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«Blue Sea – Wilt welcome me?»: Navigating Longing in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Melissa Sarikaya

ANNO VII – 2022

«BLUE SEA – WILT WELCOME ME?»: NAVIGATING LONGING IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

Melissa Sarikaya (*Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen/Nürnberg*)
melissa.sarikaya@fau.de

Abstract: Nautical motifs are key elements in understanding Dickinson's poetic world view, which suggests that humans are inferior to nature. This paper offers close-readings of Dickinson's poetry under the three topics of longing, death, and navigation to come up with the conclusion that water is the eternal realm of yearning and trust – even though humans as creatures of land are destined to fail. This paper uses an ecofeminist approach to suggest that navigating through sea is a metaphor to satisfy inner longing.

Riassunto: I motivi nautici sono elementi chiave nella comprensione della visione del mondo poetico di Emily Dickinson, che suggerisce che gli umani sono inferiori alla natura. L'articolo si propone di offrire un'analisi della poesia di Emily Dickinson secondo le tre tematiche del desiderio, della morte e della navigazione per arrivare alla conclusione che l'acqua è il regno eterno dello struggimento e della fiducia – anche se gli uomini come creature terrestri sono destinati a fallire. La prospettiva ecofemminista dell'analisi conduce a considerare che la navigazione attraverso il mare è una metafora per soddisfare il desiderio interiore.

Parole chiave: Emily Dickinson, poesia, ecocritica, navigazione, mare, acqua, morte

Key words: Emily Dickinson, Poetry, Ecocriticism, Navigation, Sea, Water, Death

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Melissa Sarikaya (*Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen/Nürnberg*)
melissa.sarikaya@fau.de

Emily Dickinson's purposeful use of language and her poetic fascination with nature are just some of the reasons why scholars are enchanted by the poet's lyrical endeavour.[1] While scholars have been concerned with Dickinson's themes of flowers and forests, birds and bees, however, the significance of water has not yet been largely studied.[2] Thus, in this paper I draw attention to the element of water and analyse Dickinson's use of nautical themes with an ecocritical reading.

The ecocritical lens has become a popular approach when reading Dickinson's poetry. Christine Gerhardt, for example, finds proto-ecological concerns and environmental awareness in Emily Dickinson's writing and muses about both human-nonhuman relationships as well as nonhuman interactions in the poetry.[3] I agree with Gerhardt in the sense that Dickinson's lyrical work reflects upon human-nature relationships with

1 The most important book dealing with Dickinson's language use is Cristanne Miller's pivotal reference work: Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1987. Other notable studies are: Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2000; Marta McDowell, *Emily Dickinson's Gardening Life: The Plants & Places That Inspired the Iconic Poet*, Portland (Oregon), Timber Press, 2019; Judith Farr, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 2004. Biographers are also aware of Dickinson's love for nature, e.g. Elizabeth Petrino argues that Dickinson's flower symbols «comment more profoundly on change, mortality, and the afterlife» than the simple «tradition» of female writers' «association of poetry and flowers» (Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820–1885*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1998, p. 160).

2 Although the sea as one of Dickinson's favourite natural symbols has been recognized: cf. Judith Farr, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 265.

3 Cf. Christine Gerhardt, *"Often seen - but seldom felt": Emily Dickinson's Reluctant Ecology of Place*, «The Emily Dickinson Journal», 15, 1, 2006, pp. 56-78.

nature being «empower[ed]» and «human subjectivity [being] allowed to dissolve»,[4] but Gerhardt did not fully explore the significance of the sea. In the specific water imagery used, water is the point of origin for human, nature, and the world – so far that the *conditio humana* is grasped through the understanding of water. Thus, my thesis is that water is first, nature comes second, and humans third in Dickinson's genesis of lyric and poetic force. Of course, the poetry is primarily «human-centered»,[5] but water is nonetheless the pivotal force.

Dickinson's poetry has been studied with the premise of her skepticism towards language.[6] Dickinson's language skepticism is most visible in the use of tropes (e.g. metonymies and metaphors) in her nature poetry.[7] More specifically, I believe that the nautical motifs are key elements in understanding Dickinson's poetic world view, which suggests that humans are inferior to nature. Thus, an affinity to the sea enhances the individual's emotion and cognition. In the following close-readings of Dickinson's poetry under the three topics of longing, navigation, and death, I will establish my main thesis: Water is the eternal realm of yearning and trust – even though humans as land creatures are destined to fail.

