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From the Cottage to the Cosmos: A Review of *Imaging A Long Journey: Travel Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*

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Abstract: In the long history of studies concerning Emily Dickinson, “travel” has been excluded from the core themes of her poetry. Although Dickinson lived a reclusive life in her cottage, the abundant travel images emerging in her poetry reveal a vision embracing the cosmos. Centering on the travel images in Dickinson’s poetry, Hu Youming’s *Imaging A Long Journey: Travel Imagery in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry* analyzes the spaces and paths in her poetry and makes a contribution to constructing Dickinson’s poetics of travel. Through rigorous close reading, conscious theoretical construction, and an interdisciplinary research perspective, the author reveals that Dickinson embarked on repeated spiritual journey through poetry, reflecting her persistent pursuit and profound reflection on the “final destination”. This work not only constitutes a vital supplement to the thematic study of Dickinson’s poetry but also carries significant reference value for subsequent research.

Keywords: *Imaging A Long Journey: Travel Imagery in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry*; Emily Dickinson; Hu Youming; Poetic Construction

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标题：从斗室到宇宙：评《想象远行：艾米莉·狄金森诗歌中的旅行意象》

摘要：在艾米莉·狄金森相关研究的漫长历史中，“旅行”长期被排除在其创作的核心主题之外。然而，狄金森虽身处斗室，诗歌中涌现的大量的旅行意象却展现了她心怀宇宙的精神格局。胡又铭的《想象远行：艾米莉·狄金森诗歌中的旅行意象》立足于狄金森诗歌中的旅行意象，系统地探讨了狄金森诗歌中的空间和路径，构建了狄金森的旅行诗学。作者通过严谨的文本细读、自觉的理论构建和跨学科的研究视野揭示出狄金森借诗歌展开一次次的精神远行，呈现了狄金森对“最终目的地”的不断追求和深刻思考。这本著作既是狄金森诗歌主题研究的重要补充，也对后续研究具有重要的参照意义。

关键词：《想象远行：艾米莉·狄金森诗歌中的旅行意象》；艾米莉·狄金森；胡又铭；诗学构建

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson, one of the pioneers of the 19th-century American modernist poetry, wrote nearly 1800 poems that probe the depths of the human soul. During her lifetime, Dickinson published only a handful of poems. Though her verses often appear brief and simple, they present her delicate insights and profound reflections on life, death, nature, and eternity. Dickinson chose to live in seclusion and remained unmarried throughout her life. Therefore, her reclusive lifestyle, her compact yet meaningful works, and the resonant themes of her works forged a legendary and enigmatic personal narrative that has attracted scholarly interest for generations.

Amid the vast expanse of research, however, the theme of “travel” has long been overlooked. Given Dickinson’s secluded life with little movement, few scholars have combined her writing with the theme of “travel”. Against such a backdrop, Hu Youming’s *Imaging A Long Journey: Travel Imagery in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry* (published by China Social Science Press in 2024) is an important contribution to this highly compelling perspective. This book systematically demonstrates how various travel imagery in Dickinson’s poetry intertwines with her lifelong contemplation of such themes like eternity and reveals the construction of Dickinson’s unique travel poetics. This review attempts to combine general commentary on the overall structure, focusing on academic progress on Dickinson and travel, spaces and pathways in

Dickinson's poetry, research innovation and academic value. In doing so, it aims to clarify the book's valuable contribution to the current studies of Emily Dickinson and its inspiration for future studies in literature and other relevant subjects in the social sciences.

1. Academic Progress on Dickinson and Travel

Before delving into the travel imagery in Emily Dickinson's poetry, the book systematically reviews previous research on Dickinson and travel in Section VII of the Introduction. Hu Youming notes that as early as 1996, some scholars had noticed the travel imagery in Dickinson's poetry. Marianne Erickson highlighted Dickinson's interest in 19th-century technological advancements, particularly railways, arguing that in her poem "*I like to see it lap the Miles—*" (J585/Fr383¹), Dickinson "seems to celebrate this exhilarating technological marvel" (Hu Youmig, 2024, p.32). Chanthana Chaichit analyzed the paradox between Dickinson's reclusive life and her poems concerning travel from a psychological perspective, suggesting that writing travel poems is conducive to soothing her psychological unrest. In addition, some scholars focused on Dickinson's interest in foreign cultures. For instance, Cristanne Miller listed Eastern elements embedded in Dickinson's poetry and traced how the poet "gained access to and acquired knowledge of Eastern countries including China, Japan, India and Turkey, as well as their cultural forms" (Miller, 2012, p.123). Studies at home have yielded abundant interpretation of such themes as nature, death, and eternity in Dickinson's poetry. However, there are scarce studies focusing on the travel imagery in Dickinson's poetry.

