

Memory and Memoir: Resurrection and Subversion in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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Confessional Poetry: The Issue of Subjectivity.

Theorists and cultural critics, all over the world are highly involved in trying to find out answers to the puzzles of identity and subjectivity. What is identity? Is it the "self" in a monolithic existence? Or does it involve "the forms and traditions that trapped the individual in a cage of ascription?" (Friedman vii-viii). Donald Hall, tries to answer us for all practical purposes, when he says:

"One's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs and allegiances that in short or long term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity" (Hall 3)

Thus, it could safely be thought, that subjectivity is something 'more' than identity. It circumvents and includes one's identity and the choices that an individual takes up in/for the expression of that identity. Ross Murfin and Supriya Ray, the authors of the Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, define subjectivity, as that which points

"To that which we would (but may be unable to) know, that which/we do

(Or believe ourselves to) know, and individual or cultural ways of Knowing-or of trying to know" (Murfin and Ray 388).

This is exactly the kind of knowledge which resulted in what Hall has called "the textuality of the self" (5). 20th century cultural and literary criticism has given rise to what Elaine Marks calls "the big questions, the big metaphysical ones that {have}dropped out of the Anglo-American philosophy: life and death and the meaning of love" (Marks 277). The inauguration of the high modernist phase of Anglo American literature pushed poets and writers towards a "different: way of understanding identities via a questioning of social values and wide critical engagement with a variety of cultural texts. The publication of Robert Lowell's "Life Studies", brought forth, the personal subjectivity and agency in literature. "This poetry of political and cultural criticism" which "centered on the individual as victim" (Rosenthal 13), sought to express personal subjectivities through an artistic sequentiality. Poets like Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, W.D. Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath, among others, for this

expression as “a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crises”, have come to be known as confessional poets.

In this paper, I intend to converge on the power of those memories, which psychoanalytically, helped Plath to achieve a radical agency in her own person. If confessional poetry is the expression of repressed memories by “leading the subject to his signifying dependence” (Lacan 77) I shall, try to find out in what ways has Plath’s poetic expression in “Daddy”, betrayed a “replacement of the understanding of the dominance of reason by another, more readily accessible to our minds, in which, the order involved in the paramountcy of reason is ‘made’ not ‘found’” (Taylor 124). Plath in all her poems, and specially in “Daddy”, confirms her “plight, the perplexity of a self forever recasting and repeating itself as text” (Anderson 53)...And this has not been achieved, sans, her subjectivity-her fears, memories and mythical expression which continued to haunt her identity and helped her to achieve “the dream of totalization, of poetic closure” (Riddle in Harari 323). Ezra Pound’s battle cry-‘Make it New’, was the rallying point of these new poetic impulse which expressed itself in Plath. As is said in A Poetics:

“Pound’s fascist ideology insists on the author’s having an extraliterary point of “special knowledge that...creates order” (123). For Plath, what acted as this “special knowledge”, was her own memories and childhood experiences, which continue to haunt her through life and whose confessional expression “provides some criteria for the assessment of the relative worth of current social relations and of alternative social configurations” (Frosh 253) We shall see how Plath achieves this in “Daddy”.

“Daddy” as the ‘Haunt’ of the Unconscious: Freud, Lacan and Plath.

According to Charles Taylor, “Freud takes a Cartesian stance to the inner world. The aim is by objectifying it to gain a disengaged understanding of it, as a consequence, to liberate us from its obsessions terrors, compulsions” (Taylor 446). Plath begins ‘Daddy’ on this very disengaged note and an objectified observation of the “black shoe”, which (the shoe is the symbol of femininity in the Freudian psychology) stands for those “cultural or social injunctions or prescriptions against which the conduct/behaviour of the persons in the poem is measured at both individual and social levels” (Raichura 81) In the lines ‘You do not do, you do not do/Any more black shoe’ in which she has lived for thirty years ‘barely daring to breathe or Achoo’, signify Plath’s revolt against normalization, the Law of the Father or the Symbolic, in which she had remained trapped all these years, silent and suffering. It was under the influence of this very Symbolic Law that she had said ‘I do, I do’ and had married a man with ‘a love of the rack and the screw’.

