



Memoranda and Documents

“BRIDGES OFTEN GO”: EMILY DICKINSON’S BRIDGE POEMS

SUSAN VAN ZANTEN

NO longer viewed as an eccentric recluse who lived romantically outside of history in the hidden recesses of the second floor of her family’s grand house in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson had, we now know, a poetic imagination that roamed freely across nineteenth-century politics, economics, popular culture, and science.¹ Reading the many periodicals that came to the Dickinson home, communicating with a wide circle of correspondents, and observing her father’s diverse business dealings, she kept abreast of her era’s innovations, including the railroad, the telegraph, and recent scientific theories.² However, scholars have yet to adequately consider her knowledge and use of another engineering marvel of the age. The bridge—its construction, destruction, and the rhetoric surrounding it—plays into a number of Dickinson’s poems, and the ways in which it does so reflects traditional Christian concepts regarding faith and salvation.

¹See, e.g., Faith Barrett, “‘Drums off the Phantom Battlements’: Dickinson’s War Poems in Discursive Contexts,” in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 133–56; Benjamin Friedlander, “Emily Dickinson and the Battle of Ball’s Bluff,” *PMLA* 124 (October 2009): 1482–1599; Betsy Erkkila, “Emily Dickinson and Class,” *American Literary History* 4 (1992): 1–27; and David S. Reynolds, “Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167–90.

²On trains, see Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), pp. 15–43. On the telegraph, see Jerusha Hull McCormack, “Domesticating Delphi: Emily Dickinson and the Electro-Magnetic Telegraph,” *American Quarterly* 55 (December 2003): 569–601, and Carol Quinn, “Dickinson, Telegraphy, and the Aurora Borealis,” *Emily Dickinson Journal* 13 (Fall 2004): 58–78. Robin Peel examines Dickinson’s scientific interests in *Emily Dickinson and the Hill of Science* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).



The Connecticut River Valley in which Emily Dickinson lived out her days was replete with thick woods, velvet-green hillsides, and scores of bridges. Near Amherst, major bridges crossed the river to the south at Northampton and Springfield and to the north at Sunderland. A local history of Sunderland notes, "So far as can be ascertained, more bridges have been built here than at any place along the course of the Connecticut River," and the Dickinson family attentively followed the checkered fortunes of these bridges.³ The first Sunderland Bridge, built on wooden trestles, opened in 1812. Five years later it was carried off by ice, and another bridge was not erected until 1822. That one, again built on wood trestles, lasted ten years before the spring floods washed it out. The third bridge, constructed on stone piers in 1832, was thought to be invincible, but it collapsed in 1839 "as Tim Rice was driving a flock of sheep across on the way to market."⁴ Sunderland bridges were risky enterprises—spring thaw's high water and ice flows destroyed three more bridges in 1850, 1857, and 1869—and their vulnerability notorious. "Such was the reputation of the bridges around the middle of the nineteenth century," local historian Grace Hubbard remarks, "that as spring came with ice breaking up and the river in flood stage, the boys always ran to the river bank following school to see if the bridge was going out."⁵

The Connecticut River not only promoted trade throughout the valley; it inhibited it as well, as Tim Rice's unsuccessful bridge crossing illustrates. Boat traffic carried goods along a route descending through Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, but the river was a major barrier between western and eastern New England. To address the matter, public-spirited and fiscally shrewd men invested in bridges. The first seven Sunderland bridges were privately owned and operated by the Sunderland Bridge Corporation, which charged tolls ranging from 3 cents for a foot passenger to 20 cents for a double team.⁶ Given his propensity for speculation, it is not surprising that Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, was

³Grace R. Hubbard, "Bridges," in *History of the Town of Sunderland, Massachusetts, 1899–1954* (Orange, Mass.: Art Press, [1954?]), p. 27.

⁴Hubbard, "Bridges," p. 28.

⁵Hubbard, "Bridges," p. 29.

