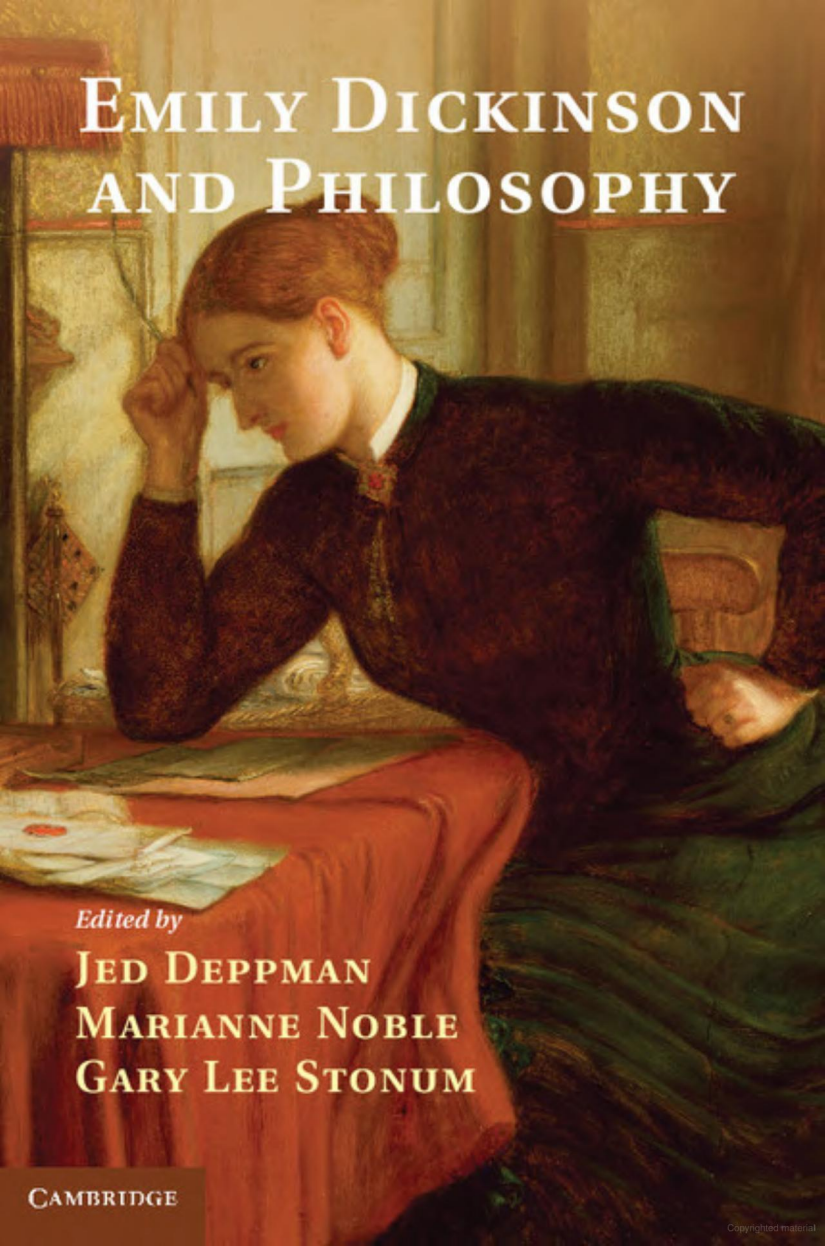
Emily Dickinson and Philosophy



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EMILY DICKINSON AND PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

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

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.

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,

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.

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.

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."

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

"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

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 aletheic 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.

