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“My Wonderful and Less Than”

The Inadequacy and Necessity of Metaphor
in Szybist’s *Incarnadine*

Katherine Snow Nelson

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Mary Szybist explained that while in Italy, she became “overwhelmed by how many paintings depicted the same scenes, particularly religious scenes—the Nativity, the Madonna, the Crucifixion, the Assumption, and so on” (Dueben). Although at first she found something restrictive about such subject limitations, she went on to say, “[It later occurred] to me that many of the paintings I love most—Annunciation scenes by Fra Angelico, Simone Martini, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli—were made within these subject limitations, and I started to wonder if the limitations themselves had played a role in engendering the art” (Dueben). Szybist’s 2013 National Book Award–winning poetry collection, *Incarnadine*, frequently draws on the subject limitations of the Annunciation tradition. Her poems re-envision the encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel, representing it variously as the Lewinsky scandal, as an act of sexual violence, as an interaction between butterfly and flower, and so on. Despite such modifications to the major figures and events, the poems enter the same thematic space that early Annunciation artwork did. As Szybist put it in her interview for the National Book Award, the Annunciation—and, we might add,

her collection—“portrays a human encountering something not human; it suggests that it is possible for us to perceive and communicate with something or someone not like us” (Lessley).

Szybist is only the latest in a long line of artists who have explored this space in which the human encounters knowledge so different from itself as to defy understanding. Throughout the history of Annunciation artwork, artists played with biblical subject limitations to make seemingly modest innovations that nevertheless unlocked a profusion of possible interpretations of the Annunciation narrative and Marian theology. The invention of perspective is one such traditional element that opened to artists new vehicles of representing and metaphorizing such encounters.

Hanneke Grootenboer explains in her article “Reading the Annunciation: The Navel of the Painting” that previous to the invention of perspective, in viewing Annunciation artwork, the viewer’s eye remained caught in the tension between the Virgin and the angel. Perspective, however, allowed the eye to run beyond them, toward the vanishing point that became an “insurmountable threshold” (257)—sometimes a closed door but also a glass window which only light could penetrate.

Grootenboer argues that “perspective provided artists with a powerful means to create various spatial metaphors of passage that revealed the mystery [of Incarnation] as secret without disclosing the content” (357)—that is, without fully answering Mary’s question, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34). In *Incarnadine*, symbol systems—particularly metaphor and sometimes language itself—serve as the “insurmountable threshold” that allow the speaker to approach understanding without full comprehension, rendering such systems ultimately inadequate. In reexamining, rupturing, and recombining traditional elements of Annunciation representations and the respective tenets of Marian theology they signified, the poems in *Incarnadine* point to the persistent inadequacy but inescapable necessity of metaphor in the process of meaning-making. After briefly describing the history of Annunciation artwork and detailing its traditional iconography, I will explore Szybist’s feminist critique of Marian theology. I will also show that the collection remains invested in its critique of Marian theology by means of appropriated symbols despite its awareness that it is therefore always also dependent on metaphor—a medium it finds unreliable but ultimately indispensable in approaching the unknown.

Few depictions of the Annunciation existed before the Council of the Greek Bishops at Ephesus in 431. In an effort to respond to sectarian perspectives that

contradicted the orthodox view of Christ as both truly human and truly divine, as Rosemary Muir Wright explains in her book *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin*, the Council “inevitably drew the mother of Jesus into the Christological arguments by virtue of the fact that, as his mother, Mary was the guarantor of the true humanity of Christ” (22). She was given the Greek title *Theotokos*, Mother of God. Following this Council, increased interest surrounding Mary’s role in Christ’s mortality was expressed in a rise in the number of depictions of the Annunciation, since that narrative often features the Incarnation of Christ and therefore calls into question Mary’s role in Christian theology. Portrayals of Mary Annunciate thus dovetailed closely with the evolution of Marian theology and Mary’s increasing prestige within Christianity. As Don Denny notes in his *The Annunciation from the Right from Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century*, “In liturgical prayers the story of the Annunciation became a cause for the exaltation of Mary” (5). So too Annunciation artwork encapsulated the emergent cult of the Virgin’s exaltation in Mary’s salvific role, her divinity or sainthood, and her particularly feminine virtues (chastity, humility, obedience, among others).

