Paul R. Cappucci

Depicting the Oblique

Emily Dickinson's Poetic Response to the American Civil War

In a February 1863 letter to Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson wrote that "War feels to me an oblique place" (L 280). Since this is one of only a dozen direct references Dickinson made about the American Civil War, critics often minimize the powerful effect it had on her poetry. As Karl Keller claims, her existence was "outside/apart from action in history" (111). Dickinson, however, is a writer very much a part of her times. She was far from insulated and isolated in her Amherst home; rather, she was acutely sensitive to the conflict's psychic reverberations. This sensitivity may not appear as obvious as it does in Whitman or Melville's war poetry, but it is nevertheless powerfully there. In *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*, Shira Wolosky insists, "The war framed her attitudes and efforts, as it did those of other writers. It became for her, as it did for them, an arena for the clash of beliefs and doubts . . ." (33). By examining her work in the context of the war period, it is possible to place Dickinson among America's Civil War poets. But, more importantly, it is possible to see how Dickinson's experience of the suffering and death of the Civil War shaped her poetic representation of the self and led to her questioning of patriotic sacrifices and religious beliefs.

To consider Dickinson detached from the defining event of her generation is to dismiss too quickly the war's pervasive impact on her. Like many Americans, she had no choice but to be immersed in the war. Her own immersion becomes apparent simply by noting, as Jack Capps has done, the Dickinson family's subscriptions to such publications as the *Springfield Republican, The Hampshire and Franklin Express, The Amherst Record, Harper's New Monthly, Scribner's Monthly,* and *The Atlantic Monthly* (128). All of these publications reported on the war; thus, a voracious reader like Dickinson would no doubt encounter the latest information about campaigns, engagements, and casualties. For example, she learned about Higginson's military service through notices printed in the *Springfield Republican* (Wolosky 35).

Dickinson's contact with the war was not limited to printed material. She was exposed more immediately through her family's involvement in the Union's military preparations. Her father Edward Dickinson was active in the organization of Union troops. As Wolosky notes, he "organized the financing of uniforms for volunteers, presided at the ceremony of the departing enlisted men, and organized the raising of a new Amherst regiment" (53). The war came even closer to Dickinson, however, when her brother Austin bought a soldier-substitute to take his place in the Union army (Sewall 536). Although such a practice was common in both the North and South (McPherson 603), its occurrence in Dickinson's family had to heighten her awareness about the war's proximity. After all, the brutality of the battlefield was only a soldier-substitute away from engulfing her Amherst home.

The activities of Dickinson's father and brother clearly brought her close to the Union's preparations for war; yet, Dickinson's experience of war was most influenced by the deaths of several young Union soldiers

from her local area. The first to die on "Amherst's quota" (Sewall 536), Francis H. Dickinson, coincidentally shared her last name; he was killed at Ball's Bluff, Virginia on October 21, 1861. Thomas H. Ford claims that the poem "When I was small, a Woman died—" [596] is written "in all probability" as a tribute to the young man (203). Two brothers, the Adams boys, also died in 1861; one died of a battle wound, the other of typhoid fever. Dickinson refers to these deaths in a letter dated December 31, 1861, to Louise Norcross. The letter describes how Frazar Stearns (Dickinson misspells his name in her references), son of the President of Amherst College, telegramed Mrs. Adams to inform her of her second son's death. Dickinson writes,

> "Happy new year" step softly over such doors as these! "Dead! Both her boys! One of them shot by the sea in the East, and one of them shot in the West by the sea." . . . Christ be merciful! Frazer Stearns is just leaving Annapolis. His father has gone to see him to-day. I hope that ruddy face won't be brought home frozen. Poor little widow's boy, riding to-night in the mad wind, back to the village burying-ground where he never dreamed of sleeping! Ah! the dreamless sleep! (*L* 245)

