The Anatomy of Pain in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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THE ANATOMY OF PAIN IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

An examination of Emily Dickinson's poems concerning pain reveals her concern for her consciousness. Displaying a positive approach to her suffering, she states her ability to gain benefits from her agony. In addition to being aware of how pain can augment her consciousness, she also recognizes the need to control the potentially threatening torment and thus protect her sanity.

Section I points out the complex nature of Emily Dickinson's pain and suggests that her anguish cannot be attributed to any one problem or conflict in her life. Her unique perception of the universe appears to underlie much of her concern with pain. Challenging Christian and Emersonian explanations of suffering, she devises her own approach. Section II explains that in many of her poems Emily Dickinson reveals her ability to derive positive effects from her anguish: she maintains that she can gain emotional strength, enhance her perception of ecstasy, and expand her consciousness. Nevertheless, she always indicates her fear of the threat which pain can present to her sanity and suggests her concern with maintaining controls and limits on her suffering. Section III reveals her most extreme protective device or control, the trance. As she portrays attempts to preserve her severely threatened consciousness, she produces some of her most intense poetry.
THE ANATOMY OF PAIN IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY
CHOOSING AN APPROACH TO SUFFERING

"Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray"; thus writes Emily Dickinson to Louise and Francis Norcross in January 1863 upon the death of their father (L II, 421). Just as Emily Dickinson cannot "pray" or offer a religious consolation to her cousins in this instance, neither can she usually soothe her own anguish with orthodox Christian explanations. Instead, she often seeks some relief in poetic expression and claims that she will "tell a Hurt - to cool it" (554). Further, her poems reveal that she fashions a pragmatic approach to her suffering: she uses her agony to enhance the "most specifically human resource, the consciousness." Displaying a concern for her consciousness in the poems on suffering, she demonstrates her attempts both to augment and to protect her mental awareness.

Attempting to discover reasons for Emily Dickinson's attention to pain, critics have offered various theories based on her life. They have pointed to such probable sources as an unloving mother, an overbearing father, a complicated relationship with her brother and sister-in-law, and unfulfilled friendships. Others have examined the possible effect of an eye disorder or mental illness. In The Life of Emily Dickinson, Richard B. Sewall concludes that while each of these theories may have some validity, the insufficiency of evidence and the likelihood of a combination of causes should be a warning against easy solutions to this issue. Inder Nath Kher further argues that
basically Emily Dickinson's torment is "nameless" and "uncaused": he regards her as a victim of existential pain elicited by her "alienation from the sources of primal existence." Clark Griffith similarly proposes that her doubts about the chaotic universe place her in a position comparable to that of modern man: she, like twentieth century man, faces the "lifelong agony" created by an existence no longer decipherable in terms of old values and unifying theories.\(^5\)

The critics cited above have been sensitive in their perception of the complex nature of the pain which Emily Dickinson describes. While certain events and disappointments may have exacerbated her suffering, most likely no one person or occurrence can account for her anguish. Her expression of human pain in her poems reveals a basic tragic view and an existential sense of agony. She is plagued by cosmic uncertainties which also haunt some of her contemporaries, such as Herman Melville. Griffith further argues that while she may have developed her approach to pain because "of personal frustration, the outlook passed the supreme test which art demands of suffering. It transcended the personal to become concerned with suffering and frustration as universal themes" (p. 6).

While Emily Dickinson reveals this profound sense of suffering, she repeatedly recounts attempts to control her anguish. She points out in both her poems and her letters that the writing of poetry enables her to discipline the potentially overwhelming agony. In Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, Albert J. Gelpi concludes that Emily Dickinson's pain finds "both relief and release in the distance and design imposed by artistic creation."\(^6\) In addition to "tell[ing] a Hurt - to cool it" (554), she will "Put it in Latin": it "Seems it
don't shriek so — under rule" (426). When she writes to Higginson, she tells him that her terror causes her to "sing": "I had a terror — since September — I could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground — because I am afraid" (L II, 404). Her singing therefore has the effect of protecting her in her agony: it helps "To Keep the Dark away" (850) and thus to maintain her rationality. Emily Dickinson also indicates her faith in the curative power of her "song" for others. She tells Louise Norcross that she will heal her more quickly than her doctor will by using "the balsam word" (L II, 425). Similarly, as Sewall suggests, she wants Samuel Bowles to "see and feel what she as poet could do for him" (II, 482), and she writes of the "Fairy Medicine" of poetry in "Would you like Summer? Taste of our's —" (L II, 371). "The Martyr Poets" performed a similar service for mankind, as they "wrought their Pain in syllable" in order to "encourage Some" (544).

Faced with the burden of suffering, Emily Dickinson attempts to find some rational explanation for the presence of pain in human experience. William Sherwood maintains that in some of her early efforts "to justify suffering or at least [to] justify reconciling oneself to suffering," she frequently turns to the traditional religious argument that "the suffering we endure on earth will be made up for in heaven" (p. 58). Citing "Tho' I get home how late — how late" (207), Sherwood argues that here Emily Dickinson offers this traditional argument concerning the reward of heaven. While he points out that in other poems she treats this explanation with irony or bitterness, he does not comment on the subtle ironies found in this poem. She may seem to be presenting the orthodox viewpoint when she describes the joy of her
ultimate arrival "home": "'twill compensate," for "Better will be the Extasy/That they have done expecting me." The transporting moment when she knocks on the door, however, has been "Brewed from decades of Agony!" The eyes have been "long-cheated," when the "unexpected knock" finally comes. Also, the knock occurs in an ominous setting: "When Night - descending-dumb - and dark." Her use of this highly secular, human scene to symbolize heaven adds a further note of irony. Although this poem may suggest future heavenly comfort after "decades of Agony," the joy does not seem to compensate for the earthly pain. Similarly, she states that

If pain for peace prepares
Lo what "Augustan" years
Our feet await!

(63).

The unanswerable conditional statement clearly implies her doubts about the future compensation.

Extending this argument further, Sherwood explains that Emily Dickinson will experiment with the idea of pain as God's "pedagogical device" for making one "appreciate future bliss all the more" (p. 59). In "I shall know why - when Time is over" (193), she portrays Christ as the schoolmaster who "will explain each separate anguish/In the fair schoolroom of the sky." Of course, the "explanation" of the pedagogical function of "each separate anguish" will occur when she has "ceased to wonder why." This delayed clarification appears unable to alleviate or compensate for present suffering. She ends the poem by emphasizing her suffering rather than the future elucidation: "I shall forget the drop of Anguish/That scalds me now - that scalds me now!"

