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Emily Dickinson's Ambrosian Nights with Christopher North

Michael West

As books circulated within the Dickinson household, family members often marked favorite passages in pencil. Thus Susan Gilbert Dickinson's copy of *Aurora Leigh* was passed on to Emily with some passages singled out with bold double or triple parallel lines in the margins. Emily proceeded to add her own marginalia in the form of light single lines beside her favorite passages. "Though the markings must be approached cautiously" as evidence of Emily's own reading, Richard Sewall wisely observes, "the general scholarly agreement on their authenticity is impressive."¹ Caution is even more necessary when dealing with other volumes in the Dickinsons' library since "the markings consist simply of several pages turned down at the corner." But in some cases knowledge of the various members of the Dickinson household permits reasonably reliable conjecture about whose hand folded the pages.

Among the books that probably shuttled between the two adjacent Dickinson households was a five-volume set of John Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae* (New York: Redfield, 1855). Now in the collection of Dickinson material at Harvard, each volume bears the bookplate of S. H. Gilbert, Emily's sister-in-law Susan. Two pages have been folded neatly in half: 2:237–38 and 5:33–34. One page is dog-eared: 5:209–10. And two pages are both folded in half and dog-eared, as if consulted on different occasions: 2:271–72 and 4:77–78. When one looks at the passages thus singled out for attention, it is difficult to discern a pattern of interests corresponding to those of Susan Dickinson, her father-in-law, Edward Dickinson, her husband, Austin, or any other Dickinson except Emily. Moreover, it is very easy to imagine how all five passages might have struck responsive chords in the poet and been earmarked for future reference.

Nor is it hard to see why these whimsical dialogues, first published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1822 to 1835, would have appealed to Emily with their free-wheeling mix of philosophizing, burlesque humor, intellectual arcana, and sentimentality. *Blackwood's* leading contributor, John Wilson, wrote the majority of the dialogues, figuring himself as the fictitious editor Christopher North, but other Edinburgh stalwarts also contributed to the famous series. Their racy Scots dialect, in particular, would have captivated a poet who cherished the songs of Robert Burns and incorporated Scottish words such as *dinna* into her own poetry.

MICHAEL WEST is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh.

¹ *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), 2:678n.

The romantic irony that informs the *Noctes Ambrosianae* is an attitude that also pervades Dickinson's poetry.

The hand that creased page 2:238 was struck by a passage where the *dramatis personae* are reclining in various attitudes at Christopher North's seaside lodge overlooking the Firth of Forth. North asks the Ettrick Shepherd James Hogg whether his sofa is comfortable and receives an ecstatic Scots reply. Then Timothy Tickler chimes in: "No sofa like a chair: See, James, how I am lying and sitting at the same time: carelessly diffused, yet—" After some more drollery, the dialogue continues:

North. There: a bold breeze from sea: Is not that a pleasant rustle, James? and lo! every sail on the Firth is dancing on the blue bosom of the waters, and brightening like seamews in the sunshine!

Shepherd. After a', in het wather, there's naething like a marine villa. What for dinna ye big a Yott?

North. My sailing days are over, James; but mine is now the ship of Fancy, who can go at ten knots in a dead calm, and carry her skyscrapers in a storm.

Shepherd. Nae wonder, after sic a life o'travel by sea and land, you should hae found a hame at last, and sic a hame! . . .

When the Shepherd suddenly breaks off to watch "yon bonny brig huggin' the shores o' Inch-Keith sae lovingly—at first I thought she was but a breakin' wave," the recumbent North suavely assures him, "Wave, cloud, bird, sunbeam, shadow or ship—often know I not one from the other, James, when half-sleeping, half-waking, in the debatable and border land between dreams and realities . . ." And the conversation modulates back to authors and books.

As dozens of poems and letters reveal, the theme of imaginative travel through reading rather than through actual experience was congenial to Emily. Indeed, one of her most famous poems on the subject begins with some intriguing parallels to this passage: "There is no Frigate like a Book/To take us Lands away. . . ." ² We need not suppose that Tickler's "no sofa like a chair" combined with North's "ship of Fancy" and Hogg's "bonny brig" to beget Emily's specific image for voyaging through reading. But surely we can recognize in North's eloquent description of losing himself in reverie an attitude more likely to provoke a marked imaginative response from Emily than from any other member of the Dickinson household.

