



Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#280 (c.1861)

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading -- treading -- till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through --

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum --
Kept beating -- beating -- till I thought
My mind was going numb --

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space -- began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here --

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down --
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing -- then --

ANALYSIS

“She projected her imagined spiritual death from excessive pain in ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’.... Her best poems on the extremity of pain, the kind producing a state of trance, make its quality of spiritual death concrete in terms of physical death and at the same time dramatize it in the ritual of burial. In the first of

these, the levels of sinking down to unconsciousness follow step by step the ceremony so familiar in her village world: 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain'... The stage lies within the cortex of the brain, and the drama is rendered exclusively in terms of unarticulated sounds, transformed into motions which enact the pantomime through its inexorable progress to extinction.

The subdued step of mourners in the real world became in the first stanza a heavy relentless 'treading' to this tortured consciousness, until it feared that 'Sense was breaking through.' The twofold meanings here, of the mind giving way and of the sensations threatening to quicken again from their comfortable state of numbness, are picked up in the following stanza and the concluding one. When the funeral service began, its incessant droning made the mind at last actually begin 'going numb,' though with the disquieting echo of a pagan ritual in its beating 'Drum.'

By the time the third stanza is reached, the mind is so dissociated it is now both the extinct life in the coffin and the agonized soul across which the pallbearers creak. 'With those same Boots of Lead, again' implies that the experience was re-enacted over and over yet simultaneously, with the lead of the coffin grotesquely transferred to the boot-soles of the attendants. This same duality of consciousness continues as the procession leaves the church and the funeral knell sounds, announcing the death of the body of agony and at the same time killing the listening spirit. This sound is so cosmic only the most extravagant simile will compass it: 'As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear.' Such a climax has an absolute rightness about it. For the poem has consisted exclusively of a succession of images all auditory and reiterated—treading, beating, creaking. And with this final tolling, the consciousness is 'Wrecked, solitary,' except for the companioning 'Silence,' more harrowing than any of the sounds had been.

For the mind to apprehend beyond the pale of death, even the hallucinatory death of obliterating pain, would be to go beyond the limits of judgment. To avoid this the poem ends with the mind simply giving way, but this too in terms of the last act of burial. Just as the coffin is about to be lowered into the grave, 'a Plank of Reason broke,' and the persona dropped down through level after level of unconsciousness, hitting a new 'World' of extinction 'at every Crash.' These were the last soundless sounds of agony, as the mind 'got through knowing.' Being as been swallowed up in trance. Perhaps the only flaw in this poem is that the metaphor of 'Funeral' comes near stealing the show. The powerfully dramatized ceremony, with all its ghastly detail, tends to draw the reader's attention away from the spiritual death it was intended to illuminate."

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

"The fragile membrane that separates 'self' from 'outer world' has been ruptured, and the surroundings flood into consciousness with a force like that of sexual violation. There are no distinct 'others' (not even the anonymous 'Eyes' that had indicated mourners to witness death in 'I heard a Fly buzz --'), nothing but a lone speaker whose mind has been filled with a jumble of sensations, as if it were no more than an empty vessel. Throughout, the speaker seems to strain after coherence, and the poem's compelling attraction derives in large measure from its ability to lure the reader into joining the speaker in this pursuit. It even seems apparent that Dickinson intends this prolonged and unresolved tension: at the beginning we are given to hope that 'Sense was breaking through,' and this expectation is not undercut until the end, when 'a Plank in Reason, broke.' The poem taunts with its invitations and frustrations, and ultimately forces us to ask what we know, how we know--whether 'life' and 'death' are susceptible to understanding.

The poem is taut in its movement, for there are at least three forces at work to set the verse in motion and structure its course. The one that is clearest and most available to the reader is the step-by-step scenario of 'Funeral,' a familiar ritual whose configuration has been decreed by society. All Congregationalist funerals followed very much the same outline, and few readers will have difficulty in recognizing it: the mourners who pay their respects, the church service, the removal to graveyard and burial, the tolling of the bell as friends and family leave to resume the pursuits of the living. What makes this poem startling, of course, is that the ritual observed in real life by the mourners is reported here by the deceased itself.

