

Marjorie Perloff: On "Daddy"

As in the case of "The Applicant," Sylvia Plath's explanation of "Daddy" in her BBC script is purposely evasive. "The poem," she says, "is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other--she has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it." As such, "Daddy" has been extravagantly praised for its ability "to elevate private facts into public myth," for dramatizing the "schizophrenic situation that gives the poem its terrifying but balanced polarity"-polarity, that is to say, between the hatred and the love the "I" feels for the image of the father/lover.

But after what we might call its initial "Guernica effect" had worn off somewhat, "Daddy" was also subjected to some hard questions as critics began to wonder whether its satanic imagery is meaningful, whether, for example, lines like "With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo" or "Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through" are more than fairly cheap shots, demanding a stock response from the reader. Indeed, both the Nazi allegory and the Freudian drama of trying to die so as to "get back, back, back to you" can now be seen as devices designed to camouflage the real thrust of the poem, which is, like "Purdah," a call for revenge against the deceiving husband. For the real enemy is less Daddy ("I was ten when they buried you")--a Daddy who, in real life, had not the slightest Nazi connection--than the model made by the poet herself in her father's image:

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.

The black telephone's off at the root,

The voices just can't worm through.

The image of the telephone is one that Plath's early admirers like George Steiner or Stephen Spender simply ignored, but with the hindsight a reading of the *Collected Poems* gives us, we recognize it, of course, as the dreaded "many-holed earpiece," the "muck funnel" of "Words heard, by accident. over the phone." And indeed, the next stanza refers to the "vampire" who "drank my blood for a year, / Seven years if you want to know." This is a precise reference to the length of time Sylvia Plath had known Ted Hughes when she wrote "Daddy"--precise as

opposed to the imaginary references to Plath's father as "panzer-man" and "Fascist."

A curiously autobiographical poem, then, whose topical trappings ("Luftwaffe," "swastika," "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen") have distracted the attention of a generation of readers from the poem's real theme. Ironically, "Daddy" is a "safe" poem--and hence Hughes publishes it--because no one can chide Plath for her Electra complex, her longing to get back to the father who died so prematurely, whereas the hatred of Hughes ("There's a stake in your fat black heart") is much more problematic. The Age Demanded a universal theme--the rejection not only of the "real" father but also of the Nazi Father Of Us All--hence the label "the Guernica of modern poetry" applied to "Daddy" by George Steiner. But the image of a black telephone that must be torn from the wall--this, so the critics of the sixties would have held, is not a sufficient objective correlative for the poet's despairing vision. The planting of the stake in the "fat black heart" is, in any case, a final farewell to the ceremony of marriage ("And I said I do, I do"). What follows is "Fever 103" and the metamorphosis of self that occurs in the Bee poems.

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Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Sylvia Plath [2]

Author:

Marjorie Perloff [3]

Poem:

Daddy [4]

Tags:

Perloff [5]

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