

The Semiotic and the Symbolic: The Rejuvenative Effect of Writing in Mary Steele's "Sonnet, 1795"

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the eighteenth-century British poet, Mary Steele's "Sonnet, 1795" in terms of the recuperative power of the act of writing and the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. The study suggests that the sonnet serves as the poetic testament to the symbolic and the real life of the historical author who aims to manage her emotional suffering and mental agony via the therapeutic act of writing. The female author has a confrontation with what is to be repressed on the symbolic through the poetic production on the semiotic that bears a witness to her traumatic experiences and physical losses. Through negation and sublimation, the author attains to order her chaotic cognitive and affective states and develop an awareness about the subconsciousness and what psychologically ails her. Therefore, she does not intend to improve her poetic abilities and self-actualize as an aspiring author being in search of a feminine sublime, but rather seeks refuge against the symbolic and applies poetry as a therapeutic device and a way of escaping from the reality. Within this context, there is a correlation between the symbolic and the semiotic, between the authorial interest in poetry and the inner motives of the female poet. Against this background, the study employs the theory of Julia Kristeva regarding the liaison between the literary creation and the literary figure, the redemptive power the poetics offers for the authorial persona and the renewing effect of the poetic production.

Keywords: Mary Steele, the semiotic, the symbolic, writing, Julia Kristeva

SEMİYOTİK VE SEMBOLİK: MARY STEELE'İN "SONE 1795" ESERİNDE YAZMANIN İYİLEŞTİRİCİ ETKİSİ

Öz

Bu makale, on sekizinci yüzyıl İngiliz şairi Mary Steele'in "Sone, 1795" adlı eserini yazma eyleminin iyileştirici gücü ve semiyotikle sembolik arasındaki ilişki açısından incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma sonenin, duygusal acısını ve zihinsel ıstırabını terapötik yazma eylemiyle yönetmeyi amaçlayan tarihsel yazarın sembolik ve gerçek yaşamının şiirsel kanıtı olarak hizmet ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Kadın yazar, travmatik deneyimlerine ve fiziksel kayıplarına tanıklık eden semiyotik düzlemdeki şiirsel üretim aracılığıyla sembolik düzlemde bastırılması gerekenle yüzleşir. Nesnelleştirme ve yüceltme yoluyla yazar, kaotik bilişsel ve duyuşsal durumlarını düzenlemeye ve bilinçaltına dair bir farkındalık geliştirerek psikolojik olarak kendisini neyin rahatsız ettiğini anlamayı başarır. Bu nedenle, kadınsı bir yücelik arayışında olan bir yazar olarak edebi yeteneklerini geliştirmeyi ve kendini gerçekleştirme amaçlamaz; daha çok semiyotik olana sığınır ve şiiri terapötik bir araç ve gerçeklik ile sembolikten kaçınmanın bir yolu olarak kullanır. Bu bağlamda sembolik olanla semiyotik

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olan arasında, yazarın şiire olan ilgisi ile kadın şairin içsel sebepleri arasında bir ilişki vardır. Bu arka plandan hareketle, çalışma, Julia Kristeva'nın edebi eser ile edebi figür arasındaki ilişkiyi, poetikanın yazar için sunduğu kurtarıcı gücü ve poetik üretimin yenileyici etkisini ele alan teorisini kullanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Mary Steele, semiyotik, sembolik, yazma, Julia Kristeva

INTRODUCTION

The British poet Mary Steele (1753-1813) is one of the woman writers that published anonymously¹ during the eighteenth century. Being born into a Nonconformist family, she is raised within a cultivated circle and forms friendship with the other female literary figures of her era, establishing her own coterie of artists. Her father, William Steele IV (1715-1785) is the leading representative of the first-generation Steele circle, penning poems under nom de plume Philander. Her aunt, Anne Steele² (1717-1748) is an accomplished poet³ and her mentor, assuming the pseudonym Theodosia in her literary works. Having an intellectual circle of female literary friends besides a family of genteel breeding for the members of which she writes with/for, Mary Steele⁴ exchanges poems with the fellows of her coterie and composes verses under the pen name Sylvia as “Mary Steele exhibited a lifelong commitment to her poetry and her coterie of female kindred spirits. She also relied heavily upon a particular pastoral persona, hinted at in her first poem, as well as in her choice of the nom de plume “Sylvia,” a name derived from the Latin word “Silvia” (a spelling also used by Steele), which means “woods” or “forest” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 54). In this respect, appearing a repeated theme and convention in the eighteenth-century British poetry “much of which was written without high literary ambitions” (Backscheider, 2005, p. 3), the subject of female friendship demonstrates itself in her poems and “such manifestations of friendship are not uncommon within the female poetic of the eighteenth century; many poems of this type “present friendship as a serious rival to marriage”” (Holmes, 2008, p. 176). In a very real sense, having a literary coterie intellectually inspires and stimulates the poet during her lifetime, particularly at the initial stages of construction of a poetic female self and finding her own voice. The habit of gathering with the literary acquaintances in the typically famous literary salons of the eighteenth-century Britain, “where female poets were emerging with increasing frequency” (Holmes, 2008, p. 13) as a distinctive marker of the eighteenth-century tradition of the female literary companionship tremendously contributes to the literary development of the poet. This Bluestocking Circle that represents “an informal society of

¹ The poet accordingly owns a published volume of poetry, as “Mary Steele’s poetry remains largely unpublished with the exception of one small obscure volume and another single poem published separately” (Holmes, 2008, p. 87).

