

Where Nature Goes: Garden, Music and Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract

The understanding of the relationship between nature and art deeply influences our environment. With rich images of nature in her poems, Emily Dickinson's identity as a gardener is a necessity to her literary career, for all her observations from nature occur in her garden. As a gardener and a hermit, her "nature" is all about her garden, which is a curious phenomenon worthy of discussion, for garden is an existence between pure nature and artificial creation: All plants are natural but people can choose them and hybrid them. Emily plans her garden as natural as it could be, and in her poem she also says that Eden is more beautiful, so her attitude for "nature" and "art" is obvious, she clearly expresses that the ideal nature excels nature, and nature excels art. In her more natural garden, there is many images with emphasis again her attitude towards nature and art, for instance, music as an image can also show her preference between nature and art. In spite of the beauty of artificial music, the natural music like bird songs is more beautiful, and the music of the heaven excels the former again. Emily Dickinson's ecological view of nature and art provides another interesting angle to look at ecological literature, and it is necessary to regard her as an ecological writer.

Key words: Emily Dickinson; Nature; Art; Garden; Music

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INTRODUCTION

Poets and artists always struggle between art and nature. Just like Goethe puts it in his *Goethes Gesprache* that there exists a dual relationship between artist and nature, for the artist dominates nature but is nevertheless enslaved by nature at the same time. On the one hand, some intellectuals think that nature has an upper hand: Plato's mimesis theory (1989, p.29) regards arts as imitations to nature and therefore are inferior to nature, George Puttenham (1985, p.303) also claims that art is the imitator of nature, it imitates the behavior and action of nature. On the other hand, Sir Philip (1989, p.134) defenses art fiercely against Plato's theory, and Vsevolod Meyethold (Gladkov, 1986) also mentions the relationship between art and nature is like wine and grapes, meaning that wine is the essence from the grapes, so art excels nature. The fight between art and nature also happens in Emily Dickinson's readers' mind, they appreciate her poems as art but are at the same time forced to admit her "nature excels art" viewpoint, because she is so eloquent at this point.

1. EMILY'S DICKINSON'S THREE GARDENS

To reach her viewpoint, it is salutary to examine her identity first. As a woman living as a hermit and remaining unmarried, the daily life of Emily Dickinson was not only spent writing poems. As we all know, she helped with house work, cooking, helping maids to pick up vegetables in the garden, planting her garden. But the extent of her love of gardening and how she shaped her garden is worthy of discussion.

It is not a coincidence but a popular social phenomenon that leads to Emily Dickinson's cult for garden and especially flowers. When Emily's mother married her father, she declared that she could not

survive the housekeeping without a splendid garden. Emily also told her cousins that "I was reared in the garden". In the nineteenth century, a garden represents the taste, education, good manners and good health of an upper class woman. There are books like *Every Woman Her Own Flower Gardener* (1871) by Mrs. S. O. Johnson claiming exactly the ideas above (Farr, 2004, p.35).

So, a garden was to Emily's outer social identity what poetry was her inner social identity. Whom she wrote poems and letters to know well her talent of literature, and would like to regard her as a poet, an elegant woman with higher education. So her inner social identity is accepted by those people above. But her writing ability alone is not enough, especially for an unmarried spinster living in a town, doing housework everyday. For people who did not know her literary life, the way to distinguish herself from those rural or lower-class women around her is to have a garden, planting it with good taste. It is said that her father giving her a conservatory might contains a snobbish effort to highlight her identity (Ibid., p.21).

Unlike many gardeners who want to shape the garden into their artificial world, Emily preferred a rather natural type in 20th century of gardenning with wayside wildflowers, and no artificial trees and architecture. The influences of her garden to her literary career are rich, like themes of love, death and religion are usually expressed through floral images, which are popularly researched in resent times. On the other hand, a gardener and flower lover must have expressed her ecological views in her work. Her love for nature is deep even in her early years, when Austin Dickinson cut down woods for business use she wrote a poem: "Who robbed the Woods/ The Trusting Woods/.....I grasped - I bore away - / What will be the solemn Hemlock - What will the Tree say?" A highly disguising tongue for those who ruined the woods (F57a) (Ibid., p.110).

