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Richard Cary

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Colby Library Quarterly

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MORE HIGGINSON LETTERS

By RICHARD CARY

THE gift of a Higginson-Eckstorm letter to Colby College by Donald H. Williams (see preceding article) revivifies the fact that there are Higginson letters in three of our outstanding collections of manuscripts — the papers of Thomas Sergeant Perry (whose personal library is also at Colby), of Sarah Orne Jewett, and of Elizabeth Akers Allen, a Maine poet best remembered for her lilting distich, “Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight, / Make me a child again just for tonight.” Since none of these correspondents are mentioned in Mrs. Higginson’s two volumes about her distinguished husband, and since none of these Higginson letters have yet been published, the occasion seems ripe to bring four of them to light. More so because of Higginson’s emphatic faith in the psychological significance of diurnal messages. In one of his autobiographical excursions, *Part of a Man’s Life* (Boston, 1905), he wrote:

“Odd people write odd letters,” was the unanswerable assertion of that else forgotten essayist, Bishop Thorold. . . . Be this as it may, it is true of all of us that the letter represents the man, odd or even. It is, indeed, more absolutely the man, in one sense, than he himself is, for the man himself is inevitably changing, beyond his own control, from moment to moment, from birth to death; but the letter, once written, is an instantaneous photograph and stays forever unchanged. *Littera scripta manet*. If sincere, it is irrevocable, if insincere, it is equally so; and however artfully executed, it may be read between the lines, some time or other, and its hidden meaning unveiled. (139)

The impeccably trochaic name of Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) rouses in the memory of most readers two prime associations: the clergyman colonel who led a regiment of Negroes in the Civil War, and the literary entrepreneur who ushered Emily Dickinson to public notice. Higginson trained for the ministry but, like Emerson, made much deeper indentation upon his contemporaries as an author. He was one of the early mainstays of the *Atlantic Monthly*, appearing more frequently in “the first twenty volumes of the magazine than any other contributor except Lowell and Holmes.”¹ His range

¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays* (Boston, 1898), 186.

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was immense, from pure polemics to classical verse. He turned out, ultimately, hundreds of periodical pieces and some thirty-three volumes. His reputation in his time was of the first water, his name and person regularly delegated to the highest echelon of Brahmin homage.

With Thomas Sergeant Perry (1845-1928), a man remarkably like him in scholarly and social posture,² Higginson had apparently sparse immediate contact, although in concert with William Dean Howells, George Washington Cable, Charles Dudley Warner, and Julian Hawthorne, he invited Perry to become a member of the newly organized Society of American Authors.³ The impetus for the following letter grew out of Higginson's article "Sappho" in the *Atlantic Monthly*, XXVIII (July 1871), 83-93. In the course of this essay Higginson included his "tolerably literal" translation of the Greek poet's "Hymn to Aphrodite" in the original Sapphic meter, professing that no poem in any literature "has, by its artistic structure, inspired more enthusiasm than this." Higginson's rendition became an instant favorite and was avidly appropriated by anthologists. Perry had obviously asked permission to incorporate the poem in his aborning *History of Greek Literature* (New York, 1890), an exhaustive study of lyric, epic, tragic, historical, oratorical, and philosophic writings, and their Hellenistic outgrowths. Higginson's response was brief but — to pursue his own theory — unctuous, punctilious, egoistic, and obliging.

Camb. Jan 13 1886

Dear Mr. Perry

I should feel much complimented by what you propose doing: but I should wish you to use the Ode in the form printed in Wharton's Sappho or Williamson's College Greek Course in English; as there is an amendment in one line.

Ever cordially

T. W. Higginson

² Perry was Harvard oriented, as was Higginson. A friend of Henry and William James from boyhood, Perry tutored foreign languages at Harvard, wrote critiques on art and literature for the *Nation* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, was an editor of the *North American Review*, a professor of English in a Japanese university, and produced several biographies and an analysis of 18th-century English literature.

³ Virginia Harlow, *Thomas Sergeant Perry: A Biography* (Durham, N. C., 1950), 155-156.

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P.S. Edwin Arnold wrote me that he should have used this translation in his "Greek Poets" had he seen it in time, in place of his own.

If you have neither book at hand Ill send you the amendment.

