

Conversations with Nature: God, Nature and the Self, in the Poems of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson, with her poetic focus on nature, ranks among the top writers and poets of the nineteenth century who assumed the amazing assignment of encountering and explicating nature. It occupies quite a large part in the whole volume of her poetry. She seems to have been in constant uninterrupted contact with nature. It captured her attention, joggled her mind, stimulated her imagination, embodied her meditations, or became an object of her definitions.

Nature remains a separate entity. It contains and disguises the Creator's secrets which are not completely revealed to man through the natural world. The whole system of the natural world is ordained and maintained by God, and man is under his governance. As Johnson asserts, “God has deputized his authority in dealing with all his other creatures”. This mission has become the concern of Nature, which is personified as the gentlest mother.

Dickinson's poetic definitions are simply insisting on the reality of essential qualities that are being demonstrated by this experiment of green. This is where the speaker's limitations of the ability to ‘know’ is revealed, and this sets her apart from the Transcendentalists. Unlike them, she is powerless in her limited “Wisdom” to understand the inner truth of nature, because of its remoteness. Nor can she express it by the effortless process of ‘vent,’ as Emerson called it, because its very transcendence places it beyond her ‘Art’.

Key words: Emily Dickinson, nature, God, self

1. Introduction

The nineteenth century, especially, marked an age of obvious interaction of the artist, poet, intellectual and philosopher with nature. Beliefs, principles and practices were shaped around the concepts of the individual about nature and the relationship of humans with it. Philosophers tried to formulate sets of illuminating patterns, theologians struggled with their goals to remake systems of beliefs around and about nature, and poets committed themselves to the artistic mission of making nature speak out their world of struggles and the complexity of their feelings. Literary representation in the nineteenth century seems to have spun around the different levels of understanding, exploring, and explaining nature. Emily Dickinson, with her poetic focus on nature, ranks among the top writers and poets of the nineteenth century who assumed the amazing assignment of encountering and explicating nature. It occupies quite a large part in the

whole volume of her poetry. She seems to have been in constant uninterrupted contact with nature. It captured her attention, joggled her mind, stimulated her imagination, embodied her meditations, or became an object of her definitions.

Accurate understanding and correct interpretation of Dickinson's use of religious imagery in general and scriptural allusions and figures in particular demands an observation of the role of the nature as the general revelation of the divine and the Bible as the book of specific revelation.

2. The Poet and Nature

The ever warming relationship that Emily Dickinson enjoyed with nature had to start somewhere and must have had factors that helped build and fortify it. Having been born in Amherst, Massachusetts, "where bashful flowers" (P-136) grow, indicates a very simple yet significant factor in the initiation of the human-nature relationship.¹ The uncomplicated country and farm life of the New England valley brought the individual into immediate physical and spiritual contact with nature. Since her childhood, she could marvel at and enjoy the beauties and surprises of nature. Sometimes she gazed at "bright crowds of flowers" (P-180), or watched while the "blushing birds go down to drink" (P-136), or "rose smiling, in their nests" (P-194), and at other times she marveled when "from Cocoon forth a Butterfly" (P-354), was envious when "the bee doth court the flower, the flower his suit receives" (P-1), but later became friends because "the bee is not afraid of me" (P-111). Thus, the fresh childhood experience and contact, enriched all through her life, started and provided support for the later relationship of the poet with nature. And the importance of this relationship is underlined by the poet's own statement in her reply to Higginson, who had asked for a brief sketch of her family, social and intellectual life; in the section where she is describing her companions, this what she writes:

You ask of my Companions Hills—Sir—and the Sundown—and a Dog—large as myself,
that my Father bought me – They are better than Beings – because they know – but do not tell
– and the noise in the Pool, at Noon – excels my Piano. (*L*, II, 404)

As a child, Emily Dickinson was soon distinguished for her rare intellectual capacity and interest in and love for books. The Amherst Academy had a stocked list of titles, with a major focus on natural sciences. Among the books Dickinson studied at school, Botany was one of the subjects she loved most. The years of educational formation brought her into contact with books which were mainly dependent on the Scriptures to supply examples for the theories of nature and natural phenomena. Directly or indirectly, Emily Dickinson came into close touch with the Bible, and as she found out, it contained substantial raw material for the later volume of poetry on the subject of nature.