Likewise page 2:271–72 is folded at a scene where his friends purloin a manuscript from the drunken North as he dozes off momentarily. "It is the least unprincipled of all kinds of plagiarism to rob a sleeping friend," claims Tickler. "To steal from the dead is sacrilege." And the Shepherd goes on to confess that "ower muckle envy and jealousy" tinges his regard for North: "I love him as weel as ony freen I hae—and sae I verily believe does he me. But, oh: that leetary envy and jealousy to which we are baith a prey." As the successful doyenne of a small literary circle, Susan seems less likely to have projected herself into this scene than Emily, whose sense of imaginative fellowship with her favorite literary figures (including Susan) was as marked as the rivalry that led her to emulate them with

² *Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 3:879 (no. 1263). Hereafter the poems are cited by their number in this edition.

dreams of publishing herself. "If my Bark sink/'Tis to another sea—/Mortality's Ground Floor/Is Immortality," she wrote, cheerfully stealing Ellery Channing's line from the end of Emerson's essay "Montaigne, or the Skeptic."³ In Sewall's words, she "read competitively" (2:675). She may well be forgiven for robbing such sleeping friends to imp out her own poetic wings. But increasingly we suspect that sibylline posing for household and friends did not entirely satisfy her desire for authorship. As the feelers to editors such as Bowles and Higginson testify, she was discreetly jealous of recognition. She probably viewed published authors at times with pangs of envy.

The person who folded page 4:77–78 was evidently struck by an eloquent passage where North, taking wing from Malebranche and Wordsworth, soars into speculations quite congenial to New England Transcendentalism:

It is not impossible that as our moral nature, to find itself entire, must rest in God, so our intellect must. We cannot be happy—we cannot be moral—we cannot know truth—except in him. Thus, it may be destined that our beginnings of life shall be on this earth, as if this earth were all. We love the parents that gave us birth, the spot on which we grow, all things living and lifeless about our cradle. We love this moist and opaque earth, which is our soil for our downward-striking roots—here we receive the sunshine and the dews—and we begin Terrene. Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own. The homely nurse doth all she can. There seem, indeed, immense powers exerted about us to bind us, to shut us up in earth and mortality, to make us love finite things, centre and limit our desire in them, and be ourselves finite. All our pleasures, all our senses, all habits and all customs, seem to close us in; strong passions spring up and embrace things finite; this is earth, and the strength of earth. This is natural man—the child—the *day-darger*—the Savage. Is it not singular to see what a fitting there has been, and what quantities of power employed, to make terrestrial man? Yet as if this were but a nursery or school, a place of preparation, lo! another end! For a power evolves, of which it seems the use to destroy and abolish what has been made with such pains, as if all that had been made were but fuel for this new fire to burn—a crop to be ploughed in for the true harvest. The fostered flesh has been strong. The spirit comes. If the spirit could have its force and course, the man should gradually tend towards heaven, as he wears from earth. He should mount continually. Morally, this is true; but is it not, my dear De Quincey, curious in metaphysics to see it true intellectually? To see the material world, that seemed so hard and ponderous, turned into a thought? To see intellect play with it, dallying between its existence and its non-existence? To see the intellect grow spiritual, till it has rejected cumbrous matter, and only knows and sees spirit?

"Even Sir Isaac Newton thought that the most solid-looking matter was a most delicate and airy network," agrees De Quincey after summarizing Kant, where "the infinitesimally invisible atoms were a thousand or a million times their own diameter distant from one another, and that all the real matter of the universe, compacted, might be contained in a cubic inch." And he concludes that "intellect, therefore, can have no rest but in Deity . . . and metaphysical intellect is driven . . . to believe even that there is no matter—nothing but a continual agency of Deity upon mind." "Just so do we find it excessively difficult, from looking at the world, to find the true relation of religion to man," North continues. "The looking at the world naturally lowers to us the estimate of this relation, because there is so little religion in the world—hardly any—and we can scarcely believe every body, here, too, to be utterly in the wrong. We think the world must have common sense,

³ *Poems*, no. 1234. See Thomas Blanding, "Emily's Bark and Emerson's Book: *Representative Men* as a Source for a

Dickinson Poem," *Concord Saunterer* 6 (September 1971): 11–12.

and end by thinking the high notion of religion contrary to common sense, and visionary. But do not mankind err—and do we not know it? For you see that the Multitude miss the end of life. Have they found the possession of their highest faculties—innate in all? No—not one in a million. Have they found happiness? No—not generally. Look sublimely upon them, and you deplore them and their fate.”

Noteworthy in this idealistic rhapsody is North’s reversal of the Wordsworthian doctrine of childhood through his insistence, with apparent sympathy, upon the finite, earthbound quality of the child’s imagination. Noteworthy also is the way in which the idealism modulates through popular science into a satiric perspective upon both the secular world and conventional religion. “How do most people live without any thoughts?” Dickinson asked T. W. Higginson in a similar vein. “How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning?”⁴ The intellectual swoops and flights of this Romantic dialogue seem well calculated to appeal to her unorthodox but fervent religious sensibility, as well as to the satiric instinct that could write such lines as these:

My Friend attacks my Friend!
Oh Battle picturesque!
Then I turn Soldier too,
And he turns Satirist!
How martial is this place!
Had I a mighty gun
I think I’d shoot the human race
And then to glory run!

