

The Embrace of Human and Nature

A Comparison of Emerson's Essay "Nature" and Dickinson's Nature Poetry

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

Janneke Corvers, 3704556

Supervisor: Roselinde Supheert

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Introduction

Born in Boston and Amherst respectively, the American writers Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) only lived a short distance away from each other during their lives. When Dickinson started to develop as a poet, Emerson was already an established writer and popular lecturer in the New England area and beyond (Kirk 53). He was an important spokesman for the Transcendentalist movement, which criticised the negative influence of society on mankind and propagated greater self-reliance for the individual. Emerson's first work "Nature," published in 1836, laid the foundation for Transcendentalist philosophy. The essay discusses how a life in harmony with nature can restore the relationship of the human being with the divine. In Emerson's words, "[t]he foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (3).¹

Dickinson was familiar with Emerson's ideas. Various of his books were found among her book collection: *Essays* (1861), including the essay "Nature," *The Conduct of Life* (1861, 1879), *May-Day* (1867), and *Society and Solitude* (1879) (Sewall 2: 678, n. 8). It is also likely that other publications by Emerson came to her attention, for instance essays and poems that were published in magazines. Furthermore, when Emerson visited Amherst in 1857 to give a lecture, he stayed with Dickinson's brother Austin and his wife Susan, who lived next door to Emily (Sewall 1: 54). While it remains unclear whether Dickinson and Emerson actually met each other during this visit, she must at least have talked about him with Austin and Susan before and after his stay with them (Kirk 54). It is also very likely that she attended Emerson's lecture in Amherst (Sewall 2: 468). According to what Susan recorded in her *Annals of the Evergreens*, Dickinson was quite impressed by him. She told Susan: "As if he had come from where dreams are born" (qtd. in Sewall 2: 468).

¹ All quotations by Emerson are from his essay "Nature" as published in *Emerson on Transcendentalism* (1994).

Emerson's greatest achievement was his influence on the liberalisation of religion (Ericson vii). He reacted against organised religion and the necessity to subject oneself to the regulations of one specific faith. He believed all religions in the world to have a "transcendent unity" and was constantly looking for abstractions beyond the traditions of individual religions, which he assimilated into his worldview (Versluis 74). In Emerson's eyes, the shared ethics of religions were much more important than their individual rituals, and rather than attending church, he preferred private contemplation in nature as a way to come into touch with the divine. As Ericson indicates, Emerson's philosophy of Transcendentalism can be characterised as "a religion of the spiritually emancipated mind and heart, unbounded by church or party" (viii).

Emerson's idea that all people should develop and shape their own religious beliefs must have been an inspiration for Dickinson (Lundin, qtd. in Eberwein 16), who was also sceptical about organised religion (Kirk 34). Although she grew up in the tradition of Calvinism, she gradually turned away from this doctrine and eventually stopped going to church at all (Kirk 34). Like Emerson, she developed her own spirituality, which was much broader than one specific religion (Eberwein 13). Both writers adhered to what Gilpin calls a "theology of solitude," with nature as the preferred spot for isolated meditation (31).

Dickinson's love of nature started at an early age. While studying botany at school, she prepared a herbarium, for which she explored the surroundings of Amherst. Later, she grew plants in her home garden and conservatory (Kirk 30). Her fascination for nature resulted in the many nature poems she wrote during her life. Sewall claims that Dickinson's exceptional knowledge of nature's properties and processes as well as her very precise observations distinguish her from other nature poets. He attributes this to the influence of the geologist Edward Hitchcock, who taught Dickinson at Amherst Academy and was a great inspiration for her. Pointing to the excellent knowledge of geology manifested in Dickinson's

poetry, Sewall notes that “[t]here are more earthquakes and volcanoes in her poems . . . than in the poetry of Keats, Emerson, Browning, and Shelley combined” (2: 345).

Although many critics claim that Dickinson was inspired by Emerson’s Transcendentalism (Abu Baker 115; Benfey 87; D’Avanzo 278; Eberwein 16; Mann 468; Von der Heydt 308), only a few have compared Emerson’s ideas directly with the content of Dickinson’s poetry. These comparisons focus on the ideas of both authors regarding issues like the divine inspiration of poetry (D’Avanzo), the scope of human vision (Kohler), the poet as a namer (Mann), and selfhood (Wolosky). Surprisingly, Emerson’s influence on Dickinson’s nature poems has not yet been studied extensively. Von der Heydt seems to be the only critic who compares Emerson and Dickinson with regard to their ideas about nature. He indicates that reading Dickinson’s poetry through the lens of Emerson’s beliefs about the natural world can lead to a better insight into her complex theory of knowledge concerning nature (310). Von der Heydt makes a beginning with such a reading, aiming to explain the simultaneous “power and powerlessness” of the individual in Dickinson’s poetry (309). However, a systematic analysis of Dickinson’s nature poems with regard to Emerson’s ideas about the natural world, which exposes the similarities and differences between the two writers, still seems to be lacking. This thesis will try to fill this gap by making a comparison between Emerson’s views on the relationship between human and nature as expressed in his core publication “Nature” and a selection of Dickinson’s nature poems.

