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THE HELP

The Women Behind Helen Keller
& Emily Dickinson

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In Service

Emily Dickinson, Helen Keller & the Irish Help

Peter Quinn

The shortchanging of women's role in history is an old story, and one that until recently was taken for granted. Whether as wife/accomplice/seductress (Eve), *maitresse-en-titre* (Madame du Barry), *casus belli* (Helen of Troy), or *Theotokos* (the Virgin Mary), women were typically seen as mate, mother, or consort, supporting actresses for the male protagonists whose strutting and fretting filled the stage. Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher were the extremely rare exceptions that prove the rule: in history's main events—conquest, exploration, revelation, invention, competition—men acted, while women (at best) abetted.

The truth, of course, has always been infinitely more nuanced and layered. From the beginning, women have been prime movers in the making and shaping of tribes, families, and communities. Their prominence and influence have shifted with the seismic social and economic alterations of the ages. But always, no matter how myopic or willfully blind men have been in overlooking them, women have been co-makers of the human epic.

Women's varied struggles to shape their own lives are exemplified by three resolute Americans whose paths crisscrossed as they made their way through the patriarchy of nineteenth-century Massachusetts. Their stories are told in a trio of recent books that study the era's intricate nexus of family, friendship, and class—a nexus these three women accepted and challenged, honored and altered in turn. Brenda Wineapple's luminously written *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson & Thomas Wentworth Higginson* takes up the relationship between the poet and the noted minister, author,

and abolitionist she called her "preceptor." Aife Murray's wonderfully insightful *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson's Life and Language* investigates the crucial role played by long-time Dickinson household servant Margaret Maher, and in the process peels away the anonymity enshrouding the domestics and laborers who staffed the estates and homes of the "better classes." Finally, Kim Nielsen's *Beyond the Miracle Worker: The Remarkable Life of Anne Sullivan Macy and Her Extraordinary Friendship with Helen Keller* offers a fully rounded portrait of a teacher whose achievements have been overshadowed by those of her famous student.

A large cleft of class separates one of these women from the other two. Anne Sullivan and Margaret Maher started at the bottom of the social pyramid topped by people like the Dickinsons. As daughter of Edward Dickinson, a wealthy attorney, church elder, college treasurer, and leading citizen of Amherst, Emily Dickinson never faced the economic hurdles or ethnic and religious prejudices that Sullivan and Maher had to overcome. She never fretted over how to support her-



Keller & Sullivan

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self, and was certainly never confronted with the notions of inborn inferiority that surrounded Irish immigrants and their children. Nevertheless, as Brenda Wineapple makes clear, in becoming one of the most startling innovators of modern poetry Dickinson had to circumvent conventions of gender, family, and society—expectations of feminine domesticity, religious conformity, and intellectual tractability that few were willing to alter. (At one point, her dourly righteous father was concerned enough about Emily's spiritual and religious views that he called in the Congregational minister to examine her; she was subsequently deemed sound.) Whether Emily Dickinson "chose her nonconformity or...it chose her" is impossible to know, Wineapple reminds us. Yet, ambivalent as she might have been at first, "over time, her commitment to independence, poetry, and a handful of soul mates" was clearly of her choosing. As Dickinson herself would write, "The Soul selects her own society— / Then—shuts the Door—"

Emily Norcross, Dickinson's mother, was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer and mill owner. Possessed of an "oppressively tidy" bent, imbued with the gospel of self-reliance and avoidance of extravagance and idleness, she did her best to run her substantial household with minimal hired help. This was an exhausting task—one that Aife Murray believes "may have contributed to the compromised health that characterized much of her life." Emily Dickinson was nineteen in 1850, when her mother's health first noticeably deteriorated ("acute neuralgia" was the diagnosis). The burden of daily chores fell on her two daughters: Emily did most of the cooking, while Lavinia, her younger sister, did the cleaning. Help arrived in 1857, when their father hired Margaret O'Brien as a live-in maid. As Murray emphasizes in *Maid as Muse*, the impact on Dickinson's literary output was dramatic: where she had averaged just one poem per year since her mother's decline, "suddenly, in 1858, there was a literary explosion with forty-three poems." In the next seven years Dickinson would write hundreds more.

