

CENTRE DE RECHERCHES ANGLO-AMERICAINES

TROPISMES

N° 9

"L'Argent"
comme échange symbolique

Publié avec le Concours du Conseil Scientifique
de l'Université Paris X - Nanterre

UNIVERSITE PARIS X - NANTERRE

1999

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

The critic wishing to address the question of economic rhetoric in Emily Dickinson suffers from no scarcity. Dickinson made ample use of an at times surprisingly technical fiduciary vocabulary to discuss poetic and affective questions, as well as theological ones. She is probably America's greatest poet of investment, deferral and return. But return carries two senses for Dickinson, for if on the one hand she often appeals to the logic of the revenue, which is meant to accrue thanks to various affective expenditures, on the other in her magnificent poems on haunting and elsewhere she fully acknowledges the revenant, the uncanny reduplication of the original loss that the "interest" refigures just as much as it compensates. For Dickinson it would seem that the revenue is always *also* the revenant, that the surplus of interest serves as much to extend as to counterbalance the original loss or investment. Thus for Dickinson, God is not only a "Mighty Merchant," (621)¹ exchanging salvation for devotion, but also a finance capitalist. She asks, "Is Heaven an Exchequer?/They speak of what we owe" (1270) and mourning the death of a beloved, ends a poem by speaking of the Lord as an overzealous customs officer:

*If "God is Love" as he admits
We think that he must be*

1 Poems will be identified by reference to the numbers attributed by Johnson in his edition of the *Complete Poems*.

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

*Because he is a "jealous God"
He tells us certainly*

*If "All is possible with" him
As he besides concedes
He will refund us finally
Our confiscated Gods— (1260)*

The pun on "gods" and "goods" here is typical Dickinson, not so much sacralizing capitalism as implying that what are to us the sacred affairs of the heart are no more than bookkeeping to the heavenly cashier. Most striking of all perhaps is an early poem which considers the Lord as banker and perhaps even usurer, again referring to the Lord's confiscation of loved ones, placed in the grave, or as she puts it, "in the sod":

*I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!*

*Angels—twice descending
Reimbursed my store—
Burglar! Banker—Father!
I am poor once more! (49)*

Given poems like these, it is hardly surprising that four major articles have already been written on the subject of Dickinson's economic rhetoric, most recently Joan Burbick's "Emily Dickinson and the Economics of Desire."² Even more recently, Mary Loeffelholz begins her interesting book on Dickinson by comparing at length her "economics of reading" (8) to those of Emerson. But if such approaches to Dickinson seem to be of undeniable importance, they also seem to

2 See Burbick's interesting comments on Dickinson's "economic tropes that ultimately determine the 'cost' of longing" (363). Burbick likewise rightly warns against reductive, overly optimistic readings of the "compensation" Dickinson sometimes evokes as "payment" for loss.

Daniel Katz

present certain dangers, for such readings of economic vocabulary can all too easily lead us into a metaphoric which is itself already an economy, in which the fiduciary terminology would be seen as directly exchangeable for a "non-fiduciary" meaning. If all rhetoric is to some extent an economics, our goal here is to avoid a too easy convertibility in which the economic terms would be seen as a medium of exchange, or "vehicle" to be cashed in and effaced before the imagined presence of the referential goods, or "tenor." The Canadian poet and essayist Steve McCaffrey has cogently criticized the tendency to interpret metaphor as transparent exchange, while insisting on viewing it through an economic lens: "We can see metaphor as a figure of economy rather than structure, predicated upon a certain scarcity (i.e. the lack of a univocal designator of an object or target term). . . . What seems incontrovertible in this. . . . displacement of metaphor is the loss of both heterogeneity and identity. The move towards the annexation of the difference occurs as much because two things are *not* the same as because of any similarity between them. The movement to resemblance effects an escape of difference, yet there is always an irreducible, unmasterable remnant in the figure that is neither resemblance nor difference but the indeterminacy of both" (pp. 206-207). In other words, we must remember not only to study Dickinson's economies, but also the rhetorical economies of those economies, the textual systems of exchange that make such languages of exchange possible.