2. THREE LAYERS OF MUSIC IN HER GARDEN

As an occurring image in her poem, music is worthy of discussion, poem 285 includes both her ecological idea for botany and the idea for music.

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune-
 Because I grow - where Robins do -
 But, were I Cuckoo born - I'd swear by him -
 The ode familiar - rules the Noon -
 The Buttercup's, my Whim for Bloom-
 Because, we're Orchard sprung -
 But, were I Britain born, I'd Daisies spurn -
 None but the Nut-October fit-
 Because, through dropping it,
 The Seasons flit - I'm taught-
 Without the Snow's Tableau
 Winter, were lie - to me -
 Because I see- New Englandly-

The Queen, discerns like me -
 Provincially - (p.285)

The first line is about a platonic statement that Robin is her standard for tuning. Man-made music is not her standard, though she herself is an excellent piano player and also is in deep love for Mozart (Note Mozart). Choosing natural creation as her criterion draws readers' memory back to Plato, whose mimesis theory makes it clear that art is the imitation of nature, and because imitation never reaches perfect, so art is inferior to nature. She especially argues a point of the importance of natural law, like geology and season. She mentions another natural criterion, Cuckoo. She chooses Robin as her criterion because she grows up "where Robins do". "But, were I Cuckoo Born", she will claim that Cuckoo is her criterion for tune. She continues to use Buttercup vs. Daisy, Nut and Snow to exemplify her viewpoint. Buttercup is her "Whim for Bloom", because she is born in America, so if she was born in England, she'd choose "Daisy". Then from geology, she keeps arguing the season. There should be Nut in October, and Snow in Winter. Through discussion of geology and season, she expresses clearly that natural law should be obeyed, if we present the opinion in another way, it is that natural law should not be violated. In her time, there is a trend for experimenting hybrid flowers. When in 1862 Higginson asked Emily Dickinson who her favorite writers were, she named Keats, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and then "Mr Ruskin - Sir Thomas Browne - and the Rev- elations" (L 261). For hybrids, John Ruskin argues in his *Proserpina* (1875-1881) that wild flowers are the best because God created them in the first place in the Garden of Eden (Anonymous, 1985).

Through the poem 285 we can sense that the image of music is quite powerful, in fact, it is powerful enough to illustrate her idea of the relationship between art and nature. The poem 14 is another good example.

One Sister have I in our house,
 And one, a hedge away.
 There's only one recorded,
 But both belong to me.

.....
 One came the road that I came -
 And wore my last year's gown -
 The other, as a bird her nest,
 Buidled our hearts among.

.....
 She did not sing as we did-
 It was a different tune -
 Herself to her a music
 As Bumble bee of June
 Today is far from Childhood-
 But up and down the hills
 I held her hand the tighter -
 Which shortened all the miles -
 And still her hum
 The years among,
 Deceives the Butterfly,
 Still in her EyeThe Violets lie
 Mouldered this many May. (p.14)

Emily again emphasizes that the bird song is different and more magical than human's music. Emily regards this bird as her another sister, and the sister builds her nest among "Our hearts". The music of this sister is "a different tune". Her miraculous music only belongs to heaven, because its magical function described is not like the music from the sub-lunary sphere. The tune can shorten her faraway distance to her childhood, and "Deceives the Butterfly" and violet to go on living their eternal spring. The music is a natural one, and a heavenly one, without thinking we can sense such wonderfully sung music never can be created by human being. In fact, more than just few times she has expressed fully her opinion of natural music and man made music, the letter here is another good proof: "the noise at Pool, at Noon, excels my Piano" (L216).

Another magical bird song can be seen in her poem 294:

The Man - to die - tomorrow -
Harks for the Meadow Bird -
Because its MUSIC stirs the Axe
That clamors for his head - (p.294)

The music of the "Meadow Bird" "stirs the Axe" that clamors for the dying man's head. The axe here obviously means the executioner's axe, so in other words, the music of the meadow bird can to some extent fight against Death.

