

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2006

### How Still the Riddle Lies; Emily Dickinson's Sense of Naturalness

Jill M. Beauchesne

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### Recommended Citation

Beauchesne, Jill M., "How Still the Riddle Lies; Emily Dickinson's Sense of Naturalness" (2006). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 529.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/529>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

HOW STILL THE RIDDLE LIES: EMILY DICKINSON'S SENSE OF  
NATURALNESS

By

Jill Marie Beauchesne

Bachelor of Arts, English Language and Literature, University of Virginia,

Charlottesville, VA, 2000

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English Literature

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

Autumn 2006

Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean  
Graduate School

Robert Baker, Chair  
English Department

Louise Economides  
English Department

Phil Condon  
Environmental Studies Department

Abstract: How Still the Riddle Lies

Robert Baker, Chair  
Louise Economides  
Phil Condon

The tradition of “nature writing” in the United States draws heavily on the literary movements of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Wordsworth’s meditative walks, Keats’s nightingale, Thoreau’s pond—these concepts have shaped literary beliefs and perceptions of natural landscapes as much as a writer’s individual haunts or favorite creatures. In a contemporary context, a writer steps down a long, well-worn path when he or she attempts to describe a bird taking flight or the way the sunlight feels at a certain time of afternoon. In the nineteenth century, writers began looking to nature as a source of redemption—through interaction and contemplation of natural landscapes or animals, writers often constructed fantastic, extraordinary metaphors and expressions of individual consciousness or feeling. These types of natural contemplations still serve as potential artistic reservoirs for contemporary writers and artists; however, this reservoir emerges as increasingly fraught under the lens of feminist criticism.

The Romantic construction of “sublimation,” a process by which a “subject” can gain invaluable creative or spiritual knowledge through an interaction with an “other” (often, a natural place or thing) requires an implicit separation of subject from object. Feminists have latched on to the dualist makeup of Romanticism and have urged a critical re-evaluation of how we must read these writers from a present standpoint. Moreover, within this re-evaluation, feminist criticism focuses on how female writers in this period and others handled this objectification of the other. In my thesis, I have utilized feminist and ecofeminist criticism to examine how nineteenth century poet Emily Dickinson confronted the Romantic sublime, specifically in relation to the natural world. Namely, I believe that Dickinson’s relationship to the natural world is less objectifying than more publicly dominant literary names of her time and that she remained less interested in obtaining subjective sublimity than in expressing a conceptually particular, somewhat strange, always fascinating relationship with her physical surroundings. Furthermore, humor served as a primary tool for Dickinson to conduct subversive reactions against the dominant Romantic paradigm concerning the natural world and also allowed her more access to reactionary discursive tools.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Robert Baker, Louise Economides, and Phil Condon for their extensive comments and advice.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: Transcending Mere Custom	1
Chapter 1: Embodied Being	5
Chapter 2: Sublime Resemblances	30
Chapter 3: Making Animal Faces	44
Chapter 4: In Conclusion: Animating an Eco-Text	59

## Introduction: Transcending Mere Custom

Few American poets have been examined as much for their daily existence as for their poetry as Emily Dickinson, a woman who lived much of her life in seclusion from peers, community, church, and even family. Theorists and critics of her immense body of work have crafted many links between her poems and her seemingly strange reclusive nature over the past century. For many decades following Dickinson's death, the criticism had a largely "private" focus, viewing the poet and her work through a narrow lens of familial events and supposed love affairs. Yet much contemporary analysis concentrates instead on fostering a wider critical perspective for Dickinson's work. Instead of reading the poems with an image of a white-clad, wide-eyed woman in mind, contemporary critics now draw on cultural, national, and literary movements in the nineteenth century to further conceptualize and understand her complex and original projects.

In this thesis, I have chosen to examine the representation of natural landscapes and animals throughout Dickinson's oeuvre. Namely, I am interested in how Dickinson's depiction of nature accords or not with Romantic conceptions; I have explored how much or how little Dickinson's depictions reflect the Romantic tendency to conceive of nature as a vital source for contemplation and sublimation. Throughout this examination I also draw from contemporary theory—specifically, feminism, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism—to draw conclusions regarding how and why Dickinson treats nature in her poetry. Ultimately, though Dickinson's project to an extent reflects Romanticism's formal renderings and presentation of nature, she tends to repeatedly rework the Romantic model of the sublime in numerous ways. Her motivations behind these

alterations seem fluid; yet in this thesis I argue that she holds the Romantic model up to the light in order to expose its adherence to a patriarchal system and its resultant limitations for female writers. Moreover, I believe the Romantic model remains ultimately too Cartesian and dualistic for Dickinson and that this subjugation of nature becomes a major point of contention in the work. Finally, I also claim that she solidifies her exposé of Romanticism through comedy; in my opinion, humor functions as a crucial tool of subversion throughout the texts.

The paper opens with an exploration of Dickinson's religious tendencies, including her decision not to join her community church in Amherst. Interestingly, as pointed out by Karl Keller, Dickinson's poetic endeavors truly commenced for the most part around the time that she made the notable decision to stay out of formalist religion. Her letters to friends and family members at this point in her life reveal an individual saddened and troubled regarding her spiritual choice but they also tell of a strange, inner confidence regarding spiritual matters. Throughout the first chapter, I highlight several poems that include reference to the natural world as well as spirituality. Many of the poems that propose different or unconventional modes of spirituality contain animal metaphors or imagery; moreover, in addition to creating "new" spiritual relationships via poetic devices, Dickinson also uses diverse humorous tropes in order to comment on the traditional set-up of religion and spirituality as they exist in her understanding.

The second chapter opens by exploring the literary movement, Romanticism, and the poets who wrote and worked under its influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Romantic poets often exalted and celebrated animals and natural landscapes in their works, and the "natural" emerged as a principal component of the Romantic

“sublime,” a literary process by which poets utilized another place or person in order to achieve figurative “transcendence” or reach full creative capacity during the writing of the poem. Dickinson, although fully cognizant of the workings of the Romantic sublime, was arguably troubled by its implicit dualist make-up and often wrote using a corrupted or altered model of the sublime in order to re-work it to serve her particular representation or to mock or satirize its inherent objectifications.

In Chapter 3, I explore more thoroughly the idea that Dickinson used humor as a means to expose the patriarchal tendencies of Romanticism and the sublime. More often than not, her “funny” poems also include animals. I explore the different types of humorous “masks” that Dickinson assumes in order to comment on the literary and religious communities of her time, and argue that humor may have allowed her increased theoretical “access” to animals and natural places than more “tragic” stylistic decisions. Critic Jonathan Bate examines how tragedy somehow “raises” the human subjects in a scene above the material reality of description and representation, while humor retains human subjects within the bounds of physical reality. Moreover, I also relate Dickinson’s humor to her refutation of the sublime and examine how several poems exaggerate or satirize the sublime model in order, presumably, to release the model from its powerful roots.

Finally, the final chapter and conclusion relate Dickinson’s representation of natural space to ecofeminist criticism and claim that she refuses traditional representation because she held a less dualistic understanding of the universe and how humans should involve themselves within the universe. As a woman writer who lacked access to literal and figurative male-dominated spheres of influence, I believe Dickinson naturally likens



the repression of women to the repression of nature as enacted by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Because dominant models of thinking repeatedly “othered” women in order to obtain increased physical or mental power, naturally an “othered” woman might find allegiance with creatures and/or natural spaces that are also objectified and “othered.” I examine several poems in which Dickinson exposes the danger and implicit violence of the patriarchal sublime and, later, explore how particular poems rebuke patriarchal models to the extent that they offer new modes of thinking and representing the natural world. Notably, her particularly subversive texts, those that question animal abuse or propose animal-human “unions,” are also often humorous. Indeed, these funny “tropes” allow Dickinson to create a highly particular and personal representative relationship to animals and places. Ultimately, she creates a resonant, unique language of her own with which to discuss and contemplate the natural world beyond patriarchal influence—and when we read and understand her work in these new terms from a present perspective, we understand her particularity anew, as a fresh, distinct consciousness: “So much has been made of the sadness in those houses and of the supposed misery of Dickinson herself, that it is really no small thing at all. Turning our eyes to Dickinson’s comedy humanizes her, makes her that much more believable, palpable, and wise. It expands her range, her significance, and her power” (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 140).

## Chapter 1: Embodied Being

As I will argue, Dickinson's relationship to landscapes and animals is more complicated and complex than those relationships posited by other Romantic writers. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how a more holistic approach to the natural world accorded with her understanding of spirituality and mortality. Prevailing Christian dogma would claim that a human being is "above" or different from nature; the presence of the human soul gives a person access to an afterlife that is unavailable to other living creatures on Earth. How would Dickinson have reacted to this elevation of the human over every other living thing? When we place her poetic emphasis on physical immediacy alongside the fact that she never officially experienced "conversion" or joined her community church, where might we conjecture that her difficulties with the church lay most strongly?

Emily Dickinson found American religion out. She found out its exclusiveness—that what was organic and necessary to her life was unacceptable, that in fact she was unacceptable. It had her without having any place for her. Furthermore, it created a world within, without putting much of anything within that world; it was barren beyond belief, without the abundance that she found ... her own senses expected of religion. ... And so she tended to reject creeds, ministers, and church in favor of simple introspection and a more pleasant existence. (Keller 77)

I would venture that this "exclusiveness" that Dickinson abhorred, as cited by Keller, includes the "occupational" tendency that men of the cloth and of letters might have expressed towards the natural world. With the word "occupational," I mean to conjure the sentiment of Manifest Destiny and the idea of physically settling in places in order to achieve human success or profit. For Dickinson, a man-centered or human-centered conception of the universe became tenuous in her poetic interactions with animals and

landscapes. Furthermore, it is telling that her writing took off in quantity and quality in the same year as the New England religious revival:

By the time she began writing poetry in earnest—1858 and 1859—her religious interests were more troubled and her life became thereafter a coherent confusion of doubts and hopes. ... Dickinson's religious state—and we find it to have been fairly consistent after the New England revival of 1859, a happening coinciding with her first poetry—was that of liminality. She got caught between institutions and free form. She found herself outside limits—and enjoyed the trouble it caused within her. (Keller 78)

Most likely, one motivation for Dickinson in writing was to explore and understand prevailing theology as well as construct her own spirituality. And, indeed, those poems that detail natural landscapes and animals frequently fall into a category of work that also explores mortality and religion. While considering those poems that deal with nature as well as spirituality, we should also bear in mind how the works adhere to or deviate from Romantic conceptions of nature; moreover, a fascinating component for exploration emerges as we recognize that Dickinson may be satirizing or poking fun at Romantic, male-centered conceptions of nature and religion.

In many of her letters and poems, Dickinson calls herself a “pagan,” sometimes in banter, sometimes in seriousness (Keller 79). Poem # 869, “Because the Bee may blameless hum” explores a particular variation of “pagan worship” and involves a metaphorical transmutation of a human speaker into an animal. The humor in this poem is light, jesting, and spontaneous:

Because the Bee may blameless hum  
For Thee a Bee I do become  
List even unto me.

Because the Flowers unafraid  
May lift a look on thine, a Maid

always a flower would be.

Nor Robins, Robins need not hide  
When Thou upon their Crypts intrude  
So Wings bestow on Me  
Or Petals, or a Dower of Buzz  
That Bee to ride, or Flower of Furze  
I that way worship Thee.  
(Johnson 414).

The poem begins by introducing a creature from the natural world—a bee, which hums along blameless throughout its daily existence. The bee hums “blamelessly” in several respects: in the speaker’s viewpoint, the bee is not a moral agent, that is, the decisions it makes throughout the day as it eats and works cannot be judged in a moral sense; the bee is blameless to itself, that is, it does not judge or feel self-loathing because of its actions; or, finally, presumably because there is no agent placing blame on the bee for its humming, it remains blameless. The speaker then metaphorically “changes” herself into a bee for “Thee,” a word which presumably represents a deity or God. This change allows the speaker to become blameless to others, to herself, and to God. In a sense, the speaker has removed the “human” qualities of herself, or the qualities that make her most vulnerable to blame. As a result of this transmutation, the poet can then continue “humming” (or singing, or making poetry) without fearing reprimand from self, others, or God. In the second stanza, the flowers, like the bees, are also unafraid to look at God—they have no guilt or judgment to consider either. And the “Maid,” a feminine individual, can in this construction find another way to experience God, if she assumes the position of the guiltless flower.

In her identification with bees and flowers in this poem, Dickinson utilizes a childlike or innocent voice in order to call attention to how knowledge becomes

constructed within her culture. The tone, while light, veils the poet's serious intent to emphasize the difference between how animals and humans experience the natural world, or, more interestingly, between how humans believe humans experience the world and how humans believe animals experience the world: "The voice of ingenuousness is clearly a performance, a character created before our eyes by a poet who plays upon the contrast she establishes between the speaker and the culture that is called into question" (Juhasz 32). In this case, Dickinson assumes a childlike voice (e.g., "Mother, if God does not mind if the bee sings, why can't I sing?" ) to question a cultural adage. The silliness of the comparison and the lighthearted diction and tone allow the female poet a safe place from which to question the guilt that humans may attach to singing, writing, and self-expression: "The voice of the little girl ... can sound like one thing and reveal something else. It can sound innocent and reveal experience, as Blake, too, had understood" (Juhasz 34).

So why then is this speaker questioning or making contrast between human and animal "guilt?" If the speaker is longing for closeness to God, to be absolved of human subjectivities, why is she blaming or judging herself? The obvious hint exists in the first line—the bee is allowed his "blameless" hum—his song and intonation are a part of unadulterated nature, whereas the speaker's hum (or song, or poem) is corrupted by how humans conceive of these two things. The speaker may in fact be seeking a transmutation not only to "reach God," but also to reach Him without sacrificing her own particular poetic voice and need to sing. For it is through song, and dance, and flight, that this speaker wants to worship—"So Wings bestow on me / Or Petals, or a Dower of Buzz / That Bee to ride, or Flower of Furze / I that way worship Thee." In this poetic

construction, the bee, flower and robin have a more direct access to God via their “voices” than the human speaker—and the human speaker sees value in the animal characteristics and highlights them for their transcendent qualities. The speaker does not want to hide from her God; she does not want to fear her God. In the surrounding landscape of personal perspective, it is the animals and plants that she illustrates as having the most admirable type of relationship to an otherworldly deity, and only by becoming one of these “creatures” can the speaker achieve the same redemption and fulfill a spiritual goal. Although the tone at first glance seems provincial and/or simple, Dickinson’s innocent approach in this poem remains a deliberate and subversive construction. “Because the Bee may Blameless Hum--/For Thee a Bee do I Become”—there is unadulterated confidence in these lines, joy in poetry’s ability to construct new modes of thinking and being. There is effrontery contained here—either against a God, or a patriarchal system, or both—as if the poet says, “if you are going to judge me for my lines, then consider me a bee. Your reproach cannot touch me, now.” A strange response to a world that would never accept her on equal footing with a male author—can we consider her poetic triumphs also practical triumphs? I believe that the answer is yes—if the poet truly changed her mode of thinking and actually considered herself animal-like, then the taunts and jabs of an audience would not have been able to touch her. She would understand blame, and not attach it to her poems. “Positioned between the mind of the poet and the culture she inhabits, the poem’s space is where she can challenge dominance and hegemony. The space of the poem is not exactly safe—someone could, after all, read it; but it is the best and only place Dickinson knows for taking the chance, for making a

try. . . . the world of the poem, in its contiguous relation to the culture itself, is the space where cultural codes are not only cast into doubt but rearranged” (Juhasz 27).

