

A detailed oil painting of Emily Dickinson, showing her from the chest up. She has dark hair pulled back, a high forehead, and a serious expression. She is wearing a dark dress with a white lace collar and a blue lace collar. The background is a dark, textured brown.

*Approaching*

*Emily Dickinson*

ITICAL CURRENTS

AND

CROSSCURRENTS SINCE 1960

FRED D. WHITE

# Approaching Emily Dickinson

Critical Currents and Crosscurrents since 1960

Fred D. White

CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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*Approaching Emily Dickinson*

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Scott Peeples, Series Editor  
(*Charleston, South Carolina*)

*About Literary Criticism in Perspective*

Books in the series *Literary Criticism in Perspective* trace literary scholarship and criticism on major and neglected writers alike, or on a single major work, a group of writers, a literary school or movement. In so doing the authors — authorities on the topic in question who are also well-versed in the principles and history of literary criticism — address a readership consisting of scholars, students of literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, and the general reader. One of the primary purposes of the series is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself, to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative.

*For Therese, with love*

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I also wish to thank Barbara F. Lefkowitz for permission to reprint lines from "Emily Dickinson's Sestina for Molly Bloom," and W. W. Norton & Co. for permission to reprint lines from "Emily Dickinson" by Linda Pastan: Copyright © 1971 by Linda Pastan, from *PM/AM: New and Selected Poems* by Linda Pastan. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Finally, to my wife, Therese, whose own fascination with Emily Dickinson has led to many a fruitful conversation about the poet, I express my deepest gratitude.

Fred D. White  
January 2008, Santa Clara, CA

## Note on References

FOR THE SAKE OF CONSISTENCY all citations of Emily Dickinson's poems follow the texts reproduced in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (3 vols.), ed. R. W. Franklin (1998), even if the scholar quoting the poems in question used a pre-Johnson or pre-Franklin version. In cases where more than one manuscript exists, I choose either the fascicle text or the text cited by the scholar being discussed, and indicate this text with the letter used by Franklin. Thus "Musicians Wrestle Everywhere" is Fr229B. To facilitate ease of reference for readers who do not have easy access to the Franklin variorum I also include in every case the Johnson number (J157 for the above poem). For poems that exist only in one manuscript version, I reproduce the Franklin number only, not the letter A, as is Franklin's practice.

In reproducing the texts of the poems, I include Dickinson's manuscript variants (indicated by a +), if any. If more than one variant is indicated for a given word or phrase, I separate the variants with an asterisk (\*). I also reproduce her possessive *it's* as *its* and regularize her spelling of *opon* as *upon*.

Citations of Dickinson's letters are indicated by their Johnson/Ward numbers (L1, L2, etc.), and follow the text as reproduced in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1958).



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# Introduction

*A Rapture as of Legacies —  
Of introspective Mines —  
(Fr1689; J1700)*

IN THE FORTY YEARS SINCE Klaus Lubbers published his bibliographic survey *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution* (1968), the number of academic studies of Dickinson and of literary and artistic creations inspired by her life and work has greatly exceeded that of the hundred-year period (1862–1962) covered by Lubbers, thus creating an urgent need for a new survey.

What has contributed to such a proliferation of Dickinson criticism and belletristic writing? I see three major factors. The first and most obvious is the steadily growing appreciation of Emily Dickinson's extraordinarily brilliant, innovative, complex artistry — an artistry that both extends and dismantles established notions of poetic possibility, genre boundaries, and even of the way language constructs meaning. The second is the availability of a number of reference tools published since 1955, without which contemporary Dickinson criticism could not have flourished. (See under the heading "Major Reference Tools Published since 1955," below.) And the third and most pervasive influence on Dickinson scholarship has been feminist criticism, which arose in the mid-1970s and flourished in the 1980s and early 90s. Feminist criticism, of course, is multi-faceted; it engages other methods of critical inquiry — such as formalism, cultural criticism, psychoanalytic and textual criticism — and in so doing redefines the aims of those earlier or concurrent methods. Chapter 3 examines the spectrum of feminist critical approaches to Emily Dickinson.

