

Reading the Fascicles of
Emily Dickinson
Dwelling in Possibilities

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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

evidence of a strategy to subvert and triumph over the tyranny of "print." This fascicle suggests that Dickinson was rather inconsistent on the subject. The poems of Fascicle 14 might be as one stage in an ongoing dialogue the poet conducted with herself. On the one hand, she claimed in that letter to Higginson to be a neophyte; on the other hand, she indicated that she was already considered at least a member of the local literati:

Two Editors of Journals came to my Father's House, this winter—and asked me for my Mind—and when I asked them 'Why,' they said I was penurious—and they, would use it for the World—

I could not weigh myself—Myself—. (L261)

This is her second (known) letter to Higginson, written after he apparently responded with faint praise to the poems she enclosed in that first famously timorous letter ("Are you too deeply occupied . . ." [L260]). She responds to his apparently tepid assessment ("Thank you for the surgery") and answers in playful hyperbole his apparent questions (about her companions, her reading, specifically, Whitman) and ends with praising his work and appealing to his judgment again. This was ten days after her first letter to him. Two months after that first flurry of correspondence she answered both his praise ("Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before—") and his criticism ("You think my gait 'spasmodic' . . . You think me 'uncontrolled'") and makes her most famous statement about publishing:

I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her—if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase—and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me—then—My Barefoot-Rank is better—. (L 265)

Coupled with the evidence of her overture to Higginson and her continuing correspondence with him, Fascicle 14 suggests frustrated ambition.

Listen to the echo (or anticipation?) of the letter to Higginson in Fascicle 14's first poem (J319, Fr304): There's a chase, a barefoot boy, and something (fame? publication? approbation?) that tantalizes and slips away:

The maddest dream—recedes—
unrealized—

The Heaven we Chase—
Like the June Bee—before
the Schoolboy—
Invites the Race—

Stoops to an Easy Clover—

Dips—Evades—

Teazes—Deploys

and so forth.

The Bee that promises but does not provide “steadfast Honey” is far from the one invoked as blessing in the first fascicle’s first poem. Just so, the second poem, “What if I say I shall / not wait!” (J277, Fr305), reflects impatience, if not frustration. In an *Explicator* article I more fully explore the almost suicidal desperation of this Hamlet-echo. There is none of that in Fascicle 1, just as there is no flower imagery (other than that crocus in the repeated poem and a jessamine/jasmine in another) in Fascicle 14, most of it straining against the conventional belief in “lips of Hallelujah / [which] Long years of practice bore.”

However, into this fascicle (Fascicle 14), so radically different in tone, Dickinson appears to have placed in a similarly central position “The feet of people.” Admittedly, knowing with certainty its position is complicated by the two problems confronting Franklin in its restoration: The first is that the fascicle’s final poems may be missing; the second, that rather than being written—as almost all of the other poems were—on previously folded sheets, sharing the space there with other poems, “The feet of people” seems to have been inserted after it was sent to someone or to have been removed and then replaced (see Franklin’s explanation in the *Manuscript Books* (1981) and in *PBSA* (1979, 353–54). Dickinson’s use of the poem again shows that she could think of it in a new way, privileging it for different reasons each time. This is what other readers do, of course. Thus we read, on the one hand, David Porter’s take on “The feet of people walking home” (aligned more or less with those of Pebworth and Summers and Jane Eberwein) as “a simple affirmation of a private faith in immortality” (1961, 145), and, on the other, Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s as “bitter irony” (1986, 148). Reading the poem in its two settings, as neither Porter nor Wolff did, reifies even polar readings such as the one by Porter, fitting well the way the poem works in Fascicle 1, the one by Wolff, appropriate to the context in Fascicle 14.

Although we may not know for sure *why* or even *whether* Dickinson placed this once-used (folded in two places) single sheet between the more customary folded and piled stationery pages, we can *see* evidence of clever self-publication. As in the poems “They shut me up in Prose” and “This was a poet,” there are poems answering others in Fascicle 14. “What if I say I shall / not wait” (J277, Fr305), for example, faces “Ah Moon—and Star / You are very far” (J240, Fr262), a poem that ends by declaring sadly, “I cannot go!” On the next two pages are two poems that appear to be about women (those who are too limited by feminine contingencies, perhaps, to leap the moon), about friendships,

and again, about disappointment: "A Shady friend—for Torrid days—" (J278, Fr306), on the left, and, facing the "Shady friend" and syntactically reflecting it, "A solemn thing—it was / I said— / A Woman—white—to be—" (J271, Fr307).

