2m11.3574.2

Université de Montréal

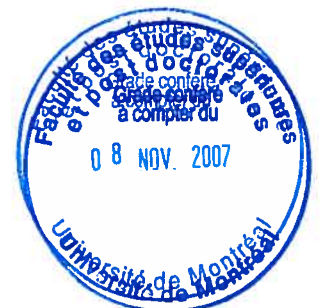
Emily Dickinson: A Rhetoric of Rescue

par
Tracie Gemmel

Département d'études anglaises
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures
en vue de l'obtention du grade de
Maître en études anglaises

June, 2007



© Tracie Gemmel

PR
14
U84
2007
V.030

Université de Montréal

Direction des bibliothèques

AVIS

L'auteur a autorisé l'Université de Montréal à reproduire et diffuser, en totalité ou en partie, par quelque moyen que ce soit et sur quelque support que ce soit, et exclusivement à des fins non lucratives d'enseignement et de recherche, des copies de ce mémoire ou de cette thèse.

L'auteur et les coauteurs le cas échéant conservent la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent ce document. Ni la thèse ou le mémoire, ni des extraits substantiels de ce document, ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans l'autorisation de l'auteur.

Afin de se conformer à la Loi canadienne sur la protection des renseignements personnels, quelques formulaires secondaires, coordonnées ou signatures intégrées au texte ont pu être enlevés de ce document. Bien que cela ait pu affecter la pagination, il n'y a aucun contenu manquant.

NOTICE

The author of this thesis or dissertation has granted a nonexclusive license allowing Université de Montréal to reproduce and publish the document, in part or in whole, and in any format, solely for noncommercial educational and research purposes.

The author and co-authors if applicable retain copyright ownership and moral rights in this document. Neither the whole thesis or dissertation, nor substantial extracts from it, may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms, contact information or signatures may have been removed from the document. While this may affect the document page count, it does not represent any loss of content from the document.

Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé:

Emily Dickinson: A Rhetoric of Rescue

présenté par:

Tracie Gemmel

a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

membre du jury

....

....

mémoire accepté le:.....21-9-2007.....

Résumé de synthèse

Résumé de synthèse

Que disons-nous lorsque nous parlons d'Emily Dickinson? Ou, plutôt, comment parlons-nous d'elle? La réponse à cette question plutôt complexe pourrait se résumer en un mot: sauvetage. En fait, nous parlons ici d'un sauvetage rhétorique, puisque l'œuvre de Dickinson est répartie sur deux siècles et qu'elle transcende les courants d'écritures conservateurs, révisionnistes et féministes.

Dans ce mémoire, je considère ce qui motive les biographes, les « New Critics » américains et les féministes à cette manœuvre de sauvetage. Quels sont les facteurs historiques et culturels qui expliquent ce sauvetage, et de quoi au juste ces auteurs considèrent-ils que Dickinson doit être « sauvée »? Certainement pas de l'obscurité puisque dès ses débuts, dès la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, on retrouvait les œuvres de Dickinson fréquemment dans les recueils de poèmes américains et sa place dans la littérature américaine était reconnue.

Méthodologiquement, je propose une analyse historique et culturelle afin de démontrer comment et pourquoi la rhétorique du sauvetage est prédominante lorsque les érudits parlent de Dickinson. Mon regard sur les contextes culturel, historique et politique qui ont contribués à cette rhétorique du sauvetage permet de saisir comment cette approche fut perpétuée par les biographes, les « New Critics » américains et les féministes des années 1970, 1980 et 1990.

Mots clés : Emily Dickinson, biographie, féminisme, criticisme, canon littéraire, New Criticism, Reception Theory, New Historicism

Abstract

Abstract

What do we talk about when we talk about Emily Dickinson, or rather how do we talk about her? The short answer to this decidedly complex question may be summed up in one word: rescue. There is a rhetoric of rescue in talking about Dickinson that spans two centuries and cuts across conservative, revisionist and feminist writings.

In my thesis I examine what is behind the rescue efforts of biographers, the American New Critics and feminists. What are the historical and cultural imperatives behind rescuing Dickinson, and just what are writers rescuing Dickinson from? Certainly not from obscurity, when Dickinson from her late nineteenth century debut has been anthologized as widely as any American poet and is firmly set in the literary canon of American poetry.

My method for exploring how and why the rhetoric of rescue has been so predominant in Dickinson scholarship consists of both historical and cultural analysis. I look at the cultural, historical and political contexts that have contributed to a rhetoric of rescue that has been perpetuated by biographers, the American New Critics and feminists of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

Key Words: Emily Dickinson, Biography, Feminism, New Criticism, Reception Theory, New Historicism, Literary Canon

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Introduction..1
What do we Talk about when we Talk about Emily Dickinson?

Chapter 1..18
Dwelling in Biographical Possibilities

Chapter 2..47
Eyes Wide Shut: New Critical Desire and Miss Dickinson

Chapter 3..73
Dickinson in Danger: The Rhetoric of Feminist Rescue

Conclusion..101
No more Talk

Bibliography... 108

Introduction

What do we Talk about when we Talk about Emily Dickinson?

Fame is the sum of all misconceptions
circulated about one individual.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fame is the tint that Scholars leave
Upon their setting Names—
The Iris not of Occident
That disappears as comes—

Emily Dickinson (J866)

"If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her- if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase - and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me – then - My Barefoot-Rank is better-".

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (L265)

They shut me up in Prose-
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet-
Because they liked me 'still'

Still! Could themself have peeped-
And seen my Brain-go round-
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason-in the Pound-

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity-
And laugh-No more have I-

(J613/Fr445)

It is an understatement to say that we — meaning critics, editors, poets and readers — "like" Emily Dickinson "still." For over a century we have made various claims to seeing her brain "go round," and she has remained "still" while we have

painted a multitude of portraits in frames of all types and sizes. She is our captive "poet," "author," "nineteenth-century woman" who provides an eternal display of what Betsy Erkkila describes as "poetic genius;" but as Adrienne Rich, a poetic genius in her own right, warns in her famous essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," "There are many more Emily Dickinsons than I have tried to call up....Wherever you take hold of her, she proliferates" (338). Despite us shutting Dickinson up in "Prose" of one kind or another, she proliferates, or rather we have proliferated her.

Just as there is no singular Dickinson poetic voice, no one "Representative of the Verse-" (L268), there is no *one* way of reading Dickinson and her writings, or one way of talking about her. All criticism on Dickinson "is a metaphor for the act of reading, and this act is itself inexhaustible" (De Man 107). Her identity and writings are idiosyncratic and resist easy interpretation. Just when we think we have securely lodged her in the domicile of one theory or another, she quietly escapes. The post-structuralist emphasis on Dickinson's multiple voices as multiple personae, separating Dickinson from her variously adopted voices of bride, girl or boy child, lover, queen, or poet, serves as one example of the difficulties in defining just who Dickinson was, is, and even what constitutes one of her poems (Eberwein 300). Discourse surrounding Dickinson proliferates endlessly and abundantly. Robert McClure Smith has looked critically at "Dickinson Studies," and has warned against the "excesses of scholarship;" he asks the pointed question, "what makes this particular poet, at this particular critical juncture, a consummate saint or martyr" ("Dickinson" 15). McClure Smith identifies the mid-1990s as a "particular critical juncture" in which Dickinson is

"a consummate saint or martyr," but I would argue that all 'junctures' since her critical inception have read Dickinson in this way. Although McClure Smith was writing almost ten years ago, in 1998, it is still pertinent to take a step back and pose the following question: *What do we talk about when we talk about Emily Dickinson?*

What do we talk about when we talk about love? This sentence is the title of one of Raymond Carver's most popular stories and was inspired by Anton Chekhov's elegantly titled, "About Love." Discourse on love, like discourse on Dickinson, is endless and circular. Dickinson herself wrote, "That Love is all there is, /Is all we know of Love" (J1765). Chekhov and Carver, also inspired to write about the ultimate unknowability of love, wrote stories to illustrate the point that it is not only *what* we talk about when we talk about love that is important but also *how* we talk about it. In Chekhov's "About Love" his character Alyohin declares with confidence, "everything else that has been written or said about love is not a conclusion, but only a statement of questions which have remained unanswered" (385).

Alyohin's meditation on love speaks to my meditation on Emily Dickinson. If we replace the word *love* with *Emily Dickinson*, "Everything else that has been written or said about Emily Dickinson is not a conclusion, but only a statement of questions which have remained unanswered," then we would have a fairly accurate description of the history of Dickinson scholarship to date. If Dickinson and her dog Carlo were alive today I suspect that we would embarrass them with our discourse that sometimes speaks of "Hallowed things" (L271).

What do we talk about when we talk about Emily Dickinson, or rather how do we talk about her? The short answer to this decidedly complex question may be

summed up in one word: rescue. There is a rhetoric of rescue in talking about Dickinson that spans two centuries and cuts across conservative, revisionist and feminist writings. From the earliest editors of Dickinson's poems, Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson, to R.W. Franklin, to Susan Howe, Marta Werner and Martha Nell Smith's creation of the Emily Dickinson Electronic Archive, we find a rhetoric of rescue that often tells us more about the rescuers than our elusive rescuee. Writing in 1932 when Dickinson studies was in its infancy, New Critic A.C. Ward prophetically observed that "the supposed enigmatic personality of Emily Dickinson will no doubt make her the victim of literary body-snatchers throughout successive generations"(79). As McClure Smith points out, Dickinson functions in the field of literary criticism as a "strange attractor," due in part to her "particular susceptibility to an easy critical appropriation, an appropriation that is directly related to her gender" (*Seductions* 148). We appropriate Dickinson and shut her up in the "Prose" of our ever-evolving discourses, all the while adopting and continually refiguring a rhetoric of rescue. Critical appropriations of Dickinson are premised on the idea that Dickinson is in need of both personal and critical rescue. She has served the development of New Criticism, revisionist and feminist movements as well as other discourses like New Historicism and textual studies, which have relied on her idiosyncratic and enigmatic ways in order to push forward agendas all their own. The approach of biographers to Dickinson, as well as Dickinson's reception by poets, artists, and in popular culture, is also revealing.

In framing each of my chapters in this project with a poem written about or in tribute to Dickinson, I highlight both her artistic and cultural influence on poets and

what they talk about when they talk about Dickinson. Poems on Dickinson provide insight into her identity as both a woman and a poet. As observed by Wendy Martin in *An American Triptych*, "William Carlos Williams, who called Emily Dickinson 'his patron saint,' acknowledged her influence on his poetry" (140). Dickinson is also known to have influenced Robert Frost, Hart Crane, Mariannne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Sylvia Plath as well as Adrienne Rich and more recently Billy Collins. There is a collection of poems inspired by the life and writings of Dickinson titled *Visiting Emily* that features almost one hundred poems in which Dickinson is revered, rescued, seduced, parodied, and mimicked. Hart Crane, for example, in his poem "To Emily Dickinson" mimics Dickinson's style, most obviously her use of dashes, and meditates on the density of her poetics:

> You who desired so much—in vain to ask—
> Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,
> Dared dignify the labor, bless the quest—
> Achieved that stillness ultimately best,
>
> Being, of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!
> O sweet, dead Silencer, most suddenly clear
> When singing that Eternity possessed
> And plundered momently in every breast;
>
> —Truly no flower yet withers in your hand.
> The harvest you descried and understand
> Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind.
> Some reconcilement of remotest mind—
>
> Leaves Ormus rubyless, and Ophir chill.
> Else tears heap all within one clay-cold hill. (16)

There is irony of course in Crane's line, "O sweet, dead Silencer." Dickinson's seeming reticence, retiring ways, and preference for solitude, while living, ironically

have prompted the very opposite of silence in the never-ending critical and popular culture dialogue that forever speculates about the enigmatic poet and her poetry.

In the fascinating book *Language as Object: Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Art*, editor Susan Danly in collaboration with six other Dickinson scholars puts together a collection of essays, poetry and photographs of several contemporary art pieces that all speak to Dickinson's popularity and almost iconic status outside of academia. In the foreword to the book, "A Poet's Resonance," written by Martha A. Sandweiss, Director of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, she explains that the book, produced in conjunction with an exhibition on visual artists and Dickinson, records the wide range of artistic responses to her work and raises questions about the interaction of literature and the visual arts. Sandweiss describes the work of such visual artists inspired by Dickinson as Joseph Cornell, Judy Chicago and Aifie Murray. These artists, through their meditations on Dickinson, "recover the resonance of nineteenth-century ideas" and reassert "the power of art as critical commentary" (11).

Dickinson has also influenced music, theatre, dance and film. In 1966, Paul Simon penned the lyrics to a love song about Dickinson, "For Emily, Whenever I May Find Her," released on the well-known album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*. Simon and Garfunkel also reference the poet in their song "The Dangling Conversation"— "And you read your Emily Dickinson/and I my Robert Frost." William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst* (1976) had a successful run on Broadway featuring Julie Harris, and interest in Dickinson's romantic life has been explored by

famous dancers like Martha Graham in 1940 with her piece *Letter to the World*, and Warren Spears' (1987) ballet *Rowing in Eden*.

A documentary by Jim Wolpaw, called *Loaded Gun: Life, and Death, and Dickinson—* (2002), is an excellent example of how Dickinson is represented in pop culture. Wolpaw's film is humorous and highly reflective of his own personal as well as our collective quest to find the *real* Dickinson. He interviews various artists, poets and critics as well as complete strangers to dramatize the range and variety of responses that people have to Dickinson and her poetry. The playful, highly self-reflexive tone of this documentary that combines both conventional and experimental techniques provides a real contrast to the more serious tone of critical writing on Dickinson that more often than not employs a rhetoric of rescue that is more unconscious than conscious.

When we talk about a rhetoric of rescue in critical writing on Dickinson, it is important to point out who is doing the rescuing and just whom the rescuers think they are rescuing when they are rescuing Dickinson; are they rescuing the nineteenth-century woman, the poet or her writings, or all of the above? For example, Cristanne Miller, in her essay "The Sound of Shifting Paradigms, or Hearing Dickinson in the Twenty-First Century," rescues Dickinson (viewed as a modernist in nineteenth-century dress) from contemporary textual critics like Susan Howe, Martha Nell Smith and Jerome McGann, who stress the importance of the visual aspects of Dickinson's fascicles. Miller argues that, in nineteenth-century America, poets wrote more for the ear than for the eye and that readers tended to perceive poetry aurally rather than visually (202). Textual critics, in Miller's estimation, who believe they are liberating

the fascicles from insensitive editors, reflect in part the early twentieth century "paradigm shift in the perception of American poetry" that gave "increasing attention to visual elements of the poem" (203). According to Miller, the work of textual critics in defining Dickinson's poetic:

> becomes inseparable from the exploration of Dickinson's multiple life choices — whether to publish, how she regarded the construction of her fascicles, and her relationship to her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson and other correspondents. It is these hypothesized biographical and cultural links between Dickinson's hand written pages and readings of her life that spur me to question the extent to which such apparently historical interpretation is based on a twentieth-century paradigm. (Miller 204)

The "hypothesized biographical and cultural links" made by the textual critics, if based on a critical paradigm that partly reads nineteenth-century poetry through a twentieth-century lens, is a good example of the ongoing rescue efforts that are made in order to either pluck Dickinson from, or to root her more profoundly in, her nineteenth-century context.

In Chapter 1 of this project I shall look at how three biographers, despite their differing critical imperatives, share a rhetoric of rescue. A discussion of biography in regards to Dickinson is important because it is enmeshed in nearly all critical writing on her as well as in the editing and publication history of her poems. Although the American New Critics would attempt *officially* to downplay the significance and importance of her biography, as Martha Nell Smith points out, "some conception of the author and her relations tends to color all interpretations of Emily Dickinson, no matter how textually centered" (58). In Chapter 2, I will look at how the New Critics, who are responsible for both ensuring Dickinson's canonical status as well as for establishing Dickinson Studies as we know it today, saw themselves as rescuing

Dickinson as well as rescuing *criticism*. Their critical blindness, however, to questions of biography and gender have ironically been productive in prompting other critics like feminists to rescue Dickinson from their long and entrenched critical legacy. In the third chapter, I will look at the feminist rhetoric of rescue in response to the New Critical legacy and to their own critical imperatives.

In the seemingly endless discourse that Dickinson provides us, I think it is fair to say that in our various rescue missions, we are not so much serving her, rescuing her biography and writings from misunderstanding or misrepresentation; more accurately, she is serving *us*. As Dickinson's literary and cultural value has increased, so has the contest over how best to represent her. When we rescue Dickinson we are also rescuing critical paradigms from perishing in the ebb and tide of what is current and exciting critically.

The excavation of Dickinson's biographical archive has been intertwined with the critical landscape of Dickinson studies from the earliest days of her reception to the present day. Biographical writing on Dickinson has always been characterized by a rhetoric of rescue, with each new biography competing for the presentation of the 'true' Emily Dickinson. There have been New Critical biographies, anti-New Critical biographies, psychoanalytic approaches, and historicist approaches all building on each other's insight and profiting from each other's *blindness*. The rhetoric of rescue is at the same time a "rhetoric of blindness."[1] Is my project then to rescue Dickinson

---

[1] The "Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau" is the title of chapter seven in Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*. My project in part tries to answer one of his chapter's main questions: "Is the blindness of these critics inextricably tied up with the act of writing itself and, if this is so, what characteristic aspect of literary language causes blindness in those who come into close contact with it" (106).

from her rescuers, from her critics? According to de Man, "To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides" (106). In the case of Dickinson I suggest that the blindness of New Critics, for example, has been paradoxically productive in spurring on other critics to contest their blind spots while building on their insights. This describes the case with feminists rescuing Dickinson from the New Critical legacy beginning in the 1970s. In my project I do not wish to rescue Dickinson from her rescuers, but rather to point out their mutual insights and blind spots and how they build on one another.

For the New Critics, Dickinson's poetry proved ideal because it was relatively untouched by a significant critical history. She also wrote short lyric poems: the ideal poetic form for the New Critics. They regarded her lyrics as compressed and self-enclosed, naturally lending themselves to close readings with little regard for biography or ideological considerations. New Critics "heroically" rescued Dickinson from the clutches of earlier critics, who mined her limited biography to evaluate and to read meaning *into* her poetry, establishing their own evaluative criteria that would not only help to secure a place for Dickinson in the canon of American Romanticism, but at the same time prove the superiority of their methodology over critical methods that were less "theoretically rigorous."

If Dickinson was an important figure for the New Critics and biographers, she was even more important for Anglo-American feminist criticism and its development. To the feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, Dickinson was seen to be in the "epitome of the nineteenth-century woman poet's predicament in an oppressive patriarchal society

and in a male-dominated literary tradition" (Mikkelsen 89). While the New Critics attempted to rescue Dickinson's poetry from the ravages of biographical criticism, American feminists in all stages of development from the 1970s to the present day have attempted to rescue Dickinson from the unjust politics of representation and cultural authority. They have attempted to rescue the "nineteenth-century woman" stifled by an oppressive patriarchal society; the "poet," who had no place in that society; and finally in the 1990s and still today, not *her* but her manuscripts from a history of male-oriented editorial practices. As with Virginia Woolf, American feminists laid claim to Dickinson and her writings "in order to articulate a new social and cultural text" (Silver 9). There is a striking parallel between our consumption of Woolf and Dickinson. In *Virginia Woolf Icon*, Brenda R. Silver states:

> As Virginia Woolf's value increased, so did the struggles over who would define her cultural standing and meaning, struggles intensified by the intervention of those who wanted to reclaim her for more traditional sites of cultural power. (9)

As Dickinson's value has increased, there has indeed been a struggle over who would define her "cultural standing and meaning." Feminists of course have laid claims to Dickinson in their desire to establish a woman's literary tradition. The way in which southern New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and R.P. Warren approached Dickinson could be interpreted as claiming her for "more traditional sites of cultural power," while more recent critics have claimed her in the fold of gay and lesbian studies.

