

“Frogs” in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry

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Abstract Based on an analysis of Dickinson’s “frog” poems, which are less commented and annotated, this essay aims to illustrate the poet’s reflection on life philosophy and her spiritual pursuit in a seemingly eventless life of intense seclusion. Dickinson’s letters on frogs and toads are employed as further evidence on the analysis. The essay, from a historical viewpoint, makes a tentative speculation on the relationship between Dickinson’s frogs and the ones in Grimms’ fairy tales and Aesop’s fables. Furthermore, the classical Chinese poetry is employed to highlight Dickinson’s poetics and metaphorical communication in the “frog” poems. Finally, borrowing such terms as “secret nobility” and “negative identity,” the essay points out, after a detailed discussion on Thoreau’s influence on Dickinson in terms of the texts on frogs, that, though there exists an apparently paradoxical expression between her poetic and the epistolary texts, Dickinson articulates in her works an envy of frogs, which are made emblems of her aspiration for a serene and contented life which proves more rewarding and meaningful to her.

Key words Emily Dickinson; frogs; bogs; life philosophy; poetics

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Dickinson’s most famous “frog” appears in her poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Franklin 260), no less famous than the one in Mark Twain’s *Jumping Frog*. Written in 1861, this poem coincides with Dickinson’s inner turmoil and later possible conclusion in terms of her pursuit of literary acknowledgment and life philosophy, and turns out a manifest statement of the poet’s final renunciation of fame and preference for a serenely self-effaced life. Although Dickinson fails to meet

Emerson in person in her lifetime, it is well known that Emerson, together with Thoreau, is the author Dickinson reads and admires. While she remains a skeptic of Emerson's optimistic unity of man and nature, and a hermit devoid of Thoreau's intimate contact with nature, Dickinson likewise admires and practices, for her whole life, the same principle advocated by these two Transcendentalists, living a genuine, simple and easy life in harmony with nature. As observed by Cicely Parks, "Dickinson would have found a companion for swamp-centric thought in Henry David Thoreau" (2) and "Another word that Thoreau and Dickinson shared was 'pool'" (3). Dickinson shares with Thoreau that nature, exemplified by the swamp, can be "a *sanctum sanctorum*" (Thoreau 616). More coincidentally, Dickinson and Thoreau share the concept that the simple and indulgent life of frogs in the pool are the envy of human beings, and keeping a low-profile life is an elective choice for both of them. The frog in the "nobody" poem, as well as some other poems and epistolary texts of hers, articulates, from different perspectives, what Dickinson aspires to in her 56-year life.

I

This frog in the "nobody" poem is the one mostly commented by Dickinson scholars. While it's more acceptable that the frog is interpreted as the epitome of annoying boasting and disgusting publicity, some scholarship identifies new implications with this poem. As Richard Sewall observes, "although the frog and the puddle are hardly new to proverbial wisdom, she rejuvenates the cliché" (675). Domhnall Mitchell observes that the "nobody" poem is often interpreted as "a kind of apologia for the oppressed and marginal" ("Emily Dickinson and Class" 197), and goes further to associate the frog with political involvement: "Rather than expressing sympathy for the disenfranchised, the speaker expresses both anxiety and contempt for the democratic system that gives 'bog-trotters' access to political and cultural influence" ("Emily Dickinson and Class" 197). Jane Donahue Eberwein also recognizes the political and gender connotation in this image: "Amused by the posturing of political orators she likened to frogs, Dickinson again shifted perspective in a way that both linked the women's sphere of domestic service to her father's and brother's male sphere of power" (37).

Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller and Martha Nell Smith refer to this poem in their elaboration on Dickinson's comic power, and observe that "the poet mocks the pretension of the public world by imagining public figures as loud bullfrogs and herself as someone unrecognizable to the world" (15). The poet here implies that being "Somebody" is "self-advertisement" (Juhasz & Miller & Smith 15) and

“Any person of reasonable modesty ... would rather be hiding out with her, another ‘Nobody,’ free from the ‘Bog’ ” (Juhasz & Miller & Smith 15).

