



CRITICAL COMPANION TO

Emily Dickinson

*A Literary Reference to
Her Life and Work*



SHARON LEITER

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for Darryl

That Love is all there is
Is all we know of Love,
Undated (Fr 1747)

Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson

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FOREWORD

The voice of the solitary
Who makes others less alone . . .

—Stanley Kunitz

More of Emily Dickinson's poems begin with "I" than any other word. Paradoxically, in the lyric this pronoun of self functions inclusively, rather than exclusively. The reader is invited to identify with the poem's speaker for the brief, intensified moment of the poem's unfolding. Although in most poems this lyric invitation is implicit, Walt Whitman states it outright and with typical confidence in the opening lines of "Song of Myself," recognizing that all the deeper emotional and spiritual transactions of his sequence derive from it:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you.

And 70 years after Whitman, William Carlos Williams even more boldly and baldly reminds his readers that the journey of the lyric "I" is one in which two travel together: "In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you.' And so, together, as one, we shall begin." (*Spring and All*).

It may be odd to think of Emily Dickinson, one of our premier *isolatos*, extending such an intimate invitation. But has not she herself both claimed and generalized that pronoun when, in that dance of revelation and evasion that is her early corre-

spondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she notes, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person"? And is she not also our greatest lyric poet, who, as Keats urged, proved her truths on her own pulse? Proven and tested for authenticity there, in the forge and hothouse of her own passions, these truths become "assumable" (to use Whitman's intriguing term) by readers, who give themselves over to her powerful experiences for the brief moment of the poem, who "become" her.

Dickinson's frequent use of "I" should not lead us to believe she is excessively egotistical or self-involved. Rather, it is the mark of a poet of the personal lyric—someone who writes an "I" poem about experience. Such a poem—the most common kind of poem or song composed in the world—is a means of coping, of incorporating the experience of disorder into the elaborate formal orderings of poetry. What makes the personal lyric such an important kind of poem in all sorts of cultures is that it represents a tool to help individuals survive existential crises. The disorders that are ordered by the personal lyric extend across the whole spectrum of human subjectivity, all the way from joy to despair, from love and delight to fear of death and madness. What all these disorderings have in common is the capacity to destabilize the individual self. By translating her joy or despair and her happiness or confusion into language and by ordering it into a poem, the poet restabilizes herself and gives her experience of disorder both shape and significance. Shakespeare described this

process through which the poet both creates a poem and stabilizes a self:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth
to heaven,
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

We could add that the “poet’s eye” is also the poet’s “I.” Nor am I casually connecting Shakespeare to Emily Dickinson. Dickinson seems to me the equal of Shakespeare, though in a lyric mode. He created a hundred vivid characters moving through the world; she dramatized several hundred vivid emotional states in the course of her work. It is not that she showed us that her inner world of subjectivity (and ours by analogy) was rich and complex (we knew that), but that she showed us that odd and intense states of inner experience could be given voice and form. Keats, wishing near the end of his life not to only write poems but to “do some good,” had come around to a grudging admiration of Wordsworth because he “thinks into the human heart.” Keats even posited, in a wonderful image, that poets like Wordsworth, feeling “the Burden of the Mystery,” were writing poems that were “explorative of the dark passages,” and it is clear from Keats’s image that these dark passages are corridors in the human mind, aspects of consciousness itself.

Keats wrote to his friend that, if they both lived long enough, they, too, might engage in such an exploration, to the benefit of mankind. Of course, Keats didn’t live long enough, but Dickinson did. It is possible to think of her as exploring, with the huge body of her more than 1,700 poems, more dark passages than anyone before or since in English. She is like a great inner spelunker—her own mind and subjectivity a veritable Carlsbad Caverns of tunnels and chambers and strange spaces full of wonder and mystery and terror. She explores the inner world of her consciousness and the poems she sends back are reports of what she has discovered there.

