

Emily Dickinson at Home

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**"A little East of Jordan":
Human-Divine Encounter in Dickinson and the Hebrew Bible**

1. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible and Dickinson wrestle with the same enigma: with what artifices can language portray the unportrayable confrontation of the human and the Divine? Their solutions are strikingly similar. Both articulate the human-Divine encounter in language riddled with paradox, wordplay, and shifts of perspective fluctuating, at times almost instantaneously, between hierarchy and intimacy, transcendence and immanence, abstraction and sensation -- all of which have the effect of creating multiple, often contradictory interpretations.

Such similarities in theme and language use are facets of an intimate relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Dickinson that extends much deeper. As we will see in the context of Dickinson's poem "A little East of Jordan" (Fr 145B), which treats Jacob's encounter with the unknown adversary at Peniel, reading Dickinson through the lens of the Hebrew Bible gives insights not readily available through the usual lens of the King James Version. These insights illuminate the rest of her work and highlight her profound perception of the relationship between humanity and God, revealing numerous features shared with the Hebrew Bible.

The greatest hidden text in Western civilization, the Hebrew Bible is known intimately through translation, but it is not widely known in original form. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew language is used as the perfect medium to express a multifaceted vision of the human-Divine encounter. Literary techniques such as paradox and wordplay are natural outflows of the structure of this language and have important parallels in Dickinson's poetry. Appreciating such artistry in the Hebrew Bible leads to a much deeper understanding of Dickinson.

Jacob's encounter with the unknown adversary at Peniel offers both a narrative emblem for these techniques and a concrete point for comparison between Dickinson and the Hebrew Bible. Although Dickinson wrote only one poem (Fr 145B) that names Jacob explicitly, Cynthia Griffin Wolff has pointed out that Dickinson identified closely with him, viewing the struggle at Peniel as an archetype of the poet's struggle to wrest meaning from a chaotic, unpredictable universe (151-59).¹ The congruences

¹ Wolff takes a first step toward reading Dickinson's Jacob poem Fr 145B through the lens of the Hebrew Bible (150). In the view of Joanne Feit Diehl, poem Fr 145B and other poems of Dickinson encode the process of poetic influence ("Dickinson and Bloom" 423). In this context, "the physicality of wrestling as a metaphor for poetic creativity relates to Dickinson's sense of struggle when confronting the combined power of muse and male Precursor" (Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* 24). One can gauge the significant resonances between poem Fr 145B

between the Hebrew Bible and Dickinson's poetry will be suggestively broadened when we consider parallels between their publication and interpretation history.

2. Wrestling with the Angel -- Art

Dickinson's poetic career was bracketed by references to Jacob's encounter at Peniel. Poem Fr 145B was recorded in a fascicle about early 1860 (Franklin, 1998: 186), while a letter written to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in spring 1886 soon before her death concludes with a characteristic misquotation of Genesis 32:26 (KJV):² "Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel 'I will not let thee go except I bless thee' -- Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct --" (L 1042). The same misquotation also appears in a letter of mid-March of that year (L 1035).

The Bible was the book that, more than any other, helped make Dickinson a poet (McIntosh, ch. 3). However, her stance toward it was necessarily complicated, even paradoxical. According to the belief system of her day, the Bible was written in an authoritative and transparent language faithfully mirroring spiritual reality. "This notion of language depended on the inherent 'truth' of the word; no word could be ambiguous or ironic and still manifest the essential truth of God" (Miller 145). As a poet, Dickinson committed the supreme act of linguistic defiance by flipping that belief upside down. Like the Hebrew Bible, her poetry relies on the use of paradox, wordplay, and multiplicity of perspective as the most effective artifices for manifesting the essential truth about the human-Divine relationship:

Hierarchy versus intimacy, transcendence versus immanence: the grand dichotomies of the religious experience. However, any tendency to label aspects of the Divine encounter in terms of such neat, mutually exclusive categories is thwarted by the poet. In her work, the human-Divine relationship is articulated, not as a fixed body of dogma, but as a verb, a field of force, a gymnastic somersaulting that never rests. Like the unknown adversary encountered by Jacob at Peniel, God can be encountered at any moment and in any place in an epiphany of awareness that reveals the Divine face. "Forever -- is composed of Nows," wrote Dickinson (Fr 690), who crafted her poetry around the paradox of trying to portray the Forever of infinite, Divine potentiality through the Nows of finite, human awareness.³ The language she used for such portrayals was supple and multilayered, darting like a hummingbird to catch God's

and Dickinson's other work by the fact that the keyword "wrestle" in Fr 145B and its derivatives appear in 10 other poems, while the keyword "Angel" and its derivatives appear in 28 other poems (Rosenbaum).

2 The verses in chapter 32 of Genesis are numbered differently in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible and in the King James Version. Because of this discrepancy, the reference to verse 32:26 in the King James Version of Genesis is designated by 32:26 (KJV). In this paper all other references to verses in the Bible follow the numbering of the Masoretic text.

3 Roland Hagenbüchle emphasizes "the concentration on the 'critical' moment" (the "Nows") as a central aspect of Dickinson's poetics (38-39).

ephemeral light. "All we secure of beauty," she wrote, "is its evanescences" (qtd. in Cott 9).

We can see this poetics at play in Dickinson's poem Fr 145B, her interpretive misreading of Jacob's encounter at Peniel.

A little East of Jordan,
Evangelists record,
A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard --

Till morning touching mountain -- 5
And Jacob, waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast -- to return!

Not so, said cunning Jacob!
"I will not let thee go 10
Except thou bless me" -- Stranger!
The which acceded to --

Light swung the silver fleeces
"Peniel" Hills beyond,
And the bewildered Gymnast 15
Found he had worsted God!

This version of poem Fr 145 was recorded in Fascicle 7 about early 1860. Version Fr 145A, "A little over Jordan," was sent to Susan Dickinson, the manuscript being subsequently lost (Franklin, 1998: 185-86). In the two versions there are nine variant lines containing significant differences. According to Franklin, "the variants [...] suggest that the fair copy to Susan preceded the fascicle" (187). If in fact version A of the poem preceded version B, then comparing the two versions will yield crucial insights into the development of Dickinson's conception of Jacob's encounter at Peniel.

