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Protestant Ecofeminism

in the Poetry of Ella Higginson

Elijah W. Morgan

Ella Higginson's writing shows us a woman obsessed with the natural world and humankind's position within it. Displaced to the remote Pacific Northwest at a young age, Higginson had ample time to explore and write about her own relationship with the mostly untouched Nature that surrounded her. As a devout Protestant woman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would be fair to expect the depictions of Nature that arise in her work to reflect a Christian-American worldview.

In "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)" and "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two)," Bron Taylor discusses how—as far back as the early 1900s—prominent environmentalists identified ways that Christianity in America was at odds with environmentalism, with *Sand County Almanac* author Aldo Leopold saying that American Christianity was "both a *hindrance* and *essential*" to the battle over ecological conservation ("Part One"

283). However, Taylor also notes that, before the mid 1960s, these voices were not necessarily impactful on American Christianity as a whole; religion would "often hinder. . . pro-environmental values and behaviors" ("Part Two" 348), exacerbating the development of anthropocentric attitudes which kept humans morally separated from and elevated above the nonhuman natural world ("Part One" 274). In this religious framework, a domination-and-submission relationship arose, where American Christianity provoked—at best—total indifference toward the fate of nonhuman natural beings, with complete domination not being uncommon.

Higginson's poetry espouses a far more radical view. For Higginson, Nature acts as an intermediary presence between the imperfection of postlapsarian

ANTHROPOCENTRIC:

considering human beings to be the most significant entity in the universe

humanity and the eternal perfection of the Christian God. The feminine character of Nature is as central to its essence as is its existence on the material plane. This viewpoint specifically rejects what O. P. Dwivedi and Lucy Reid would later identify as a “destructive, dualistic ordering of the world, where the Masculine is superior to the Feminine, the heavenly to the earthly, the spiritual to the material” (308). By incorporating her Protestant, ecofeministic themes, Higginson’s poetry undoes the world’s “destructive, dualistic ordering” in three ways: by positioning the Divine alongside the Natural, by placing Heaven on Earth, and by removing Man from the privileged position above Woman, so that the Feminine can inhabit its deserved place as part of this divine Natural, all while attributing a distinctive feminine character to the natural world around her.

We receive the first strong glimpses of Higginson’s unique brand of Protestant ecofeminism in her foundational poem “Four-Leaf Clover.” Published in 1890, this piece lays the groundwork for themes that would reappear in more developed ways in her later, explicitly ecofeminist writing. Most striking is the discussion of the inherently divine aspect of the material natural world and the inability of humankind to ever actually take dominion over this divine presence.

“Four-Leaf Clover” begins with a description of where to look for the titular plant, describing “a place where the sun is like gold”, the “loveliest nook, / where the four-leaf clovers grow” (Higginson 59). It appears, at first, that the narrator is simply fawning over a beautiful natural phenomenon and being thankful that she can witness such a moment. However, the stanzas that follow situate the Natural—in the form of the clover—within this place as not only aesthetically pleasing, but divine:

One leaf is for hope, and one is for faith,
And one is for love, you know,
And God put another in for luck¹
If you search, you will find where they grow. (59)

POSTLAPSARIAN:

of, relating to, or characteristic of the time or state after the fall of humankind described in the Bible

CONSUBSTANTIATION:

the actual substantial presence and combination of the body and blood of Christ with the Eucharistic bread and wine according to a teaching associated with Martin Luther (compared with transubstantiation, or the miraculous change by, which according to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox dogma, the Eucharistic elements at their consecration become the body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearances of bread and wine)

This stanza moves the “loveliest nook” and its contents from a purely corporeal status to one that is simultaneously natural *and* of the Divine in a form of Nature-based consubstantiation. What is most important about this stanza is how Higginson, rather than simply saying that these plants were made by God, depicts the four-leaf clover as being intimately constructed by God on an individual basis, emphasizing their importance as self-contained entities in relationship with—but not subordinate to—their human counterparts. God intentionally put the petals of each clover in position with a future purpose in mind for each one. And these purposes—hope, faith, love, and luck—while described in American and Protestant terms, are never stated as being, say, hope *for humans* or love *between humans* nor any other similar variation. They were not made *for us*, but they can be *experienced* by us.

