

Recurring Women
Danny Karlin

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words

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The Poems of Emily Dickinson:

Variorum Edition

edited by

R.W. Franklin

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Harvard, 1654 pp., £83.50, October 1998,

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The Poems of Emily Dickinson:

Reading Edition

edited by

R.W. Franklin,

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Harvard, 692 pp., £19.95, September 1999,

0 674 67624 6

Emily Dickinson:

Monarch of Perception

by

Domhnall Mitchell

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Massachusetts, 352 pp., £31.95, March 2000,

1 55849 226 7

Publication – is the Auction

Of the Mind of Man –

(#788)

Editing Emily Dickinson's poetry is a problem which continues to vex literary scholars and textual critics; meanwhile the publication, or dissemination, of Dickinson goes on apace. A trivial instance: the giant puppet of the 'Belle of Amherst', dressed in that distinctive ghost-white dress, which features in the movie *Being John Malkovich*. A hitherto 'unknown' photograph of Dickinson recently advertised on E-Bay, the Internet auction site. Shady dealings in allegedly 'new' poems by Dickinson – discovered, authenticated, sold and discredited. I recently received a flyer advertising Edie Campbell's one-woman show at the Edinburgh Fringe, in which the actress 'wants to be Emily's mouthpiece': *My Life Has Stood: The Journey of a Portrayal* unfolds with Campbell onstage, sewing the dress in which she is to portray Dickinson, while 'delving into the very fibre of her poems and letters'. Dickinson's murmur has been sent over the roofs of the world, just as emphatically as Whitman's barbaric yawp. But not by her. Even

Coriolanus was forced to stand in the street and show his wounds; but Dickinson was a greater despiser of the people.

The Soul selects her own Society –

Then – shuts the Door –

To her divine Majority –

Present no more –

(#409)

You would search English poetry in vain for lines as anti-democratic as this. The leisured exercise of choice (which is power), the arrogant assumption of desirability, the aristocrat's knack of taking for granted that the world will beat a path to the door you shut in its face. And the more she punishes us, this 'divine Majority' of one, the more we worship. We are all nympholepts, begging: choose us! The *mise-en-scène* is indefinitely repeated; readings of Dickinson replicate her self-image, like a virus taking over the natural function of a cell.

When Thomas Johnson published *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1955, it was thought that her texts had finally been restored to the state in which, had she agreed to be published at all, she would have wanted them to be read. Not a bit of it. Argument has continued over chronology, the order of the poems, the treatment of variants and the solution of cruxes – the normal business of textual criticism. Ralph Franklin gives the Johnson Dickinson a comprehensive overhaul. It is still recognisably the same model, in three volumes in a handsome slipcase, with similar typeface and layout (though Franklin naughtily and against the spirit of his own project gives the poems title headings from their first lines); the scholarly engine is more powerful, the editorial performance even more meticulous, and there are more features: twin appendices devoted to the 'fascicles and sets' in which Dickinson gathered (some of) her manuscripts, for example, and another appendix recording every instance in which the poet divided a word or phrase with a hyphen across a line, the kind of design detail that really counts with upmarket pedants. But the quality of the product is not the only issue, and Franklin's methodology is not entirely accounted for by a desire to improve on his predecessors' work. There are those who believe that to print her poems at all does violence to the particularity of Dickinson's script, every detail of which has meaning (not just the handwriting but the layout, not just the punctuation but the size and shape of the paper, not just the orthography but the gaps between individual letters). Nothing is random or accidental, everything is wired into the circuit of meaning; Dickinson's texts become like Inverarity's legacy in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the source of a mysterious, labyrinthine, self-enfolding plot, the editor's Tristero. All the manuscripts can be studied on the web, in facsimile, in the magnificent Dickinson Electronic Archives, compiled by an Editorial Collective (general editors Martha Nell Smith, Ellen Louise Hart and Marta Werner), which describes itself as 'a wide and diverse community with shared interests in the writings and in the life of Emily Dickinson', but whose manifesto is less than inclusive:

Persuaded that Emily Dickinson 'published' her work by distributing it in her letters and in the manuscript books she made and left for posterity to discover after her death, the Collective believes that print translations of her work, which erase most of her visual poetics, make practically unimaginable that world of Dickinson's hands-on distribution. Thus, the Collective is editing images of her manuscripts for electronic distribution so that all her readers can enjoy her graphic productions ... By gaining a more vivid and nuanced sense of the hand-to-hand

circulation of her work that Dickinson and her contemporary readers witnessed, Dickinson's 21st-century readers are likely to deepen and broaden understandings of her poetic project. This may not be printing, but as a form of publishing it is more intimate and shameless than the decorous recensions of Dickinson's first editors. Franklin's elaborate editorial apparatus is designed to counter the Editorial Collective's position, but ends up by reinforcing it. His presentation of the texts is apologetic, in both senses. Where two or more versions of a poem exist, Franklin prints them all, in their entirety, however minute and insignificant the variation between them, to avoid the unthinkable proposition that there might be such a thing as a 'primary' text. Every word and punctuation mark is reproduced; yet readers who believe in 'visual poetics', who attribute value to the dimensions and texture of the pieces of paper on which the poems were originally composed, to the colour of the ink or softness of the pencil, to the space taken up by particular words, either individually or in relation to each other, or to the contours of particular letters – such readers are not going to be appeased by Franklin's method. On the contrary, the contortions to which print must subject itself in order to give an impression of what the manuscript is like may well strike them as contemptible and pathetic. Franklin has edited Dickinson defensively, entrenching the texts in a fortified position which his opponents have already outflanked. In this sense his one-volume plain text follows a far more effective strategy. Here Dickinson's texts, a single version of each poem (even canonical twins such as 'Safe in their alabaster chambers'), are presented without notes, without context, identified only by numbers, a stupendous marching column of short-paced units composed of four-stressed lines, as impassive and standardised as a Roman legion. Paradoxically, the one-volume text has greater authority than the three-volume one, because it is forced to make the choices necessitated by the decision to print the poems in the first place.

The case for editing Dickinson's work in any orthodox sense of that term is, in the view of the Editorial Collective, undermined not just by her own reluctance to publish her poems (as opposed to circulate them, in letters, for example) but by her being a woman, marginalised by patriarchy and responding with a strategy of 'destabilisation', to use Martha Nell Smith's term. Smith sees Dickinson's whole writing life as a challenge to (among many other things) the stony certainties of print. (If only print were the stable medium its detractors imagine.) Making Dickinson conform to type can be made to seem a typical instance of male insensitivity – or worse. The women of her own circle who were Dickinson's first publishers, Mabel Loomis Todd and Martha Dickinson Bianchi, were naive, or had 'internalised' the values of the dominant ideology. There is no rational counter to such an argument, since questioning it proves your bad faith. I think that this explains the circumspection and placatory tone with which Domhnall Mitchell treats these issues in his book. In fact his work is far more radical and subversive than he lets on. He demolishes the foundations of the feminist-materialist view of Dickinson's texts while pretending to be doing no more than tapping politely at its chamber door. Opening his examination of the 'claims that Dickinson's poems generate meaning from the manner of their inscription', he writes: 'It is not that I think such claims are necessarily wrong but more that certain problems of approach (and some of the conclusions already drawn) have not yet been thought through or sufficiently debated.' In effect, Mitchell is saying that Martha Nell Smith and her colleagues, like cartoon characters, have walked over the edge of a cliff without looking

down. It seems clear to me that these 'claims' are, indeed, 'necessarily wrong', based on a form of intentionalism which its proponents would be the first to denounce in other contexts.

Mitchell has his own reasons for attacking the new orthodoxy. His book is devoted to 'recovering the cultural, economic, political and social nuances that provide the supporting matrix for any work of art'. If history determines (even in part) what a poet writes, then some of her autonomy must be taken away. The soul cannot 'select her own society', since the very composure of which she boasts is socially constructed. Mitchell reasons, acutely and on the whole fairly, that the modern emphasis on the materiality of Dickinson's texts is, in fact, a form of abstraction, whose consequence is not to 'reinscribe' Dickinson in her own material and social culture, but to keep her personal material practices away from contamination – either then or now. The Internet, according to this argument, would offer Dickinson a virtual community as well as an ideal medium.

