GOING, GOING, GONE: DICKINSON'S SUBJECTIVE MOVE TOWARDS THE INVISIBLE

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Early biographers and critics of Emily Dickinson often portrayed her as a reclusive and shy spinster who hid herself away from the patriarchal nineteenth-century society. They indicate her poetry reflects the anguish and desperation of a woman who was unwilling or unable to exist normally in an oppressive Victorian community. Of course this isn't the full picture. Most all critics now agree that the gendered myths about a reclusive, powerless, virginal, feeble, and love sick creature which populated the early responses to Dickinson and her poetry were typical patriarchal responses to a writer whose imagery they couldn't or didn't want to understand. That they were drawn to the images of smallness, reclusiveness and perceived helplessness instead of images of explosive volcanoes or loaded guns is not surprising. But since the works of critics like Adrienne Rich and Margaret Homans,[i] we can easily see the images of a powerful subjectivity at work in many of her poems that use typical images of power. The problem is how to incorporate the tiny persona that often is the subject of her other poems into this newer reading of Dickinson. Rather than examining the "bird and bee poems" as a separate more sentimental heuristic that doesn't correlate with the more powerful and explosive poems, it is instructive to look at how the gnat complements the loaded gun or the butterfly responds to the volcano. Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery reflects her lifestyle choices. She is able to show in her poetry how a small secluded existence helped her to have the flexibility to rise to triumphant literary heights. Henry Weels claims, "Emily Dickinson was wholly free because of her complete sincerity and command of reality" (39). Her poems reveal this power and agencythat comes from choosing a small existence.

In Dickinson's poems we are shown how smallness provides the opportunity for detachment and anonymity, which can be beneficial. Usually described as an undesirable state in much of Dickinson criticism, it should be noted that a small existence can be a means to identity and power. As Karl Keller, in "Notes on Sleeping with Emily Dickinson" claims:

> In an effort "to live apart from a cultural tradition that no longer sustain[ed her]," she "withdr[e]w from life to her upstairs room" and wrote poems for us. Where a man, Hawthorne, faced up to the cultural changes and thought about them, a woman, Emily Dickinson, did what any sensible and sensitive woman would do, withdraw and feel the change going on, so there would be fine poems of tension for us to read. (76)

Since subjectivity is dependent upon acts of separation, by being ambiguous and staying unpublished, Dickinson is able to gain the ability to constantly revise and maintain control over her poems and strengthen her position in the literary world. In this way, when Dickinson writes, "The Soul selects her own Society -- / Then -- shuts the Door --" (P 303)[ii], it is a powerful choice, or as Maryanne Garbowsky, in *The House Without the Door*, says, "impervious, and imperial . . . she makes her choice, which is forever fixed and inscrutable" (134). By authoritatively choosing her own small circle of friends, and closing the door on the larger world, Dickinson is able to broaden her horizons internally without the distraction or oppression of outside interference.

Dickinson praises a small lifestyle saying, ""The most important population / Unnoticed dwell, / They have a heaven each instant / Not any hell" (P 1746). She also shows how, when left

alone and unnoticed, one can be as content as a mouse in heaven: “Snug in seraphic Cupboards / To nibble all the day, / While unsuspecting Cycles / Wheel solemnly away! " (P 61), or find comfort in "the smallest Room" with just a "little Lamp, and Book -- / And one Geranium" (P 486) for company. Likewise, George Monteiro claims, in "Dickinson's 'I'm Nobody! Who are you?'" that private anonymity prevents "the potential auctioning by others of her very mind" (262). This is why Dickinson can write so boldly and triumphantly, "I'm Nobody! Who are You?" As John Emerson Todd, in *Emily Dickinson's Use of Persona*, says, "What she implies, of course, is that the 'Nobody" is the real 'Somebody'" (10), and so her plea of "Don't tell they'd advertise" (P 288) has real weight. It seems the benefits of having a secret and quiet existence make it worth protecting.

