

Interior Chambers: The Emily Dickinson Homestead

*M*ore than any other writer, Emily Dickinson has been intimately associated with her house. Anecdotes from friends, family, neighbors, and the poet herself provide the biographical basis for the reigning view of Dickinson as an eccentric recluse, wedded to her interiority. Considered together, these stories portray a woman acutely aware of her spatial surroundings, whether she is listening to the parlor piano from the shadows of a hallway, lowering baskets of gingerbread from her bedroom window, or conversing with visitors from around corners or behind partially closed doors. Preferring to remain largely unseen within the interior chambers of the family homestead, Dickinson inhabited space in uncommon, unorthodox, even whimsical ways.

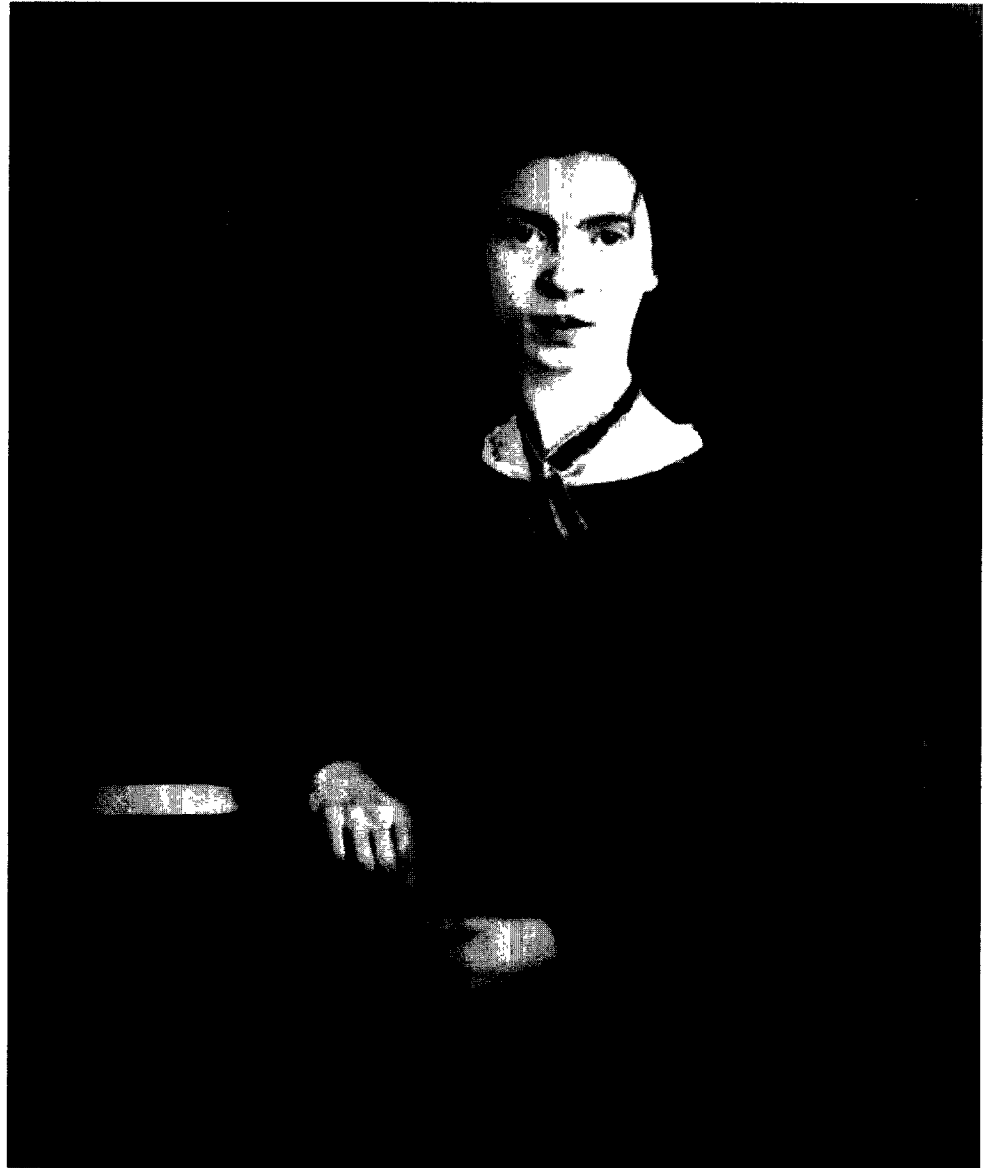
Dickinson's retreat into the recesses of her father's house has been the subject of extensive critical commentary. Her love of solitude has been variously pathologized and romanticized, overdramatized and idealized. Critics who pathologize Dickinson interpret her withdrawal as a neurotic response to a range of supposed personal traumas: grief over the loss of a secret lover, guilt over an illicit love for her brother's wife, resignation over the demands of a tyrannical father. John Cody was the

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Frontispiece.

Only known
daguerrotype of
Emily Dickinson,
approximately
seventeen years old,
ca. 1847 or 1848.

*Courtesy of the Amherst
College Library.*



first to suggest, in a 1971 study of the Dickinson family romance, that Dickinson was a full-fledged psychotic, experiencing a complete mental breakdown during the crisis years of 1861–63. Since then, armed with the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Cody has expanded his initial diagnosis of the poet to cover a host of new disorders, including avoidant personality disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive episode, schizotypal personality disorder, and social phobia. Recently an entire book on Dickinson, similarly dependent on historically anachronistic psychiatric categories, cites the poet's comparatively few poems on flight and denial as evidence of Dickinson's "severe agoraphobic syndrome" (Garbowsky).¹

Critics who romanticize Dickinson take a less judgmental approach, insisting that she freely chose her seclusion, opting to sequester herself in her father's house in order to assume the life of a professional poet. In this alternate reading, Dickinson spent her life quietly rebelling against patriarchal culture, seeking asylum from the demands of domestic servitude that made writing all but impossible (Martin; Rich). Yet tributes to the poet's independent spirit notwithstanding, commentators who read Dickinson's withdrawal in a positive vein cannot resist wondering whether her attraction to a solitary life "may have arisen in part from a neurosis, an anxiety about being defenseless when 'seen'" (Farr 24–25). Even the most sympathetic of Dickinson's readers tend to assume that if the poet's need for privacy was chiefly pragmatic, an enabling condition of artistic production, it was also deeply obsessional, and "phobically so" (Wolff 167).

Ultimately, all of the mythologizations of Dickinson are based on the same twin premise: Dickinson fashioned a radical interior life by shunning a conventional exterior one. In the view of her biographer Thomas H. Johnson, interiority was, for Dickinson, a "living entombment" (*Emily* 81). Jean Mudge, the first curator of the Dickinson Homestead, and the first scholar to link Dickinson's poetry to the domestic interior, also chooses to emphasize the poet's "self-incarceration at home" (6). Some critics combine the burial and prison metaphors, hypothesizing that the poet "immured herself within the magic prison that paradoxically liberated her art" (Eberwein 38).² Dickinson's critics all seem to agree that interiority, modeled on the architectural space of tomb or prison, was the necessary prerequisite for her poetry.

But for Dickinson, interiority was not only a matter of physical enclosure. Interiority was a complicated conceptual problem, continually posited and reexamined in a body of writing that relies heavily on spatial metaphors to advance its recurrent themes of joy, despair, death, time, and immortality. This essay probes the inner dimensions of Dickinson's poetry by attending to the domestic interior that housed her literary production. The decision to foreground Dickinson's literary construction of interiority against the backdrop of the poet's ancestral home has one important historical justification. Dickinson began writing lyric poetry (that most interior of poetic forms) at the very same time the Dickinson family moved back into the family homestead in 1855. All but a handful of Dickinson's poems are, in fact, written in the Homestead, the majority composed in the poet's bedroom, the most private chamber of the antebellum interior.

The rise of interiority in nineteenth-century America was made possible by the growing distinction between public and private space. During Dickinson's lifetime, houses became increasingly privatized as commercial labor moved out of the home and into the town or factory. With her father's law office located several blocks away from the Homestead, Dickinson's family home became a private residence, a sanctuary from the new public world of contracts and commerce that comprised the basis of Edward Dickinson's thriving legal practice. No longer the site of agricultural labor, the bourgeois family home becomes in the nineteenth century the stage for an emerging interior life. The domestic interior as private haven, where an individual could withdraw from public view, was a relatively new cultural ideal when Dickinson began writing her poetry. Privacy and publicity were still largely mutable concepts, by-products of a rising American fascination with the domestic interior.⁵

While the classical pairs of interior/exterior and privacy/publicity typically converge or even coincide in historical investigations of the domestic interior, Dickinson's work is important for the way in which it realigns and rethinks these philosophical tropes. For Dickinson, interiors are public places; exteriors are private retreats. Interestingly, much of the critical disputation surrounding Dickinson's lyrics implicitly invokes the problem of insides and outsides. Jay Leyda, perhaps the most cited of Dickinson scholars, argues that the most notable feature of a Dickinson poem is its "omitted center" (*Years* 1: xxi). Sharon Cameron counters that, just as often, a Dickinson poem has a center but no surrounding context (18). The confusion over what lies inside or outside

the poem, the dislocation of center from periphery, focuses attention on a poetic vision frankly at odds with conventional understandings of space. Even the poet's celebrated notion of Circumference, generally understood by critics as "a symbol for all that is outside" (Anderson 55), operates as a sign less of an increasingly elusive exteriority than an infinitely expanding interiority.

What follows is a cultural history of the Dickinson Homestead, organized around the play of interior/exterior defining the elastic borders of what the poet calls her "Mansion of the Universe" (P 836). Through a reading of Dickinson's poems and letters, as well as the architectural space of the house itself, I hope to show the idiosyncratic yet highly imaginative ways this most private of American poets negotiated space.

I.