Higginson's translation consists of seven quatrains, the fore-shortened last line of each verse in dramatic dactyl. The poem reappears verbatim in his *Atlantic Essays* (Boston, 1871). However, in *The Afternoon Landscape* (New York, 1889) it displays some consequential changes, few of which may be scored as improvements. The title has been converted to "Sappho's Ode to Aphrodite" and a Greek epigraph is appended. Several commas have been displaced by exclamation marks or by dashes with the intent to evoke a tauter sense of urgency. To gain swifter kinetic thrust, the truncated fourth lines have been indented to conform with the end instead of the beginning of the other lines. Goddess and Protector are capitalized to inspire awe of larger magnitude. In line 7, "mansions golden" has shrunk to "mansion golden." The crucial alteration to which Higginson refers is in line 15; the first part, "Asking what I suffered," is now "Asking why I grieved."

Perry accepted Higginson's prescript. On page 179 of the massive *History* he inserted the amended clause, retained the simpler punctuation and, peculiarly, substituted "net" for "nets" of passion in line 18. In *Sappho, Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (London, 1879), Henry Thornton Wharton offers Edwin Arnold's and Higginson's versions on successive pages (56-59). From the start Arnold placed each fourth line in conjunction with the ends of its preceding three, so it may be that this is where Higginson's switch of position emanated. Arnold's generous judgment is here absolved. Reading the two translations in proximity, the greater gracility of Higginson's becomes at once evident.

Higginson's reaction to Arnold's personality is striking enough to repeat here. During his 1878 visit to Europe he recorded in his diary: "Dined with the Edwin Arnolds. . . . There is something un-English about Arnold, perhaps from his long life in the East and his poetic nature. He is delightful when not talking politics, but there he is so vehement as to be a little fatiguing though always in a gentle, graceful way. He is

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a small man with a pleasing face. . . . Arnold the other day came upon that poem 'He who died at Azan,' read it with delight and finally remembered that he wrote it himself in youth."⁴

Two of Higginson's letters to Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), inimitable portraitist of Maine scene and character, reveal him as condescending, practical, unequivocally honest, finicking, persistent, proper, and irreverent. From long experience as a lecturer on art, literature, emancipation, temperance, and woman suffrage, at universities, Chautauquas, lyceums, cultural societies, and literary clubs, he was eminently qualified to pontificate upon over-exposure. He was an officer of a lecture association in Worcester for three years, and had written an article on "The American Lecture System" for *Macmillan's Magazine* in May 1868. To Miss Jewett's request that he participate in an Authors' Reading at Boston Museum for the benefit of the Longfellow monument fund, Higginson answered:

Cambridge
March 18, 1887.

My dear Miss Jewett

Thank you for your invitation, which I count as an honor. I will certainly attend the reading on the 31st, if all goes well; but I really think that the public has had more than enough of me this winter, and that others had better do the reading. This I will leave to you, but shall really think it a credit to your good judgment if you bring forward authors less well known to the eye of the public, and whom all are therefore curious to see.

If I am to read anything, I should prefer to have it in prose. I felt myself quite out of place in posing as a poet between Dr. Holmes & Mrs. Howe the other evening.

Let me suggest, in regard to Dr. Holmes in particular, that you should have a voice in the selection of his readings. I have heard him twice & each time at least half of his selections were of poems for which nobody cared much. To hear him read "The Last Leaf" or "Dorothy Q" or the "One Hoss Shaw" is something to remember for a lifetime: but his "verses at the Moore festival" fell dead at Gen. Paine's⁵ on an audience which had forgotten Moore, ——— [indecipherable sign] of other things. I heard him say that he hated to have to make the selection. Excuse this hint. I think the reading is a good project to arrest public attention.

Very truly & cordially

T. W. Higginson

⁴ Mary Thacher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson, The Story of His Life* (Boston, 1914), 331-332.

⁵ Charles Jackson Paine, soldier, financier, yachtsman, was a brevet major-general on the staff of Colby alumnus General Ben Butler during the Civil War.

