

## EMILY DICKINSON'S BRAZIL

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At best Emily Dickinson was a mental traveler. Except in fancy, she rarely strayed beyond the boundaries of her native Amherst. Her older contemporary, Henry David Thoreau, was *generally* content to travel widely in his native Concord, but Emily Dickinson *always* found the small town of Amherst world enough for her purposes. It may even be, as has been suggested by Dickinson's finest Brazilian translator, Manuel Bandeira, that the isolation engendered by her provincialism was vital to the flowering of her rare genius:

"No entanto, êsse isolamento, acredito, concorreu muito para fortalecer a originalidade da norte-americana, para torná-la contemporânea da geração atual e não da sua." <sup>1</sup>

Despite her physical provinciality, however, Emily Dickinson's poetry is sprinkled generously with references to places she had never seen. Almost without exception, her poetic references reflect the kind of geography that she could have learned only from her books. In that way she gained her knowledge of India, Lybia, Tripoli and Tunis, of Buenos Aires and Potosi. In that way, undoubtedly, she learned about the vast reaches of Brazil, a land which was to take on special meaning for her poetry.

With some certainty, at least, we can point to one source for Emily Dickinson's knowledge of Brazil: *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon*, by William Lewis Herndon and Lardner Gibbon, published in two volumes in 1853-54. That the copy of the book now in the Dickinson Collection of Harvard College Library was the poet's own property is clear from the inscription in the first volume: "Miss Emily Dickinson

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(1) Manuel Bandeira, *Poesia Completa e Prosa* (Rio de Janeiro, 1967), p. 603.

from her father.”<sup>2</sup> A report of a journey undertaken for the purpose of assessing the commercial possibilities of the Amazons, these volume abound with descriptions of natives, foreign settlers, the characteristics of fauna and flora. Herndon, especially, shows a sharp eye for trees, flowers, and the dyes derived therefrom. It was the existence of such intense colors in the spaces of Brazil which first attracted the poet.

The poet's explicit references to Brazil come in a series of poems written during the early 1860s, her most prolific years.<sup>3</sup> The earliest of these poems singles out the Brazilian pampas as the exotic setting for the gambols of an uncommon butterfly:

Some such Butterfly be seen  
On Brazilian Pampas  
Just at noon — no later — Sweet —  
Then — the License closes —

Some such Spice — express and pass —  
Subject to Your Plucking —  
As the Stars — You knew last Night —  
Foreigners — This Morning —<sup>4</sup>

In this straight-forward poem on the ephemeral nature of mortal beauty and on the intuitive timelessness of the experience of beauty — visual and sensual — it is the southern Brazilian pampas at noon (the moment most meaningful for Dickinson, the eternal moment out of time) which becomes the home of the exotic butterfly. The Brazilian butterfly, like a rare spice or the nightly star, offers the poet a metaphor for the glimpse which reveals eternity.

In a second poem in 1862 Emily Dickinson employs the word “Brazilian” in a different sense. She uses it to refer to the reddish dye extracted from the “pau-brasil”, the wood which gave the country its name.<sup>5</sup> She compares the color of this wood to those reds common to a late New England summer. The intense redness of *Brazil* becomes the southern hemisphere's rival to cochineal, a favorite among native colors

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- (2) Quoted in Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 175.
  - (3) The most convincing dating of the composition of the poems remains Thomas H. Johnson's in his edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).
  - (4) Johnson, *Poems*, I, 416 (item 541).
  - (5) See J. M. Monteiro, *Os nomes geográficos no Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1928).

for the poet. The poem itself tells of the poet's recent illness and the effect upon her of her near-death.

My first well Day — since many ill —  
I asked to go abroad,  
And take the Sunshine in my hands,  
And see the things in Pod —

A'blossom just when I went in  
To take my Chance with pain —  
Uncertain if myself, or He,  
Should prove the strongest One.

The Summer deepened, while we strove —  
She put some flowers away —  
And Redder cheeked Ones — in their stead —  
A fond — illusive way —

To cheat Herself, it seemed she tried —  
As if before a child  
To fade — Tomorrow — Rainbows held  
The Sepulchre, could hide.

She dealt a fashion to the Nut —  
She tied the Hoods to Seeds —  
She dropped bright scraps of Tint, about —  
And left Brazilian Threads

On every shoulder that she met —  
Then both Her Hands of Haze  
Put up — to hide her parting Grace  
From our Unfitted eyes.

My loss, by sickness — Was it Loss?  
Or that Etherial Gain  
One earns by measuring the Grave —  
Then — measuring the Sun —<sup>6</sup>

The "Brazilian Threads" that Summer left everywhere are, to be sure, visual — their color is "Brazilian" — but they are also the signals that Autumn has come and that Winter (the season of death) is about to pass. Summer's placing of "Brazilian Threads" is followed by that haze which hides Summer's "parting Grace" (and Summer's death into Autumn) from our eyes. Yet there is gain, discovers the poet, in our assessment of life after we have measured death.