PART I

Dickinson and the Philosophy of Her Time

CHAPTER 1

Emily Dickinson: Anatomist of the Mind

Michael Kearns

> "'We thank thee Oh Father' for these strange Minds, that enamor us against thee."
>
> Emily Dickinson to Mrs. T. W. Higginson, L472

Mrs. Higginson is not the recipient one might have expected for Dickinson's thanks to God "for these strange Minds, that enamor us against" Him. But the statement does reflect Dickinson's abiding sense that the human mind is not only "strange" but may work against a sanative state, undermining happiness and belief. The mind, as Dickinson portrayed it, can operate independently of the executive self, or "I." Contrary to the established psychology of her time – which was based on Scottish Common Sense philosophy as developed by Thomas Reid and held that the human mind was so designed as to develop naturally toward rule by reason and toward a spiritual awareness of God's divine plan – she focused on how the will, reason, and emotion, independently or in concert, could become "enamored" of ideas, beliefs, and passions that were conventionally regarded as unhealthy. Nor did she regard such a condition as immoral; instead, she portrayed it as the result of natural processes. At a time when the study of the mind was generally considered a branch of philosophy (termed "mental science" or "mental philosophy") and had the goal of fostering the culture's beliefs and values, Dickinson in her poems (but oddly, not in her letters) seems to have taken seriously Reid's 1764 call for an anatomy of the mind. She thus may be seen as having more in common with the developing interest in physiology than with the established mental science of the first half of the nineteenth century. She applied her anatomical focus to the dramatizing of questions central to mental philosophy, especially whether the mind had a material component, how the faculties of mind were related to each other and to the external world, and where the "I" or self was located with respect to the intellect, the will, and the emotions, but she gave to these questions a decidedly materialist twist.

The online *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* provides a snapshot quantification of Dickinson's fascination with mental phenomena. Words such as "the mind," "the heart," "thought" (verb and noun), "brain," and "nerves" occur often: there are more than eighty instances of "mind" in its various forms in the poems, close to twice as many of "heart." Dickinson frequently personifies or anthropomorphizes these entities. Mind, heart, brain, and nerves – Dickinson figures all of these as living, often self-willed, and occasionally conflicting entities within the world of her poems. She goes well beyond the clichés of folk psychology (my mind is weary, my heart aches), showing how these elements are experienced but not privileging any one faculty as being more in touch with God. This set of techniques can be read as her response and contribution to the nascent science of psychology. (John D. Morell's 1853 *Elements of Psychology* was the first book published in England with the word "psychology" in the title; Frederick Rauch's 1840 *Psychology, or a View of the Human Soul Including Anthropology* was the first U.S.-published book whose title contained "psychology" and was published in an adaptation "for the use of colleges" in 1850.) Psychology was not yet divorced from philosophy but was tending in that direction, following the lead of the natural sciences in searching for basic elements (such as atoms, cells, reflexes), methods of quantification, and holistic field theories (Hilgard 12–13). Like their philosopher cousins, practitioners of this emerging discipline grappled with the relationship between physiology and thought; unlike those cousins, psychologists tended to take seriously the possibility that the mind not only relied on matter but was itself material.

This possibility looms in the work of Alexander Bain, whose various publications were the most important English-language mental-science texts from 1855 until 1890, when William James came out with *The Principles of Psychology*. Bain's first book, *Senses and the Intellect* (1855), begins with a substantial section on the most up-to-date neurological information available, including the speed of nerve impulses and the distinction between sensory and motor nerves; in fact this was the first English-language psychological work to begin in such a way. Bain presented this information, however, as "introductory"; the book's main business is considering "the subject of Mind proper, or the enumeration and explanation of the States and Varieties of Feeling, the Modes of Action, and the Powers of Intelligence, comprised in the mental nature of mind," a subject he treats primarily from the perspective of "faculty psychology" (quoted in Kearns 106). Thus, although Bain argued for doing away with the long-standing notion of a "sensorium" (a physical chamber for processing, storing, and recovering sensory data), he offered no alternative explanation of how phenomena from the external world eventuate in thoughts

and could not demonstrate an unbroken causal chain from nerve impulses to thoughts.[1] This problem vexed him enough that in later editions of *Senses and the Intellect* he resurrected the sensorium (Kearns 106–7). That said, Bain was clear that "[t]he Brain is the principal, although not the sole, organ of mind, and its leading functions are mental ... Sensation, emotion, volition, and intelligence are suspended" when the hemispheres are destroyed or severely damaged, and any bodily movement which still occurs is without purpose, proving the dependence of mind on brain (*Mental* 5).

