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"Singing off the Charnel Steps": Soldiers and Mourners in Emily Dickinson's War Poetry

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"Singing off the Charnel Steps":

Soldiers and Mourners in Emily Dickinson's War Poetry

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In the introduction to *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), Richard Sewall writes, "Only the 'realist' context will suit the purpose for this perennially "unreal' figure" (11). Sewall is determined to locate Emily Dickinson the woman and writer in the dizzying maze of Dickinson the myth. It is the critic's task to read the poetry in a much larger context. The scope of Dickinson scholarship has widened considerably in recent years, but Sewall's quote reminds us of the importance of her engagement with the "real."

The major historical event of Emily Dickinson's lifetime was the American Civil War, and it coincided with the poet's most productive years. Until very recently, scholars viewed this fact as little more than a coincidence, emphasizing Dickinson's physical and psychological isolation from her historical moment.¹ As critics began to acknowledge the presence of the Civil War in Dickinson's poetry, many argued that she internalized the war, making it a metaphor in the poems as opposed to a subject.² Elizabeth Phillips, who looks at some of Dickinson's war poems in *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*, feels prompted to ask, "Would the successful poem be any more meaningful if there were a footnote explaining its connection to a war?" (51) By acknowledging the war poetry, Phillips argues, one recognizes Dickinson's ability to transform not only her own feelings but also those of others into works of art (52). While that aim is certainly important, moving beyond mere footnotes will expand conventional and often still narrow definitions of war poetry, women's poetry, and Dickinson's poetry. Emily Dickinson was a war poet, and it is time for us to discover what kind of war poet she was. Dickinson scholarship thus would benefit from a comprehensive analysis of her dozens of war poems as such. This paper forms a small part of that project. **[End Page 64]**

Emily Dickinson's war poems can be divided into three thematic groups. The first explores general questions of war and peace, specifically asking if any cause is worth the price and if true victory and peace are achievable. The second group probes the connections between war and God and nature. The presence of these first two themes is recognized by Shira Wolosky, whose *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* is the only extensive analysis of Dickinson's war poetry to date. She concludes that Dickinson cannot console herself with the belief that the loss of so many men is part of God's plan and will be balanced by future gains. Though Wolosky provides a compelling analysis of Dickinson's profound questioning of theology, I argue in my larger work that Dickinson's attitudes toward war and God's role in it vary widely and are even contradictory at times.

Here I will discuss poems from the third group -- poems that probe the deaths of soldiers and the sorrow of those who mourn them. In elegies, dramatic monologues, and lyrics, Dickinson writes about the front and the homefront in both sentimental and painfully realistic terms. She is both fascinated with and repulsed by the fallen men; they are at once beautiful and hideous and their deaths noble and meaningless. Her mourners range from proud to guilt-ridden to bitterly devastated. The tendency in existing scholarship on Dickinson's war poetry, and, indeed, the bent of criticism in general, has been to search for Dickinson's global perspective on war. But this search for her master narrative ignores Dickinson's artistic impulse, in Sharon Cameron's words, to tell "two conflicting stories . . . simultaneously" (26). It also ignores the nature of this "Civil" War -- which implies multiple and even contradictory responses within the nation and within each of its citizens. Emily Dickinson tells the story of soldiers dying and survivors mourning in a series of fascinating snapshots which...

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