Telling It Slant

REASSESSING EMILY DICKINSON IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY BARBARA BASBANES RICHTER

Emily Dickinson's place among the world's great poets has been secure since her first collection appeared in print: a slim volume, simply entitled *Poems*, posthumously issued in 1890 by Roberts Brothers of Boston. But along with publication came gossip about the poet as the consummate outsider, the "Myth" dressed in white who spoke to visitors through doorways, the childlike "Belle of Amherst" who never left home and had few friends except for a shaggy, faithful Newfoundland named Carlo.

LEFT
Emily Dickinson, Daguerreotype, ca. 1847. Amherst College Archives & Special Collections. Gift of Millicent Todd Bingham, 1956, 1956.002.

The floral wallpaper from Emily Dickinson's bedroom in Amherst, displayed at the Morgan. Photography by Janny Chiu.

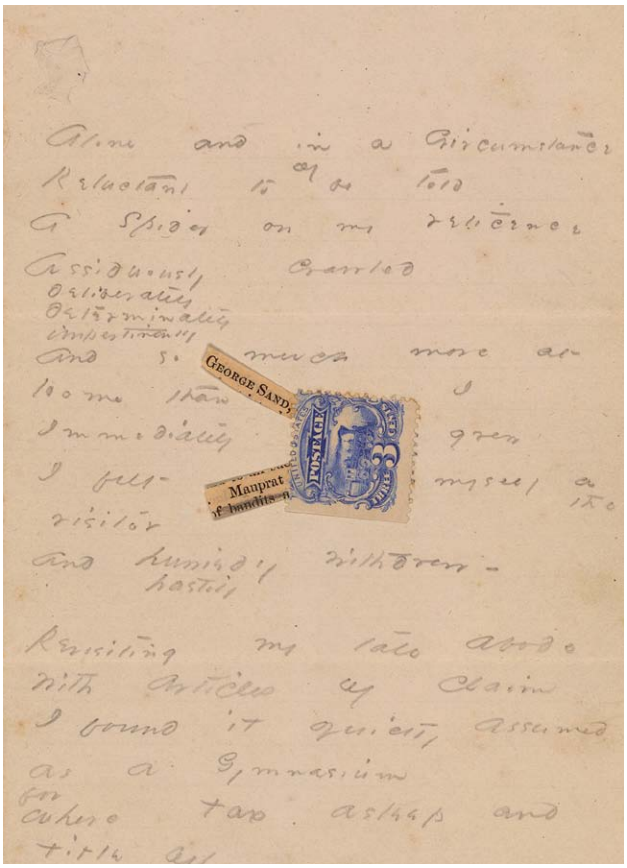
TOP RIGHT
Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst, Massachusetts, now the Emily Dickinson Museum. Photography by Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism.

RIGHT
Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890. Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.

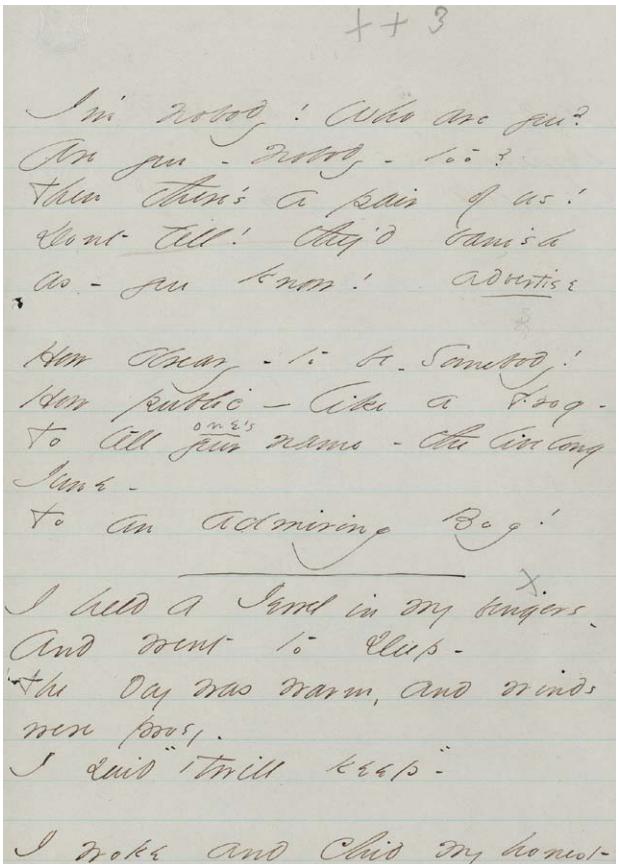
FAR RIGHT
Lock of Emily Dickinson's hair sent to Emily Fowler Ford, ca. 1853. Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson, "Alone and in circumstance," Poem with "George Sand" and "Mauprat" clipped from *Harper's Monthly* pasted to sheet, ca. 1870. Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.



