

Christina Britzolakis: On "About the Bee Poems"

Plath increasingly finds ways of connecting what I have called the 'oracular' or 'transferential' drama of her poems with a larger historical process. The 1962 sequence which has become known as the 'Bee Poems' attempts to excavate the traces of this process within the familiar scenario of the daughter's initiation into the mysteries of writing by a father whose power she both desires and repudiates. Beekeeping is associated with the childhood image of the all-powerful father in 'Among the Bumblebees', 'Lament', and 'The Beekeeper's Daughter'. It is also associated with female fertility and reproductive power. In 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', for example, the father is the 'maestro of the bees' who 'move[s] hieratical . . . amongst the many-breasted hives', in a garden of overwhelming lushness. In the Bee Poems, the relation between artistic creativity and power is inscribed as at once personal and political, drawing not only on the association of bees with Otto Plath but also on Plath's own experience of beekeeping in Devon. Beekeeping becomes an analogy for the writing of poetry, which, while playing on the Platonic figure of the bee-poet possessed by divine insanity, as described in the *Ion*, implies a craft, a specialized practical skill or expertise.

The Bee Poems are often read as a parable of female self-assertion or narrative rite of rebirth, affirming the integrity of the creative self, and thus furnishing an alternative, more hopeful ending for Plath's career. Yet if on one level the poems can be seen as forging a personal mythology of survival, on another their dreamlike logic of displacement and condensation resists narratives of self-realization anchored in a stable notion of the subject. This alternative narrative logic manifests itself through a mobility of identification, which generates various uncanny effects. In particular, the scapegoating or sacrificial trope undergoes a number of psychic and narrative permutations. Although the speaker is initially seen as at once pupil and sacrificial victim of a surgeon-priest performing an operation ('The' Bee Meeting'), she subsequently receives a box of bees with which to begin her own hive ('The Arrival of the Bee Box'). In 'Stings' it is the father-beekeeper who is stung by the bees; in 'The Swarm', he becomes a dictator who uses the bees as instruments of imperialist self-aggrandizement. In the final poem of the sequence, he disappears, leaving the speaker alone, 'wintering in a dark without a window', with the ambivalent harvest of her beekeeping.

In the Bee Poems, the governing metaphor of beekeeping inserts the dynamics of the father-daughter transference into a social and historical continuum. The beehive is a classical figure of the polis as hierarchically ordered, industrious collectivity, in which the common and private good are as one. Bees were, of course, the academic specialism of Otto Plath, author of *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, and of a treatise on 'Insect Societies' for *A Handbook of Social Psychology*. With its highly structured division of labour, the hive seems to fulfill all the requirements of the ideally 'adjusted' or technocratic society, a smoothly functioning social organism devoid of conflict. Yet it is also a rich source of paradox and contradiction. For example, it is a matriarchal society of female producers, a detail which is crucial to Plath's reflection on power. It is, also, of course, an authoritarian society. The hive allows the poet to assume multiple and constantly changing points of identification?including those of beekeeper, queen, and worker-drudge?in a psychic theatre, signalled by a pervasive imagery of clothing. For example, the villagers' protective beekeeping gear turns them into participants in a sinister scapegoating rite:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers?

The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.

In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,

And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?

They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

The speaker's lack of 'protection' casts her in the role of sacrificial initiate-victim or patient in a surgical 'operation'. She identifies herself with the scapegoat, the Queen Bee who is in the process of being moved to another hive by the villagers to prevent the virgins from killing her. Yet at the same time she becomes a performer, 'the magician's girl who does not flinch'. The rhetoric of innocence, naivety, and vulnerable nakedness is a masquerade which allows her to assume the central role in the drama. Poetic authority is inscribed as a function of the speaker's highly subjective and willed reinvention of herself, which renders the boundary between inner and outer worlds radically fluid and permeable. In 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', the speaker is a Pandora figure, who hovers on the brink of assuming her ownership of the potential hive, torn between terror of its 'dangerous' powers and fantasies of absolute control. The box of bees becomes a metaphor of the unconscious itself, whose dark, 'primitive' forces are linked with the threat of racial and class otherness ('the swarmy feeling of African hands | Minute and shrunk for export, | Black on black, angrily clambering', the 'Roman mob'). Moreover, this trope of the 'primitive' unconscious is acted out in linguistic terms. The 'unintelligible syllables' of the bees threaten the speaker with loss of sovereign control over meaning. She oscillates between the positions of master and slave, oppressor and victim; between fantasies of despotic power which mimic and caricature the authority of a 'Caesar' ('They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner') and of escape from vengeful forces through metamorphosis and disguise, assuming the 'petticoats of the cherry' or a 'moon suit and funeral veil'.

