

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#412 (c.1862)

I read my sentence – steadily –
Reviewed it with my eyes,
To see that I made no mistake
In its extremest clause –
The Date, and manner, of the shame –
And then the Pious Form
That ‘God have mercy’ on the Soul
The Jury voted Him –
I made my soul familiar – with her extremity –
That at the last, it should not be a novel Agony –
But she, and Death, acquainted –
Meet tranquilly, as friends –
Salute, and pass, without a Hint –
And there, the Matter ends –

ANALYSIS

“The proliferation of pronouns here is not a sign of artistic confusion but a grammatical echo of the dream chaos, whose intricate meaning can be parsed readily enough if the analyst follows the mode of the subconscious drama. ‘I,’ ‘Him,’ and ‘She’ are all aspects of the persona of the poem, as in the dream all characters are projections of the dreamer.

The poem falls into two equal parts of eight lines each, though the climactic quatrain that introduces the second is written as an extended couplet, thus giving emphasis to the previously unnamed ‘Agony.’ This twofold division corresponds roughly to the duality of body and soul. The fictive ‘I’ stands for the whole of the mortal life that dominates the first half, as mind-heart-body react to the sentence of death. The extrapolated ‘she,’ the filmy protagonist of the second half, is the immortal part, this section being primarily concerned with the effect of the verdict on the soul. Yet both are spoken by ‘I,’ for Dickinson could not indulge in an outright *Debate between the Body and the Soul* as the medieval poet could [see also Anne Bradstreet’s “The Flesh and the Spirit,” 1678], his belief in the absolute reality of both not being available to her [very debatable].

The law refuses to take any cognizance of such duality and addresses the reunited halves of the prisoner as ‘Him,’ though it does so at the very point where the jury in condemning his body to death makes use of a formula from traditional piety to recommend mercy on his soul. ‘Him,’ placed exactly at the juncture between the two halves of the poem, likewise unifies them and at the same time gives the persona wholeness of being for the duration of a single word, though even then only as the third person condemned in the nightmare, anonymous and detached from the agonized dreamer-narrator.

The legal language, concentrated in the first half, not only sets the scene but controls the meaning throughout. Brought up in a family of lawyers, she came by it naturally. But far more important than her precision in handling its terminology is the imaginative fitness with which she puts it to work. The dramatic appeal of a criminal trial comes from the contrast of the lawless emotions involved in the original actions and the ordered procedure by which the court re-enacts them, with the possibility that at any moment the violently human may erupt through the formalism of its jargon. From this situational irony she creates her strategy, giving it a unique twist by having one actor, the masking ‘I,’ slip successively into all the leading roles—prisoner-in-the-dock, defense counsel, judge, jury, and courtroom spectators.

The poem opens with the flat statement that the unidentified speaker, completely subdued to the mechanism of the ritual, has read his sentence 'steadily,' or as her Lexicon defines it 'without tottering, shaking,' such as might be expected of one condemned to die. This air of professional disinterestedness holds throughout the first eight lines, as the speaker performs both judicial and counseling functions. 'Reviewed it' suggests that this is a court of appeal, perhaps of last resort, reviewing the decision of a lower trial court; also that the defense, counsel and client, are going over a familiar document, not with the heart but 'with my eyes,' alert to any technicalities of 'date,' 'clause,' or 'manner' that might serve as a basis for requesting a reversal of the opinion; finally that the condemned is even looking for an extra-legal loophole in the one human phrase that has crept into this otherwise formally pronounced judgment, but the jury's vote of 'God have mercy' is just a 'Pious Form' without legal consequences. All the ingenuity of the profession and the meticulous care of the accused have revealed 'no mistake,' however, and the sentence stands in its 'extremest clause.' So ends the first scene....

Beneath the stylized language of this drama the speaker knows he is none of these other parties, judge or jury or attorney, not even the disinterested spectator, a role reserved for the reader. He is the one condemned to death.... He is also aware that the whole ritual is simply a nightmarish image of another and worse kind of death, the dying of consciousness under the pressure of despair. But he has lost his sense of identity, and this is what accounts for his apparent apathy. His detachment is such that he can read his own death sentence as if it applied to someone else. As she put it elsewhere: 'A Doubt if it be Us' assists the mind, staggering under extreme anguish, until it finds a new footing.

To lose one's identity by such a living death is in a sense to be separated from one's soul, which justifies the colloquy in the second section. But the mortal part still does all the talking, 'I made my soul familiar' answering in uninterrupted sequence to the opening line, 'I read my sentence – steadily.' The continuity of speaker binds the two parts together, and this limited point of view provides a further irony by relating an immortal sequence in mortal terms. The soul, previously introduced only in the jury's callous formula, now becomes an entity, and the theme of death-dealing pain emerges with an effect of shock from the metaphor of a legal death-sentence. The scene has now dissolved from the courtroom to some shadowy anteroom, perhaps the death-cell or even the execution chamber itself, with that inconsequent shifting so familiar in dreams. Fearing that what killed his consciousness may also kill his soul, the speaker is solicitous that 'she' should be prepared for 'her extremity' so that in the end 'it should not be a novel Agony.' 'Novel' means not only unexpected, the final shock he wants to make her familiar with in advance, but also new, implying that she has gone through all his past agonies with him too.

In his ignorance of the nature of souls he apparently thinks they are subject to death as well as to suffering. So the last irony is that the 'novel Agony' is reserved for him, not her. 'She and Death' it turns out are old acquaintances, as symbols of mortality and immortality, but since they have no common ground save the moment of passing they simply 'Salute' courteously and go their respective ways, 'without a Hint' to him of what they are really like or where they have gone. His surprise discovery is that in this friendly meeting it is only he, 'the Matter,' which has been annihilated. His sentence has been executed not by legal but by verbal machinery. In the triple pun, 'And there, the *Matter* ends,' the fictive 'I' experiences a new death by losing his soul as well as his identity in the depths of despair, the curtain is rung down on the bad dream along with all the legal theatricalities that bodied it forth, and the poem destroys itself in a tour de force. The reader, if any one, suffers shock."

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