

Journal 8

Linguistics, English



21 March The Political, the Poetic, and the Portrayal of Clashing Death-Denying Ideologies Because people fear death, some of them feel the need to annihilate those who differ from them. In *Flight from Death*, director Patrick Shen claims that death anxiety drives all human attitudes and behaviors. To develop a deeper interpretation of the film (the primary text), this paper uses Heather McHugh's poem "What He Thought," as the secondary text. The poem answers the question about the different ways that people annihilate others to preserve their death-denying belief systems. McHugh's "What He Thought" demonstrates, through enjambment, metaphor, irony, and oxymoron, that the political is also poetic, wherein the poetic confirms the death-denying ideologies of people through the oxymoron of a silent poet.

"What He Thought" uses enjambment to depict that political actions are poetic, in the sense that they reflect the innermost emotions, which are present in *Flight from Death*: death anxiety and the need to safeguard death-denying ideologies. The studies in the film, which aim to prove the influence of death anxiety on human attitudes and behaviors, establish that, when reminded of their death, people tend to support more those who are similar to them. One of the enjambments in "What He Thought" helps American poets connect to Italian poets: "...Among Italian writers we/could recognize our counterparts: the academic,/the apologist, the arrogant, the amorous,/the brazen and the glib" (McHugh 11-14). The American poets are not comfortable with differences because they will fear the Italians as potential reminders of death, so they seek to find similarities between them as much as possible. Furthermore, identifying similarities should go beyond

having the same interest in literature, but also in politics, because politics is an important way of affirming life. McHugh's inclusion of the German suggests historical differences between American and German politics: "where it must have been abandoned by/the German visitor (was there a bus of them?)..." (27-28). The enjambment suggests a tone of superiority against the Germans, as if a bus of them is an affront to a bus of Americans. These enjambments emphasize the need of poets to be related to fellow poets, or else they will feel conscious of linguistic, political, and cultural differences, differences that remind them of their deaths.

Aside from enjambment, McHugh uses metaphors and irony to illustrate the clashes that arise from the interaction between different death-denying beliefs. The metaphor of God as something that is "...poured in waves, through/all things: all things/move" (McHugh 58-60) does not sit well with people who believe that the center of the universe is humanity. This superior thinking of humanity helps people deal with death anxiety, but Giordano Bruno challenges this fundamental thinking. The opponents of Bruno believe that God cannot be in everything that moves because it suggests that dead people do not have God inside them anymore. Thus, they killed him for promoting a heretic belief that opposes their death-denying ideology. However, it is ironic that the people who persecuted Bruno misinterpreted him. Bruno claims that God is the inner essence of existence, "...he is the soul OF THE SOUL of the world" (McHugh 61), including that which does not exist, but moves as a form of energy, including spiritual energy. God is inside the soul which always moves, not only physically, but spiritually. Despite differences in death-denying ideologies, people forget their common interest,

which is the universal underlying desire to live beyond their deaths through their different conceptions of what and who God/s is/are.

Finally, McHugh uses oxymoron to encapsulate the diverse ways that people annihilate “the Other,” an annihilation that supports the causal desire of people to deny their deaths through exterminating differences. The fruits and vegetables in the poem cannot be poetry because at least they served their purpose, while a poet who is silenced with a mask is an oxymoron, the true poetry of death anxiety: “poetry is what he thought, but did not say” (McHugh 74). The poem provides a new image of annihilation- the annihilation of freedom of speech. Without speech, a poet is not free to express himself. He is not free to express ideas that contest the majority. He is not free to change the world from conformity to diversity. Poetry is a way of proving the death-denying ideologies of people, wherein the political is poetic, and the poetic supports people’s need to challenge death.

The poem “What He Thought” is another lens that connects McHugh’s thinking with death anxiety. Poetry is embedded in the political actions behind Bruno’s death. Politics is the force that took his freedom of speech. It figuratively slit his tongue away because of the overwhelming desire to preserve only one death-denying ideology. The fear of death is so devastatingly powerful that it is better to kill a person than to have him challenge the existing death-denying ideology. The unfortunate reality, nevertheless, is that these people share the same desire for life, and yet, they ended up killing one another because of death anxiety. Fear of death becomes the cause of death itself.

Works Cited

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