

Dream Elements in Sylvia Plath's Bee Cycle Poems

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For ages, writers have availed themselves of the fiction of a dream to dramatize ideas and experiences: the protagonist falls asleep, has a dream or a vision, and wakes up, with new insights.* Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates this interest in his fiction: he uses the device for satirical purposes in "The Celestial Railroad," and in "Young Goodman Brown" he touches on the idea of a dream as an "explanation" of dark and mysterious goings-on, but here more in the nature of an authorial flourish or deprecating gesture. "Had goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" Hawthorne the author asks. "Be it so, if you will," he tells the reader. It was surely a different kind of dream-narrative Hawthorne had in mind when in his notebook he put words to a never executed plan for a literary work:

To write a dream, which shall resemble the real course of a dream, with all its inconsistency, its strange transformations, which are all taken as a matter of course, its eccentricities and aimlessness—with nevertheless a leading idea running through the whole. Up to this old age of the world, no such thing ever has been written.¹

It is this kind of dream structure that Sylvia Plath, a century later, turned to good use in her poetry. When Plath was entering upon her career as a poet in the 1950s, the interpretation of dreams had become a familiar enough occupation and the use of such material in art and literature a common phenomenon. Dreams as inspiration and material appealed to the modernist writers—Joyce

* I wish to thank my friend and colleague Bjørn Tysdahl for reading this and other works of mine, offering many useful suggestions for improvement.

All quotations of poems are from *Sylvia Plath. Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981).

¹ *The American Notebooks* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. Randall Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 99.

and Eliot among them—who employed symbols, myths, and fairytales to create dreamlike states. The surrealists of the 1920s and '30s in particular were fascinated by the world of dreams that had been opened up by Freud, and they experimented with techniques to reveal this world.

Sylvia Plath's writings have occasionally been referred to as "surrealistic" without any precise explanations given of what is involved in such a label or with exemplifications in her poetry. "Surrealism" is a slippery term, but most definitions take hold of the aim to reveal the subconscious mind and free man from conventions, hypocrisy and lies. In unison with Freud the surrealists believed that dreams can make the unconscious accessible and that the unconscious represents our true selves. Plath certainly shared the general interest in Freudianism and in the interpretation of dreams, and she often recorded her own dreams in her journals. More to the point, I wish to suggest that use of dreamlike elements is one aspect of Sylvia Plath's kind of surrealism, and with a view to identifying some of the devices she employs to create a semblance of the dream, I shall discuss the cycle of Bee poems she wrote in the fall of 1962, the period when her creative powers were at a peak. "Hallucination" is a concept that has been used about Plath's Bee poems,² but in my view they are more "orderly" and factual than that and are better served by the word "dream." The first poem of the sequence, "The Bee Meeting," will be my main text, but I will also deal with "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering."

Bees and beekeeping held a special interest for Sylvia Plath, for one thing because of the connection with her father, Otto Plath, who was a recognized expert on bumble bees. While Sylvia Plath and her husband lived in Devon, she started a beehive and attended the meetings of the local Beekeepers' Association. The business of beekeeping provides Plath with important poetic raw material, used either as central narrative lines or as images and metaphors in contexts which only employ beekeeping material as a point of departure or a frame of reference.

The Bee poems follow the beekeeping year. "The Bee Meeting" is set in early summer. It narrates the moving of a queen bee from one hive to another. "The Arrival of the Bee Box" tells of how the speaker-beekeeper receives a box of bees to start her hive with. We are still in summer. "Stings" describes a somewhat later stage of the process and deals with the exchanging of honey for clean combs. In "The Swarm" a mass of swarming bees are caught and restored to a hive. "Wintering," finally, deals with the period after the gathering of the honey and the preparations for the semihibernation of the remaining bees. At

2 Barbara Hardy, "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Enlargement or Derangement?" *The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey*, ed. Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber, 1970), 179.

the end of this poem and the sequence, there is an indication that spring is near when the survivors will fly again.

