

# Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility Reconsidered

松 本 明 美\*

Akemi Matsumoto

**要約**：本論文は、エミリー・ディキンソンの美の定義を前回発表した論文とは異なる視点で、再考を試みたものである。今回の研究では、ディキンソンの詩的想像力が、精神的葛藤や苦悩を経験することによって豊かになり、それに伴って美に対する意識が研ぎ澄まされていったことを、何編かの詩を精読しながら考察した。その結果、ディキンソンにとって、孤独で地道な創作活動の中で真の美を追求し続けることが、詩人としての彼女の使命だったことが分かる。そして、文学史上、重要な詩人の一人である彼女の珠玉の詩は、後世の詩人たちや読者たちに多大な影響を与え続けている。

**Abstract** : The purpose of this paper is to reconsider Emily Dickinson's aesthetic sensibility from a slightly different angle. In this study the main stress falls on Dickinson's definition of beauty and the process of understanding it through her experience of mental strife. For her aesthetic sensibility makes a great difference to her imagination and creative activity. In spite of the continuous hardships, Dickinson pursued the substance of supreme beauty throughout her life ; consequently, she became one of the most important and influential poets in the history of American literature.

**Key words** : aesthetic sensibility, beauty, nature

## INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the prominent transcendentalist in the nineteenth century in America, was very interested in beauty and elucidated the nature of aesthetic theory or aesthetic criticism in one of his masterpieces, *Nature*, as is shown at the beginning of the third chapter, "Beauty": "A nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty."<sup>1)</sup> For Emerson, "Beauty" was obviously one of essential elements for systematizing his theory of nature, and moreover, his typical view of "Beauty" can be seen in his poem, "The Rhodora."

As for Emily Dickinson, her aesthetic sensibility

in her poems or letters has mystified critics or readers so far, because one of her poems defines "Beauty" as follows :

The Definition of Beauty is  
That Definition is none —  
Of Heaven, easing Analysis,  
Since Heaven and He are One. (Fr-797 B)<sup>2)</sup>

It might be an error to assume that Dickinson did not have a clear definition of "Beauty" and that she deliberately gave an evasive answer to this abstract word. In fact, pursuing her ideal "Beauty," she wrote several poems by making full use of her original metaphors, ingenious diction, and pithy

---

\*関西福祉科学大学健康福祉学部 講師

sentences.<sup>3)</sup> Nevertheless, what is clear is that Dickinson's definition of "Beauty" involves her mixed feelings about this term, because we can find her conflicted aesthetic sensibility in the poems with a nature theme, in particular, in the concise poems with an abstract and enigmatic theme. Therefore, I would like to briefly discuss Emerson's "Rhodora" in order to understand his general ideas about the relation between nature and beauty, and then go on to focus on examining other aspects of Dickinson's aesthetic sensibility through consideration of several poems.

I

First of all, we will begin with a short examination of Emerson's "Rhodora." It is helpful to describe Emerson's aesthetic view before moving on to the main consideration of this paper.

The Rhodora :

On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,  
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,  
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,  
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.  
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,  
Made the black water with their beauty gay ;  
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,  
And court the flower that cheapens his array.  
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why  
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,  
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being :  
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!  
I never thought to ask, I never knew :  
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose

The self-same Power that brought me there  
brought you.<sup>4)</sup>

The first half of the poem gives a vivid description of the "Rhodora" as if the scene of the flower were transformed into a picture. Above all, we recognize that Emerson has a keen sense of color, for example, the "purple petals," "the black water," and "the red-bird," as well as a sensibility to poetic techniques, such as rhyme and alliteration ("The purple petals, fallen in the pool"). This beautiful "Rhodora" alleviates the feeling of the persona "I," while the flower creates a brilliant atmosphere around "the desert" and "the sluggish brook." Fascinated by this beautiful "Rhodora," the "I" addresses this flower and ardently admires its beauty, as the flower is taken as the "rival of the rose."