Despite its linguistic affinity with the Hebrew Bible, the poem Fr 145B treats the narrative quite differently. What is perhaps most obvious about the poem is that while evoking the familiar story in chapter 32 of Genesis, the poem simultaneously erases it. That story depicts Jacob's spiritual growth in the context of the ongoing struggle with his brother Esau. It opens with Jacob's returning to his homeland from the house of his uncle Laban, to which he fled to escape Esau's wrath. Upon learning that Esau is approaching with a small army, Jacob first tries to appease him by sending ahead gifts. Jacob then brings his wives, children, and possessions across the Yabbok River, and left alone, wrestles with the unknown adversary at Peniel, who is identified only as "a man" (Gen. 32:25).⁴ Through this encounter, Jacob matures to the point where he is able to confront Esau face to face and in a spirit of reconciliation.

4 Except where otherwise noted, translations of the Book of Genesis are taken from Everett Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses*. Of all English translations, this one is the closest to the Hebrew original. In Fox's translation, personal and place names generally appear in Hebrew forms; thus,

Dickinson's poem erases most of this story. No naming the place of the struggle "Peniel." No renaming Jacob "Israel." No description of the physical relationship of Jacob and the Angel relative to each other, Jacob's wounding being only subtly insinuated in the "touching" of line 5. And, as is typical in Protestant readings, no placing of Jacob's struggle at Peniel in the wider context of the sibling rivalry. Through this erasure of context, the dynamics of the human-Divine encounter become Dickinson's sole focus.

The poem enacts this encounter via a journey that frustrates human logic, an odyssey through a four-dimensional space-time discontinuum from the remote, hierarchical perspective of the opening to the intimate perspective of the third stanza in which the language becomes multidimensional and explosive. These two perspectives -- one hierarchical and above the action, the other intimate and entwined in the action -- define what might be considered to be two fixed axes in the poem. While these perspectives mirror two possible relationships with God available to Jacob and while they generate two possible modes of interpretation of this enigmatic verse, Dickinson seems to be teasing us with this tidy separation. Refusing to allow experience to be dissected into well-defined dichotomies, she uncannily sees through them into a preverbal space in which experiences are savored whole, as hierarchical/intimate, transcendent/immanent interactions between the universe, or God, and the interior consciousness, or self.

This vision of Dickinson is artfully portrayed in the poem "A little East of Jordan." In lines 1 and 2 we are remote observers of the scene at Peniel. We are both spatially above the scene, gazing down on the Jordan River and environs, and temporally distant from it, the view mediated and obscured by the "records" of the "Evangelists." The poet directs us to the extraordinary event: a "Gymnast," not yet identified, and an "Angel" are "wrestling long and hard." We zoom in closer, hovering just above the scene in mid-struggle, close enough to identify the Gymnast -- how do we recognize him? -- and to hear first the Angel's request to be released, then Jacob's demand for a blessing. Despite the direct quotation from Genesis in lines 10 and 11, the poet is toying with us. This is not a replay of the Biblical struggle, but a new vision of the human-Divine encounter in a parallel Dickinsonian universe.

The shifting axis of this encounter, fluctuating between hierarchy and intimacy and partaking of both, is invoked in the first line. "East of Jordan" echoes the region "east of Eden," where Eve and Adam in Genesis 3:24 and Cain in 4:16 were banished.⁵ In these, the first human-Divine encounters, God "worsted" humans in relationships having traces of intimacy (e.g., Gen. 3:8 and 4:6) yet culminating in hierarchy. While in the poem hierarchy is reinforced immediately in lines 2 and 3 by references to

Yaakov and *Yisrael* in place of Jacob and Israel. The meaning of a name is usually explained in the text (Fox xv-xvi). This is represented by a slash; thus, *Yaakov/Heel-Sneak* (Gen. 27:36), *Yisrael/God-Fighter* (Gen. 32:29), and *Peniel/Face of God* (Gen. 32:31).

5 A similar point is made by Jack L. Capps (33). Variants of the phrase "east of Eden" in Dickinson's poetry are noted on pages 32-33.

"Evangelists" and "an Angel," intimacy is soon invoked in line 4 by the folksy description of the wrestling match as "long and hard" and by various elements in the subsequent stanza. Via the reference "East of Jordan/east of Eden," Dickinson sets the stage for Jacob's struggle, which will alter the landscape of the human-Divine encounter as it generates a new idiom to represent it.

Line 3 presents Dickinson's new name for her precursor, "Gymnast," which erases the name "Israel" bestowed on Jacob in Genesis 32:29. "Gymnast" highlights Dickinson's discovery of a new facet of God's personality that is revealed in the encounter at Peniel. Until Jacob's time, almost all relationships between the God of Genesis and humans -- Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his society, Abraham and Isaac -- emphasize the authoritative aspect. God usually commands; people obey or are punished. At both Peniels, that of Genesis and that of Dickinson, a transformation occurs. God's traditional relationship with humans along the vertical axis of authority and hierarchy is multidimensionalized to encompass a dynamism and an intimacy along a horizontal axis of mutual interdependence, of dance and struggle and play. This composite relationship, symbolized by a tumbling motion, is encoded in "Gymnast." "Gymnast" also emphasizes the acrobatic, paradoxical flipping of perspective that is both a key theme in the poem and a key aspect of Dickinson's sense of the poetic endeavor. A secular evangelist of the word, a poet is a gymnastic Jacob tumbling between human and angelic realms -- like Dickinson, whose gymnastic contortions in wrestling with the Biblical text are recorded here.

The points that have been made in discussing the first stanza of version Fr 145B are reinforced by comparing it with the first stanza of version Fr 145A.

Fr 145A	Fr 145B
A little over Jordan	A little East of Jordan,
As Genesis record,	Evangelists record,
An Angel and a Wrestler	A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard --	Did wrestle long and hard.

