Paradox of Paradising:

The Dickinsonian Aberrant

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【摘要】

本文旨在討論十九世紀中葉美國女詩人狄董森的特殊詩風與創意，並試圖據以建立“以異為常”的通觀。狄氏以詩為道，一生致力於建構她心目中的天堂，其風格迥異傳統英美詩，反倒與中國古典詩的語法頗多神四之處。但此實為所有創新的通則：以異代常而為新常。

【Abstract】

The paper attempts to explore the poetic creativity of Emily Dickinson, the 19th-century American poetess who exhibits a high degree of the aberrational in her poetics and ideas. Dickinson dismantles all the "framing" conventions, linguistic and otherwise, to construct her own poetic paradise, the *dao* for which the poet is prepared to martyr herself. In the process, the paper argues, the poet exhibits a surprising degree of syntactic affinity with classical Chinese poetry which, apparently aberrational to the Anglo-American poetic tradition, nevertheless establishes a pattern of poetic creativity: the aberrant supplanting the normal to become the (new) normal (science).

【Key words】

paradox, paradise, aberrant, dao, framing, de-framing

In the concluding chapter to his definitive biography of Emily Dickinson, Richard B. Sewall, tackling the question of "Just how good is she?" concurs with the prediction that "within another decade America's two seminal poets will be Whitman and Dickinson" (708). Today that prediction has become a widely accepted commonplace, with Dickinson perhaps gaining greater popularity within and without the academia. It is highly interesting to note that these two "seminal" poets of America, two distinct voices and each unique in his/her own way, should have been contemporaries, coming from the age of American literary nationalism, when a distinctly postcolonial America was engaged in an intense search for its own cultural and literary nationality. The bardic and oceanic Whitman is political, patriotic, nationalistic, and socially engaged, seeking in a conscious act of national narration to turn a song of the self into an epic of American democracy. The private, public-shunning, perhaps agoraphobic Dickinson, on the other hand, is hardly concerned with any affair of the public sphere. A letter to her neighbor Mrs. James S. Cooper, probably a Fourth of July greeting written around 1877, is a succinct statement of her position:

> "My Country, 'tis of thee," has always meant the Woods—to me—
> "Sweet Land of Liberty," I trust is your own— (L509)[1]

Securely ensconced in her father's Homestead to be with her muse, she sings in the obscurity of the woods (the acres of meadows and groves in the Homestead?), much like Whitman's hermit thrush, writing her "Letter[s] to the World" (J441).

But the paradox is that these two "seminal" and, one might add, great poets should have been merely marginal at best in their own times. While Whitman was "disgraceful" (L261), Dickinson, unpublished in her lifetime, was "strange" and "weird" even to her first major editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom

[1] All references to the letters are from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora S. Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Prress of Harvard University Press, 1958). Hereafter referred as L in the text.

Dickinson begged to be her "Preceptor" (L265), and Mabel Loomis Todd.[2] Judged from the standard of late-Romantic Puritan New England, Dickinson and Whitman were simply aberrational, a sort of aberrant "abnormal science" against the dominant paradigm. Any voice which pronounces the judgment of "strange" and "weird" assumes the stance and the authority of the norm, necessarily a structure which defines, restricts and frames. However unconcerned about the social and political events of her days and however withdrawn into her private world she might have been, Dickinson was framed: New England framed her, Puritanism framed her, opinions and attitudes of her days framed her, and English framed her. In her we see the universal case of the framed against the frame: the historical given as an essential, prescribed environment of the creative spirit, the Emersonian non-conformist, the Thoreauvian disobedient, the Melvillian Bartleby, locked perennially in an agonistic contest against the norm in order to adorn the world and nature with a new thing, and "gather Paradise":

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House that Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of Eye –
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

[2] See Richard B. Sewall. *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 715.

