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LORI EMERSON

*My Digital Dickinson*

Partly a contradiction of its title, partly a productive misreading of Emily Dickinson, this essay rewrites and writes through Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* to demonstrate a particular reading methodology in reference to Dickinson and contemporary digital poets.<sup>1</sup> Of course it is absurd to say that Dickinson was a digital poet, as we understand that term today—poetry that is both created using a digital computer and self-conscious or self-reflexive about its digital medium of creation and representation. It is equally absurd, because of its inbuilt technological determinism, to say that the variants in Dickinson's work show that she was attempting to write digital/hypertext poems with the restrictions of pen and paper—absurd, that is, to claim that if Dickinson could have written hypertext poems she surely would have done so. But what if the approach were reframed slightly? In addition to reading Dickinson into the present moment and examining her relation to poetry today, such as that by Mary Flanagan and Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley, we can foreground the ways in which the digital now permeates our reading/writing habits and the ways in which our current cultural moment may be a productive frame for reading Dickinson.<sup>2</sup> That our reading should move both from the present into the past and the past into the present is underscored by the fact that writing technologies in general and digital writing media in particular cognitively change us as readers and writers; further, we are constantly being remediated, in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's sense of the term, or intermediated, as Katherine Hayles puts it, into other writing media.<sup>3</sup> Through a reading of Dickinson alongside Flanagan and Morrissey/Talley, I argue that we irremediably see, or even reconfigure, the book through the lens of the digital and that the technology of the book finds its way into the digital as well. In other words, this essay is a case-study in reading bookbound and digital poetry—for if we are to acknowledge fully and accurately the state of literature of the present

moment, we must infuse our investigations into the present with a sense of historical groundedness and acknowledge the ways in which our reading of bookbound poets is already framed by the digital.

Digital poetry, one genre among many underneath the umbrella-term *electronic literature*, is transforming the limits and possibilities of poetry and poetics. For instance, how do we, as literary critics and scholars, begin to account for a work such as Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]"? It is an open-ended question, for this work is engaged with representing what I helplessly call "a poem" as an emergent and explorable object—a three- and four-dimensional place that is simultaneously a material and dematerialized place, one that is capable of visually reacting to the user's interactive struggle with the text. Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's *The Jew's Daughter* is similarly elusive as it invites readers to click on links embedded in the narrative text, links which do not lead anywhere so much as they unpredictably change some portion of the text before our eyes.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as these (nearly but never quite tangible) texts are constantly changing, moving, generating, and emerging, they seem to defy most conventions of literary texts (for even the most radical Language poem by, say, Bruce Andrews or Ron Silliman is consistently the same text and can be returned to over and over again). Certainly, there appears to be an unbridgeable gulf separating what I call "bookbound" poems from these digital poems, one that can lead us to ask whether digital poems are poems or even if they are of the literary.

While there are abundant critical studies on digital film, digital archives, new media art, databases, hypertext fiction, artificial intelligence, and artificial life, the only book-length studies on digital poetry to date are Loss Pequeño Glazier's *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, published in 2001, and Chris Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archeology of Forms*, published in 2007. While foundational, neither work extends its examination of the historical roots of digital poetry to the nineteenth century, and both implicitly read digital poetry precursors into twentieth-century poetry and for the most part do not attend to the ways in which the current cultural moment enriches our reading of these same digital poetry precursors. Both Glazier's and Funkhouser's works position digital poetry in a lineage of avant-garde, modernist, and experimental writing traditions (ranging from Dada to Oulipo to Language Writing) to argue for the literariness, or the legitimacy, of digital poetry. Funkhouser declares that "digital poets conceived of these works with the same poetic and theoretical practices used by artists who worked with nothing more than paper and ink" and that the "aesthetics of digital poetry are an extension of modernist techniques" (3). For

Funkhouser, then, Williams and Pound are precursors to digital poetry in their use of juxtaposition as are other “postatomic” writers who “use fragmentation to legitimize fragmentation and challenge the stability of language as a point of meaning” (12).

Williams and Pound may well be crucial digital poetry precursors, but as long as we trace their influence according to broad formal and thematic techniques such as juxtaposition and fragmentation, we can easily call almost any poet who uses these techniques a digital poetry precursor. On the one hand, at this early stage of defining the field of digital poetry, any historicizing is much needed; on the other hand, to see literary precedents everywhere we look is to gloss over the defining effects of different writing media on the reading/writing experience. Digital poets may have conceived of their works “with the same poetic and theoretical practices used by artists who worked with nothing more than paper and ink,” as Funkhouser claims, but they also conceived of their works on and for the fundamentally different medium of the computer/screen. Nonetheless, the difference between digital and bookbound poetry is not wholly unbridgeable or untranslatable.

Thus, if we can trace specific formal and thematic qualities of digital poetry back to modernism, then we most certainly can cross the divide separating the twentieth from the nineteenth century and trace these qualities back to Emily Dickinson or beyond. Further, reading the digital into and out of a poet such as Dickinson may enrich our understanding of her work. The terminology and theoretical framing of the present moment is so steeped in the digital that, often without our knowing, it saturates our language and habits of thought. Surely a self-consciousness about, and strategic exploitation of, the ideologies built into our everyday digital computing will reinvigorate the terminology and theoretical framework we use to understand, for example, Dickinson’s variants.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Sharon Cameron’s highly influential descriptions of the variants, which in *Choosing Not Choosing* are infused with the language of identity and heteroglossia, can be augmented with a sense of variants as multi-dimensional, spatio-temporal linkages. Further, this mode of reading that uses the present to read the past also makes possible the observation that we have only recently come to see Dickinson not only as a writer who pins together scraps, creates collages of sorts from fragments written at angles to each other, and disperses meaning through variants and multiple versions, but also as one who is acutely aware of pen and paper as a technology, as writing media. As Martha Nell Smith—the Executive Editor of the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*—stated in 2002, “new media challenge us to

consider what can be gained by amplifying our critical commentary into more media and how our critical-theoretical tools can be shaped to exploit multimedia most effectively" (845). Given the relative paucity of critical writing on Dickinson in relation to the digital, this essay is an attempt to take up the challenge of reading digital theory and literature alongside Dickinson's poetry as a case-study—one that I hope will help overcome the assumed otherness of digital poetry through historicization and through exploiting the ways in which twentieth- and twenty-first century readings of her work may already be unavoidably enmeshed in the digital.

