

More Than a Mouthful of Brains: The Poetico-Philosophical Nimbleness of Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville

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***Abstract:** It is my contention that, despite obvious gender-related differences in terms of experiential and social background, Emily Dickinson (1830-80) and Herman Melville (1819-91) were, to a large extent, soulmates sharing the same poetico-philosophical discourse in their life-long negotiation and articulation of the tensions between a traditional Christian *Lebensanschauung* and what Nietzsche termed the radical nihilism of modernity. How do most people live, Dickinson asked Thomas Wentworth Higginson, without any thoughts and without the maddening effect of such existential thoughts. A person that has never felt that kind of madness, Melville notes, could have but a mouthful of brains. Like Nietzsche, Dickinson and Melville refused to face the marvellous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence “without questioning, without trembling with the craving and the rapture of such questioning” (The Gay Science). My documentation comprises Dickinson’s poems and letters, and, in the case of Melville, philosophically significant texts like *Moby Dick*, *The Confidence Man*, “Benito Cereno,” and “Billy Budd.”*

***Keywords:** Poetico-philosophical discourse—Christianity vs. modernity—Nietzsche—romanticism vs. scepticism and nihilism*

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond our human ken, and informed me that he had ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated’; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and he has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous

as the sand hills amidst which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is *too honest and courageous* not to try to do one or the other.

Nathaniel Hawthorne in his *English Notebooks*, 1856¹ (my emphasis)

It is my main contention in this essay, (1) that Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson were both *too honest and courageous* not to try to philosophize about life in the Nietzschean sense, that is, they refused, in the words of *The Gay Science*, “to stand in the midst of this *rerum concordia discors* and of this whole marvelous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence *without questioning*, without trembling with the craving and the rapture of such questioning” (Nietzsche, 1974, 76); (2) that they also shared, despite minor gender-related temperamental differences, the same quasi-Nietzschean poetico-philosophical discourse and dialectic in negotiating the tensions between a traditional Christian *Lebensanschauung* and what Nietzsche termed the radical nihilism of modernity.

In Dickinson’s poems and letters there is, as far as I know, only one reference to the eleven-year-old American writer, who, according to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, as quoted above, had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” when he died, but who could, all the same, “neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” Dickinson’s reference to Melville is, however, not by name, but merely by metaphor (*nomina sunt odiosa* would presumably have applied to the poet’s patriarchal homestead in the case of a notorious freethinker like Melville). The metaphorical reference to the novelist occurs in a letter dated 7 October 1863:

I got down before father this morning, and spent a few moments profitably with the South Sea rose. Father detecting me, advised wiser employment, and read at devotions the chapter of the gentleman with one talent. I think he thought my conscience would adjust the gender. (Johnson 427)

The *South Sea rose* could, in this context, only be Melville as the author of the South Sea adventure fictions *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), and Dickinson was probably reading *Typee* seeing that her strict and pious father-cum-censor must undoubtedly have banned Melville’s subsequent

1 Quoted from Watson G. Branch, ed., *Melville: The Critical Heritage* (36).

work from the homestead library (or, at least, blacklisted it) after reading his first novel, in which this adventurous travel writer not only celebrates the “abandoned voluptuousness” of the beautiful Marquesan women, but also attacks the “civilized barbarity” of American missionaries attempting to Christianize/civilize the Polynesian savages, as, for instance, in the following wry *Freigeist* observation:

The term ‘Savage’ is, I conceive, often misapplied, and indeed, when I consider the vices, cruelties, and enormities of every kind that spring up in the tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilization, I am inclined to think that so far as the relative wickedness of the parties is concerned, four or five Marquesan Islanders sent to the United States as Missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans despatched to the Islands in a similar capacity. (Melville, 1983, 50, 181)

In the contemporary New York *Evangelist*, a journal founded “expressly to promote revivals and missions, temperance, and other reforms,” the reviewer of *Typee* indignantly protests that Melville’s book “abounds in praises of the life of nature, *alias* savageism, and in slurs and flings against missionaries and civilization” (Branch 81). Dickinson’s father would have shared the reviewer’s indignation and outrage, but, in terms of his daughter-poet’s symbolic flora or herbarium, the appellation *South Sea rose* would align Melville’s Polynesian paganism with the poet’s own brand of rebellious pastoralism/naturalism, a romantic-hedonistic nature religion complete with her own apotheosis as a rose, a *rosa mundi*, witness, for instance, one of her early poems (Fr25),² dated late summer 1858:

A sepal, petal, and a thorn
 Upon a common summer’s morn—
 A flask of Dew—A Bee or two—
 A Breeze—a caper in the trees—
 And I’m a Rose!

