

EMILY DICKINSON'S LETTERS

A Reminiscence by
Thomas Wentworth Higginson
From The Atlantic Monthly, October, 1891

Read and With a Critical Introduction by
Samuel Charters

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EMILY DICKINSON

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a lawyer who was treasurer of Amherst College, a member of the House of Representatives, and of the Massachusetts legislature. Her life was largely without event, and in her later years she became a recluse in the large family house; although she is remembered by neighbors as still ready to laugh and play with children until illness weakened her. She attended Mt. Holyoke Seminary for one year (1847-1848), and was noted for her sense of humor and lively personality. Some of her earliest writings, valentines written to young men in her father's law office in the early 1850's, have an infectious gaiety, as well as a marked skill in conventional versification. She seems to have had a severe emotional crisis in her life sometime between 1858 and 1861 which turned her to the serious writing of poetry, and she began, about this time, to gather up the poems into little handsewn packets which she kept in a bureau in her bedroom. It will probably never be known what happened to her during this period; although evidence suggests that on a visit to Philadelphia she fell deeply in love with Rev. Dr. Charles Wadsworth, an older married man, who presumably was unaware of the attachment she formed for him. They seem to have corresponded, however, and he did visit the Dickinson home on at least two occasions. Her emotional state had become so desperate by the spring of 1862 that she responded to an article in Atlantic Monthly by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, concerning young poets, sending him four poems and a short letter. They continued to correspond for the rest of her life, and in a later letter she made it clear that he had, at least in her own mind, saved her life. The poetry that she wrote during the early 1860's is so charged with an overwhelming consciousness of love, that it seems difficult to understand that it could have been the result of her distant relationship with Wadsworth, but there does not seem to have been any other emotional attachment in her life at this time.

Except for a short period during the Civil War, when eye trouble forced her to remain in Boston, the rest of her life was lived in Amherst, in a steadily shrinking circle of friends and relatives. Her brother and his wife, Austin and Sue Dickinson, lived next door, and neighbor's children often came to the house. There were friends of the family, the editor of the Springfield Republican, Samuel Bowles, among them. He printed some of the early poems in the poetry columns of his paper. As the years passed Emily withdrew more and more, letting her sister Lavinia take over the management of the house. She wrote less, but some of the most intense poetry is from these years. There were requests that she publish, and a childhood friend, Helen Hunt Jackson was able to wring a poem from her in 1878, but she had withdrawn from involvement with the world outside the house in Amherst. It was only at her death on May 15, 1886, at the age of fifty-five, that the extent of her poetry became known.

SUGGESTED TEXTS

The only edition of the poems which presents her work so that it can be read and studied at length

is the new edition by Thomas H. Johnson, THE COMPLETE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, Little, Brown & Company, 1961. Its importance is discussed in the introduction.

There is still no biography which is completely satisfactory; although Emily Dickinson has been the subject of considerable writing. "THIS WAS A POET - EMILY DICKINSON, by G. F. Whicher, (Scribner's Sons, 1939) is remarkably sensitive in its handling of her relationship with Wadsworth and has a lengthy discussion of the poetry, although it is lacking the newer details of scholarship. An interesting reminiscence is MacGregor Jenkin's EMILY DICKINSON, FRIEND AND NEIGHBOR. (Little, Brown & Co. 1939).

THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

Samuel Charters

In a letter written to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in June, 1862, Emily Dickinson said of her poetry, ". . . when, far afterward, a sudden light on orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention, I felt a palsy, here, the verses just relieve." In her concern with explaining to him the importance of her poetry to her she went on to refer to a letter she had received from him with criticism of poems she had sent. ". . . I thanked you for your justice," she wrote, then added, almost wistfully, ". . . but could not drop the bells whose jingling cooled my tramp." A few friends, her father, Edward Dickinson, her sister Lavinia, her brother Austin and his wife Susan, who lived in a house built for them next door to the family house in Amherst, knew that Emily wrote poetry, but they saw only the occasional poems that she enclosed in letters or sent with a gift of flowers. She had turned to Higginson, a literary figure deeply concerned with the liberal causes of the day, because of an article that he had written for the Atlantic Monthly, "Letter to a Young Contributor," which had appeared in the issue for April, 1862. In her first letter, written April 15, she sent him four poems, asking him to tell her ". . . if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask." It was the only moment in her life that she was to turn to the literary world beyond her circle of friends in Amherst, and she was asking him, although the question was only inferred, if she might be published. With his criticism her thought of her poetry as anything beyond ". . . the bells whose jingling cooled my tramp," was ended. It was only after her death, when her sister Lavinia found the pages of her manuscripts in a locked box, that her poetry was to take its place in American literature.

The publication of Emily Dickinson's poetry in the years that followed her death in May, 1886, was, like her letters to Higginson, only half revealing, incomplete, and often misleading. In her later years there were efforts made to induce her to publish, but with the exception of a short lyric that appeared anonymously in 1878 she persistently refused. Her refusal was certainly part of her emotional withdrawal from much of the life around her, but she must, too, have realized, from Higginson's

letters, the difficulties which she would face in publication. Whatever effect the lack of an audience may have had on her writing, however, it is difficult not to feel, in following the wayward trails which the publication of her poetry has taken, that her determined unconcern left her an increased measure of strength as a poet. She left no instructions as to what should be done with the manuscripts, and for a moment Lavinia, almost overwhelmed at the quantity of the work, even wondered if Emily might have intended that it be destroyed. Within a few days, however, she had decided to try to do something with the poetry, and turned for help first to their sister-in-law, Sue Dickinson; then to friends, Professor David Todd and his wife Mabel Loomis Todd, to whom Emily had sent some poems.

Over half of the poetry that Lavinia found had been gathered into little packets, which Emily had sewn together with thread; but the rest was loosely sorted into envelopes or left in ungathered sheets. During the summer and fall the manuscripts were left with Sue Dickinson, but she was unable to begin the difficult task of editing the material, and in February of the next year Lavinia took the manuscripts to the Todds. They were leaving for Japan in March, but Mrs. Todd agreed to begin the work when they returned to Amherst. In November, 1887, she finally began the arduous and difficult task of copying the poems from the packets and envelopes, her husband helping her by numbering the materials as Lavinia brought them to the house. Lavinia had already written to Higginson, feeling that since he had continued his correspondence with her sister until Emily's death he would be concerned with the editing and publication, but it was not until the fall of 1889, two years later, that Mrs. Todd had finished enough of the work to begin discussing even the selection of the poems with him. She had completed the material in the packets, writing the first line of each poem in a record book as a sort of index. This early part of the work, the material from the packets, was less difficult than the work with the loose manuscripts. Emily had copied most of the poems in ink, and the versions were more or less finished. It was the work sheets and still rough poems that presented the greatest difficulty. Mrs. Todd's daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, who completed the work of transcription between 1929 and 1943, has described the last manuscripts.¹

... when first discovered they looked impossible - a jumble of words on odds and ends of paper, some of it crumpled and torn. They were not sorted alphabetically, or according to size, or subject matter, or date of composition. Most of them were smothered with alternate words and phrases crowded into every available space - around the edges, upside down, wedged between the lines. Some poems, filling the margins of drafts of letters to friends, are difficult to distinguish from the body of the letter, following without a break on the same sheet of paper. Many are written on the backs of brown-paper bags or of discarded bills, programs, and invitations; on tiny scraps of stationery pinned together; on leaves torn from old notebooks (one such sheet dated "1824"); on soiled and mildewed subscription blanks, or on department - or drug-store bargain flyers from Amherst and surrounding towns. There are pink scraps, blue and yellow scraps, one of them a wrapper of *Chocolat Meunier*; poems on the reverse of recipes in her own writing, on household shopping lists, on the cut-off margins of newspapers, and on the inside of their brown-paper wrappings. The poem,

Oh, give it motion! Deck it sweet
With artery and vein!

complete, without suggested change, is on the reverse of a printed slip which reads:

This Lamp, bearing upon the Chimney Gallery and upon the Thumbscrew, the name of *The German Student Lamp Co.*, is hereby guaranteed to be perfect in all its parts, to burn properly and not to leak.

