EMILY DICKINSON

A Celebration for Readers

Edited by
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Introduction

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1986: THE YEAR Emily Dickinson centennial conferences materialized across the continent, each framing the poet differently by the structure of its program, its invited speakers, and its target audience. The Claremont conference began with a clear conception of what its tone and purpose would be. In a flurry of quick meetings, followed up by long two- and then three-way telephone conversations, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Ellin Ringler-Henderson decided that "Emily Dickinson: A Celebration for Readers" would focus the attention of its invited and attending participants on Dickinson's poems. This seemed to us an indulgence (when do we get to talk with other Dickinson scholars just about the poems?) but also ideologically important: this conference would structure an occasion for talking with other thinkers instead of talking to them. And we hoped it would be a celebration in fact as well as in title.

In this conference, we wanted to concentrate on Emily Dickinson, to encourage the participants to come closer to her and her art. We wanted depths, not surfaces; complexities, not simplification. Examining in a careful and organized way the poems themselves*, and the ways in which we read them, seemed a good way to accomplish our goal. At the same time, we wanted to avoid the lecturing and "star turns" that, at so many scholarly conferences, produce glossy summaries of positions, closed circuits which an audience may appreciate but never enter. This system seems to focus more attention on the speaker than on the subject. Instead, we envisioned a "participatory" model, with clusters of short presentations leading to discussions in a workshop setting. Especially, we wanted to focus on individual poems, and on multiple readings of the same poem, to explore the ways in which we come to determine and appreciate the poet's meanings.

We envisioned that each discussion or workshop would be set in motion by three short readings of the same poem. These readings would ideally both complement and provoke one another and, in the process, spark off conversation among all who were present. In such a format, we hoped, there would be no perception of a "correct" or "best" reading and, consequently, the multiple readings would encourage concern about how readers might accommodate more than one reading at the same time.

Behind this format — or rather, embedded into it, was yet another aspiration: to bring together and help to foster a community of Dickinson readers. Although we desired that the subject take precedence over the commentary, the "presenters" or participants would matter crucially. The poetry has meaning only in our reading of it, we all felt; we have to be there, doing it, for the poetry to come alive. As readers of Dickinson, we have a common identity and experience, which can be cultivated and enriched through interaction with one another. Not only do we learn more about Dickinson this way, but about ourselves as readers. The conference structure was developed in order that such interaction might occur.

After building our conference in the air, we began trying to reproduce it on the grounds of the Claremont Colleges. We started with the schedule: the workshops themselves and a frame that would constitute preparation for their discussion of the poems and then response to that discussion. The opening night would introduce Emily Dickinson in the form of a concerted reading of her poems. Five participants would join in giving physical voice to the act of reading Dickinson's work and, indirectly, in revealing how various this one poet's work can sound when read by different voices. The poems, chosen to let us hear Dickinson speak of herself in increasingly wider relationships — to love, to the outside world, to death and eternity — were grouped together to reveal her overlapping attitudes and feelings. There would be no commentary during this reading — only the poems themselves, back to back. The conference would begin with all listening to Dickinson's own words. In a courtyard reception following the reading, the talking *about* the poems and the poet could begin.

The next morning would start with a short introductory talk (followed by discussion) that would place Dickinson in her times and introduce questions of how twentieth-century readers interpret a nineteenth-century woman's poetry. This would provide a common ground or base from which the ensuing discussions would take off and would be the only "lecture" in the entire conference: not meant to honor a particular scholar but to provide a common reference point for the group as a whole. The short talk and long discussion, we hoped, would set the tone for a participatory conference on Dickinson herself and her poems. Next would come the first set of workshops on the poems.

We imagined that we could count on an average participation of around sixty people, and that twenty to twenty-five would be a manageable size for a good discussion. Consequently, we decided to have three workshops run simultaneously on three different poems. To establish the diversity we wanted to encourage in the discussions, we asked three critics to give brief (ten minute) readings of the poem chosen for each group: the first half an hour of the session, then, would consist of three presentations on a poem; the next hour was scheduled for open discussion. The morning session of three workshops would immediately precede lunch, and following lunch would come a second session of three concurrently running workshops.

