



Thoreau's Cosmic Mosquito and Dickinson's Terrestrial Fly

Author(s): Thomas W. Ford

Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (Dec., 1975), pp. 487-504

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/364634>

Accessed: 07/08/2008 16:24

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=neq>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THOREAU'S COSMIC MOSQUITO AND DICKINSON'S TERRESTRIAL FLY

THOMAS W. FORD

EMILY DICKINSON'S familiarity with Transcendentalism, specifically with the poems and essays of Emerson, has been noted frequently.¹ Indeed, the New England writer of that time who was unaffected by Transcendental thought would be difficult to find. By no means did Dickinson fully endorse the romantic individualism of Transcendentalism. Neither did she fully endorse Puritan doctrines of man's total dependence, doctrines firmly fixed in her New England past and still very much alive in the Amherst of her day.² Her thinking here, as elsewhere, reflects its characteristic ambivalence.

Although apparently moved by Transcendentalism's ennobling emphasis on the divinity of man's intuition, she retained a noticeable skepticism regarding man's reliability, a skepticism dictated at least in part by the Calvinist tradition of man's depravity. Rather than giving allegiance to one or the other, she chose to remain the realistic, tough-minded observer. Her *modus operandi* was to rely on her own senses, questioning through her poetry the absolute claims of both Puritanism and Transcendentalism.

One would expect Thoreau, rather than Emerson, to be the Transcendentalist especially appealing to Emily Dickinson. His fondness for solitude, his firsthand familiarity with plants and flowers, his single state, his renunciation of worldly goods, his awareness of being the rebel—these traits would certainly

¹ To mention only a few, see George F. Whicher, *This Was a Poet* (New York, 1938), 189-205; Thomas Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), 233-234; Charles R. Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (New York, 1960), *passim*; Thomas W. Ford, *Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (University, Alabama, 1966), 48-54; Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading* (Cambridge), 112-119, 173-174.

² For a graphic discussion of the importance of this Puritan influence, see Thomas Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge, 1955), 6-20.

attract Dickinson, who shared them. Yet she never refers to any specific work of Thoreau, in contrast to the documented references to Emerson.³ She does mention him, however, on two occasions in letters. The first, in 1866, is addressed to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "Was the Sea cordial? Kiss him for Thoreau."⁴ Thomas Johnson's editorial speculation is that Susan and Austin had been vacationing at the seashore, and since Thoreau's *Cape Cod* had been published in 1865, perhaps Emily and Susan had been discussing it.

The second letter, in 1881, is addressed to Louise and Frances Norcross, Emily's cousins. After telling them about a recent fire, she writes: "The fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would wonder which did the most harm."⁵ This observation suggests familiarity with Thoreau's frequent criticism of established churches as stultifying to the individual religious spirit. It might also suggest familiarity with the episode of the fire accidentally set by Thoreau and his friend Edward Hoar in May 1844, while on a fishing trip near Walden Pond. Although Thoreau turned in the fire alarm, the blaze destroyed a sizable section of the woods. Apparently the event received considerable notoriety in and around Concord.⁶

In addition to these two references in letters, tantalizing bits and pieces occur here and there which, in the aggregate, suggest more than her casual awareness of Thoreau. In 1879, Dickinson wrote to T. W. Higginson to thank him for sending her a copy of his recently published *Short Studies of American Authors*, a book containing brief critical studies of Hawthorne, Poe, Howells, Helen Hunt Jackson, Henry James, and—Thoreau. Significantly, she mentions all the authors except Thoreau, almost as if she deliberately avoided mention of him, perhaps for fear of disagreeing with Higginson's evaluation by her reply. She implies as much by the half-concealed

³ Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading* (Cambridge, 1966), 173-174.

⁴ Thomas H. Johnson, editor, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 1958), II, 455.

⁵ *Letters*, III, 692.