Now, however, she is ready to revolt. In a reading prepared for the BBC, Plath had said, “Daddy is spoken by a girl with an Electra Complex”ⁱ. In Lacan’s

writings of the 1950s, he writes about the role of the Other as fundamental in the articulation of the human desire. According to Lacan,

“Because it is founded on the loss of the subject, desire does not confirm the subject in its identity but puts it into question: desire, indeed highlights a division in the subject” (Lechte 67)

Plath's father, Otto Plath, was a German immigrant and a Professor of German and Biology at Boston University. He died in 1940 after the amputation of a gangrenous foot—'one gray toe/Big as a Frisco Seal'. Aurelia Schober Plath, Sylvia's mother, writes in her introduction to her daughter's Letters, that Sylvia's first reaction on hearing of her father's death was: "I'll never speak to God again" (Plath 25) The division of the subject, which Lacan speaks of, shows itself, both in a childish reenvisionment of the Father figure as well as an adult attitude of ambivalence towards that figure. As Paul Breslin points out:

“By calling the poem “daddy”, rather than, say, “Father”, Plath lets us know that she recognizes the outburst to follow as childish, truer to the child's fantasy of domination and abandonment than to the adult's reconstruction of facts” .I feel, that though childish in anguish, Plath, is excellently mature in her expression of the anguish. When she says, ‘Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through’, she uses a dialogic combination of the adult and the childish consciousness. This “complex, polyvalent textuality was the result of (her) search—an unrequited desire for deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poem operating with a single voice and a single perspective.” (Bernstein 123). In calling herself, her father's ‘Hound-bitch, daughter, friend’, she establishes a multifaceted divided relationship with her ‘daddy’, whom she visualizes as ‘Fascist’, ‘The brute’, a ‘German’, ‘Panzer-man’, ‘professor’ and ‘dracula’, with a cloven chin. Not only this she identifies the tyranny of her father, with the man, whom she refers to as ‘a model of you/a man in black with a Meinkampf look...’ (Ted Hughes), and both of them with her own subjectivity. As Hall says:

Freudian notions of subjectivity do not imply agency through political or group self awareness, but rather agency through the consultation of, and direction by, an authority figure (62).

For Plath, this authority figure is her Daddy, and later her husband, Ted Hughes. However, what is more interesting is the fact, that though Plath does not seek ‘agency through political or group self-awareness’, she doesn't do it by way of ‘an authority figure’ either. In the poem, *The Nazi-Jew conflict* shows her artistic instincts culminating “in an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred” (Steiner 217-18). The poet sees herself on ‘An Engine, an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew’. “Daddy”, as Steiner says:

Achieves the classic act of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all. (218)

In the cultural myths (often of the Holocaust), that Plath uses in her writing, there seems to be a subversive device...a method which she uses “as a

balm for assuaging (her) own fragmentation”(Hall 83)-her own “glued bones”. In the image of ‘marble heavy-a bag full of God’, ‘A Big Frisco Seal’, ‘The German tongue’, ‘Your foot, your root, ‘the swastika’, ‘Boot in the face, she tries to enact a psychodrama. There is on her part an attempt “to identify with something external, other, different, in order to acquire the basis of a self unified identity”(Stavrakakis 18)...and she attempts to achieve this unification, because unlike the Freudian theory which is in “pursuit of social normalization”(Hall 62), Plath is more a Lacanian postmodernist who uses the cultural paradigms, “to bring plague, subversion and disorder”(Roudinesco xv) to her psychic confessions.

Confessional poetry is more often, than not, therapeutic, in nature. The therapy involves a cleansing and recuperation of one’s subjectivity via a presentation of the personal unconscious through what Jung called the “collective unconscious”ⁱⁱⁱ Plath was not really successful in her initial attempts of getting her work published. Rejected by the New Yorker, she wrote:

“If I could cut from my brain the phantom of competition, the ego center of self-consciousness and become a pure vehicle of others, the outer world...”(Journals 315-16). However, her personal (failed marriage and father’s demise) and professional failures found a better outlet in Lowell’s poetic strategy:

“Following Lowell’s example, Plath now wanted her poetry to deal with matters close to the bone...issues of the self. Previously, she had chosen topics that presented her with little challenge. Now, she hoped to tackle difficult subjects: her husband, her dead father...and herself” (Alexander 229). Therefore, in poetically killing her ‘daddy’, she ritualistically kills her husband who ‘bit my pretty red heart in two’, and of course a part of herself (the memories being an inseparable part of herself) Sge says-‘If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two/The Vampire who said he was you’. Probably, by exorcising her memories, Plath becomes linguistically and artistically free and her tongue which was ‘stuck in (her) jaw’, scared and hateful of the father’s ‘German’, ‘Luftwaffe’ and ‘Gobbledygoo’, ultimately ‘gets back, back, back to you’. If the first such attempt was an attempted suicide at twenty, the next was the creation of a new identity (personal, subjective, performative and poetic). The murder of the haunting memories in “Daddy”, reveals a vengeful victory won by female speaker who is her own agency. In the lines ‘So Daddy, I am finally through/The black Telephone’s off at the root/The voices just can’t worm through’ⁱⁱⁱⁱ, she celebrates her new Lacanian identity. As he says:

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming (86).

