



# Sacred Nature: Metaphysics of Place in William Blake, Emily Dickinson and Seamus Heaney

## Citation

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Sacred Nature: Metaphysics of Place in William Blake, Emily Dickinson, and Seamus Heaney

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A Thesis in the Field of English  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

March 2024



## Abstract

William Blake, Emily Dickinson and Seamus Heaney are read as practitioners of ecopoetry (in Jonathan Bate's phrase) and ecotheology. Where each poet locates the sacred is plotted against their depictions of the natural world. How do they see nature; how do they see the divine; and do these views intersect? The Introduction considers a broad history of immanence and transcendence as two roads to the divine. Blake's historical contexts, in the pagan tradition of the sacred landscape, and the antinomianism of eighteenth-century Britain, including the Moravian sect, are applied to his prophetic books, chiefly *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Blake's complex and changing view of nature aspires to a reconciliation of the immanent and the transcendent. From Dickinson's milieu, the Puritan origins of New England and the American sublime, she cultivated poems which view snakes, bees and hummingbirds as "Nature's People." This most idiosyncratic of poets brought forth a new aesthetic, the impersonal sublime. Dickinson is also read as an apophatic poet, her lyrics petals around a generative nothing. Heaney digs from the bogland of history ancient queens and sacrifices, wedding them to the poetic tradition of the *aisling* in his contemporary moment of northern Ireland's Troubles. Heaney further believes in an ontological power of language to create and shape landscape itself. Blake's, Dickinson's and Heaney's visions of nature and the sacred number among the threads we may weave into a new relation to the nonhuman world, here on the brink of the sixth great extinction.

## Dedication

Eleanora Fagan

Robert Zimmerman

John Mellor

Michael Jones

Dr. Collier Brown

Professor Daniel Donoghue

Professor Leo Damrosch

Mom and Dad

Navarre Fredé

Wilder McGrew

Maile McGrew-Fredé

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction: The Way Up, and the Way In

When William Blake asks, “And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon Englands mountains green,” what does it mean for a Britain besmirched with “dark Satanic Mills” (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* 95)? Why does Emily Dickinson define “Nature” as not only “what we see — / The Hill—the Afternoon —/ Squirrel — Eclipse — the Bumble bee — ” and “what we hear — / The Bobolink — the Sea — / Thunder — the Cricket — ” but also as “Heaven” (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 322)? What does the peat of the Irish bogland preserve when Seamus Heaney likens casualties of the Troubles to ancient sacrificial victims, writing “the goddess swallows / our love and terror” (*North* 39)? How do Blake, Dickinson and Heaney articulate the relation of landscape to their vision of the sacred and its processes? How do those views manifest, at the interwoven levels of image and sound? Blake’s endlessly rich cosmos of selves participates in a complex interaction with the land, sometimes viewing Britain as the sleeping giant Albion, sometimes invoking a feminized aspect of place, charged with its own associations and mythology. At first glance Dickinson may appear to feature landscape only incidentally in her musings on the nature of the world, and of God. However, as it is impossible to depict a metaphysics without symbols (hence the apophatic tradition of mystical literature), the presence of nature in her poems acts as a valuable key. Heaney subscribes not only to a more gendered view of landscape, but also to a belief in the power of language itself to transform the world.



Literature and the sacred seem to have been threaded together, vowel and consonant, from the beginning. If we take the first writing to be hash marks incised in a bone to track the phases of the moon, it was likely for the purpose of ritual observance according to the heavenly body (Huylebrouck 153-56). Whether considering the cuneiform clay ledgers of Sumeria, tracking the wheat and oil held by, or owed to, the temple, or the oracle bones of China (whose fire-cracked marks required priestly divining), in both cases religious context is clearly inscribed into the site of writing (Ong 83; Keightley 400-1) — even if the first sentence in the written history is currently thought to have been carved on a Canaanite ivory comb: “May this tusk root out the lice of the hair and the beard” (Osborne).

Scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Max Oelschlaeger argue that nature and the sacred were once even more intertwined in the human psyche, perhaps as close as “the Brain” and “the weight of God,” in Emily Dickinson’s scales: “For — Heft them — Pound for Pound — / And they will differ — if they do — / As Syllable from Sound — ” (*Poems* 269). At some junctures in pre- and ancient history humanity seems to have viewed nature as a threat and a resource, rather than a divine whole of which we were a part. Our self-exile from nature can be seen in *Gilgamesh*, as the hero mounts an ill-advised campaign to kill the guardian of the gods and cut down the sacred cedar forest; in Genesis, as Adam and Eve leave Eden; in *Beowulf*, as evil is located outside the warm hearth of the human community, among the monsters of the tarn and the dragons of the rock.

In the first of his 1923 *Duino Elegies*, Rilke wrote, “the animals already know by instinct / we’re not comfortably at home / in our translated world” (5). A moment’s

shared gaze with a deer in a meadow will confirm this, as will humanity's ongoing destruction of every biome we find. Close to one million species are on the brink of joining the Barbary lion, the aurochs and Parish's sunflower in extinction at our hands (Bar-On et al., "The Biomass Distribution on Earth"). Our dark Satanic Mills have become Urizenic fires which threaten to burn up the vegetative world in a literal sense, rather than the burning up of error in the apocalypse of perception which William Blake announced.

At some point we humans exiled ourselves from nature. A number of anthropologists agree with Rousseau's insight: social hierarchy begins with the man who fences off a plot of land and says, "This is mine" (34). Agriculture creates surplus; who controls the surplus has power. Inequality follows: priests, kings, the first Mesopotamian city-states (Scott; Diamond). (Although, non-agriculturists such as the Pacific Northwest tribes have possessed surplus which they disposed of in a manner other than hoarding, called the potlatch: the goal is to give away the most goods (Jonaitis). (Bataille comments: excess must be spent, "gloriously or catastrophically" (21). Thus the presence alone of surplus is not sufficient to charter a society of extreme income and power disparity.)

Premonitions of our coming self-exile may, perhaps, be glimpsed in cave paintings of the Paleolithic. Thousands of ochre images in hundreds of caves, from 14,000 to 40,000 years ago, depict bison, mammoths, deer, horses, panthers, reindeer; there are virtually no plants (Krulwich). Plant allies feature in ceremonies the world over, from southwest Native American peyote rituals to Siberian shamans' *Amanita muscaria*. Hunter gatherers derive an average of 70 percent of their calories from plants (Gibbons).

The fruits of the earth must have played an equally life-giving and sustaining role for our ancestors. Why, then, do cave paintings, almost without exception, depict animals? (One paper notes Paleolithic artists' "inexplicable fascination with wildlife," although, at the time, all life was wild (qtd. in Ehrenreich 6).) We may have been documenting our dawning realization that we are not, after all, like the other animals; they become sources of fascination as we differentiate ourselves from them, through representation. As Rilke said, we are not at home in our translated world.

There are traces of our casting ourselves out of nature in the palimpsest of history. Our earliest epic, *Gilgamesh*, chronicles the process by which the wild man Enkidu learns to prefer the ways of the city, and befriends the king; the two men go on a quest to kill the guardian of the Cedar Forest. The god Enlil had appointed Humbaba to defend the forest, abode of the gods; in killing him, Gilgamesh, the king of the city-state of Uruk, achieves a decisive victory over the sacred in nature, while stripping the mountain of cedars for the voracious city (*Gilgamesh* 38-45). A similar theme plays out 3000 years later as Beowulf defends the civilization of the mead-hall Heorot ("hart") against the threatening wild, Grendel and his mother.

Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, is driven by the sight of the city's dead, consigned to the Euphrates as it flows beyond the walls, to conceive of a deed which will grant his name immortality; his quest, to cut down the sacred cedar forest, succeeds, in the process taking the lives of the forest's guardian, Humbaba, and, eventually, Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu. The cedar timber is floated downriver to Uruk, like the corpses which initiated this conquest of nature by the city; Gilgamesh has transformed the forest, with its music of birdsong, into dead bodies (Harrison 14-18). The primary motivation for the

destruction of the forest is not the utility of new building materials for the city of Uruk, whose dimensions are celebrated at the opening and close of the poem, but the renown attendant upon such a deed; Gilgamesh makes use of nature in an attempt to subvert the natural cycle of life and death. As Robert Pogue Harrison observes, in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, this formula describes much of humanity's relation to the natural world in the three thousand years since.

*Gilgamesh* makes explicit the transformation of the sacred forest into a mundane commercial resource; the cedars are cut down and the walls of Uruk go up. We are still in our Gilgamesh moment, rejoicing that we've rendered the old gods irrelevant, laying waste to holy life to build our cities of bones. William Blake contends, in his lyrics and prophetic epics, with this legacy, as do Emily Dickinson, dissenting from the Puritan errand to restore the wilderness as an American Eden, and Seamus Heaney, invoking the tutelary spirits of bog and meadow in the pre-Roman landscape.

The sacred, driven from the forest, is located by Plato in the Good, or the ideal Forms, which leaves the sensible world empty of value. The allegory of the cave relegates the rose tree and the mayfly to the lowly status of insubstantial shadows. As Socrates reports Diotima's instruction, in the *Symposium*, "suppose it were granted to someone to see beauty itself quite clearly, in its pure, undiluted form — not clogged up with human flesh and coloring, and a whole lot of other worthless and corruptible matter" (210:d). The Barbary lion, the aurochs, Parish's sunflower: so much valueless, putrefying mass, clotting up the absolute. ('Pure' suggests singularity of identity: "not mixed with any other substance or material; free from admixture or adulteration; unmixed" ("Pure," def. 1a). However, the phenomenal world depends upon the presence of multiple

elements; where there is purity, there can be no life.) Meanwhile, Athens was deforesting the Attic peninsula to build warships (J. Donald Hughes 93). After all, wood is mere matter, even if the oracle of Dodona is the susurrant of oaks (Sacks 85).

Plato's hatred of this world was embraced by the Gnostics. Where Plato's demiurge did the best he could in making the world, with shoddy materials or plans, the Gnostic God of this world is perhaps incompetent, often evil. We humans are trapped in this world, policed by Yaldabaoth's archons, imprisoned in our bodies of matter, the minutes and hours themselves made by our captors (*Secret* 116-24), as the Sons of Los build time in Blake's *Milton* (*Complete Poetry* 172-74). Augustine's invention of original sin bequeaths to Christianity Plato's and the Gnostics' condemnation of human flesh as contemptible matter. The Platonic/Gnostic loathing of matter itself shadows Blake's vegetative world; Augustine's curse visited upon life haunts Blake's world of generation.

The Gnostic dissenter, the author of the *Gospel of Thomas*, offers a way out of Plato's world-hating transcendence. The Jesus of *Thomas* says, "Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there" (*Thomas* 149). He locates the divine much closer than the inaccessible realm of pure Forms: "the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you" (*Thomas* 139). Western culture did not take the path of immanence. The lone voice would rarely be heard in the next two millennia, until Blake saw "a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" (*Complete Poetry* 490). (Although Lynn White, Jr., who sowed one of the seeds of the discipline ecotheology with his 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," did suggest Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of the ecological movement (White 1206).)

However, the mutually arising antipodes of immanence and transcendence may themselves occlude perception of the Wild Flower in and of itself. If the white-thorn is simply an expressway to heaven, do we attend to it as a flower? Are the wild thyme and the meadow-sweet here for our use, to jack ourselves into transcendence, or are they here for their own joy? One path out of the immanence/transcendence dichotomy may be to trouble the premise that there exists some other, better, higher, more real realm. If the cave, the shadows and the light are all of the same essence, the gross material world is no longer fallen. Here the vision is a continuum of being, rather than poles. Immanence and transcendence haggle over the location of heaven; a nondual approach obviates the need for a heaven (Katz; Loy; Otto). Blake's Heaven in a Wild Flower can be seen as a zen-like redirection of the attention to the present moment, to the tactile, visual, olfactory fact of the petals. Nonduality jukes out of the agon of immanence and transcendence. Where Plato praised love of the beautiful as the path to wisdom, nonduality appears to depend on a less emotionally charged quality: observation, or awareness.

To perceive the *genus loci*, or spirit of the place, of each river, hill, and wood may be more ecologically sustainable than our current regard for them as expandable resources. Blake knew this, as he wrote, "The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive" (*Complete Poetry* 38). Indigenous traditions of animism, in which each oak, each lark, each pebble is a being unto itself, also seem to recognize the natural world as a community of others for which we can feel kinship. Blake participates in this stream of thought when he acknowledges the independent

consciousness of other-than-human life: “How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?” (34).

The word *sacred* has its origins in separation, in being “set apart” (“Sacred,” def. 2.b, 3). In this context it is fascinating to consider the preservationist approach to nature as that which is set apart from humanity — wilderness can only be pristine, untouched. Once its sanctity has been disturbed by humans, whether to extract resources or reclaim as new Garden of Eden, according to two views of colonial society in the northeast, the woods, mountains, rivers and meadows are no longer wilderness (Howe, *Birth-mark* 1-25). Yet a sustainable relation to the nonhuman world must include a human presence in nature. Perhaps, too, a sustaining relation to the sacred calls for engagement, rather than setting apart.

Blake’s approach could be read as a reconciliation of the claims of immanence and transcendence, as the archetypal Zoas integrate at the end of the epics. However, as Blake, Dickinson and Heaney were all working from various Christian contexts, in various degrees of rebellion and revision, it makes sense to discuss their views of nature in terms of the sacred appropriate to their idioms, rather than a Hindu, Taoist, or Buddhist inflection of nonduality, with which they would not have been intimately familiar — even if Blake was engaged with Swedenborg and Moravian esotericism (Schuchard), and Emerson introduced some Eastern philosophy to New England (*Essays: First Series*).

Whether ancient Greek deforestation for warships or the carbon pollution of the ongoing industrial revolution, and the equally extractive information revolution (E.Williams), the consequences of our self-imposed exile from the other-than-human world grow increasingly grave. In 2018 a joint report by the Zoological Society of

London and the World Wildlife Fund found that in the last 40 years there had been an average 60% decline in populations of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians (Grooten). The International Commission on Stratigraphy, which oversees the designation of geologic epochs, draws ever closer to formally naming our present moment the Anthropocene, as for the first time in history humans are responsible for global climate change (Subramanian). The acceleration of human impact on the environment calls for urgency in finding new ways to conceptualize our relationship to nature — or in rediscovering those ways we may have lost.

Ecotheology, a branch of ecocriticism, is one dowsing rod for alternative imaginings of relation. Lynn White, Jr.'s 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" is widely cited as seeding the discipline which would become ecotheology. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in lectures delivered in 1966 (and published two years later as *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*) may have gotten there first, but White's four-page declaration of holy war on the Judeo-Christian tradition's view of nature galvanized widespread response. White identified two aspects of Christianity's doctrine and practice which have abetted the present ecological crisis: the unreflective embrace of the biblical injunction to have dominion over the land, and, since the Renaissance, institutional Christianity's embrace of capitalism and the technology industry. Ecotheology can be seen as an attempt to refute White, finding scriptural justification for a theology which includes ecology.

Ecotheology does not claim a direct influence on deep ecology, which Arne Næss proposed in 1973, but its addition to the larger discussion around environmentalism and ethics played a role. Since White raised the Ecological Complaint, ecotheology has



developed in many religious traditions; Christianity, being the background of Blake, Dickinson and Heaney is most relevant to a discussion of these poets' vision of nature. If ecotheology "seeks to uncover the theological basis for a proper relationship between God, humanity and the cosmos" (Deane-Drummond xii), it rarely looks to secular literature for inspiration. This task falls more to ecocriticism and, in Jonathan Bate's phrase, *ecopoetics* (Bate, *Song of the Earth*). An attempt to read Blake, Dickinson and Heaney ecotheologically may yield new perspectives on these poets' images of a proper relationship between the sacred, people, and nature.

