

November 18, 1998

## Working Annotated Biblio of Criticism on Emily Dickinson's "My Life Had Stood, A Loaded Gun"

- 1934 **Taggard, Genevieve.** *The Life & Mind of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Knopf. 306-7.  
 (-)Early, romanticized biography. Represents a pre-New Critical Approach. Impressionistic and rather irresponsibly biographical. Romantic in the extreme. Assumes Emily is like all her women friends. Focuses on "natural desire" for a man and "hatred of renunciation." Without fully explaining, she links this poem to other "Master" poems where ED addressing a man. Buys into the idea that ED had a happy and satisfying relationship with this man: she was "fully and physically in love." (i.e. ED is healthy hetero). Says poem is "innocently erotic"; so Ed didn't really understand what she was saying. This analysis tells us more about the position and expectations of women in the 1930's than about ED. A good example of trying to save her reputation and of how you can't trust everything you read in the library.
- 1955 **Johnson, Thomas H.** *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*. Harvard UP. 138-40.  
 Johnson is editor of definitive edition of Ed's poems; this critical biography widely trusted and accepted. Can be counted on to know what he is talking about, especially textual details. Knows all poems and letters intimately and has made definitive decisions on chronology of all.  
 Notice that he -- with access to all letters etc. -- does not connect this poem to Master poems. Instead sees theme as enactment of inner drama, within psyche of Ed, and about creation of poetry. This interpret written during height of New Crit and shows its influence in focus on poetry -- this is a poem about poetry -- and in tendency to see poem in terms of dichotomies: in this case between body (gun = body) and soul or mind or psyche (owner=soul, animating spirit, inspiration). This leads to interp of last stanza: body is only function; like gun can only kill. It is spirit/soul which has power to choose destiny: to die.  
 Supports this interp of poem with reference to a letter in which loaded gun is associated with inspiration controlled by inner identity: has no monarch in her life, when tries to organize herself her little gun explodes. (I have trouble with this; letter sounds to me like letter is saying that inner force is so great and so uncontrolled it explodes on its own).
- 1960 **Anderson, Charles R.** *ED's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*. NY: Holt, Rhinehart, & Winston. 172-5.  
 \*Classic New Crit: secular vs sacred love/ pioneer hunter and his bride!  
 Shows fully developed New Critical interpretation of poem. Sees poem as organic unity produced out of fusion of tension btw irreconcilable opposites. Tries to interpret poem as though it were 17th century metaphysical poem: comparison of life and gun in first line seen as "conceit." Life vs. gun set up as dominant antithesis of poem.  
 Second major element of interp is connection of poem to "ballad" tradition of folktale about frontier bride and hunter husband. Reminds me of Taggard in imposition of sex role expectations: wife stays home and "celebrates the softer arts" (!almost willful misinterp here: "emphatic thumb" doesn't seem very soft to me). Does find it "curious" that love "is never fulfilled in physical union."  
 Does recognize how power shifts in poem so that gun is firing r.t. Master, but doesn't seem to be able to explain it. Admits that cannot explain end of poem, but thinks it's the poem's fault.  
 Ends by turning Ed's poem into a poem by John Donne. Asserts that it is about spiritual love being more important than earthly love. Gun=body=earthly love vs. owner=soul=heavenly love.

