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978-1-107-02941-5 - Emily Dickinson and Philosophy

Edited by Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble and Gary Lee Stonum

Excerpt

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## DICKINSON, POETRY, AND PHILOSOPHY

[Emily] had to think – she was the only one of us who had that to do. Father believed; and mother loved; and Austin had Amherst; and I had the family to take care of.

Lavinia Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson's Home*

Lavinia Dickinson understood an important fact about her sister Emily: that she was a serious thinker. Her life's work, the passion that kept her at her desk late at night, involved thinking about large questions: What are the chances for immortality given that the body seems essential to consciousness? What makes a poem or anything else "beautiful"? How does being aware of death shape how we choose how to live? Why are we exhilarated or appalled by nature? Dickinson used poetry to think such problems through.

To understand her poetry as a philosophical practice challenges a bifurcation that may seem elemental, it is of such long standing in our culture. Accounts differ, but perhaps the most common grand narrative is that philosophy took an early lead. In Act One, the story goes, Plato banished poets from his republic and Socrates called them "light and winged and holy" things, arguing that the poet "has no ability to create until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him" (*Ion, Dialogues*, 11). Like the "Corybantic revelers when they dance," poets "are not in their right mind when they compose . . ." (11). Act Two recounts spirited defenses of poets and poetry by Philip Sydney and others who point up the value to human life of poetic specialties: moods, emotions, creativity, inspiration, fiction, world-creation, and entertainment. Showcasing attempts to decide the winner, Act Three often emphasizes fence-sitters and synthesizers. The Christian Platonist Marsilio Ficino explains to his Renaissance companions that since the "rational soul" often falls "into the body" and to sleep, the "poetic frenzy" is necessary to awaken it. Socrates was right, but so was Sidney: poetry is frenzy but it is

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also necessary, even primary, because it enables the soul to move from “the body’s sleep to the mind’s vigilance” (197, 201). In the end, if we are still in the grand mode we can say that this dialectical metanarrative has always accompanied Western culture, even helped defined it, right down to our everyday distinctions between thought and feeling, reason and emotion.

If we extract a comparison between philosophy and poetry from Emily Dickinson’s letters and poems then we must conclude that she preferred poetry. In various ways she celebrated poets as magicians or divinities who distill “amazing sense” from “ordinary meanings” and denigrated philosophy as ineffective or irrelevant before the real problems of existence. Simple natural experiences were usually enough for her to make the point: the Moon is upheld “in rolling Air” by “finer Gravitations – / Than bind Philosopher –” and although the “rainbow never tells me / That gust and storm are by,” it is nonetheless “more convincing / Than Philosophy” (Fr593B, Fr76). By contrast the high status of poets was for Dickinson never in doubt: “I reckon – When I count at all – / First – Poets – Then the Sun – / Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God – / And then – the List is done –” (Fr533).

But while Dickinson ranked poetry above prose, the opposition between poetry and philosophy was not important to her. She habitually referred to writing, her own and others’, as “thought,” – she never used the word “lyric” at all – and was an early, enthusiastic, and ultimately lifelong reader of both poetry and philosophy. In school, philosophy and poetry were often presented as making common cause, and she and her contemporaries carefully parsed such texts as Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, a philosophical poem introduced by the author as “moral reflections.” This poem of “thoughts” invokes Socrates (“he who woo’d from heaven / Philosophy the fair, to dwell with men”) and ultimately inspired both Goethe’s *Sturm und Drang* literature and Edmund Burke’s philosophical writings on the sublime.

When philosophy was presented as a formal discipline, she enjoyed it. “I have four studies,” she effused at fifteen to her friend Abiah Root about her “fine school,” the Amherst Academy: “They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany” (L6). Throughout high school and her year at Mary Lyons’s seminary at Mt. Holyoke, where Isaac Watts’s *On the Improvement of the Mind* was a requirement for matriculation, she was constantly exposed to, and tested on, philosophical texts and ideas. Long after her school days, she remained a voracious reader and, thanks to her proximity to Amherst College, remained in regular contact with the philosophy faculty and their families, as well as with her brother and other friends who attended the college. In short, she acquired a solid education in both poetry and philosophy and used it throughout her life.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

