On 17 March 1854, Augusta Melville wrote to her sister Fanny, “I quite sigh for leisure in which to satisfy my literary thirst.”¹ For readers of her brother Herman’s books, this phrase leaps out with galvanic force; did Melville’s sister have literary aspirations too? Her letters, and those of friends and family, which she collected and deposited in a trunk not to be discovered until 1983, do not yield a clearly literary harvest. Nor does Augusta write in a self-consciously literary fashion. On the contrary, she seems, and has appeared to a number of Melville biographers, a sedate, dependable source of family news and gossip, not in any way a literary figure herself, nor worthy of literary study. Yet her papers set forth problems that engage many literary scholars at present: the status of works in nonpublished media; the relationship between canonical and non-canonical, and classic and sentimental texts; and the implications of women’s writing, private writing, and the domestic sphere.

So far, work on the Augusta Melville papers has appeared primarily in books concerning Herman Melville’s life (Cohen and Yannella; Robertson-Lorant; Parker).² Yet study of these letters could extend well beyond Melville biography and into questions relevant to cultural studies (What do the letters tell us about reading and writing practices in nineteenth-century America?), gender studies (How do women in this period use correspondence to achieve their social and personal aims?), and media studies (What are the conventions of letter writing and how do people like Augusta and other Melvilles use and revise them?).³ Beyond the personal interest and cultural history Augusta’s papers provide, they give material evidence of significant and deeply ingrained habits of frequent correspondence, habits that have been revived in the fluid electronic media of the present day. We must put aside our prejudices in favor of print in order to read these materials sensitively; the correspondence bespeaks the rich literary culture that produced it and reveals the distinctive literary voices and tastes of those who wrote and read it.

Augusta Melville was her brother’s scrivener, her family’s caregiver, and a serious, pious woman who devoted herself to her family’s houses,
children, and worldly interests. She was also a patient and dedicated writer and collector of family correspondence. Her trunk contained more than five hundred letters from Melville parents, siblings, cousins, and friends, as well as twenty-odd letters from Augusta herself. She kept lists of books read, charitable gifts, and letters sent and received. In a family notorious for burning its correspondence, Augusta’s preservation of these intimate materials represents a remarkable departure from the Melville code of silence.

But beyond their value as documents in a family biography, the letters also speak of a manifest literary sensibility and intention. Not only do they contain comments on reading and writing—her own as well as those of Herman and other family members—but they also come to us as, in the largest sense of the word, a text: a body of written work contained by the physical confines of the trunk and by a writer’s intention to preserve relics of those she loved. Augusta’s “literary thirst” may never have eventuated in a published work, but it did express itself in her letters. Without making claims for her as a fully formed literary figure or in any way undertaking to compare her to her famous brother, I am nevertheless eager to investigate what Augusta’s “literary thirst” meant to her and in what ways we can consider this collection as a literary text.

In focusing on the letters from Augusta herself, rather than on those of her more celebrated siblings, I am departing from a biographical tradition that has tended to condescend to Melville’s younger and much-loved sister. The question of Augusta’s literary attainments has certainly not received full or flattering attention. She suffers by comparison not only with Herman, whose letters to Hawthorne remain some of the most arresting private documents in the nineteenth century, but also with her brother Gansevoort, whose correspondence contains brilliant political observations and wrenching descriptions of his unstable state of mind, as well as with her sister Helen, whose witty, worldly letters from Boston include such newsworthy items as her shaking hands with Charles Dickens. Hershel Parker has in fact argued that the three eldest Melville siblings, Gansevoort, Helen, and Herman, being the ones most influenced by their polished, literate father, Allan, had the highest literary gifts in the family. Calling them the “three rhetoricians among the children, the three who delighted in the English language all their lives” (60), he implicitly dismisses the five younger siblings as writers. Augusta, who provides facts for every page of Parker’s book, appears therein as the beloved “Dutty” or “Gus,” better appreciated for her patient copying and solid virtues than for the qualities of mind that exhibit themselves all over her correspondence. On the contrary, Parker makes belittling note of the sentimental verses Augusta copied into her com-
monplace book at the same time she was preparing the manuscript of *Moby-Dick*: “Augusta was perceptive enough to recognize her brother as noble-souled, but she did not wince at any discrepancy between what she was copying for him and what she was copying for herself” (808). Besides reflecting the literary establishment’s traditional distrust of sentimental literature, Parker’s comment reveals how easily Augusta has slipped through the biographical cracks. At best, she appears as Melville’s conventional counterpoint—a loving yet dull sister. She certainly has no reputation as a writer.

