

Emily Dickinson: Modernism and Beyond

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In a recent account of the latest developments in Dickinson studies Margaret Dickie (1995: 321-333) outlines the new set of problems that have confronted the textual editors of the American poet since R.W. Franklin's epochal edition, in 1981, facsimile edition of a large body of Dickinson's holographs. In this article Dickie makes use of a most apt metaphor that anyone familiar with Dickinson's work will immediately appreciate. The major task, after 'the butterflies' have been busy interpreting Dickinson's work, is now that of the 'caterpillars' and names, in particular, the poet Susan Howe who after her *My Emily Dickinson*, in 1987, came out in 1993, with a most challenging if unconventional new study entitled *The Birthmark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literature*; and the textual editor, Jerome McGann, primarily known for his studies on the English poets of the Late Romantic Period. McGann has challenged the universally accepted Johnson variorum edition of 1955 arguing that Johnson's is an excellent example of a scholar still following the tenets of New Criticism. In his *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993: 26-41), he claims that while the mostly feminist critics have been busy bringing the poet out into the world and placing her in the context of other women poets or of her male contemporaries, now not only they but all critics of Dickinson have the problem of re-interpreting their own work in view of the new light which has been shed on her unique handcrafted manuscripts.

This situation brings immediately to mind the well-known letter in which Dickinson gives her Norcross cousins a vivid account of the fire that destroyed downtown Amherst on the night of July 4th, 1879, of which I am giving the most relevant parts:

[...] I sprang to the window, and each side of the curtain saw that awful sun.[...] Vinnie came soft as a moccasin, 'Don't be afraid, Emily, it is only the fourth of July.'[...] I could hear buildings falling, and oil exploding, and people walking and talking gayly, and cannon soft as velvet from parishes that did not know that we were burning up. And so much lighter than day was it, that I saw a caterpillar measure a leaf far down in the orchard; and Vinnie kept saying bravely, 'It's only the fourth of July' [...]. (Johnson & Ward 1958: II. 643-644)

Here it is, as compact and intense and quirky a scene as any that have come from Emily: the caterpillar is deliberately 'measuring' his leaf while all of Amherst is

ablaze. Not only that, but this letter prophetically illuminates the uneasy relation that exists between the few philologists and the many critics who are busy interpreting her work (incidentally, the *Concordance* of the poems (Rosenbaum 1964) shows only two instances of the word 'caterpillar' as opposed to at least 48 entries between 'butterflies', 'butterfly' and 'butterfly's).

Indeed, a critic of the stature of Roger Shattuck has taken issue with the most obstreperous of Dickinson's female readers (Camille Paglia, of course), as recently as June 1996, offering his own version of the 'real' Emily Dickinson in the pages of the authoritative *New York Review of Books*. Still unaware, unfortunately, that the houses of the butterflies were burning down while the caterpillars were doing their fine piece of work.

What we now have, according to McGann, is a situation in which it would appear that any future interpretation of Dickinson's work is likely to lack a solid foundation until and unless the philological work of restoring the authenticity of the texts has been carried out. In fact, according to Susan Howe, the problem would have no solution at all:

During her lifetime this writer [Dickinson] refused to collaborate with the institution of publishing. When she created herself author, editor, and publisher, she situated her production in a field of free transgressive precovery. (Howe 1993: 147)

Clearly, this is a radical position to take and one which if carried to its logical conclusions, would make it impossible to even read Dickinson's work. That is if one assumes that while Franklin is preparing a new edition of the poems, critics and scholars could not, in good faith, continue to ask questions about her life and her work before the question of the manuscripts is answered – by the manuscripts themselves. For, as Dickie sums up the situation in her "Dickinson in Context", "Franklin is the one scholar, apart from the curator of manuscripts at Harvard's Houghton Library who has unlimited access to Dickinson's papers". (Dickie 1995: 325)

