


"THIS FIERY MIST":
AN EXAMINATION
OF THE POEMS SENT TO T. W. HIGGINSON
BY EMILY DICKINSON

by
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1972

A MASTER'S REPORT
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS
Department of English
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas
1976

Approved by:


Major Professor

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1976
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On 15 April 1862, Emily Dickinson began the sporadic correspondence with Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson that would continue until her death in 1886. The relationship that began with her query, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?"¹ has long been of interest to Dickinson scholars. Miss Dickinson had been drawn to write to Higginson after reading his article "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the April 1862 Atlantic Monthly. In her first letter to Colonel Higginson, she enclosed a sample of four of her poems (including "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," "The nearest Dream recedes unrealized," and "We play at Paste") for his perusal. Thus, Higginson was given the opportunity to provide Emily Dickinson with critical guidance. She put it to him directly in her letter to him of 7 June 1862: "But will you be my preceptor, Mr. Higginson?"²

Higginson seems to have accepted Emily Dickinson's offer, at least from the standpoint that he answered her letters and apparently attempted to give her advice. Their relationship was not to be one of teacher-pupil in an exact sense, however. Higginson perhaps never came to terms with Emily Dickinson, either as an artist or as a person. Nevertheless, their correspondence provides useful insights. The poems enclosed to Higginson in Dickinson's letters provide part of the evidence as to why he remained somewhat mystified over her work all of his life.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the poems for the forms and content that possibly bewildered Higginson enough to have prevented the flowering of a mutually satisfying friendship on a literary basis. Certainly, Emily Dickinson seems to have begun the correspondence with a definite purpose in mind; she was apparently ready to seek guidance on a purely professional level for the first time. Thus, Colonel Higginson was placed in a unique position in relation to Emily Dickinson. As Richard Sewall points out: "What is especially important about the poems sent in these first letters to Higginson is Emily's singleness of purpose in sending them. Many of the poems to [Samuel] Bowles carried personal as well as professional messages; the first poems sent to Higginson are samples of her work, presumably chosen to show its variety and range and something, as in the short poems, of its purpose and method."³

A problem arises in the studying of the entire group of poems Emily Dickinson sent to Higginson in that she sent him a large number of poems which were included within the body of her letters. Many of these poems have been published as well as those which she sent to Higginson as enclosures (on separate paper folded in with the prose text of her letters). This study, however, will focus exclusively on those poems sent to Higginson as separate enclosures. This choice can be defended for several reasons. First, an examination of all poems sent (both enclosed and in the text of letters) to Higginson would require too lengthy an analysis

for the scope of this study. There are poems, or at least fragments of poetry, in most of Dickinson's correspondence to Higginson. Secondly, a number of the poems are fragments which are quite brief and occasionally integrated into the context of the prose. (At other times Miss Dickinson sent Higginson larger fragments, such as in a letter sent about 1863, when she includes the second stanza of "That after Horror--that 'twas us."⁴) The problem would then be raised as to how such fragments should be treated. Finally, the enclosed poems, besides being intact, were, as Sewall pointed out, consciously crafted into a form that Emily Dickinson felt suitable for professional attention. Since the enclosed poems represent Miss Dickinson's personal selection, they also can possibly reveal insights into her own view of her work.

The table below provides a list of those poems sent to Thomas Higginson by Emily Dickinson as separate enclosures-- according to the research of Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward in The Letters of Emily Dickinson. Higginson took care to preserve Miss Dickinson's letters to him and a comparison of the folds of the letters and those of the text of the poems provides a generally reliable indication of the letters with which the enclosed poems were sent. However, some problems about the sample remain unresolved. For example, the folds of the letter and poems indicate the enclosures sent on 25 April 1862 were (as noted below) "There came a Day at Summer's full," "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad,"

and "South Winds jostle them."⁵ Higginson later claimed (in 1891) that the enclosures were "Your riches taught me poverty" and "A bird came down the walk." Johnson and Ward side with the evidence provided by the folds. Jay Leyda in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, Vol. II, includes "A bird came down the walk" as a possible enclosure with the other three.⁶ Thus, the question as to the exact make-up of the 25 April 1862 enclosures remains unsolved.

A second problem is encountered with the last enclosures. According to Ward and Johnson, the enclosures of November 1880 included "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat."⁷ Leyda suggests the poem was instead "Mine enemy is growing old."⁸ He is supported by Johnson in his 1955 variorum edition of the poems.⁹ Moreover, "Dare you see a Soul" was written quite early (1862); whereas "Mine enemy is growing old" was written about the time the final enclosures were sent. The other three enclosed poems of November 1880 were also composed at about that time, suggesting "Mine enemy" as the more likely choice. In any case, the text of the accompanying letter indicates firmly that four poems were enclosed. Another discrepancy remains with the November 1880 enclosures. Both Leyda in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson and Ward and Johnson in the 1958 edition of the letters cite the date as November 1880. In the 1955 edition of the poems, Johnson suggests the date is sometime in the summer of 1881. Therefore, the following chart can represent only the best estimates available of the identity of the

enclosure poems and the dates on which they were written and sent. Generally the 1958 edition of the letters compiled by Ward and Johnson remains the major source. Variances with other scholarly works are duly noted.