"The Bee Meeting," written on October 3, 1962, contains numerous factual details which have their origin in a diary entry Plath wrote on June 7 of that year, published as "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers" in the posthumous collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*.³ This prose piece tells how Plath and her husband, wishing to start a hive, attended a local beehiveowners' meeting. The people gathered there were, among others, the midwife, the rector, an out-of-town expert, and the local bee-seller, Charlie Pollard. In this extract Plath pokes gentle fun at herself as the ignorant beginner ("I understood very little," *JP* 247) and the unprotected naive ("I felt barer and barer"). Objects, people, scenes, and procedures described in the diary entry are lifted over into the poem, sometimes word for word, as in stanza 5 where the speaker tells how the initiates prepare her for the ceremony. In the diary Plath wrote of "a fashionable white straw Italian hat" intended for her, "with a black nylon veil that collapsed perilously in to my face in the least wind" (*JP* 247). The poem tells it like this: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face ... " (st. 5). Another object that found its way into the poem is the protective cheesecloth that the beekeepers wear: "Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits" (st. 3). There is the white hive, "snug as a virgin" (st. 7). The tinfoil and fan of feathers placed so as to scare off the birds from a beanfield also reappear: "Strips of tinfoil winking like people, / Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers" (st. 4). Flowers and bushes mentioned in the prose piece—gorse, hawthorn, cow-parsley—are part of the poem's setting and drama. The gorse "hurts" the speaker of the poem "With its yellow purses, its spiky armory" (st. 7). A "sick" smell is traced to the hawthorn bushes (st. 5). In a mock-childish mood she hopes she can avoid being stung by the bees by making them think she is nothing but harmless cow-parsley (st. 8).

The poem, then, relates an ordinary activity in the business of keeping bees: moving the old queen bee to another hive in order to avoid a deadly fight between the queen bee and her young rivals, the virgins. The setting, too, is ordinary: a village with gardens, fields, and clusters of trees with a clearing in their midst. Those who take part in the ritualized act are the familiar pillars of the little community: the rector, the midwife, the sexton, and the secretary of the local beekeepers' association. There is also a bee agent; he may be somebody from outside this closeknit group of villagers, but his role ties him to them, at least temporarily. The participants are wearing the customary protec-

³ *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber, 1977), 246-50; abbreviated *JP*.

tive headgear: stiff black squares with white cheesecloth fastened under the armpits. The group walk through a beanfield to the Grove where the white beehives are placed in a circle. The villagers open a hive, trying to catch the old queen, who remains invisible. Failing to catch her, they instead move the virgin bees and in this way any killing is prevented. For the bees this seems to be a happy ending.

The speaker of the poem retells these events in chronological order, moving from one scene to the next, as in an ordinary narrative. This is also the way we try to recall our nightly dreams, even though they may have had little manifest unity. In retelling our dreams we usually employ the past tense, at least for the beginning of the dream ("I dreamed I was ..."); in "The Bee Meeting" Plath uses the present tense throughout, a device that heightens the impression of immediacy and presentness. The speaker *recreates* the experience; she relives it as if it were happening *now*.

Dreamlike is the mode of questioning which characterizes so much of this poem. It renders the speaker's bewilderment about herself and her place in the world around her. The numerous questions dramatize a fearful but insistent groping for explanations of identities and actions. The poem opens with a question which hints at the speaker's outsider status:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers—
 The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
 In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
 And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
 They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.
 (st. 1)

These lines embodying the speaker's bewilderment and vague fear reverberate with Keatsian echoes of a different ritual ("Who are these coming to the sacrifice? / To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies ...?"). The questioning goes on: "Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?" "Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?" (st. 3). "Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?" (st. 5).