The final stanza further elevates the clover’s position, revealing that in order to even experience these divine creations “you must have hope, and you must have faith, / You must love and be strong” (59). In this passage, the four purposes as-

cribed to the clover's leaves are revealed not as tools for human use, but qualities that exist within the clovers themselves. Humans must individually come to possess these qualities if they desire to ever find the divine clover's beatific nook. Here, Higginson explicitly demonstrates what Dwivedi and Reid claim is intrinsic to Christian ecofeminism, that "Heaven can be heaven on earth, and God can be found here and now," both of which allows us to refamiliarize ourselves with both our physical selves and the material beings around us (315). The goal promoted in "Four-Leaf Clover" is not to find and dominate the clover, nor is it to search for the hope, faith, love, and luck. Rather, it is to enter the presence of the Divine within the clover through one's own personal realization of hope, faith, love, and luck. The divinity of the clover is represented in its four purposed petals, and this divinity is one that can only be met by humans, not controlled or harnessed.

Higginson's foregrounding of divinity within the natural world parallel to humans is the first branch of an increasingly radical tripartite thematic refutation of the aforementioned "destructive, dualistic ordering of the world," with "Four-Leaf Clover" directly attacking the first hierarchical leg; the theological privileging of the human spiritual existence over—and separate from—the material existence of the natural world. Continuing with her attack in an undated, untitled, and (presumably) unpublished handwritten poem (which will hereinafter be referred to

as "Untitled") found in Higginson's papers at the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies at Western Washington University, Higginson gives us a clear rejection of the second problematic hierarchical positioning she saw affecting both women and the world—the privileging of the space of Heaven over the space of Earth.

"Untitled" begins with the narrator openly lamenting the sectarian nature of Christian denominations on Earth, stating "God I am worn thin with creeds and isms / That weight the brain and heart!" Higginson was a non-denominational Protestant, and it is easy with this knowledge to assume from these opening lines that the narrator is making a case *for* the privileging of Heaven over Earth. She is openly decrying the central pillar of American organized Christianity at the time—the Christian creeds—and the very concept of religious organization itself, whether that organization (or "-ism") is, for example, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, or even an all-encompassing Protestantism. However, in the lines immediately following, the narrator does not yearn for an escape from these creeds in Heaven or the afterlife, but asks God to "let us go into the deep wood, / far from the world apart." The reprieve sought by the narrator, from the spiritual anguish she faces at the hands of the human-made Church, can only be attained by a direct connection with God in the God-made wilderness.

This direct connection is not, however, simply a spiritual one. As we see in the second and third stanzas, it is represented as both a physical and spiritual connection with God the Father, which mimics scenes from the life of Christ as depicted within the Christian scriptures:

Lord God, let us two go alone
 into the forest deep,

 where the cottonwoods snow noiselessly,
 and the drooping willows weep.
 There I will kneel me silently,
 low at thy white, white feet
 and bathe them with my long, soft hair
 perfumed and scented sweet. (Higginson)

To fight back against the hierarchical privileging of Heaven over Earth, Higginson places the narrator of “Untitled” in an intimate Heavenly relationship with God *on* Earth and within the wilderness, simultaneously mimicking two sections of the New Testament; the temptations of Christ as a newly baptized man in the wilderness of Judea and the Anointing of Christ as told in the gospel of Luke.

While the Gospel of Matthew explains that “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness [of Judea] to be tempted by the devil” (NRSV, Matt. 4:1), “Untitled” begins with the poem’s narrator “so tempted and so torn, / so tortured by these creeds!” that she craves an intimate venture into the wilderness where she hopes God will “Give [her] that high, exalted truth / that like a white light leads” (Higginson). Here the narrator not only mimics the journey of Christ but has Christ fulfill the position of guide, which the Holy Spirit fulfilled in the Biblical narrative. They are walking in Christ’s footsteps, and the force guiding the individual away from temptation for both the narrator and Christ has specifically led to seeking solace in the isolation of the wilderness.

In the biblical narrative, Christ had just been baptized and, despite having been surrounded by fellow followers of God, the Spirit immediately placed him within the isolated wilderness and away from his baptismal river to further affirm his faith by enduring temptation. In the exact same way, our narrator needs to be “far from the world apart” (Higginson), so God himself rejects the manmade world in favor of the divine Natural as a place of ultimate spiritual strengthening and connectedness. The wilderness of Nature is precisely where God leads both the newly baptized Christ and the woman “worn thin” by the Earthly body of believers.