There are three crucial emendations. Using the richly resonant phrase "East of Jordan" in line 1 of version B rather than "over Jordan" in version A allows Dickinson to contrast the encounter of Jacob the "Gymnast" with the Angel and the confrontations of Eve, Adam, and Cain with the authoritative Deity "east of Eden." The two versions of line 2 also work differently. In place of the factual "As Genesis record" in version A, the use of "Evangelists record" in version B not only emphasizes that an unmediated, unobscured view of the event is not available but also creates an ironic sound resonance with "Angel" in line 3.⁶ Finally, although the identification of the

6 The word "Evangelists" refers both to the scribes who recorded Scriptures (but surely not the Hebrew Bible) and to the preachers and revivalists against whom Dickinson rebelled in her youth. One word being embedded inside the other, the "Evangelists" were in theory the representatives -- but in Dickinson's experience the obfuscators -- of the "Angel" with whom Jacob struggled. The irony of her deference to the authority of the "Evangelists" in line 2 of version Fr 145B is

combatants as "An Angel and a Wrestler" in line 3 of version A is closer to the "record" of Genesis, their identification as "A Gymnast and an Angel" in version B is distinguished by the multiple associations of the first of these nouns.

The second stanza of poem Fr 145B is a key to understanding Dickinson's poetic project. Reflecting the growing intimacy of the relationship between the Gymnast and the Angel, the intimacy of the language deepens at the same time that hierarchical features of the relationship are accentuated. As "morning touches mountain, Jacob waxes strong" (lines 5-6), until, with the humor of lines 7 and 8, Dickinson celebrates his ascendancy by comically belittling the Angel, who "begged permission / To Breakfast -- to return."⁷ In this stream of mostly intimate language, the word "permission" is an intrusion of hierarchy that signals Dickinson's flippant flipping of the traditional human-Divine hierarchy upside-down. Jacob overpowers the Angel; yet Dickinson expresses his mastery in the comically intimate language of lines 7 and 8. The hierarchical versus intimate perspectives that seem so neatly separated in the first stanza become ever more playfully intermingled.

Relationships continue to somersault: because of the echo with "east of Eden," God is above humans in line 1; the Gymnast and the Angel are coequal in lines 3 and 4; Jacob is over the Angel in the second stanza. Having been beamed in from the remote perspective of the opening two lines, we now find ourselves standing at Peniel within earshot of the two protagonists. Suddenly the comedy of lines 7 and 8 confronts the direct quotation, in lines 10 and 11, of Jacob's demand in Genesis 32:26 (KJV) -- "I will not let thee go / Except thou bless me." This quotation lends to the poem "a sudden mythical seriousness" (McIntosh, ch. 3), an aspect of the poem that is attenuated in version Fr 145A, in which the first half of the quotation is absent.

Jacob's demand from Genesis 32:26 (KJV) invigorates and complicates the human-Divine encounter in two ways. First, the traditional, hierarchical relationship, flipped upside-down in the preceding stanza by Jacob's ascendancy over the Angel, is reversed once more by this demand of Jacob to be blessed. He who bestows the blessing -- namely, the Angel -- must be outside of, and above, him who receives it. Thus Jacob's demand ruptures the dynamic, intimate relationship with God, reasserting the traditional, hierarchical relationship that the "gymnastics" with the Angel had momentarily suspended.

But simultaneously, Jacob's demand in lines 10 and 11 deepens the human-Divine interaction in a way that is crucial to all future encounters. His demand discovers within the new, intimate relationship with God previously unimagined, and ultimately

mischievously reinforced by the colloquial, decidedly non-Biblical language in lines 3-4 and 7-8 and by the unorthodox reinterpretation of the Peniel encounter that the poem presents.

7 In a discussion of the relation of the female writer to the male text of the Bible, Alicia Suskin Ostriker writes that "the feminist poet replays tragedy as farce. What is supposed to be sacred becomes a joke. And I believe that whatever is sacred *must* become, somehow or other, a joke, if we want to free ourselves of mental tyranny" (*Feminist Revision* 29).

liberating, nuances of hierarchy.⁸ "Bless me," Jacob demands. And for the first time in Genesis, the omnipotent creator of heaven and earth, the transcendent God who banished Adam and Eve and Cain, almost destroyed the world in a flood, and commanded Jacob's grandfather Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son -- that God, through the agency of the Angel, obeys a human: "The which acceded to" in Dickinson's curious formulation. Jacob is stunned as a new landscape is revealed to his "bewildered" consciousness: he both can be blessed by God and can "worst God." Intimacy can become hierarchy, and hierarchy intimacy.

Until the third stanza the poem presents an idiosyncratic though recognizable misreading of the familiar Biblical narrative. The meter is regular, and every other line ends, almost monotonously, in a full or partial stop. But in the third stanza, the language explodes. The quotation from Genesis overflows the line, the regular rhythm ruptured by the four beat stress of "Except thou bless me" as the surging current slams against a massive boulder -- "Stranger!" -- and stops dead.

"Stranger!" is a flashpoint.⁹ Scintillating multireferentially in the morning light, this word is at once all of the following: (1) in its most obvious sense, Jacob's name for his unknown adversary;¹⁰ (2) Dickinson's new name for Jacob augmenting "Gymnast," which in turn erases the name "Israel" bestowed on Jacob in Genesis 32:29; (3) Dickinson's version of the Angel's answer to Jacob's question concerning the Angel's name, an exchange appearing in Genesis 32:30 but not in the poem; (4) a comparative

8 I am indebted to Catherine Madsen for suggesting this alternate reading.

9 In version Fr 145B the multireferentiality of "Stranger" is achieved by moving it outside the quotation marks that contain it in version Fr 145A. Line 11 of the latter version reads "Until thou bless me, stranger!" There, "stranger!" functions merely as Jacob's name for the Angel.

Other changes in the two versions of the third stanza occur in the first line. The archaic and distancing "quoth wily Jacob" in version Fr 145A is replaced by the more direct "said cunning Jacob" in version Fr 145B. By virtue of its form, ending in "ing," the adjective "cunning" suggests action, echoing the participles "touching" and "waxing" in the second stanza. Like "loins" in line 10 of version Fr 145A, the word "cunning" also has a sexual connotation, which recalls Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as well as their sexual acts "east of Eden" after the expulsion.

Dickinson's choice of "cunning" in line 9 of version Fr 145B links Jacob and Esau, who in the King James Version of Genesis 25:27 is described as "a cunning hunter." Described in the same verse as "a plain man, dwelling in tents," by the time of his encounter at Peniel seven chapters later, Jacob has taken on traits of his long-absent brother, becoming the "cunning" Gymnast in line 9 of Dickinson's poem.