Dickinson's academic exposure to mental science predated Bain's work, being based instead on the faculty psychology promulgated most notably by Thomas Reid (in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* of 1764 and his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* of 1785), refined and transmitted by Dugald Stewart, and disseminated in the United States by Thomas Upham, Thomas Brown, Joseph Haven, and others. The Scottish tradition of Reid and Stewart may have been even more important in America than elsewhere, because its emphasis on education tallied with the development of public schooling in the United States (Hearnshaw 95). According to faculty psychology, humans possessed definite and discrete mental powers or capacities such as the will, ideation, and feeling, which were associated with specific physiological functions. Reid held that "first principles, which are really the dictates of common sense, and directly opposed to absurdities in opinion, will always, from the constitution of human nature, support themselves, and gain, rather than lose ground among mankind" (*Essays* 607). Two of these first principles are a belief that the material world exists and that every change must have a cause. Others, such as "the distinction between substances, and the qualities belonging to them; between thought, and the objects of thought," are evident "from what is common in the structure of all languages" (*Essays* 611–12). The most important such distinction for Reid was between matter and mind; he regarded the mind as unequivocally immaterial (*Inquiry* 255–7).

Although unwilling to admit that mind was a product of material processes, Reid believed that as an "anatomist of the mind" he was engaged in natural history (*Inquiry* 3). His anatomical method consisted mainly of reflecting on the processes of his own mind, guided by analogy and classification (*Essays* 504–5). Reflection was essential, Reid argued, because

[1] In 1690 John Locke had referred to the brain as "the mind's presence-room" – chapter iii, Book I of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Although that metaphor came to be commonly used, it was not uniformly embraced. Reid for one mocked it, humorously hypothesizing that the optic nerves were made up of empty tubes which transmitted the rays of light from the retina to "the very seat of the soul, until they flash in her face" (*Inquiry* 196).

the mind's "original perceptions and motions ... are so mixed, compounded and decompounded, by habits, associations, and abstractions, that it is hard to know what they were originally" (*Inquiry* 5). Thus, although he used and even emphasized the language of natural history, and although he recognized that consciousness was "impressed" (shaped) by the tangible world, Reid consistently sought to conduct the study of mind in a mental rather than a material realm. Like all mental scientists until the second half of the nineteenth century, he argued that the principal goal of his discipline was to better appreciate the handiwork of God: knowing more about how the mind developed and functioned would lead to greater self-knowledge, which in a well-regulated mind would naturally culminate in recognizing God as creator. This goal, shared by moral philosophy, also informed the era's developmental psychology and thus was central to education: early in life, the mind acquires perceptions that are grouped by the laws of association, but as the mind matures it develops the ability to reflect as well as to select among experiences (Kearns 75). According to Stewart, the principal task of education was to "associate an infant's first conceptions of the Deity with the early impressions produced on the heart by the beauties of nature," thus helping to ensure that the mature individual will be sensible of the "innumerable proofs" of the universe's "harmony of design" (2: 73–5; see Kearns 77).

The leading thinkers spent considerable effort classifying the faculties of mind: Bain for instance identifying three, Reid naming a dozen. Underlying this activity were two unvarying principles: the faculties could not be reduced to specific material locations in the brain, and the mind was a unified and immaterial entity, the faculties being powers rather than compartments or divisions. Faculties required sensory data in order to develop but were not limited by those data. The concept of cerebral localization, so important to the later development of psychology as a science grounded in physiology, was simply not accepted by the established psychology of the first half of the nineteenth century. (See Robert M. Young.) This was the case even though the faculty psychologists described themselves as following the methods of natural science. Stewart makes this point at some length:

> Upon a slight attention to the operations of our own minds, they appear to be so complicated, and so infinitely diversified, that it seems to be impossible to reduce them to any general laws. In consequence, however, of a more accurate examination, the prospect clears up; and the phenomena, which appeared at first to be too various for our comprehension, are found to be the result of a comparatively small number of simple and uncompounded faculties, or of simple and uncompounded principles of action. These

> faculties and principles are the general laws of our constitution, and hold the same place in the philosophy of mind, that the general laws we investigate in physics, hold in that branch of science. (II, 51–2)

Stewart's assertion notwithstanding, faculty psychology at best was only a taxonomy; no faculty psychologist could predict behavior or could prove why a person would have the kinds of thoughts that Dickinson found so chillingly fascinating.

