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Clericus and the Lunatick

Max Cavitch

Clericus and the Lunatick were an odd couple, brought together by the conjunction of poetry and print toward the end of the period encompassed by Roger Stoddard and David Whitesell’s glorious new bibliography. “Clericus” is the pseudonym of one of the era’s most important theologians: Nathaniel W. Taylor, chief architect of the Reformed Calvinism of the early national period, minister of New Haven’s First Church, and professor of theology at Yale. Richard Nisbett, “the Lunatick,” was a destitute and heterodox psychiatric patient in terminal confinement at the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. This famous Calvinist clergyman and this obscure Quaker madman would indeed seem to have had little to connect them. And unconnected they surely would have remained, had Taylor not happened to come across, in the pages of Joseph Dennie’s Port Folio—arguably the most important American literary and political periodical prior to the advent of the North American Review in 1815—one of the poems Nisbett composed during his confinement (Figs. 1a–d).

With or without his consent (we can’t be sure), a number of Nisbett’s shorter poems were published and reprinted in various periodicals of the day. Though the publication venues, like Dennie’s Port Folio, were sometimes prestigious, Nisbett’s poems were usually printed as curiosi-

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Fig. 12: Nisbett's "Ode to the Evening Star," and editor's prefatory remarks in *The Port Folio* ser. 3, 4 (July 1844): 111. Reproduced by permission from the Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, shelfmark AP4-P35 Ser.3 Vol.4.
An Ode to the Evening Star, by Richard Nisbett, Mariner.

O Venus, lovely evening star,
Diffusing precious light afar!
How much superior is thy fame
To her's from whom thou art thy name!
She leads but happy man astray,
Thou lightest wanderers on their way.
The mantle of the dark was spread,
The tempest round around my head,
As wearied, pensive, and alone,
Through devious wilds I journey'd on,
Imploring for some gentle ray
To light a wanderer on his way.

When seen, with gladness and surprise,
I saw thee in the western skies.
Cheering the dismal gloom of night
With grateful, friendly, moderate light.
Complete as all the glory of day
To light a wanderer on his way.

Oh thou, should jarring cares infest,
Or anxious passions rend the breast,
And in dark Tempest struggling roll,
May Reason open on the soul;
And with serene and sober ray
Conduct a wanderer on his way.

Let others tell for wealth and fame,
Or call Ambition but a name,
Yet follow what delusion yields,
Unmindful of your starry fields,
The filler's fancies such display
Mistread the wanderer from his way.

To them their pleasures I resign,
The evening star of reason shine.
ORIGINAL POETRY.

With this—no other light we need,
This best man's dearest path shall lead
To that cold tomb of kindred clay,
Where ends the wanderer's earthly way.

ODE TO TRANQUILLITY. BY RICHARD NISBETT.

Sweet spirit of Tranquillity!
Religion's latest, loveliest child—
The bliss of souls from bondage free;
In sober garb, with accents mild,
Oh! tell thy peaceful tale to me
Sweet spirit of Tranquillity!

How many a wretched man with care,
Disquieting his soul in vain;
Whose bubble phantoms burst in air,
Vain opus luxuriae to gain—
Might find the all of life in thee
Sweet spirit of Tranquility!

The best of time religion feels,
Sweet lamp of innocence it shone;
Whether form the pilgrim kneels,
Or courtesies at the symbol's shrine;
'Tis but of small avail, we see,
Without thine aid—Tranquility!

Tell me, O fair one, whose thou art,
So coming without book or psalm!
From what pure mansion dost thou start,
Soft efflux of eternal calm?
And no reluctant quest, we see,
To those who seek Tranquility.

Vain are Ambition's flattering toys;
They end in dismal dreams at last;
Vain is the churchman's raving noise;
In vain the pupil's stupefying press;
Unless the bowman's neck shall free,
And posted with Tranquillity.
The handmaid then to all the powers,
With which kind Heaven endows the mind.
We seek thee not on banks of flowers,
For fear the serpent lurks behind:
It is through sternest love we see—
We sip thy charms, Tranquility!

It is to rain the sodish eye,
From turning round to Vice corrupt:
Since thy bright essence we desery,
For hovering o'er the vast abrupt:
And thence we could delighted be,
Consorted with Tranquility.

HORACE IN PHILADELPHIA
BOOK I. OR I.

To Oliver Oldschool, Esq.
"Hanc scilicet efficacem
O, et praedicta et cetera decus more;
Sunt quae currunt, &c."