Having pioneered ecocriticism with *Romantic Ecology*, primarily an ecological reading of Wordsworth, in *Song of the Earth* Bate introduced his concept of *ecopoetics*: "Reverie, solitude, walking: to turn these into language is to be an *ecopoet*. *Ecopoetry* is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it" (Bate, *Song* 42). He cites Gary Snyder's "Mother Earth: Her Whales" as a negative example of polemics displacing *poiesis*, making: "Worthy as the sentiments may be," they do not "transform into language the experience of dwelling upon the earth." Snyder's call to arms is not what Bate calls an *ecopoem*: "The language itself is not being asked to do ecological work" (200).

Bate extends the definition of *ecopoem* to any artistically created experience of nature, "the medium of which may as well be, say, painting as writing." He quotes Merleau-Ponty's reaction to Cézanne: "When I see the bright green of one of Cézanne's vases, it does not make me think of pottery, it presents it to me" (qtd. in *Song* 42). The fascinating disjuncture here is that Bate has chosen an example in which, rather than nature, another art form, pottery, is experienced through artistic creation.

Invoking the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty suggests that Bate believes an emphasis on sensation is key to ecopoetry. Usually a turn to David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* would follow, with its discussion of our embodied experience as essential to a relationship of reciprocity with the nonhuman world, acknowledging the distinct, yet equal in value, subjectivities of other beings. This direction recalls the I-Thou formulation of Martin Buber, who could be claimed as an early apostle of ecotheology. Buber proposed we can relate to what is outside ourselves as agents in their own right, rather than objects (*I and Thou*, 1970). He terms this the I-Thou relationship, rather than the I-It relation of objectification and use. The other fork leads to Blake: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul," "Energy is Eternal Delight," and "by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" "the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite" (*Complete Poetry* 34, 39). As Harold Bloom said, Blake, at least the early Blake of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "insists that the body is the path back to the real" (*Visionary Company* 30).<sup>1</sup> (However, Blake's thought ramifies at every chapter of his work.) This route, leads, too, to Norman O. Brown and the resurrection of the body (*Love's Body*). The focus on embodied sensation, on the (nonhuman) other as subjective agent, and on the body as the way to the real, cohere in an ethos of immanence, rather than transcendence.

The 1990s and 2000s saw a flourishing of the relatively new discipline of ecotheology. In *Eco-Theology*, which is both survey and theory, Celia Deane-Drummond notes Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949), not as an explicitly ecotheological work, but as crucial in developing an ecological awareness in which ecotheology could

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom also said Blake "was a visionary, rather than a mystic" — a subtle distinction (Bloom, "Foreword" xxiv)!

unfold. She next locates Teilhard de Chardin as a pioneering early mid-twentieth century ecotheologist before the term was coined, constructing a synthesis between “evolutionary and cosmological science and Christian faith in a cosmic, mystical vision” (37). She cites subsequent ecotheologists of creation spirituality, such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry, who “seeks to move away from materialistic exploitation of the earth for human benefit” (42).

Deane-Drummond also addresses what she calls the eco-eschatology of the discipline, finding that authors like James Dunn suggest “the purpose of the restoration of creation is that humanity can have a ‘fitting environment’ . . . Sustainability is often talked about in such language — namely, for the benefit of future generations — in a way that truncates the needs and interests of creatures as such” (169). She further describes ecotheology as correcting a trap which Christian thought has sometimes fallen into, that nature is simply the stage on which humans work out their role in the divine drama (130-45). Creation theology, eco-feminist theology, and eco-eschatology all return to nature as an aspect or expression of the divine (xiii).

In the chapter “Ecology and Spirit,” Deane-Drummond discusses the “revisionary paganism” of Mark Wallace, who “reasons that unless we remove all distinctions between human beings and other living creatures . . . those creatures remain ripe for exploitation” (135). She questions this well-intentioned flattening out of identity:

[I]f we do not consider other creatures as in some sense ‘other’ or ‘different’, then we are failing to do justice to their own worlds and respect creatures in their own terms. I suggest, contrary to Wallace, that all creatures do need to be considered valuable in their differences, and that this difference should not become a means for exploitation, but rather a way of regarding the creatures in the natural world as mutual ‘others’, worthy of respect for their own inner life and *telos* that is different from that of humanity. (135)

This argument harmonizes with the “I-Thou” conception of relation of Martin Buber, as well as the reciprocal relationship Abrams explores in *The Spell of the Sensuous* — a point of view capable of perceiving the immanent beside us. Jerome Stone, in *Sacred Nature*, calls for a similar ethos, what he calls “appreciative perception” (Stone 64). To what extent do Blake, Dickinson and Heaney practice this form of observation?

Definitions of *sacred*, *mysticism* and *visionary* have not advanced past those of William James at the dawn of the previous century. James identified four “marks” of the mystic experience: ineffability; a noetic quality; transience; and, lastly, the vision is not subject to the control of the subject but arrives and departs as it will (James 380). These qualities are largely supported by contemporary research on visionary states (Wulff; Yandell; Yaden). The ineffable nature of mystic experience, while common across cultures, has not deterred poets and seers from speaking; Dickinson upholds the apophatic tradition, notably in “The missing All, prevented Me” (*Poems* 415) and “Perception of an Object costs” (*Poems* 446). (Speculations that epileptic seizures light Dickinson’s epiphanic trances place her in James’ fourth, passive, category (Gordon). Most useful for our purposes is the noetic quality; of what does the mystic vision impart knowledge? Later thinkers agree with James that the sacred partakes of both ultimate truth and ultimate value (James; P. Hill; Evans). Thus, the visionary has direct experiences which confer knowledge of greater truth and value greater than mundane experience (James 302).

Where do these three poets locate the sacred, and does that ground of being map onto the natural landscape? Blake, Dickinson and Heaney each have their own visions of the sacred, and each participates in, or transform, the tradition of nature poetry in English,

each from their sites in time and place: Blake as perhaps the first, if heterodox, romantic poet in an industrializing England of the eighteenth century, Dickinson using the language of her Calvinist New England heritage and milieu against itself, and Heaney standing with one foot in the bogland of Irish history and the other in the blood of colonization and the sectarian Troubles. If ecotheology consists in ongoing efforts to find scriptural justification for environmental ethics, an ecotheological reading of these poets is an attempt to locate the intersections of their depictions of nature and their visions of the sacred.

## Chapter II.

### The Wild Thyme of William Blake

Blake is located, with Wordsworth, as the “greatest of the Romantic poets” by Harold Bloom, “indeed the first poets fully to enter into abyss of their own selves . . . they perform for us the work of the ideal metaphysician . . . which is the role our need has assigned to the modern poet” (*Visionary Company* 3). While the abyss does figure in Blake’s cosmology, his vision of the self is one of teeming multiplicity rather than emptiness. Bloom goes stray again by averring, “Blake is a poet in the tradition of Spenser and Milton, and ought to be read as one of their company. He is not a mystic or esoteric philosopher” (3). Surely Blake is concerned with the nature of the self, as well as the nature of the world, and the relation between the two, making him, precisely, a mystic and an esoteric philosopher, or, as Bloom has said, a metaphysician.

How can the same poet have written both “Nature is Imagination itself” (*Complete Poetry* 702) and “Natural Objects always did and now weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in me” (665)? Blake seems to anticipate Whitman’s “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . I contain multitudes” (*Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition* 85). Multiplicity has been doctrinally suspect at least since “My name is Legion; for we are many” (*King James Bible*, Mark 5:9). Exploring this paradox entails several paths. Moreover, Blake’s view of nature is in flux over the course of his life, as well as complicated at every juncture by its own shadows and emanations.

Blake’s historical milieu, a period of freethinking, plays a part. Blake’s figure of Albion participates in the tradition of sacred landscape persisting in Britain throughout

millennia of Christianization. In a more biographic field, his mother's involvement with the Moravian sect, with its eroticized worship, offers ground for conjecture, particularly in the role of a feminized nature in Blake's work. Both of these contexts suggest seams in the bedrock of Blake's prophetic books. Then, too, the resemblances between certain aspects of Blake's metaphysics in the *Four Zoas* and the creation myths of Gnosticism, with their flawed demiurge, spur reflection. A consideration of the resolutions of the other two epics, *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, examines the role of nature in the narrative, especially as manifested in the lark and wild thyme. Lastly, thoughts on Blake's poetics elucidate some currents of his thought.

The spectrum of belief possible within Christianity multiplied after the Reformation; in this context of individual conscience and new sects, an idiosyncratic thinker like Blake might more plausibly appear. With Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (circa 1440), doctrine was no longer the sole province of the Church and its agents. Although a century passed before the first English translations of the Bible began to circulate, they provided a spur to literacy, and thus curiosity and free thinking. The Reformation quickened by Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* (1517) cleared fields for heterodox speculation (C. Hill). New sects — Levellers, Seekers, Ranters, Quakers — proliferated, in a landscape already lush with pre-Christian resonances. Blake continues the revolution in book production, inventing his own method of "illuminated printing," combining word and image (Ackroyd, *Blake* 111-13). Where Blake has not invented his own mythography, the elements of Christianity he retains have a distinctly free-thinking cast; his Jesus is a force that functions within man, rather than an external being (see, for

example, the *Four Zoas*' "Night the Ninth Being the Last Judgment," *Complete Poetry* 400-401).

The tradition of the sacred footprint, in which geographical features attest to divine beings, is venerable across Europe. As Alexandra Walsham notes:

The etymology of Wye in Kent, where a holy well was a flourishing focal point of Christian piety by the end of the twelfth century, implies that it had earlier been a locus of pagan veneration: the place name signifies 'idol' or 'heathen temple'. At Lullingstone in the same county a chapel was superimposed upon a Romano-British cult site associated with the worship of local water nymphs . . . (Walsham 35)

One defining characteristic of these *sacrum loca* was the presence of life in natural features themselves; the spring is a living being, hence the well is holy. The headwaters of the stream are not water only, but nymphs, divine beings. The belief in animism, and the grottoes, pools and fens that embody the sacred, had to be obscured by a Christian cast of saints, in order to reserve the divine for the Church and its control. A similar process, tracing over pagan sites with Christian iconography, took place throughout Celtic and Anglo-Saxon regions of Ireland and Britian.

Divine meaning breathes beneath turf and rock in Blake's giant Albion, as well; he comprises mankind, and his body is the substance of the British Isles:

Then Albion rose up in the Night of Beulah on his Couch  
Of dread repose seen by the visionary eye; his face is toward  
The east, toward Jerusalem's Gates: groaning he sat above  
His rocks. London & Bath & Legions & Edinburgh  
Are the four pillars of his Throne; his left foot near London  
Covers the shades of Tyburn: his instep from Windsor  
To Primrose Hill stretching to Highgate & Holloway  
London is between his knees: its basements fourfold  
His right foot stretches to the sea on Dover cliffs, his heel  
On Canterbury's ruins; his right hand covers lofty Wales  
His left Scotland; his bosom girt with gold involves  
York, Edinburgh, Durham & Carlisle & on the front  
Bath, Oxford, Cambridge Norwich; his right elbow



Leans on the Rocks of Erins Land, Ireland ancient nation (*Complete Poetry* 140-41)

Like the idiosyncratic sects which arose in the wake of the Reformation, Blake's *Milton* and *Jerusalem* attempt a new dispensation; his vision of a renewed Christianity is intimately involved with the landscape itself. In a sense, Blake's mission can be read as breathing animism back into the mud and clay of the Christianized British terrain. Where pagans tasted the damp sighs of nymphs, Blake invokes the teeming Zoas, their Shadows and Emanations, in an ecology of archetypes.

One of the antinomian communities of belief which emerged in the fifteenth century, the Moravian Church, may have helped to shape Blake's own heterodox metaphysics. His mother, Catherine (who shares her Christian name with the woman Blake would marry), and her first husband, Thomas Armitage, were members, from 1750-1751, of the Congregation of the Lamb, which met at the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane (Schuchard 12-13). During this period, the Moravian Church and Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg influenced each other's thought (Davies); Blake would go on to write *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in a state of empathy with Swedenborg's spiritual paradoxes, before modulating some aspects of his beliefs (Bellin 21-27).

A fascinating aspect of the Moravian congregation of Fetter Lane was the ecstatic, sexual character of their worship, particularly in envisioning Christ's wound. Nicolaus Zinzendorf, a bishop of the Moravian Church, revived two Renaissance traditions by which poets and artists expressed the "humanation" of Christ: *ostentatio vulnerum*, the showing forth of the wounds, and *ostentatio genitalium*, the showing forth of the genitalia (Steinberg 57). Marsha Keith Schuchard writes, "Zinzendorf . . . urged the Brothers and

Sisters to concentrate so intently on the fully humanized body of the crucified Jesus that they psychoerotically penetrated the bleeding wounds” (30). As a description, it sounds a trifle overwrought, except that Schuchard has unearthed from the Fetter Lane archives Catherine Armitage’s 1750 letter of petition, in which she adduces proof of her devotion to the Moravian temperature of worship: “. . . last Friday at the love feast our Saviour was pleased to make me Suck his wounds and hug the Cross more than Ever” (qtd in Schuchard 322). She closes by invoking a Moravian blood-and-wounds hymn: “Here let me drink for ever drink.”

The Moravian sexualized worship of physicality (in the person of Jesus) expanded to a rehabilitation of the womb as well. Zinzendorf preached that the vulva was “deliberately formed as a chapel for worship by Moravian husbands and ‘the whole Congregation of Souls’” (Schuchard 38). We cannot know if Blake’s mother Catherine sang to him the hymns she’d enjoyed years before he was born, and enveloped the family home in an atmosphere of carnal religious ecstasy, or if Blake chose for himself a similar sensibility from the gallery of human possibility. However, the phrase “the four zoas” has been traced to a Moravian hymnal (Ripley 490-91). Nevertheless, this iconography, yoking together the sexual and the divine, is explicitly echoed in a sketch by Blake in the manuscript *VALA, or the Four Zoas*, depicting a female figure whose vulva is a tabernacle — the labia as the gates of the holy of holies (Fig. 1). Every image in Blake is shadowed by its contrary; the realm within is sacred in the sense of set apart, not to be touched — a source of desire, fear and control for the masculine psyche. The drawing appears toward the end of the Third Night in the manuscript, sharing the page with a sketch of (some aspect of) the cast-down Tharmas, reaching up abjectly from his fallen

state as the “affrighted Ocean” (*Complete Poetry* 330). The text describes another fall, that of Ahania: “As when the thunderbolt down falleth on the appointed place / . . . Ahania fell far into Non Entity” (329).

