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Voicing our “Language Obscene” in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”

Jeremy Lowenthal

With its prominent assonance, rhythm, polyglossia, and aural — if not oral — suggestiveness, Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” (1965) at the very least warrants the cliché *more than meets the eye*. The speaker intimates as much in her metatextual description of her language as “obscene” in line thirty, a notable edit from Plath’s first draft of the poem, which had the overtly sexual “incestuous” in the place of the more ambiguous “obscene.” “Obscene” derives from the Latin *obscaena* (offstage), a cognate of the Greek root *skēnē*, the backstage that was used in classic Greek theater to visually conceal illicit events that were then referenced by their corresponding sound effects (Lawrence 236). With “obscene” itself acting as a sort of *skēnē* where the explicit “incestuous” disappears from the textual stage, Plath’s edit gently entices the reading ear. When we consider Plath’s own perceptual account of “Daddy” and the other poems of *Ariel*, however, subtle enticement gives way to implacable necessity: “they are written for the ear, not the eye: they are poems written out loud” (Plath 192).

Despite the attention paid to the phonic structures of “Daddy,” few critics, if any, have adequately analyzed the incestuous language that the poem directs the reading body to voice, largely because they fail or refuse to assign these sounds semantic value. Notably, Roger Platizky reads the /oo/ sounds of the apostrophe along the lines of repetition compulsion, claiming that the assonantal end-rhymes of the poem mimic the cries of the child, Ernst, discussed by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, who would re-stage the loss of his mother using a cast and retracted spool in an oft-repeated game of fort/da (105). Steven Gould Axelrod similarly argues that the language of the poem “teeters precariously on the edge of a preverbal abyss – represented by the eerie, keening ‘oo’ sound,” and elsewhere insists that Plath’s corpus registers “not as language

at all but as noise, a radio static" (21, 56). These psychoanalytic readings laid the ground work for the most serious meditation to date on the assonance of the poem: *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Negativity* (2011), where Paul Mitchell applies the psychoanalytic work of Julia Kristeva to equate the assonance of "Daddy" to "irruptive *jouissance*...that operates in tension against the sign." Rebuking critics for "canalizing the poem's problematic signification by imposing a coherent (phallic) narrative of unitary subjectivity," Mitchell refuses to analyze the acoustics of "Daddy" as anything other than an asignifying force that works to unravel the symbolic structures that seek to contain it (162).

While Mitchell's project marks the latest and most sophisticated installment in an extensive psychoanalytic discourse surrounding the acoustic structures of "Daddy," his conclusions seem a relatively natural extension of Kristeva's own problematic commentary on Plath's corpus: "Sylvia Plath, another of those women disillusioned with meanings and words, who took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds: a refuge that already announces, for those who know how to read her, her silent departure from life" (Moi 157). A disillusionment with meaning, a silent departure from life, preverbal radio static, asignifying *jouissance* — undoubtedly, these psychoanalytic readings shed light on the traumas that the speaker's apostrophe "acts out," but in reducing the text to the level of the asignifying, the nonsignifying, or the prelinguistic, they risk reinscribing the very silencing hegemony that they seek to interrogate in their readings of the poem.

To open up this discourse, this essay adopts Garrett Stewart's 'earsighted' hermeneutic of "phonemic reading," which attends to the semantic significance of the sounds that "pour in and out of lexical molds." Supplementing the psychoanalytic commentaries of Rose and Mitchell with an account of the poem's phonotextual possibilities, I aim in part to attend to what Stewart calls the "pulse of language... heard beneath utterance, heard bringing itself to utterance" in our voicing of the text (25). By adopting this alternative mode of listening, we can escape the paralysis that currently plagues the discourse surrounding the poem; that is, we can do more than merely identify the limits of graphemic expression. Instead, we can move towards a more attuned and ethical engagement with the poem's indirect, phonemic pathways of signification — sonic channels currently untapped in Plath studies. Ultimately, I emphasize the ethical obligation that the enduring presence of these semantic pathways places on readers to assume a radical listening practice that pursues the significance of what Plath has so masterfully "written out loud" for manifestation in our reading voices. Given that Plath never actually published a print version of "Daddy" during her lifetime, that her 1962 audio recording was the only form of the text that she ever made public, and that reading aloud must have thus played an irreducible role in the early reception of the poem, phonemic reading seems best suited to address its unique interplay of sense and sound.