By the end of the medieval period, Annunciation artwork had developed a fixed iconography, often to stress Mary’s virginity and offset the sexual implications of the narrative as well as to highlight her humility and piety. Mary was often portrayed as having been interrupted by Gabriel during a devout activity; in earliest representations this activity was spinning yarn, a task alluded to in the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James, but in later representations, she was more often shown reading a prayer book or the Bible, which when depicted was usually opened to Isaiah 45:8, wherein Isaiah prophesies that “the skies [will] pour forth righteousness”—a prophecy that in Catholic tradition was believed to have been fulfilled in the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary and causing her to conceive. Indeed, a dove, representative of the Holy Spirit and its role in the Incarnation, was often present. Almost as frequently appeared lilies, emblematic of Mary’s virginity and purity, sometimes offered as a gift to Mary by Gabriel. Mary was typically robed in blue and red, symbolic of royalty, maternity, and fertility; Gabriel was often clothed or outlined in gold. Their interaction usually took place in Mary’s chambers, a loggia, enclosed garden, or antechamber outside the chambers, often with a door or window in view, to reinforce Mary’s virginity or unbroken hymen. Adherence to the prescribed iconography ensured that, as Wright explains, “discrete Marian imagery, appropriate to private devotion or public display, articulated the Church’s teaching

about Mary” (56), especially her state of virginity at the time of the angelic hail, her redemption from Original Sin at the moment of Incarnation, and even the intactness of the hymen following the birth of Christ. The images persistently remind viewers that Mary’s encounter with the divine left her permanently altered; she became nearly divine herself.

Szybist’s poems are critical of the traditional interpretation of the Annunciation as the site of Mary’s transformation from ordinary (albeit immaculately conceived) girl to *Theotokos*, suspicious of Catholic tradition’s lauding of Mary’s passive willingness to bear the Son of God, and frustrated by Mary’s incomprehensible and inaccessible status as paradoxically Virgin and Mother. “Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle” is one example of the kind of scrutiny under which the depictions and interpretations of the Annunciation fall in *Incarnadine*. The poem’s presumably teenage girl speakers catalogue the Annunciation iconography, but they do so in a way that disconnects each element from the others and repurposes them to create a secular understanding of the moment that is nevertheless meaningful to the speakers. The speakers examine pieces of the puzzle without a clear understanding of the whole picture, so to speak. They see the red, blue, and gold typical of Annunciation artwork; they see the major figures—Gabriel and Mary (actually referred to as “the angel” and “her”); and they see the garden. But like the puzzle pieces themselves, the Annunciation iconography is not presented in the traditional order, but instead “pieced” into some secular, petty part of the girls’ lives. Blue reminds them of swimming pools and swimsuits, red of the “lipstick we saw at the / mall” (Szybist 14–15). God’s intervention in mankind’s affairs takes on soap opera proportions: they wonder why he “doesn’t / just come down and / kiss her himself” (11–13). In this poem, the old representations of Mary as majestic, virginal queen (Mary *Theotokos*) are dismissed—“What kind of / queen?... Who thought this stuff / up?” (18–19, 22–23). Mary is instead translated into a series of worldly (profane) concepts; in order to better access the previously inaccessible Mary, the girls transform the moment traditionally regarded as her unique and crowning moment into a commonplace encounter. Mary becomes an ordinary teenage girl—like them.