⁶Hubbard, "Bridges," p. 28.

a shareholder.⁷ His yearly financial inventories enumerate the stock he owned in the Sunderland Bridge Corporation between 1853 and 1873, with a total valuation ranging from \$560 to \$3,000, and shares were still among his holdings when he died. In 1857, when the fifth bridge was destroyed, the value of Dickinson's stock dropped from \$42 a share to \$40.⁸ About two years later, Emily Dickinson wryly refers to the instability of such ventures as the Sunderland Bridge in the third stanza of an early poem:

Why – look out for the little brook in March,
When the rivers overflow,
And the snows come hurrying from the hills,
And the bridges often go –⁹

In a poem Dickinson's most recent editor, R. W. Franklin, has dated to 1865, a precarious wooden bridge becomes a metaphor for the uncertainty of the human condition:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea –

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience – [F926]

Although some commentators have associated the movement described in the first line as that of a victim forced to walk a pirate's

⁷On Edward Dickinson's investments, see Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), pp. 89–90, 346–47.

⁸Author's personal communication with Dotti Case, vice president of the Swampfield Historical Society, 18 September 2005, based on "Edward Dickinson's Inventories, 1850–1873," a partial list, compiled by Domhnall Mitchell. The Dickinson Inventories are in the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

⁹Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 53, poem 94. Subsequent references to Dickinson's poems will be by the number assigned by Franklin. Both Franklin and Johnson, Dickinson's first authoritative editor, date this poem to 1859 (Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* [Boston: Little Brown, 1958], p. 64).

plank,¹⁰ the fact that the poem's speaker steps *from* one plank *to* another can be more accurately construed as her carefully negotiating the slats of a wooden bridge.¹¹ In the midst of crossing the bridge, the speaker reflects on her liminal, or threshold, experience, poised as she is spatially between the river's two banks and between the sky above and the water below. That physical point in space takes on metaphysical dimensions when the poem's speaker feels herself touched by the immensity above, figured as distant stars, and that below, a river's waters now transformed into the depths of the sea, a scene the poem effectively intensifies by craftily using the preposition "about" rather than "above" or "below" and by syntactically doubling "I felt" by means of the enjambment between the head and feet. The word "final" then explicitly casts that liminal condition as that between life and death, quite literally, the human condition: "I knew not but the next / Would be my final inch - ." The fullness of that moment coupled with an utter lack of knowledge—the "This"—at last produces the poem's end state, the "precarious Gait" that "Some call Experience."

In "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (F340), the plank gives way, and the poem's speaker falls into the immensity described in F926: "And then a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down - / And hit a World, at every plunge, / And Finished knowing - then -" (ll. 17–20). In F1297, "A Single Clover Plank" initially prevents a Bee, poised "Twixt Firmament above / And Firmament below" (ll. 5–6), "From sinking in the sky -" (l. 4). Although the plank does not break, it is weak ("idly swaying"). "Responsible to nought," it allows the wind to carry off its visitor, and the "Bumble Bee was not -" (ll. 9, 10, 12), the "nought" that governs the cosmos rhyming perfectly and punningly with the "not" the Bee becomes. And yet, "This harrowing event / Transpiring in the Grass / Did not so much as wring from him / A wandering 'Alas' -" (ll. 13–16).



The Bee of F1297 accepts its fate without complaint, but humans are generally not capable of doing so. Nature refused to let the

¹⁰George Monteiro and Barton Levi St. Armand, "The Experienced Emblem: A Study of the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," in *Prospectus: The Annual of American Cultural Studies*, vol. 6 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1981), p. 256.

¹¹The speaker, of course, cannot readily be assigned a gender. I use the feminine pronoun here and throughout as a matter of convenience for readability.

Sunderland Bridge stand for long, but men kept rebuilding it. Employing the new field of scientific stress analysis, nineteenth-century engineers were continually refining stronger and safer bridge building materials and techniques. According to Eric DeLony, chief of the Historic American Engineering Record for the U.S. Park Service from 1987 to 2003, significant nineteenth-century innovations included the development of pneumatic caissons to sink foundations into bedrock and the use of hydraulic cement, which hardened underwater, both of which facilitated the construction of more stable piers and abutments.¹² Such cutting-edge procedures were applied to the construction of the St. Louis Eads Bridge in 1874, “which became a national symbol as it was built across the Mississippi. . . . Its construction [was] followed avidly in the press, becoming a national story.”¹³ Among the periodicals driving the public’s interest in such events were *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, *Scribner’s Monthly*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, all of which were delivered to the Dickinson household.

