AN APPROACH TO CRITICISM

John Ginger

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND TORONTO

ISBN 0 340 11784 2

First published 1970
Seventh impression 1980

Reproduced, printed and bound in Great Britain for
Hodder and Stoughton Educational,
a division of Hodder and Stoughton Limited,
Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent,
by Fakenham Press Limited, Fakenham, Norfolk

Preface

Many of the passages for appreciation in this book have already been used in class both at sixth form and university level. It was the accumulation of teaching material, and a consideration of the number of hours spent in searching for it, which gave me the idea that other teachers might find it useful—especially when their literary appreciation classes, however prized, are only an item in a sometimes demanding curriculum.

The actual presentation of this material in book form has raised some problems. I found that I was reluctant to relinquish my classroom right to guide, and intervene in, a discussion; and I have kept it in the form of the questions attached to each passage. They are, quite frankly, *leading* questions, which either point directly to my own interpretation of the work in question, or draw attention to the crux upon which interpretation seems ultimately to depend. Some teachers and students may prefer to use the extracts and ignore these questions. To those who do make use of them, I must make a provisional apology lest any seem too dogmatic, and confess that, apart from their inverted commas, some of the 'quotations' have very little in common with the real thing. This device, which has allowed me to present under a neutral flag both my own views and those with which I would disagree, proved too useful to resist.

For the sake of convenience the book has been divided into two parts to consider poetry and prose respectively. This arrangement is not intended to imply a rigid distinction, and in fact some sections of the introduction to Part I (in particular the discussion of imagery, diction and tone) are also relevant to Part II.

I should like to express my gratitude to Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett, Mr Laurens van der Post and Mr E. M. Forster for allowing me to quote from *A Family and a Fortune*, *A Bar of Shadow* and *A Passage to India*; and to Professor Molly Mahood for suggesting the Conrad: van der Post and Dickens: Henry James pairings.

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PART I The criticism of poetry

INTRODUCTION

MAKING THE POEM

In 1859, a New England recluse copied out the following lines and put them away in her desk:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon—
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin,
And Roof of stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them—
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence—
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Either at this time or on some occasion during the next two years, she showed a copy of them to her sister-in-law, Sue; and the outcome of Sue's criticism was a new second stanza. The revised poem was sent to Sue next door with a note:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone—

Grand go the years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—

And firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a disc of Snow—

Perhaps this verse would please you better—Sue—Emily—

Sue replied with further criticism: 'I am not suited dear Emily with the second verse—It is remarkable as the chain lightning that blinds us hot nights in the Southern sky but it does not go with the ghostly shimmer of the first verse as well as the other one—it just occurs to me that the first verse is complete in itself and needs no other, and can't be coupled—Strange things always go alone—as that verse, and I *guess* you[r] kingdom doesn't hold one—I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never *can* again— . . . . Sue

Emily Dickinson turned to the problem of the second stanza again, and produced the following versions:

Springs—shake the sills—
But—the Echoes—stiffen—
Hoar is the window—
And numb the door—
Tribes—of Eclipse—in Tents—of Marble—
Staples—of Ages—have buckled—there—

Springs—shake the Seals—
But the silence—stiffens—
Frosts unhook—in the Northern Zones—
Icicles—crawl from Polar Caverns—
Midnight in Marble—Refutes—the Suns—

She copied out the first of these and sent it round to Sue with a further note which began 'Is this frostier?'. There is no record of the sister-in-law's reply.

Evidently the poem continued to worry its author. It is probable that, when she began to work on it again in 1861, she had already been invited to contribute to the *Springfield Daily Republican*—hence the revisions. But the lines that appeared in the newspaper on Saturday, 1 March 1862, under the heading 'The Sleeping' were those she had

written in 1859. A month later, she sent some poems to a literary acquaintance, T.W. Higginson. Amongst them were the two stanzas, 'Safe in their Alabaster Chambers' and 'Grand go the years' (the second taking the place of the published 'Light laughs the breeze').

Here is a good example of the debt owed to editorial research.[1] It is also an opportunity to watch the poet in the act of creating a poem. Why did the second stanza cause so much difficulty? Was Emily Dickinson too ready to accept her sister-in-law's judgment?—Or was Sue right, and had Emily recognized a valid criticism in the note brought round from next door?

