

“I Died for Beauty” : Emily Dickinson’s Aesthetic Sensibility

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Abstract : The purpose of this paper is to examine Emily Dickinson’s theory of beauty, which is regarded as a seminal theme among English and American poets. This abstract term in Dickinson’s poems, however, is so inexplicable and inscrutable, because it often appears in the poems of compact and elliptical styles. As for Dickinson, her aesthetic sensibility is not always connected with natural phenomena, such as scenes of sunset, flowers, and something sublime attaching to nature. Her area of beauty extends into negative aspects, for example, agony, loss of confidence, and death. All of this amounts to saying that her enigmatic beauty is her making of poetry ; the ultimate beauty through her aesthetic sensibility is transformed into her great number of poems, noted for her selected gem-like words.

Key words : Beauty, Truth, Poetry

INTRODUCTION

In 1862 Emily Dickinson wrote a letter to T. W. Higginson, which would cause a heated controversy among critics in the future :

I could not stop for that — My Business is
Circumference — An ignorance, not of Customs,
but if caught with the Dawn — or the
Sunset see me — Myself the only Kangaroo
among the Beauty, Sir, if you please, it afflicts
me, and I thought that instruction would
take it away.¹⁾

The passage quoted above is very interesting but almost impenetrable, because it involves keys to solving various kinds of problems, such as how to interpret Dickinson’s perplexing poems and how to understand her ideas concerning the theory of poetry. It is hard for readers to understand Dickinson’s discourse ; likewise, “the only Kangaroo

among the Beauty” is such an impressive phrase that Karl Keller borrowed the phrase for the title of his book.²⁾

Dickinson composed poems including the word “Beauty” in a laconic style, but we notice that she employed this abstract term in connection with various themes. Therefore, the critical question is that we should study each related poem as a poetic text in detail in order to investigate characteristics of her aesthetic sensibility. Perhaps it is right to say at the outset that Dickinson’s significant way of thinking as a poet is immanent in the word “Beauty.” In this paper, I would like to focus attention on Dickinson’s theory of “Beauty,” considering that her “Beauty” can be indirectly connected with both sublime and dark, negative aspects, such as death and affliction mentioned in the letter quoted earlier.

As for “Beauty,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, the prominent transcendentalist in the nineteenth century, explained his idea of “Beauty” in his well-known essay, *Nature*. Across the Atlantic, English Romantic poets regarded “Beauty” as one of es-

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sential subject matters for writing poems, as I will examine later. Here we need to consider Dickinson's unusual characteristics of "Beauty," because there has been little study to prove various aspects of this word. Then I would like to discuss how "Beauty" can be a universally acknowledged theme for poets of all ages and countries.

I

We will start our discussion by considering Dickinson's general definition of "Beauty." Let us begin with Poem 1515 :

Estranged from Beauty — none can be —
 For Beauty is Infinity —
 And power to be finite ceased
 Before Identity was creased — (Fr-1515)³⁾

This short poem explains that a person cannot escape from "Beauty," but this abstract word is unsubstantial and is not defined concretely : "Beauty is Infinity —." In other words, it is solemn and exists endlessly with great composure, so everyone can see it any time and everywhere. However, it is impossible for even a poet to identify with "Beauty," because it has vague and indefinite factors.

The following text displays the uncertainty of "Beauty" :

Beauty — be not caused — It Is —
 Chase it, and it ceases —
 Chase it not, and it abides —

Overtake the Creases

In the Meadow — when the Wind
 Runs his fingers thro' it —
 Deity will see to it
 That You never do it — (Fr-654)

There is no special reason why "Beauty" exists, but people have a hard time in pursuing what it really is. When a person reaches it, it escapes immediately ; yet it stays still unless he or she chases it ("Chase it not, and it abides —").

In the second half of the text, we understand that a person tries to make the obscurity of "Beauty" more concrete by employing the metaphor of "the Wind." We do not care about the invisible "Wind" as a natural phenomenon until we feel the wind blowing or see the grasses rustling in "the Wind." Similarly, we suddenly encounter the moment of "Beauty" and then attempt to investigate the cause of it, but we do it in vain, as if "Deity" refused to explain the cause and made "Beauty" even more mysterious. In consequence, we may never approach "Beauty" during our lifetime.

