

## REVIEWS

THE LONG SHADOW: Emily Dickinson's  
Tragic Poetry. By Clark Griffith. Prince-  
ton University Press. 1964. \$6.00.

The author of this book knows which of Emily Dickinson's poems are very good and which are merely frequently anthologized. Saying so in print is a great contribution because the authors of journal articles generally aren't interested in whether the literature which they are discussing is good or bad -- at least they seldom say so. Professor Griffith is also undoubtedly right in what he says about the poet's themes, preoccupations and fears. But because I have a very high opinion of the author's capacities, I found The Long Shadow disappointing in a number of ways. First, Mr. Griffith makes a number of very disconcerting mistakes in the factual content of the poems, the "where we are" and "what happens." It seemed to me that these errors were matters of fact and not of "reading," and so I have been taking the book around to friends to see what they think. Alas, they agree. "His students should have caught those for him," said one, "we all make mistakes like that; good students set us straight." The second fault is related to the book's virtues. While Mr. Griffith is almost always right, the tone of his prose is frequently distressingly bald. Often he states with heavy emphasis things which sensitive readers of Emily Dickinson's poems have always known, some of them in fact things which many of us have been taught. There is, in short, a good bit of tilting against windmills, and from time to time even the setting up of a straw man: "Her poetry suffers, the critics have often insisted, because it is too terse, too threadbare, too inveterately lacking in the niceties of adornment and refinement" (61). I hope that no critic in the last few decades has really talked about "niceties" in quite that way. Or again: "One suspects that the favorite public images of Miss Dickinson are still those of an American Mrs. Browning, . . . or of a feminine Walt Whitman . . ." (6). Good critics, it seems to me, more often have made the opposite error -- making her too steadily tough, when in fact, as Professor Griffith himself pointed out in a very good article published a few years ago, sometimes she is kind of goeey.

I found the book rather uncomfortable in a number of other ways as well, although I am not sure that some of these flaws are really the author's fault: first, he needs quite a bit in the way of prose statement of the contents of poems. Such summaries always read badly. Second, while the sexuality of Dickinson's poems is undeniable, spelling it all out makes again for awkward passages. Still, Professor Griffith has pointed to a number of poems and said, "These are very good, and here's why," and then listed plausible reasons. This alone in the case of a figure as often misread as is Emily Dickinson is a genuine contribution.

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THE WAKE OF THE GODS: Melville's  
Mythology. By H. Bruce Franklin. Stan-  
ford, California: Stanford University  
Press. 1963. \$5.75.

The first chapter of Mr. Franklin's book contains a succinct and helpful discussion of the state of mythological theory and knowledge in Melville's time, "from the mastering of Sanskrit by Sir Charles Wilkins and Sir William Jones in the 1780's to just before Sir James Frazier began to displace astronomical gods in favor of vegetation gods in 1890." The author also stresses the problems posed for orthodox Christians by the similarities among the world's religions which comparative mythology revealed. The book concludes with what should prove to be a useful "Selected Index of Non-Judaic-Christian Gods, Myths, and Religions in Melville's Works."

The remainder of the book is rather less successful. Mr. Franklin tends too often to assume Melville's knowledge of source material, and he imputes to Melville a too-conscious use of mythologies and mythological theories. For example, the arguments that Mardi constitutes a careful analysis of contemporaneous mythological theory and that the Osiris-Typhon myth "is central to Melville's conception, and . . . maintains a central order" in Moby-Dick are intriguing; but they ignore much that we know about the composition and meaning of these books. The arguments seem at too many points imposed on, rather than derived from, the texts.

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THE AMERICAN HUMORIST: Conscience  
of the Twentieth Century. By Norris W.  
Yates. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University  
Press, 1964. \$4.95.

Norris Yates argues that the key to much twentieth-century American humor is to be found in the humorists' use of three character types. Two of these types, the crackerbox philosopher and the solid citizen, had