4 Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2014, p. 222-223. Gerhardt approaches Dickinson's ecocritical lyric perspectives regarding the topic of nature through five criteria: nature as a realm, nature in connection to history and culture, nature and the human, nature as a place, and finally nature and ethics. Gerhardt then comes up with the concept of humility which is a solution to the problematic anthropocentric dualist position of a nature-human binary (cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-12).

5 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

6 Scott Knickerbocker, for instance, studied Dickinson's ethical potential in her language use suggesting that Dickinson's poetry performatively induces an ethical stance towards nature (cf. Scott Knickerbocker, *Emily Dickinson's Ethical Artifice*, «Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment», 15, 2, 2008, pp. 185-197).

7 Cf. Xiaohui Liu, *Emily Dickinson and Her Metonymical Way of Knowing Nature*, «Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences», 13, 2020, pp. 573–590. Liu is suspicious of the term 'metaphorical' and argues that it is rather metonymies that Dickinson uses.

The Sea as a Harbinger of Longing

Emily Dickinson's poetry often uses sea imagery with the speaker longing for the ocean. In FR 494, the «Wind» carries the distant odour of the water («Sand» and «Pebble»), which ignites a longing for travelling in the lyrical I («Would you be the fool to stay?»).[8] Often, the oceanic longing is coupled with an urge for liberty auch as in the following lines, in which a bird – the apparent motif for freedom – flies away to learn new songs: «Yet do I not repine / Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown - / Learneth beyond the sea / Melody new for me / And will return.» (FR 4). Despite the grand ocean, the lyric I does not dread the vastly waters. Instead, the lyric I believes in the bird's navigating abilities to find back home. In general, Dickinson's poetry trusts the nautical abilities to successfully navigate, although the operation of navigation is often obscure. The poetry expresses an immanent existential epistemology that beings can always navigate the endless waters to find their destination. The combination of the bird and the water is an element often found in Dickinson's poetry. The bird functions as a waterly «siren» (FR 1789) whose singing has the power to move humans to long for the past and reflect upon the present. People at shore are longing for the sea, for instance, when their eyes wander around the sea questioning the fate of a little boat: «Whether my bark went down at sea / Whether she met with gales / Whether to isles enchanted / She bent her docile sails». The landsman left behind wonders about the fates of the bark, that is his «errand» (FR 33). While the «deep eternity» of sea is described as «exultation», it is questionable if a lifelong «sailor» used to the water, might be able to «understand» the «divine intoxication» of a landsman in going to sea (FR 143). The attraction to water is intrinsic to humans seeking for adventures.

Following traditional notions of poetic allegories, sailing is expressed as a metaphor for life's journey:

> Could live - *did* live -
> Could die - *did* die -
> Could smile upon the whole
> Through faith in one he met not -
> To introduce his soul -

8 All the poems by Emily Dickinson are abbreviated as FR with the corresponding poem number of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin, 3 vols, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Could go from scene familiar
To an untraversed spot -
Could contemplate the journey
With unpuzzled heart –

Such trust had one among us -
Among us *not* today -
We who saw the launching
Never sailed the Bay! (FR 59)

The lyric we contemplate about one of their community's people who sailed the sea. Even though this experience results in the sailor's death, the journey is not entirely connotated negatively. Instead, the lyric we still display the sea as a place of yearning in the last stanza. Sometimes the yearning to sail even results in imaginary dreams, such as the following lyric I, who is called to observe something. The lyric I, however, ignores the idyllic farm view right at their windowsill to instead fantasise: «But in their Room - a Sea - displayed - / And Ships - of such a size / As Crew of Mountains - could afford - / And Decks - to seat the Skies -» (FR 589). The lyric I longs for the sea, water, ocean – anything to escape their boring agricultural life. The sacred time on earth should rather be used wisely by surrounding oneself with the nautical: «An Hour is a Sea / Between a few, and me - / With them would Harbor be -» (FR 898). Nevertheless, some of the best voyages come with a book: «There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing Poetry - / This Traverse may the poorest take / Without oppress of Toll - / How frugal is the Chariot / That bears the Human Soul –» (FR 1286). The imagination of the mind is one of the greatest gifts humans have.

