

ECCENTRICITIES IN EMILY DICKINSON'S NATURE POETRY

Maria Odirene Nogueira de Almeida

Nature provides subject matter and imagery in Emily Dickinson's poetry. However, her treatment of nature, in general, differs greatly from that used by her contemporaries. She was writing at the same time that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were writing, but while these poets emphasize the importance of nature in man's life, the oneness of the individual with nature, she approaches the subject from an objective point of view, describing the beautiful as well as the ugly details of nature with a keenly observant eye, managing to capture the essential qualities of the object she describes.

Clark Griffith discussing Emily Dickinson's nature poetry in his book *The Long Shadow* says that she did not abandon the Emersonian principles that nature is benevolent, compassionate, and kindly disposed toward the individual. However, she manages to invert these principles. She "agrees that natural processes are indeed deliberate — but deliberately treacherous and unpredictable. In her poetry, Nature is capable of conferring moments of great ecstasy. But the moments prove fleeting and transitory. They tentatize the observer, lull her into feelings of false security. Suddenly they pass, to be followed by periods when Nature glares back with a chilling hostility."¹

This paper deals with Emily Dickinson's treatment of nature's eccentricities in poems such as "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass", "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets", "The

1 Clark Griffith, *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 25.

Mushroom is the Elf of Plants", "The Bat is dun, with wrinkled wings", and "The Rat is the concisest Tenant". The discussion will be based on critical material, but whenever possible original observations will be used.

The first two poems to be discussed deal with snakes. Although in "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" she never mentions the word snake, there is no doubt she is dealing with one. She is accurate in her description being careful to describe how the snake rides, where it lives, and what it looks like when it appears and disappears. In discussing "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" Charles R. Anderson sees the snake's appearances and disappearings as the main characteristic that makes the snake most alien to man.² The snake's home is remote from man, and show this remoteness Emily Dickinson, instead of using the conventional swamp for the snake's habitat, show the quality of separateness by juxtaposing "boggy" with "acre" and then saying "too cool for corn".³ For Anderson "acre" symbolizes agriculture, and "corn" the basis of civilization. Therefore, a merge of the two is impossible.

The idea of separateness between man and the snake (i.e., man and nature) is developed throughout the poem, and it becomes more evident when the boy tries to catch the snake and it disappears: "When stooping to secure it/it wrinkled and was gone" (229). Is Anderson implying, then, that Emily Dickinson is saying that communication between man and Nature is impossible? Not only that, but he also sees the snake as the Serpent of Eden, and, therefore, it represents for Emily Dickinson the terror of confronting cold, live evil. He sees this terror in the last two lines of the poem "Without a tighter Breathing/ And Zero at the Bone", (229) which for him clearly show how terrified the poet is of the snake.

If one is to follow Anderson's interpretation of the poem (i.e., the snake symbolizing evil), a closer look at the poem becomes necessary to show what Emily Dickinson might have thought about evil. In the first stanza

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides
You may have met Him -did you not
His notice sudden is — (229)

2 Charles R. Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 121.

3 Thomas H. Johnson, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1961), p. 229. All future quotations will be selected from this text.

the occasional ride of the snake means that evil is not a constant in the world, but everybody has to come across it. This is implicit not only in the first stanza, but also in the second when she says "And then it closes at your feet/And opens further on" (229) meaning that evil is present in every place. The fact that evil exists in a "boggy acre" may indicate that it is not exactly where people live, but none the less, it is surrounding them. Even better is her allusion to the non-existence of evil among children. The boy tried to catch the snake and it escaped him, "When stooping to secure it/It wrinkled and was gone" (229).

The fifth and sixth stanzas

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me —
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality

But never met this fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter Breathing
And Zero at the Bone — (229)

are very effective in that they serve to show her attitude towards Nature. She is able to see the good aspects of Nature, but she can also see the treacherous elements in Nature. The last line "And Zero at the Bone" is an example of her power with words. It seems that one feels the kind of sensation she is describing when faced with the snake, with evil.

The snake as a symbol of evil is also present in "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets." This poem and the previous one have a few characteristics in common — the snake's habitat, for instance. In the previous poem it lived in a "boggy acre", in this in a "swamp". The point is that none of these places are in civilization, but in the surroundings. Therefore, there is the same idea that evil does not exist exactly where one is, but is surrounding him.

The non-permanent quality of evil is another characteristic that these two poems share. In this poem it is represented in the line "A snake is summer's treason" (317). By specifying "summer" she may want to imply that evil is not among people all the time. It comes, but it goes. The idea of cycle is implicit in this line. Therefore, it reinforces the fact that although it is not permanent it does exist.

