

From One Reading to Another: What Has Emily Dickinson Made Me Experience...

By Marjorie Micucci

Translated by Antoine Cazé

... and also, of what has the poet of Amherst been the name? The name of a reading, by chance and by surprise, then “by degree.” Of various translations. From the pages of a bound collection of selected poems to the smooth silky grey tones of an aluminum beam inlaid with black typed letters made of hard plastic. From one name to another – from Dickinson, the poet, to Roni Horn, the contemporary visual artist. From a static and unquiet reading, in French – “*Le corps a une gravité simple / Que je ne comprends pas!*” (c. 1858)¹ – to a no less unquiet but unstable and mobile reading, in the delineated shapes of English words set in capital letters – “TO MAKE A PRAIRIE IT TAKES A CLOVER AND ONE BEE” (Roni Horn, *Key and Cue* N°1755, 1994). From one translation to another, one language to another, one form to another, for this same object – a Dickinson poem. From the space and material surface of the book to the space and surfaces provided by white walls in an exhibition hall. From one “room” to another, both steeped in the daily intimate solitude of an artwork behind closed doors, and yet open, linked to the present moment of the tangible world, peering into the outside – places and spaces of vision paying attention to the rustling and the events and the hidden geometries of the physical world.

Maybe Emily Dickinson was for a long time the name of her French translators? Maybe Emily Dickinson is and will always be – due to the circumstance of a PhD dissertation I am writing² – the name of Roni Horn? This kind of loss, or dispossession, should be acknowledged, just as the imperceptible disappearance of the original discovery should be accepted, the fading out of the initial experience, of the dazzlingly

obvious intimacy. Through these successive filters, and at the end of the day, I might say that Emily Dickinson has been the experience of a double reading – the variable one of her poems in translation, and the one of their Hornian doubles projected beyond the limits of literature. It has also been the experience of a subject taking the form of a double “I,” a reader becoming viewer, or the other way around, for whom the poem becomes a visit, an image, a view – in other words, this “viewer-reader” placed by Roni Horn in the intimate geometry of her em-



Roni Horn, “When Dickinson Shut her Eyes: no. 562 (Conjecturing a climate),” 1993
8 elements, solid cast black plastic and aluminum, variable lengths (102.87 to 139.7 cm) x 5.08 x 5.08 cm
Ed. of 3.
Collezione Olgiati, Lugano
Courtesy Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan

pathetic relationship and “posthumous collaboration”³ with the poet: “. . . something that can only be brought here by you, the viewer / reader.”⁴ Dickinson, or the experience of a possible form for the contemporary, and for a contemporary “I.” As she wrote in 1862: “I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose – / More numerous of Windows – / Superior – for Doors – ” (Fr466). In our present time, might this not be a poetical and political “position” of the subject, too?

So, there have been several Emily Dickinsons – existing even before Roni Horn’s Dickinson, enclosed within the minimalist, highly formal shapes of the “Dickinson Works,” those sculpture series produced by the New York artist: *How Dickinson Stayed Home* (1992-1993), *When Dickinson Shut Her Eyes* (1993), *Untitled (Gun)* (1994), *Keys and Cues* (1994-1996), or *White Dickinson* (2006-2007-2008-2009). And first of all, there was a simple “I.” For a French-speaking reader, a non-specialist of English, the reading of Dickinson in the late 1990s depended on the sporadic publication of selected poems in collections whose titles – *Emily Dickinson, Le Paradis est au choix / Paradise is of the option*; *Emily Dickinson, Une âme en incandescence*⁵; *Emily Dickinson, Car l’adieu, c’est la nuit*⁶; *Emily Dickinson, Y aura-t-il pour de vrai un matin*⁷ – were so many “calls” and “signs” and “entries,” just like Horn’s *Keys and Cues* were later,⁸ consisting in the first line of a given poem leaning against the wall of the exhibition hall. Yet this initial entry into Dickinson’s lines and poems – alongside the discovery of scattered biographical details, from which there emerged the yet-to-be-explained image of the “Recluse” – was

incomplete, unaware as I was of the “poetic bulk” comprised of the 1,775 poems in the Johnson edition, or the 1,789 in the Franklin. The question of how to read Dickinson was therefore not a question – I was smoothly leafing through, frequently starting back at the beginning, unaware of what was missing, ignorant of the totality. It was an unremarkable, banal form of reading, from which two quatrains emerged as signs of a metaphysical proximity:

La prochaine fois : rester!
La prochaine fois, les choses à voir
Inouïes de l’Oreille
Incrustées de l’Œil –

M’attacher, la prochaine fois,
Pendant que les Âges se dérobent –
Pendant que les Siècles battent le pavé
Et que les Cycles tournent!⁹

In these experiences of reading, let me keep these lines in one of their French translations for a while. For the sake of their shape and their image, their textual landscape, the blanks and spaces they inhabit on the page. It’s not unlike the way a language sees, the eye of reading itself. And it’s also how the shape of these words suffuses the witnessing eye of the reader with recognition.

