

ENG 551

“The Tint I cannot take”: the Limits of Language and Perception in the Work of Emily

Dickinson

Emily Dickinson, in a poem numbered 627 in Thomas H. Johnson’s complete edition of her poetry, begins with an unexpected valuation of the ungraspable and unbearable, “The Tint I cannot take – is best --,” and continues over twenty-four lines to articulate perceptual limits. The poem runs:

The Tint I cannot take – is best --

The Color too remote

That I could show it in Bazaar --

A Guinea at a sight –

The fine – impalpable Array --

That swaggers on the eye

Like Cleopatra’s Company --

Repeated – in the sky –

The Moments of Dominion

That happen on the Soul

And leave it with a Discontent

Too exquisite – to tell –

The eager look – on Landscapes --

As if they just repressed

Some Secret – that was pushing

Like Chariots – in the Vest –

The Pleading of the Summer --

That other Prank – of Snow --

That Cushions Mystery with Tulle,

For fear the Squirrels – know.

The Graspless manners – mock us --

Until the Cheated Eye

Shuts arrogantly – in the Grave --

Another way – to see –

Partly about seeing and its difficulties, the poem transposes those problems into language, and challenges the mind's eye similarly, recreating perceptual limits with overlapping syntactical clauses, only ambiguously semi-punctuated with dashes, so that the mind struggles to discern boundaries between them, just like the eye would squint and stare at an unfamiliar sight. That ambiguity occurs in many of Dickinson's poems, but here she addresses it thematically to suggest the nature of her poetic project (secret, mystery, discontent, but not for display in a bazaar) and a way of apprehending it (the Cheated Eye / Shuts arrogantly). The poem itself is a tint we cannot take, or full of tints we cannot take, its meaning able to be loosely sketched but never captured or even completely tolerated by the mind. That meaning often manifests in fundamentally social scenarios of looking and being looked at (the bazaar, the landscape

repressing secrets, and the fearful knowledge of squirrels), so that Dickinson's writing plays on the dynamic of display and elusiveness.

The first stanza's use of "tint" and the verb "take" suggests a triple limit – the speaker cannot take the tint as an object to be seized, cannot take it as an experience to be endured, and cannot take it like a dye, as if the poet were a piece of fabric or a photographic plate. All three meanings carry weight. First, that color itself, as an abstract, intangible entity, cannot be taken; second, even the perception of that elusive color itself cannot be tolerated, as if too painful or intense; third, the poet will not be changed or colored by the tint, so that it will be barred from the poet's self rather than absorbed in a transformative way. The consciousness of the poet, then, prefers these three characteristics as best, favorite, or superior: the color which can't be captured, which can't be tolerated, which can't be integrated or absorbed into the self. The subject of poetic experience, then, is "too remote", remains out of reach, or immovable, or hot to the touch. Possibly, it cannot be taken because taking is forbidden. A color one "cannot take" even suggests the experience of looking at the sun, with the brightness too intense to be stably perceived.

All these qualities of the tint resist commoditization, and their color can't be displayed in a bazaar, put on sale or put up as a spectacle. The language of the third line carries a slight hint of regret: one can read, alternately, "The color is too remote for me to show it in a bazaar," or "Oh, if only I could show it in a bazaar." The latter meaning, more buried, is secondary, like the emotion itself. One can't help reading some connection to Dickinson's sense of her own poetry, as something, for better and worse, not meant for easy consumption or spectacle. A bazaar, with its vaguely Middle Eastern connotation, would likely have a "tint" of exoticism for Dickinson and her world, so a color too remote for the bazaar would be remote to a special degree.