In choosing the six poems for the workshops, we attempted to balance the participants's personal preferences for a particular poem with our judgement of a poem's complexity or richness; we wanted, furthermore, to give people a chance to talk about a range of the types of poems Dickinson writes. There was also a concern that some of the six poems be well known to a general audience, in order both that the entire audience feel comfortable participating in the discussion and to persuade people to attend the conference who do not work on Dickinson or even in the field of English literature but who may previously have puzzled over one of these poems. The poems chosen were "A solemn thing — it was — I said" (271), "He fumbles at your Soul" (315), "The name — of it — is 'Autumn'" (656), "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun" (754), "A Word made Flesh is seldom"

(1651), and "The farthest Thunder that I heard" (1581). In choosing the readers for each poem, we also tried to group critics who would approach their poem differently.

After two sessions of workshops on individual poems, we wanted a more analytical plenary panel and discussion on reading Dickinson, or the ways various assumptions about the poet or the poems affect the process of reading. By this time in the conference, we thought, all participants would be eager to talk about their own processes of reading and about what differences they had observed in the two discussion workshops they had attended. Again, we decided on three presentations for this panel in order to continue the commitment to fruitful disagreement rather than either pronouncement or dichotomized views. Similarly, we expected the talks to be brief so that substantial discussion might follow. This discussion would last into the late afternoon; dinner would be followed by a showing of the New York Center for Visual History film on Dickinson.

The conference as planned thus far satisfied us with its focus on the poems, but we wanted to conclude by broadening that focus to include discussion on the poet herself. We envisioned a general session first, jokingly, titled "Who Is Emily Dickinson Anyway?", then more formally titled "Three Views of the Poet." We were aiming for a move from her words to some sense of the person who wrote them: her personality, her presence, her existence in the world. Three of the conference's participants would present brief papers on their view of the poet, to be followed by discussion.

In deciding who to invite to give papers at the conference, we returned first to part of our original decision in planning the conference: as far as we knew, there had been as yet no major celebrations of Dickinson's centennial on the West Coast (and we knew of only one other event planned), in spite of the number of Dickinson scholars and devotees there. We began, then, by inviting scholars from the West who we thought would be comfortable in the kind of participatory, non-hierarchical conference we had planned. We also decided from the beginning to invite a few participants whose primary response to Dickinson was as poets rather than as critics, and hence turned to Marcia Falk and Maurya Simon. As our funds were confirmed and as we ran into the inevitable obstacles of academic and personal commitments that prevented some people from joining us, we shifted more of our invitations to the Midwest and East. We were heartened in this stage of the planning by the enthusiastic reponses we received from people planning to come and from those who regretted that they could not: almost everyone commented on the form of the conference, and one participant wrote, "It sounds so humane!" We felt this was the height of praise.

Of course, no conference ever runs exactly as it was planned; several talks were longer than we had hoped they would be, and there were what is no doubt the normal number of minor glichs in programming. In all, however, we feel that the conference exceeded our expectations. It gave us two days of intense and glorious talking about Emily Dickinson's poetry, a shared sense of community as Dickinson readers and scholars, and a greater understanding and appreciation of the poet herself. Notes we received from participants after the conference indicated that our enthusiasm was shared: "thank you for an *unusually* stimulating and enjoyable conference," "a truly enjoyable conference," "one of the most stimulating, as well as agreeable, conferences of my academic life ... 'The

Feast of Reason and the Flow of Soul'."

What we have described so far has to do with the theory and design of the conference. Also needed are a few words about the material of this volume. Along with the papers presented in Claremont, we reproduce here transcripts from the six workshops on the poems — for most participants the highlight of the conference, both because the workshops allowed individuals to receive immediate, multiple response to private questions about a line, a poem, or the poet, and because they provided a format for intense examination of what in Dickinson's poems encouraged such difference in readings and such deep questions about intent, tone, and context.

In the morning session on "A solemn thing — it was — I said —" (speakers: Marcia Falk, Barbara Mossberg, Maurya Simon), discussion ranged from questions of how necessary metaphor is in any theological language and Dickinson's identification of herself with Jesus (as alternate "son") or with God, to questions about the relative physical size of the poet in the Dickinson family. Papers at the simultaneous session on "He fumbles at your Soul" (speakers: Robin Riley Fast, Suzanne Juhasz, Ellen Ringler-Henderson) led to discussion of whether being *receptive* necessarily involves either passivity or activity; again, of Dickinson's identification of herself with Jesus; and of the experience of reading Dickinson's poems. The seldom analyzed "The name — of it — is 'Autumn' —" (speakers: Joanne Feit Diehl, Barbara Packer) generated discussion about the disruption of categories, and more generally of play, in Dickinson's and other women writers' works, and divergent analyses of the language and structure of Dickinson's work as a whole.

