# *TWO APPROACHES TO NATURE: WORDSWORTH'S "DAFFODILS" VS. DICKINSON'S "THE GRASS SO LITTLE HAS TO DO"*

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***Abstract****: This paper identifies two specific approaches to the theme of communion with nature, both of them involving a transformation within the poetic ego and sharing specific stylistic devices in describing nature as well as a mainly two-fold (man/nature) imagery; Wordsworth's romantic approach describes a total and wholly real integration of the 'chaotic' human ego into the orderly nature, whereas Dickinson's modernist approach reveals the human ego's dissatisfaction with his/her own self and desire to integrate by transcending his/her identity and turning into an element of nature.*

***Keywords:*** *nature, poetic self, description, communion, identity.*

***Motto*** *"Poetry is the image of man and Nature." (William Wordsworth)*

The theme of communion with nature has been a permanent source of inspiration for writers, either poets and prose writers, or essayists, who have shaped it according to their conceptions, feelings and emotions, and to the trends to which they belonged. This paper will exemplify two such interpretations of the theme, given in British and American literature during the 19th century.

**Two views of nature**

A typical romanticist, one of the Lake Poets, Wordsworth regards nature as a resourceful theme for his poems. What nature represents for him as a poet is a place of refuge from the outer world, a place of regaining one's self and of living the emotions which give birth to poetry: "emotions recollected in tranquility".

For Wordsworth, Nature is "the life-giving spirit who built up the universe, who from her own universal life gave to each particular thing, the smallest flower, the drift of a gossamer cloud, its own distinct life, its own soul, its own work." (Stopford, 1964:136) The way he represents nature in his poems is, according to Sanders "dynamic, panoramic, variously lit, multitudinous, and shot through with the creative energy of God." (Sanders 1994:360)

Wordsworth's view of nature is, to a certain extent, that of a pantheist (who envisages everything as an all-encompassing immanent abstract God or even suggests a relation of equivalence between Universe, or nature, on the one hand, and God on the other hand): "It was in the Thought of God that the universe existed, and its life was in God's Thought. Nay, the life in every flower, bird, insect, in the acorn of the oak and the mossy stone on the hillside, was in the incessant Thought of God." (Stopford, 1964:140)

Moreover, Wordsworth adopts a personifying view of nature, seen as a person, an independent form of life (see Stopford, 1964:141). As a person/being, nature is, however, different from man: they represent "two separate beings, distinguishable always the one from the other. The poet does not make this or that mood in Nature by imagination; it is Nature who communicates, like a person, her mood to the poet."



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(Stopford 1964:150) Nature also incarnates the very principle of life: “Nature is a life, a universal life, conscious of herself, capable of realising herself not only as a universal whole, but in each part of the whole.” (Stopford, 1964:139) and is viewed as having three special characteristics: joy, quietude and the intercommunion of love. (see Stopford, 1964:142)

Dickinson’s view of nature borrows some characteristics from Romanticism, but it also makes a transition towards modernism by the feelings of alienation, self-denial and inability to perfectly unify with nature, feelings that altogether influence man’s relation with nature.

Like Wordsworth, who searched for transcendental meaning beyond the humble aspects of nature, Dickinson also used the familiar, the odd as well as the neglected elements to achieve a new approach to nature. Although attracted by Wordsworth’s optimism, Dickinson referring to nature as an independent force with which humans should establish a positive relationship, the poetess added to this her own religious view: “The Crucifixion had left its stamp upon the world and, like the Christ, nature must bow to the Father’s pleasure and submit to His will”. (Wolff, 1986:283)

Two main features of nature can be distinguished in Dickinson’s view: evanescence and the supremacy of energy over matter. Thus, in Dickinson’s view the forms of nature elude man’s grasp, this idea being illustrated by the motifs of motion/movement and gradual disappearance of the natural elements she selects in her poems. What results from the evanescence of nature is a sense of loss deeply felt by the humans in their contact with nature. On the other hand, it is suggested that man’s relation to objects in space matters less than his relationship to the illusions created by time. Thus, “man is unable to grasp supernal beauty because of his mind’s imprisonment in time rather than because of his spirit’s imprisonment in a body. What he sees is just a series of tricks [played] by the old conjurer.” (Anderson, 1965:975) The sun for example, is regarded rather as a symbol of human conditioning in time than as the usual source of life and light.

