Elizabeth Hewitt

Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865

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CORRESPONDENCE AND AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1770–1865

Elizabeth Hewitt uncovers the centrality of letter-writing to antebellum American literature. She argues that many canonical American authors turned to the epistolary form as an idealized mode through which to consider the challenges of American democracy before the Civil War. The letter was the vital technology of social intercourse in the nineteenth century and was adopted as an exemplary genre in which authors from de Crèvecoeur and Brockden Brown to Emerson, Fuller, Melville, Jacobs, Dickinson, and Whitman, could theorize the social and political themes that were so crucial to their respective literary projects. They interrogated the political possibilities of social intercourse through the practice and analysis of correspondence. Hewitt argues that although correspondence is generally only conceived as a biographical archive, it must instead be understood as a significant literary practice through which these authors made sense of social and political relations in the new nation.

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CORRESPONDENCE AND AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1770–1865

BY

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For Jared, Eli, and Gideon

Contents

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Abbreviations

BAP	*Black Abolitionist Papers, 1830–65*, 17 reels (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981).
C	Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993).
HM	Herman Melville, *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford (New York: Library of America, 1984).
JMN	Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman, 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–82).
L	*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).
LRWE	*The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–).
MF	*The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 vols. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).
P	*The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
PT	Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford *et al.* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987).
RWE	*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983).

INTRODUCTION

Universal letter-writers

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001, another terror spread through the United States, as anxieties about biological weapons being delivered by post in private letters turned the innocuous act of mail receipt and delivery into a site of terror and a potential act of terrorism.[1] Rumors that terrorist instructions were being encrypted into email seemed to corroborate the belief that sites of interpersonal communication were now hazardous spaces. This conjunction between postal communication and acts of violence, of course, had been realized before, as the last decade of the twentieth century seemed to illustrate with a particular intensity: Ted Kaczynski's ('Unibomber'), letter bombs; computer viruses that were increasingly spread by email; the seeming tendency of American post-office workers to turn from the monotony of mail-sorting to murderous rampages (a phenomenon that coined the phrase "going postal").[2] As we will see, this conjunction is not even a twentieth-century phenomenon. Early republican novels, for example, often describe letters as disseminating particular kinds of social injuries: because of letters, women are seduced, or lovers commit suicide. And in the antebellum period, abolitionist writing was often described by proslavery ideologues as a "plague" disseminated through the American South by way of the national post office. Even the phrase "going postal" has a nineteenth-century analogue in the tale of another disgruntled post-office worker, Bartleby, who finds himself drawn to a very different form of workplace violence.

The juxtaposition of mail and danger in many ways seems a consequence of epistolary writing's ability to complicate the distinction between representation and immanence.[3] The epistolary form is often privileged, for example, because the frequent conceit of familiar letters is that there is no essential difference between the letter-writer's *body* and her *letter*. Hence Nathaniel Hawthorne will describe himself kissing Sophia Peabody's letters, or Emily Dickinson will mail her tears to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. At the same time, however, letters are also necessarily textual: they *represent*

their senders in epistolary form. Because letters are written across the distance of time and space in an effort to bring persons into textual proximity, they inscribe a relationship between reader and writer even as the scene of letter-reading or -writing is largely a private or solitary one. We might think here of Dickinson's "The Way I read a Letter's – this –," where the speaker describes squirreling herself into a series of infinitely receding interior spaces in order to read her letter.[4] As she begins to read, however, this ostensible solitude is broken:

> Peruse how infinite I am
> To no one that You – know –
> And sigh for lack of Heaven – but not
> The Heaven God bestow –

At her entrance into the letter, two people join the speaker in her closet: the "no one" who has sent the letter being read and the "You" who does not know about this epistolary lover. The second-person address suggests that the very letter that would seem to promise a radical secrecy, at the very moment of reading, becomes a public act that elicits a community of readers. Dickinson's letter is also symptomatic of the ways in which epistolarity presumes both distance and absence: the "sigh" is occasioned by both the lover's physical absence and epistolary presence. In this way, Dickinson's poem reveals both the unique erotic charge from and the particular dangers of epistolary writing.

These paradoxical effects point to a particularly charged aspect of correspondence, which is that it highlights the very relations between readers and writers that are for the most part rendered invisible by other kinds of literary texts and genres. Letters necessarily emphasize social mediation in its two requisite generic features: an address (or superscription) to another person, and a signature (or subscription) that assigns the writer's relationship to that recipient. These two conventions are in the service of a larger project, which is to presume formally that there is some sort of social union between reader and writer. This stress on social mediation is the reason, I argue, that American authors in the first half-century of nationhood so often turn to the epistolary form as a means by which to theorize the kinds of social intercourse necessary to the articulation of a national identity and a national literature. They turn to the genre that inscribes social intercourse in an effort to interrogate the most crucial question of national construction: how will we be united? Throughout the antebellum period, letter-writing is depicted as an essential technique of nation formation. "Intercourse by letters with dear and distant friends," an 1831 essay explains, is what cements

"[the] bond of sympathy . . . between different sections of our country."[5] Federal union is literally crafted out of correspondence.

But despite the centrality of the letter in early national and antebellum literature and culture, there has been relatively little critical attention paid to the subject, save as a site for biographical footnotes and marginalia. This is largely so because interest in the literature of letter-writing has traditionally focused on epistolary fiction, and there is a wholesale abandonment of the epistolary form by 1820.[6] Yet even as the epistolary novel disappears, the letter remains vital as a cultural form through which the questions of union that increasingly dominate national discourse in the antebellum period are interrogated. I do not mean by this merely that American authors of the antebellum period were prolific letter-writers (although this is certainly true), but that those for whom issues of social mediation are paramount repeatedly turn to letter-writing as both practice and theoretical model for conceiving of social reciprocity.[7] Various considerations of union and disunion converge around both literal and theoretical correspondence.[8]

It must be "beyond simple coincidence that in . . . 1861 the federal government should have set out on a vigorous suppression of . . . independent mail routes," ruminates a character in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, a novel devoted to conspiracies of correspondence and mail delivery. This same character is writing a book that attempts "to link the Civil War to the postal reform movement that had begun around 1845."[9] I begin with a similar concern, which is the relationship between anxieties of union (national and personal) and the generic form whose necessary function is ameliorating *dis*union: the letter. Early national and antebellum authors, I argue, routinely turn to the figure of the familiar letter to consider the larger issues of social and political reciprocity that were central concerns from national formation to secession. Indeed, *The Crying of Lot 49*'s suggestions of a connection between postal reform and national division are corroborated by the fact that debates about the Post Office were often at the center of considerations of national union (especially after the Missouri Compromise) in the two decades leading up to the Civil War.

Early republican and antebellum American writers turned to the epistolary form (as both praxis and theory) as the generic form by which to engage topics of philosophical and political correspondence. In arguing for the generic distinctiveness of epistolarity, this book seeks to offer a national literary history of a particular genre. Similar accounts of the political work of genres have been made before – most influentially in Benedict Anderson's account of the central role of the novel to the construction of a nation

composed of citizens in "meanwhile" time.[10] But even though it has almost always been understood as a mode that has no nationalistic uniqueness (what would be the difference between an American letter and a British letter?), it is the epistolary form that reveals in its generic specificity the particular features that mark the articulated "exceptionalism" of American democracy as it was conceived from the Articles of Confederation to the Confederate Constitution.[11]

Alexis de Tocqueville remarked in 1831 that the marvel of American political ideology was its seeming capacity to reconcile a commitment to individual liberty at the same time as it maintained a celebration of democratic ideals. For Tocqueville this crucial political calculus emerges from American federalism, which distributes sovereignty to individual citizens and thus functions as an "invisible" monitor against anarchy:

> It was never assumed in the United States that the citizen of a free country has a right to do whatever he pleases; on the contrary, more social obligations were there imposed upon him than anywhere else . . . [B]ut the exercise of its authority was divided, in order that the office might be powerful and the officer insignificant, and that the community should be at once regulated and free. In no country in the world does the law hold so absolute a language as in America; and in no country is the right of applying it vested in so many hands. The administrative power in the United States presents nothing either centralized or hierarchical in its constitution; this accounts for *its passing unperceived*. The power exists, but its representative is *nowhere to be seen*.[12]

Central to Tocqueville's argument about the uniqueness of American democracy is that it established consensus by way of a celebration of individual sovereignty, such that "power" is "nowhere to be seen" and could pass "unperceived."[13] This ideological solution is, significantly, coincident with a particular textual effect of epistolary letters. Letters emphasize the singularity of a particular letter-writer even as they also strive to position the recipient in an idealized relationship with the writer. They emphasize solidarity and individualism at once, and, in so doing, the power entailed in this reconciliation is, as Tocqueville puts it, "nowhere to be seen."

It is, then, no coincidence (to borrow Pynchon's phrase) that Tocqueville so frequently turns to the institution of the United States Post Office as the occasion for his meditations on American democracy. The discovery of a frontier post office, for example, justifies his assertion about the enlightenment of the American over the French citizen: "It is difficult to imagine the incredible rapidity with which thought circulates in the midst of these deserts. I do not think that so much intellectual activity exists in the most enlightened and populous districts of France." And as he extends his analysis

of this particular instance of American superiority, he refers specifically to the American post:[14]

> I traveled along a portion of the frontier of the United States in a sort of cart, which was termed the mail. Day and night we passed with great rapidity along the roads, which were scarcely marked out through immense forests. When the gloom of the woods became impenetrable, the driver lighted branches of pine, and we journeyed along by the light they cast. From time to time we came to a hut in the midst of the forest; this was a post-office. The mail dropped an enormous bundle of letters at the door of this isolated dwelling, and we pursued our way at full gallop, leaving the inhabitants of the neighboring log houses to send for their share of the treasure.[15]

Tocqueville, like so many others, as we will see, explicitly credits the Post Office and its capacity to link citizen to citizen with the establishment of a unified national character:

> The post, that great instrument of intercourse, now reaches into the backwoods; and steamboats have established daily means of communication between the different points of the coast . . . There is not a province in France in which the natives are so well known to one another as the thirteen millions of men who cover the territory of the United States. While the Americans intermingle, they assimilate; the differences resulting from their climate, their origin, and their institutions diminish; and they all draw nearer and nearer to the common type.[16]

The United States Post Office, as Tocqueville describes it, is an institution that is inherently democratic (such that both the Michigan woodsman and the Virginian senator rely on the same system) *and* essentially federalist.[17] In his analysis of the political history of the American postal system, Richard R. John argues, "for the vast majority of Americans the postal system *was* the central government."[18] An 1848 essay similarly asserts that the post office is solely responsible for preserving federal union since it is "the only tie that connected the government with the people."[19]

But if the United States Post Office is an opportunity for Tocqueville to marvel at the exceptional possibility of American democratic federalism, then we must also see the ways in which the system of correspondence it facilitates also reveals what Tocqueville finds so alarming about American politics, and that is the possibility of a tyrannical majority. The "great instrument of intercourse" that assimilates Americans into a "common type" is precisely what Tocqueville isolates as the tyrannical potential of American democracy: "It seems at first sight as if all the minds of the Americans were formed upon *one model*, so accurately do they follow the same route."[20] Thus, in a seeming reversal of his rhapsodic account of American citizens

enlightened by the postal distribution of letters, Tocqueville argues that the United States, more than any other nation, censors liberty of thought: "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America."[21] Tocqueville further describes the tyranny of democracy as casting dissenters out of social relations – out of the correspondence that regulates national identity: "The master no longer says, 'You shall think as I do, or you shall die'; but he says, 'You are free to think differently from me, and to retain your life, your property, and all that you possess; but you are henceforth a stranger among your people. You may retain your civil rights, but they will be useless to you, for you will never be chosen by your fellow-citizens.'"[22] In similar terms, an 1848 essay celebrating the federalist promise of the post likewise sees potential political dangers emerging from that same power: "Instead of the government perishing for the want of contact with the people, this one branch is found to have mingled itself so intimately with the interests and enjoyments of the people, as to be a source of danger and a cause of alarm for the security of our liberties."[23]

This paradox in which correspondence is at once socio-political ideal and nightmare – in which it is the occasion both for an imagination of the utopian possibilities of American democracy and a consideration of the dystopian potential of American federalism – is a crucial problem for each author I consider in this book. Participation in a national correspondence is the instantiation of the democratic ideal, and we see this ideal emblematized by various fantasies about letter-writing: Melville, for example, describes the perpetual telegram he wants to write Nathaniel Hawthorne such that their social intercourse will be based on perfect agreement. Yet, at the same time, we will also see an insistent recognition of the ways in which these fantastical postal systems imply a political model where an inscription into correspondence entails submission that masquerades as consensual reciprocity, and in which failure to abide by the terms of concord literally casts one out of a national correspondence. Because letters make their address to audience explicit, they emphasize reciprocity: indeed, the letter's address works to make reciprocity all but ineluctable. For example, the conventional superscription to a letter that qualifies the reader as "dear" asserts an intimacy between reader and writer that the reader is given almost no space to resist.

In this book, I argue that the articulation of what constitutes the imperative of American democracy is shaped and contested in a consideration of the generic form that both describes and literalizes social relations. Letters constitute a crucial site by which democratic theory passes into social

practice. From the establishment of the Post Office Act of 1792 to Southern Secession (and the subsequent establishment of a Confederate postal system) in 1861, we discover an insistent rhetoric that depicts American letter-writing as the means by which both national and familiar consensus are to be established. Indeed, in much of this rhetoric, there is the implicit suggestion that there is no real distinction between national and familiar union. An advocate for postal reform makes just such a claim: "We need not spend time to show the social and moral and intellectual advantages that would flow from the establishment of a [reformed] post-office . . . [I]t would keep alive affections and friendship which now die out in distance; it would, in short, be a *new bond of union, binding the people* together in knowledge, and sympathy, and love."[24] This same author maintains that epistolary correspondence is one of the few institutional checks against a tendency towards increasing social isolation and atomism: only the "free and frequent communication by mail," he argues, can "weaken this tendency to separation and selfishness . . . [and] do much to keep bright the chain of affection between the scattered families and parted companions, and keep them united by love, though divided by distance."[25] A report to the Select Committee on Postage in 1841 argues similarly that

> Our Post Office system . . . is one of the most powerful of the influences which hold our Union together, and keep these States from falling apart in the agitations of faction. The system, spread through the whole land, and connecting every human habitation with every other, is everywhere the channel of a vital energy. The more we perfect the system – the more numerously letters of business, of friendship, of scientific enterprise, pass between the east and the west, between the north and the south – just so much the more do we strengthen the ties that make us *one people*.[26]

This rhetoric echoes James Madison's from 1792, where he describes the post office as the "principal channel" in the dissemination of public knowledge. Benjamin Rush likewise declared the postal system the "only means [of] conveying light and heat to every individual in the federal commonwealth."[27]

In these examples (and countless others), the post is embraced as a democratic institution of dissemination; in many ways, however, the epistolary documents that are actually delivered by this system offer a more complicated political paradigm. The letter – by which I mean the genre that self-consciously emphasizes the exchange from author to reader – paradoxically emphasizes individual sovereignty (the capacity of the letter-writer to communicate his interests without restriction or coercion) at the same time as it stresses the need to coordinate citizens in the service of a common

good (the capacity of the letter-writer to come to consensus and mutual understanding with his correspondent). In this way, the epistolary form offers a template for a central problem of democratic politics, which is the reconciliation between individual liberty and public solidarity. As we shall see, debates surrounding the establishment of American constitutional democracy at the end of the eighteenth century frequently invoke epistolarity as the means by which to describe a principle of political legitimacy that is said to accommodate both public and private autonomy.[28]

In what follows, I consider a wide range of epistolary writing – familiar letters written between friends on subjects both private and public, private letters that are published (with or without consent), public letters published in newspapers and magazines, fictional letters organized in both epistolary novels and political pamphlets. Although the *kinds* of social intercourse these various letters describe and enact are manifestly different, the use of the epistolary form in each case necessarily emphasizes social mediation. Printed letters frequently, for example, compare themselves to private letters as a justification for their epistolary pose – that is, even as the epistolary pamphlet cannot be private, it posits itself as more authentic, more heartfelt *because* it takes the epistolary form. Similarly, although much of the mail delivered by the antebellum national post was print material and not private letters, writing about the national post frequently emphasizes its capacity to circulate familiar sentiment throughout the nation. The post is a crucial technology of federalism not just because it distributes news to the American frontier, but because its dissemination of letters of all sorts serves to "keep alive affections and friendship which now die out in distance."

As with all nations born of revolution, the United States was founded out of a legitimation crisis. One remedy to this crisis comes by a careful substitution of the *historical* justification for independence with an appeal to *natural* rights. The formation of the United States, in other words, exemplifies what Norberto Bobbio describes as the contradiction between the "historical and rational justification" for the rise of the liberal state. Historically, he explains, the liberal state arises out of the continuing erosion of the monarch's power; the modern state was justified, however, as emerging out of a consensual accord between free individuals.[29]

This proleptical justification is not, however, sufficient to legitimize the consolidation of new authority under which individual citizens are asked to submit. In her consideration of the nation's founding, Hannah Arendt considers the legitimizing work of the Declaration of Independence. Arguing that the American founders were fully cognizant of the ways in which

revolutionary energies needed immediately to be harnessed, Arendt reads the invocation of a "self-evident truth" in the Declaration as an appeal to an absolute authority that contradicted the political ideals of the Revolution. Such an appeal to natural rights, Arendt argues, is apolitical, or illegitimate, since "because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion. By virtue of being self-evident, these truths are pre-rational . . . and since their self-evidence puts them beyond disclosure and argument, they are in a sense no less compelling than 'despotic power.'"[30] For Arendt, however, the Declaration nonetheless offers an occasion for modern political deliberation in the performative work signaled in the phrase, "We hold." She understands that phrase to reflect a deliberative politics even as it also appeals to a "self-evident truth." Less confident that a founding moment can escape an appeal to absolute authority, Jacques Derrida reads the "We hold" as essentially constative – as itself appealing to the authority of the "We" whose signatures are appended to the document's conclusion.[31] Derrida argues, in other words, that no moment of national consolidation can avoid an appeal to transcendental authority. Is politics, then, as Arendt would have it, the management and negotiation of human communication? Or is it a minimal politics that comes out of the recognition that political union is not a matter of consent, but of submission to an extra-human authority?

Literary critics have continued to interrogate the Declaration as a legitimizing discourse, and these interrogations often follow the terms established by Arendt and Derrida, largely centered around a debate as to what social technology offers the best framework for understanding the construction of political authority in the early republic. This debate can be neatly schematized into those who argue for the importance of print culture and those who argue, conversely, for the importance of the charismatic authority of voice. Michael Warner, for example, argues for the essential legitimizing work accomplished by print and what he calls its fundamental "negation of persons": "By articulating a nonempirical agency to replace empirical realizations of the people, writing became the hinge between a delegitimizing revolutionary politics and a nonrevolutionary, already legal signification of the people; it masked the contradiction between the two."[32] Jay Fliegelman, on the other hand, has argued that American political legitimacy must be understood within what he terms a "politics of sincerity and authenticity" that is only guaranteed by voice.[33] This model that would necessarily stress empirical scenes of political engagement finds its analogue in Arendt (although Fliegelman does not refer to her) and her argument that political engagement comes from the deliberative engagement of empirical

persons. Thus, contra Warner who reads the Declaration as emphasizing the "derivative afterward of writing," Fliegelman insists on attending to the Declaration as spoken document.

Notably, in their respective attempts to argue their point, both sides appeal to the mode that lies somewhere between voice and print – epistolarity. Thus, for example, Fliegelman reads the epistle in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* as illustrating the importance of *voice* (since letters are said to approximate conversation). Conversely, Warner reads a revolutionary epistolary pamphlet as illustrating the importance of *print*: the "pamphlet is not a personal letter, and *must* not be, in the conditions of the public sphere of representational politics."[34] Despite the different assumptions made in these examples, they similarly ignore the specificity of the epistolary mode, which for both critics becomes significant only as it approximates another mode – be it print or conversation. But Crèvecoeur's James does not *converse* with Mr. F. B.; he sends him a letter. And while Warner is right when he insists there is a fundamental difference between the private letter circulated to one identifiable person and a published epistolary pamphlet, there is also a crucial difference between an epistolary pamphlet (which insists on the particular identity of both sender and recipient) and a pamphlet that lacks this particular "generic pose."[35] The public letter is not intimate, but the epistolary form nonetheless demands that we attend to the generic demand for particularized address.

While contemporary critics understand the letter as merely approximation of orality or print, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practitioners of epistolarity understood the genre as *unique* precisely because it lay between the other two modes:

> [W]e should write as we speak; and that's a true familiar letter which expresseth our meaning the same as if we were discoursing with the party to whom we write, in succinct and easy terms. The tongue and pen are both interpreters of the mind; but the pen the most faithful of the two; and as it has all the advantage of premeditation, it is not so apt to err, and leave things behind on a more authentic and lasting record.[36]

This letter-writing manual or "letter-writer," as they were called, points to the advantages that accrue because the letter lies *between* tongue and pen. Like conversation, letters express our true sentiments; and like print, letters are permanent and leave a "lasting record." That epistolarity emphasizes both print and orality is also evidenced by the fact that letter-writing manuals often gave instructions not only on how to write letters, but also on

pronunciation. The 1790 *Complete Letter-Writer*, for example, begins with "Rules for Reading," which includes rules for oration: "Read so loud as to be heard by those about you, but not louder"; "Observe your pauses well."[37]

These letter-writing manuals mostly consisted of exemplary letters that served as models for epistolary intercourse between persons stationed along a range of social positions: letters from daughters to mothers; apprentices to employees; lovers to betrothed; poor relatives to benefactors. As such, they offer a veritable how-to manual for depicting and enforcing appropriate social relations between the various members of the bourgeois public sphere. One advertises itself as offering "such a number of letters . . . as to answer the purpose almost of every individual, from the boy at school, to the Secretary of State."[38] These letter-writing manuals teach citizens how to address each other so as to secure a more perfect union.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that soon after Constitutional ratification we find numerous publications of American letter-writing manuals. While some of these American publications were merely reprints of the British manuals that had been so popular since Richardson's publication of his *Familiar Letters* in 1732, we also see a deliberate attempt to offer rules of correspondence that are unique to the new nation. For example, many early manuals offer conflicting advice about a political problem that also occupied the nation's founders, which is how to address the elected officials of the new United States government. The *American Letter-Writer* (1793) suggests, "The title of Majesty, Royal, Highness, Excellency, Worshipful, and down to the humble title of Esquire, given to public officers in royal governments, seems only to beget pride or tyranny in the officers, and servility and dependence among the people. But in America, where all men are declared to be equal, those and the like titles ought to be discontinued."[39] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, many American letter-writers specifically declare themselves to be distinct from their English counterparts: "These [letters] are not taken from English books of forms, nor are they copied from the ignorant productions . . . But are obtained from the best American authorities, and will be found in perfect conformity to the legal and customary practice of the man of business in the United States."[40] *The New Universal Letter-Writer: or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (1800) similarly argues that its letters are "particularly suited to the circumstances of our own country, and several of [them] are taken from approved American writers."[41] One uniquely American aspect of these letter-writers is that many include a reprint of the Declaration of Independence, a text that functions in significant ways as an epistolary

document: it offers a consolidation of signers to send word (in this case to a mother nation) of disobedience, and it testifies to its sincerity by signatory power. And indeed, copies of the Declaration included in letter-writers always incorporate at least one of the signatures, even if in typescript.

Like Arendt's characterization of the Declaration, the letter as a genre is defined not by what is said, but by its performative function. In his 1843 history of letter-writing, William Roberts states, "We may relieve our minds from critical entanglements by determining that a letter has no peculiarity but its form; and that nothing is to be refused admission which would be proper in any other method of treating the same subject."[42] Letter-writing manuals from the period argue similarly: "there is no subject whatever, on which one may not convey his thoughts to the public, in the form of a letter."[43] The letter is a letter only insofar as it is framed by an envelope, a salutation, or a subscription; and while a letter need not be delivered, it does need the pretence that it *could* be sent (this 'pretence' might be found in the stationery, the date, the address, or the subscription, to name some examples). And indeed, one feature of both Declaration and letter is the subscription, thereby specifically identifying a writer's agency over the text as an intrinsic aspect of the text itself.[44]

Given, then, that the letter is a textual mode that more than any other genre makes its function as social mediation explicit, it is not surprising that it occupies such a ubiquitous place in the rhetoric of the new nation intent on establishing the new rules of political organization. Epistolarity allows for a fantasy of immanence that characterizes classical democracy (hence, as we will see, its appeal for the Antifederalists) and, at the same time, necessarily underscores the non-presence of persons, or representation, that is associated with modern democracy (and herein lies its attraction for Federalist thinkers).[45] Thus, insofar as the letter approximates conversation it offers something like the Arendtian model of the public sphere with its accent on agonistic relations; and, insofar as it is a written mode, it serves as a paradigmatic genre for describing the ties that bind a nation too large to be present to itself. Madison, for example, describes the burgeoning federal Post Office as the means by which separated citizens gain solidarity: the territorial expanse of the nation could be "contracted" by that which enabled the "general intercourse of sentiments."[46] Epistolary writing paradoxically emphasizes the individual sovereignty of the letter-writer, even as it harnesses the atomism or anarchy that might come from this model by ultimately connecting the individual to a matrix of other letter-writers.

By focusing on the legitimation offered by way of print culture *or* the rhetoric of sincerity and by failing to attend to the generic specificity of

the letter, critics have described an American political rhetoric that successfully masks the essential contradictions between power and liberty, between compulsion and consent. Letter-writing, as we will see, can likewise serve to mask these contradictions, and it too offers a coordination between individual liberty and civic responsibility. But because an appeal to intersubjectivity is a necessary condition of the genre, epistolarity also functions to critique its own ideological assumptions.[47] Because of the spatial and temporal distance a letter must span, letter-writing emblematizes not only a fully legitimized political model in which social intercourse is predicated on consent and unanimity, but it also reveals the obstacles to such sociopolitical organization. The possibility of dead, purloined, and/or miscarried letters serves to underscore the ways in which national ties may not be so easily secured.[48]

Each author whom I consider in the following chapters was not only an avid letter-writer (which in and of itself is not surprising given that letters were a principal communicative technology), but also deliberately considers the political consequences of epistolary writing. For authors like John Adams or Ralph Waldo Emerson, correspondence offers the possibility of transparent social exchange. Others, like Margaret Fuller and Harriet Jacobs, see the anti-democratic possibility of correspondence, and strive to depict a version of correspondence capable of admitting a diversity of positions and interests. This book argues that letters are the textual medium in and about which a variety of American authors conceived of democratic sociability and, consequentially, that the genre is crucial to our understanding of antebellum literature and politics.

The first chapter, "National letters," contends that debates over American Federalism can be understood as a contest between two different epistolary theories. One (Antifederalist) emphasizes political reciprocity through an ongoing and sustained correspondence of one citizen to another. The other (Federalist) is committed to federal union, and therefore emphasizes a perfect correspondence that becomes a template by which to orchestrate all subsequent political conversations between citizens and the nation. Both political models are frequently challenged by American epistolary novels, which repeatedly spectacularize the impediments to achieving social union through letters.

The relationship between democratic theories and the generic requirements of correspondence is also the topic of Chapter 2, "Emerson and Fuller's phenomenal letters," which considers Emerson and Fuller's mutual interrogation of the politics of friendship. For Emerson, the epistolary mode is the textual form that can best engender ideal sociality: the letter

makes the other fully present (transcendent) or absolutely remote (a radical individual). This model of both epistolarity and sociality is the bedrock of Emersonian democratic individualism, which itself has become a foundational text of American liberalism. Fuller, however, challenges this version of friendship and epistolarity, and therefore implicitly disputes the politics that his model of social intercourse entails. Their quarrel about postal letters must, then, be understood as a debate about the responsibilities of American democracy.

My third chapter, "Melville's dead letters," identifies another dialogue on American democracy, and one that is similarly mediated through the figure of the letter. Here I argue that Melville's interest in American democracy (and the literary forms that best represent it) routinely involves a theorization of epistolarity. His practice of letter-writing and the thematization of this practice in his fiction is inextricable from his understanding of the tyrannical and anarchical tendencies of democracy. Unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne, who conceives of the letter as sustaining a commitment to individual freedom and democracy at once, Melville interrogates (and ultimately critiques) this ideological project in his writing from the publication of *Pierre* to "The Encantadas."

Melville's loss of faith in correspondence, which yields the nihilistic suicides of *Pierre* and the desolate, anarchical landscape of "The Encantadas," is shared by Harriet Jacobs, but to markedly different ends. For Harriet Jacobs, the social isolation that comes from her enslavement and her attempted escape yields both her critique of and participation in a national correspondence, and the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In Chapter 4, "Jacobs's letters from nowhere," I argue that Jacobs ultimately rejects a conventional abolitionist rhetoric that fantasizes a national correspondence in which letters that provide "true testimony" to the facts of African American slavery would yield national union. While Jacobs's own letter-writing and her *Incidents* make appeals to the ideal of sincere testimony, she also explicitly critiques this communicative ideal in her self-depiction as a writer of counterfeit letters. In this way, she articulates an epistolary model that aims at *imperfect* union, and she instructs us in a national politics that understands the capacity for dissimulation to be itself constitutive of political community.

For Jacobs the fact of American racism proves the impossibility of perfect correspondence. For Emily Dickinson, the impossibility of correspondence and the experience of social isolation, which she sometimes metaphorizes in racial terms (in one letter, for example, she identifies herself as "Mrs Jim Crow"), yield the mixed form of the lyrical letter. Chapter 5, "Dickinson's

lyrical letters," argues that Dickinson's poetry emerges out of the recognition of the necessary distance separating one from another, even as there is a concomitant desire to repair that separation. Her rigorous interrogation of sociality (and what is gained and lost in interpersonal relations) radically revises both a Federalist and Transcendentalist theory of democratic individualism: for Dickinson, the individual is always constructed out of relations to others, and it is through correspondence, and through Dickinson's unique form of the lyrical letter, that these relations are negotiated.

In the writings of Fuller, Melville, Dickinson, and Jacobs, we see each author recognize the ways in which letter-writing both paradoxically disguises and reveals the compulsions demanded in social reciprocity, be they between friends or between citizens – be they in a love letter, or in a Constitution. Their respective inquiries into the epistolary mode ought to be understood as ideological critique of the faith in correspondence that is celebrated in the inaugurating sentence of Whitman's "Song of Myself." Whitman's assumption is the subject of the conclusion, "Whitman's universal letters." *Leaves of Grass* takes as its poetical and political manifesto the construction of consensual union that had always been the goal of the nation: his poem assumes the reconciliation of the political conflicts that are traditionally the business of letters to resolve. Yet Whitman rejects the form of the familiar letter as metaphor for this political alchemy. For Whitman, the epistolary mode seems capable of securing neither liberty nor equality, let alone the dialectic synthesis of the two.

Yet before Whitman, the letter's capacity to collapse distances between persons *and* to make this union appear inevitable was precisely what made the genre such a potent political tool. That many important Federalist and Antifederalist documents were written as public letters cannot sufficiently be explained by the popularity of the epistolary genre in the period (since we might point to the numerous political broadsides and pamphlets that did not employ the epistolary mode). Rather, the letter written from citizen to citizen was the ideal form by which to describe a moment of political persuasion that attempts to inscribe a reciprocal identity between sender and writer both admitting to and disguising the requisite compulsion entailed in that union. It is no wonder, then, that the letter would have such cultural resonance during a period of anxiety about the regulation of attachments in a rapidly expanding and diversifying population. For a nation hoping to take legitimacy on faith, a well-crafted love letter would be the nonpareil of political documents.

CHAPTER 1

National letters

When Habermas characterizes the eighteenth century as the "century of the letter," he identifies epistolary writing as the textual apparatus that best represents not only the construction of the privatized individual, but also the bourgeois public sphere that comprises the relations between these autonomous individuals. Letter-writing offers an exemplary case of "audience-oriented privacy," as well as a template for rational exchange that aims to emancipate itself from any type of domination.[1] As Habermas explains, "Public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all."[2] The rational consent that emerges from and in the public sphere demands a reconciliation between public and private interests, and Habermas identifies the letter as the textual form that best realizes this reconciliation.[3]

We can see similar political work in one of the first documents of American national consolidation, the Articles of Confederation, which declares its participants to be in a "firm league of friendship with each other," thereby insisting on private relations as the model by which to describe the political relations between the various states. Urging ratification of the Articles, one constituent writes, "when any Sociaty Gets Divded in Sentiment it is verry hard to unite them."[4] The Articles also illustrate the centrality of epistolarity to the formation of the nation, as consolidation is accomplished here by way of a document that takes the form of a letter. Although the signatures that conclude the document might at first appear to be merely an attempt to witness adherence to its provisions, this legal explanation is insufficient, as it fails to attend to the explicitly epistolary address that begins the document: "To all to whom these Presents shall come, we the undersigned Delegates of the States affixed to our Names send greeting." The national document is presented with a "greeting" to all those who will receive it and, in so emphasizing reciprocity, the Articles enact via epistolary form the very "intercourse" and "perpetual union" these "Presents" are said to maintain.

The epistolary nature of the Articles becomes clearer when compared to the document that supplants it in 1787, the Constitution, which explicitly works to revise the model of familiar reciprocity central to the Articles. The Constitution is not addressed to friends, but instead functions as a command or ordinance, committing itself not to the maintenance of "perpetual union" and "intercourse," but to the founding of "a more perfect union." For the Antifederalists, this perfect union is impossible; thus, in response to the proposed Constitution, they repeatedly raise two objections. First, they question the timeframe imposed on deliberation. As "Federal Farmer" puts it, "It is natural for men, who wish to hasten the adoption of a measure, to tell us, now is the crisis . . . and to shut the door against free enquiry, whenever conscious the thing presented has defects in it, which time and investigation will probably discover."[5] Secondly, they question each and every phrase of the proposed document, offering numerous contradictory hypothetical interpretations to demonstrate that the ideal of pellucid communication is *not* realized in this Constitution. As "Cato" insists:

> [A]dvocates for this system oppose the common, empty declamation, that there is no danger that congress will abuse this power, but such language . . . is mere vapour, and sound without sense. Is it not in their power, however, to make such regulations as may be inconvenient to you? It must be admitted because the words are unlimited in their sense.[6]

Cato argues that words are either "sound without sense" or they are "unlimited in their sense" – they mean nothing or they can mean anything.

For those opposed to the Constitution, the force of these twinned impediments to "perfect union" is not to demand revisions of the document, but to challenge the ideal of the document itself. We must take the time to make sure we all agree as to how each and every term is to be interpreted. But since we will never arrive at such an understanding, our union must be founded on these conversations – on the correspondence *about* union – and not on any document that purports to define it for us. "John DeWitt" explains the need for this "perpetual" deliberation:

> Are we to adopt this Government, without an examination? – Some there are, who, literally speaking, are for pressing it upon us at all events. The name of the man who but lisps a sentiment in objection to it, is to be handed to the printer, by the printer to the public, and by the public he is to be led to execution . . . For my part, I am a stranger to the necessity for all this haste! . . . Is it so simple in its form as to be comprehended instantly? – Every letter, if I may be allowed the expression, is an idea . . . it ought to undergo a candid and strict examination. It is the duty of every one in the Commonwealth to communicate his sentiments to his neighbour, divested of passion, and equally so of prejudices . . . If thoroughly

looked into before it is adopted, the people will be more apt to approve of it in practice, and every man is a TRAITOR to himself and his posterity, who shall ratify it with his signature, without first endeavouring to understand it.–[7]

"DeWitt" insists that only after each and every citizen has written his neighbor and arrived at a consensus as to what every letter, word, and idea means – only then can the document be considered legitimate. Anyone who would sign the document – receive or send the letter that is the Constitution – without first doing so is a traitor. Thus he sees the crisis not in the debate itself, but in the Federalist attempts to stop correspondence about the debate.

We must, then, understand the pamphlet war of the Constitutional debates as a "letter war." And what is at stake is not radical vs. conservative principles, or orality vs. print, but two radically opposed models of correspondence. The Antifederalist version insists that union inheres in the process of correspondence itself, and not in any idealized text, and it finds its manifestation in the privileging of the circulation of familiar letters. Take, for example, the case of Antifederalist George Mason's "Objections to the Constitution," which was originally circulated to only individual correspondents. As Saul Cornell explains, "Disseminating his thoughts in this fashion . . . would allow him to maintain some measure of control over how his ideas would be interpreted. Any ambiguities or confusions arising from his essay could be discussed in a private exchange of letters."[8] If in the Antifederalist model each and every citizen writes to each other, reinventing the terms of union with each letter sent, in the Federalist model, each citizen writes to the state, or through the state, or under the state's watchful eye. When, for example, Madison describes his audience in *Federalist* 37, he asserts that he writes to a reader who is defined entirely by the commitment to union he has always already made: "these papers . . . solicit the attention of those only, who add to a sincere zeal for the happiness of their country, a temper favorable to a just estimate of the means of promoting it."[9]

This is not to say that the Federalists have faith in the transparency of language; in many ways they share Antifederalist anxieties about language as an essentially imprecise vehicle for ideas. Madison, for example, principally agrees with those who question the possibility of ever fixing in a document the ideal form of union:

Besides the obscurity arising from the complexity of objects, and the imperfection of the human faculties, the medium through which the conceptions of men are conveyed to each other, adds a fresh embarrassment . . . But no language is so copious as to supply words and phrases for every complex idea, or so correct as not to include many equivocally denoting different ideas.[10]

For Madison, however, "vague and incorrect definitions" are not sufficient reasons to delay ratification. Quite the contrary, he suggests that indefinitely perpetuating individual attempts to secure the letter of the law can only lead to further confusion and obscurity, and this is the fundamental flaw in the Articles of Confederation.

"Laws are a dead letter," Hamilton writes, "without courts to expound and define their *true* meaning and operation."[11] Hamilton's metaphor suggests that any political arrangement in which individual states (and by extension, individuals) interpret laws (and by extension, union) for themselves can only lead to anarchy, as the recent Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts seemed to prove. If, for the Antifederalists, the Constitution might lead to tyranny because its words are necessarily "unlimited in their sense," then for the Federalists the failure to have a Constitution will surely lead to anarchy because, without a centralized authority to which and through which all the nation's letters might be written, the nation will be capable of writing only "dead letters" – letters that cannot be delivered, that cannot do their office.

Crucial to Hamilton's formulation is the notion that the Constitution will serve in perpetuity as a document from which the original and ideal "intention of the people" might be distinguished from the necessarily fallen and corrupt "intention of their agents." The Antifederalist position conversely understood any establishment of government (including the Constitution) as a compact in which liberty is conceded. Gordon Wood explains:

> Antifederalist arguments kept coming back to this idea that "government is a compact between the rulers and the people," a contract by which "liberty ought not to be given up without knowing the terms." "Whether it be called a *compact*, *agreement*, *covenant*, *bargain*, or what," a constitution to the Antifederalists represented in traditional Whig terms "a concession of power, on the part of the people to their rulers," a mutual bargain between two hostile interests, between power and liberty.[12]

The Federalists replied that in the establishment of the United States government there was no such contract, and because the people's power was coincident with their liberty, "the people divest themselves of nothing."[13] In part this points to the political strategy of the Federalists to define their federal system as empowering individual citizens, instead of disempowering them. But even more crucially, this political argument points to two radically different notions of social communication that are at the core of each side's understanding of political organization. The Antifederalists understand social correspondence as agonistic exchange in which different

individuals negotiate for a confederation of interests, and letter-writing between citizens is an important technology in this deliberative model. The Federalists see correspondence as providing the *discipline* that will potentially restore the nation to the lost ideal of its "founding" moment. For the former, citizen corresponds with citizen and union emerges out of the correspondence itself; for the latter, individuals correspond with the "letter" of the Constitution and the federalist judiciary interprets how close individual correspondence comes to the original ideal.[14]

This connection between correspondence and nationalism is emphasized early on in American politics, as national communication facilitated by the post became firmly associated with democratic ideals. In its earliest calls for independence, the nation declares itself to be committed to disunion: the anonymous author of *Four Letters on Interesting Subjects* in 1776 writes, "the Tories have been exceedingly fond of impressing us with the necessity of what they call a perfect union, and that we cannot hope to succeed unless we are *all in one mind*. For my part I am quite of a different opinion, and think that a *disunion* is now the thing necessary."[15] Such appeals for dissociation with Britain were likewise accompanied with appeals to "friends," attempting to "charm" them into coordinated American resistance. Jack N. Rakove argues that American leaders in the early 1770s "lamented the absence of any obvious bonds of union," and that one attempt to coordinate resistance was found in Arthur Lee's suggestion in 1771 to "establish a regular network of correspondences" – a suggestion that finally culminated in the establishment of American correspondence societies.[16]

These correspondence societies were designed to facilitate the flow of information between the colonists, as well as between Britain and America; yet it was not until the call for independence became urgent that the work of these societies began in earnest. Virginia appointed its Committee of Correspondence in April of 1773, and Massachusetts followed shortly; in both cases the explicit purpose of the Correspondence Committees was to rally rural towns in favor of independence. By the end of 1773, there was a network of committees organized to "Correspond and Communicate with their Sister Colonies in America."[17] Jared Sparks writes, "the primary movement was to bring the people to understand their interests and act *in concert*, and the first means used to attain this end was the establishment of Committees of Correspondence in different parts of the country."[18] While these committees did not hold any governmental power, they were a principal means by which news was disseminated within colonial America

during the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. The importance of correspondence is also corroborated in Goddard's *Plan for Establishing a New American Post-Office* (1774), which specifically articulates anxiety about British control of American postal routes: the proposal insists that it is "dangerous in the extreme" that "our Letters . . . are liable to be stopt and opened by a Ministerial Mandate, and their Contents construed into treasonable Conspiracies."[19] As the nineteenth-century American historian, E. D. Collins, put it:

> It was correspondence, with cooperation at the terminal points, that brought about the Revolution . . . Its importance as a piece of revolutionary machinery can hardly be overestimated. It was not merely a channel through which public opinion might flow; it created public opinion and played upon it to fashion events.[20]

One specific event often said to have contributed to the consolidation of colonial sentiment in favor of independence was the case of the purloined letters of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson. In 1772, Benjamin Franklin somehow procured letters, written by Governor Hutchinson to London parliamentary officials, that advocated that "[t]here must be an abridgement of what are called English liberties." Franklin sent copies of these letters to the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence with instructions that they not be published; but the letters were promptly made public. Franklin's tacit distribution of these letters was both embraced and censured, and is still described today as "the most controversial act of [his] career."[21] These letters, which seemed to expose a deliberate strategy to oppress the American colonies, resulted in a public outcry that worked to galvanize resistance. Writing Franklin, Samuel Cooper describes their effect: "They strip the Mask from the Authors who under the Profession of Friendship to their Country have been endeavoring to build themselves and their Families upon it's [*sic*] Ruins" (xx:234). Central to Cooper's formulation is the premise that these "true sentiments" could be exposed in no better textual mode than the letter. Familiar letters may misrepresent and be used in projects of dissimulation (indeed, they often are used in precisely such ways in epistolary novels), but their capacity to deceive or dissimulate paradoxically depends on the assumption that they offer "true sentiments."

Finally admitting to his part in their publication, Franklin declared that there was nothing illicit about publishing these private letters as they involved issues critical to the public interest. And he repeatedly insisted that his dissemination of the letters was in fact an attempt to *repair* the rift between Britain and America. Franklin writes,

> Possibly [the writers] may not like such an Exposal of their Conduct, however tenderly and privately it may be managed. But if they are good Men, and agree that all good Men wish a good Understanding and Harmony to subsist between the Colonies and their Mother Country, they ought the less to regret, that at the small Expence of their Reputation for Sincerity and Publick Spirit among their Compatriots, so desirable an Event may in some degree be forwarded. (XIX:411–12).[22]

Although Cooper describes the letters as sundering ties between Britain and England, and Franklin (at least early on) describes them as serving to repair them, both men depict letters as necessarily yielding truth and sincerity.

Christopher Looby similarly maintains that the Franklin–Hutchinson scandal confirms Franklin's espousal of a "theory of communicative transparency." Looby sees Franklin's evident commitment to "mail theft" as ultimately in the service of communicative clarity – transparency that finds its instantiation in the authentic and embodied voice.[23] Conversely, focusing on Franklin's response to the charges brought against him in his theft of the Hutchinson letters, Michael Warner argues that Franklin's role in the Hutchinson correspondence reveals his essential challenge to the "paradigm of imperial orality."[24] Warner contends that Franklin's epistolary machinations – his anonymous distribution of private letters into the public sphere – point to his commitment to the authority of print and his refusal of the fantasy of immanence and transparency. Moreover, Warner claims, Franklin's infamous silence in the face of the accusations against him (in which he refuses to voice his own interests) proves the impersonal public virtue of print.[25] We might ask how it is that the same example can serve two such diametrically opposed arguments. Again, by insisting on a position that demands an either/or choice between the centrality of print or orality, each critic ignores the mode that is foregrounded by their own very example: the letter.

The importance of epistolary discourse to Franklin's success was not, however, lost on his contemporary rivals, as we can see in Isaiah Thomas's *History of Printing in America* (1810). Thomas tells the story of William Goddard, who at the advent of the Revolution, with his partner, Franklin, published a pro-independence paper, the *Chronicle*. Because the royal postmaster refused to accept the paper in the mails, the venture quickly went out of business. In response, Goddard developed a postal system independent of the Crown post, which sought to guarantee the free exchange of news and ideas understood to be vital to the revolutionary cause. Congress adopted Goddard's "Constitutional Post" in 1775, with the result of "abolish[ing], in effect, the general postoffice under the direction of

the British government, by establishing, in opposition, a line of postriders from Georgia to Newhampshire."[26] This system was the foundation for the modern postal system, and it was a great source of consternation to Goddard that, after the Revolution, Franklin was awarded the position of first postmaster general by the Continental Congress.

We see evidence of Goddard's displeasure when he sends a letter to his fellow-printer and postmaster Thomas to correct an error of fact in the first edition of *History of Printing in America*: although Thomas had credited him with being "surveyor of the postroads, and comtroler of the postoffice," Goddard explains that he served *only* as surveyor. Thomas corrects the text, but his handwritten notes to the second edition reveal that he had intended to flesh out the history more fully based on his correspondence with Goddard.[27] Thomas transcribes a long letter to be included in the second edition as a "Note to the Article," in which Goddard offers a counter-history to the hagiography that had grown up around Franklin by 1810. Focusing most of his attention on Franklin's position as postmaster, Goddard depicts an unreliable and duplicitous Franklin: "'*Old Change Government*,' as the Dr. was called, expected . . . to be appointed Governor of Pennsylvania, but not succeeding in England, from a *royalist* he immediately turned into a *dark republican*, and wearing a mask, he was enabled for a time to appear alternately as a friend to Britain and America." In recounting Franklin's "duplicity," Goddard not surprisingly focuses on the Hutchinson affair:

> You will recollect the part he took with respect to Hutchinson's Letters, &c. &c., and how he shamefully concealed his *stealing* the letters and sending them to America . . . After the mischief was done, the old jesuit acknowledged *that he had purloined the letters*. Treason is liked, while the traitor is despised.
>
> When he arrived in America, he was considered a suspicious, doubtful character, and Mr. Samuel Adams and other patriots asked me my opinion of him. I told them if they could convince him that it would redound to his *interests* to support the American cause, he would soon declare himself in its favor, and not otherwise. This they did, and Franklin became, as they advised me, *an unsuspected, confidential patriot*.[28]

As he works to correct the record, Goddard comes up against what is clearly for him a maddening contradiction. A man known to be a purloiner of letters and a man who will "change government" if it benefits his "interest" can instantly become "an unsuspected, confidential patriot." The secret to Franklin's success, Goddard determines, lies in the object of his villainy: the post. The very system of correspondence that Goddard developed to allow the *nation* to secure its interests against those of the Crown is used by

Franklin to secure his individual interest, and the historical amnesia that surrounds his past is for Goddard directly traced back to the power of the post.[29] The most telling and ironic postscript on Goddard's and Thomas's attempts to set the record straight in the planned second edition of *History of Printing in America* is the editorial note (in another hand) appended to Thomas's would-be addendum to Goddard's entry: "To be omitted. Too personal."

A similar dispute about the legitimacy of publishing private letters is replayed in the famous correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. And, like Franklin, Adams identifies intercepted letters as an instigating factor in the Revolution. In 1775, Adams sends a letter to the president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, describing what he characterizes as John Dickinson's increasingly conciliatory attitude towards Great Britain. This letter, which depicts Dickinson as a "piddling genius, whose fame has been trumpeted so loudly," is intercepted and the letter is subsequently circulated throughout America and England. Adams clearly identifies this letter as advancing the revolutionary cause: in 1813, he recollects "the Interception and publication of that Letter . . . excite[d] the Attention of the people to their real Situation, and . . . shew[ed] them, what they must come to".[30] As was the case with the Hutchinson letters, here, too, the publication of letters reveals private sentiments that work to rally "national" union between those whose interests are purportedly threatened by the private writer(s) of the letters.

Adams's recollection of the crucial role his purloined letter had in mobilizing colonial resistance to Britain comes as a reply to Jefferson's very different invocation of the same event. Jefferson reminds Adams of the incident in 1813 in the midst of an extensive correspondence concerning the recent publication of private letters from Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, whose contents threatened the recently revived relationship between Jefferson and Adams. Responding to the publication of these letters, in which Jefferson had attacked the Federalists generally and Adams specifically, Adams writes, "these Letters [to Priestly] of yours require Volumes from me" (330). Like Goddard, Jefferson denounces the publication of private letters as "an instance of inconsistency, as well as of infidelity" (331), and he goes on to argue that, since these letters to Priestly were "a confidential communication of reflections . . . from one friend to another, deposited in his bosom, and never meant to trouble the public mind," it is unfair for Adams to demand that Jefferson respond to them as if they are documents subject to public debate and inquiry. Were the private "correspondencies" of the

Federalists "laid open to the public eye," he continues, "they will probably be found not models of comity towards their adversaries" (331).

Jefferson anxiously revisits the subject in his next missive, in which he describes the personal relations between the two men as essentially paralleling the union in the nation. He bemoans the ways in which the two men who were once "together" in championing the "rights of our countrymen" were separated by the "bitter . . . schism between the Feds and Antis" (336). Yet he also insists that neither man "personally" participated in these partisan feuds and that instead, they both "suffered . . . to be the passive subjects of public discussion" (336). Jefferson condemns the epistolary theft that translated the private "overflowings of the heart into the bosom of a friend" into fodder for partisan politics.

All of this is familiar rhetoric from Jefferson, who forever decried the publication of his private papers. Indeed, Jefferson's anxiety about the publication of his letters to Priestly seems largely to replay the very incident that began the long personal quarrel between Jefferson and Adams. In April of 1791, Jefferson received a copy of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* with instructions that he forward it to a Philadelphia printer who would be printing a new American edition of the text. Jefferson sent the book, along with a letter that read in part, "I am extremely pleased to find it will be reprinted here, and that something is at length to be publickly said against the political heresies which have sprung up among us." Jefferson's letter, which he insisted was never intended for public consumption, was printed as the preface to the new American edition of *The Rights of Man*.[31] Adams rightly accuses Jefferson of meaning these "heresies" to refer to Adams's "notions of a Limited Monarchy, an hereditary Government of King and Lords, with only elective commons" (248).[32] Adams, in other words, perceives the letter to be a direct challenge to his democratic credentials. Soon after Jefferson himself is attacked as Paine's "sponsor" in a series of letters written by the pseudonymous Publico (who we now know – and Jefferson likely knew – to be John Quincy Adams). In the correspondence that follows, both men complain that they are being personally attacked by the other, and both deny their culpability in these attacks. Jefferson especially bemoans the fact that their private disputes as to what constitutes "the best form of government" have entered the "public stage," arguing that such political conflicts ought rather be confined to "private conversation."

While Adams agrees with Jefferson about the impropriety of the publication of the letter, he challenges Jefferson's characterization of their political relationship. Citing his friend's letter, Adams writes:

> You observe "That You and I differ in our Ideas of the best form of Government is well known to us both." But, my dear Sir, you will give me leave to say, that I do not know this. I know not what your Idea is of the best form of Government. You and I have never had a serious conversation together that I can recollect concerning the nature of Government. The very transient hints that have ever passed between Us have been jocular and superficial, without ever coming to any explanation. (248–49)

Adams accuses Jefferson of a remarkable taciturnity about political issues and by implication he suggests that Jefferson deliberately obfuscates his politics even in private conversation and correspondence. Adams implies, in other words, that the key to Jefferson's political perfidy is not that he disguises his real beliefs and interests with seductive political rhetoric, but that he may not hold any real (which is to say, *private*) beliefs and interests.[33]

Although Adams frets about the possibility for misinterpretation in both his private and public writing (indeed, in the same letter, he claims that his writing has been both "misunderstood" and "willfully misrepresented"), he does *not* suggest that communicative opacity should yield communicative reticence. And ultimately, Adams (like Franklin) celebrates the ways in which epistolarity refuses any clear distinction between public and private writing:

> Correspondences! . . . There are I doubt not, thousands of Letters, now in being, but still concealed, (from their Party to their Friends,) which will, one day see the light. I have wondered for more than thirty Years that so few have appeared: and have constantly expected that a Tory History of the Rise and progress of the Revolution would appear. And wished it. Private Letters of all Parties will be found analogous to the Newspaper Pamph[l]ets and Historians of the Times. (349)

If Adams understands private letters as always subject to public circulation – indeed, he even suggests that there is no categorical difference between private letters and newspaper pamphlets – then Jefferson very differently embraces the letter precisely because the mode *refuses* that trespass. Jefferson's profound suspicion of writing that circulated outside of an author's sphere of influence is, as we have seen, concomitant with the Antifederalist mistrust of written language as it extends beyond the empirical person of the author. Conversely, in Adams's insistence on the power of writing to circulate to a larger community of readers, we see him adopting what we might call a Federalist theory of epistolarity. Whereas Jefferson is miserable

at the thought of his private correspondence being used for public and political ends beyond his control, Adams approaches such moments in his own career with equipoise. For Adams, all correspondence is necessarily public, because all correspondence is written to or through the state. As long as the citizen writes to the nation, there can be no lasting misunderstanding – a kind of "Dear Abby" or "Miss Manners" school for the making of proper citizens.

Although Franklin and Adams occupy very different political positions, we see an essential similarity between the two insofar as both suggest that letter-writing is a central technology in the establishment of national unity and the regulation of citizenship. This understanding, I argue, reveals a crucial distinction between the American epistolary novel and its British counterpart. Scholarship on the British epistolary novel has noted that the epistolary mode becomes increasingly rare after the form becomes irrevocably associated with the revolutionary politics of the turn of the century.[34] This account substantially refutes the conventional understanding that the move away from epistolarity signaled the increasing sophistication and maturation of fictional narratives. But this conventional account continues to maintain its currency as an explanation for the history of the *American* novel, where we likewise find almost no epistolary fiction after 1830. Consequently, most scholars have tended to all but ignore the role of epistolarity to the literature of the early national period. By this I do not mean that there isn't substantial attention paid to the numerous epistolary novels that circulated among early American readers: thanks in large measure to Cathy Davidson's work on the sentimental fiction of the 1790s, Hannah Webster Foster's epistolary novel *The Coquette* has quickly become one of the most widely read and studied texts in early American literature. Instead, I am pointing to the failure to attend to the generic specificity of *The Coquette* (to name only one example) as an *epistolary* novel.[35] The tendency has instead been to treat the epistolary novel as proof of the nation's submission to European forms and therefore evidence of the young nation's puerile literary culture. Epistolary American novels are generally understood to be the least "original" of American fictional forms, merely an importation of European models (*Clarissa*, *Nouvelle Héloïse*, or *The Sorrows of Werther*, to cite the most popular examples). Yet, if American epistolary novels merely capitulate to outdated European conventions, then we might ask why it is that these European novels are *not* themselves published in epistolary form in their American editions. All of the numerous "abridged" editions

of Richardson's *Clarissa*, *Pamela*, and *Grandison* published in the United States in the eighteenth century, for example, have been "translated" out of epistolary form.[36]

The epistolary form in American literature operates according to a somewhat different political logic than it does in England or France. The American letter, unlike its European counterpart, is not aligned with radicalism and, therefore, does not need to be disciplined in the same ways it does abroad. While the dominant strain of much European epistolary fiction is the need to contain writing that is aligned with a destabilization of national authority, the dominant strain in American epistolary novels depicts the *breakdown* in correspondence as signaling a breakdown in sympathetic attachments and therefore the corrosion of republican virtue on which national consolidation is forged.[37] Even in those epistolary novels in which the protection of female virtue is prominent, the prophylactic is found not in curbing female letter-writing, but in its proper regulation. In Foster's *The Coquette*, for example, Eliza is seduced *not* because she writes letters to the Lovelacian rake, Sanford, but because she *stops* writing letters to her mother and to her female friends. Only when she stops publishing her private sentiments (and therefore is no longer subject to public scrutiny) can Sanford gain access to her.[38]

Foster's second novel, *The Boarding School* (1798), likewise insists on epistolary writing as social regulation.[39] A generic amalgamation of epistolary novel, conduct manual, and letter-writer, Foster's book is divided into two sections.[40] The first half introduces us to Mrs. Mary Williams, the enterprising widow who has started a boarding school affectionately named Harmony-Grove, and is dominated by Mrs. Williams's lectures to her graduating class. The second half of the book consists of the correspondence between the boarding school girls after their departure from Harmony-Grove. Notably, then, we meet the young women who are students at the boarding school *after* they have already received their education. In this way, it would seem that we are to read the letters of the second half as illustrations of the kinds of instruction that Mrs. Williams had offered, and corroboration of the success of her teaching methods. That the novel opens with the departure of the girls from school also significantly emphasizes their teacher's absence, which is likewise insisted on by Mrs. Williams herself who tells her pupils that the period of separation will be "painful," but also essential, as it will release them into "new scenes of care, pleasures, of trials, and of temptations, which will call for the exercise of every virtue" (11). She suggests that the exile from the utopian Harmony-Grove

is the ultimate test of the adequacy of their American education. Foster's text, in this way, fashions itself as part of a national correspondence class: it will circulate to the "young ladies of America," to whom it is dedicated, so that they too will be able to profit by Mrs. Williams's example, even if they are (necessarily) deprived of access to her literal presence.