In the afternoon, discussions were equally wide-ranging. The session on "My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —" (speakers: Joanne Dobson, Lillian Faderman, Ellen Ringler-Henderson) focused on the closing conundrum of the poem, partly in the context of conventions in contemporary novels by women; on questions of whether or not Dickinson wanted to publish; on her celebrations of lesbian love; and — as in one morning session — on the extent to which Dickinson demanded that we change both our critical language and critical categories to comprehend her. "A Word made Flesh is seldom" (speakers: Joanne Feit Diehl, Cristanne Miller, Maurya Simon) generated more specific examination of the syntax and structure of the given poem than any other group, but this examination involved broader questions on the extent to which Dickinson was rejecting God's (or the patriarchal) word for her own (erotic and/or poetic) language, or transforming God's word into her own; and, again, questions about the process of reading Dickinson's poems — especially as feminist critics. Speakers Marcia Falk and Barbara Packer, in their session on "The farthest Thunder that I heard", also concentrated on single lines of the poem, their analysis leading to questions about fallacies of form — whether the poem's confusion stems from the poet or from the reader — and the extent to which Dickinson's poems create their reader. This led, in turn, to enthusiastic commentary on the conference itelf:

> "I like your observation that interpreting Emily Dickinson becomes the creation of a reader. And what you're saying is a commentary on what we're doing here: it does create a way of reading that enriches and validates what other people are doing; it's a very collaborative thing, an appreciation of each other."
>
> "... what we're doing today is acknowledging that conversation teases thought out of us."

In another favorite moment, a speaker prefaced her presentation with the comment that she was "revising" an earlier reading she had done of the same poem; and then she, and several other Dickinson scholars on the panel and in the workshop group, proceded to query, critique and expand that revision. "We never get to talk to each other in this way," various people exclaimed; "we always have to get up and expound. What a treat, what a pleasure this has been!"

We are publishing the procedings of the conference, in response to many suggestions to do so, in the hopes of sharing its contents with the wider community of Dickinson readers. We hope that the sense of conversation, and connection, as well as the information it generated, will be communicated in the following pages.

We have done little editing of the transcripts of each workshop beyond the obvious tidying required to present speech in written form. The interruptions, sentence fragments, and occasional lapses into both argument and silliness seemed, to us, worth saving as indicators of a way to pursue ideas passionately in an academic and scholarly setting, and as reminders of the what must be one of the greatest and rarest pleasures of our occupation: reading a great poet's work with a community of readers[†]

Notes

[*] We reproduce here the texts of Dickinson's poems as they were used in the conference workshops. We chose to use Johnson's one-volume edition, because it is more readily available than the three-volume edition to the reading public.

[†] This conference would not have been possible without the extremely generous support of the Pomona College Public Events Committee, aided by the Pitzer College Public Events Committee, the Claremont Colleges Women's Studies and American Studies Programs. Thanks to *Women's Studies*, in particular to editor Wendy Martin, and to the Pomona College Research Committee for the opportunity to publish the proceedings here.

Locating a Feminist Critical Practice: Between the Kingdom and the Glory

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IN THREE DIFFERENT letters, numbered by Johnson and Ward 292, 330, and 583, Emily Dickinson uses a passage from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:13) to privilege power as a category surpassing or incorporating kingdom and glory. One such passage reads: "When I was a little Girl I remember hearing that remarkable passage and preferring the 'Power,' not knowing at the time that 'Kingdom' and 'Glory' were included" (L 330).

As a feminist critic I am concerned with power: both the power language confers and the power relations which affect language use itself. Dickinson was first taken up in a major way by the New Critics who preferred what I would call the glory aspect of power in its synchronic dimensions. This was an era in which the "universality" of Dickinson's poems, particularly those about God, love and death, was applauded along with her linguistic originality. Dickinson herself called glory "that bright tragic thing/ That for an instant/ Means Dominion" in poem # 1660. The "instant" seems to lie outside of time though it might also be said to "remember" time which gives it the aura of tragic limitation.

