

A Freudian Reading of Philip Schultz's "The Wandering Wingless"

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Abstract—"The Wandering Wingless" is about a dog walker's life in New York City. It seems that the poet is representing his care about the horrors of September 11, the sibling relationship and the intimacy with animals. This paper, first interprets the poem on the basis of Freud's psychoanalytical theory, and then concludes that the output of this poem results from the influences of the death drive on the poet and the castration anxiety.

Index Terms—"The Wandering Wingless", death drive, Castration Anxiety

I. INTRODUCTION

"The Wandering Wingless" is one poem of the volume *Failure*, winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, which has gained enormous responses from various readers. There are also many writers having high praises. Gerald Stern, winner of "the National Book Award" said, "Philip Schultz's language remains that of a modern master as Isaac Rosenberg and Hart Crane. It is one thing I have always admired in his poetry, a heartbreaking tenderness that goes beyond mere pity and it is present in *Failure*. It shows as if he bears our pain." "The Wandering Wingless" is the longest poem in the volume, which includes 58 segments and 54 pages. To Gerald Stern again, "It's as if he bears our pain". With no exception, this poem also concentrates on the poet's regret and fear of the pain of life, the grief for his father's death and the horrors of September 11. It seems that the poet is just sharing his personal feelings with the reader by means of poem. Yet through a Freudian reading of the target poem, it is concluded that the output of "The Wandering Wingless" is the burst of the poet's castration anxiety and the influences of death drive.

II. THE INFLUENCES OF DEATH DRIVE ON THE POET

According to the classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory, death drive is the drive towards death, destruction and forgetfulness. It was first proposed by Sigmund Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". The opposite of death drive is Eros (the Greek word for "love"), the tendency towards cohesion and unity. The death drive is sometimes referred to as "Thanatos" in post-Freudian thought, complementing "Eros", although this term has no basis in Freud's own work, being rather introduced by Freud's secretary, Paul Federn. According to Freud, the drive of this self-destruction does not only motive individuals or collectives to destroy themselves physically but also psychologically. Psychoanalysts then try their utmost to explore the headspring of this death drive. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson claims that the death is attractive to the human being and this attraction varies in different degrees resulting from individual experiences. Furthermore, the thought of death keys into our fear of abandonment and our fear of being alone. This fear of abandonment includes the fear of being deserved and alone, fear of sibling's death and fear of intimacy. It is known that death is ultimate abandonment; your friends can not share your death, when everyone is abandoned by your friends, your siblings, and even God. Thus in some religious canon, it is said we human beings will not be alone for God, the Father will be there for us and with us and the Heavenly Father will not abandon his children even when everyone else we know has done so. Secondly, fear of abandonment also plays a crucial role in the fear of others' death. The death of ones' beloved will trigger him or her to meditate such questions as "what I have done wrong" and "why he or she leaves me alone". That is, the overwhelming feeling of loss is also a feeling of abandonment (Lois Tyson, 1999). Thirdly, the fear of abandonment also causes human being's fear of intimacy. As the blue song points out, "when you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose", that is one of the ways we can see how fear of death often results in fear of life. If we are not attached to life, it is natural we will not be desperate when life is gone. We are afraid of death but the ultimate destination of human is death. Therefore, we have no choice but to live our life in a dead way (a kind of suicide). We dare not to live a passionate life since we fear we will lose it some day. This lifeless life is also a kind of death from Freud's perspective. Although it is not biological death, it is emotional death. On the unconscious level, we are afraid of death, but the death is the only escape of this fear. The above explanation explains why human being is inclined to self-destruction (physical and psychological), why someone is numb to life, and especially why emotional death is so attractive for us human being, for if we do not feel anything, we can not be hurt by it.

