THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

Philosophical Perspectives

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's Epistemic Ambitions for Poetry

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All of the contributors to this volume argue that poetry is capable of
a kind of epistemic achievement, and that Emily Dickinson in par-
ticular is an epistemically ambitious poet. On the view that emerges,
poetry is a means for getting a better grip on how the world is and
one's place within it; and Dickinson uses poetry both to understand
the world and to advocate for poetry as a tool of understanding. Many
of the contributors also argue that Dickinson offers a distinctive con-
strual of what knowledge is: as an ongoing, inevitably unfinished pro-
cess rather than a fixed state. The unfinished nature of knowledge,
on this view, arises in part because the world transcends complete
grasp by any finite agent, and in part because as long as the knowing
agent is alive, she is never a complete, static entity. But it arises espe-
cially because the species of robust connection to reality required for
knowledge is something that must be continually earned, through
daily cognitive, emotional, and practical labor.

Some aspects of the resulting portrait fit smoothly with the ste-
reotype of Dickinson as a reclusive poet. She has an acute sense of a

gulf between herself and the rest of the world. She engages in close observation of nature and of her own mental states. She is especially concerned with "small moments" and creatures in nature—birds, snakes, frost—and with the "what it's like" of pain and death. But the Dickinson we encounter here is also decidedly more determined, argumentative, and hopeful than that stereotype allows. She strides "Vast Prairies of Air" in search of a "Missing All." She instructs her audience on aspects of reality they have ignored. Although the promised "All" is elusive, she at least sometimes finds the right words in the right form to situate herself at home in the world. And when understanding does fail her, so that her cognitive and emotional "strings are snapt," she doesn't give up, but gets back up and sets herself to work.

This portrait of Dickinson as a striving, inquisitive poet stands in stark contrast to the more pessimistic, even nihilistic construal of Dickinson articulated by many recent interpreters. Ted Hughes, for instance, characterizes her as in the grip of "almost a final revelation of horrible Nothingness," such that

> Remaining true to this, she could make up her mind about nothing. . . . Registering everywhere and in everything the icy chill of its nearness, she did not know what to think . . . all other concerns floated free of finality, became merely relative, susceptible to her artistic play.[1]

Moreover, this portrait of Dickinson as an epistemically ambitious poet also provides us with substantive lessons for philosophy itself, by offering alternative characterizations of what knowledge is, and of the methodologies through which it can be achieved.

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1. Hughes, "Introduction to *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*," 358–359; cited in John, ch. 6 of this volume.

The first essay in the volume, by *Rick Anthony Furtak*, focuses on Dickinson's attitudes toward knowledge of the external world, especially God and nature. The poet's initial findings are skeptical: when she sets out to find a person-like God who inspects our actions from his residence in Heaven, and who we will eventually encounter face-to-face after death, Dickinson encounters no "sign" from which she can "infer his Residence," only "Vast Prairies of Air / Unbroken by a Settler." However, when she pauses in this "Infinitude," she finds that the "Silence" "condescends" to "stop for her," and she is awed to encounter a Creation that transcends what she sought. Similarly, when Dickinson observes practices of institutionalized prayer in church, she finds only empty religious vestments and incantations. But when she "keeps the Sabbath" by "staying at Home" in her garden, guided by the local songbirds, then she is on her way toward Heaven "all along."

Furtak thus locates Dickinson as belonging to Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalist tradition of "natural supernaturalism," on which being perceptually and emotionally attuned to nature is the only authentic form of worship. Dickinson does at least sometimes feel she knows the reality of divinity, and more generally of a meaningful external world, in a way that is "immediately present as a fact of experience, available to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see," as Furtak says. At the same time, it is not easy, nor always possible, to maintain this confidence, for at least two reasons.

First, Dickinson's epistemic confidence is grounded in a suite of feelings—of awe and wonder, and of being "at home"—which one must experience firsthand. One can "keep the Sabbath" by implementing practices of mindful attention that make these feelings more likely. But how one feels is not ultimately under one's control; and the poet does frequently feel estranged from her social and natural environments: a "Stranger[] in a foreign World."

Second, even when these feelings are present, Dickinson worries that they are mere projections onto an empty void, and hence self-gratifying delusions rather than epistemic achievements. Thus, in

> To hear an Oriole sing
> May be a common thing -
> Or only a divine.

she suggests that it is possible that the "Tune" or "Rune" of an Oriole's song—its being a melody, being beautiful, and/or having its being a sign of the divine—is "only" a matter of interpretation, rather than of "common" fact: something that depends on how the "Fashion of the Ear" "attires" bare sound waves, rather than a feature inherent in reality, ready to be discovered.

Interpreters like Farhang Erfani[2] take such passages to establish that Dickinson embraces the skeptical conclusion that there is a fundamental gap between us and the world, and that meaning and divinity are merely human projections. Furtak agrees that the skeptic's hypothesis, combined with the poet's own firsthand experiences of meaning as fluctuating in accordance with her "Mood," invalidates a naïve view that the "song" is real in an absolute, objective sense; but he argues that they leave open the possibility that the song is a joint creation of bird and listener. On this neo-Kantian reading, a mind that is properly attuned to nature is genuinely responding to something external to itself which it cloaks in distinctively human form, so that "in the meeting of mind and world, both the subject and the object make essential contributions."