In our dreams, so we have been told, our childhood fears and desires come to the surface. Plath dramatizes this process when she lets the poetic persona reveal her exposed situation. Unlike the initiates, she is entirely unprotected in her "sleeveless summery dress," and she is "nude as a chicken neck" (st. 2). She addresses her reproaches at everyone and nobody in particular: "... does nobody love me?" (st. 2). She tries to identify the people around her, unconsciously pinning the sign of guilt onto them: "Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?" (st. 3). The man in black is a figure of authority, akin to the father

figure in other Plath poems, for example, in "Daddy," where he appears as "the black man who // Bit my pretty red heart in two."

With its fixed rules for equipment, behavior and procedure, the act of moving the queen has the character of a ritual. The ritual dramatized in the poem is at the same time a ceremony initiating the human protagonist into the lore and practice of beekeeping. The ritual of initiation borrows images from the child's world. The initiates in their secure protection, with square black hats on their heads and cheesecloth wrapped around their bodies like breastplates, are "knights in visors" (st. 3). As in a deceptively charming land of Lilliput, the strips of tinfoil placed among the beanstalks are making signals, like people; the feather dusters turn into hands; the bean flowers have eyes; and as they might in a fairytale, the leaves take on a frightening aspect:

Strips of tinfoil winking like people,
Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,
Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.

...

(st. 4)

The epithets — bean, black, bored — lead to "blood," and like a child haunted by nightmares, the persona wonders: "Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?" But, as one who is undergoing a learning process, she corrects herself: "No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible."

As may happen in a dream, the outsider status of Plath's persona is signalled by the makeshift kind of clothing she is being given. Her hat is an unprofessional Italian straw hat, her face is not covered by the initiates' cheesecloth, but by an amateurish nylon veil. Still she consoles herself: "they are making me one of them" (st. 5).

The sickly smell of the hawthorn, "etherizing its children" (st. 5), increases the speaker's fear, and she formulates a question about this whole process:

Is it some operation that is taking place?
It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for,
This apparition in a green helmet,
Shining gloves and white suit.
Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?

(st. 6)

The "surgeon" is the expert that her neighbors have been expecting. In her diary Plath had noted about the man the locals had been waiting for: "He donned a white boiler suit and a very expert bee-hat—a vivid green dome, square black

screen box for head, joined with yellow cloth at the comers, and a white neckpiece" (JP 248). The poem's dreamlike uncertainty about identities concerns above all the somewhat sinister figure hidden in the anonymity of hat and veil. The unease is strengthened by the possibility that the anonymous figure may be somebody she ought to recognize. In the prose version he is an outside expert, a "government man," who by that very fact cannot be one of "us."

At this point in the poem-dream, the persona is paralyzed by fear—the classical dilemma in dreams: "I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me /With its yellow purses, its spiky armory" (st. 7). However, here the group are in the circle of hives, in the sacred grove. The smell of smoke, used to prod the bees to action, and the muted sound of the bees' humming further immobilize the persona. (In real dreams sounds are apparently rare.) She is able to interpret the sounds of the bees. Smoke means fire and fire means death to the hive, and the collective mind of the hive "thinks this is the end of everything" (st. 8). But the persona is not yet ready to confront death in any form, and in a mood of nursery-rhyme jocularly she pretends she has found a way to avoid the aggressive stings of bees who are frantically trying to escape from the death-trap of a smoke-infested hive:

...

Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.
If I stand very still, they will think I am cow-parsley,
A gullible head untouched by their animosity,

Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow.

...

(stanzas 8-9)

The attempt to smoke out the old queen bee fails; she is too shrewd to be caught, and the virgin bees are the ones who have to leave the potential battlefield:

...

