

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE PSYCHOANALYST

Emily Dickinson e o Psicanalista Emily Dickinson und der Psychoanalytiker

Stephen L. TANNER*

SUMMARY

This essay is a consideration of John Cody's book *After great pain: the inner life of Emily Dickinson*. It reveals not only the distortions created when psychoanalysis is applied to Dickinson, but also the kinds of distortions that can result when the method is applied to authors in general.

RESUMO

Este artigo é uma ponderação sobre o livro de autoria do psiquiatra John Cody, *After great pain: the inner life of Emily Dickinson*. O artigo revela não só as distorções criadas quando a psicanálise é aplicada à poetisa, mas também os tipos de distorções que podem resultar da aplicação do método a escritores em geral.

Emily Dickinson appears tailor-made for the psychoanalytical method of biography and criticism. The childhood shaped by a dominating father, the later seclusion from society and habit of dressing in white, the penetrating self-observation and ambiguous sexuality revealed in the poems and letters — all these cry out for psychoanalytical explanation. Moreover, she had the intelligence, articulateness, and capacity for fantasy that make her, as the psychiatrist John Cody remarks, "the psychoanalysand par excellence."

According to Cody, her poetry describes a remarkable variety of psychological symptoms, sharply observed and accurately delineated. Using just herself as subject, she discovered territory Freud would not get to for another fifty years: "All the so-called psychopathology he encountered in his patients she discovered within herself." If we credit Cody, she was fully aware of the unconscious as a potent motivating force, she recognized the existence and function of repression and other ego defenses, and she understood the phenomena of identification, transference, and sublimation. "One suspects," Cody concludes, "that the ultimate elucidation of certain of her more obscure psychological poems awaits further advances in our scientific knowledge of personality" (6-7). In short, Cody would have us believe that Emily Dickinson is not only a prime candidate for psychoanalytical study but was a remarkable sort of proto-psychoanalyst herself.

Freud's influence is now so pervasive that its extent is scarcely calculable. In one form or another, often in perversions or absurd simplifications, it has permeated our life and become an integral component of our culture. Freudianism, the popular version of Freud's ideas, is one of those eminently

comprehensive and pliable world philosophies that seem capable of explaining everything. As the narrator of John Barth's *The end of the road* remarks in reflecting upon Freud's "dance of sex": "When the synthesizing mood is upon one, what is more soothing than to assert that this one simple yen of humankind, poor little coitus, alone gives rise to cities and monasteries, paragraphs and poems, foot races and battle tactics, metaphysics and hydroponics, trade unions and universities? ... A therapeutic notion!" (93).

But systems that explain everything fail to explain anything completely and accurately. Freudian psychology may be, as Lionel Trilling asserts in his famous essay "Freud and literature," "the only systematic account of the human mind which, in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries" (33). But the psychoanalytical method applied to literature manifests biases and limitations that ought to be clearly recognized. Trilling, a fervent admirer of Freud, indicates them when he acknowledges that Freud's rationalism "supports all the ideas of the Enlightenment that deny validity to myth or religion; he holds to a simple materialism, to a simple determinism, to a rather limited sort of epistemology" (40).

John Cody's *After great pain: the inner life of Emily Dickinson* (1971) is an instructive example of the psychoanalytical method applied to Emily

* English Department
Brigham Young University, USA

Dickinson. A consideration of this book reveals not only the distortions created when psychoanalysis is applied to Dickinson, but also the kinds of distortions that can result when the method is applied to authors in general.

I have selected Cody's book as representative among the numerous psychoanalytical treatments of Dickinson for the following reasons: it is written by a practicing psychiatrist; it has been highly praised and is considered the definitive psychobiography; it is ambitious and comprehensive; and its hypotheses claim to explain more aspects of her life and work than do the hypotheses of any other psychoanalytical examination of the poet.

