

Suzanne Juhasz: On "The Colossus"

Even in a poem like "The Colossus," in which the poet is exploring a very private, very personal experience, her relationship with her dead father whom she both adores and hates because he died, because he is dead and still influences her life, she needs at this point in her career to generalize even mythicize the experience to control it and therefore to write about it. (From later poems on the theme, such as "Daddy," we get a clearer picture of the devastating strength of her emotions. But in this poem they are modulated by their symbolic form.)

The father is seen as a great but broken statue, a ruin from some former time: "O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum." The poet is laboring, as she has been for thirty years, she says, to get him "put together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed" to bring him back to life or to put him into perspective, either way means freeing herself from his power. Plath's characteristic irony (yet another method of distancing) is here directed upon herself :

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol

I crawl like an ant in morning

Over the weedy acres of your brow

To mend the immense skull plates and clear

The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

This strange scene is put into its "proper" context: "A blue sky out of the Oresteia / Arches above us." There is again the mockery: we are like some characters out of a Greek drama, not real people at all; but there is also the epic dimension that the vision gives to these actors. The poet is not only Sylvia Plath, she is a type of Electra, the daughter who avenged the murder of her father, Agamemnon. They become more than themselves when identified with the devoted daughter/dead father archetype. Finally, the very setting itself helps to supply the story:

Nights, I squat in the cornucopia

Of your left ear, Out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.

The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.

My hours are married to shadow.

No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel

On the blank stones of the landing.

The scene, being a symbolic construction, is meant to be translated into a psychological and emotional vocabulary: I am yoked, dedicated to death, observes the protagonist. The giant statue is mythic and larger than life, but in being so it is also the past?it is irrevocably dead and cannot be reconstructed. But it has become her only home. She lives in its shadow and views the living world from its perspective. Her own life, as she sees it, is therefore a living death.

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