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The Poetry of Regionalism, Feminine Voices of the Nineteenth-Century: Emily Dickinson and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

by ANNE-MARIE BRUMM

PlACES as far apart as the arid pasture-striped heath of Westphalia and the small meadow-laden town of Amherst, Massachusetts, each gave birth to a nightingale that would echo its life in song. In the United States, it was Emily Dickinson who “saw New Englandly,” and in Germany Annette von Droste-Hülshoff represented her Westphalian culture on the threshold of a new period. The similarities are so numerous that a comparative study suggested itself and promised to be both interesting and revelatory, especially with regard to the rise of regionalist poetry in the nineteenth century. In this respect, both Annette and Emily were far in advance of their time. In their works, one may already see many of the typical characteristics of regionalist writing—the rejection of a universalist Romanticism and interest instead in a small segment of locale, the emphasis on local and scenic detail, the use of colloquial speech and dialect, the portrayal of nature as familiar yet alien to man, and an atmosphere of domesticity and local color.

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff was born in 1797, and her formative years saw the flowering of German Romanticism. Yet she never succumbed to the romantic vision and repudiated it almost entirely in her poetry. In fact, she was inclined to laugh at what was venerated by the romantics. For this reason she was a lonely voice, far ahead of her own time. For the realistic Annette, the Romantics’ mythopoetic vista of being one with nature was not viable. To lose oneself in the great mystical All was an ideal alien to her scrutinizing mind. The same held true for both Novalis’ poetic rhapsodies as well as Eichendorff’s fairy tale wonders. It was a world she could not accept.

In her poem, “Der Graue,” Annette leads the reader to expect a typical romantic old castle and adventure. She begins with an idyllic air, “In the forest stands the small fortress,” continues so, then suddenly assumes a different tone and we end with a very realistic and local paper mill with whirring machines:

Und wie der Stempel steigt und fällt,  
So pfeift die Dampfmaschine nach;  
Es knackt die Form, der Boger schrillt,  
Es düsstet Scheidewassers Näh,  
Und überm grauen Wappenbild  
Liest man: Moulin à papier. (ANN, 1, 287)

Translation: “And as the piston rises and falls, / the steam engine’s whistle follows. / The form cracks, / the bow utters a shrill cry. / Nearby nitric acid steams / and over the gray coat of arms, / one may read: Moulin à papier.” (ANN, 1, 287)

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In Annette's poetry, man is a stranger to nature and distinctly apart from it. He could not, as the romantics said, enter into its mysteries; all that he might do was merely to observe its rituals! Standing aloof, Annette carefully scrutinizes the most elusive movements of nature in “Das Schilf” (“The Reed”). The branch symbolizing the poet extends its protective arm over the sleeping pond. A bird gently moves his wing, a fish jerks, casting a shadow in the pond and then,

Stille, stille! er hat sich geregt,
Ein fallend Reis hat ihn bewegt,
Das grad zum Nest der Hanfling trug; (ANN, I, 92)

Only a watchful poet could observe these almost invisible fleeting events.

In “Die tote Lerche” (“The Dead Lark”), Annette again stands apart from nature and looks on helplessly as the bird falls dead but “Noch zucken sab ich kleine Glieder.” She feels her tears yet remains observant as he lay “ein armer kalter Rest / Am Strahl verflattert und versungen / Bei deinem halbgebauten Nest” (ANN, III, 364–65). In “Der Weiher” (“The Pond”), minute elements of nature also receive close attention and details are elevated to poetic eminence, a practice avoided by most romantic authors.

Emily Dickinson was born later, in 1830. However, a cultural lag in the United States also places her at the zenith of the Romantic movement which had only come to New England by that time. It continued to flourish throughout her girlhood, and when she was twenty a friend gave her a copy of Emerson's poems, then in print only three years. Yet, like Annette, Emily too rejected the Romantic doctrine. The beauties of nature attracted her senses but never would she yield her identity, a factor necessary for a romantic union with nature.

Again the influence of her Puritan heritage may be felt. It guarded her against the blinding idyllic nature theories of the Transcendentalists and endowed her poetry with a strong stem from which to develop. Instead of vague floating terms, Emily's words are clear, sharp, and exact. And instead of viewing nature through a misty blue veil, she observes carefully and objectively. Few rites of nature escape her microscopic eyes. Who but Emily has ever looked at a bird so intimately?
A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass— (EMI,328)5

The power to see truth, even the most painful, is yet another characteristic fostered by Puritanism. Emily Dickinson saw truth in nature, and accepted both the good and evil that existed therein. Her Puritan beliefs led her to recognize the fact that nature was not a continuous extension of man as the primitives thought, nor an idyllic, all-perfect manifestation of the Divine as the Transcendentalists taught. On the contrary, nature was also a place of anxiety and often presented an unavoidable hostility and danger. In the following poem, Emily expresses fear of nature and its impenetrability.

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost. (EMI,1400)

Nature is also depicted as alien, mysterious, and destructive:

The Wind begun to rock the Grass
With threatening Tunes and low—
He flung a Menace at the Earth—
A Menace at the Sky—

And then as if the Hands
That held the Dams had parted hold
The Waters Wrecked the Sky,
But overlooked my Father's House—
Just quartering a Tree— (EMI,824)

Nature can be alluring and beguiling. Thus, it is important that man see the evil lurking even beneath a romantic shimmer, if he himself is not to be destroyed. The following poem reveals the duality of nature.

Sweet is the swamp with its secrets,
until we meet a snake;

Tis then we sigh for houses,
And our departure take.

A snake is summer's treason,
And guile is where it goes. (EMI, 1740)

Anxiety also existed on the Westphalian steppe. In the nature poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, a feeling of tension and danger invests many lines. In "Kinder am Ufer" ("Children on the Shore") she voices her fear,

Pah! Frosch' und Hechte können mich nicht schrecken—
Allein, ob nicht vielleicht der Wassermann
Dort in den lange Kräutern hocken kann?
Ich geh', ich gehe schon—ich gehe nicht—
Mich dünkt, ich sah am Grunde ein Gesicht—
Komm, lass uns lieber heim, die Sonne sticht! (ANN, I, 94)

Distrust of nature is underlined also in "Der Hünenstein," "Der Haidemann," and in many other poems. Again we meet a snake. In her poem, "Feuer" ("Fire"), Annette compares an element that is often man's friend to a writhing wheezing snake. Instead of benefiting man, it lunges out to devour him.

Schau! wie es zuckt und zuckt und schweift,
Wie's ringelnd gleich der Schlange pfeift.

Schau, wie das Feuer sich zersplittert
Wie's tückisch an der Kohle kniet,
Lang aus die rothe Kralle streckt
Und nach dem Kerkermeister reckt! (ANN, I, 122–23)

Annette attains the heights of a stark almost grotesque realism in her epic poetry. For example, in Der Spiritus familiaris des Rosstüschers, the water lily and the pond are not objects of beauty for contemplation but the scene of the tragic drowning of a small child:

Drei Tage suchte man das Kind umsonst in Kraut und Wasserbungen
Wo Egel sich und Kanker jetzt
An seinen bleichen Gliedchen letzt. (ANN, II, 18)

Yet nature also has a kinder face and often smiles in familiar domestic and everyday grace. Emily plays hostess:

A Lady red—amid the Hill
Her annual secret keeps!

6. Translation: "Pah, I'm not afraid of frogs and pike— / but I wonder whether the water-sprite / might not be lurking there in the long weeds? / I'm going, I'm already going—I will not go— / I think I saw a face down in the depths— / Come, let us better go home, the sun is searching!" (Mare).

7. Translation: "Look, how it jerks and flashes and roves, / How it hisses curling like a snake. / . . . . . . . . . / Look, how the fire scattering / How it crackles spitefully on the charcoal, / Far does it stretch out its red claws / and lunge after the jailer!" (Mare).

8. Translation: "For three days they searched in vain for the child among weeds and water plants / Where leeches and spiders now / Are fattening on its pale little limbs" (Mare).
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A Lady white, within the Field
In placid Lily sleeps!
The tidy Breezes, with their Brooms—
Sweep vale—and hill—and tree!
Prithee, My pretty Housewives!
Who may expected be? (EMI,74)

To be sure, all is not evil and danger:
A little purple—slipped between—
Some Ruby Trowsers hurried on—
A Wave of Gold—
A Bank of Day—
This just makes out the Morning Sky. (EMI,204)