It was an interesting time to get that education. Dickinson lived from 1830 to 1886, a time when German idealists and their English and American disciples presented new and explosive challenges to orthodox ideas. Feeling their spirituality stifled by Locke's materialism, some ambitious young American thinkers began reading German speculative philosophy, mostly in a few key works by De Staël, Coleridge, James Marsh, and Carlyle. These core texts and translations seemed to open a bold new intellectual basis for combining rational inquiry into nature and life with deep spiritual experience. To the establishment, however, the German idealist thought was so much moonshine. The clash between the two systems was decisive and loudly debated in periodicals such as *The North American Review* (orthodox) and *The Dial* (speculative) and in the philosophy and religion departments of institutions of higher learning, such as Amherst (orthodox) and Harvard (speculative.)

Because Dickinson's poetry engages with the vocabularies, arguments, assumptions, and clashing paradigms that appeared in the philosophical debates in her college town, it is not surprising to find tantalizing similarities in concern and even idiom between her poetry and the writings of contemporary philosophers. Yet many questions remain: did her early exposure to the Platonist Transcendentalists – their so-called *Annus Mirabilis* occurred in 1836 when she was but six – prepare her to receive her Common Sense and Baconian textbooks with spiritualized, speculative, transparent eyeballs? Or if, as seems likely, Dickinson zigzagged on and off the roads connecting the Scottish Enlightenment, European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and German Idealism, then how, if at all, did she adapt specific philosophical issues, controversies, distinctions, or terminology in her poetry?

These questions lie at the heart of many of Dickinson's nearly 2,000 poems. Why is it, then, that this thinking poet from such an exciting philosophical period is so rarely the guest of honor at symposia linking philosophy and poetry? The neglect cannot be ascribed solely to literary critics and philosophers hunkering down in their disciplines. Literary criticism does not take up a Charles Bernstein without some notice of Wittgenstein, or a Wordsworth without Hartley; likewise, philosophy is obliged to take seriously Heidegger's interest in Hölderlin, Cavell's in Emerson, and Derrida's in Mallarmé and Ponge. Yet even when literary and philosophical concerns most recently overcame their mutual suspicion of one another, during the Theory Boom of the 1980s, Dickinson was, outside the writings of American feminists like Mary Loeffelholz, nowhere to be seen. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, although continental philosophy and European and American literary study had much to say about Hegel,

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[More information](#)

Schiller, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Shelley, Mallarmé, Yeats, and Proust, Dickinson's contributions to Romantic and post-Romantic thinking went largely unnoticed.

One reason is that Thomas Wentworth Higginson played an influential Socrates to Dickinson's Ion: "You enshroud yourself in this fiery mist," he wrote to her, and "I cannot reach you." When he added the next comment – that he rejoiced in her "rare sparkles of light" – he helped install a critical view that, for well over a century, has seen her as an "enigmatical being" and her poetry as intriguing and attractive but impenetrable (L330a, Higginson 1891). "Often," concluded Higginson in an influential article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "she was obscure and sometimes inscrutable; and though obscurity is sometimes, in Coleridge's phrase, a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press this compliment too hard" (*Letters* 451). Scholars have since reified the idea by arguing that her poetry – with its strange syntax, slant rhymes, abstract nouns, portraits of mental and emotional trauma and so much else – dismantled, transcended, or disregarded conventional meanings. The end result has been a persistent image of Dickinson as a sibylline or mystic poet who intuited rather than thought, who wrote on, and in, extraordinary and maybe incomprehensible terms.

Another reason, endemic to the academy, is that scholars have simply been occupied with other topics. Good work continues to be written on the questions of Dickinson's material poetics (her manuscripts, fascicles, and editing) as well as on historical and cultural contexts for her life and writing, such as the Civil War, class, gender, race, science, medicine, and religion. Other reasons could be adduced, but the fact is that despite the work of some authors represented here (Deppman, von der Heydt, Stonum) and some not (Gelpi, Kimpel, Juhasz, Vendler), the scholarly community has never seriously embraced Dickinson as a thinker or studied her relationship to philosophy. What Dickinson's critics "almost always underestimate," says Harold Bloom, "is her startling intellectual complexity" (291).