Dickinson's sea metaphors display the versatile nature of water. Sometimes the master, sometimes the follower, the poetry shows off different traits of the sea. In some poems, the sea is fierce and strong, which fits Gary Lee Stonum's definition of power. The sea's «power» lies in «dominion and discipline» (e.g. ordering other waters to flow into the sea, FR 1275). Stonum argues that above every other aspect, it is power which is «the object of cherishing», which ultimately results in the sublime.[9] Therefore, because of its power over humans and nature, the sea is sublime and

9 Cf. Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime*, Madison, WI, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, pp. 54, 67.

thus superior. Consequently, nature excels when compared to human culture: The manmade «Well» «foolish[ly]» «depend[s]» «upon the Brook» (FR 1051). Humans' craftsmanship is central to how the world is constructed. The sea has a «Basement», in which «Mermaids» live, while the «Upper Floor» houses the «Frigates». Mistaken for a «Mouse», the lyric I is consumed by the tidal movements as the human presence is inferior to the ocean and its inhabitants. However, the personified Sea realises the lyric I's affinity to the realm of water; hence the water spares the lyric I's life, even accepting them as their equal by bowing and withdrawing: «And bowing - with a Mighty look - / At me - The Sea withdrew -» (FR 656).

A drunkard's search for alcohol along the Rhine is rather a poor image of navigating along the coastline. However, the «taste» of «a liquor never brewed» is a metaphor for the insatiable desire to explore the oceans; an individual that has become addicted to exploring the endless Blue («I shall but drink the more», FR 207). The *tertium comparationis* of this interaction between the donor (alcohol) and the tenor (the sea) is that both liquids ignite longing in individuals. Because of the sea's treasures («Pearls are the Diver's farthings / Extorted from the Sea», FR 16; pearls in the sea that the lyric I dives for, cf. FR 248), humans inherently desire to explore the vastness of the ocean to find hidden, precious gems. The Sea produces «Pearl» and «Weed» (FR 857), which is similar to a woman dressing up for her male husband. Cristanne Miller argues that the sea is usually connotated with masculinity and thus finds it unexpected that the sea is used to describe femininity in this poem.[10] Instead, I rather argue that the sea is a stand-in for a multitude of ideas beyond the mere mirroring of gender. Dickinson's linguistic obscurity deliberately permits different signifiers for the sea.

The following enigmatic poem mixes the semantic fields of nautical and floral language: «Where ships of Purple - gently toss - / On Seas of Daffodil - / Fantastic Sailors - mingle - / And then - the Wharf is still!» (FR 296). The gaudy hustle is a thrilling interplay of tranquility and vivacity, performing the vicinity of nature and the wharf. The poem «'Nature' is what we see» (FR 721) is analysed by both Robert Kern and Xiaohui Liu as the speaker's inability to express the concrete experience of the natural world.[11] Arguing that the sea has major significance in Dickinson's

10 Cf. Cristanne Miller, *How "Low Feet" Stagger: Disruptions of Language in Dickinson's Poetry*, in Suzanne Juhasz, *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson,* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983, pp. 134-155: 137.

11 Robert Kern argues that there is a «lack of symmetry between our knowledge of the world and the pure physicality of its being» which results in the «powerlessness to ex-

