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# Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*: A Reading of Dissonance and Harmony

Aaron Copland, the twentieth-century composer and well-traveled, cosmopolitan New Yorker, sought out the work of Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century poet and a reclusive woman from a small town in western Massachusetts.[1] He read her poetry, indeed studied her poetry, and ultimately assumed her poetic voice when he set her lyrics to music. In 1949, he began to compose music for "Because I could not stop for Death –" (Fr479), then worked on a group of three songs, then six. When he completed his creative work with Dickinson's poetry in 1950, Copland had composed twelve songs, a cycle entitled *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*.[2] The song cycle premiered on May 18, 1950 with the soprano, Alice Howland, and Copland himself as pianist.

Aaron Copland, like Emily Dickinson, was recognized for his tremendous thematic range. Many of Copland's compositions, such as *Piano Variations*, are considered to be intellectual and rarified, while others, such as *Appalachian Spring* and *Fanfare for the Common Man* are accessible to the point that they rank among Americans' best loved music. Copland takes on western themes in *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, uses Latin American themes in *Danzón Cubano*, and responds to the European tradition in such works as *Hommage à Fauré*. Jazz rhythms and Shaker melodies at times inform the work of this artist, who also wrote Hollywood movie scores as well as the theme for the *CBS Playhouse*. Choreographers were inspired by his compositions, and, for his part, Copland was inspired by other art forms.

Reflecting on his own work, Copland acknowledges, "I have always had an aversion to repeating myself" (159).

Likewise, the art of Emily Dickinson is not easily categorized. Indeed, this poet is recognized for addressing the reader from behind any number of masks. In various poems, she assumes the voice of the coquette, the spinster, the young boy, the heretic and the devout regenerate, the dying and the dead. Emily Dickinson herself understood that she had a "vice for voices"(L Prose Fragment 19). Thus, those who look for consistent thematic or philosophical statement in Dickinson's verse are often frustrated and foiled in the attempt.

Consequently, we can understand that Dickinson scholars often put forth individual and specific constructions of the poet. As David Porter writes, "In the unruly body of her poetry there may be found a theme to fulfill every critic's predisposition" (183). Judith Farr has established "the erotic Emily Dickinson" by drawing on the poet's correspondence with Otis Lord and poems whose themes and motifs are likewise sexual, Farr's studies countering earlier constructions of "the virginal Emily Dickinson." More recently, Martha Nell Smith constructs "the homoerotic Emily Dickinson" from her investigation of Dickinson's correspondence with her sister-in-law, Sue, and the poems that passed between them. Early scholarship that identifies the profoundly orthodox religious concerns of the poet have been challenged by Jane Donahue Eberwein who discloses the ways in which Dickinson's "intensely inquiring ironic mind" examines the Calvinist tradition. Not surprisingly, there are also critics who cling to the sheaf of poems that illustrate another aspect of Dickinson as irreligious, sacrilegious, and even profane. Scholarship that interrogates the "domestic Emily," a woman very much of this world who casts her discussions of her creative activity in the metaphorical framework of the quotidian, household activity of the nineteenth-century woman, responds to Betsy Erkkila's construction of "the patrician Dickinson."

The point here is twofold. The first, an obvious statement about literary scholarship, is that every accomplished interpreter of this poet reveals not all the truth, but one or more facets of the truth of the work of this very rich and complex author. The second observation is that every interpretation

also reveals an aspect of the interpreter, perhaps not of their personal inclinations, yet surely their intellectual interests and critical orientation.[3]

In composing *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Copland assumes the role of an interpreter of Emily Dickinson and her art. The goal of this essay is to identify the truths about the poet and her poetry that Copland brings to our attention.[4] To do so, the essay will explore the character and coherence of the collection and setting of his song cycle. Ultimately, the essay will broach two questions: Who is the Emily Dickinson of Copland's construction? And what does Copland reveal about himself by this composition?

By the standards of modern scholarship on Dickinson's poetry, Copland was handicapped in that in 1949 he did not have access to current editions of her work.[5] The Johnson edition has not yet been published, and the Franklin variorum edition was fifty years to come. Copland relied on the early and heavily edited editions of her work, yet nonetheless he arrived at a sophisticated understanding of Dickinson's poetry. That is, he chose poems that challenge the stability of fixed ideas and identify her critical inspection of multiple aspects of a given theme. Very early, he identified the intellectual flexibility that characterizes the corpus of her work. He also drew on poems that fuse the elements of this world with her expectations of eternity. Not only did Copland select poems that highlight these aspects of her work, but also he sequenced these poems within his song cycle to reinforce his reading of Dickinson.

Copland opens his cycle with "Nature, the gentlest mother is," in which nature is fashioned as a maternal force that loves and guides all her children—flora, fauna, and, by extension, the people on earth. The poem begins in the day and ends at dusk to emphasize the regularity and stability of this force and this concept. Copland underscores this theme by directing that the song be "crystalline" and "pastoral-like."[6] Dickinson gives greater authority to her sentimental vision of nature by suggesting that nature be allied with religious impulse. Mother Nature's setting is a church in which

she speaks "among the aisles," and inspires "prayer" even in those who are unregenerate, or "unworthy."

