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The Capability of Literary Arts

Solely looking at a portrait of an individual's face does not typically reveal much, if at all, about that pictured individual. However, Frank Bidart reveals quite a great deal about himself (his past, present, family, personality, and thoughts) through his self-portrait. Although a portrait typically correlates with the form of visual art such as drawing, painting, or photography, Bidart uses the form of literature (poetry and specifically a sonnet) to sculpt and depict himself as seen from a reflection in the mirror. And with the 14-line poem, Bidart creatively integrates two most prominent sonnet traditions and incorporates his own style. "Self-Portrait, 1969" is a monologue inside Bidart's mind as he disengages from himself with the usage of third person and evaluates himself through his reflection in the mirror. Overall, Bidart's sonnet shows the power and ability of the art of literature that makes it distinguishable from other forms of art through: 1) its appropriateness and 2) its flexibility to move within space and time.

"Self-Portrait, 1969" demonstrates the adaptability of literature as it engages in both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean sonnet traditions. The combination of the two most popular sonnet models can be evidently perceived within this single sonnet through the spacing in line 8 and after line 12. It has the Petrarchan sonnet form because it has the volta, or the turn, in the middle of line 8 in which the octave previous to the volta creates pressure that is prompted by his dissatisfied mother as well as his own unfulfillment and the sestet following the volta releases that pressure in which the speaker has been freed from the burden (in a sense) as he accepts his

faith and what had happened in the past. Although it has both forms, this sonnet resembles the Shakespearean sonnet style more not only because it has 12 lines that is divided into three quatrains with a satirical couplet that ends in a Q&A, but also because it includes the Shakespearean rhyme scheme of abab cdcd efef gg.

While conforming to and implementing both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet forms, Bidart chooses not to adhere to the content of those sonnet traditions'. "Self-Portrait, 1969" is unlike either in that it does not have a love speaker who is addressing to a love object about his unrequited love. Bidart chooses to talk about his family, disaster, trauma, and personal experience. And knowledge of these personal information about Bidart is critical to understanding and developing deeper insight of the sonnet. If love is the central and fundamental theme in sonnets of Shakespearean and Petrarchan tradition, Bidart shows through his sonnet that love is not the only significant matter.

Also contrary to Shakespeare's sonnets which focuses on content and the actual usage of words to deliver insight and meaning, Bidart utilizes and creates a lot of visual effects with spacing as described in the second paragraph, punctuation marks, and italics. Bidart especially uses dashes, ellipses, and semicolons to slow down the reading of the poem that further allows readers to ruminate and process each word and each point being made. Semicolons are most apparently used in line 4 when Bidart portrays his mother as being "puffy; angry; bewildered...". Generally being stronger than a comma and weaker than a period, the semicolons give a staccato effect where each word is sharply detached and separated from others that accentuates those qualities as well as convey the emotions of the words themselves. Throughout the 14 lines, there are a total of 3 italicized words which are "*still*", "*unfulfilled*", and "*reaches*" (Lines 1, 6, 14). These three italicized words seem to encompass the overall sonnet and Bidart's life up to 1969

and I will further discuss how these three words do so in the upcoming paragraph after I attempt to deconstruct each quatrain. Altogether, the cluttered and quite disorganized usage of varying punctuation marks contribute to this sonnet resembling one's train of thought that is not all coherent, but more disorderly and scattered.

<u>"Self-Portrait, 1969"</u>			
Quatrain 1	Past	Exterior	Tangible
Quatrain 2	↓	↓	↓
Quatrain 3			
Couplet			
	Future	Interior	Intangible

Figure 1. Diagram of how "Self-Portrait, 1969" permeates through time and physical space/structure.

The depiction of a self-portrait with a sonnet not only replicates visual art forms, but also accomplishes more. Through his reflection and this sonnet, Bidart is able to physically draw and characterize himself with words. Not only so, but he is also able to describe more than physical attributes of self that goes beyond the external and the outward appearances. With this power of words, Bidart delves into his past and his personal life with the progression of the sonnet and the different quatrains. Whilst so, the readers are simultaneously able to explore Bidart's mind.

One thing that is immediately noticeable when reading this sonnet is that it is in third person point of view. This is interesting, yet shows the ability of language which permits Bidart to be unrestrained to his own being as he can freely dissociate from self through this usage of third person in the poem. This disengagement from self might initially seem to allow Bidart to

view and analyze self more objectively and impartially. However, this is not altogether possible:

1) Merely because the author is able to address himself as a third person does not mean that he actually is a different person, 2) Bidart is addressing his reflection on the mirror as “he” which is, ultimately, still his own self. This third person is not addressed other than with the pronoun “he”; yet the readers know to associate this person with Frank Bidart himself.