Maybe one reads first in one’s own poetic language – before one attempts any forays into the riddle of the original – in which words are formal echoes of meaning. In French, Dickinson was finding its way into the familiar space of Verlaine and Mallarmé. In Italian, Dickinson was at home next to Leopardi and Giuseppe Ungaretti. For I read her equally in Italian, and that reading put me in touch with the “poetic bulk” of Dickinson’s works. Johnson’s *Complete Poems* was translated in 1995, in the “Grandi Classici” pocket book series published by Mondadori, and regularly reprinted since.¹⁰ “Eternity” and “Immortality” merged with Leopardi’s “Infinite” and Ungaretti’s “Immensity” – not with the same meaning, but sharing the same quest.

Roni Horn allowed me to perceive Dickinson not only in a three-dimensional space and a plastic form, but also in the American space – even though she herself was able to read Dickinson in full only during one of her reclusive stays in Iceland – and in the poet’s language. I first approached her in this way on the occasion of Horn’s retrospective (*Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*) at the London Tate Modern in March 2009. The first room in this historical exhibition was what I later called in a critical article a “Dickinsonian room.”¹¹ There were three works: one of Horn’s enormous drawings in pigment (*Then 3*, 2006) – which are the best-known part of her work, together with her photographic series and molded glass sculptures – and two vertical sculptures made of long grey aluminum beams, on which the careless visitor could see nothing but white parallel lines, whereas the intrigued visitor could recognize letters, words, then a full sentence in white capitals, deciphered painstakingly rather than read smoothly. I was forced to read the wall label in order to identify the text: “I GIVE YOU A PEAR THAT WAS GIVEN ME – WOULD THAT IT WERE A PAIR, BUT NATURE IS PENURIOUS” (*White Dickinson*, 2007) and “THE MIND IS SUCH A NEW PLACE, LAST NIGHT FEELS OBSOLETE” (*White Dickinson*, 2006-2007). What Roni Horn entitles *White Dickinson* is made up of extracts from the poet’s correspondence. So, Dickinson was opening this retrospective, giving it its form, temporality and landscape, if not its meaning, if not a perception of the world between the here and the there, the hidden and the visible, the inside and the outside, event and presence, as well as the memory of presence. She was connecting it to pairs and doubles, the central motifs in Horn’s work; she was connecting it to this relationship between “I” and “you” set up by the artist as a familiar echo of Dickinson’s poetry, and following in the footsteps of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Further on in the exhibition, there was one of the *Keys and Cues N°1755*, a new landmark in



Roni Horn
White Dickinson
THE MIND IS SUCH A NEW PLACE,
LAST NIGHT FEELS OBSOLETE
2006
Aluminium and white plastic
273.7 x 5 x 5 cm / 107.75 x 2 x 2 inches
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

the arc of an oeuvre drawing the signs and lines of a landscape.

White letters used for the image of what’s private; black letters used for the image of what’s public through publication – what is shown *a posteriori*. Roni Horn sets Dickinson in a plastic and material kind of literality, puts her out in daily material life: “I wanted to take the texts from the book and put them out in the world like any other physical thing with visible attributes and a way of being present.”¹² Not only does she let us read/see a poetic text, she also lets us read/see the figure of a life. Dickinson, or necessary solitude; Dickinson, or domestic and reclusive life; Dickinson, or the event of publication; Dickinson, or a “being in the world” that comes. Roni Horn shows us her own reading of Dickinson and what she allows her to do – “In the reading of



Roni Horn, «Key & Cue: no. 1035 (Bee! I'm expecting you!)», 1996
Solid cast black plastic and aluminium
112.3 x 5.08 x 5.08 cm
Ed. of 3
Collezione Maria Grazia e Claudio Palmigiano, Milano
Courtesy Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milano

