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Author(s): Jahan Ramazani

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## “Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You”: Plath, Rage, and the Modern Elegy

JAHAN RAMAZANI, assistant professor of English at the University of Virginia, is the author of *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (Yale UP, 1990) and of articles on Hardy, Owen, Yeats, Stevens, Clappitt, Freud, Heidegger, and others. With the support of an NEH fellowship, he recently completed *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (U of Chicago P, forthcoming), from which this essay is taken.

“HOW THEY GRIP us through thin and thick, / These barnacle dead!” Plath wryly observes in “All the Dead Dears” (*Poems* 70). More than all the other dead dears, Plath’s father grips her through poem after poem. Dead when Plath was eight, he became the “buried male muse” of her work (*Journals* 223). She explicitly evokes his death in her novel, journals, and stories and in various poems, but perhaps the finest works elicited by his loss are the elegies Plath wrote between 1958 and 1962: “Full Fathom Five,” “Electra on Azalea Path,” “The Colossus,” “Little Fugue,” and “Daddy.” With these works, Plath made a major contribution to the development of the modern elegy, even though they have more often been read as examples of “confessional,” “extremist,” “lyric,” “American,” or “domestic” poetry than as poems of mourning. To reinterpret them as elegies is not to restrict them to a new classificatory cage but to ask pragmatically what aspects of their psychopoetic character this context reveals. If one defines the elegy as strictly autobiographical, Plath’s projection of her mourning onto dramatic and mythic personae may seem to bar her poems from the genre; but Plath, though labeled a “confessional poet,” follows elegists from Spenser to Yeats in articulating her grief through semifictive selves, albeit speakers more closely resembling her than contrived shepherds resemble pastoral poets. If, by contrast, one understands the elegy to be fundamentally dramatic, the semiautobiographical content of Plath’s elegies may seem to exclude them from the genre; but poets from Jonson and Bradstreet to Hemans, Emerson, and Robert Lowell mourn family members in propria persona. Further, if the elegy is defined as immediately occasional, Plath’s delayed mourning may seem to forbid interpreting her poems as elegies; but canonical elegists like Spenser, Tennyson, and Hardy wrote elegies many years after the commemorated deaths. As long as Plath is excluded from the genre of poetic mourning on the basis of such rigid criteria, readers will miss her significant perpetuation and renewal of the ancient literary dialogue with the dead. She should be understood

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as participating in a genre irreducible to raw outpouring, impersonal artifice, or prompt tally—a genre that allows her, like other poets, both to mask and to reveal grief, to dramatize and to disclose it.

The foremost obstacle to reading Plath's poems as elegies is probably their harsh ambivalence; but this is precisely her most important contribution to the genre—her enlargement of the elegy's affective parameters beyond the traditional pathos, love, reverence, and competitive camaraderie. Summoning a violent anger at her father, Plath shuns the elegy's affiliations with love poetry and encomium. She uses the genre "to express anger creatively": "Fury," she observes of her writing, "flows out into the figure of the letters" (*Journals* 273, 256). Plath extracts and magnifies the elegy's potential aggression toward the dead, which canonical elegists convert into male bonding and professional competition or expend on nature, third parties, and themselves. Milton and Shelley, though they may scourge clerics and reviewers, honor the dead without reservation. Even Jonson, Dryden, and Swinburne, who betray competitive friction with the dead, contain aggression by casting it as homosocial rivalry. The modern elegists who most influenced Plath demonstrate that the dead can be not only revered but openly resisted in elegies: Yeats and Auden criticize the personal limitations of public figures and family members, Roethke re-creates his childhood irritation at his father's unthinking hurtfulness, Lowell satirically mocks the grandiose self-regard of parents and ancestors, and Sexton calmly defies and curses her reproachful mother.<sup>1</sup> But no previous elegist brands a dead parent a "danger," a "barnyard," a "barbarous" butcher, and, as Plath writes in her final assault, a "Fascist," a "devil," a "vampire," and a "bastard." Intensifying more than any of her elegiac forebears the mourner's aggression toward the dead, Plath shatters the old dictum *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*.

Oedipal antagonism might be expected in men's elegies for real or poetic fathers, but Plath's fierce resistance does not conform to the stereotypical gendering of aggression as male and cooperation as female. Her combative elegies complicate recent attempts to define the

"female elegy" as a "poem of connectedness," "attachment," "continuity," "closeness," and "identification" (Schenck 15, 18–19, 20; Stone 87). "Women poets," argues Celeste Schenck, "seem unwilling to render up their dead," whereas the "masculine elegy" enacts "separation" and "rupture" (15). Associating men's elegies with "accusation" and women's with "affiliation," Carole Stone similarly believes that it is the "refusal to give up the dead that characterizes female elegy" (84, 85, 90). This overly rigid distinction, which obscures the relational work in men's elegies and the dissociative impulse in women's, clearly founders on Plath's poetry of agonistic mourning. In elegies of explosive grief and rage that will her deliverance from the "barnacle dead," Plath helped to free women poets from the prostrate role assigned by literary and gender codes to the female mourner. An essentialist model of "female elegy" that overemphasizes "continuity" with precursors and with the dead risks blurring the historic consequences of Plath's feminist revolt and her generation's. Already in Bradstreet's poetry the "stress-marks of anger" may be perceptible (Rich, *On Lies* 22), but the originator of the American elegy clasps her dead father in eulogy instead of desecrating his image. Like many of her female successors, this daughter feels "By duty bound . . . / To celebrate the praises" of her father—a man "pious, just, and wise." Yet ever since Plath wrote her last elegies of violent separation and rupture, American women poets like Sexton, Rich, Wakoski, Kumin, Kizer, and Olds have been more willing to use the genre to exorcize, slough, divorce, defame, even annihilate the dead. Perhaps their elegiac aggression could be seen, from a perspective made available by Simmel and Freud, as strengthening ties with the dead, but strife-sealed bonds differ markedly from unambivalent "connectedness."

While all Plath's elegies are angry, her early ones turn rage inward, resulting in poems of bitter self-reproach, and only the later ones directly attack her father. Plath was well aware that her love for her father was mingled with sadomasochistic feelings. "He was an autocrat," she said of him; "I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead.

