



The Dickinson Daguerreotype, Amherst College Archives & Special Collections

Laurie Hilburn

PB-694-01

April 20, 2023

Case Study: Emily Dickinson

THE DICKINSONS

At the end of the 19th century, Emily Dickinson emerged as a distinctive new voice in American poetry, shaking up traditional conventions alongside names like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹ Unlike Whitman and Emerson, however, Emilyⁱ was unique in that she was virtually unknown to the public for most of her life, producing upwards of 1,8000 poems yet publishing anonymously only a handful of times.² The fact that Emily became a household name after she had died added to her mystique: Who was she? Where had she come from? And why had she chosen to share her poetry with so few people when so immensely talented?

Once established as an innovative writer, changing the landscape of 20th-century American poetry, some of these questions slowly started to produce answers: Emily was born Emily Elizabeth Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, to parents Edward and Emily. She was the middle child of the family, with older brother William Austin born in 1829 and younger sister Lavinia Norcross arriving in 1833.³ A close-knit family, the Dickinsons primarily lived at the Homestead, built by paternal grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson around 1813 and notable for being the first brick house in Amherst.⁴

Yet, the family tradition of stirring things up arguably began with ancestor Nathaniel Dickinson. Born in Lincolnshire, England, Nathaniel was inspired by John Winthrop's desire for religious freedom, particularly after hearing Winthrop's famous "A Model of Christian Charity" sermon, delivered in 1630 and commencing the Great Migration, when Puritans left England for the New World colonies: "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own. . . .

ⁱ Considering there are a number of Dickinson family members covered in this paper, I took the liberty of referring to Emily Dickinson by her first name to avoid confusion. I like to think we would have been friends.

¹ Pollak, *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, 3.

² "The Life and Poetry of Emily Dickinson," The Morgan Library & Museum.

³ "Emily Dickinson," Emily Dickinson Museum.

⁴ Pollak, 20.

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people . . . on us."⁵

Although there is debate regarding *when* Nathaniel followed Winthrop — either with the Winthrop Fleet in its first voyage or sometime later between 1636 and 1638⁶ — it is clear that this ambitious spirit was passed down the Dickinson line as the family thrived in New England, soon catalyzed by Emily's appearance and talent, as described in *Emily Dickinson* by Cynthia Griffin Wolff:

Fighting for God, fighting for independence . . . the men of the Dickinson family constituted a microcosm of the American experience as it sprang from the Puritan roots of New England. Emily Dickinson's poetry was a conclusion to that tradition, and the vision of the kingdom of God on earth that had been summoned in Winthrop's invocation of a "city upon a hill" was the precondition for her art.⁷

Thus, Samuel Dickinson was determined to follow in his ancestor's footsteps. Though he dabbled in law and business ventures, it was after recovering from a serious illness that Samuel turned more to religion, embracing "raging evangelical piety" as "he gradually gave his soul over to the work of Christ," first channeling his enthusiasm into politics before his "messianic fervor . . . insinuated itself into his dream of education."⁸ He graduated salutatorian at Dartmouth College in 1795, married "outspoken" Lucretia Gunn in 1802,⁹ and helped found both Amherst Academy in 1814 and then Amherst College in 1821, the latter "located on the rise of ground at the southern end of the Common," forming Amherst's own "'city upon a hill.'"¹⁰ Samuel was defined by how "he did nothing by halves,"¹¹ gaining a reputation for being "a schemer and dreamer."¹²

⁵ Wolff, *Emily Dickinson*, "Samuel and Edward: The Last Jerusalem."

⁶ Stott, "The Correct Origins of Nathaniel Dickinson and William Gull."

⁷ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

⁸ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

⁹ Pollak, 20.

¹⁰ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

¹¹ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

¹² Pollak, 20.

Unfortunately, Samuel was quickly "consumed by the insatiable hunger of his evangelical dream,"¹³ and in 1833, he had to emigrate to Cincinnati, Ohio, due to bankruptcy.¹⁴ Embarrassed by his father's decline, eldest son Edward remained in Amherst, determined to revive the Dickinson name. Edward began practicing law in 1826 and soon married Emily Norcross in 1828, reclaiming ownership of the Homestead his father had originally built but instead incorporating the idea of a "new 'House': the lineage of *Edward* Dickinson."¹⁵

Nathaniel. Samuel. Edward. When Emily Elizabeth arrived in 1830, new life had been breathed into the Dickinson name, offering the young poet ample opportunity to find her creative voice. Continuing the family tradition, it only makes sense that she would soon find herself garnering as much attention as her ancestors had. Whether she wanted that attention, however, was another matter entirely.

