



A CENTURY OF DICKINSON SCHOLARSHIP:

Reflections of an Encyclopedist

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It is Almost the Year Two Thousand, Robert Frost titled one of his poems, and as I write we are seeing signs of millennial expectation all around us in lists of bests and worsts, in anticipation of *Time Magazine's* "Person of the Millennium" cover, in Y2K anxieties, and even in an explosion of library reference books. No doubt that explosion owes much to publishers' expectations of library purchases—easier these days for references than monographs, but I think it also reflects a scholarly urge to organize and preserve the learning of our time. In the case of *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* (1998), which I edited recently on invitation from Greenwood Press, there is no millennium of knowledge to preserve, but there is a little over a century's accumulation since *Poems by Emily Dickinson* first appeared in 1890, four years after the poet's death.

I confess that my immediate response to that invitation in November 1994 was to back off from what I instinctively recognized as an organizational nightmare, but I'm glad that second thoughts about the usefulness of such a book, the network of Dickinsonians to whom I could turn for contributions, and the auspicious timing of an August 1995 international Dickinson conference in Innsbruck, Austria, at which I could enlist volunteers all seduced me into letting down my guard

and submitting a proposal for a one-volume reference book of 180,000 words dealing with about 350 entries to be accomplished with help from about a hundred contributors. The organization proved less baffling than expected, recruitment of scholars much easier than I'd thought, and the whole project an educational experience—certainly for its editor.

In some ways, an encyclopedia seems a mistaken tribute to Emily Dickinson, whose reclusive habits and personal mysteries establish her as America's patron saint of neglected genius. A poet who lived from 1830 to 1886 in the religiously conservative college town of Amherst, Massachusetts, she avoided public exposure, and her privacy was fiercely protected throughout life by her locally prominent family. Of the nearly 2,000 poems she wrote, only ten were published in her lifetime—anonously and apparently without her consent. Dickinson's life, she commented to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her literary mentor, had been "too simple and stern to embarrass any" (L330)¹ although not so simple as to discourage the myth-making about her private passions that began while she lived and grew once her poems became known. Although she has emerged as one of this country's greatest literary geniuses and probably the best-loved woman poet of the English-speaking world, Dickinson remains a mysterious figure still shrouded in the "fiery mist" in which Higginson complained about her hiding (L330a). One thinks of an encyclopedia as fact-dense and definitively informative, but one of Dickinson's charms is her penchant for slanting or exploding definitions.

Still, there is much factual knowledge that can be assem-

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bled about the people she knew, the books and authors she read, the institutions that influenced her, the artists in various modes whom she in turn influenced, the reception of her poetry in many parts of the world, the poetic forms she adapted, characteristics of her style, and editorial and critical history of her poems and letters. Where facts are known, they can be presented; where supposition is required, we can base it on informed judgment; where the community of Dickinson scholars cannot achieve consensus, the encyclopedia acknowledges multiple perspectives. In the process of receiving and cross-checking so many entries, I inevitably learned a great deal about Dickinson and the details people consider important. Which side of the family Homestead did the Edward Dickinson family occupy when Emily was a little girl? One contributor said it was the east, another the west. Normally, this is the sort of thing I wouldn't care about, but I know that there are people fiercely concerned about every scrap of information about the two Dickinson houses in Amherst. Consultation with authorities there established that both contributors were right: the Dickinsons moved from the west side to the east after 1833, when David Mack bought the house and moved his family in. I learned other things too about the mysteries of motivating people to keep up with production schedules—even about the international date line when a writer in Japan asked which day I meant by a final deadline of next Monday. One comprehensive effect of this editing, however, has been fresh insight into a century's history of Dickinson scholarship, and I wonder to what extent observations I have been able to make about ways in which the literary-scholarly community has responded to her writing bears on our knowledge of other writers as well.

First is the reminder that curiosity is not only the justification for reference books but is the foundation for all scholarship. There are lots of things people are curious about with respect to Emily Dickinson, and consequently lots of different questions get asked by people willing to track down answers. One of the pleasures of compiling this encyclopedia turned

out to be finding out how many people had special interests that could be turned to account. There was the founding president of the Emily Dickinson International Society who, when approached for a contribution on linguistic and stylistic approaches to the poetry, agreed only on the condition that she also be given the entry on Carlo, Dickinson's dog, on whom she had been quietly amassing information for years. There was the bibliographer who turned out to have particular biographical interest in one of the poet's grandmothers and some of her aunts. An artist in San Francisco offered to share findings from her intensive research into domestic life in the Dickinson households with particular attention to roles of Irish servants. An Australian scholar who is embarked on a long-term research project that has her heroically reading through everything Dickinson is known or thought to have read agreed to report on the characteristics of various publications to which the family subscribed. Such curiosity has generated a wealth of critical, textual, theoretical, and biographical inquiry, and the questions don't stop. Another pleasure of developing this book was learning about current doctoral research and thereby incorporating entries anticipatory of books that should start appearing in three to five years.