When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him" (Steiner 45). Just as Plath heightens the outwardly directed anger of the elegy, she also heightens its inward manifestation, pitilessly charging herself with having murdered her father. Self-destructive mourning has long played a role in the elegy. Emily Brontë, for example, remembers her "burning wish to hasten / Down to that tomb," and Tennyson recalls wishing that his "hold on life would break" (28.15). But elegists before Plath are not as aggressive and persistent as she in their acts of self-immolation: her elegies end in fantasies of breathing water, of a razor rusting in her throat, of her marrying first shadow and then the pallor of clouds, and of her being "finally through."

In the early elegies, Plath blames her father's death on her excessive love for him, articulating an incestuous desire unlike the decorous affection customary in the genre. But despite the "Electra complex" that she assigned to herself and that critics have persisted in citing, Plath's ambivalent descriptions of her father indicate that this love was always laced with hostility. Indeed, she sometimes uses the "Electra complex" to mute guilt over patricidal anger. After finishing "Electra on Azalea Path," Plath asks whether guilt is the basis of her "dreams of deformity and death. If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me? And how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life?" (*Journals* 301). Like such dreams, Plath's elegies depict her father as having suffered castration (a "strange injury"), gangrene or drowning ("face down in the sea"), a shattering blast ("more than a lightning-stroke"), mutilation ("one leg"), and deformity ("one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal"). These images are at once "guilty visions of him," her reenactments of the death she seems to have caused, and "punishment for me," self-flagellations for killing him.

While the concept of the Electra complex veils the hostility in Plath's elegies for her father, the concept of melancholia may help to clarify their sadomasochistic mourning. When Plath read Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," she

called it "[a]n almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse" (*Journals* 280).<sup>2</sup> Although Freud allows that ambivalence inheres in all love relationships and in all mourning, he argues that a disproportion of negative feelings results in "melancholic" or "pathological" mourning, characterized by "self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e., that he has willed it." The mourner's self-reproach is therefore secondary, deriving from the primary anger toward the deceased. In melancholia, feelings of "sadism and hate" for the dead person "have been turned round upon the subject's own self," so that the mourner takes revenge "by the circuitous path of self-punishment" (251).<sup>3</sup> Prohibitions against female anger in particular, one might add, would encourage this internalization of rage. Moreover, later analysts show that anger and guilt in mourning are not necessarily pathological (Klein; Lindemann 142; Bowlby 29–30). Modified by these and other revisions, Freud's ideas can alert the reader to the changing distributions of anger in Plath, from the self-torment of the early elegies to the later emergence of sadistic grief, from the initial masochism, persisting to haunt her last elegy, to the final destructive force, surfacing even in her first.

Together with such poets as Hardy, Owen, Sexton, and Lowell, Plath remakes the elegy for the twentieth century, helping to shift the genre's psychic work from consolatory mourning to the violent, contradictory, and protracted work of melancholia.<sup>4</sup> She rejects the tradition of redemptive mourning not only in men's elegies but also in women's, from Bradstreet and Behn to the great profusion of consolatory elegies by the "nightingale" poets.<sup>5</sup> Early modern women poets like Millay and Bogan had muted the generic paradigm of consolation, and still earlier poets like Elizabeth Boyd and Elizabeth Barrett Browning had strayed from it, but Plath contests it more vehemently and pervasively than her predecessors did. She dramatizes the kind of irresolvable bereavement that Sigourney condemns as "pagan" and "heathen" (15, 111), the kind of violent female grief that Jackson denounces as Demeter's "foul shame to mother-

hood.” Plath emphatically refuses (unlike Bradstreet) to bow before the dead patriarch or (unlike the nightingales) to veil furious grief as a secret sorrow or to “[p]ut on submissive strength to meet, not question death” (Hemans 359). At the same time, Plath defies the largely masculine canon of elegy, which typically magnifies the mechanisms of patriarchal inheritance and homosocial affiliation, relegating women to the roles of ineffectual muses, distracting nymphs, inadequate mothers, and figures of death—as in the elegies of Milton, Shelley, and Whitman. Reversing norms of female subjugation and masculine inheritance, she insists on her power as wrathful mourner instead of effacing it, defaces the name of the dead father instead of revering it.<sup>6</sup>

But in naming her early work, Plath at first perpetuates the name of the dead father. She considered entitling her initial collection of poems after her first elegy for her father, “Full Fathom Five,” before deciding to call the book after another elegy for him, “The Colossus.” Shakespeare’s phrase, she wrote in her journal, relates “to my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator” (*Journals* 223). Yet the presence of the dead father is not altogether benign even in Plath’s early work. Though her description of paternity as the “father-sea-god muse” might seem at this point to be entirely free of ambivalence (244) and though some critics believe that her negative feelings erupt only later (Butscher 238), “Full Fathom Five” already suggests the basis for Plath’s subsequent attacks on her dead father (*Poems* 92–93).

In the first elegy, the Neptune-like father may be divine in his timelessness and enormity, but he is also a menace. A commentator thinks that in this poem the daughter regards the father with “ceaselessly loving eyes” (Rosenblatt 70), but she says she “[c]annot look much” at him because he frightens her. Plath protects herself with a coldly formal tone, diction, and syntax, nearly freezing the poem’s momentum with clotted alliterations and impeded rhythms. Her glacial language is an apotropaic mimesis of the father, who is as “cold” as “ice-mountains // Of the north, to be steered clear / Of, not fathomed.”

The elegy’s impassive and stoic surface points the way to the opposite—the wildly heterogeneous and pugnacious discourse of “Daddy”: whether withdrawing behind a rhetorical shield or attacking with a verbal onslaught, Plath represents her dead father as a dangerous antagonist. The daughter can only “half-believe” the “rumors” of the father’s demise because he rises and falls with the tide, surfacing unpredictably. The psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan observes:

In pathological grief the psychodynamic process of the work of mourning is frozen. Indeed, the pathological mourner frequently uses the word “frozen” in describing his “typical” dream in which the struggle of keeping the dead person alive appears. The lost one is both killed and not killed, is both buried within the mourner, and not buried within the mourner. (216)

If the normative term “pathological” is left aside, this description of melancholic mourning usefully suggests that the daughter’s conflict between hatred and love keeps her father dead but alive, relinquished but yearned for, feared but adored.

