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Performing History: Artistic Responses to Tragic Events

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ABSTRACT

Stories are powerful because they break the repetitive, circular movements of life. Through both creation and destruction, imagination, and evoking reality, new movements can be created. Through the performativity that exists in David Albahari and Sylvia Plath's Holocaust art, *Götz and Meyer* and "Daddy," authors, and by extension, enactors find a balance between destruction and creation, imagination and evoking reality. This allows both to use the creative process to come to a greater understanding of the human condition within the context of the Holocaust and break the repetitive circular movement of patriarchal violence.

The findings from this paper will be used as guideposts in the creation of the performative aspect of my honor's thesis.

KEYWORDS

"Life is built on repetitions, and its movement, which resembles a straight line, actually goes round in circles" (Albahari 164). Stories are powerful because they break the repetitive, circular movements of life. Through both creation and destruction, using imagination and evoking reality, new movements can be created. The act of transforming an historical event into art is simultaneously creative and destructive. Creative in that it immerses the witnesses of the art into the event and offers the possibility for a transformational experience. Destructive, in that it eliminates the safe distance that people tend to take when thinking and reflecting on tragic events. A balance between creation and destruction is essential to transforming an historical event into art. Without creativity, the work would be purely historical documentation and without destruction it would be merely an aesthetic experience. Ultimately, the greatest transformations are achieved when both imagination and reality are present. Reality grounds the story within historical truth, while imagination frees the artist and witness from the "bondage of the past" (De Pres) and allows a space for new "cultural and cognitive mechanisms" (Boswell) to be formed. Two artist who are successful in transforming an historical event into art are David Albahari and Sylvia Plath. Through the performativity that exists in their Holocaust art, *Götz and Meyer* and "Daddy," they find a balance between destruction and creation, imagination and evoking reality. This allows them to use the creative process to come to a greater understanding of the human condition within the context of the Holocaust and break the repetitive circular movement of patriarchal violence.

The historical event that has incited the most debate in the West over the ethics of transforming a real-world event into art is the Holocaust. The philosopher Gillian Rose demands "Holocaust piety"– a mode of artistic engagement which argues for the ineffability of the Holocaust. Matthew Boswell in his book, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and*

Film, instead argues for Holocaust "impiety," in other words, "works that reject redemptory interpretations of genocide and the claims of historical ineffability... [they] deliberately engineer a sense of crisis in readers, viewers or listeners by attacking the cognitive and cultural mechanisms that keep our understanding of the Holocaust at a safe distance from our own understanding" (3). Hence, the works' shared objective is to provide an opportunity for transformation. By "engineer[ing] a sense of crisis in readers, viewers, or listeners," they eliminate the barrier that acts as a safe distance that people tend to take when thinking and reflecting on the Holocaust. In his 1951 essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society," Theodor Adorno wrote, "There can be no poetry after Auschwitz" (34). However, without poetry, there is no Auschwitz. Meaning, Auschwitz can continue to exist in relation to historical fact - - it was comprised of three camps, between 1.1 and 1.5 million people were killed there etc. - - but the *reality* of Auschwitz, the remembered experiences of those imprisoned there, will cease to exist without poetry, without stories being shared. By transforming an event in context of the historical facts, the artist mediates the sacredness of the tragedy while highlighting the stories of those who suffered and survived the violence of patriarchal power.

One work of art that transforms events of the Holocaust using a balance between creativity and destruction, imagination and evoking reality is David Albahari's *Götz and Meyer*. This balance in *Götz and Meyer* relates to the shock that is achieved through the use of performative language. A distinctive characteristic of Albahari's *Götz and Meyer* is that it is "composed of a single, shatterproof paragraph." Austrian theater critic Hermann Beil has called this style Rollenprosa (rolling prose), in that, "the ideas come in waves of unceasing waves, battering our shores with an elemental, seemingly inexhaustible, power" (Cohen). The power of language is identified in the novel when Adam, upon first seeing the gray truck, comes to the

