

# Imaginary Transatlantic Crossings Textual Configurations of Domesticity and Foreignhood in Emily Dickinson's Italian Atlas

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**Abstract** Basically intersecting transnational and spatial theoretical perspectives, this essay aims at a deeper understanding of Emily Dickinson's internationalism, by focusing on Dickinson's textual domestication of Italian-related images. Dickinson's imaginary transatlantic voyage testifies to a peculiar use of Italy which actually reshapes the conventional travel rhetoric and, in so doing, Dickinson significantly partakes in the aesthetic construction of the nineteenth-century American textual space.

**Keywords** Emily Dickinson. Nineteenth-century American literature. Internationalism. Travel rhetoric. Italy.

**Summary** 1 Mapping Transatlantic Routes: Dickinson's Italy Within Nineteenth-Century American Literary Culture. – 2 From Foreignness to Domestication: Imagery and Rhetoric in Dickinson's Italian Geography.



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## 1 Mapping Transatlantic Routes: Dickinson's Italy Within Nineteenth-Century American Literary Culture

In consideration of the literary context of nineteenth-century America, the critical approach of transnationalism helps throw some light on authors traditionally reckoned among the ones linked almost exclusively to their own national context. This is the case of the poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), whose work has undergone a significant critical revision under the lens of internationalism especially over the latest years.<sup>1</sup> But placing Dickinson in a global framework necessarily involves challenging reflections and reconsiderations on the construction of intellectual spaces. In this sense, an intersection with the so-called 'spatial turn' in literary studies leads to consider texts "as maps that are able to evoke mental cartographies" (Ljungberg 2017, 97). And the perspective of a mental cartography proves an apt tool to describe Dickinson's way of dealing with the different levels of space - textual and cultural, material and symbolic - in her writings: "I judge from my Geography", as Dickinson writes in F1691. Otherwise stated, the matter of geography emerging through Dickinson's writing crosses both transnational and spatial perspectives; Dickinson deals with geography in a way that leads her work to shift constantly between the local and the global, so that Dickinson's imagery testifies to a whole "transgeographical and transhistorical global connectedness" (Finnerty 2019, 189; cf. also Giles 2011). Based on these theoretical premises, the present essay seeks to delve into Dickinson's textual internationalism, through a discussion of the use of Italian imagery occurring in her poetry and prose, as well.

Clearly, a worthwhile analysis of Dickinson's internationalism should start from an introductory consideration of the interrelation between local and global factors. First, the main local features of Dickinson's writing engage with the peculiarities of nineteenth-century American context. Dickinson's response to her own literary culture tackles both textual and extratextual issues, which range from Dickinson's own way to produce a polyphonic poetic language to her fruition of periodicals and popular press (Ladin 2004; Loeffelholz 2008). As a prolific writer and fond reader, Dickinson may be viewed as a genuine founder of nineteenth-century literary culture: while constituting the core of household life, both reading and writing assure a cohesive social function and help strengthen the cardinal cultural role assigned to literature (Buckingham 1996; Steven-

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<sup>1</sup> A thorough overview of scholarship on Dickinson's internationalism is provided by Finnerty 2019. The multifaceted interrelations between Dickinson and foreign cultures have most recently been discussed at the Emily Dickinson International Society Conference titled *Dickinson and Foreignhood*, held at the University of Seville in July 2022, and where the paper that originated this article was originally presented.

