Text, Language, and the Woman Poet: Three Problems in Teaching Emily Dickinson's Poems

by
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Unlike other American women poets of the nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson has long held a secure position in the accepted canon of "great writers." As a result, her poems are taught with predictable and justified regularity in most freshman literature courses. In fact, Dickinson is likely to be the only nineteenth-century American woman poet that many students, including English majors, will be asked to read during their college careers. This is probably regrettable since Dickinson's experience as a woman poet was atypical. Many American women who set out to be "lady poets" in the nineteenth century met with popular success and financial reward, so that Dickinson's reclusive career presents a distorted notion of what it meant to be a female poet in the American past. Nevertheless, no one disputes Dickinson's status as a major American writer, and most recognize her importance as an innovator not only in the field of poetics but in her understanding of feminine experience as well. For these sound reasons, we will continue to teach Dickinson in introductory classes, hoping that our students will share our appreciation for her greatness as a poet and thinker—assuming, perhaps too complacently, that they will acknowledge her significance as a part of the cultural past that has determined their present experience.

Such hopes and assumptions are not well founded, however, unless we can overcome certain obstacles that make the teaching of Dickinson's poems problematic and, sometimes, disappointing. A student's failure to appreciate Dickinson is often attributable to a combination of factors that the instructor can control. First, we can insure that our students read Dickinson's poetry in a text that does justice to her art. Second, we can explain her innovative style in a manner that will make poetic language less intimidating to the novice reader. Third, we can rectify the popular conception of Dickinson as an eccentric spinster—a myth that portrays her as a socially marginal figure with little relevance to the average student's experience—and present her instead as an inspiring figure in the history of women's achievements. It is my hope that the following discussion of text, language, and the woman poet will be helpful to those of us who remain committed to teaching Dickinson's poetry, and who hope to teach it well.

The most basic and most easily corrected problem in teaching Dickinson is a difficulty that is not inherent to the study of her poetry but rather a problem of our own making. Or, to put the case in less judgmental terms, it is a consequence of institutionalized learning. In many of our introductory literature classes we ask students to get to know Dickinson by presenting them with a text of poems that is not the text of Dickinson's poems. That is, we rely on literature anthologies that provide a small and necessarily misrepresentative sample of her work. The use of such anthologies, justified

in part by the instructor's need to cover a broad canvas of literary periods, forms, and authors in these courses, is nevertheless particularly disadvantageous to the study of Dickinson's poetry. Her canon is characterized by a preoccupation with approximately seven topics which are explored from a variety of different perspectives. The reader of *The Complete Poems* becomes aware of the complexity and catholicism of Dickinson's views on these issues as he or she encounters poems that differ radically in their interpretation of the same experience. In contrast, the anthology reader's knowledge of Dickinson is restricted in a way that distorts the poet's ideas. My experience suggests that the selection of poems included in most anthologies is inadequate in one of two ways: the "Dickinson text" offered is either a reflection of the narrow concerns of a group of editors rather than a text which accurately presents the comprehensiveness of the poet's mind; or, on the other hand, it is a text which attempts to represent fairly the poet's catholicity but, in fact, succeeds only in offering students a collection of poems which seem inexplicably inconsistent. For an example of the former type of selection—the narrow perspective intended to support the editors' interests or needs—I refer you to Gilbert and Gubar's *Anthology of Literature by Women*, an impressive and much-needed collection of writings which in the case of Dickinson, however, provides what might better be called a corrective sample of her poems than a representative selection of her work. Gilbert and Gubar give the student a new and most useful perspective on Dickinson, but it is nonetheless a narrow perspective, a kind of tunnel-vision approach to Dickinson's art. For an example of the second type of anthology, that which seems to offer a broader view of Dickinson's work, we can turn to any one of the many literature anthologies designed to be used as introductions to the major literary forms. One difficulty with these anthologies is that the selection of poems they provide reflects the power of Dickinson's poetry only to those who have already read widely in her canon. Such readers can place the supposedly representative pieces in a broader context, a corpus which, when read in its entirety, demonstrates the remarkably modern flexibility of Dickinson's mind as it grappled with issues that were both personal and profound. Terms like "flexible," "comprehensive," and "catholic"—though they accurately describe an important characteristic of the poet's work—will, however, seem most unconvincing to students who have been exposed to only a limited number of poems. For example, we may ask our students to read "Faith is a fine invention" and "I never saw a moor" as sister poems, in the belief that they will thereby gain an appreciation for Dickinson's intellectual integrity, for her ability to remain, as Keats put it, "in uncertainties" (261) about the most momentous of issues rather than adopt what she knew to be a reductive view of religious faith. More often than not, however, students discussing these poems side by side will express the opinion that Dickinson simply could not make up her mind to either believe or disbelieve in God; they will be led by such reading assignments to see the poet as a victim of indecision, one who did not have intellectual control of her feelings about faith. If we point out that the tone of these poems belies that view of the poet as indecisive—that "I never saw a moor" is a supremely confident expression of faith and that its companion piece looks at the issue with cool and humorous detachment—then we unwittingly force students to the conclusion that Dickinson is capriciously inconsistent. The reader of a more extensive