Like his depth, age, and power, the father’s expanse is immeasurable, his hair a “dragnet” that might trap the unwary. The hair stretches out ominously, threatening to envelop his daughter: “Miles long // Extend the radial sheaves / Of your spread hair.” With hair like “sheaves,” “skeins,” and a “dragnet,” the dead father resembles an all-encompassing text, a vast system of signifiers. In death he has assumed the boundlessness of an absent presence, living only in traces and tokens that cannot be contained, virtually personifying patriarchy’s symbolic order. Because he holds within his web, “[k]notted, caught,” the secret story of his daughter’s “origins,” he retains absolute power over her, preventing her from turning fear into rebellion or from drawing strength from her occluded origins. The daughter struggles with a paternal discourse that is unresponsive and indecipherable, in contrast to the soothing voices and inspired texts that once granted elegists access to the dead.<sup>7</sup> “You defy questions,” she says, and she dares not read him because of his many

"dangers": a father of terrifying "obscurity," he is ultimately "[i]nscrutable." From the "[w]ait down," in particular, he is "[o]ne labyrinthine tangle." Hidden there are the twin secrets of her birth (by his seed) and of his death (or castration), but though she would unravel the mystery, she fears discovering that her birth led to his death. She averts her gaze, guiltily worried that she may be implicated in the obscure story of his wounding—a wounding that links this god to the gored or castrated deities of fertility myth and elegiac tradition. By the law of the talion, her castrative loss of sight would be compensation for his "strange injury."

The poem's final stanza sexualizes their relationship, suggesting that perhaps an incestuous bond has caused his death and "[e]xiled" her from his kingdom: "Your shelled bed I remember. / Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water." To live is death, and to die is also death. That is, to live in exile from her father is to mourn her loss perpetually, ever remembering the guilty love that may have caused the loss, ever breathing an air filled with murderous thoughts of her guilt—thoughts that enforce her subjugation. But to end her exile would also be to die—to kill herself, to surrender herself to a watery death, to reenact the terrible story that she fears he enfolds. The elegy ends in a paradoxical image of both fulfillment and self-punishment: to achieve her father's underwater bed would also be to drown herself. Ever desiring his phallic power but prohibited from attaining it, the bereft daughter amplifies the contradictions lived by women under patriarchy. Instead of ending the poem with an elegiac motif of compensatory inheritance or of the empowering recovery of origins, Plath extends the anti-consolatory strain of elegy, of which the most famous example is Shelley's suicidal counsel at the end of *Adonais*: "No more let Life divide what Death can join together." The daughter's only escape from grief is to embrace the incestuous but castrative desire that caused her grief, to kill herself into a complete union with her father—the latest in a long line of female suicides in Western literature. The dead father resembles not only glaciers but also "whirlpools," a kind of Scylla and Charybdis through which the

daughter cannot possibly navigate. Normative elegists transfer affection from the lost object to a symbolic substitute—an oedipal resolution that Peter Sacks compares to the "healthy" mourning of Apollo and Pan (5–8). But nearer classical analogues for Plath's dramatic surrogates might be such female mourners as Demeter, Niobe, and Antigone, whose melancholic grief is less susceptible to the compensatory substitutions of the symbolic order. Like her ancient predecessors but unlike most elegists from Bradstreet to Sigourney and from Milton to Tennyson, Plath refuses to submit her mourning to the redemptive law of symbolic exchange, ending her elegies in inconsolable despair.

It is in part guilt that obstructs recovery in Plath's first elegy for her father—an understated guilt that breaks into full song in "Electra on Azalea Path" (*Poems* 116–17). For twenty years, the daughter has slumbered in "innocence," but the poem relates her painful fall into experience, into a sense of responsibility for her father's death. The elegy maps onto Plath's later development the psychoanalytic narrative of a child's fall from the preoedipal to the oedipal, or from the imaginary to the symbolic—a fall occasioned by the father's "castrative" threat. Hibernating under her mother's protective embrace, "I had nothing to do with guilt or anything." But one day the name of the father intervenes: she wakes to read it on a crooked tombstone, cramped by other stones and by corroding plastic flowers. Plath savagely parodies the elegiac association of flowers with immortality and sympathy: though stiff and rotproof, the "red sage" hardly betokens immortality, since it has never lived and its dye drips; nor can the dripping of the red dye indicate nature's sympathy, since the sage is merely an "artificial," "plastic" flower. Earlier elegists from Spenser ("Astrophel") to Hemans ("To the Memory of the Dead") accept flowers as substitutes for the dead, but the sage offers no such consolation because it is an "ersatz" (a plastic duplicate) of an "ersatz" (a floral token of the deceased). For this melancholic daughter, no substitute for the father, including his name, flowers, or an elegy, can heal the wound of loss.

Shocked by the inglorious and unconsoling sight of her father's grave, the daughter shifts

through various explanations for his death. The shabbiness of the burial plot indicates that the mother might have caused the death, as in the story of *Agamemnon*, which the daughter cites. "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy," she reports, somewhat deflating her self-mythologization as Electra. Plath sets against the Electra myth a different story, which hints at the daughter's patricidal guilt, suggesting that the Electra myth may be a smokescreen. But the new story is ambiguous in its imputation of culpability: "The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry / A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing; / My mother dreamed you face down in the sea." Is it daughter or mother who is responsible for the father's death? If in dreams begins responsibility, then the mother's dream reveals her guilt. But the daughter also seems implicated, since her birth occasioned the omen and the death dream. This poem, like "Full Fathom Five," both articulates and obscures the relation between the birth and the death, indicating that the connection may be merely temporal (her birth was followed by signs of his death) yet worrying that it may be causal (her birth caused the death). This ambiguity persists even in the more forthright statement "I brought my love to bear, and then you died." The "then" may either designate mere sequence or signify that the love precipitated the death. The uncanny logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* plagues earlier melancholic elegists. Jonson, for example, confesses, "My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy," as if his affectionate feelings had caused his son's death; to "like too much," he implies, is to risk killing. Because patriarchal power often shifts guilt from man to woman, father to daughter, a female elegist might be even more prone to this frightful thought than a male would. Plath's speaker tries to override it by believing that her father died of a natural cause—gangrene, according to her mother. But the abrupt shift to a surreal image of self-destruction betrays the failure of this consoling story: "I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting in my throat." Suddenly, she rather than her father is killed. Having attempted to punish herself for her illicit and destructive love, the daughter survives as the ghost of her former self. Even

though under patriarchy it is the father, not the daughter, who typically instigates incest, the daughter is made to bear the guilt: "It was my love that did us both to death."