But when I ask myself, now, whether any one category of scholarship has contributed more significantly than others to the current state of knowledge, I would have to say that the basis for everything else and hence the most fundamental kind of literary scholarship (probably for many authors beyond Dickinson) is editing. Reading is what literary study is all about—informed, appreciative, and ever-more-insightful reading. But readers rely upon texts, and the people who provide us with texts make everything else possible by guiding readers toward particular kinds of questions. As Dickinson's editorial history is unusually complex, given her total non-involvement in the work of preparing her poems for print, the encyclopedia honored her editors with individual entries on them and their publications—an honor not accorded other Dickinson scholars, not even the great Richard Sewall. Mabel Loomis

Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson brought out the first two volumes of Dickinson poems in 1890 and 1891, rightfully identifying their main task as winning an audience for this brilliant but decidedly idiosyncratic writer. So they tried to make the poems seem unthreatening and even familiar by presenting them in small, silvery books decorated with Todd's drawing of Indian pipes and divided into sections entitled Life, Love, Nature, and Time and Eternity. They added titles to many poems, inserted commas, semicolons, and periods to replace many of Dickinson's dashes, changed words to improve rhyme or make the diction less colloquial, and even omitted stanzas that might give offense. Todd followed the same methods with the third series, published in 1896, and then discontinued her efforts until long afterward, when she and her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, brought out *Bolts of Melody* in 1945. By that time, readers had grown accustomed to somewhat more faithful transcriptions of Dickinson's poems as edited by the poet's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, from 1914 to 1937; Bianchi, too, made adaptations, sometimes to make lineation appear more modern, sometimes to preserve the image of her family she wanted to project, and sometimes simply because she and her assistant, Alfred Leete Hampson, had difficulty making out her aunt's penmanship. It was not until Thomas H. Johnson published the three-volume variorum edition issued by Harvard University Press in 1955 under the magisterial title *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts* that readers saw in print accurate transcriptions of her poems with all their oddities of punctuation, spelling, and syntax and their breathtaking brilliance of imaginative expression. Then, in 1981, came *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* edited by R. W. Franklin, two volumes of facsimile reproductions of the poet's own handwritten fascicles or booklets that may have served as her private form of publication. Readers could finally discover Dickinson's own organization and match their readings against those in print. And just lately, in fall 1998, Harvard has published Franklin's new

three-volume variorum edition as a corrective to flaws detected in Johnson's.

All these editions have influenced critical interpretation except, of course, for Franklin's that is just now beginning to be reviewed. The first generation of Dickinson editors, Todd and Higginson, made her poetry accessible to people accustomed to a genteel kind of women's poetry and managed to awaken respectful interest from critics in the United States and England. Bianchi and Bingham in the next generation highlighted her poetry's incipient modernism while drawing explicit connections between her writing and family life. It wasn't until Johnson's edition, however, that readers discovered what a formidable intelligence found expression in these poems or came to appreciate Dickinson's unorthodox artistry. The *Manuscript Books* empowered readers, much as vernacular Bibles empowered Reformation Protestants; suddenly, people everywhere had access to Dickinson's own penmanship and even her cartooning; they saw how she kept the process of creation endlessly alive by inserting multiple variants into her text and resisting closure. Inevitably, we read any poem differently when we see it before us in different forms, and it is often possible to understand seemingly off-the-wall responses to Dickinson by figuring out which version of a poem was under consideration.

To judge from works most cited as recommended readings by authors of encyclopedia entries, I conclude that biography ranks second only to editing in its usefulness to literary scholars. The nature of an encyclopedia may skew things, of course, in that it focuses attention on people, places, and institutions, but, whatever the cause, I can say with confidence that Richard Sewall's two-volume 1974 *The Life of Emily Dickinson* is the work in which Dickinson scholars most place their trust, followed by two even more factually oriented books: Jay Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* and Jack Capps's documentation of *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836–1886*. Curiosity about Dickinson's life and personal character developed long before biographies became available. Mabel Loomis

