

NUMINOUS WOOING

Mary Szybist. *Incarnadine*. Graywolf, 2013.

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More than any contemporary poet whom I have read, Mary Szybist in her wonderful second book *Incarnadine* channels the spirit of Rainer Marie Rilke's great work, the *Duino Elegies*: not just in the way she imagines and addresses the angelic, but in the way her best poems evoke the heightened longings and radiant wonder of pure being. Her language and imaginative sensibility fabricate poems that are at once lushly sensual and spiritually elevated, celebratory and mournful, odic and elegiac. In "To the Troubadors Etc.," the volume's lead poem, the speaker imagines the cult of stylized wooing from the perspective of the wooed:

Think of days of those scarlet-breasted, blue-winged birds above you. Think of me in the garden, humming quietly to myself in my blue dress, a blue darker than the sky above us, a blue dark enough for storms, though cloudless.

At what point is something gone completely?
The last of the sunlight is disappearing Even as it swells—

Just for this evening, won't you put me before you until I'm far enough away you can believe in me?

Then, try to come closer—
my wonderful and less than.

By pre-empting postmodern knowingness in the poem's first line—"Just for this evening let's not mock them"—and offering a tribute to those who knew "how to make themselves shrines to their own longing," the poet is able to recover a perspective of radical innocence through which the ordinary shimmers.

Playing off of her own first name identifications, Szybist casts the Virgin Mary receiving word from the archangel Gabriel as the iconic motive and prevailing motif of the collection as a whole. (Botticelli's *Annunciation* painting adorns the cover, as one variation of her ekphrastic). Just as Louise Gluck found the allegorical garden in *The Wild Irish* or the marriage of *The*

Odyssey in *Meadowlands* as inspirational sources for a panoply of voices, Szybist re-imagines the Annunciation scene through many different personae and points-of-view—the Virgin Mary, the angel Gabriel, “the grass beneath them,” a Fender’s Blue Butterfly, a right whale attacked by gulls, and “girls overheard while assembling a puzzle,” et al. In doing so, the poet is able to clone herself across a tonal spectrum from rapturous embrace to knowing skepticism. What does remain constant in all these poems is a charged language, sometimes pitched to the level of ecstatic devotion or epiphany, where the quotidian can be transformed and elevated, or used as an ironic counterpoint to the sublime and rhapsodic. (“...as soon as she gets a few more things done and finishes the dishes, she will open herself to God.”) As Szybist explores the full range of the devotional, the line between religious and sexual surrender, sacred worship and carnal eros becomes thin and permeable to the point of erasure. The religious or mythical high-mindedness is periodically relieved by Szybist’s wry playfulness—for instance, her melding of the sublimely creative (the Word of God made flesh through Mary) with the profanely erotic, and even the pornographic, as in “Annunciation in *Nabakov* and *Starr*” where direct quotes from the *Lolita* and *The Starr Report* are uttered by a witnessing angel:

When she *walked through the Rose Garden*,
its heavy, dove-grey air,
dizzy with something unbreathable—

There was something soft and moist about her,
a dare, a rage, an *intolerable tenderness*.

A well-deserving recipient of the 2013 National Book Award, *Incarnadine* is not just a religious book for the skeptical, but sometimes an erotic book for those who eschew the pornographic for the psychologically intimate and linguistically sublimated. As Szybist herself explained in an interview upon receiving the award, “By creating disjunctions that swerve between the carnal and the sacred, the mythic and the quotidian, I aim to create spaces receptive to heterogeneity and difference.” (Lessley interview)

In writing a contemporized devotional poetry turned toward more secular mediations, many of these poems aspire to the condition of prayer. In so far as lyric can sometimes be read as the overhearing of the soul’s most private speech, Szybist explores the resemblance of apostrophe to prayer, where the addressed does not, or cannot, answer back. “Invitation” plays off ritual invocation and litany:

I call to you, angels of embryos,
earthquakes, you of forgetfulness—

Angels of infection, cover my mouth
And nose with your mouth.

Failed inventions, tilt my head back.