An archeological excavation of the roots of digital poetry—excavation that could, again, involve Dickinson as much as Williams, Pound, or other modernists—will certainly enrich our understanding of digital poetry as well, demonstrating that these works are not merely examples of "techniques whereby letters and words can move around the screen, break up, and reassemble, or whereby the reader/viewer can decide by a mere click to reformat the electronic text or which part of it to access," as Marjorie Perloff puts it in a recent essay on digital poetry (162). While these digital works do indeed "become merely tedious unless the poetry in question is, in Ezra Pound's words, 'charged with meaning,'" perhaps we need to learn to become more perceptive readers of digital poetry (Perloff 162); in other words, while we know what "charged with meaning" looks like in a poem by Dickinson, Williams, or Pound, it is not a given what "charged with meaning" looks like in the digital. Dickinson could be "the mother of them all," or, in less dramatic terms, she could very well be a key early example of the kind of innovation we see in the contemporary digital-poem-as-self-conscious-literary-object.

### **1.0 The Digital/Dickinson Poem as Antidote to the "Interface-Free"**

One of the most important aspects of Emily Dickinson's writing that has emerged in the digital age is that it reminds us that there is no such thing as writing that is "interface-free"; all writing comes to us through an interface, and the precise ways in which the interface, whether it is pencil/pen/paper or the keyboard-screen-mouse (KSM), frames such writing requires definition.<sup>6</sup> After all, what else is a fascicle, a pinned poem, or a bookbound poem that has been put into conventional type but a form of writing interface? It is not possible to have access to a pure reading of Dickinson's poems, one that is unmediated by either twentieth- or twenty-first-century interfaces or by our own thinking habits similarly enmeshed in reading/writing interfaces.<sup>7</sup> The cost of ignoring what Dickinson teaches us

about writing interfaces has been abundantly illustrated by Susan Howe's and others' work on the limitations of relying solely on edited versions of Dickinson's work that exclude Dickinson's writing interfaces and reframe her work with the interface of the printed book and the conventions of typography. While Howe, along with scholars such as Marta Werner, Jerome McGann, and Martha Nell Smith, have not discussed interfaces *per se* in arguing that Dickinson's manuscript poems cannot be accurately reproduced in book-format, digital interfaces bring to light the fact that these discussions *could* be framed as such. As R. W. Franklin more mildly puts it in the Introduction to his facsimile edition of the fascicles, "The variorum edition . . . edited by Thomas H. Johnson, translated the mechanics of the poems into conventional type and, in presenting them chronologically, obscured the fascicle structure. Such an edition, though essential, does not serve the same purposes as a facsimile of the fascicles" (ix).

To turn to the recent enthusiasm for the so-called interface-free and the pressing need for us to continue to read writing interfaces, in February 2006 New York University research scientist Jeff Han unveiled to attendees at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference his affordable version of what he called an interface-free, touch-driven computer screen. Shaped like a 36-inch wide drafting table, the screen allows the user to perform almost any computer-driven operation through "multi-touch sensing" that is, as Han describes it, "completely intuitive . . . there's no instruction manual, *the interface just sort of disappears*" (emphasis added). The phrases "completely intuitive" and "sort of" (it "sort of disappears") prompt the question of just whose intuition is driving this interface-free interface. The interface-free system Han proposes is elegant, beautiful, and compelling—like walking into a gleaming white and chrome Mac store—but after the initial pangs of longing pass for this newest of the new, why continue to long for this sort of false transparency? Why would we lure ourselves into believing that these interfaces somehow offer us the ability to transcend the interface itself rather than offer us an ever-more difficult to pin-down, perhaps even insidious, form of control on our creative expression? As Lev Manovich reminds us, "the interface shapes how the computer user conceives of the computer itself. It also determines how users think of any media object accessed via a computer" (64).

Another contemporary example of insidious interface, directly related to literary studies, is Amazon.com's release of Kindle, which Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder and CEO, describes as a "wireless, portable reading device with instant access to more than 90, 000 books, blogs, magazines and newspapers" ("Amazon Kindle"). The aim of Kindle is to improve, if not supplant, the book. However,

reading the fine-print of the "License Agreement and Terms of Use," you discover that "You may not sell, rent, lease, distribute, broadcast, sublicense or otherwise assign any rights to the Digital Content or any portion of it to any third party, and you may not remove any proprietary notices or labels on the Digital Content." The program also warns against "Reverse Engineering, Decompilation, Disassembly or Circumvention" and notes that all reading and annotation will be monitored by Amazon: "The Device Software will provide Amazon with data about your Device and its interaction with the Service (such as available memory, up-time, log files and signal strength) and information related to the content on your Device and your use of it (such as automatic bookmarking of the last page read and content deletions from the Device)." Consequently, while Bezos proposes that readers "get lost in their reading and not in the technology," he is in fact asking readers to see through the interface, as if it were a neutral medium instead of a medium that prevents sharing, lending, or reselling these e-books; it disallows an engagement with the e-book as an art object and it imbeds a layer of surveillance into private moments of reading.

Howe, Werner, McGann, and Smith, among others, already have argued that Emily Dickinson is exemplary in her keen awareness of the limits and possibilities of the writing interfaces of her time: pen/pencil/paper.<sup>8</sup> This facet of her work long preceded Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message" and the emergence of the term "interface" in the 1960s to refer to the interaction between two systems. Dickinson was acutely aware of the limits and possibilities of the triad so that "Shapes and letters pun on and play with each other. Messages are delivered by marks" (Howe, "Some Notes"). Nowhere is this understanding of the writing interface more evident than in her pinned poems, especially those she created after she turned away from the book-inspired form of the fascicle in 1864.

In a note at the end of the second volume of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, Franklin claims that Dickinson's practice of pinning was one of several methods she used when she needed to add extra lines. He writes that "[e]arly in 1862 she pinned slips to accommodate overflow when she reached the end of a sheet, but she came to favor another way: a separate sheet carrying only the additional lines. . . . When ED ceased binding fascicle sheets, about 1864, she reverted to pinning slips to sheets to maintain the proper association" (1413). But Dickinson's pinning on an extra sheet did more than establish a relationship between the content of the two pieces of paper. The manuscript version of a poem such as "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints" (MB II 1052) can be read as an instance of Dickinson's desire to draw attention (if only her own attention) to

the mediating effects of pen and paper, and therefore to denaturalize the writing media by experimenting with ways to disrupt a tendency to see through the writing surface. First dated 1864 by Franklin and then later changed to 1865, this poem appears on the verso of Set 5, designated A 92-14; two additional metrical lines are pinned to the bottom of the poem so that the final lines of the poem “proper” are covered. Or, perhaps there are three lines, depending on how one regards Dickinson’s line breaks. Not surprisingly, however, the version of “We met as Sparks - ” in Franklin’s 1998 variorum edition has stripped the poem of its riveting physicality and of this self-conscious discourse on writing *through* writing media. In the case of this particular poem, Franklin’s translation seems not to be the same poem at all.

First, the manuscript version of the poem shows us a writer who has a precise understanding of the dimensions of the page—in fact, given that she writes a consistent distance from *both* the left and the right edges of the page, it appears not only as though she has a painter’s sense of the shape and size of her letters and words, the size and shape of the page as a canvas, but also as though her line-breaks were intentional (see Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> No typeface or typographical spacing can adequately translate the handwritten word—it certainly cannot express the particular visual and aural resonances in the shape of the letter *S*, for example, that are echoed across the page to associate “Sparks” with “Sent,” “scattered,” “Subsisting,” and finally “Spark”; note too the lowercase *s* of “scattered” which is a sort of literal representation of scattering. Print, however, only transcribes. Below, the version of the poem without the pinning is on the left; the version with the pinning that covers, rewrites, or writes over the final lines of the poem is on the right:

We met as Sparks -	We met as Sparks -
Diverging Flints	Diverging Flints
Sent various - scattered	Sent various - scattered
ways -	ways -
We parted as the	We parted as the
Central Flint	Central Flint
Were cloven with an	Were cloven with an
Adze -	Adze -
Subsisting on the Light	Subsisting on the Light
We bore	We bore
Before We felt the	Before We felt the
Dark -	Dark -

<sup>W</sup>  
We met as Sparks -  
Diverging Flints  
That various - scattered  
away -  
We parted as the  
Central Flint -  
Here clorn with an  
Aids -  
Surviving on the high  
We met  
Bygone we bear the  
mark -  
We know of change  
between its day  
and that eternal  
Spark.

pinned to 92 - 14 verso

A Flint - unto this day,  
Perhaps -  
But for that King's Spark.

Fig. 1: A 92-14a, with pinning. "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints." Facsimile. Reprinted by permission of the Trustees of Amherst College. Poetry text by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College, from R. W. Franklin, ed., *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard UP) © 1981.

We knew by change	A Flint unto this Day -
between itself	perhaps -
And that etherial	But for that single Spark
Spark	

Here we are presented with a situation where everything seems to contribute to our understanding of the poem as a complex, multifaceted object. At the beginning of "We met as Sparks - " both the line break, which creates a small space of blankness, and the dash serve to dramatize the sudden movement of an ignited fleck into the air. In fact, meeting as sparks while "Diverging [as] Flints" (and then "cloven with an / Adze - ") expresses the tension Dickinson explores throughout the poem: any coming-together involves simultaneously a merging, a loss of singularity as well as a sense of separateness that can never be overcome. The "we" of the poem is both the catalyst (the flint) and the thing catalyzed (the spark). Note too that there is only a "we" and never an "I."

Dickinson uses techniques of enjambment and merges the literal and the metaphorical with the physical dimensions of words throughout the poem. The line break separating "Sent various - scattered" from "ways - ," for example, enacts a scattering since the eye must move from one side of the page and down to the other. It also seems meaningful that the version of the poem with the pinning replaces or *changes* the lines underneath. The pinning creates a sense of uncertainty or of thinking poised between two conflicting positions. This uncertainty is expressed in the word "perhaps," which is placed on a line by itself, as well as in the reference to a singular spark, which in this case does not appear on a line by itself. The poem is simultaneously the version on the left and the version on the right as well as being the version on the left or the version on the right. It is about (the tension inherent to) singleness and doubleness even as it physically manifests itself as both single and double.

There is also a temporariness to the pinning in the same way that clothing is pinned either as a form of temporary stitching or as a way to mark where fabric may later be sewn; the slip of paper has been pinned, not sewn, to the sheet of paper and so it is simultaneously bound and unbound.<sup>10</sup> Further, Marta Werner points out the distinctiveness of pinning, for "[u]nlike binding, which is premeditated, permanent, and serial, pinning is instantaneous, temporary, random" (308).<sup>11</sup> As such, the pinning in "We met as Sparks - " is more than an instance of Dickinson writing "the alternative on a slip of paper" as a way to "complete the poem"; the pinning makes impossible any reading of the poem as complete (Franklin, *Poems* 848).

