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Emily Dickinson as a Regionalist: New England and Other Angles of Vision

I wish to dedicate this essay to my friend and colleague Professor Agnieszka Salska of the University of Łódź, in honor of her outstanding contributions to American Studies in general and to Emily Dickinson scholarship in particular. With great intelligence, energy, and good humor, she has preserved, presented, promoted, and tested critically the best my nation and my region have to offer. Long may she persevere.

Certainly by the start of this new millennium, Emily Dickinson has become recognized as a world-class poet. To borrow one of her own enigmatic terms, the “Circumference” of her fame is well established and still growing. But in spite of her present globalism, she is also a presence rooted in her time and place: specifically, the time and place of nineteenth-century New England. As a native New Englander myself, I would like to make an attempt at both understanding and following Dickinson in a contrarian way that is special to my own home region. In opposition to her Emersonian idea of ever-expanding circles of growth and development, I want to pursue what we still in New England news stories call “the local angle”: that quirky regionalism that is perhaps best exemplified by simple, unadulterated Puritan stubbornness. Although Emily Dickinson confessed to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her most revered literary friend, that “My Business is Circumference” (*Letters*, 2: 412) she also forthrightly told him that she “could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp –” (*Letters*, 2: 408) when he suggested that she try prose rather than poetry. In her next letter to him she admitted that “I marked a line in One Verse – because I met it after I made it – and never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person.” Yet she also stubbornly informed him, outdoing even Emerson in her fearsome self-reliance and sense of originality, that “I do not let it go, because it is mine” (*Letters*, 2: 415).

It is some of Dickinson’s angles of vision that I want very briefly to explore now – angles of vision that counter the oft-discussed and still enigmatic idea of “Circumference” in her poetry. These angles, like the ones we study in high school Geometry classes, can be of many kinds, but I am particularly interested in what could be called her obtuse, oblique, and acute ones. The reality of a prickly, hedgehog-like Emily in some sense repels or mars the Emersonian cocoon of softening and spiraling rondure that has long

been spun around her work. What better way to puncture such critical balloons than with sharply angled arrows? In the following angular poem, Dickinson at first seems to be writing a regional manifesto, which on the surface may be taken as a little obtuse and chauvinistic – rather like Oliver Wendell Holmes’s “Autocrat of the Breakfast Table” declaring that “Boston State-House is the hub of the solar system” (110). But here she does not employ Holmes’s wheel-based metaphor any more than she diagrams Emerson’s ever-evolving circles. As we shall see, there are some acute and even characteristically oblique angles hidden in this particular demonstration of her her Local Color theorem. Sometime “About late 1861,” as her most recent editor Ralph Franklin dates it, Emily Dickinson wrote:

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 –

(Fr256)¹

Like Emerson’s famous essay “The American Scholar,” which Holmes elsewhere likened to a declaration of American literary independence, at a first reading this poem strikes one as a bumptious and even narrow piece of New England Puritan stubbornness, an exercise in petty provincial dissent. But from another angle, Dickinson’s target is not so much the great physical and intellectual circumference of the British empire in her

¹ Dickinson’s poems are referred to by number according to Franklin’s edition.

