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Date

Poetic Visions: Figures of Sight and Feminine Subjectivity in the Works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

By

Colleen C. Dunne

Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

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A.B, Brown University, 1992

M.F.A, University of Washington, 1997

Advisor: Dr. Dalia Judovitz, Ph.D.

An abstract of

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Abstract

**Poetic Visions: Figures of Sight and Feminine Subjectivity in the Works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge**

By Colleen C. Dunne

Although Sylvia Plath stands as an iconic figure for the emergence of the feminine lyric voice in 20th century American poetry, the popular interpretation of this voice as a “confessional” one has misrepresented the significance of her work by framing it largely within the confines of biographical studies. This focus has camouflaged an important aspect of Plath’s poetry, namely, how it stages the crisis attendant to the figuration of the feminine lyric voice. Plath’s work operates within what I’ve identified as a culturally dominant “script for seeing,” a detached gaze that assumes a masculine “I/eye” and a feminine object. As a result, the feminine “subject,” that appears in Plath’s work is one which can’t claim a lyric voice – it is muted and artificial, a victim of the objectification of the script her poems stage.  Plath’s work does not merely re-enact this script; it also comments upon it, exposing its violence and cruelty through hyperbolic theatricality. Plath’s dramatic staging of this crisis which haunts the birth of feminine lyric subjectivity shapes and invites new and vital forms of poetic dialogue, examples of which can be found in the works of two contemporary women poets, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Anne Carson.  Albeit in different ways, both poets open up new possibilities for conceptualizing feminine subjectivity by revising the kind of “script for sight” that dominates Plath’s lyric voice.  Anne Carson’s subject resists the de-humanization of Plath’s theatrical self-presentation by moving “offstage” into the margins where meaning cannot be seen but must be read. Although Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge’s work, like Carson’s, seeks to disempower visual objectification, it does this not by undermining the link between language and perception, but rather by expanding and complicating that connection. Her work carves a space for feminine subjectivity without separating itself from the realm of representation, locating latent possibility and “interiority” within outward forms.  In their poetic engagement with notions of vision and subjectivity, both Anne Carson and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge elude the traps of feminine representation embodied in Plath’s work and open up new possibilities for figuring the feminine lyric voice.

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