After God has led our narrator into the wilderness we are given the final scene, which elevates Earth to equal footing with Heaven through a reenactment of the anointing of Christ

from the Gospel of Luke. Luke 7:37 begins with a description of the unnamed woman who anoints Christ’s feet with her tears. She is “a woman . . . who was a sinner” who “stood behind [Christ] at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair” (NRSV). In reading this passage from the Gospel of Luke with Higginson’s poem in mind, two things are of vital importance: the fact that Luke identifies this woman as “a sinner” and that Christ rejected the transactional, Pharisaical interpretation of the events.

The nature of the repenting woman’s sin is never explained, which suggests that it is irrelevant. What does matter, however, is that Luke found it necessary to locate this woman centrally as a *sinner*, meaning that her sinful nature was in some way exceptional. The very foundation of Christianity derives from a belief in the postlapsarian sinful nature of humankind as a whole; when Adam and Eve committed the original sin, human nature changed forever. Therefore, if Luke were to specifically identify the sinful nature of every person that Christ came in contact with, the Gospel of Luke would be less a telling of Christ’s life and more an extended list of names followed by the phrase “who was a sinner.” With

this in mind, we must recognize that by placing her narrator in the position of this woman, Higginson provides a narrator who is not just a sinner, but one of exceptional sinfulness. In this, Higginson's narrator becomes our nineteenth century version of the Biblical repenting woman, and it is her inherent sinfulness that leads to the interaction they share with Christ.

In both narratives, this action is depicted as an entirely personal and physical act, yet the two interactions occur in vastly different environments. In Luke's telling, it is within the human-made home of the Pharisee, while in Higginson's poem the interaction takes place in the God-made divine wilderness. This locational difference—in conjunction with the established connection between the two women—reiterates the importance of the wilderness as an Earthly equal to Heaven, following the allusions to Christ's own entering of the Judean wilderness.

The story of the Anointing from Luke is often seen as one of simple forgiveness; the woman was a sinner, and Christ forgave her sins due to her kindness to him. However, as Wendy Farley notes in her article "Luke 7:36–50" this is a false and Pharisaical reading:

If we hear in this passage only a message of forgiveness, we remain in the world of the Pharisee: the unrighteous might be forgiven but they remain outside the world of decent behavior; they do not come to our parties. To see with the eyes of Christ, however, we must imagine that before she entered the house, she experienced affliction that is interpreted by the Pharisee as sin. But Jesus sees something else, and in seeing it, awakens in her hemorrhage of love and crazed gratitude. In this "seeing," he responds poignantly and eloquently to those who are dazed and ground nearly to dust by trauma . . . Jesus sees in [the woman] someone inflamed by love. He recognizes her, just as she recognizes him. In this mutual recognition, the category of sin dissipates like mist in the dawn light. (77)

The Pharisee fails to see the woman Christ is seeing, which is, of course, the true essence of the woman herself; he sees only a sinner, ignoring the material conditions that led to a situation so

wrought with sin that Luke felt the need to forefront said sin as an integral part of her identity. In doing so, the Pharisee ignores the full scope of this woman's actions as well as Christ's response. Yes, the woman anointed Christ's feet intimately, and yes, Christ forgave her of her extraordinary sin. However, it is not a simple transactional relationship. Christ saw a sinner so traumatized by the sinful nature of her life that she could not help but weep on his feet and affectionately clean them with her hair afterward. The vitality of this story comes not from the physical acts, but from that shared "seeing"—or sight—where Christ recognizes the woman as a loving child of God and the woman recognizes Christ as a being for whom she has a deep, uncontrollable love. By situating her narrator within this same dynamic, Higginson presents a similarly devoted Christian with a similar desire to see and be seen.

This sight, or recognition of innate nature, as shown in "Untitled," is what makes the location of the wilderness crucial. Whereas in Luke we are shown the Pharisee's presence as a representation for the humanly misunderstanding of

PHARISEE:

a member of a Jewish sect of the inter-testamental period (the period of two centuries between the composition of the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament) noted for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law



what truly goes into that intimate relationship with God, Higginson completely removes humankind from the equation and elevates the Earth to the position of a third player in the intimate relationship. It is not the “creeds and isms” of the human-constructed forms of Christianity that allow the intimate relationship with God, nor is it a separate Heaven. Rather, the Earth—in its natural state, apart from “the world” and “life’s tumultuous mart”—allows for the sight, which is depicted biblically as the true Heavenly relationship with Christ. Higginson moves the Earth from a physical location to the only place where Christians, through true connection with the Natural, can attain the “high, exalted truth” that will lead them to Heaven (Higginson). Just as the Divine and the Natural are not truly separate, Heaven and Earth are not truly separate; both rely upon the other to actualize themselves. We no longer have Heaven *over* Earth, but rather Heaven *alongside* Earth. The relationship is both equal and interdependent.

