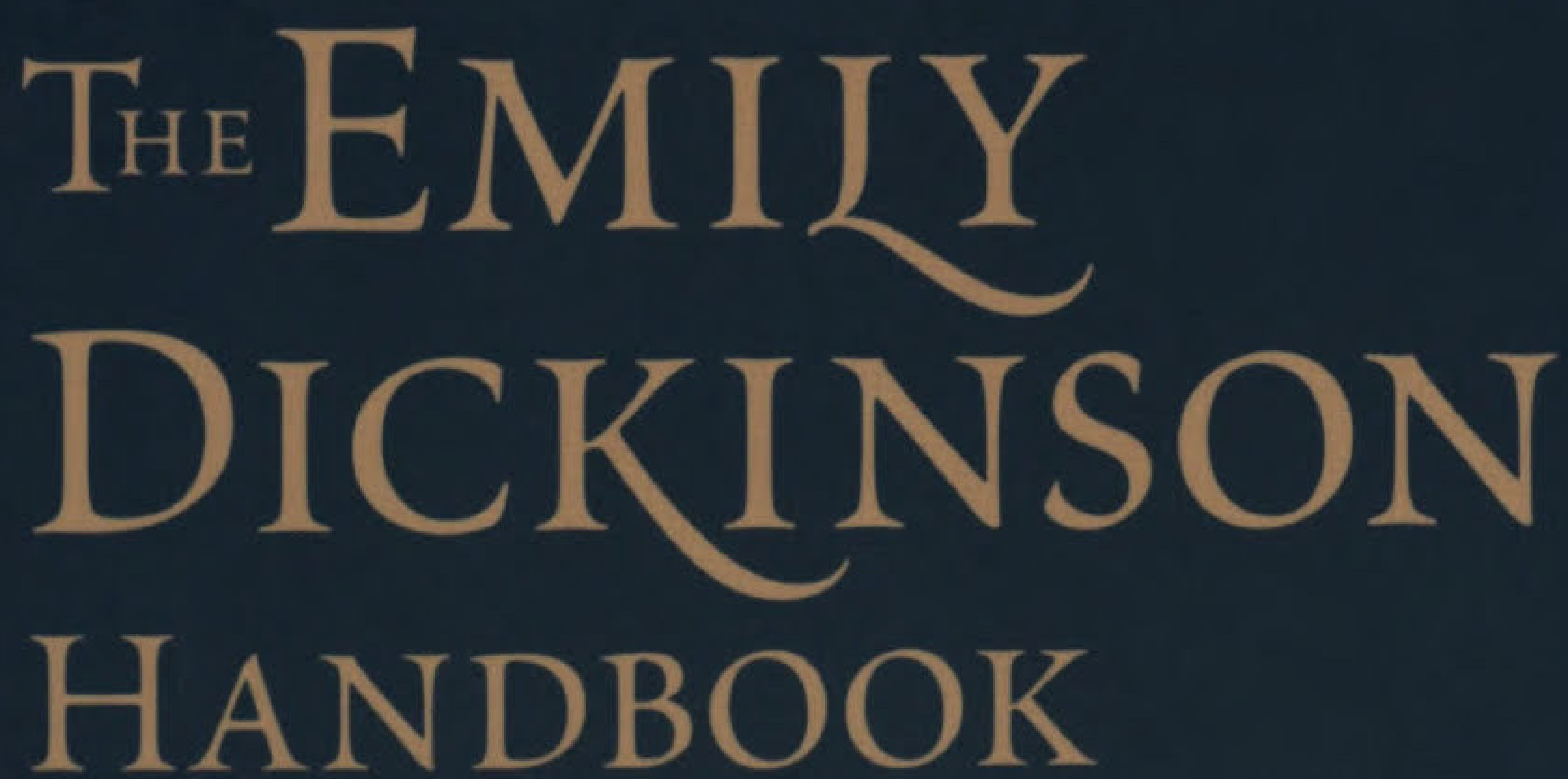

The Emily Dickinson Handbook

Edited by Gudrun Grabher · Roland Hagenbüchle · Cristanne Miller

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Richard Sewall

The Continuing Presence of Emily Dickinson

I am glad to welcome this *Handbook* into the world. It is another answer to the question proposed by a prominent American banker (and a man of literary inclinations) in 1891 when Dickinson's poems were first seeing the light of day. In October of that year, the banker, Samuel G. Ward, wrote a letter about Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who promptly sent it to Mabel Loomis Todd, whose daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, in turn included it in her *Ancestors' Brocades* of 1945 (169–70). In a covering note to Mrs. Todd, Higginson began: "This is the most remarkable criticism yet made on E.D." It strikes me, a century later, as still remarkable (if only for its prophetic third sentence), and, as a reminder of certain essentials about Emily Dickinson, an apt introduction to the special studies of this book.

Leaving Narragansett Pier
Oct 11, '91

My dear Mr. Higginson:

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 Puritan descent *pur sang*. We came to this country to think our own thoughts with nobody to hinder. Ascetics, of course, & this our Thebaid. 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. Such prodigies of shyness do not exist elsewhere. We got it from the English, but the English were not alone in a corner of the world for a hundred and fifty years with no outside interest. I sat next to Jones Very for three years [in a Boston school] & he was an absolute enigma till he flashed on me with the Barberry Bush. [?] Afterwards he sought me at my office one day with his heart in his hands & said he had come to lay axe at my root, to bring to me the Spiritual Life. I was deeply touched to find that he had all the time thought me good enough for the axe! Did you know Ellen Hooper (born Sturgis) & do you know her poems? If the gift of articulateness was not denied, you had Channing, Emerson, Hawthorne[,] a stupendous example, and so many others. Mostly it was denied, and became a

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family fate. This is where Emily Dickinson comes in. She was the articulate inarticulate. This is why she appeals to so many New England women.

You were fortunate and skillful in drawing her out.

Believe me
Sincerely yours
Sam'l G. Ward
1608 K St., N.W.

1608 K. St., N.W.
Washington, D.C.

P.S. Was it one of your family or mine that came up from Salem one day and said to a "mutual" friend, "John is dead. He died yesterday. He didn't want much said about it."

In his note to Mabel Todd, Higginson added a few words about Ward: " . . . an early transcendentalist & writer in *Dial* but for many years a N.Y. banker & agent of Barings—a rich man with a wife." He might have added that Ward was an old-line New Englander (grandson of the colonial General Artemas Ward), that he had grown up in Boston with Jones Very and Ellery Channing (namesake and nephew of the great Unitarian), that he lived with his wife near Concord and was a close friend of Emerson and Thoreau (whom he helped financially). Ward's ranking Channing as first among the great New England "articulates" is, of course, a sheer anomaly, to be explained possibly by Ward's desire to please Higginson, whose first wife was Channing's sister. As a poet, Channing was honored in Concord mostly for his "promise" and his sociability. (He was near brother to Thoreau after the real one died.) Emily Dickinson wrote at least five letters, one of them accompanied by a copy of Emerson's essays, to Mary Channing Higginson.[1]

It is not by chance that Ward's interest in Dickinson's poetry should lead him at once into a little essay on New England Puritanism. Being "*pur sang*" himself, he understood the New England brand of "asceticism" (from Gr. *askein*, "to exercise"—in this case, one's talents); its tendency toward discipline and self-denial; its particular inwardness ("we conversed with our own souls," as Dickinson did in well over a hundred poems); its "shyness," which Ward equates with the lost art of communicating with others; and what it means to be "articulate" (born with a gift for words) in a community of "inarticulates"—all qualities, I suggest, essential to an understanding of Dickinson. Ward applies them to Dickinson long before they could be documented by her letters, which were not to appear in print until 1894—for instance, Emily's relations with members of her family ("The typical family grew up strangers to each other"). Emily confirms this in letter after letter: "My father seems to me the oldest and oddest sort of a foreigner. Sometimes I say something and he stares in a curious sort of bewilderment though I speak a thought quite as old as his

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daughter. . . . And so it is, for in the morning I hear his voice and methinks it comes from afar & has a sea tone & there is a hum of hoarseness about [it] & a suggestion of remoteness as far as the Isle of Juan Fernandez"—which is about as far from Amherst, Massachusetts, as you can get. Sister Lavinia fares no better:

> Vinnie, Joseph, it is so weird and so vastly mysterious, she sleeps by my side, her care is in some sense motherly, for you may not remember that our amiable mother never taught us tailoring, and I am amused to remember those clothes, or rather those apologies made up from dry goods with which she covered us in nursery times; so Vinnie is in the matter of raiment necessary to me; and the tie is quite vital; yet if we had come up for the first time from two wells where we had hitherto been bred her astonishment would not be greater at some things I say. (R. Sewall, *Lyman Letters* 70–71)

Her mother may have been "amiable," but, as Emily told Higginson, "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is some one to whom you hurry when you are troubled."[2] Brother Austin seems to have been closer to her than the others, but one picture of him still clings: standing over his father's coffin, he kissed him on the brow, saying: "There, father, I never dared do that while you were living" (Sewall, *Life* 1: 61). Cousin Clara Newman (Turner), who, with her sister Anna, lived with the Austin Dickinsons for ten years after she and her sister had been orphaned, said that she had never seen any outward sign of affection between members of the Dickinson family (cf. Sewall, *Life* 2: 324). As Ward says, "It was *awfully* high, but awfully lonesome."

For all his perception into the realities of Dickinson's family life and even her reclusiveness (surely there was more to it than "shyness"), it is still remarkable that he should have been interested in her poetry to the extent of associating her with the New England "Thebaists" and predicting its ultimate worldwide fame. (I take the "may" of the third sentence to be a banker's hedge.) But why he could think well enough of Channing's poetry to rank him, too, with the greatest (even if he did it partly to please Higginson) is hard to explain. Channing wrote a great deal, published mostly in *The Dial*, was devastated by one of the severest reviews Poe ever wrote, and never got beyond utter conventionality. And this was at the same time (1891) when most of the reviews were critical of Dickinson's "barbarisms," her faulty rhymes, skewed syntax, and bumpy rhythms—that is, her *un*conventionality—all of which bothered Higginson's conventional taste, too, and explain why he urged her not to publish. He was even reluctant to help in the editing. So his delight at this letter from Ward, a man of standing, is predictable. As if those "six editions" weren't enough—there were five more within a year—Higginson seems to be assuring Mable Todd that the current was going their way. Emily Dickinson was becoming a "presence."

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It is good to have Ward's hearty, nonprofessional, on-the-spot response to the poems as they first became known to the world. His interest was "intense"—and he a banker. There was something prophetic, in view of today's developments, in his sense that Dickinson, as an "articulate inarticulate," was providing a voice for women. But his great distinction was that he saw her as a *popular* poet not only for New England, and for New England women, but for the world, a "presence" here to stay.

That her presence is continuing—and growing—hardly needs documenting. The evidence is on every hand as book after book and essay after essay roll off the presses. In my small Massachusetts college (Williams) in the late 1920s, only a range of hills from Amherst, she wasn't even mentioned—and I majored in American literature. As time went on, a few of her lyrics appeared in anthologies and from there in survey courses. Then, in the 1950s, after several decades of piecemeal publication, the complete poems and letters made it possible to see her work steadily and see it whole. It was as if America (and now the world) had discovered a new treasure. As a colleague of mine, a specialist in American poetry, said, "I never knew what was there." Two major studies in recent years, Alfred Kazin's *An American Procession* (1984) and Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994), contain chapters on Dickinson (a phenomenon unheard of in the 1920s) that give what could be called official sanction to her continuing presence—Kazin in America, Bloom in the world. Kazin: "She was the first modern writer to come out of New England." Bloom: "Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other Western poet since Dante."

The few poets who speak a New Word, who re-create and refresh the language, are often difficult, "strange" (Bloom's word).[3] It takes time to accommodate ourselves to the shock of their new idiom, new rhythm, the "inner music" that, for instance, Mabel Todd was the first to hear in Dickinson's poems. Such poets, in a sense, have to be domesticated, given shape and form and meaning before we take them to ourselves; before teachers feel confident enough to present them to their classes and parents don't think twice before giving their collected works as graduation gifts; before, that is, they become a presence in our lives. In the 1920s we wrestled with T. S. Eliot for longer than I like to admit; even our teachers didn't know what to say about him, or about Faulkner, whose convoluted, sometimes page-long, sentences seemed outrageous. Now we talk with (relative) assurance among their pages—and among Dickinson's poems.

But, as with the greatest, the strangeness never wears off. Shakespeare is still a mystery, and so is Dickinson. We still argue about *Hamlet*, and those poems will never let us rest. But we have, at least, a sense of direction. In play after play, Shakespeare challenges a mystery, Dickinson in poem after poem;

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and from each we learn a little more about *what it means to be alive.* The purport of Kazin's "modern" and the dynamic of Bloom's "cognitive originality" are embedded in a quatrain of Dickinson's maturity that has become, for me, a continuing presence:

> Experiment escorts us last—
> His pungent company
> Will not allow an Axiom
> An Opportunity (P1770, late 1870)

Notes

1. Frederick T. McGill, Jr.'s *Channing of Concord* (1967) gives a lively picture of Channing's life in Concord and his friendship with Thoreau and Emerson. It is frank about his failure as a poet. Ward's relationship with the Concordians is amply documented.
2. From Higginson's report to his wife about a conversation with ED (see L342b).
3. "Strangeness, as I keep discovering, is one of the prime requirements for entrance into the Canon" (Bloom 292).

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BIOGRAPHY

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Martha Ackmann

Biographical Studies of Dickinson

In 1996 the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, installed a public sculpture in honor of its two most celebrated literary residents. Just east of Sweetser Park near the town common two silhouetted steel figures face each other as if engaged in conversation. Robert Frost, looking settled and professorial, sits casually on a low flat rock. His hand rests on his knee as he appears to listen to the words of his opaque partner. Emily Dickinson perches with less certainty atop a second, more sizable, boulder. Her legs do not touch the ground, and she sits erect, starched, impatient—a bit of a schoolgirl ready with the next answer or question. Based on an 1845 rendering of the poet, the Dickinson likeness presents her as have some of our twentieth-century perceptions. She is more a girl than a woman, more precocious than profound, more two-dimensional than fully formed. Yet at dusk the sculpture prompts an altered impression, as it casts a shadow much taller, much bolder, and with edges more ambiguous than its more corporeal likeness. It is as though in escaping the confines of the sculpture Dickinson is reminding us that even a substance as formidable as steel cannot wholly capture her. "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied—," Dickinson wrote near the end of her life (L972). She may be right. Part of our interest in Emily Dickinson is our unremitting desire to track down answers to questions about the poet's life that continue to elude scholars. Although we clearly have learned much over the past century about the life of Emily Dickinson, we also recognize that much remains to be fully understood. As every biographer of the poet knows, Dickinson always remains a bit on the loose.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was among the first who sought to know more about Dickinson by actually "see"[ing] her and the way she lived her life. Writing in 1869, Higginson confessed, "Sometimes I take out your letters & verses, dear friend, and when I feel their strange power, it is not strange that I find it hard to write & that long months pass. I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that perhaps if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but till then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light. . . . I think if I could once see you & know that you are real, I might fare better" (L330a).

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Turning to the poet's biography as a means for understanding her literary work has long been a valuable approach in Dickinson scholarship. Biographical studies have been central in correcting one of the most far-reaching myths associated with Dickinson, namely, that the poet lived apart from the cultural forces of her time. Especially in the last twenty-five years, Dickinson biographies increasingly have concentrated on the context in which Dickinson created her poetry — the historical, religious, economic, familial environment — in order to show that the poet lived with the door more than a little ajar.

Biographical studies of Dickinson also have been pivotal in demonstrating the creative interplay between the poet's life and her poetry. Ideas expressed through Dickinson's actions or in her letters to family and friends often are similarly articulated by the personae of her poems, illuminating overarching tenets of her thought and the ways in which she transformed the quotidian into poetry. Moreover, comparisons between Dickinson's biography and ideas expressed in her poetry also have been essential in highlighting the poet's incongruities, reminding us that to understand the Dickinson life and art most fully we must recognize her paradox.

Inasmuch as biographical studies have provided valuable ways for understanding the context in which Dickinson created and the substance and arc of her thought, over the last century they occasionally have run too recklessly with speculation, arguing that individual lines of poetry chronicle specific events or relationships in Dickinson's life. Williams H. Shurr's *Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles* (1983) is a case in point. And yet, just as Higginson would find — and perhaps always knew — biographical details of the poet's life provide no single key for unlocking the enigmatic genius of the literature. Studies such as Shurr's that offer a quintessential biographical clue for decoding the poetry may temporarily dazzle but ultimately fade in intrinsic reductiveness. Certainly Dickinson was unequivocal when it came to the question of her work's autobiographical intent. "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse — it does not mean — me — but a supposed person" (L268), she proclaimed to Higginson three months after their correspondence began. Biographies of Emily Dickinson have contributed significantly to our understanding of the poet when they have acknowledged the power of her imagination and resisted reducing her poetry to autobiographical notations.

In contemplating the circumstances and design of her own life, Emily Dickinson plainly observed, "My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any" (L330). Although in 1869 Dickinson could not have anticipated the number of scholars who would offer interpretations of her life, her single sentence nevertheless has served as a kind of comforting reassurance to any biographer who has set out to confront the considerable challenges posed in capturing a life of Emily Dickinson. Surveying biographical studies of the poet

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from the earliest reflections of her contemporaries through the most recent works of the 1990s proves that the poet was right, in a way. Few biographers have been chagrined by their efforts as a wealth of portraits have contributed to our ever-emerging perceptions of the poet.

The depictions of the poet offered in the 1890s provided an essential beginning for an analysis of Dickinson biographical study since these views present insights into personal relationships with the poet and firsthand, although certainly subjective, accounts of interacting with her. (Mabel Loomis Todd's recollections, of course, are the exception since Todd never actually saw Dickinson.) The two most useful of these personal accounts are Susan Dickinson's perceptive obituary of the poet published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* and Higginson's entire correspondence with Dickinson, especially his August 1870 letter detailing their first meeting in Amherst. His 1891 *Atlantic Monthly* article recounting the history of their relationship also is instructive. Susan Dickinson's essay is prescient in addressing many of the questions that have become the focus of biographical research over the last 100 years: questions regarding the poet's artistic taste, audience, and creative impetus. Her perceptiveness regarding Dickinson's work and the intimate tone of the obituary also underscore the importance of Susan Dickinson's relationship with the poet, a subject currently gaining much deserved attention. Higginson's correspondence, of course, provides considerable biographical information since he often assumed an interviewer's role and asked questions of Dickinson to which family either knew the answer or felt too presumptive to ask. More than most of Dickinson's correspondents, Higginson sensed that what he was coming to understand about Dickinson had historical importance and so posed questions and recorded her responses as though he were gathering information for posterity. Dickinson answered many of his queries, and even her evasiveness toward other questions is revealing for what it seeks to skirt. Higginson's 1870 recollection of their first visit presents perhaps the most quoted primary source in Dickinson biography, the record of an afternoon when "she talked soon & thenceforward continuously — & deferentially — sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her — but readily recommencing" (L342a). Mabel Loomis Todd's prefaces to the first editions of the poems and letters offer another valuable initial glance at Dickinson biography as one can see the myth begin to take shape through Todd's emphasis on the poet's seclusion and what she views as Dickinson's fragile nature.

Conrad Aiken in writing about the second period of Dickinson's biographical research lambasted the efforts of Genevieve Taggard and Josephine Pollitt for their use of conjecture and their interest in identifying a suspected object of Dickinson's love. Although it would appear that Aiken would find nearly any biographical portrait of the poet useless, his point regarding a blurring

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between the subject of the poetry and the life is well taken. What Aiken misses in Taggard's and Pollitt's studies, and what we have yet to see fully developed in Dickinson biography, is their attempt to render a sense of the life actually being lived. There is an immediacy and freshness to their narratives that make the academic literary biographies of the late twentieth century seem almost torpid. The 1930s were marked by two other important biographical contributions, one that advanced our understanding of the poet and one that obscured it considerably. George Frisbie Whicher's *This Was a Poet* (1938) was the first biographical study to examine in reliable detail the intellectual and social culture that influenced Dickinson's life, focusing on the poet's reading, her friends, and New England culture. Martha Dickinson Bianchi's *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* (1932), however, spins a tale of "a romantic figure" (38) flitting in the garden, dressing only in white, with hardly a word about writing poetry.

The three most important biographical studies of the 1950s were Rebecca Patterson's *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1951), whose lasting significance rests in its assertion that women in the poet's life need to be taken seriously because the poet regarded them that way; Thomas Johnson's *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (1955), which serves as a companion piece to his variorum editions of the letters and poems; and Jay Leyda's indispensable *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), a two-volume compilation of events, observations, and records related to Dickinson, which are arranged chronologically and gleaned from an exhaustive list of sources from newspapers to sermons to personal correspondence of acquaintances in the poet's life. Although not explicitly analytical, the weight of Leyda's raw biographical data argues that the lasting significance of a life can be best understood by examining dailiness, proving the poet's point (which Leyda cites in his introduction) that "Forever—is composed of Nows—" (P624). Although the information presented in *Years and Hours* has been mined by every Dickinson biographer since 1960, the enduring legacy of the book is its insistence that the continuing recovery of historical documents is at the heart of every biographical enterprise and that the need to tell the story of the poet's commonplace life, what Leyda calls "the tinier scale of the immediate, the intimate, the day-by-day—the 'Now,'" is where Dickinson biography should always begin (xix).

Without question the paramount achievement in Dickinson biography during the last century is Richard B. Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), the most comprehensive biography of the poet yet written. Continuing to emphasize the importance of the "recovery effort" of factual material that Leyda advocated, Sewall presents an impressive mass of new biographical information, most notably the revelation of the romantic relationship between Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. That Sewall relies much on the point of view of Millicent Todd Bingham, the daughter of Mabel Loomis

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Todd, is undeniable, and his analysis of Susan Dickinson's role in the poet's life, for example, reflects Bingham's allegiance to her mother. Nonetheless, the biography is a generous, no-nonsense view of the poet, whom Sewall saw more as her father's daughter (the Norcross influence is not fully developed) than as an adult woman making independent choices regarding her work and relationships. Sewall's biography also demonstrates a reluctance to peer too deeply into what is termed the mystery of Dickinson's life, presenting itself as a kind of factual antidote to speculative studies that preceded it, John Cody's psychoanalytic *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971) chief among them. In terms of the biography's style, while highly readable, Sewall's work does not offer a narrative of the poet's life but instead presents the poet as seen through her relationships with individuals and ideas. Sewall describes this style as one that uses "Jamesian 'reflectors,' [in which] each relationship gives back a phase, or facet, of her character, her personality, and her literary purpose" (12). In Sewall's *Life of Emily Dickinson* we see the poet brilliantly revealed as we never have before. What we miss, however, is a sense of her life's movement and dailiness: a depiction of the life being lived.

Whereas Sewall's biography emphasizes the establishment of a factual record, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *Emily Dickinson* (1986) offers a provocative interpretation of Dickinson's life that focuses on her struggle with religious faith and against the gender expectations of the time. Wolff's portrait of Dickinson paints a far more conflicted and lonely poet who was deeply affected by her emotionally distant parents and by the oppressive evangelical fervor of the time. Analyzing Dickinson's interior life as it relates to her poetry is Wolff's primary objective; once the poet begins writing verse in the 1850s, Wolff's study shifts into literary criticism and leaves biography behind.

During the last quarter century, the most significant development in Dickinson biography has been the evolution of feminist scholarship. The publication of Elsa Green's "Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess" (1972), Suzanne Juhasz's "'A Privilege So Awful': The Poetry of Emily Dickinson" (1976), and Adrienne Rich's especially arresting "'Vesuvius at Home': The Power of Emily Dickinson" (1976) all charged that the poet's identity as a woman informed her poetry, that her gender was a source of power, and that questions of gender be incorporated into our analyses of the poet. These essays were followed by critical studies by scholars such as Paula Bennett, Joanne Dobson, Jane Eberwein, Betsy Erkkila, Lillian Faderman, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Margaret Homans, Wendy Martin, Adalaide Morris, Barbara Mossberg, Vivian Pollak, Dorothy Oberhaus, and many others who have blended contextual biographical interpretations with literary criticism to offer new feminist readings of Dickinson's work. While feminist scholarship has had its greatest impact on literary analyses of Dickinson's work, it has affected bio-

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graphical studies in two significant ways: it has established the importance of Dickinson's relationships with women and female culture, and it has interjected new questions related to gender into our investigations of the poet. An example of these new queries is Aífe Murray's current work on Dickinson family domestic Margaret Maher, which examines the poet's use of Hiberno-English and Gaelic linguistic constructions. Not only does Murray's work present a new analysis of Dickinson's poetic syntax, it also posits intriguing questions about how the poet's interactions through housekeeping with "Maid Maggie" affected both Dickinson's attitudes toward ethnicity and her literary production.

In considering the direction of Dickinson biography during the last twenty-five years, one also is struck not so much by what has developed as by what has slowed down. The essential work of expanding the factual record related to Dickinson's life and excavating and analyzing relevant biographical document has noticeably lagged since the publication of Sewall's *Life of Emily Dickinson.* It is as if scholars assumed that all that can be recovered has been recovered and that what remains is the task of reinterpretation, not discovery. There are notable exceptions, the most important of these revelations being Karen Dandurand's 1984 discovery of additional poems published in the poet's lifetime, which has led scholars to reconsider a range of assumptions connected to the poet's seeming reluctance to publish. Barton Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (1984) also is especially useful in its examination of the ways in which the poet was influenced by American Victorian culture. Polly Longsworth's *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd* (1984) and Vivian Pollak's *A Poet's Parents: The Courtship Letters of Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson* (1988) both made available intriguing documents that broaden our knowledge of the poet's family and in particular their attitudes toward romance, love, and societal expectations. A second work by Longsworth, *The World of Emily Dickinson* (1990), substantially increased the photographic record on the poet's environment.

The essential work of recovery and analysis that Leyda called for in 1960 and that Sewall continued in 1974 is in a sense even more important to current biographical studies than it was a generation before. The further removed we are historically from the years during which Emily Dickinson lived, the more documents are in danger of being destroyed or vanishing entirely. Three recent biographical discoveries I have uncovered underscore that primary material indeed remains to be found just as it is threatened by extinction. The first of these discoveries are educational records of Emily Norcross Dickinson that alter our perception of her intellectual sophistication and

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prompt a new reading of the poet's indelible judgment, "My Mother does not care for thought—" (L261).