Another advantage of being small is it allows for the opportunity of escape, and the freedom and agility which goes along with it. Gilbert and Gubar state Dickinson's "was a soul whose 'Bandaged moments' were frequently supplanted by 'moments of Escape'" (606). This power of escape and flight is expressed strongly through her (often overlooked as sentimental) poems about birds, bees, butterflies, and gnats which exemplifies how "The smallest Citizen that flies / Is heartier than we --" (P 1374). If we believe Milton was attempting to write poetry that could "soar / Aboveth' Aonian Mount" (PL I 14-15), Dickinson seems to be able to fly herself through her poetry. She indicates that life itself can be good if it is small and light: "Of Being is a Bird / . . . . / It soars -- and shifts -- and whirls -- / And measures with the Clouds / In easy -- even -- dazzling pace -- / No different the Birds --" (P 653). It seems her "Delight is as the flight -- / Or in the Ratio of it " (P 257), and her "Hope is the thing with feathers --" (P 254). In other words, living a bird-like existence has its advantages.

Dickinson's poems about birds show how being small can thrive on this advantage. Birds are able to flee danger as well as escape boredom.Dickinson writes "I envy Nests of Sparrows --" which "Have Summer's leave to play --" (P 498). She realizes that the small bird can escape when there is danger, writing, "Quick! A Sharper rustling! / And this linnet flew!" (P 27). Dickinson's small image of herself as a bird gives her a sense of control which enables her to get things accomplished. In " I was a Phoebe -- nothing more --," Dickinson compares herself as poet to a little bird which is able to use small twigs or scraps to build a nest: "The little note that others dropt / I fitted into place --" (P 1009). This ironic or possibly bitter answer to the male literary society that might have attempted to keep her small or in her place creates a powerful image of good Yankee thrift and perseverance. Dickinson writes:

> I was a Phoebe -- nothing more --
> A Phoebe -- nothing less --
> The little note that others dropt
> I fitted into place --
>
> I dwelt too low that any seek --
> Too shy, that any blame --
> A Phoebe makes a little print
> Upon the Floors of Fame -- (P 1009).

Not only is she able to avoid problems by being little, but she is able to make her "little print / Upon the Floors" of literary greatness.

Even smaller than birds, insects hold an important place in Dickinson's poetry. They too have the power of anonymity and escape. John Ciardi's "Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died'," states "Any number of poems illustrate her delight in the special significance of tiny living things" (67). Therefore, Dickinson's poems about gnats provide us with a fascinating relationship between power and size. Not only can a gnat escape the boredom of life, but it seems to be "mightier" than

humans: "Nor like the Gnat -- had I -- / The privilege to fly / And seek a Dinner for myself -- / How mightier He -- than I -- " (P 612).

Bees too can be hard to grasp, and sometimes they even taunt larger beings. Dickinson writes of a bee which, "Stoops -- to an easy Clover -- / Dips -- evades -- teases -- deploys -- / Then -- to the Royal Clouds / Lifts his light Pinnace -- / Heedless of the Boy -- (P319). Bees, like birds, deserve our admiration and envy. They too can escape and lead a varied and exiting life, even in (or because of) their small existence. Dickinson relates:

> Could I But ride indefinite
> As doth the Meadow Bee
> And visit only where I liked
> And No one visit me
> . . . . . .
> I said "But just to be a Bee"
> Upon a Raft of Air
> And row in Nowhere all day long
> And anchor "off the Bar" (P 661).

