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Jerome Loving. Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story.

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cheapens a word that he elsewhere needs in its full strength. For instance, in his discussion of the poem "The Lilac is an ancient shrub" (p. 289) he twice on one page uses the term, yet I look at the poem and say, "Where is the cross? Where is Golgotha?" The end of Melville's *Billy Budd* unmistakably hints at crucifixion, but here the word is strained too far. The same objection arises to the employment of the word in the discussion of "There's a certain Slant of Light" (pp. 239-240). The general interpretation of the poem is admirable. But spears, a "murderous blunt instrument," scourging, and actual crucifixion do not appear in the poem. The metaphor is again, and this is not the only other place, pushed too hard. Moreover, in the same passage St. Armand is much too clever in his strained pun between "air" and "heir." There is no evidence to justify his reading. Otherwise his explications are solid, well expressed, and tremendously enlightening. This is a thoroughly good book.

Curtis Dahl

Wheaton College

Jerome Loving. *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story.*
New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 128 pp.
\$19.95

Jerome Loving's *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story*, is a provocative book, but rather in the fashion of the irritant that provokes the oyster to produce the pearl. It frustrates as much for what it doesn't do, and should have done, as for what it actually accomplishes. What it accomplishes is a great deal: most important, it makes one think critically about Dickinson, but whether it will ultimately appear as some strange hybrid furniture design, like an early Victorian couch combining the seriousness of the Empire style with the capriciousness of a Rococo revival, or whether it is truly innovative in its eclecticism, only time will tell.

The first thing that Loving does is to decapitate Dickinson, and consider her as a "disembodied voice," speaking to us through her poetry like those nineteenth-century Spirit Guides who chose trumpets and tamborines as their instruments of other-worldly articulation. Loving's Dickinson is decidedly a "rapping spirit" in both senses of the word, antique and modern; she continues to knock at the doors of our twentieth-century perception and consciousness, while she also has a definite story to tell. Dickinson tells this story from the second story of her room in the Dickinson Homestead on Amherst's Main Street, but unlike the "second story" of a work which Loving constantly

parallels with Dickinson's narrative, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dickinson's is a twice-told tale. The subject of Loving's ghost-busting is, as he tells on page x of his "Preface," the "mind alone," but this returns us to an ethereal, bluestocking Emily that we have met too often before in the received tradition of Dickinson scholarship.

Naturally it was an image projected by the poet herself; as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her chief literary correspondent and later co-editor, observed in a letter to her written on 11 May 1869. "I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that perhaps if I could once take by the hand I might be something to you; but then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light." Higginson's molten metaphor, suggestive of alchemical transmutation, the fiery furnace of creativity, and the glowing apparitions of the gods, is more on target than Loving's use of Keats's "Cold Pastoral" of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." He insists again that Dickinson's verse is sculptural, that she "is the poet of the 'mind alone,' and not really the poet of the body" (p. 8), while he forgets another category of perception that combines both mind and body, and which really is the *locus classicus* of Dickinson's work. This is "sensation," and while Dickinson can be coldly, even icily analytical in her poems, she is always analyzing sensations, and thus is the direct heir of late Romantics like Shelly and Byron and Keats, whose cry was, after all, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts."

We miss the fact that Victorians like Dickinson had the whole range of Romantic styles and concerns, from Wordsworth and Coleridge onward, to choose from; there were a plethora of revival styles available, and while Dickinson does remain peculiar in her choice of American Colonial (hymn meters), she is not unique (Maria Lowell's poems and Christina Rossetti's English "Sing-songs" are close parallels). Professedly, Loving is not interested in the "facts" of Dickinson's life and art, though I think that her poetry demands just such a historicist grounding; indeed, we have the testimony of eyewitnesses that she did not compose her poetry solely on "the second story" of the family mansion, but often in the kitchen itself, in between or even in the midst of the baking of breads and the making of puddings. As her niece remembered, she was fastidious about her culinary etiquette, and would use only a silver spoon to beat with. Isn't even this seemingly trivial fact relevant to her poetical experimentation, her constant altering and mixing of the basic recipe of her verse? Like the mandarin who would permit no private audience unless he was absolutely fully dressed and fully fit for the occasion, Dickinson would allow no failed meringues or scorched "rye & injun" bread (for which she won a second prize of seventy-five cents at the Amherst Cattle

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Show in 1856) to issue from the workshop of her mind. What went into the letters was fully trimmed and finished, and one of her few public appearances in print was seriously adulterated by another hand, much to her strong disgust.

For physical facts, Loving substitutes a mythology of the closing down of American poetic possibilities with the advent of Civil War: "Action was not possible for the American Scholar. Only psychic necrophilia remained for the artist" (p. 28). Since the promised Transcendental Millennium did not arrive, the artist's solution was purely rhetorical, a "Second Coming of Language" (p. 41). Loving sounds here a bit like the dyspeptic Henry Adams, and his myth of failure makes Dickinson into a kind of American Decadent. While this idea remains suggestive, it has to be tested fully by recontextualizing her poetry in relation to French and English examples. Loving discusses the possible influence of Harriet Prescott Spofford's extravagant prose, but curiously for a constant reviewer of articles and books on Dickinson in the distinguished academic annual, *American Literary Scholarship*, he does not mention my own essays on Dickinson and Spofford in the journal *Topic* (1977) or the hardcover collection *The Haunted Dusk* (1983), or my discussion in *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture* (1984) of the influence of Spofford's revival of the Captivity Narrative.

