First Hour

The Hour of Flowers: A 827

You ask me what
my flowers said –
then they were
disobedient – I gave
them messages –

Emily Dickinson, from A 827

How late the world seems on a spring night; how close this message written over a century ago seems to come to us. Does our fascination with A 827 come from its prescience, its foretelling of the “Master” writings that will follow? Or is it rather the discontinuity, the rupture between A 827 and the later “Master” documents—two poems, one radically disordered draft, and a last incandescent work in prose and verse—that makes us fall backward into the mystery of A 827, as if we might also fall backward into an originary moment? Its unique and time-defying appearance in the spring of 1858 escapes explanation. The advent of A 827 seems at once ex nihilo and sui generis. Even if A 827 is only a fragment of a longer, now lost correspondence or an extant witness of a writing experiment inadvertently saved, the extent of Dickinson’s literary experimentation in this text marks it as more daring—more prosodically prophetic—than anything we see in the verses of the early fascicles copied in the summer of 1858. Shuttling between iambic and trochaic meters, deploying assonance, enjambment, perfect, imperfect, identical, vowel, suspended, and eye rhyme, A 827, classified as prose by every editor, initiates a movement we will see again later in Dickinson’s writings: the re-description of the boundaries between letter and poem.166

A consideration of time in Dickinson’s ”Master” documents cannot end with an account of the dates on which they may have been written but also requires us to think about the many temporal dynamics that structure them and about the times to which they potentially give us access. Though it is written by a person who no longer exists, A 827 nonetheless gives us passage directly into a bright hour of a spring night in mid-nineteenth-century Amherst. It is through this more intimately writerly lens that A 827 is dated, in its deepest interior, in this hour

166. This point was established early on by Smith; see her Rowing in Eden, pp. 97–127.
when the writer, perhaps recovering from an unnamed illness, lifts her “stronger hand” to address an interlocutor who seems to have sent word, after an unknown interval, of his own convalescence.167

In this letter-poem, the salutation, “Dear Master,” is simultaneously introduction and dedication, and the sonic linkages in the opening and closing lines—ill, tell, well; well, tell, tell, well—are an intricate clasp locking the work from the inside. All through the body of the text short and long o’s—some muted (e.g., more, stronger, thought, wonderful, flowers, love, shore, soon), others purer (e.g., eno, spoke, so, fro)—combine with soft, murmuring s’s (e.g., messages, Sabbath, Sabbaths) to impart a soothing, melodic undercurrent that carries us from line to line even as it almost perfectly conveys the hollow feeling of the body waking from sickness and falling once more into the beauty of the world it almost missed. Begun, moreover, in the immediate aftermath of surprise occasioned by the receipt of a message conveying the sound of a loved voice the writer had feared was lost forever—“I thought perhaps / you were in Heaven, / and when you spoke / again, it seemed / quite sweet, and / wonderful, and surprised / me so —” (7–13)—the poem-letter is a trove of wishes: “I wish that / you were well” (13–14); “I would that all I / love, should be weak no / more” (15–17); “I wish that / I were great” (27–28); “Will you / tell me, please to tell / me, soon as you are / well –” (57–60) (emphases added).

In a New World take on the Old World reverdie, Dickinson’s letter-poem marks the re-greening of the earth and its transfiguration into a temporal paradise that seems to have arrived during the period of the writer’s bodily withdrawal: “Indeed it is God’s house – / and these are gates / of Heaven, and to / and fro, the angels / go, with their sweet / postillions –” (22–27). In April of 1858, the Sabbath days fell on the 4th, 11th, 18th, and 25th of the

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167 The gender of the “Master” figure has been problematized by scholars and, most convincingly, by Smith. Although I do not believe that the documents were written to Susan Dickinson, or to another woman, the pronoun associated with this figure is uncertain. While I use “he” at times, I also follow Dickinson in using “It” to refer to the “Master,” and it is this latter form—at once ambiguous with regard to gender and even species—that I prefer.
month. According to the weather journal kept by Ebenezer and Sabra Snell of Amherst, in April 1858, signs of rain marred the evenings of both the first and second Sabbaths, and the final Sabbath on the 25th was cold—just 28 degrees—and cloudy.\textsuperscript{168} But on the third Sabbath in April, the record reads "Cirrus. Fine day." Could it possibly have been on the night of 18 April that Dickinson made her "stronger hand / work long eno" (5–6) to write this spring letter-poem that never left her desk but that she saved for the long remainder of her life?\textsuperscript{169} Here, nearly a quarter of a century before the passage of time led Dickinson to write to her friend Elizabeth Holland, "It sometimes seems as if special Months gave and took away – [. . . ]. April – robbed me most – in incessant instances –" (L 775), we feel the light and temperatures shifting in the northern zone towards a nineteenth-century spring.

At exactly the mid-point of the letter-poem, Dickinson addresses the "Master" directly: "You ask me what / my flowers said – / then they were / disobedient – I gave / them messages –" (31–35). Here she introduces a figure—the flower—that will recur both in other writings of this constellation and within her larger oeuvre. Whether "flowers" serves as a code word for poems or alludes rather to the literal plants growing in Dickinson's conservatory is ultimately less important than the independent agency with which she endows them. Neither allegorical representations of feminized nature nor exquisite adornments to the writer or her work, they are sentient beings, interacting dynamically with writer and world. In the prelapsarian space of this first letter-poem, Dickinson's flowers, like John Milton's in \textit{Paradise Lost} or John Ruskin's in \textit{Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers}, are expressions of a divine imagination that animates all matter\textsuperscript{170}:

"They said what the / lips in the West, say, / when the sun goes / down, and so says / the Dawn –" (36–40).