The other main component of orthodox psychology of the first half of the nineteenth century was associationism, which had been given its most complete expression in David Hartley's *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, first published in 1749. (The phrase "association of ideas" in this sense was first used by Locke in 1700, in the fourth edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.) Like faculty psychology, association psychology was based on cataloging the laws of association and analyzing how these laws lead to specific ideas. Another similarity is that associationists thought of themselves as practicing empirical science. Most of the faculty psychologists accepted the validity of associationist principles but maligned Hartley himself as a mechanist and materialist, in part because he refused to admit the existence of innate or intuitive ideas, and in part because he grounded his quite reasonable discussion of associations on a speculative theory of vibrations in the brain's "medullary particles" (*Observations* 5). These medullary vibrations, he asserted, are occasioned by impressions from external objects and are transmitted through the nerves to the brain, where they are somehow transformed into ideas and "presented to the mind" (8–11).

When Hartley's theory of vibrations became widely known at the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks to a new edition of the *Observations* brought out by his son, he was attacked by mental scientists who did not wish to see the mind reduced to a mechanism, an outcome that was becoming more plausible as physiologists measured the speed of nerve impulses, located some functions in specific areas of the brain, and better understood sense organs (Brett 436). The accusations of materialism were not entirely fair. His book followed the same pattern as those by Reid and his followers: it began with a statement of propositions or principles, moved to a discussion of human actions, and concluded with a celebration of the mind's divinity by asserting the doctrine of "ultimate, unlimited happiness to all," which should elevate "our hearts . . . to the highest pitch of love, adoration, and gratitude towards God" (*Observations* 458). Furthermore, the theory of associations explained how the ordering of sense impressions

(Kearns 75). Upham describes the relationship this way: "Inanimate matter seems to have been designed and appointed by Providence as the handmaid and nurse of the mind in the days of its infancy. . . Material eyes were given to the soul. . . that it might see. . . and material hands, that it might handle" (*Elements of Mental Philosophy* 119). The concept underlying this passage is the opposite of cerebral localization. Upham's metaphor of the soul controlling eyes and hands reflects his commitment to the mind as unitary and immaterial. Whether termed mind or soul, there is a single active power whose developmental goal is to comprehend God's creation using all available means. This power has been designed with the ability to "become acquainted with whatever is visible and tangible"; Upham feels no need to be more precise about the relationship between mind (or soul) and the tangible world than to say it is God's design.

To sum up thus far, the mental science most prominent during the years when Dickinson was in school and until around 1860 gestured significantly toward the methods of natural science and made extensive use of metaphors drawn from physics and biology. These gestures, however, tended to preface the main business, which was describing how the relationship between mind and world was designed to lead to a recognition of God's presence and of education's role in furthering that end. The division in the mental scientists' rhetoric of presentation between prefatory material stressing empiricism and the body of the text revealing a strong idealistic bent prefigures the nineteenth-century shift in the study of mind from a moral to a natural philosophy, from the methods of introspection and deduction based on the rules of logic to the methods of experimentation based on anatomy and physiology. There was a true conflict here, between identifying the mind with the brain and localizing functions within the brain, on the one hand, and on the other treating the mind as divine, immaterial, and unified. According to Daniel N. Robinson, "in the fifteen centuries beginning in A.D. 200, there is no record of a serious psychological work devoid of religious allusions," but "since 1930, there has not been a major psychological work expressing a need for spiritual terms in an attempt to comprehend" human psychology (279). The tensions leading to this transformation are most dramatic in the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in the contrast between the mental science Dickinson would have learned from Upham's textbook and others in that line, and her consistent emphasis on the tangible quality of nerve impulses, the mind/brain identity, the felt reality of internal conflicts, and the illogical quality of some mental activity.