More important than the similarities concerning place and time is the childhood imagery that is also present in "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets". The speaker in this poem gallops away from the snake, from evil. The image seems to be stronger in this poem, since it is not clear if the poet is talking about a child or comparing the action of galloping with that of a child. If the speaker is an adult, then not only children run away from evil, but everybody. Her non-romantic attitude towards Nature is emphasized in the first line of the poem "Sweet is the swams with its secrets". A swamp is as sweet for her as anything else in Nature, and she talks of a snake as she would talk of a bird. Previous Nature poets had grown accustomed to thinking of Nature as a cuddly companion, and this is not exactly what Emily Dickinson thinks of Nature.

Nature for Emily Dickinson seems to be quite deceiving, and not as serene as it looks. "Let us but turn our backs, she says, and this tranquil composition begins to waver and shift."⁴ Her poem "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" is a good illustration of this affirmation. According to Anderson images of evanescence run throughout the poem. "The Mushroom is the 'Juggler' par excellence in the vegetable world, a wandering hobgoblin(Elf) that inhabits unfrequented places. It is also a mere 'Bubble' or an 'Alibi', that last plea of the accused, 'Not me, I was elsewhere.'⁵ He also sees an image of evanescence in the Biblical overtones of the alliterating "tarried" and "tare", and also in the fourth stanza when she says "I feel as if the grass was pleased/To have it intermit" (271). With "intermit" he sees the last action of disappearance. "Intermit" also introduces an unexpected corollary: the mushroom is a pariah, an outcast.

Although Anderson does not explicitly affirm that the mushroom may stand as a symbol for man, he leaves no doubt in his commentaries as to the human qualities of the mushroom. If Anderson's suggestion is to be taken into consideration, then one is faced with a bleak view of man, therefore, of life. This may exactly be what Emily Dickinson wants the mushroom to symbolize, and, since critics in general have a tendency to see her as a skeptical person in her attitudes towards man and Nature, Anderson's suggestion is quite logical.

However, considering that Emily Dickinson always uses metaphors and hyperboles to express her ideas and thoughts, many interpretations of her poems become possible. There-

4 Anderson, p. 123.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

fore, the mushroom may also stand for a symbol of evil. If this interpretation is feasible, then it fits perfectly well within the pattern established for the first two poems discussed in this paper.

The first line "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" (271) immediately separates the mushroom from the other plants, i.e., evil from the other elements in life. This poem seems to have some of the characteristics of the previous poems, the time characteristic, for example. It is only at night that "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" (271). It does not come to remain. It is similar to "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" in that the snake appeared suddenly. The same is true of the mushroom. Its appearance is sudden. Besides, all the other images of evanescence that Anderson suggests as symbols of man's transitory state may also work as symbols of the transitory state of evil. The symbols work well according to both interpretations. But what about the fourth stanza?

I feel as if the Grass was pleased
To have it intermit —
This surreptitious scion
Of summer's circumspect (271)

Does this stanza imply that Emily Dickinson is happy with evil in the world? Not necessarily. She is simply accepting the fact that it does exist. Her use of "as if" undercuts any power that the statement might have.

Although this poem does not have a childhood image to symbolize avoidance of evil, the tone of the last stanza denies its total existence:

Had Nature any supple Face
Or could she one contemn
Had Nature an Apostate
That Mushroom, it is Him (271-2)

John B. Pickard sees this poem in a different way. He sees it as a humorous poem where the lighter side of Nature's offshoots is depicted. To him Emily Dickinson is "exploring the illusory transitory qualities that underlie nature's surface."⁶ He considers the phrases "vegetation's Juggler", "Germ of

6 John B. Pickard, *Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 62.

Alibi", and "surreptitious scion" as "mock heroic phrasing and they serve to capture the eccentric, defiant character of the mushroom. The poem concludes with nature's helpless chagrin over this rebel, whose unaccountable life is epitomized by a term of religious deviation and ungrammatical phrasing: 'Had Nature an Apostate/ That Mushroom — it is Him'.'⁷

In the three poems discussed so far "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass", "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets", and "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" an approach was used to show that Emily Dickinson may be using these grotesque aspects of Nature not only to show how far removed man is from Nature, but also to show how far removed man is from evil. This view may be optimistic provided that the common agreement among critics is that she is rather skeptical in her treatment of Nature, using Nature imagery to mock man's inability to comprehend the mysteries of Nature and of the natural process. However, since she writes about a multitude of subjects, and is able to view them from different angles, the interpretation that these eccentricities symbolize evil is quite feasible. In the next two poems to be discussed, however, "The Bat is dun, with wrinkled wings" and "The Rat is the concisest Tenant", it seems unlikely that symbols of evil are intended. Rather, by using these grotesque aspects of Nature she is able to mock religion and society.