The rose’s caper with a bee or two has obvious erotic-hedonistic connotations. In Dickinson’s symbolic bestiary, the bee, by far the most favoured of her mythopoetic animals, is always the exuberant libertine and freethinker, the *bon vivant*, like, for instance, the cavorting bee in a much later poem (Fr1562), dated late 1881:

2 That is, poem 25 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin. Hereafter cited in the text as Fr followed by the number of the poem.

His oriental heresies
 Exhilarate the bee
 And filling all the Earth and sky
 With gay apostasy.

Fatigued at last a clover low
 Ensnares his jaded eye,
 Sweet homestead where the butterfly
 Betakes himself to die.

So it should come as no surprise that Dickinson found her few moments with Melville's *Typee* "profitably" spent. To realign Dickinson's gendered metaphors, Melville would serve as one of the freethinking bees of secularized modernity, whose oriental or Polynesian heresies and gay apostasy in general Dickinson, as the Enlightenment rose of Amherst, the philosophically emancipated woman-poet and self-confessed "Pagan" (Johnson 866, 867) at the otherwise Calvinistically benighted homestead, would welcome and cherish behind her beloved father's despotic back. At least, that is how Dickinson more or less introduced herself and her life in the famous letter, dated 25 April 1862, to her prospective literary mentor or preceptor Thomas Wentworth Higginson:

I have a Brother and Sister—My Mother does not care for thought—and Father too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do—He buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them— because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious— except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning— whom they call their "Father." (Johnson 404)

I am not, Dickinson seems to insist, *religious* in the orthodox Amherst sense of the word like the rest of my family. Instead I *think*, for I am not afraid of joggling my mind with books and ideas, she tells Higginson, who also recorded the following statement to the same effect from a subsequent conversation with her:

How do most people live [Dickinson asks Higginson] without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street). How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning. (Johnson 474)

Significantly, Dickinson was the only member of the family who consistently declined to be converted and saved by the church. In another letter,

she refers sarcastically to one of the many religious revivals or awakenings staged in Amherst:

There is that which is called an "awakening" in the church, and I know of no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs. [Sweetser] roll out in crape every morning. I suppose to intimidate antichrist; at least it would have that effect on me. (Johnson 505-06)

Even her admired and enlightened brother Austin, who had formerly believed that religion was, in his own words, "a delusion, the bible a fable, life an enigma" (Habegger 336), eventually toed the conversion line in 1855, renouncing, in Alfred Habegger's words, "the candid irreverence he had shared with his sister" (337).

Again and again, in her poems, Dickinson returns to this unconverted *thinking* condition. But there is a price to be paid for that condition, the enactment, as it were, of her Cartesian-Nietzschean *cogito ergo sum* as distinct from the Christian *credo ergo sum*.³ She is for ever saddled with the philosophical "Consciousness" as the "awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid" (Fr1076), a "Consciousness" for which there is no drug, "Alternative to die," death being "Nature's only Pharmacy / For Being's Malady" (Fr887). It is "That awful stranger Consciousness" (Fr1325) that forces her, at someone's death, to face again the maddening possibility of annihilation, that is, the annulment of immortality or "futurity," to cite Hawthorne's description of Melville's ongoing crisis of faith in my opening epigraph:

I never hear that one is dead
Without the chance of Life
Afresh annihilating me
That mightiest Belief,

Too mighty for the Daily mind
That tilling its abyss,
Had Madness, had it once or, Twice
The yawning Consciousness

Dickinson and Melville share this yawning chasm of consciousness, in other words, an acute philosophical sensibility that forces both of them to

