

“TO TASTE HER MYSTIC BREAD” OR “THE MOCKING ECHO OF HIS OWN”:  
USES OF NATURE IN THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON AND ROBERT FROST

by

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## ABSTRACT

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by

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This thesis highlights the fact that the way Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost understood nature informed their work as writers. The underlying theme through each chapter is how epistemology about the natural world is created. It compares two seemingly opposed approaches to knowledge construction about nature, answering the question: Is knowledge and value about nature socially constructed or inherently existent and discovered. The second chapter emphasizes that Dickinson considered knowledge based in nature to be socially constructed, making the subjugation of the nineteenth-century woman one of her central subjects. The third chapter shows how Frost agreed with social constructivism in that knowledge is the product of imaginative involvement; he used a constructive stance to emphasize humanity's important role in compelling nature to reveal spiritual truths, which made the reciprocal relationship between people and their environments central to his work. The concluding chapter synthesizes these two approaches and suggests that both are necessary in our modern day understanding of nature.

(79 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

**“To taste her mystic Bread” or “the mocking echo of his own”:  
Uses of Nature in the Poems of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost**

Ian Weaver

The central question to this thesis is: how is knowledge about nature created? A comprehensive study to adequately answer this question would be impossible; therefore, this thesis focuses on two prominent American poets' approaches to nature: Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. These poets' nature poems are comparable for several reasons with a few being that both lived the majority of their lives in New England; both have had a significant impact on American nature writing; and both use nature as central to their work. But most importantly, Dickinson's and Frost's poetry are comparable because they have seemingly opposed approaches to nature.

After the introduction, chapter two focuses on Dickinson. One of her primary uses of nature in her poetry focuses on nineteenth-century women. Women in the nineteenth century lived under strict expectations from society, religion, and family. Nature metaphors were frequently compared to women in order to keep them within society's assigned roles. Such a comparison often led women to internalize societal beliefs, which led to women assuming such expectations were natural. As such, my analysis of Dickinson's use of nature focuses on her censorship of nineteenth-century society. She questions whether meaning and knowledge about nature is found or a figment of the imagination. She favors the idea that knowledge about nature (especially when applied to women) is socially constructed.

Frost, on the other hand, prefers to investigate nature with the hope of finding value in nature that inherently exists. The third chapter points to Frost's focus on the important role the individual plays in both discovering and making meaning about nature rather than all meaning being socially constructed. A constant thread through much of his poetry is the fear that nature holds no inherent meaning, disproving the existence of a higher being. His poetry, however, reasons out a way to counteract the social constructivism of Darwinian theory that so pervasively influenced his time. Many of Frost's themes and use of nature stress the importance of the human imagination, making his approach to nature seemingly opposed to Dickinson's.

The word “seemingly” introduces the central point of the fourth and last chapter. Though Dickinson prefers social constructivism and Frost favors the imagination, both poets' use of nature equally favor *how* knowledge is created rather than *what* knowledge is created. The last chapter points out that a critical approach is needed when making meaning about the natural world. Assuming that all meaning is socially constructed devalues knowledge about the natural world; assuming that all meaning must be initiated and maintained by the imagination, however, risks the credibility of knowledge created. Thus, not only does a comparison of these two poets' nature poetry enhance our appreciation for such unique approaches, it also gives us a way to look at *how* meaning and knowledge is created about the natural world in our modern society. A simple application of this approach could benefit society in recognizing that there resides a romantic hope as a subtext in consumer marketing that nature contains some sort of inherent, self-evident meaning (the belief in a plutonic reality).

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Jill, who always encourages me to “unite my avocation with my vocation;” I owe my time and efforts to her unyielding sacrifice and support. My thanks also go to my two children, Kip and Lila, whose bright, wide eyes kept me writing; I hope they keep their curiosity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nature plays a central role in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, yet their uses of nature differ unmistakably. While Dickinson treats nature as perpetually subject to cultural appropriation for the purpose of establishing social codes, Frost looks to nature as a resource vital to poetic creation. Different as these two approaches are, they derive from a shared conviction that accepting nature as indefinable is central to the full expression of the self that they explore in their poetry. That these two American poets should share an interest in nature is not in itself surprising; what is of interest, however, is the understanding of each poet's relationship to their culture that becomes more pronounced as their approaches to nature are made clear. When considered in light of her use of nature, the notoriously reclusive Dickinson emerges as a poet who is more deeply invested in the public implications of nature than is Frost, despite his stature as one of the most public of all American poets. A benefit of reading these poets in terms of their examinations of nature is that doing so supports the view that Dickinson was more deeply engaged in the public life of her culture than is commonly thought to be the case and that Frost was actually the more reclusive of the two when it comes to his poetic uses of nature.

Central to Frost's and Dickinson's distinct encounters with nature is the way each responds to the unavoidable fact that nature is constantly misread and distorted. Inaccuracies are of course inevitable due to the fact that even science, the most stable and reliable source of knowledge, ceaselessly presents new facts that alter our understanding of the world around us. In Dickinson's case, this expanding awareness is a source of wonder that ought to be part of the way humans structure social relations. The problem, as she sees it, is that societies do just the opposite: they ground social conduct on fixed beliefs about nature that result in social codes that require behavior she views as fundamentally unnatural. A clear example of this is a passage that appears in a letter she



wrote to her friend and literary advisor Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862. In an unusually coherent and limpid paragraph, she explains how she discovered the inaccuracy of conventional social views of nature when she was a little girl. She points out that as a child she was “much in the Woods,” provoking a warning from those who considered it improper for her to be on her own in wild nature. “I was told,” she recalls, “that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them, so I hav’nt that confidence in fraud which many exercise” (*Letters* 415). Through this episode, we see Dickinson telling Higginson that she has come to question the role of nature as a foundation for restrictions imposed on the activities of a young girl. This episode seems particularly representative of her ongoing fascination with the cultural codification of nature as the basis for highly restrictive social codes governing women’s roles in nineteenth-century American culture.

The first line in my title—“To taste her mystic Bread”—comes from Dickinson’s poem “These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns –” (Fr 1106), a poem in which Dickinson expresses her conviction that nature constantly eludes humanity’s insistent efforts to understand it. In Dickinson’s eyes, the wonderful part of nature is that it constantly yields new information and therefore resists any efforts to stabilize its meanings. As the word “mystic” suggests, nature keeps its secrets hidden. Thus in the line “To taste her mystic Bread,” Dickinson implies that using nature’s bread to enforce social regulations ignores the fact that some knowledge exists beyond human intellect. When read in context with the first stanza, Dickinson’s sentiment is explained further:

These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns –  
 Her invitation broad  
 To Whosoever Famishing  
 To taste her mystic Bread – (1-3)

Despite nature's elusive qualities, this stanza implies that those who are famished can find rest in nature's lodgings. Rest, however, is not the assurance or peace that comes from being certain. Because nature's bread is mystic, Dickinson asserts that the famished find rest by accepting nature's uncertainties. To explain further, partaking of nature's bread revitalizes the famished not because it clarifies but rather mystifies the viewer with multiple interpretations of nature. Tasting nature's bread frees the individual from restrictive definitions of nature and, as a consequence, enables the individual to escape confinement by creating meaning—and thereby determine what is natural—for him or herself. Nature's rest leaves the individual with a feeling of anxiety that accompanies the new and expanded sense of freedom as it releases the famished from the social pressure to conform. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, that rest is obtainable is not privileged knowledge restricted to a particular person, class, or sex. The famished can find a form of respite in nature's lodgings, or "Inns," by the fact that nature's "invitation" is "broad" (2) or perhaps all-encompassing and liberal. As Dickinson writes in the second stanza, nature's doors are open "with an equal width / To Beggar and to Bee" (7-8), placing nature in a position that makes it available for examination by anyone.

It is important to emphasize that Dickinson's respite or rest for the famished does not come in the form of complacency. Complacency would be the passive acceptance of what culture defines as "natural," placing individuals in a position to forget their own constructive power. Rest as complacency assumes that how one understands nature is natural rather than constructed. As Dickinson states in this poem, an understanding of nature does not leave room for one to be confident in knowledge about nature, but rather that by partaking of the "mystic Bread" one can feel confident in their own ability to make meaning, which must be based on personal assessment at an individual level, not the justification for social codes.

Frost's use of nature is even more intimate and personal. He too is concerned with how culture defines nature, but his concern lies imbedded in the fear that no grand

design for the universe exists—particularly because epistemology about nature in Frost’s day was so fundamentally founded on Darwin’s explanation of the natural world (Hass 2 and 3). Many of Frost’s poems suggest that he suffered from the dualistic paradigm he developed early in life from his parents: the coexistence and therefore contradiction of being both a believer and a doubter. From his mother, he learned to believe in the supernatural, that a grand design existed (Parini 14-15). From his father he learned how to be skeptical and doubtful of anything but provable fact (19). While Frost wanted to believe that nature contained some sort of intrinsic truth about the universe that gave explanation and purpose to life, his doubt left him unsure about what could finally be proven, making Frost a perpetually doubting believer. The intimacy in Frost’s nature poetry shows itself in his internal conflict—his dualistic angst—towards the natural world: is there a grand design, or are we the result of mechanical evolution? Frost’s desire for a grand design shows itself in his search for revelation from an external nature, and the possibility that we are the result of mechanical evolution shows itself in his assertion that all meaning found in nature is constructed by the imagination.

The second line in my title, “the mocking echo of his own,” represents Frost’s fear that an intrinsic part of nature does not exist, leaving all thought and knowledge about life and the natural world constructed rather than the product of an external reality. This line comes from his poem titled “The Most of It,” a poem in which Frost expresses his dualistic angst towards the natural world. The first half of the poem (lines 1-9) demonstrates Frost’s fear that there is no grand design. His speaker narrates that when in search of meaning, life does not want “its own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response” (7-8). Surely some form of counter-love or “genuine exchange...in which one receives...not [his] own gift back again...” would assure that cold, mechanical evolution was not life’s origin (Klein 366). As the poem continues, however—and as the phrase “mocking echo” suggests—nature’s retort not only mimics but taunts the character’s attempt in seeking original response. As a result, the character

concludes that he “kept the universe alone,” implying that nature has no intrinsic meaning to reveal; all knowledge created is a construction of the individual’s imagination.

Displaying both sides of his dualistic approach to nature, however, Frost ends the second half of “The Most” (lines 10-20) suggesting the opposite. His alternate approach is shown in the following lines: “nothing ever came of what he cried / Unless it was the embodiment that crashed / In the cliff’s talus on the other side...” (9-11). The pivotal word “Unless” shows Frost’s hope that nature can reveal some sort of intrinsic truth to an individual, turning the direction of the poem away from “mocking echoe[s]” and towards “original response.” The remainder of the poem exhibits original response: the form of a “great buck” crashing into the water and swimming across a lake (16-20). As “The Most” displays, Frost builds a bridge between original response and mocking echoes, hoping to find meaning somewhere between the two. The bridge endeavors to merge Frost’s doubt and belief, leaving room for both to exist.

The phrase “mocking echo” clearly repeats itself in many of his poems and is key to understanding his approach to nature. For example, the lines “All revelation has been ours” from his poem “All Revelation” and “never seeing / Deeper down in the well than where the water / Gives me back in a shining surface picture / Me myself...” (lines) in his poem “For Once, Then, Something” give the impression that Frost constantly dealt with the fear that he was alone in the universe. Always accompanying his fear, however, is a counter layer of meaning that proposes the hope for a form of intrinsic truth. In my analysis of his poetry, I call Frost’s combination of “mocking echo” and “original response” his reciprocal, revelational relationship to nature. The relationship is reciprocal because both the person and nature give to the moment. Though nature may provide original response, an individual must use his imagination to make meaning from nature’s revelation; both nature and the individual exchange forms of response, which enables the individual to find meaning in the encounter. The word “revelation” works for Frost’s relationship to nature because he often builds his poems around moments of epiphany

where nature speaks out of mystery, revealing itself briefly without shedding its final and ultimate impenetrability.

Despite the differences between Frost and Dickinson, each poet seeks to defamiliarize nature in order to give constructive and defining power to the individual. Accompanying such a belief comes the disclaimer: if knowledge can be constructed—however based it is in the natural world—then that knowledge is somewhat precarious. As I see it, Dickinson’s approach to nature critiques culturally imposed definitions in a social context while Frost approaches nature to work out his internal conflict between doubt and belief.

In order to show how Dickinson’s critique of nature lies in a social context, my opening chapter centers on how she questions her contemporaries’ understanding of nature. Through a close reading of her poetry, I will show how Dickinson suggests that social codes imposed on women during her lifetime were unjustified, and must be questioned, in order to resist the internal impulse to conform—which results from believing particular behaviors natural—would threaten agency. To immediately set up Dickinson’s resistance to her contemporaries’ view, I will move directly into a reading of her poem “‘Nature’ is what We see –” (Fr 721). This poem epitomizes Dickinson’s critique of nature. As she sees society placing nature in a position of authority to influence how women live, this poem deconstructs the power of nature as a reliable source for such influence. While I analyze “‘Nature’ is what We see –,” I will also show how Dickinson’s critique of nature has historical significance. To show this, I will give a close reading of the poem “Garden Lecture” that was published in *The Lady’s Book of Flowers and Poetry* in 1842 (Evans). The speaker of this poem places nature in a position of authority to govern social behavior. “‘Nature’ is what We see –” and “Garden Lecture” respond to each other nicely, demonstrating what I see as Dickinson’s quibble with nineteenth-century logic. By understanding how Dickinson views nature in this light, we are able to move forward with how she critiques the logic of placing nature in such an

influential position.

To establish her critique of her contemporaries' logic, I use Neil Smith's analysis of nature from his book *Uneven Development*, specifically his chapter titled "The Ideology of Nature." He writes, "The human-nature argument dissolves into nothing if for any reason at all the externality of nature is denied" (29). Human nature, he argues, is often fallaciously based on one of two contradicting points of view: nature either includes or excludes the human. In order to establish social codes based in nature—which codes are framed as "human nature"—one must pull from a pristine nature—not affected by humanity's tainted perspective. But as I see Dickinson arguing, no such nature exists—or if it does exist, it cannot be known. Her poem "The Outer – from the Inner" (Fr 450) demonstrates her opinion that the external world can never fully be understood because "The Inner –" always "paints the Outer –" (9). The part that whatever the inner is can never be expressed directly; therefore, whatever sense we make of nature is based on a representation and not the thing itself. As such, Dickinson argues that conceptualizing nature as separate from humanity is fruitless. No meaning found in nature is inherent; rather, meaning reflects culture.

