

Ecological Ethics in Emily Dickinson's Nature Poems

Xiang Lingling & Gao Fen

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University

No. 866, Yuhangtang Road, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, P. R. China

Email: melody.xiang@vip.163.com; gfed2002@163.com

Abstract Emily Dickinson's ecological ethics is notable for her humble and tolerant attitude toward nature, namely her reverence for natural wonders and mysteries, her non-discriminatory appreciation of natural diversity and complexity, her recognition of the significance of nature itself rather than that of "human value." With such ethical attitude toward nature, Dickinson presents her ethical choices correspondingly through the personae and narrators in her nature poems. First, they remain humble to nature, no matter it is spectacular or trivial, graceful or destructive, and choose to be modest observers and admirers to honour the sublimity and inscrutability of nature. Second, they are always sympathetic with "Nature's People" no matter these wild lives cater to human beings or not. They choose to live in a state of symbiosis, namely a state of harmony instead of cut-throat competition. Third, Dickinson establishes positive abstinence with her "ascetic paradoxes", which proposes to abstain human beings from their animal-like appetite to prevent the unprotected nature from being spoiled and keep themselves open to higher possibilities. Her ecological ethics is positive: it is mutually beneficial to sustainability of nature and human spiritual self-realization, and to potentialities of coexistence of human beings and nature in the long run.

Key words Emily Dickinson; ecological ethics; ethical choice

Author **Xiang Lingling**, Associate Professor, is a doctoral candidate at School of International Studies, Zhejiang University. Her main research area is English and American literature, especially nineteenth-century English and American literature. Her articles include "Oscar Wilde's Creative Criticism in His *Intentions*," "On Emily Dickinson's Concept of Time in Her Death Poems," "A Survey of 'Traumatic Criticism' Home and Abroad," "The God and the Inexperienced Loftiness in the Works of Dickinson," etc. **Gao Fen**, Professor of English and Director of the Institute of Foreign Literatures Studies, Zhejiang University. Her scholarship has

focused on English literature, comparative literature, formalist aesthetics. She has published more than 50 articles on British and American modernist works, especially those of Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Her latest monograph is *Towards Life Poetics: Virginia Woolf's Theory of Fiction* (People's Publishing House, 2016).

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's critics pay less attention to her ethical attitude and ethical choices underlying her poems about nature. There are two opponent voices about her view of nature: nature as "earthly paradise" or "heaven below" with whom humans beings are in ardent love; nature as the external Other, from whom human beings are estranged, alienated, and isolated. Both sides start from the modern predicament that God is absent and human beings are thrown into an unsupported, purposeless existence.

As a counter measure to the metaphysical predicament, the former holds that Dickinson has veered from the old comfort of sacred heaven and paradise to the secular one to find nature a favorable substitute, that is, "earthly paradise" or "heaven below." For example, Wendy Martin says that Dickinson "portrays the gentleness of the earth's rhythms by describing nature as a nurturing mother," "a kind, careful, and graceful mother who watches over even her tiniest creatures as part of her 'Household'" (Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction...* 87-88). Hence the divine, lofty, absent Father is replaced by the more approachable "Nature Mother."

The latter believes that Dickinson has taken the opposite route to withdraw entirely from the search for external comfort and retire in her own self. For example, Roger Lundin admits that "Dickinson struggled to believe that mind and nature were knit together as Emerson had said they were, but she could not do so. ... for the mature Dickinson the most notable fact about the human spirit was its solitary voice in an otherwise silent world" where in the absence of God, "nature goes on with her business, saying nothing intelligible to us, even as we labor to interpret her" (Lundin 153-154).

It seems that the former is more positive and active than the latter, while concerning the subjective initiatives of human beings, both are passive, for the former shifts the responsibility of human blessedness from God onto the nature, while the latter accepts the forlorn state of human beings, no longer trying to connect mankind with the external world. In a word, both neglect Emily Dickinson's ethical attitude and ethical choices in her nature poems, and neglect her belief in

human subjective initiatives in terms of human-nature relationship.