Cody's fundamental hypothesis asserts that an unsatisfactory relationship with her mother was the most important determinant in Emily Dickinson's life and poetry. Some early disturbance in the mother-daughter relationship caused Emily to feel unloved, and this primal deprivation set in motion an elaborate series of complex psychological conflicts, resulting in the enigmas and oddities of her adult behavior and the distinctive achievement of her poetry. The maternal deprivation syndrome "foredoomed her to an agonizing and protracted adolescence and an almost insurmountable crisis of sexual identity" (55). Her dissatisfaction with her mother prevented her from accepting that parent as a suitable model of femininity, which in turn prevented her from resolving the problems of "the normal, positive, oedipal situation." Her stage of sexual latency was abnormally prolonged, and she "vacillated anxiously in a state of unresolved bisexual potentiality, like a pre-oedipal child, vulnerable from every side" (148). And to complicate this situation, her relationship with her brother and future sister-in-law revived "the old oedipal dilemma, now grossly magnified and frighteningly distorted" (254). When Austin and Susan married, she was psychologically shattered — no purpose for existence, no sexual or social role, no bridge to the future. The result was a psychotic breakdown.

According to Cody, she faced the following dilemmas. To become a woman was to resemble her despised mother and be a victim of masculine callousness and exploitation. To embrace her masculine side was to lean toward forbidden homosexuality. Moreover, opting for femininity meant giving up masculinity, which subserved her creativity. Thus heterosexuality and homosexuality were ruled out, and she gave up interpersonal sexuality altogether. She became a recluse because she had no adult sexual role to play with either men or women.

Cody is critical of the "tacit conspiracy" to skirt or rationalize Emily's abnormality. Biographers who interpret behavior "on a commonsense, non-scientific basis" are inadequate. Their psychological hypotheses are academic, not based on experience with actual patients (8-9). We must face the fact that Emily was psychotic, which, for Emily *the artist*, was no misfortune because her "psychic imbalance and eventual collapse allied themselves on the side of her genius" (485). He even goes so

far as to say it is likely that she "had a deep need to feel unloved, unappreciated, and rejected by her mother (and her mother's later representatives [which for him included every adult female friend she had]) in order to bring about the barren, arid, emotional climate that she intuitively realized was necessary for the flowering of her poetic fantasies" (497).

The following critique ignores the benefits of psychoanalytical biography and criticism, not because I am blind to them, but because distortions, excesses, and reductionism are the issues here. A rigorous evaluation of Cody's book seems justified since it has already received ample commendation.

Cody begins by likening psychoanalytic interpretation of a historical figure to reassembling a fossil skeleton or, if the figure suffered a psychological cataclysm, to piecing together fragments of an aircraft that exploded in flight. These engaging analogies imply considerably more scientific accuracy than the psychoanalytical method warrants. Human personalities, after all, are not much like bones or metal parts. Cody insists, however, that the psychobiographer, like the paleontologist, is justified in using "plaster bones." He admits that one of his plaster bones is the hypothesis that Emily experienced what she interpreted as a cruel rejection by her mother. There is, as he acknowledges, no concrete evidence for this (2). In keeping with his analogy, a few plaster bones might be acceptable, but when the hypothesis of maternal rejection is the very spinal column of his study, the ratio of plaster to actual bones is unacceptable.

Another large chunk of plaster is Cody's hypothesis that Emily's adult personality was partly shaped by Reverend John S. C. Abbott's *The mother at home: the principles of maternal duty* (1833). This book, with its authoritarian discipline and religious cast, is obviously a bugbear for the psychoanalyst and an obvious target as the source of Emily's problems. But there is no evidence that the parents used it. We know only that Edward Dickinson bought it for his wife. Actually, it is a pretty innocuous book, and, as Rebecca Patterson remarks, since it was so widely popular, why weren't there more Emily Dickinsons? Are we to assume that her parents were particularly sadistic in applying the book? (233-34).