Her dissatisfaction with this explanation of pain as a "pedagogical device" becomes further obvious in "To learn the Transport by the
Pain" (167). The instruction is not necessarily confined to enhancing a future comprehension of "transport," for this supposed enlightenment should also occur now as a result of the pain: one should "learn the Transport by the Pain —/As Blind Men learn the sun!" A great deal of irony underlies the whole description of this educational process. Blind men can only "learn the sun" by knowing its opposite, darkness; they never see the sun. Similarly, the "Mysterious Bard" or God only allows one to know "transport" by experiencing its opposite, pain; one never directly encounters "transport." In The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry, David Porter explains that lines three and four further qualify the first two lines: "To suspect that there is in some other life a compensation for present anguish represents an order of understanding distinctly different from knowledge possessed." The image of one dying of thirst with the suspicion of "Brooks in meadows" clearly has negative, ironic connotations. Attempting to maintain one's faith and trust in the "Mysterious Bard," one has "To stay the homesick - homesick feet/Upon a foreign shore." Nevertheless, one remains "Haunted by native lands, the while —/And blue - beloved air!" Emily Dickinson classifies this agony as "the Soverign Anguish," which suggests an agony of extreme degree as well as one caused by the "Sovereign." Only the "'Laureates,'" who are patient enough to endure the "signal wo" of this pedagogical system, will sing a carol to the "Mysterious Bard." Refusing to identify with the "patient 'Laureates,'" the poet closes with the assertion that the carols are "Inaudible, indeed,/To us - the duller scholars." Emily Dickinson can neither hear nor sing the tunes of the "Mysterious Bard," and she thus rebels against patient acceptance of this humble, rather degrading position. Sherwood maintains
that while the theory of pain as a pedagogical device may be a rational means of handling the problem, this approach is contingent upon a firm belief in immortality. Emily Dickinson frequently reveals her doubts about the afterlife; this traditional, religious explanation therefore clearly proves inadequate for her. Also, this approach involves a distastefully subservient position: "When she attempted it, it galled her pride and vitiated her art" (Sherwood, p. 60).

If she questions the traditional religious explanation for suffering, she also finds Emerson's explanation unsatisfying. In his critical biography, This Was A Poet, George F. Whicher maintains that Emily Dickinson sees the "opposites" of the human experience and "like Emerson before her," she is "Compensation's child." While she does perceive the antitheses of experience and in many poems depicts the value of the distancing which "opposites" offer, she does not share Emerson's view of natural balance. Sherwood argues that Emily Dickinson perceives "not Emerson's equitable polarity but cosmic usury" (p. 61). In his essay "Compensation," Emerson states that "Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good." He then explains that "the world looks like a multiplication table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself" (p. 99). For Emily Dickinson, however, the world offers not a "mathematical equation" but an unproportionate ratio of pain:

For each extatic instant  
We must an anguish pay  
In keen and quivering ratio  
To the extasy.  

(125)

Her experience of anguish has been too profound for her to accept Emerson's simple equation.
Emily Dickinson does not see the just universe nor the balanced natural order which Emerson perceives. According to Sherwood, "for her, the potential compensation gained from adverse experience is achieved through the insight of the creature, not as a natural law of the Creator" (p. 62). Given the burden of pain, Emily Dickinson conceives her task to be survival. Her ability to derive some benefit from an experience of pain therefore becomes "a test of the capacity of the intelligence" or of the consciousness (Sherwood, p. 62). When she does not emphasize pain as an aspect of God's Plan, she develops some of her most powerful poems concerning human suffering. Pain becomes a means of exploring her consciousness and hence of further developing her self-awareness. Believing that "'Tis Opposites - entice" (355), she can use the painful experience to create the necessary distancing to allow her to comprehend joy, pleasure, or "transport." Unlike in "To learn the Transport," she may proclaim the advantages of learning through antitheses. If "Success is counted sweetest" (67) has slight ironical suggestions, her emphasis rests on the enhanced insight of the one who lies "defeated - dying." Similarly, "Water, is taught by thirst" (135) contrasts with "To learn the Transport": while she notes the pain of the experience, she emphasizes the positive benefits of the suffering.

As Sherwood points out, in such poems as "Success is counted sweetest" and "Water is taught by thirst," "the protagonist is an active and independent learner; here suffering exists not to demonstrate God's superiority or to prepare us to appreciate his future benevolence by contrast, but to increase our comprehension of experience" (pp. 60-61). Emily thus often illustrates how pain can be used "to
augment our most specifically human resource, the consciousness" (Sherwood, p. 61). As Albert J. Gelpi asserts, she makes "the cultivation of consciousness her religion" (p. 108). Those poems in which she illustrates how she uses pain to contribute to this "cultivation of her consciousness" prove to be some of her most powerful and intense poems. In these poems, she channels the energy of the excruciating pain to its most practical benefit. Fascinated by the power which she gets through suffering and by the expansion which can occur, she investigates some of the farthest limits of her mind and demonstrates a religious concern for the protection of her consciousness.
II

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PAIN

When Emily Dickinson displays her most positive, practical approach to suffering, she demonstrates how pain can become a means of developing emotional strength, of enhancing one's appreciation of delight and beauty, or of expanding one's consciousness. While she can derive such positive results from her misery, she never fails to convince us of the profundity of the hurt which she suffers. By exhibiting an ambivalent approach to anguish, she expresses both an awareness of the extreme hurt of the pain as well as an understanding of its possible beneficial effects. Similarly, she often indicates both a fear of the agony and a desire to cultivate an experience of suffering: aware that pain can expand her consciousness, she also recognizes the possibility that her suffering could cause an expansion beyond her powers of control and thus elicit what John Cody terms "the loss of one's psychic integrity."

Mindful of this dual potential of pain, Emily Dickinson attempts to derive positive effects from anguish and at the same time recognizes the need to impose limitations and control on her suffering consciousness. Because she senses the extreme hurt and the significant danger of the pain and yet also cherishes its potentially favorable effects, Emily Dickinson reflects an ambivalent attitude and creates particularly intense poetry concerning pain.