## The Aim of This Book

*Approaching Emily Dickinson* aims to provide new and veteran students of the poet with a detailed and up-to-date map of the scholarly terrain and to trace lines of inquiry that have evolved during the past half century — that is, since Thomas H. Johnson made the complete poems available to the public. A good bibliographic survey, however, should do more than simply report what's out there; it should also provide readers with a sense of the most valuable studies within a particular area of inquiry. This does not mean ignoring or disparaging "lesser" studies — but it does mean

suggesting which ones merit primary attention. Finally, a survey of this nature should be readable and (dare I say it?) engaging — daunting objectives indeed when one is navigating a vast sea of scholarly and artistic works.

Dickinson scholarship today cannot be neatly categorized into discrete schools. A cultural or feminist critic may well employ psychological, textual, archetypal, rhetorical, structuralist or poststructuralist methodologies. Textual scholars, working with R. W. Franklin's assembled fascicles, or with the penciled drafts archived at Amherst College's Robert Frost Library, have not only illuminated our understanding of Dickinson's method's of poetic composition; they have also made connections between those methods and the masculinist editorial and publishing conventions of her day, which she subverted by violating traditional lineation, capitalization, and punctuation, and by refusing to title her poems. For example, Susan Howe, in her 1993 book *The Birth-Mark*, sees Dickinson's editorial transgressions as representing "a contradiction to canonical social power" (1), while Cristanne Miller, in her *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (1987), uses stylistic and grammatical analyses to show how Dickinson exercised her own authority over male-constructed language norms. Like a set of Chinese boxes, a given study might contain a strict formalist reading of a poem within a framework of a psychoanalytic approach that purports to advance a cultural-studies perspective on Emily Dickinson's oeuvre. Thus, rather than attempt to classify Dickinson scholarship by "schools," I have opted to examine it by "approaches," a term I hope will emphasize the distinctive intentions of individual scholars.

## Major Reference Tools Published since 1955

This survey begins approximately where Klaus Lubbers leaves off; but I have found it necessary on occasion to re-examine, from the vantage point of half a century, a few of the earlier (pre-1960) Dickinson studies that Lubbers includes in his survey — studies insufficiently examined by him or requiring discussion in a new context. *Approaching Emily Dickinson* also builds upon several of the relatively recent short critical surveys: James Woodress's "Emily Dickinson," from his *Fifteen American Authors before 1900* (1971), and the following bibliographic essays from *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, edited by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (1998): Martha Ackmann's "Biographical Studies of Dickinson"; Margaret Dickie's "Feminist Conceptions of Dickinson"; Jonnie Guerra's "Dickinson Adaptations in the Arts and the Theater"; Roland Hagenbüchle's "Dickinson and Literary Theory"; and Marietta Messmer's "Dickinson's Critical Reception." Mary Lynn Cooper Polk's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Emily Dickinson: A Survey of the

Criticism and Selective Annotated Bibliography" (1984) also served as an important resource.

Thomas H. Johnson's three-volume variorum *Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) in effect opened the door to modern Dickinson studies. Before 1955 no single complete edition of the poems was available, and many of the poems were heavily edited and organized into vague categories, such as "Life," "Nature," "Love," "Time and Eternity" in the Bianchi/Hampson volumes. Johnson was the first editor to reproduce more-or-less accurately the poems as Dickinson had written them. Then in 1998, R. W. Franklin published a second variorum edition in three volumes, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Unlike Johnson's variorum edition, Franklin's prints every known extant manuscript of every poem, each with its own set of variants. Thus, for the 1,789 poems by Franklin's reckoning,<sup>1</sup> there are 2,500 separate texts, including transcriptions of the lost manuscripts.

In 1958 Johnson, together with Theodora Ward, published the three-volume *Letters of Emily Dickinson*. As with the poems, Johnson and Ward based their reproduction of the letters on the existing manuscripts, presenting them in chronological order insofar as dates could be ascertained.

Franklin's reconstruction of the forty fascicles and fifteen sets comprise *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, published in two volumes in 1981. Included here are holographic reproductions of all the poems that Dickinson had sewn into forty booklets (fascicles) of approximately twenty poems each. Franklin has restored their original sequences by matching up watermarks, paper imperfections, pinhole variations, ink stains and the like. This is an indispensable reference tool for Dickinson scholars. As Franklin explains in his introduction, "the manuscripts of this poet resist translation into the conventions of print. Formal features like her unusual punctuation and capitalization, line and stanza divisions, and display of alternate readings are a source of continuing critical concern" (ix).