Following this prayer, at the close of day, nature "Wills Silence – Everywhere –" (Fr741), the final dashes emphasizing the drama of the poem's final line. The dash that follows "Silence" creates the stillness that the word itself suggests but cannot fulfill by its very saying. To accentuate this point beyond the double piano dynamic, Copland dramatizes the final line with a musical rest.[7] This dash also anticipates "Everywhere," the vacuum of sound strangely establishing itself throughout the infinity of space, with the final dash suggesting the permanence and universality of this prayerful state. In this poem's contemplation of nature, the kingdom has indeed come. Yet, lest we think that Copland introduces his song cycle with this poem for the purpose of characterizing its author as a quintessential "True Woman" of the nineteenth century for whom domesticity and piety are paramount, we need only continue to the second poem of his sequence.

In song two, Copland's Dickinson destabilizes the sentimental vision of nature, when the silence imposed by the "gentlest mother" is replaced by the din of a terrifying storm, and her divine order is supplanted by chaos. "There came a wind like a bugle" breaks the "crystalline" spell of the opening song with its rapid tempo and jarring accidentals to cast nature as a gothic nightmare. Nature "chills;" it is "ominous;" it portends "doom." Its verdant splendor now imposes a "green chill upon the heat" and haunts man as his "emerald ghost." Likewise, the poem's sole image of spiritual life, the "bell within the steeple," is unstable. It plays no hymn, and its message is not Christian, but "wild." To accentuate this concept, Copland's score directs that these measures be "clangorous," and represents the bell in jarring left hand intervals of a ninth. The final lines of the song are the musically discordant bell's only tidings: "How much can come And much can go . . . And yet abide the world." Sung in staccato notes increasing from forte to double forte at the close, the discomforting religious message of the church in this apocalyptic scene is that the abiding material world, unlike in the earlier song, offers neither salvation nor peace. For Copland, this message ends harshly with a final dissonant chord that moreover suggests the enduring terror that characterizes the world.[8]

As the entrée into *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, "Nature, the gentlest mother" and "There came a wind like a bugle" create a protocol for reading the remainder of the sequence. Where the opening song asserts the unity of the natural and spiritual worlds to be experienced, as Copland puts it, "freely" and "poetically," the subsequent song challenges that assertion. Similarly, the harmony and soft dynamics of "Nature, the gentlest mother" give way to syncopation and brash, wide skips in the vocal line and the accompaniment in "There came a wind like a bugle." The reader and listener, then, should anticipate wrestling with the dramatic disjunction between one's security and pleasure in this world and one's terrified anticipation of the next. Moreover, Copland's Dickinson warns us of the dangers of reading God's will into the things of this world, and of understanding eternity in terms of our material life. Given the terrifying images of the natural world in the second song, we might logically read the *liber mundi* as an ill portent of the afterlife.

Thus, when the church bell of the second song bespeaks doom, we learn in the third song about the specific nature of that doom. The speaker of "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?" attempts the door of heaven to enter into eternal peace, but is denied by both the angels and the saints. Querying heaven, the speaker asks twice why she is forbidden entrance, pleads three times for the "gentlemen in the white robes" not to bar the door, and even requests that "the angels try me just once more." The repetitions are, of course, original to Copland's setting of the poem, and intensify the speaker's grief at learning that she is excluded from paradise.

At the same time, Copland is acutely aware of the larger complexity of this poem, and draws out its more subtle themes by the musical setting of the poem and by its placement in the song cycle. On one hand, he employs considerable "word painting" in ways that are perhaps expected. For example, when the speaker insists, "But I can sing a little minor, . . . Timid as a bird" in order to gain heaven, the word "minor" is sung softly in B-flat and A-flat, thus tonally and dynamically "minor."[9] Similarly, the birds are suggested by quick skips in the piano accompaniment in this and the following measures.[10] Yet, Copland's setting of this poem is more than simple mimicry, especially when the music appears perhaps unfaithful to Dickinson's poem

in ways that reveal his interpretation of the poem. The opening two lines of the song, "Why do they shut me out of Heaven . . . Did I sing too loud?" are delivered not plaintively in the least, but assertively with a double forte dynamic. When a speaker normally asks if he offends in a specific way, the natural assumption behind the question is that he will attempt to redress his failing. However, Copland's Dickinson asks the question for ironic, rhetorical purpose with no thought to modulating her voice, altering her opinion, or amending her thought. At the close of the song, these lines are repeated almost as a refrain. Indeed, the score directs the vocalist to offer the closing lines with a triple forte dynamic and to hold the word "loud" for three full measures, and therein lies the irony of the lyrics. Although the speaker speculates that she is barred from heaven for being "loud," and acknowledges that she is capable of singing "Timid as a bird," she boldly persists in her assertion of her right to sing with force and vigor. She does so to underscore her direct statement that she has deliberately made herself unfit for heaven. She might be timid and thereby earn eternal salvation, but she chooses to proclaim—and, in Copland's setting, to proclaim yet again—the worldly self.

It remains to answer the question of why the speaker foregoes the afterlife that she desired. Within the context of the poem itself, the second and third stanzas put forth her discovery that heaven's gatekeeper is, finally, less generous that she herself, a mere human being, might be.

> Oh, if I – were the Gentleman
> In the "White Robe" –
> And they – were the little Hand – that knocked –
> Could – I – forbid?
>
> (Fr268)

When the promise of heaven is perfect love, to exclude even one human being is to delimit its perfection. The speaker hypothesizes that if she were heaven's sentinel, she would have difficulty in barring entry. Copland's lyrics repeat the question, "Could I forbid, could I forbid, could I forbid," the possibility rendered more unthinkable with each voicing. The flaw in the

perfection promised by heaven would alone drive the speaker to sing in loud outrage because the pieties of her faith have been shattered.