Built by Emily Dickinson's grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson around 1813, the Dickinson Homestead was most likely the first brick house in Amherst, a two-story Federal-style dwelling with symmetrical windows [fig. 1]. Originally, the interior followed a standard layout, with a pair of rooms on each side of a large central hallway extending from front door to back. At the time of Dickinson's birth in 1830, the Homestead was a two-family dwelling, with Samuel Fowler Dickinson and his younger children living on the east side of the house and his older son Edward Dickinson and his new family living on the west side. In a common arrangement for the period, as many as thirteen people occupied the two-family homestead, with an invisible property line bisecting the house down the middle of the hall and staircase. Not until mid-century would the American family dwelling fall into a rigid hierarchy of public and private rooms, organized along a now familiar divide: public downstairs/private upstairs; public front rooms/private back rooms. In all likelihood, the Homestead was initially a more homogeneous public space, with the bedrooms doubling as sitting rooms, and the sitting rooms serving as extra bedrooms. No room was off-limits to visitors, and every room performed more than one function. The relatively straightforward architectural plan of the original Homestead facilitated communal interaction and mutual cooperation, as the two Dickinson families shared a kitchen during the day and gathered around a single hearth at night.

After Samuel Fowler Dickinson's financial setbacks led to the loss of the Homestead in the 1830s, Edward Dickinson relocated his own

Fig. 1
Two views of the
Dickinson Homestead.

1a.
Lithograph by
Bachelder, ca. 1858.
At the time this litho-
graph was made, the
Federal-style brick
house was painted
yellow, to mask the
extensive structural
renovations of 1855.

*Courtesy of The Jones
Library, Inc., Amherst,
Massachusetts.*



1b.
The Dickinson
Homestead today.

*Photograph by Frank
Ward. Trustees of
Amherst College.*



Fig. 2

The Pleasant Street house, where the Dickinson family lived from 1840 to 1855. Photograph ca. 1870.

Courtesy of The Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.



family in 1840 to a more spacious home on Pleasant Street, where Emily Dickinson lived from the ages of nine to twenty-four.⁴ Razed in the 1920s but shown in an 1870 photograph [fig. 2], the large wood-framed dwelling, organized around a huge central chimney, is the house that Joseph Lyman, a frequent visitor of the Dickinson's, once referred to as "that charming second home of mine" (Sewall, *Lyman* 1). It was here that Emily Dickinson watched funeral processions from a northern window overlooking the gated entrance to the village cemetery adjoining the Dickinson property. It was here that Dickinson lived her most social years, her correspondence filled with references to sociables, sleigh rides, charades, sugaring parties, country rides, and forest walks. And it was here that Dickinson first met Susan Gilbert, the woman whom, most scholars concede, was the emotional center of Dickinson's life.

It is perhaps not surprising that when Edward Dickinson at last found the financial resources to repurchase the family Homestead on Main Street, Emily Dickinson was reluctant to leave the Pleasant Street house, steeped as it was in memory. The poet's description of the move back to Main Street in November 1855 depicts the relocation not as a triumphant return but as a forced emigration. To Mrs. Holland she confesses:

I cannot tell you how we moved. I had rather not remember. I believe my "effects" were brought in a bandbox, and the "deathless me," on foot, not many moments after. . . . It is a kind of gone-to-Kansas feeling, and if I sat in a long wagon, with my family tied behind, I should suppose without doubt I was a party of emigrants! . . . Mother has been an invalid since we came home, and Fannie and I "regulated," and Vinnie and I "got settled," and still we keep our father's house, and mother lies upon the lounge, or sits in her easy chair. (L 182)

Emily Norcross Dickinson's mysterious invalidism (directly precipitated by the return to the Homestead) lasted nearly seven years, during which time Lavinia shouldered the bulk of the housekeeping duties and Emily assumed the responsibility of nursing her mother slowly back to health. It was while reacclimating to life in the Homestead that Dickinson began seriously to write poetry, composing an entire sequence of lyrics around images of empty, abandoned, or bereaved houses (P 289, 389, 399).

The Homestead to which Dickinson returns in the mid-1850s is a substantially different kind of domestic and cultural space than the one she inhabited the first ten years of her life. Six months of architectural renovations—renovations that were as much ideological as structural—transformed a classic Federal house into an early Victorian home. Religious revivalism was not the only social reform movement sweeping America in the 1840s and 1850s. Housing crusades, in response to the geographical displacements of urbanization and westward expansion, began investing the American homestead with nostalgic import and moral value (Clark 36). Architectural pattern books, along with sermons, advice books, almanacs, and popular magazines, all idealized the family residence as a refuge from the outside world, a private domain dedicated to nurturing the interior life of its newly leisured citizens.

To meet the new national standard of the republican family home, Edward Dickinson invested five thousand dollars on improvements for the Homestead, just five hundred dollars less than what it cost him to build, for his son Austin, a brand new house on the Homestead's western property (St. Armand 308).⁵ Andrew Jackson Downing's popular 1850 plan book, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, offered fourteen different designs for "the beautiful, rural, unostentatious, moderate home of the country gentleman" (269).⁶ Austin Dickinson and his fiancé Susan Gilbert chose for themselves a modern wood-frame Italian villa the couple

Fig. 3

Photograph of the Evergreens, home of Austin and Susan Dickinson. Photograph by Charles Prouty, ca. 1870.

Courtesy of The Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.

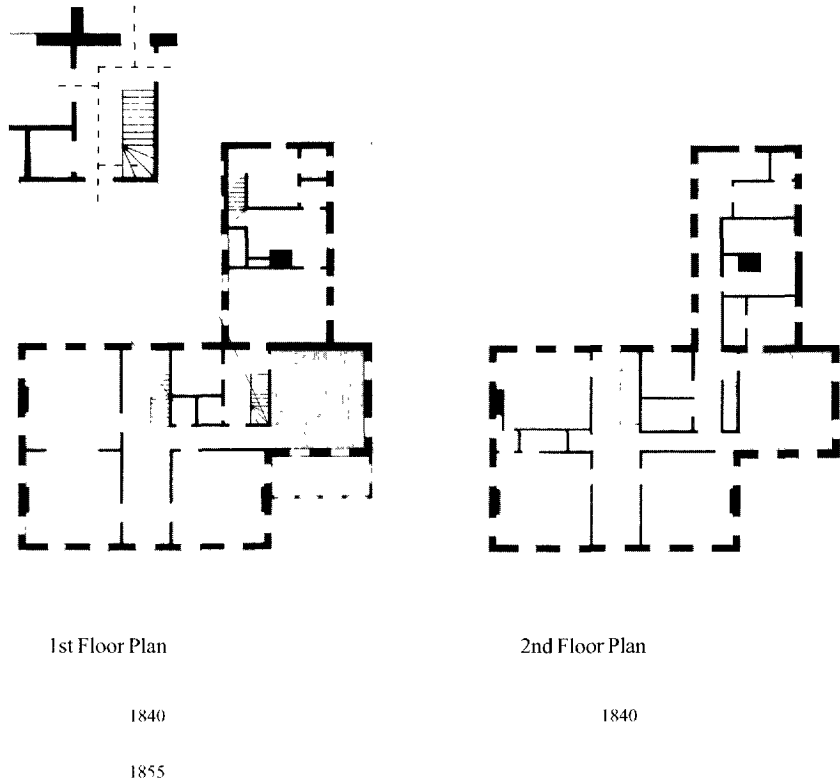


named the Evergreens, with asymmetrical dimensions, flat roofs, projecting balconies, and a *campanile* tower to harmonize the whole [fig. 3]. Edward Dickinson followed a more conservative plan in renovating the forty-two-year-old brick Homestead, considerably expanding the interior living space while largely retaining the structure's classic outline and symmetrical plan. Apparently father and son each selected a building plan that would externally reflect his inner character, taking to heart Downing's central premise that "every thing in architecture. . . can be made a symbol of social and domestic virtues" (23).

Downing's general design plan for the gentleman's country house stands as a near blueprint for the extensive changes made to the Dickinson Homestead. Structurally reinforcing the ideal of the independent, democratic, and self-reliant subject, Downing advocated that family members be given private bedrooms, that servants be assigned separate living quarters, and (most importantly) that rooms in the domestic interior be given specialized functions.

In every villa of moderate size, we expect to find a separate apartment, devoted to meals, entitled the dining-room; another devoted to social intercourse, or the drawing-room; and a third

Fig. 4
 Floor Plan of the
 first and second
 floors of the Dickinson
 Homestead, based
 on the 1916 plans by
 Howe, Manning & Almy
 Architects. Darkened
 areas denote Edward
 Dickinson's 1855
 renovations.



1st Floor Plan

2nd Floor Plan

1840

1840

1855

devoted to intellectual culture, or the library; besides halls, passages, stairways, pantries, and bed-rooms. In what we should call a complete villa, there will be found, in addition to this, a bed-room, or dressing-room, or a lady's boudoir, an office or private room for the master of the house, on the first floor; and bathing-rooms, water-closet, and dressing-rooms, on the second floor. A flight of back stairs, for servants, is indispensable in villas of large size, and, when space can be found for it, adds greatly to the comfort and privacy of even small villas. . . . [The kitchen] is generally provided for in a wing, of less height than the main building, divided into two stories, with sleeping-rooms on the second floor. (272)

Edward Dickinson approximated Downing's master plan for the new country villa first by adding to the Homestead a two-story east wing [fig. 4], opening up enough space for a new dining room, pantry, upstairs bedroom, back staircase, and a hallway with five exits that Dickinson

called the “Northwest Passage” (Bianchi, *Emily* 25). To the front of the new wing, next to Edward Dickinson’s private library, a conservatory was added for an indoor garden, bringing the outdoors into the interior. A two-story rear ell, of moderate height, relocated the kitchen and washroom to the back of the house while creating servant quarters above, accessed by a second back staircase. The only renovation to the Homestead not recommended by the new architectural plan books was the addition of a prominent Greek Revival front entrance and portico, a decorative classical imitation Downing would have censored for its want of “local truth.”⁷

But perhaps the most interesting renovations to the Homestead are those that indirectly convey the significant changes in Dickinson family relations during the mid-1850s. Austin Dickinson secured upon his marriage not only a house more grand than the family Homestead but a law practice of his own. In one of the more striking Homestead renovations, Edward Dickinson counters the house’s dominant north/south axis by placing a veranda along the west side of the main house facing his son’s Italian villa [fig. 5]. This new frontality reorients the Homestead toward the Evergreens, putting the two houses into close conversation. Whether the Homestead’s new eye onto its younger and more fashionable neighbor was protective, competitive, or a little bit of both, the west veranda, with its unobstructed view of the Evergreen’s first-floor conjugal bedroom, was as much a site of surveillance as relaxation. The cupola at the top of the Homestead, a popular mid-century renovation, also afforded a clear view of the Evergreens, and may have been added as a final structural feature because Edward Dickinson feared being “out-cupola-ed” by his son (Mudge 244).