A good deal of Mitchell's contextual work is illuminating and persuasive, such as a chapter on Dickinson's flower poems which begins by considering the mundane virtue of the cast-iron 'Franklin' stove, which enabled Dickinson to grow bulbs in her room as well as write poems there the year round. The use to which Mitchell puts this material is avowedly polemical – as polemical in its way as the work of the Editorial Collective. When we read that 'Dickinson's conservatory may not have been intended for public display or consumption: nonetheless its products were often sent to selected individuals,' we know what connection is about to be made; but by emphasising the likeness between flowers and poems, as products of 'a network in which women belonging primarily to the middle and upper-middle strata of society shared their advantages and affinities', Mitchell intends us to see Dickinson's writing in normative social terms. 'Dickinson's interest in flowers,' Mitchell states with revealing bluntness, 'is similar to her dedication to poetry, in that it has inescapably social (and political) signs.'

The problem with this view can be located in the slippage from 'interest' to 'dedication'.

Mitchell wants to realign Dickinson's writing with the other leisured activities of women of her class, and this is salutary even if his tone is occasionally pious and finger-wagging; but in his eagerness to combat the theory of textual autonomy, he ignores or elides some of what makes Dickinson's amassing of her 1789 poems (Franklin's revolutionary number) different from the growing of any number of flowers. If we judge solely by results, by what we know 'happened' in her life, then we must conclude that Dickinson practised her art with a greater degree of intellectual concentration and emotional intensity than she gave to anyone or anything else. What should we read into that? Mitchell leaves us with 'the complex historical forces and shifting set of social relations in which Dickinson's manuscripts are ambiguously embedded', but this seems unsatisfactory as well as uncomfortable. Shelley, in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, wrote that 'poets ... are in one sense the creators and in another the creations of their age. From this subjection the loftiest do not escape.' This is better sense, as well as clearer English: for great poets, form is 'the endowment of the age in which they live', but spirit 'must be the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind'. Mitchell's book is unmarked by this 'uncommunicated lightning' (Dickinson's 'bolts of melody'), which, of course, is easier to glimpse than to bottle.

If we are looking for what, in Dickinson, is undetermined by history, then we might start with the mode – as against the mere fact – of her self-reflexiveness. Many 19th-century poets are self-reflexive (the endowment of the age); none wrote anything like the following poem (#466):

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –
Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –
Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

This poem was written in 1862, at the height of Dickinson's productivity (of the 1789 poems, more than half – 937 – were written between 1861 and 1865). It is a poem of extraordinary confidence – self-pleasing but also, in its gifts of pleasure, generous. Humorously, playfully boastful (those comparatives and superlatives – 'fairer', 'More numerous', 'Superior', 'Impregnable', 'everlasting' – are like an estate agent's prospectus), the poem disarms its own arrogance by taking the metaphor which springs from 'dwell' in the first line to the brink of absurdity, then taking lyric flight (like the bird in #359, 'A bird came down the walk', also from 1862). The word 'This' in line 10, with a theatrical flourish, refers to the poem itself, and to the art of poetry of which it is a specimen, and the last two lines tell us what that means, or rather suggest a number of different meanings. 'The spreading wide my narrow Hands/To gather Paradise' may indicate something done, or something desired; 'to' allows both readings. To 'dwell in Possibility' means just that: the solid vocabulary of the poem, its windows, doors, chambers, roof, dissolves back into abstraction and metaphysics. 'Gambrels', a New England dialect word used with relish here, is already on the move: it means a 'curved or hipped roof', and the etymology comes from the shape of a horse's hind leg. In the alternation of long and short lines at the end of the poem, the physical gesture of 'spreading wide my narrow Hands' is mimed by the rhythm of a breath (open your arms wide and you will find yourself breathing in; draw them close and you breathe out; we draw breath in hope and sigh in attainment).