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Higginson's sense of discomfort "in posing as a poet between Dr. Holmes and Mrs. Howe" must have evanescenced in short order, for the *Critic*, XI (March 16, 1889), 136, reports that at another Authors' Reading with Holmes and Howe on the same program in precisely the same place, Higginson read some of his poems. Holmes, incidentally, recited "The Last Leaf" and "Dorothy Q" — among others — "in a clear voice and with delightful expression." It is something of an irony, therefore, that he refused Higginson's invitation to speak at a meeting in 1872 because "I am thoroughly tired of my own voice at all sorts of occasional gatherings."⁶

Holmes had been a friend of Higginson's older brothers, was later entertained by Thomas and his first wife in Newburyport and Newport. In his capacity of continuing critic for the *Independent* and the *Nation*, Higginson found frequent openings to write favorably about Holmes's literary output. The third essay in Higginson's *Old Cambridge* (New York, 1899) is on Holmes, and his name recurs often in *Cheerful Yesterdays*. Therein (171, 182), is recounted Holmes's reciprocal approval. He characterizes Higginson's first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly* as "an admirable paper" and heartily advocates his other early essays. Higginson's disparagement of Holmes here must not be misconstrued — he considered him the most able and amusing of the *Atlantic* coterie, enormously superior to Lowell, for one.⁷ The Autocrat's repartee was, to Higginson, always genial, effervescent, and funny. So taken was he by its brilliance that sometimes it betrayed him into inanity. Once Holmes expressed surprise "when I refused a cigar. . . . 'Then,' said he, 'you unquestionably chew the betel-nut.' I told him I was fond of nuts and also of beetles, but preferred my botany and entomology separate."⁸

Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) remembered seeing Higginson for the first time in February 1851, at a meeting to protest the detention of a fugitive slave. Then a preacher in Worcester, "the part assigned to him in the exercises was to read portions

⁶ Eleanor M. Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat, A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes* (New York, 1947), 317.

⁷ Mary Thacher Higginson (ed.), *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846-1906* (Boston, 1921), 110-112.

⁸ *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 159-160.

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of the Scripture appropriate to the day. This he did with excellent effect."⁹ They came to know each other better in Newport, where Mrs. Howe held a kind of literary salon which comprised Kate Field, Fanny Fern, Louise Chandler Moulton, and Mary Mapes Dodge. They became involved in a covey of social and cultural organizations, Mrs. Howe generally as president, and Higginson as vice-president. She accordingly dubbed him "my chief vice" and he gallantly signed himself "your minion." When the Authors' Club celebrated Higginson's 80th birthday, she presided and read her "jingle" of seven sestets in his honor; and when the Club commemorated her 86th anniversary, he presided and read many of the sixty tributes aloud.¹⁰ They were also associated in a number of civil crusades — he enlisted her support for women suffrage although the movement was repugnant to her — yet she was convinced that he never became acquainted with her deeper nature, "the serious side of my life and character."¹¹

Higginson held her abilities in high esteem but, as with Holmes, he never hesitated to signify his disapprobation. Concerning her *Modern Society* (Boston, 1881) he stated in his *Outlook* article that "it would be hard to find a book in American literature better worth reprinting and distributing," and in 1906 nominated her for membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters, into which she was inducted as the first female constituent.¹² He said once that "she read with much dignity and sweetness," and again that "she reads very quietly and with beautiful enunciation."¹³ On the hornier side, he dismissed her most notable poetic achievement — the "Battle Hymn" — as "tedious," and ranked her speech about Phillips Brooks as "neither abstruse nor brilliant."¹⁴ The "imaginary conversations" she led at the meetings of the jaunty Town and Country Club in Newport he deemed "not very good."¹⁵ With

⁹ Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston, 1900), 165.

¹⁰ Laura E. Richards & Maud Howe Elliott, *Julia Ward Howe, 1819-1910* (Boston, 1916), II, 320-321, 335.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 355. This statement is part of Mrs. Howe's reaction to Higginson's "Julia Ward Howe," *Outlook*, LXXXV (January 26, 1907), 167-178, which he declared "a mere sketch of Mrs. Howe, not a formal memoir."

¹² *Ibid.*, 174; *Letters and Journals*, 234-235.

¹³ *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 342; *Letters and Journals*, 228.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113, 228.