Where are the bones amid all the plaster? The poems and letters, says Cody, are "the authentic 'osseous' basis" for his argument (10). And he finds the poems "intrinsically more self-revelatory than the letters" because they "uniquely reveal a height of turmoil and psychic desintegration only obscurely adumbrated in the remainder of our biographical sources" (294). In other words, his primary evidence is the poems considered as direct and unequivocal expressions of her own feelings and experiences. The poems, he insists, "are the distillation of actual circumstances" and "portray faithfully the terror of a mind collapsing under pressures that exceed its endurance" (23-24). Quoting such phrases as 'And then a Plank in Reason broke, I felt a Cleaving in my Mind/ As if my Brain had split,' and 'I thought-/ My Mind was going numb,' he

asserts that Emily Dickinson was describing her own experience of going out of her mind. He acknowledges the objection that "a supposed person" is speaking in such poems, although he carefully avoids quoting in full Dickinson's own statement concerning the poem "There came a day at summer's full": "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse — it does not mean — me — but a supposed person" (Quoted in Walsh 147). Revealing his naivete concerning the nature of poetry and the psychology of the creative process, he answers the objection by saying, "We must ask ourselves whether anyone, even a poet, can portray a feeling state that he has not himself undergone. And if one grant that this is possible, what could possibly motivate a person to attempt to express what he never felt" (292). This appalling denial of the powers and uses of literary imagination characterizes too much of psychoanalytic biography.

Cody, in short, ignores the *poetry* of poems. By focusing on the poems solely as psychological documents, he ignores the way aesthetic considerations often determine meaning, the way word choice is governed by patterns of alliteration, rhyme, and imagery, the way form shapes content. As Albert Gelpi points out, "His method is paraphrase, reducing the poet's language, which links with intricate subtlety the various levels of her mind and psyche, to formulae. This sort of abstraction is diametrically opposed to the thrust of poetry to refuse generalizations and to individualize experience in richness of nuance" (158). Gelpi senses in the book "a mind and sensibility not only less complex than Dickinson's but less open than it ought to be to her complexities" (159). This is certainly true of the literary complexities.

Probably more objectionable than Cody's insistence on reading the poems as direct autobiography is the way he abandons that posture when it fails to suit his purpose. He tries to have it both ways. After asserting that the poems clearly express her own psychosis, he must deal with the famous love affair, which implies mature heterosexuality — something he denies her. At that point, he reverses himself: "The story of Emily Dickinson's love affair as it is told in the poems cannot be accepted at face value" (384). He describes the love poems as "pseudologia fantastica" — the communication to others of imaginary experiences in the guise of real happenings (388).

The exclusively sexual orientation of his method causes Cody to neglect other shaping elements — literature, for example. In a book that appeared the same year as Cody's, John Evangelist Walsh argues that much in Dickinson's poetry was borrowed, with varying degrees of modification, from literary works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Elizabeth Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. In fact, he identifies a passage in the latter as the source of the "Plank in Reason" phrase. And the intensity and love talk of Emily's letters to Sue, which Cody makes so much of, squeezing a sexual interpretation even out of the punctuation, Walsh traces to Longfellow's *Kavanaugh*, a novel both young women had

read just prior to those letters. Walsh's particular examples are sometimes less than convincing, but his conclusion must be reckoned with: "Emily's poetry, as is now abundantly clear, can never be taken as autobiographical without strong evidence to support the claim; too often she will be found parading in a rented costume" (150).

In addition to ignoring literary influences, Cody's Freudian approach neglects other significant factors that shaped her personality and poetry. Social-cultural influences receive very little consideration, such things as the emotional climate of the region, the social mores and religious ambience of the community, the place of women, the special male-student orientation of Amherst, and so on. Moreover, Emily Dickinson was homely, a fact that her brother said played no inconsiderable part in her life (Walsh, 55), yet Cody attributes no part of her psychological development to her appearance. She was also a considerable humorist in the tradition of Downeast Yankee wit, yet Cody sees her playfulness only as means of psychosexual sublimation. Of a poem Emily sent to Sue after her baby was born, he says, "stripped of its playful language," it is "a message of murderous aggression toward the infant" (364). His book demonstrates that the Freudian biographical method needs a more comprehensive view of human interaction. Inner lives are symbiotically related to outer lives, and individuals must be seen as doing more in their relations with others than simply expressing an exclusively sexual inner dynamic rooted in their infantile pasts.