² Steele’s aunt, Anne Steele holds particular significance at Mary’s pursuit of a literary career despite her relatively short life since “Anne Steele had a profound influence upon Mary Steele and her circle of friends, though the second generation diverged widely from their mentor. Anne Steele never married, devoting her life to her poetry and extended family at Broughton” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 3). Anne Steele lived as a dedicated poet, rejecting gender roles and the suitors.

³ Anne Steele is known to be “the celebrated hymn writer” and “the author of *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* (1760)” (Whelan, 2015b, p. 511).

⁴ Mary Steele is the head of the second-generation Steele circle and her only published work is *Danebury; or the Power of Friendship*. She begins to “le[a]d the second generation, after which the poet and novelist Maria Grace Andrews Saffery (1772-1858) inherited the mantle” (Whelan, 2015b, p. 511).

intelligent and literary young women (and men) who scorned typical domestic accomplishments, pursuing instead moral, intellectual and philanthropic pursuits" (Holmes, 2008, p. 14) thus turns out to be mostly a homosocial community that plays an important part in the literary advancement of the female poet and female poetic tradition as a whole.

The dissenting family background of Steele provides her with an intellectual nourishment and artistic aspirations from a very early age, her religious identity profoundly shaping her literary identity and style of life. These Dissenters or the English Nonconformists refer to the Protestant Christians who do not conform to the Anglican Church and "those Protestant groups that organized themselves outside the established Anglican Church in England and Wales came to be known as Dissenters or Nonconformists, and often experienced discrimination at the hands of the state church and the secular authorities" (Sayer, 2011, p. 115). Their worshipping outside of the Church of England leads them to be socially excluded⁵ and encourages them to compensate for this state with the feelings of superiority and a neurotic quest for power which manifest themselves mostly in the form of intellectual pursuits, literary ambitions, assuming power and acquiring prestige through knowledge. Since "historically Protestant Dissenters have trodden on the outskirts of social and political acceptance in England, and until the nineteenth century, were subject to numerous social, political, and educational restrictions" (Holmes, 2008, p. 14), they are moreover compelled and motivated to make up for this loss of liberty and the presence of constraints through making a major contribution to the literary and educational realms of the nation and share their political opinion in an outspoken manner. In a way, instead of trying to win an acceptance and to eliminate deep-rooted prejudices, they aim to prove and maintain their intellectual superiority through reading voraciously and writing extensively.

The literary coterie of Mary Steele is correspondingly composed of these Dissenting women writers that belong to the Bluestocking Society, a literary circle whose primary aim is "the circulating and preserving of informal manuscript writings (usually poems, letters, diaries, and prose discourses and historical narratives) among the members of a close-knit community" (Whelan, 2014, p. 441). As to the definition of Bluestocking, "in its broadest sense, the term refers to women who are socially prominent not because they are aristocrat, and not always because they are wealthy, but because of their learning, because they are women of letters" (Guest, 2002, p. 60). This circle⁶ refers to "the group of women writers we now think of as the Bluestockings were, on the whole, a conservative group - conservative in their political inclinations as well as in their attitudes to class and to sexuality" (Guest, 2002, p. 59) and the major function of these literary circles is explained as "the Bluestockings and other literary groups organized by women promoted discussion of women's intellect and education, if not in their topics of discussion, certainly in their writings and as social models of autonomy" (Ferguson, 1987, p. 360).

⁵ This social exclusion of the Dissenters in a way causes them to be stigmatized, being unfairly and falsely labelled, as "the historical scars left by Matthew Arnold's famous (mis-)characterization of nonconformists as "Philistines" and religious bigots" (deVries, 2016, p. 182).

⁶ Whelan (2015b) suggests that "although never a formal 'club' or 'society', the nonconformist women (and men) who comprised these circles chose to reveal their connectivity primarily through informal means, such as occasional poems, personal diaries and letters, as well as social gatherings in private dwellings" (p. 511).