poetic world, the homonym of «see» (l.1) and «sea» (l.6) might not be coincidental. Although spatially apart, the phonological properties link these two homonymic words, resulting in an equation of nature with the sensory experience of the sea. Moreover, the ocean's vastness is a visually accurate image of nature's extensiveness. Likewise, the fauna and flora are dependent on water, as the rose can only grow with a «flask of Dew» (FR 25) and the bird «drank a Dew» (FR 359). Furthermore, the «Dew» is also floral «satisf[action]» for «a Leaf» wondering about the dew drop's mysterious absence and whether it might have been «Abducted» by «Day» or flew «[i]nto the Sea» (FR 1372). Even the power of the sun is subject to watery images, as the first ever sunrise resulted in «The Steeples sw[imming] in Amethyst» (FR 204). Also, the personified Moon is described with water images: The eyes, are a «Summer Dew» and the «Dimities» are of the colour «Blue» (FR 735). Both the female Moon and the male Sun, as well as the flora and fauna are subject to the water. This speaks to the water's overpowering essence guiding the natural world. Furthermore, it seems that only water, rivers, and tides, can abide the «World» (FR 1618). Contrary to humans, nature easily adapts to the water's flow: «And [the bird] rowed him softer Home / Than Oars divide the Ocean, / […] Or Butterflies, off Bank of Noon, / Leap, plashless as they swim.» (FR 359). Apparently, nature's dependence on mastery water is in opposition to human longing for the element of water but not yet achieving to live in unity with water.

Compass and Chart: Sea Navigation

It is, of course, ironic that Dickinson refers to «brave Columbus» «sailing o'er the tide» (FR2), when it was him who navigated so wrongly to what he thought was India.[12] Columbus' errancy gives insight into the leitmotif of

press our knowledge justly and accurately» (Robert Kern, *Birds of a Feather: Emily Dickinson, Alberto Manguel, and the Nature Poet's Dilemma*, «Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment» 16, 2, 2009, pp. 327-342: 330); while Liu argues that this inability of expression is undergone by metonymically expressing «what we can perceive by seeing or hearing, with what we can know by sense or perception» (Xiaohui Liu, *Emily Dickinson and Her Metonymical Way of Knowing Nature*, «Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences» 13, 2020, pp. 573–590: 580).

12 Columbus deception of 'discovering' America is by today's standards a simplification of colonisation which is as racially dangerous as it is ideologically harmful.

Dickinson's water poetry: the immanent belief in the nautical process. A ship will always find its safe haven.

Nature offers epistemological knowledge, for instance in the season's change of light and darkness, making «winter afternoons» (FR 320) the harbingers of death. Life's futility is made apparent through this «certain Slant of light», characteristic for winter twilights. This natural illumination is suggestive of death's darkness serving as navigation through the transcendence of life. Dickinson subscribes to the ecofeminist belief that instead of the human brain, nature bears inherent knowledge and wisdom. FR 340 is a rejection of traditional human ratio: «I felt a Funeral, in my Brain». At the end of the poem, the metaphorical plunge arises images of water: «And then a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down - / And hit a World, at every plunge, / And Finished knowing - then -». The human construct of the «Plank» fails, which leads the lyric I to see «Reason» breaking. The water image suggests that the human brain is inferior to natural epistemology. Paradoxically, the human's brain is at times superior to nature: The brain is «wider than the sky» and «deeper than the sea» (FR 598), indeed exalting it to godlike status in the last stanza. Human ratio is flawless and impeccable – yet only as long as it smoothly runs. Once stopped from its run, the human brain is impossible to control. The speaker even states that it would be easier to push back the mighty water from the ground it gained (FR 365). Hence, human knowledge might have potential, but it is subordinate to water's unfailing superior wisdom. The sea's wisdom is morbidly confirmed in a poem, in which children inquire about their parents' whereabouts, when, in fact the parents have drowned as only four survived «the great storm» and the children's parents were among the forty who did not. It is the wise waters who have the answers to questions of life and death: «And only the Sea - reply -» (FR 685).

However, sometimes the sea's wisdom is challenged: the personified «Sea» orders the personified «Brook» to «Come» flowing into the sea. While the Brook is first resilient and desires to grow on its own, the Sea argues that the Brook will be even mightier when uniting with the sea («then you will be a Sea - / I want a Brook - Come now»!). After this reunion, however, the Sea loses the power over eliminating the undesired parts of integrated waters. The little waters are now part of the vast Sea: «I am he / You cherished». Consequently, the commanding Sea submits: «Learned Waters - / Wisdom is stale - to Me» (FR 1275). Water's wisdom naturally finds the right course of flowing. The sea is an ecosystem, in which do-

minion over one another is systemically disproved. The water's wisdom of learning and growing results in an epistemology that human reason and ratio are not able to compare to. The water's nature of growth, uniting the sea with brooks and rivers is addressed in the following poem:

> My River runs to Thee -
> Blue Sea - Wilt welcome me?
> My River waits reply.
> Oh Sea - look graciously!
>
> I'll fetch thee Brooks
> From spotted nooks –
>
> *Say* Sea - take me? (FR 219)

The same seductive strategy of luring another entity (this time a human male) into the vastness of water is shown in the following lines: «The waters chased *him* [italics mine] as he fled / Not daring look behind; / A billow whispered in his Ear, / "Come home with me, my friend; / My parlor is of shriven glass, / My pantry has a fish / For every palate in the Year" - ». Defying the promising claims, «The object floating at *his* [italics mine] side / Made no distinct reply.» (FR 1766), enforcing the threat of the sea's hunger for power and wisdom. It is significant that the individual in danger is male as this possibly suggests that the feminine is more connected to the natural world than masculinity is.

Even though water is full of wisdom, it is treacherous to humans, which makes navigation even more difficult and potentially fatal: «Declaiming Waters none may dread - / But Waters that are still / Are so for that most fatal cause / In Nature - they are full -» (FR 1638); «Though the great Waters sleep, / That they are still the Deep, / We cannot doubt. / No vacillating God / Ignited this Abode / To put it out.» (FR 1641). These reverent descriptions of water as one of God's most purposeful creations, poses the question if man can ever compete with water. «We send the Wave to find the Wave- / An Errand so divine, / The Messenger enamored too, / Forgetting to return, / We make the wise distinction still, / Soever made in vain, / The sagest time to dam the sea is when the sea is gone-» (FR 1643). Apparently, water is unable to control itself and only in absence of the sea, humans may dam the sea. When opposed to one another, humans have no choice other than to submit to water's unbending force.

Because of their inferiority, humans cannot compete with water, but at least they can successfully navigate through water, although their tactics are rarely revealed. «Futile - the winds / To a heart in port / Done with the Compass / Done with the Chart! // Rowing in Eden / Ah - the sea! / Might I but moor - tonight / In thee!» (FR 269). The lyric I desires bodily union with the lyric thou. Yet neither a «Compass» nor a «Chart» can help in finding the way to the lover. No man crafted tool can lead a «Heart» as water is the key to desire. The «port» is reached with «Rowing», a physically exhaustive labour. However, the «Sea» lures the lyric I into travelling further through this paradisaic «Eden». In the end, the lover's union is impossible (no «luxury» of spending «nights» together). In other poems, it is not unsurmountable distances but rather household items and man-made artefacts of culture that separate the lyric I from the lyric thou. Only nature's imagery is fit to resemble the devastatingly large abyss that parts the lyric persona: «So we must meet apart – / You there – I – here – / With just the Door ajar / That Oceans are» (FR 706).

Cristanne Miller focuses on the pattern of tidal movement of poems such as in FR 712: «The answer of the Sea unto / The Motion of the Moon». Miller finds the same pattern in FR 387 and argues that «[t]he sea is at first a "Boy" – docile, obedient and strictly confined; he comes and goes only «so far» along his mistress's [= moon, my remark] "appointed Sands"». Miller continues: «[o]bedience and control are the reciprocal gifts of the relationship» and that the «patterns of their movements are synchronized, but neither the moon nor the sea has any choice in […] vary[ing] from […] these prescribed movements».[13] While Miller rather focuses on gender roles – the sea as a boy and the moon as a mistress while later in the poem the gender roles are reversed with a female being led by a male's hand –, I would rather like to draw the attention to the guiding of the (personified) characters in this poem. The ecological trust in earthly equilibrium to fix both lovers and nature is prevalent in the above-mentioned poems. Trusting the sea equals trusting the ecosystem – and sometimes even more than that. The following poem installs a godly belief thanks to faith in nature: «I never saw a Moor. / I never saw the Sea - / Yet I know how the Heather looks / And what a Billow be –» (FR 800). The imaginary experience of the «Sea» and a «Billow» inspires the epistemological belief in an existing «God». Natural phenomena

