

LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION: DICKINSON, EMERSON, EDWARDS, AND THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NATURAL WORLD

by

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(Under the Direction of Tricia Lootens)

ABSTRACT

The following study examines Emily Dickinson's characterization of nature especially regarding nature's spiritual significance and the extent to which that significance may be conceptually interpreted and translated into language. To elucidate Dickinson's particular view, I describe the poet's response to empirical, Puritan, and transcendental philosophies of nature, traditions which also sought to explain nature's spiritual significance. This study highlights the ways in which Dickinson opposed the hermeneutic presumption implied by Puritan and transcendental theories but saw all three traditions as sources for creative appropriation as she formed her unique conception of nature and language.

INDEX WORDS: Emily Dickinson, Nature, Language, Interpretation, Empirical, Puritan, Transcendental, Emerson, Edwards

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B.A., Covenant College, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2006

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Introduction: Visions of Dickinson

Emily Dickinson's poetry has long been acknowledged as a site of conflict. Though her work is most often perceived as a site of personal conflict, a space in which the poet struggles with private issues such as religion and identity, Dickinson's poetry has also become the object of a larger cultural conflict as successive generations of readers challenge past attempts to characterize and interpret Dickinson and her work. As Betsy Erkkila reveals in her discussion of Dickinson publication history, "The Emily Dickinson Wars," cultural interests are often at stake in the battle over Dickinson's image. In this way, Dickinson's poetry represents "a scene of struggle in which significant social and cultural values have been both produced and contested" (12). Interestingly, one of these cultural conflicts has centered on Dickinson's own cultural involvement, debating the extent to which Dickinson participated in the social climate and concerns of nineteenth-century America. The separate parties of this conflict tend to locate Dickinson on one side of a public/private dichotomy, identifying her either as a perceptive social critic or as a socially oblivious recluse. As one considers these diverse images, the difficulty of evaluating the cultural values and interests that undoubtedly shape each characterization presents itself. Should these characterizations be rejected as purely subjective and self-interested accounts, or might they offer insight into the actual complexities of Dickinson's art?

To answer this question, it might help to investigate several historical accounts of Dickinson and society, examining the ways in which they have been shaped by cultural bias and the areas in which they might offer insight into Dickinson's work. The earliest characterizations of Dickinson cultivated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal an interest

in Dickinson primarily as a private figure. Early biographical sketches by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd perpetuated the image of Dickinson as a virginal spinster, an isolato with an idiosyncratic poetic sensibility who escaped the outside world by retreating to an internal world of imagination. In the introduction to the 1890 edition of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Higginson claims that Dickinson was “a recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep” and emphasizes Dickinson’s poetry as “an expression of the writer’s own mind” which revealed “a literary standard of her own” (*Collected Poems* xx). Mabel Loomis Todd similarly highlights this departure from cultural contact and convention in the 1891 preface to *Poems, Second Series* by posing the “directness and simplicity” of Dickinson’s verse as an alternative to the “modern artificiality” of her society (*Collected Poems* xxii).

In terms of the insights this early version of Dickinson has to offer, it seems that the focus on her unique style and tone as well as the cerebral quality of her verse helps readers to distinguish Dickinson from other poets of the period by identifying her particular contributions to the poetic craft. At the same time, we might also ask what cultural interests are at stake in this image of Dickinson as exceptional poetic genius. One possibility is that this image conceals certain judgments about the culture in which Dickinson lived. Though Higginson’s and Todd’s statements may be read as critiques of the artist, they might as easily be read as criticisms of nineteenth-century society, a society that the editors felt was faulty in its failure to recognize or support a genius such as Dickinson. In this way, Higginson and Todd’s version of Dickinson appears to be a comment on the state of artistic and intellectual life at the time. As Betsy Erkkila notes in “The Emily Dickinson Wars,” the emphasis these early editors place on the notions of

individualism, mind, imagination, and art might similarly be viewed as a backlash against political and economic shifts that occurred at the turn of the century. Erkkila writes:

At a time of massive social transformation, when a new industrial elite of money and business was eroding the traditional power, rank, and privilege of the old landed gentry, and labor was engaging in increasingly violent confrontations with capital, the figure of Emily Dickinson and her work were presented as a reaffirmation of the cultural power of mind and genius against the debased imperatives of both the capitalistic marketplace and the democratic masses. (13)

So while this version of Dickinson seems to reveal a fascinating aspect of the poet's work, it also reveals the complicated cultural agendas that may have come into play as this image was formulated.

Several decades after this initial version of Dickinson was posited, scholars continued to describe Dickinson as a cultural outsider who relegated herself to a mental world of words and ideas. Thomas Johnson, perhaps Dickinson's most well-known editor, introduces his audience to "Dickinson's inner world" (vii) in his collection *Final Harvest* by characterizing Dickinson as an "existentialist in a period of transcendentalism," a poet whose solitary quest was to wrestle with the "riddle of existence" (xiii). Johnson further emphasizes Dickinson's isolation in his introduction to *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, claiming, "[T]he fact is that [Dickinson] did not live in history and held no view of it, past or current" (xx).

Erkkila has identified several other twentieth-century scholars who likewise cultivated this view of Dickinson by stressing the textual aspects of her verse. R.P. Blackmur, a Dickinson critic who wrote during the late thirties, claims, for example, that "the greatness of Emily Dickinson" was not to be found in the world outside the poem, but must be discovered in "the

words she used and in the way she put them together” (qtd. in Erkkila 16). For Erkkila, William Shurr’s 1993 edition of Dickinson’s poems, *New Poems of Emily Dickinson*, serves as an extreme example of this trend in the way it ignores both the social and personal contexts of Dickinson’s work and relies instead on personal textual interpretation as the sole means of illuminating Dickinson’s poetry. In his edition, Shurr claims to have discovered over 400 new poems by close reading the three volumes of Dickinson’s letters already edited by Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward, excavating poems which Shurr believed were embedded in Dickinson’s correspondence. Erkkila explains that “[. . .] Shurr’s editorial practice is grounded in the assumption that poems are ‘freestanding, contextless productions’ that must be extricated from ‘their original contexts’ – personal, social, cultural, historical – and relocated in the canonical and ultimately transcendent realm called ‘art’” (Erkkila 18). As Shurr himself attests, “It is only when they are isolated and presented as freestanding poems that we can focus on them as the works of art they are” (qtd. in Erkkila 18).

Like the earlier characterizations of Dickinson perpetuated by Todd and Higginson, these portrayals seem to bring something new and compelling to the field of Dickinson studies by illuminating the richness of Dickinson’s text. Indeed, the evasion of Dickinson’s cultural context may be seen as a way to accentuate the complexity of language and form manifested in Dickinson’s poetry. In terms of the cultural bias this approach reveals, this version of Dickinson might also be perceived as means to reinforce certain critical persuasions held by Dickinson scholars. As Erkkila points out, the focus on Dickinson’s text as an isolated artwork corresponds with the rise of New Critical methodology during the thirties (16). As a result, Johnson’s, Blackmur’s, and Shurr’s depictions of Dickinson may well have embodied a critical partiality which used Dickinson’s work as an opportunity to highlight central New Critical values such as

the importance of “close reading, formal analysis, and the individual poem as self-enclosed aesthetic object” (Erkkila 16).

Though recent Dickinson scholarship has focused on a more public Dickinson who actively engages her culture by addressing issues such as race, class, and gender (see, for example, Domhnall Mitchell’s “Northern Lights: Class, Color, Culture, and Emily Dickinson” or Vivian Pollak’s “Dickinson and the Poetics of Whiteness”), one must consider the ways in which these more recent versions of Dickinson equally conceal the particular values and interests of our own culture. As new generations of scholars evaluate these diverse characterizations and the complex values they entail, it becomes necessary to ask two important questions concerning the utility of these characterizations for future Dickinson studies:

1. Should we aspire to objectivity as we formulate new versions of Dickinson, seeking to suppress the subjectivity of cultural values we see manifested in past approaches?
2. Might these past versions of Dickinson be resolved or envisioned in ways that provide a positive basis for future scholarship?