What is ethical attitude and ethical choice? As Nie Zhenzhao points out, human civilization has passed “the first biological selection of humankind,” that is, the “natural selection” by which human beings have distinguished themselves from animals, and have entered into “the second important choice, the ethical one... to distinguish humankind from animals and made savagery people to be ethical beings,” yet human beings could not entirely be separated from animals in the ethical sense that “Man is Sphinx (an existence of Sphinx factor), a combination of rational factor and animal factor” (Nie 1). That is to say, every ethical choice people made was fundamentally a choice to be more of a man or of an animal (Nie, Wang 6-7). Ecologically speaking, it is the “animal factor” that has compelled the human beings to make their ethical choices of jungle struggles and to establish their ethical identity as “half-man, half-animal.” Now that human beings’ animal-like choices for better living conditions have resulted in the deterioration of the conditions and the threat of annihilation of the ecosphere of the living earth, it gets to the point to consider a change.

Emily Dickinson’s ecological ethics is represented by the ethical attitude and ethical choices of the personae and narrators in her nature poems. They are moral in that they pay reverence for nature and position themselves as humble companions or carers rather than self-important owners or avaricious exploiters. They appreciate the “Nature’s people” equally, sympathizing with them and recognizing their own significance. Emily Dickinson’s ecological ethics can also be seen in her literary device of “ascetic paradox,” like “to renounce is to possess the more,” “sumptuous destitution,” etc., which illuminates her abstinent attitude toward nature. She proposes that self-abstaining from the animal-like appetite satisfaction can not only save and conserve the free communion of nature, but protect one’s desire for nature from being shattered, as she writes in her poem: “That Hunger—was a way/ Of Persons outside Windows—/ That Entering—takes away—” (J579, F439). In a word, Dickinson’s morals about the benign human-nature relationship and human beings’ ethical obligations toward nature are not taught by didactic preaches, but revealed in her idiosyncratically literary narration.

Humble Attitude Towards Nature as Modest Observers or Admirers

Emily Dickinson does not preach a sermon of ecological ethics with emotional eulogies or condemnations. Instead, she has her ambassadors, the personae in her nature poems who speak out her humble reverence for nature and her ethical choices as moderate observers or admirers rather than self-styled owners of nature.

She depicts her reverence for nature in many poems. The first-person narrator “I” in her nature poems is usually a humble girl or boy who comes across a “Nature’s people,” may it be a robin, a hummingbird, a bobolink, a spider, a bee, a butterfly, or a cricket. The speaker halts to stare at the amazing “fellow” in open-mouthed wonderment, harping on its miraculous details as if it were the first time that such a little creature had ever appeared on earth. A perfect example is her widely-acclaimed “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (F1096, B)¹:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides —
You may have met Him — did you not
His notice sudden is —

The Grass divides as with a Comb —
A spotted shaft is seen —
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on —

The “narrow Fellow” is not given a name throughout the poem as if it were some kind unknown to the narrator, or it were too slippery to be fixed with any human knowledge. The narrator only “catches” him with the sound imitation in the opening stanzas — the repetition of “s” sound like “Grass,” “notice,” “sudden,” “is,” “as,” “spotted,” “shaft,” “seen,” “closes,” “opens,” and the kinship sounds like ‘/f/’, “z,” “/dz/,” etc. — and with the familiar images of a comb dividing the hair (grass) and the shooting arrow (shaft), bringing forward a hissing fellow “at your feet” as a shock or surprise, although it is far more than the first meeting:

Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot —
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it

¹ All the poems quoted herein and after are from Franklin, R. W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*. 3 vols. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998. The bracketed “F1096, B” is the serial number of this poem in this book, namely “poem No. 1096 edited by Franklin, variant B.” The same below.

It wrinkled, and was gone —

The unnamed, defamiliarized narration in the first two stanzas conceals the “truth” that “I” have met this untitled creature several times before. “When I was a boy,” the narrator acknowledges in this stanza that, “I more than once have passed such a fellow at noon, and thought it was a whip lash unbraid in the sun. But when I stooped to pick it up, it wrinkled and was gone.” What a pity or surprise! And anyway, the “more-than-once” meeting with this old friend still pleases the narrator with scenes and feelings as fresh as at the first sight.