"Solemn": Of the twenty-four times Dickinson uses the word (in nearly eighteen hundred poems), four of them are in this fascicle. Fascicle 1 was *not* "solemn": The bees did not cruelly tease, nor did dreams. The moon was almost reachable. The speakers of the first fascicle's poems pose as coy, flirtatious, and playful, even as they speak seriously of gains earned from loss. In Fascicle 14, however, the speakers strive—often for death itself—in a landscape of pain. War rumbles in the background. A teasing God/universe is up to conjuring trickiness. That is a solemn thing in itself, but the first overt use of the word in this fascicle is the declaration in the fifth poem in the sequence that it is a "solemn" thing to be a "Woman—white," to be what the "Sages call . . . small": in other words, perhaps, to be the poet constructing the work, the poet who answers those sages by swelling at her sense of the power of the so-called "small." Although in the early, faulty, 1896 edition Higginson and Todd, who amputated the strong last two stanzas of the poem, titled the remaining stanzas "Wedded," white was not necessarily bridal in the nineteenth century, but it *was* the costume of the woman poet ("The Wayward Nun" in Juhasz [1983a, 32]), in this case one who dared to take on the majority opinion that would label her "small."

In the same fascicle all of the panoply of war—Parades . . . Pomp . . . A pleading Pageantry . . . Flags . . . Music . . . [and] Drums too near—is "Inconceivably solemn!" (J582, Fr414), the tenth in the series. There is "solemn News," too, in the eleventh poem, "More Life—went out—when / He went" (J422, Fr415), the story of the death of someone uncommonly fine. Between the two poems that begin with the overt use of "solemn" are four that in import are just that. Below the end of the fascicle's fifth poem's assertion that the poet is strong enough to "sneer" at those who do not see the force in the "small," the fascicle's editor writes "I breathed enough to take / the trick" (J272, Fr308). How can one live when one is nearly smothered? One "simulate's" a life. Something has been so nearly lethal to the speaker of this poem (faint praise, perhaps, or—not forgetting the larger world—war drums in the distance) that the only strategy is to "descend / Among the Cunning Cells / and touch the Pantomime / Himself / [and feel] How numb ("cool" is the variant) the Bellows feels!"

The implied gasping violence of this common metered poem continues in the poem that faces it: In one the poet "sneers" back at those who diminish the force of her "small"ness. Then, in the next she "simulates" a life "among the cunning Cells": "Kill your Balm—and it's / Odors bless you—" (J238, Fr309, the sixth poem). The aggressive thrust of the phrases that follow:

"Bare your Jessamine to the storm . . . Stab the bird" taunts the reader or God or the system of the universe. Keller is **right in speaking** of "the wolf in all of Dickinson's sweetness": "The poet is assertive. Poetry is daring. Audacity is an aesthetic. . . . There are rewards to the risk" (1979, 292). Keller's words are more descriptive, however, of the poet or her speaker(s) in Fascicle 14 than the one we met in Fascicle 1.

