“Question of Monuments”: Emerson, Dickinson, and American Renaissance Portraiture

Mary Loeffelholz

It is ladies’ statues, not reputations, which suffer,—gentlemen’s pictures, not characters, which are called into question.—William Dean Howells

By way of introduction to the literary-historical genre I am calling American Renaissance portraiture, I want to consider two revisionist entries offered in this line by two works of American Renaissance criticism that saw publication within a few months of one another in 1997. One of them, John Carlos Rowe’s *At Emerson’s Tomb*, features on its cover a striking photograph of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s headstone in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, in Concord, Massachusetts.1 Cropped so that one of the more conventional tablet stones of the Emerson family plot stands in the middle background, bisected by the book’s spine, the photograph captures the veiny granite of the headstone in high contrast. The headstone’s plaque sits in the very center of the image, with Emerson’s name only faintly legible under a floral design embossed in slightly higher relief above it. The remainder of the plaque’s inscription is entirely lost to the camera.

The other work, Charlene Avallone’s “What American Renaissance?” appeared in the October number of *PMLA*.2 Unusually for *PMLA*, a journal parsimonious with illustrations, Avallone’s essay was

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This essay was conceived as a paper for the panel “Poetry and the Faces of Nationalism in the American Renaissance” at the American Literature Association symposium on the American Renaissance, Cancún, Mexico, December 1997, and I owe the inspiration for it to my copanelists, Virginia Jackson and Shirley Samuels.

accompanied by a lavish lineup of daguerreotypes and photographs that reproduced for her readers the faces of Margaret Fuller, Julia Ward Howe, Charles Richardson, and Alain Locke, among other writers and critics either held responsible, in the body of the essay, for the making of American “renaissance criticism” or held up as victims of the exclusions it has produced (1104).

For all the striking visual differences between the American Renaissance pictured on Rowe’s cover and the one interpolated into Avallone’s essay, the two versions of American Renaissance portraiture accomplish complementary as well as contrasting sorts of work for the critical projects they introduce or inhabit. Both Rowe’s cover and Avallone’s portrait gallery revise, although in different directions, more conventional practices of such portraiture, well illustrated by David S. Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance*, with the frieze of photographs spanning its covers back to front, from Thoreau on the left rear to Melville on the right front, and Whitman keeping watch on the ample spine. Not that Reynolds sets out to reproduce the American Renaissance simply as an object of critical piety. For him, these canonical images achieve their “full cultural representativeness” only when read back into their origins in the polyglot popular writings and images that the great American Renaissance authors, he argues, assimilated and transformed. Even before any argumentative shots are fired, however, the logic of Reynolds’s cover insists on just how complete the great authors’ assimilation and transformation of their culture will prove to be in *Beneath the American Renaissance*: for cover purposes (and despite the wealth of visual and popular literary material summoned in the book itself), what is beneath the American Renaissance is beneath representation. The physiognomies of the Renais-

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4 The illustrations section of *Beneath the American Renaissance* drives the point home once again by opening with a group portrait of “the major authors of the American Renaissance”—the same figures featured on the cover—before moving on to the book’s popular materials.

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Cultural representativeness achieved by these means is exactly what is called into question by Rowe’s and Avallone’s revisions of American Renaissance portraiture—or, to adopt William Dean Howells’s more evocative verb, it is what “suffers” in their revisions. In Rowe’s version of the genre, we pause at Emerson’s tomb to prepare for the book’s extended meditation on “the limitations and possibilities of political critique in the Emersonian tradition of aesthetic dissent” (1). The cover photograph acknowledges for Rowe that Emerson is dead, at least the Emerson whose name continues to sponsor in American letters “the romantic idealist assumption that rigorous reflection on the processes of thought and representation constitutes in itself a critique of social reality” (1). This tradition of critique, he argues, requires supplementing by other traditions; works purely critical of social conventions of representation must be placed in conversation with “literary text[s] that offer practical alternatives” and with the past and present history of “specific political and social organizations that will accomplish what literature alone is powerless to achieve” (13). Rowe proposes a “comparative” American literary history that will not only revive past connections between Emersonian idealism and practical politics but also perform the more redemptive, utopian work of making in the present exactly “the sorts of political and cultural connections that were missed in the past” (251) and so of amending the past’s “missed opportunities for crucial political and cultural alliances” (7).