Through her poetic contextualization of Earth and its relationship to God, Higginson’s environmentalism becomes strikingly apparent. However, Higginson is not satisfied with showing the Natural as equal to the Divine or the Earth as equal to Heaven. She actually furthers these radical rejections of typical Christian hierarchies by taking the natural parts of the Earth, which she consistently elevates to the same importance as Heaven, and gendering them as distinctly feminine. For Higginson, Nature—that di-

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vine intermediary between humanity and God—not only exists materially on Earth but as an extension and manifestation of femininity and the female sex, removing the Masculine entirely from its typical privileged position.

“Four Leaf Clover” set the foundation for much of Higginson’s ecofeminist thought. In addition to initiating the move of Nature from purely material to simultaneously material and divine, “Four Leaf Clover” also gives us our first strong examples of Higginson’s female gendering of Nature by using rhetorical tools very similar to those utilized in the scriptures. In its opening stanza, this poem lays a framework for the basis of a feminine Nature that Higginson builds the rest of this poem—as well as the remainder of her poetic catalog—upon:

I know a place where the sun is like gold,
And cherry blossoms burst with snow,
And down underneath is the loveliest nook
Where the four-leaf clovers grow. (59)

Higginson uses this nook to illustrate the possibility of the Divine to be experienced by humans but the inability of humans to control said Divine. Additionally, Higginson’s language moves said Divine from a neutral to a specifically feminine position. This transmutes the Feminine—now directly linked with the uncontrollable Divine—from something that can be controlled to something that, like the Divine, can only be experienced.

Higginson provides an introduction into this experiential relationship by weaving not only yonic, but also mammary im-

MAMMARY:

of, or relating to, the mammae (breasts)

YONIC:

derived from the word “yoni,” of, or relating to, the vulva, which in Hinduism is a sign of generative power

agery into “Four-Leaf Clover.” This parallel carefully mimics the female form and offers an intimate, literary experience of the feminine Divine built upon floriography reminiscent of that found in the Song of Songs (Tran 113). All of this begins in the poem’s second line, where Higginson chooses cherry blossoms as the plant which will “burst with snow.” Higginson was a white woman, and in a time and culture when non-European depictions of the female form were rare, it is safe to assume that she would primarily orient her understanding of the female form within the context of the form of white women. With this in mind, Higginson’s description of cherry blossoms bursting with white snow evokes the breast of a white woman; the snow through which the blossoms burst serving as the pale skin, the light pink petals of the blossoms serving as an areola, and the role of the nipple being fulfilled by the darker pink center of a “bursting” cherry blossom.

This imagery itself, while strong, is not what confirms this divine Nature as one that is feminine. The confirmation comes from the following two lines and their spatial relationship to the first. After describing the mammary cherry blossoms, Higginson tells us that “down underneath” said blossoms are the “loveliest nook / where the four-leaf clovers grow” (59). The use of “down underneath” and “nook” here constitute the second half of the stanza as yonic while the first half denotes mammary; we are given the image of the cherry-blossom breasts to begin the stanza, and following that we are given the image of a nook spatially underneath said breasts. This nook actually serves as Higginson’s most overtly feminine image. Not only are we provided with a small crevice below flowers that are reminiscent of a white woman’s breast, but we are given a crevice that is abound with clovers. These clovers being, of course, plants which grow in low, dense bushes upon the nook, not unlike pubic hair upon the female pelvis.

What Higginson’s reader is offered is a very clear depiction of the white female form. We have the cherry blossom breasts, with their white skin, light pink areolas, and dark pink nipples, and “down underneath” those we have our vaginal divine nook that abounds with dense, low, pubic-hair clovers. All the while these blossoms are “bursting” and these clovers are “growing”; there is a transformation of the mammary and yonic occurring alongside their description as intrinsically divine. The image Higginson paints is not just a female one, but a pubescent one; it is celebrating the becoming of a woman through puberty. The breasts are enlarging—or as Higginson describes, “bursting”—and the pubic hair is growing. Then, too, with the clovers functioning as the central divine element of the poem, we are shown not only that the Natural is feminine, but that Nature follows the same cycle as female sexual development; the exact cycle that Higginson herself would have experienced. Her understanding of a feminine Divine is not an abstraction but one based on lived, material reality.