(J657)[3]

I

What constitute the "strange" and "weird" in Dickinson are readily recognizable to anyone who attempts to read her. The Dickinsonian language and manner, her ideas and positions, projectiles of a mind which is "just the weight of God," are a constant challenge to her readers not only of the 19th century, but of the 20th and the 21st centuries; not only to those whose English is acquired, but also to those born into the language. Cristanne Miller, in the opening page of her *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, observes with great insight that "The language of Dickinson's poetry is elliptically compressed, disjunctive, at times ungrammatical; its reference is unclear; its metaphors are so densely compacted that literal components of meaning fade" (Miller, 1). Radical ellipses often lead to disjunctive syntax, which, not dissimilar to classical Chinese, has a primordial quality that makes meaning especially fluid, indeterminate, and hard, if not impossible, to pin down. Believing wholeheartedly that language, especially words, is life, she is ready to tear down the stone walls of English grammar whenever needs be. This poem about the common house fly is a dramatic example which Sewall cites and discusses: [4]

Those cattle smaller than a Bee
That herd upon the eye –
Whose tillage is the passing Crumb –
Those Cattle are the Fly –

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[3] All Dickinson poems discussed in this paper are from Thomas Johnson's *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston & Toronto: Little Brown, 1960).

[4] For Sewall's comment on the poem, see his *Life*, 721. Sewall is enthusiastic enough about Dickinson's language that he compares her with Shakespeare. After quoting from Rita Lindberg-Seyersted to the effect that in using "freely the creative principles operating in the English language," in which "Shakespeare is her preceptor," he goes on to add that "she not only learned from Shakespeare in this area but achieved comparable results." See p.719.

Of Barns for Winter – blameless –
Extemporaneous stalls
They found to our objection –
On eligible walls –
Reserving the presumption
To suddenly descend
And gallop on the Furniture –
Or odiouser offend –
Of their peculiar calling
Unqualified to judge
To Nature we remand them
To justify or scourge –

(J1388)

The light, lively and daring metaphors are matched by an easy, nonchalant, matter-of-factly twist/invention of grammar, "odiouser offend." The cumbersome comparative marker "more" is discarded for the convenient suffix –er, and in the phrase "odiouser" is either an adjective or an adverb, depending upon whether "offend" is construed as a noun or verb. This is all very Chinese indeed. This breaking through the stone walls of English grammar does reveal an affinity of the Dickinsonian English with Chinese, resulting in an indeterminancy and multiplicity that enriches her poetry. Though seemingly irritated by the offensive pranks of the fly ("to our objection"), the speaking voice here, very typically of the Dickinson love and concern for nature's little creatures, does not presume to judge, but decided, in a light and humorous (and perhaps a bit condescending) vein, to "remand" them to the court of Nature, which may override our objection and "justify" the fly's "peculiar calling" of irritating humans.

For Dickinson, language, especially the written word, is life. This is her deeply held belief, amounting to an act of faith that guides her practice of poetizing. Words are blades (J479: "She dealt her pretty words like Blades - /How glittering they shone - /And every One unbared a Nerve /Or watoned with a Bone –") and loaded guns

(J754: "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –"), carrying with them life-warrant or death-warrant. Dickinson opens an 1880 letter to Louise Norcross with this paragraph on the written word:

> What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though no body arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched "goes off"? (L656)

Though the paragraph obviously addresses the subject of an "earnest letter," meaning epistolary letters, but as Cristanne Miller observes, it could also refer to the alphabet, thus to the written word in either case (Miller, 7). Be careful with this "awful power" invested in "a hand lightly created," it deals life or death, even unto eternity, long after the hand that impelled it is moldering dust:

> A Word dropped careless on a Page
> May stimulate an eye
> When folded in a perpetual seam
> The Wrinkled Maker lie
>
> Infection in the sentence breeds
> We may inhale Despair
> At distances of Centuries
> From the Malaria –
>
> (J1261)

In view of the power of language, which constitutes the "Circumference" that is Dickinson's "business," her poet's calling, even greater care must be taken, ultimately, to preserves the sharpness of mind which is the real master that impels the hand lightly created to project words into poems. The following poem, another example of