Despite her family's Northern affiliation, Dickinson does not describe these deaths in partisan, patriotic terms. She does not call for Northern vengeance or take the opportunity to espouse the worthiness of dying for the Union. She simply, poetically recounts the deaths of two boys shot by ambiguous, opposing seas. Sewall finds this one of Dickinson's "most moving elegies" (536). It is undoubtedly moving, but its value lies in Dickinson's perception of future hardships. After eight months of war,

Dickinson knew that it would not be as quick, decisive, and glorious as was boldly asserted back in April. Instead, many more youthful corpses would be making the same unexpected journey home, a fact eerily foreshadowed in her reference to Frazar Stearns' death. She was aware of how war could reduce youthful passion and vitality to a cold repose, a dreamless sleep in a town cemetery. Dickinson's ironic "Happy new year" poignantly emphasizes her belief that the year 1862 will offer little in the way of happiness.

Frazar Stearns' death was the most traumatic of these early war deaths for Dickinson. He was killed on March 14, 1862, in a battle at New Berne, North Carolina; his body was brought back to Amherst for burial. This death, as Ford claims, "gave her an intimate realization of war" (200), apparent in a letter she wrote to her Norcross cousins about Stearns' death and burial. She writes,

> to tell you of brave Frazer—"killed at Newbern," darlings. His big heart shot away by a "minie ball." . . . Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face. He fell by the side of Professor Clark . . . asked twice for water—murmured just "My God!" and passed! . . . Nobody here could look on Frazer—not even his father. The doctors would not allow it. The bed on which he came was enclosed in a large casket shut entirely. . . . He went to sleep from the village church. Crowds came to tell him good night, choirs sang to him, pastors told him how brave he was—early—soldier heart. . . . So our part in Frazer is done, but you must come next summer, and

> we will mind ourselves of this young crusader—too brave that he could fear to die. . . . Austin is stunned completely. Let us love better, children, it's most that's left to do. (*L* 255)

Such a detailed observation of Stearns' death and its impact on all, including Austin, should itself reveal the depth of Dickinson's immersion in her wartime reality. Barton Levi St. Armand claims that the letter conveys Dickinson's "vicarious participation in the great conflict between North and South, but its calculated idol worship demonstrates that Stearns had somehow become a symbol of her own assassinated selfhood" (105). I agree that Stearns does function on a symbolic level for Dickinson, but not in such personal terms. Rather, Stearns seems a general symbol of patriotism's destructive potential. Dickinson writes of Stearns as a young crusader whose brave heart obstructed his understanding of life's vulnerability. Consequently, his heart has been replaced by the minie ball; the town is not even allowed to see how such patriotism has changed him—the doctors won't allow it. Stearns' death therefore provides her with an insight into the deadly reality of patriotic fervor.

Stearns was devoted to the Union's war effort. St. Armand describes his devotion as a "self-sacrificial fanaticism" (111). In a memorial volume entitled *Adjutant Stearns,* an Irish private described him as "the noblest soldier that the world ever afforded . . . [who was] too brave for his own good" (St. Armand 114). Stearns' death reinforces Dickinson's understanding of war as the reducer of youthful passion to a dreamless sleep. But, it also suggests, as indicated by the funeral praise of Stearns' bravery, the emptiness of romantic notions like a "glorious death" (111). In the poem "He fought like those Who've nought to lose—" [759], Dickinson por-

trays a Stearns-like death wish. This figure who "Bestowed Himself to Balls" and "Invited Death—with bold attempt—" is in the end, however, "left alive Because / Of Greediness to die—"; his "Comrades" who were "Coy of Death" are ironically the ones who die (*CP* 372). Dickinson's inversion of the brave figure's failure to die subverts both the individual's illusions about bravery and the glory surrounding death.