A key reason for taking Dickinson to reject the skeptical conclusion is that she consistently takes Nature to transcend our powers

2. See, e.g., Erfani, "Dickinson and Sartre on Facing the Brutality of Brute Existence," cited in Furtak, ch. 1 of this volume.

of perception and understanding. Like the philosophers, Dickinson craves knowledge; and she takes their methodology of analysis and inference very seriously. But to endorse the skeptical conclusion, one would need first, to accept the assumption that our cognitive capacities are indeed adequate to analyze the evidence we acquire through perception, and second, to infer from this that an oriole's chirp is nothing more than bare sounds mis-dressed by us with merely mental "attire." And for Dickinson, such an assumption of epistemic adequacy is undermined: first, by her frequent negative experiences of limitation in the course of "this timid life of Evidence"; and second, by her positive albeit intermittent experiences of divine transcendence:

> This World is not Conclusion
> A Species stands beyond -
> Invisible, as Music -
> But positive, as Sound -

For Furtak's Dickinson, then, we are essentially finite beings stuck in a perpetual state of epistemic in-between-ness. This is not just agnosticism, understood as the refusal to endorse either a positive or negative conclusion about the reality of divinity (or of melody, or of sound). Rather, it is an active condition of "Wonder," of "not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not": a search for understanding that can only ever be partially accomplished. Further, in contrast to philosophers, who fetishize analysis and inference and take themselves to know only what they can conclude via those means, Dickinson takes herself to have other epistemic tools at her disposal. We've already seen that she appeals to first-person experiences of awe and comfort. But as Furtak notes, and as Hills will argue at greater length, she also takes it that in those cases where "Philosophy - don't know," some measure of "Sagacity" can still be achieved by going "through a Riddle," in the distinctive manner afforded by poetry.

In considering why the ultimate reality of nature and God should transcend our finite epistemic capacities, it is natural to focus on the fact that they are outside of, and in this sense "other" to, us. But as *Magdalena Ostas* argues, Dickinson often finds her own self to be at least as mysterious as the external world: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed - Should startle most," as she says. Indeed, the "self" she discerns is sometimes almost comically "haunted": her mind and brain are "cleaved," full of hidden "corridors," and divided across time in a way that leaves her brain "giggling" at the "odd" mismatch between "That person that I was - And this One." Such internal "otherness" makes the sort of introspection required for self-knowledge into a monumentally challenging task. In particular, much as with Dickinson's confrontation with nature's "Vast Prairies of Air," so too does examining her own self require not just precise attentiveness, but also emotional courage in the face of alienation:

> I do not know the man so bold
> He dare in lonely Place
> That awful stranger - Consciousness
> Deliberately face -

Passages like this might seem to supply clear grounds for attributing a nihilistic vision to Dickinson. Perhaps, as Geoffrey Hartmann claims, Dickinson's "spectatorial" gaze is a coping mechanism which allows her to "elide the agony of self-consciousness."[3] Or perhaps she has mustered the courage to introspect, and has discovered that there lurks only an empty void, rendering her own life irrevocably "other." However, much as Furtak argues that Dickinson entertains but

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3. Hartmann, "Language from the Point of View of Literature," 350, cited in Ostas, ch. 3 of this volume.

ultimately rejects external-world skepticism in favor of a neo-Kantian constructivism about nature, so Ostas argues that Dickinson rejects epistemic and metaphysical pessimisms about the mental in favor of an innovative form of self-constructivism.

To see why, it helps to bracket questions of self-knowledge for a moment, to first consider what self-expression means for Dickinson. Given Dickinson's frequent interest in close observation of inner states, there is a persistent tendency to read her as a broadly "confessional" poet: an intrepid phenomenological ornithologist documenting shy species of *qualia* in order to place them on display for the rest of the world. Along similar lines, it is tempting to read Dickinson's many poems about death, such as "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died ," as attempts to accurately simulate qualitative states that are real but otherwise cognitively inaccessible.

As we will see in discussing Izenberg's contribution, it is plausible that Dickinson is at least sometimes engaged in such projects of documentation and simulation. But Ostas argues that Dickinson's poems of self-expression are more actively creative than the confessional model allows. More specifically, she argues that Dickinson's frequent trope of "self-splitting" does not function (just) to diagnose an antecedently existing state of alienation between multiple personalities, but instead serves as an imaginative technique for "serious, forceful investigation," in which the poet "dares" to stage various possibilities, in order to probe how they strike her.

More specifically, Ostas argues that in writing her poems Dickinson assigns herself the role of curious reader as much as that of documentary reporter. Poetry gives her "the Art to stun myself / With Bolts - of Melody!": that is, by "hear[ing] the words as they make an entry into the world, suddenly concrete, as though they had not issued from her own pen and voice," Dickinson gains a new, alternative perspective on the thoughts and attitudes they express. Just as Dickinson inspects her bodily features, like her hair and dimples, to

see whether they "twinkle back / Conviction . . . of me - ," so too she "turns [her] Being round and round" verbally in her poetry:

> I felt my life with both my hands
> To see if it was there -
> I held my spirit to the Glass,
> To prove it possibler -

Confronting herself with the "sounds" she generates in her writing thus provides the poet with a mechanism for assessing whether she can accept the contents they express as her "own."

