

**Paulina Ambroży**

**“Rendezvous of Light:” Emily Dickinson, the Luminists and the Sign of the Absolute**

**ABSTRACT**

In a letter to her sister-in-law Susan (*Letters*, Vol. 3.799), Emily Dickinson used the expression “Rendezvous of Light” to describe the mystique that she saw in the death of Susan’s son. In my analysis, I intend to explore the rich resonance of such light-oriented metaphors within the poet’s continuous rethinking of death, afterlife and immortality, and to juxtapose it with similar concerns in the American Romantic painting. Here, my special focus is on works of the so-called Luminist School, represented by John Frederick Kensett, Fitz Henry Lane, Sanford Robinson Gifford and Martin Johnson Heade.

Both Dickinson and the Luminists attempted to create an idiom capable of communicating the Absolute as part of a larger Transcendentalist project within American Romanticism. The Amherst poet and her painter contemporaries shared Ralph Waldo Emerson’s recognition of art as a transcendental force, and, following the latter’s penchant for solar metaphors, explored the material and symbolic power of light as a mode of probing the realm of the Spirit. And yet, as I shall prove, their search ultimately yielded different results. Admittedly, Dickinson was intensely influenced by the Hudson River School and Luminist painting, and her imagery attests to an awareness of space, light and color; nevertheless, she swerved from her painter contemporaries’ trust in the illuminative force and stability of the material sign.

My presentation is an attempt to investigate expressive and representational powers, as well as limits of painterly and verbal signs, in confrontation with the idea of the Romantic Absolute. Using selected semiotic and ekphrastic theories, I shall argue that Dickinson’s “rendezvous” with the Absolute are rarely moments of retreat or meticulous ‘light-gathering’ into the perfect coulisse of neoclassical design (as in Thomas Cole’s landscapes) or the hermetically sealed and coldly glittering surface of Luminist masterpieces (see Kensett, Heade or Lane). Rather, she uses words to create dramatic tension between the Absolute and its unrepresentability, as she continually ‘slashes’ the surface of her poem-paintings, dispersing the light in equally powerful metaphors of darkness, and ‘roughens’ her works’ texture through broken syntax and the heavy ‘brushstroke’ of her fractured line. Whereas the Luminist method of locking light in the surface of the canvas leads to an unearthly effect of stilled time and infinitude, Dickinson’s eccentric idiom, graphic layout and spatiotemporal

imagery all push against that stillness and ultimately darken the solar optimism of Transcendental belief.