The two poems selected for the purpose of this paper are among the most famous in the literature written in English. *The Daffodils* (the title is the alternative shorter version of *I Wander’d Lonely as a Cloud*) was published in 1804 and perfectly illustrates Wordsworth’s vision on poetry as “emotions recollected in tranquility”. Yet, it is not an overtly philosophical/theoretical poem. It describes the perception of a multitude of daffodils by a poetic ego, the feelings this perception induces in him as well as the ‘a posteriori’ realization of the communion with nature achieved due to this unique experience. The poem has a mainly narrative feature insisting on the succession of events from the past of experience to the present of insight into the respective experience. The theoretical view on poems as “emotions recollected in tranquility” is only a subtext derived from the last stanza, the stanza devoted to the insight consumed in the present.

Dickinson’s *The Grass so Little Has to Do* was first published in 1890 under the title *The Grass* and it received the number *J.333* in Thomas H. Johnson’s complete collection published in 1955. The choice of the grass as the central element of the poem integrates into an American tradition which includes two other famous poets, Walt Whitman with his *Leaves of Grass* and Carl Sandburg with his *Grass*. With Dickinson, the grass symbolizes the beauty of a mere being as well as nature’s evanescence, and, simultaneously, timelessness. Her poem presents a theoretical, philosophical and



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synthetical approach to an element of nature, being situated into a permanent, generally true present, a present which is broken only by the appearance of the human element. It is structured on an argumentation pattern: the arguments are presented in a (chrono)logical order, then the first assertion is resumed and the conclusion is drawn in the end.

Structurally speaking, the two poems follow a similar pattern: they start with a description of nature emphasizing the central element and culminate with the final scene of communion with nature. The convergent and divergent points in the way of describing nature and the final scene marking a vital difference between the two poems will constitute the main points of our analysis showing two of a variety of interpretations that can be found on one literary theme.

**Description of nature**

*Convergences*

Firstly, both poets choose a tiny little element of vegetation which, in spite of its size, also impresses by its multitude. Daffodils are conceived of in terms of a multitude of similar objects, this idea being further emphasized by the choice of the plural form of the noun "daffodil". Moreover, the personifying metaphor "a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils", besides accentauting the same idea of multitude, also endows the natural element with human features and implicitly suggests the idea of solidarity and brotherhood. Dickinson, on the other hand, capitalizes the noun "Grass" but uses it only in the singular to emphasize its importance. She suggests the idea of multitude by the use of a metaphor, "A Sphere of simple Green" which creates a synthetical image of the earth totally covered by grass.

Secondly, the imagery in both poems is based on the characteristic of colour. The yellow, golden colour of the daffodils is a masculine colour that mainly symbolizes life (being the colour of the sunrays), eternity, divinity and power. It is the warmest colour of all. (see Chevalier, Gheerbrant vol 2 1995: 82-83) Green is, by contrast, a feminine colour, symbolizing power, immortality and life, too. As the colour of hope, green is the calmest colour. (see Chevalier, Gheerbrant vol 3 1995: 436-441) In both poems, the reference to colour is made only once: with Wordsworth it takes the shape of the epithet "golden daffodils", while with Dickinson colour is referred to by means of a capitalized noun within a metaphor, "A Sphere of simple Green".