It is by now a truism that the flower (balm and Jessamine—Dickinson grew jasmine in her hothouse) and the bird are metaphors for the poet. The "maddest perfume" that lingers both echoes the fascicle's first poem and, because it is so much like that first one, leads to the next poem, the fascicle's eighth, in which " 'Heaven'—is what I cannot / reach!" (J239, Fr310). Heaven hides "Behind the Hill." Although the speaker says that "Paradise—is found" there, she follows it with the discouraging news that "Her teasing Purples" are "decoys" for the "credulous." Certainly the notion of a conniving, frustrating, tricksterish universe or deity is not orthodox Protestantism. Following poems that suggest such heterodoxy, "The feet of people walking home" (J7, Fr16), lined—*but, significantly, not punctuated*—exactly as it was in Fascicle 1, seems puzzling. Although its imagery was indeed a focus for much of the first fascicle, "The feet of people" also contains images that echo poems in this fourteenth book so opposite in tone. First, because of the apparent bitterness of the surrounding poems, one guesses that here the feet of people walking home may be battle-weary feet; they may be those dead honored by the "Inconceivably Solemn" parade of the poem that follows, or they may be the Hamlet-like figure of the second poem meditating on "fil[ing] this mortal— / off." And the needed patience—the "Long years of practice"—will be the point of "There are two Ripenings" (J332, Fr420), the fascicle's sixteenth poem. There's more: The pearl imagery, for example, anticipates the fascicle's thirteenth poem, "Removed from Accident of Loss" (J424, Fr417), in which "the Brown Malay" is "unconscious" that of "Pearls in Easter Waters / Marked His." The line, one that seems almost spit out by the frustrated speaker, "Larceny [is] legacy," stings as do those poems that prepare the way for it; if we inherit a kingdom, this fascicle implies, we do so in a system that is not wholly honest, open, or fair.

Contextual pressures also shape a new take on the poem's final stanza. In Fascicle 1 the village, the angels, the abbey, and the triumphant last line, "Such resurrection pours," were linked with other poems. Here the serial images of blankness, distance, and darkness suggest reasons for Dickinson's situating the poem in this new setting. The figures that "fail to tell me" and the classics that "vail their faces," not to mention the punning verb in "How far the village lies," convey the skepticism of the very last image of the extant fascicle: the soundless, expressionless stoic vision of "Death— / who only shows his Granite face / Sublimier thing [way] than speech" (J310, Fr422). Just so, the repeated poem's key line, "My faith that Dark adores," sets up the

startling opening of one of this fascicle's oddest poems: "A Toad, can die of Light" (J583, Fr419), the fifteenth in the series. That strange ode to death as "the Common Right / Of toads and Men" fits this fascicle as it would not fit, say, Fascicle 1 or Fascicle 40.

It is as dangerous to ascribe biographical motives to one of the fascicles as to any of the poems; nevertheless, the despair of so many of these poems and the focus on death, certainly more than in Fascicle 1, might reflect several kinds of pain associated with the date Franklin assigns to this fascicle (about 1862). Not only is this the year she began her tentative association with Higginson, whose responses must not have elated the hopeful poet, but it is also the year she wrote the sad letters to her cousins and to Samuel Bowles recounting the death of "brave Frazer—'killed at Newbern' . . . by a 'minnie ball.'" (L255, L256).

Fascicle 14, chosen for this study because its centered poem provides a test case for the way context affects interpretation, it having been centered also in Fascicle 1, ends mysteriously. Franklin explains that it may be missing a leaf, one part of the folded paper having been ripped away. I am tempted to think, however, that the poem that is the last surviving one in the fascicle, is Dickinson's own way of ending this meditation on disappointment and death. She had followed her toad poem with "There are two Ripenings—" (J332, Fr420), a fairly long poem in which the speaker seems to be exhorting herself to patience, and, facing that, a poem that seems to reflect sheer weariness, "It ceased to hurt me, though / so slow" (J584, Fr421). The ambiguous "it" and the equally ambiguous "something" that "had obscured the track" (one thinks of those "feet of people walking home") to something like resurrection have taken their toll. "The Grief—that nestled close / As needles—ladies softly press / To Cushions Cheeks— / To keep their place—" has almost been assuaged. And "almost" is the operative word. The speaker cannot explain the learned consolation, the movement from the frantic tone of the fascicle's first poem, only its effect:

Nor what consoled it, I could
Trace—
Except whereas 'twas Wilderness—
It's better—almost Peace—

Below these four lines is a Hamlet-like ending ("the rest is silence"):

Give little anguish
Lives will fret—
Give Avalanches,
And they'll slant.