In some of her best poems concerning the possible positive deriv-
tives of suffering, she increases the intensity by her use of poetic
devices. The imagery of these poems often illustrates the power and
strength derived from pain as well as the difficulty of controlling
the agony. Her customary regular meter serves to stress her dominating
regulation of the anguish. Often she will then vary or break the meter
to suggest unrestrained outbreaks of the torment, to imply the diffi-
cult imposition of order, or to demonstrate her ambivalence about a
statement. In addition, Emily Dickinson uses rhyme in such a way that
Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, the undisputed authority on Dickinson's
metrics, terms it a "cooling device." Emily Dickinson herself says
that she will "tell a Hurt - to cool it" (554). Her creation of
rhymes may thus suggest an attempt to order her agonized thoughts
and subject them to the rules of poetry. Rhyme therefore often implies
both "burning" anguish as well as control. Besides using rhyme to
emphasize control, she may break the rhyme to illustrate the outbreak
of unrestrained pain or to imply a tentativeness about her assertion.

In "I can wade Grief" (252) she offers a clear statement of the
power which she can derive from pain. In Emily Dickinson, Richard
Chase argues that "the poem is certainly incoherent as a rational
statement and as a system of images." Rather than terming this poem
an "incoherent" system of imagery, one might point out its achievement
of intensification by a rapid piling up of images and metaphors. She
can "wade Grief" and can maintain her balance except when threatened
by the "least push of Joy." This joy "breaks up" her steps, as pebbles
ordinarily would. In this case, the pebble, which may represent pain,
is not responsible for her difficulties and is therefore advised not
to smile smugly. She then compares this joy to a "New Liquor," which
intoxicates her and makes her "tip - drunken." If she is threatened by joy in the first stanza, in the final stanza she more subtly suggests the threat of pain, the more typical "danger" for Emily Dickinson. Now she turns to the image of "woven rope," according to David Porter (p. 51), to exemplify how she derives power from pain "thro' Discipline." The image of strands being added to a rope through each painful experience "Till Weights - will hang" implies the tedious, demanding difficulty of the slow process and the need for rigorous control. Provided such discipline is maintained, emotional strength will be developed so that "Weights" can "hang." Contrasting the effects of giving "Balm" or "Himmaleh" to giants, she represents the strength which is acquired from the painful experience. The burden of carrying "Himmaleh" could potentially prove overwhelming (even for a giant). "Thro' Discipline," however, the agonizing episode can be dominated and transformed into a source of strength.

Emily Dickinson's emphasis on the power which she gains from disciplined agony is further reinforced by the meter of this poem. The poem begins with three lines of iambic dimeter. Then, with the "least push of Joy" in line four, the meter becomes irregular. Using some trochaic verse with other exceptions, she produces some irregular, "uncontrolled" verse in this first stanza. In *Voice of the Poet*, Brita Lindberg-Seyersted points out that "considerable ambiguity and indeterminacy" may occur "in lines where trochees spread over more than the initial reversal" (p. 132). In stanza one, three internal trochees occur as well as an initial trochee. These trochees reinforce the idea of joy as an unsettling experience and hence, by contrast, of pain as a strengthening and (in this case) controlled process. Stanza two, which
exclusively discusses pain without the threat of "Joy," has two initial trochees in lines one and two but has no internal trochees. Its meter proves to be much more regular than that of stanza one. The initial trochees, however, may imply some difficulty in imposing control. By the last two lines, the threat of pain has been quieted: the final lines return to the opening iambic dimeter. The comparative regularity of this second stanza stresses her self-possession and enforced control when in pain. Her use of meter in this poem thus does not emphasize the menace of pain as much as it demonstrates the strength which she gains and exercises in encounters with agony. She further represents her firm hold on the pain by producing an exact rhyme between the initial syllable of "Himmaleh" and "him" at the end of this poem, which is otherwise lacking in any significant rhymes. Having been threatened by joy and perhaps to a degree by pain too, she displays a final steadiness and control.

In addition to deriving this positive benefit of emotional strength from pain, Emily Dickinson points out that one may also learn to appreciate delight or beauty more fully as a result of the experience of suffering. As Richard Wilbur explains in his essay "Sumptuous Destitution," Dickinson lives "in a world of delectable distances" and approaches all experience with the attitude that "privation is more plentiful than plenty" (p. 130). Characteristically, then, she considers pain to be a means of achieving a distance which can endow delight and beauty with a "sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness" (Wilbur, p. 133). In Poem 572, she explains that

Delight - becomes pictoral -
When viewed through Pain -
More fair - because impossible
That any gain -
In the second stanza she illustrates her idea by remarking that as long as one maintains a "given distance" between oneself and the mountain, one will perceive the "pictorial" amber mountain. If one approaches the mountain and thereby decreases the intervening distance, one will lose the aesthetic delight offered by the view from afar. Similarly, in "Success is counted sweetest" (67), the one who is successful cannot comprehend success; rather, the one who lies "defeated - dying" receives the spiritual gain of enhanced insight into the nature of victory.

In his discussion of "Success is counted sweetest" (67), Richard Wilbur argues that Emily Dickinson implies "the superiority of defeat to victory" so that the dying soldier's lot proves preferable to that of the victorious men (p. 132). Indeed, she does stress the increased awareness of the defeated soldier, but she nevertheless also ends the poem on an ambivalent note: the "strains of triumph" may be "clear" but they are also "agonized." Her ambivalence perhaps proves more apparent in "Must be a Wo" (571) than in this poem. In "Must be a Wo" she again states the need to suffer in order to appreciate joy or beauty, but she maintains a subtle strain of tentativeness. The tension created by her ambivalence proves responsible for the intensity of the poem. She begins with the simple declaration that there "Must be a Wo - / A loss or so" in order "To bend the eye/Best beauty's way."

Suggesting some strain by using the verb "bend," she then implies further difficulty by stating that "once aslant" the eye will nevertheless still observe "Delight/As difficult/As Stalactite." She then proposes the "equation" that the pain or "price" is "Even as the Grace." Her use of the mathematical and monetary language suggests a control and order over the agonizing experience. In the final stanza, however,
the "price" of the Cross represents a seemingly infinite, uncontrollable woe which surpasses the boundaries of human discipline. The image of the stalactite and that of the cross, the only images of the poem, call for a comparison. The former, pointing downward, suggests the finite and hence the potentially controllable difficulty; the latter, with its Christian implications, points upward and suggests and infinite agony.