Jack L. Capps points out that "Her 'Beauty — be not caused — It Is —' recalls 'Then Beauty is its own excuse for being,' from Emerson's 'Rhodora,' one of the poems he marked."⁴⁾ Surely Dickinson was much influenced by Emerson's poems or essays, but Emerson's theory of "Beauty" seems to be different from Dickinson's. For example, Emerson tells eloquently about his aesthetic theory, as can be seen in the following quotation :

The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works. (*Nature*)⁵⁾

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and

stands on the centre. For the world is not painted or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful ; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. ("The Poet")⁶⁾

For Emerson, the poet can represent beauty and embody it by a form of art, that is to say, poetry. As is seen in *Nature*, his beauty is entirely connected with nature, so the poet feels an impulse to express nature in front of the poet. As for Dickinson's "beauty," however, it is more ambiguous and less energetic than Emerson's idea, because his "poet" always confidently "stands on the centre," while Dickinson's is more passive.

Unlike Emerson's "Beauty," Dickinson's is unique and unconventional to a certain extent ; her "Beauty" is not only an object of affection but also that of affliction :

Beauty crowds me till I die
Beauty mercy have on me
But if I expire today
Let it be in sight of thee — (Fr-1687)

According to the persona "I," "Beauty" is so exquisite that it overwhelms the persona. In other words, "Beauty" is eternal and immortal, compared to a human being, so the persona suffers from the anguish of an impossibility to define the sublimity of "Beauty." Thus the persona does nothing but entreat "Beauty" not to leave the spot even if the persona dies.

In case of Poem 1687, a similar example will spring to mind, namely a *tanka* (a Japanese poem of 31 syllables) of Saigyō (西行). His well-known *tanka*, "願はくは 花のしたにて 春死なん そのきさらぎの 望月の頃"⁷⁾ is also the poet's keen desire to expire in sight of beautiful flowers in early spring. Dickinson's "Beauty" possibly sig-

nifies her favorite flowers, but beautiful things including flowers or a fine scenery stimulate her to write, although poets are overwhelmed by "Beauty," as the great painters in the final stanza of Poem 327 are paralyzed with the grandeur of the sunset.⁸⁾

After all, Dickinson describes the definition of "Beauty" in an elliptical manner as follows :

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

The persona can neither analyze "Heaven" nor recognize what the definition of "Beauty" is : "The Definition of Beauty is / That Definition is none —." That is why "Beauty" is as divine and enigmatic as "Heaven," and "Beauty" is, as it were, equivalent to "Heaven," both equally unknowable.

Unlike Emerson, Dickinson does not concretely elucidate the nature of "Beauty," but her definition of "Beauty," which seems to be ambiguous, ironically adapts her felicitous remark. To put this in greater detail, her sketchy explanation is closest to the nature of "Beauty" ; the closer a person pursues true "Beauty," the farther away it escapes. Excellent "Beauty" is beyond description even for a poet, so Dickinson chooses to express "Beauty" as simply and directly as possible.

II

In Section I, I have considered Dickinson's general definition of "Beauty" by selecting four texts. In this section, I will now develop the consideration of her "Beauty" a little further and shift her definition of "Beauty" from the ambiguity of "Beauty" to the negative aspects of it.

The persona of Poem 1496 complains of a pain in the mind :

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

A vivid and beautiful flower touches the persona's mind, so the persona takes its sentiments about a flower as "a Woe." Without hesitation, the persona wonders to itself: "Is Beauty an Affliction — then?" We should ironically recognize that beautiful things give us not only greatest pleasure but also a pain or "an Affliction."

This text displays a contradictory feeling, which is in contrast to Poem 1687 in the previous section, because the persona of Poem 1496 declares strongly that "Beauty" is the cause of "an Affliction." In this text, the concrete object of "Beauty" is taken as a beautiful flower; when the persona sees plants around the house that bloom almost every day, it is instinctively struck with awe. The negative point of view in the text possibly resembles Dickinson's strange metaphor in the letter cited at the beginning of Introduction: "The only Kangaroo among the Beauty." So Dickinson might have acknowledged that she did not match wonderful nature as well as a "Kangaroo." Thus there is something in true "Beauty" that keeps people at a distance.

