
The ‘Alien Force’ of Emily Dickinson in the Fin de Siècle and Beyond

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson’s poems, virtually unknown during her lifetime, trickled into print well into the 20th century. Early readers “delighted in her ‘strangeness,’” wrote editor Willis J. Buckingham in *Emily Dickinson’s Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History*. “She was published at the moment when the nineteenth century could feel, and take pleasure in, the alien force of her voice” (xii). This distance between writing and publication constitutes a temporal “border crossing,” across which the poems seemed “alien,” “...from elsewhere, foreign” (OED, “alien”) and “strange,” “of or belonging to another country; foreign, alien” (OED, “strange”), to early readers. Readers and critics have continued to experience Dickinson’s writing as temporally displaced, and strange, with ongoing consequences for our readings of her work. Unlike other mid-century writers published, forgotten, and rediscovered, Dickinson was read and reviewed by fin de siècle readers free from preceding critical or commercial appraisals. She silently “crossed the border” from mid-century Romantic tradition, appearing unannounced on the brink of the 20th century. Early reviewers evaluated the poems’ strangeness in at least two ways: nostalgically, as representing a special case of receding antebellum poetic traditions; or prospectively, as flawed but uncannily forceful, unclassifiable, and new. These two modes of temporally unsettled reading generated divergent, and persistent, traditions of reading Dickinson. On one side of the “border”, critics seek to present the writings as written, situating them within Dickinson’s lived culture, tradition, and idiosyncratic practice - maintaining their cultural distance. On the other, they are read as a perpetual harbinger of the new, ill-fitting but prospective - variously modernist, postmodernist, feminist, queer, and anti-lyric. The few poems she published seem to have been well received. Her friends and fellow writers encouraged her to print more. What if Dickinson was never strange? What if our ways of reading her are?

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