POEM	NO.	WRITTEN	SENT
"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"	216	1859	15 Apr. 1862
"I'll tell you how the Sun rose"	318	1860	" " "
"The nearest Dream recedes unrealized"	319	1861	" " "
"We play at Paste"	320	1862	" " "
"South Winds jostle them"*	86	1859	25 Apr. 1862
"There came a Day at Summer's full"	322	1861	" " "
"Of all the Sounds despatched abroad"	321	1862	" " "
"Success is counted sweetest"	67	1859	July 1862
"Some keep the Sabbath going to Church"	324	1860	" "
"Of Tribulation these are they"	325	1861	" "
"Your Riches taught me poverty"	299	1862	" "
"I cannot dance upon my toes"	326	1862	Aug. 1862
"Before I got my Eye put out"	327	1862	" "
"The Soul unto itself"	683	1862	Feb. 1863 (possibly Apr. 1863)
"Further in Summer than the Birds"	1068	1866	27 Jan. 1866
"A death blow is a Life blow to some"	816	1864	early 1866
"Blazing in Gold"	228	1861	9 June 1866

POEM	NO.	WRITTEN	SENT
"Ample make this Bed"	829	1864	9 June 1866
"To undertake is to achieve"	1070	1865	" " "
"As imperceptibly as Grief	1540	1865	" " "
"The Luxury to apprehend"	815	1864	mid July 1867
"When I hoped I feared"	1181	1862	Nov. 1871
"Remembrance has a Rear and Front"	1182	1871	" "
"Step lightly on this narrow spot"	1183	1871	" "
"The Days that we can spare"	1184	1871	" "
"He preached upon Breadth"	1207	1872	late 1872
"To disappear enhances"	1204	1872	" "
"The Sea said 'Come' to the Brook"	1210	1872	" "
"Longing is like the Seed"	1255	1872	about 1873
"Not any higher stands the Grave"	1256	1873	" "
"Dominion lasts until obtained"	1257	1873	" "
"Because that you are going"	1260	1873/74	Jan. 1874
"The last of Summer is delight"	1353	1876	Jan. 1876
"The Heart is the Capital of the Mind"	1354	1875/76	" "
"The Mind lives on the Heart"	1355	1876	" "
"The Rat is the concisest Tenant"	1356	1876	" "
"'Faithful to the end' Amended"	1357	1876	" "
"After all Birds have been invest- igated and laid aside"	1395	1877	Aug. 1877
"She laid her Docile crescent down"	1396	1877	" "

POEM	NO.	WRITTEN	SENT
"It sounded as if the Streets were running"	1397	1877	Aug. 1877
"I have no Life but this"	1398	1877	" "
"A Route of Evanescence"	1463	1879	Nov. 1880
"The Savior must have been"	1487	1880	" "
"Mine Enemy is growing old"***	1509	1880	" " (possibly Spring of 1881)
"My country need not change her gown"	1511	1880	" "

*Higginson suggested the enclosures were "A bird came down the walk" and "Your Riches taught me poverty."

**Ward and Johnson suggest the poem was "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat."

A quick review of the list of enclosed poems confirms that Higginson received both what were to become well-known and what were to remain obscure pieces of Emily Dickinson's work. In 1890 Higginson recalled his initial impression. He found that "her verses are in most cases like poetry plucked up by the roots; we have them with earth, stones, and dew adhering, and must accept them as they are. Wayward and unconventional in the last degree; defiant of form, measure, rhyme, and even grammar; she yet had an exacting standard of her own, and would wait many days for a word that satisfied."¹⁰

Higginson's reaction is important, for he was in an ideal position to become Emily Dickinson's literary mentor.

He received a wide variety of Dickinson poems over a long span of time. Yet, even after his long familiarity with her work and his later editing of her poems, Higginson's feeling about Emily Dickinson's poetry remained ambivalent. Higginson admitted in his 1891 Atlantic Monthly article on Emily Dickinson's letters that "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."¹¹ In the article he emphasized his comments with an obvious reference to one of the first four poems he had received ("The nearest Dream recedes unrealized"). He admitted that "the bee himself did not evade the school-boy more than she evaded me; and even to this day I stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy."¹²

Richard Sewall feels this very bewilderment was the natural result of Higginson's literary orientation and that "one of Emily Dickinson's failures of judgment was to turn to Higginson for literary advice. She could hardly have known from 'Letter to a Young Contributor' how deep seated his literary conservatism was."¹³ A reading of Higginson's article reveals some of its possible appeal to Emily Dickinson, however. It was addressed to women as well as men, for example. Also, Higginson stated that "...every editor is always hungering and thirsting after

novelties."¹⁴ To Emily Dickinson, this must have appeared a clear invitation. Higginson goes on to urge that the aspiring writer "be noble both in the affluence and the economy of your diction; spare no wealth that you can put in, and tolerate no superfluity that can be struck out... roll your thought into one good English word. There is no fault which seems so hopeless as commonplaceness, but it is really easier to elevate the commonplace than to reduce the turgid."¹⁵ Thus, Higginson's support of the value of words and the usefulness of commonplaces is not far from the poetic practices of Emily Dickinson.

