# Introduction

## *The value of Emily Dickinson*

Emily Dickinson's writing remains valuable to a wide range of readers today. This I know because my first-generation Kindle™ tells me so; when it goes to sleep, its electronic ink every so often morphs into her image, surfacing in the screensaver's rotation of canonical authors along with the likenesses of Charlotte Brontë, James Joyce, John Milton, Sir Thomas More, John Steinbeck, Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Virginia Woolf.

If I query my reading machine about what Dickinson is being valued *for*, though, matters become more complicated. The Dickinson presented to readers through the Kindle's screen has been retouched on multiple dimensions. The image's hyperfeminine lace ruff, curly hair, and heavy eyeliner are crude twentieth-century fabrications drawn onto the single indisputably authenticated daguerreotype likeness that remains of Dickinson, taken in 1847 – she was then just over sixteen years of age – now preserved in the Jones Library of Amherst College. A reader disconcerted by Dickinson's extreme Kindle makeover could strike back with the "Emily Dickinson Historic Vinyl Wall Graphic Decal Sticker," also available from Amazon.com – an imposing presence standing 60 inches tall, advertised as "Great for Parties."[1] Emily Dickinson as icebreaker? This unlikely version of Dickinson faithfully reproduces the flat hair and unadorned facial features of the famous daguerreotype, but alters Dickinson's dress to reveal her arms and neck: a wall sticker she may be but a wallflower she must not be, cost her image what it may in historical accuracy.

Less imposing but no less retouched are the Kindle store's most popular versions of Dickinson's writings: freely available digital transcriptions (made by volunteers in the Gutenberg Project) of the first, posthumously published volumes of Dickinson's poetry, edited by

Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd and now in the public domain. Like the Kindle screensaver image, the writings in *Poems of Emily Dickinson* (edited by Higginson and Todd, 1890), *Poems of Emily Dickinson, Second Series* (Higginson and Todd, 1891), and *Poems of Emily Dickinson, Third Series* (edited by Todd on her own, 1896) were altered for public circulation, well ahead of their later migration into digital format: their spelling and punctuation altered to conform to late nineteenth-century norms, their stanza forms regularized, they appeared under titles ("The Secret," "The Lonely House") and in thematic groups ("Life," "Love") never assigned them by Dickinson herself.

In making these alterations – in selecting from the bundles and stacks of manuscript writing left behind at her death what they saw as Dickinson's most finished and accessible verses; scraping away what they construed as minor errors of spelling, informal habits of punctuation, and happenstance line breaks dictated by the margins of her stationery; and thus separating the essence of the poems from the accidents of their transcription – Dickinson's early editors believed themselves to be enhancing the value of her work for contemporary readers. Even so, it was not long before they had second thoughts about the "very few and superficial" editorial changes they confessed to having introduced in the course of bringing Dickinson's work into print. In atonement, their *Second Series* of Dickinson's poems offered readers a facsimile of one of the surviving manuscripts of a poem published in the 1890 *Poems* as "Renunciation" ("There came a day – At Summer's full –"). Occupying four full pages ahead of the front matter of the slender volume, the facsimile and Todd's accompanying preface introduced Dickinson's rapidly growing print audience to aspects of her writing previously valued, if valued at all, only by her familiar correspondents: the increasingly "bolder and more abrupt" character of her handwriting's departure from "the delicate, running hand" expected "of our elder gentlewomen"; the generous spacing that set off words and even individual letters on the page; the rhythmic tic of her dashes; the hiatus of frequent visual line breaks inhibiting the forward momentum of familiar stanza forms.[2]

There would be more editorial controversy to come in the century following Higginson and Todd's first volumes, controversy that continues today even as Dickinson's work migrates into electronic formats vastly more sophisticated than the Gutenberg Project's austerely text-based, type-faced, nostalgia-provoking interface. To a remarkable degree, though, Higginson's and Todd's editorial dilemmas of the 1890s delineate fault lines along which present-day readers – and by no means only scholarly readers – continue to divide. More than scholarly completeness for its own sake is in question when editors debate how best to represent Dickinson's manuscript writings in print, in facsimile, or in digital images. No other poet of Dickinson's stature writing in English comes to us so completely through the efforts of posthumous editors (only Gerard Manley Hopkins comes close), and differing editorial presentations of Dickinson's writing embody different arguments for why Dickinson matters. Although I will not pursue editorial history for its own sake in this book, I will not avoid it where compelling and competing interpretations of Dickinson's value are tied to editorial decisions.