"The Bat is dun, with wrinkled wings" is probably her finest treatment of Nature's misfits. This poem is a good example of her delight in exploring the religious basis of the unusual and the odd. Both Anderson and Pickard agree that this poem raises some perplexing questions concerning the purpose behind creation and man's limitations in comprehending the divine plan. "The bat appears useless and eccentric to us, but just as we are unable to hear his song, perhaps we cannot understand how 'beneficent' he is within the total order of the universe."⁸

To Anderson, the bat is used as a means to question man's inability to comprehend the ordered universe is very effective. It has wings, but they are not feathered. It flies, but is not a bird. It is a mammal with a mouth, but with feebly developed vocal cords. He utters no sounds, or if he does they are not perceptible to man. This fact reinforces the idea that man is unable to understand the mystery behind creation. Another

7 *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

image that supports this idea is the "Arc" that the bat makes when he flies. This too is "inscrutable".

Anderson also sees the second stanza as a sly thrust at Emerson who proclaimed the humble bee an exalted seer in exactly the same phrase.

His small Umbrella quaintly halved
Describing in the Air
An Arc alike inscrutable
Elate Plisopher (301)

"Describing", he says, "suggests that the bat is writing on the air, his wings being really his hands, fingers with spread membranes. He is spelling out his philosophy".⁹ But while the bee's philosophy is the union of man with Nature, the bat's philosophy is "inscrutable". No one is able to understand it, or the bat may be writing that no matter how hard one tries to understand Nature there is no way he will be able to.

If, according to Anderson and Pickard, the main theme of the poem is man's doubt concerning creation, then the same relation that exists between bat and man can also exist between man and God. Then, one is faced with a bleak view of man and his position in the universe. The fact that it was the very silence of the bat that contributed to the poet's awe suggests that she may be struck with the silence of God in regards to man. The sound imagery of the first stanza "And not a song pervade his Lips-/Or none perceptible." (301) may mean that whatever complaint man has to make will be of no avail because God will not hear him.

Also, man's role on earth is of no importance, since he is moving in circles that no one is able to comprehend. Besides, the umbrella image connotes man's nervous, hesitant personality which always needs protection. To Emily Dickinson man never seems to be certain of where he stands in relation to God. The image of the bat being "beneficent because he kills other insects, how is man beneficent? because he kills other men? Not exactly that. She may be alluding to those who in order to achieve their objectives, do not care whom they hurt. Man's creator deserves praise because even the very product of his creation is not able to understand him, and man is, then, one of God's eccentricities. The value of this interpretation is questionable. However it seems possible, since this theme is

9 Anderson, p. 109.

not novel with her. She has poems that explicitly deal with God's disregard for people on earth.

In the last poem to be discussed, "The Rat is the concisest Tenant", the rat mocks man's complacent trust in law and social patterns. It ignores all that is unessential to its own needs. Not only does it fail to pay for food and lodging but it completely denies any moral responsibility. Man is aware of the rat's amoral acts, but man's hate for it is of no use since it does not care. Commenting on the poem Pickard says that "throughout, the satire is double edged: she feigns puzzlement over the rat's parasitical traits, while ridiculing the chain-of-being concept and man's social laws."¹⁰

If the rat serves as a representation of Nature then it reinforces the idea that Nature does not care, and acts according to her own wishes. Man, on the contrary, lives according to certain laws and principles. Emily Dickinson seemed to be highly aware of them, and apparently did not always approve of them. What usually happens in her poems on Nature is that in comparing Nature with Man she is aware of man's limitations as opposed to Nature's "different" limitations. She likes to draw metaphors from the external world to portray her views of man's limitations.

The unusual and odd areas of Nature that attracted Emily Dickinson so much have been explored in this paper. In some poems these oddities served as symbols of evil; in others, they served as a means to question man's relation to God and to society. But never did she embrace the belief that Nature and Man are one. "Though acutely observant and aware of precise detail, she distrusted scientific analysis and scoffed at its attempts to codify all nature. She tempered her genuine enthusiasm for the beauty of external nature with an awareness of its innate mystery and strangeness. Never certain of any clear correspondence among God, nature, and man, she remained a skeptic who both admired and doubted."¹¹

¹⁰ Pickard, p. 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.