Suzanne Juhasz: On 341 ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes--")

Lack of feeling, or various forms of "death," occasions the metaphoric transfers which interweave in "After great pain" to measure the effect of pain on the mind and body and, in consequence, to tell us something about the nature of pain itself.

Crucial is the poem's structure of "analogical progression" (Weisbuch's term): that is, a movement typological rather than linear, since each analogy, set in apposition to a central idea, proceeds only in that it further defines. Here a series of analogies for the "formal feeling" which comes after great pain call upon a range of external situations, intricately interrelated by metaphor. The feeling is internal, mental, but Dickinson uses words associated with the body, with nature, with society, and with physical death, as well with the mind, to shape and articulate both its sensation and significance.

First Dickinson outlines the feeling by describing the body's manifestation of it: nerves, heart, feet. In each instance, however, figurative language expands the experiential nexus. The nerves are personified; they "sit ceremonious." A social definition of formal--marked by form or ceremony--is called into play; the image may evoke a scene of ladies at tea. However, immediately they are compared to tombs. Formal meaning stiff or rigid; formal marking another kind of ceremony--that of death; more definitions are added. Now all ceremonies are suspect. And that is the point. Formal behavior, because it relies on predetermined patterns, because it proceeds by rote, is mindless.

Next we see the heart. It is stiff. Stiff is another definition for formal, here specifically denoting lack of feeling; for the heart can no longer tell how much time has elapsed between its present condition and when the great pain occurred: "Yesterday, or Centuries before?"

Then the feet. They move mechanically: formal meaning highly organized, also stiff, also devoid of thought, moving by rote--a kind of death. Their path, be it "Of Ground, or Air, or Ought," is wooden and regardless. Both nouns and objects describing the route of the feet, in their juxtaposition of concrete and abstract, indicate that this path is as conceptual as it is physical, and that the feet, like nerves and heart, function synecdochically for the person--especially, for the person's mind. Ought is a path taken by the mind: that of duty? a formal gesture. The conjunction of Wooden and regardless gives dimension to thought--or rather, to the lack of it. A final metaphor and analogy complete the stanza. "A Quartz contentment, like a stone," further describes the wooden way, but it is as well in apposition to "a formal feeling," like all of the images thus far. Contentment follows from regardless and Ought, while Quartz parallels Wooden and mechanical; each harkens back to stiff, ceremonious, and Tombs; all are aspects of formal. In the phrase "Quartz contentment" the concrete and abstract vocabularies are dramatically joined: two versions of rigidity, of formality, inform one another. The quartz is stiff and symmetrical--shaped in a formal pattern. With regardless, Ought, and mechanical to precede contentment, we recognize in that seemingly benign term the kind of formality with which the poem has been dealing throughout: the death-like impotence that marks it in other poems as a primary symptom of despair. We recall "A perfect--paralyzing
Bliss--/Contented as Despair--," and the stone eye "that knows--it cannot see." The concluding analogy, "like a stone," comes as no surprise. A quartz contentment is a stony contentment, but the introduction of the word stone more directly yokes Tombs and consequently death to the image.

A formal feeling, then, is stiff, rigid, cold, conforming to patterns with no thought producing them, contented because of the absence of awareness, vitality, sensation, life. "Formal feeling" is really an oxymoron, for the feeling of no feeling.

The last stanza is introduced by a summarizing metaphor--"This is the Hour of Lead" summarizing in that Hour and Lead hook on to the chain of epithets that have been defining formal in an increasingly ominous way. Lead is as heavy, dark, solid and inanimate as tomb--like nerves, stiff hearts, mechanical feet, wooden ways, and quartz contentment. Hour is the present tense of a mind that questions its understanding of time, that proceeds by rote, according to ought rather than insight, that has grown in its contentment, regardless. The "Hour of Lead" equals "a formal feeling": with its successive parallelism the poem comes full circle here, for the circle has outlined meaning.

But the poem is not over yet, because for all of the lack of a sense of time that accompanies the formal feeling, the poem, like "It ceased to hurt me," is concerned with temporal progression, from pain to the formal feeling to whatever succeeds it. Its first word is "After"; its concluding lines return from the stasis of the formal feeling to the process in which it is located. As the poem begins by setting out the past--what precedes the action of the poem--so its final analogy projects the poem into the future, what will hopefully (unless the formal feeling is truly death-dealing) follow: "Remembered, if outlived,/ As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow--/First?Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go--." In this poem, too, time is a frame that holds the subject in place, through which one can study it.

Sharon Cameron's reading of these lines is excellent, noting as it does how the images themselves embody the temporal progression described.

The image with which the poem concludes ... is more complex because of its susceptibility to transformation, its capacity to exist as ice, snow, and finally as the melting that reduces these crystals to water. The poem's last line is an undoing of the spell of stasis. Because it is not another, different expression of hardness but implies a definite progression away from it by retracing the steps that comprise its history, we know that the "letting go--" is not a letting go of life, is not death, but is rather the more colloquial "letting go" of feeling, an unleashing of the ability to experience it again. To connect the stages of the analogy to the stages of the poem: "Chill--" precedes the poem, "Stupor--" preoccupies it, and "the letting go--" exists on the far side of its ending.

In "After great pain," a dazzling demonstration of her analogical method, Dickinson is like a juggler: the balls she suspends in air so that their shapes and colors enrich one another to create the meaning of the whole are versions of "formal," taken from all manner of experiences in the world beyond the mind. The shape that they make as they circle in the air becomes, however, that of a mental experience: lack of feeling, a formal feeling. This poem is Dickinson's most intense and most precise definition of a condition that appears throughout her poetry on mental experience. This particular version of formal feeling comes after great
pain; it is the self-protective response of the mind to a severe internal wound. . . .


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