Possibly the most interesting of the insects in Dickinson's poetry is the butterfly. Butterflies are often thought of as frail and beautiful, which may reflect what nineteenth century society felt were redeeming qualities for woman. Surely Dickinson is coyly reflecting on this idea when she writes of the butterflies' unique abilities: "Two Butterflies went out at Noon -- / And waltzed upon a Farm -- / Then stepped straight through the Firmament -- / And rested, on a Beam --" (P 533), or "And so with Butterflies -- / Seen magic -- through the fright / That they will cheat the sight -- / And Dower latitudes far on -- (P 257). Like the Butterfly that wraps itself in a cocoon and turns its energy inward as beauty is created, Dickinson finds power in her small secluded existence, and creates a glorious display. It is no wonder the butterfly is a recurring image for Dickinson. It exemplifies that both power and creativity can be achieved through a meager existence:

> The Butterfly upon the Sky,
> That doesn't know its Name
> And hasn't any tax to pay
> And hasn't any Home
> Is just as high as you and I,
> And higher, I believe,
> So soar away and never sigh
> And that's the way to grieve -- (P 1521).

Jane Eberwein, in *Dickinson:Strategies of Limitation*, makes particular note of Dickinson's butterfly and cocoon poems. Citing both "A fuzzy fellow without feet" (P 173) and "Cocoon above! Cocoon below!" (P 129) she notices how Dickinson "reveled in the cocoon's spectacular 'secret' of its seasonal unfolding" but seems convinced that while these images are like others Dickinson uses for "smashing through that icy barrier" (169) between life and death, the butterfly images are mostly "humorous" or "fun." But like many other of her images that may on the surface appear to be sentimental or lighthearted, the butterfly and other small creatures provide as powerful an image as anything in her poetry.

Embracing the small and insignificant can also be seen as a strategy for survival in a world without a place for powerful women. Furthermore, Dickinson may feel her small size, or low position in society, gives her a special power over others. In a somewhat sarcastic tone, Dickinson shows how as a woman she has been denied equal treatment: "God gave a Loaf to every Bird -- / But just a Crumb -- to Me -- / I dare not eat it -- tho' I starve -- / My poignant luxury -- " (P 791). But Dickinson also demonstrates how being small enables one to survive on just a " crumb." She writes: "A little

bread -- a crust a crumb -- / a little trust -- a demijohn -- / Can keep the soul alive -- / . . . . . / A modest lot -- A fame petite -- / A brief Campaign of sting and sweet / Is plenty! Is enough!"(P 159). Like the survivor of the concentration camp or torture chamber, Dickinson writes of the ability to eke out an existence with very little material sustenance. She shows her impressive power by highlighting the meager rations life has given her. " It would have starved a Gnat --" she writes, "To live so small as I -- / And yet I was a living Child -- / With Food's necessity" (P 612). Dickinson sees herself as superior because of this ability to survive. She has overcome large obstacles, and lives to say, "I deem that I -- with but a Crumb -- / Am sovereign of them all --" (P 791).

Gilbert and Gubar claim that "Dickinson insistently described herself as a tiny person, a wren, a daisy, a mouse, a child, [and] a modest little creature easily mastered by circumference and circumstance" (587). Even so, these small creatures are not all so "easily mastered."In Dickinson's poetry, as small things achieve greatness; seeds blossom into flowers and spread into meadows. Indeed, in her poems the miniscule can start chain reactions of atomic proportions, and a slight gesture can have momentous ramifications. Dickinson writes, "By Chivalries as tiny, / A Blossom, or a Book, / The seeds of smiles are planted -- / Which blossom in the dark" (P 55). The subtle power is echoed later, in one of her most famous "bee poems." Just like the bobolink, which is the " Sorcerer" (P 1279) of the meadow, the tiny bee has the magical power to do great things: "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, / One clover, and a bee" (P 1755). Embracing these images gives a powerful subject position to what Dickinson may have felt as her own project: that poetic greatness could be achieved by someone so "small."

