Świat i Słowo
filologia | nauki społeczne | filozofia | teologia
1(28)/2017

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"I felt a funeral, in my Brain." Writing pain: Emily Dickinson and Halina Poświatowska

First of all, I have to explain my choice to compare Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century American recluse, and Halina Poświatowska, a vivacious twentieth-century Polish socialiser. What brings these two female poets together is their common experience of illness and constant fear of death. Both Dickinson and Poświatowska treated writing as a self-therapy. On the one hand, in their verse, they depicted images of ailing bodies, disturbed minds and aching hearts because it seems to have helped them to ease their prolonged and intense pain. But, on the other hand, they wrote to reflect upon the most absorbing issues, such as the meaning of life and death, and a hidden sense of suffering. They shared these two desperate needs – to answer the basic questions of human existence and to seek repose and refuge from their nerve-wracking illnesses – and they answered them in the same way, i.e. by engaging in a creative act.

It suffices to take a quick look at their works to notice that they share many similarities. Both authors overused dashes, which stood primarily for moments of rest, a deeper breath, and reflection. They obsessively returned to the theme of death, describing it from different angles and imagining their own death from different perspectives. And, above all, they both decided to direct their thinking towards nature. Their careful and detailed examination of the natural world and its laws allowed them to discover affinities between nature and their own lives, and notice patterns which, ac-

cording to many critics, are imitated in their verse. In gardens and meadows inhabited by flowers, insects, and birds, they found answers about the sense of life, but also the intricacy of love and faith. Finally, the observation of withering flowers or dying bees brought comfort and peace of mind, and helped to accept the imminence of death, which thus seemed to be only a subsequent (and most natural) stage of transition into another form of existence.[1]

It seems that Halina Poświatowska must have encountered Emily Dickinson's poetry during her stay in the United States (1958-1961). In 1959-1961, she studied at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, which was one of the leading women's colleges in the United States, situated only seven miles from Amherst, Massachusetts, where Dickinson had spent almost her whole life. The first scholarly publication of Dickinson's poetry came out in 1955 in a complete three-volume set edited by T. H. Johnson. Not only did Dickinson begin to be recognized as one the greatest American poets, but she was also seen as a leading voice of women of the nineteenth century.[2] Poświatowska might have heard about Dickinson when she arrived in the United States because that was the time when Americans took even greater interest in the poet. In 1958, a complete collection of her letters, also in three volumes edited by Johnson, appeared in bookstores. Dickinson's poetry circulated in public discourse and was widely discussed by critics.[3]

But even without absolute certainty that the Polish poet was in some way inspired by the American one, similarities between Dickinson's and Poświatowska's lives and poetry are striking. After all, they both struggled with physical and mental illnesses – that is, Dickinson suffered from eye problems, agoraphobia, psychosis or epilepsy (biographers still explore her medical history),[4] whereas Poświatowska had a serious heart disease and depression. Illness and pain were therefore the major concerns of their lives. Admittedly, many poets have made death the central theme of their

[1] Dickinson's and Poświatowska's nature poetry (discussed in the context of their illnesses) is the main interest of some scholars, particularly: Judith Farr, *Emily Dickinson: Her Life, Her Poetry, Her Garden* (New York Botanical Garden, 2010); and Anna Siemińska, *Drobina Białka: Motywy roślinne i zwierzęce w liryce Haliny Poświatowskiej* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005).

[2] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Shakespeare's Sisters. Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 99–121.

[3] *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Richard B. Sewall (New York: Prentice Hall Trade) was published already in 1963.

[4] E.g. Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns. Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* (New York: Viking, 2010); or Christopher Potts, "Bright's Disease," in: *All Things Dickinson: An Encyclopedia of Emily Dickinson's World*, ed. Wendy Martin (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014).

poetry (e.g., another nineteenth-century female poet Christina Rossetti, or a twentieth-century poet Sylvia Plath). However, according to Thomas Johnson, "Emily Dickinson did so in hers to an unusual degree."[5] Likewise, as Jan Pieszczachowicz claims, "there are not many poets who with such penetration and passion [as Poświatowska] tracked the phenomenon of death."[6] They both had to confront death as small girls and it was always there, in their life, poetry and correspondence.