The Mary who could be a lover in a romance is again presented in “Long after the Desert and Donkey.” The speaker—Gabriel, the epigraph tells us—watches Mary (now no longer pregnant with the Son of God) from afar with erotic longing. He reflects on the Annunciation yearningly, recalling the first time he approached her. “I wanted to bend low / and close to the curves of your

ear” (Szybist 20–21), he explains. “There were so many things I wanted to tell you. / Or rather, / I wished to have things that I wanted to tell you” (22–24). His unearthly but nevertheless physical yearning for her recasts the encounter with the divine not as something only desirable to the human, but also to the non-human. He is just as eager to identify “what meanings” (34) he can pull from the erotic exchange as humans are.

Such romantic resonances are not new. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, Annunciation artists began to position angel and Virgin in closer proximity to one another. As Susan Von Rohr Scaff explains in her article “The Virgin Annunciate in Italian Art of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance,” this left artists free to play on the intimacy of the scene and evoke an almost courtly relationship between the pair (114). Gabriel was depicted as the adoring and timidly imploring suitor, Mary as the confident gentlewoman, acknowledging but not encouraging his regard. Inclined heads and extended palms bespoke an almost romantic, though still decorous intimacy. These new depictions of Mary as the object of courtly—verging on erotic—desire, added another dimension to her already prestigious position. Catholic theology’s praise for Mary’s virginity was brought into tension with such sexualizing of her position. However, her careful curbing of the lover-angel’s entreaty only amplified her laudable feminine restraint, reinforcing her position as the paragon of Christian womanhood.

Szybist’s poems go a step further, evoking eroticism not to join in the tradition of applauding Mary’s feminine weakness, but to critique worshippers, priests, and artists for taking advantage of Mary’s vulnerability. In “Annunciation as Right Whale with Kelp Gulls,” the still-living, Marian right whale is subject to the kelp gulls’ sexual ravaging: “I tell you I have seen them in their glee / diving fast into the sureness of her flesh, / fast into the softness of / her wounds” (Szybist 1–4). They are keenly aware of her vulnerability, “for she is tender, pockmarked, full / of openness” (11–12), and they interpret it as “a sweetness prepared for them” (17) that they will gain not only sexual satisfaction from, but also Eucharistic spiritual nourishment from—“for they do sit and eat” (16) echoes Jesus’s invitation to “take, eat” the bread that represents His body (Matthew 26:26). The speaker’s condemnation of the violence the gulls do to the whale suggests a critique of the patriarchal religious tradition that further amplified the paradox of Mary as Virgin and Mother by approving her role as lover as well, turning her into, as von Rohr Scaff puts it, “everything that a man might hope for in a woman—virtue and beauty, submissiveness to authority, and readiness to absorb every circumstance and feeling that might

be imputed to her from modesty and reluctance to receptiveness and sexuality ripe for the taking” (119).

The collection’s feminist critique of Marian theology continues in “Annunciation: Eve to Ave.” Like “Right Whale,” this poem calls attention to the Annunciation’s more unsettling overtones of sexual violation. The Marian speaker’s description of the angel-figure is erotic: “I dreamed of his lips, / remembered the slight angle of his hips, / his feet among the tulips and the straw” (Szybist 1–4). But her wistful recollection quickly turns into impressions of sexual violence: “I learned that he was not a man—bullwhip, horsewhip, unzip” (9–10). She would do anything to escape him: “I could have crawled / through thorn and bee, the thick of hive, / rosehip, courtship, lordship, gossip, and lavender” (10–12). The lines are not only a description of her desired escape route; the language itself enacts her wish to flee this new and obviously terrifying encounter by reframing it into something comprehensible. Each word is broken down into its aural constituents and recombined with fresh elements into a series of alternative words, ones that the speaker hopes will help her name this new experience, provide her a refuge of understanding. Repeated consonants and vowels help her discover “thorn and bee, the thick of hive”; the second syllable of “rosehip” is recycled to become “ship” and combined with “court,” then “lord,” then modified to become “gossip.” But no word, no concept, is sufficient to represent what’s happening, and she is finally forced to abandon her search and succumb to her rapist. The rape, like the traditional depiction of the Annunciation, is indeed an interaction with the not-human, but it’s an encounter with the inhuman that’s so horrifying, she can find no words to describe it, and her only recourse is to fall silent, to be “quiet” (13) in “that astonished, dutiful fall” (14). The poem suggests that her forced compliance is not so different from the biblical Mary’s submission—that both acquiescences stem more from an inability to refuse than from willingness.