Dickinson's peculiar and daring use of English, typifies the destructiveness of a traumatic experience to the creative faculty:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden Way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

(J341)

The poem, shaped by piling image upon image of rigidity, expressed in nouns or adjectives (formal, ceremonious, Tombs, stiff, mechanical, Wooden, regardless, Quarts, stone, Lead, Stupor), is an elegy for the creative mind, a version of the Coleridgean "Dejection" except that the disappearance of joy is replaced by a non-referential "great pain," which so blunted and numbed the mind until it was unable to even tell who/what caused it, and when. The dying of the mind is recorded, though, in self-referential and graphic vividness, in three stages in the final line of the poem: "First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –." It is the final "letting go," a surrender of the totally demoralized will giving up its ghost, so to speak, that turns the "Feet" of the second stanza, the feet of a verse line and therefore poetry personified, mechanical. The "Wooden Way" this pair of feet travels in a circle ("go round") is

framed, circumscribed, entombed, and in every dimension, be it "Of Ground, or Air, or Ought - ": earth (Ground, a noun), heaven (Air, a noun), and Ought (a modal inducted to serve as a noun here, referring probably to the moral logic by which the creative mind works).[5] Now this is extraordinary grammar and metaphor, a totalizing death of the creative mind whose "business" is to impel and project language into poetry, thus creating paradise. This is more serious than biological death, as Dickinson seems to be moving toward something similar to the Confucian privileging of the Dao (except that her Dao is poetry, her "Paradise"): "If I am made privy to the Dao in the morning, dying in the evening is fine by me." (Perhaps this should be rendered, Dickinsonianly, "Morning hear Dao /Evening dead fine," so that we may reap the added value of illustrating the close affinity of the Chinese and the Dickinsonian syntax.)

Deeply, even obsessively aware of the reality of annihilation, Dickinson makes it a subject of exploration, as in the preceding poem about the grave consequences of the loss of consciousness, in which it chronologizes its own demise with graphic sharpness. "This World is not Conclusion," she declares in another poem, "A Species stands beyond - /Invisible, as Music - /But positive, as Sound." This invisible world beyond the visible so "beckons and baffles" that the urge to gain access to it will never abate: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth /That nibbles at the soul -" (J501). There is a steadfastness in her gaze that would not only shame Hamlet but turn the act of gaze into an active performance of her poet's "occupation" of gathering "Paradise":

> This Consciousness that is aware
> Of Neighbors and the Sun
> Will be the one aware of Death
> And that itself alone

[5] The word "ought" is often an alternate form for "aught" for Ed, meaning anything. I have chosen to ignore this and take the word as it is to dramatize ED's radical aberrancy.

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be –
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

(J822)

The centrality of mind is further celebrated, in the bright sunshine rather than subterraneanly as in the above poem, in poem 632, where it is not only wider than the sky and deeper than the sea, but simply God itself, the source of poetry and poetizing, authoring and authorizing.

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –
The one the other will absorb –
As Sponges – Buckets – do –

The Brain is just the weight of God –

For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –
And they will differ – if they do –
As Syllable from Sound –

(J632)

And how does syllable differ from sound? The natural-neutral energy of sound is there for the creative mind to mould and shape and translate into an expressive syllable, harnessed and framed into a poem much as God created his Heaven. In short, the self-embeddedness of consciousness—the soul, the spirit, the mind, the brain, the seeing eye/I—is infinitely self-engendering and self-mirroring, its tenacious spectrality haunts even as a tireless probing intellect, like Whitman's noiseless patient spider who "launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, /Ever reeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them. /.... /Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold, /Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul."[6] This is how the poet dwells in "Possibility."

