

Lee Upton: On "Medusa"

In "Medusa," first published in the *New Republic* in 1921, Bogan enacts a break from living being to deadening stasis, precisely rendering the moment of division. The poem is in five stanzas, four of them quatrains. The second stanza is composed of five lines, as if the stanzaic form must enlarge slightly to accommodate the Gorgon's ability suddenly to change conceptions of time and space. The repeated sibilants emphasize Medusa's threatening, snakelike power. With the poem's alternating line lengths, the first and third lines of quatrains often more than doubling in syllables the second and fourth lines, the poem mirrors the effect of foreshortening, contracting upon itself as the speaker in the poem experiences an abrupt halt in motion.

Initially, the woman who speaks is a threshold figure who sees the Medusa's head "through a door." The Gorgon herself would appear curiously without volition, suggesting that what may be viewed is her decapitated head, which will share the same fate as her victim, for her eyes, likewise, will be stiff and "bald," unable to turn from an offending sight. In his 1961 essay on Bogan, Roethke points out the connection between the speaker and the Medusa, noting that the Medusa is herself located in womblike maternal space, "the house in a cave of trees." Roethke was the first to suggest that the Medusa of Bogan's poems is "the anima, the Medusa, the man-in-the-woman, mother--her mother, possibly. . . ." Medusa paralyzes beings who are then confined forever to her yard and, by extension, to the maternal. Immobilized, the speaker remains attached to her "creator" within "the great balanced day."

[. . .]

"Medusa" is marked by Bogan's central conflicts: a threateningly permeable consciousness; ruptures between will and action; and ambivalence toward maternal power as the speaker is, in a sense, "Shot dead." Beyond such conflict, the poem emerges, despite its ambiguities, as a paean to maternal power even when that power is dislocated and cut from its source. As Karen Elias-Button has contended, the Medusa encloses "female creative energies." Such a "Terrible Mother" proves a "metaphor for the sources of our own creative powers." In "Medusa" Bogan creates a testament to the frightening power of the maternal and, in subterranean form, intimates her own identification with her mother, for Gorgon and speaker assume similarities through sight as the "stiff bald eyes" of Medusa are mirrored in those of the speaker. Ensnared in Medusa's gaze and duplicating the Gorgon's perceptions, the speaker must continually gaze ahead, her own eyes rigidified by staring. Finally, she is a "shadow" Medusa:

[. . .]

The poem's network of assonance and word repetitions (bell, fall, shadow) further emphasize mirroring, the effect of alliteration between lines allowing us to experience an aural identification, linking sound and semantics. And from the depth of the poem's ambiguity, the mother emerges as both a bonding and a blinding force.

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