Four important aspects concerning the relationship between mankind and the natural world surface in Emerson’s essay “Nature”: nature as a link to divinity, the space/house metaphor, nature’s superiority to mankind, and the poet capturing nature’s beauty. Although the term “space/house metaphor” was invented by Von der Heydt (320), the division of “Nature” into these four topics has not been made before. The first aspect has a central role in Emerson’s essay, as he argues that people can come closer to God by seeking unity with

nature. The next two aspects are part of this argument, focusing in greater detail on the relationship between human and nature, while the last aspect pays special attention to the role of the poet with regard to nature. In the next four chapters, each of these aspects will be explained, and examples from Dickinson's poetry will be given that either parallel or challenge Emerson's ideas.

1. Nature as a Link to Divinity

Emerson claims that being outdoors makes people "return to reason and faith" (6). He describes one of his experiences of being in the woods as follows: "Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes" (6). Emerson thinks this positive effect of nature on the human being is caused by "[t]he presence of . . . the spiritual element" (12), since "[e]very natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (16). He believes the natural world proceeds from God, just like the human body. However, as nature is "a projection of God in the unconscious . . . [i]t is not, like [the body], now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind" (39). Thus, Emerson seems to suggest that nature has remained closer to its divine origin than mankind because it has not been spoiled by a conscious mind.

According to Emerson, "[a] life in harmony with Nature . . . will purge the eyes to understand her text" (21). This suggests that the outdoor world can function as a means for mankind to come into touch with the divine. Emerson describes what he experiences when he is in harmony with nature: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (6). As Kohler indicates, it is not just "harmony with nature" that Emerson seeks, but "a deep unity

between the human spirit and the natural world.” His metaphor of the “transparent eyeball” suggests that “the eye . . . [merges] with what it sees” (28-29). In the unity between human and nature, the boundary between the two dissolves. The human being becomes an integral part of nature, which clarifies Emerson’s perception “I am nothing.” This complete unity between human and nature resembles the Zen Buddhist’s experience of “Sudden Enlightenment,” or *Satori* in Japanese, during which all differences between the individual and the external world cease to exist (Van Tooren 39-40). Emerson’s phrase “I see all” emphasises the importance of being open to the environment to achieve this unity.

Emerson assumes there is “an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (7), implying that people do not only reach out to nature, but that nature also responds to them: “I am not alone and unacknowledged. [The vegetables in the fields and woods] nod to me, and I to them” (7). He even claims that “[n]ature stretches out her arms to embrace man” (13). The result of this interaction between human and divine nature is that the human being becomes “in some degree, himself divine” (35). Emerson’s references to the interaction between human and nature cover a wide range of natural phenomena. He mentions the woods, fields, mountains and waters; plants and flowers; beasts, birds and insects; wind, rain and snow; clouds and rainbows; sun, moon and stars; morning and twilight; and sunrise and sunset. Furthermore, he believes in the beneficial influence of summer as well as winter scenery, and of tranquil landscapes as well as stormy ones, arguing that “each moment of the year has its own beauty” (11).

The suggestion of an interplay between human and nature can also be found in Dickinson’s poem “Escaping backward to perceive” (Fr969/J867),² in which the speaker and the ocean are engaged in a continuing movement towards and away from an “Embrace” (4):

² For all poems by Dickinson that are cited, references are given to the collections of Franklin as well as Johnson.

Escaping backward to perceive

The Sea upon our place –

Escaping forward, to confront

His glittering Embrace –

Retreating up, a Billow's hight

Retreating blinded down

Our undermining feet to meet

Instructs to the Divine.

This poem mirrors the “impossible doubleness” (Von der Heydt 313) in Emerson’s assertion “I am nothing; I see all,” which implies on the one hand that the individual dissolves into the infinite space of nature, losing his or her separate identity, while on the other hand the individual remains disconnected from the landscape, as he or she overlooks it from a distance. Similarly, in Dickinson’s poem, the speaker³ remains independent from the landscape as she stands back to “perceive” (1) the sea, while at the same time she “confront[s]” (3) the sea to fuse with it. The last line, “Instructs to the Divine” (8), reflects Emerson’s belief that nature is an “expositor of the divine mind” and that people can connect with God by seeking unity with nature. However, Dickinson seems to be more cautious about the possibility of true unity between human and nature than Emerson. The alternation of approaching and retreating between the speaker and the sea stops once the speaker’s “feet” (7) are mentioned. As is also suggested by Von der Heydt, the reference to these bodily elements stresses the finite character of the human being in contrast with the infinite quality of the natural world, a distinction which may obstruct the individual’s attempt to fuse with nature (313-14).

³ For the sake of convenience, all speakers in Dickinson’s poems will be referred to as female persons.

