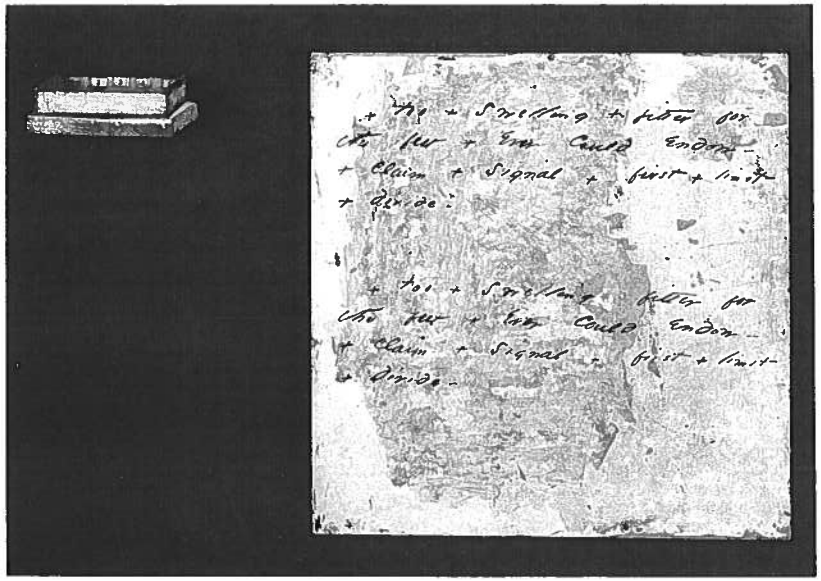

Barbara Penn
"+ too + swelling + fitter for"
1994 (detail)
Collection of the artist

Language *as* OBJECT

Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Art

Edited by Susan Danly

with additional contributions by
Martha A. Sandweiss
Karen Sánchez-Eppler
Polly Longsworth
Christopher Benfey
David Porter

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College
in association with the University of Massachusetts Press
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1997

Plate 2

Attributed to Otis H. Cooley (act. 1844-55)
Emily Dickinson, ca. 1847
Daguerreotype
Amherst College Library

"Whose But Her Shy—Immortal Face"

The Poet's Visage in the Popular Imagination

Polly Longsworth

Were you ever daguerreotyped, O immortal man? And did you look with all vigor 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 clenched as for fight or despair, and in your resolution to keep your face still, did you feel every muscle becoming every moment more rigid, the brows contracted into a Tartarean frown, and the eyes fixed as they are fixed in a fit, in madness, or in death? And when, at last you are relieved of your dismal duties, did you find the curtain drawn perfectly, and the hands true, clenched for combat, and the shape of the face or head?—but, unhappily, the total expression escaped 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 brook, 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 enchanted than Emerson was by the lifeless product of the camera, from which "the Quick" had fled (pl. 2).[1] 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, whether beautified or turned grotesque 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 dainty books, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Boston man of letters who had been the poet's literary mentor, and Mabel Loomis Todd, an Amherst neighbor,[2] 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 composed not for publication but for private sharing with friends and discovered only after her death. Readers were astonished. Who was this self-cloistered seraphic being who had dwelt invisible as a nun, shunning society and ignoring convention, who only emerged from seclusion once a year at the college commencement to help her father entertain distinguished guests?

Galvanized 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 1891 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 literarily akin to stripping the lid off her coffin, so gratuitously did 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 sensitivity, others agreeing with the critic who found her "one of the strangest personalities of our time."[3]

Figure 13

Otis A. Bullard

Portrait 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

Cut paper

Amherst College Library

In the absence of any visual image, Higginson provided his audience a verbal self-portrait by which to imagine Dickinson, quoting from the word picture she had supplied in July 1862 when he asked for her photographic carte-de-visite: "Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait, now, but 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—Would this do just as well?" (L 268).

When the second volume of *Poems* created nearly the same popular sensation of the first, Todd, at Lavinia Dickinson's insistence, began readying 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 Miss Emily lowering a basket of goodies to children playing beneath her bedroom window. Secret tragedy and a blighted romance were hinted at. Weird habits of wearing snowy dresses, running from strangers, conversing from the shadows, having her envelopes addressed by amanuenses, and asking to be carried to the grave through the back door by family 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 Todd'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 children painted by artist O. A. Bullard during his itinerant days in 1840 (fig. 13), and a wobbly chinned silhouette cut by Emily's Amherst Academy tutor Charles Temple when she was fourteen (fig. 14). Then there surfaced the despised daguerreotype made when she was sixteen,[4] the one Dickinson herself had rejected, and which neither her sister, Lavinia (Vinnie), nor her brother, Austin, thought looked like her.

Long assumed lost, the sixth-plate likeness was brought forth by Margaret (Maggie) Maher, the Dickinson family's faithful maid, into whose possession it had drifted. According to a suppressed court deposition she made later, in 1898, Maggie also had harbored the poet's forty fascicles "in my trunk," whether at the Homestead or at her own home near the Amherst depot she didn't clarify.[5] Neither Maggie nor her trunk crept into the poet's narrative, for in a talk delivered in January 1895 Mabel Loomis Todd introduced the story that the poet's sister, "a few days after Emily's death, discovered a bureau drawer full of manuscript poems,"[6] a version of events that became a cherished element of Dickinson lore, along with the cherry bureau itself. According to Todd the bureau cache included "about 1200 poems, written on note paper, collected into 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.

