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Depersonalisation and the Poetics of Trauma in Dickinson's 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'

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'This is the Hour of Lead' (Dickinson)

Poetry's structural elasticity often allows it to articulate psychological disturbance in ways prosodic writing cannot. Literary analyses of Emily Dickinson's work mention its tightly composed form, through which emotional intensity is often expressed without being directly voiced (Ghazzawi 4). In '*After great pain, a formal feeling comes*–', this is evident in how Dickinson captures the aftermath of trauma not through cathartic intensity, but through a contrasting sense of estrangement. This essay will analyse how Dickinson inscribes the condition of dissociation into the structure and language of the poem through its lyric form, metre and rhythm, syntax flow, and imagery. Furthermore, it will evaluate how the poem enacts the seemingly composed absence of feelings that follow trauma yet also reveals its deeper emotional disintegration.

Dickinson's subversion of the standard lyric form transforms what is usually a mode of emotive self-expression into a structure that instead portrays detachment. The lyric, as traditionally defined, is often suggested to express immediate and subjective experiences (Adorno 155–71). However, Dickinson withholds use of the lyric 'I'', creating a voice that speaks from an external consciousness rather than one fully intrinsic to the speaker (Blasing 41-46). The absence of any personal pronouns until the indirect 'He' (especially as this is in reference to the 'Heart') displaces the lyric's expected nature of interiority. The capitalised organs and body parts stand apart from the self as disparate entities, transforming the speaker's physical body into a proxy speaker. This imbalance is immediately reinforced through Dickinson's diction–'formal' within the title, and later, 'ceremonious,' and 'tombs'–which frames the poem not as an outpouring of feeling but as a ritualised expression. These terms belong more to the lexicon of funerals than lyrical fervour, reinforcing the poem's function of depicting unnatural and deadened emotional containment. 'Formal' operates not only as a reference to feeling subdued but also to the speaker's tone and the poem's compositional logic itself. Furthermore, the three poetic stanzas initially appear

balanced, but this order is subtly destabilised with the central stanza containing an extra fifth line instead of four. This small breach in lineation visually fractures the poem's body, parallel to the psychic disequilibrium of the speaker. The overall result is a lyric poem emptied of intimacy, creating an illusion of loosely tethered control yet revealing a significant fragmentation within. Dickinson's reconfiguration of its form literalises the theme; the poem's sentiment itself becomes a maintained structure of the very disassociation it describes.

The poem's rhythm and metre imbue a sense of the fragmented and disruptive nature of bodily and emotional dislocation. While the poem loosely adheres to lines of iambic pentameter, its execution is irregular and often jarring, mimicking the disordered internal rhythm of an individual numbed by trauma. The poem commences with a heavy line, as 'After great pain' opens first with the metrical feet of a trochee in 'After', followed by a spondee in 'great pain'. This sudden density of stressed syllables creates an initial jolt, disrupting the smoother ascent typically expected in iambic verse. The trochee in 'After' ruptures its natural rhythm, while the spondee that follows lands with dead weight, a reflection of trauma's blunt impact. This is sustained across the poem as Dickinson continues to intersperse iambic metre with irregular metrical feet. For instance, the second stanza abandons regularity altogether, with its final line shifting from the steadiness of an iamb ('A Quartz contentment') to the falling motion of a dactyl ('like a stone'), mirroring the speaker's gradual emotional collapse. The syndetic listing of 'Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—' also accelerates the stanza's pace, invoking a mounting desperation that momentarily breaks the poem's earlier stillness. Each natural and emotional element in the list expands the tone of disorientation as the speaker no longer knows what element they belong to, if any at all. Together, these moments swell towards a climax where grief becomes briefly dynamic before lapsing again into inertia. The listing functions as an accumulation piling up spatial

possibilities only to dissolve them into semantic vagueness. The rhyme scheme, similarly, appears ordered but offers no resolution. It follows an ABCC pattern in stanzas one and three, with a shift to an ABCDD scheme in stanza two. However, this order does not produce the balance expected. The final rhyme of the first stanza is a slant rhyme between 'Tombs' and 'comes'. This awkward pairing reinforces the poem's tonal dissonance, mimicking the distortion of the speaker's emotional state. Instead of unifying the stanzas, the rhyme scheme underscores the broader theme of surface-level constraint that still fails to submerge emotional pain. Through its disrupted patterns and difficult rhythmic deviations, the poem transforms trauma's contradictory nature into a faltering pulse that refuses continuity or release, though also with intermittent deceptive impressions of order that portray the tension between calm surface apathy and internal disintegration.