The historical transformation in the meaning of the Bluestocking is revealed through the associations and collocations it acquires within time, since “in the 1750s and 1760s, the term “Bluestocking” was used of the salon circles around Montagu, Boscawen, and Vesey in London, Bath, and Dublin” (Pohl & Schellenberg, 2002, p. 4) while “the late 1770s saw a change in usage of the term “Bluestocking”; increasingly it referred to the women of the groups only and, as Gary Kelly suggests, was used by those “who feared or felt excluded from Bluestocking Society,” thus preparing the way for the later pejorative” (Pohl & Schellenberg, 2002, p. 5). This Nonconformist⁷ scholarly circle of Mary Steele is inherently based upon female literary friendship⁸ and “Mary Steele and her literary friends existed primarily on the fringes of society, removed from the hustle and bustle of the more fashionable locales of commerce and society; as the daughters of Nonconformists, they were even further marginalized because of their beliefs” (Holmes, 2008, p. 39). Hence, they devote their times and lives to the art of poetry and other types of literary activities, disregarding the conventional gender assumptions assigned to the traditional notion of womanhood prevailing the era. The dissenting cultural background of these women stimulates them to turn their whole attention to the literary companionship and self-improvement while it accordingly promotes the female fellowship. In a similar vein, this demonstrates itself with the romanticization of the female friendship in their poetic works, since “friendship poems, in their idealization of female companionship, represented to many of the young women who read and wrote them the possibility of a happy life without marriage” (Holmes, 2008, p. 62). Furthermore, the written output of these female circles are accordingly significant for the researchers to delve into the eighteenth-century literature, as “these scribal coteries offer fertile ground for research into how eighteenth-century women’s literary networks were formed, how they spread and were sustained across various regions of the country and, more particularly, how such networks enriched the social, intellectual and aesthetic lives of their members” (Whelan, 2015b, p. 511). In brief, these dissenting female voices of the period glory in their Nonconformist homosocial society, free from all types of social constructs, gender roles and religious bigotry, engaging solely with literary pursuits and sophisticated activities while the literary identity and the career path of Steele

⁷ A clear-cut distinction should be drawn between the Bluestockings of the Anglican Church and those with the Dissenting ideology. The former covers “these informal gatherings united men and women primarily of the gentry and upper classes, with the participation of a number of more middle-class professionals, in the pursuit of intellectual improvement, polite sociability, the refinement of the arts through patronage, and national stability through philanthropy” (Pohl & Schellenberg, 2002, p. 2). The Anglican circle is for the most part for the members of the aristocracy and represented by Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen, who “were all close friends and eager correspondents” (Pohl & Schellenberg, 2002, p. 2) and who symbolize the first generation of the Bluestockings. The latter signifies the circle of female writers of Nonconformist ideology, who, within this context, refers to Mary Steele, Anne Steele, Mary Scott, Elizabeth Coltman and other writers within their circle. In this regard, the former turns out to be more conservative and antifeminist, particularly regarding the sexual conduct of the female sex and other issues related with female virtue and feminine body whereas the latter proves to be more liberal and feminist, resisting against the female gender roles socially imposed upon women. Therefore, “in this place - one characterized by a shift from the dominance of political and status - defined factions in the 1760s and early 1770s to increasingly rigid gender-defined and ideologically driven divisions between public and private” (Pohl & Schellenberg, 2002, p. 15). In a nutshell, each ideology produces its own intellectual circle and the suitable styles of life as well as literary representations of the writers’ worldview.

⁸ The Bluestocking Society involves the male members as well till the end of the eighteenth century and the female ones have an intellectual exchange with the men for “they spent much of their time socializing with men” (Guest, 2002, p. 59). However, it should be highlighted that these men are as marginalized as their female contemporaries.

is formed and forged basically by her intellectual family, her Protestant ideology and her literary coterie. Within this framework, the present paper aims to analyse the sonnet of Steele with regard to the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, and the close link between the literary creation and the verbalization of the depressive affect. The study investigates the therapeutic effect of the act of writing and the ways it helps the writing subject have a confrontation with the repressed and reconstruct a new self and identity for herself as well as for the implied readers. Through textualization of the physical loss and the related emotional pain, the authorial persona achieves in existing on the symbolic and overcoming the denial of the signifier, redirecting the urges of aggression into the text itself rather than the self. Yet, it should be underlined that the poet creates not for art's sake in this period of her life but for her own sake and psychological well-being, aiming to alleviate the heavy heart burdened with the anxiety of loss and separation and to purify the consciousness and memory from the destructive image of the dead and lost, the past and present. The paper is chiefly based upon the terminology of Kristeva concerning the significance of the act of writing and its function as a therapeutic means. It accordingly applies the close reading strategies to find and critically interpret the verbal indicators within the narrative.

WRITING ON THE AGONY AND THE AGONY OF WRITING

Writing on and out of pure experience enables the subject to fully comprehend and clearly perceive the quintessence of that experience at a level of consciousness, ultimately overcoming the affect or, at least, manage the perception of it. Each narrative constructed out of that subjective experience is thus accepted as the linguistic evidence and textual testimony of the neurosis. The readers become able to detect the symptoms and verbal markers of the mood, disorder or disease of the writer via the act of reading while the writer comes to understand through writing what afflicts him/herself, whether s/he mourns for the lost self, the lost object/thing or the loss of sense of loss or suffers from mere delusions. Therefore, the acts of reading and writing become interrelated and interdependent, an intricate dance and interactive play between the readers and the writer, the text and the writer as well as between the readers and the narrative. In a similar vein, while the writer rereads and reviews what has been constructed so far, besides during the act of writing, s/he is to fully grasp the core of her agony as well as the agony of writing, which turns out to be comparatively trivial to the former, and turns out to be a representation of what is accepted as transconscious.