Figure 15

Unidentified Artist

Emily Dickinson

Pencil on paper

The Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library

To assist 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.) 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 untutored structure of her singular verse.

Figure 16

Frontispiece to Mabel Loomis Todd, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1894)

Amherst College Library

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

her vogue. British reviewers dismissed her as provincial, "a kind of unfinished, rudimentary (Emily) Brontë,"[7] 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 Dickinsons 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.

Figure 17

Laura Combs Hills (1859-1952)
Emily Dickinson
Photograph with gouache
Emily Dickinson Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University
©The President and Fellows of Harvard College

Vinnie didn't abandon the quest for a picture of Emily, however. In 1896, three years before her death, she arranged for Boston miniaturist 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, curly 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.[8] 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 biography, some in collaboration with her colleague Alfred Leete Hampson.[9] 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 piecemeal and rather bewildering fashion, and as an echelon of highbrow critics that once had scorned her crudeness began to hail her as a major modern voice, the general public seemed less enamored of the enigmatic verse than of highly colored, sentimental portrayals of the poet herself. Readers assimilated, along with the new white-ruffled image, Bianchi's intimate vision of a rare, mystic spirit who wrote in "poetic flashes" on "gusts of impulse" 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 footnotes about her aunt's lifelong renunciation of 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. Whicher a professor at Amherst College, published one of the earliest critical books about the poetry, despite having limited access to any organized poetic canon.[10] But 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-

ously convinced that she herself held legal rights to Dickinson's manuscripts, she published in 1931 an enlarged edition of her 1894 *Letters of Emily Dickinson* and used the opportunity to publicize the poet's daguerreotype. At first she had only the "cabinet photo" in her possession, but by the third printing the cousin to whom Vinnie had given the authentic portrait came forward, and the world finally met the stunningly direct gaze of a shy girl in dark cotton, her oiled hair severely smoothed and knotted, her throat encircled by a dark ribbon, her fingers plucking at a flower (see pl. 2). So powerful is the black-and-white statement that one rarely remembers Dickinson had auburn hair.[11]

In the wake of the realistic new image came the no-nonsense writings of Millicent Todd Bingham, Mabel Todd's daughter, who between 1945 and 1955 published four books based on Dickinson manuscripts and materials passed on to her by her mother.[12] One of them introduced more new poems, the other three focused with scholarly authority on the poet's life. By tracing Dickinson's background and upbringing with the aid of early family letters in her possession and by including the poet's "Master Letters" (three apparent love letters to an unknown recipient), as well as publishing evidence of a late love affair with Judge Otis P. Lord, Bingham added substantial complexity to what the public knew. With Harvard University's publication in 1955 of the three-volume variorum of Dickinson's poems and, in 1958, the three volumes of her complete letters, both edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Dickinson's literary debut was at last accomplished, nearly seventy-five years after her death.

Since then writing about Dickinson has become a major industry. Scores of books appearing in the past thirty-five years have advanced every conceivable theory about her art and her self. That her great body of poetry is able to sustain the numberless suppositions and personas projected upon it ("She may become the Victim, the Virgin, the Lesbian, the Frustrated Old Maid, the Lover, the Playful Puzzler, the Naturalist, the Eccentric, or the Psychotic," writes one essayist,[13] naming but some of the roles Dickinson has been made to play in recent years) reveals both its incredible strength and its utter abstractness. Her personality never fractures under this sometimes torturous process. It can be made to hold together whether she is represented as seer or secret wife, as agoraphobic or stand-up comedian, as religious pilgrim or psychotic, for by simultaneously encompassing human experience while extracting herself, Dickinson became in essence any and none of these. By straining to keep all traces of what she called "personality" out of her poems and letters, she made herself vulnerable to the imposition of multiple personalities. By practically swallowing herself in the effort to maintain a "polar privacy," she succeeded, paradoxically, in creating a vortex of compelling mystery which, with all the energy of a black hole, draws the public into a quest for her identity. Pilgrims to her bedchamber, actresses playing "The Belle of Amherst," artists and dancers interpreting her themes, writers sifting the endless clues to her life, and even candidates for Emily Dickinson look alike contests are all engaged in an act of finding.

Figure 18

The contemporary face of Emily Dickinson

Dickinson's inclusion in the ranks of international literary giants, her acceptance by intellectual peers as one of the foremost poets of the language, a bulwark of the Western canon, is the measure of her poetic achievement. But so is being recognizable on T-shirts, gracing a U.S. postage stamp, appearing familiarly in

national advertising and syndicated cartoons, and staring in endless variation from book jackets and gallery walls (fig. 18). While it is difficult to break away from Dickinson's iconic image, an artist who has been scientifically impelled is Nancy Burson, whose computer-generated portrait (fig. 19) advances Dickinson to age fifty-two by artificially "aging" the subject in the daguerreotype image. Burson's picture of a mature Dickinson, just before her final illness, makes us more appreciative of Lavinia Dickinson's crusade to "soften" the features of her sister's daguerreotype. But the enhancement also inspires, through a stiffening at our spine, awareness that we resist aging Emily. In addition to all other roles, we have conceived this poet as the female Peter Pan.

