Language as OBJECT

Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Art

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"Whose But Her Shy—
Immortal Face"

The Poet’s Visage in the Popular Imagination

Polly Longworth

Here you are daguerreotyp’d. O immortal waste! And did you look with all eyes at the lens of the camera, or rather by direction of the operator, at the brass peg a little below it, to give the picture the full benefit of your expanded and flashing Eye? And in your zeal not to blur the image, did you keep every finger in its place with such energy that your hands became checkered as for fight or despair, and in your resolution to keep your face still, did you let every muscle become every moment more rigid, the brows contracted into a Turk’s Scurv, and the eye fixed as they were fixed in a fit, in madness, or in death? And when, at last you are relieved of your dismal duties, did you find the certain drawn perfectly, and the hands true, cheek’d for combat, and the shape of the face or head—but, unfortify, the total expression escape from the face and the portrait of a mask instead of a man? Could you not by grasping it very tight hold the stream of a river, or of a small beam, and prevent it from flowing?

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Journal, 24 October 1841

After sitting diffidently for her daguerreotype in 1847, Emily Dickinson found herself no more enchanited than Emerson was by the lifeless product of the camera, from which ‘the Quick’ had fled (pt. 2). She never again submitted to being photographed. The portrait made at age sixteen has become a tantalizing, powerful image of an only partially visible life, a picture that has played a role in shaping the iconography of and critical thinking about the poet.

Even those whose exposure to Dickinson is limited to a few most anthologized verses can recognize her face, the visage from the daguerreotype, with which book designers have waxed so ingenious (see fig. 18). Whether she is stylized or set in profile, whether adorned by wedding veil or spliced with Nefertiti, her beautified or turned ghastly by small tamperings, Dickinson is popularly identifiable. Her face is as familiar as a mask and holds the mask’s elusive promise that if we knew what she really looked like, underneath it, we would have the key to her enigmatic poetry.

Dickinson’s earliest readers had no clue to her appearance, for the first two collections of her verse contained no picture of the shy, retiring author. These small donkey-books, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Boston man of letters who had been the poet’s literary mentor, and Mabel Loosene Todd, an Amherst neighbor, appeared in November 1890 and 1891 respectively, not long after the poet’s death in 1886. While the poetry itself created a literary stir, the preface to each volume, one by Higginson...
and one by Todd, together with two well-placed prepublication articles by Higginson, provoked enormous curiosity about the poet. An inquisitive interest the essays were designed to allay. Dickinson was presented as a remarkable recluse, a lonely, gifted woman buried in a country town, writing in secret. Her profound poetic insights were composed not for publication but for private sharing with friends and discovered only after her death. Readers were astonished. Who was this self-centered seraphic being who had died invisible to a non-shining society and engaging was, who only emerged from seclusion once a year at the college commencement to help her father entertain distinguished guests?

Garnished by her circumstances, which seemed as original as the poems themselves, reviewers devoted as much attention to Dickinson’s oddities as to the discerning verses. Todd found herself speaking in public to defend the naturalness of Emily’s retirement, to emphasize her joyous nature and define an apparent irreverence. Higginson’s second prepublication article, appearing in the Atlantic Monthly of October 1881 just before release of the second volume, reproduced verbatim many of the poet’s earliest letters and poems to him and described his two calls upon her, an act literally akin to stripping the lid off her cofin, to grandiloquently do it expose Dickinson’s peculiar habits of mind and person along with her fine genius. Readers were enthralled; some drawn by the poet’s exquisite sensibility, others agreeing with the critic who found her “one of the strangest personalities of our time.”

In the absence of any visual image, Higginson provided his audience a verbal self-portrait of which to imagine Dickinson, quoting from the words she had supplied to him in July 1882 when he asked for her photographic carte-de-visite. “Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait, now, but an small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves—Would this do just as well?” (L. 368).

When the second volume of Poems created nearly the same popular sensation of the first, Todd, at Lavina Dickinson’s insistence, began reading Emily’s letters for publication. In response to public avidity for stories about the unusual poet, several of Dickinson’s relatives and friends leapt into print between 1891 and 1895 to defend or elaborate upon the Higginson-Todd narrative. Charming tales were told of Miss Emily among her flowers, of Mrs. Emily lowering a basket of goodies to children playing beneath her bedroom window. Secret tragedy and a blighted romance were hinted at. Word habits of wearing snowy dresses, running from strangers, conversing from the shadows, having her envelopes addressed by anamnesis, and asking to be carried to the grave through the back door by faithful workmen were revealed. To satisfy speculation about Miss Dickinson’s appearance, the publishers, Roberts Brothers of Boston, decided to include a picture of the poet in their edition of Toddy’s Letters of Emily Dickinson, which came out in November 1894.

