

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#449 (c.1862)

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 Brethren, 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 –

ANALYSIS

“One of Emily Dickinson’s best poems [‘I died for Beauty’] brings up the familiar question of how beauty and truth are related.... We may now add that beauty and truth are focuses of experience, intensified moments of our perception of the universe and man’s destiny in it. They produce such similar ecstatic emotions in the percipient soul as to be indistinguishable. They are nothing but the moments in which we experience with the greatest intensity and joy the full sense of our destiny. These moments of experience have a place in the poet’s hierarchy of redemption which puts them above all other experiences....

She says that she died in the name of or in pursuit of beauty, whereas the gentleman died in the name of or in pursuit of truth. In other words, she is identifying beauty and truth with ‘immortality,’ and this is the only sense in which she may be said to have tried to give beauty and truth a metaphysical meaning. But it is hardly more than one of her Gnostic assertions. And the great power of the poem lies in the remarkable feeling of the importance and limitation of the human condition and of man’s consciousness and the inevitable engulfment of man in the natural world.”

Richard Chase
Emily Dickinson
(William Sloane 1951) 196-98

“The most strange, and some of the best of Emily’s poems, imagine the experience of life after death. Obviously impossible on the level of reality, this imagined experience nevertheless conveys something of that God-like detachment from life which a person who ‘has died to the world’ may ideally achieve. The eerie unrealism of these poems recalls what D. H. Lawrence once scornfully described as the ‘post-mortem effects’ typical of American literature. But in Emily’s poetry these effects are not so much morbid and illuminating. By imagining vividly the psychological experience of life after death, she suggests the shift of values which ‘death to the world’ implies. The experience of death thus becomes less significant than the psychic adjustment implied by it.

Take one of her most popular poems [‘I died for Beauty’].... On the surface this seems a fairly simple restatement of the old romantic dream of Keats: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’” that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ But on closer examination, it is seen to imply a radical revision of the idea, and to suggest a much more exact and truthful restatement of it. It implies a different philosophy of life, at once more classical and more modern: the key phrase, which has not been reversed, is ‘on earth.’ Emily, by

implication, denies the truth of the dream on earth, but specifically affirms its truth in heaven, in the eyes of God, or—more realistically and strangely—in the earth. She contrasts the values of human life on earth with the values of God. And she redefines the romantic dream of Keats more effectively than if she had argued it. ‘That perfect dream’ of the union of beauty and truth can be realized only in death. On earth, that is ‘why I failed.’

Philosophically Emily’s idea might be elaborated in different ways. The quest for true beauty—especially for the non-human beauty of nature, and for the trans-human beauty of God—alienates the poet. Or, more pragmatically: truth seldom seems identical with beauty to the human mind. The ‘look of agony’ does not usually seem beautiful, nor does the experience of death. Only if these humanly unpleasant things are seen from the point of view of God, after all natural emotions have been ‘regulated,’ can they be described as beautiful.

Technically this poem starts with regular rhymes, as a simple statement of imagined experience. Two corpses (the word ‘adjust’ here emphasizes that they really are corpses) are buried beside each other. Only the illusion of animate intelligence is preserved by the words ‘room’ and ‘softly.’ Then, in the second stanza, the discontinuity between the values of life and of death is emphasized by the past tense of ‘failed’ and ‘replied.’ The contrast between past mortality and present eternity is suggested by the shift to the eternal present: ‘are one.’ And this difference is suggested by the imperfect rhyme of ‘replied’ and ‘said.’ Finally, the last stanza goes on to realize the feeling of alienation by suggesting the absorption of human corpse into non-human nature by the growing of ‘the moss’ over lips and headstones. And the strangeness is emphasized poetically by the strange rhyme of ‘rooms’ and ‘names.’ There are few poems in literature that seem so simple yet are so complex.”

Frederick I. Carpenter
“Emily Dickinson and the Rhymes of Dreams”
The University of Kansas City Review XX (Winter 1953) 116-17

Michael Hollister (2014)