

*The Journal of
Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
No. 27 2023*

The Failure of the “Subject Supposed to Know”:

An Analysis of *A Feather on the Breath of God*

Daniel CLAUSEN

「知っているはずの主体」の失敗：
『神の息に吹かれる羽根』の分析

クラウセン ダニエル

長崎外大論叢

第27号
(別冊)

長崎外国語大学
2023年12月

【研究ノート】

**The Failure of the “Subject Supposed to Know”:
An Analysis of *A Feather on the Breath of God***

Daniel CLAUSEN

「知っているはずの主体」の失敗：
『神の息に吹かれる羽根』の分析

クラウセン ダニエル

概要 (Abstract / Short Outline)

Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God* is an autobiographical novel that utilizes fragmentation, free association, and montage. This style resists attempts to explain and simplify traumatic experiences. In doing so, the literary work illustrates the failure of privileged forms of knowledge that try to contain experience within a comprehensible interpretation that would otherwise render the literary work (and the past experiences of the author/narrator) safe. Thus, the work gestures to the failure of the psychoanalyst or therapist on one level and, on another level, the literary critic who is “supposed to know.”

シーグリッド・ヌーネスの『*A Feather on the Breath of God* (神の息に吹かれる羽根)』は、断片化、自由連想、モンタージュを駆使した自伝的小説である。このスタイルは、トラウマ的な経験を説明し単純化しようとする試みに抵抗するものである。そうすることで、この文学作品は、経験を理解可能な解釈の中に封じ込めようとする特権的な知識の形式が失敗し、そうしなければ文学作品（そして著者／語り手の過去の経験）を安全なものにしてしまうことを例示しているのだ。したがって、この作品は、あるレベルでは精神分析医やセラピストの失敗を、また別のレベルでは「知っているはずの」文芸評論家の失敗を身振りで示しているのである。

Keywords:

Sigrid Nunez, psychoanalysis, literary theory

1. Introduction

Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God* is an autobiographical novel that explores the author’s memories as the daughter of a mixed-race immigrant couple. The novel is told in four parts and examines the problems of mixed identity, inner-city struggle, and the gap between dreams and reality. The first part focuses on memories of her emotionally distant father, who is Chinese but was born in Panama. The second part examines her relationship with her mother,

who is stubbornly proud of her German heritage and struggles to retain her dignity despite the indignities of the housing project where they live. The third part is about her experience finding freedom and meaning through her devotion to ballet. The final part explores her experiences as a young adult falling in love with an older immigrant to whom she teaches English.

Previous studies have examined the novel from the perspective of the mother-daughter relationship (Fachinger), situated the novel within a larger body of literature written by immigrant women (Kirschner), and examined how the novel’s style disrupts our expectations for story structure (Davis). Recently, however, academic interest in the novel has waned. This is unfortunate, given the novel’s lyrical prose, its unique approach to trauma, and its many interwoven themes of family, ethnicity, desire, and (un)fulfilment.

The novel utilizes fragmentation, free association, and montage. This style resists attempts to regulate meaning within the novel and, on another level, to regulate the meaning of the author/narrator’s troubled past. In doing so, the work demonstrates the failure of privileged forms of knowledge that try to contain experience within a comprehensible theory or explanation that would render the work (and the past experiences of the author/narrator) safe.

For this reason, the novel illustrates the failure of the psychoanalyst or therapist on one level and, on another level, the literary critic who is “supposed to know.”

The term “subject supposed to know” was popularized by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his lectures and later explored in the writings of Slavoj Žižek (Lacan 230–243; Žižek). In short, the “subject supposed to know” is a person, usually a professional, such as a detective, teacher, psychoanalyst, or other with sacred knowledge, who brings order to the chaotic noise of evidence, symbols, or other surface content. Naturally, we might also think of the literary analyst as an example of the “subject supposed to know.”

Throughout her novel, the author/narrator struggles to interpret her traumatic past while at the same time problematizing the act of interpretation. Can trauma truly be interpreted, made comprehensible, and thus, rendered safe? Throughout the story, the author/narrator is never able to offer an explicit answer or interpretation to her experiences, and her attempts to bring order to her memories with the insight of others (Hank Williams, Sigmund Freud, T.S. Eliot, and a female therapist) fall short.

The endings of each of the four parts fail to contain or structure fragmented narrative forms, and thus, serve in one way or another as a critique of authoritative interpretations or authoritative figures who are “supposed to know.” Rather than an authority figure with ready answers, the novel’s style and substance point to a fundamental need for empathy, compassion, and care – in short, for a reader/listener who is able to care.