Furthermore, while Emerson stresses the passiveness of the human being, who can only unite with nature by being completely open to the environment, Dickinson's speaker takes a more active stance, stepping backward and forward and retreating up and down, as if she is not sure whether she wants to unite with the ocean or not.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of becoming one with nature is reflected in other poems by Dickinson as well. In "My River runs to thee" (Fr219C/J162), the speaker represents herself as a river running to the sea, asking the sea to "welcome" (2) her:

My River runs to thee –
Blue Sea! Wilt welcome me?
My River waits reply –
Oh Sea – look graciously.
I'll fetch thee Brooks
From spotted nooks –
Say – Sea –
Take *Me!*

As the "River" (1, 3) in this poem can be seen as a symbol of life, following its course while inevitably running to its end, the "Sea" (4) may be interpreted as a metaphor for the afterlife, implying that the sea represents the divine. This is affirmed by the fact that the speaker asks the sea to "look graciously" (4), an expression often used in connection with God.

Furthermore, the speaker makes the promise to "fetch [the sea] Brooks / From spotted nooks" (5-6), which may signify a pledge to convert people, rescuing them from the dark and dirty corners of society and turning them into clear brooks running to heaven, like the speaker's river. The last lines, "*Say* – Sea – / Take *Me!*" (7-8), stress the urgency of the speaker's wish

to become one with nature.⁴ Whereas this poem only insinuates a relationship between nature and the divine, Dickinson's poem "'Nature' is what we see" (Fr721/J668)⁵ makes this link explicit, by literally stating that "Nature is Heaven" (4).⁶

According to Emerson, "[n]ature never wears a mean appearance" (5). Although he does not pay much attention to turbulence in nature, he says about the "waving of the boughs in the storm": "Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right" (7). In other words, like a peaceful landscape, storm is suggested to give rise to favourable thoughts and emotions in the human being. Emerson believes "[n]ature always wears the colors of the spirit" that perceives it. "To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population" (7). Thus, if nature may appear mean to people, this is caused by their own negative emotions, which are reflected in the landscape, rather than by nature itself.

In contrast, Dickinson believes the landscape can turn cruel. For example, in "A cap of lead across the sky" (Fr1735/J1649), "the mighty Face" (3) or "Figure" (4) of God is withdrawn, and a "Thunder storm" (7) is suggested to reflect the influence of an evil spirit from "Hell" (8). Similarly, in "The lightning is a yellow fork" (Fr1140/J1173), lightning is compared to "awful Cutlery" (4) that is dropped by "inadvertent fingers" (3) "From Tables in the Sky" (2). The reference to "The Apparatus of the Dark" (7) in this poem again implies the presence of an evil spirit. The lightning is suggested to be the equipment of the devil, which is thrown at the earth. Thus, both poems cast doubt on the divine character of nature. For Dickinson, nature is not only a source of beauty and rapture, but it also has a malicious

⁴ A similar plea for being taken up by nature can be found in a "A brief but patient illness" (Fr22/J18).

⁵ This poem will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

⁶ Other poems by Dickinson affirm the connection between nature and the divine by assuming the presence of God in the landscape, for instance "The murmur of a bee" (Fr217/J155) and "Like mighty foot lights burned the red" (Fr507/J595).

character. She seems to find divinity in the calmness and regularity of nature, with its recurrent changes, but not in its sudden outbursts like thunder storms and lightning. These are considered to be devilish rather than divine.

Dickinson's poem "The wind drew off" (Fr1703/J1694) highlights this ambivalent character of nature. The poem depicts what happens "When Nature falls upon herself" (10), suggesting that nature has two sides: a violent one and a peaceful one. The "wind" (1) and the "yellow lightning" (6) in this poem are manifestations of the violent side of nature, whereas the "trees" (7) represent the peaceful side. The wind and the lightning attack the trees, which are left as "animals in pain" (9) with "mangled limbs" (8). Considering poems like these, which address the cruel side of nature, Kohler argues that Dickinson opposes Emerson's view that the "merging of self and nature" leads to harmonious unification. These poems suggest instead that, considering nature's power, such a unity is "potentially destructive" as it would "[bring] nature overwhelmingly into the self" (49).

2. The Space/House Metaphor

In "Nature," Emerson compares the natural world to a house. He uses the word "house" twice, and although he does not elaborate the metaphor, its presence has important implications for the interpretation of the relationship between human and nature. The first time Emerson compares nature to a house is in the context of the differences between mankind and the natural world. He notices that "[a]s we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident" (39). According to Emerson, both humans and nature proceed from God. Yet, while nature has preserved its purity, people have departed from their divine origin. The second time Emerson uses the house metaphor is when he refers to the similarities that still exist between mankind and nature. He describes how the human being "wonders at himself

and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it” (44). A plausible interpretation of the house metaphor is that nature provides a home for the human being. By dwelling in nature, people are reconnected to the divine and thus, in a way, come home.

Furthermore, it suggests that nature shelters mankind. Emerson indicates that all of nature’s parts work together to “nourish man”; “[b]easts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him” (8).

