THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

EMILY DICKINSON

Edited by Wendy Martin

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I

BETSY ERKKILA

The Emily Dickinson wars

We see – Comparatively –
The Thing so towering high
– Emily Dickinson

"There was a 'war between the houses,'" wrote Mary Lee Hall of the disputes between Lavinia Dickinson (Emily Dickinson's sister), Susan Gilbert Dickinson (Dickinson's intimate friend and the wife of her brother, Austin Dickinson), and Mabel Loomis Todd (Austin's lover for thirteen years) over the first volumes of Emily Dickinson's *Poems* and *Letters* edited and published by Todd and Thomas Higginson in the 1890s.[1] This early and primarily female "war," which "had as its site and center the volcanic and transgressive love relationship between Dickinson and Sue,"[2] has continued into the present with disputes between male editors such as R. W. Franklin and feminist critics such as Susan Howe over the proper editing of Dickinson; the 1993 publication of *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by William H. Shurr, proposes to add 498 "new" poems to the Dickinson canon; and the 1998 publication of Franklin's long-awaited and already much-debated variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* adds seventeen poems to the Dickinson canon and promises to replace the standard edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson in 1955. As Christopher Benfey observes, "For a century now . . . the editing of Emily Dickinson's poetry has been entangled with human passions, sex, and blindered partiality, as though the editors were (and sometimes they were) . . . despairing lovers tossing on their beds."[3] This is the stuff of American soap opera. And yet these ongoing Dickinson wars have produced a heady mix of sex and text that has left its mark not only on past and recent editions of Dickinson's work but also on the making of American literary history.

My own interests in entering the Dickinson "wars" are more social and cultural than editorial. Rather than tracing the editorial history of Dickinson's work as stages in an ongoing telos of bringing Dickinson into proper

representation and circulation, I want to use the occasion of the new millennium, which might be said to mark the centennial of the first publication of Dickinson's poetry and the rise of her critical reputation in the 1890s, to reflect on Dickinson's publication history as a scene of struggle in which significant social and cultural values have been both produced and contested. That is, rather than seeking to wrest Dickinson's writing from the hands of seemingly adulterous, mutilating, or otherwise inadequate editors, I am more interested in the precise kinds of cultural, political, and ideological work that the figure of Emily Dickinson and her writing have been called upon to do. In other words, what is finally at stake in the Emily Dickinson wars?

1 Poetic genius

Although the volumes of Dickinson's *Poems* and *Letters* edited by Todd and Higginson in the 1890s have been widely criticized for producing a conventionalized version of Dickinson that would appeal to the popular literary taste of the time, these early editions are in fact quite interesting in suggesting the ways certain founding assumptions continue to frame Dickinson studies and literary studies more generally at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like Susan and Lavinia Dickinson, who emphasized Dickinson's "seclusion and intellectual brilliancy," her "peculiar and wonderful genius," and the separation of her poems from any specifically "personal experiences," or "love disaster,"[4] Higginson and Todd represent Dickinson as an isolated and individual artist-genius whose poems exist against and beyond time and history. "The verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called 'the Poetry of the Portfolio,'" Higginson wrote in his "Preface" to *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890); they were "something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind" (p. iii). Dickinson was, Higginson asserted in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* written to promote the second edition of *Poems* (1891), "a wholly new and original poetic genius."[5]

Although Higginson's representation of Dickinson as a solitary and original "poetic genius" might appear to be natural and self-evident, the notions of the individual "author," "poetic genius," "mind," "art," and "imagination" that he and Todd invoke in their prefaces to Dickinson's work are actually quite recent and heavily contested concepts. The notion of author as individual genius whose imagination and art are forms of intellectual property arose simultaneously with free enterprise and the literary marketplace in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as "genius" and "culture" were

redefined not as something public and *outside*, as in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) – "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest / What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest" – but as something *inside* and private, as in Emerson's words in "The Poet" (1844): "Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from the muse."[6]

At a time of massive social transformation, when a new industrial elite of money and business was eroding the traditional power, rank, and privilege of the old landed gentry, and labor was engaging in increasingly violent confrontations with capital, the figure of Emily Dickinson and her work were presented as a reaffirmation of the cultural power of mind and genius against the debased imperatives of both the capital marketplace and the democratic masses. In the words of one of Dickinson's earliest reviewers, William Dean Howells, writing as editor of *Harper's Magazine* in 1891, "If nothing else had come out of our life but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it; and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionarism."[7] Against the apparent crassness of both the new money and the new masses, "the work of Emily Dickinson" is invoked as a figure of what Perry Miller would later call *The Mind of New England* assuming its rightful and culturally dominant position as a representative not only of United States mind but of all mind on the stage of world literature.

As one of the founding assumptions of Dickinson studies, the notion of Dickinson as "a wholly new and original poetic genius" representative at once of New England genius and US genius, has in its turn come to shape later responses to the Todd-Higginson volumes as a site of adulteration (and literal adultery between Austin and Mabel) where the uniqueness and radicalism of Dickinson's work has been mutilated and defiled. And yet, as Lavinia wrote to Higginson after the publication of the first edition of *Poems* in 1890, "But for Mrs Todd & your self, 'the poems' would die in the box where they were found."[8] Ironically, if it had not been for the editorial labors of Todd and Higginson, we might not have Dickinson's writing – or at least significant parts of it – at all: in fact, Todd's carefully made transcriptions of the Dickinson holographs are, in some cases, the only copies we have. What the editing of Dickinson makes visible is the ways in which the editor, like the author, is engaged in acts of cultural production and interpretation that are collective and social rather than private and individual.

In their effort to produce a Dickinson that would appeal to popular audiences, Todd and Higginson were enormously successful. The first edition of *Poems* sold some 10,000 copies and, in the words of Higginson, enjoyed a "suddenness of success almost without parallel in American literature" ("Dickinson's Letters," p. 444). While it is not my purpose to present a detailed analysis of these 1890s volumes, I want to suggest that if we were not so singly focused on the process of bringing Dickinson into proper – meaning scholarly rather than popular – representation, we might examine the material dimensions of these early volumes of Dickinson's work and their subsequent reception for what they reveal not only about the ways Dickinson was socialized, marketed, and consumed by her first editors and readers, but also about the history of the author, the book, editorial practice, and literary taste at a crucial moment in the simultaneous emergence of aestheticism and mass culture, literary modernism and the culture of consumption.