There is no way of knowing whether a warmer reception of her work would have made a significant difference to Emily Dickinson as poet; but one can study the enclosure poems for not only their diverse elements, but also with special attention to what bewildered Higginson about them. We have, by Higginson's own admission, a group of poems that he had difficulty in understanding. Because of the importance of these poems to the history of Dickinson scholarship, an analysis of them in relation to Higginson's literary views is worthwhile. (In this study, however, the major focus will be on the first twenty-two enclosed poems, for reasons that will be outlined below.)

Before turning to those poems, however, it is imperative to obtain some idea of Higginson's opinion regarding the necessary elements of literature in general. In an article for the Atlantic Monthly in December 1867, Higginson suggested

the direction in which he thought American literature should go. He still maintained a strong emphasis on structural forms. Higginson stated: "As yet, the mass of our writers seek originality in mere externals; we think, because we live in a new country, we are unworthy of ourselves if we do not Americanize the grammar and spelling book. In a republic, must the objective case be governed by the verb? We shall yet learn that it is not new literary forms we need, but only fresh inspiration, combined with cultivated taste."¹⁶

Higginson's reliance on conventional forms is perhaps best characterized by one of his own poems. The traditional meter and verse form, plus the carefully alternated rhyme and the elevated language are all facets of Higginson's orthodoxy:

The Reed Immortal

(Pliny tells us that the Egyptians regarded the papyrus as an emblem of immortality.)

I.

Reed of the stagnant waters,
 Far in the Eastern lands
 Rearing thy peaceful daughters
 In sight of the storied sands!
 Armies and fleets defying
 Have swept by that quiet spot;
 But thine is the life undying,
 Theirs is the tale forgot.

II.

The legions of Alexander
 Are scattered and gone and fled;
 And the queen who ruled the commander
 Over Antony, is dead;
 The marching armies of Cyrus
 Have vanished in earth again;
 And only the frail papyrus
 Still reigns o'er the sons of men.

III.

Papyrus! O reed immortal!
 Survivor of all renown!
 Thou heed'st not the solemn portal
 Where heroes and kings go down.
 The monarchs of generations
 Have died into dust away;
 O reed that outlived nations,
 Be our symbol of strength today!¹⁷

Further evidence of Higginson's conservatism in literary taste is contained in his opinion of Walt Whitman. Higginson stated in 1867 that it was "no discredit to Walt Whitman that he wrote 'Leaves of Grass,' only that he did not burn it afterwards. A poet must commonly plough in his first crop, as the farmer does, to enrich the soil."¹⁸ Higginson's opinion of Whitman's work was tempered mainly by his admiration for 'My Captain,' which was one of Whitman's most regular and least characteristic poems.¹⁹

Therefore, it was a man with a strong belief in careful and conventional craftsmanship and adherence to established forms that received Emily Dickinson's request for guidance. It is not surprising that he was left bewildered by what he found, as a closer look at the enclosure poems will prove. Although an overview of those forty-five poems is intended here, there remains the problem that they extend over a period of approximately twenty-one years. Twenty-two of those poems were composed between 1859 and 1866, however, and mainly before Colonel Higginson met Emily Dickinson. These are the works that will receive the most extensive examination here. Interestingly, with the exception of one poem, from 1871 to the final enclosures of 1880, Emily Dickinson sent Higginson poems she had only recently composed. Before 1871, she often sent Higginson poems that were written one or more years before they were sent. Another interesting point is that between Higginson's receipt of the first twenty-one enclosure poems and the second group, which were written (with the aforementioned exception) in 1871 and thereafter, came Higginson's first visit to Emily Dickinson on August 15, 1870.

This visit seems to have marked a turning point, coincidentally or not, in the composition dates of the poems Higginson received from Miss Dickinson. After 1870, he no longer received poems which Dickinson had written several years earlier and had apparently singled out for his scrutiny. Perhaps the visit effectively ended, once and for all, the

hopes of both parties that Higginson could be Dickinson's literary guide. After 1870, Emily Dickinson may have simply enclosed current poems to Higginson as she would have to a friend, rather than a teacher.

Higginson was to write in 1891 of the discomfort he felt at that meeting. He stated: "The impression 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."²⁰

According to a biographer of Higginson, Tilden Edelstein, "the visit thoroughly obliterated the possibility created in their correspondence of a powerful male mentor leading a childlike woman poet."²¹ Obviously, Higginson was uneasy at the meeting but it is difficult to prove that their relationship changed markedly at that time. Sewall feels, for example, that Higginson had ceased to be Dickinson's true literary mentor as early as August 1862 when she sent him "I cannot dance upon my toes." Sewall suggests that "especially since the letter is the last one in which she discussed at any length her verse and its technique, the poem may be a comment, as Charles Anderson has suggested, on Higginson's attempts to get her to write according to his prescriptions."²²

Colonel Higginson did admit that eventually he gave up all attempt to guide Emily Dickinson though she seemed unwilling to concede that fact. He wrote in "Emily Dickinson's

Letters" (1891) that they "corresponded at varying intervals, she always keeping up that attitude of 'Scholar' and assuming on my part a preceptorship which it is almost needless to say did not exist...I soon abandoned all attempt in the slightest degree to guide this extraordinary nature, and simply accepted her confidences, giving as much as I could of what might interest her in return."²³

Higginson's first impressions are of perhaps the most interest, which is another reason why the later enclosure poems will not receive here the close attention of the first twenty-two. In judging the qualities of the poems that possibly most struck Higginson as unorthodox, technical aspects will be looked at most carefully--specifically stanza form, rhyme, grammar, mechanics, and diction. Thematic concerns will be briefly related, but pose special problems not found in a technical survey and therefore will not be discussed in detail.

