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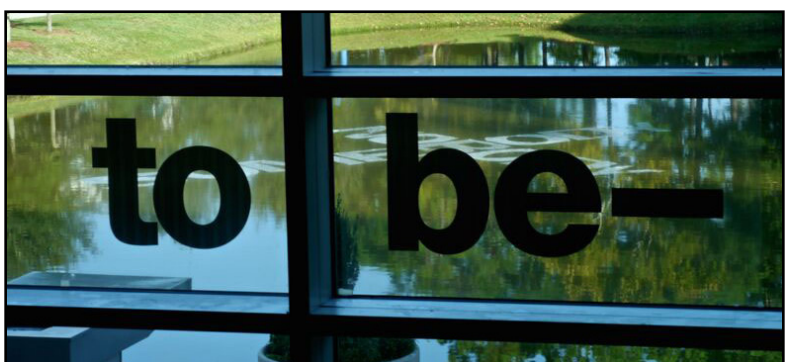
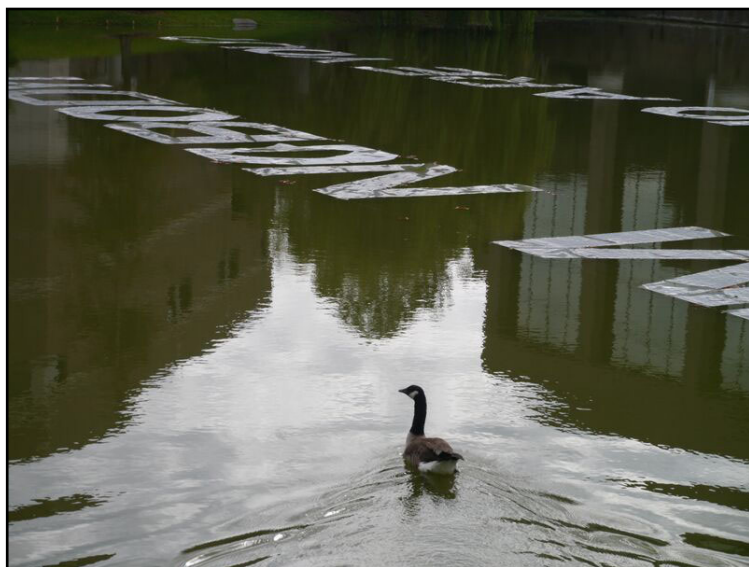
# Bulletin

Volume 27, Number 2

November/December 2015

*"The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality."*

## Dickinson and the Elements



# Bodies of Water: Somebody | Nobody (For E.D.)

By Clark Lunberry

Clark Lunberry is a Professor of English at the University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida. In addition to the “Writing on Water / Writing on Air” poetry installations on the UNF campus discussed in this article, Lunberry has completed related installations in Paris, France; Durham, England; Toronto, Canada; Tokyo and Hiroshima, Japan; and at Stanford University: <http://www.unf.edu/~clunberry>.

I’m Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there’s a pair of us!  
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!

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On a pond adjacent to the University of North Florida’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library, parts of Emily Dickinson’s well-known poem about being a “Nobody” were recently written on the water. During the fall of 2014, the familiar words of that poem’s opening line – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – appeared to float upon the library’s pond, reflecting vividly in the light of day (yet disappearing entirely in the dark of night). While inside the library’s large open stairway, on the tall windows that face directly out onto that pond, the first line of the poem’s second stanza – “How dreary – to be – Somebody!” – was also written. As one climbed the library’s staircase, moving from the first floor to the fourth, this second line from Dickinson’s poem was spatially staggered – as if by its own dashes – between the floors, its words printed onto transparencies and attached to the panes of glass. Together, on the library’s pond and windows, Dickinson’s words remained in place for the next several weeks, the lines from the poem seen by all who came upon them.

This “writing on water / writing on air” installation was the most recent of six

such projects that I have completed at the University of North Florida, in Jacksonville, Florida, as well as similar installations that I have done at various sites around the world. These installations on the library’s pond began in 2007 with the simple, initiating inscription “WATER ON WATER,” with each letter of that line – around 7’ x 7’ in size – cut from a roll of thick plastic and, with the aid of a kayak, clipped to lines of twine stretching unseen from shore to shore.<sup>1</sup> A similar procedure was followed for this most recent Dickinson-related installation, one that was entitled “Bodies of Water: Somebody | Nobody” (for E.D.). This newest project was prompted in part by a course that I was teaching at the university that fall on Dickinson.

In the weeks leading up to this installation, I hadn’t yet settled upon the precise language to be used for the project, knowing from past experience that “writing on water / writing on air” demanded a particular kind of poetic affirmation. After all, not just any language can be seen to float on a pond, or to hang suspended from windows, as if into thin air. Many hours were thus spent going through Dickinson’s poetry with the site-specifics of this installation in mind.