While I will primarily discuss the struggles by biographers, New Critics, and feminists over how best to represent Dickinson, textual editors have also attempted to rescue Dickinson or rather her words on the page. Upon Dickinson's death in 1886, her

sister Lavinia discovered an assortment of papers. In disorder were bundles of letters and scraps of paper. In order were 40 neatly hand-sewn manuscripts. Dickinson's request to have her lifetime store of letters burned was fulfilled dutifully by her sister, following typical Victorian customs. Lavinia saved the assortment of scraps of paper, bills and stationary that hosted grocery lists and poems as well as the forty hand-sewn books that are commonly referred to as manuscripts or fascicles as Mabel Loomis Todd appropriately named them. According to the *OED* a fascicle is "a bunch, bundle....a cluster of leaves or flowers...a tuft...a bunch of roots growing from one point." The word fascicle is appropriate considering the fact that Dickinson herself often referred to her poems as flowers, sending them to friends or family in need of sympathy or consolation.

Dickinson compiled the hand-written fascicles between 1858 and 1864, and each book houses between 11 and 29 poems (814 in all). When Dickinson died she left no instructions regarding the fascicles, a fact that has from the beginning challenged editors. Of the over 1,700 poems that are in print today, 800 have been taken from the fascicles, and they are an important clue as to how to read Dickinson's poems in her own context. Since 1981, with the publication of R.W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, fascicle study has been instrumental in pointing to the possibility that Dickinson in a sense self-published and edited her own work. Since our reception of her poetry, editors have had to make choices for a writer/poet who “chose, not to choose,” as Sharon Cameron has pointed out in her important text *Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson’s Fascicles.* Cameron writes that what is most powerfully revealed upon careful fascicle study is the question about “what constitutes

the identity of the poem...Dickinson's fascicles can rather be seen to *embody* the problem of identity" (4). When we regard Dickinson's poems as individual lyrics we "suppose boundedness..." (5). Cameron proposes that it is not the case that Dickinson couldn't publish the packets of poetry that she left behind in her bureau drawer, or even that she chose not to publish the packets; rather, "she couldn't choose how to do so. She could not decide whether to publish her poems in sequences or as lyrics" (54). Perhaps she preferred to dwell in "possibility."

The initial editing of Dickinson was a literal rescue effort that paved the way for all subsequently more figurative rescue missions. Never leaving any instructions behind to "authorize" the publication of her poems, Dickinson created an infinite number of possibilities in the reception of her writings. Betsy Erkkila in "The Emily Dickinson Wars" writes, "What the editing of Dickinson makes visible is the ways in which the editor, like the author, is engaged in acts of cultural production and interpretation that are collective and social rather than private and individual"(13). The history of rescuing Dickinson began with the efforts of Lavinia, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Mabel Loomis Todd, and T.W. Higginson to usher Dickinson's writings into print. Without their efforts, we would not know Dickinson as we know her today. Literary studies and the American poetry canon would be without a valuable literary and cultural commodity.

Only ten of Dickinson's poems were published in her lifetime, submitted primarily by friends to newspapers and periodicals. The poems were published anonymously and appeared before the public altered or "robbed" of Dickinson. "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (J986/F1096) for example appeared anonymously in the

Springfield Republic, published under the title "The Snake," with the addition of a question mark preventing the continuation of the third line into the fourth; Dickinson complained about this in a letter to Higginson (R.W. Franklin).[2] Dickinson's closest friends, like Susan Gilbert Dickinson (who is purported to have sent the editor of the *Springfield Republic* Samuel Bowles her copy of the poem), and Helen Hunt Jackson, urged Dickinson to publish but respected Dickinson's view of publication as "the Auction/Of the Mind of Man" (J709/Fr788). Erkkila points to the irony of this poem:

> The "Mind" of Emily Dickinson, who refused to go to market and resisted commodification by what she called "Disgrace of Price," is now owned collectively by Harvard University and Amherst College, where access to and circulation of her writings is vigorously policed and controlled. If you want to quote from or publish the work of Dickinson you must ask for the privilege and pay the price; if, on the other hand, Dickinson had gone to market, her work, like the work of many of her contemporaries, would now be in the public domain. (15)

Just as she never authorized the publication of any of her poems in her lifetime, all posthumous publication of Dickinson is essentially unauthorized. In *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*, Marta Werner states, "There can never be an authorized edition of Dickinson's writings. The gold imprimatur—emblem or face of Harvard's authority stamped across the blue binding of Johnson's Letters (1958)—is a false witness..." (5).

From the outset the editing and publication of Dickinson's writings have been a contested issue. Questions around artistic intention are unavoidable. All editors who tackle Dickinson must "implicitly rely upon the interpretation of an unverifiable

---

[2] With the letter to Higginson Dickinson enclosed a clipping of the poem from the *Springfield Republic* and wrote "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me—defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and the fourth were one—I had told you I did not print—I feared you might think me ostensible" (L316).

authorial intention" (Bushell 25). Since Dickinson's writings were initially rescued, it has been the prerogative of editors to enact the original rescue effort over and over but from various historical, cultural and political perspectives. When Todd and Higginson edited the first volume of Dickinson's poems, they focused largely on biography and on preparing the writings for a nineteenth-century reader. Todd and Higginson felt that they had to sell the idea of Dickinson as much as her poetry. As Martha Nell Smith points out,

> the editing of Emily Dickinson was, from the beginning, driven, inflected by, and /or entangled with biography. What is not so obvious is that biography persists as a key element in the editing of Dickinson. Even our contemporaries whose focus is her textual condition predicate analyses on beliefs about her biographical condition. (57)

Today, as Shawn Alfrey has pointed out, critics are focusing on "the writing scene itself" (2). Critics like Susan Howe, Marta Werner, Jerome McGann, Ellen Louise Hart, and Martha Nell Smith have returned to the writing scene and Dickinson's original manuscripts or fascicles. Sally Bushell, looks at recent editorial and critical efforts that, to borrow Robert McClure Smith's words, "fetishize fascicle manuscripts." Bushell reminds us that "those who choose to edit Dickinson implicitly believe that they are doing service to the poet by taking the creative process one stage further than she was able to take it" (25). The editing of Dickinson is fairly summed up by McClure Smith:

> many Dickinson scholars engage in a flight from history and sexuality...in order to fetishize fascicle manuscripts, to pursue somatic contact with the documents the poet fingered, pilgrimage to Harvard and Amherst to touch the relics, to ponder lost and irrecoverable intentions in new hypertextual scriptures. ("Dickinson" 15)

Dickinson's first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson, would not only set the stage for perhaps one of the longest running contests over the editing of an author's work, but would also set the stage for one of the longest contests over who an author was, is, and how she should be received. From the late nineteenth century, the division of Dickinson's manuscripts between the house of Dickinson and the house of Todd and the continuing division as it was carried on into the twentieth century by their descendants (and critics who have tended to side with either camp) have produced a rhetoric of rescue that endlessly pursues the ghost of a nineteenth-century woman, a poet, and her fossil-like writings.[3]

Dickinson was prophetic when she wrote to Higginson: "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – ." It is certain that Dickinson cannot escape her fame, and biographers, New Critics and feminists have made it so. In the efforts to rescue Dickinson from misrepresentation and the continual effort to rank Dickinson higher

---

[3] In Betsy Erkkila's essay "The Emily Dickinson Wars " she describes the division of Dickinson's manuscripts this way: "The historically contingent relation between marketplace notions of individualism and private property and the emergence of modern notions of poetic genius, the author, and the work as forms of intellectual property is particularly legible in Dickinson studies because as a field of cultural and academic study it cannot finally be separated from its origins in a property dispute between Lavinia Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. Todd was the lover of Austin Dickinson to whom Lavinia deeded a piece of Dickinson's land (at Austin's request) in partial repayment for her work on Dickinson's manuscripts" (15). In Chapter 2 I will further discuss the division of the manuscripts in relation to biography.

and higher in the American poetry canon, we must remember Dickinson's own albeit coy remark that her "Barefoot — Rank is better" (L265).

Chapter 1:
Dwelling in Biographical Possibilities

Emily Dickinson's To-Do List

Sum-Sum-Summertime

Monday
Figure out what to wear—white dress?

Put hair in bun
Bake gingerbread for Sue
Peer out window at passersby
Write poem
Hide poem

Tuesday
White dress? Off-white dress?
Feed cats
Chat with Lavinia
Work in garden
Write to T.W.H.

Wednesday
White dress or what?
Eavesdrop on visitors from behind door
Write poem
Hide poem

Thursday
Try on new white dress
Gardening—watch out for narrow fellows in grass!
Gingerbread, cakes, treats
Poems: Write and hide them

Friday
Embroider sash for white dress
Write poetry
Water flowers on windowsill
Hide everything

Andrea Carlisle, 1996

I dwell in possibility-
A Fairer house than prose
More numerous of Windows-
Superior-for Doors-

Of Chambers as the Cedars-
Impregnable of Eye-
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky-

Of Visitors-the fairest-
For Occupation-This-
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise-

(J657/Fr466)

Never was the phrase "less is more" more applicable than in describing both Dickinson's poetry, and her biographical archive. The art of the Dickinson biography lies in the predicament or gift of a scant archive in which *more* is made from *less*. Andrea Carlisle's "Sum-Sum-Summertime," comically creates a fictional Dickinson "to-do list" that nicely points out the most common, stereotyped, and iconized details of her life based on a limited biographical record: she remained indoors, wore white, wrote poems, hid poems, and fed neighborhood children gingerbread; the end. Carlisle's poem points to the commonly held assumption that outside of her poetry, Dickinson did not *do* much of anything. Although we know this is false if we consider her domestic and social obligations as well as her activities as a passionate and devoted gardener, there is a sense that Dickinson's life, in contrast to her writings, was uneventful. As with all stereotypes there is a grain of truth in Carlisle's comic biographical portrait, and the truth is that Dickinson's life, outside of her poetry and epistolary prose, does appear skeletal without the padding of biographical narratives. Ever since Dickinson warned that her life was "too simple and stern to embarrass any"

(L330), biographers have set out to rescue her from her own self-effacing portrait and narrate for her a life worthy of her poetry.

With any biographical subject worthy of inquiry, narrative possibilities are endless. Like Dickinson, the biographer "dwells in possibility." Biography is a "richer house than prose," or rather "richer" than critical writing, in the infinite ways that a biographer may excavate a biographical archive, and infinite in the ways that a biography may be persuasive. The persuasiveness of any biography on Dickinson is inextricable from a rhetoric of rescue. Every biography on Dickinson begins with the biographer outlining how other previous biographers failed to present (or represent) the *real* Emily Dickinson and where the *real* Dickinson resides.

"Where shall we find her....where is she hidden?" writes biographer Genevieve Taggard. She finds Dickinson in character: "Dickinson family character." She rescues Dickinson from a critical climate in which she says "we have forgotten character....in our modern study of motives" (71). George F. Whicher refers to Taggard and Josephine Pollitt's biographies that both appeared in 1930 as "doubtful" attempts at clarifying Dickinson's biography. Whicher's biography *This was a Poet* (1938) is indeed richer and more persuasive than Taggard's or Pollitt's unintentionally sentimental portraits of Dickinson.[1] Whicher's biography rescues Dickinson from the likes of Taggard and Pollitt while adopting a rhetoric of persuasion that showcases the

[1] Taggard's biography provides an example of de Man's sense that "not only does the critic say something that the work does not say, but he says something that he himself does not mean to say" (109). Although Taggard sets out to avoid what she calls "lazy poetic inclination" (71), she waxes poetic about Dickinson in spite of her project to rescue Dickinson from sentimentalism, myth, and legend. She states: "This story must use the knife of the poems against the accumulations of falsification. If you let the undergrowth stand, it will choke the flowers of poetry, for most of the legends make Emily's poetry obscure." She makes this statement after advising the reader earlier on that "The most common error is to assume that the positive statements, in the poems especially, should

superiority of his critical methods. He writes that since the publication of the two 1930 biographies, "a considerable body of fresh evidence has come to light. I hope I have used it with effect to terminate the persistent search for Emily's unknown lover" (viii). While Taggard looked for Dickinson in "family character" and in her *true* love for a man, Whicher *finds* her with newly available biographical evidence, and reads her in terms of her "heritage" (viii).

Dickinson provides a revealing case study for the investigation of biographical story-telling. In "The Biographer as Archaeologist," William St. Clair writes that questions about the nature of biographical evidence "lie at the heart of the whole biographical enterprise...All biographical archives can be looked upon not only as archaeological sites but as sites which have normally been dug before, their layers disturbed, their previously jumbled artefacts rearranged, and many objects thrown away" (233). The excavation of Dickinson's biographical archive in three biographies — Richard B. Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), Susan Griffin-Wolff's *Emily Dickinson* (1986) and Alfred Habegger's *My Wars are Laid Away in Books* (2001) — illustrate the ways in which Dickinson's biographical archive has been variously dug, disturbed and rearranged for competing narrative purposes. These three biographies are among well over a dozen biographies that have been written on Dickinson since her death in 1886. I have chosen these three biographies in particular because, although they are quite different in their rhetoric of persuasion, they share a rhetoric of rescue and provide a reflection of the critical landscape of Dickinson Studies in the last 30 years. In this chapter I would like to look at how their rhetoric of

---

hold true for a lifetime....we should remember that absolute statement in poetry cannot describe relative fact in daily life" (72).

rescue reflects not just the particular critical imperatives of each author, but also the way that these three biographies reflect the ever-changing field of literary criticism in regards to Dickinson.

Dickinson biographies, spanning from the 1890s until about 1930, were characterized by the tone set by both Mabel Loomis Todd's publications and lectures on Dickinson and the somewhat personally skewed efforts of Dickinson's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Albeit innocently, they participated in the alteration of dates and the withholding of information in order to produce a sentimental portrait of Dickinson.[2] In the modernist period, biographies such as Taggard's *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (1930) and perhaps the more enduring *Emily Dickinson* (1932) by Allen Tate tried to desentimentalize Dickinson. As I mention above, Taggard was not so successful. Tate's biography, in a similar vein to Whicher's, would read Dickinson's language and writings as a "translation" of the "vanished past" of nineteenth-century New England and pave the way for New Historicist readings of Dickinson.

In *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (1955), Thomas H. Johnson would be the first biographer to include Dickinson's actual words taken from her letters. This publication, along with his 1955 variorum edition of Dickinson's poems and letters, rendered most other biographies to date obsolete save for the concurrent work of Millicent Todd Bingham's biographical studies, *Emily Dickinson: A*

---

[2] The production of a sentimentalized biographical portrait of Dickinson was carried out both consciously and unconsciously. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson would not play down Dickinson's mythic status, knowing that this status made Dickinson all the more marketable to the general public. Unconsciously, there was perhaps the desire to uphold the Victorian "angel in the house" stereotype of women to which Dickinson in many ways conformed.

Revelation (1955) and *Emily Dickinson's Home* (1955), which provided scholars with valuable new material. Feeding on the work of Bingham and Johnson, Jay Leyda went on to write an anti-New Critical biography, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), that recorded every known detail of Dickinson's life and her world chronologically and without commentary. Leyda wished to create a biography that would prevent readers from "using [Dickinson's] device as *your* device to make letters and poems mean what you want them to mean" (xxii). Leyda here is referring to the New Critics as well as to psychoanalytic biographer John Cody's *After Great Pain. The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1960), which led Leyda to request that there be "no pattern please," in talking about Dickinson's life. Leyda wanted no clichés or narratives that would frame Dickinson as the broken heart, the daughter oppressed by the tyrant Father, or the recluse, which could be neatly explained by 1950s-era American psychoanalysis.

While we may appreciate Leyda's attempt at reaching a kind of neutrality regarding Dickinson's life and writings, his efforts at objectivity and a chronological approach would spur Richard Sewall to proceed in the other direction. In Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), he would consciously take to heart "biography's task of presenting its data under interpretation" (Morse 22). Sewall self-reflexively states in his introduction that "it should be noted that the chronological sequence of biography will be violated at every turn" (12). Sewall defends his strategy by stating:

> It is the truest way of presenting a figure upon whose biography no narrative structure can be imposed that is not to a degree arbitrary or fictitious. It is true that Emily Dickinson's life had a beginning, middle, and an end....But the beginning, middle and end are not articulated by any dramatic external events...she can be known as a person not through what she *did* (excluding for the moment her poems and letters

> as forms of doing) so much as through her relationships with people, events, books, ideas — but mostly, being an intensely personal person, with people. (12)

Sewall's two volume work is divided into chapters that are devoted to ancestors, family, and friends with whom she had significant personal relationships. Although Sewall's biography was a major contribution to Dickinson studies, Dickinson is strangely absent from her own story. Biographies in the 1980s, the 1990s and today have attempted to put Dickinson back into her own story — or rather in new and improved narratives of their own construction. Biographical writing illustrates the ways that Dickinson's biographical archive has been variously dug, disturbed and rearranged for competing narrative and discursive purposes.

To clarify my purpose in discussing the biographies of Sewall, Griffin-Wolff and Habegger, St. Clair provides useful insight:

> Indeed in our day, no cultural practice can be accorded full respect if it is unaware of its own history or uncritical of its own procedures. How, I ask, can those biographers who regard their work primarily as an historical investigation deal with the hard immovable fact that the sources on which they necessarily rely are normally likely to be an unrepresentative record of the patterns of the lived life? (224)

In light of the issues that St. Clair raises, I will discuss whether the biographers in question are critical or uncritical of their own procedures and just what kind of procedures they adopt. I will explore the use or abandonment of chronology, the display of self-reflexive imperatives, the way ancestor study frames Dickinson's story, and how these divergent approaches reflect the common thread or rhetorical strategy in their imperative to "rescue" Dickinson from biographical and ultimately textual misunderstanding.

At the heart of the Dickinson biographical archive, as I mentioned, there is limited evidence. From the beginning, biographical and literary scholarship on Emily Dickinson has been paradoxically determined by her paper trail that was small in scale, yet rich in textual density. The history of the Dickinson biographical archive and the struggle over how it was to be excavated, and by whom, is essential to any discussion about biographical or scholarly work on Dickinson. After Dickinson's death, her sister Lavinia was steadfast in her determination to publish the nearly 1800 unpublished poems that were found in the manuscripts or fascicles. She first enlisted the help of Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. This choice made sense in light of the life-long friendship that Dickinson had with Susan. When Dickinson died it was Susan who wrote a dignified and intelligent obituary and it was she who lovingly prepared the funeral. Throughout her life Dickinson wrote to Susan prolifically. Dickinson sent Susan letters, poems and letter-poems, a distinctive genre of writing that Dickinson was fond of. Although Dickinson shared her poetry with many of her other friends and family throughout her life, there is evidence that Susan and Emily had a unique literary dialogue that, as Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith have pointed out, "has been neglected, distorted, and obscured" (xii).

Susan first attempted to publish the poems through journals, one-by-one, just as ten of Dickinson's poems had been published in her lifetime. With a desire to produce an inclusive volume of Dickinson's writings and sensitive to what she read as Dickinson's artistic intentions, Susan could not work fast enough or please the market judgments of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom Lavinia had enlisted to aid her with publication. Impatient to publish, Lavinia turned to Mabel Loomis Todd,

Susan's arch-nemesis, the mistress of her husband Austin. Although Todd had corresponded with Dickinson and had the opportunity to sing and play the piano for the poet in her home, she never met the poet face-to-face. She set to work and collaborated with Higginson, and together they edited *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, published in 1890. Todd and Higginson were a productive team and went on to publish yet another volume the following year. Todd, independent of Higginson, went on to publish another two volumes of poems as well as a collection of letters. Like the few poems that were published in Dickinson's lifetime, titles were given to poems which originally bore none; adjustments were made to spelling, capitalization, punctuation and meter to reflect public standards. By 1896, three volumes of poems were in circulation, but with the death of Austin Dickinson in 1895, a quarrel between Lavinia and Todd over a strip of land that Austin had intended Todd to inherit ended in a court judgement in favor of Lavinia. Todd's work on the manuscripts ended, thus leaving the manuscripts divided among Lavinia, Todd, and Susan.

