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Auctions of the Mind: Emily Dickinson and Abolition

WHAT WERE EMILY DICKINSON'S OPINIONS on the great moral issue of slavery, which so shook the foundations of her society? Neither letters nor poems offer direct testimony. We know, however, that Dickinson's father, elected as a Whig to the 33rd Congress, participated in the House debate on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill; we know, too, that she read newspapers and magazines avidly, and that her chosen "Preceptor," Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was a prominent abolitionist.¹ She was, in other words, almost certainly well informed on the subject, but chose consciously (for whatever reasons) to keep close counsel with her beliefs.²

One indication that Dickinson did take note of the slavery debate is her oblique use of the language of abolition in poems that don't directly address that topic. A case in point is poem no. 709 in the Harvard edition of Dickinson's work:

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

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It's Corporeal illustration—Sell
The Royal Air—

In the Parcel—Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace—
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price—

Though the Harvard edition gives 1863 as date—the year succeeding Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation—Dickinson's language recalls an earlier era's rhetoric. The powerful image of Negro families sundered at auction, an image already slipping into history when Dickinson wrote these lines, appears to have served, perversely, as her inspiration. I say perversely because the object of Dickinson's wrath isn't slavery, nor even auction, but publication. She saves her especial vehemence for seekers of publicity, for those who would share their "Thought" with a wide public. "Thought," she says, is a gift, and should remain the intimate property of two, "Him who gave" and "Him who bear." Wider circulation she calls "Disgrace of Price." Grudgingly accepting "Poverty" as a possible justification "for so foul a thing," she nonetheless condemns this violation of intimacy as a reduction of "Human Spirit." But before following out this poem's logic more fully, I shall consider a brief series of texts that also make use of auction, in order to highlight Dickinson's peculiar use of this motif, and in order to show how compact, how heavy a burden the word "Auction" can convey.

WHITTIER, HARPER, WHITMAN

The contestation between religious and economic determinations of value Dickinson puts forward in "Publication—is the Auction" is typical of abolitionist verse. Typical too is denunciation of any compromise between the two—between claims of the spirit and claims of the market. In 1836, John Greenleaf Whittier penned one of his angriest poems on this theme, "Clerical Oppressors":

What! preach, and kidnap men?
Give thanks, and rob thy own afflicted poor?
Talk of thy glorious liberty, and then
Bolt hard the captive's door?

.....

Paid hypocrites, who turn
Judgment aside, and rob the Holy Book
Of those high words of truth which search and burn
In warning and rebuke;

Feed fat, ye locusts, feed!
And, in your tasselled pulpits, thank the Lord
That, from the toiling bondman's utter need,
Ye pile your own full board. (38-39)

In 1843, in "The Christian Slave," Whittier returned to this theme to denounce a New Orleans auction where the slaves were advertised "as pious or as members of a church":

A CHRISTIAN! going, gone!
Who bids for God's own image? for his grace
Which that poor victim of the market-place
Hath in her suffering won?

.....
Oh from the fields of cane,
From the low rice-swamp, from the trader's cell;
From the black slave-ship's foul and loathsome hell,
And coffle's weary chain;

Hoarse, horrible and strong,
Rises to Heaven that agonizing cry,
Filling the arches of the sky,
How long, O God, how long? (87-89)

"Clerical Oppressors" and "The Christian Slave" are prime examples of Whittier's pre-war protest verse, work Whittier himself described as "alarm signals, trumpet-calls to action, words wrung from the writer's heart, forged at white heat, and of course lacking . . . finish and careful word-selection" (Kribbs xvii). Critics this century have been even harsher, when they've bothered to read these verses at all.

Frances Smith Foster in *A Brighter Coming Day* usefully contrasts Whittier's rhetoric to that of Frances E. W. Harper, noting that while Whittier "chastises a nation," Harper "concentrates upon the feelings and sensibilities of those brutalized" (32). A key to Harper's force in "The Slave Auction"—her best known poem, written in 1854—is thus the suggestion that the slaves' countenances are the vividest expression

of their condition. In this, Harper's poem foreshadows certain aspects of Dickinson's:

The sale began—young girls were there,
 Defenceless in their wretchedness,
 Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
 Revealed their anguish and distress.

And mothers stood with streaming eyes,
 And saw their dearest children sold;
 Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
 While tyrants bartered them for gold.

And woman, with her love and truth—
 For these in sable forms may dwell—
 Gaz'd on the husband of her youth,
 With anguish none may paint or tell.

And men, whose sole crime was their hue,
 The impress of their Maker's hand,
 And frail and shrinking children, too,
 Were gathered in that mournful band.

Ye who have laid your love to rest,
 And wept above their lifeless clay,
 Know not the anguish of that breast,
 Whose lov'd are rudely torn away.

Ye may not know how desolate
 Are bosoms rudely forced to part,
 And how a dull and heavy weight
 Will press the life-drops from the heart.
 (64-65)

Harper describes the slaves as a form of divine writing. The "sole crime" of the men, she writes, is "their hue, / The impress of their Maker's hand," while the "sable forms" of the women are expressions of "love and truth." Like "The Christian Slave" of Whittier, the abject men and women Harper describes are martyrs, and their anguished faces become a form of testimony. Standing at auction, they are, in Dickinson's phrase, corporeal illustrations of wretchedness, that is to say, abolitionist texts.