Similarly, Dickinson's handwriting in this poem, her use of the space of the page, is a formal and thematic element of the poem and so is untranslatable into any other medium, in much the same way that it is untranslatable across time; readers of the twenty-first century cannot help but bring a different set of reading habits and assumptions to Dickinson's writing. The poem is self-conscious of its writing medium, and thus encourages us to resist the notion of the "interface-free." It implicitly argues against claims such as those made by Jaishree Odin who, in writing about the digital poet Stephanie Strickland, declares that "Unlike the print medium where content is the same as the interface, the database produced by the writer for the digital medium needs an interface to make it accessible to the user. For the first time we have a distinction between the content of the work and the interface to access it." For Odin, "content is the same as the interface" in the print medium; for Dickinson, this is not the case. For example, the typographical version of "We met as Sparks - " in Franklin's variorum edition is a neater, tidier poem than Dickinson's handwritten one; with "We met as Sparks - Diverging Flints" and "Sent various - scattered ways - " printed as one line rather than two, all the lines are the same length. Breaking the second line at "ways" rather than "scattered"—that is, at the metrical rather than the visual unit—adds a more orderly dimension to the poem: scattering refers to random or chaotic movement whereas "ways" can refer to predetermined (albeit multiple) directions. Further, in Franklin's version, lines one and three end in "Flint" and therefore make the repetition more obvious, as are the end-rhymes "Dark" and "Spark" in lines six and eight. In this version, however, the sense of the poem as a material artifact that is simultaneously single and double has been occluded, making at least the representation of "We met as Sparks - " flat and hierarchical: Franklin provides a primary text supported by a secondary set of alternative lines and an even less important (indicated by the small font-size) list of the line breaks as they appear in the manuscript.<sup>12</sup> And even this hierarchy of primary text, alternate lines, and line-breaks is excluded from the more affordable, and so more commonly used, reading edition of Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

## **2.0 The Digital/Dickinson Poem as Thinkertoy**

To read the present moment into Dickinson and to read Dickinson into the contemporary, we should see her pinnings and her variants not so much as bookbound examples of what is called chunk-style hypertext but more as "thinkertoys." To clarify, chunk-style hypertext consists of links that allow the reader/user to move from one page to another—the type of hypertext that

is almost entirely responsible for the current structure of the Internet. Calling Dickinson's pinnings or variants hypertext does draw attention to the *physical* separateness of, and connection to, each word or chunk of text, but it is unlike the hypertext we use on the Internet, which is directional and linear. Links on the Internet move us through the text or a series of texts in ways predetermined by the writer/programmer and so quite unlike the way the pinning functions in "We met as Sparks - "; here the pinning makes the poem both two-texts-as-one-text and two separate texts. This simultaneously single and double nature of her work cannot be replicated online, but an Internet-based translation of "We met as Sparks - " could be created by linking together scanned images of the sheet and the pinning, layering one over the other. Given the entirely different reading experience that is fostered by the KSM interface and the book, such a translation would have to be approached as a "thinkertoy."

This term was coined by Theodor Nelson in his 1987 "Computer Lib/Dream Machines."<sup>13</sup> He writes: "By 'Thinkertoy' I mean, first of all, a system to help people think. . . . I define it as a computer display system that *helps you envision complex alternatives*. . . . [T]he written word is nothing less than the tracks left by the mind" (330). Following Nelson, instead of emphasizing the production of new editions, versions, or translations of Dickinson's manuscript poems, we could emphasize the ways in which either a given reading/writing interface or a set of conceptual terms belonging to an era of a reading/writing interface allow us to think expansively about the work at hand—to map the multi-layered intricacies of a given poem. Hypertext or any other digital mode of representation becomes less a "radically new information technology" (Landow 3), which disrupts our notions of reader/writer/text, and more another technology by which to re-position ourselves in relation to the reader/writer/text. To read hypertext or any other digital writing media in relation to Dickinson links her work with digital writing such as Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]" and Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's *The Jew's Daughter*. Digital writing is no longer only an instance of a foreign, textual object of fascination—such digital writing also becomes a textual instantiation of a shared ongoing poetic exploration of the specific limits and possibilities of the space/time of writing and of language as an elusive and yet multi-dimensional dwelling space. Like "We met as Sparks - ," Flanagan's and Morrissey and Talley's works are ineluctably both this and that—they are readable and unreadable, intimate and other, variable and static. To read and think through Dickinson's work, then, is to be prepared for other stubborn, uncomfortable works that are simultaneously single and double material artifacts.

Mary Flanagan's "[theHouse]" is a digital poem-environment that consists of strings of transparent, three-dimensional, occasionally intersecting, shifting boxes that are accompanied by paired lines, which in turn are re-combined as the piece progresses; we may watch them as they move across the screen, grow larger or smaller or rotate so that we read them in reverse—as if we could walk to the back of our language. Or, should we want to determine the shape and direction of