Despite the efforts of Todd and Higginson to conventionalize Dickinson's work, her poems still seemed formally aberrant enough to cause some reserve, especially among genteel critics. It was Dickinson's form rather than her content that unnerved Thomas Aldrich in his influential review of Dickinson's *Poems* for the *Atlantic* in 1892. Dickinson's "versicles" were, he wrote, both aesthetically "fatal" and "queer," terms that inadvertently mark the relation between the danger of Dickinson's formal deviance and other forms of "queerness" or deviancy in her work.[9] These early volumes of poems, which were later included in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1924) and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1930), edited by Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, were also radical enough to make Dickinson a cultural icon among several modernists, including most notably Amy Lowell, Conrad Aiken, Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransome, and Allen Tate, whose 1932 article "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," begins by setting Dickinson as a New Critical embodiment of mind and culture against the "intellectual chaos" of Marxian criticism and the kinds of political writing associated with the depression: Dickinson's poetry is "a poetry of ideas," he says, "and it demands of the reader a point of view – not an opinion of the New Deal or the League of Nations, but an ingrained philosophy that is fundamental, a settled attitude that is almost extinct in this eclectic age."[10]

2 Property

The historically contingent relation between marketplace notions of individualism and private property and the emergence of modern notions of poetic genius, the author, and the work as forms of intellectual property is

particularly legible in Dickinson studies because as a field of cultural and academic study it cannot finally be separated from its origins in a property dispute between Lavinia Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. Todd was the lover of Austin Dickinson to whom Lavinia deeded a piece of Dickinson's land (at Austin's request) in partial repayment for her work on Dickinson's manuscripts. As a result of this highly publicized legal battle, the Dickinson manuscripts were divided between the house of Dickinson and the house of Todd, whose descendants, Martha Dickinson Bianchi (Susan Dickinson's daughter and Dickinson's niece) and Millicent Todd Bingham (Todd's daughter) parsed out a bewildering series of publications – including *The Single Hound: Poems of a Lifetime* (1914), *Complete Poems* (1924), *Further Poems* (1929), *Poems* (1930), *Unpublished Poems* (1935), *Poems* (1937), and *Bolts of Melody* (1945) – in response to the growing public appetite for Dickinson's work.

"The world will not rest satisfied till every scrap of her writings, letters as well as literature, has been published," wrote one reviewer in 1892 in response to the first and second volumes of Dickinson's *Poems* (Buckingham, *Reception*, p. 294). Whatever else one might say about these first editions and the earliest public response to her work, Emily Dickinson, the "Recluse Woman of Genius" (Buckingham, *Reception*, p. 182), had emerged as an author, and as such her "mind" would continue to be bought, sold, marketed, exchanged, litigated, and owned as a form of private property. Just as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the division and dissemination of Dickinson's writings were marked by the simultaneous sexual and legal terms of a property dispute between the house of Dickinson and the house of Todd, so in 1950, a further legal battle over the ownership of Dickinson's work ensued when Alfred Leete Hampson, Bianchi's companion and heir, sold Dickinson's manuscripts to Harvard University, which peremptorily claimed ownership and possession of all Dickinson's work. When Todd Bingham successfully challenged Harvard's claim, the Dickinson manuscripts were once again divided, this time between the Houghton Library at Harvard, which owns the manuscripts of Susan and Lavinia, and the Amherst College Library, which owns Todd's share of the Dickinson manuscripts.

"Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man – ," Dickinson wrote in one of her most frequently cited poems (Fr 788). The irony, of course, is that the "Mind" of Emily Dickinson, who refused to go to market and resisted commodification by what she called "Disgrace of Price," is now owned collectively by Harvard University and Amherst College, where access to and circulation of her writing is vigorously policed and controlled.[11] If you want to quote from or publish the work of Dickinson you must ask for

controversy among Dickinson scholars and in the larger literary community, with charges ranging from hoax and sham, to claims that Shurr neglected the work of other scholars who had already "discovered" some of the poems he presents, to more general charges that he has ridden ignorantly and roughshod over the complexities and ambiguities of Dickinson's sexual and textual practice and the corresponding difficulties of editorial reproduction and translation. Whereas Howe, McGann, and Smith would return us to the origin of Dickinson's art in her manuscript productions, Shurr bypasses the manuscripts altogether, preferring to "excavate" and "elevate" 498 new poems into the Dickinson canon, not through a careful reading of Dickinson's manuscripts but through a close reading of the already edited and interpreted volumes of Dickinson's *Letters* by Johnson and Ward. Where Howe, McGann, and Smith re-enact Dickinson's own resistance to the market and print by leading us back to the holograph page, Shurr openly plays the market, feeding the public "appetite" for Dickinson and staging his putative "discovery" of new poems as a media event. "[W]e continue to hope that there are stores of Dickinson material still to be discovered, works to feed the appetite of those who would like to have more of her poems," Shurr writes in his Introduction (*New Poems*, p. 2).

There are many things wrong with Shurr's edition. Shaped by notions of the author, poetry, and the aesthetic, which were set in place by the first editorial and critical constructions of Dickinson and reaffirmed by the formalist and New Critical frames of academic criticism in the forties and fifties, Shurr's editorial practice is grounded in the assumption that poems are "freestanding, contextless productions" that must be extricated from "their original contexts" – personal, social, cultural, historical – and relocated in a canonical and ultimately transcendent realm called "art": "It is only when they are isolated and presented as freestanding poems that we can focus on them as the works of art they are," Shurr writes. All signs of history and the social context must be banished: "In order further to isolate them for study," he says, "I have organized them by genre rather than by chronology" (Shurr, *New Poems*, p. 10).

Although Shurr acknowledges that "Dickinson's tendency to use the same rhythm and meter for her prose indicates that the line between her poetry and prose is not entirely fixed" (p. 102), his entire project is driven by a desire to "fix it" – to redraw the boundaries and reassert the fundamental distinctions between poetry and prose, art and history, text and context, work and life. Thus, whereas Hart in her essay, "The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire," recovers a hitherto unnoticed poem in one of Dickinson's letters to Susan, but refuses to separate this poem, which she calls "Morning," from its context either in the letters or in the erotic and lifelong love relationship

between Emily and Susan Dickinson, Shurr includes the same poem among his "discoveries," refusing to acknowledge either the homoerotic contexts of the poem or the fact that it was Hart who originally called attention to this and other "letter-poems" that do not appear in Johnson's edition of the *Poems*. But Shurr contradicts himself: while he erases the homoerotic contexts of Dickinson's "letter-poems" addressed to Susan, he keeps the "Master" plot and the heteronormative frames of Dickinson studies in play by consistently locating the heterosexual "contexts" of these "new poems" in Dickinson's relationship with Charles Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles, and Otis Lord.

In "What Is an Author?" Foucault asks, "What if, within a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or of an address, or a laundry list: Is it a work, or not? Why not?"[17] Foucault's questions suggest that once the author function is in place, there can be no end to what counts as a "work," or, in Shurr's terms, a "poem" by Emily Dickinson. Although Dickinson's letters are not laundry lists, Shurr's editorial strategy of scouting out any prose passage that smacks of a "fourteener" (a tetrameter followed by a trimeter line) and reformatting it as a poem suggests the "author function" has run amuck. In fact, Shurr himself appears to recognize that the potentially absurd logic of his editorial project would be to reformat all of Dickinson's letters as poems: "The recording of such brilliant scraps could be almost endless and would cite virtually every page of the three volume *Letters*" (Shurr, *New Poems*, p. 84).