Indeed, outstripping the talents of painter and orator, Harper's august slaves express a desolation beyond comprehension, a feeling that would squeeze away "the life-drops" from any reader's "heart." The language here ("none may paint or tell," "Ye may not know") suggests an experience of the sublime; Harper's "mournful band," presented in religious but also aesthetic terms, in many ways comprise a truer poem than the poem which describes them. By attempting to represent slavery's unrepresentable horror, the poem becomes, in fact, a work of criticism—*social* criticism.

Whitman stands in sharp contrast. For Whitman, the slave auction is not so much a scene of horror, as a reminder that nature is a process of circulation—a cyclic revolution involving all men and women, all beasts and plants alike. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), slavery as such is no longer the point, or rather, it is a point, but one among many, a mere moment in time's "revolving cycles":

A slave at auction!
I help the auctioneer the sloven does not half know his
business.

Gentleman look on this curious creature
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough
for him,
For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without
animal or plant,
For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled. (123)

Neither "sable" guardian of "love and truth," nor Christ-like victim, the slave in *Leaves of Grass* is a mere specimen, a "curious creature."³

As several critics have pointed out, by helping the auctioneer extol the virtues of the chattel, Whitman becomes complicitous in the sale.⁴ Complicity, however, is not this poem's concern. In *Leaves of Grass*, bondage and freedom are mere abstractions; the coherence of abolitionist thought is lost in Whitman's claims of *poetical* mastery:

Neither a servant nor a master am I,
I take no sooner a large price than a small price
.....
Souls of men and women! . . .

It is not you I go argue pro and con about . . .
 I own publicly who you are, if nobody else owns and see
 and hear you, and what you give and take (89–90)

Words like “servant” and “Master” and “price” and “I own” here lose their rhetorical bite. Removed from political context, they become independent of “pro” and “con”—a toothless independence in line with Whitman’s program as set forth in the 1855 preface:

To [American poets] enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—. . . the Southern plantation life . . .—slavery and the tremendous spreading of hands to protect it, and the stern opposition to it which shall never cease till it ceases or the speaking of tongues and the moving of lips cease. For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. (7–8)

The subtext of aestheticism in Harper’s poem—conferring dignity on the figure of the slave—in Whitman’s treatment of the same theme has the opposite effect.

Dickinson’s language is even less “direct” than Whitman’s, less “descriptive or epic,” but her poetry is only apparently “transcendent” of “real things and past and present events.” The strangeness of her work—her difference from such poetically conventional writers as Whittier and Harper—is equally different from the newness of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman “goes through” auction in order to discover a more general process of circulation, a process which his work endeavors to celebrate. Dickinson, by contrast, makes this general process a focus of attack. Her diatribe against “Auction / Of the Mind” stands diametrically opposed to Whitman’s “I own publicly who you are.” Thus, while her references to slavery are more attenuated than his, she remains, rhetorically, closer to abolitionism. Softened, perhaps, by slavery’s end, the connotations of “Auction” yet retain for her a measure of ferocity. Indeed, as late as 1884 (two years before her death), Dickinson could begin a poem with the following lines:

The Auctioneer of Parting
 His "Going, going, gone"
 Shouts even from the Crucifix,
 And brings his Hammer down—(*Poems* #1612)

Though these lines comprise, for one critic, "the most remarkable pun in nineteenth century Anglo-American literature" (Anderson 197), abolitionists like Whittier had long earlier joined auction and crucifixion together. Dickinson's chief contribution is her concentration on the gavel.

STOWE

Whittier was the best known anti-slavery poet (Dickinson apparently knew his work),⁵ but Harriet Beecher Stowe more than anyone gave currency to abolition's iconography. Edmund Wilson, in his deft appreciation of Stowe, calls *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "an explosion"; "as for its influence," he writes, "it is enough to remember the greeting of Lincoln to Mrs. Stowe when she was taken to call on him at the White House: 'So this is the little lady who made this big war'" (Wilson 11, 3). To appreciate how much of the force of Dickinson's poem derives from this explosion, consider the following passage from the chapter "Select Incidents of Lawful Trade":

His fine figure, alert limbs, and bright face raised an instant competition, and half a dozen bids simultaneously met the ear of the auctioneer. Anxious, half frightened, he looked from side to side, as he heard the clatter of contending bids,—now here, now there,—till the hammer fell. Haley [the slave trader] had got him. He was pushed from the block toward his new master, but stopped one moment and looked back, when his poor old mother, trembling in every limb, held out her shaking hands toward him.

"Buy me too, Mas'r, for de dear Lord's sake!—buy me,—I shall die if you don't!"

