

Emily Dickinson
The Gorgeous Nothings

Marta Werner

Jen Bervin

with a Preface by Susan Howe

CHRISTINE BURGIN / NEW DIRECTIONS

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Studies in Scale

An Introduction by Jen Bervin

The Gorgeous Nothings is an excerpt from Emily Dickinson's manuscript A 821. In choosing it as the title for this project, I was thinking of Dickinson's own definition for *nothing* in a letter: "By homely | gifts and | hindered Words the human | heart is told of nothing – 'Nothing' is | the force that renovates | the World –"¹ and her definition for *no*: "the wildest | word we consign | to Language."² These "gorgeous nothings" are *that* kind of nothing.

These manuscripts are sometimes still referred to as "scraps" within Dickinson scholarship. Rather, one might think of them as the sort of "small fabric" Dickinson writes of in one corner of the large envelope interior, A 636 / 636a: "Excuse | Emily and | her Atoms | The North | Star is | of small | fabric but it | implies | much | presides | yet."³ The writing is small in relation to the compositional space, floating in its firmament. This poem exemplifies Dickinson's relationship to scale so perfectly. When we say *small*, we often mean less. When Dickinson says *small*, she means fabric, Atoms, the North Star.

The concept of the "atom" emerges in ancient Greek philosophy as the idea of "the smallest hypothetical body." At the outset of the nineteenth century, modern atomic theory recasts the atom in chemical terms.⁴ In 1830 Emily Dickinson is born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She is thirty-five years old when the Civil War ends and Johann Josef Loschmidt first measures the size of a molecule of air. In the range of philosophic, scientific, and popular definitions for *atom* in the *OED*, we also find a dust mote, the smallest medieval measure of time, "the twinkling of an eye," and this apt, obsolete meaning too: "At home."⁵

This enigmatic poet who signs letters "Jumbo" or "Your Rascal" or "Your Scholar" is petite by physical standards, but vast by all others. "My little Force explodes –"⁶ she writes to her future editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862, during a stretch when she is writing on average three hundred poems a year. Emily Dickinson, one of the greatest American poets, wrote approximately 1,800 distinct poems within 2,357 poem drafts and at least 1,150 letters and prose fragments—a total of 3,507 pieces before her death at the age of fifty-five.⁷ On the

triangular flap of the envelope seal A 252, we find this fleeting message inscribed in lines winnowing down to a single word at the tip: “In this short Life | that only [merely] lasts an hour | How much – how | little – is | within our | power.”

Dickinson’s writing materials might best be described as epistolary. Everything she wrote—poems, letters, and drafts, in fascicles, on folios, individual sheets, envelopes, and fragments—was predominantly composed on plain, machine-made stationery.⁸ “Preserve the backs of old letters to write upon,” wrote Lydia Maria Child in *The Frugal Housewife*, a book Dickinson’s father obtained for her mother when Emily was born. It opens: “The true economy of housekeeping is simply the art of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing is lost. I mean fragments of *time* as well as *materials*.”⁹ Dickinson’s envelope writings convey a sense of New England thrift and her relationship to the larger household economy of paper, but they also disclose private spaces within that household: the line “we should respect | the seals of | others –” inscribed next to the gummed seal of A 842 resounds.

Dickinson’s poems and correspondence attest to the considerable care she gave to the ritual act of opening a letter. These envelopes have been opened well beyond the point needed to merely extract a letter; they have been torn, cut, and opened out completely flat, rendered into new shapes. To understand how forcefully Dickinson is manipulating the form of the page itself, take a simple household envelope and see how many of these forms you can re-create. You will quickly find that what looks simple, simply is not. There is not one instance here of an envelope reopened out into its die-cut shape. Look with care: what may look like a whole envelope is only one face of it, slit open. Where do those cuts fall and what shape do they prefigure when the space is opened out? How are some cut edges so surgically clean? At Amherst College Library, Margaret Dakin has acquired what is believed to be Emily Dickinson’s lap desk; its painted wooden surface is positively riddled with myriad fine cuts. Though the written compositions may show considerable speed of thought and hand, Dickinson was

not blindly grabbing scraps in a rush of inspiration, as is most often supposed, but rather reaching for writing surfaces that were most likely collected and cut in advance, prepared for the velocity of mind.