To compare Shurr's *New Poems* to recent textual studies of Dickinson's work is, writes Margaret Dickie, "to descend rapidly to another area of scholarship entirely, where the refined sensibility of Howe, the wide-ranging energies of McGann, the scrupulous attention of Smith, and the elaborate designs of Cameron have no place."[18] But while reviews of Shurr have put him in his place as an instance of what one reviewer called "the critical grotesque," I want to suggest that as a site of cultural contest, the controversy stirred by Shurr's edition is also instructive in revealing the ways notions of the poet, the poem, the individual author, language, and the aesthetic as relatively distinct categories of analysis and inquiry continue to frame Dickinson studies, despite the efforts of feminists, new historicists, multiculturalists, and cultural studies critics to move the study of literature toward a more historically contingent, interdisciplinary, and worldly focus.

Like reponses to the Todd-Higginson, Johnson, and Franklin editions of Dickinson as sites of editorial defilement and mutiliation, reviews of Shurr present Dickinson as a "major poet" whose language, texts, intentions, and integrity as an author must not be violated. "This is sad business," writes a reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*. "It should be enough that Dickinson is one of the world's greatest poets." "Dickinson is a truly major poet, and

her writing should not be cavalierly handled," asserts a reviewer for the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Unfortunately, the 'new poems' are not new, nor are they true poems," observes another reviewer in the *Boston Globe*. "Where we might ask, are the poet's clear intentions taken into account?" she asks, noting that Shurr should have "respected the 'prose-formatted poems' and discussed them as they were written."[19]

The fact that some of the poems that Shurr presents might be said to be better than ones already in the Dickinson canon suggests that the issue is not so much poetry – or even what counts as a poem – but the necessity of maintaining the integrity and purity of Dickinson's intentions as individual author and origin of the poetry. The reaction to Shurr suggests the potential conflict between an editorial practice framed by intentionalism and a critical practice that has come to discount not only authorial intentions, in accord with W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Bearsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), but also, under the pressure of poststructuralist theory, traditional constructions of the subject, the author, language, and representation. Critical of Shurr for his failure to indicate "that the letters are literary works with their own integrity" and his failure to make use of Dickinson's manuscripts, where he might have noticed that "line breaks in Dickinson's poems and letters are intentional visual strategies," Hart asserts, "Dickinson, a poet unpublished during her lifetime, left her work in handwritten manuscripts, and it is essential for an editor to return to them."[20] While I agree that Shurr should have made use of Dickinson's manuscripts, even if he had, this would not have given him any unmediated access to Dickinson's intentions. Are the line breaks in Dickinson's letters and poems "intentional visual strategies" as Howe has argued or merely matters of "arbitrary convenience" as R. W. Franklin has argued? Are Dickinson's letters "literary" letters as Todd suggested, "letter-poems" as Hart and Smith have argued, "prose-formatted poems" as Shurr claims, or, as some might argue, simply letters. These and other questions about Dickinson's intentions in her manuscripts are radically undecideable.

As McGann observes in *The Textual Condition*, the concept of "author's intentions" is "ambiguous and unstable" and "misrepresents the interactive procedures by which texts are constituted."[21] What the various alterations, excisions, and editorial translations of Dickinson's "work" suggests is the socially constituted, interactive, and collaborative nature of authors and texts. Rather than leading us to recognize the social location of the writer and writing, however, recent contests over the editing of Dickinson appear to be leading us – or at least some of us – in just the opposite direction: backward toward the room, and the box, and the manuscripts where Dickinson locked the purity of her authorial intentions.

4 Pure intentionality

The nostalgia for some pure intentionality originating in the author as a figure of mind and genius writing for eternity is particularly evident in Susan Howe's work on Emily Dickinson. With its verbal and visual gaps, markings, variants, erasures, stutters, spaces, and indeterminacies, Dickinson's poetry, as Howe presents it, reflects – or one might say inflects – Howe's interests as a L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poet. Howe herself acknowledges this: "[Dickinson's] poems and her middle and later letters encompass whatever I want to bring to them. Need to bring to them. I often worry that I may be imposing my particular obsessions on her" (*Birth-Mark*, p. 155). Unlike past and recent editors whose appeal to Dickinson's intentions often masks their historical mediation, Howe accentuates her own poetic intervention by entitling her book on Dickinson, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985).

Howe's *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, which includes her influential essay, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Value," has been hailed as "[a]n astonishing work re-presenting the American past, its history, literature, texts and critics" (Rachel Blau Du Plessis, book jacket). But Howe's subtitle, "Unsettling the Wilderness," does not mean restoring the land to its original inhabitants or even relocating Native American cultures at the center rather than the margins of the story of American literary emergence. Rather, it means displacing the land as the actual site of historical struggle between indigenous cultures and their European conquerors with the symbolic wilderness of white mind and white writing. Like *My Emily Dickinson*, *Birth-Mark* is in fact wholly Eurocentric in its mytho-poetic reading of both Emily Dickinson and American literary history.

Drawing on the work of Perry Miller, Howe's attempt to locate what she calls "a distinctive American voice" (*Birth-Mark*, p. 156) reinstates the mythic narrative of America's errand into the wilderness with all its perdurable racial, sexual, and imperial coordinates: the origins of American culture in New England; American exceptionalism as it is represented by what Howe calls the "singularly North American . . . literary expression of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, and to a lesser degree Hawthorne" (*Birth-Mark*, p. xi); the savage/civilized binary; and the notion of writing as a sacred practice, "a physical event of immediate revelation" (*Birth-Mark*, p. 1), which exists against and beyond history, or "actuality."

In Howe's reading, the "wilderness" and its inhabitants, which she signifies metonymically as "tomahawks, powwows, quickhatch and wampumpeag" are continually represented as "other" in relation to the European mind working out its sacred national "errand" and destiny in America (*Birth-Mark*,

p. 90). "The antinomian controversy was," she asserts, "the primordial struggle of North American literary expression" (*Birth-Mark*, pp. 3–4). Read within the context of current work in the field of comparative American cultural studies, however, what Howe calls "the primordial struggle" might be better understood in Walter Benjamin's terms as repeated acts of "barbarism" committed in the name of American "civilization" – against Native Americans, women, blacks, Mexicans, and other sexual and social outsiders – as the Anglo-American voice of New England seeks to naturalize its voice as *the* distinctive "North American literary expression."[22]

The cornerstone of Howe's vision of history is the mind and art of Emily Dickinson, whose "wild" poetic creation ultimately displaces and comes to stand in for the multiple indigenous cultures that actually inhabited what Howe calls the American "wilderness." "Really alone at a real frontier," which is in fact intellectual and symbolic, Dickinson is celebrated as a poetic "genius" – "Outside authority, eccentric, unique" – who "sings the sound of the imagination as learner and founder, sings of liberation into an order beyond gender" and "indifferent to worldly chronology" (*My Emily*, pp. 76, 28, 13).