To locate mind in body means to take seriously the felt, tangible reality of internal conflicts. Dickinson scholars have never questioned that, as a lyric

poet, she diligently recorded what grief, transport, and so forth actually felt like. Suzanne Juhasz, for instance, has demonstrated at length that, for Dickinson, mental events were as tangibly real as events in the external physical world and that she understood the mind to be a tangible place. Juhasz, however, takes the mind as singular and conflates Dickinson's references to mind, brain, soul, and so forth. To consider Dickinson as an anatomist of the mind, however, is to recognize that she worked with two general scenarios: a single self experiencing extreme sensations located implicitly or explicitly within the brain, and a collection of internal actors involved in conflict. Her most explicit statement of the mind / brain identity is "The Brain – is wider than the Sky –" (Fr598). Obviously, the poem is expressing a metaphorical relationship in its first two stanzas, but the third arguably shifts to metonymy, as the human brain can literally be weighed. Read thus, the brain – the physical organ – is where meaning is made (syllables are distinguished); the poem is not just about the power of the human imagination but explicitly critiques orthodox psychology's privileging of mind's immateriality.

A more complex problem for anyone considering seriously the concept of cerebral localization is where to place the self, how "I" relates functionally and spatially to the mind and the brain. Dickinson dramatizes this problem in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (Fr340) and "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –" (Fr867B). The psychology of Dickinson's time relied heavily on a basic notion of continuity: the mind was a single entity and thoughts flowed in currents. But the poems contradict that notion: the "thought behind" can't be joined "Unto the thought before," and the simile "Like Balls – opon a Floor –" gives the impression of the thoughts as discrete bodies. Yet the mind, brain, and thoughts are not here portrayed as independent agents; this extreme sensation of the brain itself being split ("I felt a Cleaving in my Mind – / As if my Brain had split") takes place within a unitary "I." The same is true of the more extensive "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." This poem's action lies within the speaker's brain: mourners treading, a drumlike "Service" beating, the numbing of the "mind," the creaking of "Boots of Lead" across the "Soul," finally the breaking of the "Plank in Reason." Brain, Mind, and Soul are all implicitly subservient to the unitary "I."

As with "The Brain – is wider than the Sky," distinguishing metaphor from metonym in this poem is difficult. Part of the poem's complexity results from the fact that the "I" seems both located within and constitutive of a space, which could literally be the sensorium, the "presence room" of the mind in which sensations are perceived and become thoughts. (Dickinson's 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, compiled

by Noah Webster, defines "sensorium" as "the seat of sense and perception," a definition not significantly different from the one offered by Bain.) Thus, the brain is a room, the floor of which is the soul ("And then I heard them lift a Box / And creak across my Soul / With those same Boots of Lead, again"). The images fail to coalesce into a coherent spatial relationship, however. "I" may be in the Brain room but may also be located on a lower level whose floor is "Reason," so that when the "Plank" breaks, I drop "down, and down." How far down the poem doesn't say, although it is a place where "knowing" is "Finished." This poem demonstrates on the one hand how well the sensorium functions either as metaphor or metonym, even though no such space or organ has ever been located in the brain, and on the other hand how cautious Dickinson was – if indeed she had in mind the sensorium – not to over-literalize by establishing an actual location for every faculty or sensation. Her goal seems always to have been to render the experience in ways that foreground sensations rather than to craft a system.