EMILY'S POEMS VS. EDITOR FRIENDS

Growing up, Emily was surrounded by the same two forces that had plagued her grandfather Samuel, then intensified by her father Edward: religion and education. On one hand, she read "omnivourously," attending both Amherst Academy and Amherst College as well as spending a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.¹⁶ She had an appetite for words and began writing poetry "in her teen years," "[coming] into her own as an artist during a short but intense period of creativity" scholars have identified as 1855 to 1865.¹⁷ On the other hand, this period directly overlapped with the Civil War, forcing Emily to reflect on the horrors that came with it. In addition to being in poor health and often bedridden, Emily was left in spiritual conflict with

¹³ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

¹⁴ Pollak, 20-1.

¹⁵ Wolff, "Samuel and Edward."

¹⁶ Wolff, "Faith and the Argument from Design."

¹⁷ "1855-1856: The Writing Years," Emily Dickinson Museum.

increasing anxieties about mortality — even having a perfect view of a cemetery from her bedroom. It is here where Emily's reputation for being reclusive started to take shape. Though she would still travel as needed, especially when her eyesight began to weaken, more and more, Emily kept to herself, connecting with others primarily through letters, developing a complex web of friendships that would be critical to her growth as a poet.

In the spring of 1862, Emily found a message titled "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the *Atlantic Monthly*, written by former minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Higginson was offering "practical and moral advice"¹⁸ for up-and-coming creatives, inspiring Dickinson to reach out with her own budding interest:

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?
The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—
Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick
gratitude—¹⁹

While they would not meet in person for several years, and though presently participating in the Civil War as a colonel, Higginson was immediately intrigued by Dickinson's unique gift for words. Emily asking if her "Verse is alive" began a lifelong friendship, one Higginson would continue to treasure even after she had passed.²⁰ And in line with the primary themes of religion, death, and intellectualism she used in crafting her poetry, Emily was worried for Higginson's health, hinting to him tragedies that haunted her and how she was determined to keep her loved ones close: "Perhaps Death—gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early, for I held them since—in a brittle love—of more alarm, than peace."²¹ Higginson was enchanted, eager to understand Emily's "strange power" and "prove that the reclusive and mysterious correspondent

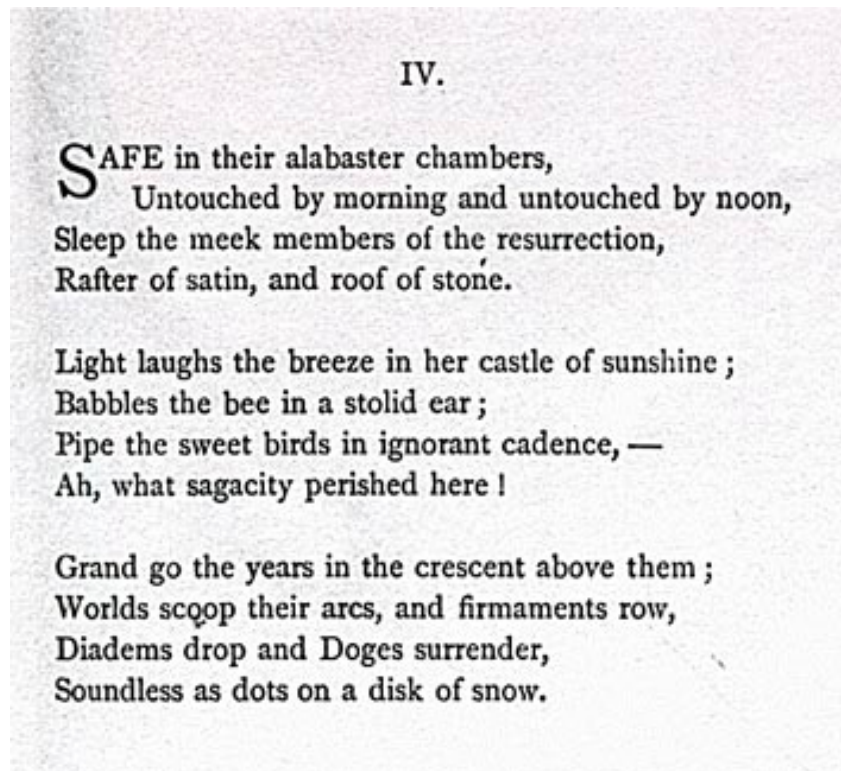
¹⁸ Pollak, 13.

