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**The Process and Purpose of
Demonizing the Father in Sylvia
Plath's Poetry**

Literary Essay

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The Process and Purpose of Demonizing the Father in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Since the appearance of Plath's book of poems titled *Ariel* in 1965, the poet's portrayal of her father as a Nazi in her most well known poem "Daddy" has baffled the Sylvia Plath fans and literary critics alike. The metamorphosis of her father into a horrible image of a Nazi seems a sudden turnabout that seems to have little basis. The aim of this paper is to refute this misconception by describing the process of Plath's treatment of her father at first as a God and then as a Nazi. Furthermore, the paper aims to prove that the purpose of the gradual metamorphosis is to make her father more tangible, concrete, although the image may by no means be realistic. By making her father palpable, Plath was finally able to face her life-long fixation with the memory of him and in the process give vent to her disappointment and anger over her husband who had left her for another woman a few months before the poem was written. As the subject-matter of this essay is essentially the poet's relationship with her father through her poetry, it seems prudent to discuss it in the light of biographical facts, which may clarify some of its quizzical aspects. I shall therefore first briefly summarize Plath's childhood and the relationship with her father and then proceed to analyze some of her poems in order to prove my thesis.

Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, to mother Aurelia Schubert Plath of Austrian descent and to father Otto Plath, a German-speaking Polack. He taught entomology at a Boston University and was considered an expert on bees. Being a fervent scientist, spending most of his time with his work, he did not take an active part in his child's upbringing and was said to have spent only about 30 minutes a day with his daughter. After the birth of her brother Warren, the family moved to sea-side, where Sylvia came in contact with the ocean, recognizing its immense power and affection to it. Otto's health began to fail him shortly after his son's birth. He mistakenly thought that he was struck with a lung cancer and seeing his close friend's long and agonising death from this disease, he refused any form of treatment. When he injured his toe and was finally forced to see a doctor it became apparent that his self-diagnosis was a grave mistake. The reason of his illness was not lung cancer, but diabetes, which was fully treatable at the time. Unfortunately, because of Otto's procrastination he had developed gangrene in his leg, which had to be amputated. Less than a month later, when Sylvia was just eight years old, Otto died in his sleep due to an embolus that had struck his lung. This tragic event left a decisive impact both on Sylvia and on her poetic canon.

The early loss of her father resulted in a strange fixation to recover the memory of him. In the "Conversation among the Ruins" (Collected Poems, 21)¹ her attempt to communicate with her long-lost parent proves to be a complete failure. The landscape is that of ancient Greece in ruins, which is, as we shall see, a very important motif recurrent in Plath's earlier poems. The meeting does not turn to the expectations of the poetical persona, as "While [he] stand[s] heroic in coat and tie, [she] sits / Composed in Grecian tunic and psycheknot". Already in this very early poem it is evident that the poet feels that the memory of her father dominates over her. She is not only "composed" but also defeated, while he stands proudly as if mocking her. "Rooted to [his] black look", she is paralysed, unable to utter a sound. As Aurelia Plath points out in her introduction to "Letters Home", Otto Plath was a firm proponent of "the Germanic theory that the man should be the head of the house" (Plath, 1992: 13) and this aspect of his persona is very much evident here. In such circumstances no "ceremony of words can patch the havoc" and the meeting is drawn to an end. The difference in clothing of the two also bears relevance as it stands for a metaphor of a vast distance of time between them. Because the two do not and can not share anything at all, not even the false and poorly constructed landscape, action is suspended and it seems as if they were trapped, being nothing more but vague shadows to each other.

Seeing how forceful imagery can have catastrophic effects, Plath seems to have decided to take small steps in her path to resurrection of her father, she decides not to burden herself with a realistic image of him for a while. What follows is a partial overview of her attempts to come to terms with him, until the emergence of "Full Fathom Five"²: in her poem Spider (CP, 48) Plath introduces her self-image in a form of an ant, which will resurface again in Colossus. The ants at the mercy of a spider "do not seem to be deterred by" the fact that he is a merciless Deus Ex Machina and "obey his orders of instinct" lemming-like without giving it a thought "till they are swept off-stage". According to Helen Vendler, this passage is about Plath's suicide attempts (she tried to commit suicide in her second year at Smith), which take place "instinctively, without her volition". In "Two Views of Withens" (CP, 71) there is no I of the poem per se, however in the last stanza there is a sharp contrast between "[a] bare moor, /A colorless weather, /And the House of Eros /Low-lintelled, no palace;" and a report

¹ In all subsequent references Collected Poems have been abbreviated with CP.