Rowe’s literary-historical equivalent of the politics of alliance fosters a conversation between Emersonian idealism and what Rowe considers the independently established “other traditions” of American literature, especially those of African American writing and American women’s writing. This conversation, though, needs a moderator; it

6 “The traditional American literary canon need no longer be ‘expanded,’ because other traditions have been established independently” (Rowe, 9); the phrasing here pays tribute to such works as Joyce W. Warren, ed., The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993). For an influential anticipatory critique of Rowe’s model of independent canons and his brief for a politics of alliance see John Guillory, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
asks us “how we shall coordinate the several traditions of literary and cultural expression now available to us” (15). The logic of Rowe’s cover art tells us that this is a “question of monuments,” in Howells’s wonderfully ambiguous syntax, not only a question about our monuments but a question to ask of a monument, of one monument specifically, Emerson’s headstone. Conceived by a late-nineteenth-century act of “aesthetic dissent” as an alternative both to the conventionally subdued funereal tablet in the background of the photograph and to more elaborate later nineteenth-century monuments commemorating famous men, Emerson’s headstone perfectly anticipates Rowe’s felt need for a marker to “coordinate” the now plural traditions of American literature. Innocent of individual physiognomy, the monument expunges what Oliver Wendell Holmes in tribute called “the race-marks of the Brahmin tribe” that were so conspicuous in Emerson’s contemporary persona: the ice-blue eyes and “the lines of thought the sharpened features wear; / Carved by the edge of keen New England air.”7 The headstone’s dead Emerson, by contrast, is both sublated and concretized, his idealism (problematic for Rowe) rendered back into New England rock in the same aesthetic gesture that effaces the particularizing marks of his race, gender, and class identity. This faceless marker need not speak—its text, as in the photograph, need not be legible—to organize an account of American literature’s “other traditions,” indelibly marked by particularized physiognomies of race and gender. Emerson’s facelessness in his headstone thus answers to the utopian dimension of the Emersonian tradition Rowe outlines in At Emerson’s Tomb; it proleptically symbolizes the “political and cultural alliances” not yet realized in American politics or letters. Almost despite himself, Rowe grants Emerson what Reynolds calls “cultural representativeness,” not in the concrete physiognomy of Reynolds’s standard American Renaissance portrait gallery but in this sublated form that nevertheless trades for much of its power on the pathos of an invisibly dead-white-male body.

The racially mixed portrait gallery of male and female writers, critics, and academics that illustrates Avallone’s “What American Renaissance?” on the other hand, points backward to the exclusionary

historical constitution, rather than forward to the utopian future, of what she calls "renaissance discourse" (1103). According to Avallone, there have been no fewer than four American Renaissances, which is to say, four distinct "academic revivals" of a critical tradition that tends "to identify certain men's work as aesthetic and nationally representative" (1104, 1103). As her archival labors in this essay trenchantly remind us, "renaissance discourse" anticipates by at least a couple of academic generations the work of F. O. Matthiessen, who is too often credited with founding this critical topos alone.8 Avallone distinguishes Richardson and Barrett Wendell, who published their histories of American literature in the late 1880s and in 1900, respectively, as nineteenth-century inaugurators of renaissance criticism—American Renaissances numbers 1 and 2—and Matthiessen as a comparatively belated Renaissance number 3. The fourth American Renaissance, like the conclusion of the neo-Elizabethan literary-historical pageant mounted in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts, is ongoing, Avallone argues, even in apparently oppositional projects.

Avallone's useful "genealogy" of American Renaissance criticism links its emergent language to the institutionalization of American literature in high school and college syllabi—the increasingly familiar disciplinary story of the 1880s and 1890s. Her observation that American critics began to talk about American literature, especially the literature of New England, in terms of a "renaissance" only after the Civil War bears consideration, partly because her overall argument does surprisingly little to extend it or to explain why "no discourse of literary rebirth or renaissance emerged in the antebellum period" (1104). Avallone takes direct aim at Rowe and other critics for rewriting the American Renaissance as a conversation among separately constituted but (today) equally valuable other traditions: "Even the notion of otherness, which defines an alternative renaissance for mid-century women, does not transform the discourse or avoid separate-sphere devaluation of women's achievements" (1115). As she points out, the "alternative" women's renaissance has primarily celebrated women's sentimental fiction, with the double consequence of obscuring mid-nineteenth-century women's work in other genres and nineteenth-

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8 See Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London: Oxford University Press, 1941).
century men's writing in the register of sentimentalism. As against Rowe's conversational model, Avallone proposes a more systemic unified theory of what she calls, after Pierre Bourdieu, "the American cultural field" (1115; emphasis mine), constituted by "the asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital," a theory that she believes better accounts for (among other things) "the relation of nineteenth-century women's and men's writings to each other and to our own cultural context" (1102).