Dickinson's work, I am in the world as it is" – while turning the "viewer-reader" into the third corner of a triangle whose

remaining two corners are conceived as a double, or a pair: "The hybridizing of looking and reading, the manner in which these two acts are so deeply entwined in this work [*Keys and Cues*] form another kind of pairing, again with you as the third element to realize this intimacy." Thus, the two experiences – of the art object and of the reading – are no longer distinct. It's a reading that involves the body of the visitor as a whole, since in order to see and read, the visitor must move, choosing her point of view, the angle at which to read. So that such a reading of Dickinson by Horn implies a kind of performativity; just as it implies loss and incompleteness, too, since the viewer-reader will only ever be facing the fragment of a poem, a poem (often quatrains for the *When Dickinson Shut Her Eyes* series) in which every line is a separate beam – facing a part of the poetic whole, given that Roni Horn uses some forty poems in all for her "Dickinson Works." But the viewer-reader "is" physically positioned before the Dickinson poem in its true form, in this literality claimed by the artist. And it is this troubling experience, which "enlarges" the poem,¹³ that the "I" and its doubles are allowed to live: the presence of the poem, in a rediscovered materiality.

NOTES

¹ Emily Dickinson, *Le Paradis est au choix / Paradise is of option*. Ed., trans., Patrick Reumaux. Rouen 1998. "It has a simple gravity / I do not understand!" p. 22-23.

² "L'inscription du texte et de la poétique d'Emily Dickinson dans l'œuvre plastique de l'artiste américaine Roni Horn," PhD dissertation supervised by Prof. Mathieu Duplay, Université Paris Diderot Paris 7.

³ Roni Horn, *Everything was sleeping as if the universe were a mistake*. Barcelona 2014, p. 115.

⁴ Roni Horn, *Events of Relation*. Paris : Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1999, p. 10.

⁵ Trans., intro., Claire Malroux. Paris 1998.

⁶ Trans., intro., Claire Malroux. Paris : Éditions Gallimard, «Poésie/ Gallimard», 2007.

⁷ Trans., intro., Claire Malroux. Paris 2008.

⁸ "The Key and Cue is an entrance; but every entrance is also a point of departure. ... it is also a cue, a prompt, a signal to something" *Events of Relation*, p. 10.

⁹ "Next time, to stay ! / Next time, the things to see / By Ear unheard, / Unscrutinized by Eye – // Next time, to tarry, / While the Ages steal – / Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel !" *Le Paradis est au choix / Paradise is of option*, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Emily Dickinson, Poesie*, a cura di Massimo Bacigalupo. Milano 1995.

¹¹ Marjorie Micucci, *Roni Horn : ses chambres avec vues*, www.poptronics.fr, 25 mai 2009.

¹² Roni Horn, *Among Essential Furnishings*, in *Earths Grow Thick*, *The Ohio State University Press*, 1996, p. 80.

¹³ Jean-Christophe Bailly, *L'Élargissement du poème*. Paris: *Christian Bourgois éditeur*, collection "Détroits," 2015.

Marjorie Micucci is a PhD Candidate in the LARCA (*Laboratoire de Recherches sur les Cultures Anglophones*, UMR 8255), Université Paris Diderot, France.

Nectar of Infatuation: A Mennonite Coming-of-Age

By Sharon Hamilton

When I was little, kids at school used to ask me why I didn't wear black, if I watched TV, if my parents owned a car. I would explain that lots of Mennonites live in cities, and that not all Mennonites work on collective farms and avoid modern technology. I wore regular clothes; my parents owned a car; I watched TV. But in some ways my classmates' instinctive questions weren't wrong, because even city Mennonites tend to live in fairly traditional ways.

When I first encountered Emily Dickinson's poems, I found myself immediately struck by

a strange sense of recognition, and particularly with respect to her bee poems, with their exuberant depictions of the sensuous life: drinking, kissing, sex. It was weirdly like encountering my own coming-of-age experiences, but in poems by a woman who lived 150 years before I did.

"Look here!" (I could point at the lines) "Exactly how it felt the first time someone kissed me!" "And here! Precisely my reaction when I tasted my first glass of wine." But I am an Anabaptist who grew up in Canada in the late twentieth century. So, I wondered, why do

these poems by someone who lived in a different country, and in a very different time, seem so familiar to me?