The final lines of the poem, however, are extremely abstract, yet come to a logical conclusion. Toshikazu Niikura explains that the theme of the poem is just "Beauty," namely, "Beauty" of natural phenomena.<sup>5)</sup> Emerson does not elaborate on the reason for "Beauty's" existence ; if anything, "Beauty is its own excuse for being," which implies that the existence of "Rhodora" is too dignified to depict or copy the beautiful flower. Trying to understand what "Beauty" really is allows artists, including poets, to compose their own works of art in a completely original way and to recognize the substance of "Beauty" in the end.

Let us now attempt to extend this argument into the main subject, that is to say, the aspects of Dickinson's aesthetic sensibility. The first point to notice is that she often adopts small plants as critical motifs of her poems. The following poem illustrates Dickinson's favorite arbutus, the flower of Massachusetts :

Pink — small — and punctual —

Aromatic — low —  
Covert in April —  
Candid in May —

Dear to the Moss —  
Known to the Knoll —  
Next to the Robin  
In every human Soul —

Bold little Beauty —  
Bedecked with thee  
Nature forswears —  
Antiquity — (Fr-1357 D)

This pink flower blooms in “April” and “May,” but the diction of the poem is bolder than that of Emerson’s, because we find only three adjectives and three dashes in the first line : “Pink — small — and punctual — .” This opening line gives a simple and vivid impression to readers, and reproduces the features of the plants as simply and directly as possible. The second to fourth lines also eliminate the waste of expression and just succinctly convey what the small flower is. The second stanza shows that this flower blooms in harmony with nature, for example, along with “the Moss,” “the Knoll,” and “the Robin.” In addition, this flower is also familiar to human beings, as the phrase “In every human Soul” suggests the close connection between this flower and people in New England.

In the first line of the third stanza, the persona of the poem addresses this small flower : “Bold little Beauty.” The word “Beauty” means a beautiful woman, but the flower is so refined that even “Nature” is overwhelmed by its decorous appearance. To put it another way, although the mayflower blooms punctually in spring, the solemn beauty of the voiceless flower transfers the familiar scene into the unfamiliar one with its unex-

pected and eye-catching existence.

Then, let us consider the next poem :

Flowers — Well — if anybody  
Can the extasy define —  
Half a transport — half a trouble —  
With which flowers humble men :  
Anybody find the fountain  
From which floods so contra flow —  
I will give him all the Daisies  
Which upon the hillside blow.

Too much pathos in their faces  
For a simple breast like mine —  
Butterflies from St Domingo  
Cruising round the purple line —  
Have a system of aesthetics —  
Far superior to mine. (Fr-95 B)

Although the flowers in this poem are not identified, the enchanted persona tries to define “the extasy” when seeing a beautiful scene. The flowers are so exquisite that “men” are at a loss for words and hit on only stereotyped expressions. So the persona wants to give “all the Daisies” to someone who can define “the extasy,” because “Flowers” like “Daisies” keep too “much pathos,” namely, poignant emotions beyond human knowledge. Therefore, as the final four lines show, “Butterflies from St Domingo” have a superior “system of aesthetics” to the persona’s. Silent “Butterflies,” which are never taught by anyone, comprehend the definition and substance of beauty better than human beings.

As for butterflies, Dickinson often applies this motif to some of her poems, as can be seen in the following poems :

From Cocoon forth a Butterfly  
As Lady from her Door

Emerged — a Summer Afternoon —  
Repairing Everywhere —

Without Design — that I could trace  
Except to stray abroad  
On miscellaneous Enterprise  
The Clovers — understood —  
.....  
Till Sundown crept — a steady Tide —  
And Men that made the Hay —  
And Afternoon — and Butterfly —  
Extinguished — in the Sea —

(Fr-610, stanzas 1-2, 6)

The Butterfly in honored Dust  
Assuredly will lie  
But none will pass the Catacomb  
So chastened as the Fly — (Fr-1305 B)

The butterfly obtains  
But little sympathy  
Though favorably mentioned  
In Entomology —

Because he travels freely  
And wears a proper coat  
The circumspect are certain  
That he is dissolute

Had he the homely scutcheon  
Of modest Industry  
'Twere fitter certifying  
For Immortality — (Fr-1701)

The butterflies of these poems quoted above possibly symbolize a lonely person, as it were, Dickinson herself as a poet. She must have been envious of a disengaged creature like a butterfly, because she led a difficult life in order to become an independent poet in Amherst, whose people strictly

cherished traditions and challenged ingenuity. The butterflies, which belong to the natural world, seem to sense the substance of “Beauty” instinctively, and they embody “a system of aesthetics,” because they develop inconspicuous chrysalides into beautiful imagoes.

