The Recluse and the Activist, Or Opposites Attract


Brenda Wineapple's *White Heat* is not a traditional biography of Emily Dickinson or her friend, literary advisor and later editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Nor is it literary criticism, as the author claims in the Introduction (13). It is a double portrait, a context for certain poems of Emily Dickinson and an enjoyable account of the relationship of these unalike, opposite characters. Brenda Wineapple tries to understand and make the reader understand the improbable friendship of the two opposite personalities. After all, opposites attract.

Emily Dickinson is known to have been a recluse who withdrew from the world and would not leave her family home. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the essayist, was an activist of women's rights and a militant abolitionist, commander of the first Union regiment of African-American soldiers during the Civil War. Unfortunately, his letters to Dickinson have not survived. However, the author imagines his part of the correspondence and recreates their unusual relationship, using both people's works to evoke their voice. The facts are richly illustrated by poems, extracts from letters, and Higginson's articles and essays, as well as thirty-two photographs. Wineapple manages to show both people as human beings, and she calls up vivid scenes from the friends' lives. The close-ups give the impression of peeping into their homes. The reader is often tempted to check the sources in the extensive list of notes only to realize that all facts are based on documentary information. While the book contains well-known biographical facts about Emily Dickinson, mostly relying on Richard Sewall's Dickinson-biography, and not so well-known ones about Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the way Brenda Wineapple views their relationship and the conclusion she draws are quite original.

Why Emily Dickinson refused to publish her poems – except for a few which were published anonymously – and chose to remain a private poet – sending her poems only to an elected circle of friends – have always been riddles for scholars. The author clarifies the misconceptions about Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who is famous – or rather infamous – for discouraging the poet from publishing. He is remembered as the graceless conservative editor "who shamelessly cut Dickinson down to Victorian size" (284). In Richard Sewall's view, "one of Emily Dickinson's failures of judgment was to turn to Higginson for literary advice." Similarly Vivien R. Pollack also accuses him of hindering the poet from publishing, though she acknowledges that Dickinson could not have been persuaded to become a public
poet: “Although there is some reason to believe that if Higginson had hailed her at the beginning of a great career and urged her not to ‘delay to publish’ Dickinson might have been prevailed upon to yield up some of her least obviously autobiographical poems to public view.” Unlike other critics, Brena Wineapple treats Higginson as an equal, offering a detailed presentation of his works to change the situation that Richard Sewall describes as follows: “It is ironic that a man so prominent in his time – Abolitionist, reformer, preacher, army officer, litterateur with a bibliog-raphy of some five hundred items – should now be known principally as the friend and editor of Emily Dickinson.” Wineapple attempts to explain Higginson’s considerations as an editor. She presumes that, although he was aware of Dickinson’s unusual talent, he wanted to protect Dickinson from the literary world both in her life and after her death. She also believes that as Higginson was only the co-editor of the first editions, it is the other editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, who was responsible for many of the changes in the poems. Wineapple agrees with John Cody’s view of Higginson as “a sensitive and perceptive man”: “when he presents him as someone who was well-chosen by Dickinson: “Dickinson had not picked Higginson at random. Suspecting he would be receptive, she also recognized a sensibility she could trust.” The author tries to reveal why the poet appreciated his friendship so much. “Of our greatest acts we are ignorant – she told him . . . recollecting then what his attention, his courtesy, his comprehension offered her during their first months of correspondence. ‘You were not aware that you saved my Life’” (118).

To reveal the details of the relationship that resulted in a life-long friendship and almost twenty-five years of correspondence, Wineapple sets the scene by vividly describing the circumstances of how Higginson received the poet’s first letter, in which she sought his opinion about her poetry. Wineapple uses the narrative techniques of novel-writing to evoke the characters: “Thomas Wentworth Higginson opened the cream-colored envelope as he walked home from the post office, where he had stopped on the mild spring morning of April 17 after watching young women lift dumbbells at the local gymnasium” (3).

