

Natalie Emma Johnsonová
Emily Dickinson and the Puritan Tradition
BA Thesis
Opponent's Report

In four chapters, the thesis aims to explore Emily Dickinson's life and work in relation to the lingering presence of Puritanism. Approximately a half of the thesis considers Puritanism, namely its formation in the seventeenth-century New England and its existence in Dickinson's cultural milieu. The first chapter overviews several principal tenets, such as the dichotomy damnation/salvation, the notion of grace and providence, the emphasis on self-scrutiny, work ethic and the preference for plain style. Having concluded that "Puritanism in its strictest form occupied a relatively small part of the American land, and lost its fervour by the 18th century, [yet] it has still exerted a profound influence on the evolution of culture, literature and politics of the United States" (17), in the second chapter, Natalie Emma Johnsonová proceeds to illustrate the presence of Puritanism in the nineteenth century generally and in Dickinson's life specifically. Whereas the biographical part of this chapter evaluates the persistence of Puritanism primarily in terms of religious practice, the second part proposes to view Dickinson's debt to Puritanism as an element of her style and thematic preoccupations: "the pressing questions regarding salvation, damnation, and how is God's will manifested in the world around" (30).

On these grounds, the second half of the thesis analyzes selected poems by Dickinson, with attention to the themes of "Life," "Bodily Wonder," "Death," "Sin" and "Faith." A separate chapter concerns God ("God and Death," "God and Creation" and "God and Poets"). Instead of depicting Dickinson as a follower, Johnsonová envisions the poet primarily as a rebel against Puritanism: a writer who could "revel in sensations and marvel at the properties of daily existence" (34); who recognized the cruelty of death and held God accountable; who felt anger, sorrow, pride and shame in regard to her banishment from heaven and was even "similar to Nietzsche, who criticised the focus given on the afterlife, making this life a secondary experience" (40). The thesis does not deny that the poems do not "necessarily reject religious convictions" (43), at times expressing reverence for God, but Dickinson's faith is full of cracks and her God appears also as "the distant fatherly figure, who allows [...] death and pain when it should be in His power to stop it" (55). "Overall," Johnsonová summarizes, "Dickinson's poems interact with the Puritan tradition, take from it, subvert it and rise from it" (63).

Formally, the thesis is systematically structured and clear. It could have been more carefully edited and the prose is occasionally colloquial for an academic thesis (for instance in the introduction, where the author expresses her disappointment that Puritanism is often "best presented in a couple of very simple characteristics and then moved on to something juicier" [8]). The range of critical sources employed is nevertheless substantial and the thesis references a comprehensive selection of Dickinson's works. Since the poems are not contextualized within Dickinson's oeuvre, the defense could attempt to do that and consider the development the poet's interaction with the chosen themes. There could also be a more detailed reflection on stylistic features, those that might be considered a debt to Puritanism and those that constitute a departure. The contrast between Dickinson and poets such as Anne Bradstreet or Edward Taylor is interesting although were the seventeenth-century poets consistently "deeply pious and addressed God in the humblest of tones" (59)? One last question, which goes beyond literary contexts: the thesis considers the lingering presence of Puritanism primarily as religious practice and a set of existential questions; it does not follow up on Sacvan Bercovitch's claim that Puritanism is a major force behind the formation of American ideology (e.g. of exceptionalism), culture and economy, nor does it consider how particular understanding of Puritanism was developed retrospectively, in the nineteenth century, as part of constructing the nation. Could the defense discuss these issues?

Proposed grade: velmi dobře

Prague, 30th May 2024



Pavla Veselá, PhD.