Do we value Dickinson's own distinctive punctuation? This would seem an easy question to begin with: few readers today would trade her original practices for more conventional usage, especially the dashes that set off words and slow the rhythm of lines, and with which Dickinson almost always ended her poems. But are the marks we refer to, for convenience, as Dickinson's dashes truly conventional dashes? Many readers have thought not. The editor of the first twentieth-century scholarly edition of her poems, Thomas H. Johnson, indicated them with the shorter en-dash, set off with spaces before and after, rather than the printer's conventional long, joined-up em-dash (like this "–", instead of like this "—"); Ralph W. Franklin's 1998 variorum edition prints them at hyphen length, thus producing on the printed page something still closer in appearance to the abbreviated marks of Dickinson's manuscripts. Has our experience of Dickinson's writing altered, if subliminally, with these changes? Other readers have gone further, locating expressive value even in the shape of Dickinson's letters and the variable spacing between words – as variable and as meaningful, argues poet Susan Howe, as when poets in our own day

deliberately manipulate spaces within lines as well as between them. By the same logic, Howe objects strenuously to Franklin's editorial decision to print Dickinson's poems in regular stanza forms, arguing that the visual line breaks created by Dickinson's increasingly spacious handwriting are meaningful rather than accidental run-overs.[3] How much of Dickinson's value to us inheres in the creative freedom of her manuscript hand?

Do we value Dickinson's own word choices? Surely an easy question. The kind of gratuitous editorial interference exercised by Higginson and Todd in this respect – replacing Dickinson's "White Sustenance" with "pale sustenance," for example, in her great lament "I cannot live with you" (Fr 706) – is unimaginable today. The bridal and Eucharistic resonance of white that leaps from this poem to others such as "Mine – by the Right of the White Election" (Fr 411) and "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat" (Fr 401), the contagion between "White Sustenance" and "Wild Nights" (Fr 269), and the image of her white dress preserved at her Amherst home are all part of Dickinson's value for us. But when she herself didn't choose among her words? The surviving manuscript of "I could not live with you" shows that Dickinson recorded two possible alternatives for "Sustenance": "exercise –" and "privilege –," as if to conjugate whiteness on an aesthetic and even political continuum running from bare bodily existence through self-willed, self-fashioning practice to aristocratic election. Many other of her poems survive with comparable alternative readings, most of them in the small, hand-stitched copybooks that Todd christened Dickinson's "fascicules." Todd also cut the fascicles' binding strings and dispersed their folded sheets for her own convenience in her editorial labors. Do the variants add to the value of "I cannot live with you"? Did Todd destroy something of literary value in scattering Dickinson's manuscript books?

Readers who value Dickinson's variants point to her manuscript books, painstakingly reconstructed by twentieth-century scholars, as evidence for Dickinson's practice of "choosing not choosing" (in the title of Sharon Cameron's influential study of the fascicles[4]) and argue that conventional print publication in her own day would have denied Dickinson the creative and cognitive freedom realized in her own

book-making. Some value the fascicles as poetic sequences in which Dickinson's typically brief verses generate larger patterns of meaning: comparable to Whitman's sequences of the Civil War, perhaps related to the same national convulsion, and equally prescient, according to critics Rosenthal and Gall, as templates for the landmark lyric sequences of twentieth-century poetry by writers such as Pound, Williams, Yeats, Eliot, and Plath.[5]

Other readers prize aspects of Dickinson's writing that stray further still from the conventions of the printed volume of poems. Dickinson's "radical scatters" of the 1870s and 1880s, as Marta Werner calls them – her fragments, many of them penciled up, down, and aslant on scraps of stationery and wrapping paper – attract readers attuned to "the beauties of transition and isolation," contingency and discontinuity.[6] For Werner, the late fragments represent a fully autonomous aesthetic practice rather than tantalizing drafts of unrealized poems. Other readers nominate the intermingling of Dickinson's poetry with her letters – letters enclosing copies of poems; letters with inset poems; letters in which prose modulates directly into poems; letters composed wholly as poems, set off by little more than opening salutation and closing signature – as Dickinson's most characteristic and distinctive medium, not just a felicitous social recycling of poems composed for more autonomous aesthetic ends. More than 600 manuscripts of poems sent to correspondents in her lifetime survive, and how many more were sent we cannot know. Like the fascicles, the letters contest Robert Weisbuch's characterization of Dickinson's isolate poems as typically "sceneless" and shorn of occasion,[7] testifying instead to the work of the poem as gift, as flirtatious token, as intervention in grief and anger, as wordplay on the rose or lily, or pair of knitted garters, or even dead cricket sent along with it. For Virginia Jackson, what is most radical and significant about Dickinson's writing is precisely this direct address to a particular reader on a particular occasion. Challenging the "cultural consensus that Dickinson wrote poems," Jackson asserts that "lyric poetry as discourse immediately and intimately addressed to the reader precisely because it is not addressed to anyone at all" is exactly what

Dickinson did *not* write.[8] What Jackson values in Dickinson is, in a certain strong sense, unpublishable, even in facsimile reproduction, whether on paper or in pixels; it was never intended, she argues, for third-party eyes.