Re-enacting Dickinson's refusal to go to market, Howe advocates a return to Dickinson's original markings on her manuscripts as a means of fully appreciating her "visual intentionality," "her naked Expression," and the "physical immediacy" of her "spiritual improvisations" (*Birth-Mark*, pp. 146, 148). It is here, at the originary scene of writing, that we "see what *she, Emily Dickinson*, reveals of her most profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scraps she left us" (*Birth-Mark*, p. 20). Drawing attention to "Dickinson's word variants, directional dashes, and crosses" as "another kind of writing" (*Birth-Mark*, p. 9), Howe calls for a "facsimile edition" – a "presentation of the author's, Emily Dickinson's texts" – that would "show the layerings and fragile immediacies of her multifacted [sic] visual and verbal productions" (*Birth-Mark*, pp. 19–20).

Howe's visionary and revisionary reading of Dickinson raises important questions about the ways we read, edit, translate, and interpret Dickinson's writing – or any writing. But her critical focus on Dickinson's "scrawls," "strokes," "cuts," and marks on the page as signs of poetic genius and sites of aesthetic significance also suggests the extent to which the mind of the individual author and a primarily aesthetic focus on questions of language and craft continue to circumscribe even the most adventurous new work on Dickinson. There are other questions we might ask. Is it only to gain access to the poet's "most profound self" or her intentions, visual or otherwise, that we read Dickinson? Are there other cultural, social, psychological,

And yet, as important as McGann's work has been to the formulation of a social theory of texts, in his discussion of the "visual aspect" of Dickinson's manuscripts in *Black Riders*, he, too, invokes Dickinson's holographs and her "visual" intentions as the "final horizon" of any editorial translation. For him, as for Howe, Dickinson's hand-sewn manuscripts are the site of some ultimate transparency where her intentions may be clearly read. Franklin's facsimile edition of the manuscripts "makes it clear," McGann writes, "that Dickinson's texts are what would later be called (by Charles Olson) 'composition by field'" (*Black Riders*, p. 27). Dismissing the notion that Dickinson's "odd lineations are unintentional," he argues that "certain textual moments reveal such a dramatic use of page space as to put the questions of intentionality beyond consideration" (*Black Riders*, p. 28). But Franklin's facsimile edition of the manuscripts does *not* put Dickinson's intentions *beyond* question – least of all to Franklin himself, who has consistently argued that Dickinson's unusual marks of punctuation, her lineation, her multiple variants, and her organization of her poems into fascicles have no particular significance, aesthetic or otherwise. What McGann's modernist interpretation of Dickinson's manuscripts in fact suggests is that in the context of his *own* reading of the "objectivist" poetics of Pound, Stein, Olson, and Zukovsky, McGann's experience of Dickinson's writing as "composition by field" is so "dramatic" that he has projected it back onto her manuscripts as "authorial intention."

Critical of Johnson's edition for going "astray," for misrepresenting Dickinson's writing by approaching "her work as if it aspired to a typographical existence," McGann argues that "Dickinson's scripts cannot be read as if they were 'printer's copy' manuscripts, or as if they were composed with an eye toward some state beyond their handcrafted textual condition." Dickinson's hand-sewn manuscripts are, McGann insists, her "work's initial horizon of finality," a horizon that is further circumscribed by McGann's exclusive focus on "*the aesthetic or expressive*" significance of her "scriptural forms." McGann concludes, "When we come to edit her work for bookish presentation . . . we must accommodate our typographical conventions to her work, not the other way around" (*Black Riders*, p. 38).

But if Dickinson's hand-sewn manuscripts are, as McGann argues, the "horizon of finality," then they were possibly not meant to be read or edited at all. So who exactly is the ideal reader that McGann and others invoke in describing how "we" must read and edit Dickinson? Moreover, what exactly constitutes the "work" whose "aspirations" and "horizon" McGann reads so clearly? We do not know the intentions of Dickinson's hand-sewn manuscripts; nor do we know if "her work" "aspired to a typographical existence." What we do know is that Lavinia discovered hundreds of Dickinson's

hand-written poems in a box shortly after her death in May 1886. If we are going to follow Dickinson's "intentions" exactly, wouldn't a further logic be that we not "edit" Dickinson's work for publication at all, in fact, that we put her manuscripts back into the box where she left them and not read them at all. Or perhaps we should just destroy Dickinson's manuscripts altogether since silence and death may have been part of what McGann calls "the work's initial horizon of finality."[27]

I am, of course, being facetious. But what I am trying to suggest is that there is no "horizon of finality." We do not know Dickinson's intentions, nor, short of the miraculous discovery of some real rather than Shurr-like "trove" of Dickinson papers, will we ever know her intentions or what constitutes "her work" in any traditional sense of the term. Lavinia chose to save Dickinson's poetic manuscripts, and we must choose and take responsibility for the precise forms in which Dickinson's work is edited and circulated, the kinds of cultural work it is asked to do, and the particular kinds of cultural and political interventions it might be asked to make.

As we move into the new millennium, we might want to reflect back upon and reconsider the histories and intellectual categories through which we have come to know and interpret Dickinson's work. Why, we might ask, has the "Mind" of the poet and the categories of the author, the aesthetic, literature, and Dickinson's status as the "greatest" American or woman poet of all time so persistently framed the kinds of questions we ask? What are the categories that organize and divide Dickinson studies? Why is gender so often separated from history and culture, and language and editing separated from both? Why does the category of the private consistently trump political and ideological analysis? Why does a focus on gender take precedence over questions of race and class? Are there other ways of organizing Dickinson studies that might bring these seemingly distinct modes of inquiry and analysis into a more fluid and fully interactive relation with each other?

Rather than reinstating the hierarchized sets of binaries – private/public, poetry/sexuality, literature/history, aesthetics/politics, high art/mass culture, holograph/print, individual authorship/cultural production – that continue to structure not only Dickinson studies but the institutional spaces we inhabit, we might want to consider other ways of approaching the relations among literature, culture, society, and world. Art is never only private and individual; it is also and always collective and social. Whereas in the past critics have measured the blank space on Dickinson's manuscript pages as a means of gauging her poetic intentions, in the future critics might want to examine her manuscript production in relation to the cultural production, poetics, and writing practices of her place and time. Was Dickinson's

manuscript production unique, or was it part of what Emerson called a broader cultural "revolution" in the production of the poetry of "the portfolio over the book?" (Emerson, p. 1169). If Dickinson resisted what Smith calls the "fixity" and "finality" of print, how do we account for Whitman's radical experiments with the fluidity and indeterminacy of print in the 1855 and later editions of *Leaves of Grass*? Whereas in the past, contests over Dickinson have tended to focus on her poetic genius, her intentions, her singularity, and the private and essentially gendered dimensions of her art, in the new millennium one can imagine enlarged definitions of "context" and other possible "wars" – social as well as literary, cultural as well as individual, international as well as national and familial – that might enrich our understanding of the historical locations and occasions for writing through renewed acts of critical attention to Emily Dickinson and the world she lived in.

NOTES

1 Letter of Mary Lee Hall to Millicent Todd Bingham, 5 August 1933, reprinted in *LED*, p. 258. Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (eds.), *Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890); Todd and Higginson (eds.) *Poems by Dickinson* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891); Todd (ed.) *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894); Todd and Higginson (eds.) *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896).

2 Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 29.