On one hand, it seems that future interpretive communities must acknowledge the impossibility of complete objectivity given their own historical and cultural subjectivity. Indeed, critiquing the subjectivity of past approaches seems to imply a double standard as it overlooks the limited perspective from which all communities must interpret Dickinson. On a more optimistic note, however, these various versions may be seen as proof of Dickinson’s depth and versatility, testifying to the multi-faceted complexity of her work. Though it remains necessary for each generation to admit the biases that complicate their separate approaches to Dickinson, it also seems possible that a combination of various cultural and historical perspectives may yield insight into the complexities of Dickinson’s art, offering a more comprehensive view of the poet

through many partial revelations and insights. In fact, one may see this cooperative approach as a way to overcome generational and sectarian biases as different interpretive groups acknowledge the contributions made by past readers and illuminate aspects of Dickinson's work that have been overlooked by these predecessors.

In many ways, it seems that recent attempts to re-contextualize Dickinson in terms of her historical and cultural setting present a unique opportunity to work towards this democratic ideal. Works such as Barton St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, Domhnall Mitchell's *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*, and Shira Wolosky's *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* serve as examples of this approach in the way they employ a cooperative, perspectival approach by culling the resources of different historical, literary, and personal documents for interpreting and contextualizing Dickinson's work. In a positive vein, this approach acknowledges the multi-faceted complexity of Dickinson's work by tracing the many social, intellectual, and personal influences that may have converged in Dickinson's poetry. In dealing with the problem of generational bias and subjectivity, this approach often balances current critical approaches to Dickinson with contemporary, nineteenth-century perspectives to jointly shed light on the poet's works. Though this contextual approach would seem to avoid the pitfall of subjective speculation by attempting to understand Dickinson in terms of her own cultural and historical setting, one should recognize that the approach must still rely on subjective interpretations of Dickinson's poetry and other literary and historical sources. In spite of these limitations, however, the approach may still be seen as a step in the right direction in acknowledging Dickinson's own cultural and historical embeddedness and in trying to balance many of the generational and sectarian biases we bring in interpreting Dickinson.

In this vein, the following study is an attempt to clarify Dickinson's conception of natural symbolism by contextualizing her in terms of prominent intellectual traditions that also addressed this subject during the nineteenth century. An overview of Dickinson's canon confirms that nature served an important function for her art, as natural forms provide a figurative foundation for much of her poetry. Dickinson's abundant use of natural forms becomes complicated, however, when one considers what a disputed territory nature was during her lifetime. Proponents of Puritan, empiricist, and transcendental theories all competed for the right to define nature's metaphysical significance and meaning for human life. Given Dickinson's position within this matrix of competing and influential ideologies, I propose to explore her unique conception of nature and the hermeneutic she applies to the external world as she appropriates natural images in her poetry. In particular, I will deal with Dickinson's treatment of transcendental philosophy, since it was fundamental in renewing questions about nature which had concerned members of the empiricist and Puritan traditions in earlier generations. Because transcendentalism served as the impetus in bringing these separate ideologies to the table of debate, it will also be important to deal with the issue of language and its relation to nature, as this proved one of the major concerns of the transcendental movement and one that Dickinson would certainly address in her poetry.

In exploring this historical version of Dickinson as nature poet, I will rely on several sources that have already addressed Dickinson's views on nature in terms of a transcendental and linguistic context. Dickinson's earliest editors serve as one such source in the way they saw nature as an important subject for the poet and perceived this inclination as a link between Dickinson and the transcendental movement. In the first three editions of Dickinson's poems, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd include "Nature" as one of four

thematic headings under which they organize their selections. Indeed, these editors saw nature as a subject so intimately associated with Dickinson that they use it as a metaphor for Dickinson's canon as a whole. In describing the unrefined yet vigorous quality of Dickinson's verse, Higginson writes in the introduction to the first series of *Poems*, "In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed" (*Collected Poems* xxi). But this basic recognition of nature as one of Dickinson's major themes was not the only feature which served to link Dickinson with her transcendental contemporaries. Higginson and Todd seemed to envision Dickinson as a poet who, like Walt Whitman, embodied the poetic qualities extolled by Emerson in his essay "The Poet." In the opening sentence of his introduction to *Poems*, Higginson uses Emersonian categories to explain Dickinson's lack of conventional poetic discipline: "The verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called 'the Poetry of the Portfolio,' – something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind" (*Collected Poems* xviii). In Mabel Loomis Todd's introduction to *Poems, Second Series*, the editor similarly seeks to explain Dickinson's idiosyncrasies in terms of transcendental doctrine. In explaining the candor with which Dickinson addresses the themes of death and God, Todd quotes a contemporary critic who claimed Dickinson exemplified "an Emersonian self-possession" in confronting religious topics (*Collected Poems* xxv).

By the mid-twentieth century, Dickinson's connection to Emerson and the transcendental movement had been well established by works such as Hyatt Waggoner's "Emily Dickinson: The Transcendent Self" (1965), Bruce McElderry's "Emily Dickinson: Viable Transcendentalist" (1966), and James Mulqueen's "Is Emerson's Work Central to the Poetry of

Emily Dickinson?" (1973). The topic commanded enough attention that Paul Ferlazzo compiled a list of outstanding scholarship documenting the connection in his article for Joel Myerson's 1984 collection *Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*. Scholarship of the 80's and 90's followed this connection by pursuing unexplored areas of intersection including Dickinson and Emerson's treatment of issues such as personal identity and gender (see Shira Wolosky's "Dickinson's Emerson: A Critique of American Identity" and Cynthia Wolff's treatment of domesticity in *Emily Dickinson*). While fewer studies on Dickinson and transcendentalism have been published in the last few years, journals such as *The Emily Dickinson Journal* and *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* continue to feature articles on the subject.

Though many works have dealt with the issue of nature as an area of comparison between Dickinson and transcendentalists, few have focused specifically on the topic of natural symbolism and language as a related area of interest. Emily Budick offers the most comprehensive treatment of Dickinson, transcendentalism, and natural symbolism to date in her 1985 book *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language* and makes several important observations that I build upon in my own study. One of the most insightful aspects of Budick's study is the way she contextualizes Dickinson's particular brand of symbolism. Budick describes Dickinson's symbolism as a reaction to "the special history of New England symbolism, to the patterns of perception and diction that she believed characterized both her Puritan ancestors and her Transcendental contemporaries" (132). Like Budick, I want to acknowledge the complexity of the context in which Dickinson developed her symbolic theory by recognizing these influences, both transcendental and Puritan, and revealing how they represent a continuum in symbolic theory. In this way, I hope to go beyond works that simply establish Dickinson's

familiarity with these traditions and specify how Dickinson may have modeled her own poetic theory with the tenets of Puritanism and transcendentalism in mind.

In addition, I plan to address the claims of empiricism and Enlightenment thought, a tradition Budick briefly addresses, as another important influence in the development of New England symbolism. I believe an examination of this tradition is important not only for the way it highlights the concerns of transcendentalists at the time but also in the way Dickinson employed the tradition as a positive model for appropriation. Albert Gelpi hits on this topic in his 1965 book *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* by examining the ways in which Emerson, Edwards, and Dickinson all dealt with the dualism of materialism and spiritualism that had come to characterize New England thought. Though Gelpi sees Emerson and Edwards as inhabiting different sides of this dualism (a difference I will not emphasize as I see Edwards' emphasis on earthly beauty as a strong point of agreement between the two), Gelpi's conception of Dickinson as a poet who bridges this gap by borrowing from the tenets of both traditions is helpful in illuminating the complexity of Dickinson's view.

Another aspect of Budick's work that I would like to emphasize in my study is Dickinson's skeptical approach to the New England symbolic tradition represented by Edwards and Emerson. According to Budick, Dickinson rejected the tradition because she opposed the symbolic reduction and presumptuous individualism implied by both theories. I would agree that Dickinson saw a danger in the way both groups of symbolizers "exaggerated the ability of individual consciousness to interpret cosmic truth and symbolic correspondences and so literalized the accuracy of the individual's perceptions that truth virtually became the exclusive property of the anointed Puritan or Transcendentalist exegete" (133). While I would like to reinforce Budick's synopsis of Dickinson's hermeneutic objection, I would add that Dickinson

was also a pragmatist who saw the New England tradition as a source for appropriation despite her objections to many of its tenets. Her response was neither that of uncompromising rejection nor of unquestioning approval but may be located somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.