2. The First Failure: The Songs of Hank Williams

In each of the four parts of *A Feather on the Breath of God* – “Chang,” “Christa,” “A Feather on the Breath of God,” and “Immigrant Love” – near the end, the author/narrator appropriates the words or elements of an outside voice. Typically, these words or elements are placed in positions that would suggest that they should clarify the preceding narrative material. Yet, when closely examined, these elements fail to take into account the complexity of the material or point to the shortcomings of an authority figure.

In the first section of the novel – “Chang” – we learn about the author/narrator’s estranged relationship with her father. An alien presence in the household, her Panamanian/Chinese father works constantly, is emotionally detached, and struggles to make himself understood in his broken English. Towards the end of the section, her mother reveals that he used to like the country-folk singer Hank Williams: “Yes, of course I remember. It was Hank Williams. He played those records over and over. Hillbilly music. I thought I’d go mad” (Nunez 27). The section closes with a list of Hank Williams songs:

Here are the names of some Hank Williams songs:

Honky Tonkin’. Ramblin’ Man. Hey, Good Lookin’. Lovesick Blues. Why Don’t You Love Me Like You Used To Do. Your Cheatin’ Heart. (I heard that) Lonesome Whistle. Why Don’t You Mind Your Own Business. I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry. The Blues Come Around. Cold, Cold Heart. I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive. I Can’t Help It If I’m Still in Love With You. (Nunez 28)

The list is presented at the end and is the last word on her father in the section. On one level, there seems to be a desperate nature to her listing of the song titles, a stretching for a completeness that does not exist. Perhaps the author/narrator has chosen these songs intentionally to express her feelings: “Ramblin’ Man” (or, in the case of the novel’s style: ramblin’ woman); “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” (her feeling of desperate loneliness even when she is with her father); “I Can’t Help It If I’m Still in Love With You” (her feelings toward her father, despite his many failings).

As the last words on her father in the section, one would hope that the song titles would reveal something important. However, the list never fulfills this expectation. The narrator says, here are the names of “some” songs by Hank Williams, without attempting to explain why she has listed *these* songs and not others, why she has put them in *this* order, or even why she found them important enough to list. Rather than explain a man whose life has been a mystery to her, the list only serves to deepen the contradictions and incoherencies of her fragmented memory/representation of him.

3. The Second Failure: Sigmund Freud

The second part of the novel deals with the narrator's troubled relationship with her German mother, Christa. Throughout this section, we come to understand how the author/narrator's mother struggled to maintain dignity within their housing project and hold on to her German heritage. The section ends with an assertion by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud: "Freud says the most important event in a man's life is the death of his father" (Nunez 94). This statement, however, is quickly followed by her own lament: "Oh, Mother" (Nunez 94), which ends the second part.

The comment responds to Freud's phrase without rejecting it or replacing it. Instead, the relationship between Freud's statement and the author/narrator's is ambiguous. As readers, we are left to wonder: Is the death of the mother the most important event in a woman's life, or at least the author/narrator's life? This seems unlikely given the narrator's emphasis on the father in part one and throughout the novel. Should we see Freud's statement as a testament to the disinterest or naivety of psychoanalysis regarding the role of mothers in the lives of daughters? Perhaps. Or, perhaps the author/narrator is reaching for some way to make her fragmented memories of her mother more coherent. The author/narrator never tells us how to interpret Freud's words or how to use them in conjunction with her own response. Rather, we are left with another insufficient device to structure fragmented memories.

However, the novel does not categorically reject such attempts at authoritative interpretation. In the preceding paragraph, the author writes: "One wants a way of looking back without anger or bitterness or shame. One wants to be able to tell everything without blaming or apologizing" (Nunez 94). The key word in this sentence is "want." Is the author/narrator looking for structure in her writing, or is she actively rejecting it? What does the author/narrator "want"? What is the purpose of her exploration of the past?

4. The Third Failure: T.S. Eliot

One key to answering these questions can be found in the author/narrator's experience with the world of dance in part three. Within the confines of the dancehall, she is able to find moments of contentment. She can replace the confusion and contradictions of her home life with a world that is ordered and purposeful. The author/narrator writes, "When I first heard that there existed a book called *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, I thought it had to be about this: singleness of mind, of passion, of purpose; one love, one reason for being" (Nunez 116). With the "singleness" she experiences in the dancehall, she can replace the confusion of her life with the pursuit of artistic and bodily perfection.