*VALA, or the Four Zoas*, is one of Blake’s first large scale iterations of cosmogonic myth, singing the origins of all that is, the fracturing of the primordial oneness into chaos, and the subsequent renewal and reintegration: Albion’s “. . . fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity / His fall into the Generation of Decay & Death & his Regeneration . . .” (301) — rehearsing the themes he will revisit in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

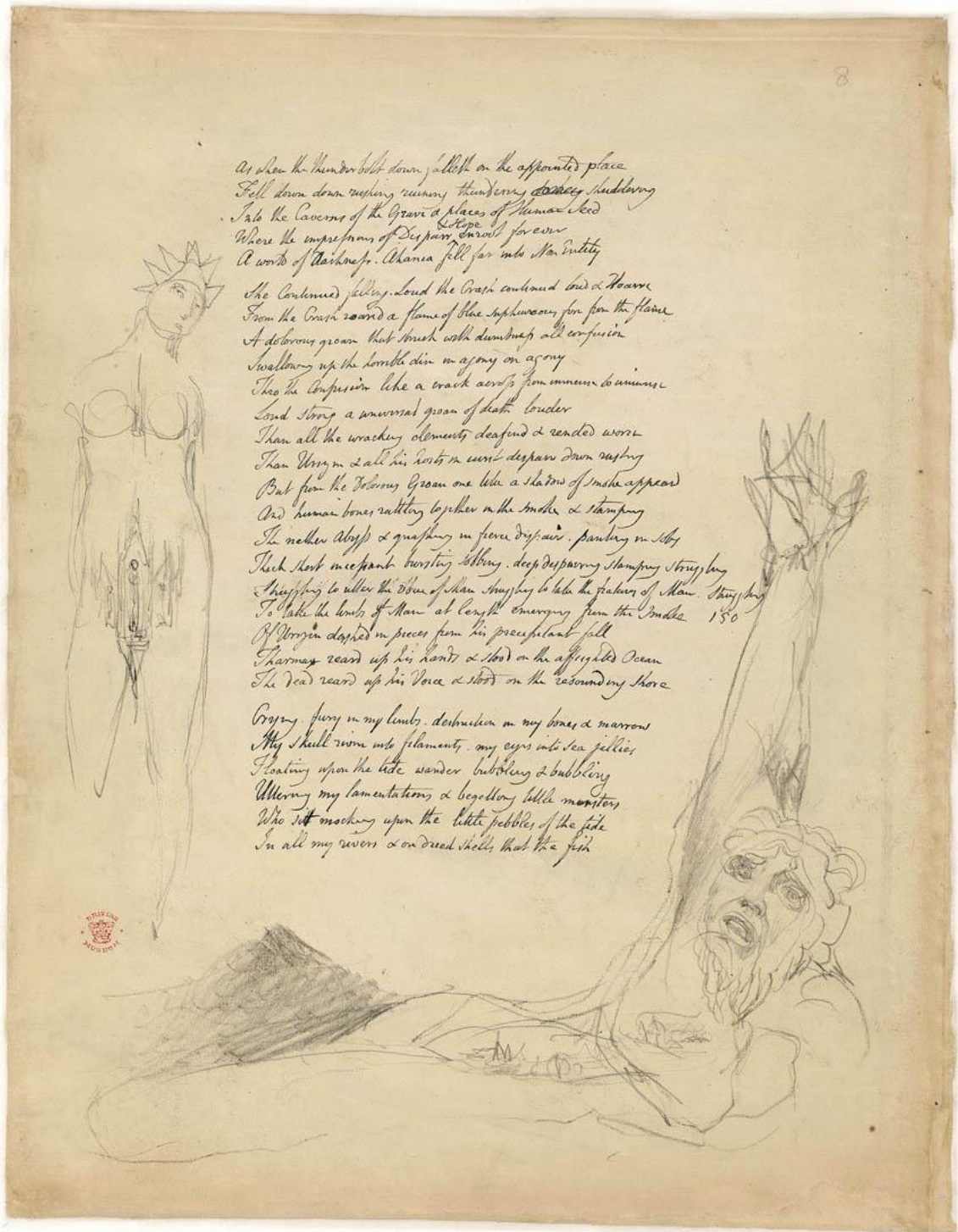


Figure 1 Manuscript, William Blake Archive. VALA, or the Four Zoas. Object 44

(Bentley 209.44)

A key realm in Blake's spiritual topography is Beulah, a cocoon (or prison) of rest. Beulah is explicitly associated with the feminine: "a mild & pleasant rest / . . . a Soft Moony Universe feminine lovely / Pure Mild & Gentle given in Mercy to those who sleep / Eternally . . ." (*Complete Poetry* 303). This domain of sleep is also one of nature, abounding in hills and rivers: in the *Four Zoas* we read, "down the hills of Beulah" (333); in *Milton*, of "Beulah's moony shades and hills" (129), and of two Streams, one of which flows through Beulah to Eden (136); in *Jerusalem*, of "the rivers of Beulah" (147), and "from the rivers of Beulah" (202). Beulah also nods with lilies and other flowers through all three poems (358, 134, 254).

Blake's first biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, alluded to a period of unhappiness in Blake's marriage: "There had been stormy times in years long past, when both were young; discord by no means trifling while it lasted. But with the cause (jealousy on her side, not wholly unprovoked), the strife had ceased" (Gilchrist 359). Swinburne maintained Blake had wanted to add a third party to the marriage, who would become a surrogate mother, in keeping with Swedenborgian beliefs (Rix 193). 'Beulah' is a Hebrew word meaning 'married' (Damon 42); it is fascinating to consider the possibility that Blake named this region of soft imprisonment after a sensation of confinement in the bounds of his marriage to Catherine.)

Throughout the epics, tension is maintained between nature as mere vegetative shell, which can only deaden, and nature as means of modulating to a new harmony, nature as Imagination itself. Nature as narcotic, luring us from the mental fight, is often identified in the epics with the female, as in the realm of Beulah.

We should expect this multiplicity of vision from Blake, who wrote, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (*Complete Poetry* 34). This work is in part a response to Swedenborg; some of its paradoxes, such as “As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to Angels look like torment and insanity” (35), appear directly inspired by the Swedish mystic, who wrote:

Through these caverns nauseous and fetid stench exhale, which good spirits abominate and flee from, but evil spirits delight in them and seek for them. For as every one in the world has been delighted with his own evil, so after death he is delighted with the stench to which his evil corresponds. . . . I heard a certain spirit crying out loudly as if from inward torture when struck by a breath from heaven ; but he became tranquil and glad as soon as a breath from hell reached him. (*Heaven and Hell*, 266-267)

Where Swedenborg’s dualistic realms were static and isolated, Blake views the interaction of contraries as generative. In later works, such as the epics, the cosmology shifts from one of ceaseless unfolding to a reintegration of contrasting energies.

In 1983, Landon Dowdey and Swallow Press published an edition of *The Four Zoas* with illustrations by Blake, culled from the manuscript and other drawings and engravings. Dowdey places the sketch of Tharmas and the female figure around the text of the end of the First Night, a description of Enitharmon:

. . . within her loins  
Three gates within Glorious & bright open into Beulah  
From Enitharmons inward parts but the bright female terror  
Refused to open the bright gates she closd and barrd them fast  
Lest Los should enter into Beulah thro her beautiful gates . . .  
. . . unknown to Enitharmon here reposd  
Jerusalem in slumbers soft lulld into silent rest (*Complete Poetry* 313)

This editorial intervention suggests the imagery of the sanctum sanctorum within the vulva is a delusory divinity, akin to the many false versions of piety found throughout Blake (for example, “And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys & desires,” from “The Garden of Love,” 26). In this reading, Blake sees organized religion, sexual desire, and the soothing beauty of the natural world as opiates, softly lulling the potential new man, who is all of us, into silent rest.

Clearly, this is a Blake of a different grain than the prophet of apocalyptic ecstasy through perception: “. . . the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite and holy where it now appears finite & corrupt. This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment” (39). Alicia Ostriker has traced in some detail the course of Blake’s attitudes regarding sexuality and gender, which are key to reading the passages in which he identifies nature with the feminine. Blake’s vision, far from a static monomyth, changed over time, Ostriker emphasizes. His relation to sexuality, entwined as it is with the material world, can be read in part as an index to view of nature. Ostriker sees four Blakes: the Blake who “celebrates sexuality and attacks repression;” a “corollary Blake . . . who depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies;” a third who “sees sexuality as a tender trap rather than a force of liberation;” and a fourth who subordinates the female principle to the male (Ostriker, “Desire Gratified” 156). The last two of these Blakes are prone to cast nature as Vala, the shadowy female who must be overcome: “Satan’s wife, the Goddess Nature” (*Complete Poetry* 273).

We find the first Blake in early works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), where we read critiques of repression such as “Prisons are built with stones of

Law, brothels with bricks of Religion,” and “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires” (36-37). Roughly contemporaneous with this work, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* explicitly joins the praise of sexuality with the natural world. At the close of the poem, Oothoon, who has maintained her dignity and independence of mind throughout ordeals of possessive masculine sexuality, sings a pantheist paean: “And trees. & birds. & beasts. & men. behold their eternal joy. / Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy! / Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!” (51).

By the composition of *Milton* (1804-1811), we find Ololon, another female figure representing the material world, apologizing to John Milton for causing Natural Religion (141). In the twenty-first century, “Natural religion” has become religious naturalism — the belief that nature itself is sacred, without recourse to God or any other divine being (Stone 10-12). As Ostriker asks, how does this identification of the female with nature and error harmonize with the Blake who “praises ‘gratified Desire’ and insists that ‘Energy is the only life and is from the body’” (“Desire Gratified” 153)? Or with the poet who wondered “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (*Complete Poetry* 35).

We must note, as well, that in some sense the corruption of the original state of human perfection in the *Four Zoas* can be attributed to Vala, the female will. Her blossoming beauty seduces the Eternal Man in the garden: “Among the Flowers of Beulah walkd the Eternal Man & Saw / Vala the lilly of the desart. melting in high noon / Upon her bosom in sweet bliss he fainted” (358). And, too, she sows discord between Urizen and Luvah (305-7), then gleefully melting Luvah down: “Luvah was cast into the



Furnaces of affliction & sealed / And Vala fed in cruel delight, the furnaces with fire” (317). Whereas in the *Four Zoas*, the Mundane Shell is cast from Luvah’s molten remains, in *Jerusalem* it is formed of Vala herself (190-91). Vegetative nature, the static cycle of birth and death, is identified more completely with Vala, the feminine principle, as Blake composes the epics.

Vala’s fall consists, in part, in becoming “a Dragon winged bright & poisonous” (317), whom Luvah casts into the deep. Two epics later, in *Jerusalem*, Vala’s body forms the material world. Across the poems, she reenacts the fate of Tiamat, the primordial female monster whom the Babylonian culture hero Marduk dismembers to build the world (Jacobsen). Bloom observes that Blake begins the *Four Zoas* with a fall, which precedes the watery chaos of Genesis, where Blake resumes the narrative (*Complete Poetry* 948-49). In some ways, Blake’s epics are revisions of the Old and New Testaments, which draw from earlier Mediterranean mythic complexes; with Vala’s Tiamat-like transformation from sea serpent into dispersed foundations of the world, Blake has gone back to the Babylonian source. As the seven clay tablets of the *Enuma Elish* were not discovered until 1849, it is likely that Blake recreated this primal scene by way of imagination, rather than allusion.

Ostriker considers the darkening of Blake’s glass as a process moving from “a love of nature that makes him one of the great pastoral poets in the English language and extends as far as *Milton*, to a growing and finally absolute rejection of nature and all fleshly things; and from an immanent to a transcendent God” (“Desire Gratified” 164). As Blake said in *The Last Judgment*, “I assert for My self that I do not behold the Outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action it is as the Dirt upon my feet

No part of Me” (*Complete Poetry* 565). However, Ostriker rejects this linear sequence as “an absurd oversimplification . . . It would be truer to say that [these opposed views] were with him always — like his Saviour — in varying proportions, and that the antagonism between them is the life of his poetry” (“Desire Gratified” 164). A similar tension between nature and other privileged sites of the sacred fuels the verse of Dickinson and Heaney.

Blake sees the damage which reason-driven civilization has wrought on the natural world. In the ninth and final night of the *Four Zoas*, Urizen repents of his relentless measuring, grasping, constructing:

. . . O that I had never drank the wine nor eat the bread  
Of dark mortality nor cast my view into futurity nor turnd  
My back darkning the present clouding with a cloud  
And building arches high & cities turrets & towers & domes  
Whose smoke destroyd the pleasant gardens & whose running Kennels  
Chokd the bright rivers . . . (*Complete Poetry* 390)

Urizen realizes it is precisely those acts of culture, architecture, commerce, which have obscured and befouled nature, destroying the gardens and choking the rivers. These suffocated rivers share their courses with the ancient Euphrates, which Gilgamesh jammed with the felled cedars of the sacred forest.

However, Urizen is not condemned only; his rehabilitation in the ninth night of the epic shows there is a place in the creation for the principle of reason:

So Urizen spoke he shook his snows from off his Shoulders & arose  
As on a Pyramid of mist his white robes scattering  
The fleecy white renewed he shook his aged mantles off  
Into the fires Then glorious bright Exulting in his joy  
He sounding rose into the heavens in naked majesty  
In radiant Youth . . . (391)

Urizen takes up his plow, in order to sow a new generation of humanity (“from the hand of Urizen the myriads fall like stars” (394). (The plow itself exhibits the presence of contraries in every detail of the poem, as it is “ornamented / With beautiful art the study of angels the workmanship of Demons” (393).) The plowman is a figure of control, placing the furrows and future generations. Urizen’s role thus indicates that reason, inherent in his very name, is in essence an instrument of control, which in the service of the greater purpose is a necessary element of the cosmos. Contraries, such as the reason of Urizen and the emotion of Luvah, can destroy, or, if their energies can circulate, create. Of course, this raises the question: who controls the controller?

One answer is found in the passage from the *Four Zoas* which Bloom deemed the entire poem in miniature (“Commentary” 955):

If Gods combine against Man Setting their Dominion above  
 The Human form Divine. Thrown down from their high Station  
 In the Eternal Heavens of Human Imagination: buried beneath  
 In dark oblivion with incessant pangs ages on ages  
 In Enmity & war first weakend then in stern repentance  
 They must renew their brightness and their disorganized functions  
 Again reorganize till they resume the image of the human  
 Cooperating in the bliss of Man obeying his Will  
 Servants to the infinite & Eternal of the Human form (395)

Or, as Luvah put it, “Attempting to be more than Man We become less” (403). Thus the structure of all, Plato’s Good, Hinduism’s ground of being, for Blake is Imagination, which is, specifically, Human. The implication is that human beings as we know them in the phenomenal world, of matter and appearances, are simply a manifestation of an all-subsuming Human Imagination. In this respect, Blake’s vision of that which is most real resembles the *mundus imaginalis*, or Imaginal World, which Henry Corbin found in Islamic mysticism (Corbin 3-36). As that which contains and generates all, Blake’s

Human Imagination enacts the physical world as well; hence, for Blake (in some seasons of his thought), “Nature is Imagination itself” (*Complete Poetry* 702).

Rare is the figure in Blake who is wholly evil or good. The fall cannot be blamed on reason, or emotion, or sensation, or creativity; each quality is essential, and each can veer into error when it believes itself superior — at which point it becomes a Spectre. Over the course of the poem, each Zoa assumes godhood, initiating another fall. We expect to see reintegration at the climax of the prophetic poems: not a collapsing of difference into a monolithic standard, but elements functioning in an ecosystem of energies. Only Vala, variously the Emanation of Luvah, in the *Four Zoas*, or the Shadow of Jerusalem (in the eponymous poem), seems unredeemed, despite her second childhood in the eighth Night. As A. K. Mellor noted, Blake’s characterization of the base identity as male, and the splittings and versions female, is an inherently biased view. Blake’s portrait of the destructive, scheming female will read as an insightful critique of misogynist caricatures of the female, who has led men astray since the garden. His portrait of repressed sexuality uniting organized religion and the state in war is all too accurate. But in a myth which goes back to the foundations of eternity, why not imagine pre-patriarchal gender roles? Perhaps Blake’s intent is, in part, to illustrate allegorically how our fractured, divided social world came to pass.

In connection with Ostriker’s narrative of Blake’s changing view of gender and sexuality, Andrew Lincoln sees in the *Four Zoas* four discrete stages of composition and revision, with attendant thematic variation. A first layer, preserved in the second and third Nights of the poem, transforms Milton’s account of creation in *Paradise Lost*, while inscribing “the complete history of a civilization, from the primeval dawn of

consciousness to the brink of collapse” (Lincoln 66). A second reading traces the main argument of the poem, with its falls, rebuildings, seductions by the nature goddess Vala, and Los’ dismantling of the Mundane Shell in the ninth Night. Lincoln views the Christian references as later emendations on Blake’s part, judging from the manuscript evidence. Lastly, in Lincoln’s reconstruction, Blake added the prehistory of Britain, Druid speculation (always associated with human sacrifice, hence a mystery religion, for Blake), and ancient Hebrew echoes.

In addition to Old Testament strains, the palimpsest of the *Four Zoas* is haunted by echoes of Gnosticism, the belief complex which originated from Judaic and Hellenistic roots and spread across much of the Mediterranean of antiquity as an antinomian or distaff religion (Quispel 3507). Urizen, the creator of the material world, proclaims himself supreme being: “. . . Urizen descended / Gloomy sounding, Now I am God from Eternity to Eternity” (*Complete Poetry* 306). He quotes the God of the Old Testament (Isaiah 43:13), but his declaration recalls the mistaken belief of the Gnostic demiurge that he is the Lord of all, as in the *Apocryphon of John*: “. . . he is impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, ‘I am God and there is no other God beside me,’ for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come” (*Apocryphon* 111). Like the Gnostic demiurge (probably descended from the ‘craftsman’ *dēmiurgós* of Plato’s *Timaeus*), Urizen exalts his station, repeating throughout the *Four Zoas* his claim to be the one, true God (*Complete Poetry* 328, 355, 360).