If, by mid-century, every room in the American country house was to fulfill a single domestic purpose, it is worth noting that the Dickinson family did not, in fact, inhabit the Homestead chambers according to their rigid plan book functions. Overreliance on advice books, including architectural plan books, can be historically deceptive, since such prescriptive literature failed to mandate completely how people actually lived (Hansen 24). In the case of the Dickinsons, the kitchen and the dining room remained multipurpose rooms, resisting the pull toward specialization and privatization. The kitchens in both the Dickinson homes on Main Street and on Pleasant Street were rooms as much for writing and reading as for cooking and eating. Dickinson’s mother and sister wrote their formal correspondence in the kitchen, and the Dickinson siblings held

Fig. 5

Site plan showing the view from the Homestead's western façade onto the Evergreens. The open lawn between the two houses gave Dickinson a view from her second story room of Austin and Sue's first floor conjugal bedroom, highlighted here.



their family conferences around the warmth of the kitchen fire. Throughout her life, Emily, who treated architectural spaces as living memorials, associated the domestic interior of the kitchen not with any of the women in the Dickinson household but with her brother Austin. It was in the Pleasant Street kitchen that brother and sister first shared confidences at a table cluttered with books, and it was in the kitchen, with its empty chair and empty nail, that Emily most deeply mourned Austin's frequent, often prolonged absences (L 109, 118).

The Homestead dining room was even more versatile in function. It contained a writing table by the conservatory window where Emily occasionally wrote, a lounge chair near the fireplace where Emily Norcross Dickinson frequently slept, and a soup tureen most likely on the dining room table where Edward Dickinson stored his law papers (Bianchi, *Life* 69). In the typical country villa, formal public rooms could be readily converted into more casual private domains. During the cold New England winters, the Dickinson parlors were closed off, the first floor furniture rearranged, and the dining room converted into a comfortable family sitting room. Throughout the year, the Dickinson dining room was

used not only for meals but for writing, reading, sleeping, and even sex. With its ready front and back exits, it made the perfect trysting place for Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd, who first consummated their affair in the Homestead dining room in December 1883 and, with Emily and Lavinia's tacit approval, continued to meet there until Austin's death twelve years later.⁸

Although some furniture from the Homestead remains, mostly in either American Empire or Federal style, very little is known about what kind of furniture the family used, and even less about how these pieces were arranged. Today the rooms of the Dickinson Homestead are displayed to the public almost entirely empty of their original furnishings. The sparseness of the chambers draws the viewer's attention to the surfaces of the house and to its most basic architectural dimensions: floors, walls, ceilings, doors, windows. The shift in focus from decoration to design, from ornament to circumference, pays ironic tribute to Dickinson's own spare and uncluttered poetry. Architectural rather than decorative references shape Dickinson's poems. Hers is a vocabulary of plane, beam, and dome, of angle, slant, and degree, of plan, scale, and latitude.

In fact, Dickinson's poetry routinely overlooks the objects within a room in favor of highlighting its spatial perimeters. "Size circumscribes," the poet writes in a poem composed in 1862; "it has no room for petty furniture" (P 641). Twenty years later she expounds on the theme of the unfurnished room in a two-line, eight-word poem remarkable for its economy:

*All things swept sole away
This-is immensity- (P 1512)*

Utilizing the domestic metaphor of sweeping, Dickinson alliteratively sweeps the poem free of internal clutter, exposing in the process the sheer immensity of a minimalist space.

"The Finite-furnished / With the Infinite" (P 906) provides an apt description of Dickinson's own poems, poems that operate as miniature interiors. Dickinson's poems about poetry—"Myself was formed—a Carpenter—" (P 488), "The Props assist the House" (P 1142), and "Remembrance has a Rear and Front" (P 1182)—all select the house as a favorite metaphor to describe the work of poetry as both labor and artistry. The poem as interior chamber finds its origins not only in the etymology of "stanza" (Italian for "room" or "capacious dwelling") but in

the very definition of lyric, identified in classical lexicons as a type of “musical architecture” (Preminger and Brogan 714–15).

For Dickinson, prose and poetry represent two starkly different kinds of architectural interiors. If prose names a space of confinement and captivity (“They shut me up in Prose– / As when a little Girl / They put me in the Closet– / Because they liked me ‘still’–” P 613), poetry offers a more open and expansive interior:

*I dwell in Possibility–
A fairer House than Prose–
More numerous of 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)*

On the one hand, a poem constructs private, secret, secure spaces, chambers “impregnable of eye”; on the other hand, a poem’s enclosed interior opens onto a limitless expanse, “the gambrels of the sky.” The contradiction of solid cedar wall and open everlasting roof to describe the architectonics of poetry suggest that Dickinson aims to reorient our vision by generating new sight lines and creating new views. In this poem, Dickinson directs our eye outward and upward, offering a view of paradise from the fortified vantage point of the inviolable interior.

The remainder of this essay focuses not primarily on the interiors of Dickinson’s poems, a subject already treated by Dickinson critics (Cameron; Jackson), but on the poetry of Dickinson’s interiors. Long before Gaston Bachelard began exploring the lyrical recesses of the architectural dwelling, Emily Dickinson was intimately involved in mapping her own “poetics of space.” Dickinson occupied the Homestead much as she inhabited a poem, publicizing the private through a discreet retraining of both eye and ear. I will be focusing here on three of the Dickinson Homestead’s most interesting chambers: the parlor, the bedroom, and the cupola. Starting on the first floor and working my way up to

the top of the house, I take as my touchstone Dickinson's own philosophy of the interior: "The Outer—from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude / The Inner—paints the Outer" (P 451). But before proceeding directly into the house, I want to pause for a moment at the entranceway, at the place that is neither inner nor outer but somehow both. There is no architectural figure more important, or more weighted, in Dickinson's poetry than the image of the door. The door serves as the central ontological support upon which Dickinson's entire theory of interiority hangs: "The Opening and the Close / Of Being" (P 1047).

II.

In Dickinson's letters and poems, the door emerges as a richly layered metaphor for loneliness, loss, and death on the one hand, and memory, secrecy, and safety on the other hand. The door is the most reversible of Dickinson's images, and the most complex. It dramatizes a tension at the heart of almost all Dickinson's poems, the tension produced by the terror and excitement of the threshold. Doors represent for the poet the possibility of crossing over or passing through. They are the concrete visualization of the tenuous border between the finite and the infinite, the mortal and the immortal, the human and the divine.

In Dickinson's correspondence, the conceit of the door is most often associated with the theme of departure. Dickinson continually portrays herself in her letters as racing to a door or window to catch a final glimpse of a departing loved one (Eberwein 53). The following letter to Susan Gilbert, written when Dickinson was twenty-three, restages for the "absent One" the effect of her departure on she-who-is-left-behind:

I ran to the door, dear Susie—I ran out in the rain, with nothing but my slippers on, I called "Susie, Susie," but you didn't look at me; then I ran to the dining room window and rapped with all my might upon the pane, but you rode right on and never heeded me. (L 102)

If the private space of the kitchen memorialized the poet's love for her brother Austin, the public space of the front doorstep commemorates her love for her friend Sue. The doorstep marks the place where the poet first fell in love with Susan Gilbert, the place that continues to remind her of Sue even after her friend has gone "West" to marry Austin:

I love you as dearly, Susie, as when love first began, on the step at the front door, and under the Evergreens, and it breaks my heart sometimes, because I do not hear from you. . . . I miss you, I mourn you, and walk the Streets alone—often at night, beside, I fall asleep in tears, for your dear face, yet not one word comes back to me from that silent West. (L 177)

Sue, the West, and the Evergreens are all part of the same affective picture for Dickinson.⁹ From the “broad stone step” where their lives first “mingled” (L 88),¹⁰ Dickinson need only look to the West to conjure her absent friend:

Dear Susie, I dont forget you a moment of the hour, and when my work is finished, and I have got the tea, I slip thro’ the little entry, and out at the front door, and stand and watch the West, and remember all of mine. . . . (L 103)

“The Heart has many Doors” (P 1567), Dickinson once aphorized. The door to the West opened onto Sue.

As she grew older Dickinson was indeed increasingly reluctant to travel forth beyond the doors of the family homestead. Preferring to be the one left behind, Dickinson writes to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (after her third refusal to visit him in Boston) “I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town” (L 330). Yet Dickinson’s poems are generally not about the fear of leaving interiors but more commonly about the anxiety of entering them. The problem of gaining entry is, for Dickinson, a far greater preoccupation.

*I Years had been from Home
And now before the Door
I dared not enter, lest a Face
I never saw before*

*Stare stolid into mine
And ask my Business there— (P 609)*

“Home” may signify for the poet her favorite spiritual locale (Eden, Paradise, Eternity), or it may refer to the actual house on Pleasant Street that Dickinson still longed to return to years later. In either case, the speaker’s dilemma is the same: terror in the face of an unknown presence hidden behind a familiar barrier.

The interior in Dickinson's poetry does not always inspire fear. Just as often a door may conceal an idealized scene of domestic comfort and plenitude.

*A Door just opened on a street–
I–lost–was passing by–
An instant's Width of Warmth disclosed–
And Wealth–and Company.*

*The Door as instant shut–And I–
I–lost–was passing by–
Lost doubly–but by contrast–most–
Informing–misery– (P 953)*

The misery of Dickinson's anonymous passerby is only deepened by the momentary glimpse of warmth, wealth, and company revealed by the open door. The repetition of the poem's second line, "I–lost–was passing by," further underscores the speaker's sense of exclusion by employing the device of the dash to segregate typographically the poem's central experience of displacement. Other Dickinson poems syntactically open and shut on the force of a dash, but "A Door just opened on a street" makes particularly frequent use of the poet's signature punctuation, both to isolate its speaker internally and to slam the poem shut repeatedly, end-stopping every line.