Once Dickinson's critique of logic based on artificial definitions of nature is set up, I will move into the consequence she identifies when one does not question nature's authoritative influence. This consequence is best described with Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon. Socially imposed definitions of nature act as an internal discipline for women in the nineteenth century. I use Daneen Wardrop's argument from her book *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge* to show how Dickinson's technique allows her to question the "reproval of women that patriarchal society causes them to internalize" (112). A combination of Wardrop's reading of Dickinson and my reading of "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –" (Fr 407) shows how she recognizes this panoptical influence.

At this point in the chapter, I ground Dickinson's poetry and critique of nature

in her historical context. I use Barbara Welter's essay "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," Judith Farr's book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, my analysis of Grace Greenwood's letter "To An Unrecognized Poetess," and the poem "Garden Lecture" to show that social codes imposed on women in the nineteenth century were founded in a belief of human nature based on assumptions projected on external nature. After this point, I use Foucault's concept of the panopticon to explain how Dickinson's poem "Nature and God – I neither knew" (Fr 803) demonstrates that women's agency in the nineteenth century, under the gaze of the cultural panopticon, was threatened. It is this final poem that allows me to conclude that Dickinson recognizes nature's intrinsic value, yet at the same time questions the use of nature to impose social codes, especially when threatening agency.

My second chapter will center on how Frost uses nature to navigate his dualistic paradigm. By illuminating Frost's complex approach to nature, I will show how his doubt and belief merge into a reciprocal revelational relationship with nature. This relationship is necessary for his belief and doubt to coexist. I begin with a close reading of "Gathering Leaves" as this poem demonstrates Frost's relationship to nature, introducing his assumption that revelation is possible and worthwhile. I will then introduce two themes that are key to understanding the complexity of Frost's reciprocal, revelational relationship. First is the theme of "play," taken from Karl Keller's book *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty*, specifically his chapter titled "When the Soul Is at Play." Keller's chapter shows how Dickinson influenced Frost's reading of nature, particularly how Frost adopted Dickinson's willingness to "dwell in possibility" (Fr 466). Frost's use of play is key because it illustrates his part in the creation of knowledge about nature.

The next theme I use to look at Frost's approach takes Dickinson's concept of "dwelling in possibility" a step further—in his version of dwelling in possibility, Frost sought to "lose" himself in the unknown of nature. To develop this theme, I refer to George Bagby's book *Frost and the Book of Nature*. Bagby writes that Frost's desire to

become lost was an effort to “relinquish willful control of [the revelational] progress” (29). His effort to lose willful control shows his hope in nature’s ability to reveal some sort of intrinsic truth. To establish these two themes in Frost’s words, I will give a short close reading of “Directive.” Afterwards, I will give a close reading of “For Once, Then, Something,” as this poem builds on the previous themes and adds a new one itself: that of imaginative expectation. Imaginative expectation precludes revelation and is a distortion of effective “play.” In the three main poems I analyze, imaginative expectation leads to the speaker’s failed efforts to receive revelation. Frost displays this theme in what I call his parabolic style (evident in “For Once”). This style allows him to accomplish three objectives. First, it allows him to demonstrate his struggle between belief and doubt. Second, while demonstrating this struggle, this style enables him to implicitly favor belief over doubt: a surface reading of his poems demonstrate his speaker’s failed attempt at “original response,” which is always followed by an undertow meaning that demonstrates successful revelation. Third, this style allows him to show what prevents successful revelation: imaginative expectation. To expand his theme of imaginative expectation, I use Amelia Klein’s essay “The Counter-love of Robert Frost.” She helps me discuss the implicit warning against imaginative expectation when reading the natural world, which I confirm in my close reading of “The Most of It.”

My analysis of these poems builds to my final and climactic reading of “All Revelation.” This poem embodies each theme and is the epitome of Frost’s reciprocal revelational relationship to nature. In this poem, he demonstrates his imagination in the form of play and chooses to become lost (or disoriented) in order to avoid (or remain free from) fixed imaginative expectation. Ultimately, this poem shows how Frost makes room for his dualistic angst, allowing him to find satisfaction in knowledge created about nature. To do so, Frost presents the possibility that revelation is obtainable through reciprocity between human and nature wedded in a metaphorically consummated relationship. My reading of “All Revelation” permits me to conclude that Frost obviously



sought a relationship with nature in which he sees himself—a personal self—as absolutely necessary in creating and receiving knowledge about the natural world.

My third and concluding chapter will be an effort to explain what the implications of my reading of Frost and Dickinson have on their respective scholarship. A reading of how these poets use nature reverses public perception of Dickinson and Frost. The popular image of Dickinson as an agoraphobic only interested in personal expression is questioned by her social critique of nature (Garbowsky). In addition, Frost's use of nature challenges his commonly accepted persona of the peoples' poet. His deep-rooted, dualistic angst causes him to approach nature for personal reasons.

FROM PRISTINE TO HUMAN NATURE: EMILY DICKINSON'S  
QUESTIONING OF AUTHORITY

Strange as it may seem to twenty-first century readers, Emily Dickinson lived during a time when women were admonished to “Live up to the full measure of life; give way to [their] impulses, loves, and enthusiasms” (Greenwood 311). Though this seems an encouraging sentiment, women were also reminded that they should “Never unsex [themselves’] for greatness” (311). They were taught, “The intellectual woman should be *richest* in ‘social and domestic ties’ . . . [And that] true feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent” (310). To understand the apparent contradiction between these two ideas—“give way to your impulses . . .” and “true feminine genius is ever timid . . .”—we must assume that the internal spark and impulse of a woman was to shrink “instinctively from greatness” (310) and remain “feminine in her dependence” on social and domestic ties (312). According to pervading cultural values, the nineteenth-century woman was, by nature, a housewife and a nurturer; “the best refuge for such a delicate creature was the warmth and safety of her home” (Welter 54). But Dickinson saw this differently.

A closer look at her use of the word “nature” in her poems supports Neil Smith’s assertion from his book *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* that “the human-nature argument dissolves into nothing if for any reason at all the externality of nature is denied” (29). By questioning her contemporaries’ understanding of nature, Emily Dickinson suggests that social codes imposed on women during her lifetime were unjustified; and, if not questioned, then the influence inherent in believing particular behaviors natural—the internal impulses to conform—would threaten agency. To oppose such influence, Dickinson used gothic and spiritualist language to promote democratic thought.<sup>1</sup> It is ultimately democratic thought that can prevent unconscious

1. In his book *Winds of Will: Emily Dickinson and the Sovereignty of Democratic*

conformity. To see her need for democratic language, we need to understand how Dickinson critiques nature, for the fundamental premise upon which she founds her critique of social codes is how society uses nature as the foundation for authority.

Smith's words describe the problem Dickinson addresses in her nature poetry. He writes that "Nature is generally seen as precisely that which cannot be produced; it is the antithesis to human activity" (49). Because nature seems disconnected from human construction, it "presents itself to us as the material substratum of daily life, [becoming] a realm of use values...." In her poem "'Nature' is what We see –" (Fr 721), Dickinson identifies the epistemological progression that explains how people imbue nature with value (which what results is nature becomes culturally and personally authoritative:

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

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

"Nature" is what We know –  
 But have no Art to say –  
 So impotent our Wisdom is  
 To Her Sincerity –

The first lines of each stanza read, "'Nature' is what We see –," "'Nature' is what We hear –," and "'Nature' is what We know –." The speaker moves from sensory experiences—seeing and hearing—to the abstract—knowledge. This progression shows that the speaker creates knowledge based on what he or she has experienced—what we see is what we know: a form of empirical observation. But considering the point that the word "Nature"

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*Thought*, Paul Crumbley develops the idea that spiritualist language allows for democratic thought; the use of gothic language to create ambiguity originates from Daneen Wardrop in her book *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge*.

is capitalized suggests that nature may have more authoritative weight than just simple knowledge based in observation. Supporting this idea, the last line from the first and second stanzas read, “Nay – Nature is Heaven –” and “Nay – Nature is Harmony –.” In both instances, the word “Nay” follows a list of what the speaker suggests we see and then hear. “Nay,” then, works as another level of renaming or defining. Nature is not only what we see and hear, but it is also heaven—or God, the creator of all things natural—and harmony—order, congruity, wholeness (“Harmony”). This movement from sensory experience to knowledge by observing an authoritative nature also suggests that nature is a reliable source of truth, especially as it is connected to heaven and harmony. Nature becomes a source by which knowledge is created. This knowledge is aligned with God and is harmonious, having no contradictions. Nature, as the speaker sets forth, holds an authoritative and influential position.

To assume that nature has such autonomous power—a nature that consciously and actively emits its influence on the human mind—would be preposterous. Dickinson’s critique of her contemporaries’ appropriation of nature speaks directly to the autonomy given to nature in her time. Though she would have been only twelve when it was published, the poem “Garden Lecture” (1842) demonstrates what type of thinking Dickinson critiques in “‘Nature’ is what We see –.” “Garden Lecture” was published in the famous houseplant and garden instruction book for women in 1842, titled *The Lady’s Book of Flowers and Poetry*. This popular household book is representative of how language in the nineteenth century conflated women with religion and nature. This poem specifically shows the tendency to search for meaning in nature and establish Truth on empirical evidence. In fact, Dickinson’s poem could almost be a direct response to “Garden Lecture.”

The language of “Garden Lecture” is important to Dickinson’s critique of nature because it embodies the nineteenth-century belief that nature could “enforce” social codes, identifying the source by which human nature can be labeled “natural” (6). As we

can see, the title itself prepares the speaker—and by extension the reader—to become nature’s student and partake of her educating wisdom. The first stanza reads:

Amid my garden’s broider’d paths I trod,  
 And there my mind soon caught her favourite clue;  
 I seem’d to stand amid the church of God,  
 And flowers were preachers, and (still stranger) drew  
 From their own life and course  
 The love they would enforce  
 And sound their doctrine was, and every precept true. (1-7)

Straight away the language offers itself to criticism from Dickinson’s “‘Nature’ is what We see –” as the speaker positions nature in an authoritative role, implying that nature is some sort of revelatory conduit—a prophet of sorts—for God’s teachings: he pictures himself “amid the church of God,” the garden’s preachers (flowers) enforcing a doctrine with “every precept true” (3-7). Comparing the colorful and fragrant garden to an ornamented church, the speaker’s walk down his “broider’d” garden paths leads him to conclude, in effect, “Nay –” nature is not just a simple arrangement of flowers, “Nature is Heaven –” (and because he finds the flowers’ doctrine “sound,” he could also conclude that “Nature is Harmony –,” its dogma pleasing to the ear, full and complete, with no contradictions in the favored views of his culture). The speaker walks past various flowers in the next six stanzas, each flower teaching their “doctrine” and demonstrating through its own “course and life” a proper protocol: the speaker walks past the sunflower that turns its head with the sun—“From womb to grave pursue the Sun of life and Might” (8-14); he walks past a “Camomile” who emits a sweet fragrance despite being trampled on by “reckless feet,” teaching—“as insulters press, / E’en turn thou thus and bless” (15-21); he walks past a “Stonecrop” (the generic name for the sedum plant which has shallow growing roots) who relies on the “juicy nurture from the sky” rather than the soil to “Draw life’s *unearthly* food” (emphasis added 22-28); etc. It is simple to see that a didactic poem such as “Garden Lecture” could have prompted Dickinson to write “‘Nature’ is what We see –.” The blatant conflation of religion and nature places nature

in an authoritative position, especially when considering this was written in nineteenth-century New England. Such linking with religion gives the flowers authority to preach what is “natural”: the flowers display their message through the way they live their lives.

Because “Garden Lecture’s” rhetoric is so obvious, however, the speaker’s placement of nature in an authoritative position comes across as a fiction of the mind; it seems that the speaker sees and hears what he wants rather than what actually exists. The speaker’s word “seem’d” in the third line admits that the flowers’ doctrine was of his own construction. Essentially, nature gave the *impression* that its inhabitants represent a higher power. Even the fact that the poem is titled “*Garden Lecture*” speaks to the theme of construction. By water, sun, and the inner workings of photosynthesis, the flowers would grow naturally, but a garden by nature is constructed. It is tilled, weeded, and pruned by a gardener. The gardener is the creator—he chooses which flowers to plant; he decides what are weeds and what are not. It may make sense, then, that the mind would follow. Certainly, any whisperings or secrets from flowers come from the mind of the speaker rather than the flowers themselves, and those whisperings come as tailored as a groomed garden.

The point that nature’s authoritative power is a construction of the speaker’s mind introduces an interesting contradiction: despite the fact that nature’s virtues are a construction of his imagination, nature still authoritatively influences how he decides to live. After six different flowers lecture, the “host”—or the garden’s occupants as a whole—call the speaker to action:

Then cried the garden’s host with one consent:  
 Come, man, and see how, day by day, we shoot,  
 For every hour of rain and sunshine lent,  
 Deepen our glowing hues, and drive our root;  
 And as our heads we lift,  
 Record each added gift,  
 And bear to God’s high will, and man’s support, our fruit.

O Leader thou of earth’s exulting quire,

Thou with a first-born's royal rights endued,  
 Wilt thou alone be dumb? alone desire  
 Renew'd the gifts so oft in vain renew'd?  
 Then sicken, fret, and pine,  
 As one thy head they shine,  
 And wither 'mid the bliss of boundless plentitude?

Oh, come! And, as thy due, our concert lead.  
 Glory to him, the Lord of life and light,  
 Who nursed our tender leaf, our colours spread,  
 And gave thy body mind, the first-born's right,  
 By which thy flight may cleave  
 The starry pole, and leave  
 Thy younger mates below in death's unbroken light. (50-70)

This call to action by the flowers is all the more interesting if we consider the garden's doctrine a construction of the mind. The speaker imagines and thoroughly convinces himself that he needs to live and teach the virtues of his garden. His projection of nature invites him to live as the flowers do: "Oh, come! And, as thy due," the host chants in unison, "our concert lead": join our efforts in lecturing, in spreading the word. By listening to what nature says—or by projecting his thoughts onto nature—he commits himself to stand for what he perceives as reality. The authority is in the mind, not some external object. Assigning nature as the mouthpiece of God places nature in a position of authority, which in reality is nothing more than a fictionalized authority, or a self-imposed influence on the self.

