Reviews

A Book About Nothing,
A Book About Everything

WILLIAM BUTTS


I scribble on anything within reach when I need to jot down some minor reminder or phone message: Back of envelope or shopping list, front of not-yet-discarded junk mail, corner of mail-order catalogue, whatever. My desk is sometimes awash with such detritus. By next day I can’t recall half of them; the other half I can’t decipher.

Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, utilized odd-shaped fronts and backs and flaps and insides of used envelopes to record fleeting poetic thoughts and observations, invariably pencilled in her neat, bold semi-cursive script. *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings* is the first such study of these seemingly minor jottings, and it is—well, a gorgeous book. Big, bold and with
literary critics tend to revel in the ethereal, not-quite-graspable emotions and wonderfully odd images that inform so much of her poetry. This kind of analysis and discussion of arcane allusions and allegory may be read by academics and recovering academics, but not by John Q. Public. The Gorgeous Nothings may just find a market in both audiences. It is visually appealing for the casual poetry buff, yet includes interpretive essays by the editors (“Studies in Scale” by visual artist Bervin and the lengthier “Itineraries of Escape” by literary scholar Werner) for the scholarly-minded.

“Dickinson’s writing materials might best be described as epistolary,” notes Bervin in his introduction, which provides a bit of background and perspective prior to the illustrations that constitute the vast bulk of The Gorgeous Nothings.

Everything [Dickinson] wrote – poems, letters, and drafts, in fascicles, on folios, individual sheets, envelopes, and fragments – was predominantly composed on plain, machine-made stationery….

Dickinson’s envelope writings convey a sense of New England thrift and her relationship to the larger household economy of paper…. 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… 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…. 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….

Bervin’s is a thoughtful elaboration of the care and forethought that went into even the most seemingly spontaneous of Dickinson’s writings.

While Dickinson’s verse is accessible and intriguing enough it continues to interest the general public, writings about Emily Dickinson definitely can’t make the same claim. Writers and luxurious margins, with plentiful actual-size illustrations of this unusual outpouring of striking messages on the most ephemeral of humble scraps, The Gorgeous Nothings is the most unusual autograph-related book published in 2013.
clever is the editors’ decision to have most facing pages featuring a simple line drawing of each envelope fragment with a typeset transcription of Dickinson’s words – useful if you’re not accustomed to her script or eccentric punctuation.) Autograph dealers like myself are well familiar with writers who seemed unable to put pen to paper without writing something somehow memorable – be it funny, outrageous, or just plain pithy. Mark Twain comes to mind as one such writer. No matter how brief or pedestrian the purpose of a letter, he usually managed to insert some zinger. Dickinson, too, packs such a punch. Even the tiniest of envelope fragments illustrated here – and some are remarkably small – are enough to make you pause, think, consider.

Autograph collectors who may have only one or two examples of her signature in general collecting texts may wish to add this to their reference collection as a superb gathering of handwriting exemplars. A few other works do illustrate many of her poetry manuscripts in facsimile, though generally in more expensive editions.

The front-and-back lovely illustrations of the 52 envelopes (all but one located at Amherst College Library) are followed by co-editor Werner’s discussion of the envelopes – how they fit within Dickinson’s writing process, how she may have used them, how the sentiment she wanted to express determined the size and shape of the envelope fragment, and so on. She writes that “Most… appear to be rough-copy poems or the lyric beginnings or endings of poems. The earliest ‘envelope-poem’ may have been composed around 1864… and a handful of other envelope-texts… belong to the same decade. The remaining envelope-poems bear composition dates ranging from 1870 to 1885....”

Talk about thorough: A “Visual Index” by Bervin at the conclusion reproduces the entire collection again in miniature by shape, sorting them into “Page Shape” (“Flaps and Seals,” “Arrows,” “Pointless Arrows”), “Envelopes Addressed by Emily Dickinson,” “Envelopes Addressed by Others,” “Index of Envelopes with Columns,” “Index of Envelopes with Pencilled Divisions,” “Index of Envelopes with Multidirectional Text,” “Index of Envelopes Turned Diagonally,” “Index of Envelopes with Cancelled or Erased Text” and “Index of Envelopes with Variants.” I’m not sure what purpose this sorting by shape and other factors serves, but it held my attention.

Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings does not, to paraphrase Macbeth, signify nothing. On the contrary, these incidental fragments, so beautifully reproduced, signify much, showing the creative process of one of our great poetical geniuses at work.