When O'Brien left in 1865 to be married, Emily Dickinson's prodigious literary production came to a sudden halt. It wasn't until 1869, the year Margaret Maher arrived, that a steady output revived. At twenty-eight, a decade younger than Dickinson, Maher had been in domestic service since her mid-teens. She'd left Tipperary in 1854 with her parents and siblings, part of the flood of Irish—a million and a half of them—who came to America in mid-century. The arrival in New England of large numbers of Roman Catholic Irish peasants, impoverished and often illiterate, had provoked America's first great anti-immigrant backlash. In his 1855 address to the legislature, Henry Gardner, the Know-Nothing governor of Massachusetts, invoked the fall of the Roman Empire, comparing the Irish to the "horde of foreign barbarians" and calling them an "insidious foreign influx to our shores." Similar views were widely shared at all levels of society. The rural backgrounds of many immigrant women frequently left them struggling to meet the demanding expectations of their

employers. Tales of ignorant Irish maids comically misinterpreting instructions were legion (for example, mistress tells maid, "Put the lamp out," and maid carries lamp outside). Yet the nineteenth century's growing appetite for luxury and leisure required steady, reliable live-in help, and efficient and respectful women like Margaret Maher were in great demand.

Emily Dickinson hadn't always been amenable to the presence of the Irish. Writing in 1851 to her brother, who was teaching immigrant children in Boston, she declared with exaggerated mockery that she and Lavinia "say Masses for the poor Irish boys' souls. So far as I'm concerned I should like you to kill some—there are so many now, there is no room for Americans." The change in Dickinson's attitude began with Margaret O'Brien; it continued over the seventeen years that she and Maher lived under the same roof. She relied on Maggie, as she called her ("a warm name," she wrote), and came to trust her more than her own sister, intuiting perhaps that Lavinia would one day fulfill her promise to carry out the posthumous destruction of her correspondence, but that "courageous Maggie" would not. And so, happily for posterity, she entrusted the Irish maid with her poems.

Aife Murray writes that Dickinson "professed herself content—intellectually and literarily"—with Margaret Maher. She was drawn by Maggie's company and to the place where Maggie did her work, frequently setting up headquarters in the pantry beside the kitchen, listening and watching, writing on whatever scrap of paper was nearby. Unlike the parlor and other rooms whose formality bordered on the funereal, the Dickinson pantry was painted in lively shades of light green and deep yellow. Its cookstove glowed warm in winter; door and windows were thrown open in summer. The little room hummed with household rhythms and routines familiar to Emily Dickinson since childhood. Relieved of the drudge work, she now found this atmosphere reassuring rather than oppressive. And it influenced her writing. Her fondness for the image of the bee, it turns out, was rooted not merely in a fascination with nature, but in her experience of the nineteenth-century kitchen. She studied the familiar traffic that came to the kitchen door, the parade of local laborers and peddlers: the gardener, handyman, tradesman, and ostler, her brother's cook and maid (Maher's niece, "Little Maggie" Kelley). Their comings and goings, the chitchat and easy banter with the two Maggies, the bustle and hustle of boiling, broiling, and baking: the constant activity created a ceaseless hum, as in a hive, and lodged itself in the poet's fancy.

At the same time, barely twenty miles south of Amherst, in Springfield, a girl named Anne Sullivan was living the hard life typical of the vast majority of Irish immigrants. As Kim Nielsen relates the story in *Beyond the Miracle Worker*, Sullivan's mother, Alice, had been born during the Irish famine and immigrated to North America, where she married into a life of poverty and lost two of her five children to death. As a child, Anne Sullivan was afflicted by trachoma—an eye infection rife in poverty-stricken popula-

tions living in crowded and unsanitary conditions—that scarred her eyelids and led to partial blindness. Her mother died from tuberculosis in 1874, when Anne was eight, leaving her three surviving children to her illiterate and alcoholic husband. He soon deposited them with relatives and went west to seek his fortune. (Years later, Sullivan would learn that he had hanged himself in Chicago.) After two years the Sullivan relatives sent Anne and her six-year-old brother Jimmie, hobbled by a congenital hip problem, to the Tewksbury Almshouse. Half-blind Annie and half-crippled Jimmie clung to each other with a love born of shared abandonment. They resisted the attempts of almshouse wardens to separate them, living together in a curtained-off space known as “the death house,” where the bodies of those who died were stored before burial. Six months after their arrival, Jimmie died. Sullivan longed to join him. “I believe very few children have ever been so completely left alone as I,” she remembered years later.