The comparison of nature to a house or building also features in Dickinson’s poetry. Several of Dickinson’s poems portray nature as a shelter for mankind. For example, “These are the signs to nature’s inns” (Fr1106/J1077) uses the expressions “Nature’s Inns” (1), “Nature’s House” (5) and “her staunch Estate” (9), and depicts nature as inviting, hospitable and cheerful towards all living creatures:

These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns –

Her invitation broad

To Whosoever famishing

To taste her mystic Bread –

These are the rites of Nature’s House –

The Hospitality

That opens with an equal width

To Beggar and to Bee

For Sureties of her staunch Estate

Her undecaying Cheer

The Purple in the East is set

And in the North, the Star –

Like Emerson's portrayal of nature as a home that protects and nourishes the human being, Dickinson's nature is kind to "Whosoever famishing" (3) and "opens with an equal width / To Beggar and to Bee" (7-8). Thus, nature makes no difference between the poor and the rich, and provides a shelter and food for humans as well as animals. Furthermore, the association of nature with "mystic Bread" (4) and "rites" (5) suggests that dwelling in nature resembles a religious experience. This corresponds with Emerson's idea that by living under nature's roof, people can reconnect with their divine origin.

However, nature is not always presented as a welcoming building in Dickinson's poetry. For example, "What mystery pervades a well!" (Fr1433A/J1400)⁷ portrays nature as a "haunted house" (19). Furthermore, in "Fortitude incarnate" (Fr1255/J1217), the "Edifice of Ocean" (9) is depicted as a rather unattractive dwelling. The third and final stanza of this poem runs as follows:

Edifice of Ocean
Thy tumultuous Rooms
Suit me at a venture
Better than the Tombs

The speaker's statement that the "Rooms" (10) of the "awful Sea" (4) suit her "Better than the Tombs" (12) implies that like a tomb, the ocean provides a final resting place for the dead body. Yet, in contrast with peaceful tombs, the ocean's rooms are suggested to be "tumultuous" (10). This contrasts with Emerson's assertion that nature has a "serene order" (39). Nonetheless, Dickinson's speaker prefers the ocean's rooms to the tombs. The first two

⁷ This poem will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

stanzas of the poem imply that this may be because the sea is old and venerable. A similar portrayal of the ocean is given in “Water makes many beds” (Fr1446/J1428):

Water makes many Beds
For those averse to sleep –
Its awful chamber open stands –
Its Curtains blandly sweep –
Abhorrent is the Rest
In undulating Rooms
Whose Amplitude no end invades –
Whose Axis never comes.

This poem elaborates the metaphor of a house by using words like “Beds” (1), “chamber” (3), “Curtains” (4) and “Rooms” (6) to describe the “Water” (1). Based on the word “undulating” (6), it seems again to be the ocean which is depicted. The poem represents the sea as cruel and hostile towards people, causing them to drown. Instead of providing protection, the “awful chamber” (3) of the ocean turns out to be a graveyard, accommodating only dead creatures. Furthermore, like in the previous poem, the ocean’s rooms are suggested to be turbulent: the chamber door stands open, the curtains sweep and the rooms undulate eternally. The ocean does not provide a calm resting place at all: “Abhorrent is the Rest” (5).

These poems by Dickinson reflect a much darker view of nature than Emerson holds. Rather than thinking of the sea as cruel, he refers to it as being part of nature’s chain of elements that serve the human being: “The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plants feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of

the divine charity nourish man” (8). Emerson thus emphasises the benevolent character of all of nature’s elements, including the sea.

As Von der Heydt indicates, Emerson’s space/house metaphor implies a paradoxical unity of vastness and enclosure (320). While the natural world encompasses immense space, a house represents an enclosed area. According to Von der Heydt, Dickinson’s poem “I dwell in possibility” (Fr466/J657) illustrates this “binary quality” of Emerson’s metaphor very well (320). The first two stanzas of this poem read:

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Although “Possibility” (1) might signify poetry, which the speaker regards as “A fairer House than Prose” (2) because it entails greater freedom, Von der Heydt argues that the poem should “be staged in real space” (337, n. 26) instead of linguistic space. As “Possibility” literally means “being able to *do* something – to orient oneself outward” (321), he interprets the word as denoting the vast outdoor world. Read from this angle, the second stanza depicts the advantages of both opposites in Emerson’s space/house metaphor. On the one hand, the speaker is protected by nature’s “Chambers as the Cedars” (5), which are “Impregnable of

eye” (6). The image of trees with dense leafage, which nobody can look through, reflects Emerson’s idea of nature as providing a shelter for the human being. The speaker is literally enclosed by nature. On the other hand, with “The Gambrels of the Sky” (8) functioning as the speaker’s “Roof” (7), the poem stresses the spatial aspect of nature by implying that “the sky is the limit” (Von der Heydt 322). Dickinson’s poem thus explains the paradoxical unity of vastness and enclosure in Emerson’s space/house metaphor by referring to the freedom and protection that nature offers mankind at the same time.

3. Nature’s Superiority to Mankind

Considering the relationship between mankind and “his house,” i.e. nature, Emerson observes that “[the human being] sees that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, once it fitted him, now it corresponds to him from far and on high” (43). Emerson believes that the corrupting influence of society has made people depart from their divine origin, and he claims that nature represents “a fixed point whereby we may measure our departure” (39). Nature is thus suggested to be more authentic than mankind. Describing how “[n]ature stretches out her arms to embrace man,” Emerson adds: “only let [man’s] thoughts be of equal greatness” (13). He believes that although mankind’s qualities once were as great as nature’s, the human being has now become “the dwarf of himself” (43). He indicates that the observation of nature fills people with “a pleasure mixed with awe” (31), suggesting that mankind acknowledges nature’s superiority.

