

“A Route of Evanescence” : Emily Dickinson’s Recollection and Imagination

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要約：本論文はアメリカの詩人、エミリー・ディキンソンの想像力について、何編かの詩を取り上げながら考察している。ディキンソンの自然詩、とりわけ夕暮れや晩夏をモチーフにした詩は、多くの読者を魅了する。その要因として考えられるのは、ディキンソンが繊細な観察力や美に対する鋭敏な感受性を持ち合わせていたことである。つまり、ディキンソンの詩を読むと、季節の移り変わり、刻々と様変わりする空の色、さらには小動物の躍動にいたるまで緻密に観察していることが伺える。ディキンソンは心に焼き付けたこれらの風景などを思い巡らし、精選した言葉を用いながら、やがて凝縮された1編の詩へと昇華させたのである。

Abstract : Emily Dickinson is one of the most prominent poets in American literary history, and her poems on a sunset have had a great influence on a large number of readers. This paper attempts to examine the meanings of recollection and imagination, which are surely critical elements for poets regardless of their poetic genre. Dickinson does not exaggerate both her own idea and words in her poems. Nevertheless, she fosters her imagination by focusing her eyes upon diverse aspects of changing nature every moment, such as the end of summer, a scene of a sunset, and the rapid movement of a hummingbird; consequently, her condensed poems on nature produced from her distinguished imagination, continue to fascinate her readers of all generations.

Key words : recollection, imagination, sensibility

Introduction

Emily Dickinson’s letters furnish material concerning her way of life or lofty sentiments as well as the historical background of those days for critics. The following passage from one of her letters enables us to get a glimpse of her thoughts and attitude as a poet :

The long life’s years are scant, and fly away,

the Bible says, like a told story — and sparing is a solemn thing, somehow, it seems to me — and I grope fast, with my fingers, for all out of my sight I own — to get it nearer —¹⁾

Here Dickinson explains a rapid passage of a time, frequently using words beginning with *s* sounds as a kind of alliteration, a significant poetic technique. In the passage, she decides to try to catch

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flying things in front of her: “for all out of my sight.” The phrase “with my fingers” implies her view of writing poetry, as I shall consider later, writing down every moment with her poetic words.

In fact, we come across several poems as a kind of evanescence, or a delicate change of nature, throughout her output of approximately 1,800 poems. Moreover, these poems are connected to her definition of beauty, as seen in her assertion: “Beauty — be not caused — It Is — / Chase it, and it ceases — / Chase it not, and it abides —” (Fr-654).²⁾ Now the question arises: Does Dickinson’s aesthetic sentiment reflect her innermost thoughts, in concrete terms, her genuine idea of writing poetry? As is commonly known, Dickinson attaches great importance to a seasonal change³⁾ and tries to represent its signs from roughly two points of view: one is a gentle and delicate change, and the other is a quick and momentary one. This double vision allows her to create a large number of poems on landscapes with her elaborately polished metaphors.

After having carefully selected poems as examples for this paper, I describe in the first section some of the poems that show Dickinson’s keen sensibility toward the delicate change of nature. This consideration is, in fact, the key to understanding her unique vision in addition to her imagination, which is relevant to the discussion in the next section. The second section considers Dickinson’s theme of instantaneous phenomena, such as evanescence, in contrast to the contents of the first section. This is the central point of imagination, which is one of the most significant concepts for the poets of all generations. From reading and examining the poems cited in this paper, we reach crucial aspects of her poetry.

I The Motive for Recollection

The first argument concerns Dickinson’s powers of observation, especially, her sensibility to the changes of the seasons. This argument helps us to comprehend a few aspects of her style of writing poetry; for poets, both a power of observation and keen insight into nature or human nature are essential elements to becoming a distinguished poet.

