

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#341 (c.1862)

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 –

ANALYSIS

[“After great pain, a formal feeling comes”] is obviously an attempt to communicate to the reader the nature of the experience which comes ‘after great pain.’ The poet is using the imagery for this purpose, and the first line of the poem, which states the subject of the poem, is the only abstract statement in the poem. The pain is obviously not a physical pain; it is some great sorrow or mental pain, which leaves the mind numbed. The nerves, she says. ‘sit ceremonious like tombs.’ The word *sit* is very important here. The nerves, it is implied, are like a group of people after a funeral sitting in the parlor in a formal hush. Then the poet changes the image slightly by adding ‘like tombs.’ The nerves are thus compared to two different things, but each of the comparisons contributes to the same effect, and indeed are closely related: people dressed in black sitting around a room after a funeral may be said to be like tombs. And why does the reference to ‘tombs’ seem such a good symbol for a person who has just suffered great pain...? Because a tomb has to a supreme degree the qualities of deadness (quietness, stillness) and of formality (ceremony, stiffness).

Notice that the imagery (through the first line of the last stanza) is characterized by the possession on a common quality, the quality of *stiff lifelessness*. For instance, the heart is ‘stiff,’ the feet walk a ‘wooden’ way, the contentment is a ‘quartz’ contentment, the hour is that of ‘lead.’ The insistence on this type of imagery is very important in confirming the sense of numbed consciousness which is made more explicit by the statement that the feet move mechanically and are ‘regardless’ of where they go. Notice too that the lines are bound together, not only by the constant reference of the imagery to the result of grief, but also by the fact that the poet is stating in series what happens to the parts of the body: nerves, heart, feet.

Two special passages in the first two stanzas deserve additional comment before we pass on to the third stanza. The capital letter in the word *He* tells us that Christ is meant. The heart, obsessed with pain and having lost the sense of time and place, asks whether it was Christ who bore the cross. The question is abrupt and elliptic as though uttered at a moment of pain. And the heart asks whether it is not experiencing His pain, and—having lost hold of the real world—whether the crucifixion took place yesterday or centuries before. And behind these questions lies the implication that pain is a constant part of the human lot. The implied figure of a funeral makes the heart’s question about the crucifixion come as an appropriate one, and the quality of the suffering makes the connection implied between its own sufferings and that on the cross not violently farfetched.

The line, 'A quartz contentment like a stone,' is particularly interesting. The conjunction involves two things. First, we see an extension of the common association of stoniness with the numbness of grief, as in such phrases as 'stony-eyed' or 'heart like a stone,' etc. But why does the poet use 'quartz'? There are several reasons. The name of the stone helps to particularize the figure and prevent the effect of a cliché. Moreover, quartz is a very hard stone. And, for one who knows that quartz is a crystal, a 'quartz contentment' is a contentment crystalized, as it were, out of the pain. This brings us to the second general aspect involved by the comparison. This aspect is ironical. The contentment arising after the shock of great pain is a contentment because of the inability to respond any longer, rather than the ability to respond satisfactorily and agreeably.

To summarize for a moment, the poet has developed an effect of inanimate lifelessness, a stony, or wooden, or leaden stiffness; now, she proceeds to use a new figure, that of the freezing person, which epitomizes the effect of those which have preceded it, but which also gives a fresh and powerful statement. The line, 'Remembered if outlived,' is particularly forceful. The implication is that few outlive the experience to be able to remember and recount it to others. This experience of grief is like a death by freezing: there is the chill, then the stupor as the body becomes numbed, and then the last state in which the body finally gives up the fight against the cold, and relaxes and dies. The correspondence of the stages of death by freezing to the effect of the shock of deep grief on the mind is close enough to make the passage very powerful. But there is another reason for the effect which this last figure has on us. The imagery of the first two stanzas corresponds to the 'stupor.' The last line carries a new twist of idea, one which supplies a context for the preceding imagery and which by explaining it, makes it more meaningful. The formality, the stiffness, the numbness of the first two stanzas is accounted for: it is an attempt to hold in, the fight of the mind against letting go; it is a defense of the mind."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry, 1st ed.
(Holt 1938) 469-71

"The authority of 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes' derives from the technical skill with which the language is controlled. As she always does in her best poems, Emily Dickinson makes her first line lock all succeeding lines into position... The heaviness of the pain is echoed by *bore, wooden, quartz, stone, lead*. The formal feeling is coldly ceremonious, mechanical, and stiff, leading through chill and stupor to a 'letting go.' The stately pentameter measure of the first stanza is used, in the second, only in the first line and the last, between which are hastened rhythms. The final two lines of the poem, which bring it to a close, reestablish the formality of the opening lines. Exact rhymes conclude each of the stanzas.