In view of the above academic progress on the travel imagery in Dickinson's poetry, Hu Youming attempts to systematically explore the diverse travel imagery in Dickinson's poetry and the connection between the travel imagery and the themes of her poetry. While existing studies have answered or supplemented discussions on why Dickinson wrote about travel, Hu Youming further probes into how Dickinson depicted travel and how she pursued the meaning of travel by writing poems.

2. Spaces and Pathways in Dickinson's Poetry

This book is composed of seven chapters, which can be divided into three parts: Introduction (Chapter One), main body, and Conclusion (Chapter Seven). The five chapters gathered in the main body of this book are organized into three categories, respectively dealing with the travel landscapes in Dickinson's poetry across the three realms of sea, sky, and land; place names in Dickinson's poetry; and "home" in Dickinson's poetry. By distinguishing different spaces and pathways, the book explores how Dickinson, confined to her cottage yet dwelling spiritually in the cosmos, accomplished her imaginary long journeys through poetry.

¹ "J585" indicates the number of the poem in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson; "Fr383" indicates the number of the poem in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Ralph William Franklin.

Chapters Two to Four explore Dickinson's maritime, aerial, and terrestrial journeys as depicted in Dickinson's poetry. Among the poems concerning travel, "nautical imagery is the earliest to appear in Dickinson's collected verse" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.59). Starting with the nautical imagery in Dickinson's early poems, Chapter Two points out a spiritual resonance between Dickinson's poetry and the landscape art trends of her era, both of which reveal a distinctive American ethos. For instance, the first section carefully compares the landscape paintings of artists such as Thomas Cole with Dickinson's sea poems, showing that both bear striking characteristics of American Romanticism. In addition, Hu argues that the nautical imagery in Dickinson's poetry not only reflects her spirit of exploration but also serves as an important carrier of her rich emotions. For example, the recurring "flood" in Dickinson's poems "showcases her passion and determination" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.77). Chapter Three focuses on the images of "sunset" and "bird" in Dickinson's poetry, reinterpreting these images from the perspective of the theories of sublime and circumference. Rather than simply categorizing Dickinson's poems within a specific aesthetic framework, the author contends that some of Dickinson's poems respond to certain theories. For example, the colors of the sky in her poems may represent Edmund Burke's theories of the sublime. Chapter Four turns its attention to railroads and trains in Dickinson's poetry, revealing her keen interest in technological innovation. For example, in her poem "*I thought the Train would never come—*" (J1449/Fr397), the sound of the train whistle is very attractive for the poet. The interpretation of road imagery forms another focus of the chapter. Hu holds that the roads in Dickinson's poetry are often not smooth and direct paths to a destination, but full of detours and bewilderment.

It is worth noting that all three chapters connect the travel imagery in Dickinson's poetry to themes like death and eternity. In Chapter Two, Hu believes that "Dickinson shows her meditation on the 'afterlife' and 'eternity'" through the image of the "boat" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.111). Boats in Dickinson's poetry often sail into the distance but rarely reach shores, expressing Dickinson's skeptical attitude toward whether the "final destination" can ever be reached. Chapter Three, through the recurrent word "circumference" in Dickinson's poetry, invites readers to ponder the meaning of travel. Functioning as both a boundary and an extension, "circumference" in Dickinson's poems is a mysterious realm that the poet yearns for but can never attain. Section II of Chapter Four points out that Dickinson regards the path to eternity as fraught with hardships and obstacles, just as she expresses her expectation for an extraordinary journey to eternity in "*Elijah's Wagon knew no thill*" (J1254/Fr1288) through Elijah's ascent to heaven by whirlwind. These inquiries into the "final destination" not only underpin the inner logical motivation for Chapter Five, but also serve as the foundation to Chapter Six's exploration of whether "home" can serve as the ultimate destination.