Stearns' death also has been linked to several other Dickinson poems. Shira Wolosky suggests that "Victory comes late" [690] refers to Stearns (61); in particular, she perceives Stearns in Dickinson's depiction of the figure's inability to taste victory because of "freezing lips— / Too rapt with frost" (*CP* 340). Dickinson also seems to be commenting upon the deadly consequences of Stearns' patriotism when she writes, "The Eagle's Golden Breakfast strangles—Them—." Her contention seems to be that such patriotism is deadly to all those who swallow it. Ford claims "It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did—" [426] is another poem written in memory of Stearns (201). Although Ford points to the poem's irregular meter as reflecting Dickinson's bewilderment, greater proof seems to lie in this poem's similarities to a letter written to Samuel Bowles. The following section of the letter relates Austin's reaction to Stearns' death: he "is chilled—by Frazer's murder—He says—his Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed' 'Frazer is killed'" (*L* 256). Poem 426 echoes these same images. This is particularly apparent in the line "I run it over—'Dead', Brain, 'Dead'" and the reference to the death as "Murder" (*CP* 203-204).

Significantly, Stearns' death, along with those of other local Union soldiers, did not drive Dickinson into a partisan shell from where she would write sentimental, patriotic poetry about the noble sacrifices of Northern soldiers. Instead, his death, along with these others,

heightened Dickinson's desire to understand the meaning of death. As St. Armand claims, Dickinson's letter to her Norcross cousins about Stearns "indicates an unquenchable desire to unlock the secrets of his very soul, to pry open that 'large casket' . . . to stare directly upon the marmoreal face of death" (106).

A poem that reflects Dickinson's "unquenchable desire" is "To know just how He suffered—would be dear—" [622].

To know just how He suffered—would be dear—
To know if any Human eyes were near
To whom He could entrust His wavering gaze—
Until it settled broad—on Paradise—

To know if He was patient—part content—
Was Dying as He thought—or different—
Was it a pleasant Day to die—
And did the Sunshine face His way—

What was His furthest mind—Of Home—or God—
Or what the Distant say—
At news that He ceased Human Nature
Such a Day—

And Wishes—Had He Any—
Just His Sigh—Accented—
Had been legible—to Me—
And was He Confident until
Ill fluttered out—in Everlasting Well—

And if He spoke—What name was Best—
What last
What one broke off with
At the Drowsiest—

Was He afraid—or tranquil—
Might He know
How Conscious Consciousness—could grow—
Till Love that was—and Love too best to be—
Meet—and the Junction be Eternity (*CP* 306-307)

Although it is impossible to state conclusively, this poem may suggest death on a battlefield where the need to "entrust" is so crucial for those helplessly dying. It also seems to allude to Dickinson's own knowledge of Stearns' death. As the poem states, "Just His Sigh—Accented— / Had been legible—to Me—." Considering the coverage Stearns' death received in Amherst, one must wonder if this might not be a reference to Stearns' reputed Christ-like "My God!" final breath. The speaker wants to get close to the sufferer's true thoughts. Such knowledge "would be dear" to her because she desires to understand the reality of death, not its patriotic or spiritual romanticization. A figure so near death, she believes, must surely have a greater insight about its ultimate meaning.

The poem's defining moment comes in the last stanza when she asks "Was He afraid—or tranquil—." The answer will in itself reveal everything about death, whether it is the beginning or the end. This speculative poem, however, does not offer definitive evidence. It only concludes with the possibility of the dying man's realization that through death he has lost both earthly love and the fulfillment of an idealized other-worldly love. In short, he realizes there is no immortality, just an eternal lack of fulfilled love. In reading this poem within the context of war, it leaves the reader questioning if such a realization about death is worth the patriotic price.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for Dickinson's immersion in her wartime reality is her decision to write to Col. Higginson. It is not coincidental that during this

period of fervent activity Dickinson decided to take action in her production and publication of poetry. As Ford notes, over half of the poems which can be given approximate dates were composed during the four years 1861-65 (199); she produced the most poems in 1862, a year that also included the shocking casualty totals of Antietam, Shiloh, and Fredricksburg. Her creative output of poetry matched the North and South's fervor to destroy one another. As Ford perceptively concludes, "the knowledge of casualties in battle acted to increase her awareness of death, which in turn roused her creative energy" (199). As she admits in poem 1059, "Death is the Wealth / Of the Poorest Bird" (*CP* 483).

