Lady Lazarus Wants a Room of Her Own: On Writing for Therapy

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"Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

I first read Plath in an American Lit class in college. She was put in with a unit called the "confessional" poets, which included Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and a few others I don't recall anymore. I do, however, recall that most of these people committed suicide, despite their deeply personal and cathartic writings. While we were encouraged to celebrate the beauty of the poetry produced, I could not help but think, *confession did not save them.* Reaching deep into their own guts and dredging up their aches and pains brought no release. And Plath's death was, hands down, the most dramatic of the group: she put her head in an oven and gassed herself to death while her children slept. It seemed to be the climax of her outsider/unloved = Jewish imagery put forth in "Daddy." Or maybe that was just coincidence. It stuck with me, though, the image of this hopelessly brilliant, hopelessly lost, hopelessly outraged woman, kneeling down beneath the weight of whatever plagued her, and resting her head in the oven.

The true horror of Plath, though, was that she made self-destruction look sexy. "I have done it again" (Plath 211), she announces in "Lady Lazarus," and says that "Dying is an art" and that she does it "exceptionally well" (Plath 213). She revels in the "theatrical / Comeback in broad day" (Plath 213) as another suicide attempt fails. But I also took her words to be about the process of creation itself, and between "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" she makes it seem as though the truly enlightened beings of the world cannot help but tear themselves apart, burned alive from the inside out by the sheer

brightness of their own visions, and she damns the crowds who gather to watch it happen. She is a doomed oracle. She makes art into an act of masochism.

I was interested in writing at the time, but I was wary. I still am, even as I write this piece. I felt from Plath what I had been feeling from my mother since the day I was born. I was raised by a martyr – my mother thought it was a sin to have anything for herself, even a single loving thought. She stifled her rage and her disappointment on the grounds that they should not exist since she had a husband, house and 2 children. If you have these things and you're a woman, then you must be happy: Look world! Look at the evidence of my joy! I SAID LOOK DAMN YOU!!

(I considered myself an orphan from a very early age. I would confide my sorrows and fears to our cat, in cat-speak. I still "meow" quite well – it's a very expressive sound. You can "meow" about anything: happy, sad, angry, plaintive, mellow, hungry – anything. It's like singing. Try it.)

Anyway, mom made death feel like a warm embrace and made happiness and love into terribly unfunny jokes. I inherited a strong love of depression and a level of self-absorption that would put black holes to shame. Oh yes, self-destruction is sexy and it has taken many years of shivering in the cold light of day to be able to embrace healthy behaviors as anything other than trite and shallow. Self-pity is addictive and highly encouraged by most advertising and marketing firms. Unfortunately, it also seems to be encouraged by many academics.

Find beauty in the everyday? Only losers do that. What shallow puddles are happiness and joy, and how quickly they evaporate! Only dark water runs deep, only dark, blood-black water. How clever and brave are those who turn away from the false

light of the sun and bathe in the darkness. The truth is always bathed in darkness, isn't it? People who can sustain happy thoughts are lobotomized Stepford zombies, aren't they? Zombies without an original thought in their empty heads.

While I was reading Plath in school, I had a friend who very seriously and carefully explained why he couldn't be the teacher he had studied to be. It was because he wanted to be a writer. *Ok, then be a writer. Follow your passions. (Perhaps I could be one of them someday.)* But he went on to say that he needed to take anti-depressants in order to have enough stability to be able to teach, to be "on stage" for those kids every day (and to hold down any kind of relationship as well). But when he took anti-depressants, then he didn't write. He didn't want to, and what he did produce wasn't as good. He preferred to use alcohol to medicate his moods when they got to be too much. So I asked him if his decision was about wanting to be a writer, or about not wanting to grow up. I don't think our friendship lasted very long after that exchange.

I was attracted to writing, but I questioned my motive: I knew I was mentally unsound, for what sane little child walks to school everyday believing that if she could only get hit by a bus, then her family would be happy? Then again, what mad little child clenches her fists and her jaw and demands from herself a better life than her mother had? Whatever direction I chose, I knew I had precious little in the way of a support network, and I was entering into dangerous territory. Knowing you have a problem doesn't make it vanish – having a name for something in the darkness doesn't make the shadows retreat one little bit, but I privately came to call the blackness "Sylvia's Oven" and I feared it as much as I desired it: peace, peace at last. A shelter from the irrational, imperfect world. With no way back out.

I wasn't worried about failing in the sense that I would be torn apart by critics, disappoint teachers, or simply be ignored. I was worried about courting death. I wanted to write but I needed the right reasons, a healthy approach. I wanted to feel at home in my own skin, but I needed the right reasons. Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own saved my life. It perched on my left shoulder and fought with the Plath demons sitting on my right. And it fought well. It fought like a hellcat in granny boots and a high lace collar. (If you were stuffed into granny boots and high lace collar, you'd be quick with your claws too, I think.)