Kingdom, on the other hand, is a signalling word frequently used to differentiate different forms of time, as in #721 ("Behind me dips Eternity") or forms of power. As a Janus-faced image, the kingdom may look toward heaven or toward earth, but when the word appears, we are usually reminded that on earth the Soul is exposed to time, to history, and to the power relations which may inhibit her, especially if she is a woman. The poems I am most interested in seem to emerge at the crux, or crossing, of kingdom and glory, in the nexus of power. Holding kingdom and glory in tension, these poems provide a discourse about power which says a great deal about one version of the nineteenth-century female imagination.

Interpreting the poems, however, involves locating one's critical practice itself within the nexus of power. As a feminist critic, I must evaluate a number of critical strategies already in place. If New Criticism tended to prefer the glory of Dickinson's work, feminist criticism inevitably concerns itself with the kingdom, with patriarchy, and with the power relations which affect language use itself.

A recent fashion in feminist criticism is to tell success stories. Having passed beyond telling the stories of women as victims, we now celebrate the way women writers remained undefeated and managed to subvert oppressive male power structures embodied in both social and literary conventions. The virtues of this criticism are often its courage, imagination, and gusto. However, my problem with it is that it seems at times to lack fidelity and sensitivity to the past. Also, by emphasizing transcendence, it minimizes the effects of patriarchy and thus subtly reinforces its hold over our past and our present.

Let me be more specific in respect to the case of Emily Dickinson. It is now fashionable to celebrate Dickinson's withdrawal from the world, to acknowledge her cleverness in avoiding various forms of social oppression many nineteenth-century women who led more normal lives had to contend with. It is also fashionable for feminist critics to feel that they can find ample evidence for Dickinson's essential sympathies with feminism in her poems and letters. Certain facts about Dickinson's life and art provide at least a degree of friction against such theories, however.

Her fearfulness and dependency upon others late into her life, her choice of conservative Judge Lord as a lover, her dismissal of most women and admiration of powerful men, her mental breakdowns: all suggest that Dickinson's life is not quite the model of a successful feminist manipulation of circumstances we sometimes wish it to be.

Furthermore, Dickinson was not unusually concerned about being "a *woman* poet." At least her *conscious* dedication to gender-neutral philosophical issues in a great many poems distinguishes her from most other nineteenth-century American women poets and has led us as feminist critics to return again and again to the same comparatively small number of poems and letters which do address gender in some overt way.

In the space I have left I would like to consider a different way of reading Dickinson historically. The *modus operandi* I wish to adopt, which might loosely be called a form of post-structuralism, is in no sense unique to my reading of Dickinson. In fact, I wish only to confirm a set of strategies used occasionally and with varying degrees of success by many critics.

Though not nearly as often situating herself in a gender-specific context as many of her female contemporary writers, Dickinson is more directly conscious of allying herself with power than they were. Her poems and letters are liberally sprinkled with references to power and certainly her language use exhibits a desire to equate poetry not with release of feeling, as many nineteenth-century poetesses did, but with the assumption of power and the defiance of tradition. One way of reading her historically is to consider the way her representation of power relations might have been affected by her experience of gender. Dickinson clearly admired power but her orientation to it was highly ambivalent and as such it both unites her to other women poets and reflects her position in a power structure which allies power with masculinity.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson was rare among her associates in being a woman who inspired Dickinson with a sense of earthly ascendancy. Even to miss her was power, as she says in letter #364, and from early to late Susan brings the word *power* to Emily Dickinson's mind. As late as 1882 she is writing to Susan: "Thank her dear power for having come, an Avalanche of Sun!" (L755).

It is usually men, however, who represent power in Dickinson's imagination. Higginson is a figure of power who often evokes the poet's most timid self. In the letter with which I began this essay, in addition to reflecting on the relationship between kingdom, power and glory, Dickinson compliments Higginson's letter for a " spectral power in thought that walks alone," adding: "I would like to thank you for your great kindness but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold" (L 330). (Apparently he has been criticizing her diction.)

She also poses as comparatively insignificant in a letter to Samuel Bowles. After her tribute to his influence in the lives of "so many," she confesses that she has no such range of impact. However, she further muses, "How extraordinary that Life's large Population contain so few of power to us" (L 275). In this reflection, she characteristically turns the tables. Though her power over others is limited, the power of most people to affect her is also limited. These two letters suggest two typical modes Dickinson employed in dealing with male power figures.