¹⁵ Anna Mary Wells, *Dear Preceptor, The Life and Times of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Boston, 1963), 214.

questionable punditry he swept her and Holmes into literary purgatory for having concentrated their "sure prospects of fame on a single poem. What the 'Chambered Nautilus' represents in his published volumes, the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' represents for her."¹⁶

Higginson's attitude toward Thomas Moore (1779-1852) demonstrates his propensity for iconoclasm, his shifting literary values, and his subterranean snobbery. On his European trip in 1872 Higginson visited the house where Moore was born, "still a grocery and wineshop such as his father kept. . . . This was my first shrine such as it was and I found it easy to conjure up the little sweet singer."¹⁷ In time he substituted Aubrey de Vere, a lesser talent, "in place of Tom Moore as the typical representative of the Irish poetic spirit."¹⁸ The verses he alludes to were indited by Holmes for use in his Lowell Institute "Lectures on the English Poets" during March and April of 1853, a series he repeated in Cambridge, New York City, Washington, Cincinnati, Louisville, and elsewhere. The second talk concluded with the lines "After a Lecture on Moore," which were first published in 1879, and are now contained in the Cambridge edition of Holmes's poetical works (91-92).

The indecipherable sign following Moore's name in this letter is an arabesque seeming, for all the world, to be a prodigal ampersand, but the context cancels that interpretation. In her biography (34) his wife explains that "in order to save time, Mr. Higginson constantly used abbreviations," and in *Letters and Journals* (59) he tells this story on himself: "Next Saturday I am going to New York to preach. They wished to know my subjects, to advertise, and I gave my evening subject as 'Three Kinds of Courage,' which they read *Three Kinds of Beverage*, and would have so printed had not some good angel led them to consult me again." Indeed, one may be exonerated without reproof for transcribing the words *sweetness* and *tearless* as *directness* and *trailers* in his letter to Elizabeth Akers Allen (below).

¹⁶ *Outlook*, 174.

¹⁷ *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 322.

¹⁸ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Part of a Man's Life* (Boston, 1905), 233.

As secretary for the committee of seventeen women (among them the wives of Agassiz, Aldrich, Fields, and Howells) who were in charge of the Reading, Sarah Jewett petitioned Higginson's help, stipulating a limit of ten minutes "or possibly a little more" for each author.¹⁹ She wrote him on March 18th and he responded the same day. A week later he received a single ticket to the affair. Slightly puzzled, he dispatched a second note for elucidation. Despite his previous apology for providing unsolicited advice, and his pose of indifference in the following letter, he could not forego heaping on specifications as to the platform arrangements. His astuteness in regard to these effects upon an audience — amply articulated in a chapter of *Cheerful Yesterdays* — led him to assume the air of an expert, while lending to his assertions a tone of mingled archness and comedy.

Cambridge
March 25 1887

Dear Miss Jewett

Thanks for the ticket, which implies, I suppose, that the readers are only called on the stage to read; and at other times use these tickets; or is it meant for the reader's wife?

I suppose the readers will be duly notified when & where to present themselves & whether to wear afternoon or evening dress. There should be uniformity in this respect; & I should think that afternoon dress wd. make it seem more like an afternoon reception & less like professionals. Personally I don't care.

If the readers are to remain on the stage during the reading, or are to be shown together at any time, I should hope that there would be a drawing room scene arranged on the stage with tables flowers &c and that the readers would group themselves naturally as *guests*; rather than be arranged in a semicircle like Ethiopian minstrels or Vice Presidents of a public meeting. Excuse suggestions.

Yrs. very truly
T. W. Higginson

P. S. I mean, in brief, that I think it should all be assimilated, as far as may be, to a private reception rather than a theatrical performance.

Miss Jewett explained that the ticket was for Mrs. Higginson, that the readers would use the stage entrance, and that afternoon dress would be worn. She also assured him that the stage

¹⁹ For data regarding Miss Jewett's side of this correspondence I am indebted to Dr. John Eldridge Frost, Librarian of New York University, and his vast reservoir of Jewettiana.

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decor and properties would be in accord with the readers' preferences. Of those asked to perform, Edward Everett Hale telegraphed from Florida that he would be delighted, though not yet able to say what he would read; Lowell pleaded surfeit of work and spirit but promised to come; Whittier sent regrets and a check for \$50. Miss Jewett declared her pleasure over the "capital" way plans were working out. Two contemporary accounts furnish details of the personnel and something of the flavor of the event itself.