Adding her characteristic twist at the end, Emily Dickinson does not state her view of the benefits derived from submerging oneself in a woe of the caliber of Christ's suffering. As in "The hallowing of Pain" (772) in which she states that "All - is the price of All," she implies both the great value and the great price of such complete suffering. A subtle note of hesitancy, therefore, ends both of these poems. In "Must be a Wo" she ends with a dash and omits a final fourth line. The rest of the poem consists of stanzas of four lines and has a predominantly regular meter; this omission of the final anticipated line causes a significant break. The other most marked exception to the regularity of the verse occurs in the line "Even as the Grace." In every other line, four syllables occur, but here there are five. This metrical variation emphasizes the mathematical equation involving "the price" and "the Grace," but it also perhaps suggests a hesitancy or questioning of the "evenness" and balance of the equation when great pain is involved. In addition, the rhyme breaks down in the final stanza and further reflects a tentativeness. In the first stanza, "wo" and "so" rhyme, and vowel rhyme occurs between all four final words. In the second stanza "Delight" and "Stalactite" rhyme, and the consonant rhyme of the final "t" occurs among all four final words. Similarly, in the third stanza one finds assonance ("Bliss"/"is") as well as
consonance (is) among all four final words ('is' offers a sight rhyme though it produces the lzl sound). "Extravagance" and "Cross" have a final consonance rhyme but lack sight rhyme, and no unifying rhyme occurs among the three final words in this stanza. The "cooling device" thus to a degree breaks down at the end. Emily Dickinson thus may be subtly implying some qualms concerning such an unreserved and potentially uncontrollable woe as the Cross represents. Nevertheless, she recognizes and praises the value of agony, as pain enables her to appreciate "Best Beauty." Her ambivalence creates a tension which saves the poem from any hint of banality and produces its intense quality.

For Emily Dickinson, pain is not useful solely because it increases one's appreciation of its opposites. In other poems on suffering, she suggests the value of an agony in terms of the possible expansion of consciousness. In these poems she demonstrates her desire to cultivate the pain as well as her fear that her expansion will destroy her psychic integrity. On the one hand, she presents her efforts to control and discipline her mind when in agony so that she may maintain the necessary supports for her consciousness; on the other hand, she demonstrates her attraction to the enticing nature of pain. As Cody explains,

The same indefiniteness of ego boundaries that presages psychotic confusion may, under other circumstances, lead to a feeling of expansiveness as the ego enlarges, as it were, to include new territory within its wavering perimeter. Thus, while Emily Dickinson acknowledges the painful tenuousness of the borders of her sense of self, from another perspective she rejoices in the heightened esthetic sensibility such a weakness sometimes brings with it.

(p. 285)

While her reservations may not be directly stated, she uses poetic
devices to create the tension.

In the relatively early poem "A Wounded Deer - leaps highest" (165), she shows an interest in this theme of expansion. In this poem the expansion proves to be in terms of the heightened awareness which accompanies pain or death. The deer makes its highest leap because of the "Extasy of death." By using parallel structuring, Emily Dickinson implies the similar superlative responses of even the inanimate when struck by "painful" blows: "The Smitten Rock that gushes!/The Trampled Steel that springs!" Moving on to the human level, she then proposes that the cheek will redden most noticeably "Just where the Hectic stings." Her desire to protect her "hurt" in the last stanza suggests her valuing of some kind of increased psychic awareness which results from the anguish of her "hurt." Here the emphasis rests predominantly on protecting her pain from the sight of other by assuming the appearance of "Mirth." She does not reflect the fear of an overexpansion which she will show in later poems. Nevertheless, she does present some tension between motion and stasis. The "Brake is still" (as well as the deer) after the superb death-leap. Although she does not specifically comment on the ultimate fate of the "rock" and "steel," one would assume that they eventually regain their static state. The "Smitten rock" may "gush," but it also retains stability and its own integrity. Similarly, the "Trampled steel" may "spring," but it should return intact to its original stasis. This tension may be an early indication of her concern with control and the necessary limits of expansion, though she makes no explicit statement in this poem concerning her fears.

In a later poem, "A nearness to Tremendousness" (963), Emily
Dickinson explores this theme of expansion of consciousness further and creates a definite tension between her desire to cultivate the expansion through pain and her need to impose control and order. By an extremely skillful use of language, Emily Dickinson represents her effort to place some restraints on a powerfully expansive and enticing agony. David Porter states that the "sentiment (as much as is discernible) cannot assimilate the verbal manipulations for they intrude and arrest the reader's attention" (p. 127). The language does indeed "arrest the reader's attention" but does not therefore prove a "barrier" as Porter later suggests. The "verbal manipulations" reflect the difficulty of "confining" agony to the limits of language and, by implication, to any kind of control. She begins with a line which suggests an appealing expansion because of the long, resonating word "Tremendousness" and because of the appearance of the comparatively long length of the line. She contracts the next line and represents an effort to control the expansion, which breaks forth again in the following line, "Affliction ranges Boundlessness." While she controls the agony in regular Common Meter, she turns to the variation of "Sevens and Sixes" (seven syllables, six syllables) in the second stanza. According to Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, the feminine endings, which occur in the Sevens and Sixes prove to be one means of blurring the verse line (p. 137). The lines of the second stanza are further blurred by the use of enjambment. Her use of enjambment in the last three lines of this second stanza and between the stanzas runs the lines together. Such blurring devices portray agony as not only expansive but also as potentially unrestrainable.

Similarly, the breaking down of the rhyme in the second stanza
suggests that the agony is "bursting forth" from its controls. In stanza one, "Tremendousness" and "Boundlessness" end in identical syllables, and "procures" and "Laws" have consonant rhyme. In the second stanza, however, only some slight slant rhyme exists between "stay" and "Illocality": the agony is "defying" the "cooling device."

This pain is further "challenging" the restraint imposed by our vocabulary: the final identification of pain's location, "Illocality" does not even prove to be an accepted word. As in many of her poems, Emily Dickinson finds it necessary to invent a word to describe this experience. Previously in the poem she has employed words suggesting an attempt to measure the pain and thus exercise some control over its extensiveness. "Agony procures" a "nearness" to "Tremendousness."

Since "Tremendousness" represents infinity, terms of degree or of finite measurement prove irrelevant. "Ranges" also implies a given finite area, while "Boundlessness" means a "lack of boundaries." Perhaps aware of the possibility that the experience of suffering may extend one's consciousness to infinity rather than only "near" to "Tremendousness," she struggles to control this expansiveness by imposing some limitations. Fascinated by the expansion of consciousness through suffering, she recognizes its potentially chaotic and unrestrainable nature.

