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On Inner Circulation

Both Jay Leyda and Theodora Ward, who worked with Thomas H. Johnson on editing Dickinson's letters, thought of editing as an activity profoundly shaped by the mind of the editor. For them, there was no practice of editing that would simply follow objective protocols, generating texts as they were intended. Instead, both thought of the final outcome of the process as impacted not only by the editor's understanding of what constitutes a text but also by their aesthetics or ideas, and even by their own personal values and preferences. For both, neutrally or objectively edited texts remain deeply subjective. In Leyda's case, editing is closely related to what kind of narrative the editor prefers: well polished with everything fitting nicely, or rough on the edges, and contradictory. He thus noted that the difference between his way of accepting new evidence that could contribute to editing a text, and Johnson's, lies "in the fact [that Johnson] always seems more disturbed than delighted by troublesome new evidence. He loves neat, finished shapes — and I have to suppress my wish to knock

them down” (24). Ward, for her part, told Leyda that he and Johnson “have entirely different ways of working. You have felt put off sometimes because he does not want to deal with details until they are needed to fill in his constructive plan. You start with the details and build up” (24).

In the tradition of Leyda and Ward, Marta Werner too recognizes the impact of personal approaches to the archive and to the text to be edited; indeed, she even promotes intellectually and affectively charged approaches to the ground on which editing stands. As a result, what emerges above all out of *Writing in Time* is a theory or even a poetics of editing — a poetics insofar as editing is charged also with weighing in on the nature of genre and the form of what is edited. Werner calls such an editing process “intimate [. . .] investigation”, by which she means “a critical meditation and devotional exercise” (11). The most precise term to name what these three processes — investigation, meditation and devotion — generate once they are brought together is interpretation. Hence, what Werner produces in *Writing in Time* doesn’t amount to altering what became known as Dickinson’s “Master Letters”. She doesn’t change the way R. W. Franklin described and ordered the letters in his 1986 edition, but neither does she simply offer a new edition, even though, were she simply to have done that — the large format of the book allows an unbroken presentation of the conjunct leaves of letters, and the print rendering of Dickinson’s handwritten materials — it would still mark an event for Dickinson studies. Rather, what emerges out of *Writing in Time* is a strong reading of Dickinson’s “Master Letters”, a reading that is in fact so strong that even the criteria dictating editorial practice are made subservient to it.

Everything in Werner’s reading hinges on the belief that the three manuscripts that became known as the “Master Letters” are not letters in any colloquial sense of the word, as previous editors (Millicent Todd Bingham, Johnson, Franklin) proposed, even if the writings are addressed to somebody called “Master”. Franklin, who got the chronology of the letters right, argued that while Dickinson treated her letters aesthetically — carefully crafting their sentences, writing and rewriting them — she nevertheless didn’t treat them as a “fictional genre” (FRANKLIN 5); that is, to the best of our knowledge, she never fantasized an addressee before going on to refer to situations experienced with that addressee, situations that happened only in her imagination. For Franklin, the letters had something quotidian and mundane about them, moving from a “tone” that was “a little distant but respectful and gracious” to oblique reference to something experienced together, and there is in them a practice of “defending herself, reviewing their history, asserting her fidelity” (FRANKLIN 5). To convey palpably the

feel of a correspondence, Franklin's edition even printed facsimiles of the letters on separate sheets of paper, enclosing them in an envelope for the reader to open, thereby reenacting the experience of reading a missive. Werner, on the other hand, doesn't treat the texts as letters at all. She is thus not interested in the question of the addressee's identity because they are not letters and are not addressed to a real person living in a world external to Dickinson's mind. Instead of being "letters" the texts now become "documents"; the "Master" becomes a "figure", and the group of texts referencing that figure becomes the "Master constellation".

What allows transformation of the letters into documents addressed to a fantasized figure — what in fact functions as the major criterion on the basis of which Werner also decides which documents can be admitted into the constellation — is whether the texts were circulated or not. Franklin read the documents as letters not only because it isn't known whether Dickinson ever fictionalized the genre, but above all — as is the case with "Dear Master I am ill" — because the condition of the manuscript, the handwriting and the variants suggested a text being prepared for circulation: "Emily Dickinson set out to prepare a finished draft suitable for mailing. She wrote in ink, on letter paper, and in a deliberate, public hand. On the second page, she miswrote 'indeed' as 'inded' but neatly added a second 'e' and continued" (FRANKLIN 11). These indicators suggested to Franklin that the manuscript ended as an "intermediate draft" even if it was initially intended as a final one.