To begin with, I would like to examine Poem 1560:

There comes a warning like a spy
A shorter breath of Day
A stealing that is not a stealth
And summer is away — (Fr-1560)

As for the theme of late summer, Dickinson writes memorable lines in several poems, such as “As imperceptibly as Grief / The Summer lapsed away —” (Fr-935 E),⁴⁾ and “As Summer into Autumn slips / And yet we sooner say” (Fr-1341 A).⁵⁾ These lines show traces of summer in a frankly condensed manner. In late summer, the days grow shorter (“A shorter breath of Day”), so this visible change of summer makes the poet notice the inevitable cycle of the seasons. For the poet, perceiving the change from summer to autumn is equivalent to receiving “a warning,” although this word evokes an unpleasant image, like a punishment. In spite of the grief of the poet, “summer” goes away in a dignified manner; therefore, its attitude is not “a stealth.” As for the poetic technique, Dickinson omits the details for brevity’s sake, but we can find alliteration, the repetition of *s* sounds, such as in “spy,” “shorter,” “stealing,” “stealth,” and “summer.” As a result of this technique, there is a tense atmosphere throughout the poem.

The next poem reveals the sorrow of parting for

"Summer," too :

Summer — we all have seen —
A few of us — believed —
A few — the more aspiring
Unquestionably loved —

But Summer does not care —
She takes her gracious way
As eligible as the Moon
To the Temerity —

Deputed to adore —
The Doom to be adored
Unknown as to an Ecstasy
The Embryo endowed — (Fr-1413)

A number of people adore "Summer," but it is only a few that love this season from the bottom of their heart : "A few — the more aspiring / Unquestionably loved —." Nevertheless, "Summer" does not recognize their praise and keeps its own pace. The second stanza shows the graceful manner of "Summer" by means of personification, as the feminized "Summer," "She" embodies a lady-like atmosphere ; moreover, "the Moon" alludes to a goddess in Greek myth. As a result, the diction of the stanza highlights the beauty and elegance of "Summer" and contrasts markedly with the minor image, "the Temerity."

The last stanza emphasis the admiration of "Summer," intentionally selecting words including *d* sounds, such as "Deputed," "adore," and "Doom." After going away, "Summer" leaves only "an Ecstasy," which makes a few people delighted or satisfied.

Poem 1340 mourns the passing of "Summer," too :

Without a smile — Without a throe

A Summer's soft assemblies go
To their entrancing end
Unknown — for all the times we met —
Estranged, however intimate —
What a dissembling Friend — (Fr-1340)

The expression "A Summer's soft assemblies" suggests pleasant days of midsummer ; however, these "assemblies" end without notice of the breaking up, as the fourth line explains such a situation. Even if these meetings do not entail desired results, participants would bask in the aftermath ("their entrancing end"). Yet the final two lines ridicule the hypocritical manners of "Summer," calling it "a dissembling Friend." To put it another way, the more ironically this poem describes "Summer," the more sophisticated the behavior of late summer is. Although "Summer" acts coldly and is indifferent to praise or blame, it is only right for the cycle of nature to proceed at its own pace.

Summer has two Beginnings —
Beginning once in June —
Beginning in October
Affectingly again —

Without, perhaps, the Riot
But graphicer for Grace —
As finer is a going
Than a remaining Face —
Departing then — forever —
Forever — until May —
Forever is deciduous —
Except to those who die — (Fr-1457)

Poem 1457 analyzes characteristics of "Summer" calmly and tells us that it rotates two times in a year. The first time comes in "June" after spring leaves, and then the second begins in "October." It

is strange that summer comes again in autumn ; however, the second summer affects people, because they think that “Summer” comes once a year, and does not come back again till the next year.

