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Music as an Expression of Traumatic Pasts and Conflicting Futures

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MUSIC CAN ACT as a mode of storytelling that conveys a multitude of emotions and experiences. Both Chad Abushanab, in “On the Dred Ranch Road Just off 283,” and Emily Dickinson, in Poem 378, “Better—Than Music!,” use music as an extended metaphor in their poems to convey a spectrum of life experiences. Abushanab and Dickinson both use the theme of music to establish a troubled past but offer opposing views of their speakers’ respective futures. Abushanab likens dismal melodies to the speaker’s and the speaker’s father’s alcoholism, seeing the father’s past as a premonition to the speaker’s dark future. Dickinson’s speaker, on the other hand, recognizes her past sufferings but personifies her faith in a beautiful future life as joyous music composed by “—perfect Mozart—” (Dickinson l. 7). Both speakers turn to music as a vehicle for asserting their conflicting visions of the future that they each believe will develop.

Chad Abushanab continuously uses a melancholy tone when describing music and other sounds in his sonnet. The speaker both mourns his past and fearfully anticipates his future. He begins “[o]n the Dred Ranch Road Just off 283” by describing a scene. While he does not yet mention music specifically, he remarks that he can hear “The howls of wolves who saunter near extinction” (Abushanab l.2), a sorrowful sound. The wolf, near death, is howling to make contact with other wolves just as the speaker is searching for his future as he approaches destruction. The sounds “carry across the plains until they’re not” (l.3). The wolves “saunter near extinction” and are all “headed in one direction” (l.4), the direction of death. The

speaker too can see himself walking down a path of destruction and eventual loss. The howls may suggest his own cry for support in the speaker's quest of sorting out his past and future life. Using auditory imagery, the speaker knows that, like the wolves that seem to be heading towards annihilation, he is headed towards a similar path.

The melodies of familiar sounds can be a way to remember the past. The speaker uses sorrowful language in describing music to echo his father's past struggles with alcoholism and the implications that his addiction has for his own future. The stanza begins with the speaker establishing that "[m]y father was a drinker. So am I—" (1.5). He cuts off at the end of the statement with a dash, almost caught off guard as if he were just having this realization at that moment. He describes this fact as being "an echo of a tune..." (1.6), or as reverberations of a far off sound. The speaker has previously seen his father as an alcoholic as considers his own relationship with drinking to be reminiscent of that of his father. As "an echo," the speaker's relationship with alcohol is a quieter, more distant repetition of what the father experienced. However, he believes that in his future those echoes may become louder and a more prominent problem in his life. The speaker elaborates that the tune is "in drunken time" (1.6), establishing that both the speaker and his father experience an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. Here the speaker uses "time" in the sense of meter in music. A "drunken time" gives the image of being stumbling, clumsy, or slurred. This music is not beautiful, it is hard to listen to, and is an unpleasant reality. Additionally, with "time" as a literal progression, the speaker's life is not measured in ordinary time but in experiences of being drunk or memories of his father being drunk. These memories of his father seem like a premonition of his own future in its echoing nature of rippling repercussions. The speaker fears, or seems to know, that the "song" that his father sang in the past (his actions related to heavy drinking) will be reprised later in his own life.

The speaker begins to relate drinking directly to himself, a problem of his own that is not exclusive to his father. He explains that "The bottle is an instrument" (1.7), insinuating that drinking is something he has practiced throughout his life. Drinking in the way that his father did has become habit, like practicing an instrument. Playing music is also a form of emotional expression. Drinking a bottle of alcohol to work through negative or positive emotions, as one might do when playing an instrument, is tied to the