10 The sound resonance between "Stranger" and "Angel" reinforces the poem's dual perspectives. While the identity of his adversary does not dawn on Jacob until the last two lines of the poem, from the viewpoint of the reader, the identity of Jacob's adversary is obvious from the first stanza, which names the Angel explicitly. In addition, the reader comes to the poem through the mediation of more than two millennia of exegesis, in which the adversary is identified by numerous commentators. The earliest such identification is by the prophet Hosea (Kugel 225). Hosea 12:4-5 (12:3-4 KJV): "Grown to manhood, he [Jacob] strove with a divine being. He strove with an angel and prevailed [...]" (*The Prophets/Nevi'im* 786).

adjective commenting on itself, on the Biblical quotation, and on what follows in the next five lines; (5) an expression of both Jacob's bewilderment and the Angel's bewilderment.

The new name "Stranger," shared by both Jacob and the Angel in version Fr 145B, focuses on the isolation, not conveyed in Genesis, experienced by Jacob and the Angel after Jacob's demand.¹¹ Erasing the context of sibling rivalry in which Genesis embeds the encounter at Peniel frees Dickinson at this juncture in the poem to allude to one of her key themes: the individual's nakedness before existence, which is both a curse and a promise of freedom. At the Peniel of Genesis, after acquiring a new name, a new blessing, and a new identity, Jacob is ready for the long-postponed encounter with his brother. By contrast, at the Peniel of Dickinson, after "worsting God," Jacob encounters the silence at the end of the poem.

The contorted syntax and nonspecificity of the next line, "The which acceded to," enact the uncertainty shared by all the participants, Jacob, the Angel, the poet, the reader, at this moment into which Dickinson has compacted the energy of the human-Divine encounter at Peniel. This line also expands the space of suspension of understanding in which "Stranger" vibrates. What is acceded to?, the reader demands. Most likely, the Angel accedes to grant the blessing, the stiltedness of the line indicating the reluctance with which the accedence occurs. Or perhaps the reader accedes to bestow a single meaning on "Stranger"; until this happens, the reader's comprehension is bewildered and the poem is stalled. There is yet another possibility, the multireferentiality of "Stranger" having affected the following line. Reading Dickinson through the lens of the Hebrew Bible, where wordplay abounds, we perceive a reading of line 12 in which the "cunning Jacob" of line 9 becomes a punning Jacob. Indeed, line 12, "The which acceded to," can also be read as "The wish exceeded too"; i.e., that Jacob demanded too much or that the blessing was too strong.

How shall we read the final stanza, in which more ambiguity is piled on the ambiguity of the previous two lines like silver-fleeced clouds on the "'Peniel' Hills"? The first three stanzas beamed us in to the heart of the action from the remote perspective of the first two lines. Classical notions of symmetry would dictate that the last stanza should beam us out again to that remote perspective from which we can dispassionately summarize the poem's themes. But this is not the case. In the final stanza, Dickinson leads Jacob into a new landscape of existential isolation and radical freedom where, until a new idiom is created for describing Jacob's experience, language remains unhinged.

Thus line 13, "Light swung the silver fleeces," can be read in two ways: either with the normal word order of subject, verb, and object, both subject and object referring to the sunrise in Genesis 32:32, or with the reversed word order in which "silver fleeces" is the subject of "swung" and "Light" functions as an adverb ("lightly") specifying how the fleeces swung. In both cases, the verb evokes a picture of Jacob as he "swings" his

¹¹ A similar point is made by James H. McIntosh (ch. 3).

arms in celebration of his victory. The phrase "silver fleeces" also suggests the sheep that Jacob owns in abundance. Are we now back inside Jacob's head as he views his flocks on the opposite bank of the Yabbok River, contemplating his wealth rather than the relationship with God? Do these fleeces symbolize the hopelessness of the poet's task, as does the quest for Jason and the Golden Fleece in poem Fr 910 ("Finally, no Golden Fleece -- / Jason, sham, too --")?

Just as the comedy of lines 7 and 8 confronts the direct quotation of Jacob's demand in Genesis 32:26 (KJV), so the ambiguity of line 13, "Light swung the silver fleeces," confronts the explosive force of "'Peniel'" at the beginning of the next line. The quotation marks enclosing "Peniel" attempt to contain the force of that potent kernel, which, as a reading of Dickinson through the lens of the Hebrew Bible reveals, encapsulates a central theme of her art.¹² In Hebrew *pney* is an ambiguous, singular/plural noun meaning "face of" or "faces of"; in addition, *el* means "God." Thus "Peniel" or *pney el*, translated as "Face of God" in Genesis 32:31, could also mean "Faces of God."¹³ One face was revealed east of Eden, where in hierarchical relationships God "worsted" humans. A second face was revealed at Peniel, where God deepened the relationship with Jacob by offering a new dynamism and intimacy and then was "worsted" by him.

Despite the potency of the reference to the "'Peniel' Hills," its meaning and its relationship to the previous line are unclear, almost as if we are listening to the stammering of Jacob's mind groping to find its way in this new world. Are the two

¹² Alicia Ostriker points out that enclosing Biblical terms like "Peniel" in quotation marks is a favorite device of Dickinson ("Replaying the Bible" 165). The quotation marks enclosing "Peniel" appear only in version Fr 145B of the poem, not in version Fr 145A.

The other significant change in the fourth stanza of the poem is the replacement of "the astonished Wrestler" in line 15 of version Fr 145A by "the bewildered Gymnast" in version Fr 145B. Whereas "astonished" appropriately emphasizes Jacob's sudden wonder, "bewildered" -- with the echoes of its etymology from "wilderness" and from the verb "wilder," meaning "to cause to lose one's way" -- evokes the much more complicated mental state of the "Gymnast" upon discovering that he has "worsted God."

¹³ While there is no evidence that Dickinson knew Hebrew, ministers in the community certainly knew the classical language. It is possible that through her contact with local clergy Dickinson was exposed to etymologies of Hebrew place names such as Peniel. As Wolff points out, "a familiarity with Hebrew was one of the most important marks of learning among these men of God (and it was, after all, the desire to establish a professorship of *languages* at the Amherst Academy that began the endeavor out of which Amherst College was born)" (150).

