

Thomas Gardner, *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*

New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

*A Door Ajar* continues Thomas Gardner's interest in poetic influence and in conversations between artist and critic. An early book (1989) was on Whitman and poetry of the 1960s-70s; in *Regions of Unlikeness* (1999), he included interviews with poets whose work he was explaining. Here he couples essays and interviews again, this time with Marilynne Robinson, Charles Wright, Susan Howe and Jorie Graham at the microphone—one chapter on the work, as it relates to Dickinson, followed by a conversation with the writer. Gardner asks for their personal history with Dickinson (first encounters), and how living with her work has informed their own. The analysis chapters were written before the interviews took place, and the latter “press,” Gardner claims, “sometimes forcefully, against my initial arguments” (231). If that sequence had been reversed, he might have responded to their comments. For example, Howe mentions that Dickinson's letters are the model for her prose style, but the letters are nowhere discussed in his analysis chapter, which focuses on her prose books *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and [116] *The Birth-mark* (1993). I wonder as well about the accuracy of his claim—in my reading there are few ripples of disagreement. But if gaps exist between some of what *A Door Ajar* claims to do—which is reconfigure the academic book by unsettling the critic's authority through dialogue with the artists—and what it actually does, the attempt must still be applauded.

To measure Dickinson's influence on four writers, Gardner defines the significance of her work rather generally: they have all learned from how she invokes that which cannot be “fully known.” Each of them arrives at a line of circumference that separates the known world from a spiritual condition that can be experienced only momentarily. On the subject of that line there is the book's central poem, “I cannot live with You” (F706) and the first three lines of its final stanza: “So we must meet apart - / You there - I - here - / With just the Door ajar.” (Graham's *Swarm* [2000], the main subject of Gardner's essay on her, was “animated” throughout by this poem.) As Gardner says, “For Dickinson, to track one's experience with a beloved is no different from tracking one's encounter with poetry [since] both seem to follow the same pattern of coming overpoweringly near and then moving inexplicably away” (9). He suggests the phrase “responsive brokenness” as pertinent to the work of all four; and punctuating the book are summaries, such as “Like Robinson's ‘imperfectly partial’ analogies, Wright's scoured attention to what refuses him access, and Howe's

improvised soundings of the unknown, Graham's enactments of vertigo open her language to a wilderness, something other, that can be inhabited but never mastered" (168).

Fraying this thread run among the writers, however, is a lurking and perhaps impossible question: how is it that Dickinson appeals to writers (of both genders) along the aesthetics spectrum? This book for Gardner is less about his view of Dickinson and more about inviting three poets and a novelist into the critical discussion. Having four perspectives on Dickinson does produce many luminous moments. And it must be noted that the analysis chapters are extensions of the interviews because in them Gardner quotes the writers at length. But Gardner himself, when his turn comes, offers too steadily just one Dickinson in an effort to provide a Dickinson that they could share in common. He suggests that "their at times opposed aesthetic commitments must have blinded us" to their mutual conversations with Dickinson, yet leaves us to discern for ourselves (in the respective interviews especially) what those various commitments are (229). Wright will admit that he took "nothing stylistically" from Dickinson—"It was all content," he says (105)—and we can see that Howe is positioned otherwise. [117]

"Such distances under her fingertips!" says Wright of Dickinson, whose "There's a certain Slant of light" (F320) has been the "ur-poem in [his] unconscious" (71, 97). Wright talks about how that poem has affected his experience of light in daily life, as well as echoed what he terms his "negative spirituality" and confirmed his sense of the lyric poem as offering something "partially glimpsed" but "never fulfilled" (96, 101, 102). Gardner sees *Zone Journals* (1988), with its "rhythms of finding and losing," as most in line with the poet of distances (74). In both the Wright and Graham chapters, Gardner repeats a phrase that discloses their aesthetic positions: for Wright it is a simile in *Zone Journals*, "I keep coming back, like a tongue to a broken tooth"; and for Graham it is a passage in a Dickinson letter, "to all except anguish, the mind soon adjusts." The repetition of these phrases almost functions as a structural device, and may reflect the search in Wright's poetry (Graham's less so) for something that would patch together cracked elements—one image for this being an "undernarrative road" (84). That something may well be, Gardner suggests, "beyond the reach of the alphabet" (75). In her interview Graham offers a close reading of "A Light exists in Spring" (F962), which contains much "of what I learned from her" (197). Such close reading is for her "a negatively capable activity in which you undergo the poem and arrive at sensations that only the—as it were—writing of the poem can get you to" (200). To read Dickinson one must "write" her: line by line one must experience the poet's process. Yet, by the end, Graham admits that she has perhaps

been “trying to expose what is not expositional,” and “it *does* seem, at times, that talking this way one risks losing the very thing one is trying to handle, or comprehend” (205).