There is an even more powerful and mighty aspect to being small. Just as a subversive volcano might wipe out a village, a disease-spreading bug has the power to destroy an entire community. Dickinson writes, "A Gnat's minutest Fan / Sufficient to obliterate / A Tract of Citizen -- " (P 422). In this poem she is noticing the amazing power of the slightest action, and emphasizing this through a mosquito's destructive capacity for spreading malaria, a metaphor for her own subject position and ability to impact a community. It is, after all, the lowly fly, which Todd claims is "one of the minor annoyances of life that occupies the center stage at the climactic moment when she loses consciousness" (69), and which has the great power to move between life and the light of death: "With Blue -- uncertain stumbling Buzz --" (P 465). This type of great power, echoed in the small gnat that the giant cannot tolerate (P 641), or the emperor who kneels "Upon [the] Mat" (P 303) of the lowly, is one that not only transcends in spite of its size, but truly benefits from smallness. After all (in a line that might be a direct message to her readership) Dickinson claims "The Gnat's supremacy is large as Thine --" (P 583).

If identity and power come through a small existence, it makes sense that the smaller the size the more effective the image. While most critics have seen the poems that deal with invisibility to be about Dickinson's interest in the afterlife, or as Eberwein claims her "fierce determination to find what lay outside" (264), Dickinson's focus on the invisible may be another attempt at adopting a powerful subject position. The unobservable snake in the grass, or the "minor Nation" of crickets that can be sensed but not seen, can be easily aligned with the Christian God that is so reluctant to appear. Invisibility denotes power on the divine level. Eberwein's claim that Dickinson "habitually conceived of smallness as the starting point of her quest, the initial condition beyond which only progress was possible. She aspired to growth . . . (14), could be turned around. If this is the case, the poems (in a progression of the theme of questing) should not be imagined with small as the starting point, but with the quest moving towards smallness and the high point of invisibility as the final goal. To be "A Speck upon a Ball --" is a triumph that allows the speaker the power to move "Beyond the Dip of Bell --" (P378). Often giving her speakers this subject position of existing on the threshold, at the "edge of eternity," or on the very "margins of subjectivity and representation," Sabine Sielke, in *Fashioning*

the Female Subject, feels Dickinson's poetry does not create boundaries, but opens possibilities and allows her speakers to "peep into the unknown into paradise" (43).

This incredible power of the invisible world is seen in many of her most famous poems. The subject ofDickinson's "Further in Summer than the Birds" (P 1068) is the almost imperceptible change of season from summer to fall. Using liturgical language throughout, Dickinson frames her poem in religious tropes, but it is not a poem that is a conclusive meditation about death or immortality. Contemplating the unknowable, the speaker ison the threshold of an understanding of eternity. It may be that something from the half forgotten past, or something that may come after the end of the poem, could point to some final wisdom that would enhance the understanding of mortal and immortal existence.

Like many of Dickinson's meditation poems, "Further in Summer than the Birds" proceeds from a description of an event in the natural world to a suggestion of its inner effects on the speaker. Invoking the precise moment where summer begins to wane, the poet is able to notice the otherwise "gradual" change of seasons only because of the sound of the "minor Nation" of insects in the grass. We can deduce what these insects are because of the title, "My Cricket," that she attaches to her poem in a letter to Thomas Niles (L 813). Coming much later than the spring song of birds, that foretell the coming of summer, the sound of crickets prophesy a similar change in the seasonal cycle. This yearly cycle brings on feelings of "Enlarging Loneliness" that suggest the feelings of loss for time past and regrets for things departed, and, coming at the moment when the world is the most alive, ". . . at Noon / When August burning low" and no "Furrow" is apparent "on the Glow" of nature, it seems particularly difficult to perceive. But while nothing else in nature appears to be visibly changed, the observant speaker can read the sign of the chirping insects as they perform a ritualistic "Mass," and meditate upon the "Difference" it makes for nature and the speaker. Like "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," where we hear the snake through an alliteration of the s sound, "The Grass divides as with a Comb -- / A spotted shaft is seen -- / And then it closes at your feet / And opens further on --" (P 986), we don't really see the creatures clearly, but we can tell that they are there. The power that they hold over us is in part their ability to not be seen.