Furthermore, reading this poem within the context of the sequence offers a broader understanding of its importance for Copland's song cycle. Because nature, the *liber mundi* of paradise, was initially cast as the feminine mother with "infinite affection And infiniter care" for all of her children whether they be "the feeblest . . . or the waywardest," the speaker is disillusioned to learn that heaven itself, represented in the third song as the masculine "gentlemen," has neither concern nor mercy for the "little hand that knocked." To emphasize this point, Copland's lyrics change the singular "Gentleman" of Dickinson's poem into plural "gentlemen in the white robes." Thus, the figure of God the Father in his role as judge has been replaced by a judicial body that resembles a communion of saints. In this way, Copland also reveals the gendered statement of this poem within the sequence when he takes the decision of salvation out of the hands of the deity and surrenders it to human beings, the masculine judges supplanting the feminine mother.

While the opening two songs together express extreme aspects of nature, and, in this way, assert the caprice of this world, "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?" asks the reader to reckon with the caprice of the afterworld in its disposition of souls for all eternity. Following the lyrical serenity of Copland's "Nature, the gentlest mother" and the loud, discordant "There came a wind like a bugle," "Why do they shut me out of heaven?" has both the meditative quality of the first and the intensity of the second. Thematically, the third poem not only expresses the tension that arises from the juxtaposition of the first and second poems, but amplifies that tension by extending it to the afterworld. Ultimately, the voice of the speaker—like the song of the vocalist—is both loud and dramatic, and thus resembles the frightening volatility of nature in the second song. As such, Copland's Dickinson signals her rejection of heaven and her determined alliance with the world, though it be strange and unstable.

Given this choice, what is the speaker's consolation at the moment of death? Additionally, when one cannot anticipate bliss in eternity, where is the source of earthly joy? The opening stanza of "The world feels dusty,"

the next song in the cycle engages but does not answer these questions. Instead, the song, which Copland describes as "darkly colored," establishes the dichotomy that vexes any resolution. When Dickinson describes the world as "feel[ing] dusty, when we stop to die," she is invoking the Christian image of man as being born of the dust of the earth and ultimately returning to dust at death. At the moment of death, when the good Christian is said to weary of the world and seek heavenly waters for spiritual relief, Dickinson argues that one thirsts for the dew of this world, not the next. "We want the dew then Honors taste dry." The honors that come with the "privilege" and "victory" of death in anticipation of salvation—to invoke the metaphors of the nineteenth-century Calvinist—"taste dry" on the tongue of one who has just learned in song three that she will be denied happiness in the afterlife. Dickinson looks to the soothing waters of worldly friendship as a "holy balm" that might restore one to life on earth.[11]

If the "world feels dusty, when we stop to die," the poet resolves to let the "rain" of friendship shower the dust, thus choosing life in this world over the afterlife. In anticipation of the final song in Copland's cycle, she will simply not "stop for Death."

Following a rest in the vocal line that sets the final stanza apart from the earlier lines, "The world feels dusty" turns to a tempo marked as "very slow." In this way, the song pauses before gravely apostrophizing an unidentified "thou" and declaring "Mine be the ministry / When thy thirst comes." With this statement, Dickinson dedicates herself to her intimate, albeit temporal, human relationships, offering her loved ones the blessed dews of this world. Once again, though, the speaker is excluded and left behind. She does not die, she is not ministered to, but she is the minister. The dissonant and unresolved musical ending to the piece signals the lack of equanimity in her role as minister to the dying and in her acceptance of death[12].

Were the following poem, "Heart, we will forget him" to stand alone, it might read as a relatively conventional statement of mourning. However, within Copland's song cycle, the poem takes on complexity. It stands as yet another example of the ways in which the speaker is denied—earlier by the angels and the communion of saints, and now by the human "warmth" and

"light" of those who have gone before. The sequencing of the poems suggests the speaker's increasing awareness of her exclusion and isolation, which is paralleled by the increasing contraction of her audience. She is no longer able to address the world at large, the assembly of God, or even an individual on the deathbed, but in this poem, the speaker is isolated to the extent that she addresses only the self. The self, too, is shattered by the loss of love. The solitary "I," the mind, voiced here in the lyrics of the song, speaks to a single "you," the heart, signaled here by a regular and persistent left hand quarter note. The mind addresses the heart, each element of the self recalling one discrete aspect of the experience of human love.

