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REFERENCES

DEPPMAN, Jed, Marianne NOBLE, and Gary Lee STONUM, eds., *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 270 p., ISBN: 978-1-107-02941-5, £ 60

- 1 “[Emily] had to think – she was the only one of us who had that to do,” or so Emily Dickinson’s sister, Lavinia, recalled. Her famous pronouncement serves as an apt epigraph to this collection of essays, whose ambition is “to understand [Emily Dickinson’s] poetry as philosophical practice” (1). As the editors, Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum, contend in their introduction to the volume, not only was Dickinson “a serious thinker” (1), but “her aesthetic practices were of a piece with her philosophical inquiries” (4): although many of her poems elevate poetry and seem to denigrate philosophy, her writing actually makes the distinction moot, as her poems turn out to be the very sites, not so much where her thinking resides, as where it takes place and shape, where it happens and develops. Following Jed Deppman’s own 2008 *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*,¹ all the essays gathered in this highly valuable and remarkably homogenous collection testify to the ambitious reach of Dickinson’s poetic thinking: offering original tacks on well-known poems, as well as foregrounding lesser-known pieces, the contributors succeed in demonstrating that Dickinson’s “business” was not only “circumference,” but also “thinking.”² More accurately, the various essays show, each in their own ways, how much both practices were in fact synonymous for Dickinson, locating, in the very workings of poetic composition, her passionate quarrel with philosophy.

- 2 The twelve chapters that make up the collection follow “the chronology of the history of philosophy” (5), roughly from Hume to Heidegger, and fall into two main sections, one looking at “Dickinson and the Philosophy of her Time” and the other at “Dickinson and Modern Philosophy.” Reaching back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical, scientific and religious systems of thought while recalling the latest concepts in vogue in the mid-nineteenth century, the essays gathered in the first section explore Dickinson’s response to the philosophical “ethos of her age” (91) and consider her engagement with contemporary philosophies of the mind (Michael Kearns), Humean Common Sense (Melanie Hubbard), Darwinist science and Biblical Higher criticism (Jane Donahue Eberwein), but also with the doctrines of Christology (Linda Freedman), as well as the philosophies of Hegel and Schlegel (Daniel Fineman), and that of Kierkegaard (Jim von der Heydt). Complicating the notion of “influence,” the essays in the first section combine historicist approaches with philosophical synthesis and literary analysis to sketch a much broader conceptual landscape, one in which Dickinson, recluse as she was, was obviously immersed and which informed her poetic endeavor, like that of most American Romantics. The essays in the second section, on the other hand, look ahead at later philosophies with which Dickinson’s poetry resonates, from Nietzsche’s perspectivism (Shira Wolosky) and William James’s pragmatism (Renée Tursi) to Sartre’s existentialism (Farhang Erfani), Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Marianne Noble), Levinas’s ethics (Megan Craig), and Heidegger’s philosophy of Being (Jed Deppman). The essays in this second section picture Dickinson as resolutely modern, that is, also, as anti-Romantic, thus problematizing usefully her vexed relation to the Romantic literary and philosophical legacy. Doing so, they suggest that the questions that troubled her throughout her poetic career equally agitated much of the twentieth century and are, as such, also constitutive of our philosophical modernity.
- 3 Beyond the many philosophies that are made to bear upon Dickinson’s poetry, and for which Nietzschean perspectivism such as Shira Wolosky investigates it (131-50) works as a powerful analytical figure, all contributions across both sections are bound by a common method, that of “reading with,” or “reading in the light of” to borrow a phrase that, coincidentally, Linda Freedman, Farhang Erfani and Megan Craig all use in their respective chapters (70, 175, 208). As Renée Tursi claims, from her own pragmatist perspective, “Whether Dickinson can be regarded as a pragmatist or not ends up being, ironically, an antipragmatic question. The more useful question would be to explore what comes of our reading Dickinson’s poetry as pragmatists ourselves. As James would have us ask the question: What difference does it make for us, one way or another, to find pragmatism reverberating in her [poetry]”? (152) Such critical pragmatism drives most of the essays gathered in this collection and sets the stage for a series of compelling *explications de texte*, such as Megan Craig’s attentive and generous close reading of “I dreaded that first Robin, so” (Fr347, 215-20)³ in terms of Levinas’s ethics of the other, as an experience and account of the arresting discovery of “the finite packed into the infinite” (220). Likewise, Michael Kearns, Daniel Fineman, and Renée Tursi offer complementary readings of “Perception of an object costs” (Fr1103) as, variously, anatomizing the inner workings of the mind and its relation to the world and countering the philosophy of the mind of Thomas Upham (28), particularizing experience in the face of abstract universal systems like Hegel’s and Schlegel’s (95), and highlighting the “attitude of wonder [that] accompanies a defamiliarized and widened perception [...] against Humean skepticism and Kantian critique” (193). Such instance of multiple

readings is not isolated: in the course of the volume, several poems are repeatedly singled out and their meaning is enriched with each new reading (the citation index provided by the editors is especially useful in this regard, even as it reveals the contributors' extensive mapping of the Dickinson corpus). The fruitful confrontation of different critical frameworks and perspective on a series of common objects is indeed one of the book's signature features and one of its main achievements.

- 4 In the end, the Dickinson that emerges from this collection is both familiar and, fittingly, decentered. Several chapters investigate anew long-standing debates in Dickinson scholarship, such as her complex relation with Christian doctrine or Emersonian Transcendentalism. Similarly, most essays revisit the difficult articulation between body and mind, matter and spirit, revelation and representation, self-creation and self-discovery that underscores her poetic enterprise, but also such issues as the pluralization of the self and the processual nature of consciousness, as well as Dickinson's experiment with language as a "power that involves both assertion and its limit" (Wolosky, 141). One of the most uncanny and thought-provoking effects performed by this rich collection, however, is to present us with a Dickinson that is somewhat at odds with her own enduring image as a poet who saw "New Englandly" (Fr256), that is, with a "European" or "Continental" Dickinson, a "French" Dickinson even, whose poetry dialogues across space and time with various forms and modes of existentialist and phenomenological thinking, from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to Levinas, revealing the full reach of the "existential philosophy of intimacy" (Erfani, 187) of "a thinker of increments and minutiae" (Craig, 226).
- 5 If some chapters read at times, and quite inevitably but also usefully, like philosophical précis and if some contributions tend sometimes to focus essentially on the philosophical overtones and implications of her lexical choices rather than consider also the possible distortions created by the dynamics of her poetic thinking, the collection as a whole is remarkably attune to the speculative nature of Dickinson's poetry and to the frictions between the concepts she scrutinizes and puts to the test and their poetic, tropic, linguistic forms. As such, it will be of major interest to Dickinson scholars, as well as to all readers of nineteenth-century American literature, and more generally to anyone working on the relations between literature and philosophy. For it is most successful when the contributors delve into, as they repeatedly do, those critical moments when Dickinson's writing does not coincide with itself, or rather, when her composition and tropes work against the paraphrasable philosophical contents of the poem: to borrow Jed Deppman's effective words in the concluding chapter which summarize the methodological stance of the whole volume, "the thetic essence [of a Dickinson poem] [...] cannot be equated with the poem itself," thereby confronting us with "a hyperconscious thinker pressuring language to reveal patterns she cannot find in rational prose, lucid as it may be" (243). Such is Dickinson's distinct and lasting philosophical contribution as a poet.

NOTES

1. Jed Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.
2. “My Business is Circumference,” she wrote Thomas Wentworth Higginson in the summer of 1862 (*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1958, letter 268).
3. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, R. W. Franklin, ed., 3 vols., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998. Citation by poem number.

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