Fortunately, the situation is not this bleak since copies of a large part of the original mss. are readily available at the Dickinson Collection at Amherst College where the Curator is willing to cooperate and has in fact stated that R.W. Franklin has already concluded his editorial work and that all the material for the next 'definitive' edition of the complete poems is presently in the hands of Harvard University Press.¹

Having paid attention to all the peculiarities of Dickinson's handwriting (the paper marks, the crosses and checks that Dickinson put on the fascicles, the

1. This statement on the progress of Franklin's new edition was made to this writer at the Frost Memorial Library, Amherst, August 1966.

variants at the end of the poems, etc.), Howe, who incidentally is also a trained painter, goes as far as saying that,

Words are only frames. [...] Letters are scrawls, turnabouts, astonishments, strokes, cuts, masks. [...] These manuscripts should be understood as visual production. [...] Wrapped in the mirror of the word. (Howe 1993: 141)

In other words, Howe seems to be poetically asserting a principle that semiologists have already arrived at in their consideration of the formal specificity of literature as a system of texts that are connoted to aesthetic ends. As Yuri Lotman (1972: 28), for one, puts it:

The artistic sign escapes conventions, i.e., the iconic or phonological morpho-syntactic motivation which binds the signifier to the signified gives the literary discourse a translinguistic or metalinguistic structure.

Jerome McGann, who is firmly committed to placing Dickinson in the context of Modernism, fully agrees with Susan Howe's conclusions. In his Introduction to *Black Riders* (1993: 27) he argues that Dickinson's texts mark the beginning of a line that would lead to Charles Olson's "composition by field":

The grouping of the poems into fascicles corresponds to a similar approach to the text at a more local level – a poetic deployment of writing within the given space of the page. Free verse forms are typically composed by field – the measure may be acoustical, visual, or some combination of the two. What is startling about Dickinson's work is that her field compositions are deployed within (a) verse conventions of simple metrical forms, typically the quatrain, and (b) certain scriptural/typographical conventions of text presentation.

To illustrate his reading, McGann chooses as an example a famous poem, "Pain – has an Element of Blank", giving first the text as it appears in Johnson (1955: II. 650):

Pain – has an Element of Blank –
It cannot recollect
When it begun – or if there were
A time when it was not –

together with the manuscript version in Dickinson's own handwriting (Franklin 1981: 819):

+ +

Pain - has an Element
 of Blank.
 It cannot recollect
 when it began - or if
 there were
 a time when it was not.

It has no future - sur-idea
 It's Infinite Curves
 It's Past - enlightened to
 recover
 from Pains - of Pain.

+ + +

The most dramatic differences, one may say, appear in the first line with "of Blank -" and in the third line "When it begun - or if". The first, McGann remarks, is a moment of what Pound would later call 'phanopoeia' in that Dickinson plays with the blank space created by her script, thus giving the "Blank" the empty space it deserves; the second, which interrupts the quatrain measure, plays with the logic of syntax and is an instance of 'logopoeia'; "or if", placed as it is at the end of the line graphically illustrates and dramatizes the hypothetical alternative.

McGann (1993: 28) argues that it is of no use to assume that "these odd lineations are unintentional", the result of the poet's finding herself at the right edge of the page and so creating run-over lines. To his mind, the mss show that had Dickinson wanted she could have preserved the integrity of the metrical unit. In addition, he also observes that the folding over of the lines reveals such a dramatic use as to put the question of intentionality beyond consideration. This he further illustrates in reference to "Experience is the Angled Road" (Johnson 1955: I. 910).

Experience is the Angled Road
 Preferred against the Mind
 By - Paradox - the Mind itself -
 Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite - How Complicate
 The Discipline of Man -
 Compelling Him to Choose Himself
 His Preappointed Pain -

Here is the facsimile of the holograph text of the poem (Franklin 1981: 1033), followed by McGann's transcription of the same (1993: 28):

33 W 15

Experience is the Angled
Road
Preferred against the
Mind
By - Paradox - the
Mind itself
Presuming it to lead.

