

does not withdraw the Rapture itself. Like Powder in a Drawer, we pass it with a Prayer, it's Thunders only dormant" (L 786, no. 842)), her letters to him are playful, especially in comparison to her humiliating letters to "Master"; she places herself on a much more equal footing with the judge, to whom she considered marriage: "Emily 'Jumbo'! Sweetest name, but I know a sweeter – Emily Jumbo Lord. Have I your approval?" (L 747, no. 780). Dickinson's friendships and loves continued to be of utmost importance to her, but they no longer destabilized her sense of self as they did in her youth; she came to accept love's heartache and disappointment as part of the contradictions of life and love. Her friends were of such importance to her that Dickinson counted them as her "few" saints, and each loss of a friend was a devastating loss: "Forgive the Tears that fell for few," she wrote to Elizabeth Holland after Judge Lord's death, "but that few too many, for was not each a World?" (L 816, no. 890). Each of Dickinson's friends was a "World" of utmost importance in itself and in its relationship to her.

"The Heaven – below":⁵¹ nature poems

Emily Dickinson's commitment to life, to this world with its complex range of emotions and relationships, also included a commitment to the physical earth. Dedicated to living a life experienced to its fullest, Dickinson celebrated the marvelous beauties of nature. But unlike the Romantics who cherished nature in its sublime magnitude, its overwhelming grandeur, Dickinson's appreciation for nature includes an appreciation for its details, its minute and often overlooked inhabitants, and its tiny pleasures. Of course, Dickinson also felt nature's sublimity and recorded it in her poetry, but more often she felt reverence for its subtle processes and intricate details. Thus, much of Dickinson's interest in nature is centered in the small spaces of her garden where she tended her treasured flowers, watched the birds and bees flit between blooms, and enjoyed the changing light and shades of daytime. She saw nature as an end in itself and not merely as a vehicle to philosophical truths. Of course, her observation of nature led her to contemplate the rhythms and meanings of life and to find correspondences between life in her garden and in human society, but unlike many Transcendentalists who saw God in and through nature, Dickinson saw nature as godlike, as worthy in itself of worship, attention, devotion. Thus, her nature poems do not always look for the meaning behind nature; she does not seek in nature a revelation of God as the Puritans and even the Transcendentalists might have. Nature is its own revelation and worthy of contemplation in and of itself.

Emily Dickinson's reverence for life led her to revere the world in which life unfolded. Dickinson dedicated herself to recording the process of life as she was able to observe it. Unfettered by economic necessity, she was able to commit herself to observing the beauty her rural community offered, and to tend the flowers in her garden, to contemplate the light and shade of the waning day. Dickinson was able to avoid the pressures of working and producing an income and to enjoy a leisurely existence supported by her father's wealth. In addition to household servants, she also had a gardener who helped her tend her plants. Dickinson appreciated the leisure that her father's wealth provided and felt at times the vulnerability of his wealth and her lifestyle: "I dreamed a dream & Lo!!! Father had failed & mother said that 'our rye field which she & I planted, was mortgaged to Seth Nims'" (L 48, no. 16). Though aware that industrialization would soon bring the world of commerce to Amherst (her father had a major role in bringing the railroad to Amherst), Dickinson cherished her bucolic life and "her seclusion permitted her to develop an extraordinarily vivid awareness of the natural world."⁵² Her leisure gave her the opportunity to observe the details of nature in a way that "could not be sustained in a law office where her brother and father worked, or a library where her cousin Frances Norcross spent her days, or especially at the tea parties that occupied Susan Gilbert's afternoons."⁵³ Such deep attention to nature's plenitude led Dickinson to feel that "Earth is Heaven – / Whether Heaven is Heaven or not" (P 602, no. 1408) – her love for nature can only be described as worship.