As the curtain rose they were grouped about a table presided over by Julia Ward Howe. At her right sat Colonel Higginson, Dr. Holmes, Mr. Lowell, and E. E. Hale; and at her left sat Mr. Howells, Mr. Aldrich, G. W. Curtis, Professor Norton, and Mark Twain. . . . Long-fellow will have no better monument to his memory than this meeting of his contemporaries and the generation to which he belonged.

—*Independent*, XXXIX (April 7, 1887), 439.

. . . although Mr. Lowell almost droned through the "Building of the Ship," and Mr. Aldrich was little heard beyond the front rows in the orchestra, the occasion was one of great interest. Mark Twain rushed off to catch his proverbial train, firing a parting shot of wit at Dr. Holmes. The Autocrat was, as he always is, charmingly at ease, Mr. Howells was natural, and Mr. Curtis the same polished speaker, inimitable in grace and finish. The entertainment was unique, and, as some one has remarked, being possible nowhere else, greatly tickled Boston vanity.

—*Literary World*, XVIII (April 16, 1887), 125.

From the point of view of at least one critic, Higginson's perturbation over Holmes's public impression was so much whistling in the wind. There is instead an oblique twist in the fact that Higginson's own performance elicited no comment, good or ill. And one tends to speculate whimsically on what went on in his mind while Mrs. Howe intoned the words of her maligned "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Higginson's private reaction to the affair is severely laconic. In his diary (at Houghton Library, Harvard) for March 31, 1887, he wrote: "Aftn. — author's reading at Boston Museum — fine audience and successful occasion."

In her memoirs of those radiant days Mrs. Aldrich gives a lively, lengthy description of the Reading.²⁰ The reprinted "Programme" indicates that "Professor Charles Eliot Norton

²⁰ Mrs. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *Crowding Memories* (Boston, 1920), 255-262.

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Will Preside," otherwise all details concur with the reports above. Most interesting — in view of Miss Jewett's assurances to Higginson — is Mrs. Aldrich's report that when her husband arrived before the rising of the curtain he saw a "semicircle of chairs all of one pattern and one height, the *mise en scène* a reproduction of the stage as set for the performance of Christy Minstrels." A hurried call was put in for the property man and the "uniform chairs were hustled away, sofas and seats of different form brought in, and the precise semicircle made carelessly irregular and casual." Thus, at the teetering instant, was Higginson's peace of mind preserved. Quoting from an anonymous "old and yellowing letter," Mrs. Aldrich reveals that the applause for Dr. Holmes "was most enthusiastic," and that Colonel Higginson "read delightfully."

Throughout these letters Higginson seems overanxious to convey the appearance of altruism on his part, to the extent of being snide. There was a touch of caste in him, perhaps best exhibited in his depreciation of the Harvard presidency after failing to be appointed — "It is not a place for a large man."²¹ Like so many eminent Americans, he was a democrat in principle, an aristocrat in temperament. His saving grace lay in his ability to laugh, at himself as well as others. He could transfigure uncomfortable incidents with a quip, label Chautauqua "an innocent Saratoga," and, in short, fully exemplify the traits assigned him by a pupil versifier: "Est semper clever, / Morosus never." He chuckled over being victimized by "a volume of my own translation of Epictetus, consisting of a single 'signature' of eighteen pages, repeated over and over, so that one never gets any farther: each signature bearing on the last page, by one of Fate's simple and unconscious strokes, the printed question 'Where is progress, then?' (page 18). Where, indeed!"²² His witticisms to Miss Jewett merge the wag and the snob in his constitution.

From time to time the *Critic* published in its back pages a department of questions and answers on matters of literary interest entitled "The Free Parliament," quite in the vein of *Notes*

²¹ *Dear Preceptor*, 244.

²² *Part of a Man's Life*, 159.

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& *Queries* or the "Q & A" section of the *New York Times Book Review*. On February 23, 1889, this question appeared on page 89:

1446. Who wrote the poem beginning —
On Righi's calm we stood,
Lovely Floribel and I,

and where can I find it?

RIDGEWOOD, NEW JERSEY

ELIZABETH AKERS ALLEN

Contrary to customary practice — it was an extremely rare inquiry that was signed with anything but initials — Mrs. Allen forthrightly subscribed her full name, thus making possible the following personal reply.

