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Review of Approaching Emily Dickinson: Critical Currents and Crosscurrents Since 1960

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White, Fred D. *Approaching Emily Dickinson: Critical Currents and Crosscurrents since 1960*. New York, NY: Camden House, 2008. \$75.

Fred White's survey of Dickinson scholarship since 1960 is an essential resource for both long-term readers of Dickinson and those coming to her work for the first time. White's book effectively picks up where Klaus Lubbers's 1968 *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution* left off, not only by providing a much needed history of recent Dickinson criticism, but also by conveying a sense of the excitement that has energized the field since then. The book will allow experienced Dickinson scholars to see more clearly how the work of predecessors and peers made their own thought possible, while it will provide readers new to Dickinson with an expanding panorama of interpretive possibilities that invite further contributions.

In an early section titled "Major Reference Tools Published Since 1955," White quite properly identifies Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 variorum as the starting point for the period he examines. This makes sense because the full impact of the Johnson edition could not be fully appreciated at the time Lubbers's book went to press. We can now more clearly see the extent to which Johnson's three-volume *Poems* and the 1958 edition of the letters that he edited with Theodora Ward transformed the field. These works, together with R. W. Franklin's 1981 *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, are the primary resources that have shaped the last era of Dickinson scholarship. White wisely organizes the consequent outpouring of criticism according to "approaches" that he describes as consistent with "the distinctive intentions of individual scholars" (2). This structure enables White to explore nearly half a century of Dickinson criticism as an ongoing conversation within which critical voices engage with key ideas and questions from multiple points of view. The concern with "currents" and "crosscurrents" that White identifies in his subtitle provides an effective framework for demonstrating the way the best criticism emerges through lively scholarly exchanges that promote, challenge, and redirect critical discourse. As a consequence, his historical overview presents contemporary scholarship as a dynamic field of study that continues to gather momentum as it moves into the twenty-first century.

Precisely what White means by “approaches” is made clear through his chapter headings. Instead of using familiar labels such as “Psychoanalytical Criticism” or “New Critical Readings,” for instance, White chooses more capacious, less rigidly drawn categories, such as “Trends in Dickinson Biography and Biographical/Psychoanalytical Criticism” and “Approaching Dickinson’s Rhetoric, Poetics, and Stylistics.” These more flexible groupings reflect White’s perception that scholars embrace multiple theoretical schools of thought and rarely if ever confine themselves to a single critical perspective. He states the matter plainly: “A cultural or feminist critic may well employ psychological, textual, archetypal, rhetorical, structuralist or poststructuralist methodologies” (2). An important benefit of this organizational scheme is that it allows readers to identify more easily those scholars whose work has had the broadest influence. White accordingly reinforces the established stature of central figures such as Richard B. Sewall, Jay Leyda, and R. W. Franklin, while also drawing attention to the contributions of scholars like Helen McNeil, Jane Donahue Eberwein, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, Alfred Habegger, and Martha Nell Smith, whose impact on scholarship in multiple fields has become increasingly clear in recent decades.

White’s concern with approach rather than school of thought also establishes a productive critical context for thinking not only about lesser-known writers whose work rewards closer scrutiny, but also about developments in the field that may have escaped the attention of mainstream academics. Judy Jo Small’s 1990 *Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson’s Rhyme* serves as a prime example of scholarly work worth revisiting. As White explains, through this work, Small “conducts an unprecedented in-depth analysis of the poet’s intricate rhyming strategies and their contributions to the thematic and structural integrity of a given poem” (25). At a time like the present, when scholars are turning their attention once more to questions of genre and prosody, this is a book that justifies renewed attention. White makes the case that Rowena Revis Jones’s 1993 article, “A Taste for ‘Poison’: Dickinson’s Departure from Orthodoxy,” is similarly worthy of closer examination, especially when considered alongside significant books by James McIntosh, Roger Lundin, and Richard E. Brantley, who accompany Jones in the chapter on “Dickinson’s Poetic Spirituality.” White’s final grouping of interests is “Emily Dickinson in Belles Lettres, Music, and Art,” a chapter that looks at poetic, fictive, dramatic, musical, and visual responses to Dickinson. While not strictly academic in orientation, the works included in this chapter make an important contribution to White’s book by, in his words, “reveal[ing] a societal impulse to bring one of the most brilliant poets—and thinkers—in American history into closer relation to our own world, the spiritual life, and in the end, to ourselves” (186).

White does a particularly admirable job of drawing attention to critical crosscurrents. Two striking examples take the form of disagreements among scholars that offer provocative points of entry into discussions of Dickinson's personal relationship to her art and how that art engages with culture. The first appears when White juxtaposes Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's assertion that "Dickinson's habit of wearing white was a form of role-playing or impersonating various types" with Judith Farr's argument that Dickinson was "'genuinely shy, militant about telling the truth, . . . [and] wore white to affirm her true nature'" (113). The other example concentrates on the ways different critics view poetry as either detached from or immersed in cultural discourse. Poet Karl Shapiro takes the extreme position in 1953 that "culture and art are enemies" (123), a position that Inder Nath Kher reiterates in modified form in his 1974 book, *The Landscape of Absence*. White frames Kher's position this way: "For . . . Kher, even though Dickinson exhibits a keen awareness of her cultural milieu, to study her poetry from . . . 'within the confines of American history and culture' . . . would be 'to minimize the range of her poetic perspective'" (156). Jane Eberwein, Joan Burbick, Shira Wolosky, and Greg Johnson represent alternative stances. For Eberwein, Dickinson "'drew strength'" from "'the sentimental women's culture of her day'"; Burbick sees Dickinson as "'more relational than individualistic'"; and Wolosky argues that "Dickinson's poetry 'can be seen as profoundly engaged in problems of the external world and aggressively so'" (124). According to White, Johnson differs from Kher by arguing that "Dickinson's personae quickly discover any quest for transcendence to be illusory" (157).

If readers take issue with White's book, their objections will probably arise from White's willingness to pass judgment on critical debates and literary works that continue to excite strong feelings among Dickinson scholars and enthusiasts. This can be seen in his commentary on the debate surrounding print representations of Dickinson's manuscript poems. "I believe," he writes, "that print publication must continue—but with even greater fidelity to manuscript versions" (105). This includes, in particular, the reproduction of Dickinson's line breaks "without editorial second-guessing about whether she ran out of room at the edge of the page" (105). Readers might also take exception to White's assessment of William Luce's enormously popular play, *The Belle of Amherst*. In White's view, the play all too quickly "slides into bathos" and mistakenly insists on casting Dickinson as "suffering inside regardless of her outward charm" (177). White goes on to agree with Jonnie Guerra who sees as an additional problem the play's "oversimplified cause-effect connections between Dickinson's becoming a poet and 'her "failure"

within the courtship-marriage plot conventionally used to narrate women's lives" (178).

There are bound to be disagreements with some of the positions White takes in this book, just as there are differences of opinion in any extended conversation. The pervasive impression White conveys, however, is that of deep interest in the subject and a wish to consider each approach with an even hand. Readers interested in knowing how Dickinson criticism developed from 1960 to the present will find this book a highly informative and stimulating read.