Thou poet's patron,grocer's friend
Mysterious sir, to thee I bend
In lowest submission;
Great despot of the scribbling train
Who hopes for fame, must hope in vain;
Without thy kind permission
What different spots our youths assume!
Some prone to literature and have
Lounge at the Athenæum,
While others stroll to centre-square
To meet the presenading fay
And ogle when they see 'em.
Some drive in gigs to Schuykill-falls,
And stop for punch at Mencken's,
Or else to hills less partial,
Through Gloucester's meadows make their way,
And sip eggnog at close of day
With good old Mencken Marseuli.

Fig. 1d. Nisbett's "Ode to the Evening Star," 124.
ties, accompanied by editorial remarks on the extent of his lunacy—for he was indeed psychotic and frequently delusional—and thus tending to emphasize not so much the aesthetic interest of his compositions but rather the sheer impressiveness of his ability, as one of the _Port Folio_ 's editors put it, to “methodize his thoughts and arrange his words in harmonious numbers.” The publication date of July 1814 strongly suggests that the unsigned editorial accompanying the poem: Taylor read and responded to was authored by the _Port Folio_ 's physician-editor, Dr. Charles Caldwell, who can be expected to have taken a keen interest in such medical oddities.

But why would this poem and its author also have caught such admiring attention from Nathaniel Taylor? Indeed, Taylor was so taken with Nisbett's poem, entitled “Ode to the Evening Star,” that he wrote an ode of his own in response. He addressed his poem to Nisbett himself and set them in circulation together by having both poems printed in an issue of _The Gospel Advocate_, whence they were taken up and reprinted by other periodicals, including the _Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine_ and _Atkinson's Casket_. Beginning to account for the significance of Taylor's actions is the simple aim of this paper. As an aside in keeping with this “Poetry in Circulation” panel at the _Poetry & Print in Early America_ symposium at the American Antiquarian Society, we have here one small example of the important role played by the publication and promiscuous reprinting of poems on religious themes in the rise of regional and national networks of mutual awareness—if not always sympathy and doctrinal agreement—among American Reformed theologians, congregants, and interlocutors.

The poem by Nisbett that captured Taylor's attention is entitled “An Ode to the Evening Star,” and it hails the star in its conventional personification as Venus, just as William Blake and many other poets before him had done. Yet whereas Blake's Venus, for example, with her “bright torch of love,” is approvingly eroticized, Nisbett dismisses the embodied Venus of sexual desire—she who, in his words, “leadeth hapless man astray”—in favor of a more etherealized figure: one who lights “wanderers on their way.” “Wanderer” is an importantly self-reflexive term here,

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as it characterizes not simply the circulation of celestial bodies generally but also plainly connects the heavens to mental wandering or errancy. Insanity was long thought to have something to do with the changes of the moon, one of the reasons why the mentally ill were referred to as "lunatics." The poem thus begins, one could say, as a kind of plea for the restoration of sanity. Indeed, as the poem continues, Nisbett associates Venus not with desire but with reason. He characterizes her light as a "serene and sober ray" to guide the anxious, careworn soul away from the psychological turmoil of passion, longing, and ambition, and toward the healing, annealing resources of reason.

It is easy to imagine how profoundly someone like Nisbett, who clearly had some lucid awareness (at least at intervals) of his own illness and propensity for delusional fantasy, would have cherished the notion of continued access to reason's guidance. His illness had cost him dearly—separating him permanently from his wife and children, for example. And writing poetry remained throughout the long years of confinement his chief adaptive resource for managing what must often have seemed like intolerable internal conflict. One of the first things he did upon being admitted to the Hospital was to write a poem to his wife, in which he mourns his separation from her. In the poem's final lines he promises,

In fit Employ, to pass the tedious stay,
Till haply I may see the favored day,
When I may weep for joy, and own me blest,
To hide my anguish Frances on thy breast.\(^5\)

According to one of his caregivers at the Hospital, this poem was circulated in manuscript among some of the Nisbets' friends, who considered it, on the basis of its neoclassical precision, to be evidence that Richard's sanity had already been restored: "They said it was cruel to confine him," the caregiver noted in the Hospital's records, "but they were ignorant of his Real Situation. [H]ad they seen him, in his confinement, they would have known better."\(^4\)

Had they seen him shortly after his confinement began, they might have found him enduring one of the various forms of physical restraint then commonly used at the Hospital: chains, ankle-irons, hand cuffs,  

3. Samuel Coates, "Cases of Several Lunatics in the Pennsylvania Hospital and the Causes thereof in many of the Cases," ca. 1785–1825, Pennsylvania Hospital Historic Collections, Philadelphia, 73.
straightjackets. But they would also have seen signs of recent amelioration in treatment, including better sanitation and a regimen of therapeutic activities such as gardening and carpentry. And Nisbett, already a published writer, was afforded the privilege of having access to writing materials, including abundant paper (no small expense) and even watercolors, which he used to illustrate many of his poems. Nisbett’s doctors—including the Hospital’s most famous physician and the father of American psychiatry, Benjamin Rush—might not have accepted the notion that the capacity to write perfect neoclassical couplets was evidence of sanity. But they were at the cutting edge of an emerging psychiatric discipline and ethic of care for the mentally ill that credited the still largely scoffed-at notion that the impairment of some mental faculties did not necessarily mean the impairment of all of them.