The poem’s title reinforces the speaker’s search for a new paradigm to apprehend the total paradigm shift she has been forced to undergo. “Eve” and “Ave” was a traditional pairing in Catholicism, particularly as the “Ave Maria” became popular in prayer books. As Ann van Dijk explains in her article “The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery,” “Images of the Annunciation inscribed with the angelic salutation are common in high and late medieval art” (420), often appearing “on a scroll that unfurls from [Gabriel’s] hand, a common medieval convention for depicting speech” (422). The inclusion of the hail reminded the viewer of Mary’s role as Godbearer,

usually during his or her recitation of the Ave Maria, which in the fourteenth century was, according to van Dijk, “immensely popular, and its recitation formed part of the daily devotions of the religious and laity alike” (420). In reading the inscription aloud, van Dijk argues, the viewer “adopts the salutation as their own. And in so doing, their eyes are led by the words themselves to the seated figure of the Virgin, the object of their angelically inspired prayer” (420). Worshippers enjoyed the aural pun in the recombined letters, and were pleased with the parallel it evoked: just as Christ was the “new Adam,” who restored humanity from the fall of Adam, Mary was the new Eve who would be, as von Rohr Scaff says, “the mother uncorrupted by sexuality” (117). In this poem, the speaker’s fall is not from virginal Mary to sinful Eve, as might be the typical Catholic interpretation of a poem about rape. Instead, the poem suggests, the true fall is from agentive Eve to passive Mary. To be the subject of the “Ave Maria” is to be fallen. Mary is subjugated by not just the angel’s hail, but the hails of all those who worship her. Like the gulls in “Right Whale,” those who participate in the Ave Maria use Mary for their own spiritual benefit. She is used not just by the angel; as a metaphor and icon, she is used—and damaged—by all believers.

Szybist’s displeasure with the dominant Marian theology is expressed particularly well in “Annunciation under Erasure,” in which Szybist has elided pieces of Luke’s account of the Annunciation to create a new version of the scene. Instead of Gabriel reassuring Mary of her unique and valuable standing in the eyes of God (“thou...art highly favoured”) and telling her not to be afraid of his approach, the Gabriel figure in the poem greets her saying, “The Lord is / troubled / in mind / be afraid Mary” (Szybist 1–5). The announcement that the Holy Ghost will overshadow her so that she will conceive the Son of God becomes the terse “The Holy / will overshadow you” (6–7). Without the inclusion of “Ghost,” “the Holy” serves as an honorific for the troubled Lord that the angelic speaker mentions in the first few lines, a Lord whose appearance in this context seems ominous, as would the appearance of a perpetrator of sexual assault (like the one in “Eve to Ave”). But “the Holy” also refers to Mary’s elevated position as an object of Catholic reverence, an icon of worship in the same cosmology that fashioned her, as the poem suggests, to “be / nothing be impossible” (9–10); Catholic tradition shaped her into a paradoxical figure (“impossible”) and one whose significance is primarily in her role as merely a vessel (“nothing”) for the Son of God. The poem’s omissions become particularly obvious at the close of the poem; rather than Mary’s submissive response

as the handmaid of the Lord, the moment Mary would speak becomes only “And Mary said” (11) followed by two lines’ worth of blank space and then the angel’s departure. Her silence echoes the Marian speaker’s “quiet” response in “Eve to Ave,” and calls attention to what’s been removed from the passage. The poem suggests that this version of Mary’s response is a more appropriate representation of Mary’s position in Catholic theology. Old patriarchal metaphors are archaic and dangerous, the poem seems to say. Only erasure of the outmoded, inaccurate symbology can accurately signify the extent of the damage, for the original metaphors are inadequate.

