if the imagination becomes an “agent of its self-mutilation,” since the suppression of the imagination is a necessary condition for the sublime feeling of reason’s supremacy over the forces of nature, then this parallels precisely the eighteenth-century woman’s experience of ‘self-victimization’: “If . . . the imagination is in the position of and behaves in ways traditionally required of women, then Kant’s sublime tells the story of internalized oppression, one of the principal strategies through which patriarchy reproduces itself” (75).

Viewing the sublime through a humanistic, overly subjective lens rids it of its essential rhetorical and contestatory power. Focusing on identity and the body, Mellor denounces Kant’s “detachment . . . from the body, from the emotions, from physical

nature--all realms traditionally associated with the feminine” (88), and Freeman insists on a feminine “imagination” which is, of course, only historically and culturally (discursively) that. A theory of substitution, such a reading depends on the other for its very formulation of what the “real” (feminine) sublime should be, and the other is appropriated in an ironic inversion of sexism.

Kristeva has been most outspoken of all the French feminists on the dangers of any totalitarian readings of the other based on sexual difference and singular notions of gender identity, writing that she is interested in the ‘analysis of the work of language . . . a *verbal practice* whose economy is complex, critical and contradictory (*poetic language* offers the most striking example of such a *practice*)’ (115; my emphasis). A poetics of practice offers difference and multiplicity based not on terms of identity but on the creativity of its users and the unique scene of each individual poem. Thus practice is always engaged in an act of becoming. Its rhetorical turns are unpredictable, both for the poet and for the reader engaged in following where the work of the poem leads. Reading women’s poetry of the sublime as literally opposite to the masculine sublime is to risk new hegemonic constructs and to overlook the oppositional possibilities of practice that reforms from within the crafted production and the creative moment of the sublime.

As we can begin to see, an emphasis on making, doing and action by prolific “consumers”--or, in our application, by women and women writers who enter into discourse with the dominant order of their society--rather than on comprehensive hegemonic structures designed to thwart and control consumers--is a useful paradigm for the rethinking of feminist literary theory (de Certeau xii). If women were prolifically practicing their writerly craft in the nineteenth century, and doing so moreover under the

cultural sign of that most revolutionary and self-altering of modes, the sublime, then one has the means to re-examine the victimology that has dominated much feminist literary thinking in recent decades. Ensuing chapters examine the application of this theory of practice in the works of the American Emily Dickinson and the German Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, pre-eminent writers both. My work examines the impact these mid-nineteenth-century women writers made on their respective cultural scenes, particularly through the practice of allowing the force of the sublime to pivot the common and everyday in the direction of the extraordinary while concluding chapters draw comparisons between these two very different yet also remarkably similar authors.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Liz Grosz for the maxim “Forces, not subjects,” a quote, by way of Nietzsche, that I take from her suggestive chapter “(Inhuman) Forces: Power, Pleasure, and Desire” in Time Travels. Feminism, Nature, Power, an earlier version of which was presented at the Rutgers’ Women’s Studies Department in 2000.

2 The translation of the term uneigentlich as “not actual or essential” is my own. Werner Pluhar translates it as “improperly,” which is slightly misleading because of the moral overtones of the word.

Chapter Two:

“I take – no less than skies”: The Sublime and the Practice of Everyday Life in Emily

Dickinson.

Perhaps I asked too large –
I take – no less than skies –
For Earths, grow thick as
Berries, in my native Town –

My Basket holds – just – Firmaments –
Those – dangle easy – on my arm,
But smaller bundles – Cram. (P. 352)

When Dickinson wrote this small but hyperbolic poem circa 1862 her subject was the Romantic sublime whose tenets she radically revises, making the uncountable sky, earth and firmament suddenly prolific and plural, a multiplying force in an attractive local rendition of Kant’s rather more ominous mathematical sublime. Her sublime is like the fecundity of berries on the ground, nourishing, ubiquitous and available to everyone, while the countable “smaller bundles,” perhaps those that society ascribes to her, do not fit because they are too narrow and “Cram”. The poem’s masculine verb ending, charged and emphasized by a final dash, underscores Dickinson’s association of poetry and force. By inverting the small-large dialectic of the sublime this poem seems to remind us that Dickinson lived a large imaginative life (she sometimes called herself “Amherst” [Eberwein 32]), and that she had grand visions, shared by Emerson and Whitman, but lived them out on a quieter scale than they. In fact, the poem points us to a problem in contemporary Dickinson criticism, namely whether the poet’s aesthetic assertiveness, her micro-historical intervention in a world concurrently engaged in macro-historical political action such as civil war and social reform, does enough. Can her aesthetic

boldness and sublime reaches correlate with material and political expansion, particularly for women in the nineteenth century whose opportunities had been “crammed?” I intend to demonstrate that Dickinson’s poetry does indeed sharpen our appreciation for the power of the poet as an actor on the cultural scene at large. Dickinson’s talent for naming interiority and personal everyday experience is her mark of greatness as a poet, since naming elevates the abbreviated self into the social realm of linguistic consensus beyond the local scope of isolated writerly practice. While a poem about pain may seem intensely private, even solipsistic, it is nevertheless open to a wider interpretive community. And, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, all aesthetic work has a cultural foundation, for “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (68-9).

But how are we to reconcile Dickinson’s reputation as New England’s most famous recluse with that of the public writer? Doing so has not always been easy or self-evident. Robert Weisbuch, for instance, sounds almost apologetic about Dickinson’s canonization as an American artist on account of her extreme privacy and rejection of a public stance. “She is far less concerned than her fellows with the idea of America and far less involved in the particular political issues of the day,” he writes, “and she never writes tracts against slavery--she never writes tracts” (7-8). However, defining the word “public” in a nineteenth-century context, following Jürgen Habermas’s historical interpretation of the word, allows us to see commonalities between Dickinson’s practice of communion through poetry, which she conceived of as letters written to the world, and her more public counterparts, Emerson and Whitman. Situating the rise of the public

sphere in the nineteenth-century emergence of bourgeois society in Germany, Habermas defines “public” as 1) open and available to all; 2) having representative value, as in one’s public name or reputation, a category formerly vested in the King; 3) public opinion (“öffentliche Meinung”), the realm of open, public discourse or debate, the opposition the individual may offer in the form of his or her opinion (1-2). Since Habermas’s study is based in European history, one must consider, as he does, the various contingencies in countries with divergent historical experiences. However, his argument is only strengthened by the American example which, by the time Dickinson was writing, had already witnessed a history of public opinion and anti-authoritarianism. The American drive for independence, intellectually as well as politically, links Emerson, Whitman and Dickinson, establishing them as poets comfortable in a public arena, speaking for the people and vesting worth in the individual (poet and audience) rather than a “public” figure of authority.

It is this investment in the agency of the common person, rather than in appointed figures of power, that de Certeau explores and endorses. Although, like Foucault, he is interested in larger determining factors and institutions of power, his main focus is what the individual can *do* within the system. Cunning tactics, such as Penelope unweaving her web, are available to everyone so that the weak can subvert (resist) the dominant order from within. Indeed, “users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv). Unlike proponents of the more tendentious subjectivity theories, which have as their central unit the revolutionary individual human being, or Marxists who are concerned with socio-economic forces that determine us, de

Certeau writes about the resistance and creativity available to everyone, which allows them to do something new with the cultural symbols and signifiers already in place. This is politically efficacious, not because of an individual's decisions and schemes, but due to the use readers and consumers of culture make of hegemonic structures: "tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong . . . lend a political dimension to everyday practices" (de Certeau xvii).

Since this view suggests that members of the public, the everyday person on the street, can practice poēisis (an "art or 'way of making'" [xv]) as a means of resisting the domination of cultural forces that want to determine us, de Certeau's model also allows for a theory of poetry as public practice. It is a commonly available, hence public, endeavor that seeks to speak out and create a public forum for the poem, representing the everyday life of us all. Poetry, by its very nature, is crafted by users of language who make rhetorical turns that fit the constraints of form. In the process, the poet (the "user" or "consumer" in de Certeau's words [xiii]) becomes a reader of symbolic structures, while the audience, in turn, brings reading strategies of its own to the poem. Readers *and* writers participate in the cultural formations that shape them and which they, in turn, reciprocally create. I suggest, therefore, that practices such as writing and reading--creative, unpredictable and not entirely regulated by individual will--operate as subtle forces on the social scene. That poetry might dialectically perform such mediation between the subject and the social matrix is a thesis especially worth testing in the work of women writers whose agency and authority, many claim, has traditionally been curtailed. Emily Dickinson's poetry demonstrates the numerous ways in which poetry becomes a public engagement through the social tool of language: her tactics of reversing

the everyday into moments of the sublime not only transforms it locally, in the space of the poem, but also offers readers a similar challenge: to see anew their own lives and experiences, and to discover a sublimity not heretofore appreciated.

That such poetic production is not always gender-specific is sustained by Dickinson's own stated caveats against doctrines of any kind. Dickinson is not always writing "as a woman," with all the expectations and broad sweeps attending such a view of poetry-as-life. While it may be tempting to read into a sublime of berries, for example, a more caring, nurturing and feminine sublime, such a reading, while possible within this poem's figurative and associative scope of meanings, is contrary to Dickinson's own declared concerns.¹ Foremost in Dickinson is her refusal in poetic work to subscribe to any dogma, be it Christianity, the sublime, or even gender. To the extent that these concepts are imaginatively experienced, they are also dynamically reconfigured through the unique *poiēsis* of Dickinson's work. That is, Dickinson is also but not *necessarily* writing as a woman poet.

Since the 1960's, however, it is precisely such readings--readings that invoke Dickinson's work for its representative status and the solidarity of her experience with other women--that have emerged. For some of these experientially-based approaches it is a fundamental tenet of women's writing that life influenced art. Any obfuscation of the role of gender in the production of aesthetics, in this view, leads to artificial fragmentation and blindness to the particularities of gender and the female experience. Thus Paula Bennet reiterates the commonly felt need after New Criticism's formalist and disembodied accounts of literature to put the female subject back into literature, noting that "Dickinson was the creator of her own discourse. She cannot be de-centered as the

subject of her verse, nor can her subjectivity be separated from her complicated and in many ways idiosyncratic response to her situation as a mid-nineteenth-century woman” (22). Similarly, Alicia Ostriker believes women poets share a “powerful collective voice” and that Dickinson “is the first woman poet whose poetic language and structures systematically register and resist the dominance of masculinity and rationality in culture [. . .].” (43). Thus domesticity takes on special representative value for many feminist critics who point out that Dickinson surrounded herself with a female support network, both professionally and sexually (Nell Smith). The domestic domain of the house, a common theme in Dickinson's poetry, figures as a specifically female locus of production: “If her treatment of domestic themes differs radically at times from that of her peers, domesticity itself was nevertheless central to her identity as poet and to her matter and style” (Bennett 13).

At the same time, turning female art into a reflection of female life tends to undercut Dickinson's aesthetic specificity and difference from other women and other poets in general. Gilbert and Gubar's influential study serves to demonstrate the cost of underestimating the “formal charges,” to invoke Susan Wolfson's term, attending poetry regardless of who is writing:

For Dickinson, indeed, art is not so much *poesis*--making--as it is *mimesis*--enactment, and this because she believes that even consciousness is not so much reflective as it is theatrical. [. . .] Life is enactment, art the outward manifestations of the scenes performed on an inner stage, and thus an author and her characters are one: they are [. . .] one ‘supposed person,’ or rather a series of such persons, interacting in a romantic drama or [. . .] a gigantic and incredible ‘Novel’ [. . .]. (586)

Such mimetic dramatization of biographical fact obfuscates the apparatus of poetry in which multiple personae and lyric voices, not to mention formal and figurative

devices compacting word and line, create a genre antithetical to mimetic demands or novelistic technique. As Edward Hirsch reminds us, a poem “is an act beyond paraphrase because what is being said is always inseparable from the way it is being said” (10). One cannot therefore blur poetic and novelistic genres without an attendant loss of specificity. If the former is to be accounted for, it is perhaps more fortuitous to analyze how Dickinson's poetic innovations have shaped our perceptions of what it means to live as a man or woman in society--a broadly political inquiry--and not how her life as a woman necessarily shaped her aesthetics.

When feminist theorists invoke deconstruction in arguing for an oppositional practice that is specifically feminine and for the female text as a subversive space, they too are limiting women writers. More often than not, this approach calls for a feminine space or “divergent positionality” (Walker 234) in the abstract, and not a history of actual physical women or women writers. Margaret Homans’ assertion for example that women write in opposition to the dominant symbolic and cultural code, entrenched in such core texts as the Bible, is continuous with this approach. Yet her argument also rests on taking the patriarchal prescriptions of female identity, in the form of cultural symbolic codes we find in myths of a gendered society, very seriously. After all, to “see oneself in Eve rather than in Adam,” regardless of whether this “lead[s] to an entirely different sense of self in relation to language” (170), necessarily endorses the biblical description of women as original sinners, which in turn legitimizes their inferiority. In other words, Homans employs the same biblical code to bolster her proto-feminist argument. Eve substitutes for all that is essentially feminine and disruptive of singular truth and reasoning, a positive model Dickinson is said to emulate:

Dickinson's way of characterizing many external things as masculine--truth and falsehood, the world and its renunciation--illustrates a mind defining its own interior operations as feminine. [. . .] Her freedom from literal meaning originates in her sense of femininity, from her identification with Eve, and it permits her a special use of irony to draw disparate meanings from a single term. (176)

While the patriarchal subtext of the Bible is read as fiction, Eve miraculously stands as a stronghold for feminist meaning. On this view, women have access, by nature and experience, to the more skeptical and dualistic thinking of Eve while male poets are essentially culpable in the dominant patriarchal narratives. Such either-or paradigms are perpetuated here, not interrogated, which is a position counterintuitive to feminism's stated goals. Not all women would want to identify themselves with Eve's "dualism," nor with any designated group trait for that matter, and their recourse in not wishing to identify themselves with an essential female locus of value is not addressed.

A critical reading method which applauds the mimetic representation of women's experience and essential female style thus tends to congeal and polarize that experience and ultimately poses a less effective means of understanding oppositional practice than one in which women are perceived as active "consumers" or agents of representation. It is this notion of practice that de Certeau alerts us to, and it makes for a meaningful reading of oppositional acts in literature. Although de Certeau posits a theory of agency for the common person in The Practice of Everyday Life, his approach is not complicit with the usual cultural practice of feminist theory, nor with a theory of subjectivity; rather, he proposes a theory of practice in which the female subject may, by turns, be construed otherwise. Accordingly, his focus is on "modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles" (xi). He suggests that an active practice or poiēsis (an "art or 'way of making'" [xv]) should

supplement "representation" and "behavior" (xii), even in quotidian contexts. For example, "the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does' during this time and with these images" (xii). Unlike the more tendentious subjectivity theories, which have as their central unit the individual human being, or, by extension, the group, such production is a non-anthropocentric force. It is politically strategic, though not because of an individual's decisions and schemes, but due to the use readers and consumers of culture make of hegemonic structures by injecting their own symbolic practice into the scene, and it is from this position of oppositionality that the "tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong . . . lend a political dimension to everyday practices" (de Certeau xvii).

Since de Certeau calls such production poēisis, in the Socratic sense of "producing, making," his model also allows for a theory of poetry-as-practice. Poetry by its very nature is crafted by users of language who make rhetorical turns that fit the constraints of form. In the process the poet (the "user" or "consumer" in de Certeau's words [xiii]) becomes a reader of hegemonic symbolic structures, while the audience, in turn, brings reading strategies of its own to the poem. Readers *and* writers, as well as both genders, participate in the cultural formations that shape them and which they in turn reciprocally create. Viewing art as a dramatization of identity, by contrast, ultimately blunts the aesthetic charges and possibilities contained within it across time and ideology. The question that needs to be asked, then, is not so much how gender influences Dickinson's art but rather how she used her art, her labor and her leisure too, as a

surrogate for everyday practice in all its contingencies, including those of being a female writer in mid-nineteenth-century New England.

To this end, Rita Felski suggests a model of broader social consensus for understanding effective intervention by women, and her approach offers a forceful corrective to the limits of a polarized reading:

The recognition that individuals are not 'spoken' by an abstract, preexisting linguistic system, but that language is rather a social practice which is contextually determined and open to varying degrees of modification and change makes possible a more differentiated understanding of discourse which is potentially more productive from the standpoint of feminist politics.

At the grass-roots level and in literary practice, women have shaped their limited environment in many individual as well as collective ways. And it bears reiteration that "gender is only one of the many determining influences upon subjectivity, ranging from macrostructures such as class, nationality, and race down to microstructures such as the accidents of personal history, which do not simply exist alongside gender distinctions, but actively influence and are influenced by them" (Felski 59). Gender is therefore a dynamic, cultural and historical factor among many other elements that concurrently shape a society at a particular temporal juncture. Seen in such terms, a theory of female subjectivity and identity must accommodate theories of practice in everyday life and in the "personal history" of women if we are to understand the dynamic of women's agency that has preceded us for centuries.

Not unlike de Certeau, sociologist Anthony Giddens provides a useful framework for a dynamic and interactive model of social structure and female agency. It has been Giddens' main project to argue that people are always both agents and recipients of social

determination, since social structures and those involved in creating them exist in mutual relationship:

We should not conceive of the structures of domination built into social institutions as in some way grinding out ‘docile bodies’ who behave like the automata suggested by objectivist social science. Power within social systems which enjoy some continuity over time and space presumes regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction. But all forms of dependence offer some resource whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. This is what I call the *dialectic of control* in social systems. (16)

Thus when one kind of feminist theory claims that women represent a different, more benevolent sphere--a notion which extends to a theory of the “feminine sublime”--and that they are obligated to operate in a symbolic order antithetical to their caring and communal natures, it necessarily discounts the possibility of men and women to act as agents of social structures that shape society even as they are determined by its institutions. “According to the notion of the duality of structure,” Giddens notes, “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the *practices* they recursively organize” (25 my emphasis). Like de Certeau’s, this approach stresses the action of the agent on an everyday basis: “Agency refers to doing” (Giddens 10). And since women have always been pragmatic survivors in a system with fewer choices based on their gender, they are already implicated in a long history of agency.

Paul Smith’s thoughts, like Giddens’, are theoretically invested in countering “those discourses [that] try to catch the subject / individual into a mastering theory which encircles and delimits” (23). He questions the megalithic and mechanistic determinism of subjects “interpellated,” in Althusser’s famous formulation, by social institutions and structures and asks instead how the subject might be “discerned,” thereby enabling

greater agency from a place not mythically removed but immersed in society's ideological institutions:

Dialectically implicated in the social, but also turned in upon itself, the subject / individual has to be questioned as to its capacity for decisions, choices, interventions, and the like which are not specifically or solely determined by such categories as class or economics--however much they may be at the behest of ideology in general. (24)

The subject is thus conceived as an agent rather than a victim of formative social structures, and Smith builds his case on the Hegelian “principle of negativity” because it is “the form of heterogeneity [. . .] that enables the maintenance of contradiction and difference at the same time as it prevents or inhibits submission to the categorical demands of the social symbolic order” (155). Smith never gets beyond the (human) subject to address how practices such as writing and reading, not entirely regulated by individual will, may operate as forces of negativity on the social scene, or how, in de Certeau's words, “‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (xiv). It is my thesis that women writers such as Dickinson and Droste mediate between the social given and the social potential by means of their craft.

Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's pivotal essay, “Art as Technique,” lays the groundwork for a theory of “negativity” in literature. Claiming that the objective of all literary art is defamiliarization, he proleptically alerts us to the technique of difference in literary language. All literary forms, but especially the poetic, rely for their effect on an element of strangeness which jolts readers out of their everyday perspectives into new ways of seeing. In one example, Shklovsky contrasts the vivifying strangeness of art with Tolstoy's 1897 diary entry in which the novelist had mused about the “habitual and

unconscious” drudgery of household cleaning (20). Here is Shklovsky’s response to Tolstoy’s entry:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (20).

Art’s salutary feat is to arrest time long enough to make us conscious, not of our own subjective and comfortable recognitions, but of the otherness of things. It allows us, in other words, to confront and grapple with difference. Often invoked in support of a proto-formalist position, Shklovsky doesn’t so much focus on the art *object*, as invite an engagement that leads to one’s “*experiencing the artfulness of an object*,” a reading that appreciates the alterity of that aesthetic moment and the aesthetic referent and thereby goes beyond isolationist tendencies. His formulation allows for a dialectic played out between the I and the non-I, paving the way for a socially conscious appreciation of literature not wrapped up in its own terms.

The interwoven domains of politics and art can be found whenever the latter addresses such scope for otherness. In his analysis of South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, for instance, Derek Attridge follows Shklovsky’s principle of estrangement in a political reading of Coetzee’s novels. He allies the uniqueness of the literary event with its jarring alterity and sees it as a means of discourse especially equipped to test habitual assumptions about ideology in the reader and to represent “the other” in ways that demand reader engagement:

Acts of literature do not operate directly upon the political realm [. . .]. But literature can act powerfully to hold the political and the ethical up for scrutiny by means of its power of suspension, momentarily dissociating them from their usual pressing context, performing the ethical decision and the political gesture. [. . .] In its blocking of both the aesthetic and the instrumental, the literary text fails to answer to our habitual needs in processing language; it thus estranges itself, presents itself as other, puts us under a certain obligation (to attend scrupulously, to suspend as far as we can our usual assumptions and practices, to translate the text into our terms only in the harsh awareness of the betrayal that this involves). (Literary Form 248).

Such accounts of defamiliarization resonate not only in a pragmatic argument for the revolutionary potential of literary practice, but also in that narrative of alteration and difference known as the sublime. One of the most popular Western discourses of sudden and complete change, the psychic mechanism of the sublime certainly entertains a similar notion of alterity. As theorized in the eighteenth century, the sublime is a moment of heightened acuity, a change from the habitual, everyday routine as the subject is suddenly “transported” to a plane of intensity and bliss, experiencing, for a moment, an alterity to itself. Accounting for the Kantian phases of the (negative) sublime, Thomas Weiskel differentiates three distinct, though synchronic, stages: first, the normal stage of habitual, disinterested existence on a plane with the other; second, the traumatic phase which commences once the subject feels itself overwhelmed by an unmanageable influx of impulses; and, finally, the recovery stage in which the subject feels elated in a sense of its own powers and sublimates the previous threat. According to this view of the sublime, transport is only achieved negatively, in the so-called second phase of the sublime when the discomfort and the succession of disinterest occurs. And, as Steven Knapp reminds us, obscurity and difficulty are characteristics of the sublime in the works of Burke because they stimulate the imagination of the reader, eliciting, like Longinus’ spectator,

new associations and leaps of meaning that supersede the poet. Thus, structurally at least, the sublime shares the defamiliarization of poetic work. Both demand a change in the viewer / reader, be it in response to the sublime stimulus or a textual event.

While the Romantic sublime and its ontological effects of movement and “transport” has most often been described as a vehicle for self-expansion, Dickinson explores the potential of the sublime to defamiliarize the self and her world. Rather than treat the sublime as a subjective extension of mind, she objectifies it by regarding the possibilities of language to write an extended version of self into being. Dickinson’s work performs alterity in ways that effect a different way of seeing. Her talent for shifting the parameters of art may not be in line with the “feminine sublime” as it is imagined by Mellor and Freeman but it does stretch the material and social order she finds herself in, both by performing difference and demanding from its readers an altered perspective on cultural and discursive stereotypes, including those on the proper role of women and women poets.

For clues on Dickinson’s agency through a sublime attenuation of everyday practice that shows what is already there, we can probe her recurring epistolary image for poetry as a letter travelling between self and world:

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

Her message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me (P. 441)

Given that Dickinson participated in a culture of prolific and often intimate epistolary exchange, her choice of metaphor is instructive. In fact, in Dickinson's material culture of sending poems as gifts, her poems take on the quality of physicality not adequately approximated in traditional ways of reading poetry. Poetry becomes a Ding an sich. Letters are material in ways perhaps now lost in the electronic media. As Roland Barthes reminds us in A Lover's Discourse, a letter carries the trace of the person who wrote it. Corporeal traces reside in the handwriting, perfume, or other aspects. Similarly, when a poem is also a gift and letter to the world, the text becomes a prolific signifier, eloquent beyond the scope of self-conscious word-play or the metaphysical conceits of a George Herbert with whom Dickinson is often paired by rhetorical critics.

In this poem, Dickinson certainly appears to erase the line between letter and poem. On one level, it is clearly about a poet whose "message" is sent to readers she does not know and from whom she receives no answer: art is conceived as public, an object in transit between self and world. But there is also a bold association in stanza two between the poet, nature, (conventionally feminine), and "Her message," as if to suggest that the poet is nature's emissary and transcriber, a role the Romantic poets had certainly epitomized. With almost divine license, the poet is to be treated with tenderness, since hers *is* the work of nature, the sublime incarnate and no mere rendition of it. Inasmuch as a letter is always a "figure from everyday life" (Favret 1), taking it as seriously as Dickinson did demands that we reevaluate our own prescriptions for literary value. Her manuscripts remind us of the coexistence of the mundane and the literary and that the latter was a way of life, incorporated into the everyday: "A winged spark doth soar about," for instance, was written in pencil circa 1879 on a piece of paper advertising

carpet washing by J.C. Arms & Co. (Franklin 1314). In this way, the poet demands to be read as a practitioner and transcriber of the everyday, and her work is defined by the manuscript culture she vehemently defended against repeated requests by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and others to publish her work and thus fix and formalize it: her poetry is playful, inscribing alternatives and possibilities into a text, indeed a social text, which becomes by turns a monumental work-in-progress (processus in infinitum) rather than a finished product.

The quotidian sublime of the messenger or letter-writer is reserved not only for the poet but also the reader or receiver of the letter:

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
 For firm conviction of a Mouse
 Not exorcised before –

Peruse how infinite I am
 To no one that You – know –
 And sigh for lack of Heaven – but not
 The Heaven God bestow – (P. 636)

While Dickinson shows us her “narrow” world of the “Wall” and “floor,” these confines of space are simultaneously eliminated by the sublime “transport” the letter brings, a prosaic heaven on earth. Letters move the poet with intensely felt transcendent effect and, like all rituals, here expressed in the methodical ‘first,’ ‘and then,’ ‘and then’ formula,

this one serves to elevate the singular and quotidian to a higher semiotic plane, giving meaning to the individual within a larger context. While her contemporaries were performing sacraments institutionalized by the church, subjecting them to the social conventions of any public institution, Dickinson performs her own private, idiosyncratic and, finally, immensely self-empowering ritual of readerly and writerly practice which cumulatively allows her to see “infinite” value in the most basic and ordinary of events. Letters move the poet with intensely felt transcendent effect familiar to us from the frequently quoted line describing the poet’s passion for poetry: “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way” (qtd. in Sewall 566). Finally, the singularity of relationship between poet and world established through the invigorating epistolary exchange replaces the conventional theology which informed Dickinson’s world since hers is not the “Heaven God bestow.”

Dickinson exceeds our attempts both to reconstitute her feminine identity *and* to fetishize the isolated form of her poems by the irreducible scope of her poetic practice and her assertive claims of agency for which poetry and species of the everyday is both source and placeholder. By all accounts, writing was an everyday, open and quasi-epistolary practice for Dickinson. Her predilection for hybrid genres such as the letter-poem, her practice of poetic gift exchange, the manuscript culture of her poetic vocation in which poems were left open-ended and with alternative word choices in tact, the habit of transferring phrases from her poems to letters sent to friends all underscore a sense of poetic vocation modeled on the need for constant and active engagement with the world

and quotidian life. Indeed, as Gary Stonum points out, Dickinson “regularly lifted lines and stanzas out of her poems in order to send them to a correspondent, sometimes altering the wording or address in the process and always disregarding any proto-formalist thought that poems ought to be seamless, organic wholes” (28-9). For her, poetry was not high art but a social bond, not esoteric or academic but quotidian and a part of everyday life.

Indeed, such a view of art-as-agency precludes notions of Dickinson’s practice as painfully private, isolated and solipsistic. Biographers present a picture of a rich if vicarious social life through a broad network of personal and professional correspondence (Nell Smith and Hart) as well as the luxury of time for such endeavors (her sister, mother and their Irish servants taking care of the domestic duties that otherwise encumbered women of her generation). Since a reclusive lifestyle and controlled social life created the space needed for a writer’s lifestyle, Richard Sewall was probably right to claim that “her life was her work” (233). More than forty people were recipients of her poems and she sent about 250 poems to her sister-in-law Susan alone. In contrast, only about ten appeared in print during her lifetime, always anonymously. Anecdotal evidence further confirms the idea that Dickinson was engaged in constant, everyday poetic practice, often substituting it in her idiosyncratic way for regular social intercourse. The most famous comes to us from her friend Mabel Loomis Todd, who wrote that Dickinson seemed to produce thank-you poems during her recitals:

I used to sing to Emily frequently, in the long, lonely drawing-room. But she never came in to listen--only sat outside in the darksome hall, on the stairs. But she heard every note. When I had finished she always sent me a glass of wine on a silver salver, and with it either a piece of cake or a rose--and a poem, the latter usually impromptu, evidently written on the spot. (qtd. In Sewall 218)

As Sewall persistently points out in his biography, it is deceptive to regard Dickinson as a recluse, and nothing would disprove it more than her own constant involvement with others through writing. If there is political engagement in Dickinson's poetry, it resides in the local and individual commitment to audaciously altering the socially instituted, teleological and ideologically prescriptive language of "self," "other," "god," "the world" and so forth, to an evocative poetic language of possibilities, and to communicate this local yet forceful transformation to the world: "I dwell in Possibility - / A fairer House than Prose - / More numerous of Windows - / Superior – for Doors" (P. 657). Most certainly wary of anything that might "cram," Dickinson's technique of constant immersion in her own practice and of attunement to the sublime makes her an agent of change in a society which, certainly for women, was in need of it.

Chapter Three.

“A Speck of Rapture”: Emily Dickinson and the Poet’s Sublime.

For human beings are not so constituted that they can live without expansion.
Margaret Fuller

L. *Sublimis*, lofty, raised on high.

To assess how Dickinson’s poetry defamiliarizes the everyday, and how it distinguishes itself from its precursors, we must first survey the arena in which her poetry of and about the sublime arrived. By mid-century, the sublime “had passed into the culture of [Dickinson’s] time” (Farr 254), familiar to the poet through her exposure to British Romanticism and the visual arts. But her situatedness as an *American* poet cannot be stressed enough if we are to understand the impulse behind the defamiliarization and difference that charges all her work. Dickinson’s characteristic investment in the quotidian sublime of the people and the earth, her baskets holding “Firmaments,” also finds a context in the nineteenth-century poets of the American sublime. Although she may have been too much a part of the culture to appreciate its influence at work, Dickinson follows Emerson and Whitman in democratizing the sublime, seeing it in “everything: a multiplication table, a privy, even an ant or a bee” (Wilson 139). Whitman’s sublime, for instance, existed in the most humble or degraded objects, overturning conventional distinctions of high and low art: “And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields, / And brown ants in the little wells beneath them, / And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap’d stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed” (“Song of Myself” 91-98). However, as Rob Wilson points out, it becomes equally hard in such democratic overturns to distinguish self and other, as dazzling displays of freedom from convention and transcendence of the everyday through the everyday result in the

inevitable eclipse of the object and the substitution in its place of the Whitmanian or Emersonian hyperbolic ego: “vocational delusions of self-grandeur and self-as-country wholeness” ultimately result in a conceit in which the poet becomes the sublime he represents (140).