When Dickinson refused to join the church in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the mid-nineteenth century, a world of exploration and role-playing opened up for her; her poetry then provided a space to enact her own conceptions of theology and the afterlife. Yet she also referenced religion and the church more directly in many of her personal letters throughout her life. Keller surmises that her religious angst began in earnest in the late 1850’s; yet her letters evince a particular spiritual questioning as early as 1852. Most notably, religion and church matters seem to have caused a major disagreement between Emily Dickinson and her bosom friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, in the early 1850’s. Yet before the disagreement took place, Dickinson wrote Susan an impassioned celebration of their friendship utilizing religious language in a rather unconventional manner. Dickinson presumably writes this letter on a Sunday morning, when she is alone in the house because all other members of the family have departed to church:

The people who love God are expecting to go to meeting; don’t you go, Susie, not to their meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love—shall intercede there for us! They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me. (Johnson Letters 79)

Dickinson’s language here seems purposely inflammatory because presumably if all who love God are going to meeting, then Dickinson is not one who loves God. Yet she repeats the word “Love” twice in this excerpt, which to my mind betrays some impulsiveness in a letter that conveys itself like a conversation. If Dickinson

metaphorically creates a “Preacher whose name is Love,” then consequently there is some room for Love, and Preachers, and perhaps even God, in her altered conception of what the Sabbath becomes when she remains isolated at home conducting letter writing: “As I sit here Susie, alone with the winds and you, I have the old king feeling even more than before, for I know not even the cracker man will invade this solitude, this sweet Sabbath of our’s” (Johnson Letters 79). Dickinson enacts her own “meeting,” in this case, a tete-a-tete with Susan Gilbert. When she associates this meeting with the church and calls this process of letter-writing and figurative meeting a “Sabbath,” she has reformulated and recreated a conventional conception of a Sabbath Day. In this case, Dickinson’s emphasis on inwardness parallels the way in which many Romantic writers began to implicitly alter the context of religious worship. As outlined by writers from Blake to Thoreau, spirituality grows and deepens through acts of creation in isolation: “For the general tendency (in Romanticism) was, in diverse degrees and ways, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine” (Abrams Supernaturalism 68). Moreover, Dickinson’s particular solitary religious experience as detailed in this letter also includes an unadulterated expression of female friendship and love. Away from the confines of the patriarchal church, Dickinson seems to feel freer and more full (the phrase that “old king feeling” becomes especially interesting in this context); the act of writing satisfies her emotionally and physically in its figurative and literal performance.

Letter #173 (likely written in 1854 according to Johnson) is also addressed to Susan Gilbert. The letter is notably less jovial and less expressive than earlier letters to Susan; there are few enacted connections of friendship extended by Dickinson. Although the tone is declarative and referential, the language still reflects an ephemeral quality in



its strange metaphors and expressions of speech: “We differ often lately, and this must be the last. . . . Sue—I have lived by this. It is the lingering emblem of the Heaven I once dreamed, and though if this is taken, I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me—there is a darker spirit will not disown its child. . . . We have walked very pleasantly—Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge—then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on” (Johnson Letters 122).

The indefinite article in the second sentence of this excerpt (“Sue I have lived by *this*”) seemingly refers to some way of life, some system of belief that Dickinson has adhered to and chooses to continue adhering to although her friend Sue most likely wishes to deter her from it. The first word in the following sentence (“It is the lingering emblem. . .”) most likely also refers to the initial metonymy contained in “this.” To follow is a strange, poetic declaration of faith, a set of sentences that could easily be broken into poetic lines:

The lingering emblem of Heaven  
I once dreamed,  
and though if this is taken,  
I shall remain alone

and though in that last day,  
the Jesus Christ you love,  
remark he does not know me—  
there is a darker spirit will not disown its child

The letter explicitly expresses a need for Dickinson to remove herself from traditional forms of religious expression. Again, as in Letter #77, she references a God that she does not love (“the Jesus Christ you love”) yet here she offers no transformation of a religious scenario to meet her unconventional spiritual needs. Rather, on the face of things with

Susan she accepts the possibility of a dark spirit taking hold of her own. Yet I hesitate to claim that Dickinson meant this altogether seriously. To me, her main focus in this letter is to expound upon the difference in her relationship with Susan. In a way, she is calling Susan out and subtly mocking her point of view—as if she is telling Sue not to worry about her (Emily) not making it to Heaven, because she'll have comfort with dark spirits in Hell. The letter ends with one of Dickinson's first poems, Poem #5, "I have a Bird in Spring":

I have a Bird in Spring  
Which for myself doth sing—  
The spring decoys  
And as the summer nears—  
And as the Rose appears,  
Robin is gone.

Yet I do not repine  
Knowing that Bird of mine  
Though Flown—  
Learneth beyond the sea  
Melody new for me  
And will return.

Fast in a safer hand  
Held in a truer Land  
Are mine—  
And though they know depart,  
Tell my doubting heart  
They're thine.

In a serener bright,  
In a more golden light  
I see  
Each little doubt and fear,  
Each little discord here  
Removed.

Then I will not repine,  
Knowing that Bird of mine  
Though flown  
Shall in a distant tree

Bright melody for me  
Return.  
(Johnson Letters 123).

The enclosed poem utilizes an animal metaphor to explain Dickinson's sense of hope and optimism regarding her particular viewpoint. Because Dickinson ends her letter with the phrase, "Then pass on singing Sue," the Bird's song in the poem is a direct comparison with Sue's traditional mode of praiseful songs of worship. Dickinson's journey with Susan and conventional religion has reached a fork in the road; while Sue passes on singing, Dickinson listens for the Bird. Yet there is evidence of faith in this early poem. Although the Robin disappears in summer, Dickinson fails to falter, as she is confident in its return. In this manner Dickinson has created a metaphorical expression of her own faith; this is not a linear spirituality but instead emerges as cyclical, represented by the changing seasons causing the return of the Robin.

Letter #175, written in 1854 to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, also addresses how Dickinson confronted the domineering presence of the church in her life. Dickinson considered Mrs. Holland an "enduring" friend and many letters between the two reveal how they shared intimate confidences:

The minister today preached about death and judgment and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly—and somehow the sermon scared me, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn, as if the whole was true, and I would not for words have them know that it troubled me, but I longed to come to you, and tell you about it, and learn how to be better. He preached such an awful sermon, though ... the subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me. (Johnson Letters 124)

Besides Dickinson's obvious disavowal of a religion based on fear ("perdition seemed to please him") the reaction of her father and sister Vinnie to the sermon seems important to

me. Their “solemn” demeanor heightens Dickinson’s discomfort with the sermon. If her father had shaken it off or slid a grin over to Austin and Emily, then her reaction to the sermon might have been much different. I believe her perception of her father as “solemn” indicates her own internal discord and perhaps even guilt regarding her “improper behavior.” Though her family seems to accept her ultimate decision not to join the church, perhaps they still do not fully condone this act—or perhaps Dickinson simply fears this reaction and projects it onto those she cares most about. After all, the letter contains no evidence that her father spoke to her regarding the sermon. She simply looked over and perceived him to be reacting in a certain way. In my opinion, this subtle perception points to Dickinson’s inner anxiety regarding her spiritual decision, although the same excerpt reaffirms that she did not believe in conventional religion; the phrase “looked very solemn as if it were true” leads a reader to conclude that ultimately Dickinson held to some inner conviction that the horrors of Judgment Day as painted by this minister were indeed false. The convictions and suppositions contained in this letter as in many others illustrate Dickinson’s pressing concerns that would soon find a stage in her facsimiles.

As Poem # 869, “Because the Bee May Blameless Hum,” illustrates, Dickinson often conjured up fantastic scenarios for finding God, many times using animals and other aspects of natural landscapes as springboards and talking points. Arguably, Dickinson’s biggest point of contention with Puritan theology may have been in its insistence on fear and self-loathing, its “blame” directed at her “humming.” Her poems at times scoff at the idea of a punitive God—yet, in Dickinsonian fashion, she chooses not to simply renounce the idea of hell. Similar to the way in which she approaches

conventional, objectifying views of nature and animals, she also chooses to dwell in the theological tradition, to satirize it and blow it out of proportion in order to demonstrate her own rejection of fire and brimstone: “Emily Dickinson had needed, in an existential manner, to transfer hell to the present moment. She wanted hell now and spent much of her poetic energy in deliberately constructing it ... the remarkable thing about her approach is that she learned to turn the hell she was taught to believe in (and live in) into a full life” (Keller 83).

More frequently than not, Dickinson utilizes humor (notably, satire and absurdity) in her efforts to deride theological tradition, metaphorically taking us to the edge of the “norms” that were proscribed for her in daily life as a woman in late nineteenth century America. Poem #766, “My Faith is larger than the Hills,” relies heavily on an aesthetic of “normative excess” (Miller). Dickinson utilizes religious language and imagery in order to expose its inconsistencies; this poem ultimately leaves the reader with multiple understandings and possibilities for religious conceptions and perceptions especially as these relate to the natural world:

My Faith is larger than the Hills  
So when the Hills decay—  
My Faith must take the Purple Wheel  
To show the Sun the way—

‘Tis first He steps upon the Vane—  
And then—upon the Hill—  
And then abroad the World He go  
To do His Golden Will

And if His Yellow feet should miss—  
The Bird would not arise—  
The Flowers would slumber in their stems —  
No Bells have Paradise—

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith

On which so vast depends—  
Lest Firmament should fail for me—  
The Rivet in the Bands  
(Johnson 375).

Starting with an image ripe with Biblical association (“Hills”), Dickinson immediately pushes the metaphorical envelope. What at first read appears to be a celebratory gesture towards religion and faith, the phrase “My faith is larger than the hills” becomes immediately complicated by the “decay” of the hills that follows. Dickinson “assumes” a dualist view in this poem and follows this position through to its strange and jostled finish. If human faith is “otherworldly” and subsists even as the Hills decay, then this faith must take over the duties of those Hills and act as a guide for the Sun who moves across the Earth. Yet the poem exists in the conditional tense—if the Hills decay, then “my faith” must take the purple wheel. And, because of this conditional, the poem seems to enact two stances at once—one, it is the stance of a speaker questioning her faith (is my faith strong enough to guide the Sun?), or two, is the poem conducting a mockery of a Western conceptions of spirituality, calling attention to the human presumption to think the world literally revolves according to “faith?” The mockery reveals itself fully at the end of the poem.

In the third stanza, the poem articulates another hypothetical conditional situation within the already existing hypothetical starting with the line: “If His Yellow feet should miss—.” The speaker has already imagined the Hills decaying, and the resulting responsibility of “my faith” to take over the role of the Hills. Now, the speaker imagines that faith fails, or chooses not to accept the responsibility of the “Purple Wheel.” If this scenario were to occur, the Sun’s yellow feet might “miss,” the “bird would not arise,” the “flowers would slumber on,” etc. Presumably, the speaker expresses how important

the role of faith is to the natural world—natural processes cannot occur without the Sun, and the Sun cannot find its way along the ground without the guiding hand of Hills or Faith. Yet the final stanza contains the most interesting language and subtly exposes the satire that lies quietly behind the overarching language in the first stanza. The speaker asks, “How dare I, therefore, stint a faith/ On which so vast depends?” This fascinating question purposely hints at the intention behind the poem; truly, this poem so far contains no “stint” (defined here as restriction, numbering, or limitation) of faith in its literal choice of words. Quite the opposite, in fact—the poem has seemingly claimed that faith is “large,” larger in size and temporal existence than any physical part of the landscape. Therefore, because at the end of the poem the poet tells us that she has been “stinting” faith, we understand the first stanza as a mockery of elevated language and its extended metaphor and figurative situation (faith guiding the sun, etc.) as a subtle satire of certain religious conventions and expressions. From Genesis 49:26: “Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills.”

So, Dickinson first sets up a biblical metaphor, and then admits that her project has subversive intent by calling herself out in the final stanza. Yet this opening line in stanza four hardly renounces her position. She asks, “How dare I stint a faith?” She does not say, “I must stop stinting this faith.” The tone is tongue-in-cheek, mocking, and near exuberant. She seems to ask her reader, “Are you wondering how I have the courage to stint, mock, and satirize this faith?” And the answer, for the reader, is contained in the poem itself. In Dickinson’s metaphorical rendering of a “faith greater than the hills,” the faith must assume duties and responsibilities of the greatest natural forces on Earth—in this case, the Sun. The poet has created narrative “excess” or a near-absurd situation in

order to mock hierarchical conceptions of faith and nature. Because her poetic project has taught her the shortcomings and defaults of a linear, more conventional understanding of the world, the poem emerges as a critical alternative to mainstream thought. Metaphors and situations are conflated, Faith and Hills change places, and the Sun assumes qualities of a God or Divine. Indeed, the poem concludes at an imagined “breaking point”: “Lest Firmament should fail for me--/The Rivet in the Bands.” This phrase serves as the answer to the previous question—“How dare I stint a faith?” The speaker ends the poem with a question and answer series that rings with a certain amount of confidence in the subversion just conducted, but still remains vulnerable to the question and definition of faith. The speaker, again, is posing this question to the reader: “Are you wondering how I have the courage to stint a faith? Are you wondering why I continue to question faith, how I can live with the risk of no heaven, with the risk of death of soul as well as body?” “Lest Firmament should fail for me”—and the “for me” is the crucial turn in this phrase. The “stinting,” the limiting and questioning of faith that the poet has undertaken, has the ability to break her at the end. When Firmament (defined as sky, heavens, a physical page in the Bible) is broken, the Rivet (bolt) in the Bands also presumably breaks—the pieces holding together our mortal life might snap as well. And this is how the poem ends, at an imagined break, an assumed fissure.

The humor in Poem #766 is satirical, relying on “excess” in order to articulate cultural subversion. At its beginning, the poem appears to “follow the rules”; it adheres to a Biblical diction and metaphorical set-up. But as the poem makes the metaphor more and more extreme and finally admits at its end that it is willing to risk its break, or “failure,” the humor emerges defined clearly as mockery of religious language, achieved



through exaggeration and absurdity. Yet the poet does not ignore the part she herself has played in constructing conventions as well as refuting them. Ultimately, the poet cannot stand wholly on one side of the fence or the other. She is indebted to convention, in the sense that her own language could not resonate or stand full without the metaphors and expressions that have come before her. Yet she is involved in exposing language's inconsistencies and problems, as expressed in Poem #766. The mockery in a poem like #766 includes the speaker in its web, and the humor is self-deprecating as well as outwardly political; the poet mocks her own ego as much as she mocks the egos of those around her. It is not "your faith" or "his faith" that the speaker chooses to expose and subvert throughout the poem; it is "my faith." As Cristianne Miller proposes in her essay, "The Humor of Excess," rarely will Dickinson articulate a clear, unsullied perspective:

There is no clear ground of innocence or safety from which the speaker may mock or criticize particular aspects of the world or human nature. Instead, just as the speaker is the focus of the poem's excess, the object of the humor overlaps or becomes elided with the subject speaker such that she also becomes its object. Rather than mocking or challenging God, the publishing industry, patriarchal domestic life, or her own family ... here Dickinson puts her own perception and body on the line: the extremity of her questioning leaves no stable position behind. (Miller 104)

Dickinson's self-indictment and unwillingness to separate herself from topics and concerns in the poem, both figuratively and formally, attest to her understanding of the formal and literary perspectives of the nineteenth century. The poem "My Faith is larger than the Hills" presents a singular speaker who utilizes natural settings en route to a fuller subjective experience, according with Romantic formulations of a speaker encountering nature. Through this framework, Dickinson contains herself in a Romantic scenario. Yet

the unfinished quality to the poem, including the impression that the speaker remains in an uncertain theoretical and emotional space, draws the very “formula of transcendence” into question.