As seen in figure 1, the first quatrain begins from the surface level that is visible and tangible. Bidart describes physical features of himself such as how he “looks younger” and “eyes and cheeks” which are “turning in the mirror” (Lines 1, 2, 3). After characterizing himself in line 2, the speaker questions himself by asking “or does he?”. This question is not asked to be answered, but serves to reveal a part of the speaker’s personality. Bidart seems quite uncertain and unconfident in his own ideas and thoughts that he doubts and challenges his own judgment. Also because the point about Bidart being young, but “[looking] younger”, is challenged with the question that is posed but never answered, the readers are only able to ambiguously picture the speaker. Alongside the physical descriptions, much of the words in this quatrain are also correlated with vision: “looks”, “eyes”, and “saw” (Lines 1, 2, 3). Not only so, but words in the first quatrain are generally more concrete and tangible such as “thirty”, “eyes and cheeks”, and “mirror” (Lines 1, 2, 3). The sonnet initially begins in the present, “tonight” in 1969, with Bidart at the age of 30 (Line 2). As Bidart looks into the mirror, the readers are positioned into the past as he reflects and states that he “saw his mother” (Line 3). And with this positioning into the past, Bidart introduces and describes his mother as being “puffy; angry; bewildered” which are emotions that can be perceived as well as be expressed physically (Line 4). This description not only characterizes and illustrates his mother, but also gives insight into how his childhood was in relation with his family and his parents: unhappy and a negative experience as he was an only

child with an alcoholic father who “chased women” and a mother who was “resentful and dreamed of other lives” (“Frank Bidart’s Poetry of Saying the Unsaid”).

From the surface level of the first quatrain, the second quatrain goes beneath it and delves into feelings and other such intangible matters. Words that express uncertainty, ambiguity, and vagueness are used throughout this quatrain: “there”, “something unfulfilled”, “something dead”, “what he once thought he surely could be”, and “habits” (Lines 5, 6, 7, 8). The speaker does not attempt to provide explanation for these unclear and unspecified things which leaves the readers aloof and uncertain as well. With the gradual transition from the tangible to the intangible, there is a slow progression from the past reflections to the present. Seeing his mother in the reflection of his own face in the mirror, Bidart feels the same emotions of his mother’s which have been mentioned in the first quatrain. This mental connection and association between concepts and events that stem from specific experiences seem to greatly affect the speaker that the past emotions of his mother transfer onto him in the present.

The third quatrain dives even deeper into the speaker and the state of the speaker in the second quatrain is furthered. Firstly, the uncertainty expressed in the previous quatrain is advanced with even more words that are used with no particular definition nor explanation: “insight”, “thrill”, “exhilaration”, “unravelling disaster”, and “necessary knowledge” (Lines 9, 10, 11, 12). The rhetorical question in line 10 also cuts off the possible detail of what the speaker would reach, which unsurprisingly (at this point) leaves the readers hanging. Secondly, the anger that the speaker mentions in line 5 is explicitly expressed in this particular quatrain and especially through sarcasm and irony. The third quatrain is filled with optimistic words—“glamour”, “thrill”, “exhilaration” (Lines 8, 10). However, they are placed alongside with “unravelling disaster” and “jargon” which have negative and pessimistic overtones (Lines 11,

12). These together indicate how the positive words are used in accordance with the negative to actually highlight and accentuate the anger of the speaker, further making the third quatrain's tone sarcastic and ironic. After the expression of anger, the speaker expresses futility as he makes the insight that everything he once thought was important became all "jargon" or meaningless talk or writing at the end of this quatrain (Line 12).

Contrary to the ironic and sarcastic tone of the previous quatrain, the tone in the couplet follows the futility Bidart expresses in line 12: still negative yet abstract and straightforward as if he has given up. The couplet, thus the sonnet, ends on a rhetorical question: "What *reaches* him except disaster?" (Line 14). This rhetorical question creates closure within this single sonnet in that the speaker has accepted his faith and his hopeless inability to escape the closed system of family and disaster. Although a question, it can also be implied that the speaker's life has been full of disaster so far that makes him numb and immune to experiencing disaster. The ending question can be an analysis and interpretation of the speaker's past in correlation with the present as well as an anticipation of the future. Despite the fact that this question sums up and concludes the sonnet as well as Bidart's life up to 1969 at Bidart's age of 30, the question is also left unanswered to be resolved in the future as Bidart continues throughout his life.

Still unfulfilled [nothing] reaches. These three italicized words in the sonnet encapsulate Bidart's self-reflection of his present in accordance with the past. I personally translate the absence of an italicized word in the third quatrain as being nothing to which Bidart is able to reach. These words express hopelessness in Bidart as he is still unable to find fulfillment.

The observation of "Self-Portrait, 1969", along with Shakespeare's 154 sonnets and other writings, has allowed me to develop greater appreciation of the art of literature. Words have the capability of freely moving about space as well as through time. It can also take on forms of

other arts as seen with “Self-Portrait, 1969”. Language also have the ability to reveal information as well as conceal them. There truly are no limits with words and with language. Sonnets, both contemporary and of the past, really help develop these limitlessness and power of words.

Citations

Als, Hiltion. "Frank Bidart's Poetry of Saying the Unsaid." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 1 Sept. 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/11/frank-bidarts-poetry-of-saying-the-unsaid.

(Note: This sonnet, as I mention in the essay, resembles one's train of thought that is scattered, disorganized, and overflowing with thoughts that there was so much to talk about. Although I tried my best to arrange the ideas, it was quite difficult because there was so much. I hope that everything makes sense though!)