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*In Memoriam:* Travis Lynn Gordon

POETRY & PRINT IN EARLY AMERICA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SYMPOSIUM HELD AT THE  
AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY TO MARK  
THE PUBLICATION OF

*A Bibliographical Description of Books and Pamphlets  
of American Verse Printed from 1610 Through 1820*



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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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## ORIGINAL POETRY.

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## CHORUS

Peal your CANNON in triumph—your STREAMERS bid fly,  
Our wave-cradled NELSONS!—this FOURTH OF JULY!

Should FACTION—ENCROACHMENT—OPPRESSION arise,  
We instinctively turn to our good CONSTITUTION;  
The CYNOSURE—in our political Skies!  
The ORACLE—knowing not *Change*, nor *Pollution*!

Lo! the eye of the *Seer*,  
In *Futurity's* year,  
Sees AMERICA—EMPERESS OF NATIONS appear!

## CHORUS.

To the GREAT GOD OF ARMIES, Who marshals the sky,  
Let our GRATITUDE rise—on this FOURTH OF JULY.

THE two following little poems, which are by no means destitute of merit in themselves, will doubtless be regarded as objects of more curiosity at least, if not of more real interest, when it is known, that they are the production of a man who is *perfectly insane*—who, in consequence of a state of confirmed and hopeless mania, has been for many years confined in the Pennsylvania hospital. We have lately spent an hour in company with this unfortunate character, intentionally and frequently changing the topic of conversation, without being able to find even one, on which we could elicit from him a single ray of sober reason.

To communicate to our readers some idea of the general state of his intellect, which appeared to us to be equally unsettled on all subjects, we will mention to them one or two of the strange delusions under which he labours. He has a wonderful predilection for the study of geography, and employs a great part of his time in drawing and painting maps and charts of the world, which, on account of their singularity, and the strange fancies connected with them, deserve to be ranked among the curiosities of the time. He strenuously contends that the island of Great Britain is no where to be found in a state of terra firma, but that it was long since overwhelmed by the waters of the ocean, and exists, at present, only as an extensive and dangerous shoal or sand-bank, proving oftentimes fatal to the unskillful mariner. The prevention of accidents like this constitutes with him a leading object in the preparation of his sea-charts. He very gravely assured me that the council of Nice have lately, after solemn deliberation, determined on the exclusive adoption of these charts, rendering it penal to employ any others.

Such is the deplorable state of mind of the author of these poetic effusions. Whence it is that he is enabled to methodize his thoughts, and ar-

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Fig. 1a: Nisbett's "Ode to the Evening Star," and editor's prefatory remarks in *The Port Folio* ser. 3, 4 (July 1814): 121. Reproduced by permission from the Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, shelfmark AP2 .P85 Ser.3 Vol.4.

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ORIGINAL POETRY.

range his words in harmonious numbers, is a difficulty we shall not attempt to solve. It constitutes one of the arcana of madness. Ea.

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 tak'st thy name!  
She leadeth hapless man astray:  
Thou lightest wanderers on their way.

The mantle of the dark was spread,  
The tempest roar'd 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 soon, 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 glare of day  
To light a wanderer on his way.

Oh thus, 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 toil for wealth and fame,  
Or call Ambition but a name,  
Yet follow what delusion yields,  
Unmindful of yon starry fields:  
The idler fancies such display  
Mistlead the wanderer from his way.

To them their pleasures I resign,  
The evening star of reason mine:

Fig. 1b: Nisbett's "Ode to the Evening Star," 122.

## ORIGINAL POETRY.

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With this—no other light we need,  
 This best man's destin'd 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 worldling worn with care,  
 Disquieting his soul in vain,  
 Whose bubble phantoms burst in air,  
 Voluptuous luxuries to gain—  
 Might find the all of life in thee  
 Sweet spirit of Tranquillity!

The best of flame religion feels,  
 Sweet lamp of innocence is thine:  
 Whether forlorn the pilgrim kneels,  
 Or courteous at the symbol'd shrine,  
 'Tis but of small avail, we see,  
 Without thine aid—Tranquillity!

Tell me, O fair one, whence thou art,  
 So coming without book or psalm!  
 From what pure mansion did'st thou part  
 Soft efflux of eternal calm!  
 And no reluctant quest, we see,  
 To those who seek Tranquillity.

Vain are Ambition's flattering toys;  
 They end in dismal dreams at best:  
 Vain is the churchman's rattling noise;  
 In vain the pulpit's thumpr or prest,  
 Unless the bosom's meek and free,  
 And posied with Tranquillity.

*Fig. 1c:* Nisbett's "Ode to the Evening Star," 123.

The handmaid thou 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 sterner lore we see—  
 We sip thy charms, Tranquillity!

It is to rein the foolish eye,  
 From turning round to Vice corrupt;  
 Since thy bright essence we desire,  
 Far hovering o'er the vast abrupt:  
 And there we could delighted be,  
 Consorted with Tranquillity.

## HORACE IN PHILADELPHIA

## BOOK I. ODE I.

To OLIVER OLDCHOOL, ESQ.

"Mecenas atavis edite regibus  
 O, et presidium et dulce decus meum.  
 Sunt quos curricula, &c."

Thou poet's patron, proser's friend  
 Mysterious sir, to thee I bend  
 In lowliest submission,  
 Great despot of the scribbling train!  
 Who hopes for fame, must hope in vain,  
 Without thy kind permission.

What different sports our youths amuse!  
 Some prone to literature and news  
 Lounge at the *Athenaeum*,  
 Whilst others stroll to centre-square  
 To meet the promenading fair  
 And ogle when they see 'em.

Some drive in gigs to Schuylkill-falls,  
 And stop for punch at *Mendenhall's*,  
 Or else to hills less partial,  
 Through *Gloucester's* meadows make their way,  
 And sip egg-nog at close of day  
 With good old *Mistress Marshall*.

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,”<sup>2</sup> 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,

1. Editor's prefatory note to Richard Nisbett, “An Ode to the Evening Star,” *The Port Folio* ser. 3, 4 (July 1814): 121–22.

2. William Blake, “To the Evening Star,” *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972), 6.

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 bemoans 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.<sup>3</sup>

According to one of his caregivers at the Hospital, this poem was circulated in manuscript among some of the Nisbetts' 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."<sup>4</sup>

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, 75.

4. Coates, "Cases," 75–76.



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.<sup>5</sup> 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*."<sup>6</sup> "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

5. Thomas G. Morton, *The History of the Pennsylvania Hospital, 1751-1898* (Philadelphia, PA: Times Printing House, 1895), 145-47.

6. Richard Nisbett, *The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement* (London: James Phillips, 1789), 52-53.

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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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.

8. Clericus [Nathaniel W. Taylor], "To Richard Nisbet, on Seeing his Address to the Evening Star," *The Gospel Advocate* (September 1823), 286–87.

9. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 274.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

10. [Nathaniel William Taylor], "Man, a Free Agent without the Aids of Divine Grace," in *Tracts, Designed to Illustrate and Enforce the Most Important Doctrines of the Gospel* (New Haven, CT: 1818), 5.