⁶ Walter Harding, editor, *The Variorum Walden* (New York, 1962), 285, n. 43.

archness of her thanks: "Had I tried before reading your Gift, to thank you, it had perhaps been possible, but I waited and now it disables my Lips."⁷

One critic speculates that "Emily Dickinson's readings from Emerson probably included his biographical sketch of Thoreau written for *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1862, two months after Thoreau died."⁸ *A Masque of Poets*, published in Boston in 1868, which contained Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest," by curious coincidence also included a poem by Thoreau. Benjamin Newton, the young friend who introduced Emily Dickinson to the then "radical" literature of Transcendentalism, sent her a copy of the 1847 edition of Emerson's *Poems* sometime in late 1849 or early 1850, the approximate date of the publication of Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.⁹ Stirred by Emerson's *Poems*, she might very well have been led to read Thoreau's *Week*.

It seems even more probable that Dickinson read *Walden*, published in 1854 by Ticknor and Fields, the Boston publishing firm. The name of this publisher was mentioned in the previously cited letter of 1866: "Dreamed of your meeting Tennyson in Ticknor and Fields."¹⁰ Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" was published the same year as *Walden*. Reviews of *Walden* shortly after its publication began appearing in leading periodicals. Many were favorable, and were apparently of the kind to attract attention.¹¹ George Eliot, one of Dickinson's favorite authors, reviewed the book in England in 1856.¹² *Walden*, being in many ways a poem itself, would have had special appeal for Dickinson.¹³

If, as appears likely, she did read *Walden* with more than

⁷ *Letters*, II, 650.

⁸ Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, 118.

⁹ Whicher, *This Was A Poet*, 89.

¹⁰ *Letters*, II, 455.

¹¹ Philip Van Doren Stern, editor, *The Annotated Walden* (New York, 1970), 43.

¹² *The Annotated Walden*, 42.

¹³ Charles Anderson is one of the modern critics who reads *Walden* as essentially a poem. See *The Magic Circle of Walden* (New York, 1968).

superficial interest, one might expect to find echoes of the book in her poems. At least one critic has convincingly demonstrated specific imagistic similarities between Dickinson's locomotive in "I like to see it lap the Miles" and Thoreau's locomotive in the chapter "Sounds" in *Walden*.¹⁴ It is a major concern of this essay to show that in one chapter of *Walden*, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," Dickinson found particular stimulus.

She could not help being responsive to the frequent observations about poets and poetry in this chapter. In view of her fondness for privacy and her dedication to poetry, comments such as the following would have held special appeal:

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.¹⁵

Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour (97).

If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. . . . The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it (103-105).

In its emphasis on the high function of poetry and the poet, the chapter would clearly have appealed to Dickinson. But what makes it virtually certain that she did read this chapter is Thoreau's comment on ringing the parish bells: "If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man . . . in . . . Concord . . . but would . . . follow that sound, not mainly to

¹⁴ Nathalia Wright, "Emily Dickinson's Boanerges and Thoreau's Atropos: Locomotives on the Same Line?" *Modern Language Notes*, LXXII, 101-103.

¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Columbus, 1969), 90. All quotations from *Walden* will be from this edition. Page numbers will be indicated in parentheses.

save property from the flames, but . . . to see it burn . . . even if it were the parish church itself" (101). Almost certainly this must have prompted her comment in the 1881 letter: "The fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would wonder which did the most harm." Still, the question remains, is there evidence in her poetry that she did, in fact, draw materials from this particular chapter? The answer can be specific.

There are striking similarities between "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," one of Dickinson's most often discussed poems, and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," the philosophical center of *Walden*. These similarities in words and phrases and the images they convey are concentrated in three closely grouped paragraphs, although similar echoes occur at intervals throughout the chapter. In the following quoted passages, the italicized words indicate either exact similarities, or slightly altered forms, or synonyms. Corresponding numbers are placed above the words to facilitate identification.

This small lake was of most value as a neighbor *in the intervals of a gentle rainstorm* . . . when both *air* and water being perfectly *still* . . . mid-afternoon had all the serenity of evening, and the wood-thrush sang *around*, and was heard from shore to shore. . . . A lake like this is never smoother . . . and the clear *portion* of the *air* above it being shallow and darkened by clouds, the water, full of *light* and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself. . . . That way I looked between . . . the . . . hills to some distant and