In the end, my own vision of Dickinson betrays an optimistic belief in the possibility that collective scholarly efforts may teach us something new about a poet whose work we have admired for over a century. While I harbor no illusions of capturing an objectively “real” or complete Dickinson in the following pages, I hope that contextualizing Dickinson in terms of this debate about natural symbolism will help to explain something of a subject that Dickinson approached with much passion as well as diminish any of the particular biases I undoubtedly bring in interpreting Dickinson’s works. While this study seeks to explain the context in which Dickinson formed her own works, I also hope that my work will become part of a growing context of Dickinson scholarship that is able to create a fuller, richer picture of a complex poet.

*Limits of Interpretation: Dickinson, Emerson, Edwards, and the Significance of the Natural
World*

While Thomas Johnson's comprehensive 1960 volume of Emily Dickinson's poems is simply titled *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Johnson titles his more selective 1961 collection *Final Harvest*, claiming that the smaller volume represents the best of Dickinson's immense canon. The title's imagery cleverly describes the work of the editor who laboriously winnows the poet's work to select the finest quality product for his audience's consumption. But the use of this natural, agricultural image also describes the outcome of Dickinson's own labor as it signals one of the most eminent concerns and passions of her poetry. Nature is often the subject of Dickinson's verse, and like Johnson, Dickinson is concerned with the task of gleaning. Though Dickinson is certainly interested in what may be gleaned from the works of other artists, she is equally concerned with what the artist may gather from the natural realm. A much quoted excerpt from an 1876 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson reveals Dickinson's interest in the intersection of Nature and Art. Dickinson writes that "Nature is a Haunted House – but Art a house that tries to be Haunted" (*Letters* 2: 554). The quote shows that Dickinson perceived a connection between the physical world and the world of spirit, but it also highlights her interest in the appropriating function of Art as it replicates the spiritual character of Nature.

Besides revealing the personal interest this subject held for Dickinson, the statement also hints at Dickinson's involvement in a larger philosophical debate about nature and its relation to language, Dickinson's chosen artistic medium. This debate centered on the issue of symbolic representation and questioned whether natural forms, like language, might serve as signifiers of a

separate reality, in this case, a spiritual or supernatural reality. One of Dickinson's major concerns involved the reliability and accuracy of the symbolic medium, whether natural or lingual. In other words, Dickinson was interested in the degree of correspondence between signifier and signified, in the success of the symbol as it sought to approximate a particular thing or phenomenon. In addition, Dickinson also addressed the human side of this symbolic equation as she judged the response of the human audience in interpreting and valuating these various signs.

As Dickinson crafted her own theory of nature and language, she was faced with several ideological alternatives that competed for the right to define nature's linguistic significance. Understanding Dickinson's response to these competing ideologies, especially the claims of empiricists, Puritans, and transcendentalists, gives her readers a better grasp of her own unique conception of nature and of her importance within a debate that had engaged not only early New England writers but centuries of scholars and philosophers from Plato to Kant.

Historical and Philosophical Perspectives

Many students and scholars conceive of Dickinson as a private poet who inhabited a limited sphere restricted to the confines of the Dickinson homestead and its familial society. Fewer recognize the privileged position the seemingly provincial town of Amherst afforded Dickinson as its geographical location granted her exposure to major intellectual areas such as Cambridge and Concord. Many of Dickinson's friends and mentors, if not the poet herself, were familiar with the tenets of transcendentalism, which had recently ignited eastern Massachusetts. Though the transcendental movement was not extremely organized or long-lived, it renewed interest in several long-standing philosophical questions, provoking debate among a rising generation of American scholars and artists of which Dickinson was part.

Since the transcendental movement served as a formative influence to Dickinson's own theory of nature, it is important to understand the questions it raised as well as the intellectual tradition to which it responded. One of the major concerns of the transcendental movement was to redefine nature in a way that recovered its spiritual significance, an aspect which had been compromised by Lockean empiricism as well as Cartesian dualism. Though we often think of these Enlightenment philosophies as primarily influencing personal epistemologies, they also had an important impact on the way external metaphysics were defined. Descartes' mind-body dualism not only forced a rift within the personal realm but also imposed a division within the natural realm by differentiating the physical world from the world of spirit. In addition, Locke's insistence on the authority of the senses discouraged spiritual intuition as a reliable form of knowledge, leading to the belief that all that could be reasonably known about the external world were its physical qualities – that, in effect, the physical was all there was to be understood.

Though Descartes, in particular, seemed troubled by the division he outlines in the *Meditations*, his attempts to resolve the split result in a mechanistic account of the mind-body union that transcendentalists would later find unsuitable. After asserting in the Sixth Meditation that “it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it,” Descartes later concedes, “Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined, and as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and my body form a unit” (465). Descartes' depiction of this unity, however, seems artificially rigid and contrived. In selecting a metaphor for this unity, Descartes describes the human body as a clock, operating as a “kind of machine equipped and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even

if there were no mind in it, it would still perform the same movements as it now does [. . .]” (467).

While Descartes’ clock analogy implied an imposed order and mechanistic unity, transcendentalists outlined a more direct and natural unity of matter and spirit. In a departure from Descartes’ awkward account, Henry David Thoreau posits a relationship in which the material body is infused with the spiritual principle. In *Walden*, Thoreau claims that “Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body. [. . .] We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones” (150). Emerson takes this principle of spiritual infusion and extends it beyond the human body to include the body of the natural cosmos. Emerson famously describes this intersection of spirit, nature, and humanity in the essay “Nature:”

In the woods, we return to faith and reason. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed in the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God. (6)

In Emerson’s scheme, matter serves as a necessary conduit for the passage of spirit. The image Emerson creates paints spirit as a source of energy, an electrical current which when combined with the natural body is practically indistinguishable from it. The surge that moves through the ground and into the human body serves to unify man and nature, matter and spirit. The unity Emerson describes, with humanity as member of a universal body animated by spirit, is one of

close, physiological dependency. This metaphor emphasizes the mind-body union as one that is organic, necessary, and fluid – a far cry from Descartes’ mind-body machine.

As transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson sought to counteract the implications Lockean empiricism and Cartesian dualism had had on nature, they posed two major questions, one metaphysical and the other hermeneutical. The first question, “What is the fundamental nature or composition of the external world?,” aimed at delineating the boundaries between the physical and spiritual in nature or, rather, determining if any such boundary existed. As shown above, transcendentalists resolved to establish a metaphysics of nature on the basis of organic unity rather than on Descartes’ mechanistic and dualist principle. The second question, “How might human beings interpret the natural world?,” sought to explain the role of the human observer as he or she translated natural phenomena conceptually and linguistically. In this area, transcendentalists wished to go beyond the empiricist model of Locke that limited human knowledge to reliance on the physical senses. Though the questions raised by the transcendental movement were by no means new, they gave an old debate a new relevance within nineteenth-century American culture.

Like her transcendental contemporaries, Dickinson displayed an interest in the question of nature’s dual significance, which is expressed in her poetry and correspondence. In an 1852 letter to Susan Gilbert, Dickinson describes how the sensory objects of the physical world provoke notions of a realm beyond the senses: “Every bird that sings, and every bud that blooms, does but remind me more of that garden unseen, awaiting the hand that tills it” (*Letters* 1: 208). A later letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson re-states this dual conception of nature but uses terminology that more explicitly expresses this duality as one of matter and spirit: “When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a

poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels” (*Letters 2: 415*). Though this statement is certainly playful and figurative, Dickinson’s use of supernatural entities to characterize the natural realm is notable for its close association of physical and spiritual phenomena. These letters suggest that nature was a source of joy for Dickinson and that she considered the possibility that nature had some spiritual significance beyond its material manifestations. Many of Dickinson’s poems reveal a tendency to look beyond the physical realities of the world for some kind of spiritual meaning. In the last stanzas of poem #378, for example, Dickinson writes:

[.....]

I find myself still softly searching

For my Delinquent Palaces –

And a Suspicion, like a Finger

Touches my Forehead now and then

That I am looking oppositely

For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven – (F.H. 224)

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes herself as a “bereft” child mourning the loss of something indistinct and mysterious, a “Dominion” from which the speaker feels removed. The last two lines, quoted above, clarify that the speaker has been searching for a spiritual dominion, the “Kingdom of Heaven,” in an area that is physically present, one that the speaker can actually look upon. Dickinson could certainly be describing an existential loss of faith, but the use of nouns such as “Dominion,” “Palaces,” “site,” and “Kingdom” suggest that

the speaker is looking for meaning within a circumscribed, delineated, and phenomenal area such as a natural scene rather than in the boundless regions of the mind.