The stanzas published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* were dated 'Pelham Hill, June 1861'. Emily Dickinson was fond of this place and had probably visited the old graveyard there. Even without biographical conjecture of this kind, we learn from her other poems that, like John Donne, she devoted a great deal of thought to death in both its physical and metaphysical aspects. This poem, like many of her others, is an attempt to communicate her own imaginative experience of it.

The poet is aware of two very different strands of feeling within herself. She is a Christian, and her religion teaches her to regard death as a sleep. She is also a person whose senses are alert in a more than usual degree; and reason tells her that death marks the end of sensory experience.

Sue had suggested a solution to the problem of the second stanza. Did the poem *need* a second? Wasn't the first stanza complete in itself?—But the poet's attempt to find a satisfactory second suggests that, fairly early in the poetic process, she had decided that the form her feelings were looking for was a two-stanza poem. The first stanza examines the 'sleep' idea, reveals it as a euphemism; the end of the stanza, when euphemism is abandoned, is the pivot on which the whole poem turns. The second stanza conveys the sense of deprivation.

The members of the resurrection sleep; they are at peace—*safe*. Here is the Christian comfort. But already another note has sounded. There is a troubling ambiguity about the first three lines. *Alabaster* may give us a picture of a palace ('marble halls')—though we remember that

[1] The different versions of this poem and the biographical material are given in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Harvard University Press, 1955).

tombs were once made of alabaster. *Chambers* at first suggests rooms, perhaps the magnificent apartments of a palace. We are undecided: is this poem about the living or the buried dead? *Safe*, that dominant first chord, has suggested the former interpretation and encouraged us to suppress the cold and funereal associations of *alabaster*; it will also prompt the reading 'unharmed' for *untouched*. But at this stage the reason begins to rebel. To be 'touched' by morning and noon is to be warmed by the sun; to be 'untouched' is to remain cold, to be deprived. We look again at *alabaster*.

As we begin to see the direction the poet is taking, we become a little more cautious of *members of the resurrection*. The phrase, familiar in a Christian context, couples the two ideas of dying and immortality. But there are no further allusions in the poem to eternal life. Does the phrase, then, introduce an unexamined concept—a second-hand idea glibly parroted?—Or is this an intentional use of cliché? The second interpretation is more in keeping with the suspicion which the use of traditional euphemisms has already aroused.

Now, having shown us that she is playing with attitudes which are really foreign to her own experience, she confronts us with the truth. *Rafter of Satin*, which strangely contradicts our sensory experience (rafters hard, satin soft), plays on the same nerve as *alabaster* and *untouched*. *Rafters* belong, perhaps, with *safe* and *chambers*; but why *of satin*?—Until we jump the gap between the euphemistically employed 'members of the resurrection' (the dead) and the actual coffin, which has a padded lid and lies under a stone slab (*roof of stone*).

Here, second-hand ideas of death are relinquished; and we come to the poet's imaginative experience of it. When the body ceases to function, the life of the senses comes to an end. The sense of touch has already been mentioned. The sleepers were *untouched* by the sun. In the second stanza, man's total sensory experience is represented, metaphorically, by the sense of hearing. In the tomb, he can no longer hear the sounds of bees and birds and of the wind in the field above him. And the metaphors point the irony that it is now the 'inanimate' things that possess a kind of life: the breeze laughs from her stronghold (*castle*) in the living world (we are reminded here of the ambiguous palace-tomb of the first line); it is the wind now, which is *safe*—unchanging, unaffected by the extinction of the sensing creature. And the things of sense have become especially desirable. We listen. The bee *babbles*; the *sweet* birds *pipe*. With a grimly humorous

return to the euphemisms of the first stanza, the unhearing dead are described, not as being deaf to these lovely sounds, but as *stolid*. They are insensitive, obtuse.

The half-mocking, half-regretful *Ah* heralds the concluding irony. The dead for all their former knowingness are now less fortunate than the birds singing over their graves. The hope which seemed to be offered in the borrowed phrase *members of the resurrection* has, within the context of this experience, been rejected. Latinisms—*cadence* and *sagacity*—with their stately suggestion of a funeral sermon—are a sombre foil to the joys of sense conveyed in simpler words, *babbles*, *pipe* and *sweet*.