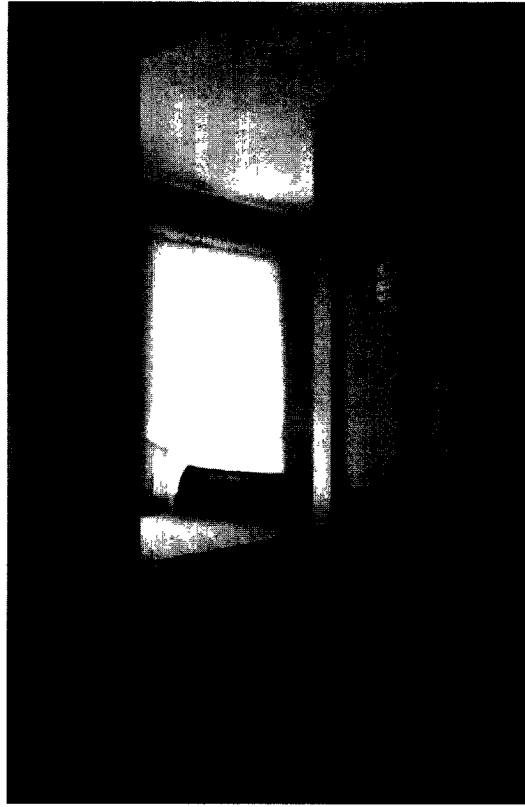
The final stanza of Dickinson's longest poem, "I cannot live with You" (P 640), also relies on the ubiquitous dash to emphasize the state of ontological suspension in which so many of Dickinson's subjects routinely find themselves.

*So We must meet apart–
You there–I–here–
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are–and Prayer–
And that White Sustenance–
Despair– (P 640)*

Although the stanza's second line implies that the You is "there" and the I is "here," syntactically the speaker is neither here nor there but hovering somewhere in between, occupying a more liminal space. It is a place Dickinson herself self-consciously occupied whenever she

Fig. 6
A door ajar onto
Dickinson's bedroom.

*Photograph by Frank
Ward.*



conducted conversations with visitors from the other side of a half-open door [fig. 6]. “I cannot live with You” suggests that close ties can only be maintained by “meeting apart”—an oxymoron that increasingly defined the poet’s own interpersonal relations. The door ajar provides the perfect metaphor for conveying the poet’s deepest inner conviction that the precondition for all true intimacy is distance.¹¹

The door ajar—half open, half closed—evolves over the corpus of Dickinson’s poetry into one of her most positive images. For example, in “The Soul should always stand ajar” (P 1055), a soul stands waiting to receive its divine caller, ready at a moment’s notice to leave the interior dwelling of the body that has temporarily housed it. The image of the door ajar also animates what may well be Dickinson’s most lyrical, tranquil, and perfect poem.

*Noon—is the Hinge of Day—
Evening—the Tissue Door—*

*Morning—the East compelling the sill
Till all the World is ajar— (P 931)*

In a single quatrain, Dickinson chronicles the evolution of a day, emphasizing, through precise temporal sequencing, the dawn beyond the dusk, the east beyond the west, the morning beyond the evening. The World is a domestic dwelling, fortified by movement (hinge), mass (door), and foundation (sill). Hinge, door, and sill are all of a piece, forming a translucent “tissue” boundary between spatial and temporal worlds. The East that gently pries open the morning, leaving all the world ajar, illuminates life’s most basic movement of opening and closing, the meaning of creation.

Ultimately, the door in Dickinson’s poetry is a completely indeterminate figure. A door can symbolize loss or gain, absence or presence, loneliness or reunion, separation or connection, life or death. The very instability of the image is what appeals to Dickinson most, immediately elevating the figure of the door over architecture’s other apparently more static forms. Not long after Dickinson’s death, the German philosopher Georg Simmel will argue (in strikingly Dickinsonian fashion) that the door is far superior to the dead geometric form of the wall. To Simmel, a wall is “mute,” but a door “speaks.” Moreover, a door more successfully transcends the divide between the inner and the outer; a door is where the finite borders on the infinite; a door marks the plane where separation and connection come together, but still remain apart (66–69).

III.

In the dynamic interplay of architectural form, such conceptual partitions between door and wall remain more figurative than literal. In the Dickinson drawing-room, for example, folding doors may have functioned as a movable wall, dividing the public front parlor from the private family sitting room behind [fig. 7]. “If you will stay in the next room, and open the folding doors a few inches, I’ll come down and make music for you,” Dickinson reportedly instructed her cousin John Graves (Leyda, *Years* 1: 301–02).¹² Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Austin and Sue’s daughter, provides a much fuller description of the Dickinson parlor, its cool interior strangely reminiscent of the poet’s famous “alabaster chambers” (P 216) (Smith 248–49).

Fig. 7

The Dickinson parlor. Folding doors originally separated the space between the front and back parlors, allowing Dickinson to play the piano, unseen, for visitors.

*Photograph by
Frank Ward.*



The walls were hung with heavily gold-framed engravings: "The Forester's Family," "The Stag at Bay," "Arctic Nights," and other chastely cold subjects. The piano was an old-fashioned square in an elaborately carved mahogany case, and the carpet a fabulous Brussels, woven in a pattern. It had in the centre a great basket of flowers at the edge. It enjoyed a reputation of its own; and the day of my grandmother's funeral two old ladies came an hour ahead of the service "to get a last look at the carpet before the mourners broke up the pattern."

The wallpaper was white with large figures. The white marble mantels and the marble-topped tables added a chill even on hot midsummer afternoons. (Bianchi, Emily 34)

The white marble mantels and table tops, white wallpaper, and "chastely cold" paintings create a funereal atmosphere in a room Higginson once described as "dark & cool & stiffish" (L 342a). Frequent use of the parlor

shutters, closed in the winter to reduce the cold and in the summer to reduce the heat, only added to the room's sepulchral feel. As much mausoleum as salon, the parlor served as the backdrop for Dickinson's own wake.

At least one extant account of the Homestead's most formal room contradicts the dominant view of the parlor as a dark and lifeless crypt. Mabel Loomis Todd, who occasionally played the piano for Dickinson in the years before the poet's death, offers a less somber picture: "although our interviews were chiefly confined to conversations between the brilliantly lighted drawing-room where I sat and the dusky hall just outside where she always remained, I grew very familiar with her voice, its vaguely surprised note dominant" (Bingham, *Ancestor's* 12). Here Mabel Todd is bathed in the brilliant light of the parlor, while Dickinson is relegated to the dark and shadowy recesses of the hall, the house's main artery and, paradoxically, its most public space [fig. 8]. In the spatial allegory of darkness and light that frames so many anecdotes about the poet, Dickinson's place in the shadows by no means eclipses her. Referred to by Todd's daughter as "the invisible voice, the phantom in the enchanted corridor" (Bingham, *Ancestor's* 12),¹⁵ Dickinson commands the authority of a stage director, issuing clear directives from the sidelines. Dickinson usually concluded her meetings in ritual fashion, sending a servant into the parlor with a tray containing a glass of sherry, a flower, or a poem.

*Between My Country—And the Others—
There is a Sea
But Flowers negotiate between us—
As Ministry (P 905)*

Like all Dickinson's trysts conducted from around corners or from behind half-closed doors, the encounter with Mabel Todd is a carefully choreographed set-piece, one that effectively heightens rather than diminishes the poet's presence.

Dickinson always had a finely tuned sense of the theatrical. Before retiring entirely from view, the poet was known for her memorable entrances. Dickinson's first meeting with Higginson in the Homestead parlor left a vivid impression:

*She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German
cannonness of some religious order whose prescribed garb was*

Fig. 8

Two views of the
Dickinson hallway:

8a.

View of staircase,
looking toward the
back door.

*Photograph by
Frank Ward, Trustees
of Amherst College.*

**8b.**

View from front door
to back.

*Photograph by
Frank Ward, Trustees
of Amherst College.*



white pique. . . . She came toward me with two day lilies. . . which she put, in a childlike way, into my hand, saying softly under her breath, "These are my introduction." (qtd. in Buckingham 208–09).¹¹

Of their second meeting, Higginson writes: "She glided in, in white, bearing a Daphne odora for me, & said under her breath 'How long are you going to stay'" (L 405). Dickinson dominated her encounters with Higginson through the very intensity of her recessiveness. "I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much," the former Union Army Colonel confessed to his wife; "without touching her she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her" (L 342b).

Joseph Lyman's famous "pen portrait" of the poet also dwells on Dickinson's entrance into a room, this time her father's library:

*A library dimly lighted, three mignonettes on a little stand.
Enter a spirit clad in white, figure so draped as to be misty[,]
face moist, translucent alabaster, forehead firmer as of statuary
marble. (qtd. in Sewall, Life 425)*

In Lyman's highly romanticized word portrait, Dickinson's face of alabaster and forehead of statuary marble make the poet sound like nothing so much as a classical sculpture. The impression of Dickinson as a piece of art may be only partly Lyman's fancy. Judith Farr has convincingly argued that by wearing white, holding lilies, and sending notes and flowers on a salver, Dickinson was self-consciously quoting an entire iconographic tradition in nineteenth-century painting: the pre-Raphaelite nun in her cloister. Victorian paintings, like Charles Allston Collins's 1850 *Convent Thoughts*, frequently depicted a nun dressed in white, clasping lilies, and sequestered from dejected suitors behind a doorway, a grate, or a garden wall (35–42).¹² By adopting the costume and manners of a "Wayward Nun" (P 722), Dickinson celebrated the space of the cloister as the most appropriate setting for the work of the novice writer.

Deprived of such extravagant images of the poet, admirers like Mabel Todd, who never actually saw Dickinson while she was alive, came to know her principally through the sound of her voice. Dickinson's acts of self-concealment forced her interlocutors to apprehend her, not as the "pattering child" (L 342a) Higginson and Lyman perceived her to be, but as the professional bard to which she herself aspired. "Stepping to incorporeal Tunes" (P 1418), Dickinson lay claim to poetic authority by

transforming herself entirely into a voice. In so doing, she was enacting the most influential notion of lyric poetry of her time: John Stuart Mill's definition of the lyric as an utterance that is overheard.¹⁶ It is one of the main contentions of this essay that Emily Dickinson's eccentric relation to space is not so much *phobic* as *poetic*. Dickinson lyricizes space, recreating in the domestic interior the very condition of poetic address and response. If so many of Dickinson's lyrics resemble miniature domestic interiors, the domestic interior functions for the poet something like a lyre—an instrument of sound.