"The Colossus" repeats the analogy with Electra, but this time the daughter resembles her classical counterpart even less (*Poems* 129–30). Now she not only loves and fears her father but reproaches and mocks him. Once again her guilt over having killed him develops into a fantasy of self-punishment, but before diverting the rage inward, she begins the poem in scornful anger. Convincingly read by several critics as an allegory of Plath's confrontation with patriarchal tradition (Bundtzen 186–88; Annas 33; Axelrod 45–51) the poem should also be seen as an allegory of her ambivalent mourning for a particular patriarch—the man who embodied that tradition in her childhood. Plath portrays her mourning of her father as the frustrated, even impossible, task of reconstituting a grandiose but shattered colossus: "I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed." If traditional elegies represent therapeutic mourning, Plath's elegy represents its breakdown. According to Melanie Klein, mourners must go through "the pain of re-establishing and reintegrating" their childhood images of their parents:

In normal mourning the individual reintjects and reinstates . . . his loved parents who are felt to be his "good" inner objects. His inner world, the one which he has built up from his earliest days onwards, in his phantasy was destroyed when the actual loss occurred. The rebuilding of this inner world characterizes the successful work of mourning. (354, 363)

The daughter tries to rebuild the image of her dead father, but he stubbornly remains a vast incoherence. As a boundless confusion, his disorderly patriarchal order sets the boundaries of her world: his fragments "are littered // In their old anarchy to the horizon-line." The father's dispersal is the basis of his power over his daughter, condemning her to the endless, fruitless work of melancholia. Were the father to speak coherently, the daughter might be able to

reject or refute his utterances; instead, she can only mock them as "barnyard" noises—"Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles." Nor can she learn from the cacophonous sounds spewing from his lips; for thirty years she has tried to make sense of his utterances, but, she sarcastically concludes, "I am none the wiser." As in "Full Fathom Five," she has "labored" to open symbolic lines of both aural and visual communication with the dead man, but the enveloping earth interrupts her access to him: she can neither "dredge the silt" from his throat nor "clear / The bald, white tumuli" of his eyes. In the fragmentation of the colossus, Plath figures her inability to totalize scattered memories and contradictory feelings—to re-member and thus forget them.

Torn between yearning for communication and mocking the father's responses, between solicitous love and dismissive aggression, the daughter cannot bring her mourning to completion. "When hatred of the lost loved object . . . gets the upper hand in the mourner," Klein writes, "this not only turns the loved lost person into a persecutor, but shakes the mourner's belief in his good inner objects as well. The shaken belief in the good objects disturbs most painfully the process of idealization," which alone can save the ego from anxieties that it will destroy itself and the loved dead person through its sadism (355). Earlier, Plath could represent her father as a sea-god or ancient hero in accordance with traditional elegiac apotheosis, but now she ridicules him for conceiving of himself as "an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other." The daughter's rage subverts her affectionate efforts at elevating and totalizing the dead man, for it breaks apart the ideal imago that she labors to reconstruct. Portraying herself as a mere ant that crawls over the father's immensity, she disguises the destructive power that she worries she may have unleashed on him.

As the poem unfolds, the daughter tames the sarcastic anger of its beginning, fearful of aligning herself with the blast that, "more than a lightning-stroke," reduced her father to "ruin." Disguising her hatred as love, she begins to ennoble him again as the hero of the *Oresteia*. He even becomes a kind of Roman Forum. Guilty over her anger, she turns increasingly

submissive and self-punishing (Bundtzen 188). This countermovement is evident in the poem's representation of the daughter as engulfed by the ruins of the father. In Klein's picture of mourning, the lost object is imaginatively reintegrated and reinstated within the mourner. Unable to unify or introject her dead father, the daughter in Plath's poem is instead enveloped by his remains. Encompassed by fragments that bound her vision, the daughter even squats in the father's ear. Because she fails to internalize him, he internalizes her. The law and language of the father rule over her hopes for renewal and over her picture of the outer world: "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue." The sun, a primary elegiac trope of the happy rejuvenation of the dead, figures instead the cruel enslavement of the daughter by her undying but unliving father. By the end of the poem, she has quashed her hope for any departure from his half-dead world: she is "married to shadow," no longer listening for some hero to liberate her from subjection. Initially combative, the daughter now directs her rage wholly inward, punishing herself for having wanted to defy or escape her father. Trapped within his ruins, she is condemned to a world defined by his catastrophic death: she must ever lament a father she detests too much to allow him a rebirth, ever chastise herself for her ambivalence toward the dead man. Even so, this apparent psychological failure is once again a literary triumph—Plath's third elegy that, while seeming to submit to the patriarch, contravenes elegiac norms of compensatory substitution and restoration.<sup>8</sup> With this anticonsolatory elegy, Plath continues to help fashion for the genre a new poetics of melancholia.