In an earlier poem, #238, Dickinson speaks of nature more explicitly as a possible locus of intersection between matter and spirit:

“Heaven” has different Signs – to me –

Sometimes, I think that Noon

Is but a symbol of the Place –

And when again, at Dawn,

A mighty look runs round the World

And settles in the Hills –

An Awe if it should be like that

Upon the Ignorance steals – [. . .] (F.H. 145)

The very first word of the poem shows that the subjects of correspondence and signification are at issue here. By enclosing the word heaven in scare quotes, Dickinson seeks to draw attention to it as a sign or signifier meant to approximate a particular reality. The notion that a natural phenomenon such as the solar circuit might likewise be a *symbol* of another reality hints that a correspondence between the material and spiritual worlds may exist. The poem seems to question the degree to which the natural world signifies a spiritual principle, whether a correspondence between matter and spirit exists or not. The last two lines of the poem highlight Dickinson’s speculative tone as she entertains the issue. The degree to which “Heaven” may be approximated, “like that,” by the natural world is left to the realm of possibility. Though the

speaker is awed by the possible link, she still considers the connection an “if,” an area in which she is ignorant.

As an inquirer, Dickinson had several ideological models from which to draw as she sought to delineate the correspondence between matter and spirit. One of these models, as suggested previously, was that of transcendentalists. Though Emerson, America’s representative transcendentalist, insisted on spirit as the basis for reality as that which had “life in itself,” he also claimed matter was equally “real” (rather than illusory) as a derivative of spirit (14). Emerson details this relationship between matter and spirit in “Nature:” “The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation, a projection of God. [. . .] Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind. It is a fixed point whereby we may measure our departure” (33). Here, Emerson argues for matter as embodied spirit, an “incarnation” that partakes in the essential character of spirit. The use of the word “expositor” to describe nature is also of particular interest in the way it attributes a linguistic character to nature. The word may be taken in a theological sense either as an allusion to the scriptures or to a sermon which expounds the will of God. Though Emerson deems the material mode of communication as remote and inferior compared to its spiritual source, he nonetheless values and distinguishes matter for the way in which it gives utterance to the divine. Like the scriptures, nature provides a moral point of reference, a “fixed point,” against which humans may evaluate their thoughts and actions.

Though Emerson employs Descartes’ mind-body distinction to describe the universal composition, he insists that matter and spirit exist together in insoluble Unity, a unity which finds perfect expression in the natural world: “A rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the

undermost garment of Nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit” (23). In Emerson’s scheme, nature conveys the observable appearance of unity because of an essential, metaphysical relationship to spirit which underlies its outward manifestations. Such a metaphysical relationship was impossible in Descartes’ scheme since the mind and body displayed entirely opposite constitutions and might function independently of one another. Despite Descartes’ attempts to describe a mind-body connection, his emphasis in the *Meditations* remains on difference and division: “The first observation I make at this point is that there is a great difference between the mind and body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible” (467). In a later passage, Descartes more strongly states that this constitutional difference “would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body, even if I did not already know as much from other considerations” (467). Given this strong emphasis on division, Descartes could never have admitted matter as an “incarnation” of spirit as Emerson claimed.

Descartes would likewise have found problematic Emerson’s attribution of mental qualities, such as intellect and morality, to nature. Because Emerson perceived such an essential relationship between matter and spirit, he conceived of nature as the primary medium through which the principles of spirit might be communicated. Emerson’s insistence that “every natural process is a version of a moral sentence” reinforces his notion of nature as a theological text, a sermon that made the mysteries of spirit accessible to the human mind (22). Similarly, Emerson claimed that nature bore a “relation to thought,” offering “discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths” (19). Again, Emerson construes nature as an intermediary medium, one that plays an instructive role by promoting a conceptual grasp of the spiritual order.

Emerson makes this textual conception of nature more explicit in “Nature” within the section entitled “Language.” Here, Emerson outlines a chain of signification in which he details the relationship of human language to nature and spirit. Emerson writes:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit. (13)

In this equation, Emerson introduces human language as a parallel to nature in that it similarly functions as a medium through which spiritual truths may be expressed. Emerson claims this propensity for language due to language’s genesis in natural form and phenomenon. Just as nature derived from spirit, so language derived from nature, creating a channel for the further passage of spirit. According to Emerson, words originally had direct reference to particular objects or events in nature. The noun “spirit,” for example, originally referred to “wind,” an atmospheric phenomenon, and the word “right” referred to something that was geometrically straight (13). This connection allowed for the distillation of spiritual principles first through nature and then through human language. Emerson claims, however, that modern language had been polluted because of its failure to maintain a close, representational relationship to nature. Thus much of the spiritual import it was meant to convey was lost. Emerson held that if men would “fasten words again to visible things,” language might accurately translate nature’s inherent moral lessons once again (16).

By positing such an optimistic view of language, Emerson also implied an optimistic view of human interpretive abilities. Emerson’s syllogism positions nature as a text that humans may confidently decode, assuming they have employed the proper language to do so. In this scheme, humans may read nature for its spiritual significance just as they would read words

within a book. The theory boldly assumes a close correspondence between matter and spirit which renders spiritual truth widely accessible and comprehensible.

While the transcendental movement seemed to pose novel conceptions of nature and language, these ideas had seen an earlier expression in the doctrines of Puritan thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards. These doctrines provided another source of influence from which Dickinson could have drawn in shaping her own theories. While Edwards admired the logical rigor of Locke's empiricist philosophy, he desired, like future transcendentalists, to prove the unity of the spiritual and physical worlds. Edwards' solution was to construct a cosmology in which all earthly beings were metaphysically dependent on God. In his essay "Of Being," Edwards describes space as an extension of God's mind in which all earthly beings dwell and rely on God for existence. Edwards concludes that all material beings originate in spirit and that spirit alone must be considered ultimate reality: "What then is become of the universe? Certainly, it exists nowhere but in the divine mind. [. . .] From hence we may see the gross mistake of those who think material things the most substantial beings, and spirits more like shadow; whereas spirits are the only proper substance" (12).

Though Emerson would probably have objected to Edwards' obvious Idealism, the idea of spirit as the metaphysically independent, originating principal of life and the implications this assumption had for nature and language sound remarkably compatible with transcendental theory. Like Emerson, Edwards insists on a strong corollary between the world of matter and spirit. In "Images and Shadows of Divine Things," Edwards claims: "The beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, either within itself, or with the Supreme Being. As to the corporeal world, though there are many other sorts of consents, yet the sweetest and most charming beauty of it is its resemblance of spiritual beauties" (14). Edwards' use of the

word “consent” to describe the matter-spirit union is notable for the way it employs a term often associated with linguistics and assigns it an aesthetic meaning. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke highlights the necessity of linguistic consent for the construction of a socially operational language. Locke writes, “Men learn names, and use them in talk with others, only that they may be understood; which is then only done when, by use or consent, the sound I make by the organs of speech, excites in another man’s mind who hears it, the idea I apply it to in mine, when I speak it” (613). In other words, language is a matter of consensus; it requires cultural agreement about the correspondence of certain symbols or signifiers to particular objects and actions. For Edwards, natural beauty is portrayed as a language founded on a consensual agreement between God and nature. The correspondence of natural signs to spiritual realities reveals a fundamental harmony that imbues the world with beauty.

Like Emerson, Edwards posits a textual view of nature based on the unity of matter and spirit expressed above. Though Emerson’s mystic spirit replaces Edwards’ Christian deity, both saw nature as a divine speech act which might be interpreted by human beings. For Edwards, nature served as a parallel to scripture as a physical revelation of the divine mind. Just as the “Book of Scripture” might be textually translated for spiritual truth, the “book of nature” might equally be interpreted for its divine sense (20). Edwards demonstrates his own optimistic view of nature as text in “Images and Shadows” as he confidently translates several of nature’s lessons for his audience. He claims, for example, that a stormy sea is “a representation of the terrible wrath of God, and amazing misery of [them] that endure it” (16) or that the silkworm “is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing” (17).