Annette, too, occasionally turns hostess and draws upon the domestic to
lighten her lines and to give them more color and life. One of her collections
is called Scherz und Ernst (Humor and Seriousness) which emphasizes the in­
terrelationship between the two concepts. In “Die beschränkte Frau” (“The
Narrow-Minded Wife”), she weaves a comic proverb in use by the common
folk into the main fabric of the poem:

Ein Sprichwort sagt: vem gar nichts fehlt,
Den ärgert an der Wand die Fliege;
So hat dies Wort ihn mehr gequält,
Als Andre Hinterlist und Lüge. (ANN,I,225)

In yet another poem, a note of domestic humor is added when nature’s roles
are reversed and its garments changed. The poet rings a very contemporary
note as sex roles, too, are exchanged. Women are doing gymnastics in men’s
clothing.

“Ist’s doch jetzt eine Wunderzeit,
Wo Gletscher brennen wie Eisen,
Weiber turnieren
Im Männerkleid
Und Knaben die Ruthe vergessen.
Jeder Wurm entfaltet sein Licht
Und jeder Narr seine Kappe,
Also, Seele, wundre dich nicht,
Wenn heute du stehst an der Klappe. (ANN,I,247)

Certainly this duality of nature, good and evil, tragic and comic, is a strong
indicator of the realistic attitudes with which these poets viewed nature. There
are yet other characteristics which point their work down the road of realism.
In the work of both poets, we may recognize the increasing influence of
science upon the general thinking of the time. In keeping with the more realis-

9. Translation: “A proverb says: he who lacks nothing / Is angered by the fly on the wall. / So this word
tormented him more / Than other intrigues and lies” (Mare).
10. Translation: “It is now, to be sure, a time of wonders, / Where glaciers burn like chimneys, / Women
do gymnastics in men’s clothing / And boys forget the switch / Every worm unfolds his light / And every fool
his cap, / Therefore, soul, don’t be perplexed, / If today you will stand on the ramp” (Mare).
tic style of literature that emerged, scientific names rather than the more familiar everyday names were often used. This would have been taboo in romantic poetry.

In “Die Wasserfaden” (“The Water Lilies”), Annette praises the beauty of the waterplant, addressing it with the name, Trifolium.

Schleuss, Trifolium, die Glocken auf,
Kurz dein Tag, doch königlich sein Lauf! (ANN, I, 94)\(^\text{11}\)

In “Die Mergelgrube” (“The Marl-Pit”), the amateur poet-explorer seeks to find an explanation for the presence of fossils in a marl pit. In so doing, Annette moves close to the idea of evolution and in the course of her wanderings meets a shepherd who has a book no less than Bertuch’s *Natural History*.

Im Moose lag ein Buch; ich hob es auf—
“Bertuchs Naturgeschichte; lest ihr das?” (ANN, I, 101)\(^\text{12}\)

Throughout the poem, the scientific names ring out poetically: porphyry, yellow ochre, flint, Byssusknäuel (a type of wool), and Scarabäus (a dung beetle). The colorful insect prevalent on the Haide and known there as Kurier is described in “Die Vogelhütte” (“The Bird House”). Note that in this instance, the scientific name, Buprestis, is not used.

Durch den Sand des Pfades eilend,
Blitzt das goldne Panzerhemd
Des Kuriers; . . . (ANN, I, 91)\(^\text{13}\)

Emily Dickinson, too, occasionally plays amateur scientist. Scientific names abound in many of her poems. For example, *Epigea* is preferred to the common name, trailing arbutus, and *Clematis* is chosen over Traveler’s Joy. And others:

Nearest the door—to wake the first—
Little Leontodon.

’Tis iris, Sir, and Aster—
Anemone, and Bell—
Bartsia, in the blanket red—
And chubby Daffodil (EMI, 142)

It is in their attitudes towards science that the two poets differ. Annette’s naturally inquisitive nature readily accepts, even welcomes, science’s new explanations of the things about her. Emily, on the other hand, recognizes the importance of science but somehow yearns for the “way things were.”

“Arcturus” is his other name—
I’d rather call him “Star.”

\(^{11}\) Translation: “Unlock your bells, trifolium, / Brief is your day, but royal its course” (Mare).

\(^{12}\) Translation: “In the moss lay a book; I picked it up— / ‘Bertuch’s Natural History; you’re reading that?’ ” (Mare).