For Dickinson, Emerson’s self-aggrandizing “Where [man] is there is nature” (Self-Reliance 43) translates most often into “where poetic work is there is nature” as she foregrounds the process that allows her to elevate seemingly insignificant natural objects such as flies, spiders, small birds and ultimately her own “mouse” and “child” personae into something divine. In her attention to “minute particulars,” as I will have occasion to explain in greater details later on, she replicates many of the Biedermeier-Romantic impulses prevalent in Europe at this time. The panoramic and sweeping long shot, which Emerson and Whitman applied almost instinctively, is entirely replaced by Dickinson’s meditation on the sublime object and moment, however small and seemingly banal, albeit with an awareness of the linguistic processes involved. She may, like Whitman, exchange the low for the high, but she retreats behind the work of language as she does so. Through what Wordsworth calls “the turnings intricate of verse” (The Prelude v. 627) Dickinson becomes an agent rather than a victim of her life and circumstances. Self-reliant and radical in her careful substitution of poetry for religion, she nevertheless departs from this commonality through poetic performance, and Agnieszka Salska aptly sums up Dickinson’s ambivalent debt to her cultural milieu:

Not only did she accept the private self as central, she claimed further that its greatness was not to be confirmed by the sublimity of any cause, nor did it rest in the security of any faith. For her the test of the self’s stature was not in the noble rage of its ambition but in the actual performance in confrontation with experience. (20)

Dickinson wrote in an age when nature was no longer an unqualified center for self-revelation but an unstable territory, a sentiment shared by her male coevals. Emerson's references to centers and circles underscore this cultural unease and loss of a center, an anchorage which, however complexly, nature had still performed for someone like Wordsworth. Emerson writes: "The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand, is not fixed, but sliding" ("Circles" 186). Perhaps this covert dis-ease accounts for Emerson's expressed need to fill the abyss between self and nature/other with talk of bravado and ego. The American sublime, Emerson suggests, is to be found not in external nature, already overfilled with the impression of others and therefore mediocre, but in the heights of each individual's fresh engagement with the scene. For this reason, Emerson seeks the sublime experience in seclusion and away from the symbolic overload of messages that had also disturbed Wordsworth in London, as reported in The Prelude, Bk. 7. Only in seclusion, Emerson writes in "Nature," can the authentic sublime be approximated:

Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God . . . In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets and villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (10)

The irony, of course, is that this vacant natural spot is so filled with Emerson's projections that it is far from empty and thick with text. As Wilson's commentary on the American sublime avows, "Nature is never just 'nature,' but some arena of discursive augmentation. Emptiness (immensity) is troped into fullness (vacancy), silence into

speech, absence into presence, circumferential irrelevance into central significance” (11). Emerson uses the natural sublime as a giant trope for his overall vision of the renewal and recovery of history. Indeed, for Emerson nature does not exist per se, nor does it serve as a foil for the self’s reflections in the Wordsworthian retrospective mode. Instead, nature operates as a metaphorical crossing over for man into future prospects, and Emerson legitimizes this imaginary move by invoking the biblical language of creation: “The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (Nature 16). Man, represented by the poet, essentially replaces nature, as he and the abyss become one and “all mean egotism vanishes” (Nature 10). A poet’s work thus involves “stretching, a sublime crossing of the gulf of solipsism, but not into communion with others” (Bloom, 158).

Moreover, the religious language of conversion, pressingly familiar of course to Dickinson who had resisted pressure to convert as a child, suffuses Emerson’s sense of the sublime in which blissful fusion between self and God marks true transcendence. Marilyn Westerkamp’s historical overview of the early American religion which informed late Puritanism proves that a cultural context for such cross-over existed. Pietism, she notes, required of individuals that they be their own priests and no longer look to a church-appointed intermediary, a shift politically echoed in the citizens’ independence from king or aristocracy in the new colony. Congregation members in the late Puritan churches in the nineteenth century were encouraged to undergo authentic conversions which required active and personal engagement with Christ and marked a radical departure from the prescribed codes of conduct and authority enshrined in the Church of England and Catholicism, with which their forefathers had broken allegiance

in the previous century. As a Unitarian minister and sermon-writer turned lecturer and poet, Emerson personifies, perhaps like no other Transcendentalist, the internal crossings of religious and secular fervor, culminating in the American religion of self-reliance: “And truly it demands something godlike,” writes Emerson, “in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity and has ventured to trust himself for a task master” (Self-Reliance 59). This intellectual stance, Harold Bloom notes, translates in the world of literature as an agonistic attempt at overthrowing the authority of the (European) past and its poetic precursors. In what amounts to a hyperbolic version of the Longinian sublime an entire nation imaginatively overtakes the original speaker. Bloom remarks that this American sublime is also a reader’s sublime, in the tradition of Longinus’ inversion of orator and audience. Strong readers usurp the poets and readers before them and are willing to dispense with conventional interpretation to insert instead their own, a characteristic also of Dickinson’s idiosyncratic take on stock poetic themes, forms and styles.

It is with the ideal of egoistic stretching, inherent in the discourse of the American sublime, that feminist literary criticism has taken issue. Its corrective to the Emersonian sublime is to point out women’s limited access to precisely the vastly liberating and self-authoritarian ideology it proclaims. Thus Joanne Feit Diehl writes that women must reimagine their place in the line of poets and of authority to which they have been denied access. Furthermore, the sublime psychic identification with authority and the subsequent substitution of self for that original locus of power are somewhat more complicated for women. She writes:

Faced with the overdeterminacy born of a relationship where her position as passive, receptive self mirrors her culturally assumed identity, a

relationship where the authoritative power *is* the masculine other, she becomes either silenced by the incursions of the sublime or radicalized by the process. (article 178)

While Emerson and Whitman can claim authority and do so with expansive ease, women have not been allowed any command of their own and therefore cannot speak in the hyperbolic voices of their male counterparts. Diehl argues similarly that Emerson and Whitman's expansive sublime gestures, in which the masculine voice as prime actor appropriates female and domestic positionality, is subsumed in utter self-reliance. As a result, women are denied an authentic and equal voice: "In Whitman's America, heroes emerge from, they are not themselves mothers" (20).

Such an essentialist reading strategy, which identifies the hyperbolic language of the American sublime positively with men and negatively with women, necessarily forecloses on the possibility of the latter's active engagement and participation in her own culture. On Diehl's view, women like Dickinson must write a counter-sublime, a radical and strategic oppositional program since, essentially, they have no other choice. Women can either submit to the system or radicalize it. Dickinson's idiosyncratic take on the sublime is thus galvanized as part of an orderly political program, a deconstruction more familiar to and bred out of our own circumstances than to the actual historical context of the mid-nineteenth century. From a historical perspective, Dickinson's differences stem not so much from an isolated, intuitive feminist rebellion, as from a broader cultural discourse on issues of reform, in which both Margaret Fuller and Emerson participated.²

In fact, evidence suggests that Dickinson was influenced directly by Emerson. From the testimony of a childhood friend we surmise that she was reading, among others,

Byron, Emerson, and Fuller's translation of Bettina von Arnim's Günderode. Dickinson commented on and admired Emerson's poems, and upon having one of her own published anonymously, public speculation about its source pointed to him instead of the female poet. In addition, Emerson gave public lectures in Amherst, although there is no record of Dickinson's attendance at these events (Gelpi 60 – 2). If the male voices around her espoused self-reliance, Dickinson declared a similar sense in her poems:

Soto! Explore thyself!
 Therein thyself shalt find
 The 'Undiscovered Continent' –
 No Settler had the Mind. (P. 832) ³

Judging by her rebellious nature, one suspects that Dickinson is not ironic in her warning against colonization of the mind. Along with other proponents of the American sublime, Dickinson voiced skepticism about locating transcendence in the language and institutions of inherited religion: “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - / I keep it staying at Home - / With a Bobolink for a Chorister - / And an Orchard, for a Dome [. . .]” (P. 324). At the same time, her preoccupation with this subject registers a reluctance--distinguishing her from Emerson and Whitman--to relinquish the search for faith in precisely those human (linguistic) terms. “Of Course – I prayed - / And did God Care?” and “Who are ‘the Father and the Son’?” she asks, as if to declare both doubt and a desire to communicate in this discourse notwithstanding (P. 376; 1258). She is serious about her search, albeit “looking oppositely / For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven - ” (P. 959). Like her counterparts, however, Dickinson's religion is far less programmatic than her actual religious environment prescribed at the time, leaning toward a Romantic vision of divinity in the everyday :

The Heaven vests for Each

In that small Deity
 It craved the grace to worship
 Some bashful Summer's Day –
 (P. 694)

By rejecting what she saw as asinine adoptions of tradition (“The Bible is an antique Volume - / Written by faded Men [. . .]” [P. 1545]) Dickinson clearly followed in Emerson’s footsteps, and “like many modern poets she found art the substitute for her inherited religion, the only instrument of revelation left to her” (Anderson 57). As Geoffrey Hartman has observed, Romanticism operated as an alternative for religion, breaking with Western culture’s dependence on the comforting paradigms of religion at large:

There clearly comes a time when art frees itself from its subordination to religion or religiously inspired myth and continues or even replaces them. This time seems to coincide with what is generally called the Romantic period [. . .]. Thus, for Blake, all religion is a derivation of the Poetic Genius [. . .]. If Romantic poetry appears to the orthodox as misplaced religious feeling [. . .] to the Romantics themselves it redeems religion. (Beyond Formalism 305)

Although Dickinson was participating in a new culture of self-reliance, the skepticism voiced by feminist critics over the tendency of women to adopt the Emersonian poet’s self-appointed representative value, that fusion of nationhood and artist Whitman also manages with ease (“Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” [“Song of Myself”]), raises a valid question. At the same time, it is clear that Dickinson acted as a “counterbalance” to Whitman, and that the two operate on complementary sides of the same whole (Salska 12). It takes Dickinson’s attention to detail and the individual to complete, in multiplication, the whole mass of nationhood. Or, as Susan Stewart writing on the miniature puts it, “the procedure by which description multiplies in detail is analogous to and mimetic of the process whereby space becomes significance, whereby

everything is made to ‘count’” (47). Seen in this light, difference becomes a matter of positionality along a continuum of intellectual and cultural heritage, rather than a manifestation of an essential and irreparable bifurcation based on gender.

Having established Dickinson’s cultural context as a poet of the sublime, her particular strand of Romanticism (under an expanded and extended definition) can be observed in sharper relief. The most notable departure from the traditional inscription of self into the sublime scene is her avoidance of what Weiskel has called the “various careers of egos within poems,” particularly in those of the Romantic sublime (33). In fact, Hartman’s now famous account of Wordsworth’s poetic Werdegang underscores Dickinson’s difference as a nature poet not bound up in autoscriptive moves. For Wordsworth, Hartman writes, nature was a tutor in an educational journey of separation as the poet’s imagination, fostered and modified by significant encounters with nature, ultimately supersedes it (Romance 33). Hartman’s account demonstrates the dialectical role of nature in Wordsworth and demonstrates the calculus of the sublime applied to a life career: nature is the catalyst that promotes man’s highest potential. It is less nature itself than nature’s effects on the subject that counts:

What is so precariously spiritual about Wordsworth, and so difficult to separate from egotism, is the minute attention he gives to his most casual responses, a finer attention than is given to the nature he responds to. He rarely counts the streaks of the tulip, but he constantly details the state of his mind. When Wordsworth depicts an object he is also depicting himself, a self-acquired revelation. There is very little ‘energetic’ picture-making in him. (Romance 5)

Although Dickinson’s poetry is not selfless, the lyric I is always firmly invested in its own poetic, communicative and interactive processes, thus overruling the autobiographical voice we are privy to in Wordsworth’s work and which calls for

Hartman's assessment that "even solipsism [. . .] becomes the subject of poems which *qua* poetry seek to transmute it" (Romance 53). Dickinson does in fact often "count the streaks of the tulip" only to display enormous celerity in reaching for grander, more encompassing themes. Instead of the psychological management of danger through hyperbolic self-assertion, which places the ego in the center of theories of the sublime, Dickinson focuses on the *practical* sublime moment as redemptive. The poetic process (*techne*) is Dickinson's sublime, to ultimately expansionary effect.

Dickinson summons the Romantic sublime in a poem whose declared subject, a firefly, operates as a palimpsest over more intriguing metapoetical codes:

A winged spark doth soar about –
 I never met it near
 For Lightning it is oft mistook
 When nights are hot and sere –

Its twinkling Travels it pursues
 Above the haunts of men –
 A speck of Rapture – first perceived
 By feeling it is gone –
 Rekindled by some action quaint. (P. 1468)

This poem is an example of how natural ephemera, an impression not helped by the lyric's singsong ring, conceals larger issues. As Weisbuch has so elegantly shown, an astute reader may unveil several concentric layers of analogical meaning in Dickinson's work. "The poems do not lack a situational matrix"--an impossibility, he writes--"but mimetic situations are transformed, transported to a world of analogical language which exists in parallel to a world of experience . . ." (19). In this poem, Dickinson announces her analogical track by presenting the subject as a riddle. Metonymy takes the place of the nominative in the first stanza so that we are left to guess at the "winged spark" and "Lightning" for which "it is oft mistook," an effect of indeterminacy which is typical of

the way Dickinson represents “impressions from nature,” leaving the reader to fill in the associations (Hagenbüchle 37). Whereas the poem appears to be an entirely self-contained meditation on the firefly, which thrives regardless of and “above the Haunts of men,” the poetic craft of course announces itself before we know it, in this little riddle of association. The poem then, inasmuch as it can be about anything since the fire fly is never “near,” deals with the vagaries of absence and the chase for presence as these are represented in the open-ended yet contained form of poetic discourse: the poem’s “real” subject, then, is the discourse of the sublime.

Dickinson registers the familiar aesthetic category of the natural sublime in words such as “spark,” “Lightning” and “Rapture”. However, while drawing on the same vocabulary, she consistently breaks with the tradition on both sides of the Atlantic, leaving aesthetic ideologies of the eighteenth century behind. Instead of the grandeur we associate with the natural sublime, Dickinson pays attention to detail and the minutiae of her subject stands in antithesis to the characteristics of the sublime. Typically, eighteenth-century literature on the sublime treats detail suspiciously since it disrupts the uniform, vast and immediate (“lightning flash”) effects of the sublime.⁴

By always keeping the dialectical opposite of the small in view, Dickinson is able to intuit the sublime where others might not: smallness harbors immensity and the scale of the dynamic sublime is always relative, a matter of perspective, with the result that a firefly, worked through Dickinson’s mill, is “Lightning.” Gaston Bachelard harnesses this dialectic of small and large to one of inner and outer worlds, remarking that “an intimate call of immensity may be heard, even more than an echo from the outside world” (198). It

is the poet's task, he claims, to "[transcend] the contradiction of small and large. This exaltation of space goes beyond all frontiers" (190).

Cultural studies such as Naomi Schor's reveal the historical imbrication of detail with a largely negative, feminine value: related to excess, the ornamental as well as the everyday or domestic has been conceived as antithetical to the grander, more abstract and ennobling impulses of the sublime and its sweeping masculine strokes (4). But we must not confuse discourse with essence. That is, we need not confine Dickinson's propensity for detail to any particular domestic or gender discourse on account of a historically documented bias in this direction except insofar as the domestic and the everyday are perforce linked. Dickinson's intellectual maneuvers are not so easily contained. Through the radicalizing potential of form, she reshuffles the value we assign things, refreshing our notions of what constitutes immensity, for instance, and thereby transcends precisely those discursively instituted hierarchies that want to fix value in essential, biological and even discursive terms.

How Dickinson bears out this problem of scale in her formal arrangements is instructive. It is not the physical characteristics of the firefly but rather its analogical dimensions that interest her, investing an object with immense pleasure and awe. Even as the firefly is described as a producer of the sublime affect ("Rapture"), in a mode suggestive of the natural sublime, this poem simultaneously and self-consciously evokes the figurative plumbing involved in "capturing" the sublime in language. The Romantic sublime, which was firmly centered in the poet's subjectivity, retreats into the background and while the hermeneutic sublime of break-down in the face of an excess of signifiers is still formally expressed in the narrative discontinuity between past, present

and future in “Tintern Abbey” for example (Weiskel 29-30), Dickinson, doesn’t present the sublime in a narrative or mimetic manner that seeks to represent the *ego*’s progress in a transcendent experiential moment. Instead of mimesis and development, Dickinson draws attention to poiēsis throughout the poem and most overtly at its conclusion.

The “Firefly’s” concluding line, “Rekindled by some action quaint,” was left open in manuscript, a hesitancy that Todd and Bingham chose in their edition to fix by excluding. Such editorial decision-making was typical in the initial decades of posthumous Dickinson publishing, and Thomas H. Johnsons’ more complete The Poems of Emily Dickinson (1955) was the first to include the last line as a valid reading. The phrase “Rekindled by some action quaint” formally echoes diction: the afterthought of intellect, breaking the symmetry of four lines per stanza and the rhythmic regularity of “near” resonating in “sere” and “men” in “gone” and most importantly the lexical choice of the word “quaint” must be traced to its usage in the nineteenth century when, unlike our own connotations of quaint as unusual and old-fashioned, the term was an aesthetic one. Webster’s 1838 edition lists “quaint” as meaning “nice; scrupulously and superfluously exact; having petty elegance,” “subtle; artful” in obsolete usage and “fine-spun; artfully framed” as found in Shakespeare. The “common use” of the term is listed last as “odd; fanciful; singular; and so used by Chaucer.” Webster’s subsequent adjectival entry reinforces the aesthetic connotations of the word since “quaintly” is listed only as “1. Nicely, exactly; with petty neatness or spruceness. 2. Artfully. 3. Ingeniously; with dexterity” and not as “oddly.” Dickinson probably had the Shakespearean “fine-spun; artfully framed” in mind as her preferred connotation, and this reading makes most sense

in terms of the climactic and recuperative moment she wishes to effect in “rekindled by some action quaint.”

Dickinson’s break with the solipsistic sublime of the Romantic tradition forecasts our own ironic stance and deconstruction of metaphysical moments in the work of language. Not unlike Wordsworth’s recollection in tranquility, the sublime is a game of experience and language; it manifests itself in action yet must be “rekindled” *via* poetry so as to exist, since the natural sublime of affect is fleeting. Perhaps she intuits that any linguistic attempt at putting into words a charged experiential event is necessarily belated since “it is impossible to maintain one’s self in possession of that knowledge long enough to ‘tell’ it” (Anderson 86). Dickinson not only takes on the challenge of representing the sublime, but ups the ante by making that arduous poetic work her recurring subject. To paraphrase Shklovsky, Dickinson shows us the *sublimity* of the sublime since, in her version, the aesthetic idea constitutes a winnowing of subjective experience in favor of “textual sublimity” or experience (Stonum 146). For Dickinson poetic process becomes more sublime than the experiential ego-exertions described in theories of the Romantic sublime. This quest is manifested not only in Dickinson’s manuscript mentality in which poems include alternative readings or unresolved word choices and are a work in progress, a continuous “letter to the world,” but also in the inner logic of her poems. “Action quaint,” she suggests, is the only recourse we have to the sublime, an amendment to Burke’s empirical drama of the passive human subject reacting to and defined by a sensory overload. By approximating the sublime, representing the process and the reading of it rather than chasing and assimilating its essence, Dickinson comes close to showing us the sublime, not as an extension of self (or what Hegel in another context

calls “merely the dry ego as a substitute for all content” [130]) but as a continuous search. The journey itself is the end, and in as much as the poet’s career has long been troped as a journey, its telos is the poet’s vocation.

At her most successful, Dickinson marshals the aesthetic insight of “A winged Spark” into embodied sublimity so that the seams of thought are less visible. The following is such a poem of immanence that, rather than intellectualizing the sublime, represents it. The result is the fusion of intense emotion and aesthetic work that is Dickinson’s signature, here erotically and sensuously charged:

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
 Were I with thee
 Wild Nights should be
 Our luxury!

Futile – the Winds –
 To a Heart in port –
 Done with the Compass –
 Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
 Ah, the Sea!
 Might I but moor – Tonight –
 In Thee! (P. 249)

This poem’s hypnotic rhythms and repetitions, especially in the heartbeat thumps of the monosyllabic opening utterance, declare a sense of urgency and immediacy. But the verse forms reinforce a temporal paradox: the urgency of the visually isolated and emphasized word “Tonight” in line seven speaks of immediacy while thematically registering an absence underscored by subjunctive verbs and the alliterative, phonetically unsounded “Wild” “Were” and “Winds”. For all its allusions to home and the body of the beloved, it is a poem about loss and absence of these things. Yet it is this felt absence that is so vividly conveyed in both form and content as to render it an aesthetic experience in

minimal form, at once unified and singularly focused on the emotive-aesthetic moment at hand.

Where the future (subjunctive action) is defined by absence, the middle stanza is the poet's stanza, the temporary reprieve from pain. There is strength in difference and independence: "Futile – the Winds - / To a Heart in port - / Done with the Compass – done with the Chart!" This is perhaps the same rejection of dogma in favor of a more unsettling inner place of doubt that compelled Emily to remain seated when the other girls at her school rose at the teachers' behest to accept Christ as their savior: a refusal to submit to a system. And like Emerson's, her imagination is caught by the empowerment of rejecting the chart and adopting an autoscriptive perspective.

Dickinson's power resides also in her ability to stop time, however briefly. In the third stanza's evocative and rapturous "Ah, the Sea!" we feel the vigor of sublimity and of the here and now. The phrase evokes a place the vagaries of time and ideology cannot touch. Thus, in moves similar to those discussed in the previous poem, Dickinson's intensely felt present of poetic action *becomes* sublime.

Crucial in Dickinson is such attentiveness to the arresting temporal power of the sublime. Her ideology of immanence is mindful of the emphasis the Romantic sublime places on abrupt temporal agitation and instantaneous change even as it changes the terms. Weiskel has commented on the thoroughly temporal foundation of the sublime, noting that, in their attempts to describe an instantaneous event, philosophers and critics project a rather artificial three-part diachronic analysis of the steps--from regular temporal flow, to sudden agitation in which the mind is moved, and finally a return to the former level self--onto what is actually a synchronic moment. The alleged second phase

of sudden agitation describes the sublime in its essence, and it is there where, paradoxically, temporality itself is suspended. This is the phase of Burke's "Astonishment . . . in which all motions are suspended," the force that "hurries us on" (53) and which forms the basis for his catalogue of sublime objects. Thus lightning is sublime since it exerts an immediate effect on the observer through the "extreme velocity of its motion . . . [and] quick transition from light to darkness" (73). Kant transposes Burke's empirical account of temporal agitation to the faculties of mind and for him too the sublime has a tempo. While under the influence of the beautiful the mind feels "restful contemplation," the mind directed by the "sublime in nature . . . feels agitated" and this movement is described as a "vibration . . . a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object"(115). The sublime is thus figured in time and space as a succession of movements: regular time is suddenly interrupted by a temporary blockage (*augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte*) followed by release and pleasure in the redemptive moment of an "outpouring" (*Ergießung*) (98). That such "momentary inhibition of the vital forces" is traumatic, a moment marked by temporal rupture, is apparent in both Burke's and Kant's accounts: terror and a feeling of being overwhelmed by an excess of signifiers (the mathematical sublime) or the immensity of the signified (the dynamic sublime) is never far from the bathos of the moment about to follow and is in fact a prerequisite, the tension required for greater enjoyment of the deferred release. In both accounts, the sublime "abrogates temporality" (Weiskel 26).

Whether or not she was schooled in the European literature of the sublime, Dickinson intuits the same response:

The Soul's distinct connection
With Immortality

Is best disclosed by Danger
Or quick Calamity –

As Lightning on a Landscape
Exhibits Sheets of Place –
Not yet suspected – but for Flash –
And Click – and Suddenness. (P. 974)

However, when Burke and Kant’s humanistic versions stress the self’s recovery after the loss of control, Dickinson retains the power of the second-phase immediacy in her poems. For her, velocity and the charged instant of the sublime are the connective impulse between one sphere, earthbound and limited, and another that she calls “Immortality.” Capturing the moment of sublime immediacy, which she variously called “spark,” “bolt” or “flash,” is a hedge against the probability of a limit and suggests a life imagined otherwise which perhaps explains why she “would not exchange the Bolt / For all the rest of Life –“ (P. 1581). The capability of the sublime to hold onto time long enough to wrestle with it thus generates imagined possibilities, an internal vastness not limited by geographical or other material constraints. Sharon Cameron describes this power of the present tense as follows:

We cannot change the story of our lives. We cannot undo or do again, and if we could, we would not always do better. Even the future takes its shape beyond us. All that we have to make good on is the space of the present [. . .]. These occasions of presence gain the self the only immortality it will ever know, for in a very real sense they lie outside of time and do not ‘count’ in (are not counted by) it. (89)

This poetic breathing space, Cameron concedes, is short-lived and the speaker must return to the flux of time but it is the idea of presence, a space freed of time and probability that lends poetry its power, a theme famously explored by the British Romantics in their meditations on poetic intransigence. “Paradoxically,” as Gelpi puts it, “poems such as Emily Dickinson wrote transcended the present by fastening upon it, and

fastened upon the present in order to transcend it. The sharp focus did, in a certain sense, fix the flux” (104). Dickinson’s strong-arm tactics, juggling spatial and temporal dimensions as we have observed in both poems, defamiliarize our conventional responses and “provide us with the connections that, incapable of making ourselves, we can at least recognize” (Cameron 46). Poems reveal inner changes that are otherwise subtle, obscured or incomprehensible, and Dickinson certainly reminds us that the world is made up of small and inner, as much as of macro-historical, changes. Her plebian touch is not so much myopic or even domestic as it is focused and charged with immensity, vast in its detail.

The perspectival challenge of representing a threshold moment forms the subject matter of what has rightly been called one of Dickinson’s finest--and strangest--poems. Here she stages a temporal and ontological crisis:

There’s a certain Slant of light,
 Winter Afternoons –
 That oppresses, like the Heft
 Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
 We can find no scar,
 But internal difference,
 Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
 ‘Tis the Seal Despair –
 An imperial affliction
 Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
 Shadows – hold their breath –
 When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
 On the look of Death –. (P. 258)

At first glance, we observe two separate but interlinked spheres: the terrestrial and ethereal. De Man's analysis of the Romantic oxymorons in three key sublime passages by Rousseau, Wordsworth and Hölderlin is of relevance here. He points to the strange juxtaposition of terrestrial and ethereal imagery as the "passages describe the ascent of a consciousness trapped within the contradictions of a half-earthly, half-heavenly nature" (76). This marks a Romantic-era literary shift, he believes, in which poets usurp the diaphanous realms, no longer relying on a sensuous, earth-bound imagination. That is to say, words themselves take on a materiality instead of trying to represent material objects. By implication, De Man locates the sublime in poetic discourse and not in nature itself. Far from pantheistic, Romantic poetry "marks instead a possibility for consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship with the outside world" (76). His postmodern sensibilities aside, De Man's observations address a broad Romantic-era preoccupation with poetic process. Dickinson also mediates between earthly and heavenly spheres. She oscillates, on one side, between the obduracy of place, underscored in the linear isolation of "Winter Afternoons - " as well as a ponderous sound-sense in "the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes," and the ethereal realm of "Heavenly Hurt," formalized in the soundless "ar" and "air" assonance of her aural puns, "scar" resonating in "meanings are" and "air" in "despair," on the other. The poet is mediating between the spheres here, between the heavy materiality of light on a winter afternoon and the ethereal ("Sent us of the Air - ") source of that material moment.

Although Dickinson seems to be describing the autonomous effects of landscape, personified as overwhelming in the characteristic negative sense of the Romantic sublime, the mediating stanzas two and three talk of a human state of rupture, possibly

depression which has been described as severe psychic pain without a palpable physical trace. Bracketed by nature's affective powers in the first and last stanzas the ethereal sphere of the poet's consciousness stands as the puissant place of "internal difference, / Where the Meanings are". Sandwiched between the external, consciousness is literally (in this poem's formal limitations) effected by the landscape and its "Slant of light" which finds its human equivalent in "internal difference." Dickinson often declared a preference for the indirect perspective ("Tell all the Truth but tell it slant - / Success in Circuit lies" [P. 1129]) and the linguistic sign of the slanted line (/) may for her have been a more direct line to the truth than head-on targeting. Certainly in this poem, human, ethereal and terrestrial spheres share a quality of obliqueness. All are interconnected by the character of change and difference they share. Even the landscape, usually so autonomous in Dickinson's poems, strangely becomes altered and overawed as it "listens" and responds to this light and "Shadows – hold their breath -"--as if to suggest the complete inversion of the Romantic sublime. The landscape, the winter "everyday," strangely displays all the symptoms of the human subject in sublime transit.

However, the landscape is not, of course, the poem's final preoccupation and, as Cameron has observed, in Dickinson's oeuvre "entire landscapes can seem like indirect renderings of something larger of which they are a mere part" (Cameron 5). The poem's final analogical layer becomes clearer in the attention the fourth stanza pays to the invisible and ungraspable itself, namely the passing of time: "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death - ". The poem addresses the coming and going of a moment, the excruciating intensity of an instant, ethereal and about to change. In turn, this representation of a moment in time becomes a complicated metonymic figure for

death, which can only be circumscribed as “internal difference” and an unteachable “Seal Despair”. Ultimately, the poem’s ambitious task is to *represent* the moment of awareness that time does pass and death is the final outcome; it uses landscape prosthetically to this end. Thus, rather than conventionally addressing nature as a symptom of the sublime in the Burkean empirical ideal, Dickinson figures the sublime itself, coming as close as possible to representing the unrepresentable and abyssal, namely the sheer overwhelming and unnatural thought of an end to our lives that the moment in all its fixity paradoxically discloses. While the internal-external dialectic figured through images of self and landscape are still present, now in the interiorized horror of absolute exteriority visiting itself upon us in death, we must see that this is no nature poem in the regardful sense still entertained by the British Romantics. Dickinson has taken the Romantics’ explorations of self through nature to a different plane, both excruciatingly interior but also vastly collective and trans-cultural in significance and contained within the nearly banal familiarity of quotidian winter. If Dickinson articulates one general truth about the everyday it is that all materiality, including nature, is in a state of limbo, bound by a time that will change, and the “internal difference” or schizophrenia of seeing that thought through to its end forms the poem’s tricky subject.

Even stronger in its paradoxical utterances, Dickinson’s poems on pain often abstractly relate the sublime and trauma. In the following poem, pain and the sublime are directly linked in a typical inversion of the conventional view:

Through what transports of Patience
 I reached the stolid Bliss
 To breathe my Blank without thee
 Attest me this and this –
 By that bleak exultation
 I won as near as this

Thy privilege of dying
 Abbreviate me this -. (P. 1153)

Both Bloom and Weisbuch confess that such poems are baffling because they take Dickinson's strangeness, her sceneless, anti-mimetic tricks, to the extreme. Tougher than analogical poems in which objects in time and space (fireflies, spiders, birds) allow themselves to be read metonymically as aspects of human concerns, this poem trades in the pure abstractions of pain and loss. Even the absent object of her love is not personified or even gendered in that detached "Thy privilege of dying". Such a poem then results in what Weiskel has called the reader's sublime, a baffling encounter with a string of complex signifiers. One by one, the oxymorons cancel one another out, for how can patience be sublime and bliss stolid? Can a "blank" attest anything? And how does "Attest me this and this" mirror "Abbreviate me this," as they do grammatically, if their meanings are mutually exclusive? The poem is thus difficult to read because the speaker leaves us with no signified behind a string of mutually destructive signifiers: a "Blank" is all that is left us and the poem allegorizes its message of "internal difference" and ontological doubt through strict economy of form.

When Dickinson sounds out the rhythmic proximity of bliss and a byss in this poem, she registers an affinity Burke had claimed was itself a necessary condition for sublime kinesis. In fact, Burke seems to write about pain and pleasure in the same breath: both move the subject from a state of indifference and the tedious randomness of temporal succession to heightened acuity, tautologically inscribing it as a symptom of the sublime. Burke's use of the passive voice underscores the technical simultaneity of sublime transport and pain or pleasure: "The human mind is often, and I think it is for the most part, in a state neither of pain nor pleasure, which I call a state of

indifference. When *I am carried* from this state into a state of actual pleasure, it does not appear necessary that I should pass through the medium of any sort of pain” (30, my emphasis). Both pain and pleasure move the self to greater heights of consciousness. He goes on to write that “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible . . . is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). Burke is not alone in ascribing sublimity to pain, absence or loss. The sublime is an abyssal image, Weiskel notes, for the “falling away from what might be seized, perceived, known” (24-5): a trope for the unrepresentable and unspeakable itself.

In other poems on suffering, Dickinson often refers to the conscription of time during crisis: “Pain – expands the Time - ” and “Pain contracts – the Time” she writes in one (967). Unlike other events in life, pain has no narrative beginning and end but feels intense and compressed, seemingly without end. It cannot therefore be framed by one’s historical experience, or so it appears to the victim immersed in the suffering: “Pain – has an Element of Blank – / It cannot recollect / When it begun – or if there were / A time when it was not – “ (P. 650). The compression of time, a quality shared by the sublime of bliss *and* of trauma, fixes the flux of time. Instead of narrative progression, Dickinson’s lines multiply the present tense, reiterated four times in the span of this brief poem in the words “this and this.” No wonder, then, given the acuteness of pain, that transport feels like patience or an absence of forward movement, and that bliss seems stolid and inanimate. Dickinson is representing the immediacy of pain (“Attest me this and this,”) and the end of narrative time (“Abbreviate me this - ”). By invoking the vocabulary of the sublime, Dickinson is able to represent an affinity between the mechanics of “Transport”

and pain and let trauma stand without attempting to resolve the poem's inherent discomfort. While Dickinson had reiterated the phenomenological proximity of the Elysian and the Stygian sublime throughout her career ("Is Bliss then such abyss" [P. 340]) here she no longer merely articulates the kinship intellectually but actually manifests it materially in the figure of a blank. As Weisbuch notes, Dickinson's sceneless poems "posit no specific situation which occurs apart from language. . . . Insofar as Dickinson's transportation of meaning does not revolve around a situation, they form the situation. An understanding of what the poet is doing with her language constitutes our only recourse for an understanding of the poem's drama" (24).

