

The Recluse and the Activist, Or Opposites Attract

Brenda Wineapple, *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 2008)

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 unlike, 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,¹ 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” (281). In Richard Sewall's view, “one of Emily Dickinson's failures of judgment was to turn to Higginson for literary advice.”² 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.”³ 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 bibliography of some five hundred items – should now be known principally as the friend and editor of Emily Dickinson.”⁴ 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”⁵ when she 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 only 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 protagonists, she finds similarities, such as Higginson'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 toward 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 relationship, 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 Higginson'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 possible 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 nature 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 Dickinson's poetry or, rather, how she incorporated his ideas into her poems.

Part Three is an account of the posthumous publication of Dickinson's poems 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 editor. The final chapters also provide information about his career after Dickinson's death.

In spite of Brenda Wineapple's intentions 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 correspondence. However, some parts of the book read as a romance. Brenda Wineapple, 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 friend-

ship 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

1. Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974).
2. Sewall, p. 575.
3. Vivian R. Pollack, *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 228.
4. Sewall, p. 573.
5. John Cody, *After great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press & Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 21.

Genial Pound

A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet. A Portrait of the Man and his Work. Volume 1: The Young Genius, 1885–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

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 extravagance on the one hand, and his works, often regarded as inaccessible or straight gibberish, on the other.