As an author, Dickinson rarely places herself on a pedestal looking down over her subject matter. She occupies the minds of cats, birds, and hills—she mocks and challenges patriarchal norms. By utilizing excessive metaphor and situational imagery in Poem #766, Dickinson challenges the system that places “faith” and/or religion “above” natural processes. In her extended absurd narrative that situates “faith” driving the Purple Wheel to guide the Sun, she mocks biblical and religious language. Moreover, the poem seems to refute conventional religious interpretations of natural processes and events:

“Humor of excess issues from the poet’s profound sense of displacement, or an imagination that has been prompted by repeated experiences of alterity to fantasize a world in which nothing takes its proscribed form ... the language, scenes, and patterns of these poems create disorder in the social and natural worlds ... so profound is the falseness of the order she perceives that she can imagine no alternative reordering or new system working from these same parts, and so demonstrates graphically and linguistically the chaos she at least occasionally would prefer to the proscribed apparent order she must live within” (Miller 105). The conclusion of poem #766 is chaotic—we are left in an imagined situation, where Firmament has failed similar to the Rivet in a Band breaking apart. Yet the poem retains a startling confidence amidst this “breaking—,” ultimately, this remains an “enacted” chaos. There is a subtle smile among these lines, as a daring poet has stepped forward to re-imagine her life and faith; this is a clever speaker who can heighten already-elevated language in order to expose its inconsistencies. Yet as Miller

states, “The grimace is never far behind the guffaw, or grin” (115); and if faith can only be re-worked and believed in via hyperbolic analogy, why do we continue to follow prescriptions of a false faith in our relationships to the natural world and to one another? Dickinson repeatedly attempts alternate visions of church, community, and culture in addition to exploring how religion tends to inaccurately represent its relationship to the natural world in language: “Dickinson’s language of excess and her fantastic, violent metaphors of physical substance constitute attempts to reconfigure the relationship of nature to culture, or to ‘redesign’ the universe” (Miller 129). Moreover, as in Poem #869, “Because the Bee may Blameless Hum,” animals continue to play a metaphorical role in Dickinson’s humorous reformulations of traditional theology.

Meanwhile, Poem # 465, “I heard a fly buzz—when I died,” re-examines the “bridge” between the present life and the afterlife and assigns multifaceted qualities to death and dying as opposed to the more binary perceptions of life and death as contained in traditional religion:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—  
The Stillness in the Room  
Was like the Stillness in the Air  
Between the Heaves of Storm

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For that last onset—when the King  
Be witnessed—in the Room

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable—and then it was  
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—  
Between the light—and me—  
And then the Windows failed—and then

I could not see to see  
(Johnson 224).

The poem is deliberately wry from its outset and outlines a seeming impossibility at work in many of Dickinson's poems—a speaker has died and is describing the process of dying after death has already occurred. By situating the speaker as already “dead,” Dickinson here emphasizes that when ministers and theologians attempt to articulate death and what dying might be like they are simply “playing” as she plays here—imagining scenarios and objectifying persons or other beings in an effort to understand the unknowable. This “playing” reflects a common claim in Romantic writing—that through creative agency, a poet can level out the reifications of church and culture. From the first phrase, “I heard a Fly buzz,” the poem calls attention to the purely quotidian nature of this event; it is a day like any other with flies buzzing around; and yet, the act of listening to a fly also emphasizes the primacy of physical sensation. The speaker hears an insect at the exact moment of her death—does she continue to hear the fly as she “becomes” dead? Placing the animal sound directly at the “bridge” of life and death is a fascinating poetic construction. Presumably, the speaker hears the fly before death as well as after it; therefore, an animal sound (and perhaps by extension, some part of animality itself) exists both before death and after it. Furthermore, the poem itself equates a flashback—the second and third stanzas describe events that immediately preceded the sound of the fly, and then the fourth stanza returns to the moment of listening. This act of moving back and forth in time, of moving back and forth over and around death, calls attention to how humans attempt to order and compose existence. Furthermore, because the speaker is listening to an “animal sound,” perhaps Dickinson again shows that animals are closer

to “death” and also closer to comprehending a veritable reality than humans. The metaphor of the fly seems particularly suitable for this project as flies literally eat off of and lay eggs in dead bodies; a disquieting disparity emerges from the poem because of this macabre set-up. Although humans tend to glorify death in its revelatory or divine qualities, this speaker subverts our expectation of the majestic by emphasizing the literal rot of a dying body. In my opinion, this emphasis on the literal human flesh works to destabilize Christianity’s dualist interpretation of living and dying. It is the sound of the fly that bridges the gap between the worlds—the sound that seemingly exists in both worlds. And although the speaker at the end states, “I could not see to see,” she does not say “I could not hear to hear” – as if the sound of the fly, occupying the space between “the light and me,” continued to be a guidance and focal point for the speaker.

Dickinson conducts her re-examination of theology by capitalizing on elements of the ludicrous and the “grotesque” as humorous mechanisms. As Suzanne Juhasz articulates, Dickinson’s “tease” or desire to jab at the ribs of her patriarchal culture extends even to the most “sacred” of subjects: “Death as well as love becomes an occasion for the tease. In poems about death, tease again reveals two different but related functions: first, destabilizing existing definitions; second, flirting—the invitation of desire. Vis-à-vis death, tease is used as a procedure for investigation; the preferred methodology for trying to understand this most evasive, most mysterious, most teasing of subjects” (Juhasz 47). In “I heard a Fly Buzz,” the entire poem presents itself as a tease, or a surreal fantasy. The speaker is not dead; she has lips, brain, and thought processes intact and she is writing a poem. The tease succeeds in that it knocks around the idea of which aspects of “being” persist after death, and which aspects cease. Ultimately, the

poem presents no answer. The speaker “cannot see,” but the wording again is strange and nearly in jest—“I could not see to see.” As if the speaker were still “seeing,” only seeing in a wholly different fashion, a “sight” entirely incomprehensible to the readers, but a sight nonetheless. And the teasing here does act as an invitation to the reader, a request that the reader join the poet in this “afterlife” and see the sights that she is seeing. The offer, though eerie, is tempting because of the speaker’s implied knowledge: “Tease as a procedure for destabilizing definitions is particularly appropriate in this context (of death), for as Dickinson points out over and over, neither the Christian belief in a Heaven for the soul nor science’s belief in a dissolution for the body will do it ... From her perspective as outside the normative systems of knowledge and belief, she can work at and worry its meaning. Consequently, Dickinson’s poems about death scrupulously unravel its meaning from those definitions already in existence” (Juhasz 47).

So if poem #465 de-emphasizes the expectation of the afterlife through its emphasis on the mortal flesh and sensate movements, might Dickinson be working to undermine the theoretical presence of the afterlife as a redemptive solace to hopeful man? Many poems conduct an easy occupation of a death scene, utilizing a speaker with an ability to speak back to humans from beyond the grave. If a poet de-legitimizes the idea of an “afterlife,” then, presumably, the “present life” gains more importance; furthermore, if the “soul” or spirit that carries through one life into the next is de-constructed, then perhaps there is more room for non-human creatures to experience physical and even a potentially “spiritual” existence in Dickinson’s poems. Allowing animals access to spirituality (or bringing humans down off of their spiritual pedestals) might be another way that Dickinson reformulates the binary set-up of her culture—

instead of bemoaning the ambiguity of the afterlife, perhaps she finds solace and redemption in an emphasis on the physical fly and how it feeds and thrives on carcass, reflecting a greater connection with animals and landscape: “Refusing to ignore the blinding resonance of light/dark metaphors that occurred and recurred throughout her culture, Dickinson explored these metaphors, revised them, and, finally, transformed them, according to her own ‘premises,’ her own actual experiences as woman writing” (Barker 132-133).

Poem # 1275, “The Spider as an Artist” contains another reworked metaphor:

The Spider as an Artist  
Has never been employed—  
Though his surpassing Merit  
Is freely certified

By every Broom and Bridget  
Throughout a Christian Land—  
Neglected Son of Genius  
I take thee by the Hand  
(Johnson 557)

This poem, another lighthearted interrogation, fascinatingly conjectures how and why Western cultures understand and value animal abilities. The spider has never been “employed” although his weaving abilities are unequalled in man, and Dickinson succinctly details the hypocrisy of an entirely human-centered Christian culture. The spider’s merit is “certified” by all “brooms and bridgets” across the Christian land—yet because of its animality, there is no room for the spider to contribute or participate in Christian culture. The poem’s speaker feels an affinity for the neglected artist—presumably the speaker feels neglected as well—and forms a symbolic allegiance with the spider. Yet the most interesting metaphorical move in the poem is the labeling of the

spider as “Son of Genius.” This phrase makes an implicit comparison to Son of God, as if this spider were as much a Christ figure as the human embodiment of God as figured in Christian texts. Nevertheless, the difference between the word God and Genius is immense—Dickinson seems to call attention to the fact that no animal can ever be considered a “son of God.” Finally, when the speaker takes the spider “by the hand,” she assigns human qualities to it—the spider receives, in metaphor, Heidegger’s “hand,” becomes a creature that exhibits “Being” with a capital B. Ultimately, Dickinson claims that this spider, with his ability to weave and make art, is as comparable and able a creature as any human being.

Furthermore, the pointedly comic nature of the poem’s subject matter and diction (when the word “employ” is placed next to spider, one cannot help but think of a line of spiders performing tasks at a factory) raises the issue that perhaps the poet does not desire or seek out a place in the mainstream publishing industry simply because she does not want to participate. The poem highlights a certain triumphant loneliness for the speaker—without human comfort and companionship, she will take the hands of spiders. This gesture exposes both the anthropocentric and androcentric underpinnings of her culture and society; if a piece of art or a trade cannot be bought and sold, it is worthless in the eyes of Christian men and women. Implicit in this reading is an understanding also how Christianity and “industry” are linked; in this “Christian” land, animals are misunderstood and misinterpreted as valueless unless commodified, and human progress marches fervently onwards: “Animals play major roles in Dickinson’s funny poems, which often function as fables that comment on human foibles” (Smith, Juhasz, Miller 16).



Close readings reveal Dickinson's tendency to assign otherworldly characteristics to animals as well as to express uncertainty towards traditional conceptions of the human soul as well as the afterlife. Dickinson's allowances for animals and nature reflect evolving, unfixed doubt regarding religion and spirituality, yet many of the poems, although radical in scope and intent, reflect not only an inherent reliance on Romanticism, but also the framework of Puritanism: "When ministers preached on godliness in wives, they were calling women to an intently active existence on all levels, emotional and spiritual, physical and practical. There was no such thing as a dull, weak, idle Puritan woman. On its cosmological scale of souls, therefore, early Puritanism promised women an authentic existence. In large measure, Emily Dickinson wrote because of that promise" (Keller 13). Interestingly, perhaps the cause of Dickinson's rebellion against church and culture found root less in the theology itself, but in the cultural and social understanding of and expression of that theology. Puritanism emphasized an "inner realm," a very personal relationship with God, and even, to an extent, seeking out very individual terms on which to encounter God: "Puritanism's dignifying (and perhaps also cruel) cosmic demands on the individual soul rather automatically assured women considerable elevation within the covenants of faith over her status in any comparable contemporary culture" (Keller 12). Yet despite promising women this "authentic" existence, men retained most if not all the power in church and state; Dickinson utilizes Puritanism's emphasis on inner contemplation to ultimately expose its inherent reliance on patriarchy. Still, Dickinson's rebellion against Christianity is not a wholehearted refutation of religion. She continues to emphasize the spiritual; her concern with reformulating religious language as regards to nature most

likely reflects her own conviction that the natural world has as much right to “God” as the human world. Indeed, she seems to long for transcendence, an overarching meaning in nature, culture, and self: “Dickinson returns repeatedly to nature in her poems as a place to learn about herself as well as a place for the largest canvas of self-display. In this sense, her concern ceases to be (the postmodern) with roles or conventions of representation and becomes more a (Romantic) concern with what might be called essence—the most profound sense of who and what kind of thing she is” (Miller 136).

## Chapter 2: Sublime Resemblances

Many critics situate Dickinson's work under the lens of Romanticism, especially the American strains of this literary and cultural movement. Dickinson was an ardent reader; her journals and letters note her thoughts and questions as she plowed through other poets and essayists of her time: "Most certainly Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats are there somewhere in her (Dickinson's) poetry, I feel, as are Thoreau and Melville, maybe even Poe. By the 1850's and 1860's, however, practically everyone who read British poets at all had, to one degree or another, seen a world in a grain of sand and had, for one purpose or another, wandered lonely as a cloud" (Keller 327-28). Arguably, Dickinson was entirely aware of the breadth and impact of the Romantic movement, including its emphasis and celebration of the natural world: "To claim the endorsement of nature is important at any time, but it was especially so in the Romantic age, when the 'natural' became a source and criterion of the good" (Perkins 31). Furthermore, within Romanticism's emphasis on the "natural" was a particular reformulation of how nature (notably landscapes and animals) should be treated and perceived in Western society. Because of Romanticism's "civilizing" tendencies and insistence on the primacy of feelings, cruelty toward animals soon became a quality of nineteenth century life to be criticized and condemned: "Cruelties to animals were said to be not only unnatural but also anachronistic, atavistic, characteristic of an unenlightened past. Hence they were termed savage" (Perkins 31).

Romantic poets, essayists, and other writers articulated and depicted these cultural shifts in regard to "animal rights" in differing ways. Early Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge tended to use animals in poetry in order to call attention to

human conditions rather than highlight indignities facing the animal itself: “Poets might describe ungrateful and abusive treatment of work animals and thus glance at similar injustice to human laborers” (Perkins 107). As a clear example, Coleridge’s “To An Ass” comments on a socio-political situation that suppresses humans of particular races and social status. Rhetorically, he persuades the reader by utilizing the image and emotional tenor of a tethered animal:

Poor little foal of an oppressèd race!  
I love the languid patience of thy face:  
And oft with gentle hand I give thee bread,  
And clap thy ragged coat, and pat thy head.  
(Coleridge)

The fact that a poet could successfully use an animal as an instrument and symbol of sympathy for suffering attests to a rising appreciation and care for animals among the general reading public. And, indeed, many poets did explicitly celebrate animals in poems and stories, attributing soulful and/or angelic qualities to an animal that a more “imperfect” human might also aspire to: “Poems such as Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ Wordsworth’s ‘The Green Linnet,’ and Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark,’ endow animals with qualities that they do not have and that humans beings also lack but long to have: joy, immortality, unity of being, transcendent knowledge, immediacy to God. Such poems involve a reversal of hierarchy, placing the animal above human limitations, where it can no longer represent any group within the social structure” (Perkins 107-108). Indeed, we can read Shelley’s “To a Skylark” as an iconic representation of the Romantic celebration of nature; notably, birds emerged as a powerful symbol of freedom, flight, and imagination for these poets:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert,

That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest  
Like a cloud of fire;  
The blue deep thou wingest,  
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.  
(Shelley)

In addition to simply celebrating animals and natural landscapes, Romantic writers frequently utilized nature as a source of “transcendence” or “redemption” for humans in an increasingly technological and “rational” society: “The metaphysics of subject-object interaction parallels the exemplary lyric form which Wordsworth established in *Tintern Abbey*: an individual confronts a natural scene and makes it abide his question, and the interchange between his mind and nature constitutes the entire poem, which usually poses and resolves a spiritual crisis” (Abrams Supernaturalism 92). Nature becomes a source of redemption or sublimation for the poet—by meditating on a natural scene, a poet can come to a conclusion about himself. Despite the emphasis on the necessity of natural places and creatures for achieving this awakening, the process of transcendence still takes place in the mind of the speaker, demonstrating that Romanticism’s emphasis lay in its belief in the power of subjectivity and imagination, rather than in any inherent power in the natural scene. In other words, Romantic power emerges from how a man uses a natural landscape via the act of thinking and contemplation: “For it is not nature but ‘the Mind of Man’ which is the ‘main region of my song’ and in the passage in which Wordsworth speaks of ‘Power, Creation, and Divinity itself,’ he speaks ‘not of outward things’ but of ‘what passed within me’ and of

‘my youthful mind.’ In the final analysis the view that informs *The Prelude* is not naturalism, but humanism” (Abrams Supernaturalism 94).