Spofford's "Sensation" story "Circumstance" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for May of 1860. Dickinson herself commented on the impact of this Gothic tale in a little-known letter to her sister-in-law, Susan, and once again it indicates her interiorizing of Sensation Fiction, as in that profound penny-dreadful, "One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted—" (J 670). Loving's myth of failure makes for a rather grim Dickinson over-all, and when she tries to be "frolicksome," as in "A Bird came down the Walk—" (J 328), he disparages her effort as presenting "a rather tidy reality in which the brutality of the food chain is transformed into a kind of Disneyland scenario—life without death, crisis, or real change. If there is any suggestion of danger, it comes when the human narrator offers the bird a crumb" (p. 56). Once again, an historicist acquaintance with the full flood of Romantic bird poetry should alert us that, far from being an intruder, the poet here is a sister-artist who offers the frightened bird an emblematic "crumb of sympathy," which is enough for it to take wing and regain its true lost paradise, the empyreal heights, where both high fliers are completely "at home."

There is an intriguing treatment of the motif of windows in Dickinson's verse beginning on page 58, yet Loving shows no acquaintance with the many Romantic and Victorian paintings that feature this image—an interdisciplinary and contextual approach that

would have enhanced his discussion immeasurably. We too often forget that poets draw on material and visual culture as much as on a purely literary and literate matrix. And when Loving comments that "It may be a measure of the psychological inadequacy of our society a hundred years hence that air conditioning has led to the disappearance of windows in public buildings," (pp. 2-63), he does not recall that many nineteenth-century workers, like Melville's *Bartleby*, stared out their office windows only to confront an actual solid brick wall of anomie and capitalist indifference, while the windows in some factories were painted with opaque colors so that the "operatives" could better keep their minds on their work. Finally, Loving doesn't seem to recognize in his otherwise incisive analysis of "Who occupies this House?" (J 92), that the "House" in question is the Grave, and that the "door" is the tombstone, another material culture reference, since New England Puritan tombstones themselves were deliberately shaped to represent "the door of death," with stylized side members, lintels, and carved tympana. The "paste" of "We play at Paste—" may be the gluey stuff of creativity, but it is first of all meaning number seven of the *American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of the term, more current in the past than in the present: "A hard, brilliant glass used in making artificial gems."

More idiosyncratic assumptions and cultural gaffs could be cited, but enough of quibblings, styes, pustules, and irritants. I have taken Loving to task for his a-historicism, presentism, and non-contextualism, but I also must praise him for a pearl of a chapter on the "uroboric" nature of Dickinson's achievement. Titled "In Medias Res," this chapter has important things to say about Dickinson's "unfinished" approach to life, which once again links her with late Romantic artists like the English Turner or the American Ryder, both of whom were fanatically attached to a concept of art as life as process, the latter so much so that he threatened to bury his paintings with him. This idea is quintessentially Romantic; one never finishes anything, since life itself is always an unfilled canvas, until it is turned into a Rothko-like "black on black" square by death's final retouching. Still, one must recognize that this theory can also be used as an excuse for sloppy work or, as in Dickinson's case, a lamentable *laissez-faire* attitude towards one's own creation. There are other competing theories of art, not so fashionable these days, when Romantic weakness of will merges with Poststructuralist indeterminacy of intent, that should have their say, as they have had their wholly admirable proponents and practitioners. It was Yeats who urged all poets, not simply Irish ones, to "learn your trade" and "Sing whatever is well made." At her best Dickinson accomplished this Neo-classic imperative; the horses in "Because I could not stop for Death" (J 712), whose heads are "toward Eternity,"

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are ridden by the same Apollonian demigod speaking through the poet who commanded that these words be cut upon his tomb:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!*

Ultimately, the successes and the faults of Jerome Loving's *The Poet on the Second Story* are those of the critical genre in which he is writing. It is no accident that part of the book was conceived in Paris, for his study has about it the air of that quintessential French form, the feuilleton—the article which is expert yet casual; personal yet casual; personal yet critical; entertaining yet provocative. The very derivation of the term from the word for “leaf” is signaled in the Keatsian title of Loving's last chapter, “The Leaf-Fringed Legend of Emily Dickinson,” where he outsentimentalizes the sentimentalists by observing that “Like the beggars on the Left Bank and elsewhere, her poetry is finally a mute protest against the way of the world—against the fact that death is man's lot and so the subject of his life” (p. 105). If so, then we are all beggars and gamins. I like to think that in spite of her blatant, necessary, and most often creative use of sentimentality, which links her so indissolubly to her own time and culture, Dickinson was more American and less Frenchified than this, that there is a Yankee toughness, even a subtle cruelty about her which is far more thorny than it is leafy. It is this toughness that I find missing in Loving's feuilleton, but distance does lend enchantment, and his book more than makes up in charm and piquance what it may lose in bone and muscle.

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James W. Gargano, ed. *Critical Reviews on Henry James: The Early Novels*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. 207 pp. \$35.00

James W. Gargano, ed. *Critical Reviews on Henry James: The Late Novels*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. 212 pp. \$35.00

The sheet of instructions from a journal (a “historical review,” to be sure) begins by stipulating a “clear and concise summary of the contents of the book.” James W. Gargano makes it easy to oblige. His introductions march chronologically through the novels to be covered, pointing up the other major criticism as well as that which he chose to present. Though he lets “early” James include *The Tragic*