Of the intensity of Brazilian reds Dickinson would have learned from Herndon's *Exploration*, where he writes admirably about "a very rich scarlet" dye, "quite equal in brilliancy

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(6) Johnson, *Poems*, I, 437-39 (item 574).

of color, to the dye of the cochineal.”<sup>7</sup> This information would have had an immediate appeal for her, especially the comparison with “cochineal”, a term which appears and reappears in her poetry.<sup>8</sup>

“Brazilian” epitomizes Nature’s redness in still another poem, this one written two years later than the others.

A Moth the hue of this  
Haunts Candles in Brazil.  
Nature’s Experience would make  
Our Reddest Second pale.

Nature is fond, I sometimes think,  
Of Trinkets, as a Girl.<sup>9</sup>

Here the poet quite simply compares Nature’s fondness for “colors” (reds, specifically) to a girl’s love of toys and pretty jewelry. The reddish hue of the moth which hovers around Brazilian candles far surpasses any of the “reds” manufactured by man. As it happens, incidentally, the poet’s use of *brasil* in this instance accords perfectly with the dictionary definition which sees it as “côr encarnada cm que se enfeitavam as senhoras.”<sup>10</sup>

But the poet’s most significant use of the word “Brazil” as a symbol occurs in “I asked no other thing”, one of her most widely anthologized poems. Like the first two poems discussed above, it was written in 1862.

I asked no other thing —  
No other — was denied —  
I offered Being — for it —  
The Mighty Merchant sneered —

Brazil? He twirled a Button —  
Without a glance my way —  
“But — Madam — is there nothing else —  
That We can show — Today?”<sup>11</sup>

It has been suggested that in this poem “Emily Dickinson refuses to accept Brazil in the place of death, although the

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(7) William Lewis Herndon and Lardner Gibbon, *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1853-54), I, 238.

(8) See, for example, Johnson, *Poems*, I, 45-45 (item 60); II, 444-45 (item 581, 570 (item 748), 747 (item 1059); and III, 1010-11 (item 1463).

(9) Johnson, *Poems*, I, 636 (item 841).

(10) *Pequeno Dicionário Brasileiro da Língua Portuguesa*, compiled by Aurelio Buarque de Hollanda Ferreira. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Rio de Janeiro, 1968), p. 191.

(11) Johnson, *Poems*, I, 478 (item 621).

offer of the 'Mighty Merchant' must have been very tempting indeed and intended as an alternative to her wish."<sup>12</sup> We can begin with this provocative interpretation because it goes astray, in my opinion, in a most interesting way. The question is: does the "Mighty Merchant" offer his customer "Brazil" as a substitute for something else, or is it the customer who from the outset of negotiations wants to purchase "Brazil"? The latter, I would venture. First, the merchant sneers at her, then he twirls a button (nervously? in embarrassment? out of disdain?), and he ends by trying for a lesser sale (since he cannot provide the goods she has asked for): "But — Madam — is there nothing else — / That We can show — Today?" Dickinson's metaphor is mercantile. The customer wants to purchase "Brazil", offering for it "Being", a very high price. In this context "Brazil" is literally a fabric that takes its name from the reddish dye, extracted from brazilwood, in which it is steeped. The "Mighty Merchant", who would retail his dry-goods, has no "Brazil" for her. With a salesman's mentality, however, he tries, unsuccessfully it would seem, to interest his customer in something else. The covering metaphor is that of an unsuccessful business transaction. But what does the metaphor stand for? Who is the "Mighty Merchant"? And why would a customer offer "Being", her finest possession, for his goods?

The poem can be read, I think, as an allegory on the theme of salvation. Reminiscent of John Bunyan's seventeenth-century comparison of the sinner's relationship to his God with the familiar relationship of a customer to shopkeeper, the poet presents the Puritan God of her fathers as a New England merchant — nothing more, nothing less. His outlook is that of a shopkeeper. His wares, then, his very best wares, have their epitome in the fabric called "Brazil." That fabric is so desirable, in fact, that a customer might offer "Being" — each individual's pearl of price — for that commodity. If this premise holds, the next step in interpreting the allegory is comparatively direct. "Brazil" stands for salvation, the most valuable "commodity" dealt in by the "Mighty Merchant". But the God of the Puritans would not and could deal with supplicants on this personal, one-to-one basis. The doctrine governing the number and the identity of the elect predestined for immortality precluded the possibility of any individual's lead-

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(12) Alexandrino E. Severino (review of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson), *ALFA*, I (1962), p. 128.

ing his life so as to become *ipso facto* worthy of election. Salvation was not dependent upon the quality of the individual life; consequently, it could not be “purchased” at any price, not even “Being.” The audacity of the poet’s offer could only rankle and embarrass the “Mighty Merchant.”

In sum, the poet’s reference in this poem constitutes her most involved allusion to “Brazil”. It refers literally to the cloth whose reddish color gives it its name, and it reaches metaphorically to the idea of personal salvation. Its use in this context, as a symbol for something desirable, beautiful, and exceedingly rare, constitutes the poet’s final tribute to Brazil, a land she would never see but whose epitome she had richly imagined.