In Avallone's view, the unified theory of American Renaissance criticism, if not of the entire American cultural field, is not far to seek. Simply enough, and underneath all the permutations she extends backward and forward from Matthiessen's famous study, "the language of renaissance serves to maintain male preeminence" (1102). The means by which American Renaissance criticism devalues women's writing include "the consignment of women writers to a separate, subordinate sphere and the erasure of their writings' significance, rebirth metaphorics and body aesthetics, the institution of formalist reading strategies and of the modernist masterwork canon, and women's muted roles in current renaissance models"; these procedures, Avallone concludes, "are more consistent than other features of renaissance criticism, and they persist in new theories and models" (1104).

One would not have to dissent from the empirical accuracy of many of Avallone's claims—far from it—to issue a caveat about what Timothy Morris, among others, has diagnosed as the "teleology of the method" employed by this kind of argument. As Morris points out, "The recent trend toward 'decanonization studies' has produced the teleological inverse" of traditional reception studies of great authors: where the traditional model works backward from the fact of canonization to uncover the reasons for its inevitability, the new model produces the same sense of inevitability in recovering "how the academy moved to exclude the subject." Whether written as narratives of canonization or decanonization, "teleological history elides the essence of historicity, recasting contingent outcomes as inevitable."9 Avallone's list of renaissance criticism's procedures for devaluing women's writing

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offers a striking instance of teleological history in that it finds "the modernist masterwork canon" and its allied "formalist reading strategies" to be among the "more consistent" features of American Renaissance criticism; accordingly, Matthiessen's mid-twentieth-century critical masterwork retrospectively determines the very nineteenth-century versions of American Renaissance criticism for which Avallone's essay overtly tries to clear independent historical space.

Call this approach "teleology of . . . method" or call it rhetoric. If it is the latter, one might further specify the figures of Avallone's critical method as metalepsis and personification: metalepsis, in that Matthiessen's twentieth-century celebration of modernist masterworks is made to precede and even to generate the aims of earlier American Renaissance critics; personification, in that "renaissance discourse" takes on for Avallone the status of a desiring subject. It wants to put women down, and the consistency of its desire over time gives the surface variations of the discourse their underlying sameness. Ironically, renaissance discourse personified as a desiring subject plays the very role in Avallone's revisionary argument that Emerson's proleptically faceless headstone does in Rowe's: it "coordinates" the apparent pluralism of American literature's new traditions—for ill in Avallone's reading, for good in Rowe's. The uncanny conversion of Avallone's and Rowe's versions of literary history may well remind us of Paul de Man's insistence, during his reading of monuments and romantic literary histories in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, that every personification or prosopopoeia "is always already disfigurement"; disfiguring personifications linger in both Avallone's and Rowe's arguments as remainders of romantic idealist literary history.10

Rhetorically or formally speaking, the combination of metalepsis and personification is just one of the features marking both Avallone's essay and Rowe's book as indeed further versions of American Renaissance discourse. But rather than pursue this line of argument immediately, I want to return to another feature of Avallone's renaissance discourse: the superb gallery of portraits reproduced in her essay, including one of Wendell dressed up in Renaissance costume. What

10 De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, by Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Seabury, 1979), 68.
are these images doing here? The essay itself leaves them strikingly unread, and it may be that Avallone is not even directly responsible for them. A reader might infer that they are an editorial interpolation, especially since Domna C. Stanton, *PMLA’s* then departing editor, enlivens her own final “Editor’s Column” in this number with illustrations of the editor’s alienating toil and eventual liberation. Elegiac pictures, one might call them, noting the editor’s epigraph from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Elegiac Verses”—“Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art is of ending.” To be strictly accurate, Longfellow’s poem is titled “Elegiac Verse,” but the wonder, of course, is that a feminist scholar of French literature quotes one of the more venerably unread dead white males of the American Renaissance (one firmly excluded, for example, from Reynolds’s frieze of subversively representative Renaissance greats) in this context at all. A cryptic conversation, conducted in elegiac verses and pictures, seems to be taking place between the editor of *PMLA* and the author of “What American Renaissance?”—as if to compensate for the absence of a direct conversation sponsored by the essay itself between its text and its illustrations.

By whatever means and with whatever intention they were interpolated, the illustrations amount to “invocations of self-evidence,” Avallone’s damning characterization of how American Renaissance criticism appeals to the supposed self-evidence of literary value and male critical authority (1115). What is invoked as self-evident in the illustrations, though, is clearly not literary value. By setting a lineup of (mostly) white male critics against a lineup of (mostly) female writers and activists, Avallone (or her editor, or both) displaces appeals to objective literary value with the specific personhood of those who did the valuing and those who were devalued. The personhood performed in every one of these illustrations is deeply worthy of interest, from Wendell’s theatrical Elizabethan getup to the famous daguerreotype of Margaret Fuller divining a book through closed eyelids to the lovely marriage portrait of Katherine Lee Bates with her dog, Hamlet, in the spouse’s place. But again, this is already closer reading than the essay itself actually performs of the pictures. What the essay implicitly relies on them to convey are both self-evident categories of personhood—

gender and race—and the self-evident visual pastness of the past, the past that, through elegiac pictures, prefigures (metalepsis again) American literary criticism's always deferred recognition of America's "hybrid culture" and its fulfilled "promise of democracy" as Avallone gestures toward them in her conclusion (1115).

