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Prosopopoeial Poetry of Personal Prophetic Transfiguration - Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and David Bowie's "Lazarus"

Tatjana Srceva-Pavlovska

Abstract

Prosopopoeia, as a literary device is not uncommon in both English and American literature, since authors have been using it throughout literary history in order to introduce a manufactured and contrived presentation of characters or personified things, that is, feigned *sub specie personae*. This paper examines the importance of prosopopoeia as a literary device in revealing certain personal prophetic visions when in anticipation of one's own imminent death with examples from Sylvia Plath and David Bowie's poetics. Through the impersonation of the absent speaker or a personification, the language of the prosopopoeia has a purpose of transfiguration by revealing the staggering horrors of inner struggles, thus becoming the enabling device through which one speaks about one's forthcoming, expected death. More specifically, this paper focuses on the adoption of such voices of the imagined Biblical figures in Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" and in David Bowie's song "Lazarus" which express a prophetic vision of the personal self, as well as the predictive resurrection and life after death through one's own immortal artistic legacy and output.

Key words: prosopopoeia, David Bowie, Sylvia Plath, Lazarus, transfiguration

Introduction

This paper examines the importance of prosopopoeia in revealing certain deeply personal prophetic visions when in anticipation of one's own imminent death. Through the impersonation of the absent speaker or a personification, the language of the prosopopoeia works as a means of achieving transfiguration through the process of revealing the staggering horrors of inner struggles, thus becoming the enabling device through which one speaks about one's forthcoming, expected death. More specifically, the paper focuses on the adoption of such voices of the imagined Biblical figure in Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" who announces her own personal doom through a visual presentation of the horrors of the Holocaust's imagery. In addition, this research sheds light on David Bowie's song lyrics and video "Lazarus," which also expresses a prophetic vision of the personal self, as well as the predictive resurrection and life after death through one's own immortal artistic legacy and output.

The General Idea of Prosopopoeia and Resurrection – From the Biblical Lazarus to a Modern-Day Inspiration

Prosopopoeia is a literary device with the main goal of introducing in a particular discourse (in this case, in verse), a contrived, manufactured presentation of characters or personal things, that is, a *sub specie personae*. The most common and usual form of such presentation is through attribution of certain human properties or qualities, most frequently, those of speaking (dialogismos) or listening (sermonocinatio). Plath, though, incorporates a new level, the so-called property or quality of observing, to enable the spectators of the act, the voyeurs who are present, an opportunity to enjoy the freak-show performance, but also, at the same time, to witness a "spectacular death" (Jacobsen, 2016) and the follow-up resurrection, leading to artistic immortality. In the same manner, despite the actual death of the man David Jones, the personae of the artist David Bowie continue to shine with a distinctive luminosity and navigational function, in absence and in repetition in various venues (Mendes & Perrott, 2019), as on wall murals, social media, YouTube videos, street and tattoo art, as well as in today's world of graphic arts and fashion.

In this respect, it is important to point out that cases of metaphorical resurrection in literature and philosophy are numerous, representing the symbolic rebirth of a person or idea, and a momentous personal transformation. In addition, it signifies overcoming hopelessness and emerging stronger from pain, loss, or despair, often

through personal growth and the integration of new perspectives. Thus, the examples are plentiful, ranging from Poe's Gothic ghost-hunt stories "The fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia", through the analogy of sin, death and resurrection in *Crime and Punishment* when, at one point even Raskolnikov contemplates the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, through the allegorical resurrection of Aslan in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and the fantastical Tolkien's trilogy and the miraculous reappearing of Gandalf and many more.

The striving urge and impulse for achieving artistic and creative immortality through resurrection have been known since ancient times as well. The Roman poet Horace wrote: *Non omnis moriar, multaque pars mei vitabit Libitinam* ("not of all me shall perish, and a great part of me will escape Libitina"), expressing certainty in the immortality of his creative output even in times before it became a widely-embraced and desired Christian concept (Horace, *Odes*, 3.30). The answer to this compulsion for transfiguration beyond temporal self into memory, into creative impulse which surpasses the mortal flesh is in the first lines of the first stanza of *Ode* 3.30, lines 1–5, which was published in 23 BC:

> *Exegi monumentem aere perennius, regalique situ pyramidum altius…*
>
> ("I have crafted a monument more lasting than bronze,
> and loftier than the royal pile of the pyramids,
> a thing which neither biting rain nor the obstreperous
> North Wind can destroy, nor the countless run of years,
> the flight of time.")

The monument in question is, of course, his own poetic craft, which transcends life and time, remaining even today, his three books of *Odes*. Horace confidently predicted his enduring fame as the first and greatest of the lyric poets of Rome, just as Plath and Bowie did with their self-referential final adieus.