One crucial strategy of Mrs. Williams's instruction is that she "suspend[s] the authority of the matrons" of the school, and, in so doing, she cultivates the "familiarity" of her pupils such that "they might be free from restraint . . . and appear in their genuine characters" (9). The cultivation of this "freedom," however, has the ultimate design of disciplining her students: "By this means she had an opportunity of observing any indecorum of behaviour, or wrong bias; which she kept in mind, till a proper time to mention, and remonstrate against it; a method the salutary effects of which were visible in the daily improvement of her pupils" (9). Mrs. Williams plays the friend so as better to discover the faults of her students and correct them. This method of moral education rivals Franklin's in its sophisticated technology of self-discipline: by making discipline coextensive with freedom, Mrs. Williams insures that her students will regulate themselves even in her absence. The success of the strategy seems proved by the frequent references in her pupils' letters to Mrs. Williams's monitoring of their epistolary correspondence, even if she has no access to the letters themselves.

Indeed, that all letters are potentially subject to public scrutiny forms one of the crucial lessons that Mrs. Williams imparts in her final days with her pupils. Describing the particular democratic value of the letter ("a species of writing . . . open to every capacity, and ornamental to every station"), she also insists that epistolary writing is characterized by "frankness, simplicity, and sincerity" (32). Yet the story that follows directly contradicts this emphasis on free and honest expression. Instead, Mrs. Williams advises: "Suffer not the expectation of secrecy to induce you to indulge your pens upon subjects, which you blush to have exposed" (33). Sounding very much like Franklin in the wake of the publication of the Hutchinson letters, or like Adams's castigation of Jefferson, Mrs. Williams asserts that while epistolary writing might be a site of freedom, it is *not* private.[41] Even within the ostensibly private space of a familiar letter, the writer must assume a public audience; she must assume that anyone (including Mrs. Williams) might be looking over her shoulder.

To illustrate she tells the story of Celia and Cecilia, two young friends who, having recently left boarding school, "commence[. . .] an epistolary

correspondence" (33) that Mrs. Williams characterizes as one of "unlimited confidence; and, without the least reserve, to reveal every dictate of levity and thoughtless folly" (33–34). In short, she condemns their letters for presuming too much freedom; and, indeed, they are specifically castigated for imagining themselves "perfectly secure from the censure of the critic." Because they don't presume such a critical eye, Celia writes letters to her friend in which "[p]urity of sentiment, delicacy of thought, and refinement of taste were entirely laid aside" and in which Celia's suitor, Silvander, is discussed with too much "freedom . . . and familiarity" (34). Anxious to discover the subjects of Celia's letters to her friend, Silvander purloins them, and upon reading them, he immediately becomes the public critic "mortified, disgusted, and chagrined" in his discovery of "the lightness of mind exemplified in them!" (34). As retaliation, he copies Celia's letter (taking care to leave out "references to his own affairs") and then "circulated her letters among his acquaintance" (35).

This circulation, Mrs. Williams sermonizes, "fixed the stamp of ignominy on the correspondents," and Celia never recovers from this assault on her character, her "reputation . . . materially injured" (35). Celia proceeds to follow the same tragic path of many a seduced young woman (at least in novels) and dies "in melancholy, regret, and obscurity." Mrs. Williams thus instructs her students that women "must not only be virtuous, but unsuspected" (74), and one way to insure that you are unsuspected is to assume that your letters are always subject to public scrutiny. Thus, while she lightly censures Silvander's mail theft, she insists "no adequate excuse can be offered for the young ladies, who dishonored their pens and their talents by a most improper and unbecoming use of both" (35). We can only become good writers and good citizens, Mrs. Williams implies when we imagine ourselves subject to the critical eyes of others – when we presume that someone else is reading our private letters.

The emphasis of this particular moral lesson is found in the parallels between the two women in the story and the correspondence that comprises the second half of Foster's novel. Like Celia and Cecelia, the young women who leave Harmony-Grove attempt to compensate for their "painful separation" by finding recourse in epistolary correspondence. In so establishing this parallel, Foster demands that we determine what constitutes the difference between the letters of Celia and Cecelia and the letters between Mrs. Williams's students. Although we are invited to assume that the letters in *The Boarding School* are intended as virtuous examples, it is not always entirely clear what distinguishes them from the letters according to which poor Celia was prosecuted.

The crucial difference is that Foster's "good" correspondent-citizens imagine a critic reading every word; and because this epistolary "freedom" is always monitored, the correspondence is necessarily also virtuous. One student's letter, for example, is stylistically far different from the others in its passionate tone and language: "You have left – you have forsaken me, Caroline! But I will haunt you with my letters; obtrude myself upon your remembrance; and extort from you the continuance of your friendship" (123). Here seems to be an instance of a letter "without the least reserve" that Mrs. Williams earlier condemned. Yet there is nothing to suggest that this letter is judged as inappropriate; indeed the author of this letter, Julia, while she admits her "eccentricities" and "gay disposition," also notably remarks, "Mrs. Williams's instructions were very seasonably interposed to impress my mind with a sense of virtue and propriety" (123). She goes on to describe the numerous times in which Mrs. Williams would "take me into her chamber, and reminded me of indecorums of which I was unconscious at the time." Here, then, is confirmation of the effectiveness of Mrs. Williams's method. Julia is "impressed" (as if she were a page proof) with Mrs. Williams's hidden and silent monitoring, and as such her "gay disposition" is firmly controlled by Mrs. Williams's disciplining hand.

Although the perfect union of Harmony-Grove is disrupted when the girls are separated, correspondence is a compensatory substitute, and indeed, much of the emphasis of the letters is on describing the incredible vigilance required to approximate the ideals of Harmony-Grove. Foster's idealized version of female education is essentially Federalist: perfect union between the governing preceptress and her constituent pupils is sustained, even as they necessarily move away from her direct influence. Moreover, as was the strategic political calculus of Federalism, Mrs. Williams's model assuages anxieties about her despotism as well as anxieties about her pupil's potential lawlessness, since her pedagogical method makes their obedience coextensive with "free[dom] from restraint."

Such a Federalist model seems also to be emphasized by the fact that the anthologized correspondence does not accentuate reciprocal communication between the individual young women. Of the forty letters, there are only five occasions in which Foster gives us both the letter and its reply. This lack of emphasis on reciprocity suggests that the exemplary significance of these letters is to demonstrate the ways in which correspondence unifies the community not by stressing relations between individuals, but by highlighting the centralized authority that controls and monitors their epistolary exchange. The complicated political work of *The Boarding-School*

is that Foster interpellates her readers into this correspondence by turning her book into just another letter, and thereby making all virtuous American women graduates of Harmony-Grove.

In this way we can see epistolary novels of the 1790s as arguing a fundamentally Federalist position: so long as letters are written with the presumption that all letters are scrutinized by authority, then vulnerable female citizens will be safe. Because bad citizens, or rakes, will distribute deceitful letters, then it is only a centralized authority (and the presumptive imagination of this centralized authority reading our letters) that will cultivate a safe citizenry and therefore a firm foundation for national union. While the 1792 Post Office Act explicitly made illegal the public scrutiny of letters, distinguishing itself from Britain where the public interrogation of letters by post office officials was sanctioned, the law depended on the notion that such arbitrary and intrusive measures were unnecessary simply because no real American would write a letter that would violate laws. According to such an assumption, the freedom of individual letter-writers is protected because obedience is made identical to freedom.

This political calculus is one of the central topics of a text that is often studied as emblematic of the complicated politics of the early nation, but that is almost never addressed in terms of its epistolary form: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Although most scholars have looked past the epistolary conceit that is announced in its title, the advertisement of the first edition (not to mention, as we shall see, the letters themselves) insists that we attend to the ways in which the book is deeply interested in the generic specificity of epistolary correspondence.[42] These letters, the advertisement reads, "were privately written," and therefore offer "authentic information."[43] While part of what is at stake in presenting the essays as a series of letters is to assert their authenticity and, therefore, the disinterestedness of their writer, the generic form is also essential to the complicated politics sketched within *Letters*.[44] The essential dilemma for de Crèvecoeur's narrator is his failed attempt to locate himself in relation to a series of political quandaries: a dedication to the authority of the Crown versus his embrace of agrarian property rights; his commitment to direct democracy versus his espousal of the expansive national boundaries that would require representative democracy; his dedication to individual sovereignty and private property versus his demand for republican solidarity and cooperative ownership; his embrace of agrarian labor versus his own implication in a speculative economy. Each time one of these quandaries is raised, the letter-form takes center-stage. Thus, the letter is aligned

simultaneously with individual sovereignty and republican disinterest; it is a template for direct democracy and for representational democracy; it is tied to agrarian labor and to speculative economics (including, ultimately, chattel slavery); it is linked to hierarchical association and to democratic participation. Letter-writing is part and parcel of the complicated politics de Crèvecoeur charts; and his use of the letter clarifies the genre's role in early national literature.

Written as a series of letters to a learned British gentleman, Mr. F. B., the correspondence begins with an extensive discussion of James's serious reservations about undertaking this epistolary intercourse. The first letter focuses almost entirely on the rationale behind his decision to enter into the correspondence, a project evidently proposed by Mr. F. B. Beginning by declaring his fundamental inferiority to his correspondent, James insists on his inability to participate in a relationship that depends on reciprocity. This characterization is confirmed by James's wife, who contends that her husband must have misread Mr. F. B.'s invitation to enter into an epistolary compact. Always suspicious of any kind of representation (be it textual or financial), James's wife argues that Mr. F. B.'s letter must have "more than one meaning" and that James must have read the wrong one. As a way to resolve this interpretive conundrum, she proposes a communal reading in which she, James, and their minister attempt to discern Mr. F. B.'s letter's intent. Thus *Letters from an American Farmer* begins with an elaborate scene of letter-reading and -writing that underscores the ways in which correspondence cannot be secured, as there is always the possibility of misinterpretation. But this scene also suggests the possibility of consensus, as what emerges out of their reading is that "all unanimously concluded . . . [that] your request appeared to be candid and sincere" (41). As such, James can enter into the epistolary contract because it is secured by a community of readers who all agree on the meaning of the letters. And indeed James assures his reader that all subsequent letters will not be sent without letting his wife and his minister inspect them first.

While his wife and minister finally agree on the interpretation of Mr. F. B.'s letter, they importantly do not agree on whether James should accept its invitation. Insisting on James's capacity as a man of letters, and as one capable of writing letters that are uniquely American, the minister dismisses the wife's concerns by arguing that epistolary writing is merely conversation put into print. In this way, he suggests that anxieties that seem to be attendant in the act of representing oneself to another in written form can be mitigated in letters, which approximate the presence of voice and person. He offers numerous instructions as to the ways in which

letter-writing must accomplish this (advice that follows the guidelines of most letter-writing manuals): "[W]riting letters is nothing more than talking on paper"(41); "a letter is only conversation put down in black and white" (44). And as if to prove the validity of the minister's argument, de Crèvecoeur's letter at this point shifts form, changing to a dramatic dialogue between the minister and James; his letter literally becomes the voices of the two men talking.

Despite James's claim about the consensus by which he is persuaded to enter into the correspondence ("The conclusion *we all drew* made me resolve at last to write" [41]), we soon hear the dissenting voice of James's wife who has strenuous objections to her husband's new role as letter-writer. For her, the role of *author* is associated with "idleness and vain notions" that directly contradict the vocation of the farmer (48). Indeed, she suggests that writing is an intrinsic agent of social stratification and therefore antagonistic to American egalitarian ideals. She further argues that writing is directly responsible for insolvency, and that incommunicative men are the only men who are not debtors: "Had [James's father] spent his time in sending epistles to and fro, he never would have left thee this goodly plantation, free from debt" (48). As she continues, she distinguishes British economy from the fundamentally agrarian economy of America by declaring that the English "live . . . by writing." In this way, James's wife explicitly aligns letter-writing with a speculative economy in which "[b]y writing [the British] send this cargo unto us, that to the West, and the other to the East Indies." In America, however, writing is productive of nothing and can be exchanged for nothing: "James, thee knowest that it is not by writing that we shall pay the blacksmith, the minister, the weaver, the tailor, and the English shop" (49).

Although James does not heed his wife's counsel, her premonitions are immediately confirmed when James finds himself in an epistolary economy in which he is already in debt. James writes that before their letter-writing began both men were on equal terms: that the hospitality (the "five weeks' entertainment") he offered to Mr. F. B. was "amply repaid" by what James learned from their conversations (39). Yet, James now describes himself as the debtor, needing to write more letters in order to compensate Mr. F. B. for the numerous virtual tours his friend "conducted me, on the map, from one European country to another." Thus, he concludes, that having "abundantly profited" from his friend, it "proves the debt of gratitude to be on my side" (39).

Letters does not, then, begin with a utopian depiction of rational communication and equal participation, but rather with a description of the

numerous ways in which James is unequal to the compact in which his correspondent has enlisted him. But if the emphasis is on the ways in which social entanglements are messy and unequal, as soon as James begins to describe his occupation as American farmer, the manner switches dramatically to the exuberant tone more often identified with the beginning of *Letters*: "The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind" (54). Yet this praise of Lockean property rights as a secular religion and the emphasis on self-ownership seem strangely opposed to the anxiety about social communication and interaction that dominated the first letter.

One way to make sense of this changing tone is that just as James comes to emphasize the individual sovereignty of the American farmer, so too is he establishing a correspondence whose focus is, at least for the moment, on the integrity of the individual letter-writer. Indeed, in his third letter to Mr. F. B., James intimates that he can script both halves of the correspondence himself. Although he begins the letter by describing the impossibility of knowing the mind of the other ("I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman when he first lands on this continent"), almost immediately he suggests that this knowledge is, in fact, possible: "[the Englishman] must greatly rejoice . . . he must necessarily feel a share of national pride" (66). Even as earlier James portrayed himself as separate from and inferior to the mind of the enlightened European, here he depicts himself as fully capable of assuming the European's position. The very distance that seemed insurmountable at the beginning of *Letters* is now collapsed. From the first letter to the third, we have a shift from a theory of social intercourse that requires a deliberative politics of competing interests to one that assumes all individual interests are ultimately identical.

The apotheosis of this latter ideal is found, for James, in the island of Nantucket, a society governed by "rational laws founded on perfect freedom" (109). This tiny community, characterized by its deprivations, offers a perfect government, because, despite the "apparatus" of law, it seldom has need for "its coercive powers" (124), for two important reasons. First, because the island can only sustain several thousand members, there exists a relative homogeneity of interests; and second, the harshness of the climate affords only a subsistence-level economy in which the inhabitants have neither the luxuries nor the desire for those goods that would otherwise corrupt them: "How could the common follies of society take root in so despicable a soil?" (125). The radical democracy and egalitarianism of

Nantucket celebrated by James requires both a pre-modern economy and an essential homogeneity of its citizens.[45]

Problems begin to emerge, however, when the proximity and similarity that govern island life are inevitably disrupted, making mild laws insufficient. Just as the perfect "republic" of bees is only threatened when the "want of room . . . induces them to quite the maternal hive" (59), so too is the population of Nantucket threatened when its citizens "emigrated like bees, in regular and connected swarms" (145). Once this emigration occurs, correspondence becomes essential: no longer capable of managing social relations directly, citizens *must* turn to letters to communicate across time and space. James explains, "several congregations" of these emigrants have been established across the continent and that "a sort of correspondence is kept up among them all" (145). These congregations, especially the one in New Garden, North Carolina, however, are not successful in replicating the American experiment of Nantucket, because the exceptional fertility of the soil there causes the citizens to "reap too much, [to] not toil enough, and [therefore become] liable to enjoy too fast the benefits of life" (147).

That Nantucket's isolation and deprivations are essential to maintaining the perfection of its social organization becomes clear when James travels to Charles Town, South Carolina and discovers a climate that "renders excesses of all kinds" (166). The most profound symptom of their degradation, of course, is their use of chattel slavery. Unlike in James's North where master and slave ostensibly labor together, in the South the slave-master engages in no profitable labor, fully invested in an economy that relies on the work of others. Significantly, then, *Letters from an American Farmer* suggests an analogy between letter-writing and slavery: just as letter-writing had been associated with unproductive labor, so too is slavery essentially defined by the fact that it provides one class of persons luxurious wealth without work. Although James identifies "lawyers, planters, and merchants" as the "principal classes of inhabitants" of Charles Town, he links lawyers most closely with the institution of slavery. The defining characteristic of lawyers, according to James, is their tendency toward tyranny: "*their* ears" are deaf to the "woes of their poor slaves, from whose painful labours all their wealth proceeds" (169). Notably lawyers are associated with the unprofitable work that eschews physical labor in favor of circulating worthless papers. In this way – and in precisely the terms that James's wife defined letter-writing – the practice of the law is totally antithetical to agrarianism: "once they [lawyers] have taken root, they will extinguish every other vegetable that grows around them" (151). Conspicuously, *Letters* represents the law, letter-writing, and slavery as each implicated in economies that are fundamentally corrupt and illegitimate because founded on systems of representation that

dissociate labor from wealth. What distinguishes southern slaveholding from the institution as it is practiced in the North is that southern African American slaves are not proximate to and do not know those for whom they labor. It is the expansion of communities (the migration from the central hive) – and the resulting need for written correspondence and currency to maintain social connections – that disables the ideal social organization James had earlier associated with America.

The Charles Town letter culminates in the book's most famous scene, which depicts the horrifying discovery of a slave, suspended in a cage, barely alive, his body picked to the bones and swarmed by insects. Although the slave begs for poison that would put him out of his misery, James abandons him, and he concludes this letter with a weak refusal to rehearse the standard southern justifications for their treatment of African American slaves. By refusing to provide poison, James abandons the slave to tyrannical mastery, but in the next letter he finds himself subjected to a kind of epistolary tyranny by his own taskmaster, Mr. F. B., who demands information about poisonous snakes. The tone of this letter is significantly altered, and, once again, James emphasizes the letter as communication between two unequal persons. He asks Mr. F. B., "Why would you prescribe this task?" (180), declaring the request to "say . . . something about snakes" an "impos[ition]." The characterization of this letter as "imposition" is similar to James's earlier depiction of labor: "you know that what we take up ourselves seems always lighter than what is imposed on us by others" (180). When self-imposed, labor and letter-writing are signs of American prosperity; when imposed by another they produce and publicize the degradation of the nation's potential. To characterize his epistolary reply as an imposition is to revise substantially the relation between the two writers, which perhaps might explain the otherwise unaccountable fact that the very next letter is not written by James, but by a new author, "Mr. IW_N AL_Z, a Russian Gentleman" (187).

With this abrupt substitution of correspondents, the letter returns to the optimistic tone that pervaded the letters before James arrived in Charles Town. The Russian "gentleman" (presumably, unlike James, Mr. F. B.'s social equal) is no servant to an epistolary master. Iwan courteously requests that his correspondent assent to accompanying him on a visit ("let us together, agreeable to your desire, pay a visit to Mr. John Bertram" (187)), but his request is mere pretense as the entreaty and the assumption of consent are contemporaneous. Iwan also revises James's assertions about political economy when he argues that tyranny will not take root in this country because the fertility and abundance of land will leave none wanting: "the land is too widely distributed; it is poverty in Europe that makes

slaves" (193). Iwan's conversation about political economy is suspended when Bertram asks him to read a letter he has received from the Swedish queen, Ulrica. This epistolary interruption leads to an explanation of how Bertram came to study Linnaeus, and we discover that Bertram's wife had once chided her husband in exactly the same terms that James's wife had earlier admonished him against entering into an epistolary relationship. Bertram explains that she "greatly discouraged me from prosecuting my new scheme . . . I was not opulent enough, she said, to dedicate much of my time to studies and labours which might rob me of that portion of it which is the only wealth of the American farmer" (195). The parallel between her indictment of scientific inquiry and James's wife's suspicions of letter-writing is made explicit when we recall that one outcome of Bertram's study of Linnaeus is to enter into correspondence with European nobility: in this case, the Queen of Sweden. And Bertram's wife's anxieties are confirmed, since his studies lead him to "hire . . . a man to plough for me" (195). Here, then, scientific inquiry (like letter-writing and slavery) is associated with alienation from agrarian labor.

The potential threat that would seem to be unleashed by this association, in which the American farm starts to resemble a feudal estate, is both realized and averted by Iwan who observes that the management of the farm reveals the "*mutual correspondence* between the master and the inferior members of the family" (195). In this way, while letter-writing is identified as a *cause* of inequities and social stratification (in which some write and some toil), it is also invoked as the *solution* to these same inequities. In other words, letter-writing is the occasion by which one "masters" another who is forever in his debt, but a "mutual correspondence" can work to translate this relationship of inequitable mastery into one of civility and decorum: "not a word like command seemed to exceed the tone of a simple wish" (195). Thus, "mutual correspondence" between "master" and the "inferior members" renders commands as wishes and translates alienated labor into another species of self-possession.

James himself refused precisely that translation in the chapter that immediately follows his witnessing of the tortured slave, which begins with an explicit declaration that the act of epistolary reciprocity was arduous precisely because it did not come from his own volition, but instead from a dictate made by another. The slave's agony forces James not only to recognize the ways in which slavery contradicts the ideals of American democracy, but also to acknowledge the ways in which power and freedom are not so easily reconciled. James takes leave of his epistolary duties in the following letter, because the republican myth of mutual reciprocity and mild laws is disproved by the very letter he is writing.

The political conundrum on which *Letters from an American Farmer* ultimately runs aground is the realization that we need close attachments that yield sympathy, but not so close that dissent becomes impossible. More specifically, James's dilemma is whether he should attach himself to the large society of the British Empire (from which he is necessarily estranged because of distance) or to the smaller society of American rebels (who tolerate no dissent). The Revolution requires him to make a commitment to one of these diametrically opposed attachments, but he insists that he cannot decide. And his inability to make such a determination casts him explicitly in the position of the slave: "stripped of food and raiment" (207). Of course, unlike the slave, James has one form of redress left to him: writing letters, he says, "seems to lighten the burthen and to exhilarate the spirits" (216). His letter serves as an "intuitive" transcription of injury, but the relief it offers is ultimately insufficient: "[I]n the moments of my greatest anguish, could I intuitively represent to you that variety of thought which crowds on my mind, you would have reason to be surprised and to doubt of their possibility" (216). Even were James competent to offer such a deposition, it would fail, because his correspondent would "doubt" its truth. Thus, James's letter inscribes the impediments to union tendered by any kind of representational economy, including letter-writing itself.

This rendering of the essential paradox of epistolary writing is illustrative of the economy of sentiment depicted in *Letters*, which strives for a calculus that offers neither too much nor too little sympathy. To have too much sympathy is to find oneself within the claustrophobic community in which "opposition . . . begets hatred." To have too little is either to find oneself with the asocial frontiersman or with the tyrant who does not even attempt to translate authority into "mutual correspondence." Crèvecoeur depicts epistolarity as the textual strategy by which to forestall the essential tyranny implied by either model. By locating citizens as non-present to one another, letter-writing can disrupt the tyranny of unanimity. But de Crèvecoeur also reveals the ways in which epistolarity can camouflage tyranny as mutual reciprocity – the "mutual correspondence" that converts servility into cooperation. And as we've seen, it is precisely *this* model of correspondence that is a crucial technology in the consolidation of the early nation.

This model of correspondence is depicted in the text most often classified as the first American novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). The novel begins with a letter from the rakish Harrington "taking the liberty" to inform his friend, the extremely sensible (and aptly named) Worthy, of his plans to seduce a poor woman, Harriot. Declaring himself

"not so much of a republican as formally to wed any person of this class," his immorality is linked explicitly to his undemocratic politics.[46] The novel begins, therefore, by gesturing towards the conventional seduction plot in which the aristocrat tries to seduce the proletariat girl. If the novel's framing apparatus (the dedicatory epistle and preface) and opening suggest that the fundamental anxiety of *Power of Sympathy* is the seduction of young American women, then the Richardsonian plot almost immediately dissolves when Harrington abruptly abandons his plans to seduce Harriot. Crucially, however, his conversion comes *not* as a result of Worthy's "monitorial correspondence" (11). Instead, Harrington explains that his own "rebellious tongue" refused seduction and deceit: "[it] refused to utter a word – it faultered – stammered – hesitated – – " (14). Instead of deceptive and illicit speech, Harrington finds himself communicating with Harriot in a perfectly transparent language:

> Though I said not a word with my tongue, she seemed perfectly to understand my meaning – for she *looked* – (and I comprehended it as well as if she had *said*) – "Is the crime of dependence to be expiated by the sacrifice of virtue? And because I am a poor, unfortunate girl, must the little I have be taken away from me?" "No, my love," answered I, passionately, "it shall not." (14)

Speechless conversation is what conquers Harrington's libertinism. This perfect correspondence – perfect because there is no possibility of miscommunication ("she seemed perfectly to understand my meaning" and "I comprehended it as well") – also converts Harrington miraculously into a radical democrat. Thus, when he later overhears a wealthy young woman ridicule "a mechanick's daughter," the formerly elitist Harrington fumes about the perpetuation of social hierarchies in the new nation: "Inequality among mankind is a foe to our happiness . . . For this reason, I like a democratical better than any other kind of government" (34).

In the end, of course, Harrington's reformation proves meaningless; Harriot is saved from becoming a victim to seduction only to become a perpetrator of incest. On the eve of their marriage, Harrington and Harriot discover that they share the same father. The novel thus suggests that Harrington's devotion to sensibility, while it may prevent seduction, is also responsible for unleashing social chaos. When Harriot learns that Harrington is her brother, her tongue (like his) turns rebellious: "Amidst the struggle of passion, how could I pronounce the word – how could I call you by the title of brother. True – I attempted to articulate the sound, but it died upon my tongue" (87). Neither can she write the word that justifies prohibition of their union: "I curse the idea of a brother – my

hand refuses to trace the word" (87). But while her tongue and hand refuse their offices, the word proves durable: sentimental tears cannot blot the name.[47]

Although the novel seems to align Harriot's critique of language with social anarchy (since a world in which we can blot out the name of "brother" is a world in which we can marry our brothers), Brown radically undermines the surety of linguistic references within his own novel. The meanings of the three most important words in this novel – sympathy, sensibility, and nature – shift markedly throughout the text. Fuming about the authoritarian manner in which Harriot has been treated by her guardian, Harrington declares himself a "man of sensibility" and recollects his observation of a "female slave" he witnessed while visiting South Carolina. Spying a scar on the exposed shoulder of the slave, he asks her to explain its cause, and she tells him that the "mark of the whip" was the price she paid for protecting her child from their master's punishment. Hearing the woman's story, Harrington finds his own "heart glow[ing] with feelings of exquisite delight" in contemplation of the universal sympathy that will ultimately yield "freedom" (62). Thus Harrington apostrophizes,

> Hail *Sensibility*! Sweetener of the joys of life! . . . good *Samaritan*, who taketh him by the hand, and consoleth him, and poureth wine and oil into his wounds . . . From thee! Author of Nature! From thee, thou inexhaustible spring of love supreme, floweth this tide of affection and SYMPATHY. (62)

Sympathy and sensibility are here associated with Harrington's newfound commitment to democracy: sympathy erases the distinction between aristocrats and mechanics, between black slaves and white owners, between brothers and lovers. Worthy's female counterpart, Mrs. Holmes, likewise correlates sympathy with a collapse in social categories, but with a markedly different emphasis: "your brother marries his sister! Great God! Of what materials hast thou compounded the hearts of thy creatures! admire, O my friend! the operation of NATURE – and the power of SYMPATHY!" (63). For Mrs. Holmes, sympathy wreaks havoc with the social order – in this case, the power of sympathy and the triumph of nature is that it causes incest.

The crucial terms in the novel, then, function as switch-words referencing both the republican virtue Harrington embraces and the social anarchy Mrs. Holmes and Worthy dread. *The Power of Sympathy* (as did de Crèvecouer's *Letters to an American Farmer*) strives to imagine a balanced economy of sentiment: the aim is to have enough sympathy to compel *rational* conversation that will reveal the truth that justifies obedience, but

not so much as to generate a *natural* sympathy that collapses all social distinction and makes a world in which sisters marry brothers.

We might imagine that Worthy and Mrs. Holmes, given their frequent arguments in support of rational conversation, would provide the novel's idealized sentimental economy; but despite their manifest commitment to regulating social correspondence, both characters (who remain isolated in the pastoral ideal of Belleview, away from the tumultuous affairs of the novel) effect remarkably little. Mrs. Holmes continually postpones revealing the relationship between Harrington and Harriot until it is too late. And although Worthy (who plays the part of Harrington's "monitorial correspondent") sends his friend lengthy treatises testifying to the power of rational discourse, he is ultimately incapable of compelling obedience. Worthy's words, which effectively "damn up" (70) all sentiment, fail to engender social reciprocity. The novel therefore refuses Harrington's fantasy of perfect correspondence and Worthy and Holmes's Federalist model of distant monitorial representation, since neither prevent the suicidal conclusion. Thus, like de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, the novel ultimately denies us the fantasy of a compromise. There is no middle ground, no happy ending.

At the conclusion of perhaps the most famous epistolary novel of the early republic, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), Clara Wieland strives to locate just such a happy ending. She moralizes: "If Wieland had framed juster notions of moral duty, and of the divine attributes; or if I had been gifted with ordinary equanimity and foresight, the double-tongued deceiver would have been baffled and repelled."[48] This "moral" has been largely read as artificial, an arbitrary ending to a complex novel in need of a clear "lesson" in the wake of so much violence and perversion. And yet when mapped on to the terms we have inferred from reading *Letters from an American Farmer* and *Power of Sympathy*, the lesson seems perhaps not so formulaic.

Clara's brother has inherited from their father a belief in God's direct communication with man, a belief that for the father resulted in his spontaneous combustion. For the son the fate is far worse, as the divine voices he hears command him to murder his entire family. Thus the accident of having heard the conman, Carwin, ventriloquize is not sufficient in itself to have caused the slaughter of his family; even Clara must finally admit that it was ultimately her brother's belief that we could "actually communicate" with "beings of a higher order" (69) that led to the tragedy. It is his belief in perfect correspondence with God that causes the most savage act of violence

found in the early American novel. If Wieland's fate is ultimately sealed by his inherited belief in divine correspondence, Clara's miseries originate from a different source. Clara too has a theory of perfect correspondence, but unlike her brother's, hers is founded on a belief in communication between men. Clara articulates her theory when she confesses to the reader her secret love for Pleyel. Contemplating on how to convey her devotion to her beloved, she determines, like Harrington, that true communication must necessarily be wordless: "I must not speak. Neither eyes, nor lips, must impart the information" (73). "When minds are imbued with a genuine sympathy," Clara concludes, "are not words and looks superfluous?" (74). At the very moment, however, that Clara is indulging in this fantasy of wordless correspondence, Carwin is ventriloquizing her words for Pleyel in an act designed to convince him that Clara is "the most profligate of women" (102). As a result, everything Clara had imagined for her future happiness is wrecked: Pleyel does not confess his love beneath a "bland and cloudless evening," and instead confronts her with her "crimes" and abandons her.

Significantly, not only is the novel written in epistolary form, but letters – as much as ventriloquism – play vital roles in undermining both Clara's and Wieland's faith in correspondence. Each time we are introduced to Carwin and the mysterious events that surround him, a letter is *misplaced* or *misdirected*. For example, when Wieland goes to their secular Temple to recover a letter in order to resolve a dispute with Pleyel, in lieu of the letter, he encounters the ventriloquized voice of his wife, Catherine. A short time later, when Pleyel is waiting for a letter from his European fiancée, he and Wieland again hear Carwin ventriloquizing Catherine's voice, this time announcing his fiancée's death.

Such a pattern, in which Carwin's duplicitous voice intrudes in the place of potentially clarifying and honest epistolary writing, would seem to suggest a privileging of writing over voice. But these are not the lessons Clara draws from her story, and indeed she trusts her writing's ability to convey the truth to her correspondents (to whom she addresses the letter that is the novel) no more than she does the voices in her closet. The real failure this novel describes is not of voice or print, but of correspondence itself. Human correspondence – the secular religion of sympathy that is to consolidate a nation out of a disparate colonial population – is as false and potentially as dangerous as the Puritan belief in divine covenant that the enlightened age had supposedly supplanted. The realization that leads James to the wilderness and Harrington to suicide sends Clara and Pleyel, at the novel's end, fleeing to Europe.

But not all American epistolary novels envision the ultimate breakdown of correspondence, and hence of the nation itself. By far the vast majority worked to define and defend a "federalist" model of representational correspondence, as Foster fully articulated in *The Boarding School*. And in his final novels Brown himself considered the ways in which the failures of correspondence he had portrayed earlier in *Wieland* might ultimately be revised as the foundation for a society that will not end in mass-murder, suicide or exile.

Jane Talbot and *Clara Howard* (both 1801) have been largely dismissed as prosaic sentimental novels. Because their plots are fashioned out of the daily stuff of interpersonal affairs – relations between lovers, friends, and families – and because of the absence of the gothic landscape (of spontaneous combustion, sleepwalking, or ventriloquism) that characterized Brown's earlier novels, both novels have been described as desperate attempts to capitalize on convention. From the time of the novels' publication until our own, they have both been understood as "far inferior" to Brown's first four major novels.[49] And that both novels are written in conventional epistolary style is often taken as corroboration of their inferiority: a sign that Brown was pandering to a female audience and had abandoned the essential features that marked his literary genius.[50] Yet his decision to turn to the epistolary mode for his last two novels cannot be understood as a submission to conventional tastes, especially given the fact that by 1801 epistolary fiction was decidedly on the wane.

While the epistolary mode raises the expectation that the novel will offer a seduction tale, neither *Jane Talbot* nor *Clara Howard* provides us with any conventional rakes or coquettes. *Jane Talbot*, for example, consists of 300 pages of epistolary debates about whether or not the widowed Jane should be allowed to marry Henry Colden. While Brown alludes to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in considering the potential circulation of feminine desire – of whether or not Jane will choose the prohibited suitor – in Brown's novel, Jane struggles against the maternal law since the prohibition comes from Jane's adopted mother, Mrs. Fielder. She vehemently opposes the marriage because of Colden's Godwinian tendencies, and, more, importantly, because she has epistolary evidence that "proves" that Jane and Colden had an adulterous affair before Jane's husband died. And this suggests a significant revision of Rousseau: because the sexual threat of this novel has already happened, nothing can be done to restore the radicalism associated with adultery already let loose in the social world of the novel. As a widow, and as a woman who is already understood to have committed adultery, Jane has no real virtue to protect. Moreover,

while Mrs. Fielder insists that her objection to Colden serves to protect Jane's virtue, Colden does not want to seduce Jane, he wants to marry her. Brown, thus, offers us only the armature of a seduction plot. All of this is *not* to say that these novels are uninterested in seduction, since both *Jane Talbot* and *Clara Howard* largely feature characters striving to seduce others into adopting their positions. But while the emphasis in most seduction tales is on illicit persuasion (which seduces vulnerable young women away from their duties), the emphasis in Brown's last novels is on the *necessity* of seduction. Both novels describe crises in which their protagonists find themselves torn between conflicting duties, and both novels offer extended inquiries into how these antagonistic positions can be reconciled, and ultimately into what might offer a foundation for submission to authority. Therefore, despite the fact that both novels seem to be chiefly concerned with affairs of the heart, such questions are clearly for Brown meditation on political relations. I mean here not only that the interpersonal relations detailed in these novels ought be read as political allegory, but rather as a fulfillment of the Godwinian presumption that there is no real distinction between moral philosophy and politics.[51]

Clara Howard tells the story of a young man, Edward Hartley, who has been rejected by his betrothed, Clara, when she discovers that he had earlier promised himself to another woman, Mary Wilmot. Clara orders Hartley to seek out Mary Wilmot and offer his hand in marriage to her, declaring that such action is the only way to vouchsafe a "just and disinterested conduct" (20). Clara further threatens to "drop [his] correspondence" unless he proves equal to her disinterest: "you [are] unable to comprehend that the welfare of another may demand self-denial from us, and that in bestowing benefits on others, there is a purer delight than in gratifications merely selfish and exclusive" (24). Hartley accedes to Clara's demands, asserting that he is "now master of my actions and my thoughts" (22). At least initially, he is able to establish a continuum between Clara's disinterest and his own self-interest: his declaration of self-mastery is commensurate with his submission to Clara's law, a law that Clara understands as necessarily legitimate because it is based on a republican dedication to "bestowing benefits on others."

Much of the novel describes Edward being buffeted by Clara's letters, which alternate between declaring their author's selfless commitment to Mary Wilmot's happiness and begging Edward to "[e]xert all thy persuasive eloquence" to convince Clara of the irrelevancy of her rival's claims (35). Clara is not critiqued for the inconstancy of her commands, but rather for her sustained belief that her law can be genuinely disinterested. As Hartley writes Clara:

> You aspire to true happiness, the gift of self-approbation and of virtuous forbearance. You have adopted the means necessary to this end, and the end is gained. Why then should I pity you? You would not derive more happiness from a different decision. Another would, indeed, be more happy, but you would, perhaps, be less. At any rate, your enjoyments would not be greater than they now are; for what gratification can be compared to that arising from the sense of doing as we ought? (110)

Hartley accuses Clara of taking pleasure in self-abnegation, and he suggests that her dedication to disinterest is part of a utilitarian calculus aimed at increasing her own happiness. He does not condemn Clara for her selfishness, but for her assumption that laws can be selfless and for the violence that assumption has wreaked upon his life.

Recognizing Clara's tyranny, Hartley nonetheless succumbs to it; but Mary does not. Mary instead declares her own self-abnegation to be equal to Clara's: "I exult that my feelings are akin to yours, and that it is in my power to vie with you in generosity" (132). Mary refuses Hartley, announcing that she will "imitate" Clara's "example of disinterestedness and self-oblivion" (135). Rejected by both women, Hartley declares that he will "make myself akin to savages and tigers, and forget that I once was a man" (134). Like de Crèvecoeur's James, Hartley resolves to take leave of society in order to escape the chaotic social landscape in which he has found himself as a result of Clara and Mary's contest for disinterested virtue.

Hartley is brought back into "reasonable" society when Mary writes to beg his return, informing him that she has chosen to marry Sedley, an aristocrat whose suit she had previously rejected. Her decision to accept the rejected lover comes when she learns from Sedley's sister, Mrs. Valentine, that Sedley had "determined to lay aside every selfish wish" and had dedicated himself to promoting Mary's marriage to Hartley (124). In this way, Sedley and Clara are in structurally identical positions: both understand their own romantic interests to be superseded by another's, and both regulate their conduct according to the belief that the renunciation of self-interest constitutes proof of disinterested virtue. But while Clara is critiqued for erroneously imagining that her authority exerts no tyrannical force over others, Sedley is critiqued for not providing *enough* authority. While Clara sends letters that script their recipient's acquiescence, Sedley sends anonymous letters that *never* reach their proper destinations. Thus, we learn that in an effort to provide Mary with sufficient income to marry Hartley, Sedley delivers money anonymously "under cover of a short billet, without signature, and in a disguised hand" (125). Mrs. Valentine, we learn, did not approve of the scheme, declaring herself as "no friend to indirect

proceedings," and she describes the many possible impediments to the success of Sedley's plan. Her anxieties prove warranted when a confidence man claims the money as his own and defrauds Mary of Sedley's gift. By insisting on anonymity, Sedley's selfless project is easily co-opted by avarice.

Yet while the novel criticizes Sedley's system as anarchical and Clara's as tyrannical (and both as ineffectual), Mrs. Valentine offers a model that ultimately redeems Hartley from the "savages and tigers" and works to forge romantic reunion. Mrs. Valentine's strategy is to give Mary letters from her brother that "will depict . . . that character which you could not fail to love, if you were but thoroughly acquainted with it" (130). By arranging Mary's reading of Sedley's letters, Mrs. Valentine corrects the misdirection that Sedley's own epistolary model caused. While Mrs. Valentine's epistolary theory might seem akin to Clara's, Mrs. Valentine exerts control not by writing letters, but by directing Mary's reading of them. She regulates Mary's interpretation of these letters such that Mary does indeed come to "love" Sedley. Describing her study of these letters and her determination to "listen . . . only to the dictates of justice and gratitude," Mary announces, "I finally prevailed upon myself to consent to her brother's wishes" (130). Establishing the conditions whereby Mary will ineluctably arrive at the proper interpretation for herself, Mrs. Valentine rewrites compulsion into consent, power into freedom, so that Mary understands her decision to marry Sedley as self-authored: "I finally *prevailed upon myself*."

Like Mrs. Williams in Foster's *The Boarding School*, Mrs. Valentine offers a model in which submission to a centralized authority is made identical to individual autonomy. And the key to this political equation, as it was in *The Boarding School*, is teaching the appropriate way to read and write letters. The novel takes the epistolary mode so as to illustrate the ways in which the "wild and ambiguous medium" (as Hartley describes the letter-form), without proper regulation, will yield either political chaos or tyranny. Both possibilities are finally forestalled in this novel by Mrs. Valentine's intervention as editor; therefore Brown's penultimate novel offers us a Federalist epistolary model very similar to that in *The Boarding School*.

Such editorship is precisely what is absent from Brown's last epistolary novel *Jane Talbot*, which was conceived and written as a companion to *Clara Howard*. Thus, while most critics have assumed that there is no substantial stylistic difference between these last two novels, it is crucial that in *Jane Talbot* there are no textual apparatuses to suggest that the letters have ever benefited from an editorial hand. Indeed, *Jane Talbot* is exceptional in that it has no introduction, preface, advertisement, or any kind of narrative frame to explain how or why the author is providing

the letters for our consumption. The absence of a purposeful arrangement is one aspect of the novel's strange meandering style – as if every letter is potentially extraneous. Thus, for example, the first third of the novel consists of feverish letters from Jane Talbot to Colden (which she describes as careless and thoughtless "prating" [153]) detailing her early biography. She explains that she needs to offer this history because she assumes he has heard calumnious stories about her that her own narrative will disprove. But when Colden finally replies, he announces that he had already "fully acquit[ted] you of the guilt laid to your charge." What is more, Colden explains, this acquittal had happened "before I heard your defense," and therefore, he implies that her letters are entirely superfluous. He has read them "merely because all that relates to you is . . . interesting to me." The extraneousness of Jane's initial letters seems largely confirmed by our own reading as well, since much of the information detailed by Jane in these original letters proves fairly irrelevant to the central problem of the novel, which is whether Jane should risk disinheritance in order to marry her true love, or whether her familial obligation to her adopted mother ought to override her amorous sensibility.

This central plot points to a similarity between Brown's two novels: just as Hartley is in a zero-sum game in which his pleasure will cause Mary's pain, so too is Jane caught between the conflicting desires of her guardian, Mrs. Fielder, and her suitor, Colden. Written after the highly partisan election of Jefferson, both novels proffer rigorous analyses of the effects and regulation of faction. Midway through *Jane Talbot*, reflecting on the contrast between her own love and her adopted mother's antipathy for Henry Colden, Jane ruminates, "How does it fall out that the same object is viewed by two observers with such opposite sensations. That what one hates, the other should doat upon?" (301). Jane's query is one that is fundamental to the novel's articulation of politics: in the face of faction, in the face of different interests, how do we reconcile difference without tyranny? In this novel, then, the question is how does Jane choose sides without becoming either the rebellious anarchist (the disinherited daughter) or the docile subject to a tyrannical will?

Thus Jane finds herself with a legitimation crisis: how will she determine to whose law she should submit? Nor is it entirely clear even to the reader what choice Jane should make. The novel deliberately disables our capacity to know with whom our sympathies are supposed to rest. Is Mrs. Fielder the tyrant, as Colden insists? Or, is Colden the rake Mrs. Fielder is certain he is? In this way, we are cast into Jane's position – located between the contradictory claims of Colden and Mrs. Fielder. Writing her mother, Jane

announces, "no struggle was ever greater between my duty to you and the claims of another." Jane insists that she cannot "blindly submit to authority," but only to authority that is rested in rational explanation, and thus she asks her mother to write a letter that will offer an argument capable of "reconcil[ing] . . . *my* duty to *your inclination*" (214–15). By demanding explanation, Jane asserts her refusal to be docile to an arbitrary law, but she also will not be disobedient to her mother's injunctions. Wanting neither to disobey nor to submit, Jane sees epistolary explanation as the solution to her dilemma.

In this way, Jane asks Mrs. Fielder to provide just the kind of resolution that Mrs. Valentine provided for Mary Wilmot. And just as Mrs. Valentine rose to the challenge by offering Sedley's letters, so too does Mrs. Fielder also turn to epistolary evidence: to convince Jane of Colden's immorality, she cites letters Colden had written as a young man that prove him as an "advocate of suicide; a scoffer of promises . . . an opponent of marriage" (227). Additionally, she offers a letter, supposedly written by Jane, as insurmountable evidence that Jane and Colden are guilty of adultery. We later learn that a jealous rival had forged the letter: finding one of Jane's unfinished letters to Colden, the counterfeiter, Miss Jessup, completes it with a paragraph that incriminates both Jane and Colden. This letter, Mrs. Fielder proclaims, leaves "no room for doubt" and will "preclude all bickerings and cavils" (233). But while Mrs. Valentine's letters produce Mary's self-authored consent, Mrs. Fielder's letters exert tyrannical force. The letters will make all discussion ("bickerings and cavils") unnecessary and are given to Jane only to compel her acquiescence to Mrs. Fielder's conditions. We might think here of Arendt's understanding of the essential violence that silence implies: to "preclude" conversation is to demand an "isolated acquiescence to a truth."

When Jane denies the truth of the epistolary evidence marshaled against her, Mrs. Fielder returns all Jane's letters unopened. She turns Jane's attempts at correspondence into dead letters. Such a response is necessary, Mrs. Fielder claims, because Jane's letters are deceitfully seductive: "I know you better than to trust to the appearance of half yielding reluctance which your letter contains. Thus it has always been, and as often as this dutious strain flattered me with hopes of winning you to reason, have I been deceived and disappointed" (217). Jane disguises her handwriting so as to compel her mother to read her letter, and Mrs. Fielder finds herself seduced into renewed correspondence: "I began this letter with a firm and as I thought inflexible soul. Despair had made me serene, yet now thy image rises before me, with all those bewitching graces which adorned

thee when thou wast innocent and a child" (229–30). While Jane associates letter-writing with the rational pursuit of truth, one that will ultimately authorize her submission to her guardian's laws, Mrs. Fielder asserts that these same letters are deceitful misrepresentations that will distract her from an inflexible authority.

Crucially, letters function in this novel as both the tool of rational persuasion and of deceitful manipulation. The problem is that characters do not know if they are being seduced or persuaded, and the novel seems to suggest that there may well be no distinction between the two. Take, for example, Jane's receipt of the "indubitable" evidence testifying to her adultery. Although, Jane knows herself to be innocent of the charges, she surprisingly abides by its claims:

> After reading my mother's letter . . . I instantly recognized the long lost billet . . . Methinks, I then felt as I should have felt if the charge had been true. I shuddered as if to look back would only furnish me with proofs of a guilt of which I had not hitherto been conscious (244)

Jane's reading of the counterfeited epistolary evidence against her transforms her into guilty subject.

While epistolarity in *Clara Howard* works to expose the hazards of both tyrannical and anarchical letters, it also provides a solution in the form of an edited "series" of letters that generates both political and romantic resolution. *Jane Talbot* likewise portrays the incipient danger of tyrannical and anarchical letters, but there is no easy solution waiting in the wings. Instead, the novel critiques both Mrs. Fielder's Federalist model (which never successfully can reconcile duty to inclination) *and* Colden's Antifederalist commitment to the continued circulation of letters (which is ultimately incapable of establishing solidarity). Thus, when Jane tells Colden that she will never be able to prove their innocence to her mother, he insists that continuing to send letters to Mrs. Fielder will ultimately lead her to reconcile with them: "By stating the simple truth, circumstantially and fully; . . . by shewing all the letters that have passed between us, the contents of which will shew that such guilt was impossible . . . surely you may hope to disarm her suspicions" (247). Like the Antifederalist "John DeWitt," Colden believes that perpetual correspondences will become the foundation for consolidation. While Mrs. Fielder and Jane understand the potential for epistolary duplicity, Colden throughout sustains his belief that correspondence will ultimately disseminate Truth.[52]

Thus he dedicates himself to proving Mrs. Fielder wrong by confronting the forger of the incriminating letter, Mrs. Jessup. Colden demands that

she write a letter testifying to her crime, and he proposes that he dictate a confession for her to sign: "All I want, said I, are but few words. You cannot be at a loss for these. I will hold: I will guide your hand: I will write what you dictate" (352). Colden's command here is remarkably odd: in his effort to persuade Mrs. Fielder of a forged letter, he will deliver Mrs. Jessup's confession written in his own hand. Because Colden believes that letters will necessarily deliver truth, he adamantly refuses to believe in epistolary deception even as he is negotiating with the woman who purloined and forged Jane's letter.

While other epistolary novels insist that there is an essential difference between truth and deceit, reason and seduction, *Jane Talbot* suggests that there might be no way to discern the difference. The novel, which consists entirely of letters attempting to engage others in rational debate, teaches us that rational debate might not be possible. Thus, although Jane wants to be persuaded into submission, the novel suggests that neither side offers a legitimate claim. Ultimately, however, *Jane Talbot* delivers a happy ending: although Colden leaves the country, a series of accidental contingencies bring him back to the United States and back into correspondence with Jane. But where romantic resolution in *Clara Howard* is scripted by Mrs. Valentine, here without a controlling editor, the happy ending is only a matter of accident. The novel even concludes before we are certain the lovers are reconciled – a fitting conclusion to a novel which feels as if, properly told, it would never end.

Largely because they follow the conventional plots of seduction or marriage, epistolary sentimental novels have been traditionally dismissed as didactic conduct manuals. More recent criticism has recovered their decidedly anti-didactic projects, arguing for the ways in which these novels allow the voices of the disenfranchised to speak in the midst of a consolidation (national and literary) that would otherwise exclude them. But our readings of the epistolary fictions – autobiographical and otherwise – of the early republic challenge both the didactic and the subversive accounts of their projects. Instead we can see these works as literary laboratories in which the machinery of national union is interrogated. And, as we shall see, the irresolution opened up by the (formal, national and literary) ideals of correspondence so crucial to the early nation will continue to challenge some of the most important literary minds of the next century.

CHAPTER 2

Emerson and Fuller's phenomenal letters

In "Politics," Emerson describes the young nation's preference for democracy as only provisional, explaining, "Democracy is better for us, because the religious sentiment of the present time accords better with it."[1] This refusal to embrace as inevitable the political system under whose name the nation (at least ideally) had been founded is an example of Emerson's characteristic contrariness – a provocative stance against the tendency to be "very vain of our political institutions." Here speaking as the radical (even anarchical) Emerson, he announces that "Every actual State is corrupt," and the nature of this corruption is particularity of interests. His denunciation of political systems is actually an invocation of civic virtue: the problem with politics is that private and personal interests contaminate ideal "instincts." In similar terms, Emerson repeatedly references the "colossal ugliness in the governments of the world," which is *force*. And force, as Emerson defines it, is the exertion of the self-interest of those who hold power (the state) over those who don't (its citizens). If his attack on self-interest is consonant with republicanism, then, in declaring the state to be fundamentally "corrupt," Emerson also speaks the essential tenet of liberalism. Because the power of the state is always understood to be a diminishment of individual autonomy, or freedom, the emphasis must be on limiting its power. In these terms we can see that the only distinction between liberalism and anarchy is that the liberal understands the state as a *necessary* evil.[2] Emerson's apparent dissidence, therefore, outlines the way in which the problem of legitimacy is a central topic of his politics – as it is, necessarily, at the center of any democratic politics.[3]

The way out of a political authority grounded in force, Emerson announces, is to imagine a political system founded in *love*. He writes, "The power of love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried" (*RWE*, 569); and "there never was in any man sufficient faith in the power of rectitude to inspire him with the broad design of renovating the State on the principle of right and love" (570). We might imagine that founding a

state on love would legitimate power because it would translate "force" into affection; and yet this isn't Emerson's claim. Rather, love solves legitimation crises because it removes self-interest. This depiction of *love* as that which rescues political order from personality is peculiar, since we typically understand love as a relationship defined by its investment in personalism. For Emerson, however, love "must become more impersonal everyday" (335).[4] His invocation of love as a principle of political organization follows from a Kantian moral calculus, which distinguishes morality and justice from matters of the good life.[5] According to Emerson, "love" is the "moral identity of men," which provides the legitimate foundation for government since in response to these moral questions "all the citizens find a perfect agreement, and only in these; not in what is good to eat, good to wear, good use of time" (566).[6] Emerson hence concludes his essay by positing a personal and private relation between two as the ideal political model: "thousands of human beings might exercise towards each other the grandest and simplest sentiments, as well as a knot of friends, or a pair of lovers" (571). Notably, what gets emphasized and valorized in his notion of both friendship and eros is the "perfect agreement" between two friends or lovers; and this conception of intimate sociability becomes a model by which to interrogate the possibilities of sociability more largely (as they are distributed amongst "thousands of human beings").

Although Margaret Fuller likewise turns to a politics of friendship to describe the practice of democracy in the American scene, her model of friendship and love will ultimately challenge that of Emerson.[7] Fuller's interrogation of marriage in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* explicitly delineates the problem of political legitimacy as it is enacted in domestic spaces. For example, in the staged interrogatory between the author and the authoritarian, slave-trading husband, the author maintains, "If the head represses no natural pulse of the heart, there can be no question as to your giving your consent. Both will be of one accord . . . But our doubt is whether the heart does consent with the head, or only obeys its decrees with a passiveness that precludes the exercise of its natural powers."[8] Here "love," at least as it is institutionalized in marriage, does not offer "perfect agreement." Instead, Fuller exposes the ways in which marriage demands an identity between its constitutive members (the "heart" and "head") that works to erase the problem of legitimacy – the force exerted to achieve this "one accord" in the name of consanguinity.

In their respective interrogations of the mediation between the individual and the community, between the particular and the universal, both Emerson and Fuller engage the topic of legitimacy: what constitutes acceptable

force? How do we distinguish consent from coercion? And these political inquiries are largely mediated for both authors through a consideration of familiar relations: friendship or erotics offer frameworks within which to interrogate the possibilities of democracy. Moreover, both authors turn to the familiar letter – a principal written technology through which such intimate relations are constructed – as the literary mode in which these political discussions are both theorized and practiced. Both Emerson and Fuller use letter-writing as a trope to describe the larger issues of social relations with which the Transcendentalist movement was essentially concerned; and, in less figurative terms, these same writers turned to letter-writing as a kind of practicum for describing the ideals and realities of social mediation.[9] As such, the happy coincidence by which *correspondence* references both letters written between persons and a central tenet of early Transcendentalism (inherited via Emerson's interest in Swedenborg) points to the ways that epistolary writing was conceived as a primary literary mode for theorizing social relations.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's first serious engagement with Swedenborgian correspondence comes in *Nature* (1836), where he articulates the profound connection between spiritual and natural laws.[10] This theory of correspondence emerged as a rejection of the strict empiricism of Locke (and Unitarianism) that, as Barbara Packer describes, "eliminated . . . [any] polysemy from nature, psyche, or sacred text."[11] For Emerson, the correspondence between nature and spirit is not ineluctable, and therefore his belief in correspondence necessarily depends on interpretation.

This transcendental theory of correspondence presumes a commitment to interpretation, and such commitments have traditionally been read as a dedication to liberty. There is, for example, a long critical line that sees Emerson's stylistic complications as an attempt to force his readers out of a passive reception of his work; and claims made about his style frequently make recourse to explicitly political tropes. Describing such rhetorical complexities, for example, Packer writes that Emerson had "scrupulous respect for the reader's liberty."[12] But if the commitment to polysemy allows for miscomprehension (as witnessed by Emerson's popular aphorism extolling the virtues of misreception), then it is nonetheless the conveyance of Truth that ultimately validates a theory of correspondence. Therefore, in *Representative Men*, Emerson will write, "The possibility of interpretation lies in the identity of the observer with the observed" (19). For Emerson *comprehension* is the most important residue of a theory of correspondence, and he announces this most explicitly in the "Language" chapter of *Nature*: "A

man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth, and his desire to communicate it without loss" (22).[13]

And so it is that even as philosophical correspondence points to the analogy between spirit and nature, it also marks the separation between them. While the theory of correspondence articulated in *Nature* declares a relationship between the soul and nature, we can only recognize this correspondence *because* nature and soul are in fact distinct and separate. As such, while we may wish to communicate "without loss," this "desire" exists precisely because of the irreparable separation between nature and spirit. A theory of correspondence that compels interpretation (the attempt to construct or reconstruct the links between natural and spiritual truths), and not revelation (where nature and spirit are immanent) suggests that something happened to make "nature opaque to our understanding."[14]

Letter-writing, as we have seen, operates according to a similar paradox; and Emerson's and Fuller's respective inquiries of the possibilities of the epistolary form are informed by their understanding of the logical parallels between philosophical and practical correspondence. If the split between nature and spirit is the occasion for a theory of *philosophical* correspondence, then it is separation between persons (and the desire to overcome it) that likewise compels the act of *literal* correspondence. Letter-writing, after all, is a technique of union: we write letters to make ourselves more present to another (or others). Were there no distance (physical, epistemological, psychological), there would likewise be no occasion for epistolarity. Thus, just as letter-writing serves as a symptom of and corrective to the separation of self and other, so too does Emersonian correspondence serve as both a symptom of and corrective tool for the separation of nature and spirit.