In her poems, she gives us joy:

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!
(Fr 269)

She gives us love’s anguish:

I cannot live with You—
It would be Life—
And Life is over there—
Behind the Shelf . . .
(Fr 706)

She gives us despair:

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, eyes—
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—
Or has an Easier size . . .
(Fr 550)

She gives us the experience of enduring traumatic violence in the grim metaphor of a lightning strike that refuses to cease happening:

It struck me—every Day—
The Lightning was as new
As if the Cloud that instant slit
And let the Fire through . . .
(Fr 636)

She gives us religious doubt:

Those—dying then,
Knew where they went—
They went to God’s Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—
(Fr 1581)

Dickinson gives us all these things and invites us (challenges us) to identify with her—to “become her” for the brief experience of the poem. And by doing so, we as readers experience her triumph over disorder and confusion as our own. We experience her ordering of chaotic experience and passions into coherence as our own vicarious but real victory.

And so Emily Dickinson invites us into the world of her consciousness. It is an invitation that

can seem a bit intimidating because she is so unrelentingly intense. Sometimes, her invitation can even take the form of a challenge to the reader: “Dare you see a Soul at the ‘White Heat?’” (from Fr 401)

No one I know in the history of the lyric was as passionate and various as Emily Dickinson when it came to dramatizing states of consciousness. But she is not an easy poet. She invites us to become her, to let our selves become her “I,” but the invitation involves quite a leap—she is so smart, so passionate, so strange. She baffled her friends and family as much as she dazzled them. And her main literary correspondent, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was clearly intimidated by her genius.

Let me put it this way: Everyone around the young Emily Dickinson was walking in a somber, well-behaved way, but she was dancing. She was too smart, too ironic, too passionate and alive for the sober and narrow world she had to inhabit:

They put me in the Closet—
Because they like me “still”—

Still! Could themselves have peeped—
And seen my Brain—go round—
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason—in the Pound—

(Fr 445)

Those around her, who loved her and wished to keep her calm, could not shut her up. Like the bird in her poem, she was born for bigger things—and with her will and her imagination she was deter-

mined to achieve them. The poet as a hero. Not a soldier in battle, but a consciousness, a mind battling to stay alive and vital but also to control and order itself (that brain “going round” in its intensities). She wrote most of her poems without hope of anyone seeing them, or, when she enclosed them in letters to friends and relatives, without much hope of people understanding them. But she stayed brave and productive—writing hundreds and hundreds of poems that only a few people read when she was alive, but that we now cherish.

Although Emily Dickinson has so much to share with us, most of us need help in making the leap from our own modest passions, thoughts, and sensations to Dickinson’s more intense and eccentric ones. We are lucky to have such a guide as Sharon Leiter—an accomplished poet as well as a scholar, and someone who is both eminently sensitive and eminently sensible in her approach to Dickinson. She brings her closer to us by clarifying the stranger parts, giving us insightful interpretations of the most compressed material, giving us a feel for how Dickinson thinks and translates her thinking into words. In short, she brings Dickinson’s poems and person closer to us, so the leap between her “I” and our own is not so huge. This is a great service, because to have a poet like Emily Dickinson as a part of our lives, to make her our own by coming to understand and love her poems, is to deeply enrich our own experience of what it means to be alive.

—Gregory Orr
Charlottesville, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

Days after Emily Dickinson's death on May 19, 1886, her younger sister Lavinia, from whom she had rarely been separated in her lifetime, discovered an unexpected Emily: hundreds of handwritten poems hidden in a box in her room. Lavinia had known that Emily wrote poems and had surely read some of them. But the sheer wealth of her finding stunned her; Lavinia was "actually trembling with excitement" when she came to Mabel Loomis Todd, who would later edit the poems, with her find. Since then, with each successive edition of her work, the world has discovered new Emily Dickinsons.

Because she never saw her work into print, the prejudices and tampering of early editors have had to be undone by later ones. Not until 1955, with the publication of Thomas Johnson's *Complete Poems*, was the poet's work available in its entirety, in a form closely respecting her original manuscripts. The process of discovery took a giant step further with the work of Ralph J. Franklin, who restored and published Dickinson's original manuscript books in 1981, thereby opening a new era of textual scholarship. One hundred and twenty years after her death, we are still finding new Emily Dickinsons.