The common symptom of neurosis and depression demonstrates itself with "the object loss and a modification of signifying bonds" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 10) on the symbolic in a way that the subject is enforced to have asymbolia and inhibition. The symbolic breakdown of the subject is induced by the functioning of language as an anxiety-punishment mechanism instead of a "rewards system" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 10) so that in silence and sadness the subject is reunited with the lost thing/object or the lost self. Even the tears that are shed replace the loss and evoke the desire for an eventual reunion in a way. These states of withdrawal and the ensuing lapses of silence reveal "intolerance for object loss and the signifier's failure to insure a compensating way" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 10) out of the collapse and persistent depression. The neurosis thereupon leads

to alterations and impairment on the symbolic characterized by muteness, pretension of death and at times attempts of suicide.

The neurotic subject unconsciously aims to compensate for the symbolic breakdown through the attempt to hold onto and remain on another level, the semiotic. "Identification with the loved-hated object other, through incorporation-introjection-projection" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 11) and its manifestation as neurotic depression is only managed with sublimation in the form of "melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole "container" seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 14). Therefore, the loss of meaning invoked by asymbolia and rejection of the signifier is replaced and reconstructed through literary production. Kristeva defines the act of producing literary output as such: "Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect- to sadness as imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol, which I try to harmonize in the best possible way with my experience of reality" (1989, p. 22). Hence, the author transposes and transfigures the agony and the affect into a poetic form so that "the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 22). Through writing, the subject begins to identify with the poetic form itself, rather than the affect, achieving in existing on the signifying system and resisting against the symbolic breakdown and the bouts of depression.

The depression that afflicts the subject leads to the denial of the signifier so that the language s/he is forced to speak is characterized by the presence of repetitions, mutism and monotony, sentences, phrases and statements that are broken and recurring, chaotic and nonsensical. The absence of the thing/object reveals itself with the presence of "the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 33) besides the gaps in understanding and symbolic bonding. Since language is translation, "all translatability becomes impossible" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 42) and depression brings about asymbolia and the loss of meaning since "if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and die" (p. 42). Depression thereupon symbolizes the impending death, and the subject that remains muted ends up losing the subjectivity, ultimately committing suicide to be reunited with that nonsignifiable thing.

The denial the subject experiences on the symbolic is solely managed with negation on the semiotic. The former refers to "the rejection of the signifier as well as the semiotic representatives of drives and affects" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 44) whereas the latter is explained as "the intellectual process that leads the repressed to representation on the condition of denying it, and on that account, shares in the signifier's advent" (p. 44). Thereupon, the subject chooses to reject what she represents through imaginary constructions and a literary form rather than the signifying system, destroying the muteness instead of the self, concealing that thing from even herself through denial in art and science (Horney, 2017, p. 153). In this regard, negation enables the subject to bring the unconscious desire into the level of consciousness and intellectually accept it, yet s/he still keeps the thing within, never replacing the loss but rather releasing the depressive affect in a way that it provides a redemptive power for the suffering subject who recreates a new identity and

reconstructs a new self as an author. This depressive affect which is “considered as the only traces of object constancy that depressive people maintain” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 48) and ultimately replaces the lost object ends up with a masochistic display of inconsolable sadness that turns into “their ambiguous source of pleasure that fills a void and evicts death, protecting the subject from suicide as well as from psychotic attack” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 48). The act of writing accordingly narcotizes the consciousness of the author whereas the perusal of such a narrative eventually has a rejuvenative impact upon the implied readers.

The subject remains on the verge of suicide and psychosis if s/he insistently prefers the denial of signifier to negation. Within time, s/he is seduced to feel deeply estranged to her innermost self and experiences the gradual disintegration of the ego and a split within. It accordingly has an adverse effect upon “subjective identity itself and sexual identity” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 48). The depressed subject becomes a foreigner to his/her mother tongue which turns out to be devoid of meaning and totally absurd so that “language and life have no meaning” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 51). Via the semiotic, the depressed subject resurrects on the textual realm since;

On the contrary, the work of art that insures the rebirth of its author and its reader or viewer is one that succeeds in integrating the artificial language it puts forward (new style, new composition, surprising imagination) and the unnamed agitations of an omnipotent self that ordinary social and linguistic usage always leave somewhat or plunged into mourning. Hence, such a fiction, if it isn't an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection... (Kristeva, 1989, p. 51)

The act of writing transforms the unconsciousness of the subject into a new ideal or other so that it fosters a mild relationship with the self. Even though “with and beyond ideology, writing remains- a painful, continuing struggle to compose a work edge to edge with the unnameable sensuous delights of destruction and chaos” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 187), it offers the writer eventual forgiveness which is “essential to sublimation, that leads the subject to a complete identification (real, imaginary, and symbolic) with the very agency of the ideal” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 207). Through the identification with the third form and an ideal other, the subject undergoes a marked change. The depressive affect that proves to be the only symptom of the lost thing is accordingly transposed owing to the fact that “at the boundaries of emotion and action, writing comes into being only with through the moment of the negation of the affect so that the effectiveness of signs might be born. Writing causes the *affect* to slip into the *effect* – *actus purus* as Aquinas might say” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 217). Therefore, writing is a transformative act in itself and a possible way of translating the affect as well as simultaneously transposing it. It is a sublime act that recreates a bond with the symbolic and the imaginary, being a harbinger of the resurrection and reawakening of the writer.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE: MARY STEELE'S "SONNET, 1795"

Oh long neglected Poesy, to Thee
I give my Soul! —and woo those viewless Powers
Whose sweet Enchantments in Life's early Hours
Could from each low born care my Spirit free.