Martha Nell Smith also values the letters' personal address, but sees Dickinson's letters as her chosen mode of self-publication, "a consciously designed alternative mode of textual reproduction and distribution."[9] Whatever Dickinson's degree of participation or consent in the appearance of the very few poems printed during her own lifetime (eleven have surfaced to date), there can be no doubt of the energy and care with which she circulated her poems in correspondence any more than there can be doubt of the energy and care with which she recorded them in her manuscript books. In both modes, letters and fascicles, she did not have to see her poems tailored to the conventions of her surrounding print culture. The medium of correspondence mattered to her. How does it matter for Dickinson's value to us now?

This book will advance an argument for the value of attending to the life of Dickinson's writing, including the large contours of its material and compositional life: the emergence and fading of the fascicles, the ebb and flow of correspondences, the improvisational flair of the fragments. But the central units of value for my study will be poems more often than fascicles, fragments, or letters; and, most fundamentally, poems more often than their manuscripts. Along with her editor Ralph Franklin, I will hold that "a literary work is separable from its artifact, as Dickinson herself demonstrated as she moved her poems from one piece of paper to another."[10] Although Dickinson's wide-open handwriting and her short, broken lines are arresting in her later manuscripts, I will mostly follow Franklin in presenting the metrical stanza as more powerful than the visual line for organizing Dickinson's poems. I will be more concerned with those aspects of Dickinson's poems that handily survive translation into print or transcription by another hand – semantics and syntax, thematic clusters, meter and rhyme – than with aspects of her manuscript writings that are highly fragile or sensitive or altogether inaccessible to this translation.

Even as I was writing this book, however, the Houghton Library and Harvard University Press in October 2013 launched the Emily Dickinson Archive, the goal of which is "to make high-resolution images of manuscripts of Dickinson's poetry and letters available in open access, along with transcriptions and annotations from historical and scholarly editions" from Higginson and Todd forward. I serve on the advisory board of EDA, as the board members call it over email, and so presumably have some conviction of its value and its potential to "inspire new scholarship and discourse on this literary icon," in the words of our collective blurb for our work.[11] Harvard's adding its materials to the considerable collection of Dickinson manuscripts already online through Amherst College removes a significant barrier to widespread appreciation for the manuscript conditions of Dickinson's artistry, and readers around the world who will never be granted access to the originals (increasingly, most of us) will now find it much easier to make their own judgments about the significance of what gets lost in print translations of Dickinson's work. Why continue to make a point, then, of valuing poems over their manuscript artifacts, or metrical stanzas reconstructed by the inner ear over the visual line breaks conditioned by the size of the paper on which Dickinson copied her poems? Indeed, why continue to assume, *pace* Virginia Jackson's and other influential arguments to the contrary, that Dickinson wrote poems that can be extracted without essential violence from the original manuscript circumstances of their composition and circulation? In the age of high-speed Internet connections, why extract anything? Why not choose not choosing?

This book will return to these questions in its final chapter. Of course, EDA's launch has provided scholars as well as general readers with immensely easier access to the riches of the Dickinson archive. More eyes will bring more intelligence to questions of dating and the relationship of one manuscript to another, perhaps to find patterns that have not yet emerged to scholars. Decoding Dickinson's manuscript hand takes practice, so the electronic archive may give visitors who are not scholars a more vivid apprehension of what editors and scholars do – no bad thing at a time when this work is undervalued. There is historical value in providing readers as well with a more vivid

apprehension of "the literate traces of [Dickinson's] everyday life," in Virginia Jackson's happy phrase,[12] and value in presenting wider opportunities to assess the various claims made on behalf of their literary importance. There will be little to regret and much to celebrate if my Kindle's frilly retouched image of Dickinson finally loses its hold on the public eye in favor of the high-resolution, meticulously curated manuscript images now widely available through the Emily Dickinson Archive.