One of the more fascinating engineering feats of the era was a bridge over the Niagara River. After the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, Niagara Falls became “the most preeminent American tourist attraction in the nineteenth century,” and when the railroad reached Niagara from the eastern seaboard in 1842, the crowds visiting the site swelled even further.¹⁴ In 1848, a suspension bridge, accommodating only carriages and pedestrians, was built across Niagara Gorge, but it “swayed and dipped under a heavy load or the wind.”¹⁵ The intensifying demands of tourism and commerce required a bridge capable of supporting a train, and German engineer John A. Roebling was selected to design the new superstructure. Roebling’s plans took into account both scientific and aesthetic concerns as he set out to achieve “a very graceful, simple, but at the same time, substantial

¹²My history draws on Eric Delony, *Context for World Heritage Bridges* (Paris: ICOMOS and TICCIH, 1996), available at <http://www.icomos.org/fr/notre-action/diffusion-des-connaissances/publications/etudes-thematiques-pour-le-patrimoine-mondial/116-english-categories/resources/publications/234-context-for-world-heritage-bridges>; accessed 5 June 2012. See also Eric Delony, “The Golden Age of the Iron Bridge,” *Invention & Technology Magazine* 10 (Fall 1994).

¹³David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 79.

¹⁴John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 12.

¹⁵“Bridges over Niagara Falls: A History and Pictorial,” at <http://www.niagarafrontier.com/bridges.html#b1>; accessed 5 June 2012.

appearance. The four massive cables, supported on isolated columns, of a very substantial make, will form the characteristic of the work; and this will be unique and striking in its effect and quite in keeping with the surrounding scenery."¹⁶ The Niagara Railroad Suspension Bridge, completed in 1855, extended 821 feet across the gorge's abyss and featured two wooden decks, the upper for trains, the lower for carriages and pedestrians (see fig. 1).

Americans were attracted to Niagara Falls to experience a complex of emotions that philosophers stretching back to Longinus have referred to as the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), Edmund Burke defined the sublime as a sensation of awe and wonder, often tinged with fear or horror, at the sight of an impressive natural phenomenon. Immanuel Kant subsequently distinguished between the mathematical sublime—characterized by endless immensity—and the dynamic sublime—characterized by awe-inspiring power and movement. In the nineteenth century, such characteristics came to be applied to engineering feats, and thus emerged the concept of the technological sublime, whereby “the awe and reverence once reserved for the Deity and later bestowed upon the visible landscape [was] directed toward technology or, rather, the technological conquest of matter.”¹⁷ In 1862, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited Niagara Falls. On his first day, he was “frantic with excitement” and describes his surroundings as “better than a church.” The next day, however, he finds that “Niagara is too much for me; my nerves shake like a bridge of wire; a vague sense of terror and unrest haunts me all the time. My head swims and reels with the ceaseless motion of the water.”¹⁸ Although the natural scenery prompts the poet's fear, his response is couched in terms associated with the sublime technology of the suspension bridge.

“Something about Bridges,” an essay by H. T. Tuckerman that appeared in the December 1863 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, demonstrates the range of conceptual associations bridges brought to mind in the nineteenth century. American bridges, Tuckerman claims, are

¹⁶Quoted in Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 253. Roebling later designed the famous Brooklyn suspension bridge.

¹⁷Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden; Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 197.

¹⁸Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with extracts from his journals and correspondences*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), p. 12.