Recently I recovered in a basement boiler room of Wilbraham-Monson Academy in Massachusetts documents from the early years of Monson Academy which were salvaged after a fire at the Academy in 1953 and then forgotten after Monson and Wilbraham merged in 1971. The records verify that for over ten years Dickinson's mother attended the Academy, which was founded by her father, Joel Norcross, among others, and which served as a model for other progressive coeducational schools in the Commonwealth, including Amherst Academy, which was founded ten years later in 1814. In attending Monson Academy Emily Norcross received an impressive education that very few young women were permitted to obtain. Among the courses open to Emily Norcross at Monson were classes in Latin, natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, botany, physiology, geography, algebra, logic, history, and rhetoric.[1] At a time when many people considered educating girls an unnecessary expense or a threat to females' reproductive capacity, the Norcross family and Emily Norcross herself clearly were nonconformists. Diantha Blodgett, who attended Monson Academy during the same period as Emily Norcross, reported that she "would tramp down and up that long hill to get all [she] could at the Academy." Blodgett's daughter explained that she "told me how they used to laugh at her for taking so much Latin and mathematics and wondered what she thought she was going to do with them, she a girl."[2] Mary Dickinson, writing to her brother Edward in 1822, expressed the sentiment of many who felt providing an intellectual experience for girls was a waste of time. She observed, "They have so little business to do in this town they are about undertaking to build a *Female Seminary*" (Edward Dickinson Papers). That Emily Norcross engaged in such an unconventional education at Monson and then continued her studies at Mr. Herrick's school in New Haven, Connecticut, is testimony to the value both she and her family placed on education. The poet, in this light, should be seen as following a tradition begun by her mother a generation before of young women exploring their minds within a culture that offered scant encouragement or validation for educating women.

Throughout her years at Monson, Emily Norcross received particularly fine training in the sciences. Joel Norcross was so interested in scientific education that he appealed to the Academy Board of Trustees to purchase scientific instruments from London in order further to enhance students' educational experiences. Monson had a close link to Yale University; many alumni came to teach at the academy and brought with them the innovative approach to natural and physical science that Benjamin Silliman pioneered at

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Yale. Arguing that science could reveal truths about both the natural *and* the metaphysical worlds, Silliman trained a generation of scholars, including Edward Hitchcock. In 1848, when the poet enthused about "studying 'Silliman's Chemistry'" (L20) at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Dickinson quite possibly was recalling her mother's scientific education at Monson and the knowledge and appreciation of the natural world which she and other members of the Norcross family were likely to have shared with the poet.[3]

Science was not the only discipline in which Emily Norcross received an exceptional education. Monson Academy also required her to prepare weekly compositions and occasional declamations. Literary studies and oral renditions especially seemed to engage Monson students. While Emily Norcross attended the Academy, female students formed the Philomathean Society devoted to poetry readings, debates, and presentation of original compositions. An Emily Norcross manuscript at Harvard University's Houghton Library—in light of these recent discoveries—now bears special significance regarding her literary education. The manuscript is the only known example of Norcross's imaginative writing and was written while she was a student at Monson. Entitled "On Amusements: A Dialogue," the work is a moralistic, energetic debate between two confident young women arguing that time should not be wasted on follies and amusement and that spiritual reflection is essential. The dialogue is notable for one character's pronouncement that a life of retirement focused on the solitary contemplation of spiritual questions was worth pursuing, although apt to be misunderstood. The character Julia professes, "Do cherish these serious thoughts and I can assure you that you will find that peace which this world can neither give nor take away" (Norcross Family Papers). Emily Norcross's education at Monson Academy taught her that addressing "serious thoughts" was an appropriate and indeed obligatory responsibility for women. Moreover, she also demonstrated that those thoughts could find expression in imaginative writing.

Recognizing that Emily Norcross Dickinson did receive a superior education for her time and for her sex prompts us to reconsider Dickinson's seemingly disparaging comment about her mother's intelligence. Biographical interpretation up to this time had suggested that the poet was indicating that Emily Norcross Dickinson was a simple woman, not capable of intellectual pursuits, and clearly someone who could not comprehend her daughter's literary endeavors. The recent work in textual editing that Ellen Louise Hart has conducted, when placed alongside this recovery of biographical material, provides an intriguing new insight into the poet's statement "My Mother does not care for thought—" (L261). It is Hart's contention that Thomas Johnson did not correctly transcribe the capital "T" in the word "Thought," a proper noun Dickinson frequently used when referring to her poetry, not contemplation in

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general.[4] Rather than implying that Dickinson regarded her mother as an intellectual nonentity, the statement could mean that Emily Norcross Dickinson simply did not take a personal interest in poetry.

A second recent biographical discovery concerns Louise and Frances Norcross, the poet's "little cousins," and their associations with the literary elite of Concord, Massachusetts. Although Emily Dickinson certainly regarded the Norcross cousins with respect and fondness (her seventy-seven extant letters to them are among the most candid in her entire correspondence), early biographers have either denigrated or dismissed the women as unimportant. Mabel Loomis Todd initiated condemnation of them with her remark, "They adored her (Dickinson) like a god. . . . They were such geese" (Bingham, *Ancestors*' 238). Johnson, for example, in his 1955 *Biography* claimed "the girls" helped Emily with life's trivialities, lending support for "such minor realities as . . . relatives who came and went, spring housecleaning, or Vinnie's cats" (59). More recent studies have indicated that the Norcrosses deserve a second look which these new discoveries help to provide. Records and documents uncovered in archives in Concord reveal that Louise and Frances Norcross were actively involved in a range of political and cultural activities that brought them into frequent contact with influential figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. The discoveries are important for two reasons: first, they suggest that Dickinson had access to the professional world of literature through the Norcrosses, and second, a fuller understanding of the cousins more accurately reveals what they represented to the poet.

From 1874 when they moved to Concord until their deaths, the Norcrosses immersed themselves in a variety of activities including suffrage organizing, Bronson Alcott's Concord School of Philosophy, and fund raising to build schools for minorities in the South and West. In addition, Frances was particularly involved with a women's theater troupe which in 1888 produced an original play accompanied by an all-woman's orchestra that drew enthusiastic audiences from Boston and was reviewed favorably in the *New York Theatre Magazine*. Frances's obituary noted that she was "always actively interested in anything of a literary nature" (*Concord Enterprise*). Louise in describing herself underscored that she was "an ardent crusader for women, a whole-souled suffragist, and a lover of every progressive 'ism' " (Scharnhorst 484).

Of all the Norcrosses' many activities, none was more important to their relationship with Dickinson than their involvement with the Concord Saturday Club. Founded by Abbie May Alcott in 1876, the club was composed of fifty elected members including Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, William Ellery Channing, II, Ednah Dow Cheney, Ellen Emerson, Lydia and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Daniel Chester French, Robertson James, Frank Sanborn, and James Whitney. Both Louise and Frances Norcross were voted into mem-

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bership in 1877 and remained members until their respective deaths. The purpose of the club was to pursue the study of literature, the arts, and general culture in bimonthly meetings at members' homes. The first meeting Frances attended on November 3, 1877, was representative of the group's intimacy and purpose. Meeting at the home of Lydia and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who lived two miles from the Norcrosses, nine members gathered to take part in a program organized by the hosts. The Emersons chose to read unpublished manuscripts that friends of theirs had shared with them, including a manuscript given to them by Henry David Thoreau (Saturday Club Files). Reading an unpublished literary manuscript was a common practice of the Saturday Club which acknowledged an author's right to privacy by asking no outsiders to be present at the reading and referring to the writer as anonymous if so desired. In describing the work of the club, the *Concord Freeman* in 1884 paid special attention to this practice of reading unpublished manuscripts, noting that "Many papers well known to fame have had their first reading before this club, and several articles by well-known writers of too personal a character for general publication have found their audience in it" (11 Jan. 1894).

Archival records do not indicate whether Louise and Frances Norcross shared any of Emily Dickinson's poems or letters with the Saturday Club. The topics of the meetings they hosted, unfortunately, are not noted. What can be determined, however, and what is of utmost importance is that through the Norcross cousins' involvement with the Saturday Club, Dickinson had before her an opportunity for circulating her manuscripts among a larger audience, for receiving literary critique, and possibly for eventual publication. The poet could have sought through Louise and Frances an influential liaison with the professional world of literature as she was aware of their Concord involvement. That no evidence exists indicating Dickinson sought her cousins' help in presenting her poems to the Alcotts, Emerson, and others suggests that she preferred another audience for her work—an audience composed of selected family and friends—and that she did not view publication as the overriding objective for her poetry.

A final biographical discovery concerns striking new evidence of Dickinson declaiming her poetry. Two independent recollections are now on record of the poet reciting her verse for family members. The first source to be recovered was Gary Scharnhorst's find of a 1904 letter to the *Woman's Journal* in which Louise Norcross observed: "I know that Emily Dickinson wrote most emphatic things in the pantry, so cool and quiet, while she skimmed the milk; because I sat on the footstool behind the door, in delight, as she read them to me. The blinds were closed, but through the green slats she saw all those fascinating ups and down going on outside that she wrote about" (Scharnhorst 485). The second record came from Sylvia Swett Viano, Dickinson's oldest

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living relative, in an oral history I conducted with her. Viano, who died in 1995, was the granddaughter of Anna Jones Norcross Swett, first cousin of Emily Dickinson. Swett's father was the poet's uncle Joel Warren Norcross, youngest brother of Emily Norcross Dickinson. As the only grandchild of Swett, Viano heard many recollections of her grandmother's frequent visits to the Dickinson Homestead. Dickinson was someone who would "capture you," Viano remembers her grandmother saying. But Swett's most vivid memory was of the poet declaiming her work. Reported Viano, "My grandmother said Dickinson would open the window or curtains and say poetically what she saw outdoors in the garden or a bird or whatever it was. My grandmother stood in awe . . . to hear this going on." Viano remembered her grandmother described the experience as observing Dickinson "talk poetry" (Ackmann 123). These two recollections reveal a Dickinson who — in an exceptionally demonstrative way — identified herself as a poet and selected members of her family as her audience. In declaiming, Dickinson was hardly the modest and reticent artist that we often have considered her to be. Certainly Dickinson at times assumed a diminutive pose; one has only to think of her initial letter to Higginson to recall the way she cast herself as Higginson's unschooled pupil. These new revelations regarding declamation suggest, however, that she also could adopt a proud and confident posture that unequivocally laid claim to her poetry. In addition, through declaiming her poetry, Dickinson could exert nearly total control over the way in which her verse was presented, regulating inflection, intonation, pace, and pause in precisely the manner she desired — control which she by necessity would have had to relinquish had she published her poetry.

The most unsuspecting remark Emily Dickinson ever made may have been her response to Thomas Wentworth Higginson when he asked to know more about her life. "But I fear my story fatigues you —," she replied (L261). Nearly 140 years after her response, our interest in the life of Emily Dickinson remains as animated as Higginson's as we seek to know more about the woman whose startling poetry "captures" us just as it did Anna Norcross Swett. There are many areas of Dickinson biography that deserve more research. A fuller portrait of Lavinia Dickinson is necessary in order to convey the qualities that sustained the sisters' relationship for fifty-three years. Examining the periods in Dickinson's life that she spent outside the family home and away from Amherst would provide additional insights into the poet's independence and seclusion. More needs to be known about Elizabeth Holland, one of the poet's most intimate friends. Useful work could be contributed that builds on the research of Wand and Sewall, Bernhard, Guthrie, and Hirschhorn and Longsworth that considers the effects of the poet's eye problems. Dandurand's ongoing investigation into editors who solicited Dickinson's poetry is especially

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promising, as is the analysis of the poet's relationship with Susan Dickinson that is currently being produced by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith.

Biographical inquiries prompted by feminist scholarship and continuing excavation and recovery of primary material undeniably must inform biographical studies of Emily Dickinson in the next century. Moreover, biography needs to provide what other critical studies of the poet cannot, namely, a sense of her life as it was lived. Photographers have a term for the technique of capturing an image in which all distances from close-up to infinity remain in focus. Called "deep focus," the technique enables both the nearest and the most distant perspective to be clearly perceived.[5] Biographical studies of Emily Dickinson will be enriched by an approach that evokes both the intimate immediacy of her nineteenth-century life and our most current critical perspectives. Park Honan, author of *Jane Austen: Her Life*, refers to this biographical approach as creating the "historical present," presenting a dynamic portrait of the life as it was lived viewed through the lens of history.

Lastly, biographers also must work to represent Dickinson in her entirety, not as a poet only. Contemporary literary biographers, in their understandable urgency to delineate the ways in which writers' lives may have affected their writings, often present their subjects in almost disembodied ways as if head, hand, and pen constituted the whole human being and as though a linear narrative focusing on the pivotal steps the writer took to become a literary figure rendered a writer's life most realistically. Yet literary biography must explore those areas of a writer's life that may not be directly linked to an author's production of literature in order to demonstrate that lives are complex, often lacking in coherence, largely unpredictable, and richly unraveled. Future full-scale biographical studies of Emily Dickinson must strive for this more expansive consideration of the woman, bringing into focus both the writer and the depth of her world beyond the upstairs window.

Notes

1. Recovered records of Monson Academy do not indicate exactly which courses Emily Norcross took. The courses cited are some that were available to her at the Academy (Monson Academy Catalogue, 1819).

2. The source of this quotation is taken from a torn newspaper clipping found among the papers I recovered at Wilbraham-Monson Academy. The only identification on the clipping is a running headline, reading *The Springfield.*

3. Lavinia Norcross studied at Mr. Herrick's school in New Haven after her older sister studied there. In a letter Lavinia reported that she was attending Professor Silliman's lectures on the Deluge and was "being very interested" (Lavinia Norcross to Emily Norcross Dickinson, 22 July 1830, Norcross Family Papers).

4. I am grateful to Ellen Louise Hart for sharing her insight with me. Conversation, 23 June 1996.

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Historical Context

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Jane Donahue Eberwein

Dickinson's Local, Global, and Cosmic Perspectives

It was probably to counteract readers' anticipated tendencies to caricature Emily Dickinson as some fragile, otherworldly creature that Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson introduced their editions of her poems with an opening group labeled "Life." Verses gathered under that rubric supposedly differed from those in the Love, Nature, and Time and Eternity groups by reflecting the poet's awareness of the world beyond her home and garden. Mrs. Todd had herself fallen under the spell of the mythic Emily back in 1881 when she first picked up from Amherst folklore an impression of this "*character* of Amherst," "the climax of all the family oddity," a spectral storybook figure blessed with a mind said to be "perfectly wonderful" (R. Sewall, *Life* 216). Finding, however, that many poems created by that mind bespoke a broad and disciplined education along with sharp observation of the local scene, these first editors attempted to foreground those that related their poetess to a familiar world.

In the process, they skipped over this minor example of her talent:

> What is — "Paradise" —
> Who live there —
> Are they "Farmers" —
> Do they "hoe" —
> Do they know that this is "Amherst" —
> And that I — am coming — too —
> Do they wear "new shoes" — in "Eden" —
> Is it always pleasant — there —
> Wont they scold us — when we're hungry —
> Or tell God — how cross we are —
>
> You are sure there's such a person
> As "a Father" — in the sky —
> So if I get lost — there — ever —
> Or do what the Nurse calls "die" —
> I shant walk the "Jasper" — barefoot —
> Ransomed folks — wont laugh at me —

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> Maybe — "Eden" a'nt so lonesome
> As New England used to be! (P215)

Here is one of those poems that — on the surface, anyway — reinforce the image of Emily Dickinson against which most of her editors, biographers, and critics have contended since 1890. Spoken by a pitiful waif, it reflects a child's narrow perspective that constricts attention to home, town, region, and some materially conceived heaven. The speaker is limited by immaturity, anxiety, provinciality, and a reductive imagination. What comes across most strongly here is fear born of deprivation. The child's social class is ambiguous, though reference to "the Nurse" suggests that the speaker comes from a household with servants — more than the hired girls and gardeners known to comfortable Amherst families like the Dickinsons. That she or he classifies potential acquaintances either as farmers or not-farmers, however, suggests experience restricted to an agricultural economy. Perhaps the nurse enters the picture because our speaker is one of those pathetic little invalids so familiar in sentimental fictions of the time. Perhaps, on the other hand, there is a nurse because there are no parents, a conjecture aroused by doubts about the heavenly "Father." In the 1945 *Bolts of Melody* edition of this poem, Todd and her daughter introduced one change in line 9, substituting "homesick" for "hungry" to suggest that the speaker is already lost in the narrow confines of her or his local environment and dreads being similarly outcast for eternity. Poverty and insecurity come to mind in references to hunger as well as to the presence or absence of new shoes. It seems that this speaker has been laughed at by more fortunate children to the point of fearing continued scorn in heaven even though paradise otherwise proffers a welcome escape from New England's humiliations and isolation. If we are to imagine Emily Dickinson as the speaker of this poem, we can find bountiful evidence supporting her mythic self-image as lonely, childlike, timid, and too fragile to withstand the pressures of a world she never understood. This is not the kind of responsive and even controlling intelligence we expect of an artist, even supposing that the reading I have so far provided for this poem is complete and adequate.

Scholars, however, have convincingly dismantled this distorted image of Emily Dickinson as a fugitive in time and space by amassing detailed information about her life's circumstances. Convinced that "what is presently most needed in the study of the life and works of this enigmatic poet, who has been the subject of so much distorting gossip and legend, is the most factual treatment possible," Jay Leyda compiled his chronologically ordered documentary record of her likely range of awareness, listing year by year events in the Dickinson households, Amherst, the United States, and the world as experienced by her family's numerous associates or represented in publications the

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poet was known to read (the *Springfield Republican*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's* among others) to demonstrate conclusively through *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* that "she wrote more *in time*, that she was much more involved in the conflicts and tensions of her nation and community, than we have thought" (xix–xx). Leyda's documentary record provides abundant factual grounding for biographical, cultural, and critical studies along with inspiration to fill gaps remaining in our knowledge; lately, it has inspired Daniel Lombardo to sketch out in *A Hedge Away: The* Other *Side of Emily Dickinson's Amherst* a host of brief, entertaining, and sometimes scandalous narratives opening insight on local events as they impinged on the poet's consciousness.

Both of Dickinson's major biographers, Richard Sewall and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, build upon Leyda's example of coming to know this intensely private poet by gathering information about the many very public figures in her world even while acknowledging that available information about the woman herself makes a less enthralling story than the rumor-enhanced narratives biographers attempt to refute; nor do the facts go far to explain the poems. Sewall responds to this biographical challenge by accepting that, as an artist, Dickinson lived her life metaphorically in ways that call for interpretation. In developing his detailed *Life of Emily Dickinson*, he builds a context for her mystery by focusing attention on whatever can be known: chiefly her Dickinson family background and the distinctive familial rhetoric characteristic of her generation, the "War between the Houses" fomented by her brother's affair with Mabel Todd, information about the poet's childhood and schooling, her reading, and her many friendships. By demonstrating how much she meant in declaring "My friends are my 'estate,'" Sewall assaults impressions of her New England provinciality (9). By heeding the intellectual atmosphere of her home and town, he traces the origins of her metaphors. "She was not reared in a household of lawyers and treasurers for nothing," he observes; "she did not live in a college town for nothing" (10). Also recognizing how much more there is to tell about Emily Dickinson's companions than herself, about her poems' editing history than the circumstances of their creation, Wolff concentrates on placing the poet in an informative social-historical context, finding in her a subtle register of a time of crisis: "She lived in a time and place when God's grandeur still glimmered in the panorama of New England. Yet she never knew the dawning or even the noon of America's heroic age, but only the long shadows of its twilight; and later, she knew the darkness of the merely commercial, instrumental society that was to follow hard upon heroism's end" (*Dickinson* 9). Tracing her central metaphor of Dickinson as "pugilist poet" combating God, Wolff interprets the poetry in terms of her era's intellectual and spiritual currents. More amply than Sewall, she also places the poet within

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a world of nineteenth-century women, observing the rhythms and pressures of lives spent managing households, nurturing children, and tending the sick—often in the shadows of prominent men.

Other recent studies confirm these biographers' discoveries of Emily Dickinson's alert responsiveness to particular circumstances and ambient culture. In *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books*, Benjamin Lease demonstrates her "passionate involvement with family, with friends, with a cultural legacy of rebellion against orthodox answers to the religious questions of her time" by foregrounding her friendships with her spiritual counselor, Charles Wadsworth, and literary mentor, Higginson (xii). Paula Bennett, by contrast or complement, shows in *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* how "the poet not only lived her entire life 'at home,' but spent her life largely in a circle of women" (14). Like Lease, she focuses on Dickinson's reading—contemporary British women writers, in this case, rather than Shakespeare, the Bible, Watts's hymns, and seventeenth-century devotional writings. This context of an international nineteenth-century feminine culture leads Bennett to discovery of a distinctively gender-grounded poetic (19). Martha Nell Smith's focus in *Rowing in Eden* on the poet's intense relationship with her sister-in-law, Sue, represents another attempt to balance already well-documented discussions of Wadsworth, Higginson, Samuel Bowles, and Josiah Gilbert Holland as influences on Dickinson.

Paying close attention to the poet's relationships both with Sue and with their mutual friend Bowles, Judith Farr moves beyond biography in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* and reads the poetry in its cultural context to reveal Dickinson's "passion to lead a life in and through art—her own and that of others" (viii), specifically art understood in the Ruskinian sense of Victorian high culture. Barton St. Armand shares that concern in *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, where he draws analogies between what Higginson identified as his friend's "Poetry of the Portfolio" and popular arts like quilting and scrapbook assemblage practiced by middle-class nineteenth-century American women as well as American folk art and Ruskin's aesthetics (considered in relation to Austin Dickinson's choice of paintings for The Evergreens). Like Karl Keller, whose *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty* cleverly links Dickinson to her Puritan literary predecessors and to Robert Frost as well as to authors of her own period (Stowe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, Boston Bluestockings, and her own literarily ambitious circle of friends), St. Armand finds revealing affinities between Dickinson and the sentimental, aesthetic, and nature writers of her time.

Investigation of Emily Dickinson's environment, then, opens fruitful insight into her poetry's response to specific circumstances of place and time. From the first appearance of her poems, it has been recognized that her

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rootedness in Amherst, Massachusetts, and particularly in the family household profoundly shaped her imagination. Martha Dickinson Bianchi, her niece, stimulated public curiosity with books that blended family tradition, personal reminiscence, and snatches of correspondence. *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* and *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* provided an idyllic image of Homestead life that tended to generate myths in an attempt to deflect negative attention from Austin and Susan Dickinson's marital discord. Millicent Todd Bingham offered a slightly less self-interested perspective—though necessarily a more distant one—in *Emily Dickinson's Home*, her answer to Bianchi. Among recent scholarly studies, Jean McClure Mudge's *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home* most fully relates the poet's inner space to the physical designs and contrasting ambiences of her two houses: the Homestead, a brick mansion built by her grandfather, where she was born and spent her first ten years and to which she returned in 1855 to pass her remaining three decades, and the Pleasant Street house of her adolescence and young womanhood—the one Mudge says she associated with "the idyllic possibilities of home" (4). Except for two terms at Mount Holyoke, two extended periods spent in Cambridge to get care for her eyes, a few weeks spent visiting her father in Washington, and some minor youthful excursions, Dickinson lived entirely within the protective confines of "my Father's ground" (L330). By secluding herself in late years and seeing virtually nobody beyond her immediate circle, she freed space and time for creativity while fostering gossip about whatever may have gone on within the Homestead and her brother's home next door.

Grasping for explanations of Emily Dickinson's strange reserve, Higginson was the first to identify her father as key to her psychic formation. He wrote to his wife about his 1870 visit to the Homestead, noting "I saw Mr. Dickinson this morning a little—thin dry & speechless—I saw what her life has been" (L342b). Certainly, her father dominated their patriarchal household, where lofty moral, intellectual, and spiritual standards were imposed on all, habits of stern self-discipline fostered yet a parodic form of merriment generally encouraged, but where gender roles were clearly defined in ways that put pressure on the one son for public success and both daughters for domestic submission.[1] Other studies, notably John Cody's psychobiography, *After Great Pain*, Wolff's *Emily Dickinson*, and Barbara Mossberg's *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer Is a Daughter*, redirect attention to Emily Norcross Dickinson's influence on her daughter, one generally regarded as negative. Mary Elizabeth Kromer Bernhard, however, rebuts this judgment in "Portrait of a Family" by tracing to the poet's maternal family heritage intellectual and civic values generally associated with the Dickinsons and finding the major distinction between the two families to be the Norcrosses' stronger tradition of female education. Other aspects of home life merit study also as stimuli to the poet's

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imagination. Home obviously provided a wealth of domestic diction as well as the legal and economic vocabularies on which Dickinson drew in her poems—for comic effect sometimes as in "Alone and in a Circumstance" (P1167), linked to religious hope in the manner of Puritan covenant theology in "Mine—by the Right of the White Election!" (P528), or applied to romantic passion as in the poems Joan Burbick examines in "Emily Dickinson and the Economics of Desire."

Given the Dickinsons' intense involvement with their town and its institutions, Amherst may be recognized as a communal extension of household values. Biographical studies necessarily foreground the influence on this poet of growing up in a college town with her father and brother among its most prominent men. Polly Longsworth's pictorial compilation of *The World of Emily Dickinson* now provides a graphic record of the changing local environment that strongly contributed to the world view of this citizen who occasionally even signed herself "Amherst." The town's architectural and spatial features can be documented: its grand homes and mill housing; its churches, college buildings, hat factories, and business blocks; its graveyard behind both the Pleasant Street house and the Homestead meadow; its Common—undeveloped until Austin Dickinson took on the challenge of landscaping; its surrounding hills—Berkshires to the west and Pelhams to the east; and the Connecticut River. So can its sharing in the conservative Congregational culture of New England's historic Connecticut Valley. More important for the formation of Emily Dickinson's mind was the interconnectedness of its domestic, religious, and educational institutions—all of which reinforced a traditional Christian perspective.

A child raised in the habit of family prayer presided over by her father and probably nurtured by her mother in the *New England Primer* (from which Dickinson later snipped engravings for comic messages to Sue) soon came under the church's influence, and Emily Dickinson grew up in a time of special religious excitement. The Second Awakening stretched far beyond Amherst, of course, and is best known for frontier camp meetings and Charles Grandison Finney's spirited revivals. But it was also an occasion of more decorous revivalism in New England's evangelical churches. Among many converts joining Amherst's First Church in 1831, just after the poet's birth, was Emily Norcross Dickinson. Edward Dickinson, although not officially joining the church by proclamation of faith for another twenty years, managed the First Church's business affairs.[2] The whole family attended Sunday worship; and, even though Emily eventually chose to remain home, it is worth noting that the church and the manse were about the last places she ceased to visit as her anxieties about public exposure gradually confined her. She heard a vast amount of preaching over her first thirty years, from guest clergy as well as her

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own pastors—scripturally centered and often elaborating on doctrines summarized in the *Westminster Catechism.* She also sang hymns at the First Church, with well-known effects on her poetic style and less widely recognized impact on her sense of personal involvement in salvation history. A look at hymnals available to her, *The Sabbath Hymn Book* and *Village Hymns*, demonstrates their systematic theological design and evangelical purpose.[3]

Waves of revivalism touched her town frequently, affecting its Congregational churches, the college, and nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. As an adult, Dickinson came to take a laughing attitude toward these phenomena, but they touched her deeply as a girl. Letters to Abiah Root, the most pious among her early friends, reveal that Emily Dickinson experienced a false conversion as a child that left her with memories "as of a delightful dream, out of which the Evil one bid me wake" (L11). This betrayal of hope also left her skeptical, self-protective, and resistant both to the emotional excitement and social pressure of awakenings. Although expressing hope for her eventual conversion, her letters to Abiah report that she stayed away from revival meetings while watching with fascination how others responded to apparent outpourings of grace. After withstanding still more pressure at Mount Holyoke, however, and witnessing her father's and sister's 1850 conversions, she declared to Jane Humphrey that "I am standing alone in rebellion" (L35). As an adult, she pursued an independent religious quest that has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention.[4] Virginia H. Oliver concludes in *Apocalypse of Green* that Amherst's religious institutions failed to answer Dickinson's persistent questions, leaving her "to make her weary way alone, taking what she could from tradition, science, nature, philosophy, and especially from the Bible, until she outdistanced them all" (45). If the First Church failed to answer Dickinson's questions, it was not because of any conflict with Amherst's educational institutions, all of which strongly supported Congregational orthodoxy. In "The Preparation of a Poet," Rowena Revis Jones shows how the region's elementary textbooks reinforced domestic and ecclesiastical teachings. Benjamin Dudley Emerson's *National Spelling Book*, for example, included biblical passages and exhortations to piety among its lessons, while Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* featured a Moral Catechism. Webster's other contribution to Emily Dickinson's lifelong education, his *American Dictionary*, provided abundant snatches of poetry to awaken her to nuances of literary language but no doubt also reached her with its painstaking elaborations on words with theological import. Defining one of her favorite nouns, "Glory," for instance, Webster provides three synonyms, a line of natural description from Pope, and an example from 2 Peter with the comment that "in this passage of Peter, the latter word *glory* refers to the visible splendor or bright cloud that overshadowed Christ at his transfiguration. The former

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word *glory*, though the same in the original, is to be understood in a figurative sense."[5] A temporary resident of Amherst and grandfather of Dickinson's friend Emily Fowler, Webster exerted major force on the community's intellectual life.

