

Richard Grey: On "Tulips"

A poem like 'Tulips' is a good illustration of Plath's passion and her craft. Its origins lie in personal experience: a time when the poet was taken into hospital and was sent flowers as a gift. The opening four stanzas recover her feelings of peace and release on entering the hospital ward. 'Look how white everything is', she exclaims:

how quiet, how snowed-in,
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands,
I am nobody . . .

The verse is nominally free but has a subtle iambic base; the lines, seven to each stanza, move quietly and mellifluously; and a sense of hidden melody ('learning' / 'lying', 'lying by myself quietly', 'light lies', 'white walls') transforms apparently casual remarks into memorable speech. What is more to the point, the almost sacramental terms in which Plath describes herself turn this experience into a mysterious initiation, a dying away from the world. 'I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses', Plath says, 'And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons'. Everything that gives her identity, that imprisons her in existence, has been surrendered; and she sinks into a condition of utter emptiness, openness that is associated at certain times here with immersion in water -- a return to the foetal state and the matrix of being. The only initial resistance to this movement comes from a photograph of her husband and children she has by her bedside: reminding her, evidently, of the hell of other people, who cast 'little smiling hooks' to fish her up out of the sea.

In the next four stanzas, the tulips -- mentioned briefly in the first line and then forgotten -- enter the scene with a vengeance:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

The flowers are all that is the opposite of the white, silent world of the hospital, carrying associations of noise and pressure, 'sudden tongues and . . . colour'. They draw Plath back to life, the conditioning forces that constitute existence. She feels herself 'watched', identified by 'the eyes of the tulips': their gaze commits her to a particular status or role. What is more, this contrary impulse drawing her back into the world and identification 'corresponds' to something

in herself. It comes from within her, just as the earlier impulse towards liberation did. This probably explains why the conflict of the poem remains unresolved: the ninth and final stanza of the poem simply and beautifully juxtaposes images of imprisonment and escape, the blood of life and the salt sea of death. 'And I am aware of my heart', Plath concludes:

it opens and closes

ts bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me,

The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health.

The alternatives here are familiar ones in American writing: either to live in the world and accept the identity it prescribes, or to flee into a state of absolute freedom. What is less familiar is that, here as elsewhere, Plath associates these two alternatives, traditionally figured in the clearing and the wilderness, with the absolute conditions of being and not-being. Fixity, in these terms, is life; flight is immolation; freedom is the immediate metaphor of the hospital and the ultimate metamorphosis of death.

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