

## Emily Dickinson's Funeral and the Paradox of Literary Fame

Emily Dickinson's careful orchestration of her own April 19, 1886, funeral transformed that event into a concluding artistic gesture, a final elegiac poem, that has much to tell us about her understanding of literary fame. Her previous statements regarding fame tell us that language powerful enough to achieve immortality did so by entering a life independent of the author, and that she—like many other nineteenth-century writers—preferred to risk obscurity rather than tether her writing to her name and the attendant historical specificity of her biography. In the context of this attitude toward fame, one that so clearly reinforces her well-known aversion to public displays of any sort, Dickinson's decision to include Emily Brontë's poem "No coward soul is mine" as the centerpiece of a decidedly unconventional funeral seems at first glance to be a surprising reversal of position. By attaching Brontë's name to her own, and in effect saying to the world that Brontë's words have found new life in her,<sup>1</sup> Dickinson appears to have used her own last poem—her funeral—to expand Brontë's fame, while also drawing attention to the artistic conversation they shared.<sup>2</sup> Despite this apparent contradiction, however, Dickinson's posthumous appropriation of Brontë's poem ultimately proves consistent with an approach to literary fame Dickinson expressed in certain key letters and poems, most particularly the poem "To earn it by disdain[ing] it" (Fr1445) in which the speaker initially proclaims that "Fame's consummate fee" is the poet's decision not to pursue it. This poem, and others like it, collectively argue that the kind of literary celebrity worthy of aspiration illuminates, ironically, the lives of those who court immortality by escaping the allure of momentary fashion and instead dedicate their creative lives to timeless art outside the public eye. The Brontë poem's reference to "The steadfast rock of humanity" (l.16) is particularly intriguing in this regard because its metaphoric association of rock with timeless fame would have resonated with developments in

geological science and linguistic theory familiar to Dickinson that also link fame to processes that escape notice in the present. As an examination of her funeral reveals, Dickinson used this final, posthumous artistic gesture to respect the “consummate fee” exacted by fame while simultaneously announcing her bid for immortality and explaining how the life she led prepared her for it.<sup>3</sup>

Dickinson’s poems exploring fame and the experience of literary immortality leave little doubt that she thought deeply about how important the proper management of the artist’s life was to the creation of enduring art. The poem “To earn it by disdaining it” is of particular importance because it represents one of the clearest and most central of all the poetic directives Dickinson delivers to aspiring artists, including herself. When that speaker admonishes the aspirant to fame by stating that “Fame’s consummate fee” is the disdain of fame, and declares in the next breath that “He loves what spurns him –” (ll. 2-3), Dickinson gives voice to a primary tension that ripples throughout her entire corpus wherever the question of enduring literary or artistic influence surfaces. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the Dickinson pantheon of inspirational artists should include the category of “Martyr Poets” (Fr665) who “did not tell” but rather “wrought their Pang in syllable – / That when their mortal name be numb – / Their mortal fate – encourage Some –” (ll. 1-4). As Leo Braudy has noted in *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, these Dickinson poems contribute directly to a “paradox” that “winds its way through the [nineteenth] century” (464) and may be observed in the work of writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (468) “for whom the badge of true success was public neglect, because each served ideals higher than the satisfaction of the multitude” (463). Writing specifically about Dickinson’s poem “The Martyr Poets,” Braudy draws attention to “the silence of the artist that assures the reverberation of the work” (469). Dickinson’s speaker in “Fame is

the one that does not stay –” (Fr1507) also associates fame with silence by noting, “It’s [sic] occupant must die / Or out of sight of estimate / Ascend incessantly –” (ll.1-4). The speaker in yet another poem abruptly declares, “I’m Nobody!” and immediately asks, “Who are You?” (Fr260), similarly advocating nameless obscurity as a means of reaching an audience that truly matters. The poem “Fame of Myself, to justify” (Fr481) insists that such an audience must begin with the poet herself: “Fame of Myself to lack – Although / My Name be else supreme –,” this artist/speaker seemingly reminds herself, “were an Honor honorless – / A futile Diadem” (ll. 5-8). True poets disdain approbation rooted in the transient fashion of the present and withhold their names for future readers.

To a large extent, Dickinson’s approach to fame accurately reflects the widely accepted understanding of fame that Braudy attributes to nineteenth-century American letters in general. According to Braudy, American writers such as Dickinson tended to be “more interested in the spirit beyond history” than in immediate acclaim; were dedicated to the belief that “true enterprise [is] posthumous, whether one is successful in his own time or not”; and shared the conviction that “No earthly hierarchy, beholdng to time, can compensate for the rewards of the spirit” (468). These noble values are often inversely expressed by prominent authors who either falter themselves and fall victim to the lure of fashion, express fear of yielding, or castigate those whose fame they interpret as the betrayal of their own artistic ideals. Edgar Allan Poe famously satirized the corrupt but popular man of letters in his sketch “The Literati of New York City” when he declares that “in a republic such as ours, the *mere* man of letters must ever be a cipher” whose highest ambition is to become “the man of fashion or society” (196). David Haven Blake cites as representative the example of one popular speaker who reduced the word “fame” to an acronym for “\$50 and my expenses” (36). Braudy points out that even at the “height of his