Hermeneutic Objections

Though Dickinson's writings often lack overt references to Puritan and transcendental philosophies of nature, careful observation of her poetry reveals that Dickinson was not only cognizant of these debates but also employed them as a point of departure from which to construct her own concept of nature. Poem #273 can be viewed as a response to the various philosophical positions about nature that were influential during Dickinson's lifetime:

"Nature" is what we see –
 The Hill – the Afternoon –
 Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –
 Nay – Nature is Heaven –
 Nature is what we hear –
 The Bobolink –the Sea –
 Thunder – the Cricket –
 Nay – Nature is Harmony –
 Nature is what we know –
 Yet have no art to say –
 So impotent Our Wisdom is
 To her Simplicity. (*F.H.* 168)

As in poem #238, Dickinson sets off the first word of the poem in scare quotes, drawing attention to the word "nature" as a signifier meant to approximate a particular reality. Such distinction seems to betray a certain cynicism about the ability of the word to function as a determinate sign, one that successfully represents its object or may be universally understood without equivocation. The declarative structure of the verses that follow would seem to establish

them as Dickinson's own statements about nature, but the negations opening lines four and eight and the alternate characterizations of nature that are offered suggest that the poem takes the form of a debate. The use of the plural pronoun "we" throughout also reveals that the debate takes place between several external parties rather than existing as an internal, mental debate.

The first option posed, that "Nature" is what we see," can be seen as an expression of empiricist theory. In this definition, nature is limited to an object of the senses. Like Locke's empiricism, this definition relies on perception or "sight" as the basis for understanding nature. The fourth verse rejects this empirical position and claims that "Nature is Heaven." Opposed to the strict reliance on the senses that would limit nature to its material aspect, this verse asserts that nature is primarily spirit. The word "Heaven" seems to be used in a theological sense, especially given the way in which nature is attributed a discernable voice, perhaps a reference to the voice or word of God. Here the definition of nature takes on a textual construction similar to Edwards and Emerson's that portrays nature as a kind of audible language for spirit.

The final five verses seem to pose a resolution to the two extremes offered in the preceding verses since its argument is more developed and it serves as a closing argument. Like Puritan and transcendental positions, it asserts that "Nature is Harmony" or a unity of matter and spirit. The last four verses, however, depart from Puritan and transcendental theory as they question human ability to translate nature's lessons. As opposed to Edwards and Emerson's positivistic view of language and its ability to accurately convey spiritual principles, Dickinson claims that we may have a sense of these lessons but that our language is inadequate to express even nature's most simple morals. We may have a knowledge or awareness of this harmony, but we lack the descriptive means or "art" to fully or properly express it. The simple way in which the natural objects of perception are listed in lines two, three, six, and seven illustrates

Dickinson's point. Regardless of the ideological framework employed to explain the natural phenomena (the squirrel, eclipse, bobolink or sea), the objects remain plain and unadorned, without any adjectival description or imagery that might alter their pre-conceptual qualities. The message appears to be that nature evades ideological characterization and remains largely unaffected by the philosophies that seek to define it. These attempts to complicate nature's "simplicity" are ultimately foolish.

Poem #211 further clarifies Dickinson's resistance to this Puritan/transcendental hermeneutic and the way it touts human ability to objectively translate nature's spiritual significance:

To hear an Oriole sing
 May be a common thing –
 Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
 Who sings the same, unheard,
 As unto crowd –

The Fashion of the Ear
 Attireth that it hear
 In Dun, or fair –

So whether it be Rune,
 Or whether it be none

Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree –"

The Skeptic – showeth me –

"No Sir! In Thee!" (F.H. 130)

The first stanza makes clear that the issue under consideration is that of perception.

Dickinson speaks from the position of a human audience who seeks to define whether its sense of hearing is a "common" physiological mechanism or a divine gift for intuiting the spiritual within nature. The poem questions what kind of knowledge may be gained by the senses. Are the senses just a vehicle for factual data, or might they provide insight into a realm beyond the physical? As in poem #273, one can see the speaker delineating two types of reasoning, the empiricist logic that would assign perception a strictly physiological role and the transcendental/Puritan conception of perception as a tool for interpreting the spiritual.

At first, the speaker's stance is tentative; she does not align herself with either position. But in the second and third stanzas, the speaker adopts a tone of assertion, claiming that the particular significance assigned to the natural phenomenon results from subjective projection rather than objective interaction of sense and object. In stanza two, the speaker rejects the idea that the meaning or significance perceived in the oriole's song is a pre-conceptual characteristic of the song itself. "It," or the type of knowledge gained through the sense, does not originate in the bird's song, the object of perception. The bird's song does not act as a text, whether scientific or sacred, that the senses may decode for meaning. The song is the same regardless of human perception; perception does not bring any special insight into the interpretive equation.

In the third stanza, the speaker insists that “The Fashion of the Ear” or the ideological presuppositions of the audience impose meaning on the object. The image of the ear or sense adopting a certain “fashion” suggests that the sense does not act objectively or alone but is culturally influenced. Before the sense even comes into contact with the object of perception, it is conceptually biased based on its philosophical commitments. Just as a certain fashion might dictate a generation’s purchasing choices, so the ideological fashion of the senses might determine choices made regarding an object’s significance. Interestingly, the perceptions are assigned the action, the “attiring,” in the process of signification. Instead of the object projecting meaning for the senses to interpret, the senses impose meaning on the object. The image of human perception clothing nature in garments of dun or fair further suggests that nature exhibits a pre-conceptual, “naked” quality, a simplicity that humans seek to complicate by clothing it in certain theoretical garments.

The speaker’s conclusion in the fourth and fifth stanzas is that the significance attributed to nature depends not so much on the actual natural phenomenon but on the pre-conceptions of the audience, what is already “within.” While the various parties of the debate would have the speaker believe that a particular significance, whether spiritual or factual, is implicit in nature (that the “Tune is in the Tree”), the skeptical speaker rejects this idea and responds that the type of knowledge perceived originates in the perceiver. The poem does not preclude the possibility that the song may convey an objective meaning apart from the human audience. Rather, it exposes the myth that that meaning may be impartially decoded or that the senses function objectively.

Dickinson similarly reiterates her objection to such hermeneutic optimism in poem #260 by asserting the essential mystery of nature and emphasizing the futility of human efforts to explain nature's spiritual significance:

The Tint I cannot take – is best –

The Color too remote

That I could show it in Bazaar –

A Guinea at a sight –

The fine – impalpable Array –

That swaggers on the eye

Like Cleopatra's Company –

Repeated – in the sky –

The Moments of Dominion

That happen on the Soul

And leave it with a Discontent

Too exquisite – to tell –

The eager look – on Landscapes –

As if they just repressed

Some Secret – that was pushing

Like Chariots – in the Vest –

The Pleading of the Summer –
 That other Prank – of Snow –
 That Cushions mystery with Tulle,
 For fear the Squirrels – know.

Their Graspless manners – mock us –
 Until the Cheated Eye
 Shuts arrogantly – in the Grave –
 Another way – to see – (F.H. 159-160)

In the first two stanzas, Dickinson describes what seems to be a scenic sky. From the beginning of the poem, the speaker hints that the beauty of the sky is mysterious and inexpressible. The tint of the sky cannot be “taken” or appropriated, but this incommunicable beauty is judged to be “best,” implying that any replication or reproduction of the scene would be inferior and inadequate compared to the experience of the original. The diction throughout the first two stanzas emphasizes the elusive, irreducible nature of the beautiful scene. It is described as “remote” and “impalpable,” suggesting that its beauties defy human comprehension and expression. In addition, Dickinson’s comparison of the natural scene to “Cleopatra’s Company,” perhaps a reference to Shakespeare’s description of Cleopatra’s sumptuous and colorful barge in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.2.196-211), highlights not only the power and majesty exuded by the sky but also a bewitching exoticism that is flaunted or swaggered before the viewer. Since the scene evades reductive attempts of appropriation, it is best enjoyed as a visual experience such as a spectacle or peep show at a bazaar.

While the first two stanzas hint at the observer's desire to possess or capture the sky's majesty, the third and fourth stanzas clarify the viewer's hermeneutic intentions. In the ninth and tenth lines, Dickinson claims that the mysterious beauty of the natural scene exercises a power over the human soul, what Dickinson terms a "moment of Dominion," that leaves the viewer discontented. The reference to the observer's soul as well as the religious connotations of the word "dominion" suggest that the observer's discontent is for something spiritual. The fourth stanza reveals that the observer's desire is to discover a source for her spiritual sense within her natural surroundings. Like an Emerson or Edwards, the observer believes she can unearth a secret spiritual meaning in nature. Believing that the spiritual import of the scene lies just beneath nature's surface, straining to be exposed, the observer eagerly looks on the landscape as an excavator who plans to illuminate the hidden mystery by explaining the connection between matter and spirit.