Even more influential was Edward Hitchcock, the geologist-theologian who presided over Amherst College during the period Emily Dickinson studied at its affiliated institution, Amherst Academy. Hitchcock's contribution, carefully studied in Wolff's and Sewall's biographies, was to demonstrate how natural revelation discovered through rigorous pursuit of modern science supported scriptural revelation as transmitted through the church. This confident pursuit of scientific knowledge, matched with religious orthodoxy and philosophical conservatism, suffused the curricula by which the poet was educated at Mount Holyoke as well as the Academy. Carlton Lowenberg's bibliography, *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks*, documents the systematic intellectual formation that prepared her to use various kinds of technical language in apt, imaginative ways. Dickinson's education, which she saluted merrily in a valentine cheer, "Hurrah for Peter Parley!" (P3), opened her eyes to the intricate drama of nature while inspiring her to seek — and question — correspondences between science and God.[6] Growing up in a town known for its collection of prehistoric fossils also nurtured the metonymic tendencies evident in "A science — so the Savans say" (P100); although, as her punctuated reference to "Savans" suggests, her academic background prepared her to doubt authority. Even after leaving Mount Holyoke, Dickinson continued to profit from Amherst's lyceum, reading clubs, bookstore, and private libraries as Jack Capps's inventory of *Emily Dickinson's Reading* demonstrates.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Dickinson's experience was limited to her hometown or that Amherst itself was culturally isolated. As a college community, it drew a constant influx of students from other rural New England towns, of faculty educated elsewhere, and of alumni returning from exotic places. Since Amherst College prepared its graduates for foreign missions, there was a strong global impetus. When Abbie Wood Bliss and her husband left for Syria, where they founded the American College, Dickinson wrote cheerily that "Mr Bliss' *Coronation* takes place tomorrow, at the College church. Charge to the Heathen, by the Pastor! Front seats reserved for Foreign Lands!" but then immediately warned Jane Humphrey, "dont let your duty call you 'far hence'" (L180). Teaching eventually took Jane to Ohio, anyway, and Sue Gilbert to Maryland. Staying in Amherst, Dickinson fretted over friends' departures — whether economically necessitated moves or pleasure trips. Those friends, however, became her envoys to the world, bringing back news of distant states, Europe, and Asia.

Proud of the geographic knowledge she absorbed in school and played with

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in her poems, Dickinson smiled at local provincials who confused Vermont with Asia (L473, L685) but commented to her often-migrant Norcross cousins that "moving to Cambridge seems to me like moving to Westminster Abbey, as hallowed and as unbelieved, or moving to Ephesus with Paul for a next-door neighbor" (L962).[7]

Nonetheless, she lived during the heyday of westward expansion. Even though their father deflected Austin's thoughts of pursuing a career in Michigan or Illinois, other acquaintances made drastic breaks with the East—most notably Charles Wadsworth when he accepted a call from Calvary Church in San Francisco and Helen Hunt Jackson—or "Helen of Colorado" as Dickinson learned to call her. It was also a period when many Americans of Dickinson's social class traveled for prolonged periods in Europe, enriching their historical and cultural perspectives while learning to cope with alien traditions of an aristocratic and still largely Catholic continent. Rather than asking Samuel Bowles about his European observations in the summer of 1862, however, she wrote: "We wish we knew how Amherst looked, in your memory. Smaller than it did, maybe—and yet things swell, by leaving—if big in themselves" (L266). Her apprehensions about travel may be traceable to the loss of her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, who died in Ohio exile after ruining himself financially in founding Amherst College. She seems to be thinking of him in "I noticed People disappeared" (P1149), a badly fragmented draft that equates settlement of "Regions wild" with dying, itself for her always "a new Road" (L332). Professor Nathan Fiske, Helen Jackson's father, had departed the Holy Land directly for heaven when both Helen and Emily were young girls, yet Dickinson never forgot President Humphrey's elegy: "From Mount Zion below to Mount Zion above" (L1042). Clinging herself to the security of home, Dickinson availed herself of cultural opportunities from Europe—Jenny Lind's singing and the touring Germania Orchestra as well as English literature—and remained alert to news about freedom fighting in Hungary, British military actions in the Sudan, and the escape of an Egyptian rebel.

She followed public events in her own country also, despite her claim that "The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality" (P827), and current scholarship grounds Dickinson almost as strongly in time as in place—if a fruitful distinction can be made, given that the Amherst of her youth clearly reflected the intellectual, moral, and social climate of a particular era. Betsy Erkkila's "Emily Dickinson and Class" stresses the generally ignored fact that Dickinson's formative years came in the Jacksonian era, a time of ferment characterized by a revisionist historian as "an age of materialism and opportunism, reckless speculation and erratic growth, unabashed vulgarity, surprising inequality, whether of condition, opportunity, or status, and a politic, *seeming* deference to the common man by the uncommon men who

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actually ran things" (Pessen 327). One of those uncommon men was Amherst's Squire Dickinson, who expounded on his ambitions and values in courtship letters to Emily Norcross. Convinced that "we live in a country & in an age when all offices & honors are held out to the deserving, and where the man of merit — the man of untiring energy & perseverance can hardly fail of promotion — & where a man of decision & determination & resolution & energy of character, seldom fails of success," the poet's father tied his personal hopes to community advancement in his resolute quest for power and wealth (Pollak, *Parents* 8). He pursued public service in the electoral realm as a state legislator and Massachusetts representative to the United States Congress while functioning as treasurer to Amherst College, promoting public works from temperance societies to railroad access, and maintaining a prosperous law practice. Erkkila's argument is that, although women were pointedly excluded from the public realm, Emily Dickinson nonetheless profited from her family's social privilege and shared her father's Whig ideology. Seeking "the historical and specifically class formations of Dickinson's life and work" ("Class" 2), Erkkila concludes that the poet "sought to secure the declining status of both her gender and her class through the accumulation of cultural and spiritual capital, what she called 'My Soul's *entire income*' " (17).

Pointing to collegian Emily's nightmare that Amherst's Locofoco postmaster had acquired a lien on the Dickinson rye field (L16) as well as to her dismissive comments about servants, Austin's Irish pupils, and other social inferiors as evidence of the poet's anxiety about aspirant social groups, Erkkila pays less attention to counterevidence of republican spirit. Rather than accepting her father's equation of success with virtue, Dickinson wrote scathingly of someone with "A face devoid of love or grace, / A hateful, hard, successful face" (P1711) and seemed to identify with the cheery robin whose "Dress denotes him socially, / Of Transport's Working Classes" (P1483). Looking at her world from perspectives either of nature or of eternity provided a corrective to Whig ideology while demonstrating her keen-eyed, satiric awareness of her contemporaries' deluded ambitions. " 'Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand / When we with Daisies lie," she mocked, "That Commerce will continue — / And Trades as briskly fly — " (P54). From the celestial perspective, status roles had no importance: "Color — Caste — Denomination — / These — are Time's Affair — / Death's diviner Classifying / Does not know they are — " (P970).

There were a number of destabilizing factors in Jacksonian America that prompted anxieties in conservative Connecticut Valley families tracing their ancestry back to the Pilgrim Fathers. Foremost among these was the wave of internal and external immigration that drew small-town New Englanders to the industrial cities, rural youth to western territories, free blacks to the

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North, and masses of Irish and German immigrants to America. Amherst felt these changes, and so did the Dickinson household. Edward Dickinson's stance was a conservative one, and the few political views his daughter expressed tended to echo his—if only because they often arose in letters to Austin, whose ambitions depended to a great extent on their father's. Despite her personal reclusiveness, Dickinson apparently took some pleasure in acquaintance with the powerful men to whom Edward Dickinson connected her, boasting in a childish letter of knowing Governor Briggs (L18) and threatening in a witty poem to retain Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, in a lawsuit against God himself (P116). On the other hand, she worried about the burdens public service placed on men she admired and resisted threats to pull her father away from Amherst. When the new Constitutional-Union party proposed to nominate the Squire for state office in 1860, she objected to her cousins, "I hear they wish to make me Lieutenant-Governor's daughter. Were they cats I would pull their tails, but as they are only patriots, I must forego the bliss" (L225). The very name of that party, along with its ephemeral nature as one of many fragments spun off by the exploded Whigs, points to the threat of secession that Edward Dickinson, like Daniel Webster, attempted to stave off by acquiescence to southern demands.[8] Later, freed from her father's aspirations, the poet expressed indifference to public affairs in a letter to Mrs. Holland: " 'George Washington was the Father of his Country'—'George Who?' / That sums all Politics to me" (L950). Still, she checked the morning newspapers each day to learn of President Garfield's condition after his shooting (L721), apparently responding to this public figure in a humane if not a patriotic way, and referred occasionally to economic scandals and political agitation. Amused by the posturing of political orators she likened to frogs (P1379), Dickinson again shifted perspective in a way that both linked the women's sphere of domestic service to her father's and brother's male sphere of power and cast both into a kind of comic-cosmic relief when she remarked of her sister's prodigious energy that "Vinnie is far more hurried than Presidential Candidates—I trust in more distinguished ways, for *they* have only the care of the Union, but Vinnie the Universe—" (L667).

Lavinia's formidable industriousness prompted her sister to claim for her the "patent action" admired in an industrialized, mechanical age (L194). Dickinson's letters, more than her poems, demonstrate alert awareness of those technological advances that swelled her countrymen's pride, although her responses to the arrival of the Amherst-Belchertown railroad reflect a mix of filial delight and discomfort. Letters to Austin adopt a celebratory tone with respect to their father's achievement in securing the railroad for the town—wishing her brother home to join in the jubilation and claiming that "I verily

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believe we shall fall down and worship the first 'Son of Erin' that comes, and the first sod he turns will be preserved as an emblem of the struggles and victory of our heroic fathers" (L72). Yet among the first loads to arrive was an excursion group of 325 New London visitors, placing heavy burdens of hospitality on Amherst's more realistic if less heroic sisters and mothers (L127). Machinery proved destructive, too, resulting in calamities she read about in newspapers "where railroads meet each other unexpectedly, and gentlemen in factories get their heads cut off quite informally" (L133). Railroads, moreover, promoted westward expansion that threatened her region. It was mainly in an ironic spirit, obviously, that Emily Dickinson claimed enthusiasm for what her contemporaries hailed as progress. In her 1850 prose valentine, she parodied familiar rhetoric:

> But the world is sleeping in ignorance and error, sir, and we must be crowing cocks, and singing larks, and a rising sun to awake her; or else we'll pull society up to the roots, and plant it in a different place. We'll build Alms-houses, and transcendental State prisons, and scaffolds—we will blow out the sun, and the moon, and encourage invention. Alpha shall kiss Omega—we will ride up the hill of glory—Hallelujah, all hail! (L34)

That skeptical attitude held for reformism in general and for social causes enlisting women in particular. Though declaring admiration for Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale in an apology to Bowles for mocking at women (L223), she remarked drolly to Jane Humphrey a decade earlier about the sewing society she avoided in their hometown, noting wryly that "all the poor will be helped—the cold warmed—the warm cooled—the hungry fed—the thirsty attended to—the ragged clothed—and this suffering—tumbled down world will be helped to it's feet again—which will be quite pleasant to all" (L30). When solicited for a literary contribution to help some charitable cause, she claimed to have burned the letter "requesting me to aid the world by my chirrup more" (L380).

Dickinson's spirited contempt for "Soft—Cherubic Creatures" among the "Gentlewomen" she observed (P401) should not blind us, however, to ways in which she drew strength from a network of female friends and the sentimental women's culture of her time. Paula Bennett argues persuasively that the poet willingly submerged herself in the feminine sphere of home and garden and that "her presentation of herself as 'poetess' (a *woman* poet) was, therefore, a good deal more than simply a role she played in order to keep from playing others" (*Woman Poet* 13). She found intellectual, artistic, and psychological support in women's writings also. Dickinson's relationship to the distinctively female literary culture of her time, chiefly British, is the subject of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking *Madwoman in the Attic;* while

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Joanne Dobson examines in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* how this poet carried to an extreme the restrictions placed by Jacksonian-Victorian culture on American poetesses. In " 'One Unbroken Company': Religion and Emily Dickinson," Joan Burbick discloses a Dickinson whose spiritual pilgrimage "is more relational than individualistic" by placing her within the context of a sentimental religious culture that significantly altered the emphasis and tone of evangelical Calvinism (63). Beth Maclay Doriani, in *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy*, links Dickinson to a deeply rooted New England tradition of female prophecy that combined in antebellum America with transcendentalist oratory, evangelical preaching, and the Bible's wisdom literature to provide the poet with both a culturally sanctioned rhetoric and the courage to employ that rhetoric in her unorthodox expression of spiritual searching.

Countering the hoary supposition that Dickinson's seclusion in the 1860s and intensive engagement with both her poems and her eyes precluded her taking an interest in the Civil War, Shira Wolosky demonstrates in *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* that she shared in the national political and moral crisis in a way that severely challenged her faith. Arguing that Dickinson's poetry "can be seen as profoundly engaged in problems of the external world and aggressively so," Wolosky places her at "a point of intersection of literary, cultural, and metaphysical concerns" exacerbated by national conflict that found expression in the "disjunctions and discontinuities" of her writing (xiii, xviii). Particularly compelling questions brought to the forefront were those prompted by massive, incomprehensible human suffering that challenged belief in God's providential justice. St. Armand brings the war's theological impact home to Amherst in analyzing that community's response to the 1863 battle death of Frazar Stearn, the valiant, spiritually searching, but unconverted son of Amherst College's president and friend of Austin Dickinson. How could Amherst—or evangelical Christians more generally—rationalize "the loss of an entire generation of young men who in sacrificing their lives on the altar of their country, simultaneously condemned themselves to eternal hellfire and damnation, all for the lack of a public profession of religion" (*Culture* 103)? St. Armand traces to that quandary the triumph of the Brother-Christ of a sentimental love religion like Dickinson's over the Father-God of traditional Calvinism. Lease (*Readings*) shows how the Civil War affected Dickinson through her vicarious sharing in transformations it brought to lives of her two mentors, Wadsworth and Higginson, prompting her lament to the latter (then colonel of a black regiment) that "I did not deem that Planetary forces annulled—but suffered an Exchange of Territory, or World—" (L280).

Such evidence of complexity and contradiction in Dickinson's experience compels a rereading of "What is—'Paradise'—" (P215). It should be obvious

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by now that the speaker is a persona, perhaps voicing some latent child within this sophisticated and knowledgeable poet but hardly articulating her full mind. Like many poems in which Dickinson adopts a child's persona, this one should be read ironically as her means of raising subversive thoughts. This speaker naively grasps at literal interpretations of promises held out by teachers, pastors, and the Bible, much as the speaker of poem 460 construes the scriptural promise that saints will "thirst no more" in heaven to mean that "The Wells have Buckets to them there." Dickinson often travestied such literalism, seeing how it entrapped imaginations in images introduced at the earliest stages of religious formation. "Is Heaven a Place—a Sky—a Tree?" she demanded, then answered her own question: "Location's narrow way is for Ourselves— / Unto the Dead / There's no Geography— // But State—Endowal—Focus—" (P489). What we realize in following the trail of her child-persona's anxious inquiries in poem 215 is how *un*heavenly he or she finds pious Amherst and how negative a view of eternity New England Calvinism projects. Moreover, quotation marks around key words communicate the writer's doubts about language's ability to represent truth, not just about "Paradise" and "Eden" that might be considered examples of religious myth but even about here-and-now seeming realities like "Amherst" and its economy. The poem offers nothing but questions—perhaps fortunately, since answers might prove so devastating to the faith society was attempting to transmit to its children, including Emily Dickinson.

On the other hand, that Amherst culture also educated her to ask questions and to settle for nothing less than experiential knowledge of both science and the soul, and the question to which she devoted her energies was the same one we recognize behind the little waif's queries. "Is immortality true?" That was what Dickinson apparently asked the Reverend Washington Gladden when staggered by deaths and alarmed about Judge Lord's stroke (L752a). In writing to a Congregational minister, locally educated at Williams College but known for receptivity to newer kinds of biblical criticism, she turned to someone who might help her resolve doubts exacerbated by intellectual currents of her day that threatened the science-religion bond she had been educated to search out. By this last decade of her life, she wondered who could provide authoritative solace: "Are you certain there is another life?" she asked Charles Clark after his brother's death. "When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure" (L827). Dickinson's response to the crumbling religious and scientific orthodoxies of her youth is the subject of Oliver's *Apocalypse of Green*, which examines how intra- and intersectarian strife disrupted New England churches while "scientific discoveries, which at first seemed benign and often supportive of religion, quietly became treacherous and life-threatening to cherished theological beliefs" (17). Chief among these threats, obviously, were Darwin's

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findings about evolutionary natural selection that challenged the familiar Genesis narrative. Equally alarming was the Higher Criticism of the Bible, which employed historical methods to display the mythic aspects of Scripture. Dickinson, who confessed once that "sermons on unbelief ever did attract me" (L176), confronted many challenges to her faith—challenges that reached her from her reading, certainly, but also from directly observed changes in Amherst.

When Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, Amherst had two churches, both Congregational. When she died in 1886, it claimed a third Congregational church, an Episcopal one, and even a Roman Catholic parish. While successive statements of communal belief from the 1834 *Articles of Faith and Government* through the 1880 *Manual of the First Congregational Church* showed Amherst's First Church maintaining its basic doctrinal core, they revealed heightened awareness of community with other churches and gradual softening of requirements for admission so that, had she desired full membership, Dickinson might easily have qualified for admission to the Lord's Supper even without experiential evidence of conversion.[9] Although the Dickinsons' church remained solidly Trinitarian, their Norcross cousins in the Boston area were Unitarians.[10] Dickinson chose a Presbyterian minister as her spiritual confidant and a Unitarian one as her literary guide. Amherst College, founded to prepare Congregational clergymen, numbered among its most distinguished alumni Austin's friend Bishop Frederick Dan Huntington. Another Episcopalian leader among the town's summer residents was E. Winchester Donald, rector of Boston's Trinity Church. The new Massachusetts Agricultural College had no connection to any church.

An 1859 Christmas letter reflects the diversity of spiritual influences bearing down on Emily Dickinson (L213). Thanking Mary Bowles for Theodore Parker's *The Two Christmas Celebrations*, she writes, "I never read before what Mr Parker wrote. I heard that he was 'poison.' Then I like poison very well." But her apparent openness to transcendentalist assaults on New England orthodoxy clashes with her next statement, which is an amused report about Austin's staying home from church to read and Sue's asking how to spell "Puseyite." Evidently the younger Dickinsons were somehow balancing Congregationalism, transcendentalism, and the Oxford movement—and finding the play of mind invigorating. Other influences to which she was exposed through Wadsworth, Higginson, and even Hitchcock included the Christian spiritualism to which Lease devotes a chapter. Choices in the religious realm seemed as various—and even more life-threatening—than medical options that befuddled her neighbor: " 'Mrs Skeeter' is very feeble," Emily told Austin, " 'cant bear Allopathic treatment, cant have Homeopathic'—dont want Hydropathic—Oh what a pickle she is in—should'nt think she would deign to

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live — it is so decidedly vulgar!" (L82). Yet she laughed as wryly at "The Fop — the Carp — the Atheist," all those who refused to credit evidence for immortality she discovered everywhere (P1380). Dickinson's typical stance in her letters was a brave one, holding herself open to Charles Darwin, George Eliot, and similar influences that her cautious mother dismissed as "very improper" (L650). Nonetheless, she held to the central promises of Scripture, even if — in sophisticated society — "no one credits Noah" and "No Moses there can be" (P403, P597). "Better an ignis fatuus / Than no illume at all," she reasoned, in a world left unprotected by scholarship's amputation of God's right hand (P1551).

Finally, what Dickinson most derived from her culture was a searching mind — and the resilience not to be overcome by mysteries that eluded religion, science, and the law. "Why the Thief ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us," she remarked to Mrs. Holland; "Each expiring Secret leaves an Heir, distracting still" (L359). Living in an era of expiring secrets, the period Wolff describes as that of "the fading of transcendence from the world" (*Dickinson* 10), Dickinson exposed herself courageously to conflicting, disruptive currents of thought and responded with a mind firmly educated to demand experiential evidence in all areas and an imagination that found metonymic suggestiveness in fragmentary observations and metaphoric illuminations even in darkening light. And, for all her awareness of local and global environments, her truest perspective remained more vertical than horizontal, more attuned to speculations on immortality (experienced even now and promised hereafter) than on Amherst, America, or the wider world opened by friendships and reading.

Notes

1. Vivian Pollak's edition of their courtship letters in *A Poet's Parents* revealingly discloses assumptions both Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross brought to their marriage. Pollak expands upon implications of this "family romance" in *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender.*

2. The Reverend Aaron M. Colton reminisced in *The Old Meeting House* about being interviewed by Edward Dickinson (and meeting his young family) while a candidate to fill the Amherst pulpit. As Colton served the First Church from 1840 to 1853, his memoirs offer valuable insight into the solid doctrinal substance but genial tone that apparently characterized Emily Dickinson's acculturation into the church.

3. Although not focused on Dickinson, Mary De Jong's "'With my burden I begin'" provides rich insight into the effect of hymn singing on the spiritual development of nineteenth-century women churchgoers.

4. In the concluding chapters of *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* and in several articles, I have attempted to do more justice to this topic than is possible here.

5. I rely here on Dickinson's beloved lexicon, the 1844 two-volume edition she used

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as an adult, while recognizing that she probably also had access at school, in college, and in friends' homes to other versions of this widely used reference that was first published in 1828.

6. See Fred D. White's essay, "'Sweet Skepticism of the Heart': Science in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," for a listing of major scientific and technical developments of the 1830s and 1840s.

7. The best discussion of Dickinson's geographic vocabulary is Rebecca Patterson's essay, "Emily Dickinson's Geography" (chap. 6 in *Imagery*).

8. In *Touching Liberty*, Karen Sanchez-Eppler explores Dickinson's antipolitical response to contemporary agitations for freedom, considering "what has happened when a concern with the corporeality of identity that appears political and public in the writings of feminist-abolitionists, Whitman, and Jacobs is fashioned by Dickinson into a poetic, ahistorical and ontological dilemma" (106).

9. Sister Regina Siegfried draws upon dissertation research on the doctrinal odyssey of the First Church in her "Bibliographic Essay."

10. See Jones, "A Taste for 'Poison,'" for illuminating insights into the denominational interplay in the poet's environment.

Further Reading

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Gary Lee Stonum

Dickinson's Literary Background

At the center of any serious investigation of Emily Dickinson's poetry, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has noted, is the problem of context. Not only do we know relatively little about the intentions, inspirations, and constraints shaping Dickinson's literary career, but the poems regularly challenge us to imagine backgrounds they conspicuously fail to specify. Poem after poem seems to avoid some "circumstance too well known to be repeated to the initiate," so we the uninitiated keep trying to invent or reconstruct contexts that will remedy the omission (Leyda 1: xxi).

The question of context most often gets raised biographically, in the hope that recovering the private circumstances of the poet's life will anchor the poetry in referentiality. Context is a cultural and historical problem as well, for like any body of writing Dickinson's emerges from a network of symbolic practices and takes many of its possibilities of meaning from this array. The hope here is that if only we could properly identify and describe the cultural milieu we could more securely understand the poetry and better appreciate Dickinson's achievement. Unfortunately, biographical criticism has more often amplified disagreements about Dickinson's writing than dissipated them, and research into the cultural contexts of her work has likewise reproduced rather than resolved disputes about how best to read it. At its best, rather than answering interpretive questions, historical study typically reconfigures the stage on which they get posed.

Challenges

The biographical critic's difficulties stem in part from a lack of documentation: Lavinia Dickinson burned Emily's papers after her sister died; only a small portion of the poet's apparently voluminous correspondence has survived and been located; and we have relatively little testimony from those who knew her, especially by contrast to writers of the time who led more public lives. The difficulties of specifically cultural contextualization begin with the same lack. We would certainly like to glean more information about the literary roles Dickinson imagined for herself, about the books she and her circle of friends

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admired or scorned, and about the references, allusions, and sayings they might have taken as starting points. Actually we do know more about these matters than about, say, the poet's erotic life. The further difficulty stems from her poetry's careful singularity, which both coaxes and frustrates a search for explanatory contexts.

The same singularity defines the boundaries of our search. Consider Dickinson's insistence on uniqueness in an 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Apparently fearful he would suspect her of plagiarism, she wrote that "I marked a line in One Verse—because I met it after I made it—and never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person—I do not let go it, because it is mine" (L271). The remark indicates a determination to avoid all literary indebtedness, especially stylistic, and it thus specifically disavows one familiar kind of context.

True to her word, with the exception of a few openly allusive poems, Dickinson does successfully conceal whatever immediate textual sources and inspirations her poetry might have. Her "Lay this Laurel on the One" (P1393), a four-line redaction of the seven stanzas composing Higginson's "Decoration," would be unrecognizable as such if we did not know from their letters that his elegy was a source. We would be equally in the dark about the quatrain's origin in Dickinson's grief over her father's death, which had happened three years before. How many other poems arise from comparable but now unrecoverable contexts? We do not know and for the most part can only mark our ignorance as one boundary of the determinable backgrounds for her work. Dickinson's 1862 letter also implicitly indicates the other boundary, namely, the broad literary values and ideals shaping her work. By claiming the marked line as inalienable property and in assuming that originality is requisite, Dickinson pledges allegiance to a pair of romanticism's central tenets (Woodmansee 35–55). That is, at the very moment Dickinson insists upon the singularity of her poetry and hence its distance from all contexts, she allies herself to an established, historically specific definition of poetry as the creation of singular genius. On the other hand, romanticism can be such a broad concept, not to mention a disputed one, as to be of limited use in establishing a context for Dickinson's writing. Even the insistence upon originality presupposes a historicism otherwise strikingly absent from her writing.