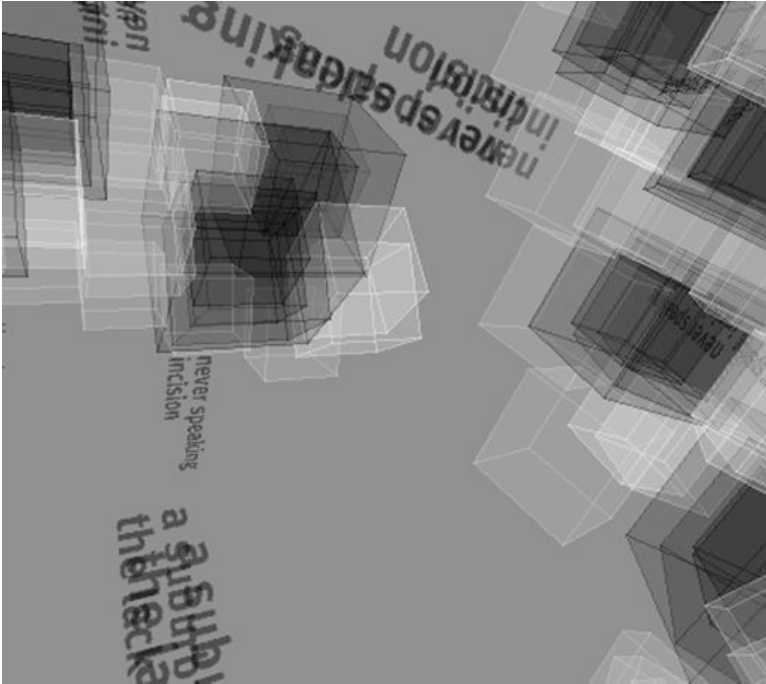


Fig. 2: "[theHouse]" (2008) by Mary Flanagan. Screenshot. Reprinted by permission of Mary Flanagan.

the text/boxes, we can try to interact with the text/boxes through the mouse. Since Flanagan writes that "[a]s in much of electronic literature, the experience of the work as an intimate, interactive, screen-based piece is essential to understanding and appreciating it," the experience of interacting with this text-environment is primarily one of struggle or difficulty since there is no way to gain control over the text—no way to determine the direction in which the piece shifts. Pulling right on the mouse does not guarantee that the text will also shift right or rotate clockwise; moving the mouse up does not necessarily allow us to venture deep inside the

boxes or the text—we may have just flipped the boxes/text or moved to a bird’s eye view of this strange computer-text-organism. Thus, despite my interactions with the text, despite the fact that I can “read” most of the lines, in its difficulty “[theHouse]” is at least in part *about* the mediating effects of an interface that, despite Flanagan’s claim above, offers intimacy while also declining it. This work embodies the complexity that defines Nelson’s thinkertoy.

To further extend the reading of Dickinson into and out of Flanagan, Dickinson’s “We met as Sparks - ” has an inbuilt aspect of instability because of the pinning; each time I read it I have the impression of returning to the same object, the same text—the same words—over and over again. However, the multiplicity of “[theHouse]” teaches us that there are at least six different versions of “We met as Sparks - ”: the first version would include the recto and the verso; the second version would include the recto, the verso, and the pinning as an alternative ending; the third would include the recto, the verso, and the pinning as an additional ending and so on. Should we decide to take into account the individual reading experiences we bring to the poem and depending on whether we rely on a facsimile version or not, there may be many more versions. Thus, “We met as Sparks - ” denies closure and stability just as “[theHouse]” does—it is just that the conventions of the book lull us into believing that a bookbound text is stable.

Reading “We met as Sparks - ” alongside “[theHouse]” brings to light the ways in which the interface of each poem bears with it a different set of standards for reading. For example, while there are sound and visual patterns in Dickinson’s poem, there is no aural element in Flanagan’s work, and the visual structure is not down or across a page or a sheet of paper—it is a rotation in and around a virtual three-dimensional space. Further, despite the variability of Dickinson’s poem, one can indeed quote from it. In contrast, while one *can* quote some of the different and recombined lines from Flanagan’s poem—for example, “giving emptiness / letters have their sharpness” or “the study almost finished / mouth to tell me”—what would be the point, especially when we cannot read the whole text or know where the text begins and ends? In fact, this text may be many, many texts that ought to be differentiated from each other in terms of time rather than space. Thus, rather than ask ourselves whether a poem on one side of the page is separate from the poem on the opposite side, we should ask whether or not the text we see at five seconds into the poem-viewing is separate from the text we see after two minutes of viewing. If we interact with the text, as Flanagan encourages us to do, we then have a nearly limitless number of texts and reading experiences.

Moreover, the fact that we cannot read Flanagan's poem in the same way that we do Dickinson's, or any other bookbound poem, means that both demand that we find the point in the text where our reading practices fail us. It is at that point of failure that we begin attending to the particularities of the event of each poem—the original event of the physical writing of the poem that took place through a particular interface, the event of our readings of the poem that take place through yet other particular interfaces—and begin taking account of what is gained and lost through each mediation.

Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley's collaborative *The Jew's Daughter* reads and reworks both the bookbound page through the digital and the digital through the bookbound page, a self-conscious doubleness that reads its own writing interface in much the same way that Dickinson's pinned poems do. Morrissey and Talley describe *The Jew's Daughter* as "an interactive, non-linear, multivalent narrative, a storyspace that is unstable but nonetheless remains organically intact, progressively weaving itself together by way of subtle transformations on a single virtual page." It consists of roughly 608 pages of recombinant chunks of texts and, indeed, "page" is more than a skeuomorph here as each screen of text—a white rectangle with mostly black text—has been made to emulate a page in a book. It is possible to read the text on each page/screen from beginning to end, left to right, as one would a page in a book—but this is "reading" in the limited terms set by the book. Moreover, because each page of *The Jew's Daughter* includes one blue-highlighted word, letter, or alphabetic character, much like a standard hypertext link, the only way to read the text on a given page from beginning to end is by refusing to touch or interact with it. The hyperlinks we are accustomed to using on the Internet take us to a new page, one whose subject-matter is clearly related (at least in the mind of the coder) to the original page. Morrissey and Talley's "links," however, are not clickable, nor do they take us to a new page, leaving the old page behind still intact. They are, instead, like *temporal* linkages; running your mouse over the blue word activates the flash programming and results in the disappearance or replacement of random chunk(s) of text. From one page to the next, the reader can never predict how, where, or why the text has changed. Thus, as Katherine Hayles points out, reading here becomes an act of memorization as you need to be able to visualize or remember the content of the first page in order to know what has changed or in order to read the text in the manner we are accustomed to.