What Rowe's book proleptically figures through Emerson's faceless headstone, then, Avallone's essay figures by multiplying the faces of literary history's agents and victims. On the whole, the illustrations in her essay strike me as improvements over Rowe's vigil strange at Emerson's tomb, but trading one version of self-evidence, that of literary value, for another, that of history figured as visible identity categories, may not be the best trade to make on the much-traded stock of the American Renaissance. By way of imagining other alternatives, I want to follow Avallone's lead in exploring the gendered genealogy of American Renaissance portraiture: first by presenting some nineteenth-century precursors to Rowe's twentieth-century subsumption of the genre and then by looking at the relationship to the genre of an American Renaissance author strikingly absent from Rowe's reckoning (and from Avallone's), Emily Dickinson.

The first precursor exhibit to Rowe's picture of Emerson's headstone is the frontispiece to Edmund Clarence Stedman's *American Anthology, 1787–1900*, published in 1900 (fig. 1).12 From Avallone's perspective, of course, everything about the gallery of portraits on the left is self-evident in terms of the identity categories of race and gender. The anthology's publisher, Houghton, Mifflin, played on a different kind of self-evidence by inserting a key to these familiar portraits on a translucent overlay between the pages reproduced here, thus inviting readers to test their own identifications against the key in a low-level pedagogy of poetic celebrity. (For readers today who have trouble with them they are, from top left to bottom right, Longfellow, Poe, Whitman, Whittier, Bryant, Holmes, Lowell, and Lanier.) Of immortality the publisher's strategy, Dickinson could have said, is physiognomy. The youngest-looking figure, Poe, was by 1900 the longest dead; aside from

Figure 1. Frontispiece and title page to Edmund Clarence Stedman, *American Anthology, 1787–1900*. Reproduced by permission of the Harvard College Library.
his bad eminence, all the poets shown here are bearded sages. Their images in (mainly) three-quarters profile are composed to face one another in a group, whose coherence is policed by the photograph on the facing page: "The grave of Emerson," the caption reads—the headstone in Concord.

It is a fascinating early example of American Renaissance portraiture. Photographs of Emerson were available in plenty to Stedman’s publisher, for whom this frontispiece virtually amounted to a gallery of house authors, so the decision not to reproduce one—say, in the place of honor held by Bryant in the composition—was plainly deliberate. Neither Stedman himself nor his publisher could have read Matthiessen’s famous characterization of Emerson as “the cow from which the rest [of American Renaissance writers] drew their milk” (xii), but here it is, this monadnock or rocky breast in its pastoral setting, facing the historically individuated portraits of the various Renaissance sages as their origin and telos. Read the images from left to right, and Emerson’s is the honored tomb to which all the other sages have or will come in order that readers may marvel at what sagacity perished there; read the images from right to left, and Emerson is the matrix of nature or original power from which the not-all-that-variegated forms of national poetic life have sprung. Or again, read from left to right, the images say E Pluribus Unum; if there are tokens of any national minority in the gallery, they are Poe and Lanier, representatives of the defeated South now welcomed back into the American anthologist’s fold, their sectional differences overcome in Emerson’s faceless tomb.

Thus Emerson’s headstone plays a role in Stedman’s frontispiece oddly like the civic role played by the “common-soldier” Civil War monuments that reached their peak of popularity in the 1880s and 1890s. Like those monuments, but in the more experimental aesthetic register of high culture, Emerson’s headstone as placed in the anthology celebrates heroic (indeed, literally rugged) American individuality while it “condense[s] the polyglot faces of the nation into a standard ‘American’ type.”13 If the nation’s faces as represented in the fron-

tispiece are not so polyglot as the nation itself, the exclusions only replicate those of the common-soldier monuments, North and South, which took as their object “a normative white soldier and citizen” and abstracted him from the particular political and sectional loyalties for which he fought (Savage, 167). Both Emerson’s headstone and the common-soldier monument eschew what Howells stigmatized as “the dreary means of conventional allegory” (647), the headstone in favor of a naturalized romantic sublime and the soldier monument in favor of a generic realism. Emerson’s monument makes a further aesthetic leap by embodying Howells’s advice that “the commemorative art of our time” need not “be directly descriptive” of what it memorializes (648). As the implied origin and end of American poetic development, Emerson’s ruggedly faceless headstone helps Stedman both democratize and modernize familiar antebellum models of the American poetic canon (fig. 2). At the same time, however, the historically individuated figures to the headstone’s left clearly delimit the range of national types it properly represents.

