

**Suzanne Clark**

## **Medusa and Melancholy: The Fatal Allure of Beauty in Louise Bogan's Poetry**

Louise Bogan's haunting, melancholy, but fierce poetry challenges me to sort out the question of poetic language and *écriture féminine*. Her experiments with the lyric earn her an important place in the history of writing by women as well as among modernist poets, and the beauty of her work opens the larger historical problematic of art. These strongly contained poems may seem to represent a look that is as alienated as it is aesthetic, the gaze of the artist at the work of art. But if we listen to the affective tone, we hear the insistent changes of sound and repeated chords, a subtle but extraordinarily intense musicality of voice that inhabits the coolly distant look. The poems exhibit and sound out a femininity that is both lovely and furious--in fact, that threatens to be sublimely awe-ful. Hers is a kind of reversal of irony in the unexpected return of body and feeling to the distanced work of art. As I read Bogan, I listen also to the double possibilities of the critical moral to this story. According to Hélène Cixous, men have made women hate themselves; male dominance has created an antilove in language which women must rupture by the laughter of the very Medusa which men figure as monstrous.

Bogan rouses the Fury to speech, but she also shows us how this can release the most terrifying images and unrelenting despair. She shows us the threat of psychosis about which Kristeva warns us. Should she have written more, dared more? Instead of the fragile structures of normalcy that she constructed to keep herself going, should she have challenged the Oedipal versions of maturity taught her by the psychoanalysts who offered her treatment when she broke down? Bogan feared revolution: hers is the conservatism of a politics of interiority, and of a woman who ruptures the stability of gendered subjectivity and finds the woman's antilove goes much deeper than what we usually mean by ideology, deep into the unconscious. In Bogan's work, we live in a fallen world, and it is a fall into gendered sexuality. If the musicality of her work does indeed function as an *écriture féminine* to write the woman into language, what I hear is not a laugh but agony. What Bogan suggests to us is the difficulty of escaping the familial enclosure and the possibility that woman's writing will open up the scene of "my scourge, my sister" rather than the scenes of reconciliation we long to find.

In *Méduse*, his study of mythological representation and the problematic of art, Jean Clair asks if there is a bond between horror and beauty. He points out the doubleness of human and animal traits in the Medusa, of male and female, and also the doubleness of meanings in the history of Medusa mythology. She was not only a monster but also a fascinating and seductive girl, and it was the latter image that prevailed for Hellenistic culture. Her face has much to do with the history of art and seeing, and with the separation of mind and body. By his account, Clair wishes to explore the enigma of *beauty* which neither Marxism nor psychoanalysis has been able adequately to address. He argues that the representation of Medusa took a decided turn in the Renaissance, away from the beautiful girl and toward the monstrous. Clair draws intriguing connections between the representations of Medusa and, on the one hand, other beheaded figures from John the Baptist to Louis XVI (appearing on a revolutionary poster), and on the other hand, fertility images including ancient bodyfaces and René Magritte's "Le Viol," suggesting as did Freud the possibility that Medusa represents the female genitals. Clair closes his speculations with the uneasiness that modern art raises in the civilized: "The 'dripping' of Pollock [who was nicknamed 'Jack the Dripper'] is no other, in fact, than the blood running out of the cut-off head of Medusa, tracing the aleatory figure of our perdition."

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Glimpses of the fatal figure appear as reflections of the speaker again and again in Bogan's poems. Instead of a "belle dame sans merci," the youth of her "A Tale" finds a place "Where something dreadful and another / Look quietly upon each other." In "Medusa," the glimpse of "The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead / Formed in the air" leaves a "dead scene forever." What the husband discovers in "For a Marriage" is the woman's "barbed heart": "The sullen other blade / To every eye forbidden, / That half her life has made." And the speaker of "The Sleeping Fury" addresses "my scourge, my sister" from the calm of having rendered her into symbol: "You, with your whips and shrieks, bearer of truth and of solitude; / You who give, unlike men, to expiation your mercy."