Should this Lamp not fulfill this guarantee, another will be supplied in its place.

Emily liked best the inside of used envelopes. Some were addressed to herself or Lavinia, or to their parents, the canceled stamps still attached; others, addressed to friends, had never been posted. Many a detached flap, too, provided just room enough for one perfect quatrain. Often the writing is clear and distinct. On other scraps it is so confused that it looks as if written in the dark - lines overlapping, letters half formed. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to tell whether such lines constitute a single poem, or whether two or more were intended. . . .

Emily Dickinson does not seem to have ever seriously considered publishing the greater part of her poetry, but the experiences which she had in the publication of the few poems that appeared during her lifetime probably helped strengthen her purpose in continuing in her "... barefoot rank," as she expressed it to Higginson. Of her first poem to be published there is only the version which appeared in the *Springfield Daily Republican* of February 20, 1852; so there is no way to determine whether there was some editorial change before it was printed, but it was a humorous valentine, conventional in form, and although still fresh and amusing probably did not present any difficulties to the newspaper printer. It begins,

"Sic transit gloria mundi,"
"How doth the busy bee,"
"Dum vivimus vivamus,"
I stay mine enemy!

Oh "veni, vidi, vici!"
Oh caput cap-a-pie!
And oh "memento mori"
When I am far from thee!

Hurrah for Peter Parley!
Hurrah for Daniel Boone!
Three cheers, sir, for the gentleman
Who first observed the moon! . . .

With her mature poetry there was more difficulty. In the spring of 1861 the poem "I taste a liquor never brewed -" was published in the "Original Poetry" column of the *Republican*. Emily may have sent it to the paper, or it might have been used by the editor, Samuel Bowles, a friend of the family to whom Emily occasionally sent verses. The opening stanza, as Emily wrote it, was,

I taste a liquor never brewed -
From Tankards scooped in Pearl -
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

The version printed by the *Republican* had been altered to,

I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not Frankfort berries yield the sense
Such a delirious whirl.

The change seems to have been made to force a perfect rhyme between the second and fourth lines. Emily had an unerring sense of the tension created by imperfect rhyme, but to readers accustomed to the monotonous jingling of nineteenth century lyric poetry the tension was uncomfortable. Her use of imperfect rhyme was disturbing even to readers encountering her poetry years later. She had considered an alteration in the third line of the stanza, and it was published in 1890 with the altered line.

I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol.

The poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich, then widely known and read, suggested that the verse should have been written,

I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine:
No tankards scooped in pearl could yield
An alcohol like mine.

Even Higginson, who had more acquaintance with her poetry than anyone except members of the immediate family, often was upset by her lack of concern with the niceties of rhyme. Among the poems she sent him during their long years of correspondence was "Your riches taught me poverty," with its last stanza,

At least, it solaces to know
That there exists a gold
Although I prove it just in time
Its distance to behold;
Its far, far treasure to surmise
And estimate the pearl
That slipped my simple fingers through
While just a girl at school!

Higginson allowed her the liberty, but in his reminiscence, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," which he wrote for the Atlantic Monthly of October, 1891, he felt it necessary to comment, ". . . The slightest change in the order of words - thus, 'While yet at school, a girl' - would have given her a rhyme for this last line; but no; she was intent upon her thought, and it would not have satisfied her to make the change. . ."

Although as Emily grew older she was frequently asked for poems for publication she had turned from any serious concern with the interest that others might have in her poetry, and her only embarrassment came from a childhood friend, Helen Fiske, who had become widely known as the novelist Helen Hunt Jackson. In the fall of 1875, when Emily Dickinson was forty five years old, she renewed their friendship with a note congratulating Mrs. Jackson on her second marriage. Mrs. Jackson wrote her, "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it - and I read them very often - you are a great poet . . ." The poems to which she referred seem to have been copies of some which Higginson had shown her. Mrs. Jackson was concerned that the poetry should be published and the next summer asked Emily for permission to include some poems in a collection she was gathering together for publication in a volume of poetry to be published by the Boston firm of Roberts Brothers as a final volume in their "No Name" series, a series of books that had been published without the author's name being revealed. She felt that the shy and retiring writer would feel some protection in the promise of anonymity, and when Emily hesitated to give her permission Mrs. Jackson persisted, visiting her in October of that year. When after a delay of over a year she was still unable to persuade her to permit publication she sent to the publisher one of the poems, "Success is counted sweetest," still in the hope that she might be able to change Emily's mind. Letters were unsuccessful, even a second visit in October, 1878, was unsuccessful. It was only a letter written the day after the visit, in which Mrs. Jackson pleaded, " - Can you refuse the only thing I perhaps shall ever ask at your hands?" that finally wrung permission from Emily, and three weeks later the book, *A Masque of Poets*, was published. Emily was sent a copy by the publisher with a note telling her that Emerson had generally been judged the author of her unsigned contribution.

This was her last experience with publication, and even in this poem of twelve lines she found that there had been alterations made. The rhymes were more conventional, presenting no difficulty, but there were five changes of wording, one of them altering the rhythm of a line. Even if she had been still concerned with seeing her poems in print this experience would have been difficult to forget. When the publisher Thomas Niles, of Roberts Brothers, asked her in 1882 and 1883 for a collection of her poems she sent him some of her finest poetry, but without permission to publish. She must have realized, in this interest of Higginson, Mrs. Jackson, and Roberts Brothers, that her work would finally be published, but she had withdrawn so far from the world that she could not bring herself even to leave any message about the poetic achievement that had been the most important work of her life. She left it for Lavinia to find, perhaps already realizing that, as she had written Higginson, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase. . ."

In his introductory remarks in his reminiscence Higginson wrote,²

Few events in American literary history have been more curious than the sudden rise of Emily Dickinson into a posthumous fame only more accentuated by the utterly reclusive character of her life and by her aversion to even a literary publicity. The lines which form a prelude to the published volume of her poems are the only ones that have yet come to light indicating even a temporary desire to come in contact with the great world of readers; she seems to have had no reference, in all the rest, to anything but her own thought and a few friends. But for her only sister, it is very doubtful if her poems would ever have been printed at all; and when published, they were launched quietly and without any expectation of a wide audience; yet the outcome of it is that six editions of the volume have been sold within six months, a suddenness of success almost without a parallel in American literature.

His surprise was genuine. He was employed as a reader by Houghton Mifflin, and he tried to interest them in publishing a volume of the poetry. When they would not consider taking the material he left the matter to Lavinia; feeling that as an employee of Houghton Mifflin he was not in a position to approach another publisher. In the spring of 1890, with Mrs. Todd well advanced on the work of transcription, Lavinia went to Boston and talked with Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers. She was not aware that Niles had asked Emily for poetry only seven years before, and Niles did not choose to remind her; but he agreed to the undertaking and turned over to his literary adviser, Arlo Bates, a selection of the poems which had been made by Higginson and Mrs. Todd. Bates suggested that a much more careful selection be made and added, "There should be few changes as possible, but some are absolutely necessary . . ." His memorandum seems to have lessened Niles' interest in the projected volume, and when he wrote Higginson in June he asked that Lavinia pay the cost of the printing plates. He wrote, "It has always seemed to me that it would be unwise to perpetuate Miss Dickinson's poems. They are quite as remarkable for defects as for beauties and are generally devoid of true poetical qualities.