The fact that nature's authority is a construction of the mind is exactly what Dickinson critiques in "'Nature' is what We see –." Her use of the plural pronoun "We" shows that the speaker generates knowledge from her social standpoint—what *she* sees and what *she* hears. Like the speaker in "Garden Lecture," Dickinson's speaker recognizes that there is an external nature separate from herself. She uses her self-created knowledge—obtained by empirical observation as the speaker in "Garden Lecture"—to catalogue and categorize: "Squirrel – Eclipse – the Bumble bee –." She then uses the

catalogues and categories to create meaning: these juxtaposed images must mean that “Nature is Heaven –.”

Another nature writer and contemporary of Dickinson seems to support the assessment that man projects his own meaning onto nature. Emerson was well aware of the natural world and human being’s relation to it. He wrote: “[Human] thought—that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre [sic] in himself” (“The Transcendentalist” 95). Here, Emerson names human thought, the mind, as the universe. Fact, as he says, flows from humanity. Emerson displays what Dickinson critiques in this poem—perception is all too often labeled fact. From this quote, Emerson implies that fact comes from empirical observation, a very scientific type of conclusion. As quoted earlier, Neil Smith explains:

The human-nature argument dissolves into nothing if for any reason at all the externality of nature is denied. For ‘human nature’ to fulfill its ideological function there must be a separate nature with its own inviolable powers, for it is from this nature that the *human*-nature draws its sustenance. (29)

Dickinson recognizes the faulty logic of basing human nature on external nature; this is the basis of her reasoning that allows her to question nature. To understand this in greater depth, then, I need to define both types of nature: external and universal.

#### The Dual Concept of Nature: An Inherent Contradiction

To define these two natures, I refer to Neil Smith’s book *Uneven Development* because of his in-depth discussion and analysis of nature and the creation of external and universal space. Concerning external nature, Smith writes: “We are used to conceiving of nature as external to society, pristine and pre-human” (7). Pristine nature is untouched by human hands; it is in a perfect state or in its original condition, unspoiled. Smith continues: “External nature is [also defined as]...God-given, [and] autonomous...” (11).



This is the nature to which the speaker of “Garden Lecture” looks to find God’s priests. The external nature found in “Garden Lecture” appears to have a sense of autonomy; the flowers possess a form of intellect that conveys enough credibility for the speaker to believe he can find God’s messages. In a sense, “Garden Lecture” and part of Dickinson’s “‘Nature’ is what We see –” concludes that a nature exists external to human experience: a conceptual space in which humans do not live. If nature does indeed exist separate from social existence, then the seasons, patterns, and imprint of nature’s impact on the landscape should be viewed as natural, which may help us understand human nature or what humans do naturally.

Believing in an external nature—pristine and autonomous—cannot not last long, however; for its existence is more of an illusion than a reality. Humanity eventually recognizes that it is still subject to a natural phenomenon that it cannot control at which point “the external conception...[—they realize—] gives [it] only part of the picture of nature...” (Smith 27). Smith continues: “A concept of nature is [then] necessary by which it is possible to explain human societies in nature” (27). In fact it could be argued that it is impossible to conceive of nature as external without also viewing nature as universal: “Alongside external nature we have human nature, by which is implied that human beings and their social behaviors are every bit as natural as the so-called external aspects of nature” (11). Universal nature is the nature which human beings see themselves as a part of: the conceptual space in which humans coexist with nature. At the same time we try to conceive of nature as separate from ourselves, Smith argues, we also recognize that we are affected by and a part of nature. Thus, “the universal concept includes the human with the non-human nature.” This contradiction between external and universal nature, Smith points out, is “not entirely reconcilable, for at the same time that nature is held to be external to human existence, it is simultaneously both external and internal” (11). To use the “natural landscape...as the material substratum of [human] daily life,” or to impose external nature on universal, is to ignore the contradiction that establishing nature

as external stems from a universal perspective on nature. Emerson seemed to overlook this contradiction and accept the dual existence of nature by praising the universal. He said:

It is the universal nature which gives worth to particular men and things. Human life as containing this is mysterious and inviolable, and we hedge it round with penalties and laws. All laws derive hence their ultimate reason; all express more or less distinctly some command of this supreme illimitable essence. (“History” 106)

Emerson recognizes that the universal view of nature creates the meaning, but does not question its “inviolable” power. If nature is inviolable, what happens when two different concepts of universal nature overlap? To put it another way, what happens when two opinions of human nature differ? Where Dickinson distances herself from Emerson, then, is when she questions nature’s weight in establishing and enforcing social obedience. As we see in “‘Nature’ is what We see –,” her use of quotation marks around “Nature” suggests that the concept behind such labeling is subjective. To support this “subjectification,” she capitalizes “We” in each first line of the three stanzas, which emphasizes the observers’ role as the one creating knowledge out of experience, hinting that knowledge is unique to the observer: there is nothing inherent about this knowledge. For example, the speaker in “Garden Lecture” can lead the host of nature because he, too, is a *part* of nature: as the flowers’ existence proves there is a God, so does man’s. The flowers teach the speaker that his mind is the gift of his birthright; a gift that parallels the flowers’ proof of a higher power (67-70). The contradiction comes as the speaker fluctuates between seeing himself as a part of nature and simultaneously believing that a nature exists without him. As a result, the speaker does not recognize the contradiction in him giving himself the birthright. When people overlook that the “I...is the mould [sic] into which the world is poured like melted wax”—the word takes shape as the individual sees it—Dickinson begins to question her contemporaries’ epistemology (“The Transcendentalist” 95). Both Dickinson and Emerson spent much time thinking and

writing about nature, and though Dickinson agreed with some transcendentalist virtues, she did not believe that nature could be internalized as confidently as Emerson did; nature was not ordered and ultimately not knowable. Because so, she believed a skewed internalization and understanding of nature should not be used to impose social identity.

Now that we understand that nature's meaning is created within the individual—not inherent to its existence—we need to explore the creation of meaning within the self more closely. More explicitly than in “‘Nature’ is what We see –,” Dickinson identifies the relationship between external and universal nature in her poem “The Outer – from the Inner” (Fr 450) and breaks down the creation of meaning into three categories: created, regulated, and published:

The Outer – from the Inner  
Derives it's magnitude –  
'Tis Duke, or Dwarf, according  
As is the central mood –

The fine – unvarying Axis  
That regulates the Wheel –  
Though Spokes – spin – more conspicuous  
And fling a dust – the while.

The Inner – paints the Outer –  
The Brush without the Hand –  
It's Picture publishes – precise –  
As is the inner Brand –

On fine –Arterial Canvas –  
A Cheek – perchance a Brow –  
The Star's whole secret – in the Lake –  
Eyes were not meant to know.

The speaker of this poem is consciously aware of the difference between external and universal as she uses words like “Outer” and “Inner.” She emphasizes that the “central mood,” “Axis,” and “inner Brand” give meaning to the external or that the external originates in subjectivity, not the universal, as Emerson wrote that the “the procession of facts...[flow from the] centre [sic] in himself.” The first three stanzas categorize

progressive steps in the process of creating the “Outer.” In the first stanza, the speaker notices that the “Inner / Derives.” To derive is to create, form, or obtain something. This could be literal or figurative, perhaps deriving an idea, concept, or even a definition of something; either way the source of meaning springs from the self. What the “Inner” derives is the Outer’s “magnitude – / ‘Tis Duke or Dwarf.” The shape and size or the amount of significance and influence the “Outer” has on the speaker is based on her “central mood.”

The second stanza moves from deriving to regulating as the “unvarying Axis / ...regulates the Wheel.” Now that the meaning of the “Outer” has been derived, the “Inner” also “regulates,” controls and preserves that meaning. The speaker recognizes that though the wheel’s spokes seem to spin with greater intensity from the “more conspicuous” rotation as seen from the “fling [of] dust,” the “Wheel” still spins on “The fine – unvarying Axis.” The individual maintains the illusion of fact. Meaning is derived and regulated from the “Inner” (subjective) according to the speaker.

As the first two stanzas establish and maintain meaning that can only be seen by the creator alone, the third stanza moves to publishing: the act of making something public or perceptible to an audience or people other than the creator. “The Picture publishes” what the “Inner Brand” paints. This act of painting and publishing does two things. First, it sets up the potential for an individual to metaphorically construct an image of the outer based on the inner. Second, as the individual publishes the inner brand, she now has influence on others. As she sets “– precise –” within dashes, Dickinson purposely separates the idea from the lines before and after, showing that the painting is only as accurate as the manufacturer’s interpretation or “Inner Brand.” “– Precise –,” then, emphasizes the creator’s individualized knowledge rather than an objective truth. This individualized knowledge has the potential to create behavior and influence others. Integrating these three stanzas shows that the “Inner—” or the individual—creates, regulates, and publishes knowledge about the “Outer.”

The relationship between external and universal nature, then, is that the individual unconsciously bisects nature into two incongruous parts, ignoring the point that the individual can never shed a subjective point of view. From conceptualization of an idea to the point of sharing that idea with others, the world around the individual is seen through that individual's own perspective; the knowledge about external nature is not inherent to its existence. Nature's significance is based and controlled within the individual; and for an illusion to maintain its influence, it must be preserved by the individual, not by external factors. Though the construction of the outer seems so obvious, the speaker creates and still solidifies his knowledge as fact. The speaker does note, however, that it is difficult to discern from first glance whether the spokes of the wheel—the "Outer"—are the ones spinning the wheel, not the axle spinning the spokes, showing that the origin of the weight and authority of nature is difficult to identify. The speaker ends the poem supporting this illusion of the wheel by comparing this knowledge creation to the reflection of stars in a lake: "The Star's whole secret" is only a secret because it is maintained in the internal. The star's secret and all of external nature becomes a metaphor for what is held within the "Inner." Smith supports this as he quotes Marx, saying, "Nature separate from society has no meaning since a 'nature that preceded human history...today no longer exists anywhere'.... Even to posit nature as external to society is literally absurd since the very act of positing nature requires entering a certain relation with nature" (32). To develop this idea further, Smith critiques the basis of modern science, much of which is built on the logic of Newton. He writes:

When he watched the apple fall, Newton did not ask about the social forces and events that led to the planting of the apple tree and the design of the garden, dictating the precise location of the falling apple. Nor did he ask about the domestication of the fruit trees that gave the apple its form. He asked, rather, about the 'natural' event, defined in abstraction from its social context. (15)

In this example Smith shows how early science tries to understand nature by positioning it external from social context; however, if society looks to an external nature for

meaning, the social should be considered. Dickinson understands that universal nature can never be fully understood, especially when confused with the external. As I will mention later, one reason this is important to our discussion of Dickinson's poetry is that nature is "incommensurable," as Paul Crumbley states, because it is conceived or constructed out of the dualism of external and universal nature. Nature is incommensurable because it is always socially constructed; it can never be understood by itself. Whatever is known performs a purely pragmatic function and should not be confused with what is—with a nature that perpetually eludes understanding. But this social construction of nature is hidden by the belief that nature is external, which is precisely why Dickinson questions its weight.

Part of Dickinson's critique of nature as authoritative is her belief that nature can never accurately nor fully be understood and is thus always misinterpreted. In the last stanza of "'Nature' is what We see –," she points out that

"Nature" is what We know –  
 But have no Art to say –  
 So impotent our Wisdom is  
 To Her Sincerity –

Again, the quotations around "Nature" suggest a level of subjectivity, indicating that the nature "we know" is not the *true* nature. Because we "have no Art to say," any attempt to interpret nature will be inaccurate; we simply do not have the ability to represent nature from an objective point of view. Our insistent efforts to understand nature can never produce a complete picture, thus our wisdom is impotent to nature's sincerity—"sincere" defined as "Not falsified or perverted in any way.... True, exact" ("Sincere"). By using the word "Wisdom," it seems that Dickinson may agree that nature contains truth—and that humanity may have the intellect to make *our own* meaning—but her quibble is with nature's authoritative use to impose social codes on others.

She develops the point that nature cannot be fully understood in her poem "What mystery pervades a well!" (Fr 1433). The speaker distinguishes between nature's

understanding of itself and humanity's understanding of nature. As the speaker looks down a well, she becomes overwhelmed with "What mystery pervades [the] well!" (1). The speaker recognizes that all she can see is a small piece of nature, "But just his lid of face" (6), and that nature hides the majority of itself from humanity's understanding as the face is like looking into bottomless "abyss" (8). Then the speaker notices grass that grows next to the well with a sense of confidence. She says,

The grass does not appear afraid,  
I often wonder he  
Can stand so close and look so bold  
At what is awe to me. (9-12)

The speaker's wonder or "awe" is in response to the grass's bold stance at what is such a mystery to herself. This mystery apparently leaves the speaker somewhat afraid. But because the grass is part of nature, the speaker recognizes that it has no reason to fear. For as she writes in another poem that "Of Nature I shall have enough" when she becomes "Entitled to a Bumble bee's / Familiarities –" (Fr 1170, 1, 3-4), so would she have the confidence the grass embodies if she were privy to nature's secrets. As one can never "have enough" or be satisfied and confident, as one can never have the "Art to say," one cannot justify social codes based on a societal understanding of nature unless that one becomes familiar with the nature that grass and bumblebees know. Dickinson claims in "What mystery..." that "...nature is a stranger..." and that those "that cite her most / Have never passed her haunted house / Nor simplified her ghost" (17-20). She writes that "those who know [nature], know her less / the nearer her they get" (23-24). Any authority nature seems to contain is, then, a fiction of the mind.

### The Panopticon

Because nature is often conflated with religion, nature easily becomes an authoritative influence on behavior. But not only does nature seem to contain influential power, but a deified nature seems to combine with what one considers natural, resulting

in a unconscious epistemology which individuals then internalize. In order to clarify how assumptions about nature shape individual thought, it will be helpful to review Michel Foucault's discussion of the panopticon. In her book *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Mary Klages summarizes Foucault's theory stating that he was "interested in the creation of 'good' subjects who obey rules...because they've internalized a belief in the truth of those rules, and 'bad' subjects who disobey because they don't believe in them" (144). Foucault wanted to find what motivated people to obedience. Foucault's theory of the panopticon, then, can be used as a metaphor that describes how individuals internalize social codes, which act as a form of behavioral surveillance (145). Once internalized, this influence appears natural rather than constructed to the individual. The panopticon, then, represents the individual's "awareness that [he or she] is always being watched," which persuades her to believe that she must behave a certain way. The person fears being punished for disobedience and thus obeys the pervading ideology.

