“DON’T TELL! THEY’D ADVERTISE”
EMILY DICKINSON IN THE ROUND TABLE
ROBERT J. SCHOLNICK

EMILY Dickinson is not a writer one would expect to see included in a collection entitled “Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America.” This private, fiercely independent, and reclusive writer refused to participate in the literary marketplace. Unlike other significant poets from the nineteenth century, she did not print her work in periodicals and books. She wrote out her poems in her idiosyncratic system of punctuation and then filed them neatly away in bound fascicles. That is not to say that she wrote in isolation; she sent at least a third of her approximately 1,775 poems in letters to a large circle of friends. To one of her regular correspondents, the prominent Boston critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she wrote on 7 June 1862, “I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin.” Only some ten poems by Dickinson appeared in print during her lifetime, and even with that handful, we have no documentary evidence that Dickinson initiated publication.

Of these ten poems, nine appeared first in newspapers, including the Springfield Republican, the Brooklyn Daily Union, and Drum Beat, a paper published during the Civil War to raise money for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. She allowed her friend Helen Hunt Jackson, who repeatedly urged her to publish, to submit “Success is Counted Sweetest” for inclusion in an anonymous collection, A Masque of Poets, published by Roberts Brothers in 1878. Only one poem, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church,” appeared first in a magazine. On 12 March 1864 a New York weekly, the Round Table (1863–69), included the poem under the title “My Sabbath.” A wide-ranging journal of opinion and analysis, the Round Table was just then mounting an attack on the corrupting conditions of publishing and literary reviewing. To examine Dickinson’s appearance in the Round Table is both to see her relationship to the literary marketplace in a new light and to understand the role of this pioneering weekly in helping to create a space in American culture in which such a critical journal could flourish.

In the context of the contemporary marketplace, Dickinson is an example of what William Charvat has described as the private poet: “The verse of both private and the public poet originates from the unique privacies of the poet as a person. The private poet is concerned not only to preserve that uniqueness but to intensify it through the writing of verse—even at the cost of being rejected for unintelligibility. But the public poet progressively subordinates or submerges his uniqueness. Representativeness in his time, then, is the differentiating quality of the public poet, and it is the quality that makes the fundamental difference between his verse and that of the private poet.” Because Dickinson did not need the financial returns of publication, there was little incentive for her to enter a commercial marketplace that threatened her integrity. A fundamental concern for the young literary critics who rallied to the Round Table was exploring the relation between popularity and intrinsic literary value, between reputation in one’s time and lasting fame. As Dickinson wrote to Higginson, “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her—if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase—and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me—then—My Barefoot-Rank is better.”

TWO cousins, Charles Humphreys Sweetser (1841–71) and Henry Edward Sweetser (1837–70), founded the Round Table in New York in December 1869. An orphan, Charles Sweetser moved to Amherst in 1847 to be raised by his uncle and aunt, the Luke Sweetzers, friends and neighbors of Emily Dickinson. After his graduation from Amherst College in 1862, where he was class poet, he served an internship on the Springfield Daily Republican before coming to New York. Henry Sweetser, after graduating from Yale in 1858, became a journalist, working on the New York Times and then the New York World. His mother was Emily Dickinson’s aunt, Catherine, her father’s sister; his father, Joseph H. Sweetser, was a successful New York merchant. Although there is no evidence about exactly how “My Sabbath” came to the Round Table, without these family connections the poem clearly would not have appeared in the magazine. Yet, as we will see, the Sweetzers’ weekly articulated many of the reservations about the literary marketplace that we find in Dickin-
son’s poetry, and in criticizing the moralism, sentimentality, and deadening metrical conventions of American poetry, it called for new departures.

Established in the midst of the Civil War—its first issue appeared on 19 December 1863—the *Round Table* from the outset faced the most uncertain prospects. In fact, a sharp increase in costs during the first half of 1864 forced the Sweeters to suspend publication after the 23 July 1864 issue. Remarkably, on 9 September 1865 the cousins were able to revive the *Round Table*. Less than a year later, in April 1866, Henry Sweeter withdrew, and Charles left the following November to found the *Evening Gazette*.

Their places were taken by Dorsey Gardner and then Henry Sedley, who from December 1868 through the magazine’s final number, 3 July 1869, had sole responsibility. During the magazine’s last year, Sedley moved the *Round Table* sharply to the right.