The idea that nature is superior to the human being can also be found in Dickinson’s poetry. Many of her poems express an admiration for nature’s accomplishments, which are suggested to be its infinity, power, permanence and perfection. The poem “What mystery pervades a well!” (Fr1433A/J1400) addresses nature’s infinity. The speaker expresses her

“awe” (12) for “a well” (1), “Whose limit none have ever seen” (5), and she marvels at the fact that “The water lives so far” (2). The qualification “so far” seems to denote the depth of the well, but may also signify time, implying that the water stays on the earth eternally. Dickinson’s admiration for nature’s boundlessness parallels Emerson’s glorification of nature’s “infinite space” (6).

In other poems by Dickinson, it is nature’s power which is admired. In “It sounded as if the streets were running” (Fr1454D/J1397), the line: “And Awe – was all we could feel” (4) is uttered in response to nature’s forces during what seems to be a heavy storm. The poem’s last lines, “Nature was in an Opal Apron, / Mixing fresher Air” (7-8), evoke the image of nature as a – rather powerful – housewife mixing the elements instead of food. Furthermore, the poem “Rests at night” (Fr490/J714) indicates that while everybody “Rests at night” (1), “some Men” (4) also “Rest at Noon” (4), “While Nature / And the Sun – go on” (5-6). So, nature and the sun are presented as harder workers than human beings. Both these poems emphasise nature’s power, and reflect Emerson’s reference to “the endless circulations of [nature’s] divine charity” (8) in the service of mankind.

There are also poems by Dickinson that look up to nature’s permanence in contrast with people’s transience. “Dominion lasts until obtained” (Fr1299/J1257) denotes the passing character of the human attributes “Dominion” (1) and “Possession” (2), while “these – endowing as they flit / Eternally belong” (3-4). The word “these” most likely refers to leaves since Dickinson enclosed them with the poem (Franklin 3: 1126). The leaves are described as “everlasting” (5) and “the Brides of permanence – / Supplanting me and you” (7-8). The reasoning seems strange, as fallen leaves will wither, but may be explicable. Since the leaves have nutritional value for the plants and trees they fall under, they will live on in the vegetation they supply energy to. Consequently, the plants that grow on top of people’s graves will outlive what is left of the human bodies underground. This means that nature lasts

forever, whereas people inhabit the earth only temporarily. A similar view is expressed in “The veins of other flowers” (Fr798B/J811). The second stanza of this poem implies that while the human being is only a passer-by, nature “abides” (5):

We pass, and she abides.
We conjugate Her Skill
While She creates and federates
Without a syllable –

The stanza suggests that people’s capabilities are futile compared to nature’s. Although we can “conjugate [nature’s] Skill” (6), that is, inflect or use language to describe her ability, nature is able to bring forth new things and to form alliances amongst her elements without using any language at all. Both these poems by Dickinson mirror Emerson’s belief in the “permanence of nature” (29) and the fact that “[n]othing divine dies” (14).

Finally, some of Dickinson’s poems admire the perfection of nature. For instance, in “How fits his umber coat” (Fr1414/J1371), the speaker marvels at the faultless “Umbre Coat” (1) of the “Nut” (2) and the “Auburn Cloth” (5) of the “Chestnut” (7). The last stanza of this poem suggests that in comparison with nature’s perfection, the human being seems “undone” (12):

We know that we are wise –
Accomplished in Surprise –
Yet by this Countryman –
This nature – how undone!

In other words, people may be clever and talented in wonder, but they look unaccomplished or unfinished next to the excellence of nature. Emerson thinks nature's perfection is caused by "[t]he presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element" (12). He believes human and nature once were alike and deplors the fact that this is no longer the case. However, the abovementioned stanza by Dickinson denies Emerson's idea of "an original kinship between humans and nature" (Kohler 52, n. 5), and suggests instead that mankind has never been as great as nature.

According to Emerson, people's departure from their divine origin has made them strangers to nature: "We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants" (39). Emerson believes that people no longer understand the natural world. They may try to fathom nature, but do not succeed: "the wisest man [will not] extort her secret, [nor] lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit" (5). As examples of elements in nature that exceed mankind's understanding, Emerson mentions the "flowers, the animals, [and] the mountains" (5).

The idea that mankind has become estranged from nature can also be found in Dickinson's poetry. The poem "Without a smile – without a throe" (Fr1340/J1330) describes the summer as "Unknown – for all the times we met" (4) and "Estranged, however intimate" (5). Although summer comes back every year, she remains unknown to people. She may come very close and look like a friend, but she really is a stranger. Summer is suggested to be a "dissembling Friend" (6), someone who feigns friendship and does not show her true character. Moreover, the penultimate stanza of "What mystery pervades a well!" (Fr1433A/J1400) literally expresses the idea that nature is a stranger to mankind:

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

This stanza suggests that people who often talk about nature as if they know her, in fact do not know nature at all. They may describe nature's exterior, but do not know her interior since they have never deciphered her spirit.