text of the poems is never pushed to this unsatisfactory view. Such a reader encounters not two, or three, or four poems on the question of faith but a whole array of perspectives on the issue, so that "I never saw a moor" and "Faith is a fine invention" are presented not in stark contrast but as significantly related to each other through a long series of poems that are linked together to form a continuum of views on the problem of faith. Furthermore, I would argue that one comes to appreciate both the style and meaning of Dickinson's poems in a cumulative fashion. Her canon is like a musical composition which presents variations on several themes, and it is essential to read—not necessarily to analyze—a sufficient number of her poems in order to acquire a taste for her art.

One solution to this problem of the Dickinson text is obvious: I would suggest that we not rely on the selections provided through general anthologies but require students to purchase and read a more comprehensive text like *Final Harvest*, which contains 576 of Dickinson's 1,775 poems. Students should be asked to read extensively in the text, say 100 poems or more, but they should also be encouraged to read in a relaxed manner. We should help them to adopt an attitude which Wordsworth described as one of "wise passiveness" ("Expostulation and Reply"), a mood in which one is alert to potential meanings in the work, receptive to potential influences, but never insistent on figuring out the poem as if it were a riddle or a mathematical problem. Some class time should, of course, be devoted to close reading of selected poems so that students have an opportunity to enhance their analytical skills either by following the instructor's interpretive model or by formulating their own readings individually and in small groups. But the main point to be stressed is that Dickinson must be read extensively. As poem follows poem, the reader gradually gains a feeling for her style, an understanding of her issues, and an appreciation for the manner in which her mind plays over the questions of faith, grief, love, art, nature, the self, and death.

If using *Final Harvest* or *The Complete Poems* is not practicable for any reason (a consideration for the student's pocketbook comes to mind), one can still find ways of supplementing an anthology so that the experience of reading Dickinson more closely approximates an ideal exposure to her poetry. Though duplicating poems is a complicated procedure given current copyright laws, xerox copies can provide students with a second Dickinson text to be read along with the anthology selection. Of course, as teacher-editors, we will be subject to the same limitations as the anthology editor; that is, we will tend to choose poems that reinforce our own interests in Dickinson and this second text we create may be just as narrow or self-contradictory as the first. It is probable, however, that this new text will at least have a corrective effect since we are likely to select poems which will counteract any bias that the anthology editors may have.