Augusta’s letters, though, show that she took keen pleasure in expressing what, as a busy housekeeper, copyist, sickroom attendant, Upholder of social ties and festivities, instructor of Sunday school children, and dispenser of charity and religious tracts, she could seldom communicate elsewhere. Amid the family news and gossip, she includes sharp critiques of the books she read, lyrical descriptions of nature, earnest religious outpourings, and passages of considerable wit and irony. What emerges from this very brief sample is a picture of a woman dedicated to letter-writing. Whether or not that “thirst” makes her a writer depends very much on how we view and value private modes of expression. As Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith’s treatment of the correspondence between Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson has shown, the notion of separate spheres in writing, divided between the private world of letters and the public world of print, is beginning to break down (see Hart and Smith; Smith). Smith’s argument rests, of course, on more self-consciously literary materials than Augusta’s, since Emily Dickinson’s letters frequently were poems, or contained poems, and since she used her correspondence with Susan at least partly as a “workshop” in writing, where she tried out different versions of her poems with a sympathetic reader. But we can find considerable literary subject matter and many literary devices in Augusta’s letters as well.

The most obvious example of Augusta’s literary sensibility appears in her discussions of reading. Scattered references to her reading habits, references that appear without fanfare, show that reading formed a large part of her daily routine. In a letter to her friend Mary Blatchford (16 January 1851), she mentions a book Herman was also reading that same year: “I have just been reading a very curious book, entitled ‘Two Years Among the Shakers.’ Did you ever meet with it? How is it possible, for reasonable persons to believe so much utter nonsense?” She tells her sister Helen (24 January 1851) with delight of Hawthorne’s books: “Mrs. Hawthorne sent Malcolm a beautiful book, ‘The Grandfather’s Chair,’ a collection of holiday stories written by her husband, & Mr. Hawthorne presented Herman with a copy of his ‘Twice Told Tales’ in two volumes. This was gladly received as an accession to
his library.” Other references to books—Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, Maria S. Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, Rufus W. Griswold’s *The Poets and Poetry of America*, Catherine Grace Frances Gore’s *Castles in the Air: A Novel*, and George Payne Rainsford James’s *The Old Oak Chest*—suggest an avid reader within a highly literate society.6

Augusta’s diction and tone in her discussions of books suggest a profound engagement of mind and heart in her reading. In fact, in the letter describing her literary thirst (17 March 1854), Augusta is talking at length about reading: “Your literary communications were peculiarly interesting & most refreshing. The perusal of your comments upon the books of the day, was almost equal to reading the books themselves. My time has been so fully occupied that I have been able to read literally nothing this winter. Two volumes comprise the whole [illegible word] read. I quite sigh for leisure in which to satisfy my literary thirst. Whenever I have a spare half hour, it seems as if I ought to occupy it in writing either to Longwood Lawrence or New York [where her siblings resided], & not selfishly spend it in reading.” Augusta here speaks in her most self-censorial tones, seeing her use of leisure for reading as selfish, whereas the time spent writing letters is selfless, or at least productive. It is clear that, on one level at least, her “literary thirst” signifies the longing to read as much as to write.

Further letters show that she indulged that longing fervently and often. To Mary Blatchford (29 August 1850) she writes earnestly, “These three weeks have been passed very quickly, undisturbed by company, they have been almost given up to reading & reflection. —Thought, busy thought!—how much there is to think of in this weary world.” She goes on to ask Mary, who has been ill, if she received the gift of books Augusta sent and to tell her about her own pursuits: “I have been reading something very beautiful & sweet.—your mother would like it.— ’The Earl’s Daughter.’7 It is from the graceful pen of Miss Sewell & fully imbued with her deep religious feelings & gentle refinement. [Hers?] are books to make one better.—they open our eyes to all that is really truly desirable in this life, and place before us one desire—the heart right with God, seeking to minister to the happiness of all around, but looking for its [illegible word] in heaven.”

Not all of Augusta’s reading is devotional. She asks, “Have you seen Dr. Mayo’s new book—’The Berber,’ which is attracting a good deal of attention. It is very different from that wild ‘Kaloolah,’ and I think you will find it deeply interesting.8—I read it at two sittings, but perhaps that was because life in Morocco was new to me, & my attention was arrested by those strange people of the Atlas. There are three lady characters, each equally the heroine, at least you feel equal interest in the fate of each. That fact alone, would I should think—bespeak for
it a wide circulation.” Indeed, Augusta could be a discerning reader, for she not only was enraptured by books, but also was capable of stinging criticism.