² The overview is loosely based on an appendix found in Helen Hennessy Vendler. *Coming of age as a poet : Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. (London : Harvard University Press, 2004) 150 passim

of "white pillars, a blue sky", which seems to imply a comparison between the present, bleak and hopeless and the past that is bright and filled with happiness and serenity. In "On the Decline of Oracles" (CP, 78) Plath connects the memory of her father with the ocean, a dear memory from her childhood. In this poem he is the keeper of her past that has been locked away in a "vaulted conch" by the books in his study. In time these objects, through which she can maintain a link to her past, are willed away by her father and the only thing that she can keep are the "voices he set in [her] ear and in [her] eyes", however, as Susan Bronfen observes that "in the course of [Plath's] mourning her eyes have grown dull, the vision he has endowed her with has become useless." Sylvia continues to employ marine surroundings that make her father become a "father-sea god-muse" (CP, 13) in "Full Fathom Five" (CP, 92), one of her first poems treating the memory of her father at a larger scale. By the year 1958 in which the poem was written, Plath's recollection of her father seems to have been seriously impeded by the ravages of time as he "surfaces seldom" and his form seems to suffer "some strange injury". Still the white muse does seem to represent danger. His long white hair and beard preserve an unimaginable myth that seems to do her more damage than good as it seems to serve no other purpose than to prove the "muddy rumors" of his burial false. Unfortunately the latter is but a mere illusion. During the rare occasions of his visit, her father is essentially as helpless as herself. On the verge between of the underworld and the world of our own, he is "rooted deep among knuckles, shinbones / Skulls." Yet as pitiful and grotesque as her father may be, Plath is unable to let go of the mythical figure of him. Not only does she reify him as she has attempted to do in the previous poems through the use of Grecian landscape, she also positions him above other gods, again creating distance between them, contrasted by him being immovable in the ocean, while she is constrained to walking "dry on [his] kingdom's border / Exiled to no good". By resurrecting her parent in a form of god, Plath seems to be unable to cling to her life. Once more she is forced to admit that in her eagerness, she has gone too far. Life becomes an unbearable strain, nothing more but an interval of time that needs to pass before she can join the white in eternity. The location of their meeting is poorly chosen as the "thick air is murderous" and makes communication impossible, which is convenient for her object of admiration as he is able to "defy questions" she has for him. Being so close to her father and yet at the same time so far away from him, she is filled with despair. She finds suicide ("I would breathe water") the only possible solution to end her anguish, although there a grave suspicion that their reunion in the underworld shall not bear redemption is painfully present throughout the poem. The use of mythical, even metaphysical

figure as a means to reach her father and come to terms with him has yet again proven to be a wrong choice.

Hoping to find the missing link, Sylvia decided to visit her parent's grave. The event is vividly portrayed in her poem "Electra on Azalea Path" (CP, 116). Although she herself later referred to it as "too forced and rhetorical" (CP 289), Helen Vendler believes that she thought it was too "Loewellesque" and goes on to prove that Robert Lowell's poetry was indeed one of the prevalent influences. Still, I believe that the poem does serve as a link between her previous "father poems" and her first poem that raised her to the level of the giants of the 20th century poetry – "The Colossus". Let us look at Electra more closely.

The poem opens with a description of the consequences of her father's death, which, I believe, makes it prototypical for the school of poetry she belonged to. Finally we come to know of the reason for her preoccupation with the father figure in her previous work: "The day you died I went into the dirt, / Into the lightless hibernaculum". Not only did she resort to imitate his death in her youth, she also shut him completely out of her memory. Using defence mechanisms of denial she then created a God-like father figure that had been protecting her from the awful truth of his death for all these years. Bronfen sees this as a "fantasy scenario where, mimicking his death, his daughter was able to imagine herself and her father in a realm outside the transience of mortal existence." (Bronfen, 79) At this stage "nobody died or withered" and upon visiting Otto's grave she faces the horrible reality of him being buried under "six feet of yellow gravel", barren, without flowers honouring his memory and the graves being so close to each other that even the tiniest shred of intimacy between him and herself proves to be an illusion. Also, she feels cheated as in her mind her father is still an immense figure, the way he was in her years of childhood. Again she relapses into mystifying his role as she becomes aware of her Electra complex by quoting three lines from Oresteia, speaking as Electra, though stripping the quote of all the names and offering only the nominal phrases "my mother" and "my sister" as reference points. Snapping back to reality she checks herself for moment of weakness she has shown, by borrowing "the stilts of an old tragedy" as Yeats would put it (Vendler, 122). She continues by mentioning two bad omens accompanying her birth and then vividly describes the reason of her father's death delivered by her mother. Here Aurelia further shatters her daughter's earlier representation of her father as a mythical figure and the narrator expresses her doubt whether she has the strength to face