In the last two stanzas, Dickinson insists on the futility of such hermeneutic aspirations. While the summer seems to communicate with the observer in a kind of linguistic, rhetorical gesture (pleading), Dickinson asserts that the display is merely a "prank," a joke played on the zealous observer. In the same way, the winter deceives the viewer by suggesting the possibility for spiritual significance and then obscuring any meaning underneath impenetrable blankets of snow. In stanza six, Dickinson doesn't seek to deny that some spiritual significance exists but insists instead that any significance is "graspless" and evasive. The observer who attempts to discern the spiritual import of nature with her mortal senses will find herself unrewarded and feeling cheated. According to Dickinson, the observer's error lies in her arrogance in trying to reduce the inexpressible to the expressible, to circumscribe the limitless wonder and mystery of nature.

Pragmatic Revisions

Poems such as #211, #273, and #260 reveal Dickinson's attempts to navigate a compromise between empiricist, transcendental, and Puritan accounts of nature as she made her own assertions about the natural world and its relation to language. In general, these poems expose Dickinson's negative response to these traditions, emphasizing the shortcomings Dickinson identified in the various approaches. But Dickinson was not merely an obstinate dissident and could be quite pragmatic in appropriating philosophical tenets that resonated with her own experiences of nature. Many of Dickinson's poems prove that she revised aspects of empirical and transcendental philosophy to shape her own statements about nature and language. Dickinson seems to have been attracted, for instance, to the empiricist attention to physical detail and sensation. Part of Dickinson's attraction appears to be that empiricism valued these qualities *apart* from any representational function, as opposed to the transcendental tradition, which valued nature and language primarily *for* this communicative function.

Poem # 208 serves as an example of this empirical inclination in the way it advocates natural beauty for its own sake. Here, Dickinson asserts that physical beauty is valuable purely for its aesthetic qualities. This may be seen as a radical departure from Emerson, who claimed that Beauty was one of nature's inferior qualities, merely serving as an adornment to spirit. In "Nature" Emerson explains that physical beauties, when considered apart from their spiritual foundations, "become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality" (11). Though Emerson praised beauty as one of nature's chief pleasures, he warned that the aesthetic quality of nature could be distracting if considered as an end in itself. Emerson emphasizes that "Beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must stand as a part, and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final

cause of Nature” (13). For Emerson, undue attention to natural beauty was viewed as a violation of the cosmic hierarchy in the way it preferenced the dependent and derivative over the independent and self-sustaining (spirit). Dickinson, on the other hand, insists that beauty deserves appreciation apart from any accessory or contingent function:

Beauty – be not caused – It Is –

Chase it, and it ceases –

Chase it not, and it abides –

Overtake the Creases

In the Meadow – when the Wind

Runs his fingers thro’ it –

Deity will see to it

That You never do it – (F.H. 128)

In the first stanza of the poem, beauty is described as a metaphysically independent category. Instead of existing in a dependent, causal relationship, beauty simply exists. The use of a being verb as well as the capitalization in the phrase “It Is” emphasizes beauty’s primacy, self-sufficiency, and importance. For those who would pursue beauty in order to trace some external cause, such as a spiritually prior origin, beauty is evasive. Seeking such an origin denies the essential character of beauty; therefore, it “ceases.” For those who can simply observe beauty and appreciate it for its aesthetic qualities, beauty “abides” since its essential qualities are affirmed.

In lines four and five, Dickinson admits that beauty and nature, represented by the wind-blown meadow, overlap forming a “crease” where beauty may be best apprehended and experienced. While nature exhibits a close, intimate relationship with beauty, the human observer is denied such a familiarity. Unlike nature, which may touch beauty directly (running its figurative fingers through beauty) the human observer must be satisfied to view beauty indirectly as it intersects with nature.

Though the poem suggests that beauty maintains some kind of relationship to spirit or “Deity,” the relationship is not advocated as beauty’s primary value or even as its source. Beauty is featured as an aesthetic end in itself rather than a means to some further spiritual end. The poem seems to suggest that the empirical way of observing nature can be more insightful since it does not overreach its interpretive bounds in seeking to define a metaphysical scheme to explain natural beauty. Satisfaction with the physical object itself is seen as a more profound and appropriate response.

Natural beauty was certainly not the only thing Dickinson enjoyed for its sensual, non-representational qualities. Dickinson took a similar delight in language as a physical experience. Just as Dickinson valued nature and beauty as independent, discrete entities, the poet likewise separated language from Emerson’s representational hierarchy as a physical phenomenon that might be appreciated in its own right. In poem #264, Dickinson illustrates the sensual pleasure language can provide apart from any external reference:

The Way I read a Letter’s – this –
 ‘Tis first – I lock the Door –
 And push it with my fingers – next –
 For transport it be sure –

And then I go the furthest off
 To counteract a knock –
 Then draw my little Letter forth
 And slowly pick the lock –

 Then – glancing narrow, at the Wall –
 And narrow at the floor
 For firm Conviction of a Mouse
 Not exorcised before –

 Peruse how infinite I am
 To no one that You – know –
 And sigh for lack of Heaven – but not
 The Heaven God bestow – *(F.H. 162)*

In the first line of the poem, Dickinson introduces her subject – a letter and the speaker’s particular way of reading. Though the speaker might focus on the content of the letter, she focuses on the act and process of reading instead. First, the speaker locks the door, withdrawing from the outside world and symbolically shutting out any external referents to which the letter may correspond. To further distance herself, the speaker also withdraws from the door in order to “counteract a knock,” effectually barring herself from any physical interferences. By excluding all other sensory distractions, the speaker is able to solely devote her senses to the text, enclosing herself within a world of signifiers.

Lines three, four, seven, and eight highlight the physical pleasure of the experience as the speaker prepares herself to read. The letter's envelope offers a pleasing tactile encounter as the speaker pushes it with her fingers and "picks its lock" as an eager explorer would fondle the lock of a treasure chest. While the touch of the letter offers the speaker pleasure, the actual language and reading of the letter are anticipated as sources of "transport." This word choice again emphasizes reading as a withdrawal from the material world and disrupts any connection between signifier and signified.

In a humorous vein, the speaker suspiciously scans the wall and floor before reading to ascertain whether any foreign bodies might remain to witness the physical intimacy of reader and text. The speaker wants to convince herself that not even a mouse lingers since he might voyeuristically "peruse" her transport. Though the last three lines of the poem are ambiguous (it's unclear who exactly is sighing for "lack of Heaven"), the result of the reading seems to be an explosion of the speaker's physical presence. Her "infinity" defies ordinary physical bounds, suggesting that language, especially when considered apart from its referential context, can provide a physical pleasure that exceeds the sensual capacity of the ordinary human body. Like Dickinson's treatment of natural beauty in poem #208, this poem seeks to validate the sensual pleasure of language as an end in itself without any referential context to authenticate it.

As these poems suggest, Dickinson appeared to take issue in particular with Emerson's hierarchy which subordinated natural beauty and language to spirit and valued these categories primarily for their representational functions. In a departure from this hierarchical structure, Dickinson identifies natural beauty and language as discrete entities with inherent rather than borrowed value. In this way, Dickinson also avoids the idealist ramifications of Edwards' theory that would reduce the material world to mere appearance as a mental construct of God. Despite

these reservations, however, Dickinson does exhibit a transcendental sensibility in many of her poems. Though Dickinson advocates natural beauty in its own right, she also seems to see spiritual significance as a part of that beauty, but one which evades classification or philosophical explanation. The empiricist assertion that the physical world is the only proper object of knowledge seems to trouble Dickinson, for example. In the opening lines of poem #202, Dickinson insists that a spiritual principle *does* exist although its exact nature is deeply mysterious:

This World is not Conclusion.
 A Species stands beyond –
 Invisible, as Music –
 But positive, as Sound –
 It beckons, and it baffles –
 Philosophy – don't know –
 And through a Riddle, at the last –
 Sagacity, must go – [. . .] (F.H. 123)

The declarative structure of the first two verses as well as the way Dickinson describes the supernatural as a “positive” certainty hints that the spiritual world is as much a reality for Dickinson as the physical world she loved so much. The use of natural and sensual metaphors (Species and sound) to describe the spiritual world also suggests that that world may resemble the material one in some respects. As Dickinson claims in the fifth verse, the presence of the spiritual just beyond this world invites philosophical contemplation. Spirit temptingly “beckons” the observer to approach its mystery but ultimately baffles and evades the earthly wisdom of philosophers.