From her house in Pleasant Street, located near the town cemetery, Emily Dickinson could have observed every funeral ritual, but she also watched deaths of her friends and relatives, including her cousin Sophia Holland: "At length the doctor said she [Sophia Holland] must die and allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly to the sick room. There she lay mild and beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an unearthly smile. I looked as long as friends would permit […]."[7] The fourteen-year old girl was not afraid of observing the dying cousin from a short distance. It must have left a deep impression on her because, in a letter to a friend Abiah Root, written in 1846, two years after her cousin's death, Dickinson described the event in detail. T. H. Johnson believes that "it came from her precocious knowledge that death establishes new perspectives for the living."[8] Young Dickinson insisted on staying in the sickroom, as if she wanted to get to know death in advance, to "tame" her enemy.

Halina Poświatowska wrote about her first encounters with death – experienced in Częstochowa during the Second World War – in *A tale for a friend*: "Then I saw them [soldiers] for the first time. They lay with their arms spread. […] They seemed to be strangely small. I grasped my father's hand, digging my nails into it. In shallow trenches in a market square there were piles of them, their uniforms were bloodstained and torn, their eyes glazy." When she described the long weeks spent in hospitals, she always mentioned death and its numerous victims: "This hospital was full of death" or "They died often, too often for this small hospital […]. They died every day, taking with them our hope, killing our hope. A girl who had been running through a corridor, peeking in every room out of child curiosity. On a day before her surgery we read colorful books together, watching pictures of kids having fun." But the worst moments for Poświatowska were

[5] Thomas Herbert Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 203.

[6] Jan Pieszczachowicz, *Walka z niebytem (o poezji Haliny Poświatowskiej)* (Bochnia: Prowincjonalna Oficyna Wydawnicza "Exatrim," 1992), p. 45. Original punctuation.

[7] Qtd. in Dolores Dyer Lucas, *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1969), p. 53.

[8] Johnson, *Emily Dickinson*, p. 206.

probably those experienced after her husband's death, which happened after just two years of their marriage: "This death, my friend, touched me more than other deaths that I have lived through so far."[9] And, possibly, it was then that Halina understood that even the biggest love cannot conquer death. She started to brace herself for an even fiercer war with her "monster-heart,"[10] with "the absolute monarch."[11]

Finally, it has to be pointed out that it is the similarity between Dickinson's and Poświatowska's nature poetry that makes me feel my comparison is justified. The microcosms of the poetic worlds of both Emily Dickinson and Halina Poświatowska consist of small and rather ordinary elements, which both poets describe with such precision and from such a short distance that their speakers become much more than attentive and watchful visitors of the world of nature. They coexist with flowers, grass, bees, birds or butterflies and their poetics are determined by their own interactions with nature. The garden and the meadow are the metaphors of the writers' own lives: their blooming desires and winged passions, but also buzzing thoughts on the impending death and withering bodies.[12]

Although Dickinson's and Poświatowska's nature poetry (especially hundreds of pieces about bees and birds) seems to be of the most avid interest for their critics, I want to change the perspective slightly to explore their selected poems in terms of the brain function and its disintegration. In order to do that, following the example of many critics in that field (e.g., Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta), I have decided to read Dickinson's and Poświatowska's poems as testimonies to their inner lives. In my further analysis, the poetic "I" coincides with the poet herself. Instead of including references to the rich literature on the relationship between women and illness or feminist criticism, I choose to focus only on the selected poems and take the cognitive poetics approach in the analysis provided in this paper.

It is worth observing that, in order to construct a coherent and comprehensible image of the world from the fragments that they get, Dickinson and Poświatowska often turn to nature, which they treat as an escape from mental and physical failures. Their poems are full of descriptions of interacting with nature through senses, especially through the sense of sight, but also through hearing, touch or smell. One may argue then that their poems

[9] Halina Poświatowska, *Opowieść dla przyjaciela* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967), pp. 30, 71, 82, 85.

[10] Qtd. in Izolda Kiec, *Halina Poświatowska. Czytani dzisiaj* (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1997), p. 39.

[11] Halina Poświatowska, „moje serce jest władcą absolutnym…," in: *Wszystkie Wiersze* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2012), p. 518.

[12] It is worth comparing e.g.: Halina Poświatowska's *Poems from 1958–1962,* 232–233 and Emily Dickinson's J54; or: Halina Poświatowska's *Poems from 1958–1962,* 252 and Emily Dickinson's J28.

can be understood as records of "re-cognition" of given sensual experience, and, accordingly, "re-cognition" in the sense of realising its meaning. The process of "re-cognition," from this perspective, is an epiphany: the speaker recognizes a greater sense behind a seemingly unimportant event (e.g., the withering of a flower or the dying of a bee), which supplements missing pieces in her or his view of the world. Such a "re-cognition" would not be possible if the poets did not make use of the conceptual metaphor of life as a garden.

