Linguistically Transformative Pain

Gary Hawkins

Reading Dickinson, we are nurtured into a veracity born of the domestic truthfulness of the poems. Her words seem to come out of deep, lived experience. Yet their confident profundities read like prophecy. Likewise, in reading Cythia Hogue's The Incognito Body, I find that these poems resonate with profound insight. Yet sometimes it seems as if Hogue would rather step writing and step into the more radical immediacy of her life. And while the lure toward Hogue's veracity could take me into her biography, eager to learn just what her "great pain" has been, I will not. Better to remain with the poems in their prophetic power, where body binds to prose and both are the vector to alast truth.

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The Incognito Body

Cynthia Hogue

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American poets have long heard Emily Dickinson as their muse. Taught to us in the common meter of a hymn, her measured cadence somberizes our limbs—or becomes what Annie Finch calls "the ghost of meter" underlining our free verse. And although the mythic Dickinson of high-collared prudence has no doubt inspired a good deal of doggerel, too, the radical, current Dickinson of multiple variant lyrics and of subject and unfamiliar epistles has loosened and enlivened contemporary poetic form. Susan Howe's landmark hybrid My Emily Dickinson (1985) re-claimed the place of Dickinson as inventor of "quite another grammar" while extending her innovation in a book of remarkable critical autobiography; and Lucie Brock-Broido's The Master Letters (1995) re-casts Dickinson's haunting epistles to include some "American & cracked" subjectless addresses to an auditor unknown. Now, The Incognito Body reveals Cynthia Hogue's direct lineage to Dickinson. Here, "another realm" of language enters into the book via Dickinson, and we witness the emergence in each of the way that Hogue describes an arrival of memory, a process in which "[i]f images like artifacts in a mid-"

Hogue's shifting quest for "what is" follows Dickinson's insistent telling of "true" truths. And when we recognize Hogue's prominent place among the contributors to the current "Poets on Emily Dickinson" special issue of Emily Dickinson Journal (15.3) (joining an impressive cast from Susan Howe to Linda Pastan, Marilyn Hacker to Bob Perelman), how we know this is no mere coincidence. In the crisis of Cynthia Hogue's The Incognito Body, the pain suffered by the body embraces a new prose. Just as Dickinson outwits her crisis of confinement, Hogue survives by "letting go" into a remarkable form.

But the transforming, central pain of The Incognito Body remains unknown as the collection begins with its confidence in the "future perfect" of "modern life" pitched in fit, certain, stanzas poems. This assurance aligns the poet with the trajectory of the book: from the surface where she initially finds herself, she seeks the depth of the "heart" where by journey's end she will have found the "truth" she seeks. But if Dickinson on her journey from "what We see" toward "that We do not" is buttressed by her "Newbridge Bridge" or "Faith," Hogue on her quest to the heart of "The Book of What Is" proceeds on more shaky scaffolding. Hogue's mode is more mystic but no less a grammatical challenge. To achieve that perfect future, she'll "absorb verbs to soothsay" a "dynamic" life which is ever-changing, uncertain ("very solid or shifting?" she asks.) her word is as "aauce plain / a blue that shimmors, that shifts," a landscape she confesses to be made of "zones I cannot read." Still, initially her divination matches a contemporary indeterminacy—where "truth" equivocates with "wave / marbled water" and "man walking down path"—with the certainty of a Romantic excavation. As she melts her way through the layers of a figure, the "old flame" of truth rises as a river opening under the strata of winter, a line-by-line revelation of a series of still-green memories.

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But such revelations are soon luxury. To enter into "The Incognito Body" (the long, sectioned title poem and heart of the book) is to "[walk to breeze and satin] / a dozen of blues past." We are "in another country," whose boundary is the body and whose passport is its pain. A chilling epigraph from Elaine Scarry sets the states of the poem as they will reverberate across the entire collection, including its measured beginning: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it. . . ." And those states of pain also inaugurate Hogue's challenge to herself and to all of us, in all our pains. "[W]e must teach ourselves—a new language, simple / words with which to start—", she writes prophetically in another poem that appears to predate most of the composition of the book ("The Sibyl's Spring, 1999"). In learning this new language, Hogue's close ally remains Dickinson. Indeed, The Incognito Body is suffused with and structured by the abject witness of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes."

Tilting sections "The Hour of Lead" and "The Nerves Like Tonsams," Hogue embodies Dickinson's "Wooden way" to create the early stages of pain in a language prosody of "slow, slug / moves, / short lines, fragments, / [ ] sentences, raked / into small shames / like so many piles of leaves."

Yet very soon the "no-more-being" of the body in pain leads her deeper into Dickinson, and Hogue recites her muse's final line in order to transform: "First cri00l, / then stupid, / then the letting go." What follows is unexpected but anticipated, the carefully unfolding lyric lines cannot go on. Let, go, the poem shatters. And while we could discuss this as a semantic shift, what sets Cynthia Hogue's poems apart from the crowd of overly intellectualized semiotics that masquerade today as poems is the presence of a human body for whom this is not an exercise. The body-poes facing a "decreasing capacity / to find words" writes new through the "[i]s" of her mOs:

You were gong to say
Could think of Nothing to say
Had Something to say and suddenly after a sentence
lose language.

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