Because of Dickinson's reverence for this spiritual mystery, the textual metaphor used by Puritans and transcendentalists to describe the relation of matter to spirit proved unsuitable. Dickinson revises this metaphor, however, from that of text or sermon to that of sanctuary, an image which retains an element of spiritual import but avoids the interpretive dilemma of textual reference. Poem #112 cleverly illustrates Dickinson's metaphor:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –

I keep it, staying at Home –

With a Bobolink for a Chorister –

And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –

I just wear my Wings –

And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,

Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –

And the sermon is never long,

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –

I'm going, all along. (*F.H.* 66)

Here, Dickinson describes nature as an arena infused with spiritual significance. The woodland scene not only imitates the conventions of organized religion but actually serves as its replacement. Worshipping within this earthly sanctuary is proposed as a more appropriate alternative to church attendance. Those who go to church to hear spiritual truth encapsulated into

theological axioms are described as keeping the “Sabbath in Surplice,” suggesting that these worshippers are adding something superfluous to an already complete revelation of spirit. Though God preaches within the natural sanctuary, his message is not to be taken as a literal verbal oratory, since his sermon is set in opposition to the structured church sermon. Dickinson seems to suggest that God’s sermon is an inaudible message diffused throughout nature, in the song of the bird and the beauty of the orchard described in the stanzas above. For Dickinson, the natural sanctuary is where one goes to receive a general sense of spiritual inspiration and awe, to “wear one’s wings” like a bird and experience a physical pleasure like that of flight.

In many ways, this poem echoes the doctrines of transcendentalism. It emphasizes Emerson’s unity of matter and spirit, characterizing the natural world as an area infused with spiritual significance. But Dickinson stops where Emerson confidently persists by insisting that human language might represent this union accurately and that the universal constitution might be expressed in a philosophical system. Indeed, it is the presumption of doctrine and organized philosophy that Dickinson seems to oppose in the poem. Because she holds that this mystical relationship can never be translated into a hierarchical scheme or a philosophical cosmology, Dickinson revises the textual view of nature with the conception of nature as a sanctuary in which spirit may be generally felt but not conceptually reduced.

Taken together, these poems show that Dickinson viewed nature as a physical reality capable of exciting sensory pleasure by its beauty and variety. Like many of her empiricist neighbors at Harvard, she displayed a scientific interest and curiosity of nature as she collected and documented plant species for her herbarium or carefully cultivated the family garden. But just as nature was a source of physical and intellectual pleasure for Dickinson, she also affirms the spiritual contemplation it invites. Like her Puritan and transcendental predecessors, she

intuited a connection between the material and spiritual worlds but asserted that this mysterious union must always be approached reverently. One may experience a general sense of the supernatural from nature, but Dickinson warns that any attempt to shape this sense into a linguistic, axiomatic system or formula is hermeneutically presumptuous. The way Dickinson's poetry plays with language and divorces it from its common sense and context serves as a reminder that language is never fixed, that its sense is always fluid and constantly changing. Thus language is largely indeterminate and unreliable as a tool to express nature's significance. Attempts to interpret nature's morals will result in principles that reflect human presuppositions and ideological commitments rather than what is objectively present in nature. So while Dickinson holds that a "Word" may be "made flesh," she emphatically stresses that it must be "tremblingly partook" in a way that preserves its essential mystery and simplicity.

Because of Dickinson's pragmatic appropriation of empirical, transcendental, and Puritan doctrines, her approach to nature might best be compared to that of a visual artist rather than that of a theologian or philosopher. Dickinson's ideological stance displays a certain conceptual fluidity that finds an apt analogy in the colorful blendings and idiosyncratic vision of a Van Gogh or Cezanne. Indeed, Dickinson's depiction of nature in terms of its physical beauty and spiritual significance mirrors the composition of an impressionist painting in many ways.

Like an impressionist artist, Dickinson often uses language to capture a momentary, visual experience. She seeks to give her audience a sense or impression of a natural scene, emphasizing it as a fleeting and subjective vision that might be considerably altered if the landscape or object were viewed from another vantage point or in another light. Just as the changing light within a scene determines how a subject is depicted in the impressionist painting,

so Dickinson suggests that the conceptual light or mood under which nature is viewed may significantly influence its portrayal.

Dickinson's depiction of nature follows this impressionistic model in the way it highlights these issues of perception and interpretation. In the case of the impressionistic painting, closer observation of the depicted scene often obscures rather than clarifies the image. More focused perception provides the observer, at best, an experience of color but fails to reveal distinct boundaries or traditional shapes. The observer who scrutinizes the painting for such lines of demarcation will find the painting less ordered and confusing. Dickinson seems to draw on this concept in poem # 208. Just like the beautiful image of the painting, the natural beauty described in the poem evades categorization or any attempts to particularize or order it. In both cases, the observer must learn that closer inspection won't necessarily provide greater conceptual insight. Full appreciation is achieved once the observer steps back, maintaining a respectful distance, and only then does the image emerge. The experience teaches the observer to be satisfied with the vague impression and fleeting sense the image provides. It further stresses that perception does not always provide a clear, distinct, or objective view of an object, that the senses can often yield a cloudy view that is subject to interpretation.

Poem #49 exemplifies Dickinson's impressionistic technique and artistic sensibility:

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms –

And leaves the Shreds behind –

Oh Housewife in the Evening West –

Come back, and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in –

You dropped an Amber thread –
 And now you've littered all the East
 With Duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
 And still the Aprons fly,
 Till Brooms fade softly into stars –
 And then I come away – (F.H. 27)

In this poem, Dickinson describes an evening sky and rural landscape in terms of their color, composition, and movement. Dickinson's purpose is clearly to paint a visual moment using figurative language. In this case, language is not employed as a metaphysical tool to uncover some causal reality beyond the scene but is used to create an impression of the natural experience.

In the first stanza, Dickinson personifies the setting sun as a housewife who avidly cleans her house, the sky, with a cloudy broom. This image may be considered the first layer of paint with which Dickinson washes her canvas. Dickinson intensifies this metaphor in the following stanzas by layering it with further images which give the picture more figurative depth. As the housewife pulls her broom through the sky, she leaves behind colored "shreds," "Purple Ravelling," and "Amber thread." The image is that of a broom picking up threads strewn across the floor and tangling them with its motion. This action evokes the image of a weaver, weaving together colorful threads in order to create a rich tapestry. The image of the sun as weaver and evening sky as tapestry adds another dimension to the housewife metaphor established in stanza one. In addition to these images, Dickinson's focus on color, composition, and motion are

reminiscent of a visual work of art. The solar housewife may also be conceived of as a painter who employs her broom as paintbrush to cover the sky and landscape, her canvas, with color. By evoking and layering these separate images within the poem, Dickinson composes her own vivid picture of an evening sky. Though the poem may be read as a theoretical comment regarding the concept of domesticity, for instance, Dickinson's object seems to be the simple recreation of a beautiful physical moment.

Dickinson employs this same technique in poem #51:

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
 Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
 Then at the feet of the old Horizon
 Laying her spotted Face to die
 Stopping as low as the Otter's Window
 Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
 Kissing her Bonnet to the Meadow
 And the Juggler of Day is gone (*F.H.* 28)

Again, Dickinson describes the passage of the sun with a painterly attention to color, composition, and movement. The first four lines provide a base layer for Dickinson's image with a metaphor that exposes the rich color of the natural scene. For the backdrop of the shifting sky, Dickinson paints with varying hues from blazing gold to deep purple and then interposes the shape of the sun, characterized as a wild leopard. This metaphor evokes not only a sense of color but of motion. Like the leopard, the sun displays a magnificent "coat" of tawny yellow that fades into darker spots as it progresses across the sky. The leaping motion attributed to the sun creates a visual arc that gives the reader a sense of composition, separating the horizon from the heights

of the noon sky. The scene Dickinson describes is intense and vital, but its fleeting quality is also emphasized as the vigorously leaping leopard of line two quickly turns into a dying and humbled beast in line four.