Los’ rending of the firmament (386-87) reflects darkly his earlier forging of both the human body and time — another Gnostic trope. In the fourth Night, with the demiurge Urizen fallen, the archon Los constructs for him a body, which is the pattern of

the human form: “Los beat on his fetters & heated his furnaces,” hammering out for Urizen a “vast spine . . . ribs like a bending Cavern . . . bones of solidness,” as well as a brain, eyes, ears, nostrils, a “craving hungry cavern,” a throat, a right and left arm, feet stamping (336-37). This form for Urizen then becomes the pattern for humanity.

Los not only constructs the human form, but the medium through which it moves, time: “. . . in his hand the thundering / Hammer of Urthona. forming under his heavy hand the hours / The days & years . . . / Linkd hour to hour & day to night & night to day & year to year . . .” (335). Los forges the seconds which are the links in the chain of time, binding us to a temporal existence as we are bound to our physical forms. Our human shape and the matrix of our existence are smithed by the same agent, in the same act. The shackles of this linear form of time can be burst by the revelation of time as continuous present — eternity in an hour.

The creation, in the *Four Zoas*, of the body by Los, deputy of the deluded would-be God Urizen, parallels eerily the part-by-part account of the creation of humanity in the Gnostic text *Apocryphon of John*. “And he said to the authorities which attend him, ‘Come, let us create a man . . .’” (*Apocryphon* 113). The demiurge, here called Yaltabaoth, and his archons create a bone-soul, a sinew-soul, a flesh soul, a marrow soul, a blood soul, a skin-soul, and a hair-soul. They create “the proportions of the limbs . . . and the proper working together of each of the parts.” There follows an itemized description of the creation of each part of the human body: head, brain, right eye, left eye, right ear, left ear, nose, lips, down to the toes (113-15). A different demon has dominion over each part of the body. The text takes care to inform its readers that the enumerated body parts (each with attendant authority) total 365 — the number of days in the year,

according to the Egyptian astrologically based calendar commonplace at the time (Stern 125). Each body part is a day; together the human body comprises a year. A similar example occurs in the *Four Zoas*' sixth Night, when the Spectre of Urthona gathers fifty-two armies, one for each week of the year (*Complete Poetry* 352).

As the maker of the physical universe, the demiurge is also associated with the stars, which, in accordance with the widespread belief in astrology throughout the ancient Mediterranean, determine our destiny. The constellations were another means for the archons to enforce their baleful influence upon us. "Gnostics pursued their radical critique of the cosmos further than any other group, finding in the seemingly regular, predictable motions of the heavens only the expression of a malevolent plot designed to deceive and entrap them" (Hodges 359). Urizen, too, as the builder of the Mundane Shell and all it contains, has the stars in his dominion: "The moon shot forth in that dread night when Urizen call'd the stars round his feet . . ." (*Complete Poetry* 58). (It is most likely happenstance that 'zodiac' and 'zoa' are etymologically related, from the Greek *zoion*, animal ("Zodiac," etymology)).

Another instance of Gnostic motifs in Blake's work occurs in the opening passage of Night VIIIb in the *Four Zoas*. This Night is a portion of manuscript which Blake seems never to have satisfactorily integrated into the narrative; various editions place it differently in the sequence. Urizen sees a Shadow on the deeps, appoints himself God, and creates human civilization:

But in the deeps beneath the Roots of Mystery in darkest night  
Where Urizen sat on his rock the Shadow brooded  
Urizen saw & triumphd & he cried to his warriors

The time of Prophecy is now revolv'd . . .  
I will walk forth thro those wide fields of endless Eternity

A God & not a Man . . . (*Complete Poetry* 360)

Urizen goes on to build laborious “Trades & Commerce ships and armed vessels,” children are sold to trades, laboring in dark despair until they become spectres, and slaves in myriads burden the deep: “Rattling with clanking chains the Universal Empire groans” (360-61). He also founds his temple of “secret religion;” war follows soon after (361). In short, the Shadow-inspired Urizen creates, if not humanity, the institutions of human society since the dawn of history: commerce, labor, slavery, organized religion, and warfare.

This episode echoes Gnostic creation myths. In both the *Apocryphon of John* and *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, the demiurge sees the divine image in the waters of his abyss, and is moved to create humanity (*Apocryphon* 113, *Hypostasis* 163). Donald Ault has asked, reasonably, whose Shadow Urizen sees: Enitharmon’s? Urthona’s? (Ault 332-34). However, the structure of the creations is homologous across the Gnostic mythos and Urizen’s founding of human institutions in the *Four Zoas*. Gnosticism and Blake are surely playing on the Genesis account, in which “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” but both interpolate a lesser creator, whose creation is flawed; Blake emphasizes the cost of civilization in slavery, repressive religion and war.

Not only our physical form, but time itself, even the constellations, are under the control of the demiurge and his archons. We humans are made by, and completely in the power of, the false god. However, Gnostic soteriology holds out the hope of the divine spark within us, the breath of Sophia, returning us to our true home in the pleroma, the original unity. Surely, Blake as well has hidden a golden thread in his mythography which can lead us out of the seemingly endless cycle of error, the continuous fall.



One may ask if Blake's Gnostic themes are informed or arrived at independently. Milton O. Percival observes that Blake's tradition is far from that of Christian orthodoxy, as in his veins "ran the dissidence of dissent and the protestantism of the Protestant religion." Percival views Blake's canon as

[t]he Orphic and Pythagorean tradition, Neoplatonism in the whole of its extent, the Hermetic, kabbalistic, Gnostic, and alchemical writings, Erigena, Paracelsus, Boehme, and Swedenborg — here is a consistent body of tradition extending over nearly twenty-five hundred years . . . in the use of tradition Blake exceeded Milton and was second, if to anyone, only to Dante. (Percival 1-2)

The congruences between Blake's thought and Gnostic cosmology observed above are corollary to a fundamental belief which Blake, in some seasons, shares with the Gnostic creed: nature deceives.

This is the tone in which Blake writes, "imagination, the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow" — the Platonic, or Gnostic, strain, substituting ideal forms, or the pleroma, for imagination. However, world-rejecting transcendence is far from Blake's only sensibility. When he sees the "tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars" (Gilchrist 7), he may be perceiving the living energy of the oak, in imagery which scans in his personal iconography: the *genii loci* of the tree. Similarly, to see a Heaven in a Wild Flower is to be aware of both the imaginal realm on which the flower depends and the White-thorn's petals. Blake's vision can hold the transcendent in the immanent, like color in water.

Theodore Roszak has noted the struggle in Blake between the calling to look through, not with, the eye (*Vision of the Last Judgment*), and the desire to sensually enjoy blossom and leaf:

. . . Blake's eye had to pierce nature as if it were a delusive veil; Wordsworth could let the natural aspect rest easy in his eye and there become the simple wonder it is. Both these are way and means of transcendence. Both transcend single vision. But Blake beneath his Gnostic burden sweats at the job; he must climb home to heaven hand over hand, hauling himself free of the 'vegetable universe'. (Roszak 110)

Such a tension runs through the prophetic books, culminating in the resolution of both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*.

To begin at the end, *Jerusalem*, the last, most knotted articulation of the prophetic themes, nearly hides its climactic moment in a welter of other events. As all seems lost, Albion's "Selfhood cruel" marching, he converses with Jesus, whose "Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los" (Complete Poetry 255). Albion questions the need for sacrifice: "Cannot Man exist without Mysterious / Offering of Self for Another" (256). Jesus replies that sacrifice is necessary: "Wouldest thou love one who never died / For thee or ever die for one who had not died for thee" (256). Albion takes these words to heart, saying "Do I sleep amidst danger to Friends! . . . So Albion spoke & threw himself into the Furnaces of affliction" (256). His act of self-sacrifice is decisive, revelatory: "All was a Vision, all a Dream: the Furnaces became / Fountains of Living Waters flowing from the Humanity Divine / And all the Cities of Albion rose from their Slumbers . . ." (256). Given the significance of Albion's sacrifice — it rends the veil, exposing the enduring reality inside the vision or dream — we can ask if Blake, the champion of sensual enjoyment, of energy as eternal delight, is endorsing what Nietzsche termed "slave morality," the Christian ethos that one's life is not one's own, but is owed (Nietzsche 15-56).

How much would one give to read Blake's annotations of Nietzsche! Sadly, the iron bounds of sequence in the Mundane Shell do not permit it. In *Milton*, the blind poet's

spirit can simultaneously return to earth to reform religious error, visit Blake and inspire him, go astray in the abyss, and walk “though darkened” in Heaven; our time-bound, mortal selves are constrained by Blake’s death prior to Nietzsche’s birth. Nevertheless, Albion hurls himself into the furnaces of his own free choosing, in order to protect friends in danger, and not out of coercion or obedience to an inculcated dogma. This suggests his action is of his volition, an expression of his nature, and therefore the deed of a free being, not a servant to an external code. As Los, whose image Jesus now wears, said earlier in the poem, “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans” (153). Albion here creates his own system, and by setting another above himself he weaves again the golden thread which had been unraveled by each aspect of eternity setting itself above. The four energies (called Zoas, in the previous work) once again function in unison:

. . . bright beaming Urizen  
 Layd his hand on the South & took a breathing Bow of carved Gold  
 Luvah his hand stretch’d to the East & bore a Silver Bow bright shining  
 Tharmas Westward a Bow of Brass pure flaming richly wrought  
 Urthona Northward in thick storms a Bow of Iron terrible thundering.  
 (256)

The “Human Nerves of Sensation, the Four Rivers of the Water of Life,” the “Parent Sense the Tongue,” the “labyrinthine Ear” are all restored (257). As the poem ends, “All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone” (258), it may sound as though Blake is collapsing the various sentient forms of nature into the human; however, he uses “Human” to refer to the Imagination itself, Corbin’s imaginal realm, or ground of being. T.S. Eliot said, “not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire” (Eliot 36), and Blake enacts not a contraction of nature to the bounds of the human, but an expansion of the human beyond our anthropomorphic limits.

“All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone” is a highly compressed song of praise to the natural world, a telegraphic ideogram of some of Blake’s earlier paeans. A draft passage from the *Four Zoas* finds Blake sounding themes upon which he will improvise in *Milton*:

Such power was given to the Solitary wanderer.  
The barked Oak, the long limbed Beech, the Ches’nut tree; the Pine.  
The Pear tree mild, the frowning Walnut, the sharp Crab, & Apple sweet,  
The rough bark opens; twittering peep forth little beaks and wings  
The Nightingale, the Goldfinch, Robin, Lark, Linnet & Thrush  
The Goat leap’d from the craggy cliff, the Sheep awoke from the mould  
(*Complete Poetry* 824)

Paradoxically, for a poet who sometimes dismissed nature as deception, Blake has noticed not only the variety of forms in the nonhuman world, but also their unique characteristics, from the frowning walnut to the long limbed beech. Blake attends, and, we can hear in the music of the syllables, he loves: “Upon its green stalk rose the Corn, waving innumerable / Infolding the bright Infants from the desolating winds” (824). The poet who called nature “Satan’s bride” here pioneers the ecstatic catalogue of Walt Whitman.

Blake’s immediately previous epic, *Milton*, ends with the author returned to his garden at Felpham, amid the song of the lark and the scent of thyme. From a cosmic apocalypse of revelation, Jesus and Albion restored, he

fell outstretched upon the path  
A moment, & my Soul returnd into its mortal state  
To Resurrection & Judgment in the Vegetable Body  
And my sweet Shadow of Delight stood trembling by my side

Immediately the Lark mounted with a loud trill from Felphams Vale  
And the Wild Thyme from Wimbletons green & impurpled Hills (143)

This imagery of the natural world is adduced, not at random, as a garnish atop the new dispensation of Heaven and earth but reveals Blake's attentive engagement with season and with forms beyond the human.

Elaine Kauvar has traced the path of the wild thyme and the lark through the poem. We initially find thyme cited as the first to lead the flowers' "sweet Dance" (131). Subsequently, in Book Two, in a complex concatenation of symbols, Ololon descends "to Los & Enitharmon / Unseen beyond the Mundane Shell Southward in Miltons track" (136). Her descent makes possible her reunion with Milton, and creates a path upward, back to the heavens: "O how the Starry Eight rejoic'd to see Ololon descended! / And now that a wide road was open to Eternity, / By Ololons descent thro Beulah to Los & Enitharmon" (136). Ololon's descent is, precisely, the "Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find," the moment which "renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed" (136). The potentially restorative moment is characterized by the presence of wild thyme: "Just in this Moment when the morning odours rise abroad / And first from the Wild Thyme . . ." (136). From here, on the Rock of Odours mantled in thyme's bright purple, "[b]eside the Fount above the Larks nest," Ololon begins her journey; wild thyme is Los' Messenger to Eden, and the lark is Los' Messenger "thro the Twenty-seven Churches" (136). The lark, and the wild thyme (twice designated "first"), are interwoven with redemption in anticipation of the close of the poem.

The lark is the first to sing, often before dawn; wild thyme, the first to flower in the spring (Bewick 614-15; J. Hill 349-50). Heralding a new day, new life after winter, they are of the same substance as the rebirth of Albion. Moreover, both lark and wild thyme unite the earth and sky. In a passage of Blake's most sustained lyricism, earlier in

*Milton*, he notes “The Lark sitting upon his earthy bed” (130), nesting on the ground rather than in the sky-close trees, though he also soars the air. Wild thyme is popularly known as Christ’s Ladder (Hutchings 70), suggesting this groundcover herb nevertheless ascends to heaven; Blake depicts it climbing the impurpled hills, attaining toward the sky. The lark and the wild thyme, the climactic beings of the poem, not only demonstrate Blake’s observation of the ecology of place; recalling Ololon’s joining of Beulah to Eternity, bird and herb also thread together the immanent and the transcendent, the mundane and the imaginal, in a way which is emblematic of Blake’s mission throughout the prophetic books.

Of course, eternity, in Blake, is not the popular conception of time rolling away endlessly into infinity, like Eliot’s “Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after” enlightenment in the *Four Quartets* (Eliot 8). Rather, eternity denotes a moment out of time; the moment Satan and his watchfiends cannot find, the moment in which renovation is possible and the new Jerusalem can be built, as a harmony of energies, is always present — heaven in the wild thyme, and eternity in the hour of the lark’s song.

However, this unity is not easily won. Through most of the prophetic books Blake struggles, contends, strives, as do the Zoas. In part, the forbidding density of the poetic line in the epics, like walls of thorns, is due to Blake’s search for a form adequate to his subject. In the preface to *Jerusalem*, Blake describes his prosody:

When this Verse was first dictated to me, I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton & Shakspeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place; the terrific numbers are reserved for the

terrific parts, the mild & gentle for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other. Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race. (*Complete Poetry* 145-46)

Blake proposes to reserve aesthetically pleasing sounds and images for the passages in the poem which call for it, and harsh consonants, rhythms, and imagery for the passages of dissolution and strife. Bloom maintains that Blake can achieve whatever effect he wishes poetically, citing the lyric: "Let thy west wind sleep on / The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering eyes, / And wash the dusk with silver" (410).

Blake was always capable of putting sensuous apprehension into euphonious form, but when mature he generally avoided it except for special purposes, as in his Beulah imagery. Blake is one of the technical masters of English poetry; whatever he wanted to do he could do. The odd but popular notion that he wrote more harshly as he grew older because he had lost his lyrical gifts is nonsense. (*Visionary Company* 13)

Beulah, the realm of soft repose, of rest and beauty, flowers and running water, should indeed be lyrically expressed. Perhaps Bloom believes that Blake attempts to lull us into an aesthetically content complacency, in keeping with Beulah's soothing nature, rather than challenge us with the clashing consonants and molossuses of war between the Zoas. At the same time, Beulah's lamentation for Ololon, in *Milton*, inspires some of Blake's most observant and empathetic celebration of the natural world, in all its variegated individuality:

Thou hearest the Nightingale begin the Song of Spring;  
The Lark sitting upon his earthy bed; just as the morn  
Appears; listens silent; then springing from the waving Corn-field! loud  
He leads the Choir of Day! trill, trill, trill, trill,  
Mounting upon the wings of light into the Great Expanse:  
Reechoing against the lovely blue and shining heavenly Shell:  
His little throat labours with inspiration; every feather  
On throat & breast & wings vibrates with the effluence Divine  
All Nature listens silent to him & the awful Sun  
Stands still upon the Mountain looking on this little Bird  
With eyes of soft humility, & wonder love & awe.