Ye beauteous Forms, ye Dear Illusions stay,
 Ah no! They fade, they vanish into Air;
 See in their stead pale Grief and haggard care
 Advancing quick to seize their wonted prey.
 Oh spread thy dark impenetrable veil,
 Pitying Oblivion, o'er the painful past!
 Must parting Agonies forever last?
 Will no kind Hand yon Scene of Death conceal?
 Ah no, with Consciousness must Anguish live
 Nor Time himself a kind Exemption give.
 (Whelan, 2015a, p. 68)

Steele entitles her sonnet a specific date which reveals the significance of that year in the life of the historical author⁹ in lieu of a common phrase or expression that fits the content of the narrative best. Whelan states that she often scribbles dates and places in her notebook while writing and prefers to pen her poems under that title since “her attention to time and place reflects the autobiographical nature of scribal poetry common to eighteenth-century female literary coterie, each poem representing a “spot of time” that could easily have found its way into a diary or a letter” (2015a, p. 4-5). This may indicate that the poet constructs the narrative under investigation as a result of her intense emotions for a specific sorrowful occasion characterized by the presence of absence as well as a reflection of a literary convention prevailing the period and peculiar to the female poetic tradition. With regard to the tragic past events in the life of the author, it should be highlighted that the focal point for the poem provides might be said to be associated with the subsequent demises of the members of the Steele circle and the dissolution of the coterie. The decease of the father, William Steele IV in 1785, the passing of the aunt, Anne in 1748, the demise of her close friend as well as a prominent member of her literary coterie The Bluestocking Society, Marie Scott in 1793 and the eventual death of the mother following a long period of illness all contribute to the bouts of depression of the authorial persona who precisely gives the sonnet the year as the title which might be explored as at its peak. The persona seems to be afflicted with chronic depression that is gradually aggravated by and evolves into a form of melancholy triggered by the emergence of physical losses in this sense. The year 1795 seems to be one of the most pathetic years of the authorial persona surrounded by misfortunes and a co-existing symbolic sign of restoration and recovery since she rediscovers her existence and resurrects on the semiotic and textual realm once again after so many years.

The narrative begins with an invocation to the art of poetry, rather than the muses, and a heartfelt plea for a reunion with the art and the act of writing. The persona's addressing to the poetry itself instead of the literary muses reveals that she does not intend to write in search of a feminine sublime or for the sake of art but for her own sake, and derive creative inspiration not from the muses but from the text/poetics and the act of writing so that she might regain strength

⁹ The historical author refers to the real writer of the text while the implied author is “a textual and fictional construct” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 90-91).

and reconstruct a new self with the help of semiotic which marks a gradual transition from the symbolic and bears a cathartic quality. The persona thus displays that she has “neglected” (line 1) penning poems for a long while and desires to unbosom “my soul” (line 2) and heart directly to the text and indirectly to the implied readers. In a way, the poem might be compared to a daily journal the historical author keeps and turns out to be the verbalization of a soul in torment appealing for help, as “her poetry is, above all else, the poetry of her life, the “language” of her “soul,” her “feelings,” and every thought worth expressing” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 86).

The persona expresses a wistful longing for the ancient past when life seems to spark a wave of euphoria for herself, her family and her circle of intimate female friends. Those hopes she has initially cherished for the future and the art of poetry along with her literary coterie seems now at an end, since “it does seem as if Sylvia’s most productive years are behind her at this point, in spite of her impending publication” (Holmes, 2008, p. 36). Thus, her dejection is related with the loss of self and the absence of former self in addition to the loss of literary aspirations and artistic ambitions that are now transformed into a mere survival skill rather than an aesthetic pleasure, since “her desire for poetry now exceeds the aesthetic pleasure she felt in her youth” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 69). For that reason, she entreatingly asks “those viewless Powers” (line 2) to abide a little longer so that she might find at least a momentary rejuvenation and recuperation. The hypnotic spell of this mental state and images of happy times in addition to the co-occurring elated mood prove sufficient and effective in rekindling the memories of a bygone era, and purifying the memory and consciousness of the authorial persona from the burden of the agony of the past and present and “from each low born care” (line 4). For the same exultant mood to linger, she begs once again of “Beauteous Forms” (line 5) and “Dear Illusions” (line 5) to stick around to no avail, as she is already aware that she is to relinquish and “they fade, they vanish into Air” (line 6).