Therefore, the codified Romantic project primarily utilizes natural symbolism in order to achieve humanistic ends. Few poets attempted to occupy the mind of an animal purely for the sake of doing so, or to question the “nature-as-object” mindset prevailing in common culture. In nineteenth-century America, the same celebration of natural landscapes and animals had extended across the Atlantic, yet these writers also focused on nature as a “thing” to be contemplated, examined, changed, ignored, or upheld—hardly ever was nature allowed to “exist” as nature. In particular, Ralph Emerson, a leading Transcendentalist thinker and poet in America in the nineteenth century, retained a strong “subject-object” relationship to the natural world, although he viewed natural “objects” as redemptory and positive for American “subjects”:

Emerson, like other Romantics, empowers the human eye in nature. The first chapter of *Nature* famously credits the poet’s eye with the power to create nature by abstracting its unruly plenitude and its traces of particular human labor into a smooth and total horizon ... For Emerson, a landscape may contain other human beings as farmers but scarcely other seers; on any given horizon, the poet’s ‘transparent eyeball’ is singular (Loeffholz 13).

From my particular position, it is interesting to note if and how “occupation of nature” exists in Dickinson’s poetry. Emerson’s project seems to reflect manifest destiny—the poet is an explorer into nature, one who must put nature into categories that he can understand and use in order to cultivate a broader “understanding” of himself and his human motivations. Although Dickinson’s quest also seems bent on understanding, her use of nature as an avenue to fuller comprehension is less invasive, less categorical, and less solipsistic than Emerson’s. Indeed, her project seems consciously gendered in the

sense that she does not participate in the traditionally male role of “colonist.” As a female speaker and author, assuming ownership of landscape and animals had to be particularly troubling for Dickinson, which is perhaps a reason that she attempts a different relationship to nature: “(Dickinson) demonstrates that she cannot write, nor does she wish to write, poems that literally repeat male poets’ encounters with nature” (Loeffelholz 8). How can a female poet and thinker participate in a cultural dialogue that excludes her as a subject and associates her gender with the natural object? “Women, as custodians of natural detail (gardeners, miniaturists, stereotypically given to numbering the streaks of a tulip) rather than sublime wholeness, are customarily denied the ‘use’ of nature” (Loeffelholz 9). Should a female poet identify with the natural object and “make reply” to male invasive movements and speeches? Or, perhaps in a more complex and intricate project, should a female poet display and parody the perverse relationship of male subject to feminized object while attempting her own reformulated relationship to the “other” with which she is associated?

In addition to celebrating the “natural,” Romantic projects also often centered on certain denunciations of institutionalized religion—Emerson, in particular, famously renounced the idea of a “sky-god” in an address before Divinity College in Cambridge in 1838: “In the soul then let the redemption be sought. Wherever a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. He is religious. Man is the underworker. He is seen amid miracles. All men bless and curse. The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man;-- indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology. It is the office of the true teacher to

show us that God is, not was; that he speaketh, not spake. The true Christianity—a faith like Christ’s in the infinitude of man—is lost” (Emerson 122-123). In general, Romanticists sought in turn to replace “otherworldly” divinity with the more subjective power of imagination, genius, or creativity: “ ‘Someone who looks,’—of all Romantic innovations, none has so preempted the attention of poets, novelists, and painters (and the critics of poetry, novels, and painting) as the concern with the eye and the object and the need for a revolution in seeing which will make the object new. And to our own day the chief definitions of transforming vision have continued to be recognizable, if somewhat distorted, variations on the Romantic categories of freshness of sensation” (Abrams Supernaturalism 411). Dickinson’s own fervent, obsessive questioning in regard to Protestant Christianity seem to parallel the general literary tendency of the period—she utilizes the theoretical power of the “I,” she relies on extreme, sensate moments as metaphorical turn and symbols, and she often supplants divine power with the power of her own imagination or vision. Yet I feel that Dickinson covers far more theoretical ground than her contemporaries in addressing the question of how the natural world should accord or fit into the human conception of imaginative power. Whereas poets like Wordsworth or Keats tend to utilize the natural world as a means to an end, i.e., as a method of demonstrating or cultivating human imagination, for Dickinson the natural world is often the figurative end. She creates communities in which a speaker conducts dialogues with animals or natural landscapes and rarely evinces a wish to move beyond this interaction. In her confrontations with nature, a subject rarely “emerges” up and over to another side, more powerful in imagination and poetic ability.



Dickinson's disavowal of religion and her "translation" of spirituality into an endeavor that includes the natural world does relate to another emphasis of many Romantic poets—the poetic search for "otherness," or the quest for emergent presences outside of or beyond dominant paradigms of church and state. Some Romantic poets such as Wordsworth or Keats looked to nature as a source of otherness, some such as Byron or Rimbaud turned to intoxicants, some such as Blake turned to mysticism as well as visual arts. Gary Lee Stonum depicts the encounter with "otherness" as the overlying definition of the romantic sublime: "The Sublime is organized as some form of sudden encounter with otherness" (Stonum 69). As Stonum continues to articulate, the Romantic encounter follows a specific three-tiered journey: "The encounter always proceeds according to a three-phase sequence that in one form or another can thus be regarded as the invariant structure of the romantic sublime" (Stonum 69). The three phases of the Romantic sublime are 1) normative 2) traumatic and 3) sublimation (Stonum 69). Broadly, I understand the process as follows: first, the poet exists in his/her everyday, habitual life. Then, upon encounter with an "other" (nature, dream, drug) the poet undergoes a transformation and the traditional manner of relating with the world has been disrupted. The other dares the speaker to behave differently: "(An object) challenges the subject's dignity by means of the drastic contrast opened up between its powers and his or her own" (Stonum 69). The speaker's held beliefs about existing systems and even about himself or herself have been permanently altered. Finally, the "other" departs from the scene, and the speaker is left to experience elevation, empowerment, or release. Often, this "release" includes a sense of a reinvigorated creative power.

It is crucial to consider how the “other” operates in Dickinson’s poetry and therefore how the “three phases” of the romantic sublime experience shift or change as a result. When we remember that Dickinson depicts animals and nature less as “others” and more as “partners,” how can we understand her particular conception of what a “sublime” might hold? If Dickinson possesses a more unmediated relationship with nature due to her understanding that patriarchal systems have worked to demean both non-human creatures and women alike, then a “Dickinson sublime” must include her understanding that “nature as other” is imbedded in male-dominated power systems. In some sense, experiencing trauma followed by sublimation as a result of the encountered “other” implies that the “other” is a thing to be subsumed. Although the emphasis in a traditional Romantic encounter shifts from the external representation of the “other” to its internal representation, an implicit hierarchy remains—that the “subject” can use the “other” to accomplish his/her own ends and that the two entities are ultimately separate things. Stonum refers to this tendency as “heroic”: “If the romantic sublime thus centrally involves a poetics of mastery, out of the writings of Dickinson’s own time the paradigmatic figure of the one seeking such mastery would be Robert Browning’s Childe Roland, as Harold Bloom has frequently argued. The romantic sublime specifically lends itself to heroic questing” (Stonum 76).

Feminist critic Patricia Yaeger hints that Dickinson may have been one of the first nineteenth century female poets to mount a confrontational re-working of the “masculine sublime”: “The female poet accompanied by a halo, or fiery trail of language, is a dazzling image, and, with its premonition of *hypsos*—of power and influence, of transport and height—is an image conspicuously absent, with the exception of the poems

of Emily Dickinson, from the poetic lexicon of the nineteenth century” (Yaeger 194). As stated earlier, Dickinson’s represented relationship with the natural world does not dutifully replicate the experience offered by her contemporaries; instead, it seems to offer a different experience of sublimity. As Yaeger explains, many feminist writers (Dickinson included, I would argue) do not completely denounce the sublime experience, but rather change its setup or result to an extent that they may at once deride its appropriating tendencies while also retaining its sense of empowerment: “The woman writer who writes in the sublime mode writes differently; in order to overcome her exclusion from the dialectic of negative power enacted in the conventional sublime, she produces a prosody of transcendence, but in a different key” (Yaeger 199). Although Yaeger conjectures that there may be many types of “feminine sublimes” (some categories include a ‘sublime of mathematics’ or a ‘pre-oedipal sublime’) I find two of her categories to be particularly compelling in my reading of Dickinson: first, the “failed sublime”: “In texts where it (the ‘failed sublime’) occurs, we witness a woman’s dazzling, unexpected empowerment followed by a moment in which this power is snatched away—often by a masculine counter-sublime that has explicit phallic components . . . the heroine finds herself not only stripped of transcendent powers, but bereft, in a lower social stratum than before” (Yaeger 201). Dickinson’s poem, “My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun” is a fascinating and compelling example of a “failed sublime” that I will discuss in Chapter 4. Yaeger’s second persuasive category is a “sovereign” or “horizontal sublime”: “The second strategy women writers use to appropriate the sublime as literary mode I will define as the ‘sovereign sublime.’ In this reinvention of the conventional sublime the woman writer appears to be appropriating a

male genre in a straight forward or mimetic way, and thus to be vulnerable to its structure of violence and domination. But in this appropriation something happens to the sublime's tidy structure. Typically, the male poet writing in the sublime mode will stage a moment of blockage, which is followed by a moment of imagistic brilliance. ... In the 'sovereign' sublime this economy of domination changes, however, and rather than a vertical flight toward mastery through height, the woman writer invents either a horizontal sublime, as we saw in Irigaray, or else what we might call a 'sublime of expenditure' in which the writer expends or spills whatever power the sublime moment—in its structure of crisis, confrontation, and renewed domination, has promised to hoard" (Yaeger 202). A "spilling" action accords significantly to how Dickinson tends to explain meaning or communicate knowledge in her poems: "Regardless of how one accounts for it theoretically, the motif of a central wildness describes effects familiar to most readers of Dickinson's poetry. Riddling, provocative, and idiosyncratic intensities of language are found in varying degrees in almost every poem she wrote" (Stonum 61). Indeed, Dickinson often describes moments of "transcendence" utilizing either blazing, vanquishing metaphors of volcanoes and lightning ("Will not cry with joy, Pompeii!") or, oppositely, metaphors of blindness ("I could not see to see"). Rather than indulging the reader with detailed images, moments of transcendence are often marked by abrupt endings or abstract one-liners.

Poem # 978, "It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon," is an interesting illustration of how a Dickinsonian speaker "spills" or does not consume the knowledge proffered by a sublime experience with an other:

It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon—  
The Flower—distinct and Red—

I, passing, thought another Noon  
Another in its stead

Will equal glow, and thought no More  
But came another Day  
To find the Species disappeared—  
The Same Locality—

The Sun in place—no other fraud  
On Nature's perfect Sum—  
Had I but lingered Yesterday—  
Was my retrieveless blame—

Much Flowers of this and further Zones  
Have perished in my Hands  
For seeking its Resemblance—  
But unapproached it stands—

The single Flower of the Earth  
That I, in passing by  
Unconscious was—Great Nature's Face  
Passed infinite by Me—  
(Johnson 457).

In the poem, the speaker “misses” or “overlooks” the knowledge proffered by an element of the natural landscape. In the first stanza, the speaker encounters a brilliant “Noon,” colored like a flower, “distinct and red,” but decided to pass by the noon and, presumably, not to further contemplate its wondrousness because there would be another Noon the next day. However, despite returning to “the same locality” the following day, the speaker cannot find this singular “species” of Noon. The speaker then berates herself—“Had I but lingered Yesterday--/ Was my retrieveless blame.” The final stanza attests to the great power that was “missed” because the speaker passed on: “Great Nature's Face / Passed infinite by Me—.” Seemingly, the speaker draws a connection between this particular brilliant Noon and “infinity.” If the speaker had stopped to contemplate and, presumably, encounter the other along the “proper” lines of the

sublime, perhaps she would have come to some greater apprehension and understanding of “infinity.” But infinity passed by with the Noon, and the speaker did not stop to describe or intimate its presence.

Furthermore, interesting considerations arise when we consider what Dickinson may have wanted to comment on through her particular “horizontal” or ill-begotten sublime moment in this poem. This particular poem seems less a gendered reaction to how society may preclude a woman from participating in a predominant mode of experience, but more a question as to how the sublime purports to operate. Despite the speaker’s conviction that she “missed” something in her encounter with the first “Noon,” a type of sublimation still occurs as a result of her encounter with the second “Noon.” First, a “normative” speaker experiences an “other,” but doesn’t understand how powerful that “other” is. Then, when the speaker tries to recapture the first experience through “resemblance” (a second experience of a similar “other”) a moment of crisis and realization occurs. The realization is that no knowledge has been gained because the speaker postponed the sublime moment. Yet, there is some knowledge, after all, as a result of the comparison between the “Noons.” The knowledge is the speaker’s conviction that “truth” and “infinity” were only contained within the original image. There is no transcendence in a typical Romantic sense, because the speaker assumed a particularity of nature could be duplicated. Yet the speaker still comes to an important realization, one that speaks to how the sublime should operate within the set-up of the poem. The speaker claims that the “species” of “Noon” that she witnessed yesterday had “disappeared” today, and she attempts no sublimation of the new “Noon” in its place. The speaker seems to subconsciously state that no “resemblance” can take the place of

the “original”: “Much Flowers of this and further Zones / Have perished in my Hands / /For seeking its Resemblance.” The original “perishes” under the weight of representation. In this “horizontally sublime” moment, not only does the speaker blunder and miss her opportunity for transcendence, she also implicitly questions the validity of representing these moments. For the speaker presumably returned to the “same locality” in order to perform the act of representation—and found that this act eluded her. “Infinity” cannot be written down or represented, except in grand, capitalized phrases—attesting to the poet’s inability to represent these concepts through detailed metaphor or imagery.

Stonum notes that Dickinson possesses Romantic structures in her work, but he admits that the project remains distant from her contemporaries: “One challenge for Dickinson is to find some way of circumventing mastery without giving up the experiential intensity she values or the promise of transcendence that the sublime always holds out. More generally, as this challenge may suggest, the romantic sublime is less an answer to Dickinson’s problems than the matrix in which they appear. Her own unorthodox version of the romantic sublime then specifically responds to such problems” (Stonum 77). The “problem” (referenced by Stonum and Yaeger) with the sublime is one of mastery, or, in my words, the problem of how to encounter the “other.” When Dickinson faces the “other” in nature, whether that other be a Jay, a Spider, a Fly, a Deer, or a Mountain, she articulates a distinctly different reactive phase. I agree with Stonum that she seems to be following the “matrix” or formula for encountering nature in her poetry—and I would argue that within this depiction is a subtle mockery of its lingering attempts at containment or transcendence through consumption. Moreover, Dickinson

seems to hint at the possibilities for a feminist sublime, as outlined by Yaeger, because of how she articulates poetic “knowledge” and “transcendence”—ultimately, these are not despairing poems—Dickinson’s is a strong, luminous poetry. Ultimately, Dickinson’s project is indebted to Romanticism; without its theoretical support, she would have been unable to contemplate nature as a place of spiritual solace and physical awareness. Yet Dickinson’s poems also expose the shortcomings of the movement, including its patriarchal tendencies and adherence to linearity and hierarchy. In these fractious works, she frequently parodies the sublimation sequence or leaves it incomplete in a seeming desire to illustrate how its aims and methods do not serve her project fully.