Today, the way that biographers approach the Dickinson biographical archive is still influenced and colored by the initial struggle over publication. The manuscripts, following the deaths of Lavinia, Mabel, and Susan, found their way into the hands of daughters. Susan's daughter Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Todd's daughter Millicent Todd Bingham published competing biographical accounts of Dickinson's life and, following these divergent accounts, biographers have shown their preferences for either source. With her death the manuscripts belonging to Bianchi were sold to Harvard University by her heir Alfred Leete Hampson, and

Bingham gave her manuscripts to Amherst College, thus dividing the Dickinson archive forever.

In the history of Dickinson biographical inquiry, there has been a tendency by biographers to side with either the Susan or Todd camp, illustrating the way that the treatment of the biographical archive is at the heart of the biographical enterprise. In the three biographies I am examining, it would seem that it is difficult for the biographers to remain completely objective concerning the struggle over the initial editing of the Dickinson manuscripts. What the struggle revealed or concealed about Dickinson's relationship to Susan and the motives behind Todd's noteworthy yet questionable editorial role in Dickinson publication is not only interesting but necessary to examine.

All three biographies are respected works that have contributed meaningfully to Dickinson biographical and literary studies. Richard B. Sewall's biography for years served as a trusted and authoritative biographical study of Dickinson. Sewall's rhetoric of rescue is loud and clear in his introduction titled "The Problem of the Biographer." Although the title of this introduction would seem to suggest a self-reflexivity that was less common in 1974 than it is today, his self-reflexivity is less about the theoretical considerations of biography in general, and more about the chief imperatives of Dickinson biographical writing specifically. Of today's biographical climate, James Walter writes:

> The self-reflexive imperative in current biography underlies both the stream of first-person reflection on what to make of evidence and the increasing tendency to include discussion of — and implicit dialogue with — the reader about authorial judgement and intention within a biography. (335)

Sewall's introduction is clear in communicating his methodology, specifically addressing the biographer's challenge in narrating Dickinson's life, but not in narrating a biographical subject theoretically.

The goal of Sewall's biography is to rescue Dickinson from myth and clichés — "the Broken Heart, the Tyrant Father, the Recluse…" (11). Commenting on the gaps in the biographical record that Dickinson left behind, Sewall laments the way that legend and myth have come to fill in the gaps:

> The fictionists have written plays and stories on the flimsiest of evidence; biographers have indulged in the privilege of the novelist; the cultists and the gossips have always been with us; and most recently the methods of psychoanalysis have raised further possibilities. The difficulty of the biographer is to say an absolute "no" to all but the wildest speculation….The three foci of legend-Lover, Father, Withdrawal — are closely related, the first two serving to explain the third. (7-8)

While Sewall was on the right track to look beyond the clichés, it is somewhat ironic that in his special attention and reliance on the Todd-Bingham archive he is blind to Mabel Todd's perhaps innocent yet willing part in myth-making herself. The influential book *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* gives weight and credence to Dickinson's emotional and creative relationship with her sister-in-law Susan. Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith blame the early editors of Dickinson's poetry like Todd for distorting Dickinson and for failing to acknowledge that Susan was one of her most important and responsive readers.

> To editors of the time, the most marketable image of Dickinson the poet was that of the eccentric, reclusive, asexual woman in white. This mysterious figure necessarily wrote all alone, harboring some "secret sorrow" that no one could understand or be privy to. There was simply no space in the Dickinson biography for the revelation of an immediate

> confidante and audience for her poetry — particularly not one who lived next door. Loomis Todd was therefore willing to play up this "solitary spinster" characterization of Emily Dickinson in her editorial productions, and thus the role of Susan went entirely unmentioned in the earliest publications of Dickinson's works. (xv)

Apparently Todd refused Higginson's suggestion that Susan's obituary of Dickinson, which stressed that although she led a fairly solitary life she was "not disappointed with the world," be included in the "Introduction" to the 1890 *Poems*. Todd instead accepted a three-paragraph introduction written by Higginson that described Dickinson as "a recluse by temperament and habit" (xv). Higginson and Todd, although productive in publishing Dickinson's poetry, perhaps unknowingly cast Dickinson in her role as "mythic" recluse.

In a brilliant article titled "How Anthologies Made Dickinson a Tolerable American Woman Writer," Amanda Gailey examines how anthologies published before 1955 distorted Dickinson's biography to help shape an ideologically acceptable picture of feminine creativity. Gailey writes:

> By studying how early twentieth-century poetry anthologies depicted Dickinson, we can clarify how her public image was constructed to fit assumptions undergirding the literary canon at the time. Since Dickinson did not construct this public persona for herself, and since her letters to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, a key biographical context for many of her poems, were suppressed by her first editors, Dickinson provides an unusual sort of Rorschach test for early anthologists. (62)

Sewall explores the life-long relationship with Susan in a chapter titled "Susan and Emily;" however since he relies quite heavily upon the Todd-Bingham archive, he fails to probe the real significance of the relationship that feminists would later explore. I am critical of his use of the Todd-Bingham archive, not only because of its inaccuracy, but for the way that it puts Todd and Austin at the center of Dickinson's

biography and fails to address in full the importance of Dickinson's relationship with Susan. In a chapter titled "Mabel Loomis Todd and Austin," Sewall writes "Mabel Todd has appeared peripherally in our pages so far, but it is time now to bring her to the center" (170). Sewall in this chapter defends his positioning of Todd by aligning himself with Jay Leyda, famous for his well researched and detailed *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* and his view that without Todd we may never have come to know Dickinson as we know her today.

In this critical look at Sewall and his treatment of Todd as a central player in the Dickinson drama, I would like to point out that I am defying biography as a "closed system. " Most readers, as St. Clair reminds us, have no way of judging the degree of truthfulness in a given biography due to the fact that biography is a kind of closed system. St. Clair writes:

> all our normal readerly procedures for judging the degree of truthfulness of a biography are based on the extent to which the biographer has been successful in convincing us, that is, on the biographer's literary and rhetorical merit, or on our own skill as readers in applying our critical faculties to the biographical text. (226)

In contrasting and comparing Sewall's biography to that of Griffin-Wolff and of Habbeger, I am able to raise questions (i.e. the question of the Todd-Bingham archive) that I could not have raised with Sewall's work over ten years ago when I first read it in a less scholarly fashion. When other Dickinson biographies are read in tandem, Sewall's biography is not a closed system to me, having read it more than once with a critical eye. One cannot forget, however, that when most readers pick up a biography they are ill equipped to question the "truthfulness" of the biography and in all likelihood are swept up in a biographer's "rhetoric of persuasion," and are persuaded

by a given biographer's commitment to telling us the "truth" about Dickinson by "rescuing" her from being misrepresented.

Following in the footsteps of Sewall, Griffin-Wolff does not need to set out to dispel Dickinson myth and legend; however, she still adheres to a rhetoric of rescue to a certain degree. Griffin-Wolff's rhetoric of rescue stems from perhaps two places. First of all her biography, published in 1986, can be said partly to come out of the "new biography" of the 1970s and 1980s in which many biographies were written to "recover the stories of women," and secondly from a modernist or psychoanalytic approach. James Walter describes the period in which Griffin-Wolff was writing: "Stress on model stories and on narrative led to a preoccupation with 'heroines' of the women's movement at just the time that postmodern theory eschewed 'grand narratives'" (328). Griffin-Wolff is at times dramatic and grandiose in her assessment of Dickinson. In her introduction she writes:

> Emily Dickinson has become the lens through which Americans can read their fate as men and women whose national identity was born out of an errand into the wilderness. (9)

Griffin-Wolff christens Dickinson as "America's Oven Bird," a reference to and association with greatness through Robert Frost. Griffin-Wolff attempts to recover Dickinson as a heroine not just for the women's movement but for America and Americans at large, in a curiously patriotic tone. Melville and Emerson are invoked and she is meant to stand beside them.

To her credit, Griffin-Wolff points to a paradox regarding Dickinson: "the need to know seems to be inversely proportional to the amount to be known" (8). She makes much of the fact that we have few facts. We don't know very much about

Dickinson's external day-to-day existence. Since Dickinson did not live her life in the public sphere, it is the "dynamic of Dickinson's interior life that infuses her poetry with power," writes Griffin-Wolff (9). Dickinson's "essential narrative" can be told in a few sentences, and she does just this in her prologue, making it almost possible for a reader with a cursory interest in Dickinson to read no further. Griffin-Wolff's prologue accurately reflects her biographical project that stresses the importance of Dickinson's interior life that Allen Tate has famously described as "one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent" (85). It is Dickinson's interior narrative that needs to be revealed, exposed, and celebrated. In Griffin-Wolff's view Dickinson is to be known and discovered through her "written remains." Commenting on the 1847 daguerreotype of the poet, she points out:

> The extant photograph has the quality of a memento; it satisfies a certain curiosity for many readers; however, few feel it has captured the real Emily Dickinson. The *real* Emily Dickinson resides in her poetry. Life has been supplanted by art. (163)

There seems to be some irony in Griffin-Wolff stating that the "*real* Emily Dickinson resides in her poetry," when her study of Dickinson is biographical. Griffin-Wolff does not heed Jay Leyda's plea for "no pattern please" in Dickinson biographical inquiry; rather she finds a pattern or rather life-myth or psychoanalytic explanation for the poet's creation of art that would supplant her life. Griffin-Wolff titles a chapter "Mother and Father: The Fall into Language."[3] In this chapter, she explores the nature of Dickinson's relationship with her mother and father, giving special attention to the former relationship and expresses the view that, "The first and most primitive feeling

---

[3] Mary Loeffelholz, in *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory*, questions Wolff's psychoanalytic reading of Dickinson. Wolff's use of object-relations psychoanalysis and its "privileging

about words and about communication in general derived from Emily Dickinson's relationship with her mother" (52). Griffin-Wolff suggests that Dickinson's preverbal stage of development with her mother was interrupted and that as an infant Dickinson was "forced to employ language as a necessary remedy for otherwise unsatisfactory communication" (54). Griffin-Wolff further states in a later chapter titled "The 1850's: Apprenticeship and Vocation" that: "The silent language of eye and face having failed, Emily Dickinson would find in poetry the way to create a superior language and a uniquely privileged self" (129). My purpose here is not to discuss the plausibility of Griffin-Wolff's explanation for Dickinson's "fall into language" as an underlying explanation for her fated life as a poet; rather I wish to contrast Griffin-Wolff's approach with that of Sewall and Habegger. Sewall goes out of his way to avoid a psychoanalytic theory or pattern that may explain Dickinson as a woman and poet; Griffin-Wolff embraces it.

While Griffin-Wolff suggests that Dickinson's "life is supplanted by her art," Habegger seems to be saying just the opposite. Working against the modernist/New Critical preoccupation with writing rather than with the person who wrote it, as he indicates in his introduction, Habegger is critical of the notion that the only interesting aspect of Dickinson's life and the only thing worth narrating is her interior life. He sets out with a conviction and belief in the difficult yet rewarding efforts of the biographer to take in hand all available biographical materials and thus to create a shape and a narrative that suggest Dickinson experienced both interior and external realities. With Dickinson, Habegger writes:

---

of the pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother" (58), is a psychoanalytic framework that fails to address "the persistent thematics of the father" in many of Dickinson's poems (59).

> it is often assumed there is no map, direction, or development- that her art was static or airless and that we don't need to know about her stages, sequences, contexts in order to catch on. (xiii)

Habbeger's work, published in 2001, is the most recent and the most self-reflexive of the biographers in question. His introduction is highly self-reflexive both on the art of life-writing in general and on the specifics of Dickinson biographical work as well. His rescue mission of Dickinson is not just about rescuing the poet but about rescuing biographical writing from modernist and feminist biographical imperatives. Habegger does not completely dismiss the modernist and feminist biographical approaches; rather he wishes to acknowledge their short-comings, the most obvious in his estimation being their abandonment of chronology.

In "Writing Lives Forward: A Case Study for Strictly Chronological Biography," Mark Kinkead-Weekes discusses the advantages of a strictly chronological approach to biographical narrative. Kinkead-Weekes writes:

> The biographer's urge to find some underlying explanation which can be read backwards and forwards irrespective of chronology-and to which the awareness (or otherwise) of the subject of the biography is irrelevant. The chronological method, insisting as it does on flux, change, development, and experience through time, suggests how much more multi-layered and complex human life and consciousness are when freed from such procrustean distortion. (239)

It would seem that Kinkead-Weekes's approach speaks volumes to Habbeger. His adoption of a chronological method attempts to avoid Dickinson being upstaged by a theory or explanation of her life constructed in hindsight. Habegger states his premise for his work:

> Chronology is vital to comprehending Emily Dickinson — that she not only developed over time but that her work often reflected the stages of her life. Her poetry shows a striking and dramatic evolution. The question of development is fundamental: again and again, in reading

> her, we need to think about her recent history and how it shaped her immediate future. (xiv)

Habbeger's chronological approach is an attempt to avoid distorting Dickinson and her historical reality. His approach importantly shows how Dickinson's poetry developed over time and how it may have responded to events and significant happenings in her life. Since virtually none of Dickinson's poems was dated, careful biographical research is helpful in placing her poetry in its proper context and time frame.

In contrast, Sewall and Griffin-Wolff steer away from chronology. With Sewall, it is telling that chapters more or less devoted specifically to Dickinson, rather than to one of her family members or friends, do not appear until volume II. Volume II also eerily hosts a photographic image of Dickinson that cannot be verified as authentic. Sewall tells his reader that there were several Emily Dickinsons living in the Amherst area during Dickinson's life-time. The effect of this admission and the photograph in contrast with the verifiable daguerreotype from volume I is to contribute to the mystery enshrouding Dickinson that Sewall ironically is attempting to dispel.

Griffin-Wolff and Sewall employ a non-chronological approach to narrating Dickinson's life for similar reasons. Sewall like Griffin-Wolff questions whether Dickinson has any external "life" to narrate and thus narrates her life through her relationships with other people. Griffin-Wolff posits that the poet's life was "supplanted by art" and that the psychoanalytic theory of Dickinson's "fall into language" helps to read Dickinson's life backwards and forwards irrespective of chronology. In defense of her strategy and in a moment of self-reflexivity, mid-way through the biography, Griffin-Wolff states:

> To be sure, in fashioning a biography of "Emily Dickinson," one must begin with the family and environment and culture that shaped her thought and defined the options available to her. However, little by little, as the woman becomes Poet, biography must shift its principal focus from the person to that Voice of the verse, for it was in her poetry and not in the world that Emily Dickinson deliberately decided to "live." Strict chronology, the primary concern with events that follow one another in orderly file — they must yield to the panoramic prospect of a larger view. (168)

As panoramic as Griffin-Wolff attempts to be in her biographical account of Dickinson there is a "shutting the poet up in prose" in her focus on Dickinson's writing rather than on the unfolding of her life-story told from a biographical point of view. The rhetoric of the above quotation is revealing. Describing Dickinson as a "woman" who "becomes poet," speaks to a feminist imperative, and the "principal focus" on the "Voice" rather than the "person" echoes a modernist stance. In stating that "it was in her poetry and not in the world that Emily Dickinson deliberately decided to 'live'," Griffin-Wolff echoes Adrienne Rich, Paula Bennett, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who made the case for Dickinson as a hard-working poet-artist. Griffin-Wolff's biography is fascinating in the sense that her rhetoric of rescue straddles imperatives that are in some respect modernist or New Critical, psychoanalytic, and feminist.

While chronology in biographies reflects various critical imperatives, so too does ancestor study. In almost all biographies the unfolding of a subject's life-story begins with some form of ancestor study. In his book *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding* David Ellis states:

> A remarkable number of biographies begin with an account of a subject's more or less remote ancestors. This seems as necessary an introduction to the biographer's relation with the reader as 'How do you do?', and often it is about as meaningful. What intellectual benefit

> do we after all derive from being told that the subject's great great grandfather was a yeoman farmer in Sussex, or a small manufacturer in Yorkshire? (39)

Ellis discusses why biographers so frequently use ancestors to aid in explaining a subject's character or artistic genius. Historically, there is great importance given to lineage in European culture, and the linking of inheritance of titles and property with notions of character. The belief in the importance of "blood," although unpopular today, is still used in biographical narratives due to the lasting influence of the nineteenth-century development of the "science of inheritance." Ellis examines Herbert Spencer's "Reflections" appendix of his 1893 autobiography, in which Spencer explains his character in terms of his mother and father. Ellis writes that Spencer's remarks are:

> Representative of a naively exuberant biological determinism: the confidence that science had provided, or would shortly provide, all the answers to the mysteries of character. Less than twenty years before, Francis Galton had begun his road to the devising and championing of eugenics with *Hereditary Genius*, a book in which, by concentration on a number of highly successful English families, he offered the current intellectual aristocracy the means of legitimizing itself in ways very similar to those which it was traditional for the aristocracy proper to employ. (41)

Although Ellis is speaking primarily about British or European biographical imperatives regarding ancestors, his points are useful in relation to Dickinson and how her biographers rely on genealogy to frame and to define her character and to attempt to "explain" her brilliance. How useful is it to learn about Dickinson's ancestors? Surely it is interesting to learn about her family's genealogy but what purpose does this genealogy serve other than to be "interesting" or impressive in that the biographer has done his or her homework.

All three biographers that I have discussed, to some degree, rely on ancestors to help frame Dickinson's life. The specific ways that they narrate ancestor stories importantly reflect their overall rhetorical approaches. Wanting to move away from a psychoanalytic method, Sewall approaches the issue of ancestor study with some reservation, stating in his second chapter, "The New England Dickinsons and the Puritan Heritage," that "Genius is ultimately unaccountable, and none more so than Emily Dickinson's" (17). Sewall's cautionary use of ancestors is in keeping with his overall project of "rescuing" Dickinson from myth; however since Sewall's overall structure of his biography involves parceling Dickinson out among family and friends as a method of analysis, he cannot help but fall into "explaining" Dickinson's genius and character through ancestors. Sewall shares Taggard's insight that:

> What has been called mystery is character; and character is the key to this extraordinary story — Dickinson family character and Emily's ...under the pressure, the light and shade, of the moral climate of Amherst. (12)

Sewall does not narrate in the kind of detail that Griffin-Wolff and Habegger do regarding ancestors. Instead of linking Dickinson's earliest New England forebears who landed in Plymouth in 1620 with Dickinson's chief personality traits, Sewall links them to Puritan ones like "simplicity, austerity, hard work, and denial of the flesh" (22).

Unable to resist fully the "ancestor" narrative, however, Sewall gives some weight to the influence of Dickinson's paternal grandfather whom he deems the only grandparent on either side of the family who "produced qualities that foreshadow in any specific way Emily Dickinson's peculiar nature and, above all, her vocation as a poet" (18). Just what were Samuel Fowler Dickinson's qualities that foreshadowed

his granddaughter's brilliance are never clearly stated by Sewall because it would involve too much conjecture; rather it is safer to link Dickinson's personality and character to specifically Puritan qualities that she either exhibited or rebelled against. It was also irresistible for Sewall to make the statement that, "Actually the Dickinsons could well be listed among 'Americans of Royal Descent'-a title given to another famous Amherst family, The Boltwoods" (18). This kind of linking of the biographical subject with "aristocratic" lineage is a rhetorical strategy that Ellis points out readers are used to and expect in the effort to explain "greatness" or "genius." Sewall importantly points out that Dickinson herself, however, showed no interest in her family lore and claim to greatness.