My argument in relation to Dickinson's poetry is that the panoptical influence of society threatens agency as it limits individuals' vision of possible choices, resulting in obedient subjects who unknowingly follow and sometimes are unwilling to change or recognize true influences that shape their value. An important part of this influence for Dickinson's critique of nature is how the panoptical influence is difficult to recognize; its origin and what maintains the influence are elusive. As spokes of a wheel in "The Outer – from the Inner" seem to be the source of spinning and not the axle, a panoptical influence of the inner-self creating meaning about the natural world is hard to discern or notice. The origin of this influence is elusive because social codes are internalized. When internalized, they are often misunderstood as the natural order of things, especially when conflated with religion. As we saw in "Garden Lecture," the authority placed on nature's flowers hid the fact that the speaker was constructing the image of authority. What maintains the panoptical influence is the fear of stepping outside the "natural" order of things. This fear keeps society in check.



Dickinson's poem "Much Madness is divinest Sense –" (Fr 620) is a nice representation of the fear that accompanies stepping outside the boundaries of normality:

Much Madness is divinest Sense –  
 To a discerning Eye –  
 Much Sense – the starkest Madness –  
 'Tis the Majority  
 In this, as all, prevail –  
 Assent – and you are sane –  
 Demur – you're straightway dangerous –  
 And handled with a Chain –

Because the speaker gives two options—assent or demur—she seems to understand that non-conformity runs serious risks. Identifying both options suggests that to “Demur” from sanity is done purposefully and with the understanding that “you’re straightway dangerous – / And handled with a Chain –.” This awareness that the speaker displays and her use of the word “straightway” indicate that to consciously depart from what was accepted as normal was to commit some sort of social suicide. Why would someone knowingly place the label of “Madness” on themselves? The consequence would be immediate. “Straightway,” one would be banned from social acceptance. The nineteenth century was a time when many feared mental institutions. It was socially unacceptable to be institutionalized, and it was certainly unacceptable to have a family member institutionalized. In his book *A History of Psychiatry*, Edward Shorter quotes a parent ignoring her son's severe case of depression: “It's inconsiderate of him not just to pull himself together...because his three sisters are just coming into marriageable age and their suitors will surely be frightened off. Nobody wants to marry into a family with mental illness” (115). The societal panopticon blinds this parent. Rather than caring for the mental health of the son, the parent is more concerned about the social consequences for his sisters, which might occur because of his “madness.” As this example shows, the panoptical influence remains elusive as the consequence of breaking social codes were

far too drastic. Rather than straightway be banned, it was better to straightway accept such influence.

This is not the only poem that shows she recognized such influence, however. Dickinson's poem, "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –" (Fr 407) conveys that she was aware of panoptical influence and its elusiveness. In her book *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge*, Daneen Wardrop suggests that Dickinson's choice to use gothic language enabled her to identify and question such influence. She writes, "Women writers have traditionally used the gothic technique of doubling to address the reproof of women that patriarchal society causes them to internalize. As such, doubling proves an efficacious technique for critiquing a power structure that relies on psychological manipulation" (112). This technique helps Dickinson to identify and bypass the panopticon's elusiveness. Wardrop calls this linguistic ability "character doubling": "The technique of character doubling... bifurcates the world into inner and outer states—most frequently the acceptable, social self as opposed to the unsocialized, libidinous self" (97). As character doubling helped Dickinson, it also helps readers be aware of panoptical influence. The speaker of "One need not be a Chamber –" sets up her character doubling by identifying an internal and external space:

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –  
 One need not be a House –  
 The Brain has Corridors – surpassing  
 Material Place –

Character doubling begins with recognizing there are two types of spaces: physical and mental. Here, the speaker suggests that an apparition—the one haunting—does not need physical space to present itself. As Dickinson makes the reader aware that it is not the external world that one should fear, but the internal, she helps the reader begin to question his or her self-construction of the external world. The next two stanzas develop this awareness but also introduce the idea that questioning one's internal critics can be unsettling:

Far safer, of a midnight meeting  
 External Ghost  
 Than it's interior confronting –  
 That cooler Host –

Far Safer, through an Abbey gallop,  
 The Stones a'chase –  
 Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter –  
 In lonesome Place –

The introductory phrase “Far Safer” and the following conjunction “Than” in both stanzas, as well as the word “unarmed,” show the uneasiness or vulnerability created in questioning one's self. Automatically, the speaker compares external hauntings to the internal. The speaker hopes to make the reader aware of his or her internal threat. The “self encounter” and “interior confronting” are much more difficult to face than one's external fears. In the fourth stanza, Dickinson shows the panopticon's elusiveness:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –  
 Should startle most –  
 Assassin hid in our Apartment  
 Be Horror's least –

“Horror's least” fear should not be what may be hidden inside the physical space of our apartment; it should be what is hidden in the corridors of the brain. Nevertheless:

The Body – borrows a Revolver –  
 He bolts the Door –  
 O'erlooking a superior spectre –  
 Or More –

All too often, as the speaker concludes, does the individual ignore or overlook the panoptical influence. The panopticon's elusiveness is a psychological haunt, tricking the individual to think the battle to fight is external when really it is internal. As Dickinson implies, it is easy to disregard the fright—the “superior spectre”—which lies within when we are too concerned with the external. The uneasiness and vulnerability formed by identifying the self as the creator of an apparition causes a self-defense reaction.

Externally, this seems incorrect: “The Body – borrows a Revolver –” and “bolts the Door –.” But this gut reaction overlooks what could be more important.

### Nature Becomes A Panoptical Influence: Historical Context

Understanding that society’s panoptical influence is elusive is important when considered within Dickinson’s historical context. Because nature held such an authoritative influence, it often became an image and metaphor to identify virtues that were deemed appropriately and thus “naturally” feminine. These virtues were then used to define her role and duties in the home and to discourage her intellectual pursuits. In her seminal essay “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter explains that that floral dictionaries of the time used “the language of flowers” to enforce the extreme doctrine that for a woman to lose purity was worse than death: “a dried white rose symbolized ‘Death Preferable to Loss of Innocence.’”<sup>2</sup> By divine appointment, women contained a certain level of purity, a virtue that should not be compromised. Speaking of such virtues, Welter writes that “God, nature and the Bible ‘enjoin on the sex, and she cannot violate [her virtues] with impunity’” (60).<sup>3</sup> Women were spurred into obedience by fearing the consequences of breaking a natural order: “Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as *unnatural* and unfeminine” (my emphasis 46). Losing purity led not to just an unfortunate circumstance, losing purity meant she lost who she was: a woman. Disobeying nature’s order and God’s will resulted in sexual exile: “A ‘fallen woman’ was a ‘fallen angel,’ unworthy of the celestial company of her sex.” Magazines of the time categorized this exile into mental and social consequences: “To contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime...brought madness or

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2. This is directly quoted from Barbara Welter’s essay on page 46. The floral dictionary she quotes from and the direct quote itself comes from the book *Lady’s Book of Flowers and Poetry*, page 239.
  3. Welter makes this conclusion based on an essay or thing from the Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, pg. 13.

death.” Women were warned to not only avoid the loss of purity—by consequence of madness and banishment from society—they were also warned not to think about such things. Either way, whether contemplated or acted out, a loss of purity brought social exile or a form of internal reproof. The thought in itself would bring pain and sadness, which is where the panopticon enters the discussion again, making Dickinson’s “Much Madness...” even more applicable. Breaking the natural order set by God and nature held mental and social consequences, clearly—according to nineteenth-century logic—women held virtues that they naturally adhered to.

Because virtues such as purity were so clearly found in nature, nature could also be used to define woman’s position in the home. Her main duty was to have a positive influence on her family, particularly the men. Welter writes that woman’s intricacies and influence functioned like nature: “‘in secret’ her love goes forth to the world to regulate its pulsation, and send forth from its heart, in pure and temperate flow, the life-giving current” (Welter 52).<sup>4</sup> As we saw in “Garden Lecture,” women—the flowers—brought man (the speaker and gardener) back to God simply by their existence, by the way they lived their lives. This existence had such a strong effect that it called the speaker to action in the end of the poem. Interestingly, it is somewhat confusing that the speaker of “Garden Lecture” would take the traditionally passive image of flowers and use it as an aggressive founder of doctrine, assuming the more masculine role of preacher. But on another level, this makes sense. According to Welter, women in the nineteenth century were thought to be the source of virtue in the home: it was in “her home [that] woman performed her great task of bringing men back to God” (54). Her way to contribute to society was through raising and training the men, the son and husband. In addition, “Woman was expected to dispense comfort and cheer...so that brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time” (55). Perhaps this is what is meant

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4. This is taken from the *Woman in America: Her Work and Her Reward*.

in “Garden Lecture” when the garden’s host reproves the speaker, saying “Wilt thou... alone desire / Renew’d the gifts so oft in vain renew’d?” (59-60). Why seek for a good time when good time is renewed by the virtues and influence of the woman of the house? The fact that flowers are preaching human virtue and correct moral conduct is not so uncanny, then. This type of pontificating was natural for women in the nineteenth century. Thus it makes sense that the speaker labels his garden a “her” in the second line while posing the flowers as aggressive establishers of social and religious doctrine.

In addition to using nature as a way to establish woman’s role in the home, nature’s proclaimed virtues by society helped woman keep what was most important in perspective; she was taught that intellectual pursuits were not part of her natural course. Welter writes that woman was “expected to have a special affinity for flowers... [because she] ‘never appears more truly in her sphere than when she divides her time between her domestic avocations and the culture of flowers’”<sup>5</sup> (57). Judith Farr supports this view in her book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*. She writes that “to be a notable gardener was a much more acceptable avocation for mid-Victorian women (meant to be the angel of their house) than to be a poet” (4). Farr’s evidence of this claim is a close reading of Dickinson’s obituary, written by her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson. The obituary, Farr infers, emphasizes Dickinson’s gardening skills over her ingenuity as a poet: “Although Susan writes admiringly of Emily’s poems...it is to her gardening that she attributes technical, virtuosic knowledge” (5). Farr suggests that Susan was “perhaps anxious after the poet’s death to make a final apology for Emily’s reclusiveness” (5). In such an attempt, Farr explains that “the first of Emily’s talents that Susan praises is her gift for growing flowers, as if her girlhood friend and sister-in-law had a holy touch that originated in her goodness and sympathy with nature” (6). Such emphasis on Dickinson’s

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5. *The Lady’s Token*.

gardening in her obituary rather than genius as a poet, Welter might suggest, is because “women were discouraged from being literary and intellectual” (52).

Grace Greenwood, a contemporary of Emily Dickinson, cautions a friend in a letter written in 1846, titled, “To An Unrecognized Poetess,” that the “*joy of inspiration*” from literary and intellectual endeavors “can never be felt by woman with great intensity; at least can never *satisfy* her” (emphasis in original 312). Grace’s friend had disclosed to Grace that she had

often said, and *thought*, that I would willingly resign all social and domestic ties, and live lonely and unloved, if only I might possess a title of Mrs. Hemans’s genius and reputation. Fame’s clarion voice has been to me ‘the voice of a charmer,’ and when I have spoken contemptuously of popularity, and with approbation of a woman’s holy and humble office, *my heart was not with it*. (emphasis in original 310)

In response to such sentiment, Grace titled and published her own letter “To An Unrecognized Poetess,” emphasizing the inevitable fate (by natural order) of the woman who forgets that her “well-spring of joy is in the heart” (312). Grace’s response was to help her friend reposition her understanding of women’s true role. A woman cannot be recognized for her intellectual or literary pursuits because she contains “a joy which must...be far more deep and full, than any which the million can bestow; one which precedes, and is independent of...fame.” It was her virtue and correct place in the home that secured woman’s joy. These outweighed her intellectual pursuits, which could never satisfy. Thus we see that women’s agency in the nineteenth century, under the gaze of the cultural panopticon, was threatened: if intellectual pursuits could not “satisfy” women, then should they not seek after that which could satisfy?

Dickinson speaks of this influence in her poem “Nature and God – I neither knew” (Fr 803). The first stanza reads:

Nature and God – I neither knew  
 Yet Both so well knew Me  
 They startled, like Executors  
 Of my identity –

The agency essential to creating identity would hopefully be in the hands of the individual; however, the speaker is suggesting that her identity is determined by an executor. This is where we see a panoptical influence. The fact that “They”—Nature and God—“startled” (moved quickly and swiftly) seems to suggest an unconscious or uncontrollable influence (“Startle”). If a woman broke free of such influence, she would be a social outcast. This helps us understand why there is a contradiction in the relationship of the speaker and Nature and God: “I neither knew... / Yet Both so well knew Me.” The speaker was unaware that his or her pervading ideology was stemming from Nature and God. The panoptical influence and its elusiveness came from a subconscious, internalization of social codes, which led the speaker to believe these codes were unquestionable, close to unchangeable. It makes sense, then, that the speaker feels that the executor *almost* acts as cultural determination. The speaker’s mental monitor regulates his or her creation of identity because of the threat of exile: “Never unsex yourself for greatness” (Greenwood 311). This influence, coming from combined authority figures such as God and Nature, has a panoptical influence on the speaker’s psyche. The speaker feels that she has no control over her own will, almost losing control of the creation of her own identity.

Despite this threat to agency, Dickinson ends her poem “Nature and God – I neither knew” by subverting the dominant ideology, reclaiming her speaker’s will. Her second stanza reads:

Yet Neither told – that I could learn –  
 My Secret as secure  
 As Herschel’s private interest  
 Or Mercury’s Affair –

This second stanza is almost a complete reversal of the first, and the hinge is “Yet.” The “Yet” in this stanza (line five) sets forth the subversion in a concession/assertion relationship. The speaker first yields to panoptical influence, then in the second stanza the speaker is set free in secret. Living in secret, the speaker puts forth the illusion that she



bends to social codes but actually lives otherwise. This is further supported by the simile, “As Herschel’s private interest” (7). Herschel was an astronomer, the one attributed with finding Uranus. His interest was in the stars; he looked through a new lens that could see farther than science has seen before. Metaphorically, Herschel lives in secret (the confines of his telescope) with new truths and facts about the universe; and perhaps, then, so does the speaker: the secret being, “that I could learn” in line five. The speaker is reclaiming his or her agency despite the cultural influence, her affair as Mercury’s: conniving, somewhat a trickster (8).