In another letter to Blatchford (25 November 1850), Augusta attacks Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *Social Distinction, or Hearts and Homes*: “At last I have read that long talked of book, & can now say that Mrs. Ellis has actually written a story worth reading—but like the two horsemen of James—the drunkard still keeps his place in her pages. This same drunkard has cost me many tears, & hence my repugnance to Mrs. Ellis’s stories. The one under discussion, however, is really deeply interesting, but don’t you think she has almost too much to say about that embankment? I thought the unknown never would get through it.—And those Ashleys—do you not think they were a most extraordinary & unnatural family. Whoever heard of such a man as that Ashley, or of such a woman, as that wife of his, or of such girls as their five daughters? No one but Mrs. Ellis.” Augusta does like one figure, however, whose character leads her to personal reflection: “Kate Staunton—she is a heroine after my heart.—Bright, noble Kate Staunton.—would that I could be imbued with a like strength of purpose & energy of character. I often think, Mary, how aimless & without any object in view, the lives of most young girls are spent.” For Augusta, reading, along with the subsequent exchange of views with a sympathetic partner, produces passionate displays of feeling.

We get some sense of how significant these literary passions are in other communications with Blatchford. In a letter dated 4 January 1851, Augusta begins with anxious inquiries into Blatchford’s health, since she has not heard from her in two months (we know that Augusta kept meticulous track of such things). Before plunging into her usual news, Augusta tells Blatchford, “Night before last, I had the strangest, wildest dream about you, a dream in which I had played so active a part, that I woke in the most extreme state of exhaustion, but only too happy to find that it was but a dream.” A paragraph later, she says, “The long evenings we have improved by reading aloud. Have finished Schiller’s ‘Ghost-Seer’, & several other interesting books.” Blatchford apparently responded and inquired about the dream. In her letter of 16 January 1851, Augusta speaks tantalizingly of her vision: “And now for the dream. That spirit moving, pen moving, curiosity moving dream!—Ah Mary—that dream I may not tell thee—’twas too strangely sad, too wildly sorrowful, for thine ears—& too intensely fantastic and airy for my pen. No doubt it was suggested by thinking of you so much, at the very time my mind was busy in unraveling the mysteries of Schillers ‘Ghost Seer.’ Knowing your devotion to old books, of which Boswell’s ‘Johnson’ comes forward but to reassure me, I presume this Ghost Seer
is an old friend of yours, & you will perfectly understand therefore the wild train of thought which as a new acquaintance he excited.” Augusta’s heightened language in writing about a book does not stray far from what was acceptable in sentimental literature or affectionate discourse between women. We know, in fact, that she used romantic language repeatedly with Blatchford. In the first letter, dated 25 November 1850, Augusta somewhat self-consciously calls Blatchford her “darling” three times, saying that she has received “a very dear & affectionate letter, & that is the reason why I say my darling Mary” and a sentence later, “for this solid proof of your heart’s affection I once more call you, my darling Mary.” What is remarkable here is not so much the affectionate diction as its attachment to a literary vehicle: Schiller’s gothic romance. Having captured Mary’s interest in the 4 January letter, Augusta on 16 January dismisses the dream as inspired by late-night reading, but indicates that Mary would understand what she meant; she then goes on to discuss Boswell and her other reading. This convergence of literature and strong feeling suggests that Augusta’s use of the phrase “literary thirst” is not casual. She finds intense pleasure and meaning in reading and writing, and she knows that she can communicate that intensity to another.

Augusta’s literary thirst extended beyond the appreciation of other people’s writing into attempts to exercise her own literary skills. We see examples of her writerly mode in the lyrical, descriptive passages scattered throughout her letters. In her October 1850 letter to Blatchford, Augusta describes Arrowhead: “I am delighted with our beautiful new home. It far surpasses my expectations. The scenery is magnificent. I could never have imagined anything more beautiful—more varied—in every direction, it stretches away in mountain, hill & valley, all, glowing with the gorgeous tints of autumn. I have no doubt we see it now under its most beautiful aspect, for I hardly think the fresh green of June can be as well suited to its wild sublimity. . . . I wish you were by my side this moment, dear Mary, to watch the changing light & shade upon the forest slope just before me—it is exquisite. The glowing scarlet of the maples contrast so brightly with the more subdued tints.” In November, she rhapsodizes further: “Never was there a more beautiful Autumn. . . . Why the skies are as bright & the air as balmy to-day as any you can have in New York. I quite begin to love our new home—& even if the dull, murky days should come, I would not weary of them, for there I should have no inducement to spend so many hours in rambling in our beautiful woods, & should have all that time for reading and the thousand things a young lady finds to do. . . . I often wish you could gaze with me upon our glorious sunsets—and such sunrises . . . Too beautiful for my gross powers of description.” As letters from Augusta’s
mother, Maria Melville, and her sister Helen reveal, this family highly prized the well-developed “powers of description.” Augusta clearly takes pains to meet the requirements of literary taste in her writing.