Although Habegger would agree with Sewall that Dickinson was somewhat indifferent to her family history, he opens his work's first chapter, "Amherst and the Fathers" with a discussion of a Dickinson Family Reunion that took place in 1883. The Dickinson legacy that was celebrated is suggested by a photograph that Habegger includes of a stage with portraits of Dickinson judges, generals, governors, and ministers. Next to the portraits is a "slender gun" which Habegger links not only to a weapon used to kill "Indians and Wolves," but with Dickinson and her infamous poem "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun." Linking Dickinson to the greatness of her forbears Habegger states:

> Although Emily Dickinson would not have attended this pious family gathering, she was very much a member of the tribe — savvy, tough, resolute, heaven-obsessed, independent, unusual. In one of her most eye-catching poems, "My life had stood a loaded gun," she, or at least the speaker, almost seems to be the deadly Dickinson musket come to life:
>
> None stir the second time-

On whom I lay a Yellow Eye-
Or an emphatic Thumb-
(Fr746). (4)

Habegger's choice of "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun" is perhaps related to his critical imperative to rescue Dickinson from feminist scholars.[4] It would be impossible for Habegger to be unaware of the importance and centrality of the poem to feminists like Adrienne Rich and Paula Bernat Bennett.[5] Habegger in complete opposition to these feminists links the riddle-like and enigmatic "My life had stood — a Loaded Gun," with Dickinson's male ancestors. Evidence that Habegger, of our three biographers, grants the most significance to the poet being a "Dickinson" is found in the very title of his biography, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*. This title is taken from one of Dickinson's poems that dates to about 1882, a year before the reunion was held. Habegger is persuasive in making his bold links between the poet and her pioneering and public-spirited forefathers. Of Dickinson, Habegger writes:

> Hard battle resulting in victory or defeat was a central, lifelong metaphor for her. Far from being a wispy escapist, she was as martial a Dickinson as any of them. Yet she had no one's blood on her hands and paid little or no attention to family or local history, including her father's toast at Hadley's 1859 bicentennial invoking the by now moss-covered theme of New England's errand into the (so-called) wilderness. (5)

---

[4] While Habegger in his "Introduction" acknowledges that "the feminist revolution had brought a number of rich new insights, conjectures, and perspectives to bear on her...," his view is that they ultimately have distorted her "historical reality" by seeing her "as a woman of her time, an American Victorian intimately involved in female networks and responsive to female writers" (xii). Habegger writes that the "inadequacies" of feminist approaches will "appear" as his "book unfolds" (xii).

[5] In Rich's essay "Vesuvius at Home" (1975) and Paula Bernat Bennett's *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics,* "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun" is key to feminist interpretations of Dickinson's poetry and her identity as an ambitious woman poet. Rich describes the poem as the "onlie begeter" of her vision of Dickinson (Loeffelholz 83). The poem lends itself to a multitude of different interpretations, due to its riddle-like quality. Habegger's interpretation of the poem may be seen as a direct challenge to or rescue of Emily Dickinson from feminists to whom the poem was so central.

Habegger goes on to suggest that Dickinson's "inheritance" was complicated by the fact that her sex disqualified her from a public life and participation in the "collective struggles of her time" (5). He suggests that Dickinson's greatness was nevertheless exercised within the private sphere of her home but that this greatness was derived from "the land of her fathers" (5). Habegger's rhetoric here greatly contrasts with that of feminists who have emphatically connected her to a tradition of woman's writing and resistance to "the male logos" and her embracing of "mysteries of female experience" (Martin 154).

Like Sewall and Griffin-Wolff, as we shall see, Habegger follows the poet's "road to greatness" by going back to her paternal grandfather who "helped set the terms within which she defined and dared to exercise her high calling—an artist's heroic errand into and out of a wilderness all her own" (7). Of all three biographers, Habegger, although not necessarily *right* about Dickinson, seems the most convincing that Dickinson's greatness can be "explained" by his New Historical approach. It is the articulate novelistic prose that Habegger writes that makes Dickinson's family, however influential in *actuality* to her character and development, *seem* very real and vivid to the reader. I have walked away from Habegger's biography with indelible portraits of the poet's paternal grandfather, her father and her mother. Habegger's portrait of Dickinson's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, is extremely detailed and rich. For the first time a reader is given as full an account as possible of the nature and circumstances of her mother's past and relationship with Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson. The effect of these portraits is to make Dickinson's own portrait more

vivid, if only for the duration of reading the biography; however regardless of their actual significance to Dickinson, they are rhetorically persuasive and illuminating.

With Sewall, since he is somewhat self-conscious about his narration of the Dickinson ancestors, the reader is not left with any strong impressions of Samuel Fowler Dickinson or the poet's mother or father. Despite the careful detail that Griffin-Wolff employs to sketch the portrait of Samuel Fowler Dickinson, her attempts at making him a convincing influence on Dickinson's development are undermined by her patriotism that attempts to showcase Dickinson as a truly "American" poet.

In Griffin-Wolff's six-part biography, part one is titled "My Father's House." Chapter one of this first part is called "Samuel and Edward: The Last Jerusalem." Griffin-Wolff writes, "The Dickinson family was of ancient and honorable stock" (13). Griffin-Wolff goes into greater detail than Sewall or Habegger in introducing the poet's first New World ancestor, Nathaniel Dickinson. Besides being slightly more gutsy in claiming that Dickinson's original English ancestor "had been cited on the battle-roll of Hastings," Griffin-Wolff's narration of the Dickinson lineage reflects her belief in Dickinson as a lens through which "Americans can read their fate as men and women whose national identity was born out of an errand into the wilderness" (9). Habegger, writing more than ten years after Griffin-Wolff, shows his disagreement with her reading of Dickinson in this way by referring to the "(so called)" wilderness.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Griffin-Wolff also exercises the imperative of "rescuing" Dickinson as a female heroine not only for the women's

movement but for Americans at large. Griffin-Wolff sums up the poet's greatness this way:

> There is something poignantly American about her vaulting ambition, those first New Englanders-men and women who made the long journey west to establish a New Jerusalem, supposing that they really might be able to make God's "kingdom" come into being here, on the shores of a New World wilderness. (13)

For some reason I find Griffin-Wolff's recruitment of Dickinson into the arena of American "vaulting ambition" somewhat unconvincing. This rhetoric seems more apt for Whitman or Melville than for a poet who, on more than one occasion, downplayed her gifts in a self-effacing way. Dickinson is famous for her poem, "I'm a Nobody! Who are You?", or stating that her life was "too simple and stern to embarrass any." She shied away from appearing ambitious, regardless of the hidden ambition that Griffin-Wolff attributes to her. Rather than there being something "poignantly American about Dickinson's vaulting ambition," there is something *poignantly feminist* about her "vaulting ambition" that Griffin-Wolff claims. Despite the feminist elements in Griffin-Wolff's biography, like Sewall and Habegger, she looks to the poet's paternal grandfather for a key to her character. Although Griffin-Wolff admits the poet only had contact with her grandfather for the first three years of her life, "Perhaps no one can fully understand Dickinson's poetry without knowing something of her ambiguous inheritance from Grandfather Dickinson; certainly no one can understand the life that gave birth to that poetry without starting here — two generations before she was born" (14).

All three biographers, as I have discussed, state with confidence the benefit of narrating the life of Samuel Fowler Dickinson in order to better understand Dickinson.

All accounts of the fairly complex and interesting man, a man of great ambition and religious zeal, yet unwise as a business man, are interesting and worthwhile but perhaps better serve a reader's understanding of Dickinson's father Edward's character and his development than that of his daughter. It would seem that all three biographers give credence to the notion that "genius" skips a generation, by looking to the paternal grandfather for a key. One is left wondering why Dickinson's mother and father, although discussed in varying degrees of detail and given importance, are not heralded as "keys" to understanding the poet when they in reality had a day-to-day influence on her life and development. Curious indeed, yet from a rhetorical point of view it makes sense.

The paternal grandfather in his historical distance is like the subject, somewhat of a mystery and enigmatic, thus "interesting." It is not necessary that he actually provide us with a key to Dickinson's genius, only that he appear to do so. The context and history that ancestor study in the three biographies provide is useful, but the overall effect contributes less to a deeper understanding of Dickinson in "reality" and more to the various degrees of success in the overall "rhetoric of persuasion." Habegger in my estimation is most accomplished not in revealing the "truth" about Dickinson and her genius, but in the eloquence of his novelistic prose that provides an illusion of "truth." Ancestor study in these biographies, however worthwhile, ultimately serves biographical imperatives of form and convention more than Dickinson as a subject.

Since the day that Lavinia "rescued" Dickinson's fascicles, the theme of rescue has been a constant one in biographical and critical inquiry. While the fascicles were

in need of discovery and rescue, has the poet herself been in need of rescue as well? Why have the two rescue missions gone so hand in hand? As Tate famously asserted in "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," "All pity for Miss Dickinson's 'starved life' is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent" (236). Nevertheless all biographers and critics to a degree "pity" Dickinson, or rather see her as a victim of misrepresentation. There is much evidence that suggests that Dickinson was not only of an incredibly independent mind, but also that she made many of her life's decisions willingly and with design. Insightfully, Adrienne Rich suggest that:

> Genius knows itself; that Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. It was, moreover, no hermetic retreat, but a seclusion which included a wide range of people, of reading and correspondence… (320)

There is a self-awareness of her vocation as a poet, and her skill with words, yet she would write to Higginson for him to judge whether her poetry was "alive," and "breathed" (L260). "The Mind" she said "is so near itself—it cannot see" (L260). Dickinson, often coy and self-effacing, writes these words to Higginson aware on some level that her poetry "breathed" – yet she would curiously write: "Of our greatest acts we are ignorant — You were not aware that you saved my Life" (L330). To this day it is not clear exactly how Higginson saved her life, but the possibility that she saw herself in need of rescue perhaps makes the present day rhetoric of rescue surrounding her all the more palatable, and perhaps inevitable.

Chapter 2:

Eyes Wide Shut: New Critical Desire and Miss Dickinson

To Emily Dickinson

Dear Emily, my tears would burn your page,
But for the fire-dry line that makes them burn—
Burning my eyes, my fingers, while I turn
Singly the words that crease my heart with age.
If I could make some tortured pilgrimage
Through words or Time or the blank pain of Doom
And kneel before you as you found your tomb,
Then I might rise to face my heritage.

Yours was an empty upland solitude
Bleached to the powder of a dying name;
The mind, lost in a word's lost certitude
That faded as the fading footsteps came
To trace an epilogue to words grown odd
In that hard argument which led to God.

Yvor Winters, 1930

Voyeurism, vampirism, necrophilia, lesbianism, sadomasochism, sexual surrealism: Amherst's Madame de Sade still waits for her readers to know her.

Camille Paglia, from *Sexual Personae*, 1990

I begin this chapter with the New Critic Yvor Winters's 1930 sonnet, a poetic homage to Dickinson, juxtaposed to the acerbic critical pronouncement of Camille Paglia, written in 1990, a period in which the New Criticism[1] of Winters, T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks was said to be "over, finished,

[1] American New Criticism flourished from the late 1930s into the early 1960s and encompassed the work of T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards. In addition to the critics I have mentioned above, it was practised by W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley and R.P. Blackmur. According to Terry Eagleton, "New Criticism was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not have in reality. Poetry was the new religion, a nostalgic haven for the alienations of industrial capitalism. The poem itself was as opaque to rational enquiry as the Almighty himself: it existed as a self-enclosed object, mysteriously intact in its own unique being. The poem was that which could not be paraphrased, expressed in any language other than itself: each of its parts was folded in on the others in a complex organic unity which would be a kind of blasphemy to violate" (47).

defunct" (Young 1). It is useful to juxtapose a New Critic like Winters with Paglia. Winters would have deemed Paglia's "isms," among *other* things, extrinsic to the understanding of Dickinson's poems. In almost all ways Paglia is the antithesis of the New Critic. Robert McClure Smith writes that Paglia's reading method dismembers "Dickinson as text" (*Seductions* 176). Her self-proclaimed method in her popular but academically controversial *Sexual Personae* is described as a form of "sensationalism" in which she fleshes out "intellect with emotion" in order to "induce a wide range of emotion from the reader" (xiii).[2] Paglia is flagrantly anti-New Critical as she sets out to "liberate criticism and interpretation from their imprisonment in classroom and library" (xiii).

While Paglia and Winters could not be further apart on the critical spectrum, his poem and Paglia's text may be seen to intersect. Paglia reads sadomasochism in Dickinson's poetry while Winters's poetic homage enacts a kind of sadomasochism, in which Winters plays a kind of submissive. Although he never reads sadomasochism in Dickinson's poetry from a critical perspective, his narrator in the poem speaks of "burning" his eyes and fingers, making a "tortured pilgrimage" through a "blank pain of Doom." Like a submissive, Winters "kneels" before Dickinson. Later, in a 1938 essay, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," Winters is not the submissive, kneeling before Dickinson. Winters's critical appraisal is somewhat schizophrenic and reflects a latent sexism in his inability to fully praise Dickinson's poetry. He makes several remarks like, "Her meter, at its worst — that is, most of the time — is a kind

---

[2] Paglia's anti-New Critical *Sexual Personae* was successful commercially but not taken seriously by many academics when it appeared in the 1990s. One of the reasons for this I would argue is that the New Critical legacy did not end in the early 1960s but lasted well into the 1990s and continues even today, especially in high school and undergraduate educational institutions.

of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon..." (246), yet he claims that "except Melville, she is surpassed by no other writer that this country has produced" (104). He crowns Dickinson as a "poetic genius" and one of the "greatest lyric poets of all time," while at the same time chastising her for her "defects in perfection." He blames her "New England Heritage" for "impoverishing her" and being responsible for her "lack of taste" and "abominable" poems. He uses "I like to see it lap the miles" to illustrate a quality of "silly playfulness" and her "limited range of metrical schemes" (245). His see-saw of harsh criticism and dramatic crowning of a poetic genius is symptomatic of the difficulties New Critics faced in trying to talk about Dickinson and how properly to place her work, but also of the rhetoric of serious and even harsh *judgment* that characterized other New Critical writing on Dickinson from the same period. Despite a critical imperative that tried to steer clear of contextualizing Dickinson's writing culturally and historically, that is, Dickinson's New England heritage, Winters writes:

> It impoverished her in one respect, however: of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly at the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems. This stylistic character is the natural product of the New England which produced barren little meeting houses... (256)

Here Winters plucks Dickinson out of her New England heritage altogether, to clear her poetry for modernist usage. This passage also illustrates the difference in tone between his 1930 sonnet that is almost sentimental ("Dear Emily my tears would burn your page") and the tone of his critical writing eight years later. The sentimentality of

New Critics and certain feminists have attempted to lift Dickinson out of her time, according to certain beliefs based on her biography and in pursuit of certain ideological ends, while New Historicists and cultural critics have insisted on the importance of her nineteenth-century social, political and cultural context. Aware of past New Critical and some feminist paradigms and the tendency to align Dickinson with either the "great" British women writers of her time (whom Dickinson did admire and emulate), or with the male authors of the American Renaissance, Paula Bernat Bennett states: "Increasingly today, she is situated outside of her own century altogether, effectively treated as a modernist in nineteenth-century dress, with no connection to her peers at all" ("Emily Dickinson" 216). According to Bennett, who calls for the need to read Dickinson in the context of her American women poet peers, by situating Dickinson outside of her century, critics "leave intact the grounding of Dickinson's mythic status as isolate" ("Emily Dickinson" 216) that New Critics and feminists like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic* underwrote.

In this chapter I will look at the New Critics and how their rhetoric of rescue in regards to Dickinson reflects not only their specific response to the way that she was received in the early part of the twentieth century, but also their struggle to establish themselves in American universities in the 1930s and 1940s as "literary critics" rather than as "literary scholars."[3] Emily Dickinson would play a key role in the New Criticism's formulation of a methodology "grounded in close reading, formal analysis, and the individual poem as self–enclosed aesthetic object" (Erkkila16). The New

---

[3] The New Critics were united in their opposition to the prevailing methods, doctrines, and views of academic English literary scholarship. They fought against "a purely philological and historical scholarship that dominated all instruction, publication and promotion " (Wellek 58).

his sonnet is ironic if one considers the distaste that New Critics expressed for sentimentalism in nineteenth-century culture and literature.

Since the beginning of her reception in the 1890s to the present, Dickinson Studies has been partially defined by the critical imperative either to rescue Dickinson from, or restore her to, nineteenth-century New England. For example, in 1930, poet Edmund Blunden exclaims: "A hundred years since Emily Dickinson was born; impossible! To those who know her, the most living contemporary, mockingly future of poets" (300). Blunden's comments are typical of the New Critics who read Dickinson's poetry as being proto-modernist and timeless in its appeal. Sixty years later, cultural critic David S. Reynolds, partly in an effort to rescue Dickinson from the legacy of New Criticism, declares: "A major reason for her enduring popularity is that she was extraordinarily receptive to the popular literature and culture of her own time" (168). While Blunden suggests that Dickinson's poetry is timeless because it transcends the nineteenth century, Reynolds claims that Dickinson's poetry is timeless precisely because it is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century literature and culture, to which Dickinson was highly receptive. Conflicting readings of Dickinson reflect shifts in critical paradigms, as well as the differences between "literary critical evaluation and literary historical scholarship" (Burr 37). Blunden, involved in "literary critical evaluation" as practiced by the New Critics, rescues Dickinson from the nineteenth century by insisting on her modernity, while Reynolds, involved in "literary historical scholarship" as practiced by cultural and historical critics, rescues Dickinson from critical projections that tend to remove Dickinson from her historical and cultural context.

Critical rescue of Dickinson from mere impressionistic "appreciation," as well as amateurish biographical portraiture, in the early part of the twentieth century, would spur them to rescue not Dickinson but her *poetry* from a void of "criticism."

An example of the New Critical imperative to rescue Dickinson from amateurish biographical portraiture is found in Genevieve Taggard's *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (1930). This biography, which appeared at the beginning of the New Critical period, was written in the spirit of rejecting "local legends and literary legends, both vulgar," according to Taggard (110).[4] Taggard thanks "the legend for helping the poems and the person out of oblivion" but declares that "the legendary half-light has lasted too long; and now we have found the poems superior to the legend" (110). An excerpt from a section titled "Legend and the Living Girl" illuminates the kind of New Critical rhetoric that Taggard employs:

> If we deduct the known taste of the period from the total legend, we shall get something like the life itself. First we remove the Victorian varnish; underneath is the grain of the wood. Like all poets' lives, Emily's was rubbed up for the needs of the sovereign reader — his easiest least vital need, his floating emotion. Queen Victoria stamped a standard of conduct for poets as well as for sentimental scrub-women, and the period, when it found that Emily Dickinson had humanly loved and renounced and remained true, embroidered the theme with the silk floss from Victoria's sewing basket. (111)

Taggard's rhetoric of rescue here is highly pronounced and characteristic of not only New Critical rhetoric but the rhetoric of any critical discourse that attempts to read a writer and his or her writings anew. She uses the word "deduct" with a faith in the objective ability of the critic and "the moral obligation to judge" (Tate 13). Allen Tate expressed the importance of judgement in his essay "Miss Emily and the

Bibliographer." The removal of the "Victorian varnish" to get at the "truth," at the "grain of the wood" underneath, nicely exposes the imperative of the New Critics to disassociate Dickinson from the sentimentalism of the nineteenth century that they judged as an inferior form of literary expression. While Taggard recognizes that Dickinson's life was sentimentalized or "rubbed up for the needs of the sovereign reader," she is blinded by her own attempt to put on a New Critical layer of varnish.

