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"FAME'S CONSUMMATE FEE": DICKINSON'S NAMELESS CELEBRITY

Emily Dickinson's careful orchestration of her own April 19, 1886, funeral[1] transformed that event into a concluding artistic gesture, a final elegiac poem, that has much to tell us about her understanding of literary fame. Dickinson, I want to suggest, believed that language powerful enough to achieve immortality did so by entering a life independent of the author. As a result of this belief, Dickinson preferred to risk obscurity, rather than tether her poems to her own name, and the attendant historical specificity of biography. Dickinson's decision to include Emily Brontë's poem "No coward soul is mine" as part of her funeral betrays a seeming reversal of position in which she attaches Brontë's name to her own, and in effect, says to the world that Brontë's words have found new life in her. In this way, Dickinson used her own last poem — her funeral — to expand Brontë's fame, while also drawing attention to the artistic conversation they shared. Dickinson's appropriation of Brontë's poem makes a powerful statement about what her speaker in "To earn it by disdaining it" terms "Fame's consummate fee:" how literary celebrity, ironically, illuminates lives worthy of such attention precisely because they sought to elude it.

Barton Levi St. Armand lends initial support for such a reading when he argues that Dickinson's 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 Rossetti painting" (1984, 74). These details would include Dickinson's request that her pallbearers break with family tradition by carrying her coffin out the back door and through the open barn, proceeding to the cemetery by pathways rather than processing from the front door to the grave by means of city streets. Aife Murray associates these directions with traditional Irish wakes, whereby the "most unused track to the burial ground [...] was meant to deceive the spirit of the dead" (2009, 199). Unlike the standard funeral elegy, then, that offers consolation in the form of conventional language acknowledging the absence of the departed, Dickinson's elegy seeks to thwart death.[2] Cate L. Mahoney presents this resistance to

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[1] 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" (1930, 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" (2008, 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" (2007, 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" (1984, 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 (1980, 575, 667) and Alfred Habegger follows suit, adding that "the defiant poem [...] had been a favorite with (Dickinson)" (2001, 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 definitively state whether 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).

[2] In "The Poetics of Interruption: Dickinson, Death, and the Fascicles," Alexandra Socarides similarly argues that Dickinson "refuses the narrative of consolation that elegy makes possible" (2008, 316). As she points out, "the sense of consolation that most elegies aim to conjure depends heavily on conventions of closure" that Dickinson

elegiac closure as a central feature of Dickinson's later elegies, within which "[t]he elegy becomes […] a device of departure that helps the elegist enact a search that does not end at all" (2015, 69). The idea that an elegy could trigger a search for the absent yet present departed makes astonishing sense in this instance, particularly in the context of Dickinson's request that Thomas Wentworth Higginson read Brontë's poem as part of her funeral service (Moon 2008, 231).

Brontë's opening line, "No coward soul is mine," reinforces the tone of defiance that characterizes Dickinson's self-elegy. The line apparently expresses the speaker's determination both to confront and overwhelm all doubt surrounding her achievement of immortality. 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" (2007, 130). This is the view I think most congenial to Dickinson, who would have encountered the poem in the 1850 edition in which Brontë's sister Charlotte described the poem as "the last lines my sister Emily ever wrote" (1850, 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 observes, 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 (2008, 241). I would go even further than Moon in urging the view that the choice of this poem represents the culmination of her developing ideas about the risks of posthumous publication, recoverable in both her poems and her correspondence.

Support for this claim comes from Dickinson's third letter to Higginson and in poems, such as "To earn it by disdaining it," which present lasting fame as literary power that informs the language of the present but is not confined by fashion or historical specificity.[3] In her June 1862 letter to Higginson, she famously responds to his suggestion that she "delay 'to publish'" by enigmatically declaring, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her." When these words are combined with the first stanza of "To earn it by disdaining it," one discovers a blueprint of sorts for the achievement of fame that requires both a denial of interest and a search:

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

Dickinson here clarifies the need to spurn fame as she did in her letter to Higginson while also 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.[4]

A scan for Brontë influences in Dickinson's writing immediately casts light on Dickinson's 1882 correspondence with Thomas Niles, the editor at Roberts Brothers who oversaw Dickinson's anonymous 1878 publication of

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refuses in the elegy "all overgrown by cunning moss." Socrarides concentrates on Dickinson's use of "Or" as a means to resist closure in an elegy (intriguingly) dedicated to Charlotte Brontë.