However, the coherence of the dancehall is an artistic and physical commitment that cannot provide wholeness or comfort when the problems of the real world inevitably reappear. Problematic aspects of race, gender, and poverty do not find a comfortable resting place through the logic of the dancehall, but rather, are pushed to the margins of the psyche, into conscious oblivion in the shadow of her singular purpose: “*Work as hard as you can. Make it beautiful*” (Nunez 116; italics in the original). Yet, once she is outside the dancehall, questions of gender and inequality reappear, expressed in the questions: “But why don’t men go on point? And why does the woman in *Serenade* have to die?” (Nunez 116).

The third part finishes with an outside element, this time T.S. Eliot. “I want to get down something T.S. Eliot said: Human beings are capable of passions that human experience can never live up to” (Nunez 118). Again, we see the presence of an outside voice (first Hank Williams, then Freud, and now T.S. Eliot). However, this time the quotation does not seem detached or misguided. T.S. Eliot’s meditation on the tragic nature of life frames not only the section, but the entire novel. Whether it is her father’s last gasps for air in part one, her mother’s desire to rise above their poverty in part two, her desire to become a ballerina in part three, or her doomed romance with Vadim in the final part, each section speaks to a desire which experience cannot fulfill.

The author/narrator’s encounter with T.S. Eliot’s ideas leads to a deeper longing for explanation: “I will sit there all through the night, I will smoke all the cigarettes, and in the morning I will cross the courtyard to answer questions about the tragic sense of life” (Nunez 118). Night, the smoking of many cigarettes, and the final act of answering questions after these acts signify the tragedy of explanation and communication: the broad humanistic insights of an eminent poet cannot alleviate the need for explanation of her own unique circumstances. The gap between desire and experience may be a universal quality of all human existence, but that cannot explain the nuances of her own lived experiences.

5. The Fourth Failure: An Unnamed Female Therapist

In the final part of the book, we see the author/narrator as a young adult. She is now an English teacher involved in a romantic relationship with one of her students, an older married man named Vadim from Odessa, Ukraine. As the relationship progresses, it becomes apparent that Vadim is a dangerous person and that the relationship is an unhealthy one. In this final section, the “subject supposed to know” is a female therapist. Her words, like the words of the other outside voices, come at the end of the section, in this case several paragraphs before the end.

“A background like that, no wonder you’re here. You don’t know *who* you are!” Then she added, more to herself than to me: “Still, there must have been something good back there: It must have come from the father.” (Nunez 178).

The therapist's statement is not an explanation, but rather, a judgment of her past, one that is further undermined by assuming that her relationship with her father was the most important. The words of the therapist do not end the section or the novel. Instead, the therapist's words build hostility toward the "subject supposed to know" which later delegitimizes another therapist's valid questions at the very end: "Why did you go with this man? What did you want?"

As a result of her past experiences with another therapist, another "subject supposed to know," the author/narrator has given up on the possibility that figures of authority will ever understand how to ask appropriate questions or how to provide fulfilling answers. That is because the understanding the author/narrator wants is not a kind of theoretical interpretation or rationalization of her experience, but rather, empathy, identification, and perhaps even a sense of solidarity.

6. Conclusion: From Subjects Supposed to Know to Readers/Listeners Able to Care

As a literary work, *A Feather on the Breath of God* resists outside interpretations of its themes and message. In place of a "subject supposed to know," what the author/narrator seems to be searching for is a reader/listener who is able to care. As readers (and especially critical readers), perhaps that is the best interpretation of this work of literature. As specialists in the humanities, our responsibilities to empathize, be compassionate, and care supersede our responsibilities to explain, analyze, and interpret. Perhaps this message reaches beyond the humanities to other subjects, obviously the social sciences like psychology, but perhaps even to other subjects of specialized knowledge such as the hard sciences. Since we are all beings bound within human flesh, we should all remember our responsibilities as readers and listeners able to care.

Works Cited

Davis, Rocío G. "Identity in Community in Chinese American Short Story Cycles: Sigrid Nunez's *A Feather on the Breadth of God*." *Hitting Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 3.2 (1996): 115-33.

Fachinger, Petra. "German Mothers, New World Daughters: Angelika Fremd's Heartland and Sigrid Nunez's *A Feather on the Breath of God*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.3 (2005): 253-266.

Kirschner, Luz Angélica. *Diaspora and Representation: Jewish Argentine, Turkish German, and Chinese American Women Writers*. The Pennsylvania State University, 2008.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977.

Nunez, Sigrid. *A Feather on the Breath of God*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Zizek, Slavoj. "The Interpassive Subject." *Traverses*, 1998.