The New Critics approached Dickinson with a kind of *moral* obligation to rescue her poetry from critical neglect. John Crowe Ransom would describe their rescue of Dickinson this way: "The slighting of the professional poet in her life-time is made up for in our time by especial gallantries on her behalf and an exquisite hatred for those who neglected her" (297). His rhetoric is somewhat ironic considering the New Critical chauvinistic "slightings" of Dickinson that were narrowly made up for by their "especial gallantries." His rescue of Dickinson from critical "neglect" is in one sense a valuable critical *insight* or rather intervention, when the quality of Dickinson's poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century was still in question; however his *blindness* to his own paternalism is an example of de Man's sense that: "Critics' moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also the moments at which they achieve their greatest insight" (109).

From the beginning of Dickinson's reception following the 1890 publication of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, readers and critics alike have been challenged as to how to talk about her poetry. In preparing a late nineteenth-century reading public for Dickinson's unconventional style, T. W. Higginson, in the preface to the 1890

---

[4] Since the New Critics were for the most part critical of the use of biography to frame a poet, Taggard's biography with its New Critical elements is paradoxical in its quest to reveal the *real* poet

publication, described her verses as "torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed" (43). Although Higginson's impressionistic description of Dickinson's poetry is quite beautiful and apt, it is an example of the kind of literary "appreciation" that the New Critics would rail against. They would also undermine the primacy of Dickinson's scant biography over the interpretation of her poetry in the early part of the century. They feared that her sentimental and mythic biographical portrait would "obscure" the poetry (Taggard 110).

As Terry Eagleton reminds us, New Criticism evolved in the years "when literary criticism in North America was struggling to become 'professionalized', acceptable as a respectable academic discipline" (49). New Criticism and its proponents — Winters, Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and A.C. Ward — although quite divergent in some of their theories, were nevertheless united by their frustration with "prevalent trends in American criticism" in the 20s, 30s, and 40s, that were either "aesthetic impressionistic criticism," "humanistic," or "Marxist" (Wellek 56). These critics were united by the desire to "heal the rift between scholarship and criticism" (Fisher 322) that was felt in American English departments during the New Critical period. In healing the rift, New Critics would:

> reinterpret and revalue the whole of English poetry. It was an act of the historical imagination (however prepared before) to revise the history of English poetry: to exalt Donne and the Metaphysicals....and to defend the break with Victorian and Edwardian conventions as it was initiated by Pound and Eliot. (Wellek 60)

---

behind the poetry.

Dickinson's poetry was perfectly suited to the New Critics who were attracted to lyric poetry of the seventeenth century and the Romantic period. They appreciated the metaphysical and modernist quality of Dickinson's poetry. And most important, they embraced Dickinson because they read her as a lyric poet.

The New Critics read Dickinson as writing in the literary genre that they prized above all others —lyric poetry. In reading her as a lyric poet, they superimposed Dickinson on top of their ideal image of a male Romantic poet who wrote in solitude, producing utterances through a single speaker who expressed a "state of mind" or a "process of perception" (Abrams 146). As Virginia Jackson discusses in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, New Critics were interested in promoting lyric poetry as being the highest form of literature. In promoting lyric poetry, the New Critics would display their "professional" ability to perform close readings. In crowning Dickinson as a lyric poet, New Critics were able to use her poetry as "an exemplary instance" (Jackson 98) of "poetry" inherent in a poem.

Her poetry was interpreted as "a poetry of ideas" (Tate 232). Poetry to the New Critics was "a solution to social problems, not a part of them; the poem must be plucked free of the wreckage of history and hoisted into a sublime space above it" (Eagleton 48). As Betsy Erkkila points out, Dickinson was:

> deployed as a weapon against the political, ideological, and popular approaches to literature associated with the left, the masses, and the thirties....Dickinson's poems became both the exempla and the occasion for modernist and New Critical definitions of the literary—grounded in distinctions between poetry and history, aesthetics and politics, high art and mass culture. (16)

Recent critics like Marietta Messmer challenge, in her words, the "poetocentric" reading of Dickinson and the "privileging of (isolated) lyrics as objects of inquiry"

that the New Critics are largely responsible for (9). She is interested in "reading the 'public' writings of a most private author" (2). In an essentially anti-New Critical way, she wants to highlight the importance of the epistolary genre of Dickinson's writings that had been critically marginalized by "a rigid generic differentiation—often hierarchically inflected—between 'poems' and 'letters'" (4). By placing Dickinson's correspondence at the centre of her literary production, rather than on the periphery, Messmer requires "first and foremost that we suspend our traditional, Romantic-residual notions of this writer as primarily a 'poet.'" This critical intervention may be read as a direct challenge to the New Critical legacy that saw Dickinson as first and foremost a "poet" – specifically a lyric poet.

The New Critics, who "broke boldly with the Great Man theory of Literature," used Dickinson as an excellent case study to prove that "the author's intentions in writing, even if they could be recovered, were of no relevance to the interpretation" of an author's text (Eagleton 48). With Dickinson's limited biographical archive and the fact that she never "authorised" the publication of any of her poetry (save for the poems that were sent in letters), she would be used by the New Critics as an excellent example of the possibility of evaluating a poem in and of itself: as an isolated entity. A.C. Ward in "A Major American Poet" praises Dickinson for her "vision and her verse" that attains unity, "which is achieved only by poets of a high order" (85). They would treat Dickinson's poems like "Romantic symbols" that were "imbued with an absolute mystical authority which brooked no rational argument" (Eagleton 49). Perhaps when Eagleton made the above statement he was thinking of the rhetoric of New Critic Robert Penn Warren in his essay "Pure and Impure Poetry:"

> Usually the critics will confess that no one strategy—the psychological, the moralistic, the formalistic, the historical—or combination of strategies, will quite work the defeat of the poem. For the poem is like the monstrous Orillo in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*. When the sword lops off any member of the monster, that member is immediately rejoined to the body, and the monster is as formidable as ever. But the poem is even more formidable than the monster....The critic who vaingloriously trusts his method to account for the poem, to exhaust the poem, is trying to emulate this dexterity: he thinks that he, too, can win by throwing the lopped off arms into the river. But he is doomed to failure...So the monster will always win, and the critic knows this. He does not want to win. He knows that he must always play stooge to the monster. All he wants to do is to give the monster a chance to exhibit again its miraculous power. (19)

This passage articulates the New Critical veneration and elevation of the poem above the author, the critic and subjective emotional responses of readers. The poem is revered as a self-sufficient, unified object that cannot be violated by the critic through analysis. It is the critic's job to exhibit the poem's "miraculous power" by performing close readings that reveal its various "tensions," "paradoxes" and "ambivalences" and how they are resolved by a poem's organic structure (Eagleton 49).

Warren's rhetoric in which adoration for the power of the poem is represented as engagement with the power of a monster is rather curious. When has a critic ever played stooge to the monster, or rather to the poem? When has the critic ever been so kind and self-effacing as to give the "monster" the opportunity to exhibit "its miraculous power" (19)? Did the New Critics play stooge to Dickinson's poems? The New Critics like all critics approach Dickinson with the desire not only to exhibit the miraculous power of her poetry, but the miraculous power of their prose, of their critical power. This desire is especially pronounced in the New Critical as well as in feminist discourses surrounding Dickinson. Roland Barthes's "Death of an Author" provides some insight into the design behind every critical endeavor:

> To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic. (1469)

New Critics would in a sense limit the reading of Dickinson's poetry by identifying the author behind her poems as an isolated, private and Romantic poet. This portrait of Dickinson, based on a biographical template of male Romantic poets like Keats, would limit our understanding of Dickinson's utterance as a woman. In the case of feminists like Gilbert and Gubar, and other second wave feminists who were writing about Dickinson in the 70s and early 80s, the "author" they find beneath the "text," or poem, is decidedly a *woman*. In their critical stance the key to explaining Dickinson's poetry is found in her gender. "Victory" to feminists who rescue Dickinson from the New Critics and who identify Dickinson as a *woman* poet whose poems may be best "explained" within a tradition of women's writing.

Although the New Critics strove to downplay the significance of the author by concentrating on close reading of the text with little reliance on biographical information about an author or his or her historical context, they achieved a certain "victory" in "explaining" a text according to the rigor of their critical judgement and close reading techniques. In the case of Dickinson, the New Critics felt victorious not because they discovered the *true* Dickinson beneath her poems but because they discovered the *poetry* in her poems. A.C. Ward announces the success of New Critics and their reception of Dickinson in the following passage:

> Her posthumous reward has been to find a generation fifty years ahead that was exactly ready for her, and qualified (by its painful reaction

> from false optimistic idealism in thought and excessive materialism in practice) to know how right she was. (83)

Many New Critics who claimed that Dickinson's poetry had a "timeless" quality were in reality making the claim about the *timeliness* of Dickinson's poetry, its appropriateness for "their time" (Burr 37) and their specific interest and objectives. Winters's demonization of Dickinson's New England heritage in his curious essay, "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," may be read as a symptom of the New Critical desire to "delicately clear" her poems for present use and evaluation, showing "what is for our time, or more grandiosely, what is for all times" (Burr 37). With a critical imperative that tries to steer clear of contextualizing Dickinson's writing culturally and historically, Winters and Allen Tate speak at length about the significance of Dickinson's New England heritage. Their discussion grows out of the desire to disassociate Dickinson from the sentimentalism of nineteenth-century literature and culture and associate her with an intellectual climate that was in transition in the later nineteenth century.

Writing in the early 1980s René Wellek states, "Today the New Criticism is considered not only superseded, obsolete, and dead but somehow mistaken and wrong" (55). New Criticism has been demonized by four main allegations. First is the notion that New Criticism is interested in art for art's sake, dismissive of the social and political function of art; secondly that it is unhistorical, isolating a work of art from its past and its context; thirdly that it aims at making criticism scientific; and finally that its only major contribution to the field of literary criticism is the technique of close reading (Wellek 55). I would add to these allegations the belief that New Critics are dismissive of biography and gender consideration. These allegations,

according to Wellek, are baseless if one looks carefully at what New Criticism was and acknowledges that New Criticism was not as unified and as rigidly defined as one may think. In regards to Dickinson, these allegations are neither accurate nor completely off-base. As Robert Penn Warren states self-reflexively in his essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," "Critics are rarely faithful to their labels and their special strategies" (19).

For example, although New Criticism *officially* rejected academic historical scholarship, they did not reject the "historicity of poetry" (Wellek 60). Allen Tate, for instance, in "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson" (1932) was far from ahistorical in his evaluation of Dickinson's language and writings as a "translation" of the "vanished past" of nineteenth-century New England. Tate would associate Dickinson with a version of nineteenth-century New England untouched by sentimentalism, wanting her to personify New England American culture before the civil war. Similarly, the New Critics were not as uninterested in biography as one would assume, especially when it came to Dickinson. By the 1930s, although many articles and reviews had been written about Dickinson, in the New Critics' view Dickinson, or rather her poetry, was not being properly attended to. Tate in "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," sums up fairly well the major reasons that New Critics were attracted to Dickinson's poetry and why they felt she had not been properly studied in literature departments:

> Great poetry needs no special features of difficulty to make it mysterious. When it has them, the reputation of the poet is likely to remain uncertain. This is still true of Donne, and it is true of Emily Dickinson, whose verse appeared in an age unfavourable to the use of intelligence in poetry. Her poetry is not like the poetry of her time; it is not like any of the innumerable kinds of verse written today. It is a

> poetry of ideas, and it demands the reader a point of view—not an opinion on the New Deal or of the League of Nations, but an ingrained philosophy that is fundamental, a settled attitude that is almost extinct in this eclectic age. (232)

First of all, the evaluation that Dickinson's poetry is "not like the poetry of her time," although accurate in that Dickinson's poetry was indeed unique among her peers, has the effect of removing Dickinson from her nineteenth-century context and isolates her from sentimental writing that did not appeal to the New Critical sensibility and that was deemed "unintelligent." The appeal of poetry that was free of any social or political messages demanding "the reader a point of view" reflects the New Critical distaste for literature of the 30s that grew out of the Great Depression.

The nature of New Critical desire for Dickinson is rich and complex. While seduced by her poetry that they read as replete with irony and paradox, and formally complex, they would try to resist her "enigmatic personality" (Ward 79). Wary of the use of biography to frame a poet, the New Critics did not venture to question the accuracy of Dickinson cast as the private-explorer and martyred recluse (7). Gailey points out that "The frequent inclusion of Dickinson's brand of creative femininity in anthologies—and frequent exclusion of competing notions of what it meant to be a woman writer—likely helped to check early feminist forces in the academy...." (4). They chose Dickinson as representative of women poets from the nineteenth-century partly because her biographical portrait fit their ideas of what a female creativity should look like. In Zofia Burr's book, *Of Women, Poetry, and Power*, she writes:

> The canonization of Dickinson as the exemplary American woman poet has had repercussions far beyond its impact on the reading of Dickinson herself. The critical reception of her poetry has served as a crucial site for constructing the terms for the reception of poetry by American women in general and for distilling the dominant assumptions and

> criteria for evaluating and responding to such poetry. Most durable among these assumptions is the romantic notion that the true poet does not write for his or her historical contemporaries but rather in response to internal imperatives. (2)

Although Dickinson, like any writer, wrote in "response to internal imperatives," she also through her vast correspondence and poetry shows great evidence of writing for her "historical contemporaries." For example, Martha Nell Smith in "Susan and Emily Dickinson: their Lives, in Letters," points out that Dickinson sent her sister-in-law and friend Susan Gilbert Dickinson over 500 writings during her lifetime. Following Dickinson's death, Susan would write to William Hayes Ward, editor of *The Independent*, that Lavinia Dickinson "feels a little baffled by my possession of so many mss. of Emily's" (qtd. in Smith 51). Just as Dickinson's sister Lavinia was baffled by the sheer quantity of messages, letters, letter-poems, and witty notes that passed between these two women, so too have most critics been, since they lack "a cultural model" for the relationship that was in part a kind of literary exchange (Smith 58). Dickinson sent Susan many of her poems in draft form and Susan played "a primary role in Emily's creative processes" by giving advice (for example, regarding Dickinson's revision of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers") (Smith 53). Smith attempts to rescue Dickinson from the New Critics who have focused too much on her isolation and on the notion that she wrote in solitude.

Recent critics like Shira Wolosky and Wendy Martin have made the case that we should reconsider the view that Dickinson was solely a private poet. Wolosky does not deny that Dickinson was a private poet, writing, "If ever there were a private poet, surely it is she — a woman famous in her own time for her reclusion" (104). However she accounts for her reclusion this way: "What has long seemed a merely

eccentric and highly gendered withdrawal from exposures to the world, takes on both motive and defiance once historical context is admitted" (107). The historical context that Wolosky wants to admit is the fact that the four-year period of the American Civil War (1861-5) coincided with the most prolific period of Dickinson's writing and her "reclusive practices." In Wolosky's interpretation, Dickinson's retreat is not the retreat of the romantic artist or of a woman poet forced by her social circumstances to seclude herself in order to pursue her writing; her retreat is an intellectual and emotional response to the morbid realities of war. Dickinson's poetry "becomes not only the powerful expression of her personal sensibility but also a centrally important representation of her society and her culture—a dimension which has been repeatedly neglected due, not least, to assumptions about gender" (109). Wolosky, in studying several of Dickinson's poems that deal both indirectly and directly with the civil war, rescues Dickinson from the New Critical sense that Dickinson "did not live in history and held no view of it, past or current" (Johnson xiv).

Just seven years after Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd launched Dickinson's posthumous career, Dickinson began appearing in American poetry anthologies on a regular basis and remained there for decades to come. The promotion of Dickinson's public image as a private explorer, a martyred recluse, and a virginal figure, "was harmonious with the aims of early twentieth-century canon formation" and the ideological aims of anthologies (Gailey 4). There were several anthologies that:

> implied a causal, natural relationship between her usually distorted biography of reclusion and martyrdom and her poetry, contributing to the belief that she could not have produced universally aesthetic poetry without a painfully feminized life. This naturalized type — the

> feminized private explorer — was arguably a response, intentional or not, to fears that hung on through the early century of the New Woman, whose characteristics are countered in these anthological caricatures of Dickinson. The New Woman participated visibly in public life and dressed masculinely; Dickinson was invariably clad in white, disappearing down the hall. (Gailey 3)

Dickinson's brand of femininity as a private-explorer, and her poetry that appeared to be produced without concern for an audience and social or political issues relevant to Dickinson's time, proved attractive to the New Critics who wanted to promote her as a private poet who was more or less uninterested in expressing political and social beliefs in her poetry. The New Critics, in their efforts to define the nineteenth-century American poetry canon, were not interested in women's writing that they deemed sentimental or related to women's reform activities. They were not interested, for example, in Helen Hunt Jackson's "plight of the Native Americans of Southern California" (Mitchell 192), that she wrote about in *Century of Dishonor*. They were attracted to Dickinson and her "subjective imagination" and promoted her partly for her achievements in lyric poetry, a genre "most removed from social and political engagement" (Mitchell 192).

In the New Critical revaluing of English poetry and their preference for the lyric genre, they would promote only certain American nineteenth-century poets to define the poetry canon. In Ward's "A Major American Poet," published in 1932, he compares Dickinson with Whitman, stating:

> If Whitman was the path of force, Emily Dickinson was a generating chamber of reserved subtlety. She lived in and upon her Self; he lived through an abundant Self which he desired to enlarge with a kind of atomic energy until that Self should, without losing its separate identity, become an accordant member of the Universal SELF. (Ward, vol III: 79)

Dickinson described as a "chamber of reserved subtlety" is just the kind of woman poet that New Critics wanted to promote side by side with Whitman. Ward, in an attempt to define "the nineteenth-century makings of American literature" (79), claims Whitman and Dickinson for his own times and critical agenda, regardless of the fact that though contemporaries, Dickinson never read Whitman. In a letter to T.W. Higginson she famously writes: "You speak of Mr. Whitman — I never read his Book— but was told that he was disgraceful-" (L261). Whitman and Dickinson are united by a critic's desire to define the landscape of American literature with the idea of the "circuit of the Passionate Self" in which Whitman is the positive and Dickinson the negative poles. Ward exclaims, "through these two it may be said that America was finding her soul" (79).

One of the main problems that feminists would have with the New Critics is their failure to deal adequately with Dickinson's gender as well as their sometimes flippant remarks about her that reveal a chauvinism typical of their era. Allen Tate described Dickinson as a "dominating spinster whose every sweetness must have been formidable" (235). Denying Dickinson an identity outside of being a lyric poet and a "formidable spinster," Ward states:

> Of what went on mentally and emotionally within this secret woman we shall never know more than her poetry tells us, because the poetry tells us everything, in the only way it can be told. Natural vulgar curiosity may incite us to peer about for information concerning externalities, but even if we should ever know the whole of the plain facts we shall know nothing more of Emily Dickinson than the poetry already conveys in essence. Emily Dickinson's life in the physical world, then, is of no significance apart from her poetry: all that is necessary to know concerning her is there, but in a form which perhaps means little to the general public eye. (80)

Critics after the New Criticism partake in "natural vulgar curiosity" by regarding all aspects of Dickinson's life. The list of "externalities" that critics and readers pay attention to is endless. There are studies of her mental and physical health, and studies of her domestic life. Dickinson is given a life in the "physical world" – I am thinking of Judith Farr's *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (2004) and Diana Fuss's *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (2004). In Farr's illuminating study, she convincingly argues the importance of Dickinson's gardens and her love and knowledge of flowers as a central consideration in the appreciation or even understanding of many of her poems. Discussing the symbolic role that flowers played in Dickinson's funeral, Farr states: "While *some* who attended the funeral knew she had been a poet, *all* knew that Emily Dickinson was a gardener" (3). Fuss explores Dickinson's relationship with the interior space of the Dickinson homestead: "A writer's domestic interior opens a window onto both author and text, reminding us that what we may at first perceive to be the timeless and universal truth of writing cannot be so neatly extricated from the complex particularities of its spatial and material origins. How do writers inhabit domestic space?" (2).