3 Christopher Benfey, "The Mystery of Emily Dickinson," *New York Times Book Review*, 8 April 1999, p. 39.

4 Susan Gilbert Dickinson, "Miss Emily Dickinson of Amherst," *Springfield Republican*, 18 May 1886, in Willis J. Buckingham (ed.), *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), p. 551. Lavinia Dickinson, cited in *LED*, p. 153.

5 Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, 68 (October 1891), p. 445.

6 John Butt *et al.* (eds.), *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 6 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 272–3; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 467.

7 Howells, "Editor's Study" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 82 (January 1891), p. 320.

8 Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestor's Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1945), p. 87.

9 Aldrich, "*In Re* Emily Dickinson," *Atlantic Monthly*, 69 (January 1892), p. 144.

10 Tate, "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Foreign Literature*, 3 (April 1932), p. 206.

11 The only scholar to have total access to Dickinson's original manuscripts at Harvard University is Franklin. When Johnson prepared his edition, he was

allowed to see the Todd collection on only two occasions (Franklin, *Poems*, vol. 1, p. 6).

12 R. P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," *The Southern Review* 3 (Autumn 1937), pp. 332, 324, 347. John Crowe Ransom later cited Blackmur's essay on Dickinson as a model of the new critical method in *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), pp. vii–x. *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, includes an extended New Critical analysis of language, image, form, and tone in "After great pain, a formal feeling comes – " (pp. 468–71). See also Tate, "New England Culture"; and Yvor Winters, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," in *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1938), pp. 149–68.

13 Johnson's comment on Dickinson appeared in the Introduction to *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), p. xx.

14 Franklin (ed.), *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. ix.

15 Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985); Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press of New England, 1993); Jerome J. McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1993); McGann, "Emily Dickinson's Visible Language," *Emily Dickinson Journal*, 2 (1993), pp. 40–51; Ellen Louise Hart, "The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire: Emily Dickinson's Letters and Poems to Susan Dickinson, 1850–1886," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 9 (1990), pp. 251–72; Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Hart and Smith (eds.), *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1998). See also Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

16 Comment appears on the book jacket of William H. Shurr (ed.), with Anna Dunlap and Emily Grey Shurr, *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

17 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" trans. Josué V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 103–104.

18 Margaret Dickie, "Dickinson in Context," *American Literary History* 7 (1995), p. 330.

19 Fredric Koeppel, *Chicago Tribune*, 14 October 1993, sec. 5, p. 3; Paul O. Williams, *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 October 1993, p. 15; Marcy L. Tanter, *Boston Globe*, 25 October 1993, p. 39.

20 Hart, "Poetic License," *Women's Review of Books*, 9 (January 1994), p. 24.

21 Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 67.

22 "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin writes in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 256.

23 Mikhail Bakhtin, in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 294.
24 Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
25 Erkkila, "Emily Dickinson and Class," *American Literary History* 4 (1992), pp. 1–27.
26 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*Illuminations*, p. 231).
27 In her will, which is dated 19 October 1875, Dickinson leaves her entire estate to Lavinia: "I give devise and bequeath to my only sister Lavinia N. Dickinson all my estate, real and personal, to have and to hold the same to her and her heirs, and assigns forever"; in *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Jay Leyda (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), vol. 2, p. 236. Although Sewall writes that "All of Emily's correspondence was destroyed by Lavinia after Emily's death, by Emily's direction" (*Life*, p. 96), the precise nature of Dickinson's "direction" to Lavinia remains unclear. According to Mabel Loomis Todd, Lavinia was uncertain about Dickinson's exact "wishes": "Soon after her death her sister Lavinia came to me, as usual in late evening, actually trembling with excitement. She told me she had discovered a veritable treasure – quantities of Emily's poems which she had had no instructions to destroy. She had already burned without examination hundreds of manuscripts, and letters to Emily, many of them from nationally known persons, *thus, she believed, carrying out her sister's partly expressed wishes, but without intelligent discrimination*. Later she bitterly regretted such inordinate haste. But these poems, she told me, must be printed at once" (Todd, "Emily Dickinson's Literary Début," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* [March 1930], pp. 463–464, *emphasis added*).

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Cameron, Sharon. *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
Erkkila, Betsy. *The Wicked Sister: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
Howe, Susan. *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press of New England, 1993.
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McGann, Jerome. *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
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Smith, Martha Nell. *Rowing in Eden. Rereading Emily Dickinson*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

division in Dickinson's legacy – and its regional coordinates – to which my title points, rather than the more familiar "war of the houses" often invoked in accounts of Dickinson's fate at the hands of her editors.

In his handsome tribute in *Harper's*, Howells claimed that in Dickinson's work "America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world," adding that "this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionairism."[9] Howells saw in Dickinson a sort of spiritual counterweight to the capitalist economy of the northeast. That qualifying specification, "or New England rather," claims for that region its traditional role (since the generation of Emerson, Channing, and Thoreau) of reminding the United States of its true purpose. In this regard, Howells might have quoted Dickinson herself, who once described "a quality of loss" on the spring landscape, as though "Trade had suddenly encroached/Upon a Sacrament" (Fr 962).

The most eloquent tribute to Emily Dickinson as a custodian of old New England values came from Samuel Ward, Margaret Fuller's close friend and an early writer for the *Dial*. Ward wrote to his friend Higginson shortly after the publication of the first edition of Dickinson's *Poems*:

> I am, with all the world, intensely interested in Emily Dickinson. No wonder six editions have been sold, every copy, I should think to a New Englander. She may become world famous, or she may never get out of New England. She is the quintessence of that element we all have who are of the Puritan descent *pur sang*. We came to this country to think our own thoughts with nobody to hinder . . . We conversed with our own souls till we lost the art of communicating with other people. The typical family grew up strangers to each other, as in this case. It was *awfully* high, but awfully lonesome. (*LED*, p. 26)

Higginson promptly forwarded Ward's letter to Mabel Todd, calling it "the most remarkable criticism yet made on E. D." (*LED*, p. 26). It is also fair to say that Ward's letter, quoted prominently in his second chapter, "The New England Dickinson and the Puritan Heritage," dominates Richard Sewall's influential view of Dickinson in his two-volume biography. Sewall acknowledged that "the following chapters [of his biography] will both confirm and qualify [though not overturn] Ward's analysis" (*LED*, p. 26). He specifically endorsed Ward's identification of Dickinson as a New Englander of "pure blood": "for the Dickinsons were pure stock, without even a wife in seven generations from outside New England" (*LED*, p. 26).

Paradoxically, however, the strongest argument for Dickinson as the quintessential, "pure-blooded" upholder of New England traditions came not from New Englanders like Higginson and Ward, but from writers of the American South, who found in Dickinson's poetry a voice strangely kindred

to their own. After the initial flurry of response that greeted the publication of the three volumes of the 1890s, Dickinson received little attention from poets or critics during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Dickinson remained a subterranean taste from about 1897 to 1924. Barely mentioned in literary histories of the time and rarely included in anthologies, she had a brief success in 1914 with the publication of *The Single Hound* (mostly poems that Dickinson had sent to Susan Gilbert, edited by her daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi).