It is certainly true that Niles may have been taking advantage of Lavinia's enthusiasm to protect himself against possible loss, but Higginson had felt, since his first encounter with Emily's poetry, that some alteration would be necessary before the poetry could be published, and he agreed, in general, with Bates's suggestions. A final selection of one hundred fifteen poems was made, and he and Mrs. Todd began the work of editing. Thomas H. Johnson, in his introduction to his 1955 edition of the poetry has described the editorial method:

. . . His editing . . . attempted wherever possible to smooth rhymes, regularize the meter, delete localisms, and substitute sensible metaphors. It was carefully designed to spare the reader's sensibilities by producing a maximum of decorum.

Despite their work the critical response was generally unfavorable, but there was an immediate response to the poetry from the general public. Some of the interest seems to have centered on her withdrawn life and the suggestion of an unfulfilled love, but the poems themselves left a lingering impression on the readers who, for whatever reason, glanced into the slender volume.

The collection opened with Emily's early poem,

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me, -
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!

and her voice, hesitant and shy, seemed to reach out to touch anyone who met it.

Emily Dickinson, with her sensitive perception of the emotions of the people around her, probably would not have been surprised at much of the confusion that followed this early publication. Higginson realized that they had been too free with their reworking of some of the poems, and in preparing for a second collection in 1891 he wrote to Mrs. Todd, "Let us alter as little as possible, now that the public ear is opened." The second volume, published in 1891, was almost as successful as the first, although there was still a consistent revision to smooth rhymes and word structure. In 1894 Mrs. Todd edited a two volume edition of the letters, which included many new poems, and in 1896 without Higginson, she edited a third collection of the poems. There was still an interest in the poetry, and she had begun work on a new collection when there seems to have flared up a smouldering jealousy between the Dickinson family, despite Sue's unwillingness to undertake the work on the poems, and Mrs. Todd. Lavinia brought a law suit against Mrs. Todd over a strip of land, and Mrs. Todd, angered, stopped her work on the manuscripts. She had returned the sewn packets and some of the ungathered poems as she had completed transcription, but the rest of the material she kept.

Without Mrs. Todd's experience and editorial skill the publication of the poetry, for the time, ended. She locked the manuscripts in a camphor wood chest where they were to lie until her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, induced her to begin the work again in 1929. E. C. Stedman included twenty-one of her poems in *An American Anthology* in 1900, but still encountered critical disapproval. To H. H. Furness he felt obliged to write, "The selections that move you to Homeric laughter were all, among hundreds, that were structural in the least; yet read them a second time and there is something in them. . ."

Despite the early success of the poetry it was almost forgotten for several years. In their revisions of the '90's Higginson and Mrs. Todd had attempted to make the work conform to the sentimental tastes of the period. The poems had been gathered into categories entitled Life, Nature, Love, Time and Eternity, many of them titled, and the selection made from the poems that presented the least difficulty in thought and image. With the emergence of the new literary styles in the early 1900's some of the work seemed dated. In 1914, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Sue's daughter, went through the material which Mrs. Todd had returned to the family and prepared a further collection which she called *The Single Hound*. By this time the experimental work of the Imagist poets had made her technical innovations seem less extreme, and there was a renewed interest in the poetry. The difficulties between the Todds and the Dickinson family had become intensified, and efforts to bring together the two groups of manuscripts were unsuccessful. Although Mrs. Bianchi knew that manuscripts were still in Mrs. Todd's possession she may not have been aware of the amount of poetry that the manuscripts contained, which was more than six hundred completed poems and fragments. In 1924 she published a biography, *The Life and Letters*, and an edition which she titled *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. It was soon evident, however, that this collection did not even include all of the poetry in her own papers. In 1929 she published a *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*, and the volume was greeted with an enthusiastic critical response. The intense expression of the poetry had finally burned through the last critical reservations. The *New York Times* review concluded that with this collection Emily Dickinson was placed " . . . indubitably and permanently among the enduring poets of the English speaking race." Mrs. Bianchi's work was an advance over the early editing, but she was perhaps too impressed with the

innovations in the poetry. In an introductory note to the pocket edition of 1926 she wrote,³

The modern poets claim to have invented a new lyric, compact, colloquial, intellectually pregnant; but Emily Dickinson did it in 1870 in length, tone, matter. For the most part she accomplished all these things better than her successors. Her revolt was absolute. She abandoned rhyme altogether when she chose and wrote in meter alone, like a Greek. This may have cheated her of supreme artistry, but it gave her work a biding significance; and the taste of its imperfection has a kind of immortality wholly identified with her spirit. As to the modern lyric as we know it, the important thing is that she did it first.

She had difficulties, too, with the handwriting, and in the 1929 edition she and Alfred Leete Hampson, who was assisting her, not only included a number of misreadings, but altered poems to conform to the newest fashions of irregular and free verse. Hampson was able, however, in an introduction to an edition in 1937, to sketch out the history of the publication of the poetry without mentioning Mrs. Todd's name.

The excitement over the *Further Poems* was perhaps the spur that convinced Mrs. Todd's daughter that the work on the manuscripts in her mother's possession should be completed. They began the work together, bringing out in 1931 a new edition of the letters, which Mrs. Todd had first seen through the press in 1894. They had begun writing the story of the first years of publication when Mrs. Todd died, in October, 1932. Mrs. Bingham continued the work alone and in 1944 *Bolts of Melody* appeared. There was a return to the use of categories; poems were grouped under headings, some of them as unfortunate as "That Campaign Inscrutable" or "An Ablative Estate", but the texts were carefully prepared, and with this final collection of more than six hundred poems the work of publication, after more than fifty years of hesitation, sometimes indifference, and angry dispute, was nearing completion.

The difficulty was that the editions still were confused. Emily herself would probably have been surprised to see that everything she had written had been published, but she might not have been surprised at the problems of editing that had been involved. The poems were collected into a number of volumes, there were enough variations in text to leave some misgivings as to the accuracy of the transcriptions, and the gathering had been done so erratically that no one could really be sure that all the poems had at last been printed. The various editions, however, had given her a secure place in American literature; and there was a strong critical interest in her writing. With her work of editing finally completed Mrs. Bingham made the manuscripts which she had been left by her mother available to scholars, and it became possible to bring together Emily Dickinson's poetry for the first time since the 1890's. In 1955 Thomas J. Johnson published a monumental three volume edition,⁴ containing all 1775 poems and fragments in their original version, their variant readings, their history of publication, and an introduction dealing with some of the difficulties in the publication and in the dating of the material. There remained only a final step in the work of editorial revision. An edition was necessary which would make a selection from the variants in the manuscripts presenting the poems in a collection more easily accessible to the general reader. In 1961 Johnson completed his brilliant work of editing with "The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson."⁵ With this edition, which was finally ready nearly a hundred years after Emily had written to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, it became possible for the first time to grasp the breadth and the strength of her poetic achievement.

There are several immediate impressions which the pages of Johnson's edition leave with the reader. The first is that she was a much greater poet than it had been possible to realize before. A second is that the early editing had robbed her of some of her strength and vigor, and a third is that the

lack of attention given her work in her lifetime helped, rather than hindered, her development as a poet.