In this regard, I would like to look at Emily Dickinson as the poet of reserve, as this word, in all its senses, is pertinent in many ways to both her biography and her poetry. One could speak of the personal reserve of the famous recluse of Amherst, who increasingly refused to meet strangers or even old friends; who from her mid-thirties onward became increasingly reluctant to leave the grounds of her father's house, then to cross its threshold, and finally even to descend the staircase from her upstairs room. Mabel Loomis Todd, the first editor of Dickinson's poems, spoke with her many times but never saw her: their interviews took place with Mrs. Todd downstairs and Emily speaking and listening from behind the partly opened door of her room. One could speak of reserve with regards to publication; only seven of her poems were published in her lifetime, and her ambivalence around the

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

subject was enormous. In 1862, she sent a few poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a prominent man of letters whose words of advice to aspiring writers Emily had read in the *Atlantic Monthly*. She asked, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive? The mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude" (letter 260)³. After the puzzled Higginson apparently suggested that her work might not yet be quite ready for print, she responded: "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—" (265). We shall return to her poetic discussion of the issue later. One could speak of her reserve in terms of the role the secret plays in both her life and work—Christine Savinel has recently emphasized its importance within the structure of the poetry, and biographically it would seem that the extent and intensity of her poetic activity remained a secret to her closest friends and family until the end. This, of course, led to the discovery of an unsuspectedly large trove of manuscripts stowed away in her room and thus the most important reserve of all—the piles of texts she seemingly refused to share, expose, or part with, keeping them safely locked away in her keeping like money under a mattress.

But how is one to read this poetic reserve? As a bourgeois hoarding—an embodiment of the capitalist ethos of accumulation and thus a fetishization which refuses the reciprocity and exchange implied by reading? Or as the opposite: a romantic refusal to assign a vulgar monetary value to the priceless. Or as a sort of synthesis of the two: an anti-bourgeois sovereignty in that she destines her work to sheer loss, refusing to recuperate her massive investment in writing not only monetarily but also in terms of prestige and recognition. Finally, following Deleuze and Guattari one could argue for a resistance to the libidinal decoding of capitalist exchange which rhymes nicely with her very real biographical "territorialization," although such a reading oddly circles back to the earliest naive readings of Dickinson as the classic nineteenth century frustrated female hysteric.

3 Letters will also be referred to by the numbers attributed by Johnson in his editions of the correspondence.

Daniel Katz

There are elements of truth in all of these interpretations, so much so that the trope of reserve, both literary and biographical, must be seen as wholly overdetermined. However it must be noted that part of this overdetermination derives from Dickinson's recognition of her status as a woman writer. The emphasis on reserving, withholding and accumulating takes on its full weight in a social economy where the role of women is not to possess money but to spend it, to consume it conspicuously, as the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen was to argue in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*,⁴ and when not spending money, as in any other strict patriarchy, women function of course quite simply *as* money, as a token of exchange between men, an organizing factor in patrilineal kinship structures themselves represented in terms of investment and debt. So the apposition of burglar and banker with "father" seen above is hardly fortuitous; Dickinson's poetry, as we shall see, constantly recognizes that in a strict patriarchy ownership and accumulation are necessarily male prerogatives, that filiation is *necessarily* figured as investment and debt. Her textual hoarding must always be seen as operating within a system in which women are a form of wealth, and not the subject which might possess it. By assuming the role of a sort of literary treasurer, Dickinson ironically writes herself into the male familial heritage; not only because her paternal grandfather and later her father were two of the founding fathers of that prestigious storehouse of knowledge and center of higher learning, Amherst College, but also because her father and later her brother were the first two treasurers of it.⁵

Yet if Dickinson writes a poetry of reserve, by the same token she writes a poetry of loss: her elliptical and condensed style refuses a simplistic, mimetic conception of the relationship between language and reference in which words could be exchanged univocally for meanings and intentions, and this in great contradistinction to the leading American poets of her day and the advice proffered by the likes of T. W. Higginson. Dickinson's poetry constantly questions the

4 Veblen's classic was first published in 1899. See for example the comments on "vicarious consumption" (68-69) in the chapter on "Conspicuous Consumption."