Clearly, Dickinson was attracted to masculine forms of power. She writes approvingly of a portrait of Tommaso Salvini in 1884 in terms that bring to mind her feelings about her father: "The brow is that of Deity — the eyes, those of the lost, but the power lies in the *Throat* — pleading, sovereign, savage — the panther and the dove!" (L 948). Her admiration for her father and the Master letters further confirm their attraction to stimulating versions of male force. And we must remember her involvement with the intimidating Judge Lord. She describes his face in these terms in 1885: "Had I not loved it, I had feared it, the Face had such ascension" (L967).

Even Dickinson's definitions of poetry are clothed in the rhetoric of power. "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it" (L342a). *Art* and *power* are sometimes used interchangeably.

But the synthesis power effects in Dickinson is always decaying into antithesis, into powerlessness, and that too is a fundamental property of her imagination and an indication of her shared relation to a gender-differentiated power structure. In order to explore why that might have been characteristic of her, it is helpful to look a little outside the usual critical structure and to bring to bear on Dickinson's work some of the insights of recent French feminist theory.

Helene Cixous begins her strange, provocative essay "Sorties" in *The Newly-Born Woman* with the following set of reflections:

> Where is she?
> Activity/Passivity Sun/Moon
> Culture/Nature
> Day/Night
>
> Father/Mother
> Head/Heart
> Intelligible/Palpable
> Logos/Pathos
> Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress
> Matter, concave, ground — where steps are taken, holding-and dumping ground. Man
> Woman
>
> Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection.
> Thought has always worked through opposition,
> Speaking/Writing
> Parole/Ecriture
> High/Low

> Through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatable, dialectical). All these pairs of oppositions are *couples.* Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought — all concepts, codes and values — to a binary system, related to "the" couple, man/woman? (63–63)

Cixous' provocative suggestion that we read a binary opposition between man and woman as the basis of many other paired oppositions in philosophical discourse is at the heart of my argument for a historical and gendered reading of Dickinson. We can, of course, search the poems for places where Dickinson consciously and directly reflects upon gender. If we are cultural critics, we can look for direct references to historical persons and events. However, we do not need to proceed in this way in order to find the impact of patriarchy on the poet's work. As a poet whose work is necessarily inscribed within the codes of nineteenth-century American bourgeois culture, Emily Dickinson could not fail to reproduce in part the structure of power relations in which she was enmeshed.

No cultural hegemony is absolute, however. Consider, for instance, this pair of statements about women and power made by two men of Dickinson's time and milieu. In his novel *Miss Gilbert's Career*, Josiah Holland, Dickinson's friend, congratulates his heroine for giving up her literary career in exchange for a career of marriage and self-sacrifice. Her need, for power is re-routed so that it is no longer her own "imperious will" which she seeks to gratify. Holland writes: "She learned that a woman's truest career is lived in love's serene retirement — lived in feeding the native forces of her other self — lived in the career of her husband" (466). Here we have the common and recognizable version of true womanhood's relation to power: indirect, self-effacing, domestic, and predicated on the virtues of heart and hearth.

Austin Dickinson's description of the impact of women on some aspects of nineteenth-century culture is quite different, however. His opinion is that "the women count in our modern census. They have appeared above the surface in the last generation, and become a power, nowhere more than in parish affairs, where they have found a congenial field for their activities ... They are hardly longer the power behind the throne; they are a good part of the throne itself' (Sewall, *The Life*, 121–22).

Leaving aside here the complex issues of biographical origins, of sincerity and authenticity raised by these quotations, let us acknowledge that they do point to a situation first experienced by middle-class American women in the nineteenth century: the situation of finding themselves able to operate in a public arena in *relatively* large numbers while they were at the same time deeply afflicted with a sense of guilt for betraying the ethical code of femininity and the domestic sphere. This is the double bind nimbly captured in Mary Kelley's title, *Private Woman, Public Stage.*

It is not enough to say that women were in many ways effectively powerless in nineteenth-century American bourgeois culture. We must also acknowledge that in parish activities, in education, in certain political causes, and *as writers*, middle-class women had more public influence than ever before. Many nineteenth-century women writers supported whole families with the proceeds of their writing. Lydia Sigourney could command $100 for four poems and $500 from *Godey's Lady's Book* for the use of her name on its title page. However, the cost of playing on the public stage, or entering the market, could be great as well. In the nineteenth century we see the first major alliance between creative women and madness.