The amount of poetry, in itself, is overwhelming. The poems are most of them rather short, and she used a briefly rhymed line, but the 1775 poems take 713 pages of a large book. She tended to return to some subjects perhaps too often, but every poet has set subjects for these moments when there is no new idea to be considered or new image to be developed, but there is still the desire to write poetry. It is these times, often, when poetry becomes emotional relief. As she wrote to Higginson ". . . when, far afterward, a sudden light on orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention, I felt a palsy here, the verses just relieve." For Emily many of the less intense poems concerned sudden glimpses of the nature around her. The bee, the robin, and the jay perhaps do not deserve the attention she gave them, but they helped her sharpen her phrase and tighten her line. There is an occasional reminiscence of Emerson's poetry, but she had early been introduced to Emerson's work, and while no poet is entirely free from influence Emily Dickinson seems to have had little concern for poetry as a formal art, and her work is brilliantly and vividly personal. Not every poem is successful; often she attempts a thought which is too complex for her compressed statement, and it eludes her; but the quality is generally remarkable, and the directness of her statement gives even the most difficult phrase the power to evoke an emotional response. The short group of three lines which she sent to Helen Hunt Jackson on her marriage in 1875,

Who fleeing from the spring
The Spring avenging fling
To Dooms of Balm -

have a disturbing tumult which their tightly compressed imagery does little to clarify. Even with the first three lines - the poem in Dickinson's manuscript, begins,

Upon a Lilac Sea
To toss incessantly
His plush alarm

the thought is still only half revealed. There are, too, poems which are little more than occasional verse in the style of feminine poetry of the day, arch and sentimental, but much of this is from the earliest packets, and by the time she had entered her most richly productive period, in the early 1860's, much of this was behind her.

To a great extent she seems to have been her own best editor. If there was a group of poems written when she was still a girl she does not seem to have chosen to keep them when she began copying some of her poetry for the packets. She was in her late twenties when the first packets were put together, and she had reached a level of skill which is only the result of persistent effort. An early valentine, written in 1850, when she was twenty, and sent in a letter to a bachelor in her father's law office, Elbridge G. Bowdoin, is already skilled in meter and rhyme. It begins,

Oh the Earth was made for lovers, for damsel,
and hopeless swain,
For sighing, and gentle whispering, and
unity made of twain.
All things do go a courting, in earth, or sea,
or air,
God hath made nothing single but these in His
world so fair!

But the apprentice work which she did to develop this skill does not seem to have been gathered into the early packets. She seems to have turned from poetry in her early twenties; then returned to it again after some years had passed. When she did return to it she was able to use the poetic idiom with such unconscious skill that she needed concern herself only with the expression of the emotion or the idea that had teased her to write.

During the years of excitement with the technical innovations of the Imagist poets there was a great deal of attention given to the style of her poetry, but this seems to be less of a conscious style than it was simply the use of the poetic conventions of the day with this casual skill to express ideas that were startling in their vividness. She wrote most often in the simple four line stanza common to much English lyric poetry, to much of the hymn verse of the time, and to the popular verse of the ladies magazines. Her rhythm, although she was capable of brilliant variations on the simple forms, was generally a loose three or four beat line of alternate strong and weak syllables. She could write a stanza like,

Delight becomes pictorial
When viewed through pain, -
More fair, because impossible
That any gain.

with its three repeated stresses ending the second line, and their close imitation in the fourth line, but a stanza like,

A bird came down the walk;
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

is more usual.

Her rhymes, which gave her early editors and critics so much difficulty, usually followed the conventional practise of a rhymed closing syllable ending the second and fourth lines of the quatrain, but she had a brilliant ear for the near rhyme. In one poem she rhymes, in three stanzas, hands and unwinds, trade and period, and light and forgot. Often she seems, as Higginson wrote, "intent on her thought" and lets the half rhyme stand, even hurriedly writing stanzas in which there was no rhyme, but she had an unerring sense of the effect which near rhyme can give, and in this, as in her rhythm, the closeness to the convention makes more clear the subtlety of her variation. In the stanza which Thomas Bailey Aldrich was able to change to achieve the perfect rhyme; from her

I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol.

to his

I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine;
No tankards scooped in pearl could yield
An alcohol like mine.

the excitement is in her near rhyme, rather than in his conventional one. She seems to have realized that the lyric forms had tended to become repetitious and dull. She showed in her letters and in her one conversation of which there is a record, Higginson's afternoon visit, that she used language in a spontaneous effort to express the startling imagery of her thought, and this same concern is evident in her poetry.

Despite the skill with which she used the conventional poetic forms Emily Dickinson was less of an "artist", in the sense of using materials to create effect, than any other poet who has risen to eminence. She used language with an instinct, rather than a conscious skill. Poetry is a means of expression, and it is finally the poet's consciousness which is the measure of the poetic achievement, but there tends to be a bunching of poetic devices, and the young poet finds himself falling into the conventional phrase pattern or the easily determined emotional stance. If Emily wrote many poems which are part of this "artistic" tradition of English poetry then they were among the youthful work which she did not include in her own selection. She used poetry to express the emotions of her own life, from a concern with buzz of a fly to the blind despair of love. She meant what she said in her letter to

Higginson, that "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person," but in her poetry this meant a person that she was supposing herself to be, and even in those poems which do not express any of the reality of her own experience, among them the poems of erotic love, they still express her relationship to this imagined experience. She was, in a sense, not writing in the English poetic tradition, which was why Higginson felt that with her poetry ". . . came the problem, never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism." She was, however, writing in a tradition whose boundaries exceeded the limitation of any artistic form or style.

The early editing robbed her of some measure of her strength as it tried to make her more conventional. The short lyric had become so lacking in imaginative richness by the end of the nineteenth century that the alteration of Emily Dickinson's poetry to give it the appearance of these poems left it tainted with their faint tediousness. It was not until the later editions returned to her some of her individuality of expression that she regained her vitality. The titled groupings, as well as the titles of the poems themselves, sentimentalized her. The conventional punctuation, which was part of the editing until the newest editions, obscured the rich musicality she had developed in her use of dashes. Mrs. Bingham was aware of this and mentioned it in the introduction to Bolts of Melody.⁶

. . . In some poems dashes are sprinkled about so lavishly that they give to the page the appearance of a thread on which the phrases are strung. At times the dashes seem so integral a part of the text that an editor is tempted to perpetuate them, lest without them the words should fall apart.

A stanza like,

Each Life Converges to some Centre -
Expressed - or still -
Exists in every Human Mature
A Goal -

with its subtle emphasis on the second line, became in the edition of 1891,

Each life converges to some centre
Expressed or still;
Exists in every human nature
A goal

The first and second lines now run together and the poet's emphasis has been lost. She had encountered this before, in 1866, when the Springfield Republican printed the poem "A narrow fellow in the grass." Her opening lines read,

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him - did you not
His notice sudden is -

The third and fourth lines were printed,

You may have met him - did you not
His notice instant is.

and when she sent the clipping to Higginson she complained, "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one -"

There was a loss, too, in the alteration of spelling to conform to standard usage. She was guilty of misspelling - her copy sent to Higginson of "Of Tribulation these are they" included the line "Our panting ancle barely passed," and she wrote on the bottom of the page, "I spelled ankle wrong" - but she also used variation in spelling to suggest the flavor of the speech she heard around her in Amherst. With conventional spelling these overtones become faint and often inaudible.

With the range and brilliance of her poetry more clearly evident there is, finally, the impression that she gained a measure of artistic freedom by avoiding publication. It did concern her, but she managed to resist the entreaties that were made to her in later years; although not without some pain. Mrs. Bingham encountered fifteen poems on the subject of "fame" in the material she edited for Bolts of Melody, and she observed,⁷

Because Emily Dickinson refused to publish, it has been assumed that she did not care for fame. By way of evidence to the contrary, poems found among these latest scraps prove that she was obsessed by the thought of it. Indeed, she was so conscious that she deserved it that she had to keep continually reminding herself of its futility - that her own approval was all that mattered.

It is difficult to think of her years of self-denial without some impatience at the difficulties which prevented her poetry from reaching an audience during her lifetime. If she had chosen to write to Emerson, who was then probably the most perceptive man of letters in the United States, rather than Higginson, who never fully understood her, she would probably have found much of the fame that came so easily to the posthumous collections of her poems. After the moment of desperation when she had written Higginson, however, she turned away from the idea of publication. It was an though she had realized that this in itself gave her poetry a freed strength. The publishing writer finds himself in a delicate relationship with his reader that cannot fail to have some influence on his writing. A writer of introspective sensitivity, as Dickinson was, often retreats to the conventional and sentimental, using this as a shield against the pain of exposure which publication involves. By refusing to publish she kept her hands free to pick up anything that interested her, without thought of the effect of anything she might say about it on anyone besides herself. Her most deeply personal, and in many respects finest, poems were kept in the locked box where no one, not even her sister Lavinia, was aware that they existed.