Throughout her poetry, Dickinson's interest in nature's bounty is apparent. Her letters also reveal her simple love for nature: "The Frogs sing sweet – today – They have such pretty – lazy – times –" (L 406, no. 262). Dickinson's dashes echo the intermittent croaking of the frogs, whose lazy melody gives her intense pleasure. Rejecting the Puritan work ethic's driven and compulsive busy-ness, Dickinson embraced the slower rhythms of nature and rural life that allowed her to enjoy the world's sensory and synaesthetic richness: "The lawn is full of south and the odors tangle, and I hear today for the first the river in the tree" (L 452, no. 318). The following poem portrays the gentleness of the earth's rhythms by describing nature as a nurturing mother:

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,
 Impatient of no Child –
 The feeblest – or the waywardest –
 Her Admonition mild –
 In Forest – and the Hill –
 By Traveller – be heard –
 Restraining Rampant Squirrel –
 Or too impetuous Bird –

How fair Her Conversation –
A Summer Afternoon –
Her Household – Her Assembly –
And when the Sun go down –

Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket –
The most unworthy Flower –

When all the Children sleep –
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps –
Then bending from the Sky –

With infinite Affection –
And infiniter Care –
Her Golden finger on Her lip –
Wills Silence – Everywhere –

(P 385–6, no. 790)

Unlike the Puritanical God, whom Dickinson viewed as a distant and judgmental father, nature is for Dickinson “the Gentlest Mother,” both patient and nurturing. Embracing a feminine vision of the earth, Dickinson imagines Nature as a kind, careful, and graceful mother who watches over even her tiniest creatures as part of her “Household.” Nature does not punish severely like a father but admonishes mildly like a caring mother. The “Rampant Squirrel” and “too impetuous Bird” are not beneath her notice and care. Indeed, nature’s gentleness, her “fair . . . Conversation,” and the soft music of her “Voice” transform her “Household” into an “Assembly” of worship where even the “minutest Cricket” and “most unworthy Flower” can offer up prayers that she will hear. Dickinson is carefully replacing God with nature, contrasting nature’s gentleness and care with the absent figure of the Puritanical God who is supposed to watch over and care for this earth but fails to do so. Nature steals God’s worship because she is more gentle, her admonitions are softer, and her care more universal. Her voice does not sound in thundering judgment and law (cf. Exodus 20) but speaks gentle and “fair . . . Conversation”; her ears are not closed to her children’s “timid prayer,” as Dickinson felt God’s were; and her will is enforced with “infinite Affection” and “infiniter Care” like a mother who gently hushes her children to sleep, not with a father’s chastising hand. Nature’s rhythms are life-affirming, and thus she receives the worship and prayers of an adoring creation and of this adoring poet.

Dickinson captures her rapturous love of nature in sensuous language and images. To describe the beauty and power of nature is for Dickinson both an impossible task and the calling that she has chosen for herself.

How the old Mountains drip with Sunset
How the Hemlocks burn –
How the Dun Brake is draped in Cinder
By the Wizard Sun –

How the old Steeples hand the Scarlet
Till the Ball is full –
Have I the lip of the Flamingo
That I dare to tell?

Then, how the Fire ebbs like Billows –
Touching all the Grass
With a departing – Sapphire – feature –
As a Duchess passed –

How a small Dusk crawls on the Village
Till the Houses blot
And the odd Flambeau, no men carry
Glimmer on the Street –

How it is Night – in Nest and Kennel –
And where was the Wood –
Just a Dome of Abyss is Bowing
Into Solitude –

These are the Visions flitted Guido –
Titian – never told –
Domenichino dropped his pencil –
Paralyzed, with Gold –

(P 135–6, no. 291)

While this poem ends with the impossibility of artistically capturing the “Vision” of the setting sun and finished day, the rest of the poem is committed to capturing that moment with vivid language. Not only does Dickinson personify the different figures that play a part in the bewitching sunset but she uses rich, luxurious language that paints a picture and thus makes the sunset palpable. The “Mountains *drip*” with the sunset which also “*drape[s]*” the brake. The rich, sensuous sounds of “drip” and “drape” give the lines an exotic feel and cause the reader not only to see the fiery “burning” sunset but also to feel the way it seems to shimmer across the landscape like golden paint. Indeed, the moment is so full of wonderful images that the sun is called a “Wizard,”