The Civil War years, however, are also the backdrop for Dickinson's poetry publication. As Karen Dandurand has discovered, in 1864 alone Dickinson published a total of five poems which "made a total of ten separate appearances in four cities" (17). Dandurand discovered that in this year three of Dickinson's poems were published in a fundraising paper called the *Drum Beat.* The three poems were "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple" [228], "Flowers—Well—if anybody" [137], and "These are the days when Birds come back—" [130]. Dandurand explains that thirteen issues of the *Drum Beat* were published in an effort to raise money for the US Sanitary Commission (18). According to Dandurand, these three poems are "unique among the poems published in her lifetime in that they appeared with at least her tacit consent" (22). This publication effort therefore suggests Dickinson's unique type of poetic involvement in the war effort. It is not an effort attempting to encourage further patriotic sacrifices in the destruction of the South; instead, it is an attempt to have her poetry literally bring comfort to those men who have come to understand the suffering and death inherent in war. Dandurand's publication discovery provides yet

further evidence that Dickinson was not detached from her Civil War reality.

Dickinson's reading, personal contacts, productivity, and publication make apparent that she was perceptively aware of the national trauma surrounding her Amherst home, and that awareness is evident throughout her poetry. In Ford's 1965 ground-breaking article, he claims, "she did write at least four poems directly inspired by the Civil War" (201). Ford suggests the following: "They dropped like Flakes" [409], "It don't sound so terrible—quite—as it did" [426], "It feels a shame to be Alive" [444], and "When I was small, a woman died—" [596]. These poems do not simply refer to the war; they express Dickinson's thoughts about the ultimate meaning of this prodigious devastation for the nation. Such thoughts are perhaps best illustrated by the poem "It feels a shame to be Alive." Ford contends that it is "appropriate" Dickinson sets this poem in a " 'common meter' for this 'hymn' in praise of the dead" (202). This poem, however, does not simply praise the dead, it expresses the narrator's complex response to the sacrifices made for an ideological belief. She candidly considers whether the price of death exacted on the battlefield is worth the abstract quality of liberty. According to the poem, the sacrifice of one's life in the name of liberty is wasteful, especially in consideration of her view that the living are not worth such a heavy price. This sacrificial depiction is also suggested in "One Crucifixion is recorded—only—" [553] which claims "There's newer—nearer Crucifixion / Than That—" (*CP* 269). In yet another poem, "My Triumph lasted till the Drums" [1227], victory for the living has a hollow, bitter taste because of its enormous cost. Dickinson comprehended the patriotic nature of war's sacrificial demands; she writes in 1227, "And then I hated Glory / And wished myself were They" (*CP* 540). Significantly, in the end, even the

restoration of national peace cannot justify its cost— "A Bayonet's contrition / Is nothing to the Dead." As Wolosky argues, Dickinson "could see little good in the war . . . [and] could not be comforted by the assurances of a providential scheme into which it would take its place and be validated" (51). That the ever-mounting war casualties forced Dickinson to struggle with the meaning of so many soldiers' deaths is obvious. She refused to depict these deaths patriotically; instead, she chose to represent them as questionable sacrifices made in the name of ideological beliefs that consume life and foster guilt and bitterness among those remaining.