\(^{13}\) Translation: “Hurrying through the sand of the path, / flashes the golden coat of mail / of the courier” (Mare).
It's very mean of Science
To go and interfere!

I pull a flower from the woods—
A monster with a glass
Computes the stamens in a breath—
And has her in a "class."

In addition to scientific terms, conversational speech and localized colloquialisms are also present in both poets' work, again pointing toward a literary regionalism. Their music contains the distinctive sounds and rhythms of the land they call their own. Both speak proudly of their homes.

Emily Dickinson is a flower tilting her delicate head in her native New England soil. Looking out of her window in Amherst, she viewed the world with a penetrating universal vision. Yet she writes,

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—
Because I grow—where Robins do—

Because I see—New Englandly—
The Queen, discerns like me—
Provincially— (EMI,285)

Through her vivid descriptions, Emily also reveals the essence of the New England character. Even her own spiritual struggles seem to be a part of the New England striving toward spiritual development. In describing a robin, she invests him with traits typical of the local people—punctuality, integrity, steadfastness, and self-denial.

He has the punctuality
of the New England Farmer—
The same oblique integrity,
A vista vastly warmer—
A small but sturdy Residence,
A self-denying Household
The Guests of Perspicacity
Are all that cross his Threshold— (EMI,1483)

In another poem, she subtly lauds the unwillingness of the New England type to yield or "give up":

"Surrender"—is a sort unknown
On this Superior soil—
"Defeat", an Outside Anguish,
Remembered—as the Mile (EMI,325)

How seriously they take the world and themselves:

And from a Settlement
A Capitol has grown

14. Glauco Cambon, *The Inclusive Flame* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), p. 28. Cambon writes, "Emily Dickinson's verse is the most exquisite fruit of that particular world which is the American, and more specifically the New England, small town."
Yet there is an element of dissatisfaction, too. Such a grave and serious atmosphere might lead to feelings of loneliness and boredom.

I can't walk the "Jasper"—barefoot—
Ransomed folks—won't laugh at me—
Maybe—"Eden" a'nt so lonesome
As New England used to be! (EMI,215)

How condescending to descend
And be of Buttercups the friend
In a New England town— (EMI,1244)

Annette's is also a solitary flute. It is primarily her work that has portrayed much of the uniquely Westphalian landscape and people. The culture springs alive in her descriptions of its customs and countryside. Who could forget the land she painted in her selection of poems called *Haidebilder (Pictures of the Heath)*, specifically, "Der Haidemann," "Die Steppe," and "Der Knabe im Moor"! The myths, legends, and superstitions of the North Rhine province are woven directly into many of her poems and hover in the background of others. This is especially true of her epic poetry.

Dotting Annette's poetry are also ways of speech common to the particular area. These colloquial phrases serve to define the region more precisely as they melt into the level plains, trees, and clustered pastures of the poems. She never actually used the dialect speech (Plattdeutsch or Low German) in her poetry, although she often did in her prose, letters, and conversations. Nevertheless, the local expressions, proverbs, and other idiosyncrasies of speech make her verses unique. For example, in "Das Hirtenfeuer," Annette uses the colloquial words "Hirtenbuben hocken" instead of the more correct "Hirtenknaben sitzen." In so doing, she adds a local quality of lower class coarseness and stubbornness to the meaning.

A feeling of familiarity and easy-going joviality is achieved by the use of the Westphalian, "Hei, wie die Buben johlen" (ANN,I,109).16

As we have already seen in some of the poems, Annette frequently employs starkly naturalistic descriptions which shocked her contemporaries. For example, "Das öde Haus" ("The Deserted House") lucidly pictures a dank decaying house replete with black flies and crawling spiders. Usually the particular species mentioned in the poems are indigenous to the area.

15. Translation: "And the shepherd boys sit idly / about in the area, they stretch / their hands, for crumbs / of peat / I watch the tan liquor greedily desired" (Mare).
16. Translation: "Hey, how the boys howl!" (Mare).
How different are those descriptions from the more generalized language used by most romantics! Truly, the voices of Emily Dickinson and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff are tinged with the atmospheric music of local color.  

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17. Translation: “Day-dreaming I listen, how in the crack / The black flies buzz reeling, / Like sighs sweeping through the forest, / On the shrub, strayed beetles grumble” (Mare).