Having examined “a system of aesthetics,” we must now return to the previous argument. The persona of Poem 1496 admits that pursuing the true answer to “Beauty” is “Woe” and “Affliction” :

So gay a Flower  
Bereaves the mind  
As if it were a Woe —  
Is Beauty an Affliction — then?  
Tradition ought to know — (Fr-1496)

Although we do not know a species of “a Flower,” we understand that the persona is greatly touched by a beautiful flower. Paradoxically, the persona asserts that such a beautiful “Flower” generates not pleasure or joy but “a Woe” or “an Affliction,” as is in the third line “As if it were a Woe — .”

As in poems in this section, Dickinson attempts to clarify the substance of “Beauty” by writing her poems on this motif all her life, even if “Beauty” often detaches itself from her. The poems in this section testify to her efforts to make it explicit that “Woe” and “Beauty” are almost like two sides of the same coin.

II

Unlike Emerson, then, Dickinson acknowledges that seeing beautiful flowers makes her feel a profound sense of anguish or affliction. Simply put, flowers are not only the object of comfort but also that of sadness for Dickinson ; moreover, the lives of flowers last but a short while. The transient beauty of flowers makes her feel deep pathos and

allows her to enrich her aesthetic sensibility and to advance her career as a great poet. As a result, her definition of beauty becomes an abstruse theory of beauty, which is very difficult to understand. What does she want to tell through her own poems? In this section, I would like to scrutinize her aesthetic sensibility by reading some of her poems, which include unfamiliar ones to readers. Finally, I shall make an attempt to define her aesthetic sensibility at the conclusion.

Poem 1341 shows the subtle changes of late summer :

As Summer into Autumn slips  
And yet we sooner say  
The Summer than the Autumn — lest  
We turn the Sun away

And count it almost an Affront  
A Presence to concede  
Of one however lovely — not  
The one that we have loved

(Fr-1341 A, stanzas 1–2)

When it comes to a lamentable feeling for the change from “Summer” to “Autumn,” we are reminded of the poem beginning, “As imperceptibly as Grief / The Summer lapsed away — ”(Fr-935 E). The poem quoted above has the same theme as Poem 935. However, Poem 1341 is much more perplexing than Poem 935, because in the second and the third stanzas the persona narrates dispassionately the complicated state of the “Presence” (“The one that we have loved”). If the persona concedes the “lovely” thing that it has loved, this act is equivalent to “an Affront.” Above all, the persona adores “the Sun,” which symbolizes “Summer” and may function as the metonymy for the vital season. Without doubt, for Dickinson, “Summer,” in particular, the late summer, is one

of the most beautiful aspects of nature, almost beyond description.

The succeeding poem explains the beautiful changes in nature by using the metaphor of the “lady,” who is busy packing :

Were nature mortal lady  
Who had so little time  
To pack her trunk and order  
The great exchange of clime —

How rapid, how momentous —  
What exigencies were —  
But nature will be ready  
And have an hour to spare.

To make some trifle fairer  
That was too fair before —  
Enchanting by remaining,  
And by departure more. (Fr-1787)

The poem starts with the subjunctive mood : “Were nature mortal lady / Who had so little time.” Here, “nature” is compared to a “mortal lady,” so “nature” is in a desperate situation as if it were a busy woman who packs and makes arrangements for a trip. A “mortal lady,” that is, mortal nature, is energetic enough to deal with changes of every season in a businesslike manner : “How rapid, how momentous — / What exigencies were — .” As a matter of fact, in contrast to a “mortal lady,” “nature” exists with great composure and has much time to prepare for seasonal changes.