fame” Emerson “still published some poetry and essays anonymously, as if to keep alive in himself the sense of a literary nature unspoiled by the public gaze” (464). Nathaniel Hawthorne is well known for designing the character Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance* as an example of how celebrity might enslave the unwary or vulnerable (Blake 40). Whitman, who openly sought the embrace of the crowd, also agonized over the seductive power of public adulation. The poet/speaker of “Bardic Symbols” admits to having betrayed his true self: “Aware now,” he confesses, “that, amid the blab whose echoes recoil upon me, / I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,” he at last bends under the weight of his own regret and “fall[s] helpless upon the sand” (*Atlantic Monthly* 1860). Blake concludes that with these words Whitman’s speaker belatedly “comes to know the emptiness and superficiality of hype” (162). What may most distinguish Dickinson’s writing on fame and set her apart from these writers is her close focus on the proper conduct of the artist who devotes her life to immortality and thereby exalts fame while steadfastly resisting the allure posed by popular approval.

How, then, does Dickinson incorporate this pattern of conduct in the planning of her funeral, and how does her inclusion of Brontë’s poem fit into a theory of literary fame consistent with her writing on the subject? Answering this question begins with the willingness to read Dickinson’s funeral as a self-elegy that celebrates the poet’s achievement after she has passed out of this life and is no longer vulnerable to the limiting influence of momentary trends. Barton Levi St. Armand provides initial impetus for such a reading when he states that the funeral does indeed function as “Dickinson’s last poem,” one so carefully structured that “[e]very detail of the ritual had as many allegorical resonances as did the emblems in a Rosetti painting” (74). Mable Loomis Todd, who attended the funeral, lends credence to St. Armand’s observation when she writes that the ““The funeral—if so ghastly a name could apply to anything so poetical . . . was

the most beautiful thing I ever saw” (qtd. in Leyda, *Days and Hours* 474). The details St. Armand alludes to would certainly include Dickinson’s request that six Irish Catholic laborers employed by the Dickinson family serve as pallbearers who would carry her coffin from the back door of the Homestead through the open barn and from there to the cemetery by pathways rather than processing from the front door to the grave by means of city streets. Aife Murray has interpreted Dickinson’s specifications as creating a “choreographed” “death rite” (182) that broke with family tradition and shared important features with traditional Irish wakes, whereby the “most unused track to the burial ground . . . was meant to deceive the spirit of the dead” (199). Jay Leyda describes the funeral as a “pageant of alliances” (“Miss Emily’s Maggie” 266) that St. Armand later analyzes as including a deviation from Protestant tradition that “simultaneously defied public opinion and renounced the patriarchal house in which [Dickinson] had immured herself for over twenty years. . .” (76). More useful, even, for understanding the role Dickinson assigned Brontë is St. Armand’s observation that the funeral incorporated a “mixture of paganism and Christianity” as it climaxed with Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s reading of the Brontë poem.<sup>4</sup> St. Armand describes the poem’s role this way: “Beginning with the declaration ‘No coward soul is mine,’ this romantic manifesto brashly addresses the ‘God within my breast’ and pantheistically concludes” with the following lines (76):

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void;  
Thou - THOU art Being and Breath,  
And what THOU art may never be destroyed. (ll. 25-28)

Thinking of the poem as a defiant utterance situated within an unconventional funeral that is in its own way defiant provides a logic for viewing Dickinson’s inclusion of Emily Brontë as an act

of poetic collaboration by means of which Dickinson enlists her sister poet in a joint declaration of the power of art to challenge the authority of death.

Unlike the standard funeral elegy, then, that offers consolation in the form of predictable language acknowledging the absence of the departed, Dickinson's elegy seeks to thwart death. Cate L. Mahoney presents this resistance to elegiac closure as a central feature of Dickinson's later poetic elegies, within which "[t]he elegy becomes . . . a device of departure that helps the elegist enact a search that does not end at all" (69). Alexandra Socarides similarly stipulates that Dickinson rejects "the narrative of consolation that elegy makes possible" (316). Writing specifically of "All overgrown by cunning moss" (Fr146), an elegiac poem intriguingly dedicated to Emily Brontë's sister Charlotte, Socarides concludes that "the sense of consolation that most elegies aim to conjure depends heavily on conventions of closure" that Dickinson refuses. The idea that an elegy could provoke increased awareness of the deceased and even trigger a search for the absent yet present departed makes astonishing sense in the instance of Dickinson's funeral, particularly in light of her request that Higginson read Emily Brontë's poem as part of her funeral service (Moon 231).

Virtually all the historical accounts agree that Higginson read the poem as part of the funeral service held at the Homestead where, according to Richard Sewall, Higginson began by explaining that this specific poem was appropriate because, in Higginson's words, "'our friend who has just now put on Immortality, and who seemed scarce ever to have taken it off, used to read it to her sister'" (274). While it is valuable to note that this poem was known to be among Dickinson's favorites, what is most striking in terms of the poem's commentary on literary fame is Higginson's riddling language of putting on and taking off immortality that to modern ears presents Dickinson as a famous poet who has just assumed immortality permanently through

death, even though she had donned this very immortality previously as a discontinuous artistic practice throughout the course of her mortal life. Embedded in Higginson's wordplay lies a chief conundrum of the Brontë poem and one of the keys to its role in Dickinson's self-elegy.

Higginson appears to understand that immortality was important to Dickinson, and that Brontë's poem is an affirmation of immortality, but what he may not have understood is the extent to which the poem speaks directly to the poet's continuous struggle to retain faith in the timeless power of her art. We of course see Dickinson as having triumphed over the doubts that attended her daily efforts, but neither she nor Higginson could have known this outcome at the time of the funeral. What might have therefore appealed most to Dickinson was the extraordinarily confident and even aggressive tone that Brontë immediately establishes in her first line where her speaker denies that her soul is in any sense cowardly.

No coward soul is mine,  
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:  
I see Heaven's glories shine,  
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God within my breast,  
Almighty, ever-present Deity!  
Life – that in me has rest,  
As I – undying Life – have power in thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds  
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;

Worthless as withered weeds,  
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one  
Holding so fast by thine infinity;  
So surely anchored on  
The steadfast rock of immortality.

With wide-embracing love  
Thy spirit animates eternal years,  
Pervades and broods above,  
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.

Though earth and man were gone,  
And suns and universes ceased to be,  
And Thou were left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou – THOU art Being and Breath,  
And what THOU art may never be destroyed.

Brontë's bold opening declaration achieves its power precisely because it acknowledges the possibility of cowardice that places the question of cowardice forever in the foreground of the poem, as if to say that courage is only real when called for, tested, and proven. The tone, then, is insistently defiant in a manner that would resonate forcefully in the ears of another poet, so much so that the reader senses the speaker staring down death, almost desiring death to announce itself so she can overcome it and in doing so, affirm faith in the immortality of her art.

Thus in the very next line of the poem the speaker states that she is "No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere" and concludes the opening stanza as if she were a champion about to enter the lists: "And Faith shines equal arming me from fear." This is indeed romantic but also highly unorthodox, and, as St. Armand has indicated, pantheistic. The full extent of Brontë's disregard of Christian orthodoxy is made explicit at the midway point in the poem where her speaker boldly asserts, "Vain are the thousand creeds . . . / To waken doubt in one . . . So surely anchored on / The steadfast rock of immortality" (ll. 9, 13, 15-16).<sup>5</sup> Here Brontë exposes the false comfort of creeds that presume to shield the soul from sources of doubt, choosing instead to situate immortality in "steadfast rock." Her speaker calls forth the very doubts such creeds would conceal, for only by facing them can she revel in the naked joy of bringing them to heel. "There is not room for Death," she almost tauntingly exults in the final stanza, "Nor atom that his might could render void" (ll. 25-26). This speaker now denies death to even the elemental atom, and she appears to delight in doing so. Such ferocity would have appealed to Dickinson, the poet who wrote, "Afraid! Of whom am I afraid? / Not Death – for who is He?" (Fr345).

Striking as Brontë's boldness is in the opening, middle, and concluding portions of her poem, she most explicitly flirts with the limits of artistic presumption in the second stanza, where

her speaker affirms the crucial interdependence that binds her finite, mortal existence to the infinite life that flows through her. This is where the speaker states that the “Almighty, ever-present Deity! / Life . . . in me hast rest” (ll. 6-7) just “As,” or in exchange for which, she receives “power” in “undying Life” (l. 8).<sup>6</sup> Brontë’s deity in effect dons mortal form by finding “rest” in the poet, opening her eyes to the wonders of creation described in stanzas five and six where Brontë gives special attention to the endless mutability of the spirit that “animates eternal years” and “Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears // Though earth and man were gone / And suns and universes ceased to be” (ll. 18, 20-22). This last observation—that undying life “animates eternal years”—implies that the artist or poet who expresses the infinite in the present must by definition defy artistic convention through acts that announce life’s ceaseless mutations.<sup>7</sup> Defiance, in other words, is a daily necessity.

Generally read as Brontë’s assertion of the soul’s triumph over mortality, the poem affirms a personal power that Brontë scholar Janet Gezari links directly to artistic creation, stating that in the poem Brontë “manages to hold eternity firmly in view and to persuade herself that her own creative power is indomitable” (130).<sup>8</sup> This is the view I think most congenial to Dickinson, who first encountered the poem in the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey* that also contained the first edition of Emily Brontë’s poems to be published after her death in 1848. The association of the poem with the very end of Emily Brontë’s life is further enhanced by its position in the volume—it is the last entry—where it is preceded by an introductory sentence written by the poet’s sister Charlotte, stating that “The following are the last lines my sister Emily ever wrote” (295). I join other scholars in imagining that Dickinson read Brontë’s poem as the earlier poet’s final pronouncement on the matter of literary fame. As Michael Moon has noted, Brontë’s poem communicates a current of stoic resolution in the face of death that

both Brontë and Dickinson associate with the posthumous publication of their poems. “No coward soul is mine,” he writes, “may mark the first moment in Brontë’s career when she felt the harsh new conditions of susceptibility to such publication,” a susceptibility the poem “may have similarly marked for [Dickinson’s] survivors” when it was read as part of her funeral (241). I would go even further than Moon in urging the view that Dickinson’s choice of this poem represents the culmination of her developing ideas about the risks of posthumous publication.<sup>9</sup>

Support for this claim comes from Dickinson’s third letter to Higginson and in poems such as “To earn it by disdaining it” (Fr1445) that present lasting fame as literary power that informs the language of the present but is not confined by transient artistic tastes or historical specificity. In her June 1862 letter to Higginson, Dickinson famously responds to his suggestion that she “delay ‘to publish’” by declaring, “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her” (L408). When these words are combined with all four lines of the first stanza of “To earn it by disdaining it,” one discovers a blueprint of sorts for the achievement of fame.