Modeled after England’s *Saturday Review*, the Sweeters’ weekly proudly proclaimed its independence from political, ideological, or economic interests. Taking all of American life, including politics, society, religion, finance, art, and literature, as its subject matter, the *Round Table* introduced a new vision of periodical literature in America. Not least among its subjects was the industry in which it was a small, vulnerable participant: publishing.

By 1866 the Sweeters had come to realize that their magazine could never support itself with subscription revenues alone: “It is perhaps an unpleasant fact, but nevertheless one that cannot be blinked, that journals of the character of the *Round Table* are everywhere dependent upon their advertising patrons for support... It is notorious with [the best English weeklies] that their circulation is but a small item of their support. But the class of people to which they appeal makes them exceedingly valuable for advertisers, and hence they go forth every week full freighted with advertisements.” This statement served to justify the editors’ decision “to devote the first and last pages... to advertisements.” They had to admit that the quality of the publication—the amount of “reading matter” that could be included—directly depended on the amount of advertising that could be booked. Conceding that “American readers, who do not thoroughly understand the science and necessity of advertising, are apt to be repelled by advertising on the covers of their periodicals,” they asked their readers to recognize that “there can never be well sustained weeklies in our midst without resort to our plan” (2 June 1866, 344).

Ironically, the Sweeters had begun life by satirizing excessive advertising claims by publishers and by forthrightly attacking the larger system in which periodicals were all too willing to puff a publisher’s products in return for advertising dollars. For instance, on 30 January 1864 the *Round Table* asked “Is Newspaper Influence Marketable?” The answer was clear: “The fact is notorious that our public journals do not hold their opinions, to a greater or less extent, subject to business patronage. The whole practice of newspaper puffery is in fact another name for a sale of newspaper influence. A quack doctor wants a first-rate notice of his nostrum; an inventor of his patent; a manager of his new play; a publisher of his last novel; it is secured to all of them by giving a few dollars—in advertising” (99). Such practices made impossible that on which the magazine had staked its existence: an unbiased, critical discussion of public policy and ideas. The Sweeters argued that this subversion of critical integrity was the more serious because it took place during a war that daily tested the moral fabric of the republic.

In “I’m nobody,” poem 288, Dickinson anticipates just such a criticism of the publishing industry. After beginning by thankfully acknowledging her own anonymity—“I’m nobody”—the speaker advises other similarly anonymous nobodies not to blow their covers: “Don’t tell,” she warns. If the instruments of fame and public recognition should find “a pair of us,” then “they’d advertise—you know!” The resulting fate would be dreary—to be—Somebody!

How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!!

The penalty for publication went far beyond the late twentieth century’s allotted fifteen minutes of fame to include at least a month of making meaningless sounds to other self-admiring nobodies.

When Dickinson wrote the poem in 1861, advertising had long since become an inescapable part of periodical publishing. Such prominent periodicals as *Harper’s Magazine* (1850), *Putnam’s* (1853), *Appleton’s Journal* (1869), and *Scribner’s Monthly* (1870) had been—or shortly would be—established by publishers to advertise the house, not least by keeping the firm’s name before the public. The pioneers in this practice were the Harpers, who established their monthly as a “tender to our business.” A main purpose of *Harper’s* would be to interest readers in the British fiction that it serialized in the magazine and later brought out in separate volumes. Among the many subscribers was Lavinia Dickinson, Emily’s sister, who considered the arrival of the magazine each month important enough to note in her diary, as on 21 January 1851: "Re-
ceived my usual magazine.""11 Ezra Greenspan has summarized the firm's
goals: "Despite their claims of serving the general public with the maga-
zine, the Harpers were clearly also serving themselves, using the magazine
as a convenient forum for printing serials which could later be
profitably reprinted by the house as books, for giving additional publishing
opportunities to Harper's authors as well as for enticing other writers
into the house, and for publicizing the merits of the works and achieve-
ments of the house. The profitability of the magazine and its many-sided
utility to the house inspired numerous other American publishers to go
a similar route."12
Their literary contents conceived as implicit advertisements for the
firms that owned them, these periodicals also carried advertising of the
firm's current list. Further, even while advertising reading materials, per-
iodicals increasingly carried ads for all manner of nonliterary products
as well: the Round Table advertised patent medicines, sewing machines,
jewelry, fireplace implements, and a host of other products of an ex-
panding industrial capitalism. Advertisements for books appeared side
by side with those for mundane commercial products, and the same lan-
guage was used to sell both. For an author, appearance in a prominent
periodical served as a means to earn money, become better known, and
build a relationship with its publisher. Similarly, publishers could entice
potentially lucrative writers to the firm by offering significant payments
for periodical appearance.
From the perspective of the explosive growth of publishing as an indus-
try, the new focus on advertising may well have been inevitable. Dur-
ing the 1840s and '50s, publishers combined new, efficient methods of
distributing printed matter throughout the country with automated pro-
duction processes to create huge, integrated firms capable of meeting
a growing demand for reading materials from a rapidly expanding audi-
ence and increasingly literate population.13 After a fire in 1853 de-
stroyed their New York factory, the Harpers invested large sums to create
a plant that was a wonder of mechanization and the division of labor.
Such a factory needed a constant supply of "product," which in turn
required a steady national demand as well as a carefully worked out na-
tional advertising campaign.
Further, the new printing techniques of electroplating and stereotyp-
ing, which meant that all of a writer's works now could be kept in print,
changed not only the way books were manufactured but also the public
persona of the writer. Ronald Zboray put the matter succinctly: "Stere-
typing and electrotyping encouraged publishers to boost not only the