A final way of enlarging the Dickinson text we offer our students is through the sharing of books and through the creation of a new text edited by the students themselves. If the instructor spends several days teaching Dickinson at the beginning of the term, copies of *Final Harvest* or *The Complete Poems* can then be circulated among the students and read over a period of several weeks. Each student would be required to read at least 150 poems, and, from those, to select approximately ten that he or she

finds particularly intriguing. The student would then make copies of each poem and provide commentary by writing marginal glosses and/or annotative footnotes for the works chosen. Near the end of the term every student will have submitted a critical "edition" of ten Dickinson poems—chapters, if you will—which can be collected by the instructor, who acts as a kind of editor-in-chief to form a new, annotated text of selected poems by Emily Dickinson. Such a text should more faithfully capture the distinctive quality of Dickinson's canon, for the poems selected and the commentaries recorded beside them will reflect a variety of perspectives on several themes and will thus effectively mimic the catholicity and comprehensiveness of Dickinson's art.

Implicit in the argument I have made so far is the claim that Dickinson's poems will simply teach themselves if they are read properly: that is, in a mood of relaxed alertness. The difficulty is that it may be impossible for students to adopt this attitude of "wise passiveness" if they feel baffled by the complexities of Dickinson's style. Indeed, it has been my experience that even relatively sophisticated students feel a sense of frustration and anxiety when confronted with the syntactic ambiguity of her poems. It is valid, of course, to point to this stylistic trait as evidence of Dickinson's remarkable originality, but this explanation does not make the poems more accessible to students and, furthermore, has the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the popular conception of Dickinson as a brilliant but "half-cracked" eccentric—a view of the poet that is detrimental to an honset appreciation of her genius, as I shall later discuss. Perhaps the most productive approach the instructor can take is to put the students at ease by acknowledging that Dickinson's style *is* difficult, and by stressing that it is intentionally so. Formalist critical theory—particularly Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarized language—offers us a way of explaining Dickinson's poetic style so that it becomes less intimidating. It also has the advantage of qualifying the view of her as an eccentric, an aberration in literary history, because it establishes an important place for her in the tradition of modern poetics.

If encouraged to talk about their experience with poetry, introductory literature students will often demand to know why poets create works that are so difficult to understand. Why, they ask with a good deal of justice, do poets feel compelled to express themselves so indirectly? Why do they "bury" their meaning in literary language? To those of us who have been led into this profession by a love of that language, these questions may betray a distressing lack of sensibility to metaphorical expression, that responsiveness to imaginative writing that we ourselves acquired mysteriously at an early age—not through classroom instruction but in the act of reading itself. To assist students in gaining this responsiveness to literature is, I believe, the most difficult task a college instructor can undertake. In fact, there are times that I am tempted to believe that it is a futile effort precisely because such sensibility *is* formed at an early age and because the adults in our classes have already established sensibilities to other modes of expression. But at the very least we can help our students to gain an intellectual appreciation of literary language; they can learn to respect poetic expression if we explain that there is a purpose behind its indirection. And perhaps they can also learn to read poetry in a simultaneously relaxed and responsive manner if they know

that their difficulties in reading are the consequence of a deliberately difficult form rather than the result of inadequacy on their part.

In "Art as Technique," a seminal essay of formalist theory, Viktor Shklovsky argues that the function of art is to save us from the deadening effects of habitual perception. Its purpose, he claims, is to force us to see consciously, to perceive things rather than just recognize them. In order to point out the importance of observing life with conscious attention, Shklovsky quotes from Leo Tolstoy's diary:

> I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember—so that if I had dusted it and forgot—that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.

Shklovsky explains the views that are implicit in Tolstoy's comments and argues that poetic language has the effect of forcing us to perceive consciously so that our lives become registered and meaningful:

> As perception become habitual, it becomes automatic. . . . Art exists that we may recover the sensations of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception. . . . After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception. . . . The poet's purpose is to create the vision that results from that deautomatized perception. . . . The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language. (11-13, 22)

Shklovsky's theories are most useful to a teacher of Emily Dickinson's poetry, especially at the introductory level, because they validate the students' experience without trivializing the meaning or purpose of her art. Students will agree that her poems "make objects 'unfamiliar,' " that the form of her writing is "difficult," that the language she uses is "rough" to interpret and that it often seems to "impede" rather than facilitate understanding. At the same time, they can also appreciate Shklovsky's argument that it is worthwhile to break habitual modes of perception, to find ways of regaining the freshness of sensation that we believe we experienced in childhood before we intellectually understood what a stone is and only felt most vividly, that a stone is "*stony*." Exposed to Shklovsky's theories about the goals of poetry and the function of poetry's "roughened language," students become less anxious about their seeming inability to understand Dickinson's poems and more willing to read them with intellectual and emotional alertness.