3 Nietzsche's version of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* appears in *The Gay Science*, namely in Section 276, which introduces Book Four: "I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. *Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum* (223).

negotiate, throughout their lives, various versions of a secularized modernity vis-à-vis Christianity. In fact, they could almost be seen as intellectual soulmates, deploying, in their poetry and fiction, the same kind of poetico-philosophical discourse and dialectic, even though they hardly knew each other: Dickinson was probably prevented by paternal censorship from finishing *Typee* and proceeding to Melville's major philosophical fiction (say, *Moby-Dick*, *The Confidence-Man*, or "Benito Cereno"), and Melville probably never read a single poem by Dickinson.

If we choose to start at the very bottom of Melville's yawning consciousness, the psychodynamic core of his poetico-philosophical scepticism, I suggest we go straight to the famous Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick* (1851), entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale," with its ponderous articulation of Melville's epistemological nihilism. Why is it, the narrator asks the reader, that whiteness as such appeals with such demonic power to the human soul?

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweetest tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; and all these are but subtle deceptions, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within ... (Melville, 1979, 197-198)

From the disenchanted, jaundiced perspective of Melville's scientifically secularized and rationalized modernity, both the God of Christianity and the deified nature of romanticism are mere illusions or delusions, metaphysical confidence tricks. Truth will out, the modern merchant of *The Confidence-Man* insists, abruptly discarding his glass of champagne, the "vintage," as it were, of Keats's romantic escapism in "Ode to a Nightingale." No more wine, no more con tricks, the merchant's "soothsaying" continues: "Ah, wine is good, and confidence is good; but can wine or confidence percolate down through all the stony strata of hard considerations, and drop warmly and ruddily into the cold cave of truth?" (Melville, 1963, 87). As already indicated by "I never hear that one is dead" (in which the "I" along with her "mightiest Belief" are annihilated), Dickinson's soul had visited the same cold cave of modern truth,

experiencing “Bandaged moments— / When too appalled to stir” (Fr360), when “Truth, is Bald, and Cold” (Fr341), when life is “shaven,” reduced to “Chaos—Stopless—cool” (Fr355), when the “Cordiality of Death ... drills his Welcome in,” with “a Face of Steel” and “a metallic grin” (Fr243), when

Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see —
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
Asks a Vane, the way —
Much Gesture from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—
(Fr373)

The narcotics or opium of old-time religion, the ritual gesturing and hallelujahs of the preacher, can no longer resist the tooth/truth of modernity. James McIntosh’s reading of the concluding lines of this poem, in *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (2000), attempts unsuccessfully, I believe, to cover up or, at least, muffle Dickinson’s sardonic note of radical doubt and scepticism here:

It is not so much the tooth of “doubt” as of Dickinson’s doubt-that-is-also-faith that keeps nibbling comically beyond the borders of the poem. The soul, after all, is not erased but persists (however nibbled at) in the poem’s understanding. (McIntosh 33-34)

Who were “the Father and the Son” (Fr1280), Dickinson pondered when she was a child, and as an enlightened, sceptical woman-poet she is still pondering that question, but also the general validity and relevance of Christianity as a modern philosophy of life. Has the Christian myth, with all its quaint ideas and characters, become an anachronism?

The Bible is an antique Volume—
Written by faded Men
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres —
Subjects—Bethlehem—
Eden—the ancient Homestead—
Satan—the Brigadier—
Judas—the Great Defaulter—
David—the Troubadour—
Sin—a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist—
(Fr1577C)

The famous two main versions of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (Fr124) epitomize Dickinson's ongoing Enlightenment critique of orthodox Christianity. In the first version, she presents a proto-Nietzschean satire on the all too "meek members of the Resurrection," who have parochially insulated themselves from the sagacity of the natural world, the other animals (the bees and the birds). In the second version, echoing Melville's cosmological nihilism in Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*, his sense of cosmic alienation and annihilation "when beholding the white depths of the milky way," Dickinson presents the reader with images of the grand, but indifferent cosmos, on whose "Firmaments" grand *human* events, like wars and revolutions, impact meaningslessly, "Soundless as dots—on a Disk of snow" (*snow* sharing the symbolic significance of Melville's snow in *Moby-Dick*, that is, the "colorless, all-color of atheism"). In my characterization of Dickinson's natural world as proto-Nietzschean I am also relating her blissful bees and birds to Zarathustra's animals in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the sagacious beasts that teach the convalescent Zarathustra that outside his cave "the world awaits [him] like a garden," and that "all things themselves dance for such as think as we [that is, the animals]: they come and offer their hand and laugh and flee—and return" (Nietzsche, 1969, 233, 234).