Comparing the “Secret” from “Nature and God – I neither knew” and the last line—“Or More”—from “One need not be a Chamber” reveals the fear of finding society’s impression on agency. The speaker of “One need not be a Chamber,” as Wardrop says, ends the poem lingering “on the rich and horrific ambiguity of ‘Or More....’ A psychological horror” (115). The real terror is not the assassin hidden in the apartment, not the materialized self with revolver, but the unarmed self-encounter of finding the panopticon at the seat of influence. The ambiguity of “Or More,” however, also leaves room to suggest that perhaps the “More” is as the “Secret” in “Nature and God – I neither knew.” Finding the self behind the self reveals the panoptical influence but also reveals to the speaker the power she had all along to determine her own identity. The first two lines of stanzas two and three in “One need not be a Chamber” refer to “Material place[s],” or physical space, being haunted. The second two refer to the internal space of one’s mind as haunted. The fourth stanza, however, breaks this pattern. This stanza begins with the internal self—hidden in the corridors of the mind behind “ourselves”—and ends with the external. This break in pattern is quite noticeable as each line in stanzas two, three, and four alternate between a nine and four syllable pattern, repeating iambic tetrameter to iambic dimeter lines. Dickinson’s adherence to such a strict meter ties these three stanzas together. Breaking the conceptual pattern of external to internal, then, suggests that Dickinson may be using words and the pattern of her poem

to show what her speaker is suggesting. Perhaps linguistically, the break in this pattern reveals the self of the poem. This sudden shift surprises the reader and causes them to read “In lonesome Place” and “Ourself behind ourself, concealed” directly connected to one another. These two internal ideas are not separated by the external. This positions the internal next to lonesome place. The speaker’s goal is to get the reader to reveal the self concealed behind the self. The speaker, then, may be suggesting that apparitions, “External Ghosts,” and “Stones a’ chase” may receive their meaning from within. They receive material existence because of the importance the self imposes on such ideas. Either way the panoptical influence has still created a fear of facing one’s self “unarmed... / In lonesome Place –.” As defined in the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, “lonesome” could mean secluded from society. The fear of facing the self, then, could be the fear of being segregated from society. Maintaining a panoptical influence, or at least not questioning it, keeps the person connected to society. The fear of self-creation could be a panopticon in itself. Dickinson may be saying that not only is there a social influence keeping agency from the person, but the desire not to face one’s self (for fear or lack of desire) is in a sense a panoptical influence: “ourselves behind ourself, concealed.”

Understanding Dickinson’s perspective on nature helps clarify how to be aware of panoptical influence. She might suggest that a dose or an internalization of social codes should not be taken as a supplemental vitamin for self-creation. Nature holding an authoritative influence, paired with other authorities or not, threatens the agency of the individual. Accepting that individuals socially construct nature and its authoritative weight allows individuals to create not just their own identity but space for acceptance of change, fluctuation, and difference. Realizing that external nature can never be fully understood means the acceptance of a shifting definition of nature that allows for ambiguity in self-creation. Wardrop says, “Emily Dickinson owns her own kind of double vision which questions the foundations of rational epistemology” (97). Dickinson’s use of gothic language invites individuals to realize the possibility for multiple selves. In

Paul Crumbley's chapter "Dickinson's Uses of Spiritualism: The 'Nature' of Democratic Belief" he posits that Dickinson's use of spiritual language allows for democratic thought. He concludes that a constantly changing nature deserves democratic thought to define it—or accept its incommensurability. It is the application of this and the "relentlessly responsive requirement of democratic thought that preserves the sovereignty of the individual by making individual choice an ongoing process" (130). If individual choice becomes an ongoing process, then individuals choose for themselves whether they want to be a housewife or an intellectual woman. The panopticon hides no choices from the individual: the fear of breaking social codes may still exist, but at least the individual is aware of more than one choice.

To believe certain social behaviors natural, Dickinson might suggest, is to give up your will. Perhaps we could sum this argument up into one phrase: beware of the consequences of Anthropopsychism: "The ascription of mental faculties or characteristics like those of man to the Divine Being or the agencies at work in nature" ("Anthropopsychism"). But as Neil Smith writes, this universalizing of nature can be seen in our own day: "The overriding function of the universal conception today is to invest certain social behaviors with the status of natural events by which is meant that these behaviors and characteristics are normal, God-given, unchangeable" (29). Considering the word "unchangeable" is exactly the point. Emily Dickinson would say behavior and assumptions that govern behavior are changeable (with democratic thought and a willingness to question one's internal belief system). Again we see another example of nature imposing social codes when Grace Greenwood wrote, "Don't trample on the flowers, while longing for the stars" (311). Dickinson would most likely reply, "Apparently with no surprise / To any happy Flower / The Frost beheads it at it's play..." (Fr 1668). Judith Farr points out, "Although Dickinson often concurred in her poems and letters...that 'Beauty is its own excuse for being,' she also recognized the cruelty with

which beauty is destroyed in nature” (116). Emily Dickinson recognizes nature’s intrinsic value, yet at the same time questions the use of nature to impose social codes, especially when threatening agency.

## TRACES OF NATURE: FROST'S RECIPROCAL, REVELATORY PROCESS

Robert Frost actively sought to understand the natural world through a combination of external inspiration and internal human imagination. As an early twentieth-century writer, Frost acknowledged that meaning taken from nature was socially constructed. Where he differed from many modernists, however, was in his belief that created meaning still had value as a source for truth originating in external nature. In his book *Going by Contraries: Robert Frost's Conflict with Science*, Robert Hass points out that Frost "could not abandon belief in an external source of truth that might serve as a bulwark for traditional moral value and religious belief" (53). His attachment to both invented and discovered meaning provides Frost his unique view of nature. It is in this aspect that Frost differs most profoundly from Emily Dickinson. Where Dickinson claims that we cannot know nature, Frost asserts that nature is the only thing worth knowing. Using nature as a playground for his imagination, Frost discovers the source most central to his poetic process. Dickinson's creative approach critiques epistemology founded in nature, concentrating on cultural constructions of nature to challenge social codes that unnaturally restrict individual freedom. Frost looks to nature as a vehicle to understand the purpose and meaning of his creative experience. As Hass puts it, Frost "desperately sought divine purpose in the universe...in an effort to stabilize his life" (43), and Frost's use of nature in conflict with the epistemology of science allowed him to "find greater solace and meaning in the world" (53). Frost achieves his greatest moments of clarity by what I describe as "revelation." The word "revelation" best expresses Frost's relationship to nature because he often builds his poems around moments of epiphany, where nature speaks out of mystery, revealing itself briefly without shedding its final and ultimate impenetrability. Any sudden moment of clarity is followed by mystery. Nature is never fully revealed for Frost; his efforts allow him a glimpse of meaning, leaving him with a hope for understanding and motivation to continue reading nature. Where Frost treats

nature as an object to look at and temporarily find meaning in, Dickinson demonstrates that despite one's best efforts, nature remains beyond our reach. Yet, as much as they differ, they both have a fascination with the central role nature plays in human thought.

The difference, then, is in their belief that nature is or is not knowable. For instance, we have already discussed how Dickinson disputes the existence of a wholly external nature. She claims that "The Outer – from the Inner / Derives it's magnitude" (Fr 450) because "The Tents to Nature's Show / Mistake the Outside for the in" (Fr 1102); the understanding of external nature is derived or constructed from a social standpoint because the true meaning of nature in itself is hidden from our view. Thus Dickinson constantly questions society's belief that it can understand nature defined as inviolable, pristine, and autonomous, allowing her to challenge human nature's ideological function. In a similar sense, Frost challenges his contemporaries' use of nature as a proof that there is no greater being. Frost, however, seems less concerned with how uses of nature in the early twentieth century influence society and focuses mainly on the way imagination combines with nature to reveal sources of understanding and spiritual purpose. His use of nature attempts to cement a belief in a higher power. His goal is to find the spiritual existence of nature in order to confirm his own spiritual existence. Thus, Frost's approach blurs the distinction between universal and external nature; at the same time that he looks into nature to find meaning, he also considers himself part of nature—an appendage, attached, inseparable.

The poem that prefaces his first book of poetry, "The Pasture," hints at this and is a complex example of the need to find a source of truth yet still use the imagination. The pronoun in the first lines of both stanzas places the speaker in direct contact with nature that is if anything too real: "I'm going out to clean..." and "I'm going out to fetch..." (1 and 5). The speaker's announcement that he is cleaning and fetching from nature shows his desire to discover what nature conceals. His venture *into* the pasture to fetch and "watch the water clear" shows his search for meaning in nature (3). Along with

fetching the calf he also goes “to rake the leaves away” (2). Metaphorically, the human imagination rakes leaves away so that nature’s clear stream of water can then reveal its depths. This action shows his belief that he needs to be *part* of the receiving of something from nature: without his raking the leaves away, the water would not clear. Frost, not so explicitly concerned about the social implications of nature as Dickinson is, looks to nature for personal reasons. He seeks revelation. Compared to Dickinson, his approach is not concerned with the way nature serves cultural aims; his more individualistic relationship to nature is reciprocal and personal: to gain or seek imaginative freedom in order to find spiritual existence.

Concluding that Dickinson’s and Frost’s uses of nature remain as complete opposites would be a mistake, however. The way they approach nature may differ but their aims are quite similar. Both understand that knowledge founded in nature cannot hold an authoritative role; both stress the importance of an active—not passive—relationship to nature as essential to fighting complacency; both seek to redefine nature in order to give constructive and defining power to the individual; and both ultimately seek to empower agency to avoid and fight hegemonic structures. To consider these similarities, then, we need to look at Frost’s approach to nature in more depth. We will see that if Frost believes that nature does reveal itself and that man can interpret it—a shared role in meaning making—then he also recognizes these two things: the precariousness of this knowledge and that expectation hinders revelation. Responsibility for how best to think about nature, then, must constantly be rediscovered and persuasive, even if only temporarily recognizing the limits of such knowledge.

To assemble Frost’s use of nature in his own language, I look first to his poem “Gathering Leaves” as it is a prime example of how the individual takes an active role in receiving revelation. The poem takes up the theme of “The Pasture” as the speaker goes “out to clean” and rake away leaves (the speakers of both poems actively take part in cleaning nature). But the speaker of “Gathering Leaves” is not here to clear only but also

to “gather,” as the title points out. This word highlights one of Frost’s most interesting questions: what is the individual’s role in receiving revelation from nature: are we passive recipients or active participants? “Gathering” implies an assertive action to collect or sort and order the scattered. As the speaker states in the last stanza that “a crop is a crop” (22), “Gathering” could be thought of as harvesting. If to gather is to harvest, nature will have produced some sort of fruit or crop to be harvested and the individual must initiate the gathering. From the title itself, then, Frost suggests that the individual must be an active participant in revelation. The activity required, as he states here, is that the individual must gather for himself to receive any sort of meaning from nature.

The gathering required by the individual who searches for meaning is more complex than simply picking up leaves, however. If the revelatory process were not more complex, it would be easy to rebut Frost’s point that one needs to simply “pick up” or gather revelation: revelation gathered would be a product of the imagination, subjective and only important to the individual who gathered. The focus point and conflict of the poem, however, is the difficulty with which the speaker gathers. The difficulty is displayed in at least two ways: one, nature’s qualities are elusive and slippery (leaves are hard to pick up); and two, one can never be sure of how useful the revelation will be (was picking up the leaves worth it?). The first stanza demonstrates nature’s slipperiness:

Spades take up leaves  
 No better than spoons,  
 And bags full of leaves  
 Are light as balloons. (1-4)

The clumsy attempt to pick up leaves with a spade is Frost’s speaker admitting that nature cannot be “properly” gathered. Though the task of raking leaves into bags seems easy enough, the awkward shoveling seems to suggest that nature resists any sort of gathering. Dickinson wrote that “nature is a Stranger” (1433), and Frost’s assertion here agrees that humanity’s effort to gather and contain nature keeps nature’s mysteries at a distance.

Frost’s speaker continues with nature’s elusiveness in the third stanza:



the mountains I raise  
 Elude my embrace,  
 Flowing over my arms  
 And into my face. (9-12)

Success in gathering is limited by the leaves' elusive qualities and because, as Hass writes, "human perception [is] simply not sufficient to gain access to the deepest mysteries of the universe" (57). Not even tools help: "Spades take up leaves / No better than spoons" (1-2). Gathering is not easy. And though the word "gathering" implies Frost's emphasis on active participation in meaning making, to suggest that "gathering" *alone* is the key to revelation does not accurately depict Frost's search for revelation.

What makes gathering even more difficult is that the speaker cannot be certain that what he gathered has any worth. The speaker's active role in "Gathering Leaves" does not guarantee a clear form of revelation. Despite the bags he gathers, his crop's worth is not self-evident or easily understood. At the end of his harvest, all the speaker has is nothing more than "bags full of leaves / [as] light as balloons" (3-4). "And what have I then?" the speaker rightly asks (16):

Next to nothing for weight,  
 And since they grew duller  
 From contact with earth,  
 Next to nothing for color. (17-20)

The speaker's work harvests a crop that is "Next to nothing for use" (21). What good is a bag of leaves? The speaker's strenuous efforts cannot guarantee that the revelation sought for will be of any use. If there is no value, what motivation does the speaker have to be so active in creating meaning? This hinders the speaker's efforts to receive revelation because of the assumptions he makes when considering the revelation's value. Robert Hass has noticed a similar situation in Frost's astronomical poems. He writes that "wish [often] influences the quality of fact" (64). The speaker's search for utility causes him to recognize other values the leaves may contain. The speaker's tendency to assume his

crop's usefulness introduces the question: if the revelation is not what we expect, can we recognize it as revelation? From this episode, Frost hints that expectation about what form revelation appears in can block the individual from discerning the form it comes in.

Without the last stanza, this reading might leave us thinking that the gathering process is fruitless, that because of the lack of utility, the speaker's bags full of leaves mean nothing. He ends his poem contradicting this type of reading: "But a crop is a crop, / And who's to say where / the harvest shall stop?" (22-24). The poem concludes open-ended. Though the crop may be "Next to nothing for use"—lacking in utility—the crop is still worth having to some degree. The speaker admits that though his bags of leaves may be light as balloons, they are still a crop (he recognizes the literal fact despite his wish for utility in the end). In this sense the speaker suggests that the meaning or quality of revelation does not matter; rather, the fact that revelation exists is what he cares about. And with this point of view, "who's to say where / the harvest shall stop?"

