



Galway Kinnell

(1927-2014)

The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson (1994)

The lecture had ended when I came in,  
and the professor was answering questions.  
I do not know what he had been doing with her  
poetry, but now he was speaking of her  
as a victim of reluctant male publishers.  
When the questions dwindled, I put up my hand.  
I said the ignorant meddling of the Springfield *Daily Republican*  
and the hidebound response of literary men,  
and the gulf between the poetic wishfulness  
then admired and her own harsh knowledge,  
had let her see that her poems  
would not be understood in her time;  
and therefore, passionate to publish,  
she vowed not to publish again. I said  
I would recite a version of her vow,

Publication -- is the Auction  
Of the Mind of Man --

but before I could, the professor broke in,  
“Yes,” he said, “the Auction’ – ‘auction,’ from *augere, auctum, to*  
*augment, to author...*”  
“Let’s hear the poem!” “The poem!” several women,  
who at such a moment are more outspoken than men, shouted,  
but I kept still and he kept going,  
“In *auctum* the economy of the signifier is split, revealing an  
unconscious collusion in the bourgeois commodification of

consciousness. While our author says 'no,' the unreified text says 'yes, 'yes?'"

He kissed his lips together and turned to me saying, "Now may we hear the poem?"

I waited a moment for full effect.

Without rising to my feet, I said, "Professor, to understand Dickinson it may not always be necessary to uproot her words. Why not, first, try *listening* to her? Loyalty forbids me to recite her poem now."

No, I didn't say that -- I realized she would want me to finish him off with one wallop.

So I said, "Professor, I thought you would welcome the words of your author. I see you prefer to hear yourself speak."

No, I held back -- for I could hear her urging me to put outrage into my voice and substance into my argument.

I stood up so that everyone might see the derision in my smile. "Professor," I said, "you live in Amherst at the end of the twentieth century. For you 'auction' means a quaint event where somebody coaxes out the bids on butter churns on a summer Saturday. Forget etymology, this is history. In Amherst in 1860 'auction' meant the slave auction, you dope!"

Well, I didn't say that either, although I have said them all, many times, in the middle of the night.

In reality, I stood up and recited the poem like a schoolboy called upon in class.

My voice gradually weakened, and the women who had called out for the poem now looked as though they were thinking of errands to be done on the way home.

When I finished, the professor smiled.

"Thank you. So, what at first some of us may have taken as a simple outcry, we all now see is an ambivalent, self-subversive text."

As people got up to go, I moved into that sanctum within me where Emily sometimes speaks a verse, and listened for a sign of how she felt, such as, "Thanks -- Sweet -- countryman -- for wanting -- to Sing out -- of Me -- after all that Humbug." But she was silent.