Books and reading were Dickinson's primary access to a world beyond Amherst. We can thus at least be reasonably confident that the cultural contexts of Dickinson's writing are primarily literary, particularly if that term is defined inclusively. Her surviving letters are filled with references to favorite authors, and some of the poems allude in one way or another to recognizable elements of her reading (Pollak, "Allusions"). To be sure, she is by no means a learned poet in the vein of Milton or Pope, writers who can hardly be appreci-

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ated without understanding their allusions and allegiances. Yet she is also surely not the unlettered author Richard Chase once unguardedly deemed her, uninfluenced by literary sources in either style or thought.

A few cautions need to be kept in mind as we examine various claims about Dickinson's literary milieu. First, we know very little about how or even whether Dickinson imagined her work as participating in any public enterprise. By contrast to a Keats, who dreamed of being among the English poets after his death, or a James Joyce, who schemed tirelessly to shape his own reputation, Dickinson hardly trafficked in any cultural arena. We do possess information about the books she read or admired, and we know from the persistent testimony of her letters and poems that she regarded poetry as an exalted calling. Yet, although we can reasonably infer from this a certain broad ambition, we simply do not know if Dickinson regarded her vocation as entailing some sense of a role in literary history or as obliging her to bargain in the cultural marketplace. We do not, for example, know whether or in what respect she regarded herself as a woman poet, in spite of a number of lively arguments supposing that she did.

Indeed, because Dickinson showed so little interest in the cultural position her work might occupy, even the most credible claims about her filiations usually testify as much to the critic's context as to the poet's. Forty years ago, for example, when New Criticism held the fort and T. S. Eliot's praise of the metaphysical poets heavily influenced Anglo-American literary taste, scholars regularly identified Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan as her important predecessors. By 1980, however, the ascendancy of poststructuralist theory in the United States had brought with it a keener appreciation of the major English romantics, and for a brief time Wordsworth and Keats were regarded as exemplars of the tradition from which Dickinson sprang. More recently and resoundingly, as feminist theory has called attention to a distinctively women's literature, critics have looked to nineteenth-century American and English women writers as Dickinson's sources and inspirations.

Evidence can be found to support all these claims. Two stanzas copied from George Herbert's "Matins" were found among Dickinson's papers and even mistaken for a time as her own composition (Bingham, *Home* 571–73). Likewise, Dickinson's letters make it clear that she eagerly followed the careers of several female contemporaries, particularly Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet evidence that Dickinson had some familiarity with another writer's work should not be confused with confirmation that the work is a significant context for her own. Indeed, we should probably distinguish two sorts of context, the writerly and the readerly. To reconstruct a writerly or compositional context would be to delineate the origins of particular texts and the circumstances in which they were written. As with "Lay this

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Laurel on the One," historical evidence is crucial to such a task. To construct a readerly or interpretive context, on the other hand, would be to set the work in telling relation to literary or cultural tradition. Historical evidence can be suggestive, but it is rarely conclusive or even obligatory. A similarity to Christina Rossetti, say, can thus be mildly illuminating, even though Dickinson seems to have had no acquaintance whatsoever with the English poet (Leder and Abbott).

At the writerly end of the spectrum lie the sources Dickinson drew upon or referred to as she wrote, which are of varying importance. Dickinson's regard for Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes it likely that her "Vision of Poets" is a source of "I died for Beauty" (P449), as well as or even rather than Keats's now more famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn." On the other hand, the identification is by no means crucial to an understanding of the poem.

The more interesting cases are those in which the source is disputed and identification would make some difference to our reading. Dickinson was notably fond of exotic place-names, most of which she must have come upon in her reading and some of which may carry thematic associations. The reference to "Chimborazo" in "Love—thou are high" (P453) may well derive incidentally from Edward Hitchcock's *Elementary Geology*, where it stands among a list of the world's tallest mountains, or it may originate from similarly casual uses in Barrett Browning and Emerson. On the other hand, if we heed Judith Farr's investigations into the influence of contemporary painting, then we might recall that Frederic Church's mammoth painting of Chimborazo was one of the most celebrated luminist canvases of the day ("Disclosing" 73–74). If the poem is read in the latter context, then the "Love" addressed by the poem as like the mountain would function more insistently as a figure of sublime theophany. (The poem also clearly alludes to Exodus 33, the chief biblical commonplace for such an event.)

Likewise, two equally recherché possibilities have been identified for the source of "The Malay took the Pearl" (P452), each linking the poem to different parts of Dickinson's work. Theodora Ward proposes Robert Browning's *Paracelsus* and along with Jack Capps associates the poem with others using the image of diving for pearls (Ward 61–63; Capps, *Reading* 89–90). Farr nominates De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, which would corroborate her reading of the poem as representing Emily's rivalry with Austin over the affections of Susan (*Passion* 148). Farr's case is helped by our knowledge that Dickinson tried to obtain a copy of *Confessions* in 1858 and that the book may be found in the family library (Capps 81–82).

In addition to supporting this or that interpretation of a poem, writerly contexts can themselves become a starting point for interpretation. According to Martha Dickinson Bianchi, three portraits hung in her Aunt Emily's room

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(*Life* 83). Two are of writers we know from other sources that she admired greatly: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. That the other is Thomas Carlyle, whom she never mentions, may suggest that he, too, helped shape her literary imagination. On the relatively slender basis of this clue, my own work has stressed an affinity between Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship* and Dickinson's "This was a Poet" (P448). The claim is highly speculative, and its value no doubt depends less on the historical evidence (itself from a somewhat unreliable source) than on the explanatory power gained from linking Dickinson and Carlyle.

On the other end of the spectrum are readerly or interpretive contexts, which must be judged entirely on explanatory power. Consider as an extreme example George Whicher's otherwise admirable biography from 1938. Whicher is one of the few early critics to notice Dickinson's comic writing, which he links to the raucous, largely populist strand of American humor championed in the thirties by Constance Roarke. We may smile today at the thought of placing Dickinson next to her contemporary Mark Twain (both clad in white, of course), but the very unlikeliness calls attention to the grounds of comparison. The association does serve an interest, even an ideological program. Seeing Dickinson as a Yankee humorist distances her poetry from the conservative and patrician social milieu in which she lived her entire life, and it gives her a place of some pride in the Popular Front vision of American literary history. Yet unbuttoned humor seems alien to the preponderantly psychological and metaphysical orientation of many Dickinson poems, so Whicher's argument ultimately calls more attention to differences than to resemblances.

Although Whicher has not persuaded many readers, his proposal is also neither illegitimate nor different in kind from more winning claims. It is an act of assimilation, and the test of such acts is whether they help us understand and evaluate the appropriated material. As Dickinson herself affirms, we see comparatively, and the very visibility of Dickinson's work partly depends upon our seeing it in comparison to some context. Moreover, such comparisons are almost always a form of judgment. Whicher clearly values the thought that Dickinson's poetry participates in the progressive social and intellectual ferment of her day, and his commentary singles out for attention and admiration those aspects of her work that do so participate.

Sources

Our information about Emily Dickinson's reading comes from a finite body of documents, and most of it can now be found conveniently in a handful of collections and studies. The vast majority of the references in her own poetry

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are helpfully annotated and indexed in Thomas Johnson's 1955 edition of the *Poems*. Although Johnson's edition has come under criticism for its typographic representation of her manuscripts and for its confident separation of poems from correspondence, these complaints do not apply to his identification of the names, places, tags, and quotations in her verse. The letters are a richer source of information about Dickinson's reading, and here too Johnson's edition is essential, although not as fully annotated as the *Poems*. Of the handful of documents by and about Dickinson that have turned up in subsequent years, the most important for conveying a sense of her cultural milieu are the *Lyman Letters*, which Richard Sewall has edited.

Many of the references in Dickinson's writings are discussed in Jack Capps's indispensable *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, which includes a detailed index of the books and authors she mentions in poems or letters. Capps also surveys the contents of the family library, much of which is now at Harvard. Unfortunately, the usefulness of the library "is limited by the fact that books from the Austin Dickinson and Edward Dickinson household have been mixed and, in most cases, dates of acquisition and individual ownership are uncertain" (8). Likewise, although these volumes include inscriptions, marginalia, and other evidence of use, few of the markings can be confidently traced to the poet herself.

Capps describes a number of suggestive facts about the library, noting for example that of a three-volume *Works of Thomas Browne* belonging to Susan the only cut pages are those containing "Religio Medici" and "Christian Morals." This casts doubt on Emily's avowal to Higginson that Browne was one of her favorites. In one of her earliest letters to him she had written that "For Poets — I have Keats — and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose — Mr Ruskin — Sir Thomas Browne — and the Revelations" (L271). The account may be more polite than accurate. Several of the writers she names were singled out for praise in Higginson's *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "Letter to a Young Contributor," the occasion of her writing to him in the first place.

Capps's account of the Dickinson library is not meant to be exhaustive, but one can find various additional remarks about marked passages and well-thumbed pages in the writings of others who have used the Harvard archive. In addition to Capps, the richest accounts are Sewall's biography and the books written by Ruth Miller and Judith Farr.

A brief but tantalizing account of the periodical literature Dickinson read is available from Joan Kirkby. In "Dickinson Reading," a preliminary report out of her ambitious project of identifying and reading all the books, newspapers, and magazines that the poet would have encountered, Kirkby concentrates on the contents of the two newspapers received at the Dickinson household, the *Springfield Republican* and the *Hampshire and Franklin Express*.

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Capps also briefly lists the textbooks in use at Mount Holyoke during Dickinson's time there. The list is substantially amplified by Carlton Lowenberg's *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks*, which interprets its subject broadly, including hymnals and devotional writings in the family library as well as the authors and texts Emily may have encountered at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Seminary. Lowenberg also describes the markings in books belonging to the Dickinsons, including those in a number of volumes not retained in the Harvard collection.

The other most important record of primary sources is Jay Leyda's remarkable *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, which excerpts in chronological order an impressive array of letters and diaries of the Dickinsons, newspapers and magazines available to the family, and various public and private writings by those in and around their world. In some respects his book is a more useful introduction to the poet's life than either of the two best biographies. Whereas Sewall and Wolff both properly give organized interpretations of her world, Leyda offers something more like raw materials.

A number of anecdotes and recollections have been preserved by Dickinson's family, friends, and early editors. Such reports, which may be found scattered throughout the works of Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Millicent Todd Bingham, need to be used with some care. However, no one has actually challenged Bianchi's account of the three portraits or questioned Susan's attribution to Emily of this remark about Emerson: "It was as if he had come from where dreams are born" (Leyda 2: 351–52). Of special although uncertain significance for Dickinson's literary milieu is an essay by Bianchi, which provides our only listing of books said to have been kept on the mantel of Emily's room: *Ranthorpe*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *Abelard and Heloise*, *The Life of Jean Paul*, and *The Last Days of Byron and Shelley*. Bianchi's essay is included as an appendix to Barton Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*.

One additional source deserves special mention. Dickinson seems to have made frequent and extensive use of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* in writing her poems, harkening not only to definitions but to etymologies (sometimes dubious ones) and illustrative quotations. It therefore matters considerably which of the considerably different versions she consulted. The scholarly consensus is for (an 1844 reprint of) the 1841 edition, rather than the 1828 edition (also in the Dickinson library), and for any of the ones dated 1847 or later (Buckingham). Although reprinted several times, the 1841 edition is relatively rare. Students of Dickinson are thus likely to welcome the annotated reconstruction of her lexicon being prepared under the direction of Cynthia Hallen.

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CONTEXTS

The extant claims about Dickinson's readerly and writerly filiations divide roughly but conveniently into three areas: Jacobean literature, including Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and some of the metaphysical poets; New England culture from the Puritans up through such contemporaries as Emerson; and nineteenth-century English literature from Wordsworth to the Brownings. Overlapping the last two but also possibly a distinct category for Dickinson were the English and American women who were Dickinson's immediate predecessors and peers. Dickinson herself might not have recognized any of the categories, we should keep in mind. Unlike most other writers of the time, Dickinson did not hold a historicist view of literature, or at least left no record of doing so.

Jack Capps has proposed that Dickinson showed little interest in literature not written in English and also that she did not pay much attention even to English literature prior to Shakespeare. The observation needs some qualification. Dickinson studied both French and Latin in school, and as Vivian Pollak notes, classical mythology contributes the second-largest group of fictive characters mentioned in her writings. Likewise, George Monteiro has argued for the influence of the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet Luis Vaz de Camoes, whom Dickinson would have encountered from reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In addition, it is possible that Dickinson shared somewhat in the romantic medievalism of her day and so may have cared more about earlier literature than Capps suspects. Farr and St. Armand both make cases for an affinity with Pre-Raphaelitism, for example.

Nevertheless, Capps's view largely holds. The Greek and Latin references are almost all proverbial, and Dickinson was surely far less interested in foreign or historically remote cultures than most of her peers. One further omission is notable. Although morally respectable authors from the Restoration and afterward were staples of her school curriculum, Dickinson makes conspicuously few references to Milton, Cowper, Pope, Johnson, Young, Thomson, or Goldsmith (R. Sewall, *Life* 349–53). The only eighteenth-century writer arguably to have influenced her is Isaac Watts, whose hymns have often been seen as the main source of her prosody. However, besides a fondness for odd rhymes and numerous examples of common meter and its kin, Watts seems at most to have contributed an occasional point of rhetorical departure or a target for parody. For a recent, measured view on this subject, consult Judy Jo Small's *Positive as Sound*, which qualifies the influential claims of Martha Winburn England.

The difference between readerly and writerly looms largest in discussions

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of Dickinson's seventeenth-century predecessors. A prime example of readerly claims, the once commonplace link with the metaphysicals, is based chiefly on similarities of style and subject. Following the lead of numerous earlier reviewers and critics, Judith Farr (writing then as Judith Banzer) has concluded that Dickinson resembles Donne, Herbert, and their successors in favoring abrupt or startling opening lines, epigrammatic forms, and unusually concise or elliptical expressions. Her "Before I got my eye put out" can thus be compared with Herbert's "I struck the board, and cried, No more," and her "To disappear enhances" with Donne's frequently paradoxical and riddling conceits. The resemblance appears the stronger when Dickinson is set against her contemporaries, and indeed the similarity is often emphasized as a way of advocating the superiority of Dickinson's style to Victorian lushness and fluency.

The intense and highly personal religious concerns in much of Dickinson's poetry have also been seen as a link to the seventeenth century, regarded as the font of English devotional and meditative verse (Martz). In this, however, she differs less from her American contemporaries, especially the Victorian writers of England and America most likely to be scorned by advocates of the seventeenth century. One issue in the relative importance of these two contexts is the stress on intellectual and pointedly antisentimental meditations; to like a look of agony or to declare that the admirations and contempts of time show justest through an open tomb is thus arguably to exhibit a metaphysical sensibility. On the other hand, much of Dickinson's religious verse resembles the sentimental consolation verse of her day in emphasizing the pathos of death and the pain of separation from loved ones.

Although Dickinson clearly had some acquaintance with Herbert and Vaughan and probably also knew a bit about Donne and others, the evidence suggests that her awareness would have come too late and been too casual to have actively influenced her own art. Such at least is the conclusion of Ruth Miller, based on examining dates and markings in the Dickinson family library and investigating references to seventeenth-century poetry in the newspapers and periodicals read by Emily. Most of the sources date from the 1860s, by which time her mature style was fully formed and her characteristic themes and attitudes well established.

By contrast, the evidence is considerable for the writerly impact of the King James Bible and of Shakespeare on Dickinson's writing. The Bible is by far the text most frequently quoted or referred to in her poetry, albeit not quite as a literary source. (Fordyce Bennett's *Reference Guide* provides a poem-by-poem list of scriptural echoes and allusions.)

The Bible is also the main source for what Ruth Miller calls Dickinson's reply poems, texts staged as a rejoinder to some other text. Sewall cites the following example in his biography:

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"And with what body do they come?" —
Then they do come — Rejoice!
What Door — What Hour — Run — run — My Soul!
Illuminate the House!

"Body!" Then real — a Face and Eyes —
To know that it is them! —
Paul knew the Man that knew the News —
He passed through Bethlehem — (P1492)

Like most reply poems, this one quotes the source text conspicuously. Oddly, but also typical of her reply poems in this respect, this poem is known to us only for having been sent in a letter; it is not to be found among the fascicles. In quite different ways, both features suggest Dickinson's care that her reader recognize the staging. She both supplies the reference and addresses the poem to a known audience, upon whose understanding she can presumably rely.

Although only a handful of poems can unmistakably be identified as replies, others may also originate more covertly as responses to a particular source. Noting the playful allusiveness in much of Dickinson's correspondence, for example, Richard Sewall has suggested that parts of a favorite text and even single words regularly served as a stimulus to her imagination. His suggestion exemplifies the frequent suspicion that many of Dickinson's poems stem from sources we are unable to identify, sources as likely to be textual as biographical and possibly to be both at once.

Like reply poems, the many references in Dickinson's letters to Dickens, George Eliot, and most of all Shakespeare presuppose a shared and often also what is obviously a mutually cherished context. Early on they seem a badge of group identity. The regular recourse to Donald G. Mitchell's *Reveries of a Bachelor* in letters to girlhood friends suggests, for example, that Ik Marvel (Mitchell's pen name) served her circle as a source of erotic and probably also parentally disreputable pleasures of the imagination. Well beyond adolescence, in addition, literary references proliferate in letters to many of Dickinson's correspondents, and they also have been taken as signs of a special relation to her audience.

The most fully argued case concerns the Shakespearean tags and allusions that proliferate in letters between the poet and her sister-in-law and also in the poems that Emily sent to Susan. In line with similar observations by Rebecca Patterson and Paula Bennett, Judith Farr has proposed that references to the plays, particularly *Antony and Cleopatra*, served Emily and Susan as a code language (Patterson, *Imagery;* Bennett, "Orient"). The single word "Egypt," as in Antony's "Egypt, thou knew'st too well," could thus invoke the entire passion of the play's principals, and it could call up an identification of Emily as Antony and Susan as Cleopatra.

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Shakespeare is not the only candidate for such a private lexicon. Farr makes a similar claim about *Jane Eyre* as a source for the Master letters and as a code used in writing to Samuel Bowles (whom Farr identifies as the addressee of the Master letters). Likewise, St. Armand proposes in "Veiled Ladies" that Bettina von Arnim's *Die Günderode* (in Margaret Fuller's 1842 translation) played a comparable role in correspondence with Susan and that Dickens and Shakespeare both served that function in letters to Bowles and later to Judge Lord.

Another aspect of the Shakespearean references, second in number only to the Bible but confined mainly to letters, points to a different kind of literary model. Dickinson never refers to the sonnets, though in their lyric and seemingly confessional mode and their frequent recourse to a shadowy but coherent erotic narrative those poems might seem to resemble many of Dickinson's. Likewise, she refers sparingly to the histories, comedies, and romances, although the last two genres might be thought to have the same kind of appeal and also to attract Dickinson's attention by their wit and wordplay, activities at which Dickinson also excels. Dickinson's evident bardolatry — "While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm" (L368) — is of another sort, however. She attends overwhelmingly to the tragedies, referring primarily to characters and dramatic speeches rather than to theme or style. Dickinson may thus have admired Shakespeare most for what Keats called his negative capability, the art coming from the embodiment of character more than sheer verbal skill or a capacity to express the poet's own thoughts and feelings. When Dickinson protests to Higginson that it is not she but a representative of the verse who speaks in the poems, we may suspect her of staking out some privacy from what otherwise are revealingly personal poems. But Dickinson's admiration for Shakespeare suggests the appeal of role playing and hence a fondness for representing characters other than her own.

Whereas the seventeenth century is a context Dickinson would have had to search out or select, New England is one she would have had difficulty avoiding, so the task for her readers and critics is to specify which aspects are most important or illuminating. Except for a common and often unspoken assumption that Dickinson is a quintessentially American writer, by which is usually meant a quintessentially New England writer, opinions differ about what her countrymen meant to her and which of them loomed the largest. Earlier cultural historians stressed the importance of a Puritan intellectual and religious heritage but were usually unable to locate particular influences. More recently critics have paid attention to the popular literature of the times, especially by women. Dickinson knew this literature quite well, as her letters make clear. In addition, from the beginning a debate has raged about the importance to Dickinson of Emerson and Emersonianism.

Emily Dickinson lived all her life in the Connecticut Valley, a stronghold of

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uncompromising Calvinism and the site during her formative years of the last great religious revivals in New England. Although she ultimately resisted conversion and although she showed no special interest in reading devotional texts, she seems nevertheless to have been well schooled in the New England mind by the sermons she heard and by the influence of family, friends, and teachers. Questions of faith get explored in Dickinson's poetry against a background of three divergent sources: the older Puritanism lingering in conservative Amherst, the liberalizing and rationalizing trends of Enlightenment thought that culminated in Emersonian transcendentalism, and a sentimental or domestic religiosity that arose during Dickinson's own lifetime.

I find that the surest guide to the first two sources is Karl Keller, who offers separate, detailed comparisons with Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Jonathan Edwards and a canny critique of the frequent emphasis on Emerson's importance. Keller argues that as a whole Puritanism chiefly supplied to Dickinson a mythic framework within which poetic and existential dramas could be staged. The most important plank in the scaffolding is that value and meaning are to be discovered by scrutinizing the soul; real life is within. The importance of introspection is, of course, a cliché about New England culture, in that it supposedly links together everyone from Cotton Mather to Wallace Stevens. The cliché takes on considerable force in Dickinson's writing, however, since she arguably privileges interiority to a greater and more exclusive degree than any American poet. Moreover, her corresponding inattention to social and historical externalities distinguishes her from another important line of American writing that also descends from Puritanism. Unlike the New England writing that Sacvan Bercovitch has recently much emphasized, Dickinson does not identify the soul's fate with a national destiny. She writes no jeremiads.

Instead, Dickinson couples introspection with a more specifically religious doctrine, namely, the ontological gap between man and God and the absolute importance of this divide. In numerous poems the difference between time and eternity or earth and heaven is precisely what makes a difference, that is, makes meaning and makes the concerns of her poetry meaningful. According to Calvinism, one more feature of the same scene is that God is above all the source of judgment, however much divinity may also be associated with charity, grace, wisdom, and so forth. Dickinson, too, never abjures this possibility, although she also entertains other opinions about divine justice and sovereignty.

Although she evinces a keen respect for human intellect, especially her own, Dickinson seems true to her Connecticut Valley roots in resisting the confidence in human reason that gave rise to Unitarianism and other liberalizing trends. However, many of her poems about nature take seriously the

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collateral Emersonian belief that one can and should read the landscape for signs of transcendental truth. Not only are there sermons in stones, but we are equipped to hear them, at least some of the time. As the Wordsworthian tag indicates, Emerson is not the only source of this romantic tenet, but he was certainly the dominant voice in the United States and he is clearly the father in this respect of the nature writings of Thoreau and Higginson, which Dickinson seems to have read appreciatively.

In a great many Dickinson poems rehearsing a number of different views, the most urgent religious and existential issues are reasonably well defined by the distance between Connecticut Valley dread and Concord enthusiasm. That Dickinson at least knew of the latter is undeniable. She was given a copy of Emerson's *Poems* in 1853, and she writes approvingly of *Representative Men.* On the other hand, she neglected meeting him in 1857 when he lectured in Amherst and then spent the night next door at Austin and Susan's house. More strikingly, none of their several mutual literary acquaintances seemed to have shown any of her poems to him.

Emerson and Dickinson both care a great deal about the soul's access to supernal power and to a transcendent state of being, and she often joins him in demanding such a boon. On the other hand, for every poem in which she imagines herself as a debauchee of dew, there is another in which she represents such rapture as an earthly paradise that too competes with heaven. In other words, she regularly imagines rivalry and conflicting motives in the soul's traffic with the divine, whereas Emerson is prone to emphasize continuity and harmony.

The relation with Emerson and the Puritan past is one emphasized in American studies by what must now be regarded as the old consensus. That school of thinking has been challenged in converging ways by feminist critics and by historical scholars such as St. Armand. Both newer approaches stress Dickinson's immersion in the popular culture of her time and her fondness for at least some of its once scorned motifs. Next to the highbrow tradition running from Edwards to Emerson, for example, St. Armand juxtaposes the literature of what he calls a Sentimental Love Religion, which is primarily a construct of the women of Victorian America. He thus notes that a number of Dickinson's lyrics presuppose as background some version of the widely popular narratives in which "death, love, the afterlife, nature and art are all bound in fealty to the great idea of romance" (*Culture* 80). Such narratives are both literally and metaphorically operatic, serving commonly as the plots for actual libretti and finding a place in numerous popular novels of the day.

Several aspects of this literature obviously resonate with a number of Dickinson's poems. One key motif is that of separated, banned, or otherwise star-

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crossed lovers, who often can hope only for reunion after death. Another is the centrality of deathbed scenes and of a sentimental rhetoric of consolation, which is especially important to the verse of the time. It has long been obvious that many of Dickinson's poems both draw upon such mortuary verse and also importantly depart from it. Now that such poetry is again being read with some respect for its historical valences, it should become possible to sort out Dickinson's relation to this work and compare the influence more judiciously to sterner Puritan notions about death and dying.

A third aspect of such literature stresses religion's material comforts, imagining heaven as a well-furnished house in which the self can feel at home. This is the aspect that most diverges from Puritanism, with its more disembodied theology and its emphasis on the perils of damnation over the promises of salvation. It is also the most significantly gendered aspect, Puritanism representing a harsh, masculine tradition against the feminized religion of the heart. Dickinson's relation to the materialist aspect of sentimentality remains a subject open to investigation. A comparison between home and heaven is clearly crucial to Dickinson, but it is less likely that she shares the Biedermeier sensibility of an Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, St. Armand's chief exemplar of material domesticity.

Joining St. Armand in decrying the tendency to dwell too exclusively on highbrow culture are both David Reynolds, who links Dickinson to the themes of the sensation fiction of the 1840s and 1850s, and a number of feminist scholars who stress Dickinson's kinship with the once much-lamented women poets of the century. The important claims here go beyond similarities of theme and imagery to the possibility that women's poetry differed in kind and genre from nineteenth-century poetry by men. Cheryl Walker offers the richest discussion so far of this claim, singling out such categories as verse fantasies of power, poems that on the other side identify with powerlessness and abjection, and poems that imagine some sanctuary for the sensitive or threatened soul. Above all, she notes, women's poetry stresses feeling and sensibility over thought or fact, largely exemplifying in this respect the culture's separation between men's and women's spheres.

American literature seems more a source of intellectual and thematic contexts for Dickinson than of specifically literary inspirations and challenges. Dickinson's gnomic style sufficiently resembles Emerson's that when published anonymously one of her poems was misidentified as his. Yet, except for one redaction of William Ellery Channing (P1234), and early references to Bryant (P131) and Longfellow (P284), Dickinson does not invoke American authors in her verse. The case for the specifically literary influence of American literature comes more from the models it may have provided for her imag-

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inative and artistic life. Richard Sewall, for example, explores in some detail the possible influence on Dickinson's imagination of Longfellow's *Kavanagh* and Mitchell's *Reveries*.

