

## Word Made Flesh: Rabinowitz's Carnal Incarnation of Mary

*The Wanton Sublime: A Florilegium of Whethers and Wonders*

Anna Rabinowitz

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Reviewed by Anne Heide

In *The Poet*, Emerson writes that "the history of hierarchies seems to show that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and was at last nothing but an excess of the organ of language." In her most recent book of poetry, *The Wanton Sublime: A Florilegium of Whethers and Wonders*, Anna Rabinowitz makes physically present the Annunciation, the moment at which Mary was told she would bear Christ. The "stark and solid" representation of Mary is undone in the gesture towards making physical both Mary as a person and the act through which she conceived Christ. In doing so, Rabinowitz creates a tension between mysticism and physicality, proposing a possible amalgam of the two, where Mary can be both divine and real, metaphor and actuality, transcendent and corporeal.

In a section from "A Disquisition of Unbearable Conundrums of Being," Rabinowitz describes the consummation between God and Mary in terms of pure physicality: "Your gluttonous, famished vagina bares its teeth: consume the semen," and later in the poem, "A shower will wet your lips: tongue it into your mouth/and swallow" (52). By making Mary's conception of Christ a specifically physical one, Rabinowitz gives an icon life as a breathing universality: "SHE COULD BE ANYONE ANYWHERE ANYTIME" (74). One of the most often

repeated words in this text is "come," which fulfills all of its designations: to emerge, to fulfill, to ejaculate, and to arrive. All of these meanings are inextricably tied up in consummation and birth, and take on another dimension when placed within the context of the narrative of Christ: "Come/ 'in/ unto her'" (51).

As the subtitle of the book states, this is indeed a floriliguim, (though moving against the patristic texts to which the word refers), an anthology that seems to glean moments from incredibly diverse sources, some of which are left without attribution. The line, "THE LIGHT CANNOT BE EXPLAINED; IT CAN ONLY BE SEEN" (25) is also found in a letter from George Seferis to George Katsimbalis written in 1949 explaining his poem "The Thrush." The line "all the parts of a good picture/are involved with each other/not just placed side by side" (27) is also seen in a statement of the visual artist John Baldessari. These "quotes" are not attributed, and there are no notes to show their origin. It is up to us to find the lines that share their source with this text. Other quotes are attributed to their sources, as in lines taken from Rembrandt and the Bible. Rabinowitz additionally takes the concept of the anthology a step further, suggesting that Mary herself is an anthology, a compilation:

I conjure her chasing stray sheep  
I invoke her gathering figs  
I call her restorer of soil, plower, tiller, dead header  
I name her prunder of olive wood, maker of fire, fanner of flame  
I come upon her wind-blown, barely sheltered under scrub oak  
I see her huddled as tax collectors pound at the door

The ability for the poet to invoke such a multiplicitous being expresses how vastly Mary can be expressed, and the various ways in which she can be represented. She is

not only an anthology of her past (the various feminine gods to which Rabinowitz compares her), but an anthology of all women, a symbol for universality. Just as an anthology can never be complete, but only representative, about half of the poems in this collection are presented as sections of larger poems by the “from” that precedes the titles. Many of these have no corresponding sections, as if we are never able to complete a thought, as if a poem in completion is a poem expired, finished. Even the sections that have counterparts don’t act to fulfill each other completely. Rabinowitz calls completion into question by asking what one text, or word (Logos) can hold.

The anthology is not the only genre with which Rabinowitz works into and against. In a section from “A Gallery of Upper Case Scaffolding as Anomalous Verse,” Rabinowitz briefly calls to attention the history of illuminated manuscripts. The poem begins with a painting that contains the letter “R,” at the center of which stands the Virgin Mary with an angel, presumably Gabriel, presumably at the Annunciation. The poem continues to call the letter “r” into direct attention:

(w)rap of **R**  
 tap/

TRAP OF **R**

(There are ways of recognition  
 but his facial features are strange to her)

In her afterthought answers quake

:one must study an object a long time to know its sign  
 :like the intermediate somewhat between a thought and a thing

The “scaffolding” described in the title calls to mind the images, icons, and figures around which we build a presence. The repeated “R” can sound to “our” or “her,” and it seems as though either or both of these mishearings would satisfy the poem. The emphasized letter takes on the ability of the image, as with every repetition of the letter’s representation, we are reminded of the visual moment at the beginning of the poem, in which Mary was given a message from God that she was chosen to bear the son of God, and God himself.

Rabinowitz builds a personal history of women writers in her construction of the Mary mythology. In “On All Hands at Hand Handily,” Rabinowitz repeats and restructures idioms that figure “hand,” recalling Anne Waldman’s use of the visceral idiom in “Skin Meat Bones.” In “A Disquisition of Unbearable Conundrums of Being,” she recalls H.D.’s gesture towards the mutable, transfiguring Virgin Mary:

Conjured in the name of Mariamne, Semitic God-Mother  
Invoked in the name of Aphrodite-Mari  
Called by names that restore the dead:  
    Juno, Blessed Virgin  
    Isis, Stella Maris, Ishtar  
    Queen of Heaven, Empress of Hell

Like the lineage of writers pointed to in this text, Mary is similarly a lineage of past mythological figures. The most recurring figure against which Rabinowitz juxtaposes Mary is Io, who was similarly violated by God, although in the case of Io, Zeus’s intentions of lust were clear. In the case of Christianity, the problem of procreation is subsumed under the power of creation; lust and violation in this tradition are covered by the “immaculate” nature of the conception.

In this text, we are asked specifically how an icon is made, especially when what is borne will bear a larger representation than the icon itself. Mary bore not only Christ, against whom she would forever be defined, but also bore Christianity as a Jewish woman. In a section from "A Disquisition of Unbearable Conundrums of Being," Rabinowitz calls into question the relationships between the Other and the bearer of the Other:

**True or false:**

1. A Jewish girl is snatched by God to play a role in the drama of salvation.
2. A supreme fiction bursts into bloom around a Jewish girl impregnated by a shepherd or a soldier one starless night.
3. An angel, determined to pave the way for a rabbi he reveres, cuddles up to a Jewish girl.
4. A Jewish girl is threatened by a band of Landsmen hoping to use her to invent a messiah with a birth record and provocative ideas.

Here, Rabinowitz lays out the difficulty of Jewishness brought to bear in Christianity, where Judaism is the womb, or vessel, of Christianity. Rabinowitz asks what it means to hold the Other physically within the body. In bringing the visceral to the miraculous, Rabinowitz asks what happens when the Other is not something out of the body, but something of the body. Within this complication arises the question of how to bear, or bare the Other. If Christ is Logos (the word), what of the bearer of the word? Who is the author when the author is absent, or omnipresent, or God? Is Mary the text that holds the word? Is she the maker of meaning? What does it mean to be an unwilling vessel? By posing these questions and refiguring Mary as a physical presence who takes the responsibility to bear the Other, Rabinowitz gives us a textured, and perhaps more importantly, real portrait of a central Western icon.