In some of her other poems on suffering, she writes more explicitly about her concern with boundaries than she does in the above poems. In "Bound - a trouble" (269), she points out the need for a limit or a boundary so that "lives can bear it [the trouble]." In a later version of the same poem, she maintains that

Circumscription - enables Wo -
Still to anticipate - Were no limit -
Who were sufficient to Misery?
One must be aware of some limit in order to be able to withstand the misery. If a limit exists, "how deep a bleeding [can] go." The existence of some boundary makes the agony tolerable. Emphasizing the need to measure the pain and hence assess its boundaries, she uses the mathematical terms of "Algebra" and "cypher." In the second stanza she then advises that one should "Tell it [to] the Ages." The pain "will ache" even after she "sings" about her agony; but having communicated the anguish, she has established enough of a control to make her "contented" in her pain. In the later version she similarly maintains that one should "State it [to] the Ages." Therefore, she is not exclusively speaking of some external limit, such as death or the assurance of future joy. Rather, she emphasizes the importance of imposing some present limitation or boundary, such as "stating" the woe, so that one can discipline this potentially overwhelming agony.

If she attempts to "measure" her grief, she also recognizes that agony has artificial boundaries, those which one imposes upon the trouble. In poem 561 she begins with a statement suggesting her effort to "measure" others' grief:

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes
I wonder if It weighs like Mine
Or Has an Easier size.

She knows, however, that she cannot really "measure" grief: she cannot "guess the kind/Correctly" and can only "presume" that some are equivalent to hers. If one cannot "measure" grief accurately, neither can one "compass a Despair." In "No Man can compass a Despair" (477), she explains that the pain of despair proves either so amorphous or so extensive that one cannot calculate or encompass this agony. One in pain is compared to a traveller on a "Goalless Road" which appears to
be circular. The traveller cannot complete his circular path and thereby "compass a Despair," for he travels "No faster than a Mile at once" and the sun is "setting on His progress."

Because of the intensity of this limitless agony which Emily Dickinson suffers, she fears her inability to impose boundaries or constraints on herself. In several poems she vividly represents the difficulty which she has in maintaining composure by comparing her pain to volcanic fire. William Sherwood suggests that in "I have never seen 'Volcanoes!'" (175) she demonstrates that "she does not always have sufficient faith in her own resources . . . to sustain the pressure of suffering" (p. 54). David Porter argues, however, that the poem is intended "to characterize the triumph of the stoical self" (p. 173). While she clearly recognizes the need for stoical control and struggles to restrain an "eruption," in the last three stanzas her conditional statements clearly indicate that she has doubts about her triumph over the pain. The "smouldering anguish" may "overcome" the "stillness . . ./ In the human face." No release from the tumultuous agony can be assured even on "Resumption Morn." As John Cody explains, "the final stanzas of this poem reveal uncertainty regarding the security of this control" (p. 301). While she may adopt "Mirth" as her "Mail of Anguish" (165) and disguise her volcanic agony under "the Grass" of "A meditative spot" (1677), she knows what lurks beneath her deceptive surface:

How red the Fire rocks below
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude

(1677)

Aware of this potentially destructive volcano of agony, she questions her powers of control. Fascinated by this inner intensity, she simultaneously fears its possible outbreak.
III
THE THREATENED CONSCIOUSNESS

When pain becomes so intense that it severely threatens her control, Emily Dickinson's fear of losing her ego boundaries and of destroying her consciousness quiets her fascination with expansion. In several poems she describes her attempts to combat the chaotic pain by straining to maintain rationality. In "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" (937), for example, she describes an experience in which she felt that her "Brain had split." Faced with this catastrophe, she struggles "to match it - Seam by Seam." The "tear," however, does not prove to be easily mendable, for she cannot "match" the disserved portions of her brain. Similarly, she can make no logical connection between "the thought behind" and "the thought before." As John Cody explains, she "vainly invokes conscious effort to connect and order the play of mental operations that ordinarily proceed spontaneously and effortlessly" (pp. 293-294). All "Sequence" is lost in the "Sound" which she hears. If "Sequence" is taken to be the musical term suggesting a harmonic progression of notes, she is implying that discord and chaos have now replaced harmony and order. The final image of balls of yarn unravelling, according to Clark Griffith, portrays her futile efforts to regain "Sequence" or coherence (p. 206). She is thus left with chaos or "a snarl in the Brain" (L II, 424) in spite of her efforts to protect her rationality. In this poem, then,
Emily Dickinson emphasizes her struggle to reconstruct some order in her thoughts. Because of the terrifying threat to her consciousness, her attitude toward this experience of pain proves to be one of frustration and destitution rather than one of fascination.

Regardless of her consciousness, she often tries to avoid the complete "unravelling" of her mind by imposing a protective trance-like state. John Cody argues that many of Emily Dickinson's poems describe "the defensive function of a catatonic trance, which constitutes a psychogenic imperviousness to an intolerable reality" (p. 323). According to Cody, in these poems she records "a more or less conscious withdrawal from a too painful reality" (p. 322). Recognizing the threat to her consciousness "When the Soul/Has suffered all it can," she follows extreme torment with a "Languor of the Life" (396). This "Languor" or trance-like state "Envelopes Consciousness" as would "A Drowsiness" or "A Dimness like a Fog" (396). In "There is a pain-so utter" (599), she further explains the protective nature of the trance. When pain reaches a certain threshold, "It swallows substance up" and "Then covers the Abyss with Trance." Consciousness is modified or limited in this trance-like state so that one does not remain totally aware of one's suffering. Because of this "Swoon," one can look back upon the experience of pain "safely." If one were fully conscious and able to recall the details of this extreme pain, his "open eye- /Would drop Him-Bone by Bone." Similarly, a veiling of the consciousness to the point that we may "Doubt if it be Us" can aid the "staggering Mind" (859). "An Unreality" or "merciful Mirage" helps us to endure an extremer Anguish and "makes the living possible/While it suspends the lives" (859).