In her school, the primary goal and mission of the professors was to win the young men and women for Christ. Therefore, the content of the teaching was radically determined by their purpose. An example of this would be Edward Hitchcock, Reverend Professor of Science and President of Amherst College. He taught science to the young minds of Amherst, but always with the purpose of "leading his students to God through the study of His works" (Sewall, 344), and he achieved this by lectures, discussions, sermons, and trips into nature. He earned quite a merited place in the early letters of Emily Dickinson, who was for sure one of his students and could have not escaped his influence. It was the deep and careful study of nature in the courses at Amherst College that served as a spark for the big fire of love for nature in the later poet.

¹ Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1961, P 1400. All poems by Emily Dickinson or parts of them are taken from this edition and will be quoted as P followed by the number of the poem.

The Dickinson family was fairly traditional, yet not radically religious. Emily's father was not a member of any religious institution until late in his life. However, this did not mean that there was no religious air blowing in the Dickinson household. In a letter to her brother, who was studying at Harvard, she wrote: "Father is reading the Bible—I take it for consolation" (*L*, I, 111), and the following words are from a letter she sent to Mrs. Holland, a close friend: "I say unto you, 'Father would read at Prayers, with a militant Accent that would startle one'" (*L*, II, 537).²

In the second letter of her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, where she puts together a concise curriculum vitae, upon previous request, she seems to exclude herself from the religious circle of the family, saying: "They are all religious – except me" (*L*, II, 404). But just a few lines above, in the same letter, she lists the Bible among her top prose selections of the Dickinson library. "You inquire my books...--For Prose—Mr Ruskin—Sir Thomas Browne—and the Revelations" (*L*, II, 404). This straightforward statement in her self-introduction makes it clear that, even though Dickinson would not fit herself in any of the traditional religious circles, she was in pursuit of a more genuine and authentic faith, in struggle to know and to know how to know, which was not the case for most of the people in Amherst, including her religious friends and family. As it became more evident later in her poetic production, and even more so with her posthumous publications, she definitely read the Bible thoughtfully and drew from it for many of her first-hand ideas, many of her striking metaphors, and at times she used biblical references as starting points for themes under consideration, or for effortless reflections upon natural life and processes starting in the morning and coming to an end in the evening.

Another factor which helped build a close relationship of the poet with nature was the changing philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual atmosphere of New England in the nineteenth century. Prevailing philosophical and theological patterns were undergoing changes due to innovations introduced by key figures such as Emerson and Thoreau, especially in literary and philosophical circles. Even though Emily Dickinson was not associated and did not have evident contact with any of these great representatives of the romantic transcendental spirit of the age, close reading and correct interpretation of her poetic expression speak of undeniable similarities to their views and literary production. The poet's sharp intuition leads her to a quest for the understanding of significance of life and natural phenomena in somewhat different ways from other literary minds of the time. Her nature poetry makes up probably the most substantial volume of poetical verses to and about nature written by one person during the nineteenth century in America.

Emily Dickinson may have not savored the rich rhetoric of her contemporary men and women of letters, but she definitely breathed the indoctrinating air of the transcendentalist movement. Yet one should not proceed without mentioning the apparent differences that emerge after a careful study of Dickinson's poems and beliefs dwelling behind them. Her concepts of nature remain unattached to any other pattern but her own. Her different beliefs arise especially when it comes to consideration of the relationship of man, nature and God. The transcendental aesthetics of Emerson, "that the poet can absorb the spirit that energizes nature and so achieve merger with the Oversoul" (Anderson, 75), which rested on a mystical base, was never accepted by Dickinson. In her guesses and inferences she manages to keep God and nature differentiated, man and nature completely separate. At this point she is different even from Whitman. If his symbols are based on a view that believes in the pantheistic merger of God, nature and man, Dickinson's keep the three entities quite separate. Yet it is important to state that despite her uniqueness and differences from her contemporaries she was, at least indirectly, influenced by their views and beliefs.

² Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1965, Vol. II, 261). All letters or parts of them are taken from this edition and will hence be quoted as *L* followed by the volume number I, II, or III, the number of the letter, and sometimes the year.

3. God, Nature and the General Revelation

Fair analysis and correct understanding of Emily Dickinson's nature poetry demand special consideration of the poet's allusions and references to nature and the Bible as sources of divine revelation. Theologians have historically categorized nature and the Bible as two open books: general revelation and special revelation. This distinction is evident even in Dickinson's poetry, where in attempt to answer the haunting questions of life, death, immortality and God, she points the reader to nature, to quote her words from a poem: "How shall you know"? / Consult your Eye!" (P-420). In other cases, despite her careful observations, deep and thoughtful study, and efforts for conclusions, the poet gives up the claim for explicit or special revelation in Nature. "Can I expound the skies? How still the Riddle lies!" (P-89). In the end, everything remains a riddle, a mystery.

The occurrences of her descriptions and depictions of nature, her "haunted house" (P-1400), surpass by numbers those of direct allusions and paraphrases of biblical passages focusing on nature. This, maybe, because of her "business" which, as she stated in a letter, was "Circumference" (*L*, II, 463), while "The Bible dealt with the Centre" (*L*, III, 733). In his biography of Emily Dickinson, Charles Sewall argues that what she probably meant by this was the "purpose to encompass the truth of life, the whole range of human experience, and somehow to arrest it in her poetry. She set out to be Expositor, Interpreter, Analyst, Orpheus—all in one." (Sewall, 700)

The references and allusions to nature as a general source of revelation will occupy the first thoughts in this section. This general revelation is believed to be the record of God that is written in the natural world around us and in the pages of the human heart. It is considered *general* in that it is a revelation of truth that has always been available to all people throughout history. It is the handiwork of God in the creation itself, and it serves as the record of God's actions in earth and human history.

The Bible itself speaks of how God reveals Himself through the book of nature. The Apostle Paul wrote,

"Since the creation of the world His [the Creator's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20).³

The Jewish author of Psalms expressed a similar observation centuries before Paul, when he wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19:1-4)

So, according to Scripture, this open book of God, read by all people, reveals God's glory, splendor and riches, His handiwork and creativity, His everlasting power (including His moral strength and His

³ *The King James Version*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge UP, 1769. Every reference to or quote from the Bible is extracted from this version identifying the book, the chapter, and the verse/s. Where the reference is from another version of the Bible it will be specified.

capacity to do miracles), and His divine nature (His attributes). In the biblical theological frame, these disclosures show that the natural world is a vast collection of divine gifts that reveal to people a great deal of truth about the personality and character of the Creator.

The traditional view also maintains that nature reveals a certain degree of truth. As Perry Miller concludes, “Puritan philosophy commenced its career in America with an unperturbed confidence that even to the most sinful of men the constitution of the universe was itself sufficient warrant for many profound truths of religion, for the nature of God and the worship which was due Him” (Miller, *The New England*: 208). Puritans pondered the relationship between God, nature, and nature’s role, and, in general, there was common agreement:

‘When God wrought the works of Creation, he had a Design in every Creature’; He displayed His infinite wisdom in this design by adapting one creature to another, and His omnipotence by making all subserve His own intent. Puritan thought, in short, presupposed a natural framework in which arbitrary power was confined within inviolable order, yet in which the order was so marvelously contrived that all divinely avowed ends were swiftly accomplished. (Miller, *The New England*: 207)

This influential view of nature also held that the creatures are a glass in which we perceive the one art which fashions all the world. They are “subordinate arguments and testimonies of the most wise God, pages of the book of nature, ministers and apostles of God,” the channel and the way by which we are led to God (Miller, *The New England*: 209). A genuine reading of the book of nature is an ascension to the mind of God, both theoretical and practical.