I hoped that a more definitive link between Dickinson and the Hebrew language might be established from the facts that her father Edward studied at Yale University, graduating in 1823, and that Yale was very strong in the study of the Hebrew language in the 1820's (Goldman). However, Edward's "father was so short of funds during the period that Edward spent one and a half of his four college years in Amherst, matriculating as a member of the junior class the year Amherst College opened" (Eberwein 68). Since Hebrew was offered at Yale during the junior year (Massa), Dickinson's connection to the Hebrew language through her father cannot be established.

lines related or are they merely juxtaposed? Did the "light swing the silver fleeces" beyond the hills, or is the poet suggesting that beyond the hills something else hovers? Is it God? Perhaps the "Peniel Hills" are the Pelham Hills visible from the Dickinson Homestead, the poet facing east at sunrise in identification with, yet in opposition to, her Biblical precursor as she rues her own latecomer status.¹⁴

The Biblical Jacob, though shaken, is both relieved and grateful after his encounter with God. In contrast, Dickinson's bewildered hero faces the void in the wilderness of his own soul (McIntosh, ch. 3). This is reinforced by Dickinson's choice, in place of "bested" in the poem's last line, of "worsted," a word distinguished by its paradoxical meaning and verbal music.¹⁵ Within the new landscape generated by the struggle with the Angel, by the demand to be blessed, and by the accedence to this demand, Dickinson finally reaches a formulation in the last two lines.

The enigma of those lines is compounded by the multireferentiality of "worsted." As a homespun term referring to woolen yarn and cloth, "worsted" connects with "fleeces" in line 13 to set up links with other elements of the Jacob story. For example, these words recall the ram sacrificed in place of Jacob's father Isaac in chapter 22 of Genesis. The near-sacrifice, a nightmare that throws its shadow across Jacob's life, is one of the root causes of the dysfunctionality of Isaac's family (Zornberg 238).¹⁶ The word "fleeces" can also be interpreted punningly. In Genesis 32:15, just before the encounter at Peniel, Jacob sent sheep ahead to appease Esau, whom in his youth Jacob had "'fleece'd' [...] by pulling the wool over their father's eyes" (Wolff 152). In the context of the Jacob poem, this wordplay suggests that perhaps Jacob worsted God by cheating God.

There is yet another interpretation of the last line that reveals Dickinson's genius, an interpretation spanning a range from the unpretentious to the profound. In order to make "worsted" woolen yarn, one must compactly interweave the fibers; worsted, of course, is not the final product but is used to make a garment. Thus, "worsting God" can refer to the process of incorporating God into another entity. While one "wrestles" with that which is separate from oneself, the process of "worsting" is the process of

¹⁴ While the Biblical Jacob named the place of his struggle "Peniel," Dickinson's hero suffers the latecomer's curse by being deprived of this opportunity. For in line 14 of the poem the hills are already named. This latecomer status is a crucial aspect of Dickinson's art. David Porter speaks of her "preoccupation, that of aftermath -- 'The After Mind,' 'That engulfing 'Since,'" as she called it in two poems -- that is quintessentially modern: life after its vital meaning has climaxed" (8). Diehl argues that perceptions of their own belatedness are shared by Dickinson and Romantic poets ("Dickinson and Bloom" 421).

¹⁵ Diehl interprets the appearance of "worsted" in line 16 in place of the superficially more expected choice, "bested," in terms of the effect that defeating "the divinating presence" has upon the pugilist and the poet ("Dickinson and Bloom" 426).

¹⁶ The nightmare that the near-sacrifice of Isaac generates throughout Jewish history is the subject of Shalom Spiegel's study *The Last Trial*.

incorporating into one's being that which is separate. Thus at Peniel, "the bewildered Gymnast [...] worsted God" by interweaving God into the fabric of his soul.¹⁷

A further dimension to "worsted" becomes accessible when we read the poem through the lens of the Hebrew Bible, which in its original format is written without vowels. Doing so, we notice that "worsted" contains the same cluster of consonants as "wrested," which etymologically is closely related to the main theme of the poem; namely, "wrestled."¹⁸ If Dickinson's text had also been written without vowels, then we as readers would have been free to read "wrstd" either way.

The wordplay of "worsted," like the other wordplay we have examined, sets up links both with related elements of the Jacob story and with related themes of Dickinson's art. The language of the poem also reflects the nature of the Deity here portrayed. Just as God can explode at any moment and in any place in an epiphany of awareness, so the poem explodes in a sequence of keywords -- "Gymnast," "wrestle," "Stranger," "fleeces," "Peniel," "worsted" -- which overturn seemingly stable ontological relationships.

[F]or Dickinson there is no stable relation between spiritual truth, the facts of existence, and the terms of language. Names are not adequate to things, and the function of language is not primarily to name. Things are perceived and understood through their relations to the rest of the world and by the process of cumulative, even contradictory, definition rather than by categorization or labeling. [...] Her language stresses the relation between object and its effects or relations in an active world; meaning, for her, is not fixed by rules or even by her own previous perception of the world. (Miller 147-48)

Each explosion of a keyword also invokes the dual perspective of hierarchy/intimacy that is a hallmark of Dickinson's art. To Dickinson, all experience partakes simultaneously and inseparably of all aspects: hierarchy and intimacy, transcendence and immanence, abstraction and sensation.

In this context we can understand the last two lines of the poem, where in the morning light an overpowering/empowering dual revelation finally dawns on Jacob: his adversary was God and he wounded God. Because this dual insight involves both Jacob and God reciprocally, in these lines once again Dickinson confounds the traditional view that God must be the top of any hierarchical heap. Jacob's revelation recognizes that the hierarchical/intimate relationship with God is multidimensional. It includes both the experience of mastering God, a bewildering awareness as the accession to one's full powers always is, and the experience of being blessed by God.¹⁹ Hence the parallel construction: the phrase "bewildered Gymnast" in line 15 is the mirror image of the phrase "worsted God" in line 16. Jacob "worsted God" by wounding God, a reciprocal spiritual injury on the bodiless yet, in the person of the

¹⁷ This interpretation grew out of conversations with Andrea Nahmod.

¹⁸ Catherine Madsen pointed out to me that old Scots forms of "wrestled" are "warssled" and "worstled."

¹⁹ Several of these interpretations of "worsted God" are due to Catherine Madsen.