At the end of the "Discipline" chapter in *Nature*, Emerson makes precisely such claims about language: words, and those who utter them, may "break, chop, and impoverish" truth, yet they are also "incomparably the richest informations of the power and order that lie at the heart of things" (30–31). The paradox here is not just that our only access to truth is defective, for, as Emerson continues, the only way to gain access to these human "fountain-pipes on the unfathomed sea of thought and virtue" is through an intimacy that itself renders knowledge impossible:

> We are associated in adolescent and adult life with some friends, who, like skies and waters, are co-extensive with our idea; who, answering each to a certain affection of the soul, satisfy our desire on that side; whom we lack power to put at such focal distance from us, that we can mend or even analyze them. We cannot choose but love them. (31)

Our proximity to these "friends," Emerson explains, renders all but love (perfect union) impossible, and only when the friend is withdrawn from sight are we able to convert the ideal into "solid and sweet wisdom." Emerson's formulation bears restating: humanity offers our only connection to truth, because only in friendship do we gain true insight into the unity between human and spirit; but in this model of friendship in which the other is only a projection of the ideal, we are capable of love but *not* perception. And as Emerson later writes, "Love is as much [the spirit's] demand as perception . . . [N]either can be perfect without the other" (47). Therefore it is only when this other, this friend, physically departs that we can understand the universal spirit to which he gave us access.

This alternation between absolute intimacy (in which the other is "coextensive with our idea") and radical solitude (in which the other is "withdrawn from our sight") represents a kind of deep structure in Emerson's work – especially in the earlier writing. It is evidenced, for example, in the depiction of the alternating current (and Emerson repeatedly turns to metaphors of magnetism and electricity) between the self-reliant individual and the Universal Spirit of *Nature* or the Over-Soul of *Essays, First Series*. In an 1838 Journal entry, Emerson will write, "Solitude is naught & society is naught. Alternate them & the good of each is seen . . . Undulation, Alternation, is the condition of progress, of life."[15] In *Nature*, Emerson seems to posit this alternation as something like a natural cycle. And this alternating cycle, as we shall see, has become the central tenet of Emerson's greatest legacy, an American politics of democratic individualism. It is precisely this alternating current that occasions claims by very strange bedfellows that Emerson is their own: praised as offering a libertarian commitment to individual freedom, Emerson is at the same time celebrated for having a social commitment that transcends mere individualism.[16] That Emerson can be embraced by those occupying such disparate political positions points to his unique status as representative of an American commitment to moderation: a political sensibility dedicated to a negotiation between individual rights and social justice, between autonomy and solidarity, between negative and positive rights claims.

In his analysis of Emerson's political work (and its legacy in the larger political culture of the nation), Christopher Newfield has described Emerson as the "principal architect" of a political tradition characterized by precisely this negotiation. Newfield argues that this "tradition of moderation rests less on the much-discussed balance between individual autonomy and popular sovereignty than on a habit of submission to authority that weakens autonomy and democracy alike."[17] While readers have attended

to the logic in Emerson (and American Transcendentalism more generally) by which the liberty of the one is reconciled with the needs of the many by recourse to Reason or Intuition, these same readers have refused to consider exactly what is relinquished to achieve this reconciliation. According to Newfield, individual liberty is coordinated with social solidarity neither by the commitment to individual freedom nor a submission to the law of the group (to an abstract principle of Justice, for example), but instead by recourse to an authority that is higher than that of the constituent members of the social order.[18] By failing (or refusing) to consider what constitutes this Intuition – or, as Emerson describes it in "Self-Reliance," "that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, [in which] all things find their common order" (*RWE*, 269) – Emerson's readers have failed to see the necessary subjection that this reconciliation entails.[19]

The key to Emerson's political calculus is a reconciliation of power and liberty, which happens through an "*alternation*" or "*undulation*" (to use Emerson's terms) between self-reliance and universalism. This alternation offers not so much a synthesis of or balance between the two positions, but instead the "monstrous" and "absurd" articulation of the contradictory assertion, as Emerson writes in "Nominalist and Realist" that "every man is a partialist . . . [and] every man is a universalist" (586). The "absurdity" of the statement, nonetheless, demands telling, as Emerson had earlier conveyed in a journal entry:

> The more exclusively idiosyncratic a man is, the more general & infinite he is, which *though it may not be a very intelligible expression means I hope something intelligible*. In listening more intently to our own reason, we are not becoming in the ordinary sense more selfish, but are departing more from what is small, & falling back on truth itself & God. (*JMN*, III:199; emphasis added)

Only by considering social relations at the two most extreme poles (the egoism of self-reliance and the pantheism of transcendental universalism) can Emerson imagine that the coordination of these two positions has no cost – that it entails no submission. Emerson's emphasis on the alternation between the two extremes of sociability finds its analogue in literal correspondence, which likewise theorizes social relations as pure absence (the writer as self-reliant and sovereign individual) and presence (the writer and reader brought into "perfect agreement" by the letter); and it is precisely this formulation of social relations that allows Emerson to maintain that there is no contradiction between the self who defies the laws of others and the self who is immanent with others.

Two essays in *Essays, First Series* explicitly articulate this Emersonian theory of sociability by taking as their titular focus different forms of social relations: "Love" and "Friendship." In both essays, Emerson defines the ideal model of social intercourse as this alternating current between solitude and society: "The instinct of affection revives the hope of union with our mates, and the returning sense of insulation recalls us from the chase. Thus every man passes his life in the search after friendship" (*RWE*, 344). For Emerson, this natural law of social intercourse is best described and enacted by letter-writing, and he begins "Friendship" by noting the idiosyncratic power of the epistolary genre: "The scholar sits down to write, and all his years of meditation do not furnish him with one good thought or happy expression; but it is necessary to write a letter to a friend, – and, forthwith, troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves, on every hand, with chosen words" (341).

Emerson goes on to offer a template for the epistle that would best characterize the alternating current of sociability. He extends to us a letter that "each man . . . might write . . . to each new candidate for his love":

> DEAR FRIEND: –
>
> If I was sure of thee, sure of thy capacity, sure to match my mood with thine, I should never think again of trifles in relation to thy comings and goings. I am not very wise; my moods are quite attainable; and I respect thy genius; it is to me as yet unfathomed; yet dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me, and so thou art to me a delicious torment. Thine ever, or never. (345)

In this imaginary letter Emerson offers a compressed account of what the epistolary form both reveals and wishes to solve about intersubjective communication. He begins with the conditional proposition that describes the anxieties present in any human interaction, which is the impossibility of knowing the other and the impossibility of making the other identical with the self. As such, what initially compels desire for the new "candidate" is the absence of intimacy. His letter neatly describes the inexhaustible desire for what Emerson calls "perfect intelligence." Emerson's sentence records the wish for a constative formulation even as it recognizes the impossibility of this knowledge. And in this delineation Emerson employs a notable solecism: although the sentence is written in the subjunctive mood, he conjugates "to be" in the simple past tense of the indicative mood. His grammar illustrates the tension between impossible knowledge (hence the subjunctive) and the desire to know (hence the indicative) that the text of his letter describes so well. Because, despite the fact that the other is for us always unattainable, always opaque, we nonetheless stupidly ("I am not

very wise") assume that we are just so transparent to the other: "my moods are quite attainable." The necessarily complicated epistemological relation between the writer and his friend is expressed in the enigmatic phrase, "dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me," which would seem to suggest that just as he cannot know his friend, his friend cannot know him. Yet the reciprocity implied in reading the phrase in that way is undermined by the rest of the sentence, "so thou art to me a delicious torment." If both friends lack the perfect intelligence of the other, then why is the "delicious torment" the writer's alone? Instead, following the implications of the early claim "my moods are quite attainable," we might read the phrase as interrogative: dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me? And the result of this uncertainty of the other that is coupled with certainty of the other's knowledge of me yields a "delicious torment" that culminates in Emerson's marvelous subscription, "Thine ever, or never."[20]

These are, for Emerson, the two possibilities: there is total attachment to, or rupture from the other. When he is the object of comprehension by another, there is perfect union: he is "thine ever." But when he is subject, and necessarily fails to comprehend the other, there is disunion: he is "thine never." Letters, for Emerson, offer a paradigmatic form for a politics that curiously presumes both radical solitude and intimacy. We can see the exceptional political work of the inclusive *or* of Emerson's epistolary subscription as characteristic of a logic broadcast through many of the essays in the *First Series* in which Emerson makes the two positions seem identical: as if it would make no real difference whether one signs a letter with "ever" or "never."

This ideal epistolary subscription is also the "motto of nature," as Emerson writes in a letter to Fuller describing a winter landscape: "it is infinitely strange that a sight so old & eternal as this of the snow hung pines should yet be so new to me. 'Always & Never' seems to be the motto of nature."[21] Here the "Always & Never" describes the ways in which nature is both familiar and strange at the same time, but this characterization also describes the relations between persons. Ideally the friend will always be familiar and estranged at once. After all, despite the titular claims of both "Friendship" and "Love" that the topic at hand is intimate attachment to others, both essays articulate Emerson's commitment to something very different: the alternation between radical solitude and radical integration with another. As he described it in *Nature*, there is no access to Spirit without attachment to another, but there is no comprehension of Spirit without separation from that other. Similarly, although "Friendship" begins with a rhapsodic account of the power of affection, which, Emerson argues, "make[s] the

sweetness of life" (341), what immediately follows is a description of a household's anticipation of a visit from a *stranger* that entirely revises the earlier privileging of intimacy. At first it appears as if his description of the stranger's affect that gives "the nimblest fancy, a richer memory . . . sincere, graceful, rich communications" is commensurate with the preceding consideration of the value that comes from social intercourse. We assume that the stranger's importance is as a potential friend. Yet Emerson insists that the stranger's value is *not* his possible attachment to the household, but his estrangement from it:

> But as soon as the stranger begins to intrude his partialities, his definitions, his defects, into the conversation, it is all over . . . He is no stranger now. Vulgarity, ignorance, misapprehension are old acquaintances. Now, when he comes, he may get the order, the dress, and the dinner, – but the throbbing of the heart, and the communications of the soul, no more. (342)

When the stranger becomes a friend, the "communications of the soul" are over: real intercourse with others, far from being enabling, destroys ideal interpersonal relations.

The formulation offered in "Friendship" is essentially the same as that posed at the end of "Discipline," in which the beloved is significant not because "we cannot choose but love" him, but because he is our only access to Universal Spirit. As in that earlier essay, here Emerson argues that particular relations are pedestrian and only gain value when they are transformed into something that transcends the relation between two, a transcendence that can only be effected by separation. It is a claim that is made even more precise in "Love," where Emerson begins in a sentimental mood, describing how the "private and tender relation of one to one" is our first education into a greater passion: the "universal heart." But although passion for a beloved is the catalyst to the Universal Love (and Emerson exalts the human lover who learns also to "accost the grass and the trees"), once the greater love is gained the initiating passion for the individual is of no consequence: the universal lover no longer "appertain[s] to his family and society" (331). The logic of the essay can be stated then fairly simply: because personal love fails (we can never secure our beloved), love ultimately will secure its transcendental object ("the universal heart"), which is necessarily impersonal.

As such, in both "Love" and "Friendship" the other is necessary, since desire for another is what compels our admission to the Universal Heart, but we are so compelled because temporal passion must fail. Since either we can not secure our beloved or, once secured, our beloved falls in our estimation,

all love is ultimately impersonal.[22] The inadequacy of friends and lovers is in large measure the inadequacy of their material presence – their bodies. For it is material union with another that is always disappointing, as Emerson repeats time and again:

> We are armed all over with subtle antagonisms, which as soon as we meet, begin to play, and translate all poetry into stale prose. Almost all people descend to meet. All association must be a compromise, and what is worst, the very flower and aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other. What a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and gifted! (345)

Henry David Thoreau also uses the phrase, "descend to meet," but he even more stridently asserts that friendship dispense with bodies:

> Let us love by refusing, not accepting one another . . . [I]n the close contact of affection, there is danger that we may stain and pollute one another, for we cannot embrace but with an entire embrace.
>
> We must love our friend so much that she shall be associated with our purest and holiest thoughts alone. When there is impurity, we have 'descended to meet,' though we knew it not.[23]

Fuller also uses the phrase to describe ideal correspondence between two persons: "We feel of these two that they were enough to one another to be led to indicate their best thoughts, their fairest visions, and therefore theirs was a true friendship. They needed not 'descend to meet.'"[24]

These versions of social relations, in which there is love without meeting, is a theoretical ideal: since we cannot dispense with our bodies, since we cannot will away the boundaries of persons, then this "descent" is also an inevitable one – only to be relieved, as Emerson says, by absence. Accordingly, Emerson demands the *alternation* between union and solitude as the only way to approximate this ideal – the only way to conceive of an impersonal love, the only way to address our friend like a "beautiful enemy" (*RWE*, 351). He describes this friendship that sustains solitude as requiring another who is at once both identical to and different from one's self:

> Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness, that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party. Let me be alone to the end of the world, rather than that my friend should overstep, by a word or a look, his real sympathy. I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance. Let him not cease an instant to be himself. The only joy I have in his being mine, is that the *not mine* is *mine*. I hate, where I looked for a manly furtherance, or at least a manly resistance, to find a mush of concession. Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo. The condition which high friendship demands is ability

to do without it . . . Let it be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them. (350)

It appears initially that Emerson is advocating that the ideal friend must occupy a moderate position in which he resembles, but not too closely, his friend: "betwixt likeness and unlikeness." Yet, as the passage continues, it becomes clear that this is precisely *not* what Emerson means, since to inhabit this middle ground would be to be neither "mine" nor "not mine": this middling position would offer neither the "manly resistance" of one who is different, nor the "deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them." Emerson is instead describing the "absurd" and "monstrous" position in which the ideal friend is he who at one and the same time – in a barely perceptible alternating current – is both alien from and immanent with another.

And once again Emerson turns to the letter as the exemplary generic mode through which to describe this relationship that presumes both deep identity and distinction:

To my friend I write a letter, and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you a little. It suffices me. It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give, and of me to receive. It profanes nobody. In these warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not to the tongue, and pour out the prophecy of a godlier existence than all the annals of heroism have yet made good. (351)

The epistolary mode provides for Emerson a practical form for depicting ideal social relations. Because the letter casts the relationship between two friends as "ever, or never," it affords a textual space for fraternity based on both antagonism and identity. Moreover, the letter is also ideal in that it forms a social model that does not require us to "descend to meet," because in epistolary intercourse the other is always ideal, always necessarily scripted by the self. Letter-writing also (at least supposedly) dispenses with bodies. I say supposedly because if the promise of a letter (especially a love letter) is that it offers a sanitized space for the articulation of desire – a place where lovers can testify to erotic urges because no bodies actually touch – then it is also the case that in practice letters are highly charged erotic spaces precisely *because* the conceit of epistolarity is that the material document is metonymic of its corporeal writer. As such, far from being, as Dickinson will write, "the mind alone without corporeal friend," letters are places where corporeal intercourse is evocatively rendered.

The body's obduracy, for example, is witnessed in the same passage from Emerson where, despite the ostensible repudiation of physical presence,

he elaborates by employing a metaphor that insists on corporeality: he describes friendship as resembling "the systole and diastole of the heart." This corporeal residue (as it emerges in Emerson's rhetoric) points to a sort of indelible resistance to both separation and merger. Thus while there is a logical precision to Emerson's paradoxical formulation that "love . . . must become more impersonal every day," his depiction of *desire* (in both "Love" and "Friendship") produces an excess to the conversion of the personal into the universal (or "impersonal"). In other words, although the subject of our desire becomes increasingly irrelevant to the construction of a transcendental passion, the stubborn fact of temporal desire remains.

This stubborn fact – this insistence on the distinctiveness of persons that refuses merger – constitutes a significant difference, indeed *the* significant difference, between Emerson's and Fuller's respective theories of friendship.[25] Because Emerson systematically denies the distinctiveness of persons, instead emphasizing that "deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them," he articulates a politics in which *consent* and *force* become synonymous for each other. Freedom, for Emerson, is found not so much in self-reliance, as it is in the "deep identity" that unites sovereign individuals. Friendship and love offer an ideal political model because, according to Emerson, in perfect friendship or love, there is ultimately no distinction between the interests of the one and the interests of the many. Because all individual interests are the same, "the citizens find [themselves] in perfect agreement" and neither consent nor force is required. As we shall see in what follows, Fuller accuses Emerson of eliding the personal and the universal, and thus taking leave of social reciprocities. And this debate over the nature of friendship (and its obligations) is crucial to understanding their competing notions of what constitutes the imperative of democracy.

Exchanges on the nature of friendship occupied much of the correspondence between Fuller and Emerson from 1839 to 1842. And Emerson's passage on the inadequacy of the corporeal friend is a central text in this three-year-long epistolary interrogation of friendship. The passage originally was written in a literal document of friendship – a letter to Fuller on October 12, 1838. The passage is also included in Emerson's journal, and later, as he is drafting his essay, "Friendship," he twice requests that Fuller offer him the text from the original letter: "Do you happen to possess [the letter] . . . I have quoted a sentence out of it into my journal which makes me think I may find a word there to fill up a bad hole in a paragraph" (*JMN*, VII:106).[26] And in this way, we might understand the essay "Friendship" itself as the product of the correspondence between the two writers. These

requests are found in the Emerson–Fuller correspondence of the summer and fall of 1840, in which Fuller repeatedly challenges Emerson's insistence on locating the self at the poles of self-reliance and transcendental union.[27] In these letters Fuller frequently pushes Emerson up against the hard fact that the one and the many are not so easily made commensurate. And their respective appraisals of the epistolary form reflect these competing theories of friendship.

If, for Emerson, the epistolary genre offers a perfect model for ideal social relations then Fuller is troubled by the genre for the same reasons. On numerous occasions Fuller will decry the form; she writes in a letter to Frederic H. Hedge, for example, "I have little taste, myself, for this epistolary medium. It does not refresh like conversation, it does not stimulate, like good serious study or writing."[28] This announcement of generic preferences raises two important questions: first, what exactly are the terms by which Fuller is distinguishing these various modes of representation from one another? Second, what exactly are the grounds by which epistolarity is found wanting in relation to both conversation and "serious . . . writing"?

In an earlier letter, Fuller describes her predilection for conversation as nostalgia for an ancient model of communication – a preference for the full presence of speech over the absence of written discourse. She writes, "Nobody can be more sensible than myself that the pen is a much less agreeable instrument for communication than the voice, but all our wishes will not bring back the dear talking times of Greece and Rome" (*MF*, 1:189). (We might see her conversation series in Boston as just such an attempt to bring back those "dear talking times."[29]) Although letters were widely understood to be the mode of writing that best approximated conversation, Fuller clearly understands letter-writing to be just as deficient as any other written form – only capable of *representing* presence. Thus, she'll write Emerson, "It is in vain, dearest friend, to hope that any letter will write itself to you. Many float through my mind, but none will stay long enough to be fixed on paper by Daguerroscope or elsehow" (*MF*, 11:68). Here Fuller justifies her failures to write, because letters (like daguerrotypes) are only copies, incapable of adequately representing the original idea. As such, her personal delinquency as letter-writer testifies to the larger failures of the genre as a whole, which will always inadequately represent 'real' consciousness.

While letters are inferior to conversation because they lack the authenticity of speech, they gain nothing over "good serious" writing for approximating that authenticity. In a later letter, in which Fuller offers some

remarks on American materialism, she makes manifest what she means by this "good serious" writing: "I believe it is absurd to attempt to speak on these subjects within the limits of a letter. I will try to say what I mean in print some day" (*MF*, II:110). Fuller argues here that serious discussion requires *print*. At stake in Fuller's generic discriminations is the difference between the precision of print (signifying as it does "serious[ness]") and the carelessness of handwritten missives.[30] But clearly what is also at issue for Fuller is that print offers an authoritative stance precisely because it is publicly disseminated and because it transcends the bounded and empirical subject.

Fuller's classificatory schema of different modes of social intercourse (conversation, print, epistolarity) has, I want to argue, serious political ramifications. At issue for Fuller is which mode of encountering another provides the ideal scene of social exchange. Is it an agonistic encounter that stresses an individualistic display of one's excellence to another? Or is it a scene in which the other is brought into parity with the self because personality is obliterated by print? Will the encounter with the other offer the power of coordinated action? Or will it, conversely, be an exertion of violence over another?

I use the Arendtian terms, power and violence, because we might profitably compare Fuller's nostalgia for the "dear talking times of Greece and Rome" to Hannah Arendt's antimodern predilection for the Greek *polis*: both thinkers articulate an anachronistic preference for the agonistic political space in which citizens vie for authority *not* by recourse to representation, but by a fully present competition. According to such a model, there can be no legitimation crisis because the contest of distinction waged within the *polis* provided the space, as Arendt describes it, for "everybody . . . to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinction," and this display was itself constitutive of power.[31] Fuller's own commitment to an agonistic model is evidenced in the letter to Hedge in which, although she maintains her preference for "talking times," she nonetheless entreats her friend "to *write*, to bring your opinions into collision with those generally received" (*MF*, I:189). While admitting the impossibility of conversation as a forum for political intercourse, she posits writing as the site of agonistic battle. Fuller is not indicating that there is no distinction between writing and conversation (as is evident by her imperative that the pen is "much less agreeable"); instead, she temporarily suggests that print can mimic the political possibility offered by speech. And she does so because she recognizes that a politics based on the full presence of voice is no longer possible in a modern world.

Nor is it possible in a nation whose commitment to democratic participation depends on representation – a nation that has already rejected the Antifederalist appeal to agonistic political models as productive only of cacophony. Fuller accepts that we have lost the public space of the *polis* precisely because our democratic commitments make the political homogeneity entailed by such a model an impossibility: "all our wishes" aren't going to bring back the *polis* or the *res publica*. As Seyla Benhabib explains, the "agonistic space of the *polis* was made possible by a morally homogeneous and politically egalitarian but exclusive community in which action could also be a revelation of the self to others."[32] Because the agonistic politics of the *polis* required the exclusion of women, slaves, laborers, and non-Greeks, then it would seem that any nostalgia for such "talking times" is a critique of "political universalism as such."[33] Yet, given that Fuller's conversation series, as well as her most famous work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, argue explicitly that those historically excluded from politics be given access to democratic participation, then we must understand that questions of who gets to speak and where are at the core of her interrogations of democracy. Fuller's preference for conversation is seemingly contradicted by her commitments to egalitarian participation in political life.

In this way, while she consistently celebrates conversation as the ideal site of self-presentation, and therefore also of sociability, her work seems likewise cognizant of the ways in which such a model necessarily asserts a kind of homogeneity that contradicts democracy. This recognition is revealed when Fuller tells Emerson that she did not read a printed version of his *Nature* until 1840. She admits that she found herself forever postponing her reading of his text because she "missed the voice"; yet she also concedes that having finally read the text, she now recognizes "how more truly I understood it now than at first. Then I caught the melody now I recognize the harmony" (*MF*, 11:128). Her appraisal recognizes the ways in which Emerson's oration of his book dictated inflection and emphasis as he himself had intended it to be read, and the effect of this kind of reading was to make "*melody*" audible. It is only when Fuller herself reads *Nature* (significantly *not* in Emerson's presence) that the book is translated into *harmony* – into a combination of notes that are nonetheless coordinated, thereby enacting (as well as describing) the correspondence between Me and Not-Me that is *Nature*'s tune. Here, then, Fuller's comprehension of Emerson's book depends on the "negation of persons" that is occasioned by print; she can better understand his text precisely because she can no longer hear Emerson as author.

Despite her seemingly paradoxical commitment to both voice and print, Fuller would reject the communicative technology of letter-writing that lies *between* the full presence of voice and the full absence of print. Letter-writing loses on both scores, since it can only mimic the authenticity of voice and yet is still too couched in the personal to negate private personality and interests. For Emerson, conversely, as we have seen, it is an ideal mode precisely by virtue of this liminal status. But what makes the epistolary mode exemplary for Emerson is what makes it so problematic for Fuller. Insofar as letters are posited as a generic form that refuses an engagement with alterity, thereby proffering a tidy political solution in which others are both embraced and rejected, Fuller decries the form. Yet letters need not necessarily be theorized in this way, and as Fuller and Emerson delve deeper into their discourse on friendship, Fuller presents a model of sociability and epistolarity as a strong alternative to Emerson's.

Consequently, although Fuller frequently argues her preference for other modes of communication over letter-writing, she nonetheless often makes it difficult to gauge the distinction she wants to draw between various literary forms. Thus Fuller will tell her friend, Caroline Sturgis, that she'll send her journal entries instead of letters (*MF*, II:107), only to send letters, essays, and journal entries as if there is no distinction between these various modes. And even in the letter to Hedge where she announces her distaste for "this epistolary medium," it isn't entirely clear if she refers to familiar letters or to the larger "correspondence" that finds itself in the *Dial*.

Both Fuller and Emerson understood the *Dial* as a journal that would obfuscate the conventional distinctions between private and public writing – a journal that would publish the kind of discourse that circulated in private correspondence – in letters, in conversations, in portfolio volumes. Thus Emerson praises the *Dial* "as a portfolio which preserves & conveys to distant persons precisely what I should borrow & transcribe to send them if I could" (*LRWE*, III:37).[34] Here Emerson describes his hope that the *Dial* will publish those texts that once circulated only among private individuals. But even more important, Emerson suggests that, despite its public status, the *Dial* should be received as an intimate and particular address. To write an essay published in the *Dial* is to conceive of yourself as an autonomous author unencumbered by your reader's demands and, at the same time, as an author committed to a larger project of solidarity that strives to bring reader and writer into perfect union. Emerson thus describes the contents of the *Dial* to Fuller as "gems from the papers of love & friendship" (*LRWE*, II:306).

Although both Fuller and Emerson understood the *Dial* (and epistolary writing more generally) as blurring the distinction between public and private, their respective understandings of the consequences of this blurring are decidedly inconsonant. We see the two editors, for example, battle each other when Fuller makes explicit her divergence from Emerson after she has passed over the editorial reins of the *Dial*:

> When I had the care of the Dial, I put in what those connected with me liked, even when it did not well please myself, on this principle that I considered a magazine was meant to suit more than one class of minds . . . I thought it less important that everything in it should be excellent, than that it should represent with some fidelity the state of mind among us as the name of Dial said was its intent.
>
> You go on a different principle: you would have every thing in it good according to your taste, which is in my opinion, though admirable as far as it goes, far too narrow in its range.

Fuller accuses Emerson of constructing an editorial policy that claims to represent the excellence of individuals at the same time as it demands homogeneity in the name of a deeper identity that unites us all. The "principle" difference to which Fuller points is substantial: she accuses Emerson of following an autocratic editorial policy in contradistinction to her own democratic one. She would publish even those things that "did not well please myself," while Emerson finds that the only things meritorious of publication are those that accord with his own taste. In this way, his principle of editing follows the same manifest logic as his theory of sociability: commitment to diversity is ultimately regulated by a stronger commitment to "deep identity."

Larry Reynolds argues that Emerson's and Fuller's respective editorial policies were similar, suggesting that Fuller agreed with Emerson's understanding that the *Dial*'s principle of address would, like that of a letter, offer a particular address to an idealized audience.[35] As proof of this position, he cites from Fuller's description of correspondence in her introductory essay to the translation of the letters between Bettina von Arnim and the Cannoness Günderode: "Those who write in the spirit of sincerity . . . write neither to the public nor the individual, but to the soul made manifest in the flesh, and publication or correspondence only furnish them with the occasion for bringing their thoughts to a focus."[36] Fuller's characterization of the Arnim and Günderode correspondence here illustrates a mode of writing committed to transcendental union between reader and writer.

In her own reading of the Arnim–Günderode correspondence Christina Zwarg somewhat differently argues that Fuller understood the representation of friendship in *Günderode* as a model with which to critique Emerson's social theory. According to Zwarg, the relationship between the two young women described the relationship she *wanted to have* with Emerson – one that would transcend the social hierarchies of gender.[37] Zwarg further argues that Fuller's deep interest in these letters was a consequence of her conviction that the correspondence between the two women offered a "model of seduction . . . [that] was a better model for American readers to explore because the gender shift displaced the hierarchical power at work in Arnim's epistolary novel about Goethe."[38] Indeed, in her introduction to the letters, Fuller repeatedly remarks that she prefers the correspondence between Günderode and Arnim to *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child* because the former is characterized by equality. While there is something almost unseemly about the inequity between Arnim and Goethe, the equality between the two women makes the friendship "Perfection."[39] Fuller's depiction of social intercourse and seduction that involves no subordination, however, far from revising Emerson's social theories, instead epitomizes his ideal, which likewise argues for the simultaneity of sovereignty with solidarity. It is only by recourse to Emerson's political calculus that "seduction" can be unhinged from appropriation: the "perfection" of the relationship between Arnim and Günderode is Emersonian. Thus Fuller's idealization of the Arnim and Günderode correspondence is a moment where Fuller is not challenging Emerson's "binary oppositions," but abiding by them.

Significantly, however, Fuller's veneration of the relation between Arnim and Günderode is not typical and, indeed, it contradicts most other occasions where she describes her own theory of social intercourse, which is deeply cognizant of the necessary inequalities that inform any interpersonal relationship. Friendship, for Fuller, is essentially dissymmetrical. Fuller even registers the idiosyncrasy of the friendship between Arnim and Günderode: "it is rare that more than one party keeps true to the original covenant." That Fuller turns to the language of contracts to describe this "perfect" model of sociability is worth pausing over: even here, in this idealized writing of the "soul made manifest in flesh," Fuller cannot eliminate a depiction of sociability that emphasizes friendship as reciprocity.

An illustrative example of Fuller's emphasis on agonistic reciprocity is found in a well-known passage from Fuller's journal from October of 1842, in which, ruminating on an engraving of Madame Récamier, she speculates that homoerotics are the only eternal erotics because they are "purely

intellectual and spiritual, unprofaned by any mixture of lower instincts, undisturbed by any need of consulting temporal interests."[40] This celebration of same-sex desire is announced in decidedly Emersonian terms: embraced as a version of love in which one need not "descend to meet." This reflection on homoerotic desire leads her to consider her own love for her friend Anna Barker – a consideration striking for both its acquiescence and resistance to the Emersonian ideal of an "impersonal" love. For example, although Fuller describes her friend Barker as phenomenal presence ("she leaned on me and her eyes were such a deep violet blue"), she emphasizes not the passionate embrace but the moment where attraction becomes repulsion:

> Now well too can I now account for that desire which I often had to get away from her and be alone with nature, which displeased her so, for she wished to be with me all the time. I do not love her now with passion, for I have exhausted her idea, and she does not stimulate my fancy, she does not represent the Beautiful to me now, she is only one beautiful object.[41]

She converts her passion for Barker into transcendent desire, and thus follows the terms Emerson provides in "Love": "Thus are we put in training for a love which knows not sex, nor person, nor partiality, but which seeks virtue and wisdom everywhere" ("Margaret Fuller's Journal," 337).

In her consideration of her intimacy with Barker, Fuller concludes in enigmatic fashion:

> I thought of all this as I looked at Me Recamier and had one thought beside which has often come into my mind, but I will not write it down; it is so singular that I have often thought I would never express it in any way; I am sure no human being but myself would understand it –[42]

This inexpressible thought might appear to be the articulation of same-sex desire when appetite is not made celibate by an adamant refusal of the body; and Fuller's self-censorship in these terms is corroborated both by the manuscript and publication of the passage in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, both of which expunge Barker's name from the text. Récamier is understood throughout this journal passage to be Barker's double, with Fuller herself, then, playing Madame de Staël.[43]

Yet we might also read Fuller's speechlessness as occasioned by her attempt to comply with the demands of Emerson's model of friendship and love. Only a month earlier, Fuller had recorded Emerson's comments on the gendering of affection and its ultimate irrelevance to transcendental love:

The soul knows nothing of marriage, in the sense of a permanent union between two personal existences. The soul is married to each new thought as it enters into it. If this thought puts on the form of man or women [,] if it last you seventy years, what then? There is but one love, that for the Soul of all Souls, let it put on what cunning disguises it will, still at last you find yourself lonely, – *the Soul*.[44]

When temporal love is conceived as only "training" towards the "one love," then its maturation will necessarily yield the "lonel[iness]" expressed by Fuller's "thought" that literally takes her out of human conversation: "I am sure no human being but myself would understand it."

Notably, however, Fuller's meditation on the engraving of Madame Récamier does not end with this speechlessness, as the next paragraph begins with an evocative and meticulous description of Récamier's beautiful body:

Me Recamier is half-reclining on a sofa[.] She is draped in white drapery which clings very gracefully to her round but elegantly slender form, her beautiful neck and arms are bare, her hair knotted up so as to show the contour of her truly feminine head to great advantage.[45]

This evocative description of Récamier's body repudiates the previous paragraph's drive to translate temporal and corporeal friend into sexless ideal. Cognizant of the sensuality of her sketch, Fuller averts her gaze from the bare neck and arms and focuses instead on the book that Récamier holds in the portrait, "which gives such an expression of purity to the female figure." Yet this purity is not precisely the same as that rendered by her initial description of same-sex love, which is "unprofane" because it aims at eternal union. There chasteness was gained because the intercourse between two was directed at union that obliterated any distinction between them. Here chasteness is occasioned by the picture of Récamier reading a book – a book that Fuller speculates is by de Staël. And as she describes this scene of reading, she emphasizes the difference between the two: "You imagine her to have been reading one of de Stael's books and to be now pondering what those brilliant words of her gifted friend, which so electrify her, can mean."[46] The book therefore simultaneously renders Récamier both chaste and sensual, since it is her inability to fathom fully her friend's words that "so electrif[ies]" her. This friendship (one that Fuller is now capable of describing as she is no longer betrothed to the voiceless marriage of "the Soul") depends on the encounter between two who are *not* fully present to each other: the seductive "electric" charge is ignited because Récamier does *not know* what the "words of her gifted friend . . . mean." As such, the provocative possibility of this scene is *not* like the one described in Fuller's

translation of the letters between Arnim and Günderode in which equality depends on the identity between the two.

The idealization of the letters between Arnim and Günderode is also contradicted by Fuller's own practices as letter-writer, since, far from erasing the fact of asymmetrical social relations, Fuller uses correspondence as the site in which to negotiate a necessarily agonistic social arena.[47] In a letter to Sturgis, for example, Fuller offers a conventional apologia for her failures to write her friend; yet, in a very unorthodox maneuver, Fuller does not promise to be a better correspondent, and instead asks Sturgis to reconcile herself to an unrequited arrangement:

> I have that degree of respect for your mind and character that I can look on you as an equal friend. I also love you, and, probably, no other person you know could be so much to you as I, notwithstanding all my shortcomings – Can you be contented, in consideration of your greater freedom and leisure, to do much for, receive little from me. Above all, can you be contented to write to me often and sometimes receive no reply, generally a meagre one. (*MF*, 11:60)

At first it appears as if Fuller's depiction of unreciprocated correspondence is like Emerson's in "Friendship," which concludes, "It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew, to carry a friendship greatly, on one side, without due correspondence on the other . . . It is thought a disgrace to love unrequited. But the great will see that true love cannot be unrequited" (*RWE*, 354). But while both Fuller and Emerson admit to the impediments to correspondence, Fuller's model of friendship sustains an engagement with the other. Emerson's does not. Indeed, while Fuller hopes that correspondence with Sturgis will continue even without the guarantee of reciprocity, Emerson quite differently suggests that reciprocity is the test of "true love" (it "cannot be unrequited"). Unlike Emerson, Fuller does not suggest that epistolary writing is the fundamentally solipsistic occasion of writing to "the soul made manifest in the flesh"; nor does she suggest that there is a fundamental identity between the writer and receiver of a letter. Instead, she depicts epistolary intercourse as laborious social negotiation in which "equal friend[s]" work towards making meaning between them.

In an illustrative letter to Emerson from 1839, Fuller sends a canto from a poem by Sturgis and includes with it explicit instructions as to what Emerson will need to read the poem correctly. The accompanying documents include a letter from Sturgis to Fuller, passages from Fuller's journal, Fuller's own poem, "Drachenfels," and a description of a letter from Fuller to Sturgis that had been lost. In the latter case Emerson's reading must

take into account an absent document, and therefore Fuller suggests that any reading can only be partial because some contextual documents shall always be missing. Fuller's instructions are elaborate:

> I send you the canto in the poem of Caroline which I half promised . . . I have given her last letter of the winter that you may better appreciate the flux and reflux of mind. Next to this read the two passages in my journal where I have turned the leaf, they were read by her and to the conversations which sprung from them several passages in her letter refer. To make the whole complete you should see a letter of mine upon the wind; but neither C. nor I has that now. The little poem of Drachenfels in the marble paper book also had much effect on her thoughts, it is to that she refers about the dragon voice! (*MF*, III:237).

Fuller's directions suggest that any act of literary production is collaboration – born out of the literal correspondences of friends.[48] Correspondence here cannot insure the receipt of meaning; indeed, since Fuller admits that some necessary contextual information is missing, perfect reception is essentially foreclosed. This model of textual relations also resembles Fuller's editorial style: vindicating her work at the *New York Tribune*, she declares, "I never regarded literature merely as a collection of exquisite products, but rather as a means of mutual interpretation" (*MF*, IV:39).[49] For Fuller, the "pacquets" are not "gems of love and friendship," but the laborious means by which love and friendship are constructed.

In his receipt of the package of poems that includes Fuller's "Drachenfels" and Sturgis's canto, Emerson suggests that Fuller is training him how to read both poetry and friendship: "You are as good – it may be better than ever – to your poor hermit. He will come yet to know the world through your eyes" (*LRWE*, II:238). As he continues, his response to the "pacquet" is euphoric:

> I plunge with eagerness into this pleasant element of affection with its haps & harms. It seems to me swimming in an Iris where I am rudely knocked ever & anon by a ray of fiercer red, or even dazzled into momentary blindness by a casual beam of white light. The weal & wo is all Poetic – I float all the time – nor once grazed our old orb. How fine these letters are! (*LRWE*, II:239)

Emerson describes his integration into "this pleasant element of affection" with a striking metaphor: the package Fuller has sent him is an "iris" in which he swims. Emerson's account is striking because here he is not himself an "eye-ball" and he cannot see: instead, he is swimming in the eye of another, and what this eye sees renders him at times "momentar[ily] blind." The effect of his reading this literal correspondence, then, is notably

different from the effect of spiritual correspondence he had articulated in *Nature*.

In that most famous of Emersonian passages, the eyeball provides a figure to visualize the infinite horizon that renders unity between the one and the many:

> 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 or particle of God. (*RWE*, 10)[50]

Just as Emerson was drawn to the optic epiphany to describe the trivialization of partial relations (of friendship and family, for example) in *Nature*, so too does he turn to an ocular metaphor to describe the trivial relations ("affection with its haps & harms") that come of reading Fuller's letter-packet. But in this latter case, neither "mean egotism" nor "accidental" relations vanish: if in *Nature*, the "name of the nearest friend sounds . . . foreign and accidental," if "to be brothers, to be acquaintances . . . is then a trifle and a disturbance," then in the letter to Fuller, Emerson describes the "haps & harms . . . weal & wo" of friendship to be "Poetic." Literal correspondence, as it is experienced here, involves antagonism and affection that renders him in both an intimate and precarious relation to another. This intimacy and precariousness might sound like the "ever and never" of Emerson's idealized subscription, but it is precisely *not* that formulation. Here the possibility is neither an intimacy that presumes union, nor is it a precariousness that compels radical difference: instead the friendship described here occupies that middle ground between the two positions that Emerson schematizes as Self-Reliance and Universal Soul.

His letter to Fuller, therefore, offers a remarkable revision of earlier claims: in this letter the man who bemoaned the fact that we "must descend to meet" now requests to be "pommelled black and blue with sincere words" (*LRWE*, 11:240). For Emerson, Fuller's portfolio of letters and poems reveals a model of friendship that necessarily involves antagonism. But this antagonism is strikingly different from the rancor described in *Nature* or the "hate" in "Self-Reliance," because to be "pommelled" is also to be touched. Indeed, there is so much corporeal contact from this exchange of words that the body itself bears the mark. Emerson, in fact, explicitly differentiates this battering from that "quarantine of temperament wherefrom I deal courteously with all comers, but through cold water" (*LRWE*, 11:239). Yet, if Emerson requests this pommelling, then he also admits that his quarantining icy temperament still affords him "days of wellbeing," and he concludes by admitting his reluctance to engage others on Fuller's terms.

This desire to construct a scenario in which swimming in another's iris will not leave him battered and bruised, even as he also describes his attraction to encounter "people who love & hate" (*LRWE*, 11:245), is the tacit topic of much of the correspondence between Fuller and Emerson between 1839 and 1841; and Emerson's receipt of letters, poems, and journal entries (primarily from Fuller and Sturgis) seems to have compelled him to begin writing the essay "Friendship." Thanking Fuller for sending him the package of texts, he writes, "I am intent some day to write out as I told you the whole chapter of friendship but am perplexed lately with a droll experience of limitation as if our faculties set a limit on our affections" (*LRWE*, 11:250). In locating the horizon of friendship as an impossible ideal, Emerson ultimately offers a very different model of affection and friendship (and therefore also a very different model of political intercourse).[51]

Describing her different position to Sturgis, Fuller writes, "When we meet you will find me at home. Into that home cold winds may blow, keen lightnings dart their bolts, but I cannot be driven from it more. From that home I look forth and address you sweetly as my friend. Is it not enough?" (*LRWE*, 11:158–59). While Emerson would describe this period in Fuller's life as characterized by a "sort of ecstatic solitude," her claim here utterly refuses solitude, and in fact articulates a profound engagement with another.[52] Eschewing the demand that friendship's ideal be a relation between two predicated on sameness (the ideal in which the friend is the self's best self), Fuller instead suggests that the sufficient condition of friendship be the irreproachable difference between two. This difference can only be bridged by making an address to another as friend. The "sweet" address her letter's superscription delivers ("My dear Caroline") is, for Fuller, "enough" – it is a sufficient and necessary condition for social relations.

In a subsequent letter to Emerson, Fuller further elaborates on this theory of friendship that rejects both absolute union and separation – the two poles on which an Emersonian theory of sociability are oriented:

> I have felt the impossibility of meeting far more than you; so much, that, if you ever know me well, you will feel that the fact of my abiding by you thus far, affords a strong proof that we are to be much to one another. How often have I left you despairing and forlorn. How often have I said, this light will never understand my fire; this clear eye will never discern the law by which I am filling my circle; this simple force will never interpret my need of manifold being. (*MF*, 1:159)

Fuller claims disunion (the "impossibility of meeting") with Emerson, but also suggests that if he ever were to *know* her, then he would realize that her persistence in the face of this impossibility would prove a kind of deeper union: "we are *to be* much to one another."[53] Yet this deeper friendship is

also not realizable, since the knowledge upon which this intimacy would be predicated is described as logically impossible. Emerson's failures (to "understand," to "discern," and to "interpret") are the very things that prove Fuller's devotion to him, since she "abides" by him in spite of these incapacities; and yet, Emerson's recognition of her remarkable dedication will require him to "know [her] well," which is the very thing of which he is incapable.

Fuller's complicated and paradoxical formulation responds to an earlier letter from Emerson where he admits to his distaste for many features of her character:

> I once fancied your nature & aims so eccentric that I had a foreboding that certain crises must impend in your history that would be painful to me to witness in the conviction that I could not aid even by sympathy. I said, it is so long before we can quite meet that perhaps it is better to part now, & leave our return to the Power that orders the periods of the planets. (*LRWE*, II:336)

As he continues, he praises Fuller for "astonish[ing]" him by defeating his expectations: in their interaction, he declares, his friend does in fact *meet* his demands: "Absent from you I am very likely to deny you, and say that you lack this & that. The next time we meet you say with emphasis that very word." Emerson critiques his friend for her eccentricity that makes "meeting" impossible, but then finds redemption in the moments that Fuller in fact fulfils his expectations. Notably, then, he praises Fuller for following a model of sociability that she herself rejects, as he himself seems to recognize later in the same letter when he offers a schematization of their respective theories of social intercourse:

> Now in your last letter, you . . . do say . . . that I am yours & yours shall be . . . I on the contrary do constantly aver that you & I are not inhabitants of one thought of the Divine Mind, but of two thoughts, that we meet & treat like foreign states, one maritime, one inland, whose trade & laws are essentially unlike. I find or fancy in your theory a certain wilfulness and not pure acquiescence which seems to me the only authentic mode. Our friend is part of our fate; those who dwell in the same truth are friends; those who are exercised on different thoughts are not, & must puzzle each other, for the time! (*LRWE*, II:336–37)

Here Emerson explicitly rejects Fuller's claim that the address "I am yours" proves social adhesion, instead declaring "pure acquiescence" as the necessary condition of "authentic" friendship.

Fuller conversely insists on an unimpeachable *distinction* (the "wilfulness" that, for Emerson, eradicates true friendship) that also commits to reciprocal relations. She rejects the Hobson's choice between either "perfect

acquiescence" or estrangement; her commitment is to social intercourse with those who may not "dwell in the same truth." Hence her complicated and paradoxical formulation in which it is his very failure to meet her that proves their friendship; the "impossibility of meeting," as she describes it, far from being a wholesale refusal of social intercourse, is the very ground on which social relations are forged. Her theories are compressed into the extremely precise address of the same letter, "Dear friend on one point misunderstand me less. I do not love power other than every vigorous nature delights to feel itself living." In one stroke, Fuller casts Emerson into the position of friend even as she asserts his miscomprehension (and, in that way, his distinction). Moreover, she also suggests that the goal of their intercourse is not in making each transparent to the other: she does not ask him to understand her more, but only to "misunderstand [her] less."

Fuller's depiction of miscomprehension here is significantly different from Emerson's claim in "Self-Reliance" that misunderstanding is the proof of genius. For Emerson, to be misunderstood – to use "hard words" – is to preach a "doctrine of hatred" as the test of self-reliance. For Fuller, miscomprehension is not an abandonment of sociability but a sustained commitment to it. To announce that Emerson will misunderstand her is *not* to take leave of him. We see a similar account of her understanding of the opacity of communication in Fuller's explanation as to why she preferred her old title, "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men: Woman versus Women" to *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. The original title was superior, she argues, because "it requires some thought to see what it means, and might thus prepare the reader to meet me on my own ground."[54] Fuller prefers the title that is harder to understand because it requires her audience to labor in an effort to "meet" her. Communication happens *because* of difficulty not in spite of it.

In a journal fragment written around the same period, Fuller comments extensively on her assessment of the inadequacies of Emerson's model of friendship:

> In friendship with R.W.E. I cannot hope to feel that I am his or he mine. He has nothing peculiar, nothing sacred for his friend. He is not to his friend a climate, an atmosphere, neither is his friend a being organized especially for him, born for his star. He speaks of a deed, of a thought to any commoner as much as to his peer. His creed is, Show thyself, let them take as much as they can. Thus are lost all the sweet gradations of affinity, the pleasures of tact. – A noble trust, a faith in the correspondencies of nature is the basis of this conduct but it is not regulated by demonical tact! (What an expression this.) His friendship is only strong preference and he weighs and balances, buys and sells you and himself all the time. I love to

keep the flower shut till my breeze and then open its blushful bosom to the friend alone. He too would wait, but in a different way. He would wait till esteem was challenged. I till the chain of affinity vibrated.[55]

Fuller's discursive commentary on Emerson's deficiencies cuts a wide swath, as she accuses him of being indiscriminately generous (giving himself to "commoner as much as to his peer"), as well as stingy with his affections as he "buys and sells you and himself."[56] Fuller's critique offers a sapient assessment of what we have described as the alternating logic of Emerson's theory of sociability. Insofar as his version of "authentic friendship" requires a commitment to universalism and identity, there is no occasion for the discrimination between persons – lover and stranger, "commoner or peer," would be equally proximate to the self. And yet, inasmuch as he is committed to the inviolability of individuals, the only true friend would be the stranger. As he describes it in "Manners" (invoking the language of his letter to Fuller in which he describes their intercourse as one between "foreign states"):

> Let us not be too acquainted . . . We should meet each morning, as from foreign countries, and spending the day together, should depart at night, as into foreign countries. In all things I would have the island of a man inviolate . . . Lovers should guard their strangeness. (*RWE*, 522)

According to this economy, Emerson wouldn't give up the "flower" of his amity until "esteem [is] challenged": as Fuller suggests, the only thing that compels adhesion for Emerson is alienation.

The force of her indictment is that his theory of fraternity eradicates those very things that friendship is supposed to engender: "the sweet gradations of affinity, the pleasures of tact." In so doing, he renders social reciprocities as a matter of faith (and ultimately of submission to the authority this faith represents), and not negotiation. According to Emerson's social contract, Fuller suggests, community is forged not through mediation and intercourse between its constitutive members, but only through an assumption that all are governed by a "deep identity." Tact, or manners, may be just so much social grease, but at least, Fuller insists, these rules of interaction admit to their entailments in power.

What is at stake in the dispute between Fuller and Emerson over the nature of friendship is not the particulars of their own relationship: it is not whether or not Emerson's "arctic" personality caused him to take leave of Fuller's society. Nor am I arguing that Emerson's social theory occasioned his withdrawal from the larger social world.[57] My claim is that Emerson articulates a social theory in which retreat is made identical to engagement;

as he suggests, for example, in a letter to Sturgis where he labels her as "Ideal Friend," and further describes their relations, "Present, you shall be present only as an angel might be, & absent you shall not be absent from me" (*LRWE*, II:334). In so doing, he constructs an apolitical politics in which alterity is both respected and ignored in one move. Where Fuller demands "affinity [and] tact" as the stuff by which social intercourse is orchestrated and managed, Emerson calls this "low sympathy," and posits transcendental union or isolation as the ground on which friendship (between two, or between many) is built. The most important consequence of Emerson's social theory is its obfuscation of the distinction between force and consent. If the ideal friend is one who is identical to you, then there can be no force: relations between two, who are really one, are necessarily consensual.

When Fuller charges Emerson with founding social relations on a "faith in the correspondencies of nature," she is accusing him of translating the labor of social reciprocities, and its complicated negotiation of power and consent, into an apolitical assumption either of identity or irreconcilable difference – each of which renders the legitimation of power and authority irrelevant. What emerges out of Fuller's and Emerson's engagement on the politics of friendship are competing versions of a democratic theory and practice that strives to negotiate the rights of individual persons against and with the needs of the community. Thus, while the ostensible subject of their engagement is private and particular friendship, clearly both thinkers understand friendship (and the correspondence by which it is negotiated and sustained) as an allegory for political relations more largely conceived.

In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida engages this same allegory as the fundamental paradox of democracy: "There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the 'community of friends' . . . without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal . . . More serious than a contradiction, political desire is forever borne by the disjunction of these two laws."[58] This disjunction, as we have seen, is the essence of the dispute between Fuller and Emerson. Or better put, while Fuller's understanding of democracy wrestles with this contradiction, what has made Emerson's model of democratic individualism so remarkably long-lived is that this disjunction ("more serious than a contradiction") is rendered by Emerson no contradiction at all. Since the friend, for Emerson, is he who alternates between being particular (and therefore recognized as fundamentally other) and general (and therefore indistinguishable from the larger community of which he finds himself a part), his model of friendship tidily

reconciles this paradox in which, as Derrida writes, "every other is *equally* altogether other."

Derrida's book is organized around the "performative contradiction" of an address, attributed to Aristotle, "O my friends, there is no friend,"and the same paradoxical address also served as a point of inquiry between Fuller and Emerson.[59] Relatively early on in their friendship, Fuller writes Emerson trying to justify her dereliction of epistolary duties because she has been "skeptical about the existence of any real communication between human beings." Telling Emerson she is ruminating on "that text of yours, *o my friends*, there are no friends," which she describes as a "paralyzing conviction," she further asks, "Surely, we are very unlike the Gods in 'their seats of eternal tranquility' that we need illusions so much to keep us in action" (*MF*, 1:294).[60] Fuller here suggests that the most basic fact of social life – the capacity to have friends with which to communicate – is a mystification or illusion, and the only way we are kept "in action" is by sustaining this fantasy. The illusion enacted by the apostrophe (since the one addressed is said not to exist) neatly summarizes Emerson's theory of friendship: by addressing the friend as such only to tell him that there is no fellowship, he positions the other as both *mine* and *not mine* at once.

Yet if Fuller finds herself paralyzed by the Emersonian reading of the enigmatic phrase, then she herself revises its terms so as to occasion "action." Most important to this revision is her suggestion that our lack of divinity is *not* because we recognize the impossibility of "real communication." Instead, we are "very unlike the Gods" precisely because we persist in believing in "real communication." We maintain a "faith in the correspondencies of nature" as the only basis for social interaction. This is the substance of Fuller's critique of Emerson's model of friendship: he encounters the other with the assumption that she either "dwell[s] in the same truth" as himself, or that there is no possibility of social intercourse between them. Conversely, according to Fuller, the "eternal tranquility" of the gods is that they act – they engage in social intercourse – with the full recognition of the impossibility of "real communication." Fuller's divine act, then, in this letter to Emerson is to overcome paralysis and write him, "I must say I feel a desire . . . to see my dear *no friends*." In so doing, Fuller's sociability is predicated not on the illusion that friends can be made identical to her, but on an acknowledgment of the impossibility of such "correspondencies." Consequently, while Emerson insists that one is either "authentic" friend or no friend at all and he values epistolarity precisely because it thematizes social relations in these terms, Fuller rejects the possibility of occupying either of these two antithetical positions. Sociability, for Emerson, is found in the

alternating cycle between society and solitude; for Fuller social intercourse is the art of negotiating the "sweet gradations of affinity [and] pleasures of tact" that lie between these two impossible extremes.

We might see an affinity between Fuller's demand that she'd like to see her "no friends" and Nietzsche's parodic revision of the Aristotelean phrase, "'Foes, there are no foes!' say I, the living fool."[61] Nietzsche's analysis of friendship is part and parcel of a critique of universalism: for Nietzsche, democracy based on a model of friendship dedicated to the "common good" can only be understood as a "caricature" of democracy – democracy that everywhere demands appropriation, suppression, and violence.[62] Refusing this friendship that everywhere masks its will to power, Nietzsche instead describes a "new species of philosopher" who initiates a form of friendship that Derrida describes as follows: "We are friends of an entirely different kind, inaccessible friends, friends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality."[63] Is this anchoritic friendship the only way, however, to imagine social relations that aren't necessarily implicated in appropriation and coercion? That is, if Fuller (much like Nietzsche) critiques a theory of sociability that masquerades self-interest as universalism, then she nonetheless rejects the sequestered life that this realization demands for Nietzsche (and Derrida).

Indeed, this position of isolation seems more closely aligned to Emerson's ideal since he too grounds (at least one version of) community in the inaccessibility of one to another. We might well see a fundamental similarity between Emerson, Nietzsche, and Derrida as each asserts incommunicability as a consequence of their theories of friendship. Thus, Emerson insists on an "absurd" and barely "intelligible" expression that will somehow reconcile the particular and the universal; Nietzsche likewise intones, "Is it any wonder we 'free spirits' are not precisely the most communicative of spirits?"[64] And Derrida too can only conclude his meditation on the possibility of a democracy "uproot[ed] from . . . these figures of friendship" with a stuttering deferral of possibility: "For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains . . . it will always remain in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept."[65]

It is this necessary and infinite deferral of democratic possibility that leads Thomas McCarthy, in his critique of Derrida's politics of friendship, to ask whether Derrida offers the best way to think about "social relations so as not to exclude or forcefully assimilate what is different."[66] McCarthy's response to Derrida restages the debate between Habermas and Foucault as to whether we must see in the project of enlightenment only a dominating

(if also constructively so) power, or if there is a counter-discourse that can find in modernity emancipation.[67] I gesture towards this debate because it reinscribes the terms central to the argument between Fuller and Emerson as to what constitutes the ideal model of friendship, and, by extension, what is the best model for imagining a social practice that tries to accommodate the demands of autonomy and solidarity.

Fuller herself offers an account of her disagreement with Emerson as the difference between his commitment to *truth* and her commitment to *love*. Describing a moonlight walk with Emerson, she narrates their respective interpretations of the dappled scene. For Emerson, the "twinkling light" compels him to "demand the whole secret," and he understands nature to both promise and refuse revelation of this secret. Fuller writes that she "never could meet him here," and her response is to be "satisfied" by the temporary correspondence between her and nature, "for nature had said the very word that was lying in my heart."[68] Fuller reveals the difference between a desire for revelation whose absence compels desire itself (Emerson's truth) and the fulfillment of revelation even as it assumed to be only temporal and partial (Fuller's love). Although Fuller admits that she and Emerson never reach any agreement, she remains happy they've had "good talks." For Fuller, good talks and the letters that record them are the sufficient condition of a politics of democratic friendship.[69]

CHAPTER 3

Melville's dead letters

Like Margaret Fuller, Herman Melville interrogates Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Friendship." In *The Confidence-Man* (1857), he offers a parodic portrayal of Emerson's theories of friendship in the character of Egbert, the "practical disciple" of Mark Winsome, author of "Essay on Friendship." Like its Emersonian prototype, Winsome's theory of friendship asserts that ideal social relations are with strangers, and it is in these terms that the Thoreauvian Egbert refuses to succumb to the Confidence-Man's appeals to fraternal trust: "I entirely agree with my sublime master, who, in his Essay on Friendship, says so nobly, that if he want a terrestrial convenience, not to his friend celestial (or friend social and intellectual) would he go."[1] The essence of the transcendentalist friendship, Melville's novel suggests, is misanthropy.

The novel also intimates that the basis of the friendship between Egbert and his philosophical mentor, Winsome, is tyranny. Hence the Confidence-Man accuses Winsome of having "usurp[ed]" Egbert's voice: "It is Mark Winsome that speaks, not [you]" (1062). Egbert responds by asserting his fundamental identity with Mark Winsome:

> If so, thank heaven, the voice of Mark Winsome is not alien but congenial to my larynx. If the philosophy of that illustrious teacher find little response among mankind at large, it is less that they do not possess teachable tempers, than because they are so unfortunate as not to have natures predisposed to accord with him. (HM, 1,062)

Because Egbert's nature is "predisposed to accord" with his master's – because there is a natural correspondence between them – there is no usurpation. And yet, when Egbert offers a tale to illustrate the validity of this theory of friendship, he himself raises the anxiety of tyrannical ventriloquism. Prefacing his story of "China Aster" (which will prove the danger of borrowing between friends), Egbert admits that the tale itself is borrowed:

> I will tell you about China Aster. I wish I could do so in my own words, but unhappily the original story-teller here has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style. (HM, 1,063)

Here Egbert admits his desire to speak "in my own words," and he declares his mimetic style to be a symptom of the tyrannical power of another exerted against his own will.