Sound emerges in Dickinson's intensely musical poetry as a far more reliable organ of perception than sight. Unlike the body's other orifices, the ear is the only organ that cannot close itself. The portals of the ear remain perpetually open, capable at any time of receiving messages from a world beyond the bounds of the strictly visible:

*This World is not Conclusion.
A species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound— (P 501)*

The ear's receptivity makes it the most vulnerable of human orifices, and the most finely tuned. It is the ear, not the eye, that offers the most direct route to the human heart:

*An ear can break a human heart
As quickly as a spear,
We wish the ear had not a heart
So dangerously near. (P 1764)*

In this poem Dickinson gives the ear the last word, embedding the word "ear" in each of the stanza's concluding images: heart, spear, near. In an 1874 letter to Higginson, the poet explains that the ear is more important than the eye because sound always comes last. Invoking the nineteenth-century belief that hearing is the last of the corporeal senses to fade upon the body's demise, Dickinson notes that "The Ear is the last face. We hear after we see" (L 405). Poems like "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" reaffirm the transgressive power of the ear, attributing to the voice-from-beyond-the-grave the ability to hear long after "I could not see to see" (P 465).

Mary Loeffelholz cannily identifies the container of the house itself as an ear, "a permeable but protective boundary organ." Loeffelholz reads the Dickinson Homestead as a sensory structure that continually channels and returns sound. As a sensitive medium of sound, this house-

lyre embodies for Dickinson “a poetic model of perception and reception” (131). Sound succeeds where sight fails, passing through windows and doors, penetrating walls and floors, infiltrating corners and crannies. Yet the contest between sight and sound is not so simple for the writer whose poems crucially depend upon both bodily senses precisely to work *as poems*. In her 1865 lyric “The Spirit is the Conscious Ear,” Dickinson once more plays on the embedded “ear” in “hear,” but she adds to this perfect rhyme the homonym “hear” and “here.”

*The Spirit is the Conscious Ear.
We actually Hear
When We inspect—that’s audible—
That is admitted—Here—

For other Services—as Sound—
There hangs a smaller Ear
Outside the Castle—that Contain—
The other—only—Hear— (P 733)*

Located at the end of four of this poem’s eight lines, the ear again appears to have final say. Yet, as Loeffelholz notes, because of the homonym, the central difference in the poem between sight and sound, between “here” and “hear,” can only be seen, not heard. The distinction between Romanticism’s twin figures of poetic authority, vision and voice, is more visual than auditory (122). The poet must paradoxically rely upon visual understanding to achieve the conceptual elevation of voice over vision, ear over eye.

Dickinson’s lack of faith in the sensory power of vision is striking; poem after poem in this poet’s expansive corpus stresses the finitude of the human eye, its limitations and imperfections. “Adorned, for a Superior Grace— / Not yet, our eyes can see” (P 575), the poet laments in 1862. A year later the message is even clearer: “I’m finite, I can’t see” (P 696). During her most prolific period, Dickinson sees blindness as the precondition of faith, as in this poem from 1864:

*What I see not, I better see—
Through Faith—my Hazel Eye
Has periods of shutting—
But, no lid has Memory— (P 939)*

By 1865, after a series of poems challenging the power of vision, the poet concludes, simply, “Best Things dwell out of Sight” (P 998).

The dating of these poems on the failure of vision suggest that Dickinson's distrust of the eye was more than metaphoric. Between 1862 and 1865, Dickinson, fearful that she was going blind, twice sought treatment for inflammation of the eyes from the country's most eminent ophthalmologist, Henry Willard Williams.¹⁷ Famous for his use of the newly patented ophthalmoscope, an optical device powerful enough to illuminate the interior of the human eye, Williams eventually cured Dickinson of her temporary blindness. Unlike the two other great optical inventions that came long before it, the microscope and the telescope, in which the supremacy of the seeing eye remained unchallenged (Crary 129), the ophthalmoscope laid bare the eye's own insufficiencies, radically undermining the traditional authority of the all-knowing subject. Whatever the exact circumstances of Dickinson's visual impairment, the poet lived in a historical period when the reigning classical model of vision was beginning to rupture. The ophthalmoscope reflected in its triple lenses not the traditional all-seeing eye, but a modern eye that could itself be seen, optically penetrated by prosthetic devices infinitely superior to the human organ.

The deflation of the classical sovereign subject in the nineteenth century led to the relocation of the organ of vision to the body's interior, where no mere technological instrument could reach it. The poetic eye turned inward, irradiating the private recesses of the soul with all the cognitive power previously expended on the world of empirical phenomenon. Thomas Carlyle, speaking in 1852 of "this strange camera obscura of an existence," used the metaphor of "spiritual optics" to describe the new Copernican revolution in vision (Baumgarten 514).¹⁸ Dickinson's spiritual third eye corrects the imperfect sight of the body's two orbs by similarly reversing the gaze, finding more sumptuous quarters inside the body: "Reverse cannot befall / That fine Prosperity / Whose Sources are interior" (P 395). Or again: "The Table is not laid without / Till it is laid within" (P 1223). By 1862, Dickinson had found her subject: "that Campaign inscrutable / Of the Interior" (P 1188).

IV.

By the time Emily Dickinson had become, in Samuel Bowles's memorable 1863 complaint, a "Queen Recluse" (Leyda, *Years* 2: 76), the American domestic interior had come to represent a place of leisure, a sanctuary for the production of privacy. But for one of Amherst's leading

families, the public/private distinction was an exceedingly loose one. The private interior of the Dickinson Homestead was, in fact, a very public place, a hub of Amherst social life even after the center of power shifted in the 1860s to the Evergreens next door. The Homestead was the site not only of teas and dinners associated with Amherst College (where Edward Dickinson was treasurer) but of the college's annual commencement receptions. As a moderator of local town meetings, a twice-elected Massachusetts state senator, and a representative to the Thirty-third United States Congress, Edward Dickinson attracted to his home a steady stream of visitors, among them, newspaper editors, bishops, preachers, judges, lawyers, politicians, academics, writers, generals, and senators (Sewall, *Life* 52; Phillips 22–23). That the Homestead was, for so many travelers to the Connecticut Valley, a final point of destination is pictographically suggested by an 1856 map of Amherst showing the town's new railroad. The Amherst and Belchertown Rail Road, which originated in New London, Connecticut, terminated practically at the Dickinson Homestead's doorstep, just a block away from the only man in town influential enough to build it.

By 1853, two years before moving back to the family homestead, Emily Dickinson was already beginning to feel displaced in her own home: "Our house is crowded daily with the members of this world, the high and the low, the bond and the free, the 'poor in this world's goods,' and the 'almighty dollar'" (L 128). Lavinia's diary of 1851 (the only year in which she kept a daily journal) records hundreds of social engagements. Rarely a day went by when the two Dickinson sisters were not either making or receiving social calls—calls usually associated, as Richard Sewall documents, with college students, tutors, or law clerks from Edward Dickinson's office (*Life* 415). Describing to her brother a particularly trying day, as she strove to entertain a series of male callers while her bemused father looked on, Dickinson wryly quipped, "I again crept into the sitting room, more dead than alive, and endeavored to *make conversation*" (L 79). Another time, exasperated by a passerby inquiring at the Homestead for housing, Dickinson claims to have directed the elderly stranger to the nearby cemetery, "to spare expense of moving" (L 427). Even the normally social Lavinia, who for years sought to protect her sister from constant intrusions, could be provoked by a sudden influx of callers to "beat her wings like a maddened Bird, whose Home has been invaded" (L 506).

It was precisely because the Dickinson household was any-

thing but private that Dickinson found it necessary to carve out her own sequestered space within the extended domain of the family living quarters. That the poet was able to retreat to her bedroom at all, at any time of day or year, was to a large extent made possible by the hiring of the Dickinsons' first full-time domestic servant in 1855, the year the family moved back into the Homestead. At one point there were as many as eight Irish immigrants on Edward Dickinson's payroll, making Emily officially a daughter of the American leisure class. "God keep me from what they call *households*" (L 36), Dickinson prayed, five years before Margaret O'Brien arrived to fulfill her wish and to save her from the trials of housekeeping, that "prickly art" (L 907). After the return to the Homestead, the bedroom became for Dickinson a space of relative freedom and release—release from domestic labor, family obligation, and social expectation.¹⁹

Dickinson's retreat to her bedroom can also be attributed to major changes in the domestic interior itself. Greater reliance on relatively inexpensive oil lamps made it possible to light more rooms for longer periods of time. And the addition of two extra chimneys in the Homestead's 1855 renovation facilitated the installation, in all the major rooms of the house, of cast-iron fireplaces. No longer constrained to gather in the evenings around a single fire for warmth and light, family members could disperse themselves through a more evenly heated dwelling. The improved heating arrangements dramatically reconfigured social relations within the home, decentralizing the family and creating new zones of privacy. More than any other revolution of the domestic interior, the Franklin stove made it possible for individual members *within* the family to seek privacy *from* the family.

The newly privatized household had a pronounced effect on Dickinson family relations. After his first visit to the Homestead in 1870, Higginson said of the Dickinsons: "Each member runs his or her own selves" (L 342a). Lavinia, late in her life, admitted that her family lived "like friendly and absolute monarchs, each in his own domain" (Bingham, *Home* 413). A letter dating probably from the late 1870s suggests that Emily happily concurred with both assessments, noting "We have no statutes here, but each does as it will, which is the sweetest jurisprudence" (L 545). The compartmentalization of the family into separate spatial domains permitted a new division of family labor. As Lavinia described it, "[Emily] had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I

had the family to keep track of" (Bingham, *Home* 414). Mabel Todd reports that, to the rest of the family, Dickinson's "curious leaving of outer life never seemed unnatural."²⁰ It was, in Lavinia's words, "only a happen," a logical outcome for the one family member whose main job it was to think.²¹ Of all the reasons hypothesized for this nineteenth-century poet's famous withdrawal, one is compelled to wonder whether Dickinson chose to isolate herself within her bedroom for the simple reason that, for the first time in the history of the domestic interior, she could.