the incredible blow posed by this revelation. She ascribes the fault of the two bad omens to herself. Finding no consolation in her mother's mundane and shocking truth, she again turns to her father whose death she is now forced to accept. Struggling to reunite with him, she suddenly becomes his reflection – a ghost: "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting at my throat". Her tone seems to be accusing: she still has not forgiven for her father for his death, which she sees as a (quasi-)suicide due to his refusal of medical help when it was still possible to save his life. Now she decides to seek answers in the world beyond, though she cannot resist the temptation of retaking her submissive role: "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend". The last verse of the poem seems enigmatic. What love is this "that did us both death". At the first sight it may seem that this is just a paraphrase of the old wisdom that love can be both a creative and a destructive force, but the more plausible explanation of this verse seems to be that it refers back to the beginning of the poem and that love is her love of herself, which has enabled her to repress her memory of her parent for so long.

All the poems discussed so far leave the I of the poem unable to communicate with her father, the primary cause being Plath's inability to admit to herself that her father is not a supernatural figure: "Conversation Among the Ruins" is a failed attempt to unite the present and the past, in *Spider* and in *Full Fathom Five* the abyss between the land of the living and land of the dead is insurmountable. In *Azlea* the poet discloses her reasons for her obsession with Otto, but before she was able to undertake first steps in process of liberation from her father's grip, she had to face Otto, who really was a bee expert, in the form of a "maestro of the bees" in *The Beekeeper's Daughter* (CP 118). Here the air, though not murderous as it is in *Full Fathom Five*, is still "almost too dense to breathe in" and while in "*Spider*" both father and daughter are dehumanized, she is in this poem at first on top of that also "deanimated" (Bronfen, 79), portrayed as a mere object, constrained to two dimensions with her father acting as her tormentor: "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone.". In the second stanza nature becomes alive as "The anthers nod their heads" and the air becomes rich and the narrator of the poem is promoted from an object to a queen of bees, echoing her awareness of the Electra complex she will have to face in "*The Colossus*" and will be finally resolved in *Daddy*. In the last line, the queen bee, according to Bronfen expresses "her fatal supremacy to all other bees" (Bronfen, 79). Although a queen of bees, she kneels down before her father and looking through a "hole-mouth" she can, only in this uncomfortable position, see his eye. Although the last line implies untimely demise, Eileen Aird points that this poem is supposed

to be read together with Plath's cycle of bee poems where the queen bee is "is a symbol of female survival, soaring triumphantly if murderously up"³. The poem thus marks Plath's decisive, albeit very small step in her healing process that would eventually free her from the death-grip of the memory of her father.

If "The Beekeeper's Daughter" is a step forward, then the Colossus should be treated as a leap in that direction. After Azlea, it is her next attempt to do justice for her father. She writes in her diary that when she saw her father's grave crowded among all the other mortals, she felt cheated and was tempted "to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead" (CP 289). In the Colossus she proves that she can live up to her words.

In Plath's first work worthy of a true poet, Otto is transformed into a colossus, a monument erected to his memory akin to that of Rhodes that had been guarding its harbour for a short time. The Colossus of Rhodes and the subject-matter of the poem share some of the characteristics in spite of the vast abyss of time that separates them. The real colossus was one of the wonders of the world and that is also the way a small child would see his or her father. The colossus stood on his post for 56 years (Wikipedia), and that was also Otto's age when he succumbed to an embolus. Yet while the colossus was governed by gods (it was destroyed by an earthquake), Plath's creation, being a god in her eyes, is destroyed by the only element that even gods must adhere to – the fate ("It would take more than a lightning-stroke / To create such a ruin"). And while the Colossus of Greece was, even in ruins, impressive enough that people travelled from near and far to see it, Otto's body is a pathetic reminder of the former self, his speech of the world beyond ours likened to that of "[m]ule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles", which pitiful as it is, it still takes away her ability of speech. The narrator is reduced to an ant, performing a never-ending task of mending "the immense skull plates and clear / The bald, white tumuli of your eyes". Already the first verse expresses the despair of its renovator and hopelessness of the act. Realizing this after thirty years, she can finally give vent to her anger because of her failure, scolding him for his inability to talk she becomes weary, denying his divine powers:

³ Eileen Aird. *Poem for a Birthday' to 'Three Women': Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath* 7 May 2005
<<http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/aird.html>>.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or
other.