Angel, embodied Deity. And God "bewildered [the] Gymnast," not by wounding him as in Genesis, but by allowing God to be "worsted." This parallel construction highlights the overarching complementarity: human experience correlates, intimately and dynamically, with Divine experience. The pen with which the universe writes on the human/Divine soul has a stylus at each end. All these possibilities are encompassed by the semantic field of the last two lines, which open the poem up, as Jacob has been opened up, to face infinity.

As in the Hebrew Bible, in this poem Dickinson's use of such devices as paradox, wordplay, and shifts of perspective reflects her understanding of the hierarchical/intimate relationship offered by God to Jacob and to her. Like God, the poem invites the reader into a hierarchical/intimate relationship with itself, in which the reader must imaginatively coordinate multiple perspectives, synthesizing the poet's desire both to control meaning and to engender open-endedness and multiplicity of meaning. Relax, the poem urges. Play with me, wrestle with me, as God did with Jacob at Peniel.

3. Reading the Torah as a Lens for Reading Dickinson²⁰

In poem Fr 145B as in many others, Dickinson's multilayered ambiguities and wordplay invite the reader to engage in what one critic labels "a Jacob approach" to reading, whereby meaning in a text is constantly being modified (Zornberg 408). While one certainly hesitates to call Dickinson a Hebrew writer, reading her poetry through the lens of the Torah -- in particular, the Jacob cycle and the other narratives -- suggests that she brought to her poetry an associative, nonhierarchical, expansive mindset much more characteristic of the Rabbinic interpretive tradition than of the conventional Christian tradition in which she was raised.²¹

There are, of course, many fundamental differences between Dickinson's poetry and the Torah; in particular, in how the human-Divine encounter is portrayed. As Allen Tate points out in his classic essay,

Dickinson [...] was born into the equilibrium of an old and a new order. Puritanism could not be to her what it had been to the generation of Cotton Mather -- a body of absolute truths; it was an unconscious discipline timed to the pulse of her life. (25)

Working both within and against the Protestant theology of nineteenth-century Amherst, Dickinson discovers within the traditional relationship with God an intimacy and an intensity that could materialize unpredictably and at any moment: in a bobolink

²⁰ Throughout the rest of this paper, "Torah" is used as a synonym for "Hebrew Bible."

²¹ Ostriker advocates the converse; namely, reading the Torah through the lens of Dickinson ("Replaying the Bible" 165). "To read Dickinson on God (etcetera), then, is to divest oneself of the desire for a single 'correct' interpretation of scripture, to accept willy-nilly a plurality of interpretations, and to begin to realize that the Bible asks to be read like this, to be plurally and not singly interpreted."

in an orchard (Fr 236C), in a maelstrom (Fr 425), in a gentian (Fr 520), as an old neighbor (Fr 689), or in the inundation of spring (Fr 1423).

Starting in the Abraham cycle and expanding considerably in the Jacob cycle, the Torah also focuses on the dynamic, intimate relationship with the Divine, but not to the exclusion of its own master chronicle: God enters human history in order to establish a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. Mirroring the Torah's bipolar vision, both interior and historical, of the human-Divine relationship, the narratives of the Torah are characterized by intricate and subtle interactions of the human and the Divine points of view. Although this interaction is present in Dickinson's work, the historicity of the Jewish relationship with God lends to the Divine point of view in the Torah an absolute reality absent in Dickinson, where God is often mediated by human consciousness. This dual perspective of the Torah, both in the Jacob cycle and elsewhere, creates a paradox at the core of its narrative art.

In this cycle one comes to feel the interpretive force of the biblical mind at work, understanding human events in the context of what God wills. It is a fascinating play between the ideas of fate and free will, destiny and choice -- a paradox which nevertheless lies at the heart of the biblical conception of God and humankind. (Fox 112)

This paradox corresponds to, and perhaps inspired, the paradox at the heart of Dickinson's poetics, which seeks to portray the "Forever" of infinite, Divine potentiality through the "Nows" of finite, human awareness.

Despite the differences in theme and focus, both Dickinson and the Torah regard the encounter at Peniel as marking a new chapter in God's biography. In wrestling with Jacob, the omnipotent Deity of Genesis, the creator of heaven and earth, makes an extraordinarily intimate gesture. In portraying this unpredictable, radically new relationship and the changes that it generates in Jacob, the Torah explodes with paradox, wordplay, and shifts of perspective. If we read Dickinson through the lens of the Torah, then not only do we recognize her use of the same literary devices, but we also realize that they serve an analogous purpose. In both works they are used to enact visions of the human-Divine encounter that in their inner dynamics are strikingly similar. In order to learn more about Dickinson's use of wordplay and other devices, we now examine how they are used in the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew language is used by the Biblical writer as the perfect medium to express the Bible's multifaceted vision of the human-Divine encounter. Literary techniques such as paradox and wordplay are natural outflows of the structure of this language, which is based on three-letter consonantal roots. Different vocalizations of a consonantal root or the rearrangements of the letters of a root often yield new meanings that enrich one another. Since in its original format the Torah is a handwritten scroll containing only consonants but no vowels and no punctuation, the reader is free -- in fact, is empowered and urged -- to experiment with alternate vocalizations and punctuations and thereby discover new meanings in the text. Such rereadings are almost always lost in translation, which usually must choose a single interpretation.

This creative and intimate relationship with the text of the Torah, analogous to the attitude Dickinson encourages, is an integral component of the Rabbinic interpretive tradition, developed in the early centuries of the common era (Handelman, ch. 2-3). A primary spiritual injunction is to wrestle with the text, to splinter the text into sparks of new meanings by applying exegetical principles such as alternate vocalizations and punctuations, rearrangements of letters, and thematic linking of noncontiguous passages via related consonantal roots. According to the Rabbis, wordplay is the trace of God's breath in the text. In playing with the text, the reader becomes God's partner.

In many printed editions of the Hebrew Bible the words are vocalized and punctuation is supplied. The vocalization and punctuation are based on the Masoretic text, which is derived from a body of scribal notes that were compiled from about 600 to 1000 C.E. and form a textual guide to the Hebrew Bible (Waltke and O'Connor 22-30). An impetus for this work was, presumably, the danger that the unvocalized, unpunctuated text would become corrupted or would be mispronounced while being read aloud.²² Ironically, the stabilized text created by the Masoretes enabled the creative genius of the Rabbinic commentators to flourish (Halbertal 39-40).

