

Emily Dickinson: from presentiment to the privilege of after-knowledge

Abstract: By means of a textual analysis of Emily Dickinson's "Presentiment - is that long Shadow - on the Lawn - " (J764) and "The Heart asks Pleasure - first - " (J536), this paper argues that, although both poems were written when Dickinson was about twenty-five years old and are thus very close in composition time, decades of experience seem to separate them. "The Heart" presents the vision of a speaker who appears to have experienced life to the full, speaking with the after-knowledge or certainty of someone near death, while the speaker in "Presentiment" shows his fore-knowledge of approaching darkness as a metaphorization of death through his realization that the same process takes place in nature, an experience that he seems to be having for the first time but which gives him the same fullness of knowledge and feeling that the first speaker possesses. This paradoxical time gap between fore- and after-knowledge, projected in the stances of the two personae, will be discussed and further problematized by means of Todorov's analysis of the opposition which Novalis presents between two types of men - the heroes and the poets - which concretize two ways to attain the knowledge of human history: the road of experience and the road of inner contemplation.

Keywords: American poetry, Emily Dickinson, Tzvetan Todorov.

Resumo: Através da análise textual de "Presentiment - is that long Shadow - on the Lawn - " (J764) e "The Heart asks Pleasure - first - " (J536), de Emily Dickinson, este artigo argumenta que, apesar de ambos os poemas terem sido escritos quando Dickinson tinha cerca de vinte e cinco anos, e portanto estarem próximos em relação à época da composição, ambos parecem estar separados por décadas de experiência: "The Heart" apresenta a visão de um eu poético que viveu intensamente, falando com a certeza ou conhecimento de alguém já próximo da morte, enquanto que o eu poético de "Presentiment" mostra seu conhecimento prévio da aproximação da escuridão como metaforização da morte através de sua percepção de que o mesmo processo acontece na natureza, experiência esta que ele parece estar tendo pela primeira vez mas que lhe dá a mesma plenitude de conhecimento e sentimento que o primeiro eu poético possui. Este paradoxal hiato temporal entre conhecimento anterior e ulterior projetado nas posturas de ambas as personae será discutido e problematizado através da análise que Todorov faz da oposição apresentada por Novalis entre dois tipos de homens - os heróis e os poetas - que concretizam duas maneiras de alcançar o conhecimento da história do ser

humano: o caminho da experiência e o caminho da contemplação interior.
Palavras-chave: poesia norte-americana, Emily Dickinson, Tzvetan Todorov.

Penetrating Emily Dickinson's poetic universe remains as fascinating and demanding an enterprise for scholars and neophytes today as it was back in 1955, when the Harvard variorum edition of her complete poems was published. On the one hand we continue to be daunted by her "startling intellectual complexity" which "critics almost always underestimate," and "baffled, not by her extraordinary eminence but by the power of her mind," as Bloom argues (Bloom, 1995, p. 272), while also acknowledging that we are still learning to read her poetry due to the genuine difficulty of her work (Bloom, 2003, p. 362). From another perspective, Frye's advice that "we shall find Emily Dickinson most rewarding if we look in her poems for what her imagination has created, not for what event may have suggested it" (Frye, 1963, p. 198), offers us new stimulus and thus alternative viewpoints to evaluate her poetry. Bloom's and Frye's statements also make us realize that, in spite of growing sophistication in literary scholarship, which somehow has made readers and critics become vassals to "the *daimon* of theory" (Compagnon, 2003) to be able to deal with Dickinson's complexity, we also become aware that, in reading her greatest critics, we are struck by the simplicity and intimacy with which they evaluate her. It is always the personal that remains in them, what each poem says individually to them, more than acknowledging or expanding on what has now become a commonplace in her critical evaluation: her paradoxes, her disregard for poetic conventions such as the unconventional rhyme scheme and the idiosyncratic use of dashes, her elliptical style, her Latinities, and so forth. For in each of her poems, these elements seem to appear anew to first-time readers as well as to scholars, demanding fresh readings to cope with our different responses. The fact that these readings may partially overlap with readings of other critics (see Duchac, 1979, pp. 380-381) does not hinder us from continuing to probe into the poems, in order to better experience in them again "the plurality of the text" (Barthes, 1981, p. 135).

Within this line of reasoning, I intend to present a reading of two poems which, in spite of my long acquaintance with them, still continue to intrigue and delight me and make demands on my imagination as they increase in significance and complexity: "Presentiment" (J764) and "The Heart asks Pleasure first" (J536) (Dickinson, 1960, pp. 262, 374). As will be argued, after a textual analysis of both poems, although "The Heart asks Pleasure First" was written *circa* 1862 and

“Presentiment” *circa* 1863, and thus are very close in composition time, decades of experience seem to separate them, as the first presents the vision of a speaker who appears to have experienced life to the full and is now looking back on it, speaking with the after-knowledge or certainty of someone near death, while the speaker in the second poem shows his foreknowledge of approaching darkness / death through his realization that the same process takes place in nature, as darkness covers the lawn, an experience that he seems to be having for the first time but which gives him the same fullness of knowledge and feeling that the first speaker possesses.