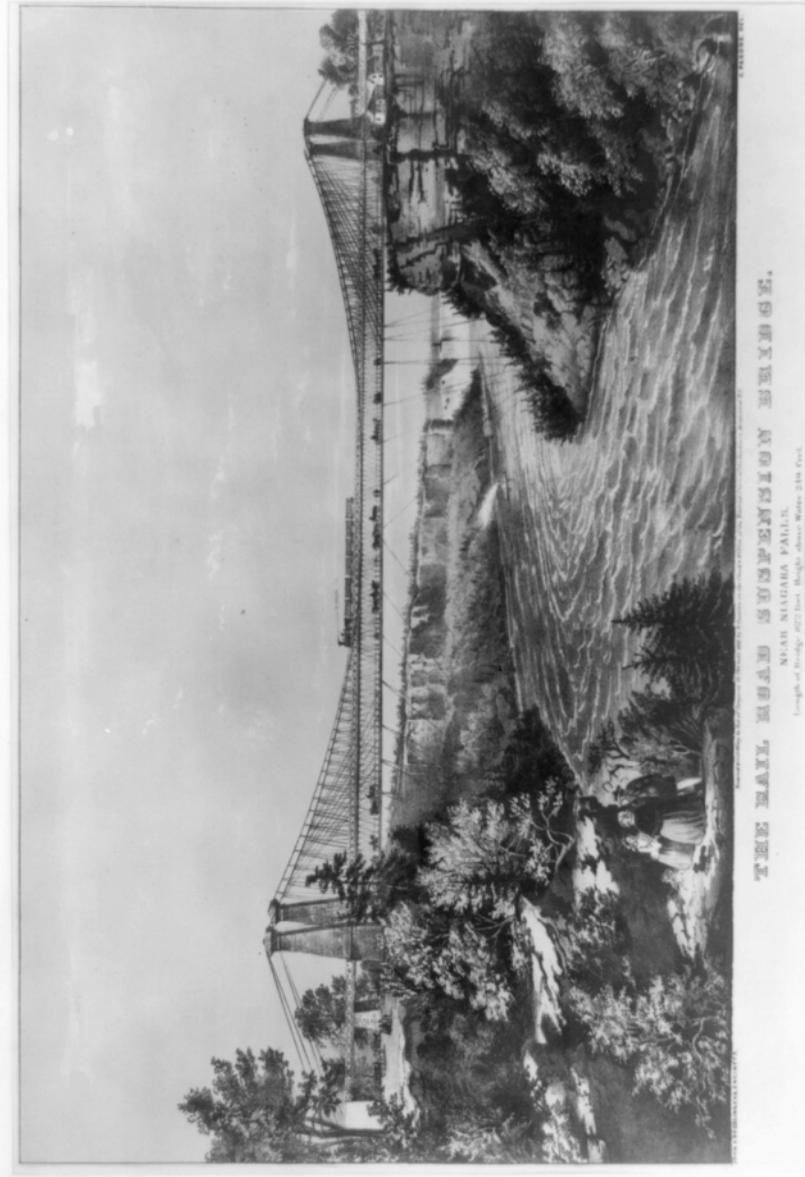


FIG. 1.—“The Rail Suspension Bridge, Near Niagara Falls.” Print by Currier and Ives. Image courtesy of The Library of Congress.

simultaneously scientific achievements, national symbols, natural phenomena, and aesthetic objects. In commenting that American bridges are sublime insofar as they are “suggestive of national power,” Tuckerman illustrates a particularly American version of the technological sublime that represents it, according to David Nye, as “an active force working for democracy.”¹⁹

Tuckerman was most interested, however, in the liminal quality of bridges. Bridges not only cross from one side of a ravine to another, but some are natural whereas others are manmade; they stand as symbols of both nature and technology. As such, bridges provoke a “spontaneous interest,” a “primitive” admiration, a rush of “sentiment.” “The Suspension Bridge at Niagara,” Tuckerman comments, “is an artificial wonder as great, in its degree, as the natural miracle of the mighty cataract which thunders forever at its side.”²⁰ In an essay that is itself rife with metaphors, Tuckerman claims, “the office of a bridge is prolific of metaphor.” To be sure, an element of a bridge’s sublimity is the peril it represents. “Our own incomplete civilization is manifest in the marvelous number of bridges that annually break down, from negligent or unscientific construction,” Tuckerman admits, returning again to the wonder of Niagara. “We have only to cross the Suspension Bridge at Niagara, or gaze up to its aerial tracery from the river . . . to feel that in this, as in all other branches of mechanical enterprise, our nation is as boldly dexterous as culpably reckless.”²¹