In "the Wandering Wingless", such emotional death drive can be sensed ubiquitously, which mainly reflects in three aspects, namely, the speaker's indifference to life, the doubt of God's Presence, and the death of speaker's father. It is obvious that the dog walker in the poem is the spokesman of Philip Schultz for the poet is also indulged in dog petting

just as a dog walker in reality. As the spokesman of the poet, the dog walker lives an indifferent life in the Washington Square, New York city. “The Wandering Wingless” is more like a narration than a poem. The dog walker is narrating his experiences about his dogs, his father’s death, and the horrors of September 11. He is displaying a wearing picture to the audience gradually. According to Freud, this narration is just the sublimation of poet’s unconsciousness. For the sake of analysis, the following chart is given to illustrate how the death drive of the poet is sublimed to the output of poem. This chart follows the four parts of the poem and the speaker’s weariness, the death of the speaker’s father and the speaker’s doubt about God’s presence are represented. The paper treats “the Wandering Wingless” as four parts and 58 segments; and the number in the bracket stands for the segment number in each part.

Section	The weariness	The death of father	Doubt of God’s presence
Part one	an air of ever skulking fatigue... world weariness ...of no one’s interest(2) ...of my seared brain ...in a desperate hum(5)	the sparkling graves(4) When Dad’s heart was failing (9) I understood he wanted to die(12)	I wandered, a false hallelujah, to swirl, flicker, and overflow(6)
Part two	but like me, they can’t bear to own one. Anyone who’s ever owned one knows what owing love means(5)waiting to be devastated(6) My brain doesn’t care what it looks like(13)	He slid flat as a shadow and sat there, on the floor, twisted, gasping, looking up at me, his only child.(14)	Null
Part three	who have little to say and prefer the company of dogs who also have nowhere else to be, apparently. (5) A poor white dog in heat(10) only he can despair who is desperate(15)	In other words: why did Dad own, believe in, admit to, understand and love nothing...why was he so afraid of the benevolence deep inside him?(11) Get away from me! He said(14)	A glistening city of scarcity beyond my understanding where God lived(4)If I was the kind who seeks God during an emergency and then is ashamed all his life...(6)
Part four	“Why won’t you own anything?” Because, frankly, I’m not prepared to do so.(4) If nothing is where I come from, return to, and am entitled to, what was I so afraid of losing?(5) Until there is nothing left but the sound of our voices and the eloquent silence of the stars. (12) I came to be here in this swallowed place.(13)	Null	As it was meant to be sung, as unraveling scrolls of prayers fell out of the molten sky pieces of oblivion(9)

A. *The Speaker’s Weariness of Life*

As illustrated above, because of the influences of the death drive on the human being, some of us are afraid of devoting themselves to something, since we fear that the more we are devoted, the tenser fear we will get and the more desperate we will be when we lose it. This results in the speaker’s lifeless life. The second segment of the first part begins with the background of speaker’s living place “here in the **Village**, everyone owns a philosophy of fateful, exquisite reluctance; an air of ever skulking fatigue and deliciously illicit world-weariness”. And the Village is capitalized, which indicates the living place of speaker, the New York City or even the whole world. The speaker can not feel the passion or vitality of the world, but only the fatigue and world-weariness. In the fifth segment of the first part, the speaker further gives description about his living background, “the wind comes whistling through, a torrent of fat squirrels scamper out of the knurled snout of the haunted ancient oak under which I prefer to understand, deep in its moist luxuriant decay, attempting to pluck slivers of tranquility out of the shade of my seared brain, cloaked as it is in a desperate hum of fear”.

In the first part, the speaker is just describing the weariness of his living place, and in the second part, he expresses his fear of intimacy “they love dogs so much they vibrate, but like me, they can’t bear to own one. Anyone who’s ever owned one knows what owing love means” (the fifth segment of the second part). Although they are all obsessed to dog pet, they dare not have one since they fear they will lose the dog someday. When it comes to the third part, the speaker delivers his attitudes toward despair “about despair it must be said: only he can despair who is desperate...” (The fifteenth segment of the third part). That is only when we are absolutely devoted to something, can we feel desperate at its loss. He is giving the reason why he lives an indifferent life. At last, in the fourth part, although the speaker has realized the headspring of the despair, he can not escape such destination, accompanying with the despair. In the fifth segment of this part, the speaker is still wondering “If nothing is where I come from, return to, and am entitled to, what was I so afraid of losing”. It is obvious the speaker is still confused about his fear of losing something. In a word,

because of the poet's repression of death drive, the only outlet is the poem.