The second scenario makes Brain, Soul, and Mind agents in the internal drama rather than mere recipients of sensations. A fascinating poem in this regard is "The first Day's Night had come" (Fr423). This poem presents a set of entities – the speaking self, Soul, Brain, and "That person that I was" – all located within the single body of the speaker and all with some independent power to act. The Soul is first mentioned: being instructed by "I" to "sing," the soul replies that "her Strings [are] snapt – / Her Bow – to atoms blown," so the speaker sets about "mend[ing] her." Next a huge and horrible day looms, causing "My Brain" to laugh, "And tho' 'tis Years ago – that Day – / My Brain keeps giggling – still." This stanza implies that the speaker would have stopped the "giggling" if possible but instead only "mumbled – like a fool." The poem's concluding stanza drives home this sense of fragmentation and internal conflict: "And Something's odd – within – / That person that I was – / And this One – do not feel the same – / Could it be Madness – this?" This stanza is not simply an example of the mind being "divided against itself," a condition that was frequently portrayed by Romantic and later artists; Brain and Soul are here deemed independent. Certainly, the pair of selves, "That person that I was" and the present person, feel dissimilar, but the speaking self also emphasizes a sense of alienation even from the present person by referring to it abstractly as "this One" – it is not "myself" or even "my present self." The fact that "Something's odd – within" further underlines that alienation; the speaker cannot identify the oddity but regards it as significant enough to justify the upper-case emphasis. The final line's grammatical overdetermination works the same way, "it" and "this" combining to call attention to the speaker's

uncertainty. The concluding question is almost beside the point; perhaps the speaker is experiencing madness, but what is of more interest is the anatomizing of this condition, not in a clinical or disapproving manner nor with any expressed interest in healing but in a way that recognizes the power of the internal forces.

Careful mental scientist that she was, Dickinson also attended to the experience of conflict both between interior and exterior selves and between several interior selves. She consistently presented these conflicts as multifaceted, for instance in the well-known "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –" (Fr407B). On the one hand, "The Brain has Corridors – surpassing / Material Place": a person easily encounters within these passageways the "cooler Host," the "[internal] Ghost." That "Ghost" (possibly in the Christian sense of Spirit) seems an avatar of the self. More terrifying is to encounter "Ourself behind ourself, concealed"; it would be preferable to encounter an "Assassin hid in our Apartment." This sensation of discovering a hidden and possibly malicious second "self" has been shared by anyone who has for instance thought vicious or evil thoughts; we wonder where those thoughts came from and if we indeed harbor darker selves capable of unspeakable actions. This being a Dickinson poem, a further twist is present: "The Body – borrows a Revolver – / He bolts the Door – / O'erlooking a superior spectre – / Or More –". That set of actions is futile: one cannot bolt the door against oneself, nor would a pistol serve any purpose save killing oneself. Although the stanza dramatizes the often-felt conflict between body and mind, it offers no judgment as to which should be running the show, unlike the conviction of mental scientists that God intended the rational mind to be the highest expression of human development. Nor does Dickinson suggest how to rid oneself of the haunted feeling or for that matter how it arises.

More dramatically revealing of Dickinson's physiological orientation is that whether referring to "nerve" or "nerves," she presents this component of human anatomy as having the potential to act. Most famous of course is the line "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs" (Fr372, "After great pain"); another striking instance, from "Severer Service of myself," is "I strove to weary Brain and Bone – / To harass to fatigue / The glittering Retinue of nerves –" (Fr887). Nerve in the singular is evoked in "I've dropped my Brain –" ("My nerve in marble lies –") and in "A single Screw of Flesh," ("One more new-mailed Nerve / Just granted, for the Peril's sake –") (Fr1088, Fr293). By themselves, these examples could simply be taken as expressions of folk psychology, like "You're getting on my last nerve." As a group, however, these poems show that compared to orthodox

mental scientists such as Stewart and Upham, Dickinson was much more willing to localize and embody sensations and thoughts. Certainly, such words as "heart," "brain," and "nerves" can stand metaphorically for the faculties cataloged by Upham and others: "brain" as "reason," "heart" as "feeling," and so forth. But Dickinson's use of these words seems designed as well to evoke actual physical sensations – the feeling that one's heart is palpitating, that one's head is throbbing – associated with strong emotions. That is, Dickinson locates mind in body rather than ignoring or attempting to transcend the physiological basis of sensations, emotions, and thoughts.

