



# The likeness of Emily Dickinson

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## The Likeness of Emily Dickinson

**D**URING the sixty-one years which have elapsed since the death of Emily Dickinson, various attempts have been made to convey in picture something of the poet's elusive charm to which contemporaries bore witness. These attempts have led to some confusion regarding her likeness, and Professor G. F. Whicher has humorously referred to one of them, at least, as a 'synthetic effort.'

The brief list<sup>1</sup> of these attempts at portraiture includes:

1. Oil painting of the children of Edward Dickinson, Emily, Austin, and Lavinia, done shortly before 1840, possibly by O. A. Bullard, an itinerant artist who painted several portraits of Amherst people at this time. This painting was reproduced as the frontispiece to *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*, by the poet's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, 1932.

2. Silhouette drawn by Charles Temple, 'a native of Smyrna,' 1845. Temple, born in Malta, taught French in Amherst Academy 1843-44. The silhouette was published in *Ancestors' Brocades*, by Millicent Todd Bingham, 1945.

3. Daguerreotype taken about 1847, Emily being about seventeen (Plate Ia). This, the one authentic likeness, was first published by Mrs. Todd as the frontispiece for *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, new and enlarged edition, 1931. A better reproduction of the daguerreotype, first appearing in the

<sup>1</sup>Based in part on a typescript compilation by Professor Whicher which he has kindly made available.

third printing of this edition, was also used by Professor Whicher in *This Was a Poet*, 1938.

4. Composite sketch, prepared in 1893 by A. W. Elson & Co., Boston, 'merely to shew the arrangement of the hair,' as a preliminary to the development of a satisfactory 'likeness' for the projected first edition of the *Letters*. This first sketch was based on the daguerreotype (No. 3) and a daguerreotype of a cousin, the latter to provide a more pleasing hair arrangement. It was at first planned to proceed from this sketch to a finished portrait, with the admixture of elements from the oil painting (No. 1), but such a portrait was ultimately abandoned as promising little likelihood of success, and the 'child portrait' (No. 5) alone used in the edition. The composite sketch is reproduced in *Ancestors' Brocades*, with a full account of the struggles over the problem of a likeness to accompany the *Letters*.

5. The 'child portrait,' derived from No. 1 by A. W. Elson & Co., and used as the frontispiece for *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, 1894.

6. Retouched version of the daguerreotype, executed by the miniature painter Laura C. Hills for Lavinia Dickinson in 1897. The publication of the *Letters* in 1894 had not put an end to Lavinia's search for a satisfactory likeness of her sister. At least three stages of this retouching are now known, the first two of which have only recently come to light. Photographic prints representing all three



PLATE IA  
DAGUERRETYPE



PLATE IB  
RETOUCHED DAGUERRETYPE, FIRST STAGE



PLATE IC  
RETOUCHED DAGUERRETYPE, FINAL STAGE



PLATE ID  
MINIATURE OF MRS LLOYD ROGERS



stages, a negative of the first stage, and a negative taken from the original daguerreotype have been placed in the Harvard College Library. The first and third stages are reproduced here, both for the first time, as Plate Ib and Ic.

7. Painted miniature, apparently derived from the final stage of the retouched daguerreotype, first published as the frontispiece of *Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, 1924, and reproduced several times thereafter in publications of Madame Bianchi. This miniature was shown at the Centenary Celebration of the poet's birth held at Yale University in 1930.

The story of the 'development' of the retouched daguerreotype, and its relation to the painted miniature, seems not without interest. In this development, Gertrude M. Graves, cousin of Emily and Lavinia, and sister of the writer, played the part of intermediary, as will be set forth below.

It was in the fall of 1896, ten years after Emily's death, and six years after the first edition of her poems had been published, that Lavinia Dickinson braved the unknown and accepted an invitation to visit the family of her cousin John Graves in Boston; preparing for immediate retreat, she told us afterwards, to Maggie and home, 'if she did not like her cousins.' Her fund of amusing stories, her daring, quaint, and witty turns of speech, her keen observation and zest gave her hosts unqualified enjoyment during the few days that she spent under their roof, and sincerest regret when her visit ended.

During those days in Boston she spoke with deep concern about the lack of a fitting likeness of Emily,

increasingly demanded by both publishers and readers of her poetry, and decried the *unlikeness* of the daguerreotype which, though constrained and severe, was their only 'mould' of her, to use Emily's phrase. Calling attention to her own abundant dark tresses, parted and looped over her ears, converging again in a bow-knot effect at the back of her head, she explained, 'Emily and I always wore our hair this way because it was the way Elizabeth Barrett Browning did.' And we know from Emily's own description of herself, in reply to Mr Higginson's request for her 'portrait,' that her hair was 'bold, like the chestnut burr,' which hardly describes the plastered style of that early picture. So Lavinia wondered if an artist might not be able to soften the rigid outlines of hair arrangement and neck line.

