

Paul S. Derrick, Norma González and Anna M. Brígido 2006: *La poesía temprana de Emily Dickinson: el primer cuadernillo*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València. 104 pp. ISBN 84-370-6316-7.

Carmen Méndez García
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
cmmendez@filol.ucm.es

Any attempt to assess the importance of Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) in North American letters seems to be doomed to failure or to the restatement of a series of clichés about her biography and work. Dickinson's powerful poetic voice, often anthologized or studied in volumes of her poetry, casts its shadow not only on 19th century poetry, but also on most Modernist and contemporary poetry. Many studies on Dickinson inevitably crash into a barrier of anecdotes and biographic foibles used to approach her work: the aura of mystery that she cultivated during her life and the apparent obscurity of her poems are often used to justify approaches that consider her work as a sort of riddle to be deciphered via her eccentricities, a risk already pointed out by Ardanaz in her translation of some of Dickinson's poems into Spanish (Dickinson 1987). It is, therefore, a pleasure to find a book such as *La poesía temprana de Emily Dickinson: el primer cuadernillo*, which leaves Dickinson's biography aside to focus on her poetry (in this case, her first *fascicle*). The study in the book flows from the poems themselves and is based on relevant thematic, structural and rhythmic aspects, always removed from the frequently over-imaginative interpretations of the influence of Dickinson's life on her poetry.

The authors, Paul S. Derrick, Norma González and Anna M. Brígido, follow R. W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (1999) for their analysis and translation. Franklin's book shortens in a single volume his own comprehensive *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998). In the *Reading Edition*, Franklin uses the last version of each of the poems, observing the punctuation and capitals of the bound manuscript. Choosing Franklin's edition as a basis is motivated, undoubtedly, by the authors' familiarity (especially Derrick, who has published on Dickinson's poetry before) with current studies on the poet. While having three authors for a book scarcely a hundred pages long is surprising, the number of authors is justified by its organization, as a note at the beginning of the text explains: Derrick and González are responsible for the first two parts of the book (the critical apparatus), while the bilingual edition of the first fascicle corresponds to Brígido and Derrick. Again, we should emphasize that the number of pages is, indeed, adequate, since it is an exhaustive analysis and edition of only those twenty-two poems found in only one of Dickinson's *fascicles*, those Dickinson chose to bind the first time. Although the authors never suggest that their work might be the first in a series, the result definitely leads us to think that the study of some other fascicles by Dickinson, in a series of monographs such as this one, might be interesting indeed, since it could help find criteria for the

selection by Dickinson of her poems, something disregarded by many editors since her poems started to circulate.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first, entitled ‘Algunos datos históricos’, could mislead the reader into thinking that she is about to find yet again an overview of the biography and historical context of the writer. However, this section focuses on data from the history of the publication of Dickinson’s *oeuvre*, presupposing a certain familiarity with Dickinson’s life and circumstance. The book is not a general introduction to the work of the poet, but to a very limited spectrum of her texts: the first fascicle (or early poetry) of the title.

As Derrick and González know, writing about Dickinson’s publication is writing about reticence: the author consented to have but a few poems published during her lifetime. From the (few, hardly ten) poems published by Dickinson, “de forma esporádica y anónima” (9) up to the already cited Franklin edition, the authors summarize the people and interests involved in the transmission and edition of the poems. From the findings by Lavinia, Dickinson’s sister, after Emily’s death, to the quadrilateral, ring-like arrangement of Mabel Todd, Colonel Higginson, Susan (Dickinson’s sister-in-law) and Lavinia herself, the reader is witness to the dismembering, revision and rewriting of poems on whose organization and distribution the author left few or no clues. The history of the first publications and editions of Dickinson’s poem is a family drama indeed, haunted by misunderstandings and hidden agendas, where Dickinson’s idea about publishing as ‘the auction of the mind’ seems to resonate. Derrick and González introduce the particular interests that motivate this dismemberment, insisting on the excessive zeal that made some editors (such as Hampson and Lavinia’s daughter, Martha) adjust the orthography, punctuation and capitals of the materials they were working on, even giving new titles to each of the poems, a feature initiated by Todd and Higginson but removed in the Hampson and Martha Dickinson edition of unpublished materials in 1929 (*Further Poems*) and 1936 (*Unpublished Poems*). The first attempt to purge and organize this chaotic legacy is undertaken by Johnson in 1955. Derrick and González signal the many positive things found in this landmark in the study of Dickinson: its respect for “[el] sentido literal, las fechas . . . las distintas opciones para un mismo verso o término, la ausencia de títulos, la ortografía, las mayúsculas y la puntuación que la escritora les había dado originalmente . . . [y] un orden cronológico” (16). We must highlight (as is highlighted in the book) the connection between Dickinson’s poems and her letters, both stemming from “el mismo manantial donde brotan las palabras” (16), something Derrick is obviously familiar with through his translation of the correspondence between Dickinson and Colonel Higginson (Dickinson 1999).