Emily Dickinson, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" Poem, ca. late 1861. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

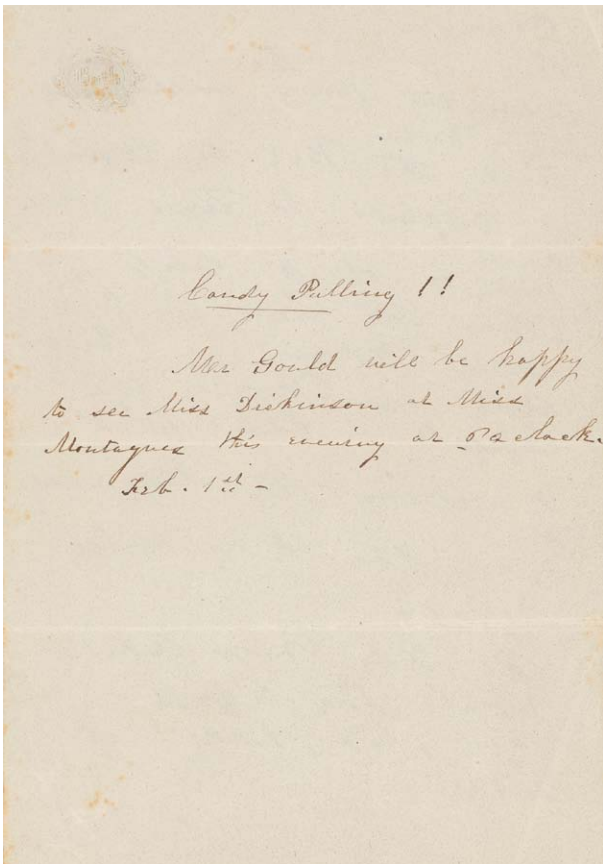
Much of that is now open for reconsideration, however, with the simultaneous opening of a landmark retrospective at New York's Morgan Library & Museum, the renovation of Dickinson's gardens and greenhouse, and the release of a feature film biopic directed by Terence Davies. Scholars may find even more consequential the unprecedented open access to most of the poet's existing written material at institutions that have carefully preserved her archives for decades.

"Dickinson was more nuanced than we've been led to believe," said Brooke Steinhauser, curator of the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts.

These days, research focuses more on the materiality of Dickinson's work, such as the bundled poems she stitched together with needle and thread known as fascicles. When Dickinson abandoned that practice later in life—viewed by some to be her own form of "self-publication"—she turned to repurposed envelopes, candy wrappers, and other scraps as writing surfaces. Some scholars now believe that these were not all variants or drafts but the final products of a visual artist at work.

This change in perception dates back to 1981, when Ralph W. Franklin, at that time librarian of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, edited a facsimile edition of all of Dickinson's manuscript books and fascicles for Harvard University Press, the first time any of her manuscripts were disseminated publicly. The 2013 publication by New Directions Press of *The Gorgeous Nothings* by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin is a sort of bookend to Franklin's project; a full-color examination of Dickinson's envelope writing from 1864 to 1886 that reproduces the poems to size, recto-verso, with transcriptions accompanying every poem. Like Franklin's work, the publication is a revelation for most readers whose only prior interaction with Dickinson's poetry was in conventionally printed formats.

These manuscripts reveal Dickinson's epistolary form of creative expression. She may have had only a small envelope at her disposal, but she used every corner to fashion poetry that soars into new dimensions of spiritual and psychological exploration. "We no longer have to convince people that Dickinson's poems must be seen in manuscript form to better understand them," said Mike Kelly, Amherst College's head of archives and special collections.


Candy Pulling 1!

Mrs Gould will be happy
to see Miss Dickinson at Miss
Montagues this evening at 8 o'clock.
Feb. 1st –

Emily Dickinson, "I suppose the time will come," Poem written in 1876 on the verso of invitation from George Gould dated February 3, 1850. Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.

"Compare her manuscripts to the transcriptions and see if everything on that scrap is captured."

Dickinson's patterns of rhythm and sound are unbound in her manuscripts. Consider "The way Hope builds his House," squeezed onto an envelope cut to resemble the frame of a house. This poem, currently on display at the Morgan, does not exist in any other version, suggesting that this collage of figure and form may be exactly what she intended.

Dickinson's manuscripts are almost neatly divided between Amherst's collection of 850 manuscripts and Harvard's 1,023-piece collection, while five other institutions like Smith College and the American Antiquarian Society keep smaller archives. In an unparalleled effort, the seven institutions with Dickinson holdings recently joined forces to provide unrestricted access to the separate collections through a single, massive online database maintained by Harvard. Though the Emily Dickinson Archive is not yet complete, it already includes hundreds of poems, letter-poems, transcripts, and scholarly annotations.