With Lavinia's consent, Gertrude Graves sought the aid of Laura Hills, the miniature painter, and persuaded her to retouch a photograph made from the original daguerreotype. With care not to alter the face, Miss Hills 'revised,' according to Lavinia's directions, the hair and dress. That first 'revision,' having but recently come to light among my sister's papers, is reproduced as Plate Ib. The reason why it was discarded may perhaps be found in the following story told to Professor Whicher by the late Adèle Allen, one of Lavinia's close friends. About the time that Miss Hills undertook the work of 'revision' there appeared in the *Century Magazine*, April 1897, an article entitled 'Old Georgetown, a Social Panorama,' by John Williamson Palmer, which contained a reproduction (Plate Id) of a beautiful miniature of Mrs Lloyd Rogers, granddaughter of Martha

Washington, in whom Lavinia may have detected a resemblance to Emily. Doubtless the Dickinson pride had been kindled to the flaming point by the ill-advised efforts on the part of certain press writers of that time to heighten the sensation of discovering a new poet by representing her as a country girl and a recluse, deprived of even ordinary educational advantages and culture. So it is not surprising that the beauty and distinction of the miniature of Mrs Rogers, with its fancied resemblance to Emily, brought to Lavinia's attention at the very moment when Miss Hills was retouching the print of the old daguerreotype, should have found instant reaction in Lavinia's determination to present Emily to the world in what she deemed fitting attire. According to Miss Adèle Allen's story, Lavinia exclaimed, upon seeing this copy of Mrs Rogers's miniature, 'That is the way I want Emily to look!'

In a letter to Gertrude Graves dated 11 May 1897, she acknowledges receipt of the first 'revision' (Plate Ib) in these words, 'The picture is beyond my highest expectations. It really seems as if Emily were here,' and then goes on to say, as if prompted by something at hand, 'I would like the picture a little enlarged if it can be and only the head and shoulders in sight. I am sorry there is nothing in the way of lace to send you. I think the artist can create some fluffy finish for the neck. Perhaps a ruffle half as high and not quite so full as Mrs. Rogers' would be the thing.'

Yet further evidence of the several steps taken in creating Emily's ruff may be seen in a photograph pasted on the fly leaf of a copy of her *Poems*, First Series, which belonged to my

sister.<sup>2</sup> It is a likeness of Emily in 'a ruffle half as high and not quite so full as Mrs. Rogers'. But that version, too, was discarded and the accepted form (Plate Ic), when compared with the *Century* reproduction of the Rogers miniature, shows such striking resemblance in brush strokes and texture of the ruff as to leave little doubt that it was the model suggested by Lavinia for Miss Hills's artistry. So the retouching was completed the third time, and the resulting photograph won Lavinia's approval, with the exclamation, 'Emily has come back to me.'

The name of Mrs Henry Rogers ('Clara Doria') has figured in conjunction with Emily's ruff. My sister had cherished from childhood a photograph of the singer as a young woman in evening dress. For some now forgotten reason, I came to accept this photograph as the origin of the ruff in Emily's revised likeness. Mrs Bingham, too, had received the same impression.<sup>3</sup> Study of the reproduction of the Rogers miniature, brought to my attention by Professor Whicher, has, however, convinced me that I was mistaken.

Madame Bianchi's *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*, published in 1932, contains an elaborate footnote, pages 17 and 18, regarding Emily's portraits. In this account the miniature (No. 7) is confused with the retouched daguerreotype (No. 6). The implications arising from this confusion are so misleading that I must clearly state that the part played by Gertrude Graves began and ended with the fortunate enlistment of Miss Hills's interest and skill in the task of retouching a photo-

<sup>2</sup> Now in the Harvard College Library.

<sup>3</sup> *Ancestors' Brocades*, p. 270.

graph made from the old daguerreotype — nothing more. Laura Hills painted no miniature of Emily Dickinson. Thus the painting shown at the Centenary Exhibition at Yale University in 1930, though hardly deserving the epithet 'grotesque' applied to it by Mrs Bingham,<sup>4</sup> yet when carefully compared with the daguerreotype shows a very different expression in eyes and mouth. This difference leads one to wonder if another hand than that of Miss Hills may have painted it upon an enlarged photographic print of Miss Hills's work.

To clarify my own recollections of this matter I have corresponded with Miss Hills. In a letter dated Newburyport, 19 March 1946, she says, 'In a long life I have forgotten many things, but I remember vaguely retouching a daguerreotype because your sister Gertrude asked me to. Well, I oughtn't to have done it. Was Emily fluffy? Did she wear wide white ruffles round her neck? Don't you think yourself that she ought to have been portrayed exactly as she was?' Then under the date of March 22, 'Please let us keep the pictures [of Emily] for a few days. Lizzie and I are very excited over them, especially the original with the little velvet ribbon crossed over at the neck — this in spite of the fact that her sister Lavinia preferred her less "severe."' Again, under date of March 26, 'I agree with you that the photograph of her in the simple tucker is the "likelier."' And on April 7 she wrote, 'Yes, I like the little crossed velvet

one best. Whatever I was guilty of in "retouching" be sure I never touched her face.'

On April 16 she wrote, 'Reading *Ancestors' Brocades* has been a strange and moving experience to me. You might say that the fine and capable writing of Mrs. Bingham is the last word in the exploitation of Emily Dickinson but no, — genius is inscrutable and writers will write about her until the end of time. . . . It was a surprise on page 270 to come upon me: Mrs. Bingham stated the case exactly and I am so grateful to her. In another life I shall paint a miniature of Emily. In heaven it will be a perfect likeness — or it wouldn't be heaven. It may not be Emily's idea of heaven to sit for me. Perhaps we'd better not pursue the subject. If our life-times had overlapped I would have made her a pastel of hepaticas, in their habit, as they lived. She would have liked them and would not have had to peep out of her seclusion.'

No, Miss Hills's work was not synthetic. It was sympathetic, and even a slight toning down of the patterned tablecloth in the daguerreotype releases the interest of Emily's hands, hands so sensitive, so in character, that it seems unfortunate that they were made to give place to the more spectacular ruff. But the likeness in all 'revisions' remains untouched, only the accessories were altered; and Emily's eyes — as she herself described them, 'like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves' — still challenge the world's attention.

<sup>4</sup> *Ancestors' Brocades*, p. 271.

LOUISE B. GRAVES

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