Interestingly enough, commenting on the phenomenon of conceptual metaphor, characteristic for the cognitive poetics approach, Agnieszka Wiśniak links it with the subject of death. She argues that, although death is often a taboo subject and we prefer not to mention it in our everyday conversations, when we cannot avoid talking about it anymore, we use metaphors or circumlocutions. Wiśniak explains:

> In poetry, the mystery, or the riddle, present in the reflections on the end of our existence, is connected with a lyrical phenomenon of a metaphor. Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson discovered that a metaphor – usually associated only with our language, and more precisely with literature, especially with poetry – refers to different spheres of human life, too: one's thoughts, experiences, actions.[13]

Indeed, when describing the concepts incomprehensible in "common" language, such as their illness, prolonged suffering or fear of death, Dickinson and Poświatowska apply various conceptual metaphors. Among examples discussed by Peter Stockwell, there are some shared by both poets, such as: death as departure, life as a day, war as an illness, ideas as plants, understanding as seeing,[14] but there are many more, such as body / brain as a house and death as a journey, which will be discussed in this paper.

Constraints of brain, mind and body

Taking a closer look at their poetry, it seems that Dickinson and Poświatowska experienced emotional distress or disturbance connected with the perception of the body as confinement, expressed through most striking mental imagery. As it will be demonstrated, brain, mind and body depicted in their poems often have qualities of a container, a room or a house. The

[13] Agnieszka Wiśniak, *"Od urodzenia w pożegnalnych ciałach..." Śmierć w poezji Lipskiej, Poświatowskiej i Szymborskiej* (Katowice: Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania Marketingowego i Języków Obcych, 2006), p. 17.

[14] Peter Stockwell, *Poetyka kognitywna. Wprowadzenie*, trans. Anna Skucińska (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), p. 157.

speaker is the prisoner locked in a box, a chamber or a church, haunted by her own thoughts and feelings.

Smith and Kapusta claim that:

> If we acknowledge that while writing poems Dickinson was ill and suffered severely, we can almost treat her output as a sort of personal diary of a battle against a serious disability. Illness always modifies the life of patients; it changes their prospects for the future, forces them to learn to live with shattered hopes and lessened expectations, and most of all directs their thinking inwards.[15]

Indeed, the speaker of Dickinson's poems is one who actually thinks "inwards" and examines her mind closely: she feels "a funeral in her brain" and tries to put its split parts back together. Dickinson's work "depicts a mind which, under a heavy weight of despair, no longer obeys her."[16] In J410, the speaker describes the experience of losing control over her brain – the process of alienation of the speaker's self from her bodily organ, which starts to act independently of her will: "My Brain – begun to laugh – / I mumbled – like a fool – / And tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day – / My Brain keeps giggling – still." Finally, she asks with anxiety: "Could it be Madness – this?"[17] While Poświatowska usually tends to separate her speaker from her own body,[18] Dickinson does the same thing, but, more than from her body, she wants to distance herself from her own mind. In J937, she experiences problems with expressing herself coherently. Her mind falls apart at the seams, her brain splits, and the confused speaker tries to rescue her mental integrity:

> I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
> As if my Brain had split –
> I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
> But could not make them fit.[19]

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[15] Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta, *Writing Life. Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011), p. 27.

[16] Ibid., p. 31.

[17] Emily Dickinson, J410 – "The first Day's Night had come - -," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/74966. Abbreviations used further in the paper: [J –] – *Johnson Edition*, ed. by T. H. Johnson, followed by the number of the poem.

[18] In the poem "Halina Poświatowska to jest podobno człowiek," the speaker says: "Halina Poświatowska – this handful of garments and these hands, and mouth which is hungry no more"; Halina Poświatowska, *Indeed I Love... Właśnie kocham...*, trans. Maya Peretz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), p. 167.

[19] Emily Dickinson, J937 – "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind - -," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/79907.

Dickinson writes about both the mind and the brain but sometimes, as observed by Sabina Sielke, she seems to privilege the word brain over the term mind.[20] Like the poet, scientists emphasize the scope of neuropsychological processes in the brain: "How can seemingly immaterial entities such as thoughts and memories arise from biological material? [...] Advances in neuroscience have now led to wide acceptance in science and medicine that *all* aspects of our mental life – our perceptions, thoughts, memories, actions, plans, language, understanding of others and so on – in fact depend upon brain function."[21] So although brain and mind are seemingly separate entities, in Dickinson's poetry, it is the brain that embodies the mind. It contains all mental processes, so when it fails, as in the poem above, the speaker is baffled and totally confused. Jed Deppman observes:

> The lyric "I" which has a clear relation neither to the whole nor to either half of the split brain, first seeks to bring order to discordant thought the way the seamstress matches fabrics or aligns seams. Despite the violence of a "cleaving," the domestic image is philosophically heartening, for it is visualizable: two halves of a brain, or two thoughts, next to each other and needing to be sewn together.[22]

The analogy between sewing and arranging thoughts can be drawn further. In the second stanza of the same poem, the seamstress drops a stitch; her thoughts remain unfastened and disjointed:

> The thought behind, I strove to join
> Unto the thought before –
> But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
> Like Balls – upon a Floor.[23]

The repetition of the word "but" only emphasises the speaker's failure. One may observe the switch of imagery: earlier thoughts were pieces of fabric and now they are unravelling the yarns dropped to the floor. It seems that the conceptual metaphor applied here is brain / mind as a sewing box. The seamstress is the poet herself, normally confined in a container, but now depicted in the chaotic moment of creating a poem. She wants to join the balls of yarn that slipped out of the box into a coherent whole, but

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[20] Sabina Sielke, "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" and "Re-Cognizing Emily Dickinson," *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2008), p. 68.

[21] Jon Driver, Patrick Haggard and Tim Shallice, *Mental Processes in the Human Brain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 1.

[22] Jed Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2008), p. 99.

[23] Emily Dickinson, J937 – "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind - -."

the sounds and the sequence of words do not fit together. Dickinson, who developed a habit of writing down some of her observations on random scraps of paper (e.g., on envelopes, leaflets, recipes, etc.), might actually be describing herself hurriedly noting down her thoughts.

The poet makes use of another conceptual metaphor: brain / mind as a house. But for the American poet this architectural space / structure can be as confusing as a sewing box filled with tangled yarns and scraps of fabric. It seems that the deeper the speaker in Dickinson's poems looks inside her own mind or brain, the more confused she is and the less she seems to know about herself. She is haunted and lost in the corridors of her brain:

> One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
> One need not be a House –
> The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
> Material Place –
> [...]
> Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
> Should startle most –
> Assassin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least.
>
> The Body – borrows a Revolver –
> He bolts the Door –
> O'erlooking a superior spectre –
> Or More –[24]

The brain is represented as an old, abandoned house. The speaker wanders indefinitely through its mazes and corners, which are terrifying even though they are not haunted. Possibly, the poet sees the brain as a metaphor for an organic cause of the disease and she personifies epilepsy as an assassin. This is why the speaker feels imprisoned in the house, that is in her own body. After all, she never knows where the assassin is hidden and when it can show up, i.e., when she can experience an epileptic seizure. This can lead to madness, but the speaker believes that confronting the assassin may also be the final step to finding "a superior spectre – / Or More," which may be perceived as the final truth, a revelation.

Even if the speaker would like to "live in the mind," rather than in her ailing body (including her brain, the malfunctioning organ – if we assume that the speaker believes that her illness has an organic cause), the only

[24] Emily Dickinson, J670 – "One need not be a Chamber -- to be Haunted - -," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/77233.

problem is to find oneself in the multiplicity of different "selves" which are "concealed" one behind/within the other. "Me from Myself – to banish –," the speaker orders in J642 and continues: "Had I Art – / Impregnable my Fortress / Unto all Heart – / But since Myself – assault Me – / How have I peace / Except by subjugating / Consciousness?"[25] Again, the speaker wonders how it happens that her own body acts against her own will or even attacks her, as it may happen in epilepsy. She describes the feelings of estrangement from "herself," a dramatic split between herself (mind) and her body (brain). Therefore, we may observe yet another conceptual metaphor, i.e. that of an illness as war: the speaker's whole self is depicted as the fortress which the split I's (the mind / will and the brain / body) try to master and rule. The split is taking place because the speaker sees her body as not obedient to her conscious will. Brain / body act on their own so the only way to integrate them is to yield one to the other ("subjugating Consciousness").

As exemplified above, in Dickinson's poems, brain / body is a place of confinement. It has the features of a sewing box, a house or a fortress; and Poświatowska depicts it in an analogous way. The speaker of her poem acknowledges: "you live but for a while / and time – / is a transparent pearl / filled with breath [...] love is a word / brain – a metal box / wound up every day / with the silver key of illusion."[26] While love is nothing more than a simple word, the brain is a clock ticking regularly and showing it is working. Its functioning is automatic and mechanical. Since it is wound up with the key of illusion, it may be put back or forward against our will at any time. As in the poems above, the speaker feels imprisoned in her own brain, as she has no control over it or, in other words, she possesses no key wounding it up.

