Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2003

State of the Union

Wendy MARTIN (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson.*

Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvii + 248 pages. ISBN 0-521-00118-8.

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/743>

DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.743

ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur

AFEA

Référence électronique

Joanny Moulin, « Wendy MARTIN (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson.* », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2003, mis en ligne le 05 avril 2006, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/743> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.743>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.

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- 1 This collection of essays by eleven American scholars is scrupulously close to the spirit of the series and provides a survey of the present state of critical discourses in Dickinson studies. Never straying in the least from the staple, business-like framing apparatus of biographical chronology, notes on the contributors, select bibliography, index and an introduction that barely sums up the various contributions classically grouped in three parts titled "Biography and Publication History," "Poetical Strategies and Themes" and "Cultural Context," this book delivers a well-informed, pragmatic picture of the critical and academic landscape, of which the features are not always specific to Dickinson's life and works, but reflect much more general contemporary trends. It seems, however, that the recontextualisation of literary studies that came back into fashion over recent years is particularly rewarding in this case. Thus, Betsy Erkkila examines what she calls the "Emily Dickinson wars," meaning first the disputes that raged especially between Emily's sister Lavinia, her sister-in-law and intimate friend Susan Gilbert Dickinson and her brother Austin's lover Mabel Loomis Todd over questions of ownership of the manuscripts after the poet's death. Beyond the family feud, however, this raises the issue of poetic genius as a societal construct, in the case of an extremely private poet, who barely published more than ten poems during her life-time. The notion that Dickinson is an individualistic, original poetic genius representative of New England genius and American genius has demonstrably been used as a powerful argument in favour of a New Critical idea of culture, in a methodological and ideological debate against Marxian criticism, from the nineteenth-thirties on. Furthermore, the editorial "cleaning up" of Dickinson's handwriting and idiosyncrasies would later encourage more recent critics like Susan Howe and Jerome McGann to favour a return to the original manuscripts. But they were overreached by the "critical grotesque" of William Shurr's 1993 edition of *New Poems of Emily Dickinson* that pretended to enlarge the Dickinson canon to the text of "poems"

excavated from her letters, thus bringing water to the mill of a critical reflection on the very nature and constructedness of the poet's canonicity. Christopher Benfey remarks that much of the legend of Emily Dickinson is due to Southerners. While Conrad Aiken called her "the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism," in the 1920s Allen Tate, a leading figure of the Agrarian movement who favoured a Southern "organic society" of common rural values against the industrial society of shared economic interest exemplified by the North, upheld Dickinson as a reactionary rebel and viewed her withdrawal from the patriarchal society she was born in as an indictment of the money-based values of the Gilded Age and a wish to return to the religious values of "Old New England." Contributing in another way to reinforcing the picture of Dickinson as a figure of silent protest, Martha Nell Smith examines the long-lasting correspondence and intimate friendship of Emily Dickinson with her sister-in-law Susan, whom she presents as a powerful intellect and a devoutly religious person, in such a way as to tilt the stereotype of the lone genius toward the notion of fruitful intellectual complicity. Wendy Barker shows how Dickinson's apophthegmatic and concise style may be partly accounted for as a reaction against the prosy discursiveness of her surroundings; her "Gem-tactics" may be seen as a strategy of resistance against the stultifying world of Calvinistic sermonizing she felt pent up in. Two or three articles are perhaps slightly less convincing than others, as for instance Fred White's attempt to demonstrate that Dickinson may be viewed, as it were, as a proto-existentialist in spite of her having lived in a time when Kierkegaard's ideas probably had not yet spread beyond Europe, especially as White's argument rests basically on the definition of existentialism in T.Z. Lavine's *From Socrates to Sartre*. But Daneen Wardrop's study of Dickinson's use of the Gothic in Fascicle 16 very interestingly corroborates David Reynolds' demonstration of the influence on Dickinson's world of the popular culture of her time. This challenges very efficiently the reductive and simplistic vision of Dickinson as a self-centered agoraphobic minimalist, by showing how much she responded, most often with ironical playfulness, to some of the worldly and aesthetic preoccupations of her time. Her relationship with Rev. Charles Wadsworth, for instance, goes beyond the scope of a mere anecdotal putative love-affair, in so far as Wadsworth was also one of the antebellum period's foremost innovator in American sermon style, who advocated the use of the imaginative over the strictly doctrinal manner of the previous generations of old-style sermon writers. Dickinson's startling imagery is granted an added resonance when it comes to be perceived against such contextual background, which includes the Gothic elements of sensational popular novels or Yellow Jacket Literature and penny-newspapers, or the jocularly of some Temperance literature. As if coming to open one more window in the hagiographic cell of the canonical Amherst recluse, Domhall Mitchell underlines a fairly consistent lack of political correctness in Dickinson's epistolary writings, in which she repeatedly proves contemptuous of progressive movements, and callously uninterested in such issues as ethnic injustice and the hard living conditions of the lower classes, or even the women's cause, as when Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote to ask for her support and Dickinson burnt her letter before mailing a flat refusal. It is as the result of the same recontextualisation of Dickinson's works that Paula Bernat Bennett looks back on the important part played by feminist scholars in the 1970s in establishing Dickinson among America's major poets. Bennett declares that she wishes to "revert at least partially to an older, pre-feminist approach to Dickinson," considering "the influence of Puritan self-examination and Emersonian

transcendentalism far more pertinent to her poetry.” In most of these studies, the methodological turn to new historicism is strongly perceptible and, in the case of Dickinson as least, it may have been the opening up of new perspectives which may still further be explored.

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Thèmes : Recensions

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