

On Dickinson

For someone who left the world awhile ago, Emily Dickinson remains in the news, most recently as the subject of a motion picture. That's as it should be. Her presence is an abiding one. The question that hovers around her poems is: what is that presence?

We are familiar with her as the author of canonical poems, wrestler with the demons of Calvinism, recusant ("no-hoper"), reclusive soul, and extraordinary imagination. She occupies that peculiar ground in the still nascent (or so one hopes) American republic of the Poet, which is to say, spirit teacher.

What a spirit teacher offers is not doctrinal. Her poems enact dramas of feeling that engage the largest human concerns but whose conclusions are always provisional, even as they ring with authority. Spirit is the river within us that distinguishes our being, our aliveness, our quickness that can't be pinned down to any one dimension of our days on earth. When we die, the particular spirit vanishes.

Poets are ambassadors of the spirit. Through words, rhythms, and forms they can engage spirit: the evanescent, the transient, the seemingly lost moments that comprise a life. This endeavor occupies an eventful but overlooked space between religion and the so-called secular, day-to-day grind of making and spending, of one morning of one day for church and the rest for work and play. The spirit space that the poets address is present all the time because it speaks for the twinges and insights that go with being alive, regardless of the venue. The spirit space speaks for all that is invisible but there: intuition, confusion, foreboding, wonder, awe, regret, passion, and countless other dimensions of emotion.

Though one can quote from Dickinson's poems as if they were apothegms, what they offer that seems especially important is a sort of battle ground of feeling that gets played out over and over, what I have called when I lead discussions of her poems, "the map of lostness." The poems are profoundly provisional, as we are privy to line-by-line leaps, surmises, and exclamations. They are, to use a related word, improvisations. This outlook seems very American. We are, for better and worse, making it up here, but also, as a strategy, her poems present a challenge because pedagogy tends to want matters settled. Pedagogy is aimed at answers and poems, particularly Dickinson's, don't offer answers. They are more like bits of being where one cannot say what they mean anymore than one can say what a person or tree or flower or dog means. They don't offer neat sums. They just very actively are.

The spirit teaching poetry imparts is simple: wake up. This is perennial advice but we need to feel it daily because we tend to sleepwalk through life. Modern times manufacture endless spurious excitements to counteract this state of being but they pale quickly and must be continually reinforced by more excitements. We now have a kind of electronic sleepwalking. The example that Dickinson's poems offer is literally, a line-by-line wake-up call to the fact that we never know what is going to happen next in life. The lines enact that ignorance while whetting our curiosity. Where are we headed? The honest answer is: I don't know but let's see what happens.

Again, it is important to call attention to the precarious space her poems, and poems in general, occupy. Typically one meets up with Dickinson in a classroom but there is nothing of knowledge about her in the sense of studying chemistry or algebra or Spanish I. The venues for passing on poetry barely exist in the modernized world. They would be something like academies in the sense of the Greeks: places where people came together to learn the spirit lore of their society. Societies that lack recognized spirit teachers are bound to fail because they have no inner compass. No matter what they seem to achieve, they are bound to founder because they have no recognition of how made-up life is to begin with and how the genius of life is what we don't know, not what we do know. Societies without spirit teachers

lack brakes. They can only careen from one financial crisis to another, one election to another, one sporting event to another, one war to another. They are the prisoners of external news.

Dickinson was not a prisoner of the days and their news. Poetry freed her and she understood what to do with that freedom. Her poems stand as instances of remarkable, unpredictable, and ever-shifting insight. One can spend each day of one's life with Dickinson's poems and not get anywhere near to the bottom of them because there is no bottom. They move through space and time like truly free spirits. We use that phrase but rarely feel what it entails. Dickinson's poems are the real, unsettling thing. We fight wars in the name of freedom but we mean only a way of life or, more narrowly, a way of making money. Freedom, as evinced by Dickinson in her poems, seems to remain more than the republic can engage in anything like a systematic, this-matters-to-all-of-us fashion. One can argue that is just as well but given the current dire circumstances of the republic such an attitude seems cavalier. We need all the help we can get. The examples that Dickinson's poems give us (and she is one among a number of extraordinary American poets) can make us pause from our busy pursuits and feel how spirit lives. That is the heart of the human matter.