The second stanza manages to suggest both a distant sight and a personal, local one, though both are elusive, “fine” and “impalpable.” The local sight: the array that “swaggers on the eye,” though the curiousness of the preposition suggests something both swaggering into view and something actually existing “on” the eye, like a pure image separated from the thing itself but not penetrating the eye’s surface. The distant sight: the swaggering array “Repeated – in the sky –“, with the syntax offering three possibilities. The first is that the array is repeated in the sky, so that it exists in two places; the second is that the array is like Cleopatra’s Company repeated in the sky, so that it visually echoes something else. Alternately, the array resembles Cleopatra’s Company in the way both are “Repeated – in the sky –“. Some ambiguity, then—what is seen on the eye is repeated in the sky, but not inevitably, because reading the lines allows a superposition of images, almost like seeing double, with a suggestion, maybe, of looking at the sun and seeing spots. “Cleopatra’s Company” likewise has more than one meaning- those who surrounded Cleopatra in her company; the company or presence of Cleopatra herself—the former suggests the absence or back-grounding of Cleopatra, as if she, like the tint, is “too remote”; the latter suggests a more radiant figure, one, if Dickinson’s Cleopatra comes from Shakespeare, with confidence in her theatricality as a social being in a way not shared by Dickinson. The poem holds all of these ambiguities at a distance from the reader, so that the boundaries of the reader’s cognition are as imprecise as the boundaries of the speaker’s vision, and objects blur at its edges.

However, the third stanza speaks most directly to poetic imagination, since the feeling left on the poet’s soul resists telling by translation into words. That feeling, “Discontent,” comes from “Moments of Dominion,” suggesting most obviously a sort of religious presence, so that the boundaries of perception remain intact, but through them she can sense the visitation of a higher force, or being, or form of consciousness, or metaphysical entity. Discontentment results

because the moments make the individual mind strain at its boundaries, perceiving but not “taking” what it apprehends, suggesting even a kind of imaginative vision, like a dream, which does not survive the cross over the threshold into ordinary consciousness.

The discontent, significantly, is “Too exquisite – to tell --,” and “exquisite,” like “take” in the poem’s first line, is a word where the architecture opens up to contain a breadth of meanings. Per the Oxford English Dictionary, “exquisite” can refer to a quality of language, that which is “carefully selected; aptly chosen...uncommon; in unfavourable sense, affected.” In this sense, the poet’s discontent would be a sort of language beyond language, so carefully selected that it resists “telling,” either because conversation reduces complexities to simplicities or because ordinary language lacks the subtlety of the hyper-refined language of the imagination. Likewise, “exquisite” can refer to anything “brought to a high degree of perfection,” like a work of art or craftsmanship. It can be a descriptor for torture, as something “intensely painful,” but the “prevailing sense” describes something “of such consummate excellence, beauty, or perfection, as to excite intense delight or admiration.” Other usages from the 19<sup>th</sup> century correlate “exquisite” with “intense, acute, keen” and “keenly sensitive to impressions...finely-strung.” Exquisite discontent, then, might be intensely felt, beautiful, perfected, carefully formed, or even bearing some arcane relationship to language. The poet faces a problem not just visual but verbal and phenomenological: tint that cannot be taken, and discontent that cannot be told. The elusiveness, though, has moved from what is separate from the self (or “on the eye”) to what is within it, so that even “dominion,” though “on” the soul rather than “in” it, leaves no interior impression capable of being communicated in language.

The poem as a whole, though, focuses on what the eye can see and on what it means to be seen, with an intense consciousness of the gaze- the color that can’t be shown in a bazaar, the

array that “swaggers” confidently before the gaze of another, and “the eager look – on landscapes -- / As if they just repressed / Some secret...” Again, the poem leaves the object of vision unclear. The language supports the possibility that “the eager look” belongs to a viewer of the landscape, and “landscape” could mean, alternately, a natural scene or a painting (or photograph) of such a scene, but the language also supports the possibility that the landscape itself bears an “eager look,” like one would speak of the look on a person’s face. The distinction between subject and object collapses, and one can’t clearly separate the parts of the scene the way more precise language would—for example, “one looking eagerly on landscapes” or “landscapes with an eager look about them” would disambiguate the meaning. In the former case, a viewer looks eagerly to the landscape as if it possesses a “secret”; in the latter, the landscape looks “eager”, personified, as if trying to conceal a secret with a distracting expression. In either case, however, the secret may be a red herring- the viewer looks eagerly “as if” the landscape holds a secret, or the “eager look” on the landscape itself seems to indicate the presence of a secret, but nothing confirms the secret actually exists, only the perception of a secret.

The poem seems to repress its own secrets, too, with some of the most elusive images in all of Dickinson’s poetry, and their difficulty alone aligns with the general motif of perceptual difficulty. Dickinson writes of:

Some Secret – that was pushing

Like Chariots – in the Vest –

The Pleading of the Summer --

That other Prank – of Snow --

That Cushions Mystery with Tulle,  
 For fear the Squirrels – know.