5 See Sewall for this and all other biographical details.

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

traditional puritan recuperation of all loss in the form of deferred divine compensation, and this also stylistically, as she enforces the structural errance and incompleteness of any fully present intentional message one would like to construct. It is for these very reasons that her poetry found no early acceptance, and was horribly marred by early editorial simplifications, re-writings and wholesale alterations. What Dickinson seemed to realize, in terms entirely reminiscent of Bataille, is that reserve *is* loss, or a form of expenditure, and *not* its diametrical opposite. Just a few years before her death Emily received an unlikely marriage proposal from the prominent jurist Otis Phillips Lord. All evidence indicates that she loved him, and one imagines she more than anyone would have relished the irony of marrying the Judge Lord her theological poetry had so long resisted, yet the response she gave reads like a gloss of Bataille's general economy: "Dont you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer—dont you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?" (562). Certainly, Dickinson here recognizes that her wild "no," her refusal, is itself a gift and not simply a disinclination to bestow. Yet it is not only her relationship to Judge Lord which is characterized in economic terms, for she also represents the relationship between the subject and language economically. According to Dickinson here, words are *consigned* to language, handed over to a language which theoretically must return them when we present our credit slip. Her rhetoric does not imply a pre-expressive wealth too precious to be exchanged for semiotic mediation, but rather a treasury of words too precious to be left in language's charge—words saved from their normal function of exchange to be admired for their unconvertible beauties, as a collector will prize old currency according to other criteria than its face value. Here we approach the poetics of Mallarmé.

Loss, however, is not only implied by her poetics but also explicitly thematized again and again in her writings: one of her most powerful poems begins, "A loss of something ever felt I—/The first that I could recollect/Bereft I was—of what I knew not" (959). Here the birth of consciousness is seen as simultaneous with both the recognition of the fact of loss, and the radical forgetting of the object of this loss: what is remembered is that something has been forgotten, and the poem goes

Daniel Katz

on to trace the speaker's determination to preserve this double awareness of loss despite the general surrounding incomprehension. If Dickinson consistently refuses the traditional Christian strategies of compensation, in which loss, denial and renunciation, the "piercing virtue" as she calls it in one poem (745), are repaid in immortality by the heavenly exchequer, it is precisely because it is most of all these losses which she wishes to keep in reserve, and which her reserves were established to protect. Dickinson's greatest refusal, her wildest 'No' addressed to the other Judge Lord, is her refusal to allow these losses to be simply recuperated as renunciation, piety, obedience, or religious virtue, that is, as deferred gain. A central tension of a certain strata of Dickinson's work, especially that surrounding the question of composition and publication as well as religion, is how to preserve this loss and recognize it, but as loss, that is, without converting it either into heavenly profit or into some kind of compensatory poetic capital. Jack Spicer, one of the most Dickinsonian of twentieth century poets, wrote on this problem in his epistolary partly prose-poem "Admonitions," which utilizes a revealing combination of poetic, economic and sexual rhetoric:

There really is no single poem.

That is why all my stuff from the past. . . looks foul to me. The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath. It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry. Look at those other poems. Admire them if you like. They are beautiful but dumb.

Poems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can. (61)

Spicer's emphasis on poetry rather than the poem, on echoing, resonating intertextual networks, should be taken to heart when

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

reading Dickinson. Many of Dickinson's poems were sent with letters, creating contexts which significantly change the inflections of the poems from them when read as isolated artistic artefacts. Moreover, the rhetoric, grammar and rhythm of her letters often differ from her verse only by the absence of lineation. Dickinson demands of us a different economy, one allowing us to integrate the letters and the poems and thus to see the poems as acts, events, singularities, determinate messages fabricating addressees, and not as atemporal aestheticized idealities. Meanwhile, Dickinson's recurrent use of certain words, figures and images, like the color white, or snow, or guns, serves to create various and variable interlocking networks of poems that echo and resonate in the manner Spicer recommended. Thus my procedure here will consist in following some of these threads to hear the echoes they produce. Perhaps it was the "English Department of the Spirit" which drew Dickinson to Higginson and the possibility of publication; as she wrote magnificently on the back of one her manuscripts, "There is an awful yes in every constitution."⁶ But in any event, the reticence which eventually won the day was, I think, based on nothing so simple as pride. Let us look at her most famous poem on the subject:

*Publication—is the Auction
of the Mind of Man—
Poverty—be justifying
For so foul a thing*

*Possibly—but We—would rather
From Our Garret go
White—Unto the White Creator—
Than invest—Our Snow*

*Thought belong to Him who gave it—
Then—to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration—Sell
The Royal Air—*

6 Recorded by Sewall (656).

Daniel Katz

*In the Parcel—Be the Merchant
of the Heavenly Grace—
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price— (709)*