Once again, Dickinson writes about the act of naming the unnamable and rendering it visible. And by wrestling with the language to express pain she manages to articulate the blank. Instead of living a blunt, experiential lack there stands now a poem: the blank has been filled in with the materiality of text, widening its scope to a wider world of readers in whom the "heft" of Dickinson's words may resonate. Poetic process is thus a form of Aufhebung or supersession of pain and trauma and becomes, in effect, a new practical sublime of powerful affirmative leaps materialized through aesthetic craft (poiēsis). Dickinson's talent for naming interiority is her mark of greatness as a poet, since naming elevates the abbreviated self into the social realm of linguistic consensus beyond the local scope of isolated writerly practice (Cameron 28). While a poem about personal pain may seem intensely private, even solipsistic, it is nevertheless open to a wider interpretive community. And, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, all aesthetic work has a cultural foundation, for "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so

that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.” If it is true that “poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience of peers” (Bernstein 23), readers can recognize Dickinson’s intensely personal sublime which underscores the undifferentiated and non-narratable logic of pain and pleasure in succession. Capturing random, everyday seriality in the measured non-narrative sound and logic of poetry, Dickinson represents the absence of narrative progression in the life of the bereaved. And, in the process, the poem also captures something of the routine life we all recognize. Dickinson demonstrates the sublimity in that most unlikely and unexpected of places: everyday life.

Finally, we must consider Dickinson’s radical and assertive self-inscribed divinity, so contrary to many women’s acquired self-image, and its implications for our understanding of Dickinson’s work both as a woman writer and as an agent in her culture as a whole. Like Emerson and Whitman, Dickinson attests the poet’s godlike nature, here by conflating the magnificent aurora borealis with poetic effort, and her poem reads on many levels like an aesthetic manifesto:

Of Bronze – and Blaze –
 The North – Tonight –
 So adequate – it forms –
 So preconcerted with itself –
 So distant – to alarms –
 An Unconcern so sovereign
 To Universe, or me –
 Infects my simple spirit
 With Taints of Majesty –
 Till I take vaster attitudes –
 And strut upon my stem –
 Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
 For Arrogance of them –

My splendors, are Menagerie –
 But their competeless Show

Will entertain the Centuries
 When I, am long ago,
 An Island in dishonored Grass –
 Whom none but Beetles, know. (P. 290)

Announcing her subject in the sparseness of single words bracketed by dashes, and aurally by the trumpeting sounds of iambic dimeter and alliteration, the splendor of the Northern Lights gains sovereignty on the page, simultaneously eliciting and confirming the sense Dickinson wishes to convey behind her formal choices. Before long, however, we are in the terrain of the analytical and contemplative voice of the speaker and the movement that takes place in the first stanza is from the autonomy of the natural event, “so adequate,” to the poet herself, moved by the sublime moment to a higher plane. The actual subject from then on is not the Northern Lights but the poet whose “simple spirit” is expanded by the sublime, both in its natural and subsequent poetic incarnations. As Charles Anderson reminds us, there is a crucial difference in tone between the two creative realms. Whereas the aurora is described with genuine awe, the lines describing poetry contain “Taints” of irony, even mockery. Editorial tampering, he remarks, changed “Taints of Majesty” to “Tints” in keeping with a more conventional Romantic view of the poet’s godlike powers that Dickinson here did not wish to convey (51). She takes a stand against the dangers of a high-Romantic sublime which infects the poet with an overdeveloped ego, ultimately divorcing him from the lifeblood of the earth and the common people: “Till I take vaster attitudes - / And strut upon my stem - / Disdaining Men, and Oxygen, / For Arrogance of them - ”. In this rejection of man severed from the lifeblood (“oxygen”) of nature like a stemless flower, we are reminded of Wordsworth’s London (Prelude Bk. 7) in which street spectacles replace nature to perverse and

dehumanizing effect (“All freaks of Nature, all Promethean thoughts / Of Man”) before the “ennobling Harmony” of nature’s more permanent forms returns to calm the poet.

Finally though, and with less misgiving than Wordsworth’s invective against the “mind-forged manacles” of the city, Dickinson does a double turn and declares the middle ground of the poet who *must* engage with the world, a sentiment realized, as we have seen, in her famous poem “This is my Letter to the World / That never wrote to me.” Far from a recluse, Dickinson encourages engagement with the world, both in its natural splendor and its everyday manmade bustle: “My Splendors, are Menagerie,” a word that refers in her usage to a travelling circus, the biblical Ark or, more generally, social spectacle (Anderson 52). Her poetry is a performance, though not on the same scale as the natural spectacle’s “Competeless Show”. The antecedent to “their Competeless Show” is ambiguous though, and Dickinson points the line in two directions: her function as a poet as well as nature’s “Splendors”. Dickinson frequently alluded to the posterity of poetic work, and a ‘meta’ poem such as this one would bear this in mind. Although Dickinson herself will be obliterated, food for “beetles,” her work will “entertain the Centuries” just as the lights will. Or, as she iterates it elsewhere:

The Poets light but Lamps –
 Themselves – go out –
 The Wicks they stimulate –
 If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns –
 Each Age a Lens
 Disseminating their
 Circumference -. (P. 883)

“The drama,” Anderson notes, “is enacted in brief compass, the poet standing on the earth’s surface, glancing up, then down, then within to measure her creative potential”

(53). Dickinson's cryptic "Circumference thou Bride of Awe" (P. 1620) gains in clarity when read against a poem in which we can trace the poetic vocation from sublime origin to incarnation of sublimity itself. The work of the poet (Circumference) and awe are mutually supportive and even constitutive in precisely the way Dickinson's nuptial imagery suggests.

Dickinson thus assaults our culturally inherited perceptions, wrestling with objects and words to find awe and deity in the local and confined spaces of the present. A house, a basket, a room reconfigured as nature, firmament and heaven alerts us to the possibilities of transcending the social boundaries of time and space. Her style of dialectical reversal, which finds expression when circumference becomes center, the plebian becomes divine, minutiae becomes colossal, and absence becomes presence is a more effective tool against social limitations than the subjective feminist script often ascribed to her. And even if "such a world existed only in her saying it--that is, only in the transcendent ordering of art" (Gelpi 88)--it goes without saying that this aesthetic intervention of defamiliarization has a wider social scope, enduring to initiate new generations of readers in effective readings of otherness.

The American Sublime provides a context for Dickinson's non-conformist stance, allowing her to be read in a tradition of male and female poets and thinkers as a whole, rather than an exemplary, curiously late-twentieth century feminist poet, an approach which has led to the romanticizing of women's attitudes toward the sublime in the nineteenth century. The ideology of self-reliance worked not only against but also ultimately for feminist practice in that it created a language to break from the past and its authority over women. An analysis of Dickinson's systems of difference, inherently

manifested in her radical use of language and difficulty of form, and extrinsically manifest in her dialogue with dominant cultural views of the sublime, enable her to reassess the role of the poet and the position of women in a society whose palpable restrictions she nevertheless resists. To be sure, Dickinson does radically alter, as Diehl and others have shown, her predecessors' views of the sublime, but this departure stems from a shared tradition of non-conformity to authority. In nineteenth-century American letters, we find an ambitious, individual sublime of "outdoing, overdoing, or outmoding existing terms" (Wilson 6) which must be the starting point for any historically-based analysis of Dickinson's sublime.

Such a historically centered reading of Dickinson's sublime allows us to champion the achievements of her poetic practice precisely by not imposing parameters of separatist doctrine around women writers. In fact, revisionist thinking on the "separate spheres" theory has recently begun to question the absolute marginalization of women in nineteenth-century history, and we are now beginning to examine the interconnection of men and women in the making of nineteenth-century history, particularly in the culture of letters.⁵ Only once we understand how female agency has widened the playing field to a more inclusive cultural base can we truly appreciate the kinds of interventions, often questioning and oppositional, that women writers have made in the world.

Notes

1 For my discussion of the "feminine sublime," see chapter one. Anne Mellor and Barbara Freeman oppose masculine paradigms of the sublime on grounds that uphold rather than refute biological essentialisms, which, I argue, is counterproductive to the objectives of feminist theory. To insist on a self-less sublime as an extension of femininity is itself an act of limitation that Dickinson's aesthetic theory of questioning boundaries would most likely not accommodate.

2 For an example of a stimulating and ongoing debate between men and women in nineteenth-century New England, see Christina Zwarg's Feminist Conversations. Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading. Zwarg persuasively argues that Fuller and Emerson enjoyed a mutually formative, intimate epistolary relationship. In particular, Fuller's ongoing debate with Emerson about marriage reform demonstrates the kinds of dialogue that existed over issues pertaining to both men and women. In ways that must redefine our notions of separate spheres, discourses about social reform, nature and other topics of broad interest were grounds for meaningful exchange, both personally and on a more abstract literary level, between male and female writers.

3 All references to Dickinson's poems follow Thomas H. Johnson's arrangement in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson and are numbered accordingly.

4 See, for example, John Baillie's "An essay on the sublime" (1747) which reinforces a strict binary opposition between the small and the large: "A flowery vale, or the verdure of a hill, may charm; but to fill the soul, and raise it to the sublime sensations, the earth must rise into an Alp, or Pyrrhenean, and mountains piled upon mountains, reach to the very heavens [. . .] (88). Edmund Burke registers a similar bias for the whole over parts. Believing the succession of eye-movements needed to take in a host of tiny parts and ornamental detail to be disruptive and therefore not suited for producing the singular sublime effect, he vests sublimity in uniformity: "We ought to look for the cause why a rotund has such a noble effect. For in a rotund [. . .] you can no where fix a boundary; turn which way you will, the same object seems to continue, and the imagination has no rest" (68).

5 For an account of revisionist gender theories, see Separate Spheres No More. Gender Convergence in American Literature, 1830-1930, ed. Monika M. Elbert. Two essays in the collection are of particular interest to Dickinson scholars: Lucinda L. Damon-Bach's "To be a 'Parlor Soldier': Susan Warner's Answer to Emerson's 'Self-Reliance'" (29-49) and Katharine Rodier's "'Astra Castra': Emily Dickinson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Harriet Prescott Spofford." (50-72). Both present the idea that literary women working in the nineteenth century were engaged in a larger cultural and political debate than has been accounted for by separatist feminist theory. The implications of their arguments are the same as mine: if men and women were engaged in an ongoing dialogue it is necessary to ask how such discourse affects feminist practice in general, and female agency of women poets in particular. Marlon Ross' The Contours of Masculine Desire presents the argument from a different national and historical angle, focussing on the confluence of influence between men and women in Romantic-era British literature.

Chapter Four:

“Vesuvius at Home”: Emily Dickinson’s Practice of Everyday Life.

Volcanoes be in Sicily
 And South America
 I judge from my Geography – Volcanoes nearer here
 A Lava step at any time
 Am I inclined to climb –
 A Crater I may contemplate
 Vesuvius at Home. (P. 1705)

There can be no doubt that for women like Emily Dickinson and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, tied to their ancestral homes, the house was an ambivalent sign. As self-described public poets, speakers for nature and the world (“This is my Letter to the World”), experience, nature and the world existed at the far side of the threshold of domesticity. At the same time, we surmise from autobiographical records that the home was also an enabling space of writerly production, certainly welcome for writers of their ilk. It is something of this dialectic of homing and roaming, of being both at home and transcending the home, that the above poem captures and that informs the thesis of this chapter. The pedestrian--the inclination to “climb”--in Dickinson is always metaphorical and allegorical, an image for the work of pushing pen on paper and of creating the sublime. In Dickinson’s case, travel and exploration are folded into an imaginative and aesthetic act, with the sublimity of the poetic process always foregrounded. The Latinate “Vesuvius” sounded out in close proximity to “Home” creates a stylistic paradox that bespeaks Dickinson’s characteristic juxtapositions of the foreign or possible with the closer confines of the local and domestic. In her poetic practice, and even in her lifestyle choices (in that famous retreat from society to the room in the house), Dickinson lived a local provincial life that nevertheless produced a visionary and expansive poetry. It is

through her minute attention to the everyday and to the sublime immersed there that Dickinson effects change and possibility in a world often delimiting to women.

In her famously aphoristic statement on art, “Nature is a Haunted House – but Art – a House that tries to be haunted” (L. 459a), Dickinson deploys the architectural image of the house, that most everyday of places, in the lives of nineteenth-century New England women especially, for what is deemed the exact *opposite* of the everyday. Art is artifice. It “tries to be haunted,” and defamiliarizes what, she claims, is not an easy or even natural place to begin with, the “Haunted House” that “Nature” is. In her commitment to the creative process rather than the final product, the affinity for difference and unsettlement of the given and ordinary that also marks the sublime, Dickinson achieves a quietly proto-feminist poetry that, though local and confined, makes a difference because it revises our views of the ordinary and the status quo. If Bloom’s dictum, “the Sublime persuades us to give up easier pleasures for more difficult and painful ones” (297) is to be believed, then perhaps Dickinson’s effort at poetic labor marks that enhancement of the quotidian that could more easily and uncritically be left as is. As such, Dickinson’s sublime may be seen, albeit in non-tendentious ways, to embody a larger political ideal. As former American poet laureate Robert Pinsky reminds us:

‘All poetry is political.’ The act of judgment prior to the vision of any poem is a social judgment. It always embodies . . . a resistance or transformation of communal values . . . Even when Emily Dickinson defines the ultimate privacy of the soul, she does it in terms that originate in social judgment: ‘The soul selects her own Society - / Then – shuts the Door.’ (97, 8)

Exactly what view of society Dickinson wrote against we cannot know for sure. But, to judge by the need for capaciousness here and in many other poems, we can surmise that Dickinson feared the cramping of society and sought an informed freedom and liberating

vastness. Needless to say, such cramping extended, though not exclusively, to the circumscribed lives of women in the nineteenth century.

In fact, feminist literary criticism in the 1970's frequently pointed out that nineteenth-century texts by women share a remarkably ubiquitous representation of enclosed and restrictive spaces, a symptom of cultural pressures. Thus the representation of houses in women's texts was most often linked to an endemic patriarchal plot of prescription. Gilbert and Gubar write:

Literally, women like Dickinson, Brontë, and Rosetti were imprisoned in their homes, their father's houses; indeed, almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men's houses. Figuratively, such women were . . . locked into male texts, texts from which they could escape only through ingenuity and indirection. It is not surprising, then, that spatial imagery of enclosure and escape, elaborated with what frequently becomes obsessive intensity, characterizes much of their writing. (83)

When biographical and artistic expressions are unproblematically aligned it becomes harder to discern the various uses women made of their material circumstances. While some of Dickinson's poems do, indeed, lament domestic limitations and may be read as a wider indictment of female confinement, many others swing the image in the opposite direction, to an adequate trope for freedom and possibility ("I dwell in Possibility"). Such applications of the house image are so entrenched in Dickinson's oeuvre that they cannot simply slide into negative reflection of patriarchal bonds.

More recently, the necessary separation of gender from other contingencies in order to make it visible has been augmented by the recognition among historians that the discourse of domesticity was more complex than perhaps one cared to imagine. For women of slave backgrounds, for example, it became a prerogative to resist working as field laborers and in the home instead, and women often proudly identified their houses

as places of work (Cott xxiii). The representation of domestic signs in literature has also recently undergone reevaluation as the ambivalence of houses as both restrictive and conducive for women has been brought into the foreground. In the Gothic tradition, enclosed spaces function ambivalently both to lock the victim in and to keep a threat, often figured as a quasi-incestuous father-figure, out (Berglund, Wardrop). When Dickinson declares, “Doom is the house without a Door . . .” (P. 475), it is a claim Virginia Woolf reiterates when she notes “a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself” (110). Domestic space can be empowering as well.

Champion of the local and everyday as a site of creative and politically efficacious activity, de Certeau’s theory of space underscores such a view of space as relative, contingent and subjective, created by the subject’s movement through time and “user-friendly,” in the politically tactical sense of the word:

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. . . . In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into space by walkers. (117)

When space is linked to movement, the pedestrian creates meaningful space according to subjective needs and perspectives. With the onset of modernity, for example, and increased alienation in impersonal urban spaces, the stroller or “flaneur” made sense of the alien maze, reading the city and indulging in what Anke Gleber has called the “art of looking,” translating space into an “aesthetics of the everyday” (ix) or “the *product* of an activity” (Morris 3). Similarly, Henri Lefebvre suggests that space is always place and motion: “Is not space always, and simultaneously, both a field of action (offering its extension to the deployment of projects and practical intentions) and a basis of action (a

set of places whence energies derive and whither energies are directed)?" (191). Even Gaston Bachelard's textbook phenomenological analysis of space, in which he makes no distinction between the physical house and one's inner mind-map of it, transforming, for example, childhood homes into oneiric images through memory and daydreams, believes spaces are corporeal and mentally created through some form of motion: "Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work" (12).

Creating space, de Certeau argues, allows the kinds of leeway and creative input (modus operandi or mētis for the Greeks) to resist determining and often invisible power structures that Foucault, for one, had identified. Unlike Foucault, de Certeau is interested less in cataloguing the everyday institutions of power that situate the subject than in tracing the various everyday ways in which the weak in society manipulate the dominant language or hegemonic system by changing the given order from within, a reading in keeping with Nietzsche's endlessly creative "will to power". Even apparent victims of any given order, he notes, have at their disposal various tactics by which they can manipulate space and other signifying practices, reinventing them to suit their needs and disrupting the inherited perspective. And, since "space is not innate or inert, measured geometrically, but an integral and changing part of daily life, intimately bound up in social and personal rituals and activities" (Rendell 102), even everyday spaces like houses and everyday activities like walking can become sites of meaning.

Place and motion are intimately bound up for Dickinson, and it is no coincidence that spatial imagery, particularly of houses and of walking or crossing thresholds, abounds in her work. A glance at S. P. Rosenbaum's concordance of most frequently used words in Dickinson shows that the topic preoccupied Dickinson almost as much as

her more stock poetic themes. Words like “home” and “house” recur 86 and 74 times respectively, and the word “feet” appears 83 times (after “I” [1682], “god” [130] and nature [110]). Through her poiēsis and the uses she made of familiar spaces, Dickinson renovated and reinvented her world and its socially imposed restrictions, including those on women. She does so, however, through the complexities of her craft and not, as has been claimed, through an identity politics which, ironically, restricts her scope and her reach.

In fact, Dickinson frequently invokes spatial imagery to describe her attitudes toward poetry, as in this famous poem:

I dwell in Possibility –
 A fairer House than Prose –
 More numerous for Windows –
 Superior – for Doors –

 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
 Impregnable of Eye –
 And for an Everlasting Roof
 The Gambrels of the Sky –

 Of Visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise -. (P. 657)

Characteristically, the poem rests on a central paradox: while one can dwell in houses it is hard to conceive of living “in Possibility” with its lack of a material base. Defined solely through a string of superlatives, we know only what poetry is not. It is defined against “Prose” and in terms of conduits to something unknown, windows and doors leading to the beyond. It is worth examining the opening lines of the poem because they so compactly associate the theme of time (to “dwell” suggests a lingering, a passing of time) and the aesthetic (“fairer,” repeated in “fairest”). By the final stanza, we understand the

sense of dwelling as a life-long “Occupation” – something that takes up and broadens an otherwise narrow life. Based on etymological readings of the word techne (to make or to build) as it relates to dwelling, Martin Heidegger assigns phenomenological value to the subjunctive “to dwell,” suggesting that it describes our situatedness in the world and, moreover, an essentially *poetical* way of being: “Poetry is what really lets us dwell. But through what do we attain to a dwelling place? Through building. Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (111). Heidegger gleans his concept of poetical dwelling from a line in Hölderlin’s poem “In Lovely Blueness” ‘In lieblicher Bläue’: “Full of merit, yet poetically, man / Dwells on this earth” ‘Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet / Der Mensch auf dieser Erde’ (112).

Material structures--houses, and, metonymically women’s spheres--are transformed by Dickinson into the kind of poetical dwelling Hölderlin and Heidegger describe, as Dickinson overlays one structure (the material house with its rooms and roofs) with another (the intangible and infinite). In the second stanza the vocabulary of architecture confirms the sense of poetic or otherworldly dwelling. In a biblical society, Dickinson would have been conscious of the conventional architectonic tropes for the aftermath, and they find a place in her art in such lines as, “In my father’s house are many mansions . . .” (L. 752a), or “Safe in their Alabaster chambers – Untouched by Morning / And untouched by Noon - / Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection - / Rafter of satin, / And roof of stone . . .” (P. 216). However, Dickinson’s spaces are heuristically, not dogmatically, spiritualized. Her spaces are really non-spaces, undelineated or free of boundaries, since her rooms of Cedar trees cannot be broken into (they are “Impregnable

of Eye”) and her “Everlasting Roof” is the sky itself, rather than heaven with its “many mansions” or the finality of the grave with its solid walls.

In the closing lines Dickinson writes of collecting Paradise as if it were immediate and tangible (and we recall her line “For Earths, grow thick as / Berries, in my native town,” ready to be picked and gathered in her “Basket” [P. 352]). What takes her time, and keeps her occupied, is handicraft, poetic thinking or dwelling: “The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise.” That she is a receiver and shaper of words in a creative process that transcends her is a sentiment shared by many poets. Dickinson elsewhere refers to her poetic gift as a godsend, hand-collected in the sense of handicraft, handwriting and techne: “It was given to me by the Gods - / When I was a little Girl - / . . . I kept it in my Hand - / I never put it down - ” (P. 454). Calling her poetic dwelling’s “Visitors – the fairest” may also be a characteristic nod to her readers, suggesting a social dimension. Dwelling in Possibility and delineating an occupation that is so intensely heuristic and idiosyncratic may sound private, but it is rooted in the “spreading wide” of a social dimension.

In the following poem, Dickinson again uses the word “dwell” aesthetically, only to reimagine the bodily and spatial dimensions even more radically:

I would not paint – a picture –
 I’d rather be the One
 Its bright impossibility
 To dwell – delicious – on –
 And wonder how the fingers feel
 Whose rare – celestial – stir –
 Evokes so sweet a Torment –
 Such sumptuous – Despair –

I would not talk, like Cornets –
 I’d rather be the One
 Raised softly to the Ceilings –

And out, and easy on –
 Through Villages of Ether –
 Myself endued Balloon
 By but a lip of Metal –
 The pier to my Pontoon –

Nor would I be a Poet –
 It's finer – own the Ear –
 Enamored – impotent – content –
 The License to revere,
 A privilege so awful
 What would the Dower be,
 Had I the Art to stun myself
 With Bolts of melody! (P. 505)

Time and space in this poem are interconnected and entirely subjective, as we cannot place an objective handle on what it means to be a painting or to float “Through villages of Ether.” Each stanza begins quietly enough, with a negation, then a tentative subjunctive, building up to the magical or surreal and ending with tropes of the ethereal – “celestial” in the first stanza and “Villages of Ether” followed by the floating imagery of “pier” and “Pontoon” in the second. Against occupation (“I would not paint - a picture -”) she posits vocation, *being* something (“I'd rather be the One . . .”). The first two stanzas thus suggest a dreamy alternative to the actual vocation of poet that she knows best. She imagines the tactile sense of being the paint an artist employs to evoke an emotion, or the sounds resonating from an orator, floating through space invisibly. Compared to these “easy” and lofty art forms, the art of poetry is hard and harsh. To *be* a poet, to “own the Ear” induces, by turns, passion, powerlessness and satisfaction (she would feel “Enamored – impotent – content - ”); it is never soft and easy, as the previous stanzas had surmised for the other arts. Poetry is an art of extremes, she seems to suggest, and one that is procured at a high cost. Not available to everyone, it requires a costly “License” as well as a dowry, literally a bride price in the archaic turn of the word

“Dower”. However, the rewards are admirable, sublime even, as they bring sudden charges, “the Art to stun myself / With Bolts of Melody!” Dickinson frequently draws on the imagery of trade in her poems and here she suggests that ownership (“It’s finer – own the Ear - ”), and the higher cost involved, ultimately brings higher returns.

Being paint, a sound, or an ear demands a shift in perspective to imagined whole-body involvement and kinesis, thereby transcending the usual boundaries of space. If space is not absolute, but rather tied to the uses it is given, then movement through places, connecting and configuring them, constitutes lived space. As part of her overall project to prove the porousness between cultural and biological determinants of the sexed body, Grosz also challenges the notion of fixed, absolute space by questioning its autonomy. In tying the body to space and time, our concepts of reality, the corporeal is decidedly cultural and is prone to change and to historical contingency. Hence “space and time are not, as Kant suggests, a priori mental or conceptual categories that precondition and make possible our concepts; rather, they are a priori corporeal categories, whose precise features and idiosyncrasies parallel the cultural and historical specificities of bodies” (Grosz *Architecture* 32). Instead of describing the artist’s occupation as a static event, Dickinson transforms it into spatial and corporeal energies such as Grosz delineates. The effect is one of difference from the adhered-to perspective, or “the Art to stun.”

Similarly, Dickinson treats space kinetically through various pedestrian metaphors. More often than not, the pedestrian--as everyday a concept as there can be--serves as an empowering device. In the following poem, intense kinesis (captured in such diction as roaming and hunting) becomes a trope for poetic practice:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
 In Corners – till a Day –
 The Owner passed – identified
 And carried Me away –

And now We roam the Sovereign Woods –
 And now we hunt the Doe –
 And every time I speak for Him –
 The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
 Upon the Valley glow –
 It is as a Vesuvian face
 Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – our good Day done –
 I guard My Master's Head –
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
 Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
 None harm the second time –
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
 Or an Emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
 He longer must – than I –
 For I have but the power to kill
 Without – the power to die -. (P. 754)

As suggested in the pairing of the capital letters for personal and possessive pronouns (“We”, “He”, “My”, “His”) there is symmetry and direct intimate connection between the master who swept her away to a life of free roaming. She is empowered by his power, a fact formally endowed by the remarkable vigor and energy of the poem's rhythmic pace. The mastery is a natural one, since it is described as completing an already latent (“loaded Gun”) potential for fulfillment with sheer “pleasure” and affirmation of possibility as a result. Roaming and hunting--traditionally masculine imagery of

movement, action, search and conquest--underscore this speaker's association with life (her professional life as well) with the potential and unlimited.

In the ensuing stanzas, we witness the mastered speaker blossoming and her power of the word, her hidden Vesuvian sources of awe and creativity, being brought to the fore, so that the potentially disruptive forces no longer overwhelm her. Instead, she becomes the master guiding her mate's head in an image and choice of syntax ("Tis better than the Eider-Duck's / Deep Pillow – to have shared - ") which suggests power rather than a conjugal scene. Although we do not know whether Dickinson read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the monster who kills his creator's family and outlives him in an endless intercontinental pursuit comes to mind in that description of the "Yellow Eye" ("It was already one in the morning . . . when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" [Shelley 35]). Like the creator who cannot disavow what he has spawned, the relationship between master and empowered "monster" in this poem is an intimate one.

Given the association Dickinson has established between her poetic practice and the images invoked in this poem, I concur with the many critics who view this poem as not about, or restricted to, a human "master" who corresponds to the biographical one in her letters, but about her work and pleasure as a crafter or technician of words. Words, Dickinson often suggested, are potent: "She dealt her pretty words like Blades - " (P. 479), she writes, or "Infection in the sentence breeds . . ." (P. 1261). Not only do they kill, but they also outlive the individual. In a poem about twinning ("I than He" "He . . . than I"), Dickinson once again couples life's deeper pleasures and her work, reiterating

that poetry outlives the individual since it does not have “the power to die.” By framing herself and her “master” (the power of poetry) in terms of an intimate and irrefutable relationship, the poet invokes death as the final coupler of herself and her work, in the mythic-romantic tradition of the “Liebestod” (‘love-death’) enacted by Tristan and Isolde or Catherine and Heathcliff in their posthumous fidelities.

In the following poem, Dickinson describes the trauma of “great pain” in kinetic terms, once again invoking the everyday trope of walking. Here, pedestrian plodding stands in for dull numbing pain:

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 –. (P. 341)

There is a link between textual mobility, the metrical “feet” of syllables and stresses in a line, and experience, or the lack thereof in the non-narrative of “mechanical feet” treading vacant spaces. Dickinson implies that truth lies in the telling, as sense can only be made afterwards, when the victim is able to “recollect” that dreadful time and see, in hindsight, the narrative progression of “First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go -”. Formally, the poem resounds with its subject of grief, exuding heaviness in its languorous rhythm and elongated vowel sounds. “Tombs,” “Quartz” and “Hour of Lead”

are words appropriate for the sufferer's emotions, as is the ponderous ring of the line "This is the Hour of Lead - " and the density of the poem itself, describing, as it does, issues such as grief, memory and recovery in the span of twelve lines.

We know from her other poems that Dickinson links the compression of time with grief, having the speaker express the arbitrariness of time: "was it He, that bore, / And Yesterday, or Centuries before?" Similarly, movement becomes vagarious and directionless, stripped of the happy serendipity of positive engagement with the world, "The Feet, mechanical, go round - / Of Ground, or Ought - / A Wooden way / Regardless grown," she writes, as if to suggest the breakdown of the creative act itself, perhaps in reflection on a personal event in the poet's life following "great pain." It is important to remember Dickinson's customary association of feet with bliss ("Is Bliss then, such Abyss, / I must not put my foot amiss . . ." [P. 340]) and her repeated claims for the sublime in the act of pushing pen across page. Here, the image in both senses – as descriptive of emotional pain and of creative loss – breaks down into the mechanical non-narrative of mindless treading, both imagistically and formally. In the middle stanza, the unthinking "Wooden" motion that continues in states of spiritual numbness is suggested not only by the idea of actual feet functioning mechanically, without the guidance of the mind and will, but also by the steady iambic movement that proceeds dully without regard to ("Regardless" of) stanzaic shape or placement of rhyme (Small 106). The final stanza, meanwhile, seamlessly aligns both meanings, as "the Hour of Lead" points to the generalized work of grief and the narrative work of the laboring poet. If it is the Romantic poet's manifesto to recollect in tranquility, then this is surely the sense Dickinson assigns the leaden hour, "Remembered, if outlived." We realize that Dickinson

remembers, in detail and on our behalf, by finding the appropriate words, describing the indescribable and making sense of the arbitrary, and this return to order is mimicked in the recovery of a regular rhyme scheme after the dislocation of the one before (Small 106).

Dickinson's most famous poem, "Because I could not stop for Death," also describes death in terms of velocity. Announced in the plodding meter attenuating the horses' indifferent labor, we are death's involuntary passengers, riding along towards the gothic locus of this poem's organizing principle: the subterranean house, or tomb:

Because I could not stop for Death –
 He kindly stopped for me –
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
 And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For his Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess – in the Ring –
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
 We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
 The Dews drew quivering and chill –
 For only Gossamer, my Gown –
 My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
 A swelling of the Ground –
 The roof was scarcely visible –
 The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity –. (P.712)

The poet here demonstrates a remarkable largesse and acceptance in her attitude toward death, a stance established in no small part by the quotidian description of the event. The oxymoron that something as awful as death can in fact also be utterly mundane is similarly expressed in the following extract:

There's been a Death, in the opposite House,
As lately as Today –
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have – always –

The Neighbors rustle in and out –
The Doctor – drives away –
A Window opens like a Pod –
Abrupt – mechanically –

Somebody flings a Mattress out –
The Children hurry by –
They wonder if it died – on that –

..... (P. 389)

In both poems, death achieves its sting because of the juxtaposition of the most irregular and disruptive of events against the mechanical, everyday routine of opening windows, the comings and goings of people, or a carriage ride. In anticipation of Freud's famous word play on the "Unheimliche," Dickinson represents the uncanny nature of death, namely that that which is most intimate, familiar and homely, figured here in the close location of the "Opposite House" and in temporal proximity ("Today"), can inspire the most fear and horror. In the former poem, however, death is described as considerate and civil, and so convivial as to lead some critics to doubt whether the poem is about death at all. Death takes the role of equal partner, one to whom the speaker adjusts her own life-pace. As we know from other poems, one of Dickinson's favorite themes is transition, the sublimity of leaving. "I'd rather recollect a setting / Than own a rising sun . . . Because in going is a Drama / Staying cannot confer . . ." she writes (P. 1349), or

“Eden is that old-fashioned House / We dwell in every day / Without suspecting our abode / Until we drive away . . .” (P. 1657). In the poem at hand, one senses a momentous letting go and leaving of life, formally articulated and paced over the span of what, for Dickinson, is an uncharacteristically lengthy poem. She gradually lets go of her professional life in the unraveling of this event: “And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too.”

This is therefore a poem which figures movement on multiple levels: in the eyes of readers as they follow this perplexing carriage ride, of death taking the speaker for that final excursion, and of endless forthcoming motion suggested in that framing spiritual concept of “Immortality” in the first stanza and “Eternity” in the last. Whereas it seems like a lifetime passes her by, (“We passed the school . . . We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain . . .”), the simple twist of perspective (“Or rather – He passed Us - ”) contracts time, reminding us that life may seem long for schoolchildren immersed in it, but short from the perspective of another about to leave it.