"Gathering Leaves" not only shows that Frost believes an individual must be an active participant in the revelatory process to glean any sort of meaning from nature, it also subtly demonstrates how "play" and becoming "lost" are necessary factors in gathering meaning. As we have seen from this poem so far, Frost's aim to find more meaning in nature than just mechanical evolution requires a concerted effort. Gathering is complex. As such, Frost's playful tone and images fulfill an important role for his speaker to conclude so optimistically that "a crop is a crop." Read in its entirety, "Gathering Leaves" feels more like a sing-songy poem, perhaps more light-hearted than serious (especially because of the short lines and alternating rhyme patterns). His jovial tone emphasizes the playfulness of the speaker's efforts to gather leaves. The images of spoons and balloons with its simple rhyme show Frost's playfulness with words and his imaginative approach to nature. And the third stanza (which reads, "the mountains I raise / Elude my embrace, / Flowing over my arms / And into my face") continues his playfulness by almost giving the image of a child playing in piles of leaves. The snapshot

of this individual hugging a pile of leaves that overflows into his face also hints at a type of play that leads to becoming overwhelmed in nature, almost to the point of becoming lost. The combination of these images and tones—highlighting the playfulness that leads to becoming lost—is a sort of judgeless encounter with nature suggesting that revelation often comes in a form that the individual does not expect. Unlike the speaker in “The Pasture” who “cleaned the pasture spring” (1) in order to “watch the water clear” (3)—perhaps hoping to divine something beneath the murky water—the speaker in “Gathering Leaves” clears the ground of leaves for no apparent reason. Though the initial motivation for the speaker to rake leaves may have been to clear his yard (he never states so), the speaker ends the poem realizing that the leaves themselves are his harvest. Frost’s ability to play leads him to conclude “who’s to say where / the harvest shall stop?” These two themes suggest that Frost believes one must approach any effort to understand nature with curiosity rather than imaginative expectation.

Karl Keller’s comments on the role of “play” in Frost’s poetry helps clarify how imagination is necessary to receiving revelation in a poem like “Gathering Leaves.” According to Keller, Frost adopted Dickinson’s “play” and ability to “dwell in possibility” (Fr 466) as an approach to nature that allowed him to be part of the revelatory process. In his chapter “When the Soul is at Play,” Keller points out that Dickinson had a profound influence on Frost. He claims that Dickinson’s playful approach to poetry in general and certainly towards nature greatly influenced Frost. Keller writes, “[Dickinson’s] mischief with poetic form was an indication to [Frost] that she was serious about what she was saying and would bend conventions to get it said...that with her poetry (and her ideas) she was *at play*” (314 emphasis in original). It was her form, ideas, and the sense that she “was having a good time trying to say it” that Frost admired.

Though Frost often criticized writers who broke traditional forms of poetry and wrote free verse, he tolerated and even celebrated Dickinson's writing precisely because of her daring ability to "play." Frost commented that Dickinson's "poetry is play" (313) when he read lines like "The Lightning skipped like mice" (Fr 1246) and "The Mountains – grow" (Fr 768). Frost's recognition of Dickinson and the influence of her form of play started early: "[Frost] lived with Emily Dickinson from the beginning of his writing of verse"; it was in 1892—when Frost was eighteen—that he began reading Dickinson's poems shortly after they first appeared (310). So from the beginning, Frost adopted a playful approach to poetry that allowed him space to consider the possibilities of meaning in nature. This play in nature, Keller writes, stems from a paradigm: that for Dickinson, "The Fall...did not make the world a wasteland" (307). Frost shared this view,<sup>6</sup> which is especially pertinent when we consider that he wrote during the high modernist period. Because the world was not a wasteland to Frost, he saw the natural world a worthwhile place to look for meaning. To find meaning, he had to play, as Dickinson did, which allowed him to "dwell in possibility."

George Bagby adds two more terms to describe Keller's "play" in his book *Frost and the Book of Nature*: "imaginative adventurousness" and "extravagance" (24). In his chapter "Eyes Seeking the Response of Eyes," Bagby comments on Frost's efforts to "read" nature writing that the seeker of knowledge "needs to relinquish willful control of his [revelatory] progress—however unsettling the prospect may be—and become lost..." (29). Calling Frost's play "imaginative adventurousness" and "extravagance" is fairly accurate as Frost used the word "extravagance" himself when referring to this type of play. Frost gave a talk titled "On Extravagance" at Dartmouth College in the

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6. Jay Parini, Frost's most recent biographer, suggests that Frost's fourth book of poetry, *New Hampshire*, was perhaps a "satirical response to Eliot's *The Waste Land*" (209). Frost would certainly have shared Dickinson's view that "The Fall... did not make the world a wasteland."

fall of 1962 in which he highlights many of Bagby's main points (Frost 902). In this address Frost speaks of the extravagance of poetry, which seems closely related to his interest in Dickinson's play. He labels extravagance "a kind of an exaggeration," like an exaggerated claim (903). In poetry, this extravagance is a chance for the poet to go beyond the expected, magnifying a moment (a sort of hyperbolic move) to emphasize an idea, a feeling, or an experience. Frost also said in his talk that "extravagance lies in 'it sometimes seems as if'" (904). Extravagance is both in the language used in the poem and the imaginative approach to the content. Frost says that some people cannot "go with" this extravagance, living or remaining safe in settled realities or what is widely accepted (904). Extravagance, then, is pushing one's self beyond the boundary of the familiar, the accepted, and the shared. As we will see later, the lack of extravagant action, or imaginative adventurousness—an open-minded inquiry—results in a failed attempt at revelation. Just as Dickinson's "poems make a space in which she can dance," Frost's poems quite similarly make a space in which he can explore (Keller 306-07). This imaginative adventurousness is a chance for Frost to be not only *in* nature but *part* of nature. It is a place where he can make "something else" from his play. This play in meaning making is important enough to Frost, Bagby claims, that "the prospect of physical death is less appalling to Frost than that of the imaginative death that results from excessive clinging to the familiar" (27). Extravagance is play in the unfamiliar, a willingness to let go of and set aside beliefs in search for something new—sometimes sacrificing the rational for the chance to explore.

Aiming for imaginative adventurousness through extravagance and play leads directly to becoming lost in nature, taking Dickinson's "dwelling in possibility" a step further. Bagby writes, "If the seeker is to achieve the deepest kind of educational encounter with the natural world, he needs at least on occasion to pursue extra-vagance until he achieves yet a further stage of visionary readiness...,[to] become lost in order to find himself more truly and more strange" (29). To become lost Bagby writes you must

cooperate “with natural forces in order to be ‘overwhelmed’ by and ultimately lost in them.” Frost “dwells in Possibility” as Dickinson does, but dwells long enough to become lost. Jay Parini—one of Frost’s more recent biographers—refers to Frost’s attempt to receive revelation, writing, “One must plunge into loss and despair before arriving at a condition of salvation” (362). Adding to this, Robert Hass writes that for Frost “spiritual renewal and wholeness can be attained only when one is willing first to confront physical decay and then, paradoxically, to move beyond it” (84). The idea of becoming lost, then, is a continuation of extravagance. “Cooperation” *with* nature is extravagant play. While in the midst of this play, the letting go of the familiar results in becoming lost, which opens the self to revelation.

Frost clearly demonstrates letting go of the familiar (play) to become lost in his poem “Directive.” The speaker claims that he only has “at heart your getting lost,” so he takes the reader through extravagance and imaginative play. The path he takes the reader down is reflective. Hass writes that Frost’s “quest for spiritual renewal must first be conditioned by an accompanying loss of conventions is evident in the first ‘directive’ of the poem” (84):

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off  
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather (1-4)

The speaker displays his play and effort to become lost (and even lose the reader) in the language and subject of the poem. The vague pronoun “this” in the first line and the stunning comparison of a weathered headstone begins this poem in Frost’s imaginative adventurousness. Frost’s extravagance continues as he fills the poem with similes and metaphors: the road your guide will take you on “May *seem as if* it should have been a quarry” (my emphasis 10) and the town’s rubble seems haunted; you may feel you are being “watched... / *As if* by eye pairs...” (my emphasis 21-22). When the speaker does describe the subject (being the ghost town in which the guide takes the reader) he often

negates the importance of the images shared, furthering the play that leads to becoming lost by saying, “You must not mind a certain coolness from” the glacier which once carved out the valley “Nor need you mind” being watched “As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins” (18, 22). Such negations sidetrack the reader to avoid coming to any certain meaning or clear narrative. The imaginative play peaks as the speaker says, “Make yourself up a cheering song of how / Someone’s road home from work this once was” (29-30). And interestingly, it is only after the speaker writes “And if you’re lost enough to find yourself / By now,” does he conclude that “Then” you can “make yourself at home” (36-37, 39).

The speaker’s play and efforts to lose himself lead him to the source of inspiration: “Your destination and your destiny’s / A brook that was the water of the house, / Cold as a spring as yet so near its source” (49-51). The entire purpose or “destination” of the speaker’s tour is to lead the reader to a brook. The revelatory attempt is made clear as the speaker refers to the brook as a source of inspiration or knowledge. In writing about Frost’s poem “Spring Pools,” Parini points out that “Water, [in ‘Spring Pools’] as elsewhere in Frost, can be taken to mean a substance into which one dips for inspiration” (234). The brook in “Directive” plays a similar role. Hass comments that “a final peace will endure for those willing to abandon desire and open themselves to the possibility of further loss” (86). Thus Frost ends his poem, writing, “Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” (62). Clearly “Directive” is a poem about looking to nature as a source of knowledge. As Bagby writes, “Directive” is “Frost’s most explicit attempt to describe preparation for vision or revelation” (Bagby 30).

What is most challenging in Frost’s poems about getting lost is the process of discerning the moment and content of revelations that is the motive for getting lost in the first place. Many of Frost’s poems are written with a parabolic style, which makes use of his “play” and becoming “lost.” I define his parabolic style as displaying one meaning

while concealing another. In other words, many of Frost's poems have a surface narrative that leads the reader one way while a greater "spiritual" truth—often contradictory and subverting to the initial reading—undercuts the more obvious reading. Robert Hass describes this parabolic style as "discernible thematic countermovements [that] often neutralize ideas that at first glance appear absolute" (100). Frost explains why he writes in parables in the end of "Directive": "I have kept hidden... / A broken drinking goblet... / Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it, / So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't" (55, 57-59). Parini clarifies these lines, writing that "Frost refers here to Mark 4:11-12, where Jesus says, 'Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables. That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand...'" (362). Essentially, Parini writes, those who are "unprepared for the experience, cannot participate in the revelations offered here."

Frost's poem "For Once, Then, Something" is a good example of this style, showing the results of imaginative expectation. This poem is also important to look at as his speaker is seeking some sort of truth in nature, asking whether knowledge is *found in* or *created about* nature. The poem begins, "Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs," which almost sounds like a response to Dickinson's "What Mystery Pervades a Well" (Fr 1433) where the speaker concludes: "those who know [nature], know her less / The nearer her they get" (23-24). One way we can view this poem, then, is Frost's effort to get nearer the source or look towards the source of inspiration as his speaker looks down and into a well, trying to see past the water. The first six lines read:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
 Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
 Deeper down in the well than where the water  
 Gives me back in a shining surface picture  
 Me myself in the summer heaven godlike  
 Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.

We see the speaker admitting his flawed perspective, "Always wrong to the light," so



he can never see beyond his own reflection, which creates a problem beyond nature being unknowable: what meaning the speaker finds in nature may only be a reflection of himself, not something intrinsic. Also, the fact that the water reflects the heavens with godlike images and cloud puffs speaks to the desire Frost has to receive some sort of revelation from nature and, in this poem specifically, water, a source of inspiration for writing poetry. Considering all this, it seems, at first, that Frost positions his speaker alongside Dickinson's in that he sees "The Tents to Nature's Show" but cannot see "Deeper down" or beyond the "surface picture." But looking at the first line again shows an important distinction between Frost and Dickinson's reading of nature. The speaker himself is not concerned at seeing his own reflection in the water, it is "Others [that taunt him] with having knelt at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light." It is the others that mock him for seeking revelation, pointing out that he only gets back a visual echo of himself.

Whether or not this poem was written in response to Dickinson is hard to say. Frost is certainly writing it in response to some sort of critic. Parini writes that "For Once, Then, Something" was partly a "response to critics who saw him as a country bumpkin whose poems did not see much beyond the "shining surface" of rural life, with himself at its center" (181-82). If it is others that are concerned with this situation, one might assume that Frost is content with seeing himself as part of the revelatory process. In this light, we can see how the speaker sees himself as "godlike." The juxtaposition of the heavens and the speaker's face reflected in the water shows the speaker searching for some sort of inspiration, recognizing his own part in the revelatory process. This is certainly a theme that repeats itself in other poems. And whether or not this is a direct response, Frost ultimately shows that he tolerates the idea of the individual seeing himself in nature as part of the source of inspiration, a matter we will discuss later.

The next four lines take a dramatic turn, showing the precariousness or uncertainty found in such jointly created revelation:

*Once*, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
 I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
 Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.

No longer is there only a reflection of himself in the water, he sees, “as [he] thought, beyond the picture.” Frost uses revelatory language here—having a moment of clarity that quickly vanishes. The speaker “thought” he discerned “beyond the picture.” The uncertainty of the revelatory moment compels him to quickly change his description from “beyond” to “through the picture.” The revelation, whether it happens too fast or is still at an awkward angle of light, is not clear. Is it beyond or through the picture on the surface? It is a “*something* white, [and] uncertain...,” but certainly “Something more of the depths” (emphasis added). Out of the fifteen lines in this poem, only these four admit that there was a moment of seeing beyond the veil, which touches on another theme in Frost’s nature poetry. If there are revelatory moments, they are only moments. Rarely if ever do they come as fully packaged texts of meaning.

The next five lines show Frost’s imaginative play:

Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
 Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The disclosure of truth sought beyond the surface does not last long. Just as the grass plays an important role in Dickinson’s “What Mystery” by distinguishing between human understanding of nature and nature’s understanding of nature—“The grass does not appear afraid” of what the speaker of Dickinson’s poem finds so much “awe”—so does the fern in Frost’s “For Once.” It is almost as though nature knew the speaker had seen just enough, perhaps close to too much, so the “Water came to rebuke the too clear water” and stanching the revelatory moment. If nature can rebuke the water, then perhaps it also had the power to clear it for one small moment. But certainly the claim

that this perfectly timed moment was a purposeful act by nature is Frost's imagination at work. Frost's imaginative extravagance in personifying nature to turn on and off the valve of revelation suggests that Frost believes that a working process from nature and an interpretive process from the human mind itself in the form of play are necessary to receive revelation. The phrase "and lo"—and as Parini points out the biblical word "rebuke"—place the revelatory moment close to the spiritual realm (182). Through Frost's deliberate contradiction of including both self-created revelation and a beam of spiritual insight from an external source in the same poem as a way to communicate with nature, I believe, accurately represents Frost's belief that both are necessary.