A case could be made that in "Further in Summer than the Birds," Dickinson is not stressing a belief in traditional Christian immortality. In fact if death in nature is supposed to tell us anything about human mortality, it is interesting to note that it is referred to with terms that signify that it is something that doesn't require conquering. There is no need for a savior when the dying of the year is already filled with "Grace," and death itself is a moment of "Repose" or peaceful retirement. While there may be some nostalgia for the beauty that was life, the "Repose" of death is clearly not undesirable and by no means does it suggest the possibility of damnation. Likewise, while references to religious rites abound, it is striking that no direct references to Christ or God appear in the poem. Furthermore, just as the speaker of the poem is unable to commune with the mass of the crickets, he or she is unreflective of the Eucharist of the Christian church during this scene. In other words, this is not a poem that is centered in the traditional Christian ritual, rather it is highlighting the ritual of a miniature invisible society in nature and its awesome powerfulness.

While Christ made the sacrifice to bring meaning to the world in Christian doctrine, in Dickinson's law of nature, sacrificial death itself brings meaning to existence. The summer of life is sacrificed to the Repose of winter, the song of the birds gives way to the chirp of the crickets, and the sun high in the noon sky foretells of the setting sun to come. This "gradual" but inevitable process is forever cyclical and eternal. Likewise, just as the Christian ceremony brings about a change in the believer, the rites of nature produce a "Difference" in those that can observe them. While nature doesn't point to Christian immortality, it does show a cycle of mortality that is evident in its gradual process and "Custom" of death.

It is these reflections that enable the speaker to have a realization about the nature of the event being experienced. With the hard consonant alliteration "Druidic Difference" Dickinson confronts her reader with the striking distinctions between humanity and nature. This is a ritual of crickets, not of humans, and therefore the meaning seems furthermost away (or "Antiquest") just as we seem to be closest to it. That Dickinson would align herself with this "minor [invisible] Nation" that is so far removed from human Christian society is not surprising. As Karl Keller claims "Emily Dickinson cannot find a center in (male-made) society, in (male-made) institutions, in her (male-made) home, and not even in the (male-made) universe. . . . God is, for her, not at the center, not a hold on things, not a focus. Only herself -- " (70).

Like many of her poems, "Further in Summer than the Birds" is a poem that is consciously ambiguous. The meanings we are looking for are "Further" beyond, just out of reach. This is not a poem about limiting the possibilities for understanding, because it provides a blueprint for opening up possibilities of knowing. Dickinson, as a complex and sensitive observer, shows how it is only by pushing the envelope and by being especially attuned to the small events that surround us that we can get a glimpse of something profound.

Dickinson has a desire to grasp this profound yet invisible presence. If women have been excluded from and underrepresented in Western philosophical discourse, and in essence from Western history as Luce Irigaray and others[iii] have suggested, the desire to recover that which is invisible is understandable. Indeed, women have been shown to speak through the empty spaces or blanks in their texts by critics like Kristiva and Pollak.[iv]Sielke even claims that "Dickinson's sense of female subjectivity in history originated from her early reception of the myth of biblical Eve" (171) and Eve's own subject position in the text. Dickinson's own interest in the invisible may be traced to this "Original Woman" who embodies the concepts of her "Love for the absent" (L 31) that is so intriguing to Dickinson. Her fascination with and alignment to this state of absence is seen in many of her poems.

In "The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants" (P 1298), Dickinson points out the difficulty in deciphering nature's often mixed or unsympathetic messages. On the surface, the poem appears to be a childishly whimsical piece about the jovial interplay of nature with humanity. With this reading Dickinson seems to be playfully analyzing nature through the lens of the mushroom so that she can underscore the wonder of nature as she conjectures about the nature of existence. The mushroom, as an elfin buffoon, pops up in stanza one "in a Truffled Hut" to entertain mankind as "Vegetation's Juggler" with magical and wondrous theatricality. Like a jester in the court of nature, the mushroom pulls the rug out from under us, but still has a harmless "Alibi." As fanciful as a character in a children's nursery rhyme, the mushroom enacts a symbolic drama that may be difficult for humanity to understand but that is playful none the less. A more mature reading, however, provides a conflicting view.