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sales of the particular work but also the author's celebrity, in the hopes
of pushing his or her previous works. Writers more than ever came be-
fore the public eye, and publishers gave substantial emoluments to re-
viewers in numerous periodicals for selling notices—puffs used exten-
sively in advertising copy.""14 It was precisely this system of paying off
the reviewers and periodicals that drew the ire of the Round Table.
Emily Dickinson's 1863 poem "Publication—is the Auction" (709)
condemns this process:

Publication—is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man—
Poverty—be justifying
For so foul a thing
Possibly—but We—would rather
From Our Garret go
White—Unto the White Creator—
Than invest—Our Snow—
Thought belong to Him who gave it—
Then—to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal Illustration—Sell
The Royal Air—
In the Parcel—Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace—
But reduce no Human spirit
To Disgrace of Price—15

The term auction accurately describes a literary marketplace where au-
thors were in fact bought and sold. For instance, in 1852 Graham's of-
ered fifty dollars per poem to the two most popular American poets,
William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, but it insisted
on dictating the length of the poems, their subject matter and treat-
ment, and the frequency of composition. William Charvat explained the
terms offered to Bryant: "(1) To get the maximum magazine rate, he
did to turn out poems at the editor's pace, not the poet's (he sent in
only two a year). (2) To maintain the contract, he would have had to
continue to produce the kind of poems that Graham's wanted. (3) The
poems in Graham's were instantly reprinted, without payment, by half
the magazines in the country."16 As the literary marketplace expanded,
the "auction" grew more heated. Graham's advertised in 1853 that it had
"spent as high as $1,500 on a single number for authorship alone... which
is more than twice the sum that has ever been paid by any other
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magazine in America." One can understand why Dickinson wrote that only poverty could justify the selling of that which has no price. Or is she saying that poverty is a fitting punishment for so "fool a thing?"

While it is hard to imagine Dickinson submitting her work to general-interest magazines, apparently she had invitations elsewhere. She wrote to Higginson on 25 April 1862 that "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." Thomas H. Johnson suggests that the editors may have been Samuel Bowles and J. G. Holland, both then of the Springfield Republican. Dickinson enjoyed long friendships with both and included them and their families in the circle to which she sent poems.

Poet, novelist, moralistic essayist, and founding editor of the profitable Scribner's Monthly Magazine, Holland was arguably the most successful American writer in the 1860s and '70s. So perfectly at one with his readers was he that the postwar years became known as the "Holland age of letters." Dickinson and Holland enjoyed a long, unbroken friendship, and yet it is hard to imagine more dissimilar writers. Dickinson was the great private poet of her generation, while Holland was the public writer, a man whose rise from poverty to social prominence and prosperity in New York served to confirm the immense appeal of his maxims.