It proves arduous to retain the happy tranquillity those remembrances invoke due to the striking contrast between the past and the present, the confusion between the dream and the reality, the hiatus between the internal experience and the external world. The feeling of serenity is thereupon replaced by the “pale Grief and haggard care” (line 7) as the residue of the poignant and painful past of the persona. The signifier “grief” (line 7) is crucially important for revealing the affective state of the author for it symbolizes the psychological distress caused by the bereavement. Lamenting all those physical and spiritual losses as well as the loss of literary talent and imaginative powers, and the accompanying anxiety obliterate the inner peace and coherent self of the persona, for “certainly, the death of her favored aunt, literary mentor, and the center of the literary circle of young women must have been a great disappointment to Sylvia as well as the other young women with whom she corresponded” (Holmes, 2008, p. 36). She begins to battle against the fits of prolonged melancholia and depression due to the recurring losses and separations as “a profound melancholy pervaded Mary Steele’s life in 1791–92, just after the death of Mrs. Steele and the departure (via marriage) of her half-sisters Anne and Martha to Abingdon” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 65). She is now left all alone, with both parents dead and female friends of her coterie subjugated by conventional gender roles as wives and mothers. Her deep depression is manifested in her poems and correspondence to the female friends and is accordingly perceived by

the poetess, as she refers to herself as “their wonted prey” (line 8) of Grief and care. She feels victimized by mourning and melancholia, and through exposing this, she unconsciously aims to assuage her neurotic feelings of guilt and the self-recriminations along with regrets that impel her all the way back to the past. This might accordingly be interpreted as a way of receiving affection from and arousing pity in the readers.

The persona pursues the primary aim of seeking relief in the semiotic through the therapeutic act of writing. The severely traumatic affect of “the painful past” (line 10) that resides deep in her emotional memory or episodic memory still lingers on for years; those disturbing and abiding memories come flooding back, for that reason “with increasing age, the deaths of friends and family members, and her own removal from Broughton, poetry became her escape from a problematic home life, though escaping from such an increasing weight of painful memories was not easy” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 79). The persona is seemingly afflicted with hysteria, turning out unable to bury her pain and losses in the past, and through poetry, tries to reorder her chaotic mind and reedit her memory, refocusing on what is respectively relieving instead of the mere agony. She therefore implores the art of poesy to “spread thy impenetrable veil” (line 9) over the tragic past, particularly when memory functions in a destructive and obsessive form and oblivion repeatedly fails due to the presence of extreme anxiety and neurosis. What the memory is lacking, the semiotic and the poetry own; solely through the act of writing, the consciousness is narcotized, at least temporarily. In this regard, literature is compared to the medications that a depressed person or a patient with a mood disorder is prescribed to take; it numbs. Rather than being numbed with grief and weariness, the persona prefers to feel numb due to the passionate writing and the soothing semiotic through which she can recreate and reconstruct a new form of personal memory, a new consciousness, a new self and identity, ultimately transforming the severe affect into the milder effect.

The persona uses literature as a form of therapy against the loss of object and the related symbolic breakdown. The imminent demises she has to witness to over the years and the following traumatic stress leads to the introjection and incorporation of those losses in a way that it prevents the eventual resolution of trauma, directing the urges of aggression into the self of the author, and ending up with a masochistic tendency and the accompanying suicidal thoughts along with the loss of language, meaning and life. She thus rhetorically asks “must parting Agonies forever last” (line 11). Apparently, it takes a longer period of time to achieve in overcoming this personal tragedy wrought with losses and separations. Besides implying an overwhelming desire for a reunion, she simultaneously craves for an immortal life despite transmuting the agony of mortality into an eternal form with the help of poesy. At the end of the narrative, she conceives that she has to confront the fact that she should be in search of other therapies to manage her affective state and to fully metabolise the anguish of grief, as “nor Time himself a kind Exemption give” (line 14). In order to subdue her melancholy and fits of anxiety, she attains to resurrect on the semiotic and hold onto a textual form rather than the losses and her enduring sadness.

With a thorough critical analysis of the narrative, it might be suggested that the historical author writes out the anguish from the depths of pure experience. The text therefore becomes the

verbal evidence of the subjective experience of the authorial persona relating to neurosis in general and loss, grief and melancholia, to be more specific. The narrative accordingly serves to be the linguistic testimony to the agony of the historical author that is accounted to have witnessed to many demises in addition to the disintegration of the literary club, the Nonconformist coterie, that is stated to have occurred in the form of separations, matrimones and deceases of the members. This contributes to the already hypersensitive character of the persona in a way that she commences penning poems to have a form of therapy, turning her attention to verbalizing the real life experiences rather than being in search of a more ideal form of the sublime or an aesthetic pleasure. Whelan particularly signifies the importance of reversals in her temper and mood states in her poetry beginning with these losses, emphasizing that "Steele's depression continued into the mid-1790s, noticeably present in her poems and sonnets addressed to Elizabeth Coltman and Lucy Kent" (2015a, p. 66). The periods following her engagement and then marriage turn out to be the most depressing and isolative years of her life. Her initial rejection of social gender roles thus changes into the responsibilities of a married woman, leaving her devoid of freedom, solitude and privacy for poetic contemplations and reflections. Retrospectively, she is understood to be longing for the romanticized past; those glorious days filled with pure literary aspirations and the genuine intimacy of the female friendships, and mourns for all these things gone in her poems.

