

*Emily Dickinson's
Reception in the 1890s*

A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY



Edited by Willis J. Buckingham

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To
JOCELYN *and* DAVID
And especially to
DEBBIE

Fame is a bee.
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.

—*Emily Dickinson*

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As noted in the Introduction, this volume builds on the review scrapbooks assembled by Mabel Loomis Todd. I wish to thank Yale University Library, where the albums are deposited among the Mabel Loomis Todd Papers, for granting permission to draw upon the scrapbooks and to quote from Mabel Todd's marginal comments in them. The Robert Frost Library, Amherst College, allowed generous access to its Higginson and Todd collections. I am indebted as well to the scholarship of others who have worked with these reviews, especially Klaus Lubbers and Virginia Terris.

The patience and encouragement of my wife, Debra Kessinger Buckingham, has been indispensable.

Art is the expression of a unique personality; yet there is no literature, not even the wildest Prophetic Books of Blake, that is not, in some measure, the joint production of author and public.

—Albert Guerard, *Literature and Society* (1935)

Introduction

*"But then, Miss Dickinson was evidently born
to be the despair of reviewers."* [no. 319]

LATE in 1890, in time for the Christmas trade, Roberts Brothers of Boston issued a delicately pretty book of poems by a deceased and unknown writer named Emily Dickinson. As notices began to appear, the volume's editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, undertook to collect and preserve the reviews in clipping scrapbooks. Higginson added to his album only rarely, but Todd, as if understanding from the start its importance, brought to her work of compilation much of the same resolution and assiduity she gave to her editing of the poems. She saved even the briefest notices that fell into her hand and hired a press clipping service to extend her reach outside Amherst and the circle of her friends. She assembled these clippings in chronologically ordered and meticulously arranged album pages, with handwritten notations identifying unlocated items and anonymous authors. For each Dickinson volume she edited in the nineties—they included two additional books of poems and an edition of the poet's letters—Todd began a new scrapbook.

Mrs. Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, appended to *Ancestors' Brocades* (Harper, 1945), a history of her mother's editing of Emily Dickinson, a list of some 125 reviews drawn from the albums. Only when the Todd scrapbooks were given to Yale University's Stirling Library after Mrs. Bingham's death in 1968 did it become apparent that her clipping albums contained another nearly two hundred reviews not recorded in *Ancestors' Brocades*. Although Mabel Todd's collection is almost doubled in the present volume, it is to her vision and effort that credit for its comprehensiveness must largely fall.

These documents allow a perspective of rarely achieved breadth on American verse criticism and book publishing in the nineties. They make it possible, for example, to learn more about the role of religious family weeklies in contributing to the popular literary taste of the pe-

riod. As for Dickinson herself, the nineties reviewers were her contemporaries or near contemporaries, and their horizon of expectations could not have been wholly un presupposed by her. Whether she shared or rejected those literary attitudes, they shaped her projection of an ideal reader. Moreover, these documents illustrate the interaction between readers, texts, and norms of valuation by which literary meaning is established and disestablished. They also offer a perspective on the modern championship of Dickinson which, so long preoccupied with recovering her work from genteel distortion, continues to risk separating her from the literary and historical contexts in which she wrote. Twentieth-century Dickinson criticism, in many ways, has been a history of mischaracterizing the nineteenth-century reception (as mostly unfavorable) for the purpose of writing against it. On the other hand, also revealed to literary excavation is the instability of end-of-the-century criticism compared to literary opinion when Dickinson began writing. She was published at the moment when the nineteenth century could feel, and take pleasure in, the alien force of her voice. These documents reveal how quickly and fundamentally Dickinson's first audience delighted in her "strangeness." Finally, the power of Dickinson's words to take on the inflections of succeeding generations lends intrinsic interest to the privileged responses of her first readers—their impressions unrepeatably exempt from the heft of major reputation.