This poem, especially in its relatively unequivocal first stanza, opens itself up to the interpretation it has usually received: that to publish one's poems is equivalent to selling one's spirit, a kind of intellectual prostitution which also seems to be a sort of sin, judging from the way the last stanza gives a theological sense to "disgrace" through its opposition to the "Grace" two lines above. Against this sullied transaction, the poet seems to propose the stainless purity of going "White—Unto the White Creator." However, the poem introduces certain complications to this schema, especially in stanza three. Line 9 would seem to refer to God, while the bearer of the Corporeal illustration of God's Thought would appear to be Christ—the word made flesh. Thus if thought belongs to God, to publish is not to auction one's *own* mind, but rather to sell for profit the property of another. It is thus a refusal to acknowledge the divine debt. But note that Christ here is not "thought" but rather its illustration—that is, Christ's body is a sign, a materialization of meaning, which is meant to be *exchanged* for the God it embodies, and not adored for itself. In this extreme form of Protestant iconoclasm, Christ is figured as the publication of God's mind, as God's worldly text, and his body is put in parallel with the printed page. Thus Dickinson cannot be seen as appealing to religious authority in her decision not to publish, because it is the Christian economy of publication which she is refusing. The last stanza seems to imply that God has again become a kind of Merchant, demanding that "Grace" be paid for with Christ's body, or all the other sacrifices of which Christ's is the template. It is in this sense that the last stanza's opposition between "Heavenly Grace" and "Human Spirit" takes on its significance: while Dickinson allows Christian economics to assimilate those of business, she holds the Human Spirit to a higher standard. What is "grace" in the holy realm is precisely its opposite, even its undoing, in the temporal. But Dickinson also seems to be refusing Christ's semiotic, mediating role between an ineffable God and a

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

material world. "Spirit" in line 15 might tell us how to read the "Royal Air" of line twelve, in that Christ's body, the "parcel" as the word made flesh, would contain the spirit or breath of God the Father. Thus, the material corporeality or humanity of Christ is simply packaging to facilitate the sale of Grace. Just as the published poem would be the package for the sale of. . . what? Despite appearances, Dickinson is not condemning poetry in favor of pure spirit; she is condemning publication in favor of reserve. The term she uses here for her poetic activity, or perhaps mental activity generally, is "snow." She uses the term the same way in a letter to her friend Samuel Bowles, believed to be contemporary with the poem: "Dear Friend, If you doubted my Snow—for a moment—you never will—again—I know—Because I could not say it—I fixed it in the Verse—for you to read—when your thought wavers, for such a foot as mine—" (251). A poem was included with this letter. "Snow" could mean her manuscripts, but also, especially given the emphasis placed on "mind" and "spirit," it could mean the "angers and frustrations" which Spicer came to refuse to view as simple aesthetic capital. In either case, the specificity of "snow" should put us on our guard against the traditional reading which claims that this poem simply prizes that which is too precious to be exchanged for the abstraction of value. As we know, it is only money that makes accumulation possible. In a barter economy, surplus cannot be turned into profit because it decays. It is only currency that allows excess to be turned into a value capable of resisting the erosion of time. Thus, if on the one hand currency is an "unreal" abstraction, a semiotic mediation between goods, on the other the conversion into money gives substance and solidity to all perishable wealth. Now, nothing is more perishable than snow, liable to melt into water and evaporate. Thus the refusal to invest snow is in no way the reticence of the skeptical hoarder, reluctant to part with real objects of wealth in return for intrinsically worthless monetary counters, whose value is wholly dependent on an arbitrary law. On the contrary, Dickinson here refuses to cash in precisely that which *cannot* be hoarded or accumulated, that which is destined to disappear. What she refuses to relinquish is her loss, and what Dickinson seems to be wary of is its conversion into an easy profit which would erase the negative moment of the general economy.

Daniel Katz

But snow has another function in the poem, as it also reinforces the map of whiteness sketched in the second stanza. Whiteness here is not only a token of purity, but also the mark of resemblance between Dickinson and her creator—a resemblance reinforced by the whiteness of her snow. Indeed, the stanza could be read as implying that if she invests that whiteness she will lose her mark of resemblance—although as we have seen, snow by its nature cannot be conserved. The poem almost seems to establish a sort of sibling rivalry between the published and public Christ and the Snowy daughter. That would be another story. But rather than simply credit the conventional association of whiteness with purity let us follow its tracks in another poem:

*I cannot live with You—
It would be Life—
And Life is over there—
Behind the Shelf*

*The Sexton keeps the Key to—
Putting up
Our Life—His Porcelain—
Like a Cup—*

*Discarded of the Housewife—
Quaint—or Broke—
A newer Sevres pleases—
Old Ones crack—*