The mourning thematised within the text and related to through the semiotic manifests itself with the loss of love objects and the modifications of the signifying bonds on the symbolic. The introjected and incorporated loss leads to the emergence of asymbolia on the part of the authorial subject and changes the loss into the nonsignifiable and noncommunicable one. The muted subject repeatedly fails to verbalize the chief cause of the emotional agony she undergoes and this causes the language to function as an anxiety-punishment mechanism, silencing the grieving subject from without the narrative. To manage this emotional turmoil and to make the loss perceptible to both herself and the implied readers, she textualizes and represents it via the act of writing and the semiotic. Therefore, she achieves in understanding what she suffers from in the first place and perceives what the loss is and should be about, ultimately overcoming the loss of the sense of the loss. In the final analysis, she refreshes and reconstructs her consciousness and comprehends the loss at a level of consciousness, reordering her chaotic mental state and redefining the concept of mourning.

The narrative that bears a witness to the depressive affect provides for the writing subject a third form to hold onto. The subject thus commences identifying with the poetic form itself, rather than the object loss and the subsequent asymbolia. With her emergence on a textual realm and the semiotic, the subject obliterates her identification with the deceased, the lost, the melancholic affect and the act of mourning but a new third form, the sonnet itself. The text helps the neurotic subject form a new bond with the language, ending the symbolic breakdown from without the narrative, and enables the authorial persona to remaster the signs again. Hence, the literary creation becomes the sublime form of the agony that persistently afflicts the persona and is transposed into a more ideal form.

The loss of object and image that manifests itself in the form of both physical and imaginary absence destroys the symbolic bonding of the mourning authorial subject and leads to the denial of the signifier. Literary creation replaces the loss while the semiotic fills the void of the symbolic, being a substitute for the signifying system. In this regard, the literary production translates and transposes the anguish of the historical writer into a text so that it prevents the emergence of a masochistic tendency that might end up with attempts of suicide. In lieu of fixating the libido on the loss, the subject redirects her urges and drives into the creation of a literary form rather than the self. The loss is thereupon prevented from being growing into a pathological lack. The poetic form accordingly protects the subject from psychotic attack and even madness.

The neurosis brings about denial, and literary creation makes negation possible. The denial of the signifier induced by loss the authorial subject experiences on the symbolic is thus overcome by negation on the semiotic. Through negation, the depressed subject remaining on the verge of symbolic breakdown and suicide stops rejecting the signifier, the signifying system, and pretending to be dead. She rather prefers to reject what she negates on the semiotic, consequently achieving in existing on the symbolic. The poetic form she produces via negation provides her with an antidepressant, putting her into a state of narcosis and narcotizing the consciousness so that she can find a remedy for the state. Therefore, she comes to prefer the denial of the denial over the denial of negation. She sublimates and negates what she does undergo and releases her subconsciousness and unconsciousness from the emotional burden of the loss and the repression even though she never fully achieves a conscious acceptance of what she negates. Hence, the sonnet she produces on the semiotic provides the historical author with a reconciliation with the language and the loss in addition to with her own self, intellectually accepting and confronting with the loss itself.

Through existing on the semiotic via the act of writing and with the production of this sonnet, the historical author prevents a nonintegration and disintegration of the ego, recovering the loss of the sense of loss and the loss of the former self. Reestablishing a new bond with the language, she reconciles with her maternal tongue and overcomes the alienation from the self and the other. The writer keeps her own subjectivity on the symbolic through resurrecting on the semiotic and detaching the self from the other and being an other. The narrative thus helps her transform her mourning into an artistic form and the melancholic affect into the effect so that the implied and historical readers perceive the effect and transmute their affect into the effect through the therapeutic act of reading.

Steele transforms herself and her self-image through textual representation and the semiotic with the help of restorative and recuperative power of literature. She renews her unconsciousness and seeks forgiveness for herself and the lost ones. From being labelled or even stigmatized as a depressed person or a sullen woman, she redefines her identity on the symbolic and reconstructs it as an author rather than a common mourner. Instead of being enslaved by the emotion, she converts that emotion into action and the passive sadness into an active and ideal form through writing and producing a sonnet form. She achieves a lasting reconciliation with the symbolic, the art, the self and the other, reuniting with the semiotic and maternal realm it provides rather than

death or the loss itself. In a very real sense, “poetry became for Mary Steele the chief means of feeding her soul, despite a significant dampening of her creative life due to her domestic travails” (Whelan, 2015a, p. 79) with the onset of old age and before/after her marriage.