There was considerable evidence of the power of Nisbett’s mental faculties in the works he published before his mental collapse and hospitalization, including two short works on slavery and two very short verse pamphlets. His first book, ironically, was a vehement attack on the famous 1773 pamphlet by his future physician, Benjamin Rush, assailing slavery and the slave trade. At the time, Nisbett was a young planter and keeper of slaves in the West Indies. Some years later, he wrote a much more even-tempered treatise on The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement, published in 1789, in which he exhorted fellow planters to take responsibility for their slaves’ religious and moral well-being. One may infer from this publication history, spanning sixteen years and one revolutionary war, the meliorist trajectory which would eventuate in his decision to relinquish his slave holdings and move to Philadelphia.

In the later treatise, Nisbett argued that slaves should be “not only the object of the master’s authority, but of his affection also,” and that the master should be the slaves’ “patron and protector, as well as his proprietor.”

“We must endeavour to suppose ourselves in the African’s situation,” he wrote,
deprived of freedom, contrary to [our] own will and consent . . . Could we conceive ourselves to be thus circumstanced, we should at once conclude, that

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nothing but the most invariable and decided attention to our interest, improvement and happiness, could possibly render the person, to whose authority we were subjugated, an object of our permanent gratitude. 7

It is quite striking how closely some of Nisbett’s recommendations to his fellow slave owners resemble the transformational goals of the late eighteenth-century mental asylum: involuntary subjection to benevolent control; disciplining the mind through the body; the restoration of the capacity for self-regulation and physical liberty. As the proponent of a benevolent patriarchal system, one in which the condition of its subjects would be improved and whose liberation was posited as the desired end, Nisbett had much in common with those who would enforce his own confinement just over a decade later.

Once we recall that this era of revolutionary psychiatric reform was also the era of Reformed theology and the nationalization of American Congregationalism, it may be easier to see why Nathaniel Taylor was so interested in Richard Nisbett and his poem. When one turns to his own ode to Nisbett, the first thing one notes—thanks to epigraph from Rev. 22:16—is his flipping of Nisbett’s Venus from Hesperus to Phosphorus—that is, from Evening Star to Morning Star—thereby redirecting the reader (along with the ode’s direct addressee, Nisbett) away from a worldly commitment to the redemptive power of reason and toward the root of reason’s efficacy in an infusion of grace: what Jonathan Edwards famously called “religious affections.” 8

Along with his teacher, Edwards’s grandson Timothy Dwight, Taylor was intent on recasting Edwardsian affection for a new era, an era in which, as Mark Noll puts it, the “props of personal godliness [that Edwards could take for granted] were gone or going fast.” 9 Dwight had inculcated in Taylor a sense of reformist urgency that extended beyond doctrine to a veritable activist commitment to social reform—the early nineteenth-century Congregationalists’ pressing need to rebuild the world for God. Taylor’s revisionist Calvinism held in higher esteem than did his Old Calvinist counterparts people’s capacity as agents in the work of their own salvation. Thus his interest in faculty psychology and

7. Nisbett, Capacity, 34.
his introduction of a psychological discourse of personality to the theological debates of this volatile and historically consequential era of revivalism and social reform. Taylor was among the first theologians to help promote in his writings a sense of the importance of the new developments in psychiatry and psychological theory to the work of both worldly reform and spiritual salvation. He anticipated by well over a decade Catherine Beecher’s crucial treatise on Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy in his 1818 tract on free agency in which he explicitly identifies “understanding, conscience, and will” as the “faculties” enabling people both to see the difference between good and evil and to act on their consequent feelings of accountability. Against Old Calvinist doctrine of determinism Taylor argued for the theological possibility and indeed obligation to pursue social reform along with personal salvation, and that a commitment to faculty psychology could be instrumental to both goals. In Nisbett’s “Ode to the Evening Star,” Taylor recognized and was moved by the evidence of a madman struggling to recapture and make use of his innate, if compromised or damaged faculties in order to pursue his own salvation and, through his poetic efforts, to help circulate exemplary evidence of the psycho-theological foundation of both personal and public reform.