Such a view contrasts sharply with the dominant critical portrait of Dickinson as "a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in a room in her father's house" (Gilbert and Gubar 583). Most Dickinson commentators imagine the poet's bedroom as a claustrophobic space of self-imposed isolation, "a melancholy, even terrifying, sanctuary." The bedroom is the place where the poet "felt herself prematurely fitted to a coffin" (Mudge 147, 102). It is a "primary Gothic scene" with the heroine "imprisoned on the inside" (Wardrop 25). But the perception of Dickinson's bedroom as a domestic coffin or a Gothic prison is largely a critical projection. The room itself, fifteen-feet-square and ten-feet-high, is spacious and airy [fig. 9]. Two large southern exposures illumine the white walls of a room further brightened by light straw mat floor-coverings and white linen bedsheets. Situated in the Homestead's southwest corner, Dickinson's bedroom is actually the room with the best light, the best ventilation, and the best views.

If vision was de-emphasized in the parlor, in favor of intensifying sound, it is subtly reinstalled in the bedroom, as if to overcompensate for a failing ear, straining to catch the distant vibrations of household activity below. The place critics routinely identify as removing Dickinson from the domain of the visible in fact invests her with considerable scopic power. More a panoptic center than an enclosed prison cell, Dickinson's bedroom affords its occupant maximum visual control. The poet commands from her corner room a clear view of the Holyoke mountains to the South and the Evergreens to the West. As Dickinson surely knew when she perhaps herself selected the room in 1855, she could watch, through the bedroom's western windows, the sun set (literally) over her beloved Sue. From her single mahogany bed, fashioned in the style of a sleigh [fig. 10], Dickinson's line of vision also encompassed the street below, where the voices of pedestrians were close enough to be frequently overheard. Proximity to the public life of the street thus allowed Dickinson to continue to indulge her ear for language, or what she herself called, in

Fig. 9
The southwest corner of Dickinson's bedroom, with Franklin stove at right.

Photograph by Frank Ward.



Fig. 10
Emily Dickinson's mahogany bed.

Photograph by Frank Ward. Trustees of Amherst College.

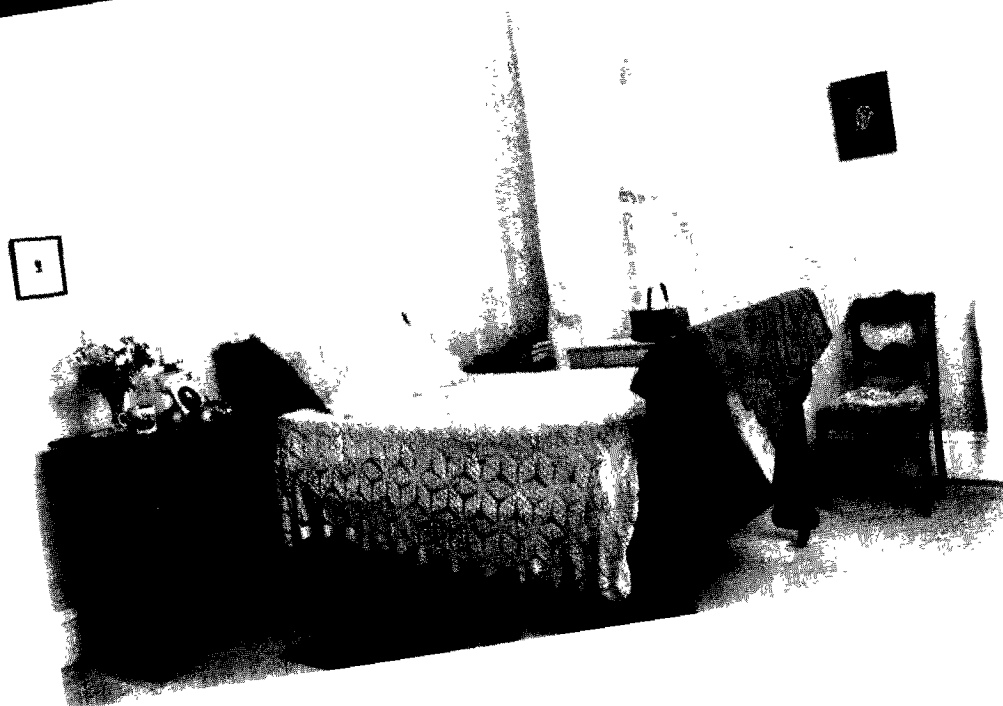
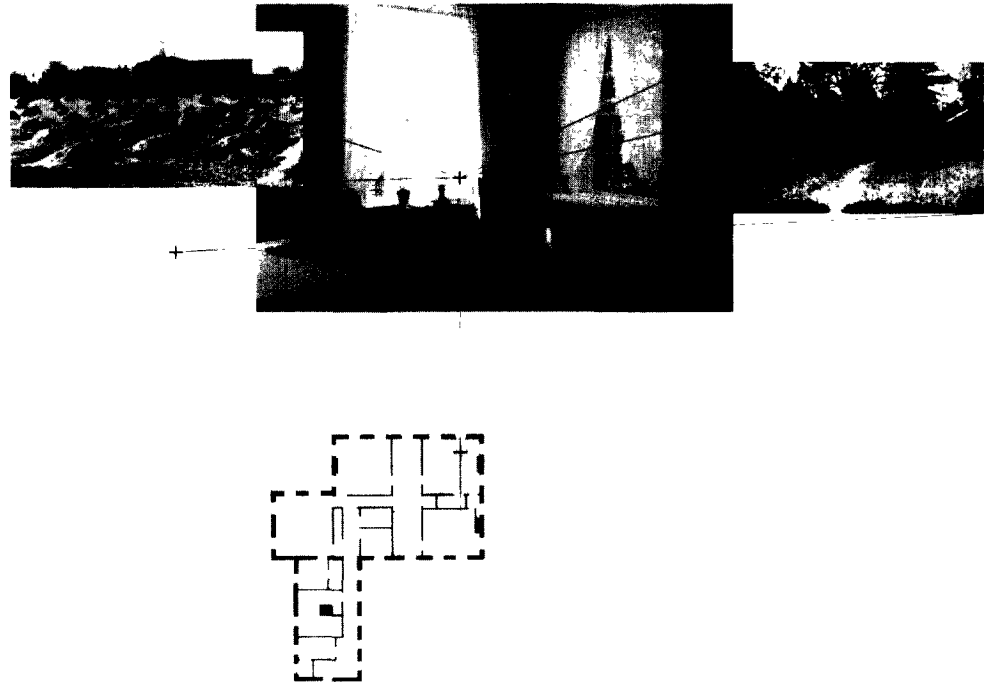


Fig. 11
Plan diagram of
Dickinson's southwest
corner bedroom,
which afforded views
of the hayfields and
mountains to the south
and the Evergreens to
the west.



reference to the delight she took in overhearing the conversations of passersby, her “vice for voices” (L prose fragment 19).

The poet's cherry writing table, located in the southwest corner of this southwest corner room, occupies the bedroom's interior within an interior, its *sanctum sanctorum*.²² Here the poet is suspended between south and west, between afternoon sun and evening sunset, between the anonymous world of the street and the intimate world of Austin and Sue. It is a liminal space that is decidedly central, as this conceptual diagram of the Dickinson property demonstrates [fig. 11]. Three hundred yards east of the Evergreens, but positioned significantly closer to the street, the Homestead's southwest corner bedroom could survey not only the Italian villa next door but the western vista beyond. It presents the viewer with a greater range of views, and with a greater number of opportunities for surveillance. The bedroom's middlemost position further highlights the poet's symbolic role within the family—central but protected, unseen but seeing, a kind of Dickinson family sentinel.

The domain of privacy in which Dickinson is said to have been imprisoned or entombed actually offered the poet ample opportunities for intellectual growth; neither a space of confinement nor of death, Dickinson's bedroom proffered ready entry into the public world of letters. It is one of the great paradoxes of this poet's interior life that the more she withdrew, the wider her circle of acquaintances became. The Homestead bedroom was the place where Dickinson composed the vast majority of her seventeen hundred and seventy-five poems and an estimated ten thousand letters, of which more than a thousand survive. Here Dickinson communicated with her "private public" (Sewall, *Life* 400, 603), developing a public persona as a private poet. With pictures of Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot on her walls, Dickinson elevated her writing into a serious occupation by converting her bedroom into a private study, a more suitable environment for a serious poet. "Sweet hours have perished here, / This is a timid room" (P 1767), Dickinson wrote of her bedroom-study.²⁵

Images of the mighty in the timid, the great in the small, the infinite in the finite, recur throughout Dickinson's poems of the bedroom. Typically, the more limited the space, the more unlimited the speaker:

*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)*

This poem about the intensely private, almost furtive act of reading a letter contains within it layers and depths of interiority, the letter itself

functioning as a locked interior within a sealed room. The experience of reading the letter in the room's farthest corner enlarges the speaker, expanding the boundaries of "narrow wall" and "narrow floor" to accommodate her limitlessness. For Dickinson, the most private, hidden, or secret corners of experience leave one completely vulnerable. In "The Way I read a Letter's—this—" the speaker presumes, in the poem's final stanza, that her own audience can "peruse" her; through the mimetic act of unlocking the poem itself, readers are invited to discover their unbounded interiority. The open intimacies of this "poème à clef" (Tucker 236) immediately call to mind another famous Dickinson anecdote. Inviting her niece up to her bedroom one day, and pretending to lock the door with an invisible key, the poet reportedly declared, "Matty, child, no one could ever punish a Dickinson by shutting her up alone" (Bianchi, *Emily* 65–66).

If hiding is a major theme in Dickinson's poetry, so is the thrill of being found. "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt! / Better, to be found" (P 842), Dickinson wrote in 1864, the year she produced the greatest number of poems on the question of invisibility and exposure. For Dickinson, there is no place remote enough, or interior enough, to escape God's sight.