When Dickinson approached her compositional space to write, she was reading and responding to her materials, angling the page to write in concert with the light rule and laid lines in the paper, using internal surface divisions, such as overlapping planes of paper, to compose in a number of directional fields. Sometimes Dickinson's writing fills the space of the envelope like water in a vessel or funnels into the triangular shape of the flap. Often she invents columns, typically two, to further divide the space, demonstrating a propensity to break poem lines shorter and shorter. She draws additional line segments or arcs to further divide the compositional space. One would think that such a space would feel carved up, crammed, but it doesn't. The page feels bigger yet, as if there has been an *insertion* of space.¹⁰

"These manuscripts should be understood as visual productions," writes Susan Howe in *The Birth-mark*.¹¹

In assembling *The Gorgeous Nothings* we were guided by this directive and specifically selected work that foregrounds Dickinson's experiments with visual form and variants on the page. We have favored this understanding in our presentation of manuscript facsimiles; each is reproduced actual size, front and back, accompanied by a transcription. This gathering of manuscripts presents all the works composed on envelopes or postal wrappers that Marta Werner has been able to trace to date. The envelope writings are not a series or discrete body of works. Each envelope has its own complex constellation of affiliations with manuscript drafts one can trace through sources in the Directory (page 243). These envelopes, spanning the years 1864 through 1886, are culled from 1,414 contemporaneous poem drafts and 887 letter drafts.¹²

We often gauge a writer's intentions by her published work, or by work she submitted for publication during her lifetime, but Dickinson offers no such certainties. Dickinson rejected print publication of her poems. In a letter to Higginson, she explains: "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' – that being foreign to my thought as Firmament to Fin. 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–." ¹³ Yet she was not secretive about the fact that she was writing poems;

she sent more than three hundred poems to recipients in letters—letters that were often indistinguishable from poetry.

In *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*, Jerome McGann writes, “Dickinson’s scripts cannot be read as if they were ‘printer’s copy’ manuscripts, or as if they were composed with an eye toward some state beyond their handcrafted textual condition.” He continues, “Emily Dickinson’s poetry was not written *for* a print medium, even though it was written *in* an age of print. When we come to edit her work for bookish presentation, therefore, we must accommodate our typographical conventions to her work, not the other way around.”¹⁴ Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, editors have painstakingly brought that work to the public for the most part “the other way around.” Even in the most trusted scholarly editions, editors have restructured Dickinson’s poems for print in opposition to the manuscripts, consistently overriding her line breaks, systematically deconstructing (or in reading editions, omitting) her formal construction of variant words and punctuation. Without manuscripts present, the reader cannot know how those editorial omissions and decisions have affected meaning.

Dickinson’s manuscripts themselves, and the forms and experiments borne out in them, are the most authentic register of her intentions. Of the 3,507 poems, letters, drafts, and fragments Dickinson wrote, approximately a third of the manuscripts have been published in facsimile thus far.¹⁵ The first substantial view of these appeared in 1981 in *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson: A Facsimile Edition*, two volumes that include 1,147 poem facsimiles—the “fascicles,” forty discrete packets of poems Dickinson assembled and tied with a stitch, as well as unbound sets. In 1996 Marta Werner published a new array of strikingly different visionary late works—forty manuscripts in *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*—followed in 2007 by *Radical Scatters: Emily Dickinson’s Late Fragments and Related Texts, 1870–1886*, an extensive digital archive bringing forth one hundred and thirty-two more manuscripts. Werner’s pioneering diplomatic transcriptions were the first to accurately reflect Dickinson’s manuscripts typographically in book form.

To represent a Dickinson poem accurately in print, to “accommodate our typographic conventions to her work,” is quite a demanding task. Dickinson’s manipulation of textual space is elastic in the manuscripts: her sprawling headlong letterforms, ambiguous capitalization, gestural punctuation, scale shifts in variant

words, extremely short lines, and expansive spatial placement of words on the page trouble even a visually minded transcription. These new transcriptions were created with the aim of a clean, legible text to act as *a key into*—not *a replacement for*—the manuscripts. If our interpretation of Dickinson’s script errs, each manuscript is present to make its own determinations and ambiguities known.¹⁶

Dickinson’s early manuscripts are predominantly written in ink; from 1864 to 1865 they are mostly in pencil, and thereafter both pen and pencil are used until the year 1878, when “the pen is almost entirely discarded.”¹⁷ All of the envelope poems are written in pencil. Unlike a fountain pen, a pencil stub, especially a very small one, fits neatly, at the ready, in the pocket of a dress. In an early letter to her brother, Austin, she wrote “This is truly extempore, Austin—I have no notes in my pocket,”¹⁸ suggesting that there were typically jottings accumulating there. Dickinson’s one surviving dress has a large external pocket on the right side, where her hand would fall easily at rest. The economy of the pocket is worth considering. An envelope is a pocket. An envelope refolds discreetly, privately, even after it has been sliced completely open. Emily Dickinson sent this minuscule two-inch-long pencil (pictured below) in a letter to the Bowles, “If it had no pencil, | Would it try mine – ”¹⁹ wryly nudging them to write. It was enveloped in a letter folded into thirds horizontally, pinned closed at each side.