Todd interrupted the sequence of poetry editing in the 1890s to bring out a collection of Dickinson's letters when she found on her lecture tours that the poet's admirers wanted to know more about her as a person, and Martha Dickinson Bianchi typically printed poems alongside letters, family lore, and her own reminiscences. That "Love" section in each of the early editions inevitably prompted curiosity about the object of the poet's passion, and it is interesting that every successive stage of editing has unloosed its own wave of speculation about such romantically unattainable lovers as the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, editor Samuel Bowles, and sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Dickinson's inner life remains as ambiguous as her poems, however, and I am relieved to note that Marianne Noble's encyclopedia entry on "Master" eschews specific identification. What we find in Sewall's and Leyda's books is a formidable context for the poet's life—lots of information about the people around her and the events happening in her world. As for the centering passions of her life, however, I find myself thinking of Robert Frost's line, "Fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." With other authors, I presume it would be less dreamlike but not necessarily less interesting to readers or less called upon in interpretations of poems.

Approaches to critical interpretation have varied with the sequential dominance of one or another kind of literary scholarship. It is easy to observe with Dickinson study how the late-Victorian life-and-letters sort of commentary yielded in turn to various kinds of historicism, the New Criticism, feminism, psychological criticism, philosophical criticism, religious criticism, linguistic and stylistic approaches, and varieties of post-structuralism. These, too, have been influenced by editorial history. Johnson's variorum, for example, proved the ideal text for critics of the 1950s and 1960s trained in the precepts of the "New Criticism" to value literature for its complexity, ambiguity, and tension. Even though that edition with its chronological arrangement inspired some biographically-oriented critics to arrive at theses about the poet's religious con-

version or her love life, the presentation of poems, variants, and manuscript history on the page encouraged the kind of close textual engagement that excited critics of the time. Now, it is evident from the relatively few encyclopedia citations of that scholarship and the faults found with its practitioners for sexism and insensitivity, that the New Criticism is much out of fashion; its continuing influence is evident, however, in tendencies toward close reading and focus on language as well as in appreciation for some brilliantly astute readings of individual poems. No doubt much to his surprise, Franklin's edition of the fascicles opened the way for feminist readings that ascribed value to the unfinished, exploratory, and relational qualities a new generation of critics found in Dickinson's writing. Although Franklin claims to see no particular significance to her ordering of poems within fascicles, feminist readers assume authorial design. Susan Howe's argument in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) that the handwritten poems possess authority lacking in print versions has encouraged attention to details of Dickinson's penmanship, punctuation, textual variants, and lineation. It has also stimulated thinking about the private "publication" Dickinson accomplished by creating these little books that she left behind in a wooden chest and by circulating poems in correspondence with friends.

Historicisms, both old and new, have been important in Dickinson study, perhaps all the more so because the poet's tendency to hide from her pursuers leaves scholars to build a context of information around her, showing how she related to literary movements of her time (romanticism, sentimentalism, realism, even frontier humor), to religious changes and related intellectual upheavals (the neo-Puritan orthodoxy of western Massachusetts in the Second Awakening challenged by the Higher Criticism and Darwin), and to her political environment (her father's career in Whig politics and the fact that her most productive years as a poet were those of the Civil War). These critical approaches blend with current penchants for cultural studies and, of course, women's studies. Dickinson's conflicted response to Connecticut Valley evangelical

culture encourages religiously oriented critics (people like me) just as her epistemological daring invites philosophical ones. As one of her most dazzling gifts is that of expressing the extremes of human sensation and consciousness, it is only natural that psychological critics have interpreted her writings in terms of Freud, Jung, and Lacan. Somewhat to my surprise, however, I found that psychological issues have been subsumed lately under medical ones in general and gender-related subversions of social convention. Sexual tensions that used to be discussed in Freudian terms now emerge in entries on eroticism, the body, and lesbian inclinations.

All of these approaches tend to blend with feminism, which turns out to be the synthesizing critical methodology for Dickinson study over the past quarter century. When feminist criticism burst onto the scene, its leaders went on the attack against the New Critics with their attitudes toward Dickinson that could be critiqued as paternalistically demeaning. Yet much feminist scholarship also employs close reading and attention to language very much like that of the New Critics, and encyclopedia entries give little sense that the two camps remain in conflict. Feminist scholarship has had an invigorating effect on Dickinson criticism by paying attention to the facts that Emily Dickinson was a woman, that many of her closest friends and favorite authors also were women, and that she inhabited a social-cultural world deeply inflected by nineteenth-century notions of gender. Increasingly, scholars in this school pay attention to the social contexts of her letters as well as poetry. Another evidence of feminist influence appears in deconstructive entries on particular poems that focus on Dickinson's use of figurative language as evidence of a subversive female voice undermining patriarchal diction and forms. There are scholars examining Dickinson's cultural milieu in terms of a sentimentalized feminine Protestantism in conflict with her Puritan inheritance and others considering her decision against publication in terms of female authorial roles in her time. There is also considerable attention paid to her at-

tachments to other women, especially Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Elizabeth Holland.