Figure 19

Nancy Burson (b. 1948)

Emily Dickinson at age 52, 1995

Computer-generated silver print

Mead Art Museum

True mysteries are fathomless. One of the tasks Millicent Todd Bingham set herself in her biographical study *Emily Dickinson's Home* was to determine where the daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson was made. Her researches turned up the fact that during the year Dickinson 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 lore.[11] Fresh evidence of the 1990s, 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 distinctively patterned tablecover upon which Emily's arm rests. The cloth has been traced preliminarily, via the imprint on the mat of another portrait, to the studio of Otis H. Cooley, who operated as a daguerreotypist in Springfield, Massachusetts, from 1844 to 1855.[12] Possibly Emily, while visiting Norcross relatives in nearby Monson about 1847, went to Mr. Cooley'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 writer surrounded by the stuff of her trade? The lone daguerreotype of an adolescent Dickinson provokes more readings than either of these supposed conditions; at the same time, the single enigmatic image serves as a screen held up between this poet's unfathomable insecurities and our culture's incessant curiosity.

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

But peers beyond her mesh—
And wishes—and denies—
Lest Interview—annul a want
That Image—satisfies—

(P 421)

NOTES

[1] ED to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, July 1862. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), L. 268. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and will be placed in the text.

[2] In addition to having strong literary interests, Mabel Loomis Todd, wife of Amherst College astronomy professor David P. Todd, was intimate with members of the Dickinson family. She had exchanged notes and "attentions" with Emily while the latter was alive, was close to the poet's sister, Lavinia, and had a love affair with Austin Dickinson, the poet's brother.

[3] Critic M. A. deWolfe Howe, Jr., in "Literary Affairs in Boston" column, *Book Buyer*, September 1894, 378; quoted in *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History*, ed. Willis J. Buckingham (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 329.

[4] Although debate has ensued about the date of the daguerreotype, Lavinia Dickinson stated twice in the spring of 1893, in letters to Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, that Emily was sixteen when it was taken. (See Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* [New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1945], 225–226.) Because Dickinson's birthday fell on 10 December, she was sixteen during most of 1847.

[5] See the records of the Dickinson-Todd lawsuit of March 1898, in the files of the Supreme Judicial Court, Hampshire County Court House, Northampton, Mass. Instigated by Lavinia Dickinson against Mr. and Mrs. Todd, the suit ostensibly concerned ownership of a small strip of land, but back of the matter lay family jealousies involving proprietorship of Dickinson's poetry and the Mabel Todd–Austin Dickinson love affair.

[6] The talk, given in Worcester, Mass., was reported in the *Worcester Spy* next day (Buckingham, *Emily Dickinson's Reception*, 309).

[7] Buckingham, *Emily Dickinson's Reception*, 201.

[8] Millicent Todd Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), appendix 1. Wallace Keep recalled Vinnie's giving him the daguerreotype in June 1892, but there is clear evidence in Mabel Loomis Todd's diary and in her letters to Thomas Niles that the portrait was in Vinnie's and Mabel's hands in the early spring of 1893. Therefore the date given here for Vinnie's impetuous generosity seems likelier.

[9] Martha Dickinson Bianchi's publications were *The Single Hound*, 1914; *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 1924; *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (with A. L. Hampson), 1924; *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1929; *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Centennial Edition, 1930; *Emily Dickinson Face to Face: Unpublished Letters with Notes and Reminiscences*, 1932; *Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson* (with A. L. Hampson), 1935; and *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (with A. L. Hampson), 1937. The volumes of poetry were published by Little, Brown, and Company of Boston, and the two books of biography and memoir by the Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston and New York.

[10] George F. Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Scribner's, 1938).

[11] "She wears a corset which has a long wooden busk inserted down the front to the point where her bodice fits. Hers is not a very tight, fashionable one, but still a young girl's easier fit, and the dress is not done in the smooth snug fashion worn by smart, well-dressed women. That is due to her youth. The nice puff of her skirt comes from fine cartridge pleating and several petticoats. I think the dress is a good school-dress, made of a dark printed cotton. The neckline is a youthful one." Personal communique from Joan Severa, author of *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840–1900* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995).

[12] Millicent Todd Bingham's books are *Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (with Mabel Loomis Todd), 1945; *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson*, 1945; *Emily Dickinson: A Revelation*, 1954; and *Emily Dickinson's Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family*, 1955. All were published by Harper and Brothers of New York.

[13] Karen Richardson Gee, "'My George Eliot' and My Emily Dickinson," *Emily Dickinson Journal* 3, no. 1 (1994): 25.

[14] See Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home*, 519.

[15] John Felix, "Otis H. Cooley: Possible Photographer of the Only Known Photograph of Emily Dickinson," *Journal of the Photographic Historical Society of New England*, nos. 3 and 4 (1995).