*I could not die—with You—
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down—
You—could not—*

*And I—Could I stand by
And see You—freeze—
Without my Right of Frost—
Death's privilege?
Nor could I rise—with You—*

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

*Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus'—
That New Grace*

*Glow plain—and foreign
On my homesick Eye—
Except that You than He
Shone closer by—*

*They'd judge Us—How—
For You—served Heaven—You know,
Or sought to—
I could not—*

*Because You saturated Sight—
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise*

*And were You lost, I would be—
Though My Name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame—*

*And were You—saved—
And I—condemned to be
Where You were not—
That self—were Hell to me—*

*So We must meet apart—
You there—I—here—
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are—and Prayer—
And that White Sustenance—
Despair— (640)*

Daniel Katz

Like the poem on publication, this too is a work about distances, mediation, deferred meetings with the beloved, and publicizing and publication as opposed to the privacy of a virtually incommunicable language, melting before it arrives at its addressee. In the previous poem whiteness was associated not only with purity but with loss, refusal and renunciation. Here whiteness is not the melting snow but rather a form of sustenance, yet seemingly thin and pale—only sufficient to keep the poet in the slow wasting condition the poem seems to describe. And in this sense it is not so far from the snow. Dickinson's recognition here that despair can be a positive force, that sorrow can be a sustaining anchor and nutriment calls for an investigation of the Dickinsonian poetics of mourning which would be the logical extension of this study. For now, let us note that this recognition once again subverts the traditional conceptualizations of profit and loss, and that once again loss is figured as the necessary reserve, that which cannot be relinquished short of starvation. The complicated erotic heresy established here is also worth a careful examination, along with the entire treatment of the question of vision and the gaze. But for our present purposes I would like to focus on the first stanza. The stanza gains its force not only from the metaphor of life packed away behind the shelf, but also from its tautological structure: life is *by definition* that which is locked away, that which is held in reserve, which is not spent. If it is spent, if it is lived, then quite simply it is not life. A lived life, a life sustained by something other than despair, could not be life, indeed, it can only be posited in the conditional mode.

This poem is probably more or less contemporary with the three so-called "master letters," which echo much of its vocabulary. The master letters are mysterious, erotic epistles addressed to an unknown recipient whom Dickinson calls only "Master," while referring to herself as "Daisy." It is not known if any of these letters were ever actually sent, nor, despite endless speculation, whom Emily had in mind in them. The poet Susan Howe rightly emphasizes the possibility that there was no master, or that these letters were composed precisely to fabricate one. Fictional or not, Howe astutely calls attention to a good number of self-conscious literary echoes in them from sources like

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

Aurora Leigh and *David Copperfield*.⁷ In all of them, the question of distancing and spacing from the beloved is emphasized, along with the inadequacy of heaven as a meeting place for the lovers. But unlike in the poem above Dickinson here emphasizes her master's lack of appreciation for the plenitude of her devotion, while begging to be forgiven for her faults. The second letter speaks of "white" in what almost seems an erotic code; I will quote at length as the passage is of interest for numerous reasons:

Vesuvius dont talk—Etna—dont—one of them—said a syllable—a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever—She could'nt look the world in the face, afterward—I suppose—Bashfull Pompeii! "Tell you of the want"—you know what a leech is, dont you—and Daisy's arm is small—and you have felt the horizon hav'nt you—and did the sea—never come so close as to make you dance?

I dont know what you can do for it—thank you—Master—but if I had the Beard on my cheek—like you—and you—had Daisy's petals—and you cared so for me—what would become of you? Could you forget me in fight, or flight—or the foreign land? Could'nt Carlo, and you and I walk in the meadows an hour—and nobody care but the Bobolink—and his—a silver scruple? I used to think when I died—I could see you—so I died as fast as I could—but the "Corporation" are going Heaven too so [Eternity] wont be sequestered—now—Say I may wait for you—say I need go with no stranger to the to me—untried fold—I waited a long time—Master—but I can wait more—wait till my hazel hair is dappled—and you carry the cane—then I can look at my watch—and if the Day is too far declined—we can take the chances for Heaven—What would you do with me if I came "in white"? Have you the little chest to put the Alive—in? (237)

The letter closes with this sentence: "I didn't think to tell you, you didn't come to me 'in white,' nor ever told me why." This letter clearly echoes the terms of the meeting with the Lord sketched out in the poem on publication—"White—Unto the White Creator"—and thus enters the old literary economy of bidirectional exchange between depictions of profane love and religious ecstasy. Yet the letter also

⁷ See the first part of Howe's brilliant study.