Then loud from their green covert all the Birds begin their Song  
 The Thrush, the Linnet & the Goldfinch. Robin & the Wren  
 Awake the Sun from his sweet reverie upon the Mountain:  
 The Nightingale again assays his song, & thro the day,  
 And thro the night warbles luxuriant; every Bird of Song  
 Attending his loud harmony with admiration & love . . .  
 Thou perceives the Flowers put forth their precious Odours!  
 And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets  
 Forgetting that within that Center Eternity expands  
 Its ever during doors, that Og & Anak fiercely guard  
 First ever the morning breaks joy opens in the flowery bosoms  
 Joy even to tears, which the Sun rising dries; first the Wild Thyme  
 And Meadow-sweet downy & soft waving among the reeds.  
 Light springing on the air lead the sweet Dance: they wake  
 Revels along upon the wind; the White-thorn lovely May  
 Opens her many lovely eyes: listening the Rose still sleeps  
 None dare to wake her. soon she bursts her crimson curtained bed  
 And comes forth in the majesty of beauty; every Flower:  
 The Pink, the Jessamine, the Wall-flower, the Carnation  
 The Jonquil, the mild Lilly opes her heavens! every Tree,  
 And Flower & Herb soon fill the air with an innumerable Dance  
 Yet all in order sweet & lovely . . . (*Complete Poetry* 130-31)

It is impossible to ascribe beauty of this order solely to mimetic representation of calm, moony Beulah. Blake would free poetry, and the human race, of their fetters; he explained, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it” (35). Perhaps Blake’s lines are hobbled when he writes of commerce, religion, and war, and at liberty when he writes of the White-thorn’s many lovely eyes, because he is a true poet, and of nature’s party without knowing it.



### Chapter III.

#### Emily Dickinson's Sacred Nothing

I thought that nature was enough  
Till Human nature came  
But that the other did absorb  
As Parallax a Flame —

Of Human nature just aware  
There added the Divine (*Poems* 495)

The oracle of Amherst, wrapped in white, reverses our expectation that human conceptions of the natural world assimilate tree, gnat and grass. Instead, Dickinson portrays nature absorbing the human, through the mystery of divine intervention. This interplay between natural, human and divine laces her work like the thread with which she bound her fascicles of poems. Dickinson weaves these themes on a ground of two primary historical contexts: the Puritan, Calvinist origins of New England as an “errand into the wilderness” (as Pastor Samuel Danforth’s 1670 Massachusetts Bay Colony election sermon had it) to create a second Eden, and the American iteration of the aesthetic of the sublime (Plumstead 53-78).

The Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) subsided for fifteen years, to return as the Third Great Awakening in 1855, when Dickinson was fifteen. She was all but unique in mid-nineteenth century New England in declining to profess Christ — the only student at Mount Holyoke Academy, and then Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and, ultimately, the only person in her family, not to do so (Habegger; Gordon). Jonathan

Edwards (1703-1758) may have been remote in time from Dickinson's milieu, but his stern Calvinist ethos hovered like a specter upon the American mind. Millicent Todd Bingham, mistress of Dickinson's older brother Austin, eventually shepherded the Delphic fascicles into print; she wrote in her memoir *Emily Dickinson's Home* that Edwards' influence:

still lay dark over Amherst. His ministry had begun in Northampton only seven miles away, and from that town his frightening message, instilling in many a sinner the fear of an angry God, had inspired the Great Awakening of the 1730's . . . . A century later the orthodox New Englander was still weighed down by his awareness of evil . . . . In his inaugural address President Herman Humphrey of Amherst College summed it up in these words: "Without the fear of God nothing can be secure for one moment." (Bingham 32-33)

Edwards equates sin with nature, as in his 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," the standard of the First Great Awakening:

The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire; he is of purer Eyes than to bear to have you in his Sight; you are ten thousand Times so abominable in his Eyes as the most hateful venomous Serpent is in ours. (Edwards 16)

Edwards views the humble spider, one of nature's builders, as abhorrent to God as a sinner. Such a doctrine eviscerates nature of the sacred; in many Native American cultures, Grandmother Spider variously created people, sang them to life, led them out of the chaos of the underworld, and taught women the art of weaving (Taylor 31-35).

Dickinson observes spiders in a more equable light in "The Spider holds a Silver Ball":

The Spider holds a Silver Ball  
In unperceived Hands —  
And dancing softly to Himself

His Yarn of Pearl — unwinds —

He plies from nought to nought —  
In unsubstantial Trade —  
Supplants our Tapestries with His —  
In half the period —

An Hour to rear supreme  
His Continents of Light —  
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom —  
His Boundaries — forgot — (*Poems* 232)

The speaker appreciates, in the lyric phrase “Continents of Light,” the spider’s capacity to create, which is abruptly ended by human indifference or malice. Dickinson’s response to nature’s lowly creatures, from insects to a narrow fellow in the grass, is often one of curiosity, and empathetic observation; in this she emulates one of her mentors, Keats (Capps 132-33). His negative capability, “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” which allows him to imagine himself a billiard ball, delighting in its own roundness, smoothness, volubility, and rapidity of motion, or a sparrow, picking about the gravel (Keats 49; Rollins 59; Keats 43). Dickinson assays a similar effacement of her human self as a bee, daffodil, snake, or another of “Nature’s people” (*Poems* 252, 52-53, 443-44).

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is emblematic of the Calvinist view of nature as a fallen realm to be redeemed by believers. Deuteronomy’s “waste howling wilderness” (32:10) was often invoked to refer to the new continent, in need of transformation into a walled garden. Nicholas Noyes’ 1698 sermon explicitly identifies America as Satan’s territory, to be wrested by the Puritans from his grasp for God’s glory:

It is certain Antichrist boasted in his American eureka and conquest when he began to be routed in Europe by the reformation. And who can blame

him to provide a new world against he lost his old one. But the Son of God followed him at the heels and took possession of America for himself. And this Province, so far as I know, is the very turf and twig he took possession by, as to the reformation and conversion of the natives and gathering of them into churches. (Noyes 75)

“[R]eformation and conversion” is used somewhat euphemistically, obscuring the theft of land inhabited for thousands of years, genocide, and the attempted murder of a world view and way of life (Woolford 1-20). As A.W. Plumstead observes in *The Wall and the Garden: Selected Massachusetts Election Sermons, 1670-1775*, America was “free of bishops, untainted (in the Puritans’ view) except for Indians” (26). Believing their errand into the wilderness was to make a new Garden of Eden, the colonists replaced the original sin of eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for which God exiled them from the garden, with Cain’s sin. In their efforts to redeem nature, they murdered peoples for whom nature was home and source of life. The colonists burnt down an Eden to build their garden wall.

In 2022, the University of Massachusetts Amherst acknowledged “that it was founded and built on the unceded homelands of the Pocumtuc Nation on the land of the Norrwutuck community” (“Land Acknowledgments: UMass Amherst”); in general, Native history has been all but effaced from the cultural landscape. The town of Amherst was named after Lord Jeffery Amherst, despite the preference of many citizens for “Norrwottuck,” for the Indians whose land it had been. Amherst had waged war against the Native population, including sending them smallpox-infested blankets in an effort to not only extirpate them from New England but “. . . put a most Effectual Stop *to their very Being*” (“Amherst to Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of the Northern Indian Department, 27 August,” qtd. in “Amherst and Smallpox”). 358 years after the region was first trod by a European (Emily Dickinson’s great-great-great-great-

grandfather, Nathaniel Dickinson), and 264 years after its incorporation as a township, many residents regret the town's namesake. In 2017, Amherst College replaced its mascot, Lord Jeff, with the Mammoth. One citizen advocates renaming the town itself, with choices ranging from "Tubman" to "Sumner" to "Emily," after the poet; Vincent O'Connor has called for a referendum in November 2023 (Sudborough). The all but extirpated Native presence leaves some traces in Dickinson's work (*Poems* 474, 564), as the Indian pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*), the white flower used by some tribes as an analgesic. It is also known as ghost pipe.

If the Calvinist errand into the wilderness, building a new Eden from the wastes, imposes divinely inspired power on the landscape, another modality of the national consciousness, the American sublime, seeks to draw power from it. The sublime underwent a journey of millennia from Longinus' first century CE conception of high style treating of powerful emotions which leads to ecstasy. He also stipulates moral excellence as a component of the sublime; however, he does not illustrate in what way Sappho's Fragment 31, the "Ode to Jealousy," instills this quality. Perhaps Longinus felt, reasonably enough, that the exercise of empathy is a moral act. In fact, his sentiment seems to be that the rapture of powerful emotions fittingly expressed is itself ennobling. In this regard, Longinus' aesthetic theory is similar to Aristotle's, who found the catharsis of pity, fear and wonder experienced in the theater to leave us better citizens (*Poetics* 230). Intriguingly, Longinus' sublime is not concerned with the gods, faith, or the ultimate nature of reality. When he cites the Genesis account of God's "Let there be light," he does so to approve of the noble diction, rather than the piety or metaphysical insight, of the passage (Longinus 12).

It is curious to reflect how little truck the sublime has had with what would seem to be its obvious referent, the divine. “Sublime” derives from the Latin *sublimis*, “up to the threshold” (“Sublime,” etymology). Encounters like Moses’ with the burning bush, or Pentheus’ with Dionysus, or Odysseus’ with Athena, seem like approaches to the threshold of the mortal that might warrant the texture of the sublime. Longinus’ examples are representations of extreme emotion among humans, rendered in suitable rhetoric. Edmund Burke admits God’s anger to the sublime, but only as an outlier among architecture, death, and that which has power. Kant, too, focusses his observations on architecture and, especially, nature: looming cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes and hurricanes; while we may feel dwarfed by nature’s size and power, we assert our superior reason (Kant 261). Burke had divided the beautiful from the sublime, which has the power to destroy us and induces awe and terror. The vastness which induces an aesthetically charged thrill of fear was one of the keynotes of Romanticism’s scripting of nature; as Wordsworth put it (none too poetically), “beauty . . . / Hath terror in it” (Wordsworth 471). Rilke seizes these threads and weaves them together in returning both the beautiful and the sublime to the divine:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’  
hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me  
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed  
in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure,  
and we are awed because it so serenely disdains  
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying. (Rilke 151)

Boileau’s translation of Longinus into French in 1674 brought the sublime as an aesthetic category back into circulation. Marjorie Hope Nicolson shows, in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, how scientific advances in knowledge of the age of the

Earth and the size of the heavens transformed nature from a site of chaos and God's disfavor to a possible location of the sublime. As God absented himself from an active role in creation during the Enlightenment, a niche opened in the ecosystem of belief for a sublime entity; Romanticism inscribed Nature onto the vacant throne. Nicolson also demonstrates that the Romantic sublime can be seen as a gradual taming of the terror of vast natural spectacles, torrents plunging down canyons, immensities of shattered stone, into an agreeable frisson, a seeking out of sensation.

Gary Lee Stonum has observed that in the confrontation with the Romantic sublime, poets master the ineffable by getting the experience of immensity onto paper. In describing the overwhelming effect wreaked by the sublime, it in effect comes to belong to the poet, another trophy of aesthetic struggle (Stonum 125). As Bryan Jay Wolf has theorized, the sublime is the "moment of psychological reversal when an oppressive burden is lifted and the soul receives an influx of power, which it experiences in an ecstasy of liberation and release" (Wolf 177).

Rob Wilson notes that the specific character of the American sublime tweaks the model of the romantic sublime such that the poet's power, acquired by circumscribing vastness with a wall of ink, accrues to the nation as a whole. Emerson pioneered the American sublime in this key. He finds "two absorbing facts — *I and the Abyss*" (*Journals* Vol. X 171), and from the industrial civilizing of the abyss of the huge American continent, empty if one erases Native Americans, the true poet of the nation, the representative man, draws power:

Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boasts and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a

poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination . . . (“The Poet” 304)

As the nation draws strength from commodifying the wilderness, the poet draws strength from subsuming the romantic sublime in his verse, what Emerson in another essay calls “an instantaneous in-streaming causing power” (“Nature” 38). Emerson’s program here quoted conjures the prospect of an enraptured young Whitman making notes in the margin with a pencil nub, envisioning his illustrious calling. It is discouraging to consider Whitman, the pantheist who sees “. . . limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields, / And brown ants in little wells beneath them, / And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen and pokeweed” as a cheerleader of empire (*Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition* 29). However, Whitman’s support for the Mexican-American War (“We pant to see our country and its rule far-reaching, only inasmuch as it will take off the shackles that prevent men the even chance of being happy and good”), and the truly disheartening “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” in which he hears the ancient giant commend its native spirit to the axe, tar him as at least a sometime champion of Manifest Destiny (*Gathering of the Forces* 244; *Leaves of Grass* 1882 165-169). Indeed, the Harold Bloom school of criticism casts Whitman as the “highly incarnational son” of Emerson, the “great white father of the American sublime,” and Dickinson as the “fiercely deconstructive daughter” (Wilson 7-8).

She transcribes her own elusive music, rather than playing counterpoint to either Puritan Eden-building or Emersonian sublimity of power. As Richard Wilbur said, “At some point Emily Dickinson sent her whole Calvinist vocabulary into exile, telling it not to come back until it would subserve her own sense of things” (Wilbur 9), and her correspondence with the sublime is equally idiosyncratic. Whereas the abyss of Jonathan



Edwards was the hellfire of damnation, and the abyss of the American sublime the vastness of an empty wilderness, Dickinson's is a paradoxically generative nothingness.

In the 132 years since Emily Dickinson's poetry was first published (or, as Susan Dickinson said, "printed" — considering her sister-in-law's privately circulated manuscripts as a form of publication), critical interpretation has ranged from validating the originality of Dickinson's thought (despite her rough numbers) to the significance for theories of the author posed by her textual practice (M. Smith 15; Werner "Itineraries," *Writing in Time*). Efforts to enlist her as a Romantic, or a Transcendentalist, have often foundered on the originality of her sensibility (Diehl; Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*). Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler have investigated Dickinson as thinker (Bloom, "Introduction"; Vendler, *Poets Thinking*). Dickinson's metaphysics and the role of nature in her work have been tapped with the tuning fork of criticism, but rarely together, sounding a chord.

The quality of Dickinson's attending to nature, curious, appreciative, are evident in a poem like "The Grass so little has to do —":

The Grass so little has to do —  
A Sphere of simple Green —  
With only Butterflies to brood  
And Bees to entertain —

And stir all day to pretty Tunes  
The Breezes fetch along —  
And hold the Sunshine in its lap  
And bow to everything —

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls —  
And make itself so fine  
A Duchess were too common  
For such a noticing —

And even when it dies — to pass

In Odors so divine —  
Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep —  
Or Spikenards, perishing —

And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell —  
And dream the Days away,  
The Grass so little has to do  
I wish I were a Hay — (*Poems* 174)

Dickinson furthers here a context of ecocriticism, specifically ecopoetics, as she enters into an imaginative sympathy with one of nature's least heralded plants, lacking the majesty of the forest or elegance of the rose. Identification is the soul of environmental rhetoric, as well as ecopoetics. As Sharon Gerhardt has noted, this ability "to see the world with the eyes of the other . . . [is] a defining principle of environmental humility — a stance that, I would argue, Dickinson's repeated identification with nature's smallest creatures explores in a radical form . . ." (Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility* 52).