She shows how the woman's place as imaginary eternal object of the lyric (stopped, still) becomes terrible, "dreadful," Medusa-like if fixed as the mirror image of the self, like the antinarcissism Cixous describes: "A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got. They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove." Her poetry at once recalls and rejects this imaginary. Bogan seems both to cite the rejected tradition and to inscribe the feminine into language as estrangement. On the cover of *The Blue Estuaries*, Roethke approves her "scorn" of what he calls the usual lyric "caterwauling," and Adrienne Rich praises her committing a "female sensibility" to language. Bogan both constitutes and distances an ideology that is female, situating herself within the struggle of asserting a lover's discourse which is at the same time a forsaken language.

By refusing the "caterwaul," she also accedes to male standards, male codes, male criticism. Like Marianne Moore, Bogan was severe with her own work, pruning mercilessly, and perhaps giving the critical spirit so large a scope that she curtailed her own productivity, unbalancing the relationship between the critical and the creative. Literary history, emerging as American modernism, recuperated the severe demands of Mallarmé in the purifying and defining break between literature and ordinary language. In the post-Eliotic modernist criticism which Bogan practiced, there is a resistance to the more commonplace identification of poets with femininity. Yet this everyday meaning stood ready at all times to capture her, as it had Millay, in the figure of the "poetess." Bogan seems, writing as a woman, to be caught between antinarcissism and sentimentality, between being critically serious and engaged in gendered social practices.

Nonetheless, Bogan's diamondlike poems cut through the looking-glass to a writing which carries the revolution of poetic language into the authority of gender, fracturing the surfaces of narcissisms, introducing struggle into the portrayals of a self. She thought she was trying to do that by struggling toward "maturity." The tragedy, the paradox, or the distance between her self-understanding and her poetic practice, is that her power comes not from the maturity of resignation but from the fury of her resistance to the Oedipal resolution. She opens up a place for hysteria or "emotion" by struggling with the austere retreats of the symbolist text. The retreat itself is, in Bogan, furious.

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Bogan rewrites the narratology of myth into a fantasy or nightmare of loss. The hero loses the plot itself, as time becomes space, as narrative becomes antinarrative. This is, of course, part of what makes her "modernist" and also part of what makes the modernist subject seem feminized, outside history. But in Bogan's work, the other and another are without hierarchy, and gender is without a weighted marking. The fantasy may be a horror story--Bogan does not idealize this ungendering. In "A Tale," the search for the unchanging results in a terrible reciprocity. In "Medusa," the shape of the countermyth emerges as nightmare: the hero/heroine is stopped forever by looking into the eyes of the Medusa. If something terrible haunted Bogan, it was not simply a matter of personal

psychology. Is this not the general nightmare, the context of Bogan's life, the fear of what will happen if the repressed woman shows her face?

In "Medusa," the temporality of a life narrative becomes the thematic foreground, as life becomes the "still life" of art and therefore becomes as well the reminder of death, like the skull in so many paintings about meditation, representing the subject's gaze into a mirror. The hero/heroine confronts Medusa and is turned to stone; not only the hero/heroine but the entire scene becomes "dead," unchanging. This is perhaps the moment not only of artistic seduction but also of the woman's seductive encounter with woman. The moment when the woman encounters the monster and is transfixed has been theorized within film theory. Linda Williams suggests that this is an extension of woman's condition within the gaze, so that the shared status as objects results in a moment of identification. When woman sees the other woman, the monster, she is seized by an uncanny recognition. Here the alternative pleasures of beauty and feminine desire break up heroic looking and promise a horrified enchantment.

The "still" immortality of art explored by Keats depended upon a separation of artisan and urn, speaker and object, poet and poem. Here it is the speaker that must stop, so that the poem pivots on the sequence of verb tense: "I had come," "Everything moved," "This is a dead scene forever now," "Nothing will ever stir," "And I shall stand here like a shadow." While the *time* of the verbs locates the speaker in an eternal present, narration itself does not necessarily stop. The story addresses a reader with a past, present, and future. Thus the story is dissociated from the storyteller by the possibility of a reader. The separation is not between subject and object but between that specular instance and the subject of another text where life goes on, perhaps beyond horror and despair.