Although Dickinson elected not to publish in literary periodicals, they constitute an essential component of her development, as reflected in the 1862 letter she wrote to Higginson after reading his "Letter to a Contributor" in the Atlantic Monthly. The resulting correspondence lasted for the rest of her life. Higginson's continuing interest in her poetry have served Dickinson as one indication of its potential significance. Further, as David Higgins has written, "For a shy spinster in a small town, Emily Dickinson knew a surprising number of notable contemporaries. Her regular correspondents, all but a few, were known to the public of the day." And since not all of Dickinson's letters have survived, we may not know of other possible correspondents. Jay Leyda suspects that she maintained a correspondence with Charles H. Sweeters, since the publication of "My Sabbath" in the Round Table "must have required some exchange... There is a reward waiting for the student who searches all the newspapers that employed C. H. Sweeters."

Dickinson may well have been disingenuous, then, in poem 441, "This is my letter to the World," in which she claims that "the world" "never wrote to Me." The poem itself suggests some of the ways that she developed her conception of poetry in response to contemporary periodical practices. Assuming the stance of a journalist reporting to a national audience, she tells not of sensational events, but

The simple News that Nature told—
With Tender Majesty
Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of me 28

Contemporary periodicals and books were filled with public "letters," analogues of the private communications that kept highly mobile Americans in touch with one another wherever they might travel. Higginson's use of the convention of the letter enabled him to write "intimately" to the many potential contributors to the Atlantic. Dickinson's unsent "letter to the world," then, comments ironically on this convention. With similar irony, Henry David Thoreau reports in Walden that his dispatches from the environs of Concord would be "published" only in the most select of "journals," his own notebooks. Sharing such reservations, the young proprietors of the Round Table set out to practice a form of journalism that could never be popular. Nevertheless, they were willing to invest large sums to create a periodical that, as part of its wide-ranging criticism of the national life, would take the measure of the literary marketplace.

II

REMARKABLY, the Sweeters were not in the least afraid to begin life by biting the hands that fed them advertising revenues. The first issue of the Round Table attacked publishers for falling to the level of the most crass commercial advertisers:

And what concerns us of the Round Table more nearly, the publishers are fast falling into the van of this clamorous crusade. Books go through their half dozen of editions (in the advertisements) before we can take breath through our race through the first chapter, and before we can fairly sharpen our pen to prick through any full-blown maggot which has skipped from the brain of some "favorite author," the town is forestalled with the snap-judgments of some half score of country journals, that fill up half a column of the Tribune. Parton's Butler (a work of tender affection for all that we know) is sandwiched about among advertisements like a new liver pill, or a wonderful preparation of Bachu (with no odor attaching). Mr. Carelton, with his cabalistic signal, is as fecund of supreme excitements, "startling novelties," and "rare flow of humors," as ever old
Ephesian Diana with the three tier of breasts. Indeed, if we might be allowed to suggest an appropriate heading for the more vehement of the later advertisements, conveying at once an imitation of the intellectual food afforded as well as a graceful compliment to the consumers—it would be this—SUCK FOR THE WISE.

Lamenting that even the “stately old North American Review” had gotten into “the advertising arena with the clumsy agility of some superannuated aerobat,” the Round Table remarked that since the subject was “too wide for present discussion,” it planned to “return to it some day with illustrative annotations” (19 Dec. 1863, 6).

Return to it the weekly did during the course of its short life. With both moral fervor and humor, the Round Table revealed both the crassness of the publishers’ advertising and the more serious matter of the corruption of criticism through the use of advertising dollars as bribes. In “What American Literature Needs,” 25 June 1864, the Round Table insisted that if there were to arise a “rougher, stronger race of literary athletes,” then the “one great requisite is trenchant, unsparing, vigorous criticism.” The essay, which has the marks of Eugene Benson,25 the self-styled literary frondeur, painter, and art critic, denounces the press: “Look at the periodicals of the country, and with the exception of a few quarterlies which nobody reads, observe how few there are that dare to offer criticism with perfect impartiality. Friendship for the author, or, what is more common, a pecuniary regard for advertisers, too often smooth the critic’s pen, which should be hard and pointed. Of course, criticism is not fault-finding:... The first sign of a renovated literature ... will be a higher style of criticism than has been current, and the development of a class of critics who will deal fairly with all books committed to their consideration, regardless of authors or publishers” (18).

