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The Human–Nonhuman Divide in Dickinson’s “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune”

Emily Dickinson’s early poem “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune” finishes with one of the more puzzling endings in her work: “…I see – New Englandly – / The Queen, discerns like me – / Provincially –” (15-17[[1]](#footnote-1)). The conclusion proves strange for a number of reasons, but particularly for its regal focus. Over the course of her life, Dickinson rarely left her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, and certainly never visited a country in which a monarch ruled. Even if she were concerned with the life of a queen, the end of this poem still appears to be a strange location for its discussion. As the poem’s title suggests, the work begins as a nature poem more typical to Dickinson; its mention of a queen in its last lines, then, proves jarring.

A comparison between the poem’s opening lines and its ending suggests a possible explanation for the conclusion. The poem begins, “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune – / Because I grow ­– where Robins do ­–“ (1-2). This beginning appears to imply a unity among both human and nonhuman entities based on a common empirical understanding of the world. Both the narrator—presumably human—and the Robin possess the same understanding of “Tune” because they mature in the same place; in other words, their understanding of Tune is that which they learn empirically. This unity of living beings through empiricism provides a provisional justification for the poem’s last lines. The reference to the Queen does not signal a shift towards a political or European focus. Rather, the narrator merely seeks to demonstrate that despite the vast differences in experience between herself and the Queen, they generate their respective understandings of the world through their respective empirical experiences: the narrator sees “New Englandly,” while the Queen discerns “Provincially.” Read this way, the poem presents a vision of radical equality among living organisms, both human and nonhuman, based on a common empiricism. Yet while this interpretation is superficially convincing, Dickinson undermines this apparent unity through her poem’s form and language. In fact, “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune” posits a sharp distinction between not only humans and the rest of the natural world, but also between humans and abstract notions of humanity.

Not only the opening two lines, but in fact the first nine lines, of the 17-line poem seem to argue for a notion of commonality among living beings based on shared empirical capacity. After the first two lines, the poem continues:

But, were I Cuckoo born ­–

I’d swear by him –

The ode familiar ­– rules the Noon –

The Buttercup’s, my Whim for Bloom –

Because, we’re Orchard sprung –

But, were I Britain born,

I’d Daisies spurn–

(3-9)

These opening lines seem to take a relatively straightforward form. Two quatrains—lines 1-4 and 6-9—provide examples of unity in nature through experience, and those sections are separated by a line that expresses the supremacy of such empiricism: “The ode familiar ­– rules the Noon.” Indeed, each quatrain implies the alignment of the human narrator and a nonhuman natural entity not only through empiricism, but through an even closer natural tie. In line three, the narrator asserts, “But, were I Cuckoo born – / I’d swear by him.” The narrator not only matures with the Cuckoo, as she “grow[s]” with the Robins, but is even “born” of the Cuckoo—a more radical linkage between the human and nonhuman. In the second quatrain (which follows “The ode familiar” line), the narrator declares, “The Buttercup’s, my whim for Bloom ­– / Because, we’re Orchard sprung.” The referent for “we” is not entirely clear (perhaps the narrator hopes to draw the reader into the poem), but the most likely candidate is the Buttercup, which appears in the prior line. Like the Cuckoo and the narrator, then, the Buttercup and the narrator both “spr[i]ng” from the same source, a suggestion of a more thorough linkage between human and nonhuman.