The difficulties which Higginson felt in judging Emily Dickinson's poetry might have stemmed from his own limited knowledge of her poems. It is now evident, with the work of editing and publication completed, that she belongs with the greatest poets of any period or of any literary tradition. No woman, of those whose work survives in any quantity, has expressed with such breadth and depth of honesty the feminine emotional experience. Her work is so marked with her being that there is perhaps no poet with whom she can be measured, but in the magnificence of her achievement is a measure of poetry itself.

FOOTNOTES

1. Todd, Mabel Loomis & Todd, Millicent Bingham, ed., Bolts of Melody, New York, Harper & Bros., 1945, p. xii.
2. Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. Emily Dickinson's Letters. The Atlantic Monthly, October, 1891, p. 444.
3. Bianchi, Martha Dickinson, ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1929, p. xi.
4. Johnson, Thomas H., ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1955.
5. Johnson, Thomas H., ed., The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1961.
6. Todd, op cit, p. ix
7. Ibid, p. xxiv

On April 16, 1862, I took from the post office in Worcester, Mass., where I was then living, the following letter:—

MR. HIGGINSON, — Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?

The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask.

Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.

If I make the mistake, that you dared to tell me would give me sincerer honor toward you.

I inclose my name, asking you, if you please, sir, to tell me what is true?

That you will not betray me it is needless to ask, since honor is its own pawn.

The letter was postmarked "Amherst," and it was in a handwriting so peculiar that it seemed as if the writer might have taken her first lessons by studying the famous fossil bird-tracks in the museum of that college town. Yet it was not in the slightest degree illiterate, but cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique. Of punctuation there was little; she used chiefly dashes, and it has been thought better, in printing these letters, as with her poems, to give them the benefit in this respect of the ordinary usages; and so with her habit as to capitalization, as the printers call it, in which she followed the Old English and present German method of thus distinguishing every noun substantive. But the most curious thing about the letter was the total absence of a signature. It proved, however, that she had written her name on a card, and put it under the shelter of a smaller envelope inclosed in the larger; and even this name was written — as if the shy writer wished to recede as far as possible from view — in pencil, not in ink. The name was Emily Dickinson. Inclosed with the letter were four poems, two of which have been already printed, — "Safe in their alabaster cham-

bers" and "I'll tell you how the sun rose," together with the two that here follow. The first comprises in its eight lines a truth so searching that it seems a condensed summary of the whole experience of a long life:—

We play at paste
Till qualified for pearl;
Then drop the paste
And deem ourself a fool.

The shapes, though, were similar
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics,
Practicing sands.

Then came one which I have always classed among the most exquisite of her productions, with a singular felicity of phrase and an aerial lift that bears the ear upward with the bee it traces:—

The nearest dream recedes unrealized.
The heaven we chase,
Like the June bee
Before the schoolboy,
Invites the race,
Stoops to an easy clover,
Dips — evades — teases — deploys —
Then to the royal clouds
Lifts his light pinnace,
Heedless of the boy
Staring, bewildered, at the mocking sky.

Homesick for steadfast honey, —
Ah! the bee flies not
Which brews that rare variety.

The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after thirty years of further knowledge; and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism. The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy more than she evaded me; and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy.

Circumstances, however, soon brought me in contact with an uncle of Emily Dickinson, a gentleman not now living; a prominent citizen of Worcester, a man of integrity and character, who shared her abruptness and impulsiveness but

certainly not her poetic temperament, from which he was indeed singularly remote. He could tell but little of her, she being evidently an enigma to him, as to me. It is hard to tell what answer was made by me, under these circumstances, to this letter. It is probable that the adviser sought to gain time a little and find out with what strange creature he was dealing. I remember to have ventured on some criticism which she afterwards called "surgery," and on some questions, part of which she evaded, as will be seen, with a naïve skill such as the most experienced and worldly coquette might envy. Her second letter (received April 26, 1862), was as follows:—

MR. HIGGINSON, — Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude, but I was ill, and write to-day from my pillow.

Thank you for the surgery; it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others, as you ask, though they might not differ. While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb.

You asked how old I was? I made no verse, but one or two, until this winter, sir.

I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does of the burying ground, because I am afraid.

You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations. I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education. When a little girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality; but venturing too near, himself, he never returned. Soon after my tutor died, and for several years my lexicon was my only companion. Then I found one more, but he was not contented I be his scholar, so he left the land.

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.

I have a brother and sister; my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. He buys me many books, but begs me not to read them, because he fears they joggle the mind. They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their "Father."

But I fear my story fatigues you. I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it unconveyed, like melody or witchcraft?

You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but was told that it was disgraceful.

I read Miss Prescott's Circumstance, but it followed me in the dark, so I avoided her.

Two editors of journals came to my father's house this winter, and asked me for my mind, and when I asked them "why" they said I was penurious, and they would use it for the world.

I could not weigh myself, myself. My size felt small to me. I read your chapters in the Atlantic, and experienced honor for you. I was sure you would not reject a confiding question.

Is this, sir, what you asked me to tell you? Your friend,

E. DICKINSON.

It will be seen that she had now drawn a step nearer, signing her name, and as my "friend." It will also be noticed that I had sounded her about certain American authors, then much read; and that she knew how to put her own criticisms in a very trenchant way. With this letter came some more verses, still in the same birdlike script, as for instance the following:—

Your riches taught me poverty,
Myself a millionaire
In little wealths, as girls could boast,
Till, broad as Buenos Ayre,
You drifted your dominions
A different Peru,
And I esteemed all poverty
For life's estate, with you.

Of mines, I little know, myself,
But just the names of gems,
The colors of the commonest,
And scarce of tiadems
So much that, did I meet the queen
Her glory I should know;
But this must be a different wealth,
To miss it, beggars so.

I'm sure 't is India, all day,
To those who look on you
Without a stint, without a blame,
Might I but be the Jew!
I'm sure it is Golconda
Beyond my power to deem,
To have a smile for mine, each day,
How better than a gem!

At least, it solaces to know
That there exists a gold
Although I prove it just in time
Its distance to behold;
Its far, far treasure to surmise
And estimate the pearl
That slipped my simple fingers through
While just a girl at school!

Here was already manifest that
fiance of form, never through carele
ness, and never precisely from whi
which so marked her. The slight
change in the order of words — th
"While yet at school, a girl" — wo
have given her a rhyme for this last li
but no; she was intent upon her thoug
and it would not have satisfied her
make the change. The other po
further showed, what had already b
visible, a rare and delicate sympa
with the life of nature: —

A bird came down the walk;
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to a wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around;
They looked like frightened beads, I
thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger, cautious.
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam —
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim.

It is possible that in a second letter I
gave more of distinct praise or encour-
agement, for her third is in a different
mood. This was received June 8, 1862.
There is something startling in its open-
ing image: and in the yet stranger
phrase that follows, where she apparent-
ly uses "mob" in the sense of chaos or
bewilderment: —

DEAR FRIEND, — Your letter gave
no drunkenness, because I tasted rum
before. Domingo comes but once; yet
I have had few pleasures so deep as
your opinion, and if I tried to thank
you, my tears would block my tongue.

My dying tutor told me that he would
like to live till I had been a poet, but
Death was much of mob as I could
master, then. And when, far afterward,
a sudden light on orchards, or a new
fashion in the wind troubled my atten-
tion, I felt a palsy, here, the verses just
relieve.