I heard a *Fly* ¹ buzz—when ² I died—

The *Stillness* ³ in the *Room* ⁴

Was like the *Stillness* ³ in the *Air* ⁵

Between the Heaves ⁶ of Storm—

The *Eyes* ⁷ *around*—had wrung them ⁸ *dry*—

And *Breaths* ⁸ were gathering *firm*

For that last *Onset*—when the *King* ⁹

Be witnessed—in the *Room* ⁴—

higher ones . . . tinged with
¹²*blue*. Indeed . . . I could catch a
 glimpse of . . . the still ¹²*bluer* . . .
 mountain ranges in the north-
 west, those true-¹²*blue* coins from
 heaven's own mint, and also of
 some ¹⁰*portion* of the village. But
 in other directions . . . ¹⁶*I could*
¹⁶*not see* . . . beyond the woods.
 . . . When I looked across the
 pond . . . all the earth . . . ap-
 peared like a thin crust insu-
 lated and floated even by this
 small sheet of ¹¹*intervening*
 water, and I was reminded that
 this on which I dwelt was but
⁸*dry land* (94-95).

They say that characters were
 engraved on the bathing tub of
⁹*king* Tching-thang to this ef-
 fect: "Renew thyself completely
 each day." . . . I was as much af-
 fected by the faint ¹*hum* of a
¹*mosquito* making its . . . tour
 through my ⁴*apartment* . . . when
 I was sitting with door and ¹⁵*windows*
 open, as I could be by any
 trumpet that ever sang of fame.
 It was Homer's requiem; itself
 an Iliad and Odyssey ⁵*in the air*,
 singing its own wrath and ¹³*wan-*

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed
 away

What ¹⁰*portion* of me be
 Assignable—and then it was

There ¹¹*interposed* a ¹*Fly*—

With ¹²*Blue*—¹³*uncertain* stum-
 bling ¹*Buzz*—

Between the ¹⁴*light*—and me—

And then the ¹⁵*Windows* failed
 and then

¹⁶*I could not see* to see—¹⁶

¹⁶ Thomas Johnson, editor, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 1955), I, 358.

derings. There was something cosmical about it. . . . Little is to be expected of that day . . . to which we are not awakened by . . . a fragrance ⁵ *filling the air* . . . and thus the darkness . . . prove itself to be good, no less than the ¹⁴ *light* (96-97).

I went to the woods because I wished . . . to front only the essential facts of life, and ¹⁶ *see if I could not* learn what it had to teach, and not, ² *when I came to die*, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and . . . know it by experience. . . . For most men . . . are in a strange ¹³ *uncertainty* about it, whether it is of the devil or of God (98-99).

There are other parallels, not so striking as the above, but in the aggregate they suggest strongly that Dickinson drew inspiration for her poem from this particular chapter in *Walden*. What do these similarities mean?

What they mean, of course, is that Dickinson was sufficiently impressed to respond with her characteristic reaction to the claims of philosophical abstractions: she would empirically test Thoreau's Transcendental assertions. To evaluate Dickinson's response properly and, in turn, the full potential of the poem, one must again call attention to the obvious but crucial and central role of the extreme idealism in the chapter. It abounds with ringing assertions of human possibilities. The following examples are typical:

After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its

organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make (97).

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor (98).

When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence (104).

The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions (105).

I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars (106).

Well and good. But are these claims simply idealistic assumptions? Do they follow from Thoreau's apparently empirical, pragmatic instructions? For he had said, in unmistakable terms, that if one holds his gaze steadily on the real, he will perceive the ideal. Thoreau promised as much by such remarks as the following:

If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. . . . I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. . . . And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. . . . If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces . . . and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality (103-106).

His formula seems clear: hold a steady gaze on facts, on reality; do not allow the vision to be distracted "by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls," and the sublime, cosmic truths of the Transcendental universe will reveal themselves. Dickinson, then, would take Thoreau's formula and apply it to her own familiar world. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died" is her effort to take Thoreau's instructions in earnest, to deter-

mine for herself whether the Transcendental harmony would be revealed if she held an undiverted gaze on the fact. The much-discussed fly becomes, in effect, the empirical fact of her poem.¹⁷

She would follow Thoreau's injunctions to the letter. Let the senses hold steadily on "the essential facts of life"; avoid "shams and delusions"; above all, observe a rigid economy and "Simplify, simplify." Thoreau had urged, "drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms." Almost literally following his advice, she drives life into a corner, that final corner in the room occupied by the persona of her poem. For could she, after all, have found "corners" in nature? Had not Emerson said in "Uriel" that "Line in nature is not found; / Unit and universe are round?"¹⁸ Could Thoreau really find that "corner" at Walden? Corners require angles, and angles require lines, not circles. Thoreau had a house, to be sure; but by his own admission, it was really not so much a house as it was "a sort of crystallization around" him, open to the elements so that he "did not need to go out doors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness"

¹⁷ Of the many interpretations of the poem, the following might be noted: Thomas Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge, 1955), 213-214, sees the poem as transmitting the "sensations which she imagines she might feel during the last moments before death," and he views the fly as "a familiar part of the natural order of persistent household discomforts" brought in "to give the touch of petty irritabilities that are concomitant with living." Gerhard Friedrich, "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,'" *The Explicator*, xiii, item 35 (April 1955), sees the fly as essentially a distraction, an intrusion of "the inferior, physical aspects of existence," something that blurs the vision "so that spiritual awareness is lost." John Ciardi, "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,'" *The Explicator*, xiv, item 22 (Jan. 1956), envisions the fly as "the last kiss of the world, the last buzz from life" rather than as a distraction. Charles Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (New York, 1960), 231-232, sees the poem as "an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place toward the significance of the moment of death." Caroline Hogue, "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died,'" *The Explicator*, xx, item 26 (Nov. 1961), agrees with Anderson, but sees the poem as a devastating disposal of the stereotyped "nineteenth-century deathbed scene." My own view will not essentially affirm or deny the validity of any of these, but will rather set the poem in a different frame of reference, hopefully adding a new dimension to this much-discussed poem.

¹⁸ Edward Waldo Emerson, editor, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1903-1904), ix, 14.

(93). No common, ordinary, workaday corners there. Really, as he said, his corner of the world was more like "some remote and more celestial corner of the system" (95).

And, after all, would it not be rather rare that when one "came to die" he would have the good fortune to die in the freshness of the air of the Walden house rather than in the confines of the sickroom? Would it not be more accurate to shift the scene to a more likely location for death, such as a home in a New England village, with the room overheated and overcrowded with the family and friends? Would the air supply not be limited and depleted by the waiting mourners whose "breaths were gathering firm"? But there would be "real" corners there, and life could be honestly tested.

Now what happens is this. In her effort to be absolutely objective, Dickinson instinctively assumes the method of the ironist: recognizing that perceptual error is always a possibility, she deliberately refrains from any generalization. No satire is intended. She had perceptions that were too broad, too inclusive for her to be the satirist. She is not the debunker, trying to ridicule or discredit the metaphysics of Transcendentalism. To the contrary, she is simply testing Thoreau's assumptions, hoping even to find them passing the test. They do not. But her irony is not preconceived. It is simply that in her scrupulous objectivity, in her intense concentration on letting the senses honestly respond to the object of vision—the fly—she instinctively employs the method of the ironist: restraint, understatement, control. And this, finally, is not only what makes the poem a great poem, but also what makes for the rich variety of ambiguity in the many interpretations of the poem.

She has carefully set the stage for potential Transcendental revelation from observed fact. Here is that possible moment of ultimate truth. Tensions mount. The epiphany is awaited. And? Nothing. No Transcendental vision. No ringing assurances of the glories of life or of death. The almost uncanny force of the poem depends upon Dickinson's economy, upon what she does not say. The equally uncanny force of the fly's

buzz depends upon what that buzz does *not* say. But her images speak for her, as they always do in her best poems. Shifting the *Walden* images to the new world of her poem, she turns Thoreau's cosmic insect into one very much of this earth. Editorializing, Thoreau found his mosquito's hum "cosmical," found it to be "Homer's requiem" filling the fragrant morning air of Walden like a trumpet announcing tales of glorious "wrath and wanderings."

Dickinson, on the other hand, refrains from overt editorializing and lets the fly speak. This absence of the human voice increases the volume of the fly's buzz. Homer's requiem? No. Simply the synesthetic confusion of life's "uncertain blue buzz." Thoreau had been distressed that "most men . . . are in a strange uncertainty about" life. One must be certain. One must affirm. And yet? Dickinson had "reduced life to its lowest terms," had driven it "into a corner," and found its song to be a "Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz." Man's earthly radio is not tuned to the mosquito's cosmic hum. The ground station receives only the uncertain static of the fly's blue buzz.

Walden's airy images shifted to the closed poem can be confined, can be tightly held under the gaze of reality. Again, following Thoreau's injunction, Dickinson wants to "steadily observe realities only" and allow her vision to "penetrate the surface of things." She will "drench" herself in reality and "stand right fronting and face to face to a fact." Thoreau had said "we crave only reality" and had promised that from an honest fix on the real, life would be seen for what it actually was: "a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments," something "sublime and noble." New England inhabitants live a "mean" life because their "vision does not penetrate the surface of things." Dickinson, as a New Englander, accepts the challenge. The fly is a fact and a reality, life reduced to its lowest terms. Trap it in the room at the crucial moment of death; rivet the senses on it. The sublime revelation will follow. Thoreau had promised as much.

But the epiphany does not follow. No Arabian Nights. The sun does not glimmer on the surfaces of the fact. The "inter-

vals of a gentle rainstorm in August" become the "Stillness in the Air—Between the Heaves of Storm." The persona gasps for air; there is no baptismal or life-giving rain, no renewal, no "everlasting vigor and fertility of the world." The wood-thrush does not sing *around*; he is not *heard*. Only the *dry* eyes of the mourners are *around*; only the "song" of the fly is *heard*. "The Eyes around—had wrung them dry." No purifying rain can come from them. Vision is difficult for dry eyes. And it is vision, in fact, which is the ultimate subject of this poem, and of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," and of *Walden* itself.

For had not Emerson, Thoreau, and even Whitman (although one must assume his influence was negligible since she said that she had "never read his Book"¹⁹) defined the poet as seer, sayer, prophet, and priest? The poet, first of all, must have clear vision—he must see. Then, he must say—he must articulate. Then, he must prophesy for future generations. Then, he must perform priestly sacraments. But first, he must see. All else depends on that.

Thoreau had seen through shams and delusions at Walden Pond, and he had articulated in beautiful prose, and he had prophesied more dawn to come, and he had performed his priestly rites with holy water from the pond. But could it be that the purifying waters of Walden had, perhaps, filtered the reality? What had he seen? Mind you, he saw during the *intervals of that gentle rainstorm*. The *air* and water were perfectly *still*; the thrush was singing *around*; and the water, full of *light* and aided by the clear *portion* of the *air* above it, became "a lower heaven itself." Looking *between* green hills, he could see higher ones tinged with *blue*. If he stood on tiptoe, he could glimpse *still bluer* peaks which became "those true-*blue* coins from heaven's own mint." For him, the earth was insulated and cradled by the *intervening* water, while he dwelt on *dry* land. Had the sacred glass mirrored a heaven that really did not exist? Was it truth or a mirage? Thoreau had admitted that, even from his vantage point at Walden, "in

¹⁹ *Letters*, II, 404.

other directions . . . I could not see over or beyond the woods which surrounded me." Dickinson, not surrounded by the Walden woods, would check those "other directions."

One of those other directions lay in Amherst, indoors. Sitting in his open-air apartment, with door and *windows* open, Thoreau had heard his cosmic mosquito. Without the magic mirror of Walden, within the confines of a narrow room, with *windows* closed, would the vision be the same? In the world of the poem, all present gather firm breaths and expectantly wait for the *King* to be witnessed in the room. The inscription engraved on the bathing tub of Thoreau's *king* read: "Renew thyself completely each day." Would this king also offer rebirth or renewal? Would he be God or Christ? Or, if life proved to be "mean"—and Thoreau had not excluded this possibility—would the king be simply Death? Or, if life proved to be "of the devil"—and Thoreau had not excluded this possibility either—would the king be Satan? Under Dickinson's unwavering gaze, he proves to be none of these. He is King Fly, of this earth and not of the cosmos. As Wallace Stevens was later to put it, "Let the lamp affix its beam. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."²⁰ No gentle rainstorm and overcast sky in this room. The fly is affixed under the lamp's beam.

Yet, curiously, a negative kind of epiphany does occur. The only *portion* of the dying persona which meaningfully can "be Assignable" is the poem itself. The only thing of real value that can be "willed" to the living is the exceptional honesty of this very personal vision, conveyed by shifting the images from the *Walden* chapter. The purifying water of Walden Pond does not *intervene* in this corner of the universe. What does *interpose* itself is the fly, not the magic mirror of the water. And the fly is not really an interposition, but rather the truth, so far as human senses can perceive truth. What distorts vision, then, the images seem to say, appears to be the water of Walden which, in effect, had created a cosmic

²⁰ Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954), 64.

mosquito. Without the screen of the water, the cosmic insect of Walden becomes the terrestrial fly of the poem. The fly is life unfiltered by the metaphysics of Transcendentalism. It is life reduced to its lowest terms, uncradled by the sacred (but illusory?) water. Dickinson had "stood right fronting and face to face to a fact."

The metaphysical *light* of Walden thus darkened before the wings of the interposed fly. Life reduced to its lowest terms, to the least common denominator of the senses found no room for the celestial light of Transcendentalism. Sighting between the green hills, Thoreau had glimpsed, he said, the *blue* peaks of heaven. Transposed to the poem, that color carries no such heavenly connotation. Dickinson's room would not be out of place in Stephen Crane's blue hotel, for the shade of her blue is much closer to Crane's than it is to Thoreau's. Crane, like Dickinson, had the perceptions of the ironist, and, like her, prided himself on the integrity of his personal vision. Underlying all the rich ambiguity of both those shades of blue is the unmistakable implication that man's senses are finite, that Transcendental ultimates are beyond his reach, that life is fraught with *uncertainties*, and that honesty demands acceptance of these human limitations. In the world of Dickinson's poem, the *blue buzz* represents both the stumbling uncertainty of life's irregular course and the equally stumbling inadequacy of man's senses to unveil the mysteries of the universe.

The open *windows* of Walden thus close when the honest beam is affixed. Man's vision, if tested by the pragmatic standards demanded by Thoreau himself, is an instrument unfit to measure the Transcendental light. Thoreau had wanted an instrument to measure reality. He had called for "a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer" (106). Dickinson's "Realometer," calibrated for both sight and sound, made no register of Thoreau's celestial blue or cosmic hum. With restrained intensity, her poem dramatizes that humbling awareness that in spite of all the human longing for absolute certainty, man's vision remains necessarily tentative. No editorializing, no wishful thinking, no wailing and gnashing of teeth that it be

otherwise, she reported the results. Because of understatement, economy, and restraint, Dickinson's concluding two lines with their transposed Walden images have the awful impact of finality: "And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see."

The critic grasps for adequate ways to explain Dickinson's startling accomplishment. Her plan had been precise and ingenious—audacious, almost, in its simplicity. She would move the *Walden* images indoors, place them inside a room during the crucial experience of death, "drive life into a corner," and let the images speak. And all the *Walden* images are there: the hum of the insect, the intervals between the storm, the stillness in the air, the light, the blue, the windows, the uncertainty, the moment of death. These were the furnishings of her room. She had set up an imagistic laboratory in which to test pragmatically Thoreau's Transcendental credo.

Willa Cather, in her theory of fiction, spoke for the novel *démeublé*—the novel unfurnished. She, as Thomas Wolfe said of F. Scott Fitzgerald, was a member of the school of "taker-outers" rather than the "putter-inners."²¹ Dickinson, without question, is a "taker-outer," and her room is an unfurnished one. And it is this Spartan simplicity that allows her images to assume prominence. In the world of her poem, in the small room stripped of furnishings the images carry extraordinary weight. There are no unnecessary chairs over which to stumble, and the images march unimpeded to their destination.