Melville's implicit critique is not just that transcendentalism is another species of a confidence game, but that this game depends on the conversion of tyrannical usurpation into consensual accord. In this way, Melville's analysis of Emerson's theory of sociability roughly follows Fuller's own critique. In the name of a "predisposed accord," or what Fuller called a "faith in the correspondencies of nature," Egbert embraces the tyranny of imposition. But while Fuller's resistance to this model of sociability was to assert her commitment to "good talks" with "no friends," Melville's response to his developing recognition of the coercive tendency implied in projects of correspondence (be they literary, philosophical, or political) will be a nihilistic refusal to speak: a commitment to the dead letter.

This tendency is exemplified early on in Melville's *Pierre; or the Ambiguities* (1852), the novel that perhaps most rigorously critiques the fundamental tenets of transcendentalist correspondence via a retrospective appeal to the nation's early epistolary novels. Although not epistolary, letters shape the narrative arc of the entire novel. For example, the perfect quiescence of Pierre's boyhood home, Saddlemeadows, is shattered when he receives the mysterious letter from Isabel, who claims to be his abandoned illegitimate sister. Isabel is the progeny of a rake (Pierre's father) and a seduced young woman and, in this way, *Pierre* presents the aftermath of a seduction plot. And as in *The Power of Sympathy*, Melville reveals incest as a consequence of adultery: just as Harriot fell in love with her brother, Isabel marries her brother Pierre.

Isabel's letter is also crucial because it effects divisions that Pierre spends the rest of the novel trying to repair. Pierre is first torn asunder by Isabel's letter in his uncanny encounter with his own reflection in the mirror: he "started at a figure in the opposite mirror [which] bore the outline of Pierre, but now strangely filled with features transformed, and unfamiliar to him."[2] Soon after Pierre is described as having "two antagonistic agencies within him . . . struggling into his consciousness, and each of which was striving for the mastery" (HM, 77). Faced with the division that Isabel's letter wrought, Pierre turns transcendentalist and, replaying the

famous scene from Emerson's *Nature*, he rushes into the "infinite air" of this new world: "bareheaded he rushed from the place, and only in the infinite air, found scope for that boundless expansion of his life" (HM, 81). Just as the transcendentalist cure can be offered only in consideration of the split between the soul and nature, so too does Pierre turn to his own "transcendentalist persuasions" only after he encounters separation between himself and the world. As did Emerson and Fuller, Melville establishes an analogy between philosophical correspondence and literal correspondence: it is Isabel's letter that forces Pierre to see the world as essentially divided; and it is Isabel's letter that compels Pierre's project of correspondence – to repair the rift her letter caused.

This is the dialectical problem that is replayed again and again in *Pierre* in which there is a transformation from unity into division – a scene emblematized in the novel with the citation of "that wonderful verse from Dante" that describes the "mutually absorbing shapes in the Inferno" from canto 25: "Ah! How dost thou change, Agnello! See! Thou art nor double now, Nor only one!" (HM, 104). In some ways, however, this depiction of the transformation between human and reptilian bodies from Dante is precisely what Pierre himself refuses. That is, while the portrait of the sinners emphasizes their "transformation" (that they are neither one nor double), Pierre's own project is to reject this inchoate shape in favor of the extremes of unity or division. Throughout the novel Pierre demands structural correspondence, and the appearance of doubles occasions the construction of such correspondences. For example, Pierre considers the difference between two portraits of his father: the "chair portrait," which depicts his father as a young man and "as a wooer" (HM, 93); and the "drawing-room painting" that his mother commissioned of his father as an older man: "Consider in thy mind, Pierre, whether we two paintings may not make only one" (HM, 101). Pierre's speculations on this query are rigidly dialectical: insofar as the paintings are two, they only make one. And the consequence of the "intuitive" power of Isabel's letter is to make the paintings correspond "by some ineffable correlativeness, they reciprocally identified each other, and, as it were, melted into each other, and thus interpenetratingly uniting, presented lineaments of an added supernaturalness" (HM, 103). Pierre's response to the correspondence (or reciprocal identification) that comes of literal correspondence (Isabel's letter) is transcendental epiphany: "On all sides, the physical world of solid objects now slidingly displaced itself from around him, and he floated into an ether of visions" (HM, 103).

Pierre's commitment to transcendental unity is disrupted (but not entirely derailed) by the ethical dilemma that Isabel's letter raises: what

should Pierre do to correct the sin of his father? To publicly admit Isabel as a sister, he determines, would be to destroy his mother's idealization of his father as a devoted and faithful husband. To ignore Isabel's appeal would be to repeat his father's abandonment of her. Hence the novel accuses Pierre of "blind dotishness" in imagining that he can somehow construct a solution that will appease all parties: "Thy two grand resolutions – the public acknowledgment of Isabel, and the charitable withholding of her existence from thy own mother, – these are impossible adjuncts . . . once brought together, they all mutually expire" (HM, 203). Refusing to admit "the infinite entanglements of all social things," Pierre resolves to make these "two grand resolutions" correspond, and he does so by renouncing his fiancée Lucy and marrying Isabel – an act that will make him "the grand self-renouncing victim" (HM, 204).

This act of self-effacing martyrdom (not unlike Clara Howard's) is also an act of exceptional egoism in which Pierre subscribes to the logic outlined in Emerson's "Love": that is, Pierre relinquishes his beloved, Lucy, in favor of Isabel because the latter is translated into a symbol of universal love. In other words, Pierre determines that his marriage to Isabel is part and parcel of his transcendental commitments. Pierre's transcendental refusal of "all fleshly alliances" allows him to imagine that his rejection of his mother and Lucy in favor of Isabel is a commitment to an absolute good. That the novel clearly understands Pierre's determination as misconceived is made explicit when, despite Pierre's belief that he is an "immortal bachelor and god," the narrator tells us that Pierre is nonetheless destined to "descend to earth . . . to be uxorious once more; glad to hide these god-like heads within the bosoms made of too-seducing clay" (HM, 214). This conflict between Pierre's transcendental pretensions and his inevitable mortality is thematized by Plinlimmon's pamphlet, a text inserted within the novel that Pierre reads in his flight from Saddlemeadows.

The author of the pamphlet, Plotinus Plinlimmon, announces that because our knowledge is "but provisional," all our moral judgments are contingent (HM, 247). Analogizing the distinction between the "heavenly wisdom of God" and the "so-called wisdom" of man as the difference between the time in China and that in Greenwich, Plinlimmon rails against the absurd bravado by which humans imagine that they can abide by a heavenly moral standard:

> And thus, though the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly to man . . . Nor does the God at the heavenly Greenwich expect common men to keep Greenwich wisdom in this remote Chinese world of ours. (HM, 249)

Such an argument would seem, then, to refute Pierre's pretension that he had found a universal standard by which to regulate his own conduct. It would seem as if the pamphlet openly challenges Pierre's belief that his marriage to Isabel offers the attainment of a transcendental truth.[3] Yet, if the pamphlet's evident message is the contradiction between transcendental and temporal morality, Plinlimmon's ultimate emphasis is the reconciliation of this contradiction. He announces, "it follows not from this, that God's truth is one thing and man's truth another; but . . . by their very contradictions they are made to correspond" (HM, 249). This world's seeming incompatibility with God results from its meridianal correspondence with Him (HM, 250).

Plinlimmon's dialectical logic echoes Emerson's explanation of the essential *contradiction* and *correspondence* between radical individualism and transcendental universalism. Just as Plinlimmon refuses to admit an incongruity between human and divine, so too does Emerson (even in his manifesto for self-reliance) insist that there is no fundamental contradiction between the individual will and the transcendental one. Viewed at "sufficient distance," the contradictions are made to correspond. Similar as well is the justification both Emerson and the fictional Plinlimmon offer as to how these moral philosophies do not inevitably tend towards antinomianism. Emerson writes:

> The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism . . . But the law of consciousness abides . . . If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day.[4]

Plinlimmon likewise elucidates how his philosophy does not yield moral laxity: "This chronometrical conceit does by no means involve the justification of all the acts which wicked men may perform. For in their wickedness downright wicked men sin as much against their own horologes, as against the heavenly chronometer" (HM, 250). The anxiety that self-reliance or chronometrics will be aligned with moral anarchy reveals the ways in which the move towards increasing secularism is accompanied by a fear of incipient social chaos. And crucially *correspondence* (between chronometric and horologic, between self-reliant individualism and transcendental universalism) is the means by which this anarchical possibility is disciplined.

Pierre's error, however, is not that he ignores the moral philosophy of the pamphlet, but that he abides by it: like Plinlimmon, he assumes the contradiction between the heavenly and the human can be erased. Yet the

novel's narrator declares the impossibility of finding this reconciliation: "Now without doubt this Talismanic Secret has never yet been found; and in the nature of human things it seems as though it never can be" (HM, 244). Repudiating Plinlimmon's correspondence theory, the narrator announces that the pamphlet exemplifies (and does *not* resolve) Pierre's moral dilemma: "it seems more the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem than the solution of the problem itself" (HM, 247).[5]

Pierre's "transcendental persuasions" are ultimately conquered by two "events." First, Pierre dedicates himself to authorship by repudiating his earlier puerile style that had been celebrated for its "Perfect Taste." Having been lauded as a tasteful and genteel author in his complacent youth, Pierre determines, upon his departure from Saddlemeadows, that authorship will be the means by which he makes a livelihood. Pierre's new book, however, is utterly rejected by his publishers. They send Pierre a letter that declares the novel to be "blasphemous rhapsody, filched from the vile Atheists, Lucian and Voltaire" (HM, 413). This piece of correspondence is markedly different from the sycophantic letters Pierre had received for his juvenile writing: hoards of "lovely envelopes" from young ladies (HM, 293), "epistolary solicitations" requesting that he pose for portraits (HM, 296), and other "epistolary petitions" from "silly correspondents" (HM, 299). When Pierre burns his juvenilia, he therefore "kill[s] the last and minutest undeveloped microscopic germ of that most despicable vanity to which those absurd correspondents thought to appeal" (HM, 299).

But this conflagration is not enough to cure Pierre entirely of his transcendental urges, and the final rupture comes in a strangely anticlimactic scene in which Pierre and Isabel discover a portrait of a "stranger's head" during a visit to a museum. Both Pierre and Isabel start at the painting: Isabel because she sees in it her own likeness and Pierre because he sees a resemblance between it and the "chair-portrait" of his father. What would appear here to be a moment of reciprocity, however, becomes precisely the opposite for Pierre. This moment of apparent correspondence – in which both Pierre and Isabel respond in seeming kind to the same painting – compels Pierre for the first time to distrust Isabel's claims of sisterhood. The portrait emphasizes for Pierre not Isabel's connection to him, but the impossibility of ever securing any connection with another. Hence, in a passage strangely reminiscent of Brockden Brown's *Jane Talbot* (in which Jane meditated, "How does it fall out that the same object is viewed by two observers with such opposite sensations"), we see that the emphasis is not on the identity of their respective interpretations, but on their inevitable distinction:

> So that there here came to pass a not unremarkable thing: for though both were intensely excited by one object, yet their two minds and memories were thereby directed to entirely different contemplations; while still each, for the time – however unreasonably – might have vaguely supposed the other occupied by one and the same contemplation. Pierre was thinking of the chair-portrait: Isabel, of the living face. Yet Isabel's fervid exclamations having reference to the living face, were now, as it were, mechanically responded to by Pierre, in syllables having reference to the chair-portrait. Nevertheless, so subtile and spontaneous was it all, that neither perhaps ever afterward discovered this contradiction. (HM, 408)

Here *pace* Plinlimmon's pamphlet, contradiction is not made to correspond: and Pierre is instead struck with the "revolutionizing thought" that Isabel is not really his sister.

In this way, the entire plot of *Pierre* is an extended meditation on the problem of correspondences. And we see a deep interest in correspondence in much of Melville's fiction of the early 1850s: not only in *Pierre*, but in "Bartleby" where the title-character is discovered to have worked in the Dead Letter Office, and in "The Encantadas," which concludes with an extended discussion of the importance of the post office to civilization.[6] These concerns are also central to Melville's literal correspondence with Nathaniel Hawthorne during this same period. Melville's repeated turn to epistolarity as a metaphor for social communication offers a challenge to a model of epistolarity that is rendered not only by transcendentalism (as we have seen above), but also by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James remembers his childhood misapprehension of the title of *The Scarlet Letter*:

> The writer of these lines, who was a child at the time, remembers dimly the sensation the book produced, and the little shudder with which people alluded to it, as if a peculiar horror were mixed with its attractions. He was too young to read it himself, but its title, upon which he fixed his eyes as the book lay upon the table, had a mysterious charm. He had a vague belief indeed that the "letter" in question was one of the documents that come by the post, and it was a source of perpetual wonderment to him that it should be of such an unaccustomed hue.[7]

James's translation of childhood mistake into adult pun is warranted by Hawthorne's own assumption of the very same pun in his introduction to the novel, the "Custom House," in which he describes his discovery of the faded scarlet letter in an "envelope" made of "ancient yellow parchment." Moreover, although Hawthorne originally speculates that the envelope "had the air of an official record," once he opens the seductive seal, he finds the enclosed letters and papers to be "of a private nature."[8]

In a novel that asks how the law can be made to function successfully when there may be no stabilized meaning to the letters that write the law, Hawthorne begins by literally opening the enveloped package that contains Hester's scarlet letter. Likewise in Melville's *Moby Dick*, which labors to catalogue the possible meanings of the leviathan symbol of the white whale, Ishmael explicitly metaphorizes the project of cetology as postal work: "My object here is simply to project the draught of a systematization of cetology. I am the architect, not the builder. But it is a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post-office is equal to it."[9] *Moby Dick* is here an extraordinary example of letter-sorting. For both authors, then, correspondence becomes a privileged metaphor by which to describe the politics of communicative exchange.

A good deal of critical attention has focused on the letters from Melville to Hawthorne between 1850 and 1852; and the anonymously published essay, "Hawthorne & His Mosses" (1850), has even been described as an early "love letter" from Melville to Hawthorne.[10] Most interest in these letters, however, has centered around biographical issues: psychological questions concerning the relationship between the two authors (was Melville really in love with Hawthorne and did Hawthorne leave Lenox because of the effusive and often passionate letters from Melville?) or claims that Melville offers access to his artistic theory in these letters.[11] I will instead suggest that both writers are invested in the epistolary form because letter-writing serves for both (albeit in very different ways) as a model for testing the limits of a democratic poetics that is of central concern to their work.[12] Yet, if both Melville and Hawthorne are firmly committed to a democratic literature – a national literature capable of meeting the standards of the nation's political ideals – then it is also clear that there is strong disagreement as to what constitutes the primary imperative of American liberal democracy. Is it a commitment to individual sovereignty or to the communitarian ideals of egalitarian participation? As we have seen, the polar extremes to which each commitment might lead – individualism to tyranny, republicanism to anarchy – have long defined the rhetorical terms by which anxieties about the potential failure of the American experiment have been deployed. The rhetoric of American liberalism, of course, has always labored to show how these commitments can be harmonized. In "Politics," for example, Emerson argues that these "two poles [and] two forces" offset each other, because "[w]ild liberty develops iron conscience [and w]ant of liberty, by strengthening law and decorum, stupefies conscience."[13] Melville, quite differently from Emerson, insists on the immanent threat of *both* possibilities. For Melville there is no faith (theological or rational) that such forces will

counterbalance one another; and instead he outlines the ways in which a dedication to sovereignty (which threatens anarchy) and a commitment to solidarity (which threatens tyranny) are in constant conflict.

Letter-writing, which presumes to harmonize sovereignty with solidarity, furnishes Melville with a privileged trope by which to describe the tyrannical and anarchical possibilities of liberal democracy.[14] Because epistolary writing calls attention to the reciprocity between reader and writer, it serves to highlight the potential negative consequences of written relationships: authorial tyranny or interpretive anarchy. On one hand, communication between writer and reader is desired, but because communicative union can also presume consensus with authorial voice, the potential cost is tyranny. On the other hand, writing that allows for the possibility of heterogeneous readings (and therefore avoids authorial tyranny) risks the loss of union (and therefore, potentially, of meaning).

These antitheses are central to both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*: as many critics have noted, both novels explicitly concern themselves with issues of interpretation in their representations of both allegory and the multiple scenes of reading that allegory occasions.[15] And these hermeneutic concerns have significant political ramifications in both novels. The heterogeneous meaning of the "A" risks both interpretive and political anarchy, in which the scarlet letter does *not* do its office.[16] Conversely, the monolithic will of Ahab, which works to stabilize the meaning of the white whale, will yield both authorial and political tyranny on board the *Pequod*. This admittedly highly schematic rendering of the interpretative problem of the two novels is useful insofar as it points to the important tension in both American politics and literature between democratic ideals and anxieties that democratization will yield either anarchy or tyrannical conformity. While the problem for both authors is how to negotiate a solution by which they can avoid both authorial tyranny and interpretive anarchy, there is radical disagreement as to which will ultimately be understood as the lesser of two evils.

That the letter could serve for both Melville and Hawthorne as such a useful metaphor by which to describe the central issues of American democracy is not surprising given that between 1840 and 1850 letter-writing was increasingly celebrated as a particularly democratic mode of communication. During this period, following the postal reforms in Britain inaugurated by Rowland Hill in 1838, citizens of the United States first began agitating for what was then called the "cheap post." The British reforms had instituted several important changes: a standardized postal rate (instead of one calibrated by the distance mail traveled); pre-stamped envelopes (in which

mail was paid on delivery, not on receipt); and the expansion of delivery and pickup services to individual addresses. Soon after these changes occurred abroad, there was much discussion in the United States about how similarly to expand postal services so that *all* citizens would be given equal access to communication. An 1843 essay, for example, maintained that the "end for which [the post office] exists, is the *equal accommodation* of every member of the community, and therefore the system must spread its branches over the whole country, those parts of it which are unprofitable being sustained by the revenues of those parts which are profitable."[17]

This demand for "equal accommodation" was largely an appeal that all regions of the United States should be given equal access to the post. Such access was becoming increasingly feasible, since after 1838 railroads were used as postal routes; but the expansion of postal routes also raised the controversial issue of cost. Those in the North (and especially in the northeast seaboard cities) maintained that they were paying postal rates that were in excess of the actual cost of mail delivery and, thus, were subsidizing mail delivery to the rest of the country. Those in the South, as well as in the rural areas in the North and West, countered that they should not be made to suffer financially for doing the hard work of American manifest destiny. One writer in 1848 asks why it should be that "[m]y brother in New Orleans shall pay more for a message, because he has the *disadvantage* of living further from the centre of the social circle than I do."[18] It should come as no surprise, then, that in the period leading up to the Civil War, the national post office increasingly becomes a topic in both unionist and separatist rhetoric. On one hand, it is defined as an institution that gives voice to factionalism by forcing regions to accommodate themselves to the finances and politics of the other regions. (For example, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, there were violent disputes over whether or not abolitionists should be allowed to mail political propaganda to southern states.) On the other hand, however, the national post office was seen as the institution that worked to connect the country's many regions together.[19]

Many, for example, claimed that the expanding Post would do much to cure the increasing factionalism in the nation:

> It is of no small importance politically and morally, as well as in respect to commercial interests, to make the means of communication between these scattered friends and kindred, as perfect and as cheap as possible. How much would the ties of kindred and friendship between the remotest portions of the country be strengthened . . . if the means of communication, or rather of communion, should be thus cheapened and perfected. Our Post-Office system as it now is, is one of the most powerful of the influences which hold our Union together, and keep these

States from falling apart in the agitations of faction. The system, spread through the whole land, and connecting every human habitation with every other, is every where the channel of a vital energy. The more we perfect the system – the more numerously letters of business, of friendship, of scientific enterprise, pass between the east and the west, between the north and the south – just so much the more do we strengthen the ties that make us one people.[20]

Similar sentiments would be expressed throughout the 1840s, as in the following editorial in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*:

We need not spend time to show the social and moral and intellectual advantages that would flow from the establishment of a post-office upon such a system [as that inaugurated with the British reforms] . . . [I]t would keep alive affections and friendship which now die out in distance; it would, in short, be a new *bond of union*, binding the people together in knowledge, and sympathy, and love.[21]

Here postal routes are the metaphoric links holding the nation together.

Melville's and Hawthorne's interrogations of correspondence similarly associate technologies of communication with democratic theories, and they similarly liken political union with communicative union – an association that might remind us of Whitman's opening lines in "Song of Myself." Just as Whitman presumes that the "assumption" of meaning will unify the body politic, discussions of postal reform presume that if channels of communication remain open between the North and South (if those in Virginia, for example, can write letters to their brethren in Vermont), then the nation will not splinter apart.

Yet, while the letter is a potent metaphor by which both authors understand the politics of communication, it is also clear that both authors do *not* understand the metaphor as functioning in the same way. My interest is not to attend to the specific interpretive complexities of *The Scarlet Letter*, but rather to consider the ways in which a long tradition of literary critics – beginning with Melville himself – have understood the novel in terms of address, consensus, and union that are also central problems of epistolarity. Hawthorne himself provides the terms of this interpretive framework, as he announces in "The Custom House," that there is a consequential difference between private letters and public literature. He disparages those authors who address themselves "only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy," arguing instead that the author should ideally write to a friend, "though not the closest friend," and that the disclosure should resemble overheard conversation and not intimate confession.[22] In other words, Hawthorne explicitly mandates that novels *not* be written as if

they were love letters: "as if the printed book . . . were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it."[23] Moreover, he ultimately intimates that novels ought not be written to any *one* person in particular: the novel does not offer perfect communication between the writer and reader, but is instead a report of the writer's communication with another.

This theory of literary exchange would seem necessarily to suggest that literature does not presume union: there can be and should be no communion, or "sympathy" (to use Hawthorne's favorite term), between writer and reader. We might, then, understand Hawthorne's comments on authorial relations as a pledge against authorial tyranny, and this posture would seem consonant with the critique of Puritan tyranny thematized in his novel. The insistence at the beginning of "The Custom-House" that the public novel is fundamentally different from a private letter is the means by which Hawthorne can raise the theoretical possibility of interpretive freedom. Because the novel is not written to one person (because there is no directed address), there is no attempt to impose meaning. Yet by asserting that there is no necessary union between reader and writer, Hawthorne also raises the possibility of offering no meaning at all, and this possibility ultimately proves deeply troubling to the novel.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne flirts with this radical indeterminacy, since throughout much of the novel there is no consensus as to how to read the "A"; but, as Sacvan Bercovitch persuasively argues, Hawthorne ultimately forecloses this ambiguity by having Hester *volunteer* to wear the letter. Her voluntary action allows the letter finally to forge a symbolic community – and, importantly, one that results not from force, but through consent.[24] As such, the possibility of interpretive freedom that the novel seems to offer is modified into a design for consensus. Bercovitch illustrates Hawthorne's political work as he describes his own recasting of the terms by which critics have traditionally praised the novel's modernity:

> Frank Kermode's claim for Hawthorne's modernity – "his texts . . . are meant as invitations to co-production on the part of the reader" – is accurate in a sense quite different from that which he intended. Kermode speaks of "a virtually infinite set of questions"; *The Scarlet Letter* holds out that mystifying prospect . . . in order to implicate us as co-producers of meaning in a single, coherent moral–political–aesthetic design.[25]

As Bercovitch's engagement with Kermode here reminds us, the novel sets the "A" in motion from its initial signification of "Adultery" toward a

dizzying array of multiple and contradictory references (Allegory, Antinomianism, Able, Ambiguity, etc.), or what Matthiessen called Hawthorne's "multiple-choice."[26] Yet, as the recipients (as "co-producers") of *The Scarlet Letter*, we can ultimately read the novel in only one way, just as Hawthorne's own "one heart and mind of perfect sympathy" (as he frequently refers to Sophia in his love letters) cannot help but read her husband's novel correctly: "It is most powerful, & contains a moral as terrific & stunning as a thunder bolt. It shows that the Law cannot be broken."[27] In her commentary, Sophia Hawthorne describes the intractability of *The Scarlet Letter*'s meaning: she cannot misread the novel's message, which is that the law cannot be broken (which is to say, the letter "A" cannot be misread).

Hawthorne's late attempt to recuperate meaning – by asserting that all inevitably will voluntarily abide by the law – is, according to Bercovitch, commensurate with the principal rhetoric of the founding text of American liberal ideology: "[Hawthorne] invites us to participate in a free enterprise democracy of symbol making. Its cultural model is the ambiguity universalized in the Declaration of Independence: *We* hold these truths to be *self*-evident."[28] Indeed, Hawthorne even depicts his own participation in this communal reading when, towards the conclusion of the "Custom-House," he describes his own receipt of the enveloped scarlet letter as occasioning a mystical communion in which, although he cannot offer interpretation, he cannot fail to comprehend the letter's meaning: "Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streaming forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of mind."[29] Hawthorne here positions himself as a privileged *reader* who inevitably is in perfect sympathy with the text he reads.[30] In so doing, then, he asserts that literature follows a model of correspondence: many will read as if it were addressed to them alone.

Thus although Hawthorne begins with the dictum that literature should *not* be read as if it were a letter – as if the author tried to enlist his reader in complete sympathy with his intended meaning – the conclusions of both his preface and the novel suggest that this relationship will be forged regardless of the intentions of lawmakers or novel-writers. In other words, Hawthorne revises his initial claim that the public novel does not follow the model of the private letter, since his novel proves that writing is necessarily addressed to the "heart[s] and mind[s] of perfect sympathy."[31] Only then does the letter do its office. Thus Hawthorne raises the theoretical possibility of writing a democratic text that allows for interpretive anarchy, but it is

only ever a theoretical possibility. Choosing between the dangers of tyranny (perfect correspondence between reader and writer) and anarchy (no correspondence between reader and writer), Hawthorne will opt for the dangers of tyranny. Significantly, however, this choice is not made manifest, since the political work of the scarlet letter – the novel and the artifact – and the founding text of American democracy is that they maintain the fantasy of heterogeneous reading, even as they inevitably bring all their readers into interpretive consensus.[32]

Although Melville's engagement with the politics of correspondence eventually leads him toward very different conclusions, early in his relationship with Hawthorne, he seems similarly to insist that literature should imitate correspondence's efforts to bring the author into communion with his reader. Melville, for example, offers an explicit depiction of literature as a *correspondence* in a letter to Richard Henry Dana, Jr. in May of 1850:

> I thank you heartily for your friendly letter; and am more pleased than I can well tell, to think that any thing I have written about the sea has at all responded to your own impressions of it . . . And I am specially delighted at the thought, that those strange, congenial feelings, with which after my first voyage, I for the first time read "Two Years Before the Mast", and while so engaged was, as it were, tied & welded to you by a sort of Siamese link of affectionate sympathy —— that these feelings should be reciprocated by you, in your turn, and be called out by any White Jackets or Redburns of mine – this is indeed delightful to me . . . I almost think, I should hereafter – in the case of a sea book – get my M.S.S. neatly & legibly copied by a scrivener – send you that one copy – & deem such a procedure the best publication.[33]

Melville is so delighted by Dana's "sympathy" with his sea tales that he imagines reconfiguring publication as intimate and exclusive exchange: he idealizes publication to the "one heart and mind of perfect sympathy," or, as Melville figures it, to his "Siamese" twin. Similarly, in "Hawthorne & His Mosses," Melville all but repeats Hawthorne's account of his own reading of the faded scarlet letter: "You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold."[34] Both Hawthorne's "reading" of the scarlet letter and Melville's reading of Hawthorne initiate scenes of communion that transcend analysis and speak directly to the *sensibilities* of the heart. Thus, according to Melville, Hawthorne's fiction disables interpretation and offers in its place the more substantial communion of intuition. He can respond, therefore, to Hawthorne's writing as if it were written to him alone, and he can align himself with Hawthorne not as a man of the same mind, but of the same *heart*.[35]

He offers a similar depiction of literary relations in his subsequent letters to Hawthorne. Most illustrative is the oft-quoted rapturous letter in which Melville responds to Hawthorne's praise for *Moby Dick*:

> Your letter was handed me last night . . . I felt pantheistic then – your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's. A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. (*C*, 212)

Here Melville articulates the transcendent union (albeit described in wholly bodily terms) that is occasioned by Hawthorne's comprehension of Melville's "paper allegories"; and significantly, this union happens at the moment of literal correspondence in which Melville reads Hawthorne's letter.

Given that Melville's depiction of merger with Hawthorne is articulated primarily as a celebration of Hawthorne's having *understood* his novel (for it is the exchange of texts that causes the exchange of bodies), then we might understand Melville's desire for union as being fundamentally a matter of hermeneutics. Hawthorne cannot read incorrectly when he and Melville literally comprise one body. Indeed, Melville later intimates that their merger is so profound that Hawthorne can accurately read allegorical meanings that he himself had not even intended, when, in a letter to Sophia Hawthorne, he writes: "I had some vague idea while writing it [*Moby Dick*], that the whole book was susceptible of an allegorical construction & also that *parts* of it were – but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr Hawthorne's letter" (*C*, 219). In his depiction of collaborative reading and writing, Melville strives to negotiate a problematic similar to that which Hawthorne negotiated in *The Scarlet Letter*. Since he had only a "vague idea" of the allegory while writing, Melville does not insist on a specific interpretation of his text; but because Hawthorne can so accurately read the novel, Melville also does not risk miscommunication. As such, it would appear that Melville here imagines, in terms with which Hawthorne would approve, a democratic poetics that escapes charges of both authorial tyranny and interpretive anarchy.

Yet, alongside this illustration of union we also see Melville *refuse* merger with his friend. Thus, immediately after his depiction of pantheistic congregation, Melville writes:

> Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips – lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the God head is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. (*C*, 212)

Melville ruptures the "ineffable socialit[y]" with the accusation that this very transcendence undermines private property rights ("what *right* do you drink *from my* flagon of life?"). Yet, he also immediately restores "fraternity" by translating the fragmentation into a description of another kind of transcendence through the metaphor of the Host. Further, in a series of postscripts that conclude this letter, we see him again offer vacillating accounts of his desire for union:

> P. S. I can't stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I'll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand – a million – billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you. The divine magnet is on you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question – they are *One*.
>
> P.P.S. Don't think that by writing me a letter, you shall always be bored with an immediate reply to it – and so keep both of us delving over a writing-desk eternally. No such thing! I sh'n't always answer your letters, and you may do just as you please. (*C*, 213–14)

The first postscript envisions and enacts a scene of ceaseless correspondence as the technique of union: the endless letter will literally unite Melville with Hawthorne. Union, then, depends primarily on the invention of two fantastical technologies of communication: first, the endless roll of stationery; and secondly (and less fantastically), the metaphor of magnetic communication, a reference to the new technology of the telegraph, which at the time was celebrated precisely because it would enable a network of communication that would make possible the magical endless letter Melville here imagines. As an 1853 book on the American telegraph puts it, "Of all the marvellous achievements of modern science, the Electric Telegraph is transcendently the greatest and most serviceable to mankind . . . For what is the end to be accomplished, but the most spiritual ever possible? Not the modification or transportation of matter, but the transmission of thought."[36]

Yet, while the first postscript idealizes union between Hawthorne and Melville, the second, and concluding, postscript insists on the separations that are also necessarily entailed in letter-writing. Here meditation on the reciprocity of epistolarity leads Melville to admit that although he might write endless letters to join himself to Hawthorne, he cannot regulate his correspondent's reception of these same letters. Thus, he defensively insists that he too will not always reciprocate Hawthorne's affections. And, in so doing, he also maintains that he and Hawthorne have separate identities,

since he now requires Hawthorne to take responsibility for his own actions: "you may do just as you please."[37]

The most frequent explanation for this odd dynamic in the letters, in which Melville oscillates frantically between demanding union with and separation from Hawthorne, reads the vacillation as evidence of Melville's ambivalent relationship with his friend. Criticism on the letters has historically been divided into two camps: one that argues for the letters as revealing Melville's confusions about his erotic attachment to Hawthorne; and the other that claims the letters evidence his ambivalence about Hawthorne's literary influence. Yet, regardless of whether the focus is on the literary or the sexual component of their relationship, the letters are nevertheless read as symptomatic of Melville's hysteria (and I use the word advisedly) – his irresolution as evidence of his instability. Most recently, for example, in his account of the relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, David Laskin writes:

> Read in sequence, the letters form a recurrent tidal pattern of advances and withdrawals, revelations and denials, solicitations and apologies. One can practically see Melville at his desk, scribbling away in a passion of communion and then pulling up abruptly, hot in the face with embarrassment over what he has written.[38]

I want to suggest that this oscillation is not symptomatic of Melville's lack of control; rather, he deliberately shifts his positions in these letters as he recognizes the potential literary–political consequences of *both* union and individualism. His fantasy of union is clearly an attempt to protect his fiction from the anarchy of meaninglessness: if a novel is an endless letter written between two who are in perfect sympathy (whose bodies literally incorporate each other), then there can be no failed communication. Melville can rest in "unspeakable security" that someone has understood his book. As such, this depiction of literature as engendering merger has the same ideological function as did Hawthorne's depiction of Hester's voluntary submission to the law. Both attempt to construct a unified community of readers.

But the potential cost of this model of union is tyranny, as Melville acknowledges when he accuses Hawthorne of infringing on his property rights ("By what right do you drink from my flagon of life?"). Thus, although Melville's depiction of corporeal communion is often identified as evidence of homoeroticism in his letters to Hawthorne, in fact, this communion would prove necessarily unsatisfactory precisely because such merger renders erotics impossible: there can be no desire, no bodies, and no language, when all are "One."[39] As Melville himself articulates,

absolute "socialities" are necessarily "ineffable," and he recognizes this paradox throughout the letters. For example, in an earlier letter to Hawthorne, Melville meditates on a phrase of Goethe's that has interested him:

> "Live in the all." That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one, – good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods . . . What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!" (*C*, 193)

Although he sympathizes with the motives behind the transcendentalist urge, he ridicules the ease with which transcendentalism dispenses with the materialism of bodies and the individuality of experience. Moreover, in a *nota bene* appended to the letter, Melville explains that while there are moments when one might be capable of living in the all (which he describes in Whitmanian terms as "lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head"), such moments happen only *temporarily*. This, for Melville, is the fallacy of Goethe's manifesto: "what plays mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (*C*, 194).

Significantly, in an illustrative postscript that concludes this letter on Goethe, he scripts Hawthorne's agreement with his thesis: "P.S. 'Amen!' saith Hawthorne" (*C*, 194). Yet the tyranny of this dictation is necessarily mitigated by the *nota bene*, which asserts that the coerced union between Hawthorne and him is *not* universal, but only "a temporary feeling or opinion." The necessary transience of this "'all' feeling" (as Melville terms it) prevents perfect correspondence between himself and another, as he also makes clear in another letter to Hawthorne: "This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it. Possibly if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it – for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper" (*C*, 213). Because identity is itself transient, there can never be complete correspondence: the man who writes the letter in November will likely not be the man who receives one in December, and as such, all letters are "missent." And so while Melville's letters to Hawthorne describe and theorize complete union, they also insist on the multiple reasons it cannot happen: first, merger cannot dispense with bodies, and as such, particular persons cannot effortlessly be converted into universal man; and second, because particular persons are temporal (they exist in time),

there can be no transcendental merger with another. Importantly, Melville does not despair over this realization, since a necessary consequence of the inherent "misdelivery" of letters is a repudiation of the tyranny of coerced assent implied by a fantasy of perfect correspondence between reader and writer.

What might seem to be erratic vacillation (in which Melville calls for union and then for separation) is in fact a deliberate posture that tries to negotiate between the anarchical possibilities of individualism and the tyrannical possibilities of union. As such, this oscillation evidences his refusal of Hawthorne's implicit suggestion that given a choice between authorial tyranny and interpretive anarchy, we must choose tyranny and call it freedom. Melville can strive to establish a compromise position in epistolary writing, because the formal structure of the letter makes the coincidence of the two positions (union and separation) tenable. To the extent that the letter can eradicate space and time (to the extent, in other words, that the letter pretends to be universal and eternal), there is union between the writer and reader. But in the gaps (of both space and time) that separate writing from reading, and delivery from receipt, the necessary disunion between persons is also emphasized.

Melville's interrogation of the paradoxical function of letter-writing is continued in a sequence of letters that begins in August of 1852 after the decline of the two authors' earlier frequent correspondence (following Hawthorne's departure from Lenox), and during the hostile reception of *Pierre* that began in the summer of 1852. In these letters, Melville attempts to elicit Hawthorne's interest in writing a story of a young woman, Agatha, abandoned by her sailor-husband after she saves him from a shipwreck. Melville relays the tale to Hawthorne in a series of letters (subsequently labeled the "Agatha Letters") whose tone oscillates between what Melville identifies as his "officious" attempts to outline how Hawthorne *should* write the story and his diffident insistence that only Hawthorne can decide how the story ought to be written.

We see this contradictory tone from the beginning when Melville announces that his interest in the story was based on sympathy: not only did he sympathize with the plight of the young woman, but his interest was equally excited by "the emotion of the gentleman who told it, who evinced the most unaffected sympathy in it" (*C*, 234). Yet, if here Melville describes the sympathetic vibrations the story affects in all its listeners, then he almost immediately seems to recognize that Hawthorne may not, in fact, share this universal response: "possibly to you the story may not seem to possess so

much of pathos, & so much of depth. But you will see how it is" (*C*, 234). Significantly, then, he retreats from his claim that all will respond similarly to the story, and he instead suggests that only Hawthorne can be an accurate barometer of the "pathos" and "depth" of the tale. This rhetorical move, of course, repeats the dynamic witnessed in the earlier letters: Melville asserts that his register of the world is commensurate with Hawthorne's, but he quickly ruptures this epistemological and ontological union with a claim that there may, in fact, be no correspondence between them. The repetition of this familiar dynamic suggests that Melville's attempts to engage Hawthorne in what looks to be a collaborative project is another means by which Melville strives to negotiate a poetical–political position that can strike a balance between tyranny and anarchy, between union and individuation. A collaborative authorial model necessarily seems to guarantee a less tyrannical authorial voice. As such, the Agatha letters seem to suggest a revision of the interpretive politics sketched by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, and the theme of correspondence is essential to this revision.

Indeed, epistolarity is at the center of Melville's interest in the story of Agatha: not only does he relay the story in a series of letters, but he also insists that Agatha chart her solitude with daily visits to the post office:

> After a sufficient lapse of time – when Agatha has become alarmed about the protracted absense [*sic*] of her young husband & is feverishly expecting a letter from him – then we must introduce the mail-post . . . Owing to the remoteness of the lighthouse from any settled place no regular mail reaches it. But some mile or so distant there is a road leading between two post-towns. And at the junction of what we shall call the Light-House road with this Post Rode [*sic*], there stands a post surmounted with a little rude wood box with a lid to it & a leather hinge. Into this box the Post boy drops all letters for the people of the light house & that vicinity of fishermen. To this *post* they must come for their letters. And, of course, daily young Agatha goes – for seventeen years she goes thither daily [.] As her hopes gradually decay in her, so does the post itself & the little box decay. The post rots in the ground at last. Owing to its being little used – hardly used at all – grass grows rankly about it. At last a little bird nests in it. At last the post falls. (*C*, 236)

In this long detailed paragraph, Melville gives his most specific instructions as to how he envisions the story they will write together. In fact, although in most of the letters he only makes tentative suggestions ("Supposing the story to open with the wreck," or "It were well . . . Agatha should have formed a determination never to marry a sailor"), here he insists on correspondence between himself and Hawthorne: "then we *must introduce* the mail-post."

Melville, in other words, demands consensus between Hawthorne and himself on the subject of the ruptured correspondence between Agatha and her husband. His interest in Agatha is not then, as many critics have claimed, in her role as martyr and silent sufferer, but in her isolation from social communication. Melville sees Agatha's story as thematizing failed correspondence: unlike Hester Prynne, Agatha will never receive the meaning of the letter ("The post rots in the ground at last"). As such, it should probably come as no surprise that Hawthorne found little in Agatha's story to interest him; he had already proven himself to have no desire to write a tale of missent letters. When Hawthorne refuses to write Agatha's story, instead "urging" Melville to write it alone, his refusal allows Melville to script his own ruptured correspondence with Hawthorne. Thus, the Agatha letters both thematize and literalize the isolation that is born out of failed correspondence. In these terms it is significant that the note in which Melville conveys his determination to write the story by himself is the last extant letter between the two authors. It concludes suggestively, "I greatly enjoyed my visit to you, and hope that you reaped some *corresponding* pleasure" (*C*, 242; emphasis added). With the refusal of Hawthorne, Melville is cast in Agatha's position, anticipating a correspondence that will not happen.

As Hershel Parker has argued, Melville eventually did write Agatha's tale (probably under the title, *The Isle of the Cross*), most likely finishing it by June of 1853. For unknown reasons, he found it impossible to publish.[40] Immediately after Melville finishes the manuscript for *The Isle of the Cross*, however, he begins work on "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the story of yet another social isolate; and as was the case in the Agatha letters, Melville describes Bartleby's isolation by making recourse to metaphors of literal correspondence. This metaphoric work is most obvious in the conclusion of the tale, when the narrator ruminates over the rumors that Bartleby had long been employed in the Dead Letter Office: "Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?" (*PT*, 45). Bartleby's occupation in the Dead Letter Office, sorting letters that will never reach their destination, parallels Agatha's daily occupation, in which she waits to receive letters that will never arrive. Like Agatha, Bartleby's proximity to failed correspondence is emblematic of his exceptional solitude. (It is also worth noting that one of the early tasks that Bartleby prefers not to do is deliver or pick up letters at the Post Office; see *PT*, 25 and 32.)

As was the case in Agatha's story, there is no successful correspondence in "Bartleby," and once again we should see this story's representation of

social correspondence as political commentary. For the most part, Melville's tale suggests that there is no communion between the title-character and the narrator. There is one moment, however, where the narrator struggles to sympathize with Bartleby's plight. Discovering that Bartleby has made his home, his "bachelor's hall," in the deserted Wall Street law office, the narrator exclaims: "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me . . . The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (*PT*, 28). Yet, this discovery of a "common humanity" leads the narrator to invade the privacy of his employee's locked desk drawer. Just as Melville's earlier letter to Hawthorne had noted the fine line that separates the "infinite fraternity of feeling" from a violation of individual property ("By what right do you drink from my flagon of life," *C*, 212), so too does the narrator here peruse Bartleby's desk because he is his employee, and because the "fraternal melancholy" makes all property mutual. But as the narrator continues to ruminate on their common humanity and attempts to translate Bartleby's loneliness into the occasion for pathos, he instead finds the loneliness repellent, thereby exacerbating his employee's solitude: "My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion" (*PT*, 29).[41] The narrator insists that the scrivener lies outside of the realm of pity, because he is "unreachable" and, therefore, beyond human correspondence.

Moreover, Bartleby himself will not participate in any project of union: he "refuses," for example, to contribute to the collaborative proofreading of the law briefs. I note "refuse" in quotes, because, importantly, Bartleby never precisely *refuses* anything. Indeed, when asked point-blank, "*Why* do you refuse?" Bartleby's reply is, of course, "I would *prefer not* to" (*PT*, 21). In so framing his response, he demands that the narrator make the articulation of his authority explicit.[42] The narrator, however, instead tries to explain how the scrivener has already entered into a compact that mandates his adherence to certain laws and behaviors, and he appeals to the larger community of the law office to confirm his belief in the self-evidence of this law. Only Bartleby refuses to believe these truths to be self-evident. He refuses the assumed rules of writing and reading that the rest of the office abides by, and in so doing he points to the implicit compulsion of that which pretends to be only voluntary, only a matter of preference.[43] Bartleby, then, unlike the outcast Hester Prynne, will not voluntarily submit to the letter of the law.

In Bartleby's passive refusals, and in his analogousness to dead letters (the symbol of ruptured and hopeless correspondence), we do not see Melville bemoan the *loss* of union, but rather offer a critique of the *assumption* of tyrannical union.[44] Bartleby demonstrates not so much the dangers of alienation (as is often argued), but the dangers of forced consensus. Bartleby's refusal to submit to the assumed voluntarism of assenting to the letter of the law is symbolized by the dead letter, which itself signifies, for Melville, ruptured correspondence. In his story of Bartleby, then, Melville recognizes that he cannot both *presume* communication between himself and a reader and, at the same time, maintain the possibility of miscommunication that prevents the tyranny of this assumption. And faced with a choice between the risks of tyranny and the risks of anarchy, Melville unlike Hawthorne chooses the latter: he chooses a world of dead letters over a world of scarlet letters.

This "dead-letter world" is nowhere more deliberately and evocatively rendered than in "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles" (written sometime between the summer of 1853 and the spring of 1854), a series of sketches describing a landscape of alienation and isolation in which there is no social communion or communication. Thus Melville's response to the tyranny portrayed in "Bartleby" is to construct a landscape in which no letters can be received and no letters can be believed. "The Encantadas," after all, begins with the narrator's description of the islands' exceptional solitude and "desolateness." Unlike places of human ruin, the Encantadas, because not "associated with humanity," offer no occasion for "sympathy" (and here Melville repeats Hawthorne's often-used term from *The Scarlet Letter*); and unlike other natural scenes of desolation ("Greenland ice-fields" or "Polar seas"), the Encantadas offer "neither the change of seasons nor of sorrows" (*PT*, 126). Nor is it only the landscape of the islands that is symptomatic of their utter isolation: the stories of the inhabitants of the islands in each case prove the impossibility of correspondence. And the fragmentary style of the "sketches" that comprise "The Encantadas" itself points to Melville's resistance to communicative union.

Moreover, the impossibility of human correspondence does not always depend on the isolation of those who inhabit the islands. For example, in sketch seven ("Charles's Isle and the Dog-King") we see a breakdown of social order not because the community is isolated, but because of the unique politics of the island. The narrator describes the strange political history of Charles's Isle, which begins with the monarchy of the Dog-King, the Creole who is given the island as compensation for his role

in gaining Peruvian Independence and who then, with his elite army of dogs, tyrannizes the human citizens. The colonists rebel and overthrow the monarchy, instituting not a democracy, as the narrator tells us, but a "permanent *Riotocracy*, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness" (*PT*, 149). This anarchy is repeatedly said to be a necessary consequence of the islands' commitment to freedom, and in particular to freedom from tyrannical shipboard governments: "Charles's Island was proclaimed the asylum of the oppressed of all navies. Each runaway tar was hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom, and became immediately installed a ragged citizen of this universal nation" (*PT*, 149). What Melville represents on Charles's Isle, then, is a schematization of two political choices: tyranny and anarchy.[45]

That these political choices are, for Melville, aligned with interpretive choices is suggested by the narrator's description of the inhabitants of Charles's Isle, who, "sated with the life of the isle," pretend to be castaways in order to gain passage on passing ships. These confidence men of the sea tell deceitful stories and, thus, "often succeed[] in getting on board vessels bound to the Spanish coast; and having a compassionate purse made up for them on landing there" (*PT*, 150). One result, then, of the island's anarchy is the dissemination of false stories that are taken as truth by trusting sailors. Correspondence, as such, breaks down not because there is a *failure* to communicate, but because there is *duplicitous* communication. Story-tellers from the anarchical island cannot be believed and, as a result, all ships avoid Charles's Isle, furthering its desolation and solitude.

Yet if the sketch of Charles's Isle asserts a correlation between anarchy and duplicity, then in his sketch of Oberlus, the monstrous hermit, Melville also suggests that tyranny can just as easily yield untrustworthy tales. In sketch nine, the narrator describes Oberlus, whose "almost unbroken solitude" has ultimately "nourished in him a vast idea of his own importance, together with a pure animal sort of scorn for all the rest of the universe" (*PT*, 164). This ultimate rupture from humanity is represented in two ways. First, his desire to keep slaves (which renders him even more despicable than the tyrannical Creole of Charles's Isle) becomes the ultimate example both of tyranny and social depravity. Secondly, Oberlus's attempts to enslave the sailors who come ashore his island result in a letter war that thematizes duplicitous speech and the inherent precariousness of correspondence.

After Oberlus successfully steals a boat from a crew that came to purchase food and supplies from him, the captains of the ship attempt to send word to other seamen warning of Oberlus's treachery: "On the eve of sailing they put a letter in a keg, giving the Pacific Ocean intelligence of the affair" (*PT*, 168). Despite this perilous mode of delivery, the letter is actually

received by another captain, thereby seeming to occasion a moment of communicative clarity. This clarity is disturbed, however, when the captain finds another letter – this one from Oberlus, insisting that *he* has been the victim of treachery by the crew of the ship. That Oberlus's letter is fraudulent is ultimately proved by his postscript, which offers the recipient the gift of a chicken and her future chicks, but that also warns the recipient, "don't count your chicks before they are hatched." This warning is borne out when the "fowl proved a starveling rooster, reduced to a sitting posture by sheer debility" (*PT*, 169).

This amusing postscript significantly points to the entire chapter's concern with competing testimonies. Oberlus's postscript, for example, is echoed by the narrator's postscript that concludes this sketch, in which he expresses anxiety that readers may not trust the validity of the story *he* has just told. In lieu of this confidence, readers are directed to corroborate the narrator's tale by looking at his source material in David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* (*PT*, 169).[46] The narrator, however, feels compelled to admit that there are differences between his account and Porter's. And one thing the narrator has altered is Oberlus's letter itself, restoring the "strangest satiric effrontery which does not adequately appear in Porter's version" (*PT*, 170). In so doing the narrator suggests that he has manipulated (perhaps fraudulently) Oberlus's own (fraudulent) letter, once again calling into question the accuracy of testimonies; which "letter" should we believe as "truth": Melville's "The Encantadas" or Porter's *Journal*? The Oberlus sketch, as such, works to prove that even tyrannical authors (like Oberlus) do not insure communicative clarity and union any more than anarchical ones (like the inhabitants of Charles's Isle). False stories still circulate and letters can still be missent and misreceived.

Melville's most serious engagement of the political consequences of interpretive choices is in the sketch of Hunilla, the "Chola Widow." We are told that Hunilla had traveled from Peru to Norfolk Isle with her husband and her brother to harvest tortoises; abandoned by the ship they had hired to pick them up, Hunilla's suffering is further magnified when both her husband and brother drown. It is no wonder then that critics see such strong similarities between the stories of Agatha and Hunilla.[47] Not only is Hunilla's story one of alienation, but the narrator also suggests that the tale's primary interest lies in its capacity to engender a sympathetic response. Thus, when Hunilla recounts her story to her rescuers without herself shedding a tear, the narrator explains, "But not thus did she defraud us of our tears. All hearts bled that grief could be so brave" (*PT*, 155). The narrator's interest in Hunilla's story, like Melville's interest in Agatha's, is in large measure based on its capacity to construct a sympathetic audience.

Yet, although Hunilla's tale engenders sympathetic communion, it is also suggested that this communion might well be the product of deceit – that Hunilla might be as much of a confidence artist as were the sailors from Charles's Isle or Oberlus, since she both gains passage on the ship that rescues her and receives a "compassionate purse" – the very same ends that the denizens of Charles's Isle hope to achieve from their own counterfeit tales.[48] Whether or not Hunilla is a conman or a true sufferer (and the tale really gives us no way of knowing), the fact that her story *may* be deceitful once again raises the possible consequences of the breakdown of correspondence. Her tale, in fact, represents a breakdown of correspondence on many different levels. Like Agatha and Bartleby, Hunilla is a figure of profound isolation and loneliness; and like the "castaways" from Charles's Isle, she may be offering a duplicitous tale. But perhaps most important we see this breakdown literalized in one of the strangest and most difficult moments of "The Encantadas," when the narrator attempts to recount Hunilla's story, and in so doing his own speech literally falls apart:

> And now follows——
>
> Against my own purposes a pause descends upon me here. One knows not whether nature doth not impose some secrecy upon him who has been privy to certain things . . .
>
> When Hunilla –
>
> Dire sight it is to see some silken beast long dally with a golden lizard ere she devour. More terrible, to see how feline Fate will sometimes dally with a human soul, and by a nameless magic make it repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad. Unwittingly I imp this cat-like thing, sporting with the heart of him who reads; for if he feel not, he reads in vain.
>
> – "The ship sails this day, to-day," at last said Hunilla to herself. (*PT*, 156)

Again and again, the narrator attempts to render Hunilla's suffering into language, and each time his tale is aborted. And what seems to happen in this jumbled narration is a curious collapse by which Hunilla's suffering becomes his own. What finally rescues his speech from ineffability is his depiction of Hunilla's *own* attempt to narrate her abandonment. That is, what finally emerges out of this tangle of interruptions is the narrator's explanation of Hunilla's writing of time's passage. "'The ship sails this day, to-day,' at last said Hunilla to herself; 'this gives me certain time to stand on; without certainty I go mad'" (*PT*, 156).

To record time, Hunilla finds a "piece of hollow cane" and crafts from it a kind of tablet on which she can write her days. What rescues Hunilla from madness is her decision to translate her abandonment into a kind of private writing:

> Circular lines at intervals cut all round this surface, divided it into six panels of unequal length. In the first were scored the days, each tenth one marked by a longer and deeper notch; the second was scored for the number of sea-fowl eggs for sustenance, picked out from the rocky nests; the third, how many fish had been caught from the shore; the fourth, how many small tortoises found inland; the fifth, how many days of sun; the sixth, of clouds; which last, of the two, was the greater one. (*PT*, 157)

Only in his recounting of Hunilla's *transcriptions* of her ceaseless waiting can the narrator himself regain language. And significantly, when she tells her listeners how she stopped marking the days, so once again does the narration of her tale also cease. The captain of the narrator's ship requests that Hunilla explain why she eventually stopped recording the passage of time, but she refuses to answer. "Señor, ask me not," she repeatedly replies.

And once again the narrator follows suit, refusing to speak what Hunilla could only haltingly articulate:

> Braced against her woe, Hunilla would not, durst not trust the weakness of her tongue. Then when our Captain asked whether any whaleboats had ——
>
> But no, I will not file this thing complete for scoffing souls to quote, and call it firm proof upon their side. The half shall here remain untold. (*PT*, 157)

The narrator must preserve Hunilla's story as a kind of dead letter, a story that will never (completely) find an audience. The cost of this preservation is, of course, a fragmentary and anarchical narration (which, in many ways, is characteristic of the whole of "The Encantadas"). But it is a necessary cost, since to recite Hunilla's tale in its entirety would allow her story to become "firm proof" for "scoffing souls." This "firm proof" would make Hunilla another version of Hester Prynne, a woman abandoned and outcast whose story becomes a letter for all to read, and a letter that can only be read in one way: the law cannot be broken.

Curiously, however, just as Oberlus's tale suggested that tyranny does not necessarily yield communicative clarity, Hunilla's tale suggests that communicative anarchy need not necessarily yield disunion. That is, although Hunilla's tale is about the rupture from community, it also constructs a sympathetic relationship between herself and her story's teller: the narrator positions himself in sympathetic union with Hunilla (neither can articulate her tale) and, as such, the narrator becomes a fellow isolate, ostracized from social communication. The paradox, of course, is that their bond is premised on the shared incapacity to correspond with others. We see this paradox clearly outlined when the narrator expresses his anxiety that understanding Hunilla's story will make the reader homologous to Hunilla. Just

as "feline Fate" dallied with Hunilla's soul, the narrator "unwittingly . . . imp[s] this cat-like thing, sporting with the heart of him who reads" (*PT*, 156). By reading the narrator's tale, the reader is cast into Hunilla's phenomenological position. And if, in the reading of the tale, the reader does not experience Hunilla's suffering, the narrator announces, then he clearly has miscomprehended the tale, for the narrator writes, "if he feel not, he reads in vain" (*PT*, 156). If communication (between the narrator and the reader) happens, then the reader too will feel Hunilla's devastation. Thus, literary correspondence has a paradoxical cost, which is the experience of a rupture from humanity. And so "The Encantadas" can itself become a kind of dead letter – either incapable of being understood or understood so well as to locate the reader in utter isolation and speechlessness.

In these dead-letter stories of the early 1850s, Melville repeatedly scripts a markedly different version of the literary poetics outlined by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, which assumes an inescapable correspondence between reader and writer. Melville writes this distinct model of correspondence explicitly in "The Encantadas," where he invents a world in which the post office literally falls apart. In the final sketch, the narrator once again explains the exceptional solitude of the isles, and he does so by describing their "post offices":

> [T]hough it may seem strange to talk of post-offices in this barren region, yet post-offices are occasionally to be found there. They consist of a stake and bottle. The letters being not only sealed, but corked . . . Frequently, however, long months and months, whole years glide by and no applicant appears. The stake rots and falls presenting no very exhilarating object. (*PT*, 172)

This "no very exhilarating object," which symbolizes the impossibility of correspondence, is very close to the decaying post stake from the Agatha letters: "The post rots in the ground at last. Owing to its being little used – hardly used at all – grass grows rankly about it. At last a little bird nests in it. At last the post falls." And the letter does not do its office.

