

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#937 (c.1864)

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind --
As if my Brain had split --
I tried to match it -- Seam by Seam --
But could not make them fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before --
But Sequence raveled out of Sound
Like Balls -- upon a Floor.

ANALYSIS

“The second line establishes that the sensation being described here is some sort of mental falling apart. The orderly progression of thoughts, compared to a string of yarn or thread, cannot be knit or sewn together into a coherent sequence. On the contrary, the balls of yarn (perhaps a graphic corollary for the brain with its bundled folds and convolutions) unravel when they roll to the floor.

Not only does this poem describe the movement toward disintegration that poem 280 undertakes to depict, but it also refers to the difficulty of such representation: ‘But Sequence raveled out of Sound’ is not just a description of mental undoing, it is an account of linguistic failure. The sequence of mental events that leads to the disruption of rationality (another sequence) quickly moves out of verbal reach (out of sound). But that one phrase is the only hint that [“I felt a Cleaving in my Mind”] cannot fully represent its subject. Its metaphors, strings of yarn torn from some knitted whole and balls of yarn unraveling on the floor, are adequate to the task they are given. The consistency of these analogies and the brevity of the poem are indices of a certain conceptual neatness.”

Karen Ford

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