Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, Gary Lee Stonum (eds.)


Poets have often been crucial for the development of phenomenology. Hölderlin, Homer, and Sophocles inspired Heidegger, Stéphane Mallarmé was an important influence on Jacques Derrida, Paul Valéry provided insights for Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl ended *Ideas II* with a poetic citation from Horace, *Epistles*, 1, 18, 84: *tua res agitur*; “this matter concerns you,” or “you have a stake in this.” (Husserl 1952/1989, p. 430). Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) writes powerfully on themes of death, language, God, and finding meaning in life. It is time to add Dickinson’s writings to *tua res agitur*; in great poetry, phenomenology has a stake.

Three Dickinson scholars, Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum, have edited a volume of essays on *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*. The collection divides naturally into two sections: “Dickinson and the Philosophy of Her Time” and “Dickinson and Modern Philosophy.”

Michael Kearns has written the first paper, “Emily Dickinson: Anatomist of the Mind.” The main components of mental philosophy found in textbooks at Dickinson’s schools were Scottish Common Sense philosophy with its emphasis on the faculties of the mind, and an associational psychology associated with John Locke. Dickinson picks up on the Common Sense philosophical goal of being “anatomist of the mind,” utilizing words such as “mind,” “heart,” “thought,” “brain” and “nerves.” Dickinson, however, often gives a materialist twist to her exploration of the mind; e.g., “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (FP340) and “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” (FP687B).1

In Melanie Hubbard’s “Dickinson, Hume, and the Common Sense Legacy,” Emily’s poetic language is contrasted with that of the Common Sense philosophers. Although these thinkers asked her to believe in the immediacy of the mind’s connection to the real, Dickinson’s poetry describe “an experience in which the speaker’s sensations are so intense as to render her unable to process the world, even to establish whether it exists” (39).

Jane Donahue Eberwein wrote “Outgrowing Genesis? Dickinson, Darwin, and the Higher Criticism.” Emily discussed Darwin in her correspondence, and several of her poems make reference to geological discoveries that refuted a literal understanding of Biblical chronology. Her schooling and home environ-

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1 I will cite Dickinson’s poems by the poem numbers (not the page numbers) in the three-volume 1998 Franklin Variorum edition (*FP*), and Dickinson’s letters from the 1958 Johnson and Ward’s The Letters of Emily Dickinson (*L*).
ment had stressed both science and religion, and she looked toward science for the hope of immortality (52).

The contribution by Linda Freedman, “Touching the Wounds: Emily Dickinson and Christology,” was one of the essays I found most brilliant. The main influences on Emily’s Christology were her Puritan, Calvinistic heritage, which she did not fully accept, and contemporary liberal Christianity and comparative religion, dominant in New England intellectual circles. Emily developed a poetic Christology, describing Christ’s body, as Dorothy Oberhaus has noted, with such phrases as “second face,” “divinest tiptoe,” and “highest head” (69). In her 1877 letter to her mentor and first publisher, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she wrote, “To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine he was uncontented ‘til he had been human” (72; L519). Utilizing her wide Biblical reading (the kenosis, or Christ’s act of emptying himself of God-like qualities, in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians 2.7), Dickinson presents the humanity of Jesus.

Daniel Fineman presents “Against Mastery: Dickinson Contra Hegel and Schlegel.” Dickinson manifested an interest in German idealism, at times mediated through the American Transcendentalists, George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle, and at times through her reading Goethe in the original German.

The final essay in this first section is “’Perfect from the Pod’: Instant Learning in Dickinson and Kierkegaard” by Jim von der Heydt. In her letters to Higginson, Emily included four poems, all of which address the question of how, and even whether, learning is possible. Von der Heydt’s comparison of Kierkegaard’s simile of learning to dance (to learn to dance, the learner must stand still) with Dickinson’s poem “I cannot dance opon my Toes—/No Man instructed me” (FP 381) is ingenious. The author’s analysis of “Safe in their Alabaster chambers—” (FP 124) relies on version F, although Franklin gives seven variations. The poem occurred in the form of a letter to her sister-in-law and friend, Susan Dickinson; while Dickinson characteristically revised her poems multiple times, this is the only poem that Dickinson is known to have changed in response to someone else’s opinion, because Susan was not satisfied with the second stanza (Hart and Smith, 1998, 97–99). This fact seems relevant in a chapter devoted to poetry and learning.

The latter half of this book concerns “Dickinson and Modern Philosophy.” The introductory essay is “Truth and Lie in Emily Dickinson and Friedrich Nietzsche” by Shira Wolosky. The author claims that Dickinson anticipated Nietzsche’s thinking in several ways, through considering the world as unstable, always being in flux, and a critique of traditional notions of immortality. Nietzsche finds truth only within the tropes and images of its representation; Dickinson, for Wolosky, does the same in: