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## DICKINSON'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF EVOLUTION AND IMPERFECTION AND THE BUTTERFLY SYMBOLISM



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### ABSTRACT

Dickinson's poetry, notwithstanding its other worldly leanings, has a typical geocentric tendency which she shares with Bergson whose thought marks a shift in the interpretation of the principle of plenitude. The archetypal Idea of the classical plenitude came to be associated with the ceaseless process of possibility. For emanationism and creationism of classical plenitude temporalization came to be substituted. God was also associated with the latter process but it was not until the publication of *The two Sources of Morality and Religion* that the élan vital was symbolized as God. Thus Bergson's interpretation of the principle of plenitude marks a shift from static mechanism to vitalism.

Consciousness has a central importance in Dickinson's poetry just as it is the focus of phenomenology. The phenomenology employs consciousness to organize and systematize the phenomena in order to arrive at truth. Thus phenomenology is "the science of discipline of phenomena as "meant entities"- meanings ordered and, indeed, constituted by the appropriate acts of consciousness."<sup>1</sup> Dickinson employs "Circumference" to denote the phenomenological role of consciousness, to denote the phenomenological role of consciousness, to show the final reach and the farthest range of operation of consciousness, where "costumeless consciousness", assumes the responsibility the responsibility to explore the depth of "the Disk to be" in the area of eternity (poem 1454).

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Dickinson's interest in natural philosophy, and especially botany, was fostered by Amherst Academy curriculum. Her interest in Botany was further promoted by Edward Hitchcock's

Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons and Mrs. Phelps's book, Familiar Lectures on Botany. She well sums up Dickinson's debt to Hitchcock's lecture, "The Euthanasia of Autumn" in his 2- volume biography: "It is hard to believe that Emily would not respond to Hitchcock's fine sense of the specific here... her own sense of precision was already showing itself for instance, in one of the delights of her girlhood, her herbarium, with its carefully printed Latin name for each item; she was known among her friends for her detailed knowledge of the flora around Amhers<sup>2</sup>" Dickinson was a liberated puritan, and it was her delight to observe the traditional resurrection confirmed in the revival of spring. Her poems on the butterfly show her profound interest in the morphogenesis of evolution though her phenomenology in some of these poems takes a venturesome leap immortality from becoming to being. Dickinson's poetry cannot run the whole gamut of the philosophical evolutionism, of course, but one cannot help noticing some coincidences between Dickinson's and Bergson's thinking. Consciousness is a central fact of life both for Emily Dickinson and Bergson. For Bergson it is a fluidity of élan vital:

"It is as if a broad current of consciousness has penetrated matter, loaded as all consciousness is, with an enormous multiplicity of interwoven potentialities.....Life, that is to say, consciousness launched into matter, fixed its attention on its own movement or on the matter it was passing through<sup>3</sup>" The primal energy as consciousness split into instinct and intelligence.<sup>4</sup> it is driven to higher structures of organization by élan vital, the creative power and the ultimate principle of existence that unifies all forms of life as a common impulse. In the emergence of the butterfly from its

cocoon, Dickinson sees the miracle of instinctive consciousness as Bergsonian impetus of original impulsion (j-129, 173,354) : the change from caterpillar to butterfly exemplifies the unique nature of life driven by the vital impetus. It is as though the élan vital is rolling through this species in its larval, pupal, and insect stages of morphogenesis. Thus the butterfly phenomenon is for Dickinson a miracle of evolution:

*Then, finer than a Lady,/ Emerges in the spring!/A Feather on each shoulder!/ You'd scarce recognize him!/By Men, yclept Caterpillar!/By me! But who am I,/To tell the pretty secret/Of the Butterfly.- (J- 173)*

This is the description of the butterfly in the chrysalis stage. The instinct of life to feel the inertia in the security of security of the cocoon soon experience the urge for motion. Overwhelmed by this urge for adventure, the larva launches upon the pupal adventure, and prefers freedom to security. Dickinson's love of the phenomena is often mistaken for naturalism. Dickinson's poetic phenomenology is neither naturalistic nor transcendentalistic; it would not be correct to call it ambivalent either. Dickinson avoids logical positivism. The laws she discovers in nature are her own intuitive insights whereas naturalism signifies discovery of the exact laws of nature: Naturalism is a phenomenon consequent upon the discovery of nature, which is to say, nature considered as a unity of spatio-temporal being subject to exact laws of nature.... The mature scientist has the tendency to look upon everything as nature, and the humanist scientist sees everything as 'spirit' as a historical creation; by the same token, both are inclined to falsify the sense of what cannot be seen in their way<sup>5</sup>. Both Dickinson and Bergson attach central importance to

consciousness and Husserl's phenomenological goal too is the investigation of consciousness in order to reduce the errors of perception and achieve the objective awareness or original intuition of reality. Thus for Husserl: "Consciousness is the source and matrix of all phenomena." <sup>6</sup> Thus Husserl discovers a procedure by which one can perceive reality without distortion. He calls it "reduction" Bergson strips perception of all its cognitive distortions in durational flux or intuition of duree, and Dickinson make consciousness an "awful Mate" of the soul (J-894). For her consciousness has the aptitude to discover the pre mortal (J-822) as well the post mortal (J-1454) existence. In other words, the data of perception are transformed into things-in-themselves or essences by direct perception or intuition. The terms of perception may be adequate for primordial phenomena but "Mightiest Things" assert them selves by "intuition", (J-420).

For Bergson the world is a theatre of an unending creation. Life may elude death now that it has conquered its ancient enemy: "The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity,

in space and time, is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming chargeable to beat down very resistance and clear the formidable obstacles, perhaps even death." <sup>9</sup> The aptitude of the butterfly for flight after discarding the cocoon has the symbolic import of the body-soul relationship. Therefore the disappearance of the butterfly, figured so often in Dickinson poems, and in (J-1627, Version 1) as Spangled journeys to the peak/of some perceiveless thing" is the soul's adventure in the supertemporal realm. Though pervaded on all sides by death and imperfection, Dickinson's bold and adventurous phenomenology aspires to catch a glimpse of life, to see an infinitesimal shade of the testimony of post-mortal survival. This reach of her genius, this leap of her phenomenology are lost sight of in the fine and subtle thematic designs of death woven by her poetic imagination:

*The Soul's distinct connection/With immortality /Is best disclosed by Danger/ Or quick Calamity – (J- 974, st. 1)*

So the imagination of death and its stark terror enables Dickinson's genius to see the gleam of immortality as a prospect more distinct than that offered by faith.

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8. See also Poems j-354, 533, 1246, 1521.
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