

**Reading the Fascicles of
Emily Dickinson
Dwelling in Possibilities**

ELEANOR ELSON HEGINBOTHAM

Fascicle 3 c.1858-1859

<u>F</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>Fr</u>	
1	58	67	Delayed till she had ceased to know—
2	89	68	Some things that fly there be—
3	90	69	Within my reach!
4	91	70	So bashful when I spied her!
5	92	71	My friend must be a Bird—
6	93	72	Went up a year this evening!
7	94	73	Angels, in the early morning
8	95	74	My nosegays are for Captives—
9	96	75	Sexton! My Master's sleeping here.
10	97	76	The rainbow never tells me
11	98	77	One dignity delays for all—
12	88	78	As by the dead we love to sit,
13	99	79	New feet within my garden go—
**14	903	80	I hide myself within my flower
15	11	38	I never told the buried gold
16	49	39	I never lost as much but twice,
17	50	118	I hav'nt told my garden yet—
18	51	41	I often passed the village
19	12	32	The morns are meeker than they were—
20	52	33	Whether my bark went down at sea—
21	53	34	Taken from men—this morning—
22	13	35	Sleep is supposed to be
23	54	36	If I should die,
24	55	37	By Chivalries as tiny,

** Here again, hidden midway in the fascicle is the poem that will appear again in another fascicle, Fascicle 40. In both cases the editor (Emily Dickinson herself, of course as we have every reason to believe) placed the poem on the bottom of a sheet on the "west" side of the opened book. That is almost all that is similar about the two versions. Separated by six years, the two settings provide radically different interpretive possibilities. Here in Fascicle 3 the impression produced by the voice—largely because of the surrounding poems—is that of a speaker fiercely skeptical. In Fascicle 10 the same poem takes on a devotional tone, far from the mood of this earlier setting.

Fascicle 40 c.1864

F	J	Fr	
1	827	820	The Only News I know
2	961	821	Wert Thou but ill—that / I might show thee
3	962	822	Midsummer, was it, when / They died—
4	902	823	The first Day that / I was a Life
5	963	824	A nearness to Tremendousness—
6	964	825	"Unto Me"? I do not / know you—
7	965	826	Denial—is the only fact
8	966	827	All forgot for recollecting
**9	903	80	I hide myself—within / my flower.
10	904	828	Had I not this, or / This, I said,
11	905	829	Between My Country— / and the Others—
12	906	830	The Admirations—and Contempts—of time—
13	907	831	Till Death—is narrow / Loving—
14	908	832	'Tis Sunrise—Little Maid— / Hast thou
15	967	833	Pain—expands the Time—
16	968	834	Fitter to see Him, I / may be
17	969	835	He who in Himself believes—
18	970	836	Color—Caste—Denomination—
19	909	837	I make His Crescent fill / or lack—
20	971	838	Robbed by Death—but that was easy—
21	972	839	Unfulfilled to Observation—

** Hidden also in Fascicle 40, the little poem which had appeared midway in Fascicle 3, takes on a different tone. In this fascicle, the speaker looks with "compound vision," backward and forward on moments of reverse and advance, claiming the power over her material ("I make his Crescent fill or lack"), even as she moves beyond her own "Color—Caste—Denomination," beyond "locality." In this last fascicle there is a stillness, even in what may well be an elegy for the war dead (these poems were compiled in 1864), "Midsummer was it, when / They died—." Whether or not Dickinson intended this to be her final edition, it ends with "a Revolution / In Locality—" and a "Night" that may be better than the "Suns." While the reader wishes for more and while the writer wrote over 100 other powerful poems after those she gathered for this collection, these poems seem to provide a "perfect" ending (a word repeated three times, more frequently than in any other fascicle), almost a benediction.

Having delved rather deeply into four fascicles, two pairs, in that each contains another version of a repeated poem, this chapter glides more quickly through four other fascicles, two other pairs, to show that jolts of astonishment such as those noted are found everywhere. The canny editor (Dickinson) seemed to delight in such surprises from the very first fascicle, collected in 1858 to the very last, some six years later.

Fascicle 1 begins—and ends—with a mock funeral and a benediction in which bee, butterfly, and breeze substitute for the orthodox trinity. Throughout the remaining poems in the twenty-two-poem sequence, other trios act as shadows of that playful threesome. The fascicle bustles, suggests a lark, a romp. Everything is in motion. The earth turns on its axis (“Frequently the woods are pink—” [J6, Fr24]); the stars swing (“There is a morn by men unseen—” [J24, Fr13]); the linnet flies free (“Morns like these—we parted” [J27, Fr18]); and the dead “dance,” “game,” and “gambol” on a mystic green (also “There is a morn”).