son 2007). Combined in her being simultaneously a producer and consumer of literature, these acts of reading and writing also account for socio-cultural practices that help Dickinson in her process of restyling of literary traditions. Among the various traditions and conventions with which Dickinson sets a meaningful dialogue, travel writing is undoubtedly one of the most successful forms of literary entertainment in nineteenth-century America – a literary form whose social meaning encourages, at the same time, the development of a national identity even through the use of a kind of ‘global’ perspective derived from a close confrontation with the foreignness of the Old World.<sup>2</sup> Dickinson’s imaginary transatlantic crossing falls into the background of this global perspective, since it reconfigures the visual imagery and rhetoric pertaining to travel writing, at a time when maps themselves are conceived as powerful “visual tools, uniquely capable of conveying complex ideas”, whose use also fosters national unity (Schulden 2012, 3-8). Nor is this travel perspective limited to travel writing, in that it often stretches across genre boundaries. This is the case of a good number of literary masterpieces which, stemming from voyage experiences through Europe, can be considered halfway between travelogue and fiction – in a roster of authors and works ranging from Washington Irving’s *Tales of a Traveller* (1824) and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Bravo* (1831), to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862), up to Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

Nevertheless, Dickinson can be rather termed a virtual traveler, a typical ‘armchair tourist’, being among the few nineteenth-century American intellectuals (like the other ‘national’ poet of her time, Walt Whitman) who had never experienced the European Grand Tour (see Stowe 1994, 3-5); indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of Dickinson’s biography consists in the fact that she spent a whole lifetime at her birthplace in Amherst, Massachusetts. Therefore, Dickinson’s indirect knowledge of Italy relies on a variety of sources, testifying to her intense reading activity. For instance, she pored over commentaries on Italy (and on Anglo-American artists to some extent related to it, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Margaret Fuller) published on national leading literary periodicals like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, or *Scribner’s Monthly*, as well as non-fictional accounts on Italian art and architecture (like the works by John Ruskin, as an 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson recalls) (Capps 1966, 128-43; Finnerty 2009). Although in-

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**2** For a detailed discussion on the socio-cultural function of Anglo-American travel writing during the nineteenth century, see especially Buzard 1993, and more recently Hamera, Bendixen 2009.

direct, Dickinson's personal treatment of Italy makes a case for her own way of domestication, deploying a literary fantasy which leads to the interiorization of Italy and its geography. Shaped into the form of literary objects as poems and letters, Dickinson's Italian space gets represented as an aesthetic object since, "in order to gain cultural meaning, physical space has to become mental space or, more precisely, imaginary space" (Fluck 2005, 25). As the selected passages from her writings will show, Dickinson's virtual voyage draws the borders of her unconventional Italian atlas, enabling a substantial process of domestication of foreign fragments embedded in the textual architecture of her poems and letters to close friends, all written between the 1850s and the 1880s.

## 2 From Foreignness to Domestication: Imagery and Rhetoric in Dickinson's Italian Geography

As previous criticism has widely underlined, part of Dickinson's Italian geography is centered on the representation of volcanoes, seen as a celebrated emblem of poetic creativity and individual freedom (Rich 1975; Barolini 1994; Reynolds 2002). Images of both Vesuvius and Etna occur in well-known poems like F165 ("I have never seen 'Volcanoes'", 1860), F517 ("A still - Volcano - Life", 1863), or F1691 ("Volcanoes be in Sicily", first published posthumously in 1914) - as well as in an 1861 letter to "Master": "Vesuvius dont [sic] talk - Etna - dont - [Thy] one of them - said a syllable - a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever" (Dickinson 1958, 2: 374). Yet, Dickinson's use of imagery connected to Italy goes beyond this much-debated image of volcanoes. Italy seems to stand for a more elaborated metaphor, disseminated through Dickinson's whole canon, and aimed at a radical reconfiguration of the traditional nineteenth-century travel rhetoric into a domestic realm. From a biographical point of view, the entire thirty-year time span when Dickinson's poems and letters of Italian subject originated, features a powerful creative output in the late 1850s, progressively yielding to a more elegiac tone in the early 1880s. This change in Dickinson's writing was determined by a personal turmoil which was caused, in turn, by ensuing family tensions (between her sister Lavinia and Susan, Dickinson's dearest friend and sister-in-law) as well as by the death of some of her fondest relatives (her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert died in the autumn of 1883, soon followed by her close friend Otis P. Lord in March 1884) (Dickinson 1958, 2: 314, 332; Dickinson 1958, 3: 654, 808). These biographical events by all means played a part in affecting Dickinson's own process of interiorization and domestication of the foreign. This process leads Dickinson to the development of a system of imagery and rhetoric dramatically parting from the traditional nineteenth-