Daniel Katz

echoes the interdiction of heaven and the rhetoric of distance, the "meeting apart," of poem 640. Whiteness is at once the melting fugitive snow, the coddled pain which sustains, and the emblem of possible union. An exhaustive inventory of images of snow and blankness in Dickinson would take us far afield, but already note that whiteness is both what symbolically joins *and* that which maintains distance, that which melts and that which feeds. Unlike the Lord who insisted on fleshly mediation only to erase it, who ceded to the awful yes in his constitution, Dickinson tends to savor the distance and the difference which subtends every meeting. Whiteness is the blank space that at once allows meeting to take its place and ensures that it will never be consummated. Biographically, the Door Ajar actually became Dickinson's favorite mode of interacting, and her penchant in the later years for wearing only white dresses was legendary. Thus whiteness among other things means writing—the notes by which she increasingly preferred to communicate with others, and that increasingly came to resemble the manuscripts she withheld as "poems." The third and last master letter focuses on Daisy's unnamed wrongs towards the master, her sense of debt and her pleading desire to make amends: "Oh, did I offend it—Daisy—Daisy—offend it—who bends her smaller life to his meeker every day—who only asks—a task—something to do for love of it—some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad" (248) and so on. I would now like to look at a short poem which in cooler and more ironic language seems to address a similar issue, while picking up the rhetoric of the living flower and its emblematic petals:

*I pay—in Satin Cash—
You did not state—your price—
A Petal, for a Paragraph
Is near as I can guess— (402)*

Taken out of context the poem appears to be the poet's complaint to her muse, as she asks for more verse. However, juxtaposed with the master letters, it is also possible to read it as a request for letters from her absent beloved. It is far from clear on what grounds this distinction could be established in any absolute sense, and moreover, the western

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

tradition has always tended to confuse the beloved and the muse in any event. Indeed, in the troubadour economy the poem fills the space left by the absence of the beloved; it is only this absence which allows the poem to come into being, a poem whose very existence is compensation for the lack of the erotic object. This bestows upon the poem a sort of double provisionality: it fills in for the missing object (when poets address their poems in the place of their lovers) and often strives to bring about the circumstances which would obviate further poetic creation (when the poems are sent to the beloved and pronounce the words of seduction the poet is too far away to utter). Dickinson here puts the emphasis on the cost of this transaction to her, but what is the specificity of "satin cash"? First of all, cash seems to privilege the skeptical, seemingly immediate temporality of the spot market against an economy of credit, with its emphasis on faith, the proper name and the signature, deferment and futurity. Dickinson's credit rating does not seem to hold good with her interlocutor, and goods are delivered only on payment. Yet as that other great American poet of economics, Ezra Pound, once noted, "The moment man realizes the guinea stamp, not the metal, is the essential component of the coin, he has broken with all materialist philosophies" (188). "Cash" might seem more reliable than a check, but even cash only derives its value through the law which guarantees its convertibility. Thomas Johnson has dated the poem in 1862, and although the datings of Dickinson's work are far from certain, it is worth noting that 1862 was the year the United States' Federal Government first issued a national legal tender. Prior to this, all money was either coin or bank notes representing coin, exchangeable only at a particular bank in a particular place. 1862 is the first year the United States had a currency whose value came not from its representation of actual coin wealth possessed by an individual but from the legal authority of the Federal Government. This measure, intended as temporary, was undertaken against significant opposition both to ease the financial crisis instigated by the Civil War and to reinforce the federal authority this war had called into question. Now, "Satin" here draws attention precisely to the materiality of the monetary unit, its "metal" in Pound's terms, in contrast to the law or "guinea stamp" which gives it value. One might be tempted here to posit a