Whereas "The Colossus" signifies melancholia primarily by the broken statue, Plath's next elegy for her father, "Little Fugue," represents melancholia in the discontinuities of the poem's formal surface (*Poems* 187–89). The shards that the daughter could not put back together are now the broken syntactic units in which she speaks. The father's symbolic order still encompasses and frustrates her. Unable to master or integrate her psychic world, the daughter shifts abruptly among recurrent images and non sequiturs. The musical term of the title also alludes, as commen-

tators agree, to the temporary amnesia that is called a fugue, but the daughter's amnesia is part of a broader psychological condition of unsuccessful mourning.<sup>9</sup> Impeded from any therapeutic advance, she numbly recycles a small set of images. Mourning is blocked partly because the daughter cannot connect with the father symbolically by either sight or sound—a blockage figured in the poem's variations on the blankness of white and black, “[b]lack yew, white cloud.” In “The Colossus,” the daughter can neither “dredge” his cavernous throat nor “clear” his “white” eyes. In “Little Fugue,” she is again cut off from aural and visual communication, as the elegy suggests by its confusion of the senses:

The yew's black fingers wag;  
Cold clouds go over.  
So the deaf and dumb  
Signal the blind, and are ignored.

Whereas the dead can often be seen, heard, and spoken to in traditional elegies, this elegy opens with an oblique representation of the deafness, dumbness, and blindness of both mourner and mourned. Despite assiduous efforts by the daughter at breaking through the barrier of death, she and the father are doomed to be oblivious of each other. Because the mourner cannot resign herself to the father's inaccessibility, her senses unsuccessfully reach out for response. Her melancholia keeps him alive even in his deadness. “I see your voice,” she says, the senses misjoining sight and sound, and she describes the voice in terms that are more visual than aural: it is a “dark funnel,” “[b]lack and leafy,” “A yew hedge of orders, / Gothic and barbarous, pure German.” Figured as black, this so-called voice resembles writing, a voice transcribed into black marks that might seem leafy, particularly in German Gothic type. Unlike the letters that join Tennyson to his friend or the “[d]ark yew” that answers the poet's touch (39, 95), this “yew hedge” of print cannot possibly yield an exchange between father and daughter. The poem's pattern of black and white represents in part the symbolic order that entraps the daughter. Her father's voice is paradoxically dumb yet loud, its “big noises” like a “grosse

Fuge,” its clamor like the cries of “[d]ead men.” Because the father seems alive but dead, accessible but inaccessible, the lines of communication misconnect. The blind pianist figures a crisscrossing not only of sight and hearing but of the other three senses as well: “He felt for his food. / His fingers had the noses of weasels.” Touch (“felt,” “fingers”) intersects with both taste (“food”) and smell (“noses”). The melancholic daughter looks uncontrollably at the pianist, even though neither he nor the dead father whom he represents can return her gaze.

But the daughter's desire to reach her father conflicts with her terror at the possibility of breaking through. The daughter's psychic fugue, Marjorie Perloff argues, is her inability to remember anything except her father (132), while others claim that it is her inability to remember him. Perhaps both views are right, for the daughter remembers yet represses him, wants to see and hear yet silence and block him. She wants, for example, to restore his voice, but once she begins to do so, she must defend herself against its unspoken accusations: “Dead men cry from it. / I am guilty of nothing.” In “Electra on Azalea Path,” the daughter also convinces herself that she “had nothing to do with guilt or anything,” but her denials break down by the end of the poem. Having protested her innocence in “Little Fugue,” the speaker half denies, half confesses guilt in her image of a “tortured” Christ, which suddenly gives way to images of a bloody, violent father. Hints of self-accusation turn round into accusations, reversing the pattern of “The Colossus,” which moved from indictment to self-punishment. She is not guilty of murder, the logic of the poem suggests; rather, he is the cruel aggressor. She remembers him “[l]opping the sausages,” which are “[r]ed, mottled, like cut necks.” This butchery is linked to the mutilation not only of his body (leaving him “one leg”) but also of her mind (making her “lame in the memory”). His death left a “[g]reat silence,” but this quiet is imposed partly by the daughter as a defensive reaction to his violent disruption of her life. She responds to the severance of his life, figured as the redness that invades her mind, by displacing it with total blankness. The disturbing recollection of his

death leads her to impose this blankness once again: "Now similar clouds / Are spreading their vacuous sheets." The daughter uses the father's enforced black-and-white pattern to force pattern on her loss—to repress his abrupt death and block his horribly colorful assault on her world. The orderly binary system of black and white shuts out red and other jarring colors: "a blue eye, / A briefcase of tangerines." Her endurance depends on her stifling such eruptions of the past:

I survive the while,  
Arranging my morning.  
These are my fingers, this my baby.  
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.

"Morning," "hands," and a "new-borne babe" once afforded consolatory hope near the end of elegies,<sup>10</sup> but here none of these images is so vivid as the brutal memory it squelches, nor can dreary skies or a bridal shroud hold out much promise. Deictic terms ("these," "this"), while assuring the daughter of a world here and now, suggest her difficulty in fastening her attention on the present. She arranges her morning by arranging her mourning; that is, she maintains a sense of order in the present by organizing her grief in a stark black-white pattern, in simple declarative statements, and through energetic repression of the unnerving past.

To answer the dead father decisively—this is the driving impulse of Plath's last elegy for her father. "Daddy" brings to a culmination the imagery and psychology of her elegiac poems (*Poems* 222–24). The opening recapitulates the contrasts of black and white in "Little Fugue," except that the father, more demonic than ever, is now explicitly associated with "black" and the once powerless daughter with "white." The father is again a "[c]olossus" ("Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue"), but now the daughter needs to be "stuck . . . together with glue" and the father split open with a stake. Like the daughter in "Electra on Azalea Path," this speaker has attempted suicide to rejoin her father, only she directs her rage not at herself but at him. Like the sea-god in "Full Fathom Five," this father has his head in the ocean, but as a mortal creature he put his "foot" and "root" in

the Polish earth. Tumbling from one order of being to the next, the paternal sea-god of "Full Fathom Five" dwindles in "Electra on Azalea Path" to a mortal hero, then in "The Colossus" to someone who merely considers himself an oracle, then in "Little Fugue" to a butcher of sausages, finally in Plath's last elegy to "a devil," "[n]ot God." Despite his earlier fearfulness, the mourned father once approximated Klein's "good object," but he now turns into the "bad object"—the inner image of the lost parent that embodies aggressive and paranoid fantasies.