While New Critics like Ward stressed the importance of 'interiority' in Dickinson's poetry and her life as a poet, they would do so based on a notion of interiority that was *a priori* to the kind of lyric and metaphysical poetry that they placed at the summit of the hierarchy of genres. The final line from the excerpt from Ward, "all that is necessary to know concerning her is there, but in a form which perhaps means little to the general public eye," illustrates the New Critical confidence in the superiority of their critical lens to properly read and evaluate poetry. Although

Ward is accurate in his judgement that we will never know what went on within "this secret woman," Dickinson's life in the "physical world" and the "externalities" of her life are relevant to the study of her poetry and can enrich our understanding of her. Ward illustrates an *eyes wide shut* approach to Dickinson that the New Critics had in which a "secret" and "mysterious" nineteenth-century woman poet served their objective and interpretive approach to poetry and literature.

The initial criticism of Dickinson by Crowe, R.P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters is fascinating in its obvious admiration and "especial gallantries" for Dickinson, but also for its bafflement with what it deemed inconsistency in the quality of her poems. This bafflement made the New Critics unable to "integrate her high and low styles" (Paglia 624), blinded as they were by the idea of Dickinson as strictly a lyric poet. R.P. Blackmur's essay "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact" is similar in its see-saw of praise and criticism:

> No Judgement is so persuasive as when it is disguised as a statement of facts. I think it is a fact that the failure and success of Emily Dickinson's poetry were uniformly accidental largely because of the private and eccentric nature of her relation to the business of poetry. *She was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as some women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars.* Neither her personal education nor the habit of her society as she knew it ever gave her the least inkling that poetry is a rational and objective art and most so when theme is self-expression. (121) (emphasis mine)

If we can get past the obvious chauvinistic tone of R.P Blackmur's "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," written in 1937 during the New Critical heyday, what we observe is strangely ironic. Blackmur attributes Dickinson's success and failure as a poet to the fact that her relation to poetry was of a "private and eccentric nature."

Blackmur chastises Dickinson for her ignorance that poetry "is a rational and objective art," and in typical New Critical fashion, in their misreading of nineteenth century society and obliviousness to questions of gender roles, blames this "fact" on her "cultural predicament" and the "habit of her society." The irony in chastising Dickinson for being a "private" poet is that, had she been a "public" poet, New Critics like Blackmur would have ignored her altogether. It is precisely Dickinson's image of a "private" poet that would ultimately set her apart from her contemporaries and secure her a place in the nineteenth-century American poetry canon (Burr 37).

In a letter to T.W. Higginson discussing how her poetry had been received Dickinson remarked, "All men say 'what' to me, but I thought it a fashion—" (L271). In essence, New Critics like Blackmur said "what" to Dickinson in their inability to understand fully the complexity of Dickinson's poetics and variations on the lyric form. New Critics judged Dickinson's poems that had an element of sentimentality in them as an instance of *bad* poetry. Today, however, critics read sentimentalism in Dickinson's poetry very differently. David S. Reynolds points to many Dickinson poems that have an element of sentimentality, but no longer is sentimentality a pejorative term. Reynolds calls Dickinson a "paradigmatic" writer whose "real representativeness lies in her incomparable flexibility, her ability to be, by turns, coy, fierce, domestic, romantic, protofeminist, prudish, and erotic" (183). He looks at how many of Dickinson's poems show evidence of interest in "imaginative sermons, reform movements, penny newspapers, best–selling novels, and women's literature." Other critics read sentimentalism to "include a range of emotional responses....viewed as a style, strategy, or other device" (Petrino 123). Contemporary critics look at the

way that nineteenth-century women writers may have employed sentimentalism to explore "domestic themes" as well as "abolition, Indian rights, pacifism, temperance, suffrage, education and the environment" (Petrino 124).

In Cheryl Walker's "Nineteenth-century American Women Poets Revisited," she divides women's poetry into four temporal and stylistic categories: early national, romantic, realist, and modern. These categories reveal the "great stylistic variety and vocal complexity" that came out of women writing in an "era of political, religious, and artistic ferment..." and "engaged in bringing about social and political change" (Petrino 122-124). In an anti-New Critical spirit, recent feminists reread nineteenth-century American women poets with an openness to redefining and expanding the American poetry canon to include voices of women who did not conform to New Critical ideas of what a woman poet should be, poetically or biographically.

The nature and influence of New Critical desire are important to explore in order to understand the desire of subsequent critical approaches to Dickinson that have, in their turn, rescued her from both a real and *perceived* New Critical blindness regarding Dickinson. While the New Critics did read Dickinson with a kind of *eyes wide shut* approach — eyes open to the irony, paradox, originality and proto-modernist quality of her poetry; eyes shut to relevant biographical, historical and gender considerations — they nevertheless were largely responsible for ensuring Dickinson's canonization, and for producing a wealth of close readings, the most famous being those of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry*.

What is fascinating in the rescue of Dickinson from New Criticism is the tendency to resist the New Critical agenda or ideology while "retaining some of its leading assumptions" (Fischer 321). "Like a stubborn plant, the New Criticism keeps cropping up, despite various attempts to weed it out or at least contain it" (Fischer 321). Two examples that Fischer gives us are writings by Stanley Fish and Harold Bloom that appeal in New Critical fashion to the authority of the text, even with Fish's emphasis on the primacy of the reader's experience, and Harold Bloom's studies in literary influence that "perpetuate the New Critics' coolness toward "source-hunters, biographers and historians" (321). In regards to Dickinson, New Historicists and textual editors, like Jerome J. McGann, have become "entangled in New Criticism" in their rescue of Dickinson's fascicles from misrepresentation. Critics like McGann and Marta Werner attend to Dickinson's texts, her "words on the page," in a reverence and manner not so different from the New Critics who performed close readings (Fischer 321).

Biographers, New Critics, and feminists (as well as other critical schools) have attempted to rescue Dickinson not only from each other, but from a period that has been defined by twentieth-century paradigms. While New Critics like Taggard "removed the Victorian varnish," others like Reynolds and Barton Levi St. Armand in "Emily Dickinson and her Culture" would put it back on. Recent feminists and historical and cultural critics have restored Dickinson to her time and place in the nineteenth century according to expanded critical and cultural paradigms that have revised questions of gender in relation to American nineteenth-century women's writings. The contest between "literary critical evaluation" and "literary historical

scholarship" (Burr 37) continues to be played out as critics either remove Dickinson from or restore her to differently imagined nineteenth-century contexts, all the while ranking her as America's pre-eminent woman poet, in part due to the New Critical legacy. Dickinson's ranking is not only due to the brilliance of her writings but to her malleable and forever enigmatic and mysterious nineteenth–century femininity, which never fails to excite critics and readers' imaginations. Following the New Critical legacy, Dickinson "still waits for her readers to know her." Dickinson will forever wait for her readers and critics to *know* her as long as there is such a thing as Dickinson Studies. Paradoxically many critics don't want to *know* her, just as the New Critics didn't want to know *her*, but her poems. Perhaps the New Critics on some level were aware that once *Dickinson* is known, is found beneath her work, critical desire is over, and *she stops being theirs*.

I'm ceded—I've stopped being theirs—
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading—too—

Baptized before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace—
Unto supremest name—
Called to my Fill—the Crescent dropped—
Existence's whole Arc, filled up
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first—
Crowned—Crowning—on my Father's breast—
A half unconscious Queen—
But this time—Adequate—Erect—
With Will to choose—or to reject—
And I choose—just a Crown—
(J508)

Chapter 3:
Dickinson in Danger: The Rhetoric of Feminist Rescue

"I Am In Danger—Sir—"

"Half-cracked" to Higginson, living,
afterwards famous in garbled versions,
your hoard of dazzling scraps a battlefield,
now your old snood

mothballed at Harvard
and you in your variorum monument
equivocal to the end—
who are you?

Gardening the day-lily,
wiping the wine-glass stems,
your thought pulsed on behind
a forehead battered paper-thin,

you, woman, masculine
in single-mindedness, for whom the word was more
than a symptom—

a condition of being.
Till the air buzzing with spoiled language
sang in your ears
of Perjury

and in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises.

Adrienne Rich, 1964

In 1862, when Dickinson wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a well-known proponent of women's writing, she seemed keenly aware of how male editors commonly characterized women's poetry or their "effusions." In her famous, "Will you be my Preceptor" letter she writes:

> You think my gait "spasmodic" – I am in danger-Sir-
> You think me "uncontrolled" – I have no Tribunal.

> Would you have time to be the “friend” you should think I need? I have a little shape — it would not crowd your Desk— nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries- (L265)

In this letter, Dickinson’s pose is that of an inexperienced, timid and naive young woman writing to an experienced “man of letters” for advice. It illustrates Dickinson’s awareness of the way that some male editors viewed sentimental writings by women, in which there was often felt to be an “excess of emotion.” Dickinson had read widely and would have been aware of the various genres of writings that her contemporary American women writers were producing and the commercial successes they were experiencing.

Adrienne Rich draws her inspiration for the title of her poem “I Am In Danger—Sir— ” from this often cited letter. Although Dickinson did not really *need* Higginson as a mentor, he did become a supportive literary *friend* right up until her death in 1886 and, importantly, following her death, one of her first editors. Out of Dickinson’s 99 known correspondents, Higginson was her second most frequently addressed correspondent next to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, to whom she wrote prolifically (Messmer 115).

In Rich’s “I Am In Danger—Sir—” she reads too literally Dickinson’s pose of innocence and naivete that masked an awareness of the stereotypes of women’s writings as “effusions” of uncontrolled and spasmodic bursts of emotion (Petrino 124). She also demonizes Higginson whom she criticizes as viewing Dickinson as “half-cracked” (85) while living and being responsible for Dickinson’s posthumous appearance in “garbled versions.” In initiating a literary dialogue with Higginson, Dickinson did not change her “spasmodic” gait or “control” her poetic expression to

suit Higginson's or anyone else's idea of what women's poetry should be. In Rich's homage to Dickinson, *she* becomes the friend she *thinks* Dickinson needs and rescues her from the likes of Higginson and a history of male-dominated New Critical reception and criticism, which she represents in her poem by the lines "mothballed at Harvard and you in your variorum monument." Rich and other feminists, from 1964 (the publication year of the poem) onwards, become Dickinson's "tribunal." Rich's poem is partly about the history of Dickinson's reception, in which Rich signals to the readers that feminists will "have it out," will approach Dickinson on their own "premises" and according to their own rules. Rich's poem marks the decline of New Criticism and the rise of not only feminist criticism of Dickinson but also the rise of phenomenological, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, and New Historicist approaches.

Although aware of Dickinson's adoption of poses in her poems and letters ("When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean me—but a supposed person" [L268]), Rich perhaps takes Dickinson's protest to Higginson that "I Am In Danger—Sir—" too literally. There is much evidence that suggests that Dickinson was never in "danger" or in need of rescue, save for the need of a literal rescue of her manuscripts or fascicles upon her death. What is the "danger" that feminists are most interested in saving Dickinson from? How does their rescue of Dickinson differ from the New Critical rescue of Dickinson in the 30s and 40s? In this chapter I would like to look at how feminists like Rich felt that Dickinson was (mis)represented by the New Critics; why Dickinson proved so attractive to feminists; how feminists have tried to (re)present Dickinson; and finally, in what ways Dickinson and her poetry resist feminist readings.

Feminists have attempted to rescue Dickinson the "author" or *woman* poet from a legacy of New Critics by locating her in a tradition of women's literature; reading her experimental and innovative poetics as evidence of her efforts to resist or revise patriarchal language; and finally, studying her sexuality as a key to understanding her poetics and aspects of her biography. I will focus primarily on the way feminists have read Dickinson within a tradition of women's writings, largely because it is in this feminist approach that the rhetoric of rescue is most pronounced. I will pay special attention to the critical texts of Rich and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, produced in the 1970s, which in many ways have provided the base from which many feminist critics approach Dickinson to this day.

By 1964, the year that Rich wrote "I Am In Danger — Sir —," Dickinson's reputation as a preeminent poet was more or less established in the academy largely thanks to the New Critical legacy. With the publication of Thomas H. Johnson's three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), a New Critical victory of sorts, Dickinson's canonical status was secure. Why then did feminists feel the need to rescue her? One of the reasons may be the fact that, as Betsy Erkkila points out in *Wicked Sisters*, early feminists "tended to treat woman's literary history as something that was *there* to be recuperated and reclaimed by literary critics" (4). Out *there* was a tradition that "had been approached and appreciated by many women readers and writers but which no one had yet defined in its entirety" (Gilbert, *Madwoman* xi).

Despite the fact that Dickinson was being studied and read all over the world, feminists felt that Dickinson's canonization and poetry had been celebrated under false pretenses. Dickinson was not canonized with any conception of a women's literary

history or tradition in mind. Feminists like Paula Bernat Bennett describe the New Critics and the limitations of their approach this way:

> For a good part of this century, advocates of the "new criticism" encouraged students of literature to ignore or diminish biographical and gender elements in art. Literature we were told, should strive for the universal, and great art should transcend both the author's life and such ultimately temporal concerns as "he" and "she." The major writer spoke not for his sex but for all people as well as for all time...But like the angel image that distorted our knowledge of what women actually are, this theory also idealized and distorted art's *true* nature. (*My Life* 10)

The first thing to note in this text is that Bennett purposely does not capitalize the customarily upper-cased New Criticism. Secondly she points out the main objection to the New Critics as being their tendency to "ignore and diminish biographical and gender elements in art." She comments negatively on the importance of "universality" in poetry that the New Critics promoted. Perhaps the most thorny of Bennett's complaints against the New Critics is that they have "distorted art's true nature." What starts as a critique of New Critics in relation to Dickinson ends in a debate about the true nature of art. For some feminists like Bennett, writing in the 80s, the true nature of art or specifically of Dickinson's art was to be found in the expression of herself, her utterance as a woman poet.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf asks "- who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?" (47). *Who* indeed? Feminists would deem the New Critics incapable of *measuring* Dickinson's "heat and violence" because of their blindness to her identity as a *woman.* Feminist Dickinson literary criticism in all of its various incarnations is characterized by an imperative to rescue Dickinson from the New Critics who were blind to the

importance of the gender, biographical, sociohistorical and cultural contexts behind Dickinson's work. Rich in "I Am In Danger—Sir—" as well as in her highly influential "Vesuvius at Home" foregrounds "gender as the crucial determining factor behind the construction of Dickinson's poetry" (182).

In her study of Virginia Woolf as a cultural icon, Brenda Silver asks, "Why is it that her being a woman may ultimately be the most significant factor in her conflicting iconic representations...?" (10). Of Dickinson, I would like to ask the same. Although the New Critics tended to downplay the significance of the "she" behind Dickinson's poems, her gender and sex would prove to be only one of the stumbling blocks to understanding Dickinson's poetry and knowing how to talk about her. The New Critics, as McClure Smith points out, regarded female poets as "fundamentally other" (*Seductions* 149). R.P. Blackmur in "Emily Dickinson's Notation" shows evidence of this in his statement:

> it sometimes seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English, our own language, but with the pressure of all the other structures we are accustomed to attend; it comes at us all voice so far as it is in control, fragmented elsewhere, willful and arbitrary, because it has not the acknowledged means to be otherwise. (268)

In this awkward passage, Dickinson is likened to an animal. She is a cat speaking *our own language*, but expresses herself in a "willful and arbitrary" fashion. The idiosyncratic poetry of Dickinson mystifies a New Critic like Blackmur who is both blinded *by* and blind *to* Dickinson as a *woman* poet or indeed as a person. It is possible to read Blackmur's frustration with the difficulty of interpreting Dickinson's poems as a result of his blindness to the nature of her utterance as a *woman*, a fact that his generation of critics repressed to a degree. As Penelope J. Engelbrecht points out,

feminist critics, on the contrary, approach texts as "evidence of the process of textuality, as an object perhaps, but as a concrete, 'genuine' artifact of human effort: every text manifests the toil of an individual author, of a living woman who had something to communicate" (344). It is the "living woman" that feminists felt New Critics failed to recognize behind Dickinson's poetry. Rather than reading a "living woman" behind her poetry, New Critics like Allen Tate identified a "dominating spinster," whose poetic artifacts were not the result of a living and breathing woman, but a stereotype of an unmarried nineteenth-century woman.

It is understandable that feminists would also read the New Critics as being uninterested in Dickinson's biography in light of the rhetoric behind Allen Tate's "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," in which he states:

> Poets are mysterious, but a poet, when all is said, is not much more mysterious than a banker. The critics remain spellbound by the technical license of her verse and by the puzzle of her personal life. Personality is a legitimate interest because it is an incurable interest, but legitimate as personal interest only; it will never give up the key to anyone's verse. (85)

In sharp contrast to the New Critics, feminists such as Rich, Gilbert and Gubar, and Bennett would read Dickinson's material, personal life as a key to her poetry just as feminist critics do today. For example, in looking at the relationship between Dickinson and her sister-in-law and life-long friend Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Martha Nell Smith stresses the importance of recovering the significance of this relationship for understanding Dickinson's writing practices. Smith's scholarship productively brings to light the fact that Dickinson "sent Susan substantially more writings than were addressed to any other person...and these nearly 500 writings constitute one or two major corpora that Dickinson bequeathed to the world at her death (the other

being the more than 800 poems in the fascicles)" (52). The large number of texts that Dickinson sent Susan testifies not only to the depth and importance of their friendship, but also that Susan was Emily's most trusted reader and critic, and the "record shows that the two engaged in a literary dialogue that lasted for decades, and the better part of Dickinson's life" (52). Smith uses the material evidence of Susan's papers to show that Dickinson sent Susan, in a spirit of a literary dialogue, what appear to be draft versions of poems that Dickinson would "record in her manuscript books, or 'fascicles,' in ink.....this is especially significant since critics, editors, and biographers have long believed that Emily did not share drafts of her poems with any other contemporary" (52-53).

Were the New Critics as immune to Dickinson's biography as Tate would have his readers believe? As Zofia Burr points out, across the critical spectrum "The quest for the 'true' Emily Dickinson-with its accoutrements of scandalous secrets, editorial censorship or incomprehension, and stunning revelations-has been a very influential way of approaching Dickinson's poetry, making it hard to read except by way of strong biographical narratives about her" (26). Because the New Critics were officially opposed to the use of biography to frame a poet's work, they would make it their critical imperative to rescue Dickinson's poetry from being undervalued, while failing to rescue Dickinson from biographical narratives that were misleading but that did not upset their preferred biographical template of a Romantic, isolated artist.