### Chapter 3: Making Animal Faces

One of Dickinson's somewhat "early" poems from 1862, poem # 507, "She sights a Bird—she chuckles," is a humorous lyric detailing a she-cat stalking its prey. The poem is light and comic, depicting a potentially "tragic" scene with a light touch:

She sights a Bird—she chuckles—  
She flattens—then she crawls—  
She runs without the look of feet—  
Her eyes increase to Balls—

Her Jaws stir—twitching—hungry—  
Her Teeth can hardly stand—  
She leaps, but Robin leaped the first—  
Ah, Pussy, of the Sand,

The Hopes so juicy ripening—  
You almost bathed your Tongue—  
When Bliss disclosed a hundred Toes—  
And fled with every one—  
(Johnson 246).

The "voice" in the poem, the speaker who observes the cat stalking the robin, assigns little judgment to the cat hunting a bird. A sense of detachment pervades the poem, and enclosed in this almost scientific observation is a cool irony, a slight familiarity on the part of the speaker with the cat. As a reader, we can almost see the saliva on the jaw of the cat—we are hungry, too—hungry for not only food, but for the thrill of the catch that this cat might experience when she pounces on a bird. We, too, can hardly stand the suspense ("her teeth can hardly stand") while waiting to see if the kill will take place. In a sense, Dickinson here provides a "safe place" for repressed feminine desires to come to the surface—instead of acting out her own angers, her own hungers, the speaker here identifies this cat's hunger as a feminine hunger, a feminine want ("She sights," "Her jaws," etc).

Humor in this piece emerges from the almost melodramatic suspense and inflated qualities of the cat and ensuing scene: “The cat’s motions, while described realistically enough to be immediately recognizable, exaggerate each of her movements so that ‘Pussy’ is cartoon-like, a figure that epitomizes hungry cat-ness” (Juhasz 16). I feel that the humor here serves two purposes. First, the speaker retains a sense of power despite the cat’s failure; the poet has created a “coping mechanism” for dealing with “bliss” that has “fled.” The act of recognizing and relating humorous aspects of a potentially tragic scene or individual ultimately reflects the poet’s intelligence and maturity. Because Dickinson creates a “she-cat,” she draws a similarity between this cat’s hunger and perhaps a “hunger” of females to express themselves in a primal manner. She creates a scene in which the cat, despite effective stalking, loses its prey. The poem culminates in the speaker off-handedly bemoaning the loss: “The poet here re-describes the event in more abstract and metaphorical terms (‘The Hopes so juicy ripening . . . When Bliss disclosed’), thereby making it a kind of parable of the failed attempt to gain a prize. Rather than moralizing, however, Dickinson maintains the comic tone through her continued exaggeration, and by animating Hopes and Bliss” (Juhasz 16). The poet’s use of humor prevents despair—the speaker has not been overcome by anger; instead, she retains the ability to laugh at herself, her hopes, and her “near Bliss.”

Secondly, I believe the humor as it specifically relates to animals in this poem allows the speaker to attain certain closeness with her natural surroundings that may have been impossible using a more tragic or somber tone. As Jonathan Bate proposes in his essay “Poets, Apes and Other Animals,” the genre of humor may create a more direct access into the natural environment than tragic genres: “The tragic hero somehow goes

beyond the material world, rises to a plane of spiritual reconciliation. Comedy, on the other hand, is about survival. It grants us our animal being, relishes the materiality of the everyday world, concerns itself with the business of living and reproducing” (Bate 180). Poem # 507 seems to adhere to this proposal. Lamentation in this poem would necessarily include a “human” intervention and “occupation” of the scene, a serious human ordering of the scene as he/she understands or wants it to be. Although there is a sense of “ordering” in this comedic description, namely in that Dickinson identifies the cat as a she and the desire as feminine, the comedy prevents any inflation or troubling corruption of the scene. Ultimately, the cat is allowed to “be”; our human laughter at the scene is purely laughter—we are not imposing our laugh at the expense of the cat or of nature. The scene is hearty and enjoyable and creates an immediate physical connection without heavy mental or emotional overtones: “Animals make us think about our own animalness, about our embodiedness in the world” (Bate 187).

Dickinson’s humor is what sets her apart most blatantly from Emerson and other traditional Romantics and establishes her intent as “non-occupational.” She does not tend to look at nature and its creatures solely to “acknowledge” or improve “the self” (Bate 188) but in order to establish a more holistic comprehension of her environment. Rather than setting up a subject/object dichotomy in Poem #507, Dickinson glories in the “object,” describing the cat’s physical and emotional desires in full. The implicit connection between the cat’s qualities and a human’s qualities is open to a reader’s interpretation. Dickinson does not claim any direct space for what the cat is showing the subject or subject the reader to a writer’s authority over the scene. Rather, she lightly uses biblical diction (“sand”) and its associated symbolism to illustrate how the pursuit of

this cat might be compared to a human's pursuit of material desires. Yet she refuses to pass final judgment on either the cat or, associatively, on humans: "(Dickinson) smirks at the mythic and the sacred, deflating pretentious characterizations of poets' endeavors" (Juhasz 19). Dickinson's poem # 507 and others reflect an emerging awareness of how a poet might engage a scene; her light touch reflects her desire to "see" and contemplate natural surroundings without a politic of reclamation.

Many contemporary critics are beginning to examine Dickinson's use of humor, jokes, and comedy in poetry as it relates to a refutation of Romantic tendencies as well as a feminist project. I hope to offer an extended argument regarding Dickinson's use of comedy as it relates to ecocriticism. Dickinson's humor might provide not only a more immediate connection with natural landscapes and animals for her readers, but the use of humor in these "animal" or "natural" poems seems to serve a subversive purpose as it re-examines the relationship that man has to the natural world. In the case of Poem #507, the identification of woman with cat creates a sympathetic relationship between female and animal, perhaps a shared self-deprecating "joke" that a woman can share with a cat. This female speaker has the ability to laugh at herself and her own abstracted desires and wants as she also giggles at a cat hunting in vain. Self-deprecation is a strong source of humor for Dickinson as well as a source of power as it brings analysis and experience to a physical, even shared level. In a poem such as #507, the speaker laughs at the cat as if she is laughing at herself. In this subtle mockery of physical desire, Dickinson's poem highlights momentary energetic instances and does not impose a plan or scheme for the natural. Again, she refuses to assign flighty abstract qualities to the natural world or to master some ultimate meaning that nature holds in store for her; instead, she remains

grounded in the here and now: “Many may contend that, like the Puritans and metaphysicals before her, Dickinson pulls the sublime down to the ridiculous but unavoidable facts of existence, thus imbues life on earth with its real import” (Nell Smith 95). Dickinson’s insistence on physical immediacy, as detailed in poem #507, relates directly to her aesthetic and poetic form. The poems as a whole refuse closed readings, overarching themes, and progressive relationships although she uses the seemingly straightforward form of the ballad hymn. Because the poems themselves do not encourage singular readings, Dickinson’s aesthetic adheres to certain holistic or “open” principles not encouraged by Western literary tradition (at that time): “Dickinson’s comic verse lacks closure and depends more on the process of saying something than on reaching a singular and definite conclusion. The pleasure of these texts is disruptive, destabilizing instead of reassuring. While her comedy may be ultimately redemptive, it is only to the reader or audience who can accept her levels of isolation and difference” (Juhasz, Miller, Smith 10).

When understood as a subversive tool, Dickinson’s humor becomes highly effective and resonant. In poem #507, the humor subtly mocks the human tendency towards a tragic inflation of natural landscapes; the poem also implicates its own speaker in self-aggrandizement and laughs quietly at itself. In poem #861, “Split the Lark—and you’ll find the Music--,” Dickinson again utilizes mockery and teasing; however, in this poem, the implication and criticism is directed at a “you”:

Split the Lark—and you’ll find the Music—  
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—  
Scantly dealt to the Summer Morning  
Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—

Gush after Gush, reserved for you—  
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!  
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?  
(Johnson 412).

This poem criticizes Cartesian philosophy while situating it within a Christian system, so that the criticism indicts religion as well as reason. Moreover, the poem directly references the lark, a Romantic icon, and then literally dissects this icon. The set-up is again comic—the speaker adheres to a parts-and-whole contemplation of the natural world, but the subversive criticism emerges in the exaggerations of the poem. The first line, “Split the Lark,” implies that a “you” must conduct violence on the bird in order to understand its inter-workings, i.e., where its music comes from. This opening is both a mockery of Cartesian philosophy (as if one could understand the origin of birdsong by dissecting a lark) and a disturbing representation of reason’s application—here, the result is violence as well as a certain loss of humanism and compassion. The rest of the first stanza adheres to the comic exaggeration, playing with the reader’s own belief systems as its line of reasoning adheres to classic representations. The lark’s music is inside its throat in this poem—rolled delicately in silver bulbs—and it can be preserved for the future. In this case, the human “you” can dissect a bird’s throat, find its music, and save it for a time “when Lutes be old.” The human has trespassed on the natural and changed it permanently for its own benefit; nature in this first stanza has become completely objectified. Yet the language at this point is still soft, lovely, and non-threatening: (“Scantily dealt to the Summer Morning”).

The second stanza parallels the first in structure and semantics (“Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—”). If we create a relationship between “Split” and

“Loose,” then the word “loose” (to loosen) gains violent tendencies. “Loosing” a flood is also unnatural; in this context the verb also implies a sense of a human trespass onto natural structures and processes. Then, “you shall find it patent” must be compared with “you’ll find the music” from the first line. (I believe the word “patent” acts as an adjective meaning ‘free,’ ‘unobstructed,’ or ‘evident’). The structural turn here is interesting—in the first line, the “you” will simply find Music, that is, the “you” will find an object. In the first line of the second stanza, the “you” shall find “it,” an indefinite article described by the adjective “patent.” If the word “it” refers to Flood, then the speaker glories in his objectification of nature, finds it exhilarating to be surrounded by openness and water. Yet if the word “it” subtly makes connection back to the first line of the poem, and we draw a connection between “Music” and “it,” then some type of “music” is contained within a flood the same as within a lark. And loosing this music is ultimately destructive, as it sweeps the “you” under: “Gush after Gush, reserved for you.” In this reading, much as the “you” desires to harness and preserve the lark’s music for a time when “Lutes are old,” so the “you” assumes in the second stanza that the Earth’s waters can be tamed by humanity. Moreover, the Christian implications of the “flood” cannot be ignored—I believe in this poem that Dickinson draws attention to the Western tendency to understand natural events (floods) purely in their metaphysical implications, the tendency to experience the world from an abstract viewpoint. Yet the primary use of the “Flood” in this poem seems to be to call attention to how man’s troubles rise and rise the more he attempts to fashion the world according to his own terms. Indeed, the implicit connection between the word “flood” and “blood” as a result of their buried rhyme also implies the violent nature of these attempts. In the third line of the second

stanza, we learn the identity of this fulsome “you”—he is a “Sceptic Thomas.” With this understanding, we grasp the fact that the “you” conducts these “Scarlet Experiments” on nature in order to “believe” in God. This fascinating twist at the end of the poem illustrates the danger and shortcomings of Christianity because of its ties to Cartesian rationale and experimentation. “God” and “nature” cannot be dissected for solely human purposes—the result is ultimately violence as symbolized by “Scarlet Experiment.” Then, in the final line of the poem: “Now, do you doubt your Bird was true?” the speaker enters the poem directly and addresses the Sceptic Thomas—hoping that he understands the damage he has wrought on natural landscapes, and, ultimately, on himself. The phrase “your Bird was true” seems to imply that the Bird was better left alone to its own devices—that tampering with nature leads to disastrous consequences for humans and non-humans. Furthermore, by likening “truth” to a “Bird” while referencing Thomas’s biblical doubt, Dickinson emphasizes how the natural must participate in any discussion of spirituality or religion.

Exaggeration comprises the principal method of humor in this poem—the speaker creates a figurative situation along a Cartesian line of thinking and plays it out to a bitter end. This exaggerated situation subverts classical lines of thinking; in this case, the events display how a rational approach to the natural world becomes misdirected and potentially harmful. The humor acts to subvert a conventional, patriarchal way of thought and action. When contemporary readers and critics understand how Dickinson utilizes humor in this fashion as a reactive and critical tool, many of the poems open themselves up to extended interpretation. Furthermore, Dickinson’s use of humor to discuss and analyze shortcomings in her surrounding culture and community



demonstrates the local and even global awareness that she possessed while writing and disproves any attempt to cage her poems solely within the personal realm. Most notably, the presence of humor in Dickinson's poetry indicates a need for an audience as well as an understanding of how an audience should function. The performative element in these poems proves their worldliness and concern with cultural topics at large; these poems are not concerned only with themselves, but conduct an on-going relationship to the world around them:

To appreciate the full range of Dickinson's humor, one must be able to conceive of her as a sharp critic of her world, as a self-conscious writer identifying with women's experience as a basis for social criticism, and as a crafter of multiple levels of intention in her poems. In contrast, to the extent that one envisions this poet as unconscious of her self and her craft, or as a victim suffering under patriarchy generally, or her own neuroses, one will not find humor in her poems ... the reader must both understand the subversive intention as possible (that is, be already familiar with it) and simultaneously accept a subversive intention as likely for the speaker—in this case, recognize the personal and cultural clues that such subversion is possible for a nineteenth-century woman writer. (Smith, Juhasz, Miller 10-11)

In this understanding, Dickinson's humor is emergent in time; whereas in the nineteenth century a reading audience may have refused to discuss or witness Dickinson's humor because of the cultural implications, within a twentieth-century perspective increased allowances have been made for feminist readings: "Assumptions about femininity and female characteristics and what pleases, provokes, disappoints, satisfies, satiates, entices, disturbs, offends, or upsets women may prejudice readers so that women's ironic and humorous expressions are misconstrued as genuinely plaintive or earnest, or repudiated as overbearing" (Smith, Juhasz, Miller 11). Furthermore, within the emergent discourse contained in Dickinson's poetry is an ecocritical project closely related to her feminist one. She continues to utilize tools of parody, exaggeration, and self-deprecation in order

to criticize Western culture's relationship to the natural world, and within this endeavor are parallels to how she critiques Western patriarchies as a whole. Dickinson, arguably a forerunner to literary modernism, seems to evince an understanding that patriarchy objectifies and subdues women as well as non-human beings to a male will.

It is hardly surprising that recent interaction with Dickinson's project includes an ecocritical component within ongoing feminist analysis. Postmodernists and radical feminists have articulated that a work of art or literature must change and be changed by its readership; this fluid quality then demonstrates that the work subsists beyond conventional hierarchies of author and reader. Dickinson, in her insistence on non-singular semantics and "openness," understood the reader's participation as necessary: "Dickinson, in her poetic project, urges us beyond simple hierarchies between author and reader, and, in doing so, beyond conventional hierarchies that organize the world" (Smith, Juhasz, Miller 12). Ultimately, Dickinson's work is feminist because it stresses its own willingness to change: "Jonathan Culler notes a pertinent paradox: 'The more a theory stresses the reader's freedom, control, and constitutive activity, the more likely it is to lead to stories of dramatic encounters and surprises which portray reading as a process of discovery.'" (Smith, Juhasz, Miller 13). Within a feminist theoretical framework, a reader may laugh at Dickinson's poems more strongly and appreciatively; accordingly, with an increased awareness of androcentric tendencies in literature and culture, a reader may begin to laugh at or appreciate Dickinson's humor as regards non-human creatures and natural landscapes as well. The presence of humor in Dickinson's work illustrates her position not as an individual living a solitary life in a white dress,

whiling away her time in a garden or bedroom, but as an intelligent and active civic participant and an astute writer and composer.