A secret “pushing...in the Vest” makes sense, as if a person’s body and clothing strain to conceal it from bursting forth, but “pushing / Like Chariots” challenges the imagination. Buttons on a vest might be a visual analogue to chariot wheels, and the association of chariots with battle would add a tint of aggressive energy to the chariots’ pushing. A conscious or unconscious reference to hymns may be in play as well. Though a full investigation into hymnal literature would be beyond the scope of this essay, a cursory search turns up an 1835 composition by Henry Hart Milman, “The Chariot! the chariot! Its wheels roll in fire”. Per [hymnary.org](http://hymnary.org), its first verse runs:

The chariot! the chariot! Its wheels roll in fire,  
 As the Lord cometh down in the pomp of his ire!  
 Lo! self moving it drives on its pathway of cloud,  
 And the heavens with the burden of Godhead or bowed.

The fourth verse, incidentally, proclaims “the thrones are all set, / Where the Lamb and the white vested elders are met.” The hymn can be aligned with the poem, if the Lord’s chariot and the Godhead translate into a fine array repeated in the sky, and to moments of dominion, while a manifestation of the divine would fit with the poem’s attention to what cannot be entirely perceived or “taken,” captured, endured. Without positing direct influence, the two texts clearly rhyme in a way which suggests an imaginative affinity.

Past the chariots, though, and past the vest, the text continues to push against what the mind can imagine. Many poems challenge the reader to construct their meaning, so the claim for this

text is one of degree, bolstered by the fact that its difficulty bears a logical relationship to its subject. The fifth stanza does not present an obvious, dominant syntactical relationship between its parts, so the difficulties of seeing and perceiving boundaries occur again in the language itself. “The Pleading of the Summer -- / That other Prank – of Snow --,” can communicate that the pleading of the summer is a prank played by snow, or that the prank is the snow, played by the summer through its pleading. One season is the prank of another, with the snow tricking the summer into pleading, presumably for its own continuance, or the summer plays a prank on a different entity with the snow, as in an unexpected, unseasonal snow shower in June. Again, the boundary between seasons and the boundary between agent and object are mingled and confused, unable to be clearly seen and perceived. Snow itself can have that effect.

The snow is clearly the subject of the clause that follows it: “...Snow -- / That Cushions Mystery with Tulle, / For fear the Squirrels – know.” Snow as tulle, a white fabric, serves a purpose similar to the vest which represses secrets, by cushioning mystery, covering it both to conceal and to soften it. (Secondarily, the snow might cushion the ground for mystery to fall on it.) The fear seems to be that the squirrels know something about the mystery, the tint that can’t be taken, the discontent that can’t be told, or might know, in a way which threatens the poem’s speaker.

The speaker does not worry idly about the knowledge of another species- the philosopher Thomas Nagel, for example, has argued that the human mind can never know “what it is like” to be a bat, even if we attain detailed anatomical knowledge of its brain and mental processes. Along with that agnosticism, one remembers Blake’s question, “How do you know but every Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, / closed by your senses five?” For a squirrel to see the tint Dickinson cannot take would be to play a prank on her, a prank by

existence or God, to privilege an animal with special knowledge denied even to poets. The speaker has fear, though, that the squirrels know, not certainty. In this case, again, the mind confronts the limits of its capacity to know unambiguously.

The final stanza suggests the possibility of another means of knowing which might circumvent the perceptual limits confronted in the poem. The text concludes:

The Graspless manners – mock us --

Until the Cheated Eye

Shuts arrogantly – in the Grave --

Another way – to see –

The “Graspless manners” are exactly those which fail to cope with perceptual limits and ambiguities, which fail to grasp their objects. They are put at a distance from the self, since they “mock us,” suggesting a portion of the mind remains separate from that frustration. The “Cheated Eye” remembers the bazaar of the first stanza, suggesting some financial loss, but more broadly connotes the disappointment of unmet expectations, from the eye which expects to see, and know, and take all tints. Its shutting happens arrogantly because it rejects its mode of perception as if entitled to something better, and with hope of an afterlife after the grave to gratify that entitlement. The final line both endorses that hope and mocks it, with the sarcastic suggestion that the other way to see is not a desirable way at all sitting alongside the idea that death will give new sight, and in between those two poles, the suggestion that the imagination of the shut, arrogant, expectant eye does give a kind of sight in its rejection of sensory immediacy and its dim construction of a new reality to come. Ultimately, though, these ambiguities again do not permit resolution, so that death itself is another perceptual limit, a tint that cannot be taken.