In the following text, "Beauty" is expressed as another world:

As imperceptibly as Grief
 The Summer lapsed away —
 Too imperceptible at last
 To seem like Perfidy —
 A Quietness distilled
 As Twilight long begun,
 Or Nature spending with herself
 Sequestered Afternoon —

The Dusk drew earlier in —
 The Morning foreign shone —
 A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,
 As Guest, that would be gone —
 And thus, without a Wing
 Or service of a Keel
 Our Summer made her light escape
 Into the Beautiful — (Fr-935 E)

The text depicts late summer, which is personified as a passing "Guest." Summer is Dickinson's favorite season, but this text is filled with complicated feelings, such as "As imperceptibly," "Perfidy," and "harrowing Grace." Summer is such a beautiful season that it brings a spiritual elevation to people, although they do not notice clearly a subtle change from summer to autumn. In the text, however, the persona is bitter about "Summer" going away, as the words "imperceptibly" and "imperceptible" show, and yet the persona regards ironically this natural phenomenon as "Perfidy," that is, betrayal.

On and after line five, seasonal changes are vividly described: for instance, "The Dusk drew earlier in — / The Morning foreign shown —." The last part of the text displays how the personified "Summer" leaves like a polite "Guest," but, on the contrary, this graceful manner of "Summer" grieves the minds of people. The simile "As Guest" makes the final days of "Summer" more visual and realistic. At last, "Summer" has passed without using "a Wing" or "a Keel" and escaped silently into "the Beautiful." "Summer" is just identified with "the Beautiful"; however, what "the Beautiful" should be is not clarified even after the final narration.

Added to this, "the Beautiful" is placed where a person cannot reach it; as a result, Dickinson feels a sense of renunciation just like the persona on account of the unavoidable cycle of seasons.

According to Anderson, this cycle of seasons here indirectly refers to one's cycle from birth to death,⁹⁾ although this interpretation is a little strained; however, this text transforms the end of "Summer" into a beautiful form of art, namely, a fine poem filled with skilful metaphors or similes.¹⁰⁾

The next text signifies the relation between "beauty" and the poet :

To tell the Beauty would decrease
 To state the spell demean
 There is a syllableless Sea
 Of which it is the sign
 My will endeavors for it's word
 And fails, but entertains
 A Rapture as of Legacies —
 Of introspective mines — (Fr-1689)

The persona describes the inability to "tell the Beauty" and to "state the spell." It is very hard even for the poet to find appropriate words to convey the true "Beauty" and to explain the magic or the enchanting things. The persona "endeavors" to represent "the Beauty" but "fails"; this circumstance is "the sign" of "a syllableless Sea," which means "a silent word reflecting a spiritual silence."¹¹⁾ As the word "but" in the sixth line shows, the repeated failures turn to the state of "Rapture." In other words, aesthetic experience brings "Legacies" to the mind of the persona, as the adjective "introspective" suggests the act of thinking or meditating that poets nourish in writing their poems. The final word "mines," which is a very significant metaphor for Dickinson, hints at the place filled with poetic imagination or themes before composing a poem. What is more, the meaning of this word is equivalent to immortality, one of Dickinson's vital key words, as the phrase "a reduceless Mine" (Fr-1091) serves as a strong

piece of evidence. Therefore, even if the inability to express the aesthetic experience is a disappointing fact, "a syllableless Sea" enriches the poet's intellectual and aesthetic work, that is, creative activity making full use of "introspective mines."

As the texts examined so far exemplify, "Beauty" is beyond description and beyond the bounds of imagination. Even if the formidable "Beauty" attracts Dickinson, she feels agony or affliction, because "Beauty" sometimes gives Dickinson a severe trial in order to cultivate eyes to make sure of the truth, and in order to become a true poet.