The penultimate stanza is the only one that stops this flux of movement and time, and introduces a pause: “We paused before a House that seemed / A swelling of the Ground - ”. Death is an imagined house, as is suggested in the use of metonymy and strange inversion of signs. And it is the house, fully described with roof and cornice intact, that seems like “A swelling of the Ground” and not the mound of soil that takes center stage here. William Galperin is therefore surely right to stress the domestic absence articulated here (in the speaker of the conjugal home and pregnancy she forewent in favor of a life of poetry), and the poem is a letting-go of a lifetime’s worth of professional or writerly labor and leisure:

The poem . . . is both an assertion of the speaker's triumph in her 'labor' as well as an admission . . . that such triumph would have been impossible were it not for the renunciation of marriage and of the domestic sphere to which the speaker would have been consigned as a result--a sphere which in the penultimate stanza she likens specifically to a grave. (68)

It is interesting that the domestic structure Dickinson so often associates with the liminal and possible here retains this association despite the macabre context, as if to suggest that life continues even as one is facing death. Significantly, in the context of her other poems, the grave is not described as a "chamber," that restrictive enclosure she elsewhere associates with inaccessibility and gloom ("Safe in their alabaster chambers"), nor does the speaker enter the building, acting instead as an onlooker on her own burial. And the power of perspective, the mind's conduit of reality, is underscored in that final return to issues of flux: "Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet / Feels shorter than the Day / I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity - ". The perspective is thus not from one living inside a grave, or even from a house with windows looking out, but of perpetually riding towards something, in this case "toward Eternity." There is therefore no actual place in this poem, except the place of the mind as sites and sounds are continuously being passed by. "Centuries" and a "day" are on a par in the speaker's mind. She seems to suggest that Eden is protracted and local: present in the everyday, rather than distant and anticipated, as the doctrine of Christian eternity suggests, or a mythical "eclipse," as she once called her parent's God (L. 261). The final stanza thus brings eternity back to the day in which the speaker first became aware of her life's outcome, essentially compressing past and future time into one present and immensely meaningful moment. It suggests that everyday spaces of the present are valuable as places where fullness of time or "eternity" may be found or, in de Certeau's sense, in the use

and subjective honing of a life. The poem may therefore be read as an allegory of the sublime of everyday life.

As we have seen, interest in the local and everyday is frequently expressed through the image of walking, traveling or any manner of human movement, all repeated focal points in Dickinson's writing. In particular the image of mechanical footwork, the work of placing one foot before the other and the minute attention to feet (human and poetical) recurs. Although plodding repetition is often associated with the numbness of mourning and death in her poems, the affinity between the mechanics of perambulatory regularity and the work of writing suggests that Dickinson is always conscious of her craft, which was essentially an adaptation of the familiar hymn meter and short lyric form (Manson, Miller). We see this fascination with "mechanical feet" in a poem that draws an analogy between walking and the sublime, the latter, as we know, always acting as an element of poetic work and appreciation:

Is Bliss then, such Abyss,
I must not put my foot amiss
For fear I spoil the shoe?
I'd rather suit my foot
Than save my Boot –
For yet to buy another Pair
Is possible,
At any store –
But Bliss, is sold just once,
The Patent lost
None buy it any more –
Say, Foot, decide the point –
The Lady cross, or not?
Verdict for Boot! (P. 340)

This poem is curious for its commercial assessment of the sublime and its dialogic treatment of the quotidian (thrift) with the lofty ("Bliss"). The sublime in its Burkean form as a source of terror, the unknown, and "Abyss" is weighed carefully and finally

judged to be too costly. Throughout the poem, however, the speaker leans heavily in favor of precisely that pure reckless “Bliss,” figured in the striding foot. She even argues for the non-material and unique source of the sublime which “is sold just once” and cannot be mass-produced, a sentiment Margaret Fuller (at Niagara) and Emerson (on the European tour) shared when failing to respond to the stock sublime tourist spots, searching instead for authentic moments in undiscovered locations. Given the rhetorical set-up of this poem, the conservative call of the last line comes as a surprise. However, the choice to preserve her boot rather than risk it being spoiled in a moment of bliss has been made only because she respects what she is rejecting. The cost in terms of emotional investment is too high since bliss, as Dickinson keeps reminding us, is also abyss.

It is interesting that, at poem’s end, a specifically female subject is introduced. In contrast to the abstractions of before, the foot now suddenly belongs to a concrete “Lady,” a stress formally underscored by the poem’s climactic end-couplet effect in this 14-line poem: “The Lady cross, or not? / Verdict for Boot!” The image is one of a lady poised at the precipice of experience yet also burdened by a set of material considerations that she must weigh in her mind. Dickinson reiterates her concern about the cost of the sublime in the second stanza of P. 1679: “But Rapture’s Expense / Must not be incurred / With a tomorrow knocking / And the Rent unpaid - ”. If it is the poet’s work to dwell in rapture, this need must be checked against practical needs also, and so Dickinson incorporates quotidian concerns into the fabric of her poetry, juxtaposing the everyday and the lofty in interesting and novel ways.

In the following poem, Dickinson similarly shuttles between the quotidian and the sublime, once again invoking the image of walking and monotonous repetition to make

her point. The effect is a poignant social critique and possibly one of her more incisively proto-feminist texts:

How many times these low feet staggered –
 Only the soldered mouth can tell –
 Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
 Try – can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead – hot so often –
 Lift – if you care – the listless hair –
 Handle the adamantine fingers
 Never a thimble – more – shall wear –

Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber window –
 Brave – shines the sun through the freckled pane –
 Fearless – the cobweb swings from the ceiling –
 Indolent Housewife – in Daisies – lain! (P. 187)

Like the inefficacy of “feet mechanical go round,” these feet are described as unsure and lowly. Their owner walks for labor, not leisure--contrary to the combination (“my labor and my leisure too”) Dickinson had always enjoyed and which Jane Austen, most notably in her perambulatory heroine Elizabeth Bennett--had likewise championed. Unlike the stroller, wanderer or traveler, these feet have merely “staggered,” yet there is pathos in Dickinson’s empathic attention to the quotidian. The poem’s aesthetic and redemptive moment is carried out post mortem when the housewife’s perfunctory tasks are finally superseded by a sartorial bed of flowers, a moment the speaker clearly privileges over the arbitrary (and ultimately pointless) labor described before. Dickinson’s formal handling of the final line is telling. A hyphen halts the flow of the line, forcing a pause for effect. This is followed by a triumphant, and possibly defiant, exclamation point to underscore the elevation of the aesthetic over the mundane. Like Wordsworth’s Lucy, this woman is unseen and under-appreciated. But unlike Wordsworth’s subject, this woman’s laborious and tedious everyday is actually

foregrounded in a way which must surely have been innovative. A subtle critique of society, this woman's singular story stands in for the overlooked lives of women generally.

As we have seen, space, motion and walking recur imagistically in Dickinson's poems. Not a traveler herself ("To shut our Eyes is to Travel" [L. 354]), Dickinson placed great emphasis on flux and the forward propulsion of living in possibility. In a letter addressed to a friend, she includes this missive:

The Things that never can come back, are several –
 Childhood – some forms of hope – the Dead –
 Though Joys – like Men – may sometimes make a Journey –
 And still abide –
 We do not mourn for Traveler, or Sailor,
 Their routes are fair –
 But think enlarged of all that they will tell us
 Returning here –
 'Here!' There are typic 'Heres' –
 Foretold Locations –
 The Spirit does not stand -. (P. 1515)

In this dialectic of there-here, neither perceptual category can adequately be understood without the other and there is a mindfulness of the present won through the experience of its opposite, namely loss and departure. In the allegory Dickinson unfolds, "Joys" are like travelers whose tale is best appreciated through story-telling, after the experience itself has been lived, an apt description also of the poet's work and the art of writing the sublime: "We do not mourn for Traveler, or Sailor, / Their routes are fair - / But think enlarged of all that they will tell us / Returning here" (5-8). This poem is thus an allegory of the quotidian sublime in that intriguing use of the plural ("typic 'Heres'") for something as specific as the present. It is as if the masses resound in the individual voice: in her multiplication of "typic 'Heres'" we sense that "The Spirit does not stand" for

anyone and the “Locations” of the here and now are well rehearsed, “Foretold” and applicable to all. Being a “Traveler, or Sailor” is therefore akin to the life of one who has lived an enlarged life close to home. Local spaces are where lives gain meaning. Thus Dickinson’s poem enacts a certain symmetry at its poles: loss is balanced by a making sense of it through narrative, and an assurance that the present and local are necessary and efficacious places to be. Dickinson’s attraction to expansiveness, wherever it may be found, her constant invitation to “think enlarged” and to find one’s Vesuvius at home, are so enabling precisely because of their reach.

Thus, although she never shared a feminist consciousness in any programmatic sense, Dickinson’s innovative and dynamic treatment of familiar and domestic subjects creates an expanded account of who and what is important. By infusing the most local and close-at-hand spaces with the sublime, Dickinson effectively shifted the parameters around women and women’s sphere. It is through her “practice of everyday life,” her commitment to the centrality of language in creating the sublime, and her conflation of the local with the enlarged that Dickinson effectively charged and changed the world around her.

Chapter Five.

“The Practice of Everyday Life”: Writing the Quotidian Sublime in the Lyric

Poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff.

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848) acquired canonical status shortly after her death and is widely regarded as Germany’s preeminent nineteenth-century woman writer.¹ A woman of letters, Droste produced novellas—including The Jew’s Beech Tree (1842) (Die Judenbuche) which is widely regarded as a masterwork of German realism—as well as dramas, historical ballads and lyrical poetry during her life as an unmarried aristocratic woman living with an overbearing mother. Born into the landed gentry with its attendant privileges, she spent her childhood in the family’s picturesque ancestral manor house in rural Westphalia. Her fiscal situation, typical of the landed gentry in Germany during the turbulent post-Napoleonic Restoration era, was precarious and the restrictions of her personal freedoms as an unmarried woman significant. Despite an arch-conservative stance (perhaps in response to the pressures of the revolutionaries and a rapidly changing Germany after the Napoleonic Wars and the Vienna Congress of 1814-1815 [Botzenhart 25]), Droste was nevertheless alert to and critical of the social realities for women and registered this attunement in a number of her works.²

Droste felt both an allegiance to her set and an imprisonment by it, an ambivalence to which numerous feminist critics have responded recuperatively. But in the scramble to reassess Droste, feminist literary criticism has sometimes glossed over the primary modus operandi available to a writer like Droste: skilled poetic practice or craft, or, as Wolfson puts it, “aesthetic formation in all its particularities, densities, and complexities” (190). It is by virtue of Droste’s self-perception as a practitioner and

handler of words, and in particular her sublime attenuation of the everyday and commonplace, that she manages to register and recreate a more promising and capacious world than the one she actually inhabited.

The submission of poiēsis to the more pressing ideological demands of recent feminist thought is in no small part a response to a century of powerful rhetorical and biographical readings. Purely literary or biographical approaches to Droste have yielded a patronizing body of critique, one that obscures ideological contexts, including the gender discourse of the nineteenth and earlier centuries. Jost Hermand points to the paucity of historically and ideologically aware critical readings of Biedermeier-Romanticism (1800-1848) in German literature, particularly as it pertains to the lyric: “there is so much monographical ‘sensitivity’ and aesthetic infatuation with subjective expressions that extra-individual structures are completely obscured. Mörike and Droste in particular are mostly treated as ‘absolute individuals’ and compared, in their gentle interiority, to Rilke” (37). Not surprisingly, many such readings idealize and romanticize the poet: she is “the sensitive intellectual, her short-sighted blue eyes not contemplating the world but some inner vision” (Mare 17).

Posthumously, Droste’s literary estate fell victim to gendered formations and condescensions. Her exemplary status (she was after all an accomplished *woman* writer) was balanced always by a pressure to subsume “femininity” under the guise of “masculine” genius. Shoring up the public’s appreciation of Droste in a newspaper article, Levin Schücking (her friend, mentor and literary agent) defines her talent as a form of literary cross-dressing, an adoption of “masculine” creative powers: “This Westphalian minstrel . . . deserves the honor of being known as someone who brought

masculine expression, resolve, energy, brevity and a host of original thoughts and images to the world of female poetry” (“Dieser Westfälischen Sängerin . . . gebührt der Ruhm in die Fraunelyrik durchaus männlichen Ausdruck, entschlossene und energische Kürze und eine Fülle originaler Bilder und Gedanken gebracht zu haben’ [Woesler 53]). Schücking’s diction reflects personal and cultural attitudes towards women rather than Droste’s actual literary ambitions. She is believed to bring male rigor to inherently weak female writing: “We find her stranger than her sisters because her spirit truly possesses the genius of a man” (“Sie ist uns fremder als alle ihre Schwestern, denn ihr Geist hat wirklich die Genialität eines Mannes’ [Woesler 49]).³

In the twentieth century, gendered but non-feminist readings that lean more towards essentialism prevailed. As part of a popular and still widely disseminated series of literary biographies (Rowohlts Monographien), Peter Berglar can write that she “was no genial force of nature capable of destroying her social prisonhouse. In this regard, she always remained true to her upper class heritage and status of old maid” (9). At every turn, it seems, Droste is read in terms of her gender and innate feminine responses; “her answer to social and familial circumscription was immersion in the depths of the soul This means, however, that her answer to the pressures of her time and environment was a wholly feminine reaction: . . . she countered the limits . . . of a male, patriarchal world with a maelstrom of feminine creative powers” (Berglar 9).

Feminist literary criticism is hardly immune to a similar, if well-intentioned, essentialism. As a reading strategy, it duplicates the very polarizations it has critiqued, arguing that the masculine tradition was conceived as an impervious and monolithic structure hostile to women’s needs. By far the most common feminist readings of Droste

have been experiential, an exposition of female identity that situates Droste firmly within an embattled tradition of “women’s writing.”⁴ As one critic puts it, “the greatest cultural and literary achievement of women’s literature, especially of the lyric in the nineteenth century, lies in the fact that it restores a piece of women’s history, bringing the scattered female heritage into the present while pointing the way to the future” (Treder 28).

Earlier feminist readings of Droste examine the mutually constitutive practice of life and art in Droste (Niethammer and Belemann 7) and seek to reconstruct her work and life mainly in biographical background studies, creating what Felski criticizes as “simplistic homologies between text and gender” in the process (10). Such critics interrogate Droste’s texts for metaphors and images that point to this specifically feminine experience. Brigitte Peucker finds in her essay on the association of death and the imagination that Droste ubiquitously entertains the specifically feminine Ophelia motif of death by drowning. Similarly, Bruna Bianchi traces Droste’s obsession with liminality, her frequent metaphors of borders and transgressions, and reads them as extensions of the writer’s circumscribed life.

Comparative studies of Dickinson and Droste focus on the writers’ innate “femininity” and their attunement to regionalism--their respective attention to detail and local color, their sober, often minutely described view of nature that rejects the extremes of the Romantics or Transcendentalists (Brumm Regionalism). These comparative studies focus on thematic commonalities: the poets’ shared interest and implied critique of inherited Puritan and Catholic religious values (Brumm Religion), or their similar views on nature and on the quotidian, but they do not contribute much to the terms of the feminist debate as a whole.

Identity politics are a particularly resilient marker of difference for many feminist critics. Women writers' texts are seen to bear signs of internal fragmentation, the culturally induced identity crises and inner ambivalences arising from the fine balance women were forced to maintain between obedience to social expectations of femininity, on the one hand, and the will to write, on the other. A forerunner of this emphasis on identity politics is Doris Maurer's tellingly titled biography, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. A Life Of Dissent and Obedience (Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Ein Leben zwischen Auflehnung und Gehorsam) in which she examines the social harnesses on the writer's creativity. According to Maurer, Droste was embroiled in a "fascinating and, at the same time, irritating tension between revolt against the limitation of the female role and acceptance of it" (Frederiksen 119), a point similarly elaborated in Joyce Hallamore's "The Reflected Self in Annette von Droste Hülshoff's Work: A Challenge to Self-Discovery": "Her works express tormenting inner tensions resulting from the clash of her 'wilde Muse' with the restrictions imposed by her social position, her sex, and above all by her religion" (58). A distressed inner ambiguity is seen to plague Droste as she "sometimes . . . writes as a consciously female self, sometimes she colludes with the social limitations on women's experience by assuming a masculine persona. Her vacillation testifies to the difficulties as a woman who writes and whose aristocratic family alternately encourages and is embarrassed by her literary interests" (Howe Women's Writing 93). Likewise, Gertrud Bauer Pickar argues that Droste's phantastical constructs were the writer's means of resolving the ambivalence she experienced as a woman writer, a rift healed in the course of time: "Before her death in Meersburg on May 24, 1848, Droste had not only savored literary acclaim, but had also resolved the conflict

between social expectations and personal commitment to artistic expression with which she had long struggled” (xiii).

That socially induced inner ambivalences hampered Droste is not far off the mark. However, in the process of proffering a narrative of the female subject pitted against a hostile other, the vagaries of creative forces and a life of writerly practice are entirely obscured. To suggest that the very thought-structure and discourse of philosophy, for example, is to blame for debilitating identity complexes, as some critics suggest, is an example of an overly subject-centric reading. On these readings, the odds of achieving the kind of integrated self, “a coherent subject capable of growth and of knowing the phenomenal world” that Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers promote, is seen as an unachievable goal, since integration within society historically follows a “male paradigm:” “In a social order which decreed women’s ‘natural’ role to be in the home, securers of domestic bliss, and which had no plan for women with literary ambitions, an integrated self was an impossibility” (Friedrichsmeyer 171-3). Certainly, promotion of “natural law,” specifically Fichte’s and Kant’s suggestions that women are by their very nature incapable of reason, was a prevailing notion at the time, making it difficult for women to publish autonomously: “Women authors’ self-representation and literary activity were shaped by gender censorship that they were able to subvert only superficially by such means as public disclaimers, accommodation to male-defined standards, and anonymous or pseudonymous publications” (Becker-Cantarino 81). Thus women writers like Droste struggle with self and agency because of the values of selflessness and passivity inculcated in women: “In the nineteenth century a woman writer has little choice, and sometimes little desire, but to construct her identity within the

prevailing rhetoric of sexual difference, a difference that traditionally assigns her socially to the domestic sphere and aesthetically to the category of object (Howe Parnassus 25). To argue that the poet's function of "oppositional relationship between self and world"--of "poetic utterance"--is a condition women writers do not assume easily inasmuch as "both literary tradition and social habituation discourage women from experiencing the self as active subject, as a seeing, speaking, desiring self" (Howe 25-6), is to position Droste solely as a victim caught between social pressures and personal desires.

Elaborating this identity-oriented reading, feminist criticism has also identified blind-spots in (male) readings of Droste. In response to Winfried Woesler's three-volume critical anthology of Droste reception, Boetcher-Joeres notes that the "theorizing he does completely avoids Droste's name and her gender: it is apparently too specific a reference for him to make, and by generalizing, he returns to the generic male, to what he sees as the universally applicable conditions of canon formation, and thereby avoids the gender discussion that is necessary and appropriate whenever one writes or talks about a woman writer, or, for that matter, any writer" (52). The consensus that Droste wrote like a man worries some feminist literary critics who wonder about Droste's easy acquisition of canonical status:

I have . . . observed my own tendency to mistrust her precisely because of that status: the canon, after all, is such a male institution, in Germany and elsewhere, and so her presence in it somehow makes her suspect. . . . Maybe she is just a male in female dress . . . Her status makes her so much a part of their gang--even if her short-story fragment 'Ledwina,' with its experimenting on themes of women, creativity and madness, seems so clearly the work of a woman writer, even if some of her poems express the kinds of gender-specific frustrations and conflicts we have learned are typical of women writers. And so I approach her here with some trepidation, not to mention curiosity. (Boetcher-Joeres 35-7).

Attention to a separate female terrain certainly allows for clearer vision and re-vision of women's works. But it also obfuscates a malleable and multifaceted interchange of ideas across gender. This chapter traces the proto-feminist effects of writerly practice by a woman, championing not any one gender but closely paying attention to poetic craft as it creates "new ways of seeing" that charge the world in which a woman writer lived and worked. It is through everyday practice of writing and recreating the world as it had been scripted for them that a writer like Droste heuristically registers both difference and oppositionality.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu advances a concept of lived practice (habitus) as a means of establishing a measure of agency within society. A somewhat complex term adopted and developed by but not original to Bourdieu, a brief definition may be in order:

Introduced by Marcel Mauss as 'body techniques' (techniques du corps) and further developed by Norbert Elias in the 1930s, habitus can sometimes be understood as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledges that might be said to 'go without saying' for a specific group. ("Habitus")

In Bourdieu's treatment of the term, habitus becomes a "theory of action suited to reintroducing the inventive capacity of agents within structuralist anthropology" ("Habitus"). "The theory of practice as practice insists," he writes, "that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and . . . that the principle of this construction is . . . *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always constituted towards practical functions" (Bourdieu 52). Furthermore, habitus is immanent skill, a niche of habit, competence, even virtuosity which affords the subject an authentic and, above all, flexible and heuristic space for work, creativity and the practice of everyday

life: “*habitus*,” he notes, “ is a spontaneity without consciousness or will,” it is “embodied history, internalized as a second nature . . .” (56). This kind of spontaneous subjectivity allows for the possibility of impacting larger, non-human institutions such as global history and economics. Unassuming plain individuals can impact the world on a micro-historical scale precisely because they bring with them the inner rules and rhythms of “*habitus*” which may override or challenge superimposed orders (such as class and the impositions of an overarching economic force):

the *habitus*, which is constituted in the course of an individual history, imposing its particular logic on incorporation, and through which agents partake of the history objectified in institutions, is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions, to appropriate them practically, and so to keep them in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails. (Bourdieu 57)

Such a concept of crafting history in subjective and agential ways also attracts

Anthony Giddens:

To be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronologically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (14).

In other words, the “essentially transformational character of all human action, even in its most utterly routinized forms” (Giddens 117), is the locus for authentic change and agency.

In his attunement to the small, the ubiquitous and the everyday, De Certeau is clearly indebted to Bourdieu’s theory of action. Moreover, De Certeau’s alertness to human agency as a catalyst for change and his vision of social structures as interactive

rather than monolithically oppressive lends itself particularly well to the work of mid-nineteenth century women writers who were, after all, writing oppositionally in a time of gender conscription and before organized women's movements. If "popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline" as they have done, for example, for Indian victims of Spanish colonization in South America, then the sublime expression of the everyday we find in poets like Droste and Dickinson deserves closer attention for the political effects of their work. "Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often *made of* the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind" (de Certeau xiii). De Certeau's goal here is "to perceive and analyze the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life." And in a similar fashion, "stubborn, guileful, everyday practices," particularly as they manifest themselves in "specific events of poetic form," become the sites for authentic intervention by women (32).

Any reading strategy that claims the quotidian for its material must be both sweepingly democratic and utterly specific as it pays attention to the minutiae of everyday life and of words and lines on a page. It must also rid itself of essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity, since practice works across gender. If we follow Rita Felski's caveat that "the feminist critique of patriarchal values cannot occur outside ideological and social structures in some privileged space, but constantly interacts with the very framework it challenges" (59), then the reading of literary texts written by women begs for a framework of intertextuality (an analysis of the cross-over of texts

written by men and women in a particular historical period), and of interrelationship and mutuality between male and female actors often played out in friendships, conversations and epistolary relationships. Furthermore, such activity can be the instrument of oppositionality itself, even in the most humble practice of everyday life (of which Penelope's guileful spinning and unraveling of the shroud in The Odyssey is a trope). To overlook the possibility of locating critical thought in "practices of everyday life" is ultimately to overlook "the historically specific, complex, and contradictory nature of human subjects and the varying degrees of dissent, resistance, and potential for change which exist in particular social contexts" (Felski 61, 2).

Bourdieu's, Giddens' and de Certeau's cultural theories do, of course, raise the question of transfer from cultural theory to the literary text. Does literary action, the expressed desires of a poem's female speaker for example, constitute action and agency in precisely the manner implied in the theory of Bourdieu and Giddens? If action is founded in routinization, in the practice of everyday life, then does a representation of the everyday count as an effective intervention? Inasmuch as poems are situated in a particular social and cultural matrix, and inasmuch as they are read and responded to, and, most importantly, inasmuch as they defamiliarize the familiar, they can surely be said to evoke and even provoke. And in so acting, literature is a presence that has an unpredictable, random effect on the world, a "transformative capacity," (Giddens 15) and "may to various degrees transform or rework rather than simply replicate given ideological positions" (Felski 3,4).

Felski's vision for feminism is compatible with the aforementioned theories of action or lived practice. Feminist efficacy, she believes, rests with "use" and application

of language within a specific historical context rather than with programmatic and group-based opposition to an all-encompassing patriarchal ideology. It is worth quoting at length Felski's dialogic model since it registers, from a feminist standpoint, social alertness without folding into the more polarized forms of oppositionality:

It would be misguided to assume . . . that women's choices before the advent of feminism were always the result of an uncritical acceptance of an all-pervasive patriarchal ideology rather than motivated by a pragmatism faced with few viable social alternatives. . . . The significance of particular communicative practices needs to be located in the contexts of their use, in the functions they serve for particular social groups at specific historical conjunctures. . . . [M]eaning is necessarily derived from use; language constitutes a form of social interaction which presupposes publicly shared intersubjective meanings." (Felski 64-5)

Felski's pragmatic stance reminds us of Denise Riley's supposition that the term 'women' is an unstable concept, "a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned" (2) and therefore that polarized gender thinking is equally dubious: "That air of a wearily continuous opposition of 'men' and 'women,' each always identically understood, is in part an effect of other petrifications" (Riley 7). Instead, we would do well to alert ourselves to particular practices by women within particular contexts in order to arrive at a historically-grounded, proto-feminist understanding of women writers' contributions to the cultural scene at large.

In this introductory chapter on Droste, my focus lies on the artist as historically situated in an array of writerly practices (literary, epistolary, and conversational) while the ensuing chapters will examine in greater detail her transformation of the quotidian into the sublime and her situatedness both inside and outside of Biedermeier-Romanticism, a critical stance, I argue, that poet's are uniquely qualified to perform.

Overall, I hope to demonstrate how feminist efficacy need not collapse into the binarisms rehearsed by a considerable body of feminist literary criticism.

Something approaching Bourdieu's concept of habituation is evident in Droste's poetic practices and modus operandi as a poet. Of the writing process itself she laments, "I wish it would appear on paper just as I was thinking it, since it appears to me, clear and bright, in all its vitality, and the verses often come to me in heaps; but by the time I have organized and transcribed them, I have lost a large part of my enthusiasm, and the writing is by far the most tedious part of the endeavor" ("Ich wollte es stände sogleich auf dem Papiere, wie ich es denke, denn hell und glänzend steht es vor mir in seinem ganzen Leben, und oft fallen mir dir Strophen in großer Mänge bei; aber bis ich sie alle geordnet und aufgeschrieben habe, ist ein großer Teil meiner Begeisterung verbracht, und das Aufschreiben ist bei weitem das mühsamste bei der Sache [Droste Briefe 6]). She valued fluency, speed and automaticity over the more laborious practice of revision. In fact, Droste's constant regret in her letters is the lack of time for the kind of sustained and fluid practice of writing she would have preferred.⁵

A poem reminiscent of Wordsworth's recollection in tranquility, "The Right Time" ('Die Rechte Stunde') functions metacognitively as a work about Droste's practice as a writer. In it, Droste makes the claim for a quiet sublime: the visitation of the artist by genial creative forces happens not in the clamor of a social scene, nor even in stock sublime moments when nature is on spectacular display, but in quiet, pensive and, above all, utterly quotidian moments and places. In true Biedermeier fashion, the site of the sublime is the sofa in a room, not Vesuvius or "Xanadu." Given its symmetrical structure, the poem is worth quoting in full:

In the festive hall by candlelight,
 When lips are all ablaze –
 And, drowned in sunshine,
 When every finger plucks a flower –
 And brings it to a beloved's mouth,
 When nature swims ablaze –
 That is not it, the right hour,
 the spirit has decreed for you.

But when day and desire ebbs,
 Then surely you will find a place,
 Perhaps in your sofa's cushions,
 Perhaps on a garden bench:
 Then sounding like a half-remembered song
 Like a half-faded gush of color
 flowing around you, softly, softly
 Then, your spirit moves you.

Im heitern Saal beim Kerzenlicht,
 Wenn alle Lippen sprühen Funken –
 Und gar, vom Sonnenscheine trunken,
 Wenn jeder Finger Blumen bricht –
 Und vollends an geliebtem Munde,
 Wenn die Natur in Flammen schwimmt –
 Das ist sie nicht, die rechte Stunde,
 Die dir der Genius bestimmt.

Doch wenn so Tag als Lust versank,
 Dann wirst du schon ein Plätzchen wissen,
 Vielleicht in deines Sofas Kissen,
 Vielleicht auf einer Gartenbank:
 Dann klingt's wie halb verstandne Weise,
 Wie halb verwischter Farben Guß
 Verrinnt's um dich, und leise, leise
 Berührt dich dann dein Genius.

As suggested in the repetition of “perhaps” ‘vielleicht,’ “half-remembered” ‘halb verstandne,’ “half-faded gush of color” ‘halb verwischter Farben Guß’ and “softly, softly” ‘leise, leise,’ the conditions for writing are best if the poet is open and aware, awaiting the arrival of words. The verb “berühren,” like the English “touch,” implies both a tactile and an emotional sensation (to be moved). This is the quiet sublime of the

everyday. The first stanza's repertoire of negatives underscores that it is not in spectacular, loud or awe-inspiring scenes--cliches at this point--but in the unexpected everyday scene of reclining on a sofa or garden bench that great thoughts come. Moreover, as the poem's passive syntax and the subtle shift from the definite article to personal pronoun ("your spirit" 'dein Genius') in the second stanza suggests, poetic genius is something that (over)comes the awaiting subject in ways that are eminently heuristic and subjective. We are reminded of Bourdieu's attention to inner rules and rhythms (*habitus*) especially in Droste's choice of the etymologically rich word "spirit" 'Genius' in culminating moments of the poem. Grimm's exhaustive etymological study of the German word "Genius" traces it from its Latin (Roman) roots to contemporaneous usage among Goethe, Schiller and the like. As such, Grimm's Dictionary (Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm 1854) is an indispensable historical record of the cultural inflection of words. The German usage of "Genius" retains an older Latin denotation of the word as tutelary spirit, guiding spirit and inner voice, and one is reminded once again of the heuristic force that shapes, creates and powerfully alters states; in short, the sense Droste conveys is not far removed from Maus' and Bourdieu's sense of habitus or immanent force. Genius moves the creating subject; as such, it is a spirit sublime. Droste's poem records, on a microcosmic scale, the process by which creating a moment of authenticity acts as a counterpoint to what others (society, hegemonic orders) deem the right moment and circumstance.

As a poem about the revivifying and creative effects of what I have called (in my chapters on Dickinson) the poet's sublime, "Farewell" 'Lebt Wohl' takes its place among Droste's vocational poems. Written in reaction to the news of Schücking's impending

marriage to Luise von Gall, this poem can be read both as a farewell to a friend and as a declaration of an ars poetica. The poem begins with a tone of resignation:

Farewell, it cannot but be so!
Hoist your flapping sails,
Leave me alone in my castle,
In this barren, ghostly house.

Lebt wohl, es kann nicht anders sein!
Spannt flatternd eure Segel aus,
Laßt mich in meinem Schloß allein,
Im öden, geisterhaften Haus." (1-4)

In contrast with the nuptial pair, the speaker feels starkly isolated, the castle and house, as so often in Droste, appearing ruinous and barren. They take with them “my last ray of the sunshine” (‘meinen letzten Sonnenstrahl’ [6]) and leave her “Alone with my magic word, / The alpine spirit and my self.” (‘Allein mit meinem Zauberwort, / Dem Alpengeist und meinem Ich’ [11, 2]). Poetry, the poem’s speaker suggests, charges the commonsensical and everyday with something of the fantastical and numinous; however, in this stanza even the fantastical is short-changed by the speaker’s isolation, which suspends reproduction of her words and ideas. One will recall, after all, that Droste’s and Schücking’s lives were interlocked in ways that were deeply personal (some have argued romantic), as well as professional. The younger man took an active part in her production process, and with the loss of her literary partner comes the loss of a sense of her writerly self, at least to some degree.⁶ The second half of this symmetrical poem recoups and co-opts the first. She may have been left behind but, the speaker now declares, she is not lonely. While she had been “devastated” (‘Erschüttert’ [10]) by the loss, it has not “crushed” (‘zerdrückt’) her (10). The poem gains momentum in the escalating

parallelisms of the final stanzas, culminating finally in the joyous reaffirmation of an inner muse.

As long as the cool forest
Rushes with song in every leaf,
From every rock, and every nook
My friend the elf lends its ear.

As long as my arm is free
And reaches for the ether
And the cry of every wild vulture
Awakens the wild muse in me.

Solange mir der frische Wald
Aus jedem Blatt Gesänge rauscht,
Aus jeder Klippe, jedem Spalt
Befreundet mir der Elfe lauscht.