realization, "Worlds were created by language, and that it was enough to alter the meaning of several words in order to change the existing world into a new one" (146). Through rolling prose, Albahari creates a space in which the readers become actors in the world that is created on the page. This creation of a world through language happens most distinctly when the narrator creates an immersive theatrical event for his students by transforming their school bus into the truck that Götz and Meyer drove from the Belgrade Fairgrounds camp: "At first it was pleasant, like some secret bond with the outside world, and then more and more repellant, but sweetish, followed by nausea, a powerful headache, choking, hoarse screams, although there were those who lowered their heads and fell asleep" (148). The language, and more specifically, the various lengths of prose between commas, mimic the fumes slowly pouring into the truck. When the exhaust pipe is first put into the back of the truck it is undetectable, "at first it was pleasant, like some secret bond with the outside world." This first section of the sentence uses poetic language, a simile, to illustrate the moment the fumes begin to enter the truck and the passenger's naivety with regard to its deadly power. The repetition of "more" is used to represent the continuous flow of the fumes. The choppiness of the list of symptoms, "nausea, a powerful headache, choking, hoarse screams" shows the struggle the passengers experience from a lack of oxygen. The final section of the sentence, "although there were those who lowered their heads and fell asleep" is an image of the body without struggle, in death. The narrator's use of language creates such a realistic world that the students become fully immersed in Adam's journey and are so affected mentally that sensations become manifested physically: "Most of them were straining to breathe, one girl had clutched her throat, someone's hand struggled feebly toward the window and then slid helplessly back, one boy covered his eyes with his hands, two girls had their arms round each other, their heads on one another's shoulders, I saw some lips moving, but except for

the driver's soft whistling, I heard no sounds" (149). The danger of writing using Holocaust piety is that there will be "no sounds" only "lips moving" repeating historic facts. Terrence De Pres, in his essay "Holocaust Laughter," argues that, by affirming historical authority and guarding historical truth, Holocaust scholars, "place [themselves] in bondage to the past" (279). By affirming historical authority, the stories of those who have survived will be silenced and the repetitive circular movement of patriarchal violence will continue. The repetitive circular movement is broken in *Götz and Meyer* because of the shock the students and the reader/viewer feel that is created through the immersive theatrical experience of the field trip. They become souls that do not, "try to forget," (160) but remember and are transformed because of the personal stories rather than historic facts that have been shared.

In the creation of art, specifically Holocaust art, the artist must keep in mind the balance between imagination and evoking reality through historical facts. The narrator explains that the field trip is going to be about, "the difference between the tangible world and art… but also about the similarity an instant of reality and a figment of imagination" (127). In his explanation to the students, the narrator recognizes that reality is constructed just as imagination is; reality becomes a construction of stories both factual (dates, locations, names) and personal. Although the narrator originally attempts to separate experience as reality and art as imagination, the narrator's art, the field trip, is a combination of both historical experience or reality and imagination. By physically bringing the students to the Fairgrounds camp (evoking reality through historical truths), and describing Adam's journey there (imagination), the narrator has created an instant of reality through imagination:

> That is the difference I want to talk about, the fact that you keep imagining reality as if it
> were an artwork in which you have a choice, while in the tangible world there is no

choice, you have to participate, you cannot step out of what is going on and into

something else, there is nothing else except what is going on, whether you like it or not,

and that means you must feel the cold taking over, and you must have at least an inkling

that you will never be back, and that you will never see your pets again, and that your

rooms, as you left them, will soon be entered by people to whom none of your mementos,

none of those little things you fuss over, will mean anything. (131)

Through his immersive theatrical storytelling, referencing both imagination and reality, the narrator gives his students the opportunity to have a choice and powerfully participate in the production of a "tangible world," a world that can break the cycle of repetitive circular movement of patriarchal violence.

Another artist who destroyed historical authority and broke free from, "the bondage to the past," by sharing personal stories is Sylvia Plath. In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr explaining her use of historical events, Plath says, "I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on." Through her Holocaust poetry, Plath reclaims the role of the victim and makes a larger claim about the role of the patriarchy in war and violence, metaphorically, in personal experience and literally, by referencing world catastrophes. Plath enacts trauma in her Holocaust poem, "Daddy," by creating a theatrical event in a way similar to that of Albahari and his narrator of *Götz and Meyer* when he takes his students on a field trip to the Belgrade Fairgrounds camp.

Plath's use of the confessional mode in her Holocaust poetry directly relates to the purpose of her art - transforming personal experience so that it becomes relevant to "the larger

things, the bigger things." Although Plath creates a persona of herself within the poem, the role

of the speaker is meant to be filled by anyone who has suffered from the violent power of the

patriarchy; the reader becomes an active participant in the transformation of the historical event.