Pursuing a similar topic in a different fashion, Joanne Dobson examines how Dickinson's ardent but invisible literary identity figures against both the careers of other women writers of the time and the models of female selfhood available in their writing. Partly stressing the code of reticence to which women were expected to adhere, Dobson also makes it clear that many women either transgressed it or found ways to mitigate it. The result is to modify the picture of Dickinson as rebel and nonconformist that is usually derived from her obvious stylistic and intellectual daring. Dobson portrays Dickinson, in her reluctance about publication and publicity, as largely acquiescing to an orthodoxy against which others often struggled.

In *New England Literary Culture* Lawrence Buell also portrays Dickinson's literary identity as more conventional than others have seen. He first acknowledges her stylistic and rhetorical obliqueness, then notes that it can and has been equally well explained as resulting from two different forms of ambivalence on her part, one about Puritan theology and the other about the ideology of true womanhood in Victorian America. In either case the result is that Dickinson is torn between private passion and established morality, and in this she is said importantly to resemble Longfellow, Lowell, and other middlebrow poets of her region. Buell accordingly portrays her as an especially telling representative of New England culture rather than an idiosyncratic exception to its main patterns.

One drawback of Buell's argument is that it would apply equally well to most English writers of the time, and indeed he acknowledges at one point that a regional focus risks blinding the critic to larger patterns. More generally, the silently nationalist bias of much Dickinson criticism may similarly limit the visibility of larger contexts. Dickinson herself was no respecter of frontiers. Perhaps conspicuously, she never echoes one of the resounding commonplaces of antebellum culture, namely, the importance of establishing a distinctively American literature. Although recent scholarship has stressed the forgotten American writers, particularly women, whom Dickinson would have learned from, thereby correcting an undue stress on Emerson, Whitman, and other male standards, Dickinson herself expressed the greatest enthusiasm for English writers, many of them female contemporaries, and seemed otherwise wholly indifferent to the cultural nationalism prevalent in her day.

More specifically, she admired the writers of her day (the Brownings, the Brontës) who most clearly carried forward the idealistic program of English romanticism. I have elsewhere argued that Dickinson felt an allegiance to the poetry of sensation, which begins with Keats and Shelley and continues with

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such "spasmodics" as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the early Tennyson. This is a school contrasted in Victorian England with the poetry of reflection, deriving from Wordsworth and perhaps finding its culmination in Arnold's criticism. More generally, Sewall observes that at a fundamental level "her sense of self had Romantic origins, rebellious at first, developing into a kind of heroic individualism," and that she had a "Romantic sensitivity to Nature" (*Life* 714).

On the other hand, she makes few references to the major romantic poets, and the one full-scale study of her relation to English romanticism, Joanne Feit Diehl's, is obliged to posit rather than demonstrate the connection. Indeed, Diehl's work depends upon the notably ahistorical and context-indifferent poetics developed by Harold Bloom. It is, in other words, another readerly appropriation, in which the detailed comparison of "Frost at Midnight" and "The Frost was never seen" depends for its value on mutually illuminating the two poems and not on the hunch that Dickinson's poem is a reply to Coleridge's.

Furthermore, in her own references to nineteenth-century English literature Dickinson more often expressed enthusiasm about novels and novelists than about poetry, the more so if we regard Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as essentially a novel in verse. Dickinson refers usually to the characters rather than to phrasings, plot, settings, and so on. Gilbert and Gubar accordingly argue that these characters offer broad models for the personae in her poems. Moreover, Dickinson's references to the characters are of a piece with her abundant interest in the writers' biographies. As Margaret Homans observes, Dickinson seems to have grouped both real and fictional characters under the category of "exemplary lives" (*Women Writers* 164). The pattern may thus further confirm Dickinson's greater interest in imagining character than in expressing the self. On the other hand, exemplary lives may chiefly be models for oneself; Homans's point is that Dickinson looked especially to other women writers for examples of literary identity.

Except for one telling phrase commemorating Elizabeth Barrett Browning (P312) and another that praises Helen Hunt Jackson, perhaps dutifully and politely (L368), Dickinson does not actually single out women writers as a category, nor does she ever explicitly identify her own situation as that of a woman writer. On the other hand, the issue of female authorship was so widely debated in her day that Dickinson could hardly have been unaware of it. Moreover, even if the issue plays an uncertain role as a compositional context, it emphatically dominates recent interpretive contexts. Much contemporary criticism reads Dickinson symptomatically, as inevitably expressing the situation of the woman writer although not necessarily thematizing it.

In addition to the otherwise separable contexts that can briefly be desig-

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nated as poetry by American women and novels by English women, two cases can be made for gender as a context that crosses borders and genres. Paula Bennett makes the most forceful claim for the first: "Dickinson's definition of herself as woman poet was . . . rooted in her positive feelings for women. If, with the exception of Jackson, Dickinson never mentions American women poets by name, she nevertheless saw herself as part of a female literary tradition which she and they shared. British in origin, this tradition had found its richest, most complicated, expression in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Bronte sisters, and George Eliot" (*Woman Poet* 1415). According to this view the American divide between a sentimental religion of the heart and a Puritan religion of the head is for Dickinson chiefly a dispute between gynocentric and androcentric notions of selfhood. As such, it links up with the social and erotic issues faced by such as Aurora Leigh and Jane Eyre.

The other case, which I find more suggestive, depends on contemporary theories about the gendering of language and meaning. According to such a perspective, which is best represented by the work of Diehl, Homans, and Loeffelholz, Dickinson draws her "unique power from her particular way of understanding her femininity" (Homans, *Women Writers* 171). However, both this argument and the more specific one that she adheres to a nonreferential language, one which she and her culture would have regarded as female, stand at some distance from historically verifiable claims about Dickinson's sources and background.

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Judith Farr

Dickinson and the Visual Arts

Praising Emily Dickinson's poem about a hummingbird, "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving wheel" (P1463)[1] in the *Atlantic Monthly* of October 1891, Thomas Wentworth Higginson remarked that it was "an exquisite little . . . strain, every word a picture" (Buckingham, *Reception* 191). Having helped to edit the first, best-selling collection of Dickinson's poems published in 1890, Higginson was eager to continue an astute promotional effort that he had begun by commending her as a painter. Probably in order to disarm criticism of what he conceded was the "rugged frame" of Dickinson's verse, he always insisted on its "vividly objective" pictorial qualities. Indeed, he wrote in the *Christian Union* just before *Poems* appeared that Dickinson's readers were about to see "sea picture[s]" better than those sketched in the poems of Celia Thaxter, done by a hand that moved with "vigor" as the author "draws the [even] mightier storms and shipwrecks of the soul" (Buckingham 4). Linking Dickinson's poetic accounts of natural scenes like "This — is the land — the Sunset washes —" (P266) with her visions of the mysteries of death, Higginson presented them all as distinctive kinds of painting that exhibited "an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power" (Buckingham 14).

By joining the word "strain," used by the Victorians as synonymous with verse measure or line, with "picture" in his account of her hummingbird poem, Higginson evoked the Roman poet Horace's concept *ut pictura poesis* ("it [should be] in poetry as in painting"). This concept, relating the arts in a single sisterhood and directing that each be judged in its successful relation to the other, had enjoyed exceptional prominence during the romantic and Victorian periods.[2] Although the friend whom she loyally called her dear "Preceptor" (L265) failed to grasp the innovative genius of Emily Dickinson, here he did *not* fail her. With his considerable knowledge as a cultivated social historian, he called upon the assumptions and tastes of the age. Painters in nineteenth-century America were accorded great prestige; they also enjoyed a popularity matched by few American writers. Thus Higginson cleverly directed her public to judge Emily Dickinson not as a verse writer alone but as a type of that hero of long magazine articles and crowded showrooms, the visual artist.[3]

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This essay seeks to provide an overview of the relation of Emily Dickinson's poetry to the visual arts and briefly to summarize scholarship, past and present, on this topic. The essay's chief theme is Dickinson's knowledge and employment of the subject matter and techniques of mid-Victorian painting; but it will also attempt to indicate the presence in her poetry of imagistic and stylistic attributes common to graphic and decorative arts such as engraving, collage, and needlework. To judge from internal evidence provided by her poems and letters and by her own acknowledgment, Emily Dickinson was sensitive to most visual arts of her day, including sculpture. But it was painting and the related art, drawing, that seem most significantly to have affected her choice of subject and language while shaping her aesthetic — her conception of the function of poetry.

That aesthetic was influenced by the painter-critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), who held that art's purpose is to see and then project in clear *pictures* the relation between mortal nature and the enduring universe. Art was transcendent, greater even than science for Ruskin and his followers; but it had the moral purpose of explaining the Creator to the created. (Or, as Dickinson's less theocentric phrase puts it, art must depict "Eternity in Time" [L688]). Ruskin's influence on painters *and* writers in the United States was profound. Dickinson herself admired *Modern Painters* and was apparently drawn to painterly "texts" by such masters as Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), thought of as the best American exemplar of Ruskin's ideas. She behaved like many artists of her time in experimenting with Ruskin's program for composition, recommended topics, and preferred techniques. Indeed, her lineation in the fascicles may, I propose, have been affected by Ruskin's theories about creative sketching. Emily Dickinson's sophistication as a poet, her lively participation in the culture of her day, and even the deeper meaning of poems that "quote" works of art she knew become clearer when she is studied as a visual artist.

THE CONNECTION between Dickinson's art and other forms of visual art — I say "other" because as soon as one puts a line on a blank page or a stitch in a piece of fabric one has a kind of "visual art" — began to attract intense, systematic scholarly scrutiny in 1984 with the publication of Barton Levi St. Armand's rich and important study, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*. St. Armand conceives Dickinson as a poet nourished by the mid-Victorian folk and high arts and crafts. He associates the fascicle poems with the portfolio and sketchbook traditions; lists and describes the painting collections of the Austin Dickinsons, known to Emily; demonstrates some shaping influences on Dickinson's verse of Ruskin, Emerson, and such artistic commentaries as Asher B. Durand's "Letters on Landscape Painting" (1855); hypothesizes the relation of Dickinson's subject matter to that of contemporary folk art; and shows that

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Dickinson participated in the "cultural maelstrom" of her own time, though always "on her own terms" (221). St. Armand's invaluable chapter "Lone Landscapes: Dickinson, Ruskin, and Victorian Aesthetics" reconstructs the imagination of Emily Dickinson in terms of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory and discriminates the distinctions between her poetic evocations and those of a painter like Durand, showing that "her palette, if not her specific subject or interpretation, was . . . Ruskinian" (287).

To this palette, Rebecca Patterson also paid attention in *Emily Dickinson's Imagery* (1979). She declared that Dickinson "knew that a poet handled color words as a painter handled colors, and when she decided to become a poet she set about acquiring a serviceable selection of color words as one more element in the vocabulary appropriate to her craft" (115). Both Patterson and St. Armand comment on Dickinson's characteristic fondness for purple, red, and yellow, associating it with the mid-Victorian palette. Earlier twentieth-century critics, to be sure, had alluded to Dickinson's knowledge of Ruskin without considering its deeper implications for her subject matter or technique. Many commentators offered generalized observations about her reading in art theory or her visual/visionary imagination (a topic about which Roland Hagenbüchle has more recently offered refined distinctions). George Whicher observed that "her browsings in Ruskin" may have given her a "moral view" of the 'Martyr Painters' that she expressed in one poem" while "suppl[ying] her with allusions to Guido, Titian, Domenichino . . . and Van Dyke" (212–13). Charles R. Anderson, speaking of Dickinson's use in "Because I could not stop for Death" of "progressively fewer visible objects" (*Stairway* 245), argued that hers was an imagination that often sought to illustrate by strategic placement of forms in space, an artist's method. Recent linguistic critics like E. Miller Budick, even, resort to a diction bordering on the art-aesthetic in calling the poems a "hesitating collection of independent perceptual moments" which "picture reality . . . in discontinuous and disparate frames of sense information" (26).

Before Patterson and St. Armand, however, those who specifically compared Emily Dickinson's poetry to the works of painters were themselves nineteenth-century writers. Indeed, Dickinson's work was immediately compared to the visual arts when the 1890 *Poems* appeared. The first to associate Dickinson with visual artists were her early reviewers. In a magazine devoted to painting and belles lettres called the *Art Amateur* (May 1891), one critic compared Dickinson's poetry to three other artistic expressions: the painting of the German Lucas Cranach (1472–1553), "the early wood-cuts of the emblem writers" who had vogue chiefly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and finally to "impressionist pictures"—probably French impressionism, which originates in the 1860s and to which Mabel Loomis Todd would

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also compare Emily Dickinson's verse (Buckingham, *Reception* 135, 237). The *Christian Register* (December 1890) likened Dickinson's elegiac subject matter to that of Michelangelo, the great sculptor-painter whose skill she envies in one of her Master letters (Buckingham, *Reception* 63).[4]

To erect such a wide frame of comparison may seem feckless. But her readers were struggling to find suitable analogues in the visual arts to qualities they perceived in Dickinson's poetry and were unused to meeting in popular late-Victorian verse. Their comparisons were not insensitive. For example, Cranach is famous for exquisitely refined, somewhat cerebral landscapes and for boldly executed scenes of death and resurrection, all to be found in *Poems* (1890). (He is also famed for eroticism; but despite "Wild Nights," the 1890 reviewers probably did not intend that comparison.) The emblem writer/engravers—whose art influenced that of Thomas Cole (1801–48), founder of American landscape painting and a vital influence on Emily Dickinson—were noteworthy for giving symbolic expression to moral proverbs, adages, ideas, or beliefs. They would print a quatrain about hope, for example, illustrating it with the picture of a woman holding aloft an anchor. Such a poem as "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea" (P76) with its boat, headlands, and symbolic traveler could be similarly seen to define by illustration. Indeed, Dickinson's many poems of definition—"Faith is . . . ," "Hope is . . . ," "Love is . . . "—bear precise relation to the emblem tradition in British art, transmitted by the Puritans to the New England of her day. Her poetry also exhibits a graphic specificity—she speaks of a splinter's swerve or a smitten rock—that is considered advantageous in the emblem tradition, wherein objects are presented explicitly and conceptually as ideas. Finally, "impressionism," a word formally established in 1874[5] but casually used in Dickinson's lifetime, was thought to characterize the rapid-sketch staccato quality of some of her verses. It seemed to describe her fascination with the play of light on forms which appears in many poems like "There's a certain Slant of light" (P258).

Since Victorian literary critics were usually cultivated in the arts, they moved among them freely, comparing architecture to music, music to painting, dance to poetry, with a wide referentiality. Moreover, artists themselves enjoyed borrowing nomenclature and insights across artistic boundaries: Whistler painted "nocturnes"; Schumann composed "scenes"; Dickinson imagined her poems as canvases one could carry in the hand (P308). The rival art form an artist chose was also revealing: thus, for example, Whistler's choice of music as descriptive of the content and form of his paintings sprang from an effort to deny that they had narrative content, to insist that they presented design and color alone, to emphasize their innovative lyricism and liquidity of brushstroke. As I seek to demonstrate in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, painting was the primary symbolic "language" of Emily Dickinson's aesthetic dis-

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course and practice. The degree of her absorption in the process (actual and symbolic) of perception and its practical, critical, and historic lore in the fine arts is therefore as essential to an understanding of her work in general as to successful reading of individual poems.

Although they compared her poems to paintings, her early critics could not have known that she herself described her poetic acts as "painting" and asked that her writing be judged as painting: "Do I paint it *natural?*" (L85). She customarily associates good writing with an imperishable painting, one that can bear being read/seen by the light of day (reality) without losing its power: "Some phrases are too fine to fade" (L277). Her loneliness for Susan Gilbert makes her long to be able to describe it—in paint, not words: "I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be—*solitude*, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades, each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there" (L176). (Here Dickinson's choice of the two genres, portraiture and landscape painting, that were most popular in American painting during her lifetime, and her mention of the solitary figures conceived in light and shade that immediately suggest the characteristic themes of Thomas Cole and his preference for chiaroscuro scenes make her knowledge of contemporary painting obvious.) In several poems and letters Emily Dickinson joined "Martyr Poet" and "Martyr Painter" in the mutual, costly, elevating, and reassuring enterprise of seeing and recording whereby one seeks "in Art—the Art of Peace—" (P544). As in "I would not paint—a picture—" (P505), she often precedes a discussion of the process, experience, and effects of writing poetry by imagining what it would be like to have a painter's "celestial fingers" that can provoke "Torment" and "Despair." Her conception in poem 505 of the painter's skill as heavenly and of what he stimulates in the viewer as suffering accords with classic late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century views of the artistic sublime (see Novak, *Nature* 34–44).

Throughout her artistic life, Dickinson painted portraits and meditated on images made by others: sculptured "Men of Ivory" or the colorful "Boys and Girls, in Canvas" (P499) whose mortal faces invited her to imagine them as immortal. Studying the world framed by her window or garden, she fashioned various landscapes, describing day as it advanced from dawn to sunset or the seasons as they supplanted one another. Their "Splendors" were to her like a "Menagerie" (P290) or a circus or a theater, and God a royal "Showman" (P628), whose art she sought to imitate. Such painters as Cole and Church, exhibiting their smoldering canvases of sunrise and sunset to wide audiences, were often described as showmen in competition with the Lord; and they, too, saw both nature and art as rival forms of "theater." For all their idiosyncracy, the style, motifs, and symbolic content of Dickinson's landscapes often evoke

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those of the Hudson River, luminist, or Pre-Raphaelite painters.[6] In addition, American art historians like Barbara Novak and John Wilmerding predicate general connections between the incisive detail of Dickinson's landscapes and that common to miniature painting in her day.[7] Wilmerding compares certain poems to the canvases of the still-life painter William M. Harnett (1848–92), remarking that "like Harnett, [Dickinson] shaped her art with refined concentration and shadowy closure, employing repeated rhythms . . . , economy of form, and concern for the transience of life" (154). Meditation on mutability is deeply intrinsic to still-life painting. So such poems as Dickinson's "His Bill is clasped—his Eye forsook—" (P1102), wherein she laments the bird "Gored through and through with Death," justify a comparison to still life, another synonym for which is *nature morte*. From almost all the American painting of her time, however, Emily Dickinson would have learned that "the true purpose of art . . . was 'impressing the mind through the visible forms of material beauty, with a deep sense of the invisible and immaterial'" (Ferber 248). Still life, landscape, portrait and history painting: all conspired, like so much of her own poetry, to provide that revelation.

Remarkably, moreover, Emily Dickinson's art shows similarities even to contemporary art works she might never have seen. Working within the *zeitgeist* of her time, she reflects it, often anticipating directions taken by some visual artists in a later period. So, in her meditative explorations of the Soul and Mind, Dickinson shows the kind of surrealistic fascination that preoccupied the American orientalist painter Elihu Vedder (1836–1923), a friend of Dickinson's friend Dr. Josiah Holland, whose drawings appeared in Holland's *Century* magazine. The surreal iconography of her visions of death—as in her fantasy about a dead woman in a "Sod Gown" riding to meet her doom with "Horses of Blonde" in a "Coach of Silver," a ghastly scene in *grisaille* (P665)—points to the work of American artists like Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847–1917). Dickinson would not have known Ryder's paintings, but she illustrates the spirit of several.[8] David T. Porter, in "Assembling a Poet and Her Poems," has linked her oeuvre to visual modernism and her writing techniques to those of the dada assemblagist Joseph Cornell, but one need not go further from the mid-Victorian period than her near contemporary Winslow Homer (1836–1910) to meet a painter whose dark meditations on mortality and specifically on empty space—what she called "Miles of Stare" (P243)—court shapes resembling Emily Dickinson's.[9]

What one consistently observes in her own art is evidence of sympathy with the ideas and techniques of painters. Sometimes, as St. Armand indicates, that sympathy resulted from Dickinson's participation in the cultural enterprises of her time. But in my view there were also singular personal reasons for Dickinson's uses of, and allusions to, the works of painters. Emily Dickinson seems to

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have been so conversant with the high art in particular of her own day that one may confidently hypothesize that she specifically cites famous mid-Victorian paintings by Church and others in order to fashion a personal language for such readers as Susan Dickinson or Samuel Bowles, who shared her tastes. Her awareness of the visual arts may be explained in part by her education and in part by the great prestige, particularly of painting, both in mid-Victorian culture and in her own family circle. Austin and Susan Dickinson were passionate collectors of Hudson River and Barbizon paintings.[10] Samuel Bowles's unpublished correspondence with the Dickinsons enthusiastically describes his own paintings and makes arrangements for the display of Austin's at Springfield charity events.[11] Despite the fact that she did not travel after her early thirties and probably did not visit the popular shows of Hudson River and Pre-Raphaelite art in Boston in the late 1850s, Emily Dickinson could meet the art of her day in magazines. Her favorite magazines—*Harper's Monthly*, the *Century*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Scribner's*—not only published articles about America's painters but occasionally provided descriptions and reproductions of their work. (So did some newspapers like the *Christian Register*, read by the Dickinsons.) The Austin Dickinsons, whose library Emily used, subscribed to the *Art Journal*. The verbal and visual sophistication of these magazines made it possible for her to see the work of such painters as Church through strikingly clear reproductions that rendered an accurate impression of the painters' subject matter and techniques. The wood engravings executed by Winslow Homer for *Harper's*, for example, would have met Dickinson's eye with an etched precision that makes some museum-worthy today. A habitual reader of *Harper's*, Dickinson would have encountered Homer's eloquent genre and war scenes so crisply rendered that she could become instructed in the manner and modes of contemporary visual art without visiting galleries and exhibitions.

Her interest, and her family's interest, in art, however, cannot explain the prominence of the idea of art and the artist in her work or, to be sure, the highly visual content of Emily Dickinson's poetry. For all her fascination with abstraction, she possessed a "visual" "sensibility" (St. Armand, *Culture* 221). That she herself drew, that she had taken lessons in linear and perspective drawing at Mary Lyon's Seminary, that she was "apt with a pencil" (Leyda 2: 284) and frequently illustrated her writing with pictures, underscores her personal attraction to the visual arts. This attraction, so variously manifested in the letters and poems, must be the underlying premise of such a topic as this one. Those closest to Dickinson were well aware of her proclivity to associate poems and pictures. It is significant that Susan Dickinson's original if discarded plan was to bring out an "article" on Dickinson's poems accompanied by her "witty" drawings (Bingham, *Ancestors*' 118).

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Hundreds of Dickinson's poems make her visual imagination abundantly clear. Many present her as a painter, first studying what she sees, then rendering the scene. Since the idea of eternity is, of all her metaphysical themes, the one that most preoccupies Emily Dickinson, she often discriminates what will last from what fades; and so even her domestic scenes often seek revelations. In "The Angle of a Landscape —," she describes herself measuring the small area of ground that meets her eye when she wakes: it holds the "Pattern of a Chimney," a hilltop, a steeple. The ground of her "Picture" shifts with the seasons, filling with emerald leaves in spring and snow-diamonds in winter. But the architecture of her landscape remains, like an essential self, and "never stir[s] at all — " (P375). Though she gazes, as a painter might, at a fixed picture in poem 375, Dickinson immediately invests it with motion: a property foreign to painting. She prefers to describe nature in movement or change. When she captures a sunrise or "finishe[s]" a sunset, as she says in poem 308, hers is usually an account of the progress of the event: "I'll tell you how the Sun rose — / A Ribbon at a time — " (P318). Her concentration is on what I have called *transitus* or movement from one state to another (*Passion* 7, 36, 83, 84, 329). This movement may be from life to death or from one to another context or stage of being. Thus one of her metaphors of *transitus* is a flower, seen first as a bulb, next as a bud, and last in bloom. Observing "Mornings," she says they "blossom into Noon — / And split their Pods of Flame — " (P620); watching sunset, she calls it "Bloom upon the Mountain — stated — / Blameless of a Name — " (P667). Her many descriptions of birds in flight, a frequent subject for artists, were also ways to describe natural motion. Sometimes she suggested a relation between flight and supernatural life: "Curve by Curve," "Out of sight? What of that? / See the Bird — reach it!" (P703). Higginson's favorite among her bird paintings, "A route of evanescence," studies the quick iridescent rush of the hummingbird among flowers with a verbal speed that is mimetic. Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904) was famous for his studies of hummingbirds in the 1860s; but his canvases do not render the experience of actual flight so persuasively as Dickinson's words.

For painting, after all — as distinguished from painted assemblages like Alexander Calder's, for example — does not easily convey the phenomena of change or movement; painting is static. Serial paintings like Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* (1834–36), which Dickinson's poems suggest that she knew,[12] triumph over this fixity by juxtaposing scenes that describe beginning, development, and end, the telescoping of processes which poetry may establish and complete in the span of one lyric. Their material stillness is the singular disadvantage of painting and other graphic arts when compared to literature or music, and, indeed, Emily Dickinson makes this disadvantage one of her more salient subjects. Despite her respect for painting, Dickinson likes to

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acknowledge its deficiencies in describing animation. And, as I have said, she makes her own "paintings" *move.* In her poem "The Trees like Tassels — hit — and swung —," for example, everything is in motion — not only the wind-tossed tree but the sun, the growing orchards, the busily gossiping birds, a snake "winding round a Stone —," and even the flowers slitting their calyxes. Compared to this scene, either in nature or her poem, she calls the seventeenth-century British painter Anthony van Dyck's "Delineation" of summer days "mean" (P606).

Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson seems always to recognize the cardinal advantage painting does have over literature: its immediacy of illustrative effect. That Dickinson, the writer, acknowledged and possibly envied this advantage is suggested by the fact that she sometimes drew a picture upon a page that contained a poem in order, she said, to convey her meaning more directly than words would permit. Possibly she did this because "All men say 'What' to me" (L271). Forced to accept the difficulty some found in deciphering her verbal pictures, she might accompany them with crayoned cartoons whose occasional crudeness could mock both her addressee's obtuseness and her own fervor — as if to say "You don't understand? Then let me *show* you."[13] Her habit suggests that she often associated drawing with *telling,* with narrative. So she says in poem 291 that, for all his eloquence, the great sixteenth-century Venetian painter Titian "never told" completely how beautiful nature is.

In the initial quatrains of her poem "It will be Summer — eventually —," telling and drawing fuse, as the poet describes the change of seasons as the making of a painting:

> It will be Summer — eventually —
> Ladies — with parasols —
> Sauntering Gentlemen — with Canes —
> And little Girls — with Dolls —
>
> Will tint the pallid landscape —
> As 'twere a bright Bouquet —
> Tho' drifted deep in Parian —
> The Village lies — today — (P342)

Here Emily Dickinson envisions a village buried in snow that, by a characteristic association of marble or sculptured forms with lifelessness or inanition, she compares to the porcelain Parian ware in use around 1850 and after for statuettes. During winter the village is as still and colorless as "Parian," she says, or, we may infer, a white canvas. But Summer will soon arrive. Then the landscape will be colored and populated by ladies carrying parasols, gentlemen with canes, and little girls with dolls. (Strikingly, Dickinson's poem anticipates the scene in Georges Seurat's *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* by about thirty

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years.) Her conceit of color transforming a white canvas need not suggest impressionism; but the "pallid" landscape juxtaposed with "bright Bouquet" evokes the startling effects many impressionists sought with light. Though Summer tints Dickinson's landscape — her use of the word "tint" in association with "pallid" makes this seem like a scene done in watercolor, not oils — her poem ends with the word "done" and with the awareness that summer always ends. Nevertheless, she reminds us, too, that "Lilacs — bending many a year / Will sway" again. Despite that voluptuous line, Dickinson's picture achieves the fixity of a Parian piece. It is a still life, composed of real and symbolic flowers: frilled gentians and a sunset like a red aster. Significantly, Dickinson provides us in poem 342 with a verbal "painting" based on the conceit of painting, in which the very word "landscape" conveys her interest in art. In the nineteenth century, *landscape* could mean either a portion of land ("Village") or a picture of it.[14] In poem 342, both meanings are relevant. Moreover, in the Dickinson family, *landscape* also seems to have been a metaphor for harmony and happiness. In "I reckon — when I count at all — " (P569), Emily Dickinson lists summer as among her four most cherished experiences. Therefore, it was perhaps inevitable that "It will be Summer — eventually — " describes summer as a living picture whose stillness implies rebirth, not death.