"You'll die if I do, that's the kink of it," said Haley,—"no!"
 And he turned on his heel. (1:158)

The scene is archetypal, and Dickinson no doubt read other, similar accounts in other texts as well. The general familiarity of the scene is in large part what makes appropriation possible—what proposes “Auction” as a useful illustration of foulness. We know, however, from an early letter, that Dickinson did read Stowe’s novel; upbraided by her father for wasting time on “modern Literati,” she writes to her brother Austin of being “quite in disgrace at present,” mentioning *Uncle Tom* by name, along with Dickens (*Letters* #113). The letter is dated 2 April 1853. Stowe’s novel began serialization two years before, in the *National Era*, and was brought out as a book in March 1852. Within a year 300,000 copies had been sold—one of which, apparently, fell into Dickinson’s hands. She was twenty-two at the time, and Stowe’s lurid descriptions of the slave trade no doubt made a deep impression.⁶

Yet despite Dickinson’s reliance on the auction motif, her diatribe against “Publication” makes a poor specimen of abolitionism, for reasons that become quite clear when we examine the poem’s argument more closely. In “Publication—is the Auction,” the right to privacy is supreme, taking precedence over all other needs and powers. The poem’s sanction against sharing “Thought” with a wide public depends on this supremacy, this precedence given to the private possession of “Thought.” For Dickinson, the intimacy ideas enjoy in the mind is a positive virtue—a condition of purity shareable only by “Him who gave” and “Him who bear.” As Joanne Dobson puts it, “ideas bond the muse to the poet in an exclusive, closed relationship” (53–54). Once we reject the purity of this bond—once we reject the special status accorded private possession—the poem is turned against itself, the argument rent. And this is just what happens when we translate “Publication—is the Auction” into the context of slavery. For despite Dickinson’s high-handed condemnation of “Auction,” she piously defends ownership itself as the gift of a “White Creator.” Set at odds in the poem, we now see, are two hopelessly entangled rights: the right to own, and the right to sell. Only when carried into the context of slavery, however, does the friction between these two rights become critical—critical because the “foul” right to offer one’s possessions at auction is now exposed as part and parcel of the fairer right to possess in private. Calling auction “Disgrace of Price” (and so echoing abolitionist rhetoric), Dickinson still champions ownership, upholds the right to keep or give away what others would sell to the highest bidder (and

here we get a hint of the pro-slavery argument). Dickinson's peculiar use of whiteness only heightens our sense that she's defending and criticizing slavery all at once. Whiteness, she suggests (speaking in the first person plural, as if in defense of an embattled society), gives us title, but selling robs us of this title—is a stain upon whiteness. By analogy: wrenching slaves from their homes, however justified by poverty, is contemptible, yet owning slaves, however wrong, is the God-given privilege of a superior race.

Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* confronts this stance head-on in the sympathetic character of Uncle Tom's original mistress, Emily Shelby. Mrs. Shelby first appears at the end of the initial chapter, where we find her promising she will never give consent to the sale of her house servant's son Harry. Stowe here describes Mrs. Shelby as a woman of "high moral and religious sensibility and principle" (1:13). Further, notes Stowe, "[Mrs. Shelby's] husband, who made no professions to any particular religious character, nevertheless revered and respected the consistency of hers, and stood, perhaps, a little in awe of her opinion" (1:13). Yet Mrs. Shelby's "opinion" holds no sway once her husband decides to sell his slaves. Notwithstanding the "consistency" of Mrs. Shelby's character, her reassurances are worthless. She is incapable of protecting the men, women and children under her control.

Here Mrs. Shelby learns that her husband, harried by debts, has made a secret deal with the slave trader:

"Well, Emily," said her husband, ". . . I shall have to sell some of my hands."

"To that creature? Impossible! Mr. Shelby, you cannot be serious."

. . . "Well, since you must know it all, it is so. I have agreed to sell Tom and Harry both. . . ."

Mrs. Shelby stood like one stricken. Finally, turning to her toilet, she rested her face in her hands, and gave a sort of groan.

"This is God's curse on slavery!—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. . . ."

"Why, wife, you are getting to be an abolitionist, quite."

“Abolitionist! if they knew all I knew about slavery, they *might* talk! We don’t need them to tell us; you know I never thought that slavery was right—never felt willing to own slaves.” (1:42–45)

Disclaiming association with abolitionists while evincing a hatred for slavery, Emily Shelby embodies a contradiction Stowe’s novel endeavors to expose—the tacit acceptance of evil by men and women of honorable intention. For Stowe’s Mrs. Shelby, this tacit acceptance has been possible—participation in the slave system has not weighed excessively on her conscience—because her own conduct has been exemplary—or so she believes until discovering her husband’s secret deal with the trader. Radicalized now by her husband’s rash and immoral act, she is forced to confront the ruthless irony buried in the phrase “good master”—the power to do evil strangling the heart of even the best-intentioned slaveowner.

The difference between Mr. and Mrs. Shelby is critical. As Thomas F. Gossett notes:

Shelby probably thinks of himself as a kindly master. He does not physically maltreat his slaves, and his manner to them is that of a benevolent patriarch. In his farewell to young George Shelby, [the Shelbys’ son,] Tom pays tribute to Mr. Shelby as a “good Mas’r” but he describes Mrs. Shelby as a “Christian.” Shelby derives his morality from what is usually done in society rather than from any real examination of issues. (115)

By contrast, Stowe’s purpose in drawing Mrs. Shelby’s character is “to show that many white southerners, and particularly white southern women, are involved in the sordid aspects of slavery against their will” (115). Stowe says as much in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

Mrs. Shelby is a fair type of the very best class of Southern women. . . . Many of them, surrounded by circumstances over which they can have no control, . . . loaded down by duties and responsibilities which wear upon the very springs of life, still go on bravely and patiently from day to day, doing all they

can to alleviate what they cannot prevent, . . . rescuing those
who are dependent upon them from the evils of the system.
(2:262)

Nonetheless, by disclaiming abolitionism, Mrs. Shelby signals that she is still ensnared in the role of “good Mas’r.” The “duties and responsibilities” of her slaveholding society still supersede, for Mrs. Shelby, the Christian duties of alleviation and rescue. But not for long. Tom’s sale forces her to confront this snare, to face her compromise with Christian belief, the contradiction that follows when “good” and “Mas’r” are joined together in a single breath. The eventual result of Mrs. Shelby’s confrontation with the impossibility of living ethically under slavery is her son’s emancipation of the remaining Shelby servants at the novel’s end.