One can test this new willingness by conducting a class discussion on "A Route of Evanescence," a work that has traditionally been taught in high schools as a "riddle poem." The riddle approach to interpreting "A Route of Evanescence" asks students to guess what Dickinson is describing and works on the assumption that the reader's goal is to figure out the poem's hidden meaning: that is, to conclude that the poem is about a hummingbird. But, of course, the poem is not about a hummingbird. In a sense, it is not *about* anything at all. It is, rather, a recreation of experience. Its goal is to mimic through language the poet's response to seeing a hummingbird before, or without, knowing the bird as the intellectual abstraction that we signify through the term "hummingbird." Dickinson sees, hears, and feels its presence with all the intensity of sensation which accompanies fresh and vital human experience:

> A Route of Evanescence—
> With a Revolving Wheel—
> A Resonance of Emerald—
> A Rush of Cochineal—
> And every Blossom on the Bush
> Adjusts its tumbled Head—
> The mail from Tunis, probably,
> An easy Morning's Ride—

One can, if one likes, withold the riddle's answer from the students and allow them to guess what Dickinson is describing. Indeed, this tactic has the useful effect of engaging readers in a close analysis of the poem's extraordinarily precise images. But I have found that this strategy usually results in feelings of disappointment and frustration on the students' part. Most will not figure the riddle out "correctly" and will therefore conclude that they have missed the point of the poem.

It is, perhaps, more useful to begin an in-class analysis of this poem by discussing how we experience startling physical phenomena. Visual aids can be most useful. One might, for example, pass around an encyclopedia that contains a black and white photograph of a hummingbird, an image of the bird that wholly distorts the experience of seeing one in its natural state. The poem can thus be scrutinized as a more faithful reproduction of sensate experience, and one can emphasize that the goal of Dickinson's poem is not to describe a hummingbird but to recreate and preserve an event that would otherwise be evanescent and irretrievable.

Once one has found a satisfactory solution to the Dickinson text, and once one has discovered a way of effectively explaining her style, one is still left with what may be the greatest obstacle to teaching Emily Dickinson in introductory literature classes today. Like other 19th Century women poets including Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson has been made unappealing to current popular taste by the very legend that has secured her fame. Her reputation as an eccentric spinster has been fostered by biographical studies which emphasize her relationship to the unknown "Master" thought to be the object of her unrequited love; such approaches have encouraged us to understand both Dickinson's eventual reclusiveness and the power of her poetry as a consequence of this unfulfilled desire. Given the kind of biographical data that supports this common approach, students often conclude that

the poetry is the product of a deviant individual suffering from a personal dilemma foreign to their own experience and consequently of little relevance to them either personally or intellectually. To teach Dickinson honestly and successfully, an instructor must be able to qualify the "myth of Emily Dickinson" so that students understand the actual constraints that she labored under and gain a respect for the psychological strength that allowed her to turn, in her words, "Captivity" into "Consciousness" and "Liberty."