Of course, a trance represents some sacrifice, for the numbed
consciousness has surrendered its spontaneous responsiveness to an almost extrinsic regulation. In addition, when in a trance, she has imposed strict limitations on her consciousness to prevent over-stimulation and dissolution. Such a stifling of psychic exploration clearly represents a sacrifice for Emily Dickinson. As Robert Weisbuch suggests in Emily Dickinson's Poetry, however, "when the alternative is a gruesome self-destruction the swoon becomes the lesser of two negations." Nevertheless, the protective "Swoon" or "Languor" can prove "More imminent than Pain" (396), for Emily Dickinson maintains that "a breathless Death is not so cold as a Death that breathes" (L II, 611). The trance proves to be such a death-in-life phenomenon that the consciousness may break under the weight of the heavy, rigid torpor. Chaos lurks so closely below the surface of the stupor following pain that an almost crushing control must be exercised; the torpor, however, proves so deadening that it too seems to threaten the consciousness. Emily Dickinson further points out the proximity of the mechanically regulated trance and of chaos. While in some of the poems discussed in the previous section, she creates a tension between her desire to control the pain and her temptation to expand her consciousness past certain limits, here an extreme fear of losing control dominates her approach. The tension in these poems occurs because of the dual effect of the mechanically ordered trance: on the one hand, her consciousness is maintained because of this numbed condition which she imposes, but on the other hand, this post-agony state seems to propel her toward a breaking point. Concerned with preserving her consciousness, she turns to the trance as her only foreseeable option. As usual, she remains aware of the contradictions of experience and lends intensity to these poems by
showing the proximity of mechanical order and of chaos.

The "stopless," mechanical order which characterizes the stupor becomes "most, like Chaos" (510). In these poems Emily Dickinson's poetic devices effectively elicit the atmosphere of a borderline state between extrinsic, mechanical regimentation and the chaos of a complete psychotic breakdown. Her imagery in these poems often suggests heaviness or rigidity: she thus implies the firm control which she is placing on this dire anguish as well as the potentially crushing power of this "Languor of the Life." While she typically employs a predominantly regular meter in her poetry, in the following poems she minimizes the metrical variations to an even more noticeable extent than in other poems. The monotonous, strict beat proves particularly appropriate to the threatening, yet ordered state of mind. Her control appears so tense and automatic here that pain has little chance to "break forth" as it did in the previous section; here the "stopless" beat illustrates the threat. In the poems of the previous section, she often uses the breakdown of a rhyme scheme to suggest the outbreak of an uncontainable affliction. She does on occasion make use of that technique in the poems discussed in the present section. More significant than her use of rhyme in these poems, however, is her use of repetition and parallelism. In the poems of this section the repeated words and parallel structures suggest order, but a mechanical order. These linguistic devices contribute to the overall sense of an impending emotional outbreak and of the burden of the death-like control.

In "After great pain" (341), one of her best poems, she describes the trance-like state which follows dire agony as a "formal feeling." In this poem Emily Dickinson exhibits her effort to maintain her consciousness after she has suffered excruciating pain. The last line
categorizes the stages of suffering as "First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go." The poem recounts the state of the mind during the "Stupor," for she has already experienced the "great pain" or "Chill" and has not yet succumbed to the "letting go." In order to prevent the "letting go," or the destruction of her consciousness, she directs all of her energies towards a "mechanism of self-overcontrol" (Cody, p. 331). Fearing what she may do if she mitigates the intensity of the torpor, she increases her control as she senses her volcanic, destructive inner self. Recognizing that spontaneous action may produce dangerous results, she has substituted what Cody terms "a compulsive, rule-bound, extrinsic mode of behavior" (p. 328). As Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren explain, the stupor here "is an attempt to hold in, the fight of the mind against the letting go; it is a defense of the mind." This extrinsic control may enable her to retain some hold on her consciousness; however, it also contributes to her mental pressure, as the volcanic inner self is suppressed by this deathly restraint. Paradoxically, the rigid, extrinsic order which characterizes the stupor comes to resemble chaos and a lack of control. Her tenuous hold on her consciousness and her straining to maintain command in spite of the pressures together account for the intensity of this poem.

As in several of the poems discussed in this section, Emily Dickinson uses the ritual of the funeral to represent her state of mind. The funeral proves to be a particularly apt metaphor, for this formal service suggests both a strict control as well as an undercurrent of profuse emotion which needs to be curbed. In the first stanza Emily Dickinson has the nerves "sit ceremonious." The nerves are numbed to restrain any irrational or undisciplined behavior just as mourners may observe the ritual to help prevent uncontained outpourings of grief or to
channel their intense feelings into some regulated outlet. The mourners' external composure, therefore, often disguises chaotic emotions lurking close beneath the surface. Brooks and Warren point out that she then switches the metaphor slightly and compares the nerves to "tombs," which suggest the death-like torpor as well as the "formal" nature of the restrained condition (p. 70). The "tombs" may represent the ultimate stasis, but their rigidity proves threatening and implies the imminence of a psychic "death." The death-in-life nature of this state is then reinforced as the corpse appears to stir: "The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,/And Yesterday, or Centuries before?"

The "corpse" or person in pain questions whether the agony has been reflecting on the possibility of "resurrection" or recovery from this agony.

The next stanza does not necessarily need to be seen in the light of the funeral, but the meaningless, mechanical pacing does resemble the movements of mourners. This stanza becomes clearer when the lines are read as 1, 3, 2, 4, as Emily Dickinson suggests on the manuscript:

```
The Feet, mechanical, go round -
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -
```

The "feet" do not regard "Ground, or Air, or Ought" and move mechanically, "A Wooden way." The circle which these feet trace creates an appropriately ambiguous image. Some form still remains in the actions of this agonized being, but the circle proves to be a particularly fluid form. According to William Sherwood, the circular movement "imitates the very formlessness it is counteracting" (p. 112). Chaos and loss of control appear imminent. Juxtaposing the image of meaningless motion
with an image of threatening stasis, she reinforces the helpless predicament of the speaker: the last line of stanza two refers to "A Quartz contentment, like a stone." The quartz, like the wood, stone, and lead refers to a fixed state and hence represents control or "contentment." Also, however, they imply a hardened, deathly state in which recovery of emotional pliancy appears doubtful. In the final stanza she emphasizes the danger involved in this near-death state, as she compares this experience to freezing. Francis Manley explains that this metaphor proves particularly appropriate, for freezing is "neither life nor death but both simultaneously." In this condition, as in freezing, the stupor is the final step before the "letting go."

Emily Dickinson's use of meter also reflects the threatening nature of this mechanically ordered trance. While she does vary the number of feet from the usual number in Common Measure, she maintains a very regular iambic meter. Of course, her metrical regularity is not peculiar to these poems, but it proves particularly noticeable and effective here. Further, her variation of the number of feet in stanza two and half of stanza three contributes to her portrayal of a "stopless," almost chaotic order. As the lines shorten, the pace of the beat quickens and the control appears less firm. In addition to the consistent, almost monotonous beat, Emily Dickinson uses repetition and parallelism in her syntax to create an appropriate sound for this poem. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted points out two instances of "The threefold repetition of the same part of speech in the same grammatical function" (p. 255) in "After great pain": "Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -/ Regardless grown" and "First - Chill - them Stupor - then the letting go." Syntactic repetition represents an order but may also
reflect the speaker's difficulty in ordering her thoughts and utterances. The control is not only difficult but also mechanical; hence, the speaker's difficulty in ordering her thoughts and utterances. The control is not only difficult but also mechanical; hence, the speaker's diminishing hold on consciousness is again emphasized.