The materials gathered here confirm Klaus Lubbers's thoughtful, well-researched chapters on the poet's early reception in his *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution* (Univ. of Michigan, 1968). As he points out, Dickinson's early acclaim—surprising to all but the poet's sister—can be credited in part to Higginson's expertly promotional preface (item no. 10), his anonymous defense of her from the respected pages of the *Nation* (no. 28), and a *Harper's* review by William Dean Howells that described her first volume as "a distinctive addition to the literature of the world" (no. 64). Roberts Brothers did their part as well, binding the book with an eye toward Christmas and wedding sales and getting review copies into the right hands with notable efficiency. The number of reviews Dickinson's book elicited, in their quantity alone, suggests that it received a push from shore of unusual firmness for a first volume by an unknown poet.

But the nineties was a time of literary crazes and the immense amount of attention given Dickinson began to seem to some an unmerited excitement. Andrew Lang, a British critic well known in America, savaged Howells's Dickinson essay immediately (no. 72). American reviewers, who noted his remarks primarily for their contentious tone, were not ready to recant. There were adverse reviews and others that attempted to balance praise with blame, as the initial response continued, but the first important downward revaluation did not appear until

the March 1891 issue of *Scribner's Monthly*. With blandishing evenness of tone, the anonymous critic undermined the often-remarked mainstay of Higginson's defense of Dickinson, that "when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence." "One thing is very certain," said *Scribner's*, "neglect of form involves the sacrifice of an element of positive attractiveness as well as offending positively by perverseness and eccentricity" (no. 123). The reviewer, by seeming reluctant to diminish Higginson's chivalrous apologetics with fair-minded criticism, only made his argument more persuasive.

Scribner's partially counterbalanced Howells's *Harper's* essay, while the *Century*, the other high-circulation arbiter of literary opinion, continued its conspicuous silence on Dickinson (as it would throughout the nineties), when the "Second Series" of her poems appeared a year after the first. The new collection was first met, much as was the earlier volume, with journalistic expressions of enthusiasm and longer critical articles rehashing the issue of form versus thought.

Partly to promote the "Second Series," Higginson had published in the *Atlantic* some of Dickinson's letters (no. 221). Whatever positive effect his article had, its contribution to the poet's critical acceptance was largely effaced by excoriating comment on her that appeared a few months later in the same journal (no. 325). Everyone knew the piece to have been written by New England's own Thomas Bailey Aldrich, a nationally prominent poet and critic and recent editor of the *Atlantic*, the region's august literary voice. His withering tone suggested that his silence on this latest Boston fad had been broken only because he could no longer countenance the lingering international embarrassment to New England literary culture that Dickinson's middlebrow enthusiasts had provoked. In New York, Aldrich's review was instantly noted and approvingly reprinted by Richard Henry Stoddard, another eminent genteel critic of the day (no. 333).

From this time forward (January 1892), the Dickinson rage was largely over. Higginson continued to speak well of her in the *Nation*, but the leading national literary monthlies declined to notice her 1894 volumes of letters and the 1896 "Third Series" of poems. Consistently friendly weeklies like the *Critic* and *Christian Union* changed their tone (nos. 316, 366). Even the loyal *Springfield Republican* cautioned that two books of Dickinson's verse were probably enough (no. 306). Aldrich's assessment insured that the decade's response to Dickinson would remain three-tiered: high-minded silence from the elite and largely New York critics (Aldrich, R. H. Stoddard, E. C. Stedman, Bayard Taylor, G. H. Boker, Brander Matthews, George Woodberry), a middle level of critical estimate treating Dickinson as troublesome but interesting, and a widespread noncritical enthusiasm for her work. Among the second and third groups of reviewers, only the latter maintained the unstinting ap-

preciation struck by Howells and Higginson. The two-volume *Letters* was well received but notices of the poems declined in spiritedness and quantity and sales dipped sharply. *Poems*, "Second Series" (1891) found only slightly more than half the 10,000 buyers of the first; the *Letters* (1894) and *Poems* "Third Series" (1896) sold about two thousand copies each (see Appendix D).

