Poor Emily and Dylan Who? Luck and Literary Success

by [Samuel Hux](#) (February 2022)

"Poor Emily!" we sometimes say. "How thick-witted those about her must have been." *Well*, I would like to imagine how Emily Dickinson would fare, alive, in a society that compliments itself on giving her her due, dead. Of course it's not really "society" which can give or withhold due to a living poet. It's the publishing industry in so far as the poet is published, and the English department, in so far as the poet *eats.* A dollar a line (or merely a free copy) does not compete with a professorial wage. The university has generally prided itself on its new role as patron, on its creation of writer-in-residence fellowships and the full-time professorships entailing a little teaching of literature as well as creative writing. The positions are often comfortable, the libraries useful, the hours conducive to creative work. It *is* a good thing. But it is *not* what it appears. Consider the following speculations.

Imagine a correspondence with a person one has never met—the correspondence beginning as a request for advice about a shared interest, and gradually becoming more personal but still essentially between strangers. The initial correspondent writes, "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 Immortality; but venturing too near himself, he never returned." Rare—one might say—delicate, and tough-minded too. Or: "You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself. . . . They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano." My god! But that's curious, fine: "the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano." This is no ordinary person—of that one is sure—and correspondence at no ordinary level. And would one perfectly understand her, expressions slightly askew, through wit or reticence or knowing something one doesn't?

And suppose that one met her, experienced the same rarity and the same sage innocence difficult to place. Would one wish the visits many, or regular? Even when blessed with "I hope you have been well. I hope your rambles have been sweet, and your reveries spacious"? Or with "Will you come in November, and will November come, or is this the hope that opens and shuts, like the eye of the wax doll?" . . . Is one sure? Is one absolutely sure?

That Thomas W. Higginson, colonel, man of letters and of the world, power around the old *Atlantic Monthly,* failed Emily Dickinson, there is no doubt. (I wish his literary adventurousness had equaled his military valor.) That he also helped her, if only baffled how, we have the word of one of the world's honest people. "Of our greatest acts we are ignorant," she wrote. "You were not aware that you saved my life." But he did *not* understand her: that, for instance, although she never lied, she did not always tell the truth. —Tell me I should not let my poems go, help me discourage this

person who suggests they be made public.— The letters reveal a discouraged plea for recognition too proud to be direct. The tone is established by her second letter to Colonel Higginson: "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish,' that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin." But he should have been able to *read* the tone. "You think my gait 'spasmodic.' I am in danger, sir. You think me 'uncontrolled.' I have no tribunal." By word and silence Higginson counselled resignation. Wonder if he knew. As the translator of the stoic Epictetus, he should have.

He *did* fail. But I think we are impertinent. An editor of Dickinson's poems and letters observes, rather smugly, "If Higginson had been more discerning and less timidly conventional, if he had had the ability to recognize genius in a new and original form, and the courage to sponsor it and to urge publication. . . ." What is it we think *we* know that gives us confidence we would act differently? Remember, this is not EMILY DICKINSON we are talking about, but only someone named "Emily Dickinson." How would she fare were she alive? Would she be taken up by the English Department? I'm afraid it would depend not upon our assumed discernment, our assumption of untimid and unconventional critical intelligence, but *quite entirely upon luck.*

In a time which has no strong definition of artistic excellence, which prides itself on a dismissive attitude toward "standards," so that the freedom from aesthetic constraint which seems a positive boon works hand in foot with a monthly shifting relativism which makes evaluative judgment merely a matter of preference, guess, heart storm, whatever. . . in such a time literary recognition is as much a matter of "luck" as the economist's "random walk," or as Christopher Jencks (*Who Gets Ahead?)* said that much material success is, "being in the right place at the right time" and such intangibles. Press an analogy for a moment.

In an educated—or at least "trained"—society, the possession

of skills does not insure success because that society will have an abundance of skilled people. Who gets the job will ordinarily be determined by economic discrimination of one sort or another; but where that doesn't obtain because of everything-being-equal, "luck" functions to sort candidates out. The employer likes the look of you, so to speak. Jencks's insights are not liable to please the more unimaginative social scientist, luck being such an unquantifiable variable: there isn't a Fortune Quotient so far as I know.