The deprivations that beset Anne Sullivan and her kind didn’t touch the world of Emily Dickinson. Yet, for all their circumstantial differences, these two strong-willed, independent-minded women had much in common. Sullivan’s description of herself would seem to fit Dickinson quite well: “Over and over she emphasized her otherness,” Nielsen writes, “her abnormality, her difference from those around her. As she saw it, ‘All my experience unfitted me for living a normal life.’” Dickinson and Sullivan both had problems with their eyesight. Sullivan never fully recovered from the disease that profoundly affected her vision. “Neither consistently blind nor sighted,” in Nielsen’s description, she “existed in a nebulous state between the two.” As for Dickinson, over the years her eyes had become increasingly sensitive to light, a sensitivity that interfered with her reading. In 1863, she traveled to Boston to visit Dr. Henry Willard Williams, one of the country’s leading ophthalmologists, and spent two months being treated for irritation of the iris. It was two years before her eyes fully healed, and she never forgot the fear and despair that the thought of going blind stirred in her. “I had a woe,” she wrote years later, “the only one that ever made me tremble. It was a shutting out of all the dearest ones of time, the strongest of the soul—BOOKS.” Being separated from her reading, she observed, had given her “eight weary months of Siberia.”

Is it possible that Dickinson’s brush with blindness left her an even keener observer of the world than before? It’s tempting to believe so. Since Homer’s time, blindness has been associated with poetic insight; and there’s no doubt that Dickinson’s poetic output increased dramatically during the years she struggled with her impairment. Indisputable, at any rate, is her profound sense of light and of the fleetingness of human sight (“By a departing light / We see acuter, quite, / Than by a wick that stays”). Observing the gloom of a solstice afternoon, she discerned a universal message in “a certain slant of light / Winter afternoons—”; an ominous shadow that “When it goes, ’tis like the Distance / On the look of Death.” Tentative and unsettled in matters of religious belief, Dickinson was fascinated by the play of sunlight and shadow,

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and looked beyond these surface impressions to mysteries and hidden meanings. “A Light exists in Spring,” she wrote in a poem dated to 1865:

Not present on the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

In Sullivan’s case, there’s no question of the impact visual impairment had on her life. Among her earliest memories was hearing someone say, “She would be so pretty if it were not for her eyes.” And it was partly her bad eyes that landed her in Tewksbury, a reeking, overcrowded, Dickensian combination of workhouse, insane asylum, and orphanage, where nearly half the inmates were Irish. Sullivan described her four years there, from age ten to fourteen, as a “crime against childhood.” The scars were so deep that it took fifty years for her to give anyone a full account of her experiences there—finger-spelling the story into the palm of her student and lifetime companion, Helen Keller.

As the world came to know, Keller had been struck in



Higginson might well have tossed it aside. The Civil War that was raging absorbed a great deal of his energy and attention. It was a war he had yearned for and helped bring about. A well-known abolitionist firebrand, Higginson had been one of the "Secret Six" who helped finance John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry three years earlier, with the hope of igniting a slave insurrection across the South. In the wake of Brown's arrest and trial, Higginson's co-conspirators went into hiding; Higginson alone stood his ground.

Though she was a revolutionary in the matter of poetics—the literary equivalent of a radical abolitionist—Emily Dickinson was largely apolitical, and what politics she did espouse were similar to her father's, Whiggish and conservative. What mattered most to her wasn't Higginson's stand on slavery and the war, but the nature essays he published in the *Atlantic* alongside the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. She'd undoubtedly read the praise his writing received in the pages of the *Springfield Republican*, her father's newspaper of choice. What Dickinson recognized in Higginson was a restless intellect like her own, a pilgrim soul seeking new paths of salvation. He was a man of action, a political radical, vociferous champion of women's rights, and violent opponent of slavery who would lead the Union's first black regiment. When it came to poetry, however, Higginson was the Whig, the gradualist and respecter of tradition. Yet he grasped that Dickinson wasn't merely different. He called her poetry "spasmodic," and though he meant it as a criticism, the remark also acknowledged a departure, a movement in directions poetry hadn't gone before.