Howe too knows that what one sees in Dickinson is predicated on the approach to her texts. As Gardner says in thinking about Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*, “we should not be reading Dickinson and the other writers she examines [Thomas Shepard, Mary Rowlandson] thematically—thinking of theme as a way of standing above the textures of broken, multiple articulation—or not strictly so” (136). Gardner’s choice of an emblematic phrase this time is (from *The Birth-mark*) the attraction to being in a “state outside of States.” One compelling aspect of the chapter on Howe is an explication of her reading in *My Emily Dickinson* of “My Life had stood - a loaded Gun” (F764). In a sense, Howe uses her interview with Gardner as an occasion to publish some of her latest unfoldings on Dickinson’s manuscripts. Reproduced is the paper on which Dickinson wrote “With Pinions of Disdain” (F1448) and three pages from [118] Webster’s *Dictionary* (1828). For this poem the variants are a built-in part of the process: instead of being added later, at the bottom of the page, they occur on the fly. For instance, on the manuscript page we see “any feather / specified / ratified / certified / in - by - / Ornithology -” (155). We then see the multiplicity of definitions (as variants) in the *Dictionary* for “ORNITHOLOGY,” “PINION” and “DISDAIN.” “This is a winged thought pinioned to the page,” Howe says (159).

Robinson, like Howe, looks back to Dickinson not just as a beginning in American writing but as a descendent of earlier voices. Where Howe turns to Shepard, Robinson points to Jonathan Edwards’ *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758), which asserts that God is still in a creative relationship with us: “All dependent existence whatsoever is in a constant flux, ever passing and returning; renewed every moment, as the colours of bodies are every moment renewed by the light that shines upon them” (50). Robinson happily discusses two of Dickinson’s contemporaries as well, Melville and Thoreau. There’s something refreshing about her disinterestedness towards the notion that anything she has written can be traceable solely to Dickinson. This seems related to Robinson’s slight preference for perception (something experienced) over identity (something understood)—in “The ‘I am nobody’ posture,” perfected by Dickinson, one perceives (55). As nobody, one can adapt when a way of understanding the world crashes, and be open to the potentialities of meaning in all things. In his essay Gardner tracks Ruth’s survival strategies in Robinson’s first novel *Housekeeping* (1980). (Unfortunately, her recent novel *Gilead* [2004], with its Dickinson-like narrator, is not discussed.) Typical in that chapter is the phrase “to cite the Dickinson poem behind all of this”: the connections, if they exist, are implicit (38). What *Housekeeping* and Dickinson have in common is the

idea that, in Gardner's words, "a language acknowledging its imperfect partiality stands poised to expand: its world is large and strange" (25).

While *A Door Ajar* welcomes readers with an attitude of self-containment, it too stands "poised to expand." Gardner incorporates the work of only a few Dickinson critics, Elisa New being the most important—her comment that "it is only in the display of difference that something outside human categories makes itself known" justifies the energy these writers have expended in their attempt to experience difference (7). Even though it is almost 250 pages long, the book's focus on particular issues gives it the clarity of a long essay. Sustaining this sense of unity, however, is a recursive style that can become repetitive. I also have a question for Gardner. About the interviews (conducted between December 1999 and January 2003) he quickly mentions "the back-and-forth of revision and expansion," but [119] that is it (vii). Why not say more? Gardner is an impressive interviewer with his ready ability to bring the written material into the play of the conversation; his close listening skills are keen. But one of the most engaging aspects of *A Door Ajar* is his own often inspired writing. He invited these artists to be critics, and in a reciprocal move the critic becomes something of an artist. For instance, in the context of Howe's work he writes that "Language's physicality leads us to what was not said—to the other of what *was* said" (136). Through quoting and ventriloquizing, Gardner extends the radiant language of his subjects.

Esdale, Logan. "Thomas Gardner's *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.2 (Fall 2006): 115-119.