Scepticism, nihilism, atheism—"of all these things," Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick* might be said to conclude, "the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" Or, to be more precise, wonder ye at Ahab's fiery *madness* in hunting a dumb brute that "simply smote [him] from blindest instinct," as Starbuck, the rationalistic chief mate, had pointed out in an earlier argument with the mad captain, namely in Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck." Ahab's madness, however, is a logical function of his epistemological modernity. Since "[a]ll visible objects," Ahab cogently argues, "are but as pasteboard masks," man, if he wants to strike, will have to "strike through the mask," even though he may sometimes think "there's naught beyond" (167-68). Most of the time *Moby-Dick* is perceived by Ahab as the demonic embodiment of "outrageous strength" combined with "inscrutable malice" (168), so he just cannot help striking (back). Indeed, in all of us, Melville notes in a letter from 1849, lodges the fuel to light the fire of such madness: "he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains" (Branch 68).

Possessing more than a mouthful of brains, Dickinson is surely no exception to Melville's observation here, and, in her epistemologically focused "Brain" and "Consciousness" poems, madness is always lurking in

the wings. Under stress, the strings of the soul may snap some day, and the brain begins to laugh and keep giggling, “tho’ ‘tis Years ago—that Day” (Fr423):

And Something’s odd—within—
That person that I was—
And this One—do not feel the same—
Could it be Madness—this?

In “I never heard that one is dead,” Dickinson registered the madness resulting from cases of “yawning Consciousness,” and again and again she insists on the vulnerability and fragility of the human psyche. Your brain may run evenly within its groove, but “let a Splinter swerve” (Fr563), and you may suffer total derangement. Then you may feel “a Cleaving in [your] Mind— / As if [your] Brain had split” (Fr867). Besides, the brain has its own chambers and corridors of horror, compared to which an “Assassin hid in our Apartment / Be Horror’s least” (Fr407). In one of these chambers or corridors of horror, Dickinson—or her so-called supposed person, her *persona* (Johnson 412)—experiences a ghostly funeral service, “like a Drum— / Keep beating—beating—till I thought / My mind was going numb” (Fr340). In this horrifying nightmare she ends up wrecked and solitary, undergoing a complete epistemological meltdown:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a world, at very plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

Both Dickinson and Melville articulate the Nietzschean disenchantment of radical nihilism. But their poetico-philosophical negotiations also share what might be called dialectical *nimbleness*, to borrow Dickinson’s own term in the draft of a letter to Judge Otis Phillips Lord: “On subjects of which we know nothing,” Dickinson the sceptic notes, “we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble” (Johnson 728). In Dickinson’s nimble dialectic of alternating belief and disbelief, *planks* function as crucial metaphors, extending from the breaking “Plank in Reason,” I have just cited, and the wobbly planks of “I stepped from Plank to Plank” (Fr926), producing “that precarious Gait / Some call

Experience,” to the more solid plank of faith, built by God, who “sent his Son to test the Plank, / And he pronounced it firm” (Fr1459). But there are also the magic planks of romanticized nature, that is, Wordsworth’s and Emerson’s prelapsarian condition of nature (as distinct from the postlapsarian Christian and post-Christian conditions), celebrated in, for instance, “A soft sea washed around the House” (Fr1199):

A soft sea washed around the House
 A Sea of Summer Air
 And rose and fell the magic Planks
 That sailed without a care—
 For Captain was the Butterfly
 For Helmsman was the Bee
 And an entire universe
 For the delighted crew.