The succeeding stanza, which is twice as long as the opening one, praises the beautiful cycle of the seasons. When “Summer” changes to autumn, people hardly find that subtle signs of autumn grow more pronounced. Furthermore, this second summer confirms the attitude of leaving: “As finer is a going / Than a remaining Face —.” The phrase “a remaining Face” can be seen as synecdoche, treating a person as an audacious guest. “Departing” is graceful, but it imparts the sorrow of parting to people who love “Summer.” To put it another way, they feel that “May,” the time of early summer, will never come forever: “Forever — until May —.” The penultimate line is full of meaning, because the adjective “deciduous” evokes an image of a dead leaf and that of late autumn ; however, deciduous trees come into leaf in spring again, and then the fresh green leaves dazzle the eyes in May. Thus, the final lines of the poem possibly refer to the cycle of the seasons, in a limited sense, regeneration in contrast to “those who die.” That is why people can find a ray of hope or “Delight” by recollecting “Summer” :

The last of Summer is Delight —
 Deterred by Retrospect.
 'Tis Ecstasy's revealed Review —
 Enchantment's Syndicate.
 (Fr-1380 F, stanza 1)

As the words “Ecstasy” and “Enchantment” convey, the “last of Summer” gives pleasure or fascination to Dickinson. The beauty of “Summer” leads Dickinson to create her poems on the subject of natural beauty :

The One who could repeat the Summer day
 —
 Were greater than itself — though He
 Minutest of Mankind should be —

And He — could reproduce the Sun —
 At period of going down —
 The Lingering — and the Stain — I mean —

When Orient have been outgrown —
 And Occident — become Unknown —
 His name — remain — (Fr-549A)

This renowned poem reveals Dickinson's decision as a poet who can represent natural phenomena in detail by selecting the appropriate words to express, although she admits difficulty in reproducing aesthetic beauty vividly. Ralph Waldo Emerson, her contemporary, confesses his inability to draw a picturesque landscape, too :

What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, and which Homer or Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words? The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers,⁶⁾

Even Emerson is forced to admit his inability to express every natural phenomenon in front of him, so he presumes that “Homer or Shakespeare” could “re-form” or represent natural landscapes with their words or expressions. It is very difficult for every great Greek or English poet to depict the beauty of nature as a photo can, but Dickinson states clearly that “The One who could repeat the Summer day — / Were greater than itself.” “The One” is surely a poet Dickinson explains in one of

her poems as follows :

I reckon — When I count at all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

.

Their Summer — lasts a solid Year —
They can afford a Sun
The East — would deem extravagant —
And if the Further Heaven —
(Fr-533, stanzas 1 and 3)

As a matter of fact, "Poets," who hold the first place in "the List," can produce "a Sun" by using carefully selected words. Even if they are undistinguished poets, only their steady efforts make "Summer" eternal or everlasting.

Let us now return to Poem 549. The central stanza follows up without a rest and "He," who can repeat the beautiful sunset, is celebrated like a hero. As in the final stanza, "His name," his great achievement as a poet, remains even if an impossible happening occurs in this world. In terms of poetic technique, we can find some rhymes in this poem, for example, "He / be" and "outgrown / Unknown." In addition, the theme of the sunset, which is a significant motif for both painters and poets,⁷⁾ is a major part of Dickinson's poetic world, giving her a central motivation to write.

Poets as well as painters can reproduce "a Setting" or keep its beauty eternal by completing their works of art. To accomplish their work, it is necessary to review what they observe in magnificent scenery. The following poem shows the importance of recollection :

I'd rather recollect a Setting

Than own a rising Sun
Though one is beautiful forgetting
And true the other one.

Because in going is a Drama
Staying cannot confer —
To die divinely once a twilight —
Than wane is easier — (Fr-1366)

As is in the other poems examined earlier, the persona "I," the speaker of the poem, prefers to recollecting "a Setting" to gaining "a rising Sun," because the former is "beautiful forgetting." Superb "Setting" holds the persona enthralled and makes it forget the passing of time, even if the rising sun is "true."

The persona narrates emphatically the merit of recollection in the succeeding stanza. Disappearing ("going") is just "a Drama," which "Staying" cannot imitate. The word "wane" is relevant to the waning of the moon, and it means that the power of something weakens gradually. However, "wane" gives an impression of modesty or elegance to the persona. Although to "die divinely" attracts the persona's attention, this act does not cause "beautiful forgetting," nor does it have an emotional effect on the persona ; therefore, the persona continues to observe "a Drama" of "going."