Consistent with the reversals in the first and second poems of the sequence, there is drama to come. "Dear March, come in!" reprises the intense relationship with nature that was introduced in the opening poems. Furthermore, Nature has the facility of healing the heart: the speaker is unable to color the spring hills a vibrant purple, yet nature can provide this pleasure. Nonetheless, the surprising shift in the theme and tone of "Dear March, come in!" from the mournful "Heart, we will forget him" is significant. "Dear March, come in!" neither looks to the past with sadness, nor attempts to numb the memory, but finds pleasure in the moment, and even gazes ahead. The poem illustrates the power of anticipation ("I looked for you before"), and, what is even more valuable, her anticipation is realized.[13]

One might postulate that "Dear March, come in!" reprises the optimism of the opening statement to the poetic sequence in a move that is almost symphonic. Throughout the song cycle, the speaker's affection for the world and her appreciation of its sensual splendor are prominent to the extent that she becomes disaffected with the promise of spiritual afterlife. However, in a complication of the symphonic theme, when Dickinson returns to nature for her pleasure in "Dear March, come in!" she looks to a different aspect of the power of nature than in the opening poem. Nature is no longer a loving mother who guides the child with constancy and concern toward salvation, but here is characterized as the charming and exclusively worldly companion. The dynamics of each song reinforce this thematic distinction. Copland indicates that "Nature, the gentlest mother" be

"crystalline" and "pastoral-like," while "Dear March, come in!" be played "With enthusiasm."[14] Specifically, nature is figured as the welcome guest.[15] The spirited, girlish speaker greets the month of March at the door, invites him to remove his hat, and then, with the intimacy of a relative or exceptionally close friend, welcomes him upstairs in her home. Moreover, the breezy and almost juvenile tone of the poem, which is reinforced by the busy left hand throughout the piece, is incongruous and perhaps even discordant after the lyric statement of the isolate in "Heart, we will forget him." Nature has been stripped of any grave and eternal import, but it does afford her solace that is found only in the things of this world. March gives her great happiness, and symbolically brings color to her world. For Dickinson, the true value of nature is found in the sensual experience of nature.

Blithe in tone, this poem nonetheless acknowledges the fleeting nature of the seasons and their beauty. The speaker initially pouts that April "stayed away a year, . . . to call when I am occupied" with March. Yet, the speaker does not truly take her temporary visitors, March and April, to task for failing to replace the security she sought in nature at the outset of the sequence. Ultimately, the speaker's posture is not sternly evaluative, but accepting, and in this she again shows herself superior to the earlier communion of saints. Unlike them, when she hears a knock on her door, she opens it wide to welcome and appreciate each one who seeks to enter. The final four lines of "Dear March, come in!," in particular, erase the notion of absolute evaluation, which abused her in "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?"

> But trifles look so trivial
> As soon as you have come
>
> That Blame is just as dear as Praise
> And Praise as mere as Blame –
> (Fr1320)

The closing lines are aphoristic and thus might appear assertive in their phrasing. Yet, in Copland's score these statements are set apart from the

earlier music by a two measure rest in the vocal line and his direction to "Relax the tempo" for these lyrics. In this way, the music signals that the poem's closure negates the cruelty of binary absolutes explored in the earlier songs—the heart and the head, the living and the dead, the saved and the damned—to assert her joy in momentary beauty. Copland marks the piano accompaniment to the word "blame" as "p (indifferent)" and the final chord of this song as "delicate," thus emphasizing the ephemeral quality of this beauty and, by extension, her serenity.

Copland wrote that two songs of the cycle were related musically: song seven, "Sleep is supposed to be," and the final song, "The Chariot" (*Copland: Since 1943*, 159). Indeed, the seventh song opens with a left hand melody with a dotted rhythm that is repeated throughout the final song. This death motif—played, according to Copland's direction, "with dignity" and "deliberately"—links the two poems, and provides insight into Copland's reading of "Sleep is supposed to be." Consistent with many interpreters of this poem, Copland understands that Dickinson is drawing on the tropes of Christianity to cast death metaphorically as sleep and symbolically as the "shutting of the eye." Likewise, the figurative dawn ("the breaking of the day") is the resurrection for eternity, much as Fr804 depicts the grave as a bed in which to wait "till Judgement Break." Copland draws attention to the religious valence of these metaphors with a series of chords at the close of the opening sentence that suggests hymnody.

Yet this poem also continues Dickinson's reversal of *idées fixes*, which are here touted by "souls of sanity" and "people of degree." We learn in the early lines what the figures of sleep and morning are "supposed to be," but Dickinson quickly corrects these received notions. In Copland's setting, the tone of the music changes dramatically with the lyrics,

Morning has not occurred!

> That shall Aurora be –
> East of Eternity –
> One with the banner gay –
> One in the red array –
> *That* is the break of Day!
> (Fr35)

Where the earlier lines of the song are sung "with great calm," this statement is made "with emphasis." When Copland's Dickinson announces that "Morning has not occurred," she acknowledges that she is not among the resurrected souls who are living outside of time for all eternity. Moreover, the accompaniment for the remainder of the song is "clangorous" and "marcato non legato" to signal a further shift from the pieties of the opening lines. In this section, she asks that our understanding of dawn be refashioned to legitimize her life on earth as a glorious day, here painted red, echoing the maple trees in "Dear March, come in!" Her Aurora occurs "East of Eternity," outside of a religious context, and she finds her true awakening in the physical experience of the world.

Because Copland understood that Dickinson's poem placed concepts that were "supposed to be" at odds with ideas that she believed, the final line of the poem—"That is the break of day"—is assertive and even definitive in Copland's setting. The composer set this line apart from the previous lyrics by a rest, and directed that the tempo be "slower," to draw attention to Dickinson's redefinition of day. The breath mark after the verb "is" underscores the statement of a tautology. Additionally, Copland indicates that the word "day" be held dramatically with a "long fermata," focusing further attention on Dickinson's redefinition of dawn. A recurring theme in the song cycle, true life takes place in this time and in this world. Copland gives this theme special prominence in the sequence because his score directs that there be a "long pause before starting No. 8," asking the listener to contemplate the statement made by this song before continuing.

