

Introduction

I Stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea –
I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience –

[F926, 1865]

Emily Dickinson grew up in the middle of an ideological war. At stake was what it means to be human. Also at stake was an idea of immutable truth upon which the structures of society ought to be built. The war was for the hearts and minds of the educated West, on behalf of God, morality, and truth according to one side, and against superstition and dogmatism according to the other. If one side might call the choice that between faith and doubt, the other side might characterize the choice as between certitude and humility.¹ The question, in a nutshell, was whether humans are able to know God, each other, and the world (and by extension our moral and religious duties) directly by intuition and reasoning, or whether our knowledge is imperfect, accidental, customary, and even fictive, a product of unconscious perceptual processing, the making of connections (called “associations”) through the mass of impressions coming into consciousness every millisecond. Were we welcomed into an already meaningful universe, or are we making it all up as we go?

In 1859, John Stuart Mill’s review of Alexander Bain’s new psychology observed the pitched battle between the “a priori” (intuitionist) and “a posteriori” (associationist) philosophies in England. The one, derived from Descartes and flourishing in Kant, insists on the mind’s priority before the world, its rational structuring of experience, while the other, deriving from Hobbes, Locke, and Hartley and brought to its apotheosis in

Hume, insists on the mind's constitution by experience. Mill sets aside European rationalism to aver that "the best extant examples of both have been produced within a recent period . . . by Scotchmen," which is to say, by thinkers deeply touched by a tradition of empirical inquiry since Bacon.² Hume's 1739 account of perceptual processing as a matter of putting together a world out of unconscious associations, and his consequent skepticism and idealism (in which we can never know reality as it is, but only our ideas of it), had been unacceptable to many. Thomas Reid's Common Sense philosophical reaction to Hume in 1764, insisting that we are fitted for and know the world directly, had produced an intuitionist or a priori realism in the English-speaking world running parallel to Kant's account of the mind's a priori rational structures (also in reaction to Hume).

Those in England who embraced Kant tended to ignore his idealist stricture that reality, the thing in itself, is unknowable; he was adopted to justify religious intuition of the Absolute. But the Scottish couldn't shake Hume's empiricism or his insistence, like Locke's, that reality in itself (like Calvinism's God) is beyond our ken. As early as 1792 and 1820, Scottish Common Sense thinkers such as Stewart and Brown (respectively) had given ground to Hume's a posteriori associationism as a psychology while bracketing ontology (admitting or embracing Hume's idealism). As the nineteenth century wore on, associationist thinking located the irresistibility of our perceptual paradigms in the biological makeup of the organism's sensory and nervous system, so that our imaginative constitution of reality is based on accidents of evolutionary history. By 1859, continued insistence on versions of Reid's a priori realism and a sponsoring God (such as by Mill's popular neo-Kantian contemporary William Hamilton) seemed more like dogmatism than argument.

Such dogmatism was welcome in America, since Scottish Common Sense philosophy and its rhetorical wing had been adopted by Calvinist clerics and their institutions of higher learning as a way to make philosophy safe for religion, or to justify religion on philosophical grounds: Emily Dickinson and her high school peers were indoctrinated.³ One could say that her education, through all of the ostensible subjects she was taught, consisted of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Philosophy of mind was both the capstone subject at a place like Amherst College and the basis of a subject like botany (since classification was crucial to thinking) at Amherst Academy. Chemistry and anatomy (especially the physiology of perception) had to do as much with religious and philosophical questions

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as did rhetoric (the appeal to another's perceptions), especially given new developments in the study of electricity. Those subjects met, perhaps surprisingly, in the nascent study of psychology. The mental and moral philosophy Dickinson learned was an unsteady and contradictory, not to say unholy, amalgam of many different "Common Sense" positions; often the associationism that was taught could not help reproducing Hume's skepticism.