Sue responded, as we have already seen, to the *coldness* of the first stanza. She had to 'go to the fire and get warm after thinking about it'. There is nothing cold about the second, and even though we may respond to the irony of the contrast, there is a danger that, in experiencing the essentially gay, light-hearted scene around the graveyard, we may lose sight of its inhabitants. Emily Dickinson accepted her sister-in-law's criticism. Instead of 'Light laughs the breeze', she needed a stanza which would convey the idea of the rift between the world of sense and the world of the dead without spoiling the cold effect of the picture created in the first. The idea of Nature which endures and continues, insensible to the passing of the individual, is essential to the poem; but in her first revision she turns away from Nature in its more immediate aspects and introduces it at a more awe-inspiring level: the stars in their courses. It is no longer gentle breezes and sweetly singing birds that ignore the sleepers, but planets that *scoop their arcs* and *row* through the *firmament* (like boats across a lake). The movement of the planets means the passing of time; and it is an easy jump to the synecdoche, *Diadems drop and Doges surrender*. The Dead are now the Great, the Rulers, whose disappearance is unmarked by the mighty rolling of the universe.

One image is salvaged from the former version. The Sleepers were deaf. Now it is the universe which is deaf. The passing of the Great is

> Soundless as dots on a disc of snow

—a return to nature at a more intimate level, but in a quite different way from the idyllic scene sketched in the first version.

We have seen Sue's reaction to this revision, and we can infer

Emily Dickinson's inability to decide between the two from the fact that in March 1861 she allowed her first version to be published, and in April sent the second to Higginson. Was her critic right? And does the poet's own indecision reflect a half-formed dissatisfaction with both stanzas?

The imagery of 2b ('Grand go the years') is on the right scale and avoids the obtrusive prettiness of 2a. But 2b is very uneven. *Grand* for instance, is unfortunate; it evokes a military parade rather than the wheeling of universes. The rowing image is irrelevant and inaccurate; for, though interplanetary space may be thought of as a lake, *row* gives a quite unhelpful picture of the planet (and the inversion in this third line makes the image obscure). *Diadem* is an anticlimax after the universe imagery, and the allusion to the fall of the Venetian Republic limits us even more drastically and irrelevantly. The heavy alliteration of this line is purposeless; we may have an uneasy idea that it alone has dictated the choice of *Doges*. Significantly, it is the echo of 2a which arrests our attention. When we examine it, we find that it is also a development of an idea in the first stanza: the dead are *cold* in their chambers of alabaster, sealed off from the warm morning and noon sun. The simile *as dots on a disc of snow* is accurate and, with its reminder of intense cold, appropriate. It captures perfectly the idea of deprivation that the poet has wanted to communicate. And it does more. Our imagination is liberated by this picture of cold and silence, of the grave itself, perhaps, being inevitably but gently obliterated, of the slow formation of a white desert.

An image of intense cold is being sought. Its beginnings were explicit in the imagery of the first stanza. In the poet's subconscious mind the card-index of memory is being raked. The conscious, critical faculty is also on the alert—partly as a result of Sue's remark, perhaps—and is ready to select the right image when it presents itself.[2] In the next attempt, we find Emily Dickinson surrendering to the influence of this winter imagery.

[2] See Dryden (the Preface to *The Rival Ladies*, quoted in *Poetic Process* by George Whalley): 'This worthless present was designed you long before it was a play, when it was only a confused mass of Thoughts, tumbling over one another in the dark; when the Fancy was yet in its first work, moving the sleeping images of things towards the light, there to be distinguished, and then either chosen or rejected by the Judgement'.

Springs—shake the sills—
But—the Echoes—stiffen—
Hoar is the window—
And numb the door—
Tribes—of Eclipse—in Tents—of Marble—
Staples—of Ages—have buckled—there—

There is a return to the house (or palace) image of the first stanza. Now the house is frost-bound. Outside, the season of spring has begun, but for the house there will be no thaw. Its *sills*, *window* and *door* are iced-up. Life is over; the long frost-death has begun. The sensory activity, which within this poem represents life, is no longer hearing. Now the dead are unable to *feel*: *And numb the door.* (There is a vestige of the hearing metaphor in *echoes*; but sound itself becomes something to touch when the echoes, heard when the window is rattled by the warming spring wind—another trace of 2a—*stiffen*, like the corpses. The meaning is probably that the dead are unresponsive to any knock and harden themselves against the idea of admitting a visitor from the living world of spring.)