The form of these first nine lines, however, undermines these claims of unity. Consider the meter in the first five lines of the poem, which contain, in order, 10, eight, six, four, and eight syllables. Dickinson could have chosen to elide the third and fourth lines, which would have created a rhythmic opening of alternating 10 and eight syllable lines. Instead, she inserts a line break between these third and fourth lines, suggesting lines that are rushed, not rhythmic. The rhyming pattern in these opening five lines implies further awkwardness. The endings of the first two lines—“Tune” and “do”—present a slant rhyme that implies disharmony. While the ending of the fifth line—“Noon”—suggests a rhyme with the first two lines, that suggestion is compromised by the slant rhyme with “do” and its five-line distance from “Tune.” Lines six through nine are similarly irregular. While the fifth line seems to link these lines with the poem’s first four, the slant rhyme at the end of the fifth and sixth lines—“Noon”/”Bloom”—complicates the notion of a smooth transition. Moreover, the meter of lines six through nine fails to mirror that of the first four lines, with lines of eight, six, six, and four syllables; the shortening of lines six and seven compared to lines one and two creates a divergent structure that further unsettles the poem’s claims to unity. Finally, Dickinson’s use of punctuation in the poem’s opening lines generates an unnerving rhythm. The commas she employs in lines six and seven, for example—after “Buttercup’s” and “Because”—are grammatically unnecessary, jolting the poem’s rhythm. If the poem’s opening nine lines, then, superficially suggest a unity between the human and nonhuman, their form, rhythm, and use of punctuation challenge that assertion.

Why are subtle imperfections in meter, rhyme, and rhythm sufficient to undermine the poem’s apparent claims of unity among living beings? The poem’s beginning—“The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune”—bases that unity on a common understanding of song. An inharmonious poem, in turn, compromises that unity. Still, while the first nine lines suggest a lurking discordance in the poem, they do not reveal the source of that acrimony. Its next three lines—the start of the second half of the poem—do. Dickinson writes, “None but the Nut ­– October fit ­– / Because, through dropping it, / The Seasons flit – I’m taught ­–“ (10-12). Excepting their last two words, these three lines appear on course to echo the conceit posited (though undermined formally) in the first nine lines of the poem: that a living being can only truly grasp the world experientially. In fact, the narrator declares that she understands seasonal change *not* through experience, but through learning (“I’m taught”). This modification implies a rational understanding of the world that accompanies an empirical understanding. The poem initially suggests a unity between the human and the nonhuman based on shared access to experiential knowledge; yet if the human narrator can also comprehend the world through reason, that unity in turn suffers. This breakdown in unity is mirrored in the lines’ form. Though each of the lines’ five lingual segments (as divided by dashes or line breaks) ends with the letter t, particularly grating slant rhymes (“Nut,” “taught”) bracket the three perfect rhymes (“fit,” “it,” “flit”). Moreover, the middle line of this three-line sequence contains seven syllables, the only line of the poem to contain an odd number of syllables, a sign of irregularity.

The poem’s conclusion, then, does not signal an equality among living beings rooted in empiricism, but rather serves to accentuate the difference between those beings. The Queen’s ability to see “Provincially” does not reflect a vision parallel to the narrator’s “New Englandly” vision. Instead, the Queen’s attitude is supercilious; indeed, the line might be better understood by adding a word that Dickinson implies, inserted here in brackets: “The Queen, discerns [*those*] like me – / Provincially” (16-7). The Queen and the narrator do not possess a shared vision; instead, the Queen patronizes the narrator as “lacking in education, culture, or sophistication” (“provincial, adj. and n.,” def. A.6). Moreover, while these lines seem to purport a human–human division, they concomitantly accentuate the human­–nonhuman division established in the first half of the poem. The narrator provides no clues towards discerning the Queen’s identity, nor does she apply any specifically human qualities to the Queen. By rendering the figure completely conceptual, Dickinson posits a split between the human and the abstract. The establishment of such a split, then, explains the odd conclusion of this poem. The work concerns not unity among living beings, but rather fissures not only between humans and the natural world, but also between humans and abstract notions of humanity. While each of the beings in the poem—the Robin, the Buttercup, the Queen, and the narrator—do possess provincially empirical capacities which create second-order commonality among them, each is also separated from the other by divergent rational and abstract properties.

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune." c. 1861. *Final Harvest*. By Dickinson. Comp. Thomas H. Johnson. New York: Back Bay Books, 1964. 45-46. Print.

"Provincial, Adj. and N." Def. A.6. *OED*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016. *OED*. Web. 14 Feb. 2016. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/153461>.

1. Citations refer to line numbers of “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune” unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)