At the point when an elitist aesthetic standard, over against the consensus standard, had nearly put Dickinson into eclipse, scattered younger critics took up her cause. They believed Dickinson would outlive her detractors. For Francis H. Stoddard, Dickinson's poems were not formless but "worded to so fine and subtle a device that they seem formless" (no. 334). For the younger Stoddard, Bliss Carman (nos. 557, 587), Harry Lyman Koopman (no. 560), Grace Musser (no. 526), and most acute and far-sighted of all, Rupert Hughes, only twenty-four years old, Dickinson was to be ranked where Howells had originally placed her, among America's permanent and most original contributors to the world's poetry (no. 553). Hughes believed that Dickinson's artistry had simply not been able to get through to the "orthodox worthies," so diverted were they with their own trivial etiquettes. A Chicago German-language paper looked back, in 1898, on her first reception as another example of that peculiarly American condition, the "tyranny of the majority" set over against genuine individual vitality (no. 581). With this flash of self-awareness, her first reception ended; the poet was to remain a footnote in literary history for another quarter century.

The decade's reviewing of Dickinson is marked by several characteristics. Two have been noted: a tendency to follow the leader and an inclination among younger critics to be less submissive to formalist preoccupations than their older colleagues. Readers of this volume will also discover a bias according to gender, women reviewers being more sympathetic, on average, than men. Regional differences become apparent as well. Some New York and western publications warned against Dickinson as a "Boston fad" (nos. 479, 522), the enervated exemplar of a waning New England school of letters (no. 530). One California paper, early on, suggested that her popularity was the self-serving creation of a "New England clique" (no. 140). The British were similarly disinclined to place themselves in Boston's orbit. Finally, notices may be grouped to some extent by the type of periodical in which they appeared. Newspapers often were friendlier than periodicals, just as the family, society and religious weeklies tended to be less critical than their more strictly literary counterparts.

From the vantage point of a century later, Dickinson's first reception prompts two questions: Why was she liked so well? Why was she liked

so little? That is, given her supposed modernity, and the decade's vitiating formalism, how could Dickinson, on first hearing, have found even a modest audience, much less wide acclaim? On the other hand, how could an entire literary community have known her work and yet have understood it so poorly that she was to earn only the transitory success of the popular writer, the favorite of a day? Although this is not the place for exhaustive consideration of these questions, a few observations may be helpful. As to how Dickinson could have made such a stir in the lifeless literary milieu she seems now to so deftly subvert, it should be remembered that of all her qualities, the nineties liked best her originality, strangeness, and force. Arlo Bates, at the beginning, called her "delightfully pagan" (no. 21). For many reviewers in the nineties, the world already had as many "excellent formalists" as it needed (no. 216).

Dickinson's unusual verse did not constitute, universally, an affront. Whitman had opened the door to critical valuation of "incoherence and formlessness" (no. 337). Browning had written poems that were not easily understood (no. 571). To an extent, perhaps, that we cannot now hear, Dickinson's verse had the ring of the nineties in it. As Virginia Terris has suggested in her dissertation, "Emily Dickinson and the Genteel Critics" (New York Univ., 1973), Dickinson's poetry portrayed New England life and landscape, often employing native diction and humor. In addition, it was pleasingly quotable, spiritual, didactic, and "intensely ethical" (no. 27), expressing various calls to self-denial and duty, as in such poems as the widely noted "If I can stop one heart from breaking." It drew upon popular themes in female verse, such as womanhood, home, human relationships, melancholy, and death. It seemed founded on approved literary sources, Emerson above all. The poet's outward life met the decade's severest canons of female and literary respectability. There was nothing in Dickinson's eccentricities comparable to Amy Lowell's cigar.