To earn it by disdaining it  
Is Fame’s consummate Fee –  
He loves what spurns him –  
Look behind – He is pursuing thee –

Dickinson here reiterates the need to spurn fame as she did in her letter to Higginson while additionally pointing to the importance of the backward glance, the “Look behind” that detects and confirms the advance of fame. It is worth noting that fame is presented as moving forward in history as a force that advances through time by means of artists, such as the speaker, who serve as its vehicles; fame itself is nameless. The backward glance is particularly significant as it registers the need for verification predicated on risk and uncertainty at the same time that it

magnifies the need to search history for evidence that fame is in pursuit. This is in effect what Dickinson asks us to do when she bonds her work to Brontë's through her funeral service: she wants us to search her work for evidence of fame; in particular, evidence that she expands the fame attributed to Brontë. What this means is that Dickinson includes the poem of her predecessor first to establish the daily courage required of the poet who seeks immortality, and then to direct attention to her own literary record, where the search for evidence will demonstrate the achievement of immortality that she shares with Brontë. This latter objective is perhaps the most daring of all the defiant gestures Dickinson builds into her funeral.

Covert references to the kinship that she felt with Brontë on questions of publication and fame are frequent in Dickinson's work, one example of which would be the poem "How happy is the little Stone" and the letters accompanying its dissemination. This poem's particular history takes a revealing turn shortly after April 24, 1882, the day Thomas Niles, the editor at Roberts Brothers who oversaw Dickinson's anonymous 1878 publication of the poem "Success is counted sweetest" in *A Masque of Poets*, wrote to Dickinson requesting that she send him "a volume of [her] poems."<sup>10</sup> Dickinson instead sent the single poem "How happy is the little Stone" (Fr1570E), the poem she refers to in the text of her letter as a "Pebble" (L726). Her use of lapidary terminology in this instance significantly echoes Brontë's rock reference at the heart of "No coward soul is mine," in which she grounds her faith in the "steadfast rock of immortality." Dickinson sent other versions of her "Pebble" poem to Susan Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Higginson, all correspondents with whom she discussed poetry and the possibility of print publication (FrFranklin 1372-75). [I steted your original reference to Franklin and inserted a space]1372-75). Jackson, for one, urged Dickinson to seek print publication, and Niles cites Jackson as the basis for his own wish to assist with publication. Jackson, Niles writes to

Dickinson, “once told me that she wished you could be induced to publish a volume of your poems” (L726). He then concludes his letter by stating, “I wish also that you could.”

Given this context, it seems reasonable to read “How happy is the little Stone” as a commentary on Dickinson’s spurning of publication, especially given the powerful conceptual links between this “pebble” and Brontë’s “rock of immortality.” Brontë’s reference appears in the pivotal fourth stanza of her seven-stanza poem where it anchors the speaker’s dismissal of doubt: “Vain are the thousand creeds / That move men’s hearts . . . // To waken doubt in one . . . so surely anchored on / The steadfast rock of immortality” (ll. 9-10, 13, 15-16). The primary link uniting the two poems is the function of rock as a symbol for immortality that in Brontë’s case continues to exist even when “suns and universes ceased to be” (l. 22), whereas Dickinson’s stone “doesn’t care about Careers” and “never fears” the “Exigencies” of life (ll. 3-4). The most obvious connection to Brontë may, however, be Dickinson’s speaker’s declaration that “a passing universe put on” (l. 6) the stone’s “Coat of elemental Brown” (l. 5) after which the stone fulfills “absolute Degree / In casual simplicity” (ll. 9-10). If Dickinson’s simple Pebble is indeed the diminutive of Brontë’s more majestic rock, the clearest evidence of that connection is Dickinson’s adoption of her precursor’s primary symbol for her own courageous defiance of mortality. To be precise, both poets present art as an illumination of the infinite that escapes adherence to time-bound artistic conventions through fusion with the timeless universe. Dickinson’s metaphoric reference to a coat donned by a “passing Universe” might in this instance underscore the accuracy of Higginson’s funeral observation that Dickinson put on immortality every day, even though he may not have fully appreciated how she accomplished this through her poetry. The relationship Dickinson’s speaker enters into with the passing universe also, and most significantly, reflects the artistic reciprocity central to the Brontë poem.

Odd as it may seem to readers today, Dickinson's appropriation of Brontë's rock as a metaphor for timeless language that permeates the universe would not have struck her contemporaries as particularly strange or unusual. Edward Hitchcock, who was president of Amherst College when he published *The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences* in 1851, used geological science and mathematics to argue that all our words, actions, and thoughts "make an indelible impression on the universe" (331) that is, "perhaps, most frequent and striking in the rocks" (351). Hitchcock goes on to state that once humanity evolves to "a condition far more exalted than the present" (354), they will discern a record that reveals all secret sins while also illuminating "a golden chain" that links "every created being in heaven and earth" (353). Benjamin Lease has usefully identified Hitchcock as a "towering presence in Amherst and an important influence on Emily Dickinson" (121), and he might easily have gone on to state that Hitchcock made the impression he did because his study complemented observations by prominent Transcendentalists, such as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the last editor of *The Dial* and the thinker Philip F. Gura identifies as "the premier purveyor of language theory, both in its theoretical and practical aspects" (154). In her 1849 volume, *Aesthetic Papers*, Peabody draws directly on the rock metaphor: "The human mind," she writes, "is in relation to nature as the stone-cutter or the artist to the quarry; and language is at once the representation and vehicle of all that has been quarried" (216).