This volume engages Dickinson's intellectual complexity by reading Dickinson in the company of comparably bold and important thinkers and demonstrating that her thoughts, while complex, are often quite comprehensible, and that she invented an array of linguistic forms and practices to articulate them. Dickinson used the lyric form to pursue the problems and questions that mattered most to her, and by comparing her poems to systematic philosophical authors and movements, both those she knew and those she anticipated, the essayists demonstrate that her aesthetic practices were of a piece with her philosophical inquiries, that specifically philosophical vocabularies and methods can both explain and reframe her artistic choices.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

A few commonalities emerged as contributors, working independently of one another, singled out the same, arguably underappreciated poems or called new attention to regularly anthologized ones. “Perception of an Object costs” (Fr1103B) and “To hear an Oriole sing” (Fr402) fall in the first category; “Tell all the truth but tell it slant –” (Fr1263), “This was a Poet –” (Fr446), and “A word made Flesh is seldom” (Fr1715) into the second. Several essays also examine what might be called Dickinson’s skepticism, her attention to gaps between conscious mind and external world. The Dickinson we see in this book tends to be an anti-Platonist, a poet of consciousness, a curious, open-minded interpreter both of how human beings make sense of the world and of what happens when they do.

The essays roughly divide into those placing Dickinson within the intellectual culture of her time and those asserting that her poems anticipate later philosophers. The essays in the first category trace lines of influence, both direct (the thinkers Dickinson knew firsthand) and indirect (the ideas she absorbed through personal connections or second-hand accounts in books or magazines). The prominent topics and authors in this section are mental philosophy, Common Sense, Humean skepticism, Christology, Darwin and the Higher Criticism, Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Schlegel. As they explore such key nineteenth-century events as the collapse of theocentrism and the rise of science, the essays also uncover the philosophical lineage of many of the terms and ideas central to Dickinson’s thinking on time and eternity, the role of others, language, the construction of the self, the relation of the created world to eternity, and the status of the body in identity and consciousness.

The essays in the second category set Dickinson’s writings in and against philosophic arguments and discourses that have arisen since her death. It can be no surprise that, like many great writers, Dickinson anticipates concepts and perspectives barely visible or entirely absent during her lifetime. The more important question is how she directly or indirectly engages ideas more fully promulgated in subsequent decades. It has been argued that Dickinson holds her own against postmodernist, postmetaphysical, and antifoundationist claims advanced a century or more after her writings, and the essays in this section on Nietzsche, American pragmatism, Levinas, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger extend, critique, and complicate the claim that Dickinson was not only aware of her philosophical epoch but ahead of it (Deppman).

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This book roughly follows the chronology of the history of philosophy. To help guide readers through the array of topics, authors, and approaches that are covered, we include here a brief summary of each contribution.

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[More information](#)

In “Emily Dickinson: Anatomist of the Mind,” Michael Kearns argues that Dickinson’s many references to mind, heart, thinking, nerves, soul, and brain, are traceable to the texts of “mental science” and “mental philosophy” that were widely taught throughout the United States for much of the nineteenth century. Generally explicating the way Dickinson adapted the terminology and the arguments of locally popular authors such as Joseph Haven and Thomas Upham, Kearns isolates two main philosophical problems: (1) the difficulty of showing how immaterial concepts might arise from our presumably material, or at least embodied, faculties, and (2) the challenge of integrating perception, association, judgment, and other mental processes into a unified understanding that was itself obliged to be compatible with the revealed truths of Christianity.

In “Dickinson, Hume, and the Common Sense Legacy,” Melanie Hubbard examines Dickinson’s responses to Humean skepticism, specifically his hard-edged separation of belief from experience and of ideas from sensations. The Common Sense thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment had answers to skepticism like Hume’s, and their writings became the basis of orthodoxy in the Amherst of Dickinson’s early life. As Hubbard demonstrates, however, Common Sense philosophy insists that mental connections are rapid, habitual, and consequently reliable, whereas Dickinson does the opposite, slowing down or interfering with associations so as to make visible their strangeness. As she drove Common Sense semiotics against Common Sense dogmatism, Dickinson went further than Hume, ultimately seizing new powers for poetry, an activity that could create both meanings and experiences.