The language of, and the themes involved in, Jacob's encounter at Peniel are echoed from the beginning to the end of the Hebrew Bible. This extraordinarily dense web of resonances has been ramified through more than two millennia of exegesis. In the space of a single article, it is impossible to trace all the roots and repercussions, both linguistic and thematic, of the encounter at Peniel and also to compare the Torah's treatment with Dickinson's 16-line miniature in her poem Fr 145B. Instead, we will focus on several examples of the literary devices used in the Torah that echo those of Dickinson.

A rich and intricate wordplay energizes the Jacob narrative. For example, the unpredictability and creativity of the transformations of Jacob's name mirror the potential for creative change in Jacob's character. Playing as central a role in the Jacob cycle as the multilayered references of "Gymnast" and "Stranger" in Dickinson's poem Fr 145B, each transformation corresponds to a crucial episode in Jacob's life. At birth Jacob acquires his Hebrew name *Yaakov* because his hand is grasping Esau's heel, *Yaakov* and the word for "heel" being connected by a common root (Gen. 25:26). After Jacob steals from Esau their father's blessing, Esau puns on his brother's name when he says, "Is that why his name was called *Yaakov*/Heel-Sneak? For he has now sneaked against me twice [...]" (Gen. 27:36). As in the first example, *Yaakov* and the word for "sneaked" are connected, this time by a common root meaning "crooked" (Alter 142).

The confrontation with the unknown adversary at Peniel is preceded in Genesis 32:23-25 by another wordplay on Jacob's Hebrew name, *Yaakov/Yabbok/va-ye'vek*.²³ After *Yaakov* brought his family and all his belongings across the *Yabbok* crossing, "a man

²² This second possibility -- namely, the danger that the text would be mispronounced while being read aloud -- was pointed out to me by Shmuel Bolozky.

²³ The wordplay relating *Yaakov* and *va-ye'vek* is noted by Wolff (150).

wrestled/*va-ye'vek* with him." This wordplay highlights Jacob's spiritual transformation, which the Hebrew text encodes as a paradox: Jacob has more by having less. We read in Genesis 32:25 that after he crossed the *Yabbok* crossing, stripped of family and all other attachments, "*Yaakov* was left alone," in Hebrew *va-yivater Yaakov l'vado*. Revocalizing the first word yields *v-yoter*, which is Hebrew for "and more." Thus Genesis 32:25 can be read "And alone Jacob was more." At this moment, the quietest in the chapter, Jacob confronts the unknown adversary as the wrestling match begins.

The wordplay *Yaakov/Yabbok/va-ye'vek* also sets the stage for the transformation of Jacob's name to *Yisrael*/God-Fighter several verses later. In the encounter at Peniel, the Heel-Sneak, he who acted crookedly, is lamed by his unknown adversary in order to be made straight in preparation for his reunion with Esau (Alter 181). He is made straight by the model of God. Indeed, his new name *Yisrael*/God-Fighter (Gen. 32:29), based on *sarah* or "strive" and *el* or "God," can be revocalized as *Yashar-el* or "God is straight"; alternatively, "that which yearns to go directly to God" (Cooper 148).²⁴

In our examination of Dickinson's poem Fr 145B, we emphasized that one of her most effective artifices for portraying the unportrayable encounter with God was the use of keywords. Similarly, the repetition, transformation, and interweaving of keywords are among the main literary devices of the Torah in the Jacob cycle and in its other narratives.²⁵ A repetition of a keyword in different segments of the text sets up a link between those segments, revealing unexpected connections that otherwise might not have been noticed.

In the text surrounding the encounter at Peniel, the following keyword cluster is crucial: *panim*, an ambiguous singular/plural noun meaning "face" or "faces," and other words sharing the same root, such as *lifney*, meaning "ahead of," "in the face of." The keyword *panim* splinters into sparks in Genesis 32:21-22, which features a five-fold repetition of derivatives of this word, each repetition conveying a new meaning. These two verses attest both Jacob's verbal artistry and his obsessiveness as he plans for the impending confrontation with Esau's face: "I will wipe (the anger from) his face/*panav* with the gift that goes ahead of my face/*l'fanay*; afterward, when I see his face/*panav*, perhaps he will lift up my face/*panay*! The gift crossed over ahead of his face/*panav* [...]"

In Genesis 32:31, *panim* is also the focus of the crucial naming ceremony at Peniel, at which Jacob compacts into that single word his experience with the unknown

²⁴ Another reading of *Yisrael* in Genesis 32:29 is *ish ra'ah el*, meaning "a man [who] saw God" (Kugel 227-28). Kugel points out the consistency of this reading with the naming ceremony two verses later: "Yaakov called the name of the place Peniel/Face of God, for: I have seen God, face to face [...]"

²⁵ Keywords in chapters 32 and 33 of Genesis are discussed by J. P. Fokkelman (ch. V). The use of keywords as a basic structural element in Torah narratives is the subject of Martin Buber's seminal essay "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative" (Buber and Rosenzweig 114-28).

adversary: "Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/Face of God, for: I have seen God, face to face/*panim el panim*, and my life has been saved."²⁶ Obsessed until the struggle at Peniel with planning, anticipation, and manipulation, Jacob confronts the unknown adversary face to face/*panim el panim*, integrating in this struggle the hands of Esau and his own voice (Gen. 27:22). Jacob is then ready for the face-to-face encounter with his brother, which he executes elegantly and simply.

The Biblical writer emphasizes the connection between the human-Divine encounter at Peniel and the human-human encounter between Jacob and Esau in two ways. When Jacob approached Esau, Esau "ran to meet him, he embraced him/*va-y'chabkehu*, flung himself upon his neck, and kissed him" (Gen. 33:4). The physicality of Esau's actions recalls the wrestling match with the unknown adversary. "He is held in close embrace by his brother: *Va-y'chabkehu* clearly evokes the love-hate ambiguities of the wrestler's grip -- *va-ye'avek*" (Zornberg 236). Second, Jacob addresses his older brother in Genesis 33:10 with the same keyword *panim* or "face/faces" used by him in the naming ceremony at Peniel/Face of God. "Pray, [...] take this gift from my hand," begs the contrite younger brother. "For I have, after all, seen your face/*panechah*, as one sees the face of/*pney* God, and you have been gracious to me."