*The deepest hid is sighted first
And scant to Him the Crowd—
What triple Lenses burn upon
The Escapade from God— (P 894)*

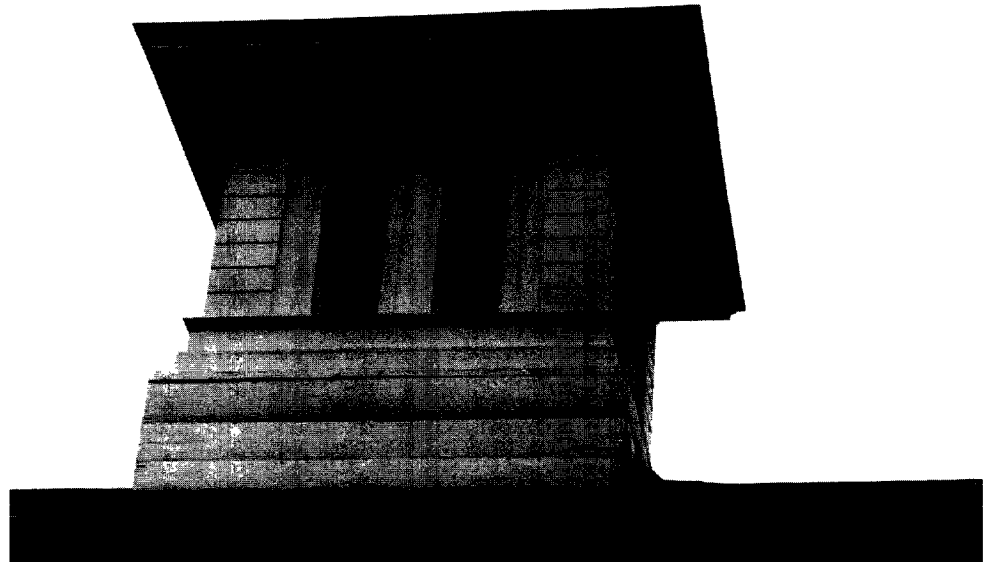
For Dickinson, the most private spaces are the most public, and hiding is simply the best way to be seen. To be "deepest hid" is to be, not anonymous, but entirely conspicuous. The one who hides best is the one who is "sighted first," ignited by the "triple Lenses" of God's powerful ophthalmoscope.

V.

Nowhere is the image of the exposed hiding place more visible than in the cupola, the Homestead's smallest interior chamber [fig. 12]. Built in the customary shape of a lantern, the Homestead cupola reestablishes the importance of light and vision in the hierarchy of corporeal senses that so powerfully organizes Dickinson's lyric phenomenology of space. The most intimate space in Dickinson's house is also the most

Fig. 12
Exterior view of the
Homestead cupola,
built in the shape of
a lantern.

*Photograph by
Frank Ward.*



revealing, laid bare on all four sides by a double set of windows. Like four pairs of eyes, the cupola's windows afford panoramic outlooks in every direction, while simultaneously exposing the observer herself to view. More than any other space within the domestic interior, the cupola conforms to Dickinson's belief that solitary and private interiors are also vulnerable and exposed—places of “polar privacy” (P 1695).

No more than six-and-a-half-feet-square, the cupola is at once the most modest room in the house and the most exalted. From the Latin for “little barrel,” the cupola draws the eye upward to the building's greatest point of concentration, much in the manner of a spire on a church. By mid-century, reformers had discovered the symbolic potential of architecture as a vehicle for the consecration of domestic life. The popularity of the cupola, like the sudden design interest in architectural cross-plans, stained glass windows, and parlor pump organs, visibly transformed the American home into a secular place of worship (Clark 25). Accessible by a winding staircase located outside Dickinson's bedroom, the cupola could be approached only by first ascending through a cavern-

ous empty attic, augmenting the feeling of entering a solitary, silent, and sacred space. The cupola's secluded location at the top of the Homestead, removed from the household and buffered by the attic, together with its perimeter of sealed windows in the winter, create an almost soundproof enclosure, where hearing gives way to seeing, and eye displaces ear as the most prominent of the corporeal senses.

As we have traveled upward in the Homestead, from parlor to cupola passing through Dickinson's bedroom situated between, we have moved progressively from the large to the small, from the dark to the light, from the auditory to the visual. At the apex of the house, the cupola promises the advancing subject an all encompassing, God's-eye-view: "His Eye, it is the East and West- / The North and South when He / Do concentrate His Countenance" (P 871). By offering a 360 degree range of vision, the cupola appears to reinstate the classical humanist subject, previously rendered blind by the darkness of the first floor interior.

Yet the view from the cupola is, in fact, a partial view, not a complete panorama [fig. 13]. Where one expects a conventional central window, offering a more continuous uninterrupted line of vision, the paired windows encasing the cupola instead create a blind center. Vision is limited not only by the structural cross-frame between the windows, blocking the spectator's view, but by the frame of the human body itself, never capable of seeing more than 160 degrees at the same time. Inside the cupola, there is more wall space than window surface. The cupola's cross-frame is broad enough to conceal anyone within it, once again offering Dickinson, if she chose, the privilege of seeing without being seen.²⁴ The tension between what the mid-century cupola theoretically offers (ideal transparency) and what it actually delivers (real opacity) is neatly reconciled by one of Dickinson's own philosophies: "To disappear enhances" (P 1209).

For Dickinson, transparency is just another form of opacity. The cupola's windows are blank, unseeing eyes, blinded by overexposure to the very light that makes vision possible.

*Before I got my eye put out
I liked as well to see-
As other Creatures, that have Eyes
And know no other way-

But were it told to me-Today-
That I might have the sky*

Fig. 13

Plan diagram of the cupola which, in place of a central window's more panoramic view, offers the viewer a blind center.



*For mine-I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me-*

*The Meadows-mine-
The Mountains-mine-
All Forests-Stintless Stars-
As much of Noon as I could take
Between my finite eyes-*

*The Motions of the Dipping Birds-
The Morning's Amber Road-
For mine-to look at when I liked-
The News would strike me dead-*

*So safer-guess-with just my soul
 Upon the Window pane-
 Where other Creatures put their eyes-
 Incautious-of the Sun- (P 327)*

Not for Dickinson the transcendental powers of Emerson's transparent eyeball, capable of taking in the cosmic world in all its astonishing infinitude. Dickinson shies away from the window pane / pain where "A Vision on the Retina" (P 566) threatens insanity.

*Had we our senses
 But perhaps 'tis well they're not at Home
 So intimate with Madness
 He's liable with them*

*Had we the eyes within our Head-
 How well that we are Blind-
 We could not look upon the Earth-
 So utterly unmoved- (P 1284)*

The lyric "I" is a blind eye, the lyric seer a sightless visionary. The pun is clear: to see is to be deprived of "our senses," to be addled by what the poet calls elsewhere the "very Lunacy of Light" (P 593). To be blinded by light is a familiar refrain in Dickinson's poetry, a poetry that routinely favors the safer practice of night vision: "I see thee better-in the Dark- / I do not need a Light-" (P 611).

True sightedness, able to pierce the veil of eternity, is achieved not from the ennobling heights of the light-filled cupola but from the ordinary chambers of the dimly lighted interior. Once again, it is a question of access: "Mortality's Ground Floor / Is Immortality" (P 1234). To cross over from the mortal to the immortal, one must progress not upwards but downwards, passing through the subterranean chambers of the grave. Nor does this spiritual journey follow a traditional trajectory from inside to outside. The grave represents simply another interior, a "low Apartment in the Sod" (P 557) that houses "Death's single Privacy" (P 463). In Dickinson's upside-down, inside-out world, direction is radically dislocated and space itself unhinged. The inside subsumes the outside, transforming the exterior into a mirror image of the domestic interior.

VI.

This is not to say that the poet moves outside exteriority altogether; Dickinson's poetry abounds in natural descriptions—of sunrises and sunsets, mountains and fields, flowers and trees—depicted in every season of the year. Yet, a significant number of Dickinson's landscape poems, including "There's a certain Slant of light" (P 258), "The Angle of a Landscape" (P 375), and "By my Window have I for Scenery" (P 797) are narrated from the perspective of an observer looking out a window. Other famous nature poems by Dickinson, like "I dreaded that first Robin, so" (P 348), "The Malay—took the Pearl" (452), and "I Started early, took my dog" (P 520), are told entirely in the past tense, as if composed retrospectively from the safe distance of house, mansion, or town. Still other poems of the exterior portray nature itself as a domestic interior, lofty as a church cathedral (P 790) or humble as a "Dome of Worm" (P 893).

It is in this latter category that Dickinson's mortuary verse falls. In an era when domestic burial grounds assumed the character of miniature neighborhoods, and family plots imitated private estates,²⁵ Dickinson analogizes cemeteries to small villages or towns (P 736, 892) and graves to "little dwelling houses" (P 411, 187, 449, 712, 813, 1310, 1489, 1752). Sometimes Dickinson casually figures the grave's interior as a bedroom: "I went to thank Her— / But She Slept— / Her Bed—a funneled Stone— / With Nosegays at the Head and Foot— / That Travellers—had thrown" (P 363). To Mrs. Holland the poet writes in January 1875, six months after her father's death: "Mother is asleep in the Library—Vinnie in the Dining Room—Father—in the Masked Bed—in the Marl House" (L 432). With a gravestone at their head and a footstone at their base, nineteenth-century New England graves, occasionally called "bedbacks," strongly resembled beds, the place where sleep was but a metaphor for death (Wolff 70, 340).

Other times Dickinson portrays the grave as a drawing room, a more formal domestic interior whose occupant serves as God's helpmate: "The grave my little cottage is, / Where 'Keeping house' for thee / I make my parlor orderly / And lay the marble tea" (P 1743). The close association of parlors with death is put to ironic use in one of Dickinson's earliest persona poems written in the voice of a corpse, in which the entombed speaker convinces herself "I am alive—because / I am not in a Room— / The Parlor—Commonly—it is— / So Visitors may come—" (P 470). If the grave is indeed a parlor, as the poet suggests in yet another poem on the interior

of a coffin, then “No Bald Death—affront their Parlors— / No Bold Sickness come / To deface their Stately Treasures” (P 457). The paradox consoles: in the grave, there is no death.

Dickinson died in her bed on May 15, 1886, after a prolonged battle with what the poet called “Nervous prostration” (L 937) and her death certificate identified as “Bright’s Disease” (Leyda, *Years* 2: 474).²⁶ The moment of Dickinson’s passing did not go unrecorded. “The day was awful,” her brother Austin writes in his diary; “She ceased to breathe that terrible breathing just before the whistles sounded for six” (Leyda, *Years* 2: 471). Following a newly popular burial practice that marked the official beginning of the American funeral industry (Laderman 9), Dickinson’s body was embalmed, transformed in death into the stately marble figure she had so often been mistaken for in life. Higginson’s diary entry for the day of the funeral, which took place in the Homestead parlor, describes the corpse in particular detail:

a wondrous restoration of youth—she is 54 [55] & looked 30, not a gray hair or wrinkle, & perfect peace on the beautiful brow. There was a little bunch of violets at the neck & one pink cypripedium; the sister Vinnie put in two heliotropes by her hand “to take to Judge Lord.” (Leyda, Years 2: 475)²⁷

Dressed in a white flannel robe specially fashioned by Sue, and holding flowers in her hand, Dickinson prepared to enter God’s stately chambers in the same formal manner she once greeted visitors to the Homestead, immediately casting all her previous entrances as dress rehearsals for a far more important, and definitive, debut.

