

Alan Williamson: On "Daddy"

Archetypally, Plath's father is represented either as godlike but fragmentary, protean, inaccessible ("The Colossus," "Full Fathom Five," or else as the dark father, the Nazi and torturer. That this latter image is archetypal, the biographers, I hope, have made clear enough: in life Otto Plath, far from being a Nazi, left the Kaiser's Germany partly because he was a militant pacifist. Possibly the image stems from Plath's early anger at her father as a Prussian "autocrat"; yet her longing for him is so evident, in *The Bell Jar* and elsewhere, that one's mind is drawn more to the traditional etiology of masochism. In place of what is really feared--abandonment, indifference--malignity or persecution is substituted, both because it implies concern, or at least involvement, intention, on the part of the other, and because it constitutes a very high degree of presence. Nothing is so unlike the inaccessibility of a corpse as the intrusiveness of a tyrant, a jailer, a torturer. In an oblique way, "Daddy" seems to acknowledge all this. At a point in the poem when the Nazi theme has reached a pitch of hysterical inarticulacy ("the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you"), the father's real image suddenly comes to mind, and there is a comic incongruity:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

The speaker seems suddenly half-aware that the fantasy image needs defending, and the true grounds of reproach?as well as a much more loving underlying feeling--slip out:

But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.

The father's negative omnipresence, while it conveys a truth about the state of obsessive mourning, also expresses an unappeased wish on the part of the hurt little girl whose voice

can still be heard here.

[. . . .]

[T]he vampire mythology of "Daddy" . . . confirms the Laingian presupposition that intimacy saps one's limited stock of vital forces, threatens one's very being. But, by a deeper logic, if men are the undead, it means that they are the dead: the "dead lover," the dead father, returning in his death-denying disguise of omnipotent will. To find love a negative, obliterating experience is thus to feel reunited with the father. Insofar as the "blood flood" signifies menstrual blood, it is also to become one with the barren moon-goddess, the evil father's consorts. In this overdetermination, we come very near the core of the masochist theme in Plath's work.

"Daddy" represents a vengeful literary assimilation, after the separation, of Plath's marriage to the same complex, and the same ritual. To reproduce the (masochistically transformed) image of the father, she has chosen a man for his dominating, sadistic qualities, regarding even his sexuality, like Marco's or Irwin's, as a torture instrument:

And then I knew what to do.

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through.

And yet the opening premise itself ("I made a model of you") implies the possibility that she has merely imagined him this way, or else made him this way by her will to respond only to this element in him; and thereby has, in a sense, destroyed him, or at least the relationship ("If I've killed one man, I've killed two"). It is, after all, the destruction of the model that makes the voodoo rite of exorcism effective. There is a burden of guilt as well as abusiveness to this passage, which can only be glossed over if it is to be read as a straightforward attack on the husband's character. Rather, the poem, here as in the passage quoted earlier, wavers near the Jungian therapeutic point at which the archetype becomes so inflated that it can no longer be imposed on a living, or even a dead, person. If the separation is not completed, it is perhaps because the archetype is occasioned by an absence, not a presence; so that, grim as it is, it alone offers the possibility of connection. As Holbrook has pointed out, the concluding rhyme-word "through" means not only through with the father in his vampire disguise, but through to the father where he actually is--in the grave.

It should be clear why--without denying Plath insight into the social harmfulness of supermasculinity as an ideal--I disagree with a radical feminist interpretation of her work. Its burden, on the more intimate level, seems to me not sexual "oppression" but the ambiguous

attractions a more-than-human Other may hold for ego weakness in either sex. Plath's writings describe a complex of feelings in which (as in the masculine Madonna complex) the other sex does not easily ?scape whipping. If men are figures of indomitable will, they are morally beyond the pale--as in the lines from "Three Women": "It is these men I mind.... They are jealous gods / That would have the whole world flat because they are." But if they are not gods, the note of sexual contempt for "small" men quickly becomes audible. It was Plath's strength, and a good deal of her despair, that she realized--if not precisely this--the possibility that deep conflicts among her conscious and unconscious values and wishes might have made her unhappiness almost inevitable.

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