In a society in which there are, admittedly, countless outlets for publication, but very few, really, which have the power to fashion recognition; in a society in which there is an over-abundance of "skill" since there are no received definitions of what skill is, and consequently practically any literate person with some flair can be judged to have it, when the lines "She mentioned, and forgot— / Then lightly as a Reed / Bent to the Water, struggled scarce— / Consented, and was dead—" might not be deemed superior to "It seemed she wanted to say something but died instead"; in such a society, then, often enough to be a factor that ought to be acknowledged, "luck" is going to function to sort out candidates for fame.

Luck. Wouldn't Emily Dickinson stand as good a chance as anyone, and perhaps a better chance than she did in a time when tastes were "timidly conventional" as Higginson's professorial detractor put it? I don't think so. Perhaps I should say, flatly, No. For when I say this is an age of dismissive attitudes toward standards I am waffling. For there *is* a standard of a sort: *How free of standards does this poem seem*? The pretense is to a freedom from standards imposed by the past—"classical," "romantic," "genteel tradition," whatever. But that in turn is waffling. For whatever the particular definition of excellence of craft and perception at any point in the past, the thing sought and honored was, or was thought to be, that intellectually elusive

quality “timelessness.” And all debates about the vernacular or the high style and such were finally debates about how to achieve that quality. But now. . . . A poet of my acquaintance had a poem rejected (not an extraordinary occurrence in itself of course) on the grounds that “The reader would not know when this was written. This is not the poetry of now.” The rejection was not by some thought-fashion dope-sheet, but by one of the most influential poetry quarterlies in America, which had formerly published her with enthusiasm.

Luck would function for Dickinson, or she’d stand as good a chance as any, if her essential qualities were not perceived. Or if—a form of being in the right place at the right time, or someone liking the look of you—her submissions satisfied come editorial need or suited the requirements of some special issue. I remind us again we are not talking about DICKINSON. Editors of poetry journals are mostly a harried lot, competing for subscribers limited in number, for grants, for a reputation for the journal as “different,” which usually means, new, newer, newest. And this is not even to charge the editors with cynicism; they may even think they are serving the muse. And often they seem justified, as for example by the periodic upswings of interest in poetry: poetry readings and read-ins almost Russian in urgency. Everyone is reading it! And more than that are writing it! The journals are swamped

But, luckily, there’s the university. There’s a home in the English Department. Of a sort. The writer-in-residence fellowship, the creative-writing professorship, belong to the reputable poet, the critically acclaimed, to DICKINSON if you will—and they should. But after this, subtle and insane discriminations occur that suggest that although patronage is necessary, and it is best that people eat, the atmosphere is not really congenial or very welcoming to Emily Dickinson. The university has implicitly announced that it is a haven for

creativity as well as scholarship, and having made that announcement thinks that enough.

The English Department is staffed by people who either study literature or make it. I allow the generalization is a little clumsy, for some do both. But I insist it's useful and true. The way to success within the profession, of course, is primarily through publication. The precondition of being considered even a candidate for eventual success is the doctorate, or some equivalent. The scholar is generally expected to have a doctorate; the creative writer *may* have it, but generally is not expected to. In some universities, such as the one I have been most intimate with, the creative writer cannot be admitted to professorial rank, as opposed to lectureship (which sounds rather "donnish," but simple means more teaching hours with less pay) without the doctorate, *unless* he or she receives a "waiver"; that is, has a novel or a book of poems, say, already published, so that the Ph.D. requirement is waived. I note in passing a certain arrogant foolishness: a novel or a book of poems must *measure up to* a doctoral dissertation, which of course does not have to be published!

A young teacher arrives fresh from graduate school with Ph.D. in hand and no publishing credits, with a specialty in American literature, and is appointed assistant professor. A young teacher arrives fresh from graduate school with M.A. or M.F.A. in hand and three or four published poems, with a specialty in creative writing and is appointed lecturer. The argument that the second has not yet proven "really" to be a poet is no argument at all, because the first has not yet proven to be a scholar. After all, the Ph.D. is merely a "promise" of scholarship, not its achievement, since were it the latter one would not be expected to produce anything else for retention or advancement—as of course one is.