While Werner explicitly acknowledges that "we do not know if other, possibly resolved copies of the 'Master' documents ever circulated beyond Dickinson's papers" (26), which would allow them to be treated as a real world correspondence with an embodied human being, this acknowledgment quickly and inexplicably dissolves into the opposite constative, which asserts that they were never circulated: "none of [the "Master" documents] was ever shared with a correspondent or another reader" (29); Dickinson made the "decision to withhold the 'Master' documents from circulation while other writings from the period of 1858 to 1861, both letters and poems, sped outward" (41); "When we consider the general condition of an epistolary project, that of circulation, Dickinson leads us to recalibrate the notion as explicitly interior" (40); all "Master" documents are "private [. . .] and none was ever bound or circulated" (42); the "Master" documents are "deliberately reserved from the circuit of exchange" (29). And this criterion of non-sharing or circulating, her "deliberately" withholding, is what decides which texts can be included in the "Master" constellation. For, in addition to three texts traditionally regarded as "Master" letters, there is

a whole range of poems in which the word “Master” appears, but Werner treats only two of them as “Master” documents (“Mute-thy Coronation” and “A wife – at Daybreak”) because “neither poem [was] ever circulated to or among recipients beyond the writer herself, as far as we know” (28). Thus, of the five documents constituting the constellation two are “are likely epistolary missives [‘Dear Master / I am ill’ and ‘Master. / If you saw a bullet’], two are verses [‘Mute – thy Coronation’ and ‘A wife – at Daybreak’], and one is a draft of uncertain genre [‘Oh ‘ did I offend it’]” (42). One may ask this, however: if what appears to be a letter isn’t a letter, what is it? How can it be an epistolary missive and yet not be a letter? Is there a relation among the five documents in the constellation and what is its nature? Those central questions guide Werner’s thinking and editorial decisions throughout *Writing in Time*, and the answers to them produce what I call her strong reading.

On Werner’s argument, whether the five “Master” documents are epistolary or versified in form, they are not “part of an extant correspondence nor part of a poetic set but something else, an experiment of another kind” (26). The first was likely composed or copied in the spring of 1858, thus just months before Dickinson begins binding fascicles (in the summer of the same year); the last — likely from 1861 — “coincides with the single most important formal transition in Dickinson’s writing”, which Franklin described as a change of method. For “not only did alternative readings begin to appear, but sometimes the manuscripts were a single leaf with a single poem, not a bifolium with many. She now left many sheets and leaves unbound. [. . .] By early 1862, the fascicle idea had itself come apart” (qtd. in WERNER 28). In other words, the first and the last “Master” document mark a journey from copying and binding, to alternating, varying and unbinding. And, as Werner puts it, “by 1862, Dickinson’s prose and verse clearly exhibit the operant features of the experimental work belonging to the period of her highest style. These years would see an increased torsion of semantic order, marked elision and oblique reference, the integration of multiple voices, the pliancy of genre crossing between prose and verse, and a vigilant resistance to closure” (29). The five master documents thus trace this movement from order, fixity and discreteness to porousness, openness and variability. And this opening is enacted by a “breach of the referential pact [. . .] between speaker-writer and reader-addressee, between ‘I’ and ‘You’ through which the Other enters to speak at the limits of ecstasy and insurgence” (29). The breach of pact between writer and addressee indexes the confusion of their difference, so that the writer can become the addressee of her own epistles, reader of her speech, and thus the you of the I that

she is. This destabilization of the I, enacted by the forces of you or otherness residing in it but unknown to it, is what Werner calls the “entering” of the Other, which is the advancement of forces that block the closure of identity into a self-identity, keeping the “I” at the very limit of its shatteredness, which Werner identifies as the condition of ecstasy. And since this Other intrudes in ways that the I can’t pre-sense, let alone control, it assumes a transcendent nature, which is why Werner capitalizes it, and why Dickinson calls it “Master”, turning the Master into an addressee. The fact of there being an addressee makes three of these documents missives, as Werner calls them; but once this addressee is a transcendent force — an “alterity whose origins are untraceable” (30) — it enters the “I”, traverses and even fissures it, making those missives no longer correspondence in any mundane sense of the word, but traces of force of “inner circulation”. Moreover, the insurgence of this otherness that sends the “I” out of itself (ex-stasis) is so extraneous to it that Werner says she was tempted to think about a “you” in the “Master” documents in terms of a “thou”: “In place of ‘I’ and ‘You’, I was tempted to write ‘I’ and ‘thou’ to underscore the strange holiness of the pact. While Dickinson does not employ the pronoun ‘Thou’ in these documents, her use of ‘It’ [as in ‘Oh ‘ did I offend it’] may come very close to ‘Thou’” (29).