Catherine Clement in her disquisition on "the hysteric" in *The Newly-Born Woman* gives us a set of highly-charged statements applicable to many guilt-ridden nineteenth-century women writers. Clement, in the essay called "The Guilty One," writes:

> That is the easiest solution: keeping oneself in a state of permanent guilt is to constitute oneself as a subject. Caught up in themes which are not hers, repeating her cues, always somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, between a hypnotic and an excited state, she is not she, but through the play of identifications, she is successively each one of the others. They are going to help her become a subject: they are going to make her guilty. (46)

This is the way Clement describes the simultaneous attraction and threat represented by the powerful male intermediary to the talented but conflicted woman.

These interventions in the on-going discussion about women and power must serve as an introduction to my reading of two poems about power in Emily Dickinson's canon: "My life had stood a loaded gun" and "Behind me dips eternity." Both of these poems have been extensively discussed by others; few critics, however, have attempted to talk about the loaded gun poem as a particularly historical document.

The poem really clicks into place when we consider it as one written by a certain kind of woman in nineteenth-century America.

Let's look at the poem in more detail:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovreign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it's pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master's Head—
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

Written about 1863, this poem examines the effects of assuming certain kinds of power. A moral focus is conspicuously absent as a divining rod until the last stanza where the speaker with only 'the power to kill" reveals her morally compromised position. The poem does a double take, strangely, in that last stanza. Up until this point, the reader is invited to see the speaker's newly assumed identity as beneficial and even heroic. The Wordsworthian mountains echo her speech, the day done has been a "good day," a strenuous day more satisfying than sleeping on a downy pillow. Only the third stanza with its "Vesuvian face" throws an eerie light over this whole proceeding. It's worth remembering that Mount Vesuvius erupted a number of times during the 1850s climaxing with a particularly fearsome and destructive eruption in 1861. Should we ignore the threat implied in a volcanic eruption? Up until the final stanza the poet seems peculiarly unwilling to judge negatively this assumption of destructive force. A variant for "None stir the second time" is "None *harm* the second time," again suggesting that the gun's destructive force is not morally suspect since it is used defensively.

However, the final stanza clearly introduces a new emotion into the poem. The emotion is guilt. I agree with Barbara Clarke Mossberg that this poem represents "an array of conflicting attitudes toward art and the self, which result in severe identity conflict" (23). The poem is hysterical in certain ways and that hysteria must be understood in the historical context of a continent and a century in which women were invited to assume certain sorts of power while at the same time subtly tortured for their desires to do so.

Let us go back to Catherine Clement's description of the hysterical woman as "the guilty one": she has been possessed by her doctors. They have offered her the chance to become a subject. "Caught up in themes which are not hers, repeating her cues, always somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, between a hypnotic and an excited state, she is not she, but through the play of identifications, she is successively each one of the others. They are going to help her become a subject: they are going to make her guilty." This is the position described by the female gun self.

From my point of view, this poem is not a confession of the poet's personal misery, however. Richard Sewall provides a helpful reminder in his biography that the *Springfield Republican* used the eider-duck image in an 1860 article discouraging women poets from writing "the literature of misery." The speaker here rejects the eider duck's deep pillow. Instead of being a confessional poem, this work is closer to a definitional exploration of a certain kind of power.

My intuition is that Dickinson began this poem with the intention of writing another celebration of her relation to the Master Force. This would connect the first stanza, at least, to other works like "I'm ceded, I've stopped being theirs," "He put the belt around my life," and "A wife at daybreak I shall be." There is a sense of strain in the poem, however, as though as she went along — at first admiring the power conferred upon the speaker by her relation to the Owner — another set of issues presented itself in her mind. What does it mean for a woman to subsume herself so totally in the life of a masculine presence? The metatext begins to unravel the text by suggesting the destructiveness of a pure instrumentality. Negative associations with power lurch through the backcountry of the poetic landscape.

Without the owner, the speaker cannot speak at all. She cannot roam in "Sovreign Woods," that is, in the forest protected for the king's own hunting, the forest of patriarchal power. However, the cost of accepting this empowerment is hunting the doe, killing off her linkage to female life, and surrendering a maternal, nurturing influence like that of the eider duck (known to cushion her babies by feathering her nest with down plucked from her own beast). Though we cannot help feeling the emphatic thumb of the poet's conscious attempt to make us admire this power through most of the poem, we also cannot ignore the accumulation of underground hints of guilt.