Your second letter surprised me, and
for a moment, swung. I had not sup-
posed it. Your first gave no dishonor,
because the true are not ashamed I
thanked you for your justice, but could
not drop the bells whose jingling cooled
my tramp. Perhaps the balm seemed
better, because you bled me first. I
smile when you suggest that I delay
"to publish," that being foreign to my
thought as firmament to fin.

If fame belonged to me, I could not
escape her; if she did not, the longest

day would pass me on the chase, and
the approbation of my dog would for-
sake me then. My barefoot rank is
better.

You think my gait "spasmodic." I
am in danger, sir. You think me "un-
controlled." I have no tribunal.

Would you have time to be the
"friend" you should think I need? I
have a little shape: it would not crowd
your desk, nor make much racket as the
mouse that dents your galleries.

If I might, bring you what I do — not
so frequent to trouble you — and ask
you if I told it clear, 't would be control
to me. The sailor cannot see the North,
but knows the needle can. The "hand
you stretch me in the dark" I put
mine in, and turn away. I have no
Saxon now: —

As if I asked a common alms,
And in my wondering hand
A stranger pressed a kingdom,
And I, bewildered, stand;
As if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a morn,
And it should lift its purple dikes
And shatter me with dawn!

But, will you be my preceptor, Mr.
Higginson?

With this came the poem already
published in her volume and entitled Re-
nunciation; and also that beginning "Of
all the sounds dispatched abroad," thus
fixing approximately the date of those
two. I must soon have written to ask
her for her picture, that I might form
some impression of my enigmatical cor-
respondent. To this came the following
reply, in July, 1862: —

Could you believe me without? I had
no portrait, now, but am small, like the
wren; and my hair is bold, like the chest-
nut bur; and my eyes, like the sherry
in the glass, that the guest leaves.
Would this do just as well?

It often alarms father. He says death
might occur, and he has moulds of all

the rest, but has no mould of me; but I
noticed the quick wore off those things,
in a few days, and forestall the dishonor.
You will think no caprice of me.

You said "Dark." I know the butter-
fly, and the lizard, and the orchis. Are
not those *your* countrymen?

I am happy to be your scholar, and
will deserve the kindness I cannot repay.

If you truly consent, I recite now.
Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to
yourself, for I had rather wince than
die. Men do not call the surgeon to
commend the bone, but to set it, sir, and
fracture within is more critical. And
for this, preceptor, I shall bring you
obedience, the blossom from my garden,
and every gratitude I know.

Perhaps you smile at me. I could
not stop for that. My business is cir-
cumference. An ignorance, not of cus-
toms, but if caught with the dawn, or the
sunset see me, myself the only kangaroo
among the beauty, sir, if you please, it
afflicts me, and I thought that instruction
would take it away.

Because you have much business, be-
side the growth of me, you will appoint,
yourself, how often I shall come, with-
out your inconvenience.

And if at any time you regret you re-
ceived me, or I prove a different fabric
to that you supposed, you must banish
me.

When I state myself, as the represen-
tative of the verse, it does not mean me,
but a supposed person.

You are true about the "perfection."
To-day makes Yesterday mean.

You spoke of Pippa Passes. I never
heard anybody speak of Pippa Passes
before. You see my posture is benighted.

To thank you baffles me. Are you
perfectly powerful? Had I a pleasure
you had not, I could delight to bring it.

YOUR SCHOLAR.

This was accompanied by this strong
poem, with its breathless conclusion.
The title is of my own giving: —

THE SAINTS' REST.

Of tribulation, these are they,
Denoted by the white;
The spangled gowns, a lesser rank
Of victors designate.

All these did conquer; but the ones
Who overcame most times,
Wear nothing commoner than snow,
No ornaments but palms.

"Surrender" is a sort unknown
On this superior soil;
"Defeat" an outgrown anguish,
Remembered as the mile

Our panting ankle barely passed
When night devoured the road;
But we stood whispering in the house,
And all we said, was "Saved!"

[Note by the writer of the verses.] I spelled
ankle wrong.

It would seem that at first I tried a
little, — a very little — to lead her in
the direction of rules and traditions;
but I fear it was only perfunctory, and
that she interested me more in her —
so to speak — unregenerate condition.
Still, she recognizes the endeavor. In
this case, as will be seen, I called her
attention to the fact that while she took
pains to correct the spelling of a word,
she was utterly careless of greater irregu-
larities. It will be seen by her answer
that with her usual naïve adroitness she
turns my point: —

DEAR FRIEND, — Are these more or-
derly? I thank you for the truth.

I had no monarch in my life, and
cannot rule myself; and when I try to
organize, my little force explodes and
leaves me bare and charred.

I think you called me "wayward."
Will you help me improve?

I suppose the pride that stops the
breath, in the core of woods, is not of
ourselves.

You say I confess the little mistake,
and omit the large. Because I can see
orthography; but the ignorance out of
sight is my preceptor's charge.

Of "shunning men and women,"

they talk of hallowed things, aloud, and
embarrass my dog. He and I don't ob-
ject to them, if they'll exist their side.
I think Carl would please you. He is
dumb, and brave. I think you would like
the chestnut tree I met in my walk. It
hit my notice suddenly, and I thought the
skies were in blossom.

Then there's a noiseless noise in the
orchard that I let persons hear.

You told me in one letter you could
not come to see me "now," and I made
no answer; not because I had none, but
did not think myself the price that you
should come so far.

I do not ask so large a pleasure, lest
you might deny me.

You say, "Beyond your knowledge."
You would not jest with me, because I
believe you; but, preceptor, you cannot
mean it?

All men say "What" to me, but I
thought it a fashion.

When much in the woods, as a little
girl, I was told that the snake would
bite me, that I might pick a poisonous
flower, or goblins kidnap me; but I went
along and met no one but angels, who
were far shyer of me than I could be
of them, so I have n't that confidence
in fraud which many exercise.

I shall observe your precept, though I
don't understand it, always.

I marked a line in one verse, because
I met it after I made it, and never con-
sciously touch a paint mixed by another
person.

I do not let go it, because it is mine.
Have you the portrait of Mrs. Brown-
ing?

Persons sent me three. If you had
none, will you have mine?

YOUR SCHOLAR.

Band 2: LETTERS IN THE WAR

A month or two after this I entered
the volunteer army of the civil war,
and must have written to her during
the winter of 1862-3 from South Caro-

lina or Florida, for the following reached
me in camp: —

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AMHERST.

DEAR FRIEND, — I did not deem that
planetary forces annulled, but suffered
an exchange of territory, or world.

I should have liked to see you before
you became improbable. War feels to
me an oblique place. Should there
be other summers, would you perhaps
come?

I found you were gone, by accident,
as I find systems are, or seasons of the
year, and obtain no cause, but suppose
it a treason of progress that dissolves
as it goes. Carlo still remained, and I
told him

Best gains must have the losses' test,
To constitute them gains.

My shaggy ally assented.

Perhaps death gave me awe for
friends, striking sharp and early, for I
held them since in a brittle love, of
more alarm than peace. I trust you
may pass the limit of war; and though
not reared to prayer, when service is
had in church for our arms, I include
yourself. . . . I was thinking to-day, as
I noticed, that the "Supernatural" was
only the Natural disclosed.

Not "Revelation" 't is that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes.

But I fear I detain you. Should
you, before this reaches you, experience
immortality, who will inform me of the
exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid
death, I entreat you, sir. It would be-
reave

YOUR GNOME.

I trust the "Procession of Flowers"
was not a premonition.

I cannot explain this extraordinary
signature, substituted for the now cus-
tomary "Your Scholar," unless she im-
agined her friend to be in some incredi-
ble and remote condition, imparting its
strangeness to her. Mr. Howells re-
minds me that Swedenborg somewhere
has an image akin to her "oblique

place," where he symbolizes evil as sim-
ply an oblique angle. With this letter
came verses, most refreshing in that
clime of jasmines and mocking-birds,
on the familiar robin: —

THE ROBIN.