Emily Dickinson’s 1865 poem “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” (F978), which reveals her awareness of bridges grander than those in the vicinity of Amherst, is controlled by the trope of the bridge. The poem receives its most extended discussion in George Monteiro

¹⁹H. T. Tuckerman, “Something about Bridges,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1863, p. 747; Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, p. 33.

²⁰Tuckerman, “Something about Bridges,” pp. 741, 740, 745. Sears notes that the Niagara Suspension Bridge was “an object which itself evoked the emotion of the sublime,” in a manner similar to the great falls (*Sacred Places*, p. 191).

²¹Tuckerman, “Something about Bridges,” pp. 742, 747. Unlike philosophers of the natural sublime, those writers considering the technological sublime often overlook the dual effect of danger and admiration, fear and awe that the sublime arouses. Marx is an exception. He notes, “Quite apart from any overt criticism of the new power, it is possible to detect tremors of doubt within the rhetoric of praise. Often writers use imagery which belies their arguments” (*The Machine in the Garden*, p. 207).

and Barton Levi St. Armand's study of the relationship between Dickinson's poetry and nineteenth-century American emblem books. "Faith – is the Pierless Bridge," they posit, recalls an image from Holmes and Barber's *Emblems and Allegories* that depicts a man crossing over an abyss on a wooden plank labeled "FAITH." The plank leads into a thick, black cloud, but the towers of the Heavenly City shine in the distance. Despite the man's inability to see what lies ahead, he confidently strides forth, guided by the light emanating from the illuminated Bible he holds in his hand. The verse the emblem illustrates is from 2 Corinthians 5:7: "For we walk by faith and not by sight."²²

For Monteiro and St. Armand, what is most significant about Dickinson's poetic adaptation is that she omits both the Bible and the Heavenly City: "Dickinson assumes the perspective of a skeptical pilgrim. Her 'walker' is not a 'convert' . . . but a reluctant explorer whose view is completely obscured by an amorphous 'Vail,' behind which may lurk the face of God—or nothing at all." Dickinson's walker, they insist, is "doubtful," but once on the plank, "all exercise of free will is ended" as the fore-ordaining "Arms of Steel" compel obedience. The poem, in this reading, expresses cynicism about a bridge of faith and resists the concept of predestination. "Surely Dickinson's 'bridge' is the same narrow 'plank' that we find in Holmes and Barber," Monteiro and St. Armand claim.²³ However, were the bridge of faith a suspension bridge, a different reading emerges. Beth Doriani questions, "How can we visualize a pierless bridge?"²⁴ But the famous Niagara Falls Bridge was, in fact, pierless. Shira Wolosky argues that by depicting a bridge without supports, Dickinson undermines faith, but as the poet well knew, the pierless Niagara Suspension Bridge was legendary for its strength.²⁵

Opening with a one-syllable, strong-stressed word indicating the concept to be defined, F978 unites paradox and pun in its elaborate metaphor of a "Pierless Bridge":

²² Monteiro and St. Armand, "The Experienced Emblem," p. 256.

²³ Monteiro and St. Armand, "The Experienced Emblem," p. 258.

²⁴ Beth Maclay Doriani, *Emily Dickinson, Daughter of Prophecy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 57.

²⁵ Shira Wolosky, "Rhetoric or Not: Hymnal Tropes in Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," *New England Quarterly* 61 (June 1988): 218–21. In *Emily Dickinson and the Hill of Science*, Peel asserts that this poem contests the relationship of faith and science and can be read as either a poem of faith or of doubt (p. 140).