Under the light of, and in undoubted acquaintance with the biblical passages and such religious views on nature, Emily Dickinson wrote a number of poems that form her “natural theology” (Oliver, 69).⁴ “Her real reverence was reserved for Nature, which seemed to her a more manifest and beautiful evidence of Divine Will than creeds and churches” (Aiken, 63). The poet was constantly looking for meaning and fulfillment in nature. She wanted to “Taste a liquor never brewed” (P-214) which came from intimate experiences with nature. Being aware of her call to poetry more than to traditional Christianity, Emily Dickinson wants to reveal the unrevealed answers by going about her business of circumference, dealing with wide circles that captivate the inner and the outer, where, as Albert Gelpi would say, “consciousness defines the inner in terms of the outer and the outer world in terms of the inner, its arc sweeping variously around the central self” (Gelpi, 102).

In a poem, characterized by a rather conversational style, expressing certainty that in a near future the speaker will know the answers of the questions that have accompanied the consciousness for so long, Dickinson writes:

You'll know it - as you know 'tis Noon -
 By Glory -
 As you do the Sun -
 By Glory -
 As you will in Heaven -
 Know God the Father - and the Son.

⁴ In her book *Apocalypse of Green: A Study of Emily Dickinson's Eschatology*, Virginia Oliver dedicates a whole section to the influences on Dickinson of the explanations of natural theology found in the most widely known and used textbooks, which were in the Amherst College book list also, written by two Anglican clergymen, the first being Archdeacon William Paley's *Natural Theology*, and the second Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*.

By intuition, Mightiest Things
 Assert themselves - and not by terms -
 "I'm Midnight" - need the Midnight say -
 "I'm Sunrise" - Need the Majesty?
 Omnipotence - had not a Tongue -
 His lisp - is Lightning - and the Sun -
 His Conversation - with the Sea -
 "How shall you know"?
 Consult your Eye!

(P-420)

Through her employment of pun, Dickinson encourages the supposed other in the conversation to engage in thinking about the "Mightiest things" which "assert themselves" "By intuition" "and not by terms". The poet relies so much on the general revelation that terms do not make any assertions. At this reflective moment, intuition is the key to the understanding of truth, disregarding the implied limitation of nature to pronounce the assertions clearly and specifically, as indicated by "His lisp". The road toward understanding should start by exertion of intuition; one can begin the process without an immediate need for talking and terms.

An attempt by Dickinson to capture the glorious manifestations of nature in the morning produced an enumeration of natural elements at the departure of night and arrival of morning.

An altered look about the hills -
 A Tyrian light the village fills -
 A wider sunrise in the morn -
 A deeper twilight on the lawn -
 A print of a vermilion foot -
 A purple finger on the slope -
 A flippant fly upon the pane -
 A spider at his trade again -
 An added strut in Chanticleer -
 A flower expected everywhere -
 An axe shrill singing in the woods -
 Fern odors on untravelled roads -
 All this and more I cannot tell -
 A furtive look you know as well -
 And Nicodemus' Mystery
 Receives it's annual reply!

(P-140)

In stichic verse and by means of anaphora the poet puts together the pieces of the morning mosaic. The rhymes are sometimes fully masculine and sometimes eye rhymes, supporting sixteen iambic tetrameters. The last couple of lines give one reason for this special observation. The poet-beholder is attracted to such a moment of fascinating beauty, because she is trying to understand the significance beyond these optical effects.

