Christina Britzolakis: On "Daddy"

. . . recall Theodor Adorno's view, in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) of the advance of Enlightenment rationality as a narrative of violence which tends to annihilate otherness in the name of an implacable principle of identity. Rooted in a prehistoric split between subject and object, the dialectic of enlightenment attempts to outlaw primitive modes of perception such as sympathetic magic, and 'makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities'. The very reason which the Enlightenment used as a weapon against myth, religion, and illusion has, in modem society, turned against itself and reverted to irrationalist violence. Its oppressive tendency culminates in the catastrophe of the Holocaust, in whose wake the entire heritage of European high culture appears discredited or exhausted.

For Adorno, as for Plath, this dark vision of Enlightenment rationality is informed by the catastrophic events of recent history. Yet while Plath's writing mourns the victims of what goes by the name of historical 'progress', it also, as we have seen, plays out a deep complicity with the drive towards mastery that Adorno sees as central to Enlightenment. This paradox manifests itself as a tendency to yoke together historical and subjective crisis in manifestly unstable metaphorical conjunctions. The invocation of events such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima as metaphors for states of psychic extremity ('Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Fever 103°', 'Mary's Song') is often seen as merely capitalizing on their public significance. Thus Irving Howe, for example: 'There is something monstrous, utterly disproportionate, when tangled emotions about one's father are compared with the historical fate of the European Jews . . . "Daddy" persuades once again, through the force of negative example, of how accurate T. S. Eliot was in saying, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates".' The familiar charge of metaphorical overreaching takes on, here, an ethical dimension; in turning a historical event of this magnitude into a metaphor for subjective crisis, Plath allegedly perpetrates a violent twisting or perversion of the principle of metaphoric similarity. This violation of New Critical codes of impersonality is conflated, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, with its violation of the widespread belief that the Holocaust is in some ultimate sense beyond representation. The scandal of 'Daddy' is compounded by the sexualized scenario of collusion, in which the daughter/victim identifies with, and is seduced by, the father/oppressor. What Alicia Ostriker calls 'the earliest and most famous of female vengeance poems' none the less remains a love poem which not only explores the tangled links between femininity, eros, and domination, but mockingly appropriates 1950s myths of female masochism in order to do so.

As I have already argued, 'Daddy' operates in the modes of pastiche and parody, mixing Gothic folklore, Freudian clichés, and racial and sexual stereotypes with allusions to historical events and literary echoes. Through its blatant theatricality and unstable irony, it reflects on its own insertion into literary history and on its own figurative processes. The speaker's comparison of herself to a Jew also happens to thematize the activity of figuration itself:

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

The infamous metaphor (more precisely, simile) is an extension of the prior metaphor of the father's language as 'An engine, an engine | Chuffing me off like a Jew'. It is, as Helen McNeil has-suggested, 'a kind of psychic conceit, as if she is daring her reader to disbelieve what has been so passionately felt and powerfully expressed'. Once this extravagant 'train of thought' has been put into motion, it becomes a metaphorical machine which conveys the 'I' into a historical and ideological 'other' space not of its own choosing ('I've boarded the train there's no getting off', as Plath puts it in 'Metaphors'). The figurative act therefore not only puts into question the ethical status of the poem's discourse but foregrounds this ethical instability as an aspect of the motivation or intentionality of metaphor itself.

The Nazi-Jew metaphor is an extreme manifestation of the trope of subjection to otherness which, I have argued, governs much of Plath's poetry. It signals a radically simplified and unstable dialectic of self and other at work in the poem's language. This projective dialectic, of which the speaker represents herself as both victim and perpetrator, is acted out through the metrical parallelism of rhyme which becomes an 'engine', a seemingly automatic force with its own momentum. The entire poem is dominated by the compulsive necessity of the 'you' rhyme, which generates as its corollary the 'Jew'; the 'I' marking the 'not-I' as its other.