New work in nerve science in the antebellum years, such as Alexander Bain's (1855) – the direct ancestor of connectionism and the embodied cognition theories of today – promised to answer the question of human consciousness by dropping metaphysics altogether. As nerve science advanced, the extent to which it was understood that our responses are physical and automatic, even unconscious, made increasingly clear that the mind is based on the entire bodily system (especially the brain and nerves). Advances in evolutionary theory, even before Darwin, implied that humans developed their perceptual processing systems in the context of environmental necessity. Whether that added up to realism (in which case we directly perceive reality) or could not mitigate idealism and nominalism (in which case our culturally constructed classifications filter or even constitute experience) was a suspended but urgent question. If societal mores and institutions could be deconstructed and then reconstructed, upon what basis were we to build them? (Perhaps this milieu accounts for the peculiar "groundlessness" felt in Dickinson and Whitman.) Eventually, roughly after the Civil War, the philosophical accounts of the mind's relation to the world Mill identified as unanswerable by psychology would collapse into pragmatism, on one hand, and naturalism, on the other.

What did Dickinson make of it all? That is the subject of this book. This book tells the story of the formation and development of a poet in the midst of a complex and contested moment in intellectual history in Britain and America. Dickinson's position in the conversation of American letters has remained uncertain. As Agnieszka Salska has observed in *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson*, "On the whole, the recognition of Dickinson's artistic rank seems to have come earlier than the mapping of her position in her own times and in the history of American literature."⁴ Worse, Dickinson has often been left out of the conversation altogether. If Dickinson's positions and practices have seemed contradictory and unprogrammable to generations of scholars, as David Porter, for example, has claimed in *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, she comes by her inconsistency honestly, not as a modernist before the fact but as a mid-nineteenth-century person, an American

Victorian steeped in religion but touched to the core by associationist thought, skepticism, and empiricism.

Elisa New in *The Regenerate Lyric* has made the case for Dickinson's participation in an American counter-tradition that rejects Emerson's Transcendental confidence. Robert Weisbuch, in *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, identifies Dickinson's skepticism as primary, writing, "what in Emerson or Whitman seems subsequent retreat and even failure is part of Dickinson's constant method from the beginning."⁵ My work here (agreeing with Jed Deppman's strong intimations in *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*) identifies associationism as the source of Dickinson's resistance to such false faiths. Dickinson's skepticism is not merely a personality quirk or Calvinist humility alone; it is the direct result of her facility with Hume's ideas (as I show in Chapter 2). Once we understand why Dickinson doesn't fit into the traditional narratives of either Romanticism or the American Renaissance (as long as those are understood as versions of Kantianism), we can ask to what extent the twentieth-century Americanist narrative fails to account for the influence of associationist philosophical and aesthetic thought, the "theory" of Dickinson's day, in mid-nineteenth-century America.

This book is also a limning of Dickinson's poetics, the theories of language, knowledge, and communication that Dickinson worked out through the poems as the basis of her practice and her charge as a poet. I argue that Dickinson's skepticism is not simply a natural predisposition of her personality, but is a deeply considered and conflicted set of philosophical, scientific, and cultural positions. Scottish Common Sense intuitionism, for example, is a skepticism of language that becomes the source of Dickinson's willingness to entertain ideas of unconscious, emotional, or bodily knowing in human experience. She goes further than Hume ever did in claiming the body as the ground for philosophy because she can update Common Sense realism with evolutionary theory, and she goes at least as far as a host of mid-century thinkers in the empiricist tradition (Berkeley, Hazlitt, Mill, Spencer, Bain) in discerning the extent to which our mental contents are determined by our perceptual habits and linguistic categories. In effect she anticipates Quine or Freud, implicitly recognizing, as do all the Scots, both conscious and unconscious perceptual processing, which is to say both linguistic and neurological systems. Missing the Scottish connection, scholars have misconstrued the extent to which Dickinson is committed to the physical constitution of human consciousness and the historicity and materiality of one of its chief modes, language. By writing poems rather than philosophical treatises, Dickinson stakes her

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all on the proposition that language's materiality matters to what and how we think.