Faith – is the Pierless Bridge
 Supporting what We see
 Unto the Scene that We do not –
 Too slender for the eye [Ll. 1–4]

Lacking piers, intermediate vertical supports, a suspension bridge nevertheless stands, hung from cables strung between towers on opposing banks of the river. “Pierless” here also suggests the pun “peerless,” incomparable or without equal, precious. The bridge extends between “what We see” and, stretching through the enjambment, what we cannot see—described in another mischievous pun as “the Scene [seen] that We do not.” The bridge itself likewise cannot be perceived, as it is “too slender for the eye,” too thin. As Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”²⁶ The sentence that begins in the fourth line, following the dash at the end of line 3, runs without any punctuation into the second stanza to present the paradox of a slight bridge that is nonetheless as strong as steel:

It bears the Soul as bold
 As it were rocked in Steel
 With Arms of steel at either side – [Ll. 5–7]

Personified as a confident and attentive mother, the bridge has “Arms of steel,” which hold and gently rock the soul to comfort it. Rather than an easily washed-out, wooden plank bridge, the poem describes a suspension bridge—constructed of steel (mentioned twice), with two strong primary cables.

In another enjambment that, so to speak, bridges stanzas two and three, we turn our attention to the scene we cannot see—the other side of the bridge—and the poem concludes with a flurry of enjambments:

It [the bridge] joins – behind the Vail
 To what, could We presume
 The Bridge would cease to be
 To Our far, vascillating Feet
 A first Necessity. [Ll. 8–12]

²⁶All scripture references are to the Authorized King James Version, the version owned and repeatedly read by Dickinson. See Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading: 1836–1886* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 27–59.

As was often the case at Niagara, a veil of fog or steam obscures the pilgrim's vision, blocking sight of the bridge's far side, where cable stays tied the deck's superstructure to the walls of the gorge. Metaphorically, the veil alludes to the curtain in the Jewish temple that hid from ordinary eyes the Holy of Holies, the area only the high priest was permitted to enter. At the time of Christ's death, the temple veil was torn in two (Matt. 27:51), and the book of Hebrews associates the rent cloth with the Christian hope of salvation (6:19–20). "Going beyond the veil" was a common nineteenth-century euphemism for death, used especially by spiritualists and table rappers who attempted to contact the dead during séances and with Ouija boards. Such connotations render the amorphous veil less threatening while still retaining its mystery.

"To what" the bridge joins, we cannot see. But if we could see beyond the veil, we would not need faith; the bridge would not be "a first Necessity [*sic*]." Jerome Loving suggests that Dickinson may have intentionally misspelled the word "as an attempt to conflate 'necessity' and 'nescience,' for the absence of knowledge makes faith our necessity," but I think it more likely that it is yet another instance of Dickinson's relaxed approach to spelling, especially since she misspelled the word the same way in seven other poems.²⁷ Similar to the "precarious Gait" of poem F926, the "vascillating [*sic*] Feet" suggest an unsteady forward motion as well as wavering confidence, yet the metrical feet in neither poem waver, with the opening trochee of F978 the only deviation from the poems' common meter (alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter). The fact that these feet are also "far" points to the future, a time yet to come, when the hesitant feet will need the strong arms of faith to support them as they move through the veil of death to the as-yet unseen scene. The invisible bridge of faith floats mysteriously above the abyss and leads to the unknown, but it will carry the traveler as safely and securely along her journey as the Niagara Suspension Bridge. While the poem emphasizes the liminal nature of the bridge, which joins seen and unseen, time and eternity, it also marries fear to wonder in the juxtaposition of invisibility and strength, mystery and boldness. Evoking the religious sublime in its subject and rhetoric but abjuring the more current national allusion, Dickinson brings technical

²⁷Jerome Loving, *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 78–79. Dickinson spells the word as commonly done so only in F1425.

knowledge to bear on transcendent concepts to produce a powerful, poetic statement of faith.