In "It was not Death, for I stood up" (510), Emily Dickinson presents a similar account of the stage just before the "letting go." Chaos lurks below the surface of "After great pain" and is specifically referred to at the end of "It was not Death." Clark Griffith calls this poem "an attempt at definition" (p. 188), and Robert Weisbuch points out the difficulty which the poet encounters in trying to define this "sub or super notional state" (p. 106). In the poem she describes her predicament of attempting to hold onto her consciousness. Her mind and body have become so dissociated during the numbing process that an assessment of her status proves extremely difficult. Her painstaking effort to describe her experience, therefore, reveals her mental torture and the tenuous nature of her grip on reality. The first two stanzas consist of statements which express her effort to resolve the apparent conflict between mental and sensory perceptions. According to her mind, she may be "Dead," trapped by "Night," or wrought with "Frost" or "Fire." Her senses, however, contradict any of these hypotheses concerning her condition. Realizing that she "stood up," she deduces that she cannot have died: "all the Dead, lie down." While her mind tells her that it is night, her ears register the sound of the noon bells. Similarly, she can feel "Siroccos - crawl" on her "Flesh" and is aware of her icy "Marble feet." After this detached, mechanical analysis, she concludes, "And yet, it tasted, like them all." This disordering of the senses implies a mental confusion which is threaten-
This Stupor or trance not only has interfered with her perception, but also has imposed a death-like rigidity similar to that in "After great pain." She feels as though her "life were shaven,/And fitted to a frame." The limiting, stifling quality of this state becomes further obvious when she remarks that she "could not breathe without a key." Even her normally spontaneous bodily functions seem to be extrinsically and mechanically controlled. Consequently, she feels the imminence of her psychic death and imagines her own funeral:

\[
\text{The Figures I have seen} \\
\text{Set orderly, for Burial,} \\
\text{Reminded me, of mine -}
\]

As in "After great pain," the image of the funeral figures implies an attempt to "set orderly" unrestrainable passion. If order is being maintained, it is of such an oppressive degree that her consciousness is impaired and severely threatened.

In addition to his imagery suggesting restraining order, Emily Dickinson implies the image of the sea in the final stanza. She maintains that her state is "most, like Chaos - Stopless." As if lost at sea, she is "Without a Chance, or Spar -/Or Even a Report of Land -/To Justify - Despair." On the one hand, she has stated that the trance resembles the crush of death because of its stiff regimentation: she compares the experience to "first Autumn morns" which "Repeal the Beating Ground." On the other hand, she suggests that the "stopless" quality of her state proves to be its most distinctive feature. With two seemingly disparate images of the sea and the frozen ground, then, she emphasizes the proximity of this oppressive trance and "stopless" chaos. She foresees no external limit to her suffering so that despair is not even "justified." Further, she recognizes her lack of control
over her situation. The "stopless" sea of chaos threatens to engulf her and obliterate her already impaired consciousness. Cody points out that Emily Dickinson has many poems in which the sea represents her fear aroused by "a threatened dispersal of the integrity of her own personality" (p. 305). If the numbed condition helps to prevent or forestall a psychic disintegration, she demonstrates how imminent the "letting go" proves to be. Further, because of the proximity of the trance and the "letting go," the stupor appears to contribute to the mental anguish which finally results in the psychic breakdown.

Emily Dickinson's remarkably consistent meter in this poem reinforces the sense of a threatening, incessant beat. Besides one feminine ending in stanza four, she follows Common Measure without variation. While her verse proves typically regular, this poem has noticeably fewer variations than many of her poems. This even meter becomes a kind of "ticking" or "beating," which may appear to be the epitome of order. Because of its incessant nature, however, the meter suggests an uncontrollable state of mind. Similarly, she employs repetition with much the same effect. Her use of the initial "And" in stanza three and of the three "And's" in stanza four creates another monotonous beat. While such repetition suggests regulation, this kind of simple order seems mechanical and hence uncontrolled. In the opening two stanzas she also repeats a syntactic pattern three times:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It was not Death, for . . .} \\
\text{It was not Night, for . . .} \\
\text{It was not Frost, for . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

Again, one is struck with the monotony and almost threatening quality of the order. Apparently suffering great impairment of her rationality, the speaker seems to adopt this pattern and repeat it. In this way some order is produced, but the tenuous nature of the control is stressed.
In "I've dropped my Brain - My Soul is numb" (1046), Emily Dickinson recounts a seemingly even more advanced stage of what Cody terms a "catatonic withdrawal" (p. 324). The trance here seems to have numbed her so completely that she cannot move or perceive sensation. Her bodily functions have not just been impaired or slowed down but here have stopped: "The Veins that used to run/Stop palsied." She concludes that "'tis Paralysis" and that her "nerve in Marble lies." She emphasizes her marble, statue-like state with her reference to stone, to the "Carved and cool" duality of her "Vitality," and to the one who "wrought Carrara" (Italian city famous for its marble) in her or "chiselled" her "tune." Recognizing that she was "A Breathing Woman/Yesterday - Endowed with Paradise," Emily Dickinson suggests how easily she fell into this petrified condition. If she has "let go" here, she suggests that some hope of recovery still exists. She states that if she could believe that "Witchcraft" or "Death" were responsible for her paralysis, she might have "a chance to strain/To Being, somewhere - Motion - Breath." If she had this assurance, she could "shiver, satisfied." Shivering represents some movement, while it recalls her "frozen" state; she thus seems to suggest the first step of recovery. With her typical irony, however, she implies that she knows that neither "Witchcraft" nor "Death" can account for her stiff condition. In this poem she exhibits her fearful speculation of or memory of this state of marble rigidity.

If the trance represents the only remaining protective device after extreme pain, it clearly resembles this paralysis and only varies in degree. Hence, while Emily Dickinson seized the trance as the only possible means of protecting her ego boundaries, she remains aware of the resemblance of the trance to the frozen state portrayed in this poem and of the proximity of the "letting go." Her desperate attempt to save
her consciousness with these poor odds thus produces poems of tragic intensity.