Instead of deploying "a logic of pressing thoughts or feelings outward from inside," then, Ostas takes Dickinson to exemplify a model of self-expression as self-construction—a model that has also been articulated by philosophers like Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, and Richard Eldridge. On this view, the task of self-expression is as much epistemic as it is communicative. But beyond this, self-expression also becomes a constitutive project of constructing a self, for at least two reasons. First, at a local level, verbal articulation helps to make the particular feelings and thoughts expressed into what they are, by assigning them a form and a location in relation to a network of other possible and actual feelings and thoughts. Indeed, Ostas argues that insofar as their verbal articulation essentially contributes to constituting those thoughts and feelings, the self they express is distributed externally, on the page. Second and more globally, the poet's response to the thoughts and feelings she "stages" at least partially constitutes them as hers: she embraces some as belonging to her, at least for this moment, while marginalizing others as odd, past, merely simulated, or otherwise "other."

This constructivist model of self-expression and selfhood in turn produces a model of self-knowledge that neatly echoes the con-structivist account of nature articulated by Furtak. In both the outer

and inner realms, our contributors attribute to Dickinson a view of knowledge as a relationship, one that must be continually achieved by a highly complex but limited self grappling to make contact with a transcendently complex reality. And in both cases, the way in which the self receives and interprets that reality partially, but only partially, constitutes it as reality. Further, both Furtak and Ostas argue that in this quest, inner sensations and emotional responses function not just as objects of knowledge, but also as epistemic tools. The poet begins with a felt yearning to understand: an often "irritable" curiosity "That nibbles at the soul." Like the philosopher, she observes, infers, and hypothesizes from the evidence she accumulates. But this never suffices: knowledge, when it comes, involves an immediate feeling of kinship, one which can be cultivated but not summoned and that is often elusive.

Where Furtak and Ostas argue that Dickinson embraces the possibility of partial knowledge in the face of skeptical threats, *Oren Izenberg* tackles the more basic question of whether poetry in general, and Dickinson in particular, are even in the business of attempting to achieve knowledge. Echoing Francis Bacon, who claimed that poetry "is rather a pleasure or play of imagination, than a work or duty thereof,"[4] many theorists of disparate stripes today hold that poetry lacks any (warranted) epistemic ambition. Instead, they take it either to be just another entry in the field of "cultural production," interesting for what it reveals about its sociopolitical environment; or else to function as an antidote to reality, "resisting by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads," as Adorno says.[5]

Against this, Izenberg argues that an interest in poetry is justified by a manifest, albeit typically implicit, commitment by poets

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4. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 82, cited in Izenberg, ch. 3 of this volume.
5. Adorno, "Commitment," 78, cited in Izenberg, ch. 3 of this volume.

themselves to "epistemic payoff." This, he claims, is what poets usually present themselves as doing, and what we as readers usually take them to be doing. Redeeming this commitment requires fending off a classic pair of threats. On the one hand, if a poem merely records what one person once happened to think or feel on one occasion, then it offers nothing more than an entry in a cabinet of curiosities, unverifiable by and uninteresting for others. But on the other hand, if the poem achieves general applicability by being stripped of its specificities, then the content that remains is typically either a banal triviality, a substantive fact known only on the basis of some other source of authority, or a patent falsehood.

One option for avoiding this dichotomy is to claim that poems propose possibilities, in the form of thought experiments. On its own, this might not seem like a marked improvement over the cabinet of curiosities. Given the vast expanse of modal space, merely knowing that one's conception is metaphysically possible is disappointingly meager reward: we want to know, and poets appear to take themselves to offer, some insight into how this world actually is.

Izenberg claims that the payoff is more substantive, and that the very features of lyric poetry that make it seem remote from genuine knowledge are in fact sources of epistemic value. His argument proceeds by way of an analogy, or a "pleasing, if slant rhyme," between lyric poems and David Chalmers's "Cosmoscope." Chalmers aims to resuscitate the Leibnitzian/Laplacean dream that an ideal reasoner could know everything about the world by knowing a highly restricted, privileged subclass of truths about it. To motivate the plausibility of such an accomplishment, and to get a grip on what it would involve, Chalmers suggests that we imagine possessing a virtual reality device into which all the facts of the world have been entered, and which has the power to calculate all entailments of those facts. Such a device wouldn't do anything that a non-ideal reasoner couldn't accomplish in principle; it "simply offloads" some of the burden of

storage and calculation "from ourselves onto the world." But armed with such a device, "one could come to know anything that could be known."[6]

Similarly, Izenberg suggests, many lyric poems should be treated as "investigatory devices" that deploy poetic rhetorical performances to provide evidence about a restricted base of facts, from which the poet and readers can draw inferences. More specifically, he argues that Dickinson makes contributions to each of the four classes of facts that Chalmers identifies as inputs to the Cosmoscope. These are first, the class of micro- and macrophysical *physical* truths and their governing laws; second, the class of *phenomenological* or experiential truths: what it's like to be in various psychological states, plus the psychophysical laws connecting them to matter; third, a class of *indexical* truths, specifying where and when one actually is; and finally, a "that's all" clause, affirming that *P*, *Q*, and *I* exhaust the *totality* of truths.