Straighten—look cautious for
 Their breath—
 But make no syllable, like
 Death—
 Who only shows his Granite face
 Sublimier thing [way]—than Speech—. (J310, Fr422)

Without noting the fascicle context for this poem (her book appeared the same year the *Manuscript Books* were published), Joanne Feit Diehl speaks of Dickinson's "stoicism of silence, the relinquishment of her art" that follows "overwhelming experience": Diehl also speaks of the "awe" in this the fascicle's last poem, saying that "the result and reaction to Dickinson's private loss becomes a precondition for her fragmentary form of art" (1981, 24). Reading Dickinson in her fascicles expands that assessment. Emily Dickinson could not know in 1862 "if fame belonged to [her]," as she told Higginson. That was not in her power to arrange or to know, but what was in her power was to shape her growing body of work, the speech hurled in the "Granite face" of death that was all around her. For some two years, perhaps with some form of publication in mind, she had chosen these books as one way to shape that speech. Whether consciously or serendipitously, she provided each little book with its own design. Each design, in turn, shapes the effect of its components so that, for example, "The feet of people walking home" has a darker, sharper effect in this wartime fascicle than it had four years earlier in the flowery first.

That difference is signified by the difference in punctuation, something that is observable only in the manuscripts. The two versions of "The feet" appear to be almost identical; they even break at the same line, spilling on to the next in both cases with "Whose peasants are the angels." In fact, when one holds the two side by side, the second seems almost a carbon copy of the first. The one change, however, shows the power of what Paul Crumbley—who believes the fascicles to be "finished works" (1996, 11)—calls "inflections of the pen." Crumbley takes the title of his intriguing study of the Dickinson dash from Dickinson's L470: "[A] Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one." Although Crumbley does not discuss specifically either the use of the end mark (the period) or this particular poem, the example of the different versions of the same poem in Fascicles 1 and 14 reifies Crumbley's call for "readers to take seriously the uniquely Dickinsonian grammar, orthography, and punctuation" (*ibid.*, 28). I would add to Crumbley's advice that readers need to take seriously as well the different uses to which she puts those details in two versions of the same passage. When it appears midway in Fascicle 1, "The Feet of People" is punctuated at the end with an exclamation

point; in Fascicle 14, the exuberance implied by such a mark is not just muted; it seems stamped out by the round, large, final period. By such small marks she "hid herself" in Fascicles 3 and 40, both of which focus on—and reveal—the "Granite face" of Death.

"I Hide Myself" in Fascicles 3 and 40

When Dickinson selected "The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality" (J827, Fr820) as the opening of what appears to be her last fascicle, she alluded to both the timeliness and the timelessness of her poems and announced the general concern of both fascicles in which she "hid herself." The news that was not news was that of death. That Dickinson constantly tweaked the meaning and margin of death, of course, is no news, but in Fascicles 3 and 40 she explores the subject in such radically different settings that they form an appropriate conclusion to this study of the way context shapes meaning.

Readers of this book know well the numbers of young and old family members and friends whom Dickinson had lost by 1858, when she compiled Fascicle 3. By 1864, when she compiled Fascicle 40, she also had, of course, as a constant reader of her father's journals and a member of Amherst's first family, become familiar with national carnage. Yet Fascicle 3's vignettes of the grieving watcher at bed-sides reveals a Dickinson closer to that described by Cynthia Griffin Wolff: "[P]erhaps this God of absolute cold has concocted a cosmos that functions primarily as an experiment in human anguish" (1986, 321); Fascicle 40, on the other hand, in which Dickinson placed a poem almost identical to one in Fascicle 3, places her closer to the mystical Dickinson of Inder Nath Kher: "In the midsummer of mind," he says, "death is like 'The Summer closed upon itself / in Consummated Bloom'" (1974, 209).

Two years before Dorothy Oberhaus published her extensive study of Fascicle 40, I had engaged in a similar study. Frankly, I was amazed at the orthodox devotion reflected in this fascicle, so that I was not surprised at part of the Oberhaus theory. Although it may be a stretch to see all of the forty fascicles as forming "a single oeuvre," in which Fascicle 40 is the climax of a "conversion narrative" (1995, 87), as Oberhaus does, her conclusions that this fascicle is "a meditation" (*ibid.*, 9) is inescapable. So thoroughly and elaborately has Oberhaus analyzed the fascicle we believe to be the final one (the proviso inherent in this sentence might be one challenge to complete acceptance of Oberhaus's theory) that this discussion focuses primarily on the different voice I hear in Fascicle 3, which contains a duplicate poem.

Both fascicles 3 and 40, separated by six years, almost hide the repeated poem in an identical position on the bottom of a sheet on the west side of the