These national types plainly do not include women. As Avallone implies, if Emerson is the rocky breast of the New World, actual women may be redundant. In fact, Stedman’s anthology represents women poets fairly copiously, among them one of comparatively recent fame in 1900, Dickinson, from whose posthumous volumes Stedman reprints twenty poems under the categories (“Life,” “Love,” “Nature”) and titles that her editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, devised. Including women poets was a matter of some anxiety to Stedman, who acknowledges in his introduction that his previous *Poets of America* (1885) was faulted for neglecting them, and in 1900 he makes amends to “a succession of rarely endowed women-singers, that began—not to go back to the time of Maria Brooks—near the mid-century, [and] still continues unbroken” (xviii). Yet “women-singers,” unlike male poets, apparently cannot be ranked, at least not in polite letters—“I am not so adventurous as to mention names,” Stedman demurs (xxix)—and they do not furnish representative *individuals* to the national portrait gallery of poets. For Stedman, women constitute not so much a visible political or social group within national life as a temporal stage in culture, both that of the individual and that of the nation.
Figure 2. Frontispiece to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Poets and Poetry of America* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842). Reproduced by permission of the Harvard College Library.
One name for this temporal stage is allegory. In Howells’s “Question of Monuments,” for instance, we find women in the ranks of antebellum allegorical “virtues, posed in their well-known attitudes, to confront perplexed posterity with lifted brows and superhuman simpers,” or serving themselves up as “scantily-draped, improper figures, happily called liberties” (647–8). For Stedman’s 1900 frontispiece, no less than for Howells’s 1866 essay, the nexus of women and allegory represents an outdated mode of literary history (see, e.g., fig. 3). Another, cultural rather than formal name for women’s temporal stage of culture is schooling. The “home-school” is Stedman’s phrase, both in the 1900 introduction (xxviii) and in the earlier Poets of America, for the emergence of a nationally distinctive American poetry, and he is at once boastful and uneasy about women’s prominence in it. Women and poetry, poetry and schooling—these are links that Stedman’s anthology seems designed both to sever and to sublate. To look at the 1900 frontispiece, no enculturating woman intervenes between the matrix rock and the accomplished male sage. Yet Stedman’s version of the American Renaissance seems intended to mediate between an increasingly discrete aesthetic realm of poetic production and an emergent college-level and primary-school poetic curriculum composed of the past American masters. Ambivalence about nineteenth-century relations between poetry and pedagogy informs not only Stedman’s representation of women poets but also his highly qualified admiration for the male schoolroom poets. Where Stedman believes that Emerson’s “thought is now congenital throughout vast reaches, among new peoples scarcely conscious of its derivation,” the group he significantly calls “Longfellow and his pupils” never escapes the taint of didacticism, never sinks from the outward acquirements of national physiognomy deep down into the DNA, so to speak, of the world’s peoples. At best, Stedman suggests, they “developed a new literary manner—touched by that of the motherland, yet with a difference; the counterpart of that ‘national likeness’ so elusive, yet so instantly recognized when chanced upon abroad” (xxiii). “Longfellow and his pupils” are the turn-of-the-century Americans anyone can spot in the lobbies of the world’s hotels; faceless Emerson, transcending national type, has his center everywhere and his circumference nowhere.
Figure 3. Frontispiece and title page to Thomas Buchanan Read, *The Female Poets of America*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: Butler, 1855). Reproduced by permission of the Harvard College Library.
Female Gifts of America
What about Dickinson’s center? Would she have or did she aspire to what Stedman celebrates as Emerson’s escape from physiognomy? There is, of course, the evidence of biography and correspondence, most famously her reply of July 1862 to Higginson’s request that she supply him with a picture. “Could you believe me—without?” she asks, claiming, “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?” The absence of a photograph, Dickinson says, “alarms Father—He says Death might occur,” but better death than dishonor: “I noticed the Quick wore off those things, in a few days, and forestall the dishonor.”¹⁴ Not that she is a stranger to the burgeoning image technologies that promote nineteenth-century literary fame; in her next letter to Higginson she asks, “Have you the portrait of Mrs Browning? Persons sent me three—if you had none, will you have mine?” (2:415). Further familiar ironies: Dickinson encloses in this letter a poem beginning

Before I got my Eye put out  
I liked as well to see  
As other Creatures, that have Eyes  
And know no other way—  
(J 327)¹⁵

One might ask, Does having or not having one’s portrait taken put one’s eye out? If you have three portraits of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, do you have an eye to spare? Does rivalry among women poets—Dickinson certainly compared herself, at least, to Barrett Browning—take the form of competition for invisibility or visibility, and is invisibility to visibility as not having eyes is to having eyes, or vice versa?¹⁶