This paradoxical time gap between fore- and after-knowledge, concretized in the stances of the two speakers, could nevertheless be explained by means of Novalis’ opposition, in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, between two types of men – the heroes and the poets – as commented on by Todorov: the opposition between “deux voies pour atteindre à la connaissance de l’histoire humaine.” “L’une, difficile et sans fin, avec d’innombrables detours, qui est la voie de l’expérience; l’autre, un saut d’un seul coup, ou presque, qui est la voie de la contemplation intérieure.” To the first type belong the men of action: “héros, ils sont, ceux-là, autour de qui affluent et se pressent les événements qui n’attendent plus que d’être dirigés et accomplis.” To the second type belong “ces êtres recueillis, tranquilles, inconnus pour qui le monde est intérieur, l’action contemplative, et la vie un secret et discret accroissement des forces du dedans. (...) C’est à chaque pas qu’ils font, en eux-mêmes, les découvertes les plus surprenantes sur l’essence et la signification de ce monde. Ceux-là sont les poètes...” (Todorov, 1978, p. 105). The texts of both poems will corroborate – or further problematize – this contention.

“Presentiment”

Presentiment - is that long Shadow - on the Lawn -
Indicative that Suns go down -

The Notice to the startled Grass
That Darkness - is about to pass -

Written in the same year Dickinson sent her first letter to Thomas W. Higginson enclosing four of her poems, “Presentiment” strikes us, among other aspects, by the fact that, in contrast to the other words in this poem, it is the only instance in the whole of Dickinson’ canon in which this word is employed. The formal aspect of the poem, composed

of one quatrain in Long Meters, further highlights this singularity, with its exceptionally long first line – 12 syllables instead of 8, as in the other three lines. This visual prominence is further enhanced by three dashes, which separate the subject “presentiment” from the predicate “is that long Shadow,” and the complement from the prepositional phrase “on the Lawn,” which is in turn followed by a dash. All these dashes seem to be suggestive, at first sight, of the poet’s groping for a definition of “presentiment,” a struggle which will dominate not only this line, but the whole poem.

But “presentiment” becomes even more visually foregrounded by its being the only 12-letter word in the poem, its length thus iconizing the long shadow that dominates the lawn, and anticipating the fact that the concept of presentiment will dominate the poem, which revolves totally around its definition. In the same way it also dominates the poem graphologically and phonologically, for its sounds re-echo and resonate in the other words, thereby reminding us all the time of its presence in the poem: the repetition of the sibilants /s/ and /sh/ in *shadow, suns, notice, startled, grass, darkness* and *pass* retrieves the stressed syllable of *presentiment*, simultaneously making it alliterate with *shadow, suns, startled*, and form a reverse rhyme with *notice, grass, darkness*, and *pass*, while the plosive /t/ in *indicative, notice, startled*, and *about*, and the nasals in *long, lawn, indicative, suns, down, notice* and *darkness* further bind most of the words in the poem to it, as if they were derivative from “presentiment.”

The double perspective of the noun “presentiment” – from *L prae* + *sentire*, to feel, to perceive – meaning not only a previous conception, sentiment, apprehension or opinion, but also a belief, impression, or foreboding that something disastrous or distressing will soon happen, an anticipation of imminent evil, will also be played upon by Dickinson, as the first two lines of the poem appear to refer to the first meaning, while the last two lines seem to refer to the second definition.

Moreover, the fact that “pre-sentiment” is not only in keeping with Dickinson’s use of Latin or Greek words to express ideas and Anglo-Saxon words for perceptions (Tate, 1963, p. 26), but doubly abstract – as “sentiment” already denotes a mental feeling, the sum of what one feels on some subject, a tendency or view based on or colored with emotion, as well as a tendency to be swayed by feeling rather than by reason, while the prefix “pre-” makes this feeling even more mysterious, by its preceding the actual feeling – makes Dickinson’s definition of the word even more striking. For, while we might have expected a statement of the precise nature of the meaning of this word, what we

actually get is the concept of “presentiment” being transformed into a thing – that long “shadow” on the lawn – and thus we are forced to understand “presentiment” not as a word which is doubly abstract, but as a “concretive metaphor” (Leech, 1971, p. 158), since the vehicle of the metaphor (the shadow) attributes concreteness – shape and color – to an abstraction.