The previous example confirms Emerson's belief that nature holds some sort of "secret." There are also poems by Dickinson that refer to the presence of a secret explicitly. For instance, "The tint I cannot take is best" (Fr696/J627) points to "The eager look – on Landscapes – / As if they just repressed / Some Secret" (13-15). While Emerson associates nature's secret with tangible elements like flowers, animals and mountains, Dickinson connects it to more abstract phenomena, namely changes in season and weather. In this particular poem, she refers to "Summer" (17) and "Snow" (18). Another poem that assumes the presence of a secret in nature is "The skies cant keep their secret!" (Fr213/J191). In this poem, "The Skies" tell "their secret" (1) to "the Hills" (2), who tell it to "the Orchards" (3), who finally tell it to "the Daffodils" (4). "A Bird – by chance" (5) "overhears the whole" (6), and the speaker wonders if she should "bribe the little Bird" (7) to tell her the secret. However, she then decides "It's finer – not to know" (10) because "If Summer were *an axiom* – / What sorcery had *snow*?" (11-12). Strikingly, this poem associates nature's secret with the exact same elements of change as the previous example, i.e. summer and snow. The speaker reasons that nature's charm would disappear if its secret were universally known, asking what enchantment snow would have if summer was well-known and without mystery, like a rule or law. Dickinson's perspective seems to be rather opportunistic. She acts as if it is her deliberate

choice not to work out nature's secret, saying it is finer not to know, but it appears she is just making the best of a bad situation. She cannot decipher the secret and therefore decides she does not want to know it. Emerson on the other hand encourages people to get closer to nature to try and "understand her text" (21), even though this may not be easy.

Like Emerson, Dickinson emphasises the difficulty of understanding nature. The final stanza of "What mystery pervades a well!" (Fr1433A/J1400) suggests that although some people may think they know nature, they will find out they are mistaken once they get "nearer" (24):

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

Likewise, the poem "'Nature' is what we see" (Fr721A/J668) conveys the idea that "our wisdom" is "impotent" (11) with respect to understanding nature:

"Nature" is what we see –
The Hill – the Afternoon –
Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –
Nay – Nature is Heaven –
Nature is what we hear –
The Bobolink – the Sea –
Thunder – the Cricket –
Nay – Nature is Harmony –

Nature is what we know –

Yet have no art to say –

So impotent our wisdom is

To her Simplicity

As Abu Baker indicates, the poem resembles the quest of “a transcendentalist who tries to become one with God through contemplating nature” (116). Marvelling at the beauty and peacefulness of the natural world, the speaker tries – in Emerson’s words – “to understand her text” by giving definitions of nature, but concludes that this is impossible. The poem suggests that we can “see” (1) and “hear” (5) the various manifestations of nature, and that we can “know” (9) nature in the sense of being familiar with her, but we cannot describe or explain her. Thus, in spite of “her Simplicity” (12), nature “remains inexpressible” (Abu Baker 116). The line “Yet have no art to say” (10) is paradoxical since Dickinson does express nature with her art, i.e. her poem. Besides works of art, the word “art” may also signify human skill, which together with human “wisdom” is suggested to be useless for describing nature’s “Simplicity.” Emerson offers a possible explanation for this oxymoron. He argues that nature is expressible, as long as the language that is used is based on the natural world: “wise men . . . fasten words . . . to visible things” (18). This implies that words that are not derived directly from nature, but from our human skill and wisdom, may be too abstract to capture nature’s authenticity. Emerson calls it “rotten diction,” used by writers who do not “clothe one thought in its natural garment” (18). Fastening words to visible things is exactly what Dickinson does in the abovementioned poem. Besides sight, she uses hearing, matching Emerson’s picture of the poet as someone “whose senses have been nourished” by nature (19).

In the poem “By my window have I for scenery” (Fr849/J797), Dickinson connects the difficulty of putting nature to words to the incapability of the human being to express the

divine. As the speaker describes the “Pine” (3) by her window and discusses its “Voice” (13), she argues that she cannot give “The Definition of Melody” (15) since “the Dumb” cannot “define the Divine” (14). The poem thus suggests that people do not have the voice or lack the words to express nature’s divine quality. This casts doubt on Emerson’s claim that nature can be expressed by using language that is closely connected to the natural world. According to this poem, people may simply not have the words to express the divine.

4. The Poet Capturing Nature’s Beauty

According to Emerson, “few adult persons can see nature . . . At least they have a very superficial seeing” (5). As an example, he mentions the sun: “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (5). Only the adult “who has retained the spirit of infancy . . . into the era of manhood” and “whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other” can really see nature (5-6). Emerson believes the poet to be one of these fortunate people. Being able to perceive the natural world as a child, the poet can “see the miraculous in the common” (45). Like a child, the poet is amazed by everything he sees: “every hour and season yields its tribute of delight” (6). Emerson argues that no man “owns the landscape,” but the only one who has “a property in the horizon” is “he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (5). Thus, because of his or her skill to see the landscape in its completeness, that is, not only its separate elements but the combined impression that all of these make together, the poet is the only person who can truly possess nature and capture its beauty.