Similarly to Dickinson describing corridors of a "haunted" house, Poświatowska employs the metaphor of a house hiding some danger, bristling with pitfalls:

> my house is now filled with pitfalls
> better stay away from my house
> my lips are there red as memory
> and my arms – animals with spry fur
> and my eyes – lights at sea
> and the shriek of my eyes – for the time's overcast
> and right by the door my shoeless feet stand begging

[25] Emily Dickinson, J642 – "Me from Myself -- to banish - -," http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75400.

[26] Halina Poświatowska, „żyje się tylko chwilę...," in: *Indeed I Love*, p. 197.

and the whole room is chilled with fear
and dark with desire[27]

The speaker's body is depicted as a house parcelled out into different elements (*pars pro toto*). Lips, arms, eyes and feet hide a danger and mystery; they are separate entities and the speaker may only observe them from a distance. Although the anaphora of the word "and" emphasizes the severity of the speaker warning the reader (the lover) not to enter her house, she actually seems to invite him to come in, as she experiences fear and desire simultaneously. She is portrayed as a woman who feels alienated in her own body, waiting for someone who is able to reunite all the separate parts.

In another poem, the speaker refers to herself as a gothic cathedral. Similarly to Dickinson's "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" (J937) discussed earlier, Poświatowska uses the motif of yarns or threads, but unlike in Dickinson, they make up the speaker's body:

from such threads is the body woven
rapture and pain rapture and pain
[…]
I am a church
I am surely a gothic church
with this slender blood-circuit
in flutter
lifted above myself
with thirsty lips
I drink up space.[28]

Poświatowska refers to the characteristics of a gothic church: it is high, slender, spacious, towering and narrow, just as the speaker's body is tall, slim, and encouraging the reader to accept the world. The speaker is able to be "lifted" above herself and to "drink up space": in analogy to Dickinson, she experiences the double consciousness and estrangement from herself. She is the church and, at the same time, she floats above herself, observing herself from above. On the one hand, she is locked in the church (as in an ailing body), but, on the other hand, it is so spacious and so impressive that it gives her a chance to set herself some lofty goals and experience uncanny feelings. In other words, both Poświatowska and Dickinson (who finishes her poem "Me from Myself to Banish" (J642) with the stanza "And since We're mutual monarch / How this be / Except by Abdication – / Me – of

[27] Halina Poświatowska, „mój dom jest teraz pełen zasadzek…," in: *Indeed I Love*, p. 186.
[28] Halina Poświatowska, „z takich nitek uplątane jest ciało…," in: *Indeed I Love*, p. 193.

Me?"[29]) learn how to "tolerate" their brains / bodies, how to accept their advantages and disadvantages, and how to live the life of pain and joy.

Haunted corridors of her brain / body are also mentioned in many of Poświatowska's poems. In "I lack former tenderness," she describes her body as both an "animal" and a "building:"

> I lack former tenderness for my body
> yet I tolerate it like a beast of burden
> useful though it requires much care
> it brings pain and joy and pain and joy
> sometimes inert from pleasure
> sometimes shelter for sleep
>
> I know its twisted hallways
> can tell which way exhaustion comes
> which tendons laughter tenses
> and I remember the unique taste of tears
> so like the taste of blood
>
> my thoughts – a flock of frightened birds
> feed on the field of my body
> I lack my former tenderness towards it
> yet feel more acutely than before
> that I reach no further than my outstretched arms
> and no higher than I can rise on the tips of my toes.[30]

The female body is a hyperbolised metaphor of a beast of burden. It may be a very useful animal (it labours for the benefit of the speaker: thanks to it, she can experience pleasure), but, at the same time, it consumes a lot of her energy and effort because it has to be domesticated. In the extended metaphor, it also has the qualities of a room, a shelter, with twisted hallways. Poświatowska tries to communicate not only her sense of confinement due to illness, but also the uncontrollability of her body, because she is too weak to do what she would like to do. Human physicality becomes the restraint, which, paradoxically, guarantees the possibility of pleasure, but, at the same time, condemns the speaker to suffering. The knowledge of the body's intricacies means knowing its reactions, which often cannot simply be explained in biological terms. Tastes of tears and blood refer to both the mental and the physical spheres. The speaker's thoughts ("a flock of frightened birds") feed on the field of her body, which indicates that the

[29] Emily Dickinson, J642 – "Me from Myself -- to banish - -."
[30] Halina Poświatowska, „nie mam dawnej czułości…," in: *Indeed I Love*, p. 53.

mental sphere is much more than "cogito," it may develop thanks to the body. Since the speaker tries to reach further than her outstretched arms and higher that she can raise on the tips of her toes, the body teaches her wisdom and humility and also allows her to measure her own limitations and borders. Physicality interpreted in this way is not only a "burden," it is also a chance to go beyond one's constraints and gain a wider perspective.

