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Looking for Trouble

Rae Armantrout

The Emily Dickinson Journal

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 15, Number 2, 2006

pp. 4-5

10.1353/edj.2006.0000

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Looking for Trouble

Rae Armantrout (bio)

Abstract

Dickinson's legacy of paradox and juxtaposition prefigures our twentieth-century interest in defamiliarization. The essay explores these themes via "I had not minded - Walls -" and the author's own poetic practice.

I don't much like horror movies but I love Emily Dickinson. Her attraction to the trouble-spots attracts me, her relentless doubt and her "Arctic Confidence" (J1259) held in equipoise. In Dickinson, light doesn't really clear things up. "But Light a newer Wilderness / My Wilderness has made -" (J1233). Her paradoxes, her ambivalences strike a strong chord with me. I wouldn't compare myself with her beyond saying that. It would be foolish. I'll just say that, perhaps because I was raised in a fundamentalist home, Dickinson's troubled obsession with time and eternity, with conviction and doubt, resonate with me.

Often I simply admire her from afar. Her word choices are more startling, more defamiliarizing than anyone's. Who else would pair "Arctic" with "Confidence," or "residences" with "nimble" ("What residences nimble / Arise and evanesce" [J1338]), who else would combine "emphatic" with "Thumb" (J754)? Both linguistically and conceptually, Dickinson makes radical, breathtaking leaps.

I want to look briefly at the way her thought moves in "I had not minded - Walls -" (J398). In this poem, Dickinson writes about a universe governed by mysterious law which prevents her from ever finding/achieving the "Recompense" of presence. (Recompense is one of her perfect and perfectly surprising words.)

I had not minded - Walls -
Were Universe - one Rock -
And far I heard his silver Call
The other side the Block - **[End Page 4]**

I'd tunnel - till my Groove
Pushed sudden thro' to his -
Then my face take her Recompense -
The looking in his Eyes -

But 'tis a single Hair -

A filament - a law -
A cobweb - wove in Adamant -
A Battlement - of Straw -

A limit like the Veil
Unto the Lady's face -
But every Mesh - a Citadel -
And Dragons - in the Crease -

The poem envisions a subtle yet impassable barrier between the believer and the mind of God. Perhaps Dickinson is also thinking of her own alienation from a public readership. (Does that mean she's playing God?) In the last two lines she describes God's mind—and/or her own mind—as a walled off and dangerous place. Here be dragons. One loves (I love) her desperate boldness.

This universe isn't solid; it isn't rocky matter—it's a hair, a filament, a law. Notice how she mixes the delicate, the skinny, with the absolute. Her take on the universe is radical in several ways. It plays tricks with dimensions. What we intuitively take to be three-dimensional and extensive is presented as (almost?) two-dimensional. (Does this anticipate string theory? The theory of the universe as hologram?) She first shrinks the cosmos to an abstraction in a kind of reverse big bang then expands again into metaphor. The vehicles of the metaphor, the adamant cobweb, the battlement of straw, and the veil hiding dragons, might be seen as depictions of deceptive feminine weakness. I called my selected poems *Veil* in tribute to this poem of hers.

Rae Armantrout

Rae Armantrout's most recent books are *Up to Speed* (Wesleyan UP, 2004), *The Pretext* (Green Integer, 2001), and *Veil: New and Selected Poems* (Wesleyan UP, 2001). Her poems have been included in numerous anthologies, including *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (1993), *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Language Meets the Lyric Tradition* (Wesleyan UP, 2002), *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (Oxford UP, 2006) and *The Best American Poetry* of 1988, 2001, 2002, and 2004. A new book, *Next Life*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan in 2007. Armantrout is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at the University of California, San Diego.

The Emily Dickinson Journal, Vol. XV, No. 2



RAE ARMANTROUT

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