Then, in 1924, the Savannah-born poet Conrad Aiken edited a selection of Dickinson's poems for British readers, with a preface that is the first major essay on Dickinson's work. Calling her "the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism," Aiken – the first in a long line of poet-critics to write about Dickinson – noticed in her work the "singular mixture of Puritan and free thinker."

Nothing in Aiken's own fluent and mellifluous poetry reminds us of Dickinson's (in his words) "bare, bleak, and fragmentary" work. He is Southern opulence and ease; she is New England granite. He complained that "her poetry seldom became 'lyrical,' seldom departed from the colorless sobriety of its bare iambics and toneless assonance." (Aiken's own poetry was, if anything, *too* "lyrical," too in love with its tuneful vowels.) But he relished her "freedom of utterance," the way "anything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought." Freedom was paramount in Aiken's assessment of Dickinson's biography as well. "It is apparent," Aiken wrote, "that Miss Dickinson became a hermit by deliberate and conscious choice."[10]

Aiken's essay makes a strong case for Dickinson's centrality in American literature. His Dickinson, part Puritan and part free thinker, is herself divided. It was the Puritan part, however, that remained a barrier for sophisticated American readers during the 1920s. One might have expected Dickinson's originality, waywardness, and embrace of freedom to have triumphed in the heroic 1920s of American writing, when, as Alfred Kazin remarked in a famous passage from *On Native Grounds*, "all the birds began to sing . . . [and] the emergence of our modern American literature after a period of dark ignorance and repressive Victorian gentility was regarded as the world's eighth wonder, a proof that America had at last 'come of age.'"[11] But Dickinson was not included in this "emergence" of "modern American literature." It was Walt Whitman, instead, who seemed, to the poets and novelists of the 1920s, the lyrical liberator who, with his expansive lines and explosive social philosophy, had heroically slipped the yoke of European convention.

Even those poets who leaned towards a more cryptic phrasing and a smaller canvas looked less often to Dickinson than one might suppose. You

will not find Dickinson's name in the manifestos of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. You might expect to find her work exerting an influence on that loosely convened school of British and American poets – including Pound, H. D., and Amy Lowell – who wished to make a break with the traditions of "genteel" poetry in English. These self-styled "Imagists" aimed for a new precision in their use of language, uncluttered with what was conventionally considered "poetic." But Dickinson seems to have been a negligible presence for them as well.

Among the Imagists, who coalesced as a group during the years after 1913, only Amy Lowell regarded Dickinson as a significant precursor. After completing her two-volume life of Keats in 1923, Lowell toyed with the idea of writing a biography of Dickinson. Mabel Todd, seeking an ally against the biography planned by Dickinson's niece Martha Bianchi, strongly encouraged Lowell to do so, sending her Dickinson manuscripts and letters from her own hoard. Lowell died of a stroke before she could seriously begin work on the project, however. That Lowell thought of writing a biography and not a critical work is itself significant, as though something about the prevailing line on Dickinson's life was preventing a generation of readers from having full access to her work.

Part of the problem, perhaps, was a sense that Dickinson's life – or at least what little was known of it – did not sufficiently express that escape from "repressive Victorian gentility" that Kazin had invoked. Aiken, in a hooded aside, mentioned the "spinsterly angularity" of her writing, as though marriage would have somehow "rounded" it. And William Carlos Williams, whose lean, imagistic lines in *Spring and All* (1921) have some of the miniaturist clarity of Dickinson's verse, took aim at American women poets generally, and Dickinson in particular, in a difficult and disturbing passage in his own attack on Victorian gentility, *In the American Grain* (1925):

> It is the women above all – there never have been women, save pioneer Katies; not one in flower save some moonflower Poe may have seen, or an unripe child. Poets? Where? They are the test. But a true woman in flower, never. Emily Dickinson, starving of passion in her father's garden, is the very nearest we have ever been – starving.
>
> Never a woman: never a poet. That's an axiom. Never a poet saw sun here.[12]

Williams's phrase "woman in flower," and his nasty epigram "Never a woman [i.e., a heterosexually "fulfilled" woman]: never a poet," hearkens back to Aiken's hint that virginity was somehow a hindrance to full poetic expression.

Clearly, an unusually perceptive temperament was needed to find in Dickinson's work, during the 1920s, a heroism comparable to Whitman's

noisier, self-celebrating "barbaric yawp." Hart Crane, who himself knew something about "starving of passion" in his father's garden, had such a temperament. Mulling over his own outsider status, as a homosexual amid masculinist poets like Williams and Ezra Pound, Crane had already, in his great poem "The Bridge," revealed a more vulnerable side of Whitman than the bluff caricature of many 1920s evocations. In 1927, a few years before his suicide, Crane began his sonnet "To Emily Dickinson" with that hunger Williams had sensed in Dickinson: "You who desired so much – in vain to ask – / You fed your hunger like an endless task." Crane saw Dickinson as a reconciler of opposites – "Some reconcilement of remotest mind"; and he answered the bloomless flower claim of Williams and Aiken with the line, " – Truly no flower yet withers in your hand,/ The harvest you descried and understand/ Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind." Crane also paid tribute, in the very un-Dickinsonian form of the sonnet, to Dickinson's genius in the use of abstractions and exotic diction ("Leaves Ormus rubyless, and Ophir chill").[13]

Interestingly, the image of Dickinson "starving of passion in her father's garden" has not gone away. Indeed, it has dominated a good deal of biographically based feminist criticism of Dickinson during recent decades. As the feminist poet-critic Sandra Gilbert recently remarked, Williams correctly understood that imaginatively "Dickinson *was* starving in Victorian Massachusetts . . . and that she couldn't be – in the 'ordinary' sense – either a woman or a poet."[14] One reason why Amy Lowell was drawn to the life of Dickinson is, presumably, the many ways in which her own life resembled Dickinson's. "Starving of passion in her father's garden" is a pretty good description of what we know of Amy Lowell's life – until her imposing father's death and his generous bequest made it possible for her to move in with her female lover and become the poet she had always wished to become.

The real trumpet blast that heralded Dickinson's arrival on the American literary map (or, to change metaphors, in the canon) came from Crane's friend Allen Tate, the reactionary Southern poet and brilliant critic, in an essay of 1932 – when Tate could still complain that "Miss Dickinson's poetry has not been widely read." By then, enough of Dickinson's poems had appeared, especially after the *Complete Poems* of 1924, to make critics feel – erroneously, since the manuscripts in Mabel Todd's hands remained unpublished for another two decades – reasonably confident that they had her entire oeuvre in hand.

Tate was a leading figure in the Southern literary movement of the 1920s generally referred to as the Agrarians (for their attachment to allegedly rural and agricultural values and their rejection of northern industrialism) or the Fugitives (for the literary magazine that they founded at Vanderbilt

in Nashville). The Fugitives attacked what they perceived as the money-grubbing tendencies of the United States (what Howells had called "our millionairism"), and looked to what they considered the best traditions of the Old South – especially religious and family traditions – for alternative modes of living. Though they regretted the presence of slavery in the antebellum South, they were inclined to interpret the Civil War as a conflict between northern industrialism and southern agrarianism, and not as a battle over freedom.