If Higginson's own reliance on the standard four or eight line stanza and regular meter is an indication of his preference in poetic form, the early samples of Miss Dickinson's poems were not to fit those conventions. Apparently, as Sewall suggested, Emily Dickinson intended to provide Higginson with an indication of the variety of her work in the first enclosures. Although she relies fairly heavily on the 8,6,8,6 Common Meter in the enclosure poems, only "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" is based on Common Meter in

the first four poems which Higginson received.²⁴ "We play at Paste" was arranged in two quatrains with the other three poems, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "The nearest Dream recedes unrealized," and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" arranged in lines of five and eight, ten and three, and sixteen respectively. As with Common Meter, Dickinson was to rely on the more standard quatrain arrangement much more in later enclosures.

In the next group of enclosures, Higginson was to receive two poems in Common Meter (the exception being "South Winds jostle them") and only one poem in quatrains ("There came a Day at Summer's full"). As with "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" an alternate version of "South Winds jostle them" exists in a quatrain arrangement, causing the poem to appear, at least, more conventional than in an arrangement with no stanza break. If Emily Dickinson were striving for variety or preferred, for whatever reasons, a less orthodox ordering of the lines, it is understandable why she chose to send a less traditional form (which, ironically, Higginson would probably have preferred).

Again, in the next group of enclosures, Miss Dickinson sent "Your Riches taught me poverty" in an arrangement of eight line stanzas instead of the quatrains of the manuscript found in one of the packets.²⁵ "Success is counted sweetest" is also in quatrains in the packet copy. Higginson received the poem arranged in eleven lines with no stanza break. "Of Tribulation these are they" and "Some keep the Sabbath going

to Church" are in quatrains. "Some keep the Sabbath" is made up of an irregular syllable arrangement. "Success is counted sweetest" is in an arrangement of Sevens and Sixes, another metrical arrangement common to Emily Dickinson.²⁶

The next four enclosures that Higginson received, dating from August 1862 through January 1866, show a good deal of regularity in form. All four are arranged in quatrains and all four are at least based on Common Meter. She had not abandoned all variation in the enclosures, however. A March 1866 enclosure, "A Death blow is a Life blow to some" consisted of one quatrain and a 9,10,8,8 syllable arrangement. "Blazing in Gold," sent in June 1866, also possessed an unusual syllabic form--the first stanza being 10,8,10,8,10,9,9,8. The eight line stanza Higginson received had been split into two quatrains for entry into a packet in 1861. The three poems accompanying "Blazing in Gold" were arranged in quatrains with "Ample make this Bed" in a 5,5,7,5/5,5,6,5 meter. The other two poems were in Common Meter.

"The Luxury to apprehend," which arrived in July 1868, was in Common Meter, but, again, there was no stanza break. The poem had been entered into a packet in 1864 in four quatrains. "When I hoped I feared," the last of the enclosed poems to be written in the 1860's had been entered (with some word changes) into a packet in 1862 in two quatrains.

Higginson received it in 1871 without a stanza break. This poem had five syllables in each line, creating an unusual chanting rhythm.

Obviously Emily Dickinson did not rely exclusively on the hymn stanza and she seemed to offer Higginson wide-ranging examples of stanza form in her verse. She did frequently use the iambic pentameter line, but Higginson nevertheless recognized immediately the unique quality of her poetry. He was to refer to her conception as "weird enough for William Blake, and one can no more criticize a faulty rhyme here and there than a defect of drawing in one of Blake's pictures. When a thought takes one's breath away, who cares to count the syllables?"²⁷ Higginson, for one, apparently counted them, and could hardly have been expected to readily accept all of the irregularities he found.

Of course, it was not just stanza form in Emily Dickinson's poetry that demonstrated irregularity. Perhaps an even more striking break with tradition occurred in her use of rhyme. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted addresses herself to the rhymes of the first four poems Higginson received and suggests they do not vary appreciably from Dickinson's other verse.²⁸ Each of the four poems has at least one exact rhyme with a variety of near rhyme. Some of the exact rhymes are, for example, row/snow; chase/race; and sands/hands. The approximate rhymes include noon/stone; pearl/fool; and boy/deploy.

fortunately, most of Higginson's letters to Emily Dickinson do not survive. We know from her replies to him that he rendered some advice. Whether he suggested she pay more attention to exact rhyme (which filled his own poetry), we do not know. At any rate, as Lindberg-Seyersted points out, the enclosed poems of the second letter are more regularly rhymed. "There came a Day at Summer's full," and "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad" contain three exact rhymes, for example. It should be noted, however, that these poems also contain a variety of near rhyme as well.²⁹

A survey of the first twenty-two poems sent to Higginson reveals that all but two of the poems--"Of Tribulation these are they" and "As imperceptibly as Grief"--contain at least one exact rhyme. Frequently an equal number (or nearly equal) number of approximate rhymes and exact rhymes can be found within the poems. One factor is clear throughout the sample, however, and that is that Emily Dickinson did not appear to depend either more or less heavily on regular rhyme over the span of time she wrote to Higginson than she did when she began her correspondence with him. If the second group of poems she sent to him reflected an attempt to present him with more regularly rhymed verse, such deference did not last long.