As the owner of her thoughts, Dickinson too assumes the posture of “good Mas’r,” and like Mrs. Shelby, Dickinson too becomes entangled in contradiction. In order to appreciate this contradiction fully, I want to look closely at the possible meanings of “Corporeal illustration,” and consider who Dickinson might have had in mind by “Him who gave” and “Him who bear.” Given the complexity of Dickinson’s condensed language, exact definition is of course impossible, but two general possibilities suggest themselves. On the one hand, “Corporeal illustration” can be a figure for writing. In this case, the one who gives would be the author, and the one who receives, the reader. Circulated between individuals, the printed form of thought becomes an example of publication free from “Disgrace of Price.” But what exactly is this disgrace—and is private circulation really free from it? The poet gives us the beginnings of an answer in her second quatrain’s emphatic declaration, “but We—would rather / From our Garret go / White—Unto the White Creator— / Than invest—our Snow.” Disgrace, in this context, means a loss of whiteness, means losing a bit of “Our” resemblance to “the White Creator”—something accomplished through the misdeed of investing “Snow.” And yet, if “Corporeal illustration” is writing, what can “Snow” mean, metaphorically, but the page—the blank page which becomes smirched, like a writer’s character, when “Thought” circulates too freely?⁷ The problem here is obvious. If a page’s whiteness is the measure of virtue, there is no way a written thought can circulate even

between individuals. Even a handwritten thought would be a form of auction, a blemish on the writer's conscience, since it would still involve a staining of "Snow" (i.e., the page). Circulation by itself is no longer the problem, for a handwritten thought shared with no one would still bear the traces of compromise. Nor is *writing* the sole problem. The literal smirch of ink on a page merely makes vivid a more fundamental contradiction implicit to the poem's argument—that opinions offered against publication are themselves publications of opinion.⁵ Written or spoken, articulations of thought risk auction, risk entry into the public sphere. As the "good Mas'r" of her thoughts, Dickinson finds herself in the unenviable position of threatening propriety the minute she upholds it.

On the other hand, however, we can interpret "Him who gives" as a figure for God ("the White Creator"), and not the writer, in which case the corporeality of thought's illustration becomes literally that—corporeal. No language need be involved at all. "Him who bears" can bear by *being* illustration. "Snow" would then no longer suggest page, but skin—"invest[ed]," presumably, when thinking individuals offer their "Thought" in the flesh. But note how Dickinson adopts the first person plural when speaking of this skin. Notwithstanding her ultimate emphasis on singular possession, she says "We" and "Our." She speaks, in these lines, as part of an impoverished public, preparing the way for her later defense of private ownership. The difference between plural and singular, public and private, is significant, for it points the way to a parallel difference between "Snow" and "illustration." "Snow," a figure for skin, is the common possession of a garreted "White" plurality; "illustration," which distinguishes one skin from the next, "belongs" only to the individual—or rather, only to *two* individuals, "Him who gave" and "Him who bear." Garreted, the plurality yet retains freedom of circulation; retains the power to invest its property—its "Snow"—in the marketplace. The constraint placed on "Him who bear[s]" is more severe, for as the "Corporeal" substance of "Thought" he is already invested—remains the property of the one "who gave." As "Corporeal illustration," "Him who bear[s]" becomes a form of publication free from "Disgrace of Price," but free only insofar as his circulation is restricted. He "belongs," first of all, to "Him who gave," and only secondarily ("then") to himself. Like Frances Harper's "love and truth" (which dwell "in sable form"), Dickinson's "Thought" is here borne by a slave, a slave

ever susceptible to “Auction.” “Him who bear[s]” bears the *burden* of illustration. The gift, as Derrida would say, is poisoned; the slave’s title to his own existence is illusory.⁹ Like those Southern masters who invested their seed through rape, Dickinson’s “White Creator” retains ownership of what his “Snow” produces. The gift of life becomes a gift of death. “Mas’r” again cancels out “good.”

POE

Without fail, critics have taken “Publication—is the Auction” as a statement of principle—an announcement that Dickinson will not seek her career in poetry, will not sully her reputation in the marketplace. The assumption behind this interpretation is that Dickinson’s polemic is aimed at the incompatibility of poetry and commerce. Such an interpretation has an early origin. Already in the 1890s, Mabel Loomis Todd was citing the poem (not yet published) to ask if Dickinson would have wanted her manuscripts destroyed rather than printed and sold.¹⁰ Since 1929, when the poem finally came into print (in *Further Poems*), similar citations have proliferated. These commonly amount to little more than a mention, usually an illustration of the poet’s character. Typical of the critics, George Frisbie Whicher introduces the opening two quatrains with the rhetorical question, “Did she not loathe the least taint of commercialism?” (114). Later commentators have ranged further in their analyses, but maintain the idea that Dickinson’s subject is her own career.¹¹ Martha Nell Smith, for instance, cites the poem to speak of Dickinson’s “eschewing that foul auction, *conventional* publication” (16, emphasis added). For Smith and other recent critics, the poet’s hand-sewn books, her so-called “fascicles,” represent a form of publishing freed from taint of commerce.¹²

But what if the poem’s subject isn’t simply the incompatibility of poetry and commerce? What if Dickinson is instead launching a broadside against the volatility of the slave debate—defending her silence on the very issue that gives her attack its rhetorical force? Because Dickinson never specifies what *kind* of publication she has in mind, the focus on poetry is at once too vague and too specific. Too vague, because poetry doesn’t bear any immediate relationship to auction. Too specific, because emphasis on poetry precludes us from looking for a form of publication which does fit the poem’s choice of words.