This shift in psychological extremes coincides with a shift in rhetorical extremes. The tonal and discursive monotony of "Full Fathom Five" gave way to the abrupt self-reversals of the increasingly ambivalent "Electra on Azalea Path" and "The Colossus," poems that juxtapose devotion with mockery, the colloquial ("Lysol") with the archaic ("acanthine hair"); these poems gave way in turn to the abandonment of syntactic cohesion in the numb drift of "Little Fugue." "Daddy" marks the last stage in this devolution of discursive integrity: the poem hops from nursery rhyme to ritual exorcism, from enraged curse to adoring supplication, from English to German. Plath directs the violence of melancholia at discourse itself, turning against the traditional elegiac use of the sign as restorer of the dead. Melancholic mourners resist language, in Julia Kristeva's view, because they are unwilling to accept substitutes for what they lost—and the original loss is the child's loss of the mother on entering into the father's symbolic order (3–68). Plath hints at this primordial grief, using Mother Goose rhyme and childlike repetition to evoke the unresolved oedipal position of the child. In a remarkable anticipation of French theories of the feminine, she portrays the symbolic "language" of the father as alien and "obscene," a disfiguring discourse that was, nevertheless, the only vehicle through which she could constitute her identity: her tongue was "stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak." The language of the father allowed her to enunciate herself, yet it threatened not only to wound but even to annihilate her; it resembled a train, "Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." Raging against the mono-

lithic language of the father, Plath would define herself in a mercurial discourse, restlessly squirming beneath the opacity and weight of the paternal signifier, “a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through.” And yet her heterogeneous counterdiscourse depends on the signifier it rejects, on the father it vilifies.

“Daddy” embodies Plath’s ambivalent resistance toward and dependence on the discourse of her father. She combats his fascistic and demonic violence, but her elegy reproduces it in exaggerating his evil and destroying his image. For Plath, patriarchal violence found its ultimate expression in the Nazi death camps, which were the triumph of the victimization from which she suffers. Her father has the same “bright blue” eye as he has in “Little Fugue,” and he terrifies her as he does throughout her elegies: “I have always been scared of *you*.” But instead of cowering under his massive image, she now fights back. As in her earlier elegies, she announces her guilt for having murdered her father: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time.” The deaths in these two incongruous lines are of different orders: her father died literally before she imaginatively killed him. She murdered him in childhood fantasy (“I probably wished many times that he were dead” and afterward “imagined that I had killed him”), and now she must murder him again in this poem. In “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” it is her love that kills her father—an incestuous love that has to be punished. Even though Plath’s radio comments link “Daddy” to the “Electra complex,” his death in this poem is the result less of love than of her need to defend herself from annihilation (*Poems* 293). Having been victimized by his violence, she now batters him with an equal and opposite aggression. The poem itself makes clear the mirror relation between his and her violence: he “[b]it my pretty red heart in two,” and so now she splits open his “fat black heart” with a stake. Much as he seemed to deport her in the Nazi boxcar of his language, she now tries to expel him by her verbal blast. He threatened her by assuming massive proportions, and now she, unlike the tiny “ant in mourning” of “The Colossus,” inflates herself by commanding a rheto-

ric that bullies and bellows; her denunciations, like villagers in a tribal rite, “are dancing and stamping on you.” By dying, he abruptly severed the lines of communication between them, and now she, instead of seeking to “get back” to him, tears the telephone “off at the root.”

Plath uses the frequently patriarchal discourse of the elegy to banish and kill the patriarch. Although she follows such modern elegists as Yeats, Roethke, Sexton, and Lowell in departing from the eulogistic strain of the elegy, she exceeds their defiance by representing her elegy as an act of murder. Even so, Plath calls attention to her demonization of the dead man, showing it to be a myth necessary for her liberation from him. Looking at a picture of her father teaching a class, she self-consciously transforms the professor into “a devil.” She converts his “cleft” chin into a trope for the devil’s cloven foot. In addition to the elegiac glorification of the dead, Plath parodies a number of other motifs central to the genre, including compensatory substitution. Having resisted libidinal displacement onto flowers, the sun, or a heavenly soul in her earlier elegies, Plath now fiercely mocks her desire to fashion a surrogate for her dead father. “I made a model of you,” she admits, marrying “[a] man in black with a Meinkampf look.” Instead of creating yet another substitute, her elegy enacts the destruction of both the original and the copy: “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two.” Wrecking father and husband-substitute, Plath also demolishes the psychological backbone of the traditional elegy. After preferring self-punishment to consolation in her earlier elegies, she now chooses sadistic vengeance over libidinal redirection or solace. To free herself of substitutive connection with the dead man, she tears out the telephone line, melancholically rejecting any simulacrum of “voices” from the grave.

The end of “Daddy” resumes but revises another traditional elegiac device—the troop or chorus of mourners. Milton and Shelley amplify their laments by representing them as group acts; Plath unites with a group, but the chorus of mourners join her in a rite not of love but of vengeance: the villagers “are dancing and stamping on you.” Milton and Shelley parallel their laments with mourning rites for such fertility

gods as Adonis and Orpheus; Plath also alludes to primitive ritual, but her tribe enacts death without hoping for resurrection. She simulates the rhythms of a destructive dance in the mounting frenzy of her ending: the final stanza begins slowly, then shifts to three anapestic lines that build in speed until slamming into the abrupt syntax and inverted rhythms of the final line: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." The ritual exorcism has succeeded, as Plath, resuming the typical work of the elegiac coda, reflects on the accomplishment of her elegy: in writing the poem, she has finally driven a stake "through" her father's heart—the heart being an ancient elegiac synecdoche for the dead. She has spilled his blood to free herself from his vampirelike appetite for her blood. Attacking him with the violence she once directed at herself, she inverts the restorative work typical of elegy—a reversal that is in part the psychological consequence of her earlier failures at restoration. "I used to pray to recover you," she recalls, but her anger subverted reconstructive idealization. The father of "The Colossus" and "Little Fugue" could not be totalized or internalized, so in "Daddy" the daughter tries expelling what she has been unable to ingest, pulverizing what she has been unable to put together. Earlier, she even "tried to die / And get back, back, back to you," much as in "Full Fathom Five" she wants to "breathe water" and reunite with him. Now she would rather get back *at* him than get back *to* him, rather renounce him than renew him. With spectacular energy, Plath shatters the taboo against female anger—a taboo that had once forced her to take vengeance on her father by the circuitous path of attacking herself.