CONCLUSION

Mary Steele’s perception of the self and the art changes in accordance with her life experiences. She thus regards the poetics as a way of self-actualizing and a form of aesthetic pleasure in her earlier life. With old age, following the tragic losses of her family members and the disintegration of her dissenting coterie of artists, she adopts a new and realistic perspective towards literature, writing and rewriting in order to reorder her cognitive and affective states, employing the art as a way of escape from daily routine and domestic travails. From that moment on, she pens poems not to publish but not to perish of agony. She textualizes her subjective experiences of neurosis to reconstruct her identity, character and consciousness, and to forgive herself and the other with the help of the semiotic. She aims to translate her emotional pain into pure art to survive and to prevent herself from psychotic attacks and asymbolia. She thus keeps penning poems as if keeping a daily journal, to keep a clear head and to pursue a quest for transcendence. Her use of literature as a form of therapy is intimately connected with her Nonconformist family background and the literary coterie. Since she is brought up within an intellectual circle, she is used to searching for the meaning and the therapy in intellectual pursuits and intellectualization. She prefers to rationalize the sadness and sorrow with the help of literature and to perpetually narcotize her consciousness, rather than to deny and avoid the neurotic situations that bother her. Via the recuperative act of writing, she extinguishes the melancholic affect while immortalizing the experience itself.

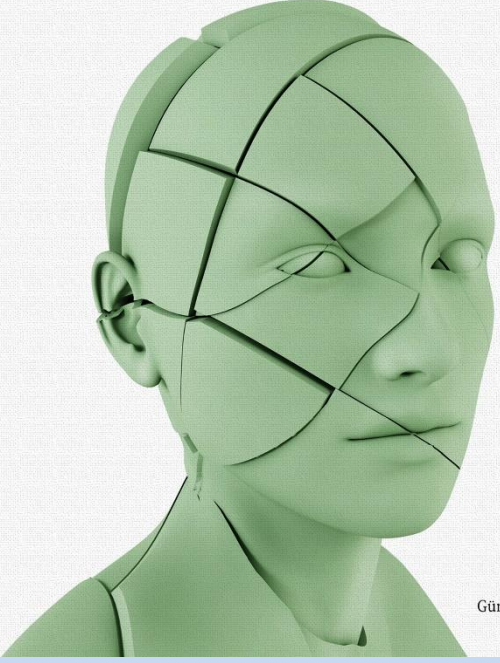
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TÜRK BİLİMKURGU EDEBİYATI VE ARKETİPLER

DR. VELİ UĞUR



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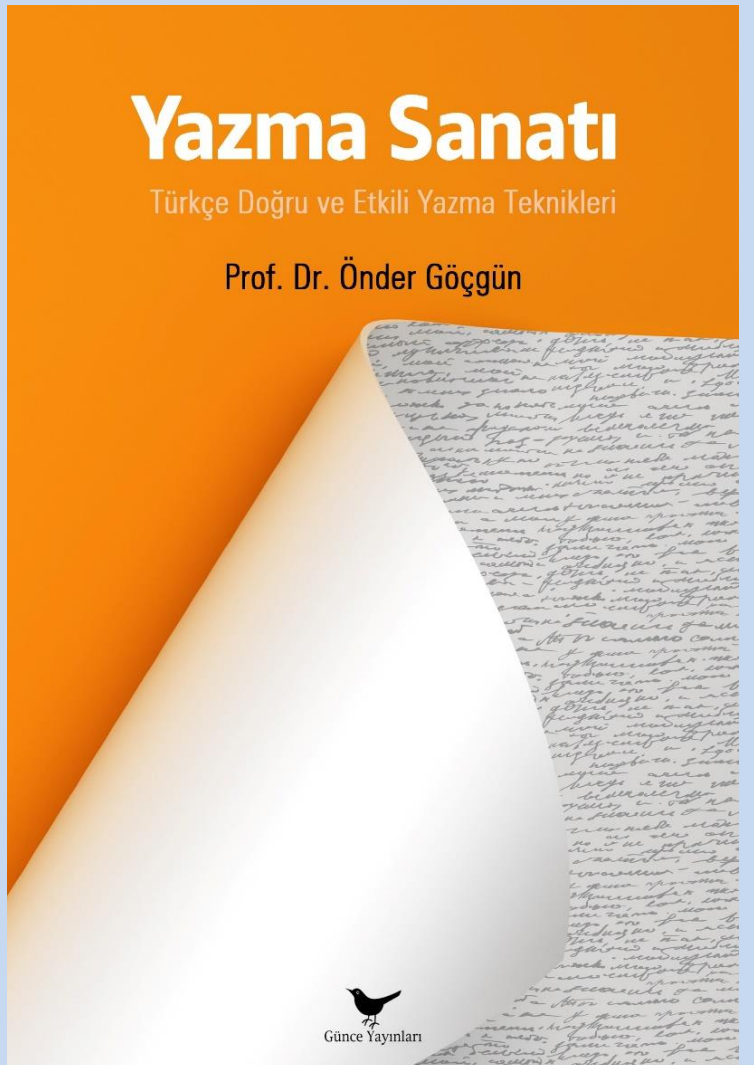


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