Laura Jeanne Coyer Selleck, though echoing the comic fiber in the poem, emphasizes the bragging nature of frogs:

The sound of a frog is croaking and humorous, and suggests the speaker’s disdain for publicity and renown. The dreariness that Dickinson describes comes from the frog’s intermittent croaking that is only heard by the bog within which it lives. Dickinson’s imagery frankly depicts the ridiculousness of seeking public recognition and her disregard for such intent. The illustrious celebrity in this case is compared to a frog, and the adoring public becomes the bog. Neither image is particularly flattering, yet each serves the purpose of communicating the speaker’s absolute humor and mockery of the search for fame. (82)

The image of frogs can be found in 2 other poems by Dickinson: “The long sigh of the Frog” (Franklin 1394) and “His Mansion in the Pool” (Franklin 1355), which are relatively less noticed or annotated.

“The long sigh of the Frog” initially appeared in Dickinson’s letter to T. W. Higginson, written in spring 1876, in which Dickinson mentions conjecture and discovery: “I was always told that conjecture surpassed Discovery, but it must have been spoken in caricature, for it is not true -” (L459), followed by the poem, which is slightly different from the Franklin version:

The long sigh of the Frog
 Upon a Summer’s Day
 Enacts intoxication
 Upon the Passer by.

But his receding Swell
 Substantiates a Peace
 That makes the Ear inordinate
 For corporal release -

Among the few scholarly comments on the poem, Amy Lowell points out that, Dickinson, in the poem, “half piteously, half bitterly refers to her own obsession by the thought of death” (100). While the letter being written, Higginson was on a

short trip, and Dickinson expresses a pleasure in her acquaintance with Higginson and a concern for his trip. The poem, which ends the letter, implies a sort of relief and peace in her dealing with the image of frogs, free from the biting satire characterized by the “nobody” poem, even though the former may involve the reflection of death.

Although Domhnall Mitchell argues that “His Mansion in the Pool” (Franklin 1355), together with the “nobody” poem, “can be said to recover the disdain of particular images deployed by William Cullen Bryant in ‘The Embargo; or Sketches of the Times’, his poetical garroting of Thomas Jefferson, then the outgoing president of the United States” (*Emily Dickinson* 161), the poem reads more like a striking depiction of the natural creature, which reminds one of Dickinson’s “A Bird came down the Walk -” (Franklin 359) in terms of both the portrayal of the subject and the logical arrangement of the narration. The first 6 lines are the staging of the frog: coming from the pool to a log and starting to croak, with the speaker as a spectator; lines 7 to 12 personify the frog as an “orator” stating to the world in a “hoarse” voice; the last 4 lines depicts the subsequent disappearance of the hero into water with the approaching intrusion from the spectator:

Applaud him to discover
To your chagrin
Demosthenes has vanished
In Waters Green -

Although there are analogies in the poem strongly denoting politics such as “Orator of April” and “Demosthenes”, the poem can be interpreted as the poet’s observation of the frog and her reflection on the relationship between human beings and other natural creatures. A note of playfulness and lightness can be discerned here, which identifies with Dickinson’s reference to frogs in her letter: “When I saw you last, it was Mighty Summer - Now the Grass is Glass and the Meadow Stucco, and ‘Still Waters’ in the pool where the Frog drinks” (L381). Meanwhile, the poet articulates her disdain for fame and publicity:

His eloquence a Bubble
As Fame should be-

Besides frogs, there’s one poem of Dickinson’s dealing with toads, a similar creature: “Toad, can die of Light-” (Franklin 419), which is usually annotated as a

discussion on death. Dickinson mentions toads a couple of times also in her letters, as Mabel Loomis Todd notes: “Bird songs, crickets, frost, and winter winds, even the toad and snake ... have an indescribable charm for her” (xii).

II

Discussion on frogs will inevitably bring one’s mind to the frogs in the Brothers Grimm tales and Aesop’s fables. Nearly everyone knows “about the aggressive, nasty, disgusting, talking frog” (Zipes 109). Now known as *Children’s and Household Tales* or *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, Grimms’ tales were first translated into English in 1823 by Edgar Taylor, entitled *German Popular Stories*, which means the tales had been popular in America for about a decade by the time Emily Dickinson was supposed to have started learning to read and write. By 1886, the year of Dickinson’s death, the translation had experienced two dozen versions, with such various titles as *Popular Tales and Legends*, *Household Stories*, *Grimm’s Goblins*, and *The Soaring Lark and Other Tales*. Although the first English edition of the fables encountered some controversy on whether children should be exposed to them, yet “Charles Dickens, Juliana H. Ewing, and others defended the folk tales as vehicles for the teaching of morality” (Reinstein 45).

