
LOGAN ESDALE

Eberwein, Jane Donahue, and Cindy MacKenzie, eds. *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2009. \$39.95.

From the reviews of the first edition of Dickinson's letters in 1894, to the introductions that launched subsequent editions, to the discrete essays that have appeared in books and journals, the epistolary Dickinson has never gone unrecognized. Yet only recently have full-length books appeared. As a companion to the first monograph on the subject, Marietta Messmer's *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence* (2001), we now have *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, with eleven contributors. In a foreword to this collection, Messmer suggests that while the letters are finally receiving their due, there will be much more critical attention to come, as they go through a re-editing process that will eventually lead to a replacement for Thomas Johnson's standard 1958 edition, and as more facsimiles become available online.

The main argument of *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters* is that knowing what letters meant to Dickinson also tells us what they meant to her culture. The case made so well here that she can be seen as a representative figure, someone who helped to sustain her culture's values, invariably depends on the thousand-plus extant letters. Without them in view, she seems the misfit, and as quiet as a manuscript in a drawer. With them, however, she made "letter-visits" (Jane Donahue Eberwein 107). With letters she could pay "social calls" (Stephanie A. Tingley 64), and we read her "meetings in letters" (Eleanor Heginbotham 129).

As a letter writer, then, Dickinson fit in. Hers was a "domestic art," often made as she cooked, her words providing addressees with comfort and nourishment (Tingley), and a shared love of gardening could reconcile her to an aunt she once thought uninteresting (Karen Dandurand). She performed the work of condolence without stint, helping others survive their afflictions, in part by canceling the notion that we deserve them (Eberwein), while a shared love of books gave her constant opportunity for witty remarks (Heginbotham). She overcame a youthful antagonism to marriage, ultimately seeing potential in it for an equal relation (Judith Farr)—even though, after a complex legal-erotic exchange with Judge

Otis Phillips Lord in the early 1880s, one that tested the idea of marriage between peers, she still rejected the status of wife for herself (James Guthrie). And Dickinson explored the techniques of emphasis, alliteration especially, available to her in elocution textbooks, as a means to “signaling meaning to a reader” (Ellen Louise Hart 219).

The contributors referenced thus far are by no means supportive of the gender relations in Dickinson’s time. Their feminist approaches simply place value on the domestic work performed by Dickinson and the other women in her circle; they want us to understand her both ways, as a misfit and participant. She did not have God nor husband nor books in print, but she did not live alone. And her genuine capacity for empathy had cause to grow over time—she had dependent readers, people whose love was important and whose lives were familiar. Judith Farr cites an 1871 letter in which Dickinson says, “to be loved is Heaven” (L361), and indeed the collection as a whole selects for its conclusions the older writer, committed to forging and maintaining the bonds of affection.

The younger writer does show herself, but often as contrast in a narrative of maturation. For instance, Eberwein observes a tactless Dickinson in her early letters of condolence: adhering to the demand for sincerity, she could not, as someone unconverted, speak to Heaven’s reward. Later she was more gentle with the subject of immortality, recollecting the energy with which the deceased had lived. In a related vein, Paul Crumbley sometimes describes her as deaf to disagreement: “Even into the 1880s, Dickinson reiterates the needlessness of saying thanks or acting in any way that does not affirm mutual understanding” (41). In short, a letter affirms what we share: the act of traveling from one home to another delivers a message of connection. The Crumbley and Eberwein essays offer counter-examples as well, the latter citing an 1869 letter to her cousin Perez Cowan, a minister: “You speak with so much trust of that which only trust can prove, it makes me feel away, as if my English mates spoke sudden in Italian” (L332); and the former referring to an 1886 letter to her literary accomplice, Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel ‘I will not let thee go except I bless thee’ - Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct - ” (L1042). Wrestling with him was her way of loving him.