Thirdly, one feature of nature is insisted upon in both poems, and that is perfection. With Wordsworth, perfection equals order and is transposed with the help of movement imagery. Moreover, he defines perfection along the opposition man/nature: man's movement is chaotic, aimless – illustrated by the semantics of the verb "to wander", whilst nature, by its representative element, "dances". The opposition man/nature can thus be easily solved in the end when man adopts the typical movement of nature ("my heart … dances with the daffodils"), this also involving the idea that Wordsworth's human subject performs a partial transformation which pertains to the spiritual world. Dickinson envisages perfection in a static form, with the help of the noun "Sphere", but also in a dynamic form, with the noun "Tunes" (sound can be regarded as movement in time), both of them hinting at the ancient concept of music/harmony of spheres.

Lastly, from a stylistical point of view, both poets choose personification as a main device in describing their elements of nature, which is meant in both cases to



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anticipate the theme of intercommunion with nature. Wordworth personifies the daffodils by placing the metaphor “a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils” as an introduction of the central element, by using the verb “dance” in connection to them, and by using a transitive verb which endows the daffodils with will and conscience “Tossing their heads”. The Wordsworthian description of the daffodils connects them to children due to the presence of the ludic element in “sprightly dance”. Dickinson personifies the grass by attributing it some human activities: “to entertain” bees, “hold the Sunshine in its lap”, “thread the Dews”, “dream the Days away”. All these activities, along with the not typically human ones contribute to creating the paradox in her poem: the grass is said in the beginning to have “little to do”, but is proved, in each following line till the end of the poem, to be extremely busy. Moreover, the simile grass/duchess involves another personification suggesting that grass is valuable, precious. If the daffodils were painted as similar to children, grass represents the female principle, this being suggested by words such as “to brood”, “to thread”, “duchess”.

*Divergences*

One obvious divergent point in the two approaches to describing nature resides in the recourse to the senses. Wordsworth presents an image of nature based on the sense of sight, visual perception being the main means by which the human poetic ego establishes a contact with nature. In keeping to this visual imagery, his poem is centred on the motifs of colour and movement. He adds to the “golden daffodils” other colourful elements of nature: cloud, vales, hills, lake, trees, and introduces the motif of light with “the stars that shine/ And twinkle on the Milky Way.” and “sparkling waves”. The earthly landscape is thus included within the whole of the Universe. The two central types of movement in Wordsworth’s poem are defined by the verbs “to wander” which occurs once, in the first line of the poem, and “to dance” which occurs four times, symetrically (once in each stanza, converted into a noun in the second stanza). The stress on the sense of sight suggests the importance of contemplation both for the birth of emotions and for the birth of a poem. Contemplation does not equal perception, it represents a deepened perception, a superior act of seeing, it is that superior perception which helps hermits meet God, the perception which encourages revelations. In her turn, Dickinson mixes all senses in revealing her vision of nature. The visual imagery combines vegetation and insects (grass, hay, butterflies, bees), water and sky (dews, sunshine), people and lifeless objects (duchess, pearls, barns) to suggest that all these elements of nature, of the whole universe, together with man and lifeless objects form a network in which nobody is useless. The sonorous imagery helps creating the idea of perfection and harmony in nature, the music of spheres being suggested by “pretty Tunes/the Breezes fetch along”, and there is also a hint at the sense of feeling in mentioning the breeze. The olfactory imagery builds the most powerful argument found by the poetic ego for transforming himself/herself into a “Hay”, because it implicitly presents a clash between humans and nature. It refers to the moment of death which, for the humans, is connected to stinking smells whilst with nature, death brings along the extremely pleasant smell of dried grass: “And even when it dies – to pass – / In Odors so divine - / Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep - / Or Spikenards perishing - ”.

Another difference resides in the use of specific types of verbs. Wordsworth mostly uses intransitive verbs such as “to wander”, “to float”, “to flutter”, “to dance”, “to twinkle”, “to lie”, “to flash”, “to fill”. The intransitive verbs, not needing any



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completion by direct or indirect objects, denote nature's self-sufficiency, independence and life of its own. Dickinson mainly uses transitive verbs: "to brood", "to entertain", "to hold", "to thread", "to make", "to dream". Being incomplete without a direct or indirect object, these verbs hint at the interdependence and interweaving of various natural elements.