Grimms’ fairy tales present “many models of perfection” (Reinstein 48), and the perfect female character is “a Cinderella, a Snow White, a Rapunzel: young, beautiful, gentle, passive, and obedient” (Reinstein 48). Although an analogy can be established between Dickinson’s personality and these models of perfection, more evidence yet needs to be located in order to confirm the direct connection between Dickinson’s frogs and Grimms’ ones. However, it has been observed that fairy tales did have some kind of influence on Dickinson’s writing: “One of the striking features of Dickinson’s poetry is its regal diction -- borrowed in part from the Bible but more obviously from British literature and even fairy tales” (Eberwein, *Dickinson* 100). Among Dickinson’s letters is one mentioning “fairy tales”:

Father is really sober from excessive satisfaction, and bears his honors with a most becoming air. Nobody believes it yet, it seems like a fairy tale, a most miraculous event in the lives of us all. (Todd 87)

The “fairy tale” here speaks more in a general sense, referring to a kind of imagination, which Dickinson discusses in her letters with her brother Austin, as illustrated in the one talking about her brother’s reading :

You are reading *Arabian Nights*, according to Viny's statement. I hope you have derived much benefit from their perusal, and presume your powers of imagining will vastly increase thereby. But I must give you a word of advice too. Cultivate your other powers in proportion as you allow imagination to captivate you. Am not I a very wise young lady? (Todd 59)

However, it's far from enough to draw even the tentative conclusion, based on this discussion on fairy tales and imagination, that Dickinson reads about Grimms' fairy tales and gets directly influenced on her manipulation of frogs.

In the similar plight is the author of this essay while attempting to clarify and establish the connection between Dickinson and another popular folk story text, *Aesop's Fables*. Comparatively speaking, Aesop's fables abound in stories on frogs, "The Ox and the Frog", "The Mouse, the Frog, and the Hawk", "The Quack Frog", "The Hares and the Frogs", "The Frogs Asking for a King", to name only a few. When he published *Aesop's Fables* in England in 1484, William Carxton made it one of the first books that had ever been printed in English. The first edition specifically designed for children appeared in 1692. More than one writer or educator recommended that "fables be a child's first reading" (Reinstein 45), and "Such notables as Sir Philip Sidney, Francis Bacon, and John Locke endorsed the teaching of Aesop to children" (Reinstein 45). Under such circumstances, the speculation can be made that Dickinson might have been exposed to the frog stories in *Aesop's Fables* in her early years or schooling.

III

In Chinese culture, frogs are partially charged with negative connotations, as best illustrated in such idiomatic expressions as "the Frog at the Bottom of the Well," "Watching the Sky from the Bottom of the Well," and "to Croak like Frogs and to Chirp like Cicadas." The first two expressions refer to the famous Chinese idioms "井底之蛙" and "坐井观天,"¹ two variants of the same meaning. "The Frog at the Bottom of the Well," originated from *Zhuang Zi*,² is a story mocking the short-sightedness, narrow-mindedness and ignorant shallowness of a frog.

However, that is not all about the cultural metaphor in China suggested by frogs. A note of passionate praise can be occasionally detected in Chinese culture, as demonstrated in the poem written by Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) in 1910,³ in which, characterized by the constant poetic style of Mao's grandeur and heroism, the frog assumes the appearance and attributes of a tiger and prevails over all the other creatures. While this high-key subversion of the traditional

characterization of frogs is relatively new in contemporary Chinese poetry, there does abound positive portrayal of the creature in classical Chinese poetry, where frogs are employed more often to highlight a touch of peace and easiness, and, more importantly, the speakers’ serenity and contentment in their seclusion and withdrawal. “稻花香里说丰年， / 听取蛙声一片”(Zhang 139)⁴, “蛙鸣蒲叶下， / 鱼入稻花中”(Peng 1531)⁵, these lines juxtapose “frogs” with “rice”, communicating the poets’ appreciation of the serene life in the countryside laden with the smell of harvest, while “蛙声篱落下， / 草色户庭间”(Li 122)⁶, and “黄梅时节家家雨， / 青草池塘处处蛙”(Yu 415)⁷ employ the image of “frogs” to demonstrate the peace and contentment in a pastoral picture.

Other poets in ancient China express the independence and easiness embodied in the life of frogs, as illustrated in the poem written by Ni Ruixuan⁸:

草绿清池水面宽，
 终朝阁阁叫平安。
 无人能脱征徭累，
 只有青蛙不属官。(Zhang & Xiao 483)
 Grass is green and pond is clear with a spread,
 croaking all the time for safety.
 Nobody can get away from the burden of taxes and heavy corvee,
 only frogs are free from the restraint of the officialdom.