First, in the domain of physical facts, Izenberg argues that Dickinson deploys the laser-like focus of poetry to home in on specific aspects of nature. One such technique presents "ribbons" of time, much as a time-lapse camera records an unfolding empirical "Experiment":

> At half-past Three
> a single Bird
> Unto a silent Sky
> Propounded but a single
> term
> Of cautious melody -

By focusing attention on a sequence of temporal moments, the poet is able to observe the details of those moments as simultaneously separate and connected, in a way that "allows space for the drawing

6. Chalmers, *Constructing the World*, 117, cited in Izenberg, ch. 3 of this volume.

of inferences from data." Similarly, in poems like "Ashes denote that Fire / was" Dickinson infers from what she sees at one moment to something unobserved in the past—while also, as we've seen, noting the limits of what can be grasped through analysis and inference.

Within the second class, of phenomenological truths, we have already seen that Dickinson is often concerned to describe actual and possible phenomenological states that confound comprehension, especially pain and madness, with a precise particularity absent from ordinary language. Much like Ostas, Izenberg argues that Dickinson frequently strives to draw experiences that are unnameable in virtue of being noncognitive and phenomenal —for instance, Pain, which "has an Element of Blank"—into the realm of knowledge by imposing partial, provisional conceptualizations on them. Crucially, Izenberg argues, the poet doesn't merely describe, but actually instances those experiences within the poem. Thus, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," we don't just learn that Dickinson felt an experience which was like hearing "Mourners" treading with "Boots of Lead"; we feel the pounding, numbing repetition in the poem's own sounds. By conveying experience via exemplification, poetry escapes the worrisome limitations of self-report. And by inducing analogous imaginative states in its readers, such poems offer an opportunity for knowledge of experiences as "idiosyncratic but not private": as indexed to a highly specific, but not essentially individual, context.

Third, also in the indexical class, Izenberg argues that first-person lyric poetry is invested in anchoring the speaker to specific locations in space and time by pointing to their context of utterance, in a way that enables the reader to instantiate for themselves contexts that are similar in relevant respects to the speaker's, as for example in

This is a Blossom of
the Brain -
A small - italic Seed.

As we saw, Ostas also drew attention to the importance of context in Dickinson's poems, and to the way that indexicality can bridge the gap between speaker and audience. However, where Ostas focuses on Dickinson's own role as reader, testing whether she can encompass the described experiences at the moment of reception, Izenberg argues that Dickinson's indexical elements point toward a more broadly available "fictive present": a possible here-and-now that other readers can implement for themselves, through actual re-enactment or imaginative projection.

Finally—in marked contrast to Furtak and Ostas—Izenberg claims that what he calls "figures of totality" are "endemic" to lyric poetry in general and to Dickinson's poems in particular. Here he cites Dickinson's common invocations of noon as "an hour of undivided illumination that leaves nothing in shadow," and her frequent skepticism of anything like Heaven as an undisclosed domain inaccessible to thought, as in:

I have no
Life but this -
To lead it
here -
Nor any Death -
but lest
Dispelled from
there -

If we grant that Dickinson does make entries into each of Chalmers's four categories, what does the "slant rhyme" with the Cosmoscope show? Dickinson and other lyric poets obviously shouldn't, and don't, claim to have amassed the kind of complete privileged data set that would fuel a Leibnitzian/Laplacean reasoning engine. Rather, Izenberg takes the analogy with the Cosmoscope to

show that lyric poets like Dickinson are making potentially valuable contributions to the project of achieving knowledge. First, they are using their powers of observation, description, and imagination to furnish actual reasoners—at least themselves, and often their (other) readers—with the same basic types of data that ordinary epistemic agents typically invoke. Second, they are deploying their cognitive powers of reason and imagination to amplify that base into a more compendious set. And third, they are doing so in the service of a sincere investigation into reality.

Indeed, the fact that lyric poetry typically presents its contents in what Chalmers calls an "empirical" rather than "conditional" mode—as claims about actuality rather than speculations about what would follow if certain states were to be actual—suggests that poetry may provide a more promising basis for establishing aesthetic "cognitivism" than fiction, which has been the more common target of philosophers' interrogations of learning from literature. For her own personal Cosmoscopic purposes, the poet needs no independent verification of the phenomena she encounters. She knows directly that she has experienced them; her challenge is to articulate them in a form that renders them comprehensible to her, and to test whether she can affirm them as reflective of a wider, persisting reality. Thus, for a poet like Dickinson, the possibility that her experiences are highly particular, even idiosyncratic may not be troubling: like Descartes in the *Meditations,* her epistemic ambitions may be directed simply at comprehending the world around and within her, for her own sake. For other poets—Walt Whitman, say—the overt need for affirmation in a common experience with other people is more central. In either case, regardless of the poet's intentions and desires, a reader may use a poem's data and its associative connections as scaffolding for their own epistemic projects, by directing their attention toward the same species of phenomena

the poet has noticed, by marshaling their conceptual and imaginative resources in the same types of structures, and by tracing out the same types of inferential patterns.

WHY POETRY?

So far, our contributors have focused on establishing that poets like Dickinson are seeking knowledge in some recognizable sense of the term. But if that is their aim, why should we think that they are doing a good job: that their ambitions are sufficiently well placed that we as readers, and perhaps specifically as philosophers, should take them seriously in those terms? More specifically, Furtak, Ostas, and Izenberg all argue that Dickinson and other poets are presenting contents or claims about philosophically interesting topics like the ontological status of God, or the self, or the expressibility of phenomenal states. But granting them this status threatens to undermine their value as poets. Why are they not then just doing mediocre philosophy, cloaked in cumbersome fancy attire?