A different Dickinson poem, “We grow accustomed to the Dark --,” complements my reading of “The tint I cannot take” by sketching a different modality of vision, one which does not reach to take a tint or color because it instead adjust to the darkness which renders those things invisible. Dickinson writes,

We grow accustomed to the Dark --  
 When Light is put away –  
 As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
 To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment – We uncertain step  
 For newness of the night --  
 Then – fit our Vision to the Dark --  
 And meet the Road – erect--

And so of larger – Darknesses --  
 Those Evenings of the Brain --  
 When not a Moon disclose a sign --  
 Or Star – come out – within --

The Bravest – grope a little --  
 And sometimes hit a Tree  
 Directly in the Forehead --  
 But as they learn to see --

Either the Darkness alters --  
 Or something in the sight  
 Adjusts itself to Midnight --  
 And Life steps almost straight.

This poem is solitary, like the grave, with no social consciousness, no public places like bazaars, no desire to tell discontent to others or see into the mind of a landscape or a squirrel, no tint or color, no light at all. The darkness of the second poem resembles the darkness on the shut eye in the first poem, except it is not the darkness of confinement to the grave, so movement is possible. That movement is risky, because one can hit a tree, so humility comes with it- people “grope” and “learn to see.”

The second shows ambiguity as an enabling rather than a limiting phenomenon, and bears more hope for that reason. Ambiguity enables near-vision:

Either the Darkness alters --  
 Or something in the sight  
 Adjusts itself to Midnight.

Instead of marking a perceptual limit- because we cannot tell whether the Darkness alters or the sight Adjusts- the ambiguity marks a perceptual balance, harmony, the compatibility of darkness and sight. Even if there is not true perception, and we see no tint or color, there is almost-straight stepping, and forward movement: Life and not the Grave.

To account for the differences between the epistemological outlooks of these two poems, one can identify differences in their sense of the social world. The latter poem carries a sense of

solitude as something freeing: when the neighbor says goodbye, and takes away light (the consciousness of others could help one to refine or confirm his own perceptions), there is still a road for guidance, even if dark, a path pre-existing the self- and the freedom of the darkness enables a degree of relaxation and humor about the self and its errors (hitting a tree in the forehead), because one can laugh at oneself most easily in privacy, when the least is at stake. The first poem has much more of a sense of social judgment and display before it: the bazaar, manners (which are social, and exist to be observed), mockery, swagger, telling, pleading. The light or lamp of the neighbor, which might confirm one's own perceptions, can also be cruel when it denies them. The radical privacy is not one of freedom, as on the dark road, but of isolation and vulnerability-- there are secrets in others, private knowledge in squirrels, and in the self, feelings of discontent that cannot be told. A degree of alienation, even paranoia, lies in assuming that one's own feelings are kept private because of the inability to communicate them, whereas others keep their feelings private for strategic reasons.

In the same vein as mental privacy and communication, both poems carry a lurking awareness about physical privacy, clothing and the body. From diction alone: in the latter text, "fit our Vision", "erect," "alters," "Adjusts,"; in the former, "color," "bazaar," "array," "vest," "tulle," "Cushions Mystery." A reclusive poet draws on language about the presentation of the self and the body, about display, concealment, and fit-- mirroring the epistemological concern with social perception, social judgment, and social isolation. The first poem seems, in its diction, to carry a tension between a desire to preserve the secrets of the body ("remote," "fine," "impalpable," "exquisite," "secret") and to share them ("eager," "repressed," "pushing," "pleading").

This dialectic of revelation and concealment-- of the body, with clothing; of the world, with perception; of the poet's self, with feeling—is not an imposition of the poet's "aesthetic" but a

consequence of her way of being in the world. The poet is coy because the world is coy to her. Dickinson writes the way she does not to encode private meaning, but because to Emily Dickinson, the world looks like an Emily Dickinson poem- other people and objects of perception are a tint that cannot be taken, and can only be half-perceived in the dark. Meaning comes in glimmers, in ambiguities, in objects with confused borders and identities, in nocturnal sight.