The poems chosen for publication in the nineties are among her least difficult. Her editors knew there was little enthusiasm at the time for poems as riddles. "Because a plain matter is put in obscure words," said the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, "it is not, therefore, poetry" (no. 545). The editors also did what they could to reduce the oddity of the poems they did choose, making changes in fifty of the one hundred fifteen poems published in the first volume. They further conventionalized the manuscripts by adding generalizing titles of a type used in the decade, such as "Reticence" and "Disenchantment." The editors' topical divisions, sectioning all three volumes into categories headed "Life," "Love," "Nature," and "Time and Eternity," brought the architecture of Dickinson's books into conformity with others of the period.

Another reason Dickinson found so much acceptance is that her work

was experienced as fulfilling many of the common reader's religious and sentimental expectations for poetry. If it is surprising to learn that two of Dickinson's erotic poems were chosen for the first and second editions, "My river runs to thee" and "Wild nights, wild nights," it is not astonishing that each was mentioned, among hundreds of reviews, only once. Also unnoticed were many of her most powerful poems of spiritual dereliction and despair, among them "There's a certain slant of light," "I felt a funeral in my brain," "Essential oils are wrung," and "They say that 'time assuages.'" When a despair poem was discussed, as was "The heart asks pleasure first," reviewers understood it to refer only to the suffering of certain people (nos. 13, 26), read it to imply an acceptance of fate "without any sign of pessimism" (no. 581), or believed it traced "the course of the weak pleasure-seeker, who is without aspiration or hope except to avoid the results of his folly" (no. 151). These poems were not ignored or misread because of their themes, for many poets of the period expressed pain and despair. Rather the modern age perceives in Dickinson a depth of psychic derangement, and an evocative power in her fractured poetics, that the nineties was unprepared to discover. At the last moment in history when it was still thought possible to see things steadily and whole, it is a mark not only of the poet's camouflage, but of stretching of the cultural seams, that her fleeting verses received the recognition they did. Had she published while in mid-career during the sixties, it is likely that her linguistic freedoms would have received even less acceptance than they did in the nineties. As Barton Levi St. Armand has suggested, and as evidence in this volume will roundly support, the decade tolerated her as well as it did partly because "there was a renewed vogue for New England 'antiquities' of all kinds [during the nineties], and so Dickinson was hailed as the last fading flower of American Puritanism."¹ In addition, Dickinson made her appearance when genteel criticism was in decline. Her seeming disregard for "rules" accorded with a changing literary ethos. In the words of a San Francisco reviewer, "If Emily Dickinson had written to-day, she would have found herself in the full sweep of the art movement, which contends for originality and freshness of expression, at the sacrifice of every art form — instead of the hackneyed, which is powerless to really express" (no. 526).

The parallel question, why Dickinson could be both well known and not better understood, finds a parallel explanation. Modernism, nascent in the nineties, had to reach fuller self-understanding before it could find its expression in Dickinson. Readers still liked euphony and concord in poetry; they liked rhymes. Dickinson's poetics denied them accus-

1. Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 3.

tomed pleasures. But stylistic aberrations alone do not account for the unease of her first readers. In her worst reviews, for example, literary rivalries played a part. Had Andrew Lang not enjoyed a longstanding enmity with Howells and Higginson, he probably would not have bothered with an American village recluse. The *New York Tribune's* punishing notices reflect that paper's loathing for the *New York Post*, whose parent company also owned the *Nation*, both associated with Higginson. Furthermore, though there was nothing untoward about the poet's life, it was hard for the nineties to view her as a figure of national importance because of the limited poetic range it supposed available to a woman who chose such a cloistered life. Higginson prefaced his invitation to her to attend some literary gatherings in Boston with the comment, "It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live so alone, with thoughts of such a quality coming up in you" (*L* 2:461). The nineties also felt that however appropriate it was for a woman to write in the lyric and other less weighty poetic modes, Dickinson's verses were too fractional to qualify as serious art. In the language of a reviewer who means to be appreciative, "The verses at their best have also an indefinable charm of will-o'-the-wisp-ness, leading you to feel that the poet is just about to reach a higher height of solid greatness, and will attain next time, and making it impossible for you not to turn the page to see" (no. 552).