Besides sheer enjoyment and absorbing fascination, the poet feels that this picture of the instant in the natural process has a more profound lesson to teach. It gives “its annual reply” to the great “Nicodemus’ mystery”. The direct reference to the gospel of John is easily identifiable.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus ... This man came to Jesus ... Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:1-5)

This passage is fundamental to Christian theology in regard to true knowledge of God and salvation of the individual. The matter is merely doctrinal, and the mystery of Nicodemus relates to generations of people who have asked the same question. Not everybody reads the Bible to be able to see these words for himself, but in the poem quoted above the poet addresses the attention of the immediate observer of nature to the underlined reply of this significant question. The capacity for general revelation of nature comes into sight. The poet does not go into detail about the theological issues. She simply maintains the status of Nicodemus’ question as mystery for people even in the Connecticut Valley. The poem here has the function of a mere guide, leading the observing eye to witness a recurring response to the important question of eternity and afterlife.

It is certain that Emily Dickinson was in a constant struggle for emotional and spiritual fulfillment. The questions that bother the recluse mind jump out of the inner into the outer, and then from the outer back into the inner, making in turn the circles of the poet’s circumference. Being the witness of such a dazzling show as in the poem to follow, she cannot miss making a comment.

Like Mighty Foot Lights - burned the Red
At Bases of the Trees -
The far Theatricals of Day
Exhibiting - to These -

'Twas Universe - that did applaud -
While Chiefest - of the Crowd -
Enabled by his Royal Dress -
Myself distinguished God -

(P-595)

In the midst of the entertaining theatrical exhibition of the day the poet’s concern for the meaning beyond the actual visual effect is not suppressed by glee. Even though the scene seems to impose leisure and relaxation on the viewer, the irretrievable quest of the poet for truth and meaning leads to closer observation and results in discernment. “Enabled by his royal dress” the poet “distinguished God”. The language and the atmosphere created in the poem remind a bible scholar, again, of a very similar passage in the book of psalms which was referred to earlier (Ps.19:1-4).

Being not only familiar with, but also a keen student of the Bible, Dickinson was able to draw from it and at times to use paraphrased or précis versions of the original biblical passages as starting points or raw material for the later artistic and poetic embodiment of her ideas, struggles, and reflections in the context of the nineteenth century. The proclamations of nature are similar in both passages, in the psalm and in the poem. In the biblical passage, the “heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1), and the days and nights,

even though they do not have speech or language, they utter speeches, their lines and their words go to ends of the world. In the poem “’Twas Universe - that did applaud”, and the natural orientation of the attention of the observer is toward the center of the show or theatrical performance, namely God. The understanding and appreciation of divine truth still remains on a general level. Nature tells, but it does not tell specifically, and as Oliver paraphrases Mark Hopkins, “the knowledge that can be obtained from nature is different in degree but not in kind from that which man can obtain from the Bible” (Oliver, 70). Nature starts the sparks for the fire of knowledge and recognition, but it does not take the individual to the end of the quest.

A change in attitude is noticeable when the poet views another scene of nature at work. The quick glimpse of a natural phenomenon like the lightning arouses the poet’s awareness.

The Lightning playeth - all the while -
But when He singeth - then -
Ourselves are conscious He exist -
And we approach Him - stern – [...]
(P-630)

The use of pun is very characteristic of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. In this case, too, the play on language achieves an effect of ambiguity. The light tone of the voice in the first line quickly switches to a serious one towards the end of the stanza. “The lightning playeth – all the while”, and people, including the poet, become “conscious He exists” only when “he signeth”. The sign that seems to draw attention in this case is the thunder. The mood that is created in such moments is apprehensive, and in most cases the viewer or observer (reader) is awakened to the fact that “He”, whichever the meaning, exists, and “we approach Him – stern”. Whatever the approach and the observations, the truth that an individual obtains remains limited and general. Emily Dickinson, as Sewall would state, considers “nature as a source of revelation, the distance to which yet remains incomplete, and the knowledge of unfulfilled, since only those who have joined the ‘Astral Ones’ have a full knowledge of it. She is still groping for a firm and abiding faith” (Sewall, 240).