And yet, she has been with us from the beginning of her journey into print. From the first volume of poems prepared by Mabel Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1890, readers have responded intimately and urgently to the poems, demanding ever more of them. As Mrs. Todd wrote in her preface to the Second Series,

1891: "[Dickinson's] 'irresistible needle-touch' . . . piercing at once the very core of a thought, has found a response as wide and sympathetic as it has been unexpected even to those who knew best her compelling power." Words may have been changed, rhyme and line lengths altered, and arbitrary titles appended, yet the core—something of the magic and the power—of Dickinson's poetic vision survived all distortions. It was the enthusiasm of those readers of her first volume that led to the speedy publication of the second. The magnetic pull of the poems has been there from the first. It is no disparagement of the work of contemporary scholars to restore Dickinson to the reading public in her full authenticity to say that we already have the essential Emily Dickinson.

Dickinson's preeminent place in world literature rests, not merely on the sheer scope of her work—almost 1,800 poems, including more great poems than any other American poet before or since—but on its depth and breadth. She has been seen as the great poet of unfulfilled longing, of expectation that never attains its object, a misfortune she transformed into the blessing of "sumptuous destitution," a "Banquet of Abstemiousness." Yet this sense of a reality that must always fall short of desire and imagination was but one aspect of her vision.

A product of New England Calvinism who steadfastly refused to join the church, she wrote continually about God, wrestling with him, cajoling him, pleading with him, challenging him, reproaching him. Until the end of her life, she continued

to ask her “flood question”—“Is Immortality true?” Although she scoffed at the primitive notion that heaven was “a Place—a Sky—a Tree,” her questing mind burrowed into the grave and beyond, imagining heaven in endless guises: “the fair schoolroom in the sky;” a “small Town;” “a Tent” that wraps “its shining Yards” and disappears; an oppressive paradise, where “it’s Sunday—all the time—/ And Recess—never comes—”; “my Delinquent Palaces—”; “what I cannot reach”—but most often, her own backyard, the earthly joys of love and nature that she preferred to whatever God’s heaven might, or might not, be. Heaven haunted and eluded her. And it is the combined force of both her longing-inspired visions and her ineluctable doubts that makes her “religious” poems so powerful.

For all her conjured journeys to the “new Continent” of “Eternity,” Emily Dickinson’s most intrepid explorations were of what she called “the undiscovered continent” of the self. Her great obsession was with what she alternately called soul, self, spirit, mind, consciousness, me, heart, and brain—her approximate synonyms for the “hidden corridors” of the inner life. The shrewdness of her perceptions and her genius in articulating them continue to make even the most sophisticated of contemporary readers “feel physically as if the tops of their heads were taken off.” Although she “thanked God” that “the Cellars of the Soul,” “the loudest place he made,” was “licensed to be still,” she was a tireless translator of the inarticulate cries from those depths into the language of poetry.

Her ability to perform this feat depended, in part, upon her understanding that she could convey her awful and awe-inspiring truth only by indirection. In her most famous poem on “how to write,” Dickinson advised:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies

Thus, although she wrote from the depth of her own experience of love and loss, she was no “confessional” poet in the contemporary sense. Far from exhibiting the details of her personal life, she has left scholars forever guessing at the nature of the profound emotional trauma she experienced in her late twenties or early thirties; the identity of the

great love(s) of her life; the reason(s) she chose not to publish her poetry; and the reason(s) she withdrew from society. She possessed the extraordinary ability to simultaneously distance herself from and make herself intimately accessible to the reader: to reveal herself while remaining hidden.

“When I state myself as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person,” she told her literary correspondent, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (L 268). Indeed, she dramatized her inner life through a large cast of personae or “speakers”: the child (sometimes “a boy”) she both pitied and wished she could always remain, through whose eyes she expressed her “naive” perceptions; the “drunken” bee-poet; the dauntless bobolink-robin-singer, the sparrow with her precious crumb; the sun-worshipping daisy; the idolatrous lover; the Queen of Calvary; the exile from love; the triumphant wife without the crown; the sanctified woman in white; the mourner; the dying; the departed; the feaster at the banquet of abstemiousness; the semi-visible observer of the natural world; the exile from nature; the scornful suppliant of heaven; the invisible sibyl behind the wisdom poems that constitute fully half her oeuvre; nobody. Even so partial a listing reveals a gallery of opposites: the grandiose and the humble, victor and defeated, sufferer and survivor, believer and doubter.