For generations, critics have overlooked the implications of Dickinson's language, the charged meaning of words or phrases like "Auction" and "White Creator."¹³ Bryan C. Short, for instance, in a cogent comparison of Dickinson and Stowe's "revisionary rhetoric" (6), focuses at length on the trope of "whiteness" without once connecting Dickinson's use of this trope to questions of race. Such silence partly reflects the continued influence of the Dickinson myth, which portrays the poet as a recluse who turned her back on society in order to meditate on eternal problems like language and existence, God and death. But this myth is not the only reason. Unexamined assumptions about specific poems have also determined Dickinson's reception. For instance, because critics have generalized "Auction" to mean commerce while particularizing "Publication" to mean poetry, the precise relationship between these two words has been effaced, resulting in critical attention turned upside down. Where the poet was vague, the critics are specific, and where the poet was specific, the critics become vague. Accepting "Publication—is the Auction" as a statement of principle, this much remains clear: if Dickinson has an opinion to offer on slavery, she will do her utmost to avoid putting this opinion on the block. The contradiction at the heart of her poem—a public statement decrying public statement—puts us on notice: we must carefully disentangle this poem's rhetoric if we would catch Dickinson's meaning, if we would rescue from contradiction the precise "Thought" her poem shields from auction.

Two reasons stand out for *not* interpreting "Publication" as referring to poetry alone. First, as many critics have noted, Dickinson did see her poems into print. Apart from "private publication" in the fascicles (Cameron 7), and apart from the more insistent circulation accomplished by letter, Dickinson allowed ten separate pieces to appear in newspapers (Dandurand 17). In each of these cases, she invested her "Snow" so that a reader might bear the "Corporeal illustration" of her gift. Ten times, moreover, she gave in to temptation (or cajoling) and shared this gift with a larger circle than that of friends and family (the majority of these instances occurring after 1863—after the poem's composition). To be sure, the modesty of Dickinson's publishing record does indicate a predilection for avoiding publicity, a disdain "to collaborate with the institutions of publishing" (Howe 147), but disdain and predilection do not alone explain the fury of the attack in "Publication—is

the Auction.” Apparently, some forms of publication were fouler for Dickinson than others. Second, then, I would note Dickinson’s careful avoidance here of the word “poetry.” She speaks instead of “Thought,” calling publication “Auction of the *Mind*.” The phrase recalls an anecdote Dickinson tells in her second letter to Higginson, written in 1862: “Two Editors of Journals came to my Father’s House, this winter—and asked me for my Mind—and when I asked them ‘Why,’ they said I was penurious—and they, would use it for the World—” (*Letters #261*). The phrase “asked me for my Mind” suggests a request for the poet’s opinion; however, because she identifies the visitors as “Editors of Journals,” it is equally possible she was asked for poetry. The point is moot anyhow. What Dickinson avoids here is not the selling of her poetry, but her entrance into the public sphere. As Joanne Dobson reminds us:

To be a woman in conventional nineteenth-century thinking was to be domestic, secluded, “content.” Publication for its own sake was in conflict with those ideals.

Emily Dickinson’s life was very different from those of the women writers who were her contemporaries. . . . Where they chose to involve themselves in social and political life in ways that were often daring in that cultural context, she withdrew into a domesticity that became absolute. Where they took advantage of every rationale to publish their work, again contrary to the prevalent ideal for feminine behavior, she consistently refused to allow hers into the public sphere. (54–55)

Yet if money isn’t the real issue, why adopt the motif of auction? Here it is worth recalling that auctions aren’t simply a means of giving objects their price. In auction (the most public form of sale imaginable), objects are sold to the highest bidder—are sold to a crowd which shouts out competing offers. Even if published writing is her subject, Dickinson’s indignation has little to do with the money a writer might or might not receive from such a sale. The shouted offers of the crowd (not money, but critical evaluation) are what offend her. Publishers may put opinion on the block, and may collect the bids (response), but readers constitute the crowd, which transforms publication into auction.¹⁴

Generalizing “Auction” to mean commerce is thus no more justified than particularizing “Publication” to mean poetry. The habit of mind which treats “Thought” as one property among others was not, for Dick-

inson, definitive of all commercial activity. Commerce as such is not the problem; *auction* is the problem. Consider the following lines, written in 1872:

A Deed knocks first at Thought
And then—it knocks at Will—
That is the manufacturing spot
And Will at Home and well

It then goes out an Act
Or is entombed so still
That only to the ear of God
It's doom is audible— (*Poems #1216*)

Thought's role in the "manufacturing" of "Act" does not receive the same censure as the "Auction of the Mind" involved in publication. "Thought" as an aspect of industry is fine; buying and selling "Thought" like chattel is not.¹⁵ Indeed, apart from this commodification, this reduction of "Human Spirit" to "Disgrace of Price," publication might even be considered a form of generosity. Clearly the editors thought so when they asked Dickinson for her "Mind," visiting the poet in her "Father's House" much as "Deed" visits "Thought" and "Will" in Dickinson's allegorical poem. If publication were only a form of industry, or circulation, the world might indeed claim benefit, but as an "Auction of the Mind," publication becomes as "foul" as slavery. The association of publication with auction, it turns out, is not incidental but central to the poem's attack.