The third stanza is impressive in that the final four lines reveal Dickinson’s eyes focused on subtle changes and the vanishing phenomena of nature. Dickinson confirms that nature makes trivial phenomena (“some trifle”) more beautiful and touching. We understand the exquisite manner of

nature only after the beautiful season leaves silently. For that reason, this poem tells us that we do not appreciate true beauty when something “fair” or beautiful stands still in front of us.

No one can match nature and reach the domain of true “Beauty” :

Must be a Wo —  
A loss or so —  
To bend the eye  
Best Beauty’s way —

But — once aslant  
It notes Delight  
As difficult  
As Stalactite —

A Common Bliss  
Were had for less —  
The price — is  
Even as the Grace —

Our Lord — thought no  
Extravagance  
To pay — a Cross — (Fr-538)

As David Porter points out that the “difficult language of extreme reduction thus holds powerful compulsions that are conveyed extralinguistically,”<sup>6)</sup> this highly compressed and condensed poem functions effectively. His comment tells us that such a condensed style produces exuberant interpretations and suggests Dickinson’s strong sentiment, even within what appears to be a plain style.

According to the poem, the close observation of “Best Beauty’s way” is just a “Wo” or a “loss,” which resembles the matter of Poem 1496. As the oxymoronic or contradictory expression conveys (“Delight / As difficult / As Stalactite — ”), it is laborious to obtain the state of joy. Dickinson de-

clares in her well-known poem that “Tell all the truth but tell it slant — / Success in Circuit lies” (Fr-1263), so “the truth” as well as “Best Beauty” has such an extremely unique value that no one can express it with felicitous remarks in an instant. Likewise, common truth or beauty can be attained without strenuous effort: “A Common Bliss / Were had for less — .”

In the final stanza, the Christian point of view can be seen, and some critics’ comments are pertinent to the issue. As far as renunciation and the aesthetic view of Christianity are concerned, Beth Maclay Doriani refers to Jonathan Edwards’ “Treatise on Religious Affections,” connecting “Wo” with renunciation, beauty, and truth.<sup>7)</sup> In Poem 538, “Lord” does not regard a high price for “a Cross” as “Extravagance,” which insinuates that one must experience “the ultimate trial”<sup>8)</sup> to approach supreme beauty. The “Hopeless”<sup>9)</sup> experience of “Best Beauty” possibly stimulates Dickinson to pursue her ideal beauty through writing poems as part of the calling of a great poet, even if she must bear constant hardships to the end of her life.

The final poem omits details for brevity’s sake, but it contains words full of significance :

They have a little Odor — that to me  
Is metre — nay — ’tis melody —  
And spiciest at fading — indicate —  
A Habit — of a Laureate — (Fr-505 B)

The pronoun “They,” which remains anonymous to the end, keeps “a little Odor” to the persona. This faint “Odor” of flowers turns to “metre” or “melody.” Although a normal odor disappears gradually, this poetic “Odor” is “spiciest at fading,” signifying the makings of a poet laureate.

One may say, with Robert McClure Smith, that “if flowers are poems, then poems are equally the

'flowers' of her rhetoric."<sup>10</sup>) To put it more plainly, Dickinson's "flowers" of rhetoric, which are equivalent to her own poems, give off a faint "Odor," but they become very strong when they stimulate or encourage her broken-hearted readers even after her death. The word "Laureate" is a laurel wreath, and symbolizes the most honorable state. Should a person wearing a laurel wreath be celebrated, a poet "Laureate" would be admired forever.

As the poems examined so far exemplify, Dickinson's aesthetic sensibility is complicated and ambiguous, because genuine "Beauty" does not appear very often, and yet it goes away as soon as anyone tries to pinpoint the cause of it. We often realize the existence of "Beauty" after it passes, and we need to go through hardships, such as renunciation and "Woe," in order to encounter "Best Beauty." Establishing her own definition of "Beauty," Dickinson must have decided to write excellent poems with "a little Odor" and to become the poet who is worthy of receiving "a Laureate."

