Dickinson

Selected Poems and Commentaries

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in proverbs do we normally find forward movement measured in inches: "Give him an inch and he'll take an ell" (an ell was a measure used in England, a unit of forty-five inches). Advancing by inches, plank by plank, over a Sea, calls to mind "walking the plank," the capital punishment inflicted on sailors. (For a poem about walking the plank beyond the final inch, see "This is the place they hoped before," 1284, J 1264.) "I stepped from Plank to Plank" shows no visible landscape—only the illimitable extent of the starry sky above and the unfathomed Sea below. To walk with the Sea about one's feet and *feel* (Dickinson's extraordinary verb in the circumstances) the Stars above one's Head is to envisage no possible salvation in any human being, any civilization, or any ship. Only a spiritual body could "feel" at the same moment the Stars and the Sea.

The vastness surrounding the unstable Planks suggests the many connotations of "precarious." Originally meaning "dependent on the will of another," it comes from the Latin for "prayer" (*prex, preces*) and has since taken on such meanings as (I reduce the *OED*'s list) "liable to fail," "hazardous," "fraught with physical danger," "at risk of falling or other accident." A "precarious" situation makes one feel the need to implore authority to provide a less hazardous environment. But in Dickinson's poem, there is no such authority: one will walk with a "precarious Gait" until death. "Experience"—itself also from Latin (*experientia,* the act of trying)—means "to put to the test." Like any "experiment," this trial should have a result. But walking slowly and cautiously, step by step, over and under a void, produces no visible outcome here, except the escape, for a temporary inch, from fatality. The poem begins in everyday Anglo-Saxon language, to emphasize the literality of "I stepped from Plank to Plank"—but by the end, to represent gained Wisdom, Dickinson moves to the polysyllabic Latinate "precarious" and "Experience." The physical word "Gait," however (coming from the same Teutonic root as "go"), confirms the "literal" side of the allegory.

[J 875]

930
883

The Poets light but Lamps -
Themselves - go out -
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns -
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference -

In nineteenth-century lamps, a wick floats in a liquid medium such as oil or kerosene; the lamplighter ignites the wick, which continues to give light indefinitely if the fuel is regularly replenished. God was the original provider of light, with his *Fiat Lux.* He, being eternal, could not "go out," but poets, being mortal, do. Their stimulating effect on other Wicks, however, continues after their death—if the Light the Wicks produce be "vital." If the Light is vital, the poetry-Wicks "inhere" (stick, cling) Age after Age, as Suns do. Each Age becomes a Lens, which, both focusing and diffusing the Light, goes on, "disseminating" (aggrandizing) its total breadth out to light's Circumference (potentially, the whole world).

Why do some poems last? asks Dickinson. Any Age has a great number of Poets, and each one creates a Lamp emitting the Light of a certain spectrum of sensibility. All of these Poets, as physical beings, perish; and, in the case of most, their poems perish too, as the era of their creation expires. Daringly, Dickinson begins her poem with the Poet's end: she will "go out." What will make her Light "vital" instead of mortal? The great example of agelessly vital light is that of the Sun: "For as the sun is daily new and old, / So is my love still telling what is told" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 76). But since "vital" Poets are many, poetic "Suns" are many, too.

Does the Light keep on burning, invariant, Age after Age? That was Shakespeare's hope in his "eternizing" sonnets. Dickinson goes him one better, explaining that "vital" poetry survives because each era produces an indi-

vidual historical "Lens" of its own that serves, like the lens of a lighthouse, to focus and spread light. If the Lens of each era finds something on which to focus in the poetry of earlier ages, then once again the Light is revitalized and disseminated. To "disseminate" means to scatter seeds; and the enlarging of the circumference of a light by its projection through a lens enables the light to function once again as a Sun functions, producing from seeds both growth and fruit.

The poem's language—which speaks of a lamp, a wick, a medium, ignition, light, and the dissemination of light by means of a lens—belongs to an illustration in optics. What saves the poet's precision from being chilly is the second, epitaphic, line, "Themselves - go out - ". The poem is written at a great distance from that mortal fate; it sees, as God sees, a panorama of Age succeeding Age. Dickinson allows for the appeal of different poems to different Ages (the lens of one Age may fix more rarely here, more frequently there) and also for the difference between eras (as between convex and concave lenses), but the affirmation that every Age is a new Lens for old Light is a reassuring one: somewhere, at some time, the vital poem will find its audience. If the mortal poets go "out," Dickinson will rhyme the word of their death with "Light," the word of their survival. And the small circle of the "Lens" rhymes with (as it resembles and disseminates) the Poet's "Circumference." The Circumference widens as each era adds a new Lens, until finally no limit can be placed on the influence of poetic radiance.

[J 883]

935

As imperceptibly as Grief
The Summer lapsed away -
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy -
A Quietness distilled
As Twilight long begun,
Or Nature spending with herself
Sequestered Afternoon -
The Dusk drew earlier in -
The Morning foreign shone -
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,
As Guest, that would be gone -
And thus, without a Wing
Or service of a Keel
Our Summer made her light escape
Into the Beautiful -

Once again, as in "Further in Summer than the Birds - " (*895), Dickinso writes of the invisible turn of the year from Summer to Autumn. "As impe ceptibly as Grief" was originally an eight-stanza poem. In cutting her poe to half its draft size, reducing it to four stanzas, Dickinson demonstrates, in "Further in Summer," the sternness she exercised against her own chan The first two and last two stanzas were kept; the middle four were excis (and consequently do not appear in Ralph Franklin's *Reading Edition*). He are the four cut stanzas concerning autumn, reprinted from Version A, wi my right-column list of their essential noticings:

Sobriety inhered	Sobriety
Though gaudy influence	Gaudiness (redness)
The Maple lent unto the Road	
And graphic Consequence	Fallen leaves