'Daddy' self-consciously exploits the linguistic primitivism of the 'unleashed tongue' through parody voodoo rituals. The father becomes a scapegoat, ritually dismembered into metonymic body parts such as foot, toe, head, mustache, blue eye, cleft chin, bones, heart, and resurrected in a bewildering variety of guises: black shoe, 'ghastly statue with one gray toe', 'panzer-man', teacher, devil, black man, Teutonic vampire, and, finally, Freudian father of the primal horde murdered by his sons. The original of 'Daddy' is irrevocably lost; it is the symbols of the (dead) father, his law, which the speaker is addressing: 'And then I knew what to do. | I made a model of you, | A man in black with a Meinkampf look.' The transformations of the father are matched by the daughter, who becomes, in succession, a white foot, Jew, pupil, gipsy, witch, and doll with a 'pretty red heart'. The violent symmetry and parallelism of the victim-oppressor scenario recalls Theodor Adorno's claim, in 'Elements of Anti-Semitism' (1944) that the Fascist projects the impulses he cannot accept as his own on to his victim. It is his similarity to the Jew which arouses the paranoid rage of the anti-Semite and turns the oppressed into an oppressor. The preverbal language of mimicry?of primitive gesture?becomes the tabooed sign of the Jew, marking him as the scapegoat. In 'Daddy', the oppressive relationship between father and daughter is seen as part of a larger process of scapegoating at work in history and language alike:

I have always been scared of you

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat mustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You?

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

Language threatens to break down into nonsense, stuttering, and aphasia ('the brute | Brute heart of a brute like you') . The terroristic staccato consonants of the German 'Luftwaffe' are translated into the childish barbarism, 'gobbledygoo'. The 'blue' of the 'Aryan eye', Nazi symbol of racial purity, is rhymed with the blue of the sky which 'squeak[s]' through the death-dealing blackness of the swastika. Victim and oppressor secretly mirror each other; and the victim's response to paranoid oppression is to imitate its features.

Plath's overreaching use of the Nazi-Jew metaphor in 'Daddy' cannot be separated from the poem's wider exploration and exploitation, through language, sound, and rhythm, of the violent logic of 'othering'. It is, perhaps, this linguistic regression which is at the heart of its perceived offence to canonical values. It does not merely refute the self-possession of the poetic subject but also suggests that, as Freud argues in The Ego and the Id, 'what is highest in the human mind' is rooted in 'the lowest part of. ..mental life'. There is no document of culture, Walter Benjamin wrote in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. Although 'Daddy' seems flagrantly to violate the Eliotic doctrine of 'impersonality', therefore, it can equally be seen as pushing it to an unholy extreme: the truly original poet who is in touch with tradition expresses 'the mind of Europe' not merely in its cultural glories but also in its deepest disgrace.

Plath's 'negations' are the effect of a profound ambivalence towards poetic language itself. On the one hand, her work can be seen as a triumphant celebration of the transformative powers of metaphor and of the 'oracular' dimension of poetic language invoked by Seamus Heaney; on the other, it can be seen as activating a darker, daemonic, or nihilistic side of the auditory imagination. In Plath's poetry, the Romantic identification of the 'symbol' with the sensuous, maternal fecundity of nature, as a means of overcoming the terror of death, or of transcending melancholy, is effectively disabled. Her rhetoric is founded on the recognition of a chronic lack of solace in figurative language. Metaphor appears less as a means of harmonizing an alienated self with the world, as in the Romantic tradition, than as a technology which

violently, if exhilaratingly, wrests the body to its own ends. The noble rider's drive towards mastery tends to undo itself, precipitating a backlash of linguistic regression. Plath thus stages a 'dialectic of enlightenment' in the arena of metaphor, rhythm, and sound, drawing upon the ambiguously incantatory and oral powers of poetic language itself. The splitting and instability of the subject in these poems?its alternation between the roles of oppressor and victim?forms part of a disturbance of memory and of language that is, as I shall argue in the next chapter, at once psychic and historical.

From *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by Christina Britzolakis.

Publication Status:
Excerpted Criticism [1]
Criticism Target:
Sylvia Plath [2]
Author:
Christina Britzolakis [3]
Poem:
Daddy [4]

Source URL: http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/christina-britzolakis-daddy

Links
[1] http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism
[2] http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/sylvia-plath
[3] http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/christina-britzolakis
[4] http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/daddy