Solange noch der Arm sich frei
Und waltend mir zum Äther streckt
Und jedes wilden Geiers Schrei
In mir die wilde Muse weckt. (17-24)

Nature, the poem suggests, stands in for human companionship as the poet responds to a densely inhabited landscape: singing leaves, observant elves and, finally, the bird's cry all serve to lift up the poet and restore her creative powers. The poem creates its own momentum in the intensifying inventory of the sublime, climaxing in the strikingly celebratory arm-raising gesture and the declaration of the "wild muse" which resonates with Longinus' rhetorical sublime (the orator's skillful and blissful display of the sublime) and the self-propelling motion that Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* also registers. In a sense, the poet's sublime creates its own momentum, breaking the plodding rhythm of the everyday. Such exhilarating self-momentum is the terrain of virtuosity and, in its manifestations in Longinus and later texts, the sublime:

Endlessly overtaken by his own words . . . the virtuoso finds in his discourse the triggers for his discourse, which goes along like a train

laying its own rails In other words, being produced by a *modus operandi* which is not consciously mastered, the discourse contains an ‘objective intention’ . . . which outruns the conscious intentions of its apparent author and constantly offers new pertinent stimuli to the *modus operandi* of which it is the product and which functions as a kind of ‘spiritual automaton.’ (Bourdieu 57)

In so doing, even the confines of a room and a sofa--and, by extension, domestic “feminine” spaces and spheres--can be transformed into the wild reaches of the divine and the sublime. It is the poet’s special gift to charge the everyday with new meaning.

Droste’s practice and self-perceptions as a “virtuoso” or habituated and immanent writer invites revision of the personae that both we and her nineteenth-century pundits have been fond of creating. But just how she harnesses her writerly finesse to effect social change warrants additional examination. When in one of her poems Droste dramatizes a dialogue quizzing the speaker’s rightful place as a poet--“What made me leave my sphere, / the peacefulness of my room?’ / You ask me this, as if, a thief, / I had broken into Parnassus” (‘Was meinem Kreise mich enttrieb, / Der Kammer friedlichem Gelasse?’ / Das fragt ihr mich als sey, ein Dieb, / Ich eingebrochen am Parnasse’ [sic 1-4])--we cannot help but become acutely aware of the kinds of social contingencies a nineteenth-century woman poet like Droste was likely facing. The sounded alliterative link in German of “sphere” (‘Kreise’) and “room” (‘Kammer’) stresses the discourse of feminine confinement and circumscription in domesticity in a poem that announces in its title, “My Vocation” (‘Mein Beruf,’) that it is decidedly not about those spheres. The speaker’s tone in the opening lines is indignant, as quotation marks set off the accusatory question that the speaker clearly feels is false. Answering her naysayers by boldly claiming poetry as a birth-right, given to her by God and unquestionable in its authenticity and omnipotence, the speaker declares: “So hark then, hark, since you have

asked: / At birth was I invited, / My right as broad as the heavens, / And my power by God's grace" ("So hört denn, hört, weil ihr gefragt: / Bei der Geburt bin ich geladen, / Mein Recht soweit der Himmel tagt, / Und meine Macht von Gottes Gnaden" [5-8]). Such audacious expansiveness is a quality both Droste and Dickinson share.

The ensuing stanzas shift the dialogue from the social question to an apology for the power of poetry for *all* that bear the gift. As the poem exhorts poetry to "come forward" ("tritt hervor,") to go up to the dreamer, step closer and claim its rightful owners, the effect of the prosopopoeia is to present poetry as a force larger than and constitutive of the poet-as-subject who comes into being only through discovery of his or her dormant poetic powers. Poetry is powerful, hence urgent, as sounded out in the symmetrical arrangement in the second stanza of two calls for poetic action, not later but "now" 'Jetzt' (9,15). And it is available to all who have the calling, regardless of gender, as the speaker spells out: "Now is the time: come forward, / Man or Woman, soul alive!" ("Jetzt ruft die Stunde: 'tritt hervor, / Mann oder Weib, lebend'ge Seele!' [15-6]). Here as elsewhere, Droste strongly associates poetry with vitality. It exhorts one to action, and so the somnambulant figure described in the third stanza is introduced as someone in need of being revived by the sounds and syllables of poetic music: "There blast out loud, there whisper softly, / Trumpet blast and West in groves." ("Da schmettere laut, da flüstere leis, / Trompetenstoß und West in Hainen!" [23-4]).

Poetry acts as a mnemonic device in the speaker's life: in the economy of the poem everything should act as a reminder of the original childhood gift of poetry. "Shake hard: awake, awake, / Wretch, think of your cradle!" ("Da rüttele hart: wach auf, wach auf, / Unsel'ger, denk an deine Wiege!") Indeed, life is most accurately distilled through

poetry. As a force larger than herself, poetry takes on a dehumanized aspect of something to which the gifted speaker must involuntarily yield sooner or later. Boldly laying claim to a natural inborn gift, the step from self to world is equally self-evident to the speaker's mind. She is perforce called to interpret her world, "Thus beckoned the times, thus was my office / Given to me by God's grace, / Thus my vocation bequeathed to me, / With new heart, with warm life" ("So rief die Zeit, so ward mein Amt / Von Gottes Gnaden mir gegeben, / So mein Beruf mir angestammt, / Im frischen Muth, im warmen Leben" [57-60]). She thus rebuts her critics, those who would question her domestic transgressions, the peripatetic inner workings of a mind, with *their* irrelevance, although the *raison d'être* of this entire poem does of course point to a certain disingenuousness on her part: "I do not ask if you know me, / do not like to pander to short-lived fame." ("Ich frage nicht ob ihr mich nennt, / Nicht frohnen mag ich kurzem Ruhme" [Briefe 61-2]).⁷

Droste's closing extended metaphor confirms both this ambivalence toward fame and her embattled self-image as a writer in hostile territory: she is a lone flower in the Sahara, completely self-effacing, ignored by passing dangerous animals (the snake and lion) that could drink and gain sustenance from its dewy petals. Flowers traditionally stand in for femininity, for the art of poetry (Peucker 375) and for the Biedermeier-Romantic period with its interest in flowers, stones, minerals and other diminutive natural forms as a whole (Sengle). While these connotations are retained here, Droste configures traditional flower imagery into icons of stark strength and self-reliance:

Yet know: where the Sahara burns,
In the desert sands, there stands a flower,
Colorless and devoid of scent, nothing knows
She, but to guard the holy dew
And to gently offer it the thirst-stricken
In her chalice.

Past her slides the shy snake,
 And shoots its gaze like raining arrows,
 Past her rushes the proud lion,
 Only the pilgrim will bless her.

Doch wißt: wo die Sahara brennt,
 Im Wüstensand, steht eine Blume,
 Farblos und Duftes bar, nichts weiß
 Sie, als den frommen Tau zu hüten
 Und dem Verschmachtenden ihn leis
 In ihrem Kelche anzubieten.
 Vorüber schlüpft die Schlange scheu,
 Und Pfeile ihre Blicke regnen,
 Vorüber rauscht der stolze Leu,
 Allein der Pilger wird sie segnen. (63-72)

Figured as an ascetic, the reader becomes a pilgrim to the wasteland, suggesting that only those willing to make the demanding pilgrimage to her text bless her with their act of recognition. As Pickar notes, the poem “is coached in Biedermeier language and imagery of her day, yet the stance is unequivocal . . . It is spoken with a conviction that needs no acknowledgement from the outside world” (296). Droste wanted this poem to appear first in her 1848 published collection of poems. This idea, rejected by Schücking, nevertheless speaks to the importance of this poem, both as her *ars poetica* and her shield against critics.⁸

I turn now to the wider implications of applying a “lived practice” writing and reading strategy to an artist like Droste. Such an approach forces us to incorporate “marginal” and even quotidian loci of practice such as physical spaces (literary salons, rooms and even such quotidian elements as sofas and tables) as well as the daily traffic of letters. In fact, a more dynamic reading model of “the practice of everyday life” is appropriate for a Biedermeier-Romantic writer like Droste who, after all, immersed herself in an epistolary and socially peripatetic culture of visits and conversations. As

Habermas points out, an upper bourgeois “culture-debating” society gave way in mid century to middle bourgeois “culture-consuming” tendencies, removing the site of public literary discourse from the living room to the feuilleton pages of newspapers and academic institutions, predominantly male cultural spaces to be sure. Droste participated in an earlier family-centric cultural trend in which readings and discussions in the home, epistolary exchanges of ideas, growth of the circulating lending library, and increasing avenues of publication for men and women fuelled public literary debate.

As a physical site of literary interaction, the Biedermeier salon, unlike the larger less intimate forums of eighteenth-century Paris for example, provided an intimate “close network of personal and epistolary connections and friendships that transcended spatial and temporary boundaries” (Dollinger 60). Small groups of literary people or writers would gather for tea (Droste mentions the “tea table” [‘Teetisch’] in her letters) and such rendezvous provided places of relative intellectual freedom and special equanimity even in anti-Protestant, provincial Westphalia. Droste felt free to come and go at these salons, and they spelled a few hours of freedom from her familial duties and prescriptions (Dollinger 68). Moreover, Droste’s salon attendance at Muenster and Cologne exposed her to important and well-connected women who provided vicarious access to the larger and more sophisticated literary centers of Berlin and Weimar. During her visits to the Rhineland in 1828, 1830/31, 1836/37 and 1842 she attended the literary salons of Wilhelmine Thielmann, Novalis’ sister-in-law, and Sibylle Mertens, who introduced her to Adele Schopenhauer (1797 – 1849), sister to the famous philosopher. In their mother, Johanna Schopenhauer, Droste gained an exceptional literary contact as the former had been active in the Weimar social scene during its heyday and had been a close friend of

Goethe's. Salons were a venue for literary practice even before Droste became a published author.

Even more than Dickinson, Droste practiced the art of discursive letterwriting, often incorporating poems as gifts, or exchanging thoughts on books and articles, thereby effectively blurring the line between literature and the everyday. "As a literary form of address," note Blackwell and Zantop, "letter writing becomes a rhetorical testing ground where elegance of style, sharpness of wit, and acuteness of description are being measured by their impact on the reader" (33).⁹ As a prime signifier of dialogic intent in a public, highly interactive, sociable and convivial society, which saw a constant intermingling of people in private homes and institutions such as the literary salon, a society, in short, that prized conversations, it comes as no surprise that letters were valued so highly. A set of social conventions and stylistic rules guided the practice of letter writing, forming part of a higher bourgeois girl's education in good citizenship. Furthermore, a good letter (an art in which Droste evidently excelled, for her letters were highly appreciated and published for the first time not long after her death) in Romantic-Biedermeier culture had to sound conversational. A "natural" expression blurring the line between oral and written expression was considered best. This concept of the "conversational letter" ('Plauderbrief') was merely an extension of prevalent social and cultural forms of engagement, of being sociable and convivial (Gödden 72). Letters provided an everyday means of expression and in no small part constituted an extension of Droste's literary life.

Such immersion in the culture of letters extends to correspondences and conversations nurtured and developed for years with women and her male mentor friends,

Anton Sprickmann, Christoph Schlüter and Schücking, all of which attests to a vested interest in larger connections than self and the poet's provincial world. Schlüter, for instance, was a mentor-figure in the same general mold as Sprickmann (an older, distinguished public figure) and a frequent visitor in the Droste household. One senses that he was valued as an intellectual partner, to the extent their differences would allow. They frequently sent each other books and poems for comment, and on one occasion Droste thanked him for the book but noted that she would have preferred a more communal and dialogic reading experience: "I would have wanted to read the book with you, dearest Schlüter, to discuss each suggestive point, but even so, I am content and grateful to you" ('Doch mit Ihnen, lieber Schlüter, das Buch gemeinschaftlich vornehmen und bei jedem reichhaltigen Punkte den Stoff in einem Gespräche verarbeiten, das ist, was ich gemocht hätte, und was mir fehlte; doch auch so bin ich gern zufrieden und Ihnen sehr dankbar' [Briefe 525]). When she visits her brother-in-law and sister Jenny in Eppishausen, Switzerland, Droste again expresses to Schlüter the wish for more like-minded company:

I knew that I would miss you, and *very* much at that, but I had hoped to meet at least *someone* whose occupation, views and taste would correspond with mine; but except for the Thurn Ladies no woman ever enters the house, only men who are all of the *same* type, old-timers, who want to rummage through my brother-in-law's musty manuscripts--very learned, very respected, even famous people in their field; but boring as the bitter death, mouldy, rusty, as prosaic as a horse's brush; staunch opponents of all new arts and literature.

Daß Sie mir fehlen würden, und zwar *sehr*, wußte ich voraus, aber ich rechnete doch auf *irgendein* Wesen, dessen Beschäftigungen, Ansichten und Geschmack dem meinigen einigermaßen entsprächen; aber außer den Thurnschen Damen betritt kein Frauenzimmer dies Haus, nur Männer von *einem* Schlage, Altertümler, die in meines Schwagers muffigen Manuskripten wühlen möchten. Sehr gelehrte, sehr geachtete, ja sehr berühmte Leute in ihrem Fach; aber langweilig wie der bittere Tod,

schimmelig, rostig, prosaisch wie eine Pferdebürste; verhärtete Verächter aller neueren Kunst und Literatur. (sic Briefe 561)

Even in translation, Droste's portrayal of these Casaubon types communicates how deeply she searched for intellectual stimulation and for lived (and shared) daily practice of her work. By proxy, letters fulfilled this need. Thus Droste's "leisure" was her "labor" also, as she engaged in the public literary discourse, in all its forms, of her day.

As the following excerpt from a letter to Schücking suggests, Droste's letters also provided a forum for reflection on the state of her professional (public) status as a writer on the literary scene.

About six weeks ago, I received . . . a letter from Paris . . . The sender was one Theodor Klein, a poetic dilettante, it seems to me--because he talks about 'the quiet hours he steals from his daily business in order to occupy himself with poetry'--, who . . . came across my poetry . . . which inspired him to write the enclosed verses, in which he crowns me with unfading laurels. The poem was mediocre, i.e. just as one would have found it enchanting fifteen years ago, the letter was somewhat bombastic yet also touching in its apparently heartfelt emotion and reserve.

Ich erhielt vor etwa sechs Wochen einen . . . Brief aus Paris . . . Er war von einem gewissen Theodor Klein, einem poetischen Dilettanten, wie mir scheint--denn er spricht von seinen 'Geschäften entübrigten Stunden der Muße, in denen er sich mit Poesie beschäftigt'--dem . . . meine Gedichte zu Händen gekommen sind und ihn zu einliegenden Strophen begeistert haben, in denen er mir den unverwelklichen Lorbeer aufs Haupt setzt. Das Gedicht war mittelmäßig, d. h. so, wie man es vor fünfzehn Jahren würde allerliebste gefunden haben, der Brief war etwas schwülstig, aber doch rührend durch sein offenbar vom Herzen kommendes Gefühl und eine große Schüchternheit" (sic Briefe 1001-2).

Like Dickinson, Droste is a forceful and inventive stylist, with a keen eye and ear for the audaciously new. In the same letter, Droste's inquiry about her book sales only serves to reinforce the point that Droste saw herself as a professional, fiscally compensated writer, immersed in the practice and lifestyle of public literary figure:

Do also tell me how Cotta is doing with the sale of my poetry! Contrary to my expectations, it is widely read here in Muenster; whether it is actually being *bought* is another story, I can't say much about that. It is unfortunately typical Muenster custom, even among the richest people, to rely on borrowing, and even when they really want the book, to innocently say: 'I've been trying to lay my hands on that book for years and still can't find it,' even as it is sitting in all the shop windows. Even now, meaning to pay me a compliment, a couple of very posh and rich ladies complained to me that their copies were completely tattered from all the lending, and I felt a pang for Cotta's sake.

Nun sagen Sie mir doch auch, wie es dem Cotta mit dem Verkauf meiner Gedichte geht! Hier in Münster werden sie, gegen meine Erwartung, sehr stark gelesen; ob *gekauft*, ist eine andere Frage. Und ich weiß darüber nichts zu sagen. Es ist leider münsterische Manier, sogar bei den reichsten Leuten, sich auf das Leihen zu verlassen und, selbst wenn sie sehr begierig auf ein Buch sind, ganz naiv zu sagen: 'Ich habe mich schon jahrelang um das Buch bemüht und kann es noch immer nicht bekommen,' während es in allen Läden am Fenster steht. Auch jetzt haben mir ein paar sehr reiche und vornehme Damen geklagt, daß ihre Exemplare von all dem Ausleihen schon ganz zerlumpt wären, und meinten mir noch ein Kompliment damit zu machen, während mir doch Cottas wegen ein Stich durchs Herz ging. (1001)

One certainly comes away from her letters with a strong sense of Droste's self-image as a professional writer immersed in a literary lifestyle. Letters were an everyday means of expression and in no small part constituted an extension of Droste's literary life. Heselhaus is therefore surely remiss in claiming that "Droste would only fail to meet *one* of [Goethe and Schiller's] three requirements for the category of artist: 'Vocation and profession'" (14) or that she was part dilettante because she "paid no attention to success,

publishers and the book market and saw books neither as merchandise nor products” (18). Feminist critics sometimes perpetuate a similar anti-professional myth, suggesting that Droste’s “rejection of a career” was politically motivated and a rejection of values inhospitable to women: “Droste does not so much renounce [a professional path] as preserve herself and in so doing the only possible means for her to write” (Bianchi 28). In fact, the writer’s letters belie any such strategic removal from patriarchal society by withholding her work for publication; in later years, she was invested in promoting herself to the world.

Droste’s first publication attempt (in 1838) was not well received at home, which evidently upset her. “I did not fare well at first with my book” ‘Mit meinem Buche ging es mir zuerst ganz schlecht,’ she confides to her sister, “now they all open their mouths and *cannot understand* how I could disgrace myself like that” (‘Nun tun alle die Mäuler auf und *begreifen alle miteinander nicht*, wie ich mich habe so blamieren können’ [Briefe 625, 6]). Three years later, in 1841, Droste was still following the success of her book and sharing her concerns with her sister. Disappointed in dismal sales, she writes: “I receive one glowing review after the other; this is the sixth, and some of the others are even more appreciative than this one, yet the book is selling so poorly that the small number of 500 copies has not yet sold out” (‘Ich bekomme eine vortreffliche Rezension nach der andern, diese ist schon die sechste, und einige der andern sprechen sich noch vorteilhafter aus wie diese, und doch verkauft sich das Buch so schlecht, daß die kleine Auflage von 500 Exemplaren noch nicht vergriffen ist’ [sic Briefe 702]). Continued reassurance by her friend Schopenhauer that the book was well-received in Jena, and that there were not enough copies to go around, is met with growing disappointment in the

limitations of her publisher: she wonders why the book sellers do not simply order more copies from the publisher, and concludes that “no one has any connections to my publisher (Hüffer) . . .” (‘da niemand mit meinem Verleger (Hüffer) anderweitige Konnexionen hat . . .’ [702]). For her next anthology of poems, published in 1848, she would start recruiting a network of friends in order to carefully and diplomatically secure a better publisher.

By 1842, Droste’s luck seemed to turn. Her reputation was now so well established that she was receiving unsolicited publication offers: “Two more of my poems have appeared in The Morning News (“Morgenblatt) . . . “The Jew’s Beech Tree” has also finally broken the ice here and converted all my former detractors, so that I hardly know what to do with all the attention and my mother is becoming quite proud of me. O tempora, o mores! Am I really better or cleverer now than before?” (‘Im Morgenblatte sind noch zwei meiner Gedichte erschienen . . . Die ‘Judenbuche’ hat endlich auch hier das Eis gebrochen und meine sämtlichen Gegner zum Übertritt bewogen, so daß ich des Andrängens fast keinen Rat weiß und meine Mama anfängt, ganz stolz auf mich zu werden. O tempora, o mores! Bin ich denn wirklich jetzt besser oder klüger wie vorher?’ [Briefe 814]). This afforded her leverage in negotiating with publishers. Not satisfied with Lassberg as her editor and mediator in dealing with Cotta, the renowned German publisher of Goethe and Schiller, she suggests Schücking take over, and in her dealings with Cotta, through Schücking, Droste again reveals a shrewdness which bespeaks quiet self-confidence as already a writer of note. In this excerpt from a letter to Schücking (1844) Droste’s implicit understanding of the benefits

of male flattery and her epistolary skills combine to tactically (in de Certeau's sense of the term) further her professional goals:

That I will benefit from this [arrangement] goes without saying, and we will try to make it advantageous for you, my good Levin, and for your sake I hope that Cotta wants to do business, that is, not only with this but also the Westphalian Sketches which I will now pick up again, and whatever else I am predestined to do. You could then always be remembered as the one who alone was able to mobilize me and I would always--and am prepared to now--make concessions that I would never consider from anyone else; i.e. as long as your fate depends on Cotta, because otherwise, I must confess, I am not at a loss for a publisher, and under the present grim circumstances I would prefer to go with the highest bidder.

Daß *mir* dann auch besser geholfen ist, versteht sich von selbst, und *Ihnen*, mein guter Levin, wollen wir suchen die Sache möglichst vorteilhaft zu stellen, und ich möchte um Ihretwillen herzlich wünschen, daß Cotta recht große Lust zum Handel hätte, d. h. nicht nur zu diesem, sondern auch zu den westfälischen Gemälden, woran ich nun gleich fortarbeiten werde, und was mir sonst noch prädestiniert ist. Sie könnten dann immer für denjenigen gelten, durch den ich allein mobilzumachen wäre, und ich würde jederzeit--und will auch *jetzt*--auf Bedingungen eingehn, wie ich sie von keinem andern würde gefallen lassen; d. h. solange Ihr Schicksal von Cotta abhängt, sonst, gestehe ich Ihnen, bin ich um einen Verleger garnicht verlegen und wär mir unter gegenwärtigen tristen Umständen der Meistbietende der liebste" (Briefe 134)

In order to secure Cotta's future business, she suggests the following tactic: "Make reasonable demands of him, Cotta, and if he doesn't give in, tell him, but only *after* the fact, that I am not the type to be unreasonable and hold it against him--he will of course give a plausible excuse--and I will therefore continue to submit work for his "Morning Journal"; in short, keep him happy and leave him with the sense of being a highly influential person." ("Machen Sie ihm, Cotta, also gemäßigte Forderungen, und geht er nicht darauf ein, so sagen Sie ihm, aber erst *hintennach*, daß ich nicht der Art wäre, dergleichen unvernünftigerweise übelzunehmen--einen plausibeln Vorwand wird er ja schon stellen--und deshalb seinem "Morgenblatt" nach wie vor Beiträge schicken würde;

kurz, erhalten Sie ihn möglichst bei guter Laune und sich in dem Ansehn einer höchst einflußreichen Person' [Briefe 135]).

Although she does not enter the publishers' offices herself, relying on male agency instead, this in no way diminishes the sense of control Droste exerted over the deal from within her sphere of influence. Such a sly display of social and political maneuvering attests to the ways in which, Penelope-like, she, like other women, was using male flattery and simple common sense to further her own ends, even as she felt the pressure to veil her more overt desires. Not unlike the colonial example of South American Indians De Certeau cites ("They remained within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally" 32) Droste operates tactically. But her maneuverings show a professional self-confidence, exemplified in her frequent choice of words to describe her work as "fate" "predestination" and "birth right." For this reason she begs Schücking to treat her manuscript with respect, "make me *one* promise, and an earnest, unbreakable one at that, your *word of honor* as you would give and keep it to a man, that you will not arbitrarily change even so much as a syllable in my poems. I am much more sensitive in this regard than you know, and, especially now that I have warned you so desperately, I may appear civil but would *never* forgive you and it would inevitably lead to an inner coldness" ('geben Sie mir . . . ein Versprechen, und zwar ein ernstes, unverbrüchliches, Ihr Ehrenwort, wie Sie es einem Manne geben und halten würden, daß Sie an meinen Gedichten auch nicht eine Silbe willkürlich ändern wollen. Ich bin in diesem Punkte unendlich empfindlicher, als Sie es noch wissen, und würde grade jetzt, nachdem ich Sie so dringend gewarnt, höchstens mich äußerlich zu fassen suchen, aber es Ihnen nie vergeben und einer inneren Erkältung nicht vorbeugen können')

[Briefe 135]). Droste clearly is invested in the particularities of form on the line, word, and even the syllable, and she implicitly invites her readers to pay attention to her poetic choices as well.

The historical image of Droste that begins to emerge is of a woman writer enmeshed in a lifestyle of practice and committed to the practice of everyday life in her art. Criticism that seeks out this historical matrix (the practice of everyday communication) while bearing in mind the social and cultural pressures that came to bear upon women during the Romantic-Biedermeier period in Germany only enriches our understanding of this writer. Furthermore, an alertness to the strategic applications and modifications of poetic form combined with renewed historical rigor can also produce fewer divisions along gender lines and even some surprises regarding the enforcement of the discourse of the separate spheres. Certainly, if one wished to register how the act of writing literature can transform social givens into individualized and sometimes subversive effects, one would do well to consider the broader personal and professional commitments that women in Droste's position often entertained. Only then can the oppositional practice of writing that this particular writer was so invested in be fully understood and appreciated.

Notes

1 Annette von Droste-Hülshoff will hereafter be referred to as Droste. Because of the paucity of published translations, unless otherwise noted, all translations of Droste's poems and letters are my own. In the interest of readability, I have cited German-language primary sources in English first, German second. Secondary sources in German appear only in translation (see works cited for bibliographical details on the original texts.)

2 For a history of Westphalia in the larger context of European politics in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Manfred Botzenhart, A.J.P Taylor and Steven Ozment. It is fair to say that the early nineteenth century was a time of radical change and redistribution in Westphalia. In 1803 secularization was enforced, followed by Napoleonic expansionism which affected the political and social landscape from 1806 to its demise in 1815 when Droste was 18 years old. This in turn led to the post-Napoleonic "Restoration" effort headed by Metternich and the establishment of the Prussian provinces Rhineland and Westphalia at the Vienna Congress (Botzenhart 25).

3 The term "genius" carried considerable ideological heft in the Romantic age, privileging masculinity in the process. Goethe and Schiller's essay "On Dilettantism" (1799), in which these giants of German high-literary culture schematically present the divide between professional and amateur applications of music, drama, architecture, drawing, gardening, dance and poetry, registers a sly affiliation between professionalism and masculinity. If indeed "a poet is nothing if he is not serious and a true artist in his endeavors" or if "in contrast to the artist and the true connoisseur, who have a total, wholehearted commitment to the seriousness of art and the work of art, the dilettante's interest is always halfhearted, and he pursues his artistic activities as a game, a pastime" (213) then women's externally imposed curtailments (the time constraints of familial duties) created an uneven playing field.

4 Because feminist literary criticism in Germany somewhat belatedly entered the theoretical scene, German feminist criticism of Droste only began to emerge in the 1980's, the first full-length feminist collection of critical essays on Droste's works appearing as recently as 1993. In as much as the novella fragment "Ledwina" represents a heroine who experiences a fragmented, liminal consciousness and ultimately death by drowning, this text has become the emblematic document in English-language feminist anthologies of German women writers (it is included for instance in the anthology Bitter Healing as the only example of Droste's work). As such, it replaces "The Jew's Beech Tree" ('Die Judenbuche') in terms of its prominence in English anthologies in general.

5 An example of the kinds of obstacles Droste faced appears in her letters:

The spirit was willing but the flesh very weak. First, my facial pains would not abate until a few days ago . . . Well, I am finally free of those . . . Now my Mother leaves in eight days and . . . all hands are needed, in short, in the next eight days nothing but thoughts of needles, yarn, irons, string and the like items, more practical than poetical, will pass--and will be permitted to pass--through my mind.

Der Wille war golden und nur das Fleisch sehr schwach. Erst haben mich die Gesichtsschmerzen nicht verlassen, bis vor einigen Tagen . . . Nun, davon bin ich endlich frei . . . Jetzt reist aber meine Mutter in etwa acht Tagen ab, und . . . alle Hände werden jetzt in Requisition gesetzt, kurz, in den nächsten acht Tagen werden und dürfen keine anderen Gedanken durch meinen Kopf fahren als Nadel, Zwirn, Bügeleisen, Bindfaden und dergleichen mehr nützliche als poetische Dinge. (Briefe 227)

6 For a discussion of Schücking's literary bet ("Wette") at Meersburg, Lake Constance, by which he meant to motivate Droste to complete larger volumes of poetry for publication, see Clemens Heselhaus ("Die Meersburger Wette") and Walter Gödden and Jochen Grywatsch (Annette von Droste-Hülshoff am Bodensee).

7 When Droste famously declares, "I do not wish to be famous now, but in a hundred years I wish to be read . . ." ("Ich mag und will jetzt nicht berühmt werden, aber nach hundert Jahren möchte ich gelesen werden . . ."), we cannot help but wonder if she was not being a little disingenuous here as well (Droste Briefe 865). In a letter to Elise Rüdiger (1843) she articulates her ambivalence toward fame, but, again, her sideways glance and secret nod to reputation suggest that she has not opted out entirely:

We receive numerous journals, the "Modezeitung," the "Morgenblatt," the "Telegraphen," When I see how everyone is falling over themselves to become famous, then I feel a slight urge to flex my fingers. Patience! Patience! But when I see how, just as you get your head above water, somebody already comes up an inch higher behind you to push you back down, how Heine has been forgotten, Freiligrath and Gutzkow are passé, and, in short, how all the celebrities feed on each other like aphids, then it seems to me better to put my feet up on the sofa and, with eyes half-closed, dream of eternity:

Wir bekommen hier eine Menge Journale, die "Modezeitung", das "Morgenblatt", den "Telegraphen", "Vaterland", "Ausland", Königsberger Literaturblätter". Wenn ich sehe, wie so alles durcheinanderkrabbelt, um berühmt zu werden, dann kömmt mich ein leiser Kitzel an, meine Finger auch zu bewegen. Geduld! Geduld! Aber wenn ich dann wieder sehe, wie einer kaum den Kopf über dem Wasser hat, daß schon ein anderer hinter ihm einen Zoll höher aufduckt und ihn niederdrückt, wie Heine schon ganz verschollen, Freiligrath und Gutzkow veraltet sind, kurz, die Zelebritäten sich einander auffressen und neu genießen wie Blattläuse, dann scheint's mir besser, die Beine auf den Sofa zu strecken und mit halbgeschlossenen Augen von Ewigkeiten zu träumen" (sic Briefe 864)

8 See "Die Programmatischen Einleitungsgedichte zur 1844er Gedichtausgabe der Droste" (Niethammer) for more information on the politics of editing and sequencing Droste's published poems.

9 All told, the practice of prolific epistolary exchanges, of men and women alike constantly writing and expecting their letters to be circulated and read communally, creates a literate society and an environment conducive to women's writing. In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century, women in the German states were producing journals

and weeklies (Blackwell and Zantop 29), writing novels, folk tales, occasional and lyric poems, although few were secured a place in the German canon during an age dominated by Schiller, Goethe and the German High Romantics.

Chapter Six:

Biedermeier-Romantic Culture and the Ambivalence of “Heimat” in the Lyric

Poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff.

Literary historians have long noted that Biedermeier-Romantic culture as a whole placed value on a sedentary and settled form of existence. Journeys were undertaken to visit relatives, to educate oneself (“Bildungsreisen”) and so forth, certainly not for leisure or personal pleasure. Be it in the realm of the nation (state) or personal (the house), the very concept of home and homeland (“Heimat”) as a stabilizing political force gained traction during a period in Germany when “lovingly enacted and inwardly appropriated spaces act as a wholesome counterbalance to the sweep of time . . . (Sengle 51).¹ Even nature comes under the sway of sedentariness, as writers of the period frequently muse on their favorite spot (“Lieblingsplatz”) in the landscape, places to be revisited habitually and claimed as their own. The peripatetic passions of the Storm and Stress and the earlier Romantic generations, walks across sublime terrain, is replaced by a more subdued regard for genial natural spots, by a domestication of nature and by a humanization of the sublime. Biedermeier period gardens, in English fashion, blurred the lines between country and city as they spilled over into the neighboring countryside (Sengle 36). Cities often contained carefully marked walking paths (“Spazierwege”) that led into the surrounding countryside. The frightful sublime encounter with wilderness is thus replaced with a genteel experience in which nature and culture merge: “Just as the garden belongs to the house, so walking paths are merely an extension of the city” (Sengle 61). Even majestic natural scenery was brought down to scale. As Simon Schama notes, the humanization of the Alps had begun as early as the sixteenth century, when they began to

be mapped, named and studied by natural historians, fossil hunters, mineralogists and the like (429). Medieval mythologies of the Alps as the place of demons and ghosts gave way to a more approachable human space for consumption (429-30). In fact, when organized tours of Alpine glaciers began in the mid-eighteenth century this event marked a shift in temporal and spatial relationships between the observer of nature and the observed, as nature became an extension of self rather than an alien, frightening event. Eventually, technology and the growing industrialization of the nineteenth century replaced Burke and Kant's negative sublime with a more moderate domestic sublime. "The grand tour of the Alps ceased to be the property of the intense, lonely, and sublime poet and became the object of organized tourism" (Nemoianu 11).

