

Reflection: "We perish—tho' We reign—"

By Nicholas Ruddick

The speaker in Dickinson's poetry frequently refers to herself as a queen or empress. Sometimes she does so self-mockingly, as if to say: "I am a drama queen to think this way"; sometimes she seems in deadly earnest: "As Christ suffered beyond all men, so I beyond all women." One of her greatest poems, (Fr693) "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes —" draws widely from her oeuvre's explorations of queenship, following the thread deep into the labyrinth of female, and human, ego-psychology.

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes—
Incredulous of Ought
But Blank—and steady Wilderness—
Diversified by Night—

Just Infinites of Nought—
As far as It could see—
So looked the face I looked upon—
So looked Itself—on Me—

I offered it no Help—
Because the Cause was Mine—
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless—as divine—

Neither—would be absolved—
Neither would be a Queen
Without the Other—Therefore—
We perish—tho' We reign—

The most significant literary analogy Dickinson draws on in (Fr693) is Shakespearean, suggesting the scale of the poet's queenly ambition. In *Hamlet*, the Prince (who is a king-in-waiting) contemplates death as an adversary who, though often embodied as Other, actually dwells in himself, and can be invoked by the self-application of nothing more weighty than a "bare bodkin." The play's most iconic moment is one in which Hamlet holds before his own face Yorick's skull and addresses it as though the court jester were alive and present. In contrast, the profound negotiations between the poet of (Fr693) and death take place, not in an open grave, but in front of that most domestic of objects, the looking-glass, a location to which the female poet is daily drawn to minister to Self as though it were Other. (Fr693) is both about an internal state (depression) and external reality (the cosmic void). This thematic duality is suggested by the double meaning of the verb "to look": (1) to seem from an external perspective, as in the phrase, "she looked heavenly"; and (2) to behold, or direct the eyes outwards, as in "she looked heavenwards". The poet, looking at herself in the mirror, is struck by the expression on the face of the Other (her reflection). The eyes of this Other look as if

they are haunted by hopelessness at having beheld terrestrial nature as a localized reflection of the cosmic infinities of nothingness revealed by a telescope. But Self can offer Other no alleviation of her despair: the pair are, after all, not merely conjoined but identical. For them, to look and to see constitute two perspectives on the same act.

However, Self and Other together are queenly. The relationship between them is a "Compact" in which Self acknowledges the apparent Other as Self. It would be probably less stressful for Self to project her alienation externally onto exalted or vilified others (as is the case with most religions). Yet while the agreement between Self and Other may intensify despair, it is also a sovereign act of accepting a hard existential truth, and as such it is "divine" because true sacredness, power, and immortality can only be achieved via the aspiration to self-sovereignty. The poet is a "Queen"—a reigning woman, a great female poet—because of the sovereignty implicit in her recognition of Other as Self, of otherness in herself. There is no eternal life: Self and Other will perish equally and simultaneously. But after death, the poet, who uses the "royal we" to signify that she is both Self and Other, will continue to reign, because of the poetry that she has made of her insight into the difficult truth of existence.

What fascinates me today about Dickinson is her philosophical position as a poet working in the immediate aftermath of the Darwinian revolution. Most of her American contemporaries resisted the new naturalistic worldview or tempered it with some sort of Emersonian transcendentalism. But Dickinson didn't. She accepted Darwinism's hard insights into the unimportance of human life in the cosmic order. It seems to me that she also accepted one of its major consequences: that God, angels, and demons were human creations, Others born of the Self then factitiously granted an independent existence to give our lives a so-called spiritual meaning. Dickinson looked the abyss in the face every time she looked in the mirror. She was able to endure because she knew how good she was. Her flesh would perish, but as queen among the poets, her word would reign forever.

Nicholas Ruddick completed his PhD dissertation on Emily Dickinson thirty years ago. Though he subsequently specialized in science fiction and related fantastic literature, Dickinson remains his favorite poet. His latest books are *The Fire in the Stone: Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009), and a new scholarly edition of Jack London's 1903 classic novella *The Call of the Wild* in the Broadview Editions series (2009). He has taught at the University of Regina since 1982.