But how fares, by comparison, the crew of the Pequod in *Moby-Dick*, whose captain is not exactly a carefree butterfly? Are there any magic planks to delight that otherwise tragic crew? Actually, there are a couple of such planks or twigs at least in the book, namely in Chapter 85, “The Fountain,” and Chapter 114, “The Gilder.” The fountain in question is the sperm whale’s spout, and this phenomenon evokes the romantic “conceit of the mighty, misty monster ... sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapour—as you will sometimes see it— glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts” (Melville, 1851, 383-84). Ishmael thanks God for this “heavenly ray,” for all have doubts and denials, but few, along with them, have “intuitions of some things heavenly” (384).

In Chapter 114, “The Gilder,” the magic plank that momentarily *gilds* the human condition is also found in nature, namely on a calm sea “when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean’s skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it,” and “softly feels a certain filial, confident, land-like feeling towards the sea:”

Oh, grassy glades! [Ishmael ecstatically cries] oh, ever vernal endless landscapes in the soul; in ye,—though long parched by the dead drought of the earthly life—in ye, men may yet roll, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of the life immortal on them. Would to God these blessed calms would last.

But this oceanic feeling, as Freud (or rather his anonymous friend and correspondent) famously named it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*,⁴ will not last, of course, for there is “a storm for every calm,” and we must for ever retrace “infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’s doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If” (498-99).

The masculinity of Melville’s stoically “pondering repose of If” perfectly matches, I believe, the femininity of Dickinson’s more playful and whimsical negotiations with modernity, complete with her masochistically tinged “Sweet Scepticism of the Heart— / That knows—and does not know” (Fr1438), her cool “Seesawing” (Fr838) between doubt and faith, which, like the “Bomb upon the Ceiling” “keeps the nerves progressive / Conjecture flourishing” (Fr1150). In both writers, there is the same tendency to displace or replace orthodox religiosity by a romantic, Wordsworthian-Emersonian worship of nature, thus exemplifying T.E. Hulme’s diagnosis of romanticism as “spilt religion” (95). Dickinson’s celebration, for instance, of a “something in a summer’s Day,” which “solemnizes” her, and a “something in a summer’s noon— / A Depth—an Azure—a perfume— / Transcending ecstasy” (Fr104), correspond to Ishmael’s oceanic feelings in *Moby-Dick*.

Let me add two of my favourite illustrations of this kind of romanticized-nature euphoria in Melville’s post-*Moby-Dick* work. First, the American captain Delano’s sanguine invocation of beneficent nature, at the end of “Benito Cereno,” in the ongoing philosophical argument with his friend, the deeply traumatized and melancholic Spanish captain Don Benito: “But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades” (Chase 90).

My second illustration of Melville’s romantically spilt religion is from *Billy Budd*, namely the sublime execution of Billy, tragically “convicted and sentenced to be hung at the yard-arm in the early morning-watch” (Chase 358). This is what happens when the last signal is given, and Billy walks, as it were, the ultimate Dickinsonian plank:

4 “It is a feeling, which he [that is, Freud’s anonymous friend, later identified as Romain Rolland] would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were ‘oceanic’” (Freud 11).

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God, seen in mystical vision and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn. (Chase 367)

Both Melville and Dickinson used or abused what Melville, in Chapter 42 of *Moby-Dick*, named “the mystical cosmetic” of nature (198), and in so far as “all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot,” both writers could be said to have their moments of poetico-philosophical harlotry. But at the end of the day, despite the minor temperamental and gender-related differences hinted at in my introduction, Dickinson and Melville would probably agree, to quote the last stanza of Dickinson’s “Those dying then” (Fr1581), that:

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

Dickinson and Melville evidently had, as Karl Keller notes, their “common quarrel with an irresponsible and unresponsive God” (Keller 328), but, after their nimble poetico-philosophical negotiations or “wandering to-and-fro,” they would both, ultimately, be opting for the religious *ignis fatuus*, the “illumine” and safety of the Christian alabaster chamber where we no longer need, in the beautiful phrase of the English bard equally idolized by both American writers, to fear the heat of the sun or the furious winter’s rages (Shakespeare 258-259).

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