Here, it is useful to distinguish two subsidiary questions. First, if poets like Dickinson are attempting to supply the same basic types of claims as other folks inquiring after truth, why should they articulate those contents in such a strange way? Call this the question of *poetic form and content.* Second, how does the form and status of lyric poetry affect the epistemic status of those claims? In Izenberg's Chalmersian terms, supposing that poets do supply the Cosmoscope with contents as input, why think that poetry makes any distinctive contribution over and above the usual labor of churning out truths through standard inference rules? Call this the question of *poetic form and justification.*

Poetic Form and Content

While some poets, such as Alexander Pope, may be justly accused of making versified philosophy, Dickinson insists that her truth must be told "slant": that to write in more standard prose would be a form of "shutting her up," of locking her in a cognitive "closet." Why is this? What difference does how she writes make to what she does?

We have already encountered one reason why Dickinson can't put her point "straight": many of the states she is interested in defy adequate categorization with ordinary concepts. As Izenberg argues, many phenomenological states, especially pain, have an "Element of Blank" which the poet attempts to fill in, or at least delineate, using non-literal tropes like metaphor. Further, as Ostas argues, in at least some of these cases the process of articulation involves not just matching stable inner states to either conventional or occasion-specific word meanings, but partially constituting those mental states themselves.

However, the ineffability of phenomenal states covers only a small portion of Dickinson's expressive choices. What other motivations are there for poetic form, and what implications might this have for how we might integrate Dickinson's insights into our own philosophizing? *Antony Aumann* argues that in an important sense, Dickinson "had to write how she did"; but that this is compatible with what she says being paraphrased in ordinary terms. Building on Martha Nussbaum's insight that "form is not always neutral,"[7] he argues that a speaker's use of a certain form can contribute to the content they express, by implying acceptance of a perspective which in turn entails certain propositional contents. Prosaically, this is illustrated by the way a speaker's choice of gender-neutral or

7. Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge*, 15; cited in Aumann, ch. 4 of this volume.

-specific pronouns reveals their attitudes toward certain assumptions about gender equality. Poetically, Aumann argues, it is manifested by Dickinson's use of "hymn scheme": an A-B-A-B rhyming pattern plus a 4-3-4-3 or "common" meter with iambic stresses. Because hymn scheme was strongly associated with Puritanism in 19th-century New England, and because Dickinson was herself deeply enmeshed in Puritan ideas and images, it is expressively appropriate for her to employ this form. But at the same time, insofar as a "straight" deployment would imply straightforward endorsement of Puritan doctrine, this would be inappropriate given Dickinson's contentious relationship to established religion. Thus, her rhythmic and aural distortions of hymn scheme appropriately reflect her substantive attitude of challenging engagement with Puritanism.

Aumann argues that the operative notions of "appropriateness" and "inappropriateness" here are stronger than the sort of aesthetic harmony exemplified by the resemblances between, for instance, the repeated "s" sounds in "His notice sudden is" and the hissing of the snake being described, or between the slowing metrical pace induced by the increasing flurry of hyphens in "This is the Hour of Lead" and the described experience of freezing to death. It's not just that the form "fits" or fails to fit the expressed content. Rather, he argues, the choice to use a certain form can generate genuine propositional inconsistency via a "performative contradiction," much as using gender-specific language to articulate a progressive gender policy would.

What implications does this connection between form and content have for the feasibility of paraphrasing poetic contents? Aumann argues that while a candidate paraphrase may indeed fail to capture a poem's total intended effect, a paraphrase, in the "modest" sense of an approximate statement of a poem's main contents, is often both possible and legitimate. The formal expressive constraints under which poets operate are generated by the fact that they are engaged

in a speech act of assertion, or something akin to it: "presenting their own views, perspectives, and attitudes about some subject matter." By contrast, because the act of reporting others' speech does not involve a commitment to the truth of the reported contents, it does not generate the same performative contradiction.

Aumann's diagnosis presupposes again that poets are in the epistemic business, and specifically that they are engaged in something like a conversation with their readers: proffering ideas that they take to be "right or true," and representing themselves as "standing behind or endorsing" them. Much like Izenberg, Aumann argues that abandoning this presupposition entails an implausibly widespread error theory about the interpretive practices of both scholarly and lay readers. But even if we grant that poets are epistemically ambitious, we might still want to deny that they are engaged specifically in assertion. In particular, Dickinson often appears to be raising questions without settling them, as Furtak claims; or staging possibilities to test whether she can affirm them, as Ostas argues. Alternatively, she may not be speaking in her own voice, but in that of "a supposed person," as she herself puts it. Aumann argues that none of these possibilities threatens the basic conversational model, or its consequence that poets operate under formal constraints that their interpreters don't. First, while some of Dickinson's poems are presented in a hypothetical or exploratory tone, others are more committal. Second and more importantly, even if Dickinson herself doesn't definitively endorse the contents she expresses, those constraints on performative consistency still apply to the speaking persona. (We might add that some models of communication and assertion-like acts, such as Stalnaker's, are designed to accommodate both exploratory and personified speech; and that expressive constraints are conditionally inherited by such speech.)