Thus considered, Dickinson emphasizes "going," as she spotlights "a Setting" and her favorite season, "Summer." Even great poets cannot retain the original shape or object, so they make a point of recollecting it and trying to record or visualize what they see into their consciousness. For Dickinson, natural landscape fascinates her, and what is more, it gives her motivation to write poems with the aid of "recollection."

II The Motive for Imagination

In the previous section, I considered Dickinson's

preference for going or disappearing and the importance of recollection as a process of writing poetry. The question that we must consider here is how Dickinson applies recollection to her writing of poetry. However, to elucidate her idea of recollection, it is inevitable to make allowances for imagination, which is an essential element for poets of all generations.

Let us start with Poem 1489, which provides a meaningful starting point :

A Route of Evanescence,
With a revolving Wheel —
A Resonance of Emerald
A Rush of Cochineal —
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts it's tumbled Head —
The Mail from Tunis — probably,
An easy Morning's Ride — (Fr-1489G)

The theme of the poem is a hummingbird, a minute bird rapidly flapping its wings. To borrow Ferrazzo's comment, this poem has been taken as "an illustration of Dickinson's celebrated ability to economize and to condense her diction and her imagery when she is writing at her best."⁸⁾ In short, the description of a flying hummingbird is full of color ("Emerald" and "Cochineal") and appeals to the sense of hearing (a "Resonance" of flapping wings). Reading the poem, we can imagine that the hummingbird is flying around flowers. So speedy is the movement of the bird that observers cannot follow it except for a "Route of Evanescence." To put it another way, the agility of the bird leaves a resonance like a humming sound, but Dickinson transforms the "Route of Evanescence" into her condensed poem without useless words. In the same way, her poetry is elusive and hard to figure out for us, like a "Route of Evanescence," which "evades our grasp."⁹⁾

Dickinson writes a brief letter on beauty and evanescence as follows :

The little Book will be subtly cherished —
All we secure of Beauty is it's Evanescences
— Thank you for recalling us.¹⁰⁾

According to the letter, "Evanescence" is gained only from the "Beauty"; namely the authentic beauty is intimately connected with the "Evanescence" of worldly things.

The key words of Poem 1633 are "Reality" and "Dream" :

Within that little Hive
Such Hints of Honey lay
As made Reality a Dream
And Dreams, Reality — (Fr-1633)

The "little Hive" is a beehive where bees are extremely active, and there is the raw material of pure honey within the hive. The third and fourth lines illuminate the pith of poetry, as it were, the significant subject matter of making poetry. The process from "Reality" to "Dream" is equal to representing a theme or a subject matter by poetic words. In the opposite sense, a poet can realize "Dream" into "Reality," that is, a poem. The word "Dream" is something a poet imagines in his or her mind. An abstract and invisible "Dream" can be recorded and vitalized within a piece of work. To accomplish such a hard work, a poet must demonstrate his or her ability as a verbal specialist whose imagination and sentiment excel that of others.

The word "Imagination" is found at the end of Poem 1686 :

The gleam of an heroic act
Such strange illumination

The Possible's slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination (Fr-1686)

It is surprising that Dickinson seldom uses the word "Imagination" in her poems. Dickinson selects the images of light, such as "gleam" and "illumination"; furthermore, she applies the image of explosion or eruption to allude to the "Possible." The "fuse" lit by "the Imagination" leads to the light of a possibility. A person who lights the "slow fuse" with "the Imagination" is a poet who composes a poem by using a fertile poetic imagination. Dickinson compares a function of "the Imagination" and its hidden possibility to "an heroic act." This "heroic act," like an epic poem, stimulates the imagination of readers, which is, in terms of literary theory, related to the "literary ethic of dissemination and productivity."¹¹⁾ "The gleam of an heroic act" lit by a poet illuminates the possibility of readers and helps them to see the earthly world from another point of view.