The dash that follows “presentiment,” besides concretizing a pause in the reading of the poem, and thus implying the poet’s struggle to find a definition for the word, also offers us, together with the other dashes in the poem, an operating procedure to manipulate the text, as this device naturally cuts the poem up into units of reading or “lexias” (Barthes, p. 136). Thus, “is that long Shadow” introduces us into a definition clause, in which the timeless present announces that what follows will become a universal statement. Nevertheless, this statement is from the start made ambiguous through the use of the deictic “that,” suggesting on the one hand that the “long shadow” is at some distance in space from the speaker, while on the other that it is already a familiar sight to the speaker and to the implied reader, thereby preparing us for the ominousness of what follows: the “long shadow - on the Lawn.” The double meaning of “that” is now extended to “long,” which not only connotes distance – the great length of the shadow that reaches us – and extended time – as if the shadow, like a long visit, is not willing to leave or to be removed easily – but also reminds us of a certain shape, a shape that will become formalized by “indicative.”

However, it is when we come to the noun “shadow,” which ends this second unit of reading as it is followed by another dash, that we are struck for the first time by the impact of this metaphor, through the realization of its different implications. If the first meaning of shadow is a *shade* within defined limits cast upon a surface by a body that intercepts the rays of light, such as the shadow of a man or a tower, “presentiment” already acquires the concreteness of a body and, by the fact that “shadow” intercepts the rays of light, the suggestion that its effect is negative, in this context, as it intercepts the sun that the lawn needs in order to grow. Since “shadow” also means the dark image made by such a body, it is again related to darkness, and, as we visualize its length in the poem, we are again reminded of the length of the word “presentiment,” stressing the length of this image, as content and form overlap. It is nevertheless the third meaning of “shadow” in the plural – the growing darkness after sunset – that confirms that the length of this shadow will continue to expand, and that this shade will gradually become darkness itself, thus anticipating the development of the poem.

From these concrete meanings of "shadow" derive the abstract ones - "shadow" as a vague indication, symbol, omen, prefiguration - in this way turning the poet's definition around, for, if we have moved from the abstractedness of presentiment as synonymous with foreknowledge to the concreteness of shadow, Dickinson has actually only retrieved the original meaning of "shadow," *through* "presentiment". In other words, "presentiment" is a natural extension of "shadow," and thus the metaphor merges two words in which the second actually gave origin to the first, as the example "coming events cast their shadows before" confirms. Thus, the metaphoric transference that has taken place between the tenor of the metaphor - presentiment - and vehicle - shadow - works in both directions, as the likeness between presentiment and shadow has become an identification. From this early change in the meaning of "shadow," other shades of meaning follow: "shadow" as the shaded part of a picture; hence, the darker phases of life; unhappiness, gloom, as in "the shadow of life's evening," as well as "shadow" as a spirit, a ghost or something without reality or substance; an imaginary vision.

If these dictionary definitions already point to the plurisignificance of "shadow," further complemented by the expressions *In the shadow of* - very close to; verging upon - and *Under the shadow of* - very close to, in danger of, apparently fated for - (Webster, 1979, p. 1665), it is when one examines the symbolic meanings of "shadow" that we become aware of a cluster of implications which derive from the metaphor, and thus allow us to enter into a still deeper comprehension of the other lines of the poem. For, even if the particular use that Dickinson makes of this image in the poem limits the "significant indefiniteness" which is the mark of symbols (Vries, 1974, Preface), the associations it supplies nevertheless help us to visualize the intensity of feeling that lies behind its meaning.

Since "long" already implied length and time, the fact that the first symbolic meaning of "shadow" is "neither body, nor soul, but something in-between, and which, having the form and quality of the body, serves to envelop the soul," makes the noun acquire a human quality, not yet present in the definitions above, a quality that will be transferred in the last line to "darkness" which "is about to pass." As "shadow" is also symbolic of gloom, obscurity, death, as the quotation from Job 10,21 confirms - "before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death" - an idea that is also constantly expressed in the Psalms (Vries, p. 417), it is this symbolism, in which

darkness and death become merged, which lies at the basis of the interpretation of the poem, as the shadow will become the announcer of darkness, with its further implications. The fact that “shadow” is also symbolic of ghost, departed spirit, soul, only confirms the dictionary definition above and thus adds to the resonance of the word as a ghostly announcer of death. The metaphoric transference that has taken place between “presentiment” and “shadow” thus works both ways, as the image of the shadow becomes an analogue for presentiment.