While the objection to assertoric force doesn't undermine the claim that poets often proffer contents in a way that commits them to

performative consistency and epistemic assessment, it does bring out the importance of identifying the appropriate unit of assessment. At a superficial level, we should be careful about citing isolated passages as capturing "what Dickinson thinks"; rather—as with exegesis more generally—we need to analyze how those utterances function within their immediate contexts, and whether they reflect a broader position that the speaking persona expresses on other occasions. At a deeper level, if we accept Ostas's argument that expression for Dickinson is less a matter of "confessing," in the sense of offering an outward sign of an antecedently fixed inner state, and more a matter of grappling with a continual series of mental phenomena as candidates for affirmation, then we also need to question the simple conception of selves as stable entities who "stand behind" their assertions. While some might take this as the opening wedge for neo-Wittgensteinian skepticism about meaning and knowledge, we might also take it, as our contributors do, as the impetus to develop a more realistic and flexible model of knowledge and conversation generally.

Poetic Form and Justification

So far, we have canvassed two primary content-based reasons why poets in general and Dickinson in particular need to express themselves as they do: the inadequacy of any ordinary conventional substitute, especially for representing phenomenal states; and the requirement that one's mode of expression be minimally consistent with, and hopefully positively fitting for, the contents expressed.

In his contribution, *David Hills* focuses on a set of reasons for employing certain forms of expression which is related to the process of coming to understand a content. Even when the content in question can be coherently expressed in ordinary terms, he argues, engaging with the "Riddle" of poetry can afford a species of "Sagacity" not provided by direct articulation.

One of Dickinson's characteristic modes is to describe an object, like a hummingbird or frost, using a trope like metonymy and personification, in ways that seduce her reader into achieving a more "distinct sight" of that object, by piquing their curiosity about what it is that she might be talking about. In this way, expressive occlusion produces a kind of cognitive clarity:

> The thought beneath so slight a film -
> Is more distinctly seen -
> As laces just reveal the surge -
> Or Mists - the Apennine

In some of these "riddle" poems, the "mists" of allusion and unexpected detail help to bring a familiar object into focus, by highlighting its contours within our own established thinking; they clarify and reconfigure what we already know, rather than teaching us something new. In others, especially those employing extended metaphors, the riddle's target is less familiar, or less cognitively tractable. The riddle is then correspondingly less straightforward: it contains layers of observation and multiple, sometimes conflicting threads of interpretation. Hills argues that tracing out each of these threads forces the reader to spend extended time with the subject, by approaching it from multiple angles and assembling multiple distinct impressions into a whole that ultimately embodies a kind of stable cognitive coherence, albeit one that may not be straightforwardly logically consistent.

This latter approach is especially appropriate when the riddle's subject is something as amorphous and terrifying as death, as in a poem like

> A Clock stopped -
> Not the Mantel's -

In such cases, each successive layer of meaning informs and rewards the reader by staging a different "performance" of the metaphor; but it also entices and prepares the reader to move on to less familiar, obvious, and stable aspects, in what Hills calls "a process of demythologizing our initial understanding of its primary subject." The result is "metaphors that owe their lasting effectiveness as metaphors to their temporary effectiveness as euphemisms." The poem's indirectness underwrites an epistemic gain even in cases where the "whole truth" could in principle be articulated directly, because it trains readers gradually into a truth that would otherwise cause their brain to "giggle" in helpless paralysis. As Dickinson puts it,

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind -

Riddles and metaphors are both tropes: non-literal or indirect modes of description. What about poetry's metrical and aural schemes? Where Aumann links Dickinson's distortion of traditional hymn scheme to her conflicted relationship to Puritan doctrine, Hills argues more broadly that it "constitutes a self-questioning, self-correcting, self-censoring mode of attention," one which is also reflected in her highly distinctive use of hyphens. Rhythmically, by echoing traditional hymns, Dickinson doesn't merely suggest, but makes us feel the familiarity of her subject, even before we know what that subject actually is. But for that same reason, when the steady rhythm stumbles, the subject itself is also rendered alien. Similarly,

the sonic similarities of slanting rhymes provide clues to the riddle poem's solution; but the slant's dissonance also "sours" those associations, reminding us of substantive disparities between the denoted objects. In both cases, Hills argues, the form engenders a feeling of orientation and safety which is then unsettled by being twisted. A prose format would miss out on both aspects of this dynamic.

Hills's discussion focuses most directly on Dickinson's use of poetic devices to enact a heuristic process for the reader. Like Hills, *Eileen John* attends closely to Dickinson's use of specific formal devices. But at the same time, like Furtak and Ostas, she emphasizes the poet's use of those devices as tools for her own epistemic purposes, specifically in seeking to understand aspects of the world for which no stable subsuming perspective can be achieved.

Substantively, John argues that Dickinson embraces a processual model of knowledge highly consonant with those proposed by Furtak and Ostas. Where traditional static accounts treat knowledge as a state of an agent achieved by standing in a privileged relation to a proposition, Furtak, Ostas, and John take Dickinson to offer a model of knowledge as an ongoing process of getting a grip on an overflowingly complex reality using limited perceptual and cognitive resources that include bodily feeling and emotion. John further connects this view to the development of expertise or know-how, especially within the context of domestic labor. Thus, in

> We play at Paste -
> Till qualified, for Pearl -

the poet suggests that while we are tempted to dismiss activities like making pretend gems as mere play, such practice actually develops genuine practical skills. The same goes by implication, John argues, for the higher-order epistemic skill of distinguishing mere appearance

from genuine value, especially as it applies to determining which of our own activities are genuinely skillful. In each case, although the transition from ignorance to ability involves a degree and depth of difference that tempts us to "deem" our previous selves "a fool," there is also deep continuity in the skills involved. By extension, we can add, although we might be tempted to dismiss poetry as mere play, the skills of observation, distinction, and feeling it cultivates function not just as proxies for, but as practice in and even instances of genuine epistemic ability.