4. The Need for Special Revelation

The inspired Scriptures of the Jewish and Christian faith are together called special revelation. Their combined influence extends all over the world and stands at the heart of Western culture, making the Bible the most widely translated, circulated, and studied book in history. The Bible speaks of itself as the written revelation of God. It claims to teach people what is true and to help them understand what is right and wrong in people’s lives. It offers to point people in the right direction and to teach them how to develop good relationships with both God and man (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Despite the fact that scientists are studying nature and learning more every day, the knowledge that one can derive from it is still limited in many ways and, most important, man does not receive the ultimate explicit answers for the life-questions such as “who?”, “where from/to?”, “why?”, “How?”. As Perry Miller asserts, the traditional Christian has been

[...] completely hospitable to the revolutionizing discoveries made by physical science during the seventeenth century, but as long as he remained true to the fundamentals . . . he was not deceived into concluding that man had at last unriddled the universe. (Miller P., 286)

Even Emily Dickinson noticed that and she admits it in one of her poems built around the multidimensional metaphor of a well:

[...] But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

(P-1400)

The more you study nature the more problems and questions it poses. As previously mentioned, the intended function of nature is to awaken in man a desire to search, to consider the quest for truth. It gives hints, but not explicit answers. Dickinson asserts that even “the ones who cite her most” (l. 4) have never achieved complete and clear knowledge of it.

As John D. Morris holds,

Nature can tell us much about the existence and nature of God, and even help us understand certain difficult Bible passages. But to claim that the majority opinion of scientists is on a par with Scripture is a recipe for disaster. Yes, special and general revelation must always agree, and both speak the truth, but not with equal clarity (Morris, 1995).

After listening to the murmur of the bee, one of Dickinson’s dearest “green people” (P-314) of nature, watching the sun over the hill, and being there when morning comes, she admits that

The Murmur of a Bee
A Witchcraft - yieldeth me –
If any ask me why –
’Twere easier to die –
Than tell -

The Red upon the Hill
Taket away my will –
If anybody sneer –
Take care - for God is here –
That’s all.

The Breaking of the Day
Addeth to my Degree –
If any ask me how –
Artist - who drew me so –
Must tell!

(P-155)

In this poem loaded with metaphors and enriched by the alternate rhymes and line schemes, the effect of these scenes and phenomena of nature on the poet is amazement to a degree of bewilderment. The bee itself and its song, “the murmur,” “A Witchcraft – yieldeth” for the poet-beholder. At such a confrontation, as in the poem, there is amazement, and the viewer, together with the poet, would find it “easier to die - / Than tell” why and how natural phenomena and living creatures are the way they are. Language and symbolism vary from hackneyed to private. In the middle of the poem, the speaker tries to comfort herself and the listener with the assurance that “God is there”, and she also wants to warn anybody who would dare to take things lightly. By the end of the poem, in answer of how morning can be the way it is, the attention is directed toward the “Artist – who drew me so”, and he is the one that “Must tell” the answers to the why-s and how-s, of the bewildered human eye.

In the poems quoted above Dickinson urges the questioner “Consult your Eye” (P-420), or when marveling at the morning view she turns to nature as “the annual reply” to “Nicodimus’ Mystery” (P-140). But once you have started the process of studying and searching for truth, nature will not suffice as a source and support of ultimate, explicit, and absolute truth. As Morris notices again:

Empirical science, locked in the natural world as it is, can never succeed in reconstructing the supernatural acts of God without the specific revelation of the Bible (Morris, 1995).

Nature itself is not complicated, but what makes it such is the limitation of the human mind to grasp everything, even beyond what can be seen. Miller’s comment here would follow that man’s “mortal reason is not God’s reason, that there is always more ignorance to be confessed than certain knowledge to be enjoyed” (Miller, 286).