That Frost and Dickinson reminisce about nature's impenetrable barrier at "well-curbs" seems to place them in opposition with one another. Dickinson's "mystery" that pervades the well seems to negate Frost's assertion that a moment of clarity is possible. For Frost, however, mystery still pervades and even prevails. In many of his nature poems the moments of truth, the revelatory moments, come and go so quickly that the speaker cannot be positive the moment even really existed. Parini points out that "the last line [in 'For Once...'] is deeply ironic, in that the 'something' might well be 'nothing' (182). The movement from "Truth" to a "pebble of quartz" equals that from the inspired to the prosaic. There was simply a glimmer of light or a glimpse of something. The peace from assurance is never given; thus mystery still prevails.

To leave the poem here, however, would be to exclude the subversive element in Frost's parabolic style that coincides with his inclusion of multiple perspectives for viewing nature. Because Frost sets the reader in a position to see more than the speaker, the reader is privileged to see not only what the speaker learns but what the speaker overlooks and completely misses. Too focused on what may be "Deeper down in the well... / beyond the picture, / Through the picture..." the speaker overlooks the possible significance of the drop of water that fell from the fern. Rather than describing the image of the ripple—how its penetrating drop sends waves from one central point which reach

and bounce off the wall to offset the rhythm still radiating from the original drop—the speaker focuses on what is lost and never seen: “ a ripple / Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom, / Blurred it, blotted it out.” The speaker is then left with what he views as a fleeting glimpse of truth. Limited by his imaginative expectations, the speaker does indeed recognize the drop as a response from nature. After all, both fern and water are certainly part of nature, and he personifies the water as a being with agency: “Water came to rebuke the too clear water.” Yet the speaker fails to register its significance in his search for “something.” For Frost, seeking to fulfill expectations before learning to listen to or view nature openly leads to failure in receiving revelation from nature.

If revelation is possible, as Frost continually asserts, then how does one recognize or identify it as revelation: what does it look like, or what form does it take? Implicitly addressing these questions, Amelia Klein also concludes that preconceived ideas or expectations of the form of revelation blind humans to a reciprocal relationship with nature. In her essay “The Counterlove of Robert Frost,” Klein challenges the myth that Frost is merely a dark poet as has commonly been accepted. Certainly Frost in his desert places responds to nature from a modernist viewpoint, but Frost’s opinions about nature are also based in the romantic tradition. Klein argues that “Frost shares with his romantic forebears a vision of the natural world as the source and context of our lives” (362). The title of her essay taken from Frost’s poem “The Most of it,” emphasizes the point that Frost actively thought and wrote about the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world.

As I reviewed in the introduction, the character of this poem desires “not [his] own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response.” But as the reader is privileged to see what the speaker overlooks in “For Once...,” the character in “The Most of It” focuses the entire poem on the character searching for response from nature. The critique of the character in this poem is found in the first two words of the poem: “*He thought* he kept the universe alone” (my emphasis). These two words show the

character's failure to objectively view nature while seeking revelation. The speaker believes he is alone because "...all the voice in answer he could wake / Was but the mocking echo of his own / From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake." The character claims that he wants "not his own love back in copy speech, / But counter-love, original response."

As we see, then, Klein's use of Frost's "counterlove" in her title is applicable to Frost's search for original response. But what I take away from Klein's essay is her recognition and analysis of Frost's implicit critique of imaginative expectation. In her reading of "The Most of It," Klein states that what Frost's character wants is

Not echoes, not redoublings, but rather a genuine exchange, a reciprocity in which what one receives is not one's own gift back again, repelled. The irony, of course, is that our hero wishes to dictate the form that "original response" should take; it should be receptive to his calls, should return them in his own tongue.... The condition he cries out upon... is precisely what he seeks to confirm, and so the form his demand takes precludes its satisfaction. Anything that is *not* an echo risks being identified as "nothing." (366)

With Klein's point of view, we see that the character tricks himself into thinking he is searching for revelation, but all he really is looking for is something human—a "voice," or perhaps an affirmation of what he already believes. Disappointed in the lack of genuine revelation from nature, his belief that he keeps the universe alone is confirmed (in the first line of the poem). The character seeks assurance of what he already believes rather than to "dwell in Possibility." He wants to *know*, not accept mystery as an answer. The answer he thinks he receives is his own image.

In this sense we see the dangers of imagining revelation in a manner that merely mimics our inner desires. Frost shows us on one level a character looking for original response from nature only to be disappointed at receiving what he wants to see. This is a warning from Frost demonstrating the dangers of solipsism (Bagby 32). The second half of the poem, however, implicitly suggests that he missed the revelatory moment.

The answer came “As a great buck it powerfully appeared” (16). The buck “crashed / In the cliff’s talus on the other side,” swam across the lake, “Pushing the crumpled water up ahead, / And landed like a pouring waterfall...” (10-11, 17-18). The revelation, Klein writes, “does not prove human, nor does it prove that nature contains or complies with human intelligence” (367). The buck simply “makes its presence felt... Its appearance... is what forces the underbrush, making an impact.” We see here that the form of nature’s response takes on an assertive presence that at first glance is nothing more than an animal walking through the woods as imaginative expectation blinds the one seeking revelation. Referring to imaginative expectation, Klein writes, “...the buck breaks into the ritual circle of the poem where imagination obsessively repeats its wants.... By failing to be the hoped-for revelation—which would, in fact, be a repetition of the already known a ‘someone else additional’—the buck puts us in contact with what is not additive but other...by no means an accretion of or adjunct to the human.” The fact that the character completely misses the revelatory moment, then, is evidence for the possibility of “original response.”

The character overlooking the moment makes an other out of nature (the buck), which places the source of revelation beyond his (the human) imagination. The fact of the matter is that the buck did jump in the water, swim across the lake, and climb out on the other side. There was no imaginative construction in this scene. This objective moment where the speaker and character both observe a buck climbing out of the lake allows for a possible reciprocal relationship to occur. Because the speaker ends the poem with such an ambiguous line—“and that was all”—it seems as though the character dismisses the moment as mere whim, while the speaker considers the moment as evidence. This example is more explicit in “Two Look at Two,” where at the end of the poem, two hikers coming upon a doe and buck are stunned, realizing that “the earth in one unlooked-for favor / Had made them certain earth returned their love” (41-42). Frost is aware that how one approaches nature affects the success of pure revelation. In “Two Look at Two,” Frost

purposely says, “one *unlooked-for* favor,” suggesting that imaginative play is important but not imaginative expectation. Expectation is the imposing of the self or the projection of social constructions onto nature while play is the dwelling in possibilities with the aim of becoming lost.

To this point, then, we see Frost’s seemingly contradictory implication that there exists both an external and universal nature. It would be easy to assume that Frost fully supports an external nature when as in “For Once...,” the speaker looks into a well for truth from nature. Also supporting the external idea, the character in “The Most...” calls out to nature, looking to the trees and cliff for some sort of response, which comes in a form he does not recognize. Both poems show the speaker or character seeking revelation from an external source. But Frost also leaves room for the universal nature interpretation. The ripple that blurs the bottom of the well must still have been reflecting the image of the speaker, becoming a wavy mix of sky and distorted facial features, a combined image reminding the speaker and reader that any human truth stems from a hybrid source—the interpreting self and observable nature. “The Most...” still leaves room to conclude that even a buck climbing out of a lake is the workings of the imagination itself, thus revelation as still constructed by the imagination responding to itself.

Reading his poem “All Revelation,” however, complicates the issue further as Frost discusses universal nature explicitly on one level while implicitly subverting this assertion on another. I am not the first to notice Frost’s desire to communicate with nature, nor am I the first to see that Frost has an interesting view of the relationship between external and universal nature. Bagby acknowledges Frost’s desire for communication when he writes, “...Frost devotes a considerable amount of attention to the question of how the human observer can best improve his chances of visionary success” (22). Bagby labels external and universal differently, naming universal nature “pure subjectivism” and external nature “pure fact.” He traces Frost’s contradictory back-and-forth views between pure subjectivism and pure fact and concludes that “For

the poet himself, the truth undoubtedly lies somewhere between these two extremes, one yielding to pure subjectivism, the other denying the imagination any power or freedom” (33). Overall, “All Revelation” shows Frost’s indecisiveness on the subject. He is not able to place the process of revelation wholly on an external or universal foundation. It also shows his ultimate suggestion that meaning making is a joint process that is central to his metaphorical, consummate relationship with nature. To begin this more in-depth look, it will help to read the entire poem at once rather than in chunks:

A head thrusts in as for the view,  
 But where it is it thrusts in from  
 Or what it is it thrusts into  
 By that Cyb’laean avenue,  
 And what can of its coming come,

And whither it will be withdrawn,  
 And what take hence or leave behind,  
 These things the mind has pondered on  
 A moment and still asking gone.  
 Strange apparition of the mind!

But the impervious geode  
 Was entered, and its inner crust  
 Of crystals with a ray cathode  
 At every point and facet glowed  
 In answer to the mental thrust.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes  
 Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,  
 Thus concentrating earth and skies  
 So none need be afraid of size.  
 All revelation has been ours.

Two readings simultaneously stand out for interpretation, showing Frost’s inability to decide on either external or universal nature. First, at the more explicit level, Frost’s speaker claims, as Bagby writes, “that all the vision we have has been and must be forged by our own imaginative efforts” (22). As Dickinson writes “The Outer – from the Inner / Derives it’s magnitude,” so Frost concludes, “All revelation has been ours.” An



initial reading of this poem takes a more negative view of the universal aspect, assuming there is nothing new learned about nature; it is all culturally constructed. The adjective “All” shuts out any possibility that there may be parts or pieces of revelation received from nature that are inherent or genuinely given from the material/external world. This exemplifies Bagby’s idea of pure subjectivism. Bagby suggests that the imagination is able to “shape a natural scene,” that it has “active control” and manipulates “...what it perceives;” thus any idea or premonition we think we receive is made up (32, 33). Indeed it is hard to disagree with this reading as Frost writes that it is only after the geode was entered that “every point and facet glowed.” And certainly the power implied in “Eyes seeking the response of eyes...[concentrate] earth and skies” suggests that Frost believes in a wholly universal approach to nature—that truly there is no nature that exists outside human interpretation; therefore, a pure revelation does not or cannot exist. The mental thrust spoken of is an assertive move by the human, a compelling argument that this poem’s central argument is that all revelation is “pure subjectivism.”

But even in this, one of his most overt poems supporting pure subjectivism, Frost undercuts the more explicit reading by leaving space for a more implicit interpretation that still holds to the external nature idea, again emphasizing what we have already seen in “The Most of It.” The poem takes a turn on the word “But” at the beginning of the third stanza. This word marks the return to the original narrative of the poem. The first line sets up the narrative of a head thrusting “in as for the view” but quickly the speaker digresses into a meditative moment for the next nine lines. The turning point basically says that despite this meditative moment, the geode was entered. This narrative (line one and stanzas three and four) obscures and reveals the failing point of revelation. One reading may show that “Eyes seeking the response of eyes” proves that all revelation is socially constructed, but this same line also shows why the speaker concludes that “All revelation is ours.” The speaker of “The Most” ironically sought for human voice in nature, thus mistaking his echo as proof that revelation is of his own making. Likewise,

in “All Revelation,” eyes seeking eyes find the revelation to be constructed. Again we see that it is when human seeks the human in nature (a form of imaginative expectation) that the conclusion is made that revelation must only be the result of the mind. This does not mean that Frost sees no relation between him and nature (because ultimately my conclusion is that there needs to be both imaginative effort and outside/external revelation), but I think it shows that to handle the possibility of revelation with an extremist perspective leaves one missing the point.

“All Revelation” does more than merely critique the universal perspective, however; it demonstrates how original response reveals itself (which is the fact that the cathode shines, there’s no wish here). Klein points out, “the possibility of original response...is staked on nature’s power to break through the established text and assert the reality of the not-yet-written” (368). Just as the Buck provides the action of nature in “The Most,” so the cathode in line thirteen of “All Revelation” provides an unconstructed encounter with nature. The cathode on a light source is the point where light or electricity leaves the cell. Here, then, the cathode acts as a revelatory conduit of sorts to support both perspectives. Whether or not eyes were seeking eyes, the cathode still “glowed.” Depending on what one seeks, however, this glow could be perceived as a construction of the mind or a revelation. Approaching revelation with imaginative expectation—“Eyes seeking the response of eyes”—would lead one to conclude that any meaning the cathode ray contains lies within the viewer’s mind. By first becoming lost, the individual approaches nature with an open mind, interpreting the assertive force from nature as a form of original response. Nature may assert itself but it cannot penetrate any further into the mind of man than man can into nature. Man has to be ready to receive; expectations have to be lowered. Nature can offer original response *to* the listener, but not *into*.

I conclude that Frost believes meaning making needs to be a combination of pure subjectivism and pure fact because he complicates the separation of external from universal. He does so in two ways. First, “All Revelation,” like “For Once, Then,

Something” and “The Most of It,” follows a parabolic pattern; it presents a surface narrative and conceals a greater spiritual truth. The surface narrative of “All Revelation” suggests that meaning found in nature is a construction of the imagination. The concealed truth is the cathode’s ray: an assertive move from nature that when the individual is lost, he considers it to be revelation. Interestingly, the speaker in “All Revelation” hints or even warns giving the answer to why someone may find nature only external in “All Revelation.” Those who are seeking original response are “Eyes seeking the response of eyes.” In a sense, the speaker pointing to this is like the speaker in “Directive” who cautions his tour group not to “mind the serial ordeal / Of being watched from forty cellar holes / As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins.” This striking resemblance to “All Revelation’s” line “Eyes seeking the response of eyes” shows the parabolic style in action: in “Directive the guide has “at heart your getting lost” (9) in order to avoid seeking the response of eyes; in “All Revelation” the speaker is less explicit.