At the end, the speaker seems to throw up her hands in horror at the satanic bargain she has made. As a ventriloquist's dummy, as a pure instrument of another's force, she has surrendered her status as a subject. Power can only be understood as part of an oppositional pair in juxtaposition with powerlessness as life can only be lived fully with the knowledge of death as its terminus. Having agreed to speak only for him, the gun seals *his* immortality while at the same time accepting the status of non-being for herself. The power to kill involves the preliminary death of the self recorded in the gun's admission that she no longer has the power to die. She is already dead. The speaker has become not a self, as she had hoped, but a mouthpiece.

As we watch the sovereign female self assume the mantle of power in the poem only to turn that mantle inside out at the end in a confession of guilt and powerlessness, we witness a ritual performed again and again in the nineteenth century by creative women, for whom power, once admired, turns ugly and self-destructive. Toward the end of the century, Ella Wheeler Wilcox summed it up in *Men, Women and Emotions* (1893): "Seen from a distance, fame may seem to a woman like a sea bathed in tropical suns, wherein she longs to sail. Let fame once be hers, she finds it a prairie fire consuming or scorching all that is dearest in life to her. Be careful before you light these fires with your own hands" (291). As in so many statements of its kind, for the more narrow instance of fame, we might very well substitute the broader, more threatening term: power.

Another poem in which fears for a female self emerge is "Behind me dips eternity" (#721).

Behind Me—dips Eternity—
Before Me—Immortality—
Myself—the Term between—
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin—

'Tis Kingdoms—afterward—they say—
In perfect—pauseless Monarchy—
Whose Prince—is Son of None—
Himself—His Dateless Dynasty—
Himself—Himself diversify—

In Duplicate divine—

’Tis Miracle before Me—then—
’Tis Miracle behind—between—
A Crescent in the Sea—
With Midnight to the North of Her—
and Midnight to the South of Her—
And Maelstrom—in the Sky—

Reading this poem in a gendered historical context, I am particularly struck by the speaker’s positioning of herself in terms of these two axes: An east-west metaphysics rendered male and a north-south temporal realm rendered female. In a century which at least paid considerable lip service to the notion of separate spheres of gender, in a country in which those spheres have paradigms in Puritan gender divisions predicated on Adam and Eve, the poet seems both to invoke and to revoke conventional mappings of power. This poem can be read as the poet’s self-insertion of the female into history: ‘Myself-the Term between.” *His* power, from this point of view, looks comparatively lifeless. As under the aegis of the patriarchal god, patriarchal authority clones itself repeatedly in what Cixous might call a “repetition of the same,” the speaker understands her position as not merely personal (an *I*’s position) but generic (a *Her*’s position). “With Midnight to the North of Her-/ And Midnight to the South of Her,” she has no points of reference to determine her own power, however. Might not this “Maelstrom in the Sky” suggest a whirlpool of male force threatening to derange her “crescent in the sea”? It will take a miracle of a different kind to preserve her from harm.

My intention in this brief textual discussion has been to make an argument not only for the plausibility of historical, gender-sensitive criticism but for its continuing exfoliation. To the extent that we can find new ways of decoding the power relations which operate both behind and within literature we open up new ways of seeing our own linguistic situations in the present. As Toril Moi puts it in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, “It is necessary to deconstruct the opposition between traditionally ‘masculine’ and traditionally ‘feminine’ values *and* to confront the full political force and reality of such categories” (160). This means locating a feminist critical practice along two axes, ignoring neither the kingdom which circumscribed an Emily Dickinson nor the glory which she learned to appropriate for her art.

Works Cited

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analogous to creating something.

I think one thing that would be important in trying to decide whether the emphasis is on the pain or on some sort of pleasure is to decide whether the closing couplet is an analogy for the experience that goes before, or an aftermath, a result of the experience?

That word “still” is the word that suddenly reverberates. And Ellen’s analogy to the symphony, because it begins in music in a sense. The wind is music in the trees in a lot of 19th-century literature. It is basically a musical analogy, in the beginning and the end.

What’s interesting about the couplet, that makes it very different from the rest of the poem, is the “when — then” structure, because the rest of the poem is all ongoing present tense. So she doesn’t give us any sense of what happens after; is there any after? All we have is “the universe is still” — that’s what we get. And we have the word “still.”

That’s a wonderful word, really.