Formally, John traces out the model of knowledge as an ongoing process of skillful but inevitably incomplete achievement through a pair of metaphoric images: hinges and seams. She takes a hinge, as a mechanism that allows one to swing between distinct planes, to be an apt figure for Dickinson's conviction that "there are radically different kinds of thought, that a human being is not in a position to work with only one of them, and can move between them with some competence." Thus, in

> The Missing All - prevented Me
> From missing minor Things.
> If nothing larger than a World's
> Departure from a Hinge -
> Or Sun's extinction, be observed -
> 'Twas not so large that I
> Could lift my Forehead from my work
> For Curiosity.

the World swings out of view as the poet remains engaged in quotidian labor such as needlework. Here again, we find the poet seeking, and failing to find, the sort of positive hold on the global "All" sought by philosophers, dogmatists, and skeptics alike. But at the same time, John argues, this absence is not devastating: the poet is confident that

"there are other things worth not missing, and we are capable of not missing them, within the absorbing work . . . at hand."

John's other focal image is the seam, deployed most systematically in "Don't put up my Thread and Needle," in which Dickinson describes falling asleep at her needlework, with her sight and her performance becoming increasingly "crooked" even as she dreams she is sewing fine, straight hems. In this poem, unlike "We Play at Paste," the poet displays confidence in herself as a "competent, discerning agent," in both practical and epistemic senses; the problem is that she is temporarily unable to implement those abilities because exhaustion has put her out of touch with her work—much as a change of Mood can render her unable to recognize God in nature, or to embrace phenomenal states as her own.

A seam, like a hinge, is a familiar, functional feature of daily domestic life, specifically one that creates a strong yet flexible connection between two things while leaving them different. John's argument is not that Dickinson is especially prone to employ hinges and seams as metaphors for knowledge. Rather, she claims that when these images do appear in Dickinson's poems, they articulate a model of knowledge that the poet often also expresses in other terms and endorses more generally. In particular, as we have seen, Dickinson frequently oscillates between the close observation of local, familiar phenomena and values, especially those embedded in domestic life, and the search for a more cosmic, impersonal, abstract perspective— a search which inevitably fails to discover a positive "All" distinct from lived experience, but which does not therefore conclude that all there really is a void or a bare physical substrate.

John's argument is also not just that Dickinson sometimes employs hinges and seams as tropes to describe an epistemic state she finds interesting. Rather, she argues that formally, Dickinson frequently employs words themselves as hinges and seams, or "pivoting points": devices that aptly join two perspectives or systems of

thought while leaving them distinct. The typical mechanism of juncture is that of the pun: for instance, in "Don't put up my Thread and Needle" Dickinson plays on the sonic similarities between "seam" and "seem," and between "sew" and the multiple meanings of "so." Although the association between punning homophones is clearly arbitrary—we are palpably aware that their semantic values are distinct—the sonic similarity links those values in our minds, sets us up to seek out more substantive similarities, and makes them especially satisfying once found.

Thus, much as with her distinctive use of hyphens and of hymn scheme, Dickinson's use of puns as "pivoting points" between incommensurable perspectives provides her with an efficient mechanism for articulating the sorts of complex relations among disparate thoughts that she is especially invested in expressing. Any articulation of her intended contents using more standard logical, causal, or other connectives would be too coarse-grained and determinate to capture the open-ended, multi-dimensional relations that Dickinson takes to obtain between the disparate perspectives she wants to stage. In this sense, Dickinson needs such hinge words to place "planes of thought" into relations that are "precise and yet somehow free," in a phrase John appropriates from Ted Hughes.[8]

Perhaps, given sufficient effort and ingenuity, this complex network of relations could be articulated in ordinary prose. However, such a prose paraphrase would still fail to enact the patterns of connection that Dickinson's poems do. And as such, it would also fail to accomplish a crucial part of the task those poems perform: of enabling her readers to trace out those patterns for themselves, by giving them direct, experiential access to their performance. Moreover, it is plausible that enacting such patterns itself has a substantive justificatory

8. Hughes, "Introduction to A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse," 359; cited in John, ch. 6 of this volume.

function. First, it inculcates through practice a distinctive species of know-how: a "mode of attention" for navigating among and interpreting certain types of phenomena. In themselves, the resulting cognitive traits might not be epistemically valuable. However, if we take knowledge to be the achievement of a certain kind of acknowledgment of and reconciliation with seemingly recalcitrant phenomena, as Dickinson arguably does, then it becomes more plausible that such cognitive know-how is epistemically relevant. Further, by demonstrating how to achieve that goal in a series of particular cases—some of which, like riddles about hummingbirds, are amusing; others of which, like metaphors about death, are potentially horrifying—it also trains the reader to accomplish that goal in other cases, for themselves.