own day and its world-wide dominance – an empire on which supposedly the sun never set – but the goal of demonstrating that context on all occasions matters, whether in terms of huge congeries, large countries, or small counties. In short, she raises the lococentric and the bioregional to the level of the archetypal. If all politics is local, so is all culture. She is passionately loyal to her own sense of place because this sense of place has shaped her, and she would even spurn her own verse – in the form of “Daisies” – had she been “Britain born,” since in her private mythology she often took on the role of an innocent and modest Daisy (St. Armand 81-82). One might also say that Dickinson assumes a kind of climatic determinism that is leveling as well as liberating. While she is fully at home with natively-grown buttercups and daisies, she is also queen of all she surveys, and so on a par with Queen Victoria, reminding us of New England Local Colorist Sarah Orne Jewett’s poignant tale of a reclusive, backcountry woman who identifies with as well as acts like Victoria in a story entitled “The Queen’s Twin.” Dickinson, too, is the Queen’s Twin, and just as the Queen’s English sets the standard for her royal nation, so does Dickinson signal her imperturbable linguistic freedom of the will by creating the adjective “New Englandly” in order to describe her special angle of vision. Even to a native New Englander like me, this adverb is well-nigh impossible to pronounce correctly at a first looking or first reading. It always makes me pause, stop, and stumble at its obtuse construction; grammatically it literally sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. I trip over it, and yet I think that Dickinson deliberately invents it exactly in order to assert the stubborn, hardscrabble character of New England itself, which will not yield to any English but its own. “New Englandly” is an indigestible and defiant word, somehow teetering on the brink of the too fey and attenuated modern adjective “New Englandy,” which today is used often to describe something quaint, folksy and boutiqueish having to do with the region. The fact is, however, that it is much easier to pronounce “New Englandy” than “New Englandly,” because there is a natural tendency to experience the two *l*’s in the latter adverb as hurdles that have been placed too closely together for an easy and liquid jump of the tongue. Like the Puritan poet Edward Taylor, who in his famous *Sacramental and Preparatory Meditations* twisted and tormented language in order to convey his passionate adherence to doctrine, Dickinson presents us with a suddenly obtuse angle that disrupts and even stops dead the previous tuneful flow of *o* sounds she has built up at the beginning of the poem. There is an uncompromising New England fierceness, too, in her declaration that “Without the Snow’s Tableau / Winter were lie to me –.” The word “lie” fairly hisses out a scornful and Puritanical contempt for anything less than the absolute truth, while the final twice-told repetition of the pronoun “me,” added to the “I” that sees, creates a kind of unholy trinity of imperial selfhood that demonstrates the final dominance of the poet and her New England way of

looking at things. Her angle here is both leveling and elevating, reminding us of the perfect probity of another prickly New Englander, Henry David Thoreau, when he declares that “my spirit looks upward habitually at an elevated angle –” (6). By this linguistic strategy, Dickinson becomes a Queen and the Queen becomes a provincial, meekly following Dickinson’s line of sight. Ironically, Victoria also becomes “subject” as well to a point of view that is part of what Allen Ginsberg called a submerged but potent “visionary awkward tradition in the U.S. Provinces (that extends up thru Sherwood Anderson and Bob Dylan)” (40). That is, Dickinson’s idiosyncratic New England English prevails on her own home grounds, grounds that challenge conventional ways of looking as well as idiomatic ways of speaking. “And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks” (490), Emerson writes in his essay “Experience,” and it is to this native deity and its native speakers that Dickinson draws attention by making us actually experience a stubbornly rocky road of deliberately leveling and paradoxically elevating linguistic difficulty.

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant –” (Fr1263), Dickinson says in another justly famous poem, written on an angular fragment of stationery, and again it is my contention that her habit of peering at things from a startlingly different viewpoint can be attributed not only to the “given” of her natural eccentricity of genius but to her indigenous prickliness, conditioned by her economy of scarcity of expression as a native New Englander. If early reviewers of her poetry saw her as a so-called “New England Nun,” appropriating the title of another famous Local Color tale of “sumptuous Destitution” (Fr1404) by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, the premier New England regionalist of her time, it is because her tradition of dwelling in both an internal and an external wilderness links her not only with the American Puritans but with even more contemporary American explorers of desert places like Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, and Gretel Erlich. Since I think the New England aspect of Dickinson’s consciousness can be taken for granted, I would now like to focus more directly on her other angles of vision beyond the obtuse – that is, those angles that are oblique and acute. I use the idea of a deliberately “obtuse” angle, as in “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune,” in a metaphorical rather than strictly geometrical sense, one defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “slow to apprehend or perceive.” From the same source I take “oblique angles” as being “indirect or evasive,” and “acute angles” as “pointed,” “critical,” or “sharp.”