Also, where alternate versions of the poems exist, Dickinson did not appear to do much conscious tampering with the rhymes in revising her verse. The worksheets

which survive show her grappling for the proper word or phrase, but not apparently for the sake of regularizing rhyme. Lindberg-Seyersted suggests that perhaps Higginson may have suggested that Dickinson drop all rhyme since she could not apparently manage complete regularity.³⁰

In his 1891 Atlantic Monthly essay, Higginson does seem to show some lingering chagrin over her rhyming practices. He noted that "here was already manifest that defiance of form, though never careless, and never precisely from whim that marked her. The slightest change in the order of words--thus, 'While yet at school a girl; [he refers here to 'Your Riches taught me poverty,' sent in July 1862] 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."³¹

A third technical area of interest in examining the enclosure poems is perhaps best introduced by Higginson himself. He stated: "It would seem that at first I tried a 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...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 irregularities."³²

These irregularities become obvious in only a brief scanning of Emily Dickinson's poetry. First, there is the wholesale use of what appear to be dashes which seem to

replace formal punctuation. This is in direct defiance of Higginson's remark in "Letter to a Young Contributor" in which he stated: "Reduce yourself to short allowance of dashes and parentheses."³³ The only other form of punctuation besides the dash which appears frequently in the first twenty-two poems is the comma, which often appears within a line, not necessarily at the end of it. The poems often end with no punctuation at all or with a dash. Several poems such as "The nearest Dream recedes unrealized," end with exclamation points.

Even if Higginson accepted the continual use of dashes as at least rudimentary punctuation, he was to receive two poems in the first twenty-two with no punctuation whatsoever ("Further in Summer than the Birds" and "Blazing in Gold"). Not surprisingly, when he began the editing job on Emily Dickinson's poetry after her death, regularizing of her punctuation was seen as a necessity. An example of a poem as Higginson received it and its appearance after the editing of Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd is indicative of the changes he must have felt necessary. The first example of "Success is counted sweetest" is the unedited version.

Success-- is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed--
 To Comprehend a Nectar
 Requires sorest need--
 Not one of all the Purple Host
 Who took the Flag-- today--
 Can tell the Definition-- so clear-- of victory--
 As He-- defeated-- dying
 On whose forbidden ear--
 The distant strains of Triumph
 Burst-- agonized-- and Clear! 34

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
 Who took the flag to-day
 Can tell the definition,
 So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Break, agonized and clear.³⁵

Another obvious inconsistency of mechanics that Higginson must have seen fit to correct was Dickinson's practice of capitalizing words which would normally remain in the lower case. This habit was to remain evident throughout her poetry. As the example above demonstrates, Higginson's editing did away with eccentric capitalization. Certainly, Higginson was preparing Emily Dickinson's work for a public that he thought expected adherence (to use his own phrase) to rules and traditions, but it is probable that he would have welcomed Dickinson's recognition of such traditions from the beginning.

One area of mechanics that Emily Dickinson did seem quite conscious of was that of spelling. Higginson himself implies that she attended to it. In the poems under study here, no grave spelling irregularities show up. In "Of Tribulation these are they" "ankle" is spelled "ancle" within the poem. Dickinson wrote "I spelled Ankle--wrong." below the poem.³⁶ In "Ample make this Bed" she employed the archaic spelling in "mattrass." These are rather isolated examples, however.

In the general area of language use, oddities again appear that might have offended a traditionalist such as Higginson. For example, Dickinson refers to "a gold" in "Your Riches taught me poverty" and to "steadfast honey" and "easy clover" in "The nearest Dream recedes unrealized." Learning to create a jewel becomes "gem-tactics." A house "encores" her and something can be "full as Opera." A feeling can be "inner than the bone." Dust, like gold, appears to be singular (in "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad") for the "Dust do not arise and play." And in an odd use of personification, Dickinson produces a "panting ancle." Using synaesthesia, she refers to "yellow noise" in "Ample make this Bed." Some of these examples, all from the first twenty-two poems, might have been among those that sparked Higginson's view that Emily Dickinson's conception was "weird." Perhaps he was not offended as much as taken aback by them. They almost certainly added to his mixed emotions over her work.

Higginson did speak of the fracture of "dictionary" as well as grammar in Dickinson's poetry, which leads to the difficult problem of judging the first groups of poems he received according to irregularities of diction. Emily Dickinson is noted for the use of the homely and commonplace in her verse. A problem arises in pinpointing the diction that may have surprised Higginson, however, for literary tastes have changed markedly. Also, what may seem quaint to the twentieth century reader may not have seemed so to

the genteel Colonel Higginson. In analyzing the twenty-two enclosure poems for commonplace, realistic diction, therefore, some subjective choices had to be made.