¹⁹ Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 260 qtd. in Pollak 13.

²⁰ Dickinson, 260 qtd. in Pollak 13.

²¹ Dickinson, 280 qtd. in Pollak 14.

who 'enshroud[ed]' herself in a 'fiery mist' was 'real.'²² This friendship plus admiration is one of the main reasons why Higginson was an instrumental part in compiling *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, published in 1890 and the first large collection of her work available for public viewing, including what would eventually be known as "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers:"



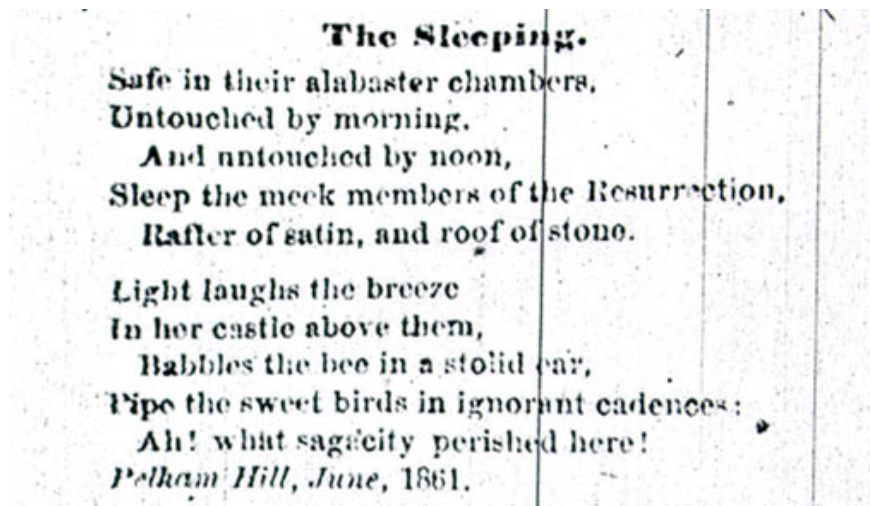
Poems by Emily Dickinson, Dickinson Electronic Archives

At the same time, Emily had also been discussing her writing with sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Susan married Emily's brother Austin in 1856, moving into the Evergreens next door to the Homestead, but she and Emily had struck up a friendship (and possibly something more intimate) back in 1850, one reflected in their correspondence with each other until the poet's death, wherein Susan even penned Emily's obituary.²³ Furthermore, when the family was upset by change, such as Susan's relationship with Austin becoming strained (when

²² Pollak, 15; Dickinson, 280 qtd. in Pollak 15.

²³ "Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson (1830-1913)," Emily Dickinson Museum.

he began an affair with Mabel Loomis Todd in 1882) or after the loss of Susan's youngest son Thomas Gilbert in 1883 (a tragedy that left Emily "ill for weeks"²⁴), Emily still turned to her for constructive criticism, with Susan also sharing her own ideas, supposedly exchanging "more than 250 poems" over the years.²⁵ For example, Emily first disclosed a version of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" to Susan in 1859; evidence of this draft has unfortunately been lost. However, with prompting from family friend and editor-in-chief Samuel Bowles, it appears Susan submitted said version to Bowles' *Springfield Daily Republican*, published under "The Sleeping."²⁶ Whether this was done with or without Emily's permission is unknown, but with one alteration ("cadence" altered to "cadences"²⁷), it is this version that would make up Fascicle 6:



Springfield Daily Republican, Dickinson Electronic Archives

Later, "perhaps as a consequence of Bowles"²⁸ interruption, Emily "labored" to create an alternative for Susan, "who evidently had not approved the earlier" 1859 draft despite most likely

²⁴ "Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson," Emily Dickinson Museum.