II

When Dickinson declares that "…I see—New Englandly—," she is openly acknowledging her framing, much as Whitman concedes that though a "kosmos," he is yet "of Manhattan the son":

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—
Because I grow—where Robins do—
....
But, were I Britain born,
I'd Daisies spurn—
None but the Nut—October fit—

[6] Nina Bayam, *et. al.* eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 1989), 2077.

Because, through dropping it,
The Seasons flit—I'm taught—
Without the Snow's Tableau
Winter, were lie—to me—
Because I see—New Englandly—
The Queen, discerns like me—
Provincially—

(J285)

Obviously, the poem is a Whitmanesque postcolonial statement of place-based American identity, yet it is ultimately about framing as the construction of a sovereign self in its universalizing of the law of provinciality: "The Queen, discerns like me—/Provincially—." This is the paradox of framing as *de*-framing, limiting as *de*-limiting, for to be able to see how one sees is a step outside the frame already: You are looking at Lu Shan (Mt. Lu) from a distance, no longer lost in its labyrinth and unable to see.

Yet seeing, true seeing, entails an inevitable risk in its act of de-framing that is bound to offend and incur the displeasure of the power that be.

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—and you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—

(J435)

The poet, with a "discerning Eye," is necessarily a non-conformist, a dissenter, an oppositionist, and a threat to whatever status quo with the terrifying truth the eye/I

reveals. The version of right and wrong, madness and sense the majority embraces and guards is deconstructed by the Dickinsonian "discerning Eye." The majority, here the menacing Other menaced as its house, not the fair one the poet names "Possibility," is in danger of being de-framed, treats truth as heresy, and thus resorts to oppressive violence. This is a veritable restatement of the Thoreauvian resistance against an unjust government which handles the least dissent with "a Chain." As with Thoreau again, anyone who is in the right, morally right, already constitutes a majority of one: "The Soul selects her own Society—/Then—shuts the door—/To her divine Majority—/Present no more—" (J303). This is also the Melvillian Bartleby intoning unperturbedly, "I'll prefer not to." Paradise is to be achieved by an act of conscious transgression.

There is a clear measure of conscious pride in Dickinson—or shall we say confidence?—about possessing a "discerning Eye" that makes the poet a distinct class unto itself/herself. Despite the speaker assuming to be one of "Us," Dickinson's real voice does filter through the posturing in this discourse on the radical differences between the poet and the populace:

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion –so unconscious –
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
Exterior – to Time –

(L448)

Syntactically, this is another strikingly Chinese poem in its omissions of functional words, and the idea, echoing the Wordsworthian defamiliarization of the ordinary, also accords with the spirit of the Chinese adage of "turning the decayed into the wonderful." Ah, but this power of the poet to see and distill "Attar so immense" from things right under our nose, which we daily look but do not see, does mock us by entitling us "To ceaseless Poverty –." How her choice word, "entitles," deprives by enlarging the dunce in us! The contrast between the poet and us is further highlighted in two opposing attractions which focus our different eyes: The poet, unconscious of "Portion," the visible, palpable concern of the world which is "not Conclusion," as we have seen earlier, and therefore impervious to any "Robbing" in this regard, looks beyond and over it to rivet his eyes on poetry ("Himself"), a "Fortune – /Exterior – to Time –." This is how the poet achieves immortality through poetry, and dwells in paradise.

But we should have no wrangle with the poet for entitling us to "ceaseless Poverty," for there is a price we are unable to pay to extract attar from roses. We do not normally sacrifice our life for the Dao of poetry, as Dickinson's poet is ready to do.

Essential Oils – are wrung –
The Attar from the Rose
Be not expressed by Suns – alone –
It is the gift of Screws –

The General Rose – Decay –
But this – in Lady's Drawer

Make Summer – When the Lady lie
In Ceaseless Rosemary –
(J675)

The rose decays, but its "Essential oils," the gift of "Screws"—the nails that pinned Jesus Christ to the cross? thus suffering, anguish, even pain of death—will make eternal "Summer," even as the Lady, probably the poet who sacrificed herself for the Dao of poetry, lies in death. So poetry may necessitate martyrdom? Is this why she counsels the art of "slant"?