- 1971 **Cody, John.** "Sunset at Easter." Chapter Nine of After Great Pain: the Inner Life of Emily Dickinson. Harvard UP. 397-415.  
 \*\*Classic Freudian: emphasis on bisexuality, masculine i.d., rage r.t. love. Reviews Anderson, Johnson, and Bogan. Creativity associated with masculine I.D. w/ father etc. Mother -- dependent, masochistic. Sexuality & creativity linked to destruction. First person to point out doe is feminine, but biograph interp that is aggression against some woman in ED's life, ie mother. Mountains, represent feminine literary figures. Gets kind of carried away w/ 3rd stanza. Caught up in Freudian sex roles: phallic woman = arrested development (409). Eider duck, conscious rejection of maternal comfort. (411) Last couplet expresses fear that "without those creative faculties which master instinctual drives" she would be uncontrollable explosion of "raw, unrestrained destructiveness and unregulated sexuality" (413). Another male critic who thinks poem is about how ED needs control; ties in with thesis that she had a full psychotic breakdown.
- 1972 **Weisbach, Robert.** ED's Poetry. U of Chicago P. 24-39.  
 \*Advanced New Crit: poem abt relationship -- puppet/blob. Concentrates on how ED uses analogy in her "sceneless poetry" (24) to characterize patterns of thought. Against reductive biographical, allegorical readings. Thinks "Gun" is about what happens when allow self to be over-dominated by another: "warns against the delusion of achieving self-realization through subservience" (27). Thus both abt love relations and abt creativity: "Dangerous delusions of borrowed power" (27). Stanza by stanza, watches passivity of gun. Sees "horror" (29) in stanza 3. Gun is not able to pull own trigger. Connects to American romantics' fears of losing freedom (puppet) vs. being formless (blob) (32). Love and creation interps are too narrow (33). Quotes letters and poems that see language as a weapon; potency of language (37).
- 1975 **Gelpi, Albert.** "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America." 1975. Rpt. in Shakespeare's Sisters; ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977. 122-34.  
 \*Classic Jungian: Dilemma of woman artist whose muse is animus. Owner is "not a real human being/. . . but a psychological presence or factor in her inner life" (123-4). Animus associated with pioneer myth, man against nature. Doe line: need to sacrifice "range of personality and experience as sexual and maternal women" (126). Variant for power in last line is art [mistake here; it's next-to-last line]. Goes into thing about how art kills life/experience by freezing it in time (129). Quotes "i'm ceded" (#508) as similar "self-baptism into areas of personality conventionally associated with the masculine" (132). Good b/c doesn't confuse phallus with "privileges of the masculine" (133); sees i.d. w/ masculine in social/historical r.t. biological or biographical context.
- 1975 **Rich, Adrienne.** "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." 1975. Rpt. in Women's Voices: Visions and Perspectives, ed. Hoy et al. McGraw-Hill, 1990. 313-30.  
 \*First feminist: personal I.D. w/ ED as woman poet making hard choices. Begins w/ trip to Amherst: "trying to visit, to enter her mind" (313). Challenges usual vision of ED as "some gnomic Garbo" (314); instead maintains she "controlled the disposal of her time. . . she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies" (314). Emphasis on strength. Refers to Sewall bio for showing us full significance of her attachments to women (315). Admits masculine element in "Gun", but doesn't think it's a male lover. Says the "real question" is 'how this woman's mind and imagination may have used the masculine element in the world at large' (317). Says ED had "a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shks" (319). Unity of personal and universal. "I suggest that a woman's poetry about her relationship to her daemon -- her own active, creative power -- has in patriarchal culture used the language of love or patriarchal theology" (321). Also quotes "I'm ceded" [NB Gelpi's essay written in same year; he and wife close personal friends w/ Rich: edited Norton Anthol of Rich's poetry, also in 1975.] Sees "Gun" as central ED poem about "dangers and risks of . . . possession [by the daemon] if you area

- woman" (322). Doesn't see poem as masc vs. fem (Gun vs Owner): "If there is a female consciousness in this poem it is buried deeper than the images: it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme" (323). [This reminds me of Weisbach.] Sees final stanza as 'no resolution, only a further extension of ambivalence" (323). Danger of poetry for woman writer in that she had to go into unconscious (324). Rest of article shows examples of her exploration of "states of psychic extremity" (325).
- 1979 Cameron, Sharon. Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP. 65-74.  
Adv. New Crit. Focus on last stanza: speaker imagines herself immortal in order to guard against return of violence expressed in poem. Comps poem to Marvell "The Mower's Song" and another anon. 17th C poem about death to discuss how poem defends against death.
- 1979 Duchac, Joseph. The Poems of ED: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1890-1977. Boston: G.K. Hall. 327-31.  
Annots for interps up to 1977. About 25 I haven't covered.
- 1979 Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven, CT: Yale UP. 606-13.  
\*Feminist emphasis on victory of rage, comp to Blake
- 1979 Keller, Karl. The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: ED and America. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP. 26-7, 266-9.  
(-)Other. Discusses various elfin et al roles that ED takes on. "Gun" shows "Puritan woman" "fulfilled in her wifely devotion to the man" (26).// Talks abt bawdry in ED "The recluse was not wholly the prude" (266). Dislikes her "maudlin love poems" (267), but sees "Gun" as "full of sexual puns" (267). Sees poem as voyeuristic observation of sex act. Ed finds "considerable 'pleasure' in servicing him [master]" (268). "Sex is for a woman, ludicrously, a waiting for 'the power to die' -- that is, to have sex" (268). Outrageous and irritating in use of Freud to impose sexist interp on ED.
- 1981 Porter, David. Dickinson: The Modern Idiom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. Adv New Crit: gun as language. Like Cameron in sense that meaning resides in evasion of meaning. Like Weisbach in seeing poem as personification of abstraction. But does settle in on idea that poem is abt language. Need for some kind of control over the awesome power of lang. Interp of last lines: "lang can destroy while it does not die itself". Quotes other poems abt. destructive power of lang. "cruel need for definition to displace the affliction of spontaneity" -- very strange idea to me that ED is so afraid of her own linguistic power and spontaneity; i'd think that was the one thing she was secure abt. Quotes Rich to prove that medium of poetry was dangerous for 19thC woman (think this is not true to AR's intent). Sees gun as something which "can kill but cannot aim." Seems as end to almost suggest a deconstructive reading in sense that poem is great b/c of what it leaves out (absence r.t. presence). While he also ends by putting down "lover" focus, it seems to me that his interp buys into stereotypes in its sense that ED's problem is lack of organization, which he equates with inability to enter experience and turning away from word. {my xerox has no page #s; need to check pages in CUL}
- 1982 Mossberg, Barbara. ED: When a Writer is a Daughter. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 18-23.  
Fem/PA: depressing lack of autonomous i.d.
- 1983 Dobson, Joanne A. "'Oh Susie, it is dangerous': Emily Dickinson and the Archetype of the Masculine." In Feminist Critics Read ED, ed. Suzanne Juhaz. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 80-97.