Interestingly, though the poem works tirelessly to erase language that it implies is deeply problematic, it nevertheless retains a portion of the King James Version (KJV) translation. In fact, in order to function, the poem must combine the KJV’s language (the old vehicles of communication), with new language. What’s new in the poem is the line on which the tone and the threat of the poem hinges—“be afraid Mary” (5). That precise wording is not in the KJV; the angel’s words are actually translated as “Fear not, Mary” (King James Version, Luke 1.30). But without the new version of the line, the Lord’s troubled mind would be indicative of brooding rather than madness, and the Holy’s threat to Mary would be diminished enough to make the second half of the poem more a meditation on some existential malaise. Instead, the introduction of the unfamiliar—the erasure and the linguistic twist on the KJV’s phrasing—into the familiar narrative transforms both erasure and twist into a critique of a patriarchal tradition that overwhelms and silences female voice.

Indeed, despite the collection’s insistence that metaphor is inadequate, it cannot deny metaphor’s usefulness as a vehicle by which to apprehend the unfamiliar. In “Holy,” for instance, the speaker’s Marian mother and the speaker herself have both been denied a transformative encounter with the divine. The speaker complains to the Holy Spirit, “I do not feel you / fall so far in me, / do not feel you turn in my dark center” (Szybist 1–3). But she also does not want to encounter the paradigm-shifting spirit, for fear of how it might change her. “I do not believe in the beauty of falling” (13), she says, a nod to the final lines of “Eve to Ave”—“Over and over in the dark I tell myself / I do not have to believe / in the beauty of falling” (14–16). She fears the disintegration of her own paradigm: “What am I,” she asks, “if I lose the one / who’s always known me?” (27–29)—and, conversely, the one (person and paradigm) she’s always known. The crumbling Eucharistic bread and the spirit represent the old Catholic tradition to which the speaker’s mother clings: “she / picks at the bread with her

small hands” (19–20), and “she edges toward you [the spirit], / saying your name with such steadiness” (17–18). Eventually, the speaker begs for a paradigmatic shift—she asks for the illness to come for her mother, for the Holy Spirit to be “the dry cough in her lungs” (34); she searches for the “Shadow...splintering into the bread’s thick crust as it / crumbles into my palms” (31–33). Toward the end of the poem, spirit and mother fuse with the bread, remnants of the previous paradigm appropriated back into the speaker’s body via a consumable, apprehensible form: “your bits of breath / diffusing in my mouth” (40–41). “Breath” is a hairsbreadth from “bread”—a word that suggests both the not-solid, not-human Spirit and the solid Eucharistic forms her mother loved. Through a blend of new symbol systems and old, fractured ones, the speaker approaches understanding and acceptance of the illness that has traumatized her and consumed her mother.

Ultimately, the collection appropriates the metaphor of the Annunciation to point to metaphor’s continuous inadequacy to fully represent or make sense of encounters with the divine—that is, to make sense of confrontations with new knowledge, unfamiliar experience, and alien worldviews. Our understanding is limited by the flawed traditions we draw on to represent the unknown; as the collection suggests, some symbol systems, like those used to depict the Annunciation, wrongfully circumscribe female behavior. But the collection also uses the Annunciation to assert our inescapable dependence on metaphor in even beginning to understand the non-human, the unknown. Szybist said in her *Paris Review* interview, “I think that a good deal of poetry and art gives us some sense of access to another’s voice, perception, texture of thought, imagination. Sometimes it gives us better access to the strangeness in ourselves” (Dueben). Attempts to fully apprehend an Other may be futile, but they are, as Szybist suggests, transformative. In the collection’s opening poem, “The Troubadours Etc.,” the speaker meditates on the difficulty of fully understanding or communing with her lover and finally closes with two lines that suggest metaphor’s simultaneous necessity and inadequacy in approaching the unknown: “try, try to come closer— / my wonderful and less than” (Szybist 41–42).

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