Having affirmed the primacy of human experience, in the subsequent song, Dickinson once again struggles with its impermanence. Specifically, in "When they come back," she worries that the glory of the spring will not repeat itself, thus equivocating on the statements of "Dear March, come in!" and, to be sure, "Nature, the gentlest mother is." "When they come back if blossoms do, . . . I always feels a doubt if blossoms can be born again When once the art is out." A rest or breath mark that precedes each "if" of the phrases, "if blossoms do," "if robins do," "if May returns," emphasizes nature's fragility. This concern leads immediately to a redirection of her fear toward the impermanence of the self. "If I am there . . . one

does not know . . . what party one may be tomorrow . . .. "With both the self and the world in precarious question, in the final line, Dickinson reshapes the question and the tone once again. "But if I *am* there . . . I take back all I say!" (Copland's emphasis). She strikes an insouciant pose to suggest that—whatever comes—she recognizes the primacy of the experience and the "Experiment" of the world, recognizing that she may not always be a "party" to this world.

"I felt a funeral in my brain" is a dominant lyric—regardless of the setting in which it finds itself. This is especially true in Copland's song cycle in which the previous poem prompts its contemplation of personal death. In "When they come back," Dickinson acknowledges that she may not see another spring, and in this poem, she imagines the very process of her death and burial. In contrast to the earlier works in the sequence that take place within nature and insist upon the cyclic time that is intrinsic to nature, "I felt a funeral in my brain" is located within the interior self of the imagination. Furthermore, its paratactic phrasing insists upon the linear nature of this experience. The relentless "And" that opens six of the sixteen lines of the poem rushes the argument forward in time.[16] Likewise, Copland's setting of this poem gives prominence to the persistent "treading, treading, treading" and "beating, beating, beating" within the speaker's mind, the triple repetitions of these words being original to Copland. Once again employing word painting for the treading feet and beating drum, the composer also directs that the left hand of the piano score be double forte and "thud-like," and that the first beat of each measure should be exaggerated. Within the context of the Copland cycle that derives its stability and joy in the anticipation of the cyclic return of the day, the seasons, and their beauty, death is defined here as the acceptance of the linear nature of human life.

Especially interesting within the context of a song cycle, Copland's Dickinson imagines herself reduced in her final moments to the single sense of hearing. In the elimination of senses that occurs in the process of dying, the speaker is limited to only the powers of her ear. While she speaks of "feeling" the funeral in her brain, she employs images of no other sense, describing the rite as a "beating drum" and hearing the treading and the

lifting of the coffin. Likewise, at the close of the poem, she depicts heaven in aural terms as a "bell," but, because she is deaf, she cannot hear the toll of heaven's bell. She is "wrecked," with silence as her only companion. This image leaves the speaker—once again—outside of paradise, and in this way reprises the theme of "Why did they shut me out of Heaven?"

In a self-reflexive statement, the life of a song cycle ends truly ends with the inability to hear. Copland's setting dramatizes the loss of hearing and loss of voice that signal death. The lyrics of this piece are sung mezzo forte and forte until they fall to piano with the words, "And I and silence . . . ," The final word of the song, too, becomes increasingly faint with a decrescendo through its three measures. However, the left hand of the piano remains mezzo forte and ominously "thud-like" for a full measure after the voice is silent, thus bespeaking the inevitable demise.

Music is again at the thematic center of the following poem. The speaker of "I've heard an organ talk sometimes" is positioned in the aisle of a cathedral, not in the aisles of nature, as she was in the opening poem. And more importantly, the speaker is no longer singing too loudly as she did in "Why do they shut me out of heaven?" In fact, she is holding her breath and not singing at all. However, where she could not hear heaven's bell in the previous poem, she can now hear, and is entranced by the speech of the church organ. The traditional chords of the piano accompaniment suggest the elegance and solemnity of hymnody. However, at the point when the lyrics acknowledge that the organ music is "cathedral" music, the chords take on subtle dissonance. This musical shift signals the way in which the speaker perceives the chords because Copland's Dickinson claims that she "understood no word" of this generally lucid music and its religious message. At the same time, she recognizes the power of this sensual experience—even though she did not comprehend its significance—because she confesses that she "knew not what was done to me," a confession that admits both confusion and acknowledgement of the music's impact. The song ends with a broad double forte affirmation of the venue as an "old hallowed aisle." Consistent with thematic elements in other poems in the song cycle, physical experience—whether of nature or of art—is intensely spiritual, although not necessarily or conventionally religious.

As a poem, "Going to Heaven!" relies on sentimental conventions of describing one's entrance into paradise as going home and receiving one's crown, with the new saint cast as a sheep returning to the shepherd. Yet, the quick tempo and non legato accompaniment that is marked at times as "impetuous" create a song that is neither grave nor sentimental. To the contrary, Copland's setting of this poem is reminiscent of the music of "Dear March, come in!," a piece with a much less sober theme. Indeed, the conductor Serge Koussevitzky found that the music did not "fit" the words in this song (*Copland: Since 1943*, 162). However, Copland's sensitive reading of Dickinson's work grasps the discordance between the images and the tone in the opening stanzas of the poem, such that his setting emphasizes the ironic reversal of "Going to Heaven!"[17] In the final stanza, the speaker admits that—despite her giddy anticipation of heaven—she doesn't have faith in her salvation, and furthermore, she elects to tarry on earth. She chooses not to "stop for death"—which, of course, leads us to the final poem of the cycle.