An even stronger contemporary connection linking geology metaphorically to language, and poetry in particular, may be found in the theory of language propounded by Richard Chenevix Trench in his 1855 *On the Study of Words*, a work contained in the Dickinson family library. The student of language, like "the geologist," Trench writes, "is able from the different strata and deposits . . . to measure the forces that were at work to produce" the English language

(125). According to Trench, such geologic reading reveals that “God gave man language” (14) not as a developed vocabulary but instead as the ability to name, thereby making linguistic creation “at once divine and human” (15). It logically follows, then, that the responsibility for honoring the gift of language rests most heavily with the poet, the “maker” invested with the power of bringing into existence what Trench describes as “things which were not before and, which would not have existed but for him, or for some other gifted with equal powers” (6). The poet extends the vital life of language by clothing it in words appropriate to the never-before-experienced historical present.

As Melanie Hubbard has made clear in her analysis of Trench’s influence on Dickinson, a central tenet of his work that would have special appeal to a poet is his “explicit” belief “that our relationship with language is reciprocal” (251). Reciprocity in this instance grows out of the power of language “to propagate and diffuse” while also granting immortality to those words that enter the stream of language and endure beyond the present. Such language, Trench notes, rises like “an ark riding above the water-floods that have swept away or submerged every other landmark and memorial of bygone ages and vanished generations of men. Far beyond all written records in a language, the language itself stretches back, and offers itself for our investigation” (124). So also does language stretch forward beyond the present, offering future readers a golden chain of sorts that links all past and future ages.

Writing specifically of the need for language to express the “spiritual and infinite” in a manner appropriate to the demands of the historical present, Trench makes direct use of the language-as-clothing trope that surfaces in Dickinson’s reference to the pebble’s “Coat of elemental Brown”: “And thus it continually befel [sic], that the new thought must weave a new garment for itself, those which it found ready made being narrower than that it could wrap itself

in . . . the old being neither strong enough, nor expansive enough to hold it” (194). In terms of Dickinson’s approach to fame, what stands out most in this context is the function of language as the vehicle that transfers what Elizabeth Peabody has referred to as the “fruits” or artistic insights of previous generations. These fruits, Peabody contends, “are conserved, or rather live and move, in language.” Language, according to Peabody, is “a necessary product” that is “what it is, precisely because it could not be otherwise” (154). The poet, then, in her capacity as literary artist, contributes to the emergence of a universal language that unites the finite with the infinite. The fame Dickinson describes as “pursuing” the successful poet would in this case be the evidence of her contribution to such a universal language. To achieve this goal, however, is to forever pass from the present into the future where the poet, like Dickinson’s “little Stone,” finds happiness when it “rambles in the Road alone” (ll. 1, 2). Fame comes from providing the linguistic garment that best fits the moment, in exchange for which the poet’s language becomes immortal.

The bargain the artist strikes with the divine, whereby access to the infinite is granted through the denial of momentary renown, is a central concern of Dickinson’s poem “Of all the Souls that stand create –” (Fr279), a poem she probably composed twenty years before she wrote her defiant letter to Niles and twelve years after first reading “No coward soul is mine.” As was the case with the pebble poem, this one also makes sense as a poetic collaboration with Brontë as revealed through a shared ethos and vocabulary. The opening two lines emphasize this speaker’s similar concern with independent choice as essential to the proper management of the soul: “Of all the Souls that stand create – / I have Elected – One –.” The curious notion that a soul is selected from among an array of already created souls reads a bit like a riddle that the Brontë poem helps to solve once it is understood that the speaker has in mind the courageous souls of

artists that live on through their creations. That would explain Dickinson's intriguing use of the present tense "create" when the past tense "created" might be expected. For her speaker, the work of true artists continues to create because it gathers vital power from the infinite and is not exhausted by what her speaker describes as "this brief Drama in the flesh –" (l. 7). Instead, at the end of mortal life, "When that which is – and that which was – / Apart – intrinsic – stand –" (ll. 5-6), the work of art that expresses the poet's soul will be "shifted – like a Sand –" (l. 8) that in an hourglass marks time's passage but is not subject to its ravages.

In this instance, Dickinson's focus on "a Sand" shrinks Brontë's rock metaphor to the nearly microscopic while simultaneously concentrating attention on the selection of a single, solitary soul that the speaker points to in line two with the words "I have Elected – One." This image of individuation then shrinks even further, appearing in the penultimate line as "the Atom – I preferred –," echoing Brontë's atom reference at the end of "No coward soul is mine." The idea that the soul is elemental like the atom and that the atom figuratively expresses the artist's soul that endures beyond this life binds together all parts of the Dickinson poem. Interpreted in light of the Brontë poem, Dickinson's speaker may be understood as selecting her own version of Brontë's undaunted soul, her precursor now functioning as an artistic model whose inspiration strengthens her own poetic resolve and enables her to justify the "Subterfuge"<sup>11</sup> (l. 4) required to avoid the appeal of temporary fame and emerge triumphant when at last all the "Mists – are carved away" (l. 10). In a manner consistent with the advice offered in the poem "Fame is the one that does not stay –" (Fr1507), this speaker remains "out of sight of estimate" in order that she might "Ascend incessantly –" (l. 3-4). Staying out of sight is, as the Brontë poem makes clear and Dickinson here reiterates, neither a safe refuge nor an escape but rather a locus for high-risk ventures that advance in the face of doubt.