Though Higginson would go on to write extensively with a female-gendered Nature, returning often to floriography, one of the most striking examples of her unique ecofeminist thought actually

comes from a poem that not only uses masculine imagery but uses it directly juxtaposed with that of the implicitly feminine Nature. "Midnight on Brooklyn Bridge" does not simply work as a masculine answer to what could be called Higginson's "nature poetry," such as "Four Leaf Clover" and "Untitled." Instead, this poem works within its own subcategory to depict twentieth-century industrial society as both diametrically opposed to Nature and intimately linked with the Masculine.

This poem begins by celebrating her home with the exclamation "Ah me! I know how large and cool and white / The moon lies on the brow of Sehome hill" (72). From the very beginning, Higginson describes longing for a part of Nature, one that has historically been linked to femininity. Similarly, the language used to describe the moonlit night is soft and gentle, describing the moon as "large and cool and white" and later discussing the "luminous background of this soft night" (72). The language continues like this, referring to the sound of crickets as "deep delight." It is all pretty standard fare for Higginson.

However, the second stanza takes both a thematic and lexical shift, moving from the soft, loving descriptions of Nature to the rough, uncomfortable ones of the city. She states at the start of this stanza that "City, a lifetime spent in thee were not / Worth one night in my western solitude!" (72). As with the first stanza, Higginson begins with an exclamation, although this is one of disgust rather than longing. Her unloving description of the city continues with the most damning lines in the poem coming at the end of the second stanza:

Thy pulse is feverish, thy blood is hot,
Thine arteries throb with passion heavily;
But oh, how sweet I hear, in interlude,
The beating, moon-lured tides of Puget Sea. (72)

As one can see, the descriptions of life in the relatively untamed twentieth century Pacific Northwest are vastly more fond than those of the fully industrialized New York City. What is important about this poem, though, and what situates it within Higginson's wider set of ecofeminist poetic elements, are not just the depictions of Nature as favorable to the city, but those of the undesirable city as unambiguously masculine.

Higginson had no fear when it came to including feminine and even yonic imagery in her poetry and does so quite frequently. Her masculine imagery is much less common, and phallic language is incredibly rare. "Midnight on Brooklyn Bridge," however, does not stray from said phallic imagery, even when vulgar. While the feminine Nature experienced on Sehome hill was "cool" and "white" and "soft," the city is "feverish," its blood running "hot." The city itself is, without a doubt, one of the—if not the—most clearly phallic images present in Higginson's poetry; that of a hot, feverishly pulsing city throbbing with passion. And beyond just being borderline vulgar in its phallic descriptions, "Midnight on Brooklyn Bridge" deprives the city and, by extension, the Masculine.

With this final denunciation of mas-

culinity and the phallic, Higginson completes the third branch of her radical restructuring of typical nineteenth and twentieth-century hierarchical structures, both secular and Christian. Higginson has removed all privilege from the phallus and its associated masculinity by connecting it with the inferior, human-made city, all the while maintaining a direct gendering of the superior Nature as feminine. In this reversal of patriarchal literary tropes of the time, Higginson's entire ecofeminist framework becomes complete; she has successfully gendered Nature as feminine, has shown gendered Nature to be inherently divine, and has elevated divine Nature to a position of spiritual equivalence with Heaven. It is only once all three branches of Higginson's attacks are realized that the true radical nature of both her Protestantism and ecofeminism can be seen. It is about more than rethinking the role of women within Nature or the role of Nature in our spiritual lives; it is a total rejection of what were, and often remain, fundamental aspects of the dominant Christian and environmentalist ideologies. It is a radical development of the gospel of Luke, wherein the necessary Christian "seeing" is one not only shared with God the Father or Christ the Son but also with Nature and the feminine self.

ENDNOTES

1. Note: Ella Higginson stated, later in life, that the "luck" referred to in this poem is not the typical notion of luck, which caused confusion for some readers. Rather, she uses "luck" as a reference to "industrious hard work," which she will later rephrase in the same poem as "strength" (Laffrado 60).

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