

## Review Article

### *The Voice of a Poet: The Art of Emily Dickinson\**

One of the less happy aspects of our monolithically organized age is that methods adapted to one field are often carried over to others for which they are not particularly well suited. This would be a general objection to these four books. They apply to Emily Dickinson procedures derived from such writers as Spenser, Shakespeare, Yeats, Pound, and Frost. Though a club or a rifle may work well with a bear, it is hardly much use on a butterfly; and even should you succeed, what would you have left? Emily Dickinson presents herself quite defencelessly, employing none of the usual armour of writers. Her poetry is the rarest wine, delicate as heliotrope and ethereal as the will-o'-the-wisp. Its ordinance insures that it shall be taken only in sips. Beyond this, it is the closest thing we have to the saint in modern letters. In demurring before the coarser pleasures of life, the numbness of sorrow and loneliness at the bone, the dedication to worship, absorption with eternity, it is the devotion to the spirit of the saint. Is it seemly to move too brusquely or loudly before the candles? She had a premonition of what was to come, perhaps, in the following poem:

That love is all there is,  
Is all we know of love;  
It is enough, the freight should be  
Proportioned to the groove.

Mr. Capps' book,\*\* as the title indicates, is intended as little more than

\* *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*. By Brita Lindberg-Seyersted. Cambridge: Harvard University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1968. Pp. 290. \$8.50.

(This work, printed in Sweden, is also published in *Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, Studia Anglistica Upsaliana*, 6.)

\*\**Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836-1886*. By Jack L. Capps. Cambridge: Harvard University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1966. Pp. ix, 230. \$5.50.

a handbook to the possible sources of some of Emily Dickinson's ideas as they lay in her reading. He traces references to the Bible, to Victorian novelists, and to her American contemporaries. Unhappily, he does not seem to be aware that what makes a writer worth studying at all is precisely that *increment* of himself that he brings to his sources; and the scholar's and critic's work is valuable just in proportion as it mediates between the reader and the artist's unique genius, that addendum which the artist, and the artist alone, is responsible for bringing to the sum total of human awareness. Mrs. Lindberg-Seyersted's work is a compendium of the technical aspects of Emily Dickinson's use of words in her poetry. She has compiled intricate analyses of patterns of colloquial speech, semantics, prosody, rhyme, and rhetorical patterns. There is a great deal of spade-work here, done with painstaking and loving care, preparing the ground for horticulturists to come. Too often, however, in supplying technical data to elucidate the poems, her explanations themselves tend to remain on the technical and general plane, so that, for example, metrical variations "break the monotony" or "give the verse speed and lightness". More important is the book's apparent failure to understand that a poet's style is more than his verbal habit; it involves all that his comportment implies and extends to the ultimate ramifications of his art. Mrs. Lindberg-Seyersted gives little sign that she is equipped to deal with Emily Dickinson's metaphysics.

Both Mr. Gelpi\* and Mr. Porter\*\* quite openly direct their attention to the spirit at the centre of Emily Dickinson's vision, and at certain points they are remarkably successful. The efforts of both appear to have been compromised by their attempt to force on all her work a unifying principle. For Mr. Gelpi it is the device of *Circumference*, which he defines as "the limit of possibility"; for Mr. Porter it is the "aspiration for fulfillment." In their fidelity to the diversity of Emily Dickinson's poetry, their search for a governing *donnée* forces them to terms so general as to become either nonsense or tautology. It smacks of the "gimmickery" that marks so much criticism today, and represents one of the sadder intrusions of the scientific ethos of the time into areas that are alien to it. This explains why very promising discussions in the books often seems to come to little. It is their adherence to the analytic, logical, and

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\* *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*. By Albert J. Gelpi. Cambridge: Harvard University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1965. Pp. xii, 201. \$4.75.

\*\**The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*. By David T. Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press [Toronto: Saunders of Toronto], 1966. Pp. xiv, 203. \$4.95.

rational before a subject that cries out for the inspirational, devotional, and sympathetic. The feeling continues to haunt one that the writer's allegiance is first to the terms of his profession and only second to Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Any fruitful beginning with Emily Dickinson must surely start with the fact of her womanhood. Both Mr. Gelpi and Mr. Porter observe how highly charged is her poetry with the natural instincts of her sex. Mr. Gelpi is especially good on how these have been transformed and transmuted into something quite different. "If she could not admit to a lover in life either within her mind or outside it, then the lover would associate himself with the prospect of death, and from the beginning she could not distinguish love from loss, pain, and finally death. . . . So the poetic metamorphosis of the "lover" . . . to Christ Himself was a transformation which, by conscious intent or not, served to glorify her in her convulsions of pain. She was not an ordinary woman wailing her lost love; she was 'Queen of Calvary,' 'Empress of Calvary.' Agony held its own exaltation, its own catharsis, its own canonization, and in triumphant agony she invoked metaphors of Calvary, crucifixion, and martyrdom for the experience of love" (p. 111). In the well-known "Because I could not stop for Death/He kindly stopped for me . . .," and a host of other poems, this "lover" dons the mask of all the imperatives of the soul: love, death, immortality, Heaven, Divinity, eternity.