Since physical travel can never truly lead to the "final destination," the place names in Dickinson's poetry are far more than geographical coordinates. Instead, they carry complex symbolic meanings. Chapter Five

first proposes the core concept of “encoded place names” to designate those locations imbued with Dickinson’s metaphors. For instance, the “Alps” in Dickinson’s poetry are not the Swiss mountains she had seen with her own eyes, but symbolize a dream of sublimity and grandeur. The process of reaching them is not a physical trek but a spiritual undertaking, symbolizing the pursuit of the “final destination”. Moreover, Hu conducts a comparative analysis of the Japanese haiku with place names and travel imagery and Dickinson’s poetry, and identifies similarities in both form and content of the two.

Framed by the question “Is ‘home’ the final destination?”, Chapter Six systematically examines the home imagery in Dickinson’s poetry, exploring whether she regards home as the “final destination.” Hu first points out that “home” in Dickinson’s poetry is not a simple physical space but appears as a metaphor. Through a close reading of a series of images such as “house,” “door,” “window,” and “threshold,” Hu concludes that “home” in Dickinson’s poetry is not endowed with a traditional 19th-century American definition of household. By contrast, it is “Dickinson’s sacred space in both the material and spiritual worlds, like the Garden of Eden” (Hu Youming, 2024, p.240). Furthermore, the author explores the question of whether home is heaven. By comparing the “home” in several poems, Hu points out that while home appears to be the end of the journey, it actually “fails to meet Dickinson’s inner expectations of an ideal home” (Hu Youming, 2024, p.256). In Dickinson’s view, “home” ought to be a place full of possibility. Therefore, she often employs “home” to depict magical journeys or draw comparisons with heaven.

3. Research Innovation and Academic Value

Based on detailed documentary research and meticulous textual analysis, the book *Imaging A Long Journey: Journey Imagery in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry* reveals how Dickinson constructs her distinctive spiritual space through travel imagery and thereby accomplishes imaginary journeys. The academic value of this work is primarily reflected in the following dimensions: its interdisciplinary perspectives, its comparative analysis, and its methodology of “presentation rather than conclusion.”

In terms of its interdisciplinary approach, the book integrates theories from multiple disciplines including feminist criticism, visual culture, aesthetic theory, and other disciplinary frameworks to analyze Dickinson’s poetic texts, thereby broadening the interpretive scope of Dickinson studies. For instance, in Section IV of Chapter One, Hu interprets Dickinson’s imaginary travel through her poetry from the perspective of feminist criticism. In the nineteenth century, women travelers were subject to more social restrictions and moral constraints than their male counterparts. Hu argues that Dickinson’s choice of seclusion was not an act of escape or withdrawal. Instead, she chose a freer way to wander the world by replacing physical travel with imagination. At that time, adventure narratives were overwhelmingly dominated by male figures. Against such a backdrop, Dickinson did not spiritually confine herself to her room. On the contrary, she embodies a

pioneering spirit and a fervent desire to seek outward. Besides, the book further delves into the connection between the nautical imagery in Dickinson's poetry and the landscape art of the Hudson River School. Thomas Cole, a leading painter of the School, remained faithful to American natural landscapes, dedicating himself to presenting "an indispensable civilization and identity belonging to Americans themselves" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.64). Landscape painting enjoyed great popularity at the time, inspiring many poets and writers including Dickinson. Hu not only thoroughly explores how Dickinson's creative work was influenced by visual culture but also reveals how Dickinson's poems and the paintings of the Hudson River School jointly embody the quintessential American Romantic spirit, joining hands in the quest for a new American "Eden". Furthermore, the book points out that the sky Dickinson depicts in her poetry serves as the manifestation of the sublime theory within the Western aesthetic tradition. Edmund Burke associates the sublime with the sense of fear. He believes that when confronted with supreme grandeur and magnificence, humans "are no longer influenced by external objects, nor can they make rational judgments, and it is then that the overwhelming power of the sublime arises" (Burke, 2014, p.37). Hu indicates that the intense color in Dickinson's poetry depicting sunrise and sunset, along with the uncontrollable emotions conveyed by her verses, serves as the best interpretation of this terror. Whether applying feminist criticism, visual culture, or aesthetic theory, Hu consistently places Dickinson's poetry at the center, allowing theories to serve poetic interpretation and achieving an organic integration of text and theories.