Overall, though, Dickinson as Pugilist is a minor note, and on the three Goliaths which Dickinson regularly fought, organized spirituality (religion), organized writing (print), and organized love (marriage), this collection says more on the last than the others. The essays that do address Dickinson’s bare-knuckled attitude toward print were chosen by the editors to frame the book: Crumbley’s and one by Martha Nell Smith. As Crumbley explains, where Higginson and

Susan Dickinson understood Dickinson's preference for circulating her writing in a gift economy, in manuscript form, others did not. To Thomas Niles and maybe Helen Hunt Jackson too, she sent a poem stating her intransigency, which begins: "How happy is the little Stone / That rambles in the Road alone, / And does'nt care about Careers" (Fr1570). The "does'nt care about Careers" line supports a reading of Dickinson the domestic poet—she would no sooner sell her baking than her poems—but "rambles in the Road alone," while also happily denying the capitalist imperative that it's literature only if it's for sale, represents her as an exception.

Among the contributors, Smith employs the language of exception most. She reads Susan Dickinson as an ideal correspondent, able to welcome Dickinson the cook, the reader, the lover, and the writer with a chosen medium (the letter-poem) rather than a chosen genre. In accounting for what this relationship inspired, Smith devises the term "technology of audience." Just as the size and quality of paper can influence a text's presentation, so too does audience, and with Susan as an addressee Dickinson could send finished poems or drafts or even scraps. Their intimacy would deliver legibility. To all others, she inscribed her texts "on linen, often embossed, usually gilt-edged stationary" (255). This argument for an ideal reader ultimately runs against the grain of the collection: having determined preferences can appear antisocial.

To mitigate further the dichotomy in which Dickinson the letter writer (in the social middle) opposes Dickinson the poet (on the circumference), the collection as a whole might have said more on the ambiguities of an epistolary poetics. For instance, Elizabeth Hewitt's *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865*, a touchstone on this subject, informs Cindy MacKenzie's essay but not much else. Hewitt has said that "*not knowing* another is an essential aspect of any correspondence," and of Dickinson that she sought "through poetic correspondence to describe the distances that bind her to others." If the medium is the message, Dickinson chose it for connection and distance. Karen Dandurand does cite an 1853 letter that states her difference: "I think we [Emily, Austin, and Susan] miss each other more every day that we grow older, for we're all unlike most everyone, and are therefore more dependent on each other for delight" (L114). But Dandurand treats such expressions as relatively juvenile even though Dickinson's reliance on letters, which encourage an exclusive selection of those who delight, increased as her years did. "A mutual plum is not a plum. . . . Send no union letters," she wrote in 1866 (L321; Tingley 77).

Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters, by contrast, embraces the "mutual plum" notion. It not only addresses academic and general audiences alike, offering a

superb readability, but its essays speak to each other. They have been ordered so that one clearly leads to the next: the various subjects—gifts, gardens, books, condolence, marriage, emphatic delivery, and manuscript culture—each draw out an aspect of Dickinson’s “audience-consciousness” (Messmer viii). Matching the contributors’ deeply informed knowledge of Dickinson’s letters, poems, and culture is what seems a familiarity with each other. The social exchange that must have led to this book, and informed its contents, mirrors its portrait of a Dickinson with echoes in her voice.

SABINE SIELKE

Peel, Robin. *Emily Dickinson and the Hill of Science*. Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2010. \$65.

The thriving Dickinson industry seems driven in part by a continuous desire to refashion our sense of who Emily Dickinson was. Recent scholarship projects the poet as healer, philosopher, and, yet again, as expert gardener. Robin Peel’s study *Emily Dickinson and the Hill of Science* adds another preoccupation to the poet’s increasingly busy days and presents Dickinson as “concealed natural philosopher/scientist” (14). For Peel, Dickinson’s knack for science invites us, once again, to see the poet from a new angle: “What happens if we shed all the assumptions we normally bring to the work of Emily Dickinson” (making us wonder what audience the author addresses) and “assess to what extent we might regard her poems . . . as examples of writing that partakes in a scientific discourse no less, or even more, than the religious or literary themes with which Dickinson is normally associated.” What if we read Dickinson’s “startlingly original poems as not only deriving some of their qualities from the influence of the exciting new scientific culture, but also as having scientific intentions and making scientific claims?” (14). And “what . . . if we consider the fascicles as laboratory or field notes and Dickinson’s writing as part of a continuing experiment to observe, evaluate, and make sense of the material and immaterial world?” (17).