The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.
Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever.
She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.
While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins

Dream of a duel they will win inevitably,

A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,
 The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her.
 The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing.
 The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?
 (stanzas 9-10)

At the end of the dream, the persona feels completely exhausted, having vicariously lived through the deadly battle of wills that the queen bee has been fighting, opposed as she is by villagers and virgin bees alike. In a flicker, another image intrudes into the bee-meeting dream: the persona, in the guise of a magician's female assistant—a version of Wilhelm Tell and son—unflinchingly faces the knives flung at the wall or board where she stands pillar-like: "I am exhausted, I am exhausted— / Pillar of white in a blackout of knives. / I am the magician's girl who does not flinch" (st. 11). Here for a moment the speaker sees herself in a more powerful role than as a beekeepers' novice. Instead of passively following the group with the man in black as a prominent figure of authority, she is now the courageous helper of a father figure who is as trusted as the legendary patriot and master shot.

After this image, we are back in the grove of hives. The villagers doff their protective clothing, and normality and friendly neighborliness are restored: "The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands." The persona has ostensibly been made part of the group through the initiation ritual, but the outcome for her is an identification with the lonely, threatened, precariously victorious queen bee, whose life span will soon be over. Is it in fact over already? Did the villagers employ a ruse to make her appear, only to be put to death? The dream ends with a final series of unanswered questions which complete the identification between speaker and queen bee, climaxing with a dreamlike transformation of bee box into coffin and an image of the coldness of death: "Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold."

In this reading of "The Bee Meeting" the dream narrative recaptures the persona's realization of her paradoxical identity as a precariously victorious victim. To the "villagers" she will appear as one of them: an initiate who lightheartedly removes the protective disguise once the minor danger is over; only she herself knows what the experience has cost her and how close her identification with death will always be.

In "The Bee Meeting," then, Sylvia Plath draws on images and narrative elements that may be found in dreams: the uncertainty and illusiveness of the identity of human figures; disguises and transformations; moods of tentativeness and mystery; the egocentricity of the dreamer. Her devices for recreating a dream are the narrative, chronological form, seemingly logical but full of

mysterious turns and transformations, and, above all, the use of questions without answers, climaxing in a final, unanswered query. Phrases and images borrowed from the world of fairytales and nursery rhymes here suggest the residue of a child's fears and attempts to master them.

We have seen that in "The Bee Meeting" Sylvia Plath uses an approach and a method that may be called "surrealist," although they are far from the mode of basic irrationality that characterized the art and literature of the surrealists. With its elements of a dream the poem uncovers a complex of fears and desires: fear of authorities, especially the father figure; fear of darkness, violence and death; and longing for power and insight and for belonging.

The other poems in the Bee cycle—"The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering"³—are not dream narratives, but, in addition to showing obvious links of subject matter and themes, they are related to "The Bee Meeting" by subtler means. Fragments of the surrealist traits that we have noted in the opening poem reappear in these poems. They all tell a story, however rudimentary. "The Arrival of the Bee Box" outlines the event indicated in the title. At the narrative center of "Stings" is the selling of honey and the buying of clean combs. "The Swarm" tells of the capturing of swarming bees and the returning of them to a hive. "Wintering" ends the series which began in summer (in "The Bee Meeting," as we have seen, the persona wears a "sleeveless summery dress"); after the gathering of the honey and the storing of the honey jars in the cellar, the beekeeper's job is to keep the bees alive during the cold months.

The use of the present tense in all these poems maintains a link with the dream narrative of "The Bee Meeting." In "The Arrival of the Bee Box" the persona's various gestures and thoughts as she faces the new box are given great immediacy by the verb tense. Anxiously observing the dangerous box, she reports: "I put my eye to the grid" (st. 3). Listening to the "unintelligible syllables" (st. 4) of the bees within the box, she says: "I lay my ear to furious Latin" (st. 5). Recognizing her responsibility as the owner, she "wonder[s] how hungry they are" (st. 6).

In "Stings," as well, we are told of the persona's movements in this very direct manner: "Bare-handed, I hand the combs" (st. 1). She recognizes her past relationship with the worker bees: "I stand in a column // Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers. / I am no drudge / Though for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair" (stanzas 4-5).