The Common Sense responses to Locke, Hume, and Kant have generally been neglected in Dickinson scholarship, but this is less true of the question of Dickinson’s challenges to religious orthodoxy. In “Outgrowing Genesis? Dickinson, Darwin, and the Higher Criticism,” Jane Eberwein reframes and complicates the common view of Dickinson as “unorthodox” by documenting and combining the poet’s awareness of two major assaults on Christian doctrines: Darwinian ideas and the philological investigations of scripture in the so-called Higher Criticism. The Connecticut Valley was an important site of geological discovery in the mid-nineteenth century, and Dickinson was prepared to embrace new scientific discoveries. Less straightforward, however, were the spiritual issues raised by Darwin’s theories. Eberwein emphasizes both the playfulness and the earnestness with which Dickinson’s poems deal with the challenges of Darwinian theory, concluding that while Darwin’s theories were retrospective, Dickinson’s primary interests were “prospective.”

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

In “Touching the Wounds: Dickinson and Christology,” Linda Freedman reviews the complicated place that the crucified Jesus as both God and man plays in Dickinson’s thinking and aesthetics. According to Freedman, Dickinson was motivated to write both by the notion of a “human” God who engaged her sympathy and poetic identity, but also by the sense of the vitally other, inhuman divinity. Her lifelong response to God’s absence became an *aesthetic* of absence – visible in her regular use of the dash, for example – and this poetic presence of absence enables readers both to experience the unknown and to be changed by the encounter. In order to ground her discussion of how Dickinson’s theology and aesthetics intertwine, Freedman cites the “incarnation aesthetic” of twentieth-century theologian Jürgen Moltmann, ultimately concluding that faith demands not a “rational” virtualization of the material world but a poetic immersion into it.

Like Hubbard in noticing the cautious pace with which Dickinson scrutinizes thought, Jim von der Heydt’s “Perfect – from the Pod’: Instant Learning in Dickinson and Kierkegaard” compares her scrupulous epistemology to the equally hesitant, doubtful, and inconclusive maneuvers of Kierkegaard. The Dane pokes fun at Hegel’s teleological system; the American seeks to learn from the experiential trajectory she repeatedly undergoes from initial ignorance to nervous conclusion. Von der Heydt shows that the question of how we can learn from experience was a pressing problem for Dickinson, governing the mini-anthology she sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in her first letter to him. This teacher proved unsatisfying, however, and she repeatedly imagined a more reciprocal, keenly felt learning encounter, involving a teacher more mysterious than he was. Like Kierkegaard, Dickinson ultimately took melancholy recourse in an idiosyncratic epistemology of Christ.

Agreeing with others about Dickinson’s skepticism, Daniel Fineman argues in “Against Mastery: Dickinson Contra Hegel and Schlegel” that she challenged dominant institutionalized approaches to philosophy in her day. Whereas Hegel optimistically saw the partial, incomplete, fragmentary nature of the world as a stage on the way to the absolute, Schlegel ironically emphasized the irreducible value of the fragmentary as an indication that totality was an inherently elusive goal. In Fineman’s view, Dickinson’s material poetics kicks sand on both: like a nineteenth-century Derrida she explores the possibility of wonderful meaning without the finality of system, a view Fineman contrasts to masculinist assumptions of philosophy as a discipline.

In scandalously suggesting that “truth” might be “a woman,” Friedrich Nietzsche allowed for a gender divide in philosophy, but Shira Wolosky’s

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

“Truth and Lie in Emily Dickinson and Friedrich Nietzsche” emphasizes how alike were the American woman and German man. After noting several biographical similarities between this otherwise odd couple, Wolosky argues that Dickinson anticipates several of Nietzsche’s philosophical innovations. Both thinkers, she claims, represent a new confrontation with the world as continual flux, change, and multiplicity. Transition, transformation, instability, and rupture are the fundamental conditions in which human beings find themselves. Thus, Dickinson sets the contingencies of Becoming over the certainties of Being; she wonders if heaven is merely a compensatory fantasy; and most of all she understands a perceptual and epistemological perspectivism as more linguistic and rhetorical than visual. In emphasizing these aspects of Nietzsche and Dickinson, Wolosky foregrounds the view of Nietzsche promulgated in poststructuralist and deconstructive interpretations.