The second reason that this poem complicates the separation of external from universal is Frost’s play in metaphor. “All Revelation” complicates the issue because we cannot be sure whether or not the poem is speaking of a literal, physical head entering into a cave or just a mental, metaphysical thrust—the poem’s play in metaphor. The first line, “A head thrusts in as for the view,” starts the reader on the literal level. But the following lines (where the head thrusts from and into, what will be left behind, and whether it will be withdrawn) turn the encounter into something more theoretical as the speaker says, “These things the mind has pondered on.” The subsequent stanza indicates that we are back on the literal level: “But the impervious geode / Was entered.” We are led to believe that whether or not these questions are answered, whether or not we understand this “strange apparition of the mind,” a head *still* entered a cave, looking for something. The search for revelation is answered at the end of the stanza as the light shining from the crystals becomes a metaphor for inspiration received “In answer to the mental thrust.” Still questioning whether or not the poem is working on a literal level,

Frost ends the poem suggesting that eyes searching for eyes determine the size of earth and skies: “All revelation has been ours.”

For these two reasons—namely Frost’s parabolic style and play in metaphor—we see Frost complicating the issue with indeterminacy. This indeterminacy leads me to believe that he must, as Bagby points out, believe the relationship between humans and nature is somewhere between the universal and external nature concepts, somewhere between pure subjectivism and pure fact. It is Frost’s play in metaphor (specifically in this poem) that sets my final interpretation of “All Revelation”: which is the metaphorical consummate relationship between nature and the individual, which metaphor Frost might suggest is necessary for understanding the important role both the human and nature play in the revelatory process.

Perhaps on a simplified level we can take the suggestion implied in this poem that the relationship between humans and nature is a similar or “like” relationship to mind and body. To look at Frost’s consummate metaphor in a more complex way, however, we need to ask who the speaker includes in the pronoun “ours” in the last line, which is where my reading of this poem departs from Bagby’s and Parini’s. Frost’s strategically placed “ours” as the last word in the poem. The plural pronoun could, as I have already pointed out, include the mind and body as separate spheres—a literal and metaphysical. This would imply that revelation is both a mental and physical sort of experience. Or, “ours” could refer to the eyes’ search for a response from eyes—the plural being a pair of eyes or even a collective group of eyes. To make the comparison between the metaphysical and physical, we could also compare the relationship between human and nature.

Considering the sexual metaphor used in this poem, I suggest that “ours” refers to a relationship between human and nature. Hass calls “All Revelation” “an elaborate fertility ritual...”(119). The sexual imagery is blatant: “A head thrusts” in the first line; the reference to Cybele, a Greek goddess connected with orgasmic rites in order to

receive revelation; and the fact that the “impervious geode / Was entered.” The poem sets up a relationship between male and female. Bagby notes that “the sexual metaphor [makes the] mind the father of perception, [and] mater-ial nature the mother” (21). The speaker, then, suggests that a relationship does take place between the human and nature. In this poem, at least, Frost uses this sexual metaphor to explore this relationship. His meditative moment demonstrates this exploration, implying that to commune with and receive from nature there needs to be some consummate action by means of which the human mind enters nature’s depths:

But where it is it thrusts in from  
Or what it is it thrusts into  
By that Cyb’laean avenue,  
And what can of its coming come,

And wither it will be withdrawn,  
And what take hence or leave behind  
These things the mind has pondered on  
A moment and still asking gone.

The speaker is contemplating the mysteries of conception. This meditation, not ending in a sure or confident answer, supports the idea that Frost sees a journey into the depths of nature based in a reciprocal “our.” It is ultimately Frost’s indeterminacy that leaves room for this type of conclusion. Parini points to this theme in Frost also. He writes that Frost always “wanted everything both ways at once” (410). He even quotes Frost saying that his life was a life “with more questions than answers” (418). Frost’s inability to decide and his play in metaphor that suggests this consummate relationship emphasizes both the need for a joint relationship with nature in receiving revelation and that ultimately the specific relationship to nature is unknowable. Hass writes that “‘All Revelation’ ultimately implies [that] knowledge is a product of both invention and discover[y], a process of creating the useful forms that reveal our relationship to the material world” (121). To question, for Frost, is okay.

Remaining consistent with his approach to nature, Frost’s “All Revelation” shows

the speaker in either mental or physical state entering nature. The extravagant play comes through his use of metaphor, and the theme of being lost is shown in two ways: the speaker's meta-questions and Frost's play through metaphor that confuses and in a sense loses the reader in a parabolic situation. Interestingly, Frost ends his poem with a sense of assurance despite these suggestions of being lost. Because all revelation has been ours we can, as Frost's speaker says, concentrate "earth and skies / So none need be afraid of size." This concentration helps avoid the fear and anxiety of being unsure when reading this poem as a parable; the implicit idea suggested is that such knowledge created with nature is at the same time comforting on one level yet insufficient on another. The speaker of the poem can have his "momentary stay against confusion," but the idea that such revelation is jointly created leaves one wondering if the revelation is worth believing or following (Parini xi). Can it work as knowledge? Ultimately, then, Frost's suggestion that revelation requires a relationship between nature and the individual means that one can discover the sanctuary needed for a moment and still deal with life realistically. Frost's human/nature relationship suggests that knowledge created under such conditions is worth something yet also needs to be questioned.

Again, Frost demonstrates his fear that all meaning is ultimately his in his poem "A Missive Missile": "The meaning of it is unknown, / Or else I fear entirely mine, / All modern, nothing ancient in't, / Unsatisfying to us each" (43-46). Because Frost repeats this theme so often, it shows how Frost used his poetry to work out his personal struggles, his dualistic angst. Hass makes a similar conclusion, suggesting that Frost's approach to nature fulfills a deeper psychological need: "...while we cannot fully recover certainty through either philosophy or science, *we must nevertheless 'reveal' the forms of existence to ourselves* in a manner that responds to our deepest psychic needs" (my emphasis 121). As we have seen, Frost reveals these forms of existence for himself. Klein adds to Frost's personal approach to nature writing that the "power [of revelation] abides only in the relation" (362). Seeing revelation as jointly produced by nature and man is necessary

for Frost to bridge his conflicted psyche. Thus, Frost looks to nature in order to find the processes by which he can merge spirit with matter, which is ultimately caused by his conflict with Darwinian science. Parini emphasizes Frost's need to find revelation by use of his imagination: "No matter what is 'really' happening around him, Frost is determined to see that it conforms to his own imagination, becomes an extension of his ongoing self-mythification (to an extent reversing the Darwinian idea that the environment shapes the individual)" (211). Hass relates this tendency to Frost's "desire to defend free will, [which] stems partly from his profound need to rescue himself from the processes of mechanistic determinism" (101). Because of such determinism, "In a post-Darwinian universe devoid of any transcendent source of value, humans alone are the sole authors of truth, beauty, and goodness..." (53). "The act of writing is thus for Frost not only the first step toward coming to terms with a hostile cosmos [(his dualistic angst)] but also the first step toward erecting the saving structures of community, marriage, and religious faith" (101). Imagination for Frost, Klein concludes, "does not generate the world out of itself but responds to nature that...engages us creatively" (362), thus the imaginative play Frost "may grant us knowledge, otherwise inaccessible, of the human mind as at home in the nature it perceives and half-creates" (382).

## CONCLUSION

Because Frost's approach to nature accepts the possibility of knowing nature to some degree, it is easy to assume that Dickinson and Frost approach nature on fundamentally different levels. That these two poets work from different assumptions, however, is what I find intriguing and enlightening. The opposing perceptions that I see these poets writing from is that which I stated in the beginning of my Frost chapter: where Dickinson claims that we cannot know nature, Frost asserts that nature is the only thing worth knowing. Although each poet's approach to nature seems to work so well, left without a comparison to one another, each seems extreme. Dickinson's claim that nature is unknowable allows her to empower women with agency, yet it could be argued that her approach risks losing meaning by placing too much emphasis on socially created nature. And while Frost's assertion allows him to find the spiritual meaning he so desperately seeks, his approach risks losing credibility by placing too much emphasis on the imagination's constructive power. Understanding each poet's approach separate from each other is important, but seeing how each fills the gaps that the other creates in his and her approach to nature says a lot about collaborative study.

My reading of Dickinson shows her critique of how her nineteenth-century contemporaries used nature to impose social codes on women. As such, her use of nature lends itself to a social constructivist lens. But relying too heavily on social constructivism risks deconstructing the meaning out of everything. As I see it, the risk in approaching humanity's relationship to nature as entirely socially constructed is twofold: one loses the value that can come from such knowledge and risks setting up a hegemonic relationship to nature—and by extension society—which ultimately transforms nature into material for consumption. Smith's argument that a dual "concept of nature is a social product" explains why Dickinson's critique of external nature works (27). Smith contends that when nature is seen as external, it becomes objectified and used as an object; it becomes



part of the human production process of meaning making. But because there also exists a nature that requires humans to include themselves as a part of nature, the universal idea was born. The simultaneous desire to produce meaning about objectified nature and see the human self as part of nature leads to hegemony and subjugation of nature, which leads to social discrepancies. Smith's critique of nature reasonably justifies Dickinson's social constructivist stance. But, left alone, such a view and approach to nature is "essentially materialistic," Klein writes (364). She maintains that this materialistic "view of nature propels us directly into the arms of radical idealism, for once nature has been defined as unmeaning formlessness, form can only be impressed by the extrinsic ministrations of the mind or spirit." Such idealism leaves nature as a "valueless, brute fact" (365). It is this observation that leads Klein into her discussion of "The Most of It" on how Frost's character finds meaning in nature by a reciprocal relationship, challenging such idealism. Interestingly, the poem that directly follows "All Revelation" in Frost's *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* is titled, "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length." Such placement suggests that Frost truly believes that "In a post-Darwinian universe devoid of any transcendent source of value, humans alone are the sole authors of truth, beauty, and goodness..." (53). Frost's approach to nature, then, can replace where social constructivism falls short. Frost's knowledge made from intercourse with nature does contain value, stays against confusion, and short-lived happiness despite its socially constructed qualities.

The second risk of viewing nature as socially constructed brings back the theme of "The Most" as interpreted by Klein: if nature is only a reflection of one's mind, it reinforces rather than challenges the speaker's belief, which introduces hegemonic tendencies. What the character in "The Most" desires, Klein writes, was "not communion [with nature] but hegemony: he wants the dominion of his intelligence to extend to every corner of the earth, to illuminate all obscurities" (366). The character's expectations prevented him from discovering anything in nature leading him to conclude that "he kept

the universe alone”: the only voice in answer was the echo of his own. What he sought was an encounter to validate and confirm what he already believed, not an encounter to which he may become lost and discover. Using Smith’s words against his ideal of social constructivism, he warns that a socially constructed nature is used to dominate: “the effect is...one of conquest—or more accurately control—and the target is...social behavior” (27), which is where Dickinson’s critique of her contemporaries’ use of nature comes into play. But Frost implies that finding a form of original response—by play and becoming lost—prevents hegemonic domination. Klein writes that “The rough glory of this incomprehensible ‘embodiment’ [the buck in “The Most”]—the ‘all’ of nature’s body, of which nothing can be definitely predicated—rebuffs the speaker’s, and the text’s claims to hegemony” (367). Ultimately, the speaker of “The Most” implies that there was original response; the character simply missed it as he was too concerned with nature as separate from himself, too fearful of the type of projections he may impose on nature. As Frost’s approach has been established, we can see that his “wandering among ideas” frees the individual from a wholly social constructivist lens, allowing him the ability to find value in the world around him.

My reading of Frost’s approach to nature shows his conflict in working out his personal struggle to separate himself from mechanical determinism. But the means by which he so regularly responds to this fear—his imaginative approach—threatens the credibility or integrity of knowledge created. But when paired with Dickinson’s point that nature can never be considered entirely external from human experience pulls—for the reader of both poets—Frost’s romantic leanings back towards reality. Klein points out that “Truth, for Frost, requires the recognition of limitation, of the contingency of knowledge—knowledge precarious but not invalid,” and Dickinson would certainly agree that if there is knowledge created, it would be precarious (383). Dickinson’s point of view helps us discern in Frost’s writing what Bagby concludes: “Such an emphasis on imaginative self-reliance obviously adds to the responsibility which the mind must

bear for the success or failure of the visionary enterprise” (22). Such perspective gained from Dickinson helps us conclude that meaning learned from nature has power for the individual but becomes precarious when applied beyond the individual; if applied to a social setting, this meaning becomes questionable (or possibly dangerous).

How I see each poet’s opposite approach as reconciled is that both Dickinson and Frost seem more interested in the process of meaning making than the end product. Dickinson is concerned with who is in control of the process; let the conclusion be what it may. For Frost, as Hass points out, “What counts...is not so much the integrity of our concepts as the processes by which we derive whatever meaning we can from a mysterious and “impervious” natural world” (120). Hass continues, writing, that just as “‘All Revelation’ ultimately implies, knowledge is a product of both invention and discovery, a process of creating the useful forms that reveal our relationship to the material world” (Hass 121). Thus nature as external does not always place it in a position to be dominated or objectified. Nature is not always seen as separate from the human for the purpose of domination. Smith writes that this process of objectification has become natural, which is where Frost might agree with him. The problem is not objectifying nature by use of the imagination; the problem is believing that the objectification process is natural. Frost maintains that one should not become complacent in losing or over using the imagination, especially to the point of viewing this process as “natural.” To view the process as natural blinds the individual from seeing the value that can come in creating knowledge based in nature and can also blind the individual from seeing the need to question such joint-created knowledge. Unintentional or unrecognized use of the imagination or even the loss of the imagination—in a word: complacency—results in a blind naturalization of the objectification process, which binds the one creating knowledge to one perspective. Thus, the play in imagination must be purposeful as well as conscious. Unconscious play results in blind thinking and hegemonic structure. Hass writes that Frost’s “insistence upon a freely chosen will could enable one to “wander

among ideas...”(46). And it is this wandering that Frost shares with Dickinson when she seeks for more play herself—more defining power—from dominant definitions of women in the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, then, Frost’s common image as a public poet and Dickinson’s famous portrayal as an agoraphobic collides with my reading to show the opposite: Frost as a poet writing about his personal struggle with meaning and Dickinson as a poet who is much more concerned with social and public life than the initial reading of her poetry suggests. By switching these two poet’s public images, we see that they relate in many more ways than one. We see that a liberal mind in such a conservative setting can give to a more conservative mind in a liberal setting: Dickinson’s feminist point of view in nineteenth-century New England to Frost’s romantic tendencies in the high modernist period.

Each poet’s differences enhance our appreciation for the other’s approach to nature. Where it could be argued that Dickinson errs on the side of social constructivism, Frost makes up for it as he suggests that there is a form of original response we can rely on as we “wander among ideas.” Where it could be argued that Frost errors on imaginative construction, Dickinson makes up for it when she challenges the validity of placing nature in an external position with revelatory power.

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