A poem that illustrates “emergent humor” within a contemporary context is Poem #842, “Good to hide, and hear ‘em hunt!” This poem utilizes a specific human to non-human relationship as a metaphor and also employs teasing as a comedic element:

Good to hide, and hear ‘em hunt!  
Better, to be found,  
If one care to, that is,  
The Fox fits the Hound—

Good to know, and not tell,  
Best, to know and tell,  
Can one find the rare Ear  
Not too dull—  
(Johnson 406).

In this poem, Dickinson again metaphorically draws a connection between animals and humans; she makes her most direct comparison between the speaker and the Fox. The poem details a “hunt,” but draws attention to the particular strangeness of this specific chase. Specifically, the poem makes space for a more conciliatory, reciprocal hunt, in which both parties “win,” namely, it appears that this metaphorical fox wishes to be found. Furthermore, because the metaphor changes at the finale—an “Ear” emerges—the finding or chase culminates in the act of listening. What makes the metaphor ultimately odd is the fact that the symbols seem to change places. Whereas at the beginning, the speaker claims that it may be better for the Fox to be “found,” at the end, the pleasure or satisfaction from the hunt results from the “Ear.” The fox, seemingly a metaphorical stand-in for the poet at the beginning of the poem, wants to be found. Yet it is the hunter who finds the Ear—not the fox—right? Or is it the fox? If the fox thinks it is better to be

found, then it could be this animal who “finds” the rare ear to listen to it. Either reading requires that the metaphor change in some way—either the metaphor for the speaker/poet changes from the one being hunted into the hunter, or the one being hunted (the fox) is also hunting as well—for the “rare Ear.”

The tease in the poem results from the riddle-like language and “code” that pervades it (good, better, best), and perhaps Dickinson again employs these riddles in order to examine and upend the traditional Romantic sense of metaphor and symbolism: “A striking phenomenon in literary history is the degree to which English writers, collaterally with their German contemporaries, imported such societal terms as “conflict,” “mastery, “tyranny,” “submission,” “slavery,” “equality” and “freedom” into the cognitive realm, to represent the relations between the mind and the natural world, or between the mind and the physical senses, in the act of redemption” (Abrams Supernaturalism 363). Dickinson does not use any of these words in this poem, but she details the state of “freedom” in a strange and conditioned manner, making direct comparison to a poet’s potential freedom that may be achieved through audience (finding an “Ear” that is not too “dull” or unlearned). But this freedom remains inaccessible for the speaker, betraying the insufficiency of the dualistic metaphor on which it relies. If the fox does not make a sound, it will find freedom from the hunter. But what if the fox symbolizes a poet, wishing to be heard by those hunters seeking out an original, talented voice? What are the consequences of allowing the hunt to take place, of letting oneself be “hunted?” In my mind, the metaphor emerges as deliberately multivalenced and unfixed. Therefore, the Romantic condition that posits a condition of “slavery” opposite one of “freedom” becomes incomplete for Dickinson: “Whatever approach readers take

to her work, the significance of those textual realities must be taken into account: the special experience of reading the Dickinson canon that produces in the reader no overall order of the poet's perception . . . the generic elements her poetry lacks, including titles, selections and categorizations, magnitude, finishedness, a dialogue with history, a hierarchy of claims, an *ars poetica*, and technical development" (Porter 21).

Feminist critics relate this quality of incompleteness, whether evinced in unstable metaphors or lack of titles, as evidence of her willingness to challenge the dominant male literary experience. Furthermore, the fact that this particular poem displays the act of hunting and being hunted as so mutable demonstrates Dickinson's unwillingness to make assumptions regarding existing power systems, especially those that posit a human over animal. In some sense, the speaker of this poem is aligned with the fox. Yet the odd ludicrousness of a statement like "The Fox fits the Hound" compels a contemporary reader to look in and around the basic premise of the metaphor: "When a power relationship is inferred—between beloved and lover, between death and the living, between the speaker and audience—Dickinson will experience both the danger and the attraction of the situation. Into the breach between hiding and being found she will send a teasing speaker . . . tease makes it possible for her to challenge these powers" (Juhasz 40). Several nuances of interpretation result from this riddle involving the hunted (and hunting?) fox: first, Dickinson is admitting the pleasure in being hunted, even in being captured. If one cares to be captured, it can lead to satisfaction-- "the Fox fits." The one being pursued (the poet) may have more in common with his/her hunter (a literary audience) than at first glance. Or, a second possibility for interpretation results when we understand this poem entirely as a joke—a satire, even. How can a Fox ever "fit" a

Hound? How can being hunted ever be pleasurable? Why use the metaphor of the hunt to explain how much a speaker wants an “Ear?” Dickinson may again be playing out her joke to its bitter end, much as in Poem #862, “Split the Lark.” In this reading, a vein of underlying violence emerges in the second stanza. If it is “good” to know, but not tell, it becomes better to know and tell—as if the hiding in the first stanza were a type of “knowing.” And, again, if this is an extended satirical representation of a hunt, than the implied consequence of the final two lines amidst the riddling is the skinning of a fox’s ear, using a sharp knife (“Not too dull”).

Poem #842 remains open to suggestion regarding its semantics and riddles, a quality that Cristanne Miller believes is prevalent in many of Dickinson’s poems:

In poem after poem, this poet brings herself to the very point of going too far, losing control—whether of good taste, metaphorical coherence, tone, language more generally, or of narrative scene. Through the very exuberance or weirdness of her expression in such poems, Dickinson creates moments of linguistic and narrative incongruity, disruption, chaos; yet because these same poems ultimately exult in ... the poet’s power of expression—hence, the power of the human psyche and brain—they are humorous rather than merely frightening. (Miller 102)

The result of these frequent incongruities in the poem “Good to hide, and hear ‘em hunt” permits increased audience participation and also emphasizes that no singular mode of interaction should dominate over another among human to non-human relationships. At times, it is good to hide, and remain hiding. At times, it is better to be found. Yet the pressure we as readers must place on the words “Fox” and “Hound” or “Ear” and “Dull” to actually make them “fit” may betray the poet’s inclination to sympathize with the creature being hunted, rather than with the trained hound and man holding the leash. If

such intense pressure is required in order to make the hunt “workable” in this poem, then perhaps the poet means to show that any hunt is, ultimately, unworkable.

#### Chapter 4: In Conclusion: Animating an Eco-Text

Despite the multi-valenced semantics, codes, and riddles in her poetry, Dickinson still expresses a hope for romantic transcendence or understanding, as Poem # 1129,

“Tell all the Truth but Tell it Slant,” implies:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind—  
(Johnson 506-7).

The “natural” element of lightning in this poem functions as an example of a “truth” that must be explained “gradually” to children, presumably so as not to frighten or disturb the children, who might not have the mental capacity to understand the devastating power of nature and death. The speaker in poem #1129 recognizes the necessity for “altering” truth (and death); indeed, the poem hints at a belief that no mere human can ever comprehend all-pervasive, “Godly” truth: “Too bright for our infirm delight/ The Truth’s supreme surprise.” The speaker condemns men and women who might claim knowledge of the afterlife or other-world—no human can understand and explain qualities of nature and “spirit,” much as children must be protected from lightning, so adults must be protected from “truth.” Yet although this poem articulates a human’s inability to comprehend existence or the afterlife and would doubtless denounce religion’s appropriations of “heaven” or “hell,” the speaker still emphasizes truth as if truth does exist, somewhere, someplace: “In its lyric intimacy with power, melancholy, love, death,



and infinite futurity—in all these we discern the lineaments of the culture from which it stemmed ... Her poems are the subtlest and most profoundly rooted flower of provincial American life in its most coherent and successful form” (Chase 23). So if we remain grounded in contextual reality, what space can we claim, theoretically, for Dickinson’s interrogations of theology and spirituality that draw expressively and symbolically on animals and nature? In what ways do Dickinson’s depictions of animals and the natural world enact reformulations of tradition and how can we articulate her project?

Drawing on contemporary theoretical initiatives such as deep ecology and ecofeminism, we understand that a human domination of the natural world is profoundly rooted in hierarchy and androcentric cultural practices. Most notably, the capitalist economic system that has grown to become a global system in the twentieth century has caused perhaps the most significant environmental destructions such as water and air pollution and a devastatingly high number of extinctions. Arguably, capitalism evolved out of an emphasis on individualism, which in turn originated in Enlightenment philosophy. “Cartesian” philosophy articulates a division between a man’s body and a man’s soul (or intellect, or reason) and place primacy on the soul; yet Cartesian thought also denies any other living creature the ability to possess a “soul.” Rooted in Western culture, philosophy, and politics is a shared “understanding” that man dwells on a level “closest” to God and therefore may subjugate all other species. This emphasis on individualism led thinkers and policy makers to glorify the pursuit of individual means to certain ends—specifically, man has a “right” to pursue property, liberty, happiness, etc—and rationalized any damage or destruction that man might cause to other creatures or the environment in these pursuits. A dualist mindset (or, in other words, the perceived divide

between body and soul), openly relates to the twentieth-century development of wide-reaching global capitalism and, as a result, increased environmental destruction.

Moreover, the history of sexism and racism can also be directly linked to Cartesian belief systems. For centuries, Western philosophy and culture did not allow equal participation in its society or theology for women and men, whites and non-whites; these conceptions are rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition: “We are told that nonhuman animals were created by God to be helpers or companions to Adam, and when they were seen as unfit, Eve was created to fulfill this role” (Kheel 247). These dominant paradigms “othered” women and non-whites as easily as it “othered” or objectified nature en route to man’s increased satisfaction and power.

Because women and nature share the experience of repression, it is necessary to recognize that the relationship of woman to nature will ultimately differ from the relationship of man to nature. As I noted through several close readings of Dickinson’s poems, she tends to identify with animals, long for their physical experiences, and even call certain animals “brother.” I believe that as a female writer, Dickinson had more room to contemplate a different, highly personal relationship to animals and nature, and in this process, she also exposes the limited and close-minded qualities of a hierarchical conception of the natural. In the introduction to Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, and Nature, Greta Gaard claims that a woman’s comprehension of the natural world tends to lack objectification. Yet she stresses that this difference is not essentialist or biologically determined, but rather culturally mediated: “A sense of self as separate is more common in men, while an interconnected sense of self is more common in women. These conceptions of self are also the foundation of for two different ethical systems: the

separate self often operates on the basis of an ethic of rights or justice, while the interconnected self makes moral decisions on the basis of an ethic of responsibilities or care” (2). Ultimately, Dickinson’s depiction of animals and nature in her poems demonstrates this interconnectedness as well as this responsibility—and it is especially interesting to consider how or why her “interconnected” self may have thrived through a life spent in near isolation. Presumably Dickinson recognized the limitations of a dualist, patriarchal view; through her articulations of ethics and care regarding animals in her poems, she provides a more holistic, ultimately triumphant, comprehension of existence. Moreover, her depictions and articulations of existing practices and systems are often biting, satirical refutations of patriarchies and expose the violence imbedded in subject-object systems.

I believe that poem # 754, “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” is a fascinating exploration and exposé of a traditional, patriarchal view of nature and ultimately condemns the prevailing dualist conceptions:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun  
In Corners—till a Day  
The Owner passed—identified—  
and carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
and now We hunt the Doe—  
And every time I speak for Him—  
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow—  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—  
I guard my Master’s Head  
‘Tis better than the Eider-Ducks’s

Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
None stir the second time—  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live  
He longer must—than I—  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without—the power to die—  
(Johnson 369-70)

Poem #754 is a complicated rendering of a female speaker's gendered relationship with a Master, or God. The speaker experiences the masculine sublime, but she loses individual power as a result of the experience, as outlined by Yaeger as a condition of a "failed sublime": "A woman's sovereignty (is) her capacious seizure of what she desires. (a man) takes this sovereignty away, revealing, in the process, the social forces that conspire against a female sublime" (Yaeger 202). The opening phrase, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" implies that the speaker spent much of her life metaphorically standing still although she had the capability and power to join in a "hunt"; her gun was set and loaded, she simply needed to find a place to use it. When the male "Owner" arrives, the speaker can leave the isolated place and presumably "use" her gun. What does this "Owner" own? Does he own the speaker's life? Does he own her gun? I think a connection can be made between the "gun" and Dickinson's poetic ability—she had nowhere to "fire" the gun, nowhere to hunt, until the male "owner" of words and rhetoric came by to "pick her up."

And now, the female speaker can participate fully in the world of words—and how brilliant a metaphor of the gun and the hunt to describe Dickinson's "female" feelings and sentiments at this point. To be accepted by male literary society, the female

poet must participate in violence; she must conduct “hunts” and separate herself from nature. This is no longer a place where a spider can be called “brother,” instead, the speaker and “Owner” roam a “sovereign” wood, a separate place that can be entered, consumed, and conquered—a place where they hunt and kill a female deer. And in Dickinsonian style, there is some pleasure in this acceptance, in this ride with the Master: “I guard My Master’s Head/‘Tis better than the Eider Duck’s/Deep Pillow—to have shared.” The female speaker is sleeping with her master, “guarding” his head—and, seemingly, her lap has taken the place of the Eider’s Duck’s deep pillow. This subtle indication of how a female provides pillow and comfort to the male hunter just as the duck’s feathers can also provide ease intimates that the female has to “die” or become objectified just as the duck in order to enter the male personal space—there is, ultimately, no equality between male and female, which the speaker will dryly hint at through the sensual pleasure. And, furthermore, by joining with the male Master on this hypothetical journey into the male sphere, the female is finally left with a loss: “Though I than He—may longer live/He longer must—than I —/For I have but the power to kill,/Without the power to die--.”

I believe this final stanza refers to the autonomy that the female speaker had to give up when she joined the patriarchal hunt. In some sense, the speaker is again laughing at herself—but this is a dark humor beset by bitterness. The speaker seems to say, “Yes, this is what I thought I wanted—but how wrong I was.” Yes, by assuming male traditions, by internalizing the hierarchy, she has gained power—she can hunt and kill the doe, she can hear and see Mountains and Valleys in new ways, she can enjoy companionship of the Master—yet she has lost the “power to die.” This phrase, “to die,”

I believe, refers to the fact that her body is no longer her own. The male Owner owns all of her—owns her body and her life—she cannot be relieved of him at the moment of death—all of her existence, including the way in which she wants to comprehend and understand the afterlife, now belongs to him. When she adhered to the rules of the Hunt and the Gun, she also signs her spirituality away—her death is no longer her own: “What it means to be inside or outside another identity; what it means to ‘take in’ or possess; the very meaning of boundary—are put into question by ‘My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—’ ... ‘the other’ recognizes no boundaries, extending his presence into and through herself, where the self’s physical processes, such as breath and pain, assume a male identity” (Loeffelholz 83). Furthermore, specifically, in this “male-dominant” world, which in some ways the speaker may have longed to enter, animals and landscapes are entirely objectified and are put to use for man’s desires (meat, pillow, etc.). In this extended satire of a patriarchal space, Dickinson portrays the inherent danger in occupying a man’s “area,” and, indeed, of occupying a man’s intellectual pursuit. To be accepted is to lose one’s feminine identity, to lose interconnectedness with nature, to lose a plural comprehension of existence. The temptation of power and knowledge are not worth the loss of female identity; gaining the ability to “kill” is not worth losing the ability to “die.” Furthermore, Dickinson seems to ultimately question the necessity of power. The female cannot “die” or, ultimately, “exist” while enacting the man’s power display, demonstrating that the male power paradigm (the idea that all humans are naturally competitive and individualistic) is false and inapplicable to all humankind: “If Mankind is by nature autonomous, aggressive, and competitive (that is, ‘masculine’), then psychological and physical coercion or hierarchical structures are necessary to

manage conflict and maintain social order. Likewise, cooperative relationships, such as those found among women or tribal cultures, are by definition unrealistic and utopian” (Gaard 25).