In "Daddy", time, may be said to be, "not a visual but a visionary time of memory. The present is not: it becomes. Everything was!(Raichura 75).I feel that Plath graduated from the realm of consciousness to that of existentialism where "all that matters really is the will to happiness. A kind of enormous, ever present consciousness"(Hall 67).This is achieved by a form of regression, self-effacement and withdrawal of life, resulting in a "masochistic form of remembrance, anaclisis and catatonia", via the "daughter-speaker's cathexis," being directed towards the father and driving 'a stake in your fat black heart'-i.e kill her Electra like Past and move on. "Daddy" is designed to reveal a new recognition of flexibility in social self-creation, which often meant challenging highly tendentious definitions of normality.(Including that of the medical establishment which 'pulled (her)out of the sack'and 'stuck(me)together with glue').Indeed, this involved a prolific use of language and symbolism.Lacan said, "The unconscious is structured like a language"(Lacan 203). He continued to emphasize the necessity to understand the rules/processes of human communication to understand human behaviour.If her 1953 suicide attempt was the Lacanian "Mirror stage", her being put together by the doctors symbolize her "developmental encounter with language"(Hall 86) 'And I knew what to do'. Her knowledge of her psychological entry into the Symbolic, points out towards her subversive independence waiting at the horizon of a cultural and psychological symbolism.Lacan said: "All human beings share in the universe of symbols. It is as a function of the symbols, of the symbolic constitution of his history that those variations are produced in which the subject is open to taking on the variable, broken, fragmented, sometimes even unconstituted and regressive images of himself"(57-58).In "Daddy", the daughter speaker, remains herself, as well becomes the alter ego of the mother, to express her hatred towards her father-husband-Who talks 'ich,ich,ich,ich',with a tongue'stuck ina barb wire snare' and yet, successfully expresses a new personality through a new language/worldview 'I began to talk like a Jew/I think I may well be a Jew'. The telephone symbolizes a negated communication and a 'cleft in (your) chin', indicate Plath's, usage of the "images of castration, mutilation dismemberment, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body"(Lacan 11)

We know that even her excellent artistic manipulations were not life-saving and yet, she was successful on her attempt to "perfect the present historicization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of historical turning points in(her) existence"(Lacan 52).Her poetry, was a ritualistic enactment of the exorcism of the unconscious. She achieved what Barthes has called a "zero-degree writing", a "transparency interrupting communication and relationships just at the moment when everything seems communicable"(Woznicki 8). American postmodernist poetry is concerned with the inclusion of "antiabsorptive" elements, which achieve a shock effect and absorb the reader through the negative, "diffuse, decorative, repellent, inchoate ,theatrical, background muzak, amusing, doubt, noise, resistance"(Bernstein

30). Thus judged, "Daddy", veers between the luridly sinister and self-deprecatingly clever. The tone vacillates between the nursery rhyme and the ironic discourse expressing an adult world of evasions and failures. Besides, The use of words like, 'bastard', 'black man', 'brute', 'vampire', 'black man', for her father, "creates dual points towards the center to interpret what Bernstein call 'the image complex'." (Woznicki 6). Plath achieves this postmodernist absorption of the reader through an anti absorption of her own self, polarizing "Daddy", "along two different sound axes, scales of values. The poem transcends its immediate experience and transforms it into something else. "Daddy" transforms 'schizo' into 'scherzo'" (Raichura 81)

Technical writing apart, "Daddy" is Plath's 'genotext'^{iv} (Lechte 142), something that is beyond the linguistic and is a process... A process of personal signification, of artistic and linguistic freedom won... A process which was initiated in "Daddy" and had still to be followed in "Lady Lazarus", via the exorcism of Hughes' memories..... But that is another story...

Notes

ⁱ This is from the notes prepared by Plath for the BBC third Programme, but was never broadcast. See The Art Of Sylvia Plath, pg 65.

ⁱⁱ Though Jung refers to the Racial unconscious, I have used the term to signify The Human Consciousness of Plath, which made her feel as one among the thousands who suffered in the Holocaust tragedy. Steiner accuses Plath of “ripping off” the tragedy, to fulfill her own poetic purposes. See Raichura, for an excellent defence of Plath’s poetic art.

ⁱⁱⁱ The telephone imagery, points out the ‘breaking point’ of Plath’s marriage with Hughes. Plath reacted violently, after, she was sure of Hughes, cheating on her. This point was proved by a phone call made by Hughes girlfriend—an event, which proved to be the death knell of all communication between Plath and Hughes.

^{iv} See Kristeva in Revolution In Poetic Language. Trans. Margaret Waller. Columbia University Press, 1984. Pg 87.

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