whose wonderful display bewitches onlookers. The sunset is a grand ball, where steeples escort grand ladies into the assembly room and the departing sun leaves glints on the grass like those reflected from the sapphires of a duchess departing after the dance. The moment is regal and rich; "Scarlet" and precious jewels and grand ladies dazzle the scene. Dusk crawls out as the ball finishes and the stars "Glimmer" on the sky's streets like torches ("Flambeau") that "no men carry." Night encloses the world with its cathedral "Dome of Abyss" and with a gentlemanlike bow encloses the wood in solitude. The repeated "How's" of the poem function not only as exclamatory superlatives but also ask a real question that the poem tries to answer: "How can I describe the glory of such a sunset?" The regal, sensuous imagery captures the transcendent "Vision" that is the sunset, a vision that paralyzes artistic attempts to depict it in its rich "Gold[en]" beauty and power. The language throughout is rich and palpable; the images are specific and concrete. Thus, Dickinson captures the "Wizard" power of the sunset by using images not of the sunset but of a royal ball. By using an entirely different set of images, Dickinson is able to convey the beauty of the sunset and the overwhelming power it impresses on its viewers.

The image of nature as a wizard is one that Dickinson often uses to convey this world's unexplainable power over her emotions. The power of sunrise and sunset are invoked in an earlier poem that shows how even the tiniest of nature's details can enthrall Dickinson; the quiet "Murmur of a Bee" holds as much sway over Dickinson's feelings as does a beautiful sunset.

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

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

The Breaking of the Day
Addeth to my Degree –
If any ask me how –
Artist – who drew me so –
Must tell! (P 73, no. 155)

Like "Witchcraft," the sunrise and sunset, even the tiny "Murmur of a Bee" has a mysterious, inexplicable power to mesmerize Dickinson, who is utterly awed

by what she sees before her. Nature is divine – "God is here"; nature possesses the power to compel Dickinson's awe in a way that a traditional, religious God has not. Indeed, the rapturous love that Dickinson feels and expresses for nature is the rapture of worship:

These are the days when Birds come back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!

(P 61, no. 130)

This poem describes those early winter days that suggest the return of spring or summer. The reverent, even religious language which Dickinson uses to speak of these days' misleading beauties is remarkable. The beauty of such days tricks a few birds into prematurely returning, while the skies mistakenly "resume the old . . . sophistries of June." It is important to note that the center of faith in this poem is not God, but June. Dickinson draws a parallel between Christ's return and the return of summer; in her view, June's return is more full of promise than the Messiah's. Though the omens of promised June are essentially fraudulent, they are harmless. Unlike the false and unfulfilled promises of a returning Christ, they "cannot cheat the Bee." The promises of spring are not altogether a ruse because they include a reliable "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) that actually produces a summer "leaf." For Dickinson, these beautiful, deceptive days are a "Sacrament of summer days, / [A] Last Communion in the Haze." They are a Eucharist, a Last Supper, a communion in which any "child" can

join.⁵⁴ The blue and gold sky and the timid leaf are the "sacred emblems" of summer that reassure the viewer that the season of growth will return. Just as Christians are to participate in the bread and wine of communion as a token of Christ's return,⁵⁵ Dickinson participates in the "Sacrament" of these late summer days as a sign that this cycle of spring and summer will repeat itself. Nature, not Christ, is Dickinson's source of hope and ecstasy.

The religious devotion that Dickinson felt for life on earth is an important wellspring of her poetry. Rejecting religious dogma, Dickinson embraces sensory truths and the truths of nature's beauty. Her devotion is not to God, her mission not to achieve heaven; instead her loyalties lie with this life and this earth:

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. (P 153–4, no. 324)

Dickinson is not interested in organized religion, its requirements, or rituals. She prefers the simple doctrines that nature offers. The warbling of the birds and the humming of the bees are true paradise, constituting sermons more edifying than those of a ponderous preacher. The "Bobolink" and "Orchard" replace the cold music and atmosphere of the choir and cathedral dome. The pomp of the preacher's "Surplice" garment is discarded, and the speaker joins the birds, thus donning a pair of "Wings" more angelic than the white surplice that covers the preacher's heavy black robe. The light and blissful events of nature replace the cold and dark rituals of the church. In contrast to the sexton of the church who "toll[s] the Bell" for church as if it were a funeral service and whose other responsibilities include gravedigging, the "Sexton" bird is full of life and sings a beautiful melody for the poet. Notice that Dickinson does not speak of ringing the bell for church but of tolling it. By invoking the funereal bell toll and the gravedigging sexton, Dickinson aligns the rituals of the church with death. The church's message is death-centered in its emphasis on a life

after death. In contrast, Dickinson revels in this life as her way of keeping the "Sabbath." Instead of looking only toward death and the heaven promised after death, she enjoys heaven now; heaven is not a destination after death, it is the process of life itself. Dickinson is "going [to heaven], all along" by drinking in and reverencing this heaven on earth.