In a definition-like poem, a recurring feature of Dickinson’s poetic style, she attempts several definitions of nature:

"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.

(P-668)

Emily Dickinson’s dictionary definition of nature starts with “what we see”, then with “Heaven” and “Harmony”, and ends “with what we know – Yet have no art to say”. The concluding lines of the poem pose an even more serious problem: “Our Wisdom is” “impotent” “To her Simplicity”. Dickinson’s poems are often build on the theme and image of “sounds beyond hearing, metaphysical sounds heard by an incorporeal ear, felt intuitively rather than received by the bodily senses” (Small, 53). Dickinson places

herself among human beings who cannot completely grasp the “Simplicity” of nature, no matter how hard they try.

The struggle of the speaker in another poem of Dickinson reaches different levels parallel to the difficulty of grasping categories of nature. For some things she does not see the need of “Elegy”, and others still do behoove her, but when the matter gets more complicated and the answers seems to escape, through a rhetorical question and an exclamation: “Can I expound the skies? How still the Riddle lies!” (P-89) concluding the poem, we understand this is the end of possible human understanding of truth from nature. The argument would go that God’s book of nature as general revelation needs to be read in harmony with the God’s written book, the Bible, which is the specific revelation. It is the outer shell that contains the essence. The inner truth of nature she can only define as ‘Heaven’ and ‘harmony,’ not actually seen and heard but presumably intuited in the mind. Several of Dickinson’s concepts of nature sound similar to transcendental views. Even though Dickinson’s vocabulary would normally be ascribed to the external, natural phenomena, she finds the origin of power within the individual. A special form of enlightenment comes from the inner sources of human soul, and it is different from the result of the contact with the natural world.

Teachings from Biblical history hold that influential spiritual leaders throughout the centuries have received their enlightenment while being in the wilderness. They were surrounded by the truth of God’s general revelation, nature, while they were meditating on the truth of His special revelation, the Bible. Many have found that when separated from the noise and distraction of civilization the book of God’s works and the book of God’s words, together, can become overpowering revelations of truth. People like Moses, David, and John the Baptist seem to have found in the wilderness a sanctuary where the books of God’s special and general revelation spoke in perfect harmony.

However, this can not be justly attributed to Emily Dickinson, since she never made it to the point of joining the two sources and drawing from both simultaneously and in complete harmony so as to claim truth. Part of the problem probably was that she never professed belief in the nineteenth century Amherst Congregationalism, or any other religious denominations. Starting with her early teen years, until her body was lowered into the grave, Dickinson definitely was in search of the ultimate truth, the compatibility of the human-divine relationship. In poem 178, she writes: “My business is, to find! / So I begin to ransack”. Her life and her poetry remain a fair embodiment of individual bewilderment at the sight of unexplainable natural phenomena, at least from a human perspective. Dickinson somehow anticipates that “nature will not tell the tale / Jehovah told to her”, and this means a struggle for spiritual survival of the individual; immortality remains a deeply rooted “secret people keep” (P-1748), not because they do not want to know it, but they seem to be short of the means of obtaining this truth merely from Nature. From the beginning to the end of Dickinson’s poetic career, nature remains her favorite, yet bewildering “whole Experiment of Green” (P-1333).

The speaker statement in this poem is an honest acceptance of human limitation to understand truth to its extreme. It challenges views which hold that Dickinson “shies away from the doctrine of nature as the revelation of God” (Anderson, 84). As Johnson observes, “for her, the world of nature is a dwelling place, hauntingly mysterious, peopled with God’s creatures who live amid the phenomena God ordains and regulates” (Johnson, 183). As inferred in the poem, we can see, hear, and feel natural objects. Our observation is captured by the harmonious coexistence of all things. Dickinson feels that it is “Heaven” to be alive and dwell close so many “fascinating creatures, moods, and vistas” (Johnson, 183). Johnson summarizes Dickinson’s view of nature in this poem as follows:

Nature as a symbol of the processes by which death gives immortality is the subject of a great body of her poetry, but she does not have that process in mind as she defines the word. Nor does she mean by it a correspondence between man and the cosmos, or between the Creator and the creature. God, man, and nature she sharply differentiates. Nature cannot be explained any more easily than God can be explained, but both can be personified (Johnson, 184).