What were these personae but the alternating voices of her multifaceted sensibility? Those who complain of her “inconsistency” fail to grasp that Dickinson’s work mimics the contradictions of consciousness itself—particularly a probing, profound, and volatile consciousness such as her own. For a lyric poet, attempting in each poem to distill the essence of a single moment, there is nothing puzzling in the fact that one poem may “contradict” another. Dickinson has been charged with lacking a poetic “project,” some grand vision of the human enterprise or overarching purpose for her poetry. Her great biographer, Richard Sewall, succinctly rebuts this accusation: “She is the poet of the passing insight, the moment of vision, the unitary experience. She had no social or political program and was inclined to smile at those who did” (*Life*, II, 714).

To this, critic Robert Weisbuch sagely adds that “you cannot define Dickinson by what she believes, but by what she keeps caring about, turning it this way and that” (“Prisming,” *Handbook*, 221–222). Not only from poem to poem, but *within* a single poem, we see her searching mind taking a stance, then changing direction and turning against her original premise before a poem ends or trails off in a characteristic final dash.

Dickinson’s “anti-project” has been enough to assure her status in the American canon and to continue to win her a devoted readership. At the same time, however, her poetry continues to arouse a certain discomfort. And, ironically, the source of this discomfort is the very thing that makes her great: her unprecedented use of the English language. From the outset, critics have distinguished between the poet’s dazzling “thoughts” and her disconcerting style. Higginson embodied this approach, when he wrote, half apologetically, in his preface to the 1890 poems:

The main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence.

Today critics see not only her grammatical “mistakes” but her oddities of capitalization and punctuation, her slant rhymes and “spasmodic” rhythms, as integral features of her poetics, a revolutionary attempt to engage every aspect of language in the interest of creating new meanings. Since Dickinson herself left no statement of her poetics, her intentions cannot be established in any definitive way; all that can be said is that, when we do assume that these “oddities” were conscious strategies, fascinating nuances of meaning emerge.

Higginson’s artificial separation of form and content was long ago discarded by literary critics, in favor of an approach to poetry that recognizes form as a primary creator of meaning. “Where paraphrase is possible,” wrote the great 20th-century Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, “the sheets have not been rumpled. Poetry has not spent the

night.” Anyone who has attempted to paraphrase a Dickinson poem, to reduce it to a simple, clean thought, knows that her sheets are indeed rumpled! For the poems’ compressed, often jarring, disjunct forms, full of silences and absences, are part and parcel of their meanings. “My Business is Circumference,” she informed Higginson, using her term for the far limits of human understanding. In her quest to stretch those boundaries, she was an intrepid deformer of language: chopping up words and adding to them, shrinking and expanding the spaces between them, destroying firm semantic connections, and replacing coherent sentences with floating units of meaning, capable of touching and repelling one another in a variety of ways. “I found the word to every thought / I ever had—,” Dickinson noted in 1862, a bit of “boasting” we might forgive in light of the fact that she wrote 227 poems that year. She might have added that when she failed to find the word she sought in common usage, she invented it.

For all these reasons, even those who know and revere her work tend to find Emily Dickinson a “difficult” poet. While there are gems in virtually everything she wrote, striking, moving, unforgettable lines and phrases, grasping a full Dickinson poem requires a certain amount of work on the reader’s part. The intent of the present volume is to serve as a critical companion, both to the poems themselves and to the engaged but perplexed reader attempting to enter the poems on a deeper level. In grappling with the fine structure of Dickinson’s language, I have found my own invaluable companions. The first is my facsimile of Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 edition, the beloved “Lexicon” the poet not only consulted, but also read for pleasure. Within its pages, the 21st-century reader can learn not only what words meant in mid-19th century America but also what literary and cultural associations they held for Dickinson and her contemporaries. The second indispensable resource is Cristanne Miller’s *A Poet’s Grammar*, the best available study of Dickinson’s language. Lucidly and concisely, Miller analyzes the poet’s strategic use of grammar, syntax, rhyme and meter, punctuation, and capitalization, and illustrates her perceptions in a series of superb close readings.