Dickinson's much proclaimed "originality" was another asset that under the surface was a liability as well. When Higginson pointed out that she drew on recognized literary models, Emerson and Blake, for example, while others mentioned Browning, the decade's darling, it was all to her favor. But when one considers that the nineties compared or contrasted her to no fewer than ninety-five other writers, clearly critics found it difficult to discover a secure niche for her in literary history. Their uncertainty was not just an inconvenience; it was the index of her willful aberrancy. The year Dickinson died, George Woodberry argued in the *Nation* that literature is only useful when it communicates shared experience.² Dickinson, by contrast, was literature's "odd child" (no. 119). As an individual talent with no tradition, it is remarkable that she came as close as she did to major status among her earliest readers.

We know from her bold, self-effacing first letters to Higginson, that Emily Dickinson was concerned about how she might be understood by her contemporaries. The documents that follow reveal the meanings her words would have for persons close to her in time and place—with one caution. Readers and reviewers cannot be equated, for the latter may reflect what they believe their readers *ought* to appreciate rather than what they honestly enjoy themselves. Yet, as Cathy Davidson has

2. George Woodberry, "Mr. Lowell's New Volume," *Nation* 43 (1886): 525–27.

pointed out, the ordinary reader, as consumer, increasingly “replaced the socially prominent critic as the primary arbiter of nineteenth-century taste.”³ The marketplace demanded that those who produced and promoted books cater to the preferences of their widest potential readership. The effort represented by Aldrich to push Dickinson out of the canon demonstrates a late effort of elite readers to retain a measure of control over literary culture. The more apparently prescriptive the review, the more clearly does it divulge the standards and opinions it was written to raise. This collection strives to minimize bias against the common reader by bringing together all published comment on Dickinson, rather than drawing selectively from “high-culture” critics. Access to Dickinson’s specifically private as opposed to public readership is provided by Appendix B, a list of nineties diaries and letters referring to her that were not published until the twentieth century.

This question of which literary standard applied to Dickinson, the privileged or common, took ironic twists during the first decade of her publication. She was announced and initially portrayed as a quality writer who would appeal mainly to “the few”—to the more intelligent and thoughtful members of the reading public (nos. 13, 21, 22, 24, 37, among others). People who might pick up a book of poems “while they wait for the dinner bell or the carriage” could hardly be expected to enjoy the Emersonian epigrams of a recluse genius (no. 86). But when it became evident that booksellers couldn’t keep the new poet on their shelves, Dickinson’s popularity was charged against her. Parnassian critics like Lang and Aldrich could argue that when the public’s thirst for novelty wore off, and the ineluctable touchstones of art and even of grammar were applied to her poems, her “versicles” would slip into oblivion. Critics like Elisha Edwards replied, “The great public does not mind if a poem is ungrammatical or is not a well of English undefiled, provided it only touches something in the human heart” (no. 335), but in this and similar statements Dickinson’s defenders began to sound like apologists for a Philistine poetics. They had lost the high ground.

Had Dickinson been Whitman, help might have arrived from a vigorous new group of realist and naturalist critics in revolt against the criterion of beauty as espoused by the whole panoply of genteel, formalist, idealist, and aesthetic movements of the nineties. They sought to elevate truth above aesthetics, but the truths they wished to raise were to be sane and wholesome. Dickinson was not socially uplifting. She may have been, as Howells and others suggested, a type of her race, but for some this type was old-fashioned—“girly-girly” (no. 479). Without mentioning Dickinson by name, one critic may well have had her

3. Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 53.

in mind when in 1891 he deplored the rise of a "brain-sickly" school of literature marked by "morbid despair" wherein "acuteness of feeling is in excess of clearness of vision."⁴ By the end of the century the last hope for edging Dickinson into the canon lay with those like Francis Stoddard and Rupert Hughes who, as mentioned above, rested their case on the subtlety of her art. She ended the decade as she began, a high-brow poet.

