

Snow-blindness in Emily Dickinson's "Pain Poems"

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This brief essay will examine an aspect of Emily Dickinson's "pain poems."¹⁾ The three "pain poems" under our scrutiny, written in 1862 according to Thomas H. Johnson, form a distinctive node in Dickinson's poetry. In spite of their subject matter, they show neither "masochist impulse" which William R. Sherwood detects in her when she deals with pain and despair,²⁾ nor "rigorous stoicism which he finds in the poems like "No Rack Can Torture Me" (J. 384).³⁾ And they have no special voice, as in "I Can Wade Grief" (J. 252), which moves Archibald MacLeish⁴⁾ with its quiet restraint mixing heterogeneous elements like "But the least push of Joy/Breaks up my feet" in the grief.

The three poems are, in a sense, pure pain poems. They allow little distance between the speaker and the object, and consequently none of them are included in the some one hundred poems discussed by John Emerson Todd in his extensive study of Dickinson's use of the personae.⁵⁾ Even death, the life-long obsession to Dickinson's soul,

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- 1) The first three poems listed under "Pain," J. 341, J. 599 and J. 650, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed., T.H. Johnson (Little, Brown and Co., 1957), p. 731.
 - 2) W.R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 160.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, p. 54.
 - 4) A. MacLeish, "The Private World," *Emily Dickinson: Twentieth Century Views*, ed., R.B. Sewall (Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 156.
 - 5) J.E. Todd, *Emily Dickinson's Use of Persona* (Mouton, 1973).

permits her to use familiar and handy metaphors and images in its presentation. Dickinson, for instance, usually "portrays the transition from life to death and eternity as a carriage ride."⁶ When she depicts pain, however, no familiar and handy metaphors and images come to her. Let us read the best-known, and the most imagerial, of the "pain poems."

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 Cught—
 A Wooden way
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect Snow—
 First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go— (J. 341)

"A formal feeling" of the first line is an abstraction, even if it may evoke some associative images. At the next line a simile, not a metaphor, is used (less distance) for the state of the nerves; and in the remainder of the stanza incomplete verbal fragments are used (directness) for the confused mind. In the second stanza John Cody finds a perfect case of catatonia.⁷ Except a metaphor ("A Wooden way") all the rest are the realistic description of the speaker's "regardless" wandering, which is one of the most striking characteristics of catatonia. "A Quartz contentment," which may have been a very unusual comparison or imagery in other poets, is almost a cliché in Dickinson's profuse use of gem-mineral images.⁸ "This is the Hour of Lead" in the last stanza reinforces Cody's diagnosis of catatonia. Too much

6) *Ibid.*, p. 57.

7) J. Cody, *After Great Pain* (Harvard, 1971), p. 329.

8) R.B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp. 345 and 456.

emphasis of catatonia, however, does not help understand the poem. We may read this poem as a metaphorical riddle for the state of living death as Dolores Dyer Lucas proposes.⁹ The epilepsy of Dostoevsky, for example, should not be too much emphasized in the novels.

Due focus should be given to the blindness ("Regardless grown") and the snow imagery at the end. The "Hour of Lead" recalls the "Leaden Sieves" of the "snow poem," J. 311, written in the same year. And "Quartz contentment" with its icy transparency and coldness gains a new meaning in the context of the snow imagery. What do the freezing persons with "Regardless grown" eyes in fact recollect, if outlived? Dickinson is saying that it is snow-blindness. The snow-blindness later becomes the "Blank" in J. 650, but before we go there, let us read J. 599.

There is a pain—so utter—
It swallows substance up—
Then covers the Abyss with Trance—
So Memory can step
Around—across—upon it—
As one within a Swoon—
Goes safely—where an open eye—
Would drop Him—Bone by Bone. (J. 599)

This poem has more immediacy than the previous one. It is not about the despair one suffers after "great Pain," but about the present pain. The pain may not be "great" but "so utter," because it is here and now in the speaker. It is presented as a being which "swallows substance," and "covers the Abyss with Trance." And blindfolded ("As one within a Swoon") memory goes on the covering. The fifth line, "Around—across—upon it," shows a blind man stepping cautiously, probably on the snow, and reveals the anxiety on the part of the speaker-blindman.

Cody here again says, "Poem no. 599 (early 1862) stresses the defensive function of a catatonic trance, which constitutes a psychogenic

9) D.D. Lucas, *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 14-6.

imperviousness to an intolerable reality." And he continues, "By means of trance, reality itself is rendered unreal and therefore unmenacing."¹⁰ But the total impression of the poem is that the state of trance and blindness itself is more menacing than the reality which underlies it, and we get an almost primordial terror out of it. The terror is reinforced by such an expression as "Would drop Him—Bone by Bone."

In this poem also there is the snow-blindness. What is it that "Swallows substance up—/Then covers the Abyss with Trance?" The answer to the riddle may be, and in this case should be, the snow. And what does make the speaker go on the snow "As one within a Swoon"? Snow-blindness. It is the snow-blindness which turns more abstract and becomes the "Blank" in the next "pain poem."

Pain—has an Element of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it begun—or if there were
A time when it was not—

It has on Future—but itself—
Its Infinite contain
Its Past—enlightened to perceive
New Periods—of Pain. (J. 650)

This poem is the abstraction itself. It is almost imageless. It is even free of actions like "swallow" or "cover" of J. 599. Only pain is present with anticipation of new "Periods—of Pain." And there looms before us the image of the "Blank," the utter blindness, and eventually snow-blindness (because of the cold desolate color the situation evokes), before which we feel terror, an existential terror.

The word "Blank" appears several times in her poems of 1862~3 period. One of the most typical examples will be "From Blank to Blank":

From Blank to Blank—
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet—

10) J. Cody, *Op. cit.*, pp. 323-4.

To stop—or perish—or advance—
Alike indifferent—

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed—
I shut my eyes—and groped as well
'Twas lighter—to be blind— (J. 761)

It is a perfect case of the metaphorical riddle which Lucas forgot to cite in her book. It has everything in it that the "pain poems" have, except the word "pain"—mechanical feet, indifference, indefinite, closed eyes, blindness and above all the "Blank". But it lacks the immediacy and pang of the previous poems. Instead a reasoning conscious mind betrays itself in the second stanza. And there is no trace of snow imagery in it. The speaker is not snowblind, and closes his eyes voluntarily. The imagery of snow-blindness is what gives "pain poems" their immediacy and pain.

Works Cited

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