The rhetoric of rescue that feminists like Rich have employed ("mothballed at Harvard" and "you in your variorum monument") slightly exaggerates Dickinson's perceived misrepresentation by male editors and critics. Interestingly, at the beginning

of her poem, Rich criticizes Higginson for considering Dickinson "Half-cracked," while at the end of the poem, Rich herself refers to Dickinson as "half-cracked" in Dickinson choosing "silence for entertainment." Rich's final assessment of Dickinson as "half-cracked" is made in the same spirit as Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic* who state that Dickinson is both "ironically" and "truly" a "madwoman" trapped in her father's house. While feminists like Rich have critiqued interpretations of Dickinson as "half-cracked," they themselves find Dickinson's portrayal as a "madwoman" a useful and productive label. Dickinson becomes the "epitome of the nineteenth-century woman poet's predicament in an oppressive patriarchal society and in a male-dominated literary tradition" (Mikkelsen 89). In Sylvia N. Mikkelsen's "Emily Dickinson, Two Twentieth-Century 'Sisters' and the Problem of Feminist Aesthetics," she is critical of the practice of imposing feminist readings on Dickinson. Mikkelsen critiques Gilbert and Gubar by drawing on Kristeva's interrogation of a universalist theory of female creativity that made assumptions about the existence of an exclusively feminine identity and language. Mikkelsen critiques feminists of the 70s and 80 like Gilbert and Gubar and their essentializing critical paradigm that "projected onto the poet and her life a formula-like pattern of psychological progression, that is from a state of initial passivity and victimization, through a usually painful transition, to a state which is almost invariably defined in positive terms as a *poetic female selfhood*" (89).

Gilbert and Gubar's rhetoric reflects their belief in the strength of their feminist approach to Dickinson in identifying her specifically as a *woman* poet. To Gilbert and Gubar and other feminists like Suzanne Juhasz, and Adrienne Rich writing in the 70s,

the "key" to Dickinson was found in her identity as a woman. The biggest problem that they determine Dickinson had to solve was not about religion or failed romances but about being a "*woman* poet." Feminists are victorious because behind the text they identify a *woman* who through feminism may be properly understood and whose life and writings may be appropriately translated to the world. However, when feminists attempt to "explain" Dickinson's texts, including her poetry, based on Dickinson's identity as a decidedly *woman* poet, they in a sense limit the reading of her poetry and enclose it within a discourse that is narrowly centered on gender. Feminists are successful or persuasive in their arguments partly because their perspective is valid and applicable; however part of their success rests on the kind of *moral* stance they take in rescuing Dickinson from a patriarchal and oppressive nineteenth century as well as perceived and real paternalistic attitudes towards Dickinson and other woman writers.

In Chapter 2 I quoted at length Robert Penn Warren's fascinating meditation on the elevation of and reverence for the lyric poem. Likening a poem to a monster that cannot be dismembered, he writes "There is only one way to conquer the monster: you must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle. And even then the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, is assimilated into you, and you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it" (19). Although one could write a paper solely on the fascinating rhetoric of Warren's text, I wish to draw our attention to Rich in "Vesuvius at Home" who seems to have taken Warren's advice to heart. In her essay she describes "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" as the poem "which is the real 'onlie begetter' of my thoughts ....a poem I have mused over, repeated to myself taken

into myself over many years" (330). Rich consumes Dickinson as the good New Critic orders, and the result is one of the most sensitive feminist readings of Dickinson to date.

The poem "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (J754) has been a central poem for feminists, a kind of Rorschach test, revealing more about the "interpreter's interests than the undebatable 'truth' of Dickinson's meaning" (Eberwein 204). The poem is also one that is used by Rich and other feminists as evidence of Dickinson's maturation into a state of "poetic female selfhood." Epitomizing her technique of the "omitted center," as Jay Leyda observed in 1960, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" makes no reference to the poem's occasion, setting, or subject. Leyda noted that Dickinson's writings provide the reader with "the riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated..., the deliberate skirting of the obvious" (1:xxi). The poem was central to Adrienne Rich's famous 1976 essay "Vesuvius at Home" and is worth presenting in its entirety:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's Head –
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's

Deep pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must –than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -

(J754/F764)

In her essay Rich describes "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" as a central poem "in understanding Emily Dickinson, and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist, particularly in the 19th-century. It seems likely that the 19th-century woman poet, especially, felt the medium of poetry as dangerous, in ways that the woman novelist did not feel the medium of fiction to be" (Rich 188). The poem is central to Rich in her interest in connecting Dickinson to a tradition of female literature in which women struggled with the split between a publicly acceptable female persona and a private creative and poetic self that was deemed "unacceptable and even monstrous" (Rich 189).

To Rich, the poem is about female poetic ambition. Rich's description of the poem as being central to understanding "ourselves" and to understanding the "woman artist" in the nineteenth century is revealing. Rich in 1964 is trying to work out her own anxieties about being a woman and a poet and thus looks to Dickinson for shared female experience. Interestingly however — as Wendy Martin points out in *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* — the fact that Rich was a mother of three boys and a faculty wife meant that "the circumstances of

her life were less conducive to writing than those of Bradstreet and Dickinson, both of whom had servants" (177). She quotes Rich as saying:

> I did not understand that we — the women of that academic community — as in so many middle-class communities of the period — were expected to fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse. (quoted in Martin 177)

As sensitive and productive as Rich's readings of Dickinson are, Rich projects onto Dickinson her own twentieth-century anxieties about writing that Dickinson may or may not have shared.

With the 1979 publication of Gilbert and Gubar's hugely influential *Madwoman in the Attic*, criticism that would situate Dickinson within a tradition of women's literature was inaugurated. In a curious parallel to the New Critics who were attracted to Dickinson specifically as a *lyric* poet, so too are Gilbert and Gubar interested in Dickinson's great "magnitude of poetic self-creation," which she achieved through pursuing lyric poetry, "a genre that has been traditionally the most Satanically assertive, daring, and therefore precarious of literary modes for women" (Gilbert and Gubar 582). In further strengthening their case for a distinctly female literary tradition, these feminists link Dickinson with writers whom she indeed admired like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Barrett Browning and who, despite their geographical, historical and psychological distance, are united by a "coherence of theme and imagery" such as "enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors....along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia" (Gilbert and

Gubar xi). Gilbert and Gubar interpret Dickinson's reclusion, the wearing of her white dress, and her agoraphobia as characteristic of nineteenth-century women's writing from Maria Edgeworth in *Castle Rackrent* to Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* to Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* and to George Eliot in *Middlemarch*. In these writers Gilbert and Gubar see self-portraits of madwomen in the attics of their novels. With Dickinson they write:

> Emily Dickinson herself became a madwoman—became, as we shall see, both ironically a madwoman (a deliberate impersonation of a madwoman) and truly a madwoman (a helpless agoraphobic, trapped in a room in her father's house). Dickinson's life itself, in other words, became a kind of novel or narrative poem in which, through an extraordinarily complex series of maneuvers, aided by costumes that inevitably came to hand, this inventive poet enacted and eventually resolved both her anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination. (583)

While Rossetti and Barrett Browning were writing about their anxieties about female art "in a series of narratives in which lyric outbursts were safely—that is, unobtrusively—embedded" (Gilbert and Gubar 582), Dickinson works out her own supposed anxieties about being a woman poet through her various poses or the enacting of distinctly female "mysteries." The "mysteries" that Gilbert and Gubar are referring to are biographical mysteries:

> Specifically, the womanly mysteries-as-miracles of Emily Dickinson's life/text fall into five major groups: the mystery of romance (a woman's literary genre); the mystery of renunciation (a woman's duty); the mystery of domesticity (a woman's sphere); the mystery of nature (figuratively speaking, a woman's analog or likeness); and the mystery of *woman's* nature....with astonishing frequency, however, this poet's transformative processes are facilitated not just by literary models but by anti-literary female activities. (28)

Gilbert and Gubar's texts raise many questions, the first being to what degree can feminists literalize aspects of Dickinson's biography to define her poetics and to what

extent can feminists read Dickinson's life as a "kind of novel or narrative poem," a "life/text" in which she consciously "resolved both her anxieties about her art and her anger at female subordination." Another question is, to what degree can we read Dickinson's transformations as necessarily *female* or associated with "women's literature and women depicted in literature, or else associated with women's life and women's place" (Gilbert and Gubar 28)? How are her transformations different from her male predecessors like Keats and Wordsworth, who transformed the ordinary into the sacred according to a romantic sensibility? One thing that we can answer with certainty is the fact the feminists rescue Dickinson from the New Critical legacy by stressing the importance of biography and historical materiality.

In "The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood" Gilbert, building on *Madwoman in the Attic*, defends late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century editors and critics whom she perceived as promoting a mythic and sentimentalized version of Dickinson:

> Mabel Loomis Todd, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and many others were not in fact projecting their own fantasies onto the comparatively neutral (if enigmatic) figure of Emily Dickinson. Rather, as I will suggest, all these observers were responding to a process of self-mythologizing that led Dickinson herself to use all the materials of daily reality, and most especially the details of domesticity, as if they were not facts but metaphors, in order to recreate herself-and-her-life as a single emblematic text....Dickinson structured this life/text around a series of "mysteries" that were distinctly female, deliberately exploring and exploiting the characteristics, even the constraints, of nineteenth-century womanhood so as to transform and transcend them. (22)

Gilbert defends her assertion that Dickinson "led a life of allegory" or enacted mysteries, and argues that rereading of myth and legend surrounding Dickinson made critical sense: "analytic acceptance of the Dickinson Myth may serve the reality of

Dickinson's art better than the contemptuous rejection of legend that has lately become fashionable. For deciphering rather than deconstructing the intricate text of this poet's life, we may come closer to understanding the methods and materials of her actual, literary texts" (22).

What is especially interesting in the above excerpt from "The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill" is Gilbert's wish to "decipher" rather than "deconstruct" the "text" of Dickinson's life. The rhetoric of "deciphering" illustrates that Dickinson's life is like a code that needs to be converted into intelligible language, something that only feminist readings may do. Unlike the New Critics like Taggard who deducted and Tate and Brooks who interpreted and judged, feminists would decipher or translate Dickinson's meaning according to her relationship with and to a tradition of women's writing.

Where Sewall attempts to rescue Dickinson from myth and legend that he felt misrepresented Dickinson as a "person," rather than a "woman," employing the "objective" lens of biographical inquiry, feminists use myth and legend to fit her into their idea of a woman's tradition of writing. Sewall premises his biography on the idea that Dickinson's identity or life is best explained through her relationships with family and friends:

> She can be known as a person not through what she *did* (excluding for the moment her poems and letters as forms of doing) so much as through her relationships with people...Like Jamesian "reflectors," each relationship gives back a phase, or facet, of her character, her personality, and her literary purpose. (12)

In contrast to Sewall, Cynthia Griffin-Wolff would avoid reading Dickinson in terms of her relational identity. In Juhasz's *Naked and Fiery Forms* she discusses a

woman's sense of self in regards to a woman being a poet and laments that women are "Always defined in terms of someone else — someone's daughter, wife, mother — they find their worth, meaning, validity in terms of other people" (2). In Sewall's attempt to get at the "real" Dickinson as opposed to the "mythical" Dickinson, there is the sense that Dickinson disappears from her very own story, his narrative being structured around Dickinson's family and friends. I would argue that Dickinson also runs the risk of disappearing from feminist narratives, particularly Gilbert and Gubar's "madwoman" and "female mysteries" narratives, as well as from Suzanne Juhasz's narrative of "The Double Bind of the Woman Poet." In trying to link Dickinson with a women's tradition, by crowning her a "foremother of a dormant tradition," these critics, like Sewall, paradoxically lose Dickinson in the "fiery mist" of a woman's tradition.

"The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill" like the *Madwoman* text raises many questions. First of all, are the "mysteries" that Dickinson enacts "distinctly female" or can her "mysteries" be accounted for by reading Dickinson within a tradition of Romanticism? Joanne Feit Diel, in *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, discusses how Dickinson both shares and departs from the Anglo-American Romantic tradition. Diel reads Dickinson's departure from Romanticism as originating in gender, in the fact that Dickinson is a woman poet and that her subversion of the Romantic tradition "is not an isolated phenomenon, but a process undertaken by every powerful post-Enlightenment woman poet who achieves a poetry beyond second-rate, who frees a space for her poetic voice" (3). Diel here clearly identifies Dickinson's writing with the idea of a tradition of women's writing. While, like her male

Romantic predecessors, Dickinson partakes in the primary concerns of Romanticism like "the self's relation to nature, the power of the imagination as it confronts death, a heroic questing that leads to a trial of the limits of poetic power—," her awareness of her gender in relation to a male tradition "alters her sense of the burdens of the past" (Diel 7), and ultimately Dickinson subverts the Romantic tradition to pursue romantic themes as a woman poet. Camille Paglia reads Dickinson's poses or self-mythologizing as sexual personae, which she describes as falling into two major modes: "the Sadean and Wordsworthian" (639). According to Suzanne Juhasz, Dickinson's poses as child, woman in white, 'poetess', etc. were "essential to her poetic self-achievement" (584) and enabled Dickinson to transcend the "double-bind" of the woman poet. The "double-bind" of the woman poet means that:

> To be a woman poet in our society is a double-bind situation, one of conflict and strain. For the words "woman" and "poet" denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. Traditionally, the poet is a man, and "poetry" is the poems that men write.... "Women" are, according to society's rules, very different from "poets." A women's identity is not defined by a profession, such as a poet, but by her personal relationships as daughter, sister, wife, mother. Her "life" is family life. (Juhasz 2)

Whether we read Dickinson as solely a private poet and how we interpret her reclusion depend largely on how we define Dickinson's identity as a nineteenth-century woman and our understanding of gender roles in nineteenth-century America.

Shira Wolosky in "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry" is critical of "sequestering Dickinson from public life" and the tendency to read her writings as "hermetically private." She proposes that we acknowledge the limitations of a gendered paradigm that views her work only "through the geographies of public and private" (104). New Critics and feminists like Gilbert and Gubar as well as poet

Adrienne Rich would suggest that Dickinson's reclusion was a conscious life-style choice that allowed her the time and freedom to pursue writing; however, their analysis is based on a "narrowish definition of gender itself" (Wolosky 1). Contemporary critics like Wolosky in "Modest Selves: Dickinson's Critique of American Identity," problematizes the second wave feminist reading of Dickinson's reclusion, pointing out that Dickinson's relation to gender roles and how they frame her behaviour are conflictual. Wolosky states:

> The claim that her reclusion freed her from gendered norms is strongly challenged by the fact that she conformed to these norms in many ways. Her confinement to domestic space and avoidance of public appearance exactly accord with the ideology of the separate spheres. And yet, this is done in a way that carries convention to an extreme explosiveness....If we sum up nineteenth-century female norms under the rubric of modesty, Dickinson's is modesty with a vengeance. Her reclusion is a highly contradictory act of aggressive compliance. Hers is a retreat which is display, a retraction which is a challenge, a withdrawal which is assaultive, and, not in the least, a silence which is loud and potently articulate. (1)

Wolosky reads Dickinson's reclusion as a far more complex affair than feminists or the New Critics allow. While the second wave feminists read Dickinson's reclusion as evidence of a necessary withdrawal from an oppressive patriarchal society in order to pursue her writing, the New Critics, in a similar vein, would read Dickinson's reclusion as evidence of a Romantic, self-isolated poet dedicated to lyric poetry.

In the critics' customary search for some "explanation" or theory behind the genesis of Dickinson's unique poetic voice and strikingly original style, Dickinson has been linked with Transcendentalism and American Romanticism prior to the feminist stirring of a "dormant" tradition of women's literature (Juhasz 7). In his preface to

Poems by Emily Dickinson (1890), Higginson, linking Dickinson with Emerson, would refer to Dickinson's verses as:

> 'the Poetry of the Portfolio,'— something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind. Such verse must inevitably forfeit whatever advantage lies in the discipline of public criticism and the enforced conformity to accepted ways....and though curiously indifferent to all conventional rules, had yet a rigorous literary standard of her own, and often altered a word many times to suit an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness. (42)

Dickinson's originality, the origin of her *genius*, is partly explained by linking her to Emerson and his idea of the "Poetry of the Portfolio." In his preface, Higginson also estimates that the "thoughtful reader" will liken Dickinson to William Blake for sharing "—flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power..." (43). Camille Paglia also connects Dickinson, "the greatest of women poets," with Blake, Wordsworth, and Sade. According to Paglia conventional feminist critiques of Dickinson:

> see her hemmed in on all sides by respectability and paternalism, impediments to her genius….. It is a sentimental error to think Emily Dickinson the victim of male obstructionism. Without her struggle with God and the Father, there would have been no poetry. (652-653)

Paglia accounts for Dickinson's genius by making the case that Dickinson as a Romantic poet benefits from her "abnormal will" and the "enormous disparity between that will and the feminine social persona to which she fell at birth" (653). She does not wish to rescue Dickinson from patriarchy but rather suggests that the oppressiveness of a patriarchal society was what in part inspired Dickinson to write.

Dickinson provides the reader with several clues that suggest her attempt to escape the restrictions of identity or "authorship" based on gender, but interestingly, Dickinson's escape from gender is not just about escaping female gender identity. Dickinson wishes to escape gender altogether in some cases, which I feel is ignored by feminists reading Dickinson within a tradition of women's writing in their placement of gender at the heart of their critical study. For example, in Marietta Messmer's study of Dickinson's epistolary relationship with Higginson, she has observed two important gestures on Dickinson's part that suggest her signaling to Higginson that:

> "being a woman" does not necessarily mean "speaking in a woman's voice": she reduces her interaction with him to an exclusively textual environment, and within this textual environment, she attempts to erase any traces of her culturally constructed, gendered body. (Messmer 117)

Dickinson's first letter to Higginson (L260) was unsigned; rather, in a separate envelope she enclosed her calling card which read "Emily E. Dickinson," delaying the identity of her gender in Higginson's reading process. Dickinson wished to enter into a literary dialogue with Higginson in which she would be judged as neither a man nor a woman but primarily as an ungendered author. Dickinson manages to avoid a face-to-face meeting with Higginson for nearly eight years and she never sends him a photograph of herself, instead coyly stating in her letter: "Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my eyes, like the sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves—Would this do just as well?" (L268). She also uses gender-ambivalent forms of signature, "delimiting her identity to that of poet and writer, stripping it of any sociocultural gender ascriptions" (Messmer 116). In her entire epistolary relationship with Higginson she uses her first name only once. Messmer points out that "in every

other instance, she instead adopts an ungendered relational identity ('Your scholar,' 'Your friend'), appropriates her father's signature ('E. Dickinson'), signs 'Dickinson,' 'D,' or omits a signature altogether (replacing it by a dash)" (120). What Dickinson's epistolary relationship with Higginson reveals is a woman poet in the nineteenth century who wishes to escape the limitations of a gendered identity and be judged as an "author" only. I feel this behavior on Dickinson's part illustrates a desire to disassociate herself from the nineteenth-century idea of a "poetess," or from other American women writers who were both popular and successful in her day.

While Gilbert and Gubar connect Dickinson with British women writers, Dickinson is not connected with her contemporary American women writers by feminists in the late 70s and early 80s in part because of a lack of familiarity with the wide range and scope of writings by women in nineteenth-century America, but also, as Joanne Dobson points out, because of the assumption that only great writers are significant in literature, "that greatness is always transcendent of its culture, and that great writers should be attracted only to greatness" (135). Today there are feminist literary scholars such as Dobson, Cheryl Walker, and Paula Bernat Bennett who study Dickinson in relation to her American women writer contemporaries like Julia Ward Howe, Rose Terry Cooke and Sarah Piatt, just to name a few. By studying Dickinson in relation to her contemporaries, we witness how Dickinson, while never indicating that she saw herself as belonging to a literary community shared with these women, did share some of their poetic and thematic concerns.