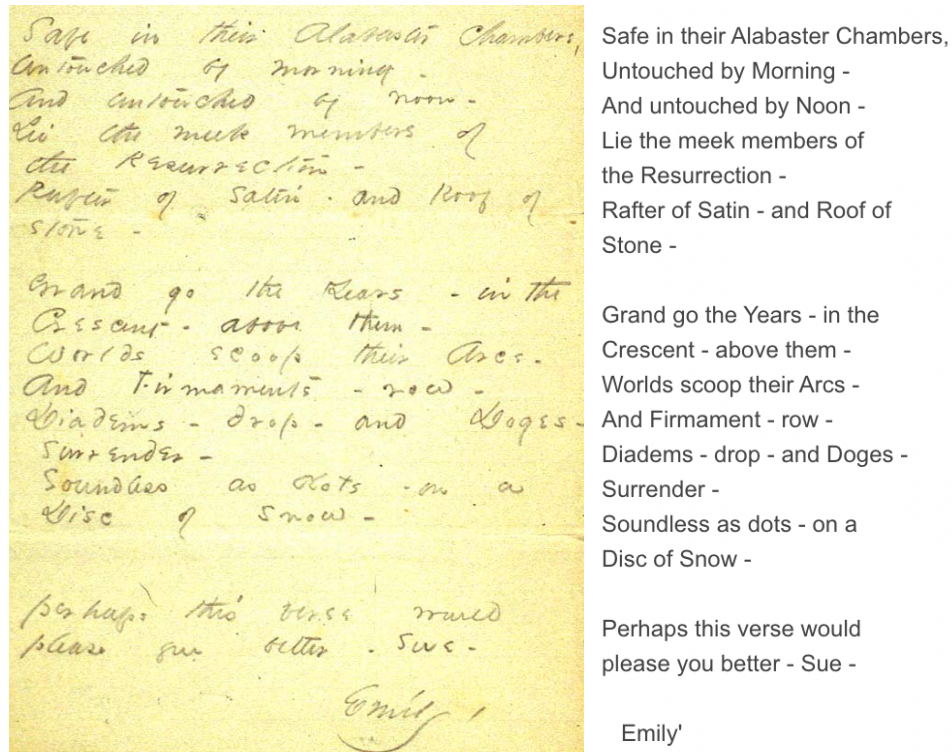
²⁵ "Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson," Emily Dickinson Museum.

²⁶ Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 159.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 154.

²⁸ Franklin, 161.

being the one who arranged it be printed to begin with.²⁹ This would be documented in 1861, recovered in a letter from Emily to Susan:



"Safe in... Grand go," Dickinson Electronic Archives

While the first stanza remained "familiar (but variant in line 4: 'Lie' for 'Sleep'),"³⁰ the second stanza proved to be the crucial shift from the 1859 version, choosing "Grand go the Years. . ." over "Light laughs the breeze. . ."³¹ When Susan still did not approve, Emily tried again with another second stanza change (as well as some attitude):

²⁹ Johnson, 152.

³⁰ Franklin, 161.

³¹ Johnson, 151-2.

Is this, frostier?
 Springs - shake the Sills -
 But - the Echoes - stiffen -
 Hoar - is the Window - and
 numb - the Door -
 Tribes of Eclipse - in Tents
 of Marble -
 Staples of Ages - have
 buckled - there -

Is this frostier?

Springs - shake the Sills -
 But - the Echoes - stiffen - Hoar - is the Window - and
 numb - the Door -
 Tribes of Eclipse - in Tents
 of Marble -
 Staples of Ages - have
 buckled - there -

"Is this frostier?" Dickinson Electronic Archives

Emily also put together an alternative to this third new second stanza:

Springs - shake the Seals -
 But - the Silence - stiffens -
 Frosts unhook - in the
 Northern Zones -
 Icicles - crawl from polar
 Caverns -
 Midnight - in Marble -
 Refutes - the Suns -

Springs - shake the Seals -
 But the silence - stiffens -
 Frosts unhook - in the
 Northern Zones -
 Icicles - crawl from polar
 Caverns -
 Midnight in Marble -
 Refutes - the Suns -

"Safe in... Grand go... Springs shake," Dickinson Electronic Archives

Overall, Emily would organize these three drafts into Fascicle 10.