The robin is the one
That interrupts the morn
With hurried, few, express reports
When March is scarcely on.

The robin is the one
That overflows the noon
With her cherubic quantity,
An April but begun.

The robin is the one
That, speechless from her nest,
Submits that home and certainty
And sanctity are best.

In the summer of 1863 I was wound-
ed, and in hospital for a time, during
which came this letter in pencil, written
from what was practically a hospital for
her, though only for weak eyes: —

DEAR FRIEND, — Are you in danger?
I did not know that you were hurt,
Will you tell me more? Mr. Haw-
thorne died.

I was ill since September, and since
April in Boston for a physician's care.
He does not let me go, yet I work in
my prison, and make guests for myself.

Carlo did not come, because that he
would die in jail; and the mountains I
could not hold now, so I brought but
the Gods.

I wish to see you more than before I
failed. Will you tell me your health?
I am surprised and anxious since re-
ceiving your note.

The only news I know
Is bulletins all day
From Immortality.

Can you render my pencil? The
physician has taken away my pen.

I inclose the address from a letter, lest my figures fail.

Knowledge of your recovery would excel my own. E. DICKINSON.

Later this arrived:—

DEAR FRIEND,— I think of you so wholly that I cannot resist to write again, to ask if you are safe? Danger is not at first, for then we are unconscious, but in the after, slower days.

Do not try to be saved, but let redemption find you, as it certainly will. Love is its own rescue; for we, at our supremest, are but its trembling emblems. YOUR SCHOLAR.

SIDE II

Band 1: THE CONTINUING FRIENDSHIP

These were my earliest letters from Emily Dickinson, in their order. From this time and up to her death (May 15, 1886) we corresponded at varying intervals, she always persistently keeping up this attitude of "Scholar," and assuming on my part a preceptorship which it is almost needless to say did not exist. Always glad to hear her "recite," as she called it, I soon abandoned all attempt to guide in the slightest degree this extraordinary nature, and simply accepted her confidences, giving as much as I could of what might interest her in return.

Sometimes there would be a long pause, on my part, after which would come a plaintive letter, always terse, like this:—

"Did I displease you? But won't you tell me how?"

Or perhaps the announcement of some event, vast to her small sphere, as this:

AMHERST.

Carlo died. E. DICKINSON.
Would you instruct me now?

Or sometimes there would arrive an exquisite little detached strain, every word a picture, like this:—

THE HUMMING-BIRD.

A route of evanescence
With a revolving wheel;
A resonance of emerald;
A rush of cochineal.
And every blossom on the bush
Adjusts its tumbled head;—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy morning's ride.

Nothing in literature, I am sure, so condenses into a few words that gorgeous atom of life and fire of which she here attempts the description. It is, however, needless to conceal that many of her brilliant fragments were less satisfying. She almost always grasped whatever she sought, but with some fracture of grammar and dictionary on the way. Often, too, she was obscure and sometimes inscrutable; and though obscurity is sometimes, in Coleridge's phrase, a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press this compliment too hard.

Sometimes, on the other hand, her verses found too much favor for her comfort, and she was urged to publish. In such cases I was sometimes put forward as a defense; and the following letter was the fruit of some such occasion:—

DEAR FRIEND,— Thank you for the advice. I shall implicitly follow it.

The one who asked me for the lines I had never seen.

He spoke of "a charity." I refused, but did not inquire. He again earnestly urged, on the ground that in that way I might "aid unfortunate children." The name of "child" was a snare to me, and I hesitated, choosing my most rudimentary, and without criterion.

I inquired of you. You can scarcely estimate the opinion to one utterly guideless. Again thank you.

YOUR SCHOLAR.

Again came this, on a similar theme:

DEAR FRIEND,— Are you willing to tell me what is right? Mrs. Jackson,

of Colorado ["H. H.," her early school-mate], was with me a few moments this week, and wished me to write for this. [A circular of the "No Name Series" was inclosed.] I told her I was unwilling, and she asked me why? I said I was incapable, and she seemed not to believe me and asked me not to decide for a few days. Meantime, she would write me. She was so sweetly noble, I would regret to estrange her, and if you would be willing to give me a note saying you disapproved it, and thought me unfit, she would believe you. I am sorry to flee so often to my safest friend, but hope he permits me.

In all this time — nearly eight years — we had never met, but she had sent invitations like the following:—

AMHERST.

DEAR FRIEND,— Whom my dog understood could not elude others.

I should be so glad to see you, but think it an apparitional pleasure, not to be fulfilled. I am uncertain of Boston.

I had promised to visit my physician for a few days in May, but father objects because he is in the habit of me.

Is it more far to Amherst?

You will find a minute host, but a spacious welcome. . . .

If I still entreat you to teach me, are you much displeased? I will be patient, constant, never reject your knife, and should my slowness goad you, you knew before myself that

Except the smaller size
No lives are round.
These hurry to a sphere
And show and end.
The larger slower grow
And later hang;
The summers of Hesperides
Are long.

Afterwards, came this:—

AMHERST.

DEAR FRIEND,— A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and ac-

cent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone. I would like to thank you for your great kindness, but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold.

Should you come to Amherst, I might then succeed, though gratitude is the timid wealth of those who have nothing. I am sure that you speak the truth, because the noble do, but your letters always surprise me.

My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any. "Seen of Angels," scarcely my responsibility.

It is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place, but tests' severe repairs are permitted all.

When a little girl I remember hearing that remarkable passage and preferring the "Power," not knowing at the time that "Kingdom" and "Glory" were included.

You noticed my dwelling alone. To an emigrant, country is idle except it be his own. You speak kindly of seeing me; could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst, I should be very glad, but I do not cross my father's ground to any house or town.

Of our greatest acts we are ignorant. You were not aware that you saved my life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests. . . . You will excuse each that I say, because no one taught me.

Band 2: THE FIRST MEETING

At last, after many postponements, on August 16, 1870, I found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent. It was at her father's house, one of those large, square, brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns, surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs without, and within exquisitely neat, cool, spacious, and fragrant with flowers. After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a

plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, "like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass," and with smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order, whose prescribed garb was white piqué, with a blue net worsted shawl. She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, "These are my introduction," and adding, also, under her breath, in childlike fashion, "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say." But soon she began to talk, and thenceforward continued almost constantly; pausing sometimes to beg that I would talk instead, but readily recommencing when I evaded. There was not a trace of affectation in all this; she seemed to speak absolutely for her own relief, and wholly without watching its effect on her hearer. Led on by me, she told much about her early life, in which her father was always the chief figure, — evidently a man of the old type, *la vieille roche* of Puritanism — a man who, as she said, read on Sunday "lonely and rigorous books;" and who had from childhood inspired her with such awe, that she never learned to tell time by the clock till she was fifteen, simply because he had tried to explain it to her when she was a little child, and she had been afraid to tell him that she did not understand, and also afraid to ask any one else lest he should hear of it. Yet she had never heard him speak a harsh word, and it needed only a glance at his photograph to see how truly the Puritan tradition was preserved in him. He did not wish his children, when little, to read anything but the Bible; and when, one day, her brother brought her home Longfellow's Kavanagh, he put it secretly under the pianoforte cover, made signs to her, and they both afterwards read it. It may have been before this, however,

that a student of her father's was amazed to find that she and her brother had never heard of Lydia Maria Child, then much read, and he brought Letters from New York, and hid it in the great bush of old-fashioned tree-box beside the front door. After the first book she thought in ecstasy, "This, then, is a book, and there are more of them." But she did not find so many as she expected, for she afterwards said to me, "When I lost the use of my eyes, it was a comfort to think that there were so few real books that I could easily find one to read me all of them." Afterwards, when she regained her eyes, she read Shakespeare, and thought to herself, "Why is any other book needed?"