habits of drinking the speaker may develop. When behaving in this addictive manner, it is only a matter of time before the speaker fully develops into an alcoholic. It is almost as if he is writing his own destiny because he sees no other way his life could turn out. By observing his own actions, the speaker realizes that alcoholism has become an incredibly personal struggle and not just something he observed in his father. Reflecting on his own behavior, the speaker describes drinking as “the amber music spilling over” (l.8). When something is “spilling over” it can be difficult to stop and music acts as an incredibly powerful expression of emotion which makes it all the more difficult. The feeling of something overflowing creates an overwhelming feeling, especially when the substance that is flooding is as personal as the music he performs on his instrument, or the alcohol he drinks. The speaker is acknowledging the inevitability of his current and future drinking problems because he believes that he cannot stop what is already beginning. The music brings drinking to a more personal level, which expresses the speaker’s belief in the inevitability of his own alcoholism.

As the poem progresses and the speaker reflects on his father’s past, he ponders what his own future may look like. He states that he is “thinking about the rhythm of decline” (l.9). Rhythms are patterns and have a set form. The speaker sees how his father lived and recognizes those patterns of unhealthy behavior developing in his own life. A rhythm is constant and predictable, so the speaker believes that his father’s repetitive behavior will transfer over into his own life, like a roadmap of his future. As the indication of a “decline,” however, this rhythm suggests a gradual loss of what he hoped his future might be. After confessing that his father measured his descent “in knuckles, hookers, drinks” (l.10), the speaker begins “to wonder how I’ll measure mine” (l.11). He is looking back at this sequence of actions in which his father took part and considers what the consequences of those actions mean for him. He describes his own descent as being “the ballad of the triple-whiskey jinx” (l.12). A “ballad” is a musical and poetic form that tells a story, often a melancholy one. A “triple-whiskey jinx” alludes to how some people believe that bad luck comes in sets of three and how jinxes are signs of bad luck as well. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “jinx” as “[a] person or thing that brings bad luck or exercises evil influence.” Once again, the speaker seems to believe that his dark future is preordained. His life is already written out in a ballad of cosmic misfortune; he feels as if he has no control over his fate. As the speaker looks into the past as a guide

for the future, he sees a musical pattern that is bound to be passed on from his father.

The final couplet that concludes this sonnet brings the speaker out of his own thoughts and back into the scene that opened the poem. Beginning the couplet with the word “but” (l.13) pulls the speaker out of his reverie and back into reality. He comments, “...the wind begins to sigh, a tired thing” (l.13). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a “sigh” is “[a] sudden, prolonged, deep and more or less audible respiration, following on a deep-drawn breath, and esp. indicating or expressing dejection, weariness, longing, pain, or relief.” The “sigh” of the wind is not the repetitious and foreboding music on which the speaker had previously so deeply focused. It is a simple sound of resignation. The poetic romanticization of his problems through music is stripped away because he has given up on his life. He is tired of trying to fight his destiny and is capitulating to a life of alcoholism, just like his father. The poem closes with the speaker stating that, “I pull the bottle from the bag. It sings” (l.14). The bottle that was once an instrument that the speaker played, implying that he may have had a semblance of control, is now taking over. By “singing,” the drink is taking over and stripping the speaker’s voice and autonomy, just as he predicted. The speaker himself taking out the bottle, but then the bottle singing, strips the speaker of the autonomy to have his own voice. Abushanab uses these musical and auditory images and metaphors to convey the speaker’s resignation to repeating his father’s drinking problems. The speaker is relinquishing control over his life to drinking, just as he believes he has been destined to do.