After the Introduction, the book consists of three parts: “Before,” “During” and “Beyond the Dip of Bell.” Part One offers a summary of the protagonists’ earlier lives: their family backgrounds, their childhood years and early friendships, their educations and their readings. The reader learns about the early career of Emily Dickinson, who had already taken up the vocation of poet, which Higginson longed to do. The author provides an unusually accurate portrait of Higginson, as well, revealing the dual nature of his character. He was an activist, a literary man, and an essayist, who was inclined to live a reclusive life, like Emily Dickinson, preferring
nature to people. When Wineapple
draws a parallel between the lives and
the personalities of her two protago-
nists, she finds similarities, such as Hig-
ginson’s withdrawal from the field of
actions and Dickinson’s withdrawal
from the world. Their attitude to religion
and nature, their love of poetry are also
highlighted as common features of two
seemingly different people. It is obvious
that the author’s intention is to detect as
many similarities as possible, not only
in the biographical facts but also in their
writings, to reveal what drew them to-
ward each other. The structure of the
book reminds us of two convergent lines
starting from the different backgrounds
of two different personalities. Then the
lines keep coming closer to each other as
more and more common features are
explored, to end up in the intimate
closeness of the poet and her friend.

Part Two is a detailed presentation of
their correspondence and their rela-
tionship, the events of their lives serving as a
background. Throughout the whole
book, but especially in this part, the
author quotes a considerable number of
poems, offering a critical reading. The
epistolary friendship is marked by Hig-
ginson’s two visits to Amherst, only the
first of which is chronicled in detail, due
to the lack of any surviving documents
concerning the second. As much as pos-
sible the author relies on the evidence of
documentary material, thus creating a
dialogue with the help of the texts. We
get an original insight into the real na-
ture of their friendship, Higginson is
presented as someone who admired and
praised Dickinson in spite of acting, at
her request, in the role of critic and
editor. Brenda Wineapple suggests that
Higginson, staying on the borderline of
writing poetry and publishing mostly
articles and essays, was secretly viewing
Dickinson with fearful respect: “Should
you think my poetry breathed, quick:
gratitude: if only he could write like
this” (5). Wineapple also provides an
interpretation of his works to highlight
how they may have influenced Dickin-
son’s poetry or, rather, how she incorpo-
rated his ideas into her poems.

Part Three is an account of the post-
humous publication of Dickinson’s po-
ems and a description of Higginson’s
role in the work. As in the previous part,
Wineapple wishes to do justice to him
by presenting him as a supportive ed-
tor. The final chapters also provide in-
formation about his career after Dickin-
son’s death.

In spite of Brenda Wineapple’s inten-
tions as outlined in the Introduction, the
genre of the book does not seem to be
clear. Though most of the text is a kind
of critical biography, the book can be
read as a documentary novel, as well,
the climax of which is the first encounter
of the friends after eight years of corre-
spondence. However, some parts of the
book read as a romance. Brenda Wine-
apple, a reputed biographer of Gertrude
Stein and Nathaniel Hawthorne among
others, seems to be overwhelmed and
inspired by Emily Dickinson. A good
storyteller, she sometimes gets carried
away and provides a text which gives the impression of a novel: “In the pinkish twilight of a September evening in 1904, after nearly twenty-one years abroad, Henry James was back in America, strolling along the brick streets of Cambridge” (302). The book is not a mixture of genres in a 3-in-1 way; rather, there is a mashing of genres due to the lack of consistency of the style.

Another problem is that the interpretation of certain poems is rather artificial and not convincing, as if interpretation was aimed solely at providing evidence for Higginson’s influence on Dickinson’s poetry. There are too many presumptions about the poems, as well as about Higginson’s reaction to them. In connection with “As imperceptibly as grief,” for instance, the author writes: “Her description of the summer may be her description of him: the guest that would disappear, if he ever came.” And he could assume that the diaphanous summer, making its light escape, is like Dickinson herself” (168). Certainly, Dickinson’s cryptic poems often lend themselves to several possible readings; however, merely the notions of “guest” and “escape” cannot justify an interpretation that identifies them with the two characters.

Despite these shortcomings, White Heat is a remarkable work, interesting for scholars and non-academics alike. The author achieves her aim of providing a historical, political and artistic context for the poems, as well as throwing new light onto the work and friendship of Dickinson and Higginson. It is unique since it focuses on both personalities, not just the poet. Written with unusual intuition and empathy, the book reveals much about Emily Dickinson and creates a new image of Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

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Notes
2. Sewall, p. 575.

Genial Pound


Being a Pound scholar may be an awkward position. All those questions about Pound’s fascism and his confinement to an asylum are ample reason for embarrassment. And if this were not enough, we have Pound’s extravaganza on the one hand, and his works, often regarded as inaccessible or straight gibberish, on the other.