Emily Dickinson's impulse to let the outer form develop from the inner mood now begins to extend to new freedoms. Among her poems composed basically as quatrains, she does not hesitate to include a three-line stanza, as in 'I rose because he sank,' or a five-line stanza, as in 'Glee, the great story is over.' On some occasions, to break the regularity in yet another way or to gain a new kind of emphasis, she splits a line from its stanza, allowing it to stand apart, as in 'Beauty -- be not cause -- It is,' and "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House.' Sometimes poems beginning with an iambic beat shift in succeeding stanzas to be a trochaic, to hasten the tempo, as in 'In falling timbers buried.' It is the year too when she used her dashes lavishly."

Thomas H. Johnson
Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography
(Harvard 1955) 97-98

"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. 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 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 [in 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes']....

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... Similarly, the 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 rigidity. 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 becomes 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 movement 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, rightness, 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 complain, 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 space, just as the essence of sound is silence."

Francis Manley
"An Explication of Dickinson's 'After Great Pain'"
Modern Language Notes LXXIII
(April 1958) 260-64

"[In "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," the] three stanzas faintly shadow forth three stages of a familiar ceremony: the formal service, the tread of pallbearers, and the final lowering into a grave. But metaphor is subdued to meaning by subtle controls.... This poem has recently received the explication it deserves [by Francis Manley], matching its excellence. But its pertinence to this whole group of poems is such as to justify a brief summary of the interpretation here.

'In a literal sense,' according to this critic, there is 'neither persona nor ritual, and since it describes a state of mind, neither would seem to be necessary.' Instead, as befits one who has lost all sense of identity,

the various parts of the body are personified as autonomous entities (*the nerves, the heart, the feet*), belonging to moving through the acts of a meaningless ceremony, lifeless forms enacted in a trance. As a result, attention is centered on the feeling itself and not on the pattern of figures that dramatize it. As the images of a funeral rite subside, two related ones emerge to body forth the victim who is at once a living organism and a frozen form. Both are symbols of crystalization: 'Freezing' in the snow, which is neither life nor death but both simultaneously; and 'A Quartz contentment, like a stone,' for the paradoxical serenity that follows intense suffering. This recalls her envy of the 'little Stone,' happy because unconscious of the exigencies that afflict mortals, and points forward to the paradox in another poem, 'Contented as despair.' Such is the 'formal feeling' that comes after great pain. It is, ironically, no feeling at all, only numb rigidity existing outside time and space."

Charles R. Anderson
Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 210-11

"'Great pain' is the predicate on which the sentence of fixity lies, the prior experience against which feeling hardens in intransigent difference. The relationship between the adjective in 'formal feeling,' the adverb in 'The Nerves sit ceremonious,' and the simile, 'like Tombs --' is a relationship of progressive clarity; the connections get made in the underground touching of the roots of each of these words; the 'formal feeling,' 'ceremonious,' is a feeling of death. And as if in parody of the initial image, in the next line the 'Heart' too is a 'stiff,' unable to connect self to incident or to date.

Like the 'Element of Blank --', like the 'Trance --' that covers pain, and like the 'nearness to Tremendousness — / An Agony procures --', the 'formal feeling' is an abdication of presence, a fact that explains why the question the speaker puts to herself is framed by incredulity and designates the subject as someone else, a 'He, that bore,' why the time that precedes the present becomes mere undifferentiated space, 'Yesterday, or Centuries before?' But unlike 'Blank --', 'Trance --', and 'a nearness to Tremendousness --', the 'formal feeling' is an anatomy of pain's aftermath from a distance, a self standing outside of the otherness that possesses it. Thus we are told of the parts of the body as if they were someone else's or no one's: 'The Heart...the Nerves...the Feet --', thus we are shown actions, how the body looks, what it does, rather than feelings. Thus the speaker arrives at a definition ('This is the Hour of Lead --') divorced from the experience because encompassing it. Thus the concluding simile departs from the present as if in analogy there were some further, final escape.