The “narrow Fellow” is so odd and peculiar that the “boy” cannot but compare it with some other “Nature’s people” that he knows well and loves cordially:

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

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone —

The “Nature’s people” are of great variety and diversity. “Several” are friendly and sociable as “I know (them), and they know me,” while the other shy off social contact like the “narrow Fellow” who wrinkles and slips away to avoid “my” approach. “Several” amiable ones make the boy feel “a transport of cordiality” as it typically happens at the reunion of the beloved ones after a long separation, while the other make him petrified with a “tight breathing” and frozen cold, reminiscent of the coming of the Death itself— “Zero at the Bone.” Whereas without strong kinship or cordiality with the cold-blooded guy, the boy does not go to the opposite extreme to take it as a repulsive demon or sinister enemy as the word “snake” or “serpent” has told us. To him, a threatening creature is but another “Nature’s People” as well as the sweet and pleasing ones, so all we can see is a boy awestruck at the nature’s might and miracle, and watching it pass by instead of fleeing or waging a war.

In correspondence with the humble reverence for nature, Dickinson’s personae are normally quiet observers and admirers of the spectaculars and particulars of

the wild world with the least interference except the unequivocal kindness and obligations to “help one fainting Robin/ Upon his Nest again” (F982). Such humble status can be seen in the awestruck boy in the above snake poem or the first-person-plural speaker in “‘Nature’ is what We see —” (F721, B) who accepts nature’s inscrutability as part of its beauty. Emily Dickinson announces with joy her humble status in respect of nature:

Flowers — Well — if anybody
Can the ecstasy define —
Half a transport — half a trouble —
With which flowers humble men (F95, B)

“Flowers humble men” with the ecstasy that nobody could define—“Half a transport — half a trouble —”—just like those who are carried away by ardent love and are not ashamed of acknowledging it.

Dickinson also admits the humble status of human beings, regarding nature’s overwhelmingly destructive forces. The mysteries of nature are not limited to the stupendous sublimity and small blessings; they can also be dark menaces, reckless harms, or even irretrievable disasters when human beings can not pose themselves as dominators any longer. Apart from the hypothetical natural calamities like volcanoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes in her poems, Dickinson portrays the quotidian nature which might annoy, irritate, and harm others:

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

A “wantonly destructive” nature is portrayed here as Wendy Martin names it—“sometimes” sears a sapling, “sometimes” scalps a tree like a wilful villain. Dickinson does not evade the unfavorable dimensions of nature for the sake of an elevated ode, nor does she attempt to “repress the darker aspects of her vision in order to create the illusions of control.” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 146, 121) Instead, she accepts nature “in its entirety,” including “death, the darkest and most threatening aspect of the cycle of birth, life, death, and dissolution” (Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction...* 96-97).

Hence we can see Dickinson’s humble attitude toward nature. Through the

curious and naive personae and the literary device of defamiliarization, etc., she reveres nature for its wonders and mysteries, its commonplaces and trivialities. Once nature is adored as something supreme and magical instead of being degraded into pure objects and possessions, the redemption of human-nature co-existence has started. In correspondence with her humble attitude, Dickinson's personae usually assume the ethical identities as modest observers and admirers instead of dominators trespassing on nature recklessly. The vivid description of admirable nature in her poems should give a telling lesson about the truth of human-nature relationship and eco-ethical choice.

Being Sympathetic with "Nature's People"

Dickinson appreciates nature in a non-discriminatory way, that is, to appreciate diversity and complexity of nature despite human beings' empirical standards. Based on the biological egalitarianism, her personae are sympathetic with the "Nature's People" and make the ethical choice to be the compassionate mates and carers of the wildlife, and live in a state of symbiosis with them instead of striving for human beings' absolute monopoly.

Dickinson is noticeable for her spirit of equality and craftsmanship, which determines her appreciation of nature with discernment and without discrimination. For one thing, she can appreciate the natural world with careful observation and discerning sensibility. Her relationship to nature is personal, experiential, and affectionate. Far from the stereotyped image of a voluntary captive whose circumference was within the building of her father's Homestead, or a "nun" whose horizon was beyond this world, Emily Dickinson had had a physical experience with nature. As a child, a girl per se, or "a boy" as she pretended to be (Habegger 126-127), she was a bold hiker in the neighboring forest of Amerhest for the sake of her herbarium, a collection of 424 preserved dried plants arranged on 66 pages (Martin, *All Things Dickinson*, 441). In an 1862 letter to T. W. Higginson, she recalled her woodsy childhood with pride and said: "When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shy of me, than I could be of them" (L271).¹ The woods are home to human beings' neighbors who are of great variety and diversity to include not only benign grannies who dote on kids, but the narcissists and the grumpy cats, which does not mean that