In “Emily Dickinson, Pragmatism, and the Conquests of Mind,” Renée Tursi similarly emphasizes epistemological skepticism and ontological contingency but places it in an American context running from Emerson to Richard Rorty and centered on William James. To read Dickinson as a pragmatist, Tursi stresses the experimental, tentative aspects of her poetic assertions as well as the way they observe and appreciate the minute transformations involved in all perception and cognition. According to Tursi, Dickinson’s form of skeptical inquiry links to a way of being in the world that fits with James’s pragmatism – namely, retaining systems of metaphysical and social interconnectivity within epistemological uncertainty. The result is optimistic, at least insofar as the absence of fixed knowledge undergirds Dickinson’s hope for immortality.

Drawing especially on *Being and Nothingness* but attentive to the broad range of existentialist thinking, Farhang Erfani’s essay, “Dickinson and Sartre on Facing the Brutality of Brute Existence,” argues that both Sartre and Dickinson underscore the uncanny and sometimes terrifying oddity of our being in the world. The world is without prior meaning, and both Sartre and Dickinson find in this the possibility for freedom, authenticity, and (new) meaning. Erfani contrasts Dickinson’s sense of this oddity with Sartre’s post-Hegelian contrast of the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi*, ultimately proposing that Dickinson seeks a specific kind of authenticity, one that is a corollary of intimacy.

Like Sartre’s in drawing out Heidegger’s existential analytics, Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy is different in the way it is dominated by attention to the Other. In “The Infinite in Person: Levinas and Dickinson,” Megan Craig uses Levinas’s emphasis on the infinite yet antinomian responsibility



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

we owe to other persons to draw forth a Dickinson whose comparative seclusion and obvious interest in exploring her own subjectivity are crucially shaped by encounters with the other. To be in the presence of others is to be subject to the ethical demands they impose upon the self, and the result is an ethics of fragmentation and resistance to closure. It is not so much that Dickinson finds herself called to ethical behavior in the world as that she finds an ethical value in resisting closure of selves as such, both her own and those of others around her.

Marianne Noble and Jed Deppman also stress phenomenological vulnerability. Focusing upon the problem of perceptual discrimination, Noble's "Dickinson on Perception and Consciousness: A Dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty" emphasizes the embodied, context-dependent nature of epistemology and ontology for both the poet and the philosopher. Anticipating Merleau-Ponty's conviction that embodiment determines the sense we make of the world, and also the "we" who make that sense, Dickinson thinks through the inconsistencies between such notions and the dualist convictions promulgated in her Calvinist culture. The result for her is neither a secure Calvinist conviction nor a confident phenomenology but a poetics of "invigorated perception."

"Wonder" in Dickinson or Merleau-Ponty translates in Heidegger better as the astonishment (*Thaumazein*) before all Being that the early Greeks understood. In "Astonished Thinking: Dickinson and Heidegger," Deppman makes a virtue out of what other critics have lamented as Dickinson's frequent bafflement and incomprehension before the Being of beings. Noting that the poet and the philosopher share existential themes (being-towards-death, the corrosive influence of the They, the consequences of living in a post-Christian world), Deppman argues that while hardly abandoning "philosophical" modes of thinking, both Dickinson and Heidegger expect the poet to be the one who discloses alethic truth, which is to say the unconcealment of all that is.

In an August 1862 letter to Higginson, Dickinson responded to his comment that he was at a loss to understand her. "You say, 'Beyond your knowledge.' You would not jest with me, because I believe you – but Preceptor – you cannot mean it? All men say 'What' to me, but I thought it a fashion – " (L271). She had previously conceded that her writing had "wayward" and "uncontrolled" qualities, but did that put it beyond her readers' philosophical grasp? She did not believe that and neither do the authors of this collection.

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