Through the confessional mode, Plath opens the poem for the reader's vicarious experience, no

matter their demographic. Boswell looks at this historical transformation in relation to "Daddy:"

"'Daddy' is not so much about personal experience as about the relationship between the

personal experience of those who were not there and the historical experiences of those who

were" (42). In looking to understand Plath's repeated use of the Holocaust and World War II

imagery, Jahan Ramazani, in his essay "'Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You': Plath, Rage, and the

Modern Elegy" says, "For Plath, patriarchal violence found its ultimate expression in the Nazi

death camps, which were the triumph of the victimization from which she suffers" (1151). These

explorations of Plath's use of the Holocaust circle back to the potential for poetry to help not

only the author, but the reader as well, break free from the bonds of the patriarchy. In "Daddy"

Plath directly addresses how she used to think of her father as a mythological God:

> Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
>
> Ghastly statue with one grey toe
>
> Big as a Frisco seal
>
> And a head in the freakish Atlantic
>
> ....
>
> I used to pray to recover you. (l. 8-14)

The past tense of the word "used" shows Plath's transition away from treating her father as a

god-like figure. In "Daddy" she actively works to reclaim the voices of the victims of the

patriarchy; she takes away her father's power by destroying his image rather than reaffirms his

power by reviving his image. By arguing for the ineffability of the Holocaust and repeating

historical facts, the power of both the Nazis and patriarchal violence is reaffirmed. Only through

transformation, a reclamation of power, can the repetitive circular movement be broken.

By using language as a weapon against her father in "Daddy," Plath is able to reclaim the

voices of the victims of patriarchal violence during the Holocaust. In "Daddy," Plath makes it

very clear that she will no longer punish herself for her father's death. Plath turns the violence

that she previously inflicted on herself towards the theatricalized metaphorical image of her

father, a stand-in for patriarchal power that found "its ultimate expression in the Nazi death

camps." She exaggerates her father's demonic violence as she destroys his image:

> I have always been scared of *you*,
>
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
>
> And your neat mustache
>
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
>
> Panzer-man, panzer-man. o You --
>
>
> Not God but a swastika
>
> So black no sky could squeak through. (l. 41-47)

By listing imaginative yet specific physical characteristics, Plath builds a sculpture of her father

in the space between the page and the performance. Through the use of historically accurate

images, "your neat mustache / And your Aryan eye, bright blue," Plath grounds her sculpture in

reality making its eventual destruction all the more powerful. Through the repetition of "your,"

Plath compounds each detail until the "panzer-man" becomes so large that it crumbles under its

own weight, "o You--". The structure of the poem alludes to the nursery-rhyme "There Was an

Old Woman Who Lived In A Shoe" and uses repeated "oo" sounds and baby talk, "goobledygoo" to mock the father. This contrast between the childish external structure of the poem and the violent rage that exists within the lines represents Plath's physical body. Her external body, the childish self, is still controlled by the patriarchy, while what she has autonomy over, her inner self, is filled with rage. Through the creative act of including the reader in the enACTment of her father's metaphorical death and destruction of his image, Plath is able to break free from the bonds of the patriarchy. Plath no longer attempts to neutralize or placate the father in her poems, but attacks him directly using her most powerful weapon, sound. Before, Plath defended herself by creating distance between herself and her father with the hard consonant sounds; now, she uses them to attack: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot." "The poem itself makes clear the mirror relationship 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" (Ramazani 1151). In his book, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry of Initiation*, Jon Rosenblatt identifies "Daddy" as an obvious "attempt to do away altogether with the idealized father; but it also makes clear how difficult a task that is. Daddy keeps returning in the poem in different guises: statue, shoe, Nazi, teacher, devil, and vampire" (125). And yet, the poem presses on until the villagers dance on his grave. Plath tackles the "difficult task" by using the power of community, those who suffered together, to finally overcome her father's power. Plath's reclamation of voices of victims of the patriarchy is a communal act. Through the active, kinetic nature of the poem, with theatrical images that are quickly built and then destroyed, readers are invited to participate in the father's metaphorical death. In doing so, the reader and Plath have worked together to create a moment in which they are free from the bonds of the patriarchy, represented by the father.

The balance between destruction and creation, imagination and reality, allows artists to use the creative process to come to a greater understanding of the human condition within the context of the transformed historical event. Albahari's and Plath's transformation of the events of the Holocaust show the importance of sharing and learning from history and overcoming patriarchal violence. By theatricalizing the shared tragedy of the Holocaust, they invite readers to reach beyond memory and vicariously experience vestiges of the past on an individual level.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

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