¹⁵ All quotations from Dickinson’s poetry are taken from The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), and are identified in the text by Johnson’s numbering.
But these interesting questions about visibility, rivalry, and embodiment, it is worth noting, are posed (and suspended) within a particular rhetoric of temporality: Dickinson’s determined (it seems) oddity of verb tenses where portraits rear their heads: “I had no portrait,” rather than “I have”; “if you had none, will you have mine?” Portraits, having no purchase on “the Quick,” exist only in the past or the future tense; as Longfellow says of another language in his “Elegiac Verse,” “Wisely the Hebrews admit no Present tense in their language; / While we are speaking the word, it is already the Past.” The question of physiognomy for Dickinson, as for the late-nineteenth-century American Renaissance criticism that would ultimately begin the process of receiving her work in print, is connected to a complex, complexly gendered and nationalized rhetoric of temporality, of prospect and retrospect, and an unthinkable space in between. Some part of that rhetoric’s motivation surely lies in Dickinson’s and her eventual readers’ experience and recollection of the Civil War. As Shira Wolosky, Barton Levi St. Armand, and other critics of Dickinson observe, death did “occur,” and was occurring at unprecedented rates, as she inaugurated her correspondence with Higginson; it was particularly connected to the memorial technologies she spurns on her own behalf in this letter but craves on behalf of others elsewhere.

Dickinson’s formal twists on temporality have been thoroughly explored by Sharon Cameron in terms of the poet’s interest in the


18 For early and important treatments of Dickinson’s relation to the Civil War see Wolosky, Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984); and St. Armand’s rich chapter “Kindred Spirits: Dickinson, Stowe, and the Wars of Romance,” in Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 78–115. St. Armand assembles a fascinating account of Dickinson’s relation to Amherst’s Frazar Stearns, an early casualty of the war, but reduces his findings to “morbid personal interest” on the part of Dickinson, who “dwelt on [Stearns’s] marmoreal apotheosis in order to compensate for her own obscure Antietams of the spirit” (110, 113). The poem St. Armand cites as evidence of Dickinson’s investment in Stearns’s “marmoreal apotheosis,” incredibly, is J 639, which represents a battlefield “populous with Bone and stain— / And Men too straight to stoop again, / And piles of solid Moan— / And Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes— / And scraps of Prayer— / And Death’s surprise, / Stamped visible—in Stone—.” “Bone and stain— / . . . And piles of solid Moan—” hardly belong to the aesthetics of the marmoreal school.
generic problems of "lyric time." Virginia Jackson, in her forthcoming *Dickinson's Misery*, extends these problems beyond "the poems themselves"—in the new critical sense of that phrase—and into the material texts of Dickinson's literary remains and their constitution and reception.¹⁹ I suggest that the nexus of physiognomy and the rhetoric of temporality that I have called American Renaissance portraiture is historical as well as formal; it conditioned both the production of Dickinson's poems and their public reception in the 1890s and continues to do so today in our variations on the genre.

Further evidence of how Dickinson herself imagined this nexus is found in the following poem (dated c. 1862 by Johnson):

The difference between Despair  
And Fear—is like the One  
Between the instant of a Wreck—  
And when the Wreck has been—

The mind is smooth—no motion—  
Contented as the Eye  
Upon the Forehead of a Bust—  
That knows—it cannot see—

(§ 305)

The poem seems to say that seeing is to knowing as prospect is to retrospect. As a maker of physiognomies, despair turns interiority into impenetrable surfaces; this bust has not had its eye "put out" in quite the sense of § 327, but in another sense it has, for that organ sits on a forehead that appears, like the mind beneath it, unable to take impressions any longer. The problem with this statue, pace Howells, is that it can no longer suffer and knows it.

Still another version of the nexus of physiognomy and temporality occurs in a somewhat later poem (dated c. 1872 by Johnson):

My Triumph lasted till the Drums  
Had left the Dead alone  
And then I dropped my Victory  
And chastened stole along

To where the finished Faces
Conclusion turned on me
And then I hated Glory
And wished myself were They.

What is to be is best described
When it has also been—
Could Prospect taste of Retrospect
The tyrannies of Men
Were Tenderer—diviner
The Transitive toward.
A Bayonet's contrition
Is nothing to the Dead.

(J 1227)

To have a face, the first stanza implies, is to be finished; against Dickinson's July 1862 letter, which boasts of forestalling the dishonor of the imaged physiognomy, the poem names the latter the honor that comes with death. Thus far the poem is faithful to the general American commemorative logic of the postwar years. Yet the second stanza dissolves the envisioned faces of commemorative time into Dickinson's more idiosyncratic, "Transitive" grammar of apocalypse. The space-time of adequate vision in the poem—of truly seeing the massed dead faces—is impossibly embedded in the future anterior tense of the stanza's opening two lines. The choice offered us, though, is between this difficult grammar of temporality and the tenderness of the bayonet.