The line of descent from this group of Southern critics and writers to the school of criticism that came to be known, after World War II, as the New Criticism is direct. Tate and his associates among the Fugitives – John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks – were leaders in turn among the New Critics, who argued that the "poem itself" as an "organic" whole was the proper subject of literary study. While the New Critics avoided explicit political statements in their analysis of literary texts, implicit in their practice was a preference for the sort of society – hierarchical, ritualized, and traditional – that could produce sophisticated and complex writing of the kind they most admired.

In an essay published in 1935 called "The Profession of Letters in the South," Tate praised the "feudal" past of the South, when "the artist was a member of an organic society."[15] This organic society – a *Gemeinschaft* of common cultural values rather than a *Gesellschaft* of shared economic interests, to borrow two influential German sociological terms – was destroyed, according to Tate, by "finance-capitalism and its creature, machine-production." By the Civil War, according to Tate, the transformation was almost complete, and those traditions he valued most – reverence for God, land, and family – were on the verge of extinction.

In Tate's view, only two regions of the country had been sufficiently imbued with theological convictions and rural traditions to resist to some degree the "rising plutocracy" – namely, the South and New England. And even they were in danger of surrendering to "the machine."

> By 1825 its [i.e., industrialism's] growth in the East was rank enough to begin choking out the ideas and habits of living that New England along with Virginia had kept in unconscious allegiance to Europe . . . Theocracy was on the decline, and industrialism was rising – as Emerson, in an unusually lucid moment, put it, "Things are in the saddle." The energy that had built the meeting-house ran the factory. (*Man of Letters*, p. 212)

By 1850, according to Tate, "the Gilded Age had already begun. But culture, in the true sense, was disappearing." "Puritan theocracy" had given a "final, definite meaning to life," and "an heroic proportion and a tragic mode to the

> carrying this so far that it becomes ludicrous and incredible; and note the subtly interfused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to most romantic poets, love being a symbol interchangeable with death. The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality. (*Man of Letters*, pp. 219–20)

The poem, for Tate, records one of those stately rituals of a conservative society: "a gentleman taking a lady out for a drive." Tate's "genteel driver" embodies the Southern ideal of chivalry. It is essential to his view of the poem that it has a rural, and specifically agricultural, setting: "The sharp *gazing* before *grain* instills into nature a cold vitality of which the qualitative richness has infinite depth" (*Man of Letters*, p. 219). The images at the heart of "Because I could not stop for death" arise from one of those "organic" and "deep" agrarian societies that Tate most admired.

Of course, Dickinson meets Tate halfway. Her poem *does* portray a stately social encounter between a lady of "leisure" and a man of "civility." The adverbs in the first two stanzas – "He *kindly* stopped for me"; "We *slowly* drove, he knew no haste" – confirm the genteel world of ritual and gallantry evoked in Tate's reading. Even the title that Higginson and Todd provided, "The Chariot," suggests an antique world – perhaps the lost world of the Negro spiritual "Swing low, sweet chariot." (There may even be a specific allusion here. Before the Civil War, Higginson had made a tour of the South, and was one of the first to collect spirituals – what he called "slave songs." Higginson may have preceded Tate in sensing an affinity between the stately arrival of death's chariot in Dickinson's poem and the angelic chariot in "Swing low.")

What Tate ignores, or glosses over in his line about "the genteel driver . . . made ironically to serve the end of Immortality," is that there are three characters in the poem, not two. As the poet-critic Randall Jarrell, another Southerner, who had studied with Tate and Ransom in his youth, pointed out, the poem was like someone saying, "We have a nice hotel room. The girl, myself, and the Sphinx."[16] Tate's erasure of the third figure is significant, and indicates just how committed he is to a certain scene – genteel, agrarian, ritualized – evoked in his mind by the poem. This mysterious third figure, whom Dickinson names "Eternity," complicates the picture of a gentleman and lady taking a drive. A chaperon, perhaps?

There is, to be sure, a certain unintended irony in Tate's view of Emily Dickinson as the voice of a pre-industrial society, a poet who "had nothing to do with . . . the rising plutocracy of the East." For if Dickinson's father and brother did not excel in the "rising plutocracy," it was not for lack of effort; in any case, the two treasurers of Amherst College did well enough in the world. Edward Dickinson invested in all sorts of financial schemes.

"I must make some money in some way," he wrote his wife in 1835, "and if I don't speculate in the lands, at the 'East,' I must at the 'West.' "[17] One wouldn't know from Dickinson's deliberately naïve poem "I like to see it lap the miles" that her Whig father lobbied and labored hard to bring the railroad – that symbol of the Gilded Age, dear to all Whig politicians – to water-power-poor Amherst, in order to improve prospects of commerce and trade. (A locomotive was named in his honor.) Emily Dickinson attended the opening ceremonies for the Amherst railroad station, a stone's throw from the Homestead on Main Street. But Tate will take the carriage poem, thank you, and not the railroad poem.

Tate's Southern reading of "Because I could not stop for death" raises an interesting question. Could Emily Dickinson's poetry owe something to her own direct experience of Southern ways of life? Emily Dickinson made one trip to the South, in February and March 1855, during her father's tenure in Congress. It was certainly the furthest she ever traveled, and, except for her sojourn in Boston because of eye trouble nine years later, it was her longest period away from Amherst. The trip has inspired a great deal of speculation, centered upon the two weeks Dickinson spent in Philadelphia on the return trip, when she is rumored to have had her crucial encounter with the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, minister of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church. (For many years, Wadsworth has headed the list of Dickinson's possible lovers.)

The Southern segment of the trip – three weeks in Washington DC with at least one foray into Virginia – has received far less attention. But two letters from the trip, one to the Gilbert sisters and one to Mrs. Holland, make clear that Dickinson was drawn to the genteel manners, the polished elegance, and the soft weather of the South. In a letter to Susan and Martha Gilbert, sent from Washington on 28 February, Dickinson reveled in the Southern spring:

> Sweet and soft as summer, Darlings, maple trees in bloom and grass green in the sunny places – hardly seems it possible this is winter still; and it makes the grass spring in this heart of mine and each linnet sing, to think that you have come [back to Amherst]. (L 178)

In a letter to Mrs. Holland dated 18 March, she recounted a visit she had made with her sister, Lavinia, to Mount Vernon:

> I will not tell you what I saw – the elegance, the grandeur; you will not care to know the value of the diamonds my Lord and Lady wore, but if you haven't been to the sweet Mount Vernon, then I *will* tell you how on one soft spring day we glided down the Potomac in a painted boat, and jumped upon the shore – how hand in hand we stole along up a tangled pathway till we reached the tomb of General George Washington, how we paused beside it, and no one

> spoke a word, then hand in hand, walked on again, not less wise or sad for that marble story; how we went within the door – raised the latch he lifted when he last went home – thank the Ones in Light that he's since passed in through a brighter wicket! Oh, I could spend a long day, if it did not weary you, telling of Mount Vernon – and I will sometime if we live and meet again, and God grant we shall! (L 179)

These letters reveal a pleasure in the "soft" spring of the South, and in the "elegance" and "grandeur" of the great plantation of Mount Vernon. "We have had many pleasant times," Dickinson told Mrs. Holland, "and seen much that is fair, and heard much that is wonderful – many sweet ladies and noble gentlemen have taken us by the hand and smiled upon us pleasantly – and the sun shines brighter for our way thus far." The sisters befriended a Mrs. James Brown of Alabama who later sent them a novel by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps as a gift. It is easy to imagine those sweet Southern ladies and noble gentlemen making their way into poems like "Because I could not stop for death."