That’s the word. And the image just resonates with possibilities of stillness. The poem leaves you with that question of ... it’s not so much a question, I think it’s a sense of... since she doesn’t tell you which meaning of still, you have to entertain a lot... and that’s where you stop, with the dash.

This inexpectation.

I thought another thing that was very interesting, just in the sense of the reading that went on, was the way everybody had recourse to the other poetry. Again, I was brought up as a good new critic, and we were told that there was this poem and it was unto itself and we never went beyond it. I see all these little nods in the room ... and so that the way we read I thought was very provocative: that everybody did that, everybody said “this poem is not a discrete object, it’s not a well-wrought urn.” Part of the reading experience that we all seem to have is that it echoes, it opens up, to the other poems. We all started hearing, and we use them kind of analytically; but to me it suggested something more profound or central to what it’s like to read Emily Dickinson, which may or may not be the same way you read any other poetry. You know, Dickinson did not publish her poems into these volumes where she edited them and decided, “these will go and these will stay.” All we have is this book, where the dashes point us on to the next poem. And it always struck me that the structure of a given poem rests upon the parallelism that we talked about, such that it keeps repeating itself, it keeps on illuminating itself. And that the poems do that as a group to one another. That as a whole, her ouevre works the way an individual poem does, because if you want to know what Dickinson thinks about death, one poem won’t do it. You’ve got to go on with all of them. It struck me that the way in which she composes is always this — what we were just talking about earlier — this sense of not solving a problem, ever.

Well I think Dickinson maybe calls attention more to the need to read her poetry in the context of all of it, just because of the constant, intense ambiguities, deletions, telegraphing that she's doing. Sure, you need to read everybody's works in order to have a full sense of what a given poem is saying, I think you could safely say that. But you're more desperate, at least I am more desperate for the context, the variations, for having the blanks partially filled in by the other poems that give you the next link.

But there are many, many poems that within the space of the individual poem work to solve the problem that the poem raises. Think of the traditional sonnet structure.

Shakespeare's sonnets, though, raise the problem.

No, I think most of the time when they get to the end they've solved what they've set up for that individual day. You might say, "OK, for a full understanding of the relations between death and art and love, read them all." But you take the given structure, it's very logical that way, don't you think? It comes to a conclusion.

No, no, I think many of them have built in ambiguity of the sort that Robin was talking about in Dickinson.

Maybe, of course again with Shakespeare, we have the best of the lot. But...

I think perhaps simply to repeat what I suggested in the paper, I think there are some wonderful ways in which this poem has got its back on Shakespeare's sonnet. I think it's fun to see it almost as a parody in the sense that the last little couplet doesn't do what the Shakespearean couplet frequently does.

But there are some Shakespearean sonnets which function in exactly this way. The concluding couplet is analogous, but the link is not there in the way you would expect it, so there is a disruption of expectation just as we have here.

Whether that's true or not, the point that I'm after is that Dickinson builds into her discourse the gap or whatever; it is a part of the actual sentence. Not that she didn't get there, it's not that she tried but she couldn't quite pull it all together — it's that she didn't want to — it's part of what's there. I don't want to talk about her intent, but it's part of what is there constantly, the irresolvable, what Cris calls the "unrecoverable deletions." And that's a fact, that's not a problem, that's not an "oh, too bad." It's there, it's information; what do we do with it? And that's what I'm pushing today. Because it really changes how you read poetry, it seems to me. It really changes where you think you're going and what you think you're doing.

This 19th century skepticism is in Melville, Hawthorne, in the prose, in Emerson — not so much in Emerson but in Melville and Hawthorne. The irony, the indeterminacy, of how you judge a thing runs through the 19th century.

One of the things that struck me was the description you were making of Emily Dickinson's poems needing to be seen as a whole. Perhaps that is. the case, that kind of organic connection that one wants to make among her poems … maybe that’s one of the things the dashes mean: “don’t stop here!”

Well, that’s a good line to end the discussion on, “don’t stop here!” Don’t stop, come back for more!

Poem 656

The name — of it — is “Autumn” —
The hue — of it — is Blood —
An Artery — upon the Hill —
A Vein — along the Road —

Great Globules — in the Alleys —
And Oh, the Shower of Stain —
When Winds — upset the Basin —
And spill the Scarlet Rain —

It sprinkles Bonnets — far below —
It gathers ruddy Pools —
Then — eddies like a Rose — away —
Upon Vermilion Wheels —

c. 1862

1892