Stanzas five and six, where the speaker first expresses her inability to speak with her deceased, now-apostrophized father, provides an important point of entrance for this phonemic reading:

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene (Plath 22-30)

For Anglophonic readers, “Ich, ich, ich, ich” might first register as an onomatopoeic sequence that sonically imitates the violent gagging that the apostrophic presence of the father induces. On the other hand, German readers might first perceive the “ich” sequence as a stammer that highlights the speaker’s crisis of subjectivity: her absolute inability to establish an identity beyond the mere repetition of the first-person pronoun, “ich,” which translates to “I” from the German. That the speaker’s attempt at identity formation manifests as an aphasic speech act in the father’s language suggests that her projection of voice on the father comes at the expense of her own voice and subject position. The phallic language of the father penetrates and thwarts the speaker’s attempt to voice her own language and identity. She gags on the “language obscene” that fills her mouth. The stanza-ending “language obscene” thus works on the metatextual level to conceal what would be a graphic scene of “language incestuous.”

This might risk falling into overreading had the speaker not already implicated her father in incestuous acts of oral sex through the elaborate phonic play of stanzas two and three. The graphemes of these stanzas relay an image of the speaker praying at the base of her father’s divine statue, but their phonemic ambiguities make possible a far more obscene interpretation:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you. Ach, du. (8-15)

“Marble-heavy, a bag full of God” evokes the testicles of the father (‘bag of marbles’), which carry within them the seed of his daughter, her origin in the father’s body. “One gray toe” similarly metaphorizes the penis of the father, which she describes as “Big as a Frisco seal.” In addition to its explicit reference

to size, the line plays with the word “seal,” figuring the phallus of the father as that which seals the mouth of the speaker, an innuendo that anticipates the gagging sequence of stanza six. Even the geographical metaphors imply penetration, as the phallic headland of San Francisco would so readily “seal” the cavernous bay of Nauset were it to move its “head” into the Freakish Atlantic.

While stanza two’s atemporal descriptive mode matches the stagnancy of the petrified paternal body, stanza three’s phonotextual features immediately set the stagnant blazon in motion, animating the “ghastly statue” of the father. The opening “And a head” offers the first invitation for phonemic reading as the line’s tempo compresses “a” and “head” into “ahead.” The noun readily slips into the adverb through the phonemic transfer that reading aloud makes possible. The stanza augments this effect with the verb “pours,” which indicates that the head of his phallus “pours” out “bean” (green over blue) in the “waters off beautiful Nauset.” Moreover, the father’s seminal “bean” (an edible seed) is animated by phonemic reading as the G of “green” is sucked back into the precedent “bean” to form the homophonic equivalent of “being” (“beang”) (*OED* “Bean”). Stanza three thus transitions the text from an atemporal description of the father’s petrified genitals to a narration of their incestuous movements with the speaker’s body. The speaker endeavors to “recover” her being as it “pours” out from her father’s “marble-heavy... bag” through his “head” and into her body. The inanimate “bean” comes into “being” as phonemic reading activates the inert “language incestuous.” Here and throughout, the poem delivers its sense through seemingly extraneous sounds whose auditory processing imply the spectral activity of the father in the present time of the apostrophe.

In the final two lines of stanza three, this phonemic fellatio approximates a kind of orgasm as the father’s seed-language comes to fill the speaker’s mouth in the present performative of the German apostrophe, “Ach, du” (O you). At this climactic / a / oo / moment, the phallic symbolic seems to gag the speaker and force her to spit out the paternal seed in an apostrophic exclamation that reestablishes the division between her subjectivity and her father as an inanimate object of address. As Jonathan Culler broadly observes, apostrophe can “be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism. Either it parcels out the self to fill the world, peopling the universe with its fragments of the self... or else it internalizes what might have been thought external” (146). Culler’s formulation aptly characterizes the tension of the apostrophe at hand: the speaker’s reflexive projection of her father’s seed-language emphasizes the challenge that she faces in maintaining her own voice, language, and identity, while trying to erect the voice of her absent father. In the very moment that she (re)internalizes her being, she hacks and spits “in the [momentarily] German tongue” — “Ach, du” — projecting it back upon her father. These dialectic poetics reproduce the emptiness or lack of being that constitute her desire for his animating sperm.

