Review Essay

PROPHETIC RIDDLES: THE ENIGMAS OF EMILY DICKINSON

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The memory is still all too painfully sharp. I was, in those distant days, a graduate student, approaching at long last the survey course in American literature, which was renowned both for scope and rigor. I actually felt pretty confident – one might say a bit cocky – until we got to Emily Dickinson. And then I was ready to throw up my hands. What on earth was the woman talking about? Even now, charged with the building of syllabi, I find myself often baffled. The other day, for instance, one of my MIT colleagues, a composer engaged in setting some of Dickinson’s verse to music, showed me a poem and said, “What do you think of that?” I had a quick reply – “It’s a riddle, of course.” “Yes – but what’s the answer?” He let me dangle and ponder for the better part of a week until he left the solution on my voice mail.1 My experience in teaching the poetry of Dickinson to undergraduates likewise confirms the paradigmatic enigma of her work. Students long for a key to the code. Too often they fall back on cheap psycho-biography: the near lunatic spinster of Amherst rises up. “She was crazy, wasn’t she?”

Recently, in an essay called “Beginners” in her prose collection What Is Found There, Adrienne Rich tries to explain this frustration. Conjoining Dickinson with her contemporary Whitman, she offers the advice that “beginners” (the term is Whitman’s, but Rich applies it to both poets) “are openers of new paths, those who take the first steps, who therefore can...
seem strange and 'dreadful' to their place and time . . . " (Rich 91). The sense of estrangement in Dickinson — dare one call it an "alienation effect?" — Rich implies, persists down to our own day. Perhaps we have still just not caught up to her, ventured with Emily "where no poet has gone before" and few enough since. Still, there is a counter-case to be made, and even the title of Professor Doriani's book suggests that she is moved to plead that cause.

For, though we seem at times to be drowning in "keys" to Dickinson, she remains a riddle and a riddler — how many of her poems, intriguingly, begin with a word in single quotations, and then offer a remarkable redefinition of it: Hope a "thing with feathers?" "Experiments" that which "escorts [sic] us last?" "Faith" a fine invention? And how often the solution to the riddle of her corpus seems as a whole to depend, according to her critics and supporters, upon a principle of opposition: Dickinson the "pugilist," battling the late stages of the Puritan religious polity, especially the patriarchal deity it constructed; Dickinson the anti-poet, in rebellion against the taste which accounted "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Excelsior" great art, but did not allow "I heard a fly buzz, when I died" so much as publication, much less acclaim. How refreshing, by contrast, to see Dickinson placed within a tradition, as a successor rather than as a "beginner"; and to hear her work accounted a force for the propagation of wisdom and vision, rather than confusion and disruption.

Professor Doriani puts the heart of her argument economically, writing that while "Dickinson's humor, irony, sometimes even ambivalence or uncertainty as the speaker reflects on the implications of her wisdom overall," still her "prophetic voice . . . is teacherly, insightful, and quotable, even if it may be unconventional in its vision" (33). It is a cogently nuanced positioning of the poet, leaving the all-too-familiar attributes of ambivalence, uncertainty, and unconventionality undenied, while placing her firmly within a long and lively tradition of prophecy which reaches back to Miriam and Deborah, and out to Emerson, Thoreau, and Timothy Dwight (along with countless now-forgotten preachers and divines whose sermon collections were, predictably, to be found in the library of her father's house in Amherst).

As my remarks should suggest, this is a brief but valuable, even necessary book. Dickinson (like, for very different reasons, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, among others) is in danger of being so particularized by her defenders as to lose a sufficiently large and central place in our literature. Professor Doriani rescues her from the pure feminists, the strict secularists, the hidebound anti-canonists, and places her firmly in the main line of a long and lively tradition of religious rhetoric.