But there will be less to celebrate, in my view, if the EDA's superb resources lend their weight to an image of Dickinson as intrinsically violated by the conditions of her translation from manuscript into print. To my mind, this image (no less than that doctored, virginal daguerreotype) plays to a gendered stereotype of woman's virtue and women's writing as something both material and fragile: a hymenal page that can only be damaged or destroyed in the processes of handling and circulation, inviting us to look but not touch or interpret. For all the genuine critical interest of Dickinson's compositional media, I believe that she too thought of a poem as exceeding its material artifact, in something of the way that "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –":

> For – put them side by side –
> The one the other will contain* *include
> With ease – and You – beside –
> The Brain is deeper than the sea –
> For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
> The one the other will absorb –
> As sponges – Buckets – do –
> The Brain is just the weight of God –
> For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
> And they will differ – if they do –
> As Syllable from Sound – *(Fr 598A)*

The Brain is "wider" because human language and thought represent the material world at large; the sky and sea cannot reciprocate the brain's representational capacity, including its scandalous reflexive

capacity – the object of Dickinson's play in this poem – to represent itself to itself. True, Dickinson here does not conceive of language and thought as existing in any way *apart from* their physical media: it is the spongy human brain, rather than a more abstract mind, that is weighed here and found sufficient (with a glimpse of the kitchen or the dissection table, or even the Civil War hospital[13]). Matter in all of its phases – liquid, solid, and gas (ink, page, and sounded syllable) – remains for Dickinson the condition of possibility for all human thought and language, underlined in this poem's metaphors and similes as they shuttle back and forth between material and immaterial containment, literal and metaphorical depth, sensation and abstraction, contrast and likeness.

According to this poem, however, the ultimate material substrate of Dickinson's poetry is not the manuscript page but rather the human brain itself, which mediates the architecture of sound and sense that unfolds between the reader's eye and her inner ear. To my eyes at least, the visual interest of the one surviving manuscript of this poem (bound into one of Dickinson's fascicles around 1863) pales next to the extravagant shocks delivered to all the senses through the poem's representational verbal art. Readers see and touch, perhaps even smell, this brain, all in words that resound to the inner ear. Highly regular as to meter and rhyme by Dickinson's standards, "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" relies on alliteration, assonance, and repetition to underscore likeness and difference. The Brain and the sea in the second stanza initially share no overlapping sounds; but the alliteration linking "Brain" to "blue" to "Buckets" enacts in sound what the stanza asserts thematically: the brain absor*b*s the sea. Whether looking at a reproduction of Dickinson's own manuscript or a translation of her writing into conventional print, the reader who reconstitutes from the material traces of the written page the speech stream of sounded language can appreciate this poem's embodied play between the back-mouth, absorbent vowels and consonants of "sponges" and the plosive front-mouth consonants of "Buckets" as Dickinson demonstrates that articulate speech is both flowing and stopped, both liquid and contained.

It is, above all, close and careful reading of the poem as a sounded verbal artifact, more so than visual inspection of the poem's shape on the manuscript page, that unfolds the complexity of Dickinson's simultaneous allegiance to sensory experience and signifying abstraction. That complexity, I believe, is why we continue to value her writing. In Dickinson's representation, the human brain that mediates this act of reading is a remarkably robust organ, by contrast with the fragile materiality of the manuscript page: powerful, hefty, absorbent, equal to taking in the entire world. "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" intimates that Dickinson's art works by absorbing and transforming its historical and cultural contexts (including the nineteenth century's growing scientific interest in the relationship between the mind and the brain); following this poem's lead, this book will draw on historical, cultural, and biographical contexts where they seem interpretively useful. Unlike the unique physical manuscript of a poem – which might have been sent to just one person, or, as in the case of this poem, was retained unshared by Dickinson during her lifetime – Dickinson's address in this poem to a generic "You" implies that the reproducible, intelligible forms of language are a shared cultural property; following this poem's lead, I will take note of where Dickinson addresses a poem or letter to an individual recipient, and will note as well where there is no surviving evidence of her having done so. In either case, the reproducible forms of syllable and sound – the poem investing its various material incarnations, the poem as transmitted from brain to brain to brain, the poem as object of close reading – will be the primary focus of this book.

Unless otherwise noted, Dickinson's poems are cited from R. W. Franklin's variorum edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998), by first line and the number assigned them in Franklin's chronology, and her letters from Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward's edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958), by the number assigned to them in that edition. Unlike Franklin, however, I observe Dickinson's punctuation and capitalization in citing poems by first lines.