Cambridge, Mass
Feb. 23, 1889

Dear Mrs. Allen

Allow an unknown friend to be the first to answer your question in the *Critic*. "On the Righi's height [not *calm*] we stood" was written by Dr. J. G. Holland, and always seemed to me one of the few good things he wrote, in spite of the somewhat conventional name of the lady. I forget where it appeared but it is doubtless in his collected poems. If you do not find it, I will copy it for you, from memory.

I remember to have copied it in Newport for a dear friend for whom I also copied your "Ich bin dein" which always seemed to me, if you will let me say so, the strongest of your poems. Yet I always remember certain phrases in that little blue-and-gold volume; "the *opulent* dandelion", "Love me *last*", "the *immeasurable* days", "the *strange sweetness* of the ferns", "tearless, companionless and dumb", &c.²³ Excuse my particularizing, but I think that this is what authors like best. I know I do. Vague & general plaudits are easily won, & soon satiate.

Cordially yours
Thomas Wentworth Higginson

²³ The phrases quoted by Higginson may be found in Mrs. Allen's *Poems* (Boston, 1866), attributed to Elizabeth Akers (Florence Percy), the latter an early pen name. "*Ich bin dein*" is the refrain recurring twice in each of the seven stanzas of "Thine," 213-215; "opulent dandelion" in "Foreshadowing," 76; "Love me last" serves as refrain in the odd stanzas, and in variant form in the even stanzas of "Last," 90-91; "the immeasurable days" in "Two Summers," 199; "the strange sweetness of the ferns" in "Two Summers," 200; "tearless, companionless and dumb" in "Two Summers," 200.

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Elizabeth Chase Akers Allen (1832-1911), a native of Maine, enjoyed a long and active, if disputatious career in letters. Her poem "Rock Me to Sleep," with its memorable opening couplet, brought her fame, notoriety, and litigation, for she published it under a *nom de plume* and at various times had to defend her claim of authorship against those of a dozen others.

For the delectation of sundry *Critic* readers, Higginson composed this briefer note, which appeared in the March 2nd edition:

The poem beginning, 'On the Righi's height we stood' is by the late Dr. J. G. Holland, and may doubtless be found in his works.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

T.W.H.

The item immediately below this, by some telepathic foreknowledge, seemed to bristle with indignation over Higginson's slipshod scholarship:

Josiah Gilbert Holland wrote the verses beginning,
On Righi's *Kulm* we stood,
Lovely Floribel and I.

See Dr. Holland's poems, published by Scribner.

BROOKLYN, N.Y.

F.P.W.

Higginson's fond memory and conjecture were no match for F. P. W.'s firmer specificity. The latter, however, was not entirely innocent of deviation himself. In Holland's *Complete Poetical Writings* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1879), 488, the first line of "On the Righi" reads "On the Righi Kulm we stood." The poem consists of four octets analogizing the rise and fall of love with the lovers' ascent and descent of a mountain peak.

J. G. Holland (1819-1881), first editor of *Scribner's* and a popular novelist and essayist during his lifetime, became acquainted with Emily Dickinson in her teens, visited and corresponded with her thereafter. Despite his position in the newspaper and magazine field, Holland made no move to secure publication for Emily's poems, in fact counseled against it. Higginson, who did not meet Emily until she was almost 40, took the initiative in this respect, and the rest is American literary history.

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Ten years before Higginson wrote this letter to Mrs. Allen, she and Holland tiffed over alleged plagiarism in a poem she sent for his consideration. She maintained to all who would listen that she had told Holland it was an adaptation in meter of a prose story. Holland denied ever having received such explanation, and the recriminations mounted. She was mollified when Longfellow assured a friend of hers that he versified tales as a matter of course and did not deem this practice plagiaristic.

Higginson's strictures on Holmes, Howe, and Holland — and his verdict on "the strongest" of Mrs. Allen's poems — show him a man of candor and decided opinions. He lay about him lustily: "There was not one of these older men whom I had not sometimes felt free to criticise, with the presumption of youth; complaining of Emerson as being inorganic in structure; finding Whittier sometimes crude, Hawthorne bloodless in style, Holmes a trifler, Longfellow occasionally commonplace, Lowell often arrogant."²⁴ He was no less crisp about his own imperfections as a writer, citing his slow, disjointed flow of thought, his "want of copiousness and fertility."²⁵ Thus, one may imagine the pungency of his probable remarks about Mrs. Allen's involvement with Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite," the subject of his letter to Thomas Sergeant Perry (see pp. 34-35).