Morrissey and Talley have created a temporally based palimpsest in that chunks of texts are layered on top of each other in the reader's mind as the text is unfolded over time; from one page to the next, some text stays the same and

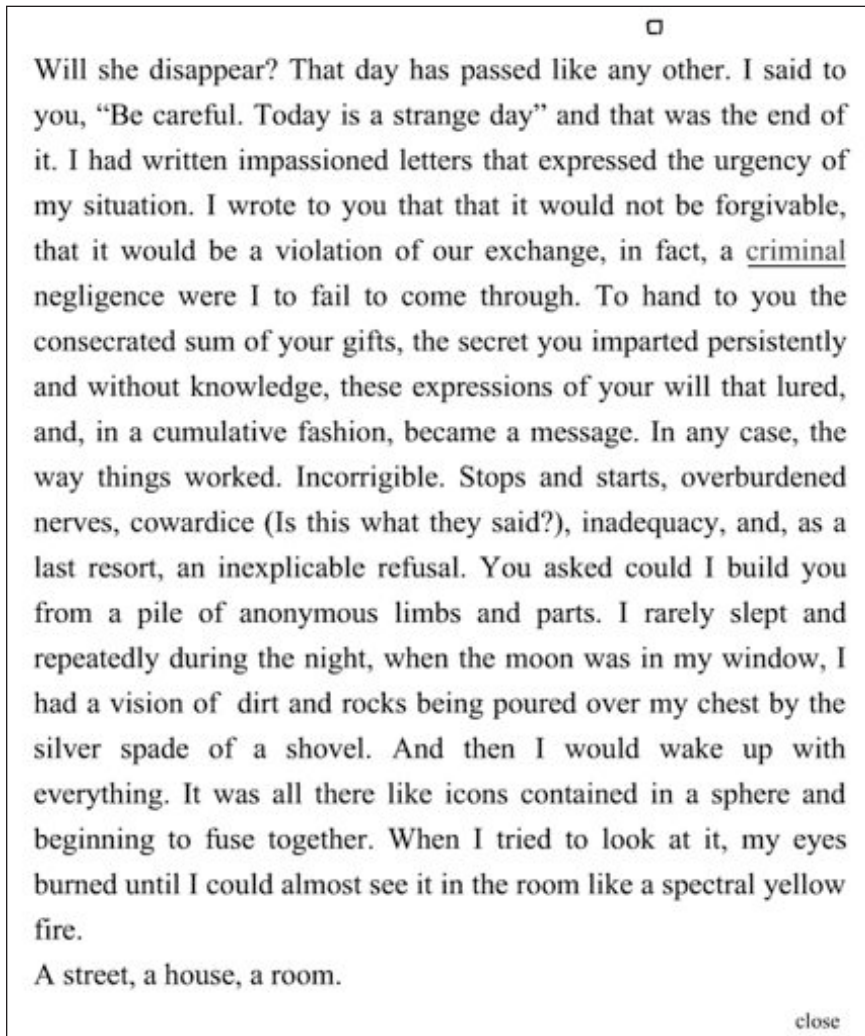


Fig. 3: *The Jew's Daughter* (2008) by Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley. Screenshot of page 1. Underlined text appeared in blue in the original. Reprinted by permission of Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley.

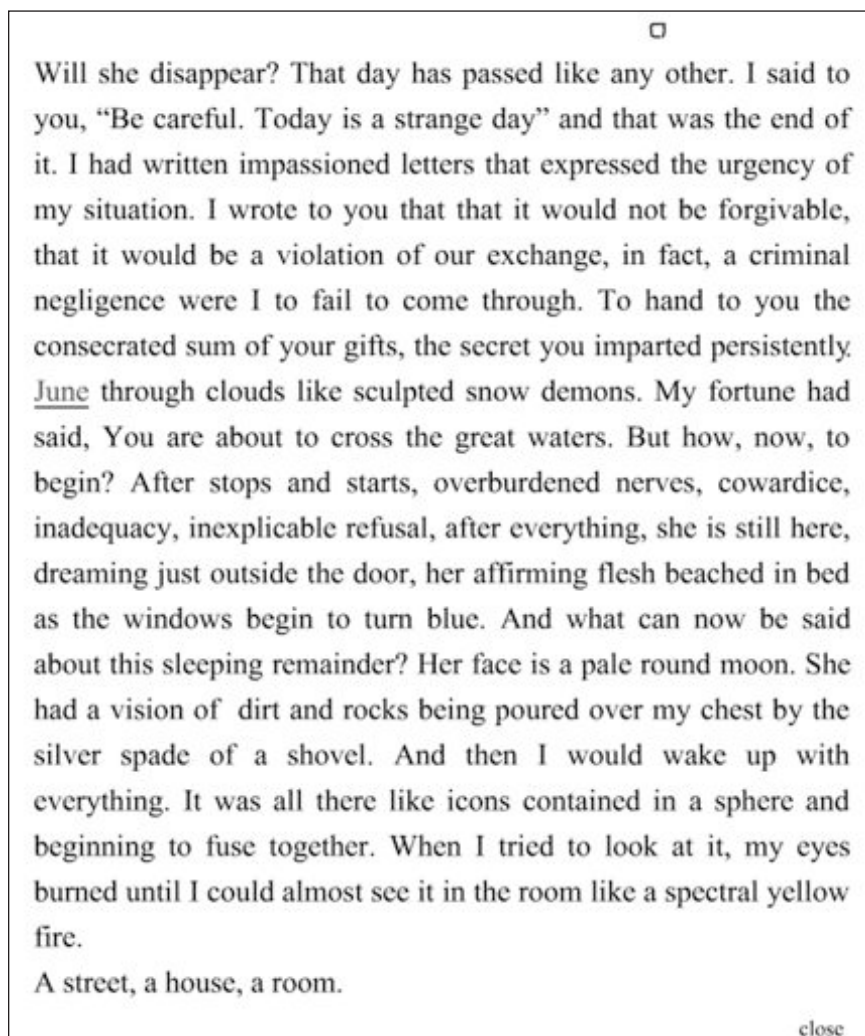


Fig. 4: *The Jew's Daughter* (2008) by Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley. Screenshot of page 2. Underlined text appeared in blue in the original. Reprinted by permission of Judd Morrissey/Lori Talley.