Both Emily Dickinson and Halina Poświatowska describe the feeling of confinement / imprisonment in their own brains and bodies, which are the sources of their suffering and pain. They employ metaphors of a container: a sewing box or a metal box (a clock), or of a house: a fortress, a church. However, while in Dickinson's poems the speaker wandering through mysterious corridors experiences constant fear, ambiguity and loss of control over her own consciousness, the speaker in Poświatowska's poems is afraid and excited at the same time. Dickinson's mentality is not much more than a constraint. The speaker of her poems seems to believe that the final truth and revelation ("a superior spectre") is to be found after death only. Poświatowska's physicality is a constraint too, but the speaker is brave enough to look beyond its "walls," which may also be a chance to find some important truths in her earthly existence.

Authenticity of pain

How can one be delighted with pain? Smith and Kapusta acknowledge that "with the development of her illness, Emily Dickinson came to know the 'real' pain, the one beyond endurance, which not only immobilises but pushes onto self-destructive action."[31] In J241, the speaker declares: "I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true – ."[32] A. B. Crowder points out that "this poem is omitted from most books on Dickinson" because "we learn that she values extreme, prolonged pain, which is an odd view to hold."[33] The poet focuses on the "reality" of pain, its authenticity and the impossibility of faking it: "Men do not sham Convulsion, / Nor simulate, a Throe – ." She leaves the reader with an image of personified anguish, who strings the beads of sweat, as if in the form of a fashionable headband.[34]

[31] Smith and Kapusta, *Writing Life*, p. 33.

[32] Emily Dickinson, J241 – "I like a look of Agony," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/79879.

[33] Ashby Bland Crowder, "Dickinson's I LIKE A LOOK OF AGONY," *The Explicator*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2013), p. 204.

[34] Emily Dickinson, J241 – "I like a look of Agony."

Speakers in Dickinson's and Poświatowska's poetry experience "real" pain they cannot bear any longer. It is so sharp and so utter that it makes them stiff and exhausted, and yet they emphasize and value its authenticity. After some time, they seem to get used to it and treat it as an indispensable part of their existence. In the poem entitled "Veritas," Poświatowska focuses on the authenticity of pain:

if I stretch my hands
and try to reach
I'll strike a copper wire
through which electric current flows
I'll spill
in an ash shower
downwards
physics is real
the bible is real

love is real
and real is pain[35]

The speaker enumerates notions such as: physics, the bible and love, and talks about pain (a very concrete and negative feeling) at the end of the poem. She provides parallel structures ("physics is real, the bible is real, love, is real") and a reversal in the last line only, as if trying to point out how important and different from the notions mentioned above the pain is. In its intensity of a physical sensation, it surpasses physics, religion and even love; it paralyses, drags "downwards," spills "in an ash shower." This literally "paralysing" pain is metaphorically described in another poem in which Poświatowska compares it to Mount Blanc:

Sharp as Mount Blanc
I've never seen it
but I've been told
that it's high and steep
covered with eternal snow

people go there rarely
this is why
I compared my pain
to it.[36]

[35] Halina Poświatowska, "Veritas," in: *Indeed I Love*, p. 143.
[36] Halina Poświatowska, „ostry jak Mont Blanc," in: *Wszystkie Wiersze*, p. 616.

Pain seems to be inconceivable, beyond reach and beyond endurance. That is why it is hyperbolised – "high," "steep," and "covered with eternal snow." The speaker calls it "my pain." It is "her" suffering, so difficult to depict in common terms that she uses the image of the highest peak in Europe.

The inability to find the right words to describe her agony is visible in Dickinson's poems as well. She starts J599 with a general statement and only then does she describe her feeling in detail:

> There is a pain – so utter –
> It swallows substance up –
> Then covers the Abyss with Trance –
> So Memory can step
> Around – across – upon it –
> As one within a Swoon –
> Goes safely – where an open eye –
> Would drop him – Bone by Bone.[37]