While many aspects of Dickinson's thought and technique reveal themselves equally in her poems and letters, this does not seem to be the case with her interest in mental science, at least insofar as representing individual entities in conflict; I agree with Jed Deppman that "the lyric may have been the richest language game she knew for such difficult projects of thought" (2005, 89). She refers to the brain in only six letters, references that do figure the brain as somewhat independent but that never show the kind of complex interaction present in many poems. (The letters are 22, 256, 281, 320, 382, and 735.) The epistolary reference closest to what the poems show is from a letter to Samuel Bowles of late March 1862: "Austin is chilled – by Frazer's murder – He says – his Brain keeps saying over 'Frazer is killed' – 'Frazer is killed,' just as Father told it – to Him. Two or three words of lead – that dropped so deep, they keep weighing" (L256). Dickinson's request of Bowles, "Tell Austin – how to get over them!" sounds naïve compared to how she renders powerful emotions in her poems, when "getting over" the emotions simply doesn't come up. Two letters to the Norcross cousins are similar: in 1863 she notes that some worries had given her "a snarl in the brain which don't unravel yet" (L281), and in 1873 she writes, "I know 'tis love for [my friends] that sets the blister in my throat . . . when winds go sweeter than their wont, or a different cloud puts my brain from home" (L382). "Nerve" and "nerves" she mentions only three times (L252, L907, L937), with only one of these attributing some independent power to this component of the mind, in a quatrain included in a letter to Bowles: "'*Speech*' – is a prank of *Parliament* – / '*Tears*' – a trick of the nerve – / But the Heart with the heaviest freight on – / Does'nt – always – move –" (L252). This letter and stanza together suggest that for Dickinson the anatomizing of mental phenomena was better carried out within the lyric environment.

Dickinson does frequently refer in her letters to "mind" and "heart," but as with "brain" and "nerves" the epistolary occurrences are less complex than what the poems show. As faculties, both the mind and the heart are

simile unless she meant exactly this. Fr1381B, however, oddly terms Heart and Mind as a city and a state that together constitute "A single Continent":

> The Heart is the Capital of the Mind
> The Mind is a single State –
> The Heart and the Mind together make
> A single Continent –
>
> One – is the Population –
> Numerous enough –
> This ecstatic Nation
> Seek – it is Yourself.

This poem emphasizes a unity among heart, mind, and the self, elements related both spatially and functionally: heart providing governance from the center, mind manifesting the effects of this governance, and the continent identical with the single self whose unity is cause for ecstasy. The poem echoes Upham's metaphorical characterization of the entity Mind in terms of a textured interior space containing "inward powers" and "hidden fountains," a sanative space wherein the mind's faculties cooperate and where "the soul finds knowledge in itself which neither sight, nor touch. . . nor any outward forms of matter, could give" (*Elements* 119). Mind and Heart are of a single mind, so to speak; this desirable condition only needs to be sought to be found, the poem implies. "It is Yourself," like salvation always within reach.

Each of these poems presents a compelling case for a vision of the mental realm: Fr1384E insisting that the human interior contains multiple self-willed actors with conflicting goals, Fr1381B that the interior is an indivisible entity, albeit layered. Together these poems represent Dickinson as a consummate natural historian of the mind, committed to representing even the most contradictory realities of the human experience. Franklin dates the manuscript of "The Heart" to late 1875 or early 1876 and that of "The Mind" to early 1876; the earliest dated poem I've considered, "I felt a Funeral," was written in fair copy around 1862 but could have been conceived and drafted much earlier. In other words, Dickinson's lyrical exploration of the mind was taking place during the same decades when she was most fully engaged as a poet.

