

Jon Rosenblatt: On "Ariel"

. . . A poem like "Ariel" possesses power and importance to the degree to which the horseback ride Plath once took becomes something more—a ride into the eye of the sun, a journey to death, a stripping of personality and selfhood. To treat "Ariel" as a confessional poem is to suggest that its actual importance lies in the horse-ride taken by its author, in the author's psychological problems, or in its position within the biographical development of the author. None of these issues is as significant as the imagistic and thematic developments rendered by the poem itself. . . .

. . . "Ariel" is probably Plath's finest single construction because of the precision and depth of its images. In its account of the ritual journey toward the center of life and death, Plath perfects her method of leaping from image to image in order to represent mental process. The sensuousness and concreteness of the poem—the "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" of the berries; the "glitter of seas"—is unmatched in contemporary American poetry. We see, hear, touch, and taste the process of disintegration: the horse emerging from the darkness of the morning, the sun beginning to rise as Ariel rushes uncontrollably across the countryside, the rider trying to catch the brown neck but instead "tasting" the blackberries on the side of the road. Then all the rider's perceptions are thrown together: the horse's body and the rider's merge. She hears her own cry as if it were that of a child and flies toward the burning sun that has now risen.

In "Ariel," Plath finds a perfect blend between Latinate and colloquial dictions, between abstractness and concreteness. The languages of her earlier and her later work come together:

White Godiva, I unpeel? Dead hands, dead stringencies.

The concreteness of the Anglo-Saxon "hands" gives way to the abstractness of the Latinate "stringencies": both the physical and psychological aspects of the self have died and are pared away. Finally, the treatment of aural effects in the poem makes it the finest of Plath's technical accomplishments. The slant-rhymes, the assonance (for example, the "I"-sound in the last three stanzas), and the flexible three-line stanzas provide a superb music. . . . the vortex of images sucks the reader into identifying with a clearly self-destroying journey. On a literal level, few readers would willingly accept this ride into nothingness. But, through its precise rendering of sensation, the poem becomes a temptation: it draws us into its beautiful aural and visual universe against our will. As the pace of the horseride quickens, the intensity of the visual effects becomes greater. The identification of the speaker with the world outside becomes more extreme; Plath's metaphors suggest a large degree of fusion between disparate objects, as in the lines "I / foam to wheat, a glitter of seas." The ride across the fields suddenly turns into an ocean voyage. The body then fuses with the external world. As the speaker's merger with the sun is completed, so is the reader's merger with her: the process of identification within the poem generates a corresponding identification on the part of the reader. If the speaker will be destroyed in the cauldron of energy, the sun, so the reader

will be destroyed in the cauldron of the poem. The poem entices us into a kind of death?the experience of abandoning our bodies and selves.

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