But the violence the daughter unleashes to liberate herself risks, paradoxically, destroying her. "I'm finally through" is a claim that she emphatically repeats at the end of the poem, a proud declaration of her independence; but the pronouncement also suggests its opposite—that in being through his heart, through with him, through with her vitriolic utterance, she is herself through, finished, at the end of her poem and of her life. Once more the sadism and masochism of melancholia seem inextricable. From "Full

Fathom Five" to "Daddy," each of Plath's elegies punishes the mourner less and the father more than does its predecessor; but even the outward anger of her final elegy obliquely modulates into an image of self-destruction. Her vehement bid for self-assertion kills off both her father and herself, indicating that her negative self-definition depends on the father whom it negates, that the obliteration of his image necessitates her own demise. This psychorhetorical interdependence between father and daughter may suggest "connectedness," but the link is a bleak version of the relational identity that Schenck and Stone attribute to women's elegies. Trapped long in lamentation, Plath triumphs over grief but risks destroying the grounds of her melancholic life and work. Moreover, in spite of her effort to redirect rage outward, much of the elegy betrays a fierce self-contempt. Breathing fire, she mocks her earlier willingness to live submissively in his tomblike "shoe," to see his gargantuan image as "a bag full of God" rather than as garbage or worse, to repeat futile prayers for his recovery, to search for his "common" and unrecognizable birthplace, to speak his obscene and menacing language, to play the victimized Jew or Gypsy of his oppression, to be yet another woman who "adores a Fascist," to submit her heart to his destruction, to try even suicide that she might recover his dull bones, and, in her last foolish act, to make and marry a model of him. This chronicle of her degrading self-deceptions ends only when she describes her present efforts at resolute self-assertion: cutting the phone line, killing both original and surrogate, and orchestrating the ritual dance of the father's destruction.

A primary rhetorical figure for Plath's ambivalence toward her father is apostrophe. The trope summons up the dead man, fictively endowing him with the ability to hear, yet it animates him in order to kill him. An ancient convention of elegy, apostrophe allows mourners to convert their relations to the dead from "I-it" to "I-thou." The figure has this function in Plath's earlier elegies, all of them apostrophic: in each of the first three elegies, "you" and "your" appear at least a dozen times, always introduced in the first line, most often respect-

fully. But increasingly Plath remakes the trope, using it in the first half of "The Colossus" to display contempt for the "barnyard" incoherence of her father's voice and introducing the figure belatedly in "Little Fugue" after his guilt-inducing voice begins assaulting her (earlier there is a pun on *yew*). In these instances, apostrophe counteracts the father's aggressive voice, for, as a "*figure of voicing*," the trope empowers her writing with the semblance of a speech act (Culler 40). Apostrophe is essential to the fiction of a combative voice in "Daddy," where the trope becomes even more prominent: "you" and "your" appear more than thirty times, with "you" often serving as an emphatic end rhyme (in earlier poems, the pronoun takes the initial and medial positions in lines). But the insistent apostrophe strengthens the illusion not only of a speaking daughter but also of a listening dead man. To empower herself, Plath must empower her opponent; the repeated *you* animates each of two competing subject positions. Calling "Daddy" "a love poem," A. Alvarez links the phoneme "oo" to a "cooing tenderness" (66), and the syllable does suggest intimate contact with the dead man; but Plath turns the sound into an angry taunt, and by the end of the poem the repetitions become undeniably fierce and vengeful ("villagers never liked you . . . stamping on you . . . knew it was you . . . you bastard, I'm through").<sup>11</sup> Thus, apostrophe is yet another figure for Plath's melancholic ambivalence, for her desire to revive yet revile the dead man, to reach yet relinquish him. Unlike the earlier elegies, this poem makes the word *you* the object of many verbs and prepositions, grammatically demoting the father from sovereign agent to passive target ("kill you . . . recover you . . . to you . . . of you . . . like you . . . of you . . . buried you . . . to you . . . of you . . . liked you . . . on you").

Apostrophe generates the elegy's rhetorical whirligig, resuscitating the dead man only to necessitate the further enlivening of his daughter, who in turn wills his destruction. The figure that summons him from the grave risks depriving her of life, and so she uses the trope to reassert ever more vigorously her own power. Apostrophe

usually serves to connect the living with the dead, but much as Plath revises other elegiac tropes suitable for postmortem exchange, she uses this one to hammer her dead father into oblivion. The father's language had engendered yet endangered her utterance and existence; now she adopts the very "barbarous" and vengeful voice that had impeded her speech. To escape the father's threat, her voice must reincarnate his; to annihilate him, she must annihilate herself: she assumes his power in order to obliterate his identity but thereby obliterates her own.<sup>12</sup> Even so, this drama of self-destructive destruction does not hold at the level of literary genealogy; for however much Plath reincarnates her elegiac inheritance even as she wrecks and ravages it, she stunningly redefines the potential of the genre, creating an elegy more combative and melancholic than any work in the tradition. Plath's rhetorical violence may kill off the fictive Plath in the poem and may even eerily anticipate the poet's suicide, but it endows Plath the elegist with literary immortality.