The frogs enjoy a carefree life, while human beings are laboring under the pressure of society. A touch of envy is highlighted between the lines.

Such poets as Chen Shunyu are more explicit and straightforward in expressing their envy towards frogs, as in the following lines:“缅怀埴中蛙， / 乐岂羨虾鱼”(Le 556). As a talented young man, Chen came out one of the top three in the Antique Imperial Examination in 1059, and was subsequently appointed official by the Song government. Shortly after that, however, he quit the high position, out of his resentment at the bureaucratic corruptions, and withdrew into a small village. Though having gone through several ups and downs, he was finally determined to live the rest of his life in seclusion, engaged himself in poetry writing. The poem above takes the frog as the envy of the mundane people, articulating the poet’s desire for a peaceful and enjoyable life, far away from the meaningless struggle and clamor in the officialdom, which is typical of the poetic ideal of the Chinese hermit poets.

Although she has never been virtually involved in the official affairs or

experienced any repeated frustrations outside, Emily Dickinson, likewise, identifies the same desirable quality in the frogs' being: it suffices for them to stay in the pool, sticking to their own world and singing to themselves. If there's nothing to lose, there's nothing to fear: "sweet frogs prattling in the pools as if there were no earth" (L611). The frogs are indulged in their own world, regardless of the turbulence and disdain without. The modifier "sweet" appears more than once in Dickinson's works: "The Frogs sing sweet - today - They have such pretty - lazy - times" (L262). A life of peace and meager needs is what Dickinson aspires to, and no wonder she would exclaim "how nice, to be a Frog!" (L262).

Compared to the dominantly detesting or ambiguous tone in her evaluation of frogs in her poetry, Dickinson demonstrates an almost unanimously favorable opinion on this natural creature in her epistolary works, as illustrated in "sweet frogs prattling in the pools as if there were no earth" (L610), "I am glad his Willie is faithful, of whom he said 'the Frogs were his little friends' " (L1040), "'Frogs' sincerer than our own splash in their Maker's pools " (L222) and "It is too late for 'Frogs,' or which pleases me better, dear - not quite early enough" (L209).

The first sight of these lines seem to reveal Dickinson's paradoxical attitudes towards "frogs" in her reflection, but a second thought would shed a light on the riddle of Dickinson's mind. The reason why Dickinson declares that "how nice, to be a Frog" is that "They have such pretty - lazy - times" in the pool, instead of posing as "Somebody."

IV

Frogs are closely related to pools, bogs, swamps, mires or, simply, wetland, which usually all evoke negative associations. Holmes Rolston notes people's perception of these images in "Aesthetics in the Swamp":

Mountains and valleys, sky and clouds, sea and shore, rivers and canyons, forests and prairies, steppes and even deserts -- none of these images have "ugliness" built in to them. But swamp, bog, and mire do. A "beautiful bog" or a "pleasant mire" are almost a contradiction in terms. Mountains are sublime; swamps are slimy. (584)

Swamps are "damp, marshy, overgrown, rank, dismal, gloomy" (Rolston 585), and Rolston even argues that "maybe we have a biophobia for swamps" (585). However, swamps or bogs are embedded with different implications in Dickinson's poetry.

Cecily Parks dwells on Dickinson’s swamps in her essay entitled “The Swamps of Emily Dickinson”, tracing “bogs and swamps through Dickinson’s lifelong conversation with the ambiguous, fluid, and wild natural world” (1), and arguing that “the swamp emerges as indispensable to Dickinson’s environmental epistemology and to her poetic explorations of what it feels like to experience the natural world in a fluidly gendered body” (1-2). Besides being an independent part of the natural world via which Dickinson reflects on the power of nature, bogs, pools and swamps are, for the most part, associated with frogs in her poetry, as manifested in the poems “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (Franklin 260), “His mansion in the Pool” (Franklin 135), and in such letters as “the Pool where the Frog drinks” (L381). Frogs and pools, in combination with other natural elements, are employed to present a desirable living status, easy and satisfying.