How this nexus has imagined Dickinson, on the other hand, may be inferred from the notorious afterlife of the one certified image that survives of the poet in her lifetime, the daguerreotype taken at Mount Holyoke College in 1847 or 1848. If we can judge from the July 1862 letter, this physiognomy played no intentional part in Dickinson's own strategy of immortality. Nevertheless, by virtue of what Jackson calls "those accidents of transmission and reception that exceed as they condition literature," this portrait of Dickinson at seventeen or eighteen is the image that now stands among the sages, whatever their ages or gender. Reynolds prefers younger and seedier—more "subversive"—Renaissance physiognomies than Stedman for the cover of Beneath the American Renaissance, but Dickinson is still the only woman. Morris groups the adolescent Dickinson with a middle-aged Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop and an elderly Marianne Moore on the cover of
Becoming Canonical in American Poetry. Either way, Dickinson stands out. Hers is the most frontal gaze among all these portraits; she appears to solicit the reader directly rather than to cross glances with her contemporaries or poetic successors. (Compare the literal solicitation I received in the mail from the makers of a documentary film on Dickinson: on the back of the reply card offering me tickets to the premiere, a copy of the video, and my name in the credits, all for five hundred dollars, I was invited to “search for Emily Dickinson” in a grainy, enlarged version—one could imagine cutting out its eyes and wearing it like a domino—of the daguerreotype’s familiar gaze.) As against our impressions of Whitman, who first published his own picture at thirty-seven and lived to become the acknowledged sage we see in most of the other surviving portraits of him, this youthful Dickinson preserves as physiognomy the gap between the production of her work and its reception.

As Jackson observes, this gap in various forms, and the “confusion” it evokes in readers between “the pathos of a subject and a pathos of transmission, . . . predicts the character of the poet who will come to be read . . . as Emily Dickinson.” Indeed, “that confusion has come to define, in the century after Dickinson’s publication, not only an idea of what counts as Dickinson’s verse but of what defines the literary as such.” Dickinson may not appear on the frontispiece to Stedman’s anthology, in Matthiessen’s canonical work, or indeed in many succeeding works on the American Renaissance or what Avallone calls “the alternative American Renaissance” (1115), including Rowe’s At Emerson’s Tomb. (Rowe’s avoidance of Dickinson may well lie in the difficulty of placing her securely within what he wishes to see as an independently “other” tradition of nineteenth-century American women’s writing.) Nevertheless, her poetic “character,” as Jackson and others observe, imprinted itself deeply on the early efflorescence of American Renaissance criticism, as it did on her. A renaissance by any other

name—including any "Other American Renaissance"—is almost by
definition a formula for generating cultural capital out of a gap
between the production and the reception of cultural works, or
between inspiration and efflorescence. By the 1890s it was clear that
the American Renaissance, like the moment of “Wreck” in Dickinson’s
poem J 305, would always be either prospective or retrospective. Sted-
man’s 1900 anthology evaluates midcentury American poetry from the
perspective of “a twilight interval, with minor voices and their tentative
modes and tones” (xviii)—a twilight interval that he had been diag-
nosing for some fifteen years. Stedman sees in the recent Spanish-
American War, however, evidence of national energies that should
soon be directed toward poetic renewal; as he protests, “To one bred to
look before and after this talk of atrophy seems childish” (xxxiii).
Renaissance can be seen only looking before or after; it is already over
or forever to come. Appearing in the “twilight interval,” under circum-
stances already invested with “a pathos of transmission,” Dickinson’s
poetry was then (and still is) read backward to Emerson’s and
Thoreau’s cragginess or forward to modernism.21 In either direction,
this is American Renaissance reading. So too is Avallone’s story of an
energetic, progressivist antebellum transcendentalism suppressed in
the same twilight interval of the late nineteenth century and still await-
ing its reemergence and fulfillment in America’s “promise of democ-
rracy,” and so too is Rowe’s projection of the alliance politics yet to
emerge from the manly pathos (death must be “met with firmness,”
Rowe’s epigraph from Emerson insists) of our vigil at Emerson’s face-
less headstone.