In a close reading of the poems, the commonplace does hold a noticeable position. Of the first four poems, "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" most abounds in such diction, with the squirrels, stile, bobolinks, ribbon, and yellow boys and girls of a sunrise. The alabaster chambers of poem 216 contain a rafter and roof, and the metaphorical June bee and school boy caper through poem 319. Even "We play at Paste" emphasizes the commonplace quality that is not elevated much by the "pearl" and "gem-tactics" of following lines.

In the remainder of the first twenty-two poems other realistic diction appears, usually relating to the everyday and concrete--bumblebees, bonnet, juggler, mattress, pillow, eider balls, claw, and crumb all are part of the first poems Higginson received. There is also the presence of rather lively verbs, such as in--"time had leaked," flowers are "jostled"; and "blent" replaces "blended" in "To undertake is to achieve" (although perhaps for rhyming purposes).

Finally, there is a question about Dickinson's use of "antiquest" in "Further in Summer than the birds." She first wrote the word "antiquer," but appears to have definitely intended the change to be "antiquest."³⁷ Either way, the usage brings about an unusual superlative.

By no means do all of the poems in this sample contain realistic diction. Fourteen of the twenty-two first poems do. Such usage seems less prominent in the following twenty-three, but is still apparent in certain works, such as "Remembrance has a Rear and Front" which contains "garret," "mouse," "refuse," and "cellar." "The Mind lives on the Heart" is graced by "meat," "parasite," and "fat." Again, it is regrettable that so few of Higginson's letters to Emily Dickinson survive. We would perhaps then know more clearly what he saw as "fractured" diction.

If one thing is clear about a comparison between the first twenty-two and the last twenty-three poems, it is that Emily Dickinson did not markedly alter the technical content of the poems she sent Thomas Higginson. The most consistent factor is her use of approximate rhyme along with usually at least one exact rhyme in every poem. The mechanics of grammar and spelling also remain consistent in their relative irregularity. The dashes, eccentric use of capitalization, and the presence of unusual grammatical forms (such as the use of the subjunctive in "Because that you are going") all are present in the final twenty-three poems.

One difference between the two sets of poems that does seem significant is the extensive reliance on quatrains. Nineteen of the last twenty-three enclosure poems are in quatrains compared to only twelve of the first twenty-two. Perhaps one reason is that Miss Dickinson was entering most

of the last twenty-three poems in packets at about the same time she was sending them off to Higginson. She entered several of the first poems in the packets in quatrains only to alter them when she sent them off to Higginson later. Perhaps in the first poems she was seeking a variety of form that she chose to abandon later in the correspondence.

Further variance in form between the two sets of enclosures does not seem evident. There appears to be equal reliance on Common Meter. Nearly one-half of the poems of both sets are in an 8,6,8,6 syllabic arrangement. There is also a strong adherence to iambic pentameter.

Sewall suggests that it was perhaps more than form that separated Thomas Higginson from Emily Dickinson. Sewall points out that the "sense of mystery of unanswerable questions"³⁸ so often found in Dickinson's poetry was at odds with Higginson's firm stance on a variety of social issues. Certainly the poems sent to Higginson are permeated by such mystery. A number of them dwell on the soul and several on the question of salvation. If, as Sewall suggests, Higginson was put off by the handling of such themes one of his later comments does not clearly indicate it. He remarked that "in dealing with Nature she often seems to have a 'sixth sense.' But most of her poems grapple at first hand--the more audaciously the better--with the very mysteries of life and death...."³⁹

What perhaps troubled Higginson was not that the questions were embedded within Dickinson's poetry, but that they were

often never answered. He claimed that he found her "obscure, and sometimes unscrutable, and though obscurity is sometimes, in Coleridge's phrase, a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press the compliment too hard."⁴⁰ Higginson seemed to attempt to lift some of this obscurity during his later editing by adding titles to Dickinson's poetry.

It would be difficult to clearly categorize the forty-five enclosed poems as to thematic concern. Nature plays a large role, but most of the poems contain themes that go beyond light, occasional verse. Perhaps those poems that Emily Dickinson felt most worthy to be sent to Colonel Higginson were the very ones that he would find most obscure. "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "There came a Day at Summer's full," and "Further in Summer than the Birds" are just a few of the early poems that contain mysterious qualities open to varied interpretation. If, indeed, Emily Dickinson chose to send Higginson what she considered her finest work, she apparently had a preference for her darker, more serious poems.

The central problem Higginson faced in relation to Emily Dickinson's themes may have resulted less from literary prejudice (such as might have been the case in his view of form) than from a lack of understanding. Colonel Higginson seems to have had particular trouble comprehending Emily Dickinson's symbolism.⁴¹ That being the case, he could find little defense for the obscurity in her verse. Therefore, the gulf between Miss Dickinson's work and

Higginson's understanding probably existed in both form and content, rendering him ineffective as her guide.