As this “long shadow” falls “on the lawn,” it reminds us how many of Dickinson’s poems were written with her garden in mind. It is an event that she must have witnessed many times, confirming the use of “that” in front of “long shadow” as an old acquaintance of hers. The passivity of the lawn in being covered by a shadow is further stressed by its being symbolic of submission – related to its being kept short and within bounds – which is again confirmed by its horizontal position. The covering of the lawn by a long shadow is also foregrounded phonologically, by the reverse rhyme long / lawn bringing both words together in meaning, and graphologically, by the letters of “lawn” being contained in “long shadow,” forming a chiasmus, as if “lawn” had sprung out of “long shadow.” The fact that there are no other versions for this poem confirms that this was the right word from the beginning.

Like an enjambment, the dash that closes this lexia transfers its suggestion of incompleteness and hesitation to the next unit of meaning: “Indicative that suns go down -.” The use of another formal Latin word, “indicative” (from *indicare*, to point out, indicate), at the beginning of line two, once more binds the definition of “presentiment” to its Latin origin. Nevertheless, if “presentiment” was characterized by vagueness, it suddenly receives, through “shadow” and “indicative,” a definite function: that of giving an indication, of pointing out. There is nothing vague in “indicative,” as there is in presentiment, thus preparing us for the concreteness of the rest of the poem. Simultaneously, it also reminds us, through “Indicative Mood,” of that mood of a verb used to express an act, state, or occurrence as actual, thus indirectly reinforcing the authenticity of the action that follows: “that Suns go down.” “Indicative” thus contrasts again with “presentiment,” not only through its Latinity, but also through its being a polysyllabic word, if compared with the other Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic or disyllabic words in the poem, thereby once again foregrounding their significance.

Since the singular form of “sun” reminds us of the incandescent body of gases about which the earth and other planets revolve and which provides light, heat, and energy for the solar system, its use in

the plural refers to any incandescent heavenly body that is the center of a solar system, thus adding a first implication of infinity to the poem. Concurrently, the poetic use of “suns” meaning “days” adds concreteness to the line, denoting not only that a day is nearing its end and night approaching with its shadows, but simultaneously that days are coming to an end, therefore also suggesting that “shadow,” as a first touch of approaching death in nature, can also imply the setting of life, since “lawn,” as an extension of land, is synonymous with life, a fact which will be corroborated in the last line of the poem.

Moreover, as the sun symbolizes generative heat and light, which would make the lawn flourish through its warmth, brilliance and splendor, the metaphor “suns go down” – reminding us of pre-Copernican times, in which the sun was seen as the great wanderer – also increases our sense of the inevitability of the apparent setting of the sun, the line connoting that, if the sun is *sol invictus*, the conqueror of death, with the sinking of the sun death as darkness will be the conqueror. Last but not least, the expressive power of “suns go down” also emphasizes Dickinson’s capacity to bring a ‘dead’ metaphor to life again, as she reconceptualizes it into a new structural analogy.

The dash that closes line two performs two functions: it brings the line to a halt, as if the speaker had completed, even if haltingly, his definition – which is further corroborated by the imperfect rhyme “lawn / down”, bringing both words together in sense – but at the same time the suspended breathing also suggests further continuity, as if the definition were not utterly completed.

This completion is given by “the notice to the startled grass,” as it further defines presentiment through another Latin word, “notice” (from Latin *notitia*, knowledge). “Presentiment” thus takes on the meaning not only of information, or a printed sign giving some public information – as the shadow that is imprinted on the grass and therefore, not abstract – but also of a formal announcement or warning, as the shadow is giving notice to the grass that its lease of the sun is nearing its end – a formality that enhances the semantic significance of the other Latin words, all of them leading to the portentousness of the coming of “darkness.”

Moreover, as “startle” (from ME *stertlen*, to rush, stumble along) denotes not only to frighten or alarm suddenly or unexpectedly, to cause to start or move involuntarily, as from sudden fright, but also to cause to feel a shock of surprise, this amalgamation of fright and movement – leading the grass to move involuntarily due to a sudden fright or shock – brings out Dickinson’s awareness of a deep sensitivity

inherent in plants and nature in general, as she attributes human qualities to nature by endowing grass with perception. As in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," in which the voice of the West Wind is recognized by nature –

The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves (...) (Welland, 1961, p. 100)

– a phenomenon that Shelley himself describes as one "well known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers and of lakes, sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it" (Welland, p. 259), Dickinson's use of "startled grass" is actually also a well-known phenomenon: vegetation retracts when light vanishes and thus its movement at the approaching shadows is, on the one hand, natural. Thus, instead of speaking of a "humanizing metaphor" (Leech, p. 158), one could speak of an empathy which exists naturally between plants and light, which would make them react involuntarily when shaded by darkness.