The heavenliness of nature was a constant subject for Dickinson's poems/ Because she revered nature so intensely, Dickinson constantly felt the need to describe and praise nature's beauties in her own poetic hymns.

"Nature" is what we see –
The Hill – the Afternoon –
Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –
Nay – Nature is Heaven –
Nature is what we hear –
The Bobolink – the Sea –
Thunder – the Cricket –
Nay – Nature is Harmony –
Nature is what we know –
Yet have no art to say –
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity. (P 332, no. 668)

Once again, Dickinson assigns herself the task of defining nature, even as she claims it is ineffable. Because nature is "what we know – / Yet have no art to say," Dickinson describes it simply with a catalogue; nature is "The Hill," "the Afternoon," a "Squirrel," an "Eclipse," "the Bumble bee," "The Bobolink," "the Sea," "Thunder," and "the Cricket." A squirrel or a bumble bee is as heavenly as an eclipse; a bobolink's song is as powerful as the music of the sea; the chanting of a cricket is as important as the crashing thunder. The great and small are equally important to Dickinson. Even nature in her utmost "Simplicity" is heavenly.

While the Transcendentalists often observed nature to discover metaphors for the soul and to learn eternal truths, Dickinson believed the minutest details of nature were significant in themselves – not as signs or representations of higher truths.⁵⁶

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
In unperceived Hands –
And dancing softly to Himself
His Yarn of Pearl – unwinds –
He plies from Nought to Nought –
In unsubstantial Trade –

Supplants our Tapestries with His –
In half the period –

An Hour to rear supreme
His Continents of Light –
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom –
His Boundaries – forgot – (P 297, no. 605)

For Dickinson, the spider's weaving is so remarkable that it deserves a poem to honor and celebrate its intricacy. Of course, the poem also serves as a warning of temporality, as the spider's handiwork, his "Continents of Light," survives only an hour and soon "dangle from the Housewife's Broom." Similarly, the poet and her woven poems may also be subject to the ravages of time and succeeding generations. But while the spider's work is small and his artistry is soon destroyed by an industrious housewife, the beauty of the pattern he creates is worthy to be remembered in a more permanent, though still fragile, form. The spider's weaving is significant in itself; in essence, it is the same as Dickinson's poetic weavings. Just as Dickinson wrote her poems for herself, the spider weaves a beautiful web as he "dance[es] softly to Himself." (Notice how the "Spider" and the pronouns that refer back to him are capitalized to highlight his importance.) The web is the outward result of an internal music. While both the web and Dickinson's poems might be destroyed by an unimpressed audience, the internal music that created them, life, is worth remembering. Thus, while Dickinson uses nature's images to explore her own life, the natural life that created these images is no less important.

Emily Dickinson found grace not in salvation and religious sacraments but in the sacramental communion she enjoyed with nature: "By carrying the Victorian dictate of feminine receptivity to its extreme, Dickinson discovered what mystics call the joy of cosmic fusion, or being one with the universe."⁵⁷ Many of Dickinson's poems record the ecstasy that Dickinson achieved in particularly rich moments of communion with the earth.

The Sun went down – no Man looked on –
The Earth and I, alone,
Were present at the Majesty –
He triumphed, and went on –

The Sun went up – no Man looked on –
The Earth and I and One
A nameless Bird – a Stranger
Were Witness for the Crown –

(P 489, no. 1079)

The poem's religious imagery supplants the Christian dogma of salvation and eternal life with an ecstatic moment of communion with the earth. The moment is like a revelation of God's "Majesty" (cf. Revelation 1, 4), but instead of witnessing a vision of God, Dickinson experiences a revelatory vision of the earth. She is not a "Witness for the Crown" like the apostle John was, by beholding a vision of Christ's return and coming reign (Revelation 21), but by participating in the earth's rhythms and observing the sunrise with the earth and a nameless bird, who itself becomes a witness and a saint not of Christ but of the earth. Ecstasy comes for Dickinson not from a religious vision or experience but from a powerful connection with the earth.