About Paper

Some years ago, exhibiting at the ABAA’s San Francisco Antiquarian Book Fair, Nick Basbanes told me about a project he was researching. It concerned the history of paper but, he stressed, would not be the usual straightforward chronological narrative. Ever since I’ve been anticipating an out-of-the-ordinary chronicle of this medium we hold dear – the medium you hold in your hands as you read this. On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History, I’m pleased (but not surprised) to report, succeeds wonderfully, proving once again that Basbanes is, as the jacket titles him, a “Self-Confessed Bibliophiliac” extraordinaire.

On Paper is also, I confess, one of the most difficult volumes to characterize I’ve encountered in this column’s two decades. Basbanes writes, “a conventional timeline of [paper’s] discovery and adoption is not the central thrust of this book.”

Instead, my driving interest points more to the idea of paper, one that certainly takes in the twin notions of medium and message but that also examines its indispensability as a tool of flexibility and function…. Paper is light, absorbent, strong, plentiful, and portable; you can fold it, mail, coat it with wax and waterproof it, wrap gunpowder or tobacco in it, boil tea in it. We have used paper in abundance to record our history, make our laws, conduct our business, correspond with our loved ones, decorate our walls, and establish our identities.

Like readers of Manuscripts, Basbanes is unashamedly in love with paper. His 1995 bestseller A Gentle Madness introduced many to the addiction known as bibliomania, and many other bookish volumes since have demonstrated his devotion to cellulose-based products. So it should not astonish readers that in On Paper Basbanes takes his fellow paperphiles on a com-
On Paper does indeed open with several nuts-and-bolts chapters in which Basbanes explores the roots of papermaking – first in the earliest years of the first millennium in China, then several centuries later in Japan. These he enlivens with a travelogue as he tours hand papermaking workshops in China with a group of like-minded paper enthusiasts. The craft spills over into Chinese-occupied Korea in early A.D. before floating across the Sea of Japan to that island nation around the seventh century – where again Basbanes visits hand papermaking masters and views their techniques. Thence to Spain via the Arabs, spreading quickly to Italy and throughout Europe, other continents following soon after.

These are the jumping-off points, though, for Basbanes is masterful at showing how papermaking developments have gone hand in hand with other technological advances and the broader historical implications they brought. Don’t assume that most of On Paper concerns paper for books and newspapers – far from it. On the dark side, where would gunpowder be without the paper cartridges that made efficient loading and firing of weapons possible and cigarettes without the special paper that holds them together? Or paper currency, stamps, financial instruments and passports without high-tech papers? On the less glamorous side, imagine the average kitchen without paper towels and personal hygiene without toilet paper. (Did you know that hardwood pulp gives t.p. its softness while softwood pulp gives it its strength? A staggering revelation.)

But my feeble litany reduces this fascinating account of how and why paper products have so formed our past, fill our present and will shape our future to the level of fun trivia. Basbanes mixes history with anecdote and observation in a style that subtly and persuasively draws together many seemingly disparate elements into a conclusive picture – again, a collage.

Take the chapter “The Sound of Money.” Basbanes’ case study of Zenas Crane founding a paper mill in 1799 includes his visit with seventh-generation papermaker Douglas A. Crane and follows this firm from its colonial beginning through all of the 19th and 20th centuries. We see it adapt to the times, change strategies, reinvent itself – and all this without ever using trees for their paper! An astonishing success story about a firm that
provides the paper for all U.S. currency and shows more than half a billion dollars in sales annually. “How Crane and Company has managed to survive as an industrial force in New England when so much of its competition has come and gone is a topic worthy of a doctoral dissertation....”

Again, this review barely scratches the surface of this most engaging but far-reaching study. At random, there’s the chapter “Metamorphosis” (routine annual destruction of millions of declassified documents for recycling and other green recyclers), “Things Unknown” (towering figures in world history who could only create on paper: Da Vinci, Beethoven, Edison), “Sleight of Hand” (origami masters who consult with N.A.S.A. and M.I.T.), “At the Crossroads” (papermaker behemoth P.H. Glatfelter Inc. that thrives as “the leading producer of more than a thousand different specialty papers for a varied cluster of ‘niche’ markets” and Harvard University head librarian Robert Darnton who keeps that institution’s many libraries active and utilized).... Add another dozen chapters and you can begin to imagine the breathtaking breadth of On Paper.

On Paper may not seem directly germane to the preoccupations of autograph collectors per se, though historical documents do surface here and there (William Bradford and John Winthrop letters, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson’s papers and others) – but ask yourself: Can any autograph collector or dealer, archivist or librarian ever know too much about paper? Basbanes manages to achieve just the right blend of information and entertainment, of journalistic writing and scholarly knowledge with just plain good writing, into a style that will capture the interest of layperson and librarian, paperphile and not-yet-paperphile. As A Gentle Madness did for book collecting – not only creating new book collectors, but increasing public awareness of our field – so too On Paper may increase awareness and appreciation of this product that informs so much of our lives.

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