Yet even here, where the language of the father, the paternal symbolic, seems to utterly

penetrate this apostrophe, “Ach, du” exceeds that which psychoanalytic critics like Rose have

assigned it: “If this poem is in some sense about the death of the father, a death both willed and premature, it is no less about the death of language...the poem seems to be outlining the conditions under which that celebrated loss of the symbolic function takes place” (225-227). In only perceiving an “alien, paternal tongue” in “Ach, du,” Rose overlooks and, as a result, inadvertently mutes the very phonemic engine that drives the text to this climax in the first place. Just as phonemic reading animates the “ghastly statue” of the father, it also attends to the transcendent voice of the speaker in the assonantal end rhymes of the text. These end-rhymes do not, as Rose suggests, announce the “loss of the symbolic function” and the “death of [her] language,” but instead make perceptible a voice that always exceeds the semantic value of non-symbolic noise, “radio static,” or “irruptive jouissance.”

To cross this analytic threshold, however, it is first necessary to note that the text confirms the presence of this sonic fellatio through slang references that have been overlooked in past commentaries on the poem. In stanza nine, for example, the speaker asserts, “I have always been scared of *you* / With your Luftwaffe, your gobbleddygoo” (41-42). “Gobbleddygoo” is American English slang for “fellatio” or “a prostitute who performs fellatio” (*Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, “Gobbleddygoo;” hereafter *GDS*). The word originated in the 1930s-1940s as a shortened version of “gobble the goo” and was later used to derive the word *gobbleddygook* (Ayto 121). The vulgar “gobbleddygoo” redoubles the speaker’s figuration of the father’s semen as the animating substance (‘the seed of life’) that the speaker must painfully consume to refill her lifeless body with being.

In similar fashion, stanza seven features the word “chuffing,” which, while onomatopoeically imitating the puffing of a locomotive steam engine, also denotes “fucking” in British English slang:

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. (30-35)

Some critics have simplified “chuffing me off” to ‘training me off,’ while others have relegated “chuffing” and “gobbleddygoo” to the status of “baby words” that carry on the “cadences of [the] nursery rhyme” (Nance and Jones 126). These simplifications disregard the fact that “chuff” emerged in the 1940s as a euphemism for both the literal and figurative senses of the verb “fuck,” resonating quite literally with the locomotive mechanism that its onomatopoeia imitates (*GDS*, “Chuff”). While evoking the lateral movement of a train in this

context, “chuffing” more directly imitates the rhythmic puffing that the locomotive chimney produces in its iterative vertical emissions (*OED*, “Chuff”). Commencing an intricate textual overlay of psycholinguistic and mechanical forms of “chuffing,” the word’s function far exceeds that of “baby words.”

Despite its oversights — the primary focus of this essay — Kristeva’s theory of poetic

language does much to counter these problematic semantic reductions of the text to infantile

blabber. In psychoanalytic terms, “chuffing” and “gobbledygo” constitute the very “engine” of

jouissance that drives the paternal symbolic (the language-phallus of the father) into the mouth of the speaker to penetrate her speech in the sexually climactic assonantal end-rhymes of the text. In the seventh stanza, for example, “An engine, an engine” metrically and phonetically mimics the pistoning (“chuffing”) of the phallus working towards the vocalic ejaculation of the assonant “a Jew.” The palatal consonant / j / phoneme that intrudes upon the self-similar phrase “an engine” (an-en-[j]in) is worn smooth in the phonetically homogenizing repetition. On the other hand, this phonetic revving also imitates the locomotive steam engine working towards the combustion and emission of its fuel as it chuffs from one concentration camp to the next. And in the following stanza, the text extends this overlay of psycholinguistic and mechanical chuffing to a third level of meaning through allusions to a much more sinister form of chuffing — the chuffing of the crematorium chimney:

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
 Are not very pure or true
 With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
 I may be a bit of a Jew. (Plath 36-40)

The traces of the Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen crematoria linger in the “snows of the Tyrol” and “clear beer of Vienna.” Despite their unadulterated appearance, they “are not very pure or true” because they are contaminated by the ash that chuffed from the crematoria chimneys and diffused in the terrain of Europe. Their apparent purity is, in other words, an optical illusion that masks their heterogenous, human constitution.