In the Colby collection of Mrs. Allen's papers are three undated holograph versions of the ode on oversize white sheets. The first is a folio, 12½ x 16 inches, on page 2 of which she has written:

I dare say it is great presumption in me to attempt, even in private, to do what so many great men have done to acceptance; but in reading this prose translation of Sappho's Hymn to Aphrodite, and the metrical forms into which it has been cast, it occurred to me that it might be put into Sapphics in even less space than Higginson gives it. He made 28 lines of it—I have made 24. You see I have used the identical words of the text, wherever it was possible; and after I had finished it, it occurred to me to count the words; and queerly enough, I find the

²⁴ *Cheerful Yesterdays*, 171.

²⁵ "Letter to a Young Contributor," *Atlantic Monthly*, IX (April 1862), 403; *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 274.

FIRST VERSION OF SAPPHO'S "ODE TO APHRODITE"
BY ELIZABETH AKERS ALLEN

Queen of the bordered throne, great Aphrodite,
Daughter of Zeus, and weaver of enchantments,
Breathe not my spirit with distress and anguish—
Kee, Aphrodite!

I have almost ever heard my voice and spoken,
Leaving behind thy father's golden swansong,
While in thy chariot fair fleet sparrows drew thee,
Flapping their pinions.

Round the dark earth, down through the endless ether;
Quickly arrived thee; now thou, blessed goddess,
Smiling upon me with thy smile immortal,
Askest me softly—

"What has befallen? wherefore dost thou call me?
 What dost thou mad heart most desire and covet?
 What immodest beauty wouldst thou draw to love thee?
 How wrong thee, Sappho?"

"Even if thy course flies, he soon shall follow;
 If he rejects thy gifts, he yet shall give them;
 And if he comes not, he shall surely come thee,
 Even through unwilling."

Come now. I pray thee, even as thou thou canst —
 From all these cruel cares and pains release me —
 All that my heart desires; do thou accomplish —
 Help, Aphrodite!

Elizabeth Akers.

prose has precisely the same number of words with my rendering — 169. Isn't it odd? I was so pleased at the coincidence, that I would not change it by a word. [Here she supplied the unidentified prose text, inserting short horizontal lines to indicate for herself the end of each projected stanza.]

On the facing page is her untitled transposition in six stanzas, beginning "Queen of the brodered throne, great Aphrodite." On the verso of this page she notes rather cunningly: "I spent not quite 20 minutes in breaking this prose translation into Sapphic lines. It somehow did itself." Just below this, in darker ink and altered hand, she adds acid to her characteristic wryness: "I find, later that a 'classical scholar' misinformed me about Sapphics. This is really a measure of Catullus."

The second version is copied on a sheet half the width of the first, 12½ x 8 inches, and is grouped with seventy others which constituted her manuscript for *The High-Top Sweeting, and Other Poems* (New York, 1891). Radically revised, the poem — pages 9-10 in the book — opens with "Mighty Queen of Love, deathless Aphrodite," and begins to resemble Higginson's.

The third version, on a sheet of the same size, was manifestly prepared for *The Sunset Song, and Other Verses* (Boston, 1902), for it reappears on pages 254-255 with the change of only a single word. The apostrophe now exalts the "Great Queen of Love, immortal Aphrodite." Mrs. Allen here substantially reverts to her earliest conception, with more numerous echoes of Higginson's preferred terminology.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson might well have been surprised by the gallery of adjectives which this study of four of his letters has called up in defining his attributes. A Victorian knight of unswervable virtue, he would accept with no demur the consequences of his theory that every letter a man writes is an "instantaneous photograph" of his character, correct and irrevocable. From that stance, Higginson emerges as a person capable of egoism and altruism, veracity and blandishment, censure and commendation, pomposity and mirth, triviality and percipience — typical of the man of his time and place, and, indeed, Everyman. What the letters prove, "between the lines" and without benefit of theory, is that Higginson was both more and less than he believed himself to be.