Nor is this association of publication with auction (and thus slave trade) farfetched. The selling of slaves, Stowe reminds us, was partly dependent on advertising—on the published announcement of public sales:

Mr. Haley pulled out of his pocket sundry newspapers, and began looking over their advertisements, with absorbed interest. He was not a remarkably fluent reader, and was in the habit of reading in a sort of recitative half-aloud, by way of calling in his ears to verify the deductions of his eyes. In this tone he slowly recited the following paragraph:—

“EXECUTOR’S SALE,—NEGROES!—Agreeably to order of court, will be sold . . . before the Court-house door . . . for the benefit of the creditors and heirs of the estate. . . .”
(1:154)

Is this the sort of “Publication” Dickinson’s poem condemns? Because she doesn’t specify what *kind* of publication, abolitionism, too, falls under the jurisdiction of her ban. The ambiguity is ineradicable, and its net result is silence—a purposeful silence. The poem, overloaded with abolitionist and slaveholding connotations, remains reticent on both topics—and appears to argue that reticence is the only moral option left to the garreted group for whom Dickinson here speaks.

Decrying publication even as the abolitionists decried slavery, she upholds abstention from publication even as slaveholders descried and enforced the privileges of whiteness. Slavery, Dickinson concedes, may be a frightful thing, but abolitionism—so her poem’s remorseless logic appears to suggest—is even worse. In this grotesque view she comes surprisingly close to the opinion of Edgar Allan Poe, who in 1849, as a Southerner, wrote of James Russell Lowell:

Mr. Lowell is one of the most rabid of the Abolition fanatics. . . . His fanaticism about slavery is a mere local outbreak of the same innate wrong-headedness which, if he owned slaves, would manifest itself in atrocious ill-treatment of them, with murder of any abolitionist who should endeavor to set them free. A fanatic of Mr. L.’s species, is simply a fanatic for the sake of fanaticism, and *must* be a fanatic in whatever circumstance you place him. (819)

Dickinson’s dislike of fanaticism would appear to have been as great as Poe’s, for despite being a Northerner, her poem finds “Auction of the Mind” no less reprehensible than auction of the flesh—indeed, the former is described after the fashion of the latter. More than that, she declares that “Thought” properly “belongs” to the master-slave relationship, the relationship between “White Creator” and “Corporeal illustration.” Like Poe, she confers dignity on slavery, while casting aspersions on the abolitionist. Like Poe, she turns the abolitionist into a vicious slaveholder, and the slaveholder into a paragon of virtue.

HAWTHORNE

But perhaps Dickinson's grotesqueness has an explanation. I haven't yet asked why she might have written this poem in 1863. Why criticize abolitionism once the slaves have been freed? In 1863, of course, the slaves were not free, not yet, or not entirely, since Lincoln's Proclamation only covered the occupied territories. Moreover, many Northerners opposed emancipation, and especially opposed transforming the war into a referendum on abolition. The New York draft riots of July 1863 were only the most alarming indication of such opposition. On July 4th, former President Franklin Pierce accused Lincoln of unconstitutional assumption of powers, attacking the President's "fearless, fruitless, fatal civil war . . . prosecuted upon the basis of the proclamations of September 22 and September 24, 1862 . . . upon the theory of emancipation, devastation, subjugation" (Nichols 522).¹⁶ On the podium to hear Pierce's speech was Nathaniel Hawthorne, the former president's Bowdoin College classmate, who had expressed his own qualms a year earlier in an unsigned article in *Atlantic*, "Chiefly about War-matters." The *Atlantic* essay, published July 1862, is a minor masterpiece of hedged bets and disinformation (*Miscellaneous* 403-42). Pressed by friends in the wake of Pierce's speech to distance himself, Hawthorne expressed his qualms less reservedly, if only in correspondence:

You do not in the least shake me by telling me that I shall be supposed to disapprove of the war; for I always thought that it should have been avoided. . . . I agree with your friend Gen Hitchcock . . . that the war will only effect by a horrible convulsion the self-same end that might and would have been brought about by a gradual and peaceful change. Nor am I at all certain that it will effect that end. Even these recent successes have not an indubitable tendency in that direction. They will suggest to the rebels that their best hope lies in the succor of the Peace Democrats of the North, whom they have heretofore scorned, and by amalgamation with whom I really think that the old Union might be restored, and slavery prolonged for another hundred years, with new bulwarks. . . . In that case, woe to the Abolitionists! I offer you in advance the shelter of the nook in our garret. . . . (*Letters* 590)

Dickinson, whose Whig father was no more a Peace Democratic than Black Republican, may well have shared such opinions.

