

The Immense Structure of Happiness: Rachel Slade and the Metamorphical Poetry of *Apocryphal House*¹

Rachel Slade's poetry relates to the contemporary human condition, to feelings of nomadism, alienation, and acceptance of what is unknown and disturbing.

Born in Putnam, Connecticut, she currently lives in Italy. Her principal activity is as a painter. Her most recent exhibitions are *Citizenship* (Villa Corrier-Dolfin, Porcia, PN, 2014, with the presentation of Alessandra Santin), *Crambe Tataria* (Villa Cattaneo, San Quirino, PN, 2015, with an introduction by Carlo Vidoni), *Ephemeral* (Teatro Russolo, Portogruaro, on the occasion of the Cinderella show of Sergei Prokofiev), *La casa apocrifa* (Cantine Collalto, Susegana TV), *Devota come un ramo* (Maniago, PN).

For Samuele Editore she oversaw the presentation of several poets in the New York City Poetry Festival of 2014 and several book covers (including most recently: *Periferie/The Bliss of Hush and Wires*, by Ilaria Boffa, and *Nuviçute mê e sûr*, by Stefano Montello). *Apocryphal House/La casa apocrifa* (2016) is a plaqueette that serves as prelude for her debut book released in 2018.

The title of her poetic collection itself, *Apocryphal House*, refers to apocryphal texts, works of doubtful authorship or authenticity, a reference which only adds to the feeling of distance and estrangement. Like her pictorial production, Slade's poetry seems full of vivid, almost tangible imagery that shapes mysterious worlds and paves the way for new beginnings and possibilities, just as roots can sprout into plants.

In Slade's style, words can be compared to real-life embryos and cells, pushing to break through the page and find new boundaries. Slade's writing is like raw material to be molded, like the porous colors she draws with: her words grow denser to eventually create a painting of the outside world. Recurring patterns and a sense of ritual pervade the style of the poet, whose personal beliefs are only hinted at.

The above-mentioned sense of rituality resonates in the poem "Pillar," through the question "what letter begins your country's name":

Pillar

what letter begins your country's name
how shall we begin to make something whole again.

MAGAZZENI

how shall we name the body,
its rivers and roads.
my companion folds herself into sleep.
I ask.
how shall we name the fields
where we were abandoned
like nightgowns.
and I ask.
how shall we name the beginning of the stone
used to martyr the bird
or the blue wing of solitude.
I ask.
how to beat the names black.
how to die like a column of numbers.
I ask. though she sleeps.
how to name the honey in the mouth.
the body of my body, sex of my sex.
the patron saint of empty houses. (7)

The poet suggests that a single initial has the power to connect people to their birthplace as soon as they recognize its name. That first letter also symbolizes an opportunity to begin to accept the body and its imperfections as a whole. Slade investigates this possibility through the prayer-like repetition of “I ask.” She is looking for a new identity to fill her “empty houses” with a spiritual, ambiguous self she will never find.

The main theme of these simple yet powerful poems is the quest for identity, for the origin of the universe, and for a future life; a journey through unknown lands named “Land I,” “Land II.”

Land I

bones of our bones.
the future
the closure
I put my mouth here
here future follows myth
and the dead sing louder than the living
here the trespassers have names.
I put my foot here.
I am, I am a cauldron of stars
I am, I am where the light is. (8)

When confronted with the challenge to settle in a foreign country where even “the dead sing louder than the living,” the poet firmly

THE IMMENSE STRUCTURE OF HAPPINESS

declares “I am.” Such a decision shows she is taking responsibility and hoping for the future. “You have come from far away. / The land is patient.”

A sense of identity and belonging to the earth blossoms in her images, creating a fabric interwoven with inference and sensation. The earth is destiny, desire, and borderline, opening onto the unexpected and the beyond, keeping memory alive and at the same time regenerating it, in order to invent a new life for what came before and is no longer.

Land II

Do you hear another country’s echo? There is a bell.
It rings far away. you will go there
and try again.
And your blood will form new bodies, seen and unseen.
Everything will be relearned. How you walk
and stand at the store. How you button your coat.
The way you look at someone.
Your name. Sleep.
Bodies. The birds especially.
You have come from far away.
The land is patient. (9)

The meditative poem “The Book of Flowers” is about writing as a means of peaceful self-reflection and awareness of the world through the senses. A number of different languages, cultural backgrounds, and forms of artistic expression come together to unleash the sheer power of this poem, erupting from the written page. Both words and pictures have the intrinsic strength to elicit evocative imagery.