But although the initial images follow upon each other like a death, the second stanza makes clear that death is only an analogy for the body that has lost its spirit, for the vacancy of will. Given its absence, all action is repetition of movement without meaning, and as if to emphasize the attendant vacuousness, the lines repeat each other: 'The Feet' 'go round --' in circles, 'Wooden,' 'Regardless grown,' until the stanza's final line boldly flaunts its own redundancy. 'A Quartz contentment' is 'like a stone --' because quartz is a stone. However, perhaps Dickinson means us to see two images here, the transparent crystal and the grey stone to which it clouds, in a synesthesia that would equate the darkening of color with a formal hardening. As in 'perfect — paralyzing Bliss — / Contented as Despair --', contentment here is the ultimate quiet, the stasis that resembles death. 'Wood,' 'stone,' 'Lead --'—the images to this point have been ones of progressive hardening. The image with which the poem concludes, however, 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. The process whereby blankness has been called into existence, given palpable form, dimension, character and movement enables the poem to specify what the previous poems on pain merely note. Dickinson's poems mostly take place 'After great pain,' in the space between 'Chill --' and 'Stupor --' 'Life [is] so very sweet at the Crisp,' she wrote longingly, 'what must it be unfrozen!'(472). But the conversion of the body into stone was not lasting. She was not, as she sometimes seemed to declare

herself, numb from the neck down. Pain was the shot that inflicted temporary paralysis, a remedy that worked until the poems took over. Then she could spell out the words she swore consciousness refused her, 'letting [the feeling] go --' into them where from a distance she could look....

Dickinson's poems on pain are an attempt to blank time out and to create, in its place, a space where the temporal apparatus of daily life has been as if disconnected. For presence is past, and even what follows presence (what Poulet calls the moment after loss) lies behind us. In the sequence of diminishing returns, what has been is, by definition, missing. What remains is a true blank, the genuine space at the thought of which despair 'raves --', and around which words gather in the mourning that is language."

Sharon Cameron
Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre
(Johns Hopkins U 1979)

"While Dickinson did not go so far as to make words mean their logical opposite, she did disrupt conventional arrangements to create emotional and psychological effects, as...in poem 341... The temporal disruption of the speaker's psyche extends to the syntax and meter, with incomplete sentences and sudden shifts from pentameter to tetrameter to trimeter to dimeter and back. Other phrases in the poem initially seem to form complete sentences but then unravel in subsequent lines that confuse the original meaning, as in the last stanza. There are no periods to mark off any thought as complete, nor even to mark the poem as a complete thought: the final sentence is completely fragmented by dashes. Alan Helms, in his incisive reading of the punctuation in this poem, says that the dashes in the last line approximate the experience of freezing by slowing down the tempo. The final verb, 'letting go,' is followed by a dash that hangs the poem and the experience described in the poem over a visual and aural precipice of frozen silence. Were the sentences to be made complete and the poem conventionally punctuated, the essence of the experience it describes would be lost. Clearly, much of Dickinson's power in evoking psychological states lies in her disregard for conventional rules of grammar and punctuation, as well as conventional rules of poetic meter, line, and rhyme.

The poem begins with words conventionally grouped (though the punctuation marks Dickinson used were not conventional), but by the third line, the grammar of the poem begins to disintegrate with the introduction of an additional comma, leaving only the iambic pentameter as a stabilizing if relentless rhythmic force throughout the first stanza. The first line describes the psychological state philosophically, the second describes it imagistically, and the two make an impressive epigram. But Dickinson is not content to end the poem here: she must explore the state from a more intimate and vulnerable standpoint. She is not content to recollect emotion in tranquillity, nor to describe it in eloquent, complete sentences. The introduction of the subject, 'He,' causes the clear ideas and images of the first two lines to crumble into disconnected images and fragmented phrases. The comma that follows the word, 'He,' is the first signal of the breakdown in the syntax, separating predicate nominative from its relative pronoun and verb, and person from action. The disruptive comma also creates a temporal dislocation that permeates the poem: the present thought is not completed (the object of 'bore' is lacking), as the speaker unsuccessfully seeks to locate the incomplete action in past time.

The present experience described in the second stanza is a mechanical, cyclical treadmill, while the past of the first stanza stretches out vaguely and endlessly. In the final stanza, past and present are confused in the line, 'Freezing persons, recollect the Snow.' The present participle evokes a present condition, but the snow that is causing the freezing is disconcertingly thrown into the chasm of the past by the verb, 'recollect.' The experience of freezing is so intensely present that even the snow that causes it, like the 'He' who bore the pain, seems to belong in the past."

Kamilla Denman
"Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation"
Emily Dickinson Journal (1993)

"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."

Suzanne Juhasz

The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind
(Indiana U 1983)

Michael Hollister (2014)