

Meg Boerema Gillette: On "The Dragonfly"

The aggressive opening line of Louise Bogan's 1963 "The Dragonfly" "You are made of almost nothing" seems almost an elaboration of the opening line of her 1923 "Women" "Women have no wilderness in them." By their aggressiveness, both lines announce their poems' oppositional climates. Though forty years and (of course) different topics separate "The Dragonfly" from "Women," the poems resemble one another by their poetics of counter-assertion. In his headnote to Bogan, Cary Nelson describes Bogan's deconstructive project, arguing "Women" mounts its feminist claims as counter-assertions, written against the grain of (and at work within) every patriarchal cliché about femininity (378). Like "Women," Bogan's "The Dragonfly" also performs a poetics of counter-assertion, here, writing itself into romantic discourse to undermine it from within.

The commission from the Corning Glass company, as reported by Elizabeth Frank, need not be the only impetus to "The Dragonfly"'s inception. Bogan's poem also borrows unambiguously from Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1833 poem of the same name, "The Dragonfly":

"Today I saw the dragon-fly
Come from the wells where he did lie. An inner
impulse rent the veil
Of his old husk: from head to tail
Came out clear plates of
sapphire mail. He dried his wings:
like gauze they grew; Thro' crofts and pastures
wet with dew
A living flash of light he flew."

Bogan's poem repeats the husk and light imagery of Tennyson's poem: the "old husk" (line 4) of Tennyson reappears in the "with the other husks of summer" (line 21) of Bogan, and Tennyson's "A living flash of light he flew" (line 8) echoes in Bogan's "light touches you" (line 10) and "you rocket into day" (line 17). These repetitions do more than suggest Bogan's familiarity with Tennyson's poem, they announce Bogan's poem as in dialogue with its forerunner.

But Bogan's poem refuses the stability of Tennyson's poem, rewriting the poetic utterance as one, not of reflection, but of production. In Bogan's poem, there is no deliberate "Today I saw the dragon-fly" (line 1) steadying the speaker as strict observer. Instead, Bogan's poem insists upon the instability of the speaker's relationship to the dragonfly. While in Tennyson, the dragonfly has mass ("plates of sapphire mail" (line 5)), surface ("veil/Of his old husk" (lines 3-4)), and unity ("from head to tail" (line 5)), in Bogan, the dragonfly is translucent, "diaphanous" (line 4), and "made of almost nothing" (line 1). For Bogan's poem then, there is no dragonfly outside of the production of the poem. The dragonfly is discursive, not material; the end of the poem is the end of the dragonfly as the poem's end and the dragonfly's death are simultaneous.

Insisting upon the dragonfly as a discursive construct, Bogan's poem resists a romantic model of a reflective poetics since, in Bogan's poem, there is no dragonfly outside of the poem for it to reflect. Instead, the dragonfly of Bogan's poem is not an object to be

represented by the poem, but is analogous to the performance of poem itself. By its apostrophic address, Bogan's "The Dragonfly" draws a comparison between the dragonfly it describes and the reader of the poem it creates. The addressee of the poem--the "you" of the poem--is at once the dragonfly nominally described, and the reader of the poem necessarily present. By the double valences of the word "you" then, the poem's description of the dragonfly reads also as a description of the reader. The "great eyes" (line 3) are both the eyes that dominate the dragonfly's appearance and the eyes that allow the reader's performance. Its "design and purpose" (line 19) speaks both to the vitality of the dragonfly and the reader's interpretative experience. Likewise, the dragonfly's correlative performance as a "Link between water and air" (line 8) applies both to the dragonfly's aquatic and terrestrial attractions (note: the dragonfly lives at the water's edge) and to the reader's double presence in and necessary negotiation of fiction and reality. To be a reader of this poem then is to be like the dragonfly, "to be ceaseless movement" (line 5), "twice born" (line 12), "split" (line 13). Hence, by the double valences of the word "you," Bogan's poem performs the very indeterminacy of movement that the poem describes, producing a reader who, like the poem's dragonfly, has no place to land: "Earth repels you" (line 9).

Refusing the existence of a non-discursive dragonfly and emphasizing the indeterminacy of the poetic experience, Bogan's "The Dragonfly" refuses the stability of Tennyson's romantic subjectivity. In Bogan's rewriting of "The Dragon-fly," discourse does not reflect but produces. For Bogan, the dragonfly *is* the poem: not only is the dragonfly produced by the poem, but in the poem's most emphatic insistence upon discursive productivity the dragonfly is even made equivalent to the poetic experience itself.

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