The greatness of Emily Dickinson's poetry has often been explained as the recoil of thwarted affective energies: critics like the biographer John Cody and the poet Ted Hughes have argued that her writing was empowered by forces that conventionally would have been expended in sustaining a relationship with a lover, a husband, a family. They see Dickinson as a woman who did not mature in a normal fashion, one who was forced by her unmarried and celibate state to redirect her growth inward and, as a consequence, to achieve remarkable genius. Implicit in this theory is the premise that artistic genius and affective fulfillment are, for women, incompatible. Had Dickinson married happily, we infer, she would not have become a great poet since her aesthetic accomplishment is a result of disappointed desire and pathological retreat. More recently, feminists critics have examined the constraints of Dickinson's life more sympathetically, but they, too, present a view of the poet's genius which, in the main, reinforces the older assumption that to become an artist in a patriarchal culture, a woman must sacrifice her feminine nature. Amy Lowell, an admirer of Dickinson's poems, anticipated such feminist readings in 1925 when she contrasted her to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose genius was, in Lowell's word, "fertilized" by her relationship with Robert Browning. Dickinson, on the other hand, gave herself only "to cold white paper. Starved and tortured,

> She cheated her despair with games of patience
> And fooled herself by winning. Frail little elf,
> The lonely brain-child of a gaunt maturity,
> She hung her womanhood upon a bough
> And played ball with the stars—too long—too long-
> The garment of herself hung on a tree
> Until at last she lost even the desire
> To take it down.

Lowell's poem, "The Sisters," implies that in the process of becoming a poet, Dickinson lost not only her womanhood but her identity as well—"the garment of herself" which she sacrificed in order to "play ball" with the universe.

I think we can argue that the very reverse is true. We can confront Dickinson's achievement more honestly and, at the same time, make her example an inspiring one, if we pay less attention to biographers, critics, and other poets, and listen to the words of the poet herself. It is essential, of course, to map out the contours of the poet's life for students: to give them a sense of her relationships and daily life, and particularly, to emphasize the constraints that she labored under both as a woman writer in a patriarchal society and as a daughter of a Puritan lineage. It is dishonest, however, to present

her as a victim of these constraints. No doubt she was oppressed, but, as Lowell acknowledges, she triumphed over oppression by playing games of solitaire.

It may be that this word "solitaire" is the key to revising our view of Dickinson so that we do justice to the poems she produced rather than reinforce the legend that has grown out of biographical studies and literary gossip. As Adrienne Rich has pointed out, Dickinson's unmarried state was not the pathological withdrawal that Cody has described, nor was it an alternative that she consciously chose (62). It was simply a fact of life for her, as it was and continues to be for many people, men and women alike. What is important is the use she made of the solitude that her singleness afforded her. Poems like "I cannot live with you" suggest that she regretted her single life, that her existence was saturated with a powerful sense of affective incompletion and despair. And yet, the final lines of the poem also describe that feeling of despair as "sustenance," that which promotes life and health. Since "despair" implies a sense of powerlessness and an attitude of resignation, the last two words of the poem ("Sustenance—Despair—") are oxymoronic and, like all oxymorons, are intended to have a startling effect. Indeed, they stand as a surprising revelation at the end of a poem about affective solitude. They reveal, suddenly and unexpectedly, that the speaker of the poem is not bowed down by despair but rather sustained by it. She is neither resigned nor powerless because she has transmuted the force which might have oppressed her into a source of strength. She has not simply channeled her energies in a new direction, "shift[ing] her passion from the lost man" onto a spiritual "Master," as Ted Hughs claims (11). Instead, she has drawn on the facts of her emotional existence and, by embracing them, found a powerful sense of purpose. That purpose, I would argue, was to live an interior life with great intensity, her "soul at white heat," as she would say, and to sustain that inner life by writing 1,775 poems. In fact, the word "sustenance" in its older meaning derived from the French "sustenir" means livelihood, the way one earns one's living and occupies one's time. In Dickinson, then, our students can see a nineteenth-century woman poet who ultimately was not victimized by the constraints of her personal life or oppressed by living in a patriarchal society. They can see instead a woman who had the strength and imagination to reject conventional assumptions about feminine self-fulfillment, to become a great poet, and, in the process, to create a sense of self identity that was truly regal: "With Will to choose, or to reject,/ [she chose] just a Crown" (#508).

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