Few Dickinsonians are unaware that, when T. W. Higginson asked her to tell him what she liked to read, Emily Dickinson listed "Mr. Ruskin" first among her favorite prose writers. Volume 1 of *Modern Painters* had appeared in the United States when she was a schoolgirl in 1847. It electrified the American painter-editor William Stillman, friend of the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who took Ruskin as a "spiritual mentor" (Gerdts 55) in his art magazine *The Crayon.* By 1862 when Dickinson was writing Higginson, volume 5 had appeared and been highly praised. *Modern Painters* was to change the public conception of what art is or should be. An extravagant, learned, compellingly written celebration of the art of Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), Ruskin's book sought to explain Turner's revolutionary absorption in luminosity, romantic subject matter and movement in nature, as well as his liberated brushwork and composition — so free that it seemed to the nineteenth century almost abstract. Turner's forms appeared to dissolve in a brilliant haze of color. His art was to Ruskin prophetic; and it led Ruskin to revise his estimate of the relative importance of painting and literature. An ardent student of medieval and Renaissance art, periods in which painting was frequently regarded as a form of decoration related to furniture building while writing poetry was considered a semidivine act, Ruskin was moved by the art of Turner to glorify painting as an equal, even superior art. Having thought that "in representing human emotion words surpass painting,

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but in representing natural scenery painting surpasses words," Ruskin began to hand the palm to painters altogether: "the painter will become of more importance, the poet of less" (*Works* 5:330, 331). This had been the classic view; for while Horace's injunction joined literature and painting in a single mission of seeing and recording, Cicero's remark "Quam multa vident pictores in umbris et eminentia, quae nos non videmus" represented painters as mysteriously, semimystically, "seeing in light and shadow what we [others, even poets] do not" (see Hagstrum 3–29).

Ruskin, therefore, restored painting to a critical eminence it had not maintained for many hundreds of years; and his criticism was having its full effect just as Emily Dickinson began to read, think, draw, and write. Probably due to Ruskin—and before him, to the criticism of Emerson and Thomas Cole (who often composed poetic accounts of his series paintings like the seminal *Voyage of Life* [1840])—nineteenth-century writers frequently attempted to draw while painters sought to illustrate their portraits or landscapes in sonnets as well as on canvases. There came to be, then, a "privileging of the act of vision" (Freedman 388) in Dickinson's culture. Ruskin specifically encouraged it when he wrote in the third book of *Modern Painters* that "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see" (5:333). Ruskin had not known the work of Emerson until 1856, when one of his students remarked on the congeniality of their aesthetic commentary; and so he was astonished to confront Emerson's similar words in *Nature* (1836), an essay that Emily Dickinson certainly knew and that greatly influenced the Hudson River painters: "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."[15]

Emerson's words have limited application for the work of Dickinson, whose speaker (despite her pose in "I'm Nobody!" [P288]) never disappears into "nothing" but retains a shrewdly measuring, idiosyncratic gaze. Even when assumed into the elements in "Behind Me—dips Eternity—" (P721), she does not become part of a personal God but is set adrift in a menacing landscape. Nevertheless, the Dickinson reader—confronted with her incessant use of forms of the verb "see," her emphasis on the analytic eye of the "I" or speaker, her frequent conception of the poetic act as requiring insight and an illustrative imagination—knows how important such statements as Emerson's or Ruskin's must have been to her. Dickinson's own aesthetic observations in "This was a Poet" (P448) make clear that her poet is akin to Emerson's transcendental poet-seer and Ruskin's artist-hero: she/he is "Of Pictures, the Dis-

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closer" and, like Ruskin's Pre-Raphaelites with their respect for definition and detail, "distills amazing sense" from the "ordinary Meanings" — truths/facts/scenes — that nature and life present. For Dickinson, moreover, art's transformative powers over the psyche could often be playfully described in terms of painting (though music also gave her the "fascinating chill" [P1480] she identified with rapture). "Make me a picture of the / sun —," she jests, "So I can hang it in my / room — / And make believe I'm getting / warm / When others call it 'Day' " (P188).

The topic of what *Modern Painters* might have offered Emily Dickinson in the way of an artistic rationale, points of view (about composition, the uses of space, important subjects, etc.), is, quite simply, vast. *Modern Painters* literally falls open to passages that find analogues in her own writing. Just one example: Ruskin muses, "Whatever beauty there may result from effects of light on foreground objects . . . there is yet a light which the eye invariably seeks with a deeper feeling of the beautiful, — the light of the declining or breaking day, and the flakes of scarlet cloud burning like watch-fires in the green sky of the horizon; a deeper feeling . . . having more of spiritual hope and longing." And he continues, moving toward a word, a concept, that is central to Dickinson's work: "There is one thing that [distant space] has . . . which no other object of sight suggests in equal degree, and that is — Infinity" (2:200, 201).

St. Armand (*Culture* 261–77) has discussed Dickinson's affection for portraying sunset and sunrise scenes that are akin to Ruskin's, in both his prose and his drawings, though she does not always take spiritual hope but sometimes "Despair" (P258) from their light. The extremes of day she found mystically meaningful. Her intense preoccupation with light — all painters share this preoccupation, but it manifested itself quasi-scientifically in luminist and impressionist painting — is sometimes characterized by seeing visions in the sunset. Ruskin had encouraged this practice of finding shapes in the sky, which the earlier painter John Constable, influenced by Leonardo, called "skying." Doing some skying herself, Dickinson describes that "Juggler of Day," the sun,

> Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
> Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
> Then at the feet of the old Horizon
> Laying her spotted Face to die (P228)

In some poems she sees ships in the sky, perhaps remembering the many volatile Turner seascapes described by Ruskin and reproduced in thousands of steel engravings in the United States in the 1850s and 1860s. (Turner's art was so well known, especially in New York and Boston, by 1859 that the *New York Times* praised Church's *Heart of the Andes* by comparing it to one of Turner's

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"noblest works" [Roque 44]). Dickinson's sunset poems, "Where ships of purple" (P265) and "This —is the Land — the / Sunset washes —" (P266), regard the sunset as a colorful scene of sailors, wharves, ships, and bales in the "Western Mystery" of the dying of the day: just the subject Turner continually essayed, either in vaporous yellow or in reds that resembled Dickinson's own "Fleets" of fire (P658).

When Ruskin spoke of "distant space" in Turner's art, moreover, and linked it to "Infinity," he reflected upon the "Stupendous Vision" (P802) on which Dickinson continually meditates, appealing to the conceits of broad vistas and terrifying spaces. Her poem "Behind Me—dips Eternity" (P721) conceptualizes the infinite in a manner akin to Turner's on one hand and to surrealism's (a movement Turner's fantasias helped kindle) on the other. Thus actual and eternal landscapes blend terrifyingly for Dickinson's disembodied speaker. Natural regions like East and West and natural bodies like the moon are placed on the canvas of poem 721 in unnatural, chaotic, and hence awful and threatening positions. Here, Dickinson moves beyond the later melancholy of Turner and toward a more nihilistic, modernist vision. Moreover, in some poems like "Because I could not stop for Death," she anticipates the metaphysical obsession with death manifest in the last canvases of a few important nineteenth-century American painters: not only Ryder, in such works as *With Shaping Mast and Dipping Prow* (n.d.) but Winslow Homer—for Homer's *Cape Trinity, Saguenay River* (1904–9), in which he avowedly equated the giant empty blackness of the Cape with a problematic Eternity, might serve as an illustration of the mood of Dickinson's speaker in poem 712, where she associates Eternity with continual placelessness.

At the same time, if Dickinson sees no comfort in sunsets or vistas in such poems as 721, she also writes more tranquil lyrics such as "The Lilac is an ancient shrub" (P1241) in which her poetic sunset *does* evoke that spiritual longing and those intimations of immortality that Ruskin associated with the death of day. In reading Ruskin, moreover, Dickinson probably took seriously not only his ideas about making an artwork but his praise of two faculties in the art of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites. Ruskin insisted that these faculties were not contradictory but related. One was Turner's apocalyptic brilliance, evident in such paintings as *The "Fighting Teméraire" tugged to her Last Berth to be broken up* (1838) and *Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), wherein ships either float within veils of cloud and water or toss indistinctly in whirls of vaporous white. This romantic apprehension Ruskin described as "completeness of the expression of ideas," "fineness of finish" (3: 155, 154). The other—highly influential, one feels, for Emily Dickinson—was Turner's distinctness of line.

For Ruskin judged Turner to be rightly committed to drawing the hard,

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bright, settled scenes with sharp outlines and specific detail that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood associated with Giotto and all European art before Raphael. Turner provided "downright facts" "in all respects like Nature as possible" (Ruskin 3: 174). Emily Dickinson, to be sure, achieves visual representations of downright fact. For them, she is well known. And, as Ruskin claimed of Turner's, her factual scenes possess an underlying poetical truth. Thus she observes that "A Light exists in Spring / Not present on the Year / At any other period—." It is a kind of color standing abroad on "Solitary Fields." Such light is very real; indeed, Monet painted outdoors to catch its precise, somewhat withdrawn intensity. At the same time, like Turner's scenes that project desolation or exultation, Dickinson's poem about light in spring conveys an emotional response, the recognition of "A quality of loss" (P812).

Though hers is an affinity primarily with the subject matter of the high art of her day, Dickinson's poetry sometimes recalls American Naïve painting in its manner of presenting "facts." Sometimes she renders a scene reminiscent of those of the American limners[16] and Naïve painters like Thomas Doughty (1793–1856), who drew a series of objects together to make a primitive but illustrative picture. So, in a different approach to the theme of sunset, she describes the "Lady of the Occident," whose "Candle so expire / The flickering be seen / On Ball of Mast in Foreign Port— / And Spire — and Window Pane —" (P716). Even when she attempts the unsophistication of limning, Dickinson records beauty as fleeting. Her still lifes of mountains, flowers, and noon skies that become a "well" before a storm breaks (P1649) are, as I have remarked earlier, never really "still"; for she prefers the energy and glamor of nature in movement. When "a lane of Yellow led the eye / Unto a Purple Wood" (P1650) in her imagination, it was usually to find that a bird or a flower "contradict[ed]" the "silence"—the stillness—there. These poems, like the rest, are keenly observant, often exhibiting a detachment that fulfills the precepts of Ruskin. Ruskin's precepts had been espoused by the American Pre-Raphaelites in particular, many of whom worked in New England and, in 1863, formed what they called the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art.

ON ONE PAINTER, the British expatriate who gave its direction to serious American landscape painting, such works by Turner as the grandly eloquent *Dido Building Carthage* (1815) had been an immense influence. Thomas Cole's epic series *The Course of Empire* (1834–36) everywhere shows the influence of Turner. The importance of Cole's art and aesthetic for Emily Dickinson is equal to Ruskin's and Turner's, and even more specific. Cole was a painter of American scenes, among them such seminal landscapes as *View from Mount Holyoke . . . after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* (1836) in which a panoramic

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view not far from Dickinson's home was bifurcated in two "visual and symbolic oppositions" — "storm and sunshine, wilderness and pastorale" (Truettner and Wallach 77). These categories and such a bifurcation appear in some of her own landscapes. Cole's scenic paintings, largely done in the Catskills or New England, seem to have exerted a direct hold on Dickinson's imagination, and she probably had seen Cole's paintings and either read or heard about his widely influential "Essay on American Scenery" (1835) even before she encountered Ruskin's glorification of Turner in *Modern Painters*.

It was Cole's name — a painter's, not a poet's, or more precisely a painter-poet's, since Cole also published poetry — that Dickinson chose as a pseudonym for herself as artist. Joking with Susan Dickinson about her skill as a draftsman in a note scribbled on a page from the *New England Primer* in 1859,[17] she wrote:

> My "position"!
> Cole.
>
> P.S. Lest you misapprehend, the unfortunate insect upon the left is Myself, while the Reptile upon the *right* is my more immediate friends, and connections.
>
> As ever,
> Cole (L214)

Dickinson's jest is an acknowledgment that Cole's name was, for her, synonymous with nature painting. Since her scene includes a snake, she may have been recalling Cole's famous painting *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (ca. 1827–28). (Indeed, as I will suggest here, Dickinson's frequent use of "Eden" as a symbol together with her vision of herself as "Eve" may come as much from Cole as from her knowledge of Genesis and *Paradise Lost*.) When Dickinson adopted his name, Cole was the best-known landscape painter in the United States during an era when landscape had begun to surpass portrait painting in popular appeal. After Cole's death in 1848, there followed a huge wave of new reproductions of his scenes of the American wilderness and countryside. With their blasted tree trunks, sharp contrasts between light and dark, cascading rivers and angry skies, the wilderness scenes were to portray the glory of nature and the power of the Almighty. Dickinson's allusions to "Maelstrom" (P414), "Gale" (P1327), and "Thunder" (P1172) describe this power and glory as great but alarming. "Nature's Temper" (P1172) often suggests to her the vengefulness of a jealous deity.

Cole's synthesizing image for both the violence implicit in nature and its endurance — a proof of the benevolence of God — was the blasted or quartered tree. In well-known landscapes like *The Clove, Catskills* (ca. 1827), and *The Ox-Bow* (1836), this devastated tree appears at the left margin of the canvas. It was

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adopted by Cole's followers as a metaphor of conquered suffering. If trees could survive lightning and storm, so human beings could transcend pain and civil disorder. In her poem "The Wind begun to knead the Grass —," Emily Dickinson paints a landscape that could be Amherst in a storm: farm wagons, birds, and cattle hurry for shelter as lightning streaks across the sky. But she concludes her poem with the emblem that was Cole's trademark, saying "The Waters Wrecked the Sky," "Just Quartering a Tree —" (P824). She makes Cole's associations between storms and psychic storm in such poems as 362, in which lightning and storm are not external but metaphors of emotional distress.

Cole's verdant fields and pleasant valleys were meant to emphasize the providence of God, in which Emily Dickinson tried hard to believe. He found God's providence most evident in the American landscape. Although "American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European," Cole wrote, "still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe." He urged Americans, who could not boast of the elegant palaces and ancient ruins so charming in Europe and European art, to "cultivate a taste for . . . scene[s] of external nature" (100, 101). Cole's "Essay on American Scenery," which, like Emerson's *Nature* (1836), became fundamental reading for American writers, painters, and connoisseurs, established a kind of program for looking, writing, and painting. The subject matter he prescribed may be found throughout Emily Dickinson's poems although, as in the case of poem 824, she frequently regards nature with a more suspicious or ironic eye than he.

I believe that Cole's famous series of four paintings *The Voyage of Life* (1840) was probably known to Emily Dickinson even as a girl at Mary Lyon's Female Seminary. These radiantly devout, delicately triumphal paintings about a traveler and his guardian angel voyaging through life to eternity were so popular in the 1840s that, after *The Voyage* toured Boston and Philadelphia in 1843–44, they were turned out in subscription steel engravings and color reproductions by the "tens of thousands" (D. Sewell 226) and sold not only to families but to schools, hotels, churches, and hospitals all over the United States. In New England especially, *The Voyage* adorned schoolroom walls. Cole had painted it for the father of Julia Ward Howe, who intended it as a formative religious "text" for his motherless daughter. The famous engravings done by James Smillie (1848) were accompanied not by Cole's poems for *The Voyage* but by anonymous sentimental quatrains demonstrating the series' hold on the popular imagination. Certain of these quatrains bear substantive though not stylistic resemblance to a few of Dickinson's lines about the voyage to Eternity.[18]

Despite her religious skepticism, Dickinson appears to allude to Cole's

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iconography as to a traditional and appealing paradigm of salvation. Many of her poems employ the imagery of *The Voyage;* so, for example, the lines "Never to pass the / Angel / With a glance and / a Bow / Till I am firm in / Heaven / Is my intention now" (P895) evokes the second panel in which Cole's imprudent youth, intent on an imaginary palace in the sky, turns his back on the Guardian Angel and thus nearly loses his soul on the dangerous river's current. In the third Master letter (L248), Dickinson entreats the Master's love in a picture evoking Cole's last panels, *Manhood* and *Old Age.* She writes, "Oh how the dying tug, till the angel comes. Master — open your life wide, and take me in forever." Cole had represented the voyager struggling on the sea, his angel's reappearance; and the wide sky opening to receive him with the ascending and descending angels that Dickinson also pictures — "to and fro, the angels go, with their sweet postillions" — in Master letter l (L187).

There are other instances in Dickinson's writing wherein she seems to "quote" Cole's *Voyage* (see Farr, *Passion* 74–82). Thus Dickinson follows a custom intrinsic to the history of art and especially to painting whereby the newer artist cites the work of an older one in order to achieve a variety of effects from justification to satire to ironic comparison, lyrical emphasis, or more. "In nineteenth century aesthetics," moreover, it was "assumed that new compositions would often include references to earlier works" (Bolger and Bennewitz 110). Thus it was expected that Cole might quote Salvator Rosa or Claude and that Cole's student Frederic Church would certainly quote Cole — as indeed Church *did*, incorporating rivers and a cross in his landscapes, like Cole himself. Dickinson's poetic allusions to other texts, both verbal and visual, have notoriously caused one critic to call her a plagiarist (Walsh, *Hidden Life*, passim). But in Emily Dickinson's unique art, allusions work as metaphors.

Cole's assertion that America was a new "Eden" was instinctive to a painter-poet for whom Genesis was favorite reading and who had been impressed by the mezzotints about the Fall and the lost Eden done by John Martin (1789–1854). In 1828 Cole had represented *The Garden of Eden* as a pastoral landscape lightened by morning with tiny naked figures bathed in the radiant light of their own innocence. "I sow sweet flower from garden bed — " (P104), Dickinson writes in one of her early, sprightly poems that picture "Lawn[s]" and gardens dotted by spicy . . . "Carnations" (P81) as in Cole's Eden, a "still . . . Landscape" (P73) of "loving forests" (P50) and sweet serenity. But Cole's first Eden canvas was followed by another that is relevant to the more mature poems of Emily Dickinson. In these poems, nature is not always comforting but "troubles" (P956) the viewer with portents of death, suffering, and loss. Summer gives way to frost, and "when the sun reveal, / The Garden keep[s] the Gash — " (P951). Cole's second view of Eden was the momentous

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Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (1827–28). There, tiny wraithlike figures of Adam and Eve are portrayed, cringing and fearful, as they leave the sunny, fruitful landscape of paradise behind and are sent forth in terror to a shadowy, storm-ridden place of shattered tree stumps and barren mountains. The *Expulsion*, as it came to be called, was Cole's symbolic portrayal of the anguish of living, with the Beautiful represented by the closed Eden and the awful Sublime by the endless, dark road into pain.

In a letter written in 1878 Emily Dickinson acknowledged a gift of flowers by using the same words as Cole's title: "Expulsion from Eden grows indistinct in the presence of flowers so blissful, and with no disrespect to Genesis, Paradise remains" (L552). Dickinson's sentence reveals her perfect understanding of Cole's premise that the beauty of nature in America recalled what was lost—"We are still in Eden" (P109)—and that Americans might cope with the afflictions of life by turning to nature for solace. Several of Dickinson's letters, together with a remarkable group of love poems that use the word "Eden" as a metaphor of sexual joy, envision paradise regained. The experience is so transporting as nearly to intimidate: "Come slowly—Eden! / Lips unused to Thee — / Bashful — sip thy Jessamines —" (P211). Dickinson's Eden, like Cole's, is full of Persian flowers such as the jasmine. (Indeed, Cape jasmines—known today as gardenias—grew in her conservatory.) Cole's South American voyage and Italian journeys provided him with exotic flora that he placed in his North American scenes. Emily Dickinson's magically far-off *Peru*, *Zanzibar*, *Domingo*, or *Potosi* are so personally realized as to become New England neighborhoods.

The poet who wrote "A loss of something ever felt I—" and "A Mourner walked among the children" (P959) was probably describing a tendency to depression (as many psychologically investigative critics show);[19] "loss" and "lost" are frequent words with her. Since the loss of Eden was the primary human loss, it was therefore easy for Dickinson to see herself as "Eve." The conceit, humorously conceived, had amused her at age sixteen, when she was feeling a "stiff-necked" backslider in religion: "why," she asks pious Abiah Root, "am I not Eve?" (L9). The tiny figure of Cole's Eve, and indeed all the miniature figures of men and women that inhabit the landscapes of the Hudson River painters, recall Dickinson's minimizing vision of herself as the "Least Figure—on the Road—." She says she is "A single Ragged Child" in "Nature['s] monstrous House," both all day and at midnight, amid "Hills" and "Heavens" (P400). Cole, Church, Jaspar Cropsey, Asher Durand, Bowles's favorite painter Sanford R. Gifford, and other members of the Hudson River school typically depicted men and women in this way as insignificant amid nature's impressive grandeur. Thus Church's boy in *Morning* (1849) watches

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with awe as the vast red bowl of the sky fills up with light. His is certainly a "*little life*," even as Dickinson says of her own, compared to eclipses, sunrise, midnights, and "*Dawn*" (P236). Her lines "The Sun went down — no Man looked on — / The Earth and I, alone, / Were present at the Majesty" (P1079) describe that wonder which the American painters made an implicit subject in canvases that set a single human being amid nature's profound stillness. In *The Ox-Bow*, Cole represents himself with his canvas and easel, solitary—like Dickinson in poem 1079—before the landscape he paints.

Mountains, emblems of permanence, aspiration, and antiquity, were among Cole's favorite subjects. Again and again, he pictured them crowned by clouds, stalwart in lightning, waiting in massive splendor for dawn. Emily Dickinson's poem 975 is the portrait of the ancestral potentate familiarly met in Cole's canvases:

> The Mountain sat
> upon the Plain
> In his tremendous Chair —
> His observation omnifold,
> His inquest, everywhere —
>
> The Seasons played
> around his knees
> Like Children round a sire —
> Grandfather of the Days
> is He
> Of Dawn, the Ancestor — (F7, 1187; P975)

Here Dickinson imagines the mountain as an omniscient, ageless natural presence—her alternative for "tremendous" was "eternal"—such as broods at the heart of Cole's canvases. Her conceit of the childlike seasons at play below and her allusion to the mountain's primordial significance evoke many of Cole's works, but in particular the first panels of his seminal *The Course of Empire*, "The Savage State" and "The Pastoral or Arcadian State" (1834), which concern themselves with the passage of time. The former painting establishes a mountain just to right center, Turneresque clouds swirling round it as if to suggest its emergence from the dawn of Creation. The latter painting (see fig. 1) shows the mountain bathed in benign light, a temple (suggesting Dickinson's wisdom, or "observation omnifold") below it and children, like her "Seasons," at play in the grass beneath. While Dickinson's poem 975, like the others, may have arisen from personal experience—the sight of Mount Tom, so near her home?—Cole's many mountain studies, disseminated in the 1850s in mechanically reproduced images, might also have inspired her. It is

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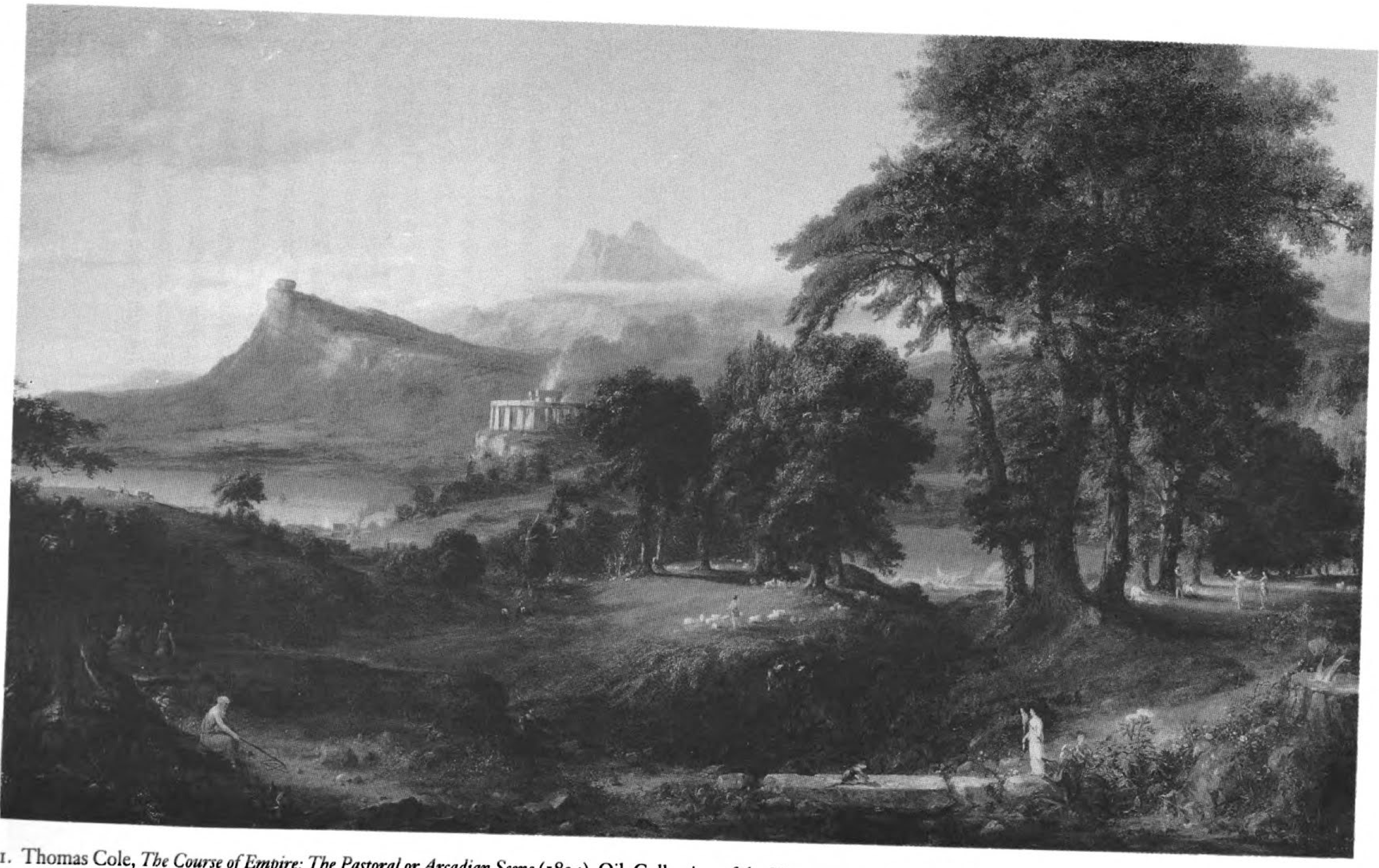

1. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Pastoral or Arcadian Scene* (1834). Oil. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

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useful to recall that, as Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., observes, "the products of the [American] image industry [at this time] were so ubiquitously available that they became a mode of experience nearly equivalent to reality itself" (65).