The digitized Emily Dickinson Archive hasn't gone unnoticed: Leslie Morris, head manuscript curator at Harvard's Houghton Library, said the site receives over 400,000 page views per month, with 300,000 unique monthly users. Among the most popular search items is a dictionary called the Lexicon. Poem headwords are alphabetized, defined, and tied to bits of poetry to identify how those words are applied in context. Though there's little substitute for physical contact with the objects—Dickinson's diminutive eighteen-inch cherry wood writing desk and chair are considered the crown jewels of the Houghton Library's Emily Dickinson Collection—"One of the motivating forces behind the online archives was that all these images should be accessible no matter where they are," said Morris.

The newfound camaraderie between Harvard and Amherst comes after over a century of spats dating to when Emily instructed her sister, Lavinia, to burn all her correspondence upon her death, but left no instructions regarding her poems. After discovering hundreds of verses, Lavinia wanted them published, and brought the material to her sister-in-law, Susan, a longtime reader of Emily's work. Susan dawdled, and in a bizarre twist Lavinia retrieved the poems and gave them to Mabel Loomis Todd, an Amherst College faculty wife (and mistress of Susan's husband, Austin Dickinson). Todd, along with Dickinson mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, published those initial three volumes of poetry in the 1890s but also regularized Dickinson's work to fit conventional reader expectations.

Tensions flared between Todd and the Dickinson women after Austin died, and battle lines were drawn after a scathing property dispute. Harvard received Susan and Austin's trove in 1950, while Todd's material arrived at Amherst six years later.

That split perpetuated divisions regarding access to the manuscripts, up to and including arguments in 2013 about putting the digitized archives behind a paywall. (Ultimately, they weren't.) "It's hard to see this history continue to be played out—for example, the gift agreement to Harvard stipulated that certain Amherst professors not be allowed to view these manuscripts," said Morris, who also serves on the board of governors at the Emily Dickinson Museum, in part to bury the hatchet and encourage open dialogue between the two institutions.

Known as the Homestead, the museum is the Dickinson family home where restoration efforts have included decorating the poet's bedroom with historically accurate rose-patterned wallpaper and furnishing it with a replica of her writing desk. Recently, reconstruction began on a greenhouse once located on the property that provided refuge and inspiration for Dickinson, an amateur botanist, who, as a teenager, produced a collection of four hundred pressed specimens known as the Herbarium. "This room was important to this poet who was a gardener at heart," said Brooke Steinhauser. Renovation of the gardens and greenhouse also compels reexamination of her life and

work, she added.

The Morgan Library's blockbuster *I'm Nobody, Who Are You?* exhibition, named after one of Dickinson's most famous poems, is an ambitious bid to reverse the anti-social stereotype. It is also the first time that nearly one hundred items from Amherst and Harvard have been united in over a century. A biographical examination of Dickinson's life within the exhibit explores her poetic development, her unique manuscript practice, and her surprising social life.

"Dickinson wrote almost 1,800 poems. Roughly ten were published during her lifetime, and in some cases, probably without her knowledge or consent," explained Morgan Library co-curator Carolyn Vega. "Untangling how to interpret and publish her work has been a challenge for editors since the 1890s. She was typecast as a recluse in white who spoke to nobody. She retreated from public life but maintained and developed new relationships with friends and editors through her letter writing."

Forgoing a traditional audio guide, contemporary poet Lee Ann Brown reads the twenty-four displayed poems aloud on a downloadable app, a practical feature since Dickinson's handwriting fluctuates from spidery cursive to wildly expressive semaphores spreading across the pages. She developed idiosyncratic letter formations as she aged—Ys, for example, have dramatic flourishes—and her spelling and punctuation is unconventional as well.

Perhaps the highlight of the show is a triptych mounted on a rear wall of the exhibit showcasing a lock of Dickinson's scarlet-red hair, the iconic 1847 daguerreotype of Dickinson in its velvet case, and a recently discovered 1859 daguerreotype entitled, "Portrait of Two Seated Women," which some believe may be the poet seated next to friend Kate Turner. Emily is possibly the woman on the left, wearing clothes a decade out of fashion, lightly draping her arm around Kate's back, confidently staring into the lens. Though unverified, alongside the authenticated images the portrait offers the tantalizing prospect of seeing the twenty-nine-year-old poet nearing the height of her talent and output.

"There's something about being able to commune directly with the physical object that cannot be replaced by a digital image," said Mike Kelly, who co-curated the show. "Take the 1847 daguerreotype. It's 3 [inches] by 2 ½ [inches] in a plush case with all the scratches and marks usually edited out, but seeing it might trigger new thinking about what the function of that image was."