On the other hand, "grass" does become personified through *startled*, if one considers that "grass" – any of various green plants with blade-like leaves, often cultivated for lawns because of their softness and dense growth – is symbolic not only of evanescence, due to its quick growth and consequently its soon being gone, but also allowing for its identification with man (the common people) as the many references in the Bible confirm: Psalms 90,5-6: "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth"; Isaiah 51,12: "I myself will comfort you: who art thou, that thou shouldst be afraid of a mortal man, and of the son of man, who shall wither away like grass?"; Matthew 6,30: "But if that is how God clothes the grass in the fields, which is there today, and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you?" (Vries, p. 223).

The partial chiasmus formed by "startled grass" also intensifies the closeness that is established between this attribute of human beings and grass and the empathy established between grass and the vanishing of light. As the very shape of a blade of grass also iconizes in miniature the "long shadow" on the lawn, it corroborates the function of the lawn, as an extension of vegetation and thus alive, to perceive the approach of darkness through its leaves.

This personification then leads us, through enjambement, to the last line, "That Darkness - is about to pass -," in which, in spite of the rhyme "grass / pass" establishing a phonetic bond between the two words, as if defining presentiment as "the notice to the startled grass that darkness is about to pass" had become easier than in the first two lines, this definition is again hesitatingly revealed, as the dash after "Darkness" suggests, while the dash after "pass" implies that maybe not everything has been said, since the speaker transmits the feeling that the approach of darkness is more than a natural event.

We have now reached the word that triggered the definition of "presentiment," through its prefiguration in the long shadow on the lawn and its anticipatory effect of startling the grass: "Darkness." Phonologically anticipated by the voiced plosive /d/ in shadow and its further alliteration with /indicative/ and /down/, as well as by its assonance with *startled* - all of which emphasize the transition from the feeling of coming darkness to its imminent arrival - "darkness" reverberates in its sounds words from the other lines of the poem, thereby enhancing their semantic proximity. As total absence of light, gloom, leading to its related connotations of obscurity, lack of clearness or perspicuity, secrecy, distress, and thus reminding us of its symbolic meanings not only as primeval chaos - "darkness was upon the deep" (Genesis 1,2) - but also as "after light," with its implications of involution, evil, misfortune and spiritual need - "I will cause the sun to go down at noon" (Amos 8,19) - as well as of mystery and death - "darkness and the shadow of death" (Job 3,5) - "Darkness" thus becomes the all-encompassing metaphor of the poem, the Biblical references further amplifying its ponderousness and ominousness with a metaphysical dimension. For, as it reverberates back on "presentiment," we realize that it is the same darkness that was upon the deep that will now pass upon the grass, that the image of the sun going down at noon seems to prefigure the image of the suns in their descending movement, and that the latent symbolism of darkness as the shadow of death was already implicit in the image of "long shadow," although we only become aware of it when we reach the last line.

This image, nevertheless, is not only active, in contrast to the passivity of the lawn and the grass, but becomes alive through the verb "pass" (from Latin *passare*, to pass; *passus*, step): it denotes as much to move forward, by steps, making us visualize darkness in the poem as like a human being walking across the lawn, his gigantic proportions in contrast to the smallness of the leaves of grass, leaving behind him his cloak of darkness, as also to proceed from one place to another, as

in the example “light passes from the sun to the planets,” thus adding a cosmic dimension to the activity of darkness, as seen above. The fact that “to pass” also means to cease, to go away, to depart, and is thus connected with sunrise and resurrection, as some critics contend, does not seem to be pertinent in this context, as it would contradict the argument in lines 1 and 2, an argument confirmed by the full rhyme “grass / pass,” which, “on the whole (...) accompanies her moods of confidence” (Reeves, 1963, p. 123).

Nevertheless, the final dash – like the one at the end of line two – although it signals the end of the poem, can also indicate again that the final word has not been said, for the voice of the speaker remains hovering, as if in suspense, in contact with that silence which awaits us behind the dash.

As we have moved from the literal definition of presentiment as a shadow indicating that the day has ended to that of the image of grass anxiously awaiting the coming of darkness, the amplification that has taken place, from the first to the second definition, also brings out, paradoxically, the way in which the abstractedness of presentiment and the concreteness of the nouns which have defined it have become blurred, not only by the root meanings of the words themselves, but also by the symbolism and Biblical connotations which lie behind them. Thus, the metaphorization of “presentiment” as a shadow announcing darkness in nature and of darkness in nature as symbolic of death not only in nature but, by extension, also in life, makes us realize that the amplification of lines 1-2 in lines 3-4 reduces the whole poem to one all-encompassing metaphor: presentiment is the shadow which precedes darkness, a metaphor in which tenor and vehicle almost overlap, for the analogue in terms of which the tenor is represented – shadow – maximizes the identification between them, as presentiment is a natural extension of shadow, as we have seen.