13 Cristanne Miller, *How "Low Feet" Stagger: Disruptions of Language in Dickinson's Poetry*, in Suzanne Juhasz, *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983, pp. 134-155: 136-137.

like the sea motivate humans to combat existential questions and to navigate through life. Remaining in the realm of religious guidance, FR 65 refers to the «Dove» guiding the biblical figure of Noah to «*Land*». The ship is a «floating casement»; a cage that both keeps the dove and the human prisoner. Water's hostility forces humans to rely on external guidance by *earth others*.[14]

The speaker has compassionate knowledge about the water's state. Yet, when the water gains strength and resilience, the lyric I is intimidated and denies the sea altogether with its associated wisdom:

> Because my Brook is fluent
> I know 'tis dry -
> Because my Brook is silent
> It is the Sea -
>
> And startled at it's rising
> I try to flee
> To where the Strong assure me
> Is "no more Sea" - (FR 1235)

Because of the lyric I's flight from the impending force of the water, the natural epistemology is sealed. Fortunately, some human souls welcome water's guidance: «Have you got a Brook in your little heart». Yet, they keep this inherent knowledge shut out from others as «nobody knows, so still it flows, / That any brook is there» (FR 94). Because of systemic societal structures, nature is believed to be inferior to human culture; hence humans embrace the epistemic water-knowledge only in secret. Dickinson's poetry advocates for an ecological balance, in which humans are close to their waterly part of the soul in accordance with nature. The harmony with nature peaks in FR 113, in which nature even strives in the lyric I's presence as «The Brooks laugh louder / When I come -». The entity of water with its omnipotent ability to consume any liquid is comforting: «A few» «Drop[s] » add up and «help the Brook / That went to help the Sea -» (FR 846). Water's extension of its vastness is supportive after all and

14 This term is significant for ecofeminist Val Plumwood who writes about the need to respect and affirm the other inhabitants of the world, so-called *earth others* (cf. Val Plumwood. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993).

stated in miltiple poems (e.g. «As Brook by Brook bestows itself / To multiply the Pond» FR 504). The capacity to embrace water and its wisdom is in fact inherent to all human beings as part of their nature: «The Heart has narrow Banks / It measures like the Sea» (FR 960). The heart's desire is described in nautical terms as «*One port* - suffices - for a Brig like *mine* -», specifying that the heart is a ship with its own «Cargo» (FR 410).

Water does not only offer humans guidance because of its epistemological wisdom, but also because humans' existential angst is also measured through the metaphor of water:

> Down Time's quaint stream
> Without an oar
> We are enforced to sail
> Our Port a secret
> Our Perchance a Gale
> What Skipper would
> Incur the Risk
> What Buccaneer would ride
> Without a surety from the Wind
> Or schedule of the Tide - (FR 1656)

The allegory of the tide reveals that humans' teleology is unknown. Neither the goal, nor the purpose of the human species is identified. Thus, many humans fear their mortality because it might reveal the absurdity of human existence.

Navigation Gone Wrong, or the Euphemism of Death

Other scholars have diagnosed Dickinson's «necrophilia» for the «recently dead body of the beloved»[15] and find a general obsession with death.[16] This line of argument can be traced in the poetic admiration of

15 Margaret Homans, *"Oh, Vision of Language!": Dickinson's Poems of Love and Death*, in Suzanne Juhasz, *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson,* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983, pp. 114-133: 125.

16 Robert Weisbuch's analysis of Emily Dickinson's ambiguous death poetry – *Dickinson in Black* (ch. 5) and *Dickinson in White* (ch. 6) – has a line of argument that I will retrieve as well, namely Dickinson's polysemic meaning of individual themes and topoi (cf. Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, Chicago and London, The University

the drowning body with the written word gazing over the lyric I's (feminine) body while slowly drowning in a river. The tradition of the *blason* is turned upside-down by highlighting specific parts of the body starting from toe to head (feet, breast, mouth).[17] The bodily spectacle of death is rather in the background as the salvation of the sea is highlighted: «Remember - when the Sea / Swept by my searching eyes - the last - / Themselves were quick - with Thee!» (FR 631). This poem is the only exception to Dickinson's otherwise lack of necrophilia, at least when only taking her water poems into consideration. For Dickinson, water is an entity hostile to the human body.