Dickinson’s poem “Dew is the freshet in the grass” (Fr1102B/J1097) reflects Emerson’s idea that only a child can really see nature. The last two stanzas of this poem portray the adult as someone who sees nature only superficially: he or she perceives “the

Outside” (7) of the natural world – “the Forests and the Hills” (5) – but cannot see what is inside. The real “Sign” (9) of nature can only be perceived by “a Child” (11):

We spy the Forests and the Hills
The Tents to Nature’s Show
Mistake the Outside for the in
And mention what we saw.

Could Commentators on the Sign
Of Nature’s Caravan
Obtain “admission” as a Child
Some Wednesday Afternoon.

Emerson’s belief that the poet is able to “see the miraculous in the common” also appears in Dickinson’s poetry. For instance, “This was a poet” (Fr446/J448) describes the poet as someone who “Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings” (3-4). Moreover, many of Dickinson’s poems express the speaker’s delight in recurrent features of nature, like the rising and setting of the sun and the changing of hour and season. For example, “She sweeps with many-colored brooms” (Fr318/J219) illustrates the poet’s capability to see magic in an ordinary sunset, as she compares it to a “Housewife in the Evening West” (3) sweeping the sky “with many-colored Brooms” (1). Dickinson’s response to nature is often “rapturous,” as in “The long sigh of the frog” (Fr1394/J1359), where the speaker feels “intoxication” (3), followed by “Peace” (6) at the sight of a simple frog (Eberwein 16). In “A something in a summer’s day” (Fr104/J122), the speaker marvels at the splendour of “a summer’s Day” (1), “a summer’s noon” (4) and “a summer’s night” (7) respectively. While the day “solemnizes

[her]” (3), the noon brings forth a “Transcending extasy” (6) and the night makes her “clap [her] hands” (9). These poems correspond with Emerson’s image of the poet as someone who is filled with wonder by anything he or she perceives in the outdoor world.

Mann points to Dickinson’s “loving precision” in “[n]aming the objects of our world” as an indication that she really had the “poet’s eye” that Emerson writes about (488). He argues that Dickinson uses this strategy of naming not only to possess the world, or to capture nature’s beauty, “but to understand, to discover, [and] to know as well” (480). An example can be found in the first eight lines of “I’ll tell you how the sun rose” (Fr204B/J318), where the speaker gives a detailed account of the various elements she observes during a sunrise, concluding that all of them together “must have been the Sun” (8):

I’ll tell you how the Sun rose –
A Ribbon at a time –
The Steeples swam in Amethyst –
The news, like Squirrels, ran –
The Hills untied their Bonnets –
The Bobolinks – begun –
Then I said softly to myself –
“That must have been the Sun”!

It seems that by naming all the separate elements she observes, the speaker is trying to understand what a sunrise really entails. Since any definition falls short of expressing nature’s true character, she tries to describe the sunrise by dissecting it.⁸ Ironically, she misses out on

⁸ A similar thing happens in “A slash of blue! A sweep of gray!” (Fr233B/J204), where the speaker names all the different colours and images that “Compose an evening sky” (3) and a “morning sky” (7) respectively.

the central feature, concluding that she must have seen the sun when the spectacle has already ended.

Emerson claims that in the process of writing poetry, the poet “unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew” (31). This implies that the poet is not just a passive wonderer, but a creator. The poet captures the beauty of nature and turns it into words. Emerson believes that the poet’s capability “to see the miraculous in the common” is an “invariable mark of wisdom”: “To the wise . . . a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables” (45). He compares the poet to the philosopher, since both “[animate] nature with [their] own thoughts” (33). The only difference between the two is that the poet “proposes Beauty as his main end [and the philosopher] Truth” (33). However, since “a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both . . . [t]he true philosopher and the true poet are one” (34).

This passage by Emerson does not only bear a striking resemblance to John Keats’s line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49) from his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but the exact same view can also be retrieved in Dickinson’s poem “I died for beauty but was scarce” (Fr448/J449). This poem describes “Beauty” (6) and “Truth” (7) as “One” (7), and the one who “died for Beauty” (1) and the “one who died for Truth” (3) as “Brethren” (8) or “Kinsmen” (9):

I died for Beauty – but was scarce

Adjusted in the Tomb

When one who died for Truth, was lain

In an adjoining Room –

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied –
“And I – for Truth – Themselves are One –
We Brethren, are”, He said –

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –
We talked between the Rooms –
Until the Moss had reached our lips –
And covered up – Our names –

Thus, like Emerson, Dickinson regards the poet and the philosopher as equals. The abovementioned poem does not link the poet’s perception of beauty specifically to nature, but another poem, “Further in summer than the birds” (Fr895A/J1775), does. This poem suggests that “Beauty – is Nature’s Fact” (24). In other words, beauty is truth, and by capturing nature’s beauty, the poet also captures nature’s truth.