Although it is an impossible [debatable] feat, seeing one's own funeral and reading one's own obituary are among the most common fantasies of our culture, and they have become stock components of our literature as well. Congregationalist ministers enjoined the members of their congregations to reflect upon the moment of death as a spiritual exercise, to imagine how family and friends would feel (would they be confident of meeting the deceased in Heaven, or would they fear an eternity of separation because the life of the deceased had given no signs of saving Grace?). Mark Twain played humorously with the remnants of this religious notion [the tone of this critic is Atheist] in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; and in the twentieth century Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* dramatized the pathos in life by using a proleptic narrator who sees, among other things, her own funeral. The premise behind all of these is the same: from the absolute vantage of death, we will be able to ascertain what is really important in life--what events were significant, what values are enduring. At last, perhaps, we can know what people really thought of us or how God will ultimately judge us: seeing our funeral might allow us finally to understand our 'self.'

This poem is grotesque, and deliberately so, principally because Dickinson's rendition of the convention turns all the usual advantages of these literary devices against themselves. No information about life or self can be gathered from this funeral. The mourners are silent, muffled figures whose movement, though constant, 'treading--treading,' leads only 'to and fro'; the funeral service has no sound but the relentless 'beating--beating' of the unmusical, toneless 'Drum.' One horror, then, is the hollow abstraction of this retrospective view. Instead of confirming the importance of certain particular events and values, instead of revealing the true feelings of people for a specific soul now deceased, it suggests that nothing and no one can have enduring value. The only lasting value is the unvarying ritual itself as ritual, and both the reader and the proleptic Voice cling to the formal, abstract structure of the ceremony that alone seems capable of imposing order upon death.

The 'Plank' of reason in the last stanza may seem cryptic to a modern reader; however, a contemporary reader might well have recognized Dickinson's allusion to the iconography of conservative, mid-nineteenth-century religious culture. In *Holmes and Barber's Religious Allegories* (1848), there is an emblem called 'WALKING BY FAITH' (modeled on the passage from II Corinthians 5:7, 'For we walk by faith, not by sight'). It depicts a man 'just starting from what appears to be solid ground, to walk upon a narrow plank [with the word 'FAITH' imprinted on it], stretched across a deep "gulph" and which ends nobody knows whither.' On one side is life, and on the other is Heaven; only the plank of 'FAITH' can provide transport--so this emblem asserts. Yet having renounced faith [?], Dickinson substitutes a 'Plank in Reason,' which breaks because no rational explanation can be adequate to bridge the abyss between earth and Heaven."

Cynthia Griffin Wolff
Emily Dickinson (1988)

"In a series of poems beginning in the early 1860s, Dickinson describes what might best be called her fall from metaphysical grace and the epistemological impact this event had upon her. In these poems, Dickinson's confrontation with the abyss becomes the central metaphor for her vision of a world from which transcendent meaning has been withdrawn and in which, therefore, the speaker is free to reach any conclusion she wishes or, indeed, to reach no conclusion at all. 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,' c. 1862, is one such poem.

On the surface, this poem is about death or, possibly, madness. But, finally, effectively, if it is 'about' anything, it is about dread. In it...Dickinson does not reorder 'what formerly appeared to be conclusively known.' She tells what it feels like to realize that nothing can be known at all.... As in the surrealist paintings of de Chirico and Magritte, outsize 'humanistic' detail functions in this poem to evoke all the terror that the isolated individual feels when confronting nothingness--the abyss. In the poem's otherwise emptied-out landscape, 'the Heavens' become a 'Bell,' 'Being' an 'Ear.' Whether it is death or insanity that opens up this vision to her, what the speaker realizes is that she is utterly alone and totally free. There is neither a sustaining God ["all the Heavens were a Bell"] nor a sustaining scaffold of meaning to support her. Like the trapdoor on a gallows or like the planks supporting a coffin until it is dropped into the grave, the 'bottom' drops out of reality [due to reliance on "Reason"]. For the speaker, anything is possible in a world that is fundamentally absurd."