**Communion with nature**

Both poems navigate around the theme of integration in and communion with nature. For both poets, the contact of humans with nature leads to a transformation of the human beings who live this experience. This transformation marks their mind and soul or, in Dickinson's case, both body and soul. The essential difference lies in the extent of "reality", "actuality", "factuality" to which the communion with nature and, subsequently, the human beings' transformation, is fulfilled.

Wordsworth's poetic ego does integrate into nature, the reality of this fact being suggested by the use of the Indicative Mood of the verbs: "my heart with pleasure fills/ And dances with the daffodils". With him, the communion with nature is a gradual process which starts with perception and ends in reflection. *The Daffodils* narrates this process step by step; at the beginning, the poetic ego – a human – performs a presumably specifically human action "I wander'd", but, soon after, this chaotic, disorderly movement is stopped by perception: "When all at once I saw a crowd/ A host of golden daffodils." and from this moment on, the poetic ego becomes totally passive, shocked as if in ecstasy or during a religious revelation by whatever he perceives around him – now he is only a beholder, a spectator to the comparatively perfect and orderly show of nature. This perception is placed somewhere in the past of experience by the use of the verbs in the Past Tense Indicative. The last step of his change occurs later, in a Present Tense Simple, a Present Tense which transforms the communion with nature into something habitual, something generally true. It is not during the passive, almost unconscious act of contemplation that he succeeds in integrating into nature, but only later on, in his own studio, as a result of an act of active conscious reflection. "For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood … / And then my heart with pleasure fills / And dances with the daffodils." With Wordsworth, the problem of integrating into nature does not mean simply "to be there and to feel", but to become aware of what you feel, to contemplate with an "inward eye". In other words, communion with nature is for Wordsworth a matter of awareness.

Dickinson's poetic ego is comparatively more absent from her poem. If in Wordsworth's poem, there are five occurrences of the pronoun "I" and one occurrence of the possesive "my", each stanza having at least one such occurrence of the poetic ego, in Dickinson's poem, there are only two such occurrences of the pronoun "I" and both are placed in the very last line. With Dickinson, on the other hand, communion with nature is not actual, it is hypothetical, possible but not real, this fact being emphasized by the use of the Subjunctive: "I wish I were a hay". Moreover, if Wordsworth's poetic ego comprehends communion with nature as awareness, therefore a change in one's feelings, perception, and way of thinking, with Dickinson it implies a total transformation, both physical and spiritual. The sadness of Dickinson's poem resides in her poetic ego's awareness that his/her wish will never come true, his/her wish will always remain a simple wish and consequently his/her perfect communion



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with nature will never be accomplished. To conclude with, Dickinson conceives communion with nature as a permanent and unfulfillable yearning.

**The motif of identity**

Wordsworth's poetic self enjoys a self-assumed identity, both as a poet and as a human. The presence of the "I" in each and every stanza best shows self-awareness, self-assuming and confidence. He defines himself both as a human (the subject who passively contemplates the show of nature) and as a poet, who, like any other poet, "could not but be gay" while contemplating nature. He is always ready to improve his self-awareness by adding experience and the more he knows himself and the outer world, the more he accepts himself and enlarges his limits. Not for a moment would he think of changing his self for a different one, thus showing his satisfaction with himself, his life and his potentialities.

Dickinson's poetic self displays an almost total dissatisfaction with himself/herself, with his/her condition. He/She is almost absent from the poem, and, when present at all, he/she takes the form of a wish which cannot actually come true. Dickinson's poetic self seemingly solves his/her dilemma by a transgression, from the human into the natural world, but unfortunately, this solution is false as long as it will only remain a wish suspended above reality.

In way of conclusion, we shall resume that, although similar in structure (description of nature, communion man/nature), and in the idea that communion with nature brings along man's transformation, Wordsworth's *Daffodils* and Dickinson's *The Grass so Little Has to Do* come to two different conclusions: the former states that man's communion with nature is a gradual process of perception – emotion – awareness, whilst the latter envisages it as a permanent and unfulfillable yearning.

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