

WALT WHITMAN AND EMILY DICKINSON: POETRY OF THE CENTRAL CONSCIOUSNESS, by Agnieszka Salska. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985. xi, 220 pp. Paper. \$13.95.

Agnieszka Salska has written the first book-length comparison of two poets who have profoundly influenced the course of poetry. She has established a common ground, philosophical and esthetic, on which to compare these poets who are so different in technique, in temperament, and in outlook. And she has shown that their very differences are drawn from a common source—Emersonian transcendentalism. Salska, a professor of English Studies at the University of Lodz, in Poland, brings a keen esthetic sense and a steady ideological perspective to bear on this problem. The result is the reader's sharpened insight into the minds of the two great poets, into the ways in which their poems are made, and into the ways in which their poems work.

The common ground on which she examines the two poets is that of their "central consciousness," a term suggesting the poets' sense of their own places in the universe, their philosophical centers, and their creative sensibilities. Different as these values may appear in the two poets, Salska relates them to a common intellectual problem: Emerson's formulation of "self-reliance," or man's yearnings for infinitude in a cosmos of which he is a vital part. The way in which Whitman and Dickinson approach this problem as poets defines their respective poetic content, their poetic techniques, and their poetic forms. For Whitman, the sense of personal infinitude expresses itself in terms of a prophetic and widely experienced persona who moves forward in time and space through a meaningful world, gathering clusters of universalized knowledge, all exemplifying the operation of a progressive and ameliorative cosmic law. Whitman's dominant symbol of the road, with its implications of progress in time and space, lends itself to a variety of poetic catalogues that illustrate the workings of this cosmic law. And Professor Salska deepens our understanding of Whitman's catalogues as a means of recording the cosmic pulse of experience in the patterned richness of everyday life. Whitman responds to Emerson's call for a "metre-making argument" with an artistry that draws its rhythms and its very forms from the pulses of life, human joys and agonies, which he feels can be harmonized with the universal law.

Professor Salska makes clear the contrast in outlook between the two poets:

Both Whitman and Dickinson insist, as does Emerson, on "seeing the universe in the light of human needs"; both posit the centrality of the artist's consciousness. The difference is that Whitman's projection is affective and sympathetic. He is Adam naming for himself a whole new world into being. Dickinson has experienced the intellectual fall. She can but watch herself create a world of meanings. Constructing analogies, detecting correspondences are ways of both human perception and human emotional need while the "Single Sound" of [Dickinson's] consciousness must forever question the truths of its own making. (190)

Dickinson matches Whitman in desiring personal transcendence and in focusing on the consciousness of the persona as an artist trying to find her place in the cosmos. But whereas Whitman sees a cosmic unfolding in time and space, Dickinson questions all principles, "never yields passively to an external principle" (95) but attempts, through artistic and mental discipline, to see whether there can be order and meaning in her world, whether there can be "correspondences" between the life she has known and the external laws. She is not sure that she can penetrate any consciousness other than her own.

"The glories strung like beads" in Whitman's world afford the basis for his organic structures, especially in the longer poems. But Dickinson's art is not organic. The moments of transcendence depicted in her poems have occurred in the persona's past, and the persona is concerned with trying to fit them into some sort of pattern from which she may make sense of her world, perhaps even find truths. Seeking order, Dickinson adopts established metric forms—ballads, hymns, etc.—and formulates her experiences into recognizable artistic molds filled with abstract, paradoxical, and agonizing personal dramas.

How these two different poets, drawing on a common heritage, create different poetries and different poetic vocabularies is the chief concern of Professor Salska's valuable study. One should add that her volume contains many fine readings of individual poems.

— Harold Aspiz