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –
(J1129)

The poem reads like a homily on moderate behavior, but it is really about the art of truth telling. Thus poetry takes on the nature of an oracle, and we have a seer who is also a sayer in Dickinson, and this is what makes the poet truly dangerous. Is this why she refuses to publish? The danger of the poet speaking truth publicly is probably what "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" (J754) is about. The poem is one of the most cryptic and difficult in the Dickinson canon which tempts almost all Dickinson

scholars.[7]

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's Head –

[7] "The names of those critics who have offered interpretations of 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun–' read like a *Who's Who* of Dickinson scholars," writes Domhnall Mitchell in his *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), and then goes on to provide this partial list: Charles Anderson, Paula Bennett, Sharon Cameron, Joanne Feit Diehl, Joanne Dobson, Alert Gelpi, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Alfred Habegger, Roland Hagenbuchle, Susan Howe, Thomas H. Johnson, Karl Keller, Helen McNeil, Cristanne Miller, Barbara Mossberg, Rebecca Patterson, Vivianne Pollak, David Porter, Adrienne Rich, Richard Sewall, Robert Weisbuch, and Shira Wolosky. See p.324. The list is taken from the two-volume annotated guide by Joseph Duchac, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1890-1977* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), 321-31, and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1978-1989* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1993), 257-62. No doubt, more critics have tried their hands on the poem in the 16 years since the cut off date of Duchac's second volume.

'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

(J754)

Let us recall a letter we quoted earlier, her 1880 letter to cousin Louise about the "awful power" of the letter: "An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched 'goes off' ?" The fact that Dickinson should have conceived of the poet as a loaded gun—loaded with words, her bullets—is revelatory of her obsession with the destructive aspect of poetry as oracle. A gun, loaded or unloaded, which stands in an obscure corner is not a gun, for it is not functioning. For a gun to be a gun, it has to be loaded, "carried away," touched and "goes off," discharging its load of bullets, a Vesuvius savoring the pleasure of its destructive eruption. But here is the paradox as dilemma: true and full expression leads to death, for "None stir the second time – /On whom I lay a Yellow Eye – /Or an emphatic Thumb –." Poetry is immortal; it does not have "the power to die." And that makes it all the more dangerous, and some measure of control has to be posited. Fortunately, the loaded gun has a master, the awareness of its own destructive nature. This awareness is the mind capable of a higher seeing that gets us out of the woods to see the true face of Lu Shan. This awareness finally leads to the loaded gun praying for its master to out live it: "Though I than He – may longer live /He longer must – than I –."

Reading "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –" and "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" together does bring some kind of a revelation: Is this why Dickinson resorts to what Martha Neil Smith and other manuscript scholars calls publication by fascicles?[8] Ostensibly, Dickinson complains about the world not writing back to her, and speaks contemptuously of publication as a foul "Auction /Of the Mind of Man –," yet on a deeper, perhaps allegorical level, it may be related to her perception of poetry. This perception, or definition, is apparently "strange" and "weird" enough as to be bemusing to Higginson, for he shared it with his wife as an amusing anecdote in a letter: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way" (L342a). But this is consistent with her obsession with the destructive power of poetry as oracle. With her aberrant mind, finally.

III

The poet as a seer and sayer is what Emerson was looking for but could not find until Whitman appeared on the American landscape. Emerson had been guest at the Homestead, and therefore had a greater physical proximity to Dickinson. Had Dickinson published her poems and Emerson read them, would Emerson have recognized another American poet in her? And would he have recognized in Dickinson a much more fearful, that is to say more effective, poet than Whitman? When F. O. Matthiessen published his monumental *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* in 1942, Dickinson, was not "seminal" enough to be included. This most dramatically bespeaks the paradox of "paradising," and the centrality and legitimacy of the aberrant.

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[8] See Martha Neil Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Reading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

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