Only then can she mourn his death. Once prevailing imagery of Greek temples and pillars is reduced to blue sky from Oresteia and even this is but a false make-up of the landscape as dead as the god spread on the floor. As she seeks shelter in her father's ear to protect herself from the burdens of the every-day life, she again tries to make contact with him, only this time she tries not to listen, but to speak to him. The ear that she squats in thus also protects her from the sound of the statue's incomprehensible "gobbledygoo" that has to this point prevented her to make herself be heard. The Colossus, however refuses to listen and the only thing that the I of the poem is left with are the memories she has of how her father and herself counted "the red stars and those of plum-/color." Although the sun is rising, both the memories and her father's greatness do not release their grip and slowly but surely, she is pulled into the darkness that represents her past and her inability to break away from it. To make matters worse, she seems to become a part of the statue, losing even the freedom of the worker ant that had been given the impossible task of rebuilding it. The last two lines of the poem seem to implicate that the narrator of the poem has severed all ties with the world of the living.

Although the ending may be bleak, I believe that *The Colossus* presents a turn-around in Plath's relationship with her dead father. The lines where she denounces him as a God bear a lot of meaning because this is the point where she realizes that her memory of him is false. It is not only the task of reconstruction of the statute that is impossible; it is also her idealizing of the past that had kept her in the darkness for all these years, away from the real life. She admits this in her short story *Ocean 1212-W*: "My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine white flying myth".⁴ The key words in this sentence are inaccessible and obsolete. Reconstruction is thus impossible because Plath's memory of her father is by far too fragile to perform its function. The only option available is therefore to construct her father from scratch and his German origin was the only factual bit of data she had at her disposal. Whereas in the beginning of the *Colossus* the tone of the narrator is at best

⁴ Sylvia Plath. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 130.

resentful, one can expect that this is just a beginning. The reader can almost feel that her up until now inhibited emotions are struggling to break free in a form that is raw and wild in its nature. A radical shift is thus made and a Nazi "panzer-man", a crazed butcher, is constructed, which is exactly the opposite of who Otto Plath really was. According to Vic Olvir, Otto was, although stern and bossy "an anti-Nazi, with little apparent interest in politics"⁵. But before we take a closer look at what many believe is Plath's best work, *Daddy*, we should first examine its thematically-related forerunner, *Little Fugue* (CP 187-9).

The poem opens with an image of prohibition of yew's black fingers waging and a sharp contrast of a featureless white cloud representing her domineering father and her innocent self. The cloud is suddenly turned into an eye of a blind pianist whom the narrator envies because he can produce the "big noises" of the *Grosse Fuge*. Both the pianist and the music take on the role of a proxy between Plath and her memory of Otto, which has nothing in common with the god, muse and colossus of the previous poems. She does not hear his voice but sees it - that is, she knows what atrocities have the Germans committed during the war and hearing his voice is to her like watching pictures or television programmes about their crimes. His voice is therefore a voice of every German as Plath declares in *Daddy*. It is "Gothic and barbarous, pure German" out of which dead men cry. Although Otto is as guiltless of the crimes that Plath accuses him of as she is herself, she will not ease the pressure that she exercises upon her memory of him. Quite the opposite, she even intensifies it:

And you, during the Great War
In the California delicatessen

Lopping off the sausages!
They colour my sleep,
Red, mottled, like cut necks.