What picture to use? There were only two: an oil portrait of the Dickinson childress painted by artist O.A. Bullard during his stay there in 1840 (fig. 13), and a wobbly charcoal-silhouette cut by Emily’s Amherst Academy teacher Charles Temple when she was fourteen (fig. 14). Then there surfaced the despised daguerreotype made when she was sixteen. The one Dickinson herself had rejected, and which neither her sister, Lavinia (Vinnie), nor her brother, Austin, thought looked like her.

Long assayed lost, the sixth-plate likeness was brought forth by Margaret (Maggie) Howitt, the Dickinson family’s faithful maid, onto whose possession it had drifted. According to a suppressed court deposition she made later, in 1898, Maggie also had harbored the poet’s forty facsimile “in my trunk,” whether at the Homestead or at her own house near the Amherst depot she didn’t clarify. Neither Maggie nor her trunk crept into the poet’s narrative, for in a talk delivered in January 1893 in Mabel Loomis’s house, Todd introduced the story that the poet’s sister, a few days after Emily’s death, discovered a bureau drawer full of manuscript poems, “a version of events that became a cherished episode of Dickinson lore, along with the cherry bureau itself.

According to Todd the drawer contained “about 1200 poems, written on note paper, collected in bundles of 60 or 70 poems, and tied up with silk or thread, besides which there was a box of scraps, with between 600 and 700 more poems and fragments.” A very full drawer indeed.

To awe her publisher in securing a portrait of the poet pleasing to the Dickinson family, Todd oversaw the making of a photographic image from the newly found daguerreotype that consisted of head and bust alone against a pale background. The result, called a “cabinet photo” by Todd, was pronounced “dreadful.” A composite sketch commissioned by publisher Thomas Niles was no more successful (fig. 15). Although in his drawing the artist neatly imposed wavy hair from a cousin’s photograph upon the poet’s photographic image, Austin and Vinnie felt he failed to catch their sister’s expression.

The oil portrait of the nine-year-old Emily at least resembled her, decided Austin. Inadequate as it seemed, the child’s face from the family portrait was isolated, given a set of shoulders, and placed as frontispiece to Volume 1 of the two-volume Letters (fig. 16). (Volume 2 featured a photograph of the stately Homestead, intended to counter inferences regarding Dickinson’s rude, uncultured background I for the next thirty years, then, a child’s face anchored the outpouring of acclaim over this powerful, original, fresh New England voice. A child’s face offset concurrent cries of imperfection and eccentricity, a ringing criticism over Dickinson’s disregard for poetic conventions, her crudities of rhyme and grammar, the unstored structure of her singular verse.

The Letters of Emily Dickinson was widely reviewed by middle-brow publications, but ignored by elite critics. It didn’t sell beyond the first printing. A third volume of Poems in 1896, edited by Todd alone, also fared poorly. Emily Dickinson, it seemed, had had

Figure 13
Olive A. Bullard
Portraits of Dickinson
Children, 1840
Oil on canvas
Emily Dickinson
Collection, Houghton
Library, Harvard
University © the President
and Fellows of Harvard
College

Figure 14
Charles Temple
Silhouette of Emily
Dickinson, 1845
Gouache
Amherst College
Library

Figure 15
Unidentified Artist
Emily Dickinson
Pencil on paper
The Todd-Bingham
Picture Collection,
Manuscripts and
Archives, Yale
University Library

Figure 16
From Frontispiece to
Mabel Loomis Todd,
The Letters of Emily
Dickinson (1899)
Amherst College
Library

Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Art
her vogue. British reviewers dismissed her as provincial, "a kind of unfinished, rudimentary (Emily) Brontë," and, as with that earlier poet, Dickinson seemed destined to linger a half-developed child/woman in the public mind's eye. Further editing was prevented by bitter animosity that erupted between the Todds and Dickinson after the death of Austin Dickinson in 1895. By century's end many hundred poems remained in manuscript, but publication had halted with half the corpus of Dickinson's work still in Todd hands and half held by Emily's heirs—Vinnie until her death in 1899, then Austin's widow, Susan Dickinson and her daughter, Martha.