Much has been written about Dickinson's genteel figure of death. Within the context of Copland's song cycle, death is depicted in clearly worldly terms—he is the man who comes to call. In this respect, he resembles the guests of the sixth song, "Dear March, come in!" but not entirely. The cyclic nature of the time suggested by the seasonal visitors of the earlier song has been replaced here by the terminus that is death. Announced by the dotted rhythm "death motif" from "Sleep is supposed to be," the courtly man of "The Chariot" escorts the speaker from her home. Together they tour familiar venues of this world, after which he delivers her to her final home, the "low house" that is the tomb.

Within the context of Copland's sequence, it is remarkable that there is no dramatic cycle of time, no anticipation of the seasons, and no fear of disappointment. Death is not accompanied by "boots of lead" that keep "treading, treading" in her head, and there is no dramatic setting as for "I felt a funeral in my brain." This characterization of death is too serene and too polite. Death is neither a place nor a condition. As suggested in an earlier poem, it is merely a loss of all sensation—with the exception of the requisite chill. Indeed, there is a decided chill in the final note of the piece,

the sustained high E for the vocalist on the last syllable of "eternity," which is held so long as to be eerie and itself seemingly endless.

"The Chariot" offers yet another reversal of earlier themes and tones within the cycle. There is no cathedral, no gates of heaven, no white robes, and neither faith in eternal life nor despair of salvation. Copland revealed that he was initially attracted to Dickinson's work by the opening lines of this poem: "The idea of this completely unknown girl in Massachusetts seeing herself riding off into immortality with death himself seemed like such an incredible idea! I was very struck with that, especially since it turned out to be true" (*Copland: Since 1943*, 159). Immortality throughout eternity—as suggested by Copland's sequence—is exclusively secular and is dependent only upon the intensity of one's experience and the quality of one's artistry. For Copland's Dickinson, then, immortality is utterly distinct from salvation or the promise of paradise.

In the brief statement about "Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson," Aaron Copland wrote,

> The poems center about no single theme, but they treat of subject matter particularly close to Miss Dickinson: nature, death, life, eternity. It was my hope, nearly a century after these remarkable poems were conceived, to create a musical counterpart to Emily Dickinson's unique personality. (*Copland: Since 1943*, 158)

Copland's general and unassuming remarks do not reveal the elegant coherence of his composition. Although he has identified the relationship between "Sleep is supposed to be" and "The Chariot"—and marked this relationship by using some of the same musical material for both songs—the song cycle exposes the ways in which "the subject matter particularly close to Miss Dickinson" is interrelated. That Copland began his work on Dickinson by setting "Because I could not stop for Death" reveals that he was very early attracted to Emily Dickinson's wry, even irreverent wit. Beginning, as he did, with the closing statement would compel Copland to construct a sequence of poems that would ultimately lead to and support

"The Chariot." The figure of death as the suitor is highly unconventional, and the depiction of the afterlife in images that deliberately avoid religious inference is also remarkable. Copland was perhaps especially intrigued by the notion that a nineteenth-century woman from a Calvinist family would possess the intellectual independence to arrive at this understanding of death. To make this point, he opened his cycle with an opposing statement in "Nature, the gentlest mother is." The progress from the first to last song in the cycle suggests the philosophical struggle, and the thematic range—like that of the vocal and piano range—is great and even jarring at times.[18] Expressive of Dickinson's personal wrestling with life in this world and the next, Copland's sequence creates a dramatic statement that begins in religious orthodoxy and ends in secular independence.

How did Aaron Copland arrive so early at a reading of the work of Emily Dickinson that recognized her gravity, wit, irony, and intellectual flexibility? To answer this question, one might first look to how he came to Dickinson at all. According to Howard Pollack, Copland's interest in the poet began as early as 1940, the year of the first production of *Letter to the World*, a ballet choreographed and performed by his friend and collaborator, Martha Graham.[19] Graham's ballet centers on the interaction between two figures, both of whom are Emily Dickinson, "One Who Dances" and "One Who Speaks."[20] The sensual pleasure expressed by "One Who Dances" and the intellectual clarity expressed by "One Who Speaks" are countered in the ballet by "Ancestress," the Puritan conscience who opposes Dickinson's intelligence, creativity, and sexual desire. This ballet is somewhat similar in theme to several of Graham's earlier works, such as *Heretic* (1929), which depicts the struggle of the outcast woman in the face of a chorus of Puritans, and *American Provincials* (1934), which treats social reproof of sexuality. Prior to her work on *Letter to the World*, Graham had also experimented with incorporating literature into her dance. In *American Document* (1938), she draws on such works as the Declaration of Independence and the poetry of Walt Whitman. The "Puritan" episode of

this ballet is especially relevant to her creation of *Letter to the World* in both its theme and use of literary texts. In this ballet, which places the erotic self in opposition to its Puritan self, passages of Jonathan Edwards's sermons are spoken alternately with verses from the "Song of Songs." Two years later, Martha Graham choreographed her statement about the rebellion of Emily Dickinson. As such, Graham's vision of Dickinson as the acutely intelligent and sensual woman who resists the oppressive social mores and spiritual strictures of her past are surely imprinted on Copland's *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson*.