Throughout these poems, the speaker is alternately attracted and repelled by the implications of being 'in control' ('Stings'). In 'Stings' she is again cast as the beekeeper's apprentice, learning how to operate the 'honey machine' which will 'work without thinking | Opening in

spring, like an industrious virgin'. Here, however, the threat emanates less from the emblematic male figure than from the female, domestic collectivity of the worker bees or 'winged, unmiraculous women', who would turn the speaker into a 'drudge'. The dreamlike logic of 'Stings' produces a splitting of the father-beekeeper figure; it pits beekeeper and female apprentice as equivocal allies against an intrusive 'third person', a false beekeeper and 'scapegoat' who provokes the fury of the bees. This surrealist triangulation is inscribed within a logic of wish fulfillment or fantasized revenge. The punitive stinging of the interloper is followed by the climactic revelation of the Queen Bee:

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet?
Over the engine that killed her?
The mausoleum, the wax house.

These lines have often been read as announcing a moment of mythic rebirth, and the triumphant flight of the Queen Bee, escaping from her enclosure in 'the mausoleum, the wax house', does indeed recall the apocalyptic-destructive power of other iconic female apparitions in Plath's work: the Clytemnestra figure in 'Purdah', the red-haired avenging demon of 'Lady Lazarus', and 'God's lioness' in 'Ariel'. Yet the 'terrible' power of the Queen Bee is deceptive; in spite of her 'lion-red body', her flight relies on the fragile mechanism of 'wings of glass', and the image of the 'red | Scar in the sky' suggests the vulnerability of a wounded, stigmatic 'I' rather than a triumphant affirmation of selfhood. The Queen Bee is in any case a highly equivocal totem of female power; she is a mere instrument of the hive's survival, and to that extent reinforces a mythic view of femininity as grounded in unchanging laws of nature. It is a masculine figure, the beekeeper, who exploits and regulates the labour and raw materials of the hive, and the fertility of the Queen Bee, for the production of a commodity. In 'The Swarm', the beekeeper who manoeuvres the bees into a new hive is likened to Napoleon, the prototypical dictator; the bees become armies which undergo self-immolation at his command:

How instructive this is!

The dumb, banded bodies

Walking the plank draped with Mother France's upholstery

Into a new mausoleum,

An ivory palace, a crotch pine.

The myth of maternity, like that of charismatic leadership, is enlisted in the service of nationalist and imperial ideology; Through such myths, the poem implies, the totalitarian state entwines itself with the affective life of its subjects and becomes 'the honeycomb of their dream'. Napoleon, whose imperial motif was the bee, and who kept bees during his exile at St Helena, is a figure who holds an ambiguous fascination for the speaker; in a draft of the poem, he is addressed as 'My Napoleon'. Although she ridicules the totalitarian dream which sees the world as mere plunder ('O Europe! O ton of honey!'), *herschadenfreude* implicates her in Napoleon's will for power.

In the Bee Poems, equivocal attempts to imagine a female collectivity are intercut with fantasies of individual martyrdom, usurpation, and revenge. The last poem of the sequence, 'Wintering', celebrates the female hive's powers of survival and its expulsion of 'the blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors' when they have performed their limited function. But the dimension of protofeminist allegory announced by the trope of the matriarchal community remains essentially tentative and undeveloped, less a conclusion than a question. Rather, Plath's use of beekeeping as the unifying metaphor of the sequence insists on the materiality of writing as social practice. The text appears as the product of social as well as individual energies. In an ironic rewriting of her New Critical apprenticeship (which saw the poem as self-referring verbal microcosm or autotelic object), what emerges from the Bee Poems is a view of the poetic text as at once psychically and historically overdetermined. Plath's earlier rewriting of de Chirico's 'metaphysical' style represented a key moment in her theatre of mourning. While the Bee Poems also draw on the resources of surrealism, they resist the psychological determinism of the earlier de Chiricoesque landscapes for a more dynamic vision of the relation between the psychic and the figurative. Their emphasis is less on the fatalistic daughter-in-mourning scenario of 'The Colossus', 'Electra', and 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', than on the rhetorical manipulation and reinvention of such transference scenarios as a means of imagining the possibilities of change and metamorphosis. At the same time, all myths of power, whether individual or collective, are seen as fissured by internal contradictions and therefore as ultimately self-defeating.

The Bee Poems represent the most complex and sustained instance of the oracular metaphor through which, as we have seen, Plath explores the technical resources of her craft and the range of possibilities available to her as a poetic initiate. The encounter with the 'oracle', in its various guises, combines a mythic return to the origins of poetic voice with the seductions of a pre-existent law or tradition, as in the fantasy of power gained through sacrificial victimhood. Yet Plath's struggle for poetic authority, and her revision of her modernist precursors, cannot be seen as a teleological movement culminating in a mythic moment of self-realization. Although the oracle is always linked with scenes of instruction and discipleship, its burden, from the outset, is the return of the repressed. The social, psychic, and above all linguistic energies which sustain the pedagogical transmission of authority are also capable of overwhelming or interrupting it. For Plath, the very terms of selfhood remain, as I shall argue

in the next chapter, entangled with a figurative 'other'.

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