“The Heart”

This fore-knowledge of the future, this foreboding of evil / darkness / and the arrival of death that the speaker of “Presentiment” has tried to convey through the observation of a natural phenomenon, will now be set in contrast with the after-knowledge transmitted by the speaker in “The Heart asks Pleasure - first -,” as he expresses his “knowledge of human history” through his knowledge of the human heart:

The Heart asks Pleasure - first -
And then - Excuse from Pain -

And then - those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering -

And then - to go to sleep -
And then - if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die -

The fact that this poem, like "Presentiment," has only one version, highlights the poetic momentum in which it seems to have been conceived, while the alternative words ("blessing" for "pleasure," and "liberty," or "luxury," for "privilege" – although only "liberty" has been adopted as an alternative reading), demonstrate again Dickinson's discernment in making the right choice. For, as will be seen, "pleasure," instead of "blessing," besides adding a physical connotation of strength contained in pleasure, anticipates its contrary – pain – much more than "blessing," which would not make "pain" follow logically. "Liberty," in its turn, is also a weaker word, for death as liberty is a commonplace, with its symbolic implications of escape from an unendurable tension in self-destruction or as a means to gain immortality (Vries, p. 131).

The formal aspect of the poem, composed of two quatrains in Short Meter – 6-6-8-6 syllables to the line – has its rhythmic pattern of iambs enhanced by ten dashes, which formalize a halting rhythm simultaneously suggestive of the poet's groping for the right word as well as for the right sequence of feelings, as the speaker reflects back on the different stages of his life and of his heart's desires. The lack of perfect rhymes – slant rhyme in lines 2 and 4 – Pain / suffering – and eye rhyme in lines 6 and 8 – be / die – on the one hand seems to confirm through lack of formal perfection this unaccomplished seeking for the right word, while on the other hand it also enhances the repetitive pattern "and then," at the beginning of lines 2, 3, 5 and 6, which formalizes the diachronic structure of the poem through syntactic parallelism. As Barbara H. Smith argues, the poem is generated by two concurrent series, where one series could be extended indefinitely (first..., and then..., and then...), but where the other has an implicit terminal point (death) (Smith, 1968, pp. 111-112).

Thus, in contrast to the thematic amplification which took place in "Presentiment," we have here an incessant reductive and involutive movement: from the heart's desire for pleasure, to – through pain and suffering – its desire for sleep and death. There is nothing ominous here, like the arrival of darkness and the consequent death in nature as in "Presentiment," but only the realization that life itself brings death

with it. This realization, nevertheless, does not come without having demanded a toll from the heart: pain and suffering. Furthermore, and paradoxically, death will not be given when the exhausted heart wishes for it, but depends on the will of a superior entity, thus transforming the wish to die into the granting of the “privilege to die.”

As the first syntactic sequence confirms, the apparently unhesitant statement “The Heart asks Pleasure -” has its significance further emphasized by the multiple meanings and thus perspectives which the noun “heart” conveys: from the concrete hollow organ which keeps the blood circulating by contracting and dilating, to its gradual synonymy with abstract entities – the mind, the soul, sensibility. Thus, as the deepest part of one’s nature, the heart comes to symbolize the seat of the emotions, of the life-essence, of the intellect or understanding, of the will and courage, as well as of the soul, which is known by God (Vries, pp. 243-244). These connotations will resonate throughout the poem, as Pleasure, Pain, Suffering and Sleep, simultaneously concrete and abstract entities, are envisaged by the speaker, as they are gradually added to his perception of life’s needs.

The fact that “ask” implies not only to make a request but also to demand seems to point to the heart’s commanding position in this first stage of life, as it demands, as its right, to feel and to have pleasure. In contrast to the Old English origin of “heart,” and thus introducing a first Latinity, the “pleasure” (OF *plaisir*, from L *placere*) the heart asks for includes not only enjoyment and delight, but also sensuous enjoyment as a chief object of life, an ambiguity between concrete and abstract qualities that has started with “heart” and will continue throughout the poem: as the center of emotions, the heart’s incessant contracting and dilating demands the delight of the senses in our early life, in its craving for endless love, attention and physical pleasure. The fact that the three middle letters of “heart” are visually carried over into “pleasure” enhances the semantic proximity, as if sensuous pleasure were a natural demand of the heart.

It is only when we reach the adverb “first,” between two dashes, that we become aware of a hesitation in the speaker’s statement, for the temporal sequence introduced by “first” – connoting not only “at first,” but also “coming before all other wishes” or “before everything else” – which will be developed in the next seven lines, will tone down and gradually reverse the positive impact and certainty of the first statement. One cannot here speak of an *aporia* on the speaker’s part, for the tone is too intimate to suggest an affectation of being at a loss what to say.