Literally, in this room, the only piece of essential furniture, and this not mentioned by name, is the bed of the dying persona. Such stark realism carried to its logical extreme becomes surrealism. Dickinson's tiny room becomes an enormous room, almost an echo and light chamber where sound upon sound, color upon color clash or merge to produce fabulous offspring—new beings created from the caging of Thoreau's outdoor images. After reading *The House of the Seven Gables*, Herman Melville wrote to Hawthorne that the book was "like a

²¹ From a letter written by Thomas Wolfe in 1937, quoted in part by William Gibson in the introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York, 1968), v.

fine old chamber, abundantly, but still judiciously, furnished with precisely that sort of furniture best fitted to furnish it."²² Dickinson, too, chooses precisely and selects judiciously her furniture. She had, incidentally, read *The House of the Seven Gables*,²³ and told T. W. Higginson that "Hawthorne appals, entices."²⁴ One must mention that perhaps Dickinson was obliquely affected by Hawthorne's vivid description of Judge Pyncheon's death in Chapter XVIII, "Governor Pyncheon." In that memorable scene were present many of the images that were also to furnish Dickinson's room: the buzzing fly, the windows, the air, the storm, the light. She would have appreciated the irony of the once-powerful judge's inability now even to brush an insignificant fly from his face.²⁵ But Hawthorne's irony here is deliberately obvious, almost to the point of being heavy-handed: death defeats the detested Philistine, the hypocritical materialist. Dickinson's scene, of course, has no such specific intent, and her irony is far more restrained, more subdued.

And yet her world view is much closer to the view of Hawthorne and Melville than to that of Emerson and Thoreau. Like young Robin in Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the mourners in Dickinson's poem (and the reader) eagerly await the appearance of the king. All breathlessly anticipate his presence; and, like that of Major Molineux, his appearance is a shocking anticlimax. Molineux is tarred and feathered. He is the scapegoat king; and Dickinson's fly, her king, although more subtle in his rôle, is still a scapegoat king. Major Molineux functions as the tragicomic king, as the ideal humiliated. And so Dickinson's fly becomes Thoreau's cosmic mosquito humiliated. The splendor is awaited, and only tar and feathers appear. "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."

²² *The Letters of Herman Melville*, editor, Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, 1960), 123-124.

²³ *Letters*, I, 155.

²⁴ *Letters*, II, 649.

²⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (Columbus, 1969), 283.

In its total unconcern with, but not unawareness of, the human tragedy, Dickinson's fly is not unlike the elms in Melville's remarkable poem "Malvern Hill." Those elms were present during the tragic deaths at the Civil War battle of Malvern Hill, and they must have witnessed human suffering that the Transcendental woods of Walden never encountered. When questioned, the elms admit remembering the deaths, but show their separation from man's world by answering: "Wag the world how it will, / Leaves must be green in Spring."²⁶ Dickinson's fly, too, must simply buzz during the crucial human experience of death.

Thoreau had a romance with nature, a *cosmic* romance. In the mainstream of nineteenth-century romanticism, he saw a mystical union between man and the elements, a joining of the self with external nature. Dickinson's relationship with nature was a *comic* one, comic in the sense of the *comédie humaine*. Man is separate from nature, and in man's most crucial moments, nature, like the sun in another of her poems, "proceeds unmoved."²⁷ The fly will indifferently buzz during the crisis of death when all await the witnessing of the king. Here is that instant of truth when all the unrealized longings of human beings should be realized. They are not. And this is exactly the point. The images of the poem pronounce, by their silence on the subject, that man's Transcendental aspirations will remain unfulfilled. Present here are all the elements of the human predicament set forth with imagistic concision and with the imagistic recognition that this is the human comedy; this is the human tragedy. And there is dignity in this recognition.

Hopefully, then, by interpreting Dickinson's poem in terms of the transposed *Walden* images, one gains insight into a further dimension of an already multidimensional poem. Perhaps, too, one gains increased awareness of just how Dickinson responded to one of the major philosophical doctrines

²⁶ *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, editor, Howard Vincent (Chicago, 1947), 45.

²⁷ "Apparently with no surprise," *Poems*, III, 1114.

of her day. Judged by her response in this particular poem, her art takes on increased qualities of irony. By denying the poet Transcendental vision, by denying him as "seer," she has, in truth, achieved an astonishing kind of vision and insight. By recognizing human limitation, and above all by conveying this recognition in remarkably restrained imagery, she becomes the seer by refusing to see, the sayer by refusing to speak, the prophet by refusing to prophesy, and the priest by refusing to perform liturgical rites. Thoreau would have applauded this kind of economy.