The speaker also depicts the experience of the most severe pain using the metaphor of the landscape of her mind. Her suffering is so intense that she falls into a deep trance, becomes numb and indifferent. The speaker follows an open eye "blindly," drops "Bone by Bone" (as a skeleton), and sinks into oblivion. She seems to faint but she is still able to hear and comprehend. Her memory can step around, across and upon the "Abyss" of pain. Hyperboles and repetitions strengthen the description of agony. While the speaker suffers from an almost "strangling" pain, the dashes inserted between words point at the places in which she can finally take a deep breath. Every dash indicates a short moment of repose, which is extremely important especially if the speaker's agony has no end. She signalizes it in another poem as well: "Pain – has an Element of Blank – / It cannot recollect / When it begun – or if there were / A time when it was not –."[38] The real pain stays with an ill person forever. It is an unchangeable force and, even if someone claims that she has been cured of it, this indicates that she has never felt it:

> They say that "Time assuages" –
> Time never did assuage –

[37] Emily Dickinson, J599 – "There is a pain -- so utter --," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75172.

[38] Emily Dickinson, J650 – "Pain -- has an Element of Blank --," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/79900.

An actual suffering strengthens
As Sinews do, with age –

Time is a Test of Trouble –
But not a Remedy –
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no Malady –[39]

Once more, the speaker emphasises the difference between the pretended and real ("actual") feelings. The real pain cannot be relieved. It may only intensify in time (hence the "persistent" alliteration of "s" and "t" – "suffering strengthens as Sinews do"; "Time is a Test of Trouble") and drag one into agony.

The experience of suffering from prolonged pain that cannot be assuaged is also present in one the best-known of Dickinson's poems – "I felt a funeral, in my Brain." It opens with a description of a burial ceremony:

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

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

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

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

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –

[39] Emily Dickinson, J686 – "They say that 'Time assuages' --," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75521.

And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –[40]

Again, Dickinson repeats the phrases, sounds "f," "t," "b," and parallel grammatical structures ("kept treading – treading" / "kept beating – beating") in order to emphasise the prolongation of agony. The speaker thinks that her mind is "going numb" and she hears people "lifting a box" and "creak across her soul," which suggests that she might be experiencing first symptoms of an epileptic seizure: the loss of rational reasoning, beating pulse, waves of a stabbing headache, or the very first seconds of unconsciousness. It seems that, in the moment of the final failure of the senses, one remains a solitary and defenceless being deprived of the possibility of reaction, yet still present. As the pain gets worse, the speaker's irritation with everything that is happening inside her own brain / body increases. Her personal drama is going on, as the illness keeps performing a ritual with "those same Boots of Lead," with the same intensity. As Smith and Kapusta observe, the prolongation of suffering is emphasised by the classic ballad meter and rhythm similar to the one characteristic for a funeral hymn.[41] In the penultimate stanza, the speaker is falling down (dropping) into a tunnel or a deep shaft in the ground (possibly into a deep grave), the anaphora (and, and) serves to imitate banging (bang, bang). She lands at the bottom (a dash at the end of the sentence in the third stanza), and then, metaphorically, in the last stanza, the plank in the bottom of the coffin breaks down, and she starts falling again (another anaphoric series of ands). The aposiopesis signifies her surprise that there is no end to this pain, that it can get even stronger when you think it cannot be worse.

Lethargy and apathy result from the fact that, after some time, one slowly gives up hope that agony can actually finish. While, in the poem above, pain is represented through a metaphor of never-ending falling, in J341, the speaker describes immobility. Suffering is a down-to-earth, everyday activity. It loses its exceptionality and leads to indifference, stiffness and mechanization:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

[40] Emily Dickinson, J280 – "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/79882.

[41] Smith and Kapusta, *Writing Life*, p. 32.

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way

Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –[42]

The speaker portrays the routine of suffering. She accumulates words connected with stones, hard minerals (quartz) and heavy metals (lead) to strengthen the physical sensation of heaviness (she feels heavy as a stone), to express stiffness and immobility experienced by a suffering person. According to the authors of *Writing Life*, "the sense of numbed consciousness is enhanced by imagery characterized by possessing the qualities of lifelessness. [...] Even though the emotions seem to be as stable and firm as a gravestone, it is not strength that stabilizes them but apathy."[43] In the final line of the poem, the speaker grades subsequent stages faced by a suffering person. Pain is compared to death by freezing and results in the ultimate surrender.

A similar indifference and routine of suffering is depicted in Poświatowska's poems. The speaker says: "I slash the orange of pain."[44] Her slow process of losing consciousness is described as follows:

on the verge of dying
there are no kisses
there are no scents
nor colours

the buzz of a bee
fades over a meadow
[...]
on the verge of dying
a narrow light dims

[42] Emily Dickinson, J341 – "After great pain, a formal feeling comes - -," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75039.

[43] Smith and Kapusta, *Writing Life*, p. 33.