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent installations at the University of North Florida were “Murmur of Words” (2008); “Floating Form Less” (2009); “Sinking Sensation” (2011); and “No Such Thing” (2012). Images and information about these, and related projects in Paris, Toronto, Durham (U.K.), Stanford University, Tokyo and Hiroshima, can be seen on my website: <http://www.unf.edu/~clunberry>

I was, in this collaboration with the poet, hoping to locate just the right lines of language, *les mots juste*, that would be both concise enough to fit upon the library’s pond (with each letter again at around 7’ x 7’), as well as on the library’s stairway windows. In addition, though, I was also looking for poems, or parts of poems, that would effectively evoke and represent something significant and revealing of the poet’s work.

It was in light of this installation’s unique environmental and architectural constraints that Dickinson’s well-known poem about being a “Nobody” suddenly seemed the ideal choice for such a project, with both its form and content fitting nicely the particular (and peculiar) needs of this installation. In fact, it was in large part the very familiarity of this much-admired, much-anthologized poem that, to my mind, made it so suitable for such a *de-familiarizing* transposition onto water and air, making new the seemingly known by materially estranging its context and formation.

I sensed also from this celebrated poem about being a “Nobody” that there would be something powerful, even provocative, in taking poetic sentiments that were apparently so private, so resistant to being made “public,” presenting key lines of its language floating out in the landscape (after having been directly asked not to share the otherwise confidential sentiment: “Don’t tell!,” the speaker politely requests). Indeed, to take parts of a poem that seems on the page almost whispered, even intimate, and intended for only one other (making “a pair of us!”), and place

them on the pond and windows, so grandly and so openly, felt like the broadcasting of a secret to the world (as if to “advertise” it, in violation of the poem’s original discretion, at the scale of a billboard).

**Weeks One and Two:** After many days of preparation (with the time spent mostly cutting out the large letters from the plastic sheeting), on a bright but blustery Sunday afternoon, the selected words from this Dickinson poem were finally installed on the library’s pond and windows, taking many hours to finish, and with several students and friends helping with its arduous and exhausting completion.<sup>2</sup> As before, using a kayak, one large letter at a time was slowly clipped into position with wooden clothespins, the words attached to suspended twine strung just beneath the pond’s surface. First to be installed were those letters that form the poem’s astonishing opening exclamation: “I’m Nobody!” Next, the second line from the poem was completed, some distance down from the first, putting in place that powerful, if powerfully simple question: “Who are you?”

Once done on the water (taking, in total, more than four hours to install, struggling in particular with Dickinson’s never-before written-on-water apostrophe [’], question mark [?] and exclamation point [!]), it was immediately clear that it’s one thing to come across this poem’s provocative opening line – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – printed discreetly upon a page at ten or

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to all of those who assisted with this installation: Michael Boyles, Michael Dimmitt, Noah Lunberry, and, in particular, Kelley Predieri, out in the kayak.



twelve point font. It’s another experience entirely to see it at such an inflated scale floating on water, with each of its individual letters larger than the person reading it. Indeed, seen in this unorthodox manner, the lines of the poem unexpectedly resonated with a new kind of uncanny urgency and insistence, as if having floated away from their originating poem, or from their originating poet. Hardly whispered, these bold words on the pond now loudly asserted themselves to those seeing them, causing us perhaps to wonder (anew) who, in that first part of the poem, is the “Nobody” that is speaking here, the “I” behind the apparent absence? And who, in the second section, is the “you” being so forthrightly, indiscriminately addressed (bringing theatrically to mind *Hamlet*’s own ghostly opening lines: “Who’s there?... Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself”)?

Curiously, in seeing the poem’s large words floating out on the water, it might have appeared as if the pond itself had suddenly begun to speak, taking on a ghostly life of its own in the bright light of day. Recalling the poem’s own reference to an “admiring Bog,” the library’s reflecting pond and its liquefied letters – now directly facing us – seemed to echo from off that body of water’s mirroring surface.

Or, one might even have wondered in coming upon this writing on the pond, was it perhaps something of language itself that was speaking that day, its luminous words having assumed a certain self-presence out on the water? As a (quite literal) floating signifier publicly announcing itself as a now-liquidated “Nobody,” the “admiring” pond ap-



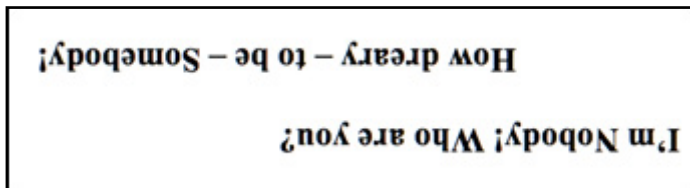
peared to ask those of us who came upon it – “Somebody” or anybody – that most troubling of questions: “Who are you?”

on the large letters and, hammock-like, sleeping upon them.

Seen from the sidewalks outside the library, the floating letters and words assumed their shifting formation in relation to the reader’s own movements, seen either from the front, to the side, or even

– upside down and “backward” – from behind.<sup>3</sup> Also, seen frequently on the library’s pond, alongside the poem’s two large lines of language, were the Canadian geese that annually migrate here in the fall, swimming both around and directly over the floating words, but seemingly untroubled by this temporary poetic alteration to their natural habitat. The big Florida turtles that live throughout the year on the pond, though initially skittish at the sight of it all, soon adapted to the situation, eventually even climbing up

<sup>3</sup>“Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have – A something overtakes the Mind – .” Emily Dickinson, note on wrapping paper (PF 30); quoted by Marta Werner in *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios*, 1).