1 All the letters quoted herein and after are from Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958. The bracketed "L271" is the series number of this letter in this book. The same below.

the visitors have any right to expel the disagreeable hosts and hostesses, the forest dwellers. Dickinson's impressive knowledge about botany and biology enabled her to identify the rare herbs and creatures; moreover, she was keen and sensitive to the nuances of the quotidian with aesthetic and affectionate discernment. As an attentive observer of nature in general and the qualified carer of her garden in particular, Dickinson factually "knew the wood-lore of the region round about, and could name the haunts and the habits of every wild or garden growth within her reach" (Knickerbocker 187).

For another, Dickinson treats the natural world in an equal and non-discriminatory way. She juxtaposes the sublime and the ordinary, the appealing and the misshapen, the human and the nonhuman in her lyrics. A nice example is the following lyric, "'Nature' is what We see—" (F721, B), where the small chirps of bobolinks and crickets, the mighty roar of the sea and thunder are put in juxtaposition in the first two stanzas to compose a marvellous reverberation of the Sound of Nature.

"Nature" is what We see —
 The Hill — the Afternoon —
 Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee —
 Nay — Nature is Heaven —

"Nature" is what We hear —
 The Bobolink — the Sea —
 Thunder — the Cricket —
 Nay — Nature is Harmony —

Nature is what we see, hear, and know as the natural phenomena present themselves. We can see the hill peaceful and the afternoon magnificent, we can appreciate squirrels, eclipses, and bumble bees in their rhythm of life, and we can find that "Nature is Heaven" to have myriads of things in their element in the "heaven below." We can also hear the tweets of bobolinks, the chirps of crickets in symphony with the roar of the sea and thunder playing a Sonata of Nature, which evokes our sigh that "Nature is Harmony."

Such is Dickinson's ethical attitude toward nature, that is, non-discriminatory appreciation of the diversity and complexity of nature. In fact, her poems abound with the minutest details of nature to record equally the notable and the negligible, and even those normally deemed hostile and evil. This kind

of biological egalitarianism enables her to follow the natural world with equal care and interest, to produce a splendid volume of miscellaneous plants and creatures, blossoms and insects, landscapes and climatic phenomena in her nature poems.

Correspondingly, Dickinson chooses to be sympathetic with the wildlife and put her personae in a state of symbiosis, namely living together with the "Nature's people" instead of stressing the life-and-death struggle between human beings and their "adversaries." Facing the ferocious nature, her personae and speakers keep in company with wildlife in distress, for example, the victims of wintry violence, and sympathize with their sufferings heart and soul. The sombre and barren winter is a major villainous role in Dickinson's nature poems where she sympathizes with the snow-stricken creatures for their predicaments, and expects the seasonal chance of their recovery:

To lose — if one can find again —

To miss — if one shall meet —

.....

You and I the secret

Of the Crocus know —

Let us chant it softly —

"There is no more snow!" (F30)

Bulb plants, together with the metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies, are among Dickinson's favorite hibernation-resurgence symbols. With the magical bulb, crocus enjoys the secret that the death of its aerial part does not necessarily mean the complete death since the well kept underground stem may resurrect the crocus itself next year other than passing on its life to the "next generation" by seeds as most plants do. But the truth is that every time we lose and miss each other, we do not know whether we shall meet again or not, so the highest blessing here should not be "Struggle and see!" but the soft prayer that "There is no more snow!" Only in this way, the bulb need not sink into slumbering and hang between life and death.

Winters in New England can by no means win Dickinson's favor when the earth is shrouded in pure elimination and oblivion of whiteness to become a "Disc of Snow" (F124, C), which is a land of inanimation and death insomuch that even a pallid ray of afternoon sun turns out to be depressive and oppressive:

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, (F320)

To the first-person-plural narrator here, winter is so cheerless that even “a certain Slant of light” can bring no warmth and illumination but oppression and depression, which weighs like the holy “Cathedral Tunes,” imposing the unavailable grace upon the “poor damned souls” (the unconverted sinners) and leaving a “Heavenly Hurt” where the injured can “find no scar.”