Water's threat to overpower humanity is evident in these lines: «An everywhere of Silver, / With ropes of Sand / To keep it from effacing / The track called Land» (FR 931). The precious foam likened to silver, stops the water's waves from taking over human land. Yet, water's consumption of all drops into a larger entity can be surprisingly comforting: «The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea - / Forgets her own locality / As I, in Thee -» (FR 255). Predominantly though, water's force is rather startling as in FR 152: the «greedy, greedy wave» that «licked» the «little - little boat» «from the Coast». The lyric I mourns the «little craft», a man-made construction. The sea's destruction of humanity deliberately focuses on the loss of items and not the loss of human lives. Nature's harm is belittled while enforcing water as the «gallant – gallant sea». Humans are indifferent to the loss of life as they «wrestle» with one another until only one survives and cruelly «turn smiling to the land». The other drowned man is passed by «stray ships» until his «face» is finally found by one of them (FR 227).

Frequently, setting sail results in death – presumably not the haven the ship's crew would hope for. Dickinson's allegory consists of a ship sailing into unknown waters. Yet, this undertaking is destined to fail. The failure in nautical navigation is shrouded in euphemisms of death, that are unexpectedly consolatory. In the following poem, for instance, the lyric I asks the ship's pilot to sail to a shore of infinite silence and peace: «Knowest thou the shore / Where no breakers roar – / Where the storm is o'er?».

of Chicago Press, 1975).

17 The *blason* is a poetic tradition originating from the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca whose sonnets admire a distant lady whose bodily beauty is stereotypically described from head to toe. While originally merely used to set beauty standards, William Shakespeare and other English poets aemulating Petrarca used the blason to transcend physicality. In the case of FR 631 by Emily Dickinson, the feminine body is attracted to the paradoxical lively restart that watery death offers.

Rather than letting the pilot find this shore, the lyric I takes the tiller and navigates the pilot instead: «Thither I pilot *thee*». The mysterious shore is death: «In the peaceful *west* (italics mine) / Many the sails at rest – / The anchors fast – / (…) *Eternity* (italics mine)! Ashore at last!» (FR 3). Not only the west as the place of metaphorical sunset but also the nautical terms conceal death, such as the «departing tide» leading to a «flowing» in order to be with God (FR 19). Sunset as an allegory for death allows for an opposite reading of sunrise as an allegorical new beginning. In FR 514, after the allegedly peaceful abduction of a human losing their breath in the water (a euphemism for drowning), the water navigates the human to a new shore in the sunrise. The change from day to night is another frequent allegory for death. A ship at sea is navigating and exploring unknown «latitudes» while missing the change of sailing conditions: «Not noticed that the ebbing Day / Flowed silver to the west / Nor noticed night did soft descend / Nor Constellation burn» (particularly noteworthy is the peaceful description of the threatening change in nature, e.g. nightfall as a soft descend). The sea-death is soothingly portrayed as «angels» «carr[ying]» the ship «to God», dressing the vulnerable «Barefoot» with «sandals», and ultimately describing heaven as «the blue havens» «lead[ing] the wandering Sails» (FR 125). The allegoric death-journey leading to a heavenly haven is repeated in FR 6, in which a «little boat» is «adrift» and looking for someone to «guide» it. While human sailors inform about the ship's sinking and imply the crew's death, the final stanza offers a much more hopeful reading of the ship's fate: the heavenly angels assure that the boat simply set off to other waters. Triumphantly, beams of confident sailing are enumerated: «One little boat - o'erspent with gales - / Retrimmed its masts - redecked its sails - / And shot - exultant on!». Even if human navigation fails, a ship never loses its way in the water. Defying death, the nautical journey simply advances to its final (heavenly) route. Elizabeth Petrino argues that Dickinson's poetry rejects the comforting image of a heavenly reunion in death.[18] However, it seems that after all, death at sea is indeed comforting, even transcending mortality: «If my Bark sink / 'Tis to another Sea - / Mortality's Ground Floor / Is Immortality -» (FR 1250).

On the one hand, human transcendence refers to overcoming mortality, and on the other hand, to transcending the manmade world of culture.