I have written with the general reader in mind, high school and college students, as well as poetry lovers of all ages, making few assumptions about previous knowledge and keeping literary jargon to a minimum. At the same time, I believe that the detailed analyses of the poems will be of value to more advanced students of Dickinson as well. For despite the wealth of recent Dickinson scholarship, close readings of her poems are hard to come by.

In the difficult task of selecting from Dickinson's 1,789 extant poems those that are the greatest, most important, and most representative, I have tried to discern a "general consensus." The 575 poems selected by Dickinson's great editor, Thomas Johnson, in his *Final Harvest* were my starting point. I honed my sense of what should be included through reading the works of leading Dickinson scholars and noting the poems they found central to her oeuvre, as well as consulting the leading anthologies of 19th-century American poetry, to see what they include. The fact is, however, that apart from a small number of incontestable masterpieces, there is little consensus among editors, critics and anthologists as to what constitutes "the essential Dickinson." Scholar Gary Stonum points out the huge discrepancies among the poems included in anthologies—a situation that does not exist for other American icons such as Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Robert Frost. One reason for this may simply be the great number of superb poems Dickinson left us; another, no doubt, is her many-sidedness. With a breadth of insight into the human condition equaled, perhaps, only by Shakespeare, the appeal of Dickinson's work to different readers is bound to be subjective. While I have tried to choose all the poems that students commonly encounter today, I also made sure the selection would be representative of her scope—including poems on all her major concerns, in all her different voices, from all time periods. Beyond that, I have inevitably added those poems that I particularly, personally love. This can never be a bad thing for a critic, for what we love we are far more likely to understand.

Although focusing on the details and dynamics of a single poem does not provide a direct path to generalizations on Dickinson's beliefs or her poet-

ics, it is perhaps the most meaningful way of coming to know her. Certainly, it is the first approach a reader should take, before moving into the airy realms of theory. Within each analysis, I do bring in other "related" poems, in order to point to general concerns and poetic strategies. But I am aware that connecting Emily Dickinson's poems is a little bit like tracing constellations in the night sky. Within the vast and intricate corpus of her work, there exists a wealth of possibilities: pinpricks of light that take on specific shapes according to the vision of the observer. Other patterns could have been drawn.

Dickinson herself believed that each generation of readers refracts the poet's vision through its own "lens":

The Poets light but Lamps—
 Themselves—go out—
 The Wicks they stimulate
 If vital Light

 Inhere as do the Suns—
 Each Age a Lens
 Disseminating their
 Circumference—

(Fr 930, 1865)

In our present age, critics are reflecting Dickinson's light through a bewildering variety of lenses. There are those who see her as the last representative of the romantic tradition, while for others she is a precursor of modernism's fractured idiom and spiritual alienation. Still others, eager to correct the distorted image of Dickinson the isolated recluse, place her solidly in the midst of Victorian New England culture, a woman of a certain religious background and socioeconomic class. These scholars show us a Dickinson in touch with leading figures of the day and deeply affected by the events of her time, particularly the Civil War, which coincided with the years of her greatest poetic production. Feminist critics, plucking her from the context of the patriarchal society and literary tradition in which she has generally been seen, emphasize her involvement with women's social networks and women's literature. Dickinson has been subjected to posthumous psychoanalysis in which her precari-

ous sexual identity and its effect on the poems have come under detailed scrutiny.

On the other end of the critical spectrum is the school of thought associated with respected scholar Robert Weisbuch, that biography has nothing to say about Dickinson's "sceneless" poems, which can and must be read on several levels simultaneously. If Weisbuch advises the reader not to "point" at any one narrow meaning, critic Sharon Cameron warns against "choosing" a specific variant for a poem, when the poet herself may have wished all her variants to be read as dimensions of a composite "meaning." Cameron's work belongs to the substantial body of textual scholarship that has emerged since the publication of *The Manuscript Books* in 1981. Another branch of textual research, associated with Martha Nell Smith, Doris Oberhaus, and Daneen Wardrop, has focused on the fascicles, Dickinson's hand-sewn booklets, as the poet's intended means of publication. While these critics see the fascicles as coherent units of meaning in which poems contradict and "balance" one another, others such as the preeminent editor R. W. Franklin believe the fascicles were merely a way for Dickinson to keep track of her rapidly growing stacks of poems and that their sequence in the fascicles is random.

