

## Desiring Dickinson

“Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied—.” Emily Dickinson preemptively pinned the impossibility inherent in mimesis that would later plague her biographers: there are many ways to know someone, but none complete. A portrait is a contrivance, an imprint of its maker’s desires met with historical knowledge, and its gaps. How does one capture something as ephemeral as countenance? How does one know something as elusive as demeanor? The writing of Emily Dickinson and her archive have together generated more writing, as well as endowed heightened importance to her possessions, her home. Each withholds as much as it presents, and her absence calls desire to duty.

But it is not that Emily Dickinson eludes biography in a way that anyone might. She actively resisted: she was exclusive about who she chose to meet in person, often hiding when a stranger—or even longtime neighbors—entered her home; she refused to publish but a handful of poems; she instructed her sister to burn all of her papers after her death (including her poems); and she avoided photographic documentation. She wrote that her resistance to being photographed “often alarms father. He says death might occur, and he has moulds of all the rest, but has no mould of me.” While her father was afraid that she would leave behind no image if she died, Emily flouted his concern. She was not a nostalgic, though she has made obsessive nostalgics out of those her writing has transfixed.

According to Sean Ross Meehan, photography became a means of formulating authorial identity for 19<sup>th</sup> century writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Douglass. But Dickinson is notable in her expressed refusal to articulate identity visually. She preferred to identify with the refusal itself. Emily Dickinson once wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that, “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.” Her words are her document.

But despite her claim that she had no portrait, there has existed to our knowledge for one hundred and twenty five years a single daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson. She is seventeen. She smiles, and yet she does not. Her eyes appear both vacant and alluring. Her posture is both upright and relaxed. Her hair is parted down the middle, and gathered out of sight. She holds flowers in her hand, but they are out of focus. Her dress is plain and dark. As a viewer, I am eager to find a clue, some revealing quality: a punctum. I seek to be pierced, but the image conceals as much as it appears to offer. She herself disliked the image, and her family found little likeness to the embodied Emily they knew. It is photographic evidence at its crudest: simple proof of her being. Perhaps she sat for a very long time.

Little in her archive reveals itself entirely. Her poems are enigmatic. The emptiness of her house, the light that blanches the hallway to her room lead us not to evidence, but to a lyrical netherworld. Her herbarium exhibits an aesthetic, rather than scientific, appreciation of the shapes and colors of the flowers she pressed. Flowers become alien eyes on a tear-shaped head, or the rough fluff of another is like the unbrushed, matted hair of a child. Many are mislabeled, some partly disintegrated, but the flowers themselves are like squashed ghosts that remember her touch, which we cannot.

But because one photograph is not enough for the archivistic drive, there have surfaced numerous frauds, improperly attributed. The first image that gained notoriety as a possible second likeness is a print made from a glass negative, purchased from a man renowned for forgery. The woman in the image has harsh, thick eyebrows that chart her broad face. She wears earrings, her hair begins high on her forehead, and she almost smiles. At first glance, she looks nothing like the teenager in the daguerreotype we have come to know. She lacks the awkward, bird-like qualities of Emily’s stature—her gooseneck, her egg-shaped head. At second glance, her lips and nose bear a resemblance, but as noted by Joe Nickell, “a mere resemblance between

two people does not constitute proof of identity.” On the back of the print, written in pencil, is the name “Emily Dickenson.” Aside from the misspelling of her last name, the image lacked provenance and the forensic anthropologist that Nickell hired concluded that “...all of the features cannot be simultaneously superimposed; therefore the evidence does NOT corroborate the hypothesis that the photographs are of the same individual.”

The subsequent image that gained traction, known as the Gura photograph, shows a doe-eyed, round-faced woman with a petite frame. Her expression is serious and dull. Looking at the image, I feel both certain that it cannot be her as well as desperate to have this confirmed. This woman has laid all of her cards on the table. In response to a forensic anthropologist’s lazy assertion that “The fit is quite good . . . actually pretty impressive and perhaps makes the case well enough,” refutations of the image pointed out obvious differences in the chin, mouth, nose, eyes, and hair of the two women. Features such as these are hereditary, and because the authenticated image we have of Dickinson was taken of her as a late teenager, her bone structure would not have altered greatly as she aged. The cleft of her chin would not flatten, the broadness of her nose would not shrink. And, too, I believe the aliveness that animated her eyes, the intelligent refusal that propagates our curiosity would not have dissipated.

Just recently, another possible likeness has been discovered, still contentious, but perhaps at least with evidence. In this second image, “Dickinson” sits with her arm around a woman decided to be Kate Scott Turner, a woman whom biographer Rebecca Patterson had argued in 1951 was Emily Dickinson’s lover. “Dickinson” sits patiently. Her nose is broad, her eyes large, imploring, and her hair parted at the middle. Her lips are separated slightly, their corners upturned quietly, and with cunning. An ophthalmologist concluded, “I believe strongly that these are the same people.” This statement strikes me primarily for the use of the word “believe.”

Whether this image is ever authenticated, I like to believe that this is Emily Dickinson, too—finally an adult, with a commanding, yet gentle, stature. Here, she has strength and confidence. She is no longer a hesitant child. Despite the affirmation that the other woman is Kate Turner, a known friend of Dickinson’s, and despite possible corroboration of “Dickinson’s” dress pattern with swatches of fabric associated with the Dickinson Estate, despite the similarity of the style of dress worn by “Dickinson” in this photograph with Dickinson as a teenager, I cannot help but wonder, *What is it that we hope to find? What would it mean for it to be authentically her?* It is not simply a matter of whether the image can be linked indexically to Emily Dickinson, but it is also a matter of her intimacies, and whether, as Rebecca Patterson once affirmed, Emily Dickinson loved women as well as men.

What excites me about Dickinson and her archive is that it all fundamentally evades and exudes: she offers so much, and yet so little. Her archive teases. Her writing, her image, her home all open onto an imaginative play-space. And I like to believe that this is Emily Dickinson because the image captures the one thing we might be certain of: her resistance toward being captured, a quiet defiance (or perhaps emblem) of the basic property of the photographic apparatus. It is her, but it is not. The other two images, simply, were not.