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Bodies of Water: Somebody | Nobody (For E.D.)

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Dickinson and the Elements

“The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality.”
Bodies of Water: Somebody | Nobody (For E.D.)

By Clark Lunberry

Clark Lunberry is a Professor of English at the University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida. In addition to the “Writing on Water / Writing on Air” poetry installations on the UNF campus discussed in this article, Lunberry has completed related installations in Paris, France; Durham, England; Toronto, Canada; Tokyo and Hiroshima, Japan; and at Stanford University: http://www.unf.edu/~clunberr.

“Who’s there?… Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself!”

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On a pond adjacent to the University of North Florida’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library, parts of Emily Dickinson’s well-known poem about being a “Nobody” were recently written on the water. During the fall of 2014, the familiar words of that poem’s opening line – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – appeared to float upon the library’s pond, reflecting vividly in the light of day (yet disappearing entirely in the dark of night). While inside the library’s large open stairway, on the tall windows that face directly out onto that pond, the first line of the poem’s second stanza – “How dreary – to be – the livelong June –” – was also written. As one climbed the library’s staircase, moving from the first floor to the fourth, this second line, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – as if into thin air. Many hours were spent cutting out the large letters that form the poet’s words, with wooden clothespins, the letters strung just beneath the pond’s surface. A similar procedure was followed for this most recent Dickinson-related installation, one that was entitled “Bodies of Water: Somebody | Nobody” (for E.D.). This newest project was prompted in part by a course that I was teaching at the university that fall on Dickinson.

In the weeks leading up to this installation, I wasn’t yet settled upon the precise line from the poem was finally printed discreetly upon a page at ten or twelve point font. It’s another experience entirely to see it at such an inflated scale floating on water, with each of its individual letters larger than the person reading it. Indeed, seen in this unorthodox manner, the lines of the poem unexpectedly resonated with a new kind of uncanny urgency and insistence, as if having floated away from their originating poem, or from their originating poet. Hardly whispered, these bold words on the pond now loudly asserted themselves to those seeing them, causing us perhaps to wonder (anew) who, in that first part of the poem, is the “Nobody” that is speaking here, the “I” behind the apparent absence? And who, in the second section, is the “you” being so forthrightly, indiscreetly addressed (bringing theatrically to mind Daniel’s own ghostly opening lines: “Who’s there?… Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself!”)?

Curiously, in seeing the poem’s large words floating out on the water, it might have appeared as if the pond itself had suddenly begun to speak, taking on a ghostly life of its own in the bright light of day. Recalling the poem’s own reference to an “admiring Bog,” the library’s reflector pond and its liquefied letters – now directly facing us – seemed to echo from off that body of water’s mirroring surface.

In the second section, is the “you” being some-thing powerful, even provocative, in taking poetic sentiments that were apparently so private, so resistant to being made “public;” presenting key lines of its language floating out in the landscape (after having been directly asked not to share the otherwise confidential sentiment: “Don’t tell!” the speaker politely requests). Indeed, to take parts of a poem that seems on the page almost whispered, even intimate, and intended for only one other (making “a pair of us!”), and place them on the pond and windows, so grandly and so openly, felt like the broadcasting of a secret to the world (as if to “advertise” it, in violation of the poem’s original discretion, at the scale of a billboard).

Weeks One and Two: After many days of preparation (with the time spent mostly cutting out the large letters from the plastic sheeting), on a bright but blustery Sunday after-noon, the selected words from this Dickinson poem were finally installed on the library’s pond and windows, taking many hours to fin-ish, and with several students and friends helping with its arduous and exhausting completion. As before, using a kayak, one large letter at a time was slowly clipped into posi-
tion with wooden clothespins, the words attached to suspended twine strung just beneath the pond’s sur-
face. First to be installed were those letters that form the po-
em’s astonishing opening exclama-
tion: “I’m No-
body!” Next, the second line from the poem was completed, some distance down from the first, put-
ing in place that power-
ful, if powerfully simple question: “Who are you?”

Once done on the water (taking, in total, more than four hours to install, strugg-
gling in particular with Dickinson’s never-before written-on-water apostrophe [‘], question mark [?], and exclamation point [!]), it was immediately clear that it was one thing to come across this poem’s provocative open-
ing line – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – printed discretely upon a page at ten or

1 Many thanks to all of those who assisted with this installation: Michael Boyles, Michael Dimmitt, Noah Lunberry, and, in particular, Kelley Predieri, out in the kayak.