If there is an alternative to the teleology of such American Renais-
sance readings, it may lie not in expanding the physiognomies repre-
sented in American Renaissance portraiture but in attending, as Jack-
son suggests, to “those accidents of transmission and reception that

21 On Dickinson’s reception in the 1890s see Willis J. Buckingham, “Poetry
Readers and Reading in the 1890s: Emily Dickinson’s Reception,” in Readers in His-
tory: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response, ed. James L.
Machor (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 164–79; and Buck-
ingham, ed., Emily Dickinson’s Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History (Pitts-
burgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989). By Buckingham’s count, 1890s
reviewers compared Dickinson “to Thoreau in fourteen notices, to Whitman in
twenty, and to Emerson in fifty-six” (167).
exceed as they condition literature.” In Dickinson’s case, as Jackson and Morris suggest in different ways, attending seriously to such accidents and contingencies challenges not only the “poetics of presence” (Morris, 141) but the “corollary projects of American literary nationalism.” As the recent and painful history of feminist efforts to exhume Adelaide Johnson’s 1921 monument to the woman suffrage movement from the crypt of the United States Capitol underlines, sometimes (to rewrite Howells) it is women’s statues that suffer under the pressure to reproduce women’s history in the nationalist idiom of the nineteenth-century monument tradition.22

Rather than seek, as one narrative of canon revision would do, to replace Emerson’s headstone with Dickinson’s monument or with a pantheon of female faces to answer those of Stedman’s 1900 anthology,23 I end here by imagining the beginnings of an exchange among

22 By 1921 Johnson’s statue was already a difficult exercise in adapting the rhetoric of civic monuments to women. Her group composition incorporates naturalistic busts of Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton into a massive, partly finished base that rises behind the figures into a craggy peak, a small-scale American natural sublime, rather like that of Emerson’s headstone. The composition implies, presumably, that the woman suffrage movement was not and could not be represented as just one woman’s achievement, still less as the achievement of allegorical woman rather than of historical women, yet the sculpture lacks a gestural idiom that might relate these figures actively to one another. When a coalition of women’s groups began working, in the early 1990s, to retrieve the monument from the Capitol basement, the National Political Congress of Black Women protested that it was insufficient as a representation of the movement, since it lacked any reference to major black suffrage activists like Sojourner Truth. As the feminist newspaper off our backs reported in May 1997, various solutions had been proposed: one was to introduce a likeness of Truth into the craggy, unfinished area of the monument (similarly, a proposal to add Anthony’s face to Mount Rushmore had been circulated earlier in the century); another was to accompany Johnson’s monument with a separate statue of Truth (like the women’s statue commissioned to stand alongside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall). On the monument’s early history see Charles E. Fairman, Art and Artists of the Capitol of the United States of America (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1927); on the effort to incorporate Anthony into Mount Rushmore see Rex Alan Smith, The Carving of Mount Rushmore (New York: Abbeville, 1985); on the recent feminist struggles to resurrect and modify or supplement Johnson’s monument see “The Truth of the Suffrage Monument,” off our backs, May 1997, 5.

23 For a famous early example of feminist canon revision along these lines see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and
three writerly hands: first, the hand of Domna C. Stanton, which may have interpolated the illustrations in Charlene Avallone's essay and thus points to the contingent hand of the editor in textual transmission, inviting us to remember her not by her face but as Claes Oldenburg's giant eraser; next, the hand of the poet in Longfellow's "Elegiac Verse," from which Stanton takes her epigraph, reminding us that "not in tenderness wanting, yet rough are the rhymes of our poet; / Though it be Jacob's voice, Esau's, alas! are the hands" (341); and finally, Dickinson's summary of her long, intense, and troubled love for and correspondence with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "Here is Festival—Where my hands are cut, her fingers will be found inside" (2:430). As against the timeless stay against contingency aspired to by monuments, the editor's intervening hand; as against the impenetrability of statues, identities wrapped—not without violence—inside another's textual skin.

the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). Like Rowe's At Emerson's Tomb, The Madwoman in the Attic uncannily reproduces the logic of Stedman's anthology frontispiece, although in a different gender. In their speculative theoretical chapter "The Parables of the Cave," Gilbert and Gubar imagine that the pantheon of great women authors treated in their study coalesce "to form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist, a 'mother of us all,' as Gertrude Stein would put it, a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember" (101). For Gilbert and Gubar, this imagined "mother of us all" serves the same purpose for women's literature that Emerson's tomb does for Rowe's and Stedman's versions of American literature, that of embodying and guaranteeing the coherence of a tradition. In its original context, though, Stein's "mother of us all" comments on Gilbert and Gubar's monumentalizing feminist ambitions with some proleptic irony. In Virgil Thomson's opera about Susan B. Anthony, The Mother of Us All, for which Stein wrote the libretto, Anthony speaks from behind a statue of herself. Stein's libretto was published in Last Operas and Plays, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Rinehart, 1949).

24 For a detailed reading of Susan Gilbert Dickinson's emotional significance in Dickinson's life and her contribution to Dickinson's manuscript poetics see Martha Nell Smith, Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 129-220.