Emily Dickinson employs similar musical and auditory images as Abushanab in her poem “Better—than Music!” However, instead of resigning herself to a dark fate, Dickinson’s speaker uses music as a form of hope. She laments her current misfortune and pins her hope on faith for a brighter future. From the very beginning of the first line, “Better—than Music!” (Dickinson l.1), the speaker establishes music as the vehicle elevating what she is about to describe. The beauty of music is not exquisite enough to capture the amazement Dickinson’s speaker feels but it is the greatest joy to which she can think of comparing it. That exuberance is made evident through her use of exclamation marks that are used sparingly through the poem and reserved for moments of pure excitement. As she continues to discover the music, the speaker expresses “I was used— to the Birds— before” (l.2). The transcendent melody, and associated joy that accompanies

it, is previously unknown to the speaker. She was used to the earthly sounds of birds, but this is distinctly different. Dickinson's use of the lively charm of birds sets a distinctly different tone from Abushanab, whose speaker compares his experiences with the howling of wolves, evoking images of loneliness and sorrow as opposed to the birds' joy and liveliness. From the initial auditory comparisons to animals, Dickinson's speaker establishes a feeling of hope compared to the resignation of Abushanab's speaker.

The speaker in Dickinson's poem interprets the music of the world around her as hope, as an unknown future. She states, "[t]his- was different —T'was Translation—/Of all tunes I knew-and more—" (ll.3-4). The life that she is seeing is distinctly different, and better, than what she has previously experienced. She describes a "Translation" that was recognizable but distinctly different from her previous experiences. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a definition of "translation" as "[t]removal from earth to heaven...without death." The life that the speaker is looking towards is so astounding that it is more heavenly than the earthly birds she is accustomed to. This song, this joy she sees in her future, is all that "and more—". Whatever future she is picturing is almost indescribable in its beauty. The fact that the tune is different shows change and progress in her life, contrasted to the stagnation in "On the Dred Ranch...". As opposed to Abushanab's speaker using descending language with the music, describing the "rhythm of decline," Dickinson's speaker's music is described as elevating her to a heavenly experience. Whereas in "On the Dred Ranch Road Just off 283" the speaker recognizes the music-like patterns of his future as being identical to father's past, Dickinson's speaker sees soaring melodies that are something distinctly different from what she knew before.

Both speakers see a lack of control of their futures. However, one sees it as being forced to repeat a familial past, whereas the other views it as being able to let go and be free from the confinement of melancholy routine. Dickinson's speaker remarks that the beauty she hears and foresees, "wasn't contained—like other stanza" (l.5). This future that the speaker envisions is unable to be restricted. Similarly, Abushanab's speaker laments "the amber music spilling over," identifying it as the inability to control the alcoholism. However, instead of the lack of control being overwhelming, Dickinson's speaker feels liberated. The previous life she has experienced was confined to strict meter and rhyme and the freedom from strict order is beautiful to her. The lack of containment is exciting because the "other

stanza” she has experienced was too controlled. Both speakers see the melancholy and confining patterns of their past lives but take opposite approaches to how that will manifest in their futures.

The speaker in “Better—than Music!” emphasizes the hope in the unique genius of the music as her own, contrasting sharply to the speaker in “On the Dred Ranch...,” who sees himself reliving his father’s past in repetitive rhythms. Dickinson’s speaker exclaims, “No one could play it- the second time-” (l.6). This music is exclusive to her in that moment because it can never be repeated. This music is for the joy of only the present. For Abushanab’s speaker, however, the music hearkens back to how “[h]is father was a drinker. So am I—”. Where everything this man does is a product of how his father lived, Dickinson’s narrator hears music that is all her own. Unlike in “On the Dred Ranch...,” this music is wholly unique to Dickinson’s speaker and is opposed to the “echo of a tune” that Abushanab’s narrator hears. Unlike in “On the Dred Ranch...” this music is wholly unique to Dickinson’s speaker. She again continues to describe the transcendence of the limitless music, saying “But the Composer—perfect Mozart—/Perish with him-that Keyless Rhyme!” (l. 7-8). As defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “keyless” can mean that something is “unexplained.” Because the music of the future is so heavenly, there is no way of using earthly words to explain it. The word “keyless” may also refer to a musical “key” or the music’s “tonality” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The capitalization of “Composer,” along with earlier and subsequent religious imagery, suggests that the person orchestrating this beauty in the speaker’s future is God. To her, the music is perfect in every way and her intense faith for it can only be the product of the divine, even better than the “perfect Mozart.” Comparatively, Abushanab’s speaker knows the source of his music of the future. It comes directly from his own past and his father’s behaviors. The two speakers find opposing sources of the music that writes their futures, which therefore creates conflicting visions of how their lives will turn out.