What this means is that—excepting the established name brought in to enhance the department's reputation—the poet begins as a

second-class citizen in the academic community. . . and continues to be. He must prove himself distinguished in a way that his scholar colleague does not have to. He may be an exception, the dean I once knew who announced at a tenure hearing considering a candidate's list of publications, "Fiction *don't count*." For usually *it do*. But not as much. Should one faculty member make a truly minor contribution to fiction, a short story fairly forgettable, and should another make a truly minor and insignificant contribution to Henry James scholarship never to be remembered. . . then the first has embarrassed himself, the second has written an article. In other words, the creative writer must at least *remind* his colleagues of, say, Saul Bellow, to gain a modest reward; the scholar to achieve same need remind his colleagues of no one at all, unless it is themselves.

Furthermore, just as a book of poems may be accepted as the "equivalent" of a Ph.D. thesis, a weird distortion of values continues to obtain. Types of publication carry certain "weights" when faculty are being considered for tenure or promotion. An ordinary novel may be as weighty as an ordinary scholarly book, although not of a certainty. A good short story *may* weigh as much as an ordinary scholarly article. A single poem does not.

Let me be pointed. If "I" should publish an article on the tone of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* my achievement would weigh more in committee deliberations than would my colleague "Emily's" publication for that semester, "A little madness in the Spring / Is wholesome even for the King, / But God be with the Clown– / Who ponders this tremendous scene– / This whole Experiment of Green– / As if it were his own!"

And this, I submit, is unconscionable, petty, insane. Not a congenial atmosphere for a living Emily Dickinson (again, not to be confused with EMILY DICKINSON!). In extenuation of the university, however, I admit that it is hard. How *does* one judge merit when it has not already been established by time

and luck? Especially when you have bought the same permissive standards of aesthetic judgment the poetry-review editor has bought. Who is, after all, generally a member of some English department.

All this is disturbing, for many assume still that the English Department—along with its periodical appendage as it were, the literary journal—is, surely, where un-Higginsonian discernment is lodged. Physicians care little for fees. Ladies of the night have hearts of gold. And Santa Claus is coming to town.

It will not have escaped the reader's attention that I have not defined poetic excellence although I most obviously have a bias which I don't think the editors I have mocked share. Impossible to provide a critical lecture in this brief space, I will speak in hopefully understood short-hand. *Poetry in English, to be literate, no matter its subject, and even if only distantly, must at the very least remind the ear of the profound and noble rhythms of* The King James. *Otherwise, merely workaday prose.*

It probably will come as no surprise, the confession to follow, that my somewhat intemperate tone is not the result of mere intellectual dissatisfaction with the foibles of a supposedly literate community. I mentioned some paragraphs back a "poet of my acquaintance" who wasn't writing "the poetry of now." This poet had earlier had no problem placing her work in reputable journals, indeed had been accepted with enthusiasm, but had since suffered what might be called a sequence of medical epics and had ceased submitting poems for a considerable time. When she recovered and renewed her literary adventures it was as if editorial staffs had been de- and then re-populated. She became relatively reticent about sending forth poetic efforts without customary responsiveness. So I—fairly well pissed off at what I considered cultural injustice, and having written a number of essays on poetry and poetics, and having taught aesthetics in a philosophy department for a number of years—thought I would

put my money where my essayistic mouth was, and serve unofficially as a kind of literary agent. These events date to about ten years ago.

Since I am being secretive and shielding this poet from any anger at *my* intemperance, I hesitate to quote her at great length and hope that the reader will take my word for it that I am not exaggerating the poetic value of her work. Perhaps it will give the reader confidence to know that the great British poet Robert Graves once judged her to have "the poetic gift indeed" (private correspondence). For the sake of economy I will focus now on only one poetic sequence, which begins with a sonnet in Shakespearean form, follows with four lyrics all exceptionally rhythmical, then a relatively long dramatic soliloquy, and at the close an epithalamion (a celebration of a marriage or love union). Although the seven poems work best together, they can each stand alone, as they were so written. Although I think the epithalamion is not the strongest of the poems I am going modestly to quote it so the reader will not be all at sea as to what I am talking about. It is called "Declaration."

And it will stand as a perpetual covenant

Such a one as we always are making

With all worlds whenever we agree

To count up and summarize

Comings and goings, bows and gestures

Till they become as columns

Surmised past all reckoning.

We agree

That beneath all endeavor

To build what can be undermined

By error or insufficiency

There will be a no matter what

Forever assumed.

We will kneel before altars

Crowned with contracts

And solemnities

Say the sound of laughter

With low reverence

And, rising, behold

The absolute, liberal air.

Three stanzas: seven lines, six lines, seven lines. A stately rhythm (appropriate to the formal occasion of the

epithalamion), but with no predictable drumbeat: iambs alternating with dactyls and trochees with sudden stark shifts to spondees. A tone of resolution: “And it will stand. . .”, “We will kneel. . . .” A resolute pacing, as it were, indicated by the most economical of punctuation, periods only concluding stanzas, only one essential comma during the first eighteen lines, and then in the last two lines a halting emphatic three both restraining and intensifying the triumphant voice.

Not the poetry of now, surely. So, therefore, a poetry of the past, archaic and dated? Not on your life. Yes, there are formal ten-dollar words and phrases with the tone and sound of times past—“perpetual covenant,” “Surmised,” “Crowned with contracts,” “low reverence,” and so on—but balanced by an almost demotic “Comings and goings” and “There will be a no matter what. . . .” So if there is a grammatical tense, so to speak, to the poem, it is *timelessness!*

One final *critical* comment about the poem: It has to be read aloud, *has to be heard. It cannot be allowed to lie silent upon the page. It is for all its force and resolution fragile enough that it can be killed by the inattentive reader.*

And one final *confessional* comment: The reader may think: “This sounds so very familiar; I think I know this poet.” Indeed. Evelyn Hooven is a regular contributor of poems, translations, plays, and essays to *New English Review* since Rebecca Bynum discovered her six years ago and the current editor Kendra Mallock confirmed Bynum’s discovery. But Bynum and Mallock are not myopic editors of a poetry review, but, rather, captains of a general cultural enterprise!

And speaking of inattentive readers, as I was a couple of paragraphs back, it is time to speak again of your garden-variety editor of the poetry review.

I am myself used to editors of journals of opinion (such as this one in which this essay appears). Ideologically speaking, Irving Howe at *Dissent* had little in common with Father Richard John Neuhaus who edited *Worldview* before *First Things* and even less with Neal Kozodoy when at *Commentary.* But the reason they coalesce in my memory is their impeccable editorial manners. Send Howe or Neuhaus or Kozodoy something, you'd get a yes or no or a can-we-talk? in a matter of days or a week or two. These contrast so sharply with the poetry-journal editor, garden variety, who apparently was brought up in a barn, as my mother used to say. Are three months too long for an answer? Try six. Try twelve. Get, more than one could ever expect, silence.

Disrespect. That's the best word to describe the normal poetry editor's attitude toward the poet. Unless, of course, the submission is from (or an editorial request is for) a "trophy poet," if you'll take my meaning. The typical rejection form-letter, arriving after several months, will say something like: "Thank you for your submission, which we are sorry to say was not selected. We receive hundreds of submissions and can accept only a few." Etc. Read closely, this of course means: "We accept only the best and yours was not good enough." (The editor thinks the poet cannot *read?*)

Another typical form-letter will say something like: "Thank you for your submission. It, however, does not suit our needs at the moment." Etc. This is truly revealing of the arrogance of the poetry-review ethos. The poet is supposed to meet the "needs" of the magazine? What needs are they? The only legitimate need the poetry magazine has is *to serve the muse!* No other! The editor does not know that his responsibility is to provide a public space for the poet to "speak"; rather, he thinks it is the poet's responsibility to provide material to fill up the magazine. This is an extraordinary mangling of priorities. A particularly offensive form of the arrogance, practiced by a sizeable minority of journals, is the admonition not to make

simultaneous submissions (submitting the poem to more than one journal at the same time); rather, the poet is supposed to wait several months for an answer before moving on to somewhere else. Suppose the poet gets three or four rejections: the poem may be in transit for a few years before finding a home, before fulfilling some editor's needs. One journal even warns submitters: defy our no-simultaneous-submission rule and you will *never* publish here.

Just occasionally the poet will receive a personal notice of non-acceptance, some apology, perhaps an explanation. Here are a few I have seen, and not addressed to a single poet, some paraphrased, some quoted.

—*"This is wonderful, but, unfortunately, not suited to our editorial needs."* Unfortunately? It is amazing how often the word *unfortunately* absolves one of responsibility for one's actions, as if fortune itself has intervened.

—*Thank you for your submission. We wish we could accept it. It is work like yours that makes running this journal worthwhile.* What in god's name is a poet supposed to make of this personal touch?

—*I found your work very interesting. But I think it contains too many thoughts.* Does that mean it would be even more interesting if more thoughtless? Or less interesting if fewer thoughts, and less interesting is better?