With the poems finally in print, scholars needed a concordance to navigate through them, a gap that was filled in 1964 with S. P. Rosenbaum's publication of his *Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*. This complete concordance even includes variant words, reproduces every line from every poem in which a given word appears, and identifies the poems by

<sup>1</sup> As compared with 1,775 poems in the Johnson variorum edition. Franklin excludes five poems on grounds that they "exhibit characteristics of verse without being so written" (1998), 1577. Franklin also includes seventeen poems not in Johnson's variorum; these formed parts of letters and in Franklin's judgment were intended as verse. Franklin prints separately twelve poems that Johnson combines; and Johnson prints separately five poems that Franklin combines. See Franklin's appendices 9 and 13.

their Johnson numbers, that is, the numbers Thomas Johnson assigned to them in his 1955 variorum edition.

Two richly documented biographies of the poet, Richard Sewall's two-volume *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) and Alfred Habegger's *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2001), supersede earlier biographies, which were highly speculative. Sewall and Habegger base their inferences on documents from the Dickinson family and a plethora of civic, institutional, and literary materials.

## Existing Surveys of Dickinson Criticism

Klaus Lubbers, in the only other book-length discussion of Dickinson's critical reception, identifies three critical phases in Dickinson criticism: (1) the discovery phase (1862–97), during which individuals who corresponded with the poet during her lifetime, and, shortly after her death, became aware of the scope and quality of her production and saw to publication of the first volumes; (2) the rediscovery phase (1897–1930), during which Martha Dickinson Bianchi nurtured Dickinson's reputation by publishing the first twentieth-century collection of Dickinson's poems, *The Single Hound* (1914); and (3) the "consolidation" phase (1930–62) during which academic criticism of Dickinson first flourished. In his concluding chapter Lubbers provides additional insights into each of the critical periods covered. He also includes a brief appendix summarizing the "non-critical acceptance" of Dickinson — her appearance in textbook anthologies, in stage dramatizations such as Frederick J. Pohl's *Brittle Heaven* (1935), and the setting of her poems to music. Lubbers's first chapter focuses on the reception by private readers: Dickinson's personal and epistolary interaction with her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson, with Samuel Bowles (the co-editor with Josiah Holland of the *Springfield Republican*), with Helen Hunt Jackson (a childhood friend who in later years became the first to recognize that Dickinson was "a great poet"<sup>2</sup>), and with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with whom Dickinson initiated a correspondence that lasted twenty-four years, from 1862 until the end of her life. The first public critical reception of Dickinson's work is marked by the publication of Higginson's "preview" article, "An Open Portfolio," in the September 1890 *Christian Union*, two months before the Roberts Brothers publication of *Poems* edited by Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. This was followed by a flurry of reviews in periodicals

<sup>2</sup> In one of her few surviving letters to Dickinson, Jackson wrote, "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it — and I read them very often — You are a great poet — and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud" (L444a; ca. 1875).

throughout the 1890s — a flurry kindled on by the publication of the two additional Roberts Brothers volumes, *Poems, Second Series* (1891), edited by Todd and Higginson; and *Poems, Third Series* (1896), edited by Todd alone.

The other existing surveys of Dickinson criticism are anthologies. In *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism since 1890* (1968) Caesar R. Blake and Carleton F. Wells include short journalistic pieces, magazine articles, and book prefaces from 1890 through 1900 (16 items); from 1901 through 1930 (14 items) and from 1931 through 1960 (15 items). Among the selections included are Higginson's article "An Open Portfolio" (mentioned above); reviews of the inaugural volume by Arlo Bates, William Dean Howells, and Maurice Thompson; Mary Augusta Jordan's review of the first publication of Dickinson's letters (by Mabel Loomis Todd in 1894); Martha Hale Shackford's important early essay on Dickinson's poetry in the *Atlantic Monthly* (January 1913); and articles by the most important of the "academic" essayists writing between 1920 and 1950, among them Conrad Aiken, George F. Whicher, A. C. Ward, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, and Austin Warren.