In her resolution to withdraw, Dickinson chooses to keep to her private world and regards publicity in either poetic creation or life as shallow and degrading, while, compared to those self-important “somebodies,” ““nobodies’ form an exclusive and secret nobility” (Mitchell, *Monarch* 160). This “secret nobility” is identified and interpreted by Elizabeth Phillips as a “negative superiority” (178) in her *Personae and Performance*. Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller and Martha Nell Smith note that, in the “nobody” poem, “the speaker coyly introduces herself as charmingly unimportant” (15). In “I meant to have but modest needs -” (Franklin 711), the prayer brings up only “modest needs”, and, according to Clark Griffith, this prayer “is bound to strike us as a model of grace and simple dignity” (33). Dickinson learns, from the frogs, to live in the pool, not to boast, but to stick to a self-indulged and self-devoted life, as Henry David Thoreau lives by Walden. While Thoreau builds his cabin by his pond, Dickinson guards her “cabin” upstairs in the Homestead. Bathed in the cool air of the woods, Thoreau experiences the solitude blessed by nature: “The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water” (Thoreau 117). What Henry David Thoreau appreciates is being practiced by Dickinson in her philosophy of life and poetics: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity” (Thoreau 82). The true nature of life lies in this simplicity, as Thoreau states:

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. (13)

Dickinson might not agree completely with Thoreau in terms of the “very simplicity

and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages" (Thoreau 33), but she may well identify with the latter when he says "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself" (Thoreau 79), and she herself declares that "My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any" (Todd 263).

Thoreau further embodies more life philosophy in his observation of frogs, part of nature: "In almost all climes the tortoise and the frog are among the precursors and heralds of this season" (279), and he asserts:

A day passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the Banquet of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wet of decayed cranberry vines, and the fresh Attic salt of the moss-beds. Say twelve hours of genial and familiar converse with the leopard frog. (406)

Although Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was published in 1849 and *Walden* in 1854, no solid evidence has been found that Dickinson read Thoreau by the year of 1862,¹⁰ when she wrote "how nice, to be a Frog" (L262). However, Thoreau indeed articulates his envy of frogs in the book:

It would be a luxury to stand up to one's chin in some retired swamp a whole summer day, scenting the wild honeysuckle and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes! (406)

Is it only a coincidence that Dickinson harbors the same envy of frogs? More researches are yet to be conducted so as to answer this question. However, it can be established that, while sharing the same admiration of the easily secluded life of frogs, Dickinson goes further than Thoreau in its appreciation. According to Elizabeth Phillips, "it is more usual to think 'young Emily Dickinson's morbid aversion to fame makes Thoreau look almost gregarious'" (178).

V

Out of this "morbid aversion to fame" Dickinson retreats into "what Hagenbuchle, borrowing from Keats, calls 'negative identity'" (230), while this negative identity is "preferably expressed metaphorically by Dickinson as the white existence" and "Self-negating imperatives, as Hagenbuchle points out, indicate her will to negative identity" (Grabher 230).

Despite the "negative" manifestations referred to by psychologists, this

“negative identity” serves, in the case of Dickinson, to reinforce the poet’s tendency of going inward, and her self-examination and her life philosophy of simplicity. In her genuine life of being “small,” Dickinson achieves a kind of spiritual solitude and soul’s privacy, which “enhances our power to sacrifice and to renounce what is otherwise valued most highly by the human beings caught up in the web of worldly circumstances” (Kher 239). Gudrun Grabher also notes the positive function of this negative identity in Dickinson: “Withdrawal from society is for Dickinson a necessary prerequisite for the self-encounter of the human being. Negative identity is a logical consequence” (230).

Therefore, this “negative identity” is not negative in Dickinson. Dickinson argues for herself that she enjoys her happy life as a “little stone” (Franklin 1570), while her smallness and simplicity does not necessarily mean weakness or impotence: “We look very small - but the Reed can carry Weight” (L262), and even “my little Force explodes - and leaves me bare and charred -” (L271). In her unusual way, she enjoys the small life, in which she explores and examines her real self. By holding onto her “little room,” “Dickinson’s speaker guards her privacy, power and control” (Freeman 110).

As E. E. Cummings declares, “a poet’s supreme country is himself” (Kazin 153). Finding one’s self entails the spiritual solitude and privacy. Dickinson detests the boasting publicity or posing importance, and would rather hide behind her curtains upstairs. By so doing, Dickinson achieves the space needed and realizes “a return to the self” and “an encounter with sources of meaning and truth beyond oneself” (Barbour 201-202). Dickinson retreats from Amherst, but achieves a broader horizon on the universe.

Dickinson would have agreed with Nietzsche that “You shall become the person you are” (Earnshaw 55). Meanwhile, Dickinson perceives that, owing to the interference of the interpersonal and social interactions, a person’s self is not the authentic self, the real self or “the fully realized self” (Earnshaw 55). That’s what Kierkegaard warns of the individuals, although he does it in a religious context. A person’s individual authenticity must be achieved and preserved in solitude.