“Fame’s consummate fee” turns out to be the reduction of individuality required to submerge the most elemental self in what Michael C. Cohen describes as the distributed network of language—a network I am associating with Brontë’s “steadfast rock of immortality,” as well as the language theories of Hitchcock, Peabody, and Trench. Cohen puts it this way: “a networked Dickinson must be a less singular Dickinson, an author with diminished control over the production, propagation, distribution, and dispersal of her own language, even in cases when that language is neither printed nor published” (76). This surrender of agency is a matter of particular interest to Bruno Latour, who notes in *Reassembling the Social*, his influential book on network theory, that “Action is not done under full control of consciousness” and “should be felt as a node, a knot, a conglomerate of many surprising acts of agencies” (44).<sup>12</sup> When the actor is a poet seeking immortality, the proper aim is to maximize the circulation and duration of the network by accepting as inevitable the reduction of individuality exacted by fame as the price of reciprocity. This is precisely the process Mary Loeffelholz sees Dickinson describing in “Of all the Souls that stand create –” where, in Loeffelholz’s words, the “elective economy of the speaking subject is a network effect of the crowd gathered, as ‘Mists – are carved away’” (116). As a consequence, “the human subject is at once an irreducible, unique kernel of autonomy and a matheme or node in an infinite ordering network.” The poet contributes to Hitchcock’s golden chain, we might say, by accepting the inevitable refinement and transmutation of her artistic soul.

In his examination of authorial subjectivity in Dickinson’s later poems, Cohen pays particular attention to the poem “A little overflowing word” (Fr1501) in which the hyper-copious “overflowing word” represents the poet’s distinct contribution—the equivalent of what I have described as Dickinson’s and Brontë’s elemental soul—that enters into and becomes a stable

feature within networked language over which the poet has little control (76). “Though Generations pass away” and “Traditions ripen and decay,” the speaker states, this overflowing word “As eloquent appears –” (ll. 4-6). Cohen explains that this timeless eloquence derives from “communicative excess” (90), by means of which poems deviate from the original circuit of authorial intention to become “social entities” that circulate independently (76). “Networked language,” he argues, “is alienating language . . . severed from subjectivity . . . only to return as the animated incarnation of the communication system” (83). Another way of saying this is that the poet who aspires to immortality must risk the release of poems into the communication network where they enter new lives independent of the poet’s name and biography.

If I am correct in suggesting that Dickinson and Brontë employ the rock metaphor in a manner resembling what language theorists like Cohen today refer to as a decentralized linguistic network, then Dickinson’s insertion of Brontë’s “No coward soul is mine” in her funeral service represents her effort to re-attach Brontë’s name to overflowing words in her own body of work, while simultaneously declaring that she joins Brontë in her willingness to risk namelessness as the price exacted by literary immortality. The key point is that both poets recognize that they have limited control over poems that take on lives of their own and, paradoxically, state their willingness to risk namelessness in a bid for immortality. When Dickinson calls out Brontë’s name for the purpose of enhancing her precursor’s fame at the same time that she draws attention to her own literary achievement, she does so through a gesture that depends for its defiance on recognition of the doubt it refuses.

That I have just taken the time to identify examples of Brontë’s influence on Dickinson’s work may be viewed as evidence that Dickinson succeeded in drawing attention to the linguistic network both poets helped generate. The fact that I have had access to published editions and

manuscript archives of Dickinson's writing that have enabled my search for Brontë's influence indicates that Dickinson also succeeded in attaching her name to the body of work now closely associated with her biography. This accomplishment may be construed as inhibiting an otherwise less constrained, un-named circulation of her work through a decentralized communication system and in a sense detaching it from the less differentiated and more enduring network that is Brontë's "steadfast rock of immortality." Dickinson's successful assertion of her own name does indeed cast the light of celebrity on specific behavior, such as her correspondence with Niles that I examined earlier, or any one of a number of dramatic enactments that might include her conduct with Higginson when he first visited her in 1870, the role she cast for herself in Amherst as the elusive recluse Mabel Loomis Todd described as "the Myth," and her posthumous orchestration of her funeral. The question I now ask myself is whether or not her success at naming her work retroactively re-defines the enigmatic gestures of her private life as the staged performances of a celebrity. All I can say at the moment is that it seems like it does.

My final point is that Dickinson's efforts at self-attribution were not designed to exert anything like absolute control over her writing; her inclusion of Brontë in her funeral is one of many steps she took to communicate this important point. It is significant that the full scope of her literary production did not reach the broad reading public until after her death; that is, after she had surrendered control over it. By making clear her collaboration with Brontë, Dickinson in effect unsettled her own sovereign authority by asserting the networked rather than the unitary nature of her art. Dickinson may in this sense be only partially guilty of, in Cohen's words, "reattaching identities to messages and thereby assigning responsibility or blame to actors, who are often represented subsequently as having hijacked the system for their own purposes" (76). Dickinson did call attention to poems that would become associated with her name, but she also