We should not forget, however, that the premise of the volume is to study Dickinson’s first fascicle, and accordingly the coda of this part is an introduction to the term *fascicle* (*cuadernillo*) (17-23) and to the edition of the fascicles as a set (23-26). Again, we have to refer to one of Franklin’s works for this, his 1981 *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, a facsimile edition of the poems that Dickinson herself chose to bind into fascicles. Derrick and Gonzalez go over the number of poems included within each of these fascicles, the forty notebooks and groups of loose poems. A detailed analysis of the distribution of the poems in each of these fascicles would be well beyond

the scope of the book under review: steering away from this temptation, the authors refer the reader to the already mentioned *Variorum* edition by Franklin, only hinting at the organization of Franklin's facsimile collection. The authors' intentions are elsewhere: they are set to explaining the origin of the term *fascicle*, suggesting 'cuadernillo' as an appropriate translation for those collections already mentioned by Todd and Higginson in their 1890 *Poems* edition. Depending on the editor or critic, these collections have received a series of names (*fascicles*, *packets*, *volumes* or even *portfolios*) and Dickinson used to call them by different names, from *my books* to *my little pamphlet*. After explaining the simple process of binding, the authors suggest as a reason for such manual labor Dickinson's contemplation of her own oeuvre, or the adherence to Emerson's request of keeping work in the form of portfolios, both ideas suggested by Franklin (1981: ix-x, 8). The selection in the fascicles suggests editorial interest, since many remaining drafts of poems are not included in the bound version. Moreover, the choice of what to include in the fascicles did not depend on family or friends, but on Dickinson herself, who would also send copies to correspondents and often destroy any evidence of the process, as explained on pages 21 and 22.

The last part of this first section describes the binding in different volumes, and aspects of textual arrangement and even size of the letters, as a consistent way of working by Dickinson up to 1870. As the authors point out, the often suggested late interest on Dickinson's part to recover the fascicle format is not such, but has to do with some critics' desire to identify a recognizable shape in the poet's output. What is written by Dickinson from 1880 corresponds to "worksheets and miscellaneous manuscripts . . . [rather] than fascicle sheets" (Franklin 1981: xiii). The fascicles were not free from stylistic and typographic revisions by early editors of Dickinson: both Susan, Lavinia and Todd left their traces, either in pencil or by un-binding and reordering the poems, showing their imprint in their interpretation of the poet's idiosyncrasies as misprints. Franklin re-orders and gives a new coherence to the fascicles, assessing them not as "cuadernos de poemas escogidos al azar sino . . . fruto de muchas horas de premeditación y trabajo inteligente" (26).

Once the vagaries of edition and publication of Dickinson's poetry have been outlined, the second part of the book is devoted to the analysis of the thematic coherence of the poems in the first fascicle. What conclusions can be drawn from the selection and subjects of these first poems, carefully chosen and edited by Dickinson herself? What are their general lines of structure and meaning? The authors answer these questions while keeping in mind this first fascicle's status as a record of Dickinson's first steps. It is analyzed as a travel notebook where the poet "establece el escenario, las condiciones del viaje, define su propia identidad, la poesía que quiere y cómo va a escribirla" (29-30). The reader is led through each of these stations in Dickinson's travel by analyzing each of the poems: for these, not only the correlative number of each poem within the fascicle is given, but also the number corresponding to the Johnson edition (Dickinson 1955). Thematic coherence is found in religious inspiration, in the constant assertion of a canonical faith that seems to forecast doubts found in later fascicles, in the uneasiness or curiosity in the face of death, and in persistent images from Nature: birds and insects fly both in the poems and around the analysis of each poem. The depth of the study makes the reader savour the apparently

simple or playful aphorisms. The limited space devoted in this review to this part of the book might lead some to think that this is the part which deserves a lighter analysis: on the contrary, the individual study of each of the poems is so rigorous that it is practically impossible to review it in a few lines. It makes the reader go forward to the poems and their translation into Spanish, which are complementary to the study notes by Derrick and González. This second part of the book cannot be separated from the poems themselves, and it is therefore adequate to include both poems and analysis in a single volume.