I want to close this discussion of the "conservative" Dickinson with a final chapter in the twentieth-century reception of Emily Dickinson, namely, the extraordinary body of feminist criticism during the last third of the century. I think it is fair to say that this has been the dominant wing of Dickinson criticism for the past twenty-five years or so. I believe, though, that the true roots of this criticism, at least as it regards Emily Dickinson, go back to the Agrarian idea of Dickinson as cultural custodian and reactionary rebel. A further impetus, also stemming in part from the Agrarians, was the so-called "confessional" poetry of the late 1950s and 1960s, which made Dickinson's voice "audible" in new and compelling ways.

When Emily Dickinson's complete poems were published more or less in the form in which she wrote them, in 1955, the Southern interpretation once again prevailed. John Crowe Ransom, a leading figure in the old Agrarian circles and a key "New Critic," argued, in an essay called "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," that "the principal literary event of these last twenty years or so [i.e., from 1935 to 1955] has . . . been the restoration just now of an old poet" who "in most ways . . . was surely not one of our 'moderns.'"[18] Ransom's analysis of Dickinson's biographical situation turned out to have an unexpectedly powerful influence among feminist critics of her poetry.

Ransom's essay recapitulates Tate's cultural analysis of Dickinson's Amherst – "where in her time the life and the metaphysics were still in the old Puritan tradition, being almost boastfully remote from what went on across the state in Boston." He quotes "Because I could not stop for death," with its restored fourth stanza, but his interpretation is essentially Tate's genteel one: "Death's victim now is the shy spinster, so he presents

himself as a decent civil functionary making a call upon a lady to take her for a drive" (Ransom, "Poet Restored," p. 90).

Ransom's essay is of particular interest, however, for the way in which it recasts certain questions about Dickinson's relation to the vocation of poetry. What Ransom notices is the singular split between Dickinson's daily life as "a little home-keeping person" (p. 89), extraordinarily ill at ease with other people, and the explosive and confident persona we encounter in so many of her poems. It is a disjunction he finds to be typical of poets. She has adopted what William Butler Yeats called the "poet's mask: the personality which was antithetical to her natural character and identical with her desire" (p. 97). Ransom draws a parallel between Dickinson and Whitman in this regard:

> By nature gentle but indecisive, plain in looks, almost anonymous in her want of any memorable history, she chose as an artist to claim a heroic history which exhibited first a great passion, then renunciation and honor, and a passage into the high experiences of a purified Soul. That is the way it would seem to figure out. And we have an interesting literary parallel if we think in these terms about the poetry of her contemporary, Walt Whitman. A good deal of notice has been paid lately to Whitman by way of pointing out that he was an impostor, because the aggressive masculinity which he asserted so blatantly in the poems was only assumed. But that would be Walt Whitman's mask. (pp. 97–8)

Ransom's view of the shy spinster adopting the bold mask would seem, on the face of it, to have little to do with the feminist interpretation of Dickinson that began to emerge a couple of decades later. And yet, the line from his essay to the influential treatment of Dickinson in the classic feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic* is direct, as the authors, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, implicitly acknowledge. Ransom is the single most invoked figure in their discussion of Dickinson. How did this come about? We will have to make a bit of a detour to explain it.

During the 1950s, it was as a poet of religious structures that Dickinson appeared in some of the most influential literary criticism. Tate's emphasis on Dickinson's religious vocabulary and traditional culture found persuasive expression in Richard Wilbur's elegant poem "Altitudes" (1956), with its comparison (or rather equation) of two perspectives, the dome of St. Peter's in Rome and Emily Dickinson's cupola in Amherst. In an important essay published the same year, which recapitulates much of Tate's argument, Wilbur chose Dickinson's oxymoronic phrase "Sumptuous Destitution" to name what he took to be the central strategy in her work – a sort of less-is-more attitude. This "paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty" could – in Wilbur's view – make a Rome of Amherst.[19] Of course, this was another turn in the old argument about Dickinson's deliberate "withdrawal." Wilbur,

Tate, and the rest believed that Dickinson had gained something important – some spiritual boon – by turning her back on "plenty."

But something else was happening as well during the late 1950s. American poetry, long in thrall to modernist notions of "impersonality," took an autobiographical or "confessional" turn. Poets such as Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman (soon followed by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton) began to quarry their own lives for material, and the first-person singular returned to poetry with a vengeance. It was at just this moment that Emily Dickinson was "restored," and this group of poets was particularly attuned to her own version of "confessional" poetry. The autobiographical turn that dominated American poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s made Dickinson's poetry, with its forceful, "I"-dominated voice, particularly audible. Several members of the group of American poets who came of age during the 1950s – the "middle generation" that included Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell – were intensely interested in Dickinson. The Southerner Jarrell was taking notes for an extended essay on Dickinson at the time of his apparent suicide in 1965. His tentative title for the essay was "The Empress of Calvary," clearly another version of the idea of "Sumptuous Destitution." In some of his own most effective later poems, Jarrell had been experimenting with women's voices, not so much in the older mode of the dramatic monologue – the creation of "believable" women characters – as in an uncanny attempt to probe his own androgynous self. As he read through Dickinson's complete poems, Jarrell was thrilled to find what he perceived to be confirmation (and provocation) for his experiments in Dickinson's practice. He reminded himself to "Notice change in versions" of poem Fr 346 (from "I showed her Heights she never saw" to "He showed me Hights I never saw – "), and in the contrasting versions of "Going to Him! Happy letter!" and "Going – to – Her! Happy – Letter."[20] Current readers may be more inclined to see, especially in the second instance, experimentation with sexual orientation rather than gender. Nonetheless, the importance for "confessional" writing is obvious.

Berryman too was proud of his skill in what he called "the administration of pronouns." Without playing with "ambiguous pronouns," he claimed, he could never have written his first major poem, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. Berryman didn't much like the poetry of his "muse," the seventeenth-century American poet Anne Bradstreet; she concerned him, he admitted, "almost from the beginning, as a woman, not much as a poetess." His "impersonation" of her was an attempt to inhabit her body, and to experience imaginatively such female experiences as childbirth.[21]

But late in his life, Berryman (like Jarrell) became obsessed with Dickinson. Having modeled the sprawling form of his *Dream Songs* on Whitman's

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