In its inner essence the human-Divine encounter is unportrayable because finite, human awareness, mediated by the finitude of language, cannot grasp the infinitude of God. Both in the Torah and in Dickinson, the thematic pressures of these encounters call into play such artifices as paradox, wordplay, and shifts of perspective. For the Torah the perfect medium to enact its vision of the human-Divine encounter is the Hebrew language, which is written without vowels or punctuation and is based on three-letter consonantal roots that can be vocalized or rearranged in multiple ways to give new meanings. In order to portray her vision, Dickinson excavated, from a mother lode of the English language, resources of paradox and wordplay strikingly similar to those used in that ancient text that was a source both of her art and of her society's conceptions about the human-Divine encounter which her poetry challenges.

Reading the Torah, and reading Dickinson through that lens, make us aware that interpretation is an ongoing process, that both texts were purposely left open-ended and ambiguous so that they could continually generate new meanings. In being engaged by the artistry of these works in a dynamic, intimate relationship, the reader becomes a partner in the act of creation.

²⁶ This central verse, Genesis 32:31, is an example of the intricate and subtle interaction, noted in the third paragraph of Section 3 of this paper, of the human and Divine points of view in the Torah. This verse conflates the third-person or Divine perspective in its first half ("Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/Face of God") and Jacob's perspective in its second half ("for: I have seen God, face to face, and my life has been saved").

4. Publication and Interpretation History: A Multi-Level Structure

The congruences between the Hebrew Bible and Dickinson are suggestively broadened when one considers four stages in the publication and interpretation history of her poetry: (1) a handful of poems published anonymously during her lifetime; (2) the first collection of verse, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson and published in 1890, in which the poetry appeared in a sanitized and conventionalized format (Johnson, 1955: xiv; Crumbley 6-7); (3) the 1955 edition edited by Thomas H. Johnson, which restored many of the idiosyncrasies of the Dickinson style, including dashes and capitalization; (4) the manuscript books edited by R. W. Franklin and published in 1981, which ushered in a new era of Dickinson scholarship that focuses on the fascicles.

The following table points out a superficial similarity in the physical publication of the Torah and Dickinson's poetry. However, this superficial similarity suggests an extremely important parallel in the reception and treatment of the two bodies of work by their respective interpretive communities.

	TORAH	DICKINSON
LEVEL 1	handwritten, unvocalized, unpunctuated Torah scroll	publication of handwritten fascicles
LEVEL 2	printed, vocalized, punctuated Hebrew Bible according to Masoretic text	1955 Johnson edition
LEVEL 3	translations, such as the King James	pre-Johnson published versions

As one drops in this table from each level down to the next, the texts sacrifice ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning, and range of reference as their dimensionality decreases. Paradoxically, because the lower levels concretize some of the infinite possibilities that the higher levels entail, the lower levels comment on the higher levels and help one evaluate them. Without such concretizations, the infinite possibilities cannot be comprehended. The table also throws into relief the unique nature of the Dickinson corpus within the modern English-language literary tradition. In contrast to the Torah column, in which historically each level followed the previous one in chronological order, in the Dickinson column levels 1, 2, and 3 occurred in reverse.

The insights and conjectures in this paper give rise to basic questions for future scholarship. Did Dickinson know Hebrew or was she familiar with the Hebrew Bible in any way? Was there any coverage of Hebrew narrative technique in what she read or heard? Was she exposed to Biblical exegesis or hermeneutics at Mt. Holyoke, where study of Scriptures was a core of the curriculum?²⁷ If not, did Dickinson try

²⁷ I am grateful to Cynthia Hallen for posing this question concerning Dickinson's background.

imaginatively to recreate the Hebrew original from her sensitive reading of the King James Version? Despite the importance of these questions, in some sense the answers are irrelevant precisely because the congruences between the two works are so suggestive. The Hebrew Bible and, more than two millennia later, Dickinson regarded the human-Divine encounter as being at the core of their art. Both crafted their dazzling panoplies of literary artifice so that this unportrayable encounter could be portrayed.

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Daniel H. Strait

Emily Dickinson and the "Balsam Word"

In late May 1863, Emily Dickinson wrote a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross in which she deals with healing, among other subjects. She records for her cousins the emotions and fears that she feels in Vinnie's absence. She says, "[t]he nights turned hot, when Vinnie had gone, and I must keep no window raised for fear of prowling 'booger,' and I must shut my door for fear front door slide open at the 'dead of night,' and I must keep 'gas' burning to light the danger up, so I could distinguish it -- these gave me a snarl in the brain which don't unravel yet" (L 281). In this same letter, we find two curious utterances, two highly compressed, didactic lines that read as one-line proverbs. The first is "[t]ruth is so best of all I wanted you to know"; the second "[]life is death we're lengthy at, death the hinge to life." The irony of her language is that all her trying results not in discursive modes of thought or amplified narratives. It results in smaller, more puzzling wisdom forms, which carry all the more strength for being small and thought-provoking. Her letter also shows her willingness to carry the burden of caring for her cousins. In fact, she readily prescribes a remedy for their care. She says to them, emphatically, "[y]ou need the balsam word" (L 281).

Earlier that same year, in late January 1863, Dickinson had occasion to utter the "balsam word" in another letter to her cousins consoling them after the loss of their father, Loring Norcross. In the letter she enclosed the following poem:

It is not dying hurts us so, --
 'Tis living hurts us more;
 But dying is a different way,
 A kind, behind the door, --
 The southern custom of the bird
 That soon as frosts are due
 Adopts a better latitude.
 We are the birds that stay,
 The shiverers round farmers' doors,
 For whose reluctant crumb
 We stipulate, till pitying snows
 Persuade our feathers home.

(L 278)

More than offering just simple consolation, Dickinson's poem, as a result of intense experience, reads as a series of strategic names for life, death, the afterlife, spiritual hardship, and heaven, to name a few. Such names, structured in part by religious thought, lead the speaker into greater social awareness. We sense also that she seeks to carry the burden of suffering to alleviate the suffering of others. Hence, through wordplay, Dickinson transforms her language into a poem of deep consolation to comfort the Norcrosses in their grief. This poem is a good example of how Dickinson's writing is often as intensely private as it is profoundly social.