Thus we reach the third and last part of the book: the bilingual edition of the poems in the first fascicle. The translation is by Anna M. Brígido and Paul Derrick, and although some had already been translated into Spanish (by Ardanaz or Ocampo) this seems to be the first time the translation of the poems in the first fascicle as a set has been tackled. Many of these poems have rarely been anthologized or included in collections of Dickinson's poems, such as those already mentioned, the translation by Jordana and Macarulla (1980) or the most recent selection by Pujol (2001). For each of these poems the numbers given by Johnson, as well as those used by Franklin, are shown. In a single footnote to each poem, both comments on translation and bibliographical and editorial references are included. It is precisely in these footnotes, albeit necessary in the case of the clarification of terms used for the translation, that an excessive repetition of the explanation of the content is found. Each of them starts by stating the subject of the poem: this could be considered to be superfluous, since almost all duplicate already dealt-with aspects, and even when new data is provided, it could have been introduced, naturally and with coherence, in the previous critical apparatus. It is indeed true that the footnotes are successful in connecting different aspects in the fascicle and providing coherence to it as a collection, but it might have been more useful for the reader to find them in a single place. This minor objection does not tarnish the translation or its connections with the critical analysis of the first part, which are flawless. The inherent difficulty in translating Dickinson's apparently clean and easy language, protected by aphorism and paucity, is brilliantly resolved. The book closes with an exhaustive list of works which include not only those cited and used for research but also a complete collection of the editions of Dickinson's poems and correspondence, ordered by year of publication, a useful tool for readers willing to enter the maze of Dickinson's editions.

The careful publication of the book must also be signaled: Biblioteca Javier Coy D'Estudis Nord-Americans is a prestigious publishing house of American studies in Spain, and its acknowledged trajectory translates here into an impeccable presentation. Some minor formal aspects could be improved, such as the excessive length of some footnotes in the analysis, which should be included, both by their length and interest, within the body of the text (for instance on pages 14, 27, 50). Despite this, the book reads, in all its critical depth and marked research bias, easily and appealingly. There are a few minor quirks, as is to be expected in a first edition, such as the abuse of *-ing* forms substituting for subordinate clauses (pages 11, 17), an awkward grammatical construction in Spanish: it is to be expected that this will be corrected in further editions.

The work under review chooses to analyze a very specific part of the vast Dickinsonian output, and the authors succeed in turning this limitation in scope into the book's greatest virtue, since it allows us to enjoy the poems, capturing their scent, something Dickinson would have approved of (she liked to call them "mis flores" [19]). The careful analysis and translation of this first fascicle reminds us that reading Dickinson is also reading ourselves, and that meditation on the pervading topics of her unrelenting poetic voice (doubt, love, loneliness, death) is still necessary.

Works Cited

- Dickinson, Emily 1890: *Poems by Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson. Boston: Roberts Brothers.
- Dickinson, Emily 1929: *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Martha Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Dickinson, Emily 1936: *Unpublished Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Martha Bianchi Dickinson and Alfred Leete Hampson. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Dickinson, Emily 1955: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard U.
- Dickinson, Emily 1980: *Emily Dickinson: cien poemas*. Trans. and intr. Ricardo Jordana and M^a Dolores Maraculla. Barcelona: Bosch.
- Dickinson, Emily 1981: *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. and intr. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard U.
- Dickinson, Emily 1985: *Emily Dickinson: poemas*. Trans. Silvina Ocampo. Barcelona: Tusquets.
- Dickinson, Emily 1987: *Emily Dickinson. Poemas*. Trans. and intr. Margarita Ardanaz. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Dickinson, Emily 1998: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Ed. and intr. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard U.
- Dickinson, Emily 1999: *Emily Dickinson: cartas a T. W. Higginson*. Trans. and intr. Paul S. Derrick and Cristina Blanco Outón. León: Universidad de León.
- Dickinson, Emily 1999: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Ed. and intr. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard U.
- Dickinson, Emily 2001: *Emily Dickinson: algunos poemas*. Trans. Carlos Pujol. Granada: La Veleta.

Received 30 June 2007

Revised version received 30 October 2007