With regard to comparative analysis, the book widely references Dickinson's contemporaries while discussing her works, thus reflecting the spirit of the age and forming a multi-dimensional comparative study. When discussing nineteenth-century American poets, Dickinson and Whitman are two inseparable towering figures. When interpreting Dickinson's poetry from the three spatial dimensions of sea, sky, and land, Hu discusses her works with Whitman's and explores their different understandings of identical imagery. In Section II of Chapter Four, for instance, Hu contrasts the road imagery in Dickinson's and Whitman's poems, showing their divergent understandings of the road. In "*Song of the Open Road*", Whitman describes "the road in a positive and passionate manner so as to present his philosophical ideas and ideals" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.166). In contrast, the road in Dickinson's mind seems to be a symbol of the arduous journey before reaching "eternity". In "*Through lane it lay—through bramble*" (J9/Fr43), images such as "the wolf" and "the serpent" appearing on the road create a Gothic atmosphere. In "*The Road to Paradise is plain*" (J1491/Fr1525), Dickinson contrasts a smooth road with a rugged one, showing the difficult process by which most people approach heaven. In addition to contemporary poets, the author also compares Dickinson with writers of other genres from the same period. For example, in Section I of Chapter Four, Hu discusses the different attitudes of Dickinson and Thoreau towards the railroad, a significant technological product of the nineteenth century. "The railroad seemed to hold little appeal for this 'hermit' of Walden Pond" (Hu Youming, 2024, p.156), whereas Dickinson repeatedly expressed joy and pride in industrial and technological achievements in her

letters. Additionally, in Section III of Chapter Five, Hu compares Dickinson's poetry with Japanese haiku. Beyond their formal similarity of brevity, Hu holds that both of them excel in creating imaginative spaces. On the one hand, the dashes that often appear in Dickinson's poetry function similarly to and the kireji, a punctuation-like element in Japanese haiku, both creating suspense and capturing readers' attention. On the other hand, both Dickinson's poems and haiku can produce the effect of forgetting the existence of time. The fragmented rhythm of Dickinson's verses leaves ample room for reverie, while readers immersing themselves in haiku also lose track of time and conjure some images. Through this series of contrasts, Hu Youming concludes that Dickinson both belongs to her era and transcends it, demonstrating the uniqueness of her travel poetics.

When it comes to its methodology, the book explicitly proposes an approach of "presentation rather than conclusion". This approach aligns perfectly with the inherent characteristics of Dickinson's poetry, reflecting the study's inclusiveness and its nature of dialog and leaving space for subsequent research. "Dickinson did not intend to please any reader, making it difficult for her to create in a conventional, explicit, and accessible style" (Spengemann, 2010, p.85). "The abundance of bizarre imagination and original metaphors in Dickinson's poetry has sustained enduring critical interpretation and scholarly fascination among readers and critics alike" (Chen Zhiming, 2012, p.19). The polysemy of Dickinson's poetry poses a major challenge to textual reading and analysis. The book presents most poems in bilingual Chinese-English versions when quoting poems, enabling readers to appreciate the original diction and rhythm. Hu also conducts an extremely meticulous textual interpretation of the poems, unfolding the analysis from aspects such as language, imagery, and musicality. The book also cites a large number of Dickinson's letters, grounding the interpretation in evidence so as to make the argument more solid and credible, thereby presenting rather than defining the intellectual contours of Dickinson's poetry.

With its solid close reading, thorough textual analysis, and interdisciplinary vision, *Imaging A Long Journey: Journey Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poetry* establishes travel as its central theme, laying a firm foundation for subsequent related research. In spite of affirming its merits, there are still areas in this book that invite further discussion and refinement. The comparative analyses in the book mainly focus on contemporaneous writers or artists, while cross-era comparisons are relatively lacking. For instance, the contemporary Chinese poet Yu Xiuhua, who has long stayed at home due to disability, is famous for her valuable insights and poetic language. Both poets share a unique perspective shaped by their experiences of confinement, raising the question of whether there are underlying commonalities in their travel poetics despite the differences in their cultural and historical contexts. In this way, the cross-era dialogue could not only reveal broader insights into the universality of human experience, but also enrich our understanding of travel poetics across time and culture.

4. Conclusion

Hu Youming's *Imaging A Long Journey: Journey Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poetry* marks the first scholarly attempt to systematically establish "travel" as a central theme in Dickinson's poetry. By delineating the travel landscapes across the three realms of sea, sky, and land, analyzing various place names, and revealing the essence of "home" in her poetry, the book successfully presents Dickinson's tireless pursuit of the meaning of life and her endless spiritual pilgrimage. Hu not only demonstrates a broad academic horizon through the application of interdisciplinary methods but also maintains a consistent theoretical self-consciousness, providing textual analysis and theoretical grounding that can serve as valuable references for future research.

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