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"SECRET OF THE VERTICAL": A CASE STUDY IN CROSS-CULTURAL GENDER IDEALISM

Nearly every modern generation has redefined the concept of gender, accommodating new thinkers who supplement prior accounts. The English-language setting has its own narrative of receiving gender-related ideas from without and formulating expressive attitudes toward these ideas from within. Finding the interplay of gender psychology with literary expression to provide an illuminating focus for the topic, the present analysis provides a view of Tatyana Apraksina's poem «Secret of the Vertical» as an instantiation of broadening gender perspectives. The work, examined in my English translation from the Russian original, presents what this reading will describe as individually construed polymorphous gender perspectives, perennially corrective for the linguistic context receiving their articulation. The relatively recent discipline of gender psychology has exerted considerable influence on a succession of evolutionary periods in both society and the arts, serving as a theoretical backdrop for aesthetic expression. Continuing literature's work in the field, the English-language schools of psychological naturalism and of symbolism explored gender on different but complementary levels. Important works were written in English on gender-inflected aesthetic subjects in the period of archetypally-informed psychology's filtration into the broader cultural sphere, including Frazer's «The Golden Bough», the poetry of Yeats and Eliot, and Graves' «The White Goddess». Concurrently, however, an «American school» of gender psychology developed along pragmatic lines, wishing to contribute to public life through a specific program. Social-minded writers and critics promoted a focus on pragmatic agendas. Nascent women's movements tended to nudge the exploration of gender psychology toward issue-centered debate, far more polarizing and generally comprehensible than psychology or aesthetics.

C.471

Activism did not always trump poetry, however, and the literalist approach to gender generally grew less rigid. Both women and men felt the need to reach back, coming to terms with Freud and Jung, as well as with thinkers such as Joseph Campbell who built on their work. American postmodern theorists, even if specifically critical of Freud, nonetheless added to the intellectual polyphony in gender attitudes. Tatyana Apraksina's poem «Secret of the Vertical» presents a contemporary attitude, hard to achieve organically within the English-language context, of gender radically reconceived through a deep embrace of sensibilities in fact inherent within ancient mystical traditions. Integral to the poem's structure, for instance, is the concept of wholeness through duality, of binary trajectories, basic to both Eastern and Western mysticism, here portending a creative ascent to the absolute. Among other movements, the poem establishes its narrator's humanity beyond conventional gender opposites.

The poem's title provides a first key to understanding how this transcendence occurs. The author states that the «vertical», a geometric abstraction, possesses a secret. Certainly, the pure horizontal and vertical, as vital abstractions, have traditionally been seen as endowed with sacred qualities. Life itself, and the perception and representation of life in art, depends on these axes, and their connotative dimensions also include the symbology of gender. Although West and East have diverged in ascribing a gender to a specific axis, the shared idea of namely axial interaction proves most crucial for a reading of the poem.

The poem opens with observations of clouds at an extreme proximity. The poet, in the wilderness near the ocean, sees clouds newly risen from the water, moving low to the ground and enfolding her mountain setting. In one sense, the clouds obliterate both vertical and horizontal, hiding direction, shape, form. A cloud «devours» the poet; «inside the belly of the cloud», her situation recalls the prophet Jonah's, invoked in liturgical contexts as a counterpoint to Christ awaiting resurrection. The womb, too, has functioned as a symbol of both life and death, as a space from which all life, personally and collectively, arises and may be drawn again, with the feminine impulse allied with Gaia, the womb of the earth, and by extension with the ocean as a counterpart to the womb's waters. The poems' clouds, as monstrous leviathans, provide a reminder of life's dependence on divine benevolence; on the other hand, in keeping with the ocean's life-giving traits (also canonically linked with the organic subconscious), the clouds connect with heaven,

leading the enveloped poet to wonder, «Am I a celestial being?» The clouds mirror a human sense of sublimity — «Celestial beings live just as I live at any time» — and the poet posits, «The cloud knows the secret». The clouds' blend of active and passive, birth and gestation, suggests privileged knowledge.

C.472

Accordingly, as the poem's layers unfold, so does its unifying secret. The poet leaves her cloud's «belly», with precise witness as her form of liberating prayer. The impression of clouds as amorphous structures dissipates as the poet describes them with exact terminology from both scientific and spiritual contexts — as «molecules» in «suspension», as well as «novices in the heavenly host» — and with a «serious mission» apart from the disorientation they have caused. The clouds' water «nourishes», and namely «Giants dine on cloud... And they, too, know the secret». The symbiotic pairing of «celestial beings» with giant trees resonates with the poet psychologically.

On the evidence of «Secret of the Vertical», the contemporary poet may inhabit broad contours in which Biblical, mythological and mystical thought patterns naturally inform concrete personal experience. The poem's fabric emerges as emblematic of creative life, open to minutiae and grandeur anchored by individual perception. Ultimately, the poem's generative space is suffused by a spiritual superabundance of forms, with the work thus constituting a treatise on the nature of both the observed and the observer.

Gender, one of the most onerous aspects of human identity, remains profound, as a link between the human and all forms of life, and as a key to a reality that simultaneously admits and denies all distinctions — the level of deity. Psychologists and artists may take on the role of theologians in pushing toward this absolute. Despite contrary pressures, committed thinkers may consolidate the gains of enlightened idealism. The English–language setting's heritage of pragmatism and literalism may impede an idealist rendering of gender psychology; however, in the utopia of higher cross–cultural interaction, no language in itself can prove a barrier, and gender psychology in this segment of the world admits a robust level of individual complexity.

C.473