III

As in texts discussed previously, Dickinson's aesthetic sensibility involves the ability to judge coolly, because she does not make any detailed comment on "Beauty": "The Definition of Beauty is / That Definition is none —." It remains very difficult for readers or critics to define precisely what Dickinson's theory of "Beauty" is. In Section III, I would like to focus on a well-known poem and examine her strong skepticism about the traditional aesthetic idea. The following text exemplifies her stance :

I died for Beauty — but was scarce
 Adjusted in the Tomb
 When One who died for Truth, was lain
 In an adjoining Room —

He questioned softly "Why I failed?"
 "For Beauty", I replied —
 "And I — for Truth — Themselves are One —
 We Bretheren, are", He said —

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night —
 We talked between the Rooms —
 Until the Moss had reached our lips —

And covered up — Our names — (Fr-448)

The persona “I” dies for an incredible factor, that is, “for Beauty”; death “for Beauty,” then, is the ultimate motivation for Dickinson. Shortly after the persona is buried in “the Tomb,” the persona notices its neighbor, “One who died for Truth,” in “an adjoining Room.”

The conversation between the persona and “He” in the central stanza is shocking, because “He” asks the persona in a strange way, “Why I failed.” The word “fail” possibly purports death, but the persona answers that the death was “for Beauty” and in turn hears of a surprising idea from its neighbor: “And I — for Truth — Themselves are One — / We Bretheren, are.” “Themselves,” which contains both “Beauty” and “Truth,” is grammatically unusual. The aim of this word is to intensify a sense of unity between the two, because “— self” stands for the singular form of a reflexive pronoun. Besides, “He” declares that “We Bretheren, are.” For the two, the word “Bretheren” is like the same race or family, and, furthermore, “Beauty” and “Truth” are identified or classified as being in the same category here.

In the final stanza, this identification turns into the word “Kinsmen,” and these two persons continue talking “between the Rooms.” The last two lines, however, make a grotesque impression on readers: “Until the Moss had reached our lips —.” This “Moss” invades the tombs until it reaches their “names.” The “Moss,” which is the symbol of nature here, has its weird vital force and does not perish, in contrast to “Beauty” and “Truth.” Therefore the sublimity of “Beauty” and the firmness of “Truth” cannot survive in the face of severe nature. To borrow Joan Kirkby’s comment, the “Moss” “signals the dissolution of the symbolic order as well as the decay of the body.”¹²⁾ Viewed in this light, the persona narrates the ironi-

cal situation of “Beauty” and “Truth” but leaves the final outcome unclear and ambiguous.

There is another text that describes one phase of the cruelty of nature:

The Frost of Death was on the Pane —
 “Secure your Flower” said he.
 Like Sailors fighting with a Leak
 We fought Mortality —

Our passive Flower we held to Sea —
 To mountain — to the Sun —
 Yet even on his Scarlet shelf
 To crawl the Frost begun —

(Fr-1130 C, stanzas 1–2)

“The Frost” is clearly a metaphor of “Death,” and manages to work its way on a beautiful and “passive Flower,” which indirectly stands for life. Life cannot overcome its enemy, the “Frost,” which is identified with “Death,” and so the shadow of “Death” keeps edging forward toward a person. Here the text compares evanescent life (“Mortality”) to a “Flower” in the same way as the “Frost” is identical with “Death.” In this way, Dickinson’s “Frost” like “Moss” in Poem 448 breaks into the world of “Beauty”; her severe way of thinking sometimes challenges the tradition of aesthetics from an ironical point of view.

As for another interpretation, Poem 448 is written on the basis of works by English poets; in particular, it is said that Dickinson loved reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Vision of Poets” and John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”¹³⁾ Now I would like to refer to the important poem by Keats, whom Dickinson mentioned as one of her favorite poets or writers.¹⁴⁾ Keats’ “Beauty” and “Truth” are expressed best in the final two lines of the last stanza when he writes the following:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed ;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of
thought

As doth eternity : Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou
say'st,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to
know.'

("Ode on a Grecian Urn," stanza V)¹⁵⁾

The closing two lines are the most important assertion in the poem ; "Beauty" is the same as "truth" and vice versa. People do not know the exact reason while alive except that "Beauty is truth," so even a poet like Keats concludes that "that is all / Ye know on earth." In other words, it is futile to attempt a clearer explanation.