"Medusa" signals its entanglement with the maternal in a number of ways. The scene is womblike, an ambiguous shelter, the house itself enclosed "in a cave of trees" in contrast to a "sheer sky" that seems vaguely threatening by its very (clifflike?) height. The multiplied resonances of house-cave-trees recall both good and bad maternal figures, witches and grandmothers, rather than the abode of the Gorgons where Perseus slew the mortal one of the trio, Medusa. The other kind of medusa, the bellshaped creature which is the sexual stage of the hydra, is here in the boundlessness: "a bell hung ready to strike," a transparent shape of silence.

Time is monumental, cyclical. Sun and reflection define a paradigm of life's mirroring. If the bell sounded it might articulate this scene with a particular moment of time; instead, it is the house--or space--which is particular. The stanza sets up strong but irregular patterns of rhythm, with all three lines after the first beginning on an accented syllable: "Facing," "Everything," "Sun," and a number of words accented as part of a spondee: "sheer sky," "bell hung ready," so that emphasis supersedes regularity. A number of sibilants--lines ending with "trees," "sky," "strike," "by" with a repetition beyond rhyme, "facing a sheer sky," "Sun" beginning the final line--reinforce the repressed menace of "strike" and the hissing of the stanza. As in "A Tale," the sounds invoke certain paradoxes of relationship between motion and stillness. The "strike" would continue life, not bring death. The spondee rhythms seem to resist the level of expression with its sibilants and its alliterative repetition of "come," "cave," "sky," "strike," "reflection," almost like a ticking. Thus "Everything moved" but is stopped at the moment of telling.

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The second stanza describes an instant of horror and recognition. The speaker is elided as a syntactic subject, and subjectivity transfers to the third person, the "bare eyes" and "hissing hair." According to the myth, Perseus avoided the danger of the bare eyes by using his sword as a mirror, so he was able to kill Medusa. The serpent-hair, once, perhaps, an emblem of fertility, has become

the symptom of evil and terror but also, perhaps, of a lost maternal power. This vision seems to be of a decapitated Medusa, a head "Held up at the window" almost as if held by someone else, a Persean shadow, and "seen through a door" as if the gaze were illicit. The signifiers of the Medusa are repeated, and this repetition of the forbidden look enters an extra line into the stanza: "The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead," so that only this stanza has five lines. The eyes seem not only horrible but horrified, "stiff" but perhaps also dead, and "bald," as if so wide open in fear that eyelashes are not visible.

The unnaturalness of this look makes it prototypically uncanny. Is the Medusa the cause of the speaker's fear, or its strangely familiar reflection? The eyes and the serpents are "Formed in the air," disembodied, unreal, dreamlike, perhaps the construction of the observing imagination.

The figure has much to do with the Freudian traumatic fantasy. The Medusa with the horror-stricken eyes is a reflection of the traumatized psyche, a memory of the mother caught in the revelation of sexuality but also the mirror image of a stricken self. The Medusa image is glimpsed like an unrecognized image in window glass. The words seem to form themselves out of one another like anagrams: "bare eyes" and "were before me," "door," and "forehead / Formed." The word "hissing" thematizes the sibilants and sutures sound to signification to produce a kind of terrified compulsiveness, a self being spoken. This is the inscription of Medusa mythology in the subject who knows herself in language. Clair reminds us how recently--since the Renaissance--this rational terror of Medusa has decisively prevailed over the representation of her as fascinating young woman, object of desire. In the poem, the Medusa speech is accompanied by the mutation of "I" to "me," an objective agency. What does this have to do with feminine subjectivity? Does it not record the horror of another woman? The hero of the Medusa myth cannot confront those bare eyes--cannot look at her as the subject.

At this point the speaker of the poem emerges to pass judgment:  
This is a dead scene forever now.  
Nothing will ever stir.  
The end will never brighten it more than this,  
Nor the rain blur.