Third, this book is an entry in the ongoing conversation among Dickinson scholars as we seek to understand a variety of issues generated by Dickinson's evidently inconsistent theories and practices, especially at the level of the manuscript. As it turns out, far from there being a gulf between Dickinson's composition methods and any sort of philosophy she might have held, I find, as I demonstrate in Chapter 1, that Dickinson's composition methods can be read as the key into an entire intellectual milieu. The manuscript variants, for example, are the visible effect of deeply contested beliefs about the importance of language to thought. In Chapter 5, I demonstrate how associative theories of memory help explain Dickinson and her culture's attachment to sentimentally powerful objects, which I argue is the key to her writing thoughts at their places on some scraps. One could say that her practices are consistent with her mostly skeptical, associationist philosophy, that she has a poetics, but that that poetics is riven with questions, tests a variety of positions, and lightly holds its answers.

My larger aim in writing this book is to put an American mid-nineteenth-century intellectual-historical foundation under Dickinson's apparent postmodernism, and, by extension, under our own. Studies such as *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, Jed Deppman's *Trying to Think*, and Theo Davis's *Ornamental Aesthetics* draw comparisons between Dickinson's poetry and certain strains of Continental philosophy or American pragmatism; my work is intended to make their historical connections to Dickinson's philosophical milieu and poetics easier to see.⁶ I find that, because of the long shadow of Hume in the associationist tradition, Dickinson was interested in thinking about the embodied nature of human consciousness, on the cusp of giving up metaphysics entirely, on the cusp of pragmatism, and already taking the linguistic turn.

My other aim is to rescue Dickinson's poetry from charges of political irrelevance, even irresponsibility. Much of Dickinson's writing consists of abstract statements deliberately stripped of particularizing contexts, including the largest social and political questions of the day, such as slavery. Dickinson, as Weisbuch put it, "never writes tracts."⁷ Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues in *Touching Liberty* that Dickinson's penchant to recast the "differences that rend society" as a "split within the self" may be "uncompromisingly radical," but that "it also disables all programs of social reform."⁸ Such an analysis in the 1990s surely maps onto deconstruction's threatened disabling of identity politics. What's more, such a conflict

in our own day maps back onto Hume's associationistic deconstruction of matter, causation, and the self – the disabling, it would seem, of the very bases for society. Scottish Common Sense aimed, in riposte, to establish the basis for rights in the sturdy bedrock of a given human nature.

The problem, or perhaps the glory, of Dickinson's time is that everybody seemed to be a little bit right, and attempts to settle certain questions empirically, such as by nerve science or evolutionary theory, left unanswered the bigger problems of dualism and human consciousness. The question of Human Nature, which Hume had hoped to "bring a little more into fashion," was raging.⁹ Hume, of course, was writing in the eighteenth century to dismantle the dogmatisms of church and state, to enable a broadly democratic politics, and to unsettle humanity's necessary fictions. If Humean skepticism undid all bases for action, nevertheless one had to act. (And this is the sort of double bind a Calvinist would embrace.) This book examines Dickinson's analysis of power (and where it comes from) in Chapter 3, while in Chapter 4, I demonstrate how Dickinson's pragmatic renovation of our perceptions in abstract representations of experience has the health of society in mind.

Certain philosophical problems are activated by the impetus to write, but it is equally true that Dickinson chooses writing poetry as her philosophical praxis.

Part of the aim of this book is to envision Dickinson as a philosopher in her own right, as Jed Deppman in *Trying to Think* has suggested we do, or to envision her as arriving at her poetics by explicitly (and also implicitly) engaging the terms of the philosophies around her. This book, therefore, refers to a variety of intellectual frameworks, all having to do with the Scottish philosophical project of understanding Human Nature, available to Dickinson as she thinks about her poetic values.¹⁰ The predominant frameworks are associationism, with Hume's epistemological skepticism in its train, versus the philosophy of Common Sense. Neither associationism nor Common Sense is a monolith; in fact, most Common Sense thinkers after Reid adopted versions of associationism, and Brown went so far as to adopt Hume's skepticism as well. Dickinson's conflicts, then, are not binary but complex.