Not only is her transcendence thus rooted in her sensuality, as is perhaps the case with all saints, but I would suggest that the entire providence of her poetry stems from her womanhood. Her subjects are all her own emotions, the universe her home, a place occupied by the masculine figure that is the object of her affections and labours. Mr. Porter quotes R. P. Blackmur, "All her life she was looking for a subject, and the looking was her subject—in life as poetry." She was master of the byways and corridors of the psyche, the underground passages and keeps in which it encloses its terrors. Her accomplishment is to have made the universe a home in which to live. She went always dressed in white, a bride setting up house for her adored. The world of the mind and universe becomes her playhouse: metaphysics is her parlour, or garden. Woman is the genius of the physical, let there be no mistake about it. Emily Dickinson's was to give the most abstract categories their most immediate physical equivalent in that particular portion of the world that is intimate, particular, our own: "Doom's electric Moccasin", "The only news I know/Is bulletins all day/From immortality", "The garment of surprise/Was all our timid mother wore/At home in Paradise", "Great Streets of silence led

away/To Neighborhoods of Pause", "November hung his Granite Hat/Upon a nail of Plush", and on and on. Her poems fill the interstellar spaces, make the vast loneliness of life's impersonality intelligible and homely. Even the worst terrors take on something of the fireside in her hands; a child's tale at the centre of a warm and cosy ambience, but perhaps more terrifying for this because they draw upon the innocent response to evil and suffering we have when young. Just as to a woman in her home, the real stuff of life's danger and cruelty is never allowed to penetrate. It is all distilled off until only the emotion remains, sealed in the breast and heart, and comes out as a cautionary tale or fable; so with her the dilemmas of life tend to be expressed in moralistic categories, and moments of insight in apophthegms. As with woman for those in her keeping, truth with Emily Dickinson is protected and insulated from the rough grain of life by her art. It is this spun-gauze of make-believe that makes it more heart-rending. To purge feeling of happening in reality while preserving the emotion, and then embody it in the naïve is the stuff of fairy tale; but it is her own adaptation of fairy tale, for she never lets go the final strand of reality that tells us what she is talking about—the soul, death, immortality, whatever. The emotional quality then, capitalized, becomes an actor in the drama itself.

It is her femininity that explains the small, precious, jewel-like qualities of the poems. They are delicate in their perfections. They are like tables set to dine (an image she was fond of) with the smells of food not far away in the kitchen, bouquets arranged to grace the interiors of our lives. The variegated light of feminine charm—whim, fancy, coyness, impulse—plays over them and illuminates them. That is the reason they so often border on incoherence, for the impulsive capitalization and dashes: it is ecstasy trying to draw more from life than life itself, beauty restrained from breaking apart by the mind that governs it. It is the fullest expression of woman in art that I know.

Married to the feminine, as Mr. Gelpi points out, was also a masculine element. Emily Dickinson had an extremely tough mind that saw through the hoaxes and deceits that most of us practise to make life bearable. Perhaps this was a prerequisite for her true wisdom, the wisdom reserved for the saints. She lived beyond the "Artifice of Time," as she puts it, for the things not of this world, that most of us find a wine too delicate for our grosser palates. Through her poetry she left behind for others the putative light of such a vision. The front rank of souls achieves transcendence unaided; the **second** rank can make it with such help as hers. Mr. Porter talks of her "habitual choice of *renunciation*, embodied everywhere in her theme". In a world where

saints have gone out of fashion, it is understandable that both he and Mr. Gelpi (who in one place denies that she is a visionary) sound a bit ghostly and not quite at home discussing this aspect of Emily Dickinson. One hopes that these helpful studies will be followed by others frankly able and willing to treat with Emily Dickinson more completely on her own ground.

*Falcarragh, Eire*

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#### NOTE

*The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration*, by R. W. Franklin (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) was not available for this review. In any case, it is even more technical than the work of Mrs. Lindberg-Seyersted, being a bibliographical study illustrated by reproductions of significant manuscripts and transcripts, and adding valuable material to the three-volume variorum edited by Thomas H. Johnson and published by Harvard University Press in 1955. Dr. Franklin reconsiders manuscripts and transcripts and the work of earlier editors, and discusses the special problems involved in the preparation of a readers' edition that will provide for a better appreciation of Emily Dickinson's mind and art.