Dickinson often sees from the viewpoint of flora, fauna and natural processes. The poet identifies with the unnamed protagonist's voice, at first "doubtful" and "sweet," then "Arguments of Pearl," in the riddling "You'll know Her — by Her Foot —" (Fr 604); with the narrow Fellow's preference for "a Boggy Acre — / A Floor too cool for Corn —" (*Poems* 443); and with dew, "the Freshet in the Grass —", one of many overlooked spectacles "beneath — our feet" (446). These acts of empathy illustrate Dickinson's ability to imagine herself into the "other" of nature, a key to environmental humility.

While such poems inscribe Dickinson into the disciplines of ecocriticism and ecopoetics, they do not explicitly address ecotheology. The capacity to experience the grass, the robin, the snake and the dew as fellow subjects, rather than objects of such

programs as reclaiming the wilderness, or exploiting resources, does not inherently recognize the constituents of nature as divine. However, such an awareness may be a necessary precursor to envisioning “Nature’s People” (444) as sacred.

Lawrence Buell has cited four criteria for an environmental text: “1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text” (Buell 7-8). These qualities are abundantly present in “‘Nature’ is what we see — ” (*Poems* 322), “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (443-44), and “Further in Summer than the Birds” (388-89).

In all three poems, the other-than human world is seen in its own sphere, while interwoven with anthropomorphic life. Nature even becomes a means of epistemology in the poems. Consider “‘Nature’ is what we see — ”:

"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 —  
Yet have no art to say —  
So impotent Our Wisdom is  
To her Simplicity. (322)

While Dickinson espouses no clear environmental ethos, Nature is valorized as a mysterious, oracular site of wisdom. In “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” the snake is

recognized as an autonomous being; he is a “Fellow” — as are other animals, since they too are people, “Nature’s People.” Nature’s people again exercise agency in “Further in Summer than the Birds”:

Further in Summer than the Birds —  
Pathetic from the Grass —  
A minor Nation celebrates  
It's unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen —  
So gradual the Grace  
A gentle Custom it becomes —  
Enlarging Loneliness —

Antiquest felt at Noon —  
When August burning low  
Arise this spectral Canticle  
Repose to typify —

Remit as yet no Grace —  
No furrow on the Glow,  
But a Druidic Difference  
Enhances Nature now — (388-89)

Dickinson envisions the cicadas as ceremonially singing in the close of summer and the enhancement of autumn.

In these three poems, nature remains to some extent unknowable. “‘Nature’ is what we see —” concludes, “Nature is what we know — / Yet have no art to say — / So impotent Our Wisdom is / To her Simplicity”; our knowledge, Nature, is inexpressible. Despite being a Fellow, the snake is ungraspable; “It wrinkled, and was gone — .” The essence of autumn, in “Further in Summer than the Birds,” escapes into the mysterious “Druidic Difference” which “Enhances Nature now.” If these poems suggest interdependence of the human and the plant and animal worlds, and an ecological ethic, in Buell’s sense, they also acknowledge nature’s ineffable qualities. The reassuring

mutuality of the speaker's "transport / Of cordiality —" for Nature's People confronts the fear of the unknowable other that is the snake: ". . . a tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone —" (444). As Herbert Zapf says, the experience of "irreciprocity," applying the ethics of the other to the nonhuman world, is "crucial for an ecological ethics" (Zapf 859). Irreciprocity circles back to Gerhardt's value of humility — to refrain from assuming that one's perception of a nonhuman being or process corresponds with its identity, and to recognize its dignity to exist without being assimilated to one's own categories. There can be fellowship as well as individuality. Zapf cites Raglon and Scholtmeijer's essay "Nature's Resistance to Narrative": the best literary texts about nature "are those that have sensed the power of nature to resist, or question, or evade the meanings we attempt to impose on the natural world" (Zapf 860).

"'Nature' is what we see —", "A narrow Fellow in the Grass", and "Further in Summer than the Birds" are ecopoems in their symbols, plots and emotional textures. Like Dickinson's riddle poems, which depend upon precise observation of the bird, flower, or other natural phenomena invoked, they also contain observant nature writing. The most common snakes of New England do prefer a boggy acre, and cicadas do announce themselves further into summer than birds (Dickinson and Vendler 397, 363). As she sees both fellowship and otherness in nature, Dickinson perceives both the face of nature and its polysemous metaphorical seams. In these lyrics, Dickinson may not explicitly equate the wild with the sacred, but her practice, acknowledging similarity as well as autonomy in nature, is requisite not only for environmental literature, but for ecotheological writing as well.

Dickinson's engagement with the natural world embraced the physical — keeping an herbarium with over 400 specimens (Habegger 154-161) — and the noumenal, as the landscape is often the medium of a mysterious quality of presence in her work. This presence emerges from the specificities of place in Dickinson's poems. Her limning of the experience of presence is characteristically subtle, as in "The Birds begun at Four o'clock — ”:

The Birds begun at Four o'clock —  
Their period for Dawn —  
A Music numerous as space —  
But neighboring as Noon —

I could not count their Force —  
Their Voices did expend  
As Brook by Brook bestows itself  
To multiply the Pond.

The Listener was not —  
Except Occasional Man —  
In homely industry arrayed —  
To overtake the Morn —

Nor was it for applause —  
That I could ascertain —  
But independent Extasy  
Of Universe, and Men —

By Six, the Flood had done —  
No tumult there had been  
Of Dressing, or Departure —  
Yet all the Band — was gone —

The Sun engrossed the East —  
The Day Resumed the World —  
The Miracle that introduced  
Forgotten, as fulfilled. (*Poems* 229)

The speaker places birdsong and the rising sun on the same metaphysical footing, an

equation describing the interdependence of nature, from vast celestial bodies to the small beings to whom Dickinson attends so closely. The poem also brings together three jurisdictions of the chain of being, birds, humanity, and the divine, as the birdsong before dawn brings about “independent Extasy / of Deity and Men —”. The speaker’s perception of this presence depends on her physical, embodied location in the landscape, the place from which she can both hear the birdsong and see the sunrise.

In a later poem, “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre —” (347), Dickinson returns to this theme, writing, of the four trees, “The Sun — upon a Morning meets them — / The Wind — / No nearer Neighbor — have they — / But God —”. Here the distant, almighty Creator has been rendered community member, neighbor — implying that the four trees, the sun, the wind, and God are of equal ontological status. The poet tacitly endorses the perennial mystical view that the divine presence is immanent in all things (or, at least, in the four trees, sun and wind, all natural forms). That she is eligible to perceive the propinquity of these elements suggests that she, too, is neighbor. The observing consciousness is necessary to record the event, and, in a sense, participates in the experience of presence.

One Dickinson biographer believes the poet’s heightened states are due not only to keen attention to the natural world. Lyndall Gordon’s critical biography, *Lives Like Loaded Guns*, advances (among other insights) her analysis of Dickinson as a mystic. In Gordon’s view, unlike Herbert, Hopkins and Eliot, Dickinson “does not feel abandoned. She is an ecstatic. ‘Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy,’ she said during her last illness” (Gordon 402). Gordon enrolls Dickinson among visionaries — those who ‘stand outside themselves’ and glimpse the transcendental order, not only saints and martyrs like

Paul and Teresa of Avila but poets like Thomas Traherne, Christopher Smart, and, indeed, William Blake. In this Gordon agrees with Louise Bogan (“A Mystical Poet”) and D. J. Moores (*The Ecstatic Poetic Tradition: A Critical Study from the Ancients through Rumi, Wordsworth, Whitman, Dickinson and Tagore*).

Gordon offers a fairly convincing case for epilepsy as causing Dickinson’s visions, as well as informing their content (114-36). However, the sources of Dickinson’s sense of the absolute are a different question from how that vision intersects with her often highly specific perceptions of nature: how much immanence shapes her transcendence, or if they obtain in distinct spheres of her thought. If many of Dickinson’s poems are ecopoems, experiences of the earth, in Jonathan Bate’s term (*Song of the Earth* 42, 149), does she also view nature as sacred, or is her highest reality something other?

“I heard a Fly buzz — when I died — ” (*Poems* 265-66), and “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (153), examine the terror of awareness after death. Dickinson’s seizures, on the other hand, are described as an aporia in consciousness, yet it is an ecstatic gap. One is reminded of *The Experience of No-Self* (Roberts), in which the author, a former nun, finds peace in the space left by personal identity. In this sense, her visionary states are of a piece with her consistent validation of absence.

One of Dickinson’s “envelope poems,” cataloged A821, reads:

Clogged  
only with  
Music, like  
the Wheels of  
Birds  
their high  
Appointment  
of I  
Afternoon and



the West and  
the gorgeous  
nothings  
which  
compose  
the  
sunset  
keep (*The Gorgeous Nothings* 172)

— suggesting that “nothings” nonetheless play a vital role, comprising the very sunset.

An 1865 poem invokes nothingness indirectly, once again performing a useful function:

The missing All, prevented Me  
From missing minor Things.  
If nothing larger than a World’s  
Departure from a Hinge  
Or Sun’s Extinction, be observed  
‘Twas not so large that I  
Could lift my Forehead from my work  
For Curiosity. (*Poems* 415)

The referent of the “missing All” is left inscrutable. Later that year she returned to the theme of absence:

Perception of an Object costs  
Precise the Object’s loss —  
Perception in itself a Gain  
Replying to it’s price —  
  
The Object absolute, is nought —  
Perception sets it fair  
And then upbraids a Perfectness  
That situates so far — (446)

At last Dickinson defines nothingness: it is “[t]he Object absolute,” the thing in itself unmediated by perception. Agreeing, knowingly or independently, with Kant, she notes the impossibility of grasping a thing by any other means than the inherently limiting valves of attention.

Eighteen years later, three years before her death at age 55, Dickinson

characterized nothing very differently:

By homely gifts and hindered words  
The human heart is told  
Of nothing —  
“Nothing” is the force  
That renovates the World — (589-90)

Here she stakes out a position in the apophatic tradition of negative theology, according to which the divine is not susceptible to human description — essentially agreeing with Wittgenstein’s “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent” (Wittgenstein 27). Dickinson sounds equally apophatic depths:

To tell the Beauty would decrease  
To state the spell demean  
There is a syllableless Sea  
Of which it is the sign (608)

The missing All, the Nothing which renovates the world, is Beauty; however, it cannot be told; Beauty itself is simply a symbol of a void, a speechless sea. Or, in Lukács’ ontology, nothingness is form itself: “A question, with life all round it; a silence, with a rustling, a noise, a music, a universal singing all round it: that is form” (Lukács 114). Similarly, Plato’s *Timaeus* posits that even the demiurge is dependent upon a receptacle, *chora*, space, which produces all intelligible forms (*Timaeus* 49a5–6; 52a8, d3).

Daniel C. Matt has cataloged three of the many kinds of nothing in religious belief: the Jewish *ayin*, Meister Eckhart’s *Nichts* (or *nihil* and *niht*), and Buddhism’s *sunyata*. For all their subtle variation, these visions of divine emptiness agree that nothingness is inherently generative. From nothingness arises the fullness of creation, God, and consciousness. In the contemporary scientific consensus, the universe, in its context of space and time, emerged from fluctuations in the quantum void (Liddle 1-8).

We human beings in our cluttered lintels of perception cannot conceive of true nothingness, any more than we can conceive of the infinite; our nothingness always has qualities, always fruits.

Dickinson's "Perception of an Object costs" echoes an eighteenth century Hasidic teaching of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch:

When one gazes at an object, one brings blessing to it. For through contemplation, one knows that it is really absolutely nothing without divinity permeating it. By means of this awareness, one draws greater vitality to that object from the divine source of life, since one binds that thing to the absolute *ayin*, the origin of all . . . On the other hand, if one looks at the object as a separate thing, by one's look, that thing is cut off from its divine root and vitality. (qtd. in Matt 321)

Again we see the need for human interaction in the natural world; however, individual personality is not a factor. This contemplation is not a means of heroically wrestling the sublime into an aesthetic form, in the Romantic sense. At issue is quality of attention.

Jonathan Edwards, away from the pulpit, exhibited a very different relation to the natural world than his sermons of fear twenty years later. In "Of Insects," a 1715 natural philosophy essay, he wrote:

Nor Can any one Go out amongst the trees in a Dewey morning towards the latter end of august or at the beginning of september but that he shall see hundreds of webbs made Conspicuous by the Dew that is lodged upon them reaching from one tree & shrub to another that stand at a Considerable Distance, and they may be seen well enough by an observing eye at noon Day by their Glistening against the sun and what is still more wonderfull: i know I have severall times seen in a very Calm and serene Day at that time of year, standing behind some Opake body that shall just hide the Disk of the sun and keep of his Dazzling rays from my eye and looking close by the side of it, multitudes of little shining webbs and Glistening Strings of a Great Length and at such a height as that one would think they were tack'd to the Sky . . . and there Very Often appears at the end of these Webs a Spider floating and sailing in the air with them . . . (qtd. in Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* 56-57)

This observer's quality of attention, capable of wonderment at the overlooked creature he would later insult as loathsome, suggests a naturalist or indeed a poet. How might the last three centuries have unfolded if the Jonathan Edwards of this passage had perdured.

Dickinson's self-effacing poems of observation, as in the riddle poems (whether of a hummingbird or the Northern lights), like her acknowledgment of the value of nothing, point toward, not a Romantic sublime, or a Manifest Destiny-besotted American sublime, but an impersonal sublime. Her ability to look outside herself, with eyes unclouded by want, at a bird who came down the walk or a narrow fellow in the grass, suggest a recognition of the sacred; as Simone Weil said, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer" (Weil 212).

## Chapter IV.

### Heaney and the Bogland of History

He courted her  
With a decadent sweet art  
Like the wind's vowel  
Blowing through the hazels:

'Are you Diana . . . ?'  
And was he Actaeon,  
His high lament  
The stag's exhausted belling? (*North* 42)

The title of this poem, "Aisling," refers to a poetic genre, originating in Ireland in the seventeenth century, which casts the land as a visionary female figure, offering strength and wisdom while in need of rescue from foreign intruders (Coughlan, "The Whole Strange Growth" 39). In essence the mysterious woman is the terrain personified, providing hope of salvation. As Daniel Corkery put it, in his 1925 study *The Hidden Ireland*, "a young poet seeking admission to the brotherhood brought his Aisling in his hand: it was his thesis" (Corkery 128). An aisling typically begins with a scene such as this:

The wood of young oak-trees, branch-sheltered, bright-foliaged; the poet's loneliness, his *sehnsucht*, his deadness to song and music; his utter weariness, he is become gentle and sick for it; his lack of companion, as he wanders by the woodland river in the afternoon . . . Then from this mist of gentle music emerges the *Spéirbhruinneal* (the Vision) herself. (137)

The poet learns that she is Erin; a time is promised which will redeem "the one root-sorrow of all the tribe . . . the Gael in bondage, his land in the grip of the alien" (139).

The aisling genre emerges from the "depressing poverty and hopelessness" of an occupied country (126). While specifically responding to British domination of Ireland in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aisling takes into account a history of incursions, from Viking raids and settlements from the eighth century to the Norman control of the Dublin region from the twelfth century (Connolly 323). In Heaney's hands, the aisling form also accommodates the Troubles, the Catholic-Protestant, republican-loyalist conflict that claimed thousands of casualties in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the late 1990s.

In his "Aisling," Heaney apportions the personification of nature between "He" (seemingly a poet, persuading by speech, whose vowels are associated with the wind), and "her" (perhaps Ireland or Erin, who is represented by the hazels, receiving the wind). However, this bifurcated identity with nature is further refracted, as in Irish folklore the hazel is the poet's tree; druid staves, as well as diving rods, were made of hazel (Hazlitt 182). (See, too, Yeats' 1899 "Song of Wandering Aengus," a poem well known to Heaney: "I went out to the hazel wood, / Because a fire was in my head, / And cut and peeled a hazel wand . . ." With the wand the speaker catches a trout, who becomes a girl, whom he seeks after the rest of his days. The poet's quest for the personification of nature is unfulfilled [Yeats 228].)

Heaney asks whether the poet, as well as the conqueror, may take the landscape for his own purposes. His query may be informed by reflection on his own practice, as in his collections *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) he constructs various identities for the land, and relations of the poet to the landscape. Themes of gendering the Irish earth as female merge with the constitutive, godlike power of words to spell a thing into being. By his translation of *Beowulf* (1999) he grants poetry the ability to mend the torn terrain of Irish-Anglo history.