Paula Bennett

“[‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’] begins, as so many of the poems do, with an assertion whose stability sounds unquestionable. Despite its semantic oddness, the first line is delivered with rhetorical assurance that temporarily contains its volatile subject matter. The sense of containment is not merely a product of orderly syntax and confident tone, however; it also derives from the claustrophobic setting of the funeral. Though the feeling of a funeral occurs in the speaker’s brain, the analogy suggests premature burial. The mental state the speaker describes is not merely like a funeral in her brain, it is like being buried alive: the heightened awareness of sounds (treading, beating, creaking, tolling) and the sense of enclosure (‘in my Brain, they all were seated,’ ‘a Box’) combine with other evidence in the poem to suggest that the mourners are conducting a funeral service for a speaker who is not yet dead (‘My Mind was going numb,’ ‘creak across my Soul’).

The mental state described here begins as a numbing, monotonous, claustrophobic feeling but proceeds to its opposite. If the beginning of the poem figures extreme interiority, the ending of the poem depicts an even more disturbing exteriority whose boundlessness is finally indescribable. The ‘Plank in Reason’ that breaks in the final stanza is anticipated in the shift from interior to exterior space, as though the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room (or the sides, lid, and bottom of the coffin), all made of planks, suddenly disappear, plunging the speaker into limitless and terrifying space.

The figurative path to the complete loss of reason, and its attendant spatial dissolution, is difficult to follow. Comparison with the more logical sequence of a similar poem offers an instructive contrast. [‘I felt a Cleaving in my Mind’] (#937) employs a metaphor that describes exactly what [‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’] enacts (that is, poem 937 says what poem 280 does.)”

R. W. Franklin, ed.
The Poems of Emily Dickinson
(Harvard 1998)

“We may speculate that the poem charts the stages in the speaker’s loss of consciousness, and this loss of consciousness is a dramatization of the deadening forces that today would be known as repression. We may further suppose that the speaker is reconstructing—or currently knowing—an experience whose pain in the past rendered it impossible to know. We note that part of the strangeness of her speech lies in the fact that not only is the poem grammatically past tense, but it also seems emotionally past tense. It illustrates the way in which one can relate experience and, at the same time, suffer a disassociation from it....

Since the speaker adds no emotive comment to the recollection, it is as if even in the recounting the words did not penetrate the walls of her own understanding. That the poem is about knowledge and the consequence of its repression is clear enough from the poem’s initial conceit, for people do not feel funerals and certainly not in the brain. In addition, as a consequence of the persistent downward motion of the poem, we see that the funeral is rendered in terms of a burial, and this fusion or confusion points to a parallel confusion between unconsciousness and death. The burial of something in the mind—of a thought or experience or wish—the rendering of it unconscious, lacks an etiology; its occasion and even content here remain unspecified. As a consequence our attention is fixed on the process itself.

Examining the conceit, we can speculate that the mourners represent that part of the self which fights to resurrect or keep alive the thought the speaker is trying to commit to burial. They stand for that part of the self which feels conflict about the repressive gesture. ‘Treading—treading—,’ the self in conflict goes over the same ground of its argument with itself, and sense threatens to dissolve, ‘break through—,’ because of the mind’s inability to resolve its contradictory impulses. In the second stanza, on a literal level the participants of the funeral sit for the service and read words over the dead. On a figural level the confusion of the mind quiets to one unanimous voice issuing its consent to the burial of meaning. But the mind’s unanimity, its single voice, is no less horrible. The speaker hears it as a drum: rhythmic, repetitious, numbing.

In the fourth stanza, the repressive force lashes the speaker with retaliatory distortion: the ‘Heavens’ and the cosmos they represent toll as one overwhelming ‘Bell’; ‘Being’ is reduced to the ‘Ear’ that must receive

it. No longer fighting the repressive instinct (for the 'Mourners' have disappeared, 'Being' and 'I' are united), the self is a victim passively awaiting its own annihilation. When the 'Plank in Reason,' the last stronghold to resist its own dissolution, gives, and the speaker plummets through successive levels of meaning (an acknowledgment that repression has degrees), the result is a death of consciousness. As J. V. Cunningham remarks, the poem is a representation of a 'psychotic episode' at the end of which the speaker passes out....