The apparent pomposity of the first line thus starts to shrink, in "And then - Excuse from Pain -," as the nouns "excuse" and "pain" are in direct contrast with "asks" and "pleasure." As "Excuse" (OF *excuser*, from L *excusare* > *causa*) already carries in its meaning not only a plea for release or exemption from duty but also exculpation, the use of "Pain" as a complement to "excuse from" brings out the sense of punishment embedded in "Pain." This sense of penalty, through the Latin root of "Pain" (OF *peine*, from L *poenare*, penalty), thereby denoting suffering, distress, of body or mind, as a probable consequence of the excess of pleasure in early life, reminds us simultaneously of Dickinson's Emersonian bent for "compensation," as if "Pain" were not only a natural sequence but also a consequence of "Pleasure." The fact that both words alliterate further foregrounds their semantic contrast.

The parallelistic temporal sequence "and then," which introduces the next unit of reading, is again preceded and followed by dashes, suggesting, as above, a halting rhythm pointing to the speaker's groping for the right sequence of words as he broods over the next wish the heart asks for: "those little anodynes / that deaden suffering." The use of the demonstrative "those," similar to the use of "that" in "Presentiment," suggests again that the speaker is drawing attention to something already named, familiar or understood, and thus of general knowledge, while the emotional implications of "little" convey not only the smallness of the "Anodynes" that kill suffering, but simultaneously raise an ironic contrast with the very noun it qualifies: "anodynes," medicine or drug able to assuage pain. Moreover, as the Greek origin of "anodyne" (*an* + *odunos* = pain + less) emphasizes the word "pain," what the speaker is actually saying is "those little pain alleviators / that alleviate pain," a pleonasm that reinforces the impact of the next lexia - "that deaden suffering."

"Deaden," in its turn, in spite of its meaning of "to deprive of or lose vitality, force, feeling, or make insensible to" suffering, nevertheless foreshadows literally the idea of death, which will be taken up again in the last line of the poem. Simultaneously, anodynes / deaden almost form a chiasmus, besides producing an alliterative effect, while the sounds in "anodynes" also prefigure the sounds of "die" through assonance, thus bringing these words together in meaning, as "anodynes," despite "deadening" suffering, are unable to eliminate it and will thus lead to the speaker's wish for death. Moreover, "suffering," denoting pain of body or mind, has a much greater impact than "pain," with its meaning further amplified by the fact that "suffer" (OF *soffrir* from L *sub* + *ferre* bear) denotes not

only to “undergo, experience, be subjected to pain, loss, grief, defeat, change, punishment, wrong,” but also to bear or tolerate, a related meaning which nevertheless is absorbed in suffering, adding to it an unending and overwhelming dimension, which does not seem to be contained in “pain.”

The line which initiates the second quatrain – “And then - to go to sleep -” – continues through syntactic parallelism the temporal sequence initiated in the first quatrain, the blank space between them implying that a longer time period has elapsed between the experiences presented in the first quatrain and those that are now being presented. The apparent simplicity of “to go to sleep” – sleep as a bodily condition, normally recurring every night and lasting several hours, in which the nervous system is inactive, eyes are closed, muscles relaxed, and consciousness nearly suspended – could almost be a natural consequence of taking anodynes, as sleep will relieve pain, were it not for the time gap mentioned above, which imprints a deeper significance on “falling asleep.” Moreover, if “sleep” also connotes rest, quiet, death, while “go to sleep” denotes not only to fall asleep, but figuratively means to die, both noun and verb already prepare us for the final wish expressed by the speaker: the privilege to die. Nevertheless, although the literal meaning of “go to sleep” cannot be separated from its figurative meaning, it cannot be forgotten, as Dickinson divests “go to sleep” from its connotations of “die,” even if only in preparation for it, by presenting both verbs in different contexts. In this way, to go to sleep and to die become the mirror image of one another, the latter contained in the former, the former a prefiguring of the latter, one reinforcing the other while simultaneously keeping their implications apart.

Prepared, as before, by a last recurrence of “and then,” the final stage of the heart’s wishes is offered to us in the speaker’s longest statement in the poem, the breathtaking outpouring: “And then - if it should be / The will of its Inquisitor / The privilege to die -.” Here, in contrast to the other parallelistic structures, the cumulative effect of “and then” suddenly receives a turn of direction, for the heart’s wishes, which have become less and less demanding, now lose all their power, since the granting of the “privilege” of death as the heart’s final wish depends on the Inquisitor’s decision or his intention to take an action, or on his power of effecting his intentions in relation to what is desired by that person. The “if” clause, denoting condition or supposition, confirms and brings to the foreground the fact that, in spite of the diminishing expectations of the heart and in spite of its sufferings, the granting of its last wish depends on a superior entity.