Paula Bernat Bennett, in "Emily Dickinson and her American Women Poet Peers," questions why feminists from the 1970s onward, while pushing Dickinson to

"the front ranks of major American authors" (215), have ignored her peers. Bennett acknowledges the work of Cheryl Walker and Joanne Dobson as well as her own work in the 1990s in reading Dickinson in the context of other nineteenth-century American poets, but questions whether their work went far enough in light of their initial tendency to study Dickinson in relation to her peers for the sole purpose of proving Dickinson's superiority and "ability to transcend the limits of time, place and gender" (215). Bennett, in revisiting her own work, acknowledges how her reading of Dickinson has changed since 1990 when she wrote: "At a period when, it seems, virtually every woman poet in the United States failed to rise above the limitations imposed on women's poetry by women's complicity in a system that oppressed them, Emily Dickinson sought 'taller feet'" (qtd. in Bennett 215). Bennett ten years later would, in her own words, "shudder" at this assertion and question whether the treatment of Dickinson as an anomaly was productive for either Dickinson Studies or for the study of other nineteenth-century American women. Bennett states that "the assumption that nineteenth-century American women poets ex-Dickinson never rose above their 'complicity in a system that oppressed them' speaks more to our own projections onto 'Victorian' women/society than it does to the actual circumstances under which these women wrote" (216). The projections Bennett refers to are the projections of first and second wave feminists. Bennett goes on to use the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe and other antebellum sentimentalists who have "demonstrated that for many women the apparent 'restraints' of nineteenth-century gender ideology, or 'domestic ideology, ' as it is called, were in themselves sources of power not to be dismissed lightly" (216).

Bennett's historical and cultural analysis of Dickinson in relation to her American women poet peers essentially restores Dickinson to a vision of the nineteenth-century literary climate for women that is neither oppressive nor negatively associated with sentimentalism. Dickinson, at the millenium, is restored to her time and place after having been rescued by New Critics and feminists who imagined a very different nineteenth-century literary clime and society.

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?" is an example of a poem that has solicited completely different readings, contingent upon the way we read Dickinson in her nineteenth-century context and how much importance we place on gender. Domhnall Mitchell calls into question readings of the poem that identify Dickinson as sympathizing with a marginal or oppressed figure.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody – Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary — to be — somebody!
How public — like a frog —
To tell one's name the livelong June —
To an admiring Bog!

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us--don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

(J288/F260)

In "Emily Dickinson and Class," Mitchell questions Dickinson's identification with the oppressed by pointing to her social mobility, class consciousness, and political leanings. Mitchell is critical of what he calls "liberal" readings of the poem and suggests that "Rather than expressing sympathy for the disenfranchised, the speaker expresses both anxiety toward and contempt for the democratic system that gives 'bog-trotters,' a term that was associated derogatively with the Irish, access to political and cultural influence" (197). The "Nobody" that Mitchell identifies is not an oppressed nineteenth-century woman but the description of an upper class person who doesn't need to work at being a "somebody." A "somebody" is a person who achieves his or her fame through a democratic system that allows for social mobility and self–promotion. Mitchell points out that "one of the reasons forwarded for Dickinson's alleged indifference to political and economic issues lies less with her class than with her gender" (194). Mitchell argues that the commonly held assumption that Dickinson's gender prevented her from writing about the civil war or "economic and ethnic parity" is false; indeed, these subjects "were perfectly respectable and even popular subjects for women writers" (194). Mitchell challenges the idea that traditional nineteenth-century gender roles prevented Dickinson from writing about more political or socially-minded issues. It is partly Dickinson's class, in Mitchell's analysis, that accounts for Dickinson's primary interest in lyric poetry rather than reform writing. Mitchell believes that a woman like Dickinson, despite living in a patriarchal society, had the freedom to choose what form of writing she wished to pursue. Interested in reading Dickinson through a lens of class and cultural history, Mitchell provides an image of Dickinson as a nineteenth-century woman in no need of

rescue. Instead of rescuing Dickinson from oppressive nineteenth-century society, he restores Dickinson to her time and place and shows how her place was secured by social and economic privilege. Mitchell also illustrates how, by placing gender at the center of our concerns about Dickinson, we limit our understanding of many of her poems.

There seems to be a kind of paradox in feminist readings of Dickinson. While on the one hand they strive to point out that Dickinson resisted patriarchy with her experimental poetics and her life-style choices that challenged nineteenth-century gender roles and highlight her determination to solve the problem of being a *woman* poet, they are dependant on her being a victim of a patriarchal society in order to fit her into a tradition of women's literature. Feminists become the *friend* they deem Dickinson *needs* without questioning whether Dickinson is in *need* of rescue. In the 70s, in the midst of feminists' search-and-rescue efforts aimed at bringing to light American nineteenth-century woman writers and poets, Dickinson, with her canonical status within the American poetry canon well-established, in actuality becomes the friend *feminists* need.

She is used strategically by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar as well as by Suzanne Juhasz as a "great woman poet to serve as foremother to a dormant tradition" (Juhasz 7). I question whether Dickinson would be comfortable with her posthumous identity as a "foremother" of a "dormant tradition" in light of her apparent ambivalence about motherhood and the lack of evidence that Dickinson saw herself as part of a woman's tradition of writing, despite her love and admiration of the great nineteenth-century English women writers like Barrett Browning, George Eliot,

George Sand and the Brontës. Regarding motherhood, as Camille Paglia interestingly points out, when Dickinson was "Habitually dressed in white, she was always a nun or bride, never a mother" (659). To Higginson she confided, "I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none" (L405). Although we should resist the literalizing instinct in reading too much into Dickinson's comments about her absent Mother, there is evidence in her letters and in her unmarried status, as well as in the absence of mothers from her poems, that Dickinson was in some way ambivalent about motherhood. In reading Dickinson within a tradition of women's writing, feminists impose an identity upon Dickinson, that of "foremother," that seems somehow ill-fitted to a poet whose only photographic representation portrays a young teenage girl in a dress that, in its tightness and shortness of sleeves, forever fixes her in a girlish rather than womanish pose.

Conclusion:

No more Talk

Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes (excerpt)

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything —
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,
how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst
that Sabbath afternoon,
nothing but a carriage passing the house,
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
when I undid the very top
hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that reason is a plank,
that life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.

Billy Collins, 1998

In *The Feminization of American Culture*, a book which explores the sentimentalism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, Ann Douglas meditates on the *meaning* of Harriet Beecher Stowe's unforgettable character Little Eva, and her highly sentimentalized premature death of consumption. Regarding Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Douglas states:

> For Little Eva gains her force not through what she does, not even through what she is, but what she does and is to us, the readers...Little Eva is a creature not only of her author's imagination but of her reader's fantasy; her life stems from our acceptance of her and our involvement with her.....Little Eva's virtue lies partly in her femininity.... (4)

There is a parallel between this fictional portrait of a young southern girl and Emily Dickinson. Unlike Little Eva, Dickinson did do something, in her prolific output of poetry and letters throughout her lifetime. Like Little Eva, however, she gains a great part of her force despite what she did, that is, despite what she wrote. She is a creature of many an author's and reader's imagination and her virtue (or more precisely, her 'value') lies partly in her femininity. In "Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," it is precisely Dickinson's fetishized nineteenth-century Victorian femininity that excites the imagination of contemporary American poet Billy Collins. In his poem, he navigates icy Victorian waters, challenged by "The complexity of women's undergarments in nineteenth-century America." He sails "toward the iceberg of her nakedness," like a "polar explorer," rescuing Dickinson from stereotypical Victorian repression. The poem also pays homage to Dickinson by cleverly interweaving some of her most famous imagery and symbolism with Collins's own lines, achieving a kind of artistic union that nicely parallels the sexual union that is being fantasized.

Collins is refreshingly frank about his desire to 'undress' Dickinson. The poem is a fantasy about the artistic and physical union between two poets, a fantasy that many twentieth- and twenty-first century critics have shared in ways both literal and figurative. The desire to 'undress' Dickinson through biographical, historical, and cultural inquiry is more than just about trying to *better* understand her poetry; it is about the dynamics of critical and readerly desire. As Robert McClure Smith writes:

> Dickinson's critical fashionability since the 1970s, her persistent academic popularity, is a direct consequence of the capacity of her poems to be continually made over, or fashioned, into a new, more contemporary image reflective of the recent critical theory that seeks to analyze them. (*Seductions* 148)

In the last 15 years Dickinson Studies has been characterized by the desire of textual critics to return to Dickinson's primal scene of writing by focusing on the textual body of her fascicles.

In Marta L. Werner's *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*, she creates an "experimental" edition of Dickinson's writing that takes as its subject 40 pencil drafts that were composed after the fascicle production that spanned the time between 1858 and 1864. She explains that the edition is about "undoing" in order to recover and rediscover "the spectacular complexity of the textual situation circa 1870, which has been all but erased by the editorial interventions and print conventions of the present century" (Werner 1). Werner's *Open Folios*, published in 1995, laid the groundwork for another project of which she is an associate editor called *Radical Scatters* (1999-2007). Produced by University of Michigan Press, *Radical Scatters* is an electronic archive of 82 documents carrying fragmentary texts written by Dickinson between c. 1870 and 1886, as well as 54

poems, letters, and other writings with direct links to the fragments. Werner uses computer technology to conceive of and to develop an alternative model of presenting Dickinson's writings, a new paradigm that allows scholars to work with Dickinson's texts in unedited form and to draw on them in a nonlinear manner, thereby undoing the nineteenth- and twentieth-century paradigms that edited Dickinson with an attempt at linearity, chronology and authority. Werner offers readers a whole new way of reading Dickinson: "Every reader is a bibliographer-poet finding his or her own way toward the future by striking out in a different direction through the past. Every reading illuminates the impossibility of a perfect return to a scene of writing, circa 1870" (6). Werner looks at the initial editorial efforts of Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W. Higginson as well as those of Thomas H. Johnson and R.W. Franklin and acknowledges their valuable contributions to Dickinson scholarship but at the same time points to their limitations in giving us or confining us to a poet who "refused the limitations of a print existence."

On another front, in the midst of late twentieth-century contests over how best to present Dickinson's manuscript materials to readers and to honor the opaque authorial intentions of Dickinson enters William H. Shurr. His attempted contribution to the field of Dickinson Studies is curious for he falls into neither of the editorial camps that Erkkila distinguishes between. In an attempt to rescue Dickinson and her "poetic genius," as well as to crown his literary career with the publication of *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1993), Shurr has mined Dickinson's letters for new poems, "shutting" Dickinson up in "poetry" rather than "prose." On the jacket of his book is quoted, "This daring book presents a stunning new literary discovery—nearly five

hundred new Dickinson poems....expanding the canon of Dickinson's known poems by almost one-third and making a major addition to the study of American literature." Rather than making a major addition to the study of American literature, Shurr managed to create a major controversy in the field. Feeding on the public's fascination with Dickinson and the aura of mystery that still enshrouds her in popular culture, Shurr "excavates" an already edited text. Instead of working directly from Dickinson's manuscripts, as poet-scholars like Susan Howe and Marta Werner, and textual critics and editors like Jerome McGann and Martha Nell Smith have done, he works from Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Van Wagenen Ward's three-volume publication, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958).

Shurr tells readers that he finds it questionable whether "the letters—written to specific individuals concerned with the minutiae of everyday life—are really suitable context for these poems. They seem to transcend such limiting contexts. It is only when they are isolated and presented as free-standing poems that we can focus on them as the works of art that they are" (10). Shurr believes that the borders between Dickinson's poetry and prose and between her poems and their contexts are "moveable;" therefore he feels justified in removing her poetry from the prose and from the context of her letters that were specifically addressed to her many correspondents. Removed from their contexts he allows Dickinson's poems to transcend the borders of the epistolary form. Shurr rather heroically states that it is his intention to "recover" poems and place them within "Dickinson's canon," or rather the canon of American poetry.

Marietta Messmer sees Shurr's efforts to prevent the poems from "being buried beneath the artistically 'inferior' epistolary context....as representative of the majority of twentieth century critics who, influenced by such editorial differentiations, also draw formal and functional distinctions between Dickinson's 'poems' and her 'letters'"(9). Messmer points out that throughout the history of the letters' critical reception they have mainly been regarded as archival sources useful for biographical study. Messmer's rescue mission then, found in her text *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*, is centered upon rescuing Dickinson (or rather, her letters) from always being considered secondary in importance and artistic merit to her poetry.

The rhetoric of rescuing Dickinson continues and will continue as long as Dickinson, like little Eva, continues to *do* something to her readers and critics. It has been my goal to have illustrated that *what we talk about when we talk about Dickinson* is not really 'Dickinson,' but rather our idea of what an author or a poet is and how they communicate with us. After all this talk about Dickinson, whom I feel at this moment is eerily absent, having slipped out the back door of her own story, I want more than ever to sit down and in something akin to a New Critical act attend to her poems, attend to her words on the page, for as many critics have said before, it is only here that we will find the girl who we are "half in love with" (MacLeish 263).

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960.

Dickinson, Emily. 1998. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 Vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999.

Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971.

Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson. Eds. Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith. Ashfield Mass.: Paris Press, 1998.

Secondary Sources

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Forth Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1981.

Alfrey, Shawn. "The Function of Dickinson at the Present Time." In *The Emily Dickinson Journal*. Baltimore: 11.1 (2002): 9-20.

Barker, Wendy. "Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 77-90.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. 1466-1470.

Benfey, Christopher. "Emily Dickinson and the American South." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 30-50.

Bennett, Paula. *My Life A Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Bennett, Paula Bernat. "Emily Dickinson and Her American Women Poet Peers." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 215-35.

Blackmur, R. P. "Emily Dickinson's Notation." Clarke 3: 266-275.

Blackmur, R. P. "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact." Clarke 3:103-121.

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry*. 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

Bushell, Sally. "Meaning in Dickinson's Manuscripts: Intending the Unintentional." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*. Baltimore: 14.1 (2005): 24-61.

Burr, Zofia. *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou.* Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Cameron, Sharon. *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Carlisle, Andrea. "Emily Dickinson's To-Do List." Coghill 9.

Chekhov, Anton. "About Love." *The Portable Chekhov*. New York: Viking Press, 1960.

Clarke, Graham, ed. *Emily Dickinson: Critical Assessments*. 4 Vols. Robertsbridge, East Sussex: Helm Information, 2002.

Coghill, Sheila and Thom Tammaro, eds. *Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000.

Collins, Billy. "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes." Coghill 13-14.

Crane, Hart. "To Emily Dickinson." Coghill 16.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971.

Dickie, Margaret. "Emily Dickinson in History and Literary History." *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization*. Eds. Joyce W. Warren and Margaret Dickie. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 2000.

Diel, Joanne Feit. *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Dobson, Joanne. *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York : Knopf, 1978.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Ellis, David. *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Erkkila, Betsy. "Dickinson and Rich: Toward a Theory of Female Poetic Influence." Clarke 4:243-258.

---. "Dickinson and the Art of Politics." Pollak, *Historical* 133-174.

---. "The Emily Dickinson Wars." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 11-29.

---. *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History and Discord.* New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Farr, Judith. *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2004.

Ferlazzo, Paul J. *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson.* Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1984.

Fischer, Michael. "The New Criticism in the New Historicism: The Recent Work of Jerome J. McGann." Spurlin 321-332.

Fuss, Diana. *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them.* New York: Routledge, 2004.

Gailey, Amanda. "How anthologists made Emily Dickinson a Tolerable American Woman Writer." In *The Emily Dickinson Journal.* Baltimore: 14.1 (2005): 67-73.

Gilbert, Sandra M. "The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson and the Mysteries of Womanhood." Clarke 4:99-120.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

Grabher, Gudrun M. and Martina Antretter, eds. *Emily Dickinson at Home: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Emily Dickinson International Society.* Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001.

Graff, Gerald. "Who Killed Criticism?" Spurlin 101-124.

Griffin-Wolff, Cynthia. *Emily Dickinson.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars are Laid Away in Books.* New York: Random House, 2001.

Heginbotham, Elson Eleanor. *Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson: Dwelling in Possibilities.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003.

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "An Open Portfolio." Clarke 2:35-41.

---. "Preface to *Poems by Emily Dickinson.*" Clarke 2:42-3.

Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.

Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.

Juhasz, Suzanne. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

Kinkead-Weekes, Mark. "Writing Lives Forwards." In *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St.Clair. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 235-52.

Kolodny, Annette. "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism." Spurlin 131-160.

Leyda, Jay. *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. N.p.: Anchor Books, 1970.

Loeffelholz, Mary. *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Lukacher, Ned. *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1986.

MacLeish, Archibald. "The Private World." Clarke 2 : 257- 268.

Martin, Wendy. *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.

---, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

Matthiessen, F. O. "The Private Poet: Emily Dickinson." Clarke 3:152-161.

McClure Smith, Robert. "Dickinson and the Masochistic Aesthetic. " *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2 (1998): 1-21.

---. *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*. Tucaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1996.

Messmer, Marietta. *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2001.

Mikkelsen, Sylvia N. "Emily Dickinson, Two Twentieth-Century 'Sisters' and the Problem of Feminist Aesthetics." Grabher 89-102.

Miller, Cristanne. "The Sound of Shifting Paradigms, or Hearing Dickinson in the Twenty-First Century." Pollak, *Historical* 210-234.

Mitchell, Domhnall. "Emily Dickinson and Class." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 191-214.

Morse, Jonathan. "Memory, Desire, and the Need for Biography: The Case of Emily Dickinson." *The Georgia Review* 35.2 (1981): 259-72.

Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Petrino, Elizabeth. *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998.

Pollak, Vivian R. "The Birth of Consciousness: The Consciousness of Exclusion." Clarke 4:220-242.

---. *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1984.

---, ed. *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

Pollitt, Josphine. "The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson." Clarke 1:267-432.

Ransom, John Crowe. "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored." Clarke 2:287-299.

Reynolds, David S. "Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 167-190.

Rich, Adrienne. "I am in Danger – Sir -." Coghill 85.

---. "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." Clarke 2:319-338.

Sandweiss, Martha A. "The Poet's Resonance." *Language as Object: Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Art*. Susan Danly, ed. Amherst, Mass.: Mead Art Museum, 1997. 10-11.

Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson: Volume I*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

---. *The Life of Emily Dickinson: Volume II*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

Shurr, William H. *New poems of Emily Dickinson*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Silver, Brenda R. *Virginia Woolf Icon*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.

Smith, Martha Nell. "Susan and Emily Dickinson: Their Lives, in Letters." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 51-73.

Spurlin, William J. and Michael Fischer, eds. *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*. New York: Garland, 1995.

St. Armand, Barton Levi. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.

St. Clair, William. "The Biographer as Archaeologist." In *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St.Clair. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 219-234.

Taggard, Genevieve. "The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson." Clarke 1:69-266.

Tate, Allen. "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson." Clarke 2:232-243.

Walker, Cheryl. "Dickinson in Context: Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets." Pollak, *Historical* 175-200.

Walter, James. "The Solace of Doubt? Biographical Methodology after the Short Twentieth Century." In *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St.Clair. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 321-35.

Ward, A.C. "A Major American Poet." Clarke 3:79-85.

Warren, Robert Penn. "Pure and Impure Poetry." Spurlin 19-44.

Wellek, Rene. "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra." Spurlin 55-72.

Werner, Marta. *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

Whicher, George F. "Emily Dickinson Among the Victorians." Clarke 3:162-174.

---. *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*. Philadelphia: Dufour, 1952.

White, Fred D. "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas." Martin, *Cambridge Companion* 91-106.

Winters, Yvor. "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgements." Clarke 2:245-256.

---. "To Emily Dickinson." Coghill 100.

Wolosky, Shira. "Modest Selves: Dickinson's Critique of American Identity." Grabher 1-11.

---. "Public and Private in Dickinson's War Poetry." Pollak, *Historical* 103-131.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Grafton, 1977.

Young, R.V. *At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education.* Wilmington, Deleware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999.