



Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz": A Waltz Macabre

by Eli Merchant

The dread experienced by the child in Theodore Roethke's poem, "My Papa's Waltz" is not immediately apparent, at least not on a first reading, particularly in view of the poem's smooth measured cadences, the neutral tone it takes to its narrative material, and the formalism characterizing its versification. In vain do we look for the prosodic irregularity (as we might in a Dickinson poem) that would dramatize the inner emotional dissonance and chaos. This dissociation between experience and affect makes it difficult to read the emotional impact of the events described in the poem either on the child as they occurred or on the narrator from the perspective of later years.

The poem is divided into four quatrains, each of which corresponds neatly to each stage of the narrative, from the moment when the father waltzes with the boy to the point when he puts him to bed clinging to his shirt. The iambic meter, with three iambs to the line, and the rhyme scheme *abab*, where the first and third and second and fourth lines rhyme, are consistently maintained throughout the poem except for a few terminal unaccented syllables and feminine rhymes at the end of some of the lines. The syntax is easy to follow, without the caesural breaks, syntactical convolutions or erratic punctuation that simultaneously bedazzle and befuddle the Dickinson reader at the edge of conscious thought and rational speech. The imagery is subdued, with negatives ("Such waltzing was not easy") and subjunctive mood ("The whiskey on your breath/ Could make a small boy dizzy") mitigating its impact.¹ Yet the impression is hard to avoid that something traumatic has left a permanent scar on the child's psyche, as portrayed through sinister word choices ("hung on like death"), the emphasis on stark physical details, (i.e., the whiskeyed breath, the battered knuckle), and the compelling need to apostrophize the father (the "you" of the poem).

The narrative facts are simple and few. The father ("papa") comes home drunk seemingly after a hard day's work and possibly a bout at the bar, and begins the waltz with the son that gives the poem its title. The dance is erratic as the father lurches and his belt buckle scrapes the son's

ear, while his palm “caked hard by dirt” beats time on the boy’s head. The dance takes the pair into the kitchen causing the shelved pans to slide with the mother demonstrating her no uncertain displeasure, and ends as abruptly as it began when the father waltzes his son off to bed.

What appears to be at play in causing the son’s dread is that the dance represents a psychological rather than physical assault. Judging by his height (he reaches the father’s belt buckle), and general helplessness, the son is probably between three and five, an important stage in his development when he is involved with both parents, develops a sense of masculine identity, and endeavors to reconcile the masculine and feminine aspects of his identity.² When the drunken father dances with him and stimulates him by contact with his bodily parts—the calloused hands, the whiskeyed breath, the belt buckle (close to the genital area)—he subverts his son’s budding manhood, foisting an essentially feminine identification on him.³ The reference to the kitchen where the pans are shelved, the mother’s domain, strategically advances this feminine identification, symbolically and thematically, particularly in view of the year of the poem’s publication, 1949. The child is being subjected to an excess of erotic stimulation that overwhelms his psyche and exceeds what his ego can sustain, anticipate or cope with.

What complicates the situation is that on some level, given the fluidity and ambiguity of his gender identification, the boy may enjoy the waltz and the stimulating fatherly attention it involves. Witness the syntactical change in the second stanza from the second person singular “you” to the first person plural “we,” reflecting a more active and robust collaboration:

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;

Hence the mother’s stern rigid reaction, whose “countenance could not unfrown itself,” similarly seared into the narrator’s memory can be seen from the child’s perspective as a reproach for colluding to displace her in the spousal relation and usurp her feminine function, undermining the stability of the domestic situation.

Although the poem concludes with the child’s being waltzed off to bed, it is not clear given the ambiguous meaning of the word “bed” whether this in fact represents the cessation of the evening’s frenetic actions or their escalation to an even more intensely stimulative level.⁴

What renders the situation difficult to decode is that it resembles the kind of roughhousing or horse playing in which many fathers and sons engage.⁵ But a crucial difference has to be recognized. The sober father who engages in this activity is conscious of his surroundings and sensitive to his child’s emotions, and thus he can choreograph the steps within well defined limits, exercising his parental role and function even during play. Above all, he can demarcate

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

the boundary between fantasy and reality, distinguishing a real waltz with its sexual connotation from an imitation and mockery of one. Such a dance, involving trust, dependency, and mutual participation, is pleasurable as experience and recollection: It is “easy.”

