

Kathleen Margaret Lant: On "Ariel"

The work which most perfectly embodies Plath's conflicting sets of figures concerning power and nakedness is "Ariel" (October 1962), for this poem shows how Plath's metaphorical universes collide but also how her mutually exclusive systems of representation give rise to some of the most effective and beautiful poetry she wrote. Plath noted in her journal that she was privileged to listen to Auden discuss his view of Shakespeare's Ariel as representative of "the creative imaginative" (Journals 77), so one might assume that in this poem she is revealing something about her own view of creativity.(17) What is curious is that the creativity which emerges so energetically here is ultimately undone within the context of the poet's own presentation of that creativity.

M. L. Rosenthal points to the basic conflict of the poem in observing that "In a single leap of feeling, it identifies sexual elation (in the full sense of the richest kind of encompassment of life) with its opposite, death's nothingness" (74). In fact, however, Plath is not conflating two opposing states of being; instead she is capering dangerously between metaphorical designs which seem to consume the poem from within. Obviously the movement of the poem is very powerful and very positive since the speaker proceeds from stillness and ignorance ("Stasis in darkness" [239]) toward light at a very rapid pace. The speaker moves with some potent force - a horse, a sexual partner, some aspect of herself - which compels her, and given the title and Plath's remarks concerning Auden, we can assume that this force must relate to some aspect of Plath's creative self. The speed of the journey is such that the earth "Splits and passes" before the speaker, and even those delicious and tempting enticements that come between the creator and her work are not enough to impede her; they may be "Black sweet blood mouthfuls," but the speaker of the poem consigns them to the category "Shadows," things which threaten the vision (light) and power of her creative surge.

The female force of the poem flies through air, and suddenly she begins to engage in that most essential of poetic acts - at least for the writers of Plath's generation; she removes those restrictions which threaten her gift. She tosses her clothing off like a rebellious Godiva and rides free, fast, unclothed, and fully herself toward her goal:

White

Godiva, I unpeel --

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And she reaches a moment of apparent transcendence: "And now I Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas." Her epiphany is associated with traditionally female symbols. (We might make a connection between the wheat and Demeter, goddess of agriculture, or between wheat and the mother earth. The sea, moreover, certainly seems closely connected with female cycles and with the female symbol of the moon.) Her moment of triumph, moreover, is conveyed in verbs which may suggest - if sexuality is at all to be considered appropriate here - female rather than male sexuality. To foam and to glitter have arguably much more resonance when

considered in terms of female orgasm than in terms of male orgasm. The energy of these verbs is great, but it is a more sonorous and sustained energy than a directed, explosive, and aimed burst. To make use of Luce Irigaray's paradigm, woman's sexuality and woman's pleasure are not "one" but "plural" because "woman has sex organs more or less everywhere" (28).

But now the speaker enters a different metaphorical paradigm. Her final "stringency" is removed, "The child's cry // Melts in the wall," and she can become more powerful only by moving her fully exposed (naked) female self toward the power which she so covets, the power of light and heat and vision - the sun. To make this journey she must transform herself from wheat and water to something much more dangerous and traditionally powerful - an arrow. And here Plath is forced - by the desire of her speaker to assert herself, to move and fly - to appropriate an inappropriate figure for her speaker's flight: the speaker of "Ariel" becomes an arrow. She transforms herself into the most potent figure of the patriarchal symbolic order - the phallus. The arrow is clearly a figure Plath associates somewhat resentfully, with masculine power. In *The Bell Jar*, Buddy Willard's mother tells him that a man is "an arrow into the future" and that a woman needs to be "the place the arrow shoots off from" (79). Esther's response to Buddy's reiteration of Mrs. Willard's platitudes is that she, Esther, wants to be that arrow: "I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself" (92). In "Ariel," Plath demonstrates the consequences for the female artist of such proud and self-affirming desires when these desires are couched in the only symbolic structures available to her.

While the speaker of the poem may call herself the arrow, while she might arrogantly lay claim to that title, she is still female, still the wheat and the water, still naked and exposed and vulnerable. It is important to note that once the speaker begins her flight, she is no longer the arrow; her femaleness has ineluctably reasserted itself. Inescapably female, she is

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

And dew must be consumed by the power of the sun. The speaker of the poem is fully aware that her urgent desire for the power she has arrogated for herself is destructive to her as a woman, for she refers quite deliberately to her journey as suicidal. What is perhaps most tragic about both the speaker of this poem and about Sylvia Plath as the creator of that speaker is that the impulse toward self-disclosure, the desire to move toward the eye/I of awareness, is destined to destroy both of them. In Western culture the unclothed female, whether it be the self-disclosing creator or the emblematic and naked female subject, can be a symbol only of vulnerability and victimization, even when the audience to the glorious and hopeful unveiling is the self.

Placing "Ariel" in a feminist context, Sandra Gilbert argues that the "Eye" toward which this poem moves is "the eye of the father, the patriarchal superego which destroys and devours

with a single glance" ("Fine, White Flying Myth" 259). But such a reading, by ignoring the play on words of "eye" and "I," leaves unremarked a central ambiguity in the poem and underestimates Plath's commitment to her female subject and her wild and creative commitment to her own art. The speaking subject here is not just moving toward a powerful male entity, the sun; Plath's speaker is moving implacably toward herself as well, toward the eye/i that has become the center of her universe, the focus of her attention. The tragedy of Plath's work, however, is that she has conceived of this overwhelmingly omnipotent figure in the only metaphors available to her - those of the masculine poetic tradition. In this tradition, power is the sun/god, as Gilbert has observed, and to be fully revealed before him, to be naked before this God, is the most transcendently powerful act a human can perform. But when you are female, when you burn with your own sun and expose yourself confidently to that sun, you are consumed. Your body, your self, is still vulnerable. It will be destroyed. The most telling irony of the poem is that the masculine God of patriarchal discourse has been displaced here by the "I" which is the speaker herself. And the female speaker has become the phallic arrow which impels itself toward that sun. But such a journey into knowledge will prove deadly - because the language, the signifiers of that journey dictate that it must be so for the speaking subject who is still "dew," still female. Even when the father is replaced, his words speak for him, his language secures his position: the dew will be dispersed by the sun.

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