Conclusion

Both Emerson and Dickinson felt a close connection with the natural world and were sceptical about organised religion, preferring private contemplation in nature over church attendance. The comparison of Emerson’s essay “Nature” and Dickinson’s nature poetry sheds more light on the question to what extent the ideas of both writers about the relationship between human and nature were related. It is important to note that the essay and the poem are two different forms of literature, using diverse modes of expression. Although Emerson’s references to nature cover a wide range of natural phenomena, he does not describe the natural world as

detailed and with as much imagery as Dickinson does in her poetry. It also has to be kept in mind that, in contrast with the opinions that are ventilated in an essay, the suggestions in a poem do not by definition parallel the author's beliefs. Nevertheless, the analysis of Dickinson's poetry on the four aspects that surface in Emerson's essay "Nature" produces valuable information about potential correspondences between the views of both writers concerning the relationship between mankind and the natural world. The examination shows that there are some striking resemblances, while their views differ in some respects as well.

Firstly, both authors assume that nature is suffused by the divine and that people can connect with God by seeking unity with nature. In several poems, Dickinson's speakers are presented as being on a quest of becoming one with nature. Emerson's paradoxical statement "I am nothing; I see all" is also mirrored by Dickinson, as she implies that the individual fuses with nature while remaining separate from it at the same time. Furthermore, Dickinson's poetry confirms Emerson's belief in the interaction between mankind and the outdoor world. Both writers suggest that the human being does not only reach out to nature, but that nature also responds to the human being, leading to a mutual embrace. However, while Emerson seems to be convinced that true unity between human and nature is possible, Dickinson is more cautious with respect to this issue. Not only do some of her poems stress the savage side of nature, which makes a union potentially dangerous, but she also emphasises the contrast between the finite human body and the infinite natural world, which may form an obstruction to complete unity. Moreover, Dickinson's individual may not show the total passiveness that Emerson believes to be required for becoming one with the environment.

Secondly, both Emerson and Dickinson compare the natural world to a house, which offers people protection and nourishment. They suggest that dwelling in nature is a religious experience, as it gives the human being the opportunity to reconnect with the divine. The paradoxical unity of vastness and enclosure in Emerson's space/house metaphor is referred to

in Dickinson's poetry as the freedom and protection that nature simultaneously offers the human being. However, while Emerson emphasises the charitable character of nature, Dickinson's presentations of nature are not all positive. In some poems, she compares nature to a haunted house or a graveyard, implying that nature is a rather gruesome dwelling. Furthermore, while Emerson highlights nature's serenity, these poems by Dickinson suggest that nature is turbulent. The contrast between both authors is revealed in their diverse depictions of the sea; where Emerson indicates that the ocean serves mankind as part of an eternal cycle in nature, Dickinson emphasises its danger and cruelty to people.

Thirdly, both writers conclude that nature is superior to mankind. While Emerson assumes that people's qualities once were as great as nature's, Dickinson suggests that nature has always been superior to mankind. In spite of this difference in opinion, both authors admire nature's accomplishments, which they consider to be its infinity, power, permanence and perfection. Furthermore, Dickinson's poetry confirms Emerson's ideas that people have become strangers to nature and that their wisdom is inadequate for understanding nature. Dickinson casts doubt on Emerson's belief that nature can be expressed by using language that refers to visible things, and suggests instead that mankind may simply lack the words to express the divine. Like Emerson, she refers to the presence of a secret in nature. Yet, while Emerson encourages people to try and understand nature's text, Dickinson suggests that it may be better not to know the secret, to preserve nature's charm.

Fourthly, Emerson and Dickinson both acknowledge that the poet is able to see the miraculous in the common. The poet is not just a passive wonderer, however, but a creator, who captures nature's beauty and turns it into poetry. Many of Dickinson's poems express amazement about nature's recurrent features, reflecting Emerson's view that the poet is fascinated by every hour and change. Furthermore, Dickinson's detailed descriptions of the various elements in the landscape affirm that she had the poet's eye that Emerson praises.

Both writers believe that only children have the capability to really see nature, and that adults see nature merely superficially. Emerson assumes that the poet has retained this spirit of infancy and is able to perceive the natural world as a child, but Dickinson does not explicitly make such an assumption. Finally, both authors compare the poet to a philosopher since their respective aims, beauty and truth, are one.

Although Emerson's view of nature is more optimistic than Dickinson's, their views on the relationship between human and nature turn out to resemble each other in many ways. It is not clear whether the comments in Dickinson's work are deliberate references to Emerson or not. As Sewall indicates, she "covered her tracks" very well, which makes it difficult to identify any direct influences by other authors (2: 679, n. 8). However, some of the parallels between Dickinson and Emerson are so conspicuous that, direct influence or not, the two writers must at least have been kindred spirits. Furthermore, reading Dickinson's poems with Emerson's ideas in mind highlights Dickinson's ambivalent relationship with nature. In correspondence with Emerson's expression "I am nothing; I see all," Dickinson's speakers seek unity with nature while simultaneously stepping back from it. Moreover, whereas some try to understand nature, as Emerson encourages people to do, others refrain from figuring out its secret. Dickinson agrees with Emerson that nature is a friend as well as a stranger. However, in contrast with Emerson's emphasis on nature's positive attributes, Dickinson's natural world is represented not only as a home but also as a graveyard, and as welcoming as well as cruel. Like Emerson's nature, it offers people protection and freedom, but besides being peaceful, it also has a turbulent side. Thus, while Emerson stresses the benefits of an embrace between human and nature, Dickinson is more hesitant about such intimacy because of the capricious character of her natural world.

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The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

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