The opening of "The Swarm" places us in *medias res* with the observation: "Somebody is shooting at something in our town." All the actions following upon the sound of "pom, pom" are rendered in the present tense. The same insistence on the present tense characterizes "Wintering." It opens with one pair of statements: "This is the easy time, there is nothing doing," and ends with

another: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring." The use of the same tense for the *beginning* of winter—the harvesting being done—and the *end* of the dark and quiet season helps to establish an inevitable relationship between winter and spring. By doing so it heightens the element of hope in this picture of the unknown and threatening space of a house and a mind. Wintering is for the female bees—worker bees, virgins, and queen—and some of them will survive the winter, and in like manner the female persona may precariously come through. Even though she may be worn down to dullness and dumbness, she too carries within her the possibility to rise and taste the spring.

Another echo from "The Bee Meeting" is the use of the uncertain identities of figures acting in the mini-narratives. In "Stings" there is the "man in white" who later in the poem shows himself to be the bee-seller. "The Swarm," as we have seen, opens with a reference to an unidentified "somebody" who expands to an equally vague "they" ("Who are they shooting at?"). One of these people may be the "man with gray hands" who "stands under the honeycomb" (st. 7), waiting for the swarming bees to decide where to settle. After the "victory"—the "black ball" of bees having been "knocked into a cocked straw hat" (st. 9)—this man, who may be the agent, smiles. It is a non-committal, "practical" smile (st. 11), presumably like the smile of the bee-seller in "Stings."

In "The Swarm" we also find a variant of the device of uncertain identity: the disguise, that is, a dreamer's "hiding" the real identity of a hated or feared person in the guise and role of another character, less threatening, because more distant. In stanza 2, the "you" that some imaginary knives "are out for" is Napoleon, here with the snows of Russia, with Waterloo and Elba as signs of his defeat and dishonor. The Napoleon figure may be a disguise for a tyrannous and deceitful male figure who is closer to the scene of action—the capturing of a ball of swarming bees—a man who plays with defenseless people as if they were "chess people" (st. 3).

A similar kind of disguise occurs in "Stings" where, in addition to the persona and the bee-seller, there is a third figure who appears in the periphery of the scene: "He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me" (st. 8). This figure unheroically takes to his heels in full panic, leaving behind a slipper here, a protective head-gear there. The reason is that "The bees found him out" (st. 10); they were willing to die—as honeybees do after they sting—in order to punish him, for what it does not say. In this way the bees do the job for the persona who has other things to do: "... I / Have a self to recover, a queen" (st. 11).

Behind this scene may be an autobiographical incident: Sylvia Plath's husband was attacked by bees in the summer of 1962, at the time of a crisis in their marriage. A reference to similar attacks on a man with outsider status—

the husband of one of the local beekeepers — appears in Sylvia Plath's diary note cited above.

In "The Swarm" we also have an example of a sort of transformation that often takes place in dreams. The gray hands of the man who handles the bees turn out to be, not hands, but "asbestos receptacles" (st. 11), that is, the protective gauntlets of beekeepers.

Finally, in these other poems of the Bee cycle, we recognize the use of unanswered questions to express fear. In "Stings" we hear an anxious question, muted by a touch of humor: "What am I buying, wormy mahogany? / Is there any queen at all in it?" (st. 3). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box" the persona empathizes with the bees who are "angrily clambering" inside the box: "How can I let them out?" (st. 4). In "The Swarm" the distant sound of shooting creates vague fear in the persona. The "something" has become a somebody: "Who are they shooting at?" (st. 1). And just before the touch of spring at the end of "Wintering," there is the final crisis before the "happy" ending of the "comedy": "Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year?"

By these several devices — the present tense of the narratives, the uncertainty about identities, the many questions expressing fear, the disguises and transformations — the individual Bee poems achieve a kind of "inner" unity in addition to the apparent one of common subject matter. The artistic success of this sequence of poems certainly depends, to a large extent, on these stylistic touches with their subtly surrealistic aura. The several elements recalling a dream contribute to making the Bee cycle a successful combination of realism and surrealism.