As we have seen, the Round Table began life at a most uncertain time. Given the extreme vulnerability of such an enterprise, the willingness of the Sweeters to confront publishers, the group on whom they most depended for survival, was remarkable. But they argue in the first issue that the very tragedy of a fratricidal war provided the strongest possible evidence for precisely what it was that their journal set out to accomplish: “It is our purpose to condense within its columns whatever, in the crowded and varied life of each passing week, most merits or demands the thoughtful attention which it is impossible men should give to the facts of each day as they fly past them on the wings of the morning journal. While the dark cloud of trial and endurance which now rests upon the land throws its shadow upon us, it is well that we should learn to think. Our American life has heretofore been so full of sunshine and action, so buoyant and untrammeled, that the most serious problems of national existence have come upon us like a thief in the night. We are beginning, however, to make the truth real to ourselves” (19 Dec. 1863, 4). In creating a cultural space for itself, the Round Table would have to educate readers to understand the purpose of such criticism, which in turn demanded a willingness to think in new ways about the meaning of America itself. The blind optimism of the prewar years, the editors claimed, left no room for the sort of frank analysis of the nation’s failings that might have prevented the war.

The Sweeters predicted, then, that “the weekly journal, which has become so powerful a lever of public opinion in England, is destined, therefore, to exert an influence not less important in this country, offering as it does both to the writer and to the reader the opportunity of reconsidering under all their aspects the questions which must necessarily be passed upon by the daily press, as it were, at full gallop” (19 Dec. 1863, 4). The challenge for such a weekly would be to identify the salient issues of the times and, drawing from the best minds from around the country, promote the thoughtful analysis of national issues that a complex, modern society demanded. Although the Round Table itself would not realize these goals, its prediction that the critical weekly would play an essential role in the national life of the United States was no less valid. The Sweeters’ weekly helped to open the way for the wide-ranging criticism that can be found today in such successors as the Nation and the New Republic.

In spite of the need to treat the great issues of politics, finance, war, and peace, the Sweeters expected that their paper would take its essential character from their own literary and artistic interests. Pointing to the connection between artistic expression and the public culture, they argued in the opening issue that the Civil War made possible a new seriousness in American literature by opening the way for the tragic: “It used to be pleaded in explanation of the poverty of American literature in all that relates to the painting of the passions, that the contrasts and compressions of European life were wanting here. There was force in the plea. The dramatic element is evolved by the conflict of man with his accidents, with the powers beyond and about himself, which men call destiny and chance. Individual life was so free with us that the conflict rarely attained to dramatic proportions. Lovelace could never have thrown such force of conviction into his song to Althea, if he had not actually been imprisoned. The reality of ‘stone walls’ was needed to
make him feel that ‘stone walls do not a prison make.’ We are in a fair way to have our stone walls set up about us now” (19 Dec. 1863, 4). The Round Table challenged writers, then, to confront the tragic reality of America. Dickinson’s most intensely creative period coincided precisely with the Civil War, when she produced approximately a poem a day. Her inner sense of tragedy now had a public face. The weekly jointly edited by her cousin and her former Amherst townsmen provided an opportunity to consider the significance of that transformation for literature.26

On the assumption that its readers would be able to reflect on the important questions if they were not distracted by personalities, the Round Table subscribed to the principle of anonymous journalism. But how to promote the magazine—and tout its roster of writers—without revealing their identities? In concluding the first volume, on 11 June 1864, the Sweetser's could not resist presenting a list of sixty-seven regular contributors. Inviting the reader to “surmise what articles came from their pens,” they listed such younger New York-based writers as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, George Arnold, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Richard Henry Stoddard, and William Winter, all opposed to the didacticism represented by Henry Wardsworth Longfellow. The name of Eugene Benson identified its regular art critic. Other New Yorkers included Gaylord Clark, the Croyls, George Curtis, and Kate Field; Bostonians included George Hillard, Justin Windsor, and R. C. Winthrop; Yale professors were G. P. Fisher, Daniel Goit Gilman, and Noah Porter. The prominent transcendentalist Moncure Conway sent long literary letters from London and the poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman contributed from Greenfield, Massachusetts. Harriet Prescott wrote from Newburyport, Massachusetts. The most prominent political name was that of General George McClellan.

