An Explication of Dickinson's "After Great Pain"

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known divine, renowned particularly for his gift to point up the paradoxes that man is heir to:

> God presses the Devill, and makes the Devill his Soldier, to fight his battles, and directs his arrowes, and his bullets, and makes his approaches, and his attempts effectuall upon us. . . . It is a strange warre, where there are not two sides; and yet that is our case; for, God uses the Devill against us, and the Devill uses us against one another; nay, he uses every one of us, against our selves; so that God, and the Devill, and we, are all in one Army, and all for our destruction; we have a warre, and yet there is but one Army, and we onely are the Countrey that is fed upon, and wasted.

There is no doubt, indeed, that this is "a strange warre"; but stranger still is that it has been depicted not by a Calvinist, but by John Donne.[21]

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An Explication of Dickinson's "After Great Pain"

Between 1860 and 1862 Emily Dickinson is commonly believed to have experienced a psychic catastrophe, which drove her into poetry instead of out of her mind. According to her explanation, she was haunted by some mysterious fright, and her fear, or whatever it was, opened the floodgates of her poetry.[1] But despite their overwhelming number, the poems she produced under these conditions are not an amorphous overflow from a distraught mind; they are informed and well-wrought, the creations of controlled artistry—especially about twenty-five or thirty poems which, unlike the rest, treat specifically the intense subtleties of mental anguish, anatomizing them with awesome precision. And since all of the poems in this small cluster deal with varied aspects of that one subject, all of them follow a certain basic pattern dictated by the abstract nature of pain.

In each of these poems Dickinson was faced with this initial problem: somehow she had to describe a formless, internal entity which could never be revealed to others except in terms of its outward signs and manifestations. Moreover, these externalizations did not always

[21] *LXXX Sermons* (London, 1640), p. 5.

[1] *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), II, letters 248a, 261.

correspond to the internal condition but at times, in fact, represented the exact opposite. Yet in poetry if such signs were completely misleading, they would obviously defeat their own purpose by communicating the wrong thing. Consequently, they must offer some oblique means for the reader to penetrate appearances to the reality beneath. In solving this problem Dickinson created some of her most interesting and complex poetry. Generally speaking, irony was her weapon as well as her strategy. First, she usually set up for her *persona* some sort of external ritual or drama which contains various levels of calm objectivity. Then, through a series of ironic involutions generated in the course of this symbolic action, she eventually led the reader from appearances to the reality of a silent anguish made more terrifying by its ironic presentation, as here:

> 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.[2]

In a literal sense, this poem has neither *persona* nor ritual, and since it describes a state of mind, neither would seem to be necessary. In such a case attention should be centered on the feeling itself and secondarily on its location. Consequently Dickinson personified various parts of the body so as to demonstrate the action of numbness on them—*the* nerves, *the* heart, *the* feet—generalized entities belonging to no one. Yet that is precisely the formal feeling benumbed contentment produces in a person, especially one who has lost the sense of time and his own identity (lines 3-4). All the parts of his body seem to be autonomous beings moving in mysterious ways. If that constitutes a *persona*, it is necessarily an unobtrusive one that must be reconstructed from *disjecta membra*. Similarly, the

[2] Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), I, poem 341.

various actions performed in this poem are disjunctive, and though vaguely related to a chaotic travesty of a funeral, they are not patterned by any consistent, overall ceremony. Since they are all external manifestations or metaphors for numbness, however, they are all as they should be, lifeless forms enacted in a trance as though they were part of some meaningless rite.

The first stanza, for instance, is held rigid by the ceremonious formality of the chamber of death when, after the great pain of its passing, the corpse lies tranquil and composed, surrounded by mourners hushed in awe so silent that time seems to have gone off into eternity "Yesterday, or Centuries before." In one respect this metaphor is particularly suitable since the nerves are situated round about the body or the "stiff Heart" like mourners about the bed of death. But if the metaphor is extended further, it seems to become ludicrously unsuitable. These nerves, for example, are not neighbors lamenting with their silent presence the death of a friend. They are sensation itself, but here they are dead, as ceremonious and lifeless as tombs. Consequently, the formal feeling that comes after great pain is, ironically, no feeling at all, only benumbed rigidness. Conversely, if the "stiff Heart" is the corpse, he nevertheless has life or consciousness enough to question whether it was "He, that bore, / And Yesterday or Centuries before." Obviously, this is moving toward artistic chaos since metaphors should be more and more applicable the further they are extended, but this one apparently become progressively worse. Curiously, however, by breaking all the rules Dickinson achieved the exact effect she needed. Her problem was to describe an essentially paradoxical state of mind in which one is alive but yet numb to life, both a living organism and a frozen form. Consequently she took both terms of this paradox and made each a reversed reflection of the other. Although the mourners, the nerves, appear to be the living, they are in actuality the dead, and conversely the stiff heart, the metaphoric corpse, has ironically at least a semblance of consciousness. In their totality, both these forms of living death define the "stop sensation" that comes after great pain.

Since the metaphoric nightmare of the first stanza could hardly be extended any further, Dickinson is obviously not concerned with elaborating a conceit. In the second stanza, then, the cataleptically formal rites of the dead are replaced by a different sort of action ceremoniously performed in a trance, an extension not of the previous metaphor, but of the paradox which informed it. For although move-

ment usually indicates vitality, there is no life in the aimless circles of the walking dead. Whether numb feet go on the hardness of ground or on the softness of air, their way is wooden because paralysis is within them. Since they cannot feel nor know nor even care where they are going ("Regardless grown"), they wander in circles ("go round") on an insane treadmill as though lost, suspended between life and death and sharing the attributes of both.

The third stanza is, in one respect, an imagistic repetition of the second. Benumbed, aimless movements through a world of waste, the motions of the living dead are similar to the trance-like, enchanted steps of persons freezing in a blank and silent world of muffling snow. But at the same time that this metaphor refers particularly to the preceding stanza, it also summarizes the entire poem since the ambiguous antecedent of *This* in line 10 is, in one respect, everything that went before. Consequently, this final image should somehow fuse all the essential elements of the poem. Not only that, it should present them in sharp focus.

Certainly the chill and subsequent stupor of freezing, a gradual numbing of the senses, incorporates many of the attributes of death itself: a loss of vital warmth, of locomotion, of a sense of identity in time and space conjoined with an increasing coolness, rigidness, and apathy. Since freezing, however, is neither life nor death but both simultaneously, it is an excellent, expansive metaphor for the living death which comes after great pain. But in addition to extending the basic paradox which informs the poem, this final figure serves a more important function by drawing to the surface and presenting in full ambivalence a certain ironic ambiguity which in the first two stanzas remains somewhat below the threshold of conscious awareness.

In its furthest extent great pain produces internal paralysis, but, ironically, this numbness is not itself a pain. It is no feeling, "an element of blank," which gradually emerges from the poem until at the end it almost engulfs it in white helplessness. In the first stanza it lurks just below the surface, unstated, but ironically present in the situation itself. For although the nerves represent metaphorically the formal feeling which comes after great pain by being silent, ceremonious mourners, they are simultaneously dead sensation, no feeling, formal or otherwise, not pain, but nothing. In the second stanza this implication is no longer subliminal, but even though it is at the surface, it is not developed, merely stated: "A Quartz

contentment, like a stone." According to Webster's *American Dictionary* (1851), the lexicon Dickinson used, *contentment* was a "Rest or quietness of mind in the present condition; satisfaction which holds the mind in peace, restraining complaint, opposition, or further desire, and often implying a moderate degree of happiness." Apparently, then, by the second stanza anguish has resolved itself into its impossible opposite, a hard, cold, quartz-like peaceful satisfaction of the mind. In the third stanza, this inert irony fully emerges to modify response and ultimately to qualify it to such an extent that the poem ends in tense, unresolved ambivalence. According to the superficial movement of the poem, the time after great pain will later be remembered as a period of living death similar to the sensation of freezing. Yet the qualifications attached to that statement drain it of its assertiveness and curiously force it to imply its own negative. For there is not only a doubt that this hour of crisis may not be outlived (line 11), but even the positive statement (that it will be remembered) is made fully ambivalent by being modified by its own negative (that it will be remembered just as freezing persons recollect the snow). Ironically, freezing persons can never remember the snow since they die in it, destroyed by a warm, contented numbness in which they sleep and perish in entranced delusion. Because there is no solution to this ambivalence, the poem ends unresolved, suspended between life and death in a quartz contentment, the most deadly anguish of all, the very essence of pain, which is not pain, but a blank peace, just as the essence of sound is silence.

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Mark Twain's Arkansaw Yahoos

The events and the people I refer to are found in chapter 21 ("An Arkansaw Difficulty") and 22 ("Why the Lynching Bee Failed") of *Huckleberry Finn*. The major point I would make about these two chapters is one that no one appears to have commented on: namely, that in point of view and in tone they stand apart from the rest of the novel.

The action in these two chapters may be summarized quite briefly: a man was murdered; townspeople attempted to lynch the murderer.