left what must continue to be considered a remarkably unruly and highly controversial body of work that has fascinated editors and critics to the extent that we still debate how to break the Dickinson poetic line, how to interpret her variants, what the fascicles are and how to read them, the importance of her circulation of poems in letters, and whether or not her letters violate the limits of genre, to name only a few of the quandaries related to her writing that may never be resolved. These and other questions like them, demonstrate that we are still trying to figure out what a Dickinson poem is, reiterating through our efforts the instability of form, meaning, and context, that enables each poem to assume multiple embodiments, each with a life of its own.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Genevieve Taggard states that Dickinson let “Vinnie know she wished Mr. Higginson to read [‘No coward soul is mine’] at her grave when she died” (236); Michael Moon cites Taggard when he describes Dickinson’s wish to have the Brontë poem read by Thomas Wentworth Higginson as an “immediate sign of Dickinson’s awareness of the powerful transferal of energy between Brontë’s writing and her own” (231); in *Last Things: Emily Brontë’s Poems*, Janet Gezari also observes that “Emily Dickinson asked to have ‘No coward soul is mine’ read at her funeral” (128). Despite this seeming consensus of opinion, however, not all scholars cite Dickinson’s deliberate request as part of the directions she gave for her funeral. Barton Levi St. Armand, for instance, treats Higginson’s reading of the poem as integral to Dickinson’s final artistic gesture that he views as “Dickinson’s last poem” (74), but he does not definitively declare that the poem was read at her request. Instead, he presents Higginson’s reading as consistent with the overall design of the funeral as dictated by Dickinson (73-77). Richard B. Sewall merely notes that Higginson read “No coward soul is mine” at the funeral (575, 667) and Alfred Habegger follows suit, adding that “the defiant poem . . . had been a favorite with [Dickinson]” (627). The most complete discussion of the funeral appears in Aífe Murray’s *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson’s Life and Language*. In the chapter titled “Emily Dickinson’s Irish Wake,” Murray points out that Sewall depended on Jay Leyda’s research for his own account of the funeral and when pressed to state definitively whether

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Dickinson's instructions were "written or verbal," Sewall "replied, 'Wish I could tell you more. I can't. All I know is what's in Leyda. He should have listed a source'" (189).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Howe has previously argued in support of the shared artistic purpose that I see as further supported by Dickinson's funeral. "Out of Brontë's Self," Howe writes, "out of her Myth, the younger woman chose to pull her purity of purpose. Metamorphosis of thought into the corresponding vocation" (61).

<sup>3</sup> Vivian R. Pollak provides useful insight into what she describes as Dickinson's "conflicted" relationship with literary fame in the "Dickinson's Personal Publics" chapter of *Our Emily Dickinsons: American Women Writers and the Intimacies of Difference*. There she writes, "However emphatic her denials of ambition, she was deeply conflicted about her private vocation and longing to be remembered" (70). The argument I make here presents Dickinson's denials as paradoxically essential to her pursuit of fame.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Sewall cites Clara Newman Turner's account of Dickinson's funeral in which she describes the central service despite having been too ill to attend personally: "The service was very simple. The Pastor of the Congregational Church of Amherst read from the Scriptures. Rev. Mr. Jenkins of Portland led in prayer, and Col. Higginson followed with the reading of Emily Brontë's last Poem. . . ." (273-74). Higginson's reading concludes the service, after which the coffin is transported to the grave.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Frank reads these lines as Brontë's "unequivocal repudiation of orthodox religion . . . and her celebration of her own individual faith which she affirmed armed her against fear and doubt and made a mockery of death" (217). Gezari more directly affirms the pantheistic character of Brontë's opposition to orthodoxy: "she expresses faith in an infinite, enduring life

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pervading the universe and in the soul brave enough to claim its participation in that life” (*Things* 134).

<sup>6</sup> Steve Vine has noted that this part of the poem “perversely conflates categories that, from an orthodox perspective, should be rigorously distinguished” (47). Vine touches on the issue of reciprocity in the following: “the syntactical fluidity of the lines fleetingly identifies the ‘I’ *with* ‘Undying Life,’ mingling the two instead of separating them” (47).

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Brontë’s editing of “No coward soul is mine” testifies to Emily’s violation of even the norms established among the sisters. Gezari points out how Charlotte sought to diminish Emily’s declaration that “human beings . . . carry the whole of the known and unknown world—every existence—within them” by altering the poem so that it more clearly situates the infinite exclusively within the divine (135). My own analysis of the poem presumes that Charlotte’s efforts failed, at least in Dickinson’s case. For a complete discussion of Charlotte’s editorial revisions see 128-134 in Gezari’s *Last Things*. My reading of the Brontë poem more closely resembles Michael Moon’s when he proposes that the poem be considered “as a writer’s rededication of herself to the muse of writing-for-herself (or for the muse and for herself?) rather than writing for other readers” (240). Commenting directly on Dickinson’s reading of Emily Brontë and the argument Moon advances, Amelia Greene arrives at the following conclusion: “‘No coward soul’ seems a declaration of both the preservation of the spirit after death and the preservation of poetic intent despite critical antagonism or hostility, an interpretation that may link Dickinson with the earlier poet outside the framework of religious belief” (123).

