

Letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson¹

[Say If My Verse Is Alive?]

15 April 1862

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 enclose 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 it's own pawn?—

[Thank You for the Surgery]

25 April 1862

Mr Higginson,

Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude—but I was ill—and write today, 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.² 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, died³—and for several years, myLexicon—was my only companion—Then I found one more—but he was not contented I be his scholar—so he left the Land.⁴

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 Briefs⁵—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 unconvayed—like Melody—or Witchcraft?

You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book⁶—but was told that he was disgraceful—

I read Miss Prescott's "Circumstance,"⁸ but it followed me, in the Dark—so I avoided her—

Two Editors of Journals⁹ 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

[Will You Be My Preceptor?]

7 June 1862

Dear friend,

Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before—Domingo¹ 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 Mob²—as I could master—then—And 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—

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung—I had not supposed it. Your first—gave no dishonor, because the True—are not

1. Thomas Wentworth Higginson "had recently resigned his radically liberal church pastorate and was beginning to make a name as a reform-minded essayist and lecturer. Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor," offering practical advice to beginning writers, was published in the April *Atlantic Monthly*. This letter, responding to that article, was accompanied by several poems and marked the beginning of a correspondence—and a remarkable relationship—that lasted for the rest of Dickinson's life. It should be noted that Higginson from the first was sensitive to the curious, original power of her poetry, but as a rather conventional 19th-century critic he found no way to judge its unorthodox formal qualities. For her

part, Dickinson was content to assume the ironic role of "scholar" to this "Preceptor," content with his friendship and her own "Barfoot-Bank."²

2. In place of a signature, Emily Dickinson enclosed a signed card in its own envelope.

3. Revelation is the last book of the New Testament. John Keats (1795–1821), English Romantic poet; Elizabeth Barrett (1806–1861) and Robert Browning (1812–1889), English poets; John Ruskin (1819–1900), English art critic and social theorist; Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), English physician and writer.

4. The friend and tutor was probably Benjamin Franklin Newton (1821–1853), who had studied law in her father's office in the 1840s.

5. The Reverend Charles Wadsworth left Philadelphia for a pastorate in California in April.

6. Edward Dickinson was a prominent lawyer of Amherst. A brief is a concise statement of a client's case made out for the instruction of counsel in a trial.

7. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

8. Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance," the story of a woman traveling home from a sick neighbor's at nightfall in Maine, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* for May 1860. See pp. 258–97.

9. Possibly Samuel Bowles and J. G. Holland, though both were associated at the time with the *Springfield Daily Republican*.

1. Sanrio or St. Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic in the West Indies; Dickinson alludes in poems to St. Domingo twice (137 [95] and 697 [726]); and Domingo twice (872 [1064], 1466 [1488]); here it is invoked as the source of the rum.

2. I.e., she was unable to write for a popular audience or a mob.

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 forsake me—then—My Barefoot-Rank is better—

You think my gait "spasmodic"³—I am in danger—Sir—
You think me "uncontrolled"—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—it 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,⁴ 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?

Your friend

E Dickinson—

[*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 just as well?

It often alarms Father—He says Death might occur, and he has Mold's⁵ 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—

You said "Dark." I know the Butterfly—and the Lizard—and the Orchis⁶—
Are not those *your* Countrymen?

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

3. While faulting her "gait" as spasmodic or jerky, Higginson may have challenged her with imitating the psychological excesses of the English "Spasmodic School" of poets, satirized by W. E. Aytoun in *Firmilian* (1854).

4. As Johnson notes, the phrase "I have no Saxon"

means "Language fails me."

5. I.e., photographs or likenesses.

6. A small purplish or white orchid. Higginson wrote many nature essays with which she was familiar.

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 Circumference⁷—An ignorance, not of Customs, 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, beside the growth of me—you will appoint, yourself, how often I shall come—without your inconvenience. And if at any time—you regret you received me, or I prove a different fabric to that you supposed—you must banish me—

When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person. You are true, about the "perfection."

Today, makes Yesterday mean.

You spoke of Pippa Passes⁸—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

Letters on "E. D." from T. W. Higginson to His Wife

[*August 16, 1870*]

I shan't sit up tonight to write you all about E. D. dearest but if you had read Mrs. Stoddard's¹ novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves. Yet I only saw her.

A large country lawyer's house, brown brick, with great trees & a garden—I sent up my card. A parlor dark & cool & stiffish, a few books & engravings & an open piano—Malbone & O D [Out Door] Papers² among other books.