It is in this tradition of what would seem an oxymoron, of a sublime sought in the commonplace (in thoughts of friendship and connection induced by nature, rather than in sublime isolation vis a vis the natural scene) that Droste must take her place. Her poem "The Bench" 'Die Bank' refers to such a rather more social sublime moment:

I know a bench in the park,
 Not the shadiest one of all,
 Only the alders, slim and slender,
 Let their sparse stripes drape over it;
 There will I sit many a summer's day
 Baking in the sun,
 No sleepless gurgling brook surrounding me,
 Yet a fountain leaps within my heart.

Im Parke weiß ich eine Bank,
 Die schattenreichste nicht von allen,
 Nur Erlen lassen, dünn und schlank,
 Darüber karge Streifen wallen;
 Da sitz ich manchen Sommertag
 Und laß mich rösten von der Sonnen,
 Rings keiner Quelle Plätschern wach,
 Doch mir im Herzen springt der Bronnen. (1-8)

Droste describes the bench in deprecatory terms: it lacks conventional ingredients of the idyll such as a pastoral stream or verdant shady trees. Yet the speaker isolates this bench as a sublime scene (“Yet a fountain leaps within my heart” ‘Doch mir im Herzen springt der Bronnen’) as the speaker articulates a sublime turned inconspicuously yet potently inward.

As it turns out, nature exists only as a trace since the speaker’s inner joy is entirely associative:

This is the spot, where the road
Can be crossed from all sides,
The dusty track, the green path
And over there the clearing in the oaks:
Oh many, many a dear trace
Has flown up under the wheel!
That which delights, distresses, me
From thence it traveled here.

Dies ist der Fleck, wo man den Weg
Nach allen Seiten kann bestreichen,
Das staub’ge Gleis, den grünen Steg
Und dort die Lichtung in den Eichen:
Ach manche, manche liebe Spur
Ist unterm Rade aufgefliegen!
Was mich erfreut, bekümmert, nur
Von drüben kam es hergezogen. (9-16)

Her roadside bench leads the speaker to reminisce about the various comings and goings of friends and relatives at precisely this spot. Past and present seem to merge in the act of memoria--present devotion to the past--so that the bench literally becomes a Wordsworthian “spot of time”. The ensuing stanzas consist of a visualization of loved ones (an older friend, her brother as a youth) at precisely that juncture on the road:

So sit I many hours as if in a spell,
Half in the yesterday and half today,
My trusty telescope in hand,
And let it sweep through the distance.

So sitz ich Stunden wie gebannt,
Im Gestern halb und halb im Heute,
Mein gutes Fernrohr in der Hand,
Und laß es streifen durch die Weite. (17-20)

The poem's action is Wordsworth's "vacant or . . . pensive mood," the "inward eye" of pensive reflection (Poetical Works). The lyric I (simultaneously of course a passive, all-seeing eye) is described as sedentary, a passive onlooker who makes use of optical technology, the telescope, to further effect distance and distortion between nature and self. Little surprise, then, that Droste successfully renders the "seen" a surreal scene.

At the dam stands a wild shrub
Oh, shamefully it has deceived me!
Stirred by the wind, it seems to me,
A loved one is traveling near!

Am Damme steht ein wilder Strauch,
Oh, schmächlich hat mich der betrogen!
Rührt ihn der Wind, so mein ich auch,
Was Liebes komme hergezogen! (21-4)

The return of a beloved in the form of a mind trick or an illusion is rather poignant, as all visualizations of the past--or, sometimes, projections into the future, the sudden dread associated with the moon behind Lucy's cottage in Wordsworth for instance--are to some degree. And this vision spells hope of replaced loss, only to be extinguished in the next. Nature has tricked the onlooker: the bush, it turns out, only *looks* human. Nature here has become internalized: a nature of memories, longings and desires not unlike Wordsworth's over-involved lunar narrative.

Irritatingly inactive as the speaker may seem to us (lifting the telescope is the extent of her exertion), it carries cultural and ontological value for the Biedermeier subject for whom nature is packaged as homely and familiar. Traces of love are, as it

were, inscribed onto the landscape itself and accessible in acts of remembrance. Droste was fond of referencing elements of the home (lamps, rooms, windows) in her nature poems, a juxtaposition equally frequent in Dickinson's work. Here it is as if the entire poem figures as a house, the speaker enjoying her firmly situated (and hence uniformly framed) view as one looking out of the window or door frame at the comings and goings of people outside. It is a replica of the sublime scene, reduced in physical but not in mental or emotional scope. The typical sublime drama of extension and euphoria (leaps of the heart and mind) followed by chagrin is faithfully represented, yet it is staged in the mind of a sedentary speaker connecting not to a majestic natural scene but to the rewards and pains of human affective ties. Nor, the poem seems to suggest, need one venture far to find this sublime as it can be found on one's doorstep, in the natural landscape surrounding the home and garden. Rather it is the sublime of the everyday.

When Jonathan Bate observes that "Romanticism has remained a living legacy because, like a fit Darwinian organism, it has proved singularly adaptable to a succession of new environments, whether Victorian medievalism, *fin de siècle* aestheticism, new critical Urn-writing, Hartmanesque phenomenology, or the counter-reading of 1980s ideologism" (433) he captures, as have so many others, the remarkable elasticity and amorphousness of the phenomenon. In a joint position paper arising out of the hiring crisis in the American university, Galperin and Wolfson suggest that our penchant for artificial and retrospective parameters is at least partly to blame for the recent problem of funding Romanticists at academic institutions. They suggest a widening of the parameters, "an intellectually and historically coherent century-long category, 1750-1850," a "Romantic Century" that is, in fact, historically coherent. Such a widened field

would challenge anachronistic views of literature as limited to the production of the central, mostly male figures most of us associate with Romanticism, and reaches out to include a prolific set of “writers, texts and discourses” not least of which is the extensive set of women suddenly writing and publishing all across the European Continent and Britain in the latter half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries.

Droste’s poetry certainly gains force when read in relation to the weight and gravitas of the entire Romantic tradition (English, American, French and local) that informed and nurtured her work. Droste’s collaboration with the Grimm brothers’ Romantic folk project in her youth is well documented, as is her exposure to a library of translated English and American works, notably by Shakespeare, Byron and Washington Irving.² It also gains depth and density when contextualized as that brand of late-Romanticism that Virgil Nemoianu has astutely identified as the Biedermeier phenomenon, widely disseminated throughout Europe in the nineteenth century and rightly a part of the earlier Romantic impulse. Biedermeier (which I prefer to call Biedermeier-Romanticism for that reason) is no break from high Romantic ideals but an extension of them: “wherever some kind of high romanticism flourished, it was followed by something resembling Biedermeier discourse and mentality” (Nemoianu 2). The term “Biedermeier” is therefore to be read as synonymous with the term “Biedermeier-Romanticism.”

Although I prefer to situate observations about the Biedermeier discourse in the context of specific literary works, a few general pointers towards a definition may be helpful at this juncture. Most would agree that the Romantic century includes related but seemingly contradictory periods within its purview. Thus the youthful passion of the

Lyrical Ballads and of the first wave of British Romantics, as well as the German and French Romantics, is inevitably followed, roughly after the turn of the century, by a more moderate sober Romanticism which nevertheless exhibits overall commonality with Romanticism as a whole. That more sedate cultural moment, Nemoianu argues, may go by the name of Biedermeier in Germany, but it is widely evident in Europe at this time. The Biedermeier period, in short, loved order and organization amid the growing chaos of the post ancien-regime, post Napoleonic, industrialized world. Aesthetically, this tendency translated into an ironic treatment of nature and of the sublime, as the subject was no longer merely moved by nature but inclined instead to *observe* herself being moved. In tandem with this growing self-consciousness, and the setting up of ironic distance between nature and experience, the European landscape became increasingly humanized and occupied, as indeed did all of Africa, America and, of course, the entire British Empire under imperialism. The landscape became a tourist destination for a people detached from nature, a sublime moment in the life of city-dwellers or landed gentry for whom nature had long been tamed into something to be enjoyed during one's leisure time (Schütt 14). In a sense then, the nineteenth-century taste for domesticity extends to the realm of nature. It is an age of the post-sublime; the "thirst for the awe-ful, the shivering pleasure of being half scared to death" (Schütt 15) replaced by the more sober and local pleasures of going for walks.

Like all literary and historical periods, the interval of 1815 to 1848 has been retrieved by historians and literary critics in an effort to define, name and categorize it. However, as Friedrich Sengle, Jost Hermand and others have pointed out, the period was far less coherent than was often imagined, its borders fuzzy and its characteristics

downright contradictory. Although often thought to be an “in-between” period, hovering between Romanticism and Realism (itself a contested label), in which the former extended its influence while the latter made itself felt in precursory ways (Sengle 118), the Biedermeier period can be understood in ways that are alternately more precise and more expansive. Although it has been fashionable to situate Droste as, by turns, a conservative-Biedermeier and a realist writer (a view cemented by the public reception of her novella, The Jew’s Beechtree, which was long considered, according to conservative rhetorical literary criticism, a textbook case of Realism), the usefulness of such categories breaks down in the face of her lyrical poetry, where Romantic borrowings are evident. Framing Droste as a player in the long Romantic century grounds her in a broader context and in a dense social and literary scene.

It is therefore imperative that we situate this writer firmly within her literary-historical context rather than exclusively within the context of gender and gendered formations. As I have argued throughout these pages, the latter approach inevitably produces counterproductive proliferations of gender stereotypes. The concept of home was a central concern for Biedermeier poets, as was the Biedermeier poets’ collusion, through poetry and narration, with nation-building during the politically unstable time of the post-Napoleonic European restoration of states. Germany witnessed Metternich’s reshuffling of power as states were realigned and Prussia’s internal expansionism within Germany’s borders kept in check. Growing conservatism, a reaction to France’s expansionism following the revolution, was also kept in check by a faction of freedom-seekers with a nationalist-liberal bent, including, most famously, the Jewish-born writer Heinrich Heine who later lived in self-elected exile in Paris. As Sengle and Hermand so

astutely point out in their voluminous research of the period, the preservative Biedermeier culture, whose poets wrote provincially of local scenes and natural things, cannot be understood without its counterpart, the urban-based group of politically forward young Hegelians whose poets produced tendentiously political poetry that was later banned. Sengle argues that the homeliness of Biedermeier culture served, accordingly, to domesticate and personalize the nation, controlling the arbitrariness of a spliced country. Imaginary identification with one's province--locally patriotic scripts with distinct geographical, mythical and linguistic themes--was the starting point for this differentiation of one's "Heimat," which created a sense of belonging and order. The ominous nationalism of the National Socialists had yet to take root in this more localized patriotic adherence to place (Sengle). In other words, the limited sphere of one's own environment was something to be explored, known and loved, and it was perhaps for this reason that Biedermeier-Romantic poets were rooted in their homes, often in regional, even marginal areas in country-estates on the outskirts of town. This centrality of the house speaks to the Biedermeier culture of immobility and home, a sedentary lifestyle that was in fact about to change with the belated arrival of industrialization and the railroads.

A cult of the house and family becomes emblematic for the strong sense of order that marks the period. As Sengle points out, the nation was structured like a paternalistic family at the head of which stood God, the "Gottvater," beneath him the monarchical father-of-the-nation, followed by a set of paternalistic landowners ("Landesväter") who were responsible for the well-being of their people in condescending yet responsible ways (62). In the home itself, the male head of the household (in German literally the

“Hausvater”) rounded off this grand familial social order. Research into women’s history, always limited by the obscurity of time, by patrilineage and a generally biased gender discourse, would later reveal many more strong-willed women, who were effectual heads of aristocratic households like Droste’s own very formidable mother had been. Still, in this familial society it is not hard to imagine the seat of pater familias, the home, as sacred, the epitome of the new order.

Although not untouched by the times she lived in, Droste was no world citizen like the cosmopolitan Heine or the urban Young Hegelian set, preferring the provincial spheres of home in rural Westphalia and travel confined to friends and family within Germany and Switzerland. To a significant extent, of course, such curtailment is attributable to gender: as a woman--an unmarried “spinster aunt” no less--her realm of influence and her liberty to travel and establish a vocation would have been circumscribed due to her sex. It is also attributable to the larger effects of sedentariness in the political climate of the Restoration. On the other hand, Droste longed for everything beyond the homely, near and familiar. On this point Droste remained emphatic. Home to her was the call of the distant and exotic, not the domestic. In an early poem inserted in one of her letters to Sprickmann (1816) she writes of this inversion of home and the distant: “From afar sound the songs of home / And the old unrest returns once more” (‘Aus der Ferne klingts wie Heymathslieder / Und die alte unruh’ kehret wieder’ [sic Briefe 12]). Similarly, she expresses her efforts to reign in what she calls her uncontrollable “longing for the faraway” (‘Sehnsucht in die Ferne’): “distant lands, large interesting people, about whom I have heard much, exotic works of art, and so forth all have this sad power over me, my thoughts are never at home, despite how well I have it

here” (‘entfernte Länder, große interessante Menschen, von denen ich habe reden hören, entfernte Kunstwerke, und dergleichen mehr haben alle diese traurige Gewalt über mich, ich bin keinen Augenblick mit meinen Gedanken zu Hause, wo es mir doch sehr wohl geht . . .’ [sic Briefe 26-7]). Yet on this point of simultaneous regard for home and mental longing for distance, the new and the exotic, she is hardly unique. Her contemporary Eduard Mörike (1804-1875), for instance, writes of a similar far-near dichotomy in his “Song to Weylas” (‘Gesang Weylas’): “You are, Orplid, my land / That glows from afar” (‘Du bist, Orplid, mein Land! / Das ferne leuchtet’), suggesting the perspectival shift of looking at and appreciating home from a distance, and the theme is associated with even earlier Romantic writers as in Hölderlin’s “Homeland” (‘Die Heimat’) where the home is scripted as both desirable and unattainable, marred by suffering so that the past (home) can never be recouped in its original beneficence: “Full of joy the sailor returns by a still stream / From islands afar where he has reaped; / So would I too return to my homeland, had I / garnered goods as many as I have sorrow” (‘Froh kehrt der Schiffer heim an den stillen Strom, / Von Inseln fernher, wenn er geerntet hat; / So käm auch ich zur Heimat, hätt ich / Güter so viele, wie Leid, geerntet’ [1-4]). The ambivalence of “Heimat” as less than whole or wholesome, which Hölderlin registers in his use of subjunctive voice, is therefore hardly unique to Droste. However, in a period that emulates and even sacralizes the house and homeland (home state), the near and dear, her articulation of a loosening, a revision and even a dis-ease with the smugness of home and hearth is particularly trenchant, both from a gender standpoint (“home” being after all a loaded word for any culture which promulgates a gendered discourse of the separate spheres) and from the

point of view of the legislative and (re) visionary function that the Romantics, Droste foremost among them, represent.

“The Marlpit” (“Die Mergelgrube”), one of Droste’s longer narrative poems and part of a cycle of poetry about the local heath or moor landscape in Westphalia (“Haidebilder”), was written during her productive period at Meersburg in 1842. Its most striking technique is that of oscillation between the temporally foreign and far-removed--the poem’s subject matter is nothing less than the history of the earth and its geological traces in fossilized and skeletal remains--and the small and local, the inner workings of the speaker’s mind and the down-to-earth homely Westphalian presence of the shepherd with his simple vernacular. The poem opens with a description of the exotic-sounding geological treasures just barely under the sandy surface: “Push your stick three spans into the sand, / and rocks you will see jutting from the cut, / Blue, yellow, vermilion, as if for auction / Nature had opened its treasure chest” (“Stoß deinen Scheit drei Spannen in den Sand, / Gesteine siehst du aus dem Schnitte ragen, / Blau, gelb, zinnoberrot, als ob zur Gant / Natur die Trödelbude aufgeschlagen” [1-4]). From these fantastic geological traces, there for the taking by anyone who looks, the speaker then uncovers the distant origins of all this treasure, the ancient deluvian mystery and the myth of Leviathan in the Sinai. Nature is immediately coded and scripted, here in etiological-mythical terms. Behind these fabulous stones, the speaker suggests, lie fabulous stories of their creation, and the second stanza effectively estranges what she had described as so common and close-at-hand in the first:

The raging wave brought them here,
 Leviathan with his giant scales,
 As, foaming, he drove over the Sinai,
 The heavens’ sluices opened thirty days,

Mountains melting like rock candy,
 When at Ararat stood the ark,
 And strange, opulent nature,
 new life sprung from new matter.

Die zorn'ge Welle hat sie hergescheucht,
 Leviathan mit seiner Riesenschuppe,
 Als schäumend übern Sinai er fuhr,
 Des Himmels Schleusen dreißig Tage offen,
 Gebirge schmolzen ein wie Zuckerkand,
 Als dann am Ararat die Arche stand,
 Und eine fremde, üppige natur,
 Ein neues Leben quoll aus neuen Stoffen. (17-24).

The speaker's recurring trope is that of finding the foreign in one's own back yard, an aesthetic, we know, this poet found appealing: "O what an orphanage is this heath," ("O welch ein Waisenhaus ist diese Heide" [29]). Like children (orphans) plucked out of their original and authentic homes and placed in new surroundings, this drab uniform landscape of the heath houses stones that are anomalous and seemingly out of place: "Into a foreign crib, slumbering unaware, / the foreign hand lays them as one would a foundling" ("In fremde Wiege, schlummernd unbewußt, / Die fremde Hand sie legt' wie's Findelkind" [27-8]).

The third stanza introduces the speaker's identification with this subterranean world and marks a drastic shift in perspective. Literally immersing herself in nature through a descent into the bowels of the marl pit, she experiences heightened sensory awareness of her new surroundings: the chill on her skin, the sights and sounds of the pit are all perceived with the acuity gained from sudden change:

Deep in the crumbling earth, into the gravel pit
 Had I descended, as the wind was strong;
 There sat I sideways in the cavern
 And harkened dreamily to the harp-like air.
 The sounds were, as when ghostly echoes
 Fade melodically into the ruined universe;

And then a hiss, as if the moor was yawning,
As, seething, it collapsed,

.....
Piece by piece the foundlings I extracted
And listened, listened with intoxicated ear.

Tief ins Gebröckel, in die Mergelgrube
War ich gestiegen, denn der Wind zog scharf;
Dort saß ich seitwärts in der Höhlenstube
Und horchte Träumend auf der Luft Geharf.
Es waren Klänge, wie wenn Geisterhall
Melodisch schwinde im zerstörten All;
Und dann ein Zischen, wie von Moores Klaffen,
Wenn brodelnd es in sich zusamm'gesunken;
Mir überm Haupt ein Rispeln und ein Schaffen,
Als scharre in der Asche man den Funken.
Findlinge zog ich Stück auf Stück hervor
Und lauschte, lauschte mit berauschem Ohr. (33-44)

The speaker's position has shifted from that of casual detached observer and commentator from above--the scientist's perspective--to that of complete immersion. She feels by turns a certain closeness to the strange and a distance or unrelatedness to the familiar scenes of her home environment, the heath, culminating in the apocalyptic vision of stanza four:

Before and around me, only the grey marl;
What lay above, I did not see; yet nature
Seemed to me barren, and an image appeared to me
Of an earth that was decayed, burned up;
I myself appeared to be a spark, that
Trembles in the dead ashes,
A foundling in the ruined world.
The cloud parted, the wind was mild;
I dared not stick my head out of the hollow,
Lest I witness the horrors of a decaying earth,
As the new arose and the old corroded -
Was I the first man or the last?

Vor mir, um mich der graue Mergel nur;
Was drüber, sah ich nicht; doch die Natur
Schien mir verödet, und ein Bild erstand
Von einer Erde, mürbe, ausgebrannt;

Ich selber schien ein Funken mir, der doch
 Erzittert in der toten Asche noch,
 Ein Findling im zerfallnen Weltenbau.
 Die Wolke teilte sich, der Wind ward lau;
 Mein Haupt nicht wagt ich aus dem Hohl zu strecken,
 Um nicht zu schauen der Verödung Schrecken,
 Wie Neues quoll und Altes sich zersetzte –
 War ich der erste Mensch oder der letzte? (45-56)

The narrator is now part of a larger, extra-individual process of the earth's very coming-into-being, as suggested in the use of the word "foundling" ('Findling')--previously used to denote the subterranean stones and fossils--in reference to herself (51). From her new perspective in the pit, it is but a small step to a fantastical identificatory association with the biblical-mythological history of the earth previously outlined in her mention of Leviathan and Noah. Here, her vision ("Bild") is futuristic with references to the last man and the emergence of new life from the old. She is witness to the earth's remarkable capacity for renewal, a sentiment captured similarly if more optimistically in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur" which considers the seemingly endless trajectory of regeneration despite the "generations" that have "trod, have trod, have trod" (5).

As the trope of live burial makes abundantly clear, Droste's vision is more gothic and claustrophobic:

It is certain, the old world is hence,
 A fossil, I, a mammoth bone thence!
 And wearily, wearily I sink to the edge
 Of the dusty tomb; as gravel settles
 On my hair and dress, I was as grey
 As a corpse in a catacomb,
 And at my feet I heard soft grinding,
 A rustling, crumbling and a fluttering.
 It was the grave beetle, which in the coffin
 Had just buried a fresh corpse . . .

Es ist gewiß, die alte Welt ist hin,
 Ich Petrefakt, ein Mammutsknochen drin!

Und müde, müde sank ich an den Rand
 Der staub'gen Gruft; da rieselte der Grand
 Auf Haar und Kleider mir, ich ward so grau
 Wie eine Leich im Katakombenbau,
 Und mir zu Füßen hört ich leises Knirren,
 Ein Rütteln, ein Gebröckel und ein Schwirren.
 Es war der Totenkäfer, der im Sarg
 Soeben eine frische Leiche barg . . . (61-70)

One critic has traced an intellectual kinship between Droste and Paul Celan's holocaust poetry (Böschenstein): both, despite their radically different ideologies and experiences of Germany, write of a nature that is decaying. Droste has no qualms about depicting nature as "corrosive, decaying, desolate, petrified objects turned to dust" in a way that refuses to aestheticize or idealize it (Böschenstein 8). But her ominous view of nature decaying and her references to the sign of the ruin are rooted, as Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Origin of German Tragic Drama" ('Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels') reminds us, in late eighteenth, early nineteenth century German classic and Romantic texts: "So, if you will, nature remains the eminent teacher for poets of this period. But she reveals herself to them not in the bud or the flower but in decomposition and decay" (Benjamin 355).³ A departure from the Wordsworthian impulse to find in nature a recuperative "genial" spirit--even amid temporary dejection--Droste's work is more closely in line with the German sentiment of "Weltschmerz" or suffering, for which nature becomes at best a reflection of inner states (for example, Werther's projections onto the natural scene prior to suicide) rather than an elixir vitae. Droste's is a divergence from the ideology of finding the numinous in nature: "It is no longer the abundant idyllic flower landscape lyrically expressed, but 'the barren landscape': Desert, Steppe, Heath, Moor . . ." (Nettesheim 19).⁴ If nature redeems the observing self through its beauty and spirit of renewal, it does so not because of an immanent divinity or a grand projection but

because of its inherent qualities. Droste is writing, after all, in a period of growing positivism in the sciences, in an age when laypersons such as herself qualified as explorers, collectors and students of natural history. She is writing in the century of Darwin, a century in which pantheism must give way to more secular views, and it is this uneasy shift from one script to another that a poem such as “The Marlpit” captures. The new materialism and positivism produces in poets of the period a sense of emptiness and alienation.⁵

Lest the poem become too lugubrious, the next stanza lightens the tone. With humorous effect, the speaker’s morbid day dream is shattered by the sudden intrusion of the everyday which jolts her back to the familiar pastoral scene above and underscores the difference from the everyday the speaker had just experienced:

What, corpses over me? – just now
 A bundle of moss falls into my lap;
 No, that’s wool, lamb’s wool to be exact –
 And suddenly my dreams left me.
 I yawned, stretched, fled the hole,
 The red ball of the sun stood in the sky,
 Dimmed with the haze, a glowing carnel,
 And sheep were grazing along the heath wall.

Wie, Leichen über mir? – soeben gar
 Rollt mir ein Byssusknäuel in den Schoß;
 Nein, das ist Wolle, ehrlich Lämmerhaar –
 Und plötzlich ließen mich die Träume los.
 Ich gähnte, dehnte mich, fuhr aus dem Hohl,
 Am Himmel stand der rote Sonnenball,
 Getrübt von Dunst, ein glüher Karneol,
 Und Schafe weideten am Heidewall. (77-84)

Droste’s lifelong interest in local Westphalian folk culture began with her participation in the Brothers Grimm’s collection of folk tales and ended with her collaboration on the Westphalian Sketches. Her inclusion of the shepherd’s folk song and vernacular makes

the point that nature is dense with people's voices and narratives. As the inclusion of the folk song also suggests, nature is thick with people's dreams and thoughts; like a palimpsest, it is written over many times with longing: The shepherd's folk song (97-8) projects subjective feelings for one's love onto the natural landscape: "Just as the moon peers into the water, / And just as the sun fills the woods with golden hue, / So my love remains buried, / All my thoughts, they are with you, my child" "Gleich wie der Mond ins Wasser schaut hinein, / Und gleich wie die Sonne im Wald gibt güldenen Schein, / Also sich verborgen bei mir die Liebe findt, / Alle meine Gedanken, sie sind bei dir, mein Kind' (99-102). Through the representation of these dreams and projections, which she had so physically experienced during the visionary episode in the pit, Droste effectively levels the playing field between herself, a woman from the land-owning classes, and the shepherd at a time and place when it was certainly easier to uphold these boundaries. The speaker establishes that they share intellectual interests as well when she discovers his copy of Bertruchs Natural History, an illustrated book published from 1789 to 1833 with the aim of bringing the enlightenment and an end to superstition to all classes and which was part of the Droste library (Pittrof 162-3).⁶ The poem ends with the shepherd's skepticism of the evolutionary process depicted in Bertruch's book, given his belief that all creatures drowned in the flood:

In the moss lay a book; I picked it up –
 'Bertruch's Natural History; you reading that?'
 Then a smile crossed his lips:
 'He's lying, Sir! And what fun!
 About snakes, bears, turned to stone,
 When, as Genesis says, the sluices opened;

 One knows of course that all creatures drowned.'
 I handed him the slate: 'Look,
 That was an animal. 'Upon which he winked

And laughed at length –

That I be deranged, he never would have thought!

Im Moose lag ein Buch; ich hob es auf –

‘Bertruchs Naturgeschichte; lest Ihr das?’

Da zog ein Lächeln seine Lippen auf:

‘Der lügt mal, Heer! Doch das ist just der Spaß!

Von Schlangen, Bären, die in Stein verwandelt,

Als, wie Genesis sagt, die Schleusen offen;

.....
Man weiß ja doch, daß alles Vieh versoffen.’

Ich reichte ihm die Schieferplatte: ‘Schau,

Das war ein Tier. ‘Da zwinkert er die Brau

Und hat mir lange pfiffig nachgelacht –

Daß ich verrückt sei, hätt er nicht gedacht! (111-22)

Not unlike Heine and Byron, Droste inserts humor as a destabilizing, irreverent, and self-ironizing device. Here it also serves as a sharp segue into the daylight world of social order, and a reminder that the lyric (Romantic) poetic I can become overly self-involved if left unchecked and unobserving of the presence of the other (here figured as the shepherd and his more unsophisticated views). The poem manages to avoid condescension because the poet has already established that nature can be “verrückt,” strange and incomprehensibly wonderful, a mood captured in the shepherd’s laugh. From the Leviathan striding across the desert in giant steps, to the flood, to the apocalypse, to the pastoral, to Bertruch’s Natural History, and to fossilized remains, nature reveals itself only through traces. It is up to us, the poem suggests, to read nature’s signs, and interpretations vary, depending on one’s perspective. Droste’s poem demonstrates the estranging process of nature (and of the close-to-home and familiar) through multiple if necessarily parallel paradigms.

If it is a poet’s prerogative to capture the times, then this poem is also about what Sengle calls this particular age’s Weltschmerz, a general malaise which captures the

mood of the Restoration period (2). Paleontology in particular came to represent scientific enlightenment but with it came the crisis of change from a largely theocentric worldview to a more secularized one (Pitroff 163). The shepherd, who cannot reconcile both the religious and the scientific narratives, regards doing so “mad” (‘verrückt’), which literally translates as “not in place, shifted.” As we are beginning to see, placeholders of Biedermeier value such as home and nature tied to one’s homeland become less stable under Droste’s pen, reflecting an increasingly unstable period. If one object of Biedermeier-Romanticism was to counterbalance political, social and economic instability with the security of home and hearth, then Droste seems to be subverting this trend by foregrounding everyday domestic yet uninhabitable spaces and by letting the ominous and unstable stand in her poems without providing overriding comforting myths.

Like Wordsworth’s “Ruined Cottage,” Droste’s poem by the same name (“Das Öde Haus”) registers the hybrid site of a decaying house. Nature has encroached upon what was once domestic space. Depending on one’s perspective, the house is either a man-made structure or a new ecodwelling. Droste seems to prefer the latter, calling it a wilderness and a subterranean place, referencing once again her returning trope of live burial and inhospitable houses:

In the depths of the Tobel there is a house,
 Fallen into ruin after the forester’s death,
 There rest I many an hour,
 Buried under shoots and saplings;
 ’tis a wilderness, where the day
 Only half lifts its weary lids;
 The cliff’s deep crevice thickened
 By graying boughs’ shady grove.

Tiefab im Tobel liegt ein Haus,
 Zerfallen nach des Försters Tode,
 Dort ruh ich manche Stunde aus,

Vergraben unter Rank und Lode;
 's ist eine Wildnis, wo der Tag
 Nur halb die schweren Wimpern lichtet;
 Der Felsen tiefe Kluft verdichtet
 Ergrauter Äste Schattenhag. (1-8)

Unlike the character of the pedlar in Wordsworth's poem (the visiting friend who comforts himself with nature's redemptive aesthetic value), Droste's speaker crawls into the crumbling space and immerses herself in a sensory moment, listening and observing the busy natural environment. Intimating interment, Droste's speaker enters a dream-like state as she listens hypnotically, her entire being in attendance: "I harken dreamily, as in the crack / The tumbling black flies' hum, / Stream through the woods like sighs, / Wild beetles buzzing at the shrub . . ." ("Ich horche träumend, wie im Spalt / Die schwarzen Fliegen taumelnd summen, / Wie Seufzer streifen durch den Wald, / Am Strauche irre Käfer brummen . . ." [9-12]).

Wordsworth also invokes natural detail to emphasize the capitulation, ultimately, of all that is human. "She is dead," he writes of the character of Margaret, "And nettles rot and adders sun themselves / Where we have sate together while she nursed / Her infant at her breast" (108-11). Droste's detail is dense and vivid; it becomes the very subject matter of the poem, palimpsestically covering all human tracks:

The roof, overgrown with moss,
 Lets debris drizzle down,
 And a spider has raised its tent
 In the window gap;
 There hangs, a leaf of delicate gauze,
 The brilliant wing of the dragonfly,
 And its gilded mirror of armor
 Looms headless upon the ledge.

Das Dach, von Moose überschwellt,
 Läßt wirre Schober niederragen,
 Und eine Spinne hat ihr Zelt

Im Fensterloche aufgeschlagen;
 Da hängt, ein Blatt von zartem Flor,
 Der schillernden Libelle Flügel,
 Und ihres Panzers goldner Spiegel
 Ragt kopflos am Gesims hervor. (24-32)

Although the motif of ruined domestic remains is similar, Droste alters the form, choosing instead a more personal, deeply invested (immersed) point of view even as she preserves a sense of nature's genuine autonomy, unaltered by the poet's projections. Not unlike Dickinson's potent yet miniscule natural forms, Droste's poem represents nature's power, even in its smallest incarnations (the spider and the fly) to assert indigeneity. And so her poem ends on a rather more somber, even sinister note than Wordsworth's more soothing narrative as she lets the memory of its inhabitant remain intact without any overriding scripts:

Sitting, lonely in the thicket,
 I hear the mouse's shrilling in the leaves,
 The squirrel barks from branch to branch,
 Toads and crickets echo from the marsh,
 Something like a shudder seizes me then,
 As if the bells are still heard ringing
 In the forest Diana singing
 And evermore the dead man whistling.