* * *

Emily Dickinson's ancestors came to North America as part of the great migration of Separatists in the 1600s fleeing to the New World (just as my own ancestors would do later) as members of a persecuted religious minority. My maternal grandparents came to North America as part of a different great migration. They fled to Canada as children with their

large families in the mid-1920s, from what is now modern Ukraine, when the Mennonites there began to be harassed, robbed, murdered and (just like everyone else) starved, following the Russian Revolution.



Tumbler belonging to Samuel Fowler Dickinson, commonly called a “flip” glass

For me, the experience of growing up in a religious home meant coming into contact with many beneficial things, not least including being raised within an extended community of extremely good and loving people, but within this kind of heritage can exist, obviously too, a number of restrictions. One imagines that Emily must also have experienced some of the weight of that constraint – which tends to lie, especially, against the most sensual things. I think we see some of her layered reaction to that situation in her bee poems, and I can relate to the tension that seems to exist there, because I knew it too.

Two years ago, on my first visit to Emily’s home, I bought a copy of *Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet as Cook, with Selected Recipes*. I took this with me to a Vietnamese restaurant and began reading it over a bowl of fragrant lemongrass-infused vermicelli and barbecue pork. As I ate my noodles, I learned that during Emily’s youth, Amherst experienced a local prohibition movement, which

the recorded contents of the Dickinson cellar suggest the family ignored. You do not tend to think about Emily Dickinson as a bathtub gin kind of girl. Yet, she sort of was. Family records show the Dickinsons served their guests rye, sherry, and port along with currant wine, and the guides at the Homestead museum charmingly note in their little recipe book that all of these could have been “home products” (9). In my case, my home was “dry” and my church was “dry” hence, unlike Emily, I grew up without exposure to alcohol, except once – and that came, quite innocently, through my babysitting.

One evening I went to the home of a family where I often babysat. My parents, I knew, did not approve of them, considering them a little too free-spirited, even (as my mother sometimes said) “hippies.” The parents were celebrating an important anniversary. That night, before they left, they opened a bottle from which they poured a small glass for everyone, including for me and the children. The drink contained some sort of carbonation, a quality I recognized from soda pop. This carbonation, though, seemed different: lighter, fizzier. The taste, as well, unexpected. Slightly sweet, like the pop with which I was familiar, but with a tartness too, like biting into a green apple. On balance, I decided, better. Tastier than pop. What this meant: my first taste of alcohol, what was it? Champagne. Not, you must admit, a bad way to start.

And Emily? She appears not only to have participated in the brewing of family liquors, but to have tried them. She certainly wrote often enough, and appreciatively, about both drinking and its effects. In my favorite instance, she compares the effect of drinking to how we respond to an “Impossibility,” suggesting that a great challenge acts like alcohol upon the spirit because it “Exhilarates the Man / Who tastes it” (Fr939).

Throughout my undergraduate years, I maintained the same habits I had grown up with, which meant I didn’t drink. That situation changed only after graduation, during a sum-

mer backpacking trip abroad. One of my other girlfriends on this trip was Muslim. She, like me, had grown up in an alcohol-free home but, at the encouragement of the third friend travelling with us, we both agreed that we would be willing to try drinking while on the trip as part of truly experiencing the Europe we were about to encounter for the first time. In practice, this meant we would go to a village store and buy good bread and cheese and a local bottle of wine and walk off into a garden in the south of France, or to a rose-filled piazza in Spain, or off into the hills of Tuscany, and eat outside. Those were the circumstances under which I first tasted wine.

All of this came back to me with great vividness when I encountered Emily’s famous poem about a bee delightfully smashed on nectar and a poet drunk on the beauty of a summer’s day. “Inebriate of air am I,” Emily declares, “And debauchee of dew; – / Reeling through endless summer days, / From inns of molten blue.” “When landlords turn the drunken bee,” she wonderfully adds, “Out of the Foxglove’s door, / When butterflies renounce their drams, / I shall but drink the more” (Fr207a). Emily’s inebriated bees veer around in her poems intoxicated by the nectar of wine and sunshine. But they also often react to the nectar of infatuation. I can relate to that situation too.

Not long after I returned to Canada following my European vacation, and just before I moved away to begin graduate school in another part of the country, a friend for whom I had long harbored a major crush surprised me by giving me a kiss good-bye. This was my first kiss. In one of her bee poems, Emily provides this description (from the perspective of a particularly ecstatic bee!) of how it feels to kiss someone, a desired someone, for the first time:

Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee – (Fr 205)

Your lips on mine, the poem says, like drinking fine jasmine nectar. The sweetest there is.