To debunk the theory that the Civil War passed Dickinson with barely any notice, the Morgan's show

Cynthia Nixon (Emily Dickinson) and Jennifer Ehle (Lavinia Dickinson) in *A Quiet Passion*.

includes an Amherst College musket and a carte-de-visite of soldier Frazar Stearns. "Students drilled in her soundscape. Dickinson wrote to [Springfield *Republican* editor] Sam Bowles about the death of the college president's son in battle. The Civil War was a part of her life, even if there is less written evidence than we'd like," Kelly explained. "Overall, the show is an attempt to correct—or perhaps complicate—the way we see the poet, and how much fuller her life experience was than we may imagine."

Another exploration of Dickinson's personal life comes in the form of a film—renowned British filmmaker Terence Davies (*The House of Mirth*, *The Deep Blue Sea*) imagines what may have been the poet's relationship with her family members while coming to terms with her own avant-garde artistry. Davies first encountered Dickinson's poetry as a teenager listening to a local radio station. "The first poem I heard was, 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death.' Then I read all the anthologies I could find. I think Dickinson is America's greatest poetess of the nineteenth century," Davies said. His biopic, *A Quiet Passion*, explores Dickinson's spiritual quest and "her unrealistic desire to see her family remain happy forever," he said. "In the film, Dickinson feels betrayed when she discovers Austin and Mabel *in flagrante delicto*. She was also very ill, and we can't imagine what her daily life was like. Yet she managed to compose poetry and run the household." In one scene, Dickinson, played by Cynthia Nixon, asks her father's permission to write after-hours when the family is asleep so that the daily rhythms of the home are unencumbered by her writing.

Rather than a critical biography, the film is an interpretation of Dickinson's creative processes, one artist plumbing the depths of another. *A Quiet Passion* delves into Dickinson's search for spiritual meaning. "Emily battles against doubt all her life. I don't believe she ever comes down on one side or another—whether there is or isn't a God—yet always implies there's some sort of hope, which I find very moving."

The various projects underway pull Dickinson out from her cloistered hideaway and remind us that she is far from a "Nobody," and far more than American literature's recluse-poet. "Like all great poets, Emily Dickinson tells universal truths," said Davies. "People don't read sentimental Victorian poetry anymore because it speaks to that era, [but] hers is unbound and eternal. I think that Dickinson's work connects with us in our technological era—we know lots about everything, but do we really know the nature of the soul? Are we able to face the extinction of death? I don't think we can, but great poetry and great art forces us to confront those things, and because you must confront those subjects, a sort of comfort arises from it. She touches your soul because she exposes hers."

Barbara Basbanes Richter writes regularly for *Fine Books and Collections* in print and online. Connect on Twitter @B_Basbanes.

On Dickinson

RECOMMENDED BOOKS & ONLINE RESOURCES

The Life of Emily Dickinson

BY RICHARD B. SEWALL (FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 1974).

The two-volume winner of the National Book Award was hailed as the most complete study of the poet's life, challenging prevailing notions through this complex biographical portrait.

White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson

BY BRENDA WINEAPPLE (KNOPF, 2008).

Thomas Wentworth Higginson had never met anyone "who drained my nerve power so much," but Dickinson fascinated him nonetheless. Wineapple examines the pair's professional relationship and debunks the notion that he did not value her work.

A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century

BY JEROME CHARYN (BELLEVUE LITERARY PRESS, 2016).

Selected as one of Oprah's Best Books of Summer, Charyn unveils a woman misunderstood by her contemporaries and scholars. Though mostly drawing on speculation and the work of others, this postmodern portrait highlights an ongoing fascination with Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems

BY EMILY DICKINSON, ILLUSTRATED BY JANE LYDBURY (THE FOLIO SOCIETY, 2016).

A visually stunning presentation of the poet's work, this edition is presented in the format arranged in 1955 by scholar Thomas H. Johnson after studying Dickinson's manuscripts and handwriting.

Emily Dickinson Archives

www.edickinson.org. The open-access website for Dickinson's manuscripts.

Amherst College Digital Collections

https://acdc.amherst.edu/collection/ed. Comprehensive archive of every piece of Dickinson material—prose, poetry, fragments, doughnut recipes, with thumbnail images and at-a-glance searches.

Houghton Library Emily Dickinson Collection

http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/collections/modern/dickinson.cfm. Over 1,000 autograph poems, 300 letters, the Herbarium, Dickinson's writing table and desk, books, family papers, and forty fascicles comprise the largest collection of Dickinson material in the world, and much of it is searchable online. The Houghton also hosts free tours of its Emily Dickinson room every Friday at 2 P.M.