Dickinson’s speaker uses religious imagery to once again compare her music of the future as being greater than anything produced by Heaven. She begins by describing how “...Children—told how Brooks in Eden—/Bubbled a better-Melody—” (ll.9-10). Children who are inexperienced in life are told by others that a paradise, and the music that is created in it, is better than the world they live in. The alliteration of “Bubbled a better” reflects the

formal structure of the music the children may hear in paradise that is thought to be better than earth. They “Quaintly infer—Eve’s great surrender—” (l.11). These children can only cleverly assume that the music of the Garden of Eden is better than that on earth, that surrendering to God is better than any earthly experience. However, as they gain experience they have a realization: “Children—matured-are wiser—mostly—/Eden—a legend-dimly told—” (l.13-14). As children grow up and have more life experiences, they realize that paradise is just a story that has been passed down, not a literal paradise to which they are attempting to gain access. Dickinson refers to it as “Grandame’s story—” (l.15), or as an old tale one’s grandmother passes on. This is then contrasted to her explaining, “But-I was telling a tune-I heard-” (l.16). As opposed to an old story passed down over countless generations, the speaker is now hearing music directly for herself. The bliss of this otherworldly music does not have to be inferred because it is directly experienced.

Dickinson’s speaker employs the same techniques as previously explained through the next stanza when she states, “Not such a strain-the Church-baptizes—” (l.21). She explains that the church has never produced music as beautiful as what she is hearing and that “[n]ot such a stanza splits the silence-/When the Redemption strikes her Bell—” (ll.23-24). Even the glory that is produced when someone is delivered from sin cannot come close to the glory of the life the speaker sees in her future; the parallel structure to line 21 reflects the similarity of the two examples. Where Biblical myth, religious ceremonies, and images of transcending Biblical paradise explains Dickinson’s speaker’s future, Abushanab’s speaker provides grimy images of bar fights and prostitution, bringing forth ideas of rough and loud music as opposed to the solemnity of hymns. Those discordant sounds are contrasted to sweet melodies of the Garden of Eden or the tolling bells of a cathedral. The two speakers frame the image of their future in opposite lights, showing the contrast in what they believe their lives will entail.

Both poets are alone in wondering about their future, but they differ in how they view this solitude. The speaker in “Better—than Music!” needs to keep the beautiful music of her vision to herself and the speaker of “On the Dred Ranch Road Just off 283” gives off the feeling of isolation, as if he is alone in this suffering. Dickinson’s speaker commands to herself, “[l]et me not spill—its smallest cadence—” (l.25). She feels as if she must not let

anyone know a single note of the music she hears, almost seemingly out of fear that she could lose it any if she reveals anything about her faith in the future. Dickinson's speaker's use of "spill" is in sharp contrast to the way Abushanab's speaker uses the same word. Additionally, Abushanab establishes isolated setting through the poem's title. The location off a highway, on a road named after a ranch, makes the reader presume that the speaker is likely alone. He then describes "the amber music spilling over" in a sense of being overwhelmed, the way that thoughts and fears can spiral when one is alone. His lamentations throughout the poem are building on one another until he is at the point of emotional distress when it feels like he can no longer control his fears. Where it seems as if Dickinson's speaker maintains faith by keeping the music to herself, he is overcome with a confusing range of emotions that is a result of him keeping this to himself. His fears in repeating his father's past manifest as these ideas spilling over.