Daniel Katz

literary extrapolation, and argue that poets likewise privilege the materiality of the signifier as opposed to its semantic exchange value as defined by the law. I do not think this would be appropriate; the materiality of the signifier "as such" only comes into being through the operation of semiotic laws and it is precisely the articulations of these sorts of laws that poets like Dickinson investigate when through syntactic, rhythmic and rhyming effects they call attention to what we dub "materiality." Yet the emphasis on satin—a material traditionally used for women's clothing—along with the traditionally feminine "petals" of flowers, can be seen as an attempt to divest systems of symbolic exchange—linguistic and monetary—from the specifically *patriarchal* law which underwrites them. As noted above, the federal government issued its legal tender precisely to reinforce its legal authority, and in America, with its relatively small federal government and widely differing state legislations and regional characteristics, it is precisely the dollar bill which creates unity and cohesion. In Althusser's terms, one could say that the only real Ideological State Apparatus in America is the greenback; it is not the state that "interpellates" the subject in America but rather the dollar bill. The state's authority is mediated, disseminated and projected by its guarantee, "THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE" printed on all currency. Thus the prime importance of the "guinea stamp," the emblem of this guarantee, in American history. America would never permit painters, writers, philosophers, or engineers to grace its money. Not only would it certainly reject the naked breasts which until recently adorned the 100-franc bill in France, it even has trouble with women's faces—the revived two dollar bill featuring early feminist Susan B. Anthony was a rousing failure. What Americans do put on their money is vividly evoked by blues singer Big Bill Broonzy in a daring figure from his song, "Romance without Finance":

*Come here Baby,
Let me give you a hint:
You can have your romance
Just give me them dead presidents.*

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

One could interpret "dead presidents" as a synecdoche, taking the part represented by the image of the president for the whole bill. But it is also a metonymy, reminding us that the law which renders this tender legal derives its authority from the authority of the presidential office, itself underwritten by the "founding fathers" of the constitution and their subsequent embodiments. In the poem, "pay" rather than "trade," and especially the word "cash" indicate that Dickinson is not hearkening back to the immediacy of a barter economy, but rather a currency whose circulation and value might be underwritten by something other than a law which presents itself as patriarchal authority, which parallels the father of the family as guarantee of the familial economy with the father of the country as guarantee of national economy. Even reading this poem within the context of the heavily gender-typed master letters, here Daisy may be seen in the very act of submission to be surreptitiously replacing the Master's law with her own—mutilating herself by plucking her own petals, certainly, but refusing to accept the Masterly, patriarchal signature as guarantor and creator of value. Satin cash is a currency whose guarantee is the parcellated body of the dying daughter, not the signature of the dead father.

If we assume that the satin cash is the satiny petals of a flower, and that this flower is also Daisy, then Dickinson here is spending herself in return for her paragraphs—this would be one way out of the reserve of the life behind the shelf, the life that by its nature cannot be lived. Living, then, would be acclimated to a kind of spending which is the spending of one's very essence; the only alternative to reserve is auto-mutilation. When Dickinson does imagine a life that could be spent, or life as a check that could actually be cashed, it is usually in terms of violence, sometimes directed at the self sometimes not. The figural language emphasizes explosion, eruption and discharge. Let us now turn to one of Dickinson's most famous poems:

*My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—*

Daniel Katz

*And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—*

*And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—*

*And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master's Head—
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow—to have shared—*

*To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—*

*Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die— (754)*

"Life" as a loaded gun standing in a corner unmistakably recalls life stored behind the shelf. This poem seems to answer the question of the other one—how have a life which remains a life, yet is spent? How release the reserves? How shoot the gun? The answer reveals much about the structure of the master letters, much about what most critics take to be the disturbing self-effacement and masochism of them. Dickinson displaces the question away from wealth and poverty, credit and debt, and ultimately, the possession of power and powerlessness, for what Dickinson seems to be saying here is that one's life is exactly that which one cannot spend oneself, but which must be spent by another. The question then is no longer that of owning or owing, but of being owned and being exchanged oneself as payment. Power here is

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

identified not with owning wealth but with being wealth. Note that in the first stanza Dickinson establishes a distinction between herself, her life, and the "owner" of her life. This poem does not celebrate restoration, retrieval, recuperation, or any traditional conception of empowerment; Dickinson does not have her life returned to her. Rather, her life is lived only by being handed over to someone else. The self is presented here not as the subject of a symbolic debt, nor is life seen as being made available once one's debts are paid. Dickinson is far from the economics of an Ezra Pound here; there is no wish to buy one's desires out of hock. Rather one realizes one's life when one is no longer subject of surplus or debt, but rather token of exchange within a larger economy—something by which, not to whom, debts are paid, and accounts settled. This poem restores some of the original violence of Lacan's dictum, "the subject is a signifier for another signifier," and lauds what others might see as the alienation inherent in assuming that position. In this uncanny re-write of "The Purloined Letter" the poet is the letter, and the letter a bullet. Whence the desperate violence of the last stanza—the subject has assumed a position in which it can only be exchanged, thus it can never receive—it can kill but not be killed. In one of her great poems on haunting, Dickinson writes:

*One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—
One need not be a House—
The Brain has Corridors—surpassing
Material Place—*

....