According to Mitchell, the opening statement of the poem 'depends for our understanding on an awareness of conflicts and uncertainties that accompany the transformation of literature into a commercial economy'; in other words, Dickinson is saying that poetry is better than the novel because it does not compete in the market-place, is 'intent on gathering in "Paradise" rather than readers or royalties'. Actually this could only refer to her own poetry, since there were plenty of poets who did sell their work (including ones whom Dickinson revered, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning): I think the opposition between 'Possibility' and 'Prose' is not one between genres, but between modes of thought – imagination and reason, or fancy and fact. It was a commonplace of Romantic aesthetics that 'poetry' was not necessarily confined to verse; a novel could be a work of imagination, 'More numerous of Windows' than many a didactic poem.

Mitchell goes on to state that ‘the poem is as sentimentalised as the cult of the Angel in the House,’ a judgment he should reconsider. The poem moves from an amused self-importance to end on a daring note of grandeur; the difference between how a Dickinson poem begins and how it ends is often disconcerting because the poems are so short, and it seems unlikely that so much could happen over so short a span. Mitchell, who shows elsewhere that he can be finely attentive to movement in Dickinson’s poetry, is careless and condescending here when he ought to be at his most alert.

To ‘dwell in Possibility’ is not necessarily the same thing as to dwell in ambiguity or indeterminacy. In some respects Dickinson is a more definite poet than she is made out to be, by Mitchell among others, and also a more singular one. The impression of uniformity, of a metrical average which predominates over local variation, extends to her self-projection and indeed forms part of it. Mitchell wants us to acknowledge ‘opposing voices and viewpoints’ in Dickinson’s poetry, voices which gave her ‘the reason for her writing those poems in the first place’, but the experience of reading the poems in bulk runs counter to this notion. The self which is so lovingly and obsessively figured, whose contours are drawn with repeated strokes, whose turns of phrase are like the habitual behaviour of a person who is alone, acknowledges no rivals and has little interest in negotiation. To get the benefit of poems like #466 we have to recognise this self-sufficiency and integrity of creative purpose, admirably and fearfully uncompromising. The outline of a poetic career based on such a purpose is given in #504:

The Birds begun at Four o’clock –
Their period for Dawn –
A Music numerous as space –
But neighboring as Noon –
I could not count their Force –
Their numbers did expend
As Brook by Brook bestows itself
To multiply the Pond.
The Listener – was not –
Except Occasional Man –
In homely industry arrayed –
To overtake the Morn –
Nor was it for applause –
That I could ascertain –
But independent Extasy
Of Universe, and Men –
By Six, the Flood had done –
No tumult there had been
Of Dressing, or Departure –
Yet all the Band – was gone –
The Sun engrossed the East –
The Day Resumed the World –
The Miracle that introduced
Forgotten, as fulfilled.

The sense of power here is overwhelming, associated with number, a term which suggests both quantity and, specifically, the 'numbers' or 'numerous music' of verse. Anyone who has listened to birdsong at dawn will recognise the effect of a cascade, of multiple overlapping notes and phrases, which Dickinson catches here, and which she claims implicitly as her own. What is its purpose? 'As Brook by Brook bestows itself/To multiply the Pond', so poem by poem bestows itself, no more accurate image could be found for the accumulation and consistency of Dickinson's work. The 'Occasional Man', like a rustic in a mythological landscape, is unimportant and unaware. But of course there is a 'Listener' – not Occasional Man but Recurring Woman, the poet whose 'homely industry' had already produced more than five hundred poems, and whose 'Extasy' is likewise 'independent ... Of Universe, and Men'. The awe with which the poem records and celebrates a natural phenomenon is redirected towards itself. In almost any other poet this movement would seem intolerably narcissistic, but then few poets could have managed the near-perfect equanimity of Dickinson's style, epitomised in the two masterly uses of 'I'. The speaker is first overwhelmed ('I could not count their Force'), then hesitant ('Nor was it for applause –/That [= 'as far as'] I could ascertain'); yet all the time her consciousness determines the shape and duration of the experience, timing it precisely from four to six, controlling the rhetorical and metrical scheme so that, for example, the final stanza is the only one which is fulfilled in the sense of rhyming (or half-rhyming) abab. The 'miracle' of the birdsong consists both in its immeasurable energy, and in its magical cessation, but the miracle of poetry takes place each time the poem is read, enacting the drama of its own fulfilment.