Emily Dickinson has often been called a “sceneless” or “abstract” poet, but in my experience of her poetry there is a density to the lone landscapes of the soul that she depicts. Her psychic space, while it may be stretched or bent or deliberately roughened – as in the example of the adverb “New Englandly” again – still results in a remarkably fresh and luminous sense of vision, because the often harrowing angularity of the road she

takes both fortifies her and prods her on. As she declares in another poem, “Experience” itself is an “Angled Road” (Fr899). Dickinson skews her angle of vision a few more degrees from the perpendicular in the following poem, which I take to be an outstanding example of what I have called her “oblique” style:

The Angle of a Landscape –
That every time I wake –
Between my Curtain and the Wall
Opon an ample Crack –

Like a Venetian – waiting –
Accosts my open eye –
Is just a Bough of Apples –
Held Slanting, in the Sky –

The Pattern of a Chimney –
The Forehead of a Hill –
Sometimes – a Vane’s Forefinger –
But that’s – Occasional –

The Seasons – shift – my Picture –
Opon my Emerald Bough,
I wake – to find no – Emeralds –
Then – Diamonds – which the Snow

From Polar Caskets – fetched me –
The Chimney – and the Hill –
And just the Steeple’s finger –
These – never stir at all –

(Fr578)

An initial puzzle a contemporary reader encounters in this hermetically secretive poem is surely the word “Opon,” which Dickinson’s latest editor Ralph Franklin claims was the poet’s “form” of spelling “upon” in her manuscripts “until 1880” (“Introduction” 3). It takes a steadier and much sharper (if not more “angular”) eye than mine to support this claim, for I see Dickinson closing the script of her *o*’s slightly more than her *u*’s, and so the “opon” hybrid that Franklin constructs appears to me to be an uneasy, unstable and

unwarranted combination of “upon” and “open.” Indeed, there is even more confusion possible in reading this poem if Dickinson intended her initial use of “open” to in fact stand for “Open” rather than “Upon,” since such a word use would tend to expand the oxymoronic idea of an “ample Crack” even more. But I think that all the tropes of the poem indicate a calculated narrowing down of vision rather than an expansive and circumferential opening up of it, so I will go with “Upon” rather than “Open” as the ultimate meaning of Franklin’s ambiguous “Opon,” especially since the word is repeated in line fourteen and so seems to be a firm part of the internal syntactical structure of the poem. Still, the strange emotional edge that the hybrid “Opon” connotes – that of leaning or relying partly on something and that of the something itself being partly open – conveys psychically the very obliqueness of Dickinson’s angular point of view throughout. There is a dissonant, dreamlike, and surreal quality to her perception – a passivity but also a predatory feeling of lying in wait as well as of being stalked. This dreamlike or oneiric aspect occurs in the fact that Dickinson “wakes” to view the landscape when aroused from sleep, and that the landscape she beholds is repeated time after time, like a recurring vision or nightmare. Moreover, it exists only within the frame of an “ample Crack,” where the adjective “ample” suggests an opening up or widening of something while the noun “Crack” implies a narrowing or restricting view of it.

Dickinson, who was fond of thinking of herself as nearly always diminutive in stature, telling Higginson that she was “small, like the wren” (*Letters*, 2: 411) for example, may simply mean that no matter how small this crack is, it is still big enough for her. But when we examine this image of the crack more minutely, we realize that it exists only “Between my Curtain and the Wall,” not between her curtain and the window, to which it presumably allows very limited access. Therefore Dickinson’s line of sight is doubly or even triply oblique, since before her line of sight even reaches the outside splinter of a landscape, it first has to pass through the crack and then through the window. She sees only in the most off-centered, astigmatic and liminal of ways, negotiating with great difficulty this severely constricted, and perhaps prison-like space. There is also the final and typical ambiguity that according to the deliberately equivocal syntax of the poem, she herself “wakes” between wall and curtain, certainly an uncomfortable and, I would suggest, potentially life-threatening position. So this “ample Crack” is resonantly sinister in a number of ways, not the least of which is because its intrinsic sharpness connects to the initial scalpel-like “Angle” that “accosts” the vulnerability of her “open eye.” Angles and cracks become animate in the poem and take on a life of their own; Dickinson even compares the Angle to “A Venetian – waiting,” ostensibly conjuring up the image of a “Venetian blind,” which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “A window screen consisting of a number of thin horizontal slats that may be raised and lowered with one