CHAPTER 4

Jacobs's letters from nowhere

Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* begins by acknowledging the loss of origins that characterized the identity of African American slaves: he writes, "I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth." But he goes on to suggest that "As nearly as I have been able to learn, I was born near a cross-road post-office called Hale's Ford."[1] That his birthplace is referenced as proximate to a post office might not be especially significant, except that as his autobiography continues, he elaborates on the centrality of the post office to the dissemination of knowledge among plantation slaves. Striving to recall the first moment in which he was self-conscious of his status as chattel slave, Washington describes his mother waking him with prayers about "Lincoln and his armies." This recollection induces him to wonder how it is that "slaves throughout the South, completely ignorant as were the masses so far as books or newspapers were concerned, were able to keep themselves so accurately and completely informed about the great National questions that were agitating the country." Although Washington claims that he has "never been able to understand" how such knowledge was acquired, he almost immediately answers the question when he explains that slaves, even those located in the most remote locations, "kept themselves informed of events by what was termed the 'grape-vine' telegraph":

> [N]ews was usually gotten from the coloured man who was sent to the post-office for the mail. In our case the post-office was about three miles from the plantation, and the mail came once or twice a week. The man who was sent to the office would linger about the place long enough to get the drift of the conversation from the group of white people who naturally congregated there, after receiving their mail, to discuss the latest news. The mail carrier on his way back to our master's house would as naturally retail the news that he had secured among the slaves, and in this way they often heard of important events before the white people at the "big house."[2]

Washington's depiction of this alternate postal system in which the African American slave becomes "mail carrier" (a job that federal law specifically prohibited African Americans from performing) reveals the importance of the post office to national politics before and during the Civil War.[3]

In this chapter I argue that epistolary discourse, as well as the institutional infrastructures that deliver letters, occupies prominent roles in both abolitionist and proslavery rhetoric. Washington, for example, sketches the postal network in which the black community gains a kind of upperhand insofar as they can discover news more quickly than their white masters. Just as the Confederate States made use of recently established national postal routes after secession, so too does the slave community organize a subversive mail system that depends on routes of the Confederate Post Office. The regulation of who gains access to what information – in short, the control of the system that literally disseminates communiqués throughout the nation – is the key to political agency. After all, in Washington's illustration, the "grape-vine telegraph" does more than apprise his family of advancing Union troops; it is also the means by which he understands himself as a potentially free individual.

Similar claims about the power of the post are made in slave narratives from the antebellum period. In Solomon Northup's narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), for example, the possibility of his restoration to freedom is tied to whether or not he can gain access to the post office. Northup, a freeborn African American who was kidnapped and lived as a plantation slave for twelve years, continually identifies letter-writing as the only possible means by which he will secure his freedom: "My great object always was to invent a means of getting a letter secretly into the post-office." While Northup can successfully find paper and fashions for himself a pen and ink (by "boiling white maple bark"), he cannot find a way to deposit the letter in the post-office: "a slave cannot leave his plantation without a pass, nor will a post-master mail a letter for one without written instructions from his owner."[4] When the white man with whom he had entrusted the delivery of his letter to the post-office proves perfidious, and Northup is forced to burn the letter, he watches the "epistle . . . which I fondly hoped would have been my forerunner to the land of freedom, writhe and shrivel on its bed of coals, and dissolve into smoke and ashes."[5]

Despite the failure of this epistolary exchange, the successful delivery of a letter does ultimately prove to be the key to Northup's rescue. Confiding in a white laborer working on the same plantation, Northup is able to send more letters North in an attempt to secure his freedom. Even when the letter's successful passage is supervised by Northup's white friend, Bass

(who writes letters in Northup's name, deposits them in the post office, and repeatedly returns to the post office to wait for replies), there is serious risk to the safety of both men. Thus, when there is no immediate reply to the letters and Northup proposes sending more letters, Bass replies, "No use . . . I have made up my mind to that. I fear the Marksville postmaster will mistrust something. I have inquired so often at his office. Too uncertain – too dangerous." Such fears appear well-founded when, after his liberation, the slave-master vows "bloody and savage vengeance" on whoever has mailed the letters for Northup; moreover, his master reveals that he has been monitoring the post office, since when Northup suggests that it was perhaps he himself who mailed the letter, the slave-owner replies, "You haven't been to Marksville post-office and back before light, I know."[6]

The possibility of resistance enabled by postal exchange was not lost on southern slaveholders who became increasingly fervid in their claims that the postal system was the instrument by which northern abolitionists were attempting to incite insurrection. Although the expanding national postal system was conceived of as the structure that would unite the States, in large measure it served to inflame, and not cool, increasing factionalism between North and South, and the mail became an early source of conflict between pro- and antislavery forces. Proslavery rhetoric maintained that the mail was potentially dangerous because it could be used to organize a black insurrection. Recognizing that the postal system was the means by which even distant communities could become unified (the manifest rhetoric of postal reform from the beginning of the century), southern slaveholders understood that the same mechanism that could link them to unseen friends and partners could be used by the African American slave community. As such, Harriet Jacobs describes the whites who pillage her grandmother's house in the aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion as imagining that they have proof of conspiracy when they find letters. Upon finding them, they shout, "We's got 'em! Dis 'ere yaller gal's got letters!"[7] She quashes their speculations when she announces that the letters in her possession are personal ("some verses written to me by a friend") and mostly written by whites. This scene corroborates what Northup's narrative has already outlined: letters are understood as a particularly threatening mode of writing, because letters make connections to those who are distant and thereby potentially refuse the isolationism that plantation-life enforced.[8]

The mail was also seen as uniquely dangerous because, beginning as early as the mid-1830s, abolitionist societies were delivering much of their

literature south through the mail, and southern response increasingly led to demands that the delivery of such material be labeled incendiary and treasonous. One consequence of Turner's Rebellion, for example, was to identify William Lloyd Garrison, as publisher of *The Liberator*, as an incipient cause of the uprising.[9] A similar context informs a brief entry in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* that records a "terrible consternation," which sends a community into tumult:

> Men talked in whispers, and slept upon their arms. Every preparation was made to crush the insurrection in the bud. Time passed – no explosion came – the negroes continued peaceful – men began to be ashamed of their fears, and look into the origin of the fearful rumor. And what was the origin? *A fragment of a northern newspaper, in the cupboard of an old negro, who had brought home some groceries from the store, wrapped up in it!* . . . some little penny handkerchiefs for children, bearing dangerous lines from Cowper, came packed with English goods nearly at the same time.[10]

If here the abolitionist *Standard* ridicules a southern response to infiltration by a northern newspaper, it is with a very different tone that the southerner Rufus Bailey, in a series of "letters," originally published in the *Christian Mirror*, describes a similar scene of "contamination":

> These [abolitionist papers] came out, like the locusts on the face of Egypt. They formed the wrapping paper for our wares, and articles of domestic use . . . They finally flooded the country through the channel of the United States' Mail, until the people at the South, by one unlawful act at Charleston . . . proclaimed . . . that there was one thing more sacred than the UNION itself, THAT for which the union was created.[11]

This "one unlawful act" refers to the ransacking of the Post Office at Charleston, South Carolina in 1835, and to the subsequent riot in which all suspicious mail matter was burnt. In response, President Jackson accused northerners of attempting to foment slave rebellions by delivering mail to the South, and proposed a law forbidding postmasters from mailing incendiary literature. This legislation was ultimately rejected, but the congressional revision of Jackson's recommendation, scripted by John C. Calhoun, led to a bill that only allowed postmasters to send antislavery literature provided they didn't mail it to states forbidding such literature.[12] In so doing, Calhoun translated the question of mail censorship into one of states' rights. Jackson's Postmaster General, Amos Kendall, assented to the administration's position, arguing that state security ultimately trumped federal law:

By no act or direction of mind, official or private, could I be induced to aid, knowingly, in giving circulation to papers of this description, directly or indirectly. We owe an obligation to the laws, but a higher one to the communities in which we live; and if the former be permitted to destroy the latter, it is patriotism to disregard them.[13]

As such, as early as 1835, southern postmasters were given *de facto* authority to determine what mail material they would or would not allow to be delivered, even though federal law positively refused to legalize this censorship.[14]

Mail censorship increasingly became a rallying cry in both anti-southern and abolitionist literature. The attack on southern restriction of the United States Mail centered on two issues: that censorship of the mail comprised yet another example of slavery's infringement on liberties and that this Draconian restriction of the post was all the more illegitimate since the postal system was largely subsidized by the North. Accordingly, abolitionist pamphlets often include extended discussion of the financial statistics of the United States Post Office that detail the precise ways in which "the post-offices in the south do not pay their way."[15]

Twenty years after the attack on the Charleston Post Office, the issue of "mail robbery" was still a prominent feature in abolitionist writing. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* (1855) portrays a scene in which the southerner, Mr. Clayton, is rebuked by a neighbor for receiving "incendiary documents through the post-office." When Clayton demands by what right his mail can be monitored and restricted, his neighbor replies with specific allusion to Charleston:

Sir, we are obliged to hold the mail under supervision in this state; and suspected persons will not be allowed to receive communications without oversight. Don't you remember that the general post-office was broken open in Charleston, and all the abolition documents taken out of the mail-bags and consumed.[16]

For northerners, the conflagration at Charleston (and the concomitant responses by President Jackson and Kendall) was identified as an especially virulent site of southern despotism in the 1830s; and there was increasing agitation about southern infringement of national liberties when Postmaster General Joseph Holt (under Buchanan) corroborated the decision made fifteen years earlier that there would be no federal challenge to southern censorship of the United States mail. In December of 1860, Holt, in the midst of the turmoil surrounding the trial of John Brown, writes a public letter to the local postmaster of Falls Church, Virginia who had requested whether or not he had federal sanction to refuse delivery of "incendiary" material. Holt replies:

You must under the responsibilities resting upon you as an officer, and as a citizen, *determine* whether the books pamphlets, newspapers, &c., received by you for distribution, *are of the incendiary character described in the statute* . . . The people of Virginia may not only forbid the introduction and dissemination of such documents within their borders, but, if brought there in the mails, they may . . . have them destroyed.[17]

Needless to say, the response to Holt in the abolitionist press was voluminous. As the southern postmaster's power was increased exponentially on the eve of the Civil War, northern correspondents marked the implicit links between the tyranny of the postmaster and the tyranny of the slave-master in the former's ability to censor all dissenting positions and to determine without recourse what constitutes a "threat" to state sovereignty. As the federal government expanded the *de facto* powers of local postmasters, increasingly the southern post is accused of mail robbery in which not only public mailings (newspapers and pamphlets) are violated, but private individual correspondence as well.[18]

While the contentious mail in most cases was newspapers and pamphlets, significantly much abolitionist and proslavery propaganda took the form of epistolary writing – frequently as a series of letters written to one's "friend" or "brother" in another region. As was the case in the political pamphlets of the early republican period, this generic pose is not incidental: the epistolary form insists on familiar relations even in a printed and public document. And this appeal to familiarity was often central to claims that even as the national post was a site of mounting regional conflict, it could also serve as a source of potential resolution. The English observer, James Stirling, asserts in his *Letters from the Slave States* that technologies of communication (the national post, the telegraph) will ultimately have the effect of sustaining union:

[T]he increased means of material communication . . . tends naturally to union in idea as well as in fact. Disunion was possible when States were separated by weeks of travel, and intelligence was fitful and slow. But with a daily mail, and hourly telegraph . . . a closer political union necessarily follows from the material nexus.[19]

Stirling's comments make manifest the importance of epistolary writing to American politics: he posits letter-writing as a cure for political divisiveness. Similarly, Rufus Bailey's *The Issue, Presented in a Series of Letters on Slavery* consists entirely of letters written by a southerner to a northern friend, who is addressed throughout as "brother." The letters, Bailey writes, are offered

in the service of repairing northern "misrepresentations" of slavery, and therefore with the hopes of bringing North and South back into fraternal union. Bailey explains that his public letter is the only adequate way to "answer . . . several private letters received principally from abolitionists."[20] And in his *Letter from a Gentleman of Baltimore, to his Friend in the State of New York, on the Subject of Slavery*, Joseph Speed writes that, having lived in both the North and the South, he is attached to "both of these communities by the strongest ties of consanguinity and friendship," an attachment that will prove the candor of his letter.[21] Such proslavery "letters," then, were offered as "true testimony" that served to correct the fraudulent missives that were being circulated by abolitionists. *Ten Letters on the Subject of Slavery* likewise argues that northern pamphlets offer "exaggerated narratives of cruelty to slaves . . . sent by mail . . . calculated to stir up the slaves to insurrection." This text subsequently critiques the epistolary style of abolitionist writers, arguing that they do not follow the model of the Paulean epistle, which "when obliged to administer reproof . . . labored to show them that he was truly their friend."[22] Indeed, many proslavery writers castigated northern abolitionists for breaking the bonds of fraternal fellowship, and evidence of this failure was located in the deficiencies of northern letter-writing.

Abolitionist writers in large measure adopted a similar rhetoric: they too addressed their audience as friend or brother, they too claimed a position of disinterested neutrality, and they too proffered their letters as the only possible cure to mounting regional divisiveness. In his *Letters on American Slavery*, Ohioan John Rankin publishes letters written to his actual brother (a Virginian slaveholder), and invokes the literal ties of brotherhood in his abolitionist plea: "I hope you will receive [these letters] as an expression of fraternal affection . . . I entreat you to give me that candid attention which the fondness of a brother solicits, and the importance of the subject demands."[23] These familial attachments comprise the central metaphor in "Friendly Letters to a Christian Slaveholder," which maintains that open communication, facilitated by letters, "must be kept up between the North and South. We are brethren of one great family, and there is no good reason why this family should not be a united and happy one."[24] The first letter concludes:

> I hope that you and I will be able to demonstrate to the world, that, although one of us lives at the North and the other at the South, yet we can communicate with each other unreservedly on an almost interdicted topic, with mutual kind feelings, if not to edification. Respectfully and fraternally, Yours, &c.[25]

Even as late as 1861, some northerners were insisting that national communication expedited by the national Post Office was one of the last defenses against secession. In his inaugural speech, for example, Lincoln announced, "The mails, unless repelled . . . will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union"; as he continues, he explicitly ties regular mail delivery to his "hope of a peaceful solution of the national troubles and the restoration of fraternal sympathies and affections."[26] Like Stirling, Lincoln explicitly links political accord to interpersonal affection, and the letters that secure such fraternal sympathies are therefore an inextricable component of national union.

Both northern and southern writers appeal to the familiar letter (even when this "letter" is a public pamphlet) as a rhetorical mode that can best heal national union, since its entire *raison d'être* is to relay honest knowledge and sentiment across a terrain of difference. Each side maintains that it offers letters in an effort to correct a miscommunication occasioned by the failure to know all the facts. But if both abolitionist and proslavery writers used the epistolary form to compel the other to understand the "truth" of slavery, each side also accused the other of engaging in deceitful testimony. Both proslavery and abolitionist writers insist that the other is circulating fraudulent letters with the intent of obscuring truth and seducing easily swayed subjects, be they white northern women or African American slaves. In this way, these letters roughly follow the plot of an epistolary seduction tale orchestrated through the delivery, mis-delivery, fabrication, and destruction of letters. As is the case in the epistolary novels discussed earlier, letters provide, on one hand, the occasion for a rationalistic discourse in which true knowledge will yield concord and agreement. On the other hand, letters can circulate false information – a deceit that is all the more pernicious because of the conceit that letters offer true testimony.

To argue that the discourse surrounding slavery in the antebellum period invokes the conventions of an epistolary novel is not to insist that there is any self-conscious attempt on the part of either proslavery or abolitionist writers to reference a novelistic form, but rather to show that the political questions invoked in national debates surrounding slavery reveals a congruence between a national politics and a particular kind of textual mode – a congruence that we likewise saw present in the epistolary novels of the 1790s. Here the invocation of veracity that is the formal condition of a familiar missive (the letter as the expression of true sentiment) is a central issue in antebellum debates about slavery; and these debates frequently make recourse to the epistolary mode as a way to engage issues of authenticity and credibility. Notably, for example, the elaborate apparatus that begins

and ends African American slave narratives consists of corroboratory *letters* that verify the truth of the narrative, the probity of the writer, as well as the authenticity of the writer as ex-slave.[27]

Largely because of its well-known publication history, in which it was thought for over a century to be a novel written by the white abolitionist, Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), more so than perhaps any other slave narrative, makes central the issue of authenticity that is a feature of almost all slave narratives. Jacobs's text, moreover, makes manifest the connection between questions of honesty and the intersubjective domain of letters through which such testimony is judged to be truthful or fraudulent. Her narrative highlights the problem of authentic voice not just in the many testimonials (by Childs, Amy Post, George Lowther, and Jacobs herself) that frame the narrative, but even more so by the narrator's constant challenge to her reader to "credit" her with the truth. Much scholarship on *Incidents* has focused on the ambivalent commitment to sentimental community that this castigating voice enunciates. This ambivalence is witnessed in the frequent appeals to communicative union that at the same time assert its impossibility, as when Jacobs writes, "O reader, can you imagine my joy?" and then immediately announces, "No, you cannot" (173).

This ambivalent commitment to communicative union is mirrored by Jacobs's engagement of the epistolary mode in *Incidents*; and while much criticism has focused on the complicated relationship constructed between Jacobs and her readers, what has not been recognized are the ways in which this discursive method both participates in and yet also disrupts the dominant rhetoric that characterizes slavery debates on both sides. Like so many of her contemporaries, Jacobs appeals to the utopian possibility of true information circulating through a nation and intimates that this circulation might be the occasion for the elimination of slavery: hers, then, is another attempt to offer truthful testimony that will convince all rational subjects of the evils of slavery. Yet to the extent that she insists that her audience cannot credit her – that there is no kind of rhetorical act that will make the experience of slavery comprehensible to one who is not, or has never been a slave – she also would seem to cast firm suspicion on the *possibility* of national union. If *Incidents* undercuts the utopianism implied in abolitionist writing that argues for national communication, it does not refuse political conversation generally. There may be no way in which to gain an audience's credit, but her text is written nonetheless and this writing is not offered as a tragic history of her rupture from

community and communication. She offers, instead, a model for a national conversation in which political union would not necessarily be represented by the sympathy and honest fraternity that a letter is said to represent. Jacobs's *Incidents*, I will argue, is an attempt to write a new kind of republic of letters.

Jacobs's career as writer begins when she publishes a public letter in the *New York Tribune*, whose manifest purpose is to cure misrepresentations being circulated in another "epistolary" document written by Julia Tyler, the wife of former president, John Tyler. Jacobs's anonymous "Letter from a Fugitive Slave," published in June of 1853, explicitly responds to Tyler's proslavery, "Reply to the Ladies of England," which itself replied to an earlier text that appealed to southern women to abolish slavery.[28] As such, Jacobs enters the fray of public letters by participating in the letter wars that dominate antebellum slavery debates. She writes that she offers her own letter, "poor as it may be," as a "truth" precisely because having been a slave she is in the unique position to disprove the distortions depicted by Tyler: "let one whose peculiar sufferings justifies her in explaining it for Mrs. Tyler."[29] Adopting the conventional disclaimers of slave narratives, Jacobs writes that the truth of her testimony is confirmed because as ex-slave she would be incapable of writing fiction: "you will not say that it is fiction for had I the inclination, I have neither the brain or talent to write it."

Jacobs proceeds to offer a narrative that revises the central claim made by Tyler, arguing that the "peculiar circumstances" within which slaves are sold are not peculiar for their infrequency (as Tyler had argued), but for their horrifying perversity. Presaging her later *Incidents*, this brief narrative demands that its audience attend to the sexual degradations of women under the slave system. The letter recounts the story of the author's "sister," a young woman only fourteen years old, harassed and tormented by their owner. The young woman finally surrenders when the slave-master imprisons her mother, threatening to sell her unless she relents: "My sister was told that she must yield, or never expect to see her mother again." As the story continues, we learn that the sister, after having two children, is "sold by her *seducer* and *master*," and that these "two helpless children were the *sons* of one of your sainted Members in Congress; that agonized mother, his victim and slave."[30] As she will in *Incidents*, Jacobs here demands that her audience attend to the sexual assaults that are an inextricable part of American slavery (and, insofar as the assailant is a congressman, also an endemic aspect of American democracy). And here too she directly appeals to and challenges her readers into sympathy: "oh, Christian mothers! you that have daughters of your own, can you think of your sable sisters without

offering a prayer"; "And can you, Christian, find it in your heart to despise her!"

In telling the tragic tale of two mothers who have lost their children, Jacobs makes the appeal to a sentimental community and in so doing constructs her letter according to conventional abolitionist demands: the artless slave offers a true dispatch from the institution that no white northerner has ever really seen. Thus Jacobs positions herself as both literary novice and experienced reporter and the two self-characterizations come together in the final lines:

> I would tell you of wrongs that Hungary has never inflicted, nor England ever dreamed of in this free country where all nations fly for liberty, equal rights and protection under your stripes and stars. It should be stripes and scars, for they go along with Mrs. Tyler's peculiar circumstances of which I have told you only one. (6)

Even as Jacobs's clever word-play here belies her self-description as lacking the genius to write, she concludes by proposing that as "A Fugitive Slave" (the name by which the letter is signed) she will continue to bring to the readers of the *Tribune* dispatches from that world that is always distorted by other writers. And, indeed, only a month later, Jacobs writes another letter to the *Tribune* in response to an article "denying the truth of an advertisement wherein slaves were outlawed in North Carolina."[31] In these two early letters, her status as "fugitive slave," her chosen narrative form, the epistle, and her sentimental appeal to the language of the heart all work in the service of truth-telling.

And as Jacobs makes manifest, she associates this candor with abolitionist politics. Thus, in *Incidents*, she writes, "Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the *plain truth*" (35). Later in *Incidents* she describes the ways in which northern visitors to the South are complicit in the dissemination of southern propaganda when she lambastes one of the more popular northern apologias for slavery, Reverend Nehemiah Adams's *A South-Side View of Slavery*. She describes a "clergyman" journeying to the south, with only an indistinct sense that "slavery is wrong":

> The slaveholder suspects this, and plays his game accordingly . . . The southerner invites him to talk with these slaves. He asks them if they want to be free, and they say, "O, no, massa." This is sufficient to satisfy him. He comes home to publish a "South-Side View of Slavery," and to complain of the exaggerations of abolitionists. He assures people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful "patriarchal institution"; that the slaves don't want their freedom . . .

> What does *he* know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them. (74)

The questions are, of course, rhetorical; yet they nonetheless hinge on the very real issue of how knowledge compels action. Jacobs argues that what is known – and by whom – is largely responsible for the fate of slavery as an institution. Yet, unlike white abolitionist rhetoric, which suggests that national fraternity might be restored when sincere communication circulates throughout the nation, here Jacobs intimates that the kinds of misrepresentations offered in northern tracts like Adams's actually work to secure the union of the *white* nation – both North and South come together in supporting the "patriarchal institution." But the dissemination of these same falsehoods destroys the possibility of union for African Americans. Jacobs proposes, then, that it is not enough for black slaves to become the texts of abolitionist literature – merely to bear material witness to the atrocities they suffer as slaves; they must insert themselves as authors (as writers of letters) into a national correspondence.

Thus in *Incidents* Jacobs identifies southern prohibitions against northern newspapers as part of a larger concerted effort to keep the slave community benighted; misinformation functions as a strategy of subjugation. Jacobs describes how she was often asked by other slaves if she "had seen any thing in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them":

> One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen of 'Merica that they were all slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarreled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free. (45)

Jacobs laments the "poor, ignorant woman" who did not know that the United States was not governed by a monarchy. But while the story underscores the nescience of the slave community, it also asserts that this "ignorant woman" herself understands how misinformation is the key to the perpetuation of her bondage. The strategy outlined in this tale is in fact a cunning one, precisely the one by which Northup had attempted to secure his own freedom: "the black people had sent word" to the Queen apprising her of their enslavement. This attempt at correspondence, however, is obstructed

because the Queen "didn't believe it" – she couldn't credit their word. Because textual communication proves deficient, the Queen (a ruler who, importantly, embodies and does not merely represent the Law) must make her presence known to the president. This fantastical tale of freedom, then, corroborates both the importance of communication and its insufficiency, which is the condition of letters for African American slaves. Jacobs recognizes national communication as the key to enfranchisement and yet also understands the ways in which the fact of slavery is itself an impediment to national communication, as it time and again serves as that thing that refuses telling – that which is impossible to credit.

This paradox is one that is central to Jacobs's writing, for if Jacobs's letters to the *Tribune* and *Incidents* both insist on their author's honesty, we also know that everything she says cannot be exactly "true." For example, while Jacobs signs her letters to the *Tribune* as "Fugitive Slave," we know that by 1853 her freedom has already been purchased.[32] More strikingly, we know that the story in which her sister is blackmailed into sexual relations with her owner is obviously imprecise in that there is no record that Harriet Jacobs had a sister. When Jacobs writes Amy Post to apprise her of her letter to the *Tribune*, or as Jacobs writes, to "commit to [her] a breach of trust," she maintains that "every word was true accept [*sic*] my Mother and sisters it was one whom I dearly loved."[33] Jacobs's negotiation of the issues of credit and truth is complicated: classifying her attempt to write as a "breach of trust" (although it is not entirely clear whose trust she is breaking), she nonetheless testifies to the truth of her letter. Indeed her logic suggests that any transgression committed by her public writing is vindicated by her need to tell the truth in an effort to correct the lies being perpetuated by women like Julia Tyler. Yet even as Jacobs asserts that her reply to Mrs. Tyler was an effort "to look back that I might tell the truth," she also admits that this truth-telling required her to manipulate the facts. Jacobs explains to Post that her "sister" in the *Tribune* letter was in fact "one whom I dearly loved." But then we must ask why Jacobs makes this revision: what is gained by making the victim of sexual assault a member of her own family?

Perhaps Jacobs understands herself to have committed a breach of trust in her publication of another woman's sexual degradation, and she imagines that this violation is repaired somewhat when the other woman is portrayed as her sister. Of course to argue this is to ignore perhaps a more obvious reading of Jacobs's revision, which is that this story, which significantly parallels her own experience of sexual victimization, rehearses an alternate version of her own autobiography. Since Jacobs never again tells this story,

we have no way of judging its veracity, but the married seducer in the story would seem to refer to Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, the congressman who was the father of Jacobs's own two children.[34] Her letter in the *Tribune*, then, conflates the roles of Flint and Sands in *Incidents*: here the sexual predator who destroys the innocence of the young slave girl and the congressman who fathers and rejects his two slave children are one and the same. The earlier story in many ways simplifies the story that Jacobs will later tell in *Incidents*, and it refuses to name the story as hers, even as it insists on itself as artless revelation of truth.

The point here is not to accuse Jacobs of lying, but rather to recognize her capacity as artful counterfeiter of letters – a talent that, as we shall see, is importantly also described in great detail in *Incidents*. Jacobs uses the conceit of letters (that they are honest) to political advantage. She shows the ways in which those who have been cast out of a national correspondence (by literally not being allowed to send or receive letters) can nonetheless insert themselves into this discourse by adopting the rhetoric of honesty even as they construct narratives that complicate the truth. For example, in her letter to the *Tribune*, Jacobs addresses her imaginary sister, suggesting that her public letter is a truthful appeal from the heart. But the sincerity of the address is complicated not only because the entreaty is made to an invented person, but also because the address also announces that there is no way that this sister could in fact receive this letter: "Perhaps while I am writing this, you too, dear Emily, may be on your way to the Mississippi River." To be African American in the United States is to send dead letters: to send letters with the full knowledge that what is sent will probably not be received.

Although Jacobs appeals to the possibilities of sincere testimony, her narrative ultimately suggests that national solidarity cannot be governed by a demand for pellucid communication in which the entire nation is brought into communicative union.[35] Jacobs positions herself as a writer of counterfeit letters, inventing an alternative post in which letters are sent from nowhere that aim only at *imperfect* union, and which instruct us in a national politics that, instead of bemoaning the fact of fraudulent letters, understands the capacity for such dissimulation to be at the center of a political community. As such, we must attend to the centrality of epistolarity to *Incidents*, as well as to the variety of ways in which Jacobs offers us a new epistolary model.

In numerous ways, of course, *Incidents* explicitly references the conventions of the epistolary seduction plot. Most obviously, Dr. Flint plays the part

of an archetypal rake when he pursues Linda Brent by sending her letters. Jacobs emphasizes the salacious content of these letters, indicating how texts, just as much as bodies, can perpetuate sexual violence. Yet the tyranny of these letters is found not only in their sexual content, but also in the scene of readings that these letters initiate. As numerous critics have noted, the fact that Flint assaults Brent with letters significantly revises the status of literacy in Jacobs's narrative, and unlike so many other slave narratives, reading and writing are aligned not with freedom, but subjugation[36]:

> One day [Flint] caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, "I can't read them, sir." "Can't you?" he replied; "then I must read them to you." He always finished the reading by asking, "Do you understand?" (31)

This scene of textual intercourse in which Flint reads his letter aloud insures both Brent's audience and her comprehension, since the conclusion of each performance is met with a demand for clarity: "Do you understand?" This query, I want to argue, is instrumental to Flint's project because he enlists Brent in the service of her own degradation and because it allows assault to masquerade as narrative contract. In a narrative as attentive to textual relations as is *Incidents*, we cannot overstate the significance of the narrative tyranny ascribed to Flint in this scene. Flint not only forces Brent to read his letters, but also demands that she comprehend them in the terms he dictates. Just as the ideological work of Hawthorne's novel was to insinuate the possibility of interpretive freedom, even as it also demanded that letters (the novel, the "A," the Law) can only be read in one way, so too does Flint feign the possibility of freedom by *asking* for Brent's comprehension.

Jacobs's book highlights the power struggle at work in the textual intercourse between Flint and Brent. When Flint becomes "troubled" with the thought that Brent will "exchange letters with another man" (the freeborn African American carpenter described as Brent's first love), he counters with a new epistolary assault: "he contrived to thrust a note into my hand" (40). This time, however, Brent decides to read the letter to herself and, therefore, "spare myself the vexation of having him read it to me" (41), determining that it is preferable to read the letter on her own terms and, in this way, to gain some control over its reception. She further attempts to wrest control from Flint by refusing to participate in this epistolary intercourse, and she returns the letter to Flint without scripting her own reply. By refusing to reply to Flint's letter she, in effect, tells Flint that she does not understand.

And when he commands her to explain why she has not replied, her answer is to try to expose as tyrannical authority what Flint is masquerading as epistolary courtesy: "I replied, 'I am your daughter's property, and it is in your power to send me, or take me, wherever you please.' He said he was very glad to find me so willing to go" (41).

By making her subjugation manifest ("I am your daughter's property"), Brent tries to bring an end to the parody of romance and reciprocity that Flint is perpetuating. It is a political maneuver strikingly similar to that attempted by Melville's Bartleby. Just as the scrivener's insistence that he would "prefer not to" works to compel the narrator of "Bartleby" to admit that his requests are couched in compulsion and not consent, so too is Brent's affirmation of her enslavement an effort to make Flint acknowledge his despotic authority. Her strategy is defeated, however, because Flint refuses to make his authority manifest and he translates her attempt at resistance back into a matter of courteous consent: "He said he was very glad to find me so willing to go." This scene is significant because it enacts in miniature the logic that was instrumental to the southern defense of slavery in which despotism is rewritten as patriarchal benevolence. But as we have seen and as the comparison to "Bartleby" suggests, this is also the implicit logic of American democracy, in which the self-evidence of a certain truth translates compulsion into consent.

In her focus on the epistolary exchange that frames the scene, Jacobs once again directs our attention to the ways in which communication (be it national or interpersonal) is an inextricable aspect of the politics of slavery. As such, it is essential that we recognize the numerous ways in which Jacobs (like Northup) locates communication (and especially epistolary communication) as a mode of resistance to enslavement. Most important is Brent's resolution "to match [her] cunning against [Flint's] cunning" (128) and her ingenious plan to make Flint the victim of her own epistolary machinations. In an effort to convince Flint that she has escaped to the North, Brent writes letters from her attic prison, sends them by way of a friend (a kind of underground post) to New York, and then has them mailed from New York via the regular post office. In this way, she both evades and co-opts the same postal system that, as we have seen, was instrumental to the subjugation of African Americans – as they were deprived access to the mail and as the national post increasingly censored delivery of any abolitionist literature. *Incidents* alludes to this censorship when Brent describes her desire to gain access to a New York newspaper as a way to learn the names of streets such that her letter will appear more authentic. Her friend Peter provides her with a copy of the *New York Herald*, which was "round a cap

[he] bought of a peddler yesterday." As such, we see the ways in which even the rabidly anti-abolitionist *Herald* makes its way into the south through devious passages – not unlike the "seditious" newspaper fragment that the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* ridiculed. Jacobs comments on the irony of the fact that the newspaper that aids Brent in duping Flint is the *Herald*: "for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to render them a service" (128). In numerous ways, then, Jacobs describes Brent's "cunning" plan as the means by which the black slave can attempt to insert herself into an epistolary scheme in which she can become the writer and sender of letters.[37]

Brent proceeds to write two letters: one to Flint and one to her grandmother, and in order to shore up the authenticity of her fabricated missives, she "dated these letters ahead, to allow for the time it would take to carry them" (129). In her focus on the specific ways in which the epistolary form can be used to trick the slave-owner, we see her recognition of the essential paradox of the mode: she emphasizes both the ways in which the letter will bring the two into union (this time with Brent scripting Flint's response), and on the ways in which the letter marks a distance (both temporal and spatial) between the writer and reader. Thus, *Incidents* calls attention to Brent's labor to craft these distances: by including street names and numbers from New York and by postdating the letter. At first it appears as if her textual manipulations are successful: only four days after the day she had directed the letters to be deposited in a New York post office, the Flints are overheard discussing their receipt of her letter. Brent's masterful orchestration of Flint's reception of her letter continues as she requests her grandmother to position Flint in the house so that she can hear him read her letters:

> [I] asked her to have him sit near a certain door, and leave it open, that I might hear what he said. The next morning . . . [h]e seated himself in the chair that was placed for him, and said, "Well, Martha, I've brought you a letter from Linda. She has sent me a letter, also."

In so staging this scene, Brent revises the earlier encounter in which Flint had forced Brent to be an audience for his letters. While Brent is still the auditor, she is now scripting the lines that he will speak.

But the perfect orchestration of the scene is defeated when Flint reads not the letter that Brent had mailed to him and her grandmother, but a letter that he himself fabricated: "He broke the seal, and I heard him read it. The old villain! He had suppressed the letter I wrote to grandmother, and prepared a substitute of his own" (12). By forging his own letter, Flint

would seem to have once again gained the upper hand, forcing Brent (and her grandmother) into the position of submissive auditors. Yet Jacobs does not describe the scene in these terms, and instead she relishes the absurdity of Flint's misguided belief that he is the one controlling the receipt and delivery of texts: "This was as good as a comedy to me, who had heard it all" (130). Jacobs's narrative suggests that although Flint has substituted her letter with one of his own, she nonetheless occupies the privileged position of knowing that both her letter and his substitution are counterfeits.

Perhaps it is the continued desire to verify the doctor's "hypocrisy" that explains Jacobs's curious decision to transcribe the full text of Flint's forged surrogate letter to her grandmother. This inclusion is all the more noteworthy since Jacobs does not offer a transcript of the original letters to Flint or to her grandmother: those letters she merely paraphrases. One explanation is that the letters that Brent actually sent never made it back into her hands, and therefore she wouldn't have been able to transcribe them. Yet this interpretation nonetheless begs the question of why it is that Jacobs opts to include Flint's falsified letter verbatim within *Incidents*. Given the extraordinary anguish that is located in Brent's attempts to resist reading Flint's letters, it is striking that the narrative chooses to "read" this letter by including it in its pages.

We need to read this transcription, I think, as an authorial attempt to wrest away his control: Jacobs reprints his letter so as to frame his artifice within her own terms. Because Jacobs constructs the scene as a "comedy" in which the artful "hypocrisy" of the doctor is exposed, she establishes herself as author of the entire scene. Reproducing the doctor's letter also enables Jacobs to emphasize what is obviously elemental to Flint in his rewriting of Brent's letters. Although we might imagine that his rewriting would function as an attempt to capture Brent – the fraudulent letter as part of a practical plot to bring Brent back into his possession – his letter in fact seems solely directed at ventriloquizing Brent. His letter rewrites Brent's articulation of the desire to "set a virtuous example[,] which a slave mother was not allowed to do at the south" (129) as a tearful apology for being a negligent mother. By reprinting the letter Jacobs makes it clear that what was at stake in Flint's forgery is less a tactic to regain his slave than an exertion of power to force Brent into uttering *his* words. This epistolary machination (purloining Brent's letter and replacing it with one of his own) is yet another version of the textual assault committed earlier when he forces Brent to read and respond to his letters.

Jacobs's commitment to reproducing Flint's correspondence persists throughout *Incidents*, as she continues to transcribe letters from the Flints

even after she actually escapes North. In each case, Jacobs frames the letter by describing the ways in which it is a deceitful effort to translate the relationship between slave and master into one of sentimental reciprocity – and in each case Jacobs describes the ways that she refuses to be conscripted into correspondence. For example, she "subjoin[s] a copy" of a letter signed by one of Flint's sons, but which she recognizes as being written by Flint himself: "I had been made too unhappy by it, in former years, not to recognize at once the hand of Dr. Flint." She scoffs at the letter, which requests that Brent "come home": "I did not return the family of Flints any thanks for their cordial invitation" (172).[38] Jacobs's practice of including the full text of letters from the Flints is made especially conspicuous when she attempts to record Flint's reply to a letter from her "asking him to state the lowest terms on which he would sell [her]." Flint predictably refuses her request, advising her to "submit to [her] rightful owners." More notable is what Jacobs writes about this letter: "I lent [it] to a friend, who lost it; otherwise I would present a copy to my readers" (166–67). This rare occasion in which Flint's letter is not included is made prominent precisely because Jacobs insists on accounting for its absence. Moreover, her explanation suggests that were she to have the letter, then it would reveal Flint's attempts to manipulate her in correspondence; and if she could transcribe his manipulation, it would be a way to best him – she could document his epistolary fraud. The struggle here is ultimately less about the *truth* of letters than about their *circulation*.

Jacobs's strategy is notably different from Henry Bibb's representation of correspondence with his former owner. While editor of *Voice of the Fugitive*, Bibb publishes several letters that challenge the slave-master to give an account of his tyranny. The third letter begins:

> Sir, You will perceive that I have not yet done with you: as I promised in my last that if you did not answer soon to the charges brought against you through my letters, that you might expect to hear soon from me again: and as the truth is all against you, silence seems to be your only defense: nevertheless I shall continue my letters for your spiritual good, and the spread of anti-slavery truth, unless I shall hear from you by letter.[39]

Each of Bibb's letters (there are six published in *Voice of the Fugitive*) demands that his former owner write back: having been deprived access to any social relations with his former owner, there is a sort of recuperative justice in his attempts to enlist the slave-master into a correspondence in which they become mutual participants in an epistolary intercourse that asserts (at least theoretically) their fundamental equality. But for Jacobs, nothing would be gained in a challenge to Flint to write back; instead, she works

to rewrite the scene of epistolary intercourse in which this time she can refuse to participate in his epistolary fraud and instead instigate her own.

One way, then, to understand Brent's manipulations of the post from her garret is as an attempt to wage an epistolary war on Flint of the kind he had waged on her. Yet, *Incidents* also describes the ways in which her letter-writing campaign is elemental to her escape. Thus when her grandmother worries that Brent's schemes will miscarry and that Flint will discover her hiding space, she asserts that the "letters will do good in the end. I shall get out of this dark hole some time or other" (131). Jacobs firmly associates her letter-writing with the possibility of physical escape. Her logic is that by convincing Dr. Flint that she has already escaped North, he will become more lax in his attempts to find her and, therefore, there will be a better chance of her actually escaping: "One of my letters, that fell into his hands, was dated from Canada, and he seldom spoke of me now. This state of things enabled me to slip down into the storeroom more frequently, where I could stand upright, and move my limbs more freely" (141). As the letters "travel," so too can Brent travel away from her cell.

The metonymic connection between herself and her letters is a significant aspect of her epistolary battle with Flint. Brent's letters must first be delivered to the North, as it is from there that they are deposited into the post office, and the extreme "hazards" that this plan involves mean that getting the letter out of North Carolina is almost as difficult as getting Brent herself out. Her friend Peter aids Brent in each of her "escapes": he transports her from the first hideaway to her grandmother's home; he arranges for the delivery of her letters to the North; and finally he secures her place on the boat that offers literal passage to New York. The parallel passages of slave and letter suggest that *Incidents* represents the "cunning" letter to Flint as itself fugitive. It will escape as a "slave" (hence the hazardousness of its departure from North Carolina); the letter's power is that, unlike the fugitive slave, it can return to proclaim itself free.

The metonymic connection between letters and their authors is invoked explicitly in narratives that frequently describe fugitive slaves as "packages" that are "forwarded" and "delivered" to their destinations. In William Still's collection, *The Underground Rail Road* (1872), for example, he often metaphorizes the passage of fugitive slaves as the delivery of letters:

> We have separated the company for the present, sending a mother and five children, two of them quite small, in one direction, and a husband and wife and three lads in another, until I could write to you and get advice if you have any to give, as to the best method of *forwarding* them . . . The mother and children we have sent off on the usual route.[40]

Moreover, given that by mid-century the post office used the railroad as the principal means of transporting the mail, the metaphor of the underground railroad would also appear to reference postal delivery. The most notorious literalization of this conceit was Henry Box Brown, the fugitive slave who packaged himself in a box and delivered himself into freedom.[41] To escape, then, is to gain access to a matrix of communication, to insert oneself (literally) into a network of communication in which one can participate in a national conversation that includes sending letters and delivering letters.

Just as the underground resistance in *Incidents* is responsible for delivering Brent's letters as well as Brent herself, so too is the underground railroad used not only to deliver fugitive slaves, but also their letters. Still, for example, records numerous requests from fugitives who have asked him to convey letters to relatives that were left in slavery. Indeed, he begins his collection (which largely consists of letters written by fugitive ex-slaves) by suggesting that although the "universal rule" of the underground railroad was that "no narratives be written" so as to keep the strategies of resistance secret, he feels compelled to publish these stories largely to reconstruct the familial attachments that slavery had severed:

> [B]y carefully gathering the narratives of Underground Rail Road passengers . . . some of the bleeding and severed hearts might be united and comforted; and by the use that might be made privately, if not publicly, of just such facts as would naturally be embraced in their brief narratives, re-unions might take place.[42]

Still's description of the ways that correspondence can restore familial affection among the dispersed African American community is strikingly similar to rhetoric used to describe national union before the Civil War. In 1872, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Still offers his collection as a kind of postal network that will bring about "re-union" precisely because the national post has failed the African American community.

While the impediment to national communication between North and South was miscommunication (the inability successfully to convey truth across the Mason–Dixon line), the impediment to communication for African American slaves and ex-slaves is that they are "severed" from *any* access to correspondence. This is the assumption that Jacobs makes in her *Tribune* letter when she addresses her "sister . . . on your way to the Mississippi River." Similarly, in *Behind the Scenes* (1868), Elizabeth Keckley recollects the love letters sent between her parents after her father is sold – letters that she describes as "the most precious mementoes of my existence." Keckley characterizes it as a "regular correspondence," yet the difficulty in maintaining that regularity is evidenced when she offers us the full text from one of her father's love letters: "I have wrote a greate many letters

since Ive beene here and almost been ready to my selfe that its out of the question to write any more at tall: my dear wife I dont feeld no whys like giving out writing to you as yet and I hope when you get this letter that you be Inncougege to write me a letter."[43] Clinging to the possibility of correspondence, Keckley's father beseeches his wife to aid him in sustaining at least this form of union. Their correspondence was, however, temporary and Keckley records the date of her father's last letter – a letter that, she describes, both testified to the desire for union even as it also proved its impossibility.

It is no wonder then that in Jacobs's description of the ways in which the condition of the wage slave in England is superior to the African American slave in the United States, she fixes her attention on the fact that the English working poor are at least able to deliver and receive letters:

> The [English] father when he closed his cottage door, felt safe with his family around him. No master or overseer could come and take from him his wife, or his daughter. They must separate to earn their living, but the parents knew where their children were going, and could communicate with them by letters. (*Incidents*, 184)

While English laborers have access to the cheap penny post, the "postal system" for African American slaves was one dominated by dead letters: letters that for the most part do not find their destination. The classification of "dead letter" is not merely metaphoric, as, for example, we see in an entry in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* that finds in the actual stores of the Dead Letter Office just such a letter from a slave wife to her husband:

> [T]he following letter is an exact copy of one taken out of the Dead Letter Office, at Washington. – The anxiety of the poor slave wife, expressed with such quiet sadness, is exceedingly touching. It makes the heart ache to think that this letter, as well as the others she wrote, never reached its destination. The interchange of soul by writing, is among the blessings denied to the poor bondsmen. It would not be safe for their masters.
>
> DEAR HUSBAND –
>
> this is the third letter that I have written to you, and have not received any from you; and [can't know] the reason that I have not received any from you. I think very hard of it . . . the trader has been here three times to Look at me. I wish that you would try to see if you can get any one to buy me up there. if you dont come down here this Sunday, perhaps you wont see me any more. give my love to them all, and tell them all that perhaps I shan't see you any more . . . I wish to see you all, but I expect I never shall see you all – never no more.
>
> I remain your Dear and affectionate Wife,
>
> SARGRY BROWN[44]

Both the editorial preface and the letter document how denying African American slaves access to letter-writing was central to the perpetuation of their bondage. The editor emphasizes the subjugation occasioned because slaves are denied the "interchange of soul by writing," and specifically states that epistolary correspondence is understood as a risk to the institution of slavery. The letter itself somewhat differently stresses the ways in which letter-writing offers a more practical means of resistance: the letter might have apprised the husband of the immanent sale of his wife. Thus the readers of this dead letter are made to wonder, had her husband received the letter would he have been able to reach her before she was sold.

As we have seen, Jacobs's relationship to the problems of correspondence is more complicated than those emblematized by this love letter. Just as Jacobs's depiction of literacy diverges from other slave narratives that more explicitly link literacy with liberation, so too does her relationship to epistolarity differ: her experience is not one that is characterized by a simple rupture from social communication. Rather she is forced into a correspondence with Flint and, as a means of revolt, she then attempts to conscript him into a correspondence with her. That said, however, we must nonetheless note the ways in which Brent herself suffers from the deprivation of those "interchange[s] of soul by writing," as she anxiously awaits letters from her brother and daughter that do not arrive. For example, immediately after she remarks that Flint "seldom spoke of me now," she also notes that "Days, weeks, and months passed, and there came no news of Ellen . . . I wrote to her in Washington; but no notice was taken of it" (142). The proximity of these two passages reveals that even as Brent is successfully manipulating the post, she also feels powerless before it, as letters from her daughter do not arrive.

The agent of the obstructed correspondence in this case is Sands, the father of Ellen, who had just been elected a United States congressman. As she did in her letter to the *Tribune*, Jacobs seeks to emphasize his elected status in *Incidents* so as to document the ways in which slavery has contaminated the nation's political institutions. Hence, immediately after her narrative outlines how Sands has broken "the links of such relations as he had formed with me" – the result of which is that the links of correspondence between Brent and her daughter are likewise broken – the narrative ruminates on the possible discovery and publication of "secret memoirs of many members of Congress." In this repository of private papers, Jacobs suggests, would be found the proof of the "secrets of slavery [that] are concealed like those of the Inquisition" (35) – the secret of the sexual assaults committed upon female slaves. Jacobs's disclosure of Flint's letters literally

publishes just this sort of secret memoir; notably, however, Jacobs does not reprint, or even paraphrase, any letters from Sands. She does, however, furnish another "letter from a member of Congress to a slave, who was the mother of six of his children":

> He wrote to request that she would send her children away from the great house before his return, as he expected to be accompanied by friends. The woman could not read, and was obliged to employ another to read the letter. (142)

This particular example from the "secret memoirs" of slavery is offered to once again document the sexual degradations of African American women; but even more importantly, I think, Jacobs's illustration reveals an epistolary exchange that is a parody of both correspondence and domesticity. The slave-owner writes a letter to a woman who cannot read (and whose literacy is unlawful) and instructs her to dispose of his children. This letter between slave and slave-owner is characteristic for Jacobs as it takes the form of epistolary favor to renounce both correspondence and courtesy.

Jacobs implicitly constructs an argument that reveals her profoundly ambivalent attitude toward the practice of letter-writing for African Americans. Like other slaves who are deprived access to a large network of communication, she appeals to the desire for communicative union. But her narrative also describes and bears witness to the fraud that is perpetuated against African Americans when they are made to participate in epistolary writing: to receive letters is to be inserted into a correspondence that masquerades tyranny as domestic concern. Slaveholders appeal to the sentimental language of the letter, even as the text of such letters works to brutalize their "correspondents." Jacobs's recognition of the uses to which correspondence is put by slaveholders is important, because, as we have seen, Jacobs's response to the epistolary designs instigated by Flint is not to abandon correspondence, but rather to conduct a kind of epistolary war on him of the sort he himself wages on her.

Karen Sánchez-Eppler has described the ways in which one of the effects of Jacobs's narrative is to construct parallels between Linda Brent and Dr. Flint: "in telling the story of her own sexual exploitation Jacobs enlists both the sexual responses of her readers and the threat of their similar sexual vulnerability for her own abolitionist purposes."[45] Just as Jacobs co-opts the "erotic power" that Flint uses to victimize her, she also appropriates another narrative strategy of his – one that is just as essential to his control of her, if not as immediately imperiling, as his sexual threat. In much the same way that Jacobs locates her white audience in a similar relationship to erotic power as she herself was subjected to by Flint, she also situates her audience

in an analogous relationship to the narrative correspondences into which Flint enlisted her. As Carla Kaplan describes, "The letter-writing exchanges parallels our reading. And it is pointedly nondialogic. It parodies writing as a form of communication, as a coming together of writer and reader, as the frequently invoked writer–reader 'contract.'"[46] We need, accordingly, to hear the parallels between Flint's query, "Do you understand?" and Jacobs's own queries to her audience, "Can you credit me?" or "Can you imagine my joy?"

If the queries offered by each appear to initiate an exchange that strives to bring reader and audience into sympathetic consensus, then there are critical differences between the two strategies. Flint's "request" for comprehension comes from a position of power in which he can, as we have seen, regulate reception. Conversely, Jacobs's entreaty for credibility ultimately insists not on her audience's comprehension, but rather on the impossibility of conscripting her audience into this correspondence. As Kaplan has argued, this assumption of miscomprehension is somewhat different than the "discourse of distrust" that Robert Stepto has characterized as a central feature of African American literature more generally. Stepto explains that one function of a slave narrative is to "tell off" its unreliable white reader even as the narrative also depicts the same "white listener [as] socially and morally maturing into competency as a reader."[47] According to Kaplan, Jacobs revises this formulation: instead of assuming her reader as unreliable, Jacobs assumes her as ideal – as already understanding her. The challenge to communication for Jacobs, Kaplan argues, is not found with her readers but with discourse itself: "In place of a 'discourse of distrust' she substitutes a profoundly more skeptical distrust of discourse."[48]

For the most part, scholars have read this distrust as narrative failure. Thus even while admitting that Jacobs's text is crafted precisely to reveal the ways in which she cannot easily find membership within a white abolitionist female community, critics nonetheless continually assume that such solidarity would ultimately be Jacobs's ideal. In other words, despite critical recognition of the ambiguous depiction of communicative union that Jacobs offers in her narrative, many readers of *Incidents* seem to understand the ambiguity as evidencing Jacobs's ultimate failure to gain this union. Even Kaplan, who offers the most critically rigorous analysis of communication in *Incidents* and who compellingly argues that freedom for Jacobs would be the freedom from having to place herself in narrative contracts with readers, nonetheless ultimately sees Jacobs's narrative strategy as one of perseverance in the face of the impossibility of attaining equal participation in contracts. She argues that *Incidents* refuses the central premise of liberalism: that we

enter social contracts as equal and free individuals. Yet, while she admits that Jacobs's narrative offers a fundamental critique of contract theory, Kaplan argues nonetheless that Jacobs holds contracts as the ideal model for social legitimation: "she endorses and even longs for the ideals and ideologies of individuality embodied by the idea of the social contract."[49] Thus, despite Jacobs's suspicions about the equality of any contract (social, legal, literary) between blacks and whites, despite her acknowledgment of the many ways she has been denied equal participation in these contracts, and despite her recognition that contracts necessarily disguise coercion as consent, Jacobs, according to Kaplan, retains faith in social contracts. The two central tenets of this faith would be a belief in autonomous individualism and a belief in the inherent equality between members of the social contract. It is in these terms that contemporary scholars depict Jacobs as both savvy critic and true disciple of American liberal democracy.

But a very different picture emerges if, as I have suggested, we see Jacobs as attempting to found community and communication not on consensual reciprocity and equal exchange, but instead on misrecognition and the acknowledgment of the coercion (which is to say, the fundamental inequality) that is necessarily entailed in the construction of *any* social order. The narrative strategy that comprises the whole of *Incidents* is, in fact, laid out in precisely the terms Jacobs establishes in her letters to Flint sent from the garret. *Incidents*, like Brent's letters from nowhere, make a pretense towards honest communication not in an effort to establish union, but to insist on the necessary differences and distances that lie between reader and writer. When Jacobs tells her audience that they cannot understand her, or cannot sympathize with her, she underscores the fact that writing cannot bring two into correspondence, into perfect union: there is no way by which she can secure the reception of another.

The tendency has always been to explain the inability of Jacobs's text to construct union as largely the consequence of the material conditions of American slavery and racism. Jacobs, according to this logic, is excluded from the abolitionist community her narrative addresses primarily because her experience as African American slave girl cannot be reconciled with the ideals of white domestic virtue.[50] But the persistent communicative disunion that circulates throughout *Incidents* does not seem entirely explained by the fact of racial inequality, or racial difference. For example, in the middle of her narrative, Jacobs concedes that her readers will probably not believe her story: "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years" (148). But the

incredulity Jacobs assumes will come from her white audience is also found in black audiences, for she describes the disbelief similarly expressed by her friend Fanny: "She could scarcely credit me, when I told her of the place where I had passed nearly seven years" (157). Even more significant than the fact that both black and white audiences are depicted as reluctant to offer her "credit," is that Fanny herself refuses to participate in the sympathetic community that Brent attempts to establish between the two women:

> Fanny and I now talked by ourselves, low and quietly, in our little cabin. She told me of the sufferings she had gone through in making her escape, and of her terrors while she was concealed in her mother's house. Above all, she dwelt on the agony of separation from all her children on that dreadful auction day . . . "We have the same sorrows," said I. "No," replied she, "you are going to see your children soon, and there is no hope that I shall ever even hear from mine." (157)

This conversation between the two women is strongly suggestive of the "conversation" that Jacobs initiates with her audience in which she insists over and over again the essential difference between her condition and that of her readers: "You never knew what it is to be a slave" (55). Thus, while American racism constitutes one devastating impediment to communicative union for Jacobs, it is not a sufficient explanation for the ruptures to community that her narrative delineates. Or perhaps more precisely, while Jacobs describes slavery as the central impediment to union, it functions to separate not just black from white, but also black from black – individual from individual.

If *Incidents* offers an epistolary theory, we might look to Jacobs's letters to others – and not just her letters to Flint described in her narrative – as a test case of this theory. Only a couple of months before Jacobs sends her public letter to the *Tribune*, she finds herself implicated in a kind of epistolary battle regarding her interest in having Harriet Beecher Stowe help publish her story. In a letter to her friend, Amy Post, Jacobs describes the unethical epistolary practices of Stowe, a woman she had greatly admired, and she expresses outrage that Stowe had taken it upon herself to forward one of her letters to Jacobs's friend and employer, Mrs. Willis, "asking might she trouble her so far as to ask if this most extraordinary event was true . . . and if she might use it in her key."[51] Jacobs explains that given that she herself had never "opened [her] lips to Mrs. Willis concerning [her children] . . . we both thought it was wrong in Mrs Stowe to have sent you[r] letter" (235). If Stowe does "wrong" by making a private letter on a private subject public, then she compounds the injury when she herself fails to reply to a "kind

letter" from Mrs. Willis "begging that she would not use any of the facts in her key saying that I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself." Jacobs reports that Stowe "never answered the letter . . . [although Mrs. Willis] wrote again and I wrote twice with no better success."

From what we can determine from the extant correspondence, Jacobs's refusal to let Stowe have her story for her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) led to a rupture in the short-lived exchange between the two women; as she writes Post in October of 1853, "Mrs Stowe never answered any of my letters after I refused to have my history in her key" (236). And there is clear evidence that Stowe's attempts to purloin her story as part of her compendious collection of correspondences and other documents that comprise the *Key* led to Jacobs's determination to become a public writer.[52] In fact, immediately after commenting on the breakdown in her correspondence with Stowe, Jacobs asks Post if she has "seen any more of my scribbling" – her "Fugitive" letters to the *Tribune*. Post's reception of these early writings had been a source of anxiety for Jacobs from the start, as evidenced in a letter from June, written immediately after the publication of the semi-autobiographical "Letter from a Fugitive Slave": "I love you and can hear your severest criticism."[53] Four months later she is still worrying about the reception of her "Letters" by her friend and readers, and this anxiety shifts naturally into what is for Jacobs always an attendant concern: the control over the circulation of her letters. As she goes on to complain to Post, her friend William Nell (a man who would in 1861 have the distinction of serving as the first African American federal employee as US postal clerk) mailed a copy of "Letter from a Fugitive Slave" to her daughter, Louisa: "I was careful to keep it from her and no one here never suspected me I would not have Mrs W[illis] to know it before I had undertaken my history" (236). Again, as was the case with Stowe, her story has been circulated beyond her control – a loss of control epitomized for Jacobs interestingly not in the anonymous world of print (book, newspaper) but in the postal system.