[44] Halina Poświatowska, „rozcinam pomarańczę bólu...," in: *Wszystkie Wiersze*, p. 325.

and the verge so clear
dies down – pain[45]

When this pain gets worse, the senses start to fail. Touch (there are no kisses), smell (there are no scents), sight (there are no colours) and hearing (the buzz of a bee stops) cease. On the verge of dying, the speaker's world quietens, turns its lights and music off and goes to sleep. Poświatowska uses a dash as well. The word "pain" is left after the dash, and it seems that everything circles around it. When, suddenly, even the pain subsides, the speaker seems to go through its barrier, and steps over the threshold of pain, over "the verge of dying" into another world.

Indifference and apathy represented in the poems above are possible reactions to the experience of suffering, but it seems that the only way to survive chronic pain is to accept it. After some time, getting used to pain is the only solution, as demonstrated in Dickinson's following poem:

I reason, Earth is short –
And Anguish – absolute –
And many hurt,
But, what of that?

I reason, we could die –
The best Vitality
Cannot excel Decay,
But, what of that?

I reason, that in Heaven –
Somehow, it will be even –
Some new Equation, given –
But, what of that?[46]

The speaker is not affected by a prolonged pain anymore, repetitions of the rhetorical question "but, what of that?" and the pace of regular iambic trimeter strengthen the description of her acceptance. The speaker resigns herself to the fact that decay and anguish are absolute and unchangeable forces. She repeats the phrase "but, what of that?" phlegmatically, almost hopelessly. It can be read as the speaker's sarcasm, giving up, but it also resembles well-known stoic ideals. The speaker, unmoved by grief, submits to death - the unavoidable necessity – without complaint .

[45] Halina Poświatowska, „na krawędzi mijania…," in: *Wszystkie Wiersze*, p. 50.

[46] Emily Dickinson, J301 – "I reason, Earth is short - -," *Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed February 12, 2017, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/75077. Smith and Kapusta, *Writing Life*, p. 33.

Smith and Kapusta highlight that suffering and self-renunciation may also be a sign of a victory and moral strength. If one is able to overcome such an intense and prolonged agony, and then stiffness and indifference, it may finally lead her or him to acceptance, serenity and a better appreciation of things.[47] Paradoxically enough, suffering also has positive and empowering sides. It sharpens the speakers' perception, helping them to grow stronger and, in effect, to get rid of the fear of death.

It seems that Emily Dickinson and Halina Poświatowska, writing from a deep need to understand the mystery of death and the hidden sense of their suffering, apply a similar method of dealing with their anxieties. In order to rescue their mental integrity and overcome physical and emotional pain, the poets decide to distance themselves from their own bodies and minds. The speakers of their poems seem to float above "their earthly existence." They describe pain through the metaphor of never-ending falling, immobility or the utter failure of senses. In other poems, they build conceptual metaphors. Brains / bodies have the features of a sewing box, a house or a fortress (Dickinson) or a clock, a gothic church or even a beast of burden. The speakers become prisoners, unable to control their malfunctioning organs. Eventually, they come to a similar conclusion. Decay and anguish turn out to be unchangeable forces and the only way to survive their "blows" is to come to terms with the imminent death or, at least, try to find acceptance and serenity in the surrounding world.

[47] Smith and Kapusta, *Writing Life*, p. 35.

Aleksandra Fortuna-Nieć

"I felt a funeral, in my Brain." Writing pain: Emily Dickinson and Halina Poświatowska

My paper examines similarities between Emily Dickinson's and Halina Poświatowska's poetic representations of mental processes connected with illness and suffering. As they both struggled with physical or mental illnesses, that is Dickinson's eye problems, agoraphobia or epilepsy and Poświatowska's serious heart disease, their poems are riddled with the themes of illness, suffering and death. Their striking metaphors explore the brain function and its disintegration, for example, in poems such as: "I felt a funeral, in my Brain," "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind / As if my Brain had split –" and "My Brain – begun to laugh –" (Dickinson's J280, J937, J410) or "brain – a metal box / wound up every day / with the silver key of illusion" and "my house is now filled with pitfalls / better stay away from my house / my lips are there red as memory / and my arms – animals with spry fur [...] and the whole room is chilled with fear / and dark with desire" (Poświatowska's translations, *Indeed I love,* 187, 198). Brain, mind and body depicted in their poems have qualities of a container, a room or a house. The speaker becomes a prisoner haunted by her own thoughts and feelings.

Key words: Emily Dickinson, Halina Poświatowska, suffering, illness, cognitive poetics