—*"Glad to have seen this ambitious and moving dramatic poem."* The only conceivable intelligent response to this is: if it is so ambitious and moving why is it not accepted? Does the editor think it was sent simply for his reading pleasure? This guy is brother to the stoic who rejected a submission although, as he enthused, "*it stopped me in my tracks.*"

—*We read your poem with interest. But the meaning of some of the evocative images is not clear to us. "We tend to prefer*

accessivity" [sic]. I can remember when ambigooitee was considered a poetic virtue, even in some cases a necessity, since truth is more often than not half-hidden by a certain nimbus, inviting the intelligence to activity.

Would this last editor find Emily Dickinson (before she became EMILY DICKINSON) fully accessible? "Prayer is the little implement / Through which Men reach / Where Presence is denied them." "Let no Sunrise' yellow noise / Interrupt this Ground." Yellow noise? Does one everyday notice "A Flower's unobtrusive Face / To punctuate the Wall"? I could go on, but I assume the reader gets the point.

I am suggesting—no, saying—that Dickinson would require just as much *luck* as anyone else. What "luck" precisely is that? To find a poetry editor who can actually read poems, can tell when he or she is reading a poem instead of something that is merely *presented as* a poem and meets some "need." My experience as "agent" convinces me that most poetry editors simply do not have the skill or taste required. (And sometimes, I am sure, do not read what they claim to have read. As when they tell me they cannot use *my* poems although they read them with great interest, obviously not having noticed that I was only the agent.) The poet and critic Clive James has spoken somewhere about writers who cannot write writing for readers who cannot read. Forget the writers who cannot write—although they are legion—and think about readers who cannot read. There you have the garden variety poetry-review editor. My friend that true poet Dana Gioia once told me that a certain well-regarded poet, who was also the editor of a well-regarded literary journal, was "incapable of a lyrical line of verse," to which I added that as editor he was "incapable of *recognizing* a lyrical line." No, the garden-variety poetry editor could not read Emily Dickinson. Nor would he be able to read Dylan Thomas (not to be confused with DYLAN THOMAS, trophy poet)

One of Thomas's most anthologized poems is "A Refusal to Mourn

the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.” The reader should reach for an anthology, for, pressed for space I’ll cut 15 lines from the poem’s 24. It begins

Never until the mankind making

Bird beast and flower

Fathering and all humbling darkness

Tells with silence the last light breaking. . .

shall the poet allow himself to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child’s death. . . .

and ends with

Deep with the first dead lies London’s daughter. . .

Secret by the unmourning water

Of the riding Thames.

After the first death, there is no other.

What would the garden variety poetry editor make of Thomas’ poem? Almost a certainty he would take the poet at his word: this is a *refusal* to mourn, just as the Thames naturally does not mourn, since death is an old story, nothing new here, because after the first one “there is no other.” And this poetry editor, reading the poem for its “meaning,” reading it as if it’s a piece of prose, this editor’s habitual way of reading, has gotten it all wrong, completely wrong, because he cannot *hear* what the poem is *doing.*

For—does the reader have the poem fully before him or her yet?—the pacing of the poem tells you that what the poem *does*

is mourn. Like drum beats of a slowly moving procession. "Procession"? Yes, that is right. A funeral procession, as it were. That is to say, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" is no refusal at all. It is one of the great *elegies* in the English language. This is an extraordinary example of what Allen Tate called the tension between sound and sense in poetry. All the time the speaker of the poem is fighting against mourning (or Thomas is pretending that the speaker is) he is slowly overcome with emotion so that he is indeed mourning to an extraordinarily moving degree. Again: you have to *hear!* Poetry was never meant (until recently at least) to be read as silent discursive writ. So: If "A Refusal" were written today by an unknown "Dylan Thomas" it would receive the light of periodical day only by sheer luck.

If the reader thinks I exaggerate I suggest he or she get a copy for instance of *Poetry*, the once magnificent magazine launched by Harriet Monroe in 1912, now declined beyond conceivability. If readers recall the poetry they read when younger they will be stunned to find stuff as aesthetically incompetent—and as foreign to the biblically educated ear—as the "poetry" found there. I could suggest they submit themselves to the discipline I forced upon myself during those months as "agent" those years ago and survey the poetry journals. But I would not wish that task upon a Nazi.

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