Vinnie didn't abandon the quest for a picture of Emily, however. In 1896, three years before her death she arranged for Boston miniatureist Laura C. Hills to retouch a copy of the "cabinet photograph," the head and bust taken from Emily's daguerreotype. After several stages, Hills produced a much softened, early-haired portrait with white dress and clown-style ruffle that delighted Vinnie (fig. 17). She felt well compensated for having impulsively given away Emily's disagreeable daguerreotype to an Amherst College student, a distant cousin, in 1893. It didn't resurface until 1931.

The ruffled image of Dickinson was disclosed to the public in 1924 by the poet's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who inherited it, along with all her aunt Emily's manuscripts except those in Todd hands, when her mother died in 1912. Susan Dickinson had respected Emily's proscription against publishing, but Bianchi, a published poet herself and something of a romantic, at once began editing her aunt's work and writing about her life. Between 1913 and 1937 she produced six books of poetry and two of biographies in collaboration with her colleague Alfred Lentric Hampson. The touched-up Hills portrait appeared in nearly all, beginning with The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson (1924).

As Dickinson's canon emerged in peculiarity and rather bewildering fashion, it is an echo of highbrow criticism that once had scorned her crudeness to laud her as a major modern voice, the general public seemed less enamored of the enigmatic verse than of highly colored, sentimental portraiture of the poet herself. Readers assuaged, along with the new white-ruffled image, Bianchi's intimate vision of a rare, mystic spirit who wrote in "poetic flashes" on "gists of impate" and was hermetically protected by her loving family against the world's intrusion. "Evoking the myth of Amherst," Bianchi emphasized Emily's choice literary communion with "Sister Sue" and supplied gossipy inferences about her aunt's lifelong fascination with love after "meeting her fate" in Philadelphia. At least two other biographers proposed different candidates for Dickinson's mysterious lover, one male, one female, around the centennial of her birth, and George F. Whitcher a professor at Amherst College, published one of the earliest critical books about the poetry, despite having limited access to any organized poetic canon. It was largely Bianchi's sharing of dozens of family letters and embellished family anecdotes that created wide interest in the poet among an audience only selectively interested in the poetry. At the same time, Bianchi's usurpation of the contents of the earliest poetry volumes without acknowledgment quickly brought a rival Emily to the fore.

Mabel Loomis Todd resented what she saw as Bianchi's misrepresentations. Errone-
national advertising and syndicated cartoons, and storing in endless variation from book jackets and gallery walls (fig. 18). While it is difficult to break away from Dickson's iconic image, an artist who has been scientifically impelled by Nancy Burson, whose computer-generated portrait (fig. 19) advances Dickson to age fifty-two by artificially aging the subject in the daguerreotype image. Burson's picture of a mature Dickson, just before her final illness, makes us more appreciative of Lavinia Dickson's crusade to "soften" the features of her sister's daguerreotype. But the enhancement also inspires, through a sinning at our sense, awareness that we resist aging Emily. In addition to all other roles, we have conceived this pose as the female Peter Pan. True mysteries are fathomless. One of the tasks Milliken Todd Bingham set herself in her biographical study Emily Dickson: How She Was to determine where the daguerreotype of Emily Dickson was made. Her researches turned up the fact that during the year Dickson studied at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary an unnamed itinerant photographer visited South Hadley, in late December 1847 and early January 1848. Supposing that seventeen-year-old Emily, like many of the seminary students, sat for her portrait at that time, Bingham introduced the probability to Dickinson how. Fresh evidence of the 1950s, however, casts doubt on the interpretation, for nearly half a dozen scattered daguerreotypes have come to light (among them one of Emily's mother) that feature the distinctly patterned tablecloth upon which Emily's arms rest. The cloth has been traced preliminarily via the imprint on the mat of another portrait, to a studio of Ovis H. Cooksey, who operated as a daguerreotypist in Springfield, Massachusetts, from 1844 to 1855. 5 Possibly Emily, while visiting Moravians relatives in nearby Monson about 1847, went to Mr. Cooksey's studio with her mother, with a result that disinclined her to further experiment at South Hadley. Possibly: With Dickinson the story is never finished.

How might we imagine Dickinson and her work, if there were no photograph of her? Or, oppositely, if there were several photographs—of a smiling female, of a mature woman amidst friends and family, of a winter surrounded by the stuff of her trade? The lone daguerreotype of an adolescent Dickinson provides more readings than either of these supposed conditions, at the same time: the single enigmatic image serves as a screen held up between these poets unclassifiable insecurities and our culture's incessant curiosity.

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld—
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled—

But peers beyond her mesh—
And wishes—and dyes—
Lost intervieweer—annul a want
That Image—satisfies—

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