If the letters excerpted so far suggest that that taste was, by modern standards, conventional and sentimental, then it may come as a surprise to find that Augusta indulged in humor and irony, especially with her sisters. In that regard, Helen, whose wit enlivens many a page, surpasses her. But Augusta is nevertheless capable of quips of her own. In the October 1850 letter to Blatchford, she claims that she has intended to write before, “but when there is so much disorder around one, one sympathizes with it, till there is about as much within and then one hardly likes to trust oneself upon paper fearful of the consequences to one’s epistolary reputation.—But now that I can discern something of order around me—sweet order that goodly thing of which these poor eyes have been deprived for many long weeks—I think I can discover a corresponding something in my brain, & hasten to communicate the delightful intelligence.” In a December 1850 letter, Augusta teases Helen about her spelling: “By the way, I don’t think I would spend another day at the Knickerbockers, for I think I can see the effects already of too much excitement with them. Why the very spelling of your letters is degenerating! Fanny proposes that I should enclose you my miniature lexicon, with the advice which I would subjoin of committing to memory a page daily in way of an antidote.—‘Peice’! ‘server’!! ‘consumption’!!! If that is the result of a few weeks association, what will be the consequence of a more prolonged intercourse. I tremble to think of its probable effect upon Fanny’s & my orthography.”

In an undated letter to her friend Justine Van Rensselaer, she launches into a spirited parody of Middle English: “[S]ome three months ago a certain modish hued dress of mine, of the class ycleped cashmere, embroidered after a most intricate, complex, elegant, elaborate, and recondite style, was suspended by the two arms in that certain receptacle of the wood named mahogany which stands in the south-west corner of the north-east room of the third story of the mansion, styled Manor House where it may, at this present writing, I hope, be found.” And in her November 1850 letter to Blatchford, she indulges in wicked joking: “So Emily Bliss has returned from her jaunting, quite improved in health, in proof of which you tell me that she is ‘fat as a barrel.’ Indeed Mary, I should think there was something quite alarming in that,—dropsical rather.—Does the Doctor her father, anticipate anything dangerous from such a sudden and unusual accession of flesh? As fat as a barrel!—why Mary it is really dreadful to think of.” These examples suggest that Augusta did indeed have a sense of humor, that her literary taste had its witty, as well as its sentimental, side.
There is no missing the fact that the writing and receiving of letters meant a great deal to Augusta, even when she treats the subject humorously. Many letters begin with an account of where the correspondent stands, usually in arrears, in relation to the correspondence: to Helen she writes, “It was high time, Miss Helen, I should think to write us” (21 December 1850). Conversely, Augusta will write on schedule, even when there’s little to say: she writes to Helen on 22 November 1850, “Having given you to understand that you should hear from me in a week’s time, I am bound not to disappoint you, notwithstanding the famine in the land—for positively there is nothing to write. Mamma is well, & Herman is well, & Fanny is well, & Malcolm is well, & I myself am well.” She describes the appearance of a letter as a monumental event: “The arrival of your letter created quite an excitement. . . . Expectations ran high—Whose address did it bear? Mamma’s—Now for the spectacles!—Another delay!—Patience—Patience.—Here they are,—& with head bent forward, eyes fixed & ears intent we drank in the contents.” And when Augusta feels she’s failed somehow in her correspondence, she expresses complete mortification: “This is the most inelegant letter I ever wrote—I am positively ashamed to subscribe my name” (14 January 1851). Clearly, she held the highest standards for herself and others.