These approaches represent only part of the explosion of scholarship emerging from today's thriving Dickinson industry. The reader in search of enlightenment can choose from those studies the ones that resonate with his or her interests and personal instincts about the poetry. In my annotated bibliography, I have tried to be of help by offering brief characterizations of the works I have found most meaningful. In developing my readings of the poems, I am indebted to the thinking of a number of disparate scholars. In exploring a poem, I frequently introduce their competing ideas and let them argue with one another. I have heeded the caution of Dickinson's most recent biographer, Alfred Habegger, who points to the "dubiousness of construing this profoundly one-of-a-kind writer by first enrolling her in any group at all" (*My Wars*, xii). The absence of any one theoretical axe to grind has given me the flexibility to pick and choose among critical approaches.

As an example, I don't take sides in the debate over whether biographical facts are relevant to understanding a poem. I believe that, while a good or great poem can never be wholly "explained" by biographical or historical events, some poems are clearly illuminated by knowledge of what was happening in the poet's life and world when she wrote it, while others are not. Thus, a poem such as "OURSELVES WERE WED ONE SUMMER—DEAR—" clearly refers to Emily's early love for Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson; to ignore the history of their relationship is to willfully turn away from an important dimension of the poem. On the other hand, a poem such as "THE BRAIN—IS WIDER THAN THE SKY—" is a philosophical reflection, rooted in the poet's concern about man's place in the world of God and nature; biographical details won't add to what we can understand without them. Similarly, I have applied the insights of feminist criticism in analyzing the many poems where they seem relevant, while omitting them when they seem contrived. In some poems, I have found plausible insights in even the much maligned psychoanalytic approach.

The subjectivity of this admittedly eclectic approach strikes me as far preferable to squeezing the poems into the procrustean bed of theory. There can be no such thing as an "authoritative and objective" reading of a Dickinson poem. For one thing, the authorities are always flat-out contradicting one another. This is the fault of lyric poems in general—slippery swimmers that elude any one conceptual net—and of Dickinson in particular. She is dense and enigmatic, complex and inexhaustible. What she wrote of "Eternity" applies as well to her poems:

As if the Sea should part
And show a further Sea—
And that—a further

The aim of the present volume is to assist the reader in parting as many seas as seems necessary and desirable in order to find his or her own Emily Dickinson. As Weisbuch astutely comments, so capacious and many-leveled is her work that what a reader finds in it is to some degree a function of what he or she brings. Before reading my analysis of a poem, I advise the student to first read the poem

aloud, listening for its tone and the rhythms of its thoughts, and formulating an initial sense of it. After that, he or she may want to go on to the recommendations for further reading that follow each entry or to turn to cross-referenced entries. I have cited the poems as they appear in Franklin's reading edition, now regarded as authoritative, while also giving the number of the poem in Johnson's earlier edition. I highly recommend purchasing one of these collections. Both are inexpensive—and indispensable for anyone who wishes to go beyond the selections of the popular anthologies.

How to Use This Book

The volume is organized into four parts. In Part I, an extensive biographical essay presents the fundamental known facts of Dickinson's life and writing career, as well as what is *not* known and continues to be the object of scholarly research and debate. Part II, the heart of the book, contains analyses of more than 150 of Dickinson's poems. Poem entries are given in alphabetical order, according to the first line of the poem, which, for purposes of this book, doubles as the poem's title.

Part III, "Related People, Places, and Topics," consists primarily of essays on biographical topics: the significant figures in Dickinson's life (her nuclear family, always the core for her, girlhood friends and relatives, teachers and presumed lovers, mentors, and canine companion), her home, the Homestead, the schools she attended, her church, and the predominant religious climate of the times. A poet who declared that she saw "New Englandly" could hardly be discussed without reference to her Puritan heritage, the Connecticut River Valley, her native Amherst, and the college that dominated its cultural and intellectual life. This section also con-

tains a number of essays on literary matters. Foremost among them is a discussion of Dickinson's surviving letters, the only prose we have of hers, and widely considered to be works of art in their own right. In addition to providing an incomplete but fascinating record of her thoughts, relationships, activities and concerns, they offer invaluable perspectives on the poems, for which reason I cite them frequently in my analyses. The three extraordinary "Master Letters," written to an unknown lover, receive separate treatment. I also include an extended essay on the history of publication and editorial scholarship, as well as entries on the essential elements of her language and style.