Nonetheless, I would like to offer a more complex explanation for her writing "Publication—is the Auction" in 1863, if only because the peculiarly involuted quality of that poem's argument suggests a more involuted response to civil war than Hawthorne's. Hawthorne's qualms are predicated on a thoroughly consistent distaste for a Union maintained by violence. Everything he writes on the subject makes sense if we keep this tenet in mind (and recognize that the violence of slavery doesn't enter into his calculations). Dickinson is *inconsistent*. Her distaste for publication, for "Auction of the Mind," leads her to maintain an insupportable argument, a claim of purity she herself transgresses. Why? Cunning in the extreme, Dickinson must well have understood her own poem's logic. Why then so entangle herself in contradiction? And why write in the terms of 1853, instead of 1863? Why speak of slaves at auction in a time when Negro troops were being assembled? My explanation, speculative in the extreme, follows from a further comparison of Emily Shelby's situation and Emily Dickinson's.

THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Emily Shelby is a Southern woman who dislikes slavery intensely but assumes the pose of "good Mas'r" in order to remain at peace with her society. Once she confronts the effects of this posture—once she grasps how her tacit acceptance of slavery has contributed to the rending of two families—she makes a break with that society and espouses a set of beliefs her husband finds indistinguishable from abolitionism. Emily Dickinson, by contrast, is a Northern woman who dislikes *publication* intensely. She shows, moreover, by her familiarity with abolitionist rhetoric that she too has attempted to conform with her surroundings. For Mrs. Shelby, the selling of children and fathers exposes slavery as a violent, immoral system, and as a Christian she has no choice but to disentangle herself. In Dickinson's case, the violence and rending are due not to slavery, but abolition—are due to a war waged "upon the theory of emancipation." Of course, the immediate result of this theory was (in Pierce's words) "devastation, subjugation." Like slavery, civil war leads to violence and rending—the bloody rending of the nation, the tearing apart of families. On New

Year's Eve 1861, Dickinson wrote her cousin Louise Norcross of one such family:

Mrs. Adams had news of the death of her boy to-day, from a wound at Annapolis. . . . Another one died in October—from fever caught in the camp. Mrs. Adams herself has not risen from bed since then. “Happy new year” step softly over such doors as these! “Dead! Both her boys! One of them shot by the sea in the East, and one of them shot in the West by the sea.” . . . Christ be merciful! (*Letters* #245)

The reason for Dickinson's peculiar stance and contradictory argument can now, perhaps, be glimpsed, for the contradictions of her poem are the same as those that made union with slaveholders possible until the end of the 1850s. Slavery is wrong, she seems to say, but if opposition to slavery means war, and the wrenching apart of families, then opposition is needed, not to slavery, but to *abolition*. Dickinson in her work offers such opposition, if only allegorically. Condemning abolition in abolitionism's own terms, she betrays the North's twofold cause of Union and Emancipation. “Sell / The Royal Air— // In the Parcel,” she writes, and then, alluding to Judas, “Be the Merchant / of the Heavenly Grace”: better to give up claim on the South (“The Royal Air— // In the Parcel”) and forgo abolition altogether (“Heavenly Grace”) than to sacrifice human lives in the calculations and miscalculations of battle.¹⁷

More indirect than Whitman, she is not “transcendent and new,” but deeply inscribed in “real things and past and present events.” She is, paradoxically, ahistorically historical and antipolitically political, and this is apt to disturb us, when it doesn't confuse us utterly. We can no longer agree so easily with past assessments like Edmund Wilson's, that Dickinson's poetry is bereft of reference to the Civil War (488).¹⁸ Yet despite important contributions from Shira Wolosky and Barton Levi St. Armand, we are far from appreciating the full extent of these references, or the nature of the silence which surrounds them. The depth of the Civil War's impact on Dickinson's poetry—half of which she composed during the crisis years of 1861–1865—eludes simple catalogue, partly because martial imagery alone doesn't measure her response, and partly because this response is only indirectly keyed to pub-

lic events.¹⁹ Her most profound response is in fact the palpable absence of response, a silence on the topic of war which requires, in Joanne Dobson's phrase, "a discourse in negative terms" (78). Indeed, until we learn to read these "negative terms," we will miss more often than catch the historical and political inflections of Dickinson's "Thought"—a thought her poetry refuses to publish anyhow, as a matter of principle.

Whitman stands with the auctioneer on the platform and sees a future beyond slavery, populated by the children of slaves.²⁰ Whittier and Harper stand with the slaves, denouncing a present too harried by auctioneers to make speculation possible. Dickinson's response to the same scene is more complex. Like Whitman, she would go beyond "pro" and "con," but not because she glimpses a peaceful future. Dickinson's present is already a future after slavery, but what it offers is not fecundity, but war. The Emancipation Proclamation has become for her what the Constitution was for Garrison—a covenant with death. Like Whittier and Harper, she stands with those who would be sundered by auction, and lifts her voice against the sale. Her "mournful band," however, is not black, but white—abolitionists from the North and slaveholders from the South, sifted like snow "from Leaden Sieves" (*Poems* #311), melted away in battle:

They dropped like Flakes—
 They dropped like Stars—
 Like Petals from a Rose—
 When suddenly across the June—
 A wind with fingers—goes—

 They perished in the Seamless Grass—
 No eye could find the place—
 But God can summon every face
 On his Repealless—List. (*Poems* #409)

In "Publication—is the Auction," Dickinson returns to an earlier era's rhetoric and reduces the broad distinction between slavery and abolition to a single pile of rubble. She moves as if backwards, beginning where Mrs. Shelby ends, and ending where Mrs. Shelby begins, as if hoping through poetry to undo the effects of the Civil War. In this, she is like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, blown forward by disaster, eyes fixed on the past:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257–58)

SUNY-Buffalo

NOTES

My thanks to Neil Schmitz, Susan Howe, Carl Dennis, Nick Lawrence, Carrie Bramen and Carla Billitteri for their helpful readings and conversation.

