

From "Letter to a Young Contributor" By Thomas Higginson.
***The Atlantic Monthly*. vol. 9 no. 54. April, 1862.**

My dear young gentleman or young lady,--for many are the Cecil Dreemes of literature who superscribe their offered manuscripts with very masculine names in very feminine handwriting,--it seems wrong not to meet your accumulated and urgent epistles with one comprehensive reply, thus condensing many private letters into a printed one. And so large a proportion of "Atlantic" readers either might, would, could, or should be "Atlantic" contributors also, that this epistle will be sure of perusal, though Mrs. Stowe remain uncut and the Autocrat go for an hour without readers.

Far from me be the wild expectation that every author will not habitually measure the merits of a periodical by its appreciation of his or her last manuscript. I should as soon ask a young lady not to estimate the management of a ball by her own private luck in respect to partners. But it is worth while at least to point out that in the treatment of every contributor the real interests of editor and writer are absolutely the same, and any antagonism is merely traditional, like the supposed hostility between France and England, or between England and Slavery. No editor can ever afford the rejection of a good thing, and no author the publication of a bad one. The only difficulty lies in drawing the line. Were all offered manuscripts unequivocally good or bad, there would be no great trouble; it is the vast range of mediocrity which perplexes: the majority are too bad for blessing and too good for banning; so that no conceivable reason can be given for either fate, save that upon the destiny of any single one may hang that of a hundred others just like it. But whatever be the standard fixed, it is equally for the interest of all concerned that it be enforced without flinching.

Nor is there the slightest foundation for the supposed editorial prejudice against new or obscure contributors. On the contrary, every editor is always hungering and thirsting after novelties. To take the lead in bringing forward a new genius is as fascinating a privilege as that of the physician who boasted to Sir Henry Halford of having been the first man to discover the Asiatic cholera and to communicate it to the public. [...]

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-

This letter was not signed. Instead, Dickinson signed her name on a small card, in pencil, and sealed the card in a small envelope which she then included with the letter. Higginson says the letter "was in a handwriting [sic] 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."

Dickinson included four poems with this first letter:

"Safe in their alabaster chambers"

"I'll tell you how the sun rose"

"We play at paste"

"The nearest dream recedes unrealized" (Higginson later said about this poem in a memoir, "I have always classed [this] among the most exquisite of her productions, with a singular felicity of phrase and an aerial lift that bears the ear upward with the bee it traces--") http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/essays/authors/higginson/twh_dickinson.html

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. 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 Im- mortality-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 he 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.