(no. 118)

Whoever folded page 5:33–34 in half evidently had a particular interest in poetics. The page concludes a debate between Tickler and North over the vocabulary proper to poetry. Like Samuel Johnson, Tickler maintains that “the technical language of no art should ever be admitted to poetry.” But he is overborne by North, who denounces him as a “land-lubber” whose “lingo” betrays ignorance of “the true seatongue.” Dryden’s nautical diction is awkward only because of his ignorance, North argues, so Johnson’s censure of it misses the point. “No technical terms of art in poetry! O sumph of sumphs! why sayest thou so?” he rejoins. “I speak of the science of the sea; and its language is in itself magnificent, many of its words are like winds and waves, imitative harmony of sound and motion, and light and gloom.” Tickler’s protests are overridden by North’s insistent questioning: “Would you weigh anchor in a poem, with a ship before your eyes, as if you were putting the mail-coach in motion from the inn at Torsonce! Is starboard a mean word? or larboard? or beating to windward? or drifting to leeward? or eating ye out at the wind?” And he concludes grandly by quoting Samuel Ferguson’s “The Forging of the Anchor” to illustrate the triumphant use of technical diction in poetry.

It is hard to believe that this issue absorbed Emily’s parents, siblings, or sister-in-law to the point where one of them would turn down a page. But it was crucial to Dickinson’s own evolving aesthetic. As William Howard has demonstrated statistically, one of the “peculiarly individual characteristics of Emily Dickinson’s poetic vocabulary” is the “relatively large number of technical terms it contains.”⁵ In poem after poem she raids the intellectual discourse of law, medicine, or grammar

⁴ *Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958–65), 2:474.

⁵ “Emily Dickinson’s Poetic Vocabulary,” *PMLA* 72 (March 1957): 248.

to great effect, often via foreign-language derivatives. Licensing technical terminology for poetic use, Wilson was just the sort of Master she wanted to hear.

Whoever turned down the corner of page 5:209–10 also had a lively interest in the workings of the poetic imagination. Reciting some verses, North is told, “You have a miraculous memory, sir.” “I do indeed,” he retorts. “I can remember nothing that does not interest me—and months of my existence in every year now . . . are a blank. That faculty called Recollection, in me is weak. When I try to exert it, I seem to ‘hunt half the day for a forgotten dream.’ But the past comes upon me in sudden flashes—without active will of my own—and sometimes one flash illuminates the whole mental horizon, and lo! lying outspread below what was once a whole present world. No idea of past time distinguishes it as a dream—I am, as it were, born again—heaven and earth recreated—and with the beautiful vision, believed to be a reality, is blended the burning spirit of youth.”

“That is Imagination, sir—Genius—not Memory,” replies his interlocutor. But North demurs, calling it “neither Memory, nor Imagination, nor Genius, but a mysterious re-revelation—made not by but *to* my soul—the same as happens to all men in sleep.” Instead of actively memorizing poetry, he continues, some stanzas merely “committed themselves to my memory,” with the result that “thousands and tens of thousands of small poems lie buried alive in my mind; and when I am in a perfectly peaceful mood, there is a resurrection of the beautiful, like flocks of flowers issuing out of the ground, at the touch of Spring.”

North’s Wordsworthian concept of poetry as the unconscious welling-up of feelings in tranquil moments is arrestingly phrased. One suspects that Emily saw analogies between North’s notion of “re-revelation” and a creative process she had begun to experience perhaps as early as the 1850s. In 1862, her *annus mirabilis*, she composed or recopied a poem a day throughout an intensely creative period. Discipline alone cannot account for such productivity. It seems that she experienced inspiration, like North, as a catalytic process flooding her with power—yet a power unconscious and half alien to her. In the springtide of her vocation she knew exactly what it felt like to have “thousands of small poems . . . buried alive in my mind.” For no other member of the Dickinson household could that phrase have leapt off the page as it must have for Emily.

Since all five marked passages bear peculiar relevance to the temper of Emily’s inner life as we understand it from other sources, they are mutually corroborating, strengthening the likelihood that her hand and hers only turned down these pages. Though not noted in previous studies of her reading habits, that she read the *Noctes Ambrosianae* cover to cover seems a virtual certainty.⁶ It ministered to a sense of humor that is still an underrated part of Dickinson’s mind. “Unto my Books—so good to turn—/Far ends of tired Days,” she wrote (no. 604). “I was the slightest in the House—/I took the smallest Room—/At night, my little Lamp, and Book—/And one Geranium” (no. 486). When we think of Emily in her lonely bedroom, we are perhaps too prone to imagine her leafing through the family copy of *The Imitation of Christ*. But one may reasonably suspect that she spent a good deal of time there simply chuckling at Wilson’s antic Scottish soirees, returning in imagination to Edinburgh to re-turn pages she once had turned down.

⁶ See Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), for the standard account of her tastes.