Though Dickinson chose "Cole" as a playful pseudonym, she was probably equally familiar with the famous art of Frederic Church, as her symbols "Cordillera" and "Chimborazo"—a mountain range and a volcano much associated for Americans with Church's art—indicate. An elegant, sophisticated painter, Church's superb *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860), like his many Niagaras, his South American volcano and landscape scenes, and, in particular, his visions of Chimborazo, made him wealthy, famous, and the subject of adulation in magazines like Dickinson's avidly read *Harper's*. The public showing of Church's *Heart of the Andes* (1859), with its river, volcano, Edenic trees, and blend of tropical with northeastern flowers (as if to imply, as Dickinson does, that Eden is at hand) was a national event.

During the early 1860s, Church spent his summers in East Eden, Maine, when Samuel Bowles was also vacationing there. Two famous men in a small town, they probably knew each other. In a letter dated May 21, 1863, Bowles wrote the Austin Dickinsons that he was learning to "row" off the "wild" coast of Eden. With her vitally symbolic fancy, Dickinson once observed of Bowles that "he was himself Eden" (L567), using the metaphoric Eden symbolism established by Cole and Church. (One recalls, as well, her poem "Wild Nights — Wild Nights!" [P249], with its line "Rowing in Eden.") For all its peculiarly Dickinsonian brilliance, "Wild Nights" shares in the tradition Cole and Church established of equating the American Wilderness with the New Eden. Another Dickinson love poem, "Love — thou art high —" (P453), moreover, describes a pacific scene in which a rower attempts to cross a lake toward a volcano, the same scene struck off by Church in *Chimborazo* (1863–64). Church began many sketches for *Chimborazo* in Eden, Maine, and it is possible that Bowles described them to the Dickinsons. In poem 453, Dickinson describes love as "the Chimborazo"—a mountain concealing fiery lava that, as it did for Church, signified passion yet was ringed round with the ice of repression. Dickinson's own poems about volcanoes, and even her association of Susan Dickinson's fiery temperament with volcanoes, argue her familiarity with their topicality in her culture: one that Church had distinctly stimulated.[20]

Frederic Church was a poet in paint, often more dynamic and symbolic in his vision and methods than Cole. His flower studies like *Cardamum* (1865; see fig. 2) remind us that Dickinson's flower studies do not only invite comparison or contrast with those of women artists, poets, and painters on china, though of course she would have been familiar with such efforts. In *Emily Dickinson, Woman Poet*, Paula Bennett associates Dickinson's floral poems with "the literature of flowers and sentiments," "books of poems and pictures too" (94) done

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2. *Cardamom (Ginger) in Blossom.* June 1865, Frederic E. Church, 1826–1900. Oil on thin cream board. 10 15/16 x 8 7/16 (27.8 x 21.4 mm). Courtesy of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, New York. Gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-676B.

by such as Henrietta Dumont in *The Floral Offering: A Token of Affection and Esteem; Comprising the Language and Poetry of Flowers* (1851) or Mrs. C. M. Badger, whose *Wild Flowers Drawn and Colored from Nature* was given to Emily by Edward Dickinson in 1859. Bennett reasons that "for Dickinson, as for most women poets in this period, the poem was "the verbal . . . representation

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of its subject — a 'painting' of another kind" (100) and hypothesizes that Dickinson's frequent choice of small flowers and small rather than grand natural subjects results from her feminine experience of nature.

Perhaps it may be seen as evidence of the androgynous character of true art, however, that while Mrs. Badger's "Fringed Gentian" print does present some of the qualities of careful arrangement of parts notable in Dickinson's herbarium pressings, Church's *Cardamum* even more successfully evokes the character of Dickinson's floral poems and of such pressed flowers as her "Coreopsis" (see fig. 3). Floral drawings were part of a wide artistic enterprise in which great painters like Church himself regularly shared. A topic intrinsic to this subject was the nineteenth-century study of botany, done both by schoolgirls who made herbariums like Dickinson and by artists who collected leaves and read botany handbooks. Dickinson's flower pressings in her herbarium in the Harvard Collection reveal a romantic sensibility with a fondness for lilies in particular, as well as a taste for symmetrical arrangement. Her "Coreopsis" is arranged to show its appealing "face" and delicate leaves at their most sprightly and therefore ultimate moment. Church's *Cardamum* (blossoming ginger, more exotic than her coreopsis or tickseed, yet similarly viewed with plain seriousness) is also shown at a moment of vibrant transcendency which Mrs. Badger's literal-minded "Gentian" does not attain. Church, Martin Johnson Heade, Jaspar Cropsey, and American flower painters like Fidelia Bridges — a mid-Victorian woman artist whose minute observation of detail is often comparable with Emily Dickinson's — might closely observe a flower; but they usually tried to imply its ephemeral delicacy, the beauty that resulted from imminent decay. Dickinson worked similarly: she liked to think of herself and her friends as "Roses of a steadfast summer" in a "steadfast land" (P163). But her flower studies almost always acknowledge the *transitus*, the "fading" of the flower "unto Divinity — " (P682). Such acknowledgment had been traditional, ever since the Dutch Renaissance floral studies that were foundational to this genre and in which a wilting or dead flower is usually depicted alongside bud and bloom.

Church's subjects, like Emily Dickinson's poems, include daily events. His painting *The Meteor of 1860* memorialized a double meteor that had occurred in July of that year. It was executed and shown around 1863, at the time when Emily Dickinson was writing a poem imagining meteors that described martyrs (for love?) convulsed by their light (P792). Like Dickinson's, too, Church's paintings suggest portents of the extraordinary in the events of everyday. In lambent works like *The After Glow* (1867) or *Twilight (Catskill Mountain)* (1856–58), Church painted the aurora borealis in 1864 as if it were a scene from his — and Emily Dickinson's — favorite Revelations. Its brilliantly apocalyptic rays predicted the glory of everlasting life. Around 1865, Dickinson wrote:

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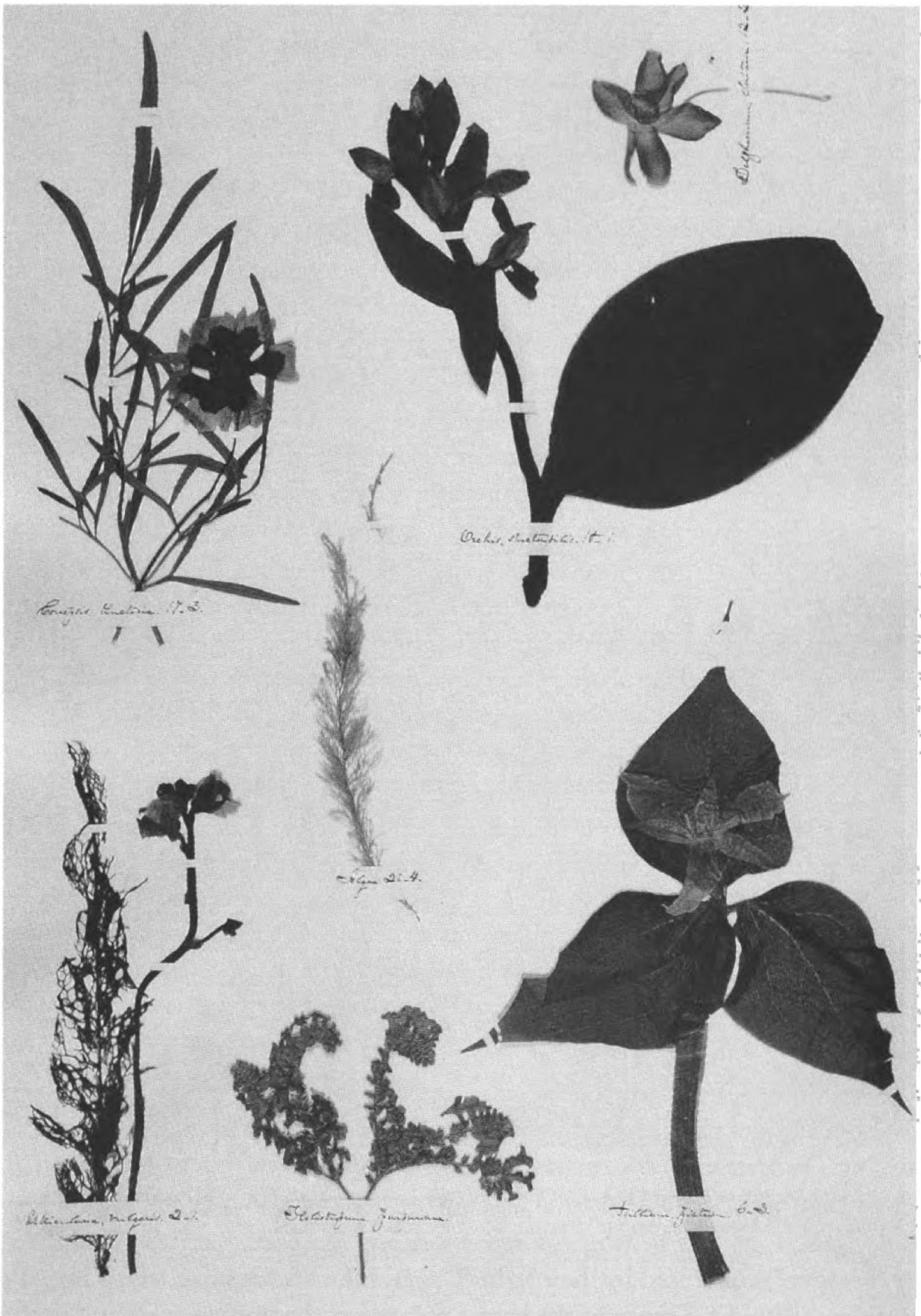

3. Pressed Coreopsis (*upper left*) in Dickinson's Herbarium, c. 1845 (?). By permission of The Houghton Library, Harvard University. (bMS AM 1118.11). © The President and Fellows of Harvard College.

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Aurora is the effort
Of the Celestial Face

Unconsciousness of Perfectness
To simulate, to Us (P1002).

Emily Dickinson's lineation in the poems is, and will probably remain, a topic of singular importance. Is it possible that principles of design may shed light on it? Are there any inherent connections between Ruskin's hypotheses in *Modern Painters* about freedom of form and Dickinson's idiosyncratic linear arrangements in the later manuscript books? Ruskin composed as a writer-draftsman. From first to last, he associated the methods of poetry with those of painting. *Modern Painters* (its subtitle *Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to All the Ancient Masters*) began as a defense of the progressive art of Turner against its detractors, who had viciously mocked his filmy atmospheric effects and the strange "bursts of light and color" (Gordon 119) in *Rockets and Blue Lights* (1840). Arguing for Turner's innovations, Ruskin proposed several rules for the poet-painter. One might be simplified thus: "artists should look for and abide by the laws of nature rather than seek to apply an artificial scheme of beauty to their compositions" (Newall 86). Another proposed that great art must be inventive and penetrate nature's meaning by eschewing arbitrary encasement in inherited forms. For Ruskin, "Line," in its "constant variety and unpredictability," "represented the infinity of nature" (Newall 113). Ruskin compared architecture and drawing to bookmaking and to literature on the page, likening the building process to the breadth of margins and the lengths of sentences. He composed his *Elements of Drawing* with a firm desire to teach pupils how faithfully and simply to "render nature" (*Works* 3: 196). But although he began his career by praising classical composition as the "type . . . of the Providential government of the world" (15: 162), his feelings toward government, as toward religion, altered; and in the art criticism Dickinson met in *Modern Painters* he demonstrated respect for recording detail but chiefly for improvisation, looseness of brushstroke, freedom of form. The "fully Ruskinian style of drawing [was] a style almost of absence of style." For example, "there is never any attempt to fill up the paper" (Hilton 17). Finally, Ruskin announced that "a sketch might give a more truthful account of a subject" (Newall 114) than either an oil or a photograph. And he compared the daguerreotype he had taken of the fanciful town of Fribourg with his drawing of it, claiming that the "sketch . . . conveys . . . a truer idea" (6: 46).

Dickinsonians may recall that Emily Dickinson disliked her 1847 daguerreotype and preferred to give T. W. Higginson a verbal sketch of herself instead. "I . . . am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves—"

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(L268). The photographic "truth" was that she was slight, with auburn hair and hazel eyes; but Dickinson offers Higginson a sketch made to charm, like one of D. G. Rossetti's tremulously lyrical drawings of women. Taken by itself, this gesture of Dickinson's is not so significant; but if it is associated with much in her writing that has the bright celerity of a sketch, it implies a truth about her art that recalls Ruskin's precepts. Like him, she valued, and her art is celebrated for, poetic concretion, what she called "the peculiar form—the Mold of the Bird" (L671). Nevertheless, her telegraphic messages with their abrupt, acute insights and the dashes that remind one of brushstrokes present the objective *and* emotional "truth" of the Ruskinian sketch. Suggestions of incompleteness Ruskin found "excit[ing to] the imagination" (3: 354). Dickinson's poems sometimes suggest, rather than define.

Recently, Dickinson scholars have been increasingly engaged in studying her unconventional lineation in many fascicle poems.[21] It is an issue charged with uncertainties, for Dickinson may write the same poem in a regular metric form like the quatrain or triplet in a letter but copy it in an improvised "form" in the manuscript books. Her fascicle lineations were regularized by Thomas H. Johnson, who assumed that, if Dickinson isolated a word or phrase like "the Dark" from poem 419 ("We grow accustomed to / the Dark") at the left margin of the page, she was observing the nineteenth-century custom of the turnover line for lack of space. Susan Howe, Jerome McGann, and other critics, however, have challenged Johnson's assumption, regarding Dickinson's lineation as intrinsic to her design and often metaphoric of her meaning.

We cannot know Dickinson's intentions in this matter; David Porter conjectures, even, that Dickinson's eccentric "scriptural forms" may result from "impaired peripheral vision" that caused an inability to "reliably ascertain a sheet's edges" (Review 127). But it is true that faithful reading of the visual "statements" made by her departures from traditional form often yields riches. In poem 419, for example, she contrasts ignorance with knowledge, and her symbolic opposition of the two (darkness with light / "Lamp") is emphasized by her lineation:

> We grow accustomed to
> the Dark
> When Light is put away
> As when the Neighbor holds
> the Lamp
> To witness her Goodbye (F15, 317, P419)

Emily Dickinson was a worker in words. For all the associations that may be made between her writing and the visual arts, drawing for her was secondary to writing (and her drawings were cartoons, inferior by far to her verse).[22] It was

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with words that she "painted." I do not mean to suggest here that Ruskin's prescriptions for drawing, rather than verbally inspired conceptions, directed her improvised lineations, which do sometimes seem crypto-modern: premonitions of modern poems in form. True it is, however, that Dickinson always regarded words as "symbols traced upon paper" (L15). It is also true that freed-up lineation in the fascicles seems to begin around 1861 (with fascicle 10) during the period when she told Higginson she was reading Ruskin. Did the free-form fascicle poems seem to her more like a Ruskinian sketch as opposed to the shapely cage of the quatrain—itself analogous to Ruskin's classical picture or daguerreotype? "What Liberty / A loosened spirit brings —" (P1587) was a theme of hers.

St. Armand associates John F. Kensett's painting *Sunset with Cows* with the imagery of poem 628, which, he says, "transfers Kensett's cows to the realm of cloud" (*Culture* 282) in a poignant verse-sunset. As we have seen above, Dickinson sometimes chose famous paintings as pointed subtexts for poems and letters. Since many of her love poems, in particular, were intended for and sent to Susan Dickinson, and since Susan's fondness for painting—like Austin's or Bowles's—was well known, the poet's practice in this style was witty. It cleverly enabled her to say a great deal swiftly and strikingly with the borrowed, implicit picture lending her poem resonance. An important instance of this strategy is provided by poem 317, "Just so — Christ — raps," which Dickinson sent to Sue. The subtext of this poem (as I hypothesize in the texts listed in "Works Cited") is almost certainly the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* (1853–56), the most famous of all mid-Victorian religious paintings, analyzed by Ruskin in Dickinson's well-read third book of *Modern Painters* and featured in the Boston press in winter of 1857 and spring of 1858 as the painting was being shown in New York. The iconography of this painting eloquently fits Emily Dickinson's purpose in poem 317. Hunt's Christ is red-haired like Dickinson and wears a white robe even as, by 1862, she wore white. On his head is a jeweled crown, surrounded by the halo or "disc" with which her passionate speakers often imagine themselves adorned. Like the speaker of this poem and others (e.g., P248) in which Dickinson dramatizes the fidelity of love in the presence of reluctance or rejection, he knocks at a door that will not open to him. Dickinson's script in 317 is inscribed by a bold hand that makes loose letters akin to brushstrokes while, emphasizing the poem's nature as a sketch, the independent entries "standing," "hiding soul," "for me," and "low" demonstrate the loneliness of the speaker. "Just so — Christ — raps" conveys its meaning through visual as well as verbal means.

THE RELATION OF Emily Dickinson's poetry to arts other than painting also offers insights fruitful to understanding it. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

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refer to the verse as her "Yarn of Pearl" and reflect that "she must have been . . . proficient with needle and thread," a proficiency asserted finally in the sewing of the fascicle books (*Madwoman* 639). To consider the needlework tradition from the 1740s to the 1850s in New England yields even more than this essential premise, which Gilbert and Gubar develop as an illustration of the poet's posture toward patriarchy in art and politics. Even for such a girl as Emily, who would attend a formal secondary school with education in languages, mathematics, and science, needlework was a traditional subject. St. Armand (*Culture* 154) observes that Dickinson "expresse[d] pride in her provinciality" by writing "I cannot tint in Carbon nor embroider Brass, but send you a homespun rustic picture I . . . saw in the terrific storm. Please excuse my needlework" (PF28). The "needlework" was her poem "Forever honored be the Tree" (P1570) about two angelic robins feeding on apples. (The robin nourished by new apples was a frequent sampler image, probably suggestive of the New Eden promised by Christ's Redemption.) As a girl of fifteen, Dickinson herself embroidered a sampler with a verse rather more infantine than was usual for girls her age.[23] Its purpose was apparently twofold: instruction in the useful art of embroidery and, as Puritan New England conceived it, in the more crucial reflexes of Christian devotion.

Four characteristics of the American needlework tradition are relevant to the growth of Emily Dickinson's mind. First, needlework had as its "frequently sounded theme" the "acceptance of death, including that of the sampler-maker herself." Thus a typical sampler, worked by Lydia Cogswell in Dover, New Hampshire, in 1804, reads: "When my short glass its latest sand shall run / And death approach to fright the lookers on / Softly may I sigh out my soul in air / Stand thou my pitying guardian angel there / Guide and conduct me through the milky way / To the bright region of eternal day / Then shall I joy to leave this clay behind and peace in happier mansion find."[24] Second, children were set to incorporating verses, like the above, within their samplers, most meditating on mortality. In addition, composition of the samplers was frequently inspired by prints or paintings, often European and often sophisticated, which broadened the scope of the girls' learning. A sampler wrought by Evelina Hull of Charlestown Academy in Massachusetts in 1812 was inspired by a Bartolozzi engraving after Angelica Kauffmann's painting *The Shepherdess of the Alps* (1785). That the iconography of famous paintings passed into the sampler tradition complicated and enriched the latter visually and technically. Finally, the sampler tradition encouraged the depiction of remarkably exotic scenes of faraway lands, one famous Connecticut sampler colorfully showing "a Grecian Lady visiting the Harem in the Bay of Bengal, India" with a (probably unintended) comical caricature effect accomplished by harem women ranged in rows. For Dickinson, with her mortality and mutability themes and her meta-

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phoric susceptibility to the allure of "The Habit of a Foreign Sky" and "Ports and Peoples" "fairer — for the farness — / And for the foreignhood" (P821, P719), this tradition could only have been another formative element.[25]

Martha Nell Smith's rewarding study of "The Poet as Cartoonist" explores Dickinson's performance not only as a caricaturist but as an artist in collage, for her cutouts from the Bible, the *New England Primer* (the cartoon accompanying her letter about Cole above derives from this source), and Edward Dickinson's copies of such works of Dickens as *The Old Curiosity Shop* reveal, as Smith asserts, the poet's "manipulations of texts" as "transformations" (71), new works — as is always the case with collage. The fact that Dickinson was willing to employ sacred or otherwise hierarchical texts for such purposes (which St. Armand calls her "art of assemblage" ["Garden" 9]) suggests to Smith that she made an intense transformative use of popular art. Dickinson's "collages" are often humorous, ironic, or satiric, providing new insights upon what Smith, Suzanne Juhasz, and Cristanne Miller call her "comic power"; yet at the same time, her jaunty stick figures bear an uncanny resemblance to the often tragically conceived small figures of Thomas Cole, suggesting once again the complicity of Dickinson's artistic stratagems in one poetic design.

Thomas Cole spoke of lifting his *pencil* (108) as the metaphor for painting. Emerson, praising Tennyson, said that "color . . . flows over the horizon from his pencil" (199). Once again, poet and painter become one in the imagery of the nineteenth century. Whether Dickinson is speaking of herself writing or sketching is sometimes ambiguous: "I took a pencil / To note the rebels down" (P36), she says of snowflakes. Which did she mean, drawing or writing? The fact is, the two were in a way one for her. The painters to whom Dickinson alludes — Michelangelo, Guido Reni (much loved by the Victorians), "Domenichino" or Domenico Zampieri, Van Dyke, and Titian — were seen by her as types of the universal creator. Although when she "count[s]" what matters most in poem 569 it is "First — Poets — " whom Emily Dickinson names, not painters, her subject matter, her Ruskinian aesthetic, her sensitivity to the look of her text on the page, and her frequent address in poetry to the idea of *seeing* make the connections between her art and the visual arts conclusive.

Dickinson's short poem "Image of Light, Adieu" (P1556) is an apostrophe to light itself, which for the luminist and impressionist painters was like a "character with a role to play" (Huntington 172) in the universe. A farewell to daylight, this deeply Platonic and mimetic poem salutes the idea of light as a metaphor of the transcendent. Imitating the rays, her dashes between "So long" and "so short" acting as defining brushstrokes, Dickinson declares light the universal "Preceptor" that "impart[s]" the truth about the "whole" of experience. If it may be said of Emily Dickinson's art that it is a "celebration of the act of perception" (Huntington 162), then "Image of Light" is her tribute

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to the natural power that enables it. For perception — light — is essential to both poet and painter, but it is especially associated with the visual arts.

Notes

1. References to Emily Dickinson's poems and letters are to Thomas H. Johnson's numbering. In quoting the poems, I have used the arrangements in R. W. Franklin's *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* when different from Johnson's.

2. Jean H. Hagstrum in the course of *The Sister Arts* usefully reconstructs the history of "pictorialism" (*enargeia*), a complex aesthetic phenomenon founded on belief in the "power that verbal visual imagery possesse[s]" and on Plutarch's conception that painting, because it has a superior "moral force," must be poetry's mentor in all matters of representation (11, 10). From about 1790 to 1890, the period of Dickinson's education and her own life, pictorialism became intensely suasive, resulting in an "exchange of imagery between painters and writers. . . . The painters raided literature, while the writers were endlessly describing and transliterating the paintings they had seen" (Dijkstra 150).

3. In *The Art-Idea* (1864), one of several critical studies owned by the Austin Dickinsons and possibly borrowed by Emily, the influential James Jackson Jarves complained that Benjamin Franklin's empiricism still ruled the American mind, choking incipient American art. But this was untrue. By 1864 the romantic Hudson River painters were celebrities. Frederic E. Church wrote a friend, "I cannot avoid creating a sensation wherever I go; I can't even walk Broadway without the street being crowded . . . on my account" (see Kelly 199). The painters' lives and works were continually remarked upon by the press, not only in professional journals like *The Crayon* but in those intended for general circulation: *Home Journal*, *Century*, *Knickerbocker*, and *Harper's Monthly*. All were read by the Dickinsons. Traveling shows of American art rival circuses as major public attractions (see Avery for a description of a typical show).

4. Using the mid-Victorian spelling of the painter's name, she writes in Master letter l (L187), "I wish that I were great, like Mr. Michael Angelo, and could paint for you."

5. A critic, Louis Leroy, mocked Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* in 1874 as "impressionism," and the disparaging term stuck. See Boyle 17.

6. "Hudson River School" was a disparaging term applied by the *New York Tribune* (1879) to the American landscape tradition of 1840–80. "Luminism," with its preference for restrained brushstroke, smooth surface, white light, has been considered either a spontaneous alternative tradition to Hudson River painting or its culminating phase. For thorough discussion of these movements, see the essays in Roque, *American Paradise;* Wilmerding, *American Light;* and Novak, *American Painting.* For a discussion of British Pre-Raphaelite art, see Hilton, and for Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites, see Ferber and Gerdts.

7. Impressionistically, Novak compares Dickinson to the "still small voice" of miniature and Whitman to "grand opera" (*Nature* 33).

8. Ryder, a visionary painter, chose themes of voyage to fuse this life with the next. His paintings, especially of riders and carriages, have an uncanny similarity to Dickinson's more surreal landscapes. See, e.g., *Pegasus Departing* (1901).

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9. Specific analogies between Dickinson's poetry and nineteenth/twentieth-century painting pointed out here have been discussed at the greater length the subject requires in Farr, *Passion.*

10. Barbizon, a French school (1840s–1870s) recommending *plein air* painting, took its name from a village near the forest of Fontainebleau, home of Théodore Rousseau. Barbizon painters like Corot and Millet were deeply absorbed in nature study; but their works do not present subject matter or imagery so directly analogous, like Cole's or Church's, to the work of Emily Dickinson.

11. The Bowles Papers (Houghton Library, Harvard University) show that the Austin Dickinsons' interest in collecting and showing paintings was shared by their—and Emily's—intimate friend, additional evidence of the family's exposure to the contemporary art scene. Pointedly informing Austin (in a letter of 14 Dec. 1863) that "specimens of Church come from . . . Northampton," Bowles urges him to send his "pictures" to "The Soldiers' Rest Fair" in Springfield, where "all Springfield [gathers] its gems for the occasion." Bowles adds in this letter that he has called on "[James Jackson] Jarves and talk[ed] about art and artists." The casual use of Jarves's surname suggests that Austin may have known him too (cf. n. 3 above).

12. See, e.g., "The Mountain sat / upon the Plain" (P975), quoted later in this essay.

13. As if he might fail (or try not) to perceive the deep feeling in her letter, Dickinson tells Bowles, "I must do my Goodnight, in *crayon*—I *meant* to—in Red" (L259).

14. Lavinia Dickinson's "There is no landscape since Austin died" suggests this. Bingham, *Home* 477.

15. Wilmerding briefly indicates a relationship between luminism and Emerson's ideas (97–98). Emerson's relation to American painting is curiously indirect; he was not fond of painting, but "it is clearly Emerson's parallel sentiments that make him the spokesman for painters" (Novak, *Nature* 300, 86ff.). To Dickinson's art, of course, Emerson's essays are foundational.