One effect of editing an encyclopedia is the discovery of how so many different approaches can coalesce or occasionally carom off each other to arrive at a coherent portrait of Emily Dickinson as she appears to us at the end of the twentieth century: an intelligent, responsive citizen of her time and place but also a sort of feminist post-modernist figure—playful, teasing, chameleon-like, and capable of seducing many more readers than whatever still unidentified person she addressed as “Master.” Something else that must come across to any reader of the encyclopedia who yields to browsing temptations is awareness of the delight of her language. Even though contributors respected my concerns about copyright permissions and therefore avoided long quotations, the book is studded with quotes that remind us why this woman is so fascinating and why we care about her: “The Soul has Bandaged moments—” (P512); “A still—Volcano—Life—” (P601); “a Glee among the Garret” (P934); and “This whole Experiment of Green—” (P1333) from the *Poems*, for instance, or “I’d as soon think of popping fire crackers in the presence of Peter the Great” from an early letter (L130). Even such fragments amply confirm Lavinia Dickinson’s observation that her sister’s “power of language was unlike any one who ever lived. She fascinated every one she saw” (Sewall 153).

Editing this book has been an education in the uses of literary scholarship, but it has also been a humbling reminder of how subordinate even the best criticism is to poetry. It is the literature itself that is alive and invigorating. It has outlived its author. When arriving at an informal style sheet for the book, I remembered her observation that “The Poets light but Lamps—/Themselves—go out—” and decided to refer to the poet herself in past tense but the poems in present because they are the “Wicks” her metaphor represents as stimulated by the poet’s illuminating imagination to “Inhere as do the Suns—/Each Age a Lens/Disseminating their/Circumference—” (P883). Many eminent editors and critics are dead,

and their specific contributions have been quickly forgotten or even held up for mockery. The twentieth-century knowledge distilled in *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* will eventually seem out-of-date, but her poems will still be alive. I find it exciting to discover how much impact they have already had in distant parts of the world and when translated into various European and Asian languages.

One thing that strikes me in appraising a century of Dickinson scholarship is that a remarkable amount of truly significant work has been done by people who haven't held Ph.D.s in English or appointments to university faculties. Since the very first American literature programs in United States colleges were established in the same decade of the 1890s that Dickinson's poems first appeared, one would hardly expect her first editors and commentators to be scholars in our current sense of the word. Thomas Wentworth Higginson belonged to that civilized class of gentlemen known to us as men of letters. Mabel Loomis Todd was a faculty wife with her own literary and romantic ambitions but not a college graduate. What comes as more of a surprise is that the three doctorates held by Thomas Johnson were honorary ones (prime examples of the occasionally false distinction between those and "earned" degrees). Jay Leyda's obituaries identified him as essentially a film scholar, not a literary person. Ralph Franklin, although trained as a teacher of literature, is now director of Yale's Beinecke Library. Even now, a private scholar such as Polly Longworth wins international recognition for biographical research. Some of the most remarkable breakthroughs in recognition of Emily Dickinson's genius have come from poets, Adrienne Rich and Susan Howe. I have been very pleased with encyclopedia contributions from non-professional scholars and fledgling ones still in graduate school. And, conversely, I have found that academically distinguished leaders of my profession still get dates wrong, miscopy titles, and otherwise keep an editor vigilant.

Even if I had imagined that I could preserve the encyclopedia from errors, I got my comeuppance less than a year

after its publication from the new Franklin variorum, which, among multitudinous small changes, replaces Johnson's numbers for all poems from number 2 on, thereby calling for revisions in at least half of the book's entries. So even the most nit-picking sort of detail-work, the harmless drudgery Samuel Johnson built into his definition of lexicographer, leaves us open to the corrective force of later discoveries. It may be well to keep in mind that "scholar," in Dickinson's usage, meant pupil rather than preceptor. So when we think about the uses and potential of literary scholarship at the dawn of a new millennium, we may want to meditate on her characteristically ambiguous definition of "Fame" as "the tint that Scholars leave/Upon their Setting Names—/The Iris not of Occident/That disappears as comes—" (P866).