The enormous amount of suffering and death during the war permeated the atmosphere of communities across the country. Although Dickinson's family and town were intimately involved in the Union's preservation, she was able to comprehend the widespread pervasiveness of this agony in a letter to her Norcross cousins. She writes, "Sorrow seems to me more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines" (*L* 298). Dickinson's comprehension of a pervasive sorrow and her supposition about its potential medicinal properties reveals yet another level of her insight into the war. A poetic expression of this commonality of sorrow and anguish surfaces in the poem "I measure every Grief I meet" [561]. The narrator notices her feelings of grief in others "With narrow, probing, Eyes" (*CP* 272); she wants to know this shared grief on a more intimate level. She is aware that "The Grieved—are many—" and speculates about what "Could give them Balm" (*CP* 273). Although there are various forms of grief unknown to the narrator, she experiences "A piercing Comfort" in her identification with Calvary and the Cross. It is through this relation to sacrificial sufferings that she can then "presume / That

Some—are like My Own—." Such a speculative comprehension of shared grief, though it admits the omnipresence of pain, provides the narrator with a medicinal-like relief from her own private sufferings.

Dickinson closely identified with the sufferings of soldiers. She uses martial imagery to dramatize her own internal conflicts and struggles in such poems as "The Battle fought between the Soul" [594] and "My Portion is Defeat Today" [639]. In the first of these poems, Dickinson compares her internal struggles with the armies' movements, battles, and campaigns; the comparison between the two reveals, for the poet, that the "unknown" war is "By far the Greater One—" (*CP* 292). In order to convey the magnitude of this "Invisible" conflict, Dickinson defines it in terms of her observation of her contemporary reality. The other poem "My Portion is Defeat Today" provides an even more detailed amalgamation of the poet's private feelings and the battlefield. In the second stanza, Dickinson presents the following scene:

> 'Tis populous with Bone and stain—
> And Men too straight to stoop again,
> And Piles of solid Moan—
> And Chips of Blank—in Boyish Eyes—
> And scraps of Prayer—
> And Death's surprise,
> Stamped visible—in Stone— (*CP* 316)

This stanza expresses in all its vividness the mangled reality of a battlefield complete with "Chips of Blank," "scraps of Prayer," and "surprise." There is no distinction between the men depicted; there are only images of the vanquished. Dickinson did not choose sides; according to Wolosky, "She sympathized with the defeated without partisanship" (59). She knew, through her own

psychical and emotional "defeats," what it was like to lie among the unfulfilled defeated.

Dickinson's consideration of war ultimately affected her perception of God. Wolosky posits that the war is one of the fields on which Dickinson "struggles with her theological conflicts" (83). As she states, for Dickinson the war "became an arena for her confrontation with the apparent divergence between a posited divine order in events and the experience of those events as disordered and painful" (62). A poem that Wolosky does not include in her study, "Those—dying then" [1551], depicts a God who appears to have suffered symbolically through the Civil War experience. The poem presents God as an amputee.

> Those—dying then,
> Knew where they went—
> They went to God's Right Hand—
> That Hand is amputated now
> And God cannot be found—
>
> The abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behavior small—
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all— (*CP* 646)

The former certainty about the spiritual promise of life after death now no longer exists. After all, in a Nietzschean sense, Dickinson claims that "God cannot be found—." Without the illusion of God, without his promise, reality itself seems chaotic. Dickinson bitterly considers belief in an illusory God better than no belief at all.

The Civil War was very much a part of Emily Dickinson's Amherst existence; it is also very much a part of the poetry she created during and after its occurrence.

The war did function in many instances as a metaphoric background for her own private struggles, but it also helped to shape her conception of the suffering and death inherent in the human condition. She was, like Melville and Whitman, a keen observer of war's capacity to shatter both the nationalistic and religious illusions of the pre-Civil War world. With the destruction of such illusions, Dickinson's poetry manages to portray the oblique reality that exists both inside and outside her Amherst home. ❑

Works Cited

Capps, Jack. *Emily Dickinson's Reading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1966.

Dandurand, Karen. "New Dickinson Civil War Publications." *American Literature* 56.1 (1984): 17-27.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, 1960.

—. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1958.

Ford, Thomas W. "Emily Dickinson and the Civil War." *The University Review—Kansas City* 31 (1965): 199-203.

Keller, Karl. *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1979.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson. Vol 2*. New York: Farrar, 1974.

St. Armand, Barton Levi. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1984.

Wolosky, Shira. *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984.