B. *The Death of Speaker's Father*

It is known that the fear of death has close relationship with the fear of abandonment by your siblings, by your friends, and even abandoned by your pet (the loss or the death of your pet). Once this abandonment hits someone, especially when one is in his or her childhood, it will become the trauma of him or her in terms of psychoanalytic theory. Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the psyche that occurs as a result of a traumatic event. When that trauma leads to posttraumatic stress disorder, damage may involve physical changes inside the brain and to brain chemistry, which damage the person's ability to adequately cope with stress. It is known that the father of the poet died early when he was young (eighteen years old), which resulted in the suffering of the poet and his mother. "After Dad died, mother returned to her old job filing invoices and I found work replacing DuPont's roof, along with twelve black men, not one of whom had ever worked with a white boy before; her fingers were swollen red with paper cuts, her eyes black shallows". This suffering makes the poet more inclined to the weariness of life, for he can not bear losing his beloved one anymore. And some reviewers even doubt the poet's pain about the death of his father. For it is seemed that the poet is describing his father's death as a bystander, "I understood Dad was sick of working [...] he was losing everything. I understood that he wanted to die". There are no sorrowful words describing the death of his father just "I understood". Besides, the father's death seems to be within his expectation. Actually, this kind of indifference is the mask of his pain of father's death. And the father's failure experiences also cast a shadow on the poet, "I understood Dad was sick of working fourteen hours a day", but until the death of his father, he can not understand why "he was losing everything". To conclude, the Dad has tried his utmost to do his business, the only thing he can get, unfortunately, is "failure". And all of these become the trauma of the poet, which results in the poet's living a lifeless life in New York City. What's more, dad is capitalized in the poem, which may attempt to universalize the figure of father or imply the Dad in the poem is the embodiment of God.

C. *The Speaker's Doubt about God's Presence*

During one interview, Philip Schultz said, "I thought it's funny that Jews don't have a guardian angel. I felt I should make up one". Therefore, one of his works is called "My Guardian Angel Stein" and the archetypes of Stein are probably his dedicated friend Yehud Amichai or to some extent his father. In the third segment of the third part, the poet writes, "O God full of mercy who dwells on high grant proper rest on the wings of the Divine Presence..." It is apparent that the Angel with wings can be interpreted as Father, one aspect of YHWH in Judaism. According to the Ten Commandments of Judaism, the Jews have to commit to the God's Presence and it is forbidden to doubt the presence of God and the Jews should not murder. While in the poem, the wings of Angel are broken, which indicates the loss of Angel's supernatural power. The poet doubts the power of Father for the Angel is the son of the God and the embodiment of the God. In the sixth segment of the first part, the poet is wondering: "is this what feels like to be dead, [I wondered,] a false hallelujah to swirl, flicker, and overflow, never again contrive to be anything more or less than a beginning, or middle, or end?". The compliment "hallelujah" to the God is modified by "false", which suggests the poet's irreverence. In the sixth segment of the third part, this irreverence goes further "If I was the kind who seeks God during an emergency and then is ashamed all his life [...]" While according to the basic beliefs of Judaism, there is one God who created and rules the world. This God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing) and omnipresent (in all places at all times). God is also just and merciful. It is a great satire that God is omnipotent, for he can not rescue his sons during an emergency. The speaker, the spokesman of the poet, is desperate for all his loss, the loss of his father and God. In a nutshell, the poet realizes he has lost everything and it is doomed he will be alone. Therefore, according to psychoanalysis, the only escape is death, the emotional death. It is natural, for a poet, the poem becomes his tool of catharsis (his loss of father in reality and the loss of God).

III. THE "WINGLESS" IN "THE WANDERING WINGLESS"

The Freudian theory is notorious for his pan-sexualism. No one can deny it is reasonable in some sense, though.