She went on talking constantly and saying, in the midst of narrative, things quaint and aphoristic. "Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?" "Truth is such a rare thing, it is delightful to tell it." "I find ecstasy in living; the mere sense of living is joy enough." When I asked her if she never felt any want of employment, not going off the grounds and rarely seeing a visitor, she answered, "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time;" and then added, after a pause, "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough," although it seemed to me that she had. She told me of her household occupations, that she made all their bread, because her father liked only hers; then saying shyly, "And people must have puddings," this very timidly and suggestively, as if they were meteors or comets. Interspersed with these confidences came phrases so emphasized as to seem the very wantonness of over-statement, as if she pleased herself with putting into words what the most extravagant might possibly think without saying, as thus: "How do most people live without any thoughts? There are many people in the world, — you must have noticed them in the street, — how do they live? How

do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning?" Or this crowning extravaganza: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me. I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?"

I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before; — on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life.

The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life. Perhaps in time I could have got beyond that somewhat overstrained relation which not my will, but her needs, had forced upon us. Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and every-day comradeship; but it was not altogether easy. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson. Under this necessity I had no opportunity to see that human and humorous side of her which is strongly emphasized by her nearer friends, and which shows itself in her quaint and unique description of a rural burglary, contained in the volume of her poems. Hence, even her letters to me show her mainly on her *exaltée* side; and should a volume of her correspondence ever be printed, it is very desirable that it should contain some of her letters to friends of closer and more familiar intimacy.

After my visit came this letter: —

Enough is so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits.

Fabulous to me as the men of the Revelations who "shall not hunger any more." Even the possible has its insoluble particle.

After you went, I took Macbeth and turned to "Birnam Wood." Came twice "To Dunsinane." I thought and went about my work. . . .

The vein cannot thank the artery, but her solemn indebtedness to him, even the stolidest admit, and so of me who try, whose effort leaves no sound.

You ask great questions accidentally. To answer them would be events. I trust that you are safe.

I ask you to forgive me for all the ignorance I had. I find no nomination sweet as your low opinion.

Speak, if but to blame your obedient child.

You told me of Mrs. Lowell's poems. Would you tell me where I could find them, or are they not for sight? An article of yours, too, perhaps the only one you wrote that I never knew. It was about a "Latch." Are you willing to tell me? [Perhaps "A Sketch."]

If I ask too much, you could please refuse. Shortness to live has made me bold.

Abroad is close to-night and I have but to lift my hands to touch the "Heights of Abraham."
DICKINSON.

Band 3: THE LETTERS OF THE LAST YEARS

When I said, at parting, that I would come again some time, she replied, "Say, in a long time; that will be nearer. Some time is no time." We met only once again, and I have no express record of the visit. We corresponded for years, at long intervals, her side of the intercourse being, I fear, better sustained; and she sometimes wrote also to my wife, inclosing flowers or fragrant leaves with

a verse or two. Once she sent her one of George Eliot's books, I think Middlemarch, and wrote, "I am bringing you a little granite book for you to lean upon." At other times she would send single poems, such as these:—

THE BLUE JAY.

No brigadier throughout the year
So civic as the jay.
A neighbor and a warrior too,
With shrill felicity
Pursuing winds that censure us
A February Day,
The brother of the universe
Was never blown away.
The snow and he are intimate;
I've often seen them play
When heaven looked upon us all
With such severity
I felt apology were due
To an insulted sky
Whose pompous frown was nutriment
To their temerity.
The pillow of this daring head
Is pungent evergreens;
His larder—terse and militant—
Unknown, refreshing things;
His character—a tonic;
His future—a dispute;
Unfair an immortality
That leaves this neighbor out.

THE WHITE HEAT.

Dare you see a soul at the white heat?
Then crouch within the door;
Red is the fire's common tint,
But when the vivid ore

Has sated flame's conditions,
Its quivering substance plays
Without a color, but the light
Of unanointed blaze.

Least village boasts its blacksmith,
Whose anvil's even din
Stands symbol for the finer forge
That soundless tugs within,

Refining these impatient ores
With hammer and with blaze,
Until the designated light
Repudiates the forge.

Then came the death of her father,
that strong Puritan father who had communicated to her so much of the vigor of his own nature, and who bought her

many books, but begged her not to read them. Mr. Edward Dickinson, after service in the national House of Representatives and other public positions, had become a member of the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature. The session was unusually prolonged, and he was making a speech upon some railway question at noon, one very hot day (July 16, 1874), when he became suddenly faint and sat down. The house adjourned, and a friend walked with him to his lodgings at the Tremont House; where he began to pack his bag for home, after sending for a physician, but died within three hours. Soon afterwards, I received the following letter:—

The last afternoon that my father lived, though with no premonition, I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for mother, Vinnie [her sister] being asleep. He seemed peculiarly pleased, as I oftenest stayed with myself; and remarked, as the afternoon withdrew, he "would like it to not end."

His pleasure almost embarrassed me, and my brother coming, I suggested they walk. Next morning I woke him for the train, and saw him no more.

His heart was pure and terrible, and I think no other like it exists.

I am glad there is immortality, but would have tested it myself, before entrusting him. Mr. Bowles was with us. With that exception, I saw none. I have wished for you, since my father died, and had you an hour unengrossed, it would be almost priceless. Thank you for each kindness. . . .

Later she wrote:—

When I think of my father's lonely life and lonelier death, there is this redress—

Take all away;
The only thing worth larceny
Is left—the immortality.

My earliest friend wrote me the week before he died, "If I live, I will go to

Amherst; if I die, I certainly will."

Is your house deeper off?

YOUR SCHOLAR.

A year afterwards came this:—

DEAR FRIEND,—Mother was paralyzed Tuesday, a year from the evening father died. I thought perhaps you would care.

YOUR SCHOLAR.

With this came the following verse, having a curious seventeenth-century flavor:—

A death-blow is a life-blow to some,
Who, till they died, did not alive become;
Who, had they lived, had died, but when
They died, vitality begun.

And later came this kindred memorial of one of the oldest and most faithful friends of the family, Mr. Samuel Bowles of the Springfield Republican:—

DEAR FRIEND,—I felt it shelter to speak to you.

My brother and sister are with Mr. Bowles, who is buried this afternoon.

The last song that I heard— that was, since the birds— was "He leadeth me, he leadeth me; yea, though I walk"— then the voices stooped, the arch was so low.

After this added bereavement the inward life of the diminished household became only more concentrated, and the world was held farther and farther away. Yet to this period belongs the following letter, written about 1880, which has more of what is commonly called the objective or external quality than any she ever wrote me; and shows how close might have been her observation and her sympathy, had her rare qualities taken a somewhat different channel:—

DEAR FRIEND,—I was touchingly reminded of [a child who had died] this morning by an Indian woman with gay

baskets and a dazzling baby, at the kitchen door. Her little boy, "once died," she said, death to her dispelling him. I asked her what the baby liked, and she said "to step." The prairie before the door was gay with flowers of hay, and I led her in. She argued with the birds, she leaned on clover walls and they fell, and dropped her. With jargon sweeter than a bell, she grappled buttercups, and they sank together, the buttercups the heaviest. What sweetest use of days! 'T was noting some such scene made Vaughan humbly say, "My days that are at best but dim and hoary." I think it was Vaughan. . . .

And these few fragmentary memorials— closing, like every human biography, with funerals, yet with such as were to Emily Dickinson only the stately introduction to a higher life— may well end with her description of the death of the very summer she so loved.

As imperceptibly as grief
The summer lapsed away,
Too imperceptible at last
To feel 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.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson.