

Brian Brodhead Glaser: on "Heart's Needle"

Snodgrass sees his relationship to his daughter as both more enduring and more changing, more particular in its phases. And he recognizes that part of his role as a father is to tolerate the increasing separations from her that cause him a poignant sense of isolation.

In this respect, we can see Snodgrass as influenced by the ideals of the New Fatherhood in a way that Yeats and the tradition of fatherhood poetry he represents are not. That this is not an entirely comfortable role for Snodgrass we can further discern from the last section of the poem ["Heart's Needle"]. Narrating a springtime return to the zoo with his daughter, Snodgrass describes the pleasures of the season, including budding crocuses and hot dog barbeques, before ending the poem in this way:

In full regalia, the pheasant cocks
march past their dubious hens;
the porcupine and the lean, red fox
trot around bachelor pens

and the miniature painted train
wails on its oval track:
you said, I'm going to Pennsylvania!
and waved. And you've come back.

If I loved you, they said, I'd leave
and find my own affairs.
Well, once again this April, we've
come around to the bears;

punished and cared for, behind bars,
the coons on bread and water

stretch thin black fingers after ours.

And still you are my daughter. (Snodgrass 1961, 418-33)

The cocks and the male porcupine and fox are compared with the wailing train, suggesting that for all the color and pride of these animals there is something futile in their lives, conspicuously without families as they are--they trot in comically empty circles. This is the kind of animal masculinity that "they" would remand the divorced Snodgrass to, one painfully extraneous to the affairs of child-rearing and intimate connection with the cycle of life. His insistence that "You are still my daughter" is a vehement refusal of this role. Yet in its unveiled plea for a special relation it makes him into a creature very like the bear and beseeching racoons that they have again "come around to," particularly since his daughter is returned to him from a departure to Pennsylvania that she so enthusiastically anticipated--his blunt "And you've come back" carries a weight of patient expectation. If he has escaped the cage of childless bachelorhood, he nevertheless finds himself confined to a role in which his daughter's alternating needs for companionship and independence, rather than his own, establish the rhythm of their relationship.

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