cord and all set at a desired angle with another cord, thus regulating the amount of light admitted.” Surely Dickinson is not in control of her poetic perspective here, for it is other forces that pull and regulate in an almost theatrical manner the cords of the changing features of the landscape, while the the rigidity of the curtain and the wall actually set the viewing angle, which is not necessarily a “desired” one. In some respects, the poet is again largely an immobile prisoner of this preset and permanent obliqueness. It is no wonder that the manipulative character of venetian blinds, and the resulting slanted pattern of slats of light and shadow they projected on interior walls, like prison bars, became in the twentieth century a near visual archetype of that form of American cinema known as film noir.

Certainly Dickinson conveys some of the same anxiety and existential sense of aloneness, anxiety, and danger that plagues the private-eye anti-heroes of these mordant motion pictures, in which espionage, violence, and voyeurism are so often compacted. In addition, the waiting Venetian conjures up an exotic city of intrigue as well as one of watery beauty, where assassination was a frequent method of dealing with political enemies, and the traditional practice of anonymous denunciation was often used to betray one to the authorities, as Casanova’s famous chapters in his autobiography on his sudden arrest and imprisonment by agents of the Venetian Inquisition prove. As Jan Morris reminds us, “To the early Victorians Venice was synonymous with tyranny and terror. The hushed and sudden methods of the Venetian security agencies, controlled by the Council of Ten and the Council of Three, cast a chill across all Europe, and have left behind them (now that we are quite safe from the strangler’s cord) an enjoyable aftermath of shudder” (168-69). While Dickinson is not strangled or arrested, she is “accosted,” though the result is ultimately more theater or opera than it is personal inhumation or premature burial.

But this favorite theme of authors like Edgar Allan Poe causes me to venture that there may be more than a hint of madness to her opening anxiety attack of being assaulted by a strangely animate New England landscape, especially if we consider how Gothic authors like Poe used the idea of a “crack” to symbolize an irreparable split in the psyche. As Poe’s narrator writes of this kind of disjunction in the fabric of the doleful mansion in “The Fall of the House of Usher”: “Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn” (117). It is through this angular crack, becoming in the development of the tale more and more what Dickinson called “Ample,” that the narrator actually views the apocalyptic fall of the house itself. “The radiance was that of the full, setting and blood-red moon,” Poe writes at the end of his masterpiece,

which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “*House of Usher.*” (131)