That Dickinson held a conflicted set of concepts about the mind suggests, finally, that she may not have accepted the ontological basis of orthodox mental science – the premise that God had so designed the human mind that in a healthy state it precisely replicated the external world. The *Hampshire and Franklin Express*, Amherst's local paper, carried several articles during the 1840s and 1850s celebrating the power of the mind and noting the need for

study that would nurture this power (Kirkby 252–3). These articles referred to the mind as unitary, immortal, and active, qualities that were deemed essential for the task of grasping God's design. Both in tone and in figurative language, these popular manifestations of orthodox psychology are substantially similar to the writings of Upham, Haven, Reid, and others in the Scottish tradition, but substantially different from Dickinson's characterizations of mental phenomena. According to Madden and Madden, "Upham believed that in the perception of objects and their relations we are directly aware of them as external and objective – aware of them as objects and relations in the physical world"; thus he disagreed with the Lockean tradition that ideas of these relations were developed and perceived (237). He held that "relations [among objects] objectively exist and the mind is constructed to so apprehend them" (237). He also believed that "the intellect is so constructed to yield the concept of space; the concept is not imposed on sensations but rather is a faithful transcription of precisely what space objectively is" (238).

Dickinson's poem Fr1103A can be read as directly countering these beliefs:

> Perception of an object costs
> Precise the Object's loss –
> Perception in itself a Gain
> Replying to it's Price –
> The Object absolute – is nought –
> Perception sets it fair
> And then upbraids a Perfectness
> That situates so far –

Regardless of the benefit that might accrue from perceiving an object, that perception according to Dickinson is the opposite of possessing the "Object absolute." She intimates that there might be a preperception state in which the object can be possessed, but when Perception (either as independent agent or as a power of the mind) becomes involved, an absolute distance is established between the object and the perceiver. The poem's final two lines even suggest that God ("Perfectness") is responsible for this component of the human condition, just as He is for "these strange Minds, that enamor us against" Him.

It would seem that for an anatomist of the mind of Dickinson's caliber, for whom the specific, the local, the immediate sensation was so important, the mind could not "absolute[ly]" apprehend material realities precisely because it was grounded in the material realm. Insofar as these realities existed within the mind, they did so as ideas locally stimulated by nerve impulses. Similarly, Dickinson does not consistently privilege one internal

entity or faculty, not even "Soul" or "I," but repeatedly shows the faculties at times in conflict, at times in concert, always multiple. In these ways she went considerably beyond the orthodox psychology of her era and can be seen as supporting the materialist angle on such central psychological and philosophical issues as the location and composition of mental activity. Whether she developed these bold explorations of mental phenomena in tandem with her ventures near the limits of lyric, certainly the puzzles and the felt reality of the phenomena could not have been better expressed than in her lyrics.

CHAPTER 2

Dickinson, Hume, and the Common Sense Legacy

Melanie Hubbard

Emily Dickinson had a problem. The Common Sense philosophical training she was given inspired some of her greatest intellectual enthusiasms, but it also squelched the very questions it inspired. The great inspiration of Common Sense for Dickinson was its elaborate archaeology of the mind, its invention of terms to label mental processes, and its extensive engagement with the question of whether or not we can truly know the world. Dickinson responded enthusiastically to these Common Sense agendas. Less enthusiastic was her reaction to Common Sense religious dogmatism. It took off the table questions like "Can we know what God is like?" and "Do we know if immortality is true?" – insisting that we simply know the answers to these through intuition. Now, Dickinson had many admiring thoughts about intuition, but in the hands of Common Sense philosophers, it had two large drawbacks. The first was that such a nonanswer to large questions did nothing to allay her philosophical and religious skepticism. Another, more subtle but no less pressing, drawback to intuition as a response to skepticism is that it was explicitly and unambiguously a *wordless* form of knowledge. This dissatisfied Dickinson deeply, given that she was a poet committed to words as her very lifeblood.

One of Dickinson's important philosophical inquiries, then, engages Common Sense theories of the role of language in forming our very perceptions, in establishing our relationships in the world, and in providing us access to the real. In her poetry, she works through and plays with Common Sense ideas about language, trying them on, seeing where they lead, and testing them against her own fundamental philosophical skepticism. Her poems work out the idea that language – with its mediation and interpretation of experience – presents to us the only world we can know. Once Dickinson arrives at a philosophy that cedes the field of consciousness to language, her poetry becomes a place where practical work is also theoretical – where the attempt to articulate experience is also a test of ideas about the relationship of language to perception.