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Homans offers a divergent view of the artist’s agency when she argues that even in the unedited version of the poem any perception of mutual dependence between speaker and divine is belied by “a hierarchical devotion that operates only in one direction” (132). What is

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most interesting about Homans's position is that she sees the speaker of the poem defining herself in competition with the divine. Drawing on Homans, Mary Loeffelholz concludes that in "No coward soul" "Brontë protests too much that the immortal power really does reside within the poet's own breast" (156). Gezari strikes a contrary posture, arguing that while Brontë "may not announce her arrival in a safe port," the poem does locate "a rock on which hope anchors" (130). By this means, Gezari concludes, Brontë "manages to hold eternity firmly in view and to persuade herself that her own creative power is indomitable." Different as these scholarly assessments are, they agree that a key question posed by the poem turns on whether or not the poet/speaker is capable of achieving immortality through her own creative efforts. The boldness of her ambition, which is matched only by her confrontation with resistance—the competition or protest mentioned by Homans and Loeffelholz—might well have interested Dickinson more than any final resolution of the question.

<sup>9</sup> Additional justification for Dickinson's inclusion of "No coward soul is mine" as part of her funeral may be found in the description Charlotte Brontë provides of her sister in the "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" that serves as a preface to the 1850 edition of Emily's poems that Dickinson read. Dickinson would certainly have sympathized with the other Emily's initial resistance to her sister's determination to publish her poems. Charlotte dedicates the following paragraph to explaining how her sister responded to the knowledge that Charlotte not only discovered and read her poems but sought to have them printed: "My sister Emily was not a person of demonstrable character, nor one, on the recesses of whose mind and feelings, even those nearest and dearest her could, with impunity, intrude unlicensed; it took hours to reconcile her to the discovery I made, and days to persuade her that such poems merited publication. I knew, however, that a mind could not be without some latent spark of honourable

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ambition, and refused to be discouraged in my attempts to fan that spark to flame” (Charlotte Brontë 6).

<sup>10</sup> Dickinson wrote three letters from 1883 and 1884 that include quotes from “No coward soul” (L802-803, 843-44, 847-48), all of which draw on the penultimate stanza, not the last one where the atom reference appears. The lines are “Though earth and man were gone, / And suns and universes ceased to be, / And Thou were left alone, / Every existence would exist in Thee” (221). In each letter, Dickinson incorporates Brontë’s words to communicate her own conviction that some portion of the self persists beyond the termination of mortal existence. Such a reading is consistent with Charles Algernon Swinburne’s 1883 observation that “Belief in the personal or positive immortality of the individual and indivisible spirit was not apparently, in [Emily Brontë’s] case, swallowed up or nullified or made nebulous by any doctrine or dream of simple reabsorption into some indefinite infinity of eternal life” (qtd. in Gezari 129). Moon presents Dickinson as seizing on the comfort implicit in Swinburne’s reading when she offers her correspondents “a single entity who can sustain them all within its existence” while simultaneously “de-romanticiz[ing]” the “egotistical-sublime” by casting doubt on the individual’s power to shape or control their immortal existence (238). Accordingly, Dickinson may have chosen not to focus on Brontë’s atom reference for fear that doing so would have provoked even greater uncertainty when her primary aim was to provide comfort. The atom reference, though, is important precisely because—as I demonstrate elsewhere in this essay—Brontë and Dickinson place it in the culminating stanzas of poems acknowledging that the magnitude is less important than the quality of what survives. Dickinson would have seen how Brontë’s emphasis on courage in her opening line anticipates the possibility that whatever individual imprint endures could elude detection. Courage of this kind requires seeing the atom

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not as diminutive but rather as constitutive; that is, as the courage to believe that the creative process out of which poetry arises is itself anchored in eternity, yielding art that is already part of what persists. As a consequence, the best assurance of fame is confidence in the creative experience itself. Moon is for this reason convincing when he writes that “what is being addressed in ‘No coward soul is mine’” is the “writer’s rededication of herself to the muse of writing-for-herself . . . rather than writing for other readers” (240). Dickinson would have appreciated the implied conundrum that the best way to produce enduring work is by not writing for future readers.

<sup>11</sup> The Dickinson family edition of Webster’s dictionary defines the word “subterfuge” in a manner appropriate to Dickinson’s use of the word in conjunction with the poet’s efforts to escape scrutiny while remaining devoted to unconventional art: “Literally, that to which a person resorts for escape or concealment; hence, a shift; an evasion; an artifice employed to escape censure or the force of an argument, or to justify opinions or conduct.”

<sup>11</sup> In an earlier essay addressing the relationship between actors and networks, Latour elaborates on the interdependent and mutually constituent nature of the two: “‘Actor’ here is not to play the role of agency and ‘network’ to play the role of society. Actor and network . . . designate two faces of the same phenomenon, like waves and particles. . .” (“On Recalling” 18-19). When Latour states in *Reassembling the Social* that “a good text” is one that maximizes actors who perform as mediators within a network (128), he means that texts are qualitatively superior according to their ability to attract actors who contribute to the social life of the subject or word that attracts interest; such works “trace a network” by means of the active engagement of actors who reshape or translate the network even as they are translated by it. For Latour, a vibrant network is one in which all the actors *do something* and don’t just sit there” (128). Sianne Ngai

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explains that such effective texts qualify as “interesting” by virtue of their ability to “link heterogeneous agents or agencies together” (114), facilitating “relays, conduits, associations—that in turn facilitate the circulation of ideas, objects, and signs” (115). What this means is that interesting texts are those that connect active agents who contribute to a dynamic understanding of the subject in a manner I am attaching to the subject of fame as advanced by Dickinson through a network she establishes with, but does not limit to, Emily Brontë.

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