Plath's Poetics of Announcement of Her Imminent Death and Resurrection

Several months before her tragic end, Plath, aged 30, composed some of the most controversial poetry of the twentieth century. She achieved her artistic brilliance despite her ill mental state, repetitive attacks of flu that affected both her and her two small children. But pressed by her desire to overcome the collapse of her marriage and her absorbing desire to write herself to stellar success, she succumbed

in a period of extended profound clinical depression and tragically ended her own life on a bleak February morning in 1963 in London. Nine months later, ten of the late poems appeared in *Encounter Magazine* and began what can only be labelled a phenomenon of contemporary poetry of the confessional-self. Despite the fact that she corresponded with her mother just that October about her resolution to pull herself together and bring her life right back on track by writing:

> "…feel only a lust to study, write, get my brain back and practise my craft. (…) I have no desire but to build a new life. Must start here (…) I must not go back to the womb or retreat. I must make steps out (…) I am fighting against hard odds and alone" (Plath, 1962).

still, in "Lady Lazarus" she demonstrates as different state, expressing and re-confirming her firmness of contemplating yet another suicide and turning it into a poetic and visual spectacle.

Silvia Plath had long been interested in the story of Lazarus and the concept of resurrection. As early as February 19, 1956, she recorded that captivation that borderlines with fixation in her journal:

> "I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent." (Plath, 1956)

Related to this, Susan Gubar, in her essay entitled *"Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries,"* states that "*Lady Lazarus* offers up a chilling warning about the fetishization of suffering with which the figure of prosopopoeia flirts" (Gubar, 2001, p. 207). She also asserts that the red rage that rises out of the ashes only fuels self-combustion, debunking the idea of transcendence or rebirth (read resurrection) at the end of the poem. The outcome seems a mere confirmation of this statement. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is the *sub specie personae*, an artistic spectacle announcing yet another "real spectacle" in the form of a spectacular death (Jacobsen, 2016) and a process of transfiguration and metamorphosis in order to achieve artistic confirmation and resurrection. In the light of the ideas conveyed during the October 1962 intimate correspondence with her family, and even more intimate presentation of her state of mind and her determination to commit a conscious act of suicide, it becomes clear that she uses prosopopoeia as a literary device for "selfish reasons," to voice a dreadful plan.

"Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call." (Plath, 1962)

Her request serves can be read as an invitation to be seen by those courageous enough to witness her in all her tragedy; to be seen is to connect and, in this respect, her words of suicide suggest a well-planned work of art. Plath's fixation with death and resurrection had been previously announced in her poem in a clear fashion, since the phrase "Your call!" means "one's own decision, one's own choice," and the verb itself carries the meaning of "to predict," because often we say "I called it!" which means that we correctly predicted something. Her death of carbon monoxide poisoning, having meticulously sealed the rooms between her and her sleeping children beforehand with tape, towels, and cloths, may exactly mean that with a cool head, she had announced her "calling" some time before it actually happened. In her biography *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*, her final days are presented in great detail, somehow leading to an intention which seems quite expected, obvious, and quite clear, and the fact that she had arranged everything and secured her sleeping children with such care removes any possible doubts that her action was anything but an irrational compulsion.

In "Lady Lazarus," the nature of the speaker is peculiar and defies our ordinary notions of someone prone to attempt suicide, which is not a joyous act and still, there is something of a triumph in the speaker's assertion that she has done it over and over again, in front of the "peanut-crunching crowd," triumph which seems to be sprouting of the possible end result of the "spectacle" (Reeves, 2012), which is achieving artistic immortality through resurrection. And though it seems psychologically impossible for the suicide victim to have the energy to rise at all against other people, much less to threaten to "eat men like air," yet, the speaker demonstrates a remarkable control not only of herself but of the effects she wishes to achieve on those who surround her.

In Plath's poem, the walking miracle, the re-gendered speaker's consciousness of her performance for the readers (who are implicitly part of this abovementioned "peanut-crunching crowd") works to reverse the gaze of the readers so that they become "overlooked in the act of overlooking," and through the process foretelling one's own transfiguration, to die with one's head in the oven and resurrect like the

imagined female Lazarus and catapult oneself consciously into one's own stardom of artistic immortality, in the light of the one described with precision in the Biblical story:

> "Martha therefore said to Jesus: Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.
> But now also I know that whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.
> Jesus saith to her: Thy brother shall rise again.
> Martha saith to him: I know that he shall rise again, in the resurrection at the last day."
> (King James Version, *John* 11:21–24)

In addition to the spectacle performed in front of the multitude of people, constructed upon the Biblical reference of the death of Lazarus and his resurrection by Jesus Christ, Susan Gubar furthermore points out yet another, even more important correlation, the one between Plath's personal tragic ending and "her appropriation of the voices of Holocaust victims," which, according to her, "still seems outrageous to those who reject any reasonable affinity or parallelism between Plath's individual suffering and mass murder." Furthermore, she underlines the intensity of rage she evoked by just daring to presume or imagine herself as being one of the victims, "to appropriate the Otherness of the deceased through a projection that might be said to profane the memory of people exterminated by the Nazis" (Gubar, 2001).