Quite Opposite - How
Compelling
The Discipline of
Man -
Compelling Him to
Choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -

Experience is the Angled
Road
Preferred against the
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By - Paradox - the
Mind itself -
Presuming it to lead

Quite opposite - How
The Discipline of
Man -
Compelling Him to
Choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -

As Sharon Cameron (1979: 37-38) comments, the lack of explicit connection between the statements in what is one of Dickinson's many 'definitional' poems, sometimes results in speech that is almost unintelligible. The distinctions are so coiled here that it is difficult to understand them. One way of interpreting the first stanza is to assume that experience is chosen above the mind ("Preferred against it" in line 2 even though (and this is the paradox) the mind itself states its preference for experience. Again McGann (1993: 28 and 31) finds that, that Johnson's normalization of the poem into quatrains complicates the matter

further, in that it clearly destroys the most important handcrafted features of the text,

[...] its repeated moves to isolate words and phrases, to fracture the traditional meter and syntax that serve as the basic subtext of the actual writing.

In McGann's reading, the separation between the first and the second set of seven lines is important because it alludes to the quatrain subtext which calls for a sharp separation, should the text be scripted in quatrains. Moreover, the word "Paradox" suggests at least two substantive functions: as object of the preposition (as Johnson also suggests) or as a simple exclamation, which is isolated by the dashes, thus presenting the possibility of a second reading, linking "By...the Mind itself / Presuming it to lead" // "Quite opposite...", thanks to a daring enjambement that would make the line fold over the next, across the stanzaic space separating the two halves of the poem.

Unlike Johnson's, McGann claims, Dickinson's text has so loosened the hinges of its more formal subtext (the quatrain stanza of course) as to throw its words open to unexpected linguistic possibilities. At this point, it may be even superfluous to stress that the openings to alternative semantic arrangements emerge principally from the visual structure of the poem.

Before I move on to a brief discussion of at least one of the readers of the fascicles *after* Franklin's facsimile edition of 1981, I should like to describe, as best I can, the contents of this two-volume publication based on the main holdings of the Houghton collection at Harvard and the Dickinson papers at Amherst College. Franklin's edition includes some 1100 of the 1775 poems edited by Johnson, the 40 reconstructed bound fascicles, that is the 40 packets of the hand-sewn original booklets found by Dickinson's sister, Lavinia, as well as the unbound sheets – which Franklin calls 'sets' – which are grouped by similarity of date and writing paper. The other mss found by Lavinia as well as fair copies sent to friends are not included by Franklin (1983: 16), for Franklin's intention was to present only the mss which Emily herself had prepared for inclusion in her mss packets. Franklin writes that the fascicles were a means of keeping order among Dickinson's poems, that they literally helped her to tidy up:

The disorder that fascicle sheets forestalled
 may be seen in the 'scraps' of the later years.
 When she did not copy such sheets and destroy
 the previous versions, her poems are found on
 hundreds of odds and ends -- brown paper bags,
 magazine clippings, discarded envelopes and
 letters, the backs of recipes.

From this statement we may infer how meritorious Johnson's edition has been. At the same time, however, we must acknowledge that the enterprise begun by Franklin is a most challenging one. No doubt Franklin's work will also in turn come under critical scrutiny with the much-awaited entirely new edition of the whole corpus of Dickinson's poetry.

Needless to say questions have also been raised as to the reliability of Johnson's edition of the letters and of the relation these bear on her poetry. Indeed, according to McGann, the full extent of Dickinson's innovation can best be appreciated only when we recall that she made and maintained lasting contacts with some 90 correspondents, almost exclusively through the medium of letter writing. What McGann describes as the "crucial formality of her work" is that her writing is not 'spasmodic' or 'uncontrolled' (as her would-be mentor Col. Higginson mistakenly thought). Rather, it reveals a deliberate choice to draw its elementary rules of form from the writing conventions of personal correspondence rather than from the conventions of the printed texts of the popular "Fireside poets" – such as Longfellow and Whittier. As so often happens in her "letter-poems", entire passages scan like evident metrical feet. And it so happened that Johnson's sharp division between formalities of verse and prose makes it impossible to see or hear "the metrical subtext of the prose and the prosy surface of the verse" (McGann 1994: 128).