Emily also finds the other kinds of music, which is even higher than natural music. It is suitable to call it the music of spheres:

Musicians wrestle everywhere -
All day - among the crowded air
I hear the silver strife -
And - waking -long before the morn -
Such transport breaks upon the town
I think it that "New Life"
It is not Bird- it has no nest -
Nor "Band" - in brass and scarlet - drest-
Nor Tambourin - nor Man -
It is not Hymn from pulpit read -
The "Morning Stars" the Treble led
On Time's first Afternoon!
Some - say - it is "the Spheres" - at play!
Some say that bright Majority
Of vanished Dames - and Men!
Some - think it service in the place
Where we - with late - celestial face -
Please God - shall Ascertain! (p.157)

She denies this music to be music of the human world (Band) or natural world (it is not Bird). Then she directly connects it to the beginning of the New Testament, "Morning Star" is the star of Bethlehem, the star which leads the Elders to find Jesus Christ. Yet she again denies the music to be the Hymn of the "Morning Star". Jesus Christ is the son of God, here by her denial she pushes the music straight to God, the highest being of Christianity. Finally she mentions it is the music of "the Spheres –

at play!"¹, a classical as well as biblical allusion to the highest ideal.

Emily also locates the heavenly music by experiencing its existence as a wondering soul:

Better-than Music! For I-who heard it-
I was used- to the Birds- before-
This - was different - 'Twas Translation -
Of all tunes I knew - and more-
'Twasn't contained -like other stanza-
No one could play it- the second time-
But the Composer- perfect Mozart-
Perish with him - that Keyless Rhyme!
So- Children- told how Brooks in Eden-
Bubbled a better - Melody-
Quaintly infer - Eve's great surrender-
Urging the feet-that would-not-fly-
Children- matured- are wiser- mostly-
Eden- a legend- dimly told-
Eve - and the Anguish - Grandame's story-
But- I was telling a tune- I heard-
Not such a strain - the Church - baptizes-
When the last Saint - goes up the Aisles-
Not such a stanza splits the silence-
When the Redemption strikes her Bells-
Let me not spill- its smallest cadence-
Humming- for promise- when alone-
Humming-until my faint Rehearsal-
Drop into tune- around the Throne- (p.503)

This music, she says, "was different" and "was translation of all tunes" she knew. It is not from birds and "no one could play it – the second time" even "Mozart" will perish with this "Keyless Rhyme". Then her soul wonders to Eden, where Brooks "Bubbled a better- Melody-". She conveys a clear idea that the music in Eden is better. It is curiously intriguing that Eden, the only paradise out of the chaos, is the first garden in the world. From another angle, when God creates Eden, it is the only natural, but it is put under two persons: Adam and Eve's control. So Eden is in fact the first half natural and half artificial garden, it is like an ideal of all other gardens in the world. Emily also mentions several times that she prefers the Old-fashioned

¹ The music of the spheres, created by Pythagoras: "When planets move according to a certain orbit, there can be a harmonious music." (Zhu Guangqian, *History of the Western Aesthetics*, 33) It represents the harmony of the world: the highest ideal. Also there is another definition by Marçal de Oliveira Neto in his essay *Pythagoras' Celestial Spheres in the Context of a Simple Model for Quantization of Planetary Orbits in Chaos, Solitons & Fractals* It is first a way to represent the quintessence of physical sciences began in earnest with Pythagoras and his school, in their attempts to find mathematical relationships that might describe natural phenomena. The first of these attempts consisted of establishing a relationship between simple numerical proportions and musical intervals. Simple ratios between integers were used effectively to construct the entire musical scale produced by a string instrument. The Pythagoreans took this notion further, extending ideas on musical harmony to the movement of the planets. The same ratios between the integers that rule musical notes might similarly rule the distances between the planets. In the geocentric system of ancient Greece, the Sun and the planets, each in their own orbit, might be described as a musical instrument generating a melodious set of divine sounds expressed by the harmony of the celestial spheres

garden like Eden. Although Eden is her idea, just like Jesus is her ideal but there exist even the higher, so in the last line the music helps her soul flow to the "Throne".

CONCLUSION

"Your Hollyhocks endow the House, making Art's inner Summer, never Treason to Nature's" (L1004)² Emily Dickinson has three gardens, artificial one, natural one and heavenly one; in these three gardens there are three pieces of music, man-made one, the natural one and the heavenly one. The man-made one, though beautiful, is always inferior to the natural one, which is ideal but is nothing compared to the heavenly one. Her viewpoint about art and nature is pure and simple now, art is inferior to nature.

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² This important information is found by Judith Farr, but she is not a good researcher in finding evidence in Emily's poems.