What the five “Master” texts document, then, is the way in which transcendent forces, now identified as holy, come to open up the “I”, to transport it into ecstasy, making it blank, and requiring it to search ceaselessly albeit unsuccessfully for a way to regain itself, however temporarily or fragilely. This experience of the mind exiting itself to dwell on the limits that cancel it finds its aesthetic correspondence in the dynamic that the “Master” documents establish between prose and verse, the dynamic between the transcendent and the individuated in which “verse [. . .] erupts inside of prose, transgressing the measure of writing and transporting writer, speaker, addressee, and reader beyond the bounds of discourse and nature” (30). The “Master” documents thus reveal Dickinson’s search for an aesthetic of the irruption of verse within the order of prose, and document the ways in which language can host meaning when closure and even syntactic order recede. And they exist as an isolated constellation because after 1862 the poet found a way to think without closure, in the open, in sentences that were sometimes not only unbound fragments but variations and remnants of dispersed thought, yet filled with meaning. The “Master” documents, which Werner goes so far as to call the “Master” project, were thus a bridge between two ways of being (the gathered self, and the ecstatic shattering

of the self), and two corresponding ways of making poetry (fascicles, and unbounded poems and fragments).

Werner's reading thus emerges as one of the most profound recent examinations of the workings of Dickinson's poetics; it is an examination that discerns how earlier and later writings are related, and even establishes a continuity between them. It reconstructs the immanent concerns of Dickinson's understanding of what poetry does — to language, to speech, to the mind — and how it can be both pushed to its limits and made to bear the testimony of what it is like to be there. It is also an analysis that finds in Dickinson a thinker and a writer dedicated to incessant experimentation, intentionally trying to disturb any limit imposed on poetic form while simultaneously trying to search for a new one. Thus, much is gained by Werner's attentive and discerning meditation upon Dickinson's "Master" texts. Yet something is also lost in this reading. For, when letters become experimental works of art, internal, never circulated, when they are missives that trace the workings of ecstasy and create an inner "holy pact" with the forces of transcendence, and when the "Master" becomes a name for what fissures the self rather than an ordinary human being in the external world, then what is lost is a Dickinson who was an ordinary woman concerned with mundane matters such as love, acceptance, recognition, fear of hurting the other, fear of losing the finite, rather than transcendent other; lost is someone simply worrying about the health of another, or desiring to leave her room and meet whoever the "Master" was in some real, concrete place. Instead of circulating by means of embodied encounters with others in a concrete world, desire, speech and thought withdraw into the disembodied interior of the mind, where they work by gaining transcendent power capable of sending Dickinson into a rapture of ecstasy that is ultimately holy.

But the most important aspect of Werner's editorial intervention — the aspect that will make a lasting contribution to Dickinson studies — is the print rendition of Dickinson's handwritten texts, their ordering and their contextualization. As Werner explains, her "goal in this edition [. . .] has been to experiment with typographic facsimiles, as opposed to strictly diplomatic transcriptions" (43). Thus, in contrast to all previous "printed transcriptions of Dickinson's manuscripts, these are rendered in italic to suggest the prevailing cursive mode of the late 1850s and early 1860s"; these typographic facsimiles hope to "convey Dickinson's hand as singular, erring, moving" (43) and her "handwriting and punctuation [as] inherently expressive" (42). In addition, each of the five documents is accompanied by three

charts that list writings circulated to known or unknown correspondents, writings not circulated in the year or years each document is presumed to be written, and inventorying historical events surrounding each document. The last of these lists establishes what Werner calls the “external temporality” of the five documents “connecting each to the larger ‘Master’ experiment as well as to other texts produced in the 1858 to 1861 period”, whereas the first two charts seek to “discover the inner temporality of the text’s unfolding” (43). And if one starts by following these first two charts, reading the poems written in the same year not only together and chronologically, but in relation to the specific “Master” document, then one will agree with Werner’s argument that we witness “those moments when [Dickinson] turned back or rushed forward, when one thought overtook or crowded out another, or when several thoughts in the shapes of authorial variants hung seemingly between rejection and preferred reading” (42). Through this re-dynamization of Dickinson’s texts we thus get a glimpse into her thinking. We get to read less a series of discrete poems but the becoming of a poem. That is the most precious gift of Werner’s *Writing in Time*.

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