No such cataclysmic scene ensues after Dickinson’s waking, for the elemental hulla-baloo in Poe is replaced by a much more sedate, metonymic composition, made up of apples, chimney, hill, and weather vane. One might assign each of these fragments a symbolic meaning, depending on the rubric chosen, so that the apples could be sin or temptation, or fulfillment and consummation, and so on down the emblematic line. But that would be to allegorize and so to control and to order these miscellaneous puzzle-pieces, for each one of these props, I think, stubbornly resists interpretation and is also surreally animate in its own way, just as Poe’s House of Usher had its own agency and aura of living sentience. Thomas Wentworth Higginson once referred to Emily Dickinson as “my partially cracked poetess at Amherst” (*Letters*, 2: 570), meaning that he thought her slightly lunatic, and so we return to the question of whether the crack in this poem is in the observer or the observed. Everything is seen from an eccentric angular obliqueness, for rather than utilizing the horizontality of a venetian blind, Dickinson peers through the verticality of an off-centered fissure that is located between wall and curtain. She does not pull the cords to manipulate this slice of landscape, even though she calls it “my Curtain,” for the curtain is more like that of a theater where a tableau is performed in front of a passive audience, reminding us once more of her “Venetian” situation, since Venice was also know as the prime city for the performance of European “Pageantries” (Morris 71-81). What remains active are the props themselves, and even the “Bough of Apples” is held “slanting,” implying that someone or something poses this slice of nature in a certain way. Similarly, it is the pattern of the chimney and not the chimney itself that catches her eye, as did the arrangement of the stones for the last inhabitant of the House of Usher, since Poe writes that Roderick Usher’s belief in “the sentience of all vegetable things” culminates in his customizing it to the building pattern of his own dwelling. “The conditions of the sentience,” Poe’s narrator tells us, “had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones – in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around – above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn” (124).

Surely Dickinson's passive encounter with the sentient aspects of her slantwise landscape is not as darkly Gothic as Poe's, where the House of Usher is also "The Haunted Palace" of a head and brain actively disturbed by madness and monomania. But in Dickinson's armchair or rather bedridden poetic journey we do confront an anthropomorphic territory that includes the "forehead" of a hill, and the pointing of a Vane's "forefinger." Only later do we realize that the vane is attached to a steeple, which in Dickinson's Local Color New England landscape must be a church steeple pointing heavenward – toward God, if one believes, or toward an empty sky, if one doesn't (St. Armand 224). In Emily Dickinson's nineteenth century, the new science of Phrenology was a means of reading human character based on the physical features of the head – especially the brow or forehead, which was taken to be a prime indicator of intelligence. All of these landscape elements are therefore also hieroglyphics that have something to do with the very concept of reading itself. Once again, I would suggest that Dickinson is going back to the Puritan tradition of trying to read nature and history as a book filled with what Jonathan Edwards called "Images and Shadows of Divine Things." However, reading depends upon perspective, a fact that is attested to by the circumstance that seeing the Vane's "Forefinger" or horizontality only happens on "occasion," since the vane can disappear from her view almost entirely, depending on which way the wind blows.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, Dickinson becomes less the tentative observer than a sovereign Yankee princess who is dowered with the Emeralds of new Spring leaves and the winter Diamonds of ice by the ever-changing Seasons. She still remains passive, but now the scenery which she sees has become "My picture," and in spite of the fact that it is often shifted, she still retains ownership of a royal gallery of still-life masterpieces. Although her emeralds are snatched away, only to be replaced by possibly more precious (and pure) diamonds (while the vanished apples can perhaps be compared to rubies) the chill breath of Gothicism returns in the form of the "Polar Caskets" that are the receptacles of these dazzling gems. There is as well a final ambiguity in the placement of the phrase "fetched me," for while ostensibly it denotes the fact that the jewels are brought forward for Dickinson's inspection and enjoyment, one must also wonder if it is Dickinson herself who is being "fetched" by the Snow to lie in "Polar caskets." It is significant that the term "casket" became a preferred euphemism for the new, precious, and extravagant burial coffers – replacing the severe and serviceable Puritan wooden coffins – that were part of the panoply of the new Victorian Way of Death (St. Armand 66). Therefore, although it appears to be a nature poem, Dickinson's oblique lyric may deal, as in poems like "Safe in their alabaster chambers" (Fr124) and "Because I could not stop for Death" (Fr479) with the surreal landscape of mortality and what in another poem about dying she called "the Crystal Angle" of death itself (Fr759). Rather than

waking between wall and curtain, she herself may be the object of a death ritual or “wake,” defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “A watch over the body of a deceased person before burial, sometimes accompanied by a festivity.” Nothing at all stirs at the end of “The Angle of a Landscape,” for what we see is literally a wintry freeze-frame of benumbed landscape components – a film noir study in black and white. The revelation that the vane’s finger belongs to a steeple makes for a final conjunction of angles that point in two directions at the same time – both vertical and horizontal. The result is absolute stasis, and Dickinson’s oblique point of view here may be that of so many of her deathbed poems, which result only in dull fade-outs and unresolved vectors.

