Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830 and died there on May 15, 1886. She left behind, in manuscript, nearly 1,800 poems, mostly untitled lyrics and brief allegorical narratives; only ten poems were published in her lifetime, and those anonymously. Some of the poems are trivial, mere quips, but about thirty of them, by my count, are among the finest lyrics in the language. Dickinson also wrote more than 1,000 letters—an unknown number have been destroyed—most of them distinctive enough in style to invite the same kind of attention as the poems. It was her occasional practice to enclose her poems in letters to friends, especially to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, who lived with her husband Austin in the house next door called the Evergreens. Sometimes it is hard to separate a poem from the letter that accompanied it.

In her new volume, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, Helen Vendler has chosen 150 poems and added a commentary on each of them—two or three pages apiece, usually:

I have included many of the familiar poems, but I have wanted to make space, too, for daring poems that have rarely been anthologized or taught in school, and so have not reached a large general audience. There are poems of varying achievement here, the lesser ones included to show the conventional or occasional Dickinson, the greater ones to sustain her right to fame.¹

The plan is reasonable, though particular readers will find some of Dickinson’s most achieved poems missing. I miss “The Difference between Despair/And Fear,” “I shall know why,” and “Through what transports of Patience.”

Professor Vendler’s commentaries are the work of a heightened consciousness, fully in keeping with her appraisal of a few of the same poems in *Poets Thinking* (2004)—except that there she had a complex interpretative thesis to negotiate:

Dickinson initially constructs her poetic structures to suggest a view of existence experienced intelligibly, serially, and chromatically, whether in delight or apprehension. She then modifies her structures to show seriality mutating into iterative stasis as others repeat her fate; or to suggest serial hope deliquescing into uncertain termini or no termini at all.

This thesis does not appear in the new book. Vendler’s attention is concentrated on each poem as it comes; she rarely looks before or after. But sometimes she seizes the occasion to make a brilliant general observation, as when noting the “sternness [Dickinson] exercised against her own charm” or remarking on the “simmering dismissiveness she has so often felt for others.” Vendler seems to say to her readers: “this is what it is like to give the poem in front of us a serious reading, following its arduous line of thought, unknot its knots.” Teachers and students will appreciate and learn from her elucidations, espe-

cially when the chosen poems are cryptic, as they often are.

In this volume, Vendler’s method is paraphrase even though, in earlier books, she has treated the practice with disdain:

As is often said, but as often forgotten, poems are not their paraphrases, because the paraphrase does not represent the thinking process as it strives toward ultimate precision, but rather reduces the poem to summarized “thoughts” or “statements” or “meanings.”

Dickinson must be the exception that tests the rule. To get to the poetry at all, one has to puzzle out her thoughts, statements, and meanings, without the irony of quotation marks. We are fortunate to have Vendler to lead us so cogently through the poems. But paraphrase remains an issue.

In the Preface to his translation of Ovid’s Epistles, Dryden made a distinction between paraphrase and metaphor. The distinction is one of degree. Metaphrase is “turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another.” Paraphrase is “translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered.” Vendler deals with a poem as if she were writing it out in longhand, resolving the hard passages, and taking whatever latitude she wants in putting the poem where she likes to see it—among other poems.

Context for her does not mean social, economic, or political considerations that may bear on a poem. It entails, rather, setting a line or a stanza in relation to companionable passages in the poets Dickinson read—especially Shakespeare, Vaughan, Milton, Keats, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Brontë—or poets we should read in critical association with her—often Tennyson, Whitman, Melville, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop. Above all, Vendler pays attention to the Bible, Dickinson’s book-of-books, especially to the New Testament, and more especially Revelation. Vendler adds to her commentary two practices that would not normally be included in a paraphrase. She examines the alternative words, variant possibilities that Dickinson considered before settling on the best one. Vendler completes the commentary by attending to prosody: a poem’s meters, rhymes, alliterations, and other such features.

The latitudes Vendler takes are bold. She exempts herself from the contests and dissections that have preoccupied scholars of Dickinson for the past fifteen or twenty years, mainly on the issue of manuscript versus print. Every editor of Dickinson’s poems from T. W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd in 1890 to Thomas H. Johnson (1955) and R. W. Franklin (1998) has incurred rebuke for preferring the fixity of print and decorum to the daring irregularity of Dickinson’s manuscripts. The poet-scholar Susan Howe has this bravura sentence, representative of the spiritedness of recent scholarship on the issue: “For T. H. Johnson, R. W. Franklin, and their publishing institution, the Belknap Press of Harvard University, the conventions of print require humiliations of caution.” The Dickinson she loves is wild (“Wild Nights!”), lawless, “antinomian.” Maybe the Dickinson Electronic Archives project will bring peace. Meanwhile Vendler is content to cite the poems from Franklin’s The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition (1998) and his Reading Edition (1999). She is not beset by the privilege claimed for manuscripts or the fact that often the printed form of a poem by Dickinson doesn’t look much like the manuscript original.