Syntax furthers Dickinson's representation of depersonalisation, as the poem involves fragmented grammatical coherence, strongly shifting from a picture of control and agency. The poem opens on an independent clause, 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes—,' where the verb is postponed until the final word, suspending the phrase and creating an uncertain tone. Throughout, Dickinson makes use of unclear subject-object relations. In the line 'The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore', it collapses into ambiguity of whether the subject 'He' is the 'Heart', or the speaker themselves. The caesura in the phrasing 'was it He, that bore' disrupts expected grammatical phrasing, prolonging the speaker's uncertainty and displacing clarity. Bodily actions are similarly impersonal. Phrases such as 'The Nerves sit ceremonious' and 'The Feet mechanical go round' isolate each body part through repeated use of the definite article 'The,' turning the body into a series of disjointed parts. This disassembly culminates in the final tercet, in the phrase 'First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —.' where each dash fractures the sequence into isolated psychological stages. Rather than being directed toward closure, the line mimics the incremental discomfort of

dissociation, its rhythm splintered into halted jolts of sensation. Dickinson's signature stylistic use of dashes thus visualises discontinuity, giving shape to forms of cognitive and emotional suspension that grammar alone cannot express (Madlool 50-59). In this case, each dash holds the reader in pause, replicating the arrested processing of the traumatised speaker and rendering the line a sequence of disturbing states rather than a coherent progression. Using such manipulation of syntax, Dickinson presents depersonalisation not through confession, but through the formal erosion of linguistic order itself.

Finally, imagery within the poem intensifies the feeling of alienation through a technique akin to Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarisation, the literary strategy of rendering the familiar strange or unnatural to disrupt standard perceptions (Bowker 1-3). By making the body feel unfamiliar, Dickinson externalises the self from its own sensations, translating psychological detachment into visual and material terms. The image of 'The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs' layers rigidity with hollowness. Nerves, intrinsic to how the body experiences sensation, are reimagined as sealed enclosures drained of feeling. In transforming the body's most responsive structures into inert architecture that evokes death, Dickinson suggests how trauma deadens the very faculties of perception as the body continues to exist solely as the shell of sensation it once held. Furthermore, the poem is dominated by material metaphors that render sensation inorganic, such as the harsh, alliterative phrase 'A Wooden Way', and similarly, 'A Quartz contentment.' Both images invoke opacity and density, qualities antithetical to fluid, emotive human experience. The effect created is to describe grief not as an affective process but as a state that is impenetrable and heavy. 'Quartz contentment' is especially striking as an oxymoron where feeling is both identified and subdued. A hard crystalline substance contradicts the softness typically associated with satisfaction or joy, suggesting that any peace felt is due to fossilised numbness rather than an emotional response. The description of movement is similarly

objectified, as 'The Feet, mechanical' reduces the body to an automaton. The following action 'go round' implies motion without destination; this is not purposeful walking but endless circularity in an image echoing a state of recursive rumination. The defamiliarisation is most evident in the poem's closing image, 'This is the Hour of Lead—,' where grief is no longer a fleeting moment in time but an immortalised geological substance. Lead, traditionally associated with weight and toxicity, suggests both the burden and danger of feeling. Hence, the poem's visual metaphors and Dickinson's use of *ostranenie* transform the self into petrified matter devoid of humanity.

In conclusion, Dickinson reconstitutes the impact of trauma through various poetic techniques. The lyric form is emptied of subjectivity; the metre stalled and irregular; the syntax conveys a series of thoughts unable to cohere; and the imagery is disparate and anatomical in place of personal sensation. Grief here is paralytic, where these techniques allude to the speaker's pain by performing their inability to feel it. What makes '*After great pain, a formal feeling comes-'* unsettling is that any sense of composure is not a triumph over suffering and pain but is symptomatic of it. Dickinson's poem is devastating in its restraint, which leaves the reader suspended in the disembodied aftermath of pain, where the 'formal feeling' is not one of peace but of a body continuing mechanically and mutely long after a traumatised self has receded.

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