Whatever the theoretical arguments for anonymous journalism, in practice it served as a disincentive for authors who had no choice but to play by the rules of the game. As I have written elsewhere, E. C. Stedman, for instance, decided that he would not send his best poems to the Round Table because its “impersonal” rule “hides its author’s name.” Further, Stedman observed that such a journal of opinion “can reach but a limited audience.”27

The magazine’s adherence to the principle of anonymous journalism was, however, consistent with the Sweetser’s avowedly disinterested approach to public life. The lead article in the opening number, for instance, “A Word for Candor in Politics,” urges Northerners of both parties to put “away... all this false and malevolent partisanship. Let us respect each other’s rights and opinions, and estimate the patriotism of men by what they do and suffer for their country, not by our own opinions and prejudices. So shall our politics acquire purity, breadth, and manliness, and politician and knave no longer be synonymous.” It asked the reader to assume the perspective of some “disinterested observer” just landed in the North from another planet who, witnessing senseless partisan strife, would “conclude that, if what these two divisions of the American people say about each other and the government is but half true, there can be no hope for the nation; there is not enough integrity left anywhere to save it; and it must perish in madness and guilt” (19 Dec. 1863, 3). Similarly, the magazine took the high ground in recommending that in place of heavy war borrowing, the government should raise taxes. That there was surplus money floating around was clear from the conspicuous consumption of war profiteers.

At the end of the first volume, the Sweetser's renewed their promise to make the weekly “a worthy exponent of American life, American literature, and America itself” (6 Nov. 1864, 401). But how did the Sweetser's and those associated with them see “America itself?” While the Round Table proceeded on the assumption that the Civil War demonstrated the need for fundamental improvement in America, it was unable to articulate a specific social policy agenda to bring about change. It assumed the posture of the wise, disinterested observer, but the Sweetser's did express a strong interest in preserving certain well-established features of the social order. That was the case in matters of gender, where it resisted female suffrage (24 Feb. 1866), and in religion, where it denounced the pantheism of Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson (20 Feb. 1864). Even in the area of race, where it saw the need “for protection, kindness, and sympathy” for blacks, it subscribed to the established principles of racial hierarchies: “That the white man is the highest of the three races is hardly a more unquestionable fact than that the negro is the lowest” (13 Feb. 1864, 181).

The Round Table best articulated a criticism of contemporary practices in literature and the arts. In the second issue it turned its critical guns on none other than Charles Sweetser's former employer on the Springfield Republican, J. G. Holland. The magazine used a review of Letters to the Jóneses, the last of three volumes of advice that Holland had written under the pseudonym of Timothy Titcomb, as an opportunity to take issue with a pervasive moralism in American letters. Holland's book is “simply another proof of the oft-repeated assertion that the didactic and personal style of writing will in time force itself into failure and almost disgust.” To “catch the ear of the masses” may well be “a very fascinating employment,” but “it is not the best development of literary taste and
culture." Popular writers like Holland did little more than reflect back to their readers what they picked up from them. "We have an abundance of didactic writing in this country. It was already become too prolific for its success. Those writers who have adopted it have many of them injured their literary reputations and fame. The pulpit is the true field of preacher, and not the printed page." Literature should be "suggestive rather than expository. . . . The new class of authors who are throwing about so lavishly the products of their experience do not really advance literary interests, which are confined to no country and no class of men" (26 Dec. 1863, 27). The reviewer pointed out that literature is not a direct transcription of the author's own experience, but a reflection on it; successful writers do something different than merely reflect back to the readers what they have absorbed. Dickinson, in explaining her literary procedure in a July 1862 letter to Higginson, wrote that "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person."28

In the same number, in a long review of Longfellow's Tales of a Wayside Inn, the Round Table considered another question of immediate interest to Dickinson: the difference between the contemporary popularity of a writer's work and its enduring significance. The unidentified reviewer begins by scornfully attacking the notion, advanced by the Atlantic, that Longfellow was the "New England Chaucer." After patiently enumerating the inconsistencies of the tales and the patent contrivance in the use of setting, the reviewer offers a more appropriate comparison, that between Robert Browning and Longfellow, as a way of defining "the difference between a great poet and a pretty one."