Vendler takes more latitude in deciding that the “I” so frequent in Dickinson’s poems is the empirical Emily Dickinson, the daughter of Edward and Emily Dickinson and sister to Austin and Lavinia who lived in the Homestead, their family home in Amherst. Sending Higginson some poems, Dickinson told him that she was not the “I.” “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person.” Vendler is not troubled by this declaration. When I was growing up into the reading of poems, I took instruction from the New Critics that I should read ev-
ery lyric as a dramatic monologue and try to intuit the drama the poem implied. I was not to submit to the “I.” The “I” was someone else, an imagined person, not to be identified with the poet. I found the injunction difficult to practice in some cases, but I have retained a prejudice in its favor.

Vendler hasn’t, evidently. Inward with Dickinson’s sensibility as she supposes she is, she often runs a step or two ahead of the poet, especially when there is an opening to say, bluntly indeed, that Dickinson was an atheist. What Dickinson believed or didn’t is still in dispute—Ted Hughes and Craig Raine argued over it in Times Literary Supplement some years ago. There is evidence on both sides. But Vendler doesn’t want to dispute it. Commenting on “Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—,” Vendler glosses the middle stanza—

The Truth, is Bald—and Cold—
But that will hold—
If any are not sure—
We show them—they pray—
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now—

with:

At one extraordinary moment in this poem, Dickinson declares her atheism, choosing firm (if frigid) Truth over religious Delusion, secular (if unaesthetic) Despair over theological Hope. . . . She is certain of the Truth, but gestures briefly and dismissively to those who need illusion. . . . She then reasserts her own affirmation, as one of a company: “we, who know.”

“Those who need illusion” is an uncaring paraphrase of “If any are not sure.” And who are “we,” and what do we know, and how do we know it? Dickinson has another poem—one of many such—in which she says that “This World is not conclusion.” Vendler can only assert that the claim is a mistake on Dickinson’s part which she corrects in the remainder of the poem. She asks, of the last lines of that poem—“Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul”—“What are the ‘Narcotics’ that might (erroneously) be thought to still the nibbling Tooth of Doubt?” and answers:

The various anti-anxiety nostrums of religion—a presumed God, promises of an afterlife, heaven-sent angels guarding the souls of the faithful, the Eucharist—can quell the churchgoer’s doubt only insofar as they dull the churchgoer’s mind.

Christians who have retained enough mind to read Vendler’s book will find her insult amusing—the Eucharist as Valium. They will also note the fact that in the quoted verses Dickinson does not indulge herself in such blatant explicitness. More often, I think, she believes in God but thinks Him vindictive; that is not atheism. She regards Christ as “the Criterion Lover.”

Vendler puts her finger on the scale again in her commentary on “Those—dying then,” when she quotes the last lines:

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small—
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all.

Vendler says:

Dickinson’s ironic recommendation “Better an ignis fatuus/Than no illume at all—” rings precisely and dismissively because it is a relief unavailable in her own case; but her distaste for “small” behavior leaves her ambivalent toward those who still rely on the grand aspirations of belief. Nonetheless, the resemblance of “illume” to “illusory” hovers at the close.

The sarcasm of “still rely on the grand aspirations of belief” is Vendler’s, not Dickinson’s. Besides, there is no resemblance, in meaning or in sound, between “illume” and “illusory.” Vendler strains for it so that Dickinson can be shown to walk boldly into skepticism. In fact, if you want to give “illume” a resembling neighbor, you should choose “illumination,” but that would point the poem in a direction alien to Vendler’s.
Enough grumbling—going back over the book, I note how often Vender shows me the way through brain-breaking poems and provides luminous perceptions in their vicinity.

Lyndall Gordon’s book, Lives Like Loaded Guns, is not strictly a biography of Emily Dickinson; her death is reported on page 227, with half of the book still ahead. But there are many chapters of sustained biographical interest. There are signs that Gordon does not much like Emily Dickinson, that she is irritated by her “Little Me” and her “Daisy” manners. She also makes a point of showing that the recluse of the Homestead could be as cruel as other people; her busybody letters to Mary Bowles in March and April 1862, when Samuel Bowles was away from home, in Washington to begin with and then in Europe, make unpleasant reading. Gordon maintains that Dickinson had a secret—she suffered from epilepsy, which was then regarded as a shameful illness. This was the main cause of her seclusion.

Gordon agrees with those scholars who think that Otis Lord was the crucial man in Dickinson’s emotional life, an even more passionate relation than any she had with other claimants—notably Benjamin Newton, George Gould, Charles Wadsworth, and Samuel Bowles. Gordon assigns to a footnote two sentences that deserve a place in the main text:

Critics who foreground what was undoubtedly an intense tie to Susan [Dickinson] are tempted to minimize her attraction to men. In my view she was susceptible to both sexes but with a verbal excitement and abandon that eludes current categories.

That seems to mean that women in love don’t write letters like Dickinson’s any more. Probably true, but in any event Dickinson is marginal to the main story Gordon tells involving Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. The story has been well-known since Polly Longsworth edited Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd in 1984, but Gordon places it in a far-reaching context and gives more detail.