For Heaney, Ireland's past belongs to its bogs. He felt a lifelong rapport with bogland and fens. In the essay "Mossbawn," he offered this paean to marshy regions: "To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation . . . possess an immediate and deeply peaceful attraction" (*Finders Keepers* 7). In "Personal Helicon," the final poem of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney begins by praising wells; most of what draws him is also found in fens: ". . . the smells / Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss . . . // . . . ferns and tall / Foxgloves . . . // . . . to pry into roots, to finger slime . . ." (44). For Heaney, the allure of bogs is not only aesthetic, but historical, epistemological. (Or, in addition to the sights, smells and palpable sensations of the bogs, the foxglove, moss and slime, he enjoys those other aesthetics of the fens, their historical, epistemological qualities.) As he wrote in "Bogland," the final poem in his second collection, *Door into the Dark*:

We have no prairies  
 To slice a big sun at evening —  
 Everywhere the eye concedes to  
 Encroaching horizon . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Our pioneers keep striking  
 Inwards and downwards,  
 Every layer the strip  
 Seems camped on before.  
 The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage,  
 The wet centre is bottomless. (55-56)

The bogland preserves the skeleton of an extinct Great Irish Elk, and salty, white butter more than a hundred years old. The poet announces that to pioneer in Ireland, one strikes not out to the horizon, but down into the earth, into the past, into history. "Bogland" is a manifesto for Heaney, opening the ground for the bog people poems of his next two

collections, *Wintering Out* and *North*. Heaney's early work affects a transformation of the bog, from a source of knowledge about national and personal identity to the complicated matrix of the bog people poems.

"Digging," the opening poem in Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, begins by lamenting his tool is a pen, rather than the turf-spade of his father: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun," and ends by elevating the pen to an implement for striking inwards and downwards, a pioneer of Ireland's boggy frontier of the past: "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (1-2). Meanwhile, in "Bog Queen," the peat bog becomes the tomb of a royal female who seems to preside over the human past: "My diadem grew carious, / gemstones dropped / in the peat floe / like the bearings of history" (*North* 26). Edna Longley has connected Heaney's depiction of the bog queen to the *aisling*: "'Bog Queen' . . . renews that well-worn genre the *aisling* by presenting Ireland as her landscape, weather, geography, and history . . ." (Longley 47).

In the six years between "Bogland" and "Bog Queen," the peat has acquired a gender (female), and a goddess-like status. The bog also affords the poet an identity, excavator of the exalted past. However, is nature, the bogland, sacred in itself, or simply for what it can do for humans, such as provide an image of the nation, and of the self?

With his first two books, Heaney had already demonstrated a fascination with bogland. In his next two, he began writing about bodies preserved for hundreds of years in the bogs of northern Europe, including Ireland. Heaney was inspired in part by archeologist P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, which describes many of these "bog people," some of them female, as victims of ritual sacrifice. Heaney



incorporates them into his mythos of the bog, which he also codes as female, representing the mother goddess, death, and Ireland herself.

In the bog people poems, we encounter some of those who have camped before on these layers of ground, of time. The figures immured in this sequence range from queens to commoners. In some cases Heaney emphasizes their sacrificial nature, while the Windeby Girl of “Punishment” is presented as having been executed for a crime; the “Bog Queen” appears to be a burial, without violence until she is dug up. Heaney uses these figures to associate Ireland with the Viking past (part of his project in *North*), as well as to investigate his nation’s bloody present in the time of the Troubles, drawing parallels between the innocent lives sacrificed to the bogs and his countrymen and - women sacrificed to sectarian violence. The “Tollund Man” moves Heaney to “risk blasphemy,”

Consecrate the cauldron bog  
Our holy ground and pray  
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed  
Flesh of labourers,  
Stockinged corpses  
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth  
Flecking the sleepers  
Of four young brothers, trailed  
For miles along the lines. (*Wintering Out* 47-48)

“The Grauballe Man” begins on the sorrowful note of the bog-preserved body weeping “the black river of himself,” and concludes by evoking victims of the Troubles: “the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped” (*North* 28-29).

The specter of Nerthus, the goddess of the bog who received sacrifices in the Iron Age (according to Roman historian Tacitus), is never far from these images; one poem is named for her, and she appears, if not by name, in “Kinship,” the concluding poem in the cycle. Heaney enjoins Tacitus to “Come back to this / ‘island of the ocean’”:

where nothing will suffice.  
Read the inhumed faces

Of casualty and victim;  
Report us fairly,  
How we slaughter  
For the common good

And shave the heads  
Of the notorious,  
How the goddess swallows  
Our love and terror. (38-39)

The poems express empathy with the victims of violence, sacrificial or punitive, found in the bogs. Heaney also admires their long tenancy in the peat, their intimacy with the elements. As the “Bog Queen” narrates:

dawn suns groped over my head  
and cooled at my feet,

through my fabrics and skins  
the seeps of winter  
digested me,  
the illiterate roots

pondered and died  
in the cavings  
of stomach and socket.  
I lay waiting . . . (25-26)

In the essay “Feeling into Words,” Heaney describes the bog as “a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it” (*Finders Keepers* 22).

“Tollund Man,” from *Wintering Out*, and “Come to the Bower” and “Punishment,” from *North*, can be read as invocations of nature, in the form of the bog, as sexuality, death, fertility, the motherland, the sacred, and the female, all in one: “the nature-goddess is simultaneously spouse, death-bringer and nurturer,” as Patricia Coughlan observes (“Bog queens” 185). For Heaney, the bog mulches together “the sovereignty goddess from early Irish literature and myth . . . *magna mater* figures from other European contexts . . . the physical territory of Ireland . . . [and] the imagery of woman-as-land-and-national-spirit from Irish nationalist political rhetoric” (186). The question is how much of the bog is left in this potent brew.

However, the presentation of both nature and woman as wholly other may preclude any attempt at integration, of human life with the nonhuman world, and of the masculine spade, stake, or pen, and the feminine ground. Evaluating Heaney’s use of this pattern of meanings in psychological terms, Coughlan observes that there can be no wholeness without “an acknowledgement of the existence of an autonomous subjectivity in others” (200). Heaney’s poems are charged with skillfully wrought sound and archetypal significance. Are they capacious enough to accept the subjectivity of that other, nature?

Alongside the bog people poems, there runs in Heaney’s early work another seam, the place name poems. In “Anahorish,” “Gifts of Rain,” “Toome,” “Broagh,” and “Oracle,” Heaney composes the landscape itself of syllables. Defining the toponym in “Anahorish,” he writes:

My ‘place of clear water’,  
the first hill in the world  
where springs washed into  
the shiny grass

and darkened cobbles  
in the bed of the lane,  
*Anahorish*, soft gradient  
of consonant, vowel-meadow (*Wintering Out* 16)

establishing an identity between the sounds of soft gradient of consonant and vowel-  
meadow with the place of clear water. He adopts a similar strategy in “Toome”:

My mouth holds round  
the soft blastings,  
*Toome, Toome*,  
as under the dislodged

slab of the tongue  
I push into a souterrain  
prospecting what new  
in a hundred centuries’

loam, flints, musket-balls,  
fragmented ware,  
torcs and fish-bones  
till I am sleeved in

alluvial mud that shelves  
suddenly under  
bogwater and tributaries,  
and elvers tail my hair. (26)

In *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth Century Poetry*, Chris Jones takes Heaney at his word that he attempts to not only “realize a landscape in language,” but to “render the physical world a linguistic one” (Jones 199). These are rhetorical moves in the right sphere, but in the wrong direction; Heaney insinuates that word forms world. He writes in “Gifts of Rain”:

The tawny guttural water  
spells itself: Moyola  
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale  
in the utterance,  
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists  
through vowels and history (*Wintering Out* 25)

Even as the round syllables “*Toome, Toome,*” seemed to drum the riverbed into being, the Moyola spells itself, chanting the magic spell of its name, invoking location. Heaney holds to an esoteric creed in which language is transubstantiated into landscape.

No wonder, then, if his linguistic sacrament is charged with resistance to the foreign invaders who have beset the motherland and the mother tongue for centuries. In “Traditions,” he writes:

Our guttural muse  
was bulled long ago  
by the alliterative tradition,  
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten  
like the coccyx  
or a Brigid’s Cross  
yellowing in some outhouse  
.....

Not to speak of the furled  
consonants of lowlanders  
shuttling obstinately  
between bawn and mossland (31)

Clearly an Irish-inflected purification of the language of the tribe, in Mallarmé’s phrase, is needed (Mallarmé 90). Heaney undertakes this ritual cleansing, writing in “Broagh”:

The garden mould  
bruised easily, the shower  
gathering in your heelmark  
was the black *O*

in *Broagh*,  
its low tattoo  
among the windy boortrees

and rhubarb-blades

ended almost  
suddenly, like that last  
*gh* the strangers found  
difficult to manage. (*Wintering Out* 27)

The language itself, like the land it creates, is difficult for interlopers to master.

The theme resurfaces in “A New Song,” in which the sound of ‘Derrygarve,’ like the Moyola of “Gifts of Rain,” is self-constituting, and Heaney proposes to rout the British presence by way of the native, river tongue:

I met a girl from Derrygarve  
And the name, a lost potent musk,  
Recalled the river’s long swerve,  
A kingfisher’s blue bolt at dusk

And stepping stones like black molars  
Sunk in the ford, the shifty glaze  
Of the whirlpool, the Moyola  
Pleasuring beneath alder trees.

And Derrygarve, I thought. was just,  
Vanished music, twilit water,  
A smooth libation of the past  
Poured by this chance vestigial daughter.

But now our river tongues must rise  
From licking deep in native haunts  
To flood, with vowelling embrace,  
Demesnes staked out in consonants.

And Castledown we’ll enlist  
And Upperlands, each planted bawn —  
Like blanching-greens resumed by grass —  
A vocable, as rath and bullaun. (33)

The five stanzas of “A New Song” distill Heaney’s themes of this period, while articulating a more militant use of the Irish language to maintain national identity.

“Demesnes,” from the Anglo-French, denotes landed estates, and remembers properties

seized from their Irish owners by Elizabethan invaders, still in the hands of the progeny of those English settlers (Corcoran 42). The stakes which pinned sacrifices in the bog poems return as British consonants marking off stolen lands. “Planted” suggests territory seized by British colonizers during the Plantation of Ulster, beginning under James I in 1606. “Bawn,” Heaney explains in his Translator’s Introduction to *Beowulf*, is Elizabethan English: “bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings that the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay” (*Beowulf* xxx). Bleaching-greens were plots of ground used by the Protestant Ulster linen trade (an industry of the colonizers), which Heaney urges be resumed by the green of native grass and by good, Irish vocables like *rath* (a hill-fort) and *bulllaun* (ancient stone mortar). Heaney believes in the power of the native vowels to generate the landscape itself, and to drive out the English consonants, flood the staked out desmesnes and resume the bleaching-greens with grass.

Not only a linguistic call to arms, with military vocabulary like “enlist” and violent verbs like “flood,” the poem also braids a tributary of eroticism; the Moyola pleasures, the vowels embrace, in this meditation occasioned by meeting a girl. The girl from Derrygarve is this *aisling*’s embodiment of Ireland, who grants the poet access to her rivers and her language. Taking up arms, be they spears or syllables, in the name of a just cause, has always had a romantic burnish.

Ireland remains gender-coded as the goddess Erin in her relation to the invaders, as well, for which Heaney modulates to a less tender key. In “Ocean’s Love to Ireland,” Sir Walter Raleigh, one of Elizabeth I’s undertakers, or supervising colonizers, “has backed the maid to a tree / As Ireland is backed to England” (*North* 40). The title of the

poem plays on Raleigh's long poem to Elizabeth, "Ocean's Love to Cynthia," and goes on to invoke Raleigh's role in the 1580 massacre of "six hundred papists" at Smerwick. After the explicit analogy of colonization as England's rape of the maid Ireland, Heaney suggests her transformation into the goddess of the land one might find in an *aisling*:

. . . Iambic drums  
Of English beat the woods where her poets  
Sink like Onan. Rush-light, mushroom-flesh,  
  
She fades from their somnolent clasp  
Into ringlet-breath and dew.  
The ground possessed and repossessed. (42)

As if to emphasize that we witness the moment of metamorphosis, "Aisling" is the next poem in the book (43).

"Act of Union" (44-45) allegorizes as sexual violence the 1800 parliamentary act which, in response to the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, ratified the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The poem eroticizes the landscape of Ireland in a jarring discord of voluptuous imagery and indifferent tone, as the speaker, "imperial / Male," caresses "bogland . . . ferny bed . . . gradual hills . . ." and the "heaving province where our past has grown." The offspring of this union beats his fists at his mother's borders, cocks his fists "at me across the water," representing both the internal strife of the Troubles and the need to beat back English dominion.

"Bone Dreams," a poem of seven sequences earlier in *North*, suggests, despite the brutal historical facts of colonization, and the ongoing Troubles in 1975, the possibility of an Irish sensibility's appreciation of English terrain, returning to figures of sensuous landscape, this time with a tender texture:

Come back past  
philology and kennings,



re-enter memory  
where the bone's lair

is a love-nest  
in the grass.  
I hold my lady's head  
like a crystal

and ossify myself  
by gazing: I am screens  
on her escarpments,  
a chalk giant

carved upon her downs.  
Soon my hands, on the sunken  
fosses of her spine  
move towards the passes.

And we end up  
cradling each other  
between the lips  
of an earthwork.

As I estimate  
for pleasure  
her knuckles' paving,  
the turning stiles

of the elbows,  
the vallum of her brow  
and the long wicket  
of collar-bone,

I have begun to pace  
the Hadrian's Wall  
of her shoulder, dreaming  
of Maiden Castle. (21-22)

This is a rare passage in Heaney's work, not only for its ability to find peace in the land of the oppressor of the Irish people, but for its eroticism and its gentle comedy. The chalk giant of Cerne Abbas, famed for his erect phallus, and the quiet pun of "ossify myself," point humorously toward a contented liaison, with a lover and with a country.

“Come to the Bower” folds the personae of exploiter and lover together in one image:

My hands come, touched  
By sweetbriar and tangled vetch,  
Foraging past the burst gizzards  
Of coin-hoards

To where the dark-bowered queen,  
Whom I unpin,  
Is waiting. Out of the black maw  
Of the peat, sharpened willow

Withdraws gently.  
I unwrap skins and see  
The pot of the skull,  
The damp tuck of each curl

Reddish as a fox’s brush,  
A mark of a gorget in the flesh  
Of her throat. And spring water  
Starts to rise around her.

I reach past  
The riverbed’s washed  
Dream of gold to the bullion  
Of her Venus bone. (24)

The insistently sexual insinuations, from “My hands come,” “unpin,” “[w]ithdraws gently,” “unwrap,” skin, and “the flesh of her throat,” to the description of the peat grave as a bower, with its connotations of romance, inscribe the discovery of the queen’s body in an erotic semantic field, confirmed when the speaker reaches past the coin-hoards, past a dream of gold, to the real worth of her Venus bone. Heaney has titled the poem after a nineteenth century ballad of rebellion against English overlords, “Will You Come to the Bower.” The last two verses read:

You can visit New Ross, gallant Wexford, and Gorey,  
Where the green was last seen by proud Saxon and Tory,

Where the soil is sanctified by the blood of each true man  
Where they died satisfied, their enemies they would not run from.

Will you come and awake our lost land from its slumber  
And her fetters we'll break, links that long are encumbered.  
And the air will resound with hosannahs to greet you  
On the shore will be found gallant Irishmen to meet you. (Ó Lochlainn  
190)

The suggestion is that those sacrificed to the bog have, in shedding their blood, sanctified the land. Heaney further implies that the longing for a goddess of the land who will deliver us from bondage is sexual in intensity. Yet the speaker also disturbs the resting place of this queen, robbing her grave of her very body, specifically the essence of her sexuality. The bog and the woman are conflated once more, under the sign of Other, whose prize can be taken but who can never be understood.