Ann Lilliedahl divides her bibliographic survey *Emily Dickinson in Europe: Her Literary Reputation in Selected Countries* (1981) into four sections: Dickinson's reputation in Sweden (and Swedish-speaking Finland), in Norway and Denmark, in France (and French-speaking Switzerland), and in Germany. The first foreign language in which Dickinson criticism appeared was German: a two-part article, mainly on Dickinson's letters, appeared in a German-American newspaper published in Chicago, *Der Westen*, on June 12, 1898 (Lilliedahl 132). As for the other European countries Lilliedahl surveys, Dickinson did not enter the critical literature until the 1940s.

Mary Lynn Cooper Polk's dissertation "Emily Dickinson: A Survey of the Criticism and Selective Annotated Bibliography" is organized into four chapters: Early Criticism; Critical Trends, 1955–1968; Recent Critical Commentary, 1969–1981; and A Critical Overview and Projected Needs. Several of the projected needs Polk identifies, such as an up-to-date edition of Duchac's *Annotated Guide* and "a study of the relationship of the poems in their respective fascicles," have since been filled. Another project recommended by Polk, "a more complete record of foreign scholarship of Dickinson," has not yet been carried out.

In *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History* (1989) Willis J. Buckingham reprints a complete set of reviews — more than 560 pages worth — of the three volumes of Dickinson's poems published in the United States and in England during the last decade of the nineteenth century, a valuable resource for the critical history of Emily Dickinson's initial reception. "These documents," Buckingham states,

“illustrate the interaction between readers, texts, and norms of valuation by which literary meaning is established and disestablished” (xii) — an eloquent justification, I wish to stress, for bringing together critical voices of very different perspectives between two covers.

Finally, most recently, Graham Clarke’s four-volume *Emily Dickinson: Critical Assessments* (2002) gathers biographical studies, such as the complete texts of Genevieve Taggard’s and Josephine Pollitt’s 1930 biographies; early reviews (also included in Buckingham’s *Reception*), and modern literary criticism of the poet. Despite the apparent comprehensiveness of this collection, however, there are, according to Daniel Lombardo in his review of this reference work (*EDIS Bulletin*, Nov.–Dec. 2003), several “inexplicable omissions” such as commentary by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and George F. Whicher.

### Additional Reference Tools for Dickinson Scholarship

In addition to the works described above, the following additional reference tools important to Dickinson studies have been published since 1968:

Willis J. Buckingham’s *Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Bibliography: Writings, Scholarship, Criticism, and Ana, 1850–1968* (1970). This splendid bibliography contains over 2,000 entries, including bibliographies and concordances, books and articles about Emily Dickinson; foreign language studies (Italian, French, German and Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, Japanese, and other languages); theses; creative tributes; recordings, films; commemorations and exhibitions; miscellanea such as Dickinson family materials; and unpublished materials such as papers delivered at scholarly conferences.

Joseph Duchac’s *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English*; vol. 1, 1890–1977; vol. 2, 1978–89 (1979; 1993). This valuable reference guide includes synopses of commentaries on individual poems, drawn from monographs, biographies, and articles. Organization is by Johnson numbers, together with first lines. This reference is especially valuable because it not only provides students and scholars with a rapid means of locating the full text of a given commentary, but also allows them to compare and contrast the commentaries, many of which differ radically in interpretation.

Jeanetta Boswell’s *Emily Dickinson: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources, with Selective Annotations, 1890 through 1987* (1989). Boswell’s annotations, including those of doctoral dissertations, are generally well-detailed.

Sheila T. Clendenning’s *Emily Dickinson: A Bibliography: 1850–1966* (1968), which is still useful as a reference to articles published through 1966. Clendenning’s entries are well-annotated and her introduction suc-



cinctly describes the changing emphases in Dickinson criticism during the period she covers.

*An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* (1998), edited by Jane Donahue Eberwein. This compact and very useful reference work includes entries on people, places, and institutions of importance to Emily Dickinson; entries on the editing history of her poems and letters and the reception of her work around the world; and entries relating to Dickinson scholarship.