Some questions about the enclosed poems remain which go beyond Higginson's reaction to them. As stated earlier, Emily Dickinson often entered poems into packets before individual poems were chosen to send to Higginson. If, as Ruth Miller suggests, the packets and fascicles represent a conscious ordering by Miss Dickinson, why did she not send Higginson an entire grouping?⁴² Thus, if each fascicle represented a long idea poem, for example, Higginson would have been introduced to the method of organization Emily Dickinson preferred as well as to a group of related poems. The fact is the groups of enclosed poems are not mainly taken from the same packet or fascicle at all. The two exceptions are "Ample make this Bed" and "As imperceptibly as Grief" which were in Packet 92 and "The last of Summer is delight" and "The Heart is the Capital of the Mind" both of which are from Fascicle 38.⁴³

Perhaps one reason that Higginson never received a fascicle was that Emily Dickinson chose to be quite selective, at least at first, in the poems she sent. If she wanted to introduce the variety in her work, she might have felt that sending a fascicle would have been self-defeating. (Although a valid argument remains as to how closely related the poems in each fascicle really are.) A second explanation

could be that the fascicles and packets contain an average of twenty poems (though the smallest contains six [Packet 89] and the largest contains forty-four [Packet 90]). Thus perhaps Miss Dickinson felt the gatherings were too large to send off to Colonel Higginson. Still, however, she could have sent him at least parts of a packet or fascicle. Apparently, she simply did not feel it necessary for Higginson to receive one. Whether he would have received one had his reaction to the poems been more enthusiastic, there is no way of knowing. At any rate, had Miss Dickinson sent a complete fascicle to Higginson, indicating her intention for the poems within it to remain an organized entity, many questions over the status of the fascicles might have been cleared up.

Another consideration in analyzing the enclosed poems to Higginson is the question of the relative quality of the poems in relation to Emily Dickinson's other work. Certainly, Higginson received some poems which have remained in obscurity--"My country need not change her gown" and "After all Birds have been investigated and laid down," for example. He also received some of Dickinson's best known poems, however--"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "Further in Summer than the Birds" and "A Route of Evanescence" are some of those. Recently, in the Emily Dickinson Bulletin, editor Frederick L. Morey compiled a list of the hundred best poems of Emily Dickinson based largely on themes.⁴⁴ Granted, this list is quite subjective (the selection was based on a system of points earned by a poem according to

the amount of favorable criticism it received as well as the frequency of its inclusion in important anthologies), but it did contain ten of the enclosure poems ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "Further in Summer than the Birds," "There came a Day at Summer's full," "As imperceptibly as Grief," "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," "Success is counted sweetest," "Ample make this Bed," "Remembrance has a Rear and Front," "The Soul unto itself," and "A Route of Evanescence"). Although this may seem a small number (assuming the list has some validity), it should be remembered that ten out of forty-five poems is a more significant percentage than one hundred out of over seventeen hundred poems. If, indeed, Morey's list is representative of critical opinion, at least to the extent that his "hundred best" are some of Dickinson's finest poems, then she apparently knew her own mind in choosing poems for Higginson's consideration.

Certainly, the fact that Thomas Higginson did receive some of Emily Dickinson's finest poetry could cause him to be maligned for not recognizing their quality. An analysis of the enclosure poems alone, however, provides a good indication of why Higginson proved to be less than totally receptive to Emily Dickinson's work. The irregularities, particularly in technical areas, are evidence enough of the barriers between the two correspondents. Ironically, Higginson was apparently fully aware of his inability to deal effectively with Dickinson's work. He says as much

in one of his few letters to her that survives. In discussing the possibility of visiting her he writes:

"...if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light...I should like to hear from you very often, but feel always timid lest what I write should be badly aimed & miss that fine edge of thought which you bear. It would be so easy, I fear to miss you."⁴⁵

If Higginson did "miss" Emily Dickinson by being unable to fully appreciate her talent, he still deserves a measure of credit that might otherwise be denied him. Given his stance on the unorthodox and his love of form, he still maintained a correspondence with Emily Dickinson over a long period of time. If he did not work hard enough to get Miss Dickinson published during her lifetime (George Monteiro takes this stand, though he remains charitable to Higginson, in his introduction to Poems (1890-1896) by Emily Dickinson),⁴⁶ he nevertheless took an active part in the later publication of her work, though he helped regularize it. In short, for all his doubts, Higginson recognized Emily Dickinson as a poet--a less easily explained phenomenon, perhaps, than his bewilderment over her work.

The enclosure poems reveal that Higginson probably had little direct influence on Emily Dickinson's poetic development. They do provide some insight into what must have

been the poems Miss Dickinson found suitable for critical comment, however, and for this alone they would be of interest. Nevertheless, they cannot really be divorced from the reaction of the man who received them. Even though Higginson's relationship to Dickinson was perhaps somewhat disappointing to them both, it nevertheless endured. The enclosure poems remain as evidence of what both repelled and almost certainly fascinated Thomas Wentworth Higginson about Emily Dickinson's poetry. Their inaccessibility to him can at least be rendered understandable through a critical examination. The hopes and intentions of the woman who sent them must unfortunately remain less clear.

NOTES

¹Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, II (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1958), p. 403.

²Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 409.