A step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer—with no good feature—in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said "These are my introduction" in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice—& added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened! I never see strangers & hardly know what I say—but she talked soon & thenceforward continuously—& deferentially—sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her—but readily recommencing. Manner between Angie Tilton & Mr. Alcott³—but thor-

1. England locales and family situations.

2. *Malbone: An Oldport Romance*, Higginson's first novel, appeared serially the first six months of 1869 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The *Out Door Papers* were a collection of his nature essays from the *Atlantic*.

3. Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), American educator, author, mystic; one of the Transcendentalists. Angie Tilton is unidentified.

ougly ingenious & simple which they are not & saying many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise—and some things you wd. hv. liked. I add a few over the page.

* * *

I got here at 2 & leave at 9. E. D. dreamed all night of you (not me) & next day got my letter proposing to come here!! She only knew of you through a mention in my notice of Charlotte Hawes.⁴

"Women talk: men are silent: that is why I dread women.

"My father only reads on Sunday—he reads *lovely* & *rigorous* books."

"If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can 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 way I know it. Is there any other way?"

"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?"

"When I lost the use of my Eyes it was a comfort to think there were so few real books that I could easily find some one to read me all of them"

"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"

I asked if she never felt want of employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time" (& added) "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough."

She makes all the bread for her father only likes hers & says "& people must have puddings" this very dreamily, as if they were comets—so she makes them.

[August 17, 1870]

* * *

E D again

"Could you tell me what home is"

"I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled."

"I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was afraid to say I did not & afraid to ask any one else lest he should know."

Her father was not severe I should think but remote. He did not wish them to read anything but the Bible. One day her brother brought home Kavanagh's hid it under the piano cover & made signs to her & they read it: her father at last found it & was displeased. Perhaps it was before this that a student of his was amazed that they had never heard of Mrs. [Lydia Maria] Child &

4. A young writer whom Higginson encouraged in Worcester, Massachusetts, and whom he introduced to the *Atlantic*. Below, Higginson lists some of the things Dickinson said.
5. A novel by Longfellow, published in 1849.
6. An abolitionist (1802-1880) famous for *Appeal*

in *Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1835) and her novels *Hobomok* (1834), *The Rebels*, or *Boston before the Revolution* (1825), *Philothea* (1836), and *A Romance of the Republic* (an abolition novel, 1867).

used to bring them books & hide in a bush by the door. They were then little things in short dresses with their feet on the rungs of the chair. After the first book she thought in ecstasy "This then is a book! And there are more of them!"

"Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?"

Major Hunt interested her more than any man she ever saw. She remembered two things he said—that her great dog "understood gravitation" & when he said he should come again "in a year. If I say a shorter time it will be longer."

When I said I would come again *some time* she said "Say in a long time, that will be nearer. Some time is nothing."

After long disuse of her eyes she read Shakespeare & thought why is any other book needed.

I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her. She often thought me *tired* & seemed very thoughtful of others.

* * *

REBECCA HARDING DAVIS

1831-1910

Rebecca Harding was born in 1831 in Washington, Pennsylvania, her mother's hometown, then taken to Florence, Alabama, where her father, a book-loving English emigrant, was in business. Her earliest memories were of the Deep South, a landscape of tropical heat and beauty and a frontier society with extremes of wealth and poverty even among whites and based, for inextricable complications, on black slavery. As her recollections show, she learned in Alabama to see for herself, if not yet to think for herself. In 1836 her father moved the family to Wheeling, Virginia, still a jumping-off place for the West as well as a prosperous manufacturing center, in that anomalous fingerlike part of a slave state that reached far north between the free states of Ohio and Pennsylvania, a location fitted for the nurture of independent observation and judgment. Bookish like her father, Rebecca Harding at fourteen went to live with an aunt at her birthplace, across the Pennsylvania line to the east, to attend the female seminary. Back in Wheeling, alert in her young maturity to abolitionist agitation yet part of the slave society, she passed into what her era considered spinstership and was a serious-minded observer of the manners, morals, and machinations of people and a reticent and dutiful daughter, yet a woman of forthrightly independent views. She continued reading (we know she read John Bunyan, Sir Walter Scott, and Maria Edgeworth, and a few Hawthorne stories in a collection of *Moral Tales* affected her strongly). By her late twenties she had read English reform novels such as those by Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell and had begun to publish anonymous reviews of new books in local papers. During the election year 1860, her mind more on the misery of the local mill workers than on the misery of slaves, she wrote "Life in the Iron-Mills," apparently the first story she completed, and sent it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, the most prestigious magazine in the country, then under the editorship of James Fields.

As editor of the *Atlantic* James Russell Lowell had censored Thoreau and Whitman, and Fields himself was to censor Hawthorne's portrait of Lincoln, but he recognized