Finally, from my particular perspective, the most fascinating quality of the poem emerges because this violent refutation of power systems occurs within the formal structure of the Romantic sublime. The “normative” speaker encounters an “other” in the person of the Master, experiences trauma and agitation in the partnership, and then comes to a new understanding. Yet the formula here does not satisfy or enlighten the subject—in opposite, Dickinson reveals the inherent patriarchy of the model and its effects on the female subject. If the female assumes the “speaking” romantic subjectivity, that her “other” is the Master who actually works to subjugate her. In this set-up, the interaction with the “other” results in negative or terrifying transcendence—and as a reader we understand the implications of assuming the romantic sublime for this female speaker. In this way we comprehend that the romantic model does not hold all of the answers—and Dickinson exposes the masculine hunter who seeks to “convert” her as machine-like and cold. Might his desire to kill reflect an inability to confront his own mortality?

Another poem that emphasizes the inability of mankind to comprehend or dwell in certain aspects of “the natural” is Poem # 1116, “There is another Loneliness:”

There is another Loneliness  
That many die without—  
Not want of friend occasions it  
Or circumstance of Lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes thought  
And whoso it befall  
Is richer than could be revealed  
By mortal numeral—  
(Johnson 502).

In this poem, the speaker references a particular kind of loneliness that many humans do not experience in their lifetimes. Societal influences, such as social circles or economic circumstances, do not cause this loneliness. This is a more ethereal, subjective feeling that can strike an individual by chance. In one reading, it appears the speaker indicates that sometimes the feeling arises because of “nature,” and sometimes because of “thought.” Yet the fluidity of the line (“But nature sometimes, sometimes thought”) leads to a more complicated reading. The repetition of the word “sometimes” without a line break makes the relationship between each “sometimes” stronger. Notably, it compels the reader to draw a connection between the word “nature” and “thought,” as if “nature” is doing the thinking. And if this “thinking” is related to a particular loneliness that strikes certain individuals in rare instances, then presumably it may be “nature” thinking through a person. The poem seems to reference moments of epiphany or sudden awareness—as when one is walking down a street and suddenly is aware for a split second of one’s actual existence. These strange occurrences are rarely articulated clearly (even by artists), and the vague nature of the lines in the second stanza seems to correlate to this awareness.

The poem is deliberately coy and outwardly plays with its dual intention. If we read the poem in the former manner, sometimes nature causes a feeling of loneliness and sometimes “thought” causes a feeling of loneliness. In this original reading, the tenses match up clearly, and the ultimate meaning of the poem remains that loneliness is not always negative—in this case, the person befallen by isolation is “richer” than could be revealed by any “mortal numeral” or rational way of thinking and/or “being.” Yet this reading does little to explicate or explore the energy behind the original loneliness or the



implications of it. The second reading I proposed above, though strange and awkward in its tense shift, accomplishes more in the sense that it hints at the distinct nature of loneliness of “nature” or “thought.” Presumably, this loneliness is close to the ultimate loneliness of death—and though it is terrifying to experience while alive, may leave an individual “richer” for the experience. Within my particular ecocritical context, the fact that “nature” can either cause an inexplicable loneliness or “speak” through and communicate this loneliness to a person emphasizes Dickinson’s unwillingness to occupy nature in an androcentric fashion. Instead of trying to understand or categorize the loneliness that results from “nature,” Dickinson allows the loneliness to happen and celebrates the richness of the experience. Instead of fearing nature and/or mortality and attempting to subjugate it, Dickinson lets well enough alone.

If venturing near patriarchal literary circles destroyed Dickinson’s particular relationship to nature and physicality, presumably entering into the male-dominated church caused like harm: “Patriarchal spirituality has been earth-disdaining rather than earth-honoring” (Gaard 47). In Poem #324, “Some keep the Sabbath,” Dickinson exhibits a simple, unadulterated, nearly child-like tone as she describes her more unconventional way of keeping the Lord’s Day. The humor in this poem is not dark, brooding, or biting as it was in “My Life Had Stood—A Loaded Gun.” Rather, the humor is innocent and fun and the poem’s scope is “cooperative and utopian” (Gaard):

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.  
(Johnson 153-4).

The Clergyman, the Sexton—these traditionally male roles have been upended as Dickinson assigns animals to the tasks. Instead of entering into an institution that would force her into an objectification of nature and animals, she chooses to create her own church, a small, harmonious, ethical place in which creatures can engage in shared worship: “A failure to recognize connections can lead to violence, and a disconnected sense of self is most assuredly at the root of the current ecological crisis (not to mention being the root cause of all oppression, which is based on difference)” (Gaard 2). By including animals in her church and elevating them to positions of influence, Dickinson implies that her conception of “authority” or power differs greatly from the conventional church. Again, as in “My Life had stood—A Loaded Gun—“ Dickinson exposes how mainstream institutions (literature, religion) contain imbedded power systems that disallow female (and animal) participation. In some sense Dickinson’s elevation of the bobolinks and other birds to choristers and sextons might be conceived as satirical, that “even animals” can occupy positions of power better than men. In this reading, the “danger” from an ecofeminist perspective is that she objectifies or “uses” animals to prove a point about men. Yet I believe that the speaker in this poem simply prefers the company of animals entirely to that of men whose patriarchal systems cause disengagement from nature and the female self. There is laughter, at the silliness of the scene, but again the speaker’s laughter is directed as much at herself as at the animals that

she “dresses” with words. The tone is kind (“Our little sexton—sings”), articulating a hope for a different kind of religious community, one without withering sermons, more direct and tangible. And although the speaker dresses her animals, she also adorns herself with animal feathers: “I wear my wings”—and finds comfort here: “I’m going, all along.”

Dickinson’s recourse to nature for a religious experience follows certain Romantic prescriptions. Emerson, in particular, saw nature as suffuse with “soul” inasmuch as a man: “The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious” (Emerson 73). Yet Dickinson’s attempt to experience religion via nature in this poem differs from the grand, expressive gesture offered by Emerson or Wordsworth. The emphasis on the solace of the domestic space (the house and backyard), rather than any sweeping landscape or vista, evokes a direct contrast to her contemporaries: “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. For it pervades Thought also. . . . I is like a great circle on a sphere, comprising all possible circles, which, however, may be drawn and comprise it in like manner” (Emerson 60). Much as the natural does not serve Dickinson as a means to an end, it will not serve as a generalizing, overarching concept. Rather, it is in the particular, discrete details of her home and yard that she finds spirituality, and she ultimately remains in that space of domestic intercourse rather than move beyond it.

Many Romantic poets utilized animal and natural symbolism while describing their increasingly charged relationship with God: “As many a scholarly study has shown, the transition from a quasi-inferential knowledge of God through nature to a more

emotional communion with God in nature came quickly, spread widely, and lasted well into the nineteenth century” (Perkins 39). And although Dickinson did not explicitly claim a theological space for animals and landscapes, her metaphorical representation of how an animal might participate in a spiritual endeavor as ardently as a human illustrates her holistic, non-hierarchical conception of physical reality. By emphasizing this aspect of her project, I hope to create a discursive relationship between Dickinson and the emerging contemporary field of ecofeminism: “Ecofeminists have mounted a challenge to this Patriarchal essentialism, or the idea that so-called ‘masculine’ traits are the essence of human nature and that power structures are a necessary concomitant of human Society” (Gaard 26). In her poems, Dickinson asks animals to help her to understand God, to provide her with access to reach transcendence (wings, songs, etc). These requests, though simple and direct, are heartfelt and rigorous. Dickinson’s poetic allegiance and loyalty to animals came before any loyalty to patriarchal systems or paradigms. When she satirizes in her poems, she is satirizing man; when she genuinely laughs in the poems, an animal is likely close by. Her ultimate decision not to publish or share much of her work may have resulted from an understanding of the implicit violence in existing cultural systems; furthermore, because of her unconventional, irregular audience, she may have felt “freer” in her poetic constructions of heaven and earth, constructions that allowed birds, bees and spiders to become her brothers, sisters, peers, and helpmates.

In her essay, The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women’s Fiction, Marian Scholtmeijer explores the material possibilities for women fiction writers in regards to animals and natural landscapes. How exactly do female authors attain the closeness to

the natural world that can refute patriarchal conceptions of nature? What precise techniques can women writers call upon in their depictions of community and partnership with animals? Scholtmeijer places primacy on the ability and tendency of female writers to “think” themselves into the condition of the other: “The political thrust of my argument comes not from denial of the status of other for women and animals, but from denial that ‘otherness’ presupposes weakness. . . . as women’s acknowledgement of animals in fiction confirms, the radical otherness of nonhuman animals provides a double source of power . . . In their work on animals, moreover, women writers perform that most anti-androcentric of acts: thinking themselves into the being of the wholly ‘other,’ the animal. It turns out that this is not an act of self-sacrifice but of empowerment” (Scholtmeijer 233). Returning to poem # 324, “Some keep the Sabbath” with this perspective in mind, I think the poem becomes not only a renunciation of conventional representations of religion and spirituality, but also becomes an enactment of Scholtmeijer’s theory of empowerment through the “other.” Identifying with birds is not an opt-out from society; rather, the identification enacts a deliberate attempt to create another “society” where all “others,” including women and animals, have time and space for participation and action: “Establishing the legitimacy of outcast experiences is precisely the political cultural work that needs to be carried out in real life for the sake of all beings disenfranchised by sanctioned power systems” (Scholtmeijer 233).

As ecofeminists assert, the claim that humans are inherently individualistic, competitive, and even violent is a purely patriarchal claim asserted by those who possess power within the current system and wish to retain that power. Within a patriarchal framework, man is often situated against nature, whether as a victim or conqueror. From

this androcentric viewpoint, “nature” is constructed as a fearful, potentially devastating aspect of reality that must be tamed and subdued in order for humans to realize progress and independence. Ecofeminists reveal that these types of claims in no way reflect any “naturalness” whatsoever in the physical world. “Nature” is as much a construction as “Society”; our feelings and thoughts toward landscapes and non-human creatures are determined by those who possess the most power within current patriarchal systems: “The legacy of the history of male dominance, which I call the ‘androcentric premise,’ is still evidenced in virtually all modern schools of thought, even ‘radical’ ones ... it is an interpretation of human nature that assumes the universality of a masculine model of Man and its associated values” (Birkeland 24). As an extension of the naturalization of masculinity, androcentrism also serves to rationalize competition and violence among humans. If humankind is “by nature” individualistic and competitive, than any fighting over resources or power is accepted as “a way of the world.” This implicit acceptance of what comprises a “natural” human remains dangerous in a variety of forms, most notably in the destruction wrought on the environment. However, ecofeminists assert that the connection between gender and environmental devastation cannot be ignored. Until the basic patriarchal premise is understood (and, perhaps, eradicated) in the cultural response to and understanding of “nature,” then destruction, war, and extinction will continue: “Ostensibly gender-neutral theories protect the power structure by concealing the ideological basis of exploitative relationships. Militarism, colonialism, racism, classism, sexism, capitalism, and other pathological ‘isms’ of modernity obtain legitimacy from the assumption that power relations and hierarchy are inevitably a part of human Society due to Man’s ‘inherent nature’” (Birkeland 25). Yet, if the patriarchal premise involved in

our cultural apprehension of “nature” is completely removed, what remains? Do constructivist modes of understanding simply make more room for other human-based ecological relationships to emerge (even if these are seemingly positive “communal” relationships)? Should there be any “givens” in a representation of ecological reality? What do these givens look like?

Taking note of these questions, it is still important to note that for the majority of literary history as well as the present time, mainstream Western writers and thinkers often continue to represent the man-nature relationship as a dichotomous one. Therefore, much of the work of ecofeminist literature must on the one hand expose erroneous Cartesian conceptions and must also strive to assert how “utopian” structures such as cooperative relationships and communities might be more rewarding and beneficial for humans and animals alike. In terms of animal relationships, women writers often follow guidelines for ecofeminist literature as outlined by Scholtmeijer. They might confront the separation of human and animal that rationalizes victimization: “Women can subvert the assumptions on which victimization is founded through allegiance with animals” (Scholtmeijer 235); or, as an extension, a woman writer might confront “cultural suppositions about the state of the individual as a subject” (Scholtmeijer 235). Finally, a woman writer might enact a metaphorical or symbolic animal community: “These fantasies show the way out of opting out of dominant culture and joining up with the animals, who already occupy worlds apart from ours” (Scholtmeijer 235). Although Dickinson most certainly associates being victimized with animals and challenges the isolation between human and animal via her constructions of a dynamic animal-human community such as in the poem “Some keep the Sabbath,” I feel that her poetry follows

one additional and important guideline for a more unconventional and compassionate relationship to animals. Most of her poems that challenge traditional animal narratives employ humor as she attempts to lend her non-human friends both an element of spirit as well as grace. In the following pages, I will discuss how several of Dickinson's poems build on and extend Scholtmeijer's conception of subversive animal narratives because of how she (Dickinson) employs humorous techniques.

A poem that asserts a kinship between a victimized animal and a victimized female speaker is # 165: "A Wounded Deer—leaps highest—:"

A Wounded Deer—leaps highest—  
I've heard the Hunter tell—  
'Tis but the Ecstasy of death—  
And then the Brake is still!

The Smitten Rock that gushes!  
The trampled Steel that springs!  
A Cheek is always redder  
Just where the Hectic stings!

Mirth is the Mail of Anguish—  
In which it Cautious Arm,  
Lest anybody spy the blood  
And "you're hurt" exclaim!  
(Johnson 77-78).

The first stanza begins immediately with the image of an injured animal. The speaker relays information from the mouth of a "Hunter," someone who has seen a deer's behavior while under duress. The first stanza smacks of satire and this tone extends into the second stanza as well. The speaker is communicating how the hunter rationalized the deer's behavior, seemingly putting a positive spin on how high the deer leapt after receiving a fatal wound. The action of "Leaping high" is a seemingly joyous, celebratory gesture, one that excites the Hunter and inflames his enjoyment of the chase and capture.



Seemingly, the speaker is also “excited” throughout this first stanza, caught up in re-telling the story of the kill. Yet the language of the second stanza is deliberately exaggerated and unrealistic. Like a wounded deer leaping high, a “smitten” rock gushes and a “trampled” steel springs. By personifying these inanimate objects, the speaker relays the ridiculousness of celebrating the deer’s leap as something “ecstatic.” There is no comparison—the deer is suffering, likely symbolizing the speaker’s own pain.