Rejecting the cliché of Higginson as a prissy Boston Brahmin who never grasped the creative genius of the hermit poet of Amherst (a central theme in William Luce's 1976 one-woman play *The Belle of Amherst*), Wineapple insists on the reciprocity of Dickinson's unlikely friendship with Higginson. Wineapple quotes Allen Tate's remark that the elusive, seductive nature of Dickinson's poems would have led Cotton Mather to have her burned as a witch, and portrays a Higginson who discerned the magic in her poems from the first time he read them. (His wife, on the other hand, thought Dickinson mad.) He admitted to Dickinson that "Sometimes I take out your letters & verses, dear friend, and when I feel their strange power, it is not strange that I find it hard to write & that long months pass." Years after her death—though seven years older, Higginson outlived her by twenty-five years, dying in 1911 at age eighty-eight—he confessed, "The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy more than she evaded me, and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy."

They were in each other's presence only twice. The first time was in August 1870, when he came to Amherst specifically to see her. A second, briefer visit occurred in 1873, when he came to give a lecture at Amherst College in support of women's suffrage. In the presence of Higginson, a man and a literary star, Dickinson was elliptical and evasive, the exact opposite of her kitchen persona with Maggie Maher. (The

infancy by an illness that left her in a permanent Siberia of sightlessness and soundlessness. Under Sullivan's tutelage, she became what Nielsen terms a "disabled superstar," an international celebrity and symbol of the human capacity to overcome the most daunting of challenges. Yet, in Nielsen's opinion, Sullivan's condition was in certain ways "more debilitating" than Keller's. "Near constant pain," writes Nielsen, "combined with the waves of melancholy that confronted her throughout her life." Keller herself reports that she "nearly went distracted" at the feeling of Sullivan's wracking sobs as, "after the silence of half a century, she spoke of her brother Jimmie's death in the almshouse."

Sullivan struggled throughout her life with a past that threatened to overwhelm her. The girl raised in a poorhouse, the damaged child of impoverished Irish-Catholic immigrants, never lost her sense of being an outsider. Yet though she spent years, in Nielsen's estimation, "running from Irishness," she never entirely escaped. She abandoned Catholicism, but defended it when schoolmates or teachers derided it. Instinctively, in an Irish way, she championed the downtrodden, and remained "stubbornly resistant to authority," notes Nielsen, "often no matter what the cause, price, or likely outcome." It was an attitude Sullivan passed on to Helen Keller.

In April 1862, following publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* of his "Letter to a Young Contributor," the Cambridge abolitionist and author, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, received a letter from a woman he didn't know. Enclosed were four poems and a simple question: "Are you too deeply preoccupied to say if my Verse is alive?"

visits “drained my nerve power,” Higginson noted. “I am glad not to live near her.”) He valued their correspondence highly, however; and, aware that Dickinson possessed a talent that defied easy categorization, Higginson accepted her reticence and honored, as Wineapple puts it, an “unspoken pact sealed by their commitment not to each other but to art.” He wouldn’t return again until 1886, when he would read a poem by Emily Brontë at her funeral.

Dickinson, in turn, was grateful for the serious attention Higginson gave her work as well as the kindness and consideration he offered her in his letters. There was little if any condescension in those letters, and if Higginson couldn’t comprehend the truly revolutionary import of Dickinson’s poems—after her death, he would assist in altering and “Victorianizing” them for publication—it’s not hard to imagine the speed and ease with which some of the literary lions of the age would have dismissed her work altogether as flighty, confused, and insignificant. “You were not aware that you saved my life,” Dickinson wrote him in 1869, referring to the reception he’d given her unsolicited letter seven years before. What higher accolade could there be?