2 Subsequent installations at the University of North Florida were “Murmur of Words” (2008); “Floating Form Less” (2009); “Sinking Sensation” (2011); and “No Such Thing” (2012). Images and information about these, and related projects in Paris, Toronto, Durham (U.K.), Stanford University, Tokyo and Hiroshima, can be seen on my website: http://www.unf.edu/~clunberr.
peared to ask those of us who came upon it – “Somebody” or anybody – that most troubling of questions: “Who are you?”

Seen from the sidewalks outside the library, the floating letters and words assumed their shifting formation in relation to the reader’s own movements, seen either from the front, to the side, or even upside down and “backward” – from behind. Also, seen frequently on the library’s pond, along with the poem’s two large lines of language, were the Canadian geese that annually migrate here in large lines of language, were the Cana.

– upside down and “backward” – from the front, to the side, or even – upside down and “backward” – from behind. Also, seen frequently on the library’s pond, alongside the poem’s two large lines of language, were the Canadian geese that annually migrate here in the fall, swimming both around and directly over the floating words, but seemingly untroubled by this temporary poetic alteration to their natural habitat. The big Florida turtles that live throughout the year on the pond, though initially skittish at the sight of it all, soon adapted to the situation, eventually even climbing up on the large letters and, hammock-like, sleeping upon them.

Cloudy days, sunny days, windy and rainy days, through them all the words of the poem endured, with the changing light constantly shifting the look of the language, the shadows of sense and suggestion at play on the pond. On bright afternoons, the letters glistened or glared, with tall trees mirrored upside-down and backwards onto the watery words; or a solitary cloud might be seen to float through the line “I’m Nobody!” – evocatively offering a kind of objective correlative to that nobody before us. But, at other times, as more clouds moved in, covering the sky, those words on the water might suddenly appear soft and diaphanous, the actual plastic of each letter magically transforming into a kind of translucent film of shaped light. With the words read in this constantly changing manner, the adjusted light of the letters, in turn, adjusted the question being asked – “Who are you?” – into one perhaps more plaintive or poignant, like one body of water addressing another (our own!), making “a pair of us” in the exchange. Later, as the sun would set, the growing darkness slowly absorbed the poem entirely, erasing it from view (that something in the day turned to nothing in the night) until, the next morning, as if reawakened, the words would reaffirm their poetic presence out on the pond.

With the first line from Dickinson’s poem – “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” – successfully written on the water, the opening sentence of the poem’s second stanza – “How dreary – ‘to be’ – Somebody!” – was unfurled from the acetate transparencies, its pre-printed words then taped into place on the windows between the second and third floors, that final large word “Somebody!” suspended boldly alone.

Once in place, these words on the window were both seen, and seen through, in relation to those other words of Dickinson’s poem simultaneously seen out on the water, the various lines of language shifting appearing in temporary and contingent alignment to one’s own floating movements through the stairway.

“Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have” – A something...
once more the kayak, the words on the pond were rearranged and rewritten, creating a new formation in which the original two-part exclamation and question “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” was radically reduced, with just the single large words “Somebody” and “Nobody” now made to intersect at the very center of the pond.

Inside the library, a similar reduction occurred, such that all that remained of the previous sentence on the windows (having taken down both “How dreary – “ and “Somebody!”) were the two small words “to be – “ suspended alone, seen still between the second and third floors at the center of the stairway. In this new arrangement, these words were then seen in direct relation to the “Somebody | Nobody” intersecting out on the pond. Those two key (and capitalized) words, those two bodies from the first and second stanzas of Dickinson’s poem, were joined together as a “pair,” while dimensionally aligning with the “to be – “ superimposed upon them through the library’s windows. Offering a kind of watery correlative to Baudelaire’s flâneur (with his “ego athirst for the non-ego”), it was as if the intersecting words written on water were suddenly uttering a delayed response to the initial question asked the previous weeks: “Who are you?” Absorbed in their own conjunction, those words remaining on the pond were now interconnected, permeably floating as “Somebody | Nobody,” as bodies of water overlapping in motion, bodies of water crossing in time.

Works Cited
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www.emilydickinsoninternationalorganization.org