16. "Limner" is the antique word for painter. (When Dickinson writes Kate Scott Anthon, "you do not yet 'dislimn' " [L222] with *dislimn* in quotes, she is probably taking the word from her favorite play by Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* [4.14.10].) In the seventeenth/eighteenth-century United States, limners were often anonymous, crude portraitists with literal-minded, childlike techniques. "Sophisticated artists may deliberately affect a naive style" (Chilvers 323). So sometimes does Dickinson.

17. Reproduced in Smith, "Poet" 83.

18. For example, Smillie's engraving of Cole's "Old Age," depicting the old voyager on the brink of heaven, carried this inscription below: "This world recedes, it disappears! / Heaven opens on my eyes, my ears / With sounds seraphic ring!" Dickinson's poem 160 declares: "Just lost, when I was saved! / Just felt the world go by! / Just girt me for the onset / with Eternity, / When breath blew back, / And on the other side / I heard recede the disappointed / tide!"

19. See, e.g., the studies of Cody, Pollak, and Wolff.

20. Volcanoes, like other geological phenomena, were represented in landscape painting to describe Darwin's idea of struggle in nature. See Gould 94–107; Novak, *Nature* 47–77. Dickinson writes six poems about volcanoes; in 1677 she sees herself as a volcano to image her efforts to repress emotion.

21. See Martha Nell Smith's account of the editing controversy in this volume.

22. For example, the cartoon of her stick-figure father's arrival in Washington to serve in Congress is, as Smith says ("Poet" 74), both clever and satiric; but like

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Susan Dickinson's doodlings of houses on scraps in the Harvard Collection, it is also rudimentary.

23. The sampler: "Jesus Permit Thy Gracious Name to stand / As the First efforts of an infants hand / And while her fingers oer this canvas move / Engage her tender heart to seek thy love / With thy dear children let her share a Part / And write thy name thyself upon her heart." Note use of the word "canvas" as for a painting to allude to the fabric.

24. Quoted in Rita F. Conant, "Schoolgirl Samplers of Dover, New Hampshire," *Antiques* Aug. 1997: 201.

25. Works (other than Cogswell's) cited in this paragraph appeared in "American Schoolgirl Needlework," Eugenie Prendergast Exhibition of American Art, Metropolitan Museum of New York, Dec. 1995, and quotations are from its curatorial texts.

Further Reading

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Paul Crumbley

Dickinson's Dialogic Voice

Dialogic criticism, which draws heavily on the key concepts of "polyvocality" and "heteroglossia" to describe poetic utterance, begins in earnest with the Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist translation of Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, published in 1981. Previous to this date Bakhtin's work was already well known in Europe; the availability of this English edition significantly sped his introduction to Americanists around the world and for that reason acts as a watershed moment after which voice acquires new focus and direction within discussions of Dickinson's poetics.

Despite the fact that Bakhtin-inspired criticism of Emily Dickinson's poetry is a relatively new development, its antecedents can be traced back to her earliest readers' concerns with poetic voice. The initial emphasis on voice that began with the first edition of her poems in 1890 continued until the publication of Thomas H. Johnson's variorum edition in 1955 sparked a newly sophisticated approach to Dickinson's voice in what I term the first stage of dialogic criticism. Though innocent of the specialized vocabulary of Bakhtinian theory, the work of these critics provided a foundation upon which subsequent dialogic approaches would build. A second stage of criticism is more obviously indebted to theories of the dialogic voice, but it tends to incorporate such analysis incidentally: instead of being a focus for critical inquiry, dialogism in the writings of these critics becomes a way of answering questions raised by such approaches as historical influence studies, genre study, gender analysis, and the investigation of manuscript material. A third, most recent stage of critical concern with Dickinson's voice overlaps in many areas with second-stage criticism, distinguishing itself by its concentration on the dialogic voice as the primary starting point for inquiry into other aspects of Dickinson's poetics.

In the late nineteenth century, "voice" tended to be analyzed and appreciated simply as the poetic fingerprint of a poet—the "sound" which distinguished one poetic genius from all others. In his preface to the 1890 first edition of her poems, for instance, Thomas Wentworth Higginson concludes that while readers may "catch glimpses of a lyric strain, . . . the main quality of

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these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor" (Preface 14). He marvels that this quality is achieved by a poet "indifferent to all conventional rules" but nonetheless possessed of "an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness" (13). The predominant tendency during the first half century of Dickinson criticism was to see the poems the way Higginson did—as replicating speech patterns and intonations characteristic of a unique person, Emily Dickinson of Amherst. It is no wonder, given the subjective responses such stress on Dickinson's unconventional individuality encouraged, that during the decade following the first edition Dickinson was "compared or contrasted to no fewer than ninety-five other writers," according to Willis J. Buckingham (*Reception* xvii). As this observation suggests, the "alien force of her voice" (xii) has from the outset thwarted reader efforts to reach agreement about the nature and identity of this elusive poet.

It was not until 1938, with the publication of George Frisbie Whicher's biography of Dickinson, that the scholarly community embraced the *possibility* that Dickinson's "I" is not necessarily the same "I" as that of the woman who wrote the poems. Whicher was the first to attend seriously to the artistic implications of the representative "I" Dickinson outlined in her July 1862 letter to Higginson: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person" (L268: Woodress 193–94). Despite Whicher's reasoned effort to establish Dickinson and her voice within a larger and less personal cultural context, however, his study ultimately sharpened rather than closed the division between readers who understand Dickinson's voice as biographical and those who hear in her poems speakers addressing social, political, and literary issues that exceed the boundaries of a particular individual's immediate personal experience. Hence, Archibald MacLeish could write in 1961 that her poems possess "not only a *voice* . . . but . . . a particular voice—Emily's voice" (154). And Elizabeth Phillips could express her amazement that in 1988 "the view that she wrote almost exclusively about herself . . . pervades Dickinson studies" (81).

After the publication of Johnson's 1955 variorum edition of the poems, critics began to raise questions about Dickinson's poetic voice that would usher in the first phase of dialogic criticism. The issue of voice emerges now because for the first time the variorum relies on the chirographic nuances of her holograph manuscripts as authoritative guides to print translation. Consequently, this edition made available to the public poems that not only looked different but required a radical reconsideration of the way Dickinson constructed speakers and their voices. Perhaps the feature of the poems that most directly influenced thinking about voice was the now famous "dash"; the category of marks referred to as dashes suddenly introduced to the reading public a

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primary form of punctuation that opened rather than closed the poet's syntax. As Richard B. Sewall states in the introduction to his 1963 volume, *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "her ubiquitous and eccentric form of punctuation — the dash . . . has been a matter of concern to almost all post-1955 commentators" (3). This new dimension of the poems greatly magnified textual uncertainties about inflection and tone, thereby significantly complicating efforts to codify the way speakers' voices sound and what they mean.

Many critics responded to the challenge that such uncertainty posed by making two related assumptions: first, that Dickinson inscribed her voice in coded language; second, that the critical task at hand was to break that code and impose order on her otherwise chaotic practice. Embedded in this approach is a deep-seated belief in the power of a unified poetic voice to authorize accurate readings of texts. Johnson's remarks in the introduction to his variorum point to the extent that he and others believed identification of this voice would grant readers the authority to modify poems once the code was broken and the mind's ear attuned to Dickinson's predictable modulations. Commenting directly on the dashes, Johnson observes that, while in the variorum a "literal rendering [of manuscript punctuation] is demanded," he can imagine future editions in which "such 'punctuation' can be omitted" (P lxiii). Presumably, the aim of critics seeking to make sense of variorum poems by "correcting" the punctuation was to rescue Dickinson from the unfortunate circumstances of her manuscripts and by this means secure her the recognition they believed she deserved.

Edith Wylder's *The Last Face: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted's *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* represent the way holding fast to traditional belief in an authoritative unified voice created problems for even the most sensitive and imaginative scholars. For the sake of future discussions of voice, the precise terms of their arguments have proven less significant than the attention drawn to difficulties attendant upon any effort to establish a unified voice on the basis of manuscript evidence.

Wylder's 1971 book defended the position she first presented in a March 30, 1963, article in the *Saturday Review*, where she argued that Dickinson drew her punctuation from Ebenezer Porter's system of elocutionary marks. When Wylder presents Dickinson as instructing readers in voice qualities, she links voice to punctuation, demonstrating that the class of marks represented as dashes in the variorum may signify far more than the en dash suggests. For Wylder, Dickinson's "unique punctuation system became one of her means for bridging the communications gap, of lending to the written language much of that precision of tone, that 'breath' of meaning, otherwise possible only in

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speech" (4–5). The "system" Wylder applies to Dickinson uses four of Porter's primary elocutionary marks in combination with her own detailed descriptions of the length, position, and angle of Dickinson's "irregular" notations (8–12).

Lindberg-Seyersted's 1968 book builds on her monograph, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, originally published in *Studia Neophilologica* in 1965. In both works, she disputes Wylder's theory that elocutionary marks form the basis for punctuation in Dickinson's poems. Lindberg-Seyersted also makes two observations about punctuation that remain important to any discussion of voice. She notes that in taking a poem through multiple drafts Dickinson "did not discard the dashes as belonging only to an experimental initial stage, but retained them as essential to the poem" (*Voice* 196); and she concludes that punctuation is "an inherent feature both of her style and her personality" (*Punctuation* 2). Against the assertion that Dickinson was schooled in Porter's *Rhetorical Reader*, she offers an alternative rhetoric, a copy of which was part of the Dickinson family library, underlined, and signed "with her father's name and the year 1839" (*Punctuation* 24). This work, Richard Whately's 1834 *Elements of Rhetoric*, is described as "radically opposed to the kind of elocutionary principles . . . exemplified by Porter's *Reader*"; more precisely, Whately emphatically rejects as artificial the notion that "it is requisite to study analytically the emphases, tones, pauses, degrees of loudness, &c . . . and then, in practice . . . conform the utterance to these rules" (*Punctuation* 25). Lindberg-Seyersted then backs up her preference for Whately's more flexible approach to rhetorical rules by showing how difficult it is to apply Porter's method to manuscript poems without violating rhythm and meaning (*Voice* 192–95).

Despite their differing conclusions about the function of punctuation, Lindberg-Seyersted and Wylder both seek to excavate a consistent voice from Dickinson's stylistic innovations. Wylder opens her book with the declaration that Dickinson used Porter's notations to ensure that her poems

> communicated her meaning as fully and precisely and with the same sense of immediacy *as if* she had spoken them. That is the point. Her punctuation system is an integral part of her attempt to create in written form the precision of meaning inherent in the tone of the human voice. (4)

In seeming contradiction, Wylder later admits that "Dickinson's capitalization may either coincide with or alter the rhythms of her hymnal meters, depending on whether the particular meaning demand a conscious alteration of the logical base" (42). The suggestion here that prior meaning determines tone and inflection runs counter to her original claim that meaning is dependent on sound qualities determined by elocutionary marks. Two pages later, writing of the horizontal or monotone notation (flat dash) that "prevails in most of the poetry," she concludes, "surely the monotone is a guarded tone (and therefore

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often ambiguous)" (44). Both of these comments indicate the difficulty of achieving a precise sense of the "meaning inherent in the tone of the human voice," no matter how elaborate the notational system.

Like Wylder, Lindberg-Seyersted's determination to discover a single voice in Dickinson's poems inadvertently reveals the difficulty of achieving that objective. She states her underlying conviction in the clearest imaginable terms: "In the bulk of Dickinson's poetry there is clearly a single voice speaking directly to a second person" (*Voice* 57). Yet just nine pages earlier she observed of the " 'spoken' character of the poems": "Sometimes it is a childish voice; often we hear a woman speak; at other times, we cannot identify the voice precisely" (48). Are the child, woman, and unknown the same voice, or do we hear a single speaker with multiple voices? In her preface, Lindberg-Seyersted declares her allegiance to the traditional view of voice: "By the *voice* of the poet I understand her style" (10). According to this statement, the voice of style must accommodate all manifestations of voice in the poet's work, leaving the clear implication that poems not attributable to this voice are either flawed, anomalous, or evidence that the critic has yet to provide a sufficiently comprehensive description of voice.

As we begin to explore the second stage of criticism related to Dickinson's dialogic voice, we see a much closer resemblance of Bakhtinian concepts to increasingly complex ideas about voice. Bakhtin proceeds on the assumption that all living language is social, consisting of utterances with specific speech properties, including voice. Within this framework, voice expresses the unique perspective of a speaker whose utterances generate experience through dialogue with the historical meanings of words. "Heteroglossia" is Bakhtin's term for the point where conservative, centripetal histories of words meet the centrifugal forces of the present. "The processes of centralization and decentralization . . . intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language . . . but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well" (*Dialogic* 272). Words like "revolution" and "free market" that are quickly implicated in specific ideologies readily express the tensions Bakhtin describes between the centripetal histories of words and the centrifugal expansion of meanings possible in present utterances. The voice that emerges through such a dialogue with prior discourse implicitly or explicitly comments on that discourse; this commentary can then be read as the "socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch" (300).

Writers interested in examining the way Dickinson engages the Bahktinian cultural dialogue have used the concept of polyvocality to explore problems posed by the search for a unified voice. The work of critics like Lindberg-Seyersted and Wylder, which makes clear the impossibility of discovering a totalizing poetic voice in Dickinson's writing, becomes the starting point for

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later studies that define the speaking self as capable of multiple voices. For example, Lindberg-Seyersted's search for a univocal speaking self gets her into trouble when attempting to account for Dickinson's girl-persona: "a great many of her poems maintain a girl's or child's speech and outlook without the necessary distance to an outgrown state" (*Voice* 38). "Often," she writes, there is a notable "discrepancy between the childish language and attitudes and the grown-up situations in which the persona is involved—for instance, a love relationship with a man." The problem a "discrepancy" posed for Lindberg-Seyersted ceases to be a problem, however, when the voice possibilities available to the speaking self are no longer bound by a demand for uniformity. Cynthia Griffin Wolff has no trouble acknowledging more than one voice in her 1986 discussion of the child's presence in love poems: "love is an awakening from childhood into maturity, and the most elegant use of the child's Voice in Dickinson's love poetry can be found in an intricately wrought 'Anniversary' poem" (*Dickinson* 372). Even though Wolff holds to the belief that no matter how "disparate these many Voices are, somehow they all appear to issue from the same 'self' " (178), she does resolve the conflict evident in Lindberg-Seyersted's writing and by this means demonstrates how early contributors to the second stage of voice criticism moved away from belief in a univocal authorial voice consistent in all its manifestations.

The "dialogic voice," which assumes that texts are polyphonic and therefore contain within them complex voice relationships, provides the theoretical background most applicable to the social and cultural commentary that Wolff and other critics of the second stage present as issuing from Dickinson's voice. As Gary Lee Stonum has demonstrated in his 1990 work, *The Dickinson Sublime*, situating Dickinson in the midst of social discourse rather than on its margins affects our understanding of her role as a leading American poet. Dickinson, he observes, has rejected the "dominant myth of American literary culture," according to which "the great writer is an isolato, who retreats from the uncaring or impure realm of public discourse in order to create a world elsewhere, the artistic sanctuary in which [she] is the lord of meaning and form" (192). This new view of Dickinson as polyvocal artist speaking from the heart of her culture reflects the extent to which the analysis of voice promoted within this group begins to overlap with key Bakhtinian concepts.

Though Wolff makes no reference to Bakhtin in *Emily Dickinson*, she joins a number of prominent critics whose work in the 1970s and 1980s discusses specific voices in the poems with the clear aim of compelling fresh thought about Dickinson's involvement with central social and cultural issues. John Emerson Todd's 1973 *Emily Dickinson's Use of the Persona* identifies four categories of speakers: the little girl, the "lover-wife-queen" (xv), the experiencer of death and eternity, and "Personae Involving Psychology and the Divided

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Personality" (72). In 1975 Robert Weisbuch's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* describes Dickinson as a "tripartite poet" whose writing reflects "the awed child of perception, the suffering heroine of experience, the contemplative queen of connective thought" (77). Seven years prior to Wolff's 1986 book on Dickinson, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* delineates a broad array of personae that can be thought of as masks for a composite self made up of the child, the woman/wife and the queen: "is not the little girl really, covertly an adult, one of the Elect, even an unacknowledged queen or empress?" (608). Wolff's "Voice" chapter in her *Emily Dickinson* presents three subheadings that identify "The Voice of the Child," "The 'Wife's' Voice," and "The Proleptic Voice" as providing distinct perspectives from which Dickinson launches her critique. All four of these approaches acknowledge the importance multiple voices play in a poetic project that seeks both to expand the range of perspectives available to speakers and to use divergent points of view to critique American culture.

The perception that Dickinson uses multiple speakers, each one of which is capable of possessing more than one voice, helps explain why the process of establishing her position in literary history has been so contentious. Scholars who hear a single clear voice in Dickinson's poetry are countered by others who identify multiple voice qualities that may simultaneously affirm and depart from established traditions. Feminist critics represent this divergence of views with special vividness because of their interest in the socioideological implications of Dickinson's voice. Joanne Feit Diehl's 1981 analysis of Dickinson's relationship to Anglo-American romanticism, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, for instance, presents Dickinson as a woman poet whose "radical experimentation" reflects her "estrangement" from this "patriarchal tradition" (11). Diehl's ultimate assessment of Dickinson's importance emphasizes her creation of a voice that speaks in opposition to this dominant male line of influence: confronting a "canon formed by voices whose experiences she could only partially share," Dickinson creates "a deeply original voice" that places her "at the center of a newly emerging tradition of women poets" (186). In seeming opposition to this view, Cheryl Walker's 1982 study, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900*, places Dickinson in a tradition of American women writers whose concern with patriarchal oppression deemphasizes originality of voice in favor of covert communication: women poets "have constituted themselves as '*femmes sages*,' wise women, midwives of a sort, whose knowledge as it is passed on to others carries a female burden of dark and sometimes secret truths" (19). This voice, concealed as "a sort of palimpsest" (31), arises from a "self that has been violated, almost rubbed out, but that speaks nevertheless" (32). Along similar lines,

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Gilbert and Gubar present Dickinson as responding to the anxiety of authorship characteristic of nineteenth-century women writers by literally becoming the madwoman written about by other authors, most notably Emily Brontë (*Madwoman* 583). Doing so, they argue, allows Dickinson to sustain a multitude of public and private voices, leading them to conclude that Dickinson's "is a fiction of multiplicity which artistically adopts numerous roles and, even more artfully, settles for none" (636). Cristanne Miller seizes on the linguistic multiplicity alluded to by Gilbert and Gubar in her 1987 *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* and adds to it "a negative stance, indirection, and subversion" (162) to suggest that Dickinson's language "could almost have been designed as a model for several twentieth-century theories of what a woman's language might be" (161). For Miller, Dickinson's indirection comes through a combination of women's speech and men's language (159) that keeps "audible both her love of the world and of language and her rejection of its attempts to keep her 'still'" (184). By acknowledging the language of men, Dickinson frees herself to confidently create "a new poetic language" through which she reveals "a whole spectrum" of "speaker's roles" (185).

Such a wide range of arguments, all sensitive and compelling readings, indicate the difficulty in categorizing Dickinson's multifaceted poetic voice. As if in response to such a dizzying array of possibilities, Mary Loeffelholz's 1991 *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* and Betsy Erkkila's 1992 *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* focus on the difficulty of establishing clear lines of influence leading up to and away from Dickinson. Loeffelholz writes of "Dickinson's first-person plural" that distances "one consciousness from the next" but does not constitute "an erasure of other existences" (38). This "inflected presence of another's voice" reflects the self's suspicious embrace of the other that Loeffelholz sees as indicative of a "non-idealizing 'countertradition' of women's writing" (38, 170). Erkkila similarly argues that, rather than imputing to Dickinson an "essentializing . . . desire" for "a univocal female psychology" (44), it would be more productive to view the entire "category 'woman poet' as itself the subject of historical struggle" (8). According to her, Dickinson transforms culture and literature by realizing "that it is on the level of language that she can resist subjection to the systems of masculine power—religious, social, and linguistic—by questioning and destabilizing its terms" (24). In this context, Dickinson becomes part of an antitradition that makes difficult either the identification of roots in the nineteenth century or speculation about her contribution to a future feminine language.

This array of differing and often conflicting perspectives betrays the dialogic character of Dickinson's voice, particularly its evocation of divergent discourses, none of which it totalizes or masters. The syntactic ruptures and

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sudden shifts of perspective that give rise to such a diversity of responses have quite understandably provoked speculation about her stature as a lyric poet. Investigations into Dickinson's use of the lyric form have sparked debate about the interrelationship of voice and self, as lyric is generally considered the literary genre best suited to single-voiced speakers. Sharon Cameron introduces the way Dickinson expands the repertoire of options available to lyric poets in her 1979 study *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre.* There she describes lyric speech as arising from a "choral voice . . . disguised under the cloak of a customary first-person speaker" (207). In making her point, Cameron refers to J. Hillis Miller's observation that in narrative voice " 'there is always . . . something left over or something missing' " so that " 'one way or another the monological becomes dialogical' " (208). Cameron concludes that despite Dickinson's use of what Wallace Stevens "would have called 'flawed words and stubborn sounds,' " her poetry addresses conventional lyric aims by throwing "into relief the shape of the lyric struggle itself" (260). Margaret Dickie significantly extends the implications for the speaking self hinted at by Cameron when she argues in her 1991 *Lyric Contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens* that Dickinson's poetry "may offer not only a new model for reading the lyric but a new and perhaps persuasively feminist model of self-presentation." Dickie sees the imposing of master narratives by feminists as part of a long line of critical maneuvers designed to tame "an individuality that resists final representation" (29).

The persistence of efforts like Cameron's and Dickie's to define Dickinson's writing as part of a literary genre or school of thought points to the dialogic complexity of a poetic project that resists containment in established literary categories. Stonum has this resistance in mind when he writes that she "shows very little concern with form as such, and she manifests a positive dislike for achieved stability" (66). The generic "indeterminacy" and "semantic open-endedness" implicit in these analyses of Dickinson's practice suggest a link to what Bakhtin describes as the "novelization of other genres" (*Dialogic* 6–7). Bakhtin argues that through this novelization all genres become

> more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia . . . they become dialogized . . . and finally . . . the novel inserts into these other genres . . . a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (7)

Barton Levi St. Armand speaks directly to this novelized quality of Dickinson's work in his 1984 *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* where he describes her creation of a new and paradoxical female genre that distinguishes itself by its mix and hence defiance of codes that would fix genre identity: "an art of assemblage, a 'quilting' of elite and popular ideas onto a sturdy underly-

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ing folk form, frame, of fabric" (9). St. Armand's admission that "it is still far too early in the history of Dickinson criticism to declare that there is no other design at all, no mega-motif that makes the whole comprehensible" (10), both reflects the openendedness of novelization and accurately sums up the way Dickinson's voices defy any easy categorization according to genre.

Respecting the visual representations of speakers who can wield such potent voices has posed a special challenge for critics who work directly with Dickinson's holograph manuscripts. Once Dickinson scholars began to read her manuscripts and letters as a literary artist's explorations into cultural definitions of self and not the eccentric outpourings of a "partially cracked poetess" (qtd. in note to L481), interest naturally gravitated to possible linkages between her textual innovations and polyvocality. Examination of manuscript materials has been especially influential in directing scholarly attention to the multitude of chirographic markers Dickinson uses to show readers that speech resists monologic containment. Bakhtin's observation that "there are not voiceless words" but, rather, that "each word contains voices that are sometimes infinitely distant . . . and voices resounding nearby and simultaneously" (*Speech Genres* 124) has special implications for Dickinson's highly disruptive style. Her punctuation, line breaks, and capitalization appear designed to isolate words and release voice possibilities that challenge the view of self as unified and single-voiced.

If speakers in the letters, poems, and fascicle books are continuously transforming the immediate present in ways no master narrative accounts for, how can we make sense of these materials? Cameron takes up these issues in her 1992 study of the fascicle manuscripts, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*, where she argues that concerns like these come down to "a question of the in(ter)determinacy of meaning, whether with respect to the relation *among* poems in a fascicle or with respect to variants *in* poems" (159). According to Cameron, a distinctive feature of Dickinson's writing is the way she brings indeterminacy to the foreground, denying monologic exclusivity at every turn: "the presumption that choosing is necessary is contested by the representation of not choosing, for in the poems the choice of particular words implied by the lyric frame to be imperative is rather shown to be impossible" (23). The lyric promise of the poems is in this way deliberately frustrated precisely because the voice is always plural, the speakers polyvocal. Cameron concludes that "Dickinson herself was uncertain about how her poems should be read, an uncertainty demonstrated by the fact that she both sent her poems to friends as individual lyrics and also copied them in the fascicles in sequences" (40).

In her 1992 *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*, Martha Nell Smith reverses the question of Dickinson's relation to genre by asking not whether she fits into or defies the lyric mold but rather how critics might best charac-

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terize her intentional creation of new genre possibilities. A more complete knowledge of this project will contribute to what Smith calls a "hermeneutics of 'Possibility' ": "a story of reading lending itself to a thousand and more interpretations, all of which may be faithful to Dickinson's poetic project" (58). Referring specifically to Bakhtin, Smith states that readers' sensitivity to "the 'heteroglossia' of all forms of communication" is an indispensable feature of the hermeneutics she has in mind. Acknowledging heteroglossia will increase reader appreciation for "the poet with a 'Vice for Voices' " who always creates "multivoiced" representations that "tell stories they do not intend as well as those the author and editors mean to convey" (48).

Cast in this light, the concept of the dialogic voice not only offers a methodology for reading Dickinson's many stylistic innovations but aids in the formulation of a rationale for her reluctance to publish her poems. As recent studies like Smith's and Cameron's testify, Dickinson may have chosen not to publish because she knew that doing so would have meant either bowing to established editorial practice or failing to reach an audience. Publishing conventions would have demanded that she regularize her punctuation, capitalization, and line breaks, thereby sacrificing innovations clearly linked to voice in a bid to win public approval.

The most frequently cited evidence of Dickinson's refusal to conform to the demands of publication comes from her March 17, 1866, letter to Higginson in which she objects to the *Springfield Republican*'s having altered punctuation in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (P986, including the editor's note; L316). Critics increasingly agree that the basis for Dickinson's objection lies in the way regularized punctuation monologizes meaning and unifies voice. Martha Nell Smith sees Dickinson's dissatisfaction with the editorial insertion of a question mark at the end of the third line as demonstrating her sensitivity to the imposition of unity where multiplicity was intended:

> By emphasizing the break between the lines, the punctuation practically insists on a particular reading, whereas its omission makes the relationship between the two lines more indeterminate, hence encouraging more interaction by the reader and more possibilities to create meaning. (*Rowing* 12)

Commenting on this same question, Stonum similarly concludes that Dickinson's version conveys "the more striking, more Dickinsonian note" by "allowing two different possibilities (in this case vocally incompatible ones)" (28).

As these remarks demonstrate, sensitivity to the dialogic voice in Dickinson comes from the willingness of readers to embrace the uncertainty provoked by her introduction of heteroglossia, that opening of the text to what Bakhtin calls "the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object" (*Dialogic* 278). When this occurs, readers are called upon to thread the

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