If we look at Augusta in the context of the whole Melville family and of an entire family correspondence, spread all over New York and Massachusetts, she may not seem to play a major role. Even if Herman had been only a civil servant like his brother Gansevoort or a lawyer like his brother Allan or a ship’s captain like his brother Thomas, he might seem more historically interesting than a woman who stayed at home all her life, never married, and did not seem to make a difference to anyone. Among a family of gifted writers, she does not stand out as literary. It is, rather, as the collector of the contents of the trunk that Augusta emerges as an “author,” for we have to ask what she put there and why. One could argue, of course, that, like many Victorian women, she collected letters, tied them up with ribbon, and put them away in the spirit of Emmeline Grangerford’s funerary “tributes.” But not all her papers are memorial in nature, and not all the correspondents were dead when she put their papers away. It seems unlikely that she had a finished literary product in mind—an intimate biography of her brother or family, for example. Nevertheless, if we see the Augusta papers as having an intention instead of being an accident, they begin to assume a literary shape, not unlike Dickinson’s fascicles, or the many other bundles of letters, journals, manuscripts, and books that nineteenth-century women preserved and exchanged between themselves.

Even if one can begin with only modest speculations about the intentions and significances of Augusta’s correspondence, they raise many
questions for further study. Some of these questions are literary and aesthetic: What are the rules for handwriting, spelling, narration, description, humor, and personal expression that the letters reveal? Do they aim for an individual style and voice or something more general, a discourse shared with the correspondent, creating community? What pleasures and satisfactions did they provide for the writer? How might they function as a rehearsal for more public kinds of writing or even as an important influence on them? Then there are the social and cultural questions implied in the correspondence: How did it serve the Melville family in their attempts to advance their interests in the world, especially after the death of the father, Allan, which left them practically penniless? Was personal correspondence considered a labor, like that of copying Herman’s manuscripts, or a leisure activity? Was Augusta’s “literary thirst” a private passion or a social duty? And, finally, we have to ask what in general to make of the letters of “nonliterary” figures, since so many of our conceptual models derive from those of canonical writers. How do the letters alter our notion of what constitutes a text?

If a person’s writing betrays a literary impulse, does that make him or her a writer? Is Woman Writing, like Emerson’s Man Thinking, as worthy an entity as that more recognizable figure, the Writer or Thinker? Augusta Melville seems to have taken a somewhat ironic view of her own literary endeavors. In an undated letter to Linda Blatchford, she says of a mountain sunset, “I declare it has made even prosaic me poetical.” To take her at her word is to give her writing a wholly new reading, and if we do that, then we have to reconsider by what standards we consider other works poetical, or literary, too.

NOTES

1. All quotations from the correspondence come from the Additions to the Gansevoort-Lansing Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
2. References to and summaries of some of the Augusta papers appear in the Melville Correspondence, edited by Horth.
3. See Davidson, “Books and Readers” and Revolution and the Word; Zboray; Zboray and Zboray; Smith-Rosenberg; Halttunen; Mary Kelley; and Thornton.
4. Until recently, not only Augusta, but many other women in Melville’s life—his mother, Maria; his wife, Elizabeth Shaw; and other female relatives and friends—have been stereotyped and misrepresented. Of course, one reason for this misjudgment has been the relative dearth of biographical materials on these women, although Metcalf, in Herman Melville, worked to correct that problem, and Leyda, in The Melville Log, included selected portions of letters from female family members. Another reason is the tendency of early biographers to read Melville’s fictional women autobiographically, to assign to Maria Melville the qualities of Mary Glendinning in Pierre. See Weaver, Mumford, Arvin, and Howard.
5. The book was A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers. Melville owned and marked a copy of this book, after visiting the
Shakers in 1850. On Melville and the Shakers, see Parker (765, 857–58); Robertson-Lorant (242, 247, 249, 276, 322, 452); Sealts, “Melville and the Shakers”; and my unpublished “Gentle Sister, Delicious Wife.”

6. Melville had probably met Griswold in New York (see Parker 572, 606); James was a neighbor in Stockbridge, Massachusetts (Parker 853–54; Robertson-Lorant 289).

7. The book was Elizabeth Missing Sewell’s The Earl’s Daughter. Robertson-Lorant hypothesizes that the popularity of books such as Sewell’s (and Ellis’s and Schiller’s, mentioned later) entered into Melville’s decision to write a domestic novel, Pierre (300).

8. Augusta is referring to William Starbuck Mayo’s The Berber, or the Mountaineer of the Atlas, a Tale of Morocco and Kaloolah, or Journeyings to the Djébel Kumri, an Autobiography of Jonathan Romer. Kaloolah is mentioned several times in Moby-Dick (Bercaw 102). Parker calls Mayo “Melville’s imitator” (761).

9. She here writes of Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller’s The Ghost-Seer, From the German of Schiller. Melville bought this edition in 1849 (see Sealts, Melville’s Reading #438a; Bercaw #605a).

10. See my “Mood for Composition” (12) on one of Helen’s letters and the idea that Melville’s writing may owe something to the family correspondence.

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