Although the harmony that Dickinson feels with nature allows her transcendent moments of communion, her love was not blind to its darker rhythms. For Dickinson, the details of nature are capable of producing not only ecstatic bliss but also heart-wrenching despair. Thus, "a certain Slant of light" could oppress Dickinson with a weight of death:

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

(P 118–19, no. 258)

The language used here conveys heaviness, sorrow, confusion: "Hurt," "oppresses," "Heft," "difference," "Despair," "affliction," "Shadows," "Distance," and "Death" are nature's negative influences. The heaviness of religious ritual that Dickinson earlier sought to cast off in her keeping of the Sabbath is now present in nature, whose "certain Slant of light . . . oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes." The bareness of winter forces Dickinson to contemplate

death itself. Nature's mysteries include darkness, at times even cruelty, and Dickinson does not "repress the darker aspects of her vision in order to create the illusion of control."⁵⁸ On the contrary, because Dickinson is dedicated to recording every emotion thoroughly, of mapping experience in its entirety, she does not hesitate to contemplate nature's destructive power. "Sometimes she portrayed the negative force in nature as male – a marauding bee who assaults a flower's tranquility, the rapining sun who seduces and then scorches nature's delicate vegetation, or death as the inevitable abductor."⁵⁹ However she chose to portray the menacing aspects of nature, Dickinson accepted this dimension as part of life. She avoided a cultish and naïve worship of the earth by recognizing its complexities, and by committing herself not only to the full range of her emotions but to all of nature's displays.

The Sky is low – the Clouds are mean.
A Travelling Flake of Snow
Across a Barn or through a Rut
Debates if it will go –

A Narrow Wind complains all Day
How some one treated him
Nature, like Us is sometimes caught
Without her Diadem.

(P 488, no. 1075)

Written the same year as "The Sun went down," this poem catches nature at her worst. There is nothing uplifting about this mean and petulant winter day, but Dickinson faithfully records what she sees in this brief, but perfect, poem.

Beyond even nature's inglorious moments, Dickinson also confronted nature's threatening power. "Nature could be wantonly destructive as well as awesome or sublime."⁶⁰ Dickinson did not ignore nature's tendency to harm as well as protect her creatures.

Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling –
Sometimes – scalps a Tree –
Her Green People recollect it
When they do not die –

Fainter Leaves – to Further Seasons –
Dumbly testify –
We – who have the Souls –
Die oftener – Not so vitally –

(P 148, no. 314)

Dickinson honors nature's capacity for both transcendent sublimity and horrible cruelty⁶¹ and accepts its darkness as well as its brilliant illuminations:

Through fissures in
Volcanic cloud
The yellow lightning shone –
The trees held up
Their mangled limbs
Like animals in pain –

(P 691, no. 1694)

Dickinson accepted nature's darkness as well as its joys.

The full range of emotion and experience is Dickinson's poetic terrain, which means she had to accept nature and life in its entirety, had to grapple with and accept death, the darkest and most threatening aspect of the cycle of birth, life, death, and dissolution. Because Dickinson recognized that death was as much a part of nature as life and its joys, she thought a great deal about the emotions that the certainty of death produced in her. Indeed, many of Dickinson's best poems are interested in the problem of death, a problem she could never quite solve until she faced it herself.

"A Riddle, at the last": death and immortality

To fully understand Emily Dickinson's attitude toward life one must grapple, as Dickinson herself did, with the problem of death. Death was the problem for Dickinson, a riddle she could never solve but which she always explored, even before the deaths of loved ones during the last decade of her life. Because Dickinson's poetry is dedicated to recording the subtle emotions of the moment, her attitude toward death is not consistent from poem to poem. At times, her poems seem to embrace the possibility, even probability, of immortality and an afterlife. Other poems are more depressed and despairing, while still others suggest the poet's resigned acceptance of uncertainty. The poems record the changes in Dickinson's fluctuating emotions. However, there is a persistent thread of mystery, silence, and uncertainty that always surrounds death in her writing. While her culture attempted to make death familiar and even comfortable, Dickinson undercut sentimental Victorian ideas about death and the afterlife by emphasizing the inherent inscrutability of death. Her project is not necessarily to clarify death but to explore its silence, mystery, and unknowability as well as to record the range of emotions that the frightening mystery of death awakens in the human heart.