In 1869, the sixth Sunderland Bridge washed out, and the value of Edward Dickinson's shares dropped from \$2,700 to \$1,000.²⁸ Dickinson died intestate in 1874, leaving his son Austin to manage the family estate, including the Sunderland Bridge investment.²⁹ Less than two years later, on 9 December 1876, a hurricane-force wind took down the seventh wooden bridge just as a local doctor was driving his sleigh over it.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, Emily wrote to her fifteen-year-old nephew Ned to warn him that "Santa Claus' Bridge blew off, obliging him to be frugal."³¹ Dickinson biographer Alfred Habegger notes that Vinnie, too, expressed concern when she wrote the old family friend Judge Otis Lord in January 1877 to inquire about the destroyed bridge and the family's finances.³² The demise of the seventh bridge, however, marked the end of the Dickinsons' investment. By legislative order, the Sunderland Bridge Corporation was dissolved, and a publicly financed eighth bridge, made of iron, was built in 1877.³³

The next year, Emily Dickinson revived the metaphor of the bridge as a support for faith. Whereas poem F978 vaunted the strength and reliability of the slender suspension bridge, poem F1459 opens with an exclamation: "How brittle are the Piers / On which our Faith doth tread –" (ll. 1–2). The supporting structures of this truss bridge are "brittle"—hard, breakable, undependable.³⁴ Indeed, "No Bridge

²⁸In her Sunderland history, Hubbard notes: "The records of Valuation of First Parish of Sunderland from 1831 to 1869 show bridge corporation shares were valued at from \$20 to \$250. In the year 1870 shares were assessed \$15, thus showing what happened following the destruction of a bridge" ("Bridges," pp. 28–29).

²⁹Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*, pp. 563–64.

³⁰Hubbard, "Bridges," p. 28.

³¹Emily Dickinson, *Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), letter 526.

³²Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*, p. 586.

³³Hubbard, "Bridges," p. 29.

³⁴An earlier version opened, "Upon what brittle Piers – / Our Faith doth daily tread," with Dickinson giving both "fickle" and "trifling" as variants for "brittle." Her selection of "brittle" in the fair copies she sent to two different correspondents emphasizes the physical construction materials rather than an attitude. R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, variorum ed., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 3:1280–81.

below doth totter so – / Yet none hath such a Crowd” (ll. 3–4). When clumsy-footed Faith “treads” heavily, the bridge “totters,” reminding us of the way in which the “Mourners” in F340 kept “treading – treading – till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through” (ll. 3–4). Even the end rhyme is clunky, confined to the final consonant: tread/crowd. But despite its perilous condition, the bridge is crowded, crammed with the faithful, and such a surfeit of pilgrims no doubt also contributes to the bridge’s instability.

Like Dante’s lament in *The Inferno* that death had undone so many beings, Dickinson’s “Crowd” reflects the fact that by this point in her life, her father and many dear friends had died. She enclosed poem F1459 in a letter to Higginson in June 1878 announcing the death of Samuel Bowles and alluding to that of Higginson’s wife, Mary. “That those have immortality with whom we talked about it,” she commented, “makes it no more mighty – but perhaps more sudden.”³⁵ The pierless bridge of F978 was a metaphor for faith, but the brittle-piered bridge of F1459 is a liminal *surface* on which those who *have* faith walk, moving from one location to another across some kind of chasm. Could the bridge refer to death? Or might it represent the means of grace by which human beings reach God or eternity?

The poetic diction of “doth” and “hath” in lines 2–4 invokes both the biblical and the archaic, impressions that are sustained in the final four lines:

It is as old as God –
 Indeed – ’twas built by him –
 He sent his Son to test the Plank –
 And he pronounced it firm. [Ll. 5–8]

As “old as God,” this bridge is eternal, everlasting. Line 6 opens with a strong interjection, “Indeed,” which is syntactically isolated by the dash that follows it, indicating an emphasis—surely, of course, truly, in fact. God is the structural engineer, the master builder of the bridge, the omniscient and omnipotent Roebing. With the aid of the passive tense, the line ends on an equally emphatic “him,” further highlighted by the oblique rhyme with “firm.” In a reversal of the historical development of the idea of the sublime, spiritual awe, lately applied to marvels of engineering, has been returned to its ultimate source, God.

