

THE PANTHER

Rainer Marie Rilke

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars;
and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly —
An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

Commentary

“The Panther” is a powerful example of extended personification, which you could interpret as the writer’s empathy with his subject. Throughout the poem, the panther is invested with human feeling, just as in “Axolotl” the salamander is invested with human consciousness. In both works, you could ask: is it that the speaker, observing the caged animal, identifies with the pain of his imprisonment? Projects his own pain upon what he observes? Empathy can be very painful.

Reading this poem, we might ask: is it that the panther is able to communicate his pain, breaking across the boundaries that separate our species, and the speaker is sensitive to the panther’s pain? As the poem opens, the speaker tells us that the panther’s vision has “grown so weary” and that his eyes seem blank, they “can’t hold anything else.” But does the speaker really know what the panther sees or if he’s weary? He takes further liberties in the third line, announcing that “It seems to him there are a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.” Does the speaker really know what the panther is thinking here? Empathy seems to have given him the liberty to assume that this is what the panther is thinking. The empathy he feels is projected upon the panther; he “identifies” with it. Once we accept that projection, once we suspend our disbelief, a powerful story emerges. From within that cruel cage—which might represent any sort of loss of freedom—the world disappears; any normal vision, normal behavior, is suspended and actions are mere motions, with no force of will behind them. Life becomes “going through the motions.” Free will (my favorite topic this semester) is paralyzed—there’s no action but empty ritual. What happens next is almost too sad, too difficult to contemplate. That unasked for but inevitable glimpse of freedom appears momentarily, that whisper of possibility as the “curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly —.” It’s not a real possibility of freedom because the bars haven’t disappeared. The bars are still there. But the “image enters in.” It’s almost too painful to imagine! That momentary glimpse of freedom tears through every muscle, plunging into the heart, knife-like, leaving the poor creature (the panther, the speaker, both?) to suffer.

Even if you read the poem literally and aren't interested in pursuing other levels of meaning (what might the panther symbolize, and so on), it's an incredibly sad portrait. It's precisely the reason why I can't have a good time visiting zoos. I know they do a lot of good work. But the sight of all those caged creatures!!! My reaction is always very much like the boy's in "Axolotl." If I allow my fascination to draw me in I become guilt-ridden and horrified; it's as if I'm trapped in there with them. I'll never forget a certain grizzly bear at the St. Louis Zoo in Forest Park (I used to live across the street from it, and went there often when my daughter was stroller-bound) ..I still remember the disturbing way it used to pace endlessly in that "ritual dance around a center," which Rilke describes so brilliantly, unable to go anywhere or do anything which would make it feel like a real bear with real purpose and a real will. It was so obviously in misery, like this panther. On the other hand, the polar bears a few hundred feet away were pretty cheerful, usually playing with their big red rubber ball, splashing in their pool, rolling around. If you wanted to leave in anything like a good mood, you would check in on them and walk very quickly past the grizzly bear, trying not to look.