18 Elizabeth Petrino argues that the dead's posthumous voices mistakenly promise a consolation with the living that cannot be lived up to (cf. Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820–1885*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1998).

The «old», «awful Sea» is the place where humans lose their «Fortitude incarnate». The «Ocean» forces humans out of their natural habitat. Humans fail to grasp the magnitude of the sea, since they are limited to their knowledge of manmade constructs, e.g. the ocean is described as an «Edifice» with «Rooms». The sea-experience surpasses human knowledge, thus an oceanic death also transcends the human notion of death, as the speaker of the poem finds the watery «Tombs» better suited than the ones at land (FR 1255). The «Water […] Beds» in lieu of tombs are also addressed in FR 1446, in which the speaker describes an allegedly peaceful resting place for the dead. However, the silent image is «awful» and « [a]bhorrent» to humans because of their alienation from the environment of water.

Some poems rather use a humorous tone in their euphemism of death, such as in FR 746 describing a brig's final journey. The linguistic properties give the impression of an innocent nursery rhyme: «It tossed and tossed», «It slipped and slipped», escalating in human mortality, «Ah, Brig – Good Night / To crew and You / The Ocean's Heart too smooth – too Blue / To break for You». Eleonore Lewis Lambert argues that Dickinson often uses humour to navigate the topic of death as this incongruous pairing shows the exhilaration to life most prominently.[19] The break in tone and decorum, coupling a nursery rhyme with death has a humorous, yet comforting effect.

The following poem subsumes Dickinson's philosophy of water-death:

> Of Death I try to think like this,
> The Well in which they lay us
> Is but the Likeness of the Brook
> That menaced not to slay us,
> But to invite by that Dismay
> Which is the Zest of sweetness
> To the same Flower Hesperian,
> Decoying but to greet us –
>
> I do remember when a Child
> With bolder Playmates straying
> To where a Brook that seemed a Sea
> Withheld us by it's roaring

19 Cf. Eleanore Lewis Lambert, *Emily Dickinson's Joke about Death*, «Studies in American Humor» 3 (27), 2013, pp. 7-23.

From just a Purple Flower beyond
Until constrained to clutch it
If Doom itself were the result,
The boldest leaped, and clutched it - (FR 1588)

The poem uses a parable in comparing death to a well. To humans, the confinement in the well appears to be a brook. This paradox grows even larger with humans resembling the brook to a sea in the second stanza. The Hesperian flower is a riddle pointing at the idea that the west is where the sun sets and could thus hint towards death.[20] Thus, the child's plucking of this symbolic flower is a code for his choice of death. The child as a paragon of innocence and boldness is closer to nature and is ignorant of the supposed danger that plucking might evoke. Similar to Plato's allegory of the cave, likewise, the child must free themself from the mental confinement to achieve enlightenment. The bold child rips the flower and is doomed to die – only that this doom is supposedly positive as humans can now partake in the water's wisdom. The experience of water enables the speaker to overcome human experience and limitation.

Conclusion

Water is semantically versatile and thus accommodates different functions in Emily Dickinson's lyrical works. Humans' inherent longing for the sea represents both freedom and escapism. The sea is a versatile bearer of signification, but is predominantly portrayed as powerful and sublime, which makes humans inferior. Water has an intrinsic navigation and epistemology, thus humans should believe in the sea's nautical process. As the world is dependent on water, humans' hearts naturally embrace water's wisdom, but the ecological harmony is fragile. Humans either form secret unions, or they construct the world and the oceanic environment only through their limited lens of manmade culture. Yet, humans are addicted to the liquid as the navigating force in life. Human items are useless in navigating; instead, the inherent teleology lies in the process of sailing as an allegory for humans' life journey. Generally, the sea-deaths are portrayed as soothing due to euphemisms or breaks in decorum. Furthermore, the po-

20 Originally, *Hesperia* was the ancient Greek name for Italy, which translates to 'western land'.

etry often focuses on the loss of items instead of the loss of human life. Dickinson's poetry is an intricate study of the human journey in overcoming, giving in to and learning about water. Humans cannot dominate water's force, but humankind can accommodate to water by learning how to navigate.