Dickinson does not create a utopia in her lyrics. There are always disaccords and conflicts between human and nonhuman, for example, when a diligent house-building spider meets with a diligent house-cleaning housewife:

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
 In unperceived Hands —
 And dancing softly to Himself
 His Yarn of Pearl — unwinds —

 An Hour to rear supreme
 His Continents of Light —
 Then dangle from the Housewife’s Broom —
 His Boundaries — forgot — (F513)

Here the insidious and creepy insect which is often considered ugly and venomous, appears on the stage again with a new look: a soul dancer and weaver which is holding some dance prop or weaving stuff (“a Silver Ball,” “Yarn of Pearl”) in unperceived hands, and dances “softly to Himself.” He’s dancing to himself and for himself. The audience may fail to keep up with his rhythm or perceive the movement of his hands, yet never mind because that’s not the point. It is obvious that the stereotype of spider as darkness and ominousness now comes the illumination of appreciation and tender feelings. However, this dancing weaver’s masterpiece — “Continents of Light” — and the boundaries he has set up within an hour is destroyed by a housewife’s day-to-day clean-up. In this round, human prevails with the help of the more powerful tool (a broom) , yet the winner does

not pursue or attack to root out the enemy, and the weaver dangles “from the Housewife’s Broom” before starting another dance of life. Although there exists the eternal territorial dispute about whose home or “boundary” it is, there’s no life-and-death combat in this poem, which displays flourishing chances for both sides, and provides another solution to the dispute between human and nonhuman.

In her garden poems, the nature is in miniature and Dickinson assumes more ethical duties than a pure observer or admirer only. She was in life a reputable gardener who cared for every trifle of her earthly paradise and took the blame for every misfortune that befell the little residents in her trust:

It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon —

The Flower — distinct and Red —

...

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 (F843)

The speaker is remorseful about a plant’s perishing in her unwary absence and wishes it might be retrievable: “Had I but lingered Yesterday —.” It’s a complicated accusation of oneself as she said that the sun was “in place” and there was “no other fraud On Nature’s perfect Sum,” which was another way to say that there WAS a fraud in “Nature’s perfect Sum” now that a plant had perished and made it incomplete. The speaker extends her guilt to the claim that “Much Flowers of this and further Zones/ Have perished in my Hands” to suggest John Donne’s enlightening sentence: “Therefore, send not to know/ For whom the bell tolls,/ It tolls for thee.” The speaker undertakes the duties and obligations of attending to the garden in such a painstaking way that it is reminiscent of the biblical text: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). In fact, Dickinson is proud of the fruit of her meticulous care and calls her garden the “Heaven below” or “paradise” in a letter to her friend: “If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below—and if God had been here this summer,

and seen the things that *I* have seen—I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous” (L185).

Dickinson makes her personae and herself to be sympathetic with nature, compromising with natural need and living together with the wildlife rather than monopolizing the world. When she sympathizes with the wildlife in distress, the wildlife’s company also gives her hope and warmth in return. Even if human and nonhuman are in disputes, there is always an option for them to coexist rather than a cut-throat competition, which is of vital importance to relieving the ecological crisis nowadays.

Positive Abstinence

Dickinson recognizes the significance of nature itself rather than that of “human value,” and accordingly, she establishes a strategy of abstinence for her personae and speakers to leave the free communion of nature unspoiled, which will in turn potentiate human amplified self-realization and human-nature coexistence by abstaining the “half-man, half-animal” species from the bestial demand. Such a positive and transcendent attitude will make the “savagery people to be ethical beings” (Nie 1).

Pragmatically speaking, nature has long been the synonym for “means,” “provisions,” “living environment,” etc., or in Aldo Leopold’s words, the wild things “had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast, and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live” (Leopold XXXi). Namely, nature and its belongings have long been judged by “human value” only as benign, useful, significant, or the otherwise. Culturally and historically, nature has been considered not as here and now, but as a “vehicle” to convey some voice beyond. Both the Christians and the Romanticists read nature as revelations of some higher truths, be it the Christian God, or Wordsworth’s “Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe,” or Emerson’s “Oversoul” or “Universal Being.”