Sitz ich so einsam am Gesträuch
 Und hör die Maus im Laube schrillen,
 Das Eichhorn blafft von Zweig zu Zweig,
 Am Sumpfe läuten Unk und Grillen,
 Wie Schauer überläuft's mich dann,
 Als hör ich klingeln noch die Schellen,
 Im Walde die Diana bellen
 Und pfeifen noch den toten Mann. (57-64)

Having made the case in over 50 lines for nature's subtle yet unmistakable force, the sudden shock of memory works. The disjuncture between this natural house and its prior domestic form is all the greater for Droste's style of immersed nature writing. This poet

avoids domesticating the earth, choosing instead raptness with nature that allows for self-abandonment and for nature's alterity, and in so doing manages to "dwell ecstatically amid the elemental, the uninhabitable, and the incomprehensible" (Rigby 172). When nature is overwritten and overwrought with "romantic ideology," in Jerome McGann's famous formulation, it becomes so loaded as a sign and a marker of human interest as to appear to have lost its autonomy and materiality entirely. What are we to make, for instance, of Wordsworth's catalogue of human suffering in "The Ruined Cottage," marked by nature's encroachment upon the dwelling, only to be told, in conclusion, that nature, even under those dismal circumstances, can elicit in the sympathetic (read "Romantic") onlooker a distinct aesthetic pleasure leading to consolation. Although nature's gradual intrusion of Margaret's domestic space is initially ominous, ("Of neatness little changed, but that I thought / The honeysuckle crowded round the door . . ." 307, 8), at poem's end, after the loss of her entire family and her own death, Margaret is so sufficiently a part of the earth to become a Romantic symbol par excellence:

‘She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.
 I well remember that those very plumes,
 Those weeds, and the high spear grass on that wall,
 By mist and silent raindrops silvered o’er,
 As once I passed, did to my mind convey
 So still an image of tranquillity,
 So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
 Amid the uneasy thoughts that filled my mind,
 That what we feel of sorrow and despair
 From ruin and from change, and all the grief
 The passing shows of being leave behind,
 Appeared an idle dream that could not live
 Where meditation was. I turned away,
 And walked along my road in happiness.’ (512-525)

By contrast, Droste's decaying cottage presents a rather more gritty material portrait of nature-dwelling, without any overriding scripts of consolation.

As the title suggests, “Lying in the Grass” ‘Im Grase’ is not unlike Droste’s other nature poems with its idiosyncratic perspective of immersion in nature and a transitional, inbetween state of mind, which Droste had named, by turns, “O strange slumber-wake” ‘O wunderliches Schlummerwachen’ (“Durchwachte Nacht” ‘Sleepless Night’), “Phantom” (“The Mirror” ‘Das Spiegelbild’), “Ghost” ‘Geist’ (“The Old Castle” ‘Das Alte Schloß’) and which she intimated thematically in her recurring references to live burial, sleep-walking as well as ruinous houses and landscapes. “Lying in the Grass” is generally judged to be Droste’s best poem, written when she was almost fifty and experiencing the culmination of all her poetic powers.⁷ Clemens Heselhaus reads the entire poem as an accomplished extended metaphor for her existence as a poet (Metapher 11). An aural poem that begs to be read aloud, “Lying in the Grass” signifies through the sounds of its words, repetitions and lugubrious lazy rhythms, an effect at least partially lost in translation. The opening stanza epitomizes this simultaneity of sound and sense:

Sweet repose, rapturesweet in the grass,
 With the scent of herbs around you
 Deep surge, deep surge of ecstasy,
 When the cloud dissolves in the blue
 When sweet laughter comes fluttering down
 On your weary and swimming head,
 A dear voice whispers, drifting to earth
 Like lime-blooms on the grave of the dead.

Süße Ruh, süßer Taumel im Gras,
 Von des Krautes Arome umhaucht,
 Tiefe Flut, tief tief trunkne Flut,
 Wenn die Wolk am Azure verraucht,
 Wenn aufs müde, schwimmende Haupt
 Süßes Lachen gaukelt herab,
 Liebe Stimme säuselt und träuft

Wie die Lindenblüt auf ein Grab. (1-8) ⁸

Not quite oneiric, not quite awake, Droste's speakers experience what Gottfried Benn would later call "feverish sweetness" ('fiebernde Süße') and "rush" ('Rausch') or Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal," and in its sensuous rhythms it is remarkably reminiscent of Dickinson's "Rowing in Eden" poem.

From the standpoint of the sublime, the poem begins *in medias res*, as we quickly arrive at the goal of ecstasy: bliss in the immersion of self in nature. There is no escalation, no representation of nature as a compelling outside force; instead, intense interiority is achieved through immediate immersion in nature (Gössmann 55-6). And it is a sublime immersion and elevation achieved not through might or by Burkean hyperbole, but with something as ordinary and ubiquitous as grass ("Von des Krautes Aroma umhaucht"). One is reminded of Whitman's blades of grass in "Song of Myself," underfoot, trampled upon, and clinging to the poet's boot soles, only to ooze into the observer, becoming even more intimately a part of her.

Soon, the feelings of drunken joy give way to the transitional oneiric phase of light sleep ("Schlummerwachen," as it is referred to elsewhere in her poems), as the subject starts to dream, first still half-awake and partially aware of the sounds around her, and then completely given over to slumber as the dreams become more surreal. By stanza two, the speaker is conjuring up gothic images of reanimated corpses:

When the dead in your breast then move
 Each corpse stretches gently and waits,
 Gently draws its breath and breathes out,
 Buried love, buried joy, buried time,
 Treasures dead in the dust, all these
 Touch each other with hesitant note,

Little bells played upon the breeze.

Wenn im Busen die Toten dann,
 Jede Leiche sich streckt und regt,
 Leise, leise den Odem zieht,
 Die geschloßne Wimper bewegt,
 Tote Lieb, tote Lust, tote Zeit,
 All die Schätze, im Schutt verwühlt,
 Sich berühren mit schüchternem Klang
 Gleich den Glöckchen, vom Winde umspielt. (9-16)

In her choice of corporeal imagery we find a “strict rejection of the immanent, pantheistic, god-in-nature. . . . This rejection is more clearly represented in inorganic, uncanny, aesthetically even repulsive objects than in nature as swelling springtime” (Böschstein 14).

Characteristically, Droste is all too sober about man’s cherished myths and scripts regarding nature, the foremost being that the sublime experience of nature acts as a hedge against our own temporal end. Droste exposes this script by insisting on the representation of death in a graphic, even kitschy register, referencing an aspect of death that most of us repress, with bodies in various stages of decay in the very earth once revered. By reiterating the death of both love and desire, Droste reminds us that our comforting nature myths are precisely and only that.

There is, of course, a redeeming twist to this dismal corporeal scene. Following the evocation of the momentary and finite in stanza three (the fleeting sunbeam on a lake, the passing sound of a migratory bird, the shimmer of a beetle caught at just the right angle in the light, or the sensation of a loved one’s last touch) the speaker reassuringly claims that it is the work of the poet to answer each fleeting moment with compassionate, life-enhancing presence.

Hours, more fleeting you are than the kiss
 Of the sun on the mourning lake,
 Than the song of the bird in flight
 Pearling down to me in the brake;
 Than the beetle's glitter and flash
 As he crosses the sunlit space,
 Than the pressure warm of a hand
 In a lingering last embrace.

Heaven grant me this one desire,
 This alone: for each free bird's song
 As it flies in the sky above,
 Just one soul which may travel along;
 And for each meager ray of the sun
 My own bright iridescent seam,
 For each warm hand the clasp of mine,
 For each happiness just a dream.

Stunden, flücht'ger ihr als der Kuß
 Eines Strahls auf den trauernden See,
 Als des ziehenden Vogels Lied,
 Das mir niederperlt aus der Höh,
 Als des schillernden Käfers Blitz,
 Wenn den Sonnenpfad er durchheilt,
 Als der heiße Druck einer Hand,
 Die zum letzten male verweilt.

Dennoch, Himmel, immer mir nur
 Dieses Eine nur: für das Lied
 Jedes freien Vogels im Blau
 Eine Seele, die mit ihm zieht,
 Nur für jeden kärglichen Strahl
 Meinen farbig schillernden Saum,
 Jeder warmen Hand meinen Druck
 Und für jedes Glück meinen Traum. (17-32)

The antidote to death, it seems, is intensified experience. For the poet, this must mean deep aesthetic awareness as well, as suggested in the book references embedded in her choice of the ambiguous German words "Saum" and "Druck" (which translate also as 'seam' and 'press'). In a series of parallelisms and superlative substitutions ("This alone: for each free bird's song / As it flies in the sky above, / Just one soul which may travel

along; / And for every meager ray of the sun / My own bright iridescent seam, / For each warm hand the clasp of mine, / For each happiness just a dream” 27-32) the poet reminds us that true happiness does not reside in nature, despite our long and various histories of salvatory nature myths. The sublime immersion of stanza one had, after all, been syntactically linked by the repetition of the temporal conjunction “wenn” to the equally dissolving state of death in stanza two. Sublime dissolution, the poet suggests, is a dilution of consciousness and not the ideal state for an observing, empathic poet. One is therefore led to agree with Gössmann’s summation of Droste’s nature poetry: “Despite all the immersion into nature there is . . . no becoming one with nature; rather the law of human distance and intellectual superiority ultimately wins through” (54).

Informing this chapter is Simon Schama’s Landscape and Memory, which traces the history of our fascination with material natural objects and confirms that “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock” (61). Like all of us, Droste approaches nature with her own cultural frame and it is not, as a matter of sheer historical progression, the same frame applied by an earlier generation of Romantics. How a Biedermeier poet such as Droste viewed nature in relation to her predecessors and contemporaries, the idiosyncratic layer she brings to the thick palimpsest of nature writing in Germany and in Western culture as a whole, becomes a subject worthy of research.

Droste is influenced enough by folklore and local tradition of superstition and legend, by the gothic tendency in literature as a whole, by Catholic doctrine and, most trenchantly, by a long tradition of Romantic nature in which she, by impartiality, is a stark observer of nature’s less savory aspects. Not unlike Dickinson’s vivid transference

of domesticity (the house) into mound of earth (the freshly-dug grave) in “Because I could not stop for death,” Droste’s poetry is hyperaware of the proximity of life and death; earth, as we have seen, frequently morphs into the tomb in her imagination. Imagining nature as a protagonist or agent has been fashionable at least since Wordsworth, but, at this late stage in the Romantic century, nature is perhaps no longer as overridden with the egotistical sublime as it had been before. For Droste, “nature is a magical space, slightly menacing, seductive, and full of literary promise” (Blackwell and Zantop 40). As a woman writer, it is also a means of strategic intervention into the world of her time.

“Lying in the Moss” (‘Im Moose’) for instance introduces a night theme, that recurring German Romantic trope immortalized by Joseph von Eichendorff. Here is the opening stanza of his “Night of Moon” ‘Mondnacht’:

It was, as if with kisses
The sky the earth had stilled,
Till deep in moon-lit blossoms,
Her dreams alone he filled.

Es war, als hätt’ der Himmel
Die Erde still geküßt,
Daß sie im Blütenschimmer
Von ihm nun träumen müßt’. (1-4)⁹

Droste infuses the traditional associations of night as magical, uplifted, and ideal with rather more sobering sentiments of death and disenchantment. The poem is in fact addressing the loss, not only of one’s loved ones, but, even more pertinently, of the opportunity one might have had for such love, an experience that played itself out in Droste’s life very publicly and which still finds its way into most biographies of the

writer today.¹⁰ In this poem, nature is figured as the speaker's true companion, as the language of intimacy makes abundantly clear.

The opening stanza figures the speaker deeply immersed in her natural surroundings. In fact, she could not get any closer: "Dark branches were nodding familiarly, / Herbs whispering at my cheek, / Sweet briar exuding its fragrance unseen" ('Die dunklen Zweige nickten so vertraut, / An meiner Wange flüsterte das Kraut, / Unsichtbar duftete die Heiderose' [4-6]). The subject is situated in a moss-covered forest, a quasi-subterranean place she imagines as her future state of immersion in the grave. In both spots, the speaker sees herself as "einsam" or 'alone' (3).

Droste already foreshadows burial in the opening stanza's vivacious and sensuous immersion in nature, as both imply an intimate contact with organic matter. This duality is sustained in the third stanza as both the allusion to the senses and to the spot's telling silence is described in ways that cradle the subject, as if she is indeed part of the earth, organically incorporated in the ecological cycle, "All around so quiet that I could hear the nibbling / Of the caterpillars in the leaves and like green dust / Gently twirling bits of leaf fluttered onto me" ('Ringsum so still, daß ich vernahm im Laub / Der Raupe Nagen, und wie grüner Staub / Mich leise wirbelnd Blätterflöckchen trafen' [13-15]).

In contrast to this background of minute realism and crafted hyper-presence, the second stanza introduces the idea of home as a distant, ethereal sphere. Through the forest the speaker sees a faint glimmer of light which she thinks may be coming from her room, faintly and intermittently glowing like a firefly and only seemingly there at all: "It looked as drowsy as a face in a dream, / But I knew it was the light of home, / Ignited for me in my very own chamber" ('Es sah so dämmern wie ein Traumgesicht, / Doch wusste

ich, es war der Heimath Licht, / In meiner Kammer angeschlagen' [10-12]). Readers familiar with Droste's mirror poetry and fascination with the double will recognize Droste's use here of the word "Traumgesicht," rendering what is supposedly close and dear, one's home, oneiric and unreal. It is an intimation certainly of the final stanza's direct association of room with tomb, which is connected figuratively by the same associative image of the light emanating from the bedroom.

The association between forest and house is a poetic snapshot of the actual landscape model Droste would have known. Schloß Hülshoff, the manor house which is now a tourist site, is in fact a water castle ("Wasserschloß") surrounded by a body of water perpetually visible from the window panes of the downstairs rooms. Water thus reflects and brings the landscape into the house. Droste's later residence, Rüschaus, was similarly semi-urban and Droste often set out on walks into the surrounding moors and countryside from her own back yard (Nettesheim). Nature and the domestic thus operated as extensions of each other, and this is an effect not just of Droste's living arrangements but of a cultural and class mindset.

The link between the earthy nearness of the forest floor and the light in the house is conventional, even Christian in the association of light with the afterlife. But perhaps in spite of herself, Droste wrote a poem that privileges the pleasures of a more pagan, sensuous immersion in nature and articulates a rather less glamorous connotation of light with the domestic, cultured sphere. It is also associated with death in its most unromantic form as habitation of a grave. The light emanating from the room is synaesthetically linked to "the eternal flame at the sarcophagus" ('das ew'ge Licht am Sarkophage' [48]), and foregrounding the architecture of the grave, the sarcophagus, tinges "Heimat" as

ominous. Were Droste a faithful transcriber of Catholic dogma, a “Catholic poet” as she has often mistakenly been categorized in the literature, such a cold and harsh depiction of eternal life as merely an exchange of room for tomb would surely not have been articulated. The poem suggests a dissatisfaction with the speaker’s life. Lying on the fecund forest floor, the speaker allows her mind to wander, reviewing the past, then the present, and finally the imaginary future as an old woman reflecting on love lost and the immanence of death. The speaker imagines herself in the future, looking at the images of unrequited lovers, a virtual, but not fully realized life. The images of loved ones exist only as decaying images, “The pictures of my love I saw, / Dressed in a style now since outdated, / Carefully divesting me of faded garments, / Locks of hair, rotted, decayed sheer to dust . . .” ‘Die Bilder meiner Lieben sah ich klar, / In einer Tracht, die jetzt veraltet war, / Mich sorgsam lösen aus verblichnen Hüllen, / Löckchen, vermorscht, zu Staub zerfallen schier, . . .’ (31-4). It is interesting to note the contrast between the fecundity and vitality of the forest scene (of which the speaker is also a vital part) and the sad simulacrum of the faded image standing in for the person as well as the organic decay of the long-preserved lock of hair, an apt image of time lost and wasted.

Finally, the poem returns to the opening dialectic of here versus there, nature’s cradling presence contrasting with home’s distant light. As the speaker describes the mind’s thought processes, it lingers briefly on the present, which one assumes refers to the life lived in the public social circle of the Droste-Hülshoff home: “And then the present stepped forth, / There halted the wave as on bank’s edge” (‘Und endlich trat die Gegenwart hervor, / Da stand die Welle, wie an Ufers Borden’ [23-4]). Certainly the reality of domesticity, the enclosures of room and house, are less than ideal as the

juxtaposition of room and tomb in the final line, and the description of her “real” life as a wave threatening to engulf the subject, make abundantly clear. But it is the reprieve from “Heimat” that ultimately sustains the speaker, the place where true companionship does exist and nature serves as intimate other. The poem’s organizing principle is not the domestic but the natural scene. “Lying in the Moss,” the poem seems to suggest, *is home*.

“Moonrise” (‘Mondesaufgang’) is a typically Biedermeier-Romantic take on the sublime: in place of a grandiose experience of the numinous in nature, the experience now is somewhat quieter, if equally intense, as frequent references to the home and the homely suggest. The favored symbol of the sublime for the Biedermeier-Romantic poet is not the sun with its blinding intensity, nor even the sunset, but the moon and its mild, softening effects on the landscape. Nature, as we have noted, was becoming progressively less alien and more appropriated, aesthetically, culturally and ideologically. In this poem nature figures as light, but it is not the sublime light of the blazing sun, nor its gentler configuration as sunset that the poem’s speaker finds alluring. Instead, the speaker is waiting for the gentle, transfiguring effect of the moon to create not only an inner shift, as the sublime always does, but a new, transformed landscape. The first stanza introduces the speaker in her customary position at a spatial and temporal boundary, here between day and night (the twilight hour), between land (shore) and lake, between self and nature. She is leaning against the railing of a balcony, looking down on the vast Alpine sea. Immediately, the reader is asked to situate the speaker in relation to her surroundings in very spatial terms sounded out in repeated prepositions: she leans “on” (‘An’) the balcony, the sky is “High above [her]” (‘Hoch über mir’), “it was getting dark around me” (‘es dämmert um mich’), “High up I stood, beside me crest of the linden

trees” (‘Hoch stand ich, neben mir der Linden Kamm’), ‘Deep below me branches . . .’ (‘Tief unter mir Gezweige . . .’), and so on. The poet then adds a second descriptive layer to a progressively denser, detailed (“durchkomponiert”) scene. To the description of the speaker’s surroundings, she adds the sensory overload of the moment: “I saw the firefly rising, glowing / Blossoms tumbled as though half asleep; / It was as if a heart drifted to harbor / A heart, brimming with sorrow and joy / And images of a blessed past” (‘Die Feuerfliege sah ich glimmend steigen, / Und Blüten taumelten wie halb entschlafen; / Mir war als treibe hier ein Herz zum Hafen, / Ein Herz, das übertoll von Glück und Leid / Und Bildern seliger Vergangenheit’ [11-16]). Through the series of verbs (“summt”, “steigen”, “taumelten” “treibe”), Droste not only brings the moment and the scene to life, but also links the event to her own inner action in the continuation of verbs from the natural to the inner scene of the heart, an effect underscored visually by the insertion of a semi-colon, not a period, to link the two distinct worlds. In writing that would echo for centuries in later poets’ work--I am referring to her technique of creating suspended subjects, intoxicated with sensory input and in a floating state of the inbetween--Droste creates a watercolor palette of moments melting and fading softly into one another: “The sea glittered and softly stretched / fading pearls or clouds of tears? / Drizzling, dusk set in, / I waited, mild light, for you” (‘Der See verschimmerte mit leisem Dehnen, / Zerfloßne Perlen oder Wolkentränen? / Es rieselte, es dämmerte um mich, / Ich wartete, du mildes Licht, auf dich’ [5-8]).

Once darkness sets in, the poem’s mood changes from hopeful anticipation to the uncanny (“unheimlich”). What had been familiar and near, surrounding the subject, now becomes unfamiliar, a harbinger of death in an association Freud would later explore in

his essay on the proximity of the words “das heimliche” and “das unheimliche” (the homely and the unhomely/uncanny): indeed, the familiar becomes unfamiliar in this scene. What had been a neutral description of branches (“Far beneath me branches, bough and stem” [‘Tief unter mir Gezweige, Ast und Stamm’]) now reads, “And branches hissed at my feet / Like whispered warnings or the greeting of death” [‘Und Zweige zischelten an meinem Fuß / Wie Warningsflüstern oder Todesgruß . . .’]). Whereas the heart had felt itself drift home to harbor, it is now “a wasted heart, alone / Lonely with its guilt and pain” (‘ein verkümmert Herz allein, / Einsam mit seiner Schuld und seiner Pein’), a reference perhaps to the Christian/Catholic ideology of sin, judgement and redemption. It seems to the speaker as if the very mountains and the landscape are harsh judges looming over the lonely observer who feels threatened by the ominous, dark lake. For now at least, nature is far from homelike or domestic. Yet all this the moon’s appearance has the power to eliminate, returning the subject to a state of peaceful reminiscence and tranquility, albeit with a new clarity and none of the somnambulism and dreaminess of before. The landscape has now become softened and simultaneously appears to the speaker in clear forms and miniscule detail, as if to suggest that the speaker’s eyes have been opened to a new reality and a state of grace: “The Alps’ darkling foreheads you softly stroked / And the judges turned to gentle old men” (‘Der Alpen finstre Stirnen strichst du leise, / Und aus den Richtern wurden sanfte Greise’ [35-6]). In her softening of the sublime, Droste is not alone. Her near contemporary, Eduard Mörike (1804-1875) for instance writes poetry that resonates with Droste’s both in content and aural effect. In “At midnight” (‘Um Mitternacht’) Mörike’s night clings onto the day, singing “of the day, of the day that was today” (‘vom Tage, vom heute

gewesenen Tage' [7]). Mörike's "Gently, night climbed onto land / leans dreamily against the mountain wall" ("Gelassen stieg die Nacht an's Land, / lehnt träumend an der Berge Wand' [1-2]) lends the the night an air of sagacity: nature here is mild and placid, reminiscent of Droste's Alpine sages and certainly a far cry from earlier-Romantic renditions of sublime hyperbole. The night thus comes to represent the mild sublime, at least in its Beidermeier-Romantic formation. Both the dreamy-reflective choice of Mörike's diction ("dreamy" 'träumend' "still" 'stille' "weary" 'müd') and the ubiquity of the transitional liminal stance remind us that writers of this period exhibit similarities because they are all products, in various ways, of the same cultural moment of late Romanticism, which also explains Dickinson and Droste's historical (mid-nineteenth-century) connection over and above their common aesthetic drives that, I have argued, must be given due attention in any credible and balanced critical reading of their work.

The edifying effects of the moon are described entirely in familial terms: the once ominous Alps, appearing in stanza three as harsh judges: "Only the mountain peaks stood hard and near / A dark ring of judges in the dusk" ("Nur Bergeshäupter standen hart und nah, / Ein düster Richterkreis, im Duster da') are transformed into grandfatherly figures. This familiarization continues in the contained image of home condensed to the smallest particle of each individual water drop, in contrast to which the large open lake had appeared ominous and distinctly "unheimlich": "Each rippling wave was winking, smiling / upon each branch I saw droplets blinking / And every droplet seemed a tiny chamber / wherein shone the lamp of home" ("Der Wellen Zucken ward ein lächelnd Winken,

/ An jedem Zweige sah ich Tropfen blinken, / Und jeder Tropfen schien ein Kämmerlein, / Drin flimmerte der Heimatlampe Schein' [37-40]). As in "Im Moose," Droste manages to simultaneously script home as familiar or ideal and as distant. Droste never describes herself, or her speaker, as ensconced in the loving confines of home. In place of the home itself we find in her poetry lamp imagery, indicating the home for one lost or looking in on the home from the perspective of an outsider. Here too, the drops appear as rooms, each with a cozy lamp, but of course such rooms are an image, not inhabited but merely viewed. The ideal image of home perhaps supersedes the reality of the actual experience of living there. The rooms are, after all, Lilliputian in their liquid-drop scale and thus practically inhospitable. The poem's final rhyming-couplet effect captures the oxymoron: the moon (figured as homelike) is strange yet mild and familiar.

In its extended metaphor of nature as home, Droste, like Dickinson, reminds us that the entire nature poem is not so much a reflection of nature, or even of the self's projections onto nature, as it is a construct, a *poem* about nature seen through the poet's eyes. Droste is careful to maintain a certain distance between herself and the moon whose light she describes as strangely familiar: "Not the sun are you, which charms and blinds, / living in flames of fire, ending in blood - / You are what a poem is to a sick minstrel, / A foreign, but oh! A mild light" ('Bist keine Sonne, die entzückt und blendet, / In Feuerströmen lebt, in Blute endet - / Bist, was dem kranken Sänger sein Gedicht, / Ein fremdes, aber oh! Ein mildes Licht' [45-48]). Like poetry, the moon is capable of altering

one's experience of reality, creating it anew as it were, and is therefore both strange and familiar. Read as a commentator on her own poetic practice, then, Droste would seem to reject the traditional sublime proposed by earlier Romanticism: a momentary exalted state which must be accompanied by an ensuing anti-climax ("In Feuerströmen lebt, in Blute endet") in favor of a more subtle (Droste favors the word "mild") transformation through reflection. For this event, the rising moon becomes an ideal allegory, and Droste's treatment of it, and of the sublime in general, is at the very least representative of a late-Romantic literary moment that conjoins her to Dickinson and vice versa.

As we have seen, Droste's nature poetry is generally allegorical and does not attempt to "capture" or even to approximate the sublime or any particular natural scene, which is ultimately impossible as all experiences are always already filtered through various cultural and personal screens. However, it would be an historical inaccuracy to ascribe this scene of softness and detail to a feminine sublime or to any inherent feminine qualities meant to counter the conventional sublime in a polarized aesthetics. Quite the contrary. Force, verve, struggle, audacity, turning the smallest of natural effects into the momentous, are hallmarks of both Droste's and Dickinson's work, as each takes on the sublime of the late Romantic period, Dickinson in her writerly practice of transforming, for example, a firefly into "A winged spark doth soar about" and Droste in her transfigurations of inherited signs and symbols as discussed above.

Thus in her subtle and authentic reworking of the traditional nature-poem, Droste registers an undercurrent of dissent with the values and ideologies of her time, even as she is, simultaneously, shaped and even stimulated by her place in history. Comforting Biedermeier structures such as "Heimat" and nature itself are both upheld and held up for

scrutiny by a poet who was aware, in a meta-cognitive sense, of the sublime's transformational (hypsos) and rhetorical possibilities. While the house may be a beacon and a cultural signpost, her poems show that this marker of value must be treated as an ambiguous sign of both comfort and containment. If the eighteenth-century sublime, based on "the oxymoron of agreeable horror," thrived rather melodramatically on "ruin, chaos, and catastrophe" (Schama 450) then Droste's landscape visions--representative as they are of a general shift toward Weltschmerz or the melancholic in her cultural moment--are rather more ominous for their lack of an egotistic center. When Droste's speaker descends into the tomb/ruin in "The Marlpit" ("Die Mergelgrube") and into "The Ruined House" ("Das Öde Haus") she represents these remains not so much as nostalgic signs of a glorious past, or as the melancholy ruins the earlier Romanticism had preferred, but as giving way to nature in becoming a half-decaying earthen form resembling a tomb. Her ruins are metonymic devices for the kinds of temporal and spatial boundaries (of mortality as well as social boundaries) we encounter in all of her poems and which the speaker seems to want to engage. Under the signs of ruins and uninhabited houses--Droste's speakers favor immersion into the natural rather than the domestic sphere, registering sly dissent with the discourse of "Heimat," that preservative and, for women, ambivalent, placeholder of Biedermeier-Romantic culture.

In a period so concerned with home values, Droste's investment of domestic spaces with the ominous (room-tomb)--an association also pursued in Emily Dickinson's funereal march toward the domestic "mound" in "Because I could not stop for death"--strikes both an innovative and historically critical note. Droste's stated concern, in her letters and in life, was always with the conservative; she was suspicious of political

radicals. Yet her poetry belies her alleged conservatism and paints an ambivalent picture, at best, of those Biedermeier placeholders of ideological value, home and “Gemütlichkeit,” that she would have been expected to uphold. Her protagonists and lyric speakers stride across domestic boundaries and thresholds, questioning the ideals of home and house, seemingly defying the social conventions, which did in fact limit the amount of time Droste was able to spend on her writing. The subject matter of her life and poetry often clash, because if she did find ways to circumvent societal expectations in life (for instance by writing and purchasing a house of her own with the advance royalties for her 1844 volume of poetry) she also never truly rejected them, choosing to profess a life-long sense of familial dutifulness that belies the wild woman fantasy of such poems as “At the Tower” ‘Am Thurme’ and, in milder form, “Lying in the Moss” with its subtly rebellious preference for nature over society--or at least offers an alternative script of desire that was never actually followed. Thus, while Droste’s awareness of gender and its restrictive codes of conduct no doubt was oppositional, she never writes as anything other than a Biedermeier-Romantic poet, and it is this situatedness of her work within its broader cultural context that must be taken into account in order to grasp her dissenting voice.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of German poems and letters are my own.

2 For references to the Droste-estate library and her reading of English-language literature, see John Guthrie (who discusses Washington Irving’s influence in particular), Lawrence Price (a useful overview of transnational literary crossings from Britain to Germany in the nineteenth century as well specific chapters on the influence of Scott and Byron are included in his book), and Frauke Lenckos who writes on “Byron-fever” in Germany during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

3 “So ist, wenn man will, die Natur auch den Dichtern dieser Periode die große Lehrmeisterin geblieben. Aber ihnen erscheint sie nicht in der Knospe und Blüte sondern in Überreife und Verfall ihrer Geschöpfe.”

4 It should be noted, though, that Hartman and others have pointed out Wordsworth's dejection and his ambivalent modes as well.

5 There is also a clear influence here of the gothic. The switch from a pantheistic or sublime nature to nature as an embodiment of death and decay is common in the Gothic and Romantic French texts of the 1830's for example (Diamond) and, given the influence of French among the upper classes in Europe, certainly part of her cultural milieu. Droste admired Washington Irving's Bracebridge Hall, translated into German in 1823, the style of which she emulated in her prose fragment "Bei uns zu Lande auf dem Lande" featuring local stories, customs and characters of her native province, Westphalia (Guthrie, Reichart) and her poem is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's The Last Man, with its apocalyptic visions of nature laid waste and reference to the last man on earth. There is thus, over and above her personal and historical interest in supernatural folk tales, second-sight, the double, ghosts and such (folklore to which her nurse would have exposed her), also a clear literary line to the Gothic genre of live burial, entrapment and horror.

6 Bertruch's "Bilderbuch für Kinder" (1747) consisted of minutely-detailed images (lithographs and engravings) for children, published with the pedagogical intent of raising literacy-levels and of bringing the Enlightenment to the peasant classes (Nettesheim 16).

7 I owe this translation of "Im Grase" to Sydney G. Swan.

8 This translation is Ursula Prideaux's (German Poetry from 1750 to 1900).

9 Geoffrey Herbert Chase's translation (German Poetry from 1750 to 1900).

10 I am referring to Droste's so-called "youth scandal." In 1820, Droste met two men, August von Arnswald and Heinrich Straube, fell in love with both and received their joint dismissal. This affair became a forum for gossip and was played out in the public arena, causing Droste years of anguish and embarrassment. The anecdote is illustrative of the relentlessly public life a woman of her social standing would have had to endure in the close circle of extended family and friends.

Chapter Seven:

Forces, not Subjects: Rethinking Feminist Literary Theory through Dickinson and Droste.

“All events, all motion, all becoming, as a determinant of degrees and relations of force,
as a *struggle* —” Friedrich Nietzsche

Despite obvious political and cultural differences between Droste, a mid-nineteenth century German woman of Catholic persuasions and a member of the Westphalian gentry on the one hand, and Dickinson, an upper middle-class New England woman with Puritan roots on the other, both poets share a remarkably similar intellectual, aesthetic, and literary-historical milieu, as the long Romantic century persists in the German states and resurfaces, belatedly, in New England's sweeping Transcendentalism. Both chose home-centeredness and the familial domain, Dickinson, for instance, responding to Higginson's invitation to Boston with the declaration that she never leaves town (Sewall 8). Both lived in their parental homes well into adulthood. At the same time, they enjoyed a rich and extensive social circle of friends and a large, extended correspondence. It was customary, both in Amherst and in Droste's circle, to visit, coming and going in each others' homes, a feat Dickinson seems to have accomplished vicariously through her letters and gift-poems. The addition of Mabil Loomis Todd, an intimate friend of Thoreau's family, to Amherst brought a cultural and social vivaciousness to the town, and Susan Dickinson, Emily's sister-in-law, had created a salon-like home, witnessing the constant comings and goings of Loomis Todd among

others (Sewall 173). Thus, for both Dickinson and Droste, a home-centered convivial culture of visits and salons made larger bustling cities effectively dispensable.

On a literary level too, numerous commonalities, ranging from subject choice (“minute particulars”) to stylistic innovations, emerge. A mutual interpretation of the sublime, variously registered as bliss but also as struggle, contest and force in their work, also reveals remarkable overlaps. As Weiskel notes, this may well be attributable to the historical relevance of the sublime, both in New England and on the Continent:

It would be hard to overestimate the presence of the Romantic sublime in the nineteenth century. In one direction the sublime opens out through Kant into the vast and gloomy corridors of German idealism. The ‘dynamical’ sublime, which concerns power and sets man and nature in desperate opposition, became an obsessive structure for German sensibility. In England we observe finer accommodations, in which nature is not merely thrown over but appears as the medium through which the mind discovers and represents itself, in eddies of separation and reunion. (6-7)

And, of course, in its mid-century American reincarnation these subtleties give way to a hyperbolic rhetoric of self-reliance and egotism, most notably in Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. As we have seen, both Dickinson and Droste register a subtle proto-feminism in their employment of the force of the sublime, converting the ostensibly small and quotidian into the extraordinary in a manner that charges the everyday--and by implication the lives of nineteenth-century women--with alternative possibilities. By turns more pragmatic, tongue-in-cheek, literarily self-conscious (what I have coined “the poet’s sublime”) and ironic, even comic, theirs was a reactionary take on the Romantic sublime quite in keeping with their cultural and historical moment. Both poets were firmly situated at the latter end of the long Romantic century, a period overlapping with the Biedermeier trend in Europe.