Nature remains a separate entity. It contains and disguises the Creator's secrets which are not completely revealed to man through the natural world. The whole system of the natural world is ordained and maintained by God, and man is under his governance. As Johnson asserts, "God has deputized his authority in dealing with all his other creatures" (Johnson, 184). This mission has become the concern of Nature, which is personified as the gentlest mother.

Dickinson's poetic definitions are simply insisting on the reality of essential qualities that are being demonstrated by this experiment of green. The concluding lines allude to the speaker's limitations of the ability to 'know', and this sets her apart from the Transcendentalists. Unlike them, she is powerless in her limited "Wisdom" to understand the inner truth of nature, because of its remoteness. Nor can she express it by the effortless process of 'vent,' as Emerson called it, because its very transcendence places it beyond her 'Art' (cf. Anderson, 83).

5. Conclusion

Dickinson's use of imagery supports the view of nature as a source of divine revelation. Various images highlight human moods and, in many cases, the persona's varying relationship to the divine. The vast range of themes projected into the nature poems of Emily Dickinson cannot be easily exhausted. This category of poems takes up a substantial place both in regard to quantity and quality. This study identifies the connections of Dickinson's nature poetry and references to biblical concepts of nature, by shedding light on the source biblical metaphors and imagery.

It must be said that the prolific poet of nature was influenced largely by several factors in the establishment of a relationship with the outer world. The poet's first hand experiences and contacts with the world, first as a child and later as a teenager, helped shape her views of nature and the possible relationship one could build with it. This relationship deepened as the poet investigated more into the matter. Her mental brightness and sharp intellect were soon discerned as she studied at Amherst College. Her passion for learning led her to absorption of whatever was available in the school's library. The text books at Amherst and at Mount Holyoke, especially natural science books, and the Holy Scriptures, had a great impact on the way the poet would view nature. The Bible served especially as a source of imagery and powerful metaphors to embody haunting and ungraspable questions and reveal intimate connections with nature.

Yet, considering the time at which the poet lived, it becomes clear that even though she spent most of the second part of her life within the walls of her house, there was no way she could have missed the echo of the major changes that were going on due to the literary and philosophical movement of transcendentalism, especially in regard to views on nature. As mentioned before, there is no evidence of definite contacts or connections of the poet with any of the contemporary literary representatives, but this does not exclude the possibility that she read or heard of some of their writings, which influenced, at least to a minor degree, her views of the external world.

Eyesight and insight tangibly interweave the perceptions of the natural world and phenomena. The questions concerning life, death, and eternity, which bothered the recluse mind all life long, become substance for her nature poems in search of ultimate truth and meaning in life. Close analysis of these poems clarifies Dickinson's position. Nature must be considered as source of general divine revelation.

The quest for explicit truth in nature, however, is given up by the poet when she states that “So impotent Our Wisdom is / To her Simplicity” (P 668), and “That those who know her, know her less / The nearer her they get” (P 1400). There arises the need for specific revelation, clear and definite answers to bogging questions of the restless soul. The difficult questions remain unanswered, and the poet calls on the “Artist ... who drew [everything] so” (P 155) to tell the answers explicitly.

The multidimensional character of nature does not escape Dickinson’s observing eye. The ever-changing moods of nature are faithfully represented in Dickinson’s poems. The human-nature relationship moves from indifference and neutrality to close and intimate terms of courtship, and then back again to the other face of nature, the hostile and threatening moments. This is viewed by the poet as a mere change in the moods of nature, with no connections to what man feels or believes.

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