Moreover, the choice of the word "Inquisitor" (from L *inquisitore* = inquirer and *in* + *quirere* = to seek), reminding us not only of a court of inquiry – investigating a charge against an officer or soldier – but especially of the Holy Office – the ecclesiastical tribunal for suppression of heresy – makes one associate this superior entity, who is inquiring into the heart's wishes and granting it relief from its excesses in early life, with the figure of an official investigator, and, more specifically, with the Grand Inquisitor in the Roman Catholic Inquisition and consequently with the torturers in medieval times, thus contaminating the word with an extra dimension of cruelty. It simultaneously brings to the foreground, through its ecclesiastical connotations, the image of a stern Old Testament God, and thus two of the chief points of Puritan theology which sustained the New England faith in Dickinson's Amherst society: the absolute sovereignty of God and Predestination.

These two points become evident in the choice of the word "will," which precedes "Inquisitor." As its root meaning (OE *willan*, from L *velle* = wish) brings out, "will" becomes almost synonymous with "wish," and thus the heart's wish for the privilege to die depends on the Inquisitor's wish to grant it, a wish that becomes even more problematical due to the different connotations of "will": as the faculty by which a person decides or conceives himself as deciding upon and initiating action; control exercised by deliberate purpose over an impulse; deliberate or fixed intention; energy of intention, power of effecting one's intentions or dominating other persons; what is desired or ordained by a person; arbitrary discretion; disposition towards others, wishing of good or ill. Thus, the heart's ascendancy at the beginning of the poem, which is gradually undermined through its own excesses or through the vicissitudes of life, comes to its checkmate or final defeat at the end of the poem, as the granting of its last wish depends on the Inquisitor's decision, on his power to effect the heart's wishes, on his arbitrary discretion and disposition, and on what he desires – as in "Thy will be done."

Nevertheless, the speaker's asking for "the privilege to die" offers an alternative to the Inquisitor's absolute sovereignty: as the root of "privilege" reveals (from L *privilegium* bill, law, affecting an individual; from *privus* private + *lex legis* law), the fact that "privilege" means an advantage belonging to a person, a special benefit, while the verb "to privilege" denotes not only to invest with privilege but also to exempt a person from burden, suggests that this omniscient Deity, who has inquired into the heart's successive wishes, may decide upon granting the heart's last wish – to be exempted from the burden of life, from

what life has become after pleasure is gone. And it is only when we reach this last unit of meaning that this figure, hidden in the speaker's heart from the start, is brought to the forefront, to decide upon the heart's desire for "the privilege to die."

Bloom calls "(...) privilege of dying," in the poem "Through what transports of Patience" (J1153), a positive oxymoron (Bloom, 1995, p. 280). Although spoken in another context and by another speaker, the idea of death as a privilege seems to lose its oxymoronic connotation in our instance, if one considers the second meaning of "privilege" as to be exempted from a burden, more than to be invested with the privilege of choice. It is as if, by gradually losing ascendancy over the body through pain and suffering, and thus no longer in control of his life, the speaker asks to be exempted from the burden of life, and thus one does not necessarily have to see "the privilege to die" as an oxymoron, but as a consequence of the events of the speaker's life. The poem ends literally with extinction, as "die" (ME *deghen*) – in this context meaning to cease to live, to expire – reminds us that life has come to its full circle, from the life of the senses, through the release of pain and suffering, to the wish for the extinction of the senses. As the speaker visualizes the different stages of his life in one wondrous moment, the alliterative effects achieved in *pleasure/pain/privilege* to project the contrasting movement from positive, to negative, and then to the paradoxical positive ending – the privilege to die – further foreground the ironic contrast in the succession of the different stages of human life. As Dickinson reconceptualizes our heart's wishes, for "to die" depends on somebody else's will, not on ours, she simultaneously grasps, by pure poetic intuition, what we take, as heroes, or men of action, a lifetime to understand: the different phases of our life projected through the different stages of our heart's desires.

In this way, as argued in the introduction, the speaker, who traces our progress through life through our desires, seems to speak with the after-knowledge of somebody who has already experienced life fully. But what we actually have behind this persona is a poet who at twenty-five already not only intuited that presentiment of a coming event is a gift that human beings share with nature, but was also able to conceptualize about our heart's wishes and thus visualize man's progress through life in one wondrous moment of emotional, intellectual and religious insight. As Todorov has contended, it is the poet who makes the most astonishing discoveries of the essence and meaning of the world, through interior contemplation, while we, the others, the "heroes," have only the road of experience to teach us about

life. From Presentiment to the Privilege of After-Knowledge, Dickinson was able to incorporate in her poems the road of experience and the road of inner contemplation, through her apprehension of the fears and desires of the human heart and mind, making both poems become emblematic of a poet's capacity to fully apprehend life, a capacity that we can only partially share with her.

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