The allegory of the funeral attempts to exteriorize and give a temporal structure to what is in fact interior and simultaneous. Because we see the stages of the funeral (stages that correspond to steps that will complete the repressive instinct) we cannot help but view repression in terms of death. Thus the funeral imagery, replete with mourners, coffin, and service, seems both to distract from the poem's subject of repression and to insist on the severity of its consequences. But it is in the tension between the two modes of knowing and of representation, between an allegorical structure and an ironic one, that the poem's interest lies.

For structure and sequence fall away in the ironic judgment of the poem's last line, which suggests, if implicitly, that action (exteriority) and knowledge (interiority) will always diverge. Even the attempt to reconstruct the experience and do it over with a different consequence leads, as it did the first time, to blankness. This divergence is further exemplified in the odd order of the poem's events: the funeral precedes death, at least the death of consciousness. Such inversion of normal sequence necessitates a figural reading of the poem and makes perfect sense within it, for Dickinson seems to be claiming we cannot 'not know' in isolation and at will. What we choose not to know, what we submerge, like the buried root of a plant that sucks all water and life toward its source, pulls us down with a vengeance toward it."

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

"The relationship between figurative excess and endings that lack closure suggests why so many of Dickinson's poems were originally published with their difficult endings deleted (or not selected for publication at all until they were published in the complete, variorum edition in 1955). ["I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"] (P 280) was typically printed without its last stanza....

["I felt a Funeral--in my Brain"] begins, as so many of the poems do, with an assertion whose stability sounds unquestionable. Despite its semantic oddness, the first line is delivered with rhetorical assurance that temporarily contains its volatile subject matter. The sense of containment is not merely a product of orderly syntax and confident tone, however; it also derives from the claustrophobic setting of the funeral. Though the feeling of a funeral occurs in the speaker's brain, the analogy suggests premature burial. The mental state the speaker describes is not merely like a funeral in her brain, it is like being buried alive: the heightened awareness of sounds (treading, beating, creaking, tolling) and the sense of enclosure ('in my Brain...they all were seated,' 'a Box') combine with other evidence in the poem to suggest that the mourners are conducting a funeral service for a speaker who is not yet dead ('My Mind was going numb,' 'creak across my Soul').

The mental state described here begins as a numbing, monotonous, claustrophobic feeling but proceeds to its opposite. If the beginning of the poem figures extreme interiority, the ending of the poem depicts an even more disturbing exteriority whose boundlessness is finally indescribable. The 'Plank in Reason' that breaks in the final stanza is anticipated in the shift from interior to exterior space, as though the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room (or the sides, lid, and bottom of the coffin), all made of planks, suddenly disappear, plunging the speaker into limitless and terrifying space....

In stanza one, the speaker's mental state is compared to a funeral and is characterized by morbidity, monotony, and repetitiveness so oppressive that 'it seemed / That Sense was breaking through.' In the second stanza, the monotony and repetitiveness continue, but the sensation of motion (in the treading feet) decreases as 'they all were seated.' The sound of a drum replaces the treading with even more monotonous and repetitive beating until the speaker feels her mind 'going numb.' When, in stanza three, she 'hears' the

creaking of the pall bearers' steps carrying the coffin 'across [her] Soul,' something changes. Perhaps the movement from the interior space of the funeral service to the exterior space of the graveyard precipitates the drastic figurative change when 'Space--began to toll.' The tolling of a church bell to signal the burial of the dead is consistent with the metaphor thus far, as the monotony of a ringing bell is akin to the insistent treading, beating, and creaking that precede it. What is not consistent, however, is that all of 'Space' is tolling, not just a church bell. At the end of stanza three, then, the setting of the initial figure is abandoned, and only the maddening sound persists to carry the metaphors of the poem forward.