Book of Flowers

In your book of flowers we find three forms –

I. A black rag in white pearl background:
a woman’s body suspended in frame, still standing.

II. A golden silhouette, a jar
on the edge of the page.
It traces the veins of the leaf that spreads itself across the tree.

III. A careful measurement between trees in a forest,

MAGAZZENI

thin black filaments between them. The distances expanding.
They measure the hard fall between them.
Hands steady inside pockets.

You will read to me later.
Will you read to me again.
Read to me each night in at least two languages
this way something will remain by morning.

Your book has many flowers. Some real, some drawn.
Will you show me the dark body of prayer? (10)

Slade's language in "Black Line" is "an animal among stars / a natural thing" which explores the semantic fields of closeness and distance, as well as everything in-between. As a result, the figures of speech in this poem are so powerful and obscure that readers may lose themselves in a maze full of animals ("a snail dreaming on a pillow of eggs") and lists of impressive metaphors ("this is the territory of shaken stars, I am an island of snow"). The poet's point of view is no longer subjective: instead, she describes her own emotions objectively, making them universal.

Black Line

The black line drawn thin
is beyond weight
holds up everything
the snow cannot enter it
it divides sleep
and pierces dreams, heaven
oblivion, erasures.
There are chasms for it to cross
between us, even though I love you.
It goes further than we can
here in the nearly closed palm of living
and sleeping and asking.
Drawn on you,
you become like the earth
an animal among stars
a natural thing. (16)

The affirmative phrase "I am" returns towards the end of the collection, as the last two poems (titled with numbers 4 and 5 as part of the series "Iris") evoke much larger or smaller animals than in real life. Thus, their industrious life is similar to that of humans and

THE IMMENSE STRUCTURE OF HAPPINESS

tragically marked by the impossibility to escape the laws of nature.

4.

I am living among the densities
says the bird suspended over empty houses
I am the immense whiteness of the eye
and the pinpoint of sorrow
if you hold out your hand, I will fly to you
and cover your face with plaster dust

I am the immense hunger of boiled noodles
and two stiff rabbits waiting in the bin
a belly ache under blue stars, tremor of rusty water
a dog of terrible proportions covering myself with earth

I am the blinkering of openings and sudden animal stillness
I am your trial come too soon (30)

5.

I was the immense structure of happiness
the solid form in the metaphysical field
that stood for one day, a year, a year and a day
I was the form your joy took
among the forms foreshortened in the sharp light of early day
how many times it all stood still
how many times a bird fixed itself to a point in midair
I was a form without mercy, time-bound, love-fixed
I was the stone-star
I was the marigold of marigolds
in your field of fields (31)

In the very last poem, the repetition of “I was” indicates a shift in the poet’s awareness of her destiny: her great dream is now too bright, “the immense structure of happiness” suddenly crumbles from within, as a shooting star is destroyed by the power of its own light.

As Sandro Pecchiari writes regarding the show of Rachel Slade’s paintings, entitled *Devota come un ramo*, presented at Maniago during the exposition *Animula Vagula Blandula*, curated by Alessandro Canzian, Samuele Editore, and Studio Fabbro, there are numerous connections and interferences between forms of poetry and of painting. The artist’s paintings, often in black and white or earth tones, seem to be mandalas continually folding into themselves. The

world of these paintings, writes Pecchiari, is like a pregnant womb, vibrating intensely but maintaining this ancient form closed into itself while its dimensions grow, almost suggesting an explosion with the consequent escape of a creation that has been held back at length.

In Slade, word and material merge, finding their strongest thematic features in ambiguity and the impossibility of a univocal vocation, which lend them their evocative mystery.

An art and a poetry, finally, created to work together, and to be found from the lector with a particular disposition to listen and recreate worlds. In this sensibility of mind, Slade's poetry bursts forth deeply modern and sincere, that translates the contemporary themes, lessons, and passions of our day. She writes and speaks of contemporary arts with a female disposition to hospitality moving from her own experiences of nomadism, estrangement, and cosmopolitanism.

Loredana Magazzeni

UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the Italian by Gea Flora Rigato.

WORKS CITED

Slade, Rachel. *Apocryphal House/La casa apocrifa*. Samuele Editore, 2016.