Nine years later after the premiere of *Letter to the World*, Aaron Copland undertook his own work with the poems of Emily Dickinson.[21] He began this project immediately on the heels of composing the score for the Academy Award winning movie, "The Heiress," and he may have carried the themes of the film project into his reading of Dickinson and his work on the song cycle. Howard Pollack has noted the musical parallels in the movie score and the song cycle, and observes that "Copland may well have realized that with his music for *The Heiress* he had created a style that could accommodate Dickinson's poetry and her world" (440). Indeed there are decided similarities between the main character of the film and the biographical Emily Dickinson. *The Heiress* chronicles the first love of a young, reclusive heiress, Catherine Sloper, who lives with her father, who is named Austin, and her Aunt Livinia, in Washington Square. Filmed in 1949, the opening frame announces that the movie is set "One Hundred Years Ago . . ." Catherine has domestic talent, is a fervent and skilled embroiderer, but exhibits no facility in social conversation, such that her father deems her unmarriageable. Dr. Sloper views his daughter through the eyes of the frivolous and demanding world, and cannot appreciate her intelligence and her artistry. He is not privy to her fabulous and sometimes caustic wit, which she reserves for her female confidante. When a fortune seeker courts the young woman, she falls in love only to be crushed when he jilts her, once the father threatens disinheritance at the prospect of their marriage. With these blows, first from her father, then her lover, Catherine's naïve, gentle, and generous nature immediately becomes terrifyingly cold, such that when the young cad returns at her father's death, she delights in

her revenge. "The Heiress" is impressive in its exploration of the extremes of human emotion, and sets forth a compelling example of an independent woman who is capable of both great human warmth and horrifying cruelty.

One might also look to Aaron Copland's education in Paris with Nadia Boulanger for an understanding of his early preparation for setting the lyrics of Dickinson. Although Copland was reluctant to study with Boulanger on the grounds that he knew of no important composer who had studied under a woman, he recanted under her tutelage. He would later praise her intellect, and confess that his work with Boulanger was "the most important of my musical life."[22] Interestingly, Copland cast his characterization of his teacher in gendered terms. In a letter to his brother, Ralph, he speaks of her as an "intellectual Amazon," but is careful to avoid misrepresenting Boulanger: "But don't make the mistake of imagining her some sort of she-male, of formidable appearance and baritone voice. That's just what she isn't! A more charming womanly woman never lived."[23] Despite his predisposition toward the female musician, Copland learned—from the example of Nadia Boulanger—that women have the capacity to be extraordinarily accomplished and sophisticated artists without compromising their womanhood.

Equally important, Copland observed in the same letter that Boulanger "is not only familiar with all music from Bach to Stravinski, but is prepared for anything worse in the way of dissonance that I may choose fit to hammer out." While Copland acknowledged Boulanger's classical background and her allegiance to the classics, he was also impressed with her intellectual flexibility as she was accepting of his innovative modernism. This is precisely the intelligence that he found in Emily Dickinson, which was the very aspect of her work that he sought to highlight through his song cycle.

Most of the poems that Aaron Copland selected for *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* are filled with the dissonant noises of everyday life, sounds that would have enormous appeal to a twentieth-century composer: wild bells and bugles, voices that sing in a minor key, persistent knocks on the door, the treading of boots of lead, and the beating of drums. At the same time, Copland recognized and valued the classic, ballad rhythms in many of these poems, the regular prosody of most, and the rhymes that structure

many of her lines. Copland perceived the confrontation of traditional and unconventional images and forms in Emily Dickinson's poetry because this was precisely his musical vision. His musical education and tastes prepared him to interpret in his art form the full range of themes and forms in Dickinson's work. Like Emily Dickinson, Aaron Copland had a "vice for voices." His compositions give voice to American folk culture, the European musical tradition, Latin American dance, and more. In *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson*, he boldly assumes the voice of the nineteenth-century woman poet, because he understood the harmony and dissonance inherent to that voice and her poetic vision.[24]

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Howard Pollack for introducing me to Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, and am indebted to him for many illuminating conversations about this work. In addition, his important critical biography of Copland, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*, has been invaluable in preparing this essay. This essay is largely the result of a 2001 program at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, at which mezzo soprano Katherine Ciesinski performed *Twelve Poems*, Pollack accompanied at the piano, and I commented on the poetry.

2. *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* is comprised of the following of Dickinson's poems: "Nature – the Gentlest Mother is" (Fr741), "There came a Wind like a Bugle –" (Fr1618), "Why – do they shut me out of Heaven?" (Fr268), "The World – feels Dusty" (Fr491), "Heart! We will forget him!" (Fr64), "Dear March – Come in –" (Fr1320), "Sleep is supposed to be" (Fr35), "When they come back – if Blossoms do –" (Fr1042), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340), "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes –" (Fr211), "Going to Heaven!" (Fr128), and "Because I could not stop for Death –" (Fr479). In this essay, I will refer to these poems by the titles used by Copland in the score of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*. In the case of the first eleven poems, Copland took the first line or a variant of the first line of the poem as a title. The twelfth poem, "Because I could not stop for Death –" is entitled "The Chariot." In the essay, all references to the lyrics of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* are to the 1951 Boosey Hawkes publication of the score. References to the poetry are from the 1998 Franklin edition and are noted in the text.

   In the late 1960s, Copland composed an orchestral sequence, *Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson*," which was comprised of poems 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12 of

the original twelve. This work was first performed at Copland's 70th birthday celebration at Alice Tully Hall on November 14, 1970 with mezzo-soprano Gwen Killebrew as vocalist and Michael Tilson Thomas conducting the Julliard Orchestra.

