

Margaret Dickie: On "Ariel"

A poem that moves from "Stasis in darkness," "substanceless," to the "cauldron of morning" cannot be adequately described as an expression of suicidal impulses, although Plath's use of that word demands explanation. The arrow and the dew, although in apparent apposition, do not reinforce each other. The arrow kills, the dew is killed; the arrow at one with the red eye is its apotheosis, while the dew is consumed by the sun. The dew, like the child's cry melting and the unpeeling dead hands and even the foaming wheat and "glitter of seas," symbolizes all that will be overcome or sacrificed in this arrow's drive into morning. But the speaker, identifying with the arrow, presents herself as no sacrificial victim on the altar of any god. The arrow, like the horse, "God's lioness," absorbs the power of the avenging God: "at one with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye," it is associated with the fury that lit the holocaust.

The sexual implications of this imagery reinforce this reading and develop as well its use in "Purdah." The female speaker here identifies with the horse, a symbol of masculine sexual potency which, as the arrow, becomes a phallic image that drives into the eye, the circle associated with female sexuality. Far from a desire to transcend the physical, "Ariel" expresses the exultation of a sex act in which the speaker is both the driving arrow and the receiving cauldron. "God's lioness" in "Ariel" calls upon both strands of the female mythological lioness: as an arrow she is associated with battle, and in her merger with the sun she absorbs its fertility. Destroyer-creator, masculine-feminine, the spirit with which the speaker identifies in "Ariel" is whole, entire in itself. The fires that burn in honor of and through this spirit are emblematic of its passion and ecstasy.

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