I adored Woolf: finally, here was a woman who did not write like a woman. She didn't waste entire chapters apologizing for being a woman who "dared" to write. She didn't waste energy raging against circumstances, or raging against anything for that matter. She called things the way she saw them and she had the guts to let her audience argue the merits of her observations. While she also succumbed to suicide and her own demons, there was nothing of the martyr about her writing. There was none of my Plath/mother's "Fuck-you-all-look-what-you-made-me-do" nonsense. She set up, in my mind, what art and creativity should really be about: the *work*. If you die giving birth to it, that's just a footnote, for the work is not a chronicle of your death or your life. It has nothing to do with you.

Writing became a discipline in Woolf's description, not a mere indulgence. It required Zen-like clarity of mind. Not rigidity, mind you, but an understanding of the difference between what the work in progress needed, and what one's personal agenda needed. If I wanted to write, I could not abuse my journal as if it were a bottle of vodka. Writing was not about whining and crying for pages on end about the same old wounds,

over and over amen. I accepted her challenge. I put up a bumper sticker by my writing desk that read "Just because no one understands you, doesn't mean you're an artist." And I wrote, as honestly as I could.

And I failed. Over a period of several years, I noticed patterns in my themes as I dumped my thoughts and feelings into my journal. There was a relentless "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" quality to my writing. Let's face it: Sylvia was never ever finished with her Daddy. He was the last wound she wanted to release. When a wound becomes the core of your identity, you walk through life leaving drops of blood in your wake, and nobody can ever make it better for you. And you would evaporate if they ever did manage to rescue you from yourself. Ask my mother. She hasn't been a real person for decades. She was long gone, long before the sick-excuse-for-a-marriage and the divorce she likes to blame:

Recite the litany of ancient wrongs. It's the music of your universe and all you have left when everything else fades to dust. Sing it sisters! From that dark rock at the center of you, pull every scrap of life into yourself. Bury yourself under a planet's worth of sorrow and rage. And marvel at what gets built on your rocky surface. Or you would marvel, if you could get out from underneath it all and bother to look.

I was not creating art. Or rather, "I" was very much in the way of my art. I was being masochistic and clinging to the wounds I wanted to cleanse. I was describing demons and magnifying them in the process. Wounds got deeper as the language got more elaborate. I sank like a stone into my own misery and finally had to admit defeat: I could not resolve by describing. I had to get up and walk through it all and stop sitting on the sidelines with a notebook and a pen.

I moved into my body and used it as an anchor when the storms in my mind blew through. Making that leap was terrifying and exhilarating, all at once. I cleaned up my diet and I lost weight. I started to play around with yoga and dancing. I went for long walks and enjoyed long silences. I got an exercise bike and actually used it. I even started jogging. I still do all of these things. And as each change was made I heard my demons go from slinky and sexy sirens to shrieking harpies with flashing claws. "Walking on Sunshine" will never be my personal soundtrack, no matter what I do. It's not my nature, and fighting back caused a terrible rift: suddenly, everything dark and shadowy took solid form, and they weren't beautiful and bittersweet anymore because they wanted to live as badly as I did. Their threats were now anything but poetic: *you're worthless and you ruined your mother's life just by being born; why lose weight? you'll never be pretty anyway and your personality isn't sweet enough to make up for being ugly; you'll always be poor and ground down under the heels of your superiors; it's just fun for others to hurt your feelings – who can resist kicking the dog that yelps the loudest?* And they went on and on and on. And for the most part, they still go on and on and on. But I found what Woolf calls "staying power" (102) by finding activities that pull me out of my mind when it starts to go sour. I don't have to argue or fight back or try to slay anything. I just leave my mind and do something else for a while. It's like hanging up on my mother when she gets herself worked up into a frenzy over god-only-knows-what-this-time: *click....silence....guilt....acceptance....freedom.* Aches and pains are not inspiration. They have nothing special to teach me and they're best ignored.

I'm always amused when people are told to write as an *outlet* for their feelings. I'm amused because I'd cry if I didn't laugh. *Scratch the surface and tell us what's underneath! Find the truth about yourself and tell us!* Sylvia, as "Lady Lazarus" is dead right: "The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see / Them unwrap me hand and foot- - / The big strip tease" (Plath 212).

The true danger of the "confessional" style of writing and the celebrated poets who exemplify this style is that they send the message that you are, truly and deep down, the person you are when you are at your *lowest* point. And there's some sick quirk of human nature that loves a good train wreck and gathers 'round to see, hoping for blood. Too often we are rewarded for speaking of our pain and misery and we are blasted as shallow and trite for seeking light and peace and love. Plath in particular is celebrated for creating a mythology out of her emotional undercurrents, for diving into the black water of the unconscious, bravely, deeply, completely, and *terminally*. After all, you're not interesting if you're not harboring a deep dark secret.

Let's tell our youngsters this, when they're at their most emotionally vulnerable, when they're desperate to please and capable of trying on a new personality every week. Tell them this when they're toting guns to school to kill their classmates. *Find beneath your skin whatever hurts the most and bring it forth, for this will be the truth. Set the sky on fire!*

Sure, ok. Or you could go for a walk, clear out your head, and go at the problem from a more relaxed frame of mind. Plath may be brilliant, but she is also very dead, and even my former friend, who "couldn't" be a teacher because he wanted to write, said that "Being fucked up is not a noble goal."

Works Cited

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