

- || • “Emily Dickinson’s Letters” by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Text pub. *Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1891.

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## **Emily Dickinson's Letters** **by Thomas Wentworth Higginson**

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 recluse 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 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.

One result of this glare of publicity has been a constant and earnest demand by her readers for further information in regard to her; and I have decided with much reluctance to give some extracts from her early correspondence with one whom she always persisted in regarding--with very little ground for it--as a literary counselor and confidant.

It seems to be the opinion of those who have examined her accessible correspondence most widely, that no other letters bring us quite so intimately near to the peculiar quality and aroma of her nature; and it has been urged upon me very strongly that her readers have the right to know something more of this gifted and most interesting woman.

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 chambers" and "I'll tell you how the sun rose," together with the two that here follow. [...]

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. [...]

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 by 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.**

(source: [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com))

- Here is an extract from another very interesting letter by Emily Dickinson to Higginson. The correspondence between Mr. Higginson and the poet began when Dickinson responded to Higginson's article *Letter to a young Contributor* published in the April issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. She sent him a letter accompanied by some of her poems seeking feedback; this marked the beginning of their correspondence and unconventional intellectual relationship which lasted until Dickinson's death.

[My Business Is Circumference ]

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 Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves – Would this do as well?

It often alarms Father – He says Death might occur, and he has Molds<sup>1</sup> of all the rest – but has no Mold 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 –

(...)

- When the 1891 edition of Dickinson's poems was being prepared Mr. Higginson wrote to his co-editor Mrs. Todd, expressing his doubts and worries about the publication of the poem 'Wild Nights, Wild Nights' as he sensed the disruptive eroticism which Dickinson's lines exude. Interestingly, Mr. Higginson feared that poem would damage and/or obliterate the image of Dickinson as the elusive 'Virgin Recluse'...

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<sup>1</sup> i.e., photographs or likenesses.

**‘One poem only I dread a little to print--that wonderful 'Wild Nights,'--lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there. Has Miss Lavinia [Emily Dickinson's sister] any shrinking about it? You will understand & pardon my solicitude. Yet what a loss to omit it! Indeed it is not to be omitted.’**

- Dickinson’s poem focusing on what she perceives as ‘her own religion’, that is poetry.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –  
I keep it, staying at Home –  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –  
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –  
I, just wear my Wings –  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –  
I’m going, all along.

Source: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin* (Harvard University Press, 1999)