

The Alienation of Nature in Emily Dickinson's Poems through the Prism of Taoism

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In the poems created by the renowned American poet Emily Dickinson, those related to nature constitute a considerable proportion. However, Dickinson's attitude toward nature is, in fact, contradictory. On the one hand, Dickinson perceives nature as gentle and kind, akin to a mother. Nature is regarded as "heaven" and embodies harmony. On the other hand, nature possesses its own operational principles and harbors inherent cruelty. According to Dickinson, humans should refrain from excessive interference in the natural order. This article attempts to analyze the similarities in attitude towards nature between Dickinson's poetry and Taoist philosophy.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, alienation, nature, Taoism

1. Emily Dickinson: A Nature Writer

Emily Dickinson, a preeminent poet in 19th century, lived a relatively "secluded" life. As is noted by Wendy Martin (2007, p. 15), sometime around 1869, when she was thirty-eight years old, Dickinson chose to remain permanently on the grounds of The Homestead and The Evergreens, never leaving the property and receding from public life completely. When Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote in 1869 to express his wish to meet her in person, she replied in her letter to Higginson: "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town" (L330).¹

Dickinson cut off almost all social activities in her life, but eagerly embraced nature. Her affection for nature is evident in a significant portion of her oeuvre, with approximately 500 out of the total 1789 poems dedicated to various aspects of the natural world, including animals. In the first three collections of poetry compiled by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, published in 1890, 1891 and 1896 respectively, the themes are divided into four categories: life, love, nature, and time and eternity. There were 31 poems under the category of "nature" in 1890 edition, 51 in 1891 edition and 29 in 1896. If we take into account the fact that there are many poems in other themes that are also related to nature, then the proportion of poems of nature will be even larger.

Dickinson's poetry focusing on nature garnered early attention from both editors and commentators. Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the first editors of her poetic works, remarked on her "profound insight into nature and life" in the preface to the first collection of Dickinson's poems in 1892:

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¹ L followed by letter number: Johnson, T. H. & Ward, T. (eds.) (1958). *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge: Harvard UP.

It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found, —flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame. (Todd & Higginson, 1892, preface)

2. Benevolence of Nature

In Dickinson's poems, nature is a very important theme. As is observed by Mable Loomis Todd in her preface to 1891 collection of Emily Dickinson poems, animals, like birds and bees, butterflies, plants like flowers, and natural phenomena, like storm, wind, etc., are typical images that occur time and again in her poems: Storm, wind, the wild March sky, sunsets and dawns; the birds and bees, butterflies and flowers in her garden, with a few trusted human friends, were sufficient companionship. The coming of the first robin was a jubilee beyond crowning of monarch or birthday of pope; the first red leaf hurrying through "the altered air," an epoch. Immortality was close about her; and while never morbid or melancholy, she lived in its presence (Higginson & Todd, 1891, p. 8).

In Fr 741², nature assumes the role of a tender mother, who is always patient to her child:

Nature - the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child -
The feeblest - or the Waywardest -
Her Admonition mild -

Nature, for Emily Dickinson, is what we see, and what we hear. It is Heaven and Harmony (Fr 721). In Fr 113, Dickinson further illustrates the harmonious relationship between humans and nature:

The Bee is not afraid of me.
I know the Butterfly.
The pretty people in the Woods
Receive me cordially —

In this poem, the bee is not afraid of the poet, and she knows the butterfly well. Those "pretty people" in the Woods "receive" her "cordially". In Fr 1096, she mentions that she knows "several of nature's people". Again, here the animals are referred to as "people", and she always feels "a transport of cordiality" for the animals. All these show that Dickinson has a very close relationship with the animals.

Generally speaking, Emily Dickinson describes a harmonious relations between man and nature, but on the other hand, she also notices the alienation of nature in many of her poems, as we shall see in the following sections.

3. The Alienation of Nature

Dickinson's attitude towards nature appears ambivalent. On the one hand, Dickinson regards nature as a gentle mother. For her, nature is heaven, and nature is harmony. On the other hand, Dickinson acknowledges the existence of inherent laws governing nature's operations, giving rise to a sense of estrangement between humanity and the natural world. This alienation manifests in various ways: an incomplete comprehension of

² Fr followed by poem number: Franklin, R.W. (ed) (1998). The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Harvard UP.

nature by humans, occasional manifestations of nature's cruelty, the adherence to its autonomous laws, and the caution against excessive human interference with nature. Remarkably, these thematic elements within Dickinson's poetry bear notable resemblance to the principles espoused in Chinese Taoism.

The fact that Dickinson led an extremely simple life and rarely left her home does not mean that her perspective was equally narrow. Quite the opposite, through extensive reading and correspondence with others, Dickinson had a profound understanding of world culture, including Chinese culture. She visited Chinese museum at Boston at the age of 16. For her, the Chinese Museum is "a great curiosity." And the Chinese people's "self denial" seems to attract her attention: "There is something peculiarly interesting to me in their self denial" (L 13).

We certainly dare not make a rash assertion that Dickinson was influenced by Chinese Taoism, but many of Dickinson's thoughts, including her choice of a quiet, and self-denying way of life, are closely connected with Taoism. Prof. Kang Yanbin has written several articles explaining Dickinson from the perspective of Chinese philosophy, and noticed the influence of Taoist spirit on ED poetry (Kang, 2018, 2021a, 2021b).

3.1 Nature as a Stranger

Taoism, an ancient Chinese school of philosophical thought and a religious tradition, underscores the principle of harmonious existence with the Tao. Central to Taoist philosophy are foundational texts such as the *Tao Te Ching*, comprising teachings attributed to Lao Tse (Lao Tsu / Laozi), and subsequent writings by Zhuangzi (Chuang Tsu). These seminal works collectively form the cornerstone of Taoism.

The term "Tao", literally meaning "the way", can also be construed to signify road, channel, path, doctrine, or line. Within the context of Taoism, it represents "the One," characterized by its natural, spontaneous, eternal, nameless, and indescribable attributes. It functions as both the origin of all phenomena and the guiding force governing their courses (Chan, 1963). For Lao Tse, "Tao" assumes the paramount status as the fundamental law governing the world, closely intertwined with the natural order. In Chapter 25 of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tze expounds upon this concept:

Humans follow earth
Earth follows heaven
Heaven follows Tao.
Tao follows its own nature. (Addiss et al., 1993, p. 25)

According to Lao Tze, adherence to the laws governing heaven, earth, and Tao is imperative for human beings, while "Tao" itself is to be guided by the principles of "Nature." It is important to note that the concept of "nature" in this context does not precisely align with the contemporary understanding of "nature." Instead, it encompasses both the intrinsic ecological nature and the anthropogenically influenced nature resulting from the interplay between humans and their environment. Nevertheless, regardless of the interpretation, the "nature" delineated in the *Tao Te Ching* exhibits a profound correlation with the contemporary conception of nature. From the Taoist perspective, Tao remains ineffable, defying comprehensive explanation and comprehension. It is characterized as mysterious and beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. Human engagement with Tao is limited to a respectful acknowledgment of nature, aspiring to attain a state of harmonious unity between humanity and the natural world. Blakney once noted that *Tao Te Ching* expresses a way of life which is at once a

mystic religion and a philosophy advocating simplicity, frugality, and the joys of living close to the soil (Blakney, 1955, preface)

Nature is mysterious, sometimes beyond human comprehension. Rachel Carson also observed that there is some universal truth that “lies just beyond our grasp”:

Contemplating the teeming life of the shore, we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp. What is the message signaled by the hordes of diatoms, flashing their microscopic lights in the night sea? (Qtd. in Hoffman, 2017, p. 29)

Dickinson's perspectives align with those of Rachel Carson. According to Dickinson, despite humans having inhabited the natural world for millennia, there appears to be a pervasive lack of comprehension regarding its intricacies. Nature, in her view, retains an aura of mystery and even evokes a sense of terror. In a letter addressed to Higginson, Dickinson metaphorically describes nature as “a haunted house.” Additionally, in Fr 1433, Dickinson conveys the notion that nature remains fundamentally unfamiliar to human understanding:

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

For Dickinson, nature is sometimes foreign to human beings and we cannot always understand nature. Nature is “what we know” but “have no art to say”, and our wisdom is “impotent to her sincerity” (Fr 721).

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

3.2 Violence and Death in Nature

Another extremely important idea of Taoism on the relationship between nature and humans is the indifference of nature to the human and animal world. Human beings should live in harmony with nature, but nature has its own operating rules and does not care about the suffering, life or death of humans or animals. Lao Tze, the progenitor of Taoism, posits the absence of benevolence or unkindness in the interactions between heaven and earth, treating all entities impartially. In accordance with Taoist philosophy, every element in the world operates under its own set of laws, and the inevitability of birth, aging, sickness, and death is inescapable for all living beings. Taoism, perceiving the world as a realm replete with the cycles of life and death, addresses the theme of nature's indifference or “ruthlessness”, as elucidated in Chapter five of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Heaven and Earth are ruthless;
To them the Ten Thousand Things are but as straw dogs.
The Sage too is ruthless;
To him the people are but straw dogs. (Waley, 2013, p. 147)

In the above mentioned chapter, heaven and earth, or nature are ruthless and treat everything as “straw dogs”. Nature is indifferent to everything else in the world. They treat everything in the same way and don't care about a special kind of thing, in the same way sages treat common people. Human beings should live in harmony

with nature, but they have to remember that nature is essentially “foreign” to human beings. It has its own rules and wouldn't care about the suffering or the life and death of a certain animal.

For Dickinson, nature is gentle on the one hand, but it is also indifferent, unknowable, and even hostile to human and animal world on the other hand. As early as 1938, Whicher commented on Dickinson's view of nature: “In Winter in My Room” (Fr 1742) can be read as Dickinson's recognition of the horrible ambiguity inherent in Nature: it can be “pastoral,” “friendly” to man — also be Hell (Qtd. in Petry, 1979, p. 16). Joan Kirkby also noted that “the operations of nature are largely invisible as well as indifferent to humanity” (Kirkby, 1991, p. 114).

In Fr 721, Dickinson says that nature is a foreign world that is difficult for us to understand: it is “what we know but have no art to say”. In the second stanza of “The Morning after Wo” (Fr 398), she noticed “nature did not care”.

As Nature did not Care -
And piled her Blossoms on -
The further to parade a Joy
Her Victim stared opon -

Let us take the first stanza of Fr 359 (“a bird came down the walk”) as an example.

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

As we commonly understand, earthworms are “beneficial insects”. For human beings, earthworms play a major role in the conversion of large pieces of organic matter into rich humus, thus improving soil fertility. The earthworm's burrowing creates a multitude of channels through the soil and is of great value in maintaining the soil structure, enabling processes of aeration and drainage. However, the animal world has its own rules of operation and doesn't protect earthworms just because they are beneficial. In this poem, the bird “bit an Angle Worm in halves /And ate the fellow, raw”.

In another poem about earthworms, Fr 932, the cute looking earthworms eventually became the bird's meal.

Our little Kinsmen - after Rain
In plenty may be seen,
A Pink and Pulpy multitude
The tepid Ground opon.

A needless life, it seemed to me
Until a little Bird
As to a Hospitality
Advanced and breakfasted -

The observer, functioning as a passive witness, encountered a visceral tableau wherein a bird voraciously consumed a “Pink and Pulpy” Angle Worm as its breakfast. The brutality in such a sight is conspicuous; however, within Emily Dickinson's worldview, this unfolds as an enactment of the natural order. The sphere of nature's influence extends beyond the plight of lower animals, permeating even the existence of the ostensibly powerful, as exemplified in the poem “A Dying Tiger” (Fr 529):

A Dying Tiger - moaned for Drink -
 I hunted all the Sand -
 I caught the Dripping of a Rock
 And bore it in my Hand -

His mighty Balls - in death were thick -
 But searching - I could see
 A Vision on the Retina
 Of Water - and of me -

'Twas not my blame - who sped too slow -
 'Twas not his blame - who died
 While I was reaching him -
 But 'twas - the fact that He was dead -

In this poem, The tiger, commonly acknowledged as the most powerful and formidable creatures, found itself compelled to acquiesce to the inexorable course of fate. Even in the face of his former prey, humans, he could do nothing but ask for help. But nature didn't give him a chance: he died at last. Rolston (1988, p. 56) once observed:

Realistically, suffering is an integral feature of sentient life in ecosystems. Nature is harsh; herbivores starve; carnivores kill. When humans encounter wild nature, animals have neither a right nor a welfare claim to be spared the pains imposed by natural selection.... (Rolston, 1988, p. 56)

For Rolston, there is no human duty to eradicate the sufferings of creation. Then when faced with such a foreign world, what are we supposed to do? Dickinson has already given us the answer in her poetry. In Fr 359, Dickinson tried to give the bird some bread, but the bird flew away regardless of her kindness. She seems to tell us that when faced with such a foreign world, what humans have to do is to let nature take its course, rather than eagerly intervene. Actually, human beings' overreaching attempts to peer into the alien animal world violate the sanctity of animal life, damage human and animal relations, and diminish the dignity of humankind (Mcabee, 2017).

3.3 Non-action to Nature

The prominent ethical principle in Taoism is encapsulated by the concept of non-action, known as "Wuwei" in Chinese Pinyin. Wuwei denotes a state of effortless action or action devoid of deliberate intent (Girardot, 1988). Taoist philosophy posits that the cosmos operates in a harmonious fashion according to its innate principles. When individuals assert their will in a manner incongruent with the inherent cycles of change, they risk disrupting this harmony, thereby potentially incurring unintended consequences. Human beings must place their will in harmony with the natural universe so that a potentially harmful interference may be avoided, and in this way, goals can be achieved effortlessly (Chan, 1963).

Zhuangzi, another Taoist master, told a story in his eponymous book "Zhuangzi":

The emperor of the Southern Sea was called Shu. The Emperor of the Northern Sea was called Hu. The Emperor of the Middle Between was Hundun. Shu and Hu often went to the land of Hundun, where he treated them with goodness. Shu and Hu wanted to repay his virtue and decided, "People all have seven holes—to see, hear, eat, and breathe with—but Hundun alone has none. Let's see whether we can't help by boring some." Every day they bored him a new one, and on the seventh day, he died. (Hamill, 1999, p. 57)

This story shows that everything should go with nature and not be forced. Human intervention, perhaps well-intentioned, destroys its naturalness. Zhuangzi believed that people tend to pursue those external things, so that their hearts suffer and their bodies toil, thus endangering his own nature. In this way, he will be far away from the “Tao” and fall into misery. For Taoists, inaction means not being able to interfere in violation of the laws of nature.

The last stanza of Fr359 (A Bird, came down the Walk), recorded Dickinson's communication with the animal world which is not so successful:

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

The author wanted to give the bird a crumb, but the bird didn't seem to appreciate it. Instead, he “unrolled his feathers, And rowed him softer Home”. The first two lines of the stanza: Like one in danger, Cautious,/ I offered him a Crumb, are actually ambiguous: is it the author, or the bird, that is cautious?

Here, Dickinson poses a thought-provoking question. When an animal meets a human, is it the human or the animal that is in danger? The author does not make it clear. Here, both interpretations are possible. Therefore, when human beings face nature, they also need to be like the writer in poetry: cautious.

In Fr 1433, Dickinson noted:

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

How can we understand nature? Or should we try to understand nature at all? The poem tell us that those who think they know nature don't know nature at all, and the less we know about nature, the better we can really understand nature.

4. Conclusion

The ancient Chinese Taoist theory, originating over two millennia ago, has bequeathed distinctive ecological insights to the dynamic between humans and nature. Taoist philosophy advocates the attainment of a harmonious unity between humanity and the natural world. According to Taoist tenets, nature operates under its own intrinsic laws, urging human beings to comport themselves in alignment with these laws rather than engaging in impulsive actions. Furthermore, Taoist masters acknowledge the occasional cruelty and adversarial aspects of nature, signifying that both animals and plants endure suffering due to its capriciousness

More than 2000 years later, Emily Dickinson voiced similar ideas with Taoists. Despite living in an era where the ecological crisis was not as pronounced as it is today, Dickinson astutely perceived the burgeoning alienation between humanity and nature. As Christine Gerhardt (2014, p. 7) rightly observed, many of Emily Dickinson's poems are “proto-ecological”. She believes that Emily Dickinson's poem “evoke(s) an ecosystem before the term was coined”, and are “ecologically suggestive even from a twenty-first century perspective”.

While Emily Dickinson may not be conventionally classified as an ecological writer, the assertion made by Slovic remains relevant—"there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecological interpretation" (Qtd. in Love, 2003, p. 34). In the contemporary milieu, marked by an escalating ecological crisis and exacerbated strains in the relationships between humans, nature, and animals, the scrutiny of these connections assumes heightened significance. Emily Dickinson's poetry, therefore, emerges as a valuable lens through which to contemplate and comprehend the intricate dynamics between humans and nature in this evolving ecological landscape.

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