The bower queen's thematic sister, the "Bog Queen" (*North* 25-27), is modeled on the initial bog body to be discovered, the "queen" found south of Belfast on the Moira estate in 1871 (*Stepping Stones* 158). The skeleton of a Danish Viking preserved in an Irish peat bog is poetically useful to Heaney, providing a historical basis for the legacy bequeathed from one culture to another he imaginatively explores. In "Belderg," early in *North*, the speaker discourses with a farmer on history:

So I talked of Mossbawn,  
A bogland name. 'But *moss*?'  
He crossed my old home's music  
With older strains of Norse.  
I'd told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound  
And how I could derive  
A forked root from that ground,  
Make *bawn* an English fort,  
A planter's walled in mound,

Or else find sanctuary

And think of it as Irish,  
Persistent if outworn.  
'But the Norse ring on your tree?' (4-5)

Much of *North* answers the farmer's query, finding or constructing an affinity between contemporary Northern Ireland and the Vikings of Jutland. The first burials recalled in *North*, in the title poem, are those of

. . . those fabulous raiders,  
those lying in Orkney and Dublin  
measured against  
their long swords rusting,  
  
those in the solid  
belly of stone ships,  
those hacked and glinting  
in the gravel of thawed streams (10-11)

The speaker trusts their eyes, "clear / as the bleb of the icicle" (11), and notes their expertise in sniffing the wind (14) — the Vikings resemble nature, and reading her messages in the air. However, these poems admires qualities other than clarity and seamanship; the voices of the Viking dead lift the speaker again "in violence and epiphany." In "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" (12-16) he calls them "neighbourly, / scoretaking killers," who, with "a butcher's aplomb . . . spread out your lungs / and made you warm wings / for your shoulders" (15). Over the course of *North*, Heaney juxtaposes the sectarian violence of the Troubles with the ritual sacrifices of the bog; he also envies and claims some aspects of the Viking ethos, notably their power — their status as invader, rather than invaded.

In "Funeral Rites" (6-9), the speaker segues from a naturalistic depiction of wakes he recalls from childhood; to contemporary rites for victims of the Troubles; to an imagined balm for that pain, an ancient funeral procession to a megalith, "the great

chambers of Boyne.” Lastly the poem pictures Gunnar, hero of the Icelandic *Njal’s Saga*, at peace in death after a bloody life. But what peace can the living find? The “violence and epiphany” that make the Vikings formidable opponents, conqueror rather than conquered, inevitably turns within, claiming lives of long ago, like the Windeby Girl in “Punishment,” or in the present of the poem: “the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped” (28-29). Has the murder of the Windeby Girl sanctified the bog, any more than the killings of the Troubles have made sacred the roadsides of Northern Ireland? Is there a rite to redeem land made to receive innocent blood? Like the ambiguous valence of the speaker in “Bog Queen,” Heaney leaves the question unresolved, preserved in the acidic medium of the poems. Perhaps, as Heaney titles a later poem in *North* about surviving the Troubles, the only safe course is: “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” (52-55).

By 1999, and his translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney sought, in part, to use the ontological power of language to heal another rift, the wound of Irish-English history. His reconciliation begins with a return to the bawn, which has undertaken a long journey from its characterization as an emblem of British oppression to be resumed by grass and Irish vocables. As he explains in his “Translator’s Introduction”:

. . . for reasons of historical suggestiveness, I have in several instances used the word “bawn” to refer to Hrothgar’s hall. In Elizabethan English, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings that the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay, so it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches. Indeed, every time I read the lovely interlude that tells of the minstrel singing in Heorot just before the first attacks of Grendel, I cannot help thinking of Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Faerie Queene* to Sir Walter Raleigh, just before the Irish would burn the castle and drive Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court. Putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with

that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more “willable forward / again and again and again.” (*Beowulf* xxx)

Heaney quotes the last words from his 1991 poem “The Settle Bed,” where they refer to the bed itself as ““an inheritance”” (*Seeing Things* 28). The reference reprises the image of marriage from the furious “Act of Union,” attempting to recast the marital rape of Ireland by England as a marriage bed of decades of contentment, to be passed on to the generations.

In his review of *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, Howell Chickering worried Heaney’s tactics:

This pleasantly fanciful picture of Spenser in his bawn is deeply confused as an analogy to Hrothgar in Heorot. It makes the historical equation read: the oppressed Irish = Grendel, and the colonizing English = Hrothgar. Surely Heaney can't mean that he takes his Elizabethan Irish forebears to have been monsters from the race of Cain, nor the exploitative English planters to have been wise rulers like Hrothgar. Yet that's the way the analogy works. Putting a “bawn” into his translation is not a way “to come to terms” with Irish-English history. (Chickering 174)

It is surprising to see Raleigh the rapist of Erin in “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” reappear in this cozy, poetical scene, being read to by another of Elizabeth’s colonial undertakers, on the site of stolen land and dispossessed people. Heaney’s wish to bring together Ireland and England into a single settle bed which can be willed forward may stem from a change in his stance toward the Troubles which he mentioned in a 1977 interview:

I think about that more and more since I did *North*. I always thought of the political problem — maybe because I am not really a political thinker — as being an internal Northern Ireland division. I thought along sectarian lines. Now I think that the genuine political confrontation is between Ireland and Britain. Yet it is my own sensibility and heritage of feeling which is the basis for the feeling of the poems, and I never had any strong feelings, for example, about the British army; it was always the RUC, the B Specials, and so on. Now that may have been politically shortsighted,

but poetry emerges from the beat coming off images, from the aura surrounding certain words. (Heaney, *Unhappy and at Home* 62)

Whatever the shifts in Heaney's political views, he maintained his belief in the power of language alone to effect change in the world. Simply calling Hrothgar's fort a bawn can, in Heaney's cosmology, bring about a reconciliation between colonizers and colonized.

In a 1974 lecture, "Feeling Into Words," Heaney unearthed some of the fields of force emanating from the bog in his lexicon: "There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht . . ." (*Finders Keepers* 24). In his poems he rarely comments explicitly on matters of the sacred. His closest approach may be in "At the Water's Edge," the third poem in "Triptych," from 1979's *Field Work*:

On Devenish I heard a snipe  
And the keeper's recital of elegies  
Under the tower. Carved monastic heads  
Were crumbling like bread on water.

On Boa the god-eyed, sex-mouthed stone  
Socketed between graves, two faced, trepanned,  
Answered my silence with silence.  
A stoup for rain water. Anathema. (14)

The snipe recalls Heaney's lament, in "The Backward Look" (from *Wintering Out*), for the vanishing dialect titles for the bird: "*little goat of the air, / of the evening, // little goat of the frost*" (29). The opening line of "At the Water's Edge" sounds a note of loss; the poem proceeds to recite elegies; faith crumbles. However, the old pagan cult offers no comfort, only estrangement, silence, and anathema. "Triptych" as a whole is concerned with the loss of friends to the violence of the British government, and to internecine warfare among Heaney's northern Irish compatriots. A cold hearthstone, a hammer, and a "cracked jug full of cobwebs," emblems of Ireland's wasted strength which could be torn

from the pages of *Dubliners*, at last move the speaker to religious feeling (*Field Work* 14):

. . . Everything in me  
Wanted to bow down, to offer up,  
To go barefoot, foetal and penitential,  
  
And pray at the water's edge.

“[P]enitential” calls back to “Punishment,” in *North*, which equated the ancient victim preserved in the bog with girls of the Troubles cauled with tar for consorting with the enemy. The speaker admits to having “stood dumb” when the humiliated women wept; he

would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge. (*North* 31)

The only audience the speaker finds for his prayer of penitence is neither the crumbling church, nor the heathen idol, but the water's edge, the natural world.

Heaney is attuned to nature as an index of human presence, as well as a record of human deeds. He responds, too, to the lyric poet's register of grass, of wind, of light and shade, as a projection of his sensibility. Yet for him the highest metaphysic seems to be that of the word itself. Nevertheless, he is capable of integrating himself into the wild with surpassing beauty, as in “Oracle,” a brief lyric from *Wintering Out*:

Hide in the hollow trunk  
of the willow tree,  
its listening familiar,  
until, as usual, they  
cuckoo your name  
across the fields.  
You can hear them  
draw the poles of stiles  
as they approach



calling you out :  
small mouth and ear  
in a woody cleft,  
lobe and larynx  
of the mossy places. (28)

It does no disservice to the poem to note that its beauty is threaded through its identification of nature with the female, the cleft and the mossy. The speaker casts the “you” of the poem as both masculine, projecting (larynx) and feminine, receiving (ear). Perhaps in “Oracle” the poet is able to wield the power of language to affect a unity of the male poet and the aisling’s visionary nature goddess.

## Chapter V.

### Conclusion: “a House that tries to be haunted”

Blake wrote as dark satanic mills of the Industrial Revolution infested England’s green and pleasant land. Dickinson conducted her samizdat as New England was showing the nation how to industrialize Satan’s wasteland. Heaney exhumed the Bog Queen in an Ireland which had become the least forested country in Europe (Luff). His *North* was published in 1975, as climate scientists were first addressing global warming (Sawyer 23). The havoc we wreak on the natural world has only grown more dire; a recent *Biological Reviews* study found nearly half of 71,000 monitored species globally are declining in population (Finn et al. 1732-35).

In *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Nicolson showed the view of peaks and “wastes” transform, through scientific accounts of vast time and space, from blemishes on the Earth to emblems of sublime immensity, seeding, in part, the Romantic movement. Is the current flood of information documenting the precarious state of our home — *The Sixth Extinction* (Kolbert); *The Ends of the World* (Brannen); *The Uninhabitable Earth* (Wallace-Wells) — transforming our species’ conviction that nature is a resource, to be depleted and abused as desired?

The emergence of the cli-fi genre (climate fiction) suggests a new territory in the imaginal realm. J. G. Ballard, with *The Drowned World* (1962), foretold the coming of cli-fi; Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* (2020) has been the genre’s greatest popular success, winning praise from President Obama (Merry). Jorie Graham’s 2023 work *To 2040* addresses climate change, among other extinctions, through poetry.

Whether these changes in aesthetic modes echo in our behavior remains to be seen. Cinematically it appears easier to imagine ourselves as survivors, narratively located after the apocalypse, than to envision ways to prevent it. The transformation of our fossil fuel-drunk, conspicuously consuming society is beyond our ken. Our concept of the environmental hero stops at the example — salutary, if emulated — of Tolkien's Frodo, who casts the one ring into the fire rather than succumb to the temptation to use its power for good. To see how we might live with nature, rather than against it, to become Nature's People, we turn from cli-fi to sci-fi; one generation's novel of ideas (Orwell's *1984*) is another's science fiction. Ursula K. Le Guin has offered models, in *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), which suggest a nonhierarchical society is the ground of an equitable relation to the natural world. We may need an I-Thou gaze with each other to share one with the bee and the birch, the red elk and the rose.

Closer to home, in her 1977 novel *Ceremony*, Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko gives us Tayo, finding his way via an intricate symbolic order of rain, canyon, mountain and cougar, back into a life inside nature; *Ceremony* is an early work of ecofiction. In *The Only Good Indians* (2020), a contemporary novel in a genre complementary to cli-fi, ecohorror, Blackfeet author Stephen Graham Jones envisions a form of responsibility to Nature's People. Perhaps the ghost pipe will be heard, in time.

Blake toils to escape the coils of Vala; Heaney fears and desires the Bog Queen and Nerthus, the land goddess of latter-day ayslins. Only Dickinson does not characterize nature as feminine; her gender characterizations most emphatic in the

“Master letters.” The master trope appears in some poems, as well, such as “My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun” (*Poems* 341-42):

My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —  
In Corners — till a Day  
The Owner passed — identified —  
And carried Me away —

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods —  
And now We hunt the Doe —  
And every time I speak for Him  
The Mountains straight reply —

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow —  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let it's pleasure through —

And when at Night — Our good Day done —  
I guard My Master's Head —  
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's  
Deep Pillow — to have shared —

To foe of His — I'm deadly foe —  
None stir the second time —  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye —  
Or an emphatic Thumb —

Though I than He — may longer live  
He longer must — than I —  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without — the power to die — (*Poems* 341-42)

The speaker, who is charged with the taking of life but cannot die herself, may be Death, in service to her master, a masculine Nature. As such, her expressions of pleasure, like a smile, assume the terrifying proportions of a natural disaster to mortals, a volcanic eruption. The “cordial light” she glows upon the valley reflects on the “transport / Of Cordiality” the speaker of “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (443-44) feels for “Several of Nature's People,” implying that Death is merely another of the wild's citizens.

The texture of Dickinson's thought is unsystematic, essaying; she does not feel Blake's need to build a system, lest she be enslaved by another's. She also escapes Heaney's need to brandish nature as a haw lantern, projecting his inner states of being on the reflective surface of the bog. Her investigations into nature are carried out in the spirit of the herbarium, observing and collecting. She also allows nature its otherness, greeting its people in Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship of equals; an equality is proposed of ontological status, not an identity of sensibility. As Dickinson is not conscripting nature into a type or figure of her soul, she is able to see with eyes less clouded by want.

Desire, its presence in the poems and the force it exerts on nature's shape, is a rich seam in the work of all three poets, awaiting further study. Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly have opened some valuable lines by editing *Sexy Blake* (2013). W.J.T. Mitchell's questions in "Dangerous Blake" (1982) still bear repeating: "As long as we insist [as Frye does] that 'madness, like obscenity, is a word with no critical meaning,' we will . . . have only a safe and sanitized Blake, not the dangerous, difficult figure he really was" (Mitchell 413).

Heaney's entanglement with the women of the water has been excavated, by Edna Longley, in "*North*: 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" (1997), Patricia Coughlan in "Bog queens: the representation of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney" (1997) and "'The Whole Strange Growth': Heaney, Orpheus and Women" (2007), as well as Stephanie Alexander, in "Femme Fatale: The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney's *North*" (2016). The analyses of Heaney's description of the bog as "Insatiable bride. / Sword-swallower," and of the speaker sinking the wettish shaft of a turf-spade in the soft lips, the tawny rut of the bog (*North* 34-35), are all here. (The

poem's rhetoric then pivots; the phallic turf-spade is replaced by the cloven oak branch upright in the bog, the emblem of Nerthus: "I stand at the edge of centuries / facing a goddess.") The transposition to a more mutual eroticism, in "Bone Dreams," also from *North*, has attracted less attention. The rehabilitation of Raleigh from colonial rapist, in "Ocean's Love to Ireland," to lover of poetry, as Heaney would have it in his "Translator's Introduction" to *Beowulf*, remains a mystery. Heaney's poetics merit notice as well; the internal rhymes, irregularly placed, in "At the Water's Edge" build the poem's sense of unease.

"The Harvest Bow," from Heaney's volume *Field Work*, says of the plaited harvest bow of the title:

*The end of art is peace*  
Could be the motto of this frail device  
That I have pinned up on our deal dresser —  
Like a drawn snare  
Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn  
Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm. (58)

The poem could be a rewrite of Dickinson's "Nature is a Haunted House — but Art — a House that tries to be haunted" (*Selected Letters* 236). Nature, the territorial numen, slips the snare of art, leaving only light and the damp heat at the center of the midden.

Do any of Dickinson's desires escape the confines of the Master letters, to circulate among the slant rhymes of the poems? The tender longing of "Clogged / only with / Music" (*The Gorgeous Nothings* 172), suggests they roam free. If there were a shape to which Dickinson could hold up her desire, it would be the charged gap of nothing — which is nevertheless capable of composing "the / sunset / keep". Her primary punctuation, the em dash, is itself a blank, pure potential, like the absence of

consciousness in one of her epileptic seizures. Her every poem is constructed around several of these generative nothings.

If Golgonooza is a state of reconciliation, of right relation, the natural world is as essential there as imagination. Golgonooza is always being built, as the moment in each day which Satan and his Watch Fiends cannot find is the eternal moment. The lark sings; the wild thyme bridges Beulah and Eternity. Let us never cease from mental fight — that we may find ourselves, and nature's people with us, immense worlds of delight.

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