All of this happens in a woodsy garden, beginning with the autumn of the gentian and moving to the summer of the rose. There are nooks for daisies, some columbine, orchis, crocus, and anemone sprinkled throughout as the persona poses as gardener, her “little spade” (“All these my banners be—” [J22, Fr29]) in hand. Indeed, in the sixth poem of the series the speaker “sows” (sews) her pageantry. Morning is privileged over night in this garden; at least four poems of the poet, who later claims “the dark” that she “adores,” focus on the coming morning.¹ This garden is out of reach of the Burglar and the cheater (“All these” [J22, Fr29]). It is a space to re/collect (“*Oh* if remembering were forgetting” [J33, Fr9]) what the “teller” doles out. Each image, each word used in this impressionistic introduction to the fascicle project exists in its own relationship, figurative and literal, within its poem. Like the flower image itself, Dickinson’s little force explodes, blossoms, and multiplies, each part seeding new images in its fascicle setting.

As she does three years later in Fascicle 14, in which she repeats the poem in a radically different context, Dickinson centers the fascicle with “The feet of people walking home” (J7, Fr16). Isolated from its setting in these two fascicles, “The feet” has invited a discussion that reveals the value of reading poems in their places. Ted-Larry Pebworth and Jay Claude Summers in a 1969 *Explicator* call the poem “an unusual example of orthodox Christianity” (item 76). Just so, Jane Eberwein notes the “happy mood” even as Dickinson confronted issues of immortality (1985, 232). However, Greg Johnson has a darker view, finding in it an “overt expression of a death wish” (1985, 145), and Cynthia Wolff finds “bitter irony” (1986, 148). By comparing the settings for the poem in the two fascicles (1 and 14), the reader sees the validi-

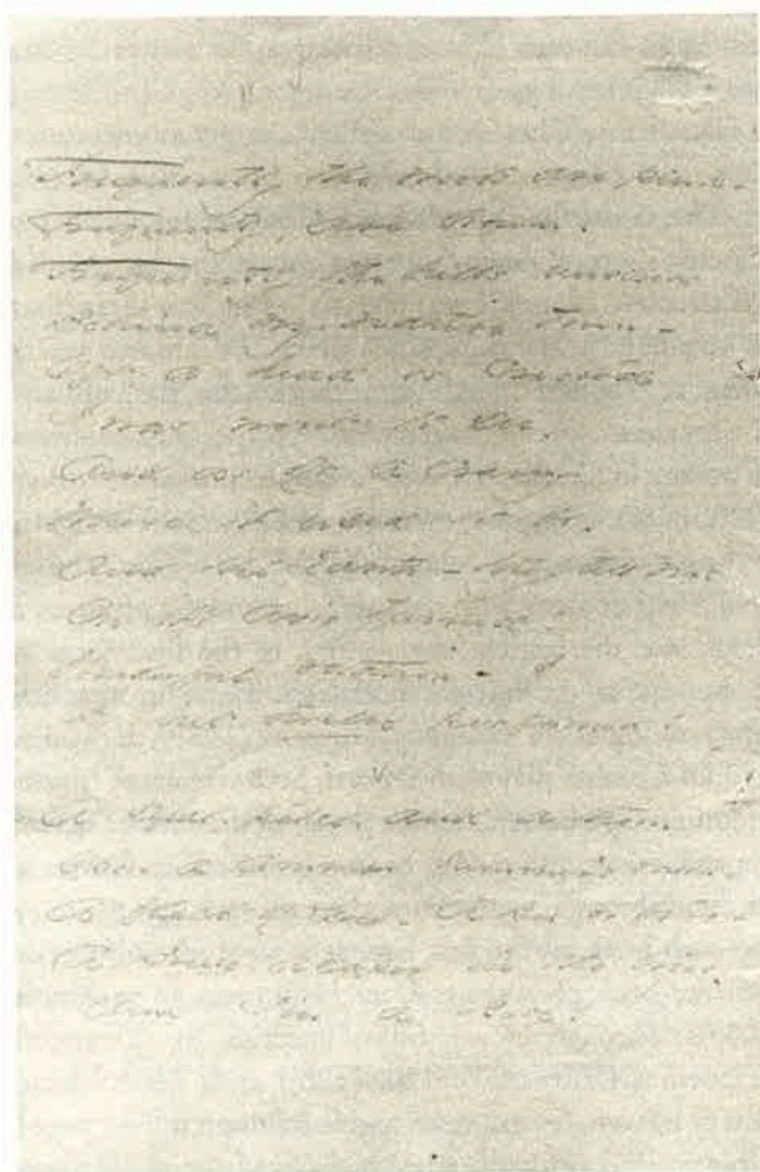
ty of each reading—but each is more relevant to the context of one or another of the two fascicle settings.