On June 1, 1886, two and a half weeks after Dickinson’s death in Amherst, Anne Sullivan graduated from Boston’s prestigious Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, which coincidentally had been founded by one of Higginson’s fellow co-conspirators in the Secret Six, Samuel Gridley Howe. Her transfer six years earlier from the living hell of Tewksbury to the genteel, well-maintained precincts of Perkins had been sudden and unexpected. Sullivan fell far short of meeting what Nielsen describes as the school’s “eugenics based” admission criteria, and owed her admission to the intervention of still another member of the Secret Six, Franklin Sanborn. A former schoolmaster and pioneering social reformer, Sanborn had followed Howe in 1874 as chairman of the State Board of Charities. In 1880, he toured the Tewksbury Asylum, where he and his party were followed through the wards by a pesky, persistent fourteen-year-old inmate who pleaded, “Mr. Sanborn, Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school!” Taking pity on the girl, Sanborn engineered her admission to Perkins as a state-supported student.

Grateful as she was to be away from Tewksbury, Sullivan was never entirely comfortable at Perkins. Older and taller than her fellow students, she’d never been to school before, found it hard to make friends, and felt out of place—a feeling reinforced when her classmates went home for the summer while she was sent to work as a domestic. At Perkins she repeatedly banged heads with administrators and teachers, and with Julia Ward Howe, the founder’s formidable widow and the revered author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Confident of her talents and fiercely insistent on her equal standing with men of her social rank, Howe was a founder (as was Thomas Wentworth Higginson) of the American Woman Suffrage Association. She stayed closely involved with the



Perkins Institution, where her daughter was married to the headmaster, and students accorded her the highest degree of deference. It’s no surprise that two proudly assertive women like Howe and Sullivan, separated by a chasm of class, ethnicity, and experience, had several confrontations. When Howe discussed with the girls their postgraduation plans, and Sullivan—a lapsed Catholic who showed no interest in Protestantism—declared her intention to become an evangelist, Howe didn’t try to hide her annoyance at such presumption. “I’m afraid you sacrifice modesty to your ambition,” she told Sullivan, who shot back, “Self-effacement is not your brightest virtue, is it, Mrs. Howe?”

Despite her contretemps with Howe, Sullivan was chosen as valedictorian of her graduating class. Not long after her graduation, the headmaster wrote her, asking if she’d consider an offer from a Mr. Keller of Tuscumbia, Alabama, who was seeking a governess for “his little deaf-mute and blind daughter.” Though Keller was a former captain in the Confederate army, and his mother a cousin of Robert E. Lee, his wife, Kate Adams Keller, had been born in Boston. It was perhaps her northern roots that allowed the couple to seek help from a Boston institution closely associated with the cause of abolition. In any case, as a result of Sullivan’s triumphant struggle to teach her six-year-old charge, Helen Keller rose to international celebrity—a story known to us primarily through William Gibson’s celebrated play, *The Miracle Worker*.

Sullivan’s life, like Dickinson’s, centered on language: Dickinson’s by dint of her poetic genius, Sullivan’s by the requirements of quasi-blindness and her work with Helen Keller. Neither took language for granted. Through poetry,

Dickinson succeeded in a challenging quest, as Aife Murray wisely puts it, "to name the unnamable." Nielsen describes Sullivan doing something similar in her breakthroughs with Keller, brilliantly awakening the girl's capacity to put names on things, to grasp the "complex realization that emotions had names or that...words could be strung together to form sentences." Poet and teacher alike were driven by their knowledge of language's power to liberate, to allow the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

During their lifetime, the pupil's fame outstripped the teacher's. Sullivan was often treated by Helen's upper-class benefactors as an accessory, part guide and part domestic, useful for shepherding Keller and for facilitating communication. She was also resented, even criticized as an upstart and ingrate, by those who felt she paid insufficient homage to the memory of Samuel Gridley Howe. The one person who never criticized her was Keller; she always revered Sullivan, whom she called "Teacher," and credited her with making all her achievements possible. "Her dearness was without limit," Keller wrote, "and it was almost intolerable. Beautiful was her touch." Sullivan traveled the world with her increasingly famous pupil, meeting many people along the way, but she remained lonely—far lonelier, it seems, than the ostensible hermit, Emily Dickinson. Sullivan's marriage, to writer John Macy, was unsuccessful. Her longest, deepest, most enduring relationship was with Keller. In many ways, Nielsen notes, Keller "became a husband to Annie," providing emotional, physical, and monetary support.