But Uroff's claim that "Lady Lazarus" draws on Plath's own suicide attempt but is not a personal confession because it reveals only Plath's understanding of the way the suicidal person thinks" (Uroff, 1977, pp. 108–112) is not entirely true; she does not only see herself as a victimized Jew but she is also a partisan who, by using the Holocaust imagery and the personified, prosopopoeic language of a "dead ma/woman walking" (again), by taking control of what seems to be a completely uncontrollable situation, performs a conscious, deliberate act of committing suicide. Although the Romanian-born American writer, professor, political activist, and Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel reprimanded that, in order "to honor the dead the living must comprehend that no one has the right to speak on their behalf," still, the usage of prosopopoeia as a literary device allowed Plath not only to summon the posthumous voice and to comprehend subjectivity enduring beyond the concentration camp, but also to announce her own doom and prophetic resurrection from the ashes like an imaginary feminine Biblical figure, a re-gendered Lazarus. During a radio interview, Plath herself defined Lady Lazarus as "a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn."

Undeniably, since the poem is about a woman's (Plath's) suicidal attempts, it seems that the female speaker furthermore "highlights the losses that Plath has experienced losses she chose as well as those over which she had no control: abortion, miscarriage, childbirth, severe postpartum depression, divorce." In this respect, the prosopopoeic re-gendered Lazarus decides to take control over for one last time, decisively and resolutely, and from the overstated archetypal victim to adopt the trope of the oven and turn it into a symbol of complete control and personal power. The process includes voyeurism, just like in the Biblical reference from *The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ According to St. Luke*, Chapter 16, lines 17–18:

> "The multitude therefore gave testimony, which was with him, when he called Lazarus out of the grave, and raised him from the dead.
> For which reason also the people came to meet him, because they heard that he had done this miracle." (*Luke* 12:17–18)

Teresa De Lauretis, who is theorizing of the cinematic positioning of women, notes that "the apparatus of looks converging on the female figure integrates voyeurism into the conventions of storytelling (...) the woman is framed by the look of the camera as an icon, an image, the object of the gaze, and thus, precisely, spectacle: that is to say, an image made to be looked at by the spectator(s) as well as the male character(s), whose look most often relays the look of the audience. But it is the male protagonist, the 'bearer' of the spectator's look, who also controls the events of the narrative, moving the plot forward" (De Lauretis, 1984, p. 99), which is exactly Plath's intention, to initiate the plot being moved forward through a process of transfiguration, into another creative dimension—immortality achieved through imaginative reappearance before that same audience, but not exclusively or solely as a woman, but an artist and poet.

Bowie's Poetics of the Blackstar – "Lazarus"

Just as Plath used prosopopoeia to announce her imminent death and achieve artistic immortality, a similar singularity can be observed in the final works of David Bowie, whose album Blackstar and the song "Lazarus" serve as a modern articulation of prophetic self-transfiguration. On January 10, 2016, British pop icon David Bowie died at the age of 69. Two days before Bowie passed away, impeccably timed with his 69th birthday, he released a new studio album, his last goodbye, his swansong. He was an exceptional artist with an immense power of transformation, the mastermind on the leading edge of what became known as Glam Rock—in fact, it

is probably not far off the mark to say that he invented it. As soon as he started to attract audiences, his flamboyance, ambiguous sexuality, and charisma propelled him into stardom (...) David deserved his success—it was a long time coming and he worked very hard to achieve it. In addition to his talent as a composer, he knows how to maintain focus and to constantly re-invent himself" (Finnigan, 2015, p. 152). His early-day biography portrays him at the age of 22, at the beginnings of his career, a paragon of beauty and sex, a young idealist, talented and irrelevant, one of the torchbearers for sex 'n' drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll life philosophy, a member of the ones that "did not care about social conventions, broke many rules but much to our surprise nearly everyone ended up loving us" (Finnigan, 2015).