Tribes of eclipse reminds us of the historical/universal imagery of 2b. Here it is used with more success. Generations are seen as nomadic tribes who live in *tents*, which are not only *marble* in appearance (stiff, white) but also to the touch. These 'tents' are ice-cold tombs, and seals are placed on one dying, *eclipsed* generation after another, as the slabs of the marble tomb are fastened together with *staples*.

The poet is coming closer to finding an objective equivalent for the imaginative experience of death which had been only partly realized in 2a and 2b. She knows consciously now that, together with the ideas of separation and oblivion with which she started, she must give expression to those of extreme cold and of silence. She also wants to suggest that the universe, with its great forces, continues inevitably, ignoring the life that it incidentally harbours.

Tribes of eclipse in tents of marble have taken the place of the planets and the historical images of 2b, but are still not entirely satisfactory. The ellipsis *tribes of eclipse* (for 'tribes threatened by eclipse') leads to obscurity, as does the inversion (it is the disappearing generations which have been sealed off in the *tents of marble*). The intellectual and sensory (visual) elements in this metaphor pull against each other; there is a rational link between nomadic tribes

and tents; but the tent/tomb identification comes to grief with *staples* and *buckled*; for 'staples' in this context can only be associated with the marble tomb and 'buckled' only with the nomad's tents.

When Emily Dickinson makes her last attempt at writing a second stanza, it is interesting to discover that actual phrases, as well as ideas and images, have begun to take a permanent form. She has been unable to forget the *sound* of

> Springs shake the sills
> But the echoes stiffen

and, in the final version, the meaning of these lines is changed with the least possible dislocation of the word-grouping which her ear has approved:

> Springs—shake the Seals—
> But the silence—stiffens—
> Frosts unhook—in the Northern Zones—
> Icicles—crawl from Polar Caverns—
> Midnight in Marble—Refutes—the Suns—

The *tents of Marble* image is the starting point of this revision. The house image is abandoned, and the stapled tomb becomes a tomb that has had a metal *seal* attached to it (signifying the finality of death). The difficult *echoes stiffen* is changed to *But the silence stiffens*: now we can hear the silence which seems more intense after the sound of the rattled seals has died away. The image of coldness is magnified ('Is this frostier?' the poet had asked her critic when she copied out the previous revision). It is the universe now that is frost-bound: the ice-cap *crawls* slowly but inevitably down from *Polar* regions to cover all life (the *tribes* no longer *eclipsed*, but congealed—the world turning to ice). It is interesting to observe that, with the expansion of vision in this stanza the appeal to the senses is multiplied. The first version of the second stanza had appealed only to the sense of hearing. Now, as well as hearing the rattling seals, we feel the cold in *stiffens*, see the slow advance of the glacier in *crawls* and, in *Midnight in marble refutes the suns*, see the total darkness of the tomb.

It seems strange that, of all the versions of stanza 2, these impressive lines should have been put away, unseen (as far as we know) by any of her correspondents. Bowles, the newspaper editor, had

received and published the 'Light laughs the breeze' version; Higginson had been sent 'Grand go the years'; Sue had seen 'Springs shake the sills'. Only the last version was left, with nearly two thousand other carefully packeted manuscript poems, to be unearthed after her death in 1886. Can we discover a reason for the poet's decision by examining the poem we should have had if she had decided to destroy the three previous versions of the second stanza and unite 'Safe in their alabaster chambers' with 'Springs shake the seals'?

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone—

Springs—shake the Seals—
But the silence—stiffens—
Frosts unhook—in the Northern Zones—
Icicles—crawl from Polar Caverns—
Midnight in Marble—Refutes—the Suns—

Here, the ambiguous *alabaster chambers*, sealed off from the sun, develop unequivocally into the tomb at the end of the first stanza. All the misleading hints of rich and secure living (*safe, chambers, sleep, satin*) of these opening lines are rejected in the second stanza. Death is final. The tomb is *sealed*. The absence of sunlight (negative) has become a positive flow of ice, establishing a kingdom of death. On this side of the grave, spring breezes blow, but they can only affect the dead by shaking the metal seals on their tombs. Inside the tomb the irresistible glacier spreads; its marble walls (marble a resolution of alabaster) exclude not just the light of one day's sun, but of rising and setting suns until the end of time.

Were we right to impose our judgment on Emily Dickinson's and decide that this is the poem she should have left? Or have we already discovered the reason for the apparent suppression of what in itself is a magnificent stanza?

The first stanza achieved its effect by means of understatement and an ambiguity which at first troubles us and then, as we examine the