On the contrary, Dickinson appreciates nature as it is, who admires its vitality and autonomy, diversity and complexity, as the concluding stanza of “‘Nature’ is what We know —” (F721, B) advocates:

“Nature” is what We know —
But have no Art to say —
So impotent our Wisdom is
To Her Sincerity—

Nature is what we know intuitively, yet we “have no Art” to decode it with human mind and language as our wisdom proves to be impotent for her sincere yet fathomless mystery. The simple style and clear elaboration in the first two stanzas turns out to be a foil to the absolute Otherness of nature which is disclosed in the concluding stanza. R. W. Franklin collects two versions of this poem in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) and one of the major variants is the alternative between “Her Simplicity” and “Her Sincerity” in the final line. No matter nature is simple or sincere as the opening stanzas have shown to us, it is external to human mind, as in a bird poem of Dickinson, which starts with a “desire to domesticate the ‘raw’ natural scene and make the bird accessible to human understanding” and ends in “the shift in the speaker’s epistemological relationship to the bird from near-communion to unknowableness,” “amplifying the bird’s beautiful otherness” (Knickerbocker 195).

Dickinson recognizes the significance of nature itself rather than that of “human value,” which is also the core of the radical ecology, especially the deep ecology nowadays. As Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology, preaches earnestly: “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have intrinsic value, inherent worth. ... Richness and diversity of life-forms contributes to a realization of these values and are also values in themselves” (Arne Naess, 18). Dickinson goes even further to recognize the significance of natural darkness, inscrutability, epistemological unavailability, not alone its factual diversity and complexity, which teaches a vital moral that we shall stay in awe of nature, rather than recklessly assuming self-styled “owner” or “master” and reaping the bitter fruit we sow ourselves.

Acknowledging nature’s significance in itself, Dickinson establishes positive abstinence to prevent human beings from objectifying nature by regarding it as purely substantial or potential property. Emily Dickinson’s readers can not but notice her status of deprivation and abstinence concerning the unfulfilment of love, religious assurance, literary recognition, and so on. While the flip side is that the withdrawal from social life makes room for her busy and serious output of poems persistently, and the lack of religious support leaves her to ponder over the long-standing questions like death, eternity, heaven, and God in a fire-new and independent way as she can not pass the buck to the orthodox Church or the Calvinistic God whom she has not confessed to trust.

The most educational ethical choice Dickinson has made is her proposal of abstinence from the free communion of nature, through which she can keep open to more possibilities of self-realization and desire-object relationship. She proposes

such a positive abstinence to leave the world's wonders and mysteries intact, so does our fancies about the objects which are sometimes thwarted by our corporeal possession of the once-tantalizing objects. In ethical sense, we can surely learn from Dickinson's "sumptuous destitution" (F1404) the wisdom to deal with the relationships between desiring and enduring, satisfaction and disillusion, human and nonhuman, which may prevent us from depleting the Earth Mother's over-generous communion at a killing speed:

Who never wanted — maddest Joy
Remains to him unknown —
The Banquet of Abstemiousness
Defaces that of Wine —

Within it's reach, though yet ungrasped
Desire's perfect Goal —
No nearer — lest the Actual —
Should disenthral thy soul — (F1447)

To leave the rare treasures where they are might be the best way for both the objects and the human beings. Psychologically speaking, the "maddest Joy" came only from those unknown and unattained, just as the sweetness of the nectar was peculiar to the infinite possibility of "Banquet of Abstemiousness," yet the drinking of the best wine can spoil it. In Dickinson's words, it is the unfulfilled desire that makes the "perfect Goal," so pray not to move "nearer" lest the realization of it should disenchant the goal and the aspirations for it.

This kind of strategy is called by Richard Wilbur "the economy of desire" where he distinguishes "appetite" from "desire" and justifies for Dickinson's eccentric "ascetic paradoxes," such as "privation is more plentiful than plenty," "to renounce is to possess the more" by summarizing that "The moral is plain: once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite... the effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing." Similarly, he distinguishes "the creature of appetite" who merely "pursues satisfaction, and strives to possess the object in itself" from those who can hold "the vaster economy of desire, in which the pain of abstinence is justified by moments of infinite joy, and the object is spiritually possessed" ("Sumptuous Destitution" 56-58).

