TEACHING DICKINSON

By Elizabeth Harris Sagaser

“Tis Centuries - and yet:
Teaching Dickinson and the Presence of the Past

Exchanging hellos and casual talk, students in my course, Dickinson and English Poetry, settled in for the last class of the semester. “Because I could not stop for Death…” and “This was a Poet…” were on the syllabus, as well as the Springfield Republican obituary for Emily by Susan Huntington Dickinson.

“Who will start us off today?” I asked. “Who can speak ‘Because I could not stop for Death…”? They glanced at each other and agreed. “I could try, but…” said the other. “How about you share it?” I suggested. “Paige, you start with the first stanza, then Chris, you speak the second, and if either of you can’t recall…” I began. “I’m not sure I have the whole thing…” one of the two said.

“How about your show?” I asked. “We happened to be sitting next to each other. “Which of you will speak it for us?” They glanced at each other and agreed. The impromptu dust absorbed and carried us, emphasizing the poem’s narrative structure – a journey advancing stanza by stanza. Hearing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this…” [italics mine].

Robin was at a different table from Chris and Paige, and as she finished the poem, her eyes and corners of the room – seemed lit up together.

At a third table, Courtney, a senior History and American Studies double major and Education minor, raised her hand, offering Sonnet 5. A student of pedagogy as well as the past, she delivered the sonnet as an experienced teacher would, addressing all parts of the room, using intonation and gesture to remind her peers how the poem worked: “Those hours, and “ever-ending time” were the grammatical subjects, personified abstractions who “frame” the beloved’s beauty with “gentle work” but then “play the tyrants to the very same” and “confound” an unsuspecting summer in winter.

Courtney paused dramatically at the sonnet’s turn, then began again, glad to reveal that in this sonnet at least, time does not triumph; “summer’s distillation” does – specifically, “how’re distilled” [italics mine]. They “leese their show, their substance still lives sweet” [her emphasis]. She made it clear that this still-living “substance,” along with Dickinson’s “Essential Oils…” was more than perfume; it was the poetry in our midst.

“You are probably thinking now of a particular poem you read for today,” I said. Though no one knew this one by heart, everyone nodded, and we opened our books to “This was a Poet…” When I asked how the three poems framed the distillation metaphor differently, many hands went up. Thanks to the useful footnotes in Cristanne Miller’s edition of the poems, our course text, students also considered how T.W. Higginson’s statement “Literature is at bottom of roses, one distilled drop from a million blossoms” (“Letter to a Young Contributor,” Atlantic Monthly April 1862), was likely the most immediate source for Dickinson’s “Essential Oils.” “What do the poetic framings of the metaphor accomplish that the statement does not?” The question prompted animat- ed responses, as all my students had learned not only to understand poems but to embody them.

How had they, and I, arrived at this point?

I developed “Dickinson and English Poetry” six years ago, drawing on my work in poetry and poetry (both historic and cognitive studies approaches) and my training in early modern literature. The course compares poems by Dickinson with poems by writers she admired and read intensely, from Shakespeare and Milton to Keats, the Brontës and E. B. Browning, and also with a few poems she did not read but that are mutually illuminat- ing with hers (by 17th-century poet Katharine Philips for example, and poets after Dickinson, such as Elizabeth Bishop and An- drea D’Iorio). Students also explore contexts for Dickinson's reading and writing, including her education, correspondence, interest in the natural world, and American Civil War. And of course, virtually, students gain close reading and comparative analytical skill.

For the course to work, however, for this idea of poetry as a kind of technology to capture imaginations and provoke personal invest- ment, for students to learn to read poems from 400 years ago as well as 150 years ago, and for them to get to know Dickinson as a reader herself as well as a poet, I had to find particularly immersive, hands-on ways to engage students in poems. I had to crack their assumptions and resistances. I had to give “close reading” a new meaning.

In each iteration of the course, I experiment- ed, learned and honed. A versatile foundation for much course work proved to be a poem reading strategy students came to know as “A Very Smart Way.” I’d first created this strat- egy for a Renaissance poetry course to help students inhabit and analyze strange-seeming poems with highly unfamiliar language. The
Dickinson's alternate words, which they love to gloss words using the play a substitution game, and they learn Father! / And I am poor once more!” (Fr39) rewrite “Burglar! Banker – Father! / I am in the poem. Likewise, they find they have thing important to say about direct address Nobody! Who are you?” as “She’s Nobody! students answer the questions and do the and second person, or vice-versa? Rewrite the personal pronouns does the speaker use? How is speaking to whom, or to what? What per’ Apostrophe,” for example, they read: “Who hold in this poem?” If they reply to them...