3. Robert McClure Smith makes a similar observation in *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*, and understands "Dickinson's rhetorical strategies [which] effect a collapsing of the distance between the reader and the poem" in terms of psychoanalytic theories of transference and countertransference (189).

4. Jonnie Guerra has directed the attention of scholars to adaptations and responses to Dickinson's poetry in music, drama, dance, and the visual arts. Studies of Copland's song cycle for literary scholars—such as those of Joseph Kerman and Nancy Cluck—are few, and focus primarily on the composition's musical setting.

5. Pollack reports that Copland consulted both the 1947 *Poems by Emily Dickinson* and the 1948 *Emily Dickinson Poems: First and Second Series* (644 n22).

6. This and all other references to Copland's score are to the 1951 Boosey Hawkes publication.

7. The dashes in the final line are not reproduced in the editions of Dickinson's poetry that Copland consulted. However, his reading of her work is uncannily perceptive, especially here where the musical rest appears to anticipate the dash of the fair copy.

8. Nancy Cluck observes that the "final tonic chord, A, C-sharp, E is disturbed by an anomalous F-sharp," and concludes that "the song does not end in harmonic consonance anymore than the theme of the poem reaches stability" (143).

9. These lines in Dickinson's poem read "But I can say a little 'Minor' / Timid . . ." (Fr268). Copland altered the verb to "sing" perhaps to reinforce the image of singing in contrast to speaking, which would be important in the context of an art song.

10. In *Copland: Since 1943*, the composer mentions the word painting in the opening songs, "an occasional bird-call, flutterings, and grace notes in the introduction to the first song, 'Nature, the Gentlest Mother,' the bugle-like melody for the voice in 'There Came a Wind Like a Bugle'" (159).

11. Copland's lyrics reproduce exactly the final stanza in the editions that he consulted for his work: "Mine be the ministry when thy thirst comes. – Dews of thyself to fetch and holy balms." Fr491 reads

Mine be the Ministry
When thy Thirst comes –
Dews of Thessaly, to fetch –
And Hybla Balms –

12. Cluck observes that "the song ends without resolution on the most unstable note of the scale, the seventh or A-sharp in the key of B minor."

13. Fr1320 reads "I hoped for you before –."

14. The addition of the exclamation point to the first line, which is original to Copland, signals his reading of the tone of the poem.

15. March is personified as a male guest in Fr1194, which begins "We like March – his shoes are purple." Likewise, in this poem, March is the portent of spring and summer, evoked by images of the dog's muddy paws, the adder's tongue, and the hot sun. Much like the figure in "Dear March," "News is he of all the others." We can also look to "March is the Month of Expectation" (Fr1422) in which the speaker tries to maintain a "becoming firmness" but reveals her "Pompous Joy" at the prospect of the joys of spring, somewhat akin to the ebullient speaker in "Dear March, come in!."

16. The version of "I felt a funeral in my brain" that Copland consulted did not contain the final stanza of four lines, each beginning with "And."

17. Vivan Perlis relates an anecdote that reveals the extent to which Aaron Copland enjoyed Dickinson's ironic wit in this poem. She writes, "In the long afternoon working through Copland's papers . . ., I occasionally heard him at the piano: one day practicing . . . the *Dickinson Songs* for a performance with Jan DeGaetani (1978): While playing, Copland sang 'Going to Heaven!' with great gusto, laughing out loud at himself as he went along" (*Copland: Since 1943*, 401).

18. Copland writes that music critic Virgil Thomson admired the wide vocal skips that were so dramatic and effective in this work, but acknowledged that they were also very demanding for the performer. The composer states that Thomson "criticiz[ed] my 'cruelty' to the singer," but further notes that "Virgil had caught the fact that I meant for the range to be rather extreme" (*Copland: Since 1943*, 161).

19. *Letter to the World* premiered at the Bennington College Theatre on August 11, 1940. With music by Hunter Johnson, the ballet featured Martha Graham as "One Who Dances" and Dickinson's poetry was spoken by Jean Erdman, one of the dancers in the company, as "One Who Speaks." Jane Dudley danced the role of the "Ancestress," a role that was created for her, and Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham danced the male roles.

20. *Letter to the World* opened with the recitation of "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (Fr260), and included the following poems: "I taste a liquor never brewed –" (Fr207), "'Hope' is the thing with feathers –" (Fr314), "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that – (Fr225), "Of course I prayed" (Fr581), "There came a Day at Summer's full" (Fr325), and the title poem, "This is my letter to the World" (Fr519).

21. In the intervening years, Copland and Graham collaborated on the 1944 ballet, *Appalachian Spring* which Graham choreographed to Copland's Pulitzer Prize-winning score.

22. Copland to Nadia Boulanger, 24 November 1950. Copland Collection at the Library of Congress. Qtd. in Pollack 49.

23. Copland to Ralph Copland, 19 January 1922, Copland Collection at the Library of Congress. Qtd. in Pollack 47.

24. Copland was acutely aware that Dickinson's poetry contained a female voice. On hearing a recording of *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson* performed by a British male singer, he said, "I liked it, even though it did seem strange to hear a man singing those words. After all, they were written by a woman with a woman's point of view" (*Copland: Since 1943*, 162).

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