Whereas Dickinson is in some sense stalked by the landscape and caught in the trap of her own angular point of view in this poem, in lyrics where she employs what I have called an acute or critically sharp angle, it is she who does the stalking. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the contemporary American nature writer Annie Dillard has declared that “Stalking is a pure form of skill, like pitching or playing chess. Rarely is luck involved. I do it right or I do it wrong” (200). But Dillard’s form of stalking is not Dickinson’s, since for her it is more of religious exercise or form of emptying of the self through a Zen-like concentration. “Instead of going rigid, I go calm,” she writes. “I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat – not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance. I am the skin of water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone” (201). When Dickinson stalks, on the contrary, she practices a determined attentiveness and obedience beginning with a sharp separatism of distance, as in the following poem:

A Bird, came down the Walk –
 He did not know I saw –
 He bit an Angleworm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw,

 And then he drank a Dew
 From a Convenient Grass –
 And then hopped sideways to the Wall
 To let a Beetle pass –

 He glanced with rapid eyes
 That hurried all around –
 They looked like frightened Beads, I thought –
 He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home –

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam –
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

(Fr359B)

I have chosen the second extant version of this poem, the first version of which was originally published by Thomas Wentworth Higginson from a lost manuscript in his possession, and exists in two slightly differing other copies in Dickinson's hand. The reason for my choice is that in this version, the somewhat old-fashioned and even ancient noun "Angleworm" is written as one word, while in the other manuscript copy it appears as two words. It is this peculiar term that I think is the key to the acuteness of Dickinson's special form of stalking, which involves a romantic sympathy for the subject, and not Dillard's modern totalizing self-abnegation. The simplest definition of the term "Angleworm" is "A worm, such as an earthworm, used as bait in fish" (*American Heritage Dictionary*) but the etymology of this word leads me to believe that what Dickinson is practicing here is a very genteel and meditative form of fishing, both physical and metaphysical, in the tradition of Izaak Walton's famous *The Compleat Angler* of 1653. Her stalking consists of what I have termed an acute attentiveness and obedience to the ways of her prey, but it also involves a genuine respect for that prey's integrity as a distinct individual. The "angle" which is part of "angleworm" is actually used in the primary sense of the word, not as a geometric term, but as a verb which means "to fish with a hook and line," and which has the further connotation of trying "to get something by using schemes, tricks, or other artful means." Interestingly enough, here the word "angle" derives from the Old English *angul*, or fishhook, and gave its name to the Engles or Angles of "Anglo-Saxon," because of the fishhook shape of their original homeland, the Angul district of Schleswig. Beyond this, the piscatory angle of "angle" can be traced back to Greek, Latin and Sanskrit roots meaning "crooked" or "bent."

Dickinson in this sense angles or fishes for her prey, which does not know she sees it, in a silent, hidden, and secretive manner. She watches its actions in her own frontward of "Nature's half-Acre," as the wild (the Bird) meets the tamed and domesticated (the man-made walkway to her house). Yet even this pacified environment is still