Cody's psychoanalytical method is Procrustean and formula ridden and at the same time ingeniously versatile — formulaic in its hypotheses, ingenious in conforming the data to them. To some extent this is its strength, but it is also its principal weakness. Cody uncritically subscribes to such Freudian chestnuts as these: every human being must solve the problem of "how to possess exclusively the parent of the opposite sex and render harmless and noncompetitive the parent of one's own sex" (182); "to some degree all men marry their mothers and all women their fathers" (214); a girl must admire her mother and want to be like her; food in art "is basically and unconsciously associated with maternal solicitude and the receiving of love" (46); all poetry is a symptom and a compensatory reflex. As true as these notions might be, they are not the whole truth. Similarly, one doubts that every illness — from Austin's headaches to Sue's ailment when Austin graduated to Emily's eye disorder — is a psychosomatic manifestation of sexual fears.

Cody characteristically begins his interpretations of Dickinson's writing by citing psychoanalytic case histories or Freudian explanations of behavior. He then selects sentences and phrases from the poems and letters which fit those patterns, or more specifically, which fit his thesis concerning psychotic breakdown resulting ultimately from maternal deprivation. He admittedly disregards chronology (260), and when he believes the poet was unaware of the full implications of her utterances, he infers

the unconscious import (10). Some poems may be "opaque and frustrating to explicate" to those without psychiatric training, he condescendingly points out (398). Freed from the constraining considerations of context, chronology, and conscious intention, and buoyed by the elitism of allegedly scientific knowledge and clinical experience, he is enticed into overly ingenious interpretation and surmise that too easily make the leap from the possible to the probable to the factual.

Psychoanalysis grants license for seeing unconscious patterns and motives in poetry. Herein lies its chief value applied to literature. But this licence incurs responsibilities. Judgment, balance, and restraint are needed. Otherwise anything can be read into a poem, and a poem can be wrenched to conform with any biographical thesis. A method of substantiating hypotheses that manifest as much latitude and pliability as Cody's has to be suspect.

A particularly irresponsible feature of the psychoanalytical approach is the tendency to confuse the literal and figurative. The result is a sort of hypostatizing of metaphor in which a figurative relationship is accepted as actual. Carl Bode does this in his epilogue to *The portable Thoreau*, when, after arguing that Thoreau had a "mother-fixation," he asserts that since Thoreau's culture did not countenance a mother-fixation he shifted his psychic energies to "Mother Nature": "Kind, lovely, she let him immerse his loneliness and tension in her" (686). Similarly, Cody argues that Dickinson feared for her eyes because eyes can penetrate as well as receive. This makes them male phallic. Thus

fear for her eyes was a fear of losing her maleness (436). Or, in another variation on eyes, he points out that the sun is to many patients an unconscious symbol of the father figure. Sunlight is thus equated with the father's gaze: hence Dickinson's photophobia (423). This hypostatizing of the figurative began with Freud himself. He cautions in *Civilization and its discontents* (102-03) against the dangers of misusing analogy in psychoanalysis, but the warning comes in the chapter which proposes that civilizations have super-egos just as individuals do.

In his essay "Education by poetry," Robert Frost asserts that "unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history" (334). He might have added, you are not safe in psychoanalytical biography. Cody could use some education by poetry.

There is something incongruous in the way the psychoanalytic approach presumes a certain mastery over poetry, in the sense that it allegedly exposes its hidden meanings and secret motives, for it tries to do so by using metaphor and symbol, things it frequently understands less perfectly than does the poet. This incongruity is strikingly apparent when a psychoanalyst with so little sense of the ways of metaphor presumes, on the basis of her poetry, to explain the inner life of one of American literature's greatest masters of metaphor.

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