Fig. 20. A 827, ca. spring 1858, lines 31–32

The first (extant) "Master" document, part message, part poem, may also be an instance of inner speech with its inherent hiddenness and elusiveness.\textsuperscript{171} It is an invitation to another—the interlocutor—to enter a shared interior. When Dickinson writes, "Listen again, Master –" (41), she is not issuing a command but wishfully summoning his participation in the immanence of her vision. She asks him to experience the interval—the layers and distances, the time and separations—between touches as a sea: "Each Sabbath on the / sea, makes me count / the Sabbaths, till we / meet on shore –" (45–48). She asks him—whispers to him—to postpone their fall into time again—both imaginatively at hand and infinitely far away—when both will reach the shoreline together "and / whether the hills will / look as blue as the / sailors say –" (48–51).

The heart is the most powerful and least accurate device for measuring time. The hand crossing the paper keeps time more surely; when it falters, it is not time's endlessness but her own ending that Dickinson records. At the top of the third page, a drop of ink may be a visible sign of her fatigue or a sign of nothing at all. The final turn of the letter-poem bends back into the world of time and sorrow. In this world, writing is painful work: "I cannot talk I stay / any more. I longer l / tonight, forever for this pain / denies me –" (52–54). While the labor of writing is underscored by authorial strikethroughs, Dickinson's cancellation of "talk" signals both her acknowledgment—and interiorization—of the absence of the "Master" and the annulment of the fantasy of an intimate, synchronous communication between writer and addressee.

168 The similar weather patterns of April 1857 and April 1858 further the ambiguity surrounding the dating of A 827. For more information, see my essay on the Snells' meteorological journals, "The Weather (of) Documents" in \textit{ESQ} 62, no. 3 (2016): 480–529.

169 Although I believe, like Leyda, Johnson, and Franklin, that this text was composed in the spring of 1858, there is still a remote possibility that it belongs to the purportedly textually blank spring of 1857. In April of 1857, the Sabbath days fell on the 5th, 12th, 19th, and 26th. The Snells' weather journal recorded fog, rain, and northeast clouds on the first three Sabbaths in April, whereas on the final Sabbath of the month, the skies shone brightly until evening: "Fine day. Hazy at eve[nin]g".

170 The Dickinson library held an 1819 edition of Milton's \textit{Paradise Lost}, inscribed "E[dward] Dickinson", and Dickinson's familiarity with the text is evident in her work; see especially L 1038, where she alludes to Milton as "the great florist". While John Ruskin's \textit{Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers} was first published in 1886, his floral studies belong to the 1840s.

171 Although the boundary between inner speech and inner thought is blurred here, I have chosen "speech" over "thought" to foreground the persistence here of the voice—a known, loved, human voice in the imagination of the other.
These have been night words. And by the letter-poem's end, night has fallen. When Dickinson turns over the second leaf of the bifolium, she does not fill the paper but writes only a few lines: “tell me, please to tell / me, soon as you are / well –” (58–60). There is no signature, only an empty space stretching out beyond these lines.

Has she decided, already, that the message will not be sent?

Whether Dickinson made another copy and sent the new version from her desk at the Homestead to an address somewhere in her world and, if so, whether a reply from this address came sometime later is not known.

We do know that Thomas Johnson long maintained that many other messages belonging to this constellation had at one time existed. Franklin tacitly agrees, writing in the introduction to his edition of the “Master” documents, “Although there is no evidence the letters were ever posted […], they indicate a long relationship, geographically apart, in which correspondence would have been the primary means of communication. Dickinson did not write letters as a fictional genre, and these were surely part of a much larger correspondence yet unknown to us”.¹⁷²

In Johnson’s and Franklin’s narratives, it follows that in the spring of 1858, Dickinson sent a copy—perhaps a variant copy—of the draft known as A 827 to an unidentified recipient and waited for a reply that may or may not have come. The image of a woman waiting for a letter is so old it seems without origins, so ubiquitous it seems always already understood. In Franklin’s and Johnson’s narratives, Dickinson has given up the prerogative of power. She is no longer a figure of agency but rather of longing.

Johnson and Franklin never imagine that Dickinson has not sent copies (variants, versions) of the messages she also saves. In their narratives, the very act of writing turns Dickinson into the one who awaits a reply, who undergoes the affective experience of waiting we (women) know so well. Yet it is not the “letter” that leaves the Homestead but rather Dickinson who leaves the safety the Homestead represents by drafting it. As spring turns into summer, she takes up a new proximity to freedom, and she does not turn back. Instead of waiting for a reply between the springs of 1858 and 1860, when the next extant “Master” document appears, Dickinson copies (in some cases, writes) some 170 poems onto fascicle sheets and binds eight volumes of her work. The hour of A 827 is followed by a breach—of hours, days, even months and years—of correspondence, but not of writing.

SECOND HOUR

The Hour of Ermine: A 825

Fold a tiny Courtier
In thine Ermine, Sir;

EMILY DICKINSON, from A 825

In the “Master” constellation, this poem feels like an asterisk—a tiny, concentrated star or point of light—separating two tendentially more epistolary documents.

¹⁷² Franklin, introduction to Master Letters, p. 5.

Mute – thy Coronation – appears to have been composed in the second half of 1860, not only at least two years after the first extant “Master” document, A 827, but also in the apparently empty interval between the end of summer in 1860 and the beginning of the new year. The time—the hour—is worth noting. As Franklin remarks, “Fascicles 5 through 8 occupied Dickinson steadily from