The first fascicle first: These poems gather a jaunty momentum by the repetition of tripartite construction in the two poems that follow the initial benediction. The visual flourish of “Frequently the woods are pink—” (J6, Fr24), the fascicle’s second poem, apparent only to the fascicle reader, underscores that tripartness. Note the way the “f’s” of its first three lines wave like flags down the poem. Below those three flying “f’s” are two sets of threes in the third poem: the “Sepal,” “petal,” and “thorn”; the “flask of Dew— / a Bee or two— / A breeze a caper in the trees.” And across from the waving “f’s” of the second poem, in the fourth, also a flower poem, “Distrustful of the Gentian” (J20, Fr26), is another evidence of Dickinson’s delight in editing. In this case the ear picks up the echo of the visual “f’s”: the “fluttering of her [the gentian’s] fringes,” along with the “perfidy,” and the *phantom meadows*.”

Four poems into the fascicle, the gentian of the first poem has evoked doubt, and the tone of the fascicle modulates. These are not simple flower poems; many, among them Margaret Homans (1980), have discussed the seriousness of Dickinson’s play with flowers, her reversals of “ordinary meaning” in the feminine symbolism and the power of the small. Dickinson begins her fascicle productions, grounding her work in beds of flowers and calling attention to them throughout the book through such appeals to eye and ear.

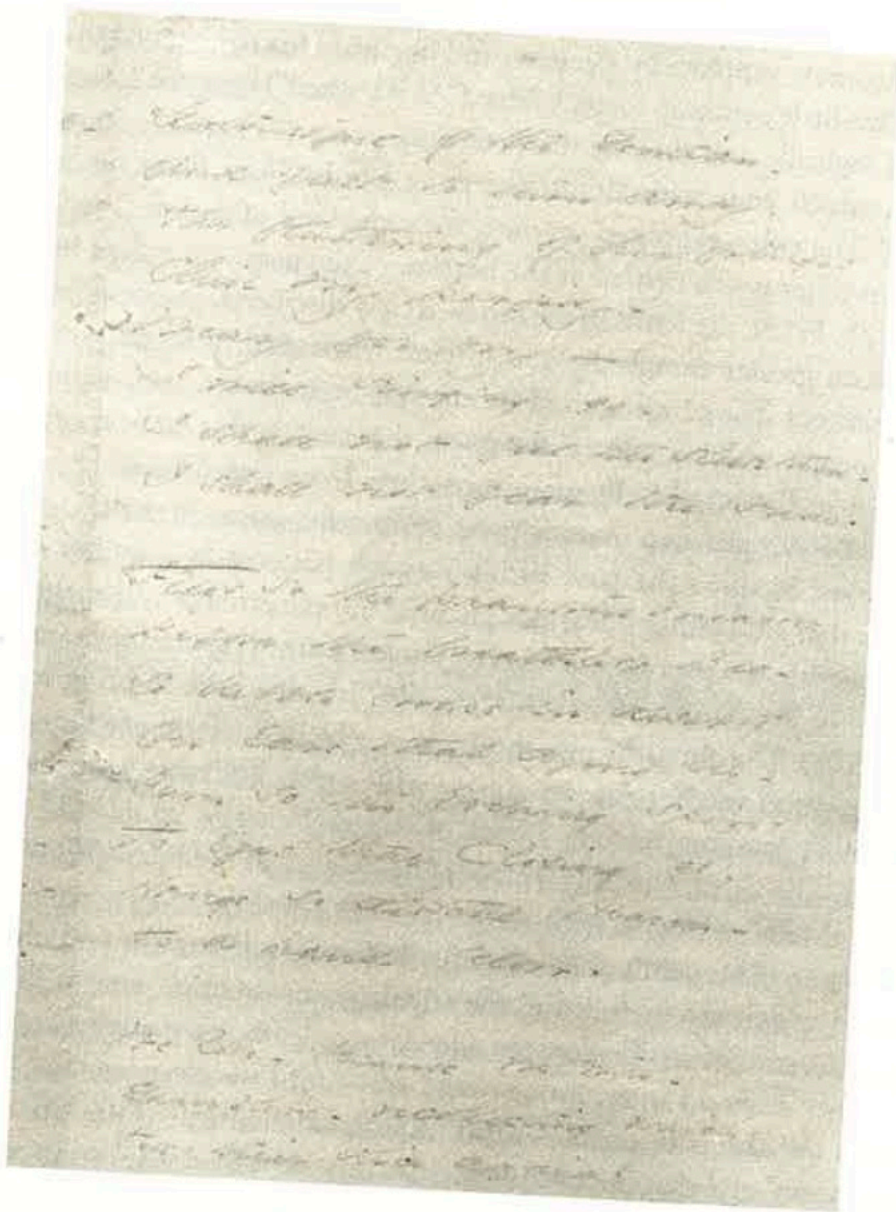
United by such imagery, the first fascicle is far from uniform or univocal, moving from the brisk playfulness of its beginnings to explorations of the economy of loss. Throughout it is full of surprises for the attentive reader. The fourth poem (“Distrustful” [J20, Fr26]) ends with a hand reaching toward a distant heaven, for example, and is followed on the page by a poem that, when it is noticed, is usually wrenched apart from it: “We lose—because we win—” (J21, Fr28), in which the hand becomes that of a gambler who tosses the dice again. Turning the page, one finds a longer meditation on loss and gain in “All these my banners be” (J22, Fr29), and so forth.