the domain of wilderness, since the Bird's actions are superficially jerky, hesitant, and very ungenteel, witnessed by its graceless devouring of the Angleworm. Dickinson's use of this term emphasizes not only the acute angle of observation which is her initial poetic stance, but also her distance from the subject of her "angling," since the worm itself is called a "fellow" and takes on something of the aura of the human. Beginning with a lady-like and very Victorian distaste for the vulgar, however, Dickinson progresses to a comic appreciation of the bird's nervous actions, combined with a growing understanding that on the ground it exists in a predatory yet self-sustaining environment, where drinks of dew are conveniently provided by nature and a certain etiquette – which today we might also term "ecology" – rules. Still, the bird is alert, aware, nervous and apprehensive; its movements themselves are crooked and angular, as it hops sideways to avoid the passing beetle. Interestingly, Dickinson mimics this move in the staccato sound and length of her line. Everything is quick, uncertain, and accelerated, while the dominant metaphors are of a glittering hardness, as in the shell of the beetle, the "frightened Beads" of the Bird's eyes, and even the angle of "Angleworm," which converts a normally soft and pulpy creature into something which is artificially stiff and bent. Yet as Dickinson peers more intently at this automaton of a bird, she domesticates it by a growing sympathy. Subtly she inserts her own interiority into her bird note with the aside "I thought," and suddenly the hardness begins to melt and metamorphose into something else. For the "Beads" of its eyes which before were merely "rapid" now look "frightened" to Dickinson, who is not emptying herself out in Dillard's kind of stalking but rather entering into the drama as an active player and participant. She realizes the bird's "danger" in a world red in tooth and claw, and moreover in a world which is not the Bird's proper element. Beginning with the line "He stirred his Velvet Head," we get a softer, more measured and murmurous description of the bird, not as a vulgar alien but as another "fellow" – in this case, a "fellow creature." After Dickinson's crumb of sympathy is offered, the poem dissolves in an oceanic melding of *b*, *o*, and *s* sounds that signal the bird's translation to its proper sphere – that of the air and of a heavenly poise and playful gracefulness of unfettered motion and being.

One might deepen Dickinson's meaning to say that the poet began by angling in a Darwinian landscape and finished by hooking into a sublime one, and that the bird itself becomes her emblem for artists who, while earthbound, are impossibly awkward, frightened and misunderstood, but in their proper airy sphere of music or art or poetry are free and potently untrammelled. Once more, there is an ambiguity in the syntax of her poem which makes it seem that she may be as cautious and as in danger as the bird himself. Compare her experience to that of Annie Dillard stalking a green heron, a much bigger bird, when she writes:

Mostly it just watched me warily, as if I might shoot it, or steal its minnows for my own supper, if it did not stare me down. But my only weapon was stillness, and my only wish its continued presence before my eyes. I knew it would fly away if I made the least false move. In half an hour it got used to me – as though I were a bicycle somebody had abandoned on the bridge, or a branch left by high water. It even suffered me to turn my head slowly, and to stretch my aching legs very slowly. But finally, at the end, some least motion or thought set it off, and it rose, glancing at me with a cry, and winged slowly away upstream, around a bend and out of sight. (187-88)

In contrast to Dillard, who is stalked by the green heron as much as she is stalking it, Dickinson is not shy about revealing herself and making a sympathetic move. Whether this move is a false one or not depends on one's environmental stance. On the one hand in Dillard we see that radical noninterference with nature which Emerson long ago called "Forbearance" (1117) and that is today advocated by many followers of a so-called Deep Ecology. On the other hand, in Dickinson we see a stress on the fellowship of nature and an attempt to reach out and befriend the environment by giving it a helping human hand. From the diversity of their experiences with stalking, or angling, Dickinson goes away with an apprehension not only of the otherness of nature but also its togetherness, while Dillard just goes away.

I have tried to use my perception of the angles of Dickinson's poetic experience – obtuse, oblique, and acute – as levers to pry open a little her deliberately difficult landscapes of life, death, and immortality. In another sense of "angle" I have tried to "scheme" or "plot" to understand her own unique otherness as a New England voice, as an American artist, and as a global poet. Whether such critical angling has been "artful" or not is up to others to judge. I only hope that I leave you, my reader, not only with a feeling for her fundamentally angular strangeness but with some sense that stalking the elusive Dickinson in this way will lead to her stalking your own consciousness once you, too, have been hooked by her subtle and amazing art.

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