in a sense remains legible while other chunks of text are replaced, reworking both the meaning of the text that stays behind in the reader's memory and the text that is still visible. It is conceivable, then, that *The Jew's Daughter* is not 608 individual combinations of text chunks but rather a piece of conceptual writing that challenges the reader to assemble mentally all 608 pages into a single text whose meaning does not reside on any one page. For example, in the screenshot of the first page (Fig. 3), one can see that the references to the activities of "she," "I," and "you" result in an indeterminate text that is not particularly about anything. Or rather, the text could be about a "she," "I," and "you," but these pronouns also could be read as stand-ins for a commentary on the text itself—for the reader must wonder, "Will she [or it] disappear?" Likewise, the following sentence could be read to confirm that *The Jew's Daughter* is a palimpsestic text which can only be read or understood cumulatively, over time: "To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts, the secret you imparted persistently and without knowledge, these expressions of your will that lured and, in a cumulative fashion became a message." Given the way the text doubles as a meta-commentary on both the book and the digital—it comments on the book to comment on the digital to comment on the book—it is fitting that the "you" could be both reader and writer. If the text is indeed indeterminate, the writer in effect hands to the reader the gift of reading the text in his or her own way; or, if the text is only limitedly indeterminate, the passage could be read as saying that the reader's reading of the text makes legible the writer's secrets, expressions of the writer's will that are only legible through the reader's work over time.

The same interpretative technique is applicable to individual sentences. In "You asked could I build you from a pile of anonymous limbs and parts," the reader might ask whether it is the writer writing about the act of compiling a coherent text from a "heap of language" (to invoke Robert Smithson) or whether, with some pronoun slippage, it is the reader who must build the text from the writer's 608 pages of scraps of text. The way in which *The Jew's Daughter* doubles itself to comment on the reader/writer/text triad from as many perspectives as possible is frequently reinforced. After running the mouse over "criminal" on the first page and then reading the second page in relation to the first, the reader discovers that the sentence beginning "To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts" has been replaced with three sentences: "June through clouds like sculpted snow demons. My fortune had said, You are about to cross the great waters. But how, now, to begin?" (Fig. 4) And the sentence from the first page that previously read "I had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest" has

been changed to “She had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest.” I should note, however, that there is a degree of stability to the text: each page consistently changes in the same way.

Should the reader too quickly dismiss the work as yet another example of a random text-generator or on the basis of its apparently arbitrary structure or unreadability, it is important to note that the piece always begins on the first page and proceeds methodically from one page to the next. With only one mouse-over on each page, the text can only change in one pre-determined manner at a time. While procedural works such as Raymond Queneau’s *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* give the impression of bearing only arbitrarily constructed meaning(s), this work allows for readerly intervention at the same time that it foregrounds its constructedness; it was in fact written to be read in a particular manner. Also, the order of the text only becomes random when the reader clicks on the small square at the top right of the screen and is then taken to whatever page number has been typed into the box. Ironically, then, it is only when the reader uses the computer-simulated “page turner” that the text becomes nonlinear and unstable, although linearity and stability are commonly ascribed to the book and nonlinearity and instability are ascribed to text mediated by the digital computer. Not surprisingly, “pages” from *The Jew’s Daughter* are resolutely of the digital medium; they can neither be printed out nor can they be cut and pasted to facilitate immobilization of the text for scrutiny or to bring to bear techniques of close-reading that apply only to the bookbound. Since we cannot print it out, this 608-page text will never be read in its entirety, thereby further setting itself apart from bookbound conventions.

Like Dickinson’s manuscript poems, which digital technology helps us to see as simultaneously exploring the limits and the possibilities of the paper/pen interface and the doubleness of meaning, *The Jew’s Daughter* builds on a Dickinsonian critique; its mediation through the digital computer simultaneously works against easy assumptions about the linearity/nonlinearity of the page—even as it emulates the page—and against the increasing transparency of the structure of hyperlinks, even as it emulates the conventional appearance of the link. It gestures to markers of familiarity while undoing these same markers. As Morrissey tellingly puts it in an interview with Matthew Mirapaul, “Because it takes the paradigm of the page, you can see that it’s not a page” (Mirapaul). Surely we could say the same of a hand-written manuscript poem by Dickinson?

Notes

1. That my approach is so inflected by Susan Howe is most certainly due to her powerful influence on me as a graduate student at the University at Buffalo; one of the first seminars I took with her was on Emily Dickinson, a course both terrifying in its intensity and thrilling in the sense of intellectual adventurousness Howe brought to class every week.
2. In *Techné: James Joyce, Hypertext & Technology*, Louis Armand takes up a similar approach to argue not so much that "Joyce was necessarily in some way cognisant of a future possibility of hypertext" but that "Joyce's text can be said to *solicit* hypertext . . . the extent to which Joyce's text can be said to both *call for* and *motivate* a hypertextuality irreducible to a stable field" (xi). Armand and I differ, however, in that he is not interested in looking retrospectively at Joyce "from the position of current computing technologies" (xi). Retrospectively viewing earlier authors through the lens of current cultural practices is simply unavoidable; "current computing technologies" saturate our every thought, our very language, and this fact should be acknowledged openly rather than sidestepped.
3. In Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's foundational book *Remediation*, they argue that the representation of one medium in another is a constitutive feature of new media. In a 2007 article by Katherine Hayles, "Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision," she reworks Bolter and Grusin's "remediation" to invoke "intermediation," or the process "whereby a first-level emergent pattern is captured in another medium and re-represented with the primitives of the new medium, which leads to an emergent result captured in turn by yet another medium, and so forth. The result is what researchers in artificial life call a dynamic hierarchy, a multitiered system in which feedback and feedforward loops tie the system together through continuing interactions circulating through the hierarchy" (100). Hayles writes:

In electronic literature, this dynamic [of intermediation] is evoked when the text performs actions that appear to bind together author and program, player and computer, into a complex system characterized by intermediating dynamics . . . the performance is designed to elicit emergent complexity in the player, who possesses much more powerful and flexible cognitive powers than the computer. If this is indeed the result, then the program's effects are no longer simply metaphoric, for it has literally changed the human's perceptions and, to the extent that perceptions provide the scaffolding for cognition, cognitive processes as well. (105)
4. All the digital writing in this essay can be found in the *Electronic Literature Collection*. Described by Adalaide Morris as a "harbinger of a revolution in thought," the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1* (or ELC1) is the first and currently the only anthology of electronic literature; it is published on the Internet and freely distributed on CD-ROM.
5. This practice of self-reflexive scholarship in the age of the digital is nicely paralleled by Martha Nell Smith's work with the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, which is informed by what she calls a "technology of self-consciousness":

Self-consciousness is a technology with which humanists are familiar. . . . But I am interested in the ways that this technology unsettles us and in ways that this unsettling can be effectively exploited . . . the technology of self-consciousness required by computer encoding of texts produces a healthy self-consciousness about what Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar describe in *Laboratory Life* as 'black-boxing'—which occurs when one 'renders items of knowledge distinct from the circumstances of their creation' . . . Maintaining

- relentless self-consciousness about how critical 'facts' have been produced, about how items of knowledge are part of the circumstances of their creation, is crucial for responsibly providing the provisionality that characterizes the best kind of science of chaos. (851-852)
6. Even the meaning of the expression "the mother of them all" has been transformed by digital computing. Those working in the IT industry use the phrase to refer to Douglas Engelbart's groundbreaking demonstration from 1968 in which he presented his invention of the keyboard-screen-mouse (KSM) interface and introduced teleconferencing, videoconferencing, email, and hypertext. Now, the KSM is so seamlessly a part of our everyday work and leisure—mediating and defining most acts of writing, reading, and thinking—that we no longer notice it as an interface at all. Steven Johnson wrote in his 1997 popular manifesto *Interface Culture* that we need to start developing criteria by which to judge our interfaces, that "if the interface medium is indeed headed toward the breadth and complexity of genuine art, then we are going to need a new language to describe it, a new critical vocabulary" (18). I doubt he could have envisioned that ten years later we would, as a culture, remain largely oblivious to the way interfaces work on us and that we would be poised to begin an era of the "interface free."
  7. Henry Petroski, the author of *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstances*, points out that understanding the development of such writing interfaces as the pencil (or the pen) "helps us to understand also the development of even so sophisticated a product of modern high technology as the electronic computer" (334).
  8. In fact, it is almost becoming commonplace for critics to now assume that any reproduction of a Dickinson poem constitutes a translation and that her poems are, in many different senses, handwritten poems. However, Dickinson critics are far from agreeing on the extent to which manuscripts register above all other versions of her work. Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, points out in his 2006 *The Shape of the Signifier* that once we treat everything in a Dickinson poem as meaningful (including the shape of her handwriting, the type and size of paper she used) then nothing is meaningful. Similarly, David Porter, Peter Campbell, and Domhnall Mitchell are skeptical of the extent to which we can determine what Dickinson's intentions were with respect to the physical properties of her manuscript poems. In particular, in his 2000 work *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* and then again in his 2005 *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts*, Mitchell is concerned to point out that while he sees Smith, Howe, McGann and Werner's work as invaluable, he has "misgivings about the kinds of positivistic assumptions that underpin such a project [of returning to Dickinson's manuscript poems to establish a reliable body of work], or, more accurately, misgivings about the lack of published attempts to measure the accuracy of claims being made on behalf of Dickinson's manuscript practices" (*Emily Dickinson* 200).
  9. In contrast, Christina Pugh has convincingly written about how recent criticism emphasizes the visual and experimental nature of Dickinson's writing at the cost of attending to her innovative, even, as Pugh puts it, transgressive use of meter.
  10. As Marta Werner writes of another pinned poem, "Clogged only with Music, like the Wheels of Birds - " (A 821): "The pin complicates the play among past, present, and future. . . . For here, the expectations of closure or *parousia* . . . may be endlessly postponed, or reversed, with the drop of a pin" (307).
  11. The reader may also find it useful to consult Marta Werner's essay "'A Woe of Ecstasy': On the Electronic Editing of Emily Dickinson's Late Fragments" in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 16.2; here Werner further reflects on representing Dickinson's work via different reading/writing media.

12. While I do not discuss this aspect of "As One does Sickness over," the poem that is on the recto of the manuscript version of "We met as Sparks -," it should also be attended to because it informs our reading: the poem on each side of the sheet meets and departs from the other. For instance, even though the slip of paper is pinned to the verso, we can also see the pin and the piercing made by the pin on the recto, which happens to be beside the two variants "Habit" and "handle." Clearly, no edited version of this poem has so far been able to replicate this additional doubleness of "We met as Sparks -."
13. Nelson is better known for coining the terms "hypertext," "hyperfilm," and "hypermedia" in his 1965 article "A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate."

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