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Aftermath in the Late-Romantic Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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RICHARD E. BRANTLEY

From Loss to Gain: Aftermath in the Late-Romantic Poetry of Emily Dickinson

'Did we not find (gain) as we lost,' declares Emily Dickinson (1830–86) in Prose Fragment 71, 'we should make but a threadbare exhibition after a few years.'[1] Thus our loss and our gain become concomitant phenomena, if not one and the same. David Porter, as though Dickinson's art were a record of pure loss, describes her 'poetry of aftermath' as pessimistic.[2] By contrast, and in keeping with the balance between loss and gain in Prose Fragment 71, I regard her concept of aftermath—namely, that 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes –' (Poem 371, line 1)[3]—as less despairing, and as broader, than it at first appears. Just as her Late-Romantic faith in experience rarely wanes—I argue this in my most recent study of the broadly experiential, spiritual as well as natural vision of Romantic Anglo-America[4]—so, paradoxically, her 'post-experiential perspective'[5] yields, and yields to, optimism of a distinctively experience-based, Anglo-American kind.

Prose Fragment 49 further prepares Dickinson's reader for historically interpreting her poetry of aftermath as a tipping of the balance between loss and gain in favor of progress from the former to the latter:

> Tis a dangerous moment for anyone when the meaning goes out of things and Life stands straight—and punctual—and yet no content(s) (signal) come(s). Yet such moments are. If we survive them they expand us. If we do not, but that is Death, whose if is everlasting. (*J* 3:919)

The first two sentences, it is true, far from underestimating, or taking lightly, the devastation of aftermath, acknowledge the threat that post-experience poses to our very sanity. The second part of the fourth sentence, moreover, beginning with the clause 'If we do not,' suggests that each loss threatens us with death, the ultimate aftermath. Experience can thus seem ineffectual, unimportant. Nonetheless, Dickinson's

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third sentence, 'If we survive [dangerous moments] they expand us,' speaks of hope, or at least of hope-against-hope. One thinks, in this connection, of Friedrich Nietzsche's well-known notion that what does not kill us only makes us stronger.[6] Since, for Dickinson, 'the meaning of things' never entirely 'goes out of things,' and since her survival can 'expand' her, her poetry of aftermath *includes* her experience, as distinct from simply entailing it, and as opposed to merely lamenting the loss thereof. In the end, her post-experiential perspective renews her lease on life, if not exactly the full-blown experience of faith that, as I have previously tried to show, she shares with her precursors and coevals on the High- to Late-Romantic arc of Anglo-American literature.[7]

I offer, then, a partial palinode, a strategic drawing-back from delineating Dickinson's contribution to the well-earned optimism of Romantic Anglo-America. *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (2004) pays too little attention, perhaps, to what everyone knows—namely, Dickinson's reputation as a recluse—and too much heed, undoubtedly, to Richard B. Sewall's cultural contextualization of Dickinson's art as socially engaged enough to approximate the outlook of a Rotarian.[8] Her post-traumatic stress, according to Roger Lundin, attends her concerns about Darwinian science and the American Civil War.[9] Her withdrawal from the social life of Amherst, Massachusetts, around 1860, moreover, in Vivian R. Pollak's view has to do with her flawed relationships with her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson (wife of Austin), and her 'dearest earthly friend,' the Reverend Charles Wadsworth.[10] Still, as James R. Guthrie demonstrates, her reclusive tendency also derives, more optimistically, from the spiritual and aesthetic dedication with which she makes a virtue of the necessity of her Teiresias-like, Homeric, and Miltonic eye-trouble.[11] Even more importantly—and herein lies the emphasis of my palinode *only* partial, my drawing-back *merely* strategic—I look within Romantic Anglo-America for a tough-minded, yet hopeful, explanation of Dickinson's withdrawal. Over her poetry of aftermath, when all is said and done, presides such an idea of post-experience as that of William Wordsworth, for whom 'abundant recompense' proves the quintessentially British-Romantic phrase for rich reward in, and for, loss of 'splendor in the grass' and of 'glory in the flower' (see, respectively, Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' [1798], line 88; and Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' [1807], line 180).[12]

'Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it—that is Life, is it not, Dear?' asked Emily of Sue, in 1885 (*L* 3:893). The pessimistic dimension of this rhetorical question compares with Percy Bysshe Shelley's