Dickinson’s funeral procession was exceptionally modest, compared to her father’s more elaborate cortege twelve years earlier. While Edward Dickinson’s coffin was carried ceremoniously through the Homestead’s front door and paraded slowly through the streets of Amherst, Emily Dickinson preferred to exit her life as unobtrusively as she had lived it, slipping quietly out the backdoor (St. Armand 74–76; Farr 1–13; Leyda 2: 470 ff). Following her request, the poet’s casket was carried on the shoulders of six of the family’s Irish men servants, who transported their charge through the open barn and across the fields to the family plot, careful to keep within sight of the house. Inscribed on her tombstone is a simple two word message Dickinson sent to her cousins in what turned out to be her last piece of correspondence, a personal elegy so condensed it might also be seen as her last poem: “Called back” (L 1046).²⁸ It is a

fitting epitaph for a poet of the interior whose deepest impulse while living was to return to the place she called “Eden—the ancient Homestead” (P 1545), and whose death certificate, under the category “Occupation,” bore the equally elliptical yet no less expressive words, “At Home.”

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Notes

- 1 Cody updates his early thesis on Dickinson's neurotic personality in his foreword to Garbowsky's more recent study of Dickinson's agoraphobia. I might note here, in response to the popular perception of Emily Dickinson as “agoraphobic,” that agoraphobia is not coined as a term until 1871, by the German neurologist Alexander Karl Otto Westphal. And it is not until after Dickinson's death in 1886 that the clinical concept of a pathological fear of open spaces (initially understood as exclusively a male disorder) can properly be said to arrive in America.
- 2 Eberwein refers here to the lines from Dickinson's Poem 1601: “Immured the whole of Life/ Within a magic Prison.”
- 3 For more on the historical emergence of the domestic interior, see Rybczynski or Wright. On the social and political history of the private/public distinction, see Weintraub and Kumar, eds.
- 4 The Homestead legally passed out of Dickinson ownership as early as March 1855, when the mortgage was foreclosed and the house was sold to General David Mack. While Samuel Fowler Dickinson relocated to Ohio with his wife and youngest daughter, Edward Dickinson and his young family remained as tenants in the Homestead for another seven years. With the General, his wife, and their two grown children occupying the west side of the house, and Edward, his wife, their three young children, and (for a time) Edward's younger brother Frederick occupying the east side, conditions in the Homestead remained crowded though apparently comfortable. For a

- brief description of the Homestead during the Mack years, see Lucius Boltwood's letter of November 5, 1842, which describes a party held there for at least one-hundred and fifty guests (Leyda, *Years* 1:72).
- 5 Austin Dickinson was eventually to have paid his father less than the full value of the house, but Edward Dickinson died before the debt was paid.
 - 6 It is not entirely clear how directly Austin or Edward Dickinson were influenced by Andrew Jackson Downing, although Austin's wife notes in her essay "Society in Amherst" that her husband "had long studied" Downing's work (qtd. in Mudge 244). Austin Dickinson was particularly well informed about architecture and landscaping. Not only did he own an inscribed volume of Calvert Vaux's *Villas and Cottages*, he also sought advice on the landscaping of the Dickinson property from Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of New York's Central Park (St Armand 20). A Northhampton architect, William Fenno Pratt, designed the Evergreens, and while no documents have surfaced to shed light on the designer for the 1855 Homestead renovations, it is possible that the same architect worked on both houses.
 - 7 Downing preferred what he saw as the more American-friendly Gothic Revival style of the 1840s to the culturally anachronistic Greek Revival style of the 1820s and 1830s. American houses that imitate Greek temples draw his special ire: "as these buildings have sometimes as much space devoted to porticoes and colonnades as to rooms, one may well be pardoned for doubting exactly for what purpose they were designed" (32).
 - 8 For a more thorough accounting of this affair, see Longworth. In her 1897 legal deposition, the Dickinson family servant, Maggie Maher, testified that Austin and Mabel met alone in the Homestead dining room, or sometimes the library, three or four times a week, for three or four hours in the afternoon or forenoon, with the doors shut (Longworth 413).
 - 9 On the personal associations of the doorstep for Dickinson, see the more detailed reading in Mudge, 49–52.
 - 10 The literal doorstep Dickinson mentions in this letter refers to the front stoop of the Pleasant Street house; yet, the threshold of the front door remains for Dickinson a powerful symbolic site throughout her life, routinely associated with Sue. In the nineteenth century, back and side entrances were for daily use, while the front door was reserved for important ceremonial occasions, perhaps enhancing the ritual meaning with which Dickinson endowed the figure of the front doorstep.
 - 11 The door ajar also recalls one of nineteenth-century America's most popular novels, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*. As Farland notes in a reading of Dickinson's 1862 poem "I cannot live with You" (P 640), this poem's image of lovers reuniting in a home beyond the grave alludes not only to Phelps's bestseller, published six years later, but to many of the other popular sentimental fictions of Dickinson's age, novels in which "friends and family would be reunited in snug, heavenly homes complete with elaborate interior decorations and detailed housekeeping regimes" (371).
 - 12 Dickinson, who took both voice and piano lessons as a child, was

- known to play (in the words of her friend Kate Scott Anthon) “weird & beautiful melodies, all from her own inspiration” (Leyda, *Years* 1: 367).
- 15 Martha Dickinson Bianchi’s memory of meeting Dickinson when Martha was a young girl again places the meeting in a dimly lighted space, specifically the “Northwest Passage.” Dickinson received her niece in the “little back hall that connected with the kitchen. It was dimly lighted. She asked if I would have a glass of wine or a rose” (*Emily* 25–26).
- 14 Higginson’s first trip to the Homestead was in 1870. For an alternate description of Higginson’s first encounter with Dickinson, see L 342a.
- 15 Farr explains that since the 1830s in America, portraits of postulants in their wedding gowns were common. By the 1860s, pre-Raphaelite art had been introduced in America, fueling the fascination with Madonna art in general and nuns in particular.
- 16 In “What is Poetry?” (1833), Mill writes: “Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*” (12). For an excellent reading of the implications of Mill’s definition of lyric for subsequent poetry, see Tucker.
- 17 For the most recent account of Dickinson’s medical history, see Hirschhorn and Longworth.
- 18 Baumgarten reprints Carlyle’s 1852 “Manuscript on Creeds,” published in truncated form by Froude under the title “Spiritual Optics,” in his essay “Carlyle and ‘Spiritual Optics.’”
- 19 For more on class in Emily Dickinson’s life and poetry, see Leyda, “Miss” and Erkilli. Foster has recently argued that Dickinson’s retreat to her bedroom, her internal exile within the home, neither reinscribes the ideology of separate spheres nor transcends it. Rather, Dickinson’s “homelessness at home” (P 1573) clears a space for poetic production by redefining, from the inside, a white middle-class woman’s relation to domesticity and the private sphere.
- 20 Mabel Loomis Todd’s autobiographical sketch, “Scurrilous but True,” is cited in its entirety in Sewall, 275–92. On the subject of Austin’s understanding of his sister’s withdrawal, Todd continues: “He told me about her girlhood and her normal blossoming and gradual retirement, and her few love affairs; her life was perfectly natural. All the village gossip merely amused him” (282).
- 21 Lavinia’s strongest defense of Emily’s reclusive nature comes in a response to the growing public mythology surrounding her sister’s character. To a reviewer of Dickinson’s *Letters* (1894), Lavinia wrote in January 1895: “Emily’s so called ‘withdrawal from general society’, for which she never cared, was only a happen. Our mother had a period of invalidism, and one of her daughters must be constantly at home; Emily chose this part and, finding the life with her books and nature so congenial, continued to live it, always seeing her chosen friends and doing her part for the happiness of the home” (qtd. in Sewall, *Life* 153).
- 22 The original writing table, now located in Harvard University’s Houghton Library, is only seventeen-and-a-half-inches-square. In “Myself was formed—a Carpenter” (P 488), Dickinson characteristically pictures this small writing table as a more expansive surface, the “Plane” upon which she

- practices “the Art of Boards.”
See also Mudge, 92.
- 23 In this poem’s first posthumous publication in 1891, Mabel Todd substituted for “timid” the antonym “mighty,” implying that the poet’s bedroom was a more imaginatively expansive space than Dickinson herself would acknowledge. Yet, for Dickinson, “timid” and “mighty” were never oppositional to begin with, but were always interchangeable terms. Typically in Dickinson’s poetry, the unimposing are invincible and the invincible are unimposing (P 796).
- 24 There is no documentation clarifying how frequently the cupola was used, by Emily or any of the Dickinson family members. The proximity of the attic staircase to the poet’s bedroom, and the opportunity the cupola afforded for the kind of expansive views Dickinson describes so memorably in both her poetry and her letters, make it unlikely that she never visited the cupola.
- 25 On the history of the evolving design of the American cemetery, see Sloane.
- 26 Whereas Dickinson’s own physician, Dr. Orvis Furnan Bigelow, attributed Dickinson’s death to Bright’s disease (a degenerative illness caused by kidney failure), recent assessments of Dickinson’s health identify the most likely cause as heart failure due to severe primary hypertension. See Hirschhorn and Longworth, 309–16.
- 27 Higginson’s diary entry further describes the Homestead itself as “a more saintly & elevated ‘House of Usher.’”
- 28 Emily Dickinson’s tombstone originally bore her initials “EED.” It was the poet’s niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi who, sometime in the early-twentieth century, chose the new tombstone and its eloquent epitaph. *Called Back* was the title of another popular sentimental novel of the period by the writer Hugh Conway, which Dickinson found to be a “haunting story” (L 856). This 1883 novel was staged as a melodrama at the Springfield Opera House just a month before Dickinson’s death.

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