On top of this leopard metaphor, Dickinson continues to layer figurative images in lines five through eight. In these lines, the sun seems to be personified as a curious maiden in a way that draws attention to the sun's motion. As the sun descends, she curiously bends over a pond or similar body of water as if looking through the "Otter's Window." Continuing her descent, she runs her figurative fingers along the roof of a barn, tinting the structure with her brilliant color. In a final flirtatious farewell, the sun blows a metaphorical "kiss" to the meadow and disappears below the horizon. The frequent use of verbs such as "stooping," "touching," "tinting," and "kissing" calls attention to the sun's fluid and varied motions as it lights up the landscape with its parting presence.

Dickinson's final metaphor in the closing line serves to summarize the impression created by the setting sun. The description of the sun as "juggler" carries associations of a circus or carnival. The occasional nature of a traveling carnival and the attractions it brings highlights the natural scene as a unique, magical experience that can't be generalized or ordered according to societal convention. The connotation seems to call for an audience response of momentary delight and revelry.

In the end, Dickinson's "theory" of nature and language seems as fluid and evasive as the composition of the physical world she describes in her poetry. While Dickinson's particular modes of perception and interpretation may be likened to those of an impressionist artist, an empirical observer, or a transcendental Gnostic, her views ultimately fail to correspond directly with the tenets of any one theory or approach. In this way, Dickinson may be considered more

Emersonian than Emerson himself in the way she embodies the characteristics of ideological freedom and flexibility extolled by Emerson in such essays as “The Transcendentalist” and “The American Scholar.” While Emerson scorns the rigidity of philosophical system, he is nevertheless tempted, as we see in the introduction to “Nature,” to delineate what he terms a “true theory,” one that “will explain all phenomena” (3). Dickinson, on the other hand, seems to resist this tyranny of theory and creed more successfully as she seeks to explain nature “from individual experience” (Emerson 113). This experience equally validated select tenets of empiricism, transcendentalism, and Puritanism, creeds that would normally be considered contradictory and irreconcilable. Thus, Dickinson could comfortably assert that physical beauty was valuable apart from any representational or symbolic function but then hint that a spiritual sense unquestionably enhanced this beauty. One is reminded of Emerson’s claim that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines” (138). Dickinson, indeed, seems to have achieved the status of Man (in Dickinson’s case, Woman) Thinking with her pragmatic approach to the various traditions that confronted her as she sought to explain the world around her. Though the past instructed Dickinson, she never became a “parrot” or a “bookworm.” Instead, Dickinson’s view emerges as one unique and alive in the way it continuously integrates the most dissimilar traditions and experiences. Louise Bogan’s essay, “A Mystical Poet,” eloquently pays tribute to this natural vitality and variability in words that may appropriately serve as a conclusion to this study:

. . . [Dickinson] mastered that Nature concerning which she had such ambivalent feelings by adding herself to the sum of all things [. . .]. “She kept in touch with reality,” someone has said of her, “by the clearest and finest of the senses – the sense of sight. Perhaps the great vitality of contact by vision is the essence, in

part, of her originality.” How exactly she renders the creatures of this earth! She gives them to us, not as symbols of this or that, but as themselves. (34)

Conclusion

As Louise Bogan suggests in her description of Dickinson's verse above, perception, especially as it involves the sense of sight, is a subject that Dickinson saw as having important implications for the symbolic process of signification. While I touch on the topic of perception with my discussion of poem # 211 and my description of Dickinson's impressionistic technique, the subject requires further exploration for those interested in acquiring a more thorough understanding of Dickinson's natural hermeneutic. For my part, I focus on the ways in which the mind processes and categorizes sensory input through the process of interpretation and abstraction through language. But there certainly exists a prior issue in the way the senses operate as they gather information and interact with the physical world. Before explaining the symbolic significance of nature, one must question, for instance, the extent to which the senses may be trusted in accurately representing the world of our experience. Do they expose what is objectively present, or are they equally subject to personal bias like our interpretations? As Dickinson realized, these questions were of central importance for any symbolic theory as sensory experience provided the foundational link between signifier and signified.

The issue of perception also serves as another link between Dickinson and the empiricist, transcendental, and Puritan traditions. Locke and Descartes dealt with the subject in depth, Descartes in his *Meditations* and Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as they sought to test the reliability of the senses as a basis for metaphysical speculation. Puritans also addressed the issue of perception, if somewhat indirectly, by tracing the effects of human depravity on the individual's physical capacities including the capacity for sight, a sense which

receives much attention in the New Testament both as a literal sense in need of restoration and as a metaphoric sense indicative of spiritual insight. Emerson similarly seems to be interested in the importance of sight not only as a metaphor for the spiritual infusion of matter but also as a tangible link between the individual and nature (and, by extension, the world of spirit). In one of Emerson's most quoted passages from "Nature," the writer hints that losing the sense of sight would be a "calamity" disrupting the body-spirit union he sought to achieve (6). Indeed, Emerson's "transparent eyeball" interestingly serves as a symbol for this ideal union of human, nature, and spirit, suggesting again the important role the sense played within Emerson's transcendental theory.

Dickinson's canon is full of poems dealing with issues of perception in ways that link her with these various traditions. Poems such as # 365 ("Compound Vision") and #115 ("Before I got my eye put out") hint, as the transcendental and Puritan traditions suggest, that there may be various ways of perceiving or seeing, that eyesight and insight are somehow related. Other poems such as #82 ("The Robin's my Criterion for Tune") deal with the reliability and objectivity of perception, a subject important for empiricists, and explores the ways in which one's way of seeing (in Dickinson's case, seeing "New Englandly") may be limited or distorted. Poem # 411 ("Perception of an object costs/Precise the Object's loss") similarly picks up this theme by investigating what is gained and lost through the process of perception, questioning the degree to which an object's essence or "Absolute" may be accurately apprehended by the senses.

One reason I have not pursued the topic of perception in more depth is because of the number of excellent studies that already treat the subject. In addition to Inder Nath Kher's *Landscape of Absence* (1974), a work which stresses Dickinson's attention to the mechanical process and creative possibilities of perception, a couple of works published in the mid-80's also

provide opportunities for further exploration in this area. As mentioned in the introduction, Emily Budick makes important observations about Dickinson's critique of New England symbolism in her book *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language: A Study in Symbolic Poetics* (1985). As a preface to her discussion of Dickinson's criticisms of this tradition in chapter five, Budick also deals with the question of perception, notably in chapters one and four, emphasizing Dickinson as a skeptic who highlighted the disjointed and limited nature of the senses. Budick's conclusion that Dickinson viewed both perception and interpretation as processes of fragmentation provides a useful addendum to my own study in the way it links these functions as equal parts of the same epistemological equation.

While Budick incorporates the subject of perception in her discussion of language and interpretation, Greg Johnson's *Emily Dickinson: Perception and the Poet's Quest* (1985) offers a more thorough and focused treatment of the issue of perception in its own right. What I find especially insightful in Johnson's study is the way he notes Dickinson's dual notion of perception. According to Johnson, Dickinson's idea of perception moves "simultaneously in two directions: toward a comprehensive vision of existential life in its contexts of the natural universe, the forces of time and eternity, and the unexplained agonies of consciousness; and toward a shrewd, empirical perceiving . . . of reality through her own eyes" (3). This attention to ideological complexity in Dickinson's verse is exactly what I seek to emphasize in my own discussion of Dickinson's pragmatic appropriation of transcendental and empirical traditions. Johnson likewise takes a contextual approach to the issue of perception by stressing the extent to which Dickinson "partook of a climate of thought and sensibility whose elements included the Puritan tradition of her region, the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, and distinct modes of perception common to American Romanticism" (3). In this way, both Johnson's and

Budick's works compliment my own by stressing the importance of Dickinson's cultural and historical embeddedness.

While more recent articles take up the subject of vision and perception in Dickinson's verse (see, for example, Cynthia Hogue's "'I Didn't Be – Myself:’ Emily Dickinson's Semiotics of Presence" or Shirley Sharon-Zisser's "To 'See—Comparatively': Emily Dickinson's Use of Simile"), I find that the works cited above are most relevant to my own study in the way they employ similar theoretical approaches and highlight the same intellectual traditions I see Dickinson responding to. I believe that studies which examine Dickinson's concept of perception will further illuminate the hermeneutic issues I explore in my study and expose more of the philosophical depth of Dickinson's poetry. Taken together, these works may help Dickinson's audience to further understand the complicated and idiosyncratic approach to the poet takes to the natural world.

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