³⁵Franklin, *Variorum Poems*, 3:1281.

The closing lines introduce a second protagonist. Reminiscent of the contemporary concern for testing the strength of bridges before opening them to public use and silently reminding us of the fragile, broken planks in earlier poems, F1459's last two lines describe how God dispatched his son to try the bridge and Christ declared it sound. Just as the slender, pierless bridge of poem F978 is securely upheld by arms of steel, F1459's bridge, apparently fragile, is in reality "firm," perhaps a faint echo of the popular hymn "How Firm a Foundation," found in *Village Hymns for Social Worship*, which Dickinson knew well.³⁶ The bridge's age-old character is reinforced by the fact that it is an outdated wooden structure, not the latest nineteenth-century iron-and-steel engineering wonder. The word "Plank," which as before refers to a fundamental structural component of the wooden bridge, also alludes to the wooden cross on which Christ was crucified. Because Jesus has gone before, through death and on to resurrection, humanity should take courage to cross the tottering bridge.³⁷

In her use of nineteenth-century bridge-building developments, Dickinson avoids the pride endemic in both American exceptionalism and human technological achievement to emphasize those aspects of the sublime that involve the ultimate liminal state between life and death, the immensity and mystery of such a transition, and the simultaneous awe and fear that accompanies the movement across the threshold. It is striking that whether describing crossing the bridge of faith in poem F978 or the bridge of death in poem F1459, both poems employ the communal third person, invoking "our" experience rather than that of the solitary, romantic "I." In the narrative structure of the romantic sublime, the poet encounters a sublime object (whether natural or technological), is profoundly moved, and then, through the power of the poem, produces a corresponding emotion in the reader, through a "rhetoric of stimulus."³⁸ In contrast, Dickinson's two bridge poems introduce a collective "We" poised in a fragile, tentative, potentially dangerous and fearful state of transition from one point to

³⁶Victoria N. Morgan, *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture: Tradition and Experience* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 123–25.

³⁷Monteiro and St. Armand see this poem, like "Faith – is a Pierless Bridge," as working with the emblem of the narrow plank of Faith "to produce . . . again, [an] unorthodox rendering" ("The Experienced Emblem," p. 264).

³⁸Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 110, 68. Stonum argues that Dickinson is motivated by the romantic sublime, which influences her affective approach to poetry and the structures in which she presents her ideas.

another, a tension that is relieved when “We” are assured that “We” are safe. In neither poem is the sublime object (the bridge) seen as “an extension of one’s own [solitary] power”; rather, it originates in God and is experienced in community.³⁹ Thus, Gary Lee Stonum’s argument to the contrary, Dickinson shows herself to be an anti-romantic in these poems. Bridge technology and the sublime operate within her texts as concepts that support an essentially traditional Christian religious understanding.

One of the more contested issues among scholars of Emily Dickinson has been that of her religious views. As *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* points out, she has been claimed “as both Catholic and Protestant, Calvinist and anti-Calvinist, firm believer, and life-long skeptic.”⁴⁰ But none of those who have argued that Dickinson, despite persistent doubts, at least occasionally expressed a religious conviction have enlisted her two bridge poems as evidence for their position.⁴¹ Read in the context of the opportunities and perils of nineteenth-century bridge building, as well as the rhetoric of sublimity, Dickinson’s two major bridge poems acknowledge humanity’s shaky, insubstantial, and wavering belief while simultaneously affirming the transcendent mystery of the awful, awe-filled journey from this world to the next.

³⁹Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime*, p. 69.

⁴⁰*The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 245.

⁴¹See, e.g., Richard E. Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans, 2004); and James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). Neither Brantley nor McIntosh discusses the two bridge poems; Lundin comments only on “How brittle are the Piers.”

Susan VanZanten is Professor of English at Seattle Pacific University, where she teaches American literature and narrative theory. Her most recent book is *MENDING A TATTERED FAITH: DEVOTIONS WITH DICKINSON* (Cascade, 2011).