The operative question, of course, is whether techniques of pun, metaphor, rhythm and rhyme, do reliably conduce to knowledge at least in the sense of getting a robust grip on the world, or instead produce a dangerous simulacrum of reason. The worry that rhetorical devices seduce readers into epistemic complacency is both longstanding and well-placed. However, while the particular structures are quite different from those employed in standard philosophical practice, the idea that formal structures have justificatory status because they display, and thereby prompt readers to enact, certain trains of thought is not especially alien; indeed it constitutes a core intuition about the nature of proof. Moreover, both Hills and John argue that Dickinson deploys these techniques in a way that brings them significantly closer to philosophy. In her hands, these formal techniques function, not to lull readers into comfortable streams of association, but rather as prompts to scrutinize and analyze first-order external and internal phenomena to which the reader has evidential access. More importantly, Dickinson also characteristically probes her own trains of thought, so that the "precise and yet somehow free relations"

that are expressed by what Hills calls Dickinson's "argument-making metrical resources" are themselves called into critical question, qualified, and sometimes rejected altogether. The "proofs" given by Dickinson's poems cannot provide indubitable signs of verity. But for a particular, limited agent grappling with how best to stitch together a comprehensive, authentic understanding of an overwhelmingly complex reality, as Dickinson is, and as many of us are, they provide a productive set of tools and products—ones that her readers must then put to the test for themselves.

WHY DICKINSON FOR PHILOSOPHY?

Stepping back from the specific contributions of our particular authors, what can we now say about the relevance of Dickinson for philosophy, given the overall picture of her poetry that has emerged? We've canvassed Dickinson's take on philosophical topics such as the ontological status of God, sound, the self, and the nature and basis of knowledge. We've also seen something about how and why she deploys distinctively poetic techniques to express contents and persuade her readers, including herself. But in the absence of an antecedent interest in Dickinson, why should philosophers care about what she says and does?

First, Dickinson demonstrates a suite of productive epistemic practices that complement standard philosophical techniques of analysis and inference. We can work toward knowing by allocating attention to particular familiar but puzzling phenomena which we encounter within ourselves and in the world around us; by trying on multiple, contrasting interpretations of those phenomena that link them to other situations and scenarios; by probing our intuitive and evaluative responses to them under those interpretations, to see if

we can affirm them as belonging to our reality; and by attempting to reconcile, or at least find ways to navigate effectively among, the resulting interpretations. And we can treat this epistemic work as a kind of ongoing, quotidian labor, one that is often bound up with the practical tasks of everyday life but that also roams to remote corners of modal space.

We should expect this work to require sustained attention, courage, and fortitude. We should acknowledge that it will never be finished, because we are constantly encountering new phenomena, and because those phenomena are too complex to be susceptible to any single, fully reconciled accounting. Sometimes we are stymied: our "Strings are Snapt, [our] Bow - to Atoms blown - "; we face a "blank" of pain or a "cleaving" of alienation that our brain can only "giggle" at, agog. When that happens, it is profoundly terrible. In that case, the best we can do—the only thing to do if we are to remain alive—is to get up the next morning and set ourselves back to work, mending those strings, sewing seams of partial comprehension, and learning again to wonder at the world within and around us.

Second, contra the stereotype of a reclusive poet confined to her Amherst drawing room and garden, Dickinson often appears to be engaged in this epistemic labor with others, both by appropriating other thinkers' perspectives and claims, and also by inviting her readers to observe and interpret structurally analogous phenomena for themselves. But even when she does labor on her own, this already involves a kind of conversation, in which she stages multiple personas, and she can "stun" herself by learning that she resonates to or rejects possibilities in ways she would not have expected. In either case, Dickinson demonstrates a suite of techniques for fruitful conversation that complement standard philosophical techniques of argumentation. We can entice our interlocutors to pay close attention to the relevant phenomena by employing precise, vivid descriptions of concrete instances, or else by presenting them with intriguing puzzles to solve. We can offer them "kind" initial explanations to avoid "dazzling" them into cognitive paralysis, which we replace with successively richer interpretations. And we can employ expressions and forms that are consistent with and reinforce the broader perspectives being presented, and that in some cases actually exemplify the contents being expressed.

Poetry is not philosophy. One of its constitutive aims is to please, at least in the ecumenical sense of eliciting admiration at the aptness of how it accomplishes what it sets out to do. But this aim is not incompatible with engaging in a serious, self-critical attempt to make sense of the world, and oneself, and one's place in the world. Writing and reading poetry can be a mode of philosophizing, one that affords epistemic payoffs not attainable via "straight" analysis and inference. In that practice, Dickinson shows us a way.[9]

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Chapter 1

Forms of Emotional Knowing and Unknowing

Skepticism and Belief in Dickinson's Poetry

RICK ANTHONY FURTAK

How are the allure of truth, and the problem or challenge of attaining knowledge, addressed in Emily Dickinson's poetry? Continually at issue in her verse are the possibilities and limits of knowing the nature of the surrounding world, including the minds of others. Many of Dickinson's poems give voice to wonder, frustration, and the feeling of illumination or insight, along with other emotional states involved in exploring the promise of knowledge and confronting skeptical questions. This chapter will focus especially on moments in Dickinson's poetry at which an encounter with the natural or human world is portrayed as moving the poet toward either an intensification or a partial resolution of doubt—a dialectic through which she, the implied speaker, articulates the affective struggle to make sense of the world and to find herself at home in it. As we shall see, the philosophical thinking that unfolds in her lyrics is often preoccupied with a characteristic human distress about our finite limitations *and* with a contrary,