Over and over again, her correspondence testifies to the terrible things that happen to letters: they get lost, they get forwarded without authorization, and they are ignored and become "dead letters." In other words, African American letters (and particularly those by women) suffer the same fate as African American bodies (and particularly those of women), an analogy that is, as we have seen, codified throughout *Incidents*. Even in the correspondence with her closest confidante and advisor, Jacobs articulates a deep concern – at times bordering on distrust – that Post (and the post) will fail her. For example, when Post fails to respond to her letters, Jacobs's entreaties for reciprocation become urgent. She begs her friend to "write

and say why you have not written one word from you would do more good than you think."[54]

By the time that Jacobs completes *Incidents*, however, her tone shifts markedly. Gone are the demands for correspondence, replaced now with prideful acknowledgments of her *own* epistolary failings – delays explained as being a necessary aspect of her business as author. Thus she writes in 1857, "A heart full of thanks for your kind and welcome – letter which would have been answered immediately – but for want – of time to think a moment."[55] In this famous letter that makes public that which might better be "whispered," Jacobs depicts herself as delinquent correspondent. In so doing, she ruptures sympathetic community not only by announcing that she does not offer her text so that she can be judged, but also by refusing to play the role of the anxiously pining correspondent. Her own authorship no longer depends on reciprocity. She writes, "I come to you just as I am . . . not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen – and what I have suffered and if their is any sym [page break] pathy to give – let it be given to the thousands." The seemingly deliberate break in the word symbolizes the inevitable ruptures in "sympathy"; Jacobs's chirography demonstrates her reconfiguration of sympathetic attachments. Here she doesn't suffer the consequences of social rupture, she scripts them into her letter.

We also see evidence of Jacobs's new epistolary role in the same letter, when she attempts to dictate for Post the language of the testimonial letter Post had agreed to write for *Incidents*:

> Say anything of me that you have had from a truthful source that you think best – ask me any question you like . . . I think it would be best for you to begin with our acquaintance and the length of time that I was in your family your advice about giving the history of my life in Slavery mention that I lived at service all the while that I was striving to get the Book out but do not say with whom I lived. (242)

Post's testimonial letter in the Appendix to *Incidents* follows Jacobs's instructions explicitly, including citing Jacobs's own words from the letter: "You know a woman can whisper her cruel wrongs in the ear of a dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read" (203–4). It is in her book, as never in her familiar correspondence, that Jacobs is able to regulate the post – both the circulation of the facts of her life and, more importantly, the letters of her life. Instead of allowing Stowe to serve as postmaster to her story and her letters (and the *Key* is characterized by Stowe's command over a range of correspondences, both personal and public), Jacobs emerges as her own postmaster. While Jacobs's struggle with Stowe has been conventionally understood as a moment of authorial empowerment, of the black

woman wresting her own story from the patronizing control of the white abolitionist, Jacobs's concerns lie less with the facts or the "voice" of her story than with its circulation. Keeping her story private (even after she is a free woman) proves ultimately as impossible as maintaining her virginity while a slave, and in both cases her response is the same. She writes of her decision to sleep with Sands rather than let her "tyrant," Flint, have his way: "I knew what I did, and did it with deliberate calculation" (54). Virginity and privacy, Jacobs suggests, are the luxuries of those who still believe in "sympathy"; for the rest, there is only "deliberate calculation." Her publication is her attempt to become the one *to* and *through* whom (and not just *about* whom) others will write. She will deny the "Great Lady" Stowe what she had earlier denied the "tyrant" Flint: the ability to control the distribution of her letters.

While Jacobs embraces the role of postmaster in her writing and publication of *Incidents*, she also recognizes (as did Fuller) that she can neither elicit another's sympathy, nor can she necessarily regulate another's response. One graphic (or grammatical) sign of this rupture is that Jacobs increasingly uses the dash in her correspondence after the publication of *Incidents*. As we will see in the next chapter, there is a notable similarity between the mechanics of Jacobs's epistolary style and that of Emily Dickinson: the letters of both women are punctuated with frequent dashes. More significant is that for both women, this stylistic feature seems intimately connected to their similar understandings of the gaps inherent in social and epistolary intercourse. For both, the dashes emerge out of the recognition of the inevitability of social rupture.

The remarkable similarities between Jacobs's and Dickinson's social theories should not obscure a crucial (and obvious) difference between the two, which is the *cause* of their social rupture as writers. For Jacobs, slavery not only destroys the possibility of true sympathy, but it has translated sympathy into a technology of coercive power. While Dickinson's writing offers similarly critical accounts of sympathetic attachments, as we will see, this ideological suspicion of perfect correspondence does not seem obviously connected to any recognition of the facts of American slavery. And yet we do see Dickinson make appeals in her correspondence to the metaphors of racial exclusion as a way to depict social rupture. Describing, for example, a break with a friend (whose reliability as correspondent was always, for Dickinson, problematic), she writes, "I am much ashamed. I misbehaved tonight. I would like to sit in the dust. I fear I am your little friend no more, but Mrs Jim Crow."[56] Here Dickinson identifies not only as a black woman, but as the *excluded* black woman to depict her own sense of

social and communicative isolation. We might also consider Dickinson's famous "Master letters," which necessarily emphasize in their superscription the inherent separation (and inequality) between her and the Master. Perhaps more significant, as we will see more clearly in the next chapter, Dickinson's Master letters emphasize the inadequacy of testimony: others may not believe the accounts of experience when they are narrated. These topics are, of course, central to most slave narratives (including Jacobs's), making Dickinson's employment of the superscription to "Master" highly suggestive of the similarity between her "purely" philosophical concerns and the philosophical dilemmas that are a consequence of American racism and the institution of chattel slavery.

Jacobs's own recognition that correspondence isn't transparent (that one cannot easily script another's assent) emerges from her position as "Slave Girl," and she uses this realization as the means of besting Flint. Moreover, in *Incidents*, she insists that she will write despite her recognition of the failures of correspondence; or, more accurately, she will write precisely *because* she recognizes that the assumption of perfect correspondence compels her into subservience. *Incidents*, therefore, exposes both her own and the master's conceits of transparency in order to evacuate such appeals of their power.[57] In so doing, Jacobs refuses the solipsistic retreat of Melville's Bartleby. Jacobs's vision of the "postal nation" is finally premised not on sympathetic union, but on a letter-war: we write ourselves into being as a nation through epistolary conflict: may the best postmaster win.

CHAPTER 5

Dickinson's lyrical letters

In 1891, five years after her death, Thomas Wentworth Higginson published in the *Atlantic Monthly* a selection of letters he had received from Emily Dickinson in the early years of their twenty-four-year correspondence. He justifies the publication of the letters, which he claims to do with "much reluctance," by offering them not as an extension of Dickinson's body of work, but as documents that provide clues to the life and mind of the "partially cracked poetess at Amherst":[1]

> It seems to be the opinion of those who have examined her accessible correspondence most widely, that no other letters bring us quite so intimately near to the peculiar quality and aroma of her nature; and it has been urged upon me very strongly that her readers have the right to know something more of this gifted and most interesting woman.[2]

Higginson proposes that Dickinson's epistolary writing is valuable insofar as it offers biographical revelation. Four years later, Mabel Loomis Todd (who compiled the first edition of Dickinson's letters) cites the revelatory quality of the poet's epistolary writing as the reason for her own reluctance to publish the poet's correspondence: "It was with something almost like dread that I approached the task of arranging these letters, lest the deep revelations of a peculiarly shy inner life might so pervade them that in true loyalty to their writer none could be publicly used."[3] Todd, however, revises her initial impression, explaining that her initial fears turned out to be unfounded since "with few exceptions [the letters] have been read and prepared with entire relief . . . and with unshrinking pleasure: the sanctities were not invaded."[4] Here Todd determines that the letters can be legitimately published because they are no more private than are the poems.

The distinction between these two considerations of posthumous publication in many ways is emblematic of a conflict that still is rehearsed in Dickinson criticism. On one hand, her letters are depicted as documents

that offer biographical revelation to supplement our reading of the poet's lyrics and, therefore, are valued for their ability to invade the "sanctities" of the poet's "peculiar quality and aroma."[5] On the other hand, the letters are described as a mode of public writing that is generically indistinct from Dickinson's lyrics. Dickinson's letters, therefore, have long served two seemingly opposed critical agendas, confirming either the public or private poet. Her prodigious letter-writing, for example, is sometimes taken as evidence of her reclusiveness, as corroboration of her inaccessibility; the fact that she mailed letters to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, her sister-in-law and next-door neighbor, becomes testimony to her adamant privacy. Yet, her epistolary habits are also read as the means by which she negotiated her attachment to the public world. And here critics cite Dickinson's letters to various important literary figures of the nineteenth century (Higginson, Samuel Bowles, Josiah Holland, and Helen Hunt Jackson) – men and women who were in a position to *publish* her.[6]

This consideration of Dickinson's paradoxical privacy (which is, I will argue, formalized in her epistolary writing) has served as a battle-ground for Dickinson scholars from the very beginning of her canonization: first as a focus of the early mythologizing of the poet, then as an occasion to isolate her from the canon of the American Renaissance, and in recent decades by scholars determined to locate Dickinson in the public world of antebellum literary culture.[7] More recent criticism, which focuses on her handwritten fascicles as the site of her "publication," likewise understands the poet's publishing strategies in terms of this paradoxical privacy.[8] In her consideration of these critical interrogations, Margaret Dickie declares that this newest emphasis on Dickinson's publishing practices is finally irreconcilable with a project that seeks to recover a "public" Dickinson.[9] Indeed, it *is* hard to read Susan Howe's description of Dickinson's handwriting as visual art or Jerome McGann's insistence on the importance of Dickinson's choice of stationery without feeling as if we have returned to a portrait of the mystical and mystified Dickinson. As Dickie complains, "[McGann's] Dickinson looks like the odd eccentric and reclusive Dickinson." In this way, the attempt to take more seriously the oxymoron of Dickinson's "private career" has had the curious effect of reproducing Higginson's "cracked poetess" – the very Dickinson that feminist critics had set out to revise.

Yet this need not be the case, and I will suggest that we should not understand Dickinson's privatized venues of publication as evidence of her rejection of the public world. Dickinson's commitment to manuscript publication (which is to say, her refusal of a conventional print culture) is coincident with her exhaustive consideration of the conditions and

problems of sociability. Moreover, her private publication does not entail a rejection of sociability. Indeed, it is by considering the poet's extensive epistolary writing, both in relation to the poetry and as a literary project in itself, that we gain access to the ways in which issues of social relations are at the very heart of Dickinson's poetic career.

In his discussion of the sociology of private correspondence, Georg Simmel points to the generic specificity of the familiar letter: "The mixture of these two contrasts – the objective elimination of all warranty of secrecy, and the subjective intensification of this warranty – constitutes the letter as a specific sociological phenomenon."[10] According to Simmel, the letter is defined by its functional paradox: the letter *advertises* a *secret* self. In her own study of the form of the epistolary novel, Janet Gurkin Altman describes this necessary function of the letter in very similar terms:

> As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between presence and absence; the two persons who 'meet' through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all.[11]

This theory is pertinent to Dickinson's epistolary practice, which likewise suggests that epistolary writing both protects the self from the intrusions of others, thereby intensifying the "warranty of secrecy," at the same time that it eliminates such a warranty by reporting this secret *to* another. This paradox also establishes the essential terms for Dickinson's unique practice of combining lyric and letter: she embeds poems within letters, she sends poems as if they were letters, and she includes copies of poems with her letters. The poet's development of a unique textual genre (which I term the "lyrical letter") reveals the ways in which the paradoxical conditions of both sociability and epistolarity are at the heart of her literary practice.

While the collected, authorized editions of Dickinson's corpus assume a distinction between poetry and prose, to open these volumes is to complicate the generic division implied by their titles. For example, poems numbered as individual lyrics are also contained within the body of individual letters, and lines that are written as stanzas in the poems are organized as prose in the letters. R. W. Franklin's recent edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, in its aim to offer a more "comprehensive account" of Dickinson's corpus, does assert the contiguity between letter and lyric; he attempts to provide all extant versions of individual lyrics (worksheet, epistolary, and fascicle).[12] His edition likewise provides the texts of what he

terms Dickinson's "impromptu verse," which are "lines included in letters or quickly dispatched, for which Dickinson ordinarily kept no copies."[13] Yet despite this more holistic account of Dickinson's work when compared to that of his predecessor, Thomas Johnson, in determining whether or not passages from letters ought to be included in his *Poems*, Franklin is still committed to a generic litmus test. In order to be classified as poetry, Dickinson's writing must meet two conditions: "They have independent verification as poetry by having other appearances that confirm it, or they were incorporated as poetry in Dickinson's customary way, or both."[14] Franklin insists, "the distinction between genres was Dickinson's own. She maintained a workshop for the production, distribution, and recording of poetry, but separated letters from it."[15] Like Franklin, I want to argue that there is a generic distinction between lyric and letter: we must consider, for example, what difference context makes to our reading of the epistolary version of "Two swimmers wrestled on the spar" sent to Samuel Bowles and the fascicle version of the same (*P*227).[16] But the presumption of generic distinction does not mean that we presume lyric is superior to letter, nor do Dickinson's own practices corroborate this assumption: the two extant copies of "Title divine" (*P*194), for example, are both epistolary.[17] Instead, the recognition of Dickinson's commitment to epistolary writing requires us to consider the importance of correspondence to *all* her poetics.

Dickinson's letters evidence a repeated vacillation between a desire for solitude and a desire for relations. More specifically, she insists on recording (or confessing) experiences for and to others, even as her testimonies almost always admit to the tenuousness of this communication. Her letters therefore always feel implicated in a paradoxical solitude: presuming both a commitment to and a responsibility for others, her letters, nevertheless, recognize that one can only take it on faith that these social commitments are reciprocal. This recognition occasions her investment in the letter as a literary form: the generic form of the letter formalizes what is so often described in Dickinson's poetry – the articulation of distances and differences, proximities and attachments between writer and recipient. Thus, her letters consistently focus on the formal problems of correspondence: will I be understood? Will my letter be received? Will I receive a letter in reply? Dickinson's employment of the epistolary mode and her unique incorporation of it into her poetic practice reveals the inadequacy of the terms usually used to describe the poet: private or public; social or reclusive; liberal or republican. As we have seen, what marks the uniqueness of the epistolary genre is precisely its complication of these dichotomies. In the case of Dickinson, these generic complications are thematized in her poetry,

and in these terms, we can begin to see how it is that correspondence is a constitutive aspect of Dickinson's poetic discourse.

There are 1,045 extant letters from Dickinson assembled by Thomas Johnson in his *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, and these probably comprise only a small portion of her total correspondence.[18] The chronological range, however, is great (we have selections from as early as 1842 to the year of her death in 1886), and it is perhaps this comprehensiveness that enables the three volumes to present something that looks like an epistolary biography – a life conveyed through letters.[19] Yet if it is as biography that the letters often attract the attention of Dickinson's readers, then it is as such that they are also most frustrating. For not only is Dickinson's correspondence incomplete because we do not have all the letters she sent, but we also have almost none of the letters she received from others.[20] Unfortunately, the necessarily cryptic quality of the incomplete collection magnifies the already oblique character of Dickinson's epistolary style, enabling critics to read her letters not as what they are – documents sent to other people – but rather as documents that register an inevitable incommunicability.[21] Unless read within the binary structure of correspondence, the letters seem falsely to confirm the mythology of Dickinson's solitude.

Indeed, it is the reticent quality of her letters that is most often noted by her critics, and not surprisingly, the letters that have attracted most attention have been the Master Letters, the three love letters addressed to an anonymous "Master."[22] Here not only do we not know the identity of the "Master," but there may have been no recipient at all – either because Dickinson did not actually send the letters or because there was no single person whom she imagined as "Master." Predictably, the anonymity that characterizes these letters provides for their easy incorporation into the aforementioned model of correspondence in which there are no correspondents. What is remarkable about the Master Letters, however, is not that they do not name the identity of the recipient, but that they reveal precisely the ways in which *not knowing* another is an essential aspect of any correspondence. The Master Letters detail the ways in which guessing is an essential aspect of corresponding.

Dickinson begins, for example, the second Master Letter by describing the necessary game of faith that grounds her relationship to the Lover:

> Master.
>
> If you saw a bullet hit a Bird – and he told you he was'nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word.
>
> One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom – then would you *believe*? Thomas' faith in Anatomy, was stronger than his faith in faith. (*L*233)

The problem raised at the entrance to this letter is the necessary disparity between what is *evidenced* and what is *said*: in the face of a contradiction between empirical evidence and testimony, what will another believe?[23] Revising the story of Thomas, Dickinson suggests that even "Anatomy" or corporeal proof may not necessarily insure the lover's comprehension of her broken heart. Therefore, although this letter attempts to reveal her injury to the lover, it also declares the inadequacy of this project. As it continues, the letter further testifies to the letter's insufficiency:

> You say I do not tell you all – Daisy confessed – and denied not.
>
> Vesuvius dont talk – Etna – dont – [Thy] one of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could'nt look the world in the face afterward – I suppose – Bashful Pompeii! "Tell you of the want" – you know what a leech is, dont you – and [remember that] Daisy's arm is small.

Comparing her confession to Vesuvius's eruption and her lover's reticent response to Pompeii ("She could'nt look the world in the face afterward – I suppose – "), Dickinson cites the lover's demand that she confess her desire ("Tell you of the want") as well as her reply to the query: "you know what a leech is, dont you." What she wants, the metaphor would seem to imply, is bodily union, a parasitic relationship that would combine bloods – and we might, then, recall the "gash" with which the letter began. This corporeal commingling would eliminate the original problem of the letter (how to testify to her broken heart) because sharing one blood they would also share one heart. The wound would secure perfect comprehension, because to leech is to make the epistemological problems of alterity (the need, for example, to ask, "you know . . . dont you"?) irrelevant. This model of corporeal union offers a different kind of faith in Anatomy – a faith secured by corporeal identity.

In similar terms, Dickinson suggests another model of corporeal collapse:

> I dont know what you can do for it – thank you – Master – but if I had the Beard on my cheek – like you – and you – had Daisy's petals – and you cared so for me – what would become of you? Could you forget me in fight, or flight – or the foreign land?

By figuring herself as the lover and the lover as herself, Dickinson here too attempts to collapse their corporeal difference so as to secure perfect comprehension. At the same time, however, the letter seems to presume that the lover will ignore these fantasies of union, corroborating both the precariousness of the correspondence and the elusive faith on which the letter is predicated. This Master Letter, which depicts a desire for union that does not happen, is typical of both Dickinson's poems and letters. And

we must understand her rigorous attempts to specify landscapes ("There's a certain Slant of light," *P*258) and to describe the predicates of scenarios and conditions ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes –, " *P*341) as essentially an anxiety about the precariousness of communication.

Of course, as we have seen, much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse on the letter (especially in letter-writing manuals) celebrates the honest and pellucid communication that flourishes in correspondence. *The New and Complete Letter Writer* (1806) explains, for example, that "as soon as [letter-writing] began to flourish . . . the language of the heart was committed to characters that faithfully preserved it . . . and social intercourse rendered more free, and agreeable."[24] For these manuals, the letter's necessary function is to convey "honest and true" utterances from one person to another. One of the earliest American letter-writing manuals instructs its readers:

> When you write to a friend, your letter should be a true picture of your heart; the stile loose and irregular; the thoughts themselves should appear naked, and not dressed in the borrowed robes of rhetoric; for a friend will be more pleased with that part of a letter which flows from the heart, than with that which is the product of the mind.[25]

Similarly, manuals of the period give careful instructions for making sure letters *literally* reach their destinations, specifying that writers use standard stationery, write with legible penmanship, and provide precise addresses. In this way, manuals suggest that formal regulation will insure communicative clarity.

Curiously, this emphasis on the protocols of letter-writing has the paradoxical effect of revealing the ways in which epistolary transit is a risky business: even the writer who uses all the proper forms and expressions may not necessarily reach her correspondent. Dickinson's earliest letters (those written between 1842 and 1848) seem to exemplify the commitment to communicative clarity always shadowed by the possibility of communicative isolation. Indeed, Dickinson's earliest letters are striking precisely because they look so conventional: unlike later letters, which often fly in the face of conventional epistolary forms, these early letters employ traditional salutations and subscriptions, the grammar is regular, and they are dated and posted according to standard rules. Yet, at the same time, even these earliest of letters self-consciously consider the variety of impediments to social union.

Dickinson's letters almost always begin self-consciously by situating the scene of letter-writing. The following letter to her friend, Abiah Root, for

example, is typical of Dickinson's narration of a formal entry into a letter: "Dear Abiah I have now sit down to write you a long, long, letter. My writing apparatus is upon a stand before me, and all things are ready" (*L*7). Dickinson also works to fix Abiah's reception of her letter, thereby hoping to secure the reciprocity formalized by epistolary salutation and subscription[26]:

> I havnt altered any, I dont think except that I have my hair done up and that makes me look different. I can imagine just how you look now. I wonder what you are doing this moment. I have got an idea that you are knitting edging. Are you. Wont you tell me when you answer my letter whether I guessed right or not. (*L*7)

The interrogative pattern that this youthful letter initiates ("Are you," "Wont you tell me") provides an embryo of Dickinson's later attempts to reconcile the distance between herself and her "Master." Thus even as there is, we presume, more consequence to asking the "Master" whether she or he loves her than in asking Abiah whether or not she is knitting edging, these questions are structurally identical: the letter's form presumes a disarticulation for which the letter attempts to compensate.[27]

The formal requirements of the familiar letter interested Dickinson precisely because they emphasize the distance between writer and recipient that increasingly becomes a central topic of Dickinson's poetics. The poem most often cited as exemplifying the association between the epistolary genre and Dickinson's *ars poetica* is, of course, "This is my letter to the 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)

Identifying itself as an epistolary document, the poem testifies to the impediments to communication between speaker and "World." It describes a future correspondence that might serve as recompense for the correspondence that fails now. Even this future correspondence, however, may not be successful, since it too ultimately relies on faith: the speaker commits her letter "To Hands I cannot see." Thus, although the second stanza

reconfigures the relationship between the three participants of this exchange (speaker, World, and Nature), and although it suggests that time might solve the problem of correspondence, the potential for miscommunication still lurks. She is still depending on the "World" (now described as her "countrymen") to fulfill finally the covenant of the letter.

Crucially, although we might be inclined to read the difficulty of securing the postal delivery of nature's "Message" as something to be mourned, the tone of the poem does not suggest a lamentation about this potential impossibility. That she cannot successfully inscribe a correspondence between herself and the world and, therefore, that she may not successfully tell nature is depicted as the inevitable condition of her poetic vocation. Neither does she propose that a model of pellucid translation, however utopian, would signal the success of her poetic utterance. She asks to be judged tenderly because she is conveying Nature's message, but she does not demand that her correspondent write back. Instead, the poem depicts a scene of social reciprocity – relations between "countrymen" – that graphically describes just how messy and incomplete correspondence must be. This poem reveals that a characteristic feature of epistolary intercourse (the delinquent correspondent) is also an inextricable aspect of poetic communication.

It is commonplace that letters begin with apologies for not writing sooner, and many of Dickinson's letters commence with explanations for her *own* negligence.[28] In an early letter, Dickinson describes the conventionality of the epistolary apologia:

> You must forgive me, indeed you must, that I have so long delayed to write you, and I doubt not you will when I give you all my reasons for so doing. You know it is customary for the first page to be occupied with apologies, and I must not depart from the beaten track for one of my own imagining. (*L*23)

Such perfunctory apologies are not solely the issue of good manners; rather they are an essential consequence of correspondence. Once a letter is sent it demands a reply: as one of a sequence, when the letter concludes there is a transfer of responsibility for perpetuating the sequence to another person. This perpetuation of responses and returns, however, can never be immediate – as soon as the letter is sent there is a gap between the two correspondents that logically entails a posture of delinquency and neglect that even technologies of speedy delivery (the penny post in Dickinson's era, e-mail in our own) will not satisfy. If the letter is a compact between the writer and the reader, then the space that emerges between the sending and the receipt of a letter opens up a gap that can only be settled by another letter.

Dickinson's early correspondence frequently witnesses her anxiety about this gap: she often offers apologies for her epistolary negligence and likewise offers pleas that her own correspondents will not be similarly inconsiderate. "Don't forget your affectionate friend, Emily E. D.," Dickinson pleads in the subscription to an early letter. She routinely describes the pain that accompanies the impediments to epistolary reciprocity as an inevitable entailment of letter-writing. Of her friend, Harriet Merrill, Dickinson writes:

> I have written her two letters, sent her two papers & a package containing a very handsome book mark since I have received anything from her . . . really cant help thinking she has forgotten the many happy hours we spent together, and though I try to banish the idea from my mind, for it is painful to me, I am afraid she has forgotten us, but I hope not. (*L*8)

These portraits of social isolation signified by epistolary negligence are inextricable from a subject that is prominent in Dickinson's juvenile correspondence: her tortured refusal to "give up the world" for Christ (*L*23).

The question of whether or not Dickinson will convert increasingly occupies her attention, and also increasingly defines the separation between her and her friends. As each friend "give[s] up and become[s] a Christian" (*L*23), Dickinson's own failure to "give up" is increasingly figured as a deep alienation from the community of believers, which evidences itself in the young poet's isolation from social communication. Dickinson writes Abiah, "I will no longer impose my own feelings even upon my friend. Keep them sacred, for I never lisped them to any save yourself and Abby" (*L*23). So pronounced is her isolation here that Dickinson even loses the capacity to voice without "lisp" her opinions on the religious issues that until this letter had so prominently occupied her letters. And, indeed, with the exclusion of this subject comes the end of her correspondence with Abiah: five months after Dickinson sends this letter, Abiah still has not responded. The long letter Dickinson sends Abiah, in which she tries to account for this rupture, reveals how important epistolary forms are to Dickinson's understanding of social reciprocity:

> My own dear Abiah,
>
> For so I will still call you, though while I do it, even now I tremble at my strange audacity, and almost wish I had been a little more humble not quite so presuming.
>
> Six long months have tried hard to make us strangers, but I love you better than ever notwithstanding the link which bound us in that golden chain is sadly dimmed, I feel more reluctant to lose you from that bright circle, whom I've called *my friends* I mailed a long letter to you the 1st of March, & patiently have I waited a reply, but none has yet cheered me.

> Slowly, very slowly, I came to the conclusion that you had forgotten me, & I tried hard to forget you, but your image still haunts me, and tantalizes me with fond recollections. At our Holyoke Anniversary, I caught one glimpse of your face, & fondly anticipated an interview with you, & a reason for your silence, but when I thought to find you search was vain, for "the bird had flown." Sometimes, I think it was a fancy, think I did not *really* see my old friend, but her spirit, then your well known voice tells me it was no spirit, but yourself, living, that stood within that crowded hall & spoke to me – Why did you not come back that day, and tell me what had sealed your lips toward me? Did my letter never reach you, or did you coolly decide to love me, & write to me no more? If you love me, & never received my letter – then may you think yourself wronged, and that rightly, but if you dont want to be my friend any longer, say so, & I'll try *once* more to blot you from my memory. Tell me very soon, for suspense is intolerable. I need not tell you, this is from, Emilie (*L*26)

In this letter Dickinson both illustrates the significance of letter-writing to forging social ties and employs epistolary conventions to illustrate the severing of those same social ties. She announces her ostracized position at the entrance of the letter, in the tentative address to her friend. Dickinson calls attention to the literalism of the formal convention: the relationship, "My own dear Abiah," is likely inaccurate, because it is not reciprocated. Subsequently, the letter has a dual function – to reconcile ("I love you better than ever") but also to mark the disjunction between her and Abiah (the "golden chain is sadly dimmed"). Moreover, Dickinson also insists that Abiah take responsibility for articulating the rupture: "if you dont want to be my friend any longer, say so." The subscription also functions as an attempt at reconciliation – with her signature she transfers epistolary responsibility to Abiah – but it clearly anticipates that Abiah (like the "World") will fail to write back, because the subscription (like the superscription) describes a lopsided relationship. It insists that Abiah has knowledge of Dickinson's devotion ("I need not tell you, this is from, Emilie"), but this kind of knowledge is precisely what Dickinson herself does not have. The letter, therefore, presumes a connection to Abiah, but it only risks the "audacious" presumption so as to afford the opportunity to account for and describe Abiah's remoteness.

This letter is not the last between the two women, and almost two years later Dickinson will write her friend Jane Humphrey that she and Abiah are "going to correspond again" (*L*30). But many of the letters that Dickinson writes after her break with Abiah bear a marked shift in both tone and style. Her syntax becomes much more recognizably Dickinsonian: the grammar is less conventional (at about this point Dickinson first begins using the dash) and her references are more oblique and unconventional

(she is far less likely, for example, to reference her own comments to what her correspondent had written). The effect of such stylistic changes is that the letter is increasingly valued less as a document that can successfully mediate correspondence than as a document whose primary function is to describe or give an account of the project of correspondence itself. Having lost her faith in the ability of a regular and formal correspondence to preserve eternally a community of friends, Dickinson begins a conscious project to disrupt and interrogate the principles of letter-writing.

The essential connection between poetic production and epistolary practice is most conspicuous in Dickinson's letters to Susan Dickinson, the person with whom she corresponded the most.[29] From the beginning, it is evident that Dickinson conceives of their relationship as part of a larger literary project. In her second letter to Sue, for example, she informs her friend that Longfellow's *Golden Legend* is being sold in the local bookshop, and she uses the occasion to declare that they are both poets: "but for our sakes dear Susie, who please ourselves, with the fancy that we are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose*, let us hope [Longfellow] will yet be willing to share our humble world and feed upon such aliment as we consent to do!" (*L*56). This imagination of herself and Sue as poets may, in large measure, have been derived from Longfellow himself, who, in *Kavanagh* (1849), describes the epistolary relationship between two young women as the proper focus of the poet's lens.

At the center of Longfellow's romantic tale is not the love affair between the title-character, Kavanagh, and his betrothed, Cecilia Vaughn, but rather that between Cecilia and her friend, Alice Archer: "They told each other their manifold secrets; they wrote long and impassioned letters to each other in the evening; in a word, they were in love with each other."[30] That Dickinson likened her relationship with Sue to that between Cecilia and Alice is apparent in the first letter she writes Sue, in which she contrasts Sue with Alice by citing *Kavanagh*: "your little 'Columbarium is lined with warmth and softness,' there is no 'silence' there – so you differ from bonnie 'Alice'" (*L*38). Not only would Longfellow's tale have held interest for Dickinson in its portrayal of a passionate relationship between two young women, but she would have also been interested in the epistolary nature of the relationship between the two girls who purchase a carrier pigeon, "a flying post," to facilitate more frequent correspondence. And finally, she was certainly drawn to the story's implicit suggestion that the love affair between these two girls conveyed by this "flying post" is the most interesting, and yet most overlooked, literary subject.[31] The story makes this

claim in its depiction of Mr. Churchill, the school teacher-cum-poet whose literary efforts are frustrated, in part, because he is forced to correspond with "poetical young ladies," who query him as to the value of their poetry manuscripts. Because Churchill is occupied with reading volumes from young women who think they are poets, he does not see the real poetry that is the epistolary relationship between Alice and Cecilia: "What Mr. Churchill most desired was before him. The Romance he was longing to find and record had really occurred in his neighborhood, among his own friends."[32]

Longfellow's depiction of the poetics comprised by letters between young girls might also remind us of Fuller's depiction of the correspondence between Bettina von Arnim and the Cannoness Günderode, where she describes the union (physical and epistolary) between two young women as having "poetical significance":

> The relation between two young girls is essentially *poetic*. What is more fair than to see little girls, hand in hand, walking in some garden, laughing, singing, chatting in low tones of mystery, cheek to cheek and brow to brow! The *correspondence* between very commonplace girls is interesting . . . There is a fluent tenderness, a native elegance in the arrangement of trifling incidents, a sincere childlike sympathy in aspirations that mark the destiny of woman. She should be the poem, man the poet.[33]

Dickinson would have been familiar with Fuller's translation of this correspondence, since a copy of *Günderode* was included in the Dickinson family library.[34] As we saw in Chapter 2, Fuller's characterization of the epistolary friendship between Günderode and Arnim celebrates a version of social correspondence that does not emphasize the messiness of social intercourse, but rather the perfect communication between two young women. Fuller locates the "talisman" of this idealized friendship in a postscript that concludes one of Günderode's letters, "If thou findest Muse, write soon again." Fuller ruminates:

> I have hesitated whether this might not be, "If thou findest Musse [leisure], write soon again;" then had the letters wound up like one of our epistles here in America. But, in fine, I think there can be no mistake. They waited for the Muse. Here the pure products of public and private literature are on a par. That inspiration which the poet finds in the image of the ideal man . . . the friend finds in the thought of his [*sic*] friend, a nature in whose positive existence and illimitable tendencies he finds the mirror of his [*sic*] desire, and the spring of his conscious growth. For those who write in the spirit of sincerity, write neither to the public nor the individual, but to the soul made manifest in the flesh.[35]

For Fuller, this "essentially poetic" correspondence obscures the distinction between private and public writing. Accordingly, these letters are both superior to private documents (since they provide *more* than the revelation of youthful intimacies) and, at the same time, superior to published documents (since they offer intimacies that public writing might otherwise obscure).

Dickinson corroborates this idealized version of epistolary intercourse in her early letters to Sue, which underscore the importance of Sue as "flesh." That is, in her earliest letters to Sue, Dickinson routinely emphasizes their *corporeal union*.[36] Of course, in correspondence with other people, Dickinson depicts the letter as compensating for corporeal absence: yet, in no other correspondence does she so continually demand the material presence of the other person as in those earliest of letters to Sue. For example, after describing the weather in Amherst, Dickinson asks her friend:

> Do I paint it *natural* – Susie, so you think how it looks? Yet don't you care – for it wont last so always, and we love you just as well – and think of you, as dearly, as if it were not so. Your precious letter, Susie, it sits here now, and smiles so kindly at me, and gives me such sweet thoughts of the dear writer. (*L*85)

The initial sentence, which asks whether or not her description has reconciled potentially discrepant perspectives, is of course conventional; but the second sentence is unique because it suggests that Dickinson's capacity at rendering is irrelevant. Whether or not Dickinson has the talent to make Sue see what she sees, the letter nonetheless presumes attachment between them ("we love you just as well – and think of you, as dearly"). Attachment requires Sue's participation, but Dickinson secures this not by regulating her friend's reception of the letter (as she did in letters to Abiah), but by making Sue's letter substitute for Sue's body. The effect of this personification of the letter is to render content strangely irrelevant to the correspondence: it makes no difference what she writes, since the fact of having sent and received a letter is enough.

Of course, however, Dickinson always admits that the personified letter is ultimately inadequate to the real body: "[God] is very kind to let me write to you, and to give me your sweet letters, but my heart wants more" (*L*85). And thus, we see in these early letters to Sue a variety of different strategies by which she can secure union with her friend: the letter becomes both linguistic and material witness to the identity between her and Sue. A long letter exemplifies these manifold attempts at union:

I wept a tear here, Susie, on purpose of *you* – because this "sweet silver moon" smiles in on me and Vinnie, and then it goes so far before it gets to you – and then you never told me if there was any moon in Baltimore – and how do I know Susie – that you see her sweet face at all? She looks like a fairy tonight, sailing around the sky in a little silver gondola with stars for gondoliers. I asked her to let me ride a little while ago – and told her I would *get out* when she got as far as Baltimore, but she only smiled to herself and went sailing on.

I think she was quite ungenerous – but I have learned the lesson and shant ever ask her again. To day it rained at home – sometimes it rained so hard that I fancied you could hear it's patter-patter, patter, as it fell upon the leaves – and the fancy pleased me so, that I sat and listened to it – and watched it earnestly. *Did* you hear it Susie – or was it *only* fancy? Bye and bye the sun came out – just in time to bid us goodnight, and as I told you sometime, the moon is shining now. (*L*56)

More interesting than her recognition of the phenomenological gaps that necessarily accompany different visual perspectives are Dickinson's attempts to rectify these discrepant visions. First, in her elaborate tale of the moon as gondolier, she suggests that a descriptive narrative might allow Sue to see the moon as she had seen it. Second, in her representation of the sound of the rain – "patter-patter, patter, as it fell upon the leaves" – she suggests that she might make her meter echo the sound of the rain, and in so doing allow Sue to hear what she hears. In both cases she attempts to secure Sue's attachment to herself through aesthetic means.

As Dickinson notes, however, these descriptions fail, and the tearstain that begins the letter, which, in fact, serves as the address of the letter, marks this failure. In the manuscript of the letter, there remain two visible tearstains: one on the "Thursday" of the header of the letter ("Thursday Evening"), and the other blurring the "here" in the line, "I wept a tear here."[37] While the tears clearly are intended to commemorate the melancholy occasioned by Sue's inability to see her moon, they also serve as a compensatory gesture for that very failure: the tear becomes the corporeal matter that will unite Dickinson with Sue. The tearstained letter strangely proves that the document is more than metonymy for the writer, since by enclosing tears with the letter, Dickinson offers a literal part of herself (albeit a small one) to compensate for her linguistic failure to connect herself to Sue. The enclosed tear is paradoxically both the by-product of this linguistic failure and Dickinson's attempt to compensate for it. Therefore, although Dickinson frames the problem of this letter as a poetic one (as a matter of whether or not she can adequately represent sensory experience), the impediment to successful representation is not artistic inadequacy, but corporeal boundaries and limitations. Language fails, not because Dickinson cannot make Sue "understand" the rain and moon, but because it cannot make the two women identical.

In many ways, Dickinson's letters to Sue are characteristic of Victorian love letters generally. In her study of nineteenth-century courtship in the United States, Karen Lystra suggests that the love letter was understood as a device that could mediate the physical and emotional distance between lovers. Concomitant with this project, Lystra explains, was a tendency to collapse any difference between the body of the lover and the body of the letter: "As romantic love grew more intense, the nineteenth-century couple seemed more and more likely to anthropomorphize the letters of the loved one into the person of the absent lover."[38] As such, love letters are not merely a practical device of courtship, but a textual rehearsal for what was supposed to happen in marriage: the construction of one heart, one mind, one body, and one soul.

An illustrative example of this epistolary union is the correspondence between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sophia Peabody.[39] Like Dickinson's descriptions of Sue, Hawthorne depicts Sophia's letters as both fragments and miniature versions of her body. Indeed, his language insists that letter and beloved (his "dove") are materially indistinguishable:

> I know not whether your letter was a surprise to me – it seems to me that I had a prophetic faith that the Dove would visit me – but any rate, it was a joy, as it always is . . . So I pressed the Dove to my lips (turning my head away, so that nobody saw me) and then broke the seal.[40]

The ritual of opening his fiancée's letter enacts a scene of textual intercourse whose function is to simulate physical intercourse. But this understanding of epistolary erotics that stresses the materiality of both body and letter slips easily into an articulation of the erotic function of the letter as one that dissolves materiality. In other words, Hawthorne proposes that the letter does not form an approximate version of the corporeal lover, but rather allows access to the beloved that transcends corporeality.

Hawthorne portrays the letter as signifying both spiritual communion and physical consummation, as the following letter to Sophia makes clear:

> I feel as if my letters were sacred, because they are written from my spirit to your spirit. I wish it were possible to convey them to you by other than earthly messengers – to convey them directly into your heart, with the warmth of mine still lingering in them. When we shall be endowed with our spiritual bodies, I think they will be so constituted, that we may send thoughts and feelings any distance, in no time at all, and transfuse them warm and fresh into the consciousness of those whom we love. Oh what a bliss it would be, at this moment; if I could be conscious of some purer feeling, some more delicate sentiment, some lovelier fantasy, than could possibly have had its birth in my own nature, and therefore be aware that my Dove was thinking through my mind and feeling through my heart![41]

Sounding very much like Melville rhapsodizing about his own desire for direct epistolary conveyance into Hawthorne's heart, Hawthorne describes the ideal letter as one that would not be delivered by "earthly messengers" and, therefore, would not carry with it the possibility of misdirection. Such communication would not enter the realm of the material – it would use neither words nor paper – and would instead be "conveyed directly" into the heart of the beloved. And yet, what is conveyed directly into Sophia's heart is not mere spirit, but Hawthorne's still "warm" heart. Moreover, although his is a fantasy of transparent communication, significantly, he can only prove this transparency by discriminating Sophia's consciousness from his own: "if I could be conscious of some purer feeling . . . than could possibly have had its birth in my own nature." The test of their merged consciousness is not the *inability* to distinguish oneself from the other, but, rather, the capacity to recognize the other in oneself as something alien and unfamiliar. Thus, although Hawthorne argues for the elimination of bodies as a way to bridge the inevitable gulf between two different persons, this erotic fantasy of union refuses to give up the distinct subjectivities that comprise the union. Neither, despite his ardent wishes for bodies to turn into spirit, does Hawthorne actually disavow the materiality that constitutes these discrete identities, and indeed, it is the very materiality of these different bodies that compels desire.

The letter as a textual form uniquely accommodates this model of romantic love that stresses both the physicality of touch and the transcendence of union: as we have seen before, epistolary writing emphasizes the body because it is the textual mode that is said to best approximate physical intimacy (letters, for example, are described as a textual instantiation of conversation), and at the same time, letter-writing is said to transcend the body because it is the textual mode that makes physical intimacy unnecessary. No wonder, then, that the letter was such an important aspect of Victorian courtship rituals, which labored to convert the expression of bodily pleasures into the language of spiritual devotion.

Yet the mundane fact of epistolary delinquency intrudes again and again on her idealized version of friendship, and Dickinson describes the infrequency of her friend's letters as a kind of elusive corporeal presence: "I watch your letters Susie, to see if they grow saintlier, and more like Susie *Spirit*, than my earthly child . . . [F]or the last few weeks and days – they *are* so evanescent that I cant see them *at all*; dear Susie, *please* be corporal, it would so comfort me!" (*L*70). In similar terms, Dickinson describes her friend's failure to write back as an assault on her very being: "I do not miss you Susie – of course I do not miss you – I only sit and stare at nothing from my window, and know that all is gone – Dont *feel* it – no – any

more than the stone feels" (*L*172). The depiction of loss as that which rends the self is not atypical in amorous discourse, but what is notable is this letter's suggestion that loneliness poses a risk to poetry. A subsequent letter explicitly articulates the risks solitude poses to an aesthetic project:

> Susie – it is a little thing to say how lone it is – anyone can do it, but to wear the loneness next your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever missing something, *this*, all cannot say, and it baffles me. I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be – *solitude*, and the figures – solitude – and the lights and shades, each a solitude. (*L*176)

Loneliness here "baffles" her capacity at art, and in this case, the poet even lacks the capacity to produce the tears that might offer some compensatory attachment – as they did, for example, in the "I wept a tear here" letter.[42]

Yet, while here solitude eviscerates artistic potential, in subsequent letters we see the ways in which solitude yields poetic production. In a letter sent to Sue in 1853, for example, the desire for correspondence engenders the poem that comprises the letter itself:

> Write! Comrade, write!
> On this wondrous sea,
> Sailing silently,
> Ho! Pilot, ho!
> Knowest thou the shore
> Where no breakers roar –
> Where the storm is o'er?
>
> In the peaceful west
> Many the sails at rest –
> The anchors fast –
> Thither I pilot *thee* –
> Land Ho! Eternity! Ashore at last!
>
> Emilie (*P*3)

Not only is this the first occasion in which Dickinson deliberately combines prose and poem, but the topic of correspondence is inextricable from the poem's depiction of the quest for safe harbor.[43] Dickinson clearly conceived of the initial line, "Write! Comrade, write!" as an address or superscription to Susan, for in subsequent copies of the poem (including one that is transcribed into the first fascicle set), this line is missing.[44] Although the line is extraneous to the poem (it is not included, for example, in the rhyme scheme of the lyric), it is nonetheless echoed by the line, "Ho! Pilot, ho!" which has the effect of integrating the epistolary address with the lyric. In so doing, the poem suggests a similarity between the imperative that the friend should write back and the imperative to the sea pilot that he return

to shore. The poem posits an analogy between the demand for epistolary reciprocity and the demand for union (metaphorized as a kind of mooring) between "I" and "thee." Both the request for correspondence initiated by the command, "Write! Comrade, write!" and the description of the sea voyage delineate the passage from solitude to community. Dickinson "launches" her letter in the hopes that it will occasion the union that the poem itself describes. Her letter requests that the other write back, and it is this act of reciprocity that will occasion the exultation, "Land Ho!"

But if epistolary reciprocity yields the exuberant "Land Ho!," then it is the failure to write back that occasions the poem. The poem's emphasis, after all, up until the last line, is on the silent and solitary pursuit of harbor with another. We see a very similar dynamic (the attempt to turn solitude into poetic prospect) in a lyrical letter Dickinson sends Sue about 1854, which concludes with the poem, "I had a Bird in spring." Here Dickinson explicitly describes her role as unrequited lover as impetus to poetic production. The letter begins atypically with an ultimatum: "Sue – you can go or stay – There is but one alternative – We differ often lately, and this must be the last" (*L*173). Yet, in the next paragraph, Dickinson clearly suggests that she alone bears the consequences of this decision: "You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved . . . thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several previous ones." This graphic account of loneliness as corporeal injury does not, as it did before, leave her silent or "baffled," but rather becomes redemptive as it is translated into song. Her letter thus concludes:

> We have walked very pleasantly – Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge – then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on.
>
> I have a Bird in spring
> Which for myself doth sing –
> The spring decoys.
> And as the summer nears –
> And as the Rose appears,
> Robin is gone.
>
> Yet do I not repine
> Knowing that Bird of mine
> Though flown –
> Learneth beyond the sea
> Melody new for me
> And will return.

Fast in a safer hand
Held in a truer Land
Are mine –
And though they now depart,
Tell I my doubting heart
They're thine.

In a serener Bright,
In a more golden light
I see
Each little doubt and fear,
Each little discord here
Removed.

Then will I not repine,
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return. E –

The redemptive song in this lyrical letter is not only the deferred melody of the bird's song described by the poem, but also the poem itself, which seems to be occasioned by Dickinson's separation from her friend.[45] At "the point at which our paths diverge," Dickinson turns to lyric utterance to describe a compensation for failed correspondence that is not merely a stoic declaration of a toughened heart ("I shant mind the hemorrhage"). The poem's remedy is the imagination of a song that will continue after disunion – after collaboration is over and after the robin "which for myself doth sing" flees. The song is sustained whether or not the other "go[es] or stay[s]."

In so describing the lyrical response to loss, Dickinson significantly revises her earlier depiction of collaboration with Sue, and she instead implies that reciprocity is irrelevant to poetic production. Thus, although the second stanza seems to predict the robin's ultimate return, the formulation "do I not" articulates the speaker's skepticism about this eventual reunion. The syntax urges us to read the declarative statement as interrogative, and it comes as no surprise, then, when the next stanza reveals a "doubting heart." Likewise, although the last stanza appears to assert that "each little doubt and fear . . . [is] Removed," the adverbial construction of "*Then* will I not repine" indicates that the confidence in a returned or reciprocated melody is clearly conditional: only in "a serener Bright" or "more golden light" will such doubts disappear. Yet, the poet sings without this guarantee of

return, and thus this lyrical letter marks the moment in which Dickinson announces that poetic vocation no longer depends on actual collaboration, but now relies only on the faith that it might happen in the future.

Increasingly for Dickinson, letters are valued not because they can mediate social correspondence, but because they give an account of the impossibility of correspondence itself. And this topic – the impossibility of social reciprocity articulated in the phrase of such interest to Fuller and Emerson, "Oh my friends, there are no friends" – is likewise essential to Dickinson's poetry. I mean by this not only that numerous poems depict social isolation (akin to Melville's dead-letter world), but also that her idiosyncratic publishing practices that incorporate letter and lyric theorize poetry as a specific kind of *social* communication.[46] Moreover, Dickinson's deliberate combination of the lyrical with the epistolary reveals her understanding of the ways in which human intercourse requires the perpetual negotiation of social attachments even as such attachments are never guaranteed.

An 1861 letter to her frequent correspondent (and editor of the *Springfield Republican*), Samuel Bowles, provides an example of Dickinson's characterization of the impediments to social union.

> I cant explain it, Mr Bowles.
>
> Two swimmers wrestled on the spar
> Until the morning sun,
> When one turned, smiling, to the land –
> Oh God! the Other One!
> The stray ships – passing, spied a face
> Upon the waters borne,
> With eyes, in death, still begging, raised,
> And hands – beseeching – thrown!
>
> (*L*219)

What is immediately striking is that Dickinson introduces the lyric by announcing her incapacity at explanation. The prose line, "I cant explain it, Mr Bowles," which comprises the superscription of the letter, at the same time declares the impossibility of correspondence. As was the case in "I have a Bird in spring," Dickinson turns to lyric when she recognizes the inadequacy of the prose letter. And just as that earlier lyrical letter to Sue described the separation between speaker and bird, so too does this lyric to Bowles describe the separation between "Two swimmers." In its depiction of social rupture (a battle in which one swimmer is saved and the

other drowned), the poem describes what the letter enacts: the separation between two persons.

Dickinson's response to the inevitable insufficiency of explanation is not, however, to stop writing. The poet's response to Sue's critical commentary on her poem, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," for example, does not emphasize the communicative transparency between writer and reader, but instead Dickinson's trust in communication despite linguistic opacity. She writes Sue, "Your praise is good – to me – because I *know* it *knows* – and *suppose* – it *means* –" (*L*238). Dickinson expresses her confidence in Sue's interpretation even as she admits that she can only "suppose" that there is any corresponding identity between the two women's "knowledge" of the poem's meaning. But if poetic communication does not rely on the transmission of a single meaning, what would constitute successful telling? What are the terms by which Dickinson can engage her reader without subjecting herself to the substantial risk of communicative isolation? How does Dickinson rescue herself from the dead-letter world?

These questions are also central to her well-known exchange with Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Indeed, the impetus to that relationship is a moment of epistolary reciprocity when Dickinson writes back to Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor" published in the April 1862 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, which begins, "My dear young gentleman or young lady." Dickinson's famous reply should be understood, then, as part of a larger correspondence:

> Mr Higginson,
>
> Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?
>
> The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask –
>
> Should you think it breathed – and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude –
>
> If I make the mistake – that you dared to tell me – would give me sincerer honor – toward you –
>
> I enclose my name – asking you, if you please – sir – to tell me what is true?
>
> That you will not betray me – it is needless to ask – since Honor is it's own pawn – (*L*260)

Dickinson's dedication to epistolary exchange is evidenced by her adoption of Higginson's own vocabulary: when, for example, she asks if her "Verse is alive?" she is responding to Higginson's claim that "there may be years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence." Likewise, when she describes her own verse ("While my thought is undressed – I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown – they look alike,

and numb," *L*261), she is clearly referring to Higginson's own description of composition: "what a delicious prolonged perplexity it is to cut and contrive a decent clothing of words . . . how many new outfits a single sentence sometimes costs before it is presentable, . . . as if it could never be thoroughly clothed."[47]

If this letter initiates a relationship in which the poet will rely on Higginson's comprehension of her work, then it nonetheless also hints at an attitude of self-sufficiency. She "dares" the editor to assess her work, and she asserts that he "will not betray" her "since Honor is it's own pawn."[48] Dickinson's peculiar signature that "signs" the first letter to Higginson nicely allegorizes this self-representation in which she both requests that another appraise her work and at the same time she describes herself as isolated from this evaluation. Instead of signing the letter, Dickinson signed a card, sealed the card in its own separate envelope, and sent the entire package (letter, four poems, and enveloped signature) to Higginson. In so doing, Dickinson endorses neither her letter nor her lyrics with her name, and thus, although she asks for Higginson's verdict, she can distance "Emily Dickinson" from his judgment of the poems.

Of course, this characterization of Dickinson as self-sufficient is commensurate with the myth of the hyperbolically private poet who repudiates all community. This Dickinson (who resembles Emerson's self-reliant individual) can reject publication because she relies on no others.[49] Yet, this depiction of the isolated poet is undermined by the very context of these letters, in which Dickinson is writing another to request a response. Indeed, Dickinson suggests in her early letters to Higginson that one reason she writes him is that self-critique is impossible: one cannot take one's own Mind (or poetry) as a critical object. Contradicting the premise of Emersonian individualism, Dickinson seems to argue that there is no possibility for introspection: "The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask – " (*L*260) and "I could not weigh myself – Myself –" (*L*261).

Likewise in her third letter to Higginson, Dickinson once again takes up the practice of embedding poems into her letters (instead of enclosing them separately) and she depicts her relationship to Higginson as one of faithful dependence:

> If I might bring you what I do – not so frequent to trouble you – and ask you if I told it clear – 'twould be control, to me –
>
> The Sailor cannot see the North – but knows the Needle can –

The "hand you stretch me in the Dark," I put mine in, and turn away – I have no Saxon, now –

> As if I asked a common Alms,
> And in my wondering hand
> A Stranger pressed a Kingdom,
> And I, bewildered stand –
> As if I asked the Orient
> Had it for me a Morn –
> And it should lift it's purple Dikes,
> And shatter me with Dawn!
>
> (*L*265)

The "Alms" in this lyrical letter would seem to refer to Dickinson's initial query of Higginson as to whether he had time to read and comment on her poems.[50] And Dickinson compares her receipt of Higginson's reply to a "Stranger press[ing] a kingdom in her hand" or to "the sky shatter[ing her] with dawn": the poem describes a bewilderment that is engendered by another's munificence. The poem tells how an exchange that begins as both anonymous (between beggars and strangers) and rhetorical (between landscapes and directions) can render the recipient of the gift speechless. As such, Dickinson's turn toward lyric is testimony to that muteness. Unlike Dickinson's announcement to Bowles, "I cant explain it," here the incapacity to respond is not occasioned by another's failure (not by the swimmer who turns toward shore), but by another's generosity. Thus, the original "alms" initiates a relationship in which Dickinson will blindly put her hand in Higginson's. His editorial hand is the compass needle that will direct her wavering foot ("You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I am in danger – Sir," *L*265).

Thus, in letters to her most important editors (Susan Dickinson, Samuel Bowles, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson), Dickinson turns to lyric to thematize (in poetry) the impossibility of communicative reciprocity. In so doing, the mixed form of the lyrical letter testifies to intercourse that perseveres even when explanation (or "Saxon") fails. But Dickinson also describes Higginson's unwillingness to understand her terms of social reciprocity: "You say 'Beyond your knowledge.' You would not jest with me, because I believe you – but Preceptor – you cannot mean it? All men say 'What' to me, but I thought it a fashion – " (*L*271). Higginson, her letter implies, has presumed incorrectly that what she desired from him was a correspondence regulated by a single code of meaning, since to ask "what"

is to assume that meaning can only be based on identical experiences that circumscribe all interaction – on an insularity whereby anything external to this frame of identity is necessarily incomprehensible. By way of comparison, we might remember Dickinson's comments to Sue: "I know it knows – and suppose it – means." To ask "what" is to gain nothing from supposing that it means. But while Higginson claims that he cannot understand, she insists that he can, because they are both "countrymen," and she makes the social and literary contract explicit: "I am happy to be your scholar, and will deserve the kindness, I cannot repay. If you truly consent, I recite now –" (*L*268). This contract (sounding very much like Fuller's description of epistolary exchange) demands reciprocity between sender and receiver at the same time that it depicts egalitarian exchange as impossible: she will deserve, though she cannot repay. A contract between reader and writer, Dickinson suggests, is necessarily inequitable.

In a letter written to her friends the Hollands, Dickinson echoes the vocabulary of her letter to Higginson:

> Dear Friends,
>
> I write to you. I receive no letter . . . Now, you need not speak . . . but if you are well, let Annie draw me a little picture of an erect flower; if you are ill, she can hang the flower a little on one side!
>
> Then, I shall understand, and you need not stop to write me a letter. Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love. I found a bird, this morning, down – down – on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears? One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom – "My business is to sing" – and away she rose! How do I know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened, and applauded her unnoticed hymn? Emily (*L*269)

Although the letter begins by chastising her friends for their epistolary delinquency, it concludes with an announcement that their replies are unnecessary to Dickinson's own "business." Even in the face of their failure to correspond, Dickinson asserts that her business is loving and singing – both of which peculiarly hang in the balance of risking no recipient, even as they need someone to receive the love and hear the song. To assert that communication – epistolary and lyrical – is not about identity requires one to sing neither with the protection that solitude affords (in which the narcissistic poet sings without risk of losing another), nor with the insurance that comes with the assumption that you know how the song might mean for another.[51] Dickinson's lyrical mode rejects both poles of an Emersonian theory of correspondence, since it refuses a model of radical autonomy

(in which the poet sings for no one) and likewise refuses transcendental universalism (in which the poet's song unites us all).

This description of poetic business complicates the conventional depiction of Dickinson's relationship to antebellum literary culture. Despite the increasing tendency, for example, to describe Dickinson as an active participant in the socio-economic world in which she writes, the scholarly community has nonetheless remained committed to a portrait of Dickinson, her family, her poetry, and her sense of poetic vocation as privatized, exclusive, liberal, and ultimately undemocratic. Betsy Erkkila writes:

> Emily Dickinson sought to resist the forces of democratic, commercial, industrial, and nationalist transformation by enclosing herself in ever smaller social units – first within Amherst, then within her house, and ultimately within her room and the space of her own mind. Not only did she set herself against the abolitionist, reformist, and democratizing energies of the times, she also set herself against the public and political engagement of her father.[52]

Considering a different feature of Dickinson's poetics, but with a very similar emphasis, Marta Werner describes Dickinson's idiosyncratic manuscript practices as symptomatic of her "desire to inscribe herself outside all institutional accounts of order."[53] Each of these critical accounts posits Dickinson as purposefully *elite* – be it as a result of institutional privilege afforded by her wealthy Amherst family or by virtue of deliberate poetic and publishing eccentricities. This tendency to emphasize Dickinson not only as exceptional, but as committed to the exception, has the effect of making us blind to a crucial feature of her poetic project, which is its emphasis on *social* reciprocity.

One poem in particular is often cited as evidencing Dickinson's commitment to radical individualism: the portrait of the solitary soul who must have liberty to "select her own society" (*P*409). Because this poem so emphasizes governmental terms in its depiction of the monarchical soul's isolation from her constituents (be they her "divine majority" or the supplicating "Emperor" who kneels at her mat) this lyric has established the terms for Dickinson's political and poetic model. Yet, while the poem does depict the soul's commitment to exclusivity, we might also consider the ways it emphasizes the entailments of selection. In other words, if the poem (appealing to both governmental and theological language) offers a scene of election, it also emphasizes those in the "ample nation" who are not chosen. Indeed, we might say that the speaker identifies not with those

who have been chosen, but with those who have literally been shut out of this social contract.

On the verso of a later (1864) draft of "The soul selects her own society," is a pencil copy of another short lyric:

> Love reckons by itself – alone –
> "As large as I" – relate the Sun
> To One who never felt it blaze –
> Itself is all the like it has –
> (*P* 812)

While we need not necessarily read the two lyrics together, they describe, in many ways, a similar scenario – save that Love is even more exclusive than the selective soul, since "Love" reckons alone. But significantly the scenario of this poem is not social isolation, but phenomenological nonidentity: Love reckons alone because it repudiates the Sun's foolish attempt to use itself as analogy for one "who never felt it blaze." Love is solitary because "Itself is all the like it has." As such, this solitary reckoning does not reject others, but rejects identification with others. The depiction of love here is not, then, like Emerson's paradoxical love that refuses sociability in favor of antagonism or "manly resistance." Instead Dickinson's poem recognizes that identity necessarily entails exclusion, and she thus depicts love as that which refuses identification.

Another short lyric further describes how we are asked to ignore the labor required to forge the identity that founds both friendship and love:

> By a flower – By a letter
> By a nimble love –
> If I weld the Rivet faster –
> Final fast – above –
>
> Never mind my breathless Anvil!
> Never mind Repose!
> Never mind the sooty faces
> Tugging at the Forge! (*P* 163)

The poem offers an extended metaphor that describes securing affection as metalwork: flowers, letters, and love join one person to another. These implements of attachment are all offered in the service of the transcendental "Final fast," but the lyric also seems to suggest that as "nimble" as these various fasteners may be, they are always inadequate. After all, the repeated directives in the second stanza to "never mind" the work of attachment have the paradoxical effect of focusing our attention on the very drudgery of securing this "Final fast."

Notably, American democratic theory likewise insists that we "never mind" the kinds of labor required to translate conflict into consent. Both liberals and democrats demand the harmonization of individualism with communalism by either adjusting the common good to suit the needs of the individual, or adjusting individual needs to suit the needs of the community. As a means by which to reveal the kinds of force required to achieve consensus, Habermas frames his account of the "ideal speech" situation with the following query:

> How would the members of a social system . . . have collectively and bindingly interpreted their needs (and which norms would they have accepted as justified) if they could and would have decided on organization of social intercourse through discursive will-formation, with adequate knowledge of the limiting conditions and functional imperatives of their society?[54]

As Russell Hanson explains, "reflection on ideal speech provides a way of revealing the systematic distortions of communication that are embedded in a tradition and that lend it ideological force . . . Once they are made visible . . . they lose their ability to distort communication."[55] Just as Habermas's appeal to ideal social intercourse is his means to acknowledge all the "limiting conditions" of this democratic ideal, so too does Dickinson's poem interrogate the appeal to a transcendental origin that ostensibly resolves the tension between individual freedom and the democratic good.[56] In "Love reckons by itself," Dickinson suggests that appeals to "likeness" strive to make liberty and democracy compatible by refusing to admit those "who never felt it blaze."[57] The poem does not suggest, then, that because we are unlike there is no basis for community, but instead posits that appeals to sameness as the basis for community inevitably obscure certain kinds of difference.

Dickinson's rejection of this transcendental appeal is perhaps complicated by the fact that in numerous poems she seems to suggest that it is only when we take leave of the material and temporal world that we have access to political freedom. For example, the poem, "Color-caste-denomination," suggests that democracy (the refusal to make distinctions on the basis of color, or caste, or denomination) can only happen in an immortal or immaterial world:

> As in sleep – all Hue forgotten –
> Tenets – put behind –
> Death's large – Democratic fingers
> Rub away the Brand – (*P* 836)

Dickinson similarly depicts death as the radical democrat (who refuses hierarchical distinctions) in a letter to the Hollands ("Ah! Democratic Death!

Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden, – then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child"); as well as in "Not any higher stands the grave," where she declares that democratic death "equal holds / The Beggar and his Queen" (*P*1214). In each case, Dickinson makes a conventional argument not only about death (which is democratic because he robs without discrimination), but also about liberal freedom (which posits ideal freedom as being the stuff of the soul and not the body). Democratic possibility, these poems say, happens only when the body is obliterated.

In these terms, Sánchez-Eppler describes the poet's "apparent willingness to forfeit her body for freedom."[58] And to corroborate her position that Dickinson rejects flesh for freedom, she cites several lines in a letter to her friend, Joseph Lyman, in which Dickinson asserts, "So I have concluded space & time are things of the body & have little or nothing to do with our selves. My Country is Truth . . . I like Truth – it is a free Democracy."[59] Dickinson similarly appeals to liberty's incorporeality in the following:

> No Rack can torture me –
> My Soul – at liberty –
> Behind this mortal Bone
> There knits a bolder One –
>
> You cannot prick with saw –
> Nor pierce with Scimitar –
> Two Bodies – therefore be –
> Bind One – The Other fly –
>
> The Eagle of his Nest
> No easier divest –
> And gain the Sky
> Than mayest Thou –
>
> Except Thyself may be
> Thine Enemy –
> Captivity is Consciousness –
> So's Liberty. (*P*649)

The contention of this lyric, at least until the last stanza, is that it is the body, and not the soul, that can be fettered. This argument, however, is complicated, since it is only by dividing the self into "Two Bodies" that the poem depicts emancipation. Moreover, the depiction of freedom offered in the first two stanzas is revised in the poem's conclusion when we discover that the soul cannot entirely escape capture, since the soul cannot escape "Consciousness." Thus the poem ends with recognition of the ways in which captivity and liberty both comprise subjectivity. In so

doing, not only does the poem revise a notion of the incommensurability between corporeality and freedom (flesh is neither more nor less inimical to freedom), but it also ridicules the notion that the individual subject can be sovereign.

Dickinson's portrait of ambiguous emancipation complicates a notion of liberal sovereignty (in which the free subject is unencumbered by collective interests) as well as democratic freedom (in which emancipation comes when the interests of the common good are secured). And, thus, the conventional understanding of Dickinson as our Victorian liberal – as the protector of private space and individual liberties – is challenged by the representations of freedom in her lyrical letters. Likewise, although Dickinson's depiction of poetry as both the product and medium of social intercourse refuses to imagine that such intercourse can transcend, or translate across, the range of interpersonal differences, this refusal is not (as is so often claimed about the poet) an abandonment of concern for the common good. Her recognition that identity with others cannot be secured (save by the tenuous address to another that is emblematized by a letter's superscription and subscription) constitutes a theory of both poetry and sociability. Her commitment to address (instantiated in her voluminous letter writing) is premised upon the apparent contradiction that the essential separation between persons is the very basis of social relations, which is for Dickinson no contradiction at all. In his discussion of Walter Benjamin's letter writing, Adorno precisely describes the way in which the epistolary mode allows for this elusive engagement of the other, "In a letter one can disavow isolation and nonetheless remain distant, apart, isolated."[60] Dickinson's lyrical letters likewise do not attempt to cure social isolation with an address to another, but instead emblematize the ways in which this alienation, or what Adorno calls the recognition that the letter-writer is an "uncomprehended individual," is the necessary entailment of all social mediation. This understanding of social mediation is the foundation for all of Dickinson's poetic discourse, in which the "uncomprehended individual" seeks through poetic correspondence to describe the distances that bind her to others.

To say that Dickinson is dedicated to the autonomous self as well as to social solidarity is not, however, to argue that her poetry works to reconcile these political dichotomies. Yet it is precisely this reconciliation that constitutes the political work of Whitman's American epic, which describes an American politics and poetics that no longer makes liberty and democracy mutually exclusive. Dickinson differently understands that the reconciliation between individual freedom and democratic good does not come

without cost. Her poetry considers both the costs of and obstructions to social consensus, and it reveals the compulsions demanded in social reciprocity, be they between friends or between citizens. In this way, we must understand her dedication to the epistolary mode as ideological critique of the faith in correspondence that is celebrated in the inaugurating sentence of Whitman's "Song of Myself."

CONCLUSION

Whitman's universal letters

Given that the letter is a primary technology of union (the literary form whose function is to congregate aggregates) and given that from ratification to secession the epistolary mode was so frequently used to describe an American politics dedicated to managing union, we might expect that the poet of national union would likewise be invested in letter-writing as both practice and metaphor. After all, the inaugurating sentences of Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* seems to offer a condensation of what we have seen to be Ralph Waldo Emerson's epistolary theory: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."[1] Whitman's celebration of radical individualism is aligned with his celebration of communal identity and, thus, his "assumption" seems to depend on the very same presumption that characterizes the political work of the letter, which likewise functions to make identity and distinction (proximity and distance) commensurate.

We might also presume a certain affinity between Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and the epistolary mode given his poem's sustained employment of the second-person address that likewise characterizes familiar letters. When, for example, Whitman describes his intimate relationship to us in "Song of Myself" ("This hour I tell things in confidence, I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you" [45]), the conceit would seem to be that we are addressed as the recipient of a private and intimate document. Similarly, the lyric, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," employs a metaphor that is conventional in epistolary writing: that the paper on which the author writes is metonymic for the author himself. There is a notable similarity, for example, between Whitman's appeals, "to put your lips upon mine," or to "thrust . . . me beneath your clothing," and Hawthorne's rapturous description of pressing Sophia's letter to his lips. For all these reasons, Whitman would seem to be our poet of perfect correspondence: the American writer whose literary project relies on the assumption that

transparent union between writer and reader can be secured, on the "perfect faith" that there is no distinction between a celebration of liberal self-sufficiency and republican civic virtue.[2]

Yet, throughout *Leaves of Grass* (in all its various editions) Whitman rarely mentions epistolary writing, nor does he describe his own poetry as a kind of letter-writing. He never characterizes *Leaves* as his "letter to the world." In other words, despite his exhaustive interrogation of interpersonal communication and erotic attachment, he does not embrace the crucial mid-century medium of communication and erotics, the familiar letter. Likewise, although he is like Emerson and early republican political theorists in that he conceives of American political relations according to the template of interpersonal relations ("the main purport of these States is to found a superb friendship"), Whitman does not propose epistolary writing as the technology for founding this "superb friendship"(285).

One notable exception to this is his metaphoric use of letters at the end of "Song of Myself" to describe his recognition of God:

> I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name,
> And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come forever and ever. (85)

At first, this seems to be an instance of the perfect epistolary reciprocity we have seen as the fantasy object of many American writers: because God is not a delinquent correspondent, these divine letters will perpetually rain down on us. And yet these ceaseless letters never guarantee comprehension of their author, since the poet admits, "I understand God not in the least" (85). Here Whitman employs the letter to describe divine communication as both perfect and unattainable: he is sustained in a continuous exchange with God that nonetheless maintains God's mysterious isolation. Whitman here uses the metaphor of the letter to describe a kind of communication that is transparent and opaque at once. His employment of the epistolary metaphor in this case resembles Emerson's letter to the ideal friend with whom there is a perfect correspondence because he is "Thine ever, or never." Whitman's figure of the letters from God might similarly remind us of Melville's magical "endless riband of foolscap" or the "divine magnet" that will sustain him in perpetual correspondence with Hawthorne. There are, however, some notable differences in Whitman's portrait of correspondence worth pausing over as we consider the fate of epistolarity at the hands of the nation's self-proclaimed poet of union.

Whitman illustrates a scene of epistolary *reception* and not reciprocity. The poet receives letters from God, but he does not send any letters back.

Whitman's divine post is not, then, like that in Dickinson's "You love the Lord – you cannot see – " (*P*, 474), which depicts the writer as perpetually sending letters "every day." The comparison to Dickinson reveals an additional distinction in Whitman's use of the epistolary metaphor: he is not describing letters between persons, but the receipt of letters from God. Significantly, there is a very different representation of postal delivery in the only moment in *Leaves of Grass* where Whitman explicitly depicts the delivery and receipt of letters between persons; and this moment helps reveal what he finds problematic about epistolary writing.

In "Come Up From the Fields Father," which is included in "Drum-Taps," Whitman narrates a scene in which an Ohio family receives a letter from their son who is fighting in the war:

> Come up from the fields father, here's a letter from our Pete,
> And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from thy dear son . . .
> Open the envelope quickly,
> O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,
> O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken mother's soul!
> Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital*,
> *At present low, but will soon be better*. (436–37)

Unlike the autographed letters signed by God himself, a stranger has signed this letter for the boy: therefore, even as its receipt offers some form of communication between family and absent son, it is depicted as inadequate. Not only is the letter a poor substitute for Pete because it is a letter and not a person, it is doubly deficient because it is not even written with Pete's hand: as such, there is not even a metonymic connection between letter and letter-writer. Moreover, we also discover that the optimistic message the letter delivers is erroneous: although the narrator cites various family members assuring their mother that the note confirms Pete's health, the narrator (who knows more than the letter) reveals that "he will never be better . . . While they stand at home at the door he is dead already, / The only son is dead" (438). The essential problem with epistolarity, as Whitman describes it, is that delivery occurs over time: because the delivery of the letter is not instantaneous, it cannot repair the distance between (in this particular example) a loving mother and her dear dead son.

By contrast, the next poem, "Vigil Strange I Keep on the Field One Night," represents the poet's own spatial and temporal proximity to "my son and my comrade" who lies dead on the battlefield. Unlike the mother who opens the envelope to receive misinformation about her son written in an alien hand, the poet gets to "envelop[e]" the dead soldier's body, which he

has been caressing throughout the night. And unlike the mother who spends her midnight "waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing . . . that she might . . . follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son," the poet buries his "son [and] comrade" with the complete knowledge that "we shall surely meet again."

These accounts of the letter's feeble attempts to compensate for absence and distance in "Drum-Taps" are complicated in interesting ways by Whitman's account in *Specimen Days* of his frequent role during the Civil War as a letter-writer for wounded and dying soldiers. Visiting a camp hospital in Virginia, Whitman writes, "I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c." (712). Likewise, he describes a visit to the wounded on a battlefield: "Several wanted word sent home to parents, brothers, wives, &c., which I did for them, (by mail the next day from Washington)" (713). He not only writes letters for soldiers, but also distributes the requisite tools of letter-writing: "[I] supplied the men throughout with writing paper and stamp'd envelope each" (714). In this way, Whitman emphasizes his wartime vocation as a sort of itinerant postal general:

> When eligible, I encourage the men to write, and myself, when called upon, write all sorts of letters for them, (including love letters, very tender ones). Almost as I reel off these memoranda, I write for a new patient to his wife. (716)

The embrace of his role as epistolary amanuensis in *Specimen Days* is strikingly different from his depiction of epistolary insufficiency in *Leaves*.

What accounts for this difference, I want to suggest, is the manifestly distinctive aesthetic and political purposes of these two texts. The project of *Leaves* is to "absorb" his countrymen and to publish this unifying song; conversely, Whitman explains that the purpose of *Specimen Days* was to keep numerous "little notebooks for impromptu jottings . . . forming a special history of those years, for myself alone, full of associations never to be possibly said or sung" (689). Whitman's discussion of his search for a title for his "impromptu jottings" likewise emphasizes the substantial difference between this collection and his epic poem: "Then reader dear . . . let us be satisfied to *have* a name – something to identify and bind it together . . . without bothering ourselves because certain pages do not present themselves to you or me as coming under their own name with entire fitness or amiability" (885). Far from suggesting that these various sketches have any organic unity, Whitman emphasizes their randomness at the same time that he announces the arbitrariness of his choice of title.[3]

While *Specimen Days* celebrates Whitman's epistolary labors as useful insofar as they apprise distant families of the fate of their soldiers, these very same letters are insufferable in *Leaves*. The poet's aim is not to *transcribe* death, but to *translate* it into transcendental unity.

Thus, one inadequacy of epistolary writing is that even as it is a literary form that would seem to be dedicated to establishing union – to initiating and sustaining the very intimate addresses that occupy Whitman's poem – the letter is always technologically deficient: the mechanics of the post mean that letters do not sufficiently collapse the distance between persons. Far from guaranteeing transparent knowledge of others, familiar letters seem to insist on the impossibility of securing this knowledge. Despite the very different politics espoused by Whitman, Jacobs and Dickinson, each has a very similar assessment of the limitations of the epistolary mode.[4] But Whitman rejects the form for precisely the reasons that Jacobs and Dickinson ultimately embrace it: because it reveals the impediments to reciprocity and because it exposes the kinds of force exerted to achieve claims of transparent communication.[5] Of course, to say that Whitman rejects the epistolary form because it fails to eradicate or dissolve the differences between persons necessarily assumes that this dissolution is the aim of *Leaves of Grass*. And, of course, this question gets to the heart of critical debates about Whitman's politics of union, which has been variously read as a commitment to democratic possibility, to the tyranny of sameness, or to the categorical imperatives of liberalism (to name just a few of the possibilities).[6]

The essential problem for almost all critics is whether or not we understand Whitman's devotion to union as commensurate with a politics of egalitarianism, which is of course the manifest claim made in the inaugural sentence of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's assertion about our shared assumptions is inextricable (thematically and grammatically) from his claim that the reason for our common convictions is our fundamental equality: "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (27). This sentence, as Doris Sommer argues, offers a "condensation of liberal democracy's founding ideals."[7] In other words, Whitman secures the legitimacy of our union (our mutual assumption) by gesturing towards the putative integrity of each individual participant – the appeal to equal possession. As in Emerson, the political alchemy of *Leaves of Grass* aims to resolve the tension between a politics committed to liberal freedom and one committed to democratic equality. And as was the case for Emerson, proof of Whitman's success in achieving this political mixture is that he gets to be *everyone's* political bedfellow.

For example, Jonathan Arac argues that Leo Marx conceives of Whitman's unifying syntax as evidence of "radical democracy," but that the very same grammar from the perspective of Karl Marx might be seen as "the logic of the commodity."[8] Similarly, Whitman's political slipperiness allows Wai Chee Dimock to see an essential similarity between Whitman's "need for substitutability and interchangeability" and John Rawls's appeal to categorical personhood as the foundation of his liberal theory of justice.[9] But this same "need for interchangeability" – or universal identity – leads Sommer to place Whitman in a very different political genealogy: "If we allow Whitman to give himself to us, we guarantee his own returns and give up our particular desires for his universal will. It is a political alchemy worthy of Rousseau."[10] The point is not that these variant (and sometimes contradictory) interpretations of the politics of *Leaves of Grass* are more or less correct, but that the work of Whitman's poem is to make these variant and contradictory positions correspond.[11]

Whitman's political calculus seeks to resolve that familiar conflict between liberty and equality that constitutes the work of liberal democracy.[12] But while for other authors the epistolary mode was an ideal genre to conceptualize the integration of these political antimonies because it served to emphasize a commitment to individual sovereignty and egalitarian solidarity at once, Whitman's own version of this political resolution very differently asserts the fundamental inadequacy of the genre to conceive of an ideal political union. For Whitman, because literal correspondence cannot secure perfect correspondence (the transparent union between persons) the letter offers a model of social communication that likewise fails to guarantee liberty. If difference cannot be collapsed, then there is nothing common on which to base appeals to shared assumption. If assumption, or common conviction, is not secured by an *a priori* identity, then our conscription into "consent" may emerge out of tyranny and not adhesive love. As did Fuller, Melville, Jacobs, and Dickinson, Whitman recognizes the political consequences of the impossibility of correspondence. But while each of these other authors interrogates the formal structure of the letter as revelatory of the coercive entailments of social reciprocity, Whitman rejects the form out of hand because it inevitably exposes the potentially tyrannical implications of the assumption into intersubjective union.

Whitman also rejects the epistolary form because it is, for him, a formal structure incompatible with equality. Since a defining feature of the familiar letter is that it addresses specific individuals as unique and particular persons, it necessarily privileges certain relations over others. To write a letter to one particular person, therefore, jeopardizes the claim

that the poet can be "as good" to each of us. The letter is necessarily inimical to equality, for Whitman, because its emphasis on particular and exclusive relations implies hierarchical preferences. Whitman reveals this particular deficiency of epistolary writing in his well-known 1856 correspondence with Emerson. Here Whitman implicitly critiques the genre not so much because it is incapable of transcending the difference between the two correspondents, but because letter-writing reduces intercourse to an encounter between two discrete and particular individuals. It is with precisely such a particular address that Emerson concludes his letter: "I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office" (1326). Because Emerson can send him a letter through the mail, Whitman exists as a "real" author *and* person: Emerson's letter to Whitman, therefore, not only initiates a conversation with the poet, it confirms the poet's discrete identity.

Although Whitman's return letter likewise addresses Emerson as individual – as "dear Friend and Master" – it quickly moves towards a refusal of the version of epistolary intercourse that Emerson's letter initiates. Whitman, for example, declares that the only adequate reply to Emerson is to send him more poems: "Here are thirty-two Poems, which I send you, dear Friend and Master, not having found how I could satisfy myself with sending any usual acknowledgment of your letter" (1326). In so responding, he declares an essential difference between poetry and letter-writing: "I much enjoy making poems. Other work I have set for myself to do, to meet people and The States face to face, to confront them with an American rude tongue; but the work of my life is making poems" (1327).[13] What constitutes the difference between making poems and meeting people is at least partially revealed when only five paragraphs into the letter Whitman's use of the second-person "you" shifts from an address to his "Friend and Master" to an address to the nation at large:

> America, grandest of lands in the theory of its politics . . . Where are any mental expressions from *you*, beyond what *you* have copied or stolen? Where the born throngs of poets, literats, orators, *you* promised? Will *you* but tag after other nations? (1328; emphases added)

Here Whitman both refuses to address Emerson as particular individual and refuses the specificity of Emerson's direct address. It is also worth noting that Whitman's series of rhetorical questions paraphrases Emerson's own critique of the impoverishment of American intellectual life: the result is a merger of his own voice with Emerson's as well as the dissolution of

Emerson into the nation as a whole. This universalizing gesture is repeated in the letter's conclusion, even as he once again addresses Emerson directly:

> Receive, dear Master, these statements and assurances through me, for all the young men, and for an earnest that we know none before you . . . and that we demand to take your name into our keeping, and that we understand what you have indicated, and find the same indicated in ourselves, and that we will stick to it and enlarge upon it through These States. (1,337)

Despite his return to an intimate address, Whitman writes Emerson not as an individual, but as a representative "for all the young men." And if this representative body seems to position itself as subject to Emerson ("we know none before you"), the subservience is translated into merger when Whitman depicts the incorporation of Emerson into their representative body: "we demand to take your name into our keeping." Moreover, Whitman asserts his (or rather, all "the young men's") complete comprehension of Emerson, which corroborates their identity with this "Master." Equality (between Emerson, Whitman, and all young men) is achieved through the presumption of perfect correspondence (or comprehension) between all. The intimate familiar letter, however, cannot achieve this perfect correspondence, because it is addressed to a particular individual – an individual whose identity is secured by a postal address. Thus, Whitman replies to Emerson's private letter with a mass mailing.[14]

That familiar letter-writing is problematic for Whitman because it initiates an exchange with a particular other might seem to be contradicted by the numerous gestures at intimate address that circulate through Whitman's poem. But notably these numerous addresses to "you" consistently refuse to mark the "you" as a discrete or identifiable individual. For example, it would seem that Whitman is making an exclusive address when he writes, "This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you" (206). The presumption here is that the poet is making private revelations to a particular "you." Yet the exclusivity of the address has already been tempered because the section begins with an egalitarian manifesto that the poet "make[s] appointments with all" and that "[t]here shall be no difference between them and the rest" (205). Michael Warner argues that these intimate addresses that emerge in Whitman's syntax are disrupted precisely because "you" invokes the "special discursive conventions of print-mediated publicity."[15] We receive these confidential messages not as a private letter addressed to an exclusive individual, but as a published and printed volume addressed to any anonymous recipient who happens to pick up the leaves. For Warner, however, the anonymity that

characterizes the "print-mediated" relationship between author and reader implies "mutual non-knowledge" or the "definitional impossibility of intimacy." Yet what is so peculiar about Whitman's second-person address is that he wants "you" to be anonymous (no one in particular), but he also wants to have perfect intelligibility of this non-specific other.[16]

This dedication to anonymous intimacy is, for Whitman, essential to political legitimacy.[17] All are equal and all are equally represented under the umbrella of the poet's boundless affection. Thus, as was the case for Emerson, Whitman conceives of friendship as the basis for a legitimate politics. Just as Emerson proposes that we "renovat[e] the State on the principle of right and love," Whitman asserts that "affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet, / Those who love each other . . . shall yet make Columbia victorious" (449).[18] Both invoke human affection because they imagine that a state founded in love is not "grounded in force": from affection derives a political union that escapes coercive violence.[19] But despite this similarity, there is a substantial dissimilarity between their two political theories: each has a very different understanding of how love serves to eradicate coercion. Emerson's version of friendship and love, as we have seen, assumes an impersonal and ultimately asocial affection: "The condition which high friendship demands is ability to do without it."[20] His democratic theory of friendship, therefore, is predicated on sustaining the other as absolutely identical and absolutely distant at once; and the letter is an exemplary form because it is the genre capable of depicting this paradoxical relationship to the other. Whitman conversely wants intimate knowledge and proximity to infinite non-particular others. And the familiar letter cannot formalize this version of affective relations, both because it cannot transcend the differences and distances that lie between persons *and* because it insists on relations between individuals.

The necessary and sufficient condition of a friendship, for Whitman, is one that positions anonymous friends and lovers as intimately "face to face." In "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice," for example, he writes:

> It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection,
> The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly,
> The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,
> The continuance of Equality shall be comrades. (449)

The political ideal Whitman sketches here refuses the anchoritic friendship that Emerson proposes as the foundation for his idealized democratic politics. Whitman instead posits that liberty and equality are secured in an embrace between comrades. The physical encounter between two "faces" is

not, however, a portrait of two specific comrades or lovers even as it emphasizes the physicality of their erotic touch. His depiction of those faces is notably plural ("lovers" and "comrades") and non-specific ("dauntless and rude"). The erotic ideal here is not an exclusive embrace of two bedfellows, but the pleasures that come from being pushed up against a stranger in a crowd. And the universal affection secured by this version of corporeal presence legitimates submission: these ties of loving union are "stronger than hoops of iron." The poem pejoratively contrasts these unyielding ties with the feeble ones that come from mere representation: "Were you looking to be held together by lawyers? Or by an agreement on a paper?"

Whitman's imagination of the social contract as one based on a "face-to-face" encounter might appear a pre-modern nostalgia for Fuller's "dear talking times of Greece and Rome." But Whitman's ideal is not a model of deliberative democracy in which a consensual politics emerges from agonistic face-to-face interaction because, although he celebrates the presence of the face, the embrace is absolute: union doesn't come from contingent mediation between particular individuals, but from perfect correspondence between universal, or categorical, persons. We can perhaps more clearly see his desire for fully present anonymous persons in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," where the poet describes a "face to face" encounter with himself as he gazes down on the East River. This narcissist vision, however, yields the celebratory announcement that "others are to follow me," as well as his "certainty" about the durability of the "ties between me and them" (307–8).[21] While the mechanics of this face-to-face mediation are not precisely what they were in "Over the Carnage," the political consequences are essentially similar insofar as they lead to the speaker's announcement that "distance avails not."

Indeed, the radical politics of this poem depends on the fact that the query, "What is it then between us?," is a rhetorical one since all those things that might lie between us (the distance of place or time) "avail not" (310). As a consequence of this identity that "fuses me into you," the poet can assert his confidence (his assumption) of shared meaning: again he asks rhetorically, "We understand then do we not?" (312). And on the basis of this shared comprehension, as I suggested above, the poem negotiates a social contract that compels obedience effortlessly and wordlessly: "What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?" The ideal citizen that the poem conscripts into this social contract is characterized by paradoxes: he is anonymous and intimate, corporeal and transcendent, present and future, familiar and universal. But while other writers we have considered invoke either the metaphor and/or the practice of epistolary writing as a

means by which to depict these essential contradictions, Whitman conversely suggests that letter-writing ineffectually confers intimacy, corporeality, presence, or familiarity, while at the same time failing to depict intercourse that is sufficiently anonymous, transcendent, proleptic, or universal. There is something here akin to Fuller's critique of the form, since she too thought that the letter failed to gain the presence secured by conversation *and* likewise failed to provide the anonymous representation offered by print. But where Fuller ultimately embraced the practice of the letter even though (or perhaps *because*) it failed neatly to coordinate the antinomies that characterize modern politics – she is committed to epistolary intercourse with "no friends" – then Whitman rejects it.

He does, however, reference another technology of communication as metaphoric of his idealized democracy of friendship: telegraphy, which Whitman suggests can render the perfect national and personal union that the post could not. "Starting from Paumanok," for example, announces both the transnational and transatlantic telegraph as a crucial "new invention" that will comprise his song. We are therefore instructed to "see, the electric telegraph stretching across the continent. / See, through Atlantica's depths pulses American Europe reading, pulses of Europe duly return'd," and in these reciprocated pulses we will hear "the loud echoes of my songs" (187–88). In "Years of the Modern," Whitman likewise extols the godly "average man" who with "the steamship, the electric telegraph, the newspaper . . . interlinks all geography, all lands" (598). The aesthetic and political possibility of telegraphic communication is more explicitly rendered in "Passage to India," which like "Starting from Paumanok" celebrates the "modern wonder" of "seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires" (531). The telegraph constitutes an essential tool by which the poem imagines its passage to perfect union:

> The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
> The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
> The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
> The lands to be welded together. (532)

Because the telegraph can bring the "distant" together, it serves not only to unite nations, but races, and neighbors: "All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together / The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth shall be completely justified" (535).

Whitman's rhapsodic accounts of the telegraph's capacity to collapse all distance (to make it such that neither time nor place avails) define it as an essentially different technology from postal letters; the immediacy of electric

letters corrects the fundamental flaw of mail, which is the sluggishness of delivery. Certainly other contemporary accounts of the telegraph at mid-century likewise comprehend the telegraph as superior to mail delivery because of its speed.[22] An 1873 article on the telegraph, which is almost as ecstatic about the capacity for technology to effect union as is Whitman, declares:

> The telegraph system . . . has penetrated almost every mind with a new sense of the vastness of distance and value of time. It is commonly said that it has annihilated time and space . . . It lifts every man who reads its messages above his own little circle, gives him in a vivid flash . . . of vast distances, and tends by an irresistible influence to make him a citizen of his country and a fellow of the race as well as a member of his local community.[23]

Indeed, the telegraph is frequently depicted as a revolutionary innovation – as a technology that will potentially transform both national and international politics. In the above essay, for example, the telegraph will bring about a kind of perfect Federalism in which those who use the telegraph will embrace their citizenship in both global and local constituencies. Other accounts of the transatlantic telegraph emphasize the international peace that will emerge from the communicative proximity: "England and America are placed within whispering distance of each other; a new link in the chain of destiny has been forged; the electric current binds two great nations together in bonds of amity."[24] The intercontinental telegraph is likewise celebrated (both before and after the Civil War) as the means by which the United States will ultimately be unified:

> [T]he increased means of material communication, whether of thought or person, tend naturally to union in idea as well as in fact. Disunion was possible when States were separated by weeks of travel, and intelligence was fitful and slow. But with a daily mail, and hourly telegraph, and express trains, a closer political union necessarily follows from the material nexus.[25]

A postbellum essay on the American frontier makes a comparable argument when it describes the isolated and despondent pioneer who turns a "longing eye toward the distant frontier." His seclusion is cured, however, when "the erectors of the telegraph" suddenly appear; and with their appearance "the emigrant who has crossed the plains sends instantaneous word back to his distant friends, and communes with them with the facilities of neighborhood chat."[26]

The telegraph may provide faster delivery than the post, but portraits in the 1860s and 70s of the telegraph as a system of communication that will facilitate political union are all but identical to earlier accounts of

postal networks as effecting the very same political ends. And as was the case with earlier discussion about the post office, although there is praise for the telegraph's ability to collapse the differences and distances that lie between citizens, it is also criticized for failing to eradicate completely the impediments to perfect union. Popular writing about the telegraph is almost as likely to ridicule the inaccurate messages that telegraphs deliver as they are to eulogize its capacity to annihilate space and time.[27] What is more, they often locate the inevitable miscommunication that stems from the telegraph as paradoxically exacerbating the very national disunion it is supposed to cure. And just as both abolitionist and proslavery writers accused the post office of being complicit in sowing the seeds of disunion, so too do we see the telegraph blamed for circulating misinformation about American slavery.[28]

Yet, Whitman doesn't acknowledge the potential impediments to telegraphic communication. He focuses not on the messages sent, but on the mechanism by which this system of wires will penetrate the body of the nation, and the world. Modern mass-mediated communication, for Whitman, fulfills the Federalist notion of a united national body – offering physical connections between virtual, anonymous citizens. Notably, for example, when Whitman describes the wires that move across the nation, he does not praise them for conveying eloquent messages: instead he says that the wires themselves are eloquent. Their eloquence lies in the means by which persons shall be linked to a larger communicative system that will spread through the world, as a circulatory system spreads through a body.[29] The telegraph – like its not-so-distant descendant the internet – allows for the "face to face" that is both immediate and anonymous.[30] Whitman fantasizes a network of communication that will offer both union and anonymity at once: his is a form of "cruising" – an intimate encounter with absolutely unparticular persons.[31] The impediments to the ideal of the telegraph that disrupted the utopian visions of his contemporaries did not dampen Whitman's enthusiasm, in large measure because he was already theorizing the electric post and mass media of our own day and age.

The vision for Whitman is not of a cacophony of particular intimate encounters, but of anonymous, intimate encounters that circulate through the centralized body of the nation – a center everywhere depicted in *Leaves of Grass* as the Poet. In this way, the seemingly antithetical pedagogical missions of Mrs. Williams in *The Boarding School*[32] and Whitman's Poet in *Leaves* are remarkably similar. Both offer a fantasy of correspondence between individual citizens that does not depend on physical presence:

by directing all communication through and to a centralized authority – whether the Preceptress or the Poet – the anarchic potential of a nation of sovereign citizens is negated. But whereas Mrs. Williams (and Foster) imagined the letter as the technology that could effect this solution, Whitman turns instead to fantasies of electric letters hardwired into the body of the nation. Thus, and contrary to the ways in which Whitman is often imagined, we must see him not as radical communitarian, but as describing the mass-mediated triumph of American Federalism and the machinery of citizenship mapped out in the *Boarding School*.

In this way, Whitman rearticulates the fantasy of antebellum America: that a politics based on affection can offer the model for a non-coercive politics. His essential revision is to say that familiar letters are no longer the textual space in which to imagine this ideal model of nation and citizenship. Whitman, of course, is not alone in turning away from the epistolary form as he considers the making of nation and its citizens. After the Civil War and with the Industrial Revolution, a nation premised on the bonds and affections of the familiar letter is increasingly inconceivable. As Brook Thomas reminds us, the form of social intercourse crucial to American Realism is the contract, and literary texts at the end of the century are more and more likely to characterize contracts as coercive – as no longer founded in the ideals of social reciprocity.[33]

It might well be, however, that we are witnessing a new American renaissance, for both the epistolary form and the national questions that it once helped frame. Internet culture of the twenty-first century is spectacularly close to what Whitman imagined when he rhapsodized about the electric communication inaugurated by the telegraph: electronic mail, chat rooms, newsgroups, bulletin boards, the World Wide Web, instant messaging, multi-user domains, and file-swapping. But he would likely have been disappointed by the terms by which it has articulated itself in the past decade or so. Far from the instantiation of ideal Union, the internet has instead become the space through and around which the founding debates have resurfaced after a long dormancy. Turning back to the political paradigms with which I opened this book, the recent explosion of communication technologies represents the long-belated return of the troubled Antifederalist ideals with which the "Founders" inaugurated the nation. After all, the internet offers the fantasy of face-to-face contact, of spontaneous communities, and even of the endless "talking time" later idealized by Fuller.

All of which is not to embrace utopian fantasies of the internet. Indeed, precisely what makes the analogy between antebellum letter and contemporary internet so compelling is that the political rhetoric that surrounded

the post from the end of the eighteenth century to the Civil War is strikingly similar to the rhetoric used to describe the political possibilities or dangers of the internet. As was the antebellum letter, the internet today is conceived as a textual form that is potentially anarchical, or tyrannical, or capable of reconciling these political antinomies. For example, accompanying the celebrations of the chaotic freedom and lack of regulation that characterizes internet culture are critics who decry its anarchical organization and content. Similarly, if the internet is praised as reinvigorating participant politics, it is also critiqued as making citizens even more passive or virtual. Like the letter of the early national period, the internet today (as both practice and metaphor) is increasingly imagined as the space in which the messy work of making communities can be dissolved, even as it simultaneously is the place where that work is exposed. In this way, over 200 years after the founding of the first system of national communication, the ideals of American democratic citizenship still depend on constructing a nation of universal letter-writers.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: UNIVERSAL LETTER-WRITERS

1 In the aftermath of the anthrax scares, all mail sent to national organizations in Washington, DC was irradiated. In a bizarre coincidence, when I attempted to return to the National Postal Museum several slides of 1847 stamps, they were destroyed by irradiation. Anxiety about disease (and especially yellow fever) being spread through the post was common in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Ed Liebowitz, "Special Delivery," *Smithsonian Magazine* (February 2004).

2 The fear that there was some sort of essential relationship between postal work and violence led to a two-year national study that concluded, "'Going Postal' is a myth, a bad rap." See Joseph A. Califano, Jr. *et al*., *Report of the United States Postal Service Commission on a Safe and Secure Workplace* (New York: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, August 2000).

3 I use Larzer Ziff's terms, as they seem to codify best the particular tension in American literary–political history between the desire for legitimation based on equal representation and the desire for legitimation based on a model of democracy that idealizes the presence of individual citizens. See *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

4 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), *P*636. All subsequent Dickinson poems will be from this edition, cited parenthetically by poem number to the Franklin edition with the abbreviation *P*.

5 "Letter Writing; In Its Effects on National Character," *Ladies' Magazine, and Literary Gazette* 4 (June 1831): 242.

6 As Godrey Frank Singer remarks in his 1933 survey of the epistolary novel, "Between . . . 1853–54 and 1890 there is an amazing lack of epistolary fiction"; see *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline and Residuary Influence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 167. My own survey of novel publication during this period reveals a similar decline in epistolary novels. In the 1770s and 80s, there were roughly equal numbers of epistolary and non-epistolary novels. By the 1790s, there is a definite movement away from the epistolary novel: between 1790 and 1792, for example, there were 51 epistolary

novels and 114 non-epistolary novels published in Britain. Both Nicola Watson and Mary Favret explain this decline as essentially related to the revolutionary politics of the 1790s. See Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790–1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See also Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). The standard argument about the similar decline in United States literary history has been to claim that American authors simply followed the tendency of the British novel.

7 In his book *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), William Decker similarly studies letter-writing as cultural practice; but, for the most part, he does not consider *why* this literary mode has such resonance for describing a particularly American form of social and political relations. Although her focus is on the postbellum period, Nan Johnson describes the centrality of letter-writing (and especially letter-writing manuals) to the construction of gender roles for American women. As such, Johnson reveals the importance of "private writing" to the establishment of model citizenship. See Nan Johnson, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866–1910* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

8 The paradoxical stress on union and disunion characterizes correspondence as both textual practice and philosophical ideal. Letters simultaneously articulate union (by connecting us to an other) *and* disunion (the letter is sent in lieu of presence). Likewise, correspondence, as the term is used by American Transcendentalists for example, describes an analogy between soul and nature, but it also necessarily marks a separation. Emerson's *Nature* makes this claim manifest: the soul *corresponds* with nature, but the only reason we recognize this correspondence is because the identity or connection between soul and nature no longer exists. See Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 82. Jerome Christensen argues for this wide range of denotations in his consideration of correspondence and David Hume: "I want to load up the word *correspondence* as much as possible; none of the definitions canvassed by the *OED* can be left out of reckoning." See *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 10. In fact, the *OED* explains that one curious feature of the word *correspondence* is that even as its "etymology insists on a relationship of reciprocity, before its adoption in English, it had been extended so as to express the action or relation of one side only, without however abandoning the mutual notion, which is distinct in the modern sense of epistolary correspondence." In this way, the very definition of *correspondence* stresses both reciprocity and separation.

9 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper, 1990), 53–54.

10 Building from Walter Benjamin, Anderson claims "every essential modern conception is based on a conception of 'meanwhile,'" starting of course with nation and novel. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991). Or we might think about Michael Warner's argument about the centrality of print to the development of American civic virtue; or Cathy Davidson's account of the novel as a textual site for imagining alternative models of American citizenship; or Shirley Samuels's account of the significance of the romance novel to a democratic politics that links familial relations to political ones. See Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Shirley Samuels, *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

11 Indeed, although early nineteenth-century commentators often lament the superiority of the British Post Office, they also insist that postal reform following the British model (free delivery, uniform postage paid on delivery and not on receipt) is crucial to fulfilling the promise of American democracy. One such commentator insists on the antipathy between American political principles and its postal system: "our 'enlightened people' . . . think their 'post-office privilege' is a great boon, while a neighbouring nation has for years been in the enjoyment of a system compared to which ours is like a relic of the dark ages" (83). He continues, however, that postal reform will yield "the most binding union" – a union that is fundamentally democratic, but also that forestalls the anarchical possibilities found in revolutionary France, who where the population, because they don't write letters, "have snapped all the ties of family and of friendship" (88). "Review of *Cheap Postage* by Joshua Leavitt, Corresponding Secretary of the Cheap Postage Association (Boston, 1848)," in *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 2 (December 1848): 82–104.

12 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1994), 71.

13 For a splendid account of the "containment policy" that underwrites Tocqueville's democracy, see Donald Pease, "Tocqueville's Democratic Thing," *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics,* ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 22–52.

14 James Fenimore Cooper makes a similar argument in *The Pioneers* (1823), where he describes the mailboxes of the citizens of Templeton as a part and parcel of its transition from wilderness to civilized town: "the traveler might as often see, stuck into the fissure of a stake, erected at the point where the footpath from the log cabin of some settler entered the highway, as a post-office for an individual. Sometimes the stake supported a small box, and a whole neighbourhood received a weekly supply, for their literary wants, at this point, where the man who 'rides post,' regularly deposited a bundle of the precious commodity." See *The Pioneers; or the Sources of the Susquehanna* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 99.

15 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 317 n6.
16 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 404–405. In this section, Tocqueville explicitly identifies the American postal system as an institution that works in support of sustaining American federalism, although Tocqueville ultimately is arguing for the decline of federal power.
17 In an 1840 encyclopedia entry on the post office, Francis Lieber praises the emphasis on centralization in the American postal system by directly comparing between the American mail and the German postal system, Thurn and Taxis: "It was wise in the U. States to intrust the whole post establishment to the general government, thereby avoiding the difficulties which have interfered with the beneficial operation of the institution in Germany [Thurn and Taxis]." See *Encyclopaedia Americana*, ed. Francis Lieber, 16 vols. (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait, & Co., 1840), x: 290. Thurn and Taxis, we might recall, is the alternative postal system that is the subject of Oedipa Mas's investigations in *Crying of Lot 49*.
18 Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4.
19 "Our Post-Office," *The New Englander* 6 (1848): 393.
20 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 267.
21 Ibid., 263.
22 Ibid., 264.
23 "Our Post Office": 393.
24 "Review of *Cheap Postage*": 90–91.
25 "Review of *Cheap Postage*": 89.
26 This report is republished as "The Post-Office System, as an Element of Modern Civilization," *The New Englander* 1 (1843): 21.
27 "Notes on Debates," December 6, 1782 in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William Thomas Hutchinson *et al.*, 15 vols. (University of Chicago Press, 1962): v:372. Benjamin Rush, "Address to the People of the United States," *American Museum* 1 (1787): 8. For an extensive inquiry into Rush's and Madison's understanding of the post, and the importance of the Post Office Act of 1792, see John, *Spreading the News*, 28–30, and 59–63.
28 This principle remains central to a range of contemporary democratic theories. As Jürgen Habermas argues, "The internal relation between the rule of law and democracy can be explained . . . by the fact that the individual liberties of the subjects of private law and the public autonomy of enfranchised citizens make each other possible." See *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 454. Habermas here offers "discourse theory" as an alternative to what he conceives of the inadequacies of both a liberal and republican tradition: "According to discourse theory, success of deliberative politics depends not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication." My argument also suggests that epistolary writing is a textual space that is used to reconcile a central paradox of democracy – an appeal to abstract or universal personhood as the basis for political rights at the same time as there is an appeal to the particular (and embodied) citizen and her particular needs. While Russ Castronovo obviously turns to a different

cultural location as the place in which this paradox is reconciled, the terms of his inquiry are similar to my own. See Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

29 Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 1990), 8.

30 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 192.

31 Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," *New Political Science* 15 (1986): 7–15.

32 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 42, 104.

33 Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford University Press, 1993).

34 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 40. Warner asserts an absolute difference between the familiar letter (which is personal, and therefore private) and the political pamphlet (which necessarily assumes the "negation of persons"). My claim is that the epistolary form in fact obfuscates this distinction, not only because private letters can (and do) circulate into the public sphere, but also because it is a textual form that appeals to disembodied community and corporeal presence at once.

35 See Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 39–44. Robert Ferguson similarly does not discuss the epistolary form of many of the most important of these pamphlets. One of the most widely circulated texts of the revolutionary era was John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, which Ferguson argues describes the "mission" of compelling understanding: "The capacity to assert one's understanding means everything in this context." See Robert Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750–1820* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Although Ferguson's important reading of the rhetorical effect of this text in shaping a consensus of "understanding" necessary to imagine a "nation" does not discuss the pamphlet's epistolary genre, his reading nonetheless suggests that the genre allows for the effect of the final passage, which as Ferguson says, "proves all the more effective for kindling emphatic recognitions in his immediate audience, 'My *Dear* COUNTRYMEN'" (102).

36 W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer: Containing Familiar Letters on the Most Common Occasions in Life*, 2nd edn (Boston: John West Folson, 1790), 8. There are numerous publications of this edition throughout the 1790s. The most recent edition of *Early American Imprints* notes that Evans erroneously attributes Dilworth.

37 Dilworth, *Complete Letter-Writer*, 5.

38 *The Complete Letter-Writer: Containing Familiar Letters . . .* (New York: Durrell, 1793), 4.

39 *The American Letter-Writer: Containing, a Variety of Letters on the Most Common Occasions in Life . . .* (Philadelphia: John McCulloch, 1793), 4. The earlier *Complete Letter-Writer* (1790) quite differently proposes that letters to the first president be addressed, "To His Highness George Washington"; yet, in its next edition (1794), the advice becomes much more circumspect: "The subject of Official titles, for those persons who shall, from time to time, be entrusted with

the administration of the federal government, has been recently agitated, and nothing has been definitively done relative thereto." See W. H. Dilworth, *The Complete Letter-Writer*, 3rd edn (Boston: Folsom, 1794), 201. This third edition specifically suggests that the "most customary" address to the president is "His Excellency the President of the United States" (201).

40 *The Complete American Letter-Writer and Best Companion for the Young Man of Business* (New York: Richard Scott, 1807), iii, iv. John McCulloch's 1793 *American Letter-Writer* is one of the first to explicitly identify itself as American; a few years later a 1796 manual claimed and highlighted the identification *twice* in its title: *The American Academy of Compliments; or, the Complete American Secretary* (Philadelphia: Deshong & Folwell, 1796). By the early years of the nineteenth century, this identification would be increasingly standard, as in *The Complete American Letter-Writer*, which patriotically promises that "These precedents are not taken from English books or forms . . . but are obtained from the best American authorities" (iv).

41 *The New Universal Letter-Writer: or, Complete Art of Polite Correspondence* (Philadelphia: D. Hogan, 1800), iv.

42 William Roberts, *History of Letter-Writing, from the Earliest Period of the Fifth Century* (London: W. Pickering, 1843), vii.

43 *A New Classical Selection of Letters; Interspersed with Some Original Productions Designed for this Work* (Boston: John M. Dunham, 1807), v.

44 Of course, as Derrida argues, the authority of the writer (of both letter and Declaration) is not consolidated until this moment of signature; the signature proves, in other words, that some recourse must be made to an illegitimately constituted authority.

45 Like Dana Nelson, I see the drive towards American Federalism as the means by which to contain a more radical democracy of face-to-face encounters. See Dana Nelson, "Representative/Democracy," in *Materializing Democracy*, 218–47. As we will see, what makes the epistolary form so peculiar is that it is embraced as the textual form that accommodates a version of political relations that emphasizes both versions of democratic exchange.

46 See John, *Spreading the News*, 63.

47 Consider Louis Althusser's famous example in which he explains the interpellation of the subject who turns around when addressed, "Hey, you there!" Althusser writes, "Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed." See "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 174. But let us suppose that the scene transpires instead in a letter – after all, the superscription of a letter ("Dear . . .") is the textual instantiation of Althusser's "Hey, you there." On one hand, this example corroborates Althusser: the addressee of the letter is interpellated as subject. But, on the other hand, because letters can miscarry – because they might not reach their destination – the subject of the letter may not turn. Letters, therefore, may not be as successful a means

of "practical telecommunication" to the transformation of individuals into subjects.

48 Literary theorists have been similarly interested in correspondence because postal letters dramatize the impediments to social communication that characterize the delivery of meaning (language) more generally. Jacques Lacan's seminar on Edgar Alan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (as well as Derrida's response to it) largely circulated around meditations on the titular object of the story as a kind of metaphor for signification more generally. See John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds.), *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). That reception may not be so easily accomplished is precisely the emphasis in Jacques Derrida's *La Carte Postale*, which likewise proposes "the post" as "the 'proper' possibility of every possible rhetoric." Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 65. See also Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

1. NATIONAL LETTERS

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 48. See also Thomas Brown, *Intercepted Letters; or The Twopenny Post Bag* (Philadelphia Moses Thomas, 1813), which describes the age as "a letter-writing era" (xi).

2 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 83. See also Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Grantland Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Burgett's analysis is especially important to my own insofar as he stresses the complicated "symbolic relation between the public sphere and the post" (84).

3 Despite the critical interest in the public sphere in early American literature and politics, very little attention has been paid to the literary genre that Habermas identifies as significant to the modern public sphere – with two important exceptions. Julia Stern argues that epistolary writing is between *voice* and *print* in *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16–17. And Burgett, in his *Sentimental Bodies*, suggests that epistolary writing in the early republican period complicates our conventional understanding of republicanism and liberalism as being politically antithetical (82–83).

4 As cited in Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 186.

5 "Federal Farmer," Letter I, October 8, 1787, in *The Debate on the Constitution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1993), 1:248.
6 "Cato," Letter VII, January 3, 1788, in *The Anti-Federalist Papers; and, the Constitutional Convention Debates*, ed. Ralph Louis Ketcham (New York: Penguin, 1986), 323.
7 "John DeWitt" Essay I, October 22, 1787, in *Anti-Federalist Papers*, ed. Ketcham, 192.
8 Mason's "Objections to the Constitution of Government Formed by the Convention" is cited in Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 74–80.
9 Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 225.
10 *Federalist Papers*, ed. Rossiter, 229.
11 *Federalist Papers*, ed. Rossiter, 150. John Adams uses the same phrase in his epistolary *Defense of the Constitutions*: "the laws are a dead letter until an administration begins to carry them into execution," *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 372.
12 Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 541.
13 Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 542.
14 The quarrel between the significance of classical republicanism versus Lockean liberalism to American revolutionary political theory is a misconceived one in some ways, as the ultimate aim of American politics is to make civic virtue identical to liberal individualism. For extended discussions of this political–historical debate see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975); Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
15 *Four Letters on Interesting Subjects* (1776), in Charles Shand Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, *American Political Writing During the Founding Era, 1760–1805*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), 1:276; emphasis added.
16 Rakove, *Beginnings of National Politics*, 5.
17 See letter from Thomas Cushing to Benjamin Franklin, 20 April 1773, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard Woods Labaree *et al.*, 30 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–), XX:173. On the Correspondence Committees, see Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: the Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772–1774* (New York: Norton, 1976); and Edward D. Collins, "Committees of Correspondence of the American Revolution," in *American Historical Association Annual Report for 1901* (Washington, DC, 1902).

18 Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris; with Selections from his Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, 3 vols. (Boston: Gray & Bowen, 1832), I:30; emphasis added.
19 William Goddard, *The Plan for Establishing a New American Post-Office* (Boston, 1774).
20 John H. Scheide, "The Lexington Alarm," *American Antiquarian Society* (1940): 53.
21 *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Woods, XIX:401. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
22 A letter (almost certainly written by Franklin) published in *The Public Advertiser* in the midst of the Hutchinson scandal affirms similarly: "It is in vain to say, this would be betraying private Correspondence, since if the Truth only was written, no Man need be ashamed or afraid of its being known" (XX:381).
23 Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 71, 74.
24 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 93.
25 Warner, *Letters of the Republic* 94.
26 Isaiah Thomas, *History of Printing in America*, 2 vols. (1810), II:134. In his original *Plan for Establishing a New American Post-Office*, Goddard spells out what the colonies are surrendering in ceding control of their mails to the Crown's postmaster, "into whose Hands all the social, commercial, and political Intelligence of the Continent is necessarily committed; which at this Time every one must consider as dangerous in the extreme. It is not only our Letters that are liable to be stopt and opened by a Ministerial Mandate, and their Contents construed into treasonable Conspiracies, but our News-Papers, those necessary & important Alarms in Time of public Danger, may be rendered of little Consequence for want of Circulation" (1).
27 For an account of the rivalry between Goddard and Franklin, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 131. John also offers a compelling refutation of the claims made on Goddard's behalf as the true father of the modern post system (292–93).
28 "Note to the Article on William Goddard," Isaiah Thomas Papers, AAS, Box 12, folder 3.
29 Goddard even goes so far as to imply that Franklin's appointment as postmaster general by Congress was in fact the *interest* that Franklin had secured from the "patriots."
30 *The Adams–Jefferson Letters; the Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 353; subsequent citations will be given parenthetically within the text. Adams is actually quoting Joseph Reed's assessment of the publication of the letter. On the feud between Adams and Dickinson, see also Rakove, *Beginnings of National Politics*, 102.

31 Jefferson writes Adams that he "was thunderstruck with seeing it come out at the head of the pamphlet" (246).

32 Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 238, for an extended description of this affair, as well as the entirety of the correspondence between Jefferson and Adams during the controversy.

33 Larzer Ziff usefully describes Adams's frustration that Jefferson and Franklin, both famously silent in public, should have garnered so much fame with so little risk on the stage of oral argument, where he himself did some of his most important work (Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 101, 109).

34 See Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790–1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford University Press, 1996). Blythe Forcey also discusses the importance of the epistolary form in *Charlotte Temple* in her "Charlotte Temple and the End of Epistolarity," *American Literature* 63 (1991): 225–241.

35 The important exceptions here are Burgett's *Sentimental Bodies* and Stern's *Plight of Feeling*.

36 The following American editions of Richardson's novels, for example, are all non-epistolary: *The History of Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded. Abridged from the Works of Samuel Richardson* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1794); *The Paths of Virtue Delineated; or, the History in Miniature of the Celebrated Clarissa Harlowe* (Cooperstown: Phinney, 1795); *Clarissa; or the History of a Young Lady* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1795).

37 See Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*, 16.

38 In Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Charlotte's downfall is caused by the interception of letters. *Reuben and Rachel* also details the social and historical catastrophe caused when letters fail to be delivered. The American editions of *Clarissa* similarly emphasize that Clarissa's downfall happens because her parent's tyrannical prohibition against her writing letters force her into clandestine epistolary writing.

39 Hannah Webster Foster, *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to her Pupils* (Boston: Thomas & Andrews, 1798). Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.

40 Notably several letters from Foster's *The Boarding School* are included in letter-writers. For example, one sequence is anthologized in *The New Universal Letter-Writer* (Philadelphia: Hogan, 1800).

41 Franklin, *Papers*, xx:381.

42 Larzer Ziff, for example, declares that the "epistolary convention is employed only as a general framework" (*Writing in the New Nation*, 18).

43 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer: and, Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 35. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

44 In labeling de Crèvecoeur a "Monarcho-Anarchist," Myra Jehlen usefully describes the political paradoxes that *Letters from an American Farmer* strives to straddle; see Jehlen, *American Incarnation: the Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). See also Cook, *Epistolary Bodies*, 140–72; and Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship*, 99–124.

45 Historians similarly argue that the commitment to extensive suffrage in colonial small towns was not so much a dedication to democracy as such, but rather a technique for instituting consensus and social control. See Michael Zuckerman, "The Social Context of Democracy in Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 3–30.

46 William Hill Brown and Hannah Webster Foster, *The Power of Sympathy and The Coquette* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 11. Subsequent references to *Power of Sympathy* will be to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

47 Using the same figure, Worthy suggested, "The record of memory is so scrawled and blotted with imperfect ideas, that not one legible character can be traced" (21). Harriot wants just such a "scrawled and blotted" memory – one that would allow her to marry her brother.

48 Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 227. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

49 See "Historical Essay," in Charles Brockden Brown, *Clara Howard: in a Series of Letters; Jane Talbot: a Novel* (Kent State University Press, 1986), which, although it argues for the consistency between the themes of Brown's first four novels and his last two, nonetheless characterizes the more popular assessment that "Brown's last two novels are thus in important ways quite different from his earlier ones, and critics have generally lamented the choice he made to write in this mode" (434). All subsequent references to *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot* will be to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

50 Leslie Fielder, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), 73–76, 138–39, argues for the essentially feminized project of Brown's latter two novels; Norman Grabo, *The Coincidental Art of Charles Brockden Brown* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 129–43, describes Brown's move to the epistolary as a sign of an artistic failure.

51 Sydney J. Krause, "*Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*: Godwin on Trial," in *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 184–211.

52 Brown clearly means for us to hear the Godwinian strain in Colden's assertions. William Godwin writes, "It is absurd therefore to say that sound reasoning and truth cannot be communicated by one man to another. Whenever in any case he

fails, it is that he is not sufficiently laborious, patient and clear." See Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1976), 141–42.

2. EMERSON AND FULLER'S PHENOMENAL LETTERS

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Politics," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 563. Subsequent citations to Emerson's essays, unless otherwise noted, refer to this text and are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 1990), 16.

3 See Seyla Benhabib's "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 73–98. See also Bruce A. Ackerman, who likewise argues that legitimacy is the governing question in liberalism, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 4.