1. Bingham discusses Edward Dickinson's congressional career; Capps gives an account of Emily Dickinson's gleanings from newspapers and magazines. In a 7 June 1862 letter, the poet wrote, "But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr. Higginson?" (*Letters* #265).

2. The most thorough study to date of Dickinson's work in relation to abolitionism is Sánchez-Eppler's final chapter, which examines how "a concern with the corporeality of identity that appears political and public in the writings of feminist abolitionists, Whitman, and [Harriet] Jacobs is fashioned by Dickinson into a poetic, ahistorical and ontological dilemma" (106). Her sensitive reading of this thematic—"the relation between embodiment and freedom"—"modifies but does not disown" the accepted view of "Dickinson's social detachment" (106). "For Dickinson," writes Sánchez-Eppler, "the political imagery of emancipation counts not as politics but as imagery" (129). But Dickinson's silence on political issues is not necessarily a sign of detachment, of apolitical or even ahistorical interests. Also discernible in this silence is an antipolitical poetics—or, more accurately, a poetical antipolitics. As Dobson notes, "A discussion of Dickinson and public issues is to some degree a discourse in negative terms, a chronicle of what isn't there" (78). To read Dickinson's silence—"what isn't there"—as a rigorous, even ruthless response to history is my goal in the present paper.

3. In 1856, Whitman changed "curious creature" to "wonder," retaining the sense of spectacle, albeit in a softer form.

4. See, e.g., Larson 155–56; Sánchez-Eppler 54–55.

5. See Leyda 2:24.

6. Keller offers a useful account of the ties connecting Dickinson's family with the Beechers, and opens the possibility of a Dickinson-Stowe meeting in Amherst. Yet he assumes *Uncle Tom* would not have moved the poet: "She had," writes Keller, "following Emerson, another slave to free—herself" (104). Of course, if abo-

litionist sympathies had been a prerequisite for enjoying Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom* would never have become so popular.

7. Snow, of course, is one of Dickinson's favorite figures, and as such acquires a number of conflicting resonances. For an alternative reading of the meaning of "snow" in "Publication—is the Auction," see D'Avanzo, who finds a source for the figure in Emerson's "The Snow Storm."

8. Taking publication in its broadest sense, as meaning "to make public," we see right away that a voiced opinion is no less a form of publication than a shared piece of writing. See, in this context, poem #329, which includes the line "There publishes a Tear—," suggesting that *anything* revealing meaning "publishes." Such a notion follows naturally from the "Puritan hermeneutics" of typology Keller cites as Dickinson's and Stowe's common New England inheritance (121).

9. Bennington's discussion of "The Gift" offers a fine *precis* of how this concept circulates in Derrida's thought.

10. See Buckingham 141–42, 143–44.

11. See, e.g., Pollack's feminist and Dobson's historicist analyses. An exception is Benfey, who finds the poem implying "all expression is suspect" (35, emphasis added).

12. See Dickie, who summarizes recent Dickinson scholarship by noting, "Dickinson has become a poet whose decision not to publish in conventional typographic outlets is the central fascination of her work" (332).

13. An exception is Erkkila, who briefly cites the poem as "deploying a highly charged political language in which the rhetoric of antislavery protest intersects with the rhetoric of protest against wage labor" (309).

14. Johnson comes closest to grasping the singularity of this juxtaposition of "Publication" and "Auction": "In all the long history of poetry, as Emily Dickinson well knew, the association of publication and 'price' has been negligible if not nonexistent" (119).

15. Several poems, in fact, adopt mercantile metaphors without hint of rebuke. See, e.g., #580 ("I gave myself to Him— / And took Himself, for Pay"), as well as two poems Johnson identifies as fragments, #1119 ("Paradise is that old mansion / Many owned before") and #1131 ("The Merchant of the Picturesque").

16. The September dates refer to the Preliminary Proclamation, which announced the January 1st emancipation of any slaves held in the rebel territories. Full emancipation would not occur until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865.

17. "Disgrace of Price" also suggests the common practice of buying a substitute for military service—as Austin apparently did, for \$500. See Sewall 2:536.

18. Among recent critics, Porter is the most prominent to uphold the notion that "There is, astonishingly, no Civil War in the flood of poems from the war years" (115). Indeed, Porter makes two of his theses "*There is no history in the poems*" and "*No social consciousness informs the poems*" (183). He later writes, however, "I am willing to speculate that while the Civil War is largely absent from her writing, it may be present but unseen behind the tension, the fragmentation, the anxiety,

and the lack of purpose" (242). Wolosky's is at present the only book-length treatment of the subject. Dobson's discussion of Dickinson's "strategies of reticence" offers a useful model for further work.

19. Ford was the first critic to draw a positive inference from this chronology of the poems, declaring "it is no mere coincidence that the Civil War years were also those of her greatest creative productivity" (58). His tentative conclusions remain remarkably apt.

20. "A woman at auction, / She too is not only herself . . . she is the teeming mother of mothers" (Whitman 124).

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