The trance, however, is not always easily imposed. In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280), Emily Dickinson recounts an effort to numb her perceptions to avoid the "letting go." William Sherwood explains that her "attitude is one of enforced numbness, a protective device against a feeling that, when it forces its way to consciousness, has, paradoxically, the effect of extinguishing consciousness" (p. 107). As in some of her other poems, she uses the funeral motif to suggest her attempt to restrain an outbreak of uncontrollable emotion. Weisbuch points out that just as funerals "attempt to bring reason to bear on the unreasonable, so the consciousness which has been jolted in some way by experience tries, with equal futility, to hold itself within bounds, to dam the flood tides of irrational thoughts" (p. 103). Because of the volcanic, chaotic agony beneath this ritual, however, the funeral comes to assume a tortuous quality. The ritual cannot control the agony, and the energy of the pain is transferred to the supposedly protective device. Combining an oppressive ritual and an overwhelming torment in this mental encounter, Emily Dickinson vividly portrays her intense effort to maintain a grip on her rationality in spite of the difficulty.

In the first stanza she explains that the "Mourners" in her mind "Kept treading - treading - till it seemed/That Sense was breaking through." According to Charles Anderson in Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, the latter line has a twofold meaning: it can suggest "the mind giving way" as well as "the sensations threatening to quicken again from their comfortable state of numbness." The mind will "give way" if her sensations "quicken." Because of an awareness
of this threat, she attempts to cultivate a numbed state of mind. The ritual cannot stifle the pressure of the misery, and the "treading" of the "Mourners" becomes like the "breaking through" of her sensory and mental perception (Weisbuch, p. 103). Because of her effort to impose a firm control and because of the intensity of the counterpressure from the pain, the ritual (as well as the agony) becomes a threat. The "beating - beating" of the "Service, like a Drum" causes her to feel that her brain is "going numb." This attempt at what Cody terms a "self-overcontrol" (p. 331) thus threatens to paralyze the mind as in "I dropped my Brain." Nevertheless, she must suppress "Sense" or her emotions will erupt and destroy her ego boundaries. She thus skillfully portrays the fears and anxieties which characterize this experience of being on the brink of psychic disintegration.

Emily Dickinson increases the efficacy of the funeral motif by creating appropriate imagery. In addition to the portrayal of the funeral service, she produces a sense of heaviness. If the weight suggests suppression and hence control, it also suggests an oppressive burden which leads to the breaking of the "Plank in Reason." In stanza three she refers to the lifting of the "Box" or coffin and then notes the "Boots of Lead" of the mourners. As Clark Griffith explains, the "Box" (perhaps also of lead) and the "Boots of Lead" not only add to the sense of heaviness but also the gray hue of the lead appears to be "the color of gradual distinction" (p. 248). Suffering this intolerable burden, the mind is slowly disintegrating. Finally, according to Griffith, the "last prop" or "Plank" breaks in her mind from the "weight of the feet, drum, and coffin" (p. 249). The beating of the drum, as well as other auditory images, contribute to a sense of onerous weight.
Beginning with the last line of stanza three, she suggests the tolling not of just a "Bell" but of "Space": "As all the Heavens were a Bell/ And Being, but an Ear." Now she has narrowed her perceptions and indeed her whole self down to the auditory sense. With her self-awareness almost destroyed, she then implies that her state of alienation resembles being "Wrecked, solitary, here." Perhaps alluding to a shipwreck, she may again be using the sea to illustrate her sense of a loss of control. Finally, the trance is destroyed and she loses control of her consciousness. Perhaps her numbness has ended and "sense has broken through;" perhaps the trance has brought forth a complete "Paralysis." In any case, the pressure created by the intensity of the agony and by the comparable oppressiveness of the protective numbing of the mind causes a breakdown in spite of her efforts to hold onto sanity.

As in "After great pain" and "It was not Death," the extremely regular meter provides an appropriately threatening atmosphere for the poem. With one minor exception, each stanza is written in regular Common Measure. This ordered verse reflects the mechanical, numb state of the speaker's mind, and its incessant beat seems to lead to the breaking of the "Plank in Reason." Brita Lindberg-Seyersted points out further that the repetition of words helps to "heighten the sense of painful grating on an oversensitive ear" (p. 209). The "treading - treading" and "beating - beating" onomatopoetically suggest the agony of her mental state. Similarly, the repetition of "And" emphasizes the incessant beat as well as the speaker's difficulty in ordering her thoughts. An initial "And" appears once in the second stanza, twice in the second and third stanzas, and finally in all four lines of the last stanza. As Brita Lindberg-Seyersted points out, the use of "And"
in all lines of the final stanza "indicates the climactic lack of control of self" (p. 210). In this poem she employs rhyme as she did in the poems discussed in the previous section. The second and fourth lines of every stanza (except the last) rhyme in either slant (stanza one) or exact rhyme (stanzas two, three, and four). When the "Plank in Reason" breaks, however, so does the rhyme.

While the "Plank" does break in this dramatic account of the steps leading toward a loss of rationality, Emily Dickinson has emphasized her desperate, unrelenting struggle to maintain her consciousness. Unfortunately, sometimes the trance proves unable to prevent the "letting go." The tension created by the oppressive control and by the throbbing, underlying agony may defy even the most valiant of efforts to hold onto reason. Her skillful portrayal of her struggle to retain her sanity in these poems depicts her religious concern for her consciousness. Just as she strives to derive positive benefits from pain and to explore the farthest reaches of her mind during agony, so does she recognize the need to sacrifice expansion when mental integrity is threatened. Behind all of these poems, one senses a speaker who suffers acutely and who therefore remains constantly aware of the imminence of a volcanic eruption of emotion. Her extreme sensitivity to anguish, however, does not make her a helpless victim of human misery. Confronted with intense pain and with "that awful stranger consciousness" (1323), Emily Dickinson does not cower: she responds with fascination, practicality, and discretion.
NOTES


Scansion of "I can wade Grief" (252)

I can wade Grief -
Whole Pools of it -
I'm used to that -
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet -
And I tip - drunken -
Let no Pebble - smile -
'Twas the New Liquor -
That was all!

Power is only Pain -
Stranded, thro' Discipline,
Till Weights - will hang -
Give Balm - to Giants -
And they'ill wilt, like Men -
Give Himmaleh -
They'ill Carry - Him!


NOTES TO PAGES 28-36

17"An Explication of Dickinson's 'After Great Pain,'" Modern Language Notes, 73(1958), 263.

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