Austin Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, as she was then, married on July 1, 1866. By 1875 they had three children, Ned, Mattie, and Gib, to give them their colloquial names. Gib died in 1883 at the age of eight. In 1882, Austin fell in love with a new faculty wife and she with him. Mabel Loomis Todd was the wife of David Todd, a professor of astronomy at Amherst College where Austin was a trustee and the treasurer. Austin and Mabel consummated their passion, if that is the right verb, on December 13, 1883 in the dining room of the Homestead. The affair continued, with somewhat diminishing returns, till Austin died on August 16, 1895.

Assignments were not a problem. The lovers had two houses available to them, and often a third. Over the years, a comfortable arrangement developed in which Austin and Mabel met for love-making in the Homestead, or in the Todds’ house, or—if Susan and the children were away—in the Evergreens. David Todd was an assiduous philanderer. Mabel continued to make love to him and to Austin, often on the same day, afternoon, and evening.

There was no jealousy, it appears. The only sufferer in the case was Susan. Austin disengaged himself from her and the children. Susan survived on the little attention he gave her and on her custom of taking the children on lengthy vacations. I believe that Austin was a cad, Mabel a society queen, and David—“our mutual friend,” as the lovers called him—a complacent husband. Polly Longsworth estimates that in 1884 Mabel slept with her husband “an average of eight times a month” and with Austin “twelve.” Complications arose only when Mabel started cultivating murderous fantasies against Susan and demanding that God or Austin put an end to her, presumably by having her wilt into the grave. In the event, Susan survived Mabel’s lurid imaginings for many years and died in 1913.

2 Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds, by Lyndall Gordon; Viking, 491 pages, $32.95.
What did Emily Dickinson think of her brother's adulteries and Mabel's frequent visits to the Homestead? Some scholars have held that Emily lived in such a world of her own that she did not know what was going on downstairs. Gordon doesn't agree; she must have known. She made sure never to see or be seen by Mabel. The few letters she felt obliged to write to her are so riddling that they could be deciphered only by the combined attentions of Lyndall Gordon and Helen Vendler. But she had little choice, given the conditions she faced in the Homestead. After Edward's death in 1874, Austin became master of the house; he paid the bills and could come and go as he pleased. He did not have to ask anyone's permission to entertain Mabel behind a closed door. His sister Lavinia condoned the affair because she thought Susan was more to be blamed than Austin for the bleakness of the marriage. Emily loved Susan, but she had to accept Austin's jurisdiction. Mostly she did so by staying upstairs.

The ethical question seems not to have arisen: Emily Dickinson's sense of sexual morality seems to me to have been feeble at best. Besides, her own fantasies were often so extreme that the difference between having them and putting them into practice may have seemed merely nominal; though the evidence indicates that she did not put them into practice, even when Otis Lord urged her in that direction. Still, the moral question hardly casts a shadow on the erotic behaviors of Austin, Mabel, and David. Lyndall Gordon pointedly quotes the passage in Henry James's *The Europeans* (1879) in which Gertrude Wentworth indicates that she is ready to be carried off to Europe by Felix Young, whom we know to be a Bohemian adventurer. Her poor distressed father exclaims, "Where are our moral grounds?" a question that no one in the room thinks of taking up. Someone should have taken it up, a few years later, in Amherst.

Emily Dickinson had to put up with Austin's adultery, although it intruded on her privacy, but she drew a firm line on a question of property. In the autumn of 1885, Austin, pestered by Mabel, decided to give the Todds a piece of the Dickinsons' estate on which to build a house. He needed Lavinia and Emily to sign off on the official deed. Lavinia signed, but Emily refused: she would not allow him to deprive Susan and their son Ned of their rights. After she died, the Todds got the gift. But there were legal problems. On October 6, 1895, after Austin's death, Mabel showed Lavinia a letter from him giving "Mrs Todd" his share of his father's estate. The letter had no legal validity, but Mabel assumed that Lavinia would act in its spirit. She refused at first, but, later, she capitulated. Later still, she regretted her capitulation and, on May 25, 1896, took the case to court to have her signature declared invalid. On April 15, 1898 she won, mainly on the evidence of the Dickinsons' Irish maid, Maggie Maher. The Todds had to return the land.

Meanwhile another feud was proceeding, over the disputed possession of Dickinson's poems and letters and the right to publish several volumes of them. On one side, Mabel and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham; on the other, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Susan's daughter, Emily Dickinson's niece. Chapter 16 of Gordon's book, "The Battle of the Daughters," is especially absorbing as it rehearses the later years of the feud. Gordon holds that most of the biographical work on Dickinson, including Richard Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), has been unjustly skewed in Mabel's favor. Sewall's approach, she says, "leaves the poet more elusive than ever." I interpret her book as speaking up for Susan Dickinson, whose presence in Emily's life Austin and Mabel conspired to erase: it is an honorable motive; the justice of it pleases.