If the fascicle’s seventh poem, “I had a guinea golden—” (J23, Fr12), enacts a drama of loss of inspiration, the eighth, “There is a morn by men unseen—” (J24, Fr13), declares that the poet, as Joanne Feit Diehl puts it, is finding “the ground of poetry” in “an alternative territory” (1983, 159). Situated on the leaf before the central poem, which is repeated in another fascicle (“The feet of people walking home” [J7, Fr16]), this eighth poem anticipates it: Alike in structure (each is twenty-four lines with six of those lines spilling into the next page), each is a resurrection poem, the celebratory dancing feet of “There is a morn” yielding to “the feet of people walking home.” Each suggests a Heaven reminiscent of the Swiss Alps (Sue was in Geneva in 1858, don’t forget—albeit the one in New York—at about the time these poems may have been gathered).



"Frequently the woods are pink" (J6, Fr24). Source: Archives and Special Collections, Robert Frost Library, Amherst College.

Between the two longer and similar poems is the quick thrust of the ambiguously worded "As if I asked a common alms" (J323, Fr14). Syntactically two fragments of sentences, "As if I asked a common alms . . . / As if I asked the Orient," initially puzzles, even frustrates the reader. On its own this shorter poem seems an enclosure of that mysterious empty space, the gap, which interests those who find in Dickinson an existential soulmate.² The unnamed something the speaker asks for is not kingdoms, not the Orient, not a Morn, though it is akin to each. One clue to the identity of those alms is another context Dickinson provided: She included "As if I asked" four years after the approximated date of this gathering in a letter to Higginson, where it follows, without a break, this introduction: "The 'hand



you stretch me in the Dark,' I put mine in, and turn away—I have no Saxon now" (L265). Significantly, this is the letter in which Dickinson asks Higginson to be her "preceptor," a linkage that suggests that the wished-for "common Alms" relates to recognition of her poetic gifts and skills.³

Such a reading reifies Dickinson's placing the "common Alms" in this fascicle," and the intertextuality between contexts reifies the studies of scholars, such as Martha Nell Smith, who correctly insist on reading between various venues. This is a fascicle, remember, in which flowers and gardens are metonymies for poems and poet. When she wrote the same poem to Higginson, in which it appears in an almost identical form, the "a's" of its first words drift down the page on the right to remind us subliminally of that "alms" on the right, whether those alms are the grace to write or the grace of a kindly reading.