Part IV contains three appendices: a detailed chronology, including important life events and publication dates; a bibliography of Dickinson's works, including poems published during her lifetime and posthumous editions of her poems and letters; and an annotated bibliography of the most important books and articles on Dickinson and her work.

Any reference to a poem by Dickinson that is the subject of an entry in Part II and any reference to a person, place, or topic that is the subject of an entry in Part III is printed in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS the first time it appears in a particular entry.

For a poet such as Emily Dickinson, who is constantly being rediscovered, it seems particularly appropriate that the image of her on the cover of this book should also be a rediscovery and a reinterpretation. In "Emily Dickinson—Her True Colors," Amherst artist Guillermo Cuellar has transformed the familiar black-and-white daguerreotype, Dickinson's only known likeness, into a new vision of what the chestnut-haired 16-year-old girl who posed for it might have looked like.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book about Emily Dickinson is like standing within the circle of a rare and ever-changing light. More than anything else, the seemingly inexhaustible richness of her poetry, with its emotional depths and intellectual challenges, provided the sustained impetus and energy needed to complete a work of this kind. At the same time, I could not have written it without the collaboration and support of several individuals. First among these is my editor, Jeff Soloway. His enthusiasm, flexibility, and wisdom have been essential to this project from beginning to end. Receptive to the need for a critical companion to Dickinson's poetry, Jeff worked with me in defining and refining the shape such a book should take. I have benefited immeasurably from his advice and encouragement, his openness to new ideas, and his patience.

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PART I

Biography

Dickinson, Emily Elizabeth

(1830–1886)

“My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any,” Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON in 1869 (L 330). In spite of this disclaimer, she has proven an elusive subject for biographers. Higginson noted the difficulty of capturing the poet when he wrote “you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light” (L 330a). Hers was not a consciously documented life. She kept no diary and left no memoirs. Her surviving LETTERS, only a fraction of her entire correspondence, are a rich source of information about her, but their cryptic style tends to obscure personal details.

Many of Dickinson’s correspondents preserved her extraordinary letters, but at least as many lost or destroyed them. The only person who made a point of collecting facts about her, as if he knew her life would be important, was Higginson. Her letters to him are the most revealing, and his 1870 recollection of their first visit is the most cited source in biographies of the poet. While a wealth of research has been done, uncertainty remains about many vital facts of her life, including the exact dates of her manuscripts.

“‘It is finished’ can never be said of us,” Dickinson observed (L 555). One hundred and twenty years after her death, scholars continue to search for revealing documents, despite the increasing unlikelihood of finding them. A range of new critical approaches has allowed readers to see the poet from fresh and revealing perspectives. Foremost among these are cultural studies, which deflate the myth of the “poet recluse,” isolated from the social and political events of her times, and feminist studies, which view the role of gender as crucial to understanding the poet’s life and work.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born at 5 A.M. on December 10, 1830, at The HOMESTEAD, the brick mansion built by her grandfather, SAMUEL FOWLER DICKINSON, in 1813 on Main Street in AMHERST, Massachusetts. Her ancestors had come to the fertile western Massachusetts region known



This daguerreotype, made when the poet was about 16, is the only known photograph of Emily Dickinson. (*Amherst College Archives and Special Collections*)

as the CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY, in the 1630s to escape the corruption of the Church of England and find the freedom to practice their “purified” Calvinist religion. The line of Dickinson forebears that sprang from these early Puritans consisted of practical men and women, involved in the affairs of this world: settling and defending their new home, bearing and nurturing large families under severe conditions, becoming landowners and farmers, educators, lawyers, and civic leaders.

Grandfather Samuel had been a pillar of Amherst society, playing a leading role in the creation of its educational institutions and securing a position of social preeminence for his family. He was known by his fellow townsmen as “Squire” Dickinson, a role that combined property, privilege, and responsibility. But Samuel’s fanatical zeal for his religiously inspired projects led him to overplay his hand. When he invested his personal wealth in the development of AMHERST COLLEGE, his finances grew