This leads to a concluding paragraph, which offers an excellent explanation of what it meant to be a public poet at midcentury:

The impression left upon our minds by this last volume of Mr. Longfellow's (the tenth . . . he has published in twenty-five years) is, that the popularity which he enjoys is considerably above that which his talents entitle him to. Not gifted with genius in the highest sense, and possessing no unusual qualities of intellect, he has succeeded in winning a large circle of intelligent readers. This he has done by never writing above their comprehension. His themes, even those which are the furthest removed from their knowledge, are still within the range of their sympathies, and so managed by him as not to cost the majority too much effort to understand them. The common and familiar in real life—the pretty and pathetic in books—picturesque aspects of the past—gentle trains of sentiment and reflection, colored by a practicable morality—of such stuff the tissue of

Dickinson, in her letter of 7 June 1862 to Higginson, had remarked that she had no intention of publishing: "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her—if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase."29 This implicit argument in the Round Table that to the extent that Longfellow moved in the direction of popularity he moved away from the real work of poetry, is entirely consistent with Dickinson's decision not to seek contemporary popularity. Lasting fame was quite another matter.

Just as the Round Table was willing to take issue with the didacticism of Holland and the mediocrity of Longfellow, so too did it treat the limitations of contemporary metrical conventions. In a review published on 6 February 1864 of a book on Civil War poetry, it complained that "the soul cannot be awakened to enthusiasm, nor can the eye grow dim over such twaddle. It is the quintessence of mediocrity, whose smooth and sapless iambics flow with exasperating faultlessness over subjects that should have set the wildest and most wondrous fancies ringing out." The Round Table here encourages poets to break out of deadening metrical conventions.

The Round Table argued in "Individuality in American Art and Literature," published on 19 March 1864, that the great need in American art was for distinctive personal expression. Chartist's distinction between public and private poets, cited earlier, is apposite. For the Round Table insisted on individuality, on a personal vision, as a precondition of artistic expression: "We are created individual souls, charged with the necessity of making that individuality act in the world, using it as a light to reveal and make good what others have neglected. He who is false to his
individuality is false to his most sacred and special possession. For we are endowed with a special genius for a special purpose. . . . To yourself be true, and according to the force of your individuality you will be cherished by the world. We act on the world, and are remembered, not through the fulness of our intellectual equipment, but by means of the force of our nature. Byron used his individuality and impressed two continents with his genius, but his intellectual culture was meagre” (211).

Just the week before this defense of individuality, on 19 March 1864, the *Round Table* published Dickinson’s “My Sabbath,” poem 324:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church,  
I keep it staying home,  
With a bobolink for a chorister,  
And an orchard for a dome.  
Some keep the Sabbath in surplice,  
I just wear my wings,  
And instead of tolling the bell for church,  
Our little sexton sings.  
God preaches—a noted clergyman,  
And the sermon is never long;  
So instead of going to heaven at last,  
I’m going all along.

In publishing in the *Round Table* Dickinson did not have to worry about being the victim of advertising; here was one periodical that did not print contributors’ names. And in view of her close family connections to the Sweetser cousins, no doubt she did not have to worry about entering the literary marketplace and auctioning her work to the highest bidder. Hers was precisely the sort of individual voice for which the magazine had called. The *Round Table*, in questioning the real significance of popularity and contemporary fame, provided for its readers a critical lens through which to examine the “admiring Bog” of the contemporary literary marketplace.

**NOTES**


To this day, the white mile markers once laid out by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon carry the traces of an M on one side and a P on the other. Every fifth mile along the Mason-Dixon line still sometimes reveals an aging "crown" stone, which displays the Baltimore coat of arms on its southern front and William Penn's family crest facing north. Across more than two hundred miles, the two British astronomers laid these markers due west in the 1760s and thus settled at last the border dispute that had chafed the colonies of Maryland and Pennsylvania for more than eighty years. The line they surveyed a bare fifteen miles from Philadelphia later became the designated boundary between slave and free states in 1820, when Congress hammered out the Missouri Compromise holding the Union together for a time. So in 1861, when an ill-fated troop train left Philadelphia carrying the Sixth Massachusetts, the first regiment to march after Sumter fell and President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers, the boys from Lowell and Worcester who passed the stone markers were loading their muskets as they headed for Baltimore and rebellion to the south.

The first blood of the war was drawn when those Massachusetts recruits tried to make their way across Baltimore's streets, a provocation that turned to tumult and that brought the city under martial law. For the next four years, Maryland remained a border state, tied to the South by sympathy and tobacco but bound to the North by the Union and trade. Equally a crossroads after hostilities ended, Maryland surged with postwar capital, and Baltimore proved a haven for both southern refugees and German immigrants. Many of the immigrants went west to farm the prairies, however, while many of the refugees remained to tug at the city's political compass and fortify its culture. They were among the first to bolster the magazine trade outside eastern publishing centers and