For Paul Mitchell, the nonsignifying noises of the genotext blare out most clearly at “a Jew” and other junctures of irruptive *jouissance* such as “Achoo,” “Ach, du,” and “I do, I do.” At these moments, he argues that “the collapse of the signifier can be viewed in terms of the text’s phonetic disruption...” (130). “Phonetic,” not phonemic — Mitchell’s sweeping claim suggests that the five times repeated “a Jew” marks only the noise that endures the fiery destruction of its referent. Burnt down to the level of nonsignifying, onomatopoeic ash, “a Jew” would reference only the chuffing noise of the oven chimney, much as the opening “Achoo” would reference only the sound of allergic expulsion. Hence,

“a Jew” would merely direct us to the machinery responsible for its mechanical and semantic destruction: on the one hand, the crematorium chimney that “chuffs” out “a Jew” after “a Jew,” and, on the other, the poetic language that “chuffs” out the sound of / a / oo / after / a / oo / in irruptive, asignifying textual *jouissance*. Consequently, these two forms of “chuffing” are indistinguishable in the last (psycho)analysis: “a Jew” marks the limit of reference and signification as the subject (“a Jew”) utterly dissolves into the pure unintelligibility of the genotext (/ a / oo /). Reducing the subject to ash and sound, the chimney obliterates all identifying qualities. In their mechanical and semantic incineration, “a Jew” leaves behind no trace other than the indistinguishable “chuffing” onomatopoeia that comes to mark the subject’s diffusion into the landscape.

But, is this truly the last analysis? Is this semantic limit really the last word, or nonword, of the text? Could this “celebrated loss of the symbolic function” be the product of psychoanalytic interpretation rather than its discovery? Might this absence of meaning be the result of an oversight — the result of too much seeing and not enough listening — an over-seeing that all too readily subordinates the voice of the other in its attempt to secure total mastery over the last word or the final say? Though Mitchell and Rose powerfully draw our attention to the way that the assonantal end-rhymes of the text descend into nonsemantic noise under the weight of what they seek to relay, they do not adequately attend to the manner in which those sounds are always shuttling back into sense across our reading voices. Listening to the voice within our reading mouths, we animate the possibility of an impossible performative that our lips are nonetheless made to pronounce in “not do,” “Achoo,” “Ach, du,” “a Jew,” “I do, I do,” and even the closing “[d]addy, you.” Can you not hear an *Adieu* just on the cusp of expression? Can you not feel it on the tip of your reading tongues: this greeting beyond death? This final goodbye? The possibility of this impossible resolution?

Let us voice that possibility here and now: if the final line of the text, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through,” announces a refuge from meaning and a departure from life, as Kristeva, Mitchell, Rose, and countless others suggest, it is only insofar as each assonantal pulse of the text propagates within and from our reading bodies the announcement of a new refuge, meaning, and enduring life within our voice. Her voice is “through” only insofar as it has seeded itself so deeply within our own that we cannot but engender its being in every voicing of the text. *Adieu* “does not signal the end,” as Jacques Derrida forcefully reminds us in his own *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. If it announces a “refuge” from meaning and a departure from life, then it is only insofar as each assonantal pulse propagates within and from our reading mouths the welcome of a new refuge, meaning, and enduring life within *our* voices. It is the voice within our voice that imposes upon us the ethical responsibility of phonemic reading: a radical listening that tends not to the future of some predictable “crisis of representation” ahead, not to the interpretive reproduction of the next

onomatopoetic “a Jew,” but one that always welcomes the infinite possibility of a radically different voicing to come.

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