³Richard Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, II (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), p. 546.

⁴Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 262.

⁵Johnson and Ward, eds., The Letters of Emily Dickinson, p. 262.

⁶Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 56.

⁷Johnson and Ward, eds., p. 681.

⁸Leyda, p. 334.

⁹Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson, III (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1955), p. 1041.

¹⁰Thomas W. Higginson, "An Open Portfolio," The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism Since 1890, eds. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 10.

¹¹Thomas W. Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," Atlantic Monthly, 68 (1891), p. 445.

¹²Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," p. 445.

¹³Sewall, p. 575.

¹⁴Thomas W. Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," Atlantic Monthly, 9 (1862), p. 401.

¹⁵Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," p. 405.

¹⁶Thomas W. Higginson, "Literature As An Art," Atlantic Monthly, 20 (1867), p. 753.

¹⁷Thomas W. Higginson, "The Reed Immortal," Atlantic Monthly, 46 (1880), pp. 248-249.

¹⁸Higginson, "Literature As An Art," p. 753.

¹⁹Thomas W. Higginson, "Walt Whitman," Contemporaries (1899; rpt. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Gregg Press, 1970), p. 79.

²⁰Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," p. 453.

²¹Tilden G. Edelstein, Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 344.

²²Sewall, p. 559.

²³Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," p. 450.

²⁴Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 130.

²⁵Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 323.

"Packets" refers to groupings of loose manuscripts which Emily Dickinson gathered. The term "fascicle" refers to those poems sewn together as evidenced by needle holes along the margins of the manuscripts. Miller lists the member poems of eight packets and forty-four fascicles. Dickinson entered poems into packets before and during her correspondence with Higginson.

- ²⁶Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 162.
- ²⁷Higginson, "An Open Portfolio," p. 7.
- ²⁸Lindberg-Seyersted, p. 162.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 162.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 163.
- ³¹Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," p. 446.
- ³²Ibid., p. 449.
- ³³Higginson, "Letter to a Young Contributor," p. 407.
- ³⁴Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, p. 53.
- ³⁵Emily Dickinson, Poems (1890-1891) by Emily Dickinson, ed. George Monteiro (Gainesville, Fla: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p. 13.
- ³⁶Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 256.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 752.
- ³⁸Sewall, p. 542.
- ³⁹Higginson, "An Open Portfolio," p. 6.
- ⁴⁰Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," p. 451.
- ⁴¹Edelstein, p. 348.
- ⁴²Sewall, p. 542.
- ⁴³Miller, pp. 318-319; 330-331.
- ⁴⁴Frederick L. Morey, "The Fifty Best Poems of Emily Dickinson," The Emily Dickinson Bulletin, 25 (1974), pp. 8-9; "The Hundred Best Poems of Emily Dickinson," The ED Bulletin, 27 (1975), pp. 44-47.

⁴⁵Thomas W. Higginson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson,
eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, p. 461.

⁴⁶George Monteiro, Poems (1890-1891) by Emily Dickinson,
p. x.

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"THIS FIERY MIST":
AN EXAMINATION
OF THE POEMS SENT TO T. W. HIGGINSON
BY EMILY DICKINSON

by
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B.A., Kansas State University
1972

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1976

Emily Dickinson wrote to Colonel Thomas W. Higginson in 1862 with the hope he would become her literary mentor. Although the correspondence between them continued until her death in 1882, Miss Dickinson's hope was not realized. An examination of Higginson's conservative literary opinions and one of his poems gives some indication as to why Emily Dickinson's poetry seemed to bewilder him. However, an analysis of the poems Miss Dickinson sent to Higginson in regard to what they contained that may have added to his bewilderment is also in order.

Higginson received forty-five complete poems as separate enclosures with Dickinson's letters. Twenty-two were written between 1859 and 1866, mainly before Dickinson and Higginson met for the first time. A close examination of those first twenty-two poems on the basis of stanza form, rhyme, grammar, mechanics, and diction reveals irregularities that almost certainly would have troubled Higginson. When Higginson helped edit Dickinson's poems after her death, he participated in the correction of these irregularities (which had persisted throughout the poems he received during their correspondence). Besides Dickinson's use of unorthodox forms, Higginson also may have been uneasy over the treatment of themes in Dickinson's poetry. Many of the poems he received were concerned with serious, unanswered questions that were not common to conventional poetry.

Some considerations remain concerning the enclosure poems. For example, none of them were sent in a packet or

fascicle though they were gathered in such groups before and during the correspondence. Also, one must necessarily judge as to whether Higginson received poems representative of the scope and quality of Dickinson's work. According to a list compiled by Frederick L. Morey, Higginson did receive a number of poems which critics include among Dickinson's best.

Higginson is thus left open to criticism that he did not do more to guide and encourage Emily Dickinson in her poetic endeavor. The difficulty Higginson faced, however, is apparent in the light of his literary taste and Miss Dickinson's use of unconventional forms and themes within the poems she sent to him. Higginson seems to have recognized both Emily Dickinson's unique talent and his inability to pierce the "fiery mist" which surrounded her. Therefore, the enclosure poems remain as evidence of the reasons for both Higginson's attraction to and bewilderment over Emily Dickinson as poet.