Vast, undifferentiated, resounding space is the setting of lines 11 through 14, a setting, if it can any longer be termed such, of pure sound. Space tolls as [if] 'all the Heavens were a Bell' and 'Being, but an Ear.' Whatever the speaker means by 'Being,' she is not included in that category, for she and 'Silence, some strange Race' are [ship]wrecked in this world of sound, like two lost mariners washed up in some alien and, we discover, hostile land. 'Wrecked, solitary, here' suggests shipwreck and strange lands, but we must remember that the speaker and her companion, Silence, are disembodied; and even Being, the native race of this aural world, is 'but an Ear.' It is worth reflecting, before proceeding to the final stanza, that the speaker has moved from the claustrophobic environment of the funeral (perhaps of the coffin) to the boundless environment of pure sound; worse, the mind-numbing experience of the beginning of the poem has reduced her to silence, rendering her strange and solitary in this world of sound. It is this strangeness and isolation that she amplifies in the final stanza.

The last stanza restores the spatial setting, at least to the limited extent that one prop, a plank, from the material world is poised precariously over this aural abyss. Balancing on the imagery of the preceding stanza, the speaker seems to be walking the plank of a [pirate] ship, the victim of a nautical execution that recurs to the funeral motif. When the 'Plank in Reason' breaks, however, she plunges into space again, rather than into the sea, and thus descends through the vast emptiness that here seems to be outer space: she 'hit[s] a World, at every plunge.'

This dizzying perspective of the speaker tumbling through space yet colliding with whole worlds (then bouncing off of them and continuing her fall?) is difficult to picture, which is precisely the point of such excessive imagery. Once again the admission of failure and the end of the poem coincide: 'then,' like 'now' in ["Grief is a Mouse"], points to a moment when the poem's formulations recognize defeat. 'How then know' and 'Finished knowing—then' bring their respective poem's processes of knowing to an end, though the way that '— then --' in this poem is suspended between two dashes suggests both ending and continuation: at that moment [then], I finished knowing; and, I finished knowing, [and]...then [I can't convey what happened then]. In either case, what the poem is able to do with words has ended."

Karen Ford

Gender and The Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade
(U Mississippi 1997)

"In the first three stanzas Dickinson carefully erects a plausible physical setting, which she then demolishes in the last two stanzas. The poem itself functions as a house with a 'cellar' in which the narrator listens to the mourners carrying a coffin, perhaps her own, across the floor 'above' her head; then, in the fourth stanza, the word 'here' suddenly becomes problematic, immediately before the narrator drops, first, through the cellar floor, then through her own grave, and then through the last line of the poem--multiple levels of reality or 'World[s]' that her body and consciousness pierce, at every 'Plunge.' The 'here' at the end of the poem, or the point of view from which the narrator describes the action, is finally a very different 'here' from that in the fourth stanza, the place where the speaker stands as she listens to the heavens tolling like an immense bell. Because the poem replicates the disappearance or appropriation of a physical space, it can inspire in readers a sensation of bodily and intellectual disorientation that may begin to approximate Dickinson's own confusion as she made her way around the Dickinson household. Furthermore, the narrator's 'unconsciousness' resulting from her 'fall' in the poem's last line becomes a metaphor not only for the cessation of consciousness that is death but for the soul shut out of heaven, condemned to pass from world to world, existence to existence, without ever achieving the physical stability which is analogous to spiritual salvation."

James R. Guthrie

Emily Dickinson's Vision: Illness and Identity in Her Poetry
(U Florida 1998)

The speaker represents the “strange Race” of nonbelievers, having a premonition of death. She is “wrecked” and “solitary” because she is depending on “sense” and Reason to the exclusion of intuition, which supports Faith. This poem combines the traditions of Christianity and the Romantic movement—in particular New England Transcendentalism—in rejecting the limitations of the 18th-century Enlightenment, especially as represented by Locke, expressed in philosophy by Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and by Emerson. In the first stanza “sense” is “breaking through” the plank that breaks in the last stanza. While “all the Heavens” are ringing with the funeral bell, the nonbeliever can only respond to its transcendent meaning with “Silence.” When the “Plank in Reason” breaks, she plunges down through a succession of “worlds” like the levels of Hell in Dante. She is “Finished.” Only “then” does she know the meaning of life and death—too late. Ironically, just like the speaker, secular academic critics of this poem—reductive Postmodernists--likewise walk the plank of Reason and miss the point.

Michael Hollister (2014)