[3] Other poems addressing the proper management of fame would include "Fame of Myself, to justify," "Fame is the one that does not stay–," and "Fame is a fickle food."

[4] Susan Howe affirms Dickinson's close artistic identification with Emily Brontë in *My Emily Dickinson* when she writes, "Out of Brontë's Self, out of her Myth, the younger woman chose to pull her purity of purpose" (1985, 61).

"Success is counted sweetest" in *A Masque of Poets.* In response to his April 24 request that she send him a "volume of poems," Dickinson instead sends the single poem "How happy is the little Stone," the poem she refers to in the text of her letter as a "Pebble." Reading the poem as a commentary on Dickinson's spurning of publication makes particular sense once the connection to Brontë's "rock of immortality" is taken into consideration. Brontë's rock 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" (1998, 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) and thereafter fulfills "absolute Degree/In casual simplicity" (ll. 9-10). Dickinson's simple Pebble may well be the diminutive of Brontë's more majestic rock, but she undeniably adapts her precursor's primary symbol for her own daring 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.

Though it may strike today's readers as odd, 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 his *The Religion of Geology and Its Connected Sciences* in 1851, uses geological science and mathematics to argue that all our words, actions, and thoughts "make an indelible impression on the universe" (1851, 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 points out that Hitchcock was a "towering presence in Amherst and an important influence on Emily Dickinson." It is entirely possible 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" (1997, 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" (1957, 216).

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 Peabody refers to as the "fruits" or artistic insights of previous generations. These fruits, she 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 of nature 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). To be part of the infinite is to pass through the present, not locate happiness in it and, as it turns out, not tether one's language to a name that would distinguish it from the universal. It is for this reason no accident that Dickinson uses Brontë's proclamation of posthumous fame to reinforce her own aspirations as part of her funeral, a ritual designed to acknowledge her departure from mortal life. Dickinson's declaration of fame is, as it were, after the fact, and her backward glance, one she asks us to make for her, as directed by her absent presence. She could not herself have done so without risk of compromising the artistic communion with the infinite that made fame possible; but we can do this for her, now that her creative life has ended.

"Fame's consummate fee" consequently turns out to be the reduction of individuality required to submerge the self in what Michael C. Cohen describes as the distributed network of language that I am here associating with Brontë's "steadfast rock of immortality" and the language theories of Hitchcock and Peabody. 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" (2014, 76).[5] Cohen pays particular attention to Dickinson's later poems, looking closely at the poem "A little overflowing word" in which an "overflowing word" enters into and becomes a stable feature within networked language over which the poet has little control. "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 admits the uncertainty of success.

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 sought to enter. The fact that I have had access to published editions and manuscript archives of Dickinson's writing when pursuing 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 "steadfast rock of immortality." Her successful assertion of her own name does indeed cast the light of celebrity on specific behavior, such as the 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 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 did not exert 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

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[5] Bruno Latour defines "network" as "a concept, not a thing out there," as "a tool to help describe something, not what is being described" (2005, 131). When Latour also states that "a good text" is one that maximizes actors who perform as mediators within a network, 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. Sianne Ngai explains that such effective texts qualify as "interesting" by virtue of their ability to "link heterogeneous agents or agencies together" (2012, 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 Dickinson through a network she establishes with, but does not limit to, Emily Brontë.

also left what must continue to be considered a remarkably unruly 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.

Were Dickinson alive today, she might well enjoy the bafflement and delight expressed by the poet speaker of John Ashbery's poem "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" who ultimately admits that he cannot control the lives of his poems. Addressing a single representative poem, he imagines a reader struggling to make sense of it: at first "You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other" (ll. 3-4); then the poem "Bring[s] a system into play" (l. 7) and "gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters" (l. 12); then the poet —now reading his poem the way he imagines a reader might — discovers that "the poem / Has set me softly down beside you (the reader)," leading to the concluding recognition: "The poem is you" (ll. 15-16). In the poet's eyes, the poem that initially fails to connect with the reader by means of the system it brings into play becomes swept up in the "steam and clatter" of a decentralized system of language networks that alienate the poet from his work. The poem meanwhile acquires a new life that that the poet does not recognize until after it transports him to another reader in whom he acknowledges the reincarnation of the poem he thought had failed. Michael Cohen might put it this way: "Networked language is alienating language [...] severed from subjectivity, only to return, like a book in the mail, as the animated incarnation of the communication system" (83). And Dickinson might say, yes, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her."

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