Plath was, of course, not the only poet helping to reinvigorate the American family elegy during the late 1950s and early 1960s. At a time when many Americans and Britons felt, according to the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, that mourning should be disciplined and silenced, "indulged, if at all, in private, as furtively as if it were an analogue of masturbation" (128), Lowell, Sexton, and Ginsberg were, like Plath, using the parental elegy to articulate publicly an ever more intense and ambivalent grief. Lowell mocks his mother's pretensions, describing the casket he brought her as "like Napoleon's at the *Invalides*" (77), and chronicles his father's pathetic decline from naval officer to soap salesman; Sexton sneers at her father's "alcoholic tendency" and her mother's Christian "clutter of worship" (*Poems* 51, 43); and Ginsberg remembers feeling "revolted a little" by his mother's scars, stitches, and orifices (24). But even amid this irreverent and outspoken company, the aggression of Plath's last elegies is singular. Indeed, her "torrent . . . / of agony and wrath" so impressed Berryman (191) that he, although previously

mourning his father in ironic elegies indebted to Lowell, adopted her violent elegiac mode for his climactic, penultimate poem in *The Dream Songs*. Getting back at and back to his father, he wields an "ax" that functions enough like Plath's stake to suggest that, in a neat reversal of patriarchal inheritance, the poetic son is now borrowing "phallic" authority from a literary foremother (406).

Moreover, Plath broke taboos not only on desecrating and openly mourning the dead but also on female expressions of rage, thereby setting a precedent of special importance for women poets. The daughter's elegy for the father became, with her help, one of the subgenres that enabled women writers to voice antipatriarchal anger in poetry—anger initially focused on the familial embodiment of masculine authority. Writing about Plath and Wakoski, Rich argues that "[u]ntil recently this female anger and this furious awareness of the Man's power over her were not available materials to the female poet" (*On Lies* 36). Rich herself, who later explored her lingering rage toward her father in prose, began to articulate such feelings in poetry under the sway of Plath's elegies. Less than two years after Plath wrote "Daddy," Rich composed her premortem elegy, "After Dark." Despite many differences between the poems, the mourning daughter in each confesses that she has wanted her father to die, protests that he has eaten her heart, depicts him as physically impeding her utterances, remembers trying to join him in the ground, meditates on a photographic image, and represents him as an insistent, repetitive, autocratic voice. In beginning to sound her anger in this elegy, Rich affirms as a valid affect what she had been taught in childhood was a "dark, wicked blotch" to be suppressed (*Of Woman Born* 46). In her later prose poem *Sources*, Rich's address to her dead father still echoes Plath's apostrophic "Daddy": "For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inextricable from your love. For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you" (15). Plath's example has been fundamental for other women poets, who have used elegies for fathers to vent continuing anger, to finger childhood wounds, and

to scrutinize paternal power in its absence. In father poems of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kumin represents her dead parent in a nightmare vision of enormous, disconnected body parts, and Wakoski mythologizes her vanished "Father, / Father, / Father" as absent, militaristic autocrat. Sexton, whose work Plath echoes in "Daddy" (Cam), admitted in 1968 that Plath's incomparable "hate poem" had "influenced" her in turn: Sexton had "never dared to write" such a poem and had "always been afraid . . . to express anger" (Sexton, "Art" 13). In her late elegies for "'Daddy!' 'Daddy!'" Sexton even brands the dead man an incestuous demon: "I am divorcing daddy—Dybbuk! Dybbuk! / I have been doing it daily all my life" (*Poems* 543, 545). Today, Plath's work continues to reverberate through elegies by women. While claiming never to have "written against the dead," Olds nevertheless says of her grandfather, "Let this one be dead" ("Of All the Dead"), and she details in an entire volume of poems the death of a father she not only "loved" but also "hated" and even "killed" (*The Father* 71, 60). Like Plath, these undutiful daughters renounce the submissive mourning commended by gender codes, mortuary custom, and elegiac tradition—a renunciation basic to their poetic careers and their renewal of the elegiac genre.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For valuable discussions of Plath's debt to these poets, though not of the generic debt specified here, see Guttenberg; Gilbert; and Cullingford—all on Yeats—and see Axelrod on Lowell and Roethke (62–70); Cam on Sexton; and Plath herself on Auden, Lowell, and Sexton (Interview 170, 167–68).

<sup>2</sup>As Axelrod remarks, Plath "[a]stonishingly" goes on to apply the essay's insights to her mother rather than to her father; see his discussion of Freud's essay and Plath (26–27).

<sup>3</sup>Schwartz and Bollas aptly say of Plath, "By focusing murderousness on herself rather than on the father who left her, she could have partially denied the magical idea that her bad feelings toward him caused his death" (186). For helpful literary discussions of female anger, see Gilbert and Gubar 85–89; Marcus 122–54; Ostriker 122–63; and Bennett 242–67.

<sup>4</sup>For descriptions of the traditional elegy in relation to consolatory mourning, see Sacks 1–37 and Pigman 6–9.

<sup>5</sup>In contrast, see Schenck's argument that "refusal of consolation" characterizes women's elegies (24) and Stone's assertion that "women in the past have been excluded . . . from the writing of elegy" (85). On the "nightingale" poets and their elegies, see Walker 23.

<sup>6</sup>For analysis of traditional elegy in terms of oedipal inheritance, see Sacks 32, 36–37; Schenck 13–16.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Hemans's "O Ye Voices Gone" (255) and Tennyson 95.

<sup>8</sup>See Axelrod's analogous distinction (50–51).

<sup>9</sup>For insightful readings of the poem informed by psychoanalytic concepts (fugue, castration, the *lex talionis*, etc.), see Kroll 110–14, Bundtzen 186–92, Holbrook 160, and Rose 130–33. Perloff astutely analyzes the poem's language and black-and-white pattern (130–34).

<sup>10</sup>See Milton; Tennyson 124.23; Sigourney's "The Lost Sister" (59); and Spencer.

<sup>11</sup>In contrast, Wagner-Martin terms the poem "a nearly reasonable hate-chant" (219). Axelrod places the work in the generic context of "poems about parents" or "family poems" (59). My reading draws on de Man's discussion of the dangerous symmetries implicit in apostrophe.

<sup>12</sup>At a more general level, Schwartz and Bollas note this psychodynamic process: "Plath's response to her father's death was to become like her father. . . . Her aggression, in its verbal and phallic form, is inseparable from the fantasized aggression of the father" (187). Still, it could be argued that Plath's aggressivity differs from his in being the violence of resistance rather than of oppression.

<sup>13</sup>For generous help in revising this essay, I thank Susan Fraiman, Diane Freedman, Paul Mariani, Caroline Rody, and Herbert Tucker.

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