The context supplied by the letter to Higginson fits the context in this fascicle. This little common meter bridge ("As if I asked") between longer poems follows logically and directly the preceding poem ("There is a morn" [J24, Fr13]), which ends with almost the same words: "And flood me with the Dawn!" The twice-expressed yearning for some kind of rebirth is repeated in the even tinier poem nestled at the bottom of the page: "She slept beneath a tree" (J25, Fr15), the tenth in the series. Rarely discussed, except as "simple,"⁴ it takes on greater complexity and interest when read in its fascicle setting. The speaker's "foot," recognized by the not-born flower, merges into "The feet of people walking home," the poem that centers this fascicle and that is repeated in Fascicle 14. In more ways than I can detail here,⁵ the central, repeated poem picks up or anticipates every other poem in the fascicle. One can almost imagine the poet sifting through patterns as a quilter does for designs that are neither linear nor pictorial but pleasurable and suggestive.

Answering the plea for alms in the fascicle's ninth poem, for example, the speaker of the twelfth offers alms, saying, "It's all I have to bring today—" (J26, Fr17). The alms, the gift, the grace may be in the form of a literal flower (one imagines another context: a note with a gift) but more probably in the form of a poem, maybe even a book of poetry. This gift "could tell," says the speaker, who accompanies it with her "heart, and all the Bees / Which in the Clover dwell," taking us back to the fascicle's opening.

Between this twelfth poem with its three-part gift and the end of the fascicle, in which the flowers and the tripartite construction return, the editor inserts a series of meditations on silence—or death, particularly that on the sea. They seem an interruption—and are—until we consider that the little ship in the sixteenth poem, "Adrift! A little boat adrift!" (J30, Fr6) "shot—exultant on" and that the twentieth, "On this wondrous sea—sailing silently" (J4, Fr3) is the one that precedes Dickinson's instructions to Sue, "Write! Comrade, Write!" in the letter sent to Geneva. The ship sails into eternity, and the poet, as the fascicle ends, offers a rose to the reader rather than "Garlands for Queens" (J34, Fr10). The rose, symbol of "Chivalry, Chastity, and Equity" (that tripartite construction again) is the stuff of which the attar comes, attar that in "This was a Poet" (J448, Fr446 F21) is distilled; in other words it is poetry. Another rose poem shares that last page of the first fascicle. If one opens the fascicle and looks at its cover pages, the last poem (now on the left) leads to the first (now on the right of the opened book), suggesting the cycles, rebirth, a kind of eternal use, adding (the Bird/poet) to the characters of the initial blessing (Bee, Butterfly, Breeze):

Nobody knows this little Rose—
It might a pilgrim be
Did I not take it from the ways

And lift it up to thee.
 Only a Bee will miss it—
 Only a Butterfly,
 Hastening from far journey—
 On it's breast to lie—
 Only a Bird will wonder—
 Only a Breeze will sigh—
 Ah little Rose—how easy
 For such as thee to die! (J35, Fr1)

It might be easy for the rose to die, except that it is lifted up to us, readers who continue to discover its multifoliate suggestions as we read the fascicles, of which this is the first.

The "Feet of People" and Issues of Power and Print

By the time Dickinson copied that central poem of Fascicle 1, "The feet of people walking home" (J7, Fr16), into a similarly central position in what we now call Fascicle 14, her world had changed. Compiled against the backdrop of the opening of a war, the feet have changed from those strolling through a garden to those gathered in troops or on graveyards. In this period, too, she initiated "the most important correspondence" of her life, that with Higginson (*Letters*, 388). The poems selected for this book provide a striking contrast to those in Fascicle 1, and the repeated poem demonstrates the value of reading contextually.

If the first fascicle announced an effort to give shape to an already clearly articulated ambition "to be distinguished," Fascicle 14 interrogates the problematical extension of that ambition. Blessings in bees and breezes and gifts of flowers and poems give Fascicle 1 a kind of gentleness. This almost totally different setting (Fascicle 14) for an almost identical poem ("The feet" [J7, Fr16]) is most of all different in the attitude it reflects toward "Power." Power desired, thwarted, robbed, and won is an overt concern in four of the sixteen existing poems and seems a hypogrammatic shadow in virtually every one of its poems. By this time Dickinson, who lied to Higginson ("I made no verse—but one or two—until this winter—Sir—" [L261]), had become a poet aware of "authority and potency," as Gary Stonum points out (1990, 128). By this time Dickinson had, in fact, self-published at least fourteen books (these fascicles), selecting from at least three hundred poems to do so.

How much—if at all—were the poems in this fascicle and the letters to Higginson an appeal for the kind of attention that might lead to publication? Martha Nell Smith argues persuasively—and many scholars agree with her on this—that Dickinson eschewed the marketplace and that the fascicles are