

## Susan Gubar: On "Daddy"

**[NB. *Prosopopoeia*: a rhetorical figure involving the adoption of the voices of the imagined, absent dead.]**

. . . surprisingly, no poet has been more scathingly critical of the figure of prosopopoeia than Sylvia Plath. Even as she exploited the trope in the Holocaust context, Plath emphasized her awareness that imaginative identification with the victims could constitute either a life-threatening trap for the poet or a sinister trip for the poet's readers, as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" demonstrate. In "Daddy," Plath considers what her identification might mean, rather than simply assuming that identification: "I think I may well be a Jew" (emphasis mine). In this, Plath's self-conscious method sustains this distance in a more sustained way than Anne Sexton does in the (probably) influential line from "My Friend, My Friend": "I think it would be better to be a Jew." Plath's line echoes Sexton's, but with a difference: Plath maintains a definitively post-war perspective on her own deployment of the voice of the victims. Similarly, Plath's is a more self-consciously fictive and qualified identification than John Berryman's effort to see himself as an "imaginary Jew." Plath illuminates not merely the psychological scenarios which most critics examine but also offers brilliant insights into a debilitating sexual politics at work in fascist anti-Semitism. From this perspective, "Daddy" reads less like a confessional elegy about Plath's grief and anger at the loss of her father, more like a depiction of Jewish melancholia?the primitive, suicidal grieving Freud associated with loss over a love object perceived as part of the self?and thus a meditation on an attachment to Germany in particular, and to Western civilization in general, that many European Jews found not only inevitable but galling as well.

Although numerous readers have noted that Plath anathematizes Naziism as patriarchy pure and simple, they have failed to understand how the dependencies of a damaged and damaging femininity shape her analysis of genocide. A "bag full of God," a "Ghastly statue," an "Aryan" blue-eyed "Panzer-man" with a "neat mustache," Daddy deploys all the regalia of the fascist father against those robbed of selfhood, citizenship, and language, for the speaker's stuttering tongue is "stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak." The daughter confronts a symbolic order in which the relationship between the fragile "ich" and the overpowering national and linguistic authority of Daddy frustrates any autonomous self=definition. That, as Jacqueline Rose points out, the English "you do not do" can be heard as the German "you du not du" (226) heightens awareness of a confluence between the daughter's vulnerable and blurred ego boundaries, her ardent responsiveness to the lethally proximate society that constructed her, and the European Jew's conflicted but nevertheless adoring address. Standing "at the blackboard," the fascist represents the irrational power of rationality, of the arts and the sciences, of culture in the Fatherland. According to Plath, the Jews chuffed off "to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" suffered the horror of impending extermination along with a crippling consciousness of complicity, if only the collusion of those doomed by a long history of intimacy to love and respect a force dead set against them.

For, through a rhetorical strategy itself implicated in the calculus of colonization, the poem dares to confront the daughter-speaker's induction into revering Daddy and his charismatic power: "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (223). The daughter's subsequent decision to make and marry "a model" of Daddy (224) suggests how difficult it may be for a consciousness captivated by the inimical source which shaped it to escape self-destructive forms of thralldom that refigure bonds saturated with the only pattern of attachment known?lexicons of emotion devised by the dead Daddy. Vampiric, the phantom father and his constructed surrogate, the husband who loves "the rack and the screw," have drained the speaker of her creative talents, her currency, her autonomy. Depleted. the daughter rages against her appalled feelings of radical insufficiency, which bespeak a blurring of boundaries between Jewishness and Germanness that many German-Jews lamented before, during, and after the Shoah. Since this tiny percentage of the German population played a relatively important role in business, finance, journalism, medicine, law, and the arts in the twenties and thirties, many German-Jews felt shocked at the betrayal of a culture to which they had vowed what Saul Friedlander calls "ever-renewed and ever-unrequited love." When Leo Baeck, the famous Berlin Rabbi, sat down to pay his electric bill moments before the SS dragged him off to Theresienstadt, Hyam Maccoby thinks his act exemplified not passivity but instead many Jews' inability to believe that "this Germany; which they loved, felt obligations toward . . . , felt gratitude toward" could have dedicated itself to their annihilation (emphasis mine). The forfeiture of a beloved language and a revered homeland, the loss of a citizenship that had signified and certified professional status and security: such grief reeks of the narcissistic wound Plath's daughterly speaker suffers after she tries to commit suicide, only to find herself instead "pulled . . . out of the sack" and stuck together "with glue."

As the Mother Goose rhymes on "you," "du," "Jew," "glue," "screw," "gobbledygoo," "shoe" accumulate, the poem goose steps toward the concluding "I'm finally through" that proclaims a victory over the spectral afterlife of the fascist, but only at the cost of the daughter's own life. At the very moment Plath declares she is "through" with her father, the final line intimates that she herself is also and thereby "through." No longer supported by the fragile hyphen between German and Jew, the outraged daughter knows her "gipsy ancestress" and her "Taroc pack" only confirm her status as a pariah, even decades after the catastrophic engagement with Daddy. Plath's scandalizing feminization of Europe's Jews suggests just how appalling, how shameful would seem, would be, the emasculation of often intensely patriarchal communities. Just as Plath's speaker asks herself who she can possibly be without Daddy, European Jewish men and women might well have asked themselves who they could possibly be after the Shoah definitively estranged them from their fathers' lands, their mother tongue, their neighbors' customs, their compatriots' heritage or so the ghastly number of post-war suicides of survivors-who-did-not-survive intimates. Without in any way conflating the different motives and circumstances of Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Peter Szondi, Jean Amery, Bruno Bettelheim, Jerzy Kosinsky, Piotr Rawicz, Tadeusz Boroswki, and Andrzej Munk, this frightful list of suicides attests to the devastating on-goingness of the Shoah.

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