“Conversion Figure” imagines the other side of the solitary and unresponded-to speech act, where the archangel addresses the ordinary, yet-to-be-transfigured girl:

Out of God's mouth I fell
Like a piece of ripe fruit
Toward your deepening shadow.

Girl on the lawn without sleeves, knees bare even of lotion, Time now to strip
away everything
You try to think about yourself.

Whether in the longing of the human for the sacred and angelic, or the angelic for the profane and human, these lyrics at their best embody the ache and the ecstasy in trying to bridge the chasm of invisible silence between orders of being. Szybist's brilliant and fecund premise is that, liberated from dogmatic religious symbolism, the iconographic Annunciation becomes a meditative conceit for the ultimate possibilities of language and meaning, communication and transcendence.

This poetry is not political in any conventional sense, but the ekphrastic inspiration for these poems reveals their feminist implications. After all, in iconographic terms Mary is not just the passive and obedient recipient of the Word, but also the objectified spectacle of the “male gaze.” Perhaps the boldest aspect of Szybist's project is the way it presents alternatives to Christian orthodoxy—the impossible ideal of the virgin mother—but never hardens into ideological complaint. A clue to the transgressive nature of Szybist's vision can be found in “Long After the Donkey and the Desert,” the poem from her first volume *Granted*, which presages her project in *In-carnadine*. In her notes, Szybist explains that the poem was inspired by *Dos Mujeres*, the Cubist painting by Diego Rivera, which depicts Maria Dolores Bastian standing over a sedentary Angelina Beloff, who was to give birth to Rivera's first son. Szybist sees the painting as the aftermath of an annunciations scene, and her poem, spoken in the voice of Mary, is further informed by the notion that Gabriel also means “divine husband” and that Gabriel is

believed by many to be the only female archangel:

Yes, I cared for him, but it is you
who has stayed with me, after all

In imagining Mary's tender reminiscence to an ethereally androgynous Other, the poem does not just push beyond categories of sex and gender, but beyond the dualities of body and spirit, and beyond any simply categorizable conceptions of eros.

The erotic quality of Szybist's poetry derives both from the rich sonorities of her language as well as from the psychological intimacies of address and content. Stevens' "Sunday Morning," with its "complacencies of the peignoir," might serve as an index of how the "necessary angel" of imagination can recast the ordinary in all its mortal beauty and sensual wonder; but Szybist works to *re-imagine* a more heterodox mythology of faith, not replace it as an overreaching modernist might. In "Long After the Desert and the Donkey" from *Incarnadine*, which forms a diptych and antiphon with the aforementioned, similarly titled poem from *Granted*, Gabriel remembers the miraculous moment in the tone of the plaintive subjunctive:

I remember the first time coming toward you,
How solid you looked, sitting and twisting
Your dark hair against your neck.

But you were not solid.
From the first moment, when you breathed
on my single lily, I saw
where you felt it.

From then on, I wanted to bend low and close
to the curve of your ear.

From then on, I wanted to tell you.
Or rather,
I wished to have things that I wanted to tell you.

What a thing, to be with you and have
no words for it. What a thing,
to be outcast like that.

Gabriel's memory of Mary, addressed as if from a faraway present, creates an almost voyeuristic intimacy. The language act itself—from angelic utterance to human hearing—becomes the ultimate union as the Incarnate Word

enters history. In re-imagining various scenarios where a woman is elevated by election, as in “To Gabriela in the Donkey Sanctuary,” Szybist does not emphasize female passivity and receptivity so much as the power of demoral or refusal or acceptance.

“Be it done unto *me*,” we used to say, hoping to be called by the right god. Isn’t that why we liked the story of how every two thousand years, a god descended. Leda’s pitiless swan. Then Gabriel announcing the new god and his kingdom of lambs—and now? What slouches

toward us? I think I see annunciation everywhere: blackbirds fall out of the sky, trees lift their feathery branches, a girl in an out-sized yellow halo speeds toward—

....a world where a girl had only to say yes and heaven opens

But while Yeats’s violent pre-Christian Annunciation in “Leda and the Swan” is part of his vision of historical cycles, Szybist in “So-and-So Descending from the Bridge” imagines the foil to her Annunciation in starkly personal and maternal terms, alluding to a news story about a woman who throws her two children off a bridge.