4 For an extensive consideration of impersonality in Emerson's work see Sharon Cameron's "The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 1–31.

5 As Benhabib describes it, the distinction between "questions of justice or of the good life" is crucial to liberal theories of "conversational restraint," which argue that only questions of justice are subject to public conversation ("Models of Public Space," 83). Benhabib explains that this distinction restricts (before the conversation has even begun) what topics are legitimate.

6 Anita Patterson argues that Emerson's commitment to the affectionate ties of friendship points to Emerson's fundamental critique of Lockean liberalism: "[S]elf-culture, insofar as it unfolds the affectionate nature in persons, represents a critique of Locke's contractarianism." See Patterson, *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86. According to Patterson, Emerson's notion of self-culture is one that makes *consent* moot, because the self is said to be immanent with the commonwealth.

7 My discussion of the relationship between Fuller and Emerson is highly indebted to Christina Zwarg's *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

8 Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 16.

9 For an extensive discussion of the ways in which Emerson understood himself as a practitioner of the epistolary genre see William Decker's *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), ch. 3.

10 See Lee Rust Brown, *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for

a more extended discussion of the importance of Emerson's Swedenborgian revelation in terms of a larger project of taxonomy and classification.

11 Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: a New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 39.

12 Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 7. We see identical language (as Packer notes) by Stanley Cavell, who writes that Emerson puts us "at liberty to discover whether he belongs to us or we to him . . . It does not require us." See *The Senses of "Walden": an Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Points Press, 1981), 160.

13 This "without loss" is the condition of poetry according to Emerson in "The Poet." See, especially Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, Cavell, *The Senses of "Walden"*, and David van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology: the Argument of the Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), on the complicated relationship between language and truth in Emerson.

14 Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 41.

15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman, 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–82), VII:14. Subsequent references will be located parenthetically in the text and abbreviated *JMN*.

16 Christopher Newfield's *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Patterson's *From Emerson to King* both consider why those along such a wide ideological divide embrace Emerson as their own. For a consideration of Emerson's political legacy in the twentieth century see also Charles E. Mitchell, *Individualism and its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880–1950* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). Robert D. Richardson, Jr.'s biography of Emerson offers a fine example of a portrait of the thinker as dedicated to individualism and likewise to democratic republicanism and social reform: See *Emerson: the Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

17 Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 1.

18 Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 24.

19 Newfield, for example, cites Harold Bloom's description of Emersonian self-reliance as "god-reliance," and then muses, "that even radical individualists like Bloom think of this as an answer is itself the problem" (25). Likewise, George Kateb asks whether we might "disregard [Emerson's] ritualist appeals to divinity and selectively take what Emerson has to give?" Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 91. David Robinson sees that commitment to universalism is the means by which Emerson can conceive of human possibility in the face of individual limitations; and, conversely, the particular individual is the site in which such universalism is developed. See Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 72. Sacvan Bercovitch considers Emerson's commitments to the conflicting pulls of universalism and individuality as framed by the larger questions of legitimacy that inform

a liberal political culture in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. chs 9 and 10.

20 My reading of this subscription is different from that of Decker or Robinson, both of whom argue that it is the "never" that is most likely emphasized. As Decker writes, "failure always seems more probable than success, 'never' the more probable term than 'ever'" (*Epistolary Practices*, 118). I argue that the particular power found in the subscription is that "ever" and "never" coincide and that both describe an ideal of friendship: one is not privileged over the other.

21 *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–), 11:247. Subsequent citations to Emerson's letters refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LRWE*.

22 See a similar discussion in *JMN* VII:86–87.

23 Henry David Thoreau, *Letters to Various Persons* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 81–82. Elsewhere Thoreau explicitly rejects letter-writing (and the post-office) as an impediment to transcendental self-knowledge – precisely because it forces one to "descend to meet": "In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while" (Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle," in *Atlantic Monthly* 12.71 (September 1863): 491).

24 *Günderode*, trans. and intro. Margaret Fuller (Boston: E. P. Peabody, 1842), xii. Fuller originally published their correspondence in *The Dial* (January 1842) under the title "Bettine Brenta and Günderode", and then later published it as *Correspondence of Fräulein Günderode and Bettine von Arnim*, trans. Margaret Fuller Ossoli and Minna Wesselhoeft (Boston: T. O. H. P. Burnam, 1860). See Notes 35 and 38 below.

25 My comparison between Emerson's and Fuller's democratic theories is not dissimilar from Dana Nelson's comparison between Emerson and Rebecca Harding Davis in which she argues that we should understand Davis's version of "democratic interaction in all its messy, heterogeneous irreducibility" as a strong alternative to Emerson's. See Nelson's "Representative/Democracy," in *Materializing Democracy*, 222.

26 See also *JMN*, 11:309 and 11:314.

27 Given the long-standing critical interest in Fuller's personal life, these letters have predictably elicited much speculation on possible love affairs between Emerson and Fuller. More recent criticism has devoted itself to proving the absence of selfsame love affairs – see especially Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*.

28 *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 vols. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1083), 11:113. All subsequent citations of this edition appear in the text as *MF*.

29 Likewise, in a letter to Sarah Helen Whitman, Fuller describes her distaste for epistolary writing, "I am not excited by the thought as by the face of a

companion. I pray you forgive my being a bad correspondent in consideration of my being a ready talker" (*MF*, II:118).

30 In an 1843 letter to Emerson, Fuller, citing Goethe, argues that handwriting (when it is honest) can represent the truth of an individual. See *MF*, III:163.

31 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 199–207; and 202.

32 Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 78.

33 Arendt's apparent nostalgia for the *polis* has, therefore, troubled her contemporary readers, according to Benhabib, largely because it seems "necessarily an elitist and antidemocratic project" ("Models of Public Space," 75).

34 See Larry Reynolds, "From *Dial* Essay to New York Book: The Making of Woman in the Nineteenth Century," in *Reynolds, Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 17–34. Reynolds argues that Emerson's commitment to "epistolary intercourse" was "his main reason for" taking over Fuller's role as editor of the *Dial* (21), citing Emerson's essay, "New Poetry," which explains that "a wider epistolary intercourse ministers to the ends of sentiment and reflection than ever existed before" (21). See *The Dial* (October 1840): 220.

35 Reynolds, "From *Dial* Essay to New York Book," 22.

36 Following the extraordinary popularity of *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*, Fuller published a translation of the earlier correspondence between Arnim and the Cannoness Günderode in the *Dial* in 1842 under the title "Bettine Brentano and Günderode." Fuller herself corresponded briefly with Arnim, sending her a copy of Emerson's *Nature* as well as an issue of the *Dial*. Her letter to Arnim is not extant. (Letter to RWE, 7 November 1840.) For an extensive account of the importance of the Arnim–Günderode correspondence to Fuller see Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*.

37 Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*, 89.

38 Ibid., 86.

39 Fuller, "Bettine Brentano and Günderode," *Dial* (January 1842): 316. In a letter to William H. Channing, Fuller also indicates her preference for the letters between the two women, telling him, "The two girls are equal natures, and *both* in earnest. Goethe made a puppet show for his private entertainment of Bettina's life, and we wonder she did not feel he was not worthy of her homage" (*MF*, II:202–3).

40 Robert D. Habich, "Margaret Fuller's Journal for October 1842," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 33 (1985): 286. Habich suggests that the engraving on which, as Fuller writes, she "fixed [her] attention," was most likely a "composite of two famous portraits of Récamier, one by David (1800), the other by François Pascal Gérard (1802)" (286, n. 23).

41 Habich, "Margaret Fuller's Journal," 287.

42 Ibid.

43 "Anna Barker's name has been crossed out in the manuscript and is deleted in the excerpt of this passage printed in *Memoirs of Fuller*, I:283–84" (Habich,

"Margaret Fuller's Journal," 282, 287, n. 26). Fuller explicitly compares her love for Anna Barker with the famous friendship between Récamier and de Staël: "how natural is the love . . . of Me de Stael for de Recamier, mine for Anna Barker" (287).

44 Joel Myerson, "Margaret Fuller's 1842 Journal: at Concord with the Emersons," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 21 (1973): 330.

45 Habich, "Margaret Fuller's Journal," 287.

46 Ibid., 288.

47 As such, Fuller's own letter-writing ought not to be read as a failure – as if she were incapable of embodying the model exemplified in the letters between Arnim and Günderode.

48 Fuller imagined *Summer at the Lakes* according to roughly the same model, as she explains to Emerson: "Some leaves are written of my record of the West out of which I hope to make a little book. – It is for this I want back Triformis [James Clarke's poem, which was eventually published in *Summer*], intending to make a chapter at Chicago. I shall bring in with brief criticism of books read there, a kind of *letter box*, where I shall put a part of one of S. Ward's letters, one of Ellery's and . . . a letter containing Triformis" (*MF*, III:159).

49 See Reynolds on the transition in Fuller's career from editor of the *Dial* to popular writer for the *Tribune*.

50 The implicit corporeality that has sometimes been noted in the celebrated passage is manifest in Emerson's response to Fuller's letter in which he describes himself as being "knocked ever & anon."

51 Emerson writes, "It may be of little import what becomes of our personal webs, but we will be equal to an Idea so divine as Friendship" (*LRWE*, II:242).

52 *Emerson, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 2 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Samson, 1852), I:308.

53 "Meeting" is used by both Fuller and Emerson to describe idealized proximity, as well as the profane meeting of physical bodies. The ambiguity of the word suggests the contradictory impulses towards both proximity and distance that are experienced by both authors.

54 Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 5.

55 Houghton Library, Os 735Z 1840.1.22. The fragment is not clearly dated, but Fuller does write "Tonight 22nd Jany." While Hudspeth speculates that it was probably written in 1840, I would guess that the tone suggests that it would have been written in January of 1841.

56 This accusation that Emerson understands friendship as a matter of "buying & selling" seems to have sounded a deep note with Emerson, as he frequently returns to it in his own letters to both Sturgis and Fuller. Telling Fuller that he is in "danger of becoming a mere writer of letters," he also states, "I must therefore 'buy & sell.' A letter for a letter & not for a billet, especially, if as in late instances, that billet be a dun" (*LRWE*, II:332).

57 This claim is the terrain on which much discussion of Emerson's career has been centered. In so doing, his defenders argue that what appears to be a

utopian disengagement from the real world is in fact a profound engagement with it.

58 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, ed. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1977), 22.

59 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 27.

60 Although Fuller attributes the passage to Emerson, it seems likely that she would have known that Emerson finds the phrase in Montaigne, and that he attributes it to Aristotle. Emerson records the phrase in his quotation book, "Encyclopedia" (*JMN*, VI:161).

61 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 376.

62 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 38.

63 *Ibid.*, 35. The call is to the "new philosopher" who Nietzsche addresses across time in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), paras 42–44.

64 *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Kaufmann, para. 44.

65 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 306. Emerson and Derrida turn to an "absurd" articulation not, like Nietzsche, to announce an inability to communicate, but instead to try to articulate a commitment to some reconciliation between autonomy and solidarity. Here I am finding myself in partial agreement with Peter Dews's critique of the "new Nietzscheanism," which even as it argues for a radical heterogeneity nonetheless keeps a "liberal–universalist safety net." Dews argues at least Nietzsche "understood that, if claims to universality can never be more than the mask of particular force and interest, then 'life' cannot take the form of harmonious plurality of standpoints." See *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, ed. and trans. Peter Dews, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1992), 39.

66 Thomas McCarthy, "On the Margins of Politics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 645.

67 In its most schematic version, Foucault accuses Habermas of holding a utopian belief in the possibility of transparent communication, and Habermas accuses Foucault of offering no place for liberation insofar as Foucault's own critique of reason is subject to the very critique he levels. See, for example, the late interview by Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," trans. J. D. Gauthier, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 12 (1987): 112–31. Habermas's extended engagement with Foucault can be seen in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), especially chs 9–10.

68 Myerson, "Fuller's 1842 Journal," 324.

69 Fuller's assessment of her argument with Emerson is echoed by Habermas's characterization of his dispute with postmodernist critique: the "paradigm of the knowledge of objects has to be replaced by the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action" (*Philosophical Discourse*, 296).

3. MELVILLE'S DEAD LETTERS

1 Herman Melville, *Pierre; Israel Potter; The Piazza Tales; The Confidence-Man; Uncollected Prose; Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1059. All subsequent references to *The Confidence-Man* will be to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Herman Melville, *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, and Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 76. Subsequent citations will be to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

3 This is certainly how most critics read the pamphlet. According to such an account, Pierre errs by assuming a correspondence between the terrestrial and the transcendental. F. O. Matthiessen, for example, describes the pamphlet's message as an emphasis on "the difference between the ideal and the actual by refuting the transcendental doctrine of Correspondence." Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford University Press, 1941), 471. For a focused reading on the Plinlimmon pamphlet see Brian Higgins, "Plinlimmon and the Pamphlet Again," *Studies in the Novel* 4 (1972): 27–38. See also Michael Rogin's *Subversive Geneology: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), which argues that the pamphlet's articulation of the distinction between terrestrial and heavenly moralities allows Pierre to sustain his own distinction between altruism and incest (177).

4 *RWE*, 262.

5 Significantly, the chapter that immediately follows this long inquiry details Pierre's changed epistolary relationship with his cousin, Glen Stanly. Just as Plinlimmon's pamphlet ends in a "mutilated stump" – without an ending – so too does Pierre conclude his letter "without any tapering sequel of – *'Yours, very truly and faithfully, my dear Cousin Glen*.'" Instead Pierre "finished the letter with the abrupt and isolated signature of – 'PIERRE'" (267).

6 Melville writes *Pierre* (the winter of 1851–52) when he is beginning a regular correspondence with Hawthorne, and he writes "Bartleby" (the summer of 1853, published in *Putnam's* later that year) and "The Encantadas" (the fall of 1853, and published serially in *Putnam's* in 1854) shortly after the correspondence has lapsed. The last known letter from Melville to Hawthorne is dated between 3 and 13 December 1852.

7 Henry James, "Nathaniel Hawthorne", in *Henry James: Literary Criticism*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 402.

8 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 18 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 1:29.

9 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle (New York: Library of America, 1983), 935.

10 Edwin Haviland Miller, *Melville* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1975), 36.

11 For an extensive analysis (and bibliography) on the topic of the Melville–Hawthorne relationship see *The Hawthorne and Melville Friendship: an Annotated Bibliography and Critical Essays, and Correspondence between the Two*, ed.

James C. Wilson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991). Subsequent references in the text are cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *C*. See also Richard Hardack, "Bodies in Pieces, Texts Entwined: Correspondence and Intertextuality in Melville and Hawthorne," in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 126–54.

12 At least since F. O. Matthiessen, American literary criticism has had as one of its focal points the fundamental problem of democracy. Matthiessen, for example, depicts Melville's "fervent belief in democracy" as the "origin of his sense of tragic loss at the distortion or destruction of the unique value of a human being" (442).

13 *RWE*, 567.

14 Considerations of Melville's democratic commitments have largely been positioned within a dichotomy that sees his desire for democratic ideals in which his fiction would be accessible to all as contradicted by his authorial practice of writing non-accessible fiction that highlights an aesthetic elitism. For useful examinations of this issue see John P. McWilliams, Jr., *Hawthorne, Melville, and the American Character: a Looking-Glass Business* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); Kenneth Dauber, *The Idea of Authorship in America: Democratic Poetics from Franklin to Melville* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

15 See, for example, Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne*, rev. edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Edgar A. Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968); Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1953); John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Donald Pease, "Melville and Cultural Persuasion," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, 384–417; and Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: the Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (New York: Viking, 1981).

16 Thus Hester Prynne not only suggests Anne Hutchinson, but also is allegorically suggestive of the radicalism associated with the European revolutions of 1848–49, as well as its reverberations in the American scene. See Larry J. Reynolds, "The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad," *American Literature* 78 (1985): 44–67; and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219–24.

17 "The Post-Office System, as an Element of Modern Civilization," *The New Englander* 1 (1843): 15.

18 "Review of *Cheap Postage* by Joshua Leavitt, Corresponding Secretary of the Cheap Postage Association (Boston, 1848)," in *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 2 (December 1848): 94–95.

19 If in the 1840s these proposals to institute uniform postage rates were associated with preserving national unity, by the mid-1850s some northerners were actually calling for the abolition of any national post, arguing that the national

institution served only the best interests of southerners. See, for example, *Abolition of the Postal System. Speech of Gerrit Smith, in the House of Representatives, June 15, 1854* (Washington: Buell & Blanchard, Printers, 1854), 6. For the best account of the role of the post office in national formation, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

20 "The Post-Office System," 23.

21 "Review of *Cheap Postage*," 90–91.

22 Hawthorne, *Works*, 1:4.

23 Ibid., 1:3–4.

24 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 91.

25 Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 212.

26 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 276.

27 Quoted in T. Walter Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: the Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 208.

28 Bercovitch, *Office of the Scarlet Letter*, 92. Douglas Anderson makes explicit the thematic and verbal similarities between Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" and Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*: "Like Jefferson's celebrated preamble, Hawthorne's preface opens on an atmosphere of 'decent respect to the opinions of mankind' and closes . . . by acquiescing in the 'necessity' to adhere to the truth of his introductory sketch of contemporary life." See Anderson, "Jefferson, Hawthorne and The Custom-house," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46 (1991): 312.

29 Hawthorne, *Works*, 1:31.

30 Hawthorne's turn towards the language of sentiment (and away from that of reason) might remind us of early Republican strategies of political authority, which also understood assent as achieved without violation of individual will. See Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 35–39.

31 David Leverenz likewise notes that Hawthorne revises his claims about the intimacy between reader and writer: he argues that Hawthorne ultimately rejects intimacy, choosing instead what Leverenz describes as a "halfway point" in *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 35. What Leverenz sees as a vexed and problematic compromise, I see as a deliberate political strategy.

32 The large number of readers who believe that Hawthorne's novel does not commit us to the self-evident truth of *The Scarlet Letter* evidence the success of this "fantasy." Illustrative of this position is Kenneth Dauber, who maintains that Hawthorne's demand for the perfect translatability of his texts evidences his commitment to ethics (172). By reading what Bercovitch calls an "assum[ption of] interpretive consensus" (*Office of the Scarlet Letter*, 91) and what I am calling "assumed correspondence" as an ethics of "commitment," Dauber strives to rescue Hawthorne from ideological critique. Lauren Berlant argues that Hawthorne's text exposes the work of constructing the fantasy of the National

Symbolic, but that the text also shows the resistances to this national fantasy. Thus Berlant, for example, argues that Hester possesses identities "unavailable to juridical containment", in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 117.

33 Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 160. Further citations to Melville's *Correspondence* will be cited parenthetically in the text, abbreviated *C*.

34 Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford *et al.* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 244. Further citations to this volume will be found parenthetically in the text, abbreviated *PT*.

35 John McWilliams argues that Melville's laudatory essay celebrates Hawthorne for his capacity to sustain an ambivalent relationship to elite literary culture and literary democracy, and that these are the contradictory requirements of aesthetic excellence (20). Of course, this contradictory commitment also characterizes the contradiction inherent in liberal democracy that *The Scarlet Letter* works to reconcile.

36 Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph, and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1853), 13. Hawthorne was similarly aware of the "spiritual" affects of this new technology, since during Clifford's flight with Hepzibah in *The House of Seven Gables* he meditates on the power and possibilities of the telegraph.

37 These two postscripts presage Melville's "Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids" in which he imagines the utopian paradise of bachelors – in which there is perfect union between men – and the dystopic tartarus of maids, who labor to make the roll of foolscap on which such paradisiacal union will be written. The dialectic relationship between these two stories is paralleled by the dialectic between the two postscripts: Melville understands that the cost of perfect union is alienation, and in the case of "Tartarus of Maids," also subjugation.

38 David Laskin, *A Common Life: Four Generations of American Literary Friendship and Influence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 67–68.

39 My use of "erotics" here to describe a commitment to intersubjectivity that can nonetheless resist demands of identity (and the relationship between this version of erotics and communicative theory) is highly indebted to Carla Kaplan's, *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

40 Melville writes Harper & Brothers, "In addition to the work which I took to New York last Spring, but which I was prevented from printing at that time . . ." (*C*, 250). See Hershel Parker, "Herman Melville's *The Isle of the Cross: a Survey and a Chronology*," *American Literature* 62 (1994): 1–16. Other speculations on the missing "Isle of Cross" manuscript include Basem L. Ra'ad, "'The Encantadas' and 'The Isle of the Cross': Melvillean Dubieties, 1853–54," *American Literature* 63 (1991): 316–23. Harrison Hayford argues that the Agatha letters are a response to the failure of *Pierre* ("The Significance of Melville's 'Agatha' Letters," *ELH* 13 (1946): 299–310).

41 Hershel Parker considers this passage as evidencing a "comfortable, self-indulgent variety of melancholy" that is characteristic of the narrator's ability to dismiss the sufferings of Bartleby. See Parker, "The 'Sequel' in 'Bartleby,'" in *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 162–63.

42 My reading of Bartleby's preferences does not so much "undermine[] the contractual ideology that dominated nineteenth century law" (Brook Thomas, "The Legal Fictions of Herman Melville and Lemuel Shaw," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (September 1984): 36) as it does point to the essential coercion entailed in this employment contract. In this context, Robert J. Steinfeld's *Coercion Contract, and Free Labor in the Ninetenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) offers a persuasive argument for the ways that pecuniary sanctions (the withholding of wages, for example) are just as effective as non-pecuniary ones in compelling labor.

43 David Kuebrich sees the conflict between the narrator and the scrivener as symbolic of an "ideological struggle between capital and labor," in "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: the Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" *The New England Quarterly* 69 (1996): 386. While Kuebrich focuses on the specific "assumptions" of capitalism (e.g. that "property rights are supreme" and that "workers are the servants of the boss,"), my concern is the necessity to capitalist ideology of assumption itself. See also Gilmore who argues that "Bartleby" is about the invisibility of the poor and that literature, according to Melville, participates in the manufacture of this invisibility (141). I argue somewhat differently that Melville's interest is not in the invisibility of the disenfranchised, but in the invisibility of the laws that construct the disenfranchised as such.

44 Melville's interest in dead letters, and in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, DC was not idiosyncratic, since according to Parker, "there was a vogue of Dead Letter Office articles about the time 'Bartleby' was written." Parker makes especial mention of a "widely-disseminated essay," "Dead Letters – By a Resurrectionist," which appeared in the Albany *Register* in September of 1852 (Parker, "The 'Sequel' in 'Bartleby,'" 159). For a full transcription of this essay see Parker, "Dead Letters and Melville's Bartleby," *Resources for American Literary Study* 4 (Spring 1974): 90–99.

45 Charles's Isle is clearly depicted as the political counterpoint to an earlier fictional *polis* represented by Melville – the tyrannical *Pequod*. He makes this dichotomy more explicit at the end of "The Encantadas," where he explains why all the islands breed this solitary lawlessness: "A sullen hatred of the tyrannic ship will seize the sailor, and he gladly exchanges it for isles, which though blighted as by a continual sirocco and burning breeze, still offer him in their labyrinthine interior, a retreat beyond the possibility of capture" (*PT*, 170).

46 Porter's *Journal* was one of the texts on which Melville drew significantly in the writing of "The Encantadas" (see "Notes on 'The Encantadas,'" in *PT*, 603).

47 Ra'ad argues that the "Isle of the Cross" manuscript, which is often thought to be Melville's writing of the Agatha letters, emerges as the sketch of Hunilla

in "The Encantadas," further suggesting that Hunilla's story comes from a tale of a "female Robinson Crusoe," that was circulating in 1853. An essay entitled, "A Female Robinson Crusoe," was published in the *Albany Evening Journal* on 3 November 1853. For more on this essay and sources for Hunilla see Robert Sattelmeyer and James Barbour, "The Sources and Genesis of Melville's 'Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow,'" *American Literature* 50 (1978): 398–417. See also "Notes on 'The Encantadas,'" in *PT*, 604.

48 Carole Moses argues that because Hunilla's sorrowful tale immediately follows the story of the deceitful castaways from Charles's Isle, then Melville means for us to be suspicious of the validity of her story. See "Hunilla and Oberlus: Ambiguous Companions," *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 (1985): 339–42.

4. JACOBS'S LETTERS FROM NOWHERE

1 Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Norton, 1996), 7.

2 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 9–10.

3 In 1802 Congress passed legislation that prohibited all but free whites from carrying the mail. The prohibition's sweeping restriction was underscored twenty-six years later when the Postmaster General sent a widely publicized letter making it clear that the law referred not only to African Americans in the south, but also "any colored person" living in a non-slaveholding state. Yet, as Richard R. John argues, this exclusion "was not entirely successful" (141). Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). See John McClean to Connecticut Postmaster, December 10, 1828, *Niles's Weekly Register* 35 (1829): 313. In his account of his travels in the United States, Edward S. Abdy describes the same incident: "Who would believe that there existed a civilized nation, where it is illegal for any but a 'white person' to carry a heavy bag, locked, chained, and studded with nails! – *Nimium ne crede colori*! While the black man is prohibited from carrying the mail, the white man plunders its contents," in *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States*, 3 vols. (London, 1835), II:132.

4 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 230.

5 Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 235.

6 Ibid., 281.

7 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1987), 65; subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

8 See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

9 See, for example, "Nat Turner's Insurrection," *Atlantic Monthly* 8 (August 1861): 173–97, 173; and Rev. Charles Elliott, *Sinfulness of American Slavery*, ed. B. F. Tefft, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: L. Swomstedt & J. H. Power, 1850), II: 140.

10 *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 2 September 1841, 51.

11 Rufus William Bailey, *The Issue, Presented in a Series of Letters on Slavery* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1837), 54.

12 For more on the Charleston post office break-in, and the significance of abolitionist "mass mailings" to the advent of the Civil War, see John, *Spreading the News*, 257–80. See also Wayne Edison Fuller, *The American Mail; Enlarger of the Common Life* (University of Chicago Press, 1972), 92.

13 Amos Kendell's response is quoted in Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860–65*, 2 vols. (Hartford: O.D. Case & Company, 1866), 1:238.

14 John details Congressman Hiland Hall's labors to enact the Post Office Act of 1836, which "reaffirm[ed] . . . the inviolability of the mails" (273–74).

15 Elliott, *Sinfulness of American Slavery*, 1:122. Elliott gives specific numbers: "it cost $70,970 more to carry the mail in the slave states than in the free, while it ran 5,826,931 miles less" (1:122–23). Hinton Rowan Helper's *Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the South* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1860), itself the target of much southern censorship, similarly argues, "the mails were transported throughout the Southern States, during the year 1855, at an extra cost to the General Government of more than six hundred thousand dollars!" (211).

16 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1856). Stowe also describes the incident at Charleston in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: Clarke, Beeton, and Co., 1853), 397. Moreover, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the delayed delivery of the letter from Miss Ophelia to Mrs. Shelby (apprising the latter woman of the immanent sale of Tom) is the plot by which Tom is sold to Red River. "The letter of Miss Ophelia to Mrs. Shelby had, by some unfortunate accident, been detained, for a month or two, at some remote post-office, before it reached its destination; and, of course, before it was received, Tom was already lost to view among the distant swamps of the Red river." Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, 2 vols. (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1852), 1:276.

17 As quoted in "Post-Office Despotism," *New York Tribune* (December 8, 1859): 4.

18 For example, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* tells of a "Northern man's letter broken upon" (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 8 December 1860). Citing substantially from *The New York Tribune* (a newspaper frequently characterized as incendiary by proslavery writers), *Southern Notes for National Circulation* (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860) details in explicit terms the threat to liberty that southern restrictions on the mail pose, and intimates that southern postmasters were reading private letters: "[Allowing] a Postmaster of some little village . . . to decide what his fellow-citizens may read, and to pry into their letters and other mail matters, is a species of despotism which will not be to those who hold to freedom of thought and speech" (119); or citing a Virginia postmaster, "We are in the midst of a reign of terror here. There is no certainty that letters duly mailed will not be opened on their way." Interestingly, Thayer & Eldridge originally intended to publish Jacobs's narrative, but they went bankrupt before publication.

19 James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1857), 349.
20 See Bailey, *The Issue*, 27, 65–66.
21 Joseph Speed, *A Letter from a Gentleman of Baltimore, to his Friend in the State of New York, on the Subject of Slavery*, 3rd edn (1841; Baltimore: Sherwood & Co., 1842), 3.
22 N. L. Price, *Ten Letters on the Subject of Slavery* (St. Louis: Keith, Woods, 1855), 15–16.
23 John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 6.
24 Rev. A. C. Baldwin, "Friendly Letters to a Christian Slaveholder," in *Liberty or Slavery: the Great National Question* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1857), 43.
25 Baldwin, "Friendly Letters," 47.
26 Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, in *Inaugural addresses of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1961); 122.
27 Contemporary scholarship on the American slave experience is in many ways dominated by similar questions of authenticity: who actually wrote the text? What part of the text is true testimony and what part was oriented toward a white audience? As Robert S. Starobin writes, "Slaves were conscious of the need to deceive for purposes of survival, not only when they communicated with each other, but also – and especially – when they addressed their masters. Thus the letters have to be read with extreme care, for they are loaded with subtleties of meaning, irony, double entendres, and outright put-ons." Starobin, *Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), xiv.
28 Jacobs's letter was not the only epistolary reply to Julia Tyler's essay. A public letter from "Ethiop" to Frederick Douglass describes, "a dirty bantling of [Mrs. Tyler's] in the shape of a letter . . . [held] up to public gaze, as a counterpoise to the very mild, yet timely and just 'remonstrance of the noble women of England to the women of America upon the subject of slavery'" (*Frederick Douglass's Paper*, February 18, 1853).
29 [Harriet Jacobs], "Letter from a Fugitive Slave," *New York Tribune*, June 21, 1853, 6. Greeley denounced Tyler's letter, suggesting that it had actually been penned by John Tyler (*The Black Abolitionist Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985–1992), IV:167).
30 [Jacobs], "Fugitive Slave," 6.
31 [Jacobs], "Cruelty to Slaves," *New York Tribune*, July 25, 1853.
32 Cornelia Grinnell Willis arranges the purchase of Jacobs's freedom in 1852, a year before this letter is written to the *New York Tribune*. See *Incidents*, ed. Yellin 291,n.12.
33 Jacobs to Amy Post, June 25 [1853], *Black Abolitionist Papers, 1830–65*, 17 reels (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981), 16: 696–97. Hereafter, cited as *BAP*.
34 The editor of *BAP* identifies the congressman as Sawyer.
35 Both Jacqueline Goldsby and P. Gabrielle Foreman discuss the ways in which claims made in the name of truth and authenticity are important to *Incidents*, and abolitionist rhetoric more largely. Goldsby specifically focuses on the ways

in which the narratives written by Jacobs and her brother, John, do not corroborate one another. Foreman is specifically interested in interrogating the apparent narrative gaps that emerge when Jacobs implies that there were no sexual relations between Brent and Flint. Like Goldsby, Foreman's aim is not to discover the "real truth" behind Jacobs's narrative testimony, but rather to disclose the ways in which Jacobs's appeals to truth are located in a narrative that simultaneously undercuts these same appeals to veracity. Jacqueline Goldsby, "'I Disguised my Hand': Writing Versions of the Truth in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" and John Jacobs's "'A True Tale of Slavery,'" in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–43; P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Garfield and Zafar eds., *Harriet Jacobs*, 76–99.

36 We see Jacobs's qualified depiction of literacy in her descriptions of Brent's receipt of Flint's letters, as well as in her depiction of an older black man whom she is teaching to read. There literacy is not associated with liberation, but instead with a submission to Christianity in precisely the terms the slave-owner advocates. See Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179, n.13. See also Karen Sánchez-Eppler who likewise attends to the significance of textual violence in *Incidents*, in *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 83–104.

37 The strategy strives to locate Flint in the position of reader; it uses the national post to send these letters; and she employs a proslavery newspaper, which can make its way across the Mason–Dixon line, to gain information that will make her simulated letter appear more authentic.

38 Yellin notes that John S. Jacobs offers a different story of the letter, "naming Caspar Wistar, an older brother, as its signator, and dating it earlier as part of the correspondence between Jacobs and the Norcoms before her escape from the South" (*Incidents*, 285, n.2). When Emily Flint offers a similar "invitation" to Brent, it is met with a similar reply from Brent: "Of course I did not write to return thanks for this cordial invitation. I felt insulted to be thought stupid enough to be caught by such professions" (187).

39 Henry Biff, *Voice of the Fugitive*, November 5, 1852. The other letters are published in September 22, October 7, November 4, December 2, 1852.

40 William Still, *The Underground Rail Road. A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters &c.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 39. Likewise, S. H. Gay (ex-editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and *New York Tribune*) writes: "Friend Still: – The two women . . . arrived this morning. I shall *forward* them to Syracuse this afternoon" (40; my emphasis).

41 See Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 40.

42 *Ibid.*, 4.

43 Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 26–27.

44 *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 16, 1841.

45 Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 104.
46 Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 57.
47 Robert B. Stepto, "Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives," in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 309.
48 Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 64. The evidence of this "distrust" is located, according to Kaplan, in Jacobs's frequent enunciations that she has failed to contract with her readers, and it is likewise evidenced by the silence that Kaplan argues is central to Jacobs's strategy of resistance (65). Of course, that silence is also associated with the perpetuation of the secrecy of that which Jacobs wants to locate as the principal degradation of slavery – sexual assault: "The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell you who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed!" (35).
49 Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk*, 51.
50 See, for example, Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: the Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49. Carby argues that Jacobs addresses an audience whose ideology excludes her.
51 Letter 6, in *Incidents*, ed. Yellin; *BAP*, 16:681–83. Further citations to Jacobs's letters will parenthetically be to Yellin's edition when available; otherwise to the autograph copies in the *BAP*.
52 In fact, earlier correspondence between Jacobs and Post demonstrates Jacobs's profound reluctance to publish her own story, and she herself suggests that Stowe might be willing and able to do something with it. See Letter 4 (231–33).
53 Jacobs to Post, June 25, [1853] in *BAP*, 16:696–97. Although the year cannot be fixed positively, there is evidence from a letter dated August 19th that Post left Jacobs adrift for two months: "I have waited two months for an answer to my letter what is the matter Dear Amy have I acted unwisely and are you offended did I not tell you in my letter that I would hear any reproof from you and feel that it was from a friend[?]" (*BAP*, 16:672).
54 Jacobs to Amy Post, ALS August 19 [?], n.p. (*BAP*, 16:672).
55 ALS June 21, 1857, n.p. (*BAP*, 16:676–78); see also *Incidents*, ed. Yellin, letter 10.
56 Letter 223, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986). The term "Jim Crow" originated in 1832 from a minstrel song performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice. By 1838, the term was widely used as a synonym for "negro," and John Brigg's book, *The History of Jim Crow* (1839), was an anti-slavery book published in Britain. By 1841, the term also implied racial segregation, as the railroad commission of Massachusetts instituted the first "Jim Crow" railroad car.
57 See Philip Fisher, "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency," in Philip Fisher, ed., *The New American*

Studies: Essays from Representations (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) who discusses the assumption of transparency as a crucial aspect of American politics.

5. DICKINSON'S LYRICAL LETTERS

1 Quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 6.

2 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *The Atlantic Monthly* 68 (October 1891): 444.

3 Introduction to *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Mabel Loomis Todd (1894; New York: The World Publishing Company, 1951), ixvii. Many of Dickinson's letters were published almost simultaneously with the initial publication of her poems. The first edition of her poems was published in 1890; Todd's first edition of her letters was published in 1894. For the reluctance of Dickinson's correspondents to give up her letters see Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestor's Brocades* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1945) and R. W. Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).

4 Todd, *Letters*, xvii–xviii.

5 Christanne Miller, for example, claims that the "letters and notes provide a perfect analogue for the confiding but noninformative voice of Dickinson's poems," in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 10.

6 On the complicated issue of Dickinson's publishing history see Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), who argues that the poet's sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, was the essential conduit by which Dickinson's poems reached editors. Karen Dandurand in "Another Dickinson Poem Published in Her Lifetime," *American Literature* 54: (1982): 434–37; and "New Dickinson Civil War Publications," *American Literature* 56 (1984): 17–27, documents twenty publications by Dickinson, including those in *The Drum Beat* and *The Brooklyn Daily Union*. The more traditional interpretations of Bowles's and Higginson's failure to publish Dickinson can best be seen in Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); and in Sewall, *Life of Emily Dickinson*, chs 21 and 24.

7 For criticism considering Dickinson as public poet engaged with her world, see Elizabeth Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820–1885* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998); Joanne Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: the Woman Writer in 19th-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Margaret Dickie, *Lyric Contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Betsy Erkkila, "Emily Dickinson and Class," *American Literary History* 4 (1992): 1–27; Benjamin Frielander, "Auctions of the Mind: Emily Dickinson and Abolition," *Arizona Quarterly* 54 (1998):

1–25; and Martin Orzeck and Robert Weisbuch eds., *Dickinson and Audience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

8 For criticism on Dickinson's idiosyncratic publication strategies, see Jerome McGann, "Emily Dickinson's Visible Language," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1993): 40–57; Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985); Howe, *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 131–53; and Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997).

9 Margaret Dickie, "Dickinson in Context," *American Literary History* 7 (1995): 323.

10 *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), 352–53.

11 Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 43.

12 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Varorium Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). All subsequent references to Dickinson's poems are from this edition, cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *P* and Franklin's poem numbers.

13 *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed., Franklin, 1:23.

14 *Ibid.*, 1:32.

15 *Ibid.*, 1:34.

16 In many ways Franklin's insistence on determining the conditions for inclusion into the poetic corpus seem motivated in reaction to William Shurr's *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), which used the letters as a mine from which to cull "new poetry." Franklin tells us that "only a few of what [Shurr] identified are included in this volume" (1:32). Despite Shurr's apparent attentiveness to Dickinson's epistolary writing, he essentially argues that the letters provide a bad context for good poetry (10).

17 One copy is sent to Samuel Bowles (approximately 1861) and the other to Susan Dickinson (approximately 1865).

18 *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986). All subsequent Dickinson letters are from this edition, cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *L* and Johnson's numbers.

19 Jay Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960) also offers a biography constructed out of Dickinson's correspondence – the correspondence of the Dickinson family and Amherst society, and newspaper articles and reviews, which is a correspondence of another sort.

20 Linda Kauffman argues that to read letters is necessarily to read incompletely, because in the case of epistolary writing, the "work" is always partial. See *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 84.

21 Chrisopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) offers a fine account of Dickinson's poetics as essentially not solipsistic. Benfey's emphasis is on defining a pragmatic philosophy on which to understand Dickinson's theory of communication.

22 R. W. Franklin published a facsimile edition of all three Master Letters: See *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Amherst: Amherst College Press, 1986). Franklin maintains that "Dickinson did not write letters as a fictional genre, and these were surely part of a much larger correspondence yet unknown to us," but he does not specify the identity of the "Master" (5). Both Judith Farr's *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Smith's *Rowing in Eden* suggest that we read the Master Letters as literary (and not biographical) documents, and they position themselves against Franklin's speculation that Dickinson "did not write letters as fiction." Despite their resistance to the biographical reading of these documents, however, Farr maintains that the "Master" is Samuel Bowles, and Smith speculates that the "Master" is Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

23 Benfey argues that "The passage rests on the distinction between witnessing . . . and evidence" (*Dickinson and the Problem*, 95), yet perhaps the more essential distinction is between evidence (what is seen) and testimony or what is told.

24 Thomas Cook, *The New and Complete Letter Writer* (Poughkeepsie: Bowman, Parsons & Potter, 1806), 1.

25 *The American Letter-Writer: Containing, a Variety of Letters* (Philadelphia: John McCulloch, 1793), 3.

26 Altman delineates this as a key feature of epistolarity: "Such reciprocality whereby the original you becomes the I of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange" (117). This "reciprocality" happens by way of the salutation (which initiates a dialogue with the missive's recipient) and the subscription (which transfers the responsibility for communication to the recipient).

27 My choice of the pronoun "he or she" might appear to gloss over the prickly issue of the sex of Dickinson's "Master." But inquiries about whether or not the "Master" is a woman or a man – whether the Master is Sue or Bowles or the Philadelphia minister, Charles Wadsworth – turn the letter into merely biographical context. Dickinson herself suggests the irrelevance of her recipient's gender in two variant versions of a poem that explicitly represents the lyric speaker as a letter-writer: "Going to Him! Happy letter!" and "Going – to – Her! / Happy – Letter!" (*P*494).

28 See, for example, the following characteristic early letters: "I fear you have thought me very long in answering your affectionate letter and especially considering the circumstances under which you wrote. But I am sure if you could have looked in upon me Dear A. since I received your letter you would heartily forgive me my long delay" (*L*10); or, "Though it is a long time since I received your affectionate epistle, yet when I give you my reasons for my long delay, I know you will freely forgive and forget all past offences" (*L*12).

29 See Martha Vell Smith's "Suppressing the Books of Susan in Emily Dickinson," in *Epistolary Histories*, 101–25.

30 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Kavanagh, a Tale* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Field, 1849), 145. Higginson recalls the contraband status of *Kavanagh* in the Dickinson household, "One day her brother brought home Kavanagh, hid it under the piano cover & made signs to her & they read it; her father at last found it & was displeased" (as quoted in Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 1:156–57).

31 The letters between Dickinson and Sue (like those between Cecilia and Alice) play at the boundary between the romantic discourse that characterized female friendships of the nineteenth century and the erotic epistles sent as the precursors to institutionalized heterosexual marriage. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg describes these two social spaces as supplemental: "Emotionally and cognitively, their heterosocial and their homosocial worlds were complementary," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 59. Rosenberg cites letters from the mid-nineteenth century in which women refer to their love for women friends as comparable to heterosexual love. Dickinson makes similar equations when she describes herself waiting for Sue's return, "[I]t seems to me as if my absent Lover was coming home so soon – and my heart must be so busy, making ready for him" (*L*96).

32 Longfellow, *Kavanagh*, 168–69.

33 Bettine von Arnim, *Günderode*, trans. and intro. Margaret Fuller (Boston: E.P. Peabody, 1842); see Chapter 2, Note 24.

34 The volume is inscribed "Baltimore 1850," and in Sue's handwriting is written, "Given me by Austin before we were engaged." The 1842 copy is included in the Houghton Library collection of the Dickinson library. Since Dickinson and Sue made a practice of sharing books, Dickinson almost certainly read *Günderode*; further, her personal library included *Goethe's Letters to a Young Child* (the letters between Brentano and Goethe; see Chapter 2, Note 35.)

35 *Günderode*, xii.

36 Because of Dickinson's famous comment that a letter is "the mind alone without corporeal friend" (*L*330), the poet is often said to devalue the body in her letters. In the letters to Sue, however, precisely what is valued is the letter's representation of corporeality. Dickinson's remark about the letter's immateriality (contained in a letter to Higginson and then repeated in a letter to her friend, James C. Clark) offers an argument about the similetic relationship between the letter and immortality. As we will see, Dickinson's dismissal of the body is always a very attenuated one.

37 Houghton Library Collection, "I wept a tear here" (MS Am 1118).

38 Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 23. In her own consideration of American epistolary courtship, Ellen K. Rothman explains that as modes of communication became more reliable, the letter increasingly did not primarily serve as a barometer of the letter-writer's health. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 10.

39 Not published until the late nineteenth century, Dickinson could not have been familiar with these letters; yet they are useful in understanding the culture of the love letter that defined epistolary courtship as a means toward corporeal union.

40 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Letters, 1813–1843*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), letter 97. For more on Hawthorne's love letters see Leland S. Person, Jr., "Hawthorne's Love Letters: Writing and Relationship," *American Literature* 59 (1987): 211–27, and T. Walter Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: the Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

41 Hawthorne, *The Letters*, letter 95.

42 As if to reinforce that this is the central message of the entire letter, Dickinson writes upside down and above the address to this epistle, "'They say that absence conquers.' It has vanquished me." Houghton Library Collection, "Susie – it is a little thing to say" (MS Am 1118).

43 I consider this text the first example of a lyrical letter, because the two earlier cases of poems sent as missives ("Awake ye muses nine, singe me a strain divine," *P*1 and "Sic transit gloria mundi", *P*2) are examples of a more conventional genre, the valentine.

44 Martha Nell Smith speculates that Dickinson intends the first line as title to the lyric (170), but this imperative address to a second person would be a very unusual title for Dickinson who, when she does choose to title verses, almost always does so with nouns that bear some relation to the subject of her lyric. In addition, the imperative to another that begins this letter is characteristic of the beginnings of almost all her letters to Sue from this time: in these early letters, Dickinson rarely addresses Sue with the conventional "Dear."

45 Dickinson's text makes no discrimination between prose and poem: the manuscript does not, for example, indent the lyrical lines, and their organization on the page is indistinguishable from the prose lines that precede them. It is also the case that generic distinction cannot be determined metrically. As Stephen Cushman explains, "Dickinson's writing cannot be broken down into two separate modes, the unmetered language of prose and the metered language of verse. Instead the metricality of her prose insists on the continuity and likeness of the two modes." Cushman, "The Broken Mathematics of Emily Dickinson," in *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 54.

46 In their essay, "Introduction: Dickinson the Scrivener," Martin Orzeck and Robert Weisbuch compare Dickinson to Melville's Bartleby. Their emphasis, however, is on Dickinson's reluctance to publish and not on the similarity between Dickinson's and Melville's respective interrogations of correspondence and its assumptions. See Orzeck and Weisbuch, *Dickinson and Audience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

47 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," *The Atlantic Monthly* 9 (1862): 403. Her brother, Austin, told Mabel Loomis Todd that there

was much posturing in these early letters to Higginson. Todd records Austin's comments in her journal, "Those [letters] to Mr. Higginson are not of a private nature, and as to the 'innocent and confiding' nature of them, Austin smiles. He says Emily definitely posed in those letters, he knows her thoroughly, through and through, as no one else ever did" (Quoted in Sewall, *Life of Dickinson*, 538).

48 Dickinson would have known the phrase, "honor's pawn" from a number of Shakespeare plays, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1.3.47), *Coriolanus* (5.6.20), and *Richard II*. She uses the same phrase in an earlier letter to Bowles, which includes "Title divine – is mine!" (*L*250).

49 That Dickinson emphasizes this self-characterization in these letters to Higginson is evidenced by famous renunciation of publication: "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' – that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin" (*L*265).

50 Dickinson had written the poem, "As if I asked" (14) four years earlier (1858) and had bound it into the first fascicle sequence. In that context, we might read the surrounding poems as supplying a referent to the unstated, but presumed, "it": [it] is "As if I asked a common Alms." Placed as it is in the letter, however, the "it" would seem to refer to Dickinson's exchange with Higginson. Dickinson also incorporates the poem into a letter (to an unidentified recipient) twenty-five years later (about 1884).

51 Describing Renaissance love lyrics, Elizabeth Harris Sagaser articulates the risks attendant with a lyrical project: "Our usual idealizing, or romanticizing of lyric poetry . . . tends to conceal how profoundly conservative [it] is, how relentlessly it insures its poets and readers against future loss." (See Harris Sagaser, "Shakespeare's Sweet Leaves: Mourning, Pleasure, and the Triumph of Thought in the Renaissance Love Lyric," *ELH* 61 (1993): 20.

52 Erkkila, "Emily Dickinson and Class," 7.

53 Marta L. Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 5.

54 Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975), 113.

55 Russell Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America* (Princeton University Press, 1985), 415.

56 Of course, unlike Habermas, Dickinson appeals to communicative opacity (and not transparency) as the critical standpoint from which to reveal the ways in which language can forcefully discipline subjects into consensus.

57 As William Connolly suggests, the "hope and danger [of democracy] reside in the same ideal." The "hope" of democracy is of a "skeptical citizenry" who are not willing to be "mere stone in the edifice." The danger is that the practice of democracy nonetheless requires them to be ground into "material for use" – to be the willing participant in that edifice. See William Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3.

58 Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 117.

59 Ibid., 122.
60 Theodor W. Adorno, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (University of Chicago Press, 1994), xviii.

CONCLUSION: WHITMAN'S UNIVERSAL LETTERS

1 Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 27. All subsequent references to Whitman will be to this edition (unless otherwise noted), and cited parenthetically in the text.
2 The phrase "perfect faith" is Whitman's own (in his 1856 letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson), in which he describes his confidence in the ultimate potential of American politics and aesthetics: "Master, I am a man who has perfect faith" (1,327).
3 The arbitrariness of the title is also emphasized not only by his extended discussion as to why he didn't decide to title the book "Cedar-Plums," but also the list of thirty-five other possible titles (884–86).
4 Citing from an early notebook ("I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters / And I will stand between the masters and the slaves, / Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike"), Ed Folsom argues that Whitman takes a political position that opposes both proslavery ideologues and abolitionists. See Ed Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (Oxford University Press, 2000), 45–96. Notably, Jacobs critiques southern proslavery rhetoric for doing precisely the same thing: she asserts that their appeals to sympathy and understanding serves to erase the substantial differences between freedom and subjugation as they are experienced by the subjects of the rhetoric – that is, by African Americans.
5 There are moments in *Leaves of Grass* where Whitman claims that his own purpose is to reveal our thoughtless submission to illegitimate authority; in "To the States," for example, he advises us to be careful not to practice "unquestioning obedience" since this is the root cause of enslavement from which no nation will ever "resume . . . its liberty" (172). Yet, his political admonishment never to accept blindly the terms of any obedience to authority is contradicted often in *Leaves*, when Whitman proposes that the social contract presuppose an assent to a contract that is offered in the name of a universal affection. He rhetorically asks in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," for example, "What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?" (312).
6 Those who argue for Whitman's essentially egalitarian politics and poetics of union include Betsy Erkkila's *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1889), as well as her essay, "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic," in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 153–71; and Allen Grossman, "The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln," in Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (eds.),

The American Renaissance Reconsidered. Selected Papers from the English Institution, 1982–83 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 183–208. Doris Sommer makes the strongest claims for the tyrannical entailment of Whitman's construction of union in *Leaves*: she argues, "To understand is to establish identity; and this requires conceptualization that generalizes away otherness . . . empathetic identification violates the other person; and ontological identification eliminates particularity for the sake of unity" (27). See Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). And for the most sophisticated account of the appeal to liberalism implied in Whitman's dedication to union see Wai Chee Dimock, "Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory," in Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (eds.), *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 62–82.

7 Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, 36.

8 Jonathan Arac, "Whitman and Problems of the Vernacular," in *Breaking Bounds*, 55.

9 Dimock, "Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory"; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

10 Sommer, 47.

11 In his reading of the first lines of "Song of Myself," Michael Moon proposes that the poem's rhetoric "can be shown to exceed . . . the oppressive political tendencies in which it to some degree participates." More specifically, Moon argues that the demand for assumption ought not be read as "simply a coercive disablement of the reader," but as an "invitation to the reader to 'assume' the totalizing stance of the speaker." (Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in* Leaves of Grass (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 82–83.

12 Dimock somewhat differently characterizes this conflict as the "fatal incompatibility" between "the language of democratic equality . . . and the language of affective preference"(70).

13 Whitman's rejection of "face-to-face" relations can be read as a rejection of the acknowledgment of alterity, which is Emmanuel Levinas's ideal model of reciprocity. See *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Whitman's letter corroborates Doris Sommer's claim that Whitman's politics are antithetical to those espoused by Levinas. If Whitman refuses alterity in the name of the universal subject, then Levinas's devotion to the mysteriousness of the other has a similar effect: both responses to the other offer no engagement with alterity.

14 We can see perhaps an early example of Whitman's commitment to mass mailing (but not to the familiar letter) when he describes the power of the post to deliver the message of popular fiction, which is "wafted by every mail to all parts of this vast republic." See Walt Whitman, *Early Poetry and Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 126–27. See Michael Warner, "Whitman Drunk," in *Breaking Bounds* for more on Whitman's own piece of popular propaganda fiction that was likewise "wafted" through the mails.

15 Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 40.

16 There is a similarity between Warner's argument and Dimock's in that both maintain that Whitman's model of friendship (or intimacy) presupposes a universal, or categorical person. But while Warner understands Whitman's rejection of the intimate and specific "you" as evidence of his "imperfect success of selfing" (Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 41), Dimock understands this rejection as essential to Whitmanian liberalism. Moreover, while Warner reads this social theory as confirmation of the "Whitmanian sublime" (Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 39), Dimock understands it as a potentially impoverished notion of social relations since we are "not always so grammatical in love and friendship" (Dimock, "Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory," 69).

17 We might characterize Whitman's politics as "unitary democracy," which Benjamin Barber explains asserts that all division and conflict will be resolved "through the organic will of a homogenous or even monolithic community." The homogeneity of this community, Barber explains, can come from a "large and abstract" body (hence fascism would be one version of a "unitary democracy") or from a small community that allows for "face-to-face" interactions; and Barber cites the example of the small seventeenth-century New England town – Crèvecoeur's portrait of Nantucket would, of course, be another example of "unitary democracy." See Barber, *Strong Democracy* (University of California Press, 1984), 45–55.

18 Emerson, *LWRE*, 570.

19 *Ibid.*, 570.

20 *Ibid.*, 350.

21 Moon argues that the poem offers a different representation of the poet's relationship to his contemporary audience (the "curious" crowds that surround him on the ferry) and the future audience he addresses more directly. The poem can imagine a face-to-face encounter with this latter audience, because it "foresees them becoming sufficiently 'other from the poet . . . that they . . . can complete the circuit of desirous gazing which his contemporaries cannot" (Moon, *Disseminating Whitman*, 109). Moon's assessment of these different accounts of social reciprocity is exactly right, although I would suggest that the reason the prospective audience can reciprocate the poet's gaze is because they are figured in the poem as anonymously present to the poet.

22 For example, an 1874 essay that praises the development of faster routes dedicated to international mail delivery (especially from Australia to the United States) ultimately saves its greatest admiration for telegraphy, which brings "the distant parts of the earth in still nearer and closer commercial friendship". See "Girding the Earth with Postal Service," *Appleton's Journal: a Magazine of General Literature* 11.29 (1874): 318.

23 "The Telegraph," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 47 (August 1873): 359. An 1871 history of the United States postal system similarly announces that before the development of the telegraph system, "people . . . depended upon, and were quite satisfied to wait upon, chance for information." Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "New York City Post-Office," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 43 (October 1871): 646.

24 Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1858), 193. Similarly, Charles Francis Adams writes that the telegraph "would do more than any other agency to strengthen the bonds of union between the two countries," in "The TransAtlantic Telegraph Cable," *Harper's Weekly* (July 29, 1865): 447. An illustration entitled, "The Electric Union," published only a month later depicts the allegorical figures of Mother England and Lady Liberty in an embrace, and at their feet lie a lion and an eagle holding a rope. "The Electric Union," *Harper's Weekly* (August 19, 1865): 516.

25 James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London J. W. Parker and Son, 1857), 349. An illustration in *Harper's Weekly* makes a similar claim with its portrait of a winged figure traipsing across telegraph wires, which are suspended across the American landscape, while holding a scroll that reads "may the union be perpetual." See "The First Telegraphic Message from California," *Harper's Weekly* (November 23, 1861): 752.

26 "Emigrants Crossing the Plains," *Appleton's Journal: a Magazine of General Literature* 1.19 (1869): 601.

27 Telegraph operators are frequently depicted as so badly transcribing messages that the telegraph only transmits gibberish. Popular magazines frequently offer little poems that make fun of spelling inaccuracies: "Reduce the charges, which now is plundering. / And teach the clerks to spell without blundering." See "Telegraph and Telegram [By a Modern Greek]," *Harper's Weekly* (November 14, 1857): 735. An essay entitled "The Torments of Typography," similarly announces that "of all typographical torments endured by the daily press, none are comparable with those inflicted by the telegraph. Nothing need be said of the vast mass of trash sent over the wires every twenty four hours, not half of which would be read . . . were it not for the magical words 'By telegraph.' . . . The telegraph would be blameless if it would only deliver faithfully and accurately at one end whatever is put upon it at the other." See *Appleton's Journal: a Magazine of General Literature* 5.104 (1871): 345.

28 Josiah Quincy, for example, cites both the mail and telegraph as the culprits in the dissemination of proslavery propaganda, in *Address illustrative of the Nature and Power of the Slave States, and the Duties of the Free States, delivered at the request of the inhabitants of the town of Quincy, Mass. on June 1856* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856), 28. Frederick Douglass likewise suggests that although the telegraph is presumed to be associated with the dissemination of truth, it often perpetrates falsehoods: "The lightning, when speaking for itself, is among the most direct, reliable and truthful of things; but when speaking for the terror-stricken slaveholders at Harper's Ferry, it has been made the swiftest of liars." See *New York Daily Tribune* (November 4, 1859): 6.

29 The intimate connection between telegraph and the internet is articulated explicitly in Tom Standage's *The Victorian Internet: the Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Walker and Co., 1998).

30 Whitman's rhetoric is echoed in popular writing of the time: "It is now almost certain that within a few months the Magnetic Telegraph, which is literally material thought, and flies as swift, absolutely annihilating space and running in advance of time, will be extended to all the great cities in the Union – so that a net-work of nerves of iron wire, strung with lightning, will ramify from the brain, New York, to the distant limbs and members . . . to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Nashville, St. Louis and New Orleans" ("The Magnetic Telegraph – Some of its Results," in *The Living Age* 6:63 (July 1843): 194).

31 Warner characterizes Whitman's paradoxical commitment to intimacy in which we are both "on notice about our place in nonintimate public discourse" at the same time as we are "solicited into an intimate recognition exchange" as a "phenomenology of cruising" (Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 41).

32 Hannah Webster Foster, *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to her Pupils* (Boston: Thomas & Andrews, 1798).

33 In Thomas's account of realism as characterized by the "failed promise of contract" – "[the] failure to sustain the promise that an equitable social order can be constructed on the basis of interpersonal exchanges lacking the regulation of transcendental principles" (14) – we see a shift from a model of consensual social reciprocity to one that makes coercions and restrictions explicit. Although Thomas does not describe "perfect contracts" as epistolary ones, as we have seen, the epistolary mode from at least the eighteenth century has been theorized as textual interpersonal exchange regulated by "transcendental principles." See Brook Thomas, *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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