Other English Romantic poets, for example, George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, are much interested in Beauty and deal with it in their poems. Byron describes a woman, "She," as visible in the following : "She walks in Beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies."¹⁶⁾ Also, Shelley, who wrote the poem titled "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," explains his theory of poetry in *A Defense of Poetry* as follows :

Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world ; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them in language or in form sends them forth among mankind bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide — abide. . . .

Poetry turns all things to loveliness : it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed. . . .¹⁷⁾

For Shelley, the imagination cultivated through the aesthetic sensibility of a poet constitutes poetry by selected words, and poetry makes the most beautiful things in the world immortal. That is to say, beauty transformed into poetry will live forever.

Having examined a few aesthetic theories of the English Romantic poets, I will return to Dickinson's theory of "Beauty." Dickinson also believes that "Beauty" gets stronger and more sophisticated in the form of poetry ; however, she always understands the complications about "Beauty," because it is the supreme ideal that poets pursue for writing poems, and "Beauty" does not allow them to reveal what the cause of it is. Additionally, she recognizes that "Beauty," or joy of the world, is truth in the world, even if natural beauty is involved in death, as I have considered the "Moss" in Poem 448, as it were, the symbol of an encroaching, obliterating nature.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this paper I have attempted to demonstrate aspects of Dickinson's aesthetic theory through her poems, as well as quotations from Emerson's essays or the works of English Romantic poets. We find that Dickinson's theory of "Beauty" is complicated and ambiguous ; on the whole her definition of "Beauty" is simple, but she does not develop her idea in detail. As is seen in Section I, "Beauty" impresses us so strongly that we are at a loss for words and cannot explain what "Beauty" is. Therefore, Dickinson ultimately wishes to pass away near "Beauty," because she comprehends that "Beauty" is the supreme theme in the world.

Emerson, Shelley, and Keats tend to deliver impassioned speeches arguing their aesthetic theory; however, they deal with “Beauty” itself rather than clarify some characteristics of this word, as does Dickinson. One of the marked features of Dickinson’s aesthetic theory is that some of her poems concerning “Beauty” have immeasurable factors, as I have studied in regard to Poem 448. Natural phenomena, which seem to be good representatives of solemn beauty, sometimes are transformed into great menaces to people; as a result, authentic “Beauty” is beyond description and imagination even for Dickinson. On these grounds I have come to the conclusion that Dickinson was a poet who made every effort to seek her ultimate “Beauty” in her lifetime through writing poems, in the face of dangers and death.

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) 412, No. 268.
- 2) Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979). In this book, Keller examines the study of the interrelation between Emily Dickinson and other American poets or writers, such as Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Ralf Waldo Emerson, and so on.
- 3) R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. by Emily Dickinson (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998) 1324, No. 1515. The poems in this edition will hereafter be referred to as Fr-1515, at the end of the quotations.
- 4) Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson’s Reading, 1836–1886* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966) 116.
- 5) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature: Addresses and Lectures*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, vol. 1 (New York: AMS P, 1968) 24.
- 6) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed., Edward Waldo Emerson, vol. 3 (New York: AMS P, 1968) 7.

- 7) 西行『山家集』後藤重郎 校注(東京:新潮社、昭和57年)29頁。
- 8) The last stanza of Poem 327 is as follows:
These are the Visions flitted Guido —
Titian — never told —
Domenichino dropped his pencil —
Paralyzed, with Gold — (Fr-327, stanza 6)
- 9) Charles Roberts Anderson, *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Westport: Greenwood P, 1960) 150.
- 10) Anderson 150.
- 11) Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 166.
- 12) Joan Kirkby, *Women Writers: Emily Dickinson* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 104.
- 13) Helen McNeil, *Emily Dickinson* (London: Virago P, 1986) 161–162.
- 14) *Letters*, No. 261. According to this letter, Dickinson cites the names of Mr. and Mrs. Browning as some of her other favorite poets.
- 15) John Barnard, ed., *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, by John Keats (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973) 345–346.
- 16) Frank D. McConnell, ed., *Byron’s Poetry*, by George Gordon, Lord Byron (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978) 11.
- 17) Timothy Webb, ed., *Poems and Prose: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley (Vermont: Everyman, 1995) 275.

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Akemi Matsumoto : "I Died for Beauty"

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