century literary depiction of Italy, mainly consisting in picturesque descriptions of landscape and stereotyped views on art and culture often reflected in fictional and travel accounts. Indeed, Dickinson's geographic imagery involves Italy as a whole, its seas and mountains, and a wider movement of ocean crossing, recasting their meaning into three main semantic categories related to nature, subjectivity, and household rituals (see Patterson 1979, 169-74) - that is, three semantic layers which textually mirror Dickinson's own mental cartography, gradually drawing and expanding her internal map.

First, Dickinson's process of domestication involves an imagery connected to Italy in general and its sea. In this case, Dickinson uses this Italian imagery to describe natural elements referring to seasons and hours of the day: for instance, Dickinson's Italy addresses the spring atmosphere embracing her familiar surroundings. In a letter to John L. Graves (late April 1856) Dickinson writes about "skies on me fairer far than Italy, in blue eye look down" (Dickinson 1958, 2: 327), and, in another one to Otis P. Lord (30 April 1882), she states that "The Air is soft as Italy" (Dickinson 1958, 3: 728). Along with these fragmentary references through Dickinson's correspondence, her Italian imagery extends from the skies to the seas, and across literary genres, thus designing a more detailed and nuanced virtual map. The Mediterranean Sea occurs in the poem F589 (1863), depicting the colors that can be perceived at twilight:

They called me to the Window, for  
"Twas Sunset" - Some one said -  
I only saw a Sapphire Farm -  
And just a Single Herd -

Of Opal Cattle - feeding far  
Upon [*sic*] so vain a Hill -  
As even while I looked - dissolved -  
Nor Cattle were - nor Soil -

But in their Room - a Sea - displayed -  
And Ships - of such a size  
As Crew of Mountains - could afford -  
And Decks - to seat the Skies -

This - too - the Showman rubbed away -  
And when I looked again -  
Nor Farm - nor Opal Herd - was there -  
Nor Mediterranean - (Dickinson 1998, 2: 585-6)

Similarly, in a shorter poem like F1295 (1873), reproducing the sound of the wind:

I think that the Root of the Wind is Water -  
It would not sound so deep  
Were it a Firmamental Product -  
Airs no Oceans keep -  
Mediterranean intonations -  
To a Current's Ear -  
There is a maritime conviction  
In the Atmosphere - (Dickinson 1998, 3: 1123)

Most interestingly, Dickinson stylistically develops the Italian imagery of all these descriptions of nature occurring in letters and poems alike. She crucially employs the rhetorical device of synesthesia into a multi-sensory textual pattern, weaving together the senses of touch (the comparative phrase “soft as Italy” in the letter to Lord is related to the air) and hearing (in F1295 the syntagma “Mediterranean intonations” is associated to the wind). Above all, Dickinson’s use of synesthesia embraces the sense of sight – as in the colors “blue eye” in the 1856 letter, “Sapphire Farm”, and “Opal Herd” in F589 to portray the iridescence of a deep-blue sky.<sup>3</sup> While associating foreign skies and seas to her domestic spaces, Dickinson’s rhetorical strategy deepens the plain visual aspect of the depiction of the Italian landscape often conventionally rooted in the picturesque, which intertwines natural elements, art and history – as occurs, for example, in Stowe’s description of the Gulf of Naples in her romance *Agnes of Sorrento*,<sup>4</sup> or in the Jamesian Rome of *The Portrait of a Lady*.<sup>5</sup> In like manner, even a city like Venice, usually rich in picturesque and romantic associations derived from its great artworks and long history, in Dickinson’s poetic fantasy is ‘downsized’ to what it seems a more desirable, humble, domestic proximity made up of plants and flowers, as in the following verses from F96 (1859): “Venice could not show a

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**3** For an in-depth discussion on the linguistic function of colors in Dickinson’s poetry, see Mariani 1997, 118-26.

