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Barton Levi St. Armand. Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society.

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well as with the *Arabian Nights*, not surprisingly, are linked with his own ventures into Gothicism. This subject invites further exploration to supplement what has been done. Sealts likewise illuminates such matters as Melville and Hawthorne, Poe, or Irving; Melville and the periodical world of his day, Melville and American thought. By others, the textual notes, comments on sources, and the facsimile of Amasa Delano's account that underlies "Benito Cereno," evince like breadth and depth in Melville scholarship. Along with Lea Newman's excellent G. K. Hall overview of the short fiction, this volume serves as a bibliographical guide to Melville's shorter prose writings.

All in all, the two latest volumes in the Northwestern-Newberry edition supply an embarrassment of riches for the study of Melville. We come away from them with a sense of facts handled well but without pedantry, and we return for additional dips into or lingerings over primary and secondary sections. "Magisterial" is the term undeniable when one has once turned their pages and read with an alert eye. More of this edition is what we ask.

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Barton Levi St. Armand. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 368 pp. \$32.50 (Cloth); 1986, \$14.95 (Paper)

No one, I believe, can ever read Emily Dickinson again in quite the same way after reading this splendidly interdisciplinary study. Barton St. Armand, Professor of English at Brown University, uses his wide and special knowledge of mid-nineteenth-century literature, literary theory, art, religion, and popular culture to explicate the poems of Emily Dickinson in terms of the personal, intellectual, generic, and stylistic background out of which they came. Starting with the concept of the portfolio, that usually feminine patchwork quilt-like compilation of highly personal literary sketches and fragments so characteristic of the middle century, he goes on to read Dickinson's work in relation to her time's images of death, sentimental fiction and Gothic romance, "image of heaven," often grotesque folk art, and conventions of portraiture and landscape painting. Though he bases his book in part on his lively acquaintance with a wide range of modern Dickinson scholarship, he has eagerly and understandingly explored many hitherto overlooked or slighted areas of Dickinson's emotional, intellectual, and artistic background. The results are new and exciting.

One of the merits of the book is that, like many of the best of Dickinson's poems, it sticks close to Amherst while stretching out toward Tunis. As his example of a portfolio St. Armand uses the scrapbook of Mary Warner, one of Dickinson's closest friends. The landscape painting of the era he exemplifies through meticulous examination of the art collection of Emily's brother Edward Dickinson. He constantly uses Dickinson's and her circle's letters and is careful always to document Emily's nearly certain familiarity with a book before he discusses it in relation to her. Yet, like Thoreau at Walden, by staying very close to Amherst St. Armand travels afar. For, as he convincingly shows, mid-century Amherst was surprisingly literate and outreaching. As well as its enthusiasm for Sigourney, Higginson, and a host of other now disparaged authors, it was profoundly influenced, as might be expected, by Emerson. And from across the Atlantic the voice of Ruskin rang clear. The book is excellent cultural history. It deftly interweaves the specific folk culture and intellectual and religious heritage of the Connecticut River Valley with the larger fabric of the era's religious, literary, and artistic milieu to present a unified, interlocking, understandable pattern. This was the cloth out of which Emily Dickinson's poems were made.

But the book does not rest there; it is also first rate criticism. St. Armand's interpretations of specific Dickinson poems in terms of her time's portrait and landscape paintings are entirely convincing. His comments on the connotative meaning of colors, particularly in the sunset poems, ring true. He shows how changes in her poetry throughout Dickinson's career in part parallel the changes in nineteenth-century landscapes. Similarly, his delineation of the often ambiguous and never quite straightforward relationship between Dickinson's poetry and the Connecticut River Valley's residual Puritanism is also exceedingly helpful to the understanding and full appreciation of her work. How complex a mixture of religion, sentimental love, and artistic fiction they embody, and how many subtle nineteenth-century allusions and nuances have we hitherto missed! St. Armand moves from subject to subject, never treating them merely for their own sakes but unflinchingly employing them in lucid and practical explication of the poetry itself. Nor, having once introduced any subject, does he ever permanently leave it; no chapter ends at its ending but continues a vital presence till the book's final conclusion. Thus, though in one way refreshingly untheoretical, the book as a whole has a complex and satisfying critical unity.

My only objections to *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture* are minor. St. Armand too often uses the term "crucifixion" in regard to poems which, though they talk about agony and pain, do not really even metaphorically involve crucifixion itself. He thus weakens and

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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.

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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