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have attempted to elucidate Dickinson's perplexing aesthetic definition by examining some of her poems, as well as Emerson's notable poem. Similarly, I have explored the underlying implications of her aesthetic sensibility as to how and why her poems on the definition of "Beauty" have delicate shades of meaning. As is seen in Section I, Dickinson's flowers, which are motifs representative of natural beauty, bring both a pleasure and a pathos to viewers. In other words, "Beauty" in nature keeps people at a distance even if one hopes to uncover the mysteries of natural beauty.

What I have tried to show in Section II is that the valuable experience of genuine "Beauty" de-

mands self-sacrifice, for instance, a "Wo" and a "loss," as this affliction is compared to the sacrifice of Christ in Poem 538. Although the search for true "Beauty" involves many hardships in contrast to Emerson's aesthetic view, the joy of coming in touch with "Beauty" inspires Dickinson to continue to write her poems. In conclusion, I should note that Dickinson's unceasing efforts to achieve her career ambitions as a poet with unmatched creativity and originality result in the production of gem-like poems with incomparable impressiveness.

### Notes

- 1) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature : Addresses and Lectures*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, vol. 1 (New York : AMS P, 1968) 15.
- 2) R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. by Emily Dickinson (Cambridge : The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998) 754, No. 797 B. The poems in this edition will hereafter be referred to as Fr-797 B, at the ends of the quotations.
- 3) Akemi Matsumoto, "'I Died for Beauty' : Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility," *Journal of Kansai University of Welfare Sciences* (Osaka : Kansai University of Welfare Sciences, 2005) 175-183.  
In this paper, I considered Dickinson's fundamental and significant definitions of "Beauty" in detail by closely reading some of her poems that include the word "Beauty."
- 4) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York : Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965) 3.
- 5) 新倉俊一、『アメリカ詩の世界—成立から現代まで—』(東京 : 大修館書店、1981年) 104頁。  
[Toshikazu Niikura, *Americashi No Sekai : Seiritu Kara Gendai Made* (Tokyo : Taisyukan Syoten, 1981) 104.]
- 6) David Porter, *Dickinson : The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1981) 51.
- 7) Beth Maclay Doriani, *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy* (Amherst : U of Massachusetts P, 1996) 169.
- 8) Doriani 169.
- 9) Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the*

*Beauty : Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 93.

Keller tells that the “trial” in this poem is similar to “Essential Oils — are wrung — ”(Fr-772 B).

- 10) Robert McClure Smith, *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson* (Tuscaloosa : U of Alabama P, 1996) 2.

#### Works Cited

Anderson, Charles Roberts. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry : Stairway of Surprise*. Westport : Greenwood Press, 1960.

Budick, E. Miller. *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language : A Study in Symbolic Poetics*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State UP, 1985.

Capps, Jack L. *Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836–1886*. Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1966.

Diehl, Joanne Feit. *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*. Princeton : Princeton UP, 1981.

Doriani, Beth Maclay. *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy*. Amherst : U of Massachusetts P, 1996.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue, ed. *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. Westport : Greenwood P, 1998.

Farr, Judith. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*. Cam-

bridge : Harvard UP, 1992.

Keller, Karl. *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty : Emily Dickinson and America*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979.

Kher, Inder Nath. *The Landscape of Absence : Emily Dickinson's Poetry*. New Haven : Yale UP, 1974.

Kirkby, Joan. *Women Writers : Emily Dickinson*. London : Macmillan, 1991.

McNeil, Helen. *Emily Dickinson*. London : Virago P, 1986.

Poter, David. *Dickinson : The Modern Idiom*. Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1981.

Smith, Robert McClure. *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*. Tuscaloosa : U of Alabama P, 1996.

Stonum, Gary Lee. *The Dickinson Sublime*. Madison : U of Wisconsin P, 1990.

Wolosky, Shira. *Emily Dickinson : A Voice of War*. New Haven : Yale UP, 1984.

新倉俊一、『アメリカ詩の世界—成立から現代まで—』東京：大修館書店、1981年。[Niikura, Toshikazu. *Americashi No Sekai : Seiritsu Kara Gendai Made*. Tokyo : Taisyukan Syoten, 1981.]