Sharon Cameron: On 258 ("There's a certain Slant of light")

How does "light" come into relation with "Despair?" and "Despair?" into relation with "Death?"? What are the generative fusions of the poem and why is the grammar of its concluding lines itself so confusing? We note that light is a "Seal" or sign of despair and we remember that Dickinson was much too conscientious a reader of the Bible and particularly of the Book of Revelation not to have intended "the Seal Despair?" to point to an experience that was, if a secular experience can be so, both visionary and apocalyptic. In the Bible, however, while the self is "not worthy to open the scroll and break the seals" that will reveal divine agency, in the speaker's world meaning must be deduced within the privacy of a solitary consciousness. Thus "None may teach it [to] any [one else];" "None may teach it any [thing]" (it is not subject to alteration); "None may teach it?[not] any [one]." But the "Meanings" of the event are not self-generated; if this is a poem about the solipsistic labor of experience, it is not about autism. To be credited as vision, despair must also seek its connection to the generative source outside itself. For light may seal despair in, make it internal and irrevocable, but the irrevocability, by a line of association that runs just under the poem's surface, prompts the larger thought of death.

In fact, the poem is about correlatives, about how interior transformations that are both invisible and immune to alteration from the outside world are at the same time generated by that world. The relationship between the "Slant of light" in the landscape and the "Seal Despair?" within may be clarified by an analogy to Erich Auerbach's distinction between figure and its fulfillment, for the "Slant of light" and the "Seal Despair?" are not in this poem merely premonitions of death, but are, in fact, kinds or types of death. Indeed it could be asserted that in the entire Dickinson canon, despair is often a figura for death, not as Auerbach uses the word to specify related historical events, but rather as he indicates the word to denote an event that prefigures an ultimate occurrence and at the same time is already imbued with its essence. Figural interpretation presupposes much greater equality between its terms than either allegory or symbol for, in the former, the sign is a mere form and, in the latter, the symbol is always fused with what it represents and can actually replace it. While it is true that figural interpretation ordinarily applies to historical events rather than to natural events, and while the "Slant of light" and the "Seal Despair?" are indeed natural and psychological events not separated by much time, they have a causal or prefigurative relationship to each other that is closer to the relationship implicit in the figural structure than to that in the symbolic one. Certainly it would be incorrect to say that they are symbols. "Light" and "Seal," however, are in relation to "Death?" as a premise is to a conclusion. Auerbach, speaking of the relationship between two historical events implicit in the figural structure, writes, "Both . . . have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event." We may regard the "Slant of light" and the "Seal Despair?" as having just such a signatory relationship as that described above. For the light is indirect; it thus seeks a counterpart to help it deepen into meaning. The "definitive event" in the poem to which "light" and "Seal" point is, of course, "Death?." While we would expect the departure of the light to yield distance from the "look of Death?," instead the preposition "on" not only designates the space between
the speaker and the light but also identifies that light as one cast by death, and in turn casting
death on, or in the direction of, the speaker. The "Slant of light," recognized only at a
distance?its meaning comprehended at the moment of its disappearance?is revelatory of
"Death?", is "Death[']s?" prefiguration. Figure fuses with fact, interprets it, and what we initially
called the confusion of the two now makes sense in the context of divination.

If the light is indeed one of death, then we have the answer to why and how it "oppresses" in
the first stanza and to the earlier oblique comparison of it to “Cathedral Tunes?.” What
Dickinson achieves in the poem is truly remarkable, for she takes a traditional symbol and
scours it so thoroughly of its traditional associations with life that before we get to the poem’s
conclusion the image leans in the direction of mystery, dread, and darkness. By the time we
arrive at the final simile and at the direct association of light and death we are not so much
surprised as relieved at the explicitness of the revelation. It is the indirect association of "light"
and "Death?" (the "Slant" that pulls them together at first seemingly without purpose) that
prompts "Despair?:" We feel it indirectly, internally, obliquely. Were we to know it, it would be
death. For Dickinson, death is the apocalyptic vision, the straightening of premonition into fact,figure into fulfillment.

The fusions I have been discussing either between literal reality and its metaphoric
representation (where literal reality permanently assumes those metaphoric characteristics
that seemed initially intended only to illuminate it) or between the more formal figura and its
fulfillment (where events contain in a predictive relationship the essence as well as the form of
each other) raise the question of whether we can ever know anything in its own terms, and
suggest perhaps that knowledge is not, as we might have thought, absolute, but is rather
always relational. If these fusions link the historical or natural world with the divine one, the
 analogue with the real thing, they are predicated on a structure of simultaneous
 correspondence rather than of linear progression. The truth that is "Bald, and Cold?" is death,
it does not lead to it. The "certain Slant of light," although it prefigures death, also already
contains its essence. The thing in other words is saturated in the terms of its own figuration.
Given the synchrony of this relationship, we are not very far from those poems that strain to
annihilate the boundaries of time itself and to treat death as if its very reality could be cast into
the present tense, experienced, and somehow survived. The effort to know what cannot be
known, to survive it, is thus carried one step further in those poems in which the speaker
travels over the boundary from life to death to meet death on its own ground. Given the
presumption of the quest, figural structure often gives way to allegory or at any rate to the
acknowledgment of the inadequacy of simple analogue, for on the other side of death true
knowledge can find no correspondences.

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