Even the most innocent and trivial acts she imagines of him performing are portrayed as a source of her anguish and suffering. Before our eyes her father is turning into a demon that would not leave the poetess in peace even when she sleeps. The immense pressure of refiguring her father as pure evil backfires, and whatever positive memories she may have had of him at this point are gone. The remark that her "memory is lame" is pregnant with

⁵ Vic Olvir. *Sylvia Plath: Stasis in Darkness*. May 7 2005.
<<http://www.nationalvanguard.org/story.php?id=2945>>.

meaning: it stands for farewell to her father the god, but also to her husband that she had divorced recently. Considering the fact that she sees herself as a Jew in *Daddy* it may also be a reference to the suffering she had had to endure due to her father's death and in her marriage with and divorce from Ted Hughes. The line "I am guilty of nothing" also has (at least) two meanings: its use makes it possible for the poetess to wash her hands on the ghastly deed of disfiguration that she has committed on the memory of her once beloved parent, but on the other hand, the line may also be read as her self-absolution of guilt for the end of her marriage. In the poem we also witness gradual fusion of the father figure with that of her husband's. This feature is made more explicit and final in *Daddy*.

The poem *Daddy*, widely regarded as Plath's best piece of work, but for this essay it is important for three reasons: it provides a clear narrative of her relationship with her father, it explains the purpose of father's metamorphosis and it represents the liberation of the poet and the end of her struggle with her long-dead parent. It also stands for her emergence out of the shadow of her husband, who was regarded as a very promising poet at the time they were married, whereas her poems were considered but of an average quality.

In the first few lines of the poem, Plath becomes aware that the memory of her father has presented an immense weight that was crushing her beneath it ever since she had written the *Colossus*. But this time she does not submit herself and does not try to recover him as in the poems preceding *Little Fugue* because she knows that this path will never bring an end to her struggle. For this reason, she employs what Freud would call after-effect⁶ i.e. she kills her already dead father again in the mental world in order to accept his death. This, however, is not enough. The narrator feels that the years marked with agony of coming to terms with her father deserve more attention. She recalls Otto's German roots and the fact that he lived in Poland, a country that was the first one to be brought down by the Nazi war apparatus. This leads her to remember her confusion with her roots, which may have troubled her at an early age. The reference to her roots, in turn, gives her the needed leverage to recollect her inability to learn German⁷ and her inability to find a way to communicate with her father in her early poems. The repetition of German pronoun "ich" implies like the speaker is suffocating with the voice and language of her once domineering and now twice deceased parent. The

⁶Jacqueline Rose. "Daddy" in *Psychoanalytic literary criticism* Maud Ellman (ed.) New York: Longman, (1994): 239

⁷ cf. *Letters Home*, pp 244, 246, 319

"universal" tormented Pole is suddenly turned into a system of empty signs denoting a universal Nazi, tormentor of millions ("Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You -- / Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through"), and the language he speaks is the medium that turns the narrator into a Jew. Although this inferior position seems to bear a striking resemblance to Full Fathom Five and the Colossus, the difference is that in Daddy the American I tormented by her father's German "ich" is able to redirect all the love of her father into the ice-cold hatred of his model – the unfaithful ex-husband. The latter is at first a remnant of a Nazi that was her father ("A man in black with a Meinkampf look") but then he becomes a blood-sucking vampire that has been gradually killing her. By running a stake through Plath can sever all the links to her present relationship with him and make peace with her father. The last line of the poem bears to both her father and her husband, the (unfaithful) bastard who had left her with two of their children. But the "The black telephone's off at the root" and finally, she is able to achieve liberation from the two central male figures that have dominated her life to that point.

It is difficult to discern whether Daddy tells us more about the poetess' relationship with her father or her hatred for Ted Hughes. The fast-paced flipping between the images of an oppressed Pole, domineering Nazi and a blood-sucking vampire, gradually fusing into a single entity create a complex vortex of imagery and action, so that even a careful reading may not be able to completely untangle the intertwined network of links and relationships between all the driving factors present in the poem. One can only propose a modest attempt at doing so.

This paper proves that Otto was present as a godly figure of Plath's poetry long before the creation of the Colossus. Already the first poem in the Collected Poems presents her father as a memory that haunts the poetess throughout her life and there are numerous references in her later poems, which prove that her relationship with her father had a decisive impact both on her life and possibly even on her choice of her spouse. The path that brings us to the father as a Colossus was therefore long and tedious, full of detours that Plath had to take due to her inability to find the purpose of her poetry. Little Fugue and Daddy uncover the purpose. With the two poems Sylvia is able to both free herself of the grip not only presented by the memory of her father and her past, but also of the grip of her husband, a more experienced poet, who was at the time when Plath reached her creative peak, widely regarded as a poet whose poetry was superior to hers.

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