Now, for rather obvious historical reasons, the largely European discourse of Biedermeier cannot quite find a comfortable fit in a post-revolutionary America that had only fairly recently begun to find its authentic literary voice, and for whom high-Romantic ideals of individualism and optimism, kinship with nature and a love affair with the sublime were still current in such figures as Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman and, as I have argued, Dickinson herself. Temporally, the Biedermeier impulse coincides with the American Romanticism of Emerson and Thoreau. And if Biedermeier culture admires home and hearth, settlement and establishment, then the peripatetic American writers--Emerson on his lecture circuit, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain on their literary trails--certainly belie any such impulse. Nor does the restlessness of Westward expansionism settle easily with situatedness or with moderation. Nevertheless, ensconced as she was in her familial home, her love of the garden and small natural forms, her Sesshaftigkeit (vicarious travel and a penchant for epistolary forms taking the place of actual travel), we find that Dickinson's *milieu* in provincial New England, and that of a number of her social circle, does *parallel* Biedermeier culture. Afterall, if Biedermeier is conceived of as one discourse among others during that long Romantic century, a discourse that forms a part of "romanticism as [a] genuinely international period process," it becomes possible to speak of Biedermeier-Romanticism as a dynamic "cultural process" not to be fitted to narrow national settings (Nemoianu vii). It may be possible then, to find "*a mode analogous to that of the Biedermeier*" (Nemoianu 61 my emphasis) not only in Austen's Emma or Mansfield Park with its famously sedentary heroines (for Emma the six miles between London and her provincial Hartfield home represents a hurdle), but also in such established, settled and closely-knit college towns as

nineteenth-century Amherst, Massachusetts, which existed alongside the concurrent peripatetic spirit of the self-reliant Transcendentalists or forging frontiersmen and women. All of which is not to say that Dickinson *was* a Biedermeier poet, a literary anachronism to say the least. I am merely suggesting that she manifested *aspects* of Biedermeier discourse in her milieu and in her subject choices. We would do well to remember that the period is hardly homogenous in any of its configurations, certainly not in Germany where Heine and the Young Germans produced a body of work inimical to the Biedermeier trend. And it is imperative to note that the Biedermeier impulse is still very much an organic part of Romanticism, albeit in post-absolutist, moderated form: “the sublimities of romantic intergralism were still close enough” to be felt; a truly separate movement or split Biedermeier was not. As in retro-fashion trends, the belated interpretation is tongue-in-cheek, ironic, muted and toned down: elements remain but the entirety is diluted. An acknowledgement of the parallels between Droste’s milieu and Dickinson’s along the logic of Biedermeier Romanticism brings more historical/cultural thickness to a comparative framework that all too often has seemed largely a matter of gender and of certain approaches to women’s writing, all of which this dissertation has sought to revise.

Revisionary stances of identity politics in feminist literary theory have become more prevalent in recent years. For instance, Showalter’s literary history of American women writers (*A Jury of Her Peers* 2009) registers developments in women’s literary history since her first book, *A Literature of Their Own*, appeared in 1977. Whereas before, she notes, feminism had been in the business of recovery and revision, we are now in a position to judge, evaluate, compare and rank women writers as we enter a new

phase of freedom (Showalter *Jury* 512). In her earlier book surveying nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists, Showalter had taken a retrospective chronological approach to women's literary history, which she maintains here:

I defined three phases in the development of women's writing that were akin to those of any other literary subculture. First, there is 'a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition'; second, 'there is a phase of protest' against these modes, and 'advocacy' of independent rights and values; and third, a phase of self-discovery, a search for identity and a specific aesthetic. I called these phases in women's writing 'feminine,' 'feminist,' and 'female.' In the 1970s, I could only imagine a fourth stage, a 'seamless participation in the literary mainstream.' By the end of the twentieth century, however, American women's literature had reached the fourth and final stage, which I would now call 'free.' American women writers in the twenty-first century can take on any subject they want, in any form they choose. (*Jury* xvii)

However, perhaps as an effect of focusing on novelists rather than on poets and the specificity of their craft, such a broadly chronological approach overlooks some of the anomalies, exceptions and complexities attending a formula of "stages". It is certainly worth asking whether nineteenth-century women poets did not in fact take on a host of subjects, often but not always writing "as women," laboring sometimes as imitators but also as innovators, and whether, in fact, the phases listed above could not be compressed and rearranged in heuristic ways. Dickinson and Droste were, variously, imitators, protestors, self-possessed and, I would venture to say, at least in their capacity as professional writers, remarkably innovative, even "free". Instead of a chronological formula, a "messy" thick matrix of factors--historical (ideological and cultural contingencies, gender and racial discourse, etc.); aesthetic (the "gift" of writing, literary history, ideological pressures on the aesthetic); and personal (gender, educational and religious backgrounds, personality, lifestyle)--intertwine in unique and various combinations. One cannot isolate or weigh any one single factor (history, or gender)

without risking reduction of the whole. Droste's and Dickinson's work gives representation to the complexities of a woman writer's work in subtle yet tactical uses of the sublime as a power or force packaged as an *aesthetic* rather than an identity-confirming response.

As outlined in the introduction, Nietzsche's emphasis on forces marks a radical intellectual shift, one that Grosz, again, has taken up and examined for its benefits to feminist thinking. The "will to power manifest in all events" (299) refers less to the negatively weighed sense of the term "power" as enforcing one's will over another than to a constant wrestling and becoming that is truly creative, a force which relies on acting rather than on being acted upon by outside humanized agents: "As soon as we imagine someone who is responsible for our being thus and thus, etc. (God, nature), and therefore attribute to him the intention that we should exist and be happy or wretched, we corrupt for ourselves the *innocence of becoming*" (Nietzsche 299). Once one has dislodged the typical trajectory of acting in and upon the world along with the anthropomorphic structures related to the imposition of the human onto nature, force suddenly becomes something joyful and creative: "The victorious concept 'force,' by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be completed: an inner will must be ascribed to it, which I designate as 'will to power,' i.e., as an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive, etc." (333). What Nietzsche had in mind involved power as a form of creative energy (299): an energy or a force that supplants the subject engaging with and participating in forces rather than either relenting or resisting them. "Force is always engaged in becoming. It is never stationary. It has a history and a duration. Force does not seek intentions, goals,

purposes, but simply its own expansion, elaboration, celebration; it seeks to act. (This is why force is named ‘the will to power’ in Nietzsche’s work.)” (Grosz Time 188).

In its capacity as a drive, as a will or force not tied to the human being, this “will to power” is a creative force that is articulated, often expressly, in Dickinson and Droste’s work. Both poets articulate inner struggles, contests and sudden highs and lows that register strife, discord and struggle. The sublime is a force for both poets and it articulates not so much the bliss of the ego in self-enhanced mode--Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman’s sublime--but rather a sublime of forces and contests in negotiation, drives that are quite beyond the subject’s own ego. In Dickinson and Droste, the abyss follows hard upon the heels of bliss. Both Dickinson and Droste tap into the contestatory forces that are battled out on an inner or psychic level. As the former notes,

I have never seen “Volcanoes” –
But when travelers tell
How those old – phlegmatic mountains
Usually so still –

Bear within – appalling Ordnance,
Fire, and smoke, and gun,
Taking Villages for breakfast,
And appalling Men -

If the stillness is Volcanic
In the human face
When upon a pain Titanic
Features keep their place –
..... (P. 175)

Dickinson’s choice of metaphor, of harnessing “Volcanic” emotions, is striking in its emphasis on force and latent power, the latter always teeming beneath the surface:

Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit – *Life!* (P. 108)

In the following poem, the image of hidden inner forces is once again invoked:

Cocoon above! Cocoon below!
 Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so
 What all the world suspect?
 An hour, and gay on every tree
 Your secret, perched in ecstasy
 Defies imprisonment!

An hour in Chrysalis to pass,
 Then gay above receding grass
 A Butterfly to go!
 A moment to interrogate,
 Then wiser than a 'Surrogate,'
 The Universe to know!

Given her famously cloistered lifestyle, it is fair to surmise that the poet identifies with the cocoon and its hidden bounty. The image of a threshold, of always perching between imprisonment, suffering, or toil and the sudden outburst of ecstasy is once again taken up, here in the form of an apt metaphorical presentation of the creative force and the will to power of the poet. That the cocoon-butterfly trope is a biological one is particularly appropriate, underscoring the inevitability (always already scripted) of a force that is instinctual, a point de Certeau makes as well when he articulates his theory of practice and the power of instinctual forces. Furthermore, nature is always evolving through levels of struggle, competition and force; hence nothing either in nature or in humans is still or fixed. The speaker admires the speed and the intuitiveness with which the butterfly familiarizes itself with its new environment, and the closing lines are suggestive of the poet's function, "The Universe to know". Bear in mind that in the later poem, ca. 1862, "This is my Letter to the World," Dickinson's speaker declares herself nature's emissary, "For love of Her-Sweet – countrymen - / Judge tenderly - of Me" (P. 441), so

conflation of self with nature is a recurring theme, no doubt influenced by Emerson and her cultural milieu, albeit with less ego involvement.

Dickinson's mind is never still, she declares in the following poem, which similarly deals with outer closeting versus irrepressible action:

They shut me up in Prose –
 As when a little Girl
 They put me in the Closet –
 Because they liked me 'still' –

Still! Could themselves have peeped –
 And seen my Brain – go round –
 They might as wise have lodged a Bird
 For Treason – in the Pound –

.....

Taken as a trope for artistic endeavor, Dickinson's metaphors suggest a hyper-awareness of the power and energy of the creative process; it is contestatory, a struggle with inner forces imminently erupting. "Artists wrestled here!" she writes (P. 110), and, in a stroke of irreverence and appreciation, Dickinson renders the biblical wrestling match recorded in Genesis 32:26-30 (Capps 149) between "cunning Jacob" and God's representative:

A little East of Jordan,
 Evangelists record,
 A Gymnast and an Angel
 Did wrestle long and hard –

The poem ends with Jacob's astonishment: "And the bewildered Gymnast / Found he had worsted God!" (15-16). The tone of the poem is clearly appreciative of Jacob and his audacious act, a characteristic we have come to associate with Dickinson's and Droste's self-possessed perceptions of themselves as artists as well.

Fear and awe are two of the forces Dickinson associates with poetry:

To pile like Thunder to it's close
 Then crumble grand away

While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry – (1-4, P. 1247)

As Kher points out, we fear what we love (16), and this poem may be read as a declaration of her abiding appreciation of creating poetry. On more than one occasion Dickinson associates poetry with awe, “Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy” (P. 1640). To be sure, the constant crafting of lines amounts to something of a Nietzschean always-becoming.

Similarly, Droste’s much-anthologized poem “The Mirror Image” (‘Das Spiegelbild’) acknowledges inner or psychic struggle hovering beneath the façade of outer composure.¹ Charging intimacy with the Burkean sublime of horror, the self in this poem becomes the uncanny or its own precarious double. One of her most famous and widely translated poems, it has received attention from critics of various ideological commitments. Gössmann’s ontological reading alerts us to the ubiquity of the mirror and double motif in Western culture (“Narcissus,” “Snow White”) and in Droste’s literary epoch in particular, declaring the tradition well suited to “uncovering the submerged realms of the human soul . . . Mirrors reveal the uncanny which harbors in the human psyche, and they can shake up human consciousness, promoting self-knowledge in the process” (Spiegelbild 32). It is Gössmann’s assertion that the mirror motif promotes greater aesthetic self-knowledge and a sense of deeply-rooted professionalism.

Not surprisingly, psychoanalytical readings figure prominently in the critical oeuvre as well. Christa Suttner, for instance, underscores the poem’s intimations of the unconscious and its modern appeal:

In this recognition of the unconscious as an equal if not more powerful determining factor of the personality, in the expression of fear of the unconscious, as well as in the assumption that the unconscious is

accessible to the conscious, Annette joins that group of her contemporaries which . . . seems to form a link between the period generally known as *Spätromantik* and our own time. (629)

Along the same lines, Lars Ingesman and Irmgard Roebing read this poem of doubling and doubting as a Lacanian instance of subjective eccentricity or self- alienation. The oedipal figure of “Moses” (31) in particular is foregrounded since such a choice of metaphor “in Lacan’s theory anchors the subject in the unconscious thereby determining language as well as identity” (Ingesman 390).

Feminist critics read the poem as a symptom of Droste’s struggle with identity, an expression of “tormenting inner tensions” resulting from the collision of personal desire and social expectation (Hallamore 58) or an “[experiment] with ambiguous, sometimes unsatisfactory strategies for creating poetry out of the divisions in herself: . . . confronting a mirrored self at the risk of madness, mutilation or grief . . .” (Howe Parnassus 40-1).

Indeed, the poem is riddled with signifiers of alienation. The image reflected in the mirror is a “Phantom” evoking a strong emotional reaction in the speaker. She is by turns frightful, shy, seduced and, finally, accepting of the strange image reflected back at her in the mirror. To my mind, the poem has achieved precisely such wide recognition not only because it captures a struggle for female identity but also because its theme (doubling, the fissure between self and self-image) resonates as an essential human problem: the inner struggles that are ongoing and over whose forces we have little control.

Mirror poems are of course loaded signifiers; they “implicitly incorporate the symbolic complexity of the mirror since the Romantic period: the mirror as a symbol of the soul, reflecting the universe or acting as a medium for identity formation . . .”

(Wehinger 229). This was not the only mirror poem Droste wrote during her productive years between 1841 and 1843. In “The Hedge” (‘Die Taxuswand’) the mirror figures as a positive place of self-affirmation, a “harbor” (‘Hafen’ [44]). “I gladly stand before you,” (‘Ich stehe gern vor dir,’) Droste’s lyrical “I” declares, “Since yonder I know, / The green garden bench, / Where, early in life, I / drank with glowing lips . . .” (‘Denn jenseits weiß ich sie, / Die grüne Gartenbank, / Wo ich das Leben früh / Mit glühen Lippen trank . . .’[17-21]). The mirror is the reminder of that glorious place of childhood (rendered more wonderful, perhaps, in retrospect). Life has become a “thorn” (‘Dorn’) but her younger version is reaffirmed with every visit to the reflective scene: “How I long to steal up / To your dark cloth / And strike eighteen years / From my book of life” (‘So will ich immer schleichen / Nur an dein dunkles Tuch / Und achtzehn Jahre streichen / Aus meinem Lebensbuch’ [29-32]).

In “The Mirror Image,” by contrast, the mirror scene creates greater ambivalence and disharmony. The ultimate alienation in which the familiar becomes spectrally unfamiliar is described in the vocabulary of the uncanny. Her own mirror image appears strange to her: “Phantom, you are not me” (‘Phantom, du bist nicht meinesgleichen!’ [7]). It is monstrous even, a “creature [that] could indeed come to life” (Hallamore 61). The scene described in “The Mirror Image” is of an older person (woman) approaching the end of life and refusing to identify with the alien appearance reflected in the mirror. The image thus does not match perception and creates a spectral disconnect, a haunting reminder of the passing of time and the most uncanny and unbearable thought of all: the demise of self or the inevitable death force that effects the most trenchant disconnect of

all, between body and conscious mind. Droste maintains an oscillating effect in all her stanzas as the self is both attracted to and repelled by what it sees:

When you gaze at me from your crystal
 With your foggy eyes
 Comet-like and fading
 With mysterious aspect
 Two souls like spies
 Hovering, yes, then I whisper:
 Phantom, you are not me.

Schaust du mich an aus dem Kristall
 Mit deiner Augen Nebelball,
 Kometen gleich, die im Verbleichen;
 Mit Zügen, worin wunderbarlich
 Zwei Seelen wie Spione sich
 Umschleichen, ja, dann flüstere ich:
 Phantom, du bist nicht meinesgleichen! (1-7)

All but the final stanza repeat this pattern of simultaneous attraction and repulsion caused by the image's strange doubling ("double light" ['Doppellicht']). As the speaker gazes at her image, she is attracted to the forehead because it houses her thoughts, but as she scrutinizes the image, the "eyes' cold glimmer" ('des Auges kaltem Glast') repel her to the point of horror. Traces of the child she was remain around the mouth, ("And playing around the mouth so gentle, Soft and helpless as a child . . ." ['Und was den Mund umspielt so lind, / So weich und hilflos wie ein Kind . . .']), but the same mouth can appear hard and repulsive ("when it mocks me, / aiming as from a drawn bow . . ." ['When it wenn er höhrend spielt, / Wie von gebanntem Bogen zielt']). This ambiguity culminates in the penultimate stanza:

It is certain, you are not me,
 A strange being, whom I
 Like Moses, approach unshod,
 Full of strength not known to me,
 Full of strange suffering and strange desire,
 May God have mercy, when in my breast

Your soul lies slumbering.

Es ist gewiß, du bist nicht ich,
 Ein fremdes Dasein, dem ich mich
 Wie Moses nahe, unbeschuhet,
 Voll Kräfte, die mir nicht bewußt,
 Voll fremden Leides, fremder Lust;
 Gnade mir Gott, wenn in der Brust
 Mir schlummernd deine Seele ruhet! (29-35)

Finally, the quasi-Burkean sublime of fear and terror, the struggle sustained throughout the poem, is released in the last stanza and exchanged for a measure of acceptance:

And yet I feel, as though related,
 Captivated by your horrors,
 Love must with fear unite.
 Were you to step out of your crystal ball,
 Phantom, alive onto the ground,
 I would merely tremble and
 Methinks – I would cry for you.

Und dennoch fühl ich, wie verwandt,
 Zu deinen Schauern mich gebannt,
 Und Liebe muß der Furcht sich einen.
 Ja, trätest aus Kristalles Rund,
 Phantom, du lebend auf den Grund,
 Nur leise zittern würd ich, und
 Mich dünkt – ich würde um dich weinen! (36-42)

Love and acceptance of self are described as levelers in this wary dance between self and self-image. It is perhaps an oxymoron to hate and even fear the self, but this scene is also a familiar one. Droste has represented the fissures that external forces (aging, death) create between ourselves and our images in such a way that they resemble the Burkean sublime of wonder and fear. At every turn, the image is both appealing and horrifying because the mirror, she well knows, is a site of both endless appeal and of judgment or

scrutiny. Women in particular have a long history with mirrors and the self-doubt they create:

In all cultures and at all times women have lived under the spell of the mirror, and it is a relationship of ambivalence and tension. Women carry mirrors in their purses, and they are not embarrassed to look at them in public; women tend to hang more mirrors in their rooms than men do; they cannot pass a mirror without stealing a glance. The glance in the mirror, at her own reflection, is however not, as is always suggested, self-satisfied affirmation or admiration. Rather, women observe and judge themselves critically and anxiously in the mirror, making sure they are not too pale, too fat, too wrinkled; they search for imperfections. The mirror on the wall is always also imagined publicity; she anticipates the gaze of all in the mirror. (Akashe-Böhme 9)

Although the fear of aging and of the transitoriness of life, traces of which are evident in the mirror image, is especially difficult for women who have based their identity on the affirmation of beauty and youth, it is also a general fear, and in this sense Droste's poem resonates for a wider audience.

Often, Dickinson's poetry registers a similar dialectic of pain and pleasure, of inner wrestling and contestatory forces, negotiated and wrought, one through the other. A bookkeeper's careful log comes to mind, balancing the books.

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ration
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years –
Bitter contested farthings –
And coffers heaped with Tears! P 125

Something of the inner mosaic of forces is at work in the following poem. Underscoring the element of struggle, Dickinson employs a military trope:

To fight aloud, is very brave –
 But gallanter, I know
 Who charge within the bosom
 The Cavalry of Woe –

Who win, and nations do not see –
 Who fall – and none observe –
 Whose dying eyes, no Country
 Regards with patriot love –

We trust, in plumed procession
 For such, the Angels go –
 Rank after rank, with even feet –
 And Uniforms of Snow. (P. 126)

As we know, a recurring trope in Dickinson's work is the trudging of feet, here transfigured as marching troops of angels to denote labor or suffering. The metrical feet of the "labor" of writing poetry may sometimes be implied, as when the speaker declares leaving behind her life of work and play, "My labor and my leisure too," or "The Feet, mechanical, go round -" when articulating grief. Labor, laborare, is to labor, strive, toil. It impresses an exertion of effort and a longue dureé, which frequently is taken up by Dickinson in her catalogue of poems on death and dying. In one of her more skeptical poems, the image of trudging is employed to denote the difficulty of finding the Father in heaven that her childhood religion denotes:

'Many Mansions,' by 'his Father,'
 I don't know him; snugly built!
 Could the Children find their way there –
 Some, would even trudge tonight!" (P. 127).

Both Dickinson and Droste register pain (along with joy) in their work, a fact that may be related to what Grosz notes are elements and extensions of forces:

Pleasure and pain are the corporeal registrations of the forces of the world, the visceral impact of forces, what we use to struggle with and against, in order to become more and other. They are the most powerful aids to

learning and the most direct and effective stimuli for action, and thus for the expansion of force. (Grosz Time 190).

Similarly, one of Droste's more widely anthologized and translated poems registers a similar range of ecstasy and abyss, of forces, action, contest and struggle. In "On the Tower" ('Am Thurme') the speaker's perspective on high (the tower balcony and site of her productive middle-age years in the tower room at Meersburg) issues a series of relative spatial dimensions as she views the world around her ("The shrieking starling streaks by" ['Umstrichen vom schreienden Stare,']; "And as I look down at the beach . . ." ['Und drunten seh ich am Strand, so frisch']; "And further I see a pennant blow" ['Und drüben seh ich ein Wimpel wehn'] and, finally, the imaginative projection, "If I were a hunter, out in the wild, / If I were a bit of a soldier, / If I were at least and simply a man" ['Wär ich ein Jäger auf freier Flur, / Ein Stück nur von einem Soldaten, / Wär ich ein Mann doch mindestens nur, . . .']). The poem is breathlessly peripatetic, manic even, as every line enacts movement and fantastical transgression. Aggressively, the speaker claims her space in the world of action and freedom.

I stand on the tower's high balcony,
The shrieking starling streaks by.
And like a maenad I let the storm
Rumple and tear at my hair.

Ich steh auf hohem Balkone am Thurm,
Umstrichen vom schreienden Stare,
Und laß gleich einer Mänade den Sturm
Mir wühlen im flatternden Haare. (1-4)

Indeed, the speaker seems immersed in the storm, which she personifies and addresses as her match in passion and fury:

Oh my wild comrade and crazy boy,
I long to embrace you and match
My strength against yours, two steps from the edge

And wrestle with you to the death.

O wilder Geselle, o toller Fant,
 Ich möchte dich kräftig umschlingen
 Und, Sehne an Sehne, zwei Schritte vom Rand
 Auf Tod und Leben dann ringen! (5-8)

The imagery here is masculine, combative even, as the lyric speaker imagines a wrestling match with the storm itself, tottering dramatically between life and death at the balcony's edge. "In a sense the poet would like to compete with nature in her own creation" (Hagenbüchle 39).

Even the aural elements of the poem are edgy, rough and onomatopoeic, sound effects lost in translation ("the waves / are like hunting dogs at play" ['die Wellen / Sich tummeln rings mit Geklaff und Gezisch' 10,11]), inviting the speaker to join them in wild play: "How gladly I'd jump to be among, / That raging pack of hounds / And follow through the coral woods / The walrus with merry sound." ['Oh, springen möcht ich hinein alsbald, / Recht in die tobende Meute, / Und jagen durch den korallinen Wald / Das Walroß, die lustige Beute!'] (13-16).

By contrast, the final image of a woman loosening her hair in covert rebellion against social strictures rings all the more poignant, emphasizing the repressiveness of society:

But now I must sit like a good little girl,
 Sweet, delicate and fair.
 And have to secretly loosen my hair
 And let it blow in the wind!

Nun muß ich sitzen so fein und klar,
 Gleich einem artigen Kinde,
 Und darf nur heimlich lösen mein Haar
 Und lassen es flattern im Winde!' (29, 30).

Two of the four stanzas address male vocations in wishful mode: “Oh, I want to stand in that fighting ship, / And grasp the steering wheel / And over the spitting, hissing deep, / Glide as the seagull will” (“Oh, sitzen möcht ich im kämpfenden Schiff, / Das Steuerruder ergreifen / Und zischend über das brandende Riff / Wie eine Seemöve streifen’ [21-4]). Written in the subjunctive, the final stanza reiterates the appeal for freedom. She wishes she were a “hunter”, a “soldier” or, at the very least, “a man”

One of the attractions of the Kantian sublime is its anticipation of self-expansion. Kant employs the vocabulary of space and elevation as he describes the transcendence of the sublime:

And we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence . . . Hence nature is here called sublime [erhaben] merely because it elevates [erhebt] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature. (sic 120, 1)

In her desire to rise and match nature in all of its wildness, the poem’s lyric speaker is replicating the economy and the ideology of the sublime. However, Droste’s poem exemplifies Kant’s point even as it is forced to invert its more celebratory outcomes: transcendence of boundaries, with which the poem begins, is only imagined, and the subject must ultimately face the reality of a return to “baser nature” which hems and halts Kant’s empowering sublime imagination. Indeed, Bruna Bianchi notes that Droste repeatedly writes under the sign of the border and of transgressing those boundaries in what she calls effects of “visionary euphoria” (33) but hardly ever crosses the precipice into the potential chaos of the unknown (24): “The unattainable wish for once to cross one’s own vitally necessary limits comes into being at the site of the tower: as such, the

tower becomes the specific site of poetry, since, for Droste, it is nurtured by the desire or the visionary trajectory of crossing boundaries” (Bianchi 29). The speaker’s transgressions remain in the wishful mode. I would argue though that the poem’s proto-feminist effects rest not so much in the drama of frustration and thwarted desire – in the human drama – but in the transcendence of the human, in the articulation of force and struggle, in a wild traditionally “masculine” engagement with the public sphere, and finally in its mimicry of the apparatus of the sublime in those wild imaginary reaches. It is an imagined freedom and a lifestyle that is forceful in the act of being articulated (and, in turn, of being read), a dream that came into partial fruition in Droste’s own life during her latter days, especially with her purchase of a house and the attendant freedoms the life of an independent professional writer could provide.

As we have seen, much of Droste’s and Dickinson’s work, as well as their aesthetic mindset, is forceful both in Nietzsche’s and in de Certeau’s sense of action. The poets’ emphases on forces of nature are rooted in the mid-nineteenth century discourse of empirical science that is non-Romantic (i.e. not subjectively tied to the observer) but instead seemingly arbitrary, cruel and, as Darwin famously announced, competitive. Honing in on the smallest of natural objects, both Dickinson and Droste illuminate the sublime (overpowering and omniscient) force of indifferent natural law, thus elevating the everyday and the minute to something genuinely considerable. Here, for instance, is Dickinson on the subject of natural forces:

Apparently with no surprise
 To any happy Flower
 The Frost beheads it at its play –
 In accidental power –
 The blonde Assassin passes on –

The Sun proceeds unmoved
 To measure off another Day
 For an Approving God. P. 1624

For her part, Droste's flower imagery is similarly bleak:

How green are my fingers,
 Flowers they have torn;
 Their wish was to bloom for me
 And yet they had to die

Wie sind meine Finger so grün,
 Blumen hab ich zerrissen;
 Sie wollten für mich blühn
 Und haben sterben müssen. (1-4)

And when Droste turns her gaze on the cold natural forces at play in the abrupt demise of a lark, we are again reminded of nature's arbitrary forces:

Then, suddenly, it sank and sank,

 Still I saw its tiny limbs convulsing
 Approaching it with awe;
 Your final song had rung out;
 Lying, what was left of you, poor and cold

 By your half-built nest

Da plötzlich sank und sank es nieder,

 Noch zucken sah ich kleine Glieder
 Und bin erschrocken dann genaht;
 Dein letztes Lied, es war verklungen;
 Du lagst, ein armer kalter Rest,

 Bei deinem halbgebauten Nest.

In "The Ailing Eagle" 'Der kranke Aar,' irreversible natural forces clip the wings of the once mighty bird: ²

Near a lifeless stump in a fertile lea
 A bull ruminated on its feed
 A wounded eagle sat low upon a tree,
 An ailing bird with broken wings.

“Rise up, my bird, into the clear blue sky.
In my fragrant bed I’ll watch you fly.”

“Alas! Alas! In vain the sun does cry
To the ailing eagle with broken wings!”

“O bird, it’s your wickedness and vanity
And lifelong scorn of all captivity!”

“Alas! Alas! Too many above me –
And all eagles – broke my wings!”

“So, off the branch, flutter to your nest,
You’ll ruin my herbs with your distress.”

“Alas! Alas! I have no place to rest,
Exiled eagle with broken wings!”

“O bird, if only you were just a hen,
You could live in a stove vent” –

“Alas! Alas! I’d rather be an eagle, then,
Much rather be an eagle with broken wings!”

Am dürren Baum, im fetten Wiesengras
Ein Stier behaglich wiederkaut den Fraß;
Auf niederm Ast ein wunder Adler saß,
Ein kranker Aar mit gebrochnem Schwingen.

“Steig auf, mein Vogel, in die blaue Luft,
Ich schau dir nach aus meinem Kräuterduft.” –

“Weh, weh, umsonst die Sonne ruft
Den kranken Aar mit gebrochnen Schwingen!” –

“O Vogel, warst so stolz und freventlich
Und wolltest keine Fessel ewiglich!” –

“Weh, weh, zu viele über mich,
Und Adler all – brachen mir die Schwingen!” –

“So flutter in dein Nest, vom Aste fort,
Dein Ächzen schier die Kräuter mir verdorrt.” –

“Weh, weh, kein Nest hab ich hinfort,
Verbannter Aar mit gebrochnen schwingen!” –

“O Vogel, wärst du eine Henne doch,
Dein Nestchen hättest du im Ofenloch.” –

“Weh, weh, viel lieber ein Adler noch,
Viel lieber ein Aar mit gebrochnen Schwingen!”

The eagle--that Roman symbol of national pride, pomp and prestige--is here all the more pathetic for his altered state ("exiled"). So distressed is the speaker by this spectacle that her idyllic landscape and her mood have been affected ("You'll ruin my herbs with your distress"). The proffered solution of quiet domesticity, lack of flight in exchange for warmth and comfort in an oven vent, is rejected by the majestic bird that would "rather be an eagle with broken wings" than lead a curtailed existence. Read against the poet's other self-reflective poems, letters and self-proclaimed assertions of poetic vocation, this strongly empathic poem suggests a parallel between the poet and the eagle, as both scorn the yokes imposed by external circumstances (cf. "On the Tower"). And with that, Droste returns to her theme of thwarted forces, made all the more poignant in lieu of the fact that forces by their very nature demand to act, flow and expand unhindered. That some can soar while others must sit still, ensconced in a life of domesticity, is a reality that Droste well understood. And it is a compromise that she rejects outright, both here and in her other more overtly proto-feminist poems.

Looking back, we can no doubt conclude that feminist literary theory was essential in readjusting exclusionary reading practices. However, it now calls for a more inclusive examination of women's writing, an examination that is attuned to the dense, cluttered matrix of contemporaneous (Biedermeier or late-Romantic) culture with all of its players, regardless of gender, in attendance. Furthermore, as I have pointed out, in instances where the specificity of craft or poiēsis--that nebulous, heuristic extra-individual force, often random or somewhat unpredictable, the "sudden and spontaneous appearance of the 'right' word in poetic creation" (Kher 44)--is taken into account, poetic

effects, indeed its forces, can have interesting and puissant outcomes as instruments of change.

Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all German translations of poems are my own.

2 The translation of “The Ailing Eagle” is by S. L. Cocalis and G. M. Geiger, published in their anthology “The Defiant Muse”.

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Curriculum Vitae

Susanne Silvia Navarre

1996 – currently: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Ph. D. Program in Comparative Literature.

1996, M.A. in English. University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

1991, B.A. Honors in English. University of Stellenbosch, South Africa (with the equivalent of a minor in German).

Positions Held

1996 - Fellowship to Rutgers, Comparative Literature Department.

Summer 1998 – Spring 2001: T.A. and PTL. Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in the Comparative Literature and German Departments.

Courses taught:

World Mythology - six times independently, twice as professorial assistant.

Kafka course, assistant to visiting Professor Emeritus, Walter H. Sokel.

PTL in “Shaping a Life” Program, Douglas Campus.

PTL in ESL program (PALS).

1993-1995: T.A. University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

1991 T.A. University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

2002-present: full-time English teacher (literature and writing) at Bickleton High School, WA.

Publications:

Three papers in college journals (conference publications): The English Department, the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and Exit 9 - Comparative Literature.