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Review of Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing

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no longer the antinomian she thinks Dickinson was, for Howe wants a line of legitimate descent for her dissent. Such a patriarchal notion of authority that would entitle her “nonconformist” work is more in the Puritan grain: “Though they crossed a wide and northern ocean, Scripture encompassed them” (49).

But what happens to Dickinson here? Howe’s sentimental reading of the materiality of Dickinson’s texts precisely “tames” Dickinson “for aesthetic consumption.” Dickinson’s work is painfully focussed on the materiality of the signifier and text; throughout her work, she enacts and thematizes the violent objectification of her subjectivity. The mutilated words, sentences, lines, and stanzas that mark her stylistic practice, along with her uncommon punctuation, present what has already happened. For the mangled “material” texts are her visions of her voice in print. The objectification of the subject — “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” — has in fact to do with her translation into print. As Valéry put it, “The writer’s mind sees itself in the mirror provided by the printing press” (Theodor Adorno, Notes to Literature I, 159). Such is the social and historical materiality of her practice, distinct from the accident that she left us her poems only in manuscript. What to do with the manuscripts raises issues for textual scholarship and theory. But for those who do not claim to be textual scholars, there are ways of reading Dickinson’s graphic practice without fetishizing handcrafted books. Howe does not help us read the Dickinson who already knew, scored, and underscored her “banishment” into print.

PAUL CRUMBLEY


In Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios Marta L. Werner presents both an experimental edition of the forty holograph drafts and fragments known as the Lord correspondence and a highly suggestive analysis of this material. Werner’s book proceeds from the simple seeming proposition that we must learn to see Dickinson’s holographs before reading them. In this claim Werner aligns herself with Susan Howe, Martha Nell Smith, Sharon Cameron and a
growing list of scholars who believe that the visual complexities of Dickinson's holograph manuscripts significantly challenge generic categories such as poetry, prose, letters, and books. Werner's work most particularly resembles Howe's stylistically, for Werner allows her critical perceptions to shape the texture of her prose. Convinced that at the heart of Dickinson's work is an interplay of voices, Werner herself abjures traditional argumentation in favor of a poetic writing that encourages readers to collaborate with the voices of literary discourse in a conversation designed to expand rather than resolve interpretive possibilities.

Werner describes her book as "an edition about undoing" (13) that shifts the focus of reading "from the lexical toward the visual" so that "deciphering gives way to witnessing" (15-16), and each reader becomes a "bibliographer-poet finding his or her own way toward the future by striking out in a different direction through the past" (6). Of the many techniques Werner utilizes to undo assumptions about the past, perhaps the most effective is her non-discursive weaving of Dickinson's holograph fragments and the specialized language of textual analysis throughout her own critical narrative. In one instance, she juxtaposes her assertion that non-generic holograph markings "require a new nomenclature" (15) with the photograph of a holograph specimen accompanied only by the austere language of descriptive bibliography. Such a procedure proclaims the authority of Dickinson's hand while maintaining appreciation for critical practices that approximate but never achieve exact description. The request for new nomenclature thus makes sense, not because Werner has shown the failure of past efforts but because through her presentation prior accomplishments emerge as contributions to an ongoing conversation rather than competing discourses. In this way, the form of Werner's book invites readers to join with author and critic as equal partners in a conversation that undoes the closural processes of the critical past in order to better understand applications of that past to the present.

This open-ended quality of Werner's presentation allows her to offer additions to the critical conversation about Dickinson without compelling her readers to assess each item's merit in terms of an underlying unified argument. Such is the case, for instance, when she suggests that in addition to semantic content holograph documents also function as "scenes of writing" where physical surfaces "witness" the poet at work. Similarly, her alternative account of scissored manuscripts introduces a new critical perspective available to many argumentative strategies but exclusively allied to none. Without rejecting the familiar assumptions that an insensitive early
editor or a protective sibling mutilated Dickinson's holograph leaves, Werner considers the possibility that Dickinson cut out pieces herself to distribute as autograph "keepsakes" or to construct new poetic compositions. The important point Werner makes here and elsewhere has less to do with the accuracy of her suppositions than the recognition that her view casts in a constructive light manuscript anomalies previously viewed as unimportant or damaging. This unbinding of perspective performs as the best of all Werner's suggestions do — it opens our eyes to the limitations of our own interpretive traditions and enables us to see Dickinson's writing in a clearer, less mediated light.

The difficulties Open Folios may pose for readers will probably correspond in one way or another to the book's strongest attributes. One might hope, for instance, that a work focusing so closely on visual aspects of Dickinson's holographs would make manuscript study more appealing to readers coming to Dickinson for the first time. But as Werner readily admits in her introduction, this essay-edition offers a "counternarrative" (6) that depends for its success on reader knowledge of the antecedent narrative. It is as a work that chooses academics as its primary audience, then, that Werner's book succeeds most. However, even Dickinson scholars will find room to dispute certain of her decisions. I wonder, for example, at her inclusion of handwritten dashes in print transcriptions of holographs when doing so implies a precision belied by discrepancies with length, angle and spacing shown in the manuscript photographs that face her transcriptions. Even so, disagreements like this one do ultimately serve Werner's aims by directing attention to physical features of holograph materials and bringing them into the emerging conversation about Dickinson that Open Folios so effectively engenders.

JOANNE FEIT DIEHL


Cynthia Hogue's Scheming Women: Poetry, Privilege, and the Politics of Subjectivity is an ambitious work that offers significant theoretical insights into relations among authorship, gender and style. Through a series of atten-