As Cairns Craig, in *Associationism and the Literary Imagination*, has pointed out, associationism as an idea or a set of ideas has had a long and generative history, not only in the philosophy of the Scottish seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (in such thinkers as Locke and Hartley) but also

in nineteenth-century British aesthetic theory and literature and in the development of British empiricism and scientific inquiry, especially in the biological sciences.¹¹ Cairns quotes an article by Robert M. Young, who argues that associationism is “the most basic, the most fecund, and the most pervasive explanatory principle in the human and, to a lesser extent, the biological sciences,” and that associationist ideas have been as generative, and as controversial for religionists, as Darwin’s theory of natural selection.¹²

The basic idea, as, for instance, Dugald Stewart, a Common Sense philosopher, states it in *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792), is “that when two subjects of thought, for instance, have been repeatedly presented to the mind in conjunction, the one has a tendency to suggest the other.”¹³ Or, put even more simply, “that one thought is often suggested to the mind by another.”¹⁴ Out of this simple mental fact all our complex thoughts and emotions arise. Stewart observes that associations form the texture of our consciousness: “By means of the Association of Ideas, a constant current of thoughts, if I may use the expression, is made to pass through the mind while we are awake. Sometimes the current is interrupted, and the thoughts diverted into a new channel.”¹⁵ This connectivity in thought is perhaps most observable in the actions of memory, but it is no less active in the processes of perception and learning.

A century earlier, John Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), had observed that though we can analyze simple ideas (such as a particular color, odor, or shape) present to us in an object, “the qualities that affect our senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended that there is no separation, no distance between them.”¹⁶ The ideas present in, say, an orange come already associated by nature. A rational thinker reflects upon these given associations and may even select and recombine certain simple ideas (including those generated by reflection) to produce complex ideas less available to the senses, such as the idea of beauty or of gratitude. But Locke cautions that the influence of chance experience and custom may result in wild, irrational associations, superstitions, and dogmatisms: “ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some men’s minds that it is very hard to separate them.”¹⁷ The mind itself makes these connections, but they seem to harden into almost physical habits, “all which seems to be but trains of motion in the animal spirits, which, once set agoing, continue in the steps they have been used to, which, by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy, and as it were natural.”¹⁸ This

physiological aspect of association – the obstructions and pliability of matter in the body – seems to cause Locke the most distress.

Locke's examples propose at least four types of association: natural associations in an object of sense, complex but rational associations (due to reflection), complex but irrational associations (due to chance or custom, but also due to the physiology of the nerves), and the linear associative "path" or "motion" of thinking (or not-thinking). Association, then, for Locke, is both how the mind thinks and what the mind does – crucial to our rationality but error prone and automatic. Finally, or rather furthermore, since we capture or label our ideas in words, unruly associating "gives sense to jargon, demonstration to absurdities, and consistency to nonsense, and is the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said of all the errors in the world."¹⁹

David Hume, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), far from abhorring the automatic and habitual nature of association, embraced as the key to his argument that our thinking was not, in fact, rationally coordinated with nature. Hume identified three principles by which association proceeds, which are resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. As impressions come to consciousness, if they are similar, they will be classed together. (It is as if successive frames of film are sped up to produce the illusion of the "same" object.) If items are contiguous in time or space, they will be associated, like a leaf to a tree. When we notice an event, we look for its cause (which is often a matter of contiguity in time and space). Out of these three mind moves, according to Hume, the associating imagination builds up the tissue of our perceptions. Though they're all we've got to go on, the imagination's associative operations present to us a world we'd do well to take with a grain of salt.

Associationism threatened materialism and skepticism. Two of Locke's observations about associations, that they are prone to irrationality and that they are physical habits, have to do with the body, with experience ungoverned by rational ordering. Locke had studied physiology in the seventeenth century with Thomas Willis, who located the soul in the brain and nerves, and associationism could be taken to imply both the passivity of the perceiver and the automaticity of the entire perceptual system.²⁰ (Such fears were only confirmed by David Hartley's *Observations on Man* [1749], which accounted for perception and thought as wholly physiological processes.) Though it was a promising path out of dualism, associationism tended to imply the collapse of mind into body. Associationism also tended to imply epistemological skepticism because it meant that the

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contents of consciousness are put together by a process that may not coordinate our mental representations with reality.