As with Emily Dickinson, whose readiness to marry Judge Otis Phillips Lord, a widower almost twenty years her senior, didn't preclude passionate ties to other females, it's unknowable whether Keller and Sullivan's intimacy was physical as well as emotional. The curtain of silence draped over all forms of sexual activity reflected the age's reverence, at least among the middle and upper classes, for propriety and privacy. Yet if the Victorians kept the smoke well hidden, there's no doubt that the fires of sexuality were ablaze in bedrooms, backrooms, coaches, and closets. Behind the staid façade of the Dickinson Homestead, for instance, Emily's brother Austin carried on an intense twelve-year affair with Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an Amherst professor.

Those most privy to the secrets of the Victorian household were the servants. Their employers took their presence for granted, as familiar as the furniture. In the private quarters of the Homestead, Aife Murray surmises in *Maid as Muse*, "the Dickinson servants saw much of the intimate lives of their employers: what was endearing, petty, or mean, and other things they wished they hadn't seen." Maggie Maher never spoke of the Dickinsons or told their secrets, at least not outside the circle of her own family. Her paper trail is scant compared with that of Emily Dickinson or Anne Sullivan. Like the vast majority of human beings, especially among the lower classes, she quickly faded into the shadows after her death. Murray does a brilliant job of pulling

Maher back into the light, restoring the context of her life, acknowledging her contributions, and, in the process, those of the servant class she belonged to.

It was in Maggie Maher's trunk that Dickinson stored her fascicles, the forty packets of stitched-together poems whose existence she hid from everyone else. Perhaps this is no surprise. It was Maggie, after all, who tidied her room and put the papers on her desk into order, who stood beside her in the kitchen, laboring long hours while Dickinson applied herself to her poems. When Dickinson grew feeble, it was Maggie who bathed her, brushed her hair, and brought her meals to her. And when the end came, it was Maggie who not only stripped the bed and removed any sign of her final struggle, but also disobeyed Dickinson's wishes and brought the poems to the attention of Lavinia instead of burning them, as Dickinson had requested. And so we owe our knowledge of the poet to her maid. In fact, the single daguerreotype by which the world knows Dickinson, the famous image of the sixteen-year-old taken in 1847, exists thanks to Maggie. Her family, thinking it a poor likeness, had discarded it. But Maggie rescued it.

Margaret Maher stayed on in the Dickinson household for eight years after Emily Dickinson died, until 1894, then moved in with her sister and her husband, Tom Kelley, and their brood of eight children. Tom, who'd lost an arm in an industrial accident and worked on the Dickinson property, had been specified by Emily Dickinson as chief pallbearer at her funeral, along with five other Irish workers on the estate. Austin Dickinson had come to accept his sister's eccentricities, but, public as a funeral was, this bordered on the embarrassing, and he asked four of his acquaintances from among Amherst's respectable classes to serve as honorary pallbearers. Of the five Irishmen who did the actual hauling of the coffin, four were born in Ireland. The fifth, Stephen Sullivan, was born locally and raised by a widowed mother who supported six children as a laundry worker. It's well within the realm of possibility that he was from the same Springfield-area Sullivan clan as Anne, and that his mother was among those who had felt unable to save Anne and her brother from Tewksbury.

It would be a fitting circumstantial link among three women whose lives shared common themes, and whose efforts were graced with a similar sense of persistence and dedication. Nielsen is certain that rather than be recalled as a so-called miracle worker, Anne Sullivan would wish to be remembered as an intensely devoted teacher whose education, experience, and intuition allowed her to touch and open other lives. For their part, Maher and Dickinson, far less public in their lifetimes, left their mark on all our lives. More than any family member or acquaintance—more than Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who answered Dickinson's poetry with praise but also with the desire "to lead her in the direction of rules and tradition"—it was Maggie Maher whom Emily Dickinson judged capable of the disobedience necessary to bring her work to the world. Maher did not disappoint. Her act of insubordination worked the miracle for which posterity is in debt, turning the private genius of her mistress's poetry into a universal legacy. ■