The kinship between animal and woman in this poem arises because the speaker implicates herself in the patriarchal “hunt” of the deer. She, too, is guilty—first for “celebrating” the hunt, and secondly, for behaving in a manner like the deer when she too is “wounded,” leaving herself open to patriarchal occupation. When the speaker ridicules the Hunter’s perception of the “ecstatic” deer, she criticizes herself for also assigning mystical qualities to the deer’s suffering—it was her pen that wrote “ecstasy of death,” even though later she redacts this androcentric valuation of the scene in stanza two, Moreover, stanza two reveals that the female speaker has been as hurt by patriarchy’s linguistic assignments as the deer; indeed, perhaps the deer is a metaphorical stand-in for her own self-conception as a victim: “A Cheek is always Redder/Just where the Hectic stings!” Stanza three then emerges as the crux of the matter. If the speaker participates in the “hunting” of the animal by listening and participating in conversation about it, she also participates in the “hunt” for *herself* because she covers up her pain and suffering with “words”—in this case, comic or humorous words: “Mirth is the Mail of Anguish--/ In Which it Cautious Arm.” This is a multifaceted metaphor involving the deer—much as the deer leaps upon being shot, so the speaker laughs when she is hurt. Both actions result in the patriarchal “hunter” catching his prey. In the case of the deer, the animal’s

life is lost. In the case of the speaker, she figuratively loses some aspect of her life as well. Yet because the speaker is laughing in order to cover up her hurt (“Lest anybody spy the blood / And ‘you’re hurt’ exclaim”) there is another comparison made between a woman’s self-protective behavior and a deer’s self-protective “leap.” Much as an animal in the wild will hide its pain in order not to be sought out by predators, so a woman must shield herself from patriarchy’s “gun.”

Poem #165 emerges as a work that places a woman’s pain on par with an animal’s pain, and the shared source of the pain emerges as the patriarchal hunter. Dickinson has adhered to ecofeminist assertions that this type of progressive literature must expose patriarchy’s conception of the “natural.” In this poem, patriarchy perceives the deer’s leap as a momentous, ecstatic, adrenaline-pumping leap before death—a hopeless last leap that takes place before death befalls the animal. The speaker’s connection with this type of animal pain allows the reader to comprehend that our conceptions of the “natural” do not necessarily reflect reality. The speaker explains to us that she, too, is like the animal—she covers up her pain and suffering through what others might perceive as mirth—much as hunters misjudge the deer’s behavior. Furthermore, because we understand that the speaker covers up her pain with laughter, we re-read the first two stanzas with the understanding that the speaker’s celebratory tone and inflated diction actually work to mask her pain. So, this roundabout “code” leads us to realize that the speaker’s “pain” results from the animal’s pain. If the speaker allows herself to laugh and celebrate the “ecstasy” of the animal’s death, she is therefore laughing to cover up her other feelings. It is a lonely place for the speaker to end up in at the conclusion of this poem, but critically this move places Dickinson within an ecofeminist framework: “The

narrative act of conjoining human and animal victims is a step toward affirming the importance of animal suffering. At the same time, the psychic unity of woman and animal victim underscores the pointed rejection of women from the social nexus” (Scholtmeijer 236). Dickinson pairs up the lonely speaker with the animal victim and renders a complicated expose of patriarchal “injury.” Dickinson’s utilization of humor in her poetic execution proves invaluable and leaves the reader aware that a speaker’s laughter remains entirely notable as well as revealing.

Another ecofeminist literary project as outlined by Scholtmeijer may allow an animal to escape or may question the abuse of an animal; she offers an additional option for ecofeminist writers to create “fantasy worlds” or communities in which animals and humans co-exist together. Dickinson’s poem #1561, “No Brigadier throughout the Year,” does not depict outright physical abuse of an animal but does question the human tendency to place animals on lower spiritual rungs of the celestial ladder; furthermore, it creates a symbolic union between the human speaker and a bird, much to the dismay of a “sky-god” watching over the pair from above. The poem animates a bird with mighty and almost royal characteristics, leading the reader to comprehend this creature’s sense of agency and perhaps consciousness:

No Brigadier throughout the Year  
So civic as the Jay—  
A Neighbor and a Warrior too  
With shrill felicity  
Pursuing Winds that censure us  
A February Day,  
The Brother of the Universe  
Was never blown away—  
The Snow and he are intimate—  
I’ve often seen them play  
When Heaven looked upon us all  
With such severity

I felt apology were due  
To an insulted sky  
Whose pompous frown was Nutriment  
To their temerity—  
The Pillow of this daring Head  
Is pungent Evergreens—  
His Larder—terse and Militant—  
Unknown—refreshing things—  
His Character—a Tonic—  
His Future—a Dispute  
Unfair an Immortality  
That leaves this Neighbor out—  
(Johnson 649).

In this poem Dickinson creates a metaphorical “escape” for the Jay. The enacted escape is more figurative than literal; by personifying the Jay and lending it human qualities, Dickinson lets the animal break out of its traditional role in human dialogue and experience. She opens the poem by simultaneously calling the bird a civic brigadier, a neighbor, and a warrior. In this description, the speaker is distinctly absent—no “I” spots and then comprehends the bird—this is a more unmediated approach, allowing the bird to subsist on its own terms. The “I” has little to do with the fact that this Jay is a “Neighbor” and “Warrior,” rather, these facts are relayed as “givens” in the landscape. The speaker enters the poem informally with the line: “Pursuing Winds that censure us” and then more formally at: “I’ve often seen them play.” The speaker’s role in this poem is to observe and admire the Jay and how he contends with the bitter winter landscape surrounding him. Much as Dickinson referred to animals in other poems as brother or partner, here she also refers to the Jay as “the Brother of the Universe,” and she enjoys watching her metaphorical sibling play with the Snow: “the Snow and he are intimate.”

The poem takes an interesting turn in the middle with the line: “When Heaven looked upon us all / With such severity /.” Here, Dickinson animates “Heaven” as she

has previously animated the “Snow” and the “Jay.” She lends “Heaven” human-like qualities and situates it as a “character” within the poem. “Heaven” does not seem pleased at what it sees below on Earth; likely, this displeasure is a result of the play among the Jay, Snow, and the speaker. Although the speaker feels she ought apologize to the mighty sky, as expressed in the line, “I felt apology were due,” she offers no contrite gesture. Rather, the speaker reveals that the sky’s displeasure actually causes those being watched to behave more and more impudently: “Whose pompous frown was Nutriment/ To their Temerity.” The speaker intimates that Heaven is portentous and, moreover, wrong insofar as how it conceives of the speaker and her relationship to the Jay and the Snow. Interestingly, this particular poem reflects little inner turmoil in regards to its subtle rebellion against Heaven and convention. Similar to Letter #175, in which Dickinson expressed concern that her father may have been subconsciously judging her for her spiritual quandaries, in this poem the speaker recognizes that the “correct” or conventional behavior would be to apologize to the great sky for her indiscretion. However, the speaker intimates that more is at stake here than herself—she is reconsidering and re-formulating how Heaven and convention regard her figurative brother, the Jay: “Unfair an Immortality/ That leaves this Neighbor out--.” This poem reflects anger and impatience as a direct result of how Heaven perceives of animal spirituality. The speaker metaphorically refuses to alter her behavior and continues to celebrate the Jay (and, accordingly, celebrate herself) through the end of the poem: “The Pillow of this daring Head / Is pungent Evergreens--/ His Larder--terse and Militant--/ Unknown—refreshing things--.”

Dickinson relies on humor to achieve her particular renunciation in poem #1561. Her devices here rely on a light poetic touch, and although the voice does not explicitly articulate itself as a child, there is a child-like daring and rebellious quality to the poem. The characterization of “Heaven” as pompous and overbearing is similar to how a child might sulkily characterize an authority figure. Through this “innocent” or “youthful” voice, Dickinson achieves a safe space for criticizing a system that does not cherish or emphasize creatures and landscapes as she might: “The perspective of ingenuousness in Dickinson’s poetry is a tease from the word go, because it is a role assumed by an educated, adult woman. It is a way to play at innocence, to imagine a condition beyond the full constraints of culture, and then to use it as a position from which to critique the culture” (Juhasz 29). Through her speaker’s metaphorical daring, Dickinson manages to enact cultural subversion via poem # 1561. From the ecofeminist perspective, she has managed through her language to celebrate an animal’s way of life on its own, without human objectification or intervention. Yet the language of metaphorical “escape,” however adamant, remains personified—she lends the Jay human qualities in order to elicit sympathy for him and to create a full-bodied connection with him. This aspect of the poem betrays how difficult ecofeminist poetics becomes at the level of language—that in order to “free” the oppressed creature, a speaker must still relate to and describe that creature using human language and experience. Yet the aim of an ecofeminist project remains alteration and repair of man’s corrupted relationship with nature, and this poem attempts to raise and question the objectifying tendencies of convention and religion in regard to animals: “The question is how the massive abuse of power by (specific groups of) humans can be stopped, their exploitation and destruction of the lives

of others (human and nonhuman) and of the so-called environment, can be stopped” (Kappeller 334).

When Dickinson emphasizes the majesty and might of nature, she typically points out that these qualities subsist outside of human intervention. The Jay in poem #1561 appears in his “felicity” before the human speaker appears in the poem; his qualities precede any human intervention in the scene. The aim of this poem to mock a religion that makes no room for the bird’s “immortality” or spirit. Most clearly, Dickinson seems to achieve a refutation of patriarchal religion by aligning herself with the “other.” This alignment occurs clearly in “No Brigadier throughout the Year,” in which the speaker aligns herself clearly with the Jay against “Heaven” and convention. As a result of the animal-human alliance in this poem and in many others outlined earlier, the separation that must occur during the sublimation phase cannot happen as a result. Indeed, when we read this poem within the “matrix” of the sublime, Dickinson’s frustration becomes mightily apparent. If the beginning of the poem represents the “normative” phase in which animal, landscape, and speaker all “play” together, then presumably the “traumatic” phase occurs when Heaven spies them together and as a result the characters gain more “temerity.” Yet there is little room within this structure for “sublimation.” The speaker has grown more daring, and can learn “refreshing things” from the Jay, who is presumably experiencing “trauma” as well. Because of the speaker’s established alliance with the Jay, presumably the speaker and the Jay should emerge “triumphant” as a result of the poem’s progress. But the Jay is left behind—he has no spirit. He is a “Neighbor” but he is “left out.” We can also wonder if the romantic “structure” in this poem situates “Heaven” as “other.” If this reading holds throughout the poem, then in

this reading the “other” does little to affect the “normative” state of the speaker and her Neighbor Jay, similar to how the Master as “other” negatively affects the speaker in “My Life had Stood—a Loaded Gun.” The experience with the “other” is beguiling and frustrating, and compels the characters to act abrasively out of frustration and anger. Their experience with the “other” reminds them that in order to achieve sublimity on these terms, the “neighbors” must separate and go their separate ways—one, presumably, to Heaven and the other, to nowhere.

Therefore, Dickinson’s particular “sublime” must include the “others” whom she works to hard to make into partners and friends throughout the poems. Although her project is wholly related to and indebted to the Romantic model of heightened subjectivity and secularization of “sky-gods,” she will not embrace this model in all its untoward aspects. I believe, in conclusion, that her rather nebulous refutation of the full Romantic endeavor must relate specifically to gender. The Romantic models of the sublime and transcendence cannot serve a nineteenth century female writer in the same way as they might serve a male writer: “Theoretically speaking, the nineteenth century woman poet was barred, in the cultural myth of which Freud was only one later redactor, from what Thomas Weiskel describes as the essential structure of the ‘sublime movement,’ its recapitulations of the ‘positive resolution’ of the boy’s Oedipus complex. In the ‘sublime moment,’ the individual ego conquers an awesome external threat by identifying with a transcendent faculty that at once contains, interjects, and is contained by ... ‘Already castrated,’ as Freud would put it, she has no direct access to the initiatory agon through which a male poet may assume his identification with patriarchal tradition” (Loeffelholz 50). This pre-existing castration emerges directly in those poems about



animals and nature, poems in which Dickinson foregrounds the fact that the Romantic model leaves little to no room for “already-othered” female poets. Because of this condition of gender, Dickinson is left to condemn, parody, or fragment the Romantic model in various poems: “Instead Dickinson seeks out the differences within male language itself, the contradictions . . . and plays them out through skeptical quotation, punning reference, and self-deconstructing figures” (Loeffelholz 54).

Although Dickinson did not attempt to formulate an alternative model in her search for personal “transcendence” and remained reliant upon the sublime experience in general, her humor in particular demonstrates a willingness to confront the inadequacies and sexist tendencies of the Romantic sublime. Many critics have claimed that her project lacks “authorial control.” “The more credible charge (David) Porter brings against Dickinson is that she fails to fulfill the vocational responsibilities of a serious author. His litany of neglect reveals a clear and plainly factual difference between Dickinson’s authorial practice and that of virtually all her peers and contemporaries” (Stonum 8). Yet it is this very lack of “control” or “mastery” that feminist critics especially have celebrated. Indeed, it is fascinating that the one American poet who did follow the Romantic “prescription” for a life of artistic solitude did not communicate any wholly formed thematic or aesthetic product out of this life spent in isolation. Theorists as a result have argued that we must read Dickinson’s lack of “control” or guidance as conscious and deliberate: “By transforming the space between the reader and the text, Dickinson creates the conditions for a more dynamic and unstructured or open reading experience. The text becomes a field for volatile appropriation in the most physical and positive sense” (Juhasz, Miller, Smith 25). A reader can therefore positively appropriate

the poem in an ecocritical or ecofeminist fashion, especially because of the humorous tropes of ingenuousness, exaggeration, and satire, among others. Although Dickinson's mockery of convention most likely resulted from her frustration with certain Romantic models, a contemporary reader can subsequently comprehend her project as possessing ecocritical components. Her poetic "openness," a product of her unwillingness to adhere to tenets of Romantic "mastery," allows for exciting, postponed understandings of the work:

The Skies can't keep their secret!  
They tell it to the Hills—  
The Hills just tell the Orchards—  
And they—the Daffodils!

A Bird—by chance—that goes that way—  
Soft overhears the whole—  
If I should bribe the little Bird—  
Who knows but *she* would tell?

I think I won't—however—  
It's finer—not to know—  
If Summer were an Axiom—  
What sorcery had Snow?

So keep your secret—Father!  
I would not—if I could,  
Know what Sapphire Fellows, do,  
In your new-fashioned world!

(Johnson 90).

## Bibliography and Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971.
- Abrams, M.H. The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Adams, Carol J. & Josephine Donovan, Eds. Animals and Women. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Barker, Wendy. Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- Bate, Jonathan. The Song of the Earth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Birkeland, Janis. "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice." Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature. Ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- Chase, Richard. Emily Dickinson. New York: Dell Press, 1965.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "To a Young Ass." 1794.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Selected Essays. Ed. Larzer Ziff. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Gaard, Greta. "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature." Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature. Ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Thomas H., Ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. New York: Back Bay Books, 1955.
- Johnson, Thomas H., Ed. Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Juhasz, Suzanne, Cristianne Miller & Martha Nell Smith, Eds. Comic Power in Emily Dickinson. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. "The Big Tease." Comic Power in Emily Dickinson. Eds. Suzanne Juhasz, Cristianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Keller, Karl. The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

- Loeffelholz, Mary. Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Miller, Cristianne. "The Humor of Excess." Comic Power in Emily Dickinson. Eds. Suzanne Juhasz, Cristianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Orzeck, Martin and Robert Weisbuch, Eds.. Dickinson and Audience. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- Perkins, David. Romanticism and Animal Rights. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Scholtmeijer, Marian. "The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women's Fiction." Animals and Women. Ed. Carol J. Adams & Josephine Donovan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "To a Skylark." 1820.
- Stonum, Gary Lee. The Dickinson Sublime. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Yaeger, Patricia. "Toward a Female Sublime." Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism. Linda Kauffman, Ed. New York: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1989.