But Locke (well before Hume) was already struggling with skepticism on other grounds. A huge problem for Locke is the question of how we come to have the contents of our consciousness – our ideas – in the first place. What if our perceptual experience of the world is wholly imaginary? He suggests that our knowledge is trustworthy when “there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things.”²¹ How one judges this conformity, without access to reality itself, is the issue, however. Ultimately he relies on a literal notion of causation, and/or the coordinations of God. Our ideas, coming from sensations, are literally caused by the world. But Locke has not convinced himself of their correspondent truth. All we can know is that “something” exists: “In fine, then, when our sense do actually convey into our understandings any idea, we cannot but be satisfied that there doth something at that time really exist without us.”²² We can trust that there is a reality, but we can’t trust our ideas about it.

In short, Locke’s incipient skepticism is irritated by associationism, but it’s fully engaged by the problem of how our ideas are caused. Where Locke’s doubt had been mollified by recourse to the Deity, Hume pounces, but Hume’s skepticism is merely Locke’s taken to its logical conclusion: he surmises that all our ideas, however necessary to our negotiations in the world, are fictive – that is, made rather than given. He allows that we cannot do without these necessary fictions, but that we should question them. Hume questions the idea of God and the idea of an independently and eternally existing self or spirit, but he also rules out the security of metaphysical concepts such as matter and the “power” in causation. In fact, Hume’s attack on causation loosens the relationship between the perceiving mind and the world altogether: one cannot even assert that objects “cause” sensations in us, since we remain ignorant of the nature of the necessity we impute to causation.

The first Common Sense philosopher, Thomas Reid, directly responded to Hume’s skepticism in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) and in the much shorter and clearer *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785). Reid thinks Locke’s and Hume’s division of consciousness from the world, as the precondition of the attempt to learn how we know the world, is precisely the problem. (He also abhors Hume’s attack on causation.) Locke’s notion that the mind represents the world to itself through “ideas” (corresponding to our sensory perceptions and to our reflections) interposes a medium that does nothing to solve the problem of how we get our ideas in the first place. Reid proposes that we

might just as well dispense with representations like “ideas” and admit that we know the world directly through our senses, that they are trustworthy until proven otherwise, and that the compelling nature of our inferences indicates that they are as fitted to reality, and as trustworthy, as our reason (both given by God for the purpose). In effect, Reid turns Hume on his head by accepting Hume’s analysis of the nonrational basis for our concepts and arguing that our indispensable habits of thought (such as a propensity to trust our senses), however nonrational, are inborn and orient us to reality. Reid’s position is known as Common Sense, but it also goes by Common Sense realism (since we perceive the world directly), and by “intuitionism,” since it’s by our intuitive first principles (such as a conviction, for example, that our memories are of real things past) that we navigate in the world.²³

But Reid’s attack on “ideas” did not beat back the explanatory power of associationism as a psychology. Reid’s inheritor Dugald Stewart, having accepted the Common Sense idea of the trustworthy nature of nonrational intuitions, assimilates the association of ideas to Common Sense as yet another set of intuitive mind moves. He accepts Reid’s dismissal of “ideas” but avers that the mind’s associated contents (including emotions) constitute, in any one moment, a complex change of state. Stewart advances an argument for the presence in the mind of unconscious associations, and he assimilates logic as itself a form of intuitive association. He even accepts versions of epistemological skepticism, since Stewart eschews metaphysical speculation for the more pressing work of examining the processes of consciousness.

Stewart’s student Thomas Brown went further still toward dividing the study of the mind from metaphysics, combining Reid’s intuitionism with Hume’s skepticism and associationism in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820). As Thomas Dixon notes, Brown, trained as a physician and not a cleric, agreed with Reid that the compelling nature of our intuitive mind moves was an inbuilt or innate bit of mental equipment, but he otherwise excoriated Reid’s realism and vigorously defended Hume’s destruction of causation, working from what Dixon calls a “sparse metaphysics, and phenomenalist epistemology.”²⁴ Brown accepted Hume’s associationism, and the mechanisms of contiguity, similarity, and attributive causation in perception and thought, while being careful, in Common Sense fashion, to depict the mind in complex states or affections rather than as having “ideas.” But he had no illusions about our ability to know reality. In a telling quip, he gives Reid his due but sides with Hume, acknowledging their closeness: “Reid bawled out that we must