Susan Howe (1993: 19), for one, quotes the translator of Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hymns and Fragments*, Richard Sieburth, as saying that:

(The editors of the Frankfurt Holderlin) by presenting his texts as events rather than objects, as processes rather than products, convert the reader from passive consumer into active participant in the genesis of the poem, while at the same time calling attention to the fundamentally historical character of both the reader's and writer's activity.

Incidentally, in a *TLS* review of *The Birth-mark* Sieburth (1993) lambasts "the generations of (male) philologists who have editorially dwarfed Dickinson into a poet of exquisite miniatures and prim quatrains".

Susan Howe (1993: 19) proceeds to ask:

Why isn't there a similar editorial project working now to show the layerings and fragile immediacies of (Dickinson's) multifaceted visual and verbal productions? Why is there still no substantial critique of the history of these authorized and unauthorized texts?

Indeed, in her recent *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*, a Dickinson critic like Sharon Cameron has already provided a cogent critique of Franklin's work by questioning his conviction that Dickinson intended "no order to govern her compilation of the fascicles". As she states, in Dickinson's poetry the apparent need to choose is countered by the refusal to choose and explains how this refusal shows in numerous ways throughout her poetry: at the level of syntax, at the level of 'story' in the poems, at the level of diction, and punctuation. And of course Dickinson chooses not choosing by providing so many variants. All of these "not choosings" suggest, she argues, that Dickinson is "exploiting a form so as to point to the 'identity' or convergence of boundedness *and* unboundedness" (Cameron 1992: 24 and 28-29).

Cameron's point may be best illustrated by giving the Johnson text of one of the fair copies of poem 1333, "A little Madness in the Spring"², followed by the facsimile reproduction of Dickinson's holograph (Franklin 1981: 1333):

² These are Johnson's notes on the poem (1955: III. 921-922):

"Manuscripts: There are two fair copies, both in pencil and both written about 1875, identical in text and form; one was sent to Sue (H229), and the other (Jones Library) was sent to Mrs. J.C. Holland and is signed 'Emily'. In addition there is a worksheet (Bingham 104-1), written at the same time, especially interesting because of the elaborate experiments ED conducted to find a satisfactory substitute for two words in line 5:

A little madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King
But God be with the Clown
Who ponders this Tremendous scene
This sudden legacy of Green
As if were his own

5. sudden legacy fair Apolcalypse of Green

whole

gay

bright

fleet

sweet

quick

whole

This whole Apocalypse of Green –

experience –

Astonishment –

Periphery –

wild Experiment

Experiment

Publications: SH (1914), 40 – from the copy to Sue; and LH (1951), 106 – from the copy to Mrs. Holland."

A little Madness in the Spring
 Is wholesome even for the King,
 But God be with the Clown -
 Who ponders this tremendous scene -
 This whole Experiment of Green -
 As if it were his own!

A little madness
 in the spring
 Is wholesome
 even for the King
 But God be with
 the Clown
 who ponders this
 tremendous scene
 this sudden leap
 of green
 as if it were
 his own - ^{gay} ^{meat}
 quick - smit ^{quick} ^{meat} ^{meat}
 fair Apocal, ^{meat} ^{meat}
 (green) whole
 this whole apocal, ^{meat}
 of green -
 Experience - astonishment
 Perished, - Experiment
 mid experiment

It would seem clear even to someone who is not a critical editor, that Dickinson's "wild Experiment" was so complex and open-ended as to deserve a critical edition that will at least attempt to provide the reader with the typographical/visual support necessary to appreciate the full scope of her creative process.

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