

## EDWIN DICKINSON, Onieric Manifestations

Edwin Dickinson's pictures induce reverie. Watching, observing his "rare perspectives," through the blurred but luminous haze that always enshrouds them, one glides between planar elisions, slips around swelling curves and darts from one nodal point to another in and out of his pictorial spaces as though they were cells inside the mind. The experience can be dizzying at times, but it is always pleasurable. Immaculately so. The visual pleasures he provides are pristine and precise, like sharp, sudden thrills. They are not fat and sensual, like those of Rubens, say. Mostly they come from the very act of seeing, of discerning shapes, identifying them, and then watching them disappear into adjacent forms. But these pleasures also derive from the warm and simple fact of light itself, its effulgent emergence and presence on the picture surface, filling one's consciousness. His pictures seem to have been blown onto these paper or canvas surfaces by puffs of radiant air.

Because the space of *Young Man's Tombstone* is filled with light, only a few wisps of shadow—a blush here, a smudge there—are needed to set the scene for an entire Grecian idyll, a beach with an amphora (the funerary urn) leaning against some rocks and plants. In the distance, a masted ship—or the ruins of a fort or lighthouse on a rocky promontory, crowned by a cross or flagpole—it doesn't really matter which, since the elegiac, reverie-generating effect is the same. Only Seurat before him created such a sense of volume out of a few soft darks lit as if from behind by the white of the paper and only Hopper, during his time, managed to make the paper white sparkle so brilliantly. No one ever made light feel quite so enfoldingly, pleasantly suffusive, not even Morandi or Balthus, though they have come close.

Dickinson may have learned Oriental methods of suggestion and respect for the negative space of the

picture plane from Arthur Wesley Dow when he studied at Pratt Institute, and he surely learned how to build an image out of patches of color-light from William Merritt Chase and Charles Hawthorne, but he probably finally learned how to put all those ideas and methods together into modernistically ambiguous totalities when he saw how Cezanne, the Cubists and Duchamp were doing so in the pictures they sent to New York for the Armory Show in 1913. As an art student in New York City that winter, he cannot have failed to visit the exhibition, and even if he admired the more modern Americans, he couldn't have avoided Duchamp because of all of the notoriety generated by his *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Duchamp's other entries, *The Chess Players* and *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* would seem to have had an even bigger impact on young Dickinson, however, judging by *Rival Beauties*, 1915, his first major painting. (*Concert Touche*, 1920, also a strange, loggia-like interior scene where music is teamed with lovely ladies of the night, is a later statement of this idea.) Softly curved, semi-transparent planes of color overlap, intersect, emerge out of and disappear back into the fluid structure of *Rival Beauties* and his other large-scale efforts of the next two decades. Except for the specificity of the portraits he includes in these pictures, and his refusal to break the objects up into facets, they seem remarkably close to the kind of formal manipulations and rampant ambiguities found in Gleizes, Jacques Villon, and his brother Marcel Duchamp. Dickinson's marvelously bizarre painting of an imaginary wreck of two brigantines, "Angie P. Fuller" and "Spreading Dawn" in the Arctic ice, could not conceivably have been painted without a firm grasp of Cubism as it was developed by these members of the Cubist Section d'Or. Despite the realistic elements, the painting is comprised of interlocked planes and cubic forms from

bottom to near-top. We seem to look down upon these compressed shapes from a dizzying height, but from no single, comprehensive perspective.

Like Duchamp as well, Dickinson was obsessed with multiple perspectives and other unusual approaches to the translation of visual reality into a two-dimensional sign system on the picture plane. The kinds of distortions demanded by this process when it is carried out with absolute honesty results in truly "rare" perspectives. As he said, "I learned early that the assumption of verticality was going to get me in trouble . . . Flagpoles are straight up and down and beds are sideways. I was very young when I discovered that you couldn't assume these things, because verticality and the appearance of the vertical object, when on the picture plane, is a very different thing."<sup>1</sup> Studying Cezanne's *La Colline des Pauvres* in the Armory show probably gave him one solution upon which he was to rely all his life—squinting. Looking at *Hall House*, *Bound Brook Island*, *Marsh Woods*, *South Wellfleet*, *Massachusetts* and *Two Counties* one can easily decipher his secret code as he outlined it in the following quotation:

*What the sight appeared to be in the squint is what the painting is, and it's just like it in the squint. [Try squinting at a section of landscape and you will see what he meant.] And if you look at the scene without squinting, you will know what it is, do you understand. Think of the leaves that might have been six feet from you, immediately beyond which was a piece of rock forty yards away. You just can't do it leaf by leaf. It's got to be taken in its large groupings. They will be found by the painter to be interesting compositionally. That's why [the painter] looked in*

*that place instead of some other one . . . People assume that that was done with thoughts other than representation in mind. Honorable as that would be, it was not the case. It's exactly like it, to the extent that I could make it like it . . .*<sup>2</sup>

Through these means and others, Dickinson managed to fuse reality and a kind of mysticism in his work. One thinks of Albert Pinkham Ryder's *Grazing Horse*, Washington Allston's moonlit scenes, and John La Farge's magical *Bishop Berkeley's Rock*, which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum not far from Dickinson's *Ruin at Daphne*. The last painting seems likely to be a source for Dickinson's use of single, isolated elements in a given work, such as the foreground hillock or rock in *Two Counties*. In an article titled, "Edwin Dickinson, American Mystic," Jacob Getlar Smith said about him that he ". . . moves noiselessly and surely within his own orbit, intent upon his dreams, seeking only to more fully realize those images that make his works illustrious examples of American mysticism, darkly brooding, profoundly moving." Dickinson did, of course spend a very large part of his existence at the end of Cape Cod, where the light, the marshes, and even the houses share a silvery tonality much of the time. The atmosphere is often misty and always luminous. Off-season is resonantly quiet, the long winters, dark, and the even-longer springs, profoundly absorptive of one's energies. It is a place for poets and dreamers, and for painters who are mystics with a sustaining pictorial vision.

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1. John Ashbery, "Edwin Dickinson," *Edwin Dickinson: Draftsman/Painter*, exhibition organized by John H. Dobkin for the National Academy of Design, April 7 - May 9, 1982, p. 14.

2. Ashbery, p. 14-15.