The span from these days until the artist's last album named *Blackstar* was almost 50 years of stardom. However, *Blackstar* was covered under a veil of controversy, which was opened by the renowned UK newspaper *The Telegraph* in January 2016, following David Bowie's death. *The Telegraph* published an article in which they re-questioned the origin of the last album's title (Vincent, 2016), linking it with a common medical term for breast lesion cancer, thus opening a myriad of questions regarding the artist's prophetic last message to the world on the eve of his death. His personal experience is intrinsically and indisputably related to his work and the profound poetics of his lyrics, which is most evidently expressed in his last album, which makes sense even with the seemingly nonsensical atmosphere serving the purpose of disseminating his complex emotional state after stopping all medical treatments in the final stages of the diagnosed terminal cancer.

It has also been argued that the power of Bowie's star image rests largely upon his private emotional life taking precedence (for the listening-body) over his private life (Cinque et al., 2015). Even more so, Cinque further makes a reference to Ahmed (2004, p. 202), who asserts that the social philosophies of trauma and scarring—with the understanding in this context that the exposure of the private emotional life is necessary to developing a correlation with the listener-viewer—which is exactly what Bowie is trying to convey through the prosopopoeic discourse in "Lazarus," without bypassing the Biblical story from the Gospels of *"The Death of Lazarus,"* which is basically about the public demonstration of God's wonders and His power to raise a dead man to life. Therefore, in his video for the song "Lazarus," Bowie's words, his "sound and vision," linked spiritual belief and death by depicting the metaphoric Lazarus bearing linen superposed around his head, perhaps pitting his faith upon his own spiritual and/or physical resurrection, similar to the Biblical story.

"Now a man named Lazarus was sick (...) 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep: but I am going to wake him up' (...) 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' (...) When he said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out [of his tomb], his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face." (*John* 11:1–44)

The prosopopoeic notion in "Lazarus" is deliberate, serving the purpose of creating a spectacle and drama, to be observed voyeuristically and deliberately, which employs multiple elements of fame, dominance, control and power as well as artistic performance, the so-called "spectacular death," the transfiguration leading to resurrection. In the article entitled *"Walking the Dead – David Bowie and the Humanizing Obverse,"* Namik Mačkić and Eliyahu Keller elaborate on a famous Bowie quote perceiving mortality and death, with a clear reference to one of his final public moments, his appearance in the video "Lazarus" (Keller & Mačkić, 2018). They sketch a vision of the process of transfiguration, when the artist, through the outer mutation, ignites the first stage of the procedure of metamorphosis, when a living person transforms from a walking dead, a corpse, into ethereal form, the risen Lazarus, who then undergoes the stages of resurrection and becomes an immortal entity living through his art:

> "His face is now covered not with makeup but with gauze, the hallmarks of this endlessly painted and reconfigured visage hidden. The heterochrome eyes are gone—windows to a soul that have been gouged and hollowed, purged of even alienated humanity that eyes convey. Replaced by hardware nuts, the eyes suggest a soothsaying Tiresias in a steely grip, blindly delivering a prophecy of a future hidden in the unknowability of technical objects (...) the past is revisited, as Bowie is now looking inside into the inner workings of a human dying—neither superhuman, nor post-human; no bionic man." (Keller & Mačkić, 2018, p. 91)

In this respect, we get yet another glimpse inside other similarly orchestrated human dying; the "man who fell to Earth," not from Heaven, but from Mars, and who had a planetary career in music, art, and the film industry, uses as well, in a similar manner, the same metaphor of "Lazarus's rising" and prosopopoeia to announce spectacularly and voyeuristically his own death to the world. Bowie as an artist embodies numerous stances that are alien, alternative, and transgressive, and by using these powerful metaphors, parallelisms, and alter egos, he not only re-confirms himself as an utterly strange and unique persona who has firm control over his own passing, but also, with the release of his last album *Blackstar* and his single "Lazarus," he demonstrates to the world his profoundly personal philosophy of

trauma and scarring, at the same time, just like Plath did more than half a century before, confirming his own existence in the afterlife.

Conclusion

Plath and Bowie, with the usage of prosopopoeia, and through their "spectacular deaths," achieve so-called creative and artistic immortality, one by the publication of what is today known as the best verse in Confessional poetry, the other by the release of an album, videos, and music which break the records of all the world's top lists. According to Jacobsen, such "spectacular death" inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length—it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence; we wallow in it and want to know about it without getting too close to it (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 10).

But Plath's and Bowie's artistic legacy surpasses the instances of the obvious, of the moment of such spectacular passing away and resurrection. The resurrection through their alter egos "Lady Lazarus" and "Lazarus" occupies not only the realm of immortal fame, but also, by giving the world a sublime artistic creation, it achieves its only purpose: to rise above mortal existence and reappear beyond the essential quality of humanness.

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