The present tense intervenes to exercise its function of making present the subject of discourse. The peculiar effect of the statement arises from its connecting the deictic "This is," which ought to designate a very specific location of the subject, to "a dead scene forever now." The words resemble a curse. The other three lines of the stanza, in future tense, likewise seem ambiguously descriptive and prophetic. The absolute vocabulary rings out: "forever," "nothing," "ever," "never." (Like lines out of Poe?) This decisive negation marks the "dead scene" as the place not only of paralysis but also of *loss*.

Bogan's poem is not quite ironic because it is not fully detached. What is lost is motion and change, but the vocabulary suggests also emotion. What is lost is ambiguously a quality outside the observer or an internal perception or feeling. The power of the poem depends on its externalizing and objectifying, so that the speaker has no agency, no imaginative will. Religious, mythological, romantic explanations of such visionary moments will not do, but neither will the therapeutic diagnosis. The poem may seem to represent an experience of the individual "I" and the particularity of this instance, yet the experience is, precisely, a catastrophic loss of particularity, a collapse of time's differentiating force, the spacing between ever and never.

Louise Bogan's success in unsettling the imprisonment of feminine subjectivity within the private and domestic space of personal experience depends on this experience becoming impersonal. The

narrative itself is installed within the stasis of the scene's eternal present, "This is." Fear of the feminine is attached to the fear of art, with its "dead scene." Thus the rest of the poem will adumbrate what the observer, now outside the poem, must see--the fatally charmed moment, bright with sunlight, within which the kind of scene Keats mused about seeing on the Grecian urn seems dangerous. The rhetoric is the "never again" trope of elegy. It has a force which is the opposite of Keats's "happy melodist, unwearied, / For ever piping songs for ever new," even though both contemplate the ironic immortality of art. The speaker of Bogan's poem is--unlike Keats--captured by the otherness of the encounter.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,  
And the tipped bell make no sound.  
The grass will always be growing for hay  
Deep on the ground.

The elements of the scene are divided from themselves by this future of never--the water from its fall, the bell from its sound, the grass from becoming hay. The subject in process is stopped. This internal separation is not like Keats; his lover will never kiss the maid, but "she cannot fade." The urn is "still," but its beauty is not dead. The speaker of "Medusa" will fade, become "like a shadow"--that is to say, she will be taken up into the system of sun and reflection, "the great balanced day." What she will see forever is not the paralyzing face of Medusa but "yellow dust." The pastoral scene is a simulacrum of the mortal human body, shadow and dust. This loss is of mortality, separating the human subject from what defines her, from her body.

This is also a loss of the maternal, at once a loss and a rejection. The bell of the womb, the "tipped bell," is stopped by that figure of maternal sexuality, Medusa. As one of the Gorgons, Medusa figures forth the remembrance of matriarchal goddesses made hideous by patriarchal mythology. What is glimpsed by the poem's speaker is a shadow of herself, a feminine subjectivity that is unspeakable and uncanny. Imaged in discourse she becomes the object, "Medusa," the *poem*, a terrible and life-threatening beauty. Bogan sees clearly how much the woman writer might fear the poem she might become.

What might becoming a poem mean? Thinking of this problem both from the point of view of the woman as the centering object, gendered image, and position which culture produces for "woman," and from the point of view of the woman as subject, the "other" of language and hence in a position of negativity as a subject, I want to suggest that Bogan's "Medusa" produces the effect of the uncanny because it is a narrative of feminine poetic agency, of the gendered pre-Oedipal melancholy and the word become fetish. The drift of sound is stopped and sutured. This is especially significant for Bogan's work, where the contrapuntal effects of sound figure so importantly. The rich complexity of the rhythm, the rhyme, and the play of anagrammatic punning develops usually into what she calls in "Sub Contra" "some thick chord of wonder." After the break in "Medusa," however, the sounds of words ever and ever seem melancholy and unstressed, and the tone almost nostalgic. There is a thinning out of affect to pure elegy.