As far as "the Imagination" is concerned, the following quotation is pertinent to the theme of this poem :

Since straightforward human language is inadequate for Dickinson's vision, the imagination takes a prominent position. Dickinson preferred the subjective world of her creative mind to the objective external reality, believing that a reduction of external light might involve an increase in clarity.¹²⁾

For Dickinson, her poetic imagination is much better than ordinary light, because her imagination has the power to transform even eerie or elusive matters within her mind into a condensed poem through her elaborate words and figurative expression.

Now we will read the conclusive poem :

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays (Fr-1749)

According to this poem, we can see things more "acuter" by "a departing light," because the light that is almost out "clarifies the sight" and "decks" (adorns) the rays. The poem does not explicate what "something" is concretely; even so, a thin light compels us to focus our eyes upon the object. Concentrating our attention on the object, we might bask in the aftermath while discovering something new. Thus considered, not staying but going gives us a "fuse," which leads to the possibility. In the case of Dickinson, to see a going light can be a metaphor for bringing her imagination to her work, opening the door to a possibility, as well as the "heroic act" of making poetry.

Conclusion

Up to this point I have presented an overview of Dickinson's sensibility to evanescence and her idea of imagination. What I have tried to show in Section I is that "Summer," her favorite season, provides crucial insights for her. In particular, late summer can be taken as the wellspring of her creativity, because the change from late summer to autumn is very gentle but it passes without any manifest sign of going. Valuing "going" above "Staying," Dickinson highly enriches her sensibility to and sentiment for natural phenomena, from a sunset to small living creatures, by her close observation and recollection. In regard to recollection, we need mention here only that we might remember the well-known works by English poets, such as Wordsworth's "The Daffodils" and Shakespeare's sonnets.

In Section II, I have considered Dickinson's idea of imagination on the basis of four poems, including some unfamiliar ones. Although she does not frequently use the word "Imagination," she compares writing poems with the "Imagination" to the "gleam of an heroic act." In the final analysis, the "Imagination" not only enlarges the possibility of poets and readers but also enables them to look at things from a broader and more flexible perspective. As evidence of this, we, therefore, conclude that Dickinson's great many gem-like poems, such as the poem on a hummingbird, can stimulate the sensibilities of readers to come. As such, Dickinson cultivates her sensibility and prodigious imagination by concentrating on diverse phases of nature and then composing a great number of poems in order to fix a vivid recollection of constantly changing scenes.

Notes

- 1) Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, by Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1958) 410, No. 266.
- 2) R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. by Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998) 638, No. 654. The poems in this edition will hereafter be referred to as Fr-654, at the end of the quotations.
- 3) Akemi Matsumoto, "'I Died for Beauty': Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility," *Journal of Kansai University of Welfare Sciences*, vol. 9 (Osaka: Kansai University of Welfare Sciences, 2006) 175-183.
Akemi Matsumoto, "Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility Reconsidered," *Journal of Kansai University of Welfare Sciences*, vol. 10 (Osaka: Kansai University of Welfare Sciences, 2007) 119-126.
- 4) Matsumoto, "'I Died for Beauty'" 178.
- 5) Matsumoto, "Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility Reconsidered" 123.
- 6) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature: Addresses and Lectures*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, vol. 1 (New

York: AMS P, 1968) 17-18.

- 7) Judith Farr, *The passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 260.

At the same time Farr refers to Cole, who is one of American painters and is widely known as works of magnificent landscapes, and other artists as follows:

The sunset (painted over and over by Cole, Church, Gifford, Inness, and the other landscape artists) was the emblem of the sublime, of passion and terror joined in one awful moment (260).

- 8) Paul J. Ferlazzo, *Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976) 120.
- 9) Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds, *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998) 287.
- 10) *Letters*, No. 781.
- 11) Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990) 82.
- 12) Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds, 282.

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