It’s no exaggeration to say solitude makes Dickinson’s poetry. According to Roger Lundin, Dickinson’s preference for being alone, to a large extent, guarantees the time and space for the poet’s writing and exposes the poet to a world more diversified, which inspires Dickinson to achieve what she is later:

Whatever its costs, that solitude to her was worth its price. It granted her a freedom of self-definition unavailable in the obligating arrangements of

marriage, family and church. And it offered her a more fertile world than the sterile Whig culture she knew so well. (62)

Lundin's interpretation of Dickinson's solitude echoes that of Harold Bloom, who is justified in stating that "Poetic sublimation is an *askesis*, a way of purgation intending a state of solitude as its proximate goal" (116). Dickinson's poetic writing is virtually an *askesis* made in solitude and obscurity, but the poet benefits from this purgatory solitude in that it helps to preserve her individuality and originality, and, most importantly, she holds it enjoyable and satisfactory.

In "I lost a World - the other day!" (Franklin 209), Dickinson is looking for a "lost world," and claims that, compared to the rich, she is "frugal." However, Dickinson, in this assertion, announces with pride that her "frugal eyes" has "more Esteem than Ducats." In spite of being obscure as illustrated in "Nobody knows this little Rose -" (Franklin 11), the poet is convinced that beauty and fulfillment can be achieved in the lowland of reticence, like the wild roses which "redden in the Bog" (Franklin 374).

There are proofs that Dickinson is a reader of Emerson, and as Susan Castillo observes, "one of the texts she read was Emerson's 'self-Reliance'" (137). Judith Farr mentions in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* that, in Dickinson's copy of Emerson's "self-reliance,"

a page is turned down at the following passage, which is also marked at the right: "My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than it should be glittering and unsteady." Again, "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what people think." (46)

Emerson states in his "Circles": "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and large circles, and that without end" (210). Dickinson may not anticipate a life which would possibly evolve into infinitely large circles; instead she prefers to remain in a lower strain and live in the originally small ring in itself, which is believed to be simple, but genuine, inspiring and rewarding. In this sense, the "frogs" in Dickinson's poetic and epistolary texts speak for her, aspiring to a simple but self-contented life and enjoying her small but authentic world. Dickinson, though living in the lowland, would have agreed more with Thoreau when the latter writes "these were a life in conformity to higher principles" (194).

Notes

1. They can be respectively back translated into “The Frog at the Bottom of the Well” and “Watching the Sky from the Bottom of the Well”.

2. 《庄子》, originally written by Zhuang Zi (or Zhuang Zhou, 369B.C.-- 286B.C.) in the Warring Period of ancient China, is an important work of China’s Taoist philosophy.

3. The poems goes like this:

独坐池塘如虎踞, / 绿荫树下养精神。 / 春来我不先开口, / 哪个虫儿敢作声?

It can be translated as follows: Sitting alone in the pond like a tiger, / Building energy in the shade of the tree. / If I utter not first sound for the spring, / Who dares to open mouth in thee?

Unless specially noted, all the translations of the Chinese poetic lines in this essay are done by the author.

4. By Xin Qiji (辛弃疾 1140-1207), a well-known poet in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

Translation: talking about the harvest year in the smell of rice flowers, / listening to the croaking of frogs

5. By Wang Jian (王建 roughly 767-830), a poet in the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Translation: frogs croaking under leaves of calamus, / fish diving into flowers of rice

6. By Zhang Ji (张籍 roughly 767-830), a poet in the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Translation: frogs croaking in the twig fence, / against backdrop of grass between the houses

7. By Zhao Shixiu (赵师秀 1170-1219), a poet in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

Translation: rain’s falling on every household in the rainy season, / frogs are ubiquitous in the grassy ponds

8. 倪瑞璿 (1702-1731), a female poet in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1912).

9. 陈舜俞 (1026-1076), a poet in the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Translation: I would rather be a frog set in the bog, / than envy the shrimps and fish wandering around

10. Emily Dickinson refers to Thoreau twice in letters written in August 1866 and April 1881 respectively: L320 and L691. The publication note following Letter 320 shows that Susan and Emily Dickinson might have discussed Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, published in 1865. In addition, the publication note following Letter 622 mentions Higginson’s *Short Studies of American Authors*, published in 1879, includes brief critical sketches to a couple of writers including Thoreau.

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