Cloudy days, sunny days, windy and rainy days, through them all the words of the poem endured, with the changing light constantly shifting the look of the language, the shadows of sense and suggestion at play on the pond. On bright afternoons, the letters glistened or glared, with tall trees mirrored upside-down and backwards onto the watery words; or a solitary cloud might be seen to float through the line “I’m Nobody!” – ephemerally offering a kind of objective correlative to that nobody before us. But, at other times, as more clouds moved in, covering the sky, those words on the water might suddenly appear soft and diaphanous, the actual plastic of each letter magically transforming into a kind of translucent film of shaped light. With

the words read in this constantly changing manner, the adjusted light of the letters, in turn, adjusted the question being asked – “Who are you?” – into one perhaps more plaintive or poignant, like one body of water addressing another (our own!), making “a pair of us” in the exchange. Later, as the sun would set, the growing darkness slowly absorbed the

poem entirely, erasing it from view (that *something* in the day turned to *nothing* in the night) until, the next morning, as if reawakened, the words would reaffirm their poetic presence out on the pond.

With the first line from Dickinson’s poem – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – successfully written on the water, the opening sentence of the poem’s second stanza – “How dreary – to be – Somebody!” – was unfurled from the acetate transparencies, its pre-printed words then taped into place on the windows of the various floors in the library’s stairway. Though certainly not as large as those on the water, the letters on the windows were still big and bold, measuring about 3’ x 3’, with each word

printed jet-black onto the clear sheets of acetate.

Much like those seen floating below, the words on the library’s adjacent windows were seen and read in specific relation to one’s movement up or down the stairway, as if the poem’s sentence itself was being moved through, the poem physically, spatially entered. Looking up the library’s stairway from ground-level, what was first seen on the windows were the words “How dreary –” emblazoned starkly upon the background sky between the first and second floors. Then, taking my cue for the division of the poem’s second line from Dickinson’s own line-dividing dashes, the next two sections of the sentence were dimensionally connected as one climbed the stairs, first with “to be –” attached to the windows between the second and third floors, and then, between the third and fourth floors, that final large word “Somebody!” suspended boldly alone.

Once in place, these words on the window were both seen, and seen through, in relation to those other words of Dickinson’s poem simultaneously seen out on the water, the various lines of language shifting

their locations, intersecting and overlapping, offering in the momentary adjacencies suggestions of unexpected formation. Reading this poem inside and out, from the library’s first floor to its fourth, parts of its three spatially staggered lines could at times be read directly upon, or alongside, those floating out on the pond, forming such arrangements as the following:

- “How dreary –” / “I’m Nobody” (as if characterizing the dreary condition described)

Or:

- “Who are you?” / “to be –” (insinuating the audacity of the claim being made)

Or:

- “I’m Nobody? Who are you?” / “Somebody!” (That single word on the window, “Somebody!,” heard as an affirmative response to the pointed question being asked out on the water)

Seeing and reading in such kaleidoscopic motion,<sup>4</sup> those of us walking up and down

the library’s stairs moved (like a passing cloud) through the poem, as the poem appeared to move porously through us. Each particular arrangement of language gave way to another, and then to another, in temporary and contingent alignment to one’s own floating movements through the stairway.

**Weeks Three and Four:** After two weeks, during which the initial arrangement of the poem’s words remained largely unchanged (more or less untroubled by the autumn winds or rain that passed through the area, or the geese and turtles seen moving on and around the language), a kind of editing and adjusting of the poem was to occur, a pared-down revision of the words written on the water and air. And so, on another Sunday afternoon, using

<sup>4</sup>Such seeing-in-motion suggests something of Baudelaire’s 19th century Parisian *flâneur* transported to 21st century Florida, that “kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting” (Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*).



once more the kayak, the words on the pond were rearranged and rewritten, creating a new formation in which the original two-part exclamation and question “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” was radically reduced, with just the single large words “Somebody” and “Nobody” now made to intersect at the very center of the pond.

Inside the library, a similar reduction occurred, such that all that remained of the previous sentence on the windows (having taken down both “How dreary – ” and “Somebody!”) were the two small words “to be – ” suspended alone, seen still between the second and third floors at the center of the stairway. In this new arrangement, these words were then seen in direct relation to the “Somebody | Nobody” intersecting out on the pond. Those two key (and capitalized) words, those two *bodies* from the first and second stanzas of Dickinson’s poem, were joined together as a “pair,” while dimensionally aligning with the “to be – ” superimposed upon them through the library’s windows. Offering a kind of watery correlative to Baudelaire’s *flâneur* (with his “ego athirst for the non-ego”), it was as if the two intersecting words written on water were suddenly uttering a delayed response to the initial question asked the previous weeks: “Who are you?” Absorbed in their own conjunction, those words remaining on the pond were now interconnected, permeably floating as “Somebody | Nobody,” as bodies of water overlapping in motion, bodies of water crossing in time.

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