*The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (1998), edited by Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller. The twenty-two essays in this volume are organized under the following headings: Biography, Historical Context, Manuscripts, Letters, Poetics, Reception and Influence, and New Directions in Dickinson Scholarship. In his introductory essay for the volume, "The Continuing Presence of Emily Dickinson," Richard B. Sewall remarks how Dickinson's poems, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "will never let us rest . . . from each we learn a little more about *what it means to be alive*" (6–7; emphasis Sewall's).

Joel Myerson's *Emily Dickinson: A Descriptive Bibliography* (1984). Myerson's bibliography precisely describes all editions of Dickinson's writings published since 1890. It does not include publications about Dickinson or her work. Many facsimile illustrations of title and copyright pages are included.

*A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson* (2004), edited by Vivian R. Pollak. This book provides five essays situating the poet in her cultural milieu. Along with an illustrated chronology and brief biography, topics include politics, faith in an age of upheavals, and other women poets of the nineteenth century. For a more detailed discussion of this work see chapter 6 of this book.

Cynthia MacKenzie's *A Concordance to the Letters of Emily Dickinson* (2000). Emulating Rosenbaum's concordance to the poems, MacKenzie's concordance locates every word in Dickinson's extant letters.

A biographical reference work published in 1960, one that Lubbers mentions (166), but which deserves further attention, is Jay Leyda's two-volume *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960). "The tiniest scraps of biographical fact," writes Leyda in his introduction, "might be the very detail needed to help grasp a cluster of associations, the missing piece of the puzzle that makes plain a series of relationships in the life that in turn reveals a major theme or continuity in the poems" (xix). Leyda understands that Dickinson, contrary to the notion that her reclusive way of life disconnected her from the world, was keenly aware of worldly affairs, read widely and deeply, and shared her thoughts with many through her correspondence (a small fraction of which, while voluminous in its own right, has survived). In excerpting passages from local newspaper stories, announcements, sermons, lectures, and such, Leyda has produced an



extraordinary body of source material that has repeatedly proven useful in shedding light on the historical and cultural context of Dickinson's work as well as what he famously refers to as the "omitted center" in Dickinson's poetry:

The riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated to the initiate, the deliberate skirting of the obvious — this was the means she used to increase the privacy of her communication; it has also increased our problems in piercing that privacy. With so much background detail coming constantly to light, her poems and letters take on unexpectedly deep roots in national and community life, in family crises, and in her daily reading. (xxi)

Leyda's survey covers the years 1828–86, from two years before Dickinson's birth to two weeks following her death. Leyda also includes a supplement consisting of materials that would not fit into a chronological reconstruction; namely reminiscences, anecdotes, and remarks by friends and relatives. Perhaps most importantly, Leyda does not include or exclude material on the basis of "relevance." The most seemingly insignificant, gossipy tidbit has the potential to shed important light on some aspect of the poet's life and work — but distinguishing such revelatory connections from insignificant details are the responsibility of the scholar-critic, not the scholar-compiler.

## Introductory Volumes on Emily Dickinson

Concise introductions to the poet serve beginning and advanced students well in their ability to identify major themes and historical contexts. The most useful of these include the following:

Donna Dickenson's *Emily Dickinson* (1985). Dickenson discusses the richness and complexity of Emily Dickinson's poetry, how it generates a virtually inexhaustible stream of meaning.

Paul J. Ferlazzo's *Emily Dickinson* (1976). One of the Twayne's United States Authors Series volumes. Ferlazzo's introduction is admirable for its concise and insightful commentary on key poems, categorized in a more or less conventional manner: faith, mortality, love, nature.

Bettina L. Knapp's *Emily Dickinson* (1989). Similar in design to Ferlazzo's volume, Knapp's book provides insights into some of Dickinson's more mysterious poems. Knapp's prose becomes purple at times, however ("Dickinson, who had eaten of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, questioned always"; 81).

Joan Kirkby's *Emily Dickinson* (1991). Kirkby manages to capture facets of Dickinson's genius overlooked by others; for instance, how the poet regarded intellect ("the 'Native Land' and 'the only Bone whose Expanse