Morally speaking, the demand for appetite satisfaction is the instinct of all animals, while the rational call to be abstained from corporeal possession of

finite things so as to keep open to more possibilities and infinite joy is peculiar to human beings. In other words, abstinence does not necessarily mean distress and deprivation; it can bring higher pleasure, just as Dickinson names it, the supreme pleasure to “dine without Like God—” (J1282, F1311). It is the most illuminating part of Dickinson's dialectical strategy that she achieves an amplified Self by restraining herself from this or that object so as to remain open to all of them. According to Wilbur, Dickinson “discovered that the soul has an infinite hunger, a hunger to possess all things” in the way of metaphysical desire rather than physical appetite, so she distances herself from the things with “their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness.” (Wilbur 57-58) Thus, the domains of Dickinson's Self and her poems are expanded infinitely to accommodate the strange, exotic things such as the Italian volcano, Ukrainian river, Indian city, and all sorts of legal jargons and scientific findings. Such a strategy of desirable instead of deplorable abstinence is definitely of positive significance to advancing the ecological practices today.

The dialectical relationship between positive abstinence and amplified self-realization can also be seen in Arne Naess' radical “Self-realization” and “symbiosis” in the sense of deep ecology. Naess stresses that the “self” should not be just the ego who is confined to his or her being, but the capitalized Self “when we identify with all living creatures and ultimately with the whole universe, or Nature” (Naess 315), which helps to achieve the “higher levels of self-realization” and to encompass others in a state of “symbiosis”—a state of “‘living together’, rather than cut-throat competition” (Naess 389). The biological term of “symbiosis” is a perfect summary of Dickinson's attitude to nature, in which she sympathizes with blessings and misfortunes of the “Nature's people” day by day, and is pleased to have them as parts of her solitary yet all-inclusive Self.

Compared with human communion services where there are strict entrance requirements and ritual procedures, the nature communion is free and limitless, too generous to stand immoderation for long. As Barton Levi St. Armand has reminded, “because such a communion was free, however, it was the communicant and not the celebrant who now had to exercise due restraint” (St. Armand 191). When the ethical obligations are totally on the communicants, their ethical choices of being moderate or insatiable will decide the fate of the Nature and human beings themselves.

Hence Emily Dickinson's third ethical choice for her personae and herself is to abstain oneself from asking relentlessly for corporeal appetite satisfaction so as to keep open to higher level of metaphysical possibilities, amplified self-realization,

and better co-existence of human beings and nature. What we can learn from Dickinson's positive abstinence is also confirmed by Naes's admonitions: "Clearly, a policy of restraining certain forms and lifestyles in favor of others is called for — in favor of those with high levels of symbiosis, or more generally, good potentialities of coexistence" (Naess 292).

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson is not a pure moral poet, nor is she a pure nature poet, yet her voluminous nature poems set a righteous example for the benign human-nature relationship. The ecological ethics in her nature poems is not only morally sound, but catchy and thought-provoking when the moral principles are embodied in the ethical attitude and ethical choices of her personae and the "ascetic paradoxes." The awestruck girl or boy who remains humble, curious, sensitive, and respectful to nature miracles is a metaphor for human proper orientation in regard to nature. The suspense of disputes between the housewife and the spider, the hiker and the snake, allows the potentiality of co-existence of both sides in their mutual homeland. Dickinsonian observers and narrators juxtapose the myriads of natural phenomena, and appreciate them in a non-discriminatory way, recognizing nature as an end in itself.

Besides the underlying biological egalitarianism, Dickinson proposes positive strategy of abstinence through her illuminating "ascetic paradoxes," which is of important value to alleviating the ecological issues nowadays. It is positive because nature is unable to protect itself from being spoiled and human beings are the only ones who can claim the identities of ethical subjects and solve the deteriorating ecological crisis by simply abstaining themselves from their insatiable appetite. Dickinson's "ascetic paradoxes" are more than an artistry, but an ethical call for human beings to curb their "animal factors" and make more humane and rational choices. It is positive because Dickinson stresses the positive effect of abstinence, which may set the soul free to infinite metaphysical desire and a higher level of an amplified self-realization.

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