Dickinson's first recognition reveals how literature has been read and judged. Does it also have interpretive value? Whether one is speaking of the literary milieu of her true contemporaries, or that of the nineties, Dickinson, like Whitman, "stood in and out of the game." Her end-of-the-century audience can tell us little with certainty about the creative self-awareness of the artist herself. The light that reflects back so tellingly on her readers in these reviews, glances off their ostensible subject. Interpretation of Dickinson will nevertheless continue to need the countering push of all we can know about her time and place. It is revealing of our impatience with the nineteenth century that Susan Dickinson's obituary of her sister-in-law received its only modern reprinting with the following sentences deleted (see Appendix A):

One can only speak of "duties beautifully done"; of her gentle tillage of the rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into the heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her chemistries; of her tenderness to all in the home circle; her gentlewoman's grace and courtesy to all who served in house and grounds; her quick and rich response to all who rejoiced or suffered at home; or among her wide circle of friends the world over. This side of her nature was to her the real entity in which she rested, so simple and strong was her instinct that a woman's hearthstone is her shrine.

Talk of shrines, duties, and rare flowers probably did not occasion the same uneasiness for the poet as it does for readers one hundred years later. In this sense, the nineties readership might well poke a collective finger at their modern counterparts, questioning their readiness to read.

The value of the nineties response for the modern reader lies also in its capacity to teach the lesson of indeterminacy, "the resistance of art to the meanings it provokes."⁵ These documents provide a laboratory perspective on how a generation's determination to make a poet its own

4. F. O. Eggleston, "Brain-sickly Literature," *Unitarian Review* 35 (1891): 477.

5. Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 269.

was at every moment undermined by the texts themselves. As a reading community, the nineties kept alive the “strangeness” of Dickinson’s verse but could not achieve the necessary distance from its own synthesizing and consistency-building activity to see how the poems slipped away from their attempts to master them. For a modern reader, these reviews powerfully manifest the openness and resistant power of Dickinson’s poems.

Some may also find that this collection has value in teaching one to read as a nineties reader. Learning to “read as a woman,” for example, has and is earning its place as a productive strategy for experiencing Dickinson’s poems. It furnishes clues and affiliations, however, rather than a unifying or all-sufficient perspective, for there are many ways of reading as a woman (i.e., as a reader empathetic with feminine experience): reading as a nineteenth-century woman, a modern woman, an anorexic woman, a woman reading other women, and so on.⁶ While not giving up hope for a critical lens that someday will bring all the poems into a single satisfying circumference, Dickinson readers in the meantime appear to enjoy reading playfully, eclectically, and individually. They engage the poems through various adoptive sympathies—existentialism, Christianity, transcendentalism (to name at random a few of the most easily labeled)—appropriating each as it seems revelatory. To read as a nineties reader carries the advantage of reading with some of the pieties Susan Dickinson speaks of still in place. The fullest promise of these reviews will finally lie in the capacity of new generations of readers to discover in them—and to compose out of them—yet another valued constituent of their own patient questioning of Dickinson’s words.

The chief function of the present volume is rendered not so much in adding bibliographically to the first chapter of Dickinson’s literary life as in making the documents which reveal that history fully accessible. To date, the most extensive reprinting of nineties material is a gathering of sixteen items in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*, an anthology of selected criticism from 1890 to 1960 edited by Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Univ. of Michigan, 1964). Most of the early reviews assembled there are from journals such as *Scribner’s* and *The Atlantic*, whose back numbers are still readily available. But the great bulk of comment from the nineties lies in the crumbling pages of such periodicals as *The Housekeeper’s Weekly*, now retrievable only at a few depositories. The near unavailability of this primary material has allowed even accomplished students of the period to generalize on too little in-

6. For discussion of “reading as a woman” as an example of the nature of the reading experience and of the consequences of reading, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 43–64.