**4** “The old town of Sorrento is situated on an elevated plateau, which stretches into the sunny waters of the Mediterranean, guarded on all sides by a barrier of mountains which defend it from bleak winds and serve to it the purpose of walls to a garden. Here, groves of oranges and lemons, with their almost fabulous coincidence of fruitage with flowers, fill the air with perfume, which blends with that of roses and jessamines; and the fields are so starred and enamelled with flowers that they might have served as the type for those Elysian realms sung by ancient poets [...]. In the region about Sorrento one may be said to have found the land where beauty is the rule and not the exception” (Stowe 1862, 15).

**5** “The herd of re-echoing tourists had departed, and most of the solemn places had relapsed into solemnity. The sky was a blaze of blue, and the plash of the fountains, in their mossy niches, had lost its chill and doubled its music. On the corners of the warm, bright streets one stumbled upon bundles of flowers [...]. The sun had begun to sink, the air was filled with a golden haze, and the long shadows of broken column and formless pedestal were thrown across the field of ruin” (James 1882, 250-1).

cheek | Of a tint more lustrous meek. | Never such an ambuscade | As  
of briar and leaf displayed | For my little damask maid” (Dickinson  
1998, 1: 133-4). Here, the adjective “lustrous” is surprisingly associ-  
ated by Dickinson to the “little damask maid” rather than to Venice,  
subverting the stereotyped Anglo-American view of the Italian city.  
In this regard, an effective example is provided by James Fenimore  
Cooper, who depicts a night view of Venice according to a standard  
set of conventions – whether in the concise opening lines of *The Bravo*  
 (“The sun had disappeared behind the summits of the Tyrolean Alps,  
and the moon was already risen above the low barrier of the Lido”;  
Cooper 1831, 1: 1-2), or in his more elaborate travel account collect-  
ed in *Gleanings in Europe* (1838).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Dickinson’s subver-  
sion is even more striking if compared to the description of Venice  
carried out by Irving in his *Tales of a Traveller*; neither Dickinson nor  
Irving visited Venice, but the latter’s nocturnal portrait of it clearly  
evokes the fixed picturesque side of “this old mermaid of a city”, “so  
brilliant and clear in the pure atmosphere of Italy. The moonbeams  
streamed on the tall tower of St. Mark, and lighted up the magnifi-  
cent front and swelling domes of the cathedral” (Irving 1849, 73-5).<sup>7</sup>

However, Dickinson connects the Mediterranean also to the se-  
mantic field pertaining to subjectivity, along with its feelings and  
interpersonal relations. Here, Dickinson’s own Italian cartography  
begins to slide more decidedly towards an extensive process of inte-  
riorization. In this voyage into subjectivity, in fact, Dickinson starts  
from the material space of her domestic surroundings to arrive at  
a more metaphysical, universal dimension. In a letter to Jane Hum-  
phrey (16 October 1855), for example, Dickinson comments on the  
physical distance separating her friend: “Distances *here* seem pret-  
ty long, but I confess, when it gets to that, that one crosses the Med-  
iterranean, tis even *farther* off [...], nor can carriage take me” (Dick-  
inson 1958, 2: 321). As the Mediterranean seems extremely distant  
to her, its barriers are still likened to what Dickinson describes as an  
insurmountable space between her and Jane. A further step towards  
a metaphysical journey, instead, is represented by the three poems  
F129 (1859), F203 (1861), and F580 (1863). These texts feature the

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**6** “By this time it was evening; but a fine moon was shedding its light on the scene, rendering it fairy-like [...]. No other scene in a town ever struck me with so much surprise and pleasure. Three sides of this large area were surrounded by palaces, with arcades; and on the fourth stood a low ancient church, of an architecture so quaint, having oriental domes, and external ornaments so peculiar, that I felt as if transported to a scene in the Arabian Nights. The moon, with its mild delusive light, too, aided the deception; the forms rising beneath it still more fanciful and quaint. You will know at once, this was the church of St. Mark” (Cooper 1838, 2: 208-9).