Notes

1. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., edited by Thomas H. Johnson, with Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), L1563.
2. See Amherst College manuscript A 739: "Dont you know you | are happiest while | I withhold and | not confer – dont | you know that | 'No' is the wildest | word we consign | to Language? | You do, for you | know all things –" Amherst College Digital Collections, Emily Dickinson Collection, <https://acdc.amherst.edu>.
3. Manuscript H B 103 at Houghton Library, a letter written in pencil, folded horizontally in thirds, from Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert Dickinson from the early 1880s, carries another version of this text: "Excuse Emily | and her Atoms – | The 'North | Star' is of | small fabric, | but it denotes | much –" *Letters*, L774.
4. Dickinson would have been familiar with scientific developments through Mount Holyoke Academy and was an avid reader of newspapers, periodicals, and literature. For more on this, see Jack L. Capps's *Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836–1886* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966). A number of writers Dickinson read are using the word, most notably George Eliot and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Dickinson uses the word *atom* differently in eleven poems: P376, P410, P515, P600, P664, P889, P954, P1178, P1191, P1231, and P1239 (A 339, "Risk is the Hair | that holds the Tun"), *Poems* 1955.
5. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. *Letters*, L271.
7. The count is based on the total number of poem drafts indicated in *Poems* 1998. The tally of letters and prose fragments is from *Letters*. It's quite likely the number of actual letters was higher, diminished by the nineteenth-century custom of burning correspondence.
8. See Ralph Franklin's *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), and *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).
9. Jay Leyda, ed., *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 16. Lydia Maria Child, *The Frugal Housewife*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Carter & Hendee, 1830).
10. The tendency in Dickinson's late manuscripts is toward larger spaces between letters and words, short, heavily enjambed lines that amplify space, and smaller, yet more frequent punctuation marks. For more on this, see *The Dickinson Composites* (New York: Granary Books, 2010).
11. Susan Howe, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values," *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 141.
12. *Letters, Poems* 1998.

13. *Letters*, L265.
14. Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 38.
15. See also Polly Longworth, ed., *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 1986), and *Emily Dickinson: A Letter* (Amherst, MA: Oliphant Press, Friends of the Amherst College Library, 1992).
16. The transcription offers readers a typographic “map” to consult while reading the manuscript facsimile. Century Gothic’s rounded, fixed-width, sans-serif letterforms are intended as a translation (not an imitation) of her scripts. Dickinson’s upper- and lower-case letterforms, punctuation, and markings are expressive and open to multiple readings. The typographic interpretation reflects our scholarly engagement with her scribal practice but in no way claims definitiveness, given such ambiguities. The size of the transcriptions—50 percent relative to the envelopes—reflects our belief that Dickinson’s manuscript is the primary space to read her work and is the highest authority on all questions. Though it is finally impossible to represent all the spatial dynamics of Dickinson’s handwritten documents, attempts were made (using InDesign) to reflect them through placement, kerning, leading, spacing, and type size within the line drawing of the envelope. Ultimately, it was our hope to keep the transcriptions as legible as possible and gesture back toward the “bright Orthography” of Dickinson’s manuscripts.
17. See Theodora Ward’s “Characteristics of the Handwriting,” in *Poems* 1955. See also Theodora Ward’s “Study of the Handwriting” in *Emily Dickinson’s Letters to Dr. and Mrs. Josiab Gilbert Holland* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1951).
18. *Letters*, L165.
19. *Poems* 1955, P921; *Poems* 1998, P184. The two pins pictured on the front of the Visual Index (p. 225) originally pinned this letter with the pencil closed. This manuscript can be viewed online at <https://acdc.amherst.edu/view/asc:5717>.

we
talked with
each other
about each
other
though neither
of us spoke.

We were + too
engrossed with
the Second's Races

and the Hoops of
the Clock.

Pausing in front
of our + sentenced
faces

time's decision
shook -

Arks of Reprieve

he opened
to us -

Ararats -
we took -

↳
were
listening
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time compass
sion took