After Emily passed away on May 15, 1886,³² her younger sister Lavinia "consulted the two people most interested in Emily's poetry" about what to do with the writings left behind: "her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson, and [Mabel Loomis] Todd."³³ This did not bode well; Todd ingratiated into the Dickinson family soon after moving to Amherst in 1881, and though married herself, as mentioned previously, Susan and Todd were familiar with each other due to the awkward fact Emily's brother Austin was married to the former and having an affair with the latter. More controversy cropped up when Todd's diaries, included in 1945's *Ancestors'*

³² "Emily Dickinson and Death," Emily Dickinson Museum.

³³ Johnson, xxxix.

Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson by daughter Millicent Todd Bingham, indicated why Lavinia had preferred Todd have ownership: "All the [poems] were taken to Sue during the summer of 1886. . . . Lavinia was beseeching Susan to make a selection from them for publication. . . . Pressed for a decision that winter, [Susan] allowed [Lavinia] to recover the manuscripts without . . . having to come to an answer."³⁴ Because Lavinia was impatient, Susan was indecisive, or a combination of the two, Lavinia "went to [Todd's] house" in 1887 "presumably with the poems in her hands" and "pleaded with [her] to take on the labor."³⁵ Todd agreed and soon teamed up with Higginson. Together, between the copies Todd made from what Lavinia gave her and Higginson's own personal correspondence with Emily, they edited and produced *Poems by Emily Dickinson* in 1890.

As seen earlier on page six, this printing showed "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" as having gone from two stanzas to three, stitching the familiar first stanza with the second stanza from 1859 and the second stanza from 1861 as the new third stanza, with the "Springs shake. . ." option seemingly eliminated from consideration. Prior to the release, as a way to tease Emily's introduction to the literary world, Higginson vaguely alluded to the reasoning behind this decision in an article contributed to *Christian Union*:

This is the form in which she finally left these lines, but as she sent them to me, years ago, the following took the place of the second verse, and it seems to me that, with all its too daring condensation, it strikes a note too fine to be lost.³⁶

Thus, the "version of 1859 furnished the text for stanzas 1 and 2; the second stanza of the version of 1861 becomes stanza 3; and the lines are arranged as three quatrains," with only the phrase "castle above them" on line five "altered" to "castle of sunshine."³⁷ This has given scholars three

³⁴ Johnson, x1.

³⁵ Johnson, x1.

³⁶ Higginson, "An Open Portfolio," 393 qtd. in Johnson, 155.

³⁷ Johnson, 155.

principal witnesses to study altogether — the *Springfield Daily Republican* in 1859, the letter from Emily to Susan in 1861, and then Todd and Higginson's collection in 1890 — as well as an unofficial fourth — the "Springs shake. . ." stanza also from 1861 — being up for debate.³⁸

THE SUBSTANTIVE CRUXES

Overall, the cruxes of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" boil down to how it is simply "unlikely that [Emily] ever completed this poem in a version that entirely satisfied her."³⁹ After all, following her exchanges with Susan and Higginson roughly between 1859 and 1862, Emily "seems never to have referred" to "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" again, with no further "copy in any version or arrangement."⁴⁰ From here, it is easy to identify where the controversial textual questions begin, expanding upon "what [Emily's] final thoughts about these versions [might] have been."⁴¹

For one, does the poem have two stanzas, as seen in 1859 and 1861, or three stanzas, like shown in 1890? Or does it have four stanzas, incorporating the variant from one of Emily's letters to Sue that went unused in Todd and Higginson's collection? Then, if the poem has two stanzas, which second-stanza variant do we follow: "Light laughs the breeze. . ." from 1859 or "Grand go the Years. . ." from 1861?⁴² We can also put a critical eye on 1890's eclectic edition, where Todd and Higginson "combined" "readings from variant witnesses . . ." to produce a text that approximates (so the editor hopes) the ideal (usually understood to be the author's intended) text.⁴³ The version featured in *Poems by Emily Dickinson* is maybe the most prominent to critical and casual readers alike, so does that render Emily's original, independent two-stanza

³⁸ Johnson, 155.

³⁹ Johnson, 152.

⁴⁰ Johnson, 155.

⁴¹ Johnson, 155.

⁴² Johnson, 155.