Barely hidden below the surface, like a partially exposed truffle, there lies a much bleaker view of nature. The way nature moves in and out of focus in this poem underscores the difficulty in discerning what reality is in nature. In the first stanza the mushroom has a definite presence as the "Elf" in the "Hut," and later in the third stanza the mushroom is "Vegetation's Juggler," clearly taking on an important role. Furthermore, in the final stanza the mushroom is personified as an "Apostate" that undermines itself. What is interesting to note, in comparison to these intermittent concrete images, is that the mushroom becomes faded and abstract in stanzas two and four. It moves out of focus when Dickinson uses the vague distanced wording "As if it tarried" and "as if the Grass were pleased." It seems that the image of the mushroom falters just as we are beginning to visualize it. In other words, as we are trying to think more deeply about it, its image blurs and we are left with nothing definite.

This mushroom is also fast moving: "its whole Career / Is shorter than a Snake's Delay," and yet it appears "As if it tarried always." The final stanza brings all the ambiguity and dichotomy to a head as if the poem itself has mushroomed into a commentary about the character of nature. Here the mushroom can be seen to define nature by adopting its "supple face" at the same time that it seems to be rebelling against it. Dickinson's rhyme scheme reinforces the wavering reality in the poem. Three stanzas in the poem have a clear nursery rhyme type of structure. The hard rhyme "not" and "Spot" is echoed in the third stanza's "Alibi" and "hie." The final stanza's double rhyme "Face" and "Apostate," and "contemn" and "Him," give it a solid and clear rhyming pattern. The intermittent stanzas, two and four, have a more ambiguous rhyme that matches the vagueness of its subject; therefore, the mushroom loses its strong presence just as the rhyme scheme becomes more muddled. That she is able to visually grab the mushroom in the end with the line "it is Him!" is a sign of her fantasy of embracing this invisible realm.

If the patriarchal society has made women's history insignificant or invisible, Dickinson has made clever use of the world given to her. She may even have found the power to toy with her male society. David Rutledge's insightful reading of "Good to hide, and hear 'em hunt!" paints a picture of the poet as a trickster (not unlike the mushroom) in which "she may step out from her self-imposed concealment, dazzling immediately, if she decides to let herself become discovered by the reader. Instead, however, she has decided to hide" (139). In fact, Rutledge suggests that Dickinson has a powerful position in the poem, as the mysterious fox-like poet that is hunted by the hound-reader. This position is a direct challenge for the reader, and exemplifies the power that can be associated with invisibility. As Rutledge states: "Dickinson's game of hide-and-seek has become a game of 'know and tell,' but . . . the game is laced with doubts as to whether there will be a reader good enough to successfully seek her out" (140). From this position she questions: "Can one find the rare Ear / Not too dull --" (P 842) that could appreciate her greatness? As stealthy and clever as she is, from what society would deem a position of meekness, the answer may be "not without being exceptionally clever readers ourselves." If we underestimate her talents or position, the rug may be sharply snatched from under us.

Dickinson's poems can always be reassessed because of the many facets they contain and the open nature of her verse. That small objects can be powerful in her poems, like the atom waiting to explode, reflects volumes about the society in which she lived, and the way she was willing to respond to it. In the nineteenth-society, where feelings of futility could have dominated her creative powers, Dickinson chose to control her situation with the means available to her.

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[i]See Rich, Adrienne. "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." *On Lies Secrets and Silence*. New York: Norton, 1979, 157-84. andHomans, Margaret. *Woman Writers and Poetic Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.

[ii]Throughout this essay, I will be using the Johnson edition for both Dickinson's poetry and letters. I will use the capital P to refer to poem numbers and the capital L to refer to letters.

[iii]See Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca: Cornrll UP, 1985.

[iv]See Krisreva, Julia. *A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980., and Pollak, Vivian R. Dickinson: *The Anxiety of Gender*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. 1984.