**7** For a detailed critical discussion on both Cooper’s and Irving’s Venice, see Mamoli Zorzi 1990.

occurrence of the Italian mountains to address the individual's inner life, as they also symbolize the imaginary barriers often perceived by the human mind. The Alps first occur in F129:

Our lives are Swiss -  
So still - so cool -  
Till some odd afternoon  
The Alps neglect their curtains  
And we look further on.  
*Italy* stands the other side.  
While like a guard between -  
The solemn Alps -  
The siren Alps  
Forever intervene - (Dickinson 1998, 1: 169)

In Dickinson's poetic fantasy, the Alps are likened to barriers intervening inside the human mind; just as curtains do, these mountains can either hide or reveal what lies beyond - be it a fresh awareness or a new standpoint upon reality. Even a shorter poem like F203 is thematically and stylistically construed on a quite similar image, as "The thought beneath so slight a film - | Is more distinctly seen - | As laces just reveal the surge - | Or Mists - the Appennine [*sic*] -" (Dickinson 1998, 1: 235). In its conciseness, the poem revolves around the established equivalence between the image of the Italian mountains (here surrounded by mists) and any kind of hindrance that the mind might perceive. Accordingly, this symbolic use of the Apennines is expanded in F580:

We see - Comparatively -  
The Thing so towering high  
We could not grasp it's segment  
Unaided - Yesterday -

This Morning's finer Verdict  
Makes scarcely worth the toil -  
A furrow - Our Cordillera  
Our Appennine [*sic*] - a knoll -

Perhaps 'tis kindly - done us -  
The Anguish - and the loss -  
The wrenching - for His Firmament  
The Thing belonged to us -

To spare these striding spirits  
Some Morning of Chagrin -  
The waking in a Gnat's - embrace -  
Our Giants - further on - (Dickinson 1998, 2: 580)



From a strictly semantic viewpoint, Dickinson's vocabulary in these three poems underlines the tight affinity of both household items (such as "curtains" and "laces", in F129 and F203 respectively) and natural elements ("knoll" in F580) with common feelings and shared experiences, which are related to three antithetical pairings. These pairings are polarized around the notions of expectedness vs. unexpectedness ("Till [...] The Alps neglect their curtains"), exposure vs. secrecy ("As laces just reveal the surge"), and rationality vs. irrationality ("Unaided - Yesterday - | This morning's finer Verdict"). Furthermore, the field of subjectivity intersects with an image of domesticity which is connected not only to a whole private space, but also to a broader standpoint opened up by the value of travelling as a transcultural experience. In F129, indeed, Dickinson metaphorically follows the traditional route of the Grand Tour, which usually led foreign travelers through Italy southwards from the northern Alpine border ("*Italy* stands the other side").<sup>8</sup> In spite of this conventional element, however, Dickinson keeps on developing her own personal perspective on the Italian tour, as her imaginary voyage is increasingly headed to a metaphysical experience.

In fact, the overlapping images of domesticity and foreignness marking the abovementioned 'mountain' poems are further developed through the use of Italy in the third (and last) semantic category, which deals with typical household rituals. More specifically, Dickinson seems here to reach the Old World - and Italy as an integral part of it - by enacting a wider movement of ocean crossing. In so doing, Dickinson frames her internal (i.e. private) map within a socio-cultural (i.e. public) architecture characteristic of a nineteenth-century bias. At first, Dickinson starts this voyage to Italy by sticking to cultural stereotypes. Nineteenth-century Anglo-American writers often judged Italy as the "land of art" par excellence, casting its spell on any artist: for instance, Hawthorne defines Rome as "the favorite residence of artists - their ideal home which they sigh for in advance, and are so loth to migrate from, after once breathing its enchanted air" (Hawthorne 1860, 1: 168). Likewise, Dickinson's virtual ocean crossing becomes a literary pilgrimage and homage to poetry in F637 (1863), written in memory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "'Twas Short - to cross the Sea - | To look upon [*sic*] Her like - alive - | But turning back - 'twas slow -" (Dickinson 1998, 2: 626). In this sense, the metaphor of an imaginary voyage across the Atlantic