One of the major branches of Freudian theory is his interpretation of dreams. He interprets the dream as the speaking out of the unconscious. According to the Typographical Model of Freud, The unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them. The unconscious comes into being when we are very young through the repression of these unhappy psychological events and during sleep, the unconscious is to express itself, and it does so in our dreams. However, the unconscious does not express itself in explicit way, but in very covert way in the form of defense, condensation and displacement. Through displacement, we use a "safe" person, event, or object as a "stand-in" to represent a more threatening person, event, or object. Condensation occurs during a dream whenever we use a single image or event to represent more than one unconscious wound or conflict. Freud asserts that the unconscious will express its suppressed wishes and desires in the form of images or symbols in our dreams. For a writer, the text is the disguised form of his or her dream. A writer's chief motivation for writing any story is to gratify some secret desire, some forbidden wish that was suppressed in the unconscious and the writer's work is a dream containing a hidden meaning. Thus through the interpretation of the dream (or text), we can go deep into the writer's unconscious.

Another major notion of Freud theory is the theory of psychosexual development. According to Freud, in our childhood, all of us go through three overlapping phases: the oral, anal, and phallic stages. During the phallic stage, Oedipus complex, Castration complex and Electra complex are formed in terms of Freud. Freud asserts during the late infantile stage, all infant males possess an erotic attachment to their mother and they all consider their father as rivalry, this is called Oedipus complex. Then the infantile male becomes aware of differences between male and female genitalia, he assumes that the female's penis has been removed. He then becomes anxious that his penis will be cut off by his rival, the father figure, as punishment for desiring the mother figure, this is called castration anxiety.

Referring to "the Wandering Wingless", firstly, it can be considered as the representation of the poet's dream, the nightmare, the horrors of September 11, the death of his father, and the suffering after his father's death. It is seemed that the poet is describing his horrible experiences. Actually, it is just the catharsis of his castration anxiety and the self-punishment or self-torture for his murder of his father.

If "the Wandering Wingless" is analyzed as a dream, the first image comes to our sight is the "wingless". As stated in *the Interpretation of Dreams*, the flight or the bird is the symbol of male or intercourse. Thus the "wingless" may suggest the castration. In the fourth segment of the first part, it is seemed the poet is sketching his father's despair after the failure of business; however, it is more like describing the intercourse between mother and father.

Dad sold gaskets
Without which sewing machines
Stopped stitching
The more refined crotches
Of the Finger Lakes region
In upstate New York.
He liked to say
He tried to sell God
A second Sunday
But no one buys anything
On Sunday. When
His heart was failing
He'd sit on his bed
Staring at his hands, unable
To understand why
They were so angry.
Inside the sparkling graves
of his shoes
He'd stand wavering,
Arms hanging,
Chest heaving,
Each sigh intricately
Intertwined
in the infinitely
Variegated blasts
Of his broken breaths,
Waiting
For his strength
To return.

It is obvious that this is the erotic sight of Father and Mother. For Freud, the child perceives the father's attention to the mother as sexual. So in the poet's young experiences, he might witness some sight and he is willing to see his father's incompetence. In the fourteenth segment of the fourth part,

Beyond Golden Gate Park
I could hear *ocean waves*.
My hands were shaking.
What was I doing here,
In this *public pain*?
Everything I loved I feared.
Was this what failure was---
Endless fear? My face
Pressed against cold bars,
Every muscle
In the universe relaxed as piss flowed warm
And free down
Both my legs

All the way to hell.

The “ocean waves” can be interpreted as female, Mother. He wants to kick out father from the world between mother and him. However, he fears he will be castrated by his father. In order to release/let out this anxiety, he appeals to writing. In a nutshell, the wingless does not only indicate the poet’s castration anxiety but also suggests his displacement of his willingness of his father’s inability even father’s death. Then when his dreams come true (when his father is dead), he feels the sense of guilt and projects the sense of guilt onto his mental illness. In “the Wandering Wingless”, the Saint Vincet’ psych ward are mentioned several times and in the first segment of the fourth part, he began to punish himself “I got so sick of my voracious appetite for calamity, first I cut my left wrist and then my right one with funky Gillette and swallowed 15 meprobamates to stop the echoing in my waxy ears.”

IV. CONCLUSION

As the winner of Pulitzer Prize, it is seemed that “the Wandering Wingless” is describing some universal topics, the horrors of September 11, the affection for the intimate sibling, and his affection for the dog. However, through the Freudian reading, it can be safely concluded that the output of this poem is just the poet’s catharsis of his castration anxiety and the influences of death drive on him.

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