Emily Dickinson’s Letters: Another Revised Date

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Since Emily Dickinson (1830–86) seldom recorded dates when writing letters, the editors of her correspondence have always relied on a combination of internal and external evidence to help estimate the time and place of their composition. The year 1851 is an especially good one for both kinds of evidence because, starting in June, the poet sent regular messages to her brother (William) Austin Dickinson (1829–95), then working as a teacher in Boston: most of these are now archived at Amherst College in Massachusetts, and many of their postmarked envelopes have been preserved with them.1 In addition, Dickinson’s younger sister Lavinia (1833–99) kept a diary for the same year, which also survives.2 Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward had access to both sets of material when compiling the standard three-volume edition of her correspondence in 1958, as did Jay Leyda for his monumental work on the Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson in 1961.3 But another source—a meteorological journal kept by Ebenezer Strong Snell, a Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at Amherst College—provides additional information about the year of 1851 that enables us to make fine adjustments to some of their estimates.

A letter to Austin, dated 5 October 1851 separately by both Johnson and Ward and by Leyda, and endorsed only ‘Sunday morning’ by the poet, poses a challenge to Dickinson scholars because it has an envelope but no postmark.4 It begins with Dickinson explaining to her brother that, because of ‘rain and shower, and shower after shower of chilly pelting rain’, she has been given permission by parents anxious about her delicate health to stay at home—which allows her time to write. She also mentions that it ‘is Communion Sunday’ (traditionally the initial Sunday of every month in the First, Congregational, Church of Amherst) and refers to a recent visit by Lavinia and herself to Boston, which is known to have lasted from 6 to 21 September. The suggested date for this letter was based on an anecdotal explanation in Emily Dickinson’s Home by Millicent Todd Bingham (daughter of Mabel Loomis Todd, editor of the first ever selection of Dickinson’s correspondence), whose information was often thought to have derived, via her mother, from Austin Dickinson himself.5

Bingham writes that on ‘the fifth of October, in order to take advantage of a chance messenger leaving for Boston early the next day, Emily spent an uninterrupted morning writing to her brother’. There is no reason to doubt the account—for Dickinson herself mentions in the letter that Ebenezer ‘Burgess called on Friday evening and offered to carry anything which we would like to send-he says he shall see you often.’6 But there are two problems with the date assigned by successive editors: Lavinia Dickinson’s diary makes no reference to Burgess visiting the Dickinson family on Friday 3 October, and (less seriously) nor does she record poor weather on that Sunday (as she sometimes does when it rains).7 More importantly, Snell’s meteorological journal entry for Sunday 5 October describes it as ‘mostly clouded’ with no precipitation—which does not tally with Dickinson’s description: she regrets the constant showers, but enjoys the freedom of being allowed to stay at home because of them.

A different set of coordinates is needed here—one that includes a date that is subsequent to the Boston trip that ended on 21 September, a Communion Sunday when it rained persistently, and a Friday visit by Ebenezer Burgess in 1851. Crucially, Lavinia mentions that ‘Both Burgesses’ called at the Dickinson’s Main Street home in Amherst on Friday 31 October, which is the only time she notes a Friday visit from Burgess for the entire year. Next, Lavinia’s note for Sunday 2 November reads: ‘Communion Sabbath. Rainy day. Went in morning only. Burgess called.’ Snell’s record for 2 November confirms the weather: ‘Overcast. Rainy from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M.’ Thanks to a common reference to Burgess in separate documents by the Dickinson sisters, and a remarkably detailed daily record of the Amherst weather by a college professor, we can now be reasonably certain that L54 was composed on the morning of Sunday 2 November 1851.

1 Emily Dickinson Collection, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

2 Lavinia Norcross Dickinson, Diary: autograph manuscript, 1851 January 1 through December 31. Dickinson family papers, 1757–1934. MS Am 1118.95 (226). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

3 The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, 1958). Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven, CT, 1960).

4 Letters of Emily Dickinson, 140–2; Years and Hours, I, 215–16. The original is at the Archives and Special Collections of the Frost Library at Amherst College, where it has the catalogue number AC#570. The envelope, ornately edged, is addressed to ‘Wm Austin Dickinson./ Boston/ Mass.’ but has no stamp.

5 Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson’s Home: Letters of Edward Dickinson and His Family (New York, 1955), 181. Mabel Loomis Todd, Letters of Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1894).

6 Letters of Emily Dickinson, 141.

7 Dickinson’s letter mentions that ‘Wm Kellogg is going [to Boston] tomorrow’—and Lavinia Dickinson’s Diary refers to an ‘E. Kellogg’ visiting on Friday 3 October, but not Burgess. Lavinia’s Diary includes references to rain on Sunday 19 September (‘Rainy day. Church closed, at home all day … Attended evening meeting’) and Sunday 28 September (‘Rainy + dismal!’). Of the nineteen references to ‘rainy’ days, five are to Sundays.