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<sup>8</sup> An exception is marked by Ralph Waldo Emerson who, during his European journey, inverted this traditional route and reached Italy by sea from Malta (instead of continental Europe), travelling then from Sicily northwards. Once landed in Syracuse (on 23 February 1833), Emerson recorded in his journals the first impressions of Italy as follows: "Shall I count it like the Berber at Rome the greatest wonder of all to find myself here?" (Emerson 1964, 122).

stands as a viewpoint which recasts the idea of the foreign into household spaces and daily experiences – such as the parallel acts of reading and writing. Reading is the core idea in the 1873 poem F1286:

There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry –  
This Travel may the poorest take  
Without offence of Toll –  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul – (Dickinson 1998, 2: 1117)

Accordingly, writing a letter feels like the most congenial counterpart to reading a book, since both actions lead their performers to overcome any obstacle through space, just as if a traveler would be able to cross the ocean (“To take us lands away”, Dickinson’s poem clearly states). The same imagery occurs in an early 1884 letter to Mrs. Elizabeth Carmichael that Dickinson wrote on the occasion of exchanging Christmas gifts: “Against the peril of ocean steamers I am sweetly provided, and am sure you had my safety in mind, in your lovely gifts. I have taken the passengers from the hold – passengers of honey – and the deck of silk is just promenaded by a bold fly, greedy for its sweets” (Dickinson 1958, 3: 809). Here, Dickinson exploits once again the domestic imagery related to both household items (“honey”, “silk”) and natural elements (“fly”) already found in her three poems centered on the Italian Alps and Apennines. The letter to Mrs. Carmichael, however, further unfolds the thriving combination of imagery and rhetoric sustaining Dickinson’s Italian writings: everybody can afford this virtual ocean crossing, even across the most ordinary spaces and by the easiest way of transportation – as the metaphorical images “passengers of honey” and “deck of silk” suggest, closely recalling the travel that “may the poorest take”. Then, the travel rhetoric employed by Dickinson testifies to a process of displacement of the foreign Italian geography into a domestic setting, defined by Dickinson’s New England environment and her own web of relations with close friends, acquaintances, and relatives.

These concluding examples show how the very acts of letter writing and book reading addressed by Dickinson represent central household rituals characterizing the life of middle-class families; most importantly, it is worth recalling that these activities hold a fundamental socio-cultural position in the development of nineteenth-century American literature. Dickinson herself participates to this process, and recasts the dichotomy foreignhood vs. domesticity in the textual representation of Italy. While dealing with conventional cultural practices related to the Grand Tour, such as the ones that

mark nineteenth-century American travelogues and fictional narratives on this subject, Dickinson builds upon the current American gaze by casting her own perspective on the Italian spaces, interiorizing the rhetorical and stylistic tropes usually belonging to the literary representation of the foreign. Nevertheless, Dickinson does not limit her experience of a virtual Italian tour to an exclusively private function. Instead, through the representation of her imaginary map as an aesthetic object, she actively partakes to the construction of the American literary space, endowing the idea of domesticity – both textual *and* contextual, private *and* public – with surprising aesthetic insights. In other words, as the comparison between Dickinson's writings and the works by such authors as Irving, Hawthorne, or Stowe, among others, has also underscored, the constitution of a distinctive American gaze towards the foreign identifies the social, cultural, and literary experience of the sophisticated nineteenth-century convergence between the Old World and the New. And Dickinson's personal contribution to this convergence results in a domestication of Italy as both an emotional quality and metaphysical device, thus applying her own reading to the textual reconfiguration of a transatlantic geography.

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