⁴³ Kelemen, *Textual Editing and Criticism*, 102.

drafts incomplete — or do we only feel they are incomplete *because* the 1890 compromise of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" is arguably best known today?

Lastly, there is the moral dilemma of if Emily even wanted this poem, in any form, to be published and studied by the masses into the modern age, especially when considering that her first drafts were contained in personal (and therefore private) letters. As Todd's diaries claim from *Ancestors' Brocades*, "Lavinia discovered a locked box in which Emily had placed her poems" not long after Emily's death, and she was eager "to spare them because she found no instructions specifying that they be destroyed."⁴⁴ This begs the question: Having drafted those three versions of the second stanza, wouldn't Emily have made the decision to create a three- or four-stanza poem if that had been what she wanted? And do we — *should* we — have the audacity to probe in the first place?

POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Of the accounts of Emily from her vast array of close companions, one quote from Higginson stands out in particular: "This is the form in which she finally left these lines . . . it strikes a note too fine to be lost."⁴⁵ He is, of course, referring to how "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" appears in 1890's *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, combining 1859 and 1861 into one. No matter what, it is going to feel presumptuous to guess what Emily would have wanted, if she would have wanted it at all, but that line from Higginson is too poignant to ignore. Susan and Todd battled over differing claims of ownership of Emily's writings before Susan's daughter Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Todd's daughter Millicent Todd Bingham reached a compromise, which puts their relationships with Emily and their plans with her work into question.

⁴⁴ Johnson, xxxix.

⁴⁵ Higginson, 393 qtd. in Johnson, 155.

However, judging by his correspondence with Emily, Higginson was genuine with his intentions, though there is debate on his complicity with the emendations made by Todd in structuring *Poems by Emily Dickinson*. For example, Thomas H. Johnson in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* asserts Higginson crafted the *Christian Union* article which holds the quote in question "to cushion the shock that he feared the public was in for," with "his editing . . . apologetic" as he tried "wherever possible to smooth rhymes, regularize the meter, delete localisms, and substitute sensible metaphors" — all "carefully designed to spare the reader's sensibilities by producing a maximum of decorum."⁴⁶ Whether this is to be believed or not, Higginson truly appears to have wanted to honor Emily's poems the best way he knew how, especially when compared to Susan and Todd's bickering.

Thus, the 1890 arrangement in *Poems by Emily Dickinson* is the simplest solution to the textual questions surrounding "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers." Not only is it an enduring edition, but it is also the best argument for what Emily would have wanted because it is supported by the opinion of someone familiar with her yet equally unbiased. Overall, though, Emily loved words, and her letters and poems to friends and family demonstrate she loved those who loved words as well. In one message to Higginson, Emily "described her life as 'too simple and stern to embarrass any,'"⁴⁷ illustrating one of the many contradictions in what made the poet so fascinating:

. . .she was hinting at desires which, if revealed in their riotous complexity, would discomfort many. Dickinson refused to be confined by the normalizing realities of her time and place and struggled against the narrowing demands of her immediate environment. Yet in some measure she had internalized an ideology that confined women to the domestic sphere, and she deflected opportunities to publish during her life: only ten of her poems were published before her death in 1886.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Johnson, xlv.

⁴⁷ Dickinson, 330 qtd. in Pollak 15.

⁴⁸ Pollak, 15-6.

It makes sense, then, that in the preface of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Higginson describes Emily as "[belonging] . . . to what Emerson long since called 'the Poetry of the Portfolio,'" or "something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind."⁴⁹ Because "such verse must inevitably forfeit whatever advantage lies in the discipline of public criticism and the enforced conformity to accepted ways," Higginson explains, "it may often gain something through the habit of freedom and the unconventional utterance of daring thoughts. . . . she must write thus, or not at all."⁵⁰ Ultimately, Higginson says of Emily's unique voice "when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence,"⁵¹ providing an ideal answer to the first question Emily posed where she wondered if her "Verse is alive."⁵²

⁴⁹ Todd and Higginson, *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, "Preface" qtd. in Kelemen 442.

⁵⁰ Todd and Higginson, "Preface" qtd. in Kelemen 442.

⁵¹ Todd and Higginson, "Preface" qtd. in Kelemen 442

⁵² Dickinson, 260 qtd. in Pollak 13.

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