*Ourself behind ourself, concealed—
Should startle most—
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.*

*The Body—borrows a Revolver—
He bolts the Door—
O'erlooking a superior spectre—
Or More— (670)*

Daniel Katz

The suggestions of suicide are ominous here as the body borrows a revolver to protect itself from a ghost which is in fact itself too: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed." But the "loaded gun" of the other poem is not pointed at the self, nor by the self, but *with* the self, *with* the "me" that the owner carries away with the "life." By no longer borrowing, by no longer being a subject of debt, the subject escapes the circular economy in which it can only protect itself by destroying itself. In the poems on haunting the threat is internal—that in "me" which must live and that which must die cannot be separated—while the loaded gun is the opposite side of the same problem. In the poems of haunting the action of stopping the threat stops myself, but here the action of stopping stops only the doe, while that in "myself" which needs to be subjugated, killed, controlled, is beyond my stopping, is become unstoppable. Before, "I" could only die. Now, "I" cannot ever.

The "Loaded Gun" poem seems to me to emblemize an entire strain of American literature and culture, from Captain Ahab to Timothy McVeigh, in which the weight of the superb American imperatives of prudence, reserve, investment and profit can only be sidestepped through a predication of the subject no longer as potential possessor of power but as an agent of power, as unaccountable energy in the service of an Other. Throughout her work, Dickinson skirts the edges of the two opposed archetypal American economies of aggression which Melville emblemized as Ahab and the Confidence man. Throughout, Dickinson's reserve was also an investment in poverty. She wrote,

*I am afraid to own a Body—
I am afraid to own a Soul—
Profound—precarious Property—
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier. (1090)*

Satin Cash: Dickinson's Reserves

This poem once again separates an I from both soul and body, and treats both precisely as cumbersome items one is not allowed to be rid of. Reserve here is less a strategy than an inescapable destiny: the problem is not that one might lose one's property but that one has no choice but accept it. As in the haunting poem, no riddance is possible short of death, and unlike the loaded gun the body and soul can never be traded, given, lost, exchanged, spent. Did Dickinson store up her poems the better to ensure their survival or their disappearance? Her sister Lavinia honored her wish that after her death her correspondence be burned; her biographer Richard Sewall estimates that the 1,100 letters of hers which survive represent a tenth of her output, while only one one-hundredth of the mail she received remains. She left no instructions concerning the manuscripts found in her drawer. To close I would like to read a poem I have held in reserve, by another of the twentieth century's most Dickinsonian poets, Robert Creeley:

THE DISHONEST MAILMEN

*They are taking all my letters, and they
put them into a fire.*

I see the flames, etc.

But do not care, etc.

*They burn everything I have, or what little
I have. I don't care, etc.*

*The poem supreme, addressed to
emptiness—this is the courage*

*necessary. This is something
quite different.*

Daniel Katz
Université Paris VII
Denis Diderot

Daniel Katz

Works Consulted

- Broonzy, "Big Bill." House Rent Stomp (audio cassette). Milan: Sarabandas, 1990.
- Burbick, Joan. "Emily Dickinson and the Economics of Desire." *American Literature*, volume 58, number 3, 1986 (361-378).
- Chaliff, Cynthia. "The Psychology of Economics in Emily Dickinson." *Literature and Psychology* 18 (1968).
- Creeley, Robert. For Love: Poems 1950-1960. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.
- Dickinson, Emily. Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Dickinson, Emily. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.
- Howe, Susan. My Emily Dickinson. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985.
- Loeffelholz, Mary. Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- McCaffery, Steve. North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986. Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986.
- Meredith, Robert. "Emily Dickinson and the Acquisitive Society." *New England Quarterly* 37, 1964.
- Pollak, Vivian. " 'That Fine Prosperity': Economic Metaphors in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973).
- Pound, Ezra. Guide to Kulchur. New York: New Directions, 1970.
- Savinell, Christine. Emily Dickinson et la grammaire du secret. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1993.
- Spicer, Jack. The Collected Books of Jack Spicer. Robin Blaser, ed. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980.
- Veblen, Thorstein. The Theory of the Leisure Class. New York: Mentor Books, 1953.