Maybe some darks are deep enough to
swallow what we want them to.

But you can’t have two worlds in your hands
and choose emptiness.

I think that she will never sleep as I sleep,
I who have no so-and-so to throw

or mourn or to let go.

Eschewing the ideological, Szybist poems play off religious myth to measure realistic capacities for desire and loss and language, especially as they reflect female fulfillment and creativity.

These poems, like those of Rilke’s, may be full of longing and lament for some unrealizable ideal, but they are hardly naïve about how idealism and idealization can be feminist concerns, and why in “Annunciation of Right Whale with Kelp Gulls,” the feminized whale is vulnerable:

Why wouldn’t such sweetness
Be for them?

For they outnumber her.
 For she is tender, pockmarked, full
 Of openness. For they
 Swoop down on her wherever she surfaces. For they
 eat her alive

The violence of the gulls, according to Szybist in a *Paris Review* interview, is directly related to the violence done to women as a consequence of the ideal of obedience and moral purity linked to sexual virginity:

The violence of the gulls, in my mind, corresponds to this. On another level, I actually mean for some of my poems to behave as the gulls: to tear apart and consume that terrible ideal of the Virgin Mother. Other poems seek to unseat that ideal by replacing it with alternative versions of Mary. I love the paintings that do not simply represent Mary's response to the angel as placid acceptance but rather portray Mary's confusion and even terror in the moment and suggest that it is combined with the ambiguities of bodily desire—eros of various kinds. (Dueben interview)

In "Annunciation in Play" the male gaze is countered by the agonized suspension of the equalizing look:

into the 3rd second, the girl
 holds on, determined not to meet his gaze—
 she swerves her blue sleeve,
 closes down the space,
 while his eyes are intent, unwilling
 to relent...

The affirmative project of these poems resembles Joyce's *Ulysses* in more than Molly's culminating "yes": by imagining everyday annunciations, as Joyce imagines everyday epic heroism, the most quotidian details of ordinary lives can be invested with mythic meaning—as in "Annunciation Overheard from the Kitchen":

I could hear them from the kitchen, speaking as if
 Something important had happened.

I was washing the pears in cool water, cutting
 The bruises from them.
 From my place at the sink, I could hear

A jet buzz hazily overhead, a vacuum
 Stat up next door, the click,
 Click between shots.

“Mary step back from the camera.”

The concept of the Annunciation is sometimes ironized, but more often the poems seem to participate in their audacious premise, as if the poet's acts of deliberate linguistic attention confer the very epiphanies they seek. This kind of poetry participates conditionally in the *as if* of a greater witnessing consciousness and power. Hence, a woman doing dishes, or “Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle,” can be transformed like the animated nature of “Annunciation (the grass beneath them),” where

we rose up to it, held ourselves tight
 when it skimmed just the tips of our blades

Benedictory or comic affirmations are deepened by the volume's predominantly elegiac strain. “Holy,” written for the poet's mother, who was dying as the volume was being completed, provides grounding context, but Szybist's special *métier* is not for the particularized elegy, or even for the elegy of human mortality *per se*, but rather for the death of innocence vision and of faith itself.

Mary who mattered to me, gone or asleep
 among the fruits

in ash, in dust, I did not

leave you. Even now I can't keep from
 composing you, limbs and blue cloak

and soft hands. I sleep to the sound

of your name. I say there is no Mary
 except the word Mary, no trace

on the dust of my pillowslip.

(“Hail”)

Incarnadine as a whole is a moving and beautiful lament for the loss of a shared symbol system of sustenance and consolation, and of a belief system

based in the efficacy of prayer. In an age sometimes darkened by scientific demystification or materialistic reductionism, her best poems woo the numinous with a residual longing and language; they invoke and translate the light like the “unkissed/idiot stars” of her poem, “Knocking or Nothing”:

Call them out of that quietness.
Knock them in their nothing, against their empty enamel,

against the dark that has no way to hold them
and no appetite.

Call in the dead to touch them.
Let them slip on their own chinks of light.

Works Cited

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