Fem/arch: masculine archetype in ED's poetry. Quotes Gelpi. Mostly provides a context to show that animus i.d. in "Gun" is apparent in a number of other poems.

- 1984 **Pollak, Vivian.** Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender. Ithaca: Cornell UP. 150-155.  
\*Fem and PA. Very interesting. At first seems more PA than fem b/c of focus on rage against female and i.d. w/ male as oedipal center of poem. But (somewhat like Weisbach) sees poem as a self-critique of what happens when over-dependent on male. Gets rid of female element twice: 1. hunt doe 2. rejection of Eider duck. Particularly good with detail of structure and syntax. "Lulled into mute acquiescence by the rollicking rhythms and simple coordinate sentence structure, we find ourselves responding as the Life-Gun does, by obliterating all points of view" (152). [NB this makes me think about trying to do a reader-response reading that, like Fish, takes such delicacies of syntax into account.] More about owner representing lack of morality, "liberating mania" (153). Sees last lines as not fitting into poem as whole. Brings up "to die" as sexual pun, pointing out that it is impossible for mechanical object to have orgasm (153). Sees whole point of poem that last two lines don't fit. Because the feminine has been exorcised in the poem, the resolution/unification of neutered I and male owner in the last stanza is only a parody. NB refers in note on p. 154 to other poems in which "power to kill" and "power to die" appear. Ends article w/ very interesting segue into discussion of how ED rejects American culture b/c it impedes female bonding. CFs Janet Todd.
- 1986 **Bennett, Paula.** My Life, A Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Politics. Boston: Beacon P. 1986. 5-8  
Book on Dickinson, Plath, and Rich. In Intro sets up "Gun" as paradigmatic poem abt, "task of self-redefinition and self-empowerment" (5). Stress ED's pride in being unwomanly, "embracing the true or unacceptable self" (6). Shows signs of reading Pollak (n. 11). Quotes Rich on ambivalence towards power (7).
- 1987 **Miller, Cristanne.** ED: A Poet's Grammar. Harvard UP, 1987. 122-6.  
N. 14 says that Weisbach, Gelpi, and G&G are her most useful sources. Sees "Gun" as "an adolescent fantasy about coming of age that breaks down before what should be its happy ending"; it "may also be a terrible fantasy of adult womanhood" (123). Remarks on "stasis" at beginning and end [from Gelpi]. Fantasy of being carried away by Master, but end no idea what to do when Master gone. Stress independence of speaking, guarding etc. but also sees "she destroys herself in being 'carried. . .away'" (124). Refer to American paradox: "the female speaker who destroys nature indirectly destroys herself" (124). Ending, stresses ambivalence btw. art and power. "killing is her only 'art,' her only form of expression" (125). Against a biographical interp of poem which would "mistakenly suggest that the poet was deeply uncomfortable with her art" (126). But ends by suggesting that "Gun" is a dead-end fantasy.
- 1989 **Dobson, Joanne.** Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. 123-7.  
Comes close to being a DC reading. Refers to Jay Leyda's idea of the "omitted center" in ED's poetry (123), use of "nonspecific reference", tend to write about subject that can't be overtly mentioned. Sees "Gun" as enigmatic: "reading this poem to determine its meaning becomes something in the nature of an exercise in futility" (123). "the meaning of this poem is irrecoverable" (124). So what we should do is try to understand the significance of the impediments to comprehension" (124). Main problem is lack of reference for metaphor [cf Weisbach] (124). Quotes Cameron, Rich, and Cody on anger as central issue [seems misinterp of Rich to me] (125). Quotes Porter on idea poem is abt. language and then says that ambivalence of poem represents "profound culturally conditioned anxiety about telling personal experience" (125). Ending "communicates to us more through tone -- through the sense of irresolvable and disorienting/ contradictions -- than through statement" (125-6). If we see poem as succeeding it is b/c of reading it from Modernist perspective. Ends w/ sense that "modernism" is condition of female alienation.