The situation is totally different in the poem, where the drunken father (“papa”) demonstrates no control over his stumbling movements or sensitivity to his surroundings. A titular father defined purely by his physical characteristics, a child in an adult’s body, he is no more able to distinguish fantasy from reality than his son. As a result, the dance assumes a grim autonomous existence, gaining momentum at every turn, following a self-determined course to an unpredictable conclusion, a veritable *waltz macabre*. Such a dance, to use the narrator’s understatement with which he seeks to defend himself against the psychic blow, is “not easy.” (l. 4.)

Does the narrative poem, with its understatement, indirectness, negation and even double negatives (“My mother’s countenance/ Could not unfrown itself”) give us a full or partial account of the sequence of events, owing its effectiveness to omission rather than inclusion? It may be instructive at this point to compare the poem to a moving, much anthologized chapter in Sherwood Anderson’s *Memoirs*, “Discovery of a Father.” Anderson describes how his father, a compulsive liar, boaster and exhibitionist, a teller of egregious tall tales, who absents himself from the household for weeks, has practically succeeded in thoroughly alienating his son: “I was often filled with bitterness,” Anderson tells us, “and sometimes I wished he wasn’t my father.”⁶ One night his father returns home unexpectedly and tells his son to follow him into the stormy night. They arrive at a pond where the son is told to strip and get into the water. While the father’s sudden harsh hortative tone is obviously frightening, particularly as the night is punctuated by thunder, lightning and rain, the son’s reactions are as understated as in Roethke’s poem. In a postscript, however, swimming silently side by side with his father he discovers a new side to him: responsible, serious, sensitive, dependable, powerful, a genuine father he can bond and identify with, motivating him to becoming a teller of tales in turn. As Anderson writes, “For the first time I knew that I was the son of my father. He was a story teller as I was to be.” (p. 49)

Parent and child, masculine and feminine, present and future are reunited as they return from the pond and its baptismal immersion home to the lit snugness of the kitchen and the mother’s welcoming presence:

There was a lamp lighted in the kitchen and when we came in, the water dripping from us, there was my mother. She smiled at us. I remember that she called us “boys.” (p. 49)

Roethke’s poem offers us no such postscript. Taking us to the edge of the precipice, the poet does not indicate what happens afterwards, leaving the reader’s imagination to fill in the lacunae. Does the poem imitating the waltz in its beat and rhythmic cadences show a successful bonding and identification with the father, constituting a nostalgic tribute to him and demonstrating the power of art in mastering instinct and emotion? Or does the poem despite its seeming rhythmic perfection, narratological simplicity, and posture of innocence, represent an ultimately failed attempt to exorcise the specter of a childhood experience, taking us to place where art and memory cannot follow?

It is this rich and complex ambiguity that gives “My Papa’s Waltz” its resonance and esthetic efficacy, allowing it to deal with the dissonances and contradictions of human experience, particularly childhood experience, and our responses to them.

End Notes

¹ Theodore Roethke *The Last Son*, London: John Lehmann, p. 25, l. 4, ll.1-2, respectively.

² Robert Fliess, *Ego and Body Ego*, New York, International Press, 1961, in his notes on Hamlet indicates the conflicting constellations of a child's masculine and feminine identifications and their effect on adult development, which may shed light on the psychological dynamics here.

³ It is interesting to note that a study of the work-in-progress papers left by Roethke to the University of Washington demonstrates a change from "girl" in the first draft to "boy" in the succeeding one, indicating the ambiguous nature of a child's gender identification. See John J. McKenna, "Roethke's Revisions and the Tone of 'My Papa's Waltz,'" *ANQ*, Spring 98, Vol. 11, Issue 2, p. 34.

⁴ If as has been pointed out the word "waltz off" in the last line acquires a meaning different from its previous one, so the word "bed" could acquire a connotative one fraught with sexual connotations. See Ronald R. Janssen, "Roethke's MY PAPA'S WALTZ," *Explicator* 44.2 (Winter 86): 43-44.

⁵ See X.J. Kennedy, *An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 4th ed., Boston, Little Brown, 1987, p. 51. John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* 2nd ed., Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1975 takes a different tack and describes the terror infusing the poem's mood.

⁶ Sherwood Anderson, *Memoirs*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1942, pp. 45-48.