Dickinson's speaker, on the other hand, describes how she is "[h]umming—for promise—when alone—" (l.26). Here, she is demonstrating how this music is what keeps her going. Continuously convincing herself of the promise of a brighter future is how the speaker keeps her faith and she must quietly recite it to herself if she wants those wishes to come true. She similarly refers to "[h]umming—until my faint Rehearsal- (l.27). She repeats "humming" to show that she is constantly quietly practicing this music herself. She must continuously repeat it to herself to remember to hope that it will one day manifest into a reality, even if it is when she dies and joins the heavenly choir, as she implies when saying that she will, / Drop into tune—around the Throne—" (l.28). On the contrary, Abushanab's speaker, by the end of the poem, has resigned himself to giving in to what he believes to be his destiny. He remarks "but the wind begins to sigh, a tired thing./I pull the bottle from the bag. It sings." He has given up hope and is no longer willing to actively devote his energy to changing his fate. Unlike Dickinson's narrator, he has no faith in a better future and is tired of trying to work for it; he is giving into his destiny where Dickinson's speaker works to keep faith that her future may change. She sees an endpoint to her suffering when her life will change where he sees no end to it and gives into that dark familiarity. Dickinson's poem concludes by stating that the speaker's faithful rehearsal of the music she has heard will allow her to someday "[d]rop into tune/— around the Throne —" (l.24), as if she is singing joyfully in harmony with the others around "the Throne" of

God. The endpoint of her musical quest is to experience eternal happiness after death.

These poems not only utilize music in their content as extended metaphors but they also employ forms in the structure of the poems themselves to emulate musical motifs. “On the Dred Ranch Road Just off 283” uses the sonnet form. The way in which Abushanab does not keep it in iambic pentameter but maintains the Shakespearean rhyme scheme makes the form more subtle which leads to its quiet musicality. The sonnet’s rhyme scheme reads naturally, with a similar pattern not unlike many songs. Within this structure, Abushanab has hidden moments of alliteration, from the first line “Stars are fired up like scattershot” (Abushanab l.1), to the last line “I pull the bottle from the bag” (l.14). The word “scattershot,” describing the visual dispersal of the stars, also has an auditory component of shooting as well, in conjunction with the sharp sounds of the “s” create a harsh pitch. Abushanab uses these subtle rhythmic techniques that flow naturally to create a song-like reading of the poem. Like the speaker’s thoughts, the poem’s form aids it in flowing in a natural narrative structure and the repeated rhyme scheme aids in the feeling of repetitive behavior emphasized in the poem. The sonnet form is relatively common and familiar, just as the speaker could be any man suffering from alcoholism. He is remaining in a life that is familiar to him because that is how his father lived, not matter how painful it is.

“Better — than Music!” uses very different structural techniques yet still maintains a musicality that complements the poem’s content. Dickinson does not use a structured rhyme scheme, although there are a few scattered instances of line ending rhymes. The most striking formal component of this poem, and in Dickinson’s work as a whole, is her use of dashes within and at the end of every line. The natural pauses that accompany the reading of these dashes gives the poem a syncopated feel, like a strange rhythm in music. Ending each line with a dash almost makes it feel like the line is being cut off before it can be finished, similar to the way the speaker must cut herself off from revealing the music she hears to anyone else. The pausing that comes along with the middle of line dashes is almost like the speaker having to think about how she is going to explain this otherworldly, ethereal music she hears. In the opening line, “Better—than Music!”, the speaker pauses after “Better—” almost as if she is doubting herself that anything could be greater than her current life, but her exclamation in the second half

of the sentence shows her burst of enthusiasm as she realizes that what she is experiencing is indeed truly more beautiful than the melodies she has heard before.

By combining form and content surrounding the theme